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ACROSS THE ATLANTIC: GRACE AGUILAR'S CORRESPONDENCE WITH MIRIAM AND SOLOMON COHEN

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Abstract

The study of women's epistolary writing offers important perceptions into gender stereotypes and changing cultural insights of gender-genre connections. Moreover, studying a writer's letters may offer clues to the fundamental textures of lived experience as well as express his/her private thoughts, theological, social, cultural deliberations, etc. Grace Aguilar's correspondence with her American friends Miriam and Solomon Cohen has never been investigated, although this exchange delineates Aguilar's literary oeuvre, her theological deliberations and her reflections about the status of women in general, and Jewish women, in particular, in the nineteenth-century society. This paper aims at rectifying the aforementioned neglect by exposing and examining the ideological and literary heritage of Grace Aguilar revealed by her correspondence.

Key words

Grace Aguilar; Jewish theology; correspondence; women's education

In youth doubts and questions must arise. They cannot and ought not to rest satisfied with the Religion of their childhood and it is to satisfy these questions my present task is undertaken. (Grace Aguilar's letter to Miriam Moses Cohen; March 17, 1846; underlined in original)

The first half of nineteenth-century England witnessed the unparalleled emergence on the literary scene of some highly accomplished and talented Jewish female writers. Among these were Judith and Charlotte Montefiore, Marion Harzog, Anna Maria Goldsmid, the Moss sisters and others. The most important of them was, however, Grace Aguilar (1816–1847).

Aguilar was a descendent of Spanish and Portuguese Marranos who arrived in England in the eighteenth-century. In 1835, she contracted measles and her health never completely recovered; subsequently, she struggled with her health all her life. The doctors recommended complete rest of body and mind, which proved impossible since after the death of her father in 1845 Aguilar helped providing for the family (herself, her mother and two younger brothers).

Aguilar's correspondence with Miriam Cohen, the niece of Rebecca Gratz, an American Jewish reformer, writer and educator, and Miriam's husband, Solomon Cohen, of Savannah, Georgia, started in November 1842, and ended abruptly in 1846, supposedly due to Aguilar's serious illness. Aguilar's mother, Sarah, continued the correspondence with the Cohens for six additional years after Grace's death in 1847. The Cohen-Aguilar correspondence sheds light on Aguilar's reflections about her literary project. In it, Aguilar also articulates her duality towards Jewish women's place in mid-nineteenth-century English society, and reveals her theological credo. Aguilar's emphasis on the great significance of spirituality in Judaism and on the need of making this "spiritual" Judaism easily accessible to all members of the community, including women, made her legacy very similar to that of her contemporary male reformers. Both Aguilar and the reformers advocated the need for women's education. Both emphasized the fact that in the Biblical era women were equal participants in Jewish religious and communal spheres.¹

Nevertheless, in spite of her ideological proximity with the reformists, in none of her writings does Aguilar overtly side with them, probably fearing that an explicit association with a specific side in the ongoing theological debate might jeopardize her literary, educational and theological undertakings. "She argues that there must be a Jewish literature that can challenge the dominance of Christian anti-Semitic and anti-Judaic representations, create positive Jewish self-identity, and encourage more accurate theological understandings of Judaism within Victorian culture" (Scheinberg 2002: 149).

Aguilar zealously advocated the promotion women's status in society that in her view might be achieved through young women's exposure to both Talmudic and Halachic texts, formerly inaccessible to women, as to secular ones; on the other hand, Aguilar often asserted that domesticity and the preservation of familial values are the building blocks of the Jewish home.

Moreover, the letters disclose Aguilar's intricate relationships with her Jewish and non-Jewish critics, her financial hardships, and her warm and caring familial bonds with parents and brothers. Although some of the letters are almost strictly business-like, especially those addressed to Solomon Cohen, who helped her to advertise and sell her books in America, most of the collection is a telling exchange of ideas between Miriam and Grace, two well-read and well-educated devout young Jewish women.² In the course of their four-year correspondence, Aguilar develops an affectionate and personal rapport with her American friends, and each subsequent letter shows a sense of growing trust and mutual understanding, though they lack intimate familiarity.

Looking at Aguilar's pictures and envisaging a lively young woman, one way or another hiding behind an austere moralist's veil, makes the reader wonder about Aguilar's intimate musings. Why does even her personal and quite intimate correspondence with the Cohens lack a personal touch? This question is difficult to answer. I might only speculate, after examining her private journals and correspondence, that Aguilar, whose early writings testify to her openheartedness towards and optimism about human nature, became much less so after receiving poignant scrutiny from people whom she initially trusted – Isaac Lesser, her

American editor, in particular. Moreover, as a single woman, suffering since early youth from very frail health and constantly struggling to provide for her elderly mother and herself, and always worrying about the professional and personal future of her two younger brothers, Aguilar was also probably especially reserved.

It is worthy of note that Victorian female friendship was often built around an unselfconscious pattern of single-sex networks, networks that were supportive and institutionalized in social conventions.³ When checking the letters of Aguilar's female contemporary writers, I discovered that, unlike those of Aguilar, the letters of the Brontës and those written by Mary Shelley assume a much more personal stance. Charlotte Brontë, for example, relates in a letter to her sister's Emily death, saying, "moments so dark as these I have never known," (Smith, 1985: 154). In her other letters, Brontë relates to her private affections, relationships with family members and friends, and so forth. In Shelley's correspondence with her stepsister, Claire Clairmont, the emotional, personal and familial concerns of the writer are meticulously recorded. Betty Bennett, in the introduction to *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, contends that the letters reveal Shelley's courageous response to her illness, and show her "fundamental belief in the primacy of love" (xxvi).

With Aguilar, the case is quite different. Though she counts on the Cohens as her very good friends, Aguilar prefers not to get emotionally involved. There is a sense of holding back when she writes about her personal affairs, which might be also partly due to her reserved nature. The only piece of writing which to a certain, though only to a limited, extent exposes her emotional state and reveals some more intimate thoughts, is her short story "The Authoress," a biographical story in disguise.

I chose to deal with Aguilar's correspondence chiefly because letter-writing in general, and letters written by a writer in particular, illuminate in multiple ways his or her self-representation, and allow him or her to adopt a certain role or image, which might change noticeably when writing to different addressees. A personal correspondence also provides the reader with a better and deeper insight into the fictional work of the writer in question, for in letters writers often divulge their literary concerns.⁴

Letters often become a substitute for direct speech and enable the sender some degree of influence, since through letters a writer can construct his or her particular identity: "The letter acts as a sender's voice, giving the sender a degree of influence" (Sadlack 2005: 2). Moreover, although letters are often of a private nature, they allow the writer to articulate his views on political and societal issues, and at times, letters might also serve as a means of affecting the recipient's point of view.⁵

Aguilar's letters, as well as her theological essays, are deeply concerned with the communal spiritual experience of contemporary English Jewry and with educational and cultural issues.⁶ It is only in her private correspondence that Aguilar is more candid when addressing such pressing topics as Jewish communal politics and the status of women. It is only in such a forum that she feels free to attack the ill-treatment she often suffered from her Jewish male critics.⁷

In a letter dated June 28, 1843 to Miriam Cohen, Aguilar complains about the "little stirring of interest in our religion at present" (Galchinsky 1999: 92). She

believes that her task, therefore, is to emphasize Jewish spiritual values and save Judaism from stagnation. Mainly, she wishes to make Judaism plausible and accessible to all, especially to Jewish youth and to Jewish women. Aguilar takes the stance, which she often uses in her fictional and non-fictional writings, of a moralist and the keeper of the Jewish tradition. In another letter, dated September 28, 1845, and sent to the same addressee, Aguilar sounds somewhat optimistic about the prospects of her educational enterprise. She feels that there is a certain process of revitalization taking place in the area of Jewish spirituality:

I do indeed rejoice at the awakening spirit in our congregations, over many parts of the world – even some division is better than the dead calm of stagnation ... but a dead calm is as fearful to a nation, as indifference to an individual. (Galchinsky 1999: 103).

This quotation reiterates Aguilar's growing sense of hopefulness with regard to the Jewish spiritual revival expressed in her epistolary composition *The Jewish Faith: its Spiritual Consolation, Moral Guidance and Immortal Hope* (1846) – a collection of thirty-one letters addressed to a fictional Jewish girl and chiefly intended to strengthen young Jewish women's faith. In the introduction to *The Jewish Faith*, Aguilar observes:

There is a new spirit breathing through the “dry bones” and scattered remnant of Israel, from north to south, and east to west, even to the remotest isles in the sea, a spirit that is of God, and will lead back to Him. There is hope, more hope for the regeneration of spiritual Israel, than there has been for many centuries ... It is the awakening into life; the bursting from the fearful grave of apathy and stagnation. (*The Jewish Faith*, 1846: 7–8)

However, two interesting points should be noted when addressing these passages. First, while talking about the Jewish spiritual revitalization, Aguilar is referring to this process occurring in “many parts of the world” and on “the remotest isles in the sea.” Probably encouraged by the growing popularity of her books in America, Aguilar is mainly addressing American Jewry. She refrains from speaking about English Jewry or mentioning a spiritual revival in England, where she senses instead the gradual estrangement of many local Jews from practicing the religion of their ancestors to which I will refer later, mainly when reading Aguilar's mother's correspondence. Second, in the first quotation above where Aguilar refers to “some division” which, in her opinion, “is better than the dead calm of stagnation,” she tries very diplomatically to tackle the issue of the establishment of the first Reform Synagogue in London in 1841.⁸

It is interesting to note that Aguilar's emphasis on the great significance of spirituality in Judaism and on the need of making this “spiritual” Judaism easily accessible to all members of the community, including women, made her legacy very similar to that of her contemporary male reformers such as David Einhorn and Isaac Meyer Wise. Both Aguilar and the reformers advocated the need for women's education. In 1855, for instance, Wise established the first Jewish –

American periodical in German intended for women, where Jewish literati published short stories, articles, essays and literally and cultural debates. Both Aguilar and her male counterparts emphasized the fact that in the Biblical era women were equal participants in Jewish religious and communal spheres.⁹

Nevertheless, in spite of her ideological proximity with the reformists, in none of her writings does Aguilar overtly side with them, probably fearing that an explicit association with a specific side in the ongoing theological debate might jeopardize her literary, educational and theological undertakings. Moreover, Aguilar certainly was trying to keep a subtle balance between her pioneering initiative of remodeling Jewish contemporary theology and ameliorating the status of Jewish women within the Jewish community, and her wish to become a mainstream writer. Hence, after encountering criticism from Franklin and Leeser, Aguilar became quite cautious when advocating her theological and societal assertions; although her ideas were not of an exceptionally revolutionary nature, mid-nineteenth-century women who meddled in politics, even if it were only Jewish communal politics, were accused of being either unwomanly or acting irrationally. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar indicate, while mainly speaking about male writers, that “to many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century men, women seemed to be agents of an alien world that evoked anger and anguish” (p. 4). Jewish women, the “double Other” (women and Jews), in particular, were not expected to produce theological or scholarly religious texts, a writing arena monopolized by Jewish patriarchal authorities.

Aguilar’s mother, Sarah, testifies in her letter to Miriam Cohen of May 23, 1850, three years after Grace’s death, that her daughter’s theological work was severely disapproved of in England. Sarah responds to Miriam Cohen’s call for publishing Grace’s prayers in America, saying that

such a request had been made to her [Grace] but she seemed to shrink from it, fearing to be thought presumptuous. Had she met with the appreciation in England she has received in America, perhaps, she might have been induced to publish some of them [prayers] – as she did not, I cannot yet make up my mind to bring them before the Public.¹⁰

The mother’s letter reinforces Aguilar’s own feeling of being constantly “censored by would be critics” (Galchinsky 1999: 98). In an atypically bitter letter to Miriam Cohen dated October 30, 1844, Aguilar refers to Rebecca Gratz’s request in which Gratz (an American philanthropist who was a proponent of Jewish education and a pioneer in establishing charitable institutions) entreats Grace to publish her prayers. Most probably, these were prayers in the English language that might have been extremely enlightening for Jews, and especially useful for Jewish women, many of whom could not read the Hebrew prayers. Though it is clear from Aguilar’s letter that she believes such prayers could have been of great service to the Jewish community, she does not dare to publish

such a volume, as Miss Gratz describes – with my [Grace’s] own name, amongst our nation in England. If even my *Records of Israel* – simple Tales

as they are – are censured by would be critics as anti Jewish, my *Spirit of Judaism* by many violently condemned and my prospectus of my *Women of Israel*, greeted with both hinted and expressed disbelief in my capacity to write it, my dreadful presumption, to attempt it because as a Woman I could know nothing on the subject – what would such kind encouragers [sic] say, did I issue a book of prayer. (Galchinsky 1999: 98)

In this letter, Aguilar refers with bitter pain and irony, which usually are strange to her optimistic nature, to the Jewish critics' discrediting of her work. Here, she is no longer a Jewish moralist but an angry and hurt feminist who feels that her gender alone is the cause of the marginalization and even the rejection of her important work.

Galchinsky insightfully argues that throughout her career Aguilar was compelled to make two bargains – one with the Christians and the other with contemporary Jewish men. The first bargain granted Jews Christian tolerance, if the Jews, on their part, kept their traditions hidden from the public sphere (Galchinsky 1997: 37). According to the second, Jewish women would be given the opportunity to broaden their education if they restricted it to private learning and to teaching children at home. "Aguilar's bargains, articulated in romances, domestic fictions, and midrashim," says Galchinsky, "enabled her to break centuries' old exemptions on women's participating in the intellectual life of the Jewish community, and enabled her to create a new Jewish novelistic tradition from scratch" (Galchinsky 1997: 27). These two bargains, though seemingly different in their scope and nature, actually complement each other and properly serve the two major purposes of Aguilar's enterprise – that of advancing the status of Jews and minimizing the Christian society's attempts to convert them, and that of promoting Jewish women's general and religious education.

I claim that Aguilar's "bargains," which I prefer to call, compromises or concessions, are not to be judged as incidences of a woman giving in to the Jewish patriarchal leadership's censure, nor as attempts to diminish Jews' religiosity or to estrange them from Jewish ritual practices. Rather, Aguilar's mission is mainly directed at tactfully reaching a middle-way, which could promote the interests of the English Jewish community as a whole, and specifically, the personal and educational pursuits of Jewish women. "By reworking the hierarchy of public and private devotion," Cynthia Scheinberg declares, "Aguilar insists that women can claim full agency as Jewish devotional subjects, in contradistinction to various traditional practices and precepts that, in the nineteenth-century, tended to position women as second-class citizens within Jewish law" (2002: 160). In order to be acceptable as a model figure, especially by her female Christian readership, Aguilar's devotional rhetoric is adapted from Christian women's devotional rhetoric of the time, such as that used by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In "A Vision of Jerusalem" (1844), in which the narrator forecasts a reinstated Jewish home when sitting in a friend's church, Aguilar enquires "whether a Jewish voice can ever claim authority in a Christian culture" (Scheinberg 2002: 187).

Some modern critics, such as Mermin and Clapp-Itnyre, view women's devotional poetry as disturbing, since it points to the submissive position of Victorian

women, “reinforcing the self-effacement and self-suppression that threaten their existence as writers” (Mermin 70). I argue that Aguilar’s use of devotional rhetoric is not necessarily a sign of submissiveness; rather, I see it as one of Aguilar’s tactics to get recognized as a mainstream writer, and as such, to promote her social and educational agendas.

In one of the most personal passages in her correspondence with Miriam Cohen, Aguilar praises her addressee for her “spiritual feelings” and for the education and care Mrs. Cohen bestows on “her little nieces” (Galchinsky 1999: 104). While referring to Miriam’s long lasting wish to become a mother (which was granted several years later), Aguilar unveils her views vis-à-vis what she regarded as the Jewish mother’s most important vocation – educating children in the spirit of the Jewish tradition. She compares Miriam Cohen to the Biblical Hannah, “whose yearning as mine were not unaccepted by Him for He not only granted her prayer but blessed her in her child” (Galchinsky 1999: 95), mainly emphasizing that the blessing of the mother does not only depend on bearing a child (as she herself did not have children of her own), but on educating him or her. Once Miriam Cohen will have a child of her own, Aguilar feels certain that her friend will “lavish the love, with which God of Love has stored our hearts,” thus giving the Jewish mother the opportunity “to whom to teach Him and His mercies” (Galchinsky 1999: 95).

An interesting reference to *The Jewish Faith* in Aguilar’s letters to the Cohens sheds light on her multiple motives for writing this book, and on its major theme – the need of educating youth in the spirit of the Jewish tradition. In a letter to Miriam Cohen dated March 17, 1846, Aguilar, adopting again the identity of a moralist and educator, expresses her yearnings “for the foundation of a firm Religious hope, and principle,” thus sending a special message to the younger generation. She believes that “in youth doubts and question must arise. They cannot and ought not to rest satisfied with the Religion of their childhood and it is to satisfy these questions my present task is undertaken” (Galchinsky 1999: 105; *underlined in original*).

The book encompasses Aguilar’s theological thoughts about the spiritual proximity between Judaism and Christianity, again in an attempt to bridge over the differences and to “bargain” for mutual understanding and acceptance of one by the other. Both, according to Aguilar, “owe their origin to, and acknowledge the same living oracles of God – What does the New Testament teach but that, which we Hebrews knew and followed centuries before?” (Galchinsky 1999: 105). Here again, Aguilar takes on Christian women’s pietistic rhetoric. One of the motives for doing so might be that of reaching a wider readership. Yet, there is also a sense that Aguilar identifies with such rhetoric, since it reflects her genuinely passionate and deep personal spirituality as well. Nevertheless, in her private letters and in *The Jewish Faith* she also underscores the seniority and antiquity of Judaism, which make it the base for all monotheistic religions. She stresses her belief that God is

preparing the Nations for that great and glorious day when the veil shall be removed, and all shall know the One Sole God of Israel, that I can bear

with its strange mysteries, calmly and I trust with perfect charity. Perhaps these feelings may have arisen from my knowing so many truly, spiritually pious Christians – and my perfect conviction of their acceptance before God. (Galchinsky 1999: 105; *underline in original*)

Nevertheless, till “that great and glorious” day arrives, Jews, according to Aguilar, should make tremendous efforts to preserve their tradition and educate their children accordingly. Aguilar’s theological credo, at the heart of which stands her recurrent attempts to promote close associations between Christians and Jews, based on shared values, came under harsh scrutiny from different corners, both during her lifetime and by modern critics. Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, for example, criticizes Aguilar for putting forward “popular theology” that “does not excite either for its originality or for its profundity” (2003: 8).

Such pointed accusation ironically reiterates the criticism Aguilar was subjected to during her lifetime, especially from Orthodox Jewish male leaders, as well as from her publisher in America, Isaac Leeser. However, her critics disregard Aguilar’s main literary contribution, that of defending Judaism and protecting it from widely popular Philo-Semitic and anti-Semitic currents whose main goal was to convert Jewish youth and women to Christianity. Probably Aguilar’s theology is not groundbreaking, as she herself never presumed that it was;¹¹ probably, the compromises Aguilar suggests and her wish to bridge the gap between Jews and Christians seem at times as too naïve and impractical; probably, her feminist stance is often ambivalent. However, Aguilar’s educational and social agendas are praiseworthy, especially considering her lack of formal education, her young age and the humble social and economic strata from which she came. In addition, one should bear in mind that Aguilar operated in extremely difficult conditions – thrice alienated as a Jew, a woman and as the only contemporary English-Jewish female writer who had to make a living with her pen.

Aguilar’s compromises place her literary endeavours in a problematic place from the point of view of feminist criticism. Although no feminist literary research per-se has been done on Aguilar’s writings, critics have now and then commented on her undecided stand vis-à-vis women’s place in Jewish and Gentile societies. On the one hand, Aguilar unmistakably advocates women’s right to access education and knowledge, thus criticizing the patriarchal dominance over Jewish learning and Jewish texts. Nonetheless, Aguilar’s voice does not at all sound distinctively feminist, as it echoes perfectly the popular contemporary discourse defending the status of Jewish women voiced by rabbis and writers. These men, by stressing women’s high social position within the Jewish community, tried to rebut the popular claims of the opponents of the Jews’ Bill that Jewish women were ill-treated. “For opponents of the conferral of civic rights on Jews,” says Paula Hyman, “the treatment of women within Jewish tradition demonstrated that Jews remained ‘Orientals,’ perpetually other to European society” (2002: 155).

Moreover, Aguilar might be pronounced as an anti-feminist when she emphasizes the importance of women’s domestic “career,” their humbleness, and their devotion to the familial hearth. Aguilar’s letters are perfectly in line with the general ideology of domesticity in nineteenth-century England, according to which

feminine duties were disengaged from masculine work and economy. The Victorian home was “a place of peace and not strife, rest and not labor, confidence and not anxiety, unity and not division” (Cohen I). In a letter written to Miriam Cohen on October 30, 1844, Aguilar describes at length her domestic doctrine:

Home is Woman’s appropriate shining scene – and that an amiable disposition and loving heart, are so much dearer in Woman – than their superficial accomplishments which to many make the sole end and scope of their existence. Domestic affections and duties are not in general, brought as visibly before the young as they ought to be – It is my longing desire to represent them in all their natural beauty in whatever I write, if it is of a light or serious nature.... (Galchinsky 1999: 98).

When advocating the importance of women’s domestic duties, Aguilar juxtaposes these to women’s “accomplishments” outside the home sphere, which in her opinion are “superficial,” vain and valueless. This quotation is only one among many others that appear in her letters, prose and fiction, in which Aguilar passionately glorifies women’s domesticity. Nevertheless, we should not forget that for Aguilar, as for other nineteenth-century female writers, home was also the place of work. The separation of spheres – home: a female sphere; work: a male sphere – is not clear-cut in their case. Home is also the female writer’s place of labor, but unlike the male’s public working space, it is a secured place, which does not require the writer to interact socially.

Although her work is done at home, Aguilar still feels quite embarrassed to pursue a successful writing career. Thus in almost every tale and letter (addressed both to the Cohens and to D’Israeli) she apologizes at length for her literary pursuits, which ostensibly contradict her domestic credo. She repeatedly stresses her vocation in the role of God’s messenger and his humble servant, whose task is to pass God’s word and teaching on to the Jewish nation. She feels that God “had blessed my task,” stressing again her belief that “this spirit inspired me to write – and it is the same blessed spirit at work on those who read” (Galchinsky 1999: 90). In the same letter, she assures Mrs. Cohen that “this is no fake humility,” adding that her “religious writings [are] so distinct from myself, that I shrink with pain and dread from any undue praise” (Galchinsky 1999: 90). Aguilar envisions herself as a kind of prophet, probably comparable to Deborah or Hulda, whom she admires profoundly, and to whose prophetic gifts she dedicates long and detailed chapters in her book, *The Women of Israel*. She feels that without God’s guidance and divine inspiration, she and her biblical women prophets do not have a say, and it is this divine calling which legitimizes her work and their prophecies. Only God’s calling authorizes female political and communal activity occurring out of the domestic sphere.

In another interesting passage from Aguilar’s letter dated September 28, 1845, she rigorously criticizes women who “imitate the writings of the man and so cast aside the delicacy of thought and expression and even of creation, which should be their characteristic” (Galchinsky 1999: 102, *underlined in original*). These women, according to Aguilar, similarly to the Biblical Miriam, whom the writer

considers in her *The Women of Israel* “a false prophet,” transgress gender boundaries, appropriate male qualities of power and domination, and thus violate inherent female traits of “delicacy,” mildness and tenderness.

Aguilar is content with the Philadelphia review of her book, which acknowledges her writing as considerate, gentle and feminine, and which like “many Christian (English) papers have reviewed it in the a spirit of love and praise, which could not but be very pleasing to me alike as a Woman, an Author, and a Jewess,” as, she explains, “my greatest aim is that my works should always be feminine” (Galchinsky 1999: 102, *underline in original*). In this passage, Aguilar insightfully points to three important issues. First, she twice underlines the womanly aspect of her writing, which at once distinguishes her from other female writers who imitate men and grants her legitimacy to create outside what was traditionally considered as “the female domestic sphere.” Secondly, she refers to herself as “a Jewess,” thus rebuffing some of her contemporaries’ criticism regarding her practice of Marrano Judaism, which, they claimed, is closely associated with Christianity. Thirdly, by praising the Christian reviews of her books, she gets back at some of the Jewish reviewers who undermined her worth as a serious writer writing on theological issues and accused her of penetrating into male spheres, acts that were considered as unbecoming to women.

Aguilar’s constant accentuation of her “feminine” writing style, her criticism of female writers who “imitate” men, the persistent emphasis on her humble stance and on her role as God’s emissary, might suggest conformity with the patriarchal culture and raise questions about her quest for promoting women’s rights. This ambivalent agenda turns out to be even more problematic if we relate to Aguilar’s unsympathetic portrayal of the Biblical Miriam in *The Women of Israel*.

In a lengthy chapter about Miriam Aguilar reprimands her heroine

For fancying herself ... as zealous and earnest in the cause of God as she appeared to be. But for true piety, something more is wanted than the mere enthusiasms of the moment, or the high sounding religion of flowing verse. (Aguilar 1845: 189)

While defending Judaism as a religion that allows a woman to feel “quite as responsible a being as man before the Lord,” Aguilar accuses Miriam of false prophecy, of vanity and presumptuousness, and of an unjustified ambition of “sharing the holy triumph of that brother [Moses], and responding with apparently her whole heart, to the song of praise bursting forth from the assembled Israelites” (Aguilar, 1845: 189). A reader would probably expect Aguilar, an artist herself, to be taken with Miriam’s artistic gifts. Miriam was the first, and one of very few biblical women artists. She was also the first among the five biblical female prophets. The biblical text calls attention to Miriam’s art when saying that she “took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went after her, with timbrels, and with dances. And Miriam answered them, Sing, sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously” (*Exodus* 15:20).

Nevertheless, Aguilar completely disregards Miriam’s talents as a singer, musician, dancer, and the Jewish women’s leader. To her, Miriam’s song is an act of

defiance, of rebellion, a threat to male domination and to the domestic values she cherishes. It feels like some psychological ambivalence is at work here – as if Aguilar tries to suppress an inner demon or an alter ego that threatens her wellbeing. Similarly to Hawthorne’s narrator who describes the art of Miriam, a painter in *The Marble Faun*, as bold and rebellious (“there was the idea of woman, acting the part of a revengeful mischief towards man” (Hawthorne 1974: 44). Aguilar’s biblical Miriam is a rude and impudent artist. According to Aguilar, she “appears to have been one of those gifted beings, from whom the words of sacred song flow spontaneously...but for true piety, something more is wanted than the mere enthusiasm of the moment, or the high-sounding religion of flowing verse” (Aguilar 1845: 187). According to Chana Weisberg, however, Miriam was the true leader of the Jewish women. Her support, her kindness and the music with which she elevated their spirit, helped the Jewish women cope with the harsh experiences of leaving Egypt and wandering for forty years in the desert:

Engulfed in misery, the women did not lose their vision. Mourning their murdered children with their feminine sensitivity more keenly than any of their male counterparts possibly could, the women found the strength to fortify themselves not to lose hope. The women found *meri*, Miriam’s spirit of rebellion. They would rebel against depression that would have been a natural outgrowth of such circumstances. They would rebel against apathy. They would rebel against hopelessness. (Weisberg 2005: 2)

Aguilar is not impressed by Miriam’s independent spirit; she is even less impressed with her leadership skills and with her self-reliance. Even Miriam’s heroic act of saving her brother Moses is criticized. Aguilar accuses Miriam of “boldly addressing the princess of Egypt in the child’s [Moses’] behalf” (Aguilar 1845: 187). For Aguilar, it is an act that points to Miriam’s arrogant character and to her being “one of the most perfect delineations of woman” (Aguilar 1845: 187). Modern critics and more traditional midrashim, written mainly by male writers long time ago, usually view Miriam in a much more positive light. In the *Talmud*, it is explained that “there were three excellent leaders for Israel. They were Moses, Aaron and Miriam.” While Moses and Aaron were leaders for all the people, “Miriam was the teacher of the women” (*Talmud, Taanit* 9).

Miriam is not disqualified as a leader, though some critics suggest that as a woman her leadership was marginal or temporary. Susan Ackerman in an extremely illuminating article suggests that Miriam’s leadership “was assigned only within the context of liminal anti-structure, during a point in the narrative when she, although a woman, could assume an otherwise almost exclusively male role” (80). Ackerman analyses the narratives of the five biblical women prophets, suggesting that their rule was made possible only during pre-monarchic times, liminal periods or at times of social dysfunction. Whenever there was a central (male) ruler or when Israel reached a stage of re-aggregation, Jewish female leaders were disempowered (Ackerman 2002: 68–72).

In the *Midrash Rabbah*, *Shemot* 1:13, Miriam was called Puah, due to another episode: “she revealed her face brazenly (from the root *hofiya*) against Pharaoh

pronouncing, ‘Woe to this man, when G-d avenges him!’” Pharaoh was very angry with Miriam’s comment and wanted to kill her. But Jocheved appeased him, saying: “Will you pay attention to her? She is but a child who doesn’t realize to whom she is speaking, or what she is saying!” Miriam was only a young child at this time. Despite her tender years, she courageously stood up to the mightiest ruler on earth, boldly rebuking him for his cruelty to her people.

Interestingly, Aguilar, similarly to Miriam, was a fighter. She refused to give in to the relentless pressure of the Conversionist Societies; she also tried to help her people, and like Miriam, her goal was to encourage Jewish women expression, education and participation in spiritual endeavours and practices. However, for some reason Aguilar finds fault with the first female Jewish leader and artist, with Miriam. Why does Aguilar object to Miriam’s public activity? Why is Miriam accused of being a “false prophet”? Why does Aguilar glorify women such as Deborah, Hulda, Yocheved and particularly the Shunamite? There are no definite answers to these questions; however, I would speculate that, as suggested in her correspondence with D’Israeli, in Aguilar’s mind, bold, self-confident, and independent women elicited threat and fear. These women’s outspokenness could have jeopardized her effort of advancing women’s cause. She herself, as I have mentioned earlier, tried to hold back her literary ambitions and public involvement in communal affairs. She believed that her educational missions could be achieved only at the price of compromise and of timid, self-effacing and almost underground labor.

Aguilar’s favourable depictions of Huldah and Deborah imply that these women are “true prophets.” Similarly to herself, and unlike Miriam, they do not seek glory in their public and artistic careers. Aguilar views them as God’s messengers, whose task is to “sing” the glory of God. Unlike Miriam, who is accused of jealousy, vanity and presumptuousness, Deborah is praised for “the simplicity and lowliness of the prophetess’s natural position” and, Aguilar emphasizes, it “is beautifully illustrated by the term she applies to herself – neither princess, nor governor, nor judge, nor prophetess, though both the last offices she fulfilled ...a *MOTHER* in Israel” (Aguilar, 1845: 207, *emphasis in original*). Aguilar, who might have otherwise criticized Deborah for fulfilling the important public roles of judge and military leader, stresses the heroine’s domestic qualities, those of wife and mother. These “feminine” functions, and the fact that Deborah was chosen by God, accord her public mandate. Aguilar’s portrayal of Deborah totally neglects her martial assertiveness. To Aguilar, Deborah is not a strong woman who moved in a world dominated by men as a respected leader. Neither is she a woman of strength and conviction who brought order out of chaos. *The Book of Judges* calls her “Eshet Lapidot” – “the woman of torches” or “the fiery woman,” which fits the image of Deborah and the leadership she provided at a crucial time in Israel’s history. Aguilar, however, is particularly careful not to portray Jewish women as rebels, defying male hegemony.

I would also suggest that Aguilar’s praise of domesticity and feminine docility reflects, at least to a certain extent, her intricate personal relationships with some prominent contemporary male critics (Leeser and Franklin) and literati (Isaac D’Israeli) . Her main critic was her publisher, the American rabbi, author, trans-

lator, editor and founder of the Jewish press of America, Isaac Leeser. Leeser edited Aguilar's book, *The Spirit of Judaism* (1842), and published it in America, where it became tremendously popular. A second edition was issued in 1849 by the first American Jewish Publication Society; and a third (Cincinnati 1864) has an appendix containing thirty-two poems (bearing the dates 1838–1847), all but two reprinted from *The Occident*. Leeser's notes serve mainly to dispute Aguilar's decline in adherence to Jewish tradition, which he appropriates to her Marrano ancestry and to her country life, cut off from association with Jews. Leeser also claims that as a woman whose knowledge of Jewish theological texts is minimal and superficial, Aguilar should not have meddled in topics beyond her intellectual scope (Galchinsky 1996: 75–77; Sussman 1995: 134–134). Aguilar, probably influenced by the Protestant spirit of England, argues for religion based on the biblical text as opposed to that inspired by later traditions that were chiefly composed by men (Aguilar 1853: 27–28). Her editor, Leeser, responds to this claim in the introduction to the book, saying that the interpretations of the Holy text are of great value and attest to the continuing bond between God and his people:

It is useless to say, that the Scriptures speak for themselves; they assuredly do so to the person who has received instruction; but it requires no argument to prove that difference of education makes people take a different view of the sacred Text...Certainly the Scriptures should constitute the daily exercise of every Israelite; but the interpretations, dogmas and opinions of our ancients should not be neglected; ay, tradition is the firm support of the Unity of God.
(Aguilar 1853: 25)

Galchinsky maintains that the main difference in Aguilar's understanding and that of her editor "was a difference between Aguilar's version of reform and Jewish men's, it was that hers was motivated by an acute awareness that she had been excluded from many of the primary texts of her tradition because of her gender" (Galchinsky 1996: 145).

Leeser's notes were printed, without Aguilar's consent, and she was deeply offended by their misogynist subtext. Galchinsky rightly suggests that in Aguilar's later works, such as *The Women of Israel* and "the Authoress," her "call[s] for women's subordination come to seem more like rhetorical gestures intended to prevent Jewish men's censorship than expression of an essentialized view of gender" (Galchinsky 1996: 40). Aguilar had, even if just ostensibly, to stick to her compromises and utilize a "rhetorical play" if she wanted to get published. Playing by the rules of Leeser and Jacob Franklin, the editor of the *Voice of Jacob*, a Jewish-British monthly periodical, she ensured their and the Jewish English and American communities' recognition of her as a morally upright writer.

Nevertheless, while in her public activity Aguilar refrained from openly reacting to Leeser's attack, in her private correspondence with Miriam and Solomon Cohen Aguilar feels free to voice her disapproval of Leeser's editorials.¹² In a letter to Solomon Cohen dated November 1, 1844, Aguilar complains of Leeser's unfair treatment, both literary and financial, saying that "even now Mr. Leeser

has not remitted to me, or even accounted for the sales of *The Spirit of Judaism* in some Towns and Colonies to which he sent them – and therefore except to those sent to Philadelphia – I did not wish to trouble him further” (Galchinsky, 1999: 100). In the same letter she firmly accuses Leeser of criticizing her book, *Records of Israel*, with the purpose of harming its sales: “his review of my *Records*, by accepting the fake charges of the *Voice of Jacob* was calculated greatly to injure the sale of the book” (Galchinsky 1999: 100). Criticism of *Records of Israel* which appeared in *Occident* 2 (July 1844), written and edited by Leeser, blamed her for writing “anti-Jewish” tales.

An interesting, though somewhat gossipy, reference to Aguilar’s uneasy rapport with Leeser appears in the correspondence between Gratz, an American educator and philanthropist, and her niece Miriam Cohen. Gratz had a brief correspondence with Aguilar but was mainly informed about Aguilar’s life and career through Aguilar’s correspondence with the Cohens. Gratz, a close friend of Leeser’s, writes in one of her letters to her niece Miriam that her Philadelphia acquaintance believes that Aguilar could have been a suitable match for Leeser if he and Aguilar had met. Referring to Aguilar’s bad health, Gratz says that she is

sorry to hear such bad accounts of Miss Aguilar’s health. How I should like to see this interesting woman. I wish she had some friend in this country to invite her here. Perhaps a change of climate might restore her. I do not know her age but believe she was nineteen... Sara [Gratz’s friend] tells Mr. Leeser she will be his wife if they ever meet. When she first wrote to him, she took him for a sage advanced in years and from the deference she pays to age [I] think she is still very green. (*Gratz’ Letters*, November 17, 1845)

From this letter it is quite clear that Gratz did not know about the tense relationship between Leeser and Aguilar. Nevertheless, it is quite ironic that rumors about a possible match between Aguilar and Leeser spread across the ocean while at the same time Aguilar felt deeply hurt by Leeser’s condescending attitude and his harsh scrutiny of her work. In another letter from Gratz to her niece, sent right after the news of Aguilar’s death reached America, Gratz acknowledges, though allusively, that Leeser’s treatment of Aguilar was unjust:

The last arrivals brought heavy news for us all, my dear Miriam, heavy news for the literary world, most heavy for the Jewish nation, in the death of Miss Aguilar...Send some testimonial, my dear Miriam, worthy of the memory of Miss Aguilar, your friend, for *The Occident*. Mr. Leeser’s obituaries are not remarkable for their appropriateness and such a subject should not be carelessly handled. I do lament her more than I can express. No such an Israelite pen has been consecrated to the service of religion for ages. Her works will ‘praise her in the gates’ and live to enlighten generations to come. (*Gratz’ Letters*, October 24, 1847)

In this letter, Gratz highly praises Aguilar’s contribution to the Jewish literary world and to the Jewish nation as a whole. Yet, she implies that Leeser’s obituary

undermines the value of Aguilar's work, and, therefore, it is inappropriate for the commemoration of such a gifted writer. It is obviously ironic that Aguilar's editor, who was also the editor of *The Occident*, could not, following the writer's tragic death, give tribute to Aguilar's talent as suggested by Gratz; it should have been granted to her by others. Gratz's last letter to Miriam Cohen, in which she refers to Aguilar's extraordinary contribution to her nation, is only one of many written after her death (mainly addressed to Aguilar's mother), and it is just another testimony of the great contribution of Aguilar's work:

The death of Miss Aguilar is truly a national calamity ... She read the Scriptures understandingly and drew inspiration from its pages. She illustrated the beauties and virtues of character and brought them so naturally out as living examples that all your sympathies were engaged ... Everything Miss Aguilar has written makes you love her, and it is sad to think that her very zeal in a holy cause shortened her stay on earth.

(Gratz' Letters, November 8, 1847)

Aguilar died a premature death after suffering from a severe illness she contracted in 1835 and from the effect of which she never fully recovered. Moreover, she suffered much from the undue treatment of her critics, and died heartbroken and frustrated. Aguilar's incessant "zeal" for the betterment of the Jewish nation's condition and the strengthening of its tradition is certainly praiseworthy. Nonetheless, it was also troubling for me, at times, when reading Aguilar's letters (though written to an intimate female friend) that Aguilar concentrates on discussing her literary tastes, her educational and social agenda, her support of Jewish spirituality, without any mentioning of her personal sentiments or private affections.¹³ She talks at length about her brothers' careers, about her mother's emotions and sympathies, but never about her own intimate feelings.

Conclusion

Aguilar's triple "Otherness" – her Jewishness, her gender and her artistic career frequently complemented each other in the creation of Aguilar's multiple identities. At times, though, such triple "Otherness" was responsible for some paradoxical agendas, which often raised questions about Aguilar's "true" identity. As a devout Jew, well-instructed, but mainly self-educated in theological matters, and as a fervent protector of Jewish schooling and national and religious identities, Aguilar fought for the establishment of Jewish educational institutions accessible to all members of the Jewish community (including women and youth). Zealously opposing the insistent, and from time to time, even fierce attempts of the Conversionist societies to convert Jews, Aguilar believed that only unified, resistant and at the same time, liberal Jewish communities could withstand the well-organized and highly-motivated Conversionist propaganda.

As a woman, and especially a Jewish woman, Aguilar's agenda of promoting the educational and social standing of her gender occasionally clashed with the

persistent determination of the male-dominated Orthodox Jewish institutions to exclude women from delving into Halachaic and Talmudic learning and from writing on theological matters. Women were allowed to visit the synagogue and pray in Hebrew, a language most had never been instructed in, but were not supposed to participate in erudite theological debates. Aguilar's daring attempts to study and write on theological issues often resulted in stern accusations from the leaders of the Jewish community, Jewish male literati and even from her editor, Leiser, who charged her with ignorance or of practicing Marrano or crypto-Jewish rituals.

As a female artist, living and creating in the first half of the nineteenth-century, Aguilar's social and professional status was no less problematic than her Jewishness or gender. British society, abiding by the Victorian norms and dominated by conservative patriarchal codes of conduct, did not encourage female artistic ambitions, to say the least. This society maintained a meticulous separation of spheres; the domestic sphere was the woman's proper place, while the outer "marketplace" was secured almost exclusively to males. A Jewish female artist and activist whose aims included the promotion of women's education and the spread of literacy among women, paired with firm opposition to Conversionists' causes, thus transgressed the codes set by Jewish and non-Jewish male authorities was certainly censured. Aguilar's endless attempts at finding a mid-way allowed her to some extent to advance her agendas without fully jeopardizing her stance among the Jewish and non-Jewish literati, critics and public. Nevertheless, the concessions Aguilar continuously had to make in order to be heard and published lessened the effect and probably also the artistic value of her literary endeavors.

Critics, who pass judgment on her work, arguing that it either lacks assertiveness or does not offer real innovation, certainly fail to understand the benefit of her educational work. They also fail to grasp the perpetual "juggling" Aguilar was forced to perform in order to reconcile the contradictory demands made on her. They seem to disregard the social, political and economic climates in mid-nineteenth-century England and the prevailing attitudes towards Jews, women and artists. Such a critique does a disservice to the recent attempts made by a group of literary scholars at reviving the rich and valuable literary production of female Jewish artists that has been consigned to almost absolute oblivion.

Notes

- ¹ David Woolf Marks, the founder of the London Reform Synagogue, maintained in one of his first sermons that Jewish religious teaching is not "limited to either age or sex. Indeed, there were certain periods," he said, "when it was compulsory upon all the women to attend the holy house" (Marks, vol. 1, 111).
- ² She was educated at home except for 18 months spent in school. "A gifted, self-taught writer, she started writing poems, short stories for children and a diary at the age of thirteen. Already in her twenties, Aguilar became well-known in England and America for her theological works dealing with Jewish subjects, as well as for her poetry and fictional work about Jews and non-Jews." (Rabinovich 2012: 162).

- 3 Pre-twentieth-century friendships remained almost unchanged from the 1760s to the 1880s, a period when “continuity, not discontinuity, characterized this female world” (Smith-Rosenberg 1975: 10).
- 4 Letter writing, as some critics have noted, allows writers in general and women writers specifically, to voice a range of concerns about their private and public lives. In her study of Victorian women, *Disorderly Conduct*, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg deals with letters written by women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who were “turning to one another for comfort,” and forming bonds “often physical as well as emotional” (1985: 71). Linda S. Kauffman, building on Smith-Rosenberg’s work, suggests, somewhat metaphorically, that the letter also serves as the repository of feminine desire in literature, the “reading of a bodily residue” (1986: 27–28).
- 5 Building on Bakhtinian theory on authoritative and internally-persuasive discourse, James Daybell (1999) examines the “mechanics of letter writing” to more fully understand how letters shaped women’s lives; he writes: “Clearly, the mechanics of letter writing are of fundamental importance when looking at a range of interesting issues relating to women’s writing and their lives. These include women’s persuasive and rhetorical skills, the degree of confidence and authority that they displayed, self-fashioning and the creation of personas, empowerment and female agency, as well as the intimacy and emotional content of social and family relationships...” (2006: 162).
- 6 The examination of the epistolary form leads into a discussion of this genre’s relationship to the wider category of women’s autobiographical genres. Marlene Kadar contends that life-writing, similarly to letter-writing, is by definition self-exploratory, which makes it for the most part a suitable form for women’s reflection on their status (1992: 9–15). Letters let women examine their relationships with their self, the world, and their spirituality. Cecile Jagodzinski notes that “reading and writing are actions that require individual initiative and autonomy that reinforce the notion of personal responsibility for one’s spiritual life” (1995: 44). In the case of Aguilar’s letter-writing, the examination of “one’s spiritual life” is extended far beyond the private experience.
- 7 Jacob Franklin, in a review of Aguilar’s book, *The Spirit of Judaism*, published on December 3, 1842 in the influential British-Jewish journal, *The Voice of Jacob*, writes: “A lady, and that too young a lady, whatever the advantages of quick perception conceded to her sex, is, by the iron rule of custom, limited to fewer opportunities of acquiring that information and experience, which might restrict a too apt disposition to generalize from few facts” (quoted in Galchinsky 2003: 365–366). Aguilar’s American-Jewish editor of *The Spirit of Judaism*, Isaac Leiser, either altered Aguilar’s text directly or in various instances added lengthy notes, making the original text difficult to read. Noteworthy, following Franklin’s review Aguilar never published theological tractates.
- 8 The West London Synagogue was founded by a group of Jews who broke from the old Sephardic and Ashkenazi synagogues, chiefly due to ritual and theological disagreements. Aguilar, a fervent advocate of the Reform movement, is very careful, however, not to publicly articulate her views on the dispute, saying only that there was “some division” within the Jewish community.
- 9 David Woolf Marks, the founder of the London Reform Synagogue, maintained in one of his first sermons that Jewish religious teaching is not “limited to either age or sex. Indeed, there were certain periods,” “when it was compulsory upon all the women to attend the holy house” (Marks, vol. 1, 111).
- 10 Sarah Aguilar’s letters to Mrs. Solomon Cohen of Savannah, Georgia, are kept with *The Moses Papers*, #2639, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. They are quoted in this dissertation for the first time. Sarah Aguilar eventually edited Grace’s prayers and sermons, which are contained in a volume entitled *Sabbath Thoughts and Sacred Communings* (London, Groombridge and Sons, 1853).

- ¹¹ In a letter addressed to Isaac D'Israeli, Aguilar apologetically asserts "I dare not expose to the eye of a censorious world (unless indeed my situation were as independent as my thought are free) poems, which have only met the judgment of affection – my own opinion is of slender importance, for what is the couplet, for which the Author himself does not feel regard – and for many months I have entertained the too presumptuous thought of entreating your candid judgment of some poems, which I have long been desirous of publishing, either in magazines or as a volume – you will be surprised at a thought so extraordinary; it sprung from the repeated perusal of your interesting and most valuable work" (Grace Aguilar's letter to Isaac D'Israeli, 29 July 1840).
- ¹² Since the Middle Ages, and as late as the nineteenth-century, women were not expected to publicly voice their political and social concerns. Letters, therefore, became an alternative stage for women's exchange of ideas and for their political involvement in pressing contemporary affairs. Jacques Derrida refers to letters as a system that produces privacy. For him "Envois": "the letter, the epistle... is not a genre but all genres, literature itself" (1987: 48).
- ¹³ Since classical times, letter writing has been associated with female writing (Goldsmith 1989: 7). Ovid's *Heroides* is a collection of fictional letters in which Ovid takes upon himself the voices of classical heroines who correspond with absent lovers. Chaucer and Shakespeare used letters as vehicles of fostering the illusion of a woman's authentic voice.

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