In the Shadow of the New Woman: Amy Levy’s Lesbian Aestheticism

Principal Investigator: Elissa Myers

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kathryn Ledbetter, Professor, English Department

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2.1 In my thesis, I will explore the way in which the full understanding of the works of Amy Levy, a nineteenth century Jewish lesbian poet, has been hindered by the tendency of scholars to identify her with the figure of the New Woman. The New Woman was a progressive political construct of womanhood, appearing in the popular press and novels of the 1890s. Though Levy was progressive, she was not political, and she had already died by the time the New Woman came into vogue. I intend to visit the British Library and the Amy Levy archive in London, in order to access her unpublished works, as well as periodicals containing her works, and personal documents that are held there. From viewing these materials in their original contexts, I expect to be able to discover more fully how her works and her life exhibit characteristics that have been overlooked and downplayed in favor of the New Woman label.

2.2 This project is significant to the field of English Literature because scholars have hitherto neglected aspects of Levy’s identity that are important for understanding her work, and women’s experience of the nineteenth century. The focus on the political label “New Woman” has obscured the stylistic features of Levy’s work, and has obscured the fact that while she was a feminist, she was not political. The focus on defining her by this label has also caused scholars to neglect other important elements of her identity. For instance, less work has been done on her sexuality as it effects her work. Because I will be examining primary sources, I have the chance to discover things about Levy that few scholars have yet to articulate, and therefore, to contribute new knowledge to the discussion of Levy’s life and works.
3.1 While popular scholarship states that author Amy Levy represented the highly political feminist figure of the New Woman, I will reconcile Levy’s status as a progressive feminist with her apolitical fictional works. I have done research on the New Woman previously for a class entitled, Sex, Drugs, and Cabaret, and have written a paper on this topic.

3.2 More research using primary sources is needed to determine how Levy scholars have neglected Levy’s aesthetic style and subjectivity as a lesbian. For example, biographer Linda Hunt Beckman discusses Levy’s relationships with women, but she does not connect these relationships to Levy’s literary technique. Access to Levy’s works at the British Museum will help me to determine how Levy’s sexuality and her feminism interact to influence her work, helping future scholars overcome the reductive New Woman label.

3.3 In order to articulate this new perspective on Levy, I need to access primary materials that can only be found at the British Library, including Volumes 1-3 of the magazine Woman’s World, in which her work was originally published, as well as some of Levy’s unpublished manuscripts. During my research trip to London, I, Elissa Myers, the Principal Investigator, will study these materials at length each day. This will ensure that my work does not repeat the interpretive mistakes of past scholars, but relies on materials that express Levy’s ideas in the most direct way.

3.4 I intend to discover the connection between Levy’s apolitical style and her identity as a lesbian. This research would help scholars of English Literature to theorize a broader definition of aestheticism, the school to which Levy belonged, and help gender history scholars to theorize common stylistic characteristics of nineteenth-century lesbian authors. My methodology includes using literary sources and primary historical documents, which is appropriate for historically grounded literary work.

3.5 I plan to publish my research in both a physical format through Alkek and via e-Commons, and to present it at the Thesis Forum.
3.6 I plan to evaluate my research during the project in light of work done by other Levy scholars. My research could help future scholars by engaging with sources that are difficult to access, and by dispelling reductive labels in favor of a more holistic picture of Levy.

3.7 I plan to develop this project into a doctoral dissertation, continuing to study Levy’s lesbian subjectivity, thereby paving the way for other work on the theorization of the styles of lesbian authors in the nineteenth century.

3.8 I will organize the research in coordination with Dr. Ledbetter in weekly meetings.

3.9 I plan to develop this project into a doctoral dissertation, continuing to study Levy’s lesbian subjectivity, thereby paving the way for other work on the theorization of the styles of lesbian authors in the nineteenth century.

3.10 I, the Principal Investigator, Elissa Myers, am a senior undergraduate student in the English department, and am embarking on this research in fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Thesis. Dr. Kathryn Ledbetter, the Faculty Advisor, is a professor in the English department. She suggests primary and secondary research materials for me to use and reviews drafts.

3.11 This project can meet its objectives in innovative ways by largely focusing on primary sources, allowing me to develop an original perspective on Levy’s work. This project is interdisciplinary, since it engages with the already interdisciplinary disciplines of Women’s Studies, Jewish Studies, (as Levy is Jewish) and Queer Theory.

3.12 It is required for me to write a thesis, as I am an Honors minor. However, as the thesis course is within the Honors College, I consider the SURF grant to be an appropriate grant to apply for.
4.1 Curriculum Vitae - Elissa Myers

EDUCATION

B.A. in English (May 2013), Texas State University - San Marcos, Texas

Honors Undergraduate Thesis: In the Shadow of the New Woman: Amy Levy’s Lesbian Aestheticism

Minor: Honors Studies

Overall GPA: 3.94
Major GPA: 4.0

HONORS

Honor Society Membership:
Alpha Lambda Delta, Fall 2009-Spring 2013
Alpha Psi Omega, Fall 2009-Spring 2013
Sigma Tau Delta, Fall 2011-Spring 2013

Dean’s List:
Fall 2009-Spring 2012.

Scholarships:
AT&T Foundation Scholarship Fall 2009-Fall 2013, TILF Scholarship Fall 2009-Fall 2013, Presidential Scholarship Fall 2009-Fall 2013, Robert Walts Scholarship Fall 2011-Spring 2013, ASG Scholarship Fall 2011-Spring 2013 Honors College Scholarship Fall 2011-Spring 2012, Emmie Craddock Scholarship (Awarded by Honors College) Fall 2012-Spring 2013

Other:
Nominated for 2012 Outstanding Women’s Studies Scholar Award by Diann McCabe, M.F.A.;
Submitting paper “Intertextuality as Power: The Magic of Stories in the Works of E. Nesbit” for the Carol Gay Award (under consideration).

CONFERENCE PAPERS


“Sacrificial Mothers and Fat Daughters: Challenging Ideal Womanhood in Edna O’Brien’s The Country Girls” will be presented at the Sigma Tau Delta International Convention, Portland, OR March 2013


PUBLISHED PAPERS


WORK EXPERIENCE

Honors Student Coordinator - Texas State University – San Marcos Honors College (August 2010-present)
February 21, 2013

Dear Honors Research Grant Committee:

I am writing to request that Elissa Myers be awarded research funds necessary for adequate completion of her Honors thesis. She has chosen an excellent topic that engages a study of fin-de-siècle British writer Amy Levy, and Elissa would like to do primary research in the Amy Levy archive in Britain. She also intends to view periodicals containing Levy’s publications, available only at the British Library. As Elissa’s Thesis Director, I fully recommend this trip and feel that the experience will be extremely valuable for her future career in academia. Elissa is on schedule with her thesis, and I am confident that she will finish this spring as expected.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
Kathryn Ledbetter
Professor of English
KLedbetter@txstate.edu
4.4 2 - I, Elissa Myers, the Principal Investigator, will travel by air (Delta Airlines, coach, two-way-travel) to London, England for a 3-day research visit at the British Library and the Amy Levy Collection. This visit will allow me to view primary source documents only available at the British Library. The per diem cost covers two meals, as continental breakfast is provided at my hostel. I will not need to pay for cab or bus fare to and from the Library, because it is only a twelve-minute walk from the hostel.

17 - Hotel Stay: Principal Investigator (Elissa Myers) will stay at the Clink Hostel in London, in an 8-bed dorm, which costs $47.14 per night. The total cost for three nights is $93.27.
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If project costs exceed available funding, enter Applicant, University, and External funding on lines 30-32 above.