Kate Bateman
Sanitizing the Beautiful Jewess

Stefanie Halpern

Young ladies at evening parties already ask between pauses in the quadrille, Have you seen Miss Bateman? Or, How do you like Leah? To which the answer is perhaps—the person questioned being a cynical male—she is stagey, forced, awkward, and speaks powerfully though her nose. Whereupon the questioner shrugs up her pretty shoulders in derision, and thinks her companion “a brute” as doubtless he is. But if the question had been asked of the other sex, the answer would most probably have been, “She is lovely, and she has such beautiful arms and her curse is the most beautiful thing I ever heard; and the scene with the little girl when she cries is splendid—it is lovely;” which combined criticisms will perhaps give the reader as precise a notion of what Miss Bateman’s Leah is, as if it were written in more formal and conventional phraseology.

—Baily’s Magazine of Sports and Pastimes (1864:323)

On 8 December 1862, 19-year-old Kate Bateman, chased by a rabble band of anti-Semites, bounded onto the stage for the first time as Leah the Jewess in Augustin Daly’s play, Leah the Forsaken. With Bateman as the play’s main attraction, Leah the Forsaken was to become one of the most beloved plays of the second half of the 19th century. Artists of the day sought to immortalize Bateman’s Leah in poetry and paintings. Many an actress wishing to exhibit her own powers of emotional acting looked to embody the character that Kate Bateman had created.

Little scholarship has been devoted to Leah the Forsaken, and less to Kate Bateman. What exists touches only tangentially upon the issues of class, gender, race, and sexuality that arise when examining the interplay between play text, character, actress, critic, and audience. As one of the most well-known American dramas on the mid-19th-century stage to portray a Jewish woman, Leah the Forsaken is often mentioned in discussions of the image of the Jew in American literature. Because the characterization of Leah is not anti-Semitic, the play is inserted into a category of plays deemed “philo-Semitic,” such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s Nathan the Wise (1779) and Richard Cumberland’s The Jew (1794). As problematic as this category is, “philo-Semitic” aptly describes key elements of the play. To say, however, that the play was viewed by the contemporary middle-class American audience as such would be to miss those nuances of the play that lent it its layered saliency.

In any case, to limit the scope of study to only the themes of the play is to omit a large contender in the success or failure of 19th-century plays—their star actor. Competing for the loyalty of a certain theatergoing constituency, the star actor/actress became representative of the class for whom he/she acted (McDermott 1998:193). In the case of Leah the Forsaken, Kate Bateman became the vehicle through which and upon whom the hopes and fears of the audience were played out. In an age where the role of women in middle-class society was held up to

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strict moral standards, the 19th-century actress, navigating the margins of middle-class purity and respectability, was at once alluring and threatening to audiences (Marra 2006:17).

This, coupled with the fact that Bateman, a non-Jew, was embodying a distinctly Jewish role, makes for an interesting analysis. In a country where the question of how the growing German Jewish population might fit into the fabric of the United States, Americans were looking for a way to reconcile contradictory notions about the Jews. *Leah the Forsaken*, with Bateman as its core, allowed the American middle-class audience to watch their morals, fears, and intolerances played out on the stage nightly. A close examination of Kate Bateman’s theatrical representation of the Jewess, then, is the key to understanding the play’s surprising success despite the fact that *Leah the Forsaken* presents a position on both the woman and the Jew that seems antithetical to 19th-century middle-class American standards.

Augustin Daly adapted *Leah the Forsaken* from *Deborah*, a well-known German play by Salmon Mosenthal. In Daly’s version, Leah, a Jewess living in the forest bordering an 18th-century German village, falls passionately in love with Rudolf, the son of the Christian town magistrate. Nathan, a Jewish apostate, convinces Rudolf to test Leah’s love by offering her a bag of money in return for leaving town. Nathan gives the money to an old Jewish couple, but sends word to Rudolf that Leah has accepted the bribe. Consequently, Rudolf renounces his love for Leah and thereafter marries Madalena, the niece of the village priest. Witnessing the marriage of her lover, Leah, in a fit of rage, wields a dreadful and vengeful curse against Rudolf and his family.

Five years pass and a wandering band of Jews travels through the village on their way to America. Now sickly and haggard, and still vengeful over Rudolf’s marriage, Leah enters Rudolf’s home, a dagger concealed beneath her skirts. But Leah, upon meeting the daughter of Madalena and Rudolf, whom they have named after the Jewess, embraces the namesake child. As her hate and vengeance is converted to love and forgiveness, Leah repeals her curse and
blesses the family. After exposing Nathan as an apostate and a murderer, Leah, in the throes of death, leaves the village.

For months after its opening on 8 December 1862, at the Howard Athenaeum in Boston, mixed reviews of *Leah the Forsaken* flooded the theatre and arts sections of daily newspapers. One reviewer claimed that Daly’s play was “a finely written production” (in Asermely 1973:46). The *New York Herald* of 26 January 1863, however, lamented, “[T]he piece does no credit to the translator, who has made a melodramatic hash of one of Mosenthal’s best dramas.” Several reviewers complained that Daly’s play was poorly written, employing tedious language, crude imagery, and poor grammar (*New York Times* 1863). Bateman’s performance, too, received a smattering of mixed reviews. Although in one review Bateman was described as a “second-rate actress” (*Daily Picayune* 1865), and elsewhere as an actress who “disappoints the instant she speaks” (*Orchestra* 1864), Bateman was, for the most part, lauded for her performance. Reviews touted her Leah as a “splendid creation” (*Philadelphia Inquirer* 1863) and hailed Bateman as “a great tragic artist” (*Illustrated London News* 1868). Critics particularly harsh towards Daly’s writing claimed that “[i]t is […] only Miss Bateman who makes ‘Leah’ a drama worthy of even the slightest admiration” (*New York Herald* 1868). Bateman was praised for her emotional style of acting and for her ability to extend pathos to the hearts of the audience (*Manchester Guardian* 1865). Several rightly predicted that Bateman was “not likely to play anything but Leah for years” (*Evening Union* 1864). Indeed, although Bateman played various leading roles throughout her 30-year career, she continually returned to the character of the tragic Jewess, filling theatres time and again to overflowing.

Although critical reviews may have been mixed, both the play and Bateman were unquestionably great successes with the audience. Indeed, the play was staged for five weeks at New York’s Niblo’s Garden and enjoyed an unprecedented 211-performance run at the Adelphi.
Theatre in London. Much of what made Bateman’s performance so popular may be explained, in part, by the disconnect between the stage and reality. American authors who dealt with Jews and Judaism, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Marble Faun* ([1860] 1990), did little to base their characters on any existing reality. Instead, these writers borrowed preexisting English stereotypes of the Jew, which had remained generally unchanged since their advent in medieval Europe. Rather than creating characters that were illustrative of the American Jew, American authors, until well into the late 19th century, appropriated Shakespeare’s Shylock (*The Merchant of Venice*) or Cumberland’s stereotypical Sheva (*The Jew*), and transplanted them onto American soil.

In Daly’s case, his Leah was derived from the image of the beautiful Jewess, a literary trope originating in medieval literature composed during a time when sex between Jew and Gentile was punishable by death. The image of the tempting and exotic Jewess who seduces a Christian lover has found many forms in European literature. In all cases, from Shakespeare’s Jessica (*The Merchant of Venice*) to Fromental Halévy’s Rachel (*La Juive*) to Sir Walter Scott’s Rebecca (*Ivanhoe*), the Jewish female body, objectified as it is vilified, is presented as an object that is simultaneously sexually desirable and morally repulsive.

The beautiful Jewess lies in contrast to her male counterpart who, grotesque in his femininity, stands in true opposition to the male Christian. With sickly yellow skin, withered frames, and hooked noses, Jewish males, guilty of supposedly killing Christ, could not escape the physical markers of their vile crime. On the other hand, Jewish women, whose innocence regarding Christ’s crucifixion was confirmed by the grace afforded to Mary Magdalene by Jesus, were looked upon less negatively than their male counterparts. Although the beautiful Jewess is at once a threat to and an object of desire for the male Christian community, as a woman, she is susceptible to male influence, specifically to conversion, and thus less of a threat than men, who cannot be brought to salvation through Christianity (Lewin 2008:240).

Daly hews to this typology. Although when the play opens, Nathan has been living as a Christian for the past 25 years, his actions are noticeably unchristian. Like Shylock, who must adhere to the letter of the law even at the expense of his daughter, Nathan’s determination to strictly observe the law excluding Jews from society is an act of revealment, even as Nathan believes he is concealing his Jewish identity. Nathan’s fear concerning his acceptance into Christian society is manifest in a psychologically rooted hatred towards Judaism, and his overly self-conscious attempt to “pass” as a member of the dominant culture authenticates his Otherness. In an age when scientific racism was coming into its own, and when the question of whether or not environmental factors could erase one’s inherent cultural identity, Nathan’s ultimate inability to become a true Christian would have confirmed for the middle-class audience that male members of the “Hebrew” race were unable to transcend their marginalization (Romeyn 2008:153–55).

The transformation Leah undergoes — from Jewish vengeance to Christian goodwill and forgiveness — is indicative of the way in which Jewish women were perceived in contrast to Jewish men. Nathan must be removed from society because the qualities of Jewishness can never be removed from his person. Not only a villain, Nathan is the epitome of the wandering Jew, the descendant of Cartaphilus, condemned to wander the earth until the time of the second coming (Rosenberg 1960:188). Leah, on the other hand, who possesses the feminine quality of forgiveness, has the power to be redeemed from her faults as a Jew (Valman 2007:41). Leah, by repealing her curse, leaving Jewish vengeance behind, and embracing Christian forgiveness, is redeemed because of her conversion. For Leah, death and conversion occur almost in tandem, and the embrace of Christian morality ends her wandering.

As the play opens, the townspeople gather in a mob to “seek the accursed witch” (Daly 1862:9) because of the fear that the Jewess has come to the village to “poison our wells and fountains [...] to bewitch our children that they become infected” (8). Nathan rouses the crowd
with cries of the blood libel: “To-morrow they celebrate their accursed Passover, when they
devour little children as sacrifice” (9). Rudolf, always in the woods and not in Church, undergoes noticeable emotional transformations because of Leah’s love. Madalena exclaims, “Why
are you so changed? You are not at peace in your father’s house” (11). What is more, even in the
midst of his love, Rudolf describes Leah as the dangerous Jewish temptress. He says of Leah,
“[S]ince that night a strange bond draws me to thee — thou givest me no rest nor peace — in
my sleep thy image is ever present — thy dark eyes are ever gazing in my soul — thy gleaming
hair ever twining round my hands draws me to thy heart” (13). Spider-like, Leah’s web of long
and flowing hair binds Rudolf to her, and her dark and piercing stare bores through Rudolf’s
core. Rudolf exclaims that she is an “enchantress” for the magic she has performed on his emo-
tions. He laments with an ambivalence typical of one attracted to the taboo, “Then I am angry
that thou hast taken from me all that was once so dear, and I hate thee — yet thou hast given me
more than thou hast taken, and I pity thee — and hate, fear, and pity are my love!” (13). Rudolf
yearns for Leah’s love, even as he is repulsed by her.

This, then, is the threat of the Jewess, the threat of pulling a good and once God-fearing
Christian man away from his home and religion. And it is this threat, the dark Other from the
forest on the outskirts of town, a being which is forbidden, that draws Rudolf to Leah. For
much of the play, the audience, too, is in danger of being ensnared in the trap of the Jewess,
which Bateman, as the embodiment of Leah, weaves. Unlike Rudolf, however, who is repelled
by Leah’s love even as he so desires her, the audience, packing houses night after night, never
seems to feel loathing towards Bateman.

This may be due in part to the fact that the stage Jew and the typical Jew on the street seen
by theatergoers shared little to no similarity. A reviewer from the Manchester Guardian writes, “A
number of Jews are introduced, with many of the peculiarities of the gipsy race. They are poor
vagrants — terms that cannot often be applied with truth to Hebrews” (Manchester Guardian
1864). The audience, then, looked upon Bateman’s Leah not as one of their Jews, but rather,
as a European-inspired literary representation that did not exist in reality. But the fact that
the audience failed to be truly ensnared in the web of Bateman’s Leah has more to do with
Bateman’s own physical characteristics and public persona than anything else. At a time when
actors often confounded their own lives with the roles they played on the stage (McConachie
1992:77), Bateman was able to maintain a distance between stage image and reality. What is
most striking about Bateman’s portrayal of Leah, and what separates her rendition of the Jewish
maiden from that of Sarah Bernhardt, who came to identify herself publicly as a highly sexual-
ized Jewish woman, is that Bateman’s private life and public performance seemed to travel in
two distinctly different spheres.

Harley Erdman, in Staging the Jew, points out that “Bernhardt’s performance fore-
grounds the belle juive as an object of male desire, a connection made more readily possible
by Bernhardt’s own Jewessness than by a ‘chaste’ gentle American performer like Bateman”
(1997:49). For the Victorian theatre-going audience, the independent and emotional Jewess
walked the line just beyond the perimeter of what was perceived to be proper in gentile society.
The actress, too, was viewed in much the same light, as a woman unable to be fully contained
within the strict Victorian conceptions of womanhood. When the two came together — the
Jewess and the actress — as they did in the case of Sarah Bernhardt, the “dangerous sexuality”
of this character was highlighted for the American audience (50–52). Kate Bateman’s chastity,
however, and the fact that she had been an active and public member of the Episcopal Church
since the age of 16 (London Journal 1869), left a gap between who she was offstage and who she
became each night.

In addition to this, Bateman can hardly be described as meeting the physical criteria of the
beautiful Jewess. Daly provides little indication of Leah’s physical characteristics in the play’s
stage notes. Through the characters’ dialogue, however, we are given a glimpse of her appear-
ance. Madalena describes Leah as “[t]all and strangely clad, her brown hair flowing over her
naked shoulders, her great eyes gleaming beneath her arched brows” (Daly 1862:5). Later she is described by Father Herman as a “wild, uncouth woman” (19). Bateman, in reviews of the play, is described as being “statuesque,” exhibiting “plastic grace” (New York Times 1863), and as being “neither tall of stature nor particularly good-looking” (Observer 1863). None of these renderings of Bateman are particularly “Jewess-like.” Rather, they seem racially nondescript.

Photographs of Bateman as Leah reveal a furrowed brow and long curly hair covered by a white, turban-like headdress. Wearing a thin, white, off-the-shoulder blouse, her shoulders and arms remain bare. And yet, although she seems to have been put into a costume meant to evoke the alluring dress of a beautiful Jewess, something in her appearance resists this expectation. Her aesthetic persona inhabits none of the raw sexuality and eroticism expected of the beautiful Jewess, and her features lack the “exoticism” attributed to her by the characters in the play. What is more, never do the reviews mention that Bateman has physically embodied the stereotype of the Jewish woman current at the time. A reviewer in the Manchester Guardian asks,

What is there in her drawing of the character specifically Jewish? Where does she paint the struggle between conflicting passions of love and religion in distinguishable lines? Where has she introduced the grandeur, the poetry, the pathos which cling to the garments of the chosen people; where is there on her part any attempt to represent anything beyond the colourless figure of an outcast who might, for all the specialty she invests it, equally well represent a Mormon or Parsee? (Manchester Guardian 1867)

The ethnically nondescript way that Bateman embodies Leah is the key to understanding her overwhelming success. Night after night, audiences could weep and empathize with Leah as she is torn from all that she loves, without actually having to feel any true pathos for the Jews.

In Representations of Jews through the Ages, Regine Rosenthal points out that “the image of the Jew constructed by writers of the dominant Christian culture is a reflection of how that culture perceived and invented the Jew, and a means of facing, manipulating, and subjugating the Other” (1996:171). In racialized theatre, the stage Jew represented a stock character, and the actor playing the Jew came to affect a certain perceived dialectical speech and to don grotesque makeup and clothes. In so doing, the actor playing the Jew, by emphasizing “Jewish” stereotypes, highlighted his or her seeming attributes of Otherness, ostensibly creating for the audience a character perceived as more authentic than anything ever seen in reality (Romeyn 2008:154). In contrast, Bateman appeared on the stage with little facial makeup, not made to look like a woman of wild passions and fervent emotions, a woman so exotic that a man would forsake religion and family for her, a violently crazy woman who has been scorned. Rather, her appearance, chaste and bland, embodied the epitome of middle-class femininity. The appeal of this play, then, is to be found in Bateman’s appropriation and physical subjugation of the Jew, in her non-Jewish portrayal of Leah the Jewess. Bateman allowed the Jewess to appeal to the middle-class audience by playing the Jewess as if she were one of them. When spectators saw Bateman on the stage, they were always aware that they were seeing a church-going Christian woman. Bateman portrayed for the audience a Jew who could never be a Jew. Even as Bateman acted out Daly’s words, the audience looked past her stage persona to see the star beneath.

Bateman’s success was also predicated on the specifics of this particular play. The mid-19th-century Jewish population of the United States stood at approximately 50,000. Although mid-19th-century America welcomed its German Jewish immigrants, historian Hasia Diner notes that American Christians voiced typically negative stereotypes about the Jews, including those that painted Jews as money-hungry, socially amoral mongrels guilty of deicide. The evangelical Christian community of the United States, with a vision of maintaining their stronghold on American society, viewed Jews not only as outsiders, but, ultimately, as a threat (Diner 1992:170). Hospitable to foreigners and yet fearful of their possible corrosive effects on society, wishing to create an egalitarian nation and yet drawing impenetrable racial lines, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority grappled with how they were to accept the integration of Jews
into their ranks. As Diner notes, Jews held a special place within society. Although marginalized, Jews penetrated every sector of America, from government to business. But because Jews defined their Americanness only in terms of their Jewishness, they were at once inside and outside of social bounds, and both Jews and gentiles needed to navigate this contradiction (168–72).

While evangelical Christians of the period prided themselves on creating an inclusive society, Jews were seen as constituting an insular and intolerant community. American Christians, who viewed themselves as inherently tolerant, liberal, open-minded, and loving, understood Judaism to be incompatible with their reigning ideologies (175). Diner writes, in reference to elite literature, theatre, and cartoons, “They saw in their midst a people whom they perceived to live and look different, and they used and explored that difference for their own purposes” (171). Since Daly showcased the light of Christianity as that which ultimately leads Leah to salvation, audiences could feel compassion for the Jewess without forsaking their bourgeois sensibilities. With Bateman at the helm, Leah the Forsaken provided the middle-class American audience—torn between the need to accept Jews into society so they could uphold the image of America as the nation of tolerance, and their need to repel the Jew to assure that America continue to be a Protestant nation—a way of doing both at once.

The subjugation of Judaism as played out on the stage allows for the signifying systems of the play to “contribute to the assertion of a fundamentally moral universe [...] and to the inevitable reassertion of the proper moral order” (Richardson 1998:259). The audience viewing Leah looked to the stage as the arena in which they could evaluate their own morality. While the play was ostensibly understood as literature that valorized the Jew in the face of rising anti-Semitic sentiments in the United States, a consideration of the role of the actress within the play reveals the opposite. Leah was, in fact, an enactment of these anti-Semitic sentiments. To the question, “What part should Jews play in society?” Daly put forth a telling response. Leah, at the height of her Jewish vengeance, is unable to look upon the cross. She hails a bloodcurdling curse upon Rudolf, a curse linked to the Biblical text, a curse that demands an “Eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a heart for a heart” (Daly 1862:35), a curse that only the hateful and vengeful Jewess could wield. But the moment she embraces Rudolf and Madalena’s child, Leah is filled with Christian light. She leaves the village for the last time as the curtain slowly descends on the tableau of Rudolf and Madalena embracing their young child. Indeed, the child named Leah—a symbol of Leah the Jewess baptized and born anew—is all that remains. And at the final curtain call, the audience again comes face to face with the Christian Kate Bateman. The turmoil surrounding the place of Jews in society moves from the street to the stage, and Leah the Forsaken, by textually and aesthetically subjugating the Jewess and re-casting her as a Christian woman in both action and appearance, presents to the audience a sanitized and thus palatable Jew.

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