Jewish Women, Identity, and the Aufklärung: The German-speaking Enlightenment around 1800

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Abstract

This paper poses the question, "how enlightened was German-speaking central Europe around 1800?" The initial idea was to explore how marginalized groups accessed the German Enlightenment. During the process of writing, it developed into a wider exploration of female Jewish identity. This revised and lengthened paper, therefore, has become a critical analysis of civil society's perception of Jewish female participants and their unique identity in nineteenth-century Germany.[1]

[1] I would like to thank Dr. Claudia Kreklau for always encouraging me to develop my ideas and for suggesting I submit my work to the Yearbook. I would also like to thank Professor Meyer Weinshel and the entirety of the Central European Yearbook for giving me the opportunity to publish my work and be a part of this journal. And I would like to thank Tom and my parents for supporting me in everything I do.

Introduction

Rahel Levin Varnhagen, a salonnière of the German-speaking Enlightenment, often contemplated her female Jewish identity and questioned her place in society. How did someone who was both Jewish and female, and thereby doubly marginalized, internally remedy these contrasting components of identity? Jay Geller deciphers this comingling of identities, presenting the "Jewess," a separate identity projected onto female Jews.[2] This unique character allowed Jewish women to hold specific roles in the German-speaking Enlightenment. The nineteenth-century Enlightenment was inherently paradoxical, professing freedom and liberty for humanity while simultaneously excluding large swathes of the population. People of color, women, lower classes, and other marginalized groups had no access to the position white male philosophers held. Yet, some groups could access these higher echelons of society – as long as they conformed to specific conditions. This paper explores one marginalized group's role in the Enlightenment.

German-speaking Jewish women had active roles in the German-speaking Enlightenment. However, these parts did not evolve into the utopian, egalitarian society that scholars such as Brian Vick and Hannah Ardent would like to purport.[3] The teleological assumption that marginalized groups were working for some larger historical development conflicts with the actions of those marginalized individuals who successfully entered and participated in civil society. There is little to no evidence to suggest, for example, that salonnières were ardent feminists in the way twenty-first-century activists may imagine. The German-speaking Enlightenment, then, was a place that involved more diversity than one may expect, but by no means was it a utopia fostering diverse, egalitarian thought. So, how exactly did German-speaking Jewish women participate in the Berlin Aufklärung, and how could they do so through both their gender and religious identities?

Jewish identity is a complex concept to deal with. Geller, for instance, chooses to use the term "identification" rather than "identity" when examining the Jewish Question. "Identification" instead alludes to a process that an agent undertakes rather than the complex concept of "identity." He argues that "no single conventional criterion is sufficient for determining an individual's Jewishness," so the process of "identification" aptly reflects this multiplicity.[4] Weir further complicates this by identifying the myriad of "Jewish Questions" to deal with; there is not one singular issue concerning Jewish identity, but rather a plethora of questions and issues that have existed throughout history.[5] "Identity" is always a difficult concept to grapple with, but especially so when dealing with Jewish identity. This paper takes "identity" (specifically in relation to upper-class Jews) as their role and participation in the civil sphere. While "identification" may be a more accurate and less abstract term, this paper uses both terms for ease in order to discuss the unique position of Jewish women.

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[2] Geller, Jay, "Circumcision and Jewish Women's Identity: Rahel Levin Varnhagen's Failed Assimilation," in *Judaism since Gender*, eds. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (Routledge, 1997).
[3] Brian Vick, *The Congress of Vienna* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 152; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Schocken Books, 1951), 77.
[4] Geller, Jay, *The Other Jewish Question: Identifying the Jew and Making Sense of Modernity* (Fordham University, 2011).
[5] Todd H. Weir, "The Specter of 'Godless Jewry': Secularism and the 'Jewish Question' in Late Nineteenth-Century Germany," *Central European History* 46 (2014), 815–849.

The question of Jewish women's unique status within Enlightened Germany immediately raises a query: What was the Enlightenment? Such a simple, four-word question has stumped scholars for centuries. The Enlightenment was such a vast movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that it surely cannot be reduced to a single definition. Lester Crocker addresses this first problem. He discusses how definitions "impose a restrictive order on phenomena," forcing authors to live within their prescriptive interpretations. Instead, he pulls on the concept of "descriptions," which can interpret phenomena more broadly. Describing not what something *is* but what it *did* displays the phenomena and accepts its wide-reaching nature.[6] What did the Enlightenment do, then, and how can we describe it? Crocker presents it as so:

> *A diverse intellectual movement whose general direction was to use free, critical reason, untrammeled… by authority and tradition, in order to understand the universe, man's place in it, human nature and interaction, to improve the economic and political institutions of society.*[7]

Crocker's definition is simultaneously valuable and limiting. His open-ended definition allows an unrestricted interpretation of the Enlightenment, but it also leaves us wondering where the Enlightenment began and ended and who it involved. Perhaps the Enlightenment was not something that had a beginning nor end. We cannot point to a date and declare it the beginning of modern thinking. It, like so many other things in history, emerged slowly until, all at once, it was there. To simplify Crocker's idea, we can infer that the Enlightenment was an extensive concept primarily characterized by critical thinking and the advancement of society. It was a diverse movement throughout Europe, with a plethora of intellectual thinkers, all theorizing about human existence, knowledge, logic, reason, and so much more. This diversity meant that the Enlightenment manifested differently in various regions. The most common connotations of the Enlightenment period stir up ideas of France, equality, fraternity, and liberty. These images, while characterizing the French Enlightenment – and others such as America – cannot be said to characterize every region's movement.

German history has been presented in historiography as "peculiar" and "exceptional" compared to the main trends of Western European history.[8] This is also said of Germany's Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), which has been presented highly differently throughout historiography to that of Britain and France. The Aufklärung has been illustrated as tedious, timid, unoriginal, and overall "little there to compare with the best of contemporary writing in France and Britain."[9] Marx, following this line of thought, argued that a failed bourgeoisie was to blame, who "had sunk to the level of a type of estate, as clea§rly marked off from the people as from the Crown."[10] They supposedly didn't have the same urgency in their actions or demands, seeing the state as a partner in Enlightened thinking.[11] To be sure, the Aufklärung differed from France and Britain, but these differences weren't necessarily disadvantages. Following Crocker's idea of descriptive rather than prescriptive interpretations of the Enlightenment, we can argue that the movement was not monolithic,

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[6] Lester G. Crocker, "The Enlightenment: What and Who?," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 17, no. 1 (1988): 336.
[7] Ibid, 341.
[8] David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford University Press, 1984).
[9] H.B. Nisbet, "'Was ist Aufklärung?': The Concept of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Germany," *European Studies*, xii (1982), 77; Isabel Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700-1815* (Cornell University Press, 1996).
[10] Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848*, (Allen Lane, 1973), 192-4.
[11] Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: the rise and downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* (Allen Lane, 2006).

"dull," or "tedious." Both understudied and unfairly presented, the German-speaking Enlightenment was rife with discussions, debates, and social events. One of the busiest arenas of the Aufklärung were the sitting rooms of the Berlin elite. These spaces, called salons, welcomed a range of people, including women and Jews, allowing them to contribute to the Aufklärung effectively.

There is, however, no exhaustive description of the Aufklärung, as recent trends in scholarship show; Hull, Blackbourn and Eley, Nisbet, and others have revised this portrayal of German history. Germany's Aufklärung may not fit the model of France and Britain's, but that does not mean it was a failure nor any less "enlightened."[12] To write another paper looking deeply into the nuances of German enlightened thinking – or comparing Germany to France and Britain – would be iterative and formulaic. As historiographic trends have shown, Germany's differences should not be minimized nor derogated.[13] As such, this essay accepts Germany's differences and moves to ascertain how enlightened it was through the scope of the movement.

This brings us to our second query. How does one measure the Enlightenment? Historical studies are not a scientific discipline; try as we may, we cannot give a scale on which to objectively mark enlightened thinking. A concept as abstract as the Enlightenment can, however, be measured in a plethora of abstract ways, using print media, legislation, civil society groups and clubs, or even the presence of a revolution. This paper uses different foci, such as gender and religion, to demonstrate how active the Aufkläung was, and how large the scope of the movement was. Using these foci, we can examine how far enlightened thinking permeated into German-speaking society. Looking at the gendered and religious aspect of Jewish women's participation in the Aufklärung, we can ask not only what the Enlightenment *did* but also *whose* it was. Jewish women were practitioners of civil society but were marginalised on two counts – for their gender and their religion. "Civil Society" here refers to the people and community that engaged in enlightened thinking – usually the public sphere but also incorporated into the private.

Using this term, and Hull's idea of "practitioners of civil society," this paper will revise and reinterpret an old-school question, giving it a modern-day twist. Primarily focusing on Prussia and Berlin around the turn of the century, circa 1800, we will look more closely at how Jewish women were active and involved in the Aufklärung. These women were far more involved in civil society than one would first believe, yet they were still markedly different from the principal practitioners and philosophers. This essay will first examine how Jewish women entered the civil sphere as women, particularly in their gendered roles as salonnières. Secondly, we will turn to religion and how women as Jews, and the Jewish community more broadly, participated in the Aufklärung through the Haskalah. Finally, this paper will present the concept of the "Jewess" where Jewish women's gender and religion coalesced into a unique identification. This study uses excerpts of letters and biographies from Jewish women who contemplated and examined their identities. Letters, at this time, were a literary form deemed acceptable for women, so the ones still in existence offer a window into Jewish women's emotions, ideas, and reflections at the time.[14] From this, I posit that German-speaking central Europe was a society moving towards an enlightened age, incorporating large swathes of society in its movement; however, its scope was still sorely limited by gender, religion, and class conditions. Indeed, this civil society was a

[12] Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany*.
[13] Blackbourn and Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History*.
[14] Liliane Weissberg, "Writing on the Wall: Letters of Rahel Varnhagen," *New German Critique*, no. 36 (1985), 157-173.

"developing" one, where enlightened thought and liberation benefited only the upper-classes of both Christians and Jews alike. This essay focuses on upper-class Jewish women who experienced the inner circles of the Aufklärung.

"Berlin Landmarks": Jewish Women

Using a gendered lens, we can find that Jewish women, as women, were able to access civil society despite their role in the inferior sex. Fanny Lewald commented on the legacy of these women's contribution to the Aufklärung in the 1830s.

> *It seemed to me as if I found myself at King Arthur's Round Table when I looked at these old, weathered faces… Once they had all been at the forefront of the movement. These frail women had overcome the barriers of the caste spirit with their Bildung, and they had conquered the violence of prejudice in Berlin by means of their own powers.*[15]

Fanny Lewald, a young salonnière, had lunch with Henriette Herz and Sara Levy – two famous salonnières in their seventies. She admired and revered their legacy, likening them to knights, even calling them "Berlin landmarks." While this conveys them as having overcome the discrimination and prejudice in Berlin to become part of civil society, it suggests there was still a marked difference between them and the practitioners of civil society – they had prejudice to overcome in the first place that their male counterparts did not.

Salons were a critical space for civil society at this time. Practitioners of civil society gathered in the living rooms of Berlin elites to share and discuss ideas. Despite salons' fundamental role in the Aufklärung, there is no concrete, steadfast definition for them. Indeed, such a term was emerging during this period – Hahn, in fact, describes "salons" as a word for "what we do not know about social life around 1800."[16] Rather, the term provides an umbrella definition of female-led activities around 1800, an emerging and gendered term in German-speaking Europe. These salons were held in the homes of Berlin notables and invited a diverse group of people to join in discussion and conversation: men, women, Christians, Jews, middle classes, nobility, professors, poets, and others. The female hosts, known as salonnières, were wealthy elites with education in the humanities – often Jewish too. Through salons, Jewish women were active in the Aufklärung; they facilitated discussions and were educated in enlightened thinking. Their roles as women were fundamental to the character of salons; their marginalized social statuses meant they could promote these meetings full of diverse people. Hannah Arendt, a twentieth-century philosopher and Jewish woman, wrote an autobiography about her predecessor, Rahel Levin Varnhagen – a nineteenth-century forerunner of Jewish, female philosophy.[17] She illustrates salons as a utopian, transformative space: "The charm of the early Berlin salons was that nothing really mattered but personality and the uniqueness of character, talent, and expression."[18] From both Lewald's and Ardent's depictions, it's clear these women were important parts of the Aufklärung, even years later.

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[15] Fanny Lewald, *Meine Lebensgeschichte*, Volume 3 of Gesammelte Werke (Berlin: Verlag von Otto Janke, 1871); 116–17, 123–24.
[16] B. Hahn, "Die Salons der Rahel Levin Varnhagen," in Berliner Romantik, Orte, Spuren und Begegnungen, ed. H. Gärtner and A. Purfürst (Berlin: Trescher Verlag, 1992), 106.
[17] Hannah Ardent, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (Institute, 1957).
[18] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 77.

Henriette Herz, in her later years, also described how transcending gendered barriers in salons had its difficulties. Even when mixing socially in these interstitial spaces, women were not on equal footing. However, she does admit that these differences in status were somewhat overcome:

> *The relationships changed within our circles soon enough. The mind is a powerful equalizer, and love, which now and then does not refrain from meddling, often entirely changes pride into humility.*[19]

Herz's experience exemplifies that women could be accepted into the salon community as equals, but not without a struggle. She posits the mind as an "equalizer," an organ capable of overcoming gendered barriers. Her intellectual contribution to enlightened thought and discussion allowed her to transcend this barrier. This comment reveals a very vulnerable and human thought from Herz in relation to her challenges in life. To find a woman of this time so openly commenting on the power of intellect to overcome gendered hurdles is powerful to read.

This egalitarian utopia illustrated by Ardent, Lewald, and Herz, however, was not all it seemed. Jewish women, while having these facilitatory roles, were not fully incorporated into civil society. The salons provided them with a space they could enter to participate in the Aufklärung, but this space was not wholly within the public civil society. As Vick argues, "salons bridged the boundary between private and public."[20] During this time, the dichotomy existing in a society where women inhabited the private, domestic sphere meant they struggled to access the masculine, public sphere. As Carol Pateman argues, "women are incorporated into a sphere that both is and is not in civil society. The private sphere is part of civil society but is separated from the 'civil' sphere."[21] This is an apt illustration of how women slotted into civil society during the Aufklärung; the salons allowed them to participate in civil society and enlightened thinking but were not able to fully permeate the boundaries. As Hedwig Staegemann – Jewish daughter of a Prussian official and a salonniére, despaired:

> *O, truly, women are not suited to these times! They are suited, but they are made unsuited. …The soft education of the female sex makes their spirit as undecided, wavering, and weak as their body. … My heart rises up against this. It hammers and pounds forcefully and wants to fly boldly out of this petty sphere.*[22]

She describes how women have been weakened by society, which forces them into a specific sphere, limiting and controlling their education. Brian Vick argues women were able to participate more publicly and politically than historiography would have you believe.[23] But from Hedwig's description, the middling sphere created by salons was as similarly imprisoning as the private one, tying this confinement to her sex. While they could engage publicly and politically, they were expected to limit and soften their interests and engagement with society. It was thought that women did not understand politics and to become too politically active in their endeavors was unseemly. The Austrian statesman

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[19] Emily Bilski and Emily Braun, *The Power of Conversation: Jewish Women and Their Salons* (Yale University Press, 2005), 27.
[20] Vick, *The Congress of Vienna*, 149.
[21] Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11.
[22] Hedwig Staegemann, quoted in Vick, *The Congress of Vienna*, 126.
[23] Vick, *The Congress of Vienna*, 125.

Metternich is recorded to have told his wife, the Duchess of Sagan, that he "would love [her] a little less still if [she] were political." The Duchess, thereafter, subdued her political interests with humor and apologies to suit her husband.[24] Men were open to female political participation, "with certain limits." They could not be wholly political, needing to soften their opinions for the men around them. It is interesting to view Metternich's censorship of his wife's politics in the context of his censorship in Austria more broadly. His regulations in 1810 set out guidelines for censors to restrict and redact media and texts, guidelines which divided texts into academic scholarship and popular entertainment – the latter of which was susceptible to more rigorous censorship.[25] Texts, then, intended for the masses and lower orders were more heavily restricted by the state. When looking at Metternich's censorship of his wife, we can see a mirroring of similar restrictions of lower orders. Men in scholarship and science who made new discoveries spoke more freely and could access more texts. Texts that were mildly censored were available only to scientists and academics, while women and the lower orders were censored and restricted from accessing them. Tamara Kamatović describes how these censorship regulations were paternally justified,[26] implemented to protect the wellbeing of the Emperor's subjects, stating that His Majesty was:

> *Fully conscious of his foremost duties as ruler and father, which encompass the intellectual and moral education [of his subjects], as well as their physical well-being, and which no more allows that the subjects' spirits or hearts be corrupted than that their bodies be corrupted.*[27]

Austria's censorship regime under Metternich, while not Prussia, demonstrates the role of Germanic states in the proliferation of printed Enlightenment thought. The paternal hierarchy of state censorship is mirrored in Metternich's approach to his wife's participation in political thought and discussion. In encouraging her to soften her political tendencies, he is censoring her role as a practitioner of civil society, just as he similarly censored the literature of the masses. In salons, however, women were able to participate in enlightened discussions, although their politicization was still curbed. Here, discussions were seen to be calmer and more civil due to the presence of women;[28] in fact, salons were one of the only places women could participate in civil society. Spaces like coffee houses were seen to be too impolite, public, or consequential to let women participate in. Salons, then, were shaped by women to keep civil society civil. Jewish women were certainly practitioners of civil society, but not in the same manner as men. They were fragmented from the main movement, allowed only to participate in certain settings or with certain conditions. The Enlightenment was theirs – but only in specified circumstances were they allowed to be active participants in it.

'The foreskin of your heart:' Jewish Women as Jews

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[24] Metternich, quoted in Vick, *The Congress of Vienna*, 130.
[25] Marschke, Ben (trans), "Guidelines for Administering Censorship and for the Conduct of Censors" (1810), published in German History in Documents and Images. Available at: https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/the-holy-roman-empire-1648-1815/ghdi:document-3567. (Accessed 15/11/2024).
[26] Tamara Kamatović, "Metternich's Censors at Work: Philosophy and Practices of Censorship in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Romanic Review* 109, no. 1-4 (2018), 103-26.
[27] Marschke, Ben (trans.) "Guidelines for Administering Censorship and for the Conduct of Censors" (1810), published in German History in Documents and Images. Available at: https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/the-holy-roman-empire-1648-1815/ghdi:document-3567. (Accessed 15/11/2024).
[28] Vick, *The Congress of Vienna*, 129.

Jewish women, and Jews more broadly, were similarly able to access the civil sphere. The Jewish elite of Berlin learned Enlightenment thinking just like that of Christian Berlin intellectuals, and salons allowed the comingling of all religions and classes – Jews were part of civil society in this way.[29] But they also had their own Enlightenment movement – the *Haskalah*. They read and debated new Enlightenment philosophy in their own communities and critiqued orthodox Jewish teachings – all fostered by the Jewish tradition of learning – from there, the Berlin Haskalah, a movement specific to the Jewish elites of Berlin – "was born and thrived."[30] For Jews, the Haskalah meant questioning orthodox practices and the religious elite, reinterpreting Judaism through enlightened thought.[31] Clark discusses the Haskalah and argues its presence demonstrates the distinctive nature of the Aufklärung; it marked an important moment for German and Jewish-German sociability. Further than this, civil society provided an "interstitial sphere of enlightened trans-confessional conviviality."[32] Similarly to salons for women, the civil society provided a space for Jews to participate in the public sphere alongside Christians. And Jewish women were a large part of this, as salonnières they were able to further bring together a mixed group of people.

However, Jews were still fragmented from the center of civil society, being perceived as markedly different from their Christian counterparts due to contemporary legislation. In 1750, Frederick II issued a General Code dividing Prussian Jews into six classes. Wealthy Berlin Jews sat in the upper class – generally privileged. But still, people of this class were rarely granted full citizenship, and citizenship itself was not instituted for Jews until 1812. The majority of Prussian Jews were modest people living under restrictive laws in Berlin.[33] Additionally, Weissberg describes how Jews were markedly different from the rest of Berlin through their homelessness. The concept of *heimatlos* comes from the German word *heimat* – an indefinable term with no English equivalent. It loosely equates to the German homeland or ancestral lands, and during the Enlightenment period, it was utilized by practitioners as a regional identity, a concept used in the midst of German states lacking territorial and political cohesion. Minsky finds that *heimat* became a central discourse "about place and belonging" in these spaces.[34] *Heimatlos* was utilized conceptually to reference the topos of the "Wandering Jew." Woolf describes this motif as so:

> *He is, to a degree, the ultimate cosmopolitan: restrained by no borders and, often, able to speak all languages. He resides within time and beyond it, belongs nowhere and everywhere. He is human but condemned to live forever until the Second Coming of Christ releases him.*[35]

As a group suffering from *heimatlos,* Jews were constructed as cosmopolitan beings who drifted from city to city, borders not restricting their movement. The motif of the

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[29] Geller, "Circumcision and Jewish Women's Identity."
[30] Liliane Weissberg, 'Literary Culture and Jewish Space around 1800: The Berlin Salons Revisited,' in *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries,* eds. Shelia Jelen, Michael Kramer, and Scott Lerner (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 29.
[31] Ulrike Wagner, "On Dialogical Writing, Self-forming, and Salon Culture: Rahel Varnhagen, Henriette Herz, and Fanny Lewald," *Hegel Bulletin* 43, no. 3 (2022), 441.
The Berlin Haskalah was highly characterized by Moses Mendelssohn, a Jewish scholar whose writings and use of Hebrew in the public sphere were widely admired.
[32] Clark, *The Iron Kingdom*, 263.
[33] Ibid, 257-269.
[34] Amir Minsky, "Home Is Where the Heart Is: The Rise of Emotional Spaces in German Late Enlightenment," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 45, no. 3 (2021), 106.
[35] Michael Woolf, "The Wandering Jew," *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 30, no. 1 (2018), 21.

"Wandering Jew" was utilized antisemitically, pursuing the narrative that Jews had no home, residing across Europe unattached to specific nations. This unattached status was seen to be a part of a larger Jewish conspiracy where Jews were aiming for world dominance.[36] In the context of Berlin's civil sphere, Jewish homelessness (*heimatlos*) marked Jews with a distinct status. Expelled from their homeland, they were visitors in German-speaking central Europe, with no native land, nor any civic rights or citizenship to take advantage of. They were granted the *privilege* to live in Berlin, rather than the right their Christian counterparts enjoyed. They were seen as homeless in both a philosophical and legal sense, pushed to the edges of society due to their historical status.[37]

Their distinct status was also evident in salons. Salons were not solely secular places for reasoned debate and discussion; they acted as places for religious sociability also.[38] The Jewish salonnières who, being socially marginalized themselves, were able to "suspend boundaries" and allow the intermingling of multiple faiths.[39] After hosting in their homes, however, Jewish women could not expect invitations in return from their Christian visitors. While salons allowed the mixing and mingling of so many people in civil society, it still conserved markedly different statuses. The salon meant more privileged visitors – Christians with civic rights – could keep their homes off-limits to Jews, while still socializing and interacting with them in the civil sphere.[40] Jewish women, and Jews more broadly, were participants in civil society, but degrees of separation had to be maintained – such as preserving Christian homes as Jewish-free spaces. Salons, while centers of enlightened thinking and discussion, acted like halfway homes for the *heimatlos* Jews of Berlin, providing an interstitial sphere but still stifling women and Jews' full involvement in the public civil sphere.

Even without the restrictive legal impositions, Jews felt symbolic differences between themselves and Christians. Rahel Levin Varnhagen expresses the conflict she endured over her Jewish identity; she articulated her Jewish identity through "figures of circumcision," referring to the removal of the foreskin that physically marked Jews from non-Jews. Varnhagen, as a woman, was not circumcised but she talked of her phantasmal circumcision that, while not real, still left her feeling physically marked and removed from society. The *Bildung* that elite Jews were educated in was supposed to transcend this difference, but Varnhagen argued her (imagined) circumcision "could not be removed."[41] Even Hebrew scripture argues circumcision is not a physical condition but a fundamental difference Jews are born with. Deuteronomy 10:16 comments that one should "circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart,"[42] finding that Jewish observation required an internal alteration, demarcating Jews from Christians and therefore removing them from the center of civil society – and larger society as well. Jews were a part of enlightened thinking and civil society but were denied full and central involvement due to their lesser statuses.

'Eroticised and exoticized beauties:' Jewish Women as the 'Jewess'

The Jewish salonnières, such as Henriette Herz, Fanny Lewald, Rahel Levin Varnhagen, Hedwig Staegemann, and Sara Levy, held their gender and religion as two intermingling

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[36] Ibid.
[37] Weissberg, "Literary Culture and Jewish Space around 1800," 27.
[38] Vick, *The Congress of Vienna*, 113.
[39] Clark, *The Iron Kingdom*, 264.
[40] Ibid, 32.
[41] Geller, "Circumcision and Jewish Women's Identity," 175-178.
[42] Deuteronomy 10:16, Hebrew Old Testament.

parts of their identities. Not isolated attributes, these qualities mutually shaped each other. This is the definition of intersectionality according to Collins and Bilge who present it as categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and others, all "mutually shaping one another."[43] Gender and religion are two such entities intersecting within people's identities. The Berlin salonnières experienced the intersectionality of their gender and religion in Prussia during the Aufklärung. They were agents of civil society and enlightened thinking that brought together feminine and Jewish aspects. These women were still a part of the Enlightenment, but these intersecting entities affected Jewish women's place and involvement within it in a unique manner.

In her letters and autobiography, Varnhagen discusses being a "Jewess." The term "Jew" is a gender-neutral category, but Varnhagen interpreted her Jewish identity as gendered. She was not born Jewish but as a "Jewess."[44] As we have seen, Jewish women had a uniquely different experience from their male and female counterparts in the Enlightenment. They were not able to participate in the Haskalah which was reserved for Jewish men who had been brought up with an intellectual education. While elite Jewish women had also been educated, it was not learning in the traditional Jewish way, but a flawed and defective form of Jewish *Bildung*. Jewish women, therefore, could not access the Haskalah in the same way as their male counterparts.[45]

The Jewish women's experience differed from Christian women's also; as Jewish women, society projected a sense of being foreign and exotic onto them, viewing them as "eroticised and exoticised feminine [beauties]."[46] This perception of the "Jewess" objectified Jewish women; their gender and religion were merged into an exotic form of beauty and morbid curiosity. This was, however, dependent on these women being objectively "beautiful." Varnhagen had expressed that being an "ugly" woman made their lives and efforts that much harder.[47] Varnhagen was described by her visitors as a plain, middle-class girl – a contrast to the great beauty of Henriette Herz. She was, however, praised for her intelligence, wit, and friendship – qualities that were seen to compensate for her lack of wealth and beauty. These Jewish women, then, had to make up for their deficiencies as women and Jews with some impressive outstanding quality, whether that would be beauty, wit, or charm. They were not, however, allowed to exist as women in their own right. The topos of the "beautiful Jewess," or as a charming and witty acquaintance, allowed female Jews to enter the civil society as objects of curiosity and desire.

[43] Patricia Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.
[44] Geller, "Circumcision and Jewish Women's Identity," 175.
[45] Weissberg, "Literary Culture and Jewish Space around 1800."
[46] Marjanne Goozé, "Posing for Posterity: The Representations and Portrayals of Henriette Herz as 'Beautiful Jewess'," in *Body Dialectics in the Age of Goethe,* ed. Marianna Henn and Holger A. Pausch (Leiden; Brill, 2003), 80.
[47] Wagner, "On Dialogical Writing, Self-forming, and Salon Culture," 450.

*Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 1. Anna Dorothea Therbusch: Portrait of Henriette Herz (1778).*

The salonniére Henriette Herz was renowned for her great beauty and she defined herself through this beauty. In later years she reminisced, explaining that "guests spoke a great deal with me since they assumed I was intelligent because I was pretty."[48] In fact, her looks determined her place in society from a young age. As Marjanne Goozé describes, she was painted as the goddess Hebe at fourteen years of age, a common style for the upper class of eighteenth-century Europe.[49] Despite being fourteen, she is sexualized; with her gown half off her shoulder revealing a hint of an areola, her small smile, and straight-on stare, she is displayed in a sexual manner. Perhaps this speaks more widely to the archetype of the "Jewess." This sexualization could speak to Jewish women's experience of eroticization from a young age, not just within the civil sphere but society at large. Despite this, Herz herself admitted that her perceived beauty made her an object of interest at salons, aiding her role as a Jewish salonnière.

Jewish women had specific experiences that were unlike those of Christian women or Jewish men. Not just because of their gender and religion but because of the way these entities mutually shaped and entangled with each other, creating unique identities. But these individuals – Jewish men, women, Jewish women – were all tied together by their challenges to entering civil society. Jay Geller ties Jewish identification to the body, specifically *beschneiden* (circumcision). He finds that *Beshneidung* was an act "performed on objects that already served, respectively, as iconic and indexical markers of difference," such

[48] Bilski and Braun, *The Power of Conversation*, 26.
[49] Goozé, "Posing for Posterity," 71.

as the penis marking gender and sexuality.[50] Women's genitals were doubly marked as the inferior gender, lacking circumcision which was said to be what made a Jew a Jew. Philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte made a remark to this effect in 1811, commenting that if one is not circumcised, then "one is not a Jew."[51]

Women, Jews, and Jewish women, however, did not share a cohesive experience as one and it is important not to over-romanticize this. As Wagner argues, social endeavors at this time "were not tied to specific ends that we can either admiringly endorse or expose as failures."[52] Their individual involvements in enlightened thinking were not smaller parts of a larger Jewish emancipation movement or feminist campaign. These people had prejudices to overcome, which they did – but not to any full extent. Neither were their intentions to form a part of an overarching Jewish movement. On the contrary, these "Jewesses" made up a privileged group of the Berlin Jewish elite, an elite group not solely concerned with furthering Jewish civic equality, but with their own penetration into the Berlin upper class. As Geller asserts, they "considered themselves different from their poorer, more traditional brothers and sisters."[53] The consequence of this was a middling group. Jews who were not entirely accepted into the Christian upper class but were distinguished from the everyday Jew in Berlin. It is important, then, to remember that the Enlightenment was an upper-class possession, a movement the general, unprivileged Jews and Christians alike could not claim to belong to. It is easy to draw up a narrative of a great campaign forming at this time, especially if we look to sources written by the likes of Lewald who presents salonnières as unsung heroes of the Aufklärung. These women may have held some greater, societal value in their assimilation into the Berlin elite, but ultimately, they participated in civil society for their own interests and ambitions. But who can blame them? These women were scaling the glass ceiling and smashing it open for themselves.

The Enlightenment was accessible to them, and it was their movement too, despite their differences and disadvantages. However, they were markedly different from the other enlightened thinkers of the time. They were fragmented from the main sphere, on the edge looking in. Geller epitomizes this paradox well:

> *Because she is a Jewess, she can never be accepted fully as such an individual. Being a Jewess is not just a birth defect. Rather, the birth defect recalls the biblical circumcision of the heart.*[54]

Conclusion

There was a great diversity in enlightened thinking across Europe. This is true not only transnationally, but within borders too; the Aufklärung and enlightened thinkers in German-speaking central Europe varied greatly themselves. Women and Jewish Enlightenment thinkers, while involved in the movement, were fragmented from the main sphere. The famous Berlin salons of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries bridged between both the private and public spheres, creating a space for women to participate and even lead enlightened thinking. Similarly, the Haskalah was an abstract place allowing Jewish participation in the Enlightenment. Gender and religion entangled with

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[50] Geller, *The Jewish Question*, 7.
[51] Ibid, cited in Geller, 15.
[52] Wagner, "On Dialogical Writing, Self-forming, and Salon Culture," 438.
[53] Geller, "Circumcision and Jewish Women's Identity," 176.
[54] Ibid, 179.

each other in a dynamic manner within Jewish women, forming unique identities in the form of *Jewesses*.

This paper has, while proving Jews and women had access to the German-speaking civil society of the later 18th and early 19th centuries, revealed how Christian men shaped and molded this sphere to their liking. There was an implicit contract in place for these suburban citizens of civil society that placed conditions on their existence in the Aufklärung, regulating how they participated within it. Women were allowed to partake in Enlightenment discussion while in the salons and correctly presenting themselves as polite and appeaseable beings, avoiding offending the traditional traits expected from women. Likewise, Jews, while being afforded certain privileges in the upper classes, were not recognized as citizens (just as women weren't) and, in fact, were often perceived as foreigners. They could not access *Bildung* or education in the same manner, nor be guests in Christian homes as Christians were guests in their homes.

The main condition of enlightened contribution was class. Most women and Jews would never have the chance to access civil society; debate and enlightened discussion was a privilege for the elite that the bulk of society would never have an opportunity to access. Being of high class was the key to them accessing the higher tiers of society while being tied to disempowered identities. These marginalizations of women and Jews led into the combined identity of the "Jewess." These Jewish women experienced civil society uniquely, sitting in a "painful chasm between social power and racial prejudice."[55] They endured the Enlightenment movement under dual non-citizenship, marginalized on two counts, which coalesced into their identity as a Jewess. Jewish women, while not physically circumcised, experienced the phantasmal, biblical circumcision described by Rahel Levin Varnhagen that doubly marked them as outsiders of the Enlightened world. These physical and anatomical differences covertly manifested in social marginalization in civil society and salons. A marginalization that could only be overcome by class.

For Jewish women, class was enough to just get through the door. To truly participate in the Aufklärung and prove their worth they had to compensate for their Jewish identity through beauty or intellectual prowess. Women were expected to conform to feminine norms, Jews remained outside of Christian society, and Jewish women were to be objects of curiosity for others to marvel at.

This study begs the question, can a society excluding large portions of the population be enlightened? This is anachronistic to consider, but the question at hand provokes anachronistic thinking. Women and Jews were markedly different at this time. This was the natural hierarchy of eighteenth-century society; women and Jews were not invited into the public sphere. The Enlightenment principally belonged to Christian men. Rather than a time of civil society, this period could perhaps be termed *civilising* society; the Enlightenment was a process for all areas, different for each place and person, developing in fragments in Germany. These fragments were connected, involving many types of people in society, but some people were on the edges, marked as different and separate from the center. As Kant argued, this was an age of Enlightenment, but not an enlightened age.[56] This is illustrated by Moggach and Stedman-Jones, who describe the 1848 revolutions as a "slow unfolding of freedom and reason," a historical process more than anything.[57] Elite Jewish women

[55] Bilski and Braun, *The Power of Conversation*, 4.
[56] Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" (1784), 3.
[57] Douglas Moggach and Gareth Stedman-Jones, eds. The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.

experienced this slow unfolding of freedom through the meeting of conditions set out by civil society. A combination of their class, looks, wit, and hostess skills coalesced to combat their existence as Jewish women – a class that was set apart from any other in nineteenth-century Berlin.

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