Elizabeth Polack is the earliest known Jewish woman playwright in Britain. We know very little about her life, but her entertaining melodramas in the late 1830s made lasting impact, so that people were still talking about the spectacular murder mystery The Echo of Westminster Bridge well into the twentieth century. They address pressing issues such as the struggle for the emancipation of the Jews and of women at a time when both were subjected to overwhelming legal and cultural disabilities. And they brought together in public theatres in largely Jewish neighborhoods both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences to mingle while enjoying plays such as Esther, the Royal Jewess, or the Death of Haman!, even though it was clearly a Purimspiel as well as a melodrama. Although recovering a forgotten but significant Jewish woman writer is part of my goal in this project, I also want to emphasize the value of Polack’s gathering diverse communities in the same playhouse to enjoy theatrical performance.

Sharon Aronofsky Weltman is the Director of Comparative Literature at LSU, the Davis Alumni Professor of English, and co-editor of Nineteenth-Century Theatre and Film. Her most recent book, Victorians on Broadway: Literature, Adaptation, and the Modern American Musical (University of Virginia Press, 2020), was named a “MUST READ” summer theatre book by Playbill in 2020, is a Top 40 academic best seller in theatre and music, according to Library Journal (March 2021), and it won the 2021 SCMLA Book Prize. One chapter focuses on performing Jewishness in the musical Oliver!. Her article “Melodrama, Purimspiel, and Jewish Emancipation” on the first Anglo-Jewish woman playwright won the 2020 Nineteenth Century Studies Association Best Article Prize. In September and October 2021, she was thrilled to visit the New York City Public Library’s collections on a Fordham-NYPL Short-Term Research Fellowship in Jewish Studies to work on Elizabeth Polack and her contemporaries. In April 2022, she will begin her time as the Margaret Belcher Visiting Fellowship in Victorian Studies at St Hughs College, Oxford University, where she will continue her research on Polack.

Registration link: