

# Roots and Responses to Literary and Literal Antisemitism



scorn and contempt of Christ, that so they might avenge their sufferings on Him; inasmuch as it was because of Christ's death that they had been shut out from their own country, and were in exile as slaves in a foreign land. Wherefore the chief men and Rabbis of the Jews who dwell in Spain assemble together at Narbonne, where the Royal seed [resides], and where they are held in the highest estimation, and they cast lots for all the countries which the Jews inhabit; and whatever country the lot falls upon, its metropolis has to carry out the same method with the other towns and cities, and the place whose lot is drawn has to fulfill the duty imposed by authority.

## 2. From Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

Here beginneth the Prioress' Tale.

In a great city of Asia amongst the Christian folk there was a Jewry, sustained by a lord of that land for foul usury and villainous lucre, hateful to Christ and his followers; and men might ride or walk through the street, for it was free and open at both ends. Down at the farther limit there was a little school of Christian folk, in which there were a throng of children of Christian blood, that learned year by year in that school such lore as was wonted in that place, that is to say, to read and sing, as small children do in their childhood.

Among these children there was a widow's son, a little chorister-boy seven years of age, that day by day went to school, and eke as he had been taught it was his wont, where he saw the image of Christ's mother as he went by the way, to kneel down and say his Ave Marie. So hath this widow taught her little son to honour aye our blessed lady, Christ's mother dear, and he forgot it in no wise, for a good child will alway learn soon; and ever, when I have this thing in remembrance, Saint Nicholas standeth aye before me, because he did reverence to Christ so young. This little child, as he sat in the school, learning his little primer, heard sung Alma redemptoris, as the children learned their anthem-book, and as he durst, he drew nearer and nearer and hearkened ever the words and the note till he knew the first verse all by heart. He wist not at all what this Latin meant, for he was so young and tender in years; but one day he prayed his fellow to expound him this song in his own language, or to tell him why this song was in use. This he prayed him to construe and explain full oft a time upon his bare knees.

His fellow, that was older than he, answered him thus: "I have heard tell that this song was made to salute our noble blessed lady, and eke for to pray her to be our succour and help when we die. I can expound no more thereof; I learn singing; I know but small grammar."

"And is this song made in reverence of Christ's mother?" said this innocent, "now certes I will do my best to know it all, ere Christmas is gone; though I shall be scolded for my primer and be beaten thrice in an hour, I will know it to honour our lady."

His fellow taught him in secret from day to day on the way home, till he knew it by heart, and then he sung it boldly and well from word to word in accord with the tune; twice a day it passed through his throat, when he went schoolward and homeward; his mind was set on Christ's mother. As I have said, this little child, as he came to and fro through the Jewry, would sing full merrily, and cry evermore O alma redemptoris; the sweetness of Christ's mother hath so pierced his heart, that in prayer to her, he cannot stint singing by the way.

Our first foe, the serpent Sathanas, that in a Jew's heart hath his wasp's nest, up-swelled

law?" From thenceforth the Jews have conspired to hunt this innocent out of this world. Thereto they have paid an homicide that had a privy dwelling in an alley; and as the child gan pass by, this cursed Jew seized him and held him fast, and cut his throat and flung him into a pit.

O cursed folk of new Herods, what may your evil mind avail you? Murder will out; verily it must; and chiefly where the honour of God is pledged, the blood crieth out on your cursed act. O martyr, confirmed to virginity, now mayst thou sing, following ever and ever the white lamb celestial, of which the great evangelist wrote, Saint John in Pathmos, who saith that they that go before this lamb and sing a fresh song, never carnally know women.

All that night this poor widow awaiteth her little child, but he came not; for which, as soon as it was day, with face pale for dread and anxious disquietude, she hath sought him at school and elsewhere, till finally she espied thus far that he was last seen in the Jewry. With mother's pity pent in her breast, she goeth as it were half out of her mind to every place where by likelihood she hath supposed her little child might be, and ever she cried on Christ's mother meek and kind, and at last she came to seek him among the cursed Jews.



and deceptions that issued from his devilish mind. He did not teach in accord with the word of God, and therefore he forfeited the right to teach.

Fifth, I advise that safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews. For they have no business in the countryside, since they are not lords, officials, tradesmen, or the like. Let them stay at home. (...remainder omitted).

Sixth, I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping. The reason for such a measure is that, as said above, they have no other means of earning a livelihood than usury, and by it they have stolen and robbed from us all they possess. Such money should now be used in no other way than the following: Whenever a Jew is sincerely converted, he should be handed one hundred, two hundred, or three hundred florins, as personal circumstances may suggest. With this he could set himself up in some occupation for the support of his poor wife and children, and the maintenance of the old or feeble. For such evil gains are cursed if they are not put to use with God's blessing in a good and worthy cause.

Seventh, I commend putting a flail, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young, strong Jews and Jewesses and letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow, as was imposed on the children of Adam (Gen 3[:19]). For it is not fitting that they should let us accursed Goyim toil in the sweat of our faces while they, the holy people, idle away their time behind the stove, feasting and farting, and on top of all, boasting blasphemously of their lordship over the Christians by means of our sweat. No,

And always kept the sexton's arms in ure [use]  
With digging graves and ringing dead men's knells:  
And, after that, was I an engineer,  
And in the wars 'twixt France and Germany,  
Under pretence of helping Charles the Fifth,  
Slew friend and enemy with my stratagems:  
Then, after that, was I an usurer,

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SHYLOCK I say, my daughter is my flesh and blood.

SALARINO There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory; more between your bloods than there is between red wine and rhenish. But tell us, do you hear whether Antonio have had any loss at sea or no?

SHYLOCK There I have another bad match: a bankrupt, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto; a beggar, that was used to come so smug upon the mart; let him look to his bond: he was wont to call me usurer; let him look to his bond: he was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy; let him look to his bond.

SALARINO Why, I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take his flesh: what's that good for?

SHYLOCK

To bait fish withal: if it will feed nothing else,  
it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and  
hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses,  
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to the same diseases, healed by the same means,  
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as  
a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?  
if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison  
us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not  
revenge? If we are like you, shall we not



For Discussion:

How does this *perek* describe the experience of the oppressor?  
What does it feel like to be the persecutor (vs. persecuted)?

How does the *perek* suggest Israel respond? What can be done to stop hate and cruelty?

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### Defining and Responding to Literary and Literal Antisemitism

1. "If you cannot define something, you cannot address it or fight it." Deborah Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now* (Schocken, 2019, 15).
2. "A certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as

to assure its triumph than those who endorse it. There is no universal rule for quelling violence, no principle of guaranteed effectiveness. At times all the remedies, harsh as well as gentle, seem efficacious; at other times, every measure seems to heighten the fever it is striving to abate. Inevitably the moment comes when violence can only be countered by more violence. Whether we fail or succeed in our effort to subdue it, the real victor is always violence itself. The mimetic attributes of violence are extraordinary—sometimes direct and





Islam had defeated them in places they regarded as their own, especially Jerusalem. That was when, in 1096, on their way to the Holy Land, the Crusaders stopped first to massacre Jewish communities in Northern Europe. It was born in the Middle East in the 1920s with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Antisemitism re-emerged in Europe in the 1870s



My readers will have already observed that in speaking as I do I contradict certain principles that numerous critics hold as sacrosanct. I am always told one must never do violence to the text. Faced with Guillaume de Machaut the choice is clear: one must either do violence to the text or let the text forever do violence to innocent victims. Certain principles universally held to be valid in our day, because they seem to guard against the excesses of certain interpretations, can bring about disastrous consequences never anticipated by those who, thinking they have foreseen everything, consider the principles inviolable. Everyone believes that the first duty of the critic is to respect the meaning of texts. Can this principle be sustained in the face of Guillaume de Machaut's work?

7. From Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' *Not in God's Name* (2015)

Never say, I hate, I kill, because my religion says so... As a general rule, though, the application of every ancient text to another age involves an act of interpretation, and there is nothing inherently religious about this. It is a central problem in secular law and jurisprudence, deliberated over in every Supreme Court. How is a law enacted then to be understood now? It is a problem every theatrical director faces in deciding how, for example, to stage *The Merchant of Venice* for a contemporary audience. In each case, the issue is how to apply the-word-then to the-world-now, bridging the hermeneutical abyss of time and change. Religions develop rules of interpretation and structures of authority. Without these, as we see today, any group can do almost anything in the name of religion, selecting texts, taking them out of context, reading them literally and ignoring the rest. Without rules, principles and authority, sacred texts provide the charisma of seemingly divine authority for purposes that are all too human. As Shakespeare said, 'The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.'

For Discussion:

Based on our readings and discussion, do you think texts that include violent/cruel caricatures of Jews are harmful? Should these writers continue to be read and taught today? If not, why not? If yes, how?

If you do encounter such texts in a college classroom or another environment, how do you think you would/should respond? What do you think educators can do to equip students for encounters with negative portrayals of Jews in popular culture of the past and present?