

## **Anxiety and Vulnerability: Women and Ritual Murder in Medieval Western Europe**

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*Abstract: "Anxiety and Vulnerability" examines Christian ritual murder and host desecration accusations against Jews in medieval Europe. Analyzing several charges from diverse locations reveals trends in conceptualizations of women in religious discourse between the two groups. Previous studies of these accusations have acknowledged the presence and importance of female characters, but have not treated them as a subject of study in and of themselves. This paper moves female characters from the margins of ritual murder and host desecration charges to the forefront, arguing for the necessity of examining gender in understanding the rhetorical power of these influential narratives. Andino argues that Christians viewed women as the weak links in their struggle against Jews, reflecting anxiety over marginal women and their ability to fulfill their roles in Christian society. In Jewish accounts of these events, representations of women centered on their bodies as sites of Jewish debility and Christian aggression. Both Christians and Jews conceptualized the vulnerabilities of their communities in terms of female weakness. Through their shortcomings, women offered the religious Other a point of entry into the community, enabling and legitimizing the danger of the Other.*

As the child-killer, the Jew becomes the destroyer of an important, vulnerable part of the Christian community. The Jew represents the outsider threatening the heart of the inside.

— William MacLehose

As William MacLehose explains, medieval Christian authors of ritual murder accusations saw Jewish men as a grave peril to the Christian community.<sup>1</sup> Jewish sources on these events communicate a similar fear of Christian violence. Both Christian and Jewish sources on ritual murder and host desecration charges give insight into how male elites of each group viewed and understood the religious other.<sup>2</sup> Medieval ritual murder

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<sup>1</sup> William MacLehose, *A Tender Age: Cultural Anxieties Over the Child in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 110.

<sup>2</sup> Accusations of ritual murder alleged that Jews abducted, tormented, and killed Christian children in order to reenact the crucifixion or collect blood to make matzo, the unleavened bread Jews made and consumed for Passover. Host desecration charges maintained that

accusations often share similar characters: the innocent, abducted child, the dishonest Christian betrayer, and the wise priest. Women also fulfill a variety of roles, as mothers, betrayers, baiters, and victims, and historians have yet to fully explore the dynamics of these characters. Analysis of female representation in ritual murder and host desecration charges allows us to obtain a better understanding of how ideas of gender functioned in Christian-Jewish discourse.

Historians have analyzed these supposed crimes in a variety of ways, including their origins, effects on Jews, and role in the spread of anti-Semitism. Examining these charges through the lens of gender may appear to be a tangential approach, considering that these accusations often had destructive and violent consequences for entire Jewish communities. However, I argue that gendered analysis of the sources allows us to move beyond focusing on cause and effect. As Joan Scott has shown, the construction and maintenance of hierarchies depend on widespread beliefs about gender.<sup>3</sup> By examining the role and perceptions of women in these narratives, we gain a more complex understanding of the way gender has shaped Christian-Jewish relations. This study examines accusations of both ritual murder and host desecration in medieval Europe. I argue Christian male authors thought that women made Christian communities susceptible to Jewish attack, reflecting anxiety over the ability of women to fulfill their roles in Christian society. In Jewish sources, representations of women centered on their bodies as sites of Jewish debility and Christian aggression. Both Christians and Jews conceptualized the vulnerabilities of their communities in terms of female weakness.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, in discourses of inter-faith violence, women act as the cipher through which the threat of the religious other is realized.

In this study I examine several ritual murder and host desecration accusations. I include both kinds of charges because Jewish communities were frequently accused of both in the same narrative.<sup>5</sup> I rely on sixteen

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Jews stole, or bribed Christians to steal consecrated Communion hosts and then malevolently abused and stabbed them. The first ritual murder accusation was in Norwich in 1144, while the first host desecration accusation was in Paris in 1290.

<sup>3</sup> Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1069, 1073.

<sup>4</sup> This paper employs the categories of Christian, Jew, and woman in the same way(s) the authors of these narratives used them. Obviously, the historical reality behind these broad categories is far more complex. This paper analyzes the ways Christian and Jewish authors related and made sense of these terms.

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I do not use the terms "accusation" and "charge" in terms of their formal legal definition. Both terms are used to communicate Christian belief in an alleged Jewish crime.

cases from 1144 to 1510 to illustrate the presence of enduring patterns in conceptions of women. I move thematically, rather than chronologically, in order to compare non-contemporaneous accounts. These documents are problematic as sources of historical fact. For example, Thomas of Monmouth's account of the death of William of Norwich was written six years after the event.<sup>6</sup> Thus, I rely on these sources not as factual representations of what actually occurred, but as windows into their authors' attitudes and beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Samantha Seal advocates this approach, arguing that as crafted literary narratives, these texts are sites of discourse that allow insight into each faith's conception of the other.<sup>8</sup> R. Po-Chia Hsia maintains that the historian's role with these documents is not to determine a historical reality, but to analyze the "significance of a particular mode of representation" and how it is "related to other representations of the same phenomenon."<sup>9</sup> This study examines the significance of representations of women in comparison to representations of men from both medieval Christian and Jewish perspectives.

While all of these studies add value and complexity to our understanding of the accusations, few have studied the significance of gender within them.<sup>10</sup> Miri Rubin focuses on the elements and characters of the narrative of the host desecration charge, but makes no comprehensive argument about gender. In her analysis of female characters, she only states that women served to introduce the domestic setting and children into the narrative. She focuses on the rationales behind the accusations, arguing that they were Christian efforts to differentiate Jews, and were a consequence of the increasing importance of the Eucharist to Christian identity. William MacLehose focuses his analysis of ritual murder accusations on the role of the child. He argues

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<sup>6</sup> Gavin Langmuir, "Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder," *Speculum* 59 (1984): 820.

<sup>7</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 8. Bynum takes a similar approach to saints' lives. With both saints' lives and ritual murder and host desecration accusation narratives, the authors chose to write about these events as they found them compelling, providing us "important evidence about the assumptions of the people" who wrote them.

<sup>8</sup> Samantha Seal, "Miraculous History: Fictions of Text and Body in a Ritual Murder Trial," *Religion and Literature* 44 (2012): 24-25. Seal focuses on the fictional Jews and holy saints' narratives created to convince Church officials that the Jews had committed ritual murder.

<sup>9</sup> R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 34-35, 70-92.

that the child, as a symbol for Christ, concentrates the emotion of the story, while women take on Mary's role as mother and mourner. MacLehose maintains that the Christian mother is always an entirely positive character, an assertion that will be challenged in this study.<sup>11</sup> A gendered analysis of ritual murder and host desecration charges illuminates the narrative roles of women and goes beyond identifying misogynistic views in male authored texts or studying exceptional women. Through this approach we can identify the different ways religious discourses and conflicts were gendered.

### **The Fallibility of Women**

In many accusations, Christian women primarily play the role of the aware, but incapable, observer. These women are frequently blind to Jews' actions, and even when they do recognize the threat of ritual murder or host desecration, they are powerless to stop it. In Thomas of Monmouth's narrative of the 1144 ritual murder of William of Norwich, a "treacherous fellow" bribed William's mother to allow him to take William away.<sup>12</sup> With William in tow, the man stopped at the boy's aunt's house. She became suspicious and sent out her daughter to investigate; she saw William with the Jews and reported this back to her mother.<sup>13</sup> His aunt, wise in her suspicion, had deduced the crime, but did nothing with this information. Later, a nun, Legarda, prayed for divine direction, saw a dead boy at the base of tree, and realized that his body was holy.<sup>14</sup> Legarda, however, is unable to make the connection between the body and the alleged crime of the Jews. This link is drawn by Henry the forester, who found William murdered in the woods, saw the torture he had suffered, associated this with the Jews, and then informed the priest.<sup>15</sup> The contrast between Legarda and Henry is stark: both are divinely guided to William and see the same scene, but only Henry reflects on the sight and intervenes.

The narrative of William's death presents women as possessing knowledge, but being unable to act upon it. Male actors, such as Henry, are the ones who move the narrative forward. Thomas of Monmouth, a monk in Norwich, wrote the text to persuade his fellow monks and

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<sup>11</sup> MacLehose, *A Tender Age*, 107-175.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Passion of William of Norwich*, trans. Miri Rubin (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

townspeople that Jews had killed William.<sup>16</sup> Thus, he wrote the narrative in a way he thought would be compelling. Monmouth builds on the larger societal view of women as the weaker, inferior sex to express concern over women in the polemic against Judaism. Their weakness and passivity are presented as indirectly allowing these horrible events to occur. Women are the chink in the armor that should protect Christian communities against Jewish crimes. Ultimately, Thomas's narrative was successful and news of the tragic story of William spread to France by 1204.<sup>17</sup>

In other narratives, women are even more explicitly and directly responsible for these crimes. Men and women both betray their fellow Christians, but do so for different reasons. Female actors give up their children or the host due to their circumstances, while male actors help Jews commit their crimes because of their character and personality. In the ritual murder and host desecration charges from La Guardia, Spain in 1491, the Jews are said to have bribed a woman to steal the host for them. According to the charge,

Near them, there lived an old woman, who was very poor, much poorer than the nobleman, and they went to her and said, "Sister, it will be well worth your while to do what we are going to ask you ..." The poor old thing said that, if she could, she would willingly do it.<sup>18</sup>

Later, the Jews took the victim of the ritual murder, Christopher, from his elderly, blind mother.<sup>19</sup> In many other accusations, the women whose children are stolen or given up for bribes are poor, infirm, or old. In a 1510 ritual murder charge from Nuremberg, the author mentions that the Jews purchased one of many Christian children from a poor peasant mother.<sup>20</sup> The 1285 accusation from Munich emphasizes the old age of the female kidnapper who gave captured children to Jews.<sup>21</sup> This common motif expresses male Christian authors' worry over the economic and social

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, xi-xii.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>18</sup> Sebastian de Horozco, "La historia del niño inocente de la Guardia, 1533," in *The Jews in Western Europe 1400-1600*, ed. John Edwards (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 111.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>20</sup> "Publishing House of Hieronymus Holtzel, Nuremberg Host Desecration and Ritual Murder Charges Reported," in *Scattered Among the Nations: Documents Affecting Jewish History 49 to 1975*, ed. Alexis P. Rubin (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995), 116.

<sup>21</sup> Hermann Strack, *The Jew and Human Sacrifice* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1909), 184.

vulnerability of women. Single, old, and poor, these women were prime accomplices in Jewish crimes.

This characterization of women as vulnerable reveals elite male anxiety over women's marginal position in Christian society. These women did not neatly fit into the socially acceptable categories of lay and married, or single and religious. The texts present the existence of socially and economically vulnerable women as a destabilizing force in Christian communities. Medieval legal codes also evince this concern over women's security. Thirteenth-century Norman laws heavily protected women's dowries and ability to marry. If a woman's male relative would not arrange her marriage, he would be called to the royal court and made to do so.<sup>22</sup> If a woman's husband was exiled, she would still maintain her inheritance.<sup>23</sup> Similar laws existed in thirteenth-century Spanish and Sicilian law codes.<sup>24</sup> Just as law codes sought to ensure married women were economically secure, the Church attempted to control financially vulnerable religious women. When women joined convents, their families usually paid a considerable entrance fee, similar to a dowry, to provide for their material needs. The Church expressed an uneasiness towards religious women who lived in voluntary poverty outside the security of this convent structure. The Council of Vienne in 1312 castigated religious women who lived independently.<sup>25</sup> As a result, in the Low Countries in the fourteenth-century, the Church increasingly investigated and suppressed beguines, laywomen who lived in houses together and practiced charity.<sup>26</sup> Over time, the Catholic Church impinged on female religious movements and their ability to charitably serve in their communities, with the progressive installation of strict enclosure of convents that ended with the Tridentine decrees of 1563.<sup>27</sup> Although the

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<sup>22</sup> Ernest-Joseph Tardif, "Coutumiers de Normandie, I: Le Très Ancien Coutumier de Normandie," in *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, ed. Amilie Amt (New York: Routledge, 1993), 59.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 53. These laws also protected a widow's right to her dowry.

<sup>24</sup> James M. Powell, "The Liber Augustalis, or Constitutions of Melfi, Promulgated by Emperor Frederick II for the Kingdom of Sicily in 1231," in *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, ed. Amilie Amt (New York: Routledge, 1993), 60; Colin Smith, "Christians and Moors in Spain," in *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, ed. Amilie Amt (New York: Routledge, 1993), 69.

<sup>25</sup> Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, "Holy Women in the Germanic Territories: A Survey," in *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition*, eds. Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 321.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 122-133.

<sup>27</sup> E. Ann Matter, "Italian Holy Women: A Survey," in *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition*, eds. Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden (Turnhout: Brepols,

majority of the women in these narrative texts are not religious, the Church's negative response to the rise of unenclosed communities of religious women, who often practiced voluntary poverty, evinces the trepidation with which Catholic authorities regarded single, marginal women. The poverty of the women in these ritual murder charges was not merely a fictional rhetorical device, but had a basis in reality. Most of women's paid work was unskilled and unvalued and women rarely had access to the guild system. Additionally, the unexpected death of a husband and entrance into widowhood was a perilous economic situation.<sup>28</sup> Thus, these texts' anxiety over women on the periphery of communities fits within the larger economic realities in Christian society.

The strong contrast between the accounts' treatments of female and male traitors further demonstrates the apprehension around marginal women. Men who abduct children or steal hosts for Jews are described not in terms of their economic or marital status, but with moral language. Thomas of Monmouth describes the man who brought William of Norwich to the Jews as a new Judas, a "treacherous, detestable," wolf.<sup>29</sup> Paul Fromm, the host thief in the Nuremberg case, is presented as a "wicked Christian," and a "tinker and reputed murderer."<sup>30</sup> A Christian woodcut recounts the Passau host desecration charge of 1478,

Christopher Eysengreisshammer, unmindful of his soul's salvation and lusting for temporal goods, made an agreement, Judas-like, with the Jews after inquiring whether, if he brought them the Sacred Host, the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, they would buy it.<sup>31</sup>

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2010), 540. The Council of Trent decreed, "The holy council ... commands ... the enclosure of nuns be restored wherever it has been violated and that it be preserved where it has not been violated ... No nun shall after her profession be permitted to go out of the monastery, even for a brief period under any pretext whatever." Rev. H.J. Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Charlotte, NC: Tan Books, 1978), 224-225.

<sup>28</sup> Patricia Skinner, "Gender and Poverty in the Medieval Community," in *Medieval Women in Their Communities* ed. Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 213-215. Most women in medieval towns worked as domestic servants, petty retailers, spinsters, or prostitutes. Maryanne Kowaleski and Judith Bennett, "Crafts, Guilds, and Women in the Middle Ages," in *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages*, eds. Judith M. Bennett et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 11-13.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, 14-15.

<sup>30</sup> "Publishing House of Hieronymus Holtzel," 114.

<sup>31</sup> "From a Woodcut, ca. 1480," in *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book: 315-1791*, eds. Jacob Rader Marcus and Marc Saperstein (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 173.

Christopher, although he also accepted the bribe like many female characters, was not demarcated in economic terms. In these stories, men are capable of self-interest and wicked deeds, while women can only be manipulated. While women in these texts are vulnerable characters tricked by Jews, in the Passau narrative, Christopher seeks out the Jews to make a deal with them.<sup>32</sup> Men, in the pursuit of their self-interest, play active roles in betrayal and deception, while women, as ignorant bystanders and victims, are passive participants.

This characterization may stem from the personage of Judas, often invoked in these narratives. Judas is an example and model of betrayal that is explicitly and exclusively male. Both men and women often betray for money, but like Judas, men do it out of greed, while women do so out of desperation. Male actors advance the narrative of these accusations and assist Jews as accomplices. Thus, their behavior can be identified, punished accordingly, and perhaps prevented in the future. On the other hand, victimized women, who give up their children out of poverty, betray not from free will, but of need. The poor virtue of these men can be more easily rectified than the widespread economic vulnerability of women or the passivity and ignorance of female bystanders. The contrast between male and female betrayers further exhibits the anxiety surrounding marginal women. Unlike men, women have little choice, and in the face of supposed Jewish child murder and host desecration, women's lack of autonomy and stability becomes an all the more frightening prospect.

### **Inattentive Mothers**

These texts also demonstrate a worry over women as mothers and their ability to fulfill their familial duties. William's mother is an important figure in Thomas' account. When the messenger of the Jews arrives at her house in an attempt to take William away with him, "The mother resisted, her gut feeling warning her, fearing for her son with a maternal instinct."<sup>33</sup> The man begged and begged, and the stalwart mother continued to refuse. After several attempts at bribery, the "mother's spirit was severely shaken and her maternal devotion was already gradually wavering ... and, thus convinced, she bowed to the very thing she did not want, willy-nilly."<sup>34</sup> This scene expresses the idea that maternal love, so greatly respected and lauded with the Virgin Mary, was susceptible to corruption by money. The

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<sup>32</sup> Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, 77. Rubin writes "Women in the host desecration narrative were thus the weak and easily tempted accomplices of Jewish plans ... Women in poverty were particularly vulnerable to seduction."

<sup>33</sup> Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

text casts the messenger as a wolf and the mother as a sheep, unable to protect her lamb.<sup>35</sup>

The implied criticism of William's mother and the concern over maternal devotion is further evinced by William's aunt. Throughout the story, Thomas, deliberately or not, paints the aunt as a better mother than William's actual one. To begin with, the aunt was suspicious enough of the messenger to send out her daughter to investigate and ascertain the situation, while William's mother did nothing but sell her child to the Jews.<sup>36</sup> Later, the aunt had a vision in which Jews attacked and beat her. After she heard about William's fate, she realized that the vision was a prophecy.<sup>37</sup> The aunt is blessed with a vision to warn of danger to William, but the mother is not. Throughout the narrative, the aunt is more mindful of William, and thus perhaps a more dutiful maternal figure.

The text describes the aunt's reaction to William's death: "for a long time, she could hardly contain her mourning, because she lamented him whom she loved most tenderly and with all her heart."<sup>38</sup> The aunt's mourning is in stark contrast to the mother's: "Here was a woman carried away by feminine and reckless daring ... Compelled by maternal suffering, she accosted everyone with horrible cries and asserted that her son had been ... killed by the Jews."<sup>39</sup> The mother borders on the edge of panic, while the aunt laments the person she "loved above all others."<sup>40</sup> The aunt weeps out of great love, but the maternal role is what drives her intense, undignified grief. Thus, these accusations not only demonstrate anxiety over women's capability to protect their children from Jewish abduction, but also over maternal love. Had money not compromised her maternal devotion, William's mother could have saved her child. This text argues that faithful and loving mothers are necessary to protect Christian communities against the imagined perverse practices of Judaism.

Other narratives further establish this critique of mothers' inadequate dedication. In 1255, Hugh of Lincoln was found dead in a well and his death was attributed to the Jews. The ballad of his life, found in the *Annals of Waverly*, presents Hugh's mother, Lady Maisry, as entirely unaware. She does not know where her child is, and is taken aback when he does not return home late in the day. She goes out to search for him

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

and eventually finds his body in a well.<sup>41</sup> The text implicitly argues that had Maisry been more attentive, Hugh could have been saved. Matthew Paris' account of Hugh of Lincoln's death very much resembles that of the *Annals of Waverly*.<sup>42</sup> Hugh's mother did not know where her child was and had to learn from neighbors that he had last been seen playing with a group of Jewish boys. After several days of searching, she finds her dead son in a well.<sup>43</sup> Once again, Hugh's mother is totally ignorant of her son's whereabouts.

The juxtaposition of this narrative with another Matthew Paris chronicle will further demonstrate the disparagement of Christian mothers. Matthew's accusation of ritual murder in 1240 in Norwich contains an unusual element: a father looking for his lost child. He recounts,

The father of the boy, however, from whom the Jews had stolen him, after diligent search, at length discovered him, confined in custody of the Jews, and with a loud cry he pointed out his son, whom he believed lost, shut up in a room of one of the Jews' houses.<sup>44</sup>

Although the father is unable to prevent the Jews from circumcising his son, he catches the Jews in the act and prevents his son's murder. Unlike with the first account, here Matthew gives little detail about how the Jews managed to obtain the child, only vaguely mentioning that they had stolen him. Rather than censuring the father for losing his child, the author praises him for his daring rescue. Matthew Paris' description of Hugh's mother appears even more critical when viewed in comparison to the father in Norwich. Especially when compared to fathers, mothers were presented as inadequate parents.

In a 1550 account by Victor von Karben, a German convert, a Jewish child enjoyed playing with his Christian friends and went to church with them. His mother, disturbed by this, commanded him to stop going, but to no avail. The father strove to temper the mother's anger, believing their son's behavior was only a phase. She tried to get her husband to kill

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<sup>41</sup> "Sir Hugh, or the Jew's Daughter," in *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, eds. Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904), 369.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew Paris was a Benedictine monk who lived from c. 1200-1259.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew Paris, "Chronica Majora," in *The Pinnacle of Hatred: The Blood Libel and the Jews*, ed. Darren O'Brien (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2011), 315.

<sup>44</sup> Matthew Paris, "Monachi Sancti Albani, Chronica Majora," in *The Pinnacle of Hatred: The Blood Libel and the Jews*, ed. Darren O'Brien (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2011), 310-311.

their child, but he refused. Eventually, she poisoned and killed her son.<sup>45</sup> Although he is nominally Jewish, Karben presents him as a boy who is about to be brought into the Christian fold. The father is the rational, calm figure, while the mother is stringent, murderous, and cruel. She is the obstacle to the child's conversion, killing him before he can be saved with the cleansing waters of baptism. Once again, lack of maternal love harms Christian, or at least potentially Christian, children.

Interestingly, this story is a reversal of the tale of the "Jewish boy," common in medieval literature.<sup>46</sup> As in Karben's story, the Jewish boy shows an affinity for Christianity. However, usually, the father is the one who kills the boy by throwing him into an oven, but here the mother is the murderer. Miri Rubin maintains that "the sense of danger posed by Jews—linked so frequently to the utter vulnerability of children to any adult malefactors—was represented in a northern tale about Jews, children, and ovens."<sup>47</sup> Karben builds on this representation by reversing the roles. Instead of the story ending with the child miraculously saved and the mother converting to Christianity, it results in tragedy. It is possible that Karben's conversion influenced his escalation of the story. With its maternal violence, this depiction heightens the "strong fears of abuse and loss" that the original tale communicates.<sup>48</sup> This fear of female cruelty likely grew out of the Christian perception of Jewish women as more orthodox and devoted to their faith, and thus quick to kill children to prevent conversion, an idea supported by the mass murder-suicides in the accounts of the attacks of the First Crusade.<sup>49</sup> As a convert himself, perhaps Karben knew of these events and explicitly utilized this perception of Jewish mothers in his work. Regardless, these texts present Jewish and Christian mothers, with their inability to love their children and care for them as they should, as allowing the Jews to wreak havoc on Christian life.

### **The Role of Jewish Women**

Thus far, analysis has centered on Christian men's perceptions of their female co-religionists' roles in the accusations, but Jewish women's presence also received attention. Jewish women, although they rarely actually participated in the physical violence allegedly inflicted on

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<sup>45</sup> Yuval, *Two Nations*, 187-188.

<sup>46</sup> Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, 7-10. The narrative of the Jewish boy was first recorded in the sixth-century.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Yuval, *Two Nations*, 189.

Christian children, often acted as accomplices to Jewish men. In the 1470 ritual murder trial in Emdingen, Elias the Jew, who was already presumed guilty, confessed that “some poor people were resting on his lane and would have liked to have some lodging—they were a man, a woman, with two children . . . Whereupon his wife Serlin invited these poor people into the shed,” where later a group of Jews came to commit the murder.<sup>50</sup> In another trial for ritual murder in Freiburg in 1504, a Christian accomplice to the Jews, Michael Hun, described his role in the event,

The Jews told him that they had asked other people to kidnap children, whether in woods, fields or wherever, that if they kill them the Jews would make them rich . . . The old Jewess . . . [was] especially encouraging. One time when they were getting some eggs and hay from him, they entreated him to kidnap the children who may come his way.<sup>51</sup>

In Hun’s account, the elderly, female Jew is persuasive and devoted to her cause, scheming to convince him to assist in the theft of children. In both cases, Jewish women bait participants or victims into the Jewish sphere of violence.

Obviously, trials do not give unimpeded access to the events that transpired. Witnesses and defendants were under pressure from officials who already believed that the Jews were guilty. Defendants were likely aware of the severity of their situation and attempted to prove their innocence. Logically, then, we can assume that they spoke and acted in ways that they thought would be convincing.<sup>52</sup> In her study of Inquisition trials, Lu Ann Homza argues that we can still use trial records, “to reveal what individuals thought was rhetorically effective, which in turn illuminates the range of their voices, their sources, and their reasoning.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, these testimonies beg the question: why include Jewish women? Witnesses’ stories of Jewish men abducting and killing Christian children fully function without the presence of Jewish women. Thus, their choice to include Jewish women as accomplices reflects that both Christians and Jews believed this was an important part of the story for the judges; those on trial thought that judges would find the presentation of Jewish women as baiters plausible. Perhaps this idea was effective because it capitalized

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<sup>50</sup> Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>52</sup> Lu Ann Homza, *Religious Authority in the Spanish Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* R. Po-Chia Hsia takes this approach in *Trent: 1475*; Hsia examines the magistrates’ desired narrative imperative and the process of Jewish witnesses creating their testimony to match this vision.

on the medieval stereotypical ideas of women as seductresses and temptresses. In these trials and accusations, Jewish men allegedly performed the violence, but Jewish women assisted in these evil deeds, widening the circle of guilt. By applying stereotypically anti-female attitudes to Jewish women, these men presented a convincing picture to officials because they implicated more Jews, and thus the Jewish community more broadly.

### **The Jewish Female Body**

Christians conceptualized the role of Jewish women from another angle as well: the body. Some accusations rely on gendered perceptions of the body to explain the rationale behind Jews' alleged ritual murder of Christian children. A number of Christians believed that Jewish men were cursed with menstruation, and that they ingested Christian blood to end their suffering. This belief had a long tradition, first expressed in writing in the thirteenth-century by Jacques de Vitry.<sup>54</sup> An account of a ritual murder in Tyrnau in 1494 states, "They [the Jews] had discovered as men and women among them suffered equally from menstruation, that the blood of Christian child is a specific medicine for it, when drunk."<sup>55</sup> Here, the author feminizes Jews to differentiate and demonize them. Sharon Koren explains the belief:

The notion of Jewish male flux, conceived as an excessive blood flow from the anus, was justified in terms of humoral science and Christian theology. Medieval scientists noted that Jews, like women, were by nature pale because they suffered from an excess of cold and wet humors. These excess humors settled in the lower abdomen and were transformed into blood. In order to maintain homeostasis, Jewish men purged themselves of this excess blood through hemorrhoidal bleeding.<sup>56</sup>

Male Jews, with their unnatural, womanly menstruation, are clearly demarcated as the Other. Frequently, Jews were thought of as sexually dangerous. The myth of male menstruation added to this, because it made them effeminate, and thus, "unruly, unstable, and uncontrolled."<sup>57</sup> Menstruation was depicted as a dark and polluted curse, since Jews

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<sup>54</sup> David Baile, *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol between Jews and Christians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 105.

<sup>55</sup> Strack, *The Jew and Human Sacrifice*, 201.

<sup>56</sup> Sharon Faye Koren, "The Menstruant as 'Other' in Medieval Judaism and Christianity," *Nashim* 17 (2009): 45.

<sup>57</sup> David S. Katz, "Shylock's Gender: Jewish Male Menstruation in Early Modern England," *The Review of English Studies* 50 (1999): 459.

supposedly had to use the blood of a Christian child as the cure. This cure was supposed to help both men and women, but one would expect the blood to assist the Jewish men alone, since only their menstruation is unnatural. In the Tyrnau accusation, two Jewish women assisted in the murder of a Christian child to cure their menstruation.<sup>58</sup> These types of accusations express a multitude of ideas about femaleness. First, that menstruation is contaminative and corruptive. Christian scholars, who inherited this fear from Greco-Roman natural philosophers, believed that sex during menstruation would harm the resulting fetus.<sup>59</sup> Some confessors' manuals even suggested that sex with a menstruating woman would give the man leprosy.<sup>60</sup> Accusations containing belief in male menstruation demarcate both Jewish-male bodies specifically and female bodies in general as abnormal. The application of menstruation to male Jews differentiates them from Christian men, while the association of this bodily cycle with Jews makes menstruation, and thus also the female body, dark and polluted.

While Christian sources rely on women's bodies to demarcate the Other, Jewish texts present female bodies as grounds of disputation between the two faiths. Ephraim of Bonn describes the events of the accusation of ritual murder in Speyer in 1196.<sup>61</sup> A gentile woman was found dead and the town believed her death had come at the hands of the Jews. In response to this perceived offense, some Christians "removed the corpse of the daughter of R. Isaac b. Asher Ha-Levi from its grave during the period of mourning and hung it naked in the market-place, with a rat hanging in the strands of her hair as a mockery and humiliation to the Jews."<sup>62</sup> The Jewish source communicates the dishonor done to the community with this act. By stealing, stripping, and violating the Jewish female body, the Christians attempt to avenge the death of one of their own. The corruption of one female body by death is traded for the

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<sup>58</sup> Antonius Bonfini, "Rerum Hungaricarum Decades," in *The Pinnacle of Hatred: The Blood Libel and the Jews*, ed. Darren O'Brien (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2011), 330.

<sup>59</sup> Koren, "The Menstruant as 'Other,'" 41.

<sup>60</sup> Jacqueline Murray, "Gendered Souls in Sexed Bodies," in *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, eds. Peter Biller and A.J. Minnis (Rochester: York Medieval Press, 1998), 88.

<sup>61</sup> Ephraim ben Jacob of Bonn was a Talmudist and poet who lived in today's Germany. He lived from 1132 to 1197. Jacob Rader Marcus and Marc Saperstein, eds., *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Sourcebook: 315-1791* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 92.

<sup>62</sup> "The Report of Ephraim of Bonn," in *Church, State and Jew in the Middle Ages*, ed. Robert Chazan (New York: Behrman House, 1980), 164.

debasement of another by public display. Jewish texts present women's bodies as the means of retaliation between Jews and Christians.

A Jewish chronicle of the First Crusade also focused on female bodies when discussing ritual murder. In Worms, the Christians took a dead body and paraded through the streets, proclaiming that the boy died at the hands of the Jews.<sup>63</sup> These public actions produced significant anti-Jewish violence in the town. With the threat of violence and forced conversion, many Jews committed mass murder-suicide; the chronicle explains that, "It was for Him and for His Torah that they were slain...and lay naked in the streets, for the foe stripped them and left them naked...the survivors saw their brethren lying naked and the chaste daughters of Israel naked."<sup>64</sup> Jewish men and women died honorably to preserve their faith, but the disrespect and ruin of their bodies put the survivors under "great duress."<sup>65</sup> Like in Ephraim of Bonn's account of the events in Speyer, the exposure and degradation of Jewish bodies, particularly women's, represents the dishonor the Jews suffer at the hands of Christians.

The motif of the female body as a site of revenge is present in Bonn's description of another accusation. In Würzburg in 1147, the Christians found a dead body and accused the Jews of murder. Bonn details that a Jewish girl

was dragged to a church for she was to be baptized; but she hallowed the name of god and spat on the cross. So she was beaten with rocks and fists...but she didn't die and fell to the ground instead, pretending to be dead. They [the Christians] pinched her hands, beat her and burned her repeatedly and laid her on a marble stone, to see if she had died. But she didn't wake and didn't stir or move, not her hands and not her feet, and fooled her enemies until night time ... Thus she was saved.<sup>66</sup>

Bonn gives special attention to this girl in his account, he specifically mentions two other murdered boys, but does so only in passing. As with Speyer, the female body is the nexus point for retribution through violence. The female form here is also a source of hope: the girl, through

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<sup>63</sup> "Mainz Anonymous," in *The Jews and the Crusaders: The Hebrew Chronicles of the First and Second Crusades*, ed. Shlomo Eidelberg (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 102. The "Mainz Anonymous" is one of the chronicles written in the generation following the events of the First Crusade.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ephraim bar Jacob of Bonn, "Book of Remembrance," in *The Pinnacle of Hatred: The Blood Libel and the Jews*, ed. Darren O'Brien (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2011), 287.

her cleverness, outwits the Christians and lives. Bonn later notes that many of the Jews survived by fleeing to another town.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps the figure of the girl represents the wider position of the Jews in this situation: attacked and wounded, but still alive.

Narratives of the ritual murder charge in Blois in 1171 express concern over the consequences of female sexuality for the Jewish community. A soldier saw a Jewish man, and told his master he believed he threw a Christian child into a well. The master proceeded to tell this to the Count of Blois, because he hated Pulcelina, an influential Jewish woman.<sup>68</sup> Pulcelina had a close relationship with the Count and attempted to save the Jews, but to no avail. "His cruel wife, a Jezebel, swayed him, for she also hated Dame Pulcelina."<sup>69</sup> A different Jewish account of the same event, written by Baruch ben R. Meir, provides more detail on Pulcelina, and presents her as having an affair with the Count. After the accusation, "she remained confident, since she did not believe that the heart of the count had turned against her. For his love for her had been so strong for so long- how could it now change?"<sup>70</sup> Historians have generally agreed that Pulcelina was indeed the Count's mistress.<sup>71</sup> Meir's account explicitly condemns Pulcelina:

She was harsh as a rock to her fellow-citizens because of the count's protection. She dealt arrogantly with all who came in contact with her, for the count loved her. She even dealt harshly with the countess and her guardian.<sup>72</sup>

Pulcelina's position of influence and her sexual activities led to the accusation, and her poor behavior continued the narrative. Meir's depiction clearly argues against Christian-Jewish sexual relations by foretelling the danger that can result.

### **Conclusion**

Ritual murder and host desecration charges often led to the violent persecution, conversion, and expulsion of Jewish communities. Historians can only imagine their impact on the daily lives of Jews, who sometimes

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<sup>67</sup> Ephraim bar Jacob of Bonn, "Book of Remembrance," *The Pinnacle of Hatred*, 288.

<sup>68</sup> Ephraim bar Jacob of Bonn, "Book of Remembrance," in *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book: 315-1791*, eds. Jacob Rader Marcus and Marc Saperstein (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 93.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> "The Report of Ephraim of Bonn," 303.

<sup>71</sup> Judith Baskin, "Jewish Women in the Middle Ages," in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Judith Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 113.

<sup>72</sup> "The Report of Ephraim of Bonn," 303.

remained at the sites of the accusations. Christian communities often glorified the supposed child martyrs, erecting shrines or pursuing canonization.<sup>73</sup> Given the grave and deadly consequences of these events, every approach to them merits consideration, including gender. These sources reveal a variety of anxieties about the consequences of female weakness that were part of the medieval world. Christian texts express concern over economically and socially vulnerable women and the strength of maternal love. In these accounts, women are the hole in the armor that should protect Christian communities against the perceived onslaught of Judaism. Although Jews were the ones supposedly killing Christian boys, women, as unfit mothers, enabled the murders to occur. These texts, with their attribution of menstruation to Jewish men, rely on femaleness to demarcate the Jews, and thus demonstrate wariness about femaleness in general. Jewish sources, on the other hand, focused on women's bodies, as susceptible to violence and sexual corruption at the hands of Christian men.

The accusations and accounts analyzed in this study employ common motifs and women are key to understanding the ways these discourses functioned. Medieval Christian and Jewish writings often share a similar theme: the frightening religious Other coming to take the community's children. Christians feared that Jews would abduct and kill children for their blood, while Jews were cognizant of the threat of Christians attempting to baptize Jewish children and remove them from the faith. The narrative idea of the evil religious enemy requires a delicate balance: the enemy has to be foreign and strange enough to be mysterious and malevolent. Yet, if the religious Other is too differentiated, too separate, it loses its rhetorical power and ability to be a believably dangerous threat. In these texts, through their vulnerability and failings, women and their bodies fulfill the crucial role of acting as a conduit between the communities. Women provided the religious Other a path into the community and its children, allowing the threat of the religious Other to be allegedly realized, and thus perpetuated.

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<sup>73</sup> Simon of Trent is a particularly good example of this phenomenon.

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