

The Medieval Myth of Jewish Ritual Murder: Toward a History of Literary Reception

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Matthew Paris's *Chronica Majora* relates the following story for the year 1255:¹ Around June 29, the Jews of the city of Lincoln abduct the eight-year old Hugh. They fatten him for ten days and send messengers to all Jewish communities in England to invite them to celebrate a ritual parody of Christ's crucifixion. After the visitors' arrival, one of the Lincoln Jews is selected to act as judge, a Pilate so to speak, and the Christian boy is sentenced to a variety of tortures. After being whipped, crowned with thorns, spat at, cut with knives and insulted, Hugh is finally crucified and his side is opened with a lance. Afterwards, his body is taken off the cross and his bowels are taken out for ritual examination. In the meantime, the boy's mother has been searching for her son for days. Neighbors have told her that they saw the boy playing with Jewish children and entering a Jewish house. The mother then finds Hugh's body in that same house. Her cries for help gather a crowd of people including John of Lexington, a member of the local clergy who explains that this is not the first such Jewish atrocity he has heard of. John threatens the Jewish owner of the house, Copin, that not even all the gold in England will free him from the consequences of his actions but promises him that he will not be put to death if he gives a truthful account of events. Copin confesses: he is made to admit that the Jews crucified a Christian child every year; after they found that the innocent Hugh's bowels were unfit for divination, they tried to bury the body, but the dead Hugh

¹ Matthaueus Parisiensis. *Chronica Majora*. ed. Henry Richards Luard, (London: Longman, 1880) (Rolls Series, vol. 57), vol. 4, pp. 516-19, and 546. A preliminary version of this essay was read at the Thirteenth International Conference on Medievalism, in Rochester, NY, October 1998.

repeatedly came back from under the earth; finally, they threw the body in a well, but it had not sunk, which is why the mother had been able to find it. After Copin's testimony, members of the Lincoln cathedral chapter ask for Hugh's body and bury it within the cathedral with all the rites appertaining to a martyr. When the king learns of the promises made to Copin, he does not approve of the deal. Copin, realizing that he will be sentenced to death, offers a complete confession: He declares that all English Jews share the guilt for the killing, and almost all Jewish communities in England have sent representatives to assist in the ritual murder as it is the custom with Passover celebrations. After his confession, Copin is dragged to the gallows and hanged. Ninety-one additional Jews are transported to London to be imprisoned. The investigation carried out by royal judges proves that the murder was indeed a joint venture of the entire English Jewry. Consequently, eighteen more of the richest and most influential Jews of Lincoln are hanged. The remaining Jews escape punishment, as Matthew Paris explains, due to bribes or the intercession of Franciscan preachers.

The chronicler's narrative is confirmed by a substantial number of entries in other chronicles and by an Anglo-Norman ballad.² However, the often mutually

² Cf, e.g., the descriptions in: *Anna monasterii Waverleia*, ed. Henry Richards Luard (London; Longman, 1865) (Rolls Series, Vol. 36/I), pp. 346ff, *Annales de Burton*, in *Annales Monastici*, ed. Henry Richards Luard (London; Longman, 1864) (Rolls Series, Vol. 36/I), pp. 340-80; *Close Rolls of the Reign of Henry III* (London: The Public Record Office, 1931; repr. Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1970), pp. 141ff. Another thirty later entries in chronicles retell these reports with slightly varying content. The Anglo-Norman ballad closely follows the story as told by Matthew Paris, see Francisque Michel, *Hugues de Lincoln*: (continued...)

exclusive details in the different coeval versions of the ritual murder of Hugh of Lincoln indicate that the authors of these versions and/or their sources were less interested in writing historiography than in paralleling stories they had heard about or read with salvation history. Like other false medieval accusations against the Jews, host desecrations and well-poisonings, the myth of Jewish ritual murder developed as one of the most virulent models for reading the world in medieval Christendom. Accordingly, an analysis of this myth, beginning with the events around Hugh of Lincoln, is illustrative: The various literary and cultural transformations of the story provide an insight into the transition of the myth from its medieval genesis to its post-medieval reception.³

² (...continued)

Recueil de ballades anglo-normannes et Écossaises relatives an meurtre de cet enfant commis par les Juifs en MCCLV (Paris: Silvestre; London: Pickering, 1834), pp.1-16.

³ For my research, the following publications proved most valuable: Karl Heinz Göller, "Sir Hugh of Lincoln - From History to Nursery Rhyme," in *Jewish Life and Jewish Suffering as Mirrored in English and American Literature. Jüdisches Leben im Spiegel der englischen und amerikanischen Literatur* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1987), pp. 17-31; R., Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder. Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), Friedrich Battenberg, *Das europäische Zeitalter der Juden*, 2 Vols.. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990); Gavin I. Langmuir, ed., *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); Alan Dundes, ed., *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Stefan Rohrbacher and Michael Schmidt, *Judenbilder. Kulturgeschichte antijüdischer Mythen und*
(continued...)

Although the allegations of ritual murder against the European Jewish minority begin in England with the case of William of Norwich as early as 1144, the particular charges are part of a larger medieval Christian mentality.⁴

³ (...continued)

antisemitischer Vorurteile (Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1991); and Rainer Erb, ed., *Die Legende vom Ritualmord. Zur Geschichte der Blutbeschuldigung gegen Ju den* (Berlin: Metropol, 1993).

⁴ The story of William of Norwich, the first “documented” case of martyrdom due to ritual murder, was authored by Thomas of Monmouth. Begun around 1150 and finished in 1172-73, Thomas’s narrative relates the story of a seven-year old boy, William, who is distinguished by his piety, humility, and his desire for fasting. Although not wealthy himself, he distributes food to the poor, loves to attend church, and has memorized all important psalms and prayers. At the age of eight, after William has worked as an apprentice at a furrier’s shop in Norwich, the Jews of the city offer him a job because of his reputation as naive and hard-working. Soon the Jews decide to torture the boy to death in a mock celebration of Christ’s crucifixion on March 22, the date of Jewish Passover as well as Ash Wednesday. Under a pretext, he is lured into a Jew’s house where he is tortured, hanged on a beam, and finally killed by stabbing his side with a lance. To cover up the murder, the Jews try to bury the body in a forest close to the city on Holy Friday. Because they are observed by a citizen, they bribe the king’s local representative, the Sheriff John of Cheney, to oblige the witness to swear that he had not seen anything. However, the body’s location is soon detected because of a miraculous light emanating from the site during the same night. Because of the Easter season, the Jews are immediately suspected of having committed the murder. A priest named Godwin, the boy’s uncle, identifies the

Various other accusations on the continent (e.g., Würzburg, 1147; Pontoise, 1163; Blois 1171) indicate that the myth of ritual murder originated along with the unsuccessful second crusade (1147-48) and had its general historical causes in the competition between the two monotheistic religions in late antiquity. That English cities became the central sites for the accusation in the

boy, and the crowd demands that the Jews, eternal enemies of Christianity, should all be killed. Godwin accuses the Jews of the murder, but Bishop Eberard of Norwich and the Sheriff protect them against the furious Christian citizens until a royal edict guarantees them freedom from prosecution. In the meantime, a Cluniac friar, Aimar of Lewes, convinces the Bishop of Norwich, that the boy is a martyr, and the Bishop decides to have the body buried on the monks' cemetery, close to the cathedral. During the *translatia* of little William, his status as a saint is confirmed by the integrity of his body and by the sweet fragrance the body exudes. The entire rest of the *vita* recounts manifold miracles which supposedly happened in connection with and after William's death. For a text of the *vita* (Latin and English), see *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*, ed. Augustus Jessopp and Montague R. James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896). For a survey of the history of Jews in England, see James Parke's, "Jewish Christian Relations in England," in *Three Centuries of Anglo-Jewish Relations. A Volume of Essays*, ed. V. D. Lipman (Cambridge: Heffer and Sons, 1961), pp. 149-68. The case of William of Norwich was the first ever documented. See Friedrich Lotter, "Innocens Virgo et Martyr: Thomas von Monmouth und die Verbreitung der Ritualmordlegende im Hochmittelalter," in *Die Legende vom Ritualmord*, ed. Rainer Erb, pp. 25-72, and Gavin I. Langmuir, "Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder." *Speculum* 59 (1984), 820-46.

twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Gloucester, 1168; Bury St. Edmunds, 1181; Bristol, 1192; Winchester, 1232; London, 1244) had its reasons in the country's deficiency in saints' relics which the clergy attempted to compensate by claiming numerous children as martyrs. Matthew Paris's report demonstrates the pressing interest of the Lincoln cathedral chapter in burying the child inside their cathedral and thus hints at one of the important motives of local English clergy in the martyrdom of children reported missing and found dead, namely the desire to further the importance and wealth of one's own church as a place of pilgrimage.⁵ This desire also explains the chroniclers' hasty reports about miracles and healings during and in the wake of the children's deaths. In addition, Paris's entry also shows that the uncovering of a child's body, at least in the first phase of the myth's genesis, necessitated the theological interpretation by an expert, in this case by John of Lexington, a member of the clergy. Only his knowledge of similar cases and his typological reading provided the laymen present with sufficient cause to accept the killing as a credible ritual murder. Specific knowledge of the Easter liturgy and the "Passio-Christi-Mysticism" are supposed to authenticate the details of the accusations against the Jews for the citizens of Lincoln as much as for the readers of Paris's chronicle: Just as the Christian Easter liturgy repeats the events at Golgatha every year

⁵ Matthew Paris, e.g., realizes the economic background for the haste among the monks of St. Paul's in Norwich (*Chronica Majora*, p. 377), as they attempted to stylize the finding of a dead child as a ritual murder although the child's body did not show any signs of a ritual crucifixion. Thomas of Monmouth, the most vociferous of the Norwich monks, augmented the number of miracles in his later versions of the Vita of William of Norwich from five to thirty-five to press the issue of canonization. Cf. Lotter, "Innocens Virgo," p. 40.

on a set date, it was assumed, that the Church's enemy, the Synagogue, would repeat and reenact a perverted parody of the Christian celebrations.⁶

This typological interpretation fully informs Matthew Paris's explanatory insertions: The Jew appointed judge over Hugh of Lincoln is seen as a new Pilate; the stages of the killing corresponds with a series of the "stations" in Christ's passion. The typological worldview explains the irrational, abstractive judgment of mysterious infanticides. The chronicler is moreover intent on underlining that the witness, Copin, admits to the collective guilt of all Jews. This admission made it possible to extend the accusation to the whole of English Jewry and simplified deriving the guilt of future Jewish individuals from an abstract factual concept. Moreover, as soon as such readings became authenticated by church and state authorities, they degenerated into unreflected notions of Jewish otherness and, as Friedrich

⁶ On the connections between the typological readings during ritual murder accusations and Christian liturgy, cf. Georg R. Schroubek, "Zur Tradierung und Diffusion einer europäischen Aberglaubensvorstellung." in *Die Legende vom Ritualmord*, p. 18, and Rainer Erb, "Zur Erforschung der europäischen Ritualmordbeschuldigungen," in *Die Legende vom Ritualmord*, p. 10. Ivan G. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood. Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 94-101, believes that the blood libel needs to be understood not only in light of Christian cultural shifts but also in connection with the Jewish eucharistic sacrificing of Torah children. However, it is questionable how much medieval Christians would have known about these rare cases (Marcus documents only one such case in 1096). On this problem, cf. also Leah Sinanoglou, "The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the Corpus Christi Plays," *Speculum* 48 (1973), 491-509.

Battenberg has illustrated, could lead to large-scale popular exoneration mechanisms which helped justify earlier as well as future excesses.⁷ In a final step, the stigmatization and demonization of all Jews in this popularized form of Christian doctrine facilitated its functionalization for private and political purposes without impending pangs of conscience. The *Annales de Burton* narrate how Richard of Cornwall, to whom his brother Henry III had mortgaged English Jewry *en masse* as a security for a major loan, had the Jews of Lincoln released from prison because their hanging might have endangered his important investment.⁸ Such a functionalization of English Jewry exemplifies the deterioration of the Jews legal status from a regular business partner to a commodity (*res propria*) of the English king. This development, together with the interdiction on carrying arms (and thus the impossibility of self-defense), shows the increasingly inimical stereotypization of Jews which culminated in the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290.⁹

The disappearance of many Jews from English daily life after 1290 did not result in erasing the stereotype of the “Jew.” England’s close political and economic ties with western and central Europe conveyed news of conflicts from the continent where accusations against Jews multiplied despite numerous imperial, royal, and papal decrees in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The alleged Jewish atrocities also remained present in the

⁷ See Battenberg, *Das europäische Zeitalter der Juden*, Vol. 1, p. 66-67.

⁸ *Annales de Burton*, pp. 340-48.

⁹ On this process of increasing functionalization in the entirety of late medieval Europe, cf. Friedrich Battenberg, “Die Ritualmordprozesse gegen Juden in Spätmittelalter und Frühneuzeit. Verfahren und Rechtsschutz,” in *Die Legende vom Ritualmord*, pp. 95-132.

English collective memory by virtue of various places of pilgrimage: Hugh of Lincoln's magnificent cathedral shrine, to name only one example, was revered until the beginnings of the Protestant reformation as a martyr's resting place.¹⁰ In addition, the popular sermons of late-medieval mendicants, the literary representations in mystery plays, iconographic depictions, and the often orally disseminated miracles of the Virgin made sure that the accusation was not forgotten. Chaucer's vernacular version of the otherwise mostly Latin miracles involving ritual murder in his "Prioress's Tale" is evidence not only for the widespread circulation of the myth but also for its adaptability to different cultural settings as well as to new literary genres and their audiences' horizons of expectation.¹¹

Perhaps in reaction to the physical absence of Jews in England, Chaucer's Prioress situates her story's plot in an anonymous city in Asia minor: A seven-year old boy, driven by a natural and innocuous joy in the songs in honor of the Virgin, traverses the Jewish quarter of his town on his daily walk to school. The Jews, spurred on by Satan himself take offence at the boy's loud singing of the "Alma Redemptoris Mater". One day, they ambush him, cut his throat and throw him into a pit. After searching the entire city, the mother learns that her child has last been seen walking through the Jewish quarter. In her terrible predicament, she asks the Virgin for

¹⁰ The most recent research on these issues has been presented by Joseph Jacobs. "Little St. Hugh of Lincoln: Researches in History, Archaeology, and Legend," in *The Blood Libel Legend*, pp. 41-71.

¹¹ A list of the more than 30 late medieval parallel versions of the story can be found in Carleton Brown, "The Prioress's Tale," in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1941), Vol. 2, pp. 447-85.

assistance. The Jews deny any knowledge of the boy's whereabouts until he miraculously begins to sing the "Alma Redemptoris Mater" despite his cut throat. A large crowd assembles and the bailiff immediately imprisons the present Jews. The murderers are punished, first dragged by horses and then hanged. In the meantime, the dead child, still singing the hymn to Mary, has been transported into the nearby abbey where the abbot confirms the events as a miracle and relieves the child of his task as the miracle's herald. Finally, little Hugh's body is put to rest in a magnificent marble sarcophagus.

For her audience of pilgrims to the shrine of England's greatest martyr, St. Thomas à Beckett, Chaucer's Prioress had taken her personal pick from the pool of elements used to present the ritual murder myth. She transforms the Story into a crime committed in the heat of a deviant religious passion. In her final stanza, however, she connects her own story with all the other accounts on the death of Hugh of Lincoln:

O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also
With cursed Jewes -- as it is notable,
For it is but a litel while ago --
Preye eek for us, we synful folk unstable.¹²

Thus, even toward the end of the fourteenth century the Prioress (and Chaucer) could be certain that every potential recipient would be familiar with the events which happened more than 150 years earlier. Her version lacks the ritual use of blood and body parts so central to the chroniclers' reports as well as the typological analogies with Christ's passion. Rather, she gears her story to glorifying the Virgin through a miracle which only uses ritual murder as a necessary literary

¹² Cited from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. John H. Fisher (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977) p. 246.

vehicle.¹³ Chaucer's gendering of the tale as well as his characterization of the Prioress in his "General Prologue" offers an insight into the transformation of the ritual murder myth which would not have been possible on the basis of texts written and/or narrated by male authors.

In the vast majority of cases, Jewish men, sometimes rabbis, are accused of committing ritual murder. Sigrun Anselm links this feature with what she terms the phantasy of the male-paternal infanticide.¹⁴ She is convinced that the patriarchal Christian model of family and its glorification in the God-Father/God-Son relationship made it necessary to displace the essential conflict of ambivalency between fathers and sons in families onto an external object, Jewish men. Interestingly, the myth of Jewish ritual murder in Europe begins at the very time when the cult of the Virgin and the presentation of Mary as Mother and of Jesus as Child, a Mother-Son dyad, gains greater currency. This propagation of Mother-and-Child images hints at a regressive solution of an underlying religious conflict. When the importance of the close connection between mother and child, the unity of the Mother-Son dyad, could not be reconciled with the Christian pattern of the Father-Son relationship, escape away from and fear of the overly-powerful father image and a desire for the

¹³ It should be noted that Chaucer might have had a personal connection with Lincoln cathedral. On February 19, 1386, his wife, Philippa, and other members of John of Gaunt's family were accepted into the "Fraternity of Lincoln Cathedral," and thus it is possible that the poet may have felt tempted to commemorate the local saint in his literary text. Cf. *Chaucer Life -Records*, ed. Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. 91-93.

¹⁴ Sigrun Anselm, "Angst und Angstprojektion in der Phantasie vom jüdischen Ritualmord," in *Die Legende vom Ritualmord*, p. 256.

unbroken unity and security with the mother was shifted and transferred onto Jewish father figures.

According to Anselm's reading, anti-semitic thinking develops as a result of unresolved conflicts implicit in the Christian model of patriarchy which imputes to the Jews a regression into a former and lower, pre-Christian stage of civilization, an archaic form of sacrificial anthropophagism which finds its outlet in the perversity of ritual murder. This regression, which the theological construct of transubstantiation had attempted to extinguish from the subconsciousness of medieval Christians since 1215, is still palpable in the fourteenth-century discussions on the Eucharist. Chaucer's meticulous description of the Prioress, her exaggerated table manners, consciousness of fashion and finery, and degradation of the child-killing Jews reveals her desire to give a personal display of civilisatory superiority. Her revealing selection from the existing pool of details to describe ritual murder confirms Anselm's theories: The flight away from the overpowering father into the Mother-Child dyad can be seen in her turning the child's mother into a widow. The intimate unity of mother and child, for the Prioress only attainable in her vicarious, narrative projection into the motherly joys of the Virgin, is represented linguistically through the conspicuous use of the ME adjective *lytel* (small) and the extreme punishment (dragging *and* hanging) for the violent separation and destruction of this unity. Similarly, the projection of her own fears for the Christian children onto the Jews is only accessible to her via a misdirected *caritas* toward her spoiled pet dogs and her excessive compassion for little mice caught in traps. However, to equate Chaucer's psychologically realistic critique of the Prioress with the writer's concomitant intention to mount a pro semitic critique of late medieval

views of Jewish life and customs is misguided. Chaucer's text does not support such modernizing views.¹⁵

As the myth of ritual murder moves from the late middle ages into the early modern period, it undergoes further transformation. During the Reformation a more differentiated relationship between the Christian majority and the Jewish minority evolves on the European continent. The establishment of general legal procedures, the legal assimilation in status of all Jews as citizens of their respective states, and a higher success rate in solving child-killings resulted in a substantial decrease in the number of ritual murder accusations toward the end of the sixteenth century.¹⁶ However, these changes on the level of the legal superstratum had no significant effect on the popular reception of the myth which could be revived where- and whenever economic competition, political or personal animosity rendered it advantageous. On the continent, and even more so in England, where until the middle of the seventeenth

¹⁵ On this problem, see the discussions by Richard J. Schoeck, "Chaucer's Prioress: Mercy and Tender Heart," in *Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Richard I. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), pp. 245-58; Robert Worth Frank, Jr., "Miracles of the Virgin, Medieval Antisemitism, and the 'Prioress's Tale'," in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), pp. 177-88.

¹⁶ Cf. Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder*, p. 228.

century the survival of the myth oral forms incorporated stories.¹⁷

An exact dating of the first appearance of the ritual murder myth in ballads or nursery rhymes is virtually impossible. The great number of English, French, Scottish, Irish, and American ballad versions indicates the regularly confirmed acceptance of the medieval allegations. Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1889) alone lists eighteen poems telling the tale of "Hugh of Lincoln," "The Jew's Daughter," or "Sir Hugh."¹⁸ As children are the target audiences of these short texts, a ball game often becomes the point of departure for the story told. Bad weather hints at the presence of powerful supernatural forces. An adolescent Jewish girl lures one of the ball-playing Christian boys into her father's house, promising an apple, a golden ring, or a cherry. She leads the boy through nine dark doors to a table on which he is slaughtered like a pig and is bled to death. Afterwards, the girl bakes him into a cake of lead and throws him into a deep well sacred to the Virgin. His sorrowful mother finds him there, because he answers her calls. Sir Hugh begs his mother to bring his shroud outside the city gates the following morning. As promised, she finds his body outside the Lincoln city gates early next morning.

¹⁷ James Joyce's use of an Irish version of the "Sir Hugh" ballad in his *Ulysses* demonstrates the resilience of the accusation even in the twentieth century. See Louis J. Edmundson, "Theme and Countertheme: The Function of Child Ballad 155, "Sir Hugh, or the Jew's Daughter," in James Joyce's *Ulysses*" (Diss., Middle Tennessee State University, 1975).

¹⁸ Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (New York: Dover Publications, 1965), pp. 233-54. For an exemplary interpretation of Ballad 155 in Child's collection, see Brian Bebbinton's "Little Sir Hugh: An Analysis," in *The Blood Libel Legend*, p. 72-90.

Suddenly, all the church bells of the city are ringing and voices read all the city's books out loud, all without human agency.

Karl Heinz Göller, who has investigated the transition of the Hugh story from the chronicles to the popular ballads and nursery rhymes, has shown that together with the increasing temporal distance from the medieval source texts, and the new genre-specific demands, the ritual character of the murder and the religious affiliation of the girl become less and less important as the ballads concentrate more and more on themes such as seduction, initiation, or love.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the Romantic reception of the myth in ballads, collections of songs and popular religious manuals leaves no doubt that the gradual changes becoming noticeable in the literary tradition could be reversed at any moment.

Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano's inclusion of the accusatory poem "The Jews of Passau" in their collection, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, in 1805 thus does not happen by chance.²⁰ Arnim, who actively opposed Jewish membership in the ultra-conservative "Deutsche-christliche Tischgenossenschaft," because the inclusion of Jews might "replace the Christian community with a synagogue, substitute merry singing with the whirring of wood grouses and slaughter Christian children instead of pheasants" ("welche statt des frohen Gesangs auerte, statt der Fasanen Christenkinder schlachtete"), must

¹⁹ Karl Heinz Göller, "Sir Hugh of Lincoln," p. 26. The orientation away from the theme of ritual murder also increases the growing geographic distance from the sites of origin, as Göller's examples from Florida, Utah, and Kentucky demonstrate.

²⁰ "Die Juden von Passau," in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn. Alte deutsche Lieder. Gesammelt von L. A. v. Arnim und Clemens Brentano*, part 1, in Clemens Brentano, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Heinz Rölleke, (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1975), Vol. 6, pp. 88-91 (my translation).

have regarded the Jews' general cultural and legal assimilation as a threat to his own status. Many of his texts are interspersed with the medieval anti-Semitic myths.²¹ Brentano meanwhile was probably influenced by his study of a number of well-known Catholic authors. His interpretation of alleged ritual murders as crimes committed in analogy to the Christian Easter passion is typical of pre-Enlightenment thought and thus reminiscent of the typological readings of medieval clergy. These two romantic writers' texts are confronted by the perhaps first widely-known pro-Semitic critique of the myth, Heinrich Heine's *Rabbi of Bacherach* (1840). In his first chapter, Heine speaks as a true representative of the European enlightenment who warns against the potential negative side of the folk-tale revival in the nineteenth century. This side is present in what he calls "the foolish fairy tale, often ad nauseam repeated in chronicles and legends, that Jews would steal consecrated hosts, pierce them with knives until the blood flowed and that they slaughtered Christian children on the occasion of their Easter celebrations in order to use their blood at their nightly masses" ("das läppische, in Chroniken und

²¹ Quoted from Gunnar Och, "Alte Märchen von der Grausamkeit der Juden. Zur Rezeption judenfeindlicher Blutschuld-Mythen durch die Romantiker," in *Die Legende vom Ritualmord*, pp. 226-33, here p. 229 (my translation). Interestingly, Johann Gottfried Herder, often blamed for inventing the nationalistic concept of the German "Volksgeist," had criticized the ritual murder accusation when translating a Scottish ballad version, "The Jew's Daughter" (see Child, p. 244-45) into German, as based on a well-known "Nationalvorurtheil" which had already cost many Jews their lives. Cf. "Die Judentochter," in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Volkslieder, Übertragungen, Dichtungen*, ed. Ulrich Gaier (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990), p. 125-26, and p. 1005.

Legenden bis zum Ekel wiederholte Märchen: daß die Juden geweihte Hostien stählen, die sie mit Messern durchstächen bis das Blut heraus fließe, und daß sie an ihrem Passahfeste Christenkinder schlachteten, um das Blut derselben bei ihrem nächtlichen Gottesdienste zu gebrauchen“).²²

Heine's literary defense as well as Arnim and Brentano's attacks are, in the end, symptomatic of fundamental changes in European society. Enlightenment culture had succeeded in making Jewish and Christian citizens equals before the law. As a result, Jews became increasingly visible during the eighteenth century which meant that their Christian counterparts encountered them more and more in daily life, as competitors for jobs or even as superior civil servants. For many a member of the majority population, this encounter sufficed to revive old prejudices which, in turn, re-validated medieval models of thought even in the modern world. These models of thought became all the more vicious as the originally religious opposition was now transformed into an unconscious general animosity against Jews. No longer controlled and channeled by the church, long-standing popular superstitions were projected on to the Jewish culture. If medieval Christians had misunderstood and rejected Jewish religious customs, they had at least experienced them through direct contact. Now, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the unbroken tradition of the Jewish customs was only known by the vaguest of notions which made them appear almost automatically as strange, sinister,

²² Cited from Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften in zwölf Bänden*, ed. Klaus Briegleb (Frankfurt a. M.: Ullstein, 1981), Vol. 1, p. 462 (my translation).

and threatening, especially in rural and Catholic regions of Europe.²³

The discrediting of numerous Enlightenment achievements in the wake of Napoleon's defeat led to a renewed deterioration of the social and political status of Jews. European national governments, intent on consolidating their power, instrumentalized the exuberantly growing rumors to divert their populations away from pressing economic or social problems and were eager to brand the Jewish minority as a scapegoat. This intimate intertextuality of ideological and mythographic discourses is unmasked by Arnold Zweig's 1914 play, *Ritualmord in Ungarn*, and by Bernard Malamud's 1966 novel, *The Fixer*. That both fictional texts are situated and that both their historical source materials originate in Eastern Europe is not a coincidence. In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the politically unstable Eastern European regions were inhabited by a predominantly uneducated and multi-ethnic population and thus provided a hotbed for another renaissance of the ritual murder accusation.

Both texts are based on actual legal proceedings against alleged ritual murderers. Arnold Zweig's play, written in 1913 and first published in 1914, is a fictional commentary on the murder of the fourteen-year old Esther Solymosi in the Hungarian village of Tisza Eszlár in April 1882, a case which received much public attention in Hungary and by the world press and which led to three heated discussions in the Hungarian

²³ For a concise survey of this historical process, see Battenberg, *Das europäische Zeitalter der Juden*, Vol. 2, pp. 116-17.

parliament.²⁴ The Jewish “Schachter” Salomon Schwarz was accused of luring the girl into the local synagogue and -- with the assistance of other Jews -- of having killed her there for ritual purposes. After one full year, thirty-three days of court sessions, and despite the potent pressure through nationalist-Hungarian politicians, all defendants were acquitted because of overwhelming evidence in their favor. Zweig’s text reveals that the myth of ritual murder at the end of the nineteenth century had not only undergone a geographical relocation but that the Hungarian accusation also represents a freshly motivated revival of the medieval model. In making his Esther figure four years older and having the murder committed by a member of the local landed gentry, Zweig exposes the repressive sexual character of the modern ritual murder accusation. Already in the three decades before the Tisza Eszlar case, the number of collective accusations against the Jewish minority for the ritual killing of children had diminished while those against Jewish men for the killing of Christian women had significantly increased. Moreover, Zweig exposes the public prosecutor’s attempt to extract a false testimony from a thirteen-year old Jewish boy named Moritz Scharf. The prosecutor wants Moritz to establish a connection between the Jewish ritual slaughtering of animals, the “Schachten,” and the Jewish ritual killing of human beings. This happened at a time when the Jewish practice of “Schachten,” which consists of the bleeding to death and the subsequent ritual and hygienic inspection of the animal’s body, was being attacked by medical

²⁴ Cf. Albert Lichtblau, “Die Debatten über die Ritualmordbeschuldigungen im österreichischen Abgeordnetenhaus am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts,” in *Die Legende vom Ritualmord*, p. 267-92. The details of the murder trial have been described by Andrew Handler, *Blood Libel at Tiszaesler* (New York: Eastern European Monographs, 1980).

experts as well as animal-rights activists all over Europe.²⁵ The paralleling of ritual murder with a daily practised religious and hygienic necessity of Jewish life shows Zweig's play as an eloquent critique of the prevalent anti-Semitic mentality in the central European fin de siècle. Julius Streicher's infamous Nazi-journal, *Der Stürmer*, would make use of this and similar accusations for cover and content of the first edition of May 1, 1934.

Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer* has its historical basis in a ritual murder accusation directed against Mendel Beiliss by the Kiev authorities in 1913. Beiliss, an inconspicuous employee in a local brickyard, was charged with murdering a Christian boy and using his blood for ritual purposes. The process was cut short and Beiliss was set free. In its publication of the judgment, however, the court made no formal statement about the general improbability of this kind of accusation, and the instigators of the heinous extrajudicial press campaign against the defendant remained similarly uncriticized.²⁶

²⁵ Cf. Sander Gilman, "Kafka Wept," MODERNISM/modernity 1 (1993), 17-37 and Jost Hermand, "Ritualmord in Ungarn (1914) als prosemitisches Tendenz- und Läuterungsdrama," in *Engagement als Lebensform. Über Arnold Zweig* (Berlin: Sigma, 1992), pp. 35-49. During one such public protest as early as 1883, the mayor of London compared the arguments brought forward against the Jewish ritual slaughtering of animals with the ritual murder accusations during Chaucer's time.

²⁶ On the historical Beiliss case, see Maurice Friedberg, "History and Imagination - Two Views of the Beiliss Case," in *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, ed. Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field (New York: New York University Press, 1970), pp. 275-84, Maurice Samuel, *Blood Accusation* (New York: Knopf, 1966), and M. Rajagopalachari, *Theme of Compassion in the Novels of Bernard Malamud* (New

Malamud's fictional account is also situated in pre-revolutionary Czarist Russia.²⁷ The impoverished and divorced Jakov Bok leaves his *shtetl* in the country and moves to Kiev in the hope of finding work and a better life. As an agnostic, he has no qualms about concealing his Jewish origins and takes up a job under a false name in a brickyard situated in the Christian part of the city. However, his different behavior, a noticeable accent, and the help he offers to an old, helpless Jew, raise suspicions about him. When a young Christian boy is murdered in a conspicuously ritualistic manner, the Russian government attempts to use the case to divert attention away from its domestic problems and onto the Jewish majority. In this atmosphere, Jakov Bok (nomen est omen!) is revealed as a Jew and becomes a welcome scapegoat. In the story of Bok, Malamud sketches a typical example of a modern, government-sponsored myth of exoneration. The Fixer's case has been chosen by Czar Nikolas II, personally to justify his demagogic policies for suppressing the Russian Jews. During his three years of detention pending trial, Bok reconverts to the Jewish religion, and his newly gained Jewish identity helps him to resist all tortures administered and all bribes offered by the authorities. Thus, the novel turns into an all-encompassing counterdiscourse against many of the elements of the ritual murder accusation raised since the middle ages. He pillories Father Anastasius's medievalizing typological reading of the murder as committed in mockery of the Christian Easter passion, as well as the public prosecutor's

Delhi: Prestige, 1988). As Charlotte Kelin has shown ("Damascus to Kiev: Civiltà Cattolica on Ritual Murder," in *The Blood Libel Legend*, pp. 180-96), in both the Tizla Eszlâr and the Kiev case official Catholic publications supported the ritual murder accusations.

²⁷ Bernard Malamud, *The Fixer* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1966).

pseudoscientific connection of the Jewish slaughtering of animals and ritual murder. A key scene in which Jakob Bok is lured into a bedroom by the daughter of his Christian employer with the help of cherry liqueur and a kiss, but refuses to sleep with her because she is menstruating, not only confirms the deep Jewish abhorrence of all physical contact with blood but can also be read as a conscious reversal of the characteristic situation in the popular ballads where a Jewish girl uses a cherry to lure a Christian boy into her house to have him killed. Malamud also reverses the best-known literary version of the ritual murder myth, Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale." He positions the final stanza of Chaucer's tale as motto for his novel; Bok's employer, who sheds tears for his dead dog but is ready to participate in a pogrom at any moment, reminds readers of the Prioress's misguided compassion with animals. The depiction of the murdered Schenja Golow's mother as a widow and the hyper-affected stressing of the boy's smallness and innocence similarly take up Chaucerian details.

In Malamud's revisionistic reception of the medieval and postmedieval myth of Jewish ritual murder, the Hugh of Lincoln story comes full circle. The story's resilience and its manifold transformations leave no doubt that to dismiss the myth of ritual murder as an unacceptable regression into medieval irrationalism or an atavistic delusion is to underestimate its continuing power. The ritual murder pogrom in Kielce, Poland, which led to the killing of 42 Jews in 1946, the commemorative plaque of little Hugh's alleged martyrdom which remained in Lincoln cathedral until 1959, and his inclusion as a Christian martyr in the *Acta Sanctorum* until 1966, are unmistakable signs that the basic human dependence on mythographic discourse demands

conscious and unceasing analysis and enlightening education.²⁸

²⁸ The ritual murder myth has not even disappeared after 1960 and was revived especially in the anti-Zionistic propaganda of Arab countries. As recently as 1985, the Assistant Premier Minister of Syria, Mustafa Tias, published a book (in Arabic) entitled *The Matza of Zion*, in which he repeats a number of the typical nineteenth-century accusations against Jews (cf. Alan Dundes, "The Ritual Murder of Blood Libel Legend," in *The Blood Libel Legend*, p. 349-50). The alleged late medieval ritual murder of Aderl of Rinn (Rinn/Judenstein is situated close to Innsbruck, Austria) led to the institutionalization of a pilgrimage from the late sixteenth century on. The diocese of Innsbruck removed anti-Jewish depictions (1961) and Aderl's relics (1985) from the church before officially ending the church's status as a site of pilgrimage as late as 1994. In reaction to this decision, ultra-conservative Catholic organizations made Aderl the symbol of their more general fight against the decisions of the second Vatican Council. This recent case has been documented in *Judenstien. Das Ende einer Legende*, ed. Diözese Innsbruck (Innsbruck: Redaktion Kirche, 1995) and by Bernhard Fresacher, *Aderl von Rinn: Ritualmordkult und Neuorientierung in Judenstein 1945-1995* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia Verlag, 1998).