Complicating Medieval Anti-Semitism: The Role of Class in Two Tales of Christian Violence against Jews

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Abstract

Miri Rubin justly concluded that “most remaining traces” of medieval atrocities against Jews “represent the position of Christian authorities—chroniclers, preachers, town officials—who were almost always writing in defence or celebration of the events.” The exceptions to this rule, however, are illuminating. This article explores images produced for Christians that condemn Christian acts of violence against Jews. Although these are few in number, their existence complicates our understanding of medieval anti-Semitism. The first part of the essay investigates an episode in a fourteenth-century French chronicle, the pillage of the Jews of Paris in 1380. The second part examines depictions of the fable of the murdered Jew, which date from the late thirteenth through the fifteenth century. Both narratives—one drawn from a historical event, the other grafted onto an ancient fable—portray the Jew as the innocent victim and the Christian as the treacherous assailant. In doing so, they reverse the better-known paradigm of the Jew as the evil aggressor who attacks innocent Christian boys or the consecrated host. This essay considers the circumstances that enabled some Christians to view with sympathy the figure of a vulnerable, attacked Jew and proposes that sometimes class interests trumped religious prejudice.

We do not think it right that any Christian who wants to can kill a well-behaved Jew and go unpunished.

—Thomas of Monmouth, ca. 1150

In Gentile Tales, Miri Rubin justly concluded that “most remaining traces” of medieval atrocities against Jews “represent the position of Christian authorities—chroniclers, preachers, town officials—who were almost always writing in defence or celebration of the events.” The exceptions to this rule, however, are illuminating. Some representations of attacks on Jews were produced for Jews, and it is not surprising that these construct the events quite differently. In this essay, though, I focus on another exceptional group of representations: images produced for Christians that condemn Christian acts of violence against Jews. These are admittedly few in number, yet their existence complicates our understanding of medieval anti-Semitism. The first part of this article explores an episode in a fourteenth-century French chronicle, the pillage of the Jews of Paris in 1380. The second part examines the tale of the murdered Jew, which first appears in late twelfth-century fable books. Both narratives—one drawn from a historical event, the other grafted onto an ancient fable—portray the Jew as the innocent victim and the Christian as the treacherous assailant. In this way, they reverse the better-known paradigm of the Jew as the evil aggressor who attacks innocent Christian boys or the consecrated host. This essay considers the circumstances that enabled some Christians to view with sympathy the figure of a vulnerable, attacked Jew. By examining in turn manuscripts

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made for the royal circle, aristocrats, and merchants, my study suggests that sometimes class interests trumped religious prejudice.

Les fleurs des chroniques

A scene of the pillage of a Jewish home appears in a version of Les fleurs des chroniques, a chronicle that traces the history of the world from its creation until 1383, the manuscript’s terminus post quem (Fig. 1). Although neither its

3. For this manuscript, see Christiane Raynaud, La violence au Moyen Âge, XIIIe–XVe siècle: d’après les livres d’histoire en français (Paris: Léopard d’Or, 1990). For this illumination, see François Garnier, La guerre au Moyen Âge: Xle–XVe siècle: l’histoire par les documents iconographiques (Poitiers: INRDP, CRDP Poitiers, 1976), 46
provenance nor the identity of its patron is known, the manuscript consistently betrays the perspective of the French monarchy. Since Les fleurs des chroniques was originally written in 1368 for King Charles V of France, it is not surprising that the updated version continues to focus on royal events and to express the viewpoint of the French king. The chronicle was commissioned together with Bernard Gui’s Arbor genealogiae regum Francorum, which sought to strengthen royal legitimacy and therefore is also consonant with the interests of the king.4 In general, the text of Les fleurs des chroniques is brief; it merely enables a reader to identify the particular action shown. The artist similarly summarizes and simplifies each event, relying heavily on symbolic visual language.5

In the illumination, Christian men pillage the home of a Jewish woman. No visual signs mark the woman or her home as Jewish, but the accompanying marginal note makes the subject clear. It reads, “The Jews of Paris who were pillaged” (Des Juifs de Paris qui furent robé).6 The miniature shows, in the right background, two men seizing costly garments from a rod, while below them another prepares to break open a large coffer with an ax.7 At the left, one thief removes expensive vessels and another carries away a small coffer on his shoulders, bending low under its weight. The visual focus, however, is at the center foreground, where a woman falls to her knees in an unstable pose, her arms helplessly outstretched before her as a man grasps her hair with both his hands. This is not a scene of a man pulling a woman’s hair. Rather, in medieval art disheveled hair was often a sign of sexual assault. Proper women throughout Europe covered their hair, and images of St. Agnes and the Levite’s wife (Judg. 19), among others, show would-be rapists fondling their victims’ long, loose hair.8 Furthermore, other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century illuminations—those showing the ancient Roman rapes of Boreas and Oreithia, Paris and Helen, and the Sabine women—portray victims of sexual violence with the same gesture as the woman in our chronicle, vulnerable, their arms extended before them.9 Perhaps the closest analogy is a woodcut of St. Agnes being threatened with rape in an edition of Jacobus de Voragine’s Leben der Heiligen, which was published in Augsburg in 1485 (Fig. 2). In both images, a woman on or falling to her knees stretches out her arms as a man touches her loose, disheveled hair. As Heath Dillard has observed, “to be cast to the ground was damaging to a woman’s dignity but often most demeaning when engineered

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**Figure 2.** St. Agnes, Leben der Heiligen by Jacobus de Voragine, woodcut, Augsburg, 1485 (photo: Rare Books Collection, O. Meredith Wilson Library, University of Minnesota).
by a man. . . . When a man removed a woman's coif or let down her hair, he assaulted her modesty and exposed her as defenseless and pregnable. 10 In short, like the heroines of classical antiquity, the Levite's wife, and St. Agnes, the Jewish woman in the chronicle is portrayed as an innocent victim of sexual assault. 11

Another miniature in Les fleurs des chroniques, which depicts soldiers from Ghent pillaging Bruges, offers additional support for the idea that the Jewess is an innocent victim (Fig. 3). Even though the illumination shows a man as well as a woman, and they are taken prisoner rather than assaulted, they suffer the same offenses committed against the Jewess of Paris: theft of a valuable coffer and expensive clothes. Through these visual similarities, the illuminator equates the aggrieved parties and reinforces the idea that the Jewish woman, like the Christian couple in Bruges, is blameless and deserves our compassion. 12

The text that accompanies the miniature of the pillage of a Jewish home elaborates the information supplied by the marginal note (Fig. 4). It reads, “On Thursday the fifteenth day of the said month of November 1380, several commoners and ordinary folk went to pillage the Jews of Paris; and several of them were put to death and their books torn.” 13 The miniature, however, does not correspond to the text, since no Jews are shown slain or books destroyed. Why, then, did the artist represent robbery and sexual assault instead?


11. Although the miniature indicates that the woman was sexually assaulted, it does not make clear that she was raped because it lacks such undeniable visual signs of rape as the grasped wrist, torn clothes, or sexual intercourse, for which see Wolflhal, Images of Rape. This may well be due to the reticence that is a general characteristic of this manuscript, but Raynaud suggests that the illuminator avoids showing the most egregious offenses against the Jews, which would have been perceived as particularly outrageous violations of the doctrine of lèse-majesté. Raynaud, La violence au Moyen Âge, 26–27, 223–24, 229.

12. Raynaud, La violence au Moyen Âge, 229.

13. “Le jeudy XVe jour dudit moyes de novembre l’an mil CCC IIII plusieurs poppullaires et gens de commun alerent rober les juifs de paris et furent plusieurs deuix mis à mort et leurs livres rompus.” I thank Marie-Claire Waillé for correctly transcribing this inscription.
To answer this question, we must first examine the only other image in this manuscript to show Jews, a representation of the alleged crucifixion of a young boy, William of Norwich, by Jews in 1144 (Fig. 5). This anti-Semitic theme, which was so often invoked to justify violence against Jews, portrays two Jewish men in a stereotyped, caricatured manner, as Christiane Raynaud has observed. The one on the left wears a turbanlike hat to suggest his foreignness, both men have noses that are larger than those of Christians in the manuscript, and both are bearded, unlike the Christians who are generally shown clean-shaven.

Recent publications by Sara Lipton help explain the gendered attitude toward Jews expressed in these illuminations. She convincingly argues that Christians caricatured male Jews in order to condemn Judaism’s alleged “rigid obsolescence, its blind literalism, [and] the severity and intractability of its law.” Lipton further observes that medieval stereotypes about women led Christian artists to conclude that Jewish women were ill suited to express these negative stereotypes. Instead, Jewish women were invoked to justify the protection of Jews within Christendom and to suggest the hope that they could be converted. Lipton concludes that these “notions [were] effectively embodied in the sign of the woman, whose face and body encode receptivity to dominance and potential for change.” The contrast between the Jewish men’s cruel actions and stereotyped physiognomies and the Jewish woman’s defenseless posture and normative facial features, which are indistinguishable from those of Christian women in the manuscript, would certainly have reflected and reinforced these gendered beliefs.

There is, however, a particular reason why this illuminator would have wanted to criticize violence against Jews. In expressing the viewpoint of the French monarchy, he sought to gain sympathy for the current royal policy of safeguarding the Jews. The pillaging depicted in Figure 1 took place on 15 November 1380, just two months after the death of Charles V. The new king, Charles VI, wished to continue his father’s policy of protecting the small group of wealthy Jews because they were a critical source of revenue. Yet Parisian Jews were an easy target for an angry mob because they were a small community, who lived on a single street apart from Christians, and they were easily identifiable, since most were marked by a distinctive circular badge worn on their clothing. Jews were also an attractive target because they were not only wealthy but also had amassed their money by accepting such pawns as clothes, jewels, and reliquaries, and by lending at interest, a practice deemed sinful by Christian theologians. Chronicles relate that many of the Parisian rioters took their own pawns, either to free themselves of their debt.

14. Raynaud, La violence au Moyen Âge, 326.

Figure 5. Crucifixion of William of Norwich, fol. 68r, Les fleurs des chroniques by Bernard Gui, 1384, Besançon, Bibliothèque municipale de Besançon, MS 677 (photo: CNRS-IRHT © Bibliothèque municipale de Besançon). See the electronic edition of Gesta for a color version of this image.
or to prevent others from stealing them. The rioters also took to the street to protest high taxes. Although Charles V on his deathbed had revoked a household tax, the *fouage*, taxes on the consumption of goods, called *aides*, were still in place. 21 In short, Jews were attacked in part because debtors resented their creditors, in part because of the rioters’ anger at the taxes levied by the new king who protected the Jews, and in part because of the opportunity offered by the climate of unrest that followed the death of the previous king. 22

Charles VI, during whose reign this manuscript of *Les fleurs des chroniques* was produced, would have viewed the attack on the Jews of Paris just two months into his administration as a particularly outrageous example of the crime of lèse-majesté, that is, an offense against his authority, since Jews were still under royal protection in the 1380s. By focusing on the sexual assault of an innocent woman who is indistinguishable from Christians in the manuscript; by showing the theft of clothes and coffers, the same acts committed against Christian victims in the manuscript; and by omitting any scenes that might explain the underlying causes for the riot, such as exorbitant taxes, the illuminator constructs the pillagers in an unambiguously negative light. If the illuminator had instead showed the destruction of Jewish books, an act mentioned in the accompanying text, this might have aroused negative feelings toward Jews. Such books might have been copies of the Talmud, which Christians believed contained “blasphemies and slurs” against Christianity and “made Jews obstinate in their perfidy,” to quote a letter circulated by Pope Gregory IX in 1239. 23 If they were account books, as the archives suggest, this might have reinforced the negative association between Jews and usury, something a king who wished to protect the Jews would also want to avoid. 24

The miniatures that precede and follow the scene of the pillage of a Jewish home reinforce the message that the riot was a crime of lèse-majesté. The illumination that appears immediately to the left of the pillage scene helps establish this framework by showing the entry of Charles VI into Paris after his coronation at Reims on 4 November 1380 (Fig. 4). The miniature that follows the attack on the Jewish home, on the reverse of the folio, depicts a scene of lèse-majesté, the church punishing Hugues Aubriot for an act that supported the king’s policies (Fig. 6). Here Aubriot, the provost of Paris, is portrayed doing public penance for the crime of heresy, an event that took place in May 1381. 25 An able administrator who improved the fortifications and sewers of Paris, Aubriot had earlier offended the Church and the university by pressuring them to support the schismatic pope in Avignon. The spark for the trumped-up charges of 1381, though, was his arrest of those who had assaulted the Jews four months earlier and his return to their Jewish families and their Jewish faith those children who had been forcibly seized and baptized. For that reason, Church authorities charged Aubriot


with “abetting the Jewish perfidy.”26 Unlike other accounts of his public penance, here Aubriot stands, rather than kneels, and in this way is granted greater dignity, which conforms to the manuscript’s restrained style and its consistent support for the king’s policies.27 This miniature reinforces the view that the preceding scene, the pillage of a Jewish home, should also be interpreted as an unjust act, an offense against royal authority.

A key element for interpreting the scene of pillage is that both its text and its image clearly mark the assailants as commoners. The text calls them “commoners and ordinary folk,” and the miniature portrays them as such by their simple, short garments.28 Yet other contemporary chronicles assert that noblemen not only participated in the riots but also incited them.29 The erasure of the noblemen’s complicity in Les fleurs des chroniques therefore demands an explanation.

This manuscript is not the only source to link commoners with sexual assault and brutality. The chronicler Jean Froissart noted that the Jacquerie, members of a popular revolt in 1358, raped women, and concluded, “Never did men commit such vile deeds. . . . I could never bring myself to write down the horrible and shameful things which they did to the ladies.”30 The miniature in Les fleurs des chroniques, painted in the restrained style typical of this manuscript, reinforces such views by representing the riot of 1380 with an image of a woman being sexually assaulted by a commoner. This is part and parcel of the way the manuscript constructs this class of Frenchmen, who are sometimes shown as obedient workers but elsewhere as despicable rioters, as in the revolt of 1358, which is rendered by a scene of peasants slaughtering innocent aristocratic men, women, and children (Fig. 7).31 From the illuminator’s point of view the key figure in the episode of 1380, although unseen, is the king. The miniature’s true subject is the conflict between royal authority and the uncontrol- lable mob. The Jews are powerless pawns in this struggle. Yet the scene of pillage may well have sparked, in the minds of some readers, a modicum of sympathy for the Jewish victim whom it portrayed (Fig. 1).

For the Jewish community of Paris, the riot of 1380 had quite a different meaning. Jews had only been readmitted to the kingdom of France some twenty years earlier and, according to Roger Kohn, the single day of pillage and another three-day massacre two years later resulted in the economic ruin of the Jewish community. He argues that this ultimately led to their expulsion in 1394, when they were no longer a fruitful source of income for the king.32 Jews and Christians interpreted violence against Jews in radically different ways. To my knowledge, no scene of the pillage of a Jewish home appears in any Jewish manuscript.33 Similarly, I know of no medieval Jewish representations of contemporary atrocities; instead, these are visually commemorated through renderings of

26. Due to the intervention of the duke of Burgundy, Aubriot’s sentence was commuted to life in prison with only bread and water. When a mob later released him, Aubriot fled the city. Jean Guiraud, The Medieval Inquisition, trans. E. C. Messenger (Kila, MT: Kessener, 2003), 201–2.
27. For the kneeling posture of Aubriot, see Leroux de Lincy, “Hugues Aubriot,” 197–200.
28. The text reads “poppullaires et gens de commun.” For short clothes as denoting the working class, see Margaret Scott, Fashion in the Middle Ages (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011), 78.
31. As Raynaud (La violence au Moyen Âge, 331) convincingly argues, even though the peasants are armed, they would not be mistaken for soldiers.

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ritual observances, such as Purim or Tisha b’Av, or incidents that occurred in the distant past. For example, the Hamburg Miscellany, a manuscript created in the area of Mainz in the 1420s and 1430s, shows Jews imprisoned, stabbed, beaten with switches, mutilated, tortured, decapitated, murdered, and forced to leave town. These illuminations—which show the Maccabean martyrs of the second century BCE—would have been interpreted by their Jewish audience as scenes of sacrifice that could lead to redemption and as commemorations of more recent events, such as the persecutions that occurred during the crusades. One scene might suggest sexual violence: two Jewish women, nude except for loincloths, hang by their breasts in a composition that recalls representations of the martyrdom of St. Agatha, whose breasts were cut off (Fig. 8). Unlike Christian images, this scene has nothing to do with preserving the virginity of the women. Instead, female Jewish martyrs were generally married or pregnant, and their breasts would have been associated by a Jewish audience primarily with their ability to nourish their children. Furthermore, unlike Christian scenes of martyrdom, this image does not include the torturers of the women. No man touches these Jewish women, unlike the scene in the French chronicle. That Christians sexually assaulted Jewish women may have been considered too shameful to depict.

Nonetheless, the scene of the pillage of a Jewish home is strikingly different from the vast majority of Christian images that show offenses against Jews (Fig. 1). The typical medieval Christian attitude is expressed in the inscription on an engraving of the Regensburg synagogue by Albrecht Altdorfer, which states that its destruction in 1519 was “according to God’s just judgment.” By contrast, the illumination in Les fleurs des chroniques is primarily concerned with the assertion of royal authority, and for this reason it unequivocally condemns the pillage of the Jewish community.

**The Fable of the Murdered Jew**

Although only one image of the riot of 1380 is known, more than thirty depict the fable of the murdered Jew. These date from the late thirteenth through the late seventeenth century and appear in manuscripts and printed books written in French, German, Italian, Latin, and Yiddish. Because of their broad geographic and temporal range, and because printed books are reproduced in multiple copies, the audience for this fable must have been much larger and more diverse than that for Les fleurs des chroniques. For this reason, images of the fable likely had a greater impact on how European Christians viewed Jews, and they also offer an opportunity to understand better how local history and local concerns affected representations of Jews.

Although chronicles like Les fleurs des chroniques are early forms of historical writing, fables are fiction. A popular literary genre in medieval Europe, these short narrative tales

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34. Purim commemorates the defeat of Haman, who plotted to massacre the Jews of Persia. Tisha b’Av commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem as well as later catastrophes that befell the Jews on the ninth of the month of Av.


37. I thank Zsofia Buda for calling this image to my attention.

served as both entertainment and exempla. Although medieval writers attributed their fables to the legendary Greek storyteller Aesop, their earliest versions stem from such Latin fabulists as the first-century Phaedrus and the fifth-century Flavius Avianus. The first medieval collections of fables were written in Latin to teach ethics and grammar, but by the twelfth century vernacular editions began to appear. If initially the audience for fables was largely aristocratic, gradually it came to include merchants and humanists interested in ancient Graeco-Roman culture. In this section, I trace the changing meaning of the fable of the murdered Jew from its origins at the twelfth-century English royal court, to its subsequent interpretations for Franc-Comtois and Burgundian aristocrats, to its final medieval transformation in the mercantile centers of fifteenth-century Tuscany. Despite changes in the fable as it traveled in time and space, its text—and usually its imagery—made clear that an innocent Jew was killed by a greedy Christian.

From the Murder of Ibycus to the Fable of Walter of England

The fable of the murdered Jew may be traced back in its broad outlines to an ancient Greek tale about the poet Ibycus, who lived in the sixth century BCE. A robber critically wounded him, but before dying, the poet implored a flock of cranes that had witnessed the attack to avenge his death. They shadowed the murderer to a stadium, where they hovered overhead until he confessed his crime. He was then seized, tried, and sentenced to death. Among the many modifications of this fable that evolved during the Middle Ages was the transformation of Ibycus into a Jew.

The first medieval version to incorporate this change is a collection of Latin fables composed about 1175 and generally attributed to Walter of England. This book was the most influential source for fables in the late Middle Ages. Although fifty-eight of its sixty fables derive from those by the legendary Romulus, which in turn stem from the collection of Phaedrus, the fable of the murdered Jew is one of two tales, both placed at the end of the book, whose derivation is unknown. In Walter's version, a Jew asks a king for safe conduct through a dangerous forest in exchange for gifts. The royal cupbearer agrees to protect the Jew, but instead robs and kills him. Before dying, the Jew predicts that a partridge that witnessed the crime will denounce the murderer. When the cupbearer later sees the bird being readied for the king's dinner, he laughs uncontrollably. The king demands an explanation for this outburst, whereupon the murderer confesses and is executed. Since the cupbearer was a trusted member of the king's inner circle, a servant of high rank whose duty it was to ensure that the monarch's wine was not poisoned, this initial version of the tale is primarily about obeying the royal order to protect a Jew. But it is also a tale of greed. As Esther Zago, Janice Owen, and Michael Serwatka justly conclude, "What we have here is a reversal of roles: it is the Jew who is victimized by the avarice of a Christian."

Thomas Edward Wheatley concludes that the fable of the murdered Jew is "notable for its avoidance of anti-semitism," but Aaron E. Wright goes too far when he asserts that the Jew's religious identity is "purely incidental and neutrally...

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42. For the identity of Walter of England, the dating of his fables, and his version of the tale, see Esther Zago, Janice Owen, and Michael Serwatka, "The Jew and the King's Cup-Bearer: A Tale of Jewish Life in Medieval Europe," Fabula 42, nos. 3–4 (2000): 213–42, at 214–16, 218. The authors transcribe and translate the version appearing in Paris, Bibliotheque nationale de France (hereafter BN), MS lat. 14381. For the general acceptance of Walter as the author of these fables, see Ferry-Hue, "Isopets," 716. A few remain unconvinced of this identity, including Jeanne-Marie Boivin, Naissance de la fable en français: l'Isope de Lyon et l'Isope 1-Avionnet (Paris: Champion, 2006), 132–33, who, however, did not know the article by Zago, Owen, and Serwatka. For this fable, see also Aaron E. Wright, The Fables of "Walter of England" (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1997), 151–55, no. 59; and Thomas Edward Wheatley, "The Fabulae of Walter of England, the Medieval Scholastic Tradition, and the British Vernacular Fable" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1991), 47.


44. Boivin, Naissance de la fable en français, 134.

described. Searching for a pretext for the robbery that precipitated the murder, Walter of England seized on the idea of a Jewish victim, in part because he associated Jews with wealth. As John D. Martin observes, medieval fables that involve human actors rely on stereotypes, whether the knight, the farmer, the housewife, or the Jew. This version twice states that the Jew was carrying "his wealth." In this way, the tale reinforces the negative association between Jews and money.

Zago, Owen, and Serwatka convincingly argue that the decision to transform Ibycus into a Jew was made in response to a historical event, the murder of a Jew named Eleazar in an English forest about 1146. Although he was one of the Jews who had been falsely accused of the ritual killing two years earlier of twelve-year-old William of Norwich, Eleazar was not executed for that crime. Instead, he was assassinated by the squires of one of his debtors, Simon de Novers, who lured him into the woods on the pretense of repaying the knight’s debt and instead stabbed him to death. Our source for this incident is the second volume of Thomas of Monmouth’s hagiography of William, which was written before 25 October 1154. It became better known with the completion of Thomas’s final volume in 1172/73, shortly before the first appearance of the fable of the murdered Jew. Thomas’s account of the murder of Eleazar shares many similarities with the later fable: the victim is a rich Jew, fatally stabbed with a sword in an isolated woods in a treacherous manner by a Christian whose goal was monetary gain. One key difference between the two tales is that in *The Life of William of Norwich*, and presumably in actuality, the murderers of Eleazar of Norwich were never punished, whereas in the fable, written from the viewpoint of the English king, the assailant who disobeys a royal order is executed. Zago, Owen, and Serwatka demonstrate that through this reworking of an ancient fable, Walter of England, the chaplain of King Henry II, intended to issue a warning against harming the Jews whom the king protected.

Indeed, Henry’s predecessor, King Stephen, was personally involved in this case. His sheriff had defended the Jews of Norwich against the bishop who wished to charge them with William’s murder. The Jews found refuge in the royal castle when their lives were threatened, and the king issued an edict guaranteeing their safety. He also refused to respond to the bishop’s charges against them. The king had initiated a policy of not only maintaining the Jewish presence in London but also expanding it to royal cities throughout England as a way to foster trade and fill the royal coffers. His successor continued this policy, and Henry’s reign has been termed a “Golden Age for the Jews.” Much like the image of the pillage of a Jewish home (Fig. 1), the fable of the murdered Jew was composed by someone in the circle of a king who wished to protect the Jews, and whose policy was opposed by the local clergy as well as by many commoners. Furthermore, like the riot in Paris, the murder of Eleazar and its aftermath were not simply about anti-Jewish prejudice. Christians were divided, and religious prejudice was intensified by class conflict, since animosity against Jews was tightly bound with native English hostility toward their new Norman overlords. Jews, who had entered England with the Normans and continued to speak French until their expulsion in 1290, were to a great extent viewed as foreigners. That the kings of England protected Jews only reinforced antipathy against them. In addition, anti-Jewish sentiment was compounded by the usual resentment of debtors toward their creditors. After Edward I expelled the Jews, even the English royalty lost interest in this tale, and the fable never again appeared in English versions.

Illuminations from Franche-Comté and Burgundy

Walter’s original manuscript is lost, but it survives in subsequent versions. The core story remains the same: an innocent Jew is harmed by a Christian servant who has defied his lord and is executed as a result. The appeal of the tale continues to lie in its entertainment value and its meaningful moral about the evils of greed. After Walter’s time, however, the fable took
on a life of its own. No longer did it issue from the royal circle
and have as a primary motivation the desire to express disap-
proval of underlings who disobey the king and harm his Jews.
Since many collections of fables that are derived from Walter’s
omit the tale of the murdered Jew, the specific motivation for
including it and the ways in which it would have been inter-
preted must be understood as rooted in local history.

The earliest extant images of the fable were produced in
Franche-Comté and Burgundy in the late thirteenth and four-
teenth centuries. The oldest surviving illustration appears in
an Isopet de Lyon, which consists of sixty tales derived from
those by Walter of England (Fig. 9). Each story is interpreted
first by a Latin text, then by an illumination, and finally by a
Franc-Comtois variant. This dialect and the provincial style of
the illuminations help localize the manuscript’s provenance. Un-
fortunately, the name of the person who ordered the col-
lection has been effaced and is illegible even under ultravio-
let light, but this sumptuously illuminated codex, written in
Latin and the vernacular, could only have been produced for a
wealthy and educated, presumably aristocratic, patron.57

Each framed miniature spans the full width of the text,
and most are divided into two compartments. The poorly pre-
served miniature shows, at the left, the servant plunging his
sword into his victim, who gestures toward the missing area
above the three brown tree trunks to his right. Presumably
he is pointing to a partridge that is no longer visible. In the
right half, the servant, now termed a butler (botoiller), kneels
in obeisance while serving the bird to the king. To the right
a sentinel guards the murderer, who is stripped to the waist
and hangs from a gallows, his eyes closed to indicate that he
is dead. This visualizes the lines of the poem that read, “Let
him be hanged at the gallows / he who has shed the blood of
the Jew.”58

Unlike the assailants in the image of the Paris riot (Fig. 1),
the offender here is not a commoner; generally butlers came
from the elite class. For this reason he is shown wearing a
long garment and is permitted to use a sword. Nonetheless,
he is clearly subservient to the king, before whom he kneels.
The butler’s treachery is visualized through the posture of his
victim, who turns his head around to look at his assassin, who
must be stabbing him in the back. The depiction of the hang-
ing makes clear the severe punishment that awaits disobed-
ient servants who fail to safeguard the king’s Jews. Like the
scene of the pillage of a Jewish home, but in contrast to so
many other contemporary images, the Franc-Comtois mini-
nature does not differentiate the Jew from the other figures.
His physiognomy and garments are indistinguishable from
those of the butler, and he is not accompanied by any signs of
wealth. Unlike the servant, the Jew is not criticized in any way.

55. For this manuscript, see Françoise Cotton, “Les manuscrits à
peintures de la Bibliothèque de Lyon: essai de catalogue,” Gazette des
beaux-arts, ser. 6, 65 (May–June 1965): 165–320, at 276–77; Busby,
Codex and Context, 216–19, 222; and Louis Holtz and Pierre Guin-
nard, Manuscrits médiévaux: de l’usage au trésor, 21 septembre–4
janvier 2002 (Paris: Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon la Part-Dieu,
2002), 62. For the text of Isopet de Lyon, see Julia Bastin, ed., Recueil
général des Isopets (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français, 1929–),
2 (1930): 186–90. For its date (probably end of the thirteenth cen-
tury, at the latest fourteenth century), see Wendelin Foerster, ed.,
Lyoner Yzopet: altfranzösische Übersetzung des XIII. Jahrhunderts
in der Mundart des Franche-Comté (Heilbronn: Henninger, 1882), 1.
56. For the provincial style, see Busby, Codex and Context, 216.
57. Ibid., 217, 219.

58. Zago, Owen, and Serwatka, “Jew and the King’s Cup-Bearer,”
230, give the translation and its original language: “Que ciz soit a
forches penduz, / Qui du Juïf ai espandu / Lo sang.”
Four additional illuminations of the fable, all Burgundian, appear in versions of *Isopet I*, another compilation of fables based on those of Walter of England. The three earliest, now in London, Paris, and Brussels, have closely related texts that mention several historical figures, including the dedicatee, Jeanne of Burgundy, wife of King Philip VI of France.59


60. These manuscripts are Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, MS 11193; BnF, MS fr. 1594; and London, British Library, Add. 33781. For these, see McKenzie and Oldfather, *Ysopet-Avionnet*, 376–88 (for date, 25–52); Marguerite Debae, *La bibliothèque de Marguerite d’Autriche: essai de reconstitution d’après* (Louvain: Peeters, 1995), 223–26; Zago, Owen, and Serwatka, “Jew and the King’s Cup-Bearer,” 223–24; Busby, *Codex and Context*, 219–22; and Boivin, *Naissance de la fable en français*. According to the latter (419–46), the compiler may have been Jean de Chavenges, adviser to the Parlement of Paris. Others suggest that the compiler might have been a woman: McKenzie and Oldfather, *Ysopet-Avionnet*, 32–33; and Bastin, *Recueil général des Isopets*, 1:xxxvii. The version in Brussels has the best claim to being the presentation copy, since much of the Burgundian library entered the Royal Library in Brussels. Camille Gaspar and Frédéric Lyna, *Les principaux manuscrits à peintures de la Bibliothèque royale de Belgique* (Brussels: Bibliothèque Royale Albert 1er, 1987), 307–10; and Busby, *Codex and Context*, 220.

These names enable us to date the composition of the text to 1339–48, and the illuminations are assigned to the same period, or perhaps a year or two later. The fourth manuscript, probably produced in the 1380s, is today in Paris. Unlike the narrative approach of the image from Franche-Comté, all four Burgundian illuminations show only one scene, the most dramatic moment of the story, when the assaillant draws his sword and is about to strike his target. Elaborating Walter’s text, the author of *Isopet I* states that when the two protagonists were passing through the woods, the Jew lost trust in the servant and asked to follow him so that he might watch him closely, but the servant refused. All four images show the next moment, one of great dramatic tension, when the assaillant comes from behind and raises his sword to kill the Jew, who gestures toward the birds that will avenge his death.

In one version, a complex drama is visible despite being confined within the outlines of an initial (Fig. 10). The Jew, clearly marked as such by his circular badge, raises his right hand to point to the birds that hover in the margin. He si-
multaneously turns back to look at his assassin, who vigorously steps forward, steadying the Jew with one hand while readying his sword with the other. Again the artist has planted seeds of sympathy for the Jew, who is shown as unarmed and about to be stabbed in the back. In another illumination, the assassin’s horse leaps up, highlighting the pitched drama of this climactic scene (Fig. 11). Once more the Jew is marked by a badge on his chest and is in no way denigrated; by contrast, all the Burgundian miniatures make clear the treachery of the servant.

These illuminations parallel two changes introduced into the text of Isopet I: the focus on this dramatic moment and the fleshing out of the two main characters. The poet greatly expanded the fable, increasing the number of lines from twenty-four in Walter’s original to eighty-two in Isopet I. The servant is now characterized as straying far from societal norms in his greed, his disobedience to his lord, his foolishness, and his treacherous acts of theft and murder. The Jew, by contrast, is portrayed in the text as dignified, polite, and truthful. Similarly, in the illumination in London, even though the Jew is associated with a large coffer that indicates his wealth and is clearly identified as Jewish by his circular badge, his features are normative, and he wears a long garment (Fig. 12). It is the servant who wears shorter clothes, denoting lower status, and his facial features are bestial. Furthermore, the coffer rests between the servant and the Jew, as if to indicate that it is the reason for the murder, and the servant seems to take possession of it since his right leg overlaps it. As Zago, Owen, and Serwatka conclude, “If the standing of the [servant] is diminished in this text, that of the Jew is enhanced.”

The fable ends with the statement that no man can defend the cupbearer from his death sentence. Zago, Owen, and Serwatka propose that the inclusion of this fable in manuscripts from Franche-Comté and Burgundy was not accidental. They observe that it did not appear in England or France after the expulsion of the Jews and argue that when the Jews were expelled from France, many fled east, to Franche-Comté and Burgundy, where they were welcomed and protected as a good source of revenue. But these authors paint an overly rosy picture of Jewish life at the time when these manuscripts were produced. In Franche-Comté in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, Jewish existence was precarious, and privileges granted Jews varied depending on date and locality. For example, although Jews in that

61. Unlike Jews who lived in Muslim lands, those who lived under Christian control were permitted to ride horses. See, for example, Yom-Tov Lewinsky, “Games,” in Encyclopaedia Judaica, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnick, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 7:370–73.


63. Ibid., 226.

64. Ibid., 226, 229, 231.

County were unaffected by the expulsion of Jews from the French kingdom in 1306, they were included in the expulsion edict of 1322. Similarly, a document of 1296 indicates that some areas permitted Jewish residence, whereas others did not. In return for the payment of road tolls, two charters enacted in the 1290s guaranteed Jews a series of privileges, including the right of safe passage and protection from violent attacks—the very rights that the servant in the fable ignores. Yet some segments of the population vociferously condemned usury and wished to restrict the activities of Jews. Violence erupted in Franche-Comté in the 1320s, when a popular movement, composed largely of peasants, massacred Jews.

In the same decade Jews were ordered to leave the county, although it is unclear how many did, since by the 1330s the number of Jews there had increased. Zago, Owen, and Serwatka go too far when they suggest that Jews were uniformly welcomed in Franche-Comté, but they appear to be justified in concluding that the “dissemination of the fable was intended to constitute a kind of policy statement in favor of the Jewish community in Franche-Comté.”

Jews went to the county only very late in the thirteenth century, when the need for moneylenders, including Jews, became especially acute. Noblemen there had revolted against Count Otto IV of Burgundy after he signed a treaty in 1295 ceding the county to his daughter Jeanne as a dowry and designating her husband, Philip IV, king of France, as its administrator. Civil warfare continued until 1301, despite mounting debts on both sides of the conflict. Because of their opposition to Otto and their need for funding, many aristocrats opposed the count’s French-leaning policies, including those that were anti-Jewish. The debt left to succeeding generations and the cost of the continuing violence prolonged the need for loans well into the fourteenth century. For these reasons, the text and image of the murdered Jew must be seen in the context of the struggle between the count and the king, on one side, and the lower lords, on the other. The tale of an innocent Jew who is unfairly attacked may have served to support noblemen who argued that Jews should be permitted to stay in Franche-Comté. In doing so, it inverted the original topos of the tale, a king’s desire to protect his Jews.

Jews in Burgundy also had a perilous existence. Although a massive emigration occurred in 1321 or 1322, by the 1330s eighty-five Jewish households are recorded there. Jeanne of Burgundy, the dedicatee for the three earliest Burgundian fable books that include the story of the murdered Jew (Figs. 10–11), was an avid collector of a wide range of manuscripts, and it would be natural for a writer to try to obtain her patronage. The dedication to her suggests several purposes for the fable book. It was to be used for entertainment, especially in the winter when it is difficult to enjoy outdoor pleasures, and for instruction, particularly for the young (“aux juesnes gens”). We cannot be certain why the tale of the murdered Jew was included in a manuscript dedicated to the queen, but it was probably intended, at least in part, to encourage her to tolerate a Jewish presence in her territories.

The case is clearer for the fourth Burgundian illumination of the fable, created in the 1380s (Fig. 10). In 1374 Duke Philip the Bold granted privileges to Jews, although he limited the number of families who could live in Burgundy to twelve; in 1380 he increased the number to twenty. Despite a popular outcry and calls for expulsion, the duke granted Jews privileges again in 1384 and increased their number to fifty-two families. Yet in 1394, before the end of their twelve-year term, all Jews were expelled. It makes sense, then, that during the period in which the duke of Burgundy welcomed Jews to the

69. Ibid., 11.
70. Ibid., 11, 13.
73. Ibid., 220; Morey, “Les Juifs en Franche-Comté,” 7; and Holtmann, Juden in der Grafschaft Burgund, 35.
74. Holtmann, Juden in der Grafschaft Burgund.
76. Busby, Codex and Context, 220.
county, a book produced there would portray a Jew as an innocent who is unfairly attacked and in need of protection.

German and Swiss Images

German-language fable books were extremely popular, especially Ulrich Boner’s Der Edelstein, a collection of one hundred tales that were derived in large part from those attributed to Walter of England.78 Boner, a Dominican preacher from Bern, composed his comical and down-to-earth fables in Middle High German about 1349–50. Images of the story of the murdered Jew appear in southern Germany and Switzerland in eleven fifteenth-century manuscripts of Der Edelstein and in its first printed edition.79 By 1461 Der Edelstein had become so popular that Albrecht Pfister of Bamberg decided to publish it as the first book with movable type to be illustrated with woodcuts.80 Despite their popularity, Boner’s fables never developed a fixed iconography. Illuminations of the murdered Jew show a range of subjects, including the murder, the serving of the partridge, and the hanging of the assassin on the gallows. Although a few images reinforce the negative stereotype of the Jew by showing him clutching money, most represent him in a sympathetic light.81

In a manuscript today in St. Gall, which was produced for an unknown patron in northern Switzerland in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, the Jew is not denigrated in any way (Fig. 13).82 In this version, the servant stabs the unarmed Jew in an isolated place, a meadow bordered by trees, which highlights the devious nature of the attack. Garnering further sympathy for the Jew is his act of grasping with both hands the blade of his attacker’s long sword. This might have been interpreted as a tragic, desperate attempt to dislodge the weapon from his chest, or as a heroic martial-arts move, the so-called murder stroke, which involved seizing the blade of one’s opponent’s sword in order to gain control of it and then using it against him. This action is described in Hans Talhoffer’s popular fifteenth-century martial-arts treatise, which was reproduced thereby introduces the fable, the victim is identified as Jewish by his beard and pointed hat, but in many ways he resembles his assailant. Both are young, slender youths of about the same height who wear similar knee-length slit garments.

many times, including in an illustrated Swabian manuscript of 1467. In a volume of Der Edelstein produced in Augsburg in 1443–49, an illumination that precedes the accompanying fable shows the Jew similarly grabbing the blade of the sword, although this time with just one hand (Fig. 14). Unlike the manuscript in St. Gall, the Jew is here the star of the scene since he is much larger than the servant and occupies the center of the composition. On the right, four fluttering birds register the pitched drama of the assault.

A different, but similarly sympathetic, approach is adopted in a manuscript created in Augsburg in 1449 and written in a Swabian dialect, which includes two illuminations of the fable. The first, which precedes the tale, shows the murder taking place in a clearing in a dense forest (Fig. 15). As a bird flies overhead, the servant plunges his sword into the Jew, who is identifiable by his beard and pointed hat. The victim’s agony is expressed through his raised head, arched back, grimacing expression, and convulsing hands. The illuminator underscores the treacherous and cowardly nature of the crime by depicting the servant straddling the unarmed Jew while stabbing him in the back. The second illumination is placed midway through the text of the fable, just below the line that describes the servant presenting the king with the partridge and remembering the Jew’s prophetic words (Fig. 16). The murderer, now bareheaded, barefoot, and dressed in the simple undyed garment of the condemned criminal, sits on the ground with his wrists bound; beside him, a monk helps him repent his sins. The hangman readies the ladder for the murderer’s ascent, while the rope by which he will hang lies nearby on the ground. The empty gallows, which takes up half the composition, is ominously silhouetted against the sky and serves as a powerful reminder of the murderer’s fate. These illuminations reinforce the text, which condemns the murderer’s greed, states that it led him to sin, and notes that the consequence must be his execution, since the wages of sin is death, “as the Holy Scriptures teach us.”

86. Pfeiffer, Der Edelstein von Ulrich Boner, 108, line 8: "als uns lêrt der heiligen wort."
By contrast, a manuscript today in Heidelberg, which was also produced in Augsburg at roughly the same time (between 1443 and 1449), was in the library of count wilhelm von oettingen by 1462 (figs. 15–16). edelstein, a humanist who assembled an impressive library. in short, the german and swiss versions of der edelstein bridge the gap between the earlier aristocratic manuscripts from franche-comté and burgundy, which express feudalistic ideals and oppose royal policies, and the fifteenth-century tuscan manuscripts, which articulate mercantile values.

Tuscan Illuminations

about twenty manuscripts produced in tuscany derive from a single prototype, the esopo volgarizzato per uno da sienna, which was written in a tuscan dialect in the late fourteenth century. the text is believed to have been composed by a merchant, and this dramatically affected the style and content of the tales. based on walter of england’s collection of fables, the esopo volgarizzato appealed to mercantile tastes. merchants wanted their stories not only to fulfill the usual goals of a short, entertaining tale with a clear moral but also to include references to trade, realistic details, quick-paced narrative, and lively prose. most of the prosperous, educated merchants who owned these manuscripts were citizens of the florentine republic with close ties to both the medici and humanists, and the esopo volgarizzato reflects both mercantile values and civic ethics. the anonymous author of this collection of fables also modified walter’s tales by adding to the details that concluded each fable two new morals, one spiritual and the other secular.

in the fable of the murdered Jew, the plot remains the same. the servant is still characterized as someone from the king’s inner circle, one of his most trusted attendants (donzello). In


90. for the most recent discussion of these books, see federico botana, “Family Wisdom in Quattrocento florence: the Benci aesop (florence, biblioteca nazionale centrale MS II.II.83),” Journal of the warburg and courtauld institutes 75 (2012): 53–92.


Complicating Medieval Anti-Semitism

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the title of the story he is called a mariscalco, or high court official.93 The body of the fable describes him as “the most intimate and valuable one that he [the king] had, who served him in his room.”94 The Jew, as usual, is a wealthy but sympathetic victim. As Zago, Owen, and Serwatka observe, the Tuscan version of the tale introduces into its first sentence the verb guadagnato (earned) to suggest that the Jew earned his money; in other words, he acquired it the same way other merchants did. Furthermore, the text emphasizes the Jew’s fear of being robbed as he enters the forest. The same authors note that in the first seven lines of the tale the merchant’s apprehension is mentioned five times.95 One sentence states, for example, that the Jew is weighed down as much by fear as by his heavy load.96 This same fear—of being robbed when alone in a distant land—would have been shared by many Christian merchants. Zago, Owen, and Serwatka justly conclude that the merchants who composed the audience for this tale would have identified with the Jew.97 In fact, in one manuscript in Florence, the Jew is so assimilated to the concept of the merchant that initially the first line of the fable read, “Once there was a merchant,” rather than the usual “Once there was a Jew.”98 Only later was a correction made and the word Giudeo inserted alongside (Fig. 17).

The secular motif that was added at the end of the tale strongly criticizes the servant. It reads, “By the attendant is understood each perfidious and treacherous man who under cover of loyalty betrays his duty, and acts harmfully and disloyally.”99 By contrast, it describes the Jew more favorably: “by the Jew is understood each man who trusted unconditionally and finds himself cheated.”100 Here the Jew is seen as a merchant who foolishly placed his trust in the servant. The mercantile lesson is clear: if you travel with large sums of money, be careful whom you trust. In the spiritual moral, the Jew is interpreted as “every man who unconditionally trusts his confessor.”101 It is astonishing that the Jew has become “every man” rather than an outsider who adheres to another faith.

The illustrations express many of the same ideas as the text. Three manuscripts share a similar composition. The one in Udine was copied and illustrated in 1449 by a Florentine magistrate, Francesco di Cambio Orlandi, who came from a wealthy family and was a friend of Cosimo de’ Medici (Fig. 18). It emphasizes the secular moral by showing the Jew, on the right, carrying a heavy sack of money; he approaches the servant and offers to pay him for protection.102 Raising his hammer above his anvil, the servant appears to be forging a sword—the weapon with which he will kill the Jew. Yet the Jew seems oblivious, and this appears to be the artist’s main point. The focus is on the anxieties of wealthy merchants, not the concerns of medieval kings. Even though the Jew is bearded and serves as an example of a foolish businessman, his dress is nearly identical to the servant’s and he is not visually denigrated in any way.

A drawing at Harvard University, which was added in the fifteenth century to a late fourteenth-century Sienese manuscript by someone who was clearly not a professional artist, adopts a different approach (Fig. 19).103 Here a graphic

94. For the accompanying text, see Claudio Ciociola, ed., L’Esopo di Udine: cod. Bartolini 83 della Biblioteca arcivescovile di Udine (Udine: Casassimma, 1996), 155–58: “più segreto et ch’aro che gli s(e)rvisse i(n) chamera” (156).
95. Zago, Owen, and Serwatka, “Jew and the King’s Cup-Bearer,” 236.
96. For the original, see Ciociola, L’Esopo di Udine, 155: “e non era meno charichato del peso de la paura che del peso dello avere.” In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century northern Italy, some Jews sought and won an exemption from wearing the obligatory Jewish dress or badge when they traveled, probably in an attempt to protect themselves from harm. Brian S. Pullan, The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550–1670 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 155; and Don Harrán, Salamone Rossi: Jewish Musician in Late Renaissance Mantua (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 16, 18, 25, 246. Alfred Rubens notes that travelers and the wealthy were often exempted from wearing the badge: Rubens, A History of Jewish Costume, enlarged ed. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), 82, 86. Similarly, see Norman Roth, “Badge, Jewish,” in Roth, Medieval Jewish Civilization, 67–70, at 68. The threat was so great that Jewish authorities even permitted traveling Jews to disguise themselves as priests, according to Israel Abrahams, The Book of Delight, and Other Papers (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 125.
98. Ibid.
99. Ibid., 238: “Per questo donzello s’intende ciascuno uomo malvagio e fello a che pura fede di leanza tradisce e fa dannaggio e misleanza.”
100. Ibid.: “E per lo giudeo ciascuno che s’è fidato liberamente e truvosi ingannato.”
101. Ibid., 237: “ciascuno uomo liberamente si fida nel confessor.”
102. For this manuscript, see Branca, Esopo toscano. For Francesco, see Claudio Ciociola, “Francesco di Cambio,” in Ciociola, L’Esopo di Udine, 235–301. The coins in the sack are clearly visible in a version copied by Piero dei Rici (Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS 2805, fol. 121r, dated 1463). Another manuscript that shows this composition was also copied by Piero dei Rici in 1463 or earlier (Florence, Biblioteca nazionale centrale, MS XXI.87).
103. For this manuscript, see Livres anciens et modernes manuscrits et imprimés . . . (Milan: Hoepli, 1954), 20–22, no. 26; Paul Oskar Kristeller, Iter Italicum: A Finding List of Uncatalogued or incompletely Catalogued Manuscripts of the Renaissance in Italian and Other Libraries (London: Warburg Institute, 1990), 5237; and Roger S. Wieck, Late Medieval and Renaissance Illuminated Manuscripts, 1350–1525, in the Houghton Library (Cambridge, MA: Department
image of the deceased shows him lying on the ground, his decapitated head resting some distance from his body. His assassin walks nonchalantly off to the right, a long sword at his side, while three birds fly before him. The dead Jew is not marked as such; he has no beard, wears no Jewish badge, and his youthful face is not caricatured at all. The Jew is simply a merchant who, tragically, has been killed because he trusted unwisely. In a manuscript in Verona, the Jew, whose head lies in a pool of blood, wears the same type of clothing and has a haircut and youthful face similar to those of his assassin, who now carries off his sack of money.  

104. Verona, Biblioteca civica, MS 528–529, fol. 59v.
The most poignant image among the quattrocento mercantile manuscripts appears in a fable book copied and illustrated by Filippo di Lorenzo Benci in the 1450s (Fig. 17). Filippo came from a family of successful merchants who were friendly with the humanist Marsilio Ficino and had connections to Lorenzo de’ Medici. They had a large library, containing mostly vernacular, secular miscellanies. Filippo was the copyist for at least nine of these manuscripts, and he added illustrations to a few of them. He was not a professional artist, but his compositions show greater complexity than do contemporary drawings in other Tuscan fable books. The image for the fable of the murdered Jew depicts at the left a standing king, crowned, caped, and holding a scepter and a gold coin. He faces the kneeling Jew, and between them stands the servant, his shorter stature compared with that of the king denoting his lower status. The Jew is described as wealthy (“arricchito”), and this is underlined by the two large vessels filled with gold that are displayed in the foreground. To the right is a second scene, separated from the first by a crenellated tower. In a grove of trees that represent a forest, four birds fly away while the assailant kneels, bloody sword in hand, beside the Jew whom he has slain. The servant leans toward his victim and touches his head as blood pours from wounds to the head, neck, and side. The head of the Jew is turned so that his unseeing eyes face the viewer. Fashionably dressed in blue and pink parti-colored stockings, the Jew is certainly not denigrated. Indeed, he looks remarkably like the servant. They are comparably dressed, and both are shown as slim, beardless, blond youths. Furthermore, unlike the example in Udine (Fig. 18), there is no suggestion of the foolishness of the Jew, and unlike the example at Harvard (Fig. 19), Filippo creates a space for the reader to view the murder as horrific and poignant. The leaflike red forms that issue from the first letter of the fable and spill down the left margin seem to underline the bloody and tragic ending of the Jew.

Just as Jeanne of Burgundy may have used her fable book to instruct her children, so Filippo di Benci may have employed the Esopo volgarizzato to teach youngsters civic ethics and mercantile values. Federico Botana recently demonstrated that Filippo produced his book in part to educate the children in his extended family. His evidence is extensive, but it rests in part on manuscripts (like the one at Harvard) that are miscellanies composed of books that were often used to teach children. Although Botana does not discuss Filippo’s image of the murdered Jew, it could easily have been used to teach future merchants. It emphasizes the value of loyalty by portraying a disloyal servant, and it dramatically conveys the need to place trust wisely by visualizing the bloody, lifeless body of a Jew lying isolated in a wood.

Two factors help explain why the fable shows a Jew in a sympathetic light as a stand-in for the figure of the Christian merchant. The first is that the tale appears in a secular book that is primarily concerned with mercantile values and civic ethics, not with religious disputations. The second is the date of the Tuscan manuscripts, which were produced from about 1380 to 1463, at a time when Jews were viewed with relative benevolence.

Jews had migrated north from Rome in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; their earliest attested presence in Florence was in 1304. As a major commercial center, Florence benefited from its Jewish moneylenders, and at first their services were acknowledged. One document, for example, requests permission for a Jewish moneylender to stay in town by noting “the financial distress that the paupers experience because of the absence of a Jewish lender.” Maristella Botticini has observed that "Jewish lending helped households to smooth..."
In short, before the late fifteenth century, the humanists and merchants in the circle of the owners of the fable books were relatively sympathetic to the Jews.

In the last few decades of the quattrocento, however, anti-Jewish sentiment in Florence hardened and intensified. Jews were seen as foreigners, and discriminatory fines and regulations increased. Anti-Jewish feeling, incited by such preachers as Savonarola, culminated in 1495 in the establishment of a *monte di pietà* (charity with low-rate loans) and the expulsion of the Jews. Florence was among the last Italian towns to expel its Jews; the movement began in Perugia in 1462 and continued in Orvieto in 1463, Siena in 1472, Prato in 1476, and Genoa in 1483. Stephen Bowd has recently demonstrated that humanists often supported anti-Semitic views, but his evidence dates largely from the end of the quattrocento. For example, after witnessing a debate between Jews and Christians that took place about 1485, Marsilio Ficino concluded that Jews lacked wisdom and that “Jewish guile is crushed and Christian truth is upheld,” and in the same decade, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s *Heptaplus* urged Christians to “attack” Jews who refused to convert. Anti-Semitism reached an “explosive level” in the late fifteenth century, but the fable books were produced before this wave of anti-Jewish feeling.

**Yiddish Prints**

After the publication of *Der Edelstein* in Bamberg in 1461, prints of the fable of the murdered Jew appeared next in late fifteenth-century Italy. Such prints were reproduced in multiple copies throughout the country and likely reached a wider audience. The tale appears in fable books printed in Verona in 1479, Naples in 1485, Brescia in 1487, and Venice in 1493. Such books also appealed to a Jewish audience, and the fable is included in the Yiddish *Kuh­Bukh* (Book of Cows),

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111. Jews lent money to a wide range of Florentines, from peasants to the wealthy, and to the commune itself. As Michael Dean Crews concludes, “These services were vital to the rapidly developing economy of fifteenth-century Tuscany.” Because Jewish lending relied on a widespread network of family and friends, it was less subject to unpredictable local economic conditions and for this reason was especially useful. By the end of the century Lorenzo de’ Medici attended anti-Semitic debates, but earlier he opposed the attempts to remove the Jews . . . for he saw economic advantages in their presence. In addition, his humanist training may have instilled in Lorenzo contempt for discrimination on racial or even religious grounds. Among his circle of literate friends were men who questioned whether virtue existed solely in the Western Christian tradition and who appreciated the value of the writings of the ancient Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and Hebrews. Lorenzo himself had protected and patronized Hebrew scholars. In 1478, when a pontifical delegation went to Lorenzo hoping to work out a plan for levying taxes on Florentine Jews, Lorenzo carefully avoided compliance.113


113. Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 31. For Lorenzo’s attendance at anti-Semitic debates, see eadem, “The
published in Verona in 1595 (second edition, Frankfurt, 1697). Derived from Boner’s Der Edelstein, the text differs from it and other Christian versions primarily in its omission of all references to the Jew’s wealth. A comparison of the illustrations is also revealing. The Kuh-Bukh includes four images for this fable, more than any other version, which suggests the story's importance to its Jewish audience. The first three woodcuts closely parallel illustrations in earlier books, but the final print focuses on the execution of the murderer, which was sometimes omitted previously or included only as a minor motif. For the first time, the murderer is broken on the wheel, a particularly brutal and degrading punishment. In addition, unlike images produced for Christians, the Yiddish woodcut shows a huge crowd witnessing the event, which must have given great satisfaction to its Jewish audiences. Jews visualized violence against their own people in a manner strikingly different from Christians. The choice of the wheel to punish the murderer and the inclusion of a huge crowd of witnesses would have expressed the Jews’ longing for the just punishment of those who attacked them.

Conclusions

This essay has examined a small group of images that criticize Christian violence against Jews. Both the pillage of a Jewish home and the fable of the murdered Jew derive from historical incidents in which Jews who were protected by their king came under attack. Both narratives were composed by someone in the royal circle who wished to rebuke those guilty of the crime of lèse-majesté. If the initial impulse for these tales was class conflict between a king and his underlings, then later iterations of the fable were motivated instead by the concerns of other classes of aristocrats who wished to safeguard their source of loans or were in conflict with their king or lord or by merchants who identified with Jews in their desire to protect themselves from murderous thieves. Nevertheless, the initial conflict described in the fable between a king and his servant continued to be visualized, as in each case local concerns, those of aristocrats or merchants, superseded anti-Jewish sentiment and violence against Jews is condemned. It is noteworthy that these sympathetic portrayals of Jews appear only in secular books, not in those made for devotional ends.

In showing that Jews interpreted anti-Semitic violence quite differently from Christians, either by refraining from depicting contemporary scenes of pillage or by radically re-fashioning the fable, my analysis draws on the ideas of Eva Frojmovic. I also build on numerous scholars, most recently Sara Lipton, who explore the intersection of gender and religious identity. In fact, the representation of gender distinguishes the two narratives. Although Les fleurs des chroniques visualizes Christian men as aggressors and a Jewish woman as the innocent victim, in the fable of the murdered Jew all the actors are male. The portrayal of a contemporary Jewish man in a sympathetic manner forms an exception to Lipton’s assertion that even though images of contemporary Jewesses are rarely stereotyped, Jewish men often are. Whereas exemplary tales whose goal was to castigate Christian sin often involve sympathetic representations of male Jews who convert in the end, the fable discussed in this article is striking precisely because it concerns a male Jew who remains Jewish, yet is still portrayed in a positive light.

The images and texts that I have explored enable us to envision a range of possible audience responses. One reader of a fifteenth-century Tuscan manuscript removed the folio on which the fable of the murdered Jew appeared. This reader


122. See, for example, Eva Frojmovic, ed., Imagining the Self, Imagining the Other: Visual Representation and Jewish-Christian Dynamics in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

123. For Lipton, see note 15 above.


125. Zago, Owen, and Serwatka, “Jew and the King’s Cup-Bearer,” 239. The manuscript is Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS 1385.
may have wished to eliminate from the codex a sympathetic image of a Jew and the condemnation of his assailant. Yet by visualizing Jews as innocent victims of Christian aggression, medieval writers and artists opened a space in which some readers might understand that sometimes Christians wrongly assault Jews.

The epigraph of my article illustrates how this might occur textually. In his hagiography of William of Norwich, Thomas of Monmouth invents “an imaginary sketch of the trial” of the murderers of Eleazar, which begins with the Jews pleading their case before the king. Thomas has them implore, “We Jews are yours . . . your very own Jew was killed. . . . We do not think it right that any Christian who wants to can kill a well-behaved Jew and go unpunished.” Even though this passage is embedded in a volume that includes an accusation of ritual murder that caused great harm to European Jewry, these eloquent and powerful words may have led some readers to wonder, however briefly, whether Jews might be innocent of such crimes. Similarly, seeing images of an innocent Jewish woman being thrown to the ground and sexually assaulted or a Jewish man treacherously stabbed in the back might have engendered a modicum of sympathy in some medieval viewers.

All that remains of two traumatic Christian attacks on medieval Jews—the riot in Paris in 1380 and the murder of Eleazar in Norwich in 1146—are the traces left by writers and artists who interpreted the events. These traces planted seeds of sympathy for Jews, but these seeds did not take root. In part the illuminations failed to have a major impact because they were few in number and few readers saw them. Many more would have been needed to turn the tides of anti-Semitism, but this small group of images that portray innocent Jews assaulted by avaricious Christians does reveal moments when artists challenged the dominant discourse. As Miri Rubin justly observed, “In order to discover such voices one has to believe that choice is possible at all, and thus see in violence not the inevitable, spontaneous and culturally ‘expected’ reaction, but a choice.”

126. Thomas of Monmouth, Life and Passion of William of Norwich, 65, 67; and idem, Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich, 99 (“In iudiciali genere coniecturalis causa,” 100; “Nos iudei tui sumus . . . domine rex, iudem peremptum esse contat,” 102). For the rest of the quote, see note 1 above. For Thomas’s text, see also Langmuir, “Thomas of Monmouth,” 820–46.


128. Rubin, Gentile Tales, 5.