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3 William of Norwich in Iceland

Antisemitism Studies between Middle English and Old Norse

Abstract: The central concern of this article is why research on depictions of Jews was almost non-existent in Old Norse-Icelandic Studies until just a few years ago, while in the analogous field of Middle English Studies it has flourished. In addition to surveying the research culture in both disciplines, I consider tangible connections between the medieval English blood libel tradition and the Norwegian-Icelandic cultural elite, with the myth of Kvasir from Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* suggested as an example of how future research based on such connections might look.

Keywords: Blood libel; Eysteinn Erlendsson; Geoffrey Chaucer; Kvasir; Middle English; Old Norse; Robert of Bury; William of Norwich.

Introduction

One of the attractions of the Middle Ages is that it was a time when European culture was at once universal and local. It was universal in that a common language (Latin) and a reliable network of communications (both ecclesiastical and lay) facilitated the dissemination of literature from one end of Europe to the other. To take some nearly random examples, it was unremarkable that the *Historia Scholastica* was accessible to learned persons across the continent,¹ or that an Old French manuscript produced in Antioch ended up in the possession of Queen Isabella Bruce of Norway, herself not a Norwegian, but a Scot.² On the other hand, cultural production could also be tightly linguistically or nationally bound. Works written in geographically peripheral vernaculars such as Old English stood virtually no chance of international circulation, nor were they probably ever intended for such a market.

The simultaneous globalism and parochialism of the Middle Ages is also reflected in the way that “Medieval Studies” is arranged as a set of disciplines. The

1 Friedrich Stegmüller, *Repertorium Biblicum Medii Aevi*, vol. 4 (Madrid: Instituto Francisco Suárez, 1954), 288–91.

2 Bjørn Bandlien, “A Manuscript of the Old French William of Tyre (Pal. Lat. 1963) in Norway,” *Studi mediolatini e volgari* 62 (2016): 21–80.

existence of a unified medieval culture consisting of texts and mentalities common across Europe prior to the Reformation is acknowledged by organs such as The Medieval Academy of America, the International Medieval Congress, or several institutes for Medieval Studies (e. g. the University of Notre Dame, University of Toronto, University of Leeds). But Medieval Studies can also be subdivided along linguistic or regional lines, e. g. Iberian Studies, Middle High German Studies, or indeed the two disciplines discussed here: Middle English and Old Norse-Icelandic. Inside each of these subdivisions of Medieval Studies, a certain portion of research has been undertaken concerning attitudes towards Jews and Judaism.³ There has also been synoptic research, which attempts to study Jewish-Christian relations as found in facets of the global culture of the European Middle Ages: what we might think of as research directly connected to the central “college” of Medieval Studies.⁴

In the following study, the relatively muted presence of Antisemitism Studies in Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship will be compared with the enormous prolifer-

3 E. g. in Middle High German: Winfried Frey, “Das Bild des Judentums in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters,” in *Judentum im deutschen Sprachraum*, ed. Karl E. Grözinger (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991), 36–59; Edith Wenzel, “Synagoga und Ecclesia: Zum Antijudaismus im deutschsprachigen Spiel des späten Mittelalters,” *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 12, no. 1 (2009): 57–81. In Old English: Andrew P. Scheil, *The Footsteps of Israel: Understanding Jews in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Samantha Zacher, ed., *Imagining the Jew in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Mo Pareles, “Translating Purity: Jewish Law and the Construction of Difference in Late Old English Literature” (PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2015). In Old Russian: Henrik Birnbaum, “On Some Evidence of Jewish Life and Anti-Jewish Sentiments in Medieval Russia,” *Viator* 4 (1973): 225–55. Medieval France is a special case, given the tendency for the overarching discipline of Medieval Studies to reflect especially Franco-Latin culture, but see William Chester Jordan, *The French Monarchy and the Jews: From Philip Augustus to the Last Capetians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989); Bernhard Blumenkranz and Monique Lévy, *Bibliographie des juifs en France* (Toulouse: Privat, 1974). The Iberian Peninsula is also peculiar on account of its unique multireligious, multilingual environment, though for a recent account in English, see David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: Norton, 2014), 217–45. See also Louise Mirrer, “The Jew’s Body in Medieval Iberian Literary Portraits and Miniatures: Examples from the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* and the *Cantar de mio Cid*,” *Shofar* 12, no. 3 (1994): 17–30.

4 Arguably the foundational work: Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1966). More recently, see Irvn M. Resnick, *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2012); Sara Lip-ton, *Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography* (New York: Metropolitan, 2014).

ation of Antisemitism Studies in Middle English.⁵ Although Old Norse is often brought into dialogue with Old English, the parallel with Middle English is in this case more compelling. Firstly, Old Norse and Middle English were coeval languages and literatures, both products of the High to Late Middle Ages. (Other periodizations are possible,⁶ but here I define Middle English as the body of literature that emerges in England from around 1200). Indeed, as shall be seen, the anachronistic desire to pair Old English and Old Norse is itself potentially revealing. Secondly, the primary sources concerning Jews in Old Norse have more in common with Middle English than any another medieval literature – but the secondary sources (i.e. academic research) vary enormously between the two corpora.

By my count, the electronic version of the Chaucer Bibliography once published in *Studies of the Age of Chaucer* contains ninety-seven entries of articles, chapters, and books on the topic of Jewish-Christian relations in Middle English literature.⁷ “Race and medieval studies: a partial bibliography” in *postmedieval* contains a further fourteen works on this theme which are not featured in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*.⁸ There is also one chapter known to me which is not featured in either bibliography.⁹ Doctoral theses which were either not subsequently

5 To avoid ugly repetition of phrases and an off-putting amount of qualificatory statements, here some terms are used synonymously which otherwise would not be. By “Middle English” I include Anglo-Latin, as the vast majority of Middle English scholars also read Latin, as could most men of letters in medieval England. Jonathan Adams’s chapter in this volume discusses East Norse (the literature of medieval Denmark and Sweden). My use of “Old Norse” includes only literature written in Norway and Iceland, also called West Norse or Old Norse-Icelandic. Although elsewhere I readily accept that antisemitism and anti-Judaism are distinct phenomena, for present purposes the distinction is not important as I am mostly discussing the interests of researchers rather than analysing primary sources. I occasionally use the term “Judaophobia” to designate both tendencies, but sparingly, as it is not well known. If on occasion the reader feels that the term “anti-Jewish” would be more appropriate than “antisemitic,” or vice versa, I believe that mentally substituting one term for the other will not result in any changes to the outcome of my reasoning.

6 Elaine Treharne, *Living Through Conquest: The Politics of Early English, 1020–1220* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 20012), 1–8.

7 *Chaucer Bibliography*, < <https://newchaucersociety.org/pages/entry/chaucer-bibliography> >. Regrettably it has not been possible to cite individual items from a bibliography where their number exceeds ten.

8 Jonathan Hsy and Julie Orlemanski, “Race and Medieval Studies: A Partial Bibliography,” *postmedieval* 8, no. 4 (2017): 500–31.

9 Candace Barrington, “The Youtube Prioress: Anti-Semitism and Twenty-First Century Participatory Culture,” *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*, ed. Gail Ashton and Daniel T. Kline (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 13–28.

published as monographs or were in my view sufficiently different in their original form to warrant inclusion as separate items contribute another nine items.¹⁰ This means a corpus of scholarship of at least 121 separate publications – and inevitably there will be plenty more peer-reviewed research floating around outside of bibliographies.

In Old Norse-Icelandic, the corpus of antisemitism/anti-Judaism studies consists of eight articles/chapters in peer-reviewed volumes,¹¹ one encyclopedia

10 Bonnie J. Erwin, “Gender, Race, and the Individual Subject in Middle English Representations of Conversion” (PhD thesis, Indiana University, 2010), 92–156; Cord Whitaker, “Race and Conversion in Late Medieval England” (PhD thesis, Duke University, 2009), 112–76; Dorothy Westerman Millner, “The Jews in *Piers Plowman*” (PhD thesis, City University of New York, 1984); Frances Howard Mitiileos, “English *Convivencia*: Aspects of Christian-Jewish Cooperation in Medieval England, 1189–1290” (PhD thesis, Loyola University, 2009); J. Holder Bennett, “An ‘Absent Presence’: An Internal History of Insular Jewish Communities Prior to Expulsion in 1290” (PhD thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 2009); Maija Birenbaum, “Virtuous Vengeance: Anti-Judaism and Christian Piety in Medieval England” (PhD thesis, Fordham University, 2010); Michael Nicholas Jones, “*Sceleris Auctores*: Jews as Theatrical Agents in Medieval England” (PhD thesis, Stanford University, 1996); Mary Elizabeth Sokolowski, “‘For God of Jewes is Crop and Roote’: The Cyclic Performance of Judaism and Jewish-Christian Intimacy in the Chester Mystery Plays” (PhD thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1999); Willis Harrison Johnson, “Between Christians and Jews: The Formation of Anti-Jewish Stereotypes in Medieval England” (PhD thesis, University of California Berkeley, 1997). I include here theses which either were confined to Jewish-Christian studies by their title or included a substantial chapter on the topic which was central to the method of the rest of the thesis. Theses where one chapter was on the subject but it was not integral to the thesis’s chief theme were not included, i.e. theses where a chapter deals heavily with *The Prioress’s Tale* but not from a particularly interreligious/interethnic perspective.

11 Bjarne Berulfsen, “Antisemitisme som litterær importvare,” *Edda* 58 (1958): 123–144; Kirsten Wolf, “An Old Norse Record of Jewish History,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 77, no. 1 (1986): 45–54; Kirsten Wolf, “The Judas Legend in Scandinavia,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 88, no. 4 (1989): 463–76; Richard Cole, “One or Several Jews? The Jewish Massed Body in Old Norse Literature,” *postmedieval* 5, no. 3 (2014): 346–58; Richard Cole, “*Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt*: Proto-Racial Thinking and its Application to Jews in Old Norse Literature,” in *Fear and Loathing in the North: Jews and Muslims in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region*, ed. Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Heß (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 239–68; Richard Cole, “Snorri and the Jews,” in *Old Norse Mythology – Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Pernille Hermann and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 243–68; Veronka Szőke, “The Old Norse *Translatio* of the Latin *Inventio Crucis*,” *Annali – Sezione Germanica* 24, nos 1–2 (2014): 295–326; Yvonne Friedman, “Reception of Medieval European Anti-Jewish Concepts in Late Medieval and Early Modern Norway,” in *The Medieval Roots of Antisemitism: Continuities and Discontinuities from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 59–72.

entry,¹² and one PhD thesis.¹³ An article dealing primarily with visual rather than textual culture – but still from Norway – could also be included.¹⁴ One of the aforementioned articles is also critiqued in a forthcoming book, although not one otherwise on an Old Norse-Icelandic theme, and can therefore be discounted.¹⁵ This means a corpus of scholarship of eleven separate publications. It is worth noting that this combined production is the work of six individual authors, two of the articles would not have existed without the efforts of the editors of the present volume (who have done much to facilitate similar research on related Nordic and Baltic sources), and more than half of it has been published since the year 2014. That is to say, the study of Jewish-Christian relations in Old Norse is not only smaller than its Middle English counterpart in absolute size,¹⁶ but is also substantially younger, and the product of a dramatically smaller number of individuals.

With the disparity between Middle English and Old Norse-Icelandic illustrated, we will turn to potential explanations.

Absence/Presence: lived experience of Jewish life

An obvious place to start is the historical reality that from c. 1070 to 1290 Jews lived in England. They lasted for seven generations, and at the height of their numbers probably constituted around 0.25% of the population.¹⁷ On the basis of the recently revised figure of England's population at the time of the Edict of Expulsion, this means there would have been approximately 11,875 Jewish men, women, and children in England who were forced either to flee or convert

12 Bjarne Berulfsen, "Jøder. Norge og Island" in *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder fra Vikingetid til Reformasjonstid*, vol. 8, ed. Alan Karker (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1963), cols 77–78.

13 Richard Cole, "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Studies on Jews and their Absence in Old Norse Literature" (PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2015).

14 Kristin Bliksrud Aavitsland, "The Church and the Synagogue in Ecclesiastical Art: A Case from Medieval Norway," *Teologisk Tidsskrift* 5, no. 4 (2016): 324–41.

15 Richard Cole, *The Death of Tidericus the Organist: Ethnicity, Class, and Conspiracy Theory in Hanseatic Visby* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, forthcoming).

16 We will return to the issue of its relative size later.

17 Robin R. Mundill, *The King's Jews: Money, Massacre and Exodus in Medieval England* (London: Continuum, 2010), 43–44.

in 1290.¹⁸ Norway and Iceland, on the other hand, almost certainly did not have resident Jewish populations during the entirety of the Middle Ages.¹⁹ Indeed, we have only one potential example of a passing Jewish visitor in Norway, and none at all in Iceland.²⁰ This means that an entire field of study is open to Middle English scholars and historians of medieval England which is completely closed to Scandinavianists: the experiences of Jewish people living in the area in question, and the historical relationships between the Jewish and Christian communities.

However, the importance of this difference should not be overstated. After 1290, Middle English authors were writing from a similar position of Jewish absence as their Old Norse-Icelandic colleagues. Geoffrey Chaucer, whose *Prioress's Tale* is the indisputable locus classicus of Middle English Antisemitism Studies, had no more Jewish countrymen than the contemporaneous author of *Grettis saga*. Chaucer may have met Jews on his travels abroad, but this is also true of Old Norse-speakers and in any case is not indicated in his extant writings.²¹ Indeed, while Anglo-Latin chroniclers record fictionalized accounts of interactions between Jews and Christians on English soil,²² Middle English authors in the post-expulsion period tend not to engage directly with experiences of Jewish-Christian interaction in England's past. This may well have its own meaning. As Tomasch points out, it is telling that *The Prioress's Tale* takes place in an undisclosed location in Asia, rather than in England: "In the *Prioress's Tale*, a polluted Asia, polluted through Jewish presence and actions – is implicitly contrasted with a purified England, whose sanitized state is founded on the displacement of the Jews."²³ The key word here is "implicitly": it remains true to say that the reality of historical Jewish presence does not condition Middle English in overt ways. That is to say, there are no Middle English works which explicitly and at length lament or celebrate the fact that Jews were once present and then removed.

18 Bruce M. S. Campbell and Lorraine Barry, "The Population of Great Britain c. 1290: A Provisional Reconstruction," in *Population, Welfare and Economic Change in Britain, 1290–1834*, ed. Chris Briggs and others (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 50.

19 Cole, "The Jew Who Wasn't There," 7–17.

20 Cole, "The Jew Who Wasn't There," 17–21, 256–57.

21 Miriamne A. Krummel, *Crafting Jewishness in Medieval England: Legally Absent, Virtually Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 90; Cole, "The Jew Who Wasn't There," 2–5.

22 E.g. Anthony Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006), 23–53.

23 Sylvia Tomasch, "Postcolonial Chaucer and the Virtual Jew," in *Chaucer and the Jews: Sources, Contexts and Meanings*, ed. Sheila Delaney (New York: Routledge, 2002), 73; Bale, *Jew in the Medieval Book*, 62–63.

While the historical presence of Jews in England prior to 1290 has given scholars of Middle English an interesting background upon which to comment, the lack of a corresponding history in Norway-Iceland does not mean that there is nothing to say. Elsewhere, I have pointed out that there are different sorts of absence: Jews in post-1290 England belong to the lesser state of absence I call “once-here-now-gone,” while Jews in medieval Iceland and Norway belong to the state of absence I have called “never-here-now-there.”²⁴ Medieval Icelanders and Norwegians might well have been fascinated, disturbed – or even tantalized – by the thought of Jews in exciting, foreign locations. There is nothing to prevent speculation on this prospect in the same way that Middle English researchers speculate on how it felt for medieval Englishmen to have an awareness that Jews had once lived on their own soil. It seems unlikely, then, that this difference is the key reason that Antisemitism/Anti-Judaism Studies has flourished in Middle English and not in Old Norse. Absence paradoxically gives us quite a lot to talk about.

Occurrences in the corpus

On the basis of secondary sources, one might reasonably assume that Jews were hardly mentioned in Old Norse literature, but mentioned frequently in Middle English. To test the truth of this assumption is not easily done. Despite exciting experiments by, for example, Franco Morretti, reading literature lends itself to qualitative more than quantitative investigation.²⁵ Not all instances of antisemitism have equal discursive weight. For example, a hundred asides simply repeating the falsehood that “Jews killed Jesus”²⁶ tell us much less than one paragraph illustrating a sophisticated antisemitic conspiracy theory. There is also the problem of what exactly we would be counting. Would we count every individual antisemitic utterance, so that work *x* has *y* number of antisemitic episodes? How then would we count the utterances in a work such as the Anglo-Latin *Vita et passio Sancti Willelmi martyris Norwicensis* (Life and Miracles of William of Norwich, 1150s–70s) – would all of the first two books, which constitute one fluid antisemitic narrative, be registered as just one utterance? Instead, I have opted

²⁴ Richard Cole, “Towards a Typology of Absence in Old Norse Literature,” *Exemplaria* 28, no. 2 (2016): 141–45.

²⁵ Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005).

²⁶ Jeremy Cohen, *Christ Killers: The Jews and The Passion from The Bible to The Big Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19–36.

for a binary where either a given work discusses post-Old Testament Jews, or it does not.

This leads to the problem of what constitutes a work. I am of the view that most sermons and miracle tales should be considered independent works, because they once circulated as independent texts rather than having always existed in the compendiums in which they were subsequently preserved.²⁷ But published lists of works tend not to take this approach. For example, the approximately sixty Old Norse Marian miracles are often referred to simply as *Maríu saga*, not differentiating between the *vita* of Mary, probably written by Kygri-Björn Hjaltason (d. 1238), and the later Marian miracles.²⁸ This is before we enter the New Philological minefield of how far works should be differentiated from manuscripts.²⁹ If one work containing an antisemitic episode is preserved in twenty manuscripts, do we have one or twenty instances of antisemitism? There is no option but to be arbitrary. In the name of simplicity, then, I (1) use corpora defined by other authorities, (2) prefer works to manuscripts, and (3) ask only whether a text contains treatments of Jews at all rather than how many treatments it contains. This yields the following results, imperfect though they may be:

On this basis, the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* has a register of works which delineates 437 distinct works of Old Norse literature.³⁰ Of these, fifty-three mention Jews at some point. This does not include poetry, where the proportion of works mentioning Jews is undoubtedly fewer, although conversely the few antisemitic moments in Old Norse poetry are some of the most colourful in the canon.³¹

²⁷ Cole, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There,” 232–34.

²⁸ Gabriel Turville-Petre, “The Old Norse Homily on the Assumption and *Maríu saga*,” in *Nine Norse Studies* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1972), 113–17. On the *vita* more generally, see Christelle Fairise, “Relating Mary’s Life in Medieval Iceland: *Maríu Saga*. Similarities and Differences with the Continental *Lives of the Virgin*,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 129 (2014): 165–96.

²⁹ Richard Cole, “Philology and Desire in Old Norse, between *Stone* and a Hard Place,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 117, no. 4 (2018): 513–22.

³⁰ *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*, < http://onpweb.nfi.sc.ku.dk/vkreg_d.html >.

³¹ For example, “Gyðingsdiktur,” in *Íslenzk Miðaldakvæði: Islandske digte fra senmiddelalderen*, vol. 2, ed. by Jón Helgason (Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard, 1938), 87–119, “Gyðingsvísur,” *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, vol. 7: *Poetry on Christian Subjects*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 515–25, “Geiplur I,” in *Rúnnaafn. Samling af de ældste islandske rimer*, vol. 2, edited by Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen: S. L. Møllers & J. Jørgensens Bogtrykkeri, 1913–22, 363.

The *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse* catalogues 148 distinct works.³² Of these, thirty-five mention Jews at some point. Methodological caveats abound here: the Middle English *Corpus* is not as comprehensive as the Old Norse *Dictionary*, even though the *Corpus* contains poetry and prose while the *Dictionary* is confined to prose. Nonetheless, it is probably true to say that proportionally Jews are mentioned more frequently in Middle English than Old Norse (24 per cent of Middle English surveyed works mention Jews, versus 12 per cent of Old Norse surveyed works). However, in absolute numbers, the Old Norse corpus probably contains more occurrences than the Middle English. Regardless, it must be stressed that the corpus of Old Norse treatments of Jews is not small. Having identified what I believe to be every overtly antisemitic episode in Old Norse (both in prose and poetry), the accumulated material weighs in at 32,374 words.

Table 3.1: A Comparison of the Middle English and the Old Norse-Icelandic Corpus and the Topic of Jews

| | Middle English | Old Norse-Icelandic |
|---|----------------|---------------------|
| Works containing references to Jews | 35 | 53 |
| Number of works surveyed | 148 | 437 |
| Percentage of corpus surveyed containing references to Jews | 23.6% | 12.13% |
| Number of books, book chapters, articles, and PhD theses published on the topic | 121 | 11 |

By this point it should be clear that the quantity of the Old Norse material ought not to be a barrier to potential scholarship on Jewish-Christian relations. But what of its quality? True, there is a substantial amount of antisemitic/anti-Jewish content in Old Norse, but is it worth commenting upon in the way that Middle English material apparently is? It must be answered that *The Prioress's Tale*, which has inspired much comment from Middle English antisemitism scholars, is actually a fairly direct retelling of a common European legend which is also told in Old Norse, the *Erubescat* miracle.³³ It is true that Old Norse critics cannot

³² Humanities Text Initiative, *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*, < <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/> >. Other corpora could have been used, though I have found this one to yield the largest result relative to the number of individual works contained.

³³ Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book*, 59, 74. On the Old Norse transmission: Ole Widding, "Norrøne Marialegender på europæisk baggrund," *Opuscula* 10 (1996): 104. For the Old Norse texts: "Af klerk ok gyðingvm," in *Mariu Saga: Legender om Jomfru Maria og hendes jertegn*,

connect their version of the legend to the lived experiences of Jews on Norwegian/Icelandic soil in the way that Middle English critics can do for England, so there is in this regard less to say about the Norse tale. But this factor alone can hardly account for the fact that JSTOR lists over 700 articles on *The Prioress's Tale*, while as far as I am aware there is only one published study which treats the Old Norse version of the *Erubescat* miracle in more than a passing remark, and even then the treatment is fairly superficial.³⁴

Example: the blood libel – from England to Norway to Iceland

The Prioress's Tale, being a story about the murder of a young Christian by Jews, is adjacent to the historical phenomenon of the blood libel.³⁵ Here, we find that the Old Norse material is in fact intertwined with English material, yet comment from Scandinavianists has been surprisingly lacking. The story of William of Norwich marks the beginning of concrete accusations of Jewish ritual murder. It has been an important site for Medieval English Antisemitism Studies, and indeed for Medieval Studies more generally.³⁶ William was a twelve-year-old boy, whose body was found in the woods outside Norwich on Holy Saturday in

efter gamle haandskrifter, ed. Carl Rikard Unger (Christiania: Brøgger & Christie, 1871), 203–07; “Af klerk er Judar drapu fyrir (þui er) hann song af vorru frv.” *Ibid.*, 779–80. Chaucer does add some original elements, most importantly the reference to another blood libel case, Little Hugh of Lincoln (d. 1255): “O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also / With cursed Jewes, as it is notable, / For it is but a litel while ago.” Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 212.

³⁴ Cole, “Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt,” 245–47.

³⁵ In what follows, I use “blood libel” and “ritual murder accusation” interchangeably. A much more precise typology has been proposed but is too intricate to be employed in the present work: Darren O’Brien, *The Pinnacle of Hatred: The Blood Libel and the Jews* (Jerusalem: Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, 2011), 63–67.

³⁶ Either particularly important or particularly recent: Jeffrey J. Cohen, “The Flow of Blood in Medieval Norwich,” *Speculum* 79, no. 1 (2004): 26–65; Hannah R. Johnson, “Rhetoric’s Work: Thomas of Monmouth and the History of Forgetting,” *New Medieval Literatures* 9 (2007): 63–91; by the same author: *The Ritual Murder Accusation at the Limit of Jewish History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 30–58; John M. McCulloh, “Jewish Ritual Murder: William of Norwich, Thomas of Monmouth, and the Early Dissemination of the Myth,” *Speculum* 72, no. 3 (1997): 698–740; E. M. Rose, *The Murder of William of Norwich: The Origins of the Blood Libel in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Anna Wilson, “*Similia similibus*: Queer Time in Thomas of Monmouth’s Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich,” *Exemplaria* 28, no. 1 (2016): 44–69.

1144. William's story is the earliest known blood libel accusation (although there were antecedents, such as the "Jewish boy in oven"³⁷ or *Erubescat* miracle tales – both also attested in Old Norse, in multiple recensions).³⁸ The cult of William remained largely a local affair; of all the paintings of William made in England, or references to him in medieval English chronicles, not one originates more than a hundred miles from Norwich itself.³⁹ Outside of England, McCulloh has undertaken a thorough survey of references to William in European sources. He finds a cluster of passing mentions in Norman writers (Robert of Torigny, d. 1186, and an anonymous annalist from the Abbey of Mortemer), an annalist from the Abbey of Notre Dame d'Ourcamp, and a legend recorded by Hélinand of Froidmont (d. c. 1230), which made its way into Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale* (c. 1250).⁴⁰ One rogue is an image from a vault-boss in Girona Ca-

37 The connection between the "Jewish boy in oven" and the blood libel has been posited as historical (if circumstantial), in that it was preached by Bishop Herbert of Losinga at Norwich in the 1090s: McCulloh, "Jewish Ritual Murder," 737–38; Miri Rubin, Introduction to *The Life and Passion of William of Norwich*, trans. Miri Rubin (London: Penguin Books, 2014), xxv–xlvi. A genealogical relationship, suggesting the place of the "Jewish boy in oven" tale as part of an ancestry of legends culminating in blood libel and host desecration accusations, is sketched by Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 28. See also Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christian–Jewish Relations, 1000–1300: Jews in the Service of Medieval Christendom* (London: Longman, 2011), 171–72. The stories have further been read as mirrors of each other: Geraldine Heng, "England's Dead Boys: Telling Tales of Christian–Jewish Relations before and after the First European Expulsion of the Jews," *MLN* 127, no. 5 (2012): 73–81.

38 For *Erubescat*, see n33 above. For the "Jewish boy in oven" tale: Carl Rikard Unger, ed., *Mariu Saga*: "Af gyðingsbarni." Ibid., 71–72. "Munkr mintizt vid kinn vorrar frv." Ibid., 836–38. "Af iuda syne" [recension A] Ibid., 987–88, [rec. B] 989, [rec. C] 989–90. On its preservation in *Draumkvedet* and visual culture: Yvonne Friedman, "Reception of Medieval European Anti-Jewish Concepts in Late Medieval and Early Modern Norway," in *The Medieval Roots of Antisemitism*, 62–65.

39 The major contemporary textual witness besides Thomas of Monmouth is the *Peterborough Chronicle*, compiled by the monks of Peterborough abbey, about sixty-four miles from Norwich: "On his time [King Stephen r. 1135–54] þe Iudeus of Noruuic bohton an Cristen cild before Estren, & pineden him alle þe ilce pining ðat ure Drihten was pined, & on Lang Fridæi him on rode hengen for ure Drihtines luue & sythen byrieden him ... & hatte he Sanct Willelm" (In his time the Jews of Norwich procured a Christian child before Easter, and tortured him with all the sort of torture by which Our Lord was tortured, and on Good Friday hung him on a cross for the love of Our Lord and then buried him ... and he was called Saint William). *The Peterborough Chronicle*, ed. Cecily Clark (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), 57. On paintings of William, see McCulloh, "Jewish Ritual Murder," 709–17.

40 McCulloh, "Jewish Ritual Murder," 717–24.

thedral in Spain.⁴¹ There is also an outcrop of German attestations. McCulloh discovered a brief mention in an appendix by Paul of Bernried to a Bavarian martyrology from the eleventh century. There is a reference in Hartmann Schedel's *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493), an incunabulum which appeals to a textual witness of the story, probably being Vincent's *Speculum*: "Gwilhelmus ein kind in engelland wardt diser zeit von den iuden amm karfreytag in der statt norwico gekreütziget. Von dem liset man darnach ein wunderlichs gesihte"⁴² (Gwilhelmus, a child in England, was at this time crucified by the Jews on Good Friday in the city of Norwich. One can read a wonderful story about this hereafter). Schedel's chronicle also contains an illustration of the alleged crucifixion by Michael Wolgemut (d. 1519).

What I have never seen mentioned is that there is also an Icelandic reference to William of Norwich. It is found in one manuscript, AM 657 a–b 4to, written in Iceland, c. 1375. A legend entitled *Af Lanfranco* contains a sub-chapter where a boy named William has a vision of his namesake, William of Norwich. Frustratingly, the manuscript lacks a folio just moments after William of Norwich appears, so we will never know precisely what the Icelandic version entailed:

Í þeim stað á Englandi er í Jórvík heitir var einn pilltr XIII⁴³ vetra gamall, Vilhjálmr at nafni. Honum bar svá til um vátir eptir páskar á mánadegi nærri níundi stund, at hann sofnaði; ok þegar sem í andarsýn bregðr hann augun sundr:⁴⁴ ... Borg ein ágjæt var fyrir þeim ... Til suðrs í þeirri háleitu borg sêr hann eitt dýrðligt alltari með skínanda búnaði. Þar umbergis stendr mikil fylgd er öll var himneskliga prýdd, enn í miðju þeirra höfðingi svá klæddr ok krúnaðr sem jarðlig tunga fær eigi greint. Engillinn talar þá til Vilhjálms: "Þersi herra hinn krúnaði er nafni þinn Vilhjálmr er Júðar krossfestu í Nórvík⁴⁵ á Englandi upp á frjádag langa. Er nú úti erendi þitt fyrst at sinni, þvíat þú hefir sêt ..."⁴⁶

In that town in England which is called York there was a fifteen-year-old boy by the name of William. It so happened to him in the spring after Easter on a Monday, close to the ninth hour, that he fell asleep. And as though in a spiritual vision he opened his eyes ... There was a fantastic city before him ... In the south of this celebrated city he sees a glorious altar with a shining [altar]cloth. All around there stands a great congregation who were

41 Julian Luxford, "The Iconography of St William of Norwich and the Nuremberg Chronicle," *Norfolk Archaeology* 47, no. 2 (2015), 241–44.

42 Hartmann Schedel, *Register des buchs der Croniken vnd geschichten, mit figure vnd pildnusen von anbegin der welt bis auf dise vnsere Zeit* (Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 1493), cci.

43 Gering has XIIIII but this is not corroborated in the manuscript. AM 657 a–b 4to, fol. 25r.

44 "Af Lanfranco," *Isländzk Æventyri: Isländische Legenden Novellen und Märchen*, vol. 2, ed. Hugo Gering (Halle: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1883), 303.

45 Gering suggested "Nor[ð]vík," presumably feeling it to be a more authentic form, although the manuscript clearly has "noruik." AM 657 a–b 4to, fol. 25v.

46 "Af Lanfranco," *Æventyri*, 305.

all heavenly attired, and in the middle of them was their chieftain, clothed and crowned in a manner that no earthly tongue can manage to describe. The Angel speaks to William [of York]: “This Lord, the crowned one, is your namesake William, whom the Jews crucified in Norwich in England on Good Friday. Now, this is the first time that your task is complete, because you have seen ...”

Af Lanfranco is mainly based on the *Vita Lanfranci* (Life of Archbishop Lanfranc, d. 1089) contained in the *Speculum Historiale*, although it also contains exotic elements for which it is hard to account.⁴⁷ For example, the Icelandic text introduces the detail that the vision occurred to a fourteen-year-old boy called William, who lived in Jórvík (York). In both Vincent’s and Hélinand’s text, there is no such geographical information.⁴⁸ McCulloh’s study raises the question of orally transmitted stories about William, circulating alongside written sources.⁴⁹ The Old Norse *Af Lanfranco* perhaps suggests that Norway-Iceland was party to these now lost traditions (was there even a poetic tradition on which the author of *Af Lanfranco* drew? Jórvík and Nórvík rhyme). There are further hints of direct transmission between English blood-libel accusations and the Old Norse-speaking sphere. As previously mentioned, between c. 1150 and 1173, the monk Thomas of Monmouth composed the *Vita et passio Sancti Willelmi martyris Norwicensis*. Strikingly, this text – at the epicentre of the William cult – contains a suggestion that the legend was spread to Norway soon after William’s death. Thomas of Monmouth mentions that a ship crossing the North Sea was caught in treacherous weather:

presbitero quodam Thetfordensi qui cum eis de Norweia aduenerat, beati martiris Willelmi opem inuocauit. Se quippe omnes et sua omnia pariter cum nauī eius committunt patrociniis et sic directo cursu ad proximum tenditur litus.⁵⁰

[A] priest who was from Thetford, who had accompanied them from Norway, called on the aid of the blessed martyr William. Indeed, they [the crew] all committed themselves and all

47 “Af Lanfranco,” *Æventyri*, 240–41.

48 Hélinand of Froidmont, *Chronicon* in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 212, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris: Migne, 1855), col. 1036; Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Quadruplex*, vol. 4, ed. Academy of Douai (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1965), 1125–26. Vincent’s episode did not find its way into the Old Norse *Stjórn I*.

49 McCulloh, “Jewish Ritual Murder,” 718–19, though cf. 717, 724. In general: Rachel Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate: Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in High Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 28–46; Heather Blurton and Hannah Johnson, *The Critics and the Prioress: Antisemitism, Criticism, and Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 66.

50 Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich*, ed. Augustus Jessopp and Montague Rhodes James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), 277.

their belongings as well as the ship to his protection and thus with a straight course they headed to the nearest shore.

The priest in question appears to be English rather than Norwegian (hence Thetfordensis in the nominative, “native to Thetford”) so this is not an account of a Norwegian professing William’s saintliness. However, it is worth noting that William is invoked on the return journey *from* Norway. At the very least, then, we have an indication of an adherent of the William cult who has been travelling in a West Norse-speaking country. It would not be surprising if our nameless priest were not the only William-proselyte traversing the routes between East Anglia, Norway, and Iceland, given the affiliation of all three regions to what has been termed the “North Sea World.”⁵¹ After William’s death, blood libel accusations continued apace across Europe. In 1181, another East Anglian boy was found murdered, Robert of Bury. His story is much less well preserved. He was supposed to have been murdered by Jews, but his *vita* does not survive. The details in the fiction of his no-doubt grisly murder are lost to us, as are the miracles that were attributed to him after death.⁵² The only literary account of any note is a Middle English poem by John Lydgate, *A Praier to Seynt Robert*, composed two centuries after Robert’s death:

O blyssid Robert, Innocent and Virgyne,
 Glorious marter, gracious & riht good,
 To our prayer thyn eris [ears] doun Enclyne,
 Wich on-to Crist offredyst thy chast blood,
 Ageyns the[e], the Iewys were so wood ...
 Fostrid with mylk and tende pap [sweet breast] bi foode
 Was it nat routhe [horrid] to se bi veynes bleede?⁵³

If Robert remains an obscure case of blood libel for historians of England, he ought to be important for historians of Norway-Iceland. The *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds* by Jocelyn de Brakelond (fl. 1170s–c. 1200) records Robert’s body being brought to the church at the titular abbey, at the same

51 On East Anglians, Norwegians, and Jews, see Cole, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There,” 4–5, 151–52. See also Anna Agnarsdóttir, “Iceland’s ‘English Century’ and East Anglia’s North Sea World,” in *East Anglia and its North Sea World in the Middle Ages*, ed. David Bates and Robert Lilliard (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), 204–17, who amongst other matters, discusses an apparent case of child abduction from Iceland to King’s Lynn in 1429.

52 On the remains of the Robert cult, see Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book*, 105–19, 141–43.

53 John Lydgate, *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, fasc. 1, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken (London: Kegan, 1911), 138.

time as a Norwegian by the name of “Augustinus” was visiting (and, it would seem, assuming a lot of responsibilities at the monastery during an interregnum):

Vacante abbatia perhendiavit Augustinus archiepiscopus Norweie apud nos in domibus abbatis, habens per preceptum regis singulis diebus x. solidos de denariis abbacie; qui multum valuit nobis ad habendam liberam electionem nostram, testimonium perhibens de bono, et publice protestans coram rege quod viderat et audierat. Eodem tempore fuit sanctus puer Robertus martirizatus, et in ecclesia nostra sepultus, et fiebant prodigia et signa multa in plebe⁵⁴

While the abbacy happened to be vacant, Augustine, archbishop of Norway, stayed with us in the abbot's quarters, for the king had given him ten shillings a day from the abbot's money; he did us much good in obtaining our free election, testifying well for us, and speaking out publicly before the king of what he saw and heard [about us]. It was also at this time that the saintly boy Robert was martyred, and was buried in our church, and there were many signs and wonders amongst the people ...

This “Augustinus” is in fact Eysteinn Erlendsson, Archbishop of Niðarós (r. 1161–88).⁵⁵ Between 1180–83 he was in exile from Norway, having supported a defeated faction in the Norwegian civil wars. During his time in England he appears to have particularly identified with the cult of Thomas à Becket (d. 1170), and to have encouraged the cult in Norway upon his return.⁵⁶ How much of the cult of Robert of Bury did he bring back? As in the case of the nameless Thetford priest, there is much we do not know. Did Eysteinn avoid all sight of Robert's body? If he did take a moment to contemplate upon the delivery of the corpse to the monastery, what ran through the Norwegian outsider's mind? Did he reflect over the supposed beastliness of the Jews, and gladden himself that Norway was spared the presence of such a murderous people? Or, in his private thoughts, did he find the behaviour of his English colleagues deluded? Did he recognize the cynical power games driving the architects of the cult, later commented upon by Bale?⁵⁷ In the latter two eventualities, we can be reasonably

⁵⁴ Jocelyn de Brakelond, *Chronica Jocelini de Brakelonda, De rebus Gestis Samsonis Abbatis Monasterii Sancti Edmundi*, ed. Johanne Gage Rokewode (London: Camden Society, 1840), 12.

⁵⁵ Erik Gunnes, *Erkebiskop Øystein: Statsmann og kirkebygger* (Oslo: Aschehough, 1996), 250–55.

⁵⁶ Haki Antonsson, *St Magnús of Orkney: A Scandinavian Martyr Cult in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 63.

⁵⁷ Anthony Bale, “‘House Devil, Town Saint’: Anti-Semitism and Hagiography in Medieval Suffolk,” in *Chaucer and the Jews: Sources, Contexts, Meanings*, ed. Sheila Delaney (New York: Routledge, 2002), esp. 186–87.

sure that he did not raise the issue: an outspoken non-believer at the heart of the establishment in Bury would likely have attracted comment from Jocelyn.

We have only one opaque hint at Eysteinn's personal attitude. If his authorship of the *Passio et miracula beati Olavi* (c. 1180s) is accepted, the presence there of seven miracle tales concerning young boys in perilous situations suggests that the themes of the Robert narrative would have been congruent with his tastes.⁵⁸ The miracle of two Christian boys living among pagans, and the miracle of a Christian boy whose tongue has been cut out, speak in particular to the blood libel's interests (1) in the mutilation of innocents and (2) in conflict between different faith communities.⁵⁹ However, the fact that these stories do not contain Jews means Eysteinn's opinion remains ambiguous: was he inspired by the experience of dealing with Robert's burial, and so quietly allowed blood libel-like themes into his work? Or is the absence of Jews from his surviving literary output a sign that he rejected the anti-Jewish topos? For our purposes, it is not a problem that these questions are unanswerable. Whether he supported or disapproved of the Robert cult, Eysteinn had direct experience of it before he returned to Norway. Between 1183–88, there were five years where the highest church official in both Norway and Iceland had perhaps seen with this own eyes a child allegedly murdered by Jews, and at the least worked closely with people who encouraged that child's veneration. It is almost unthinkable that none of his Norwegian or Icelandic colleagues were interested in the remarkable experiences he had in England.

One might attempt to excuse the lack of comment on these connections between medieval English Judaeophobia and Norwegian-Icelandic men of letters by saying that the anti-Jewish/antisemitic stories transmitted from England left little impact in Old Norse literature. The aforementioned presence of an Old Norse reference to William of Norwich would militate against this defence. But it is not impossible that English blood libel legends also influenced more canonical works of Old Norse literature. The *Prose Edda* is a mythological compendium authored by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson c. 1220, probably while he was a guest at the Norwegian court. There we find the following myth about the being called Kvasir, who emerged from a bowl containing the spit of all the gods, and who possesses omniscience:

58 "Passio Olavi," in *A History of Norway and The Passion and Miracles of the Blessed Óláfr*, ed. Carl Phelpstead, trans. Devra Kunin (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2001), 36–37, 47–48, 51–52, 55–57, 57–58, 60, 73–74.

59 "Passio Olavi," 36–37, 55–57.

Hann fór víða um heim at kenna mönnum frœði, ok þá er hann kom at heimboði til dverga nokkvorra, Fjalars⁶⁰ ok Galars, þá kǫlluðu þeir hann með sér á einmæli ok drápu hann, létu renna blóð hans í tvau ker ok einn ketil, ok heitir sá Óðreyrir, en kerin heita Són ok Boðn. Þeir blendu hunangi við blóðit ok varð þar af mjöðr sá er hverr er af drekkur verðr skáld eða frœðamaðr. Dvergarnir sögðu Ásum at Kvasir hefði kafnat í mannviti fyrir því at engi var þar svá fróðr at spyrja kynni hann fróðleiks ... Af þessu kǫllum vér skáldskap Kvasis blóð eða dverga drekku eða fylli eða nakkvars konar lǫg Óðreris eða Boðnar eða Sónar⁶¹

He travelled widely around the world teaching people knowledge, and when he came to stay with some dwarves, Fjalarr and Galarr, they invited him to have a one-on-one conversation with them and [then] killed him, letting his blood run into two vats and one cauldron, and this [cauldron] is called Óðreyrir, while the vessels are called Són and Boðn. They mixed honey with the blood and from this comes the mead whereof anyone who drinks becomes a poet or a scholar. The dwarves told the Æsir that Kvasir had choked on wisdom because there was no one clever enough around who could ask [questions] of his knowledge ... From this we call poetry “the blood of Kvasir” or “the drink of dwarves” or “the share” or some kind of “liquid of Óðrerir or Boðn or Són.”

It must be said at once that Snorri had pre-existing material with which to work.⁶² The use of the kenning *Kvasis dreyri* (Kvasir’s gore), meaning “poetry,”

60 In what follows, I suggest the possibility that Snorri’s tale has more in common with the blood libel legend than it does with a putative body of pre-Christian myth. Pursuant to this, we might note that in the *Gesta Danorum* (c. 1208), Fjalarr appears as the prefect of Scania: Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, vol. 1, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. Peter Fisher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), 218. In Eddic poetry, he appears either as a giant or as a dwarf. Explanations of this confusing situation have relied on the theory that there were multiple characters in Old Norse myth called “Fjalarr” – perhaps as many as four: Peter H. Salus and Paul Beekman Taylor, “Eikinskjaldi, Fjalarr, and Eggþér: Notes on Dwarves and Giants in the *Völuspá*,” *Neophilologus* 53, no. 1 (1969): 77–78; John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), 166–68. When we consider that the name “Galarr” is not found outside the *Prose Edda*, the possibility ought to be considered that Snorri knew little of Fjalarr other than his name, and invented Galarr so as to make a pair of Tweedledum/Tweedledee-like villains for a myth that in its details owed more to Snorri’s own age than the distant pagan past.

61 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál 1*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), 3–4. Quotation marks are used because technically Óðinn is speaking here, not the narrator.

62 Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964), 39–40. The name Kvasir seems to have etymological connections with the idea of being crushed, particularly in the sense of crushing ingredients to prepare a drink: Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 336. It is uncertain whether this etymology would have been clear to Snorri, though we might note in passing that it is not mutually exclusive with the imagery of the blood libel. William of Norwich was supposedly crushed using a bizarre device which used knotted ropes to concentrate pressure: Thomas of Monmouth, *Life and Miracles*, 20–21.

is attested in the skaldic poem *Vellekla*, allegedly composed by Einarr skálaglamm Helgason in the 900s, though the term Snorri offers, *Kvasis blóð*, is otherwise unknown.⁶³ Analogues have been offered with the Hindu myths of Mada and Soma (the god)/soma (the drink), with some comparative mythologists suspecting a shared Indo-European inheritance.⁶⁴ I note, though, that while Hindu analogues can be found for the magical drink and the being born of a peace accord between the gods, I see no Hindu analogue for the manner of Kvasir's murder, and the use of his blood for making the aforementioned magical drink.

There is an analogue, however, with the blood libel.⁶⁵ Jews in medieval England were crown property,⁶⁶ compelled to provide services which demanded specialist knowledge, finance being the classic example, and sometimes being thought of as possessing particular occult knowledge in matters magical or medicinal.⁶⁷ Dwarves in Old Norse literature occupy an analogous role: genealogically distinct from gods and humans, whom they are often compelled to serve as master smiths or magicians.⁶⁸ Like a typical blood libel victim, Kvasir is invited into the home of his murderers under false pretences. His blood is then used for occult purposes (we will return to this detail shortly). Kvasir is, like William, good-natured and helpful by inclination; he asks no reward for sharing his

63 Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, "Vellekla I," ed. Edith Marold, in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035. Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1*, ed. Diana Whaley (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 283.

64 Georges Dumézil, *The Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, trans. John Lindow and others (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 21–25; Georges Dumézil, *Loki* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1948), 102–05. Cf. Jarich G. Oosten, *The War of the Gods: The Social Code in Indo-European Mythology* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 61–62. In a volume on the present topic, the troubling political implications of Dumézil's enthusiasm for a coherent "Indo-European" ideology should be remembered: Stefan Arvidsson, "Aryan Mythology as Science and Ideology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 2 (1999): esp. 347 n21, 349; Bruce Lincoln, "Rewriting the German War God: Georges Dumézil, Politics and Scholarship in the Late 1930s," *History of Religions* 37, no. 3 (1998): 187–208. For a similar reminder regarding De Vries, cited earlier, see Willem Hofstee, "The Essence of Concrete Individuality. Gerardus van der Leeuw, Jan de Vries, and National Socialism," in *The Study of Religion Under the Impact of Fascism*, ed. Horst Junginger (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 543–52.

65 I am grateful to Amber J. Rose for initially pointing out to me the resemblance between Kvasir and the blood libel in general.

66 Sapir Abulafia, *Christian-Jewish Relations*, 2011; Krummel, *Crafting Jewishness*, 2011, 28–36; Cole, "Snorri and the Jews," 250.

67 Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 3–5; Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, esp. 57–60, 90–92.

68 These are just some of the attributes of *dvergar*. Exhaustive survey is provided by Werner Schäfer, "Was ist eigentlich ein Zwerg? Eine prototypensemantische Figurenanalyse der *dvergar* in der Sagaliteratur," *Mediaevistik* 23 (2010): 197–299.

knowledge.⁶⁹ Both Kvasir and the prototypical blood libel victim have a special aura even before their murder. Kvasir is born of a strange ritual performed by the gods, and William is apparently predestined to be killed centuries before his birth (see figure 3.1).⁷⁰

If Snorri's version of the Kvasir myth was coloured by the blood libel trope, Snorri need not have had one particular instance in mind. By the time he composed the *Prose Edda*, there had been at least four accusations in England: William of Norwich, Harold of Gloucester (d. 1168), Robert of Bury, and a case in Winchester (1192, to which we will shortly return). France had seen the case of Richard of Pontoise (1163, on which more to follow), and accusations in Blois (1171), and Bray-sur-Seine/Brie-Comte-Robert (1192). A case of alleged murder of a Christian by Jews from Würzburg in 1147 was thought to have a ritual dimension, and in 1187 the Jews of Mainz were called on to swear to the Bishop that there was no ritual whereby they murdered a Christian during Easter.⁷¹ There is also the possibility that further stories circulated in the early thirteenth century, failed to take root as local cults, and so have left no written trace. It would be speculative, reductive, and not reflective of Snorri's usual eclecticism to suppose that Kvasir is a calque exclusively on William of Norwich; Snorri need only have known the general tradition of Jewish ritual murder accusations. As seen, there are resemblances between Kvasir and William, but there are also details which echo with blood libel accusations that postdate Snorri – especially the use of the victim's blood for apparently magical purposes.

Thomas of Monmouth's *vita* does not suggest that the Jews were particularly interested in collecting William's blood, much less for any occult purpose (on the contrary, they are so disturbed by the "sanguinis defluebant riui" [stream of blood flowing] that they use boiling water to seal William's wounds).⁷² A rood screen from Holy Trinity Church in Loddon, Norfolk, of c. 1514 does depict a Jew attentively collecting William's blood.⁷³ Julian Luxford expresses doubt that William folklore ever included the deliberate collection of the saint's blood, arguing convincingly that the screen was informed by a woodcut of another

69 Thomas of Monmouth, *Life and Miracles*, 13–14.

70 Thomas of Monmouth, *Life and Miracles*, 15.

71 Sapir Abulafia, *Christian-Jewish Relations*, 175–84.

72 Thomas of Monmouth, *Life and Miracles*, 22.

73 The dating is from Carlee A. Bradbury, "A Norfolk Saint for a Norfolk Man: William of Norwich and Sir James Hobart at Holy Trinity Church in Loddon," *Norfolk Archaeology* 46, no. 4 (2013): 456 (illustration of the screen and the William panel on p. 457). Finessed by Luxford, "Iconography."

er child martyr, Simon of Trent (d. 1475), from Schedel's *Liber Chronicarum*.⁷⁴ That said, M. R. James's speculation that lay adherents to the William cult might have had grisly ideas about the use of blood in an imaginary ritual, not mentioned by Thomas, seems valid.⁷⁵ There is perhaps a hint that Robert of Bury was thought to have been ritually bled: "Was it nat routhe to se þi veynes bleede?" asked Lydgate, indicating a particular interest in the image of a still-conscious Robert watching the blood leave his body.

Indeed, Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Heß note several cases of murder by Jews, prior to the likely composition of the *Prose Edda*, where the victims were allegedly consumed by their killers.⁷⁶ William the Breton's (d. 1225) continuation of Rigord's *Gesta Philippi Augusti* records how King Philip II of France was disturbed as a child: "... Philippus magnanimus audierat a coetaneis et consodalibus suis, dum sepius cum eis on palatio luderet, quod Judei singulis annis unum christianum immolabant, et ejus corde se communicabant"⁷⁷ (Philip the Bold heard from his fellows and those of the same age as him, while playing in the palace, how every year a Christian was sacrificed by the Jews, and how their heart was taken as communion between them [alt. shared out amongst them]).⁷⁸ This appears to be a reference to the case of Richard of Pontoise (d. 1163), whom William (the Breton) mentions immediately afterwards in his text.⁷⁹ Richard of Devizes (fl. 1180s–90s) tells a story in his chronicle of two French boys who travel to work for a Jew in Winchester. When one of the boys suddenly disappears, his companion makes the accusation: "Iste Judæus diabolus est, iste cor meum de ventre meo rapuit, iste unicum sodalem meum jugulavit,⁸⁰ præsumo etiam quod manducavit"⁸¹ (That Jew is a devil, who has torn the

⁷⁴ Luxford, "Iconography," esp. 244.

⁷⁵ Montague Rhodes James, "The Cult and Iconography of St. William," *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*, ed. Augustus Jessopp and Montague Rhodes James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), lxxxvi.

⁷⁶ Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Heß, "A Rational Model for Blood Libel: The *Aftonbladet* Affair," in *The Medieval Roots of Antisemitism*: ed. Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Heß, 265–84, esp. 266–69. See also Sapir Abulafia, *Christian Jewish Relations*, 2011, 177–80.

⁷⁷ William the Breton and Rigord, *Œuvres de Rigord et de Guillaume le Breton: Historiens de Philippe-Auguste*, vol. 1, ed. François Delaborde (Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1882), 180.

⁷⁸ On *communicare* in medieval Latin, see J. F. Niermeyer, *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 222.

⁷⁹ There are some doubts about the precise date: Gavin Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 284–85.

⁸⁰ Particularly in the sense of "cutting the throat": Niermeyer, *Lexicon*, 566.

⁸¹ Richard of Devizes, *Chronicon Ricardi Divisiensis: De Rebus Gestis Ricardi Primi Regis Angliae*, ed. Joseph Stevenson (London: English Historical Society, 1883), 64. Richard is not completely convinced: "etsi factum forte defuerit" (perhaps the act never took place), 59.



Figure 3.1: The dwarves collect Kvasir's blood to make mead. No medieval images of the myth survive. From Franz Stassen's illustrations to *Die Edda: Germanische Götter- und Heldensagen* by Hans von Wolzogen (1920). The resemblance between the dark-haired dwarf and classic antisemitic imagery may not be accidental. Stassen was later a member of the NSDAP and favoured by Adolf Hitler. This image also bears a striking resemblance to the depiction of Jews collecting William of Norwich's blood, found on the rood screen at Loddon Church. Public domain.

heart from my trunk, who has killed my only friend, [and] I presume has also eaten him).

When these late twelfth-century cases are considered alongside incidents from the thirteenth century, it becomes reasonable to suspect that the written cases of Jews eating the flesh or drinking the blood of their supposed victims – reminiscent of the way that the dwarves make mead of Kvasir's blood – are just the tip of an iceberg of tradition that would have been available to a European Christian intellectual in the 1220s.

We know little of the grisly details surrounding Harold of Gloucester or Robert of Bury, for example, and we have seen that in the latter case there is a hint that the draining of blood might have been an important aspect. A recurrent detail in later ballads of the story of Hugh of Lincoln (d. 1255) is Hugh's blood being collected by a Jewish nurse in either a cup, variously of gold or silver, a pan, or a washbasin.⁸² Matthew Paris's *Chronica Majora* (c. 1250s) claims that after Hugh's crucifixion: "cum expirasset puer, deposuerunt corpus de cruce, et nescitur quare ratione eviscerarunt corpusculum; dicitur autem, quod ad magicas artes exercendas"⁸³ ([W]hen the boy died, they [the Jews] took his body down from the cross, and for reasons unknown they disembowelled the little body; it was said, though, that it was for the practice of the magical arts). Later, according to Paris, the Jew Copin implicates the whole Jewish community in the murder, repeating the alleged occult usage of body parts: "Inutile enim reputabatur corpus insontis augurio; ad hoc enim eviscerabatur" (It was thought that the body of an innocent was useless for divination; that's why he had been disembowelled [in the first place]).⁸⁴ If the thought can be tolerated that antisemitic ritual murder accusations already contained the idea of a special use for gentile blood by the 1220s, then it would seem we have found a contemporary analogue for the Kvasir myth that Indo-European comparative mythology cannot provide.

However, this is not the venue to decide whether Snorri was inspired by the vivid imagery of the blood libel. Instead, I raise this case to show that whatever has prevented Antisemitism Studies from emerging as a subdiscipline of Old Norse literature, it is *not* the ecology of the corpus itself. The flow of anti-Jewish narratives from England to Norway-Iceland is a historical fact, as shown by AM 657 a–b 4to. The Kvasir case is an example of the sort of conversations that an awareness of the connections between medieval English antisemitism/anti-Judaism and Old Norse literature might facilitate. Whether it is accepted as a productive reading of the *Prose Edda* or not, our question is why conversations of this type have largely not taken place.

⁸² Brian Bebbington, "Little Sir Hugh: An Analysis," in *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 82.

⁸³ Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, vol. 5, ed. Henry Richards Luard (London: Longman & Co., 1880), 517.

⁸⁴ Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, vol. 5, 518.

The decisive factors: escapism and identity

On first considering the question of why Antisemitism Studies have been so much more prominent in Middle English than they have been in Old Norse, I suspected that the answer would be a simple issue of critical mass. There are a great deal more researchers with stable employment working on Middle English than there are on Old Norse. Therefore, perhaps the research culture in the larger discipline has benefited from a greater number of worker-hours, allowing it to cover a greater variety of questions than its smaller, Nordic cousin. However, on further reflection this factor – while probably not irrelevant – seemed to me unlikely to be the prime cause. Depictions of Jews and Judaism have not been a favoured research avenue in Old Norse circles, but those neglected depictions are neither few in number nor located in terribly hard to find texts (I have not dealt with any unpublished material, for example). One might protest that they are normally *not* found in the “original” texts of the Old Norse canon, but rather the “translated” texts. However, we have seen that there is not much “original” to *The Prioress’s Tale*, and yet this has been no barrier to the creation of a sizeable body of scholarship. Indeed, even if the lack of research on antisemitic/anti-Jewish moments in Old Norse literature could be explained as an accidental consequence of the preference for genres such as the *Íslendingasögur* (which have no Jewish characters), we would still be looking at a consequence of ideology, not of cold, hard numbers: deciding what we want to read – what phenomena we will be alive to – is always an ideological process.⁸⁵

A rigorous study of Old Norse philologists’ published diaries, correspondence, forewords to monographs, and the like might yield falsifiable conclusions about *why* people are attracted to Old Norse. From there, we could present some hypotheses about how studies of Jews and Judaism have been antithetical to the source of these attractions. However, this would be a project in its own right, so regrettably in what follows I will depend on only a few printed studies, supplemented by supposition and anecdote, pitiful sources though these latter two may be. The question remains the same regardless of method: what ideological concerns have meant that Antisemitism Studies has not arisen in Old Norse literature, in the way that it has in other bodies of literature?

Firstly, there is the hard-to-define atmosphere or flavour of the Old Norse canon. Here, I have considered Old Norse alongside Middle English – a not unknown endeavour, and one that makes sense given that the two literatures were

⁸⁵ E.g. Douglas W. Cooper, “Ideology and the Canon: British and American Literature Study in China,” *American Studies International* 32, no. 2 (1993): 70–81.

contemporaneous.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, it is striking that the most common comparandum with Old Norse tends to be Old English. There are good reasons for this – the languages bear a superficial similarity to each other, and Old Norse often has an antiquarian bent which means that it provides analogues with literatures of earlier times.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, it remains true to say that, whether for good or ill, a body of literature with its apex in the 1200s is often considered a sibling to a body of literature with its apex in the 900s. The result is not that Old English gets brought forwards in time, but that Old Norse gets sent back. As a consequence, the mood which a novice will expect to find in Old Norse tends to be something like the “Germanic mists” criticized by José Ortega y Gasset:⁸⁸ the mysterious, heroic past, before the bondage (or order) of the High Middle Ages. The truth, of which it is sometimes hard to convince first-year undergraduates, is that Old Norse is largely a literature from the 1200s–1300s.

Though everyone who reads Old Norse in a more serious way quickly realizes this truth, I wonder if the pedagogic and research culture surrounding Old Norse has historically facilitated a degree of escapism, which I do not see reflected to the same extent in Middle English. I expect that everyone involved in Old Norse Studies knows somebody who at some point (with varying degrees of earnestness) adopted an Icelandic patronymic version of their name, or even claimed to believe in their heart of hearts in the divinity of the pre-Christian Scandinavian gods.⁸⁹ It is well known that the Viking Society for Northern Research, today a leading organ of rigorous Old Norse scholarship, originated as the “the Social and Literary Branch of the Orkney and Shetland Society of London, or the Viking Club.” During its early days, those attending Viking Club meetings could expect to hear piano recitals, songs, poetry, and even comedy routines, all

86 Christopher Sanders, “*Bevens saga* in the Context of Old Norse Historical Prose,” in *Sir Bevis of Hampton in Literary Tradition*, ed. Ivana Djordjević and Jennifer Fellows (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), 51–66, esp. 52; Sif Rikharðsdóttir, “The Imperial Implications of Medieval Translations: Old Norse and Middle English Versions of Marie De France’s *Lais*,” *Studies in Philology* 105, no. 2 (2008): 144–64; Hamilton M. Smyser, “The Middle English and Old Norse Story of Olive,” *PMLA* 56, no. 1 (1941): 69–84.

87 For example the Herebeald/Hæþcyn story in *Beowulf* and Baldr/Hqðr in the *Prose Edda: Beowulf*, 91–93. On this and other Old Norse readings in *Beowulf*, see Frederick Klaeber’s introduction in *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Frederick Klaeber (Boston: Heath, 1950), xiv–xliii.

88 José Ortega y Gasset, “Mediterranean Culture,” *Meditations on Quixote*, trans. Evelyn Ragg and Diego Marín (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 74–78.

89 Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 251–97.

devoted to Viking themes.⁹⁰ Members were provided with a glossary of some seventy terms, part Shetlandic dialect, part “cod Norse,” for describing the society’s business, e.g. the “council chair” was to be referred to as the “Law-thing-seat,” an annual general meeting was to be a “Great Al-thing,” the treasury was the “Skatt-kist.”⁹¹ Naturally, such exuberance is now far behind us, but I wonder if in some small way, philologists are still drawn to Old Norse because of an enduring idea that it might lead us into a world very different from our own. As Carol Clover points out, we cannot help but notice how strange the *Íslendingasögur* seem compared to other forms of literature, and accordingly much scholarship has obsessed over how these exotic literary artefacts came to be.⁹² Antisemitic/anti-Jewish episodes, which are (1) party to a common European tradition and (2) found exclusively in Old Norse genres outside the *Íslendingasögur*, have no place in such research.

In the postscript to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Medieval Identity Machines*, he explains lucidly how the political troubles of the world in the early 2000s, and his personal experiences on 11 September 2001, might well inform the reading of his book.⁹³ The book made waves in Middle English and Medieval Studies more generally (at the time of writing, it has 297 citations according to Google Scholar). I think it is impossible to imagine a book coming from Old Norse Studies, making comparable waves in its own field, *and* featuring such an explicit disclaimer of how the author’s identity and experiences might shape its composition and its reception.⁹⁴ Put crudely, are some drawn to Middle English because they want to find themselves, while some are drawn to Old Norse because they want to lose themselves? (It must be stressed that the latter impulse is also a form of

90 John A. B. Townsend, *The Viking Society, 1892–1967* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1967 [off-print]), 12–13.

91 Townsend, *The Viking Society*, 1–4.

92 Carol J. Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),” in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 239–41.

93 Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 222–23.

94 At the time of writing, the closest frequently-cited work I can think of is the chapter towards the end of Mikhail I. Steblin-Kamenskij’s *The Saga Mind* where the author admits to being inspired by the apparition of a ghost named Þorleifr in his room at the Saga Hotel in Reykjavík, but even this is a different phenomenon. Its political concerns are more roaming than Cohen’s (a glancing reference to the siege of Leningrad, a possibly environmentalist comment on the laying of geothermal pipes, and two paragraphs on the unhappiness of modern urban life) and it is harder to connect them to the rest of the work: Mikhail I. Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind*, trans. Kenneth H. Ober (Odense: Odense University Press, 1973), 141–52.

self-discovery – it is just less self-aware.)⁹⁵ The acceptability amongst Middle English scholars of using their object of study as a window into modern problems has made their field naturally amenable to Antisemitism Studies. In contrast, I wonder if we Old Norse scholars want to escape into the world of the sagas, and we do not want to find something as ugly as antisemitism waiting for us when we get there. Strangely, the same dynamic appears to be at work even when modern antisemites read Old Norse. Nazi-sympathizing philologists such as Jan de Vries and Andreas Heusler were sufficiently erudite that they must have noticed the antisemitic moments in Old Norse literature, but they never commented upon these episodes so as to vindicate their racial preoccupations. They did not write approvingly of medieval Scandinavian Jew-hatred. They ignored it. To far-right ideologues, Old Norse had greater value as an escape into the Germanic mists; something at odds with the presence of a distinctly High Medieval anti-Jewish tradition.

Conclusion: love and hate

I hope I do not give the impression of being overly critical towards Old Norse scholars for not taking an interest in Antisemitism Studies. Ours is a field that has as its object of study a considerable body of literature, out of all proportion to the number of scholars securely employed to study it, and consequently there are many questions still to be resolved where there would be nothing to be gained by considering the Judaeophobic material. Today, the typical Old Norse scholar is obviously not an escapist or fantasist, even if we have inherited a scholarly tradition which was first constructed by people with ideological preoccupations that most of us would not share.

If there is one generalization that could be made about Old Norse scholars today, regardless of their research focus, it is that they all have a very obvious feeling of love for Old Norse literature: love that causes people to use their own time to publish even when they have not been lucky enough to obtain a full-time academic job; love that causes people to make tremendous sacrifices in pursuit of such jobs; love that inspires a great depth of feeling on points where a layperson would see little cause for ardour (all this could be said of Middle English scholars too, but that is not my point here). Perhaps this sense of

⁹⁵ On how Old Norse Studies in the English-speaking world were ideologically conditioned, both consciously and unconsciously, see Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2000).

love is what the Old Norse philologist Peter Foote meant by his description of his research as “a constant grappling with a desired object.”⁹⁶ By calling for Old Norse to host a subdiscipline in Antisemitism/Anti-Judaism Studies, in the way that other literatures do, one would be asking a lover to recognize something in their beloved that they had previously refused to see: one of the most detestable psychological impulses in European history. Whether achieving this recognition is possible, and what the consequences would be if it were, I cannot say with certainty. But I think our love would survive it.

⁹⁶ Peter Foote, “Bréf til Haralds,” *Kreddur: Select Studies in Early Icelandic Law and Literature*, ed. Alison Finlay (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2004), 200. Comparable are Roberta Frank, “The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Philologist,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 96 (1997): 486 and Cole, “Philology and Desire,” 524–25. On the gendered implications of Foote’s statement, see Kristen Mills, “‘Philfog’: Celts, Theorists, and Other ‘Others,’” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 53, no. 1 (2017): 81–82. Mills’s article provides considerable insight into the relationship between philology, ideology, and desire more broadly.

