

REVIEW ESSAY

Blood Libel: A Dark Cynical Conceit

Norman Simms

E. M. Rose, *The Murder of William of Norwich: The Origins of the Blood Libel in Medieval Europe* (Oxford, Oxford University press, 2015); pp. xvi + 294 + b/w maps and illustrations; ISBN: 978-0-19-021962-8.

If you think the Blood Libel is a thing of the past – even the very recent past of the last one hundred years such as the Mendel Beilis case in Czarist Russia – think again. In July 2016, a medical seminar in Germany was told that Jews in Israel ‘harvest’ the organs of poor Palestinians. According to the Anti-Defamation League, “The allegation that Jews murder non-Jews to use their blood for ritual or medicinal purposes dates back to the Middle Ages and has spawned many variants over time.”¹ What E. M. Rose’s new book attempts to show in infinite detail is that the first recorded instance Blood Libel occurred in England in regard to a murdered youth, William of Norwich.

But while the first part of the book takes a post-modernist cynical line and tries to embed the history of the putative ritual murder of young William by combing every able piece of possible (much of which turns out to be irrelevant or so vague as to be useless) archival evidence and memorial inscription from the region, and adding them up – juxtaposing known and possible facts – yields something less than the whole: what emerges is a massive tissue of probabilities, guesses and speculation. (If you go the Notes section at the back which takes up more than a third of the

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¹ ‘Anti-Semitic Canard About ‘Organ Harvesting’ Spreads Globally’, *Anti-Defamation League*, at http://archive.adl.org/presrele/asint_13/5604_13.html. Accessed 28/10/2016.

total pages, the information gleaned is set out, the modern authorities evaluated, and a much less speculative tone rules). It is only in the second part of the main text which examines closely the later centuries that the manner in which the formulated blood libel is spread becomes evident: through public burning of Jews, iconographic manuscript illuminations and dramatic performances. It is at this point, that E.M. Rose begins to get into the very nub of the problem: how and why did a relatively simple and local event – the discovery of a body and a failure to prosecute the one likely culprit who happened to be an aristocrat – take off a century later to become an extremely heinous, contagious and long-lasting element in the arsenal of anti-Semitism? If it was not in the original event or its local aftermath, then what was it that transformed a pretty feeble murder case and vague, inchoate semblance of a ritual parody of the Crucifixion into the widespread and persistent libel we know today?

Here Rose formulates a mixed argument, brilliant in some senses, weak in others. In each of the main cases of this incipient new scandal against Jews – after Norwich, events occurred in Blois, Bury and Paris, after which, as they say today, ‘the story went viral.’ Rose examines the evidence in meticulous detail: the actual murder itself, its initial impact on the usually monastic community, and its political ramifications, are seen to be the occasion for a cynical ploy by the local leaders, lay and clerical or monastic, and only in retrospect do they take on a spiritual or cultic power. But the reasons adduced for why the factual evidence is so sparse and how the spread of the libel becomes so endemic does not really stand up, partly because the author’s insights – and many of them are almost convincing and brilliant, to be sure – remain vague themselves, partly because her theoretical framework is weak (and when it comes to dealing with visions, obsessions, contagious delusions, the author relies on ‘standard’ sources and neglects psychohistorical discussions, so Philip Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* rather than Lloyd de Maus, *The Emotional Life of Nations*), and partly because, with few exceptions, she does not seriously own the description of traumatic events (she does speak once or twice of ‘panic’ but only in a vague and not a technical sense, and certainly utilising none of the studies of the relationship between panic, trauma, stress and hallucinatory experiences) and their energy (again a technical sense meaning vividness, persuasive power, hormonal stimulation, and genetic expression) to destabilize personalities (such as the political chaos and violent turmoil of civil wars, the mass disillusionment of the failed Second Crusade, the

forced witnessing of Jews burned at the stake and tortured in mock crucifixions, the economic crises in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries). In short, a whole alternative perspective and methodology is possible such as the one hinted at in the parenthetical comments here.

Look again at her methodology and its underlying theoretical base. After setting forth the supposed circumstances and the matrix of historical events, Rose presents a standard view (what the rabbinical exegetes would call *pshat*, not the literal but the received interpretation to be taught outside of their schools) of the development of the Blood Libel actions – arrests, burial, foundations of a cult, performance of ritual celebrations and dramatic processions; in which account she allows for and even elaborates on the power and persuasiveness of fear, suggestion and a contagion of collective trance states, particularly among adolescent boys, such as oblates, knights and kings. But then, instead of following through on the way in which the secondary traumatic experiences function in individual and group consciousness—watching and hearing Jewish victims scream and writhe in agony at the stake, crowds of young people, local peasants and urban working folk, bourgeois women and their husbands repeatedly being preached at and morally entertained (we might say ‘brain-washed’) that such suffering lies ahead for those who succumb to Jewish perfidy or even the very presence of Jews within the realm or monastic precincts, Rose propounds a more ‘realistic’ and ‘probable’ scenario, that is, a cynical view that people are primarily motivated by greed and ambition, not by emotions and fantasies. She is very good in places where she offers descriptions of these secondary events. However, she also dismisses out of hand two ‘research notes’ by Gillian Bennett that appeared ten years before her own book because they are folkloric studies and lack historical evidence, the first of which is ‘Towards a Reevaluation of the Legend of “Saint” William of Norwich and its Place in the Blood Libel’² and the second being ‘William of Norwich and the Expulsion of the Jews’.³ The first ‘note’ offers a detailed description of the scene of how Thomas Monmouth in *The Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich*, the primary contemporary source of all we know about this case, imagines the murder, discovery of the body and subsequent translations to a site of cultic worship. Rose is not concerned with the details of the imaginary event,

² Found in *Folklore*, vol. 116, no. 2 (2005), pp. 119-139.

³ Found in *Folklore*, vol. 116, no. 3 (2005), pp. 311-314.

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lonely in the circumstances that actually obtained in the region as proved by archival data cross-referenced to an infinite degree; yet they supplement and amplify the substance of what was subsequently shown to people in processions, plays, tapestries, stained-glass windows, etc. In Bennett's second 'note' published four months later, realizing she did not provide sufficient historical context to the imaginary experience manifest in rituals, reported dreams and iconological developments, she provides what in effect is an outline for Rose's own ampler historical study. Just as the folklorist's notes are inadequate themselves to explain the dynamic of the spread of the Blood Libel a century and more after the original discovery of William's body, so Rose's historical expansion takes us a few stages further in the road to understanding, but not far enough, especially considering what she herself fails to explore in her own argument and what was available in the secondary sources to lead her forward. But that would mean taking her own second step exegetical exercise in *ramez*, contextualization and recontextualization of the primary documents, in a far more critical sense, and leaping way from so-called logocentric and classical rhetorical expression (doing more than juxtaposing Christian and Jewish iconography of infanticide, martyrdom and salvation through suffering; taking into account the flow of ideas and images back and forth between Christian and Jewish communities and schools; the shared traumatic shocks of persecution, expulsion, massacre and reconstituting spaces and roles vacated by these violent acts) to achieve more creative midrashic interpretations, such as *drash*, the application of new readings towards homiletic, juridical and political situations, and *sod*, the secret fissuring of surface texts and their reassembly in dream-work, artistic rendering and even city-planning.

In one brief but telling passage, Rose commits one of the most elementary errors in textual criticism, the so-called intentional fallacy, wherein a writer or author means what they say in a direct, literal and uncomplicated way. Chaucer, for example, is made to say and believe what the Prioress speaks in her tale of the little *clergeon* whose slaying by Jews is an example of ritual parody of the Massacre of the Innocents and whose sanctity is affirmed and rewarded by the vision of the Virgin Mary operating through a local bishop in some non-specific Asian Islamic city.

Whereas, as I have elsewhere shown at great length,⁴ the Prioress is not just a fictional character, but a woman suffering Post-Traumatic Syndrome following repeated oral sexual abuse as a child, and consequently her hymn in praise of Mary and little Hugh the martyr saint deviates in almost every peculiarity from the standard generic versions of such liturgical tales, and loses all sense of Christian mercy and piety, and because Chaucer, never one to adhere to a clear-cut Catholicity appropriate to mid-fourteenth-century England, was probably a child (or at least grandchild) of those Jews who went into hiding at the time of the Expulsions of 1390, a single generation before his birth; which is not to question his authenticity as a Christian, but to problematize his self-identity as a believer pure and simple.

Similarly, many of the script-writers of the late medieval dramas cited by Rose as evidence of a systematic and conscious programme of inculcation of Jew-hatred into West European thought and policy, may themselves have been highly conflicted and ambiguated 'oblates' (infants and toddlers 'dedicated' to a religious life prior to the age of discretion) of recent *anusim* (forced converts, 'forced' in the sense of someone raped) – and if the Roman Church has trouble today with sexual abuse by the clergy, imagine what it was like in the late Middle Ages, as indicated by Alan de Lille's *De planctu naturae* (Nature's complaint against buggery in the monasteries and lesbian rape in the convents).

Let us give major credit to E. M. Rose for bringing into the discussion two key factors barely touched on in other historical and folkloric discussions on the origins and development of the Blood Libel. These are, in England, the crushing defeat of the Second Crusade and the ignominious return of the defeated crusader armies which left church and aristocracy in not just a foul mood but grasping after revenge on somebody, and in France the foundation of the cult of Holy Innocents and its use to expropriate Jewish money and property as a way of bolstering King Philippe's control over Paris.

⁴ Norman Simms, *A New Midrashic Reading of Geoffrey Chaucer: His Life and Works* (Lewiston, NY, Queenston, ON, and Lampeter, UK: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004). I returned to these psychohistorical problems more recently in 'A Meditation on Possible Images of Jewish Jesus in the Pre-Modern Period', in *The Jewish Jesus: Revelation, Reflection, Reclamation*, ed. Zev Garber (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2011), pp. 204-227.

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There are some who want to dismiss religion altogether from any consideration of historical events, though the fact that everyone involved was in some sense or other a functionary of the Church and virtually all institutions in medieval England had some basis in a cult, saintly foundation, or feudal attachment sanctioned by an ecclesiastical office (something that would not change until the sweeping legislation of the Puritan Commonwealth in the mid-seventeenth century). Others granting a nominal relationship to Christian worship cannot accept a real sense of faith (theological justification) without feeling they had to couch that in terms of nineteenth-century notion of piety and superstition, that is, they would have to recognize a different mentality at work than the universal (Enlightenment or Post-Modernist) human nature – or would they have to give over the notion of disembodied ideas and images determinately fixed into texts with no authors, readers or ‘consumers’. Yet without going so far as to assume everyone in the pre-modern world was a magical-thinking automaton, it does not take much to see all around us today, and probably as far back as we can imagine or gather evidence, a world traumatized over and over again by wars, natural disasters and economic catastrophes, societies that are unable to distinguish between fact and fantasy, vast hordes of people mesmerized by the mass media, entranced by popular culture, chasing ideological dreams and caught up in their own self-doubts, discomforts and longing for security at any cost. The original form of the Blood Libel may therefore not be in mid-twelfth century Norwich but rather in the crowd-induced carnival games of first century BCE Alexandria later transferred by moral contagion to Jerusalem in the next two or three generations, as José Faur suggested in *The Gospel According to the Jews* (2012) and other recent books.