

Gentile Tales: the Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews

Review Number:

105

Publish date:

Saturday, 1 April, 2000

Author:

Miri Rubin

Date of Publication:

1999

Pages:

279pp.

Publisher:

Yale University Press

Place of Publication:

New Haven, CT

Reviewer:

John Klier

Visitors to the Chapel of the Holy Blood (consecrated 1396) in Pulkau, Lower Austria, may view a magnificent winged altarpiece with carved scenes of the crucifixion. The wing panels contain paintings of high standard, attributed to a master of the Danube School, Nicholas Breu, who painted them around 1520. These panels are no longer available for public viewing, perhaps because of their content: they depict a desecration of the sacramental wafer, the host, by a group of Jews. The alleged sacrilege, dating to 1338, had disastrous consequences for the Jews. According to the chronicler John of Viktring, the Jews were despoiled of their treasures, drowned, burnt, beheaded, eviscerated. Whole families were destroyed, including children in their cribs.

This latter motif is repeated in a magnificent series of paintings executed by Paolo Uccello (1465 X 8) on the *predella* for the altarpiece of the Communion of the Apostles in the Ducal Palace in Urbino. In one scene, a Jewish family stands transfixed as a Christian mob batters down the door to their house, alerted to a host desecration by the miraculous flow of blood through the walls of the house. One of the two Jewish children weeps in terror, while a younger sibling clings to the mother's skirts. A subsequent panel shows the same family, bound together at the stake, as the flames consume them.

Miri Rubin's extraordinary book contains a multitude of such images, on altarpieces, stained glass, illuminated manuscripts and woodcuts. Many of them depict the horrendous punishments inflicted upon the Jewish miscreants (when they were not simply massacred *en masse*, by vengeful crowds). The punishments were so public and horrific that one wonders what lethal curiosity drove Jews to steal hosts in order to stab, crucify, boil, burn and defile them, when they knew the penalties which awaited the discovery of their misdeeds.

The answer, of course, is that Jews did *not* steal the sacramental bread, despite the confessions which were often extracted from them by investigators. (R. Po-Chia Hsia's analysis of the investigation of the alleged murderers of Simon of Trent in the celebrated ritual murder case demonstrates how Jews could be made, not only to confess, but to provide the required detail and evidence which was expected of them, *Trent 1475. Stories of a Ritual Murder Trial*

[New Haven, 1992], 34-50.) In point of fact, Jews were only too aware of the danger which the accusation carried, as Rubin demonstrates in a particularly useful chapter drawn from contemporary Jewish sources. As the title of this book reminds us, the host desecration myth is not about "real" Jews at all, but rather a projection of the fears and obsessions of their Christian neighbours: "Gentile tales."

Gavin Langmuir has already posited that the host desecration myth grew out of Christian insecurities surrounding the elaboration of the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation, whereby the body and blood of Christ is truly, physically present in the guise of the consecrated sacramental bread and wine. (Gavin Langmuir, *History, Religion and Antisemitism* [London and New York, 1990], 300-1, and at greater length in his *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990]). Christian theologians grappled with some of the obvious biological problems which attended this belief, such as the implications of digestion and excrement. (It is striking how often Jews were alleged to have disposed of the desecrated wafer on a dung-hill or in a latrine.) The ceremony and ritual which attended the consecration, the respect with which the consecrated bread was treated, created an aura of magic which was seemingly at odds with the common-sense physical evidence available to on-lookers. Thus arose another common ingredient of the tale: it is a Christian who first steals the host and then offers it to the Jew. The growing centrality and preciousness of the host, as Rubin also notes, led to a growing sense of unease about the Jew's proximity to it within Christian space. This was a specific example of the Church's general regret that Jews at this time were so closely integrated, at least by physical location, into the Christian community. The tale represents part of a cultural drive which sought to expel Jews to the very periphery of Christian society, if not to be rid of them entirely.

Rubin is not satisfied with generalities alone. She also seeks to demonstrate that representations, visual and verbal, can only be understood if we see how they are embedded within the contexts which accredited them and gave them meaning. Indeed, a special strength of Rubin's study is that it goes beyond psychological speculation to demonstrate specifically how the tale evolved and spread, locating it securely within the context of time and place. In addition, she examines episodes where the narrative "failed," and did not provoke either violence or the communal self-justification which invariably followed it.

The *ur*-tale upon which the mythic construction began was the Tale of the Jewish Boy. It relates how a Jewish boy accidentally received communion, and was thrown into a fiery oven by his indignant father. Retrieved unhurt by Christians, the boy relates how he has been preserved by the beautiful woman whose image he had seen in church (i.e. the Virgin Mary). The story ends with the conversion of the boy and his mother, and the relegation of the obdurate father to the flames. Rubin identifies the narrative potentialities in this tale: it is conversion tale which also depicts the Jews, threateningly, at close quarters with the Christian mysteries, as well as a piece of incipient Mariology. The link of Mary the Mother of God introduced the motif of the Christ Child in proximity to the host, a linkage which proved extremely fertile. In the accounts presented by Rubin, it was always the infant Christ who appeared in the host. (Rubin notes that the host desecration tale and the ritual murder motif were originally quite separate, but proved susceptible to a successful process of convergence. The Tale of the Jewish Boy proved very popular, and gained a much wider audience through its inclusion in collections of *exempla*. Widely circulated, narrators added local features to make the tale their own.

The first fully documented version of a host desecration was the case of Paris in 1290. In its completeness and satisfactory resolution--the host saved after miraculously revealing itself, the female Christian accessory punished, the Jew's family converted, and the Jewish malefactor himself burned at the stake--it proved an excellent narrative model. Artistic fall-out was also an important element of the case. The Jew's house became the site for a chapel which housed some of the relics of the affair. The case inspired numerous artists across Europe: the Urbino paintings noted above purport to illustrate the Paris case. Whether under the direct influence of Paris, or a case of parallel development, further incidents soon emerged in Franconia, leading, in 1298, to a series of bloody incidents known as the Rintfleisch massacres. These popular disturbances displayed affinities to the massacre of Jewish communities during the First Crusade.

Rubin seeks to go beyond a mere chronicle of the most notorious host desecration episodes. She excels at

putting events in the context of the wider societies and the specific societies. On one level, she shows how the tale was gendered: the perpetrator was always a male Jew, his accomplice was normally a female Christian and, as a further demonstration of female inconstancy, the Jew's wife was unsupportive and often converted in the aftermath of events. Innocent children, both Christian and Jewish, often served as a source of reliable information and the identifiers of miraculous events. (Their youth, again as noted above, did not preserve some Jewish children from collective punishment meted out to families and communities alike.) Local and regional peculiarities coloured the narrative. Anti-clerical sentiment was voiced through the personae of sceptical priests or corruptible sextons. Regions under weak princely authority might produce versions which portrayed the royal authority in a poor light. This was also a reflection of the reluctance of rulers to allow local authorities to destroy "their" Jews, a source of royal income.

Rubin explores how the narrative was communicated through art and literature and made to "work." As she observes, the myth produced works of great artistic merit, but it was very much a "cruel beauty." The Protestant Reformation put paid to the myth in much of Germany, undermining both the sacramental integrity of the tale, as well as the artistic celebration linked to it. The display of miraculous hosts, like the pilgrimages to chapels and shrines, fell into desuetude. Metaphorically, the winged altar screens were closed.

Miri Rubin's work is a major contribution to the study of the history of pre-modern Antisemitism and to the history of Jewish-Christian relations in the late Middle Ages. It is handsomely illustrated, in a perverse way forcing the observer to look beyond the surface beauty of works of great skill and creativity, to the grim human tragedy which lies close to the surface.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/105#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/673>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>