

“Constant Enemies of the Christian Name”: Tracing the Construction of the Ritual Murder Charge in The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich

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Abstract: This paper examines the construction of the blood libel myth in Thomas of Monmouth's 12th-century manuscript, The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich. Building upon existing scholarship, it analyzes Life as both a martyrdom narrative and an anti-Jewish polemic. Drawing on Elizabeth Castelli's theory of martyrdom and collective memory, this paper argues that the rhetorical construction of the Jew as a biblical, bloodthirsty enemy of Christ served to reinforce a dubious martyrdom narrative and consolidate a medieval Christian identity perceived as under threat. By deconstructing the rhetorical devices underpinning the account's blood libel charge—literary foil, biblical metaphor, and the Christ-killer accusation—the paper highlights how Monmouth successfully transformed Jews from victims of conspiracy to perpetrators of violent crime. Monmouth's use of a literary foil drew on prevailing ideas of Christian-Jewish difference to reinforce notions of Christian piety, while his invocations of biblical metaphor stabilized a tenuous assertion of Jewish guilt and Christian persecution. These anti-Jewish rhetorics culminate in Monmouth's invocation of the Christ-killer myth. By likening medieval Jews to the biblical betrayers of Christ, Monmouth created a universal framework that rationalized and justified the violent persecution of Jews.

Introduction

On March 25, 1144, a grim discovery shook the Christians of Eastern England: the mutilated body of 12-year-old William of Norwich was found in the depths of Thorpe Wood.¹ In an era defined by political unrest and paranoia, there seemed only one possible culprit for this heinous crime: the Jews.² Defined by their religious, social, and legal separation from Christians, the Norwich Jews were convenient scapegoats for those anxious to make sense of the massacre.³

The story of William's slaughter—and the unfounded assertion of Jewish guilt—fueled one of the most pervasive anti-Jewish myths in history: the ritual murder charge. A recent arrival to Norwich, Benedictine monk Thomas of Monmouth harnessed latent paranoia about the murder to position himself as the ultimate authority on the crime, elevate his status in the church, and consolidate what he understood as a Christian identity in peril.⁴ In a detailed account of William's life, death, and 'miracles' the monk set out to quell doubts about Jewish culpability in the crime.⁵ Originally composed in Latin, *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich* canonized William as a martyr and a saint, casting him an emblem of Christian piety and a victim of Jewish barbarity.⁶

Monmouth's 12th-century account is among one of the earliest and most detailed invocations of the anti-Jewish ritual murder charge.⁷ Countless scholars

¹ Gavin Langmuir, "Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder," *Speculum* 59, no.4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2846698>, 827.

² Gillian Bennet, "Towards a Revaluation of the Legend of "Saint" William of Norwich and its Place in the Blood Libel Legend," *Folklore* 116 no. 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30035273>, 125. In 12th- century Norwich, the region was grappling with the consequences of Norman domination. Nearly a decade before William's murder, William Duke of Normandy had invaded and conquered the region, triggering widespread social upheaval and paranoia. No longer in control of the region, the 12th- century residents of Norwich witnessed all positions of wealth and power placed in Norman hands. According to Bennet, "the immediate backdrop to the accusations at Norwich was decades of anarchy and a twelve year civil war followed by a succession dispute" (122). The era was defined by "lawlessness," "ruffianism," uncertainty, and violence (122).

³ *Ibid.* The Jews of 12th century Norwich occupied a precarious social position. As the courted guests of King Steven, they played a pivotal role in the country's economy. Many had been brought from France as the only capitalists capable of financing commercial enterprises (124). Lacking citizen status, the Jews were not members of the state, but instead understood as the "king's chattel" (124). Protected by the king and connected to Norman nobility, Jews were exempt from taxes, tolls and fines (124). Unlike their gentile neighbors, Jews did not answer to ecclesiastical or local authorities (124).

⁴ Gavin Langmuir, "Thomas of Monmouth," 829.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 842. Langmuir notes that Monmouth's theory of Jewish guilt was criticized, doubted, and dismissed by Church authorities as well as his broader audience.

⁶ "The Life and Miracles of William of Norwich by Thomas of Monmouth," Cambridge University Press, accessed December 10, 2024, <https://www.cambridge.org/us/universitypress/subjects/religion/church-history/life-and-miracles-st-william-norwich-thomas-monmouth?format=PB>. Written in Latin, Monmouth's original manuscript was found and translated into English by Augustus Jessop (1823-1914) and M.R. James (1862-1936) in 1896. This is the translation that I reference in this essay.

⁷ Langmuir, "Thomas of Monmouth," 828.

have examined this work, many arriving at disparate conclusions about its historical impact and influence on anti-Jewish conspiracy. In “Towards a Revaluation of the Legend of ‘Saint’ William...” folklorist Gillian Bennett introduces Monmouth’s accusation as an outgrowth of 12th-century England’s social tumult. She contends that although Monmouth’s account contains elements of the blood libel charge, it is “nothing like a blood libel as properly defined.”⁸ Bennet is not the only scholar to question the impact of Monmouth’s accusation on the propagation of the blood libel charge. As Magda Teter traces the medieval origins of the blood libel, she argues that the impact of Monmouth’s charge is “more limited than previously thought”: in the dissemination of the blood libel, the 15th-century murder of Simon of Trent was the true “turning point.”⁹ Medieval historian Gavin Langmuir refutes this claim. Outlining the detrimental effects of Monmouth’s account, he contends its anti-Jewish accusation directly affected the status of European Jewry, “[causing] the deaths of many Jews in different localities.”¹⁰ Scholar of Jewish history Jeremy Cohen echoes this assertion, arguing that the ritual murder charge “became fashionable” after William’s murder, reappearing across Europe and gaining credibility before the end of the 12th century.¹¹ On one point, most scholars agree: shaped by local concerns, Monmouth’s accusation was both an outgrowth of theological suspicions of the Jew and a projection of Christian anxieties about the social and political turmoil of 12th-century England.¹²

Building upon existing scholarship, my research hinges upon a singular question: how does the alterity, barbarity, and criminality of the Norwich Jew construct Christian piety and persecution in *Life*?¹³ While the text was ostensibly written to silence doubts about Jewish guilt, *Life* served broader purposes: it canonized William as a martyr, outlined the perceived persecution of Norwich Christians by local Jews, and validated the “miracles” that occurred in the wake of William’s death. In doing so, it relied upon and reimagined theological denunciations of the Jew, transforming medieval suspicions into a dangerous anti-Jewish accusation.

A reflection of 12th-century social anxieties and an outgrowth of entrenched anti-Jewish sentiment, *Life* propagates the ritual murder charge through three distinct yet connected rhetorical strategies. By presenting the

⁸ Bennett, “Towards a Revaluation,” 129.

⁹ Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 8,9.

¹⁰ Gavin Langmuir, “Thomas of Monmouth,” 844.

¹¹ Cohen, *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 94.

¹² Bennett, “Towards a Revaluation,” 124.

¹³ Cohen, *Christ Killers*, 102.; Gavin Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). While Cohen contends that the ultimate aim of the anti-Jewish accusation was to canonize William as a martyr and a saint, Langmuir argues that the ritual murder charge reflected Christian anxieties about their faith in changing medieval Europe. The figure of the Jew thus served as a scapegoat, “the surrogate on which they vented their hate” (14).

Norwich Jews as William's oppositional foils, leveraging biblical metaphor, and extending the victim-perpetrator paradigm of his accusation to implicate all Jews in a capacious anti-Christian conspiracy, Monmouth constructs a ritual murder charge and consolidates a medieval Christian persecution complex in peril. This framework creates a schematic conception of Christian-Jewish difference: The Jews' criminality perpetuates Christian innocence; their animality codifies Christian humanity; their marginality reinforces Christian supremacy.

My paper will substantiate this thesis through an in-depth analysis of Monmouth's work. First, I will outline the theoretical framework that underpins this study, dissecting Castelli's analysis of martyrdom and drawing on Peter of Cluny's *Against the Inveterate Obduracy* to introduce *Life* as both martyrdom narrative and anti-Jewish polemic. Then, I will analyze William and the Norwich Jews as oppositional foils to demonstrate how Monmouth employs Jewish-Christian archetypes to substantiate his claims of Jewish treachery. Next, I will examine the biblical metaphors that underpin Monmouth's account, dissecting these devices to illustrate how they stabilize an otherwise tenuous assertion of Jewish guilt. Finally, I will analyze Monmouth's invocation of the ritual murder charge and his subversion of the victim-perpetrator paradigm. I will argue that Monmouth exploited the Christ-killer myth to craft a ritual murder accusation that transformed Jews from victims of conspiracy to perpetrators of violent crime. I will conclude this investigation by situating Monmouth's blood libel charge within a broader historical tradition of symbolic, biblical, and myth-based accusations, examining the destructive legacy of these claims by highlighting their impact on victim and perpetrator alike.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the significance of Monmouth's anti-Jewish accusation, one must first examine the Christian culture that enabled its creation and dissemination. Elizabeth Castelli's *Martyrdom and Memory* underscores the central role of persecution in shaping Christian ideals, institutions, and identity.¹⁴ Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, Castelli argues that Christian culture formed around the memory of martyrdom.¹⁵ The stories told and retold about martyrs' painful deaths created a Christian identity hinged upon the memory of sanctified suffering.¹⁶ Although Castelli's scholarship focuses on the construction of early Christian identity, her argument is equally applicable to 12th-century England and beyond. Castelli herself highlights the modern resonance of such an argument: the sixth chapter of her book applies this framework to the murder of Cassie Bernal, a high school student killed in the Columbine shooting. As she outlines the crucial role of martyrdom in shaping

¹⁴ Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture-Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

Christian identity, Castelli argues that the potency of Christianity's "usable past" lies in its malleability.¹⁷

The crux of Castelli's argument helps explain Monmouth's fixation with William's martyr status. Punctuated with references to the immaculate conception and the crucifixion, Monmouth's account leverages the memory of sanctified suffering to present a stable image of a Christian identity marred by persecution. By situating William's death within the time-honored tradition of martyrdom, Monmouth warps the victim-perpetrator paradigm, quelling doubts about Jewish culpability by casting Christians as perennial victims of Jewish treachery. In this paper, I will draw on Castelli's thesis to introduce *Life* as an attempt to protect Christian identity against the perceived threat of Jewish difference.

Though Monmouth's account is written in the tradition of the martyrdom narratives Castelli describes, I argue his work also functions as an anti-Jewish polemic. It is true that *Life* fits neatly within the martyrdom narrative genre: the work begins with an assertion of William's sanctity, culminates in a depiction of his violent crucifixion, and concludes with a detailed account of his "miracles." However, relegating this account to one genre limits a nuanced analysis of Monmouth's anti-Jewish accusation. I contend that reading *Life* as both a martyrdom and a polemic enables a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between William's supposed sainthood and Monmouth's assertions of Jewish guilt.

It is safe to assume that as a Benedictine monk, Monmouth was somewhat familiar with the anti-Jewish polemic. Written by members of the Christian clergy, the polemics circulating in 12th century Europe drew on theological arguments to critique, correct, and denounce non-Christian religions in an attempt to highlight the moral and spiritual supremacy of the "One True Faith."¹⁸ Of these medieval Christian texts, *Against the Inveterate Obduracy of the Jews* is one of the most notable. A 12th-century anti-Jewish polemic written by French abbot Peter of Cluny, this account drew on Christian scripture to stress the irrationality of the Jews who refused to accept Christ as their savior.¹⁹

Monmouth and Cluny's works are structured differently: *Against the Inveterate Obduracy* is an overt polemic that presents a step-by-step, New Testament-informed condemnation of Jewish heresy while *Life* tells a story of a murder in the martyrological tradition. Though it differs from *Against the Inveterate Obduracy* in both its structure and stated goal, *Life* embeds its anti-Jewish polemic within the narrative framework of William's martyrdom story. The explicit aim of this account—sharing the story of a martyred 11-year-old—enables Monmouth to amplify polemical anti-Jewish tropes while framing them as secondary to William's sanctified status. As Cluny introduces

¹⁷ Ibid., 74.

¹⁸ Daniel J. Lasker, "Jewish-Christian Polemics at the Turning Point," *The Harvard Theological Review* 89, no. 2 (1996): 164, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1510138>.

¹⁹ Peter of Cluny, *Against the Inveterate Obduracy of the Jews* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University Press, 2013).

Jews as “wretches” with “wicked hearts,” “blasphemous mouths,” and “shameful impiety,” Monmouth echoes these theologically based denunciations to introduce Jews as the natural antagonists within William’s martyrdom narrative.²⁰ As Castelli points out, martyrdom narratives construct Christian identity through the memory of sanctified suffering. Both drawing and diverging from this tradition, *Life* consolidates Christian identity by embedding a polemical anti-Jewish accusation within the folds of its narrative. Indeed, Monmouth constructs a stable vision of Christian persecution by positioning Jews as blasphemous outsiders, “shedders of innocent blood” and inborn “enemies of the Christian name.”²¹

Understanding the Accusation: Examining Monmouth’s Explicit and Implicit Aims in Writing *Life*

It is difficult to understand the significance of Monmouth’s anti-Jewish accusation without first examining his stated and implicit goals in writing *Life*. As he dedicates his account to the bishop of Norwich, Monmouth outlines the presumed purpose of his work in a display of deferential devotion: “I submit myself to the judgment of your...criticism...[and] humble myself as a learner to your teaching.”²² Presenting *Life* as a humbly written hagiography, Monmouth argues that his only motive is to ensure that the tale of a “holy martyr [does not] pass away in oblivion.”²³ Here, Monmouth lays bare his “simple motive of devout intention.”²⁴ As he highlights his service to the “gracious Lord” Monmouth presents *Life* as an outgrowth of his devotion.²⁵ However, according to the scholars who have scrutinized this work, Monmouth had more noteworthy aspirations. Gavin Langmuir argues that “a monk of the twelfth century,” Monmouth was “concerned with his status on earth and heaven.”²⁶ On this point, medieval scholar E.M. Rose agrees. Rose contends that Monmouth wrote *Life* to produce a patron saint— a sanctified symbol that would “bring...benefactions” to the Norwich church and in doing so elevate Monmouth’s status.²⁷ This preoccupation with spiritual authority explains Monmouth’s deep-seated anxieties about his work’s reception within the Church.

As he foregrounds his anti-Jewish accusation, Monmouth leverages his Christian creed to bolster his credibility as a narrator. Presenting his assertion of Jewish guilt as an unassailable truth, Monmouth calls into question the character—and the faith—of those who dare doubt his claims. As he introduces his work, the monk goes to great lengths to stress his honesty, reminding readers that “if some things in [his account] should seem...improbable, [they] should

²⁰ Ibid., 218, 232, 280.

²¹ Monmouth, *Life and Miracles*, 44, 21.

²² Ibid., 1,2.

²³ Ibid., 3.

²⁴ Ibid., 2.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Langmuir, “Thomas of Monmouth,” 829.

²⁷ E.M. Rose, *The Murder of William of Norwich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 94.

not...account [him] guilty of falsehood”²⁸ Anxious to establish his credibility, Monmouth leverages his faith to corroborate his claim of Jewish guilt: “Since the lying mouth destroy[s] the soul, far be it for me to lie in holy things or to handle the word of God deceitfully.”²⁹ Likening his anti-Jewish accusation to “the word of God” itself, Monmouth transforms his theory of Jewish culpability into a divine truth beyond reproach. In so doing, he contends that his critics are not just “cavilers,” but enemies of the church— “blasphemers” who seek to defame the word of the savior.³⁰ More than a sanctimonious affirmation of his credibility, the introduction to Monmouth’s account highlights the monk’s deep-seated anxieties about the perceived credibility of his work. As many scholars have aptly pointed out, rumors of Jewish culpability were doubted and dismissed by numerous church authorities.³¹ By presenting his anti-Jewish accusation as divine truth—and outlining his anxieties about its reception— Monmouth underscores the significance of the anti-Jewish charge that undergirds his otherwise tenuous narrative.

Character Study: Analyzing William and the Norwich Jews as Oppositional Foils

In Monmouth’s attempt to make a martyr and canonize a saint, the Jewish-Christian foil served as an invaluable rhetorical strategy.³² As he outlines young William’s birth, infancy, and “intelligent boyhood,” Monmouth leverages depictions of the boy’s piety to bolster claims of his sainted status, reinforcing medieval conceptions of Christian supremacy by constructing a schematic vision of Jewish-Christian difference.³³ In Monmouth’s account, the Jewish-Christian foil operates as a rhetorical weapon—a narrative device that reflects and reifies existing anti-Jewish prejudice.

In a decidedly hyperbolic depiction of William’s childhood, Monmouth introduces the young boy’s piety as both inborn and extraordinary. Monmouth takes great pains to corroborate his claims of the martyr’s sainted status. Presenting his account as an attempt to “give the whole of England” a “patron [saint],” Monmouth introduces William’s “sanctity” as a defining feature of his life rather than a mere outgrowth of his death. More than an “honest” individual, William is depicted as a “boy of sanctity destined for... honor” and glory.³⁴ As he details William’s boyhood, the monk highlights his asceticism. He contends that the young boy “became so devoted to abstinence that, though his elder brothers

²⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

³⁰ Ibid., 5.

³¹ Langmuir, “Thomas of Monmouth,” 842; Bennett, “Towards a Revaluation,” 122.

³² When this essay cites the “Jewish Christian Foil,” it is referencing a one-sided literary foil—a Christian conception of Jewish difference manipulated by Monmouth to construct, consolidate, and maintain his claims of Christian supremacy.

³³ Ibid., 13.

³⁴ Ibid., 10.

did not fast, he fasted on three days of the week...he used to pass many days content with nothing but bread and water.”³⁵ Monmouth presents an image of a boy set apart by his devotion and unyielding faith. An individual “overflowing with piety,” William is defined by his “[great] reverence” for “all the things of God.” Monmouth’s exaggerated depiction of William’s spiritual purity not only justifies the boy’s elevation to sainthood but also presents him as a perfect foil to the “wicked” Norwich Jews.

Monmouth’s portrayal of the Norwich Jews as greedy, treacherous, and conniving antiheroes exemplifies this dichotomy. As he outlines William’s relationship with the Jews, Monmouth draws on existing conceptions of Jewish alterity and treachery to introduce these outsiders as natural adversaries to the “[unusually] [innocent]” William.³⁶ Detailing William’s work as a tanner, Monmouth contends that “gifted with a teachable disposition and industry to bear upon it,” William’s faith in God was matched by his skill in leatherwork.³⁷ He asserts that William’s relationship with the Jews was an unfortunate consequence of his “mastery of the craft”: “They esteemed him to be especially fit for their work, either because they had learned that he was guileless and skillful, or because attracted to him by their avarice, they thought they could bargain...for a lower price.”³⁸ Here, Monmouth lays bare the constructed archetype of the Norwich Jew. Motivated by greed and power, the Norwich Jews are introduced as a group defined by their “avarice.”³⁹ As he recalls the tale of William’s murder, Monmouth introduces the “wicked” Jews as the only possible suspects in such a heinous crime.⁴⁰ Weighing their different possible motivations, Monmouth argues that the Norwich Jews had more sinister motives in deciding to work with William: “...as I believe...he had been...chosen to be put to death and made a mock of by the Jews.”⁴¹ As he outlines the Jews’ plot to exploit, mock, and murder, Monmouth relies upon existing notions of Jewish treachery to frame these “Christian slayers” as natural foils to William’s guileless purity.⁴² In doing so, he lays the groundwork for the creation of a capacious anti-Jewish accusation—one that universalizes the conceptions of Jewish criminality and villainy he so readily exploits.

The Immaculate Conception, the Crucifixion and the “Christ Slayers”: Biblical Metaphor in Life

While the Christian-Jewish foil strengthens William’s claim to sainthood, Monmouth’s repeated invocations of biblical metaphor stabilize a flimsy assertion

³⁵ Ibid., 13.

³⁶ Ibid., 16.

³⁷ Ibid., 13.

³⁸ Ibid., 15.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁴¹ Ibid., 15.

⁴² Ibid., 5.

of Jewish guilt and an equally dubious claim of martyrdom. As he reconstructs the gruesome tale of William's death, Monmouth casts William in the image of Christ, drawing explicit biblical parallels from the immaculate conception to the Passion to appeal to the collective memory of his Christian audience.

More than a reflection of Monmouth's devotion, *Life's* perennial references to Christ imbue William's murder with divine significance, transforming a heinous crime into a redemptive event. As she defines martyrdom as a "willing and self-sacrificing death on behalf of one's religion," Castelli contends that "suffering violence in and of itself is not enough": "For a martyrdom to emerge, both the violence and its suffering must be infused with particular meanings."⁴³ By this definition, William's death struggles to qualify. Though he is presented as an unfortunate victim of Jewish violence, William's death cannot be reasonably understood as a willing self-sacrifice: the boy was taken against his will and killed days later by an angry mob. However—as Castelli aptly points out—martyrs are produced not by the circumstances of their death but by the stories told about them afterward.⁴⁴ Well aware of this fact, Monmouth molds his account of William's murder to fit the contours of Christian martyrdom. Defined by appeals to sanctified suffering and punctuated with comparisons to the crucifixion, the story of William's death is rendered in the image of Christ.

Monmouth's assertions of William's Christ-like status begin with his birth. As he emphasizes the holiness of the young martyr, Monmouth presents William's conception as irrefutable proof of his sainted status. Introducing William as a child "by divine goodness conceived," Monmouth molds the story of William's birth in the image of the immaculate conception.⁴⁵ Like Mary, William's mother was "favored with a marvelous forewarning by a vision of honor," a dream that "revealed to her [the]...great sanctity and dignity of him who she bore in her womb."⁴⁶ Here, William's holiness is presented as an inborn trait and his conception, a divinely inspired event. As he details this immaculate conception, Monmouth argues that William's sainthood was preordained: From the day of his conception, the "boy...was to be martyred among illustrious martyrs and worthy to be honored among all the army of saints."⁴⁷

Monmouth's strategic invocation of biblical allegory extends beyond depictions of the young saint: Even William's parents are molded into the archetypal roles of Joseph and Mary. As he introduces William's mother and father, Monmouth stresses their lowly status: "his father was a certain Westan by name. His mother was called Elvira, and they passed their lives as honest people...being somewhat well supplied with the necessities of life and nothing more."⁴⁸ Anxious to corroborate his claims of William's sainthood, Monmouth

⁴³ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 72.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Monmouth, *Life and Miracles*, 10.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

leverages William's lowly status to stress his similarity to the Christian savior: "Let it not seem absurd...that a boy of such sanctity...should by God's will be born from lowly parents...He Himself was pleased to be born among the poor."⁴⁹ This statement is telling: Drawing explicit parallels between William and Christ, Monmouth reveals a deep-rooted concern with William's sainted status. Addressing a Christian reader who would likely think William's alleged sainthood "absurd," he leverages the memory of Christ to quell doubts about the boy's chosen status.⁵⁰

More than mere narrative tools, Monmouth's repeated invocations of Christian doctrine make a martyr. In the effort to introduce William as a divinely ordained victim, the monk leverages the memory of the passion as a rhetorical weapon— a narrative device that transforms the Jew from biblical enemy to contemporary criminal. The purpose of this strategic biblical parallel is self-evident: By casting William in the image of Christ, and the treacherous Jew in the role of Christ-killer, Monmouth imbues William's murder with "world and meaning-making activity."⁵¹ The monk rewrites the tragic tale of William's murder in heavily borrowed language. As he introduces William as a boy "predestined for martyrdom since the beginning of time," Monmouth presents his death as a sacred sacrifice as important as the crucifixion itself.

Interestingly, it is the figure of the Jew who makes William's martyrdom possible. As he introduces William as a "guileless," "innocent," and pious boy, Monmouth presents him as a perfect victim of Jewish deceit: William was "chosen to be made a mock of and put to death in scorn of the lord's passion."⁵² More than a pawn in the Jews' "malignant" plan, the young boy is portrayed as a symbol of Christ and an emblem of sanctified suffering.⁵³ Likening William to "an innocent lamb...led to the slaughter," Monmouth invokes biblical imagery to resurrect the painful memory of the crucifixion.⁵⁴ The choice to liken William to a lamb was a strategic one. A seemingly innocuous animal metaphor, the image of the lamb is imbued with long-standing symbolic significance for Jews and Christians alike— significance Monmouth was certainly aware of when he decided to deploy the metaphor.⁵⁵ According to medieval historian Heather Blurton, the image of the lamb serves a twofold purpose in Monmouth's account: it evokes the image of Christ's crucifixion and strategically perverts the Jewish conception of

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.; Bennet, "Towards a Revaluation," 122. According to Bennett, Monmouth's anti-Jewish accusation was not well received by his contemporaries, many of whom were unconvinced by his story (122).

⁵¹ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 71.

⁵² Monmouth, *Life and Miracles*, 17, 15.

⁵³ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁵ Heather Blurton, "The Language of the Liturgy in the 'Life and Miracles of William of Norwich,'" *Speculum* 90 No.4 (2015): 1059, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43884043>. Though this essay lacks the space to properly deconstruct the significance of the lamb in Jewish and Christian texts, it is nonetheless an important observation to be made in the discussion of biblical metaphor in *Life*.

the Paschal Lamb to construct a universal conception of Christian victimhood.⁵⁶ While the book of Isaiah in Prophets was later interpreted to describe Jesus as a “lamb led to the slaughter,” a redemptive figure whose suffering and death takes away the sin of the world, the book of Exodus in the Pentateuch introduces the Paschal Lamb as an animal “slaughtered” by the people of Israel to commemorate their devotion to God during the Passover.⁵⁷

Monmouth’s lamb metaphor not only strengthens William’s claim to martyrdom but also draws on existing notions of Jewish treachery to create a universal idea of Jewish criminality. As she outlines the parameters of martyrdom, Castelli contends that a martyr’s suffering is legitimate only if it is “meaningful.”⁵⁸ More than a painful death, martyrdom “reasserts the superiority of a privileged system of meaning.”⁵⁹ By drawing on the image of the Paschal Lamb, Monmouth introduces William’s murder as a consequence of a deeply rooted practice of Jewish ritual murder. Employing the painful memory of “Lord’s passion” as his evidence, Monmouth highlights a longstanding tradition of Jewish treachery.⁶⁰ In the Jewish scheme to corrupt and crucify Christian “innocents,” William and Jesus serve as mere pawns.⁶¹ By aligning William’s death with the crucifixion, Monmouth positions Jews as eternal persecutors—“wicked” agents in a transhistorical conspiracy against Christianity.⁶² In doing so, he inscribes William’s death with “world-making meaning,” reflecting and reproducing biblical anti-Judaism to construct an entirely novel anti-Jewish accusation: the ritual murder charge.⁶³

Constructing Christian Persecution: Examining The Impact of the Ritual Murder Charge

An outgrowth of Monmouth’s anti-Jewish accusation, the ritual murder charge constructed an enduring image of Jewish treachery and Christian victimhood. In accusing the Norwich Jews of William’s murder, Monmouth did more than level a charge— he constructed a potent myth that not only justified but actively incited the violent persecution of Jews.

A hateful conspiracy rooted in the erroneous idea that Jews murdered and sacrificed innocent Christians, Monmouth’s ritual murder charge harnessed existing anti-Jewish vitriol to consolidate a Christian persecution complex in peril. As Castelli notes in *Martyrdom and Memory*, early Christian identity was shaped by the memory of past suffering—the memory of persecution.⁶⁴ Inscribed in

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1059.

⁵⁷ Michael Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 97 1039.

⁵⁸ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 31.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁰ Monmouth, *Life and Miracles*, 15.

⁶¹ Ibid., 42.

⁶² Ibid., 16.

⁶³ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 72.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Christ's passion and embodied in early martyrdoms, Christian persecution represented a central feature of the faith and a cornerstone of early Christian identity. In 12th-century Europe, Thomas of Monmouth confronted a Christian identity at risk. Once members of a persecuted minority, Christians now created and controlled European systems of power.⁶⁵ A Welsh monk, Thomas of Monmouth recognized this clear shift in Christian status. As he confronted an identity in flux, Monmouth weaponized the ritual murder charge to stabilize an inherently flimsy medieval Christian persecution complex.

Leveraging the memory of the Passion, Monmouth presents William's murder as an outgrowth of a historical anti-Christian conspiracy. As he stresses the "wickedness" of the Norwich Jews, the monk clarifies their motivations for William's murder in an imagined dialogue: "Even as we condemned Christ to a shameful death, so let us also condemn the Christian...uniting the Lord and his servant in a like punishment, we may retort upon themselves the pain of that reproach which they impute to us."⁶⁶ This constructed conversation leverages the Jews marginalized status in medieval Europe to rationalize their culpability. As they highlight the "pain of [Christian] reproach," the Norwich Jews introduce their crucifixion of William as a flawed attempt at revenge.⁶⁷

In a strikingly circular argument, Monmouth attributes Jews' minority status to their alleged role in the crucifixion, framing ritual murder as their sole means of collective liberation. As he presents Jewish ritual murder as a central tenet of their faith, he strategically subverts the victim-perpetrator paradigm, relying on an ahistorical narrative to universalize his claims of Jewish treachery while amplifying assertions of Christian persecution.⁶⁸ Monmouth presents ritual murder as an age-old practice, a custom laid down" in the "ancient writings" of the Jews.⁶⁹ He explains that as foreigners in a strange land, the Jews could "neither obtain their freedom...nor...return to their fatherland" without "sacrificing" an innocent Christian "in contempt of Christ" each year.⁷⁰ In a detailed description of this so-called Jewish practice, Monmouth contends that the victims of this ritual are chosen at an annual assembly in Narbonne, where "the rabbis...cast lots for all the countries in which the Jews inhabit...and the place whose lot has drawn has to fulfill the duty imposed by authorities."⁷¹ Here, Monmouth expands upon the Christ-killer myth to construct an unassailable conception of Jewish guilt. As he attempts to rationalize this imagined claim, he contends that Jews choose to "avenge their sufferings on [Christians]" *because of*

⁶⁵ Bennett, "Towards a Revaluation," 123.

⁶⁶ Monmouth, *Life and Miracles*, 16, 21.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁸ I employ the term "ahistorical" to highlight how Monmouth weaves together Jewish past and present to introduce Jews as perpetual victimizers and aggressors. This simplistic narrative distorts Jews' minority status in medieval Europe by presenting Jews—not Christians—as those in power, ultimately laying the groundwork for his assertions of Christian persecution.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

their crucifixion of Christ: “Every year they must sacrifice a Christian...in scorn and contempt of Christ... insomuch as it was because of Christ’s death that they...were exiles in a foreign land.”⁷² Here, Monmouth draws on the Christ-killer myth to extend his accusation to all Jews, constructing a universal image of Jewish criminality that reinforces and reimagines entrenched anti-Judaism.

As he presents Jews’ treachery as a core tenet of their faith, Monmouth not only quells doubts about Jewish culpability in William’s murder: He resurrects a Christian persecution complex. Leveraging the ritual murder charge to construct all Jews as “constant enemies of the Christian name” and “shedders of innocent blood,” Monmouth weaponizes William’s memory to cast all Christians as potential victims of Jewish deceit.⁷³ As he laid the groundwork for the propagation of the ritual murder charge, Monmouth constructed a dangerous narrative of Jewish criminality that not just enabled but encouraged the “utter destruction” of “all the Jews.”⁷⁴

Conclusions

In April 2023, almost 900 years after William’s death, the Lord Mayor of Norwich Kevin Maguire issued an official apology to the city’s Jewish community. Directly addressing “the Jews who continue to suffer because of the past actions of [Norwich] citizens and their blood libel accusation, Maguire declared, “William’s murder is a story for today”: “We...blame...and seek to punish those who are not like us.”⁷⁵ As he condemned “the lies told blatantly” by those who constructed the myth, the Lord Mayor highlighted the enduring impact of Monmouth’s blood libel charge.⁷⁶

More than a heinous anti-Jewish accusation, Monmouth’s ritual murder charge stands as a striking reminder of the potency of myth and the power of the written word. Though unique in its innovative invocation of both biblical metaphor and entrenched anti-Jewish sentiment, Monmouth’s charge is part and parcel of a broader historical tradition—one that deploys mythic narratives as rhetorical weapons used to rationalize hatred, justify prejudice, and incite violence. Drawing on the symbolic power of biblical myth, texts like *Life* transform prejudice into accusations, enmity into violence, and fear into persecution. The consequences of these mythic texts are far-reaching. Adapting to fit changing social, political, and historical contexts, these narratives subvert the truth to scapegoat innocent (and often marginalized) populations, further

⁷² Ibid., 93.

⁷³ Ibid., 44, 42.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ The Jewish Chronicle, “Norwich Lord Mayor’s ‘Heartfelt Apology’ to Jewish Community for First Blood Libel,” accessed December 9, 2024, <https://www.thejc.com/news/community/norwich-lord-mayors-heartfelt-apology-to-jewish-community-for-first-blood-libel-ljv6tb1n>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

entrenching hateful stereotypes by fostering a culture of fear, hostility, and distrust.

Monmouth's ritual murder charge created a blueprint by which all Jews could be persecuted, all accusations rendered credible, and all stereotypes reified and reproduced. The potency of the blood libel lies in its malleability. Easily adapted to shifting contexts and prejudices, the blood libel always retains its core purpose: to vilify, isolate, and endanger. The only way to combat these pernicious myths is to study them, dissecting their vitriol to expose their falsehoods and undermine their power.

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