



**Miriamne Ara Krummel.** *Crafting Jewishness in Medieval England: Legally Absent, Virtually Present.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 272 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-61870-1.



**Reviewed by** Charlotte Newman Goldy (Miami University of Ohio)

**Published on** H-Judaic (September, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

## A Postcolonial Reading of Medieval English Anti-Judaism

The history of medieval antisemitism will be familiar to readers of this list. From its formative time, authoritative Christian writers held up the Jew as the antithesis of the Christian, and during the Central Middle Ages, this rhetorical device took on racialized tropes projected onto contemporary Jews, increasingly accused of monstrous acts. Certainly since the Shoah, this change from anti-Judaism to antisemitism has been examined from many perspectives. The medieval English experience was relatively short (from perhaps 1070 to the Expulsion in 1290), but reflects the extremes of medieval Christian-Jewish relations. The site of the first blood accusation, it was simultaneously a haven for Jews with effective royal protection of strong kings for more than a century. Conditions worsened in the thirteenth century as that protection weakened or was abused, and the written and visual rhetoric became racialized as it did elsewhere. Perhaps most striking to recent scholars was that this racialized Jew became enshrined in classics of English literature after the Expulsion of real Jews.

In *Crafting Jewishness in Medieval England*, Miriamne

Ara Krummel presents a postcolonial reading of this literature and succeeds in adding much to our understanding of its medieval function while also nuancing our reading. While Kathleen Biddick's *The Typological Imaginary* (2003) and Steven F. Kruger's *The Spectral Jew* (2006) apply postcolonial theory to the subject, they both examine the larger scope of European literature. Anthony Bale's *The Jew in the Medieval Book* (2006) focuses on use of the Jew in developing English identity after the Expulsion but uses Latin texts, primarily historical writings. The book under review therefore fills a void in a lively scholarly debate.

After a wide-ranging introduction to theoretical and literary questions, Krummel organizes the book chronologically by text. First she looks at a selection of governmental documents from Edward I's 1275 Statute of Jewry to early fourteenth-century land records explicating how they demonstrate a colonization of the Jewish body, even after it becomes spectral, and arguing that Jews were becoming the other to the developing identity of English. Krummel then examines the exile poem

of Meir b. Elijah of Norwich, bringing a Jewish voice into the discussion, especially emphasizing the poet's identification with the nation of England. These themes—the colonization of the body and the use of the absent Jew in the development of national identity—are then explored in the writings of John Mandeville, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Thomas Hoccleve, and in the Croxton Play. All were vernacular works with the potential of having the widest audience and, therefore, impact.

Krummel's most original analyses and convincing arguments are in the rereading of these post-Expulsion Middle English texts. While the bulk of scholarship suggests that medieval Jews are—more often than not—represented through antisemitic tropes, there are ... textual sites where a kinder, more sympathetic response to the Jewish figure surfaces ... even sometimes compassionate terms (p. 117). In fact, *Crafting Jewishness* presents a much more complicated usage of the Jew than previous works by focusing our attention on these four authors. The work generally known as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* is an early fourteenth-century account of a fictional Englishman's travels into distant lands where he encounters (among others) Jews. Though they had been absent in England for about two generations, the author described Jews with the traditional anti-Judaic tropes, but also praised rather than criticized Jews for their stubborn willingness to remain different. Krummel convincingly argues that John Mandeville is holding these Jews up as a model of national identity for Englishmen, something he could not, or would not have done when their presence would have disturbed the homogeneity of the newly imagined English nation. The second author, Geoffrey Chaucer, is considered the father of the English language at the moment it was becoming the symbol of the nation. His late fourteenth-century retelling of a blood accusation in the Prioress's Tale of *The Canterbury Tales* is the best known text discussed. What Krummel does, however, is to contextualize this non-human, bloodthirsty character with other images of Jews in both *The Canterbury Tales* and three other Chaucerian works. The best known of the *Tales* present Jews in the stereotypical antisemitic trope but are told by highly unsympathetic, hypocritical charac-

ters, which she argues may imply that the reader was not to trust them. Other, less-studied tales vary the image of Jews. Sir Thopas's Tale, immediately following that of the Prioress, has a Jewish artisan helping in the fight against evil. So by looking widely at Chaucer's moments of Jewishness, Krummel argues convincingly that he is presenting a cultural geography of the manifold aspects of Jewishness in his world (p. 115). The chapter on Thomas Hoccleve likewise looks at the corpus of the author's work. In this case Krummel notes that the author omitted an antisemitic passage when he translated a poem about the Crucifixion, and he demonstrates in another work the pain of false accusations. Whether this would have had an effect on the audience is arguable, but clearly the medieval authorial voices are not as unified as often believed. Subtle differences between the Croxton Play and its contemporaries further complicate our understanding of how the memory of England's absent Jews was crafted and functioned. These arguments succeed because Krummel deeply knows both texts less often read and their manuscripts' history, and so can point out and give explanation of variants less often noticed.

Like most books, *Crafting Jewishness* is not uniformly successful. The analyses reading government documents as social texts (a long tradition in medieval studies) lacks the contextual strength of the literary chapters. For example, Krummel argues that the use of Jewish names as previous holders of land kept Jewish bodies present in England for generations after real ones had left (pp. 8-12). On its own, this sounds convincing but what is not addressed is that this was the convention of reference in a highly formalized tradition and was applied to Christians as well as Jews. Generally the arguments presented in the earlier chapters are less original but help to connect the pre-Expulsion period to the argument of how Jews became the national as well as religious other in later medieval England. *Crafting Jewishness* adds much to our understanding of antisemitism. For medieval historians like me, the book provides a unique insight into vernacular literature, raising new ideas about its reception. For those readers of H-Judaic who study the long history of racialized images of Jews, it will give new and complex insights into its birth.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

**Citation:** Charlotte Newman Goldy. Review of Krummel, Miriamne Ara, *Crafting Jewishness in Medieval England: Legally Absent, Virtually Present*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32378>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.