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History 3616
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November 2009

Sexing the Jewish Body: Male Menstruation Libel and the Making of Modern Gender

Recent scholarship on the history of anti-Semitism in Europe has made much of an intriguing and puzzling charge by some early modern Christians that Jewish men menstruated. This particular anti-Semitic libel seems to have been widespread throughout early modern Western Europe, not only within clerical circles, but within secular and popular society as well. Evolving from roots at least as far back as late antiquity, it arrived in its “mature” form in select thirteenth century texts, in which Jewish men suffered monthly flows of blood from the posterior region, either anally or from the penis. This is a difficult topic for the modern mind to study because contemporary conceptions of embodiment and gender are radically different from medieval thought on the subject. However, it is the very difficulty of understanding how identity constructs change over time that makes male menstruation libel such a fascinating and relevant topic for discussion. What are the ancient and medieval roots of the myth of Jewish male menstruation? At what point did these representations become sexed/gendered? What ideological purposes might this gendering have served and what can we moderns learn from the history of Jewish male menstruation libel about what it means for gender to be “modern” in the first place? A critical examination of the theological and medico-scientific origins of the menstruation libel reveals that its production was a contingent historical process that required many permutations and contributions to crystallize. Nevertheless, as early as the thirteenth century, versions of this narrative clearly

feminized Jewish men. These representations became more widespread in early modern Europe and constitute an essential shift toward more modern notions of sex, gender, and embodiment that naturalized the role of Jewish men in European society, physically marking them with a badge of difference.

Before getting carried away by theory, however, it is important to note that the pitfalls of anachronistic thought have resulted in several misreadings of primary sources by scholars who project modern constructions of sex, gender and race backward onto pre-modern discourses on male menstruation. As Willis Johnson has helpfully pointed out, the image of the feminine menstruating Jewish man “projected back upon medieval sources... has led to a serious misunderstanding of medieval attitudes toward Jews.”¹ For example, in his seminal four volume work, *The History of Anti-Semitism*, Leon Poliakov argued that medieval Christian polemicists depicted Jewish men as “hemorrhoidal and, men as well as women, afflicted with menses. From this point of view, they are women, that is, inframen.”² Poliakov neglects to explore the different meanings which menstruation acquired in the medieval context, in which it was considered normal for men as well as women to periodically require excess or impure blood to be purged from their bodies.³ While both theological and medical discourses portrayed Jewish men as prone to bloody secretions from the posterior, these representations were not necessarily gendered. The overlap between representations of

¹ Willis Johnson, “The Myth of Jewish Male Menses.” *Journal of Medieval History*, 24, no. 3 (1998): 275.

² Leon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism* (trans. Richard Howard; 4 vols.; London: Elek Books, 1965) 1. 143. Sander Gilman’s *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), contains a similar supposition on pages 74-75 upon which Johnson launches his article’s critique.

³ Johnson, “The Myth of Jewish Male Menses,” 289. Johnson quotes the thirteenth century medical theorist, Arnold of Villanova, who described menstrual and haemorrhoidal bleeding as interchangeable. “Many men are purged [of bad humours] via these small veins (just as weomen are by their menses) and preserved from diverse illnessses when they flow in the appropriate amount.” Arnold of Villanova, *Opera Omnia, cum Nicolai Taurelli Medici et philosophi in quosdam libros annotationibus* (Basil, 1585), 1241-3.

Jewish men and representations of femininity in medieval Christendom illustrate not that Jewish men were thought of as feminine, but rather that gender was more fluid than it is today, operating on a Galenic one-sex model, “in which the standard was man, and the inferior woman’s body was in a literal sense a defective man.”⁴ Bloody discharges suggested a weak constitution, and perhaps therefore a deficient masculinity, but not necessarily femininity.

However, when Johnson argues that menstruation libel only became gendered in the early modern period, he neglects important evidence from the early thirteenth century that clearly presents a gendered version of the menstruation libel story.⁵ Whereas earlier medical and theological discourses portrayed the Jewish male as prone to hemorrhoidal bleeding and a weak constitution, they impugned merely their health, not necessarily their masculinity. In the thirteenth century on the other hand, Christian polemicists combined theological and medical discourses to explicitly state that Jewish men were effeminate and that they suffered from monthly menstrual bleeding. The earlier discourses used many of the same tropes to discuss Jews as were used to discuss women, but did not directly feminize Jewish men. Feminization of the Jewish man required a confluence of medical and theological thought that resulted in the notion that, as a result of their sinful rejection of Christ, Jews were cursed with “womanish” constitutions whose gross blood required monthly bleeding. This narrative grew in popularity from the mid-thirteenth

⁴ David S. Katz, “Shylock’s Gender: Jewish Male Menstruation in Early Modern England.” *The Review of English Studies*, 50, no. 200 (1999): 445. See also, Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 8, for a comprehensive discussion of pre-modern constructions of sex and particularly the Galenic “one-sex model.”

⁵ This account comes from Jacques de Vitry’s *Historia Orientalis* from the mid-thirteenth century, and will be discussed at greater length later on.

century through the early modern period and ultimately contributed to the move away from the one-sex model and toward a bifurcated gender system.

Biblical exegesis played a key role in the making of the myth of Jewish male menses. Christians believed that because Jews were descendents of the murderers of Christ and stubborn sinners who refused to convert to Christianity, God punished them with cursed blood that required periodic purging. However, the motif of the sinful man punished by God with a bleeding anus already had a long history when it was integrated into thinking about medieval Jews, and persisted from late antiquity through the Middle Ages.⁶ It is a punishment earned by God's enemies, from Judas to Arians and from heretics to Jews.

The theological roots of the menstruation libel begin with interpretations of the betrayal and death of Judas. When Judas betrayed Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, he arranged to kiss Jesus in order to signal to Roman soldiers that he was the one to be arrested. After receiving his thirty pieces of silver, Judas repented, went to a field, and hanged himself. In Acts 1:18-9 he, "bought a certain field with the price of his wickedness. And hanged, his middle burst and all of his guts poured out."⁷ In late antiquity, Christian writers interpreted this verse to mean that Judas' guts "poured out" through the anus.⁸ Not long afterward, this narrative of "oral transgression and anal retribution" broadened to include not only Judas, but heretics as well.⁹ Eusebius, the famous biographer of Constantine the Great, also wrote a report on the death of the

⁶ Johnson, "The Myth of Jewish Male Menses" provides a great overview of this motif in the section "Bad men's bad ends," 275.

⁷ "Et suspensus crepuit medius et diffusa sunt omnia viscera eius." Quoted in Johnson, "The Myth of Jewish Male Menses," 276.

⁸ This image is favored by Juvenius (before 350) and Arator (544). From Johnson, "The Myth of Jewish Male Menses," 276.

⁹ Ibid., 278.

heretic Arius in 395. With evident enjoyment, he gloated that Arius, “proceeding to the church... turned aside to a public toilet because of human necessity. While he was sitting there his intestines and all of his guts flowed down the drain of the toilet. In this fitting place he paid for his blasphemies and stinking mind with a suitable death.”¹⁰ The narrative was reiterated for centuries and became widely known as a fitting end for heretics.

The first application of the narrative to the notion of Jewish bloodguilt is especially noteworthy because Thomas of Monmouth created it along with the first recorded ritual murder accusation in 1170. During the twelfth century, Christian polemical writings against Jews increased in both volume and viciousness. This was accompanied by a dangerous new accusation that Jews murdered Christian children for occult religious ends, often to obtain their blood, which was thought to be a cure for the many supposed physical defects with which Jews were afflicted as a result of bloodguilt.¹¹ In 1170, the townspeople of Norwich accused the town’s Jewish population of ritually murdering a twelve-year-old boy, William of Norwich. A certain Sheriff attempted to prevent retaliatory mob violence against the town’s Jewish population. Thomas of Monmouth writes that as a result of attempting to subvert Christian justice, the Sheriff began to bleed from his bottom, such that “he might in very truth say with the

¹⁰ Rufinus, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, in: Eusebius Weke, ed. E. Schwartz and T. Mommsen. (Leipzig, 1908) (=Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte... Eusebius; Reihenfolge des Erscheinens 9.2), vol. 2. Part 2, 979. Quoted in Johnson, “The Myth of the Jewish Male Menses,” 277.

¹¹ Irven M. Resnick, “Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 93, no. 3 (2000): 242. The reasons for the increase of anti-Semitic polemic is the subject of much debate. I.J. Yuval has hypothesized that it is a result of the notion of the Corpus Christi or Christian body politic combined with the events surrounded forced conversion, infanticide and mass-suicide of Rhenish Jewish populations during the First Crusade. See I.J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

Jews, 'Let the innocent blood be upon us and upon our children' (Matt 27:25)."¹² This verse from Matthew was already very important to the notion of Jewish bloodguilt for Christ's death, and here joins with the Judas and Arias narrative of divine punishment by anal bleeding.

Another important verse for the tradition of Jewish bloodguilt and menstruation was Psalms 77:66, "He smote His enemies in their posteriors, He set them in everlasting shame." Writing in the mid-thirteenth century, Hugh of St. Cher emblemizes this exegetical tradition: "He smote his enemies in their posteriors...the Lord smote the Gazan nation in their anus [lit. 'secret place']; and the mice gnawed the tumours which protruded from their colons. It was to their everlasting shame because such an infirmity was most vile. And some say that the Jews bear this shame, that in vengeance for the Passion of the Lord they suffer a flux of blood. And that is why they are so pale."¹³ This is an important and vivid discursive construction of the Jewish body, marked physically with a flux of blood from the posterior region due to the betrayal of Christ. Although it is not in any way gendered, it forms the basis for a later combination with medical thought that would differentially sex the Jewish male.

A second theological foundation of the menstruation libel that is much debated in the scholarly community is the notion that female menstruation signified the curse of Eve's mortal nature after her fall from grace. Medieval Christians believed that menstruation was a curse cast upon women for Eve's role in bringing sin into the

¹² Thomas of Monmouth. *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*, ed. And trans. A Jessopp and M. Rhodes James (Cambridge, 1896), 11-2. Quoted in Johnson, "The Myth of Jewish Male Menses," 279-280.

¹³ *Hugonis de Sacto Charo Opera Omnia*, 8 vols (Venice, 1754), vol. 2, 207v. Quoted in Johnson, "The Myth of the Jewish Male Menses," 281.

world.¹⁴ That Jewish menstruation libel was meant to link Jews to this tradition of unruly feminine characters is one of the central thrusts of Sander Gilman's *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*. Gilman's argument is further extended in Irven Resnick's article, "Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses." Resnick points to Christian polemical writings from late antiquity that argue that Jews, like menstruating women, were ritually impure due to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.¹⁵ He goes on to argue that such notions influenced Thomas of Cantimpre's thirteenth-century *Miraculorum et exemplorum memorabilium sui temporis libri duo*, which held that, due to the Jewish bloodguilt, Jewish men were cursed with a bloody flux every Easter.¹⁶ However, while it draws interesting parallels between the idea of Jews after the destruction of the temple as ritually impure and the impurity of female menstruation, Resnick's case seems to be overstated. Nowhere does Thomas of Cantimpre specifically gender the bloody flux of Jewish men, nor does he even refer to it as menstruation. Most importantly, Cantimpre believes the flux to occur not on a monthly or lunar basis, but only on Easter in commemoration of the murder of Christ, clearly aligning his libel with exegetical legacy on Judas' punishment in Acts and Eusebius' writings on Arius and heretics. Indeed, he explicitly cites Matthew 27:25,

¹⁴ Resnick, "Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses," 245. Also, Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*, 74-75.

¹⁵ Resnick, "Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses," 248-249. Resnick notes that after the temple's destruction, Jews were reported by Christian polemicists to live in a state of pollution, since they did not have access to the ashes of a red heifer which were prescribed for use in purifying the dead. Additionally, without temple priests Jewish women were thought to be unable to perform the necessary offerings to purify themselves after menstruation or childbirth. For this, Resnick cites Peter Alphonsi's *Dialogus* (PL 157: 596D). Resnick further cites Jeremiah who described Jerusalem after its fall to the Romans as "like one defiled among them by menstrual [uncleanness]." Thus, Resnick draws interesting parallels between female menstruation and the ideas in medieval Christian polemical writings on the bloody flux of Jewish men. Nevertheless, a direct link is simply missing from any of the primary sources that Resnick cites. This point is made explicitly by Johnson in "The Myth of Jewish Male Menses."

¹⁶ Thomas of Cantimpre, *Miraculorum et exemplorum memorabilium sui temporis libri duo* (Douai, 1605) 305. Cited in Resnick, "Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses," 249.

placing himself squarely in the tradition of Thomas of Monmouth in terms of Jewish bloodguilt. By the thirteenth century, it was widely understood in Christian clerical circles that Jewish men suffered from bleeding anal hemorrhoids as a divine punishment for their bloodguilt. However, this bleeding only became explicitly gendered with the revival of the classical medical tradition of bodily humors.

In the thirteenth century, Latin translations of ancient Greek and Roman medical works along with the importation of medieval Arab medicine in the wake of several Eastern Crusades provided a medical explanation for hemorrhoids.¹⁷ The notion that a balance of fluids (or humors) governed the body was essential to that revival. A healthy body had the correct balance of fluids, but deviations from healthy living such as rich diet or lack of activity could upset the proper balance. According to Hippocrates, perhaps the father of the theory, women's bodies were colder and moister, because they were more sedentary. Active men could sweat and vigorously digest to purge their bodies of excess fluid, whereas women menstruated in order to achieve balance.¹⁸ At the same time, many medieval physicians advocated male bloodletting, particularly during the Spring and for those with more sedentary lifestyles, in order to restore balance to the humors. Furthermore, nose bleeds and hemorrhoids were thought to be forms of male menstruation, alternate means of purging excess blood.¹⁹ The divide between the genders was thus highly fluid, lending support to the one-sex hypothesis. Sex at this time was not a dualistic system. Menstruation was not a sign of women's unique role as child-bearers but merely a different way in which their bodies maintained a balance of fluids.

¹⁷ Resnick's "Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses," locates the revival in the translation of Greek medical texts as well as Arabic medieval medical texts into Latin, 252, while Johnson credits the Crusades with increasing intellectual exchange between East and West on medical topics.

¹⁸ Katz, "Shylock's Gender," 442.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 442-447.

This is very significant for scholarly discussions of menstruation libel because it means that representations of fluid-emitting Jewish men did not have the same gendered connotations that they would today.

When combined with the theological legacy of menstruation as a punishment for Jewish bloodguilt, however, the natural science of humors took on a much more sinister meaning. It was generally believed that Jews struggled with attaining the correct balance of bodily fluids as a result of bloodguilt. In the early fourteenth century, Bernard de Gordon put it thusly:

“The Jews suffer greatly from haemorrhoids for three reasons: first, because they are generally sedentary and therefore the excessive melancholy humours collect; secondly, because they are usually in fear and anxiety and therefore the melancholy blood becomes increased, besides (according to Hippocrates) fear and faint-heartedness, should they last a long time, produce the melancholy humour; and thirdly, it is the divine vengeance against them (as written in Psalms 78:66) and ‘he smote his enemies in the hinder parts, he put them to a perpetual reproach’.”²⁰

Thus, Bernard de Gordon makes the dangerous move of mixing a metaphysical application of melancholy humors (Jews are cursed by God with bad blood) with a more contingent and scientifically palatable explanation (they have bad humors because of a sedentary lifestyle), creating a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby Jews were cursed and thereby socially relegated to melancholic lifestyles. After all, Jews were forced into sedentary lives because they were largely banned from the active masculine occupations that these doctors no doubt believed created beneficial humoral balances. Moreover, with the prevalence of anti-semitic libel, massacres, forced conversions and the like, who could blame them for being fearful and timid? Nevertheless, these attributes were soon naturalized into a construct of the Jewish body. Furthermore, this body increasingly

²⁰ Translation in Hebrew is contained in the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York: cited in Katz, “Shylock’s Gender,” 449.

appeared to be feminine. As Resnick points out, “characteristics such as timidity and pallor were understood by medieval authors to be ‘womanish.’” Jewish men, like women overall, were judged to be possessed by cold and damp (melancholic) humors that needed to be purged by posterior blood letting (hemorrhoidal bleeding), as a result of blood guilt.²¹

The final addition to the gendering of the menstruation libel was the claim that Jews suffer from their bloody flux according to a monthly or lunar cycle, as women do. In fact, this appears in the written record well before Bernard de Gordon combined theological and scientific explanations to create the figure of the womanish melancholic Jew. In 1221 Jacques de Vitry, a successful clerical proponent of the Albigensian Crusade and the Fifth Crusade in the East, wrote *The Historia Orientalis*, in which he presented the figure of a fully feminized Jewish man who menstruated on a monthly cycle as a result of melancholic humors and divine bloodguilt.²² He wrote of Jews who cried out,

“His blood be upon us... we have become unwarlike and weak *even as women* and it is said that they have a flux of blood *every month*. God has smitten them in their hinter parts, and put them to perpetual opprobrium (Psalms 78:67). After they slew their true brother, Abel [figured metaphorically as Christ], they were made wanderers and fugitives over the earth, cursed like Cain, with a trembling head, that is, a quaking heart, fearing both day and night, not believing in his life.”²³

This passage contains all of the key elements of both the theological interpretation of bloodguilt and the medical thought about female menstruation. Jewish men are discursively portrayed as weak and feminine, they suffer a monthly flux of blood in their

²¹ Resnick, “Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses,” 256.

²² *Ibid.*, 258.

²³ *Historia Orientalis* 82. 159-160. Italics mine. Quoted from Resnick, “Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses,” 259.

hinter parts as a divine punishment as indicated in the exegetical tradition of Psalms 78:67, and they suffer from the physiological effects of a melancholic humor- a trembling head, a quaking heart, and a fearful disposition. Furthermore, Resnick indicates that in the second half of the thirteenth century, this representation spread beyond clerical circles, due to the translation of *Historia Orientalis* into vernacular French.²⁴ Given Jacques de Vitry's version of the menstruation libel and the metonymic slippage that Resnick points out between the theological tradition of the curse of bloody flux upon Jewish males and the understanding of female menstruation as a curse upon Eve for her role in original sin, it is easy to see how the distinction between hemorrhoidal bleeding and actual female menstruation could have eroded in the centuries that followed the dissemination of *Historia Orientalis*. This evidence directly counters the arguments of those like Willis Johnson, who argue that a fully gendered version of the libel does not appear until the early modern period.

Indeed, as early as the beginning of the fourteenth century, this version of the menstruation libel begins to appear with some frequency.²⁵ Such accusations gathered steam in the early modern period, becoming part of official inquisitorial records of ritual murder trials. In Tyrnau in 1494, several Jews were put on trial for the ritual murder of a child. The records state that, "suffering from menstruation, both men and women alike,

²⁴ Resnick, "The Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses," 260.

²⁵ Resnick cites Cecco d'Ascoli's commentary on Sacrobosco's *De sphaera* (ca. 1324), trans. From Peter Biller, "Views of Jews from Paris around 1300: Christian or 'Scientific'?" in Diana Wood, ed., *Christianity and Judaism: Papers Read at the 1991 Summer Meeting and the 1992 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 199. Cecco d'Ascoli wrote an astronomical treatise in which he declared, "After the death of Christ all Jewish men, like women, suffer menstruation." Another example provided by Resnick is an early fourteenth century medical text called *Omnes homines*, in which the author explains that Jews suffer a bloody flux as a result of defective lifestyle and diet as well as theological bloodguilt. He *explicitly* associates the bloody flux with the female menstruation cycle.

[the Jews] have noted that the blood of a Christian constitutes an excellent remedy.”²⁶

This is the example cited by Willis Johnson as the earliest complete recording of the gendered menstruation libel story.²⁷ While Johnson’s admonition for modern minds to not project their own notions of embodiment back into the past is absolutely correct, and the libel only appears widely in the primary source literature in the early modern period, it nevertheless has a clearly gendered form that precedes what he supposes to be the earliest example of the libel by over two centuries.

The discursive feminization of Jewish men as far back as the early thirteenth century provides a major insight for gender theorists on the meaning of modern gender. It seems to contradict the idea forwarded in many circles that the one-sex model persisted whole and intact until the nineteenth century, for if it was enough that Jewish men’s lack of balanced humors represented a deviation from the ideal body, then there should have been no need to explicitly feminize them. Indeed, although it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting here the exciting work being done by Daniel Boyarin, who has argued that the legacy of male menstruation libel and feminization of the Jewish man contributed immensely to the 19th century construction of the heterosexual matrix, that is to say, a bifurcated gender system based on compulsory heterosexual desire.

“All the features that construct the figure of the homosexual construct the Jew as well, namely, hypersexuality, melancholia, and passivity. It was this factor and hysterization of the Ostjude that led to Freud’s relative abandonment of hysteria... and to the production of the inexorably heteronormative Oedipus narrative... Since within this culture, male hysteria and homosexuality are both symptoms and products of gender inversion, there is a slippage between them: the Jew was queer and hysterical- and therefore, not a man. In response, the normatively straight Jewish Man was invented to replace the bent Ostjude, and his hysteria- his

²⁶ Cited in Resnick, “The Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses,” 262, Anton Bonfin, *Rerum Hungaricum Decades*, cited in Polliakov, *History of Anti-Semitism*, 1. 143, n. 13..

²⁷ Johnson, “The Myth of Jewish Male Menses,” 293.

alternative gendering- was the first victim... The Oedipus complex is Freud's family romance of escape from Jewish queerness into gentile, phallic heterosexuality."²⁸

The ideal Jewish male of Eastern Europe (Ostjude) would have been pale, sedentary, and studious. His wife was ideally robust, energetic and economically active. Not only does this "sedentary" and "pale" modern Jewish male sound much like the representations whose winding history reaches all the way back to the Middle Ages, this parental unit is exactly the pairing that was thought to yield homosexuals because the father did not assert a strong masculinity for the son to identify with. It also described Freud's family. In any case, the medieval evidence for the menstruation libel indicates a clear material benefit to feminizing Jewish men- it was another way to mark their bodies with a sign of difference. The Jewish man was "naturally" timid, passive, melancholic, menstrual, and feminine. Despite the fact that its basis in reality relied upon social conditions (ghettoization, persecution, labor discrimination, etc.), effeminate gender naturalized the body of the Jewish man for his sedentary and precarious social role as urban dweller, outcast, or moneylender. However, both the primary and secondary literature for this myth is currently limited and much more work remains to be done to explore how the Jewish body was discursively sexed in the Middle Ages and to what purposes.

²⁸ Boyarin, Daniel. *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 215.

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