Chapter 16

Bringing Meir b. Elijah of Norwich into the Classroom: Discovering a Medieval Minority Poet

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This chapter brings us to visit a "Survey of Early English Literature" classroom. None of the survey anthologies is ideal, but I always feel the need to include an anthology, so I do. For the sake of full disclosure, I want to begin with a confession. I had been teaching a version of "The Survey of Early English Literature" for a bit before it hit me that the many available anthologies that stretched from Anglo-Saxon times to the Enlightenment lacked either a Jewish voice or a Jewish presence. What leads to my confession is that as a scholar of the Middle Ages, especially the English Middle Ages, I knew that Jews were physically present on—and certainly writing in—the "English" territory after the Normans arrived in 1066. As a scholar, I knew this. In fact, in my role as a scholar, I was both invested in researching and writing about medieval English Jews and publicizing the historical oversights concomitant with Jewish presence. As a teacher, I had yet to intertwine my scholarly discoveries with my classroom work, but once I did make that link, I had new struggles with issues of space and allotment on my syllabus. There is much to tell students about the Jewish presence between 1066 and 1659, and I desired to tell it all.

Bandying about two larger concerns regarding the logistics of addressing the Jewish presence in medieval England, I found myself caught in a state of fear that sprung from worries over an anti-Semitic backlash that might surface either implicitly or explicitly in the classroom. I was also reluctant to add more material to an already packed syllabus. Desirous of encouraging

rather than discouraging a passion for literature among the students, I thought I needed to avoid the imagined complaints that would surely follow upon incorporating additional material (not in the anthologies) about medieval Jews. Courage and scholarship prevailed over fear, and in the end I added material about the English Jews, explaining to students that our anthology (not just the one we use but all of them) fails to include material about the medieval Jews and that we in our classroom would correct this oversight. And every subsequent semester that I have taught the Survey class, my students have joined me in making an intervention into the elisions of early literature anthologies.

The following essay foregrounds one such intervention and presents my introduction of Meir b. Elijah of Norwich and the subject of medieval English Jews into my syllabus. For my purposes here, I foreground the introductory survey classroom, but the information I share can easily be spread to a more advanced medieval literature class. Some of my conversation about medieval English Jewish literature in the Early Middle English culture occasionally touches upon the work I do in more advanced classes, particularly those entitled "The Medieval Postcolonial Jew" and "In the Margins of Christendom," but for my purposes in this essay, I focus more on work that is relevant to the Survey classroom. The topics addressed here—of the treatment, lives, and writing of medieval English Jews—fall in between my talking about Anglo-French poetry and Middle English poetry on the syllabus. In essence, we discuss Meir of Norwich in between our conversations about Marie de France's and Geoffrey Chaucer's writing.

The Great Awakening, or Teaching Students about Medieval English Jews

I usually start with a brief history lesson that explains how over the course of the centuries covered in our survey course (ca. 500 to 1785), Jews occupied space in the Christian

imaginary, on the English soil, and sometimes in both.[1] Considering the medieval English

territory, as historian Robin Mundill points out that even though small pockets of Jews might

have appeared on the land during the Anglo-Saxon era and possibly during Roman Britain, "it is

likely that a few Jews had set foot on this land well before 1066."[2] In the eleventh century, the

size of the Jewish population increased noticeably as the Jews started to populate England soon

after the Normans claimed the monarchical seat.[3] In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the

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[1] I open with a brief lecture that explains Jewish presence and absence in medieval, early

modern, and eighteenth-century England. I foreground the 1290 Expulsion of the Jews from and

the 1659 Readmission of Jews to England, while also briefly mentioning Amelia Lanyer,

Lanyer's connections with the Crypto-Jewish (and probably *converso*) musicians in Elizabeth I's

court, and Menasseh ben Israel's argument for readmission in the early modern period. I want

students to recognize that Jew are treated like things—objects—and passed around and discarded

like the monarch's possessions that they were. On the Crypto-Jewish musicians, see David

Lasocki and Roger Prior, *The Bassanos: Venetian Musicians and Instrument Makers in England,*

1531-1665 (Hants, England: Scolar Press, 1995).

[2] Robin Mundill, *The King's Jews: Money, Massacre, and Exodus in Medieval England*

(London: Continuum, 2010), 1-4, at 1.

[3] See Robin Mundill, *The King's Jews*, 1-20. James Campbell, in "Norwich before 1300,"

Medieval Norwich, ed. Carole Rawcliffe and Richard Wilson (New York: Hambledon and

London, 2004), 19-48, provides a fine survey of Norman building practices. On the topic of

Norman colonization, see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "The Flow of Blood in Medieval Norwich,"

Speculum 79 (2004): 26-65.

voices of medieval English Jewish writers started to be heard. Meir ben Elijah of Norwich stands out among the medieval Jewish poets not only because a sizeable corpus of his poetry has survived but also because of his investment in preserving his personal history.

The twentieth-century scholars Vivian Lipman and A. M. Habermann, separately and together, performed strategic roles in bringing Meir of Norwich—both his writings and the medieval Norwich in which he lived—to public attention.[4] Following these foundational efforts, twenty-first century scholars are continuing the recovery of Meir of Norwich's voice. Most notably, Susan L. Einbinder has produced an English translation of Meir's "Put a Curse on My Enemy," a *piyyut* [liturgical poem] believed to have been composed sometime around the 1290 Expulsion of the Jews of England.[5] In 2013, Keiron Pim published an edition of Meir's surviving

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[4] See Vivian Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich* (London: Jewish Historical Society of England, 1967). Lipman's book ends with A. M. Habermann's Hebrew edition of Meir's work, "Hebrew Poems of Meir of Norwich" or (פיוטים ושירים, *Piyyutim v'Shirim* [liturgical poems and songs]).

[5] Susan L. Einbinder, "Meir b. Elijah of Norwich: Persecution and Poetry among Medieval English Jews," *Journal of Medieval History* 26 (2000): 145-62. Einbinder's translation is the first English version of Meir's "Put a Curse on My Enemy." My monograph, *Crafting Jewishness in Medieval England: Legally Absent, Virtually Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), devotes a chapter to unpacking Meir of Norwich's "Put a Curse on My Enemy" in light of his other poetry and their acrostics (49-67). On the issue of the Expulsion, see Robin Mundill, *England's Jewish Solution: Experiment and Expulsion, 1262-1290* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). A. M. Habermann, in "Meir Ben Elijah of Norwich," *Encyclopedia*

works with facing-page translations. Pim's edition opens with a cautionary note to readers, asking them "to listen" carefully to the poetry of a minority poet whose people were marginalized and excoriated: "Here is an urgent voice subdued for 700 years, a medieval cry at last amplified and able to tell a disturbing story to those who care to listen amid the din of the twenty-first century."[6] Pim's introductory comments are taken seriously by my students who are mostly young people committed to serving as socially and environmentally just citizens. I was wrong to think that students would not enjoy learning about a small Jewish minority who shared territorial and cultural presence with the likes of the legendary King Arthur and Robin Hood. The more vocal of my students, at any rate, express appreciation for a dose of reality, as well as diversity, amidst the fantasy and magic—and Christianity—otherwise evident in so many medieval texts. It may also be that millennials are—as a larger group—just trained to be more culturally sensitive than previous generations. Or it may be that Meir's time to be publically reassembled has come.

Medieval England and Its Jews

Adding material about the medieval English Jews into the course unfolded over several stages. When I began this process, I was still thinking about how the Anglo-French monarchy

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Judaica, vol. 11 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1971), claims that Meir's work was composed while in the state of Expulsion.

[6] Kieron Pim, ed., *Into the Light: The Medieval Hebrew Poetry of Meir of Norwich*, trans. Ellman Crasnow and Bente Elsworth (Norwich, UK: East Publishing, 2013), 9. All references to Meir's poetry are taken from Pim's edition, unless otherwise noted.

perceived and treated the Jews. As a result, I included the 1275 Statute of Jewry (in a double-column translation, one column Anglo-French and the opposite column eighteenth-century English).[7] The Statute of Jewry introduces students to the treacherous terrain tread by the Jews in Norman England and, in particular, Meir of Norwich as he writes in "Put a Curse on My Enemy": "In the land of the heavy-hearted and exhausted / we have heard the people's reproach" (10-11). Since no edict of Expulsion has yet materialized, the final lines of the statute—"this Licence to take Lands to farm shall endure to them only for Fifteen Years from this Time forward" (9)—is the closest that we can come to the evidence of an edict of country-wide expulsion.[8] Students enjoy reading this primary source and calculating the difference between

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[7] I work with a copy was made at the University of Rochester Rare Books library in 1999 while I was studying as the Helen Ann Mins Robbins Fellow at the Robbins Library. The 1275 Statute of Jewry is found in the *Statutes of the Realm, Printed by Command of His Majesty King George the Third in Pursuance of an Address of the House of Commons of Great Britain from Original Records and Authoritative Manuscripts*, vol. 1 (London, 1810), 221-221a. All references to this statute are taken from the *Statutes of the Realm*, which I cite according to its paragraphs. An English translation of the 1275 Statute can be found in the second appendix of Robin Mundill, *England's Jewish Solution*, 291-93. A more period-specific copy can also be found in British Library Additional MS 38,821, folio 81v. I wish to thank Zoe Stansell of the Manuscript Reference Services for helping me locate this statute.

[8] The capitals appear in the eighteenth-century document. The Anglo-French reads, "ceo p*er* p*ro*ndre [terres] a ferme me lur dorra for q*ui*nze anz de cet hure en avaunt." (Here and in all of

the date of the 1290 Expulsion and the short lease to farm ("Fifteen Years from this Time forward") as evidence of the Crown's eventual intent to expel the Jews. Meir also indirectly refers to a nation-wide Expulsion in his "Put a Curse on My Enemy" with the words "banished one" (22) and references to a "scatter[ed] Israel" (37).[9] The statute, after all, decrees that Jews must cease their work in the moneylending industry: "for the Honour of God and the common benefit of the People, the King hath ordained and established, That from henceforth no Jew shall lend any Thing at Usury, either upon Land, or upon Rent, or upon other Thing" (1).[10] A nation-wide expulsion seems evident because the English Jews, having been forced to work in the moneylending industry following their arrival in England, presumably had little time to develop new skills in hitherto alternative professions. While farming could conceivably serve as one of the new occupations, that professional opportunity is rendered impossible by the 1275 Statute's closing statement that Jews can only farm for another fifteen years. The Statute of Jewry also brings us to envisage the medieval English Jews' social condition—namely, equal-opportunity badging and taxing of the Jews for *female* and male Jews: "each Jew after he shall be Seven Years old, shall wear a Badge on his outer Garment; that is to say, in the Form of Two Tables

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the following references of the 1275 Statute abbreviations have been quietly expanded and included as italics.)

[9] I develop this point more fully in *Crafting Jewishness*, 63-63. See also Einbinder, "Meir b. Elijah of Norwich."

[10] The Anglo-French reads, "en le honur de deu e p*re* le com*m*un pru del people ke le Rey ad ordine e establi ke nul geu desoremes ne p*re*ste ren a usure ne sour t*er*re ne sur rente ne sour autre chose."

joined, of yellow Felt, of the Length of Six Inches, and of the Breadth of Three Inches. And that

each one, after he shall be Twelve Years old, pay Three pence yearly at Easter of Tax to the

King, whose Bond-man he is; and this shall hold place as well for a Woman as a Man" (5).[11] The

mention of women should not go unnoticed, and calling out the phrase, "shall hold place, as well

for a Woman as a Man," allows instructors to introduce the subject of women who participated

in the moneylending industry. Charlotte Newman Goldy and Suzanne Bartlett have done fine

work familiarizing us with the incredible tales of medieval Jewish working women whose

moneylending activities attest to some evidence of agency among English Jewish women.[12] The

1275 Statute, in addition to its unambiguous reference to young women being equally badged

and taxed, also decrees ghettoization: "they [Jews] may have Intercourse with Christians, in

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[11] The Anglo-French reads, "e k*e* checun Geu pus kil avra passee set anz, porte enseine en son

soverain garnement cest assav*et* en fourme de deus tables joyntes de feutre iaune de la longure de

sis poucer*is* e de la laur de treis pou*tz*. E ke checun pus kil aura passe duzze an paie tres den*er*s

p*re* an de [taillage] au Rey [ky serf il est] a la Pasche e ceo seit entendu ausi ben de fem*me* com

de houme" (5).

[12] See Charlotte Newman Goldy's "Teaching Jewish and Christian Daily Interaction in Medieval

England," which is chapter 16 in this volume. See also Goldy's "Muriel, a Jew of Oxford: Using

the Dramatic to Understand the Mundane in Anglo-Norman Towns," *Writing Medieval Women's

Lives*, ed. Charlotte Newman Goldy and Amy Livingstone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

2012), 227-45; and Suzanne Bartlett, *Licoricia of Winchester: Marriage, Motherhood, and

Murder in the Medieval Anglo-Jewish Community* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2009).

order to carry on lawful Trade by selling and buying. But that no Christian, for this Cause or any other, shall dwell among them (8).[13]

Teaching both Meir's poetry and the 1275 Statute of Jewry benefits from incorporating thirteenth-century medieval English manuscript pictorials. (I find visuals of medieval manuscript images very effective to my lectures.) Along the way toward thinking about medieval doodles, I encourage students to reflect on the fluidity of temporal boundaries by asking them to search through the modern world for images that speak of cultural Othering and caricatured minorities. Some students are fascinated by apparent temporal crossovers between Edward I's decrees in the 1275 Statute and the twentieth-century *Shoah*, and I encourage these students to examine the Nazis' anti-Jewish laws and anti-Semitic images from *Der Stürmer* (a Nazi propaganda magazine).[14] My reasoning is as follows: once the class begins studying Meir's poetry, students will come to the subject with a strong sense of what it means to suffer physical and cultural

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[13] The Anglo-French reads, "par cest encheson ne p*er* autre nul Crestien ne seit cochaunt ne levaunt entre eus" (8). Even though technically the first use of the word "ghetto" appears in English in 1611 and in Italian as "getto" in 1516 (*OED*), the aim of the 1275 Statute is clearly to locate the Jews in one area, to ghettoize them. Eileen Lavine, in "Jewish Word: Ghetto," *Moment Magazine* (May / June 2013): 18-19, provides an accessible historically informed journey that starts with Venice and includes a discussion of the twentieth-century Holocaust or *Shoah* and the present-day United States. I have found that discussing ghettos in all their iterations is a valuable detour.

[14] On the subject of *Der Stürmer*, see the work of Kevin P. Spicer, especially his *Hitler's Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

deprivations. The transformative education inherent to social justice teaching becomes possible here as students experience, witness, and imagine what Meir wrote in and against.

The two images from medieval England that I share with students draw directly from the 1275 Statute's expressions of reducing the circumstances of Jews. The head of a Norwich tallage roll (see figure 16.1) includes an illustration of a Jewish woman, named Avegaye by the illustrator. This doodle also links Jews to devils. The second image is a doodle that caricatures a Jew wearing the Jewish badge, and is found in the margins of Matthew Paris's *Flores historiarum* (see figure 16.2). This moment of manuscript marginalia memorializes the English badge that Jews were legally compelled to wear on their outer garments. Figures 15.1 and 15.2 associate Jews with financial transactions in general and the moneylending industry in particular. Sara Lipton distinguishes between the idea of the Jewish caricature and of the caricatured Jew that can help students toward a productive conversation about these images. Are these images "caricatured Jews" or attempts to depict actual Jews? Do the two doodles represent artists' culturally generous attempts to reproduce ontologically present Jewish figures? Or are these medieval artists falling into the standard mockery of caricatured Jews? Does the intent of the first image differ from that of the second? Trying to interpret these figures can lead to lively discussions about art and the effects of visual Othering, especially on the Other who is being depicted.[15] Figure 15.1 can be understood as a way of marking Jews as evil and guileful (note: the tipped scales); Figure 15.2 can be read as a gesture of policing the Jew through a very visible

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[15] In *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), Frantz Fanon discusses the postcolonial's encounters with visual images of the Evil Other; see esp. 145-52.

badge (note: the extreme size of the badge in relation to the body). What do these faces, badges, demons, tilted scales, and other such images "do for medieval Christianity?"[16] What is the relationship between shaming and naming? Perhaps, Avegaye a real Jewish woman; she may also represent an Every-Jewish-Woman. The character to the left of the devil (named "Mosse Mokke") and the "three-faced" crowned character at the top of the roll (named "Issac of Norwich"). The men bear the names of actual English Jews, but who is Avegaye?[17] Is she meant to invoke—and this operate as a placeholder for—women in the moneylending industry, like Muriel of Oxford and Licoricia of Winchester?

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[16] I ask these questions after reading Sara Lipton's "The Jew's Face: Vision, Knowledge, and Identity in Medieval Anti-Jewish Caricature," *Late Medieval Jewish Identities: Iberia and Beyond*, ed. Carmen Caballero-Navas and Esperanza Alfonso (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 260-87, at 261. Lipton is discussing an image of the Gothic Jew in the *Psalter and Hours of Bonne of Luxembourg*, fol. 83v (Psalm 52). For this image see figure 6.1 in this volume. In *Crafting Jewishness*, 23-47, I include a more detailed reading of figure 16.1. For more images from medieval England, see the first and second chapter of *Crafting Jewishness*; and Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[17] Sara Lipton, *Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), points out that "we cannot firmly identify the elegantly dressed though bizarrely beak-nosed woman" (178).

Figure 16.1   Issues of the Exchequer of 1233, E. 401/1565, m. 1. Photo: Public Records Office. In custody of the National Archives.

Figure 16.2   *Flores Historiarum*, England, early fourteenth century. MS. Cotton Nero D.II, folio 182 recto. Photo: British Library. Reproduced by permission of the British Library Board.

Such interrogations about medieval artistry and the labor of caricature bring us to a second pedagogical direction—possibly a diversion for the Early English Survey class but certainly quite useful in courses that are more narrowed to only medieval literature. These images not only lend to stimulating conversations about the power of images to represent realness and simultaneously to mock, demean, and belittle legally present Jews (both women and men) through potentially insulting doodles. Figures 15.1 and 15.2 also bring students to recognize how the medieval past and the modern present touch upon the idea of making the Jew an abject Other.[18] If this direction suits instructors' syllabi and pedagogy, they can potentially make a meaningful—and for some of my students unforgettable—intervention into their daily lives by more directly thinking about the contemporary world. Here, instructors can make overt gestures toward welcoming in the touch of the modern, which has likely been circling about this

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[18] See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 189. See also Dinshaw's *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). Both texts are important to this conversation.

conversation anyway. I have asked students to compose editorials about the specters of anti-Semitism that creep into our daily lives, and depending upon the social climate of the moment, students may be encouraged to submit their work to local, home, or school newspapers. Two other options to the editorial are including blog time or inviting students to introduce their own clippings from YouTube, the Internet, and print sources, that reproduce either images or articles (or both) about unjustly badged and ghettoized individuals. If you ask students to circle back to the *Shoah*, you should do so cautiously to deflect any narratives that touch upon a lachrymose history.[19] Students may be interested in talking about the terrifying link between the modern and the medieval world especially because there *is* a visible link between the decrees of Edward I's Statute and the restrictions enacted by the Nazis. If you wish to pursue this direction, Laurie Finke's and Martin Shichtman's "Paranoid History" and Salo Baron's "Ghetto and Emancipation" will add a level of nuance that may prove instructive in helping students think critically about the temporal echoes reverberating between thirteenth-century England and twentieth-century Europe.[20] Finke and Shichtman's chapter interrogates the Nazis' deep

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[19] There is a vast difference between "the historical and transgenerational sense of a connected Jewish fate across time and place" and a story of woe; on these matters, see Iris Shagrir and Netta Amir, "The Persecution of the Jews in the First Crusade: Liturgy, Memory, and Nineteenth-Century Visual Art," *Speculum* 92 (2017): 405-28, at 421; and David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 1-9.

[20] Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman, "Paranoid History," *King Arthur and the Myth of History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 186-214; and Salo Wittmeyer Baron, "Ghetto

investment in the Middle Ages, and Baron's essay imagines, perhaps too idealistically, the possibility that medieval Jews felt safe(r) in rather than out of the ghetto.

Meeting Meir ben Elijah of Norwich

    For me, the most productive way of introducing Meir to students follows the lead of Meir himself by unpacking the acrostics that line three of his poems: "On the Termination of the Sabbath" (22-29), "Put a Curse on My Enemy" (30-37), and "Who Is Like You?" (46-85).[21] "On the Termination of the Sabbath" celebrates Shabbat and builds on the iconic image of dwindling candles that run low as Shabbat gains in its force and power: "my evening candle, burning bright,

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and Emancipation," *Menorah Treasury: Harvest of Half a Century*, ed. Leo W. Schwarz (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1928), 50-63. For a view from the *Shoah*, see Janet Jacobs, *Memorializing the Holocaust: Gender, Genocide, and Collective Memory* (New York: I. B. Taurus, 2010).

[21] Meir of Norwich's poetry survives in two medieval manuscripts: Vat. ebr. 402 and Parma De Rossi 654. For more information about Vat. ebr. 402, see Malachi Beit-Arié's descriptions of this manuscript in *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Vatican Library*, ed. Benjamin Richler (Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2008), 348-509. The three *piyyutim* I discuss here can be found on folios 114v-117v of the thirteenth-century Vat. ebr 402 (Beit-Arié, *Hebrew Manuscripts*, 348-49). Meir of Norwich's poetry can also be found in Parma De Rossi 654; for a description of this manuscript, see Malachi Beit-Arié, *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma: Catalogue*, ed. Benjamin Richler (Jerusalem: Jewish National and University Library, 2001), 270-71.

/ that clears the dark with lasting light" (47). Still the peace of Shabbat is hard won; anticipating the angry voice of "Put a Curse on My Enemy," "On the Termination of the Sabbath" includes a few moments in which loss lingers at the outskirts of the joy of Shabbat, where Jews—largely protected from "the unclean" (23)—still find themselves "lament[ing] their loss" (37). "Put a Curse on My Enemy" details that loss following upon the end of the days of peace: the heroes of "Put a Curse on My Enemy" meet with mockery (7-8), "reproach" (10), "affliction" (25), imprisonment (41), and "annihilation" (44). The poem with the longest running acrostic, "Who is Like You?" narrates the wonders that God accomplished for the Jewish people in Biblical times.[22]

Reading Meir through the margins of his poems familiarizes students with a popular device deployed by medieval poets. One medieval English poet whom many students know—namely, Geoffrey Chaucer—uses acrostics to good effect, but there is an instructive difference between Chaucer's and Meir's methods with their acrostics. I find it helpful to reference and possibly include in the syllabus Chaucer's "An ABC" so that students can visualize the dramatic differences between Chaucer's and Meir's acrostic writings: Chaucer's acrostics have far less autobiographical urgency than Meir's. Chaucer's "An ABC" is a *carmen* [song] celebrating the Virgin Mary with *litterarum alphabeti* [the letters of the alphabet].[23] Chaucer's work largely emerges from the heteronormative majority. Chaucer's acrostic also resonates with his

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[22] This 216-line long acrostic, as Kieron Pim mentions, is one of the longest acrostics in medieval Hebrew poetry (46).

[23] See Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 637-40.

characteristic playfulness as he matches the Virgin's bounteous qualities with the letters of the English alphabet. Meir's acrostics, alternatively, are invested with the urgent voice of a disappearing minority, and Meir's marginal letters that line his poetry serve as bulwarks against a threatened identity. Absent from Meir's poetry is an alphabet game like Chaucer's, and in that absence of Chaucerian playfulness, the visibly silent anxieties of a minority voice surface. Meir wants his identity to be secured and re-membered by every (future) reader. Meir's margins create a time capsule that may one day memorialize him whereas Chaucer's "ABC" speaks of willing (?) participation in the medieval hegemony.

Two of Meir's *piyyutim* [liturgical poems]—"On the Termination of the Sabbath" and "Put a Curse on My Enemy"—work together as the virtual tombstone marking Meir's missing grave.[24] Meir's sister poems illustrate his careful efforts to design a permanent rhetorical memorial both for himself and for his father as his letters fashion a perpetual presence in the unwelcome world of Latin Christendom that is filled with continual threats intended to result in Jewish erasure. The letters that line the margins of "On the Termination of the Sabbath"—mem [מ], aleph [א], yud [י], reish [ר], bet [ב], reish [ר], bet [ב], yud [י]—announce the name of the poet and start to signify paternity, expanding to Meir (מאיר) b'rabi (ב'רבי) and meaning "Meir, son of rabbi." "On the Termination of the Sabbath," though, lacks closure, perhaps suggesting that Sabbath peace is not achieved without "Put a Curse on My Enemy"—a poem that provides a solution to an otherwise undeveloped close. "On the Termination of the Sabbath" forms an incomplete sentence—and an unfinished genealogy—without the letters that line "Put a Curse on

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[24] See my *Crafting Jewishness*, 55-56, where I discuss the relationship between these two *piyyutim*.

My Enemy": aleph [א], lamed [ל], yud [י], hey [ה], vav [ו], ḥet [ח], zayin [ז], qof [ק].[25] The letters

of "Put a Curse on My Enemy" expand to the words *Elihu* or Elijah (אליהו) *Ḥazak* (חזק), meaning

"be strong" or "strong."[26] Together, these margins illuminate Meir's poetic identity and protect

the memory of his father: "Meir, son of Rabbi Elijah. Be Strong." The margin (or right side) of

"Put a Curse on My Enemy" begins where "On the Termination of the Sabbath" leaves off with

"*Elihu Ḥazak.*" These two acrostics are only the beginning of Meir's invitation to his readers to

look carefully into the body of the poems to discern the explicit and implicit meaning concealed

within the words and the refrains of both *piyyutim*. Students, having a clearer sense of Meir's

poetic invitation to read these *piyyutim* together, may look forward to unpacking the body of

each poem to limn the internal rhetorical images and speech acts that also connect "On the

Termination of the Sabbath" and "Put a Curse on My Enemy."

The acrostic of a third *piyyut*, "Who Is Like You?" (מי כמוך), adds more texture to Meir's

expressions of resistance to erasure: in these margins Meir articulates his territorial allegiances in

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[25] Each of these letters is repeated twice at the head of each three-line stanza.

[26] Ḥazak is a common addition to medieval Hebrew poetry; see Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 229. See also Kieron Pim, *Into the Light*, 46. In *Crafting Jewishness*, I propose that "[b]y closing the acrostic with the word '*hazak*' [be strong], Meir may be adding his plea for strength and survival. Performing as both memory and protection, guarding the *piyyut* with the word '*hazak*' or 'be strong,' the second half of the acrostic in 'Put a Curse' serves the community, inspiring strength for survival" (55).

a 216-line acrostic.[27] Given that Chaucer's "An ABC" weighs in at 184 lines, Meir's task may

not seem all that noteworthy at first glance. But circling back to Chaucer's playfulness with the

alphabet introduces a different Meir from "On the Termination of the Sabbath" and "Put a Curse

on My Enemy" because in "Who Is Like You?", Meir assembles a memorial around self,

language, and geography. Opening with an assertion of self through the initial "Meir" (mem [מ],

aleph [א], yud [י], and reish [ר] that spells M-e-i-r), the acrostic continues with the Hebrew aleph-

bet or alphabet (the odd lines of 9-51) and moves into the fusion of self, language, and

geography after an *ani* or "I am" (aleph [א], nun [נ], yud [י]).[28] What follows the *I AM* is a

fantastic artifact of territorial place names that capture an otherwise lost Jewish dialect of Middle

English with the Anglo-Judaic rendering of Norwich and England as "Norgitz" (נורגיץ) and

"Angleterre" (אנגלטירא), respectively.[29] Even more, the body of the poem also positions itself as a

narrative about the Jewish God and all that he has done for the patriarchs *and* matriarchs. "Who

Is Like You?" closes with the Exodus and Miriam's timbrel playing after the Hebrews pass

safely over the Sea of Reeds. Reflecting on typology and mimesis helps students to think

critically about the acrostic's operations: a kind of wish fulfillment, perhaps, for the medieval

Jews who have their own Exodus out of England to worry about and their own Sea of Reeds to

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[27] I take this alternative Hebrew spelling of "Who Is Like You?" from A. M. Habermann's

edition (17).

[28] Meir practices a similar gesture made by the medieval poets Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de

France, who forge a permanent link to their poetry by embedding their names in their poetry, but

they do not do so in acrostics but rather in the body of their poetry.

[29] I mention these linguistic markings of Anglo-Judaic in *Crafting Jewishness*, 53.

pass over. If there is time in the syllabus, this a fine moment to incorporate a creative writing exercise that emphasizes the impressiveness of Meir's undertaking with this acrostic: ask students to compose a poem with an acrostic that includes their name, all letters of the alphabet, as well as the city they hail from and the country where they live. Alternatively, instead of including city and country, students might consider what words in their idiolect they would preserve (or geocache) for posterity.[30]

Meir's "I"

  Meir ben Elijah of Norwich has created a capsule of artifacts that students can open and discover for themselves. He appeals to various levels and sorts of students from young poets to gamers who enjoy solving puzzles and wrestling with encrypted and coded writing. But perhaps the most empathic audience members are those whose life experiences resonate with the idea of expulsion, ghettoization, and racial marking. The Meir whom I teach—the one who puts a curse on his enemy—is a Meir who undergoes feelings of betrayal when he learns that he is forced to leave his home and when he is faced with the future reality that he will lose part of his name: Meir *of Norwich*. Some students—or at least some of the students I have taught—find themselves touched deeply by Meir's personal struggles and psychic plight, for they too have desired, at some point or another in their lives, to curse their enemies. When teaching Meir of

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[30] Introducing Meir's version of Norwich and England is useful in my History of the English Language class, where I talk about the Aramaic languages and the aleph-bet's metamorphosis into Greek and then Latin. Meir's Anglo-Judaic is an interesting side note between discussions of Anglo-French and Northwest Midlands / Northeast Midlands.

Norwich's poetry, I either include or suggest that students reflect on their own experiences with betrayal and whether that moment of betrayal left a traumatic mark on their psyche. Inviting students to reflect quietly (I ask students to freewrite for five minutes) about their own wounds and scars brings them to channel the power of Meir's dreams for the peace of heavenly light in "On the Termination of the Sabbath"; of Meir's desires for an unattainable light in "Put a Curse on My Enemy"; and of Meir's story of genealogy and tribal history in "Who Is Like You?"

Throughout the encounter with Meir of Norwich's poetry, readers find themselves confronting two complicated choices: silence or speech. Silence is the easier of the two, but silence ends in erasure; speech represents the more difficult choice and involves commitment. A possibly insurmountable issue underlies these choices: are students willing to give of themselves to the Other to act as vocal witnesses? If Meir fails to gather witnesses, he disappears, and the pain of the Expulsion fades. Acting in the role of witness, however, demands telling and retelling the traumatic event; witnessing is, therefore, not a role adopted by the faint of heart. Nor is asking for a witness a simple matter. When victims speak about their trauma, they risk imagining a future without witnesses. Victims risk not being believed. Meir longs for a witness to his trauma, to realize the depth of his scarred psyche. Meir performs as the "involved witness" that Shoshana Felman discusses; we, in turn, have the choice to act as "witnesses of the other witnesses" and to admit that Meir's trauma has "inhabited" us.[31]

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[31] Shoshana Felman, "Narrative as Testimony: Camus's *The Plague*," *Reading Narrative: Form, Ethics, Ideology*, ed. James Phelan (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), 250-71, at 263.

Meir's writings belong to him and are the product of an English Meir, living in Norgitz, born in Angleterre, with an identity that he spells out again and again. In fact, Meir is caught in an iterative and echoic fantasy where his first-person assertions speak to a plea for witnesses: אני [ani, "I am"], Meir tells us. *I* am. Meir has only the margins of his poetry into which he has encoded his genetic material, his DNA. Without readers, without students, without us, Meir's "I" would disappear.