

Summer 2009

Meir b. Elijah of Norwich and the Margins of Memory

Miriamne Ara Krummel

University of Dayton, mkrummel1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/eng_fac_pub



Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), and the [Reading and Language Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Krummel, Miriamne Ara, "Meir b. Elijah of Norwich and the Margins of Memory" (2009). *English Faculty Publications*. 82.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/eng_fac_pub/82

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlange1@udayton.edu.

Meir b. Elijah of Norwich and the Margins of Memory

Miriamne Ara Krummel
University of Dayton

"Meir b. Elijah of Norwich and the Margins of Memory" is a study of Meir of Norwich's use of acrostics to record his English Jewish identity. In the face of the 1290 Expulsion, which follows upon many episodes of anti-Jewish violence and antipathy, Meir attempts to have his name recorded in perpetuity. This essay details some of those moments of violence in order to give voice to Meir's world and to clarify Meir's desire to be remembered.

The Lord the king condemned all Jews of whatever sex or age living throughout England into perpetual exile without any hope of return. In truth, out of all that large number of Jews, whose total number from young to old was reckoned to be 17,511, no one who would not be converted to the Christian faith either by promise or allurements remained beyond the fixed and decided day of departure.

— *Chronica Johannis de Oxenedes*¹

John of Oxnead's words underscore the undeniable Otherness of Jews in medieval English culture. While his discussion of the English Expulsion of the

¹The English text is quoted in Robin R. Mundill's *England's Jewish Solution: Experiment and Expulsion, 1262–1290* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 1. The Latin text reads, "Dominus rex omnes cujuscumque sexus aut ætatis per universam Angliam habitantes Judæos absque spe remeandi perpetuo damnavit exilio. De tota vero illa Judæorum turba, cujus numeras omnibus a minori usque ad seniore[m] computatis erat xvii. millia quingenti et undecim Judæi, certo egressionis die statuo non remansit unus qui promisso vel blandimento ad fidem converteretur Christianam" (p. 277). See *Chronica Johannis de Oxenedes*, ed. Sir Henry Ellis (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1859).

Jews may be brief, his amplification of the number of Jews ("17,511" or "xvii. millia quingenti et undecim Judæi")—when the Jewish population was probably no more than 7,000 if even that high²—suggests a great anxiety about the imagined threat the Jewish Other represented to the Christian English community. John of Oxnead's remarks also reveal that Jews—never considered English³—had to choose between either the loss of their Jewish identity by becoming Christian ("ad fidem converteretur Christianam") or the loss of their home by accepting condemnation to perpetual exile ("perpetuo damnavit exilio"). John of Oxnead's history also provides evidence that a medieval Christian chronicler is most likely incapable of relaying the Jewish version of events. There is an unbridgeable difference between the Christian and Jewish histories⁴; for example, what John of Oxnead perceives as a state of "perpetual exile," the Jews understand as a permanent commitment to faith and community. To most medieval Jews, Christianity was not and could never be the "rightful inheritor and fulfillment of Jewish tradition."⁵ Medieval Jews were admittedly caught in an ideological bind: as Steven F. Kruger writes, "staying Jewish, insisting on one's unchangeable Jewishness, is not only a positive self-assertion but also a reconfirmation of the anti-Semitic view that Jews are a people trapped by their own stubbornness in the past, a people incapable by their very nature of embracing change, the truth, the future."⁶ In fact, the post-

²On the power of these myths to absorb the imaginations of the macro-culture, see Anthony Bale's *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350–1500* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Regarding the number of Jewish bodies, see Vivian D. Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich* (London, Eng.: The Jewish Historical Society of England, 1967), pp. 34–48; and Robert C. Stacey, "Anti-Semitism and the Medieval English State," in J. R. Maddicott and D. M. Palliser, eds., *The Medieval State: Essays Presented to James Campbell* (Rio Grande, Ohio: Hambledon Press, 2000), p. 166. Gavin Langmuir traces fantasies in "Historiographic Crucifixion," in *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 282–98.

³Langmuir, "'Tanquam Servi': The Change in Jewish Status in French Law about 1200," in *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, p. 175. Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book*, pp. 41–43.

⁴See, for example, Bale's fine study of the legend of the Jew of Tewksbury in *The Jew in the Medieval Book*, pp. 23–53.

⁵Lisa Lampert-Weissig, "'Why is This Knight Different from All Other Knights?' Jews, Anti-Semitism, and the Old French Grail Narratives," *JEGP*, No. 106 (2007): 225.

⁶Steven F. Kruger, *The Spectral Jew: Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe*, *Medieval Cultures*, Vol. 40 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 168. See also Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 5–23.

biblical Jew—once largely considered a typological figure rather than a multidimensional being—had become a nearly irreconcilable presence in Latin Christendom by the thirteenth century.⁷

In 1290, the Jews discovered first-hand the irredeemable condition of their alien nature: an order of Expulsion determined that all Jews of England had to leave their homes. Since most medieval Jews were well aware of their historic departure from Judea and their exilic wanderings in Ashkenaz (Europe) and Sepharad (the Mediterranean), the reality of uprootedness was a continual specter that loomed over their medieval lives. Even so, these same Jews acculturated to life in the various territories where their diasporic lives unfolded by adopting aspects of the local cultures where they lived.⁸ Because of the willingness to borrow from the cultures of local territories, the idea of departure and banishment evoked a particularly acute rupture. To compound the disavowal associated with exile, the 1290 Expulsion of the Jews from England was scripted in such terms so as to erase any doubt that medieval Jews were ever really English.⁹

On the cusp of the 1290 Expulsion of the Jews of England, the personal history of Meir b. Elijah of Norwich (fl. 13th century) was subject to the same ill-defined future as the other Jews of England. Exile and expulsion implied an absence from the land; the outcome of both promised a fading memory of the Jewish presence on English soil. Even more, because the appearance of “prose chronicles,” were, in Robert Chazan’s words, “rare,”¹⁰ Jewish histories were subject to the “cultural power” of the Christian chroniclers.¹¹ Ismar Elbogen, writing of the “external form” of a liturgical poem, observes that the *piyyut* “was an

⁷On these matters of irreconcilability, see Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁸For examples of acculturation, see Ivan G. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Robert Chazan, *Medieval Stereotypes and Modern Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 95; and Raymond P. Scheindlin, *Wine, Women, and Death: Medieval Hebrew Poems on the Good Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1986), p. 4.

⁹See Mundill, *England’s Jewish Solution*.

¹⁰Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 17.

¹¹These are Anthony Bale’s words. See his *The Jew in the Medieval Book*, p. 6. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who discusses the issue of minority voices (particularly the female minority) seeking to articulate their desires, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.

artistic poetry and was therefore subject to the laws of taste of its time and place.”¹² And Meir’s poetry was no different. Seeking to prevent the erasure of both an English Jewish identity and an English Jewish history among a people who at the time did not regularly chronicle their past, Meir incorporates the memory of his unique identity into the acrostics that he composes in the margins of his liturgical poetry, his *piyyutim*. And while Meir is not the only Hebrew poet to encrypt his acrostics—in fact, acrostic writing can be found in Biblical and medieval texts¹³—Meir provides us with a distinctive poetic voice that expresses his desire to maintain his presence despite absence (that is, to be reassured that the Jewish version of events would continue to be told in *Judenrein* England).

Indeed, medieval Jewish poets deployed acrostics to detail important, even critical information. As a case in point, Benjamin the Scribe uses the acrostic technique to memorialize his fellowship with the martyr Samson.¹⁴ In a poetic gesture that is similar to Benjamin’s, Meir, while also using acrostics to preserve relationships, embeds place and profession in the margins of his own *piyyutim*. The effect of Meir’s acrostic writing is an amalgam of his personal identity with his public liturgical poems so that the margins of his poetry coordinate acrostics that spell out his full name and help Meir to record his hybridity.¹⁵ Rather than focusing his acrostics only on standard matters such as blessings and alphabets, Meir deploys acrostic formulae to broadcast his unique English Jewish identity.¹⁶ In this way Meir commemorates his paternity (the son of a rabbi) and his home (a writer from Norwich). Meir acts as a spokesperson for the expelled Jews: because of Meir’s poems, we seek (and, then, rehearse) events endured by the English Jews. And so, I attempt to fashion a more com-

¹²Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), p. 228.

¹³David Noel Freedman, “Acrostics and Metrics in Hebrew Poetry,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 65 (1972): 367–92, discusses the acrostics in Lamentations. For medieval Hebrew writers’ use of acrostics, see Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, p. 229; and Susan L. Einbinder, *Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom in Medieval France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹⁴For discussion of Benjamin and Samson, see Einbinder, *Beautiful Death*, p. 107.

¹⁵For a fine discussion of a more general and postcolonial sense of hybridity, see R. Radhakrishnan, “Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity,” in Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 312–29.

¹⁶On the subject of acrostics, see Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, pp. 228–29, and Einbinder, *Beautiful Death*, pp. 132 and 140.

plete sense of the community and culture that Meir would have written in.¹⁷ As Susan L. Einbinder works with Benjamin's martyrological poem to show that "it is possible to learn a great deal from an obscure poem," I too turn to Meir's liturgical poetry to illuminate how Meir's poetry provides us with a time capsule (albeit a limited one) of the biography of a Norwich Jew.¹⁸

Meir's efforts to compose alternative stories to those told by the mainstream chroniclers both line the exterior and constitute the body of his poems. These margins indicate a committed desire on Meir's part to impart writings that serve as witnesses—what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub consider testimonials of trauma—to the experiences of medieval Jews.¹⁹ In fact, Meir militates against erasure by inscribing a much needed permanency into his poetic texts, and because of Meir's efforts to design a testimonial to and for himself, we scholars have more evidence of the medieval English Jewish experience to add to the scarcity of surviving material.

As a way of tracing Meir's attempts to be remembered, this essay examines the margins of three poems: *מי כמוך* or "Who Like You"; *למצאי שבתות* or "For the End of the Sabbaths"; *מאורח בגונה* or "A Light Hymn" or *אויבי בְּמֵאֲרִיכָה* or *תִּקְבּ*, "Put a curse on my enemy."²⁰ Specifically detailing Meir's deployment of acrostic writing to introduce his personal history, this essay animates Meir's attempts to compose a vehicle for historical remembrance. Interestingly, Meir's urgency is also echoed in the work of one of his scribes who composes a superscription to head "Put a curse on my enemy."²¹ And so both the acrostics and

¹⁷Einbinder, *Beautiful Death*, p. 100.

¹⁸Einbinder, *Beautiful Death*, p. 100.

¹⁹Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. xviii.

²⁰Here I use the scribe's titles. "A Light Hymn" refers to "A Light Hymn Sung About the Burden of Exile, Death in Imprisonment, and Robbery." This incipit is taken from A. M. Habermann, "Meir Ben Elijah of Norwich: Persecution and Poetry Among Medieval English Jews," *Journal of Medieval History*, Vol. 26 (2000): 1253. Meir's work appears in Habermann, *Hebrew Poems*, Appendix B, in Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich*, pp. 1–45. Throughout the essay I refer to "A Light Hymn" as "Put a curse on my enemy," the title Einbinder uses to refer to this *piyyut*.

²¹The scribe of "A Light Hymn" joins Meir in recording Jewish history. Even though the specific scribe who copied Meir's material has yet to be identified, the other items in the manuscript have been attributed to three scribes—Yosef, Shemuel, and Meshulam—who identify themselves through scribal formulae (Malachi Beit-Arié, *The Only Dated Medieval Hebrew Manuscript Written in England [1189 CE] and the Problem of Pre-Expulsion Anglo-Hebrew Manuscripts* [London: Valmadonna Trust Library, 1985], p. 19n24).

the superscription embed history and instantiate the fashioning of poetry as a vehicle for personal, as well as community remembrance.²² Together, these artifacts speak of the desires to celebrate identity, to record hybridity, and to avoid permanent erasure. Meir and his scribe succeed in transcending the forced erasure that Edward I's 1290 Act of Expulsion compels.

The Significance of an Acrostic

Recovering specificities about the lives of medieval Jewish poets, particularly of those living in Europe, is often nearly impossible.²³ We can, despite this difficulty, deduce some information about Meir's biography by limning the acrostics in his poetry. Important to keep in mind is the fact that the need to convey the message in the acrostic must dictate the language and lettering in the poem. That is, the poem must dutifully follow the acrostic. And Meir's design of a complicated acrostic expresses a deep commitment to memorialization of his hybridity. Playing with the many possibilities inherent in poetry, Meir constructs an artifact that delimits personal history in the margins of a poem that can be read from right to left, as well as from top to bottom, with each reading choice providing a different, but inter-related, text. In "Who Like You," Meir—in part of the poem-long acrostic—embeds his full name and specifies the land he resides in before expulsion. The margins of Meir's *piyyut* speak to us and enable us to reconstruct certain aspects, limited though they may be, of his identity. "Who Like You" integrates paternity, place, and position, fashioning a complicated text that indicates both a linguistic and a poetic agenda. The acrostic reads,

²²Angel Sáenz-Badillos discusses an anonymous superscription that also alludes to the historical and social "atmosphere of the period" (p. 50); see his "Hebrew Invective Poetry: The Debate between Todros Abulafia and Phinehas Halevi," *Prooftexts* 16 (1996): 49–73.

²³See, for instance, Norman Golb, *The Jews in Medieval Normandy: A Social and Intellectual History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), who in writing of a medieval Jewish and European poet, Berakhiah b. Natronai Crispia ha-Nakdan, comments, "as is true regarding every other Jewish savant of the period who lived in northwestern Europe, most of the details of Berakhiah b. Natronai's life are lost" (pp. 324–25). And we know a great deal more about Berakhiah ben Natronai ha-Nakdan's work and life than Meir of Norwich's. Habermann believes that Meir of Norwich worked as a *hazzan*, a reader or singer in the synagogue; see his "Meir Ben Elijah of Norwich," p. 1253. See also Cecil Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, 3rd ed. (1964; rpt. Wiltshire, Great Britain: John Trotter Publishers, 1992), p. 127n4.

אני מאיר ברבי אליהו ממדינת נורג'יץ אשר בארץ האי הנקראת אנגלס'טירא

I am Meir son of Rabbi Elijah of Norwich (Norgitz), which is in the land of the island England (Angleterre)

At once the “traditions” of liturgy (the acrostic ends with the blessing *אמן* *amen* or “amen amen selah” and includes the full alphabet from א [aleph] to ת [tav]), the acrostic of “Who Like You” also features Meir’s unique idiolect.²⁴ Acrostics, especially Meir’s, can act as memorials of a life once lived. Because of Meir’s encrypted text, we can, for example, identify Meir’s knowledge of the traditions of writing a *piyyut* (including a blessing and the alphabet), as well as his awareness of different Jewish cultures, most notably the Sephardic or Spanish culture of poetry writing (by opening his biography with *אני* or “I am”).²⁵

The margins of “Who Like You” immortalize Meir’s paternity (ברבי אליהו or “son of Rabbi Elijah”), reveal his home (נורג'יץ or “Norgitz” / Norwich), and broadcast the territory (אנגלס'טירא or “Angleterre”) where he lived. These moments indicate the impulse to cultivate the practice of memory and to record identity. Through the naming of place, such as “Norgitz” and “Angleterre,” the margins of “Who Like You” bear witness to a linguistic exchange. As a poem that—because of its liturgical nature—is written in an international Hebrew, “Norgitz” and “Angleterre” emerge to speak of a small moment of blending both a now-lost Anglo-Judaic language (with “Norgitz”) and the Norman tongue (with “Angleterre”). In this way Meir remarkably advertises his link to the English territory.²⁶ Meir’s openness about his hybrid identity is startling, given that the English, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, have such conflictual regard about their own hybridity.²⁷ In all, “Who Like You” exists as a living

²⁴On the subject of authorial idiolect, see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), especially p. 4.

²⁵Meir’s multiculturalism is mostly evident in the *אני* (or “I am”). Regarding the tradition of adding “blessing formulas” and the Sephardic or Spanish poets use of “ani” or “I,” see Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, p. 229; and Einbinder, *Jewish Death*, p. 107.

²⁶On this subject of selective memory, see Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 6–40. I wish to thank Kenneth Stow for calling my attention to Connerton’s text.

²⁷Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), reasons that the English people’s aversion to their own hybridity involved refashioning their genealogies to accommodate their fantasies of seamless “English” identities that did not possess the muddiness of “recalcitrant impurities” (p. 13). See also pp. 11–42 in Cohen’s volume.

memory of family and of place by openly claiming the land from which Meir, along with all the Jews, had been exiled and by willingly embracing—even affirming—his hybridity. Meir's gesture toward linguistic complexity is one indicator that he accepts his hybrid identity.

These same moments of linguistic and cultural hybridity also provide evidence of Meir's "difficult middle spaces" between the margins and the centers of medieval English society.²⁸ Meir's forced departure from the land (Norwich) and the territory (Angleterre) involves not only losing his name but also fracturing his identity. Perhaps even more troubling than losing land, Meir stands to forfeit part of his name and part of his identity, as proclaimed in the acrostic, since his identity is represented in the acrostic as linked to a place. Who will Meir b. Elijah of Norwich become outside of England? After all, Meir's name attests to ways in which his identity is a blend of Jewishness (through his first name, "Meir") and Englishness (through his last name, "Norwich"). Losing the claim to a territory becomes a site of personal lack since Meir's name registers loss as territorial and personal.²⁹ In this way when Edward I expels the English Jews, the King reclaims not only territory but also individual identities.³⁰

Meir's desire to commemorate Norwich / "Norgitz," or more generally to possess permanently a part of some physical territory ("Angleterre"), underscores Meir's emotional, literary, and psychic ties to Norwich. In the Norwich of Meir's memory, there was an established culture where liturgical poets would have thrived. Because of the generosity of the Jurnet family, wealthy patrons of artists, poets, and scholars, Norwich became the home to "five or six rabbinical scholars" in the last quarter of the thirteenth century and was the site where a Talmudic Academy was formed in the thirteenth century.³¹ Even the famous scholar, poet, and philosopher Berakhiah ha-Nakdan hon-

²⁸See Patricia Clare Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 12. See also Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, p. 23. See also Cohen, *Hybridity, Monstrosity, and Identity*, p. 29.

²⁹On the subject of lack, see L. O. Aranye Fradenburg "Be not far from me: Psychoanalysis, Medieval Studies, and the Subject of Religion," *Exemplaria*, Vol. 7 (1995), pp. 41–54.

³⁰My reading of the process of reclaiming and leaving a territory owes a debt to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 311–50.

³¹Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich*, pp. 147, 149; Roth, *Intellectual Activities of Medieval English Jewry* (London: Oxford University Press, n.d.), pp. 13–15.

ored Norwich with a visit.³² For a brief period, the Jews of Norwich flourished and eventually increased in population as Jews who were expelled from Bungay and Cambridge moved to Norwich to seek asylum.³³ At the time of the Expulsion, 50 to 60 Jews still remained in Norwich.³⁴ Meir's desire to possess Norwich / "Norgitz" as part of his identity bears upon this rich and meaningful past and points toward the purposefulness of adding Norwich / "Norgitz" to his acrostic.

But the history of Norwich was also steeped in a culture of anti-Jewishness. There too the Jews had to defend themselves against the accusations of ritual murder common to other parts of England. In fact, Norwich has the inauspicious distinction of being the first site of a ritual murder tale told in England: "the events of William's life and of his death in 1144" at the hands of Norwich Jews, which was recorded in the twelfth-century monastic chronicle of Thomas of Monmouth, *Life of St. William*.³⁵ Described by Gavin I. Langmuir as "an influential figure in the formation of Western culture," Thomas of Monmouth took a tale about William of Norwich and "created a myth that affected Western mentality from the twelfth to the twentieth century and caused, directly or indirectly, far more deaths than William's murderer could ever have dreamt of committing."³⁶ In the end Thomas of Monmouth's account

³²For information regarding Berakhiah ha-Nakdan, also known as Benedictus le Puncteur (that is, punctuator, massorite, or scribe who puts in the *nikkud* [vowels]), see Curt Leviant, ed. *Masterpieces of Hebrew Literature* (New York: Krav, 1969), pp. 432–33; and Golb, *The Jews in Medieval Normandy*, pp. 324–47.

³³See Joe Hillaby, "Hereford Gold: Irish, Welsh, and English Land—The Jewish Community and Its Clients, 1179–1253, Part I," *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club*, Vol. 44 (1984): 358–419.

³⁴Mundill, *England's Jewish Solution*, p. 18.

³⁵Langmuir, "Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder," *Speculum*, Vol. 59 (1984): 820. See also A. Jessopp and M. R. James, eds., *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich* (Cambridge, Eng., 1896), especially Book I; and John J. McCulloh, "Jewish Ritual Murder: William of Norwich, Thomas of Monmouth, and the Early Dissemination of the Myth," *Speculum*, Vol. 72 (1997): 698–740. The interconnection between Christian and Jewish histories—if we follow the conclusions of Israel Jacob Yuval—are profound. Yuval's conclusions suggest, for instance, that the blood libel accusations actually originate in the practice of *kiddush ha-Shem* (sacification of the Name) in the eleventh century. See Yuval's *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 135–204.

³⁶Langmuir, "Thomas of Monmouth," p. 844. For more on this subject, see Stacey, "Anti-Semitism and the Medieval English State"; and Cohen's fine reading of the postco-

of Jewish involvement in William's death contributed to the suffering medieval Jews endured in the thirteenth century—from unfair taxes and forced baptism, to murder, and ultimately the 1290 Expulsion.³⁷ Such treatment of the Jews complicates Meir's desire to be remembered. As Israel Jacob Yuval states: "Thomas of Monmouth's work should be seen as an attempt to harness to local needs the rumors of the Jews' being a murderous and dangerous element."³⁸ Perhaps because of the suffering of the medieval Jews in thirteenth-century England, Meir's acrostics and his poetry signify a resistance to the erasure of his English identity. "Put a curse on my enemy" immortalizes the more painful past for the Jews of Norwich.

Re-Membering Personal History

"Put a curse on my enemy" includes an autobiographical gesture similar to that in "Who Like You." But the acrostic of "Put a curse on my enemy" is not as self-contained as the one of "Who Like You." "Put a curse on my enemy" concludes "For the End of Sabbaths," and in doing so forms an interdependent relationship between father and son, between poet and community, and between acrostic and poem. These two acrostics, as Einbinder points out, intend to illustrate the drama of *havdalah*, the movement from the beginning to the end of the Sabbath.³⁹ This textual performance—and, thus, the relationship between "Put a curse on my enemy" and "For the End of Sabbaths"—also mirrors Meir's personal drama as he is forced to move from what is known to what is unknown.

Through the margins of these poems, Meir defies erasure of identity and loss of patrimony. The acrostic of "For the End of the Sabbaths" reads מאיר ברבי or "Meir son of Rabbi"; this acrostic awaits, even yearns for, its sister poem, "Put a curse on my enemy," whose margins unfold with אליהו חזק or Elijah Hazak. Meir, managing his and his father's names, as well as his personal

lonial possibilities: "The Flow of Blood in Medieval Norwich," *Speculum*, Vol. 79 (2004): 26–65.

³⁷See Mundill, *England's Jewish Solution*, pp. 272–76.

³⁸Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb*, p. 170.

³⁹Einbinder finds this exhibition of Meir's artistry "striking" and limns his complicated work as a dialogic text that smartly uses his and his father's names to suit the genre of *havdalah* poetry, which signals the close of the Sabbath, by "weaving 'Meir' (literally the 'one who brings light') through the first poem and 'Elijah' (the precursor of the Messiah, summoned at the end of each Sabbath in song) through the second" ("Meir b. Elijah of Norwich," p. 153).

identity, creates a way of locking these poems together. The acrostics, thus, feature a device that marks genealogy: the encrypted words serve to guard the plea of the poet for strength and survival by closing with the word “*hazak*” (“be strong”).⁴⁰ When Meir opens “For the End of Sabbaths” by establishing authorship and signifying kinship, Meir affirms the relative importance of that kinship and his place in the community (the son of an important man [ברבי]).

The acrostic of “Put a curse on my enemy” also advertises genealogy and the complexities of human relationships. The first half of the acrostic enacts remembrance of Meir’s paternity by naming his father, “Elijah,” and thus militating against any forgetfulness about patrimony. The acrostic guards the words of the poet, who is also a son. Meir, thus, intertwines the commandment to remember the relationship between father and son with the bonds to recall the relationship between a poet and his community and the commitment to commemorate medieval Jews in England. The reference to paternity attests to (or even explains) Meir’s having remained a Jew throughout the hardships of the thirteenth century. The column of paternity (Meir son of [a] rabbi) links to “Elijah Hazak” by signaling that Meir came from an intact family, which is an important part of Meir’s personal drama because, as Robert C. Stacey observes, many of the medieval English / Jewish converts were seeking a family whom they had lost.⁴¹ And so, performing as both memory and protection, guarding the *piyyut* with the word “*hazak*,” the second half of the acrostic in “Put a curse on my enemy” serves the community, inspiring strength for survival. In this way Meir’s use of the acrostic underscores the importance of memory and of being re-membered—putting back together the pieces of a nearly lost history.⁴² And, for Meir, re-membering the past is the cord of survivorship, of survival.⁴³ Deftly weaving the past and present tokens of his identity into the margins of these two poems, Meir’s future self (the identity

⁴⁰On the subject of “*hazak*,” see Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, p. 229.

⁴¹See Stacey, “The Conversion of Jews to Christianity in Thirteenth-Century England,” *Speculum*, Vol. 67 (1992): 270–75. A note of thanks is due to Sheila Delany for calling my attention to Stacey’s essay.

⁴²On the issue of Jewish memory, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor* (Seattle, 1989).

⁴³Vera Schwarcz’s remark that “memory matters; it is the cord that attaches hope to despair” indirectly touches Meir’s urgency. See her *Bridge Across Broken Time: Chinese and Jewish Cultural Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 183.

without “Norgitz”) is noticeably absent. The body of “Put a curse on my enemy” addresses this absence.

Meir’s text reveals that encrypting history, like embedding identity, is the important work of a liturgical poem.⁴⁴ Indeed, chronicle accounts, as Robert Chazan has noted, are often “studded with biblical citations and references” because the medieval Jewish chronicles articulated present crises through biblical tropes.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Meir’s impulse to evoke secular and sacred histories would not be realized without the work of his anonymous superscriber who adds a title that expects the rehearsal of events important to thirteenth-century medieval English Jews. The scribe who has composed this title exposes both Meir’s call for strength and Meir’s implicit testimonial of historical events with the words—

מאורה בנגונה על כובד הגלות והרגות הכלה וכליון הממון

[A Light Hymn Sung About the Burden of Exile, Death in Imprisonment, and Depletion of Wealth].

The superscriber clarifies Meir’s memorialization of identity by historicizing the liturgical poem. In this way the composer of the superscription draws on Meir’s need to evade erasure by rehearsing the trauma connected to living in thirteenth-century England.

Among those traumas referenced in the incipit is the notion of גלות or “exile,” which invokes at least two events simultaneously: the Expulsion from Judea in 70 C. E. and the 1290 Expulsion. The effect of this exile erupts in complicated images of violence in “Put a curse on my enemy.” On the one hand, Meir wishes to curse the individuals who are responsible for his woe; on the other hand, he expresses a desire to return home. When Meir writes

הַשֵּׁב הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּיָחוּזוֹ

[Let the King bring home His banished one] (22)

he protests the violent upheaval of his English and Jewish world and introduces the overlap between secular and sacred economies with the word מֶלֶךְ (*melekh*), “King.” “Put a curse on my enemy” implies that both royal powers (*melekh* as God and as Monarch) have the authority to enable the Jewish outcast to return home (to England or to Judea). As a dialogic text that compresses historical and biblical meaning, Line 22 of “Put a curse on my enemy” can also be read to say, “Let the King restore His exile,” translating הַשֵּׁב as “restore”

⁴⁴Einbinder, “Meir b. Elijah of Norwich,” p. 153, provides her reading of the historical echoes.

⁴⁵Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade*, p. 223.

and נִדְחוּ as “exile,” which can signify “outcast,” as well as “banished one.” This word game reveals that Meir cannot accept his forced mobility: Meir remains fixed in between what he cannot return to and what he cannot depart for. L. O. Aranye Fradenburg rightly observes that desiring a mobility that leaves us “unfixed from the place of our loss” is not mobility at all.⁴⁶ Yet this unfixed mobility is the only movement that people in mourning are capable of. Meir’s mourning for what is lost reduces his experiences to what is absent and inaccessible because he can neither embrace his future dwelling nor can he let go of his past home. Neither the new nor the old can be satisfying, and the site of loss becomes the only place Meir occupies.

The expression of mourning and the desire to end exile by returning home also emerges in the line—

ויבֹשֶׁשׁ חֲזוֹן סוֹדָיו וְיִתְמַד כָּל מוֹעֲדָיו

[The vision of His intimates tarries; the predicted time has passed.] (28)

Meir attributes the condition of exile to the King’s “intimates” or counselors סוֹדָיו (*sodav*) and imagines that the “predicted time” or deadlines מוֹעֲדָיו (*moa-dav*) might be forgotten. Meir’s wishful thinking, his plea, once again points towards the importance of a physical home (the antithesis of *galut* / exile) to the poet.⁴⁷ Meir’s wanting to return to a place where he (and the Jews of England) can possess a fraction of some territory indicates that the expulsion was perceived as a type of amputation. The English land, as such, resembles a lost limb that—despite a traumatic haunting—still exists. In this amputation there is a yearning for the lost object and a longing for the return of that lost object.⁴⁸ So when Meir pleads, “Let the King bring home His banished one”—or, alternatively, let the King restore his outcast—and “The vision of His intimates tarries; the predicted time has passed” (see l. 22), a certain cathexis materializes: Meir dreams of an end to exilic Otherness and homeless wanderings of the Jewish people.⁴⁹ This fantasy of return trumps all of the bitterness and betrayal that results from rejection, from expulsion and exile.

⁴⁶Fradenburg, “Be not far from me,” p. 43.

⁴⁷See Einbinder, “Meir b. Elijah of Norwich,” p. 158n58.

⁴⁸I am thinking here of a provocative image introduced by Alan Liu, “The New Historicism and the Work of Mourning,” *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 4 (1996): 553.

⁴⁹For a discussion of cathexis, see Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *Collected Papers*, Vol. IV, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1948), pp. 152–70. Cathexis involves both the denial of loss of a beloved object and a subsequent railing against that object which, in the mind of the melancholic, allowed itself to be lost; the anger results because facing the loss involves recognizing one’s limited power to control loss.

The desire to be whole leads to the hope that a more peaceful existence will follow a return—that once he and the homeless are returned to the (former and inaccessible) territory, the memory of being an outcast will end: like the hope that once a detached limb is re-attached to its body, the limb will no longer feel damaged.

The state of mourning is most evident in the refrain that adopts what Cohen rightly describes as “an incantatory quality” because it (re)surfaces seventeen times in a fifty-one line poem.⁵⁰ The refrain—

אָדיר אַתָּה וְנֹאֹר מִחֹשְׁכִים תְּסוּבֵב לְאוֹר
[You are mighty and full of light, You turn darkness into light]—

introduces the notions most central to and at the same time most performative about “Put a curse on my enemy.” The exchange of hopefulness for hopelessness occurs most visibly in the battle for survival into a theoretical war between the forces of “light” (אוֹר) and “darkness” (מִחֹשְׁכִים) that drive the refrain (and, thus, the context) of “Put a curse on my enemy.” The “darkness” has the power to erase what Meir can claim to have witnessed. To be sure, “Put a curse on my enemy” hinges on the loss of words to express the palpable intensity of darkness and the freedom that light offers. Meir himself inhabits this site where the witness has escaped from complete darkness and is in search of light. For this reason, the space between the safety of home (light) and the dangers of exile (darkness) becomes the touchstone of Meir’s “Put a curse on my enemy.” This image suggests that the pre- and post-Expulsion world has become a jumble of shades.

While the longing to stay in England can suggest a forgetfulness about past mistreatment because of the present (impending) exile, both the incipit and the poem also recall כְּלֵא or “imprisonment,” a possible reference to history of the 1278/79 coin-clipping charges when Jews were wrongly imprisoned:

וַיִּתְּנוּהוּ בְּבֵית הַקְּלֹא וּבְגֹשְׁפוֹ יָקוּ לְאוֹר:
[They put him in prison, where in twilight he hoped for light]. (41)

The verse imagines a man, synecdochally substituting for the English Jews, cloaked under the darkness of night (וּבְגֹשְׁפוֹ) and being led to prison (בְּבֵית הַקְּלֹא). The man is left in prison, uncertain about whether “light” (אוֹר) will win the battle against darkness. The darkness of imprisonment suggests the condition of Jews incarcerated during the coin-clipping trials and falsely accused of

⁵⁰Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain*, p. 177.

having clipped the king's coins.⁵¹ The hopelessness of this situation reached a particular intensity because the accused were not the only ones held on trial: families of the accused (husbands, wives, and children) were imprisoned as well. In all, more than 600 people were imprisoned, and perhaps as many as 293 were hanged.⁵² At least two of the imprisoned Jews sought refuge in conversion, an act not of assimilation but of denial of identity and a desperation to live.⁵³ Meir would have witnessed his neighbors being affected by Edward I's ungrounded accusations. As a case in point, the number of Norwich Jews who were either "executed" or forced "to flee" probably reached a total of sixteen.⁵⁴ At least four Norwich Jews were hanged, one of whom was a woman.⁵⁵

The incipit invokes yet another episode of violence directed against the Jews. *וּכְלִיּוֹן הַמָּמוֹן* or "depletion of wealth" refers to the looting of Jewish wealth. Such looting occurred during both the Expulsion and the coin-clipping trials. H. G. Richardson finds that the homes of those English Jews, imprisoned in the coin-clipping trials, were repeatedly ransacked by the "baser elements of the population," which the authorities did little to prevent.⁵⁶ Cecil Roth presents evidence that at the time of the Expulsion, Edward I ordered that all Jewish property, such as synagogues, cemeteries, houses, and bonds, be forfeited to him.⁵⁷ Thus, in 1290, Jewish property was confiscated without compensation. Meir's poetic response to such robbery emerges as an expression of fury in "Put a curse on my enemy":

⁵¹See Colin Richmond, "Englishness and Medieval Anglo-Jewry," in Tony Kushner, ed., *The Jewish Heritage in British History: Englishness and Jewishness* (London: Frank Cass, 1992); Richmond considers Edward I's acts of anti-Jewish violence, particularly the 1278 massacre, as a model for Philip the Fair (p. 46). See also Langmuir, "Thomas of Monmouth," pp. 845–46; and McCulloh, "Jewish Ritual Murder," pp. 732–40.

⁵²See Zefira Entin Rokeah, "The Expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290 A.D.: Some Aspects and Its Background" (Diss, Columbia University, 1986), pp. 44–49. That husbands were imprisoned, of course, implies that women worked as moneylenders. For more on this subject, see Roth, *A History of the Jews of England*, p. 115, who mentions the names of three prominent women who worked as moneylenders—namely, Belaset of Wallingford, Licoricia widow of David of Oxford, and Margaret daughter of Jurnet of Norwich.

⁵³Stacey, "The Conversion of Jews," pp. 272–73, also makes such an observation.

⁵⁴Lipman, "Anatomy of Medieval Anglo-Jewry," p. 65.

⁵⁵H. G. Richardson, *The English Jewry under Angevin Kings* (London: Methuen, 1960), pp. 218–19.

⁵⁶Richardson, *The English Jewry under Angevin Kings*, p. 218.

⁵⁷Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, p. 88.

אֶת סִגְוֹר הַלְכָּבוֹת קָרַע לִבָּא בְּשִׁמְדֵי הָרָע

[Tear out their hearts—they who brought harm to those who come in Your Name]. (4)

By alluding to the memory of anti-Jewish episodes in thirteenth-century England, the scribal title historicizes Meir's anger. Because the Jews were robbed, as historical records attest, Meir uses his only available weapon, words, to express his desire for revenge. While the origins of this aggression can only be conjectured, invoking "robbery" or "depletion of wealth" in the superscription instantiates the images of brutality. The severity of the loss of control over financial records—although the episode involves a closing up rather than a tearing open—figures as a possible source for the violent wish. Sealing the chests of the Exchequer, in particular, signifies both the end of an already freighted professional relationship and an unbearable betrayal. In fact, in preventing the Jews access to the documents that specified their earnings, the edict authorizes acts of robbery by leaving those chests open to abuse since the Jews lost control over their accounts. The closing of the accounts was, to the Jews, a ripping open and laying bare of Jewish accounts and even Jewish bodies. The Jews were, thus, prey to violence and manipulation.

Myths of Difference

For minority cultures to maintain borders that signify difference and that indicate the uniqueness of their (speaking) identities, writers from the subordinate culture need to embrace the Otherness that their languages signify.⁵⁸ Hebrew served as a distinctive feature of Jewishness throughout the Middle Ages, for as Robin R. Mundill notes, "[t]he Edwardian Jew . . . actively perpetuated an intellectual and literary culture that set him apart from Christian society."⁵⁹ And while Hebrew resonates as Meir's likeliest language choice, Meir, by writing in Hebrew in thirteenth-century Norman England, also claims a difference. Meir's poetic efforts are separate from the texts of the macro-culture. In the end, though, the Hebrew language that Meir composed his poetry in—the natural choice given that he composed religious poetry—simultaneously af-

⁵⁸See David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 110. See also Jonathan Boyarin, *Thinking in Jewish* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 87–107.

⁵⁹Mundill, *England's Jewish Solution*, p. 29.

firms his resistance to erasure, proclaims his Jewish identity, and yet contributes to his continued obscurity.⁶⁰

To understand Meir's Hebrew voice—to acknowledge the position of Hebrew for medieval Jews in a Christian economy (as opposed to a medieval Christian Hebraist's interest in Hebrew)—is to imagine thinking and writing in a language of a subordinate culture. On the one hand, as Cohen remarks, "Latin enabled the Roman church to imagine itself as consisting of a single *gens*. . . . Hebrew meanwhile set apart the Jews. This sacred language was treasured as a divine inheritance, a promised unity to come after long diaspora. Christians in the twelfth century read their Bible in Jerome's Latin; for them Hebrew locked the Jews into a temporality superseded and unredeemed."⁶¹ But, on the other hand, Hebrew enabled writers to retreat from the horrible realities of antisemitic massacres, imprisonment, and robbery. Without these linguistic walls medieval English Jews would feel betrayed—as they most likely did regardless—by the massacres and attacks on their cultural choices.⁶² Marginalized medievals, thus, sought ways to affirm their voices. Latin was the language of the majority, of the Christians; Hebrew was the language of the marginalized Jews.

Theorizing the position of the foreign-speakers, Julia Kristeva finds that the language of the stranger is viewed with fear and treated with contempt. Only spoken in the marginal world occupied by Others, the language of the stranger cannot garner an "outside reality" in the macro-world; the language of the stranger / foreigner will only be allowed voice in the margins of the society.⁶³ Living among the people of a macro-culture while accepting cultural and linguistic marginalization, the Jews of medieval England maintained knowledge of Hebrew, as is evidenced not only by Meir's work but also by the *shet-aroth* or records and "written agreements" of the Jews.⁶⁴ Kristeva's argument

⁶⁰For over 700 years, Meir's poetry, which he presumably hoped would reach the international Jewish community, has remained inaccessible to English speakers because it is written in medieval Hebrew. This silence has disabled non-Hebrew readers and speakers from gaining access to an important artifact of the medieval English Jewry. It was not until Einbinder's translation, published in 2000, that Meir's poem emerged from silence and invisibility.

⁶¹Cohen, *Hybridity, Monstrosity, and Identity*, p. 24.

⁶²See Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade*, pp. 50–84.

⁶³Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 1–40.

⁶⁴M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), p. 202.

also signifies most vividly in the record keeping of the *scaccarium Judaeorum* (Exchequer of the Jews).

Although the Jews lived in England for at least two hundred years, Jews and their language, Hebrew, remained foreign, and Hebrew was kept separate from the official Latin and Anglo-Norman languages. A separate Plea Roll in Hebrew was created, known as the *rotuli Judeorum*, and then appended to the main plea rolls. Not only was the Jewish language segregated, but Jews themselves were also kept apart and “audited by special committees of exchequer officials who kept their own separate rolls of accounts.”⁶⁵ The Latin / Christian and Hebrew / Jewish division—while only on paper—indicates both the Jews’ minority status and their alien nature because of their choice to remain Jews. The segregation of Hebrew in the rolls enables the Exchequer officials to enact a physical separation between the bodies of Christians and Jews. The removal of Hebrew text from the Latin document literally prevents both the graphic and the physical intermingling of languages, cultures and, by extension, belief systems and bodies. So even though the debts recorded in the *archae* (chests containing records of financial agreements) comprised accounts made with Jewish moneylenders, Jews had no real control over their accounts, neither garnering an external power nor claiming a reality outside their local Jewish communities. Jews could not work alongside non-Jews.⁶⁶ As a result, English Jews lost possession of their work, recorded in the deeds and records, after the moneylending effort was completed and, especially, once their expulsion was decreed.⁶⁷

The documents of the Exchequer are not the only sites of linguistic colonization. Even though the scribes may have been aiming to make the Hebrew decipherable, the language referring to and found in the rolls also has the effect of effacing Jewishness. This observation was first made by an eighteenth-century historian of Jewish studies, D’Blossiers Tovey, who in his *Anglia Judaica* opines that “the Jewish Contracts, then, of any kind, when reduc’d to Writing,

⁶⁵Mundill, *England’s Jewish Solution*, p. 29. See also Stacey, *Receipt and Issue Rolls for the Twenty-Sixth Year of the Reign of King Henry III* (London: J. W. Ruddock, 1992), p. xxx.

⁶⁶Stacey, *Receipt and Issue Rolls*, p. xxxi.

⁶⁷For a discussion of the safe-keeping of the *archae*, see Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, who explains that the *archae* became a bureaucratic venture that, at its inception in 1198, employed one Jew and two Christians; after April 1200, when the system of the *archae* evolved into the Exchequer of the Jews, only Christians were employed to oversee the chests and “no Jewish name is included thereafter” (p. 29). See also Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, pp. 62–64; and Mundill, *England’s Jewish Solution*, pp. 57–62.

were, like those of other Men, for the most part, stil'd CHARTÆ, and CHI-ROGRAPHIA, but very often STARRA, or STARRS; from a Corruption of the Hebrew Word שטר *Shetar*, which signifyes a *Covenant*."⁶⁸ "Starrum" (plural, "starra") is a Latin word that denotes financial records of Jewish transactions that were kept in the *archae* in protected buildings (presumably kept from the Jews themselves). The Latin word "starrum" can be characterized as a transliteration of the Hebrew word "shetar," meaning "writ, document, deed, bond, bill." The transliteration, however, conceals the Hebrew word by keeping the general meaning of the Hebrew word yet rendering the word into Latin syntactical form.

Meir would have been well aware of the labor required to retain a Jewish identity. Jews had to resist the cultural script that celebrated sameness not only by maintaining but also by celebrating their alterity. As a member of the Jewish community in Norwich (something that Meir advertises), Meir would have known that the Jews of medieval England were under siege. History is clear on this point: within a few decades after their arrival, the Jews were made to feel unwelcome.⁶⁹ Besides which, governmental policy supported conversion by erecting the *Domus Conversorum* or House for the Converted Jews. In 1232, Henry III opened the *Domus* with the polemic of advocating Jewish conversion to Christianity.⁷⁰ Later, to add insult to injury, Henry III's heir to the throne, Edward I, made the Jews responsible for the maintenance of the *Domus*.⁷¹ But even conversion did not entirely erase the stain of Jewishness from their newly Christianized bodies: "[b]y the middle of the thirteenth century in England, there was clearly an irreducible element to Jewish identity in the eyes of many Christians, which no amount of baptismal water could entirely eradicate. . . . Through baptism, converts from Judaism became Chris-

⁶⁸See Tovey, *Anglia Judaica: or The History and Antiquities of the Jews in England* (1738; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1967), p. 32; text not modernized; italics his.

⁶⁹One horrible episode of violence against the Jews occurred during Richard I's coronation. The violence started on 3 September 1189 in London and spread throughout the kingdom, focusing on urban centers and ending in Bury St. Edmonds on 18 March 1190. For a discussion of Richard I's coronation and the after-effects of the discovery that a few Jews had come to honor their King, see Roth, *A History of the Jews*, pp. 18–20.

⁷⁰Michael Adler, *Jews of Medieval England* (London, Eng.: The Jewish Historical Society of England, 1939), p. 281.

⁷¹See Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich*, p. 37; and Mundill, *England's Jewish Solution*, p. 100.

tians, but this did not mean that they had entirely ceased to be Jews in the eyes of their brothers and sisters in Christ."⁷²

The particular past of the thirteenth-century Jews stretches back to the arrival of the Normans onto the soil of Angle-lond.⁷³ Allowed to enter the English territory shortly after the Norman conquest in 1066, the Jews soon began to immigrate and to make England their new home.⁷⁴ There was at the time a unique relationship established between the Jews of England and the new Anglo-Norman monarchy: "Since Anglo-Saxon law had said nothing about the Jews, the Anglo-Norman kings were able to impose their own definition, with the consequence that in England the legal status of Jews had another peculiarity: they were protected, taxed, and judged only by the king and his officials."⁷⁵ Exile was, thus, not necessarily a negative experience: the Jewish emigration from Rouen, as well as from the Rhineland in the 1090s, to England was, overall, a welcome one. The Jews from Rouen sought new economic opportunities in England, and those fleeing the Rhineland after the 1096 Crusades saw England as a safe haven. The Expulsion from England in 1290, therefore, figured as a betrayal.⁷⁶ Norwich, in particular, housed a scholarly English Jewish community with a history that spanned over a century when Norwich first became home to Jews around 1135—during the end of Henry I's or at the beginning of King Stephen's reign.⁷⁷ The loss of this haven must have been deeply felt.

By the thirteenth century, however, England had become inhospitable. Starting in the 1240s, Jews were subject to conversionist sermons and, in the 1270s, to local expulsions.⁷⁸ Daily life, especially by the thirteenth cen-

⁷²Stacey, "The Conversion of Jews," p. 278.

⁷³The interconnection between the Jews and Normans suggests a fraught past between these groups. Cohen nicely unpacks the Jewish and Norman presence on English soil in "The Flow of Blood in Medieval Norwich," pp. 26–65.

⁷⁴Mundill, *England's Jewish Solution*, p. 16.

⁷⁵Langmuir, "'Tanquam Servi': The Change in Jewish Status in French Law about 1200," in *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, p. 175.

⁷⁶See Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, pp. 4–6.

⁷⁷Hillaby, "Beth Miqdash Me'at: The Synagogues of Medieval England," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 44 (1993): 182; see also Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich*, p. 4. On the date of the general entrance of Jews into England, see Joseph Jacobs, "London Jewry, 1290," *Publications of the Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition*, Vol. 1 (1888): 20–52.

⁷⁸For a discussion of the required attendance at conversionist sermons, see Stacey, "The Conversion of Jews," pp. 267–71 and 280. Mundill, *England's Jewish Solution*, pp. 16–44, discusses the expulsions.

tury in England, forced medieval English Jews to experience the grim reality of persecution first hand. In the initial phase of this internal exile, what Sylvia Tomasch considers the surfacing of postcolonial impulses, the Jews were marginalized within the territory they considered home.⁷⁹ Rendered aliens in medieval English society, bizarre (and impossible) myths were imagined about the Jews. Kruger finds that these inventions underwrote the construction of a spectral Jew, which, in turn, involved the “conjuring up of a Jewish presence in order to subject it to attack and a wished-for disappearance.”⁸⁰ Indeed, the Jews were feared and monsterized just at that moment when the Anglo-Normans were struggling with their own hybridity and desiring to fabricate their (uninterrupted) Englishness.⁸¹

Over time, this state of internal exile erupted in total expulsion. In 1290, under Edward I, the decree was passed to expel all the Jews of England. Legally, the medieval English Jews had to break all physical ties to the English territory, and on 1 November 1290, England acquired the notorious distinction of becoming the first medieval sovereignty to expel all of its Jews. The personal history of Meir of Norwich is bound to the contingencies of exile effected by the 1290 Expulsion of the Jews of England.⁸² Meir’s Hebrew poetry could not, at the time, counter the anti-Jewish martyrologies spread by medieval English Christian histories, such as Thomas of Monmouth’s. But Meir’s work, nevertheless, reveals how important Jewish *and* English identity was for him and thus gives us new insight into medieval English history from an English Jewish perspective so long obscured.⁸³

⁷⁹Sylvia Tomasch, “Postcolonial Chaucer and the Virtual Jews,” in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), pp. 243–60.

⁸⁰Kruger, *The Spectral Jew*, p. xxx. See also Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Lampert [Lampert-Weissig], “The Once and Future Jew: The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, Little Robert of Bury and Historical Memory,” *Jewish History*, Vol. 15 (2001): 235–55; Langmuir, “The Jews and the Archives of Angevin England: Reflections on Medieval Anti-Semitism,” *Traditio*, Vol. 19 (1963): 183–244; and Richmond, “Englishness and Medieval Anglo-Jewry,” pp. 213–27.

⁸¹See especially Cohen’s fine arguments in *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain*.

⁸²A. M. Habermann, “Meir Ben Elijah of Norwich,” believes that Meir composed this poem while on “this exile”; see his piece in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 11 (1972): 1253.

⁸³On this subject of Jewish integration of lived experiences, see Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb*.

Stories silenced by documents that have not been preserved have interfered with Jewish studies of this period. We know very little, for instance, about the daily lives and desires of medieval English Jews, and much of what we do know is gathered from sources that are either Hebrew deeds or monastic history.⁸⁴ Many of our forays into the medieval past involve imagination and finely tuned efforts of reconstruction.⁸⁵ But these efforts are hindered by the inevitable gaps in the records. Too often, specialists who study the Jews in the European Middle Ages ponder the inevitable questions that return us to issues of invisibility and remembrance: why were the Jews brought from Rouen around the time of the Norman invasion of the eleventh century? Why were the English Jews later expelled on the cusp of the thirteenth century? Conclusions about the admittance and expulsion of the Jews compel frequent suppositions about the Jews' integral connections to monarchical finances.⁸⁶ And while such musings are reasonable, they address more global issues, overlooking local expressions of the performance of individual Jewish identities.

Directed toward different paths, this essay has attempted to explicate Meir's resistance to complete erasure, to tell an alternative history to the stories of the hegemony, and to listen for Meir's voice as he speaks through the margins of his poetry. Meir invites us, his (future) readers, to puzzle through such decisions as adding a fairly complex biographical acrostic to his liturgical

⁸⁴See M. D. Davis's שטרות or *Hebrew Deeds of English Jews before 1290* (London: Publication of the Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition, 1888) for a collection of the deeds of the medieval English Jews. Although fraught with Christian anti-Judaism, Matthew Paris's monastic histories also provide some clues about the lives of medieval English Jews: see, especially, Matthew Paris, *Annales Monastici*, Vol. I, ed. Henry Richards Luard (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864).

⁸⁵I am reminded of the words of John Matthews Manly who once remarked that "[w]e shall never succeed in the interpretation of the past without the use of the constructive imagination. Facts are dead and useless until we try to ascertain what they mean. . . . Undoubtedly all of us do, privately and with our intimate friends, form and try out hypotheses of interpretation for which we have scanty evidence. The main value of such hypotheses is that they make us alert to see the significance of facts which has previously passed unobserved or uninterpreted"; see his *Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1926), pp. ix–x. A fine example of this point can be found in an essay by Joseph Jacobs: "Little Hugh of Lincoln," in *Jewish Ideals and Other Essays* (1896; reprint, New York: Freeport, 1972), pp. 202–24.

⁸⁶Stacey, "Parliamentary Negotiation and the Expulsion of the Jews from England," in Michael Prestwich, R. H. Britnell, and Robin Frame, eds., *Thirteenth Century England*, Vol. VI (Rochester: The Boydell Press, 1997), pp. 77–101; and James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 46–55.

verse and in composing poetry in a medieval Hebrew that evinces some linguistic interaction with Anglo-Norman and English languages. And so I ask the questions: How does Meir advertise his identity while he is on the verge of his compelled exile? How does Meir articulate the uniqueness of his identity when faced with ever-increasing hostility from the dominant group? Calling attention to the nearly inaudible voice of Meir of Norwich, this essay joins Meir in his desire to give voice to his memory. Meir writes so that his past will not be entirely forgotten, and as Mundill's history testifies, Meir did, in fact, become a voice of the medieval English Jews.⁸⁷ Meir's text features the process of encoding a memory and, in this way, resists the inevitability of erasure that time, expulsion, and language necessitate.



The research into and writing of this essay were made possible through two summer research grants from the University of Dayton, one from the Women's Center and the second from the Research Council. For their generous help with revision, I wish to thank Roger Dahood, Patricia Clare Ingham, Lisa Lampert-Weissig, Simone Sofian, Kenneth Stow, Margaret Strain, and Chava Weissler and most especially of all Matthew Adkins, who has read and responded to many drafts of this essay. "Meir b. Elijah of Norwich and the Margins of Memory" is dedicated to my daughter Yetta Zipporah.

⁸⁷Mundill, *England's Jewish Solution*, p. 29.