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Rights, Rites, Writes Talk

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“‘Imprints and Impressions: Milestones in Human Progress,’ Time, and The Question Mark”

[FIRST SLIDE]

I have a confession to make: I love books. And I will protect them at all costs. I am concerned about their intransigent nature and how quickly they can be made into kindle for fire. I take us to Paris in 1242 when a book was put on trial. This book, the Talmud, is no ordinary book and is the home to Jewish law and interpretations of that law. These Talmud trials, orchestrated by Nicholas Donin, a disaffected Yeshiva scholar and a Jewish convert who later became a Franciscan Friar, undermined Augustine’s famous decree, “*sicut Judaeis*” or “slay them not,” which only protected Jews insofar as Jews were testimonials to a Mosaic law, untainted by medieval modernity. The appearance of a new law in the Talmud interfered with the Jews continuing to serve as the living embodiments of Mosaic law, as Bernard de Clairvaux imagined Jews (Cohen, *Living Letters*, 361). The Talmud trials ended with the Talmud being found guilty and “24 cartloads of Talmudic works were burned in Paris in 1242.”¹ In the end—over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—thousands of Talmuds were burnt not only by the Franciscan order but also by the Dominican order who joined in Franciscans in their efforts of condemning, ultimately, the medieval Jews for “having deserted the biblical religion” (Cohen, 313). So, as a medievalist, I am particularly aware of the intransigence of books. Like

¹ Judah M. Rosenthal, “Nicholas Donin,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. Vol. 5 (750). Information also taken from Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law* (University of California Press, 1999).

humans and like all good things on this Earth, books are, alas, so burnable, so fragile, so impermanent. [SECOND SLIDE] In a recent piece written for the *University of Dayton Quarterly* about the Stuart Rose exhibit, Interim Provost Paul Benson points out this condition of physical frailty, noting that books are intransient things visiting us only for a short time, in his words “fragile, all-too-transient objects” (26).²

And Paul Benson’s point brings me to the topic of this talk today. Why, if books are intransigent, do we forge such strong relationships with them? Why has Stuart Rose sought out books, collected volume upon volume of texts at such a cost to his income? Stuart Rose considers himself—and I quote Rose here—a “temporary custodian of the books” in his possession (13 Sept. 14). David De Simone, a former UD MA who now works for the Folger Library in Washington, DC, tells tales of people going broke collecting books. So why might books be so important to humans (16 Oct. 2014)? Why am I filled with despair when I think of all those burnt Talmuds? All those books burned by the Nazis? Like Interim Provost Benson and Professor Sutherland who joins me in this Rights, Rites, Writes presentation today, books were my childhood secret sharer: I developed dreams around them and passionate readings of the world because of them. I find it fascinating that Dr. Sutherland, captivated by Geoffrey Chaucer’s bawdy “Miller’s Tale in translation,” as she explains on her youtube piece as part of the Stuart Rose online exhibit, felt driven to learn Middle English—the version of fourteenth-century English in which Chaucer wrote—because of her encounter with a book. Benson recalls, in his piece, “Books and Our Human Stories,” an episode in his two-year-old life when he sought out and deshelled, as it were, his parents’ priceless and hefty set of *The Great Books of the Western World*. His vivid remembrances of this event linger because he touched—at that two-

² I am quoting from the Autumn 2014 issue.

year-old moment—the enormity of human creativity. And I, remember lingering on my parents’ *big, big* bed one morning when I was sick and home from school and staring at the titles on the bookshelf that doubled as their headboard. I remember being intrigued by two titles in particular and pulling them off the shelf: *Tar Baby* and *Song of Solomon*, both by an author with a tantalizing non-gender specific name—Toni Morrison. I was fourteen and a freshman in high school and suffering from, what I would soon learn was, mononucleosis. I remember wondering what was meant by “tar baby.” The daughter of two Jewish atheists, I knew little of who Solomon was or why he had a song. But I never forgot these books: what they looked like, what I learned from them, and how amazed I was when their author was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Neither Dr. Sutherland, Interim Provost Benson, nor I knew then what we would later learn about the literate world and the roles we would perform in that world of literacy—namely, that one day we would earn PhD’s and then one day find academic posts in a university.

Human interaction with books suggest that books have awesome power. But before talking about their awesomeness, I want to return to Dr. Benson’s comments about the transient nature of books. Yes, like human beings, books can only linger on this Earth for a set number of years. Printed books are especially prone to a shelf life that, although surpassing that of most humans, is certainly nowhere near the age span of the papyrus of *The Book of the Dead* on exhibit or the vellum of medieval manuscripts. For instance, the fourteenth-century vellum scribal version of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* will likely outlive the printed copy from 1492 that is on display in the Stuart Rose exhibit, “Imprints and Impressions: Milestones in Human Progress” because animal skin lingers longer than paper, so unlike humans, really old books can outlive their younger cohort.

Age is one reason that books are impermanent fellow travelers, yet there are other reasons that books have shortened life spans. I am thinking of what books are subject to when they make contact with humans. Books have been deemed so dangerous by some that they have been both censored and burnt. Think then of the implication in these acts that books garner an immense power. As the Talmud trials and subsequent book burnings of thirteenth and fourteenth centuries has taught us, if books stand trial, they will likely be found guilty because, as history has shown us, a book is more likely to be censored or burnt than to be passed over. [**THIRD SLIDE**] Let's think about the act of censorship for a moment, about why we might advocate for a books' permanent or temporary silencing. At least three of the books in the Stuart Rose exhibit are censored: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain—racially offensive—*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison—profanity and violence—*Lord of the Rings* by J. R. Tolkein—satanic. Still, others of us read and love these books. In fact, each of us can probably claim some purchase on a censored book, but I think more locally of my colleague, Dr. Sutherland's affection for the bawdy "Miller's Tale."

[**FOURTH SLIDE**] And so, I bring us to Geoffrey Chaucer through Dr. Sutherland's story about learning Middle English in order to read Chaucer's bawdy tale in its original Middle English. Chaucer himself was prepared for accusations against his tale that is both a bawdy story and a narrative that disrupts the social order. Here's the backstory to my point: After the Knight finishes his "noble storie" (I 3111), Harry Bailey, the host of the pilgrimage, calls on the Monk to tell the next tale. The order of the medieval estates defines this imperative: first monarchy, then nobility and church officials, and finally everyone else. The Miller is part of this social class I am calling, "everyone else," and there are many individuals on the Canterbury pilgrimage who, by the constraints and laws of the social structure, should tell their tale before the Miller. But the

Miller is inconsolable . . . and drunk; in fact, he might even fall off his horse, he is so inebriated. But a complexity arises because of this drunk nobody: the Miller insists that he will tell his tale and that his voice will be heard; Harry Bailey tries to distract him from this desire; tempers flare; the Miller wins the rhetorical battle:

“By armes, and by blood and bones,
I kan a noble tale for the nones,
With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale.”
Oure Hooste saugh that he was dronke of ale,
And seyde, “Abyd, Robyn, my leeve brother;
Som better man shal telle us first another.
Abyd, and lat us werken thriftily.”
“By Goddes soule,” quod he, “that wol nat I;
For I wol speke or ells go my wey.” (I 3125-3133)

The Miller tells his tale so that the pilgrimage community can remain intact. In this moment of social disruption, we witness a largely invisible milestone of human progress. Not because the “Miller’s Tale” is bawdy but because the Miller interrupts a long cherished Norman custom of maintaining order and privilege. In telling his tale, the Miller effectively hurls one enormous brick at that wall of order and privilege and rends a crack in that social structure that will later implode in the work of Karl Marx (an author also on exhibit).

[FIFTH SLIDE] Chaucer adds another reason for our not censoring the “Miller’s Tale”:
human choice. Chaucer tells us, if you don’t like something in a book, “Turne over the leef and
chese another tale” (I 3177), because, he explains

I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they better or werse,
Or ells falsen som of my mateere.
And therefore, whose list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thing that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys. (I 3173-81)

Books should not be censored; they should not be burnt. Follow the practice that Chaucer
advocates: turn over the leaf and choose another tale. I deeply cherish these words of Chaucer’s.
As I said at the beginning, I *love* books. I advocate for them whenever I can and cherish their
physicality, their tactility. I particularly have a fondness for the ones with fictions that lie
dormant until I awaken them from their slumber as I unlock their mysteries and connect with
them “through time, space, meaning, and value,” as Paul Benson writes, “to create shared spaces
for exploration, imagination, creation and discovery, both here and now and stretched across
time” (24, 27).

I *love* books. And I love sharing my readings of these books with my medievalist colleagues and my engaged students. There is, therefore, much that I love in the Stuart Rose exhibit: the early feminist urges surfacing in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*; the desires for equality and freedom expressed by the Black slave, Phillis Wheatley, and the visible-invisible Black man, Ralph Ellison; [SIXTH SLIDE] the personal joy I experience in seeing texts in Hebrew sitting alongside texts in Arabic. These little pleasures are matched only when I think of how time has preserved two medieval Hebrew texts so that they can sit next to two other early texts that house antisemitic stories. In fact, I became first an early modernist and then later a medievalist because of these antisemitic narratives.

So on one level it would seem—if a young woman has to read anti-Judaic stories—that books are actually quite dangerous, harmful, and hurtful. Yes? In fact, the Hebrew texts themselves have backstories that remind us to be cautious about the subtitle to the Stuart Rose exhibit: “Milestones in Human Progress.” Last semester, a colleague of mine in the Philosophy Department, Dr. Gabbe, expressed concern about the title of this book exhibit.³ I suggested adding a question mark so that the title would read “Imprints and Impressions: Milestones in Human Progress?” The question mark, though, does more than change my intonation at the end of this title; the question mark asks us, “What is human progress?” “How far have we progressed?” My talk will now address these questions, departing not from my love of books but rather changing the way I converse with them and sharing with you my impressions of these imprints.

³ Dr. Gabbe has given me permission to use her name in this talk.

The two Hebrew books in the exhibit are the ca. 1469 edition of Moses Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and a 1505 copy of Don Isaac Abravenel's *Zevach Pesach* or "The Passover Sacrifice." Both of these Hebrew books tell stories about the authors' commitments to Judaism, their Jewish faith, and philosophical dialogue. Both authors wrote their works despite continuous exile and anti-Jewish hate. Both authors are Sephardic Jews. [SEVENTH SLIDE] Maimonides, who lived from 1135 to 1204, wrote *The Guide of the Perplexed* because he was invested in illustrating that the Ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle's, work spoke to the Jewish tradition.⁴ Moses b. Maimon was born in Cordova, but he and his family were forced to flee Cordova in 1148. As exiles, Moses and his family also became wanderers as they then moved from one city to another in Spain as they first sought refuge and then had to flee (Weinstein, 16). In 1159, they left Spain for good and landed in Fez, Morocco (Weinstein, 16). In 1165 or 1166, Maimonides ended his wanderings in Cairo, Egypt, where in 1190 he wrote *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Weinstein, 17, 21). [EIGHTH SLIDE] Don Isaac Abravenel, the author of the other Hebrew text on exhibit, was familiar with Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* (Sarachek, 25), and this connection is only one of the ways that Maimonides and Abravenel touch each other. Another similarity is the Sephardic connection: Abravenel's father also emigrated from Seville, Spain to Lisbon, Portugal, where Don Isaac Abravenel was born in 1437. And like Maimonides, Abravenel's life also unfolded as that of a Sephardic exile: "welcome then ejected, fleeing from one country to another, from city to city, hunted by one king, invited by another, falling from honor to disgrace, passing from wealth to poverty" (Sarachek, 17). In 1483, Abravenel collected two of his three sons and his wife and fled Portugal for Segura de la Orden in Spain (JS, 32), and then fled there to go to Toledo (JS, 39). The 1492 Edict of Expulsion for the Jews of Spain, of

⁴ Joshua Weinstein, *Maimonides the Educator* (Pedagogic Library, 1970).

course, spelled another departure. Abravenel landed with his family in Naples, where he composed *Zevach Pesach* (JS, 50) in 1496 as he attempted “to distinguish among different degrees of the miraculous,” as Seymour Feldman describes (9).⁵ In essence, Abravenel ponders the miracles of the Passover story, especially the Ten Plagues and the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds in his *Zevach Pesach*. For a philosopher positioned as a continuous exile, the Passover story has obvious attractions. And now, back to Abravenel’s wanderings. Naples did not long remain a welcoming home to Abravenel, and our writer once again flees—this time to Sicily, and then from Sicily to Corfu, but at the end of his life, Abravenel returns to Sicily and there dies in 1503. In his biography of Don Isaac Abravenel, Joseph Saracheck categorizes Abravenel’s works as “Bible Commentaries,” which were largely “lectures delivered to student and lay groups in Portugal, Spain, and Italy” (Saracheck, 24); “Philosophic Works”; “Messianic Works,” and “Miscellaneous” (213) of which *Zevach Pesach* was one. Maimonides lived in the Middle Ages, but Abravenel lived in a border time: the Middle Ages were coming to a close, and the early modern times were beginning.⁶ Both Maimonides and Abravenel suffered the indignities of antisemitism in their lives. And, to me quite compelling, both scholars works are exhibited with the voices of antisemitism of their age [NINTH SLIDE] : Chaucer, the medieval, Shakespeare, the early modern. I speak directly of Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Prioress’s Tale” in the *Canterbury Tales* and of William Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* in the Second Folio.

For the rest of the talk, I will introduce you to these works and bring us from them to Anne Frank and the dreams she expresses in her diary before her life was cut short by the discovery of her family’s secret hiding place and her death in Bergen-Belsen.

⁵ Feldman, *Don Isaac Abravenel: Defender of the Faith* (Routledge, 2003).

⁶ This is a point that Joseph Saracheck makes *Don Isaac Abravenel*, p. 14, and I am paraphrasing Saracheck.

On exhibit we can see one of the two most visible women on Chaucer's fictional *Canterbury Tales* pilgrimage: the Wife of Bath [TENTH SLIDE]—a character that two twentieth-century critics, I speak of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, immortalized as the example of an early feminist in their *Madwoman in the Attic*. [ELEVENTH SLIDE] The other woman, the Prioress, appears in the pages of Paul Benson's *University of Dayton Magazine* [TWELFTH SLIDE]: the Prioress. The Prioress is very clear about her antisemitism. [THIRTEENTH SLIDE] Her tale positions itself at the start with a certain rhetorical gesture against Jews: [FOURTEENTH—Prioress in Middle English—THEN FIFTEENTH SLIDES]

Ther was in Asye, in a greet citee,
Amonges Cristene folk a Jewerye,
Sustened by a lord of that contree
For foule usure and lucre of vileynye,
Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye;
And thurgh the strete men myghte ride or wende,
For it was free and open at ether ende. (VII 488-94)

While the direction of the hate can be interpreted slightly ambiguously—are the Jews or the usury “hateful to Christ”?—there is no doubt that Jews are in Jewish quarters, a “Jewerye,” which scholars have debated over whether this Jewerye is an early harbinger of the actual ghetto that will appear in Venice, Italy around 1516, or just a free and willing collocation of like-minded folk. Either way, Jews are located in one area—whether by force or by choice, we don't

know—and deployed as financial servants. And the story worsens for the Jews from these first seven lines of the poem to the end, where all the Jews of this Jewerye, presumably children, women, and men, are dragged through the streets with wild horses and then hanged (VII 633-34). The “Prioress’s Tale” belongs to a genre of anti-Judaic stories that were circulating in Maimonides’s time.

[SIXTEENTH SLIDE] During Abravenel’s period, the anti-Judaic legends had advanced somewhat, and William Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* embodies the best example of that advancement. When Shylock opines the unfortunate nature of his condition as always Othered from the community, only allowed to serve as a usurer but then hated—and called a “misbeliever, cutthroat dog” (I.iii.106)—for lending money, readers, and I am one, can find a space where there is possible sympathy for Shylock’s struggle and his human condition. The “he” in this quotation is more directly Antonio, but more globally represents all people who treat Shylock or the Jews injudiciously:

[SEVENTEENTH SLIDE]

He hath disgraced me . . . laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains,
Scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated
My enemies; and what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?
Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?
Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same
diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter
and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle
us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us,

shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. (III.i. 45-57)

And Shylock *is* tested. His enemy, Antonio, borrows money even though he is broke; his daughter, Jessica, runs off with one of the boys who had mocked and despised Shylock; he is told that Jessica sold his wife's wedding ring; and all of this hate and horror culminates in a trial where Shylock is stripped of his Jewish identity and left without a community: shunned by the Christian community, excommunicated from the Jewish community, without a daughter or any friends, Shylock is alone. Palpably alone.

[EIGHTEENTH SLIDE] My last final Stuart Rose text to discuss is Anne Frank's *Diary*, which her father Otto Frank, after he alone of his wife and two daughters, survives the death camps, only to discover that a journal his daughter, Anne, had kept had been preserved by a righteous gentile. Anne's is a story of survival and of loss, a story of a young girl who forges on with her life despite violence and hate for Jews. Anne dreams of a different world where women have more power and influence; Anne reads difficult books and writes commentaries and creative pieces as did Maimonides and Abravenel. Anne hopes that one day the world will be a better place; Anne hopes that one day she will live. The last words she writes are I "keep trying to find a way to become what I'd like to be and what I could be if . . . if only there were no other people in the world" (331). I "keep trying to find a way to become what I'd like to be and what I could be if . . . if only there were no other people in the world."

Is Anne's wish justified: does the world have to be bereft of people to allow a young Jewish girl to explore her identity?

The question that I want to submit to you and the one with which I would like to end this talk is as simple as it is complex: can we learn from what we have not censored, from those pages we have *not* turned, and if we can learn from those pages we have read carefully—those pages that we have taken out of the background and placed in the forefront—dare we hope that our future will be different from our past? Even if our Earth is peopled with adversaries? Perhaps, the milestones of human progress may not be the ones we have witnessed but the ones that are still to come. It is with the possibility for such a future that holds true milestones that I hope for and aspire to.