“HIM JESUS, THAT JEW”!—REPRESENTING JEWISHNESS
IN THE YORK PLAYSL

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[O]n the seventeenth day before the calends of April, being the sixth day before Palm Sunday, the Jews of the city of York, in number five hundred men, besides women and children, shut themselves up in the tower of York [...] in consequence of their dread of the Christians. [...] Each master of a family, beginning with the chief persons of his household, with a sharp knife first cut the throats of his wife and sons and daughters, and then of all his servants, and lastly his own. Some of them also threw their slain over the walls among the people. [...] Those who had slain the others were afterwards killed by the people. [...] All the Jews in the city of York were destroyed, and all acknowledgments of debts due to them were burnt.2

1 “Him Jesus, that Jew” are words spoken by Judas in “The Conspiracy,” l.127. From here onwards all references to the York Plays will be cited in the body of the essay by line numbers and taken from the York Mystery Plays, eds. Richard Beadle, and Pamela L. King (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). All translations of this play are my own and follow Beadle's glossary. The early ideas for this essay were hatched during the 2003 NEH Institute at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, entitled “Representations of the ‘Other’: Jews in Medieval Christendom” (9 July to 13 August 2003). I extend my greatest debt of gratitude to Irv Resnick for organizing a marvelous institute in 2003. I wish also to thank the NEH for providing the financial support necessary to make study at this institute possible. One expected outcome of the institute was a syllabus, and I designed one entitled “The Medieval Postcolonial Jew,” which I taught to two communities of undergraduates and to a fine group of graduate students. I am particularly grateful to students in these three classes whose compelling conversations about matters medieval and postcolonial enabled me to work out my ideas about these seemingly disparate but also deeply connected subjects. Among all my students, these four were the most involved in my project: Abbe Adre, Eli Galayda, Katie Faraone, and Wanda Huber, and I thank them for their lively responses to my questions. “The Medieval Postcolonial Jew” is also the provisional title of my second book, and my work in this essay will figure in that book. A special thanks is due to Kristine Utterback and Merrall Price whose careful reading of my prose compelled me to expressions of clarity where I had been unwittingly unclear. This essay is dedicated to Rhoda Soloway who first encouraged me to allow the practical work of the classroom to have an impact on the theoretical world of scholarship. Without Rhoda’s encouragement this piece would not be. All mistakes are my own.

Once again, Jewish death results in Christians being free from their debts. Thus Roger of Hoveden documents a trauma that cut deeply into the history of twelfth-century York. Roger of Hoveden’s solemn and sobering account is not the only chronicle of this event; another twelfth-century chronicler, William of Newburgh, tells the story in equally emotional language. In William’s account, Jewish deaths occurred amidst raging flames, ending only the following dawn when the Jews were promised “clemency” in return for baptism; as the survivors left the castle, the “cruel butchers” slaughtered them all. After this episode of Jewish immolation, the chancellor of the king traveled to York and tried to unearth the cause of the massacre at Clifford’s Castle. With this trip the chancellor intended to reconcile how the Jews’ flight for sanctuary concluded, instead, in martyrdom and death. But such closure was not meant to be; the chancellor’s mission was unsuccessful. He failed to arrest the “cruel butchers”—the men whose actions prompted the antisemitic outburst that precipitated the Jews’ eventual act of kiddush ha-Shem (ritual suicide). The chancellor of York thus closed his case without achieving any resolution and without trying those who had participated in the murder of the Jews of York.

The chancellor’s failed investigation epitomizes the early response that would embed trauma into the history of York, enabling the massacre of the Jews to resonate with “an interrogative force, imbuing the impossible, unceasing communication between the dead and the living, the past and the present with fearful intimacy.” That is, the slain Jews of the Clifford’s Tower massacre become specters, haunting the roads and byways of York. The traumatic memory of Jewish death resonates as an open wound—

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4 Another well remembered event of kiddush ha-Shem [martyrdom for the sake of Jewishness or God] occurred in 1096 in the Rhineland. The Jews of the Rhineland were attempting to escape certain death at the Crusaders’ swords by choosing their own death. See Robert Chazan, European Jewry and the First Crusade (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Chazan provides two narratives of the Rhineland massacres (“S” and “L”); see 225–97. See also Lee Patterson, “The Living Witnesses of Our Redemption: Martyrdom and Imitation in Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale,” Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 31 (2001), 507–60; Patterson studies the “historical layering” (255) of the Prioress’s Tale and reflects on its intersections with the Rhineland Jews’ act of kiddush ha-Shem. Christian behavior can be likened to acts of super-obedience. On the subject of super-obedience, see Slavoj Žižek, The Plague of Fantasies (New York: Verso, 1997), esp. 54.
