

Dr. Liora Brosh

Antisemitism in British Literature: The Tradition and its Contemporary Legacy

This course studies antisemitism in the British literary canon and in contemporary British drama. The course will note the centrality of antisemitic discourses to the British literary tradition and then move on to study how this legacy is shaping contemporary British theatre. We will begin by studying the antisemitic texts of three of the greatest British writers, Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, and Charles Dickens. We will together identify key motifs in the antisemitic discourses of “The Prioress’s Tale”, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Oliver Twist*. After studying Chaucer’s blood libel, we will examine Shakespeare’s use of Christian antisemitic themes in *The Merchant of Venice*, especially the identification of Jews as being of the flesh, and the law, rather than the spirit. We will also study Shakespeare’s emphasis on Shylock’s vengefulness, his being a Jew without mercy. We will then study Dickens’s depiction of Fagin, the corruptor of Christian children’s souls in *Oliver Twist*. We will also discuss the Victorian tendency to depict Jewish men in sexually ambiguous or perverse ways. Once we have analyzed these examples of Medieval, Renaissance and Victorian British antisemitism, we will move on to study contemporary antisemitism. We will begin by studying the 1948 David Lean film adaptation of *Oliver Twist*, a film banned in the United States for its antisemitism until 1951. We will examine how the creation of Israel created a new type of character, one described by the film’s actors as “not Jewish, but rather, a Middle Easterner from the East End.” After discussing the shift in antisemitic tropes that occurs with the establishment of Israel, we will study 3 contemporary plays about Jews, David Hare’s *Via Dolorosa*, Caryl Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children*, and *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. Our goal will be to examine where there are continuities and discontinuities in the antisemitic discourses of British literary works.

Course Requirements:

Brief Presentations	20%
Seminar Paper (20-30 pages)	55%
Final Exam	25%

Required Texts:

David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: A History of a Way of Thinking*

Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England*

Robert Wistrich, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, the Jews, and Israel*

Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body*

Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People*

Stephen Greenblatt, “Shakespeare and Shylock”

Heng, Geraldine, “England’s Dead Boys: Telling Tales of Christian-Jewish Relations Before and After the First European Expulsion of the Jews”

Excerpts from The Gospel of St. Matthew

Excerpts from Epistle to the Romans

Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Prioress’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales*

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*

David Hare, *Via Dolorosa*

Caryl Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children*

My Name is Rachel Corrie

Recommended Texts:

Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*

Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

Part 1: The Canon

Week 1: Judaism in the Gospel of Matthew and the Epistle to the Romans.

David Nirenberg, Chapter 2: Early Christianity: The Road to Eummaeus, the Road to Damascus

Week 2: The Blood Libel

Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Prioress’s Tale”

Scheidlin, Chapter 5 “The Jews of Medieval Christian Europe”

Week 3: The Impact of antisemitism on real Jews: Letters from Medieval British Jews (Primary sources)

[I am here putting links to primary sources from Germany, since I cannot now find similar material from England. This is an example of the type of primary source material I will include. The goal is to give students a sense of the real world impact of antisemitic stories

like “The Prioress’s Tale”.]

Albert of Aix and Ekkehard of Aura: [Emico and the Slaughter of the Rhineland Jews](#).

Soloman bar Samson: [The Crusaders in Mainz](#), 1096, written in mid 12th century

Week 4: *The Merchant of Venice* Act I-III- “The letter killeth but the spirit giveth life” Christian anti Judaism in Shakespeare

Week 5: *The Merchant of Venice* Act IV-V: The vengeful Jew and the merciful Christian

David Nirenberg, Chapter 8 “Which is the merchant here and which the Jew?": Acting Jewish in Shakespeare’s England”

Week 6: Cleaning Up Shakespeare? Contemporary Productions of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Week 7-8: *Oliver Twist*

Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, excerpts

Week 9: David Lean's *Oliver Twist* 1948

Part 2: Contemporary Echoes

Week 10: Contemporary antisemitism and Israel.

A Short History of the Jewish People, Chapter 10, "Zionism and the Origins of the State of Israel"

Robert S. Wistrich, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, The Jews, and Israel* Introduction

Week 11: David Hare *Via Dolorosa*.

Screening: Pierre Rehov *The Road to Jenin*

Wistrich, "Great Britain: A Suitable Case for Treatment" in *Ambivalence*

Week 12: Caryl Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children*

Robert Wistrich, "The Holocaust Inversion of the Left" in *Ambivalence*

Week 13: Caryl Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children*

Anthony Julius, Chapter 5 "Modern English Anti-Semitism"

Week 14: The sanctification of the anti-Israel activist. *My Name is Rachel Corrie*

Anthony Julius, Chapter 6 "The Mentality of Modern English Anti-Semitism"

Week 15: Final Exam