JUDAS, A MEDIEVAL OTHER? RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND GENDER IN THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY MIDDLE ENGLISH JUDAS

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Summary

The article commences with a discussion of the otherness of medieval literature in comparison with the texts from other epochs. The topic of otherness also appears in medieval texts. The religious, ethnic, and gender difference of Judas is complemented by that of his “sister”, who similarly to him illustrates the anti-Judaic stereotypes of the epoch. In the thirteenth-century poem Judas, however, remains a universal figure, since he is one of many traitors and sinners, while his “sister” univocally embodies the type known as la juive fatale. Judas’ effeminacy, both psychological and physical, seems to be only one of many diverse aspects of that complex literary construct. The equivocal nature of representing Jews in Middle English literature is best exemplified by the fourteenth-century romance The Siege of Jerusalem, but even this text features the topic of weakness, if not effeminacy, of that ethnic group in their confrontation with the Romans. Judas, a text more complex in that respect from The Siege of Jerusalem, emphasizes religious, ethnic, and gender difference, but also presents the main character as an everyman, allowing its modern readers to explore the sphere of medieval imagination to a greater extent.

Streszczenie

Artykuł rozpoczyna się tezę o odmienności (otherness) literatury średniowiecznej na tle innych epok, która to inność jest również tematem niektórych utworów średniioangielskich. Judasz, odmienny pod względem religijnym, etnicznym i płciowym, ma w tym utworze także „siostrę”, która tak jak on ilustruje antyżydowskie stereotypy epoki. Judasz jest jednak w tym utworze także postacią uniwersalną, jednym z licznych zdrajców i grzeszników otaczających Jezusa, podczas gdy jego „siostra” jednoznacznie uosabia typ postaci znany jako la juive fatale.
Zniewieścienie Judasza (psychiczne, ale może również fizyczne) wydaje się tylko jedną stroną tej złożonej konstrukcji literackiej. Typowy dla innych utworów średnioangielskich brak jednoznaczności w przedstawianiu Żydów dobrze ilustruje czternastowieczny romans Oblężenie Jeruzalem (The Siege of Jerusalem), ale nawet tam pojawia się motyw nie tyle zniewieścienia, co słabości tej grupy społecznej w konfrontacji z Rzymianami. Judasz, tekst bardziej skomplikowany od Oblężenia, uwypukla różnice religijne, etniczne i te dotyczące płci kulturowej, ale też pokazuje główna postać jako rodzaj everymana, pozwalając współczesnym czytelnikom głębiej wniknąć w sferę średniowiecznej wyobraźni.
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Exploration of the phenomenon of alterity and, subsequently, of the responses to it, appears particularly pertinent in reference to the epoch which, according to Thomas Hahn, emblematizes otherness itself. Hahn diagnoses the medieval alterity as a result of “the harmlessness of medieval studies, the foreignness of medieval texts”; in the modern world the Middle Ages thus symbolically represent otherness as such\(^1\). That situation leads to a curious intermingling of both alterities, that of the scholarly discipline at play and that residing in the texts under the analysis, in the case of scrutinizing such texts as the thirteenth-century \textit{Judas}\(^2\). In \textit{Judas} the archetypal traitor of Christ is paired with an enigmatic character introduced to the audience under the name of his sister, both of whom embody anti-Judaic stereotypes: those of effeminate men and treacherous beautiful women representing that religious and ethnic group. Nevertheless, despite the venomous anti-Judaic overtones transparent in the poem, Judas’s female-like portrayal signals all human weaknesses in the face of temptation, even though Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou claims that


\(^{2}\) I will quote \textit{Judas} from \textit{Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology} edited by Davies, where the text is entitled \textit{Judas Sells his Lord}, and give the numbers of the lines in brackets; still, I will use the traditional title kept in other anthologies; see \textit{Judas Sells his Lord} in \textit{Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology}, ed. R.T. Davies, London 1963, pp. 75–77.
the “story of how Judas came to betray his lord... is scarcely appropriate for emotional identification – especially since the main subject of the story, Judas himself, is not a proper personage for the devout Christian to identify with”\(^3\). Even more significantly, in the ballad in question responsibility for the act of betrayal is transferred also onto other characters appearing in it, thus exposing the shallowness of identifying Judas as the only agent in the narrative of Christ’s torment and death and contributing to the effect of the poem’s universalism. The betrayal of Judas, here more effeminate than expected, only signals the advent of multiple treasons of the Lord, including those symbolically committed by sinning Christians in all the epochs to come. Religious and ethnic alterity matters perhaps, as the two could not be set apart in medieval times, but it does not determine all human attitudes in the text in question. In this sense the anonymous author overcomes anti-Judaic prejudice and presents his audience with a fairly complex accusation of humanity as such, regardless of their religious and ethnic background. The questions of Judas’s alterity and the story’s universality are thus constantly renegotiated in the poem.

As for Christian anti-Judaic attitudes, they could usually find their full expression in narrating the story of the treacherous disciple of Jesus, be it in the form of visual representations or literary texts\(^4\). Medieval visual arts are replete with portrayals of Judas as the arch-Jew, the embodiment of all the evil allegedly characterizing that ethnic group\(^5\). One of the miniatures illustrating the manuscript of Peter Comestor’s *Historia evangelica* (from the Karlsruhe Landesbibliothek, Cod. Tenn. 8, folio 75) conveys that message when it depicts Judas as the figure informing the Jews in conical hats about the place of Jesus’ stay in Jerusalem\(^6\). Coins are dropped by the Phar-

\(^3\) K. Boklund-Lagopoulou, “I have a yong suster”. *Popular Song and the Middle English Lyric*, Dublin 2002, p. 54.


ises to Judas in return for the information, while the coins were perhaps identifiable by medieval Europeans as similar to those they themselves used. The miniature in question would thus include elements of what Andrzej Dąbrówka defines as “presentism”: the situation when “physical and historical time may be ignored with the result being a sort of simultaneity we know from medieval non-perspectivic pictures, putting different time layers into one view”7. The presentism results in the phenomenon when “thanks to this access to the reality out there, it appears or becomes closer. When a text aims not at simple information, but at the formation of the soul, the effects of proximity become exceptionally effective”8. Hence even the visual text including anti-Judaic message entails a degree of universality. Evoking Poteet’s example of presentism which Dąbrówka uses and which is particularly relevant for our discussion here, “as soon as one sees that Judas has been paid with the same money one has in his or her purse, one should feel a little uneasy”9. The ethnicity of the traitor may partly lose its significance since all viewers have the chance of imagining the situation of the one who declared his devotion to Jesus and then betrayed him, merely for the want of profit in the story narrated by the miniature (while in Judas he is not motivated by greed, as Boklund-Lagopoulou emphasizes it)10. The universality is the quality distinguishing the Jewish presence in the thirteenth-century text11 from that in The Siege of Jerusalem, a late fourteenth-century romance partly based on Josephus’s The Jewish War from the 1st century AD and a text notorious for its anti-Judaic images12. Kim

8 Ibidem, pp. 1–16.
10 K. Boklund-Lagopoulou, op. cit., p. 56.
11 K. Boklund-Lagopoulou calls the text one of the “items from an oral vernacular tradition that can be turned to didactic use in a sermon” rather than a ballad due to the temporal gap between it and the fifteenth-century ballads, even though she also lists Chambers’ theory of it being a written clerical composition and Fowler’s, that it is a religious folksong; Hirsch in turn openly states that the poem is “the first known English ballad”; see Boklund-Lagopoulou, pp. 48–51, 63; J.C. Hirsch, The Earliest Known English Ballad: A New Reading of Judas, “Modern Language Review”, vol. 103 (2008), pp. 931–939.
12 Bonnie Millar differentiates between the poem’s anti-Judaism, understood as “an antipathy to the religious beliefs of the Jews which was expounded in doctrinal terms by the