Entangled Jewish/Christian Relations in the Middle Ages

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Entanglement theory derives from Jacques Derrida’s idea of the separatrix. In the case of Jewish/Christian relations in the Middle Ages, the use of the separatrix, also referred to as the slash, indicates that the two groups—Jews and Christians—are unstable identities that are mutually constructing and revising these two terms, Jewish/Christian. In essence, both groups in the Middle Ages are “contaminated”: their identities are formed next to each other, overlapping, and blurred. Jewish/Christian religious identities, therefore, could be articulated only while entangled with each other. My approach to the history of Jewish/Christian relations moves beyond antisemitism, philosemitism, and allosemitism to reframe this separatrix between Jews and Christians as not simply a history of integration, acculturation, or persecution, but a “history of entanglements.” In particular, I focus on how gendered entanglements refine and stretch the categories of Jewish/Christian, English/Hebrew, and feminine/masculine.

In London, British Library MS Egerton 1151 is a small (162x107mm), gorgeously illuminated, 13th-century Book of Hours made for a wealthy, female Christian patron in Oxford sometime between 1260–70. The Book of Hours was a Christian prayer book that had been recently invented in Oxford in the mid-13th century. It was marked as a feminine religious genre because women were the main patrons of the Book of Hours in its first 100 years of existence.

As one of its earliest known English examples, Egerton 1151 features a very unusual iconographic program. In particular, two decorated illuminations stand out in this volume. As a bespoke book, Egerton 1151 was specially ordered for the patroness shown kneeling before the Virgin in its opening image. The unusual iconographic design reveals that the patroness had requested specific images.
for her personal prayer book. The volume's illumination differs significantly from other illuminated books produced by the William of Devon workshop. In particular, the female reader's gaze is regularly focused on the male form—often, a nude one.

Examples of these unique images can be found on f. 83r [figure 1] and 155v [figure 2]—two decorated initials in which naked men, Christian/Jewish are prominently presented. I use the separatrix/slash to highlight how thin the marks of Christian/Jewish masculinity are in this prayer book. The image on f. 83r reveals a white, naked man squatting with his genitals exposed. He is marked as Christian in this decorated initial by two items: his haberdashery and his genitals. He wears a crown, and his penis has been drawn as uncircumcised. Considering the size of the image in relation to the petite size of the prayer book, the particular detail of the close paint work demonstrates the determined intent of both the patroness and the illuminators to mark Christian masculinity. The illuminators endeavored to visualize the uncircumcised Christian penis by the minute folds seen in the genital area.

Doubly striking is the close resemblance between the marked Christian masculinity and the marked Jewish masculinity on f. 155v. This slippage between exposed Jew and exposed Christian correlates to the earlier slippage of distinguishing a Jew from a Christian with a hat (as seen in an earlier series of images in Egerton 1151), but now it appears that the stakes have been escalated. On f. 155v, a naked man, wearing a gilded conical hat, squats with his hands up, and exposes his gilded genitals [figure 2]. The gold on the manuscript's vellum flesh actually creates a three-dimensional quality to the two-dimensional naked image. This naked Jew and naked Christian are each other's double in pose, size, skin color, and general expression. They are differentiated by the details of hats and genitals—though the gold in the genitals does make it difficult to distinguish if the Jewish male is circumcised.
That question only further complicates the close, blurred, and entangled constructions of Jewish/Christian difference.

Both images are thumbnail-sized and these details, particularly in the genitals, require close view and scrutiny. In this way, the female devotional gaze demands careful visual and possibly tactile contemplation. Her devotional reading practice would compel her to contemplate, see, and read slowly, methodically, and privately.

These two images convey the very issues at the heart of canon 68 of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). This canon outlines the first Christian rules for marking Jews and Muslims distinctively through clothing. However, the reasons behind the distinguishing marks of clothing for the Jewish and Muslim groups suggest how difficult it was to differentiate Christians from these other religious and sometimes visually racialized groups. Canon 68 reflects an underlying anxiety that perhaps such distinctions among groups would not be apparent, and that passing for Christian, Jewish, Muslim, might result in entangled sexual coupling. The central purpose of the canon's framework is to patrol and control interreligious sexual encounters.

In addition, visual expressions of Jewish/Christian entanglements in 13th-century English manuscripts centered almost entirely on Jewish masculinity (with only one example of a marked Jewish woman in a Norwich tax roll). Because so many illuminated English manuscripts were created for female patrons, the Jewish/Christian entanglements in manuscript production were often Jewish male/Christian female entanglements. Egerton 1151 is the only 13th-century English Book of Hours that reflects this uneasiness about interreligious sexual relations (discussed in Lateran IV, canon 68) and offers such a nuanced display of the instability of Jewish/Christian religious identities. This entangled history emerges in a clear picture of a naked, male Christian/Jew (f. 83r and f. 155v). These images testify to the linked sites in which the female religious gaze on her bespoke manuscripts exposes her devotion/desire by fixating on defining the male body, on marking/unmarking racial otherness, and on the shock of exposing the familiar neighbor/neighboring familiar. The triangulated entanglements between female patron, male scribe and illuminator, and male visual subjects create an interesting moment to consider gendered power dynamics intersecting with religious/racial markers. In this way, the female gaze, rather than the male gaze, has produced visual art that disrupts Christian/Jewish binaries and asks the question: What does it really mean to be a Christian/Jewish man?