

**Kati Ihnat**  
***Mother of Mercy, Bane of the Jews:  
Devotion to the Virgin Mary  
in Anglo-Norman England***

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The dichotomy in the title of Kati Ihnat's *Mother of Mercy, Bane of the Jews* perfectly captures the problem she seeks to address: where does the anti-Judaism that appears in different genres of writing about Mary originate, and why and how do Anglo-Norman authors rework and refine this material? This forcefully-argued book focuses for the most part on English monasteries from roughly 1066-1154 because, as Ihnat emphasizes, Benedictine monks were by far the most creative proponents of Marian devotion. It is in English monastic liturgy and records that we first find the innovative daily Little Office of Mary, the doctrine of Mary's immaculate conception, and the feast of Mary's conception. The Marian miracle collections also first emerged from this cultural-devotional moment, the transition from Anglo-Saxon to Anglo-Norman rule.

In her introduction, Ihnat moves to connect the various aspects of the Marian cult to the "hermeneutic Jew," the famously abstract figure who, by adhering to a superseded Old Law, serves to show Christians the path to correct and incorrect devotion (p. 6). She further claims that looking for "'real Jews' behind their fictional counterparts is a trap" in the religious materials that she examines (p. 13). While this may be a reasonable choice given Ihnat's circumscribed monastic setting, it also points to a larger methodological problem with drawing such a sharp distinction between the Jews of monks' narrative imaginations and the Jews who had migrated to England with the Normans and lived just miles away in some cases.

The depth of Ihnat's scholarship on the many aspects of Marian devotion in English monasticism is breathtaking. Each of the first three chapters—on liturgies and feasts, on theology, and on miracle collections—offers illuminating accounts of Mary's growing importance to the thinkers defining Christianity in the twelfth

century. Not surprisingly, Anselm of Canterbury is at the center of much of this story as philosopher, polemicist, and author of the famous affective Marian prayers that raised Mary to a role in salvation interdependent with Christ's. The works of Anselm and his disciple Eadmer likewise stress Mary's power as an intercessor with Jesus and her role as the merciful mother of a strict son. One of the most fascinating texts that *Ihnat* discusses with regard to Mary's powers is the work of another of Anselm's disciples. Honorius Augustodunensis's *Sigillum de Beata Maria* is the first commentary on the Song of Songs to imagine the text as a dialogue between Mary and Jesus on divine love. Here, following her death and assumption, Mary becomes queen of heaven and oversees the supersession of the Old Law by the New and ultimately the conversion of the Jews.

The Marian miracle collections, or "hagiographies," that *Ihnat* considers in the third chapter are the purest expression of Mary's intercessory role. In these tales (many closely connected to monastic liturgical practices), Mary intercedes, for example, to save a clerical devotee from marriage or to protect monks who promote the controversial Feast of the Conception. This genre, which the monks translated into sermons for a general public, leads *Ihnat* to the subset of miracles displaying Mary's special enmity toward Jews. In her fourth chapter, "Enemies of Mary," *Ihnat* explains that the Jew in these stories represents unbelief and impiety, the opposite of good Christian devotion. To this end, she interprets a sequence of eight such miracle stories, some with much older analogues, in which a perfidious Jew or group of Jews insults Mary, Jesus, or their images. The most popular story in these English sources, as she points out, is the "Jewish Boy." In its basic elements, a little boy takes communion with his Christian friends, leading his father to throw him into an oven, but Mary rescues him from the flames. It appears, with variations, in sermons by Herbert of Losinga and Honorius and in the famous Marian miracle collection by William of Malmesbury. A prolific historian and hagiographer, William is the central figure in *Ihnat's* approach to these legends since he used his great literary talents to create versions of these tales that heightened their emotional force. William ratchets up the viciousness of the Jews and the helplessness of their victims in order to demonstrate the great triumphs of Mary.

*Ihnat's* book is about Mary and how English monastic writers of the period situated Jews in their development of her cult. As she makes clear, their polemics in the miracle stories were meant not to create new "discourses" about Jews but rather to exalt and explain Mary's unique role in Christianity (p. 182). However, at several points her argument approaches incoherence because of her ambivalence about how "real" English Jews might figure in her narrative about Mary. She postulates the monks' awareness of contemporaneous Jews when a particular aspect of a Marian tale, like Jewish moneylending or royal protection, demands it. However, she never speculates on deeper connections between the worlds of twelfth-century monks and actual Jews. The conclusion comes as something of a surprise, then, when she addresses Thomas of Monmouth's *Life of William of Norwich*, the source of the first ritual murder, as a text that stands between William of Malmesbury's Marian miracles and the ritual murder accusation that led

to the burnings of Jews at Blois in 1171. Following David Nirenberg and Miri Rubin, Ihnat characterizes these later events as violent afterlives of Marian texts. Yet even as she emphasizes the violence of such crucial moments when Christians and Jews interacted, she underplays this possibility at other moments. The “real Jews,” with their own texts and practices, were there in the earlier times and places covered in this study. The question lingers: according to the monks, which Jews so infuriated Mary?

*Mother of Mercy* is invaluable for its originality and evocation of Anglo-Norman monastic piety. As for Ihnat’s approach to the “Bane of the Jews,” it is sure to spark welcome debate.