NEAR THE END of his account of the life and miracles of William of Norwich, Thomas of Monmouth records a case of blasphemy punished. Thomas tells us that a certain man named Walter, a fellow monk in the Norwich priory, made a habit of disparaging “the holiness and miracles” of little William.¹ Though repeatedly warned to stop mocking the saint, Walter never listened. Finally, after being visited in a dream by William and soundly beaten by the saint for his sin, he awoke in terror and “felt the smart of severe pains all over him,” the blows just as real as if he had borne them while awake.² The import of this account as “a sort of general warning to all” is clear to Thomas, William’s secretarius: “It is the height of rashness to attack the saints of God thus boldly with abusive words, since we so plainly see them glorified by many and great miracles by the Lord Himself.”³ These remarks, which appear near the end of William’s hagiography, carry an important subtext. In the early to mid-1150s, as Thomas was most likely composing William’s Vita, Norwich Cathedral was still a new foundation, just over sixty years old, and had no patron saint.⁴ This was a problem that would have been remedied if William’s cult had been more widely accepted, but by Thomas’s own testimony, it appears that the boy was nearly forgotten in Norwich before Thomas’s arrival, probably sometime around 1150 (TDA, 216). What is more, “Blessed William” is the subject of controversy within the priory, and Thomas’s claims for his holiness—that he is “plainly” glorified by God—are not universally accepted by those around him.
Thomas of Monmouth's most enduring claim is that at Easter time in 1144, the Jewish community of Norwich kidnapped a young boy named William, kept him hidden for a short time in one of their houses, and then crucified him in imitation of Christ. William's body was discovered in the woods outside the town, and he was eventually recovered and buried in the monks' cemetery next to the cathedral, but only after a sequence of hurried burials and reburials in the unconsecrated ground of Thorpe Wood, his original resting place. The monk Thomas arrived at the priory a few years after the boy's death, conducted his own investigation, and managed to have William moved into the monks' cemetery, then the chapter house, and later the cathedral itself, calling him a martyr for Christ. As author of William's Vita, Thomas presents his case for William's sanctity as the logical outcome of careful inquiry, but it is built upon a foundation of circumstantial evidence that was not lost on his contemporaries. The blasphemer Walter appears in the seventh and final book recording William's life and miracles, but he is only one of a number of skeptics who are featured in the course of Thomas's narrative, and their motivating resistance directly influences the grounds of his claims about the dead boy and shapes the course of his work. In his account of the skeptic Walter's conversion, Thomas highlights the nature of the other monk's transgressions against the saint: he mocked William's holiness and miracles. William's sanctitas and miraculi are the very topics Thomas says are disputed by his antagonists within the priory, the same qualities that are supposed to confirm the child's status as a martyr. In addition to expressing such doubts, Thomas points out a third problem with his opponents—"their habit of corrupting others."  

The problem of doubt is so fundamental to the Vita that Thomas’s narrative can be read as a contest between the intellectual skepticism of Christian monks and what Thomas describes as "simplicity," and this contest is at least as important, from Thomas's point of view, as the more obvious competition in the text between Jewish unbelief and Christian faith. In Book I, the forces of skepticism are represented by the Jews of Norwich who, Thomas alleges, kill William in mockery of the Christian faith. But from Book II onward, the rhetoric of skepticism within the Vita is produced by Christian reason and is represented as the questioning of Christian monks. Thomas's efforts to persuade and convince, his rhetoric, are efforts of highly evolved stylization, developed in response to sophisticated objections among his contemporaries that can be partially reconstructed—if only partially—from his arguments against them. There is very little we can say we know about the circumstances Thomas describes in twelfth-
century Norwich based on his account alone, but we can reconstruct what a reasoned twelfth-century critique of the ritual murder accusation might have looked like in contemporary terms. Paradoxically, in the absence of a secure ground of reference for the events depicted in Thomas’s work, his partisan rhetoric may constitute the text’s only stable location of meaning. I am less interested in the fact of rhetorical manipulation (something previous analyses have taken for granted anyway) than the methods used to anchor such manipulations, methods that reveal as much as they erase about the arguments exchanged between Thomas and his contemporary critics. Thomas recasts opposition as blasphemy, links doubting Christians with unbelieving Jews, and encourages us to forget any distance between the paired terms. He also establishes a fundamental precedent for discussions about the ritual murder accusation that has persisted down to the present. Thomas articulates the terms of what I call the juridical discourse surrounding the charge of ritual murder, a discourse that insists on adjudicating claims of guilt and innocence, crime and libel. In Thomas’s text, we see this rhetoric taking shape from an unaccustomed perspective, since his greatest struggle is with the skepticism of his fellow Christian monks.

**Juridical Discourse and the Struggle with Doubt**

Previous analyses of William’s *Vita* have largely ignored Thomas’s tactical rhetorical effects in their search for the origins of the ritual murder accusation in Europe. In their drive to answer this question, scholars do not often pause to consider that Thomas’s fictional “embellishments” may extend beyond accusing the Norwich Jews of William’s murder to his representations of certain figures within the priory or accounts of his own activities. Gavin Langmuir criticizes the naïveté of analyses that once sought to use Thomas’s account to determine “what really happened” in Norwich circa 1144. Yet in many respects, he and other scholars make use of the narrative in much the same way, extrapolating from it what Thomas “really did” in his work of investigation and reporting. While the narrative probably does reflect critical aspects of the investigation from Thomas’s point of view, and Langmuir does an admirable job of analyzing the occulted rhetoric of Thomas’s work, it remains true that scholars have been insufficiently attentive to the rhetorical character of the work itself. In our rush to examine his anti-Jewish means, modern readers often forget to attend to Thomas’s limited, and even mundane, ends. And we have followed Thomas in consistently undervaluing the argumentative force of his critics.
in pursuit of Thomas himself—his motives, his influences, his successes or failures. It is tempting to identify a kind of critical amnesia at work in such a consistent devaluation—an amnesia that suggests our focus on the origins of antisemitism may have encouraged us to overlook potential contexts of resistance. By calling attention to what Thomas has covered over, I pick up the threads of a counternarrative just visible in the rhetorical warp and weft of his text. Within this forgotten counternarrative, the seeds of a modern dialogue between the forces of anti-Jewish persecution and resistance to anti-Jewish myths are already visible.

Thomas works hard to shore up a case that relies on circumstantial evidence. The monks who wash William’s body prior to its reburial in the priory cemetery rightly interpret the ambiguous signs before them, according to Thomas: “They perceived certain and manifest indications of martyrdom in him.”

11 *Certa et manifesta* is a conceptual pairing that appears over and over again in Thomas’s narrative—he emphasizes the certainty of his knowledge repeatedly, and in diverse ways. He speaks of “most certain and manifest signs,” which often follow in the wake of his work of “enquiring very diligently” into events. Each of his witnesses, he claims, reports what he or she knows to be true—*pro certo cognoverat* (I.30)—so that Thomas can claim he reports such accounts only after “hearing it from their lips and knowing it to be certainly true” himself. Like Thomas, his witnesses investigate, ask questions, and draw conclusions in the hope of obtaining certain knowledge, of knowing about past events *pro certo*. And a few of these witnesses, Thomas insists, know of events through the evidence of their own eyes. Thomas’s text enacts a few dramas of seeing and then being cut off from sight at the very threshold of certainty. This motif takes on striking theatricality when Thomas recounts, years later, what a Christian servant inside the Jew’s house is alleged to have seen.

Through the chink of the door [she] managed to see the boy fastened to a post. She could not see it with both eyes, but she did manage to see it with one. And when she had seen it, with horror at the sight she shut that one eye and they [the Jews] shut the door.

14 Such dramatic moments of eyewitnessing stop just short of the actual sight of William’s *passio*, but Thomas musters all of his rhetorical skill to bring his narrative as close to certainty as possible using circumstantial evidence.

Thomas’s emphasis on what is certain and manifest presents a deliberate contrast with the uncertainty and confusion of his opponents in the text, both Jewish and Christian. He reports several conversations among
the Norwich Jews—none of which he claims to have witnessed, but probably still accounted as “true” parts of his narrative, in keeping with the common medieval practice of assigning imagined speeches to historical figures on the basis of what seemed “suitable” to their character type. It is a form of licit (though limited) stylization that reveals a great deal regarding Thomas’s beliefs about Jews. Following William’s death, Thomas asserts, the Norwich Jews met to decide what to do with his body and “were in doubt and quite uncertain what they should do.” Their momentary confusion as they are left “in doubt” echoes Thomas’s remarks about those Christians who are doubtful of his story, while the language he invokes here—nihil . . . pro certo—reverses his own formula for his certain knowledge of events and witnesses. Thomas claims that the Jews present at the meeting discuss various options for the body’s disposal, but since nothing can be decided, further discussion is put off until the next day. At that time, still “quite undecided what they should do,” the Jews appeal to one of their auctoritates, who gives an imagined speech highlighting their anxiety, timidity, and the uncertainty of their living situation. This drama of fear, uncertainty, and the appeal to an authority is acted out several times, as when the Jews of Norwich are called before the ecclesiastical synod at which they have been accused of William’s murder and appeal to the sheriff for protection (I.47–48).

Everyone associated with the Jews in Thomas’s narrative is ruled by uncertainty. The identity of the messenger sent to entice William away from his home is ambiguous: Thomas tells us, “I am not sure whether he was a Christian or a Jew.” The Christian servant who tells Thomas that she worked in the house where William was killed is morally unmoored by the events she claims to have witnessed, “hesitating whether she should make the disclosure or keep silence, [until] at last her fear of revealing the matter prevailed”—prevailed, that is, until Thomas persuaded her to talk to him much later. Thomas also portrays his opponents within the priory as being uncertain, and their confusion parallels that of the Jewish unbelievers in his story. The fruits of reliance on human reason instead of the “simplicity” Thomas advocates are disorientation, uncertain knowledge, and a multiplicity of conflicting voices. Thomas even dramatizes the conversion of his alleged informant, the Jew from Cambridge called Theobald, in these terms. Thomas says that Theobald was quick to recognize the significance of William’s miracles; becoming afraid, just as his Jewish confreres do in other parts of the narrative, Theobald, simply by consulting his conscience, is led to certain knowledge of Christianity and converts
Thomas’s claim here is a powerful rhetorical blow against his Christian skeptics, since he suggests that a Jew can perceive the truth of William’s merits simply by consulting his conscience, whereas Thomas’s coreligionists are unable to do the same.

In his characterizations of both Jews and skeptical Christians, Thomas frequently returns to the idea of *malevolentia*—spite, ill will. His Christian adversaries are not motivated by a desire for the truth or certain knowledge, he suggests, but are guilty of a willful ingratitude that clouds their perception: “Thankless for heaven’s gifts, they try, so far as they can or dare, under the garb of religion to make little or nothing of divine mysteries, or, at least, to turn them to ridicule.” Though his fellow monks are dedicated to God, Thomas implies that under the sharp knives of their intellects, always “ready and eager to find fault,” the holy is annulled (*ad-nuillé*), diminished (*imminuéré*), or perverted (*depravé*). Instead of creating faithful knowledge, they undermine what others believe they already know. When Thomas portrays his own arguments as “spiritual claims of reasoning,” he is implicitly criticizing his Christian critics’ reliance on human reason, which was closely identified with the emerging scholastic practices of the contemporary schools. His opponents are unable to “see” the truths of the faith properly because they are incapable of using “the reason of faith.” This is William of St. Thierry’s polemical formulation for a properly Christianized use of human reason. While his opponents are “hard of heart and slow to believe,” and insult William’s miracles, Thomas views his own claims from a lofty position of certainty: “As for us, in very truth, we reverence as a saint him whom in deed we know to be a saint.” It is from this secure height that Thomas claims he is ministering to those poor souls who fluctuate in uncertainty.

Not only are his opponents uncertain of the truth and changeable in their opinions; they cannot even agree on an alternative version of events, according to Thomas. He moves from the arguments of the first (*primis*) group of doubters, on to others (*alios*), who make their own arguments, to a third class (*terciis*; II.87–88). Rhetorically, he distinguishes between what may be parts of the same argument in this way, responding to the remarks of those who think a pauper boy unlikely to be a saint, answering those who object that there is no evidence William exhibited special virtue during his life, and finally making a long and complex series of counterarguments in response to those “who are uncertain by whom and why [William] was made an end of.” All of these objections are complementary, and speak to William’s disputed status as a martyr for Christ. But by
presenting them in this way, moving from the arguments of some, to others, and then on to still “others,” Thomas multiplies his opponents and implies they are divided, a set of cacophonous voices barking at him from the margins of the text, and “doing all they can to stop the spread of [William’s] renown and persecute him by making light of him.” He attempts to shift the burden of proof from himself, as advocate of the would-be saint, to those who doubt William’s sanctity, a neat trick in a period when the determination of sanctity is becoming increasingly vested in the upper echelons of the church hierarchy.

In characterizing his opponents this way, Thomas surreptitiously enters into contemporary intellectual debates about the balance between reason and faith in a proper understanding of the world. He suggests that his detractors, like contemporary products of the Paris schools, have reversed the proper order of things by subordinating faith to reason and demanding rational proofs for matters that are the proper province of faith. One of the ironies of Thomas’s text is that even as he appears to ally himself with contemporary critics of scholasticism, he highlights some of the dangers of innovation such men feared. Thomas invokes the simplicity of faithful belief in the service of a novelty—his narrative of ritual murder—unsupported by Christian tradition. Thomas acknowledges the unprecedented character of his narrative, asserting that “some indulgence ought to be allowed for this novel attempt,” and even suggests that this novelty may have entertainment value for his readers, since he hopes “that I may tempt those who wish for something new to read.” Thomas knows very well that the claim of novelty is a potentially damning characterization in ordinary medieval discourse, though he seems to feel that his spiritual purpose overrides such considerations. He adduces the importance of faith in constituting Christian ways of knowing, but his account is not sanctioned by Christian authority. Of course it must be said that Thomas never accuses his opponents of being imprisoned by scholastic reason. He addresses a critic as a detractor (“obtrectator”; I.5), says that his foes are envious and full of malice, and represents their criticisms as unworthy. And yet the objections he attributes to his opponents can be read, I suggest, as the skeptical arguments of medieval intellectuals.

Nevertheless, it is important to avoid casting this conflict in black and white, as a case of progressive intellectuals pitted against a religious reactionary. Thomas’s opponents are skeptical of his account, but not because they doubt the occurrence of miracles or the suspect status of unbelievers. Instead, they appear to doubt William’s status as a martyr on specific
grounds and openly question Thomas’s reliability as reporter of events. While we cannot assume that Thomas represents his critics fairly, it is likely that he brings forward most of their objections in his efforts to answer them. In Book II, he provides a roll call of arguments against William’s sanctity and accusations against himself; accusations he proceeds to refute. The first of these critiques is that “It is very presumptuous to maintain so confidently that which the church universal does not accept and to account that holy which is not holy,” a clear objection to William’s status as a saint or martyr. Thomas also defends his claims against accusations of novelty when he says, “Now let no one withhold his attention from these things that I assert, because they are matters not usual in his own time.”

Thomas speaks repeatedly of those who “mocked at the miracles when they were made public, and said that they were fictitious,” and may reveal more than he intends when he says, “let no man think I am interpolating or passing off for true that which is untrue; let no man call me an inventor of trifles or falsehoods.” Thomas says that some of his critics even “pretend that [William’s supporters] are mad,” while another objection is that “we are entirely uncertain and doubtful by whom and why, and how he was killed . . . [whether] in punishment by Jews or anyone else.” This diversity of complaints covers the whole spectrum of Thomas’s claims, from the manner of William’s death to the character of Thomas himself. While it is impossible to say precisely how this rhetoric of doubt was justified since Thomas does not represent these claims in any great detail, we can reconstruct from these remarks some basis for a set of coherent objections to the ritual murder accusation in twelfth-century terms.

This reconstruction must begin by bringing to notice what Thomas encourages us to forget. He engages in a systematic redefinition of key terms like martyr and cause over the course of his debates with critics, even as he elides or erases the significance of these changes. When Thomas’s opponents accuse him of “accounting that holy which is not holy” (II.59), their criticism appears to consist of two parts: William is not venerated by the church, and (as both a consequence and a complement of this claim) his sanctity is not certain but is in dispute. On both counts, Thomas subtly reworks the terms of the debate. On the first count, the accusation that, because William’s cult is not more generally known, Thomas is “presumptuous” to call him a saint, he is quick to stage the conflict as a matter of the local versus the global.
And to say the truth, saving only the glorious Virgin mother of God and John the Baptist and the Apostles, of few of the saints can it be said that the knowledge of them is spread over all the earth whereon the religion of the Christian name prevails.36

He goes on to invoke the names of other prominent English saints to reinforce his claim, asking, “Is it the fact that the famous name of the most blessed King and Martyr Eadmund or of the glorious Confessor Cuthbert, renowned in every part of England, is equally well known among the people of Greece or Palestine?”37 Thomas suggests that the criticism is a slight against a local English saint whose renown, like that of most northern saints, has simply not traveled throughout the Christian world.38

We should question the adequacy of this rebuttal. The majority of regional saints achieve notoriety because they have a popular following that emerges (or, perhaps less kindly, appears to emerge) spontaneously.39 At the very least, clerical encouragement of a cult usually develops alongside some degree of popular devotion. When Thomas’s contemporaries complain that he is wrong “to account that holy which is not holy,” they may have been drawing attention to the fact that he is reverse-engineering a cult for William, first by having his remains translated to a more public place, then by seeking out miraculous accounts from those around him. Thomas himself acknowledges the general lack of popular interest in William’s case when he says, “Assuredly by this miracle the memory of the blessed martyr William revived, for it had gradually been waning, yea in the hearts of almost all it had almost entirely died out.”40 And his contemporaries cannot have failed to notice that William’s first miracles are reported among the priory’s extended familia—monks and their relations, priory servants, and benefactors—in other words, the people who would be most easily influenced by Thomas’s stories.

The second and more fundamental objection regarding William’s status is the matter of his “martyrdom,” which Thomas tries to establish by arguing that William is one of those who have suffered on behalf of the Christian faith. As both Thomas and his critics know, the question of William’s sanctity rises and falls on his status as a martyr for Christ, and Thomas’s opponents remind him more than once, “it is not the pain but the cause that makes the martyr.”41 William, they maintain, displayed no special sanctity during his life, when he was only “a poor neglected little fellow.”42 Furthermore, “who could confidently believe that this lad courted death for Christ’s sake, or bore it patiently for Christ’s sake when it was inflicted
upon him?" In advancing this objection, they point to an obvious weakness of Thomas’s account, in which William appears to suffer all manner of indignities without any sign of resistance or presentiment. A logical literary model for Thomas’s account would be the narratives of early Christian martyrs so popular in Anglo-Saxon England, many of which were being rewritten in the twelfth century, around the same time Thomas produced his text. In these narratives, the unbelieving persecutor and his Christian victim often engage in a religious debate over the martyr’s body, while the martyr resists in both body and spirit. In William’s Vita, there are no debates in which the saint taunts, ridicules, or converts his tormentors. Thomas sidesteps this convention entirely—in fact his victim is even incapable of speaking because Thomas claims that a “teseillun” (“teazle”; I.20) is used to gag him during his sufferings. Thomas’s opponents may have been dissatisfied with this missing element of the martyrological story—or rather the absence of any sign of William’s knowing acceptance of his own sacrifice. Certainly their remarks, as reported by Thomas, point to the importance they placed on the victim’s intentionality in determining the martyr’s status—that he “courted death” and “bore it patiently for Christ’s sake.” Thomas’s skeptical opponents understand the “cause” (causa) of martyrdom as the martyr’s religious cause, his spiritual vocation: the martyr must die for something in order for his death to exhibit his virtues.

In Thomas’s account, William appears to suffer without deliberate intentionality at all, and Thomas’s constant references to his “simplicity” and “innocence” in fact encourage the view that he may be incapable of achieving the martyr’s knowing intentionality. Thomas responds to this obvious difficulty by redefining the term martyr—he formulates a different definition of the term both literally and figuratively, by redefining the requirements for martyrdom and by making an argument by analogy for the “truth” of William’s death as an imitatio Christi. In addition, he consciously situates William’s story within a particular genre, aligning it with the traditions of saintly inventio, about the finding or discovery of a saint’s remains. But in the course of defending himself against doubters in his narrative, Thomas inadvertently signals what most disturbs him about the case, and it has less to do with William’s status as a martyr than the apparent injustice of an untimely death. Relinquishing for a single key moment his claim that Jews killed the boy in an act of theologically motivated spite, Thomas tells us that “by the certain marks of his wounds, whoever may have inflicted them, he is proved as it were by sure arguments to have in-
deed been slain.” He also remarks, “Let the matter have happened as it may, we hold it for certain that after being handled in the cruellest manner he was slain at last.”

Thomas needs the Jews to play the role of the bad pagans in this martyrological narrative, but even without them, he suggests, the cruelty and injustice of this death render it a kind of special martyrdom. These slips of rhetoric, in which Thomas implies that William’s death is singular regardless of how it happened, suggest that the death itself carries a transcendental value for him. André Vauchez reviews a number of medieval cults inspired by the death of a person under tragic circumstances, including a woman killed by her husband, travelers murdered far from home, and even a dog who faithfully served his master. He includes William as one of these individuals, a case like the others in which “pity provokes piety” (Vauchez, Sainthood, 151). Vauchez goes on to remark, “The large number of popular ‘martyrs’ we encounter in the Middle Ages suggests that the word encompassed very different realities,” and proposes that the clergy may occasionally have borrowed religious language to dress up a narrative whose specific Christian content “seemed to them to be dubious” (Sainthood, 152). Of course in William’s case, there is no popular following whose accounts must be revised—it is Thomas himself who structures the narrative and engenders wider interest in the cult at a time when it had been all but forgotten.

But in order for his narrative to withstand the scrutiny of his peers, Thomas understands that he must introduce suitable Christian content to his story and not rely on the pity it inspires alone. By using the word *causa* in a subtly different way than his opponents, Thomas recasts his argument as an answer to theirs. He tells us, “Assuredly we have seen the marks of the sufferings on the holy William’s body, but it is plain that the cause of those sufferings was Christ, in scorn of whom he was condemned and slain.”

The “cause” of William’s death was Christ because his death was a reenactment of the original model, according to Thomas. The “cause” here is a literal one, and has almost nothing to do with William’s active adoption of the “cause” of Christ, the criterion put forward for martyrdom by Thomas’s opponents. Thomas’s argument is largely implicit: if Christ died having received certain wounds, and one of his believers received these wounds also, then that believer must be holy, not precisely as Christ was, but in a similar manner. From Thomas’s point of view, this argument trumps his opponents’ discourse of doubt because of its symbolic power. William’s suffering, its powerful clustering of signs as an imitation crucifixion, signals to Thomas not only the reality of an authentic martyr-
dom but the highest or ultimate “cause” of his religious worldview. The sense of Thomas’s deliberate deployment of this meaning of *causa* is reinforced by his use of the word elsewhere in the narrative, where *causa* appears in its primary sense of advocacy. Instead of the intentionality of the martyr himself, Thomas emphasizes the intentionality of his persecutors, who allegedly reenact a crucial event from Christian history. Indeed, Thomas suggests that this work of reenactment is their “cause,” taken up out of a desire for revenge: he claims that Jews must scorn Christ in this way “so they might avenge their sufferings on him; inasmuch as it was because of Christ’s death that they had been shut out of their own country.”

It is clear to Thomas (if not to everyone else) that the only group capable of redeploying the signs of crucifixion in this way are Jews, irrevocably separated from the Christian community and yet implicated in its foundation. Thomas imagines one of the accused speaking to other Jews following William’s death: “It will not seem probable that Christians would have wished to do this kind of thing to a Christian, or Jews to do it to a Jew.” With remarks like these, Thomas anticipates much later historiography of Jewish-Christian relations by pointing to the divided character of the two communities, who may share physical spaces but are understood to act and think on behalf of entirely different causes. The suggestion that these two communities are at ideological war with one another points to what Thomas sees as the allegorical aptness of his theory: the Jews of Norwich are supposed to persecute William as a kind of literal reenactment, making him a *memento* of another crucifixion they also regard as the death of one who was simply a man. By refiguring William’s death as a martyrdom, Thomas hopes to show a new triumph of Christian understanding over alleged Jewish literalism that parallels the way the two communities interpret the Crucifixion: the Jews of Norwich supposedly kill a boy, but Thomas resurrects a saint, someone more than human, from his remains, just as the Jews believe Christ died a man, while Christians proclaim that he is the son of God.

*Medieval Politics of Knowledge*

Like many later writers who take up the historical accusation of ritual murder, Thomas understands his debate with critics as a struggle to be won on evidentiary grounds. In his use of legalistic language, Thomas also inaugurates what has become a familiar juridical discourse surrounding the ritual murder accusation, in which responsibility—framed as guilt—becomes
the subject of debate. Saintly *inventiones* and catalogs of miracles are supposed to be true relations about the past, and Thomas signals his commitment to the truth-telling function of his narrative at every turn. He has followed all of the evidentiary procedures of the period self-consciously, and his text resounds with the signs of his investigations, moving beyond the commonly accepted phrases about “men who were to be believed,” to the insistent refrain, “All which I, Thomas, a monk of Norwich, after hearing it from their lips and knowing it to be certainly true, have been careful to hand down in writing.” At one point he remarks of his method that he did not record some of the many miracles performed at William’s tomb because “we were not able to arrive at any certainty about the facts. Those, however, we resolved to insert in the present book which we were fully assured of, either by what we saw or what we heard.” This rhetorical ploy is not unique to Thomas, and signals both the fullness of the saint’s miracles and his own discrimination and discernment in reporting them. Most important, Thomas highlights his reliance on eyewitness testimony to substantiate his claims, always his own or someone else’s who communicates directly to him. He is seldom more than a few degrees removed from the miraculous events he reports. From Thomas’s perspective, the evidence is transparent, and doubt is unreasonable. The signs of holiness were shown by miracles, these miracles were witnessed by many, they were made public, and they were written down.

In both history and hagiography, the reliability of witnesses, and the extent to which their testimonies could be trusted, in either the mundane or the sacred realms, was an important topic of medieval concern. Differentiating the miraculous from the wondrous, *miracula* from *mirabilia*, was an important epistemological issue with spiritual ramifications, and often this came down to the issue of reliable testimony. Caroline Walker Bynum has suggested that between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries, there was increasing scope for naturalistic explanations for unusual phenomena, but acknowledges, following Vauchez, that there was not in fact a sharp enough sense of what the regularities of nature were to allow for testing individual miracles as *contra* or *supra* the ordinary course of things. Hence the authenticating of saints tended to fall back on testing the character—the veracity and dependability—of witnesses.

Medieval historians were concerned with evaluating the truth of miraculous reports, and both Nancy Partner and Monika Otter draw attention to the
efforts of certain twelfth-century English historians (notably William of Newburgh) to analyze such accounts on the basis of available testimony. Partner summarizes this state of affairs when she writes that “in the twelfth century the evaluation of testimony rather than laws of probability was central to the problem of authenticating prodigies” (Partner, 116–17).

Medieval people also understood that it would be possible for a witness to report something sincerely without always being correct. This is one reason why a witness’s credibility was so often emphasized. But this consideration only makes Thomas’s reports of his critics’ remarks all the more damning: he is not just accused of “getting it wrong” but of deliberately “interpolating or passing off for true that which is untrue,” of being “an inventor of trifles or falsehoods” (II.74). And while Thomas’s efforts to substantiate his claims with tropes of eyewitnessing and careful procedure are fairly common methods of authentication, Monika Otter is one of a long line of critics to suggest that Thomas “is virtually obsessed with clues and corroborating detail” (41)—in other words, he has the look of someone who is protesting too much. I have already mentioned the novelty of this case and suggested that Thomas’s account of William’s “martyrdom” was out of keeping with the kind of narrative expected for a martyr during this period. It is also possible that Thomas’s account, because it is modern, is being held to a higher standard of evidence and testimony by his peers. This idea goes hand in hand with the novelty of the narrative: there is no sense of tradition here to reinforce the status of Thomas’s claims.

In addition to his elaborate evidentiary apparatus, Thomas attempts to fall back on one of the few other “authorities” available to him, the authority of common report. Thomas suggests at several points that “everybody knows” about the ritual murder accusation already, or, if they are unaware of the specifics, they already “know” that Jews are capable of doing something very much like it. By suggesting that such activities are an open secret, Thomas tries to play down the novelty of his own narrative. Of course “testimony” of this kind is not considered as reliable as eyewitness testimony from credible individuals, something Thomas acknowledges with his innuendoes about the behavior of William’s mother when she learns of his death.

And so, assuming everything to be certain which she suspected and asserting it to be a fact, as though it had actually been seen—she went through the streets and open places and, carried along by her motherly distress, she kept calling upon everybody with dreadful screams.
Thomas appears to be insensible to the similarities between this behavior and his own, but it may also be true that he is trying to distinguish his “diligent” investigations from the simple credence of individuals like William’s mother or the other citizens of Norwich who repeat common knowledge to one another. Thomas argues that “everybody knows” about ritual murder already, yet it is difficult to evaluate the truth-value of a claim whose rhetorical function in his narrative is so pronounced. The fact that William’s cult never became very popular seems to militate against the idea that everyone knew about the accusation—and believed it—before Thomas arrived. What is insidious about Thomas’s account, of course, is the effect to which it contributes. Thomas is accused of manufacturing fictions, but he contributes to a process of canonization, in which novel claims gain authority with repetition—tellings and retellings eventually create new cults, and periodic outbreaks of violence.

Medieval critics’ doubts about Thomas’s credibility as a reporter of events reinforce modern commentators’ basic agreement that he is an unreliable narrator. Benedicta Ward calls Thomas “a sly and secret manipulator of events” (69), while Langmuir remarks that “The Life tells us what he wanted to believe happened, but not necessarily what really did happen” (TDA, 218). Many a historian would dismiss these remarks as modern psychologizing, but they are assessments drawn from the rhetoric of Thomas’s text, a rhetoric that reveals more than it means to and implicates its author in a web of contemporary controversy that hardly paints him in a positive light. It seems likely that Thomas also pushed his rhetoric too far by contemporary standards. His peers would have had a subtle sense of how to evaluate “proper” embellishments from improper, appropriate innovation on a textual model from inappropriate fabula. This finely tuned sense of discrimination is not something easily recovered now. We understand true and untrue in definitive terms, and we understand the canons of relativism, but the complex negotiations, reciprocal confirmations, and overlap of genres involved in advancing medieval truth claims are another animal altogether. One of the things Thomas reveals is that his critics among the Norwich monks broadly agreed with modern assessments of his unreliability, although their reasons for doing so were different from ours.

It is easy to forget that only Books I and II of the Vita focus on Thomas’s argument for William’s sanctity, while Books III through VII are premised on a kind of forgetting of the originary crime, allowing it to recede into the background as miraculous cures for toothaches and fluxes, paralyzed limbs and painful swellings come to the fore. This is where
Thomas records the miracles William is supposed to have performed, and this is the project of establishment and consolidation he sought to complete with his narrative—Books I and II are the toll, the tax he had to pay to his critics in order to move on to these miraculous accounts. In the end, Thomas merely requires the Jews, as former martyrologists needed bad pagans, in order to do his work. For Thomas, the real meaning of William’s death lies in his own mundane accounts of the miraculous, and how these reassert the coherence of his community and his place in that community. In their drive to locate some glimmer of insight into historical events beneath Thomas’s rhetoric, scholars have forgotten his critics and his modest aims as William’s advocate. An unpleasant truth obscured by this act of forgetting is the possibility that beneath the rhetoric may lie only more rhetoric, with little secure ground of historical reference to offer outside the bounds of Thomas’s confidence in his version of events. He reminds us of his own role in the text by his constant, obtrusive presence, and instead of composing a narrative that allows us to forget his work of persuasion, he announces his partisanship through his defensive tone. But if we attend to that rhetoric carefully, we can just hear, at the very margin of our historical perception, the contrary voices of Thomas’s twelfth-century critics. It is at this margin between memory and erasure that we can also detect the beginnings of what has become a perennial feature of the discourse surrounding ritual murder, namely, its juridical character.

**Juridical Judgments: Anatomy of a Discourse**

Thomas’s rhetoric of legalistic struggle, used to verify what he sees as the self-evident question of Jewish guilt in the Norwich case, is a prominent feature of discussion of the ritual murder accusation that persists up to the present, though this juridical discourse arguably reached its peak in public debates about the ritual murder libel before World War II. In the traditional framework of the discourse, one must choose: either the accusation is false, and Jews have been unjustly persecuted, or it contains some element of truth, however marginal, and the question of responsibility must be reimagined, or transformed. The stakes of this argument have always been ethically significant. As one early modern writer put it, “Either the Jews are slaughtering Christian children most cruelly, or the Christians are slaughtering innocent Jews most shamefully, which a Christian . . . should not do.” What is more, many commentators and interpreters, from Thomas of Monmouth down to the present, believed that the result of
their inquiry would be a definitive answer, one that would determine once and for all not only the question of guilt in a particular case but the status of the accusation itself—as truth or fantasy, crime or libel. In the terms of the juridical discourse, it almost goes without saying that the implications of a guilty verdict are imagined in collective terms. Furthermore, as I will argue below, when it comes to arguments about historical ritual murder accusations, this dangerous question of the “reality” behind the legend has become superimposed on questions of historical responsibility. To take a position on “what actually happened” is at the same time to take an ethical position on the question of historical blame, the assignment of responsibility, and the ultimate meaning of such events. This close association between the status of the blood accusation in historical reality and determinations about historical guilt has meant that invoking one necessarily means invoking the other. Traditionally, the claim that there is some “reality” to the legend, however tenuous, has been taken to imply a de facto assumption of generalized Jewish guilt.

For a variety of reasons, contemporary scholarship has deliberately moved away from wrangling over the question of what “reality” might lie behind a particular accusation of ritual murder. First, the blood accusation has been debunked numerous times—in fact this is a perennial feature of discussion, in keeping with the juridical framework itself. Second, arguments that sought to exonerate historical Jews inevitably appeared to suggest that there might be some reality to the accusation they were refuting. Finally, open debates with marginal antisemitic advocates of the ritual murder accusation appeared unseemly (to say the least) in the wake of the Holocaust. But one thread of my argument in this book is that even when modern scholars have tried to frame their analyses in terms other than the juridical, they have still struggled with this shadow discourse and the structures it employs. Often this takes place at a deeper level than that of simple riposte; as we will see, the historian of antisemitism Gavin Langmuir simply rules such debates about the accusation’s “reality” taboo and their implications dangerous, while Israel Yuval does not deign to acknowledge them explicitly. Others, like Ronnie Po-chia Hsia and Helmut Smith, have subtly pushed aside such uncomfortable questions in order to emphasize how the ritual murder accusation functions according to a social script, with prescribed roles, expected styles of evidence, and predictable conclusions. Yet the traditional context of debate lingers, and where it is operative, the juridical discourse typically avoids discussion of the problem of indeterminacy that perpetuates debate about the libel. If
medieval accusations are short on evidence in general, modern accusations of ritual murder are no less lacking when it comes to unbiased or disinterested testimony. The constant interference between evidence, bias, and interpretation is a key characteristic of the ritual murder accusation, and this curious suspension is one aspect of its status as a limit case, though it is often discussed in terms that imply a final answer is not only desirable, but imminent.

The modern juridical discourse about the blood libel divides along a stark continuum of guilt and innocence that is absolute, collective, and usually decided in advance. If, in Thomas of Monmouth’s text, we must work to reconstruct the claims of those skeptics who doubted his account, in a modern context, it is the insidious antisemitic claim of guilt that lurks in the subtext of mainstream historiographical studies. Henri Desportes’s 1889 book, *Mystère du Sang Chez les Juifs de Tous les Temps*, offers a paradigmatic example of the juridical discourse at work on the side of an overt and explicit antisemitism. “This work establishes and develops a serious accusation against modern Jews,” Desportes writes, introducing the legalistic language of the charge.67 This juridical orientation only becomes more explicit as the work proceeds.

We sustain and will prove that from the dispersion of the Jewish people until now, in every century and quite recently in our own, in nearly every country of the East and West, the Jews have been found guilty more than once of having murdered Christian children at the time of their Passover celebrations; these murders are committed in hatred of Christ and his believers; they have not been the deeds of isolated men blinded by superstition, but they are national and lawful crimes, observed and practiced by all the Jewish people, at any time when it seems possible to commit them without risk.68

The charge is specific, and its claim is collective, transhistorical, and encompassing. The terms recall those of Thomas of Monmouth himself. According to this logic, even one guilty verdict suggests some truth to every charge. The traditional quality of this rhetoric, and its stability over time, are evident in the more or less direct continuity between Desportes’s language and that visible in the later Nazi publication *Der Stürmer*.

The suspicion under which the Jews are held is murder. They are charged with enticing Gentile children and Gentile adults, butchering them and draining their blood. They are charged with mixing this blood into their masses [*sic*] (unleaven [*sic*] bread) and using it to prac-
tice superstitious magic. They are charged with torturing their victims, especially the children; and during this torture they shout threats, curses, and cast spells against the Gentiles. This systematic murder has a special name. It is called *Ritual Murder*.69

The claim of ritual murder functions to support a whole congeries of other accusations against Jews—of clubbish group loyalty, superstition, hostility to Christians, and deceptive conspiracies. The legalistic language—being “charged” and “held under suspicion,” the accusation that must be “clearly proved”—is language that would fit seamlessly into Thomas of Monmouth’s text. Barnet Hartston remarks on the presumption of guilt understood to lie behind such rhetoric, referring to the dramatic nineteenth-century trials for ritual murder that preoccupied residents of the early German Empire: “For anti-Semites, these trials had two possible outcomes. Either the charge of ritual murder would once and for all be legally substantiated with a conviction, or the German justice system would once again succumb to Jewish influence. Thus, in each case, not only the guilt or innocence of the accused was put at issue, but also the guilt or innocence of all Jews” (Hartston, 134–35).

Such a provocative language of accusation calls for an answer. In the highly charged debates about the “Jewish question” in Europe during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, the public discourse of antisemitism stimulated responses from both Jews and Christians offended by this language of collective guilt and the methods of accusers. This is also a pivotal moment when ritual murder became an issue for the courts: Hartston writes that there were more than 120 publicized ritual murder accusations between 1870 and 1900 (Hartston, 129, n. 2). Several of those that went to trial became famous and were closely watched by the German-speaking public. But a new element was also visible in this paradigm. In the wake of these accusations came a number of prominent libel trials, in which concerned groups and individual Jewish activists sued newspaper editors and others who made strong claims about ritual murder as a requirement of Jewish religious practice, often securing their arguments with deceptive readings and translations of the Talmud. Using the language of libel to counter the language of accusation reconfirms the juridical discourse itself. Those who lodged libel cases hoped to establish Jewish innocence once and for all, just as their opponents hoped for some final proof of guilt.

These trials often featured dueling “expert witnesses” who provided tes-
timony on the nature of the Talmud and specific features of Jewish practice and religious law. The Christian Hebraist and theologian Hermann Strack was a prominent figure in several court cases. As a Christian with substantial knowledge of both the Hebrew language and Jewish religious texts, and a scholar with no political antisemitic affiliations, he could be looked upon as a neutral witness by most trial participants. Strack was also a theologian involved in missionizing efforts to Jews, so there were limits to his validation of the Jewish religion. Just a few years after Desportes’s book appeared, Strack published his own systematic refutation of the blood libel legend, *The Jew and Human Sacrifice*. In later editions of the work, published on the cusp of the twentieth century, Strack offers a series of increasingly detailed prefaces that indicate something of the combative atmosphere in which he worked: he writes that antisemitic opponents misrepresented his conclusions and accused him of falsifying information or being in the employ of mysterious Jewish patrons. Strack remained undaunted, and his work on the ritual murder accusation offers a powerful example of a direct response to the juridical discourse of antisemitism, offered in the same idiom and on the same terms as his opponents.

The antisemites of Strack’s day engaged in case-by-case compilations of examples that were supposed to “prove” that ritual murder existed as a historical fact, and Strack responded in kind with a legalistic, case-by-case refutation. A whole tribe of false servants, desperate unwed mothers, abusive parents, and victims of robbery, rape, and accidental death are invoked in Strack’s account to explain how Jews became scapegoats for specific deaths. His methods are rational, juridical, and systematic. He insists that the burden of proof rests with accusers, not the accused. In one case, Strack argues from medical records that a body was probably carried from the scene of the crime and only dumped after rigor mortis set in, thus rationally explaining the odd disposition of the corpse (*Jew and Human Sacrifice*, 228–33). Discussing the 1475 case of Simon of Trent, Strack points out the contradictions within the documentary records of the investigation and reprints excerpts of the interrogations to demonstrate how techniques of torture encouraged the accused to supply the answers desired by biased judges (*Jew and Human Sacrifice*, 193–200).

Strack’s efforts at rebuttal echo and invert the antisemite’s juridical discourse of guilt by proclaiming Jewish innocence instead. In addition to his reevaluation of the records of specific cases, Strack summons the testimony of the Bible and *halakhah* (Jewish religious law), effectively calling upon authoritative precedents that refute the charge of ritual murder. These ar-
Arguments repeat what have long been familiar themes in the effort to rebut such charges: Jewish tradition abhors blood in any form, forbidding the consumption even of animal blood, and from its earliest emergence as a distinctive religious culture has condemned human sacrifice (Jew and Human Sacrifice, 123–54). Strack also appeals to a tradition of common legal testimony, privileging hostile witnesses—namely, Jewish converts to Christianity—who nevertheless insist on the falsity of such accusations. In addition, he employs the testimonial form of the oath as evidence (something his opponents do as well). He cites Menasseh ben Israel’s famous oath declaring the falsity of the legend of ritual murder, delivered in the course of ben Israel’s efforts to secure the readmission of Jews to England in the seventeenth century. Never one to be satisfied with a minimum number of examples, Strack publishes several other nearly identical oaths. The words of one Jewish convert to Christianity are entirely unambiguous.

Although there is indeed a general slander against the Jews, that they follow after Christian children, and when they have got hold of them, stab them horribly, extract the blood from them, using it with certain ceremonies as a remedy . . . I am able, as a born Jew (who without boasting, know well all their customs, having myself practised, or at any rate seen with my eyes, most of them) to asseverate by God, that the whole time I was connected with Judaism, I never heard among them of such dealings with Christian children, much less that they had ever had Christian blood or had ever used it in the aforesaid manner.

The Jewish convert, fulfilling his traditional role as knowledgeable insider, is the expert witness who swears in favor of the defendant—the entire Jewish people. Using the testimony of converts could, of course, cut both ways, since converts are often implicated in accusations of ritual murder. Thomas of Monmouth’s recourse to the testimony of the convert-monk Theobald is just one example. Historically this juridical formula has been more than metaphorical, since oaths, testimony, and the evaluation of evidence are common features of trials for ritual murder, as well as the historiography surrounding it. The case that originally prompted Cecil Roth to publish Cardinal Ganganelli’s eighteenth-century refutation of the blood libel was the 1911 Beilis case in Russia, in which a brick factory superintendent, Mendel Beilis, was put on trial for the murder of a thirteen-year-old boy. It is salient to remind ourselves that the struggle over the status of ritual murder has not been limited to words alone. At the same time, the meaning of the accusation extends beyond or beneath the surface claims.
advanced by its advocates. It is also “about” the status of Jews and Judaism, and it has functioned as a venue for debates about modernity and cultural change. This was true even in the twelfth century, though Thomas of Monmouth’s “modern” moment was quite different from our own.

This is nowhere more obvious than in the most recent example of the public life of this juridical discourse in Western culture at large: the struggle over Holocaust denial. This self-proclaimed “revisionist” movement came to notice in the late 1970s and early 1980s in France and led to the publication of Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s *Assassins of Memory.* However it was the lawsuit against the scholar Deborah Lipstadt by the prominent Holocaust denier David Irving in 2000 that brought widespread public attention to the latest generation of juridical antisemites. In a fascinating reversal of the nineteenth-century paradigm, in which Jews sued antisemitic antagonists for libel, Irving sued Lipstadt because she had referred to him as a Holocaust denier in her 1997 book, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory.* Irving waited to file suit until Lipstadt’s book was published in Britain, where the burden is on the accused to prove that his or her claims are substantially true, and cannot therefore qualify as libel. This is a much higher standard than that required in many other countries, including the United States. Despite Irving’s efforts to put the Holocaust itself on trial in the libel case, Lipstadt’s arguments were borne out by the London court that declared Irving was, in fact, a Holocaust denier. The language of the final judgment is unambiguous and damning.

The charges which I have found to be substantially true include the charges that Irving has for his own ideological reasons persistently and deliberately misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence; that for the same reasons he has portrayed Hitler in an unwarrantedly favourable light, principally in relation to his attitude towards and responsibility for the treatment of the Jews; that he is an active Holocaust denier; that he is anti-semitic and racist and that he associates with right wing extremists who promote neo-Nazism.

This verdict, much more than some of the equivocal outcomes of the nineteenth-century trials for libel, points to the limits of a juridical discourse from a scholarly point of view. Irving was definitively judged a bad historian and an antisemite, yet Holocaust denial remains a viable pursuit for some individuals, with Irving as their martyr for free speech.

While the Lipstadt case did not deal with the ritual murder legend, it is
a clear example of the juridical discourse of antisemitism at work in another cultural quarter. Holocaust denial websites traffic in a diverse array of antisemitic materials, from antizionist diatribes that indict the entire Jewish people, to claims that Jews run the world banking or media outlets. Deniers have also adopted the cause and topos of ritual murder, all in the name of prosecuting a claim of eternal and collective Jewish guilt. The prominent lawyer and scholar Anthony Julius (who also represented Lipstadt in the libel case) has synthesized the major libels taken up by this juridical antisemitism under three headings: the blood libel, the conspiracy libel, and the economic libel. He summarizes them succinctly.

The blood libel supposes that Jews entertain homicidal intentions towards non-Jews, and that Jewish law underwrites these intentions; the conspiracy libel supposes that Jews act as one, in pursuit of goals inimical to the interests of non-Jews; the economic libel supposes that Jews, who are self-interested, acquisitive and unproductive by nature, financially exploit non-Jews. The libels share the premise that Jews hate or despise non-Jews. Of the three libels, the blood libel is the master one. The categories of this guilt may vary, but the basic thesis never does. Holocaust denial relies upon a slightly altered but familiar allegation about a nefarious Jewish desire to dupe or take advantage of the non-Jewish world; here the claim is that Jews have invented or exaggerated the realities of the Holocaust for their own benefit.

We may seem to have strayed quite far from the topic of the medieval accusation of ritual murder, yet this embedded juridical discourse of guilt and innocence is deeply imbricated in debates about blood libel and extends back beyond the start of the Middle Ages. In fact, it is first instantiated as a reality of Western culture with the long-standing Christian argument that ancient Jews conspired to kill Christ, the murder that stands behind and surpasses all others from a Christian point of view. But the discourse of adjudication I have been describing is not only long-standing; it is also a rhetorical trap whose terms are set by the claims of antisemitism itself. This is something opponents have long recognized. To argue against the juridical terms of the discourse set by antisemites and insist on Jewish innocence is to participate in the structure of attributed guilt by reversing its terms: Jews are innocent rather than guilty of the charges leveled at them. In publications and statements, Lipstadt herself has repeatedly insisted that the reality of the Holocaust is a monumental historical fact that should not require defense because it cannot legitimately be disputed.
There is simply no foundation to claims that the Holocaust did not happen. On her refusal to debate deniers publicly, Lipstadt writes:

We cannot debate them [the deniers] for two reasons, one strategic and the other tactical. As we have repeatedly seen, the deniers long to be considered the “other” side. Engaging them in discussion makes them exactly that. Second, they are contemptuous of the very tools that shape any honest debate: truth and reason. Debating them would be like trying to nail a glob of jelly to the wall. (*Denying*, 221)

This is a clear response to the problem the discourse itself represents—when it becomes a matter of choosing “sides” that are understood to correspond to truth positions, then even historiographical fantasies assume a kind of epistemological reality. But to ignore the claims of the discourse is to risk appropriation by it. As of this writing, medieval historians Israel Yuval, Elliott Horowitz, and Ariel Toaff are grouped together on at least one prominent polemical website, where they are presented as unwitting champions of antisemitic causes.⁸² Scholars are well aware of this shadow discourse of juridical antisemitism even when it is not explicitly mentioned.

It is worth pointing to the curious status of these debates as largely public affairs that cross into the supposedly hermetic environment of scholarship. Strack, for example, was a recognized scholar, but one of his major opponents in contemporary libel trials was August Rohling, a curious hybrid of scholarly ambition and intellectual mediocrity who became notorious for his best-selling pamphlet *The Talmud Jew.*⁸³ Rohling’s text was a hot seller, reprinted many times, while Rohling himself became a scholarly authority cited by antisemitic political agitators. Eventually Rohling was disgraced after he withdrew from a libel suit following accusations that he relied on flawed translations of Hebrew texts (Hartston, 190–204).⁸⁴ The sphere of debate surrounding the ritual murder accusation has often been populated by a range of pseudoscholars and willful mistranslators, as well as antisemitic agitators who hide behind the work of self-declared experts as a way of claiming authority for their own agendas. While the space of the scholar’s study has sometimes become a site of legalistic deliberation, often the broader public sphere of debate has also become bound up in scholarly projects. Gavin Langmuir is an excellent guide to the foibles and difficulties of the project of rebuttal, and he regards the juridical discourse surrounding the ritual murder accusation with deep suspicion and unease. Despite the juridical tones of his own work on antisemitism (discussed in the following chapter), Langmuir appears to share with Lipstadt a strong
sense of the futility of adopting an explicit posture of rebuttal. His suspicion is evident in his essay “Historiographic Crucifixion,” in which he discusses the historiographical search for what “really happened” in Norwich circa 1144, a project he describes as peculiarly susceptible to the seductions of “wishful thinking” (TDA, 296–97). Langmuir describes how many modern scholars and writers have been preoccupied with the question of Jewish culpability and often seem to operate on the assumption that medieval Jews must have been guilty of something, if not ritual murder. Langmuir documents how this question of Jewish culpability has been invested with partisan overtones, whether a particular investigator hopes to convict or exonerate historical Jewish communities. He also suggests that ungrounded speculations about an ultimately irrecoverable historical event are often carried out in bad faith and may lead to dangerous outcomes.

The category of strange speculations includes the bizarre theories of M. D. Anderson, a British art historian who wrote several works about medieval woodcarving and images. In 1967, she published a book arguing that the Jews of Norwich had indeed killed William, but not from any ritual or religious motive. Instead, fearing a pogrom as a result of hostilities aroused by their recent celebration of Purim, they brought him in for “questioning,” and eventually killed him when the situation escalated beyond their ability to keep it quiet. This strange, if ingenious, solution required that Anderson accept certain aspects of Thomas of Monmouth’s text at face value while skeptically reinterpreting others according to her own entirely unsubstantiated paradigm. Langmuir also reports the conjectures of a medical pathologist, William D. Sharpe, who read Thomas’s secondhand descriptions of the state of William’s body literally (and rather naively) to produce a theory that William was killed by a “sexual deviate” who also happened to be “a morbidly anti-Christian Jewish fanatic” (TDA, 295). We might be tempted to dismiss claims like those of Anderson and Sharpe as amateur mistakes, drawing on techniques easily avoided by sober professional historians, but Langmuir insists that we recognize “the extent to which both Anderson and Sharpe’s conjectures were not deviations from, but the consequence of, prior historiography” (TDA, 295), which was always ambivalent on the question of Jewish culpability.

Some, like the nineteenth-century scholar M. R. James, rejected the idea of a corporate Jewish conspiracy but held open the possibility of a Jewish murderer. Interpreters, James writes, must “take into account the possibilities of what a mad hatred of a dominant system, or a reversion to half-forgotten practices of a darker age, might effect in the case of an ig-
norant Jew seven centuries back” (Life and Miracles, lxxix). After alluding to a “darker age” of (presumably) Jewish history, James invokes the Jew-cum-monk who acted as Thomas’s informant, Theobald: “Can we be sure that there were not at Norwich Jews as bad as he, who could give effect to such a fancy? Is it beyond the bounds of possibility that he did the deed himself?” (Life and Miracles, lxxix). This strange preoccupation with (exceptional) Jewish culprits is especially striking in William Thomas Walsh’s 1930 book, Isabella of Spain, in which the author’s sympathies are so clearly with those who accused Jews of religious crimes that he often seems to be an advocate for the prosecution. Referring to a Spanish accusation of ritual murder in the late fifteenth century, Walsh writes:

Let it be said at once that there is no evidence that murder or any other iniquity has ever been part of any official ceremony of the Jewish religion. . . . It does not follow by any means, however, that Jewish individuals or groups never committed bloody and disgusting crimes, even crimes motivated by hatred of Christ and of the Catholic Church; . . . With all possible sympathy for the innocent Jews who have suffered from monstrous slanders, one must admit that acts committed by Jews sometimes furnished the original provocation.86

As Langmuir understands very well, the theory of the exceptional Jewish crime works rhetorically to implicate Jews as a group. Walsh’s prose reinforces this: “However this may be, and granting that innumerable lies were circulated about the Jews, it is a great mistake to assume their complete innocence of all the crimes attributed to them” (439).

Langmuir acknowledges the polarity of this tradition of legalistic speculation, which sought determinations of innocence as well as guilt. “Wishful thinking,” he writes, “could work both ways,” affecting those who sought to exonerate Jews from unjust accusations as well as those who assumed some kind of direct reality behind the claim of murder (TDA, 290). Langmuir describes two well-known efforts by early Jewish scholars to rebut the accusation at Norwich, including Cecil Roth’s argument about how raucous Purim festivities might have been misunderstood by Christians as aggressive symbolic demonstrations against Christian belief. In a forerunner to theories like those of Israel Yuval and Elliott Horowitz, Roth suggested that perhaps Christians were suspicious of practices like the traditional hanging of an image of Haman during Purim, so that the idea of Jews murdering a Christian boy seemed plausible to them.87 Another influential theory, originally advanced by Joseph Jacobs, was that William
of Norwich was accidentally buried alive after suffering an epileptic seizure, his disinterment therefore resulting in some unusual phenomena. Jacobs fixed on the idea that the report of earth rising up from the grave as William was disinterred from his original burial site in the woods around Norwich was accurate, even if many other elements of the story were unreliable. Langmuir is deeply suspicious of all of these rationalizing gestures, which from his point of view come dangerously close to suggesting some realistic basis for the ritual murder accusation, whether it is rooted in murder or misunderstanding.

What may disturb Langmuir most, however, is the problem of indeterminacy that undergirds but also finally calls such arguments into question. Barnet Hartston’s analysis of public debates about the “Jewish Question” in the early German Empire underscores this problem clearly: no matter how many Jews are acquitted of ritual murder, or how many libel trials end in convictions of those who make false claims about Jewish religious practices or the contents of the Talmud, the question can never be resolved by a simple court decision, and historiographical argument has been no more successful in laying debates to rest. The juridical discourse of debate also reveals the simple truth that ritual murder accusations are always “about” more than they appear to be. The libel is a kind of cul-de-sac of historical thought, where evidence is ambiguous, and interests often dominate interpretation. We must be aware of what the accusation stands for, and how it comes to function as a political tool in different environments, if we are to understand the entanglement of these issues.

Part of the work of the libel is to hash out the symbolic significance of Jews and Judaism in Western culture, and this process has always seemed to entail a confrontation with modernity, however it is defined in the moment of debate. For Thomas of Monmouth, the Jews may have represented the newfangled forms of Norman governance; certainly they were for him strangers, foreigners whose place in the reconfigured city of Norwich represented a confluence of changes in twelfth-century culture. For the political antisemites of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jews were once again understood to represent the modern forces most feared by agitators. These forces included new government and banking initiatives, and the sweeping changes of modernity and industry, and were further epitomized by the movement known as Emancipation, by which Jews became enfranchised members of the broader population. Hartston describes these fears in terms of an amalgamated master concept: the “Jewish-liberal-Manchesterites,” who were feared to be destroying
Europe from within (Hartston, 2). Pierre-André Taguieff writes that despite many changes in the definition of modernity, a new antisemitism has emerged that relies on a similarly loaded master concept, rooted in fears of conspiracy and the betrayal of contemporary values—this new amalgam, he writes, is “Israelis-Zionists-Jews.” This concept, which represents a curious nexus of leftist and traditionally right-wing themes, is as deceptive as the old label, and covers just as many fears, now of rampant power, globalization, and the dark forces of unstoppable colonialist capitalism. “For all these producers of ideological discourse,” Taguieff writes, “the amalgam ‘Israelis-Zionists-Jews’ operates as a representation of the absolute enemy, worthy of absolute hatred.”

But the association between Jews and modernity is an ambivalent one. That symbolic entity, “the Jews,” may often be invoked as a way of debating larger forces of cultural change, but Jews and Judaism are just as often called upon in the name of tradition, ethnic authenticity, and stable identity. This is an ambivalence that, as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes, is long-standing in Western discourse. Bauman adopts the term allosemitism to describe how Jews and Judaism are charged topics even before any discussion begins. Allosemitism, according to Bauman, “refers to the practice of setting Jews apart as people radically different from all the others, needing separate concepts to describe and comprehend them and special treatment in all or most social intercourse.” Bauman advocates this new term because it captures for him the essence of a particular position that precedes either philo- or antisemitism.

“Allosemitism” is essentially non-committal. . . . it does not unambiguously determine either hatred or love of Jews, but contains the seeds of both, and assures that whichever of the two appears, is intense and extreme. The original non-commitment (that is, the fact that allosemitism is, perhaps must be, already in place for anti- or philosemitism to be conceivable) makes allosemitism a radically ambivalent attitude. (“Allosemitism,” 143)

This ambivalence suggests why debates about Jews and Judaism quickly take on larger resonances: as a charged symbolic presence in Western culture, “the Jew” becomes a proxy for other tensions—between change and tradition, global and local politics, and even competing epistemological regimes—that the surrounding culture is struggling to encompass. The genealogy of the juridical discourse surrounding the blood libel concretizes this ambivalence in a particularly striking way: one’s choices are quickly
delimited to guilt or innocence, antisemite or Jew. There is no room for grey areas or interpretive uncertainties.

Recent work on the history of the ritual murder accusation reflects these familiar juridical currents, even when it does not directly engage them. Even for scholars who want to move away from the limited terms of a courtroom-style verdict, the shadow of this discourse continues to influence the manner in which historical responsibility is discussed and imagined. Joshua Trachtenberg’s poignant question, composed just after the end of World War II, still captures something of the difficulty of this enterprise, and the stakes of the work of interpretation. “How is it,” Trachtenberg asks, “that men believe of the Jews what common sense would forbid them to believe of anyone else?” It is a question that Thomas of Monmouth could not have conceived. For the historian Gavin Langmuir, whose work crystallizes many of the themes of twentieth-century historiography on Jewish-Christian relations, the answer must be sought in the realm of the irrational, and evaluated in an ultimately juridical language of moralization.