

# A Literary Case Study of Medieval Anglo-Jewish Women in the Plea Rolls of the Exchequer of the Jews

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For an interactive storytelling experience, use this QR code to visit a website created by Alexandria Brooks using Twine.



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## Background

Judicial records are the largest body of historical primary sources involving medieval Anglo-Jewish women and demonstrate their prevalence in the law courts. While legal sources are often expected to be objective, there are elements of court records that allow for literary readings. These elements include dramatized witness accounts, layered narration, bored marginal “doodles,” Biblical allusion, and gendered and religious stereotypes.

This research focuses on the Solomon Turbe case—a murder trial recorded in the plea rolls in 1220 CE—which “reveals... complex interactions between Christians and Jews, and the interrelationships of several Jewish communities” (*MAJW*). Prominent figures such as Mirabel of Gloucester and Isaac of Norwich are involved. Also, Elias of Warwick (Abraham Gabbay’s pledge) and his family appear in another violent case twenty-four years later.



Fig. 1 Isaac of Norwich, Avigaye, and Mosse in Exchequer Receipt Roll, 1233. TNA E 403/1565, m. 1.

**NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY:** The source material and the people within, when viewed through the literary lens, are described here as a “literary text” and “characters,” respectively. This approach is used to further analysis and not to devalue the subjects which are real people and events.

## Methods and Materials

- ❖ A survey of prominent cases in the plea rolls of the Exchequer of the Jews was conducted using Latin manuscripts preserved in The National Archives of the UK, as well as translated volumes of these plea rolls. The Solomon Turbe murder case was selected for specific analysis.
- ❖ The *Medieval Anglo-Jewish Women (MAJW)* project, which maps the relations of Anglo-Jewish women through their involvements in medieval court cases, informed the direction and scope of this research.

### Critical Archival Theory

Not only are there layered narratives within the relevant plea roll, but also its creation, preservation, and presentation has relied on potentially hostile, antisemitic parties. We can think of such archives as biased technologies:

*...the click of the camera’s shutter acts like a verdict—a very limited portion of information is captured, framed, and made appropriable by those who become its rights holders. The verdict-shutter is common to other imperial technologies and was in use prior to the invention of the camera. (Azoulay iv)*

Azoulay’s analogy of camera-framing exposes the Christian scribes’ power over the characters and narratives that they capture, as well as the influence of modern scholars such as J.M. Rigg (whose translation of the Solomon Turbe case was published in *PREJ* vol. 1 in 1905).

## The Timeline

The timeline below arranges the legal proceedings of Solomon Turbe’s murder trial in chronological order as a bare representation of events faithful to the primary source. Secondary sources were required to ascertain the correct chronology due to inaccuracies in the manuscript’s arrangement of pages. This approach removes the dramatization and gendered stereotypes seen in the raw material: Comitissa, wife of Solomon, is depicted as hysterical and unreliable, while Mirabel, a well-networked and wealthy businesswoman, is direct, discreet, and resourceful.

### Character Narratives

The character narratives are first-person representations of potential events written as interactive narratives in Twine. This creative approach highlights uncertainty and negative space, undermining the assumption of truth and objectivity in historical primary sources. It also dramatizes character-specific events, emphasizing the literary elements of the text.

### Marginal “Doodles”

Marginal doodles show Christian scribes sketching caricatures of their Jewish compatriots, and interpretation of them can reveal the biases of modern scholars as well. Some assumptions regarding the hostility of drawings have been debunked (see man with weigh-scale in Fig. 1), and some confirmed (see Isaac of Norwich as Antichrist in Fig. 1)—while others have revealed a historical “same-ing” of Jewesses and Christians (see Fig. 2).

## Discussion

- ❖ This research questions linear history by participating in the ongoing discussion around the study of medieval Jewish history through potentially hostile records, the value of a literary analysis on non-literary texts, and the importance of unlearning imperialism.
- ❖ The character narratives rely on the primary source as much as the timeline does, but rather than recounting the main narrative, the interactive character narratives isolate one perspective and reposition it alongside other perspectives. Reconstructing the primary source events as a literary text exposes the elements within the primary source that betray the biases of its own time and allow for literary readings. As an interactive form of data representation, Twine allows an outline to be actively traced over the captured image while interrogating historical and modern biases.



Fig. 2 Mirabel of Gloucester in the margin of Fine Roll for 2 Henry III (1218). TNA C 60/9, m. 7.

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## Solomon Turbe Murder Trial: Chronological Timeline of Legal Proceedings

