

Elliott Horowitz, *Polcelina of Blois as seen by Medieval Hebrew Chronicles and Modern Jewish Historians*

Ephraim of Bonn, in his late twelfth-century account of the ritual murder accusation against the Jews of Blois of 1171, the first such instance in France, repeatedly mentions a Jewish woman named Polcelina (sometimes Latinized as Pulcelina or Pucellina), whose close relations with “the ruler Thibaut” (Count Thibaut V) were allegedly behind the outbreak of hostility against the local Jews, more than thirty of whom –the bulk of the community– were burnt as punishment for the murder of a child whose body was never found. Ephraim’s chronicle was interpreted by the nineteenth-century historian Heinrich Graetz as suggesting that the mayor of Blois “bore a grudge against an influential Jewish woman...who was a favorite of his lord... and took this opportunity of revenging himself.” The opportunity presented itself, as we learn from Ephraim (and from an earlier Hebrew source –a letter from the neighboring community of Orleans), when one evening a local servant saw a Jew watering his horse alongside the Loire and thought that an untanned hide sticking out from the bottom of his coat was the body of a child. The servant, in Ephraim’s telling, knew that his lord “would rejoice” upon hearing the news, “since he hated a certain haughty Jewess in the town.” Upon hearing of the alleged incident the lord replied: “Now I shall take my revenge from that woman, Madame Polcelina.”

But which local lord hated Polcelina, and why? In Graetz’s reading, it was not Count Thibaut who hated her, but the local mayor, who was jealous of the close relations between the “haughty Jewess” and the aristocratic count. This story line was later followed rather uncritically by Salo Baron, who wrote in 1957 that the local investigation into the servant’s suspicions regarding the body in the Loire “became entangled in Count Thibaut’s love affair with a Jewess... and the enmity of local officials toward the count’s exacting lady friend.” From the 1960’s on, however, a different narrative began to emerge, one that suggested –or even assumed– that it was the count’s own change of heart towards Polcelina that set the stage for the tragedy in Blois. In his *Medieval Jewry in Northern France* (1973) Robert Chazan asserted that Polcelina, “had unknowingly lost her leverage with the eroding of princely ardor.” In a subsequent essay –published in 1994– Chazan wrote somewhat more dramatically that an “amorous relationship gone sour... bore the seeds of disaster” for the Jews of Blois. Chazan’s increasingly bold departure from the Graetz-Baron narrative may have been fueled by the publication –in the very year of Baron’s death– of William Chester Jordan’s *The French Monarchy and the Jews* (1989), wherein it was stated straightforwardly that “the count of Blois fell out of love with the Jewess

Polcelina.” The Princeton historian had asserted more broadly that “clandestine as such relationships [between Jews and Christians] usually were, falling out of love was a fact of life and could lead to spectacular problems.”

Earlier Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1932-2009), had discussed the Blois incident in his now classic *Zakhor* (1982). In Yerushalmi’s version, “Count Thibaut was having an affair with a Jewess, Polcelina, which aroused the jealousy of the count’s wife, while other Christians resented the lady’s influence at court.” The last phrase echoes his teacher Salo Baron’s brief summary, some twenty-five years earlier, of the events of 1171, but Yerushalmi also focussed on another aspect of Ephraim’s medieval narrative –“the jealousy of the count’s wife.” Although the Hebrew chronicler had referred to Thibaut by (a punning version of) his actual name –as did his brother Hillel of Bonn in a penitential poem based on the Blois incident– he gave the count’s wife only the archetypal name of “Jezebel.” Since the 1953 publication of Shalom Spiegel’s (Hebrew) article on “the martyrs of Blois” we know both her real name and her royal pedigree. She was Countess Alix, the second daughter of Louis VII by Eleanor of Aquitaine, who was born shortly before their divorce. By the time she married Thibault V in 1164 the latter’s sister had become Louis's second wife. The relationship between a local aristocrat so closely connected to the royal chamber and a Jewish widow was bound to become a subject of gossip among both Jewish and Christians –and perhaps also between them.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that even before the publication of Spiegel’s ground-breaking article a Hebrew play was written about Polcelina and the events of 1171. More surprising, however, is the identity of the playwright: Shelomo Dov (formerly Fritz) Goitein (1900-1985), a scholar best known today for his work on the Cairo Geniza but during the 1920’s, when Goitein was composing his play he was –like Spiegel– a high-school teacher in Haifa, where he had emigrated shortly after earning a doctorate in Islamic Studies at the University of Frankfurt. *Polcelina*, as the final page of its published version indicates, was completed in Jerusalem early in the spring of 1927. Several months later a three-part review by Shalom Spiegel appeared in the Labor Zionist newspaper *Davar*. The last part of the lecture shall discuss Goitein’s play and Spiegel’s review thereof side-by-side with other attempts to reconstruct the twelfth-century story of Blois during the twentieth century.