The extension of print culture and the mainstreaming of political antisemitism

Article

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2024.2428064

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

The extension of print culture and the mainstreaming of political antisemitism

Bryan Cheyette

Submit your article to this journal ⟲

Article views: 98

View related articles ⟲

View Crossmark data ⟲

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The extension of print culture and the mainstreaming of political antisemitism

BRYAN CHEYETTE ⓘ

ABSTRACT   Cheyette's article will explore the many ways that popular culture in Britain, after the expansion of print culture in the 1890s, was influenced by the growth of political antisemitism and the resulting campaigns against Jewish citizenship in Western European nation-states. It will focus on four bestselling authors who instigated the paperback revolution—George Du Maurier, Hall Caine, Marie Corelli and Guy Thorne—and enjoyed total sales of several millions. With the demise of the expensive three-volume library edition of the novel, there was a sea-change in the types of novels that were produced from the 1890s onwards. Cheap one-volume novels ('yellowbacks') were marketed aggressively and were easily accessible which meant that the British reading public were transformed into book buyers rather than book borrowers. The novels and stories of Du Maurier, Caine, Corelli and Thorne were a print version of mass democracy and a new medium that enabled gratuitously dehumanizing portrayals of Jews, once marginal, to have a widespread appeal in mainstream culture. These authors complicated the received linear narrative of the history of antisemitism—which supposedly moved from religious hostility to racial demarcation—by engaging directly with the religious debates of the time. They popularized the so-called 'Jewish question'—articulated by Wilhelm Marr's Antisemiten-Liga (League of Anti-Semites)—by distinguishing between 'desirable' and 'undesirable' Jewish 'aliens'. This resulted in the promotion or disavowal of immigration restrictions on East European Jewish refugees and often positioned 'the Jew' as a racialized outsider not worthy of citizenship.

> *Prejudice sold novels—by the ton.*
>   —John Sutherland, *Bestsellers*[1]

As we know, the word 'Antisemitismus' was coined by Wilhelm Marr in his 1873 pamphlet, *Der Sieg des Germanthums über das Judenthum* (The way to the victory of Germanism over Judaism). Six years later he founded the Antisemiten-Liga (League of Anti-Semites) to campaign against the citizenship of Jews in Germany on the grounds that German-Jews dominated media, finance and politics, and were an irredeemable threat to the 'Aryan' nation.[2] German-Jewish citizenship, in other words, was viewed by political antisemites as a means of disguising 'Semitic' racial power. By the 1880s, the concept of 'anti-Semitism' was popularized in many European languages, including English, and signified a backlash against the greater freedom and equality granted to Western European Jews throughout the mid- to late nineteenth century.[3] My article will explore the many ways that popular culture in Britain, after the expansion of print culture in the 1890s, was influenced by the growth of political antisemitism.

I will focus on four bestselling authors, George Du Maurier, Hall Caine, Marie Corelli and Guy Thorne, who sold hundreds of thousands of copies of any one novel and had total sales of several millions. These bestselling authors were both to reinforce as well as problematize the idea of 'anti-Semitism' either by creating ambivalent Jewish figures—some of whom were worthy of citizenship, others not—or by responding to the anti-semitic version of 'the Jew' by formulating an equally racialized philosemit-ism. These authors also complicated the received linear narrative of the history of antisemitism—which supposedly moved from religious hostility to racial demarcation—by engaging directly with the religious debates of the time. I will begin by exploring the popular cultural realm that could be a vehicle for mainstreaming political antisemitism and that often had the capacity to position 'the Jew' as a racialized outsider not worthy of citizenship.

The age of 'trash triumphant'

With the decline of the 'library edition', or the expensive three-volume edition of the novel, there was a sea-change in the types of novels that were produced from the 1890s onwards. Cheap one-volume fictional

---

1   John Sutherland, *Bestsellers: A Very Short Introduction* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), 87.
2   Moshe Zimmermann, *Wilhelm Marr: The Patriarch of Antisemitism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986).
3   David Feldman, 'Toward a history of the term "anti-Semitism"', *American Historical Review*, vol. 123, no. 4, 2018, 1139–50.

works ('yellowbacks') were promoted by newly created publishers (such as Chatto & Windus and Methuen) with accessible bookshops (most notably W. H. Smiths) which enabled a significant cadre of authors to gain a considerable readership. Popular novels were marketed aggressively on both sides of the Atlantic and transformed the British reading public into book buyers rather than book borrowers.[4] The novel was, in the early years of the new century, the most accessible art form in Britain, and sold in even larger numbers in the United States where it was more cheaply produced. Books were translated into all European languages and widely serialized in newspapers and periodicals that, like their literary counterparts, were priced inexpensively from the 1890s to sell in large numbers. The emergence of the popular press at the same time was a crucial backdrop for new fiction. Daily papers also founded at the turn of the century—the *Daily Mail* (1896), the *Daily Express* (1900) and the *Daily Mirror* (1903)—had a mass circulation, with the jingoistic half-penny *Daily Mail* selling over a million copies a day during the Second Boer War (1899–1902). The sensationalism of this 'new journalism' influenced bestselling novelists in so far as both forms claimed to represent their readership.[5]

Literary agents became prominent mediators at this time, with authors, who were able to sell to a large reading public, making unprecedented fortunes and becoming literary celebrities. The massive demand for works of fiction led to a sophisticated authorial sense of the kind of audiences that were being addressed, with popular writers emulating the 'new journalism' and speaking directly to their readers to bypass any assumptions about the 'literary' value of their work. They were writing in a new medium (cheaply produced one-volume potboilers were novel in all senses) for a recently educated and enfranchised working-class or lower middle-class readership. Just as popular fiction could eschew aesthetic pretensions, newspapers no longer aimed merely to educate and inform but, instead, were designed with scandalous headlines and reader-friendly layouts to enable mass circulation. Both 'new journalism' and popular fiction were equally pioneering and intimately related as bestselling novels were serialized or heavily promoted in newspapers.

Here a distinction should be made. Bestselling fiction, unlike the 'new journalism', was not merely 'trash triumphant', as presumed by Henry James's narrator in 'The Next Time' (1894).[6] New fiction pastiched nineteenth-century literary forms, and bestselling authors could champion religiosity and spiritual tolerance in much the same way as enlightened Victorians.

4 David Glover, 'Publishing, history, genre', in David Glover and Scott McCracken (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), 15–32.

5 Greg Smart, 'From Persecution to Mass Migration: The "Alien" in Popular Print and Society, 1881–1906', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Southampton, July 2008.

6 Henry James, *'The Lesson of the Master', 'The Death of the Lion', 'The Next Time', and Other Tales* (London: Macmillan and Co. 1922), 139–94 (143).

But they could also concoct, often with sophistication, a bewildering array of dehumanizing racial representations of Jewish people and draw on the contemporary rhetoric of political antisemitism (in relation to Jewish equality) while denying vehemently that they were 'antisemitic'. This rhetoric, reinforced by grotesque cartoons and visual caricatures, saturated most popular newspapers and some periodicals. That this new media arose soon after the rise of political antisemitism is significant as it radicalized a mainstream culture of race-thinking that Bill Williams has called the 'antisemitism of tolerance'.[7]

At the heart of such 'tolerance' is a series of bifurcated images of 'the Jew', as both old and fossilized as well as new and transformative. Jews within Christian theology were, after all, thought of traditionally as devil-like Christ-killers and as potential redeemers of Christ. These beliefs were still prevalent in the early twentieth century and their binary structure influenced the debates on whether Jewish people were worthy of equality or not. Depending on who was doing the representation, Jews were categorized as both a bastion of empire and one of the main threats to empire; as prefiguring a socialist world order and as a key force preventing its development; as the ideal economic man and the degenerate plutocrat.[8] Such was the banalization of Christian theology that, at the time, provided a religious context—often reinforced by race-thinking—in which to assess the virtue of 'the Jew'. In this spirit, newspapers, with one voice, distinguished between 'desirable' and 'undesirable' Jewish 'aliens', and promoted the restriction of immigrant East European Jews based on these spurious distinctions. Such was the influence of the 'Jewish question' unleashed by Wilhelm Marr.

The growth of bestselling fiction not only changed the publishing industry and the modes of book distribution, marketing and authorial entrepreneurship, but culture itself. Mass-selling novels, in other words, were a counter-culture with their own 'independent history'.[9] This meant that portable, cheaply serialized and easily purchased books had a fraught relationship with mainstream culture. Bestsellers referred regularly to each other, what we would now call an 'echo chamber', and they veered between literary and mass culture. I will show the many ways in which received conventions and the new novel were in dialogue as well as conflict. Popular culture was above all intertextual. By the 1920s, the relationship between fiction and other forms of technology, most notably radio and film, was paramount. Popular fiction, before this time, interacted with a range of other media and performative activities such as periodicals, newspapers, theatre, political rallies and

7   Bill Williams, 'The anti-Semitism of tolerance', in A. J. Kidd and K. W. Roberts (eds), *City, Class and Culture: Studies of Social Policy and Cultural Production in Victorian Manchester* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1985), 74–102.
8   Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), 9.
9   Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction since 1900*, 3rd edn (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2021), 123–4.

religious sermons. The 'new' novel resonated across many different types of media not least when it was explicitly promoting political antisemitism.

My case studies of some key bestselling authors—Du Maurier, Caine, Corelli and Thorne—who laid the foundations for the expansion of print culture, will illustrate a range of Jewish representations from a celebratory philosemitism to an exclusionary antisemitism. Many popular novels were a print version of mass democracy that enabled gratuitously racialized portrayals of Jews, once marginal, to have a widespread appeal within mainstream culture. As Lisa Moses Leff has shown, there is a 'perplexing relationship between late nineteenth–century political antisemitism and the liberal public sphere in which it emerged'.[10] Political antisemites were illiberal—in excluding Jews from the body politic as their core belief—but still participated in the democratic structures of the nation-state and were on the side of economic modernization. Mass-produced fiction had similar paradoxes. It was both a conduit for the most egregious race-thinking but it also engaged directly with mainstream society, culture and politics. The expansion of print culture both enabled the broadening out of political antisemitism into the mainstream but the outcome, when 'trash' triumphs, was not straightforwardly exclusionary.

Svengali and the age of the bestseller

George Du Maurier's amazingly popular *Trilby* (1894) began the process of generating a newly educated readership with the time and money to take advantage of cheap, easily accessible fiction.[11] Within six months it sold over 200,000 copies and an extraordinary two million copies were purchased in Europe and the United States in its first two years. It was initially published in three volumes although it put so much pressure on lending libraries that it was impossible to meet the demand of borrowers. A one-volume illustrated edition was soon published on both sides of the Atlantic. 'Trilbymania', as it was called, took a myriad of forms and gripped America initially. According to one estimate, there were twenty-four dramatic productions of the novel playing at the same time. One town in Florida had a Svengali Square and a Little Billie lake (named after Trilby's doomed admirer). There were countless Trilby-parties, concerts based on the music

10 Lisa Moses Leff, 'Liberalism and antisemitism: a reassessment from the peripheries', in Abigail Green and Simon Levis Sullam (eds), *Jews, Liberalism, Antisemitism: A Global History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2020), 23–45 (26). See also Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford: Blackwell 1994).

11 George Du Maurier, *Trilby*, ed. Daniel Pick (London: Penguin Books 1994). References to this edition will be in parentheses in the body of the text. See also Daniel Pick, *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2000).

in the novel, along with soaps, toothpaste, shoes, sweets, sausages, hams, hearth-brushes and the ever-present felt hat.[12]

The growth of popular novels, after *Trilby*, was characterized by literary manias up until the First World War but, significantly, this did not result in a moral panic about the nature of mass appeal until after the 1920s. In fact, late Victorian and Edwardian bestsellers induced moral certainty rather than moral panic. On the other side of this glorious certainty, however, as Jonathan Freedman has argued, is the exclusion of those who did not belong. Rivalling Trilby-mania was Svengali-phobia and one reason for the novel's popularity was precisely such easily digested moralizing.[13]

But here we need to distinguish between the text's reception and its narrative complexity as the figure of Svengali is extraordinarily ambivalent. He is both a dazzling musical genius and a sexually rapacious, racial interloper, and his description removes him from any known reality. It is as if he is part of a phantasmagoria: 'a weird, ungainly cat, and most unclean; a sticky, haunting, long, lean, uncanny, black spider-cat, if there is such an animal outside a bad dream' (66). By mesmerizing Trilby (or La Svengali)—'the apotheosis of voice and virtuosity' (193)—he can enrapture his audience to the point of 'madness' (197). Her voice is 'irresistible; it forces itself on you; no words, no pictures, could ever do the like!' (198). Both the audience and Trilby are equally under Svengali's control: 'the many-headed rises as one, and waves its hats and sticks and handkerchiefs, and stamps and shouts. . . .' (199). 'Trilby-mania' is both a feature of the novel and anticipates its reception. Mania, as the 'many-headed' audience demonstrates, can be outrageous in all senses. It is a creative form of culture-making (resulting in the Trilby hat and myriad forms of commodification) as well as a type of enraged exclusion (resulting in anti-immigrant legislation).

Soon after enthralling his audience Svengali, the 'Oriental Israelite Hebrew Jew' (223), is traumatized by his memories of being abused by the English 'three musketeers' and wakes up in 'agonies of terror, rage, and shame' (223). It is as if Svengali is returning the 'rage' (embracing its full meaning) that surrounds him. But he is far from being reduced to a single image. The words 'Oriental Israelite Hebrew Jew' are not separated by punctuation as they all blur into one 'uncanny' (66) image. The vagaries of this misleadingly precise conglomeration range from past to present and east to west and refuse to settle on any one time or place. As Edgar Rosenberg first noted, Svengali is a 'veritable compendium': 'the wandering Jew, the demonic Jew, the bestial Jew, the occult Jew' to mention just a few of his various incarnations. He is 'sticky' because he defies the order of things as his stickiness blends together locales and meanings (such as the ghetto and

12 L. Edward Purcell, 'Trilby and Trilby-mania, the beginning of the bestseller system', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1977, 62–76.

13 Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), 89–116 (ch. 3).

the metropolis) that 'ought to be kept apart'.[14] The literary manias surrounding *Trilby* may have been clear cut, but Jewish racial difference is both rejected *and* universalized by Du Maurier. At the start of the novel, the narrator argues that the 'winning and handsome face' of Little Billie has just a 'faint suggestion of some possible very remote Jewish ancestor':

> [. . .] just a tinge of that strong, sturdy, irrepressible, indomitable, indelible blood [. . .] which is not meant to be taken pure; [. . .] Fortunately for the world, and especially for ourselves, most of us have in our veins at least a minimum of that precious fluid, whether we know it or show it or not. (6–7)

The transgressive ambiguities, concerning the preciousness of Jewish 'blood', are immensely troubling. Everyone has some of this blood in their veins but not too much. *Trilby*, for all its concerns about the virtue of La Svengali, is on the side of impurity as 'indelible blood [. . .] is not meant to be taken pure'. And yet, the all-important boundary between racial and sexual purity and impurity is impossible to locate in the novel. What could 'at least a minimum' of Svengali's blood possibly mean? One reason for the novel's resonance in the United States is that Du Maurier, perhaps unconsciously, is universalizing the 'one drop' rule of blood at the heart of American segregation. But it is still not clear whether Du Maurier is on the side of an inclusive 'mongrelization' of the nation or racialized differentiation.

Trilby is the product of Svengali's pure-blooded voraciousness and artistic virtuosity and is shaped by these unleashed desires. As seen in the novel's stupendous reception, such desires are notoriously difficult to control and could both denigrate Svengali as well as idealize Trilby. In a potent novelistic afterlife, many other bestsellers place the amorphous 'Oriental Israelite Hebrew Jew' next to the radiant transparency of Jesus Christ. Svengali's dominance over an individual (or his audiences) enabled later writers to express more widespread fears concerning so-called Jewish power, especially after the First World War, beyond mere individuals. *Trilby* unleashed a veritable slew of contradictory and free-floating Jewish representations (not least the caricatures of Svengali in the illustrated edition and in *Punch* magazine). These intoxicating images, mixing both literary and mass culture, were soon to find political and social homes that transformed Svengali from the exception (or the exceptional figure) to the rule.

Hall Caine: culture over 'race'

But not all bestsellers were on the side of antisemitism. While *Trilby* was a singular phenomenon, which spoke to a more widespread Semitic discourse,

14 Edgar Rosenberg, *From Shylock to Svengali: Jewish Stereotypes in English Fiction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1960), 261; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge and Maldon, MA: Polity Press 1989), 39.

Hall Caine's fiction sold more than anyone else at the time and he was made 'fabulously rich' with life-long sales of nearly ten million copies.[15] His novel *The Manxman* (1894) was a key factor in terminating the stranglehold of the three-volume library edition by being originally issued in a cheap one-volume format. His claim to prophetic wisdom fed into his novels that laid claim to spiritual (if not established Christian) certainties. The religiosity of his fiction was taken up by other bestselling authors including Marie Corelli and Guy Thorne. Many of his plotlines were based on the Bible and he was one of many authors who wrote a life of Christ. His was begun in 1893 (but published posthumously in 1938) and was primarily concerned with 'the Christ hope in the heart of man—the divine Messianic dream of a deliverer, a Redeemer, a Saviour', as he stated in his foreword.[16] This 'Messianic dream' was akin to Jewish messianism and highlighted Caine as an influential philosemite who was beloved by the Anglo-Jewish community.

To promote his novel *The Scapegoat* (1891), Caine delivered a lecture in May 1892 on 'The Jew in Literature' to the Maccabeans (a newly formed Jewish society made up of professionals, creative writers and intellectuals).[17] He uniquely became an honorary non-Jewish member of the society. Set in Morocco, his novel distinguishes between a ghettoized Jewish community engaged in 'base usury', and a cosmopolitan 'Jewish' hero, Israel Ben Oriel (with a Moroccan Jewish father and English mother) 'without standing ground in Morocco, whether as a Jew, a Moor, or an Englishman'.[18] He only becomes a 'heroic' figure when he completely distances himself from a largely Shylockian Jewish community. The split between vulgar communal Jews and exceptional cultured individuals is taken from George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876). But *The Scapegoat* was not read pejoratively by the Anglo-Jewish community who characterized Caine as a friend of the community: an 'oasis' of rationality in the 'great desert of Jew-baiting and Jew hating'.[19]

Caine was aware of the 'numerous and popular [. . .] grotesque Jews' such as Fagin in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and Du Maurier's Svengali. In contrast, he welcomed a 'small group of noble Jewish studies', which reflected the 'sublimity' of the Hebrew Bible, through the lens of Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820), Disraeli's fiction and Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. His ambition in *The Scapegoat* was to follow these earlier precedents and add to 'noble' studies by

---

15 Bloom, *Bestsellers*, 70.
16 Hall Caine, *Life of Christ* (London: Collins 1938), ix. See also Jennifer Stevens, *The Historical Jesus and the Literary Imagination, 1860–1920* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2010).
17 Hall Caine, 'The Jew in literature', *The Literary World*, 20 May 1892, 482–4.
18 Hall Caine, *The Scapegoat* (London: Heinemann 1897), 5, 11.
19 'Chovevi Zion Association', *Jewish Chronicle*, 23 December 1892; for this reading of *Daniel Deronda*, see Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society*, 13–54 (ch. 2).

portraying a cultured 'heroic Jew'.[20] Ben Oriel's heroism is absent, however, until he learns to love his daughter, but only after she regains her sight, hearing and speech. The melodramatic plotline, combined with the familiar moralizing of 'good' and 'bad' Jews, characterizes one of Caine's supposedly more 'realistic' novels.

He was typical of popular authors in promoting an extra-textual dimension to his work. By placing his self-proclaimed 'prophetic' imagination at the heart of his fiction, Caine replaced the uncertainties concerning whether the established church was too Romanish (articulated in the so-called 'great church crisis') with a higher form of imagined 'righteousness'.[21] One reason he was so successful is that he encouraged a view of his work (soon to be replicated by his contemporaries) that associated ethical thought with his novels. Caine's humanism also embraced child poverty and the fate of unmarried mothers, but it was only the enlightened treatment of persecuted Jews that was to distinguish 'the world of civilized man' from 'medieval barbarism'. That is why he became a firm public opponent of anti-immigrant legislation on the grounds that it went against the liberal principles that made Britain 'rich and free'.[22] The Anglo-Jewish community recognized the importance of Caine's support and, soon after the publication of *The Scapegoat*, encouraged him to visit the Russian empire in 1892 to see first-hand the extent of Jewish suffering. His publisher Heinemann advised him on the trip, as it generated an extraordinary amount of publicity for his novels that they welcomed. On his return, Caine lectured to a Jewish Working Men's Club on the 'poverty and deprivation' he had witnessed. He continued to support Russian Jews throughout his life.[23] As a result, he joined Israel Zangwill in endorsing a territorial solution to Jewish suffering (initially the immigration of Romanian and Russian Jews to Palestine) which he thought of, in his own terms, as a kind of secular messianism. Palestine, which he visited to research his *Life of Christ*, was characterized as a:

20 Caine, 'The Jew in literature'.
21 Bethany Kilcrease, *The Great Church Crisis and the End of English Erastianism, 1898–1906* (London: Routledge 2016). See also Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain 1870–1918* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2008), 740; and Joanna Rzepa, *Modernism and Theology: Rainer Maria Rilke, T. S. Eliot, Czesław Miłosz* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2021).
22 Hall Caine, *Edinburgh Evening News*, 26 March 1902, quoted in Anne Connor, 'The Spiritual Brotherhood of Mankind: Religion in the Novels of Hall Caine', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Liverpool, 2017, 188.
23 Hall Caine, 'Scenes on the Russian frontier', *Jewish Chronicle*, 16 December 1892; and Muireann Maguire, 'Master and Manxman: reciprocal plagiarism in Tolstoy and Hall Caine', in Timothy Langen and Muireann Maguire (eds), *Reading Backwards: An Advance Retrospective on Russian Literature* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers 2021), 129–57 (146), available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0241.06 (viewed 13 December 2024).

Jewish Commonwealth, protected by all the powers, and perhaps also partly controlled by them. And if this is not the millennium the Jewish people have looked for and prayed for, it may be a step in that general progress of the world which is binding all parts and all peoples together.[24]

Such was Caine's philosemitism that encouraged the integration of Jews into their national cultures and the imperial sphere. But Caine also contended that Jewish persecution was partly in response to self-separation: 'May I dare to say that it would be well if Jews came oftener into the light and free air of the world that is common to all men.' Here he was merely reflecting contemporary accounts of antisemitism that 'blamed Jews and Judaism for their persecution'.[25] Even in this inhospitable atmosphere, Caine placed the treatment of Jews at the heart of his ethical humanism and the characterization of the nation as 'rich and free'. He was not alone in moving from his imagined universe to the social sphere where both desirable and undesirable Jewish behaviour was to have a wider symbolic resonance. The popular novel utilized the figure of 'the Jew', for good or for ill, as a means of commenting on the state of the nation—war, immigration or integration were just three 'Jewish questions' of the time—and, eventually, the rest of the world.

Marie Corelli: 'race' over culture

Corelli, the most popular woman writer of her age, a favourite of Queen Victoria, was the first among a new breed of bestseller writers to reject humanist verities, in the name of her bespoke Christian values. Her fame, at its height, resulted in her best-known novels (she published thirty in all) selling more than 100,000 copies annually with overall sales close to the ten million of Hall Caine, her arch-rival. She wrote 'directly from her heart to the hearts of the people' which bypassed any critical reception of her work.[26] Such anti-modern popularism included the recasting of the basic tenets of Christianity in many of her novels. Her bestseller *Barabbas: A Dream of the World's Tragedy* (1894), for instance, revised the gospels for a new readership.[27] As Arnold Bennett rightly maintained in 1901: 'The

24 Hall Caine, Article Club, 20 November 1901, quoted in Connor, 'The Spiritual Brotherhood of Mankind', 191.

25 Caine, 'The Jew in literature', 483. See also Jonathan Judaken, 'Anti-Semitism (historiography)', in Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury and Kalman Weiser (eds), *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2021), 25–38 (esp. 36); and Hannah Ewence, *The Alien Jew in the British Imagination, 1881–1905* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2021), 86–97.

26 T. F. G. Coates and R. S. Warren Bell, *Marie Corelli: The Writer and the Woman* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Co. 1903), x.

27 Marie Corelli, *Barabbas: A Dream of the World's Tragedy* (London: Methuen 1894). References to this edition will be in parentheses in the body of the text.

unrivalled vogue of Miss Marie Corelli is partly due to the fact that her inventive faculty has always ranged easily and unafraid amid the largest things.'[28]

Whereas Caine was on the side of tolerant British liberal conventions, as seen in his opposition to anti-immigrant legislation, Corelli, his antithesis, was distinctly illiberal when it came to the 'spirit of the Jew' as she called it. In 'Society and Sunday', an essay in *Free Opinions*, she described 'Christian and Unchristian clerics' as being 'pervaded' by the 'spirit of the Jew' in their 'whole composition and constitution'. Speaking in the voice of a corrupt clergy she states: 'though I borrow money off the Jew whenever I find it convenient, there is no reason why I should follow the Jew's religious ritual' in keeping the Sabbath.[29] No wonder she actively promoted the British Brothers League (BBL) which campaigned for restrictions on immigration to oppose Jews entering Britain. Corelli sent a 'long letter' of support for the 1902 'Great Public Demonstration', which attracted a crowd of 4,000 and generated an active membership of 12,000. As with all forms of political antisemitism, the BBL used democratic means to suit its nefarious ends: 'voluntary associations, mass meetings, and marches . . . newspapers, posters and manifestos'.[30] Corelli's letter was read out at the BBL rally, to the delight of its leadership, and subsequently published. It called for branches of the BBL to be set up in 'large provincial towns' to counter the 'constant foreign invasion of our land and our trade interests'.[31]

Her unabashed illiberalism reinforced that of the BBL, who made clear their concerns in pamphlets promoting the mass rally:

> Thousands of foreign paupers, unclean in their habits and possessing no code of morals—no sense of honour or decency—have been steadily pouring into London (settling chiefly in the East), driving English people out of their native parishes, and literally taking bread out of English mouths.[32]

Although the leaders of the BBL, which included members of parliament for the East End of London, deliberately spoke of 'alien' rather than

---

28 Arnold Bennett, 'The Master Christian', quoted in Sandra Kemp, Charlotte Mitchell and David Trotter (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Edwardian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), 77.

29 Marie Corelli, 'Society and Sunday', in Marie Corelli, *Free Opinions, Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct* (London: Constable 1905), 233–44 (233).

30 Robert Nemes and Daniel Unowsky, 'Introduction', in Robert Nemes and Daniel Unowsky (eds), *Sites of European Antisemitism in the Age of Mass Politics 1880–1918* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press 2014), 1–9 (8).

31 Sam Johnson, '"Trouble is yet coming!" The British Brothers League, immigration, and anti-Jewish sentiment in London's East End, 1901–1903', in Nemes and Unowsky (eds), *Sites of European Antisemitism in the Age of Mass Politics*, 137–56 (150); David Glover, *Literature, Immigration, and Diaspora in Fin-de-Siècle England: A Cultural History of the 1905 Aliens Act* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012),117 and ch. 3.

32 Johnson, '"Trouble is yet coming!"', 145.

'Jewish' immigrants (to avoid charges by the Liberal Party of being antisemitic), this was not the case in practice where cries of 'No more Jews', 'Sweater' and 'go back to Jerusalem' were commonplace at their rallies. Jews were also described in local newspapers, written by BBL supporters, as a 'plague', as 'exacting blood-money', as 'crucifying East London' and as generally more demonic than human: 'fancy using Christian blood for their ritual!'[33]

Corelli was quite at home with such language. Nearly a decade before the BBL demonstration, her novel *Barabbas* had evoked the blood libel when the character Barabbas describes the Crucifixion as a 'great Feast of Slaughter—the apotheosis of the Jews!': 'this Man of Nazareth was slain to satisfy the blood-thirstiness of the God-elected children of Israel' (36). The book's omniscient narrator (speaking directly to the reader) follows Barabbas and describes the Crucifixion as 'this singular Jewish festival of blood' (48). Throughout the novel Jews are portrayed as wicked Pharisees as summed up by Corelli's Saint Peter: 'Thou who art not born again of water or of spirit, but art ever of the tainted blood of Israel unregenerate, contest no words with me!' (112). To the amusement of many of her reviewers, Corelli, as this last quote illustrates, writes *Barabbas* in a poor pastiche of the King James Bible. In this she follows Caine in *The Scapegoat* (published three years before her novel) presumably to claim spiritual authenticity and a readership, not unlike Caine's, in need of religious and moral exactitude. But fundamental to her thinking, as opposed to *The Scapegoat*, was the insurmountable difference between Christianity and Judaism. One is on the side of rebirth, spirituality and baptism, the other on the side of unredeemed blood, degeneration and materiality. She was to speak for the well-being of Christianity, and the soul of the nation, by revealing the threat to both.

Her antisemitic perspective was expressed most succinctly in her title story, 'The Song of Miriam', which concertinas together an astonishingly large number of literary portrayals of Jewish women following the synoptic style of Du Maurier.[34] Based in the slums of Paris, the story concerns the murder of Reuben David, an elderly 'poor beggar', whom his neighbours call 'that dirty Jew', a 'designation' that was 'by no means complimentary, yet happened to fit him exactly' (5). He lived with Miriam, his fourteen-year-old granddaughter, who had 'bright, eager [black] eyes, a glimmer of red lips and white teeth, and the tip of a decidedly Jewish nose' (6). Her beloved grandfather was killed by his predatory nephew, Josef Perez, who had a 'Jewish mother and Christian father' and described himself as a 'half-breed between a lie and a truth, I suppose, and it doesn't matter to me which is the truth, and which is a lie' (9). When his impoverished

---

33 Quoted in ibid., 143–54.

34 Marie Corelli, 'The Song of Miriam' [1899], in Marie Corelli, *The Song of Miriam and Other Stories* (London: Hurst Publishers 1907), 5–21. References to this edition will be in parenthesis in the body of the text.

uncle is unable to give him a thousand francs, the amoral Perez stabs him to death in a fit of anger.

The sensationalist storyline is amplified further when Miriam becomes a famous Parisian opera singer known as 'the divine Miriami' who 'looked like a goddess and sung [*sic*] like an angel': 'her ravishing grace had won her the admiration of kings and emperors' (14–15). Such 'pre-eminence' on the Parisian stage makes her a cross between Rachel Félix and Sarah Bernhardt as well as conjuring up the figure of Trilby in decadent Paris. In a plot change that echoes Svengali's sudden appearance with Trilby on stage after five years, Josef Perez finds himself in the same opera as Miriam. But 'rage made Miriam pitiless' (18). She stabs him in front of an audience with the knife that was used to kill her cherished grandfather and justifies her actions by contending brazenly: 'He deserved his fate. It is a just vengeance' (19).

This murderous act ends her stellar Parisian career, and she lives her final years in a retreat in Palestine where she is known as Madame David and educates the children of the 'neighbouring Jewish poor' (20). She remains a 'grave, dark, beautiful woman' (20)—a macabre version of the 'belle Juive'—and becomes a potent symbol of the unbridgeable gulf between Judaism and Christianity: 'those who follow the Mosaic Law are not bound to love or forgive their enemies, and the God of the Old Testament is not the God of the New!' (21). Here the contrast with Caine is to the fore, as Corelli's antisemitism is on the side of Miriam's unchanging 'race' rather than the transcendent power of culture briefly exemplified by the 'queen of song' (20). The unresolved nature of 'Jewish blood' in *Trilby* is here settled decisively.

Guy Thorne: conspiratorial antisemitism and the end of Christianity

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Corelli's shameless race-thinking encouraged a slew of outrageously illiberal popular writers who are largely forgotten today. But while all were to employ a heady mix of immovable racial and theological distinctions, when it came to 'the Jew', it would be wrong to assume that they were all writing from the same perspective. Guy Thorne, for instance, was a renowned journalist before becoming a full-time novelist at the start of the new century. By 1902 he was a professing Anglo-Catholic whose best-known work of fiction, *When It Was Dark: The Great Conspiracy* (1903), was described by Freud as 'an English novel of Catholic origin'.[35] Thorne changed his name from Cyril Arthur Edward Ranger Gull to match his religious conversion (his personal crown of

---

35 Guy Thorne, *When It Was Dark: The Story of a Great Conspiracy* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1906). References to this edition will be in parentheses in the body of the text. Freud quoted in Bethany Kilcrease, 'Radical anti-Catholic Protestantism and *When*

thorns). He was the son of a Church of England clergyman and described himself as 'intensely Evangelical in my theology, with a combination of High Church practice in regard to the value of the sacraments'.[36] Most best-sellers were militantly Protestant or anti-Catholic. But Thorne's pro-Catholic fiction caught the mood of the time by denouncing the 'curse of indifferent-ism' (13) as opposed to the supreme moral and religious principles champ-pioned in the novel.

When It Was Dark sold 500,000 copies and was the most read novel in 1903. The 'great conspiracy' is an attempt to prove that Jesus's resurrection was a hoax by faking archaeological evidence to show that the body of Christ was removed from its tomb by Joseph of Arimathea. The novel's devilish anti-hero, Constantine Schuabe, is behind this conspiracy and blackmails Professor Robert Llwellyn, keeper of biblical antiquities at the British Museum, to forge the ancient records and place them in the Holy Land so that they can be discovered. Schuabe is a man of enormous 'power and influ-ence' (12), who owns the equivalent of *The Times* newspaper, had a stellar career at Oxford, and was about to enter politics. He is 'no longer a Jew' (13) as he had converted to Unitarianism which, as the narrator makes clear repeatedly, is another form of Judaism.[37] Schuabe is called 'the Jew' throughout the novel. That is presumably why he '*hates Christ*' (13, emphasis in the original) and wants to undermine faith in Christianity and reinforce the 'antichristian influences' (13) that typify the age.

In a nod to the preface of *The Scapegoat*, which acknowledged the help of Chief Rabbi Adler, the narrator emphasizes that he was not denouncing Jews *tout court*: one can 'reverence a Montefiore, admire an Adler' (13) (respectively, a renowned philanthropist and Hebrew scholar). But such admiration plainly does not apply to a Schuabe, whose German name reinforces the popular anti-Germanism of the time and whose physical description leaves the reader in no doubt that he is a 'Jew' according to his racial 'features':

> His hair was a very dark red, smooth and abundant [. . .] His features were
> Semitic, but without a trace of that fulness, and sometimes coarseness,
> which often marks the Jew who has come to the middle period of life. The
> eyes were large and black, but without animation [. . .] They were coldly, ter-
> ribly *aware*, with something of the sinister and untroubled regard one sees in a
> reptile's eyes. (15, emphasis in the original)

It Was Dark: the novel and the historical context', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2014, 210–30 (215).

36 Quoted in Kilcrease, 'Radical anti-Catholic Protestantism and *When It Was Dark*', 214.

37 T. S. Eliot also believed that his family's Unitarianism was a form of Judaism and may have taken the idea from Guy Thorne. See Bryan Cheyette, 'Eliot and "race": Jews, Irish, and Blacks', in David E. Chinitz (ed.), *A Companion to T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Black-well 2014), 335–49 (337).

Not unlike Du Maurier's and Corelli's cryptic summaries, Thorne fuses together a vast array of Semitic representations in a short space. They begin with the red-haired Victorian 'stage Jew', move on chronologically to the hypnotic, all-controlling eyes of Svengali, and conclude with the 'sinister' Jew being categorized as a bestial cold-hearted intellectual. Rather sloppily, this description is repeated verbatim one hundred pages later as if to leave the reader in no doubt of Schuabe's 'Semitic' (107) race and 'snake-like' (200) character. Schuabe is finally defeated by Sir Michael Manichoe, his benign mirror-image: 'the stay and pillar of "Anglicanism" in the English Church' (104). Like Schuabe, Manichoe is a 'man of great natural gifts' who has immeasurable wealth, is a Jewish convert to Christianity, and has entered political life. He is:

> The owner of one of those colossal Jewish fortunes which, few as they are, have such a far-reaching influence on English life; he employed it in such a way, which for a man in his position, was unique.
>
> He presented a curious spectacle, to sociologists and the world at large, of a Jew by origin who had become a Christian by conviction and one of the sincerest sons of the English Church as he understood it. In political life Sir Michael was a steady, rather than a brilliant, force. (104)

He is given no physical description to limit his uniquely benign presence. In contrast to his malevolent double—the Italian word 'manichoe' means Manichaean in English—he has a 'far-reaching influence on English life' but only for good. His political career is 'steady', in contrast to the 'over-brained' Schuabe,[38] who remains intellectually detached from the country that he is meant to serve. Manichoe, instead, combines his 'Jewish brain and Christian heart', which had 'already revolutionized Society nearly two thousand years ago' (106). Such is the Manichaeanism that structures the novel. One character personifies Christ, the other anti-Christ. Schuabe's conspiracy against Christianity results in global anarchy starting with an 'anti-clerical wave' (119) throughout Europe and moving on to a second American civil war, a revival of Islam in the Middle East and South Asia, rioting by 'lower class Jews' (126) in Palestine, and 'criminal assaults' (176) against women. After 'everything seemed dark, black, hopeless' (134), churches are emptied in Protestant Britain but, tellingly, not in Catholic Ireland or other Catholic countries. This is because Catholicism stayed aloof from the false archaeological evidence that supposedly disproved Christ's divinity. Only 'half the Christian world' (208) was weakened by the great conspiracy as the Catholic Church cannot be undermined by mere facticity as it is contrary to its fundamental beliefs: 'in a rational view of history there is no place for a Resurrection and Ascension' (108).

---

38 Claud Cockburn, 'The horror of it all', in Claud Cockburn, *Bestseller: The Books that Everyone Read, 1900–1939* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson 1972), 19–42 (25).

Manichoe has the 'colossal Jewish fortune' and 'Jewish brain' to defeat Schuabe, the 'most active of God's enemies in England' (18). But he needs the help of Gertrude Hunt, a 'woman of good brain' (165) who has an affair with Robert Llwellyn although, the narrator explains, she sinned 'with her body, not with her heart' (170). Hunt was a 'dark, Jewish-looking lady' (76) who wished to redeem herself by exposing Llwellyn's forgery to Manichoe.[39] It was Llwellyn's adultery with Hunt, along with the fact that he was in debt to Schuabe, that enabled Schuabe to blackmail him in the first place. Once the fraudulent evidence was revealed and Christ's divinity restored, the world returned to sanity and Schuabe, in poetic response, goes mad. By the end of the novel, he is a laughing stock who babbles away in an insane asylum: '*It* got up with a foolish grin and began some ungainly capers' (247, emphasis in original). Five years after 'the great conspiracy', all is right with the world and Schuabe, now an '*it*', is utterly rejected by humanity.

When It Was Dark was a public phenomenon and ignited the 'church crisis' by triggering the 'various parties in the Church of England to a sort of frenzy for and against it'.[40] The year 1903, when the book was published, coincided with the Church Discipline Bill passing its Second Reading, and the forming of a Royal Commission, which examined Catholic ritualism in the Church of England. The *Times* noted that the novel formed the subject of sermons by many popular preachers which was anticipated in the plot of *When It Was Dark*. This is a much-quoted example of a Thorne-inspired sermon from the Bishop of London in Westminster Abbey:

> I wonder whether any of you have read that remarkable work of fiction entitled *When It Was Dark*? [. . .] When you see how darkness settles down upon the human spirit, regarding the Christian record as a fable, then you quit with something like adequate thanksgiving, and thank God it is light because of the awful darkness when it was dark.[41]

Caine's and Corelli's fictional works were also the subject of popular sermons. But, in 1905, the *Daily Mail* rightly declared Thorne to be the 'most talked of novelist in England'.[42] Subsequent commentators have argued that *When It Was Dark* was 'one of the most significant works of the Edwardian and early Georgian eras'.[43] The novel had a stupendous

---

39 James Joyce repeats the ambiguity of 'Jewish-looking' with reference to the '*jewess looking*' Molly Bloom in *Ulysses* (1922). See also Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society*, 231.

40 Leonard Ingleby, *Oscar Wilde*, 363, quoted in Kilcrease, 'Radical anti-Catholic Protestantism', 223.

41 Cockburn, 'The horror of it all', 19–20.

42 H. A. Milton, 'The most-talked-of novelist in England', *Daily Mail*, 16 November 1905, 9.

43 Cockburn, 'The horror of it all', 19.

influence—General Montgomery of Alamein said that the novel had changed his life—with countless readers inundating Thorne with a vast amount of post. Hilaire Belloc, who had a copy of the novel in his library, was emboldened to write his Jewish conspiratorial fictions, and engage in antisemitic politics, after his isolated stance as a Catholic anti-Dreyfusard.[44] Not that the novel's claim to have generated a 'great conspiracy' is strictly accurate. The conspiracy in the novel is easily contained and is, ultimately, the insane folly of a single individual. Thorne, to be sure, was extravagant in his use of Semitic discourse—even describing an elderly Jewish man as a 'great grey slug' (93)—which paved the way for cruder versions of bestial, dehumanized Jews. But Thorne's novel, following *Trilby*, is a good deal more ambivalent than its one-eyed reception. The reader could choose between the 'good' Jew of Christianized virtue or the 'bad' Jew who needs to be summarily banished from the national orbit. Such bifurcation, distinguishing between 'light' and 'dark', characterizes antisemitism in a mainstream, everyday context and allowed those who engage in race-thinking about Jews to deny that they were antisemitic.

The age of the bestseller

The origin of the paperback revolution is an example of a new media mainstreaming a racial discourse that is presumed to be only at the margins of liberal democracy. Before the First World War and the Russian Revolution, a Semitic discourse was, as we have seen in our case studies, fluid and could take different forms depending on the perspective and politics of the authors concerned. Perhaps that is why these timebound bestsellers are largely forgotten today. Only Du Maurier's *Trilby* has entered Anglophone culture and it is significant, in this regard, that the extravagant race-thinking in the novel is not tethered to any one political or religious viewpoint. By the 1920s, it was not mere individuals who were conspiratorial or had extraordinarily malignant power, such as a Svengali or a Schuabe, but it could be Jewish people *tout court*. Semitic discourse, by the inter-war years, was to harden and move closer to Wilhelm Marr's version of political antisemitism which was reflected in Britain in a series of discriminatory measures against 'foreign' Jews in particular.[45]

What is clear, from the bestsellers that we have explored, is that there was no simple linear narrative from religious to racial forms of anti-Judaism or antisemitism. But, as we know, post-war race-thinking was to become more prevalent, and the technology used to promote such thinking—

44 Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society,* 150–205 (ch. 5).
45 Didi Herman, *An Unfortunate Coincidence: Jews, Jewishness and English Law* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2011); Tony Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice: Antisemitism in British Society during the Second World War* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press 1989).

increasingly popular print media, radio and film—was transformative. Not that the medium is necessarily the message. To be sure, new media did magnify a dehumanizing racial discourse, which could be put to political use, but there was obviously not a complete disconnection in Britain from the universal values of the state in which citizenship was a national right. Nonetheless, newly emerging mass media was to put enormous pressure on these established rights. Such popular culture, however contradictory in its origins, eventually contributed to further denigration and racialization of the 'alien' or 'illegal refugee' or 'foreign' citizen.

Bryan Cheyette is Emeritus Chair in Modern Literature and Culture at the University of Reading. He has published twelve books, most recently *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (Yale University Press 2014), and *The Ghetto: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press 2020). A Series Editor for Bloomsbury (*New Horizons in Contemporary Writing*), he has been a visiting professor at Dartmouth College, the University of Michigan and the University of Pennsylvania. He also holds fellowships at the universities of Leeds, Southampton and Birkbeck. He is currently completing a concise history of Testimony. Email: b.h.cheyette@reading.ac.uk http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0099-0190