

1 | I

Volume 1 | Issue I | March 2017

A Quarterly Journal
Humanities and Social Sciences
Young Scholars Worldwide

The Schola



9 772508 783006

ISSN 2508-7835

The Schola | Volume 1 | Issue I | March 2017

Editor: Eva M Shin

Publisher: Veritaum

Editorial contact: editorial@theschola.org

Cover design: Leo Solluna

© 2016, The Schola. All rights reserved. *The Schola* (ISSN 2508-7835) is an online journal published quarterly by Veritaum. Use of this digital material is governed by the terms and conditions set out by *The Schola*. Essays published in the journal may not be republished, photocopied, or reproduced without the prior written permission of Veritaum. A subscription purchases access to the journal, but not the intellectual property rights in it. The publisher has the sole right to make copies or allow them to be made, apart from the exceptions allowed by law, such as fair dealing.

This issue was typeset on a MacBook Air, using Microsoft Publisher.

For further information on *The Schola*, visit our website: www.theschola.org.

CONTENTS

Volume 1 | Issue I | March 2017

MAGNA	1
<i>Interdisciplinary Humanities</i>	
Denmark's Distemperment: The Medical and Physical Representations of Political Strife in <i>Hamlet</i>	
	<i>Sam Karp '18</i> Collegiate School New York, USA
<i>History</i>	12
Journey Home: From Hindustan to Israel, The Return of the Bene Israel	
	<i>Jahnavi Bhavsar '19</i> The Dalton School New York, USA

MAGNA

Interdisciplinary Humanities

**Denmark's Distemperment:
The Medical and Physical Representations
of Political Strife in *Hamlet***

Sam Karp '18
Collegiate School
New York, USA

Abstract

In Elizabethan England, writers conceived of social structures, governments, and monarchies through the prism of the human body. The metaphorical body politic was invested with cosmic significance, shaping correspondences between the physical body of a man and the larger body of the universe. These analogies were particularly dominant in theories of kingship, which sought to reconcile monarchical infallibility with the imperfections and mortality of the physical body. This essay argues that in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare fuses ancient Greek concepts of pathology, particularly the four humors of human temperament, with medieval political theory, which emphasized the inseparability of the king's political and natural bodies, to depict the conflicts within and illegitimacy of the Danish court. In his deployment of medical imbalances, corporal sickness, and bodily sins as metaphors for Denmark's political and moral corruption, Shakespeare shows how the dysfunction of the state can be represented through the reification of the human body. As we see throughout the play, the emphasis on physical, corporal transgression serves to channel a larger social anxiety about the crisis that has befallen the Danish state. These metaphors help distill the philosophical and legalistic complexities of political illegitimacy into an aesthetically absorbing theatrical form.

In Elizabethan England, the medical understanding of the human body, anatomy, and sickness revolved around the four humors and their varying proportions in the body. The prevailing understanding of the monarchy held that the king controlled two bodies: the body natural, or his regular human body, and the body politic, or the state as a whole. In *Hamlet*, using this belief of kingship and monarchical government, along with knowledge of the prevailing medical theories of the time, Shakespeare employs medical imbalances, corporal sickness, and bodily sins as metaphors for Denmark's political corruption and illegitimacy. Instead of directly discussing the political ramifications of Claudius's usurpation of power, Shakespeare views the issue through individual bodily problems: Gertrude's lust, Claudius's thievery and greed, and Hamlet's own personal melancholic disposition. Hamlet concerns himself more with his mother's infidelity than he does with his father's murder, as his mother's corporal, flesh-based transgressions are more readily apparent than the abstract political crimes committed by Claudius. Similarly, Hamlet becomes enraged at Claudius because Claudius took his father's bed and stole his wife; Hamlet focuses on these physical, bodily possessions as symbols for the abstract concepts of the throne and kingship. Hamlet, as the rightful heir to the Danish throne, is both a person and a manifestation of the body politic. Thus, Hamlet's personal psychological imbalances and his inability to act reflect the debilitated condition of Denmark. In each of these reifications of problems within the body politic, the sicknesses that plague each of the characters in *Hamlet* come from some sort of imbalance or inconsistency. Claudius's appearance as a strong leader goes against his nature as a murderous usurper, Gertrude's lustful and adulterous actions discredit her position as a noble queen, and Hamlet's desire to avenge his father cannot exist alongside his indecisive, melancholic personality. These individual inconsistencies represent the flaws of the Danish court on a personal, bodily level. These illnesses go unchecked and weaken Denmark until the end of the play when every member of the royal family dies. Ultimately only Fortinbras, a foreign, levelheaded leader who does not suffer from any of the illnesses of the royal family can lead Denmark and begin to restore the country with strength.

The understanding of medicine, sickness, and human anatomy in Shakespearean England provides a scientific base for the metaphorical representation of the political structure in *Hamlet*. Elizabethan England centered on the Pythagorean concepts of the four elements, earth, water, air, and fire, and their corresponding humors, melancholy, phlegm, blood, and choler respectively.¹ According to this Pythagorean logic, the four elements compose the food that man eats; the liver then converts

¹ E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, New York, vintage, p. 63.

the elements into their corresponding humors, which are the “life-giving moisture of the body”.² When a person is healthy and functioning normally, the humors pass through the veins to the heart and liver in specific, balanced proportions. This balance is important for growth and continued bodily function, just as a proper balance of the four elements is necessary to create the “permanent substances”³ of the world. The small variations in this equilibrium determine each man’s specific personality and character. An individual’s temperament or complexion does not merely refer to the skin but is a specific medical term relating to origin, race, body type, composition, and diet, and it reflects a person’s most abundant humor.⁴ A man of choleric temperament would be angry yet valiant, while a melancholic man would be sorrowful yet witty; men of sanguine and phlegmatic temperaments would be primarily cheerful and dull respectfully. When the humors of a body or individual organ are not in balance, meaning that “any one of the four humors [is] present in too great or too small an amount,” the person becomes “distempered” or “diseased,” and “the body’s constitution [suffers]”.⁵ A distemperment can manifest itself as a physical illness or as a psychological issue, such as an inability to find understanding or, as is the case with Hamlet, a lack of will.⁶ In order to re-achieve balance in a distempered body, Elizabethan doctors most commonly employed purging, the removal of the excess humor causing the distemperment, as “the first line of therapy in any disease”.⁷ The very specific relationships between the four humors and the importance of balance in Elizabethan medicine shape the representation of illness and outline the metaphorical connections between physical health and politics in *Hamlet*.

Along with knowledge of contemporary medical beliefs, Shakespeare uses the medieval understanding of the dual nature of the monarch, containing both his personal body and the body politic of his kingdom, to construct analogies between the health of individual members of the Danish royal family and the health of Denmark as a whole. Medieval European political theory holds that the king’s “natural body is conjoined to his body politic, which contains his royal Estate and Dignity”.⁸ The concept that the king has a political body and a natural body that cannot be divided from one another sets up a strong

² Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 63.

³ Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 63.

⁴ S. Iyengar, *Shakespeare’s Medical Language: A Dictionary*, London, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2014, p. 73.

⁵ Iyengar, *Shakespeare’s Medical Language*, p. 100.

⁶ Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 66.

⁷ Iyengar, *Shakespeare’s Medical Language*, p. 281.

⁸ E.H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 9.

correlation between Hamlet's mental and physical state and Denmark's state as a political entity. The king's two bodies are not equally important, even though they form "one unit indivisible;" the body politic of the king is "more ample and large than the [b]ody natural".⁹ Furthermore, the body politic of the king removes the human frailty and imperfection from the inferior body natural. Because "the worthier" body politic pulls up the "less worthy" body natural, the king ultimately contains "no folly or weakness" within himself, and he is "not only incapable of *doing* wrong but even of *thinking* wrong".¹⁰

This understanding of the king as absolutely infallible and his two bodies as indivisible, however, creates some inherent contradictions for the political thinkers of the era. First, the concept that the king's body has "two very distinct capacities" but at the same time is a "perfect union" of the body natural and body politic forces writers of political theory to contort their ideas to explain away the seeming contradictions, saying "the capacity of one [kingly body] does not confound that of the other, but they remain distinct capacities. *Ergo*, the [b]ody natural and the [b]ody politic are not distinct but united, and as one [b]ody".¹¹ Similarly, political theorists had to accept the king's infallibility while simultaneously recognizing that his "[b]ody natural" is "subject to all infirmities that come by Nature or Accident".¹² Just as the balance of the humors determines the health of any individual, so the balance of these conflicting political ideals and a "cooperative harmony"¹³ determine the health of any kingdom. When a king is benevolent and easily lines up with the complicated ideology of the dual body, he allows "mutual charity [to reign] everywhere" and ensures that justice, which is the "guarantor of the [political] body's health," will exist in the kingdom.¹⁴ However, when a king makes a certain contradiction in the political logic obvious, either by suffering from a human sickness or weakness or by acting despotically against the kingdom's best interests despite being infallible, he creates disharmony in his kingdom. Medieval political philosophers see tyrants, the extreme antitheses of noble kings, as criminals trespassing against "the body of justice itself".¹⁵ While the metaphor of the body politic allowed writers to describe and dissect the constituent parts of politics and political life, it also points to the difficulties that attend any attempt by a monarch or government to

⁹ Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p. 4 and 10.

¹¹ Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p. 12.

¹² Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p. 7.

¹³ K. Bollermann, 'John of Salisbury', *Stanford University*, Stanford, CA, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/john-salisbury/>, (accessed 18 November 2016).

¹⁴ Bollermann, 'John of Salisbury'.

¹⁵ Bollermann, 'John of Salisbury'.

successfully combine the virtues of leadership with morality in a healthy polity. Shakespeare was well aware of the belief that tyranny and a lack of justice subvert the health of the body politic, just as a poison or disease threatens the well-being of the body natural. Thus, throughout *Hamlet*, Shakespeare investigates the horrible effects of rampant injustice in a kingdom by showing Gertrude, Claudius, and Hamlet to be individually weak rulers who deviate from the concept of the ideal monarch.

Gertrude's infidelity and lust for Claudius act as physical, corporal representations of the frailty of the Danish throne and the tarnished legitimacy of the royal family's power. Hamlet introduces the problems with his mother by referring to his family as "an unweeded garden".¹⁶ Instead of directly speaking about the political ramifications of Gertrude's and Claudius's different schemes, Hamlet decides to address these issues through the natural metaphor of a garden filled with "things rank and gross in nature,"¹⁷ providing an easily intelligible allegory for the larger monarchical consequences of Gertrude's marriage to Claudius. The "too, too solid flesh" that he wishes "would melt / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew" reflects Hamlet's disgust at corporality itself.¹⁸ Gertrude's sexuality channels Hamlet's distaste for the corruption of bodily flesh in evil, illness, sin, and death. Furthermore, by pointing out that a "beast, that wants discourse of reason, / would have mourned longer"¹⁹ than Gertrude, Hamlet brings his monologue about the abstract concepts of loyalty, frailty, and deceit down to a more corporeal, animalistic metaphor that is easy to understand. Hamlet filters his hatred for the state of affairs in Denmark into a concentrated, physical attack on his mother's decision to remarry before "the salt of most unrighteous tears / had left the flushing in her galled eyes" and the "wicked speed" with which she posts to "incestuous sheets".²⁰ Since he spends this soliloquy on the actual object of his anger, meaning his mother, as opposed to the less tangible crimes against his father, Hamlet allows his feeling that "any remarriage by Gertrude shows her inconstant"²¹ to parallel a much deeper emotion that Denmark as a whole is in a state of inconstancy. When Hamlet finally confronts his mother, he strictly speaks about her comprehensible, physical problems, such as her lack of "blush" and the fact that her "sense / is apoplex'd".²² Hamlet only mentions the medical problems specifically affecting Gertrude such as

¹⁶ W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, New York, Dover Publications, 1992, I.2.139.

¹⁷ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.2.140.

¹⁸ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.2.134.

¹⁹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.2.154-55.

²⁰ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.2-159-60, 162.

²¹ M. French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, New York, Summit, 1981, p. 148.

²² Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.4.82-83, 91.

apoplexy, which is a technical term to describe an excess of phlegm or melancholy that causes blindness and deafness, and lack of blush, signifying both an imbalance of the rational sanguine humor and a deficit of conscience.²³ He describes his mother's action as one that "blurs the grace and blush of modesty, / Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose / From the fair forehead of an innocent love / And sets a blister there..."²⁴ The "blister" here serves as an allusion to the symptoms of syphilis and also to the branding of prostitutes that sometimes occurred in Elizabethan England. Thus, Hamlet demonstrates how a single person's physical appearance can act as a simple and useful allegory for the more complicated political issues plaguing Denmark as a whole. Hamlet's obsession with Gertrude's bodily transgressions serves to channel his anxiety about Denmark's monarchy and present the Danish governmental troubles through the resonant metaphor of an individual's body.

The characters in *Hamlet* discuss Claudius's weaknesses as a ruler through corporal symbolism, showing the importance of the link between physiology and governmental ideology for Renaissance thinkers and writers. Claudius first introduces himself with a soliloquy filled with contradictions such as "defeated joy" and "an auspicious and a drooping eye" that mirror his internal contradiction as a usurping murderer and as a king.²⁵ Claudius's paradoxical linking of "mirth in funeral" with "dirge in marriage" reflects the dissonance between Claudius as a king containing a supposedly omnibenevolent body politic and as a man who has committed the worst physical atrocity against his own brother.²⁶ Even though Claudius is actually "an effective public ruler," he loses overall efficiency because an internal, bodily force "rebels at his own rebellion," as he knows that he is illegitimate.²⁷ Claudius's uncertainty comes from his illegitimate status as ruler, as "certitude resides only with legitimacy, which seems to have vanished"²⁸ from Denmark. Hamlet shows his "real hatred...for [Claudius's] illegitimacy"²⁹ by using simplified analogies for his theft of the throne. Just as the prince becomes furious at Gertrude's infidelity instead of at the underlying governmental problems, Hamlet attacks Claudius not as a politician but as a simple "cutpurse of the empire" who steals a physical "precious diadem," which

²³ Ivensgar, *Shakespeare's Medical Language*, p. 21.

²⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.4.42-45.

²⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.10-11.

²⁶ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.12.

²⁷ M. Mack, *Killing the King: Three Studies in Shakespeare's Tragic Structure*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1973, p. 189.

²⁸ M. French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, p. 153.

²⁹ M. French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, p. 152.

represents the abstract concept of power.³⁰ Old Hamlet introduces the problem of Claudius to Hamlet through a similar metaphor of theft, saying that “his brother’s hand,” a metonymy for the idea of fratricide and regicide, had “at once dispatch’d” him “of life, of crown, of queen”.³¹ In his interactions with Claudius, Hamlet’s mind also continually reverts to images of disease and decay. He is encouraged to perceive Claudius in these terms after his early conversation with the Ghost, who tells him that Claudius “in the porches of my ear did pour / The leprous distilment...”.³² Claudius has not only poisoned Claudius but also the entire body politic. The quick spread of the poison through “the natural gates and alleys of the body” reflects the way in which the metaphorical infection of regicide spreads throughout society.

The Ghost’s striking description of the manner in which he died compounds Hamlet’s awareness of the ubiquity of bodily and political corruption. After being quizzed by Claudius about the whereabouts of Polonius, Hamlet replies, “a certain / convocation of politic worms are e’en at him. Your / worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all / creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for / maggots”.³³ In this pun on the political convocation of the Diet of Worms in 1521, Hamlet likens “worms” to the emperors of our human bodies. Ultimately we do no more than prepare ourselves to decay in death. Hamlet also compares Claudius to a “mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother”.³⁴ Here the state is compared to a garden or field, and the corrupt usurper to a diseased ear of corn that infects the one next to it, thus ruining the entire crop. Hamlet eventually comes to view Claudius through purely medical terms; indeed, Guildenstern discusses with Hamlet how Claudius “is...marvelous distempered...with choler”.³⁵ When Hamlet says if he puts Claudius “to his purgation,” Claudius will “plunge...into far/more choler”³⁶, Hamlet shows the double understanding of Claudius through the two ways of interpreting the vague use of purgation: here, Claudius is both a regular sick man who needs to be purged of his humoral imbalance and a manifestation of a problem that needs to be purged out from the body politic. By viewing Claudius and his crimes as creating a corporeal imbalance for Denmark as a whole and for himself, the characters in *Hamlet* manifest Shakespeare’s tendency to use physical, bodily imagery to represent more complicated political commentary.

³⁰ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.4.113-14.

³¹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.1.82.

³² Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.5.63-64.

³³ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, IV.3.21-24.

³⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.4.65-66.

³⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.2.327, 330.

³⁶ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.2.333-34.

Shakespeare's readiness to describe Hamlet through his physical frailty and humoral weaknesses as opposed to his political inabilities further proves that the concept of the body of a king or prince truly represents the larger political scope for medieval and Renaissance thinkers. Even though Hamlet as the rightful heir to the throne should possess all of the perfection and infallibility of a king, he realizes and laments that he "is pigeon-liver'd and lack[s] gall".³⁷ According to contemporary medical thought, a person's body requires gall to perform any physical action; thus Hamlet's lack of gall results in diminished "military prowess..., courage..., and determination" that reflect these enervated aspects of the country as a whole.³⁸ Hamlet's "weakness" as a man and the fact that he remains "unpregnant of [his] cause,/and can say nothing" conflict with his royal standing and thus manifest the frailties and inconstancies plaguing the Danish kingdom.³⁹ He is unable to perceive his physical reality in concrete terms, telling Rosencrantz, "this brave / o'erhanging firmament, this majestical room fretted / with golden fire – why, it appears no other thing to / me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors".⁴⁰ The sky, which appears to others as a sublime canopy filled with sunlight, is to Hamlet nothing more than air filled with disease. Hamlet's suffering from "melancholy," which Renaissance medicine perceives as an ailment in which "cognitive faculties are literally darkened...and slowed by the workings of the melancholy humours," parallels Denmark's suffering from inaction and unpunished crimes.⁴¹ Contemporaries of Shakespeare hold in a very real sense that "a darknes & cloudes of melancholie vapours rising from that pudle of the splene obscure the clearenes, which our spirites are indued with".⁴² Therefore, Shakespeare uses Hamlet, the reification of the body politic who suffers from this melancholic disease, as a contained, bodily metaphor for the more complex figurative vapours that obscure the clearness and efficacy of Denmark's politic. Hamlet's view of himself as a "muddy-mettled rascal" shows further discrepancies between himself and a proper prince, since "princes such as Hamlet" are supposed to have real "precious metal...innate in [their] finer natures".⁴³ Utilizing the concept of solid metal and the lack thereof in Hamlet, Shakespeare points out an integral quality of successful nations that is missing in Denmark. Hamlet even contrasts heavily with Pyrrhus, the fictional prince in the play that Hamlet puts on to prove Claudius's guilt. The

³⁷ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.2.604.

³⁸ G.K. Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage*, Chicago, University of Chicago, 2004, p. 48; Ivengar, *Shakespeare's Medical Language*, p. 146.

³⁹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.2.595-96, 630.

⁴⁰ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.2.295-98.

⁴¹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.2.630; Paster, *Humoring the Body*, p. 47.

⁴² Paster, *Humoring the Body*, p. 47.

⁴³ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.2.594; Paster, *Humoring the Body*, p. 46.

contrast between the rugged and hard-bodied Pyrrhus, who is able to maintain bodily agency, and the weak-willed Hamlet, who will not act despite suffering the same injustices as Pyrrhus, illustrates the difference between Denmark and other, stronger nations.

When Hamlet sees the skull of Yorick, his father's jester who was "a fellow of most excellent fancy" during Hamlet's childhood, without "gibes," "gambols," "songs," or "merriment," he realizes that even the noblest men suffer the same mortal fate as everyone else.⁴⁴ Hamlet's revelation that even "Alexander" the Great eventually "looked o' this fashion i' the earth...and smelt so" leads him to understand that kings die despite the "dogmatic unity of the two bodies" and their elevated status as incorporations of the body politic.⁴⁵ This newfound understanding of monarchs' mortality allows Hamlet to finally take action and kill Claudius. However, Hamlet's physical imbalances and inadequacies as a ruler make him hesitate for so long that his deed results in a "mist of confusion,"⁴⁶ in which Hamlet indirectly kills himself and his mother along with Claudius. By using Hamlet's personal weaknesses, his failure to become a perfect prince, and the subsequent destruction of his family's dynasty as metonymies for the failure of the Danish monarchy as a whole, Shakespeare proves that the medieval understandings of medicine and the king's dual physiology can serve as useful tools to describe complex governmental issues.

Throughout *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses the well-documented connection between physiological and medical knowledge and contemporary political doctrine when describing Gertrude, Claudius, and Hamlet to transform his complex political ideas into easily understandable and interesting metaphors that can be visually compelling accessories on a stage. Gertrude's raw, primal, and flesh-based crimes of lust and infidelity stand in for a more complex conversation about the correct behavior of a queen and the failing of Denmark's integrity as a whole. The image of Claudius as a mere thief and as a man sickened by cholera creates an ironic contrast with his position as a supposedly benevolent ruler; the ability of such an immoral man to contain the body politic exhibits the failings of the Danish kingdom. Finally, Hamlet's inability to act until the final scene and his overly melancholic disposition despite his position as heir to the throne represents the weakness that plagues the state of Denmark. Denmark is only cured of its sickness and frailty when Hamlet finally pushes himself to act and kills Claudius,

⁴⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V.1.191, 196-97.

⁴⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V.1.204-05, 207; Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p. 12.

⁴⁶ J. Alvis, and T.G. West, *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, Wilmington, DE, ISI, 2000, p.294.

Gertrude, and even himself, just as the body kills and disposes of dead and poisoned parts.⁴⁷ Fortinbras serves as the political and physical foil for Hamlet, as Fortinbras's "mettle" is "hot and full" in contrast to Hamlet's sickened metal; additionally, Fortinbras is capable of commanding a group that "hath a stomach in't".⁴⁸ Fortinbras, who externally recognizes from the beginning of the play that the "worth" of Denmark is "weak" and sickly, is strong enough to lead Denmark, "which now...doth invite" him.⁴⁹ By ending the play with Fortinbras taking control of Denmark as Hamlet dies, Shakespeare shows that action against bad rulers and movement toward stronger ones in a sickly kingdom can allow a country to regain strength, just as curing a sickly body lets it regain strength.

⁴⁷ M. Eppich-Harris, "Hamlet, Art, and Apoptosis: The Shakespearean Artwork of Julie Newdoll." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2015, p. 549.

⁴⁸ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.1.108, 112.

⁴⁹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V.2.433

Works Cited

- Alvis, and T.G. West. *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, Wilmington, DE, ISI, 2000.
- Bollermann, K., 'John of Salisbury', *Stanford University*, Stanford, CA, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/john-salisbury/>, (accessed 18 November 2016).
- Eppich-Harris, M., "Hamlet, Art, and Apoptosis: The Shakespearean Artwork of Julie Newdoll." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2015, pp. 540-558.
- French, M., *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, New York, Summit, 1981.
- Iyengar, S., *Shakespeare's Medical Language: A Dictionary*, London, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2014.
- Kantorowicz, E.H., *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1957.
- Mack, M., *Killing the King: Three Studies in Shakespeare's Tragic Structure*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1973.
- Paster, G.K., *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage*, IL: University of Chicago, 2004.
- Shakespeare, W., *Hamlet*, New York, Dover Publications, 1992.
- Tillyard, E.M.W., *The Elizabethan World Picture*, New York, Vintage, n.d.

Journey Home: From Hindustan to Israel, The Return of the Bene Israel

Jahnavi Bhavsar '19
The Dalton School
New York, USA

In 1948 Jews from all over the world were called to reclaim their homeland of Israel, and indeed, Jews of all nationalities and ethnicities responded, including members of the three little-known communities of Indian Jews: the Bene Israel (literal translation: sons of Israel), the Baghdadi, and the Cochin Jews. Of these three groups, the Bene Israel encountered the hardest acceptance into Israel because they lacked official rabbinic certification testifying that they practiced and followed Jewish rituals concerning marriages and divorces; there had been no authorized rabbis in their communities in India. Accepting the open-handed invitation to join other Jews in the newly founded homeland, they faced discrimination concerning marriage laws, housing, and education because of their ethnicity upon arrival in Israel. This paper will document their efforts to achieve acceptance into Israeli society.

The Bene Israel were the most ancient of the Indian Jewish communities – they had been living in India for more than 2,000 years.¹ Traditionally thought to be descended from the ten lost tribes of Israel, their origin story claims that they arrived in India after a shipwreck and migrated inland.² Most scholars agree that they had resided in India for over 2,000 years,³ with major concentrations in Mumbai, Maharashtra, and Ahmedabad, Gujarat; they generally speak Marathi and some Gujarati. Their numbers peaked at 20,000 in the early 1950s⁴ after which the overwhelming majority immigrated to Israel. Largely employed in

¹ Joseph Hodes, *From India to Israel* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014).

² Joan Roland, *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998), 11.

³ Hodes, *From India to Israel*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

agriculture, specifically farming and oil pressing, they became known as “Shanwar Teliss” – Saturday oilmen – because they didn’t work on Saturday when all the other pressers did.⁵ Although not officially part of the caste system (some religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam were exempt, as it was mostly a Hindu caste system), they were nonetheless at the lower end of the class system.⁶ A second group, the Arabic-speaking Baghdadi Jews came from Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Yemen, Persia, and Afghanistan.⁷ As merchants, they were wealthier and of a higher class than the Bene Israel, whom they regarded as rural, but many were urban and worked in the textile mills of Bombay) and unsophisticated.⁸ During British rule the Baghdadi were closely associated with the British and often worked directly for them.⁹ The major communities of Baghdadi Jews were in Kolkata (Calcutta), West Bengal, and Mumbai in Maharashtra. The third community of Indian Jews was the Cochin Jews who lived in Kerala in the south along the Malabar Coast. Like the Bene Israel, they originally came to India by sea and lived under the protection of the Indian Maharaja.¹⁰ During British rule, they were under British protection, but not as directly as the other groups,¹¹ and because they lived farther south, they were more isolated from the tensions that existed between the other two groups who lived in closer proximity. They were in the same economic and social class as the Bene Israel.

Despite never having experienced anti-Semitism common in Europe, most Indian Jews left India to go to Israel. There were two mass exoduses: the first in 1948 after the creation of Israel¹² and the second in the 1970s-1980s.¹³ Together, these meant the near extinction of Jews in small towns. There were three main reasons for the exodus: the economy, Indian Independence, and the Zionist movement. Being largely farmers and small-scale agriculturalists, the Bene Israel and Cochin Jews were economically depressed. Increasing mechanization meant a lower demand for their types of jobs in agriculture. Small communities were being marginalized,¹⁴ and there was little opportunity for economic growth. Pursuing jobs, Jews who didn’t leave India left

⁵ Roland, *The Jewish Communities of India*, 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Roland, *The Jewish Communities of India*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Katz and Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin*.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Katz and Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin*.

small towns for bigger cities.¹⁵ The newly-independent Indian government also took away primarily Jewish jobs and businesses in India, such as family-run services, local jobs in Jewish communities, or lines or areas of work where most of the employment was Jewish.¹⁶ In Southern India (specifically Kerala), the government took over a Jewish-run ferry service¹⁷ and later took over the Jewish Electricity Company.¹⁸ This was also during a period of nationalization in India, which greatly affected Jewish economic prospects. Wealthy Indian Jews (mostly Baghdadi) made their money from trade but suffered when the Indian National Government stopped the import of luxury goods. Israel offered better jobs for younger generations.¹⁹

Although the Jews of India met with no official discrimination, they did face some new discomfort when the British left India. Prior to partition, the Bene Israel and Baghdadi Jews enjoyed British favor.²⁰ The British empathized with Indian Jews because both were a minority in a large country. The British provided the best education for Indian Jews and protected them. When the British left India, there was no minority government, and with the new majority ruling the country, Jewish political and social voices fell silent.

On a spiritual and religious level, Indian Jews felt their commitment to their religion meant they had to immigrate to Israel. The creation of Israel was the fulfillment of the biblical prophecy, and by going to Israel, they too would be fulfilling that prophecy.²¹ In Judaism, the concept of “the homeland” is very important.²² Like many other Jewish communities in the Diaspora, Jews of India had lived in isolation, even largely unknown. As it turned out, many of the Indian Jews had unrealistic expectations of Israel²³ and were incapable of imagining how disorganized the newly created state of Israel was. Another religious reason to immigrate is related to marriage opportunities. Young Indian Jews wanted to leave the small isolated towns where it was difficult to marry another Jew to whom you weren’t related, so there was a marital appeal for younger Jews to immigrate to Israel. Zionism also led to the reinforcement of Jewish identity in Indian Jews who wanted to return to their religious roots.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Katz and Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin*.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

When the Bene Israel arrived in Israel, their dreams of marriage were destroyed along with their idealistic views of a welcoming homeland. In terms of marriage, the Bene Israel were not accepted as being Jewish according to *Halacha*, Jewish law, by the Rabbinat. When the Bene Israel arrived in Israel, they were unknown, having been isolated from the larger mostly European Jewish community for centuries. As a result, they did not strictly fit into any of the Jewish ethnic categories (Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Mizrahi), so the government was forced to classify them as Sephardic, which was the classification used for any group that wasn't distinctly from Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. The only two things that were known about the Bene Israel were that they lacked legitimate rabbis and "official" Jewish courts, so there was no documentation to prove that Bene Israel marriages and divorces conformed to official Jewish Law. To make matters worse, the Bene Israel also didn't practice all of the same traditional ceremonies as other Jews, such as "Chalitzah", the ceremony to remarry widows.²⁴ Since the original Bene Israel's marriages weren't certified by Jewish law, Bene Israel children and their marriages weren't recognized as legitimate. And as a result the Bene Israel weren't seen to be *Halachally* Jewish, so they couldn't marry other Jews. "This community, which had lived as Jews in India for almost two millennia without prejudice, was now being told that they were not Jewish enough to marry other Jews according to Jewish law."²⁵

The main enforcer of this policy was Rabbi Itzhak Nissim, the chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel.²⁶ In October 1960, he refused marriages between the Bene Israel and any other Jews.²⁷ Nissim had three main arguments against the Bene Israel. First, they married non-Jews. Secondly, their divorces weren't approved by Jewish law. Finally, marriages occurred between close family members in India.²⁸ Serious flaws in Nissim's reasoning suggest a rush to judgment. He had simply assumed that Bene Israel married non-Jews without any proof or any source confirming this for him. Also, because there had been very few divorces in India (it was almost considered taboo, which Nissim even acknowledges in his work), his second argument fails. Personal prejudice may have played a part in his ruling – Rabbi Nissim's relatives were Baghdadi Jews, so it was rumored that he looked down on the Bene Israel because of the Baghdadi/Bene Israel tensions. Baghdadi Jews

²⁴ Hodes, *From India to Israel*.

²⁵ Hodes, *From India to Israel*, 126.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Hodes, *From India to Israel*, 125.

thought the Bene Israel were inferior, even unorthodox, because Bene Israel had different traditions, although the main aspects of Judaism remained intact. The Baghdadi questioned the Bene Israel's proof of their Jewish heritage because they had no official documentation of their Jewishness, so they couldn't prove that they were descended from real Jews as opposed to being Indian converts. The question of the Bene Israel's Jewishness would continue to haunt them in their journey to Israel as well. Even if the Bene Israel *were* Jewish, according to the Baghdadi Jews, they had absorbed too many Hindu traditions. This is overtly hypocritical of the Baghdadi Jews because the same thing could be said for them; they had developed many Muslim practices. Ethnic prejudice was the root cause of the marriage discrimination the Bene Israel faced.

The Bene Israel were given a choice by the Israeli Government: they could (re)convert to Judaism to marry other Jews, or they could stay as illegitimate Jews and only marry other Indian Jews. The Bene Israel didn't view this marriage ban simply as a matter of Jewish law; for them, it was discrimination against their ethnicity, caste, and purity. The Bene Israel had darker skin compared to the Ashkenazi Jews, which led them to see the law as racist and based on ethnicity. In India of course, all citizens were aware of the strong and ethnically based caste system. Despite their enthusiasm for their new homeland, the Bene Israel saw this discrimination as based on the fact that the Bene Israel were part of a lower class/social status. Another theme in India, particularly in Hinduism, is the idea of the "purity" of a religion. The imposition of a marriage ban in Israel suggested that the Bene Israel weren't purely Jewish, and perhaps they never were, but simply had adapted Jewish practices in India.

In response to this law, members of the Bene Israel community in Israel formed the Bene Israel Action Committee, led by Samson J. Samson. On May 6th, 1961, there was a meeting between 2-3 chosen representatives from each Bene Israel community in Israel.²⁹ An earlier group representing Indian Jews – the Organization of Indian Jews – already existed, but it was made up of mostly Baghdadi Jews, who didn't suffer the same grievances as the Bene Israel and was consequently of little use. An article in a Bene Israel newspaper (Truth: the Voice of the Bene Israel Action Committee), tackled the issue directly: "We accuse the Jewish Agency. The question we ask now is, why did the Jewish Agency uproot hundreds of families and bring them to the Holy Land to face religious discrimination by the so-called "pure Jews"? Does it think that this small and politically unimportant eastern community can be

²⁹ Hodes, *From India to Israel*, 128.

suppressed and repressed?”³⁰ The Bene Israel were upset that the National Government wasn’t doing anything to change the Sephardic Chief Rabbi’s directive and decided to unite.

To complicate matters, Rabbi Nissim changed his original argument against the Bene Israel.³¹ He told Arie Tartakower, the chairman of the Israeli Executive of the World Jewish Congress, that if the rabbis in India were replaced with Orthodox rabbis (from Israel), he would accept the Bene Israel as being truly Jewish.³² This development was leaked to the Jewish communities in India and caused an uproar.³³ The *Jerusalem Post* issued a warning saying that even if the rabbis in India were replaced with Orthodox ones, that still wouldn’t change the status of the Bene Israel.³⁴ In the end, no changes were made to any Indian rabbis. Soon after, Nissim and the Rabbinical Council met and approved the Bene Israel’s legitimacy.³⁵ As a result, the Bene Israel were under the impression that they had gained back their marital rights. But the wording of the published agreement and the wording of the agreement reached in the meeting were very different.³⁶ The Bene Israel began protests, rallies, and strikes against the Israeli government. Many of them were outraged because the opportunity to marry other Jews was a key factor motivating Indian Jews to migrate in the first place. On July 26, 1963, protests against the Jewish Agency began³⁷ followed a year later by hunger strikes.³⁸ Soon they were gathering support from Jews of all different ethnicities and backgrounds. On July 31, 1964, Samson J. Samson asked to meet with Rabbi Nissim, the President of Israel, and other members of the Jewish Agency on behalf of the Action Committee.³⁹ By August 5th, several thousand people from all over Israel came to protest the marriage law. Finally, on August 31, 1964, the Bene Israel marriage law was removed.⁴⁰ It was one victory in a very long war for equality.

When the Bene Israel arrived in Israel, the lack of housing forced them to live in reception camps. Israel was a fairly new country when the majority of the Bene Israel immigrated; it was undeveloped, which

³⁰ As quoted in Hodes, *From India to Israel*, 130.

³¹ Hodes, *From India to Israel*, 130-131.

³² Hodes, *From India to Israel*.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hodes, *From India to Israel*.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

shocked the Bene Israel from big cities in India.⁴¹ Most of the Bene Israel had no home, family, or friends to receive them. Even if some new arrivals did have family in Israel, transportation was scarce, making it nearly impossible for family members or friends to take them home.⁴² The reception camps were crowded, unsanitary, and disease-ridden. Competition for even the barest rudiments was intense – getting up from bed for a moment could cost you that bed forever. Although he never experienced European concentration camps, Bene Israel oleh (someone who immigrates to Israel as a Jew), Menchem Sogavker said, “During my month’s stay at Shaar Aliyah, I found the place to be like an improved concentration camp with Jews guarding the Jews.”⁴³ The Indian Jews felt imprisoned by their own kind, unable to do anything but wait for housing in filthy and unsafe conditions. An aggravating factor was that the housing policy discriminated against Sephardic and Mizrahi communities, favoring instead Ashkenazic Jews even when Sephardic or Mizrahi Jews had been waiting for longer. This issue was addressed by Yehudah Berginski, the head of the Absorption Department when speaking to the Jewish Agency: “I have to present you with a tough problem, and one the public is concerned with Discrimination against *edot haMizrah*. . . . We took four hundred apartments that were slated for earlier immigrants from North Africa, who were scheduled to move into housing, and gave them on credit to more recent immigrants. . . .”⁴⁴ More houses were given to the Ashkenazic Jews, although this may have to do with the sympathy they were receiving as a result of the Holocaust.⁴⁵ When Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews *were* given houses, they were in small, secluded factory towns, far away from big cities, which limited their economic and social opportunities. Many of the communities the Bene Israel were assigned to were far from food production, so receiving fresh food was often an issue.⁴⁶ Housing discrimination impeded the acceptance of the Bene Israel in Israel.

Education was also a big concern for Bene Israel parents upon their arrival in Israel. A major clash between Indian and Jewish cultures centered on the idea of kibbutzim for the children.⁴⁷ In India, many generations of families lived under one roof; there were strong central cultural ties to the concept of families being together. By contrast, in Israel, children were forced to leave home and live in kibbutzim, where they would spend their days and nights with a few visiting hours for their

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Hodes, *From India to Israel*, 106.

⁴⁴ As quoted in Hodes, *From India to Israel*, 106.

⁴⁵ Hodes, *From India to Israel*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

parents.⁴⁸ Some Indian Jews didn't know about the mandatory kibbutzim when they decided to emigrate, so they were shocked upon arrival. Discrimination within the education system against Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews was also a shock for the Bene Israel.⁴⁹ There was a big gap between the schooling opportunities for Ashkenazi and those for Sephardic/Mizrahi Jews. The Ashkenazi Jews received better teachers, more advanced school curriculums, longer school hours, and closer schools compared to the other Jewish communities.⁵⁰ To the Bene Israel, who had received the finest education in India due to the British education system, the Sephardic education system was outrageous.⁵¹ This is ironic because Israel considered India to be primitive at this time.⁵² The Bene Israel typically were given an "average" education, which would lead to an "average" job in a textile factory in the same small town, while the children of the Ashkenazi Jews would get an exceptional education and live in a big city with huge economic opportunities. The Sephardic community, along with the Bene Israel, was stuck in a cycle of social inequality and discrimination. Later, the government would try to fix the statistics of the domineering cycle, but it would be too late. The Bene Israel were angry, disappointed, and frustrated with their treatment as second-class citizens in a place where they thought would be home.

The discrimination against the Bene Israel did not go unnoticed by other countries, India especially. In May 1961, the Indian press took up the cause.⁵³ Newspapers such as "*The Indian Express*, *The Times of India*, the *Free Press Journal*, *The Hindustan Times*, and *The Maratha*" portrayed a negative image of Israel to the Indian public. On April 4, 1962, the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru stated that India could not have political relationships with Israel because of the poor treatment the Bene Israel were receiving.⁵⁴ At the time, India, arguably one of the most pluralistic societies, did not recognize Israel's statehood because it did not usually support religiously-oriented governments.⁵⁵ India also supported Palestinian freedom, making it difficult to amend political relations.⁵⁶ Once India published articles about the discrimination against the Bene Israel, other countries did as well, especially political enemies of

⁴⁸ Hodes, *From India to Israel*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Hodes, *From India to Israel*, 111-112.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Roland, "Adaptation and Identity".

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Hodes, *From India to Israel*.

⁵⁵ Maina Chawla Singh, *Being Indian, Being Israeli: Migration, Ethnicity and Gender in the Jewish Homeland* (Manohar Publishers & Distributors: 2009).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

the new Israeli country.⁵⁷ The Egyptian government even offered Bene Israel asylum in Egypt to escape from Israeli persecution.⁵⁸ This offer wasn't taken seriously by most Bene Israel, but it was embarrassing for Israel to have another country offer asylum to Jews who were meant to be thriving in their "homeland". The idea of persecution in their own "homeland" was demoralizing for the Bene Israel as well. Around 150 Bene Israel decided to return to India; their trip was financed by the Israeli government.⁵⁹ But because there was very low economic growth in India at the time, all of the Bene Israel's former jobs had been taken, so by 1954, most of the Bene Israel returned, once again, to Israel.

Overall, the Indian heritage of the Bene Israel determined their treatment in Israel from the moment of their arrival through discrimination in marriage, housing, and education. For the Bene Israel to assimilate into Jewish culture, they had to find a balance between expressing their ethnicity and their religion. When the Bene Israel first arrived in Israel, the Israeli government failed to recognize the wide variety of different ethnicities and backgrounds. The Bene Israel had never been the target audience for the Zionist movement but instead was isolated from the rest of the Jewish community, which brought unintended consequences. Because the Indian Jews didn't fit into a specific ethnic category, they forced people to consider what it meant to be Jewish in Israel. The Israeli people had to come to terms with the fact that there were Jews from all over the world who also had a share in the new homeland. The Bene Israel drove Israel to refine its notions of Jewry. Today in Israel, there are over fifty Bene Israel synagogues. The Bene Israel now represent their ethnicity through song and dance, major aspects of Indian culture. For the Bene Israel to assimilate into Jewish culture, a change in the perception of "what it means to be Jewish" was needed. The Bene Israel's migration forced Israel to address, understand, and question the role of ethnicity within the Jewish Nation. Their impact has shaped Israel into becoming the ethnically diverse country that it is today.

⁵⁷ Hodes, *From India to Israel*.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Frederick A. Lazin and Gregory S. Mahler, *Israel in the Nineties: Development and Conflict* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996).

Bibliography

- Dafni, Reuven. *Indian Jews in Israel*. Bombay: Published by the R. Dafni on Behalf of the Consulate of Israel, 1967.
- Egorova, Yulia. *Jews and India: Perceptions and Image* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006)
- Fernandes, Edna. *The Last Jews of Kerala: The Two Thousand Year History of India's Forgotten Jewish Community* (New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2008)
- Goldscheider, Calvin. "Immigration, Nation-Building, and Ethnicity." In *Israel's Changing Society: Population, Ethnicity, and Development*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996)
- Hodes, Joseph. *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration, and the Struggle for Religious Equality* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014)
- Israel, Benjamin J. *The Jews of India* (New Delhi: Mosaic Books, 1982)
- Israel, Rachael Rukmini. *The Jews of India: Their Story*. (New Delhi: Mosaic Books, 2002)
- Japheth, M. D. *The Jews of India; a Brief Survey*. (Bombay, 1969)
- Katz, Nathan and Goldberg, Ellen S. *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993)
- Katz, Nathan. *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1995.
- Roland, Joan G. "Adaptation and Identity Among Second-generation India Jews in Israel." *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* XXXVII, no. 1 (June 1995): 5-37.
- Roland, Joan G. *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998)
- Roland, Joan G. "The Preservation and Transformation of Indian Culture and Identity among the Bene Israel in Israel." In *Israel in the Nineties*.

Singh, Maina Chawla. *Being Indian, Being Israeli: Migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Homeland* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2009)

