# The Middle English Development of the Theophilus Legend

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This presentation will demonstrate the imaginative progression of the Theophilus legend in Middle English from the late thirteenth century to the late fifteenth century. While the earliest version in English appears in the *Early South English Legendary,* three later Middle English versions show significant adaptation and development of the legend particular to its English context, yet these versions have so far evaded scholarly attention. The story of Theophilus was a vastly popular legend in medieval England: as well as appearing in miracle collections and sermons, it was illustrated in Books of Hours, church carvings, stained glass windows, and even in the liturgy, referred to as '*Theophilum reformans gratiae'* ('Theophilus transformed through grace') in the Office of the Virgin. In most versions, Theophilus is a Christian man in poverty who is led by a Jewish magician to make a contract with Satan, exchanging his soul for worldly wealth. It is a story that displays the anti-Judaic foundation of much popular and learned literature produced about Mary in the later European Middle Ages.[1] This presentation will use close reading methods to excavate the differences and continuities between these three Middle English versions of the legend, exploring the theological implications of these variations and their engagement with other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century literature about the Virgin Mary, both within the genre of miracle writing and extending to analogues and influences in romance and lyric, while also taking account of iconographical parallels. In particular, the presentation will focus on thematic issues of biblical time, scriptural references, and the opposition

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[1] I have used the term 'anti-Judaism' to describe the anti-Jewish ideas and impact of these Middle English texts, in accordance with the theological focus of my reading and to reflect recent developments in the field of medieval Anglo-Jewish history; for example, see Miri Rubin's explanation of the utility of anti-Judaism as a theological term alongside antisemitism when discussing the Middle Ages, in "What is Antisemitism?", Mile End Institute Podcast, 14 July 2020, 01:39-02:43, https://anchor.fm/mile-end-institute/episodes/What- is-Antisemitism-egnjto [accessed 11 August 2021]. Rubin argues that 'anti-Judaism' is a useful term because it not only allows access to the theological origins of the hate we now recognise as antisemitism, but also because it opens the potential of how specific and particular these theological constructs of anti-Judaism were in medieval Christianity. For more on the complexities of this terminology, see Miriamne Ara Krummel and Tison Pugh, "Introduction: Jews in Medieval England— A Temporal and Pedagogical Vision", in *Jews in Medieval England: Teaching Representations of the Other*, ed. Miriamne Ara Krummel and Tison Pugh (New York; Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 7-8; Anthony Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3; Irven M. Resnick, *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages* (Washington, D. C.; The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 3-12; Jeanne Favret-Saada, "A fuzzy distinction: Anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism (An excerpt from "Le Judaisme et ses Juifs")", trans. Eléonore Rimbault, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (2014): 335-340 (see especially 337, note 2).

between Synagoga and Ecclesia in these versions of the Theophilus legend; I will conclude that detailed and imaginative dialogues with anti-Judaic iconography and the scriptural interpretations of prominent theologians, such as Honorius Augustodunensis, are displayed in the work of these Middle English adapters.