

ESSAY

Taylor Swift talks back to SHAKESPEARE

JONAH KENT RICHARDS

I first heard Taylor Swift's song "The Fate of Ophelia" on the radio during a road trip to New Hampshire the day after it was released on October 3. It was the opening song of Swift's latest album, *The Life of a Showgirl*. The song's title is a reference to the character of Ophelia from William Shakespeare's play, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark* (1599–1601). It is difficult to overstate the impact that the song and the album as a whole is having in the United States. The song is ranked number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 and broke the Spotify record for the most streamed song in a single week. Everyone—Swifties and Shakespeareans alike—started talking about the song. Fashion magazines like *Elle* published articles explaining the literary references in the song. One can't help but wonder what is engendering such a powerful cultural response?

"The Fate of Ophelia" isn't the first time that Swift has written about Shakespeare. She famously referenced *Romeo & Juliet* in her 2008 song "Love Story." It peaked at number 4 on the Billboard Hot 100, generating a far less cultural response than "The Fate of Ophelia" has produced. What is the difference? I argue that "The Fate of Ophelia" is Swift's personal talk-back to Shakespeare. It is Swift's attempt to rewrite the ending for one

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of Shakespeare's most tragic heroines with whom she feels a personal connection to.

"The Fate of Ophelia" is an example of what Shakespeare scholar Martha Tuck Rozett describes as "Talking Back to Shakespeare" (1996)—a process



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

where an artist adapts or appropriates one of Shakespeare's original works into a new collective text that often challenges the bard's original intent while still drawing upon his cultural authority.

In the 2025 *Taylor Swift: The Official Release Party of a Showgirl* promotional film, Swift explained her motives behind writing the song, "I love those tragedies so much. I fall in love with these characters so much that it hurts me when they die [...] I'm just putting a romantic spin on the fact that Ophelia was driven mad—they drove her mad—but not me." As someone who is no stranger to heartbreak, Taylor is deeply empathetic to the character. She is not content to let Ophelia suffer what she considers an unjust fate.

In her song, Swift writes a version of herself as a foil figure to Ophelia. Unlike

in Shakespeare's play where Hamlet leaves Ophelia to drown, Swift's love interest rescues her. Swift writes in the second stanza of the song, "And if you'd never come for me / I might've drowned in the melancholy[.]" The lines are a direct reference to Act 4 Scene 7 of *Hamlet* where Queen Gertrude describes Ophelia's offstage drowning in a local brook, "Your sister's drowned, Laertes". Swift continues this revision in the subsequent third stanza of the song when she writes, "Late one night / You dug me out of my grave and / And saved my heart from the fate of / Ophelia." Swift's lyrics echo Act 5 Scene 1 of *Hamlet* during Ophelia's funeral where we witness Laertes order Ophelia's corpse laid in her freshly dug grave, "Lay her in th' earth, / and from her fair unpolluted flesh, / May violets spring!".

Swift's talk-back is best visualised in the opening sequence of Swift's music video with a tableau vivant (living picture) of Swift lying on her back in a white dress on the surface of a flower-backed brook. The image is a recreation of the 1851 to 1852 painting *Ophelia* by Sir John Everett Millais of Queen Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning. Swift's tableau can be seen as a foil to Millais' painting. Millais' Ophelia is floating on her back looking upward singing to herself in her dirty flower strewn dress as she is already showing signs of submerging in the water. Swift's version of the character's dress remains pure white as if she remains unsullied by the dishonour and madness that stains Ophelia. Most importantly, Swift's character floats on the surface of the water completely undrowned. Unlike

Ophelia, she can get up and walk away from her fate.

Swift's "The Fate of Ophelia" represents a unique dialogue between Swift and Shakespeare. Shakespeare scholars are already talking about the song. Regardless of Shakespearean opinion, Swift's song is likely to become a popular lens through which many future students approach the character. It is imperative that scholars study the song and similar adaptations to better understand this influence. The fact that artists like Swift are continuing to talk back to Shakespeare's plays offers strong proof that the bard's characters are alive and well in our cultural imagination.

Jonah Kent Richards is a Shakespeare screen adaptation scholar, an English teacher, and contributor for *Star Books and Literature*.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Contested words, painful genealogies

Review of 'On Antisemitism: A Word in History' (Penguin Press, 2025) by Mark Mazower

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Buried beneath masses of mangled bodies of countless innocents slowly pulled from the shrapnel and debris, their remaining flesh torn in the extraction, lies a reflection of the world's inhumanity. The recent devastation in Gaza—what many observers have termed a genocide—has buried everything we thought integral to our conceptualisation of modernity: international law and human rights. While the Palestinian struggle continues amid unprecedented international outrage, particularly in the Global North, accusations of antisemitism have been increasingly weaponised to shut down criticism of Israel and champion the rights of one group over another. Has antisemitism always had one meaning? Like ideas and theories, meanings shift depending on their context.

A historian's job is seldom easy, and dissecting the past and present poses challenges of deep introspection and reflection. Mark Mazower, an acclaimed historian at Columbia University known for his distinguished books on the Balkans, delves into uncharted territory, attempting to understand a word—"antisemitism"—that is largely a product of the western modernity and a stain on Europe's bleak record of historical tolerance toward the Jewish people—which has added numerous words to our everyday vocabulary: pogroms, Holocaust, and ghetto.

On Antisemitism: A Word in History sifts through the troubled legacy of a word that was once used to hunt down Jews who spoke about equality and today is routinely used to silence critics of Israel, including Jewish critics themselves. Languages are often turned into instruments of power, and antisemitism—a term famously popularised in 1879 by a German politician, Wilhelm Marr, to oppose legal equality of Jews—has been transformed into an abstract noun with far-reaching consequences in world politics. The meaning of antisemitism

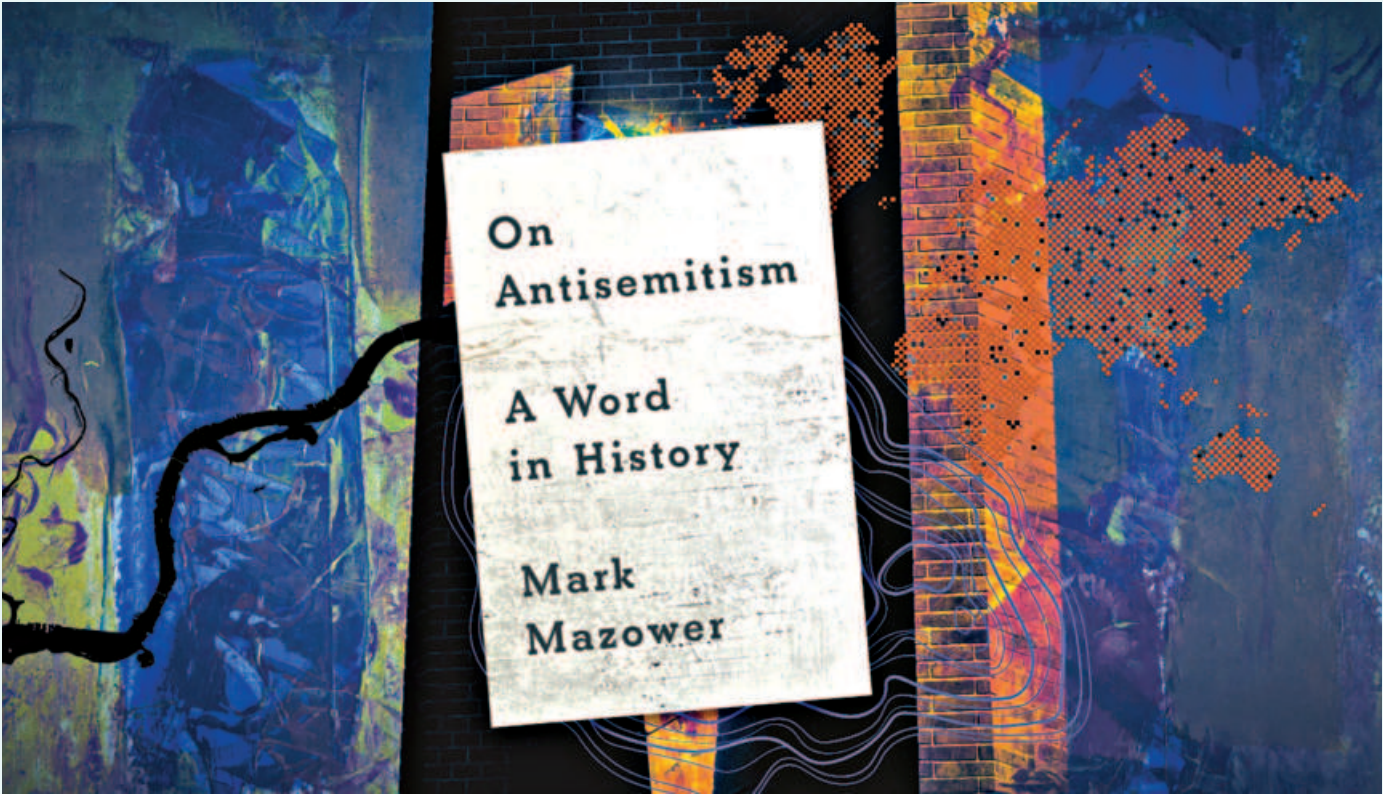


ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

has shifted since World War II, first being associated with the genocide of Jews at the heart of Europe, to now being inextricably linked with Israel's image in the world. Mazower argues that "no form of racial or religious prejudice enjoys such international attention," with countless countries and organisations pledging against it. Antisemitism, in of itself, "has become a world power."

While antisemitism exists in many parts of the world—including regions without Jewish populations, where it manifests through blanket demonisation of Jews simply for existing as a people (a phenomenon known as "antisemitism

without Jews")—the ideological conflation of Israel with the Holocaust is a relatively recent development. In the early 20th century, the Jewish experience in Europe oscillated between the remarkable successes of electoral democracy and the rise of communism and fascism, the latter becoming the death knell for a people and their storied civilisation. Mazower's great strength as a historian, particularly as a Jewish historian rooted in the Anglosphere, is his ability to create a narrative history of a world that evokes powerful memories for many people, contested as they might be.

To understand how this transformation occurred, Mazower examines the

demographic and political evolution of Jewish communities in the 20th century. Israel, from its initial formation through the early years of the new millennium, did not house the world's largest Jewish population. In fact, it had the third-largest Jewish population after the world powers of the day—the United States and the Soviet Union—with constant calls to Jewry in both countries to settle in the Jewish state. As Jews in the American polity reached new heights, establishing themselves in terms of influence and representation, constant linkages to Israel evoked anxiety over dual loyalties. Meanwhile, prominent Jewish organisations hailed

"the virtual end of overt antisemitism," even as it remained embedded in larger forms of racial discrimination in society, particularly toward the African-American community—a parallel struggle that many Jews had actively supported. Mazower traces the presence of Israel in American politics from colonial times to the present day, when Christian Zionists continue to view Jewish rule over the Holy Land as necessary to hasten the coming of the Messiah. The politics of Christian Zionism remains enmeshed with support for Israel's actions to this day.

In the post-1945 period, most American Jews saw their own fates tied to America and its numerous problems—the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights struggle—rather than conflating what it meant to be Jewish with Israel. This changed with the 1967 war, when Israel emerged victorious over its Arab neighbors. "American Jewry had become Zionized," in the words of a fellow Israeli historian. Since 1967, support for Israel has been the top priority of American Jewish civil rights organisations, superseding topics such as the struggle for civil liberties and the fight for anti-discrimination measures. Interestingly, politicians and early advocates of Israel did not view Arab opposition to the Zionist project as antisemitic, but rather as a political movement for nationalist self-determination in a land from which they had been forcefully displaced.

In the aftermath of what many people call the world's first live-streamed genocide, clarion calls for justice and a one-state solution grow louder. Mazower, a professor at Columbia University, where numerous protests against Israel's actions have taken place, has penned a book that explains how words are a double-edged sword, capable of both describing oppression and perpetuating it.

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