

THE CRITICS AND THE PRIORESS

Antisemitism, Criticism, and Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*

HEATHER BLURTON & HANNAH JOHNSON



Of all the *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*, in which a young schoolboy is murdered by Jews for singing a song in praise of the Virgin Mary, poses a problem to contemporary readers because of the antisemitism of the story it tells. Both the *Tale's* antisemitism and its "Chaucerianism"—its fitness or aptness as part of the Chaucerian canon—are significant topics of reflection for modern readers, who worry about the *Tale's* ethical implications as well as Chaucer's own implications. Over the past fifty years, scholars have asked: Is the antisemitism in the tale that of the Prioress? Or of Chaucer the pilgrim? Or of Chaucer the author? Or, indeed, whether one ought to discuss antisemitism in the *Prioress's Tale* at all, considering the potential anachronism of expecting medieval texts to conform to contemporary ideologies.

The Critics and the Prioress responds to a critical stalemate between the demands of ethics and the entailments of methodology. The book addresses key moments in criticism of the *Prioress's Tale*—particularly those that stage an encounter between historicism and ethics—in order to interrogate these critical impasses while suggesting new modes for future encounters. It is an effort to identify, engage, and reframe some significant—and perennially repeated—arguments staked out in this criticism, such as the roles of gender, aesthetics, source studies, and the appropriate relationship between ethics and historicism.

The Critics and the Prioress will be an essential resource for Chaucer scholars researching as well as teaching the *Prioress's Tale*. Scholars and students of Middle English literature and medieval culture more generally will also be interested in this book's rigorous analysis of contemporary scholarly approaches to expressions of antisemitism in Chaucer's England.

Heather Blurton is Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Hannah Johnson is Associate Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh.

"Blurton and Johnson have produced a work of scholarship so shrewd, humane, and conceptually alert that it will surely gain a large audience in the field. In their hands, the review of research becomes a canny and creative thing. They trace the history of the criticism, and isolate for scrutiny its premises and preoccupations; but they also, most hopefully, show that this history has on the large scale a rationality not always visible in its details."

—Steven Justice,
University of California, Berkeley

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*Antisemitism, Criticism,
and Chaucer's Prioress's Tale*



Heather Blurton and Hannah Johnson

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The Critics and the Prioress

For Isaac

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Introduction

Whan seyde was al this miracle, every man
As sobre was that wonder was to se

When the Prioress finishes her tale, the pilgrims' response is silence. To break the "sober" moment, the Host begins to "jape." Turning to Chaucer, he asks, "what man artow?" and requests "a tale of mirth." Chaucer, that is, the character of "Chaucer" who appears among the pilgrims' company in the *Canterbury Tales*, launches into the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, a tale "of myrthe and of solas / Al of a knight was fair and gent." The Host, however, finds neither mirth nor solace in this tale, and cuts Chaucer short, requesting "some mirth or some doctrine." Chaucer replies, in prose, with "a moral tale virtuous," *The Tale of Melibee*.¹ The reaction to the *Prioress's Tale* provokes a significant disruption in the narrative sequence. The resumption of tale-telling seems a struggle, even as the author himself makes an appearance, and the "solas" promised by the tale-telling competition is cast into crisis. Several critics have identified the fragment in which the *Prioress's Tale* is embedded, Fragment VII, to be uniquely concerned with language. It is, Alan Gaylord has suggested, the *Canterbury Tales*' "literature group."² Accordingly, the *Prioress's Tale* is one of a series of tales that plays with the destabilized and destabilizing properties of language itself. Thus, in Peter Travis's words:

the ice-cold uncomedy of the Shipman's fabliau; the spiritual ferocities of the Prioress's boy martyrology; the narrative and prosodic pratfalls of Chaucer's *Sir Thopas*; the monitory confusion of a thousand prov-

1. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), VII 691–706. All subsequent citations to the *Prioress's Tale* will be noted in text.

2. Alan T. Gaylord, "Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*: Harry Bailly as Horseback Editor," *PMLA* 82 (1967): 227.

erbs running amok in the *Melibee*; the anti-cathartic effect of a hundred tragedies promised by the Monk . . . each of these five takes can simultaneously be read straight as well as askew, an artistic success as well as a parodic near miss.³

This seems an apt characterization, and in this light, the sober reaction of the pilgrims to the *Prioress's Tale* functions as a sort of *mise en abyme* in an already incredibly self-reflexive work, where narrative itself pauses, for a moment, to reconsider.

But this pause also introduces a critical conundrum. The pilgrims' sober response to the *Prioress's Tale* and the crisis of narrative that ensues have puzzled critics, who have struggled with the question of what it would mean to read it "straight" or "askew." Is the audience's sobriety an appropriately worshipful and respectful response to a religious tale told by a nun? Or is their sobriety an indication that they are uncomfortably taken aback by the tale's demonizing of its Jewish figures? The pilgrims, with their ambiguous response, stand as a kind of cipher for the terse economy of the tale itself. Is its impact primarily devotional or satirical? Does the tale comment on its teller, or reflect the culture that produced her? Does Chaucer surpass his contemporaries and transcend his moment, or produce an excellent exemplar of a predictable genre? None of these questions is untouched by the others, and concerning all of them, we find settled areas of dispute resounding with broadly similar arguments offered over the course of the past century or so.

The *Prioress's Tale* offers a narrative that, by any measure, already contains much that is "askew" by modern standards. The Prioress recounts the story of a young boy who is so devoted to the Virgin Mary that he continuously practices singing a hymn in her honor as he walks back and forth to school. His path takes him through the Jewish quarter of his town, where his incessant singing so provokes the Jews that they hire a killer to slit the boy's throat and toss him in the sewer. However, his singing continues unabated even in death, enabling his bereaved mother to discover both his body and the conspirators. The Jews judged responsible are subsequently executed, and the boy is buried with honor in the local abbey. Despite the spare limits of Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*, as Hannah Johnson has noted elsewhere, "even its glancing details now have a critical history of their own—the tale's setting 'in a greet cite,' located 'in Asie' rather than in England (488) . . . the sentimental diminutives that distinguish the Prioress's

3. Peter W. Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading the Nun's Priest's Tale* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 30.

characterization of the ‘litel clergeon’; the villainous representation of the Jews as the ‘cursed folk of Herodes al newe’” (574).⁴ This profusion of interpretation telegraphs some important truths about the tale’s modern reception. Chaucer’s poem accommodates significant ambiguities, even as its modest length (just over two hundred lines), presents constraints on interpretation. What is more, the stakes of interpretation itself are high: modern readers are typically discomfited or disturbed by the tale’s antisemitism and, by extension, Chaucer’s own possible bigotry.⁵ Long after “the death of the author,” these ghosts in the Chaucerian machine continue to polarize critics who are concerned about the poem’s ethical implications.

The problem of ambiguity in reception has erupted out of the Canterbury frame, one might say, to become a problem for understanding the tale’s intended or likely impact among Chaucer’s readers. Indeed, the tale has come to focus a series of questions related to Chaucer’s own ethical and authorial positioning. Despite a number of efforts to rehabilitate Chaucer on the grounds of satire, suggesting that he was mocking the Prioress and, by extension, her antisemitism with his tale, critics like Derek Pearsall and Emily Stark Zitter voice another commonly held view when they find him guilty of a regrettable but historically comprehensible ethical failing.⁶ While this difference of opinion is long-standing, the debate about Chaucer’s satire—and, by implication, his complicity with historical antisemitism—continues to be rehashed, and appears perennially as an unresolved dilemma. This owes something to the studied equivocations and ironies of Chaucerian poetics, but also indicates critics’ deep investment in recuperating a beloved canonical author. Between the story’s high ethical stakes and its ambiguities, arguments about this tiny piece of the Chaucerian canon are more than usually fraught. Both the tale’s antisemitism and its “Chaucerianism”—its fitness or aptness as part of the Chaucerian canon—are significant topics of reflection for modern readers, who worry

4. Hannah R. Johnson, “Antisemitism and the Purposes of Historicism: Antisemitism and Art in Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale*,” in *Middle English Literature: Criticism and Debate*, ed. D. Vance Smith and Holly Crocker (New York: Routledge, 2014), 184.

5. We use the term “antisemitism” throughout this book to describe both medieval and modern negative portrayals of Jews and Judaism. Although we are aware that the term is considered by some to be anachronistic when applied to medieval thought, we prefer this term to “anti-Judaism,” because we believe the hostility that is represented is, in most cases, more than theological; and we prefer it also to “anti-Semitism,” following current practice that prefers not to reify the racial implications of the term “Semite.” In this, we follow arguments laid out by Anthony Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3 and Robert C. Stacey, “From Ritual Crucifixion to Host Desecration: Jews and the Body of Christ,” *Jewish History* 12.1 (1998): 14, among others.

6. Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Routledge, 1985), 245–46; and Emily Stark Zitter, “Anti-Semitism in Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 25.4 (1991): 277–84.

about the tale's ethical implications, and the author's implication in them. Over the past fifty years, in particular, scholars have asked whether the antisemitism in the tale is that of the Prioress, or of Chaucer the pilgrim, or of Chaucer the author—or, indeed, whether one ought to discuss antisemitism in the *Prioress's Tale* at all, considering the potential anachronism of expecting medieval texts to conform to contemporary ideologies. This problem of Chaucer's culpability and the status of his “masterpiece” is more complicated than it may initially appear, since it quickly invites the question of why we are reading the poem at all, and what our obligations are in doing so. These are issues we consider in some detail in the opening chapters of the book, where we discuss the embedded discourse about ethical implications that has shadowed criticism on the tale for more than half a century, and then turn to reconsider the conversation about Chaucer's relation to his sources as a problem for the history of antisemitism as well as a problem for medieval literary criticism.

In the context of Chaucerian criticism, such questions are further confounded by the status of the *Prioress's Tale* as, in Lawrence Besserman's resonant phrase, “the first canonical anti-Semitic literary masterpiece.”⁷ Philip Alexander offers a similar appraisal, suggesting that the *Tale* may be “the best antisemitic tract ever written.”⁸ It is one thing to interpret a crude piece of medieval anti-Jewish propaganda, critics often imply, but what are we to do with an antisemitic “masterpiece,” a work of sophisticated poetry produced by a beloved canonical author? Indeed, one critical commonplace of scholarship on Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* is the assertion, as almost a throwaway point, that it is “the best” of its kind, and we will admit to finding such assertions perplexing. Thus, for example, in her introduction to her updating of Carleton Brown's “Sources and Analogues” of the *Prioress's Prologue and Tale*, Laurel Broughton writes: “In creating *The Prioress's Tale* Chaucer has drawn on a number of cultural and literary influences to produce a complex and multi-layered narrative that transcends its genre.”⁹ We do not wish to single Broughton out here: in its context this is an unremarkable and uncontroversial comment that is echoed by any number of Chaucer critics.¹⁰ The oblique argument implied by such locutions

7. Lawrence Besserman, review of *Chaucer and the Jews: Sources, Contexts, Meanings*, ed. Sheila Delany, *Speculum* 79.1 (2004): 166.

8. Philip Alexander, “Madame Eglentyne, Geoffrey Chaucer, and the Problem of Medieval Anti-Semitism,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 74 (1992): 120.

9. Laurel Broughton, “The Prioress's Prologue and Tale,” in *Sources and Analogues of The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002–5), 584.

10. For example: “most critics would agree that the tale is almost perfect in its kind” (John P. Brennan, “Reflections on a Gloss to the ‘Prioress's Tale,’ from Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*,” *Studies in Philology* 70.3 [1973]: 248); “Chaucer is thus presenting us with the bluntest, rawest form of the myth by means of what may be the most refined verses he ever wrote” (John Archer,