“Or Elles Oughten Be”:
Reframing Antisemitism in Chaucer’s ‘Prioress’s Tale’

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To Lenore K. Morrell — Greetings!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction .................................................................................................................. 4

- Chapter I ....................................................................................................................... 8
  *Critical Traditions*

- Chapter II .................................................................................................................... 39
  *Character Study*

- Chapter III ................................................................................................................ 58
  *Analogues & Irony*

- Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 83

- Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................... 85
INTRODUCTION

The Prioress’s Tale presents some of the strongest violence and hate that appears in all the Canterbury Tales. Much scholarship on this tale wrestles with the question of intent: is the story an ironic one, or does it reflect a genuine abhorrence of the Jewish other? While the tale’s blatant antisemitism echoes the xenophobic rhetoric that characterizes descriptions of “the other” elsewhere in Chaucer, the story is uniquely hateful at its core. Importantly, Chaucer fails to turn this tale, unlike the Man of Law’s and other “miracle of the Virgin” tales, into a story of conversion. The vast majority of the tale’s analogues, however, end the story—of Jews in a foreign Christian city mutilating a young boy of piety—with the conversion of the accused Jews. What does it mean that Chaucer departs from this storied literary precedent, especially given the abundant character flaws of his narrator, the Prioress? I conduct an analysis of the tale’s analogues, finding that the treatment of the Jews as a social other has been neglected in existing analogue scholarship. I consider what Chaucer’s murderous ending means with respect to the story’s ironic potential, and ultimately suggest that Chaucer, an anticlerical poet, uses the exacerbated hatefulness of the Prioress’s tale in part to critique the medieval English church.

In an age where some of our worst assumptions about Chaucer are proving false, revisiting the contentious political- and identity-based portions of his work is particularly interesting and exciting. In no way do I extend the logic that Chaucer’s innocence in one matter

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1 Euan Roger and Sebastian Sobecki, “Geoffrey Chaucer, Cecily Chaumpaigne, and the Statute of Laborers: New Records and Old Evidence Reconsidered,” The Chaucer Review 57, no. 4 (October 2022): 407–437. In the late nineteenth century, Frederick J. Furnivall found a quitclaim document dated May 1380 in which Cecily Chaumpaigne released Chaucer of “all manner of actions related to [her] raptus.” Since then, and especially so after Christopher Cannon located an additional quitclaim that seemingly affirmed this reading in 1993, scholars have been plagued by the troubling possibility that Chaucer committed sexual violence against Chaumpaigne. (Raptus is a nebulous word, and many varying definitions have been mapped onto the life-record.) In October 2022, Roger and Sobecki published evidence exonerating Chaucer of the charge: two previously unknown court records assert that Chaumpaigne and Chaucer had been on the same side of a legal case in which Thomas Staundon, Chaumpaigne’s former employer, claimed that Chaumpaigne had been poached from his employment into Chaucer’s service illegally.
is his innocence in another, which is to say that even if our assumptions are proven wrong,

Chaucer needs to be understood as a product of his time and place. Likely, much of our scholarly understanding is right to fall on the side of moral sensitivity: even if not a perpetrator of sexual violence, Chaucer was probably a chauvinist; if not, his works certainly demand to be read with attention to gender. I aim for a similar reflexiveness with the Prioress’s Tale: perhaps this is not Chaucer’s manifesto, condoning the hanging of the Jewish people—we will never know Chaucer’s personal sentiments towards the Jews, though we know a rampant culture of antisemitism existed at his time. It is near impossible to imagine that these pervasive antisemitic attitudes escaped Chaucer, and the hateful tale of his Prioress is strong evidence in this respect.

At the same time, I find so much evidence for the ironic coding of the Prioress that I have difficulty avoiding reading the tale without attention to its satiric potential. As I will show, Chaucer indicates the Prioress is fallible. Her moral and Christian shortcomings are extensive, and yet criticism of her tale only became attune to its potential irony in the mid-20th century. Since this shift, informed by both the advent of New Criticism and postwar scholarship, there has been contentious volleying in scholarship to determine if and how irony might shape our understanding of the story. Irony alone, however, leaves many questions regarding intent and culpability unanswered or murky at best. Analogue analysis reveals that the Jewish violence in Chaucer’s version exceeds near all other analogues; his decision to hang rather than convert the Jews is a rare one among source texts. Together, these abnormalities—the Prioress’s fallible character and the extreme violence of her tale—indicate to me that we may again see our worst assumptions about Chaucer challenged, this time by the reality presented by his works and the context of their analogues. I do not doubt that Chaucer was an antisemite; it is probable that he was. Of his Prioress, however, he makes a mockery, and this indicates some level of irony in his
representation of Christian attitudes towards the Jewish people, as she frames her tale and is thus inextricable from its content.

In my first chapter, I review the critical reception of the Prioress’s Tale over time. I look for the emergence of the ironic reading and early concerns regarding the story’s antisemitism, finding New Criticism and the Holocaust as the primary constraints that have led to shifts in criticism. Much of the resulting scholarship contends with the question of responsibility for the story’s moral failures. Here, I review in detail Heather Blurton and Hannah Johnson’s The Critics and the Prioress, which provides a retrospective of scholarly trends in response to the tale. I also consider children’s editions of the Canterbury Tales and the ways in which they may reflect changing sensitivities to the Prioress and her antisemitism.

I then conduct a character study of the Prioress. Here, I mostly pay attention to the General Prologue and its subtle mockery of her character, though I also consider the elements of her own Prologue and tale that reinforce the ironic reading of her character. I am especially interested in questions of geography and history, which Chaucer uses to belittle the Prioress’s intelligence and worldliness. I conclude that irony is a salient factor in the portrait of the Prioress across Chaucer’s multiple renderings of her character.

Finally, I review the 32 known analogues to the story. These are texts that share near-identical narratives to Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale, many of which predate Chaucer by decades (if not centuries). Many of these sources were written originally in Latin, and several postdate the Canterbury Tales. I identify the analogues using Carleton Brown’s 1941 chapter on the Prioress’s Tale in Sources and Analogues (ed. Bryan and Dempster), most of which Brown himself translated and reprinted in an earlier volume, A Study of the Miracle of Our Lady Told by Chaucer’s Prioress. I find that most analogues end with the conversion, rather than the hanging,
of the demonized Jews in the story. I then consider what may have motivated Chaucer to break
from literary precedent in this uniquely violent way. I suggest that Chaucer’s satirical
representation of the Prioress and break from the literary precedent set by the tale’s analogues
are reflections of his anticlericalism.

In this last chapter, I also suggest a new system of categorization for the analogues.
Carleton Brown remains the preeminent scholar on analogues to the Prioress’s Tale, and the
system he put forth in 1941 to catalog the analogues remains standard. In it, he organizes his
identified sources and analogues into three groups in accordance with their rough chronology
and shared narrative details. Given the profound uncertainties surrounding dating these sources, I
challenge the usefulness of chronology as a primary tool for organizing the analogues. Moreover,
I take issue with the narrative details Brown singles out to categorize the analogues – namely,
that he fails to wholly consider sources’ treatment of the fate they bestow unto their Jews. As I
will show, a clear pattern emerges among analogues with respect to their treatment of the Jews as
a social other. I propose that centering Jewish fate in our scholarship of the analogues is not only
a socially responsible correction to past criticism, but also a more useful tool in understanding
differences between source texts – especially that of genre. I suggest that the few source texts
ending with the murder of the Jews, including Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale, are failures of the
Marian genre, a group to which they have historically belonged and been understood. I hope that
this comparative work more satisfyingly untangles the complexities of this notorious Chaucerian
text.
CHAPTER I:
CRITICAL TRADITIONS

Introduction

What is to be done about texts that are problematic? In schools across America, the discourse over racist canonical texts has been a loaded one, particularly in the wake of curricular debates over Critical Race Theory. Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale is perhaps one of the earliest texts to come under such scrutiny – as early as 1906, scholars have expressed discomfort with its antisemitism.\(^2\) And in their book-length study *The Critics and the Prioress*, Heather Blurton and Hannah Johnson go as far back as the Prioress’s original audience—her fellow pilgrims—to find evidence of emotional confusion surrounding the story.

In this chapter, I attempt to understand critical responses to the Prioress’s Tale over time, with the hopes of identifying certain moments or movements that have contributed to contemporary scholarship regarding the tale’s antisemitism. First, I summarize the major trends in ironic readings of Chaucer. I then consider critical responses to the Prioress’s Tale specifically. Much of this section is indebted to Blurton and Johnson, whose recent book has done a significant amount of this labor for me. Their retrospective deftly handles a mountain of wide-ranging and often hypocritical scholarly responses throughout the 20\(^{th}\) century, the middle of which constituted a major turning point in the way the Prioress’s Tale is understood. Here, I home in on New and post-Holocaust Criticism as driving forces behind the rise the ironic reading of the Prioress’s Tale. In assessing responsibility for the story’s antisemitism, I consider gender theory and the study of sources and analogues as major loci of critical history.

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\(^2\) Heather Blurton and Hannah Johnson, *The Critics and the Prioress: Antisemitism, Criticism, and Chaucer’s “Prioress’s Tale”* (University of Michigan Press, 2017). Future references to this book will be provided parenthetically in my text.
In addition to reviewing formal scholarship to corroborate these turning points in criticism, I also consider children’s Chaucers from the 20th century. With these sources, I am able to conduct a close comparative analysis of modifications to the tale over time. Children’s Chaucers reflect adult attitudes. Many earlier generations of children have enjoyed the Prioress’s Tale as a piece of beautiful religious prose, their parents and teachers seemingly unconcerned about the story’s violence and xenophobia. Yet in the past century, as popular attitudes towards both pedagogy and antisemitism have shifted, the sensitivity ascribed to an audience of children makes for a useful data point in critical attitudes towards the Prioress’s Tale. Here, I consult Velma Richmond’s *Chaucer as Children’s Literature*, which helpfully points out variations in content between many editions of children’s Chaucers. Richmond’s analysis stops with a 1923 edition; I bring in some later children’s Chaucers to extend the New Critical and postwar lens onto mid-century works. I also consider a modernization by Peter Ackroyd, the prominent British biographer, which is geared toward contemporary adult audiences. The work, from 2008, is helpful in considering how critical impulses regarding troubling and xenophobic content have changed over time.

As I’ve completed this project, attempting to understand the antisemitism of the Prioress’s Tale through the lens of irony, historicization and context from the analogues as well as Chaucer’s characterization of the Prioress, I’ve realized that I’ve followed a critical pattern taken up by Blurton and Johnson in their retrospective. As they correctly assert, scholars who see room for irony in the Prioress’s Tale tend to externalize the tale’s antisemitism onto the Prioress, rather than Chaucer – and there is very much a gendered dynamic to doing so, to exonerating Chaucer, who penned the words we find so abhorrent, and condemning the Prioress, to whom he assigned them so many centuries ago. The instinct to externalize can be powerful and potentially
misleading; I’ve done some externalizing myself here, while working to remain self-conscious about the pitfalls of this impulse. Understanding Chaucer as an ironist and carving out room to interpret the Prioress as an underwhelming Christian figure leads to the urge to write her antisemitism into her other, less contentious shortcomings. As such, I remain unsure as to whether there is necessarily something inherently problematic about this critical tendency. Still, Blurton and Johnson are correct to see and question this pattern, especially as most (male) narrators have not come under the same level of scrutiny that has haunted the Prioress. Do we forgive Chaucer in this instance only because there is a convenient woman on whom to place the blame? As male narrators face less investigation into their moral shortcomings, even when telling tales littered with ironies and hypocrisies, I find myself wondering how much of the blame we assign the Prioress comes from her womanhood (or Chaucer’s presentation of it), and how much of it comes from the evidence throughout the General Prologue and her tale that she is in fact a moral or Christian failure in her vanity or in her hatefulness towards the Jews. But does the Prioress’s uncompromising commitment to her tale doom her or Chaucer? At any rate, gender presents an interesting complication to understanding the Prioress, her tale, and its reception, and Chaucer’s responsibility as a poet. Ironic potential makes sorting out the question of culpability a difficult one, and here Blurton and Johnson’s retrospective is especially helpful.

Irony Broadly in Chaucer Scholarship

Contemporary scholarship is close to unanimous in its assessment that irony features heavily in Chaucer’s work. As Anthony Farnham writes on Chaucer’s *Troilus*, “that Chaucer was an ironist is a critical commonplace which no one would wish to deny.” ³ While there is a settled

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consensus that irony is at play broadly in Chaucer’s work, the Prioress’s Tale is one text characterized by enduring contention in this regard. Before addressing disputes over the Prioress’s Tale specifically, I intend to discuss irony more broadly—as a trope and throughout Chaucer’s works—in the hopes of seeing with greater clarity the function and nature of his irony in the specific instance of the Prioress.

Today, there is substantial agreement among contemporary scholars regarding the existence of some irony in Chaucer (the extent is more heavily contested); this has not always been so. A brief history of the scholarly treatment of this enduring question helps illuminate best practices now for reading irony in Chaucer. Useful, too, is a working definition of irony. For this discussion of irony in Chaucer studies broadly, and as I use it in relation to the Prioress’s Tale specifically, I will consider irony to be the expression of deeper meaning in such a way that contrasts with its face-value significance. This definition is based on that of the Oxford English Dictionary, which notes that irony usually seeks is humorous or emphatic effect, and that irony can refer also more broadly to the “manner, style, or attitude suggestive of the use of this kind of expression.”4 While I largely refer to this literary approach and style as “irony,” I will occasionally use the word “satire” interchangeably.

For the first few centuries after the circulation of the Canterbury Tales, ironic readings were largely absent from scholarship. Prior to the early-mid 20th century, most scholarly references to irony (which were, again, severely limited in number) were concerned with dramatic irony; while irony began to get some attention, there was by no means a consensus on its existence in the Canterbury Tales, nor was it a topic that gripped the discipline. It was not until the early-mid 20th century that irony became a focal point of scholarship. This sudden

centrality of irony in scholarship reflects, I believe, the “New Criticism” movement of the mid-20th century. This style of criticism, which viewed texts as “self-containing” and valued close reading over outside contextualization, came into vogue contemporaneously with the deluge of early ironic readings in Chaucer scholarship. The idea central to this approach is that while philology, historical context, or an author’s biography may influence the way we read and interpret a literary work, the work itself provides everything necessary to understand its significance. For Chaucer studies in the 1940s and 50s, this meant that instead of considering English courtly politics or Boccaccio, or even Chaucer’s own life records, scholars considered word choice, punctuation, rhyme and rhythm, embedded humor, and—crucially—irony; that is, scholarship leaned more heavily into Chaucer’s works themselves rather than historical context at the time of his writing. The approach, commonplace today, was novel at the time, and inspired prolific scholarship concerned with this new question of irony.

Such a sudden and forceful emergence of the ironic reading led to great disagreement – many scholars were hesitant to identify or embrace irony as a mode of reading Chaucer after centuries of literal readings of the Canterbury Tales. While they embraced certain tenets of New Criticism, Alan Gaylord, C. David Benson, David Lawton, and Derek Pearsall were among the early scholars expressing resistance to ironic readings of Chaucer. Gaylord writes, with attention especially to more troubling elements of Chaucer’s works, that “to dismiss the problem by invoking the name of ‘irony’ can be dangerous, particularly if in doing so one avoids analysis, avoids noticing and accounting for all the complex shifts of tone.” Even those who are less inclined to dismiss irony as a theoretical framework for reading Chaucer, such as Anthony Farnham, agree: “Mr. Gaylord is surely right in rejecting the temptation to explain away a

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6 Farnham, “Chaucerian Irony,” 208.
problematical statement by terming it irony.”

Why does this academic history matter in the context of the Prioress’s Tale today? Without attention to irony, one cannot read the Prioress’s Tale as anything other than a vessel for antisemitism. Questions—good ones—can still arise from literal interpretation: scholars might ask (and do) how much of the Prioress’s Tale reflects Chaucer’s opinions on Jews, or simply transmits popular prejudices without comment, or how profoundly the tale reimagines the biblical scripture it echoes. These are worthwhile and important questions, but my point here is that those inquiries miss the massive complication of the tale that arises from reading it ironically; those questions, which can be addressed with entirely literal readings, lose dimension when no consideration is given to irony. In Chaucer’s Religious Tales, Elizabeth Robertson “defends” the violence perpetrated against the Jews in her story as a “displaced expression of the narrator’s ‘sense of her own victimization and her rage at male authority.’” This reading—and others like it—attributes the tale’s content to the character of the narrator, while bypassing the demands the tale places on us to determine whether or not that content is to be taken seriously — even to pass critical judgment on it. Robertson’s response to the tale is divorced from the Jewish hate at the core of the Prioress’s Tale. Responding to the story’s antisemitism forces us to consider if and how that hate may form part of the satire of the Prioress. Without proper attention to the genuine antisemitism that plagues this story, and whether it is intended literally or ironically, productive scholarship is severely limited.

While most scholars are open to finding some irony in Chaucer’s presentation of the Prioress, few have explored the precise functions and mechanisms through which he uses the

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7 Farnham, “Chaucerian Irony,” 208.
ironic technique. I believe it necessary to consider the function of irony broadly in Chaucer to understand how to draw conclusions from the *Prioress’s Tale*. While there may be some consensus on the existence of ironic potential, the way that irony codes the Prioress’s antisemitism is still widely contested, and something I hope to address more satisfyingly in my analysis of the tale’s analogues. For now, it is important to stress that reading Chaucer ironically remains a potentially valid approach to studying his works, including the Prioress’s Tale.

*Criticism and Culpability:*

*Reviewing Blurton & Johnson’s The Critics and the Prioress*

Additional mainstay categories brought to bear on criticism of the Prioress’s Tale include the ways in which the Prioress’s character is defined by emotionalism or infantilization, gender, and the extent to which she embodies Christian values. How do these features implicate or exonerate her? Here, critics have tended to focus on the General Prologue, in which Chaucer details the Prioress’s dress, table manners, and sexuality as indicators of the character’s moral strength – or, in later criticism, her lack thereof. Seminal sources on these matters include Muriel Bowden and Elizabeth Robertson, both of whom use the General Prologue to interrogate questions of ethics and maturity in relation to the Prioress’s character. I will discuss the Prioress’s characterization in the General Prologue more explicitly and at greater length in Chapter II of this thesis; here, my intention is to identify the primary focuses of critical responses to the Prioress’s Tale over time. This work will show that sources and analogues have been understudied and undertheorized, and that gender complicates the way we understand the Prioress’s biases.
Before irony became commonplace in the study of the Prioress’s Tale, Blurton and Johnson explain that there was a “broadly shared sense” that the tale’s “antisemitism was simply there, requiring little in the way of explanation or analysis” (19). This philosophy manifested in the work of early-20th century scholars, who tended to focus on the Prioress as a character—usually sympathetically—as opposed to the more complicated matter of her tale (which, it should be noted, they mostly did not see as complicated or incongruent with the character of a Christian figure). It’s important to note also that New Criticism alone does not explain the rise of satirically-minded scholarship: post-Holocaust, criticism needed to be and was more preoccupied than earlier scholarship had been with the question of the Prioress’s antisemitism. New Criticism and post-Holocaust scholarship thus worked in tandem to pull Chaucer, his Prioress, and her story into the ironic realm.

After irony entered the picture, “almost every argument about the tale register[ed] an opinion … about whether or not Chaucer use[d] satire as a rhetorical tool through which to address and reproach medieval antisemitism” in the tale (32). Blurton and Johnson explain that the rise of ironic scholarship effectively divided critics into two distinct camps: there were those who did not see room for irony in the Prioress’s Tale, who would instead often discuss the liturgical aspects of the story and contextualize both it and Chaucer as products of their time, and then there were those who argued for a satirical interpretation of the tale, many of whom suggest or imply that Chaucer would have been “above” the antisemitism of his time (24). Blurton and Johnson explain that post-war scholarship is sensibly concerned with the question of culpability, and irony then became an especially useful consideration. And as the Holocaust

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10 Here, they write that critics denying the potential for irony in the tale will “carefully [avoid] an indictment of a Christian theology that relies upon a foundation of antisemitism.”
made it harder to ignore the treatment of the Jewish other, the question of irony became less “yes-or-no” and more “how much.”

In assessing culpability, gender is a key consideration. The teller-tale relationship is key to the gendered reading of the Prioress’s antisemitism, and especially the tendency of scholarship to understand the Prioress’s antisemitism through her femininity. This reading, Blurton and Johnson assert, is an oft-overlooked consequence of New Criticism – in using the text itself to understand the Prioress’s Tale, attention naturally centers on the Prioress herself as the problematic and interpretive key to the tale’s troubling elements. Blurton and Johnson identify a “critical tradition” informed by this persisting interest in the Prioress as a character that “suggests that the Prioress’s antisemitism is directly related to her feminine shortcomings” (23). They persuasively argue that in our desire to distance Chaucer from the antisemitism he presents in the Prioress’s Tale, scholars have “inadvertently found ourselves embroiled in reproducing and repeating a discourse that trades antisemitic stereotypes for antifeminist ones” (105). In this way, gender works both as an explanatory mechanism for the Prioress’s antisemitism and an “alibi” for Chaucer, who then escapes culpability (at least for antisemitism if not antifeminism). There is indisputably a gendered dynamic to externalizing blame from Chaucer the author to the female (and fictional!) Prioress. Blurton and Johnson pull in the Pardoner and the Monk as examples of male characters who escape such readings; the Man of Law poses perhaps an even stronger example, as his tale deals with similarly xenophobic themes – and yet scholarship of his tale does not tend to focus on his appearance or moral fortitude.11

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11 Some scholarship for these male narrators is concerned with physical features and expression as outlined in the General Prologue; my point here is that while these kinds of readings do exist for male narrators, they are not as common or extensive as they are for the Prioress or the Wife of Bath.
Blurton and Johnson are careful in their language – their consideration of gender reads like a report rather than a condemnation of antifeminist tendencies in criticism. Still, their well-made point suggests that the Prioress faces unique scrutiny, and this has been the case, as I understand it, even before New Criticism and the Holocaust forced a reckoning with her antisemitism. Gender is a powerful explanation for why we (and I include myself here) are so obsessed with her character and moral shortcomings, especially as they relate to or potentially excuse her story’s antisemitism. How would the Prioress’s Tale be understood if Chaucer had assigned it to a male narrator? This is a worthy and complex question. And yet it is difficult for the modern reader to sympathize with either the Prioress as a character, or for the contemporary scholar to feel (or express) that she has been judged too harshly. This is in large part why scholarship on gender falls flat on this tale; attending to the matter of gender seems or perhaps feels to be detracting from its antisemitism. The hate the Prioress presents is brutal, and popular attention to antisemitism has only risen since the advent of the New Criticism. These scholarly and popular movements together make it difficult to read the Prioress softly or empathetically. Indeed, gender cannot be understood in isolation from the consideration of the tale-type of the Prioress’s Tale.

Chaucer scholarship in general demonstrates interest in identifying potential sources, as evidenced by the continued publication and updating of *Sources and Analogues*. The Prioress’s Tale is a unique case, as analogues offer tonal and historical insight into Chaucer’s presentation of antisemitism. And yet the analogues themselves, which I see as offering potentially revolutionary insight as to the question of irony, have not played a central role in criticism of the tale. In their discussion of sources and analogues, or what they consider “text networks,” Blurton and Johnson review the implications for the neglect of the analogues in criticism of the Prioress’s
Tale. Though analogue studies offer a valuable opportunity for scholars to “particularize and historicize” the tale, Blurton and Johnson are quick to note that Prioress scholars have had a uniquely vested interest in identifying sources and analogues to which they can assign blame, or at least precedent, for the troubling elements of Chaucer’s adaptation. Mirroring this pattern perhaps unintentionally, Blurton and Johnson themselves then turn their focus to differences between Chaucer’s tale and its analogues, suggesting that Chaucer’s most dramatic alteration to source material is to end the Prioress’s Tale with a prayer. They highlight this change over others that have been a focus of previous analogue scholarship, such as the magical object of the “greyn” and the hymn sung (*Gaude Maria* or *Alma redemptoris*), perhaps because these details seem morally neutral. Blurton and Johnson acknowledge that the punishment faced by Chaucer’s Jews is “more violent” than those of source texts. But they do so in a list of other narrative differences, which undermines the striking and confusing twist fundamental to Chaucer’s adaptation. As I will show, the most telling and crucial change Chaucer makes is to end the story with the hanging rather than conversion of the Jews.

*Censoring the Prioress: Children’s Chaucers*

Reception studies can be conducted by looking at scholarly criticism, but this is not our only resource. Even as criticism begins to reflect social concerns surrounding antisemitism in the mid-20th century, other cultural markers offer earlier clues as to popular reception. In the hopes of better understanding exactly when and under what circumstances the Prioress’s Tale began to make readers feel uncomfortable and was thus altered, censored, or abandoned, I consult children’s Chaucers, which are one such source of popular insight. As Velma Bourgeois Richmond writes in the introduction to her *Chaucer as Children’s Literature*, the edits made by
authors of children’s Chaucers offer a window into the “historical, political, educational, and social contexts” of their times, but also responses to more troubling matters, such as the Prioress’s antisemitism. Given that children would have been considered a most vulnerable audience, children’s Chaucers are a useful case study, as they reflect increased sensitivity to troubling content. Modernizations of the Prioress’s Tale designed for children are thus more likely to respond promptly to popular concerns over antisemitism than are scholarly works.

Versions geared especially toward children crop up in the late 19th century and remained popular through the early 20th, with many professional Chaucer scholars, including Katharine Lee Bates, creating their own editions. Most children’s Chaucers focus exclusively on the Canterbury Tales, without attention to Chaucer’s other works; though children as characters feature only selectively in the Canterbury Tales, the story format is one that translates well for younger audiences. Children’s Chaucers were intended primarily to draw children into the English canon in an accessible but informative way, which required the skillful simplification of Chaucer’s poetry or even its translation into digestible prose. Bates reflects this desire in the introduction to her collection, which she says “aims to stimulate imagination, broaden sympathy, and awaken a love for literature.” There is the additional benefit of Chaucer’s moral and religious teachings, which many authors expound. Mary Eliza Haweis, the author of the first known children’s Chaucer, writes that all “[Chaucer’s] pages breathe a genuine faith in God.” Chaucer’s compatibility with this decidedly younger body of readers comes not only from the immediacy or morality of his content, but from his own playfulness: Steve Ellis writes that Chaucer’s “childish immediacy and unsophistication” inform the “delight” younger readers take

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12 Velma Bourgeois Richmond, Chaucer as Children’s Literature (McFarland & Company, 2004).
14 Siân Echard, Printing the Middle Ages (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
in the *Canterbury Tales*;

Richmond suggests that the Host’s description of Chaucer as “elvyssh” and “a popet” works to “link [him] to the child before he tells his first tale.”

Richmond’s work is helpful in that it catalogs most children’s editions from the fifty or so years during which they were primarily published. In seeking a “drop date” for the Prioress’s Tale, I consulted the tables in her *Chaucer as Children’s Literature*, which identify which tales are included in each children’s edition. Nearly all of the earlier editions, beginning with Charles Clowden Clarke’s 1833 *Tales from Chaucer in Prose*, include the Prioress’s Tale; interestingly, Frances Storr & Hawes Turner’s 1878 edition fails to include it, as do a handful of early 20th century texts. However, these texts reveal no immediate chronological pattern with respect to their inclusion of the Prioress’s Tale; though there is a loosening, perhaps, or detachment from the tale evident in the early 20th century, many authors at this time did choose to include it. There is, of course, also a different political context to consider here, given that all these editions were created pre-Holocaust. Still, there is utility in examining the rhetoric used by authors in these texts formulated for younger readers. Here, I consider several late 19th and early 20th century editions of the Prioress’s Tale.

**F. J. Harvey Darton: The Tales of the Canterbury Pilgrims, Retold from Chaucer & Others**

Darton’s 1904 edition takes some liberty in contextualizing the Prioress’s Tale – here, more so than in other early children’s Chaucers, the editorializing clearly goes beyond the conventions of spelling and grammar. Darton expands the link prefacing the Prioress’s Tale, and it is here that he repurposes Chaucer’s General Prologue description of the Prioress. After the

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16 Richmond, *Chaucer as Children’s Literature*, 10.
17 Richmond, *Chaucer as Children’s Literature*, 220-221.
Host solicits Madame Eglentyne to tell a story, she still responds “gladly”\textsuperscript{18} – but then, Darton warns us, she goes on to tell a “story about a little boy who was murdered by some Jews. The Jews were greatly hated by the Christians of Europe, and were often cruelly persecuted. People were ready to believe almost anything evil of them, so that it was neither strange nor painful” for fellow pilgrims to hear this tale from the “gentle Prioress.”\textsuperscript{19} Despite the brusqueness of Darton’s reference to “some Jews,” the insertion demonstrates a keen awareness of the story’s antisemitism, which is unusual among early editions.

When she begins her tale, though, the Prioress says that the Jews of the Jewry “were always quarrelling with the Christians of the city, whom they hated; for Jews and Christians are very bitter enemies, wherever they are.”\textsuperscript{20} This language clearly identifies the Jews as the instigators of religious strife not just in the tale, but everywhere. Barbara Stevenson calls this line “the most blatant case of anti-Semitism” among reproductions, and she is correct to note that this is unprecedented: while no version of the Prioress’s Tale is kind to its Jews, most do not extrapolate in this way to declare mutual and perpetual religious antipathy.\textsuperscript{21} Stevenson, however, does not discuss the content warning from Darton that precedes the tale. This warning, too, is unique, as children’s authors rarely comment broadly on the patterns and behaviors of popular antisemitism. In doing so, Darton at least implies fault in those who further claims of Jewish “evil” or are eager to believe them, and with those who take a role in Jewish persecution. Accordingly, then, he suggests fault in the Prioress for stooping to these hateful patterns.

\textsuperscript{18} F.J. Harvey Darton, \textit{The Tales of the Canterbury Pilgrims, Retold from Chaucer and Others} (Wells Gardener, Darton, United Kingdom, 1906).
\textsuperscript{19} Darton, “Tales,” 98.
\textsuperscript{20} Darton, “Tales,” 99.
The visual elements of the edition are antisemitic in their own right. The book features detailed pen and ink illustrations by Hugh Thomson, a highly prominent Victorian illustrator. Among them are charming barn animals from the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, courtly princess-like renderings of Emily and Griselde, and a crown-laden Palamon and Arcite presiding horseback over their territory. Also depicted, at the very beginning of the Prioress’s Tale, is a Jew, who appears to be scowling at the clergeon with whom he shares the page. The two figures are wrapped under the dropped capital “T,” divided by the letter’s stem. The clergeon, even in black and white, is beatific, his mouth open in song, ambling, it appears, towards school or home in some gentle way. Thomson sets the Jew behind the arm of the letter, hidden away to spy and prey upon the innocent Christian boy in the foreground. True to stereotypical renderings of Jews at this time, the Jew has a long beard and a garishly hooked nose. Interestingly, he appears to be wearing a fez, or a similar form of tall-sided cap. While the fez is not unheard of as a head covering for medieval or 20th century Jews, it was also not particularly common. In conjunction with the Prioress’s odd setting of the tale in Asia, and the context of the medieval expansion of the Ottoman Empire, the fez adds to the depiction of the Jew as fundamentally ‘other,’ reflecting to contemporaneous concerns over foreign invasion.

Together, Darton’s prose and visual rendering of the Prioress’s Tale make for a confusing retelling. His acknowledgement of Christian hatred toward, persecution of, and eagerness to villainize the Jews goes beyond the work of contemporaneous scholars, and even of some writing in the 21st century (see Ackroyd). Still, Darton communicates respect for the Prioress. He maintains Chaucer’s language in repeatedly calling the Prioress “gentle,” and his Harry Bailey addresses her “very courteously,” referring to her as a “dear lady” when he requests the story. Darton seems to position the Prioress as fallible to the antisemitism of her time without indicting
her. Overall, his presentation mimics one camp of early postwar criticism, when scholars began to acknowledge the tale’s antisemitism but were largely reluctant to condemn Chaucer or the Prioress, whom they viewed merely as products of their time. I find it likely then that Darwin, like the scholars after him, saw the Prioress’s Tale as a miracle of the virgin story more than a hateful spew of antisemitism. And yet in retelling the story for younger audiences, Darton found a need to address the antisemitism, to find fault in it. In some ways, then, his modifications are progressive, though they fall short of anything truly radical or wholly condemning.

*Margaret C. Macaulay: Stories from Chaucer Re-Told from the Canterbury Tales*

Margaret C. Macaulay’s edition was initially published in 1911, with a second edition in 1926. In the first edition, Macaulay includes the Prioress’s Tale, and her version matches Chaucer’s practically sentence-for-sentence. With the exception of an observation about Jewish usury (described below), little about her translation registers as striking. Macaulay writes that the Jews were allowed to live among the Christians “in order that he [the country’s ruler] might be able to borrow money from them.”22 Like Chaucer, at the story’s outset she finds room to subtly suggest that Christians bear some responsibility for the Jewish plight at the story’s outset; this detail is something often glossed over or edited out of other children’s editions. Still, Macaulay’s retelling is overall quite faithful to Chaucer’s original story, antisemitism and Christian martyrdom included.

Macaulay prefaches the second edition, however, with the note that “some additional Tales of the Falls of Men have been substituted for the Tale of the Boy Martyr.”23 The first edition was well-received: the *Educational Times* called the edition “charming” and “most capably

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executed”; another reviewer for the publication seconded the favorable assessment, praising Macaulay’s successful and uncommon “attempt … to exhibit the general scheme and conduct of the *Canterbury Tales.*” 24 Clearly, then, reviews did not motivate Macaulay to exclude the antisemitic story. While Macaulay refrains from explaining her choice to exclude the story from her second edition, it’s not unreasonable to suppose she became more sensitive to the story’s antisemitism. Hateful attitudes towards Jews in Britain were, at the time of Macaulay’s second edition, “[rising] again to new heights.” 25 This current of popular antisemitism is a plausible explanation for Macaulay’s self-censorship, especially given her audience of children. Macaulay’s 1926 volume is the first instance, to my knowledge, of an author removing the Prioress’s Tale in a second edition after including it initially. The edit may be viewed as the beginning of a turning point.

*Katharine Lee Bates: The Story of Chaucer’s Pilgrims*

Bates writes that her 1909 series “aims … to help in arousing a desire for the more imaginative and inspiring legends of the Aryan race.” 26 Given that Bates chooses to include the Prioress’s Tale in her children’s edition, and particularly that she uses Wordsworth’s version of the tale, which as I will show is arguably more antisemitic than Chaucer’s, the scholarly instinct here may be to read her inclusion of the story and use of the word ‘Aryan’ as endorsements of the Prioress’s sentiments. Echard, for one, suggests that post-Holocaust, “there was no doubt” as to what Bates meant by the word ‘Aryan.’ 27 I find it more likely, however, that Bates, like her

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27 Echard, *Printing the Middle Ages*, 161.
contemporaries, found little abhorrent about the Prioress’s Tale. Most scholars and readers before the mid-20th century read the story as a beautiful piece of religious prose, seeing both the Prioress and her tale as “simple and heroic”\(^{28}\) – accordingly, there would have been no reason to exclude it from a children’s collection. Moreover, ‘Aryan’ in Bates’s introduction does not carry the full context of Nazism it later accrued, as the particular connotation of antisemitism attached itself in the 1920s, upon the rise of the Nazi party.\(^{29}\) Still, Wordsworth’s language, replicated exactly by Bates in her edition, is troubling.

Wordsworth, like other scholars at his time, worked primarily to update the spelling and grammar of Chaucer’s poetry. Still, some creative liberties were taken, especially regarding the Jews. Chaucer writes that the Jews are of “foule usure and lucre of vileynye” (VII.491).\(^{30}\) Wordsworth cleanses his rhetoric to say simply that they are for “gain and usury,”\(^{31}\) leaving the hateful adjectives behind. Wordsworth faithfully reproduces Chaucer’s statement that the Jews are “hateful to Christ and to his company,” though he describes the physical Jewry as “unbarred” rather than Chaucer’s “open” (VII.494). Here, “unbarred” reminds the reader of the word’s opposite, implying that perhaps the Jewry should, in fact, be barred, confined like prisoners; Chaucer’s “open” is decidedly more neutral. While Wordsworth makes other slight modifications, the story is by-and-large the same; the most notable exception is that Wordsworth

\(^{28}\) Lecture on Chaucer by William Hazlitt, 1818, as quoted by Bruce Graver.

\(^{29}\) “Aryan, adj. and n.,” OED Online (Oxford University Press, 2023) and Gottard Deutsch, “Anti-Semitism,” (The Jewish Encyclopedia, 2023). The word ‘Aryan’ has been used as a racialized term for non-Christian people prior to the 1920s. The Jewish Encyclopedia identifies Christian Lassen (1800-1876) as the first person to distinguish ethnically between the Jews and Aryans; Lassen affirmed the intrinsic superiority of the latter. Ernest Renan (1823-1892), a French scholar, also applied the term in this way. Still, I find it necessary to note that the popular dissemination of these readings was considerably less before the rise of the Nazism as we attempt to understand what Bates may have intended in her iteration.

\(^{30}\) Geoffrey Chaucer, The Norton Chaucer Canterbury Tales, ed. David Lawton and Jennifer Arch (W.W. Norton and Company, 2020): 151-156. This is the only edition I refer to throughout this work, and all parenthetical line numbers refer to this edition. Citations without an assigned fragment come from the General Prologue in this edition.

\(^{31}\) William Wordsworth, The Prioress’s Tale [From Chaucer], in “The River Duddon” (Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1820), 175-186.
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refrains from explicitly setting the clergeon’s death in a Jewish toilet. Wordsworth writes that the boy is “[thrown]” into a pit from which “noisome scents exhale,” while Chaucer writes that the pit is “wheras this Jewes purgen hire entraille” (VII.573). Wordsworth’s sanitizing of the setting, for those familiar with his source text, is clear; still, given his faithful reproduction of Chaucer’s antisemitic rhetoric elsewhere in his translation, it stands out that here Wordsworth draws a line. In some ways, it seems, Wordsworth demonstrates increased caution with regard to explicitly hateful antisemitic rhetoric.

At the same, Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale is quicker to fault his story’s Christians for the initial plight of the Jews. At the very beginning of the tale, where Chaucer writes that the Jewry is “sustened” by “foule usure and lucre of vileynye” (VII.490-91), Wordsworth claims that the Jews are “assigned” to their “gain and usury,” which were, at the time, considered unchristian. The word “sustained” carries with it a sense of burdened necessity, suggesting that the Jews lack access to full sustenance on their own, that they need usury to survive, which leads one to wonder who, exactly, has relegated the Jews to this unpleasant, immoral work. Wordsworth’s “assigned” is, in contrast, less troubled by the matter of agency — or Christian fault. Chaucer reinforces this subtle suggestion of Christian responsibility with the word “vileynye,” which Wordsworth does not use. The Middle English Compendium suggests several definitions for “vileynye,” including “disgraceful or shameful conduct,” but also “degradation … suffered by a person or thing, or imposed on a person.”32 As Chaucer used both of these definitions,33 there is precedent to suggest that the latter is one that could be mapped onto the Prioress’s Tale. The allusion to Jewish suffering at Christian hands does not diminish the brutal antisemitic violence

32 “vileinī(e), n.,” Middle English Compendium (University of Michigan Library, Regents of the University of Michigan, 2023).
33 “vileinī(e), n.”
faced by Chaucer’s Jews at the tale’s end — but there is room to interpret these concessions as sensitive to the hardship that Christians at this time inflicted on Jews, which informed the Jews’ “degradation.” That Wordsworth refrains from alluding to Christian culpability is potentially significant, as elsewhere he either maintains or sanitizes Chaucer’s antisemitism.

Interestingly, despite his modifications, Wordsworth himself bestowed great importance on respecting Chaucer’s original works. These originalist sentiments are repeated in the decades and centuries following Wordsworth, as the authors of children’s Chaucers similarly toiled over the question of faithful translation. Wordsworth was, of course, deeply inspired by Chaucer, and translated several tales throughout his career; this we know in part from the detailed journals of his sister, Dorothy.\footnote{34 Bruce Graver, \textit{Why Chaucer’s Prioress?}, The Wordsworth Circle 51, no.1 (2020): 92-103, and Caroline Spurgeon, \textit{500 Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900} (Cambridge University Press, 1908).} Wordsworth declined to publish the vast majority of these translations in his lifetime – the Prioress’s Tale, though, he chose to include in \textit{The River Duddon}. As Wordsworth scholar Bruce Graver notes, it’s an odd choice: besides the fact that Wordsworth rarely published any of his translations, \textit{The River Duddon} is a volume of descriptive poetry and lakeside imagery, and as such, a Chaucer translation “seems rather out of place.”\footnote{35 Graver, \textit{Why Chaucer’s Prioress}, 92.} There is the additional question of why it is the Prioress’s Tale, over the many others Wordsworth translated, that is alone included in that volume. Graver concludes that Wordsworth sought to solidify his place alongside the medieval poets he so cherished, and this motivated his inclusion of a translation from Chaucer; Graver, finding evidence that other translations had received poor feedback or were incomplete, suggests that the Prioress’s Tale was simply the “only one ready and unobjectionable.”\footnote{36 Graver, \textit{Why Chaucer’s Prioress}, 99.}
In reality, Wordsworth’s translation was in fact quite objectionable, as it was poorly received by contemporaries. A critic in the *British Review and London Critical Journal* writes that the translation “has failed”; a reviewer in *The Eclectic* goes further, suggesting that tale’s irony is lost on Wordsworth, who confuses it for pathos, and that the story is a “very ill-chosen subject” with which to pay homage to Chaucer. Graver is quick to note, though, that these critiques, even those attuned to the subject matter, take more issue with its “promulgation of Roman Catholic superstition” than with the Prioress’s antisemitism, as was typical for the time.

So if Wordsworth’s translation was received so poorly in its own time, why does Katharine Lee Bates later print it in her children’s Chaucer? In the textual note that prefaces her introduction, Bates writes that the modernizations she chooses to include—Dryden and Leigh Hunt, alongside Wordsworth—have “recognized place[s] in English literature” of their own right, and it’s true that in time, Wordsworth’s translation came to be understood as one of the best modernizations of the Prioress’s Tale. What’s more, contemporaneous criticism appears not to take issue with her use of the Wordsworth version: one review, from the *Journal of Education*, calls the volume a “masterpiece retold by eminent masters” – indicating not just a tolerance but a reverence for Wordsworth’s version as it appears in Bates’s edition. The Prioress herself is not singled out, and there is no suggestion that the content Bates retells is in any way unsuitable for her young readers. It seems, then, that Bates escaped the scrutiny Wordsworth faced over the text’s sympathy towards Catholicism or antipathy towards the Jews. In the early 20th century

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context, there was paradoxically less resistance to the Prioress’s antisemitism than there had been a century earlier.

Mid- and Late-Twentieth Century & Contemporary Adaptations

Later editions take decidedly more issue with the morally troubling content of Chaucer’s work, including the Prioress’s antisemitism. The publication of children’s Chaucers slowed significantly after the 1920s but did not stop completely. The later editions are useful, then, in locating a drop date or other trends in censorship – and many of the postwar editions I located fail to include the Prioress. Below, I study several of these more recent 20th and 21st century editions, which I have identified through contemporary secondary scholarship on children’s Chaucer. Where possible, I also consider differences between first and later editions of the volumes included.

Eleanor Farjeon’s *Tales from Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales Done into Prose* does include the Prioress’s Tale – both in its first edition, from 1930, and a 1959 reprint.41 Farjeon’s modernization is altogether true to the original; she faithfully reproduces Chaucer’s most offensive lines. Though in prose the story naturally becomes more digestible for its audience of younger readers, Farjeon matches Chaucer practically line-for-line, with the exception of the Prioress’s Prologue. As Farjeon condenses the Prioress’s Prologue into just a few sentences, she as a narrator really takes second stage; the clergeon and his laudable piety take up a much larger portion of the story. In this way, Farjeon draws out the Christian moral element of the tale.

Edwin Johnston Howard and Gordon Donley Wilson’s 1937 *Canterbury Tales* reprints all tales, including the Prioress’s Tale, in poetry.42 The language is modernized in places, but

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very lightly and generally only for spelling. The General Prologue and Prioress’s Tale and Prologue are near-identical to Chaucer’s, so are limiting with respect to comparative analysis. My used copy, a 1947 reprint, is inscribed with a previous owner’s name and the words “Lawe House”; a typewritten note inside from the Dean’s Office is marked “Lawrence College.” Lawrence University Archives reveal that Lawe House was “built in the 1890s and [...] demolished in the late 1950s.” Given the text’s faithfulness to Middle English and straightforward reprinting of all tales, including the Prioress’s, in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, I find it likely that the edition was not intended for young children, but for older students, including, evidently, Lawrence University students in the 1940s and 50s. More interesting is that this volume includes a comprehensive introduction, in which Wilson and Howard discuss at length the Christian politics of Chaucer’s time. Chaucer sketches Madame Eglentyne “gently,” they write, “but the picture is that of a worldly woman more interested in the things of this life than in those of the life to come.” Tellingly, they write that it is “certain” that Chaucer “sharply criticizes all the members of the clergy he describes.” Unlike in earlier editions of the tale, no effort is made—or perhaps even seen as necessary—to sanitize the Prioress. She is herself, and her story is as Chaucer wrote it, and Wilson and Howard correctly assert that Chaucer is critical of her as a clerical figure. Still, they by no means condemn her or her story.

I see Farjeon’s edition as a sort of midpoint between the earliest children’s Chaucers and those of the mid- and late-20th century. Popular antisemitism was on the rise in Britain in 1930, at the time of Farjeon’s initial publication, though it hadn’t reached the peaks it would in the mid- to late-1930s, when later editions of the volume were printed, or when Howard and Wilson’s book was published. In mapping trends in popular antisemitism onto these early 20th

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43 “Lawe House,” Lawrence University Archives (Lawrence University, 2023).
century editions, it becomes clear that Farjeon and Howard enter into a vastly different culture than do those postwar, when the tale seems to have become more taboo and thus less likely to be anthologized. Here, I take inventory of several mid-century editions and popularizations (not limited to children’s versions) see how they handle the Prioress’s Tale in the early days of New Criticism and in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust.

H. L. Hitchins’s *Canterbury Tales*, from 1946, reprints the Prioress’s Prologue and Tale. His version, unlike Howard and Wilson’s, does not include a lengthy preface. The slim volume instead offers some notes on the language it uses, instructing “reader[s] of Chaucer” and “students of Middle English” to put the volume down and seek out the original instead. The originalist sentiment carries through to his reproductions of the tales, including the Prioress’s. Similarly, Nevill Coghill’s 1952 edition is faithful to Chaucer’s versions of both the General Prologue and the Prioress’s Tale. The language of both editions is altogether very similar to Chaucer’s.

Ian Serraillier includes the Prioress in his 1979 book, *The Road to Canterbury: Tales from Chaucer*, but only as a character in the General Prologue. The complexities of Chaucer’s characterization are necessarily reduced here. The Prioress is presented as a true nun, if slightly haughty. The only inserts from Serraillier are to note that “she [wears] her wimple – against the Bishop’s order – / High on her head, with a dainty pleated border,” that she has a “passion / For jewellery and trinkets,” and that her cloak is “the latest fashion.” These are small transgressions, cute ones, even; the impression does not come close to suggesting that the Prioress is morally a failure or inept as a Christian. Serraillier also includes an index that offers more details about the

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pilgrims. There, he writes that in addition to her clerical responsibilities, the Prioress “[takes] in as boarders the daughters of well-to-do families,” to whom she would teach “manners, deportment, and perhaps a little reading.” He also notes that she goes by “Lady Sweetbriar.” These fictional details render the Prioress sweet beyond question. She sounds like Madeline’s Miss Clavel – perhaps slightly overbearing, but no more than any endearing schoolteacher ought to be. Still, Serraillier chooses to exclude her tale from his collection (instead, he picks about nine tales from the other pilgrims to repurpose). In this way, Serraillier can be faithful to the *Canterbury Tales* by including the Prioress, and at the same time avoid the uglier matter of her antisemitism altogether. This treatment—including the character but not her tale—has earlier precedent than we might expect – J. Walker McSpadden’s 1907 book, *Stories from Chaucer*, does the same.49

Geraldine McCaughrean also removes the Prioress almost entirely from her 1996 edition.50 Chaucer the pilgrim narrates the General Prologue, which is greatly condensed. There, he mentions several pilgrims present in Harry Bailey’s inn, including the Wife of Bath, Parson, and Knight, but not the Prioress. After the brief prologue, McCaughrean goes on to the thirteen tales included in her edition, which are told in plain prose. The Prioress’s Tale is excised. At the very end of her book, McCaughrean inserts an epilogue, and here the Prioress makes a brief appearance. The epilogue details the pilgrims’ arrival to Canterbury, where they squabble over who has won Bailey’s storytelling contest. The Prioess interjects herself in the conversation in her true fashion: “Humorous stories are all very well,” she says after someone suggests the Friar ought to win, “but we must consider the VALUE of the stories. How much did they teach us

48 Serraillier, *The Road to Canterbury*, 140.
about LIFE?” The Prioress then “sniffs” when Harry Bailey crowns himself the winner, and this is all we hear from her. Like the delicate approach taken by Serraillier a decade earlier, McCaughrean is thus able to maintain some level of originalism in her edition by including all Chaucer’s pilgrims, without uglifying or complicating her story with the Prioress’s antisemitism.

Chaucer for 21st Century Adult Audiences

In his highly anticipated The Canterbury Tales: A Retelling (2008), Peter Ackroyd modernizes Chaucer’s original tales, including the Prioress’s Tale, in prose. His retelling is unusual, especially for a post-Holocaust retelling, in that it is simultaneously hard on the Jews and easy on the Prioress. His prose is careful in its depiction of the Jews but does not refrain altogether from reproducing Chaucer’s antisemitism. Ackroyd writes that the lord of the Jewish ghetto was “intent upon making as much profit as he could from the vile practice of usury,” and that that profit was “evil money, accursed by Christ and his saints.” These sentences maintain the judgmental tone of Chaucer’s Prioress, but are not exact reproductions of her words, and in some ways go further than the original text. In particular, Ackroyd’s note that the representative Jew aims to make “as much profit” is an unnecessary addition to the text that furthers the antisemitic trope of Jewish wealth hoarding. Ackroyd’s Prioress goes on to explain that Satan, “the enemy of mankind … [rises] up among the Jews […] full of poison.” The invocation of Satan is true to the text, but here Ackroyd avoids the claim that Satan makes a “wasp’s nest” in Jewish hearts, as Chaucer had written it. Still, the implication of Jewish evil or satanism is clear, and Ackroyd chooses to maintain the setting of the murder in a toilet. His story, too, ends with the Prioress’s reference to Hugh of Lincoln, though this is common among retellings.

Though Ackroyd in some ways softens Chaucer’s antisemitic rhetoric in his version of the tale, his Prologue is overly sympathetic towards the Prioress herself, a figure unpopular in contemporary scholarship due to her antisemitism, as I will show in Chapter II of this thesis. Especially interesting is that Ackroyd modifies the description of the Prioress that appears in the General Prologue – where scholars have identified potential religious-moral shortcomings, Ackroyd seems to double down and insist upon the Prioress’s whole goodness. “She was an exemplary nun,” he writes, without “excessive piety.” Chaucer himself makes no such similar comment to protect the Prioress from allegations of improper piety, and accordingly, much scholarship on the Prioress’s character remarks on exactly the issue of her piety. Shrouded in implications of vanity and profanity, her religion takes on a certain performativity, and this is often highlighted by scholars who take issue with her antisemitism. In short, it’s an unusual and puzzling move, especially for a contemporary audience, to try to cleanse a figure who is widely regarded as troublingly antisemitic.

Ackroyd maintains a decidedly defensive tone throughout the description of the Prioress in his General Prologue. He refutes Chaucer’s dig at the Prioress’s French (“Frenssh of Paris was to hire unknowe”) – “What does it matter if we do not speak the exact language of the French?” he asks. Ackroyd continues his defense: “[the French] are no longer our masters. English is even spoken in the parliament house now,” he insists. As I will show in the next chapter, the Prioress’s French has been understood traditionally as a marker of her vanity, as she attempts—and fails—to highlight her supposed worldliness. Ackroyd’s rhetorical questions and assertion of English language superiority thus read as almost desperate, overeager to prove the Prioress’s virtues.

Later, he says that for all the prioresses the reader may have encountered before, Madame Eglentyne is “the very model of her kind.” And though he says he “should have asked her,”
Ackroyd is confident enough in her goodness to “presume” that the inscription on her brooch “[refers] to divine love,” over its potentially profane alternative reading. Together, these additions to Chaucer’s prologue render the Prioress true in both her faith and moral goodness. Ackroyd preemptively counters any concerns of the Prioress’s character – of which there are many.

What motivates this unusual defense of the Prioress’s character? In his introduction, Ackroyd writes that his aim in his retelling is to embody “the spirit if not always the letter” of Chaucer’s poetry. He considers that different passages will have different “spirits” or tones, and that his translations will be reflective of these then goes on to highlight a passage from the Nun’s Priest Tale, which features “bawdy and scatalogical humor” in contrast to the “pious spirit” of the Prioress’s Tale. Ackroyd’s categorization of the Prioress’s Tale as simply and uncontestably pious is reminiscent of prewar criticism, which largely viewed the Prioress and her story as simple, beautiful, and devotional. Alongside the extensive praise he bestows on the Prioress in his prologue, the impression is one that seems blind to her moral and religious shortcomings, and to the story’s ironic potential in turn. It is true that Ackroyd acknowledges that the Canterbury Tales is a product of the Middle Ages: “we may note here also the casual misogyny and the equally casual anti-Semitism. All these were as characteristic of the time as the continual appeals to the Virgin and the constant invocations of Christ’s name.” Still, where other authors excised the Prioress’s Tale entirely, or shrouded it with notes of warning, context, and caution, Ackroyd does no such thing – he offers an acknowledgement, not a condemnation. It is an odd choice for a 21st century edition, but perhaps one that reflects changing cultural

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52 Ackroyd, Canterbury Tales, xix
53 Ackroyd, Canterbury Tales, xvi.
attitudes towards the ethics of censorship, or even a new and disturbing willingness to accept a holy figure’s antisemitism.

**Conclusions**

Criticism of the Prioress’s Tale has shifted widely in scope and focus over the past several centuries. Initial readings were near-universal in their sympathy. While some early scholarly voices have expressed dissent or concern against this grain, the Prioress was not effectively reread until New Criticism and postwar considerations made her antisemitism impossible to dismiss. Criticism that attempts to understand the Prioress’s antisemitism generally takes one of two shapes identified by Blurton and Johnson, which naturally contend with the question of satiric potential. Scholars who deny the tale’s irony view its antisemitism as part of the literary and historical traditions of Chaucer’s time, including the Marian genre, which often villainized religious others to exalt Christianity. On the other hand are those who see room for irony, and among this group it is common to then fault the Prioress and her character, rather than Chaucer, for the tale’s blatant antisemitism. These readings are inextricable from gender, as characterizations of the Prioress are rooted in gendered critiques; readings of her antisemitism have also become very much tied to perceptions of her character as unsuitably vain, transgressive, or hypocritical, as we will see in my next chapter.

In seeking out popular counterpoint to scholarly reception, I was surprised to find the continued inclusion of the Prioress’s Tale, especially for contemporary late 20th and early 21st century editions. Throughout the past several decades, attitudes toward censorship have shifted vastly; erasing altogether the “problematic” pieces of canonical works is no longer considered a solution to the social issues they present. Recent years have seen movement toward either
canceling or contextualizing and acknowledging canonical works that are xenophobic or racist. Now, outright banning these texts is sometimes seen as an erasure of the author’s biases, a false cleansing of the canon. The countermovement in scholarly circles is to historicize and maintain accuracy to the originals while acknowledging the harms and mistruths they often perpetuate. Chronicling children’s Chaucers reveals both that approaches have affected the treatment of the Prioress’s Tale.

Broadly, Barbara Stevenson finds that the Holocaust serves not only as a dividing line in scholarly responses to the Prioress’s Tale, but in visual representations of the story, including illustrations. Both critical and visual works prove much more responsive to antisemitism after the Holocaust. Children’s Chaucers reinforce this pattern of increased postwar sensitivity to antisemitism – and are especially helpful in that they naturally reflect popular attitudes in addition to scholarly ones. In studying both early and contemporary children’s Chaucers, I find that post-Holocaust criticism motivates but does not wholly explain trends in retellings of the Prioress’s Tale.

With the loaded and somewhat confusing context of critical and popular traditions in mind, I undertake my own character study of the Prioress. I would like to preface this work with the note that I see room both for legitimate satiric potential and the reality that Chaucer likely held his own antisemitic beliefs. The extent to which the antisemitism reflected in the Prioress’s Tale is serious is not something that can be quantified or really addressed in a wholly satisfying way – but it is not zero. Still, reading the Prioress with Chaucer’s unflattering characterizations in mind is something I find necessary to understanding her antisemitism, especially in the

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54 Stevenson, “Visualizing the Jewish Other,” 221.
context of analogues that lack a narrator to frame them. I find her character flawed, and I believe Chaucer intended for these flaws to map on to the way readers interpret her story.
CHAPTER II: CHARACTERIZING THE PRIORESS

Introduction

There are many versions of the story that the Prioress retells in her tale. In all these analogues, the story exists without a narrating figure. Thus, Chaucer’s adaptation of this legend for the *Canterbury Tales*, wherein narrators crucially inform their stories, calls our attention to the Prioress – who is she, and why is this the story she tells? How do her background and character influence the way we read the story? These are fundamental to any analysis of the *Prioress’s Tale*, and questions I believe Chaucer meant us to entertain. The Prioress complicates the tale she tells, which in turn complicates the moral conclusions readers are able to draw.

In the General Prologue, Prioress’s Prologue, and the Tale itself, Chaucer discredits the Prioress handily, though subtly. I identify two primary mechanisms that facilitate this discrediting: first, Chaucer’s suggestion of the Prioress’s moral shortcomings, and second, the doubt he casts upon her credibility as a narrator. These implications of her character as lacking, either in morality or authority, gain their legs in the effusive irony that characterizes this tale, as I will demonstrate in this chapter.

When we read the Prioress’s character as ironically coded, the potential for satire transcends her character and enters the realm of her story. The Prioress herself is the starting point for the tale’s ironic potential – in shadowing the tale, in inserting herself as a narrative voice, she prevents the story from being read at face value. Accordingly, reading Chaucer’s descriptions of her character with a careful eye towards irony is key. In this chapter, I will consider Chaucer’s representation of the Prioress with a specific focus on the various ways that
he discredits her character. I believe this discrediting to be ironic in nature, which establishes irony as a key underlying apparatus not only to the way we read the Prioress’s character, but how we understand her tale.

Irony and the General Prologue

The General Prologue is one locus about which some scholarly consensus exists as to Chaucer’s ironic intentions: “whatever disputes continue about certain passages, no one is likely to deny today that the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales is rich in subtle and satiric ambiguities,” writes Earle Birney in “The Beginnings of Chaucer’s Irony.” Amazingly, some of this consensus extends even to the Prioress, whose characterization is a notoriously contentious matter. Many scholars new and old have commented expansively on Chaucer’s description of the Prioress in the General Prologue, noting especially his physical characterizations of her and their courtliness:

Ful semely hir wimpel pinched was,
Hir nose tretis, hir eyen greye as glas,
Hir mouth ful smal and thereto softe and reed—
But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed
It was almost a spanne brood, I trowe,
For hardly, she was nat undergradowe (151-156)

As Norton editor David Lawton assesses them, these lines “[stress] social form over spiritual substance.”\(^{56}\) This is a succinct and apt characterization of the Prioress in the General Prologue, and one echoed in most scholarship of this passage. The features Chaucer lingers over—her gray eyes, her small mouth and nose, her broad forehead—are all characteristic of ladies of the court during this time. The obvious conclusion from these details is that Chaucer intends the Prioress to be conventionally beautiful — he goes to lengths to make her so in the extensive detailing of these physical features.\(^{57}\) The question then becomes: what function does the Prioress’s beauty serve?

The General Prologue goes beyond the Prioress’s physical features, offering us our first glimpse into her behaviors and values, which interestingly also complicate her portrayal. In her *Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, Muriel Bowden aptly characterizes Chaucer’s language in these descriptions as “gentle, demure, [and] aristocratic.”\(^{58}\) And yet, even as he praises her excellent beauty, Chaucer exaggerates her goodness to the point that these fine attributes become ironic: her extreme “gentility” towards small creatures is, in context, an extravagance that “would be judged … by even the most lenient of fourteenth-century standards”;\(^{59}\) her “aristocratic” worldliness is disgraced by her ineptitude for the French language (“Frensh she spak ful faire and fetisly […] / Frenssh of Paris was to her unknowne”). Given that she goes on to tell “with perfect blandness” of the violent persecution faced by the

\(^{56}\) Lawton, *Canterbury Tales*, 351.

\(^{57}\) Some scholars disagree, believing Chaucer’s detailing of her size (“she was nat undergrowe”) and large forehead to indicate that she is ugly, and that her ugliness exists at odds with the courtly etiquette described elsewhere in the passage. There is significant scholarship, however, that identifies these features—perhaps unsightly to a modern reader—as having been prized during the time. The Ellesmere manuscript illustration for the Prioress, which renders her to be beautiful, offers an affirmation of the cultural value of these attributes that is contemporaneous with the tale.


\(^{59}\) Bowden, *Commentary*, 99.
Jews in her story, the Prioress’s aristocratic and romantic characteristics crucially inform the ironic reading of her tale.

Other hints of moral dissonance emerge from the General Prologue, perhaps most notably in Chaucer’s detailing of her signature brooch. Chaucer hints at her brooch early in the General Prologue passage, noting that the Prioress’s “gretteste ooth [is] but by Sainte Loy” (VII.120). Saint Loy, or Eligius, is the patron saint of metalworkers, and in invoking him early, Chaucer heightens the significance of the Prioress’s brooch, singling it out as important to our understanding of her as a character. Crucially, as a significant portion of metalwork in the Middle Ages was done by Jews, that the Prioress takes her “grettest ooth” towards “the patron saint of goldsmiths”—prior to the story she tells of Jews being hung—offers the tale’s first hint of ironic antisemitism. Tellingly, the irony occurs at her expense, for there is no evidence that she registers this tension between her own religious sentiments and the allegiances emblazoned upon her chest. The brooch itself, “of gold ful sheene,” features “a crownded A, / And after Amor vincit omnia” inscribed upon it, and further advances the romantic irony of Chaucer’s description of the Prioress (VII.160-63). Bowden identifies *Amor vincit omnia* as a motto from Virgil, which originally “concerned profane love,” but was adopted and reclaimed by the Church to pertain to divine love — although by the 14th century, the motto had somewhat regained its original erotic connotation. This hint at the Prioress as potentially “profane” again reinforces Chaucer’s hints at romantic irony, or the sense that the Prioress is lacking in the Christian set of values she is expected to represent. And regardless of which interpretation of her brooch’s motto (profane or

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60 Bowden, *Commentary*, 100.
61 Chaucer is obviously aware of this, as he gives Sir Thopas armor “of Jewes werk” in the tale that directly follows the Prioress’s (VII.865).
63 Bowden, *Commentary*, 97.
religiously innocent) would have been most familiar to Chaucer’s audience, the Prioress “defies all regulations in wearing any ornament at all,” rendering her transgressively vain, and furthering the suggestion that she lacks clerical morals.

The Prioress’s care for animals offers another sticking point for her virtue. Her nurturing care is consistent with her portrayal in the tale as overly identified with the tiny and the vulnerable: she sympathizes with the clergeon who dies in her story, who shares the conditions of littleness and helplessness with her beloved mice and hounds. But she shows no regard for the Jews who are hanged in her story. This antipathy presents a fundamental challenge to any portrayal of her character as fundamentally sympathetic and nurturing. And, moreover, while the Prioress’s aristocracy and gentility may not have been notable at the time of Chaucer’s writing, her high regard for her hounds offers a grounded detail of her character that misaligns her with the values of her time, which clearly place humans above animals in the chain of being.

These moral discrepancies and shortcomings are intentional and serve an important function in prefacing the Tale the Prioress tells. All hints of her flaws, moral or otherwise, can be read ironically when considering her profession – as Lawton reminds us, prioresses held “socially prestigious positions.” The Prioress knows her profession to be morally demanding and important, which is why she takes such “pains” to “countrefete cheere / Of court, and to been establich of manere, / And to been holden digne of reverence,” or to prove her worthiness (VII.139-141). The attempts to do so render her almost desperate to please; the impression is one of a try-hard. This obsession with her perception is off-putting, but more than that, it contradicts the prudence and meekness expected of a woman of the book, who ought to be a moral guide for those placed in her care. It is ultimately this contrast in the General Prologue—between the

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62 Bowden, Commentary, 98.
65 Lawton, Canterbury Tales, 59.
Grant 44

Prioress’s behavior or character and her religious profession—that introduces irony into the Prioress as a figure. In this way, the implicit digs at her character here comes close to demanding an ironic reading of the tale she later tells.

‘Twelfmonth Old or Lesse’ & The ‘Litel Child’ – Infantilization of the Prioress

The Prioress’s Prologue presents yet another cause for concern with regard to her character. Particularly interesting in this passage is the Prioress’s self-infantilization. While she belittles herself throughout the tale, the bulk of these comments occur in the prologue—that is, even before she tells this horrible story, she takes pains to let her audience know how meek she is. Consider this excerpt from her prologue:

My conning is so waik, O blisful queene,

For to declare thy grete worthinesse,

That I ne may the weighte nat sustene,

But as a child of twelfmonth old or lesse,

That can unnethes any word express,

Right so fare I, and therefore I you praye

Gideth my song that I shal of you saye (VII.481-87)

The passage underscores the odd but persistent role children and self-infantilization play in the Prioress’s prologue, following a brief reference to the Holy Innocents earlier in her prologue (“…But by the mouth of children thy bountee / Parfourned is”) (VII.457-58). Repeatedly, the Prioress portrays herself as small, even diminutive. After her larger-than-life description in the
General Prologue, the smallness of her own prologue has invited much discussion. As Blurton and Johnson discuss in *The Critics and the Prioress*, the tonal shift from Chaucer’s description of the Prioress in the General Prologue to her presentation here is a profound one. Blurton and Johnson echo extensive scholarship arguing that the Prologue shows the Prioress as “a devotee of the Virgin,” and comment also on the elevated maturity of the prose as it compares to the General Prologue (122).

It is true that the blatant satire that characterizes the Prioress of the General Prologue seems abated here. In her own prologue, the Prioress lightly protests the burden of storytelling: her cunning is so “waik” such that she cannot express “any word.” This self-portrayal indeed registers as incongruent with the Prioress introduced in the General Prologue. That Prioress, who is aristocratic, self-possessed, and learned—if not an intellectual—wields her power knowingly. The impression Chaucer creates is of a character who is fully empowered, who seeks to distinguish herself by her etiquette and through her devotion; in essence, she is self-possessed. The Prioress in her prologue, by contrast, is meek and self-deprecating. I believe this new, contrasting image of the Prioress as somehow infantilized works in tandem with the ironic descriptions of the General Prologue. The result is confusing: Chaucer tells us the Prioress is overly aristocratic and feminine, ascribing power to her character, while she herself then challenges that image. Scholars have generally taken the detailings as a sign of the Prioress’s immaturity. Blurton and Johnson, however, take issue with the characterization of the Prioress as childish, believing that doing so ignores that invoking children in this context instead serves to “echo a common exegetical topos” (122). Other scholars—Elizabeth Robertson and Katherine Zieman—concur, sharing in the sentiment that characterizing the Prioress as *childish* is very different from acknowledging the *childlike* nature of the prose in the Prologue.
This distinction is a valid and helpful one, though I believe that the context of the General Prologue and the parallels in the Prioress’s later descriptions of the clergeon in her Tale lend an air of childishness to her self-infantilization in the prologue to her tale. Moreover, the extension of this “smallness” to her character maps onto the “connections between immaturity, antisemitic impulses, and emotionalism” that inform much ironic scholarship on her character (125). As Alfred David succinctly assesses, “the basic irony in her portrait is that this rather large woman with her exquisite manners is emotionally still a child.”66 While the irony of infantilization does not justify the Prioress’s antisemitism, it works as an explanatory mechanism for her puzzling moral shortcomings as they relate to the Jewish suffering in her tale.

While some scholars dismiss the impulse to read the Prioress’s Prologue as evidence of the Prioress’s emotional immaturity, her self-infantilization must be read in the context of the rest of the Tale, with particular attention to the traductio of the word “litel.” Litel becomes so loaded in the Prioress’s Tale that it becomes essential context for reading the Prioress’s character—especially given the ‘littleness’ she bestows unto herself in her Prologue.

The traductio is a rhetorical strategy used not uncommonly by Chaucer, intended to call attention to slight variations in the meaning of a word through repetition. In the Prioress’s Tale, the word “litel” occurs a dozen times, often in slightly different contexts. Initially, the Prioress tells of a “litel scole of Cristen folk,” and a “litel clergeon” who attended that school “day by day” (VII.495, 503). She lingers on his youth: “Nat wiste he what this Latin [of the Alma redemptoris] was to saye, / For he so yong and tendre was of age” (VII.523). This passage, interestingly, mimics the Prioress’s self-portrayal in her prologue: “My conning is so waik, O blissful queene, / For to declare they grete worthinesse, / That I ne may the weighte nat sustene”

Both passages follow a pattern of belittlement – the clergeon is so young and “tendre of age” that he can’t understand the song from his prayerbook; the Prioress is “so waik” that she can’t speak to the holy power of the Virgin Mary – she is unable to “expresse” anything of that nature. These descriptions, similar in structure and in tone, are followed by resilient declarations of faith. The clergeon learns that his song is “maked in reverence / Of Cristes moder” and commits himself to “honoring” the Lady the Virgin by singing it ever more often (VII.537-38, 543). Similarly, the Prioress sandwiches her infantilizing musing with praise for the Virgin Mary. Beforehand, she expounds upon Mary’s grace: “Lady, thy bountee, thy magnificence, / Thy vertu and thy grete humilitee / Ther may no tonge expresse in no science” (VII.474-76). Then, she appeals to Mary directly: “Right so fare I, and therefore I you praye / Gideth my song that I shal of you saye” (VII.486-87). Both of these Marian appeals work to carry the Virgin and her blessings into the Prioress and clergeon’s expressions (her tale and his song, respectively); in making this rhetorical parallel, the Prioress aligns herself with the clergeon, who is wholly and uncomplicatedly devoted to Mary and the church, whether the same is true of her or not. Alastair Minnis takes this reading even farther, claiming that it is only through her self-identification with the Blessed Virgin’s little clergeon that the Prioress can “valorize” her story as a woman narrator.

The highlighting of the clergeon’s smallness and youth are undoubtedly intentional. Carleton Brown, a seminal voice in scholarship of the Prioress’s Tale and its analogues, notes that in specifying that the little clergeon is “seven yeer of age,” Chaucer departs from analogue sources: in Fortalicium fidei and De cantu alma redemptoris mater, the boy is ten years old, or at

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67Alastair Minnis, Fallible Authors: Chaucer’s Pardoner and Wife of Bath (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
least a couple of years into schooling (VII.503). As school typically began at age seven, that
the clergeon is in his very first term works alongside these other details to emphasize his
vulnerability, which is a “deliberate” choice on Chaucer’s part, intended to “heighten the pathos
of the story.” Brown’s analysis invites pause, because the same logic could be extended to the
Priess herself: she repeatedly renders herself small, innocent, and weak, likely in a similar
attempt to use pathos to appeal to her audience. Where Chaucer offers us a few hints that the
Priess is potentially erroneous in the telling of her story (explored below), we are not offered
any context to assess the validity of the Priess’s self-characterization. Instead, we have a
possible motive – following Brown’s assessment of the belittlement of the clergeon, the Priess
wants to endear herself to the audience.

*Geographic and Temporal Dissonance: Unreliable Narration*

Chaucer offers us another testament to the Priess’s unreliability in the form of
geographic inconsistencies. Madam Eglentine sets her story in a “greet citee” in “Asie” –
specifically, a “Jewerye … amonges Cristen folk” (VII.487-88). Immediately, this raises
questions. What did “Asie,” broadly, mean to Chaucer, or to Europeans during this time? The
earliest work on this matter, by Sherman Hawkins, skirts the question, suggesting that the
Priess’s Jews and their Asian city have figurative rather than literal significance; others have
followed in his assessment of the setting as almost mythical. The most notable work to address
these wholly unsatisfying explanations is that of Sheila Delany, whose chapter “Chaucer’s

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69 Brown, “Priess’s Tale,” 465.
Prioress, the Jews, and the Muslims” in her *Chaucer and the Jews* anthology offers a historicized, literal contextualization for the Prioress’s unique setting. Delany reminds us that among all its many analogues, “Chaucer’s [version] is the only one to locate the tale in Asia.”72 As she argues, its distinctiveness proves the setting to be a “deliberate authorial choice”; the tale’s setting, Delany contends, influences its meaning, though she does not entertain Chaucer’s motives for setting this story—otherwise, a very European one in tone—in Asia. Particularly given that Chaucer, as a well-traveled courtier, would likely have been aware of the historical realities at the time, it becomes a profound thing that he allowed the Prioress to set her tale—wrongly, as I will discuss—in Asia. I believe that the historical incongruities Delany identifies between broader religious trends and the city the Prioress describes deepen Chaucer’s ironicized portrayal of the Prioress. A careful consideration of the historical reality during the time is crucial to reaching this conclusion (one, admittedly, that Delany writes off as speculative), so here I review the central tenets of Delany’s argument.

Delany defines Chaucer’s “Asie” as modern-day Asia (that is to say, the whole continent of Asia, rather than Asia Minor or Asia Major, which were also synonymous with “Asye” during the time),73 based on his reference to “Auffrike, Europe, and Asye” in his *House of Fame*—the only other time the word “Asye” appears in his collected work. Accordingly, Delany concludes that “Chaucer’s ‘Asia’ most likely includes the vast sweep of Central Asia as well as Turkey and the Arab peninsula” (43). Identifying a location, or in this case a range of locations, allows for historical analysis of those regions to contextualize the Prioress’s reference to Asia. Delany finds

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72 Sheila Delany, “Chaucer’s Prioress, the Jews, and the Muslims,” in *Chaucer and the Jews*, ed. Sheila Delany (Routledge, 2002), 43-59. References to this text in this section will be provided parenthetically.
73 “Asía, -e n.,” Middle English Compendium (University of Michigan Library, Regents of the University of Michigan, 2022).
that the existence of a Christian city with a Jewish ghetto, such as the Prioress describes, would have been rather unlikely, given that these regions were largely under Islamic rule at this time.

Delany offers convincing evidence that life for religious others under Islamic rule is inconsistent with the Prioress’s account of the “Jewerye” in her city. Under Muslim rule, religious others, including Jews, were not relegated to usury as a profession; they had legal protections; they could serve as bankers, merchants, doctors, or even government officials (46). As Delany writes, Jews would have been considered “part of the *ahl al-dhimma*, or protected non-Islamic population,” and Islam was significantly “more positively disposed to Judaism than Catholicism was” (46). Crucial to Delany in all of this is the context of the rapidly expanding Ottoman Empire and Islamic influence, the impacts of which would have been felt in Chaucer’s England “in very direct and personal ways” (46). Delany posits that England was indeed very aware of Asia as an Ottoman or Islamic, rather than Christian, territory. Chaucer, given his government tenure, would not only have been aware, but potentially “involved” in this massive political-social encroachment (46).

When we compare these realities with the Prioress’s account, it becomes quickly apparent that the latter “would be virtually impossible in a great Asian city” (47). There is obviously a stark and jarring dissonance between Chaucer’s Asia and the Prioress’s Asia. In a medieval Asian society, Delany is quick to point out, Christians would not have been in power—rather, they would have fallen under the same *dhimma* law that protected Jews. A tenet of *dhimma* law was cohabitation of religious minorities with followers of the Islamic faith, so as to encourage exposure and potential conversion. The historical realities that Delany identifies mean that a Jewish ghetto or even a Christian neighborhood would have been very unlikely indeed. And if, as Delany asserts, Chaucer was aware of these historical circumstances, we can see quite
clearly that his Prioress erroneously imposes Christian attitudes towards Jews on this Asian city, which would have been under Islamic rule; more importantly, the ambient culture in historicized Asia would have been much less hostile towards Jews than the Prioress suggests. The question then becomes why Chaucer makes this choice. I believe that the rather massive inconsistencies between the Prioress’s account of Asia and historical reality serve an ironic purpose. This incongruity lies at the heart of the second ironic mechanism I identify in Chaucer’s characterization of the Prioress: for all her stature, beauty, and elegance, we, her readers, cannot rely on the Prioress’s narrative. And for all her desired worldliness, it is obvious the Prioress knows nothing of Asia; perhaps we are meant to think she knows nothing of Jews, either.

Like Delany, and most Chaucer scholars, I believe Chaucer’s life-records to be an influential reference point in our interpretation of his works, including the Prioress’s Tale. In the case of this story’s Asian setting, it is Chaucer’s travels and life records that lead Delany to conclude confidently that Chaucer was very much aware of the expanding Ottoman Empire and Islamic rule throughout Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Marion Turner’s recent biography of Chaucer, *Chaucer: A European Life*, confirms that Chaucer’s travels were indeed central to his life and writing. With respect to the question of Chaucer’s familiarity with Asia, Turner notes that Chaucer was “on the edges of a social group for whom long journeys and extended stays in or near non-Christian areas were common,” and this included Central Asia.74 That Chaucer or his contemporaries would have traveled to this region supports Delany’s belief that Chaucer would have been aware of the political realities—meaning the growing power of Islam—in Asia at this time.

Turner’s biographical work offers helpful context for another geographic complication of the Prioress’s Tale. At her story’s end, the Prioress invokes the story of Hugh of Lincoln – an urban legend in which a young Christian boy was murdered by Jews in the English town of Lincoln. Obviously, this story uncannily mirrors the Prioress’s Tale; likely, she invokes it in order to extend the narrative of Jewish violence beyond her tale, and to remind her fellow pilgrims that the threat of Jewish violence looms in their real world. Roger Dahood helpfully illuminates some of the questions brought about as a result of the Prioress’s reference to Hugh.75

How long after the expulsion of the Jews in 1290 the details of Hugh’s story survived in the English national memory has not been established, but the Prioress’s invocation suggests that Chaucer would expect his contemporaries to recognize the principal narrative events. It is possible that the drawing and hanging were present in Chaucer’s source, but even if they were not I suggest that, mainly because of Hugh, popular tradition in Chaucer’s England linked the punishments of drawing and hanging with stories of Jewish child murder … The Prioress’s word notable (VII.685) “famous, well-attested” (MED, s.v., 1), would have applied alike to Hugh’s death and the attendant executions of the Lincoln Jews.

Complicating Dahood’s assessment of the notoriety of this story are the life-records presented by Marion Turner. In her work, Turner notes that Chaucer’s wife Philippa had religious ties to Lincolnshire, near Lincoln.76 Turner’s confirmation of Philippa’s connections to Lincoln implies

76 Turner, Chaucer: A European Life, 493.
that Chaucer would have been more familiar with the area—and likely, the story—than other Christian and English contemporaries. She writes that his reference to Hugh of Lincoln “is not merely throwaway” – while the story of Hugh was “rather obscure” at the time, Chaucer offers too many specific details about the incident for the reference to be a passive or ill-informed one.\textsuperscript{77} It is important to remember, though, that while Chaucer certainly was aware of this story and, as Turner discusses, likely had personal contact with Jews and Jewish communities throughout his travels in Europe,\textsuperscript{78} the Prioress—the character as he created her—would have had a much more limited personal knowledge of either Lincoln or Jews. Moreover, Turner suggests that the general populus would largely have been unfamiliar with the legend of Hugh, in contrast to Dahood’s conclusion; how the Prioress comes to know of this story is unclear, but Chaucer hints that she may not know it all that well. Chaucer communicates her distance from the story in the way she contextualizes it: she claims it happened “but a litel while ago” (VII.686). From a rhetorical perspective, the word “litel” here is fascinating, as the murder of Hugh of Lincoln had happened over a century prior to Chaucer’s writing of the Prioress’s Tale, and perhaps beyond the geographic range that the London religious might have been expected to know. Beyond this literal, temporal dissonance, the context of the word “litel” throughout the tale adds to the oddness and significance of the Prioress’s reference. While earlier uses of the word dramatize the Prioress’s self-infantilization, I believe its reappearance in this line serves a satirical function, reminding us that the Prioress is just as ill-informed about Hugh of Lincoln as she is about the historical, political, and religious realities of the Asian continent.

\textit{The Prologue of Sir Thopas as a Contemporaneous Reception Study}

\textsuperscript{77}Turner, \textit{Chaucer: A European Life}, 494.
\textsuperscript{78}Turner, \textit{Chaucer: A European Life}, 435.
Is the Prioress successful in endearing herself to her fellow pilgrims, or to her readers? To what extent does she distance herself from the antisemitism in her story? Does Chaucer expect his readers’ moral sensibilities to rebel against the tale’s violence? And how would Chaucer’s courtly or otherwise contemporaneous audiences have reacted to such a story? Evaluating these questions remains challenging. Most contemporary readers and scholars express discomfort with the antisemitic content of the story, and there is a lack of resolution at the story’s end; the hate sits uncomfortably. Chaucer offers us a glimpse into what the reaction from the Canterbury pilgrims may have been in the Prologue of Sir Thopas, which directly follows the tale:

Whan said was al this miracle, every man
As sobre was that wonder was to see,
Til that oure Hoste japen he bigan,
And thanne at erst he looked upon me,
And saide thus, “What man artou?” quod he.
“Thou lookest as thou woldest finde an hare,
For ever upon the ground I see thee stare” (VII.691-97)

The impression offered by this passage is that the Host feels the group has been overly subdued by the Prioress’s tale. The first lines stretch out languidly, forcing the reader into this moment of shared uncertainty and discomfort, before the Host intervenes (“japes”) and makes light once more. Even when the Host rescues the group from silence, he acknowledges something is amiss: “For ever upon the ground I see thee stare,” he tells the pilgrim Chaucer. The image of all the pilgrims staring at the ground, “soberly,” is a powerful one, but again, Chaucer’s absence of
detail leaves us wanting. The pilgrims may have avowed silence in the aftermath of the Prioress’s tale out of disdain, perhaps taking issue with the disturbing content, or her tone; out of reverence, perhaps, for her invocations for Mary, or even for her characterization of the story of Hugh of Lincoln—which they may not have known to begin with—as a miracle; or out of mournfulness, for either the clergeon, the Jews, or little Hugh. Regardless of the emotional sentiment uniting the pilgrims in this uncomfortable aftermath, the prologue makes plain a sense of unease here.

For all the scholarship that has followed the Prioress’s Tale, the prologue to the tale that follows (and its rhetorical structure in particular) provides a crucially useful insight as to contemporaneous potential responses to such a story. It is worth noting that rhyme royale, which characterizes the Prioress’s Tale, continues into the Prologue of Sir Thopas (though not the tale). This is the only time throughout the Canterbury Tales where a link maintains this style from the preceding form, indicating some deliberate desire for a sense of continuity between the Prioress’s Tale and the Host’s musings in the Prologue of Sir Thopas. Harvard’s Chaucer site notes that all instances of rhyme royale in the Canterbury Tales happen to share “grave discourses,” and all are works concerning the suffering of innocent victims. The Prologue to Sir Thopas is the notable exception; in the tale that follows, Chaucer, as a pilgrim-narrator, engages in extensive self-satire—clearly not the “grave discourse” common to Chaucer’s other works in rhyme royale. There must be some function, though, for this unique rhythmic continuity. I believe the Prologue to Sir Thopas is intended to linger on the discomfort of the pilgrims (and who better, really, to have as a lens for this than our happy facilitator the Host and Chaucer himself, as a pilgrim-narrator), while also emphasizing the tonal difference between the Prioress’s Tale and that of Sir

Thopas. I will not go so far as to say that the “hodgepodge of common rhetorical devices”\(^80\) in the tale of Sir Thopas and their contrast from the elevated rhyme royale of the Prioress’s Tale are Chaucer’s way of absolving himself from the Prioress’s antisemitism. But perhaps Chaucer does intend irony here at his own expense: Chaucer as a pilgrim-narrator is woefully untalented; in following the Prioress’s Tale, which, if horrifying, is beautiful rhetorically, Chaucer the poet intends to remind his readers of his presently elusive talent, suggesting perhaps, that poetic skill (or its lack) is no guarantee of deeper morality. By any metric, this link, which bridges these two vastly different stories rhetorically, is interesting, even if the only contrast it succeeds in amplifying is tonal.

**Conclusion**

By the time the Prioress has finished, we the readers have been forced to sit with the pilgrims in their uncomfortable, sober silence, and to watch the Host wrangle the world merry again. This is a confusing moment. There is no clear indication of how readers are supposed to respond, other than gravely.

The intention behind this present chapter is to illustrate the ways in which the Prioress as a character is coded ironically through the two mechanisms I identify: moral shortcomings and narrative unreliability. The salience of this satire is underscored in the Prologue to Sir Thopas, which immediately follows the Prioress’s Tale, and sees the pilgrims similarly unsure of what to make of the Prioress’s story. Here is this beautiful, courtly, powerful prioress, who has just shocked the masses not only with a hateful story but with a confusing self-belittlement. Chaucer’s General Prologue works to reinforce this layered, contradictory characterization,

\(^80\) Lawton, *Canterbury Tales*, 351.
revealing the Prioress’s unchristian habits and egregious extravagances.

Identifying the ironic forces at work here is crucial for my later analogue analysis, where I chronicle the ways in which Chaucer has uniquely amplified the violent antisemitism common to analogues and possible sources. It is my belief that in doing so, he draws upon these subtle mockeries of the Prioress’s character to reinforce her failures as a Christian, that her violence and hate, at their most basic, are not values of her church or any. And yet the Prioress seems unfazed by her story; it is difficult not to read the “blandness” of her tone as an endorsement of the Jewish fate in her tale. Accordingly, paying close attention to the way irony works within her tale and the General Prologue is key to understanding the severity of the elevated violence in the Prioress’s resolution to this universally troubling story.
CHAPTER III:
ANALOGUES AND IRONY

Introducing and Identifying the Analogues

Carleton Brown’s extensive works on analogues to the Prioress’s Tale remain the best, most comprehensive sources available for identifying and sourcing analogues. In my analogue study, I use analogues identified in his chapter “The Prioress’s Tale” of Bryan and Dempster’s Sources and Analogues. The translations I use come largely from Brown’s Study of the Miracle of Our Lady Told by Chaucer’s Prioress, which offers English translations for many of the analogues he identifies. In the former volume, Brown identifies 32 known texts sharing in the Prioress’s legend and classifies them into Groups A, B, and C as described below (the Prioress’s Tale belongs, according to Brown, to Group C). I will discuss each of these groups, highlighting Brown’s categorizations and differences between them, to underscore the ripe room for comparative analogue analysis of the Prioress’s Tale before suggesting an alternative categorization.

Study of Group A Analogues

Below are the characteristics linking Group A analogues, as identified by Brown. As he notes, many of these works originate from a pre-1200 manuscript, long before the texts of Groups B and C. This is an important note, as the politics of the Jew were very different in the

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81 Brown’s system is very much the normative one when it comes to analogue analysis of the Prioress’s Tale. Because I want to be in conversation directly with Brown regarding his categorization system, I do not explicitly engage with Correale and Hamel’s 2003 edition of Sources and Analogues. In their edition, Laurel Broughton revisits Brown’s work and identifies several new analogues – which she labels as “NA” (“New Analogue”). Broughton’s choice to label her newly identified sources and analogues in this way—rather than Brown’s A, B, and C groupings—reflects her desire to preserve the integrity of Brown’s system. In doing so, she reinforces just how seminal Brown’s original work is to the continued study of sources and analogues to the Prioress’s Tale.
12th and 13th centuries than in Chaucer’s time; most notably, the Jews had not been expelled from England, which is where many of these stories originated. Brown writes that Group A presents what is apparently the earlier form of the legend, which must have been in existence before the year 1200. The story as it stands in Group A may be outlined as follows.

1. The boy sings the responsorium “Gaude Maria” as he passes daily along a street in which Jews dwell, and thereby invokes their resentment.

2. He is slain (either by a single Jew or by a group of them in conspiracy), and his body is buried under the earth in the Jew’s house (A 2, 3, 5, 7, 13), in his garden (A11), in a trench beside his door (A1), in a stable under the manure (A 4, 8), in a cemetery (A6), or “sub modio absconsus” (“hidden away somewhere,” A12).

3. The boy’s mother, in her search for him, passing by the Jew’s door, hears the voice of her child and, with the assistance of friends and a crowd of citizens, forces an entrance.

4. The boy is dug up from the earth alive and unharmed.

5. In consequence of this miracle, the Jew (or Jews), according to most versions, is converted. According to others, however, conviction and punishment follow.\(^8\)

The most obvious differences between these features and those of Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale (or its fellow Group C analogues) include the hymn (Gaude Maria rather than Alma redemptoris), that the boy is found “alive and unharmed,” and that the Jewish fate is mostly one of conversion.

\(^8\) Brown, “The Prioress’s Tale,” 455.
It is this last difference that is most salient for the question of Chaucer’s exacerbated hate in the Prioress’s Tale.

Many Group A analogues skirt the question of Jewish fate entirely: in A1, the story resolves with the boy being “dug up alive,” and singing his hymn at the request of the Virgin. A6, A7, A8, and A11 similarly fail to address the Jewish fate after the clergeon’s miraculous revival. Instead, these stories generally linger on the boy’s song, his reunion with his mother, and the goodness of the Virgin Mary (*Beate virginis*).

A2 is a different story: the Jew who kills the little clergeon (in this source, “poor scholar”) is put to death by the provost, who “[banishes] all Jews from [the] city.” This source is from the 13th century, which perhaps contextualizes the mention of expulsion, which is relatively unique among analogues. Barring a more certain date for the manuscript, it is unclear whether A2 had been written after the 1290 Edict of Expulsion. While it’s possible the Jewish population may not have yet been expelled from England at the time of this work’s creation, Jewish expulsion was becoming increasingly common across western Europe in the 13th century, with major cities across France and Italy formally expelling their Jewish populations. A2 is doubly interesting in that it vilifies just one Jew rather than many. In some ways, this makes the story less insidious, as it refrains from depicting all Jews and Jewishness as conniving and scheming in the way other, more explicitly violent analogues do. That the boy also is found “alive and well,” as is the case for most Group A analogues, works to lessen the violence inflicted by the Jew in question as compared to the Prioress’s Tale, where the clergeon ultimately dies.

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83 Bibliothèque nationale MS Lat. 18134, fol. 142.
84 Brown, *Study*, 3.
A3, A5, A9, and A12 share violent resolutions. In A3, “several Jews” convert and become Christians, while those who do not are killed. In A5, “the law [punishes] with death the Jews in England”; in A9, the Christians are moved by “Christian zeal” to slaughter the Jews; and in A12, the Jews are burned when their crime is found out. While I will not delve into the cremation politics of the time, it is important to note that cremation was considered a pagan burial ritual in medieval Europe, and thus the Christians who burn the Jews commit a second act of violence against them.

A4 and A13 end strictly with conversion. Both stories present a voluntary conversion, detailing the Jews’ amazement at the miracle they witness as a pure, unadulterated motive for converting to Christianity. This is not always the way conversion is treated in Chaucer, or in blood libel stories; among even just Group A analogues, A3 depicts Jewish conversion as forced. However, the story seems unbothered by the question of “true” faith. (This was often a concern in medieval blood libel stories, wherein a supernatural occurrence would sometimes be used to verify the validity of the converter’s intentions and faith.)

The works of Brown’s Group A demonstrate a wide-ranging treatment of the Jewish fate. While Brown notes that “most versions” end with the Jews’ conversion to Christianity, nearly half of the analogues forgo a resolution that even speaks of the story’s Jews; violent endings, too, are more common than simple conversions. However, the clergeon’s full revival tempers the sense of Jewish evil. Group C texts generally depict the boy’s revival as temporary, almost feverish in some instances; accordingly, the violence inflicted by the Jews is more permanent, and their evil has a staying power not present in Group A texts. Consequently, I see even Group A analogues ending with the fatal punishment of the Jews as less ardent in their portrayals of the

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Jew as a threat to the Christian faith; tonally, these stories end softly, wholly rejoicing in the Virgin and her miraculous restoration of the Christian boy, rather than dwelling on the hatefulness or threat posed by the Jews.

**Study of Group B Analogues**

Group B analogues generally come a bit later, primarily in the early 14th century and into the 15th. Brown writes that the narrative changes from the shared structures of Group A indicate a “deliberate adaptation of the earlier story,”

87 which confirms their later timestamps. Interestingly, these analogues tend to be less violent than those of Group A—when we define the murder of the Jews as the supremely violent resolution among analogues—, with nearly all analogues in Group B ending in the Jew(s)’ conversion to Christianity. While there is still violence in forcibly advancing the narrative of Christianity as the “true” religion (and the rhetoric of these stories does just that), the absence of physical brutality is significant. Given the salience of the physically punitive resolution in the earlier Group A analogues, many of which would likely have been known to Group B authors, the prevalence of conversion resolutions in Group B registers as a departure. It’s possible the abatement reflects the declining population of religious others in England at this time, as Jews would have been expelled prior to the writing of all these stories; perhaps the threat of the religious other felt less pressing or topical for Group B writers, and this is reflected in the dominance of the conversion resolution among them. I will discuss motive more definitively in my later analysis, but here I defer to Brown’s identified characteristics for the Group B analogues to help contextualize them:

Group B changes the form of the story in Group A, as outlined above, by introducing several important modifications:

1. The boy is made a chorister and sings his song in the regular services of the church.
2. The boy’s mother drops out of the story.
3. The guilty Jew (or Jews) after the murder hears the boy singing as before, either from the spot where he is buried or from his place in the choir, to which the Blessed Virgin has restored him.
4. The Jew (or Jews) thereupon confess the crime before the Christians have learned of it and in most versions are converted and baptized.\(^88\)

The social politics of Group A largely go away here: there is no concerned body of citizens or local authority running the mother’s mad search. As Brown rightly notes, even the mother’s presence is minimized here. In this way, Group B’s stories are much more centrally focused on the boy, his song, and the miracle of his revival.

Interestingly, in contrast to many A and C analogues, most B analogues feature just one wicked Jew. In some ways, this lessens the Jewish evil, as the cruelty is contained to an individual, rather than bestowed upon a collective Jewish group. Further, fatal violence is uncommon among Group B. B9 alone chronicles a fatal punishment, wherein the Jew is tried and burned. Beyond B9, the works of Group B tend to end with conversion. B1, 3, 6, 7, and 10 all chronicle a voluntary conversion, in which the Jew or Jews find the miracle so powerful that they are brought to convert. B2 notes that the Jews are “amazed” by the miracle they witness but does

\(^88\) Brown, “The Prioress’s Tale,” 449.
not explicitly mention conversion one way or another. However, given the similarity of this language to that of Group B’s other numerous conversion-ending analogues, I find it quite plausible that this text means to imply conversion; at the very least, it certainly refrains from punishing the Jews.

**Study of Group C Analogues**

Group C analogues were initially thought to be predated by Group A, until Alfred Friend identified a manuscript from Corpus Christi College (Oxford, MS 32, fol. 92; now known as C1) as an analogue to the Prioress’s Tale. The text has been dated around the early 13th century, around 1215. Not only does this mean that C1 predates the Prioress’s Tale by nearly two hundred years, but also that it predates many of the analogues identified in Group A. Dating the analogues has proven to complicate their characterization, as Brown discusses extensively.

Group C is interesting and distinct in other ways, most notably in its treatment of Jewishness. Unlike those of Groups A and B, Group C analogues end, as Brown writes, “tragically” — that is, the little clergeon ultimately dies. While the Virgin performs a miracle in restoring his power of song and revealing the location of his body, the miracle is obviously and substantially weaker among Group C texts. The alteration of the miracle may serve a rhetorical purpose in highlighting the cruelty of the Jews; the “evyl” they commit is so powerful that not even the Virgin can undo it. The finality of the Jewish cruelty, though, does not directly correlate to the punishment inflicted upon the Jews, as not all Group C texts end with the murder of the Jews, while a considerable number of Group A texts do. In part for this reason, I will suggest a

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restructuring of the categorization of the sources and analogues, which ought to reflect this major narrative difference among texts. The normative categorization—Brown’s—is as follows:

The versions of Group C, though uninfluenced by the modifications of the story introduced in Group B, show striking agreement in certain divergences from the narrative of Group A.

1. The song which the boy sings through the Jewry is the antiphon “Alma redemptoris mater” according to seven versions (C 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10), and in only one (C7) the *responsorium* “Gaude Maria,” as in nearly all the texts of Group A and Group B. The antiphon “Ave regina,” mentioned in C3, and the “Sancta Maria,” in C4, may be dismissed as mere variants.

2. The body of the murdered boy is thrown into a “jakes” (“cloaca”). This is explicitly stated in every version of this group except C3 (which is silent on this point).

3. The miracle does not end, as in Group A, with the recovery of the boy’s body, but an elaborate funeral scene follows, during which the corpse continues to sing, for in Group C, unlike the others, the story ends tragically. C4 and C10, which differ in this respect from the other C versions, will be considered later in discussing the development of the versions within the C group.

Crucially, the Jews and their fates are excluded from the list. And as Brown discusses, this is a much more complex or developed version of the story presented in Group A and B texts. The funeral scene, which is largely nonexistent in A and B texts, forms a strong moral heart to Group
C texts. He notes that, unlike the other analogue groupings, Group C texts end “tragically.” What is immediately striking about Brown’s language here is that his identification of tragedy rests with the clergeon – the story “ends tragically” when the clergeon dies as opposed to being restored by the Virgin. I find it especially interesting that Brown does not speak to the Jewish fate in this characterization of Group C; in his introduction of Group A, Brown explicitly notes the Jewish fate shared by those texts (largely one of conversion); similarly, for Group B, he includes in his list that the Jews confess their crime and are mostly converted and baptized. In Group C, Brown does not include anything about the Jewish fate in his list of shared characteristics, despite the fact there is considerable consistency among treatments of Jews in Group C (and inconsistency doesn’t appear to be an obstacle to Brown; he acknowledges the existence of both converting and punitive resolutions in Group A). Is this a reflection of a desire amongst scholars to distance Chaucer from the hatefulness and violence in the Prioress’s Tale? Possibly; while we can only speculate on Brown’s failure to address the Jewish fate for Group C, the texts themselves demonstrate near-uniformity in their resolutions, which, with a couple of fatal exceptions, neglect to describe the fate of their Jews.

Among C 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8, the Jewish fate goes unaddressed; versions C 2, 3, 4, and 7 end with the revival or singing of the boy’s corpse, while C1 and C8 note only that the Jews are unable to hear the boy’s miraculous singing. In C10, the Jews convert willingly. This leaves us with C6 (the Prioress’s Tale) and C9 (a Spanish text) alone as ending with a violent death for the Jews. But Chaucer could not have known C9, as the Prioress’s Tale predates C9 by nearly a century. Possibly Chaucer was even a source for this later text, if his work made its way to Spain. And there are other important differences that distinguish the Prioress’s Tale from this

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later work. C9’s author is Alphonsus de Spina, a Spanish Jew who later converted to Catholicism. This personal history is very different from Chaucer's; moreover, the Jews were not expelled from Spain until 1492, so de Spina would have been writing at a time when antipathy towards Jews was on the rise, quite different from the political reality of Chaucer’s England in the 14th century. One might even speculate about internalized antisemitism in the Jewish de Spina’s work; though such a theory is of course speculative, it forces us to consider personal and political context in assessing antisemitism. That de Spina himself converted and was a theologian might have predisposed him to a favorable view on conversion; that he chooses to kill his story’s Jews rather than convert them is thus doubly interesting. For our purposes here, at least, this unique context—a Spanish text by a Jewish-born Catholic convert—marks the Prioress’s Tale alone among Group C analogues in having a Christian author (and his Christian narrator) resolve the story with the murder of the Jews at a time when there were no Jews in his country. It is a particularly damning and insidious portrayal of the Jews, even without the complication of the Prioress’s narration.

**Genre and Alternative Categorization**

Brown’s groupings are based on a strong and unquestioned assumption that the texts in each of his groupings can be securely dated, and that earlier texts, as so defined, are thus necessarily possible sources for later ones. He does not, for example, consider the possibility of missing intermediate sources or of oral provenance for lost sources. He also views complexity as a powerful indicator of later dating. Brown posits that each group—A, B, or C—is an adaptation of a shared parent source, that each analogue family has its own distinct origin story upon which

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all others in that group are based. He also identifies Group A as the “parent group” of Groups B and C. While the identification of C1 as an analogue of this story could present a challenge to that characterization, Brown says it holds: based on the fact that A1 and A2 as well as A6 and A8 must have shared common sources, Brown is confident that the “archetype” of Group A must have been written before 1200. Therefore, Brown suggests it is quite plausible—even probable—that Group C developed from “some form of the legend” among Group A versions. Brown sees “narrative development” (or increased complexity) of Group C texts as still stronger evidence that Group A versions are older or share an older original source; he finds it unlikely that Groups A and B would have abandoned the narrative complexities in Group C should they have been known to their authors. However, scholars since Brown’s Sources and Analogues, most notably Margaret Statler, have taken issue with Brown’s suggestion that his groups have little to do with one another other than the narrative similarities inherent to the “parent” group. Statler challenges Brown’s assertion that the Prioress’s Tale not only “definitely belongs to Group C [but] betrays no influence from any version of the legend outside this group” on the grounds that the Prioress’s Tale and some of its Group C cousins show remarkable similarity to certain Group A texts.

I, too, take some issue with Brown’s characterizations. Brown’s Study of the Miracle of Our Lady Told by Chaucer’s Prioress (1910) emphasizes the “striking” similarities between the Group C narrative and the story of Hugh of Lincoln, and attributes the tragic ending unique to Group C texts to the influence of the Hugh story. However, in the later (1941) Sources and

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96 Brown, Study, 10.
Analogues, Brown acknowledges that this explanation is “manifestly impossible” due to the discovery of a Group C text that predates Hugh of Lincoln by several decades.\(^{97}\) For this reason, Brown concludes that Hugh is “eliminated” as the source for Group C’s “tragic ending,” though notes that similar stories were certainly in circulation in decades and even centuries prior, and these could have been influential.\(^{98}\)

This conclusion registers to me as naïve and positivistic. I find it quite likely indeed that Chaucer and other 14\(^{th}\) century writers took liberally from the legend of Hugh in writing these stories; the similarities are so striking that negating them on the grounds that one Group C text antedates Hugh is frankly nonsensical. And yet, Brown insists the idea that the legend of Hugh of Lincoln could serve as the inspiration for the tragic ending in Group C is “impossible” because C1 predates the legend.\(^{99}\) Roger Dahood writes extensively on the unique “drawing and hanging” punishment that is passed down to the Prioress’s Jews, which is both unique among analogues and the same punishment that was extended to the Jews in Lincoln.\(^{100}\) Of course, Chaucer obviously knew of the story of Hugh, as he references it in the text; the suggestion that the influence of the legend is absent in the Prioress’s Tale on the basis that the story would have been unknown to earlier Group C texts is thus not a compelling one. Further, such dating on the basis of the internal characteristics of known literary texts ignores that circulating stories (oral or written) might have influenced the accusations falsely leveled at Jewed during the Hugh of Lincoln episode. More broadly, the use of chronology to characterize the analogues’ relationships to one another carries an inherent level of speculation. Dating medieval literature is no easy task; while some texts helpfully reference others for which dates are more certain, or

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\(^{100}\) Dahood, “Punishment,” 471.
have clear authors, there is no way to establish absolutely the order in which the analogues were written.

Beyond the issue of Brown’s rough chronologizing, his system fails to center the most significant narrative elements shared by the stories, most importantly that of Jewishness. In particular, I take issue with Brown identifying the “tragedy” of his Group C texts as the Christian boy’s death. I believe that if Brown had been writing a bit later, or had his scholarship been more attuned to the Jewish plight at the time of his writing in the early 1940s, the tragedy of the Prioress’s Tale and source texts would be located elsewhere. I am not the first person to suggest the global attitude shift towards Jews and antisemitism in the post-WWII era affects our contemporary understanding of the Prioress’s Tale. As Philip Alexander writes, “critics [could not] view the Tale after the Holocaust in quite the same way as they viewed it before.”101 (We have also seen in Chapter I of this thesis the influence of the Holocaust on the presentation of the Prioress’s Tale in popular editions.) Moreover, the ardency of Brown’s language in 1941 feels almost defensive, like a fevered attempt to retain the validity of his system and its logic despite the complication of the discovery of C1, which predates Hugh of Lincoln. Reframing the categorization of the analogues to rest with the Jewish fate in the stories is more useful from the perspective of scholarship following Brown — as practically all contemporary scholarship on the Prioress’s Tale engages with the issue of the story's antisemitism. While Brown’s system is partially narrative based (singling out details such as the hymn that is sung, the presence or absence of a mother figure and funeral scene, and where the Jews dispose of the corpse), on the note of Jewish fate, Brown is only mildly interested. This is not to negate the importance of Brown’s work, but to suggest that the question of Jewish fate ought to be more central to

scholarly treatment of the analogues. Certainly, the treatment of the Jews ought to be more important than trivialities such as which Marian hymn that is sung. While there may be multiple loci of tragedy in these troubling texts, I find the predominant tragedy to be ultimately Jewish, and believe this warrants scholarly acknowledgment in the classification of analogues. What I suggest is as follows:

i. A boy sings a Christian song, be it the *Gaude maria* or *Alma redemptoris*.

ii. The nearby Jew or Jews take issue with the song and kill the boy and dispose of his body, either in a “jakes” or some other place.

iii. The boy is either actively searched for or reveals himself by singing his song, having miraculously had the power of voice restored to him by the Virgin Mary; in some versions, he is restored fully to life.

iv. The Jews are either
   1. Dropped from the story after the miracle
   2. Converted to Christianity, forcefully, or, more often, willingly, on account of the miracle they’ve witnessed

Texts would be organized in accordance with the fate faced by their Jews, as presented in the table below. While I maintain an approximation of chronology as available from Brown’s attempts at dating the analogues (though with prudent modesty about the firmness of such dates), the primary factor in my proposed categorization is the tale’s treatment of its Jews. Those labeled “1” are silent on the Jewish fate; those labeled “2” convert their Jews, and those labeled “3”
fatally punish their Jews. Letters refer roughly to the possible chronology of the texts within each group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analogue and Brown’s Corresponding Number</th>
<th>Resolution</th>
<th>Suggested Alternative Categorization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corpus Christi College, Oxford, MS 32, fol. 92 (C1)</td>
<td>Silent on Jewish fate</td>
<td>1A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibl. Publ. de Vendôme MS 185 (A1)</td>
<td>Silent on Jewish fate</td>
<td>1B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.M. Egerton MS 1117, fol. 176. (A8)</td>
<td>Silent on Jewish fate</td>
<td>1E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friar William Herebart, Phillipps MS 8336, fol. 205 (C2)</td>
<td>Silent on Jewish fate</td>
<td>1F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.M. Add. MS 11579, fol. 5 (C3)</td>
<td>Silent on Jewish fate</td>
<td>1G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.M. Roy. MS 12.E.I, fol. 170 (C4)</td>
<td>Silent on Jewish fate</td>
<td>1H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.M. Add. MS 16589, fol. 87, col. 1 (B2)</td>
<td>Silent on Jewish fate</td>
<td>1I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidney Sussex College MS 95, Lib. II, cap. 84 (C7)</td>
<td>Silent on Jewish fate</td>
<td>1J</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidney Sussex College MS 95, Lib. II, cap. 83 (A11)</td>
<td>Silent on Jewish fate</td>
<td>1K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidney Sussex College MS 95, Lib. II, cap. 87 (C8)</td>
<td>Silent on Jewish fate</td>
<td>1L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gautier de Coincy, <em>Les Miracles de la Sainte Vierge</em> (A3)</td>
<td>Jew(s) convert</td>
<td>2A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cæsarius of Heisterbach, <em>Libri VIII Miraculorum</em> (A4)</td>
<td>Jew(s) convert</td>
<td>2B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.M. Add. MS 32248, fol. 5 (B1)</td>
<td>Jew(s) convert</td>
<td>2C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.M. Add. MS 18929, fol. 79, col. 1 (B3)</td>
<td>Jew(s) convert</td>
<td>2D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.M. Add. MS 33956, fol. 73, col. 2, (B6)</td>
<td>Jew(s) convert</td>
<td>2E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Legender om Jomfru Maria og Hendes Jerter</em>, Pergaments Cod. 11, Royal Library, Stockholm (B7)</td>
<td>Jew(s) convert</td>
<td>2F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hague Kon. Bibl. MS X, 64 (new no. 70, II, 42), fol. 48c (A13)</td>
<td>Jew(s) convert</td>
<td>2G</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The utility in this system is doubled in that it illuminates the generic implications of the various treatments of Jewish fate. It is in mapping genre, specifically Marianism, onto the Prioress’s Tale and its analogues that I find room to reframe with confidence our understanding of Chaucer’s version as ironic. In understanding the Prioress’s failure as a Christian and her story’s failure as a Marian text, it becomes helpful to identify a “New Law/Old Law” distinction among analogues. It is this distinction that informs our ability to see Chaucer’s and other texts ending with punitive resolutions as failures of their genres.

I begin chronicling these ironic failures with a study of Erich Auerbach’s seminal *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* to better understand the concept of Old and New Law. Auerbach, a scholar of Romance philology, lived a “life in motion”; exiled from Germany on account of his Judaism, he came to believe literary history to be “evolutionary, ever-changing.”[^102]

an attempt to situate texts properly. I detail Auerbach’s personal history and biography here because they embody the approach I attempt, which is to situate this argument mercurially, to find a space that historicizes and contextualizes the Prioress’s antisemitism without denying or absolving it.

Auerbach tracks the evolution of “figura,” identifying that concept in Lucretius, noting definitions like ‘model,’ ‘copy,’ ‘figment,’ and ‘dream image’ that “clung” to the word as opposed to earlier, more simplistic uses from Varro. By the end of the republican era, the word was “firmly ingrained in the language of philosophy and cultivated discourse.” Only later, with Tertullian, does figura come into a religious context, used in Marcionem Adversas to describe “something real and historical” using another real and historical happening; in the passage Auerbach cites as an example, we see that Jesus’s promise of “eternal beatitude” is foreshadowed by Joshua’s leading of the Jews to the holy land of Palestine. Auerbach writes that the Jews were seen as “figures of [Christian] selves” in Corinthians, and that scripture then writes off Jewish faith as purely a prefiguration: “the old Law is suspended and replaced, it is merely a shadow, a typos.” Accordingly, “obedience to it is pointless,” or “even harmful,” given the salvation offered by Christ.

Auerbach writes that “often, vague similarities in the structure of events or in their attendant circumstances suffice to make the figura recognizable; to find it, one has to be determined to interpret in a certain way.” Scholarship has been determined to cast the Prioress’s Tale into the genre of Marianism, to interpret it in this certain way. But the narrative

103 Auerbach, Scenes from the Drama, 17.
104 Auerbach, Scenes from the Drama, 21.
105 Auerbach, Scenes from the Drama, 29.
106 Auerbach, Scenes from the Drama, 31.
107 Auerbach, Scenes from the Drama, 31.
108 Auerbach, Scenes from the Drama, 29.
and religious elements that are so troubling in Chaucer’s version, the killing of the Jews, do not themselves lend to a fixed interpretation of the Prioress’s Tale as a Marian story. The murderous ending marks a serious departure from literary precedent, and as her endorsement of such violence fails to uphold traditional Christian values of nonviolence and mercy, the Prioress departs from religious precedent as well; she falls short of the idealized Christianity she ought to represent. In that Chaucer’s Jews are not moved by the miracle they witness to convert, the Virgin’s miracle is also less total, less powerful, even, than in analogues that resolve in conversion. In this way, both the Prioress and her tale can be characterized as holdouts of the Old Law – prefigurations of the full goodness and faith they ought to embody.

As Auerbach writes, the “desire” in making the distinction between the Old and the New Law was to “show that the events and persons of the Old Testament were prefigurations of the New Testament and its history of salvation.”109 Rather than the enlightened, “genuine” religion of Christianity at this time, the Prioress embodies the less developed, morally lacking values that would have been associated with the Old Testament and looked down upon by “true” Christians. The moral shortcomings identified in Chapter I demonstrate these failures: the Prioress is vain where she ought to be modest; she is improvident where she ought to be prudent; she is dishonest where she ought to be truthful; she is romantic where she ought to be demure. All these characteristics can be considered Christian moral failures, and on their basis, E. Talbot Donaldson asserts that Chaucer “could not have believed that such a story represented the supreme form of Christian narrative.”110 And so here enters irony.

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109 Auerbach, Scenes from the Drama, 29.
Genre suggests just one ironic complication of the Prioress’s Tale as it relates to its analogues. “While perhaps the most popular and notorious of its genre,” writes Merrall Price, “the Prioress’s Tale is by no means unique in its linking of sadism, sentimentality, and antisemitism; such linking is characteristic of later contributions to the genre of the Marian miracle.”\textsuperscript{111} Price echoes other generic scholarship in identifying a Christian “sentimentality” to this sort of story. The both-andness of antisemitism and religious enlightenment is key to the genre and informs its depiction of Jews. Miri Rubin, in her seminal \textit{Gentile Tales}, writes that the Marian story “[embraces] the Jew as the opponent of the Virgin’s grace, but also as a needy recipient of her mercy.”\textsuperscript{112} Presumably, then, “true” Christians would also value mercy and likely see a certain value in extending the right to conversion to “needy” Jews. Even so, the extension of the possibility of conversion does not wipe away the stain of antisemitism; conversion itself implies lack within Judaism, as no medieval Christian would deny.

In her attempt to glorify the Virgin, the Prioress goes too far — she descends into unnecessary violence against the Jews. In finding justice in the killing of the Jews, the Prioress transgresses the nonviolence that would have been a cornerstone of the “New Law,” or evolved Christianity. Moreover, the story she tells accidentally belittles the very figure she hopes—and claims—to exalt: were the miracle of the clergeon’s restoration sufficiently divine, the Jews would convert. Clearly, there is abundant literary precedent for a conversion resolution; the vast majority of analogues conclude with the conversion of the Jews, or a forgetting of the Jews entirely, in which case the story ends with a pure embrace of the Virgin. These stories (groups A and B in my alternate categorization system) are doubly Christian, in that their miracles are

\textsuperscript{112} Rubin, \textit{Gentile Tales}, 7.
potent enough to convert the Jews, and that the Christian communities who were initially harmed by Jewish violence (the killing of the clergeon) transcend any misgivings to embrace the converted Jews as new members of their community. This emotional transcendence is the pinnacle of New Law Christianity: pure, unadulterated love, something the followers of the Old Law—the Jews—could never hope to achieve. For this reason, I find those analogues that kill the Jews to be failures of the Marian genre, as their Christian miracles do not spiritually rouse the Jews to the point of conversion.

What’s more is the Prioress’s failure to embody wholly the evolved Christianity she ought to represent. Prioresses held socially important, religiously powerful positions; of all people, the Prioress should epitomize Christian values. As Hebrew scholar Emmy Stark Zitter observes, the traditional conversion resolution would be more “in keeping with the character of a truly Christian nun,” which Zitter uses to condemn the argument for irony.113 Given Chaucer’s sly discrediting of the Prioress’s character, however, it is precisely this incongruity between her spoken words and her profession that I believe Chaucer uses to advance the ironic narrative. The irony of the Prioress’s personal failure as a Christian is doubled by her story’s failure as a Marian tale, cementing the presence of irony in both the Prioress as a pilgrim-narrator and the tale she tells.

Ironic Conclusions

Importantly, these distinctions—Old Law versus the New; Marian versus not-Marian; violent versus nonviolent resolutions—have a potent relation to the satire of the Prioress’s character. Clearly, the Prioress believes herself to be telling an important Christian story. She

sees herself exalting the Virgin Mary, fitting her story into both her own Christocentric world and presenting it as a storied literary precedent of Marianism. And in invoking Hugh of Lincoln, she goes almost out of her way to connect her story to the trope of Jewish ritual murder,\textsuperscript{114} even as it lacks the narrative elements that hallmark that tradition. Here, I review the shortcomings of Brown’s system and detail how irony emerges when the Prioress’s personal failures are considered in relation to the extreme violence her tale presents.

With respect to sources and analogues, careful examination reveals that Brown’s categorization system is simplistic and positivistic; more recent approaches to dating medieval texts are open to more complex relationships and less confident about specific lineages. A fixed chronology is at the heart of his system, which assumes and identifies a “parent source” for each family (A, B, or C). Immediately, a complication to this methodology arises, in that dating Chaucer carries an inherent level of speculation. To handle this limitation responsibly, Kathryn Lynch writes that we as Chaucer scholars “need … to admit more honestly what we do not, and likely cannot ever, know about the timetable on which Chaucer wrote,”\textsuperscript{115} rather than speculate into eternity. As with all of Chaucer’s works, there is no way no way to verify or make certain that there is one pure lineage for the Prioress’s Tale or its analogues, unblemished by the influence of other written, oral, or historical stories. It is unproductive to insist upon what we likely will not ever be able to make certain. An additional complication emerges in the intertextuality that exists between analogues across Brown’s groupings. Several texts, including Chaucer’s, seem to borrow elements from across Brown’s families. The Prioress tells us that her story’s Jews were “hung […] by the lawe” (VII.634). While most texts, including others among


Brown’s Group C, do not bring in legality with respect to Jewish punishment, A5 does; it says its Jews were “killed by the law.” The rhetorical similarity here is remarkable, and reinforces the problematic nature of forcing dates upon texts whose histories remain not fully known. Rather obviously, the connection between C6 and A5 here challenges Brown’s assertion that each text has one parent source and is uncorrupted by influence from texts in other analogue families.

Moreover, the punishment Chaucer’s Prioress strikes upon her Jews, that of drawing and hanging, was atypical among Group C analogues, though it has precedent elsewhere. While there is no way to ascertain definitively where the murderous ending comes from in her story, it is also impossible to rule out the influence of Group A texts, which were in some respects more violent. And as Dahood notes, the Prioress’s resolution is unique in its violence—drawing and hanging, as opposed to hanging alone in other death-ending texts—and the particulars of the Jewish fate in her tale mimic exactly the supposed punishment faced by Lincoln’s Jews.116 Despite this eerie similarity, Brown denies wholeheartedly the possibility that Chaucer borrows from the legend of Hugh for the reason that earlier Group C texts predate that occurrence. As chronicled earlier, the conclusion is nonsensical, given that Chaucer obviously was familiar with the myth.

Beyond Brown, there is the troubling matter of the Prioress’s own failure to embody the Christian values she claims and ought to represent. Unlike the vast majority of analogues, the Prioress ends her tale not with the conversion of the Jews, but with their hanging. Among over thirty analogues, only seven end with the fatal punishment of the Jews; among those that kill the Jews, the Prioress’s is particularly brutal. Beyond the particulars of the physical fate met by the Jews, the Prioress’s Tale is also unique in that it has a narrator. All other analogues lack such a figure, meaning they stand alone. Madame Eglentyne, as is heartily evident from her lacking

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morality and reliability, is a complicated figure, one who probably should not be taken at face value. In conjunction with his many hints as to the Prioress’s moral shortcomings, I argue that the exacerbated hatefulfulness of her tale indicates some level of irony on Chaucer’s part. Why else would a prioress—one who is questionably honest and lacking in full virtue—choose not only to tell but to celebrate such a violent story? As Albert Friedman writes, “murder is no less a violation of Jewish law and precept than it is of Christian.” In endorsing the brutal hanging of the Jews, the Prioress transgresses the values of both religions she represents, seemingly unknowingly; her tone of “prayerful seriousness” endures until the very end, without any indication that her hypocrisy registers internally.

Because of the abundant suggestions that the Prioress is unreliable and perhaps less pure than one of her ranks ought to be, and this in and of itself is ironic, it is essential to map her—flaws and all—onto her story. When we do so, it becomes clear that Chaucer is showing us a failed Christian telling a failed Marian tale — and she is blind to these failures. The question at the heart of my analysis is why the Prioress engages with and endorses such horrible violence, when both Christian values and literary precedent should forbid her from doing so. This appears to me as a satire of the church the Prioress represents. Here is a powerful religious woman, who despite her self-infantilization seems solidly in control of her story, and yet she is vain; she is unworldly; she is unbecomingly profligate; she may even be profane. On top of these failures, she also endorses the murder of a religious group in which she ought to recognize herself as in a mirror — as William Quinn writes, even in the Middle Ages, Judaism was understood by some to be closely related to Christianity, rather than entirely disparate and threatening, which is

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117 Friedman, “The ‘Prioress’s Tale,’” 119.
118 Friedman, “The ‘Prioress’s Tale,’” 118.
how the Prioress represents the faith. In treating her story’s Jews with hate rather than mercy, with cruelty over compassion, the Prioress soils Christianity and the values she so clearly is supposed to embody. Because Chaucer was an ironist, it then becomes prudent to establish that a better or more wholly Christian foil exists elsewhere, to prove that he sees genuine faith as possible. Quinn presents a strong reason to find irony in the Prioress’s religious shortcomings as she relates to the Second Nun, who more wholly understands and embodies New Law Christianity. Where the Second Nun is genuinely pious, demure, and fulfills all Christian expectations, both rhetorically and morally, the Prioress falls notably short. In warping the Prioress’s character and having her fail in this royally awful way, Chaucer shows us a Christianity that is hypocritical, self-important, and violent.

This is not to imply that Chaucer intended the Prioress’s Tale as a critique of the rampant antisemitism of his time, but to allow for a reading that is at least partially critical of the medieval church. I find it unlikely that the text is meant to counteract medieval antisemitism; Chaucer was a product of his time, and his time was antisemitic. As numerous scholars have acknowledged, there is no responsible way to claim any insight as to Chaucer’s personal opinions on Jews. However, there is significant reason to find room for a critique of Christianity in this tale and in Chaucer broadly, and the Prioress’s antisemitism is crucial to this reading. In “The Protestant Chaucer,” Linda Georgianna discusses the over-rationalization of the Christian faith that has dominated Chaucer scholarship over the last several centuries. Georgianna suggests that rational belief existed in deep tension with the Christianity of the medieval period — and that Chaucer communicates this tension in the *Canterbury Tales*. She writes that Chaucer “celebrates” the incompatibility of medieval Christianity and rationality in the Clerk’s Tale,

which is “designed” to demonstrate the “radical demands of the Christian faith.”  

121 Other Chaucerians, including Sheila Delany and Elizabeth Kirk, 122 put forth the concept of “skeptical fideism,” or the notion that while reason does not support faith, it also fails to wholly deny it.  

123 This philosophy echoes Georgianna’s in that it finds fault in the assumption that faith is wholly rational. And while Chaucer’s thoughts on Wyclif are contested, many if not most scholars identify a certain anticlericalism in Chaucer. Even as Chaucer idealized the early church, and believed ardently in its miracles, both he and Wyclif found significant room for criticism of their contemporary church, which was widely considered corrupt.  

124 In seeing room for criticism of the church elsewhere in his works, it becomes plausible indeed that the Prioress’s Tale is a continuation of Chaucer’s investigation of this tension between reason, rationality, and the Christian faith of his time. Because the Prioress herself indulges in emotionalism and lacks rationality, her tale exemplifies a tension that would lead to the Reformation – which she is unable to resolve on even the most literal level (here I am thinking in particular of her suggestion that the story takes place in Asia). More importantly, in seeing the potential for Christian critique in Chaucer, there becomes a motive for the irony I identify in the characterization of the Prioress and the high violence of her tale.  


CONCLUSIONS

The Prioress’s Tale is a notoriously confusing text. Critics have both shied away from the story, offput or scared off by the intolerance it presents, and speculated wildly as to Chaucer’s personal belief system and politics in the hopes of absolving him. On both fronts, we are severely limited with regard to productive and satisfying scholarship. Without addressing the ugliness and hate Chaucer hands us in the form of the Prioress’s Tale, it continues to rest uneasily in our Riverside Chaucers and anthologies; by and large, speculation brings about only speculation. In this thesis, I have attempted to understand the Prioress’s Tale in the context of the narrator’s character and in relation to its sources and analogues.

Given Chaucer’s known anticlericalism and irony, I find it impossible to dismiss his portrait of the Prioress as vain, unlearned, and morally or religiously uncertain. There, too, is the inescapable fact of her story, her telling of which is untroubled. Analogue analysis only heightens the relative cruelty of the story, as nearly all analogues resolve with the conversion rather than murder of the Jews. The conversion ending keeps with both the traditional Christian values of faith and mercy as well as literary precedent; the murderous ending, in contrast, is violent and backward, wholly unchristian. In condoning the undue violence perpetrated against the Jews, the Prioress stoops to the tenets of the Old Law, which she ought to transcend. Why does Chaucer break from literary and religious tradition in his version? What does it mean to present a nun who is fundamentally unchristian?

I suggest that irony explains Chaucer’s choices to buck the abundant literary and religious precedent that call for an alternative resolution to the tale he assigns the Prioress. Between his convoluted and not wholly flattering portrait of the Madame Eglentyne, the unprecedented and needless violence faced by the story’s Jews, and the pilgrims’ sobriety in the
immediate aftermath of her tale, Chaucer subtly but substantially denigrates the Prioress. The existence and true innocence of the Second Nun prevents reading the Prioress and her tale simply as Chaucer’s misogynistic depiction of medieval women religious. The Second Nun is uncomplicated in her goodness, and the Prioress decidedly is not. Chaucer’s presentation of female affective piety is therefore not monolithic; he chooses to depict the Prioress in this confusing way. How ironic, to have a clerical authority figure exalt the Virgin Mary to her fellow pilgrims while failing to perform and uphold the Christian values she represents! From an anticlerical poet, the portrayal invites readers to extrapolate, to hold Christian authority figures to Christian values.

Chaucer in no way condemns Madame Eglentyne’s antisemitism. Still, I find compelling evidence to the existence of irony in both his portrayal of her character and in her condoning of Christian violence against her story’s Jews. Dismissing the literary and religious precedent that Chaucer abandons makes it difficult to assess the questions we keep returning to of culpability and motive. I see complexity and self-awareness in Chaucer’s entanglement of character satire and analogue modification, which is necessarily informed by his anticlericalism – and I find these complexities a strong indicator that the text is more reflexive than has traditionally been understood. I hope that my analogue study and proposed alternate categorization system help to recenter scholarship, rightly, on the story’s villainized Jews, and reframe the way we historicize Chaucer’s ever-mysterious ugliest tale.
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