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REFLECTIONS ON CHAUCER'S "THE PRIORESS'S TALE"

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All through this brief historical survey, I will use the term "anti-Jewish" instead of the more common "anti-Semitic." The distinction between the two terms is important, since "anti-Semitic" is a 19th century term which shifted the focus of the entire Jewish question from religion to race. It would therefore be inappropriate to accuse Chaucer of anti-Semitism. Being a Christian, he expressed the sentiments of the Christian community in which he lived, and he did so with the rhetorical and poetic skills which make of the *Canterbury Tales* one of the most celebrated texts of English literature. But precisely because Chaucer's masterpiece is so widely read, it seems necessary to put "The Prioress's Tale" in historical perspective. This is a text which raises the question of religious prejudice, and that question should not be glossed over as irrelevant to the "literary" value of the text.

When reading "The Prioress's Tale" in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, or Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* for that matter, one cannot help but be struck by the force of anti-Jewish sentiments expressed by their respective authors. One wonders to what extent their hatred against the Jews was a personal conviction, or an injunction on the part of the patrons they were obliged to please, or the manifestation of a collective imagination that for centuries had cast every Jew into the role of the villain. It may then be useful to put the presence of the Jews on British soil in historical perspective, albeit very succinctly.

Jewish settlers first come to England at the time of William the Conqueror, possibly attracted by business opportunities. Money was badly needed to finance the local economy, and the Jews were willing to take the risk of lending it at interest. By the end of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th, Christian money lenders, English and Italian in particular, had entered the lending business and did not look favorably upon the

presence of Jewish competitors either in England or on the continent. Within that same time frame, anti-Jewish sentiments had been fueled by the preaching of the Crusades. Many Jews were massacred in England, France, and Germany; others preferred to take their own lives rather than surrender or be forced to convert. In York, a mass suicide took place on March 16, 1190, at Clifford's Tower, where most of the town's Jews had taken refuge to defend themselves against the attacks of an excited mob. The castle was besieged, no escape was possible. The rabbi exhorted every head of family to kill all the members of his family and then kill himself.

It is also significant that when Richard the Lionheart, during the Third Crusade, was taken prisoner by his arch-enemy, the Duke of Austria, a sizable proportion of the ransom money was extorted from English Jews. When William the Confessor ascended the throne in 1272, he found that the Jews had lost most of their capital to taxes and that they were no longer useful to the English government. At first, Edward thought that by allowing the Jews to participate in other trades or businesses, their situation could be improved. When this policy failed, the king decided to banish the Jews altogether in 1290. They were to return only four centuries later, in 1655, at the invitation of Oliver Cromwell.

Anti-Jewish sentiments had also been fomented by religious prejudices and widespread bigotry. In the popular imagination, the Jews were specifically accused of outrageous crimes. The outbreak of the Black Death was attributed to the Jews. The disease made more victims among the Christians than among the Jews, whose hygienic practices evidently protected them in some measure. One reason more to blame them. According to wide- spread rumors, the Jews were accused of satanic ceremonies. [For example, they would obtain consecrated wafers from fallen Christians, men or women; the wafers were burned or stabbed, obviously a metonymical, symbolic act against Christianity. In the course of such ceremonies, the wafers would begin to bleed; the stream of blood flowed towards the Christians as if to denounce the crime. Jews suspected of the desecration of the host were immediately apprehended, tortured, and condemned to death together with their families. The most famous representation of this gruesome story is the one painted by Paolo Uccello, which can be seen in the Ducal Palace of Urbino. Art history students are taught to admire the painter's accomplishments in handling the perfect perspective of the black and white tile floor, the mastery use of contrasting color—the tiny white wafer standing out against a black background—but seldom are they reminded of the horrendous injustice perpetrated against innocent Jews.]

The Jews were also charged with the ritual murder of Christians, usually children. As many historians have pointed out, the medieval imagination is not responsible for inventing this story; its origins can be traced to the first century A.D., in the anti-Jewish writings of Apion, an Alexandrian Greek. Apion maintained that every year the Jews kidnapped a Greek, fattened him up, then sacrificed him and ate his flesh in the Jerusalem Temple. Ironically enough, the early Christians were also accused of sacrificing and eating "pagan" babies. For our understanding—which does not in any way mean justification—of the collective imagination that surrounds "The Prioress's Tale," it may be useful to remember that the first blood-libel case of the Middle Ages actually took place in England, at Norwich in 1144. The body of a young apprentice by the name of William was found in a wood on Easter Sunday. The Jews were accused of having lured

the young man into a home where he was crucified in mockery of Christ's death on the cross. The youth's body was solemnly buried in the cathedral where it was said to work miracles. Several other cases of blood-libel were reported in England prior to the expulsion of the Jews in 1290. One of them, which occurred at Lincoln in 1255, is Chaucer's acknowledged source for "The Prioress' Tale." The body of a child, later venerated as "Little St. Hugh," was found in the cesspool of a house located in the Jewish section of the town. Its owner, a Jew by the name of Copin, was immediately arrested. He confessed to the "crime" under torture and was condemned by King Richard III to be hanged. Ninety other members of the Jewish community were apprehended; eighteen of them were later executed. Chaucer's imagination and rhetoric considerably embroidered the facts, as every one who has read the tale knows only too well. The circumstantial detail of the cesspool was exploited by Chaucer as a springboard for his sadly prejudiced invective against the Jews:

> I seye that in a wardrobe they him threwe
> Whereas these Jewes purgen their entraille.
> O cursed folk of Herodes al newe
> What may your yvel entente yow availle?
> Mordre wol out, certein, it wol nat faille,
> And namely ther th'onour of God shal sprede,
> The blood out cryeth on your cursed dede.
>
> (Lines 120-126)

As I mentioned earlier, it was not the medieval mind which invented the ritual murder of Christians of which the Jews were accused, but its wide-spread accounts—including Chaucer's—certainly made a lasting impact on the collective imagination. Hard to believe as it may seem, the last case of blood-libel occurred in Russia in 1903. The story is told by Bernard Malamud in *The Fixer*.

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This list concentrates on books dealing with Christian anti-Semitism in the Middle Ages; only a few articles are included. It does not include works on medieval Jewish life nor, for the most part, does it directly address literary concerns. It does contain a few books on cultural studies, racism, postcolonialism, etc., that I have found helpful in attempting to understand the medieval version of the phenomenon (for additional information, see *MFN* [December 1988]).

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