

The Critics and the Prioress: Antisemitism, Criticism, and Chaucer's Prioress's Tale, by Heather Blurton and Hannah Johnson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017. Pp. 218. ISBN: 9780472130344.

Timely in its arrival during a period of renewed social upheaval, one in which medievalists face the burden of critically examining our collective methodologies and approaches to our subject matter as it is appropriated by and for white supremacist activities, whether Heather Blurton and Hannah Johnson intended for it to be political is irrelevant; this is a highly political—and intellectually important—critical study that should not be ignored or overlooked. Quite simply, this book is now the essential first stop for all scholars working on new projects related to the *Prioress's Tale*, and required reading for all scholars teaching and researching the *Prioress's Tale*.

Beginning with an Introduction that summarizes the problems and debates involved in this tale's interpretation, Blurton and Johnson move quickly into chapter 1, a retrospective of critical responses to the Tale's antisemitism from the nineteenth century through the present day. Their stated aim with this chapter is not to present new readings or interventions, but rather to “offer a particular kind of intellectual history, one that aspires to add a few insights regarding this unfolding conversation and the circumstances that conduced to make it what it is” (17); in this effort, they are highly successful. Their discussion of the shaping and reshaping of scholarship on this tale throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in response to critical movements is absorbing. The conclusion that “there are some significant shifts visible in twentieth-century scholarship on the *Prioress's Tale*, particularly following World War II” and that these trends “speak implicitly . . . to a desire on the part of scholars to exonerate Chaucer from the antisemitism of the tale” (54) is not startling; however, the subsequent detailing of the critical investments revealed (prioritizing ethical concerns or historical prerogatives and the relative merits of critical theory and historicism) provides opportunity for reflection on the disciplinary arguments that have shaped, and continue to shape, critical conversations—most often, and most frustratingly, as Blurton and Johnson point out, in the form of critical impasses that hinder our efforts to understand the Tale's “deeper rhetorical, ethical, and cultural structures” (55).

Chapter 2 takes on the subject of source and analogue study as a critical approach. Pointing out the deep ties of source studies to the origins of the field of Chaucer studies, and making use of theoretical discussions by Helen Cooper, Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, Roy Liuzza, and Allen Frantzen, Blurton

and Johnson remind us that “source studies as a critical practice . . . generally focus on the author’s practice, and attempt to view the text from a vantage point that privileges the author’s personal volition” (67). In the case of the *Prioress’s Tale*, by focusing on sources and analogues of the Tale, and especially on the idea that we are missing some key source that would reveal to us the “truth” of Chaucer’s invention versus borrowing, scholars historically have been able to sidestep the unanswerable question of how much of the antisemitic material in the Tale is Chaucer’s own, in favor of, for instance, classifying it as a Marian devotion and thus focusing on it as a genre entirely removed from the genre of ritual murder stories. Rather than seeking a hierarchical source background, relying on “models of filiation and descent” (63) that we know to be illusory and ideologically invested, Blurton and Johnson advocate an approach based in the network model set forth by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and theorized in support of examining plots and texts by Michael Sargent and Daniel Selden. They use this network model to demonstrate that the *Prioress’s Tale* does, indeed, participate in the network of Jewish ritual murder stories, showing how it “shifts our attention from the author to its cultural moment and his audience” (104) to argue that “what matters is not the question of whether or not the Prioress’s Tale meets the modern definition of a ritual murder accusation, but that it literally asks to be compared to one” (104)—offering a critically responsible reading that should serve as a blueprint for all future interpretations of this tale.

Chapter 3 reveals a “blind spot” in critical studies on the *Prioress’s Tale*: the ways in which at times scholars have performed antifeminist readings of the Prioress which double, however inadvertently, as an alibi for Chaucer concerning the tale’s antisemitism. The chapter is divided into three sections; the first part examines the practice of reading the teller-tale relationship as the hermeneutic key to the collection, an approach that reinforces the assumptions of the gendered portrait rather than interrogating them. Part two explores aesthetics and affect, especially the use of the heightened sentimentality of the character of the Prioress in the General Prologue as a key to understanding the story she tells as a satire. The third part focuses on the two main trends of feminist scholarship in the 1990s—the recuperative approach to women’s voices and experiences, which did not focus on the Prioress, and postcolonial medieval studies, which figured the Prioress as an Other because of her gender, thus aligning her with the Jews in alterity *contra* the dominant white male culture of the medieval period—suggesting that while not problematic as critical lenses generally, these approaches have allowed some critical truths about the Prioress to escape scrutiny. The chapter concludes with suggestions for further feminist critical work on the *Prioress’s Tale*.

In the final chapter, Blurton and Johnson look at five, fifteenth-century examples of the *Prioress's Tale* as a stand-alone text without the structure of the *Canterbury Tales*. In the critical tradition reviewed in this chapter, the discussion of the tale is organized around whether or not the absence of the Prioress, herself, amplifies or mutes the antisemitism in the tale: an argument with no clear consensus. These fifteenth-century instances found in devotional anthologies reveal the tale to be legible as an example of orthodox fifteenth-century devotional literature and Chaucer, as its writer, to be a seminal author of English vernacular literature. Blurton and Johnson lay out the two tracks of the *Prioress's Tale*—its isolated presence in devotional miscellanies, and its situated presence in copies of the *Canterbury Tales*—to show that it is difficult to ascertain whether it was Chaucer's art, or the tale's Marian devotion, that was most compelling for the audience; ultimately, they conclude, "what does seem clear . . . is that for Chaucer's first critics, the antisemitism of the tale does not appear to have been one of the themes around which their responses were organized" (185). The end of the chapter positions this ambiguity in the tale's early reception against its much clearer post-Holocaust reception to explore the dissonance of reading the tale's antisemitism against Chaucer's canonic reputation, arguing, together with the brief Afterword—correctly, and importantly—that any zero-sum approach that reads Chaucer as an either/or figure is reductionist scholarship that does a disservice to our ability to understand and interpret this tale.

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