MADAME EGGLENTyne, GEOFFREY CHAUCER AND THE PROBLEM OF MEDIEVAL ANTI-SEMITISM

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The history of the criticism of Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale affords proof, if proof be needed, that the attitudes and events of their own days affect how critics read literature, even literature of the distant past. As Florence Ridley notes, the question of anti-semitism in the Prioress’s Tale has in recent years become an important critical issue, to the extent that most contemporary readings of the text seem to involve, explicitly or implicitly, a response to this problem. The explanation is not far to seek. Critics cannot view the Tale after the holocaust in quite the same way as they viewed it before. Since the holocaust anti-semitism has become academically discredited: it is now one of the few generally acknowledged intellectual heresies. So for a critic today to expound the Tale and to ignore the question of anti-semitism would strike most educated people as displaying a detachment from life bordering on the irresponsible, if not on the perverse.

Most who have written on the problem of the anti-semitism in the Prioress’s Tale have been literary critics by calling. Few historians of Judaism, or of anti-semitism, seem to have addressed the question. As a result some of the analysis, though painstaking and well intentioned,


has been historically and philosophically confused. The sort of confusion that can arise is illustrated by John Archer’s article, ‘The structure of anti-semitism in the Prioress’s Tale’. Archer, unlike some, perceives the importance of defining anti-semitism. His stated aim is ‘to examine the operation of the imagery in the Prioress’s Tale against the background of the tradition, and in the process to extrapolate three or four categories of imagery that might be used to analyze anti-semitism in so far as it functions in other literary works.’ He stresses the transformation of society that takes place within the Tale. The opening lines depict the secular authorities as being subservient to the Old Law: they sustain the Jews in their usurious practices, which are ‘hateful to Crist’ (492). At the end of the Tale, however, in the person of the Provost, they break with the Jews and with the old dispensation, and embrace the New Law of Christ. The decisive change is wrought by the clergeon’s death, which is ‘a sacrifice as well as a murder because it has loosened the hold of the Old Law over the secular positive law’. The clergeon is a Christ-figure and his death recapitulates Christ’s death, which by redeeming man from the curse and bondage of the Old Law transformed society. All this is moderately persuasive till we recall that the purpose of Archer’s article is to lay bare the structure of anti-semitism in the Prioress’s Tale. Anti-semitism turns out for Archer to be identical with the central tenets of the Christian faith! Archer shows not a flicker of awareness of the radical implications of this analysis, which at a theological level risks delegitimizing Christianity, and at a literary level, if extrapolated, appears to brand much of European literature as anti-semitic.

Clearly we need a more historically-informed view of the nature of anti-semitism if we are to deal responsibly with the question of anti-semitism in a given piece of literature. Anti-semitism is not a charge to be lightly bandied about: it is more than ‘queasy, resentful feelings about Jews’. The definition of the phenomenon is not self-evident. The term ‘anti-semitism’ itself did not emerge till the late

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3 It is as an historian of Judaism with an interest in anti-semitism that I offer the present paper. I am grateful to Carole Weinberg and John Anderson who criticized an earlier version of it and drew my attention to literature which I had missed.


5 Archer, ‘Structure of anti-semitism’, 45.

6 Ibid., 52.

7 Significantly Archer uses the terms ‘anti-semitism’ and ‘anti-Judaism’ interchangeably. Rosemary Radford Ruether, Faith and fratricide: the theological roots of anti-semitism (London: Search Press, 1975), also sees anti-semitism as bound up inextricably with the original Gospel message, but she is a professional Christian theologian, well aware of the radicalism of her views and prepared to take full responsibility for them.

8 The words were used by Lionel Trilling in an attack on T.S. Eliot’s anti-semitism. Trilling showed commendable courage in charging Eliot with anti-semitism, but it is a pity that, even in a context heavy with irony, he should have so trivialized the issue. Dislike or resentment of Jews (however reprehensible) does not in itself constitute anti-semitism. For the Trilling-Eliot exchange see Christopher Ricks, T.S. Eliot and prejudice (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 26-7.
nineteenth century, when it was used by the proponents of a worldview (widely deemed then as acceptable), which embraced three main tenets: first, Jewish culture is inferior to Germanic culture; second, the Jews are plotting to undermine Germanic culture and to foist their own cultural values on society; and, third, in the interests of progress and civilization society has a duty to defend itself against Jewish domination and to purge itself of decadent Jewish culture. Nineteenth-century anti-semitism was often racist in that it espoused the belief that culture and race were interconnected, and so the inferior Jewish culture was seen as the product of inferior Jewish genes. However, racism, in this precise technical sense, was not fundamental to the anti-semitic point of view.

Nineteenth-century anti-semitism presented itself, often aggressively, in secular and scientific terms, and some of its proponents fastidiously distanced themselves from the crude ‘Jew bashing’ of earlier centuries. It has, consequently, been argued that modern secular anti-semitism should not be confused with the religious anti-Judaism of the middle ages. If this view is correct, then the problem of anti-semitism in the Prioress’s Tale is solved at a stroke. What we have in Chaucer may be anti-Judaism (and deplorable), but not anti-semitism in any exact sense. The dissimilarities can, however, be overplayed. The fact is that mediaeval Christendom espoused a set of beliefs which are strikingly congruent in content and structure with the nineteenth-century anti-semitic creed: Judaism is inferior to Christianity; the Jews, motivated by malevolence, and in alliance with the powers of darkness, are seeking to overthrow Christian society; the Church, in the interests of humanity, has a sacred duty to protect society from the baleful influence of the Jews and Judaism. Nineteenth-century anti-semitism was not a bolt from the blue. Rather it represented the modernization of the anti-semitism of the middle ages. At a time when religious language and religious categories were losing their power, nineteenth-century anti-semites found a modern, intellectually more acceptable way of restating the mediaeval position. In much the same way nineteenth-century Christian theologians, in the face of the onslaught of Darwinism, found more modern and acceptable ways of restating the biblical doctrine of creation. There is, then, then,
a deep, underlying continuity between the modern and the mediaeval phenomena, and in virtue of this continuity the term anti-semitism can be applied properly to both.

There is a consensus among critics that the Prioress's Tale has been carefully constructed not simply in terms of a limited, local incident, but in terms of timeless absolutes. It is intended to represent the conflict between truth and error, between good and evil. The clergeon died as a martyr (579, 610, 680), because he testified to his faith, not because he disturbed the peace and quiet of the neighbourhood. It was the content of his song that raised the Jews' ire. The Jews as a whole are blackened, and it is this which makes the story anti-semitic. They conspire as a group to kill the boy (even though only one of them actually slits his throat), and this is recognized by the Provost who holds them all guilty and has them all killed. The confrontation between the seeking mother and the Jews (593–606) is handled in a masterly way, so as to put the Jews as a whole in the worst possible light. Unmoved by the mother's pitiful distress, each and every Jew (601) denies that he has seen the boy: 'they seyde "nay"' (603). Not a flicker of conscience, no attempt to soften the answer, or even to be economical with the truth, only barefaced villany! There are racist undertones here. It is often said that mediaeval Christian anti-semitism was not, unlike much modern anti-semitism, racist, in that it always left open a way of escape for the Jew through conversion. This is broadly true, but it should also be borne in mind that there were some Christian authorities in the middle ages who found it very hard to accept the sincerity of any Jewish conversion. Hence the whole tragic problem of the Conversos in Spain. Conversion did not always save the Jew from harrassment or even death. It is chilling so early in the Tale to find the line: 'Children an heep, yeomen of Cristen blood' (497). Why 'blood'? Was Chaucer strapped for a rhyme for 'stood', or is there a more sinister note here? Is Christian blood any different from Jewish blood?

Running like a refrain through the Tale is the description of the Jews as 'cursed' (570, 574, 578, 599, 631, 638). ‘Cursed Jews’ is not a generalized term of abuse like ‘damned Frenchies’. It means very literally that Jews are under a divine curse, a curse which they called down upon their own heads when they goaded Pilate into crucifying Jesus: 'When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children' (Matthew 27:24f). Jews were Christ-killers, and they killed Christ with their eyes open, thus taking upon themselves

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11 The Conversos (also called Marranos and New Christians) were Jews who, at least outwardly, had embraced Christianity. See the article 'New Christians', Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), xii, cols. 1022–24.
and their descendants the consequences of that dreadful deed. This charge was used throughout the middle ages to deny Jews the due process of law, and to justify lynchings and pogroms. Note in this context line 578: 'The blood out crieth on youre cursed dede'. There is a clear echo here of the story of Cain and Abel. God says to Cain: 'What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now thou art cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive they brother's blood from thy hand . . . a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold thou has driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that everyone that findeth me shall slay me' (Genesis 4:10–14). In Christian exegesis Cain is often seen as typifying the Jew (the wanderer rejected by both God and man); Abel is taken as a type of the just man, or of the Christian, or (most significantly) of Christ, on whom the Jew tries to vent his spite. 12

The Prioress invites us in all kinds of subtle but not unmistakable ways to see the death of Mary's little devotee as being parallel to the death of Mary's son. To this extent Archer's analysis of the Tale is sound. In murdering the clergeon the Jews are giving rein to the same evil nature which led them to kill Christ. The parallelism is very explicit in some forms of the tradition on which Chaucer has drawn: the boy is ritually murdered, crucified in repetition and mockery of the death of Christ. 13 There is no hint of ritual murder in Chaucer. Nevertheless the parallelism between Jesus and the clergeon is clearly implied. It comes out, for example, at 574f: 'O cursed folk of Herodes all newe,/ What may youre yvel entente yow availle?'. Just as the Jew Herod had tried to kill the infant Christ, but killed the holy innocents instead, so had the Jews killed the innocent clergeon. The reference to the slaughter of the innocents, which picks up allusions to the liturgy for Childermas in the Prioress's Prologue is further strengthened by 625ff: 'His mother swowynnge by his beere lay;/ Unnethe myghte the peple that was theere/ This newe Rachel brynge fro his beere'. This echoes the application in Matthew 2:18 of Jeremiah 40:1 to the slaughter of the innocents: 'In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they were not'. Implicit parallelism between Christ and the clergeon may also lie behind 628–34: 'With torment and with shameful deeth echon,/ This provost dooth thise Jewes for to sterue/ That of this mordre wiste, and

that anon./ He nolde no swich cursednesse observe./ “Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve”;/ Therfore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe,/ And after that he heng them by the lawe’. Though the Provost may have been acting within his legal powers (a point carefully stressed in ‘by the lawe’), the execution is, in effect, summary. Why the haste? Because the Provost was unwilling to abide such ‘cursednesse’. The murder of the clergeon was a curse-bringing act, like the murder of Jesus. By taking prompt and decisive action the Provost ensured that the divine curse would fall on the Jews and not on the community at large.

At 558ff the Prioress gives expression to one of the standard charges of mediaeval anti-semitism, namely, that the Jews are in league with the devil: ‘Oure first foo, the serpent Sathanas,/ That hath in Jues herte his waspes nest,/ Up swal, and seide, “O Hebrayk peple, alias!/ Is this to yow a thyng that is honest,/ That swich a boy shal walken as hym lest/ In youre despit, and synge of swich sentence,/ Which is agayn youre14 lawes reverence?”’ As early as the New Testament a special relationship is alleged to exist between the Jews and the devil. John 8:44 is the locus classicus: ‘Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him.’ The Book of Revelation twice savagely refers to ‘the synagogue of Satan’ (2:9, 3:9). Such language may have begun as straightforward abuse, but later it took on more sinister, theological connotations: the Jews were sorcerers able to do evil by the power of the devil. Some even regarded them as devils incarnate. The pact between the devil and the Jews is a common theme of the mystery plays. Lines 558ff of the Prioress’s Tale are strongly reminiscent of the scenes in the mystery plays in which devils are shown inciting the Jews to demand the crucifixion of Jesus.15

At the very outset of the Tale the Jews are put in a bad light by linking them with usury – the activity which more than any other distorted their relationships with their non-Jewish neighbours and brought down opprobrium on their heads: ‘Ther was in Asye, in a great citee,/ Among Cristene folk a Jewerye,/ Sustened by a lord of that contree/ For foul usure and lucre of vileynye,/ Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye’ (488-92). The Prioress could have found no surer way to dispose her audience against the Jews than by raising the charge of usury. The charge is incidental to the main thrust of the story and plays no direct part in the development of the plot, but it is more than

14 The variant reading ‘oure lawes’ (see Riverside Chaucer, 915; Boyd, The Prioress’s Tale, 142-3), defended by some, would identify Satan even more closely with the Jews, but the idea that Satan was the author of the Jewish law (= ? the Old Testament) is theologically very dubious, and it seems gratuitous to accuse the Prioress of heresy as well as of anti-semitism.

local colour. Dramatically it helps to justify the gory punishment meted out to the Jews at the end.

There are, in fact, as Yunck has pointed out, technically two distinct charges here: usury was the lending of money on interest; 'lucre of vileynye' was profiteering. Both were condemned in canon law, and in using such precise legal terms the Prioress is showing herself a well-informed daughter of the Church. Her knowledge also comes out in her claim that usury and profiteering are 'hateful to Crist and to his compaignye'. At first sight this is odd since one would assume that at least the prohibition of usury was based on the Old Testament (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35–37; Deuteronomy 23:19–20), and not on the New. However, canon lawyers often appealed to Luke 6:35 (Vulgata: mutum date, nihil inde sperantes), a fact which the Prioress is presumably supposed to know. A New Testament text certainly lies behind 'lucre of vileynye'. As the gloss turpe lucrum in the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts indicates, it is 1 Timothy 3:8: 'Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre' (Vulgata: diaconos similiter pudicos, non bilingues, non multo vino deditos, non turpe lucrum sectantes).

The charge of usury was well founded: Jews were heavily involved in moneylending in the middle ages. There were a number of reasons for this. Other professions and means of livelihood were not readily open to them. Since the various trades and crafts were dominated by guilds which were often anti-Jewish, it was difficult for a Jew to become, for example, a carpenter or a stone-mason. It was also difficult for them to break into the feudal system of land tenure. In fact it was not advisable for them to hold much land, for if they tied up their wealth in real estate they ran the risk of losing everything when, as so often happened, they were forced to flee. The only means of livelihood readily open to them were trading and moneylending, in which they put to some use the surplus of money they acquired through trading.

The civil authorities actively encouraged Jewish moneylending. They used the Jews as a caste of untouchables to do a necessary but 'dirty' job. The financial systems of the mediaeval world were primitive in the extreme. There was only a rudimentary bureaucracy to collect taxes, and few sources of cash existed from which one could get a loan to finance a project or to tide one over a financial crisis. The chronic shortage of money and credit particularly affected kings and

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17 The rabbinic interpretation of these laws was initially very strict (Bava Metzia, chap. 5), but circumstances later forced the easing of the restrictions (Maimonides, *Yad*: *Malchut*, chap. 5; *Shulhan Arukh*: *Yoreh De'ah*, 157–77.

18 The source of Chaucer’s wording is unclear. The Authorized Version ‘filthy lucre’ goes back through Rheims, Geneva and Cranmer to Tyndale. Wycliffe (c. 1380) translates ‘not suynge loule wynynngis’
princes, who, though potentially rich, were often short of hard cash if the need to wage war or to build a castle made sudden demands on the exchequer. Jews were encouraged to perform the function both of substitute tax-collectors and bankers. Through various privileges the state promoted their wealth, and then creamed off a proportion of that wealth into the state coffers. As Lilian Winstanley succinctly puts it: "The Jews were permitted to fleece thoroughly the people of the realm on condition that the king fleeced them". This placed the Jews in an invidious position socially and exacerbated their already fraught relations with the Christian population.

The social basis of Jewish moneylending is not entirely lost on the Prioress: the ghetto is sustained by 'a lord of that contree'. Once again the Prioress reveals that she is au fait with Church teaching and politics. The Church often had occasion to rebuke Christian princes for allowing and for benefiting from Jewish usury. The Church had only limited powers of physical coercion. To compel compliance with its wishes it had to rely on the secular authorities, whom it had to persuade to do its will. The negative picture of civil authority at the beginning of the Tale is offset, as Archer rightly notes, by the picture of the Provost at the end. Here was a secular authority who, acting in concert with the Church, knew how to defend good Christians against the blaspheming Jews. Article LXVII ('On Jewish Usury') of the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 provides an illuminating commentary on the opening lines of the Tale:

The more the Christian religion refrains from exacting interest [usura], the more does the perfidy of the Jews in this practice increase, so that, in a short time, they exhaust the wealth of Christians. Desiring, therefore, to protect the Christians in this matter from being immoderately burdened by the Jews, we ordain by synodal decree that if, on any pretext, Jews extort heavy and excessive interest from Christians, all relationships with Christians shall be withdrawn from them, until they make adequate restitution for their exorbitant exactions. The Christians also shall be compelled, if need be, by ecclesiastical punishment against which no appeal will be heard, to abstain from business dealings with the Jews.

Moreover, we enjoin princes not to be hostile to the Christians on this account, but rather to endeavour to restrain the Jews from so great an oppression.

And under threat of the same penalty we decree that the Jews shall be compelled to make good the tithes and offerings owed to the Churches, which the Churches were accustomed to receive from the houses and other possessions of the Christians, before these came, by whatever entitlement, into the hands of the Jews, in order that the Churches may be preserved against loss.

19 Lilian Winstanley, Chaucer: the Prioress's Tale, the Tale of Sir Thopas (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1922), lvi.

20 Note also the Prioress's political aside at 642-3: 'This abbot, which was an hooly man./ As monkses been - or elles oghte be - ...'. The suggestion that the 'lord of the contree' and the 'provost' are 'not supposed to be the Christian governors of a Christian land' (Archer, 'Structure of anti-Semitism', 52) is unnecessary. The Church was often at loggerheads with the secular powers within Christendom, and frequently complained that Christian rulers did not behave in a sufficiently Christian way.

Though the Prioress is Chaucer’s creature, her voice cannot automatically be identified with his. An author, holding up a mirror to life, may express through his characters ideas which he himself would repudiate. However, the author may find himself on morally dubious ground if he insists on being an out-and-out realist, a recorder but not a commentator. He is responsible for his creatures, and he cannot be allowed carte blanche to publicize any point of view purely and simply on the grounds that there are people who say such things. Inevitably he has his own perspective and where this clashes with the perspective of his characters he can reasonably be expected to find ways of distancing himself from them. The more momentous the issues and the deeper the clash, the more imperative does such distancing become. If the author is totally self-effacing he can hardly complain if the reader assumes that his voice and the voice of his character are one and the same. Is it possible to distance Chaucer from the Prioress? An influential body of criticism claims that it is. Two main lines of argument have been followed.

The first involves playing off the General Prologue against the Tale. An ironic, satirical tone pervades Chaucer’s treatment of the Prioress in the General Prologue. Her nice manners (139–40: ‘And peyned hire to counterfete cheere/ Of court’) and fashionable dress (151: ‘Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was’) sit uneasily with her spiritual calling. She is lax in the observance of monastic rules: she eats roast meat, keeps lap-dogs and wears a brooch with the ambiguous inscription *Amor vincit omnia* (162). The description of her physical charms in terms of the conventions of courtly love poetry, ending with the understatement, ‘For, hardly, she was not under-grove’ (156), is comical. Even her linguistic accomplishments (and her finishing school) are made the butt of barbed comment: ‘And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,/ After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,/ For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe’ (124–6). She weeps easily – at the suffering of small animals: ‘She was so charitable and so pitous/ She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous/ Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde’ (143–5). The bathetic ‘mous’ is surely mocking. A picture emerges of a rather large, sentimental, vain woman. But against all this must be set the verve and passion of the Prioress’s actual words. The brilliance of her narrative, its burning sincerity and its persuasiveness show that Chaucer was prepared to give her a fair hearing, without a shadow of satire or mockery to cloud her actual speech. Critics have rightly remarked in particular on the power of the Prologue to the Tale. Here is a liturgical composition of the very highest order. Whether or not we feel a tension between the Tale and the General Prologue, and how we interpret that tension, once felt, will depend in the final analysis on our own innate moral sense. We may see the Prioress’s concern for the suffering of small animals, in contrast to her relish at the hanging and drawing of the Jews, as evidence of her stunted moral development. But we may
equally choose to see her love of small animals (so modern in its concern for animal welfare!) as all of a piece with her horror at the fate of the little clergeon. Chaucer keeps his own counsel, and offers no clear guidance. He has simply given us a slice of life—a well-observed, full-blooded portrait of a certain human type. If he meant to distance himself from the Prioress's views then the means by which he has chosen to do so are inadequate.

A second line of argument used to exculpate Chaucer is to urge that he is simply drawing on traditional material: he is repeating what was in his sources, not inventing anything significantly new.

In fact, the Prioress’s Tale can be seen as representing one of the more moderate forms of the tradition; it could have been worse, a lot more lurid and virulently anti-Semitic. At least in Chaucer, as we noted earlier, the clergeon is not crucified, as he is in some other versions; the murder is not a ritual murder, nor is the blood used for nefarious purposes. Moreover, it is urged, since Jews had been expelled from England in 1290, the Jews of the Prioress’s Tale are not drawn from life, but from literature and folklore. They are not perceived as real people, but almost as mythical beings, like hobgoblins. These arguments, however, can easily be stood on their head. It is the very fact that Chaucer is writing within a well-established tradition that demonstrates beyond all doubt the anti-Semitic character of the Tale. The tradition was so well known that the audience would have confidently classified and interpreted it in a certain way. Elements not explicitly mentioned could still have been read in by them. And although the Prioress may not have been to ‘Parys’, Chaucer himself had travelled widely on the continent. In fact a realistic topographical detail at lines 493–4 suggests that he was directly acquainted with Jewish ghettos.

The implication that because the Jews of the Tale may not be perceived as real people, Chaucer or the Prioress are in some sense exonerated, shows insensi-

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22 See the magnificent collection of sources and analogues assembled by Carleton F. Brown, A study of the miracle of Our Lady told by Chaucer's Prioress, Chaucer Society, Second Series, no. 45 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trübner, 1910 [for 1906]). In some versions of the Tale (e.g. Brown p. 13) the boy sings not the Alma redemptoris mater but the Gaude, Maria, dwelling particularly on the line Erubescat iudaeus infelix qui dicit christum ex wseph semme esse natum (‘May the unlucky Jew be covered with shame, who says that Christ was born of Joseph's seed’).

Curiously this line has been inscribed in a scholarly hand in the top margin of fol. 39r of Rylands Hebrew 31, a manuscript of Isaac ben Joseph of Corbeil's Sefer mitzvot qatan, copied in northern France or the Rhineland in 1346. The Latin graffito has nothing to do with the content of the Hebrew text. Whoever added it probably recognized that the manuscript was Jewish and wished to signal his disapproval by scrawling in it this taunting line.

23 'And thurgh the strete men myghte ride or wende,/ For it was free and open eyther ende' This suggests that Chaucer knew that most ghettos were closed with gates, whereas the ghetto which he was envisaging was the less common sort which was open and used as a general thoroughfare. The plot demands that the boy should go regularly through the ghetto, so an open ghetto is required by the basic mechanism of the story. However, critical ingenuity has found deeper meaning in the ghetto's openness: 'The ghetto sprawls like a devouring monster, “free and open at eyther ende” (494), and when this analogue of the pageants' Hell-Mouth is coupled with the scatological image of the disposal of the body “Where as these Jewes purgen hire entraile” (573), one hesitantly recalls the equation of money with excrement found in Freud and folktales' (Archer, 'Structure of anti-Semitism', 50).
tivity to the history of anti-semitism. It was precisely such mythologization (a process of dehumanization unchecked, as history shows, by face-to-face contact with Jews in the flesh) which hardened people to committing appalling atrocities against them.

The Prioress's Tale belongs to the large and varied mediaeval genre of Miracles of the Virgin. More precisely it can be assigned to a sub-group of that genre consisting of tales which link the Virgin's miracle to the blood-libel. The first recorded mediaeval case of the blood-libel was at Norwich in 1144: the story was written up with considerable flair by Thomas of Monmouth. The veneration of the Blessed William of Norwich provided a useful source of income for centuries for Norwich cathedral, and to this day on rood screens in churches around Norwich representations of the foul murder of William can be found. 24 Within a short time of the Norwich incident blood-libel accusations were springing up all over Europe. Between 1144 and the 1390s, when Chaucer composed the bulk of the Canterbury Tales, at least twenty-three instances in England, France, Germany, Spain and Czechoslovakia are documented. 25 Another famous English example was the case of Hugh of Lincoln, supposedly done to death by the Jews in 1255. Hugh, like the Blessed William of Norwich, was venerated in the local cathedral. Hugh's story is recounted in the Annals of Waverley and by Matthew Paris. Significantly, it is the subject of a ninety-two stanza Anglo-Norman ballad dating probably from the late thirteenth century – a hint, perhaps, of how these stories were spread. Hugh's case is particularly relevant because it is mentioned at the end of the Prioress's Tale: 'O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also/ With cursed Jewes, as it is notable,/ For it is but a litel while ago,/ Preye eek for us, we synful folk unstable,/ That of his mercy God so merciable/ On us his grete mercy multiplie,/ For reverence of his mooder Marie. Amen' (684–90). Chaucer had close connections with Lincoln cathedral. 26 He clearly knew Hugh's story. Indeed, it is puzzling that he did not simply tell Hugh's story, which is in all essentials parallel to the clergeon's. Why does he go back in time, to a nameless Christian youth in a distant land when he knows a recent case so close to home? Have we here, perhaps, a later edition to the Tale? This, then, is the tradition within which Chaucer was working. He knew what he was doing, and his readers knew what he was doing. He set out to create a version of a well-known type of anti-semitic tale, and he succeeded wonderfully well.

Chaucer's Prioress's Tale may fairly be described as an anti-


26 See Riverside Chaucer, 916; Boyd, The Prioress's Tale, 19.
semitic tract. Most anti-semitic writing has been poor and shabby, but here is a piece which displays fine intellect and consummate artistry. Artistically it may be the best anti-semitic tract ever written. Chaucer was a child of his time — no better, no worse in his attitudes towards the Jews than many of his contemporaries. But that is hardly a defence. The verdict that he was anti-semitic is not entirely based on hindsight or on the morality of a later age. There were wiser heads throughout the middle ages ready to defend the Jews, at least against grosser charges such as the blood libel.27 There were even some who argued, on good theological grounds, that the Gospel demanded that the Jews be treated with compassion and respect.28

This sorry conclusion leaves us with a reflection and a problem. The reflection is on the amorality of art. Art, being largely a matter of form and proportion, can, it seems, be used to articulate morally bad ideas as well as morally good. One may acknowledge the aesthetic power of a piece of writing without endorsing its sentiments.

The problem is what to do with the Prioress’s Tale today, now that it has entered the canon of English literature. Lumiansky’s exclusion of it from his 1948 prose version of the Canterbury Tales does more credit to his heart than his head.29 Such censorship is dangerous and futile. We should also resist the temptation of apologetically re-reading the text in such a way that it is made to say the opposite of what it appears to say, and to express politically correct opinions. That sort of hermeneutic has been widely used within religions to make classic religious texts acceptable to later ages. It is hardly proper in the academic study of Chaucer. Chaucer, though a classic, does not have the status of Scripture. Applied to Chaucer such an approach is fundamentally dishonest, and the dishonesty will be rapidly perceived. The only course of action left open is to ensure that when the Prioress’s Tale is expounded, the basic facts of anti-semitism are expounded as well. Some critics may be irked when asked to play the historian or the moral ‘nanny’, but in this case there is no honourable alternative. Art may be neutral on morality; the criticism and appreciation of art cannot.

27 See Poliakov, Anti-Semitism, vol. I, 60–1; further, J. Parkes, The Jew in the medieval community (London: The Sonecino Press, 1938), 123–49. Note Pope Innocent IV’s eloquent bull of 1247 against the blood libel: ‘Although the Holy Scriptures enjoin the Jews, “Thou shalt not kill”, and forbid them to touch any dead body at Passover, they are wrongly accused of partaking of the heart of a murdered child at Passover, with the charge that this is prescribed by their laws, since the truth is completely the opposite. Whenever a corpse is found somewhere, it is to the Jews that the murder is wickedly imputed. They are persecuted on the pretext of such fables or of others quite similar; and contrary to the privileges that have been granted them by the apostolic Holy See, they are deprived of trial and of regular judgement; in mockery of all justice, they are stripped of their belongings, starved, imprisoned and tortured, so that their fate is perhaps worse than that of their fathers in Egypt . ’ (Poliakov, Anti-Semitism, 61).
