

Persecutory Chaucer, Revelatory Chaucer:  
Mimetic Theory and the Double-Voiced Satire of “The Prioress’s Tale”

by

Matthew Yodhes

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree

With Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Winter 2020



## **Acknowledgements**

I first wish to thank my brilliant advisor, Professor Karla Taylor, for guiding me through the labyrinth of Chaucerian criticism and for her encouraging and concise critiques through the quixotic writing process of a thesis. If this thesis has any “sentence” or “solaas,” it is thanks to my conversations with her. I couldn’t have asked for a better advisor.

And many thanks to my cohort, whose commiseration in the trials and tribulations of this enormous task helped make it bearable—even enjoyable. I will miss you all and wish you success in all of your future endeavors.

To my English 495 and 496 professors, Cathy Sanok and Scotti Parrish. I wouldn’t have had any clue on how to write a thesis or go about editing one without you both, nor could I have finished this thesis in the time allotted without you. Your guidance was crucial.

To Professor Scott Lyons, who introduced me to the wonderful world of Mimetic Theory and encouraged me to write a thesis in the first place. I wouldn’t be here without your encouragement and friendship.

To my best friend Matthew Dodd. Thank you for being the outside pair of eyes always open to reading this thesis piecemeal and for always encouraging my writing. You’re the best.

To my family, for supporting me and my return to University. Anything I have achieved, I have achieved through your support and care. I love you all.

## Abstract

Mimetic theory and the categories of persecution text and revelatory text allow us to explain how the satire of “The Prioress’s Tale” functions by giving us a vocabulary to apply to its irony and double voicing. The Prioress’s voice earnestly attempts to form a persecution text out of her tale by scapegoating the Jews while Chaucer’s voice inserts moments of dissonance which allow a reader to see her scapegoating as arbitrary—thus creating a satirical revelatory text. These moments of dissonance include setting the tale in Asia, the mirrored doubling of Christianity onto Judaism, Chaucer’s depiction of Jewish punishment and his allusion to the whited sepulcher through the “tombe of marbul stones cleere.” Chaucerian satire in “The Prioress’s Tale” gives persecutory antisemitic readers an opportunity at revelation by seeing the error in their antisemitic thinking. For those already against antisemitism, the tale shows how Marian miracles and ritual murder accusations perpetuated persecution. The tale is ultimately a satirical warning against the Prioress’s uncritical and imitative piety as potentially leading to and perpetuating persecution. Modern criticism responds to these persecutory and revelatory readings through their hard and soft readings of the tale respectively.

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## Introduction

In recent years antisemitism emerged as the burning point of contention in the criticism of “The Prioress’s Tale.” Indeed, the unabashed and ubiquitous antisemitism on show in the tale prods as the “iren hoot” “amydde the ers” for modern Chaucerian critics. As the world grows increasingly hostile and vigilant towards persecution of any kind, critics seek either to reconcile, contextualize, apologize or condemn Chaucer, the Prioress and/or their tale. This new concern for antisemitism in Prioress criticism remains radical in its diversity and divergence amongst itself and compared to older criticism. Henry Ansgar Kelly relays that “The tale attracted no special attention until after the Second World War: and the antisemitism found within the tale “was seen as typical”,<sup>1</sup> something common to stories in the middle ages. It was once believed that Jews were swapped interchangeably with Saracens and Romans as the persecutors necessary for stories of Christian martyrdom, just as Russians and Middle Easterners tend to be swapped as the “big bad” of Hollywood action thrillers. Nowadays, the very presence of antisemitism in a work of fiction requires strict scrutiny.

The presence of antisemitism in the Prioress’s Tale is of course undeniable.

To the Prioress, the Jews are the “Cursed folk of Herodes<sup>2</sup>”, connected with the biblical King Herod’s slaughter of the Holy Innocents<sup>3</sup>. The Prioress’s depiction only gets worse as she

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<sup>1</sup> Blurton, Heather, and Hannah R. Johnson. *The Critics and the Prioress: Antisemitism, Criticism, and Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey. “The Prioress’s Tale.” In *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann. (Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 2005), line 574.

<sup>3</sup> Haskell, Ann S. *Essays on Chaucer’s Saints*. Studies in English Literature ; v. 107. (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 46ff.

accuses the Jews of slaughtering her own manufactured holy innocent. In the tale, the “litel clergeon” who knows little more than that he loves the Virgin Mary sings “Alma Redemptoris Mater” through what is effectively a Jewish ghetto. For the supposed crime of lacking reverence to Jewish law, the Jewish community, goaded by Satan himself, pays a “homycide” to kill the clergeon. For his “litel” piety, this seven-year-old boy gets his throat “kitte” and his body tossed into a privy. “O cursed folk of Herodes!” Through the miraculous intervention of Mother Mary, the throat-less boy throats more “Alma Redemptoris Mater” and the Christian community discovers his body. The law then acts on the Jews without reverence. For their supposed crimes the “provost” on behalf of the Christian community brutally murders the Jews: “with wilde hors he dide hem [the Jews] drawe, / And after that he heng hem by the lawe.”<sup>4</sup> The clergeon’s body is taken to the nearby abbey where he explains that upon his death Mary placed a “greyn” upon his tongue which allowed for his post-mortem antiphon. The “greyn” is removed and the clergeon’s body is placed in a “tombe of marbul stones cleere.”<sup>5</sup> The Prioress ends the tale by referencing the ritual murder accusation of another boy, Little Saint Hugh of Lincoln and a pleading refrain on mercy for the sinful.

While the depiction of the Jews in “The Prioress’s Tale” is obviously and overtly antisemitic, the purpose of this antisemitism is much less clear. When critics or readers declare a work antisemitic, they tend to be making judgements on authorial intent or an overall effect of the work. That is, an antisemitic work emerges from an author who holds an antisemitic ideology to be true or that the work itself in some way normalizes, endorses and encourages antisemitic thinking. Authorial intent, an already impossible concept to pin down, is further complicated

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<sup>4</sup>Chaucer, lines 633-34.

<sup>5</sup>Chaucer, line 681.

within *The Canterbury Tales* because of the nesting doll of authors the frame story creates. We must consider Chaucer's intent and ideology; the Prioress's same; and the Chaucer's purpose for whatever intent and ideology he gives the Prioress. The contexts of the tale need also be considered. This includes its historical context, its context within its genre and against its analogues, as well as its context as a tale within *The Canterbury Tales* and compared against Chaucer's depiction of its teller in "The General Prologue." With these considerations in mind, treatments of "The Prioress's Tale" have tended to fall into "hard" and "soft" readings, depending if they place the tale's antisemitism on Chaucer or the Prioress.

"Soft" readings of "The Prioress's Tale" find fault with Chaucer, declaring him an antisemite or his work antisemitic, disparaging his time and its productions. These readings range from shrugging apologia, attempting their best to excuse or sweep away a cherished author's faults, to frank condemnations of Chaucer's prejudice in spite of his more tolerable views and his exceptional craftsmanship. If one takes Chaucer's prejudice to be real, his literary skill emerges as a real threat to tolerance. Such readings oft, as Emmy Stark Zitter does, caution about the perils of not carefully qualifying such a "dangerously effective anti-Semitic tale"<sup>6</sup> when teaching it to nonacademic audiences.

The necessity of such qualifications for modern nonacademic readers inevitably comes off as condescending, as the efficacy of "The Prioress's Tale" in spreading antisemitic ideas appears lackluster at best and largely nonexistent. Though "The Prioress's Tale" shares roots with blood libel stories and ritual murder accusations that are the bread and butter of antisemitic

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<sup>6</sup> Zitter, Emmy Stark. "Anti-Semitism in Chaucer's Prioress's Tale." In *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism*, ed. Robert W. Frank, 1:277–84. 25. (Pennsylvania State University, 1990), 282.

propaganda, it has not specifically shown up as part of said propaganda, unlike other “problematic” works of English Literature such as *The Merchant of Venice*. This to me indicates another level to “The Prioress’s Tale.” Soft readings also inevitably suffer from the fact that the more obvious an instance of antisemitism is, the more difficult it is to claim it’s effective in proselytizing its audience towards antisemitism. To be able to point out the antisemitism in the tale as problematic is to undermine its effectiveness. Persuasive antisemitism, one would think, should be difficult to notice. Soft readings then necessary question the rhetorical capabilities of the author who wrote it, which is certainly difficult to argue about an author as influential as Geoffrey Chaucer. Considering how unclear Chaucer’s personal stance on antifeminism and Lollardy are (which seems very much his intention), to presume that his antisemitic motives are clear and problematic is to suppose Chaucer is less skillful than his other works show or that antisemitism is so ubiquitous in the late middle ages as to be taken for granted as a self-apparent and universally shared truth, a subject that is no small point of contention in Chaucerian studies and research on the middle ages.

“Hard” readings see the antisemitism in “The Prioress’s Tale” as satirical. Chaucer uses the tale to lambast the ridiculousness of antisemitism and antisemites. Consequently, these hard readings fall hard on the Prioress. Many critics affix the tale’s antisemitism to her so that Chaucer appears to be singling out the Prioress for ridicule. This has the consequence of opening Chaucer up to accusations of antifeminism. Why is antisemitism feminized as a women’s weakness? Nevertheless, hard readings can provide more compelling analysis. Assuming Chaucer has a satirical effect in mind with his use of antisemitism allows hard readings to better contemplate the methods and qualities of Chaucer’s satire rather than merely accumulate evidence of Chaucerian antisemitism. Therefore, it will be more profitable to approach “The

Prioress's Tale" how most approach the rest of *The Canterbury Tales*—as satire. Specifically, a satire concerning antisemitism.

However, even if we can suppose that the aims of the tale are satirical (which, as noted above, many soft readings do not) what antisemitism specifically satirizes in "The Prioress's Tale" is not clear. We must come to understand what this effect is and why the antisemitism is necessary or effective in achieving that effect. This requires us to understand the specific peculiarities of Chaucerian satire and, if possible, provide a systematic analysis of how it functions and what it accomplishes. Any historical evidence supporting satirical intent will bolster the argument, but to explain the divergence in modern readings requires the satire to at least in some part be structural or function on a more universal storytelling level.

The work of Richard Rex suggests an exhaustive satire of the Prioress up to and including her antisemitism by relying on historical context. In "The Sins of Madame Eglentyne" Richard Rex pours over the Prioress's depiction in "The General Prologue" revealing how almost every detail of her description is a jab and how un-nun-like this head nun is. Rex shows how The Prioress appears far more interested in imitating the trappings of courtly life than the Christian ideals of charity and piety. Rex speculates that the antisemitism of her tale is also intended to satirize women in general or the Prioress in particular.<sup>7</sup> For those skeptical of medieval Christian tolerance of Jews, Rex in "Chaucer and the Jews" provides us evidence for "the *existence* of tolerance in fourteenth-century

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<sup>7</sup> Rex, Richard. "The Sins of Madame Eglentyne." In *The Sins of Madame Eglentyne, and Other Essays on Chaucer*. (Newark : London: University of Delaware Press ; Associated University Presses, 1995).

England, particularly among those in Chaucer's immediate social and intellectual milieu,"<sup>8</sup> which at the very least opens up the possibility that Chaucer could cast a satirical eye on the antisemitism in his depiction of it in "The Prioress's Tale." "Chaucer and the Jews" along with R.I. Moore's *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* furthers our understanding of how antisemitism and persecution more broadly functioned and for what socio-political reasons it spread in the middle ages, but they cannot help us differentiate antisemitism, antisemitism used for satirical purposes and a satire of antisemitism within this particular text. Moreover, we need to find a way to make sense of a critical ecosystem which can simultaneously support attempts at hard, soft and antifeminist readings without contradiction. The quandary can best be resolved if we take such divergent readings as an intentional feature rather than a bug of the text.

By searching for moments of dissonance in the telling of "The Prioress's Tale" compared to its analogues, we can see that "The Prioress's Tale" is a satire on antisemitism which works by revealing to the engaged reader the ironic hypocrisy of persecuting Jews for persecuting Christians. This accounts for the divergent critical readings of the tale; "The Prioress's Tale" is modeled after truly vile antisemitic tales, but it also reveals the hypocrisy of said tales. Its satire, however, requires engagement. Satire, particularly Chaucerian satire, arises largely from the effects of double-voicing and irony. The satirical effect is dependent on irony for its impact. The subversion of expectations, the contrast between the presented and the expected in a satirical work leads to the inception of the author's

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<sup>8</sup> Rex, Richard. "Chaucer and the Jews." In *The Sins of Madame Eglentyne, and Other Essays on Chaucer*. (Newark : London: University of Delaware Press ; Associated University Presses, 1995), 14.

social critique within the reader. Chaucerian satire, because it tends to be in the gentler Horatian style of satire, achieves a conversational, double-voiced subtlety in this irony. Chaucer's critical voice arises through the moments of dissonance that emerge as he (re)tells and (re)voices the incidents of the pilgrimage and the tales of the tellers. These moments of dissonance are carefully laid opportunities for critical intervention placed by Chaucer for the reader. They are moments of recognition or misrecognition of a character or story type, a sense of "that's not quite right" that allows a reader to (re)inspect a text and reveal the satirical critique. This requires a careful juggling act of reader expectations about the societal roles the pilgrims inhabit and expectations about the genre of the stories the pilgrims tell. What truly makes this a double- or even multiple-voiced style is that engagements with these moments is optional. Optional, but encouraged. A reader can enjoy a character or story being satirized in complete earnest, much like how the fictional Chaucer admires the pilgrims the authorial Chaucer is satirizing in "The General Prologue."<sup>9</sup>

René Girard's Mimetic Theory is an apt lens to understand how the satire of "The Prioress's Tale" functions and how the tale supports such divergent readings. This is due to how central Girard sees persecution to the formation of our cultural sensibilities and textual canons along with the theories rich explanatory power when it comes to violence's relationship with the sacred. "The Prioress's tale" largely arises from two textual traditions—Marian miracles and ritual murder accusations—which are better understood

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<sup>9</sup>Of course, to enjoy the pilgrims and their tales without satirical reflection leaves you open to the same sort of mockery authorial Chaucer levies at the beguiled fictional Chaucer or, as we shall later see, the dangerous lack of introspection of the Prioress.

as persecution texts, particularly antisemitic persecution texts. Persecution texts are what Girard sees as myth and modern attempts at mythmaking. The purpose of persecution texts for Girard is to remind and justify the persecution of scapegoats within a community in order to maintain the hierarchical, sacrificial order of persecuting societies. Persecution texts remind readers of the value of persecution in maintaining a functioning society. Persecutory violence of the scapegoat is foundational sacred violence. As a satirical take on such texts, however, "The Prioress's Tale" falls into the category of revelatory text—a text which reveals persecution as unjust and arbitrary.

Revelatory texts are a category of texts implied in the work of Girard which the Gospels typify. According to mimetic theory, a key moment in cultural evolution is the disentangling of violence from the sacred and the revelation of the scapegoat as an arbitrary victim of persecution. This revelation begins the transition from mythic cultures to modernity with an increasing awareness and hostility towards scapegoating. Revelatory texts reveal the arbitrary violence of persecution often by engaging in a dialogic or examination of the structures or stereotypes of a persecution text.

We can understand the mechanism that structures revelatory texts by examining Girard's exegesis of Matthew 23, the Curse Against the Pharisees. In the curses, Jesus lays out the mechanisms of sacred violence and scapegoating and how the pharisees misunderstand this violence because they fundamentally misunderstand what their holy texts have started to reveal. Because pharisees engagement with their religion is only superficial, they perpetuate such violence by denying their role in it. When Jesus is crucified for revealing the role of violence in the cultural order, his death proves the centrality and obscuring nature of scapegoating in persecutory cultures. Chaucer uses a

similar understanding of Matthew to portray the Prioress as a type of pharisee whose imitative and uncritical piety, if spread through the Christian community will lead to the same sort of violent order which killed Christ. Chaucer references to the Curse Against the Pharisees implicitly and through direct allusion to the outwardly clean dish and the whited sepulcher.

Mimetic theory and the categories of persecution text and revelatory text allow us to explain how the satire of “The Prioress’s Tale” functions by giving us a vocabulary to apply to its irony and double voicing. The Prioress’s voice earnestly attempts to form a persecution text out of her tale by scapegoating the Jews while Chaucer’s voice inserts moments of dissonance which allow a reader to see her scapegoating as arbitrary—thus creating a satirical revelatory text. These moments of dissonance include setting the tale in Asia, the mirrored doubling of Christianity onto Judaism, Chaucer’s depiction of Jewish punishment and his allusion to the whited sepulcher through the “tombe of marbul stones cleere.” Chaucerian satire in “The Prioress’s Tale” gives persecutory antisemitic readers an opportunity at revelation by seeing the error in their antisemitic thinking. For those already against antisemitism, the tale shows how Marian miracles and ritual murder accusations perpetuated persecution. The tale is ultimately a satirical warning against the Prioress’s uncritical and imitative piety as potentially leading to and perpetuating persecution. Modern criticism responds to these persecutory and revelatory readings through their hard and soft readings of the tale respectively.

In section one, I provide historical context to medieval antisemitism and persecution—as R.I. Moore sees it in *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*—as it is necessary to understand the historical and political realities in which Chaucer wrote *The*

*Canterbury Tales*. The assumed ubiquity of medieval antisemitism can be called into question; antisemitism is neither monolithic in character nor a permanent facet of western civilization. Rather—at least on a systemic level—persecution has gone in and out of vogue through the eras. Brands of antisemitism that exists to this day arose from the expedient machinations of kings and churches during the tenth and eleventh centuries. Antisemitism is certainly a topic that can be satirized in the middle ages. The usefulness of Moore’s schema will nevertheless reveal its limits in understanding how antisemitism and persecution function in the text. Moore can teach us why the powerful might wish to spread antisemitic stories but he can not tell us why those stories proved so popular and why the telling of such tales of persecution would spread antisemitism. Section one will also cover the genre history of “The Prioress’s Tale,” enumerating and dissecting its analogues to see how “The Prioress’s Tale” converges and diverges with the genres it borrows from. We must understand what readers expected from a Marian miracle tale to truly appreciate the effect of Chaucer’s moments of dissonance. Chaucer’s choice to combine the genres of Marian miracles and ritual murder accusations itself serves to delegitimize the veracity of ritual murder accusations while highlighting the antisemitic quality of Marian miracles—an antisemitism whose validity this combination has just undermined. We will further see how Chaucer’s convergences and divergences with these genres works to undermine the ideology of antisemitism and persecution.

Section two will provide a short introduction to Mimetic Theory. Mimetic Theory privileges imitation as the driving force behind human conflict. The perpetuation of scapegoats to historically manage the outbreak of violence caused by mimesis is found to be the origin and original function of human culture. The murder of a scapegoated

individual by a community in crisis is the genesis of myth and therefore the human literary tradition. The revelation of the volatility of scapegoats is a key turning point in literary and cultural history away from texts which validate persecution to texts that reveal its mechanisms. Particular focus will be brought to stereotypes of persecution—what tropes in a story reveal the persecution behind it—and Girard’s non-sacrificial reading of the gospels—a reading which Girard sees as subverting the tropes of persecution texts to reveal the absurdity and randomness of sacrifice and persecution. Girard’s exegesis of *The Curses Against the Pharisees* becomes especially important as “Pharisee” emerged as a figure in criticism contemporary to Chaucer and the Prioress’s depiction in “*The General Prologue*” and her tale appear to directly reference the Matthew passages. Chaucer appears to satirize the Prioress as a type of pharisee whose imitative sort of piety he is warning against.

Section three integrates Girard and Mimetic Theory into the wider analysis of “*The Prioress’s Tale*” and its genre. Analyzing the tale in search of its relations to the stereotypes of persecution that coincide with moments of dissonance with its analogues will reveal the satirical reading. The resemblance to a persecution text will be shown to be textually subversive which better qualifies the text as a revelatory text, undermining the persecutory order. The relation of the Jewish and Christian community is revealed to be that of doubles and the martyrdom and persecution within the Judeo-Christian community to be arbitrary. The distinction between Jews and Christians is shown to be a socially constructed hierarchy within the community which cannot stand forever.

In conclusion—as a caveat—I discuss the dangers of misreadings of revelatory texts like “*The Prioress’s Tale*.” Such readings, readings which Girard argues encapsulate how

the medieval Christian community understood the gospels, can mistake a text with clear markings against persecution as a persecution text. In such readings any text may function to perpetuate or justify persecution. It is this uncertainty of reading which I think underlines the debate around hard and soft readings of "The Prioress's Tale."

## Historical Context

### Persecution's Socio-Political Context

Medieval historical research tends to understand medieval persecution as that enforced by the powerful or constructed by the educated for their own self-interest. It was not Jewish greed but Christian greed that led to Jewish persecution. Jews were murdered not for their own sins, but the sins of their persecutors.

Medieval persecution cannot be reduced to a consequence of Christian ideology. Nor should we presume that persecution is the ignorant reaction to difference.<sup>10</sup> If this were so, one would expect persecution to remain directly correlated with the religiosity of the general population, increasing as the size or notoriety of differentiated minority populations increased. However, As R.I. Moore points out in *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, this is hardly the case.

The church's message on Jews and heretics could be best described as mixed<sup>11</sup>. At times, they went to great measures to prevent persecution. As Fredrich Heer notes, the third Lateran Council of 1179 called for tolerance of Jews based on a shared humanity,<sup>12</sup> and later, in the mid-eleventh century, the papacy continually disavowed the myth of Jewish ritual child murder accusation.<sup>13</sup> Heresy largely disappeared from the church for five-hundred years before the end

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<sup>10</sup> 'difference,' for our purposes can be defined as any belief, behavior or characteristic heretical to presumed cultural norms.

<sup>11</sup> Heretics are another group commonly persecuted in the middle ages. Though Judaism isn't exactly a heretical form of Christianity (at best it is the other way around), laws against heretics tended to apply to Jews as well.

<sup>12</sup> Heer, Friedrich. *The Medieval World*. Trans. Janet Sondheimer. (20 New Bond Street London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), 256.

<sup>13</sup> Moore, R. I. *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*. (Oxford, UK ; New York, NY, USA: B. Blackwell, 1987), 38.

of the tenth century<sup>14</sup> which likely had less to do with a lack of idiosyncratic belief in Christendom than it did with a lack of persecution towards it. As Moore emphasizes, in a time of liturgical reform, heresy “became the policy of the church.”<sup>15</sup>

Yet, at the same time during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, systemic, institutionally sanctioned persecution began to emerge in medieval Europe. The “machinery of persecution” was constructed in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.<sup>16</sup> The council’s initial foci would be in the legislation of a Christian community and Christian way of life, enforced through the sanction of heretics. This sanctioning would soon be used to persecute a multitude of victims.

Before the Fourth Lateran Council, there is little to no evidence that medieval Christianity yet had the homogeneity or the will to persecute others on dogma alone. The dogma, largely, did not yet exist. However, Lateran IV lacked any sense uniformity or progression in its details of persecution. For example, it lessened the penalties for homosexuality compared to Lateran III.<sup>17</sup> Lateran IV went largely unimplemented in many parts of Christendom, or—like in England, who (initially) declined to implement the antisemitic portions of the council—was implemented piecemeal.<sup>18</sup>

Neither is there reason to suspect that there was a notable increase in the size of persecuted populations that could account for the marked rise in persecution that started in these

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<sup>14</sup> Moore, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Moore, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Moore, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Moore, 93.

<sup>18</sup> Moore, 44.

centuries. As Robert C. Stacey highlights in “Anti-Semitism and the Medieval English State” in twelfth century England, the total population rose from two to six million, while the Jewish population “probably never exceeded 5000,”<sup>19</sup> and was around only 2000 when the Edict of Expulsion<sup>20</sup> was given. Persecution may have well increased as population decreased. The uniformity of accusation and manner of persecution brought upon the prominently oppressed groups of this time—namely, heretics, Jews and lepers—makes the proposition that their rate of persecution is in any way a function of their true population far less probable than a change within medieval society at large causing the increase in persecution.

Jews had been integrated into society in myriad ways over the course of the middle ages but were largely that: *integrated*. Jews appeared to participate in every facet of medieval society. Christians and Jews bought houses from each other and lived as neighbors without any great animosity towards each other well into the twelfth century.<sup>21</sup> At least in the ninth and tenth centuries, but likely as far back as the Roman Empire, Jews held land, participated in trades and owned Christian servants and slaves.<sup>22</sup> Jews and Christians were at times so integrated that it seemed only outspoken bishops and concerned Rabbis—for wildly different reasons-- pushed for differentiation or separation of their essentially singular community. Rabbis sought to preserve a distinctly Jewish culture while a Bishop was outraged at the notion of Jews owning Christian slaves.

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<sup>19</sup> Moore, 166.

<sup>20</sup> The Edict of Expulsion, a 1290 royal decree of King Edward I, expelled all Jews from England.

<sup>21</sup> Moore, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Moore, 82ff.

Political changes led to the separation of Christians and Jews leading to the persecution of the latter. Jews became royal property in what was “essentially an innovation of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.”<sup>23</sup> Royal serfdom of the Jews gave the nobility a profitable financial resource and supposedly provided protection for the Jews. This protection seemed more to function as a way for nobles to insulate a particular asset of theirs from traditional prohibitions that would reduce their earning potential: “In principle the Jew’s property was the king’s, to seize at will, and in hard practice debts owed to the Jew were owed to the King.”<sup>24</sup> Jewish communities, due to their lengthy continuous existence in some areas and, later, the practice of usury, provided them with a great deal of wealth. By constructing Jews as a differentiated class, nobles could steal their wealth or exploit their earning potential expediently.

As Jewish property and opportunity became more and more limited, Jews were pushed towards usury. Usury’s association with Judaism did not begin until this period in the twelfth century because, as Jews were forced into that role, Christians were pushed out.<sup>25</sup> The Second Lateran Council of 1139 prohibited Christian burial of usurers<sup>26</sup> while, in England, Henry II disrupted the predominantly Christian money-lending market by confiscating the debts or otherwise destroying the largest (Christian) money lending firms in the country.<sup>27</sup> Jewish usury

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<sup>23</sup> Moore, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Moore, 39.

<sup>25</sup> Moore, 85. R.B. Dobson, quoted by Moore, also suggests simple market forces may have led to the better educated Jewish community taking the existing money-lending market: “They performed a well-established service more efficiently than their Christian competitors.”

<sup>26</sup> Moore, 84.

<sup>27</sup> Stacey, Robert C. “Anti-Semitism and the Medieval English State.” In *The Medieval State: Essays Presented to James Campbell*, edited by John Robert Maddicott, D. M. Palliser, and James Campbell, 163–77. (London ; Rio Grande, Ohio: Hambledon Press, 2000), 172.

became more and more strongly associated with the king, especially after 1186 after the crown confiscated and began collecting the debts of a prominent Jewish moneylender.<sup>28</sup> The reasons behind this disruption, while not entirely clear, appear fiscal. Seizing and collecting the debts of Christian and later Jewish moneylenders was a pragmatic way to shore up capital.

This redefinition of the Jewish community was an incoherent bundle of paradoxes that disrupted the relative integration of Jews in medieval society and birthed many of the Jewish stereotypes which still exist to this day. From a basic Christian perspective, Jews appeared lower to Christians, yet their association with the nobility elevated them. Despite their true status being that effectively of chattel, Jew's nevertheless real association with moneylending would make them the face of economic anxiety and ire towards the King. Even before the crown began collecting Jewish owned debt on its behalf, creditors could pay the crown to enforce the collection of debts.<sup>29</sup> For anyone having their debts collected, it would appear their suffering was caused by or for the benefit of Jews. As the brutality of collection increased, so too did the ire towards the Jews. Ironically, as this hostility grew, Jews began to suffer great economic hardship themselves due to heavy taxation.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, this association between Jews and the nobility would remain. Attacks on noble power often led to violence against Jews.<sup>31</sup> Whether intentional or not, Jews formed a fruitful buffer for the upper class, providing them with wealth as well as a preliminary barrier between themselves and the dissatisfied masses.

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<sup>28</sup> Stacey, 172.

<sup>29</sup> Stacey, 172.

<sup>30</sup> Moore, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Moore, 117.

Hostility towards Jewish communities rose in an autocatalytic reaction. Kings, hoping to protect their profitable resource, and members of the church, hoping to differentiate Jews and Christians, cause a separation of Jews from the greater community. While Jewish quarters existed, ghettos where all Jews in a community were required to live did not arise until 1243.<sup>32</sup> Further restriction of location and occupation lead to Jewish stereotypes, followed by acts of persecution and myths which increased animosity and calls for distinction and separation which reinforced stereotypes and led to more persecution which...etc, etc.

Moore is right to suggest that “the fear of pollution protects boundaries.”<sup>33</sup> The fetishization of purity is therefore a call for distinction and boundaries. Pollution becomes associated with chaos and danger. Rather than a fear of social change *per se*, associations with pollution highlight a fear of the liminal undefined space characterize moments of rapid social change. Classification increases just as much in a new social order asserting itself as it does in an old social order attempting to reassert its power. Jews association with heretics and lepers—who were themselves associated with putrefaction and filth—along with their sexual connection to the devil helped construct them as a polluted and polluting figures. This will surprise few who have read of the pogroms inflicted during plague times for alleged Jewish well poisonings.

The first accusations of Jewish ritual murder appear from the work of Thomas of Monmouth and his account on the death of William of Norwich. He quotes a Theobald who claimed that an international Jewish conspiracy selects a child annually as sacrifice for Christian crimes against Judaism and purports evidence that William was crucified.<sup>34</sup> Robert C. Stacey

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<sup>32</sup> Moore, 87.

<sup>33</sup> Moore, 100.

<sup>34</sup> Moore, 120.

points out that there would be pecuniary benefits to Norwich and its priory if it were the site of the child martyr and therefore *Saint* William. In the fierce competition between monasteries for pilgrims, child martyrs were crucial and successful attractions.<sup>35</sup> This accounts for the dramatic increase of Jewish child murder accusations that popped up around this time in England, including the most popular (and profitable) one, little Hugh of Lincoln. Stacey stresses that monastic competition, while playing a part in the proliferation of the ritual murder myth is no more culpable than the crown. King Henry III took personal interest Little Hugh's case which led to the full authority of the king being placed behind a ritual murder accusation. Nineteen Jews were executed for the crime and many more imprisoned.<sup>36</sup>

It's important to keep in mind the essential arbitrariness of distinction with which a minority group is defined. As R.I Moore suggests, persecution caused classification: "heresy, leprosy and Jewishness lay with beauty in the eyes of the beholders, and that their distinctiveness was not the cause but the result of persecution."<sup>37</sup> We do not persecute them because they are different. We find them different because we persecuted them. This is particularly obvious in the case of heretics, as, Moore reminds us "heresy exists only in so far as authority chooses to declare its existence."<sup>38</sup>

#### Source and Analogues

"The Prioress's Tale" intersects several story traditions in a way which maximizes its satirical impact. By placing the tale thusly, "The Prioress's Tale" critiques antisemitism

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<sup>35</sup> Stacey, 167.

<sup>36</sup> Stacey, 174.

<sup>37</sup> Moore, 67.

<sup>38</sup> Moore, 68.

in these genres, a feat accomplished through careful changes to key narrative features. These subtle alterations to the standard tropes of the genres borrowed from foregrounds the antisemitism embedded within them. In the antecedents to “The Prioress’s Tale,” antisemitism is found only if one understands where it hides its surly face. It peaks from under the blue mantle of the Blessed Virgin in earlier Marian miracles or murmurs about the rightness of murder, grasping tentatively the toga of lady justice, claiming blood will balance her scales in accusations of ritual murder. If these earlier tales are coquettish with their use of antisemitism—if they ignite antisemitic desires with what they suggest—then “The Prioress’s Tale” is burlesque. Antisemitism is teased at directly or it goes even further, tearing all trappings away and revealing antisemitism outright and bald-faced. Rather than direct exposure engendering approval for antisemitism, it opens antisemitism to mockery, fascination and ridicule.

Currently, *The Prioress’s Tale* lacks a known source; *Sources and Analogues to The Canterbury Tales* identifies thirty-eight analogues in the miracle of the Virgin genre alone.<sup>39</sup> The miracle of the Virgin genre encapsulates an extremely popular genre of literature “deeply embedded in the popular culture of fourteenth century England.”<sup>40</sup> *The Prioress’s Tale* appears to belong to a sub-genre that is a mix of two other Marian miracle sub-genres. The older of these groups tells how Mary, through her miracles, “successfully opposes a Jew or a community of Jews, resulting in their punishment or conversion”<sup>41</sup> The other group

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<sup>39</sup> Broughton, Laurel. “The Prioress’s Prologue and Tale.” In *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel. *Chaucer Studies* 28, [35]. (Cambridge ; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 584.

<sup>40</sup> Broughton, 592.

<sup>41</sup> Broughton, 593.

finds a white lily—a symbol of the virgin—growing on the tongue of a deceased devout singer of Marian songs. The sub-sub-genre resultant from the combination of these two groups form what is often known as “chorister” stories, where, typically, a devout male child is murdered by Jews for singing a Marian song. The child is found miraculously singing after death, instigating Jewish conversion or punishment. We can also position these categories and sub-categories of tales related to Mary into the greater popular devotional tradition around saint’s lives and saint’s miracles.

While miracles of the Virgin were extremely popular tales in the late medieval period, Chaucer, draws the reader’s attention to “O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also / With cursed Jewes, as it is notable, / For it is but a litel while ago”<sup>42</sup> linking devotional literature not only with the genre of Jewish blood libel, but a particularly political and historicized instance of ritual murder accusation. The above lines appear to be the first explicit connection between the subset of miracle of the Virgin chorister stories and ritual murder accusations of boy crucifixion.<sup>43</sup> By weaving the two genres together, “The Prioress’s Tale” emphasizes to the reader the shared antisemitic impulse rooted in both traditions. This is particularly damning to the Marian miracle genre, a genre still told by nuns to this day.<sup>44</sup> This then very much becomes a condemnation of the Prioress and her

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<sup>42</sup> Chaucer, lines 684-86.

<sup>43</sup> Dahood, Roger. “English Historical Narratives of Jewish Child-Murder, Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale, and the Date of Chaucer’s Unknown Source.” *STUDIES IN THE AGE OF CHAUCER*, n.d., 137.

<sup>44</sup> See note 6 above.

kind, as such tales are associated with priory's and schools such as the one the 'litel clergeon' attended.

Chorister tales analogous to "The Prioress Tale" are divided into three groups—A, B, and C—by Carleton F. Brown's seminal *A Study of the Miracle of our Lady Told by Chaucer's Prioress*. As Brown succinctly puts it, the essence of the chorister stories is thus:

A boy who loves the Virgin devotedly sings often in her praise a certain response (or anthem). The Jews (or an individual Jew) on hearing the song are moved to anger, and determine to kill the singer. Watching their opportunity, they put him to death, and carefully conceal the body. The Virgin restores the boy to life and bids him sing as before (or causes the lifeless body to sing). By this miracle the crime is exposed, and the murderers apprehended. Thereupon the Jews are (1) converted and baptized, or (2) punished by death or banishment. Such, at least, is the outline of the miracle as it is told in more than twenty versions.<sup>45</sup>

C group stories<sup>46</sup>—of which The Prioress's Tale most closely resembles—add three of their own wrinkles. One, they tend to change the song which the boy sings to "Alma Redemptoris Mater," two, they dump the dead boy's body in some space associated with human waste, and, three, the story ends with the dead boy singing at his own funeral.<sup>47</sup> Many of the tales give reasoning for throwing the child into a fecal pit. The murderer

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<sup>45</sup> Brown, Carleton Fairchild. *A Study of the Miracle of Our Lady Told by Chaucer's Prioress*. (London, 1910), 53.

<sup>46</sup>For full versions of C group stories and other analogues, see Broughton and Brown.

<sup>47</sup> Broughton, 588.

usually wishes to hide the melodious corpse and avoid further exposure<sup>48</sup> or the murderer desires to commit further sacrilege towards the Virgin.<sup>49</sup> The latter's reasoning is telling of the mindset of the tale-teller. C7 hints at the malformed logic behind Marian myths by specifying the hatred of the Virgin Mary as the impetus of the Jews's actions.

Though it does not necessarily stress credulity that Jews, "Amonges Cristene folk" and "Sustened by a lord of that contree / For foule usure and lucre of vileyne,"<sup>50</sup> could, through cultural osmosis and vocational necessity have such knowledge, it certainly cannot be assumed. The tale itself goes as far as to stress the lack of *Christian* understanding of the hymn, let alone Jewish understanding. That the entire Jewish community is not only capable of understanding the hymn but also hate it is unlikely, especially given the importance put on the separation of the Jews in the Jewerye.

The tale spends an inordinate amount of time explaining how a young boy may learn a hymn, but fails to explain how Jews came to hate it. The 'litel clergeon' is given an active will which he chooses to use in piety. The Jews are made passive in respect to their will, convinced of hating the clergeon by the words of Satan. A Satan who accuses the boy's singing of Mary to be irreverent to Jewish law.<sup>51</sup> The boy we know is a bastion of innocence—if only because he is ignorant of his own faith, let alone the Jewish one. Neither Jews nor Christians could rightly justify murder through the lack of reverence caused by

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<sup>48</sup> Broughton, C5, lines 40ff.

<sup>49</sup> Broughton, C7, line 9.

<sup>50</sup> Chaucer, lines 489-91.

<sup>51</sup> Chaucer, lines 558ff.

the naive ignorance of children. Children are inevitably ignorant, even of what they desire to know as the tale shows. This irreverence—to put it lightly—is exactly what ritual murder accusations do to Jewish faith, turning ignorance or misunderstanding into malice. The reasons oft given for ritual child murder (mixing blood with their bread, performing mock crucifixions or even magic) requires a sacrilegious ignorance on the part of the tale-teller and its listeners for them to work as a justification. That is to say the reason the Jews kill the clergeon within the tale is the same reason/follows the same logic as Jewish pogroms outside of the tale: a misunderstanding of intent.

In many of the analogues after the child is found, the Jews fall out of prominence. Their end is outright ignored by the other tales so they may focus on praising the miracle. “The Prioress’s Tale” does not shy away from the details. C5, considered the closest analogue to “The Prioress’s Tale” leaves the Jew’s fate to one line, “Þe Jauh was Jugget for þat Morþere,”<sup>52</sup> which leaves ambiguous how the Jew was judged, leaving his probable death merely an implication. Conversion and death are in fact rare outcomes in the Marian miracle and chorister genres. The Jewish murder of the innocent is simply a means to the miracle. The garish drawing and hanging of the Jews, according to Dahood appears to be an invention of Chaucer, as it does not appear in any chorister tales before “The Prioress’s Tale.”<sup>53</sup>

The method of execution described by Chaucer is somewhat ambiguous. Drawing and hanging immediately calls to mind the infamous capital punishment of hanging,

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<sup>52</sup> Broughton, C5, line 114.

<sup>53</sup> Dahood, 124.

drawing and quartering, which tended to be reserved for those said to have committed high treason. If this was the punishment Chaucer was thinking of, it connects the fate of the Jews in “The Prioress’s Tale” with both Jesus and ritual murder accusation. Ultimately, the crime Jesus was crucified for under Roman law was treason. The Jews in the “The Prioress’s Tale” in some sense parallel Jesus as they suffered under the punishment for high treason in their contemporary society. Moreover, the disembowelment common in hanging, drawing and quartering would make this punishment a sort of reciprocal violence to the claims of crucifixion and disembowelment common in ritual murder accusations. The execution of Jews in “The Prioress’s Tale” arises as a symbol of reciprocal violence between Christian and Jewish communities. The fact they are punished in the manner of high treason suggests the tale may be using this instance as a justification of the Edict of Expulsion as the Jews are punished as if their crime is a crime against the crown.

Chaucer however does not mention quartering. Drawing itself has variously meant being torn apart by four horses or dragged to one’s hanging by the tail of a horse, as with the story of Brunhilda (“Brunhilda”). Still gruesome, these methods have less resonance.

## Understanding Persecution

The knowledge of Mimetic Theory is deeply embedded in language—idiom, cliché, and, most of all, story. René Girard’s Mimetic Theory gives us insight into the mechanisms behind myth and persecution throughout human history, giving his reader an explanation on the origin of stories and their evolution. As we will see, within Girard’s framework, myths—from Oedipus Rex to Jewish well poisonings—are textual accounts of a persecution. His work describes the comprehensive evolution of story over time which allowed readers to see the victim of a persecution as such rather than as a justified sacrifice necessary to the order and safety of the community. The victim can be seen as innocent inasmuch as their individual actions were not the driving cause behind their sacrifice or persecution. The function of stories has diverged from a primary focus on perpetuating prejudice by masking the arbitrariness of persecutions towards a new competing impulse, which reveals the arbitrariness of this prejudice and therefore weakens the community forming and pacifying aspects of persecution. With an understanding of Mimetic Theory, we can better understand exactly how the antisemitism in “The Prioress’s Tale” functions. The theory begins with desire.

As can be seen in the complexity of human activity and the absurd things humans yearn for, human desire is often separate or far abstracted from human need. Nowhere is the separation of desire from need seen better than in the phenomena of fads and love triangles. By honestly inspecting faddish behavior—your own or others—it should be simple to gather the basic tenant of Mimetic Theory: desire is imitative, mimetic. Humans “borrow their desires from the Other in a movement which is so fundamental and primitive that they completely confuse it with the will

to Oneself.”<sup>54</sup> This truth may be already known to you in the form of a common idiom: monkey see, monkey do. With a pair of tsks of the tongue, we shake our heads in grave disapproval at the overplump child, prone, spasmodically smashing his little fists into the mall floor’s grimy tiles. The child bellows, “I want it I want it I want it” re some bauble all his friends have that mom has so cruelly blocked him from having, while we queue for the newest iPhone. During our extended wait, we’ll opine to our fellow line-mates vague government policy changes that just have to happen, which they’ll all assent to, of course, having also read the same opinion piece from the latest refresh of The New York Times. And if you’ve ever seen a friend endure a love triangle or unrequited love and/or suffered through these binds yourself, you can start to see how deceptive and enamoring mimetic desire can be. If the desire for a mate was merely the drive to reproduce, why, especially in modern western society where there are effectively infinite potential mates, do humans get hung up on those uninterested in them or with someone else? Why is the most cliched dating advice, there are plenty of fish in the sea, so easy to spout from the outside but feel near impossible to commit to from the inside? Others can never understand. I don’t want another fish, a prettier fish, a fish better suited for me, a fish available. I want that fish. “I want it I want it I want it.”

Mimetic Desire is all about imitation. It is when we are imitating the desire of another or, more accurately, when we imitate what we think another person desires. In Mimetic Theory, the person experiencing mimetic desire is called a subject and the person they imitate is called their model. What the subject desires is called the object of desire. Because the model inspired in the subject a desire for the object they have, the subject begins to imitate the model as a strategy to

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<sup>54</sup> Girard, René, and James G. Williams. *The Girard Reader*. (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 35.

achieve said object. We as subjects are utterly systematic at pursuing our imagined imitations. We imitate our model wholesale quickly convoluting and complexing our desire.

Look to your own experience with desire and economic theory: things grow more valuable, the more desirable (demanded) they appear to be and when that desire is hard to attain (supply is restricted). You want what you can't have. The subject-object-model functions as a feedback loop which continually heightens the value and desirability of the object to metaphysical levels. "The ever increasing price that the buyer is willing to pay is determined by the imaginary desire which he attributes to his rival."<sup>55</sup>

The process of mimetic desire becomes more chimeric, more consuming, and more dangerous when we realize that every member in the triangular desire situation (subject-model-object) will be a person who, obtains their desires mimetically. Like some sort of thought contagion, whole communities can be infected via mimetic desire. Of particular interest to our inquiries is when at least two persons are models for each other. That is, they share the same desire and use each other as models for achieving their desire; they are rivals. The goal of both subjects is to imitate their model as best as possible. In such a situation both subjects imitate their model's imitation of themselves (their model's model). This means both subjects, due to their reciprocal imitations, will approach a singularity as they mirror each other. Distinction will be lost between the two rivals. In Mimetic Theory these two persons are what's known as doubles. Doubles become increasingly occupied with each other rather than their initial object of desire. This frustrated obsession with the other will lead to utter hatred and contempt, as they will be anxious to improve past their model while the best they can do through imitation is matching them. The model will be seen as a roadblock to a resolution to this state, which the subject will

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<sup>55</sup> Girard, 37.

see as the model purposely blocking them due to the model's contempt for the subject (which the subject themselves will then imitate). The subjects are trapped in an endless elevating imitation of each other which they will seek to escape from. The problem is because the Subjects are doubles without distinction, they each try to escape their bind in the same way, maintaining their undifferentiated state. Like the mirror scene in *Duck Soup*, doubles, like the Marx Brothers will try to break their mirroring only to be met with their double doing the exact same action. This will inevitably escalate to violence as killing or expelling the double seems the only way out of endless imitation.

As noted previously, mimetic desires can spread like a plague within a community which can result in a mimetic crisis. A mimetic crisis is a crisis of doubles, where everyone starts doubling, all distinction between individuals is lost and a violent chaos ensues. Murders beget imitative murders beget reprisal murders. A single pair of doubles ending in a murder can mimetically spread murder throughout the community. "There is always one act, murder, which is performed in the same way for the same reasons, in vengeful imitation of the preceding murder."<sup>56</sup> Vengeance is an inherently imitative act that becomes unbound from the cause, the Object, the initial murder and leads to a constant chain of violence reprising more violence. In a community, "Vengeance turns them into doubles."<sup>57</sup> This paroxysm would destroy the community with arbitrary violence if it were not for the scapegoat mechanism.

The Scapegoat or Victimage Mechanism is what allowed our ancestors to escape mimetic crises. Just like how a single pair of doubles in a mimetic crisis is searching for an escape from

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<sup>56</sup> Girard, René, Jean Michel Oughourlian, and Guy Lefort. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World Kekrummena Apo Kataboles (Matthew 13:35)*. (Stanford, Conn: Stanford University Press, 1987), 12.

<sup>57</sup> Girard, 12.

the chaotic lack of distinction through violence, the community wants out of the crisis. To achieve this, a scapegoat occurs, one individual the community unanimously believes was the cause of the mimetic crisis. Obviously, the individual is not the true cause of the crisis because mimesis is a phenomenon between individuals—an interindividual phenomenon. The community, as one undifferentiated mass murders the victim which relieves the mimetic crisis through unification of their violent desire. “If a strike or any hint of suspicion against one of the community’s members is imitated by several others, this can lead to a snowballing of imitated violence that affects the entire community.”<sup>58</sup> Everyone’s double can be eliminated at once. A point is made which differentiates the community from the murdered.

And this murder is foundational and sacred. “In the founding mechanism reconciliation is achieved against and around the victim.”<sup>59</sup> The victim before the murder is pure evil, the ultimate power causing all the community’s ills. After the murder, with differentiation being established and peace supplanting chaos, the victim is seen as bringing about the community and all that is good in it. The double transference of all that is good and all that is evil onto the scapegoat creates the sacred. This founding murder creates a community around the sacred, the murdered scapegoat. “For the first time there can be something like an inside and an outside, a before and after, a community and the sacred” (102).<sup>60</sup>

It must be noted that for the scapegoat mechanism to work, all members of the community must believe unanimously that the victim is to blame for their mimetic crisis,

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<sup>58</sup> Palaver, Wolfgang. *René Girard’s Mimetic Theory*. Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture Series. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 151.

<sup>59</sup> Girard, *Things Hidden*, 102.

<sup>60</sup> Girard, 102.

otherwise doubles would still exist and spread again. This must stem from a shared distorted perspective that the entire community shares. That is to say, communities are founded by that community's misunderstanding of its own act of group murder. This true tale told wrongly of the founding murder is the origin of myth. A myth is the tale of a founding murder told from "the perspective of the lynchers on their own lynching."<sup>61</sup> It is not only justified violence to them, but necessary violence. The undifferentiated state of mimetic crisis melds all distinctions together—the internal from the external, one person from another, man from animal, man from nature—and the sacredness the dead victim receives after the murder is retroactively applied. Monsters, hybrids and humans-gods are born. "The initial confusion between the divine and the human is part of that crisis."<sup>62</sup>

The scapegoat mechanism therefore creates the initial paradigm for myth and story. Story in this era functions mostly to prevent further crises from occurring by reminding the community of this existential threat as the community understands it and reinforcing a persecutory order for that crises resolution—should it arise again.

Girard describes the function of story shifting from perpetuating violence and persecution to a revelation about the arbitrariness of this persecution, attributing this development to textual innovations found in the Old and New Testaments. This includes perspective shifts of telling myths from the perspective of the victim (or at least sympathetic to them) to metatextual elements of the gospels that point to how the scapegoat mechanism and persecution operate. The nascent revelations of Judeo-Christian myth created readers that were able to identify scapegoating in texts.

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<sup>61</sup> Girard, 115.

<sup>62</sup> Girard, 106.

### Persecutory Texts

For Girard, the history of literature is a history inseparable from human's relationship with persecution and persecution's eternally recurrent solution—violent sacrifice. In the broadest sense, Girard's history of literature describes the laborious transition from sacrificial to non-sacrificial texts, from texts that justify a persecutory order to texts which reveal the absurdity of any such order. From texts which necessitate scapegoating to texts which elucidate scapegoating. Girard himself specifically characterizes two types of literature—myths and persecution texts—while charting the innovations of the Old and New Testament and its effect on western literature and culture. His exegesis of the New Testament implies a third category which I call revelatory texts.

Myths are tales of founding murders told from the perspective of the murderers. They tell the tale of a mimetic crisis which a group of individuals escape through the unanimous scapegoating of an arbitrarily designated individual or subgroup. The elimination of the victim is justified, and the victim is sacralized. Within the newly formed community the victim emerges as the ultimate source of good and evil. This double transference is due to the fact that, for the scapegoat mechanism to work, all involved must believe the scapegoat caused all the problems implicit in the mimetic crisis. After the elimination of the scapegoat forms the community, all involved must believe the scapegoat's death brought about all the good implicit in the new community at peace. Because the act of arbitrary murder must be fundamentally misunderstood by the perpetrators to have its desired effect (“The only true scapegoats are those we cannot recognize as such”),<sup>63</sup> mythic accounts are warped from their very inception, their fantastical

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<sup>63</sup> Girard, *Things Hidden*, 129.

elements obscuring<sup>64</sup> a murder which they deny. In retellings, the murder often becomes more and more obscured because future audiences, further abstracted from the founding murder, do not understand what aspects of the myth are important, only that the myth is important. This transfiguration of the victim into something holy or supernatural is a primary characteristic of myth. This tends to wholly disguise the victim of the sacrifice as such while justifying their persecution matter-of-factly. Within the logic of myth, things could happen no other way. Scapegoating as unjust persecution is conceptually foreign to myth and those whose cultures are structured through myths.

It is revelatory texts which define scapegoating as arbitrary and unjust persecution; Revelatory texts are texts which unmask the scapegoat mechanism. This isn't necessarily a complete unmasking. Revelatory texts can be and often are notoriously misunderstood. Nevertheless, a revelatory text is a text which makes a revelatory reading available. These revelatory readings of revelatory texts destabilize sacrificial orders and prevent the scapegoat mechanism from functioning to its fullest effect. This is because the scapegoat mechanism and the sacrificial orders it inspires require unanimous belief in the justness of the sacrifice. Revelatory readers break that unanimity; The scapegoat mechanism cannot form a new

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<sup>64</sup> Girard does not see this obscuration as intentional; myths are accurate accounts of the hallucinatory undifferentiated experience that a full-blown mimetic crisis entails, made meaningful in introspection after the scapegoat mechanism has founded the community and restored differentiation. As a pair of doubles lack any distinction between the two, all constituents of a mimetic crisis lack distinction between themselves and the outside world. Human becomes god becomes animal becomes nature. This helps explain the fantastical creatures and demi-god heroes of myths and why myths so often end in a death or expulsion which founds. The creation of differentiated states is key to a founded community's social order.

community with them in it<sup>65</sup> and the revelatory reader questions the justness of the current order, which destabilizes it, leading to more attempts at founding a sacrificial order.

It is from revelatory texts disruption of myths and sacrificial orders that leads to texts of persecution. As Girard and Jean-Michel Oughourlian summarize,

“The [scapegoat] mechanism becomes recognizable only with the development of sufficient critical intelligence to hinder its functioning. The arbitrariness of the victim becomes apparent, and a reconciliatory unanimity is no longer possible. Myth and ritual can no longer grow and spread. One can find only intermediate, mixed phenomena that are increasingly transparent to criticism; these can be read as persecution.”<sup>66</sup>

This implies that revelatory texts can create a new type of reader, one with “sufficient critical intelligence” to hamper the scapegoat mechanism from sacralizing the victim and creating myth. It does not suggest these new readers are on equal footing when it comes to identifying persecution as modern readers are, only that these new readers represent a step where some persecution may be seen as arbitrary and complete sacralization is no longer possible. Attempts at using the scapegoat mechanism with these new readers leads to accounts of such events being persecution texts rather than myths and therefore open to critique. Readers effected by revelatory texts will both create persecution texts as well as criticize them. Persecution texts “still contain elements very close to mythology, in that the perspective they employ remains definable by a

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<sup>65</sup> Often, this leads to groups attempting to form a new community *by* sacrificing the revelatory reader. The reader of course points to their innocence which may further damage the unanimity; the desacralizing cycle continues. As we will see, this phenomenon is essential to the deconstructive power of revelatory texts.

<sup>66</sup> Girard, 129.

type of distortion closer to that of myth, [and] can be situated in an intermediary zone between mythology and the more radical demythification of which we ourselves are capable.”<sup>67</sup>

Within this mass of readers, writers, and attempts at scapegoating, is an autocatalytic cycle where acts of scapegoating create persecution texts which are criticized by revelatory texts which further reveal the functioning of scapegoating. Once we begin to see texts of persecution in a culture, new myths are no longer possible. Persecution can be perceived as arbitrary. New attempts at myth can be interrogated as persecution texts by revelatory readers. New revelatory texts can be made to reveal the arbitrariness of persecution in persecution texts and reveal more the workings of the scapegoat mechanism.

Revelatory texts are texts of innovation, where more and more instances of arbitrary persecution become revealed as the texts reveal or attempt to reveal the mechanisms behind scapegoating and persecution. Mimetic theory in this way is wholly intersectional. The processes behind and reasons for racism, sexism, class hatred, religious enmity, even revulsion at persecutors themselves—*any* sort of scapegoating—are attempts at resolving mimetic rivalry through the scapegoat mechanism. All scapegoating is arbitrary and all scapegoating leads down a reprisal paved road leading towards violence. Literary theory and perhaps the humanities and social sciences broadly are systematic attempts to reveal the fundamental and endemic nature of scapegoating. They (like all of us), of course, are not immune from scapegoating themselves and any subfield runs the danger of using oppressor groups as a scapegoat<sup>68</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> Girard, 127.

<sup>68</sup> In an ironic if inequal doubling of what their oppressors do to them. While not the rule, this is not an uncommon pitfall one may find themselves in when seeking social justice.

For the western world, Girard finds the New Testament to be the original revelatory text in the canon, with the Old Testament engendering the new as a fruitful progenitor<sup>69</sup>. The Old Testament's primary innovation is that of ethical perspective. As an example, Girard compares the differences between the myth of Romulus and Remus and the myth of Cain and Abel. Both are part of an extremely common genre of founding myths about the conflict between two brothers resulting in the formation of a community (the former tale results in the formation of Rome and Romans and the latter in the formation of the city of Enoch and the Cainite community). However while "the murder of Remus appears as an action that was perhaps to be regretted, but was justified by the victim's transgression" (violating the boundaries of a city that did not yet exist), Cain "is nonetheless presented as a vulgar murderer" and "the condemnation of the murder takes precedence over all other considerations."<sup>70</sup> Girard here concurs with Max Weber that the Old Testament's distinctiveness lay in its tendency to defend and side with the victim on moral grounds.

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<sup>69</sup> While, as Girard does, I separated my descriptions of the textual transformations of Judeo-Christian scripture into the Old and New Testament and, due to the importance Girard puts on the revelatory nature of the Gospels, I fear this distinction may suggest to some readers—or may cause some readers to believe that I am suggesting—that there is a hierarchy between Judaism and Christianity. To suggest this would be to make the same pitfall that historical Christianity does and the same pitfall that this thesis hopes to illuminate to its readers. The New Testament is a Jewish text made by and for Jewish readers. Jewish distinctiveness from Christianity is a product of medieval Christianity's mythic reading of the gospels which "transforms the universal revelation of the founding murder into a polemical denunciation of the Jewish religion" (174); It is medieval Christianity denying their own misunderstanding and part in founding violence by scapegoating Jews. Religions and cultures are uniformly founded by "the collective expulsion of the victim" (178). This is an observation over a value judgement. What we are interested in here is how Judeo-Christian texts eventually come to reveal and unravel this sort of violence in the modern world. In other words, how the world became disenchanted or desacralized.

<sup>70</sup> Girard, 146-7.

This siding with the victim is not the same as revealing the mechanisms of persecution as in a revelatory text or merely a partial sacralization susceptible to inquiry as in a persecution text. Rather the differences seen in the perspective of Old Testament myths is a necessary innovation required for revelatory texts to become possible. Biblical myths are still myths. Biblical myths are “worked through with a form of inspiration that runs counter to them, but they continue in being. The sacrifices are criticized, but they continue” and “Yahweh is still the god to whom vengeance belongs.”<sup>71</sup> Girard reminds us here that the Cainite community is still founded by the murder of Abel, and the Mark of Cain is a differentiating mark used to “discourage mimetic rivalry and generalized conflict.”<sup>72</sup> The murder of Abel is sacralized even in its bald-faced appearance as wrongful murder. The irony that the murder of a murderer becomes punishable by an avenging God goes unrecognized. The foundational law against violence in the Cainite community is still based on violence.

The recognition of this irony is one of the main features of revelatory texts. The self-consciousness of the above Jewish texts in which myths, while still maintaining a sacrificial order, make value judgements and assessments on myths and mythic logic, is heightened. It is in the Gospels where this self-consciousness becomes a sort of metafiction. Girard’s exegesis of ‘The curses of the Pharisees’ sees the text and Jesus as both a political polemic and a deconstructive theorist as Jesus performs both a critique on culture as well as a critique on narrative structure. By Girard’s reckoning, and especially apparent in mythic cultures, these are one and the same. Myths reinforce and justify the rituals and prohibitions of a culture. As with the Cain and Abel myth, this implicit logic is the prevention of violence through violence which

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<sup>71</sup> Girard, 156.

<sup>72</sup> Girard, 146.

cannot hold. By deconstructing the structure and logic of myth, one threatens the very foundations of sacrificial culture.

‘The Curses of the Pharisees’ implicates the Pharisees in the crimes of their fathers and the sacrificial order. By condemning the violence of their fathers, the pharisees believe they are free from and above their violence. But it is the very act of denial which implicates them; sacrificial orders rely on the denial and obscuration of founding violence. By building the tombs for the prophets that their fathers killed, the pharisees sacralize the murder

They try to make the message of the prophet sacred – they worship the words that their fathers killed the prophets for. In doing so they disguise the violence implicit in the murder of the prophet. They fail to understand the same thing their fathers who killed the prophets failed to understand. Their holiness is false because it claims a knowledge and piety its actions ignore. and through their misunderstanding of the prophet

#### Chaucer & Mimetic Theory.

Geoffrey Chaucer is trying very hard to get you to read critically and take the act of reading seriously, from the work’s basic structural framing to its slurry of meta- and inter-textual elements. The narrative reason for tale-telling within *The Canterbury Tales* is the Host’s game, to tell “[t]ales of best sentence and moost solaas”<sup>73</sup> an act which has social and pecuniary rewards for the tale-teller (a paid dinner) and the primary listener (The Host, who gets another full house at his inn). The frame narrative creates a space where there are rewards for listening (a why), a series of tales to listen to (a what) and a means of judging said tales (a how)—that is, by their level of moral perspicacity (“best sentence”) and entertainment value (“moost solaas”).

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<sup>73</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey. “The General Prolouge.” In *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann. (Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 2005), line 798.

Before the first tale is told the reader has been given authority and encouraged to scrutinize the text.

Chaucer's use of a participatory author surrogate is a metatextual element that serves to encourage the reader to analyze stories and characters from *The Canterbury Tales* as they do in their real life by muddling the distinction between real and fictional accounts (the frame narrative works to accomplish this as well by using real locations). "The Tale of Sir Thopas," one of the tales told by author surrogate Chaucer (and the tale immediately following "The Prioress's Tale") is considered so bad by The Host that he cuts off Chaucer and tells him to tell another tale. This interaction undermines authorial power by giving The Host—who is foremost a character but also an audience surrogate—the ability to end any story and move on to another, reminding the reader of their ability to do the same (an ability Chaucer explicitly states at the end of the General Prologue). While such a reminder is empowering to the reader it is also reminding them of the distinction between reality and fiction. The author surrogate is not the real Chaucer but a parodic model of himself. The fact that surrogate Chaucer's tale is such a poor one causes a tension for any reader that has read any of the tales so far, particularly the aesthetic masterclass that is "The Prioress's Tale" because we know the skill that Chaucer the author has. Chaucer the character, by choosing a tale so quickly abhorred by the Host shows his own delusion in misunderstanding the nature and quality of his story and the nature and quality of his audience. Chaucer is showing us that authors are often poor evaluators of their own texts, perhaps even completely misunderstanding them. After "The Prioress's Tale" they are especially not keen on hearing a romance, as "Sir Thopas" is a parody only for the reader of *The Canterbury Tales*, not for the character Chaucer or the pilgrims. The rest of the pilgrims can nevertheless see that the tale lacks "sentence and solas."

“Sir Thopas” isn’t the first romance the reader has come into contact with and like “The Squire’s Tale,” it is also cut short. Clearly the *The Canterbury Tales* wants to criticize the genre of medieval romance, but the criticism brought towards the character Chaucer is much harsher than that brought to the Squire. This implies that someone the age and position (a writer) of Chaucer should know better than to tell romances or that some event or tale since “The squire’s tale” has harshened The Host’s view on romance (or poorly constructed storytelling)

Girard systematizes this new lens in which readers began to read texts as stereotypes of persecution. We have hinted at the stereotypes of persecution through our description of mimetic crises and the scapegoat mechanism. The stereotypes of persecution are a set of tropes, a literary grammar that one can use to identify a story or myth as a persecution text. You likely have used some of these without knowing. The stereotypes of persecution include:

- 1) a theme of disorder of undifferentiation
- 2) one particular individual (class) stands convicted of some fault
- 3) the victim has preferential signs of victimage
- 4) the victim is killed, expelled or otherwise eliminated and
- 5) after the violence, peace and order returns to the community.

We will see that “The Prioress’s Tale” contains these stereotypes of persecution and can then conclude whether it is a persecution text.

A theme of disorder or undifferentiation signals the mimetic crisis. This is often represented as plagues, floods or other natural disasters which may or may have not actually occurred. “They may be symbolic, real or simultaneously symbolic and real”<sup>74</sup> The stress on a

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<sup>74</sup> Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 119.

community and its desirable resources as well as the lack of rituals and prohibitions during a disaster is likely to increase the chances of a mimetic crisis occurring. What is important to this stereotype is that “culture is somehow eclipsed as it becomes less differentiated,”<sup>75</sup> that in some way the social order is dismantled, and members are subjected to a chaotic lack of distinction. In “The Prioress’s Tale” this lack of distinction is caused by the existence of an open ghetto of ‘impure’ Jews in a pure Christian community.

When one person or one class of people is accused of the cause of a natural disaster or community-wide crisis we now see that as patently absurd because we can see the arbitrariness of distinctions within the community. “The Prioress’s tale highlights the arbitrariness of this distinction subtly by setting the tale in Asia where an astute reader may realize that a Christian community in Asia would be in a similar situation as a Jewish ghetto in a Christian community. The fact that a Christian community and Jewish ghetto is transplanted together in Asia also highlights these two groups as one community that cannot exist without the other. A persecutory society needs its scapegoat to survive. Ergo the Jews and Christians make up one Judeo-Christian community which is easier to see in a different environment. The Jews as a class are blamed for the undifferentiation by the accusation that they conspired to kill the ‘litel clergeon.’

Preferential signs of victimage are certain distinctions a victim might have that increase their chances of being a victim. These are usually a series of arbitrary distinctions that allow a mob to see a victim as other from them (despite still being a part of the community and therefore able to be blamed for the crisis) and/or unlikely to cause a greater spread of violence via reprisals. This includes minority groups, the lowest class groups as well as kings as they all constitute groups both inside and outside. Ethnic and religious minorities are therefore perfect

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<sup>75</sup> Girard, 109.

victims because of their divergences from the rituals and prohibitions of the majority they are more easily accused of breaking the majority's prohibitions and therefore more easily accused of causing the crisis. This applies too to physical and social abnormalities that the mob calls attention to: "extreme characteristics ultimately attract collective destruction."<sup>76</sup> In "The Prioress's Tale," the Jews are chosen due to their position as a minority group. The accusation of child murder and the throwing of the body into a privy associates them with a severe taboos against harming children and impurity.

When we see that the victim is killed or otherwise removed from the community in a persecution text, we can clearly see this as an unjust murder of an innocent victim. In these texts the author shows no doubt that their victim is guilty. It is a completely earnest text. They are completely unaware that they are scapegoating and that the murder is unjustified so "they present things as they see them."<sup>77</sup> They have no reason to lie because, from the persecutor's perspective, persecution of the victim was necessary and good. This is why within the text of the story the Jews really do kill the 'litel clergeon' but readers are uncomfortable and skeptical a community would do such a thing. The persecution of the Jews in PrT makes the reader uncomfortable because they can tell that the story is from the deluded mind of a persecutor and that punishing a whole class for a crime is unjust.

Our final stereotype of persecution shows us the completion of the scapegoat mechanism as order is claimed to be restored and peace is brought to the community. A myth or persecution text about an actual mimetic crisis or scapegoating would necessarily have to claim a regenerated order or end to the crisis. "The Prioress's Tale" shifts in tone after the persecution to a more

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<sup>76</sup> Girard, 113.

<sup>77</sup> Girard, 104.

referential tone focused on the sacred where the community worships together the miracle of the 'lifel clergeon.'

Within the framework of Mimetic Theory, Girard defines a structural dichotomy between what he sees as two broad categories of literature, distinct in how readers and writers understand desire and persecution within them. His terms vary for these categories and migrate in focus and specificity over time. In his earlier writings, he suggests this distinction as the difference between romantic and novelistic texts and why novelistic texts tend to be viewed more favorably in literary circles and what underlying structures make each category distinct. Within this stage of Mimetic Theory, these terms focused strictly on whether texts portrayed desire as an inherently individual phenomenon (romantic) or as an arbitrary interindividual phenomenon (novelistic). Criticizing romantic sentiments in literature appears to be a consistent way in which authors have created a readership for centuries. Later, as Girard integrates this distinction into his anthropology and larger theories on the origin and evolution of cultures, he uses the term "persecution text" to describe myths and any other texts that obscure the nature of desire and violence. Texts which accomplish the opposite therefore reveal the arbitrary nature of desire and violence as well as reveal how persecution texts obscure this nature. I will use the terms persecution text and revelatory text to refer to these two types of literature.

In many ways "The Prioress's Tale" appears to be a persecution text in which readers are now capable of seeing as the unjust persecution of Jews. It features all stereotypes of persecution that signal a persecution text. Within this reading, Chaucer and The Prioress are both guilty of perpetuating antisemitism as both good and right. However, features of the text suggest that the text is more revelatory as it seems to comment on persecution texts and their authors. If we analyze "The Prioress's Tale" through the stereotypes of persecution it appears to have we will

see that these stereotypes are complicated in such a way that they have a more parodic function. The greatest illusion “The Prioress’s Tale” belies is its own earnestness.

“The Prioress’s Tale” in many ways constructs themes of disorder and undifferentiation. In the ways in which the ‘litel clergon’ resembles Christ he creates disorder and undifferentiation merely by entering the Jewish ghetto singing of the Virgin Mary. The song he sings, the *alma redemptoris* is about the immaculate conception which mimics the intermingling of god and man, a common motif of myth which is seen as the cause of disorder. The song’s focus on mercy and redemption, however, is antithetical to the gods of myth, obsessed with justice, order and sacrifice and becomes all the more ironical when the Christian community doesn’t show mercy to the Jews.

In the context of England at the time, the existence of a Jewish ghetto within a Christian community may be enough for an English audience to signal a lack of distinction and disorder. In this way, “The Prioress’s Tale” would function as a sort of mythological justification for the expulsion of Jews from England. The setting of the community in Asia, however, disorients the reader and disrupts the hierarchy of Christians and Jews by placing them in a foreign land whose government and major religion do not match the British order of things. The expulsion of Jews, the mythological “solution” for British Christians when faced with undifferentiation cannot be assumed to also apply in Asia at resolving the problem. Rather, it highlights the arbitrary hierarchy of any distinction. It encourages the reader to consider what difference there is between a Jewish ghetto within a Christian community and a Christian community within an Asian country.

When one person or one class of people is accused of the cause of a community-wide crisis we can start to see the cogs turning within a text to resolve the mimetic crisis. The fact that

a Christian community and Jewish ghetto is transplanted together in Asia also highlights these two groups as one community that cannot exist without the other. A persecutory society needs its scapegoat to survive. Ergo the Jews and Christians make up one Judeo-Christian community which is easier to see in a different environment. The Jews as a class are blamed for the undifferentiation by the accusation that they conspired to kill the ‘litel clergeon,’ which, within the fiction of the text, they did. I point this out neither to justify the Christians murder of a whole community for the actions of one, ordered by the actions of some, but to highlight that both the Jewish and Christian community are functionally doing the same thing. Both communities scapegoat individuals who were not guilty of the crime they are said to have committed. Satan is said to speak directly to the Jewish community and telling them “O Hebrayk peple, allas! / 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 youre lawes reverence?”<sup>78</sup> It is clear that the “litel clergeon” holds no “despit” towards the Jews and has little understanding what the song he sings means as even the one who teaches him the song “I kan namoore expoude in this mateere. / I lerne song; I kan but smal grammeere.”<sup>79</sup> His innocence (though associated with ignorance) is irrefutable. Given that the ghetto “was free and open at eyther ende”<sup>80</sup> (494) it’s patently absurd to assume no other Christian individual committed a “transgression” against Jewish law comparable to singing a song while passing through. The Jewish community is also innocent if it is merely parroting the logic of Satan and that the entire community is obviously not guilty of the murder. If we blame the whole Jewish community we must then blame the whole of the

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<sup>78</sup> Chaucer, “The Prioress’s Tale”, lines 560-564.

<sup>79</sup> Chaucer, line 535-36.

<sup>80</sup> Chaucer, line 494

Christian community in our condemnation of their antisemitism. For the contemporary reader especially, a condemnation of the Jews becomes a condemnation of the self.

Preferential signs of victimage are certain distinctions a victim might have that increase their chances of being a victim. The obvious sign of victimage within the story is Jewishness, the community's minority status. The Jewish community is paradoxically connected to royalty "Sustened by a lord of that contree"<sup>81</sup> while at the same time ghettoized. Both the powerful and the powerless tend to be victims in scapegoating but the combination of the two suggest the arbitrariness of power dynamics when it comes to persecution.

The victim is killed, expelled or otherwise eliminated. We have two obvious eliminations with the tale: The murder of the "litel clergon" and the killing of all of the Jews who knew of the murder. The murder of the child for singing a song—to put it lightly—is an extreme reaction to a lack of reverence. This is suggested by to stress the dogmatic law and order stereotype of Jews in contrast to Christian mercy, who does not fail to miss the deep irony of punishing all who knew of the murder plot without mercy or discretion and quoting Isaiah 3:11 of the Hebrew Bible as a justification for their punishment. They commit the same cry in which they decry The irony of this should not be lost on a Christian audience because, as Girard points out within the Curse Against the Pharisees is that they deny the sins of the father while benefitting and participating in them.

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<sup>81</sup> Chaucer, line 490.

## Moments of Dissonance

### Misunderstanding and Descriptions of Murder

In the (re)telling of the tale, Jewish guilt has been decided before the story begins. Their murder is already deemed justice. The stereotype of Jews hating Christ is not up for debate from the perspective of the teller. Jewish guilt is necessary for the tale to make sense and for the miracle to take place. If their guilt is in anyway ambiguous, a miracle would no longer be needed to resolve what is otherwise portrayed as a superlative injustice.

The Jews are accused of being “hateful to Crist and to his compaignye”<sup>82</sup> before they do anything. The logic of a Jewish conspiracy against Christians, ripped from the script of ritual murder accusations plays from the expectations of these words despite what the sentence says. What is actually “hateful to Crist” is not Jews but the Jewerye and/or the usury sustained by the lord. The sentence by itself is moreso a condemnation of ghettoization for the sake of profit by those in power than a specific condemnation of the Jews. Yet the Prioress fails to see this in her telling of the tale.

Both Jews and Christians are guilty of *méconnaissance* of Christian texts; they are deaf to the words they putatively revel or revile. Jews would have to ignore the message of the text which calls for mercy towards sinners. from a Christian perspective, this would be the Jews and from their perspective the ‘litel clergeon’ When the ‘litel cleregon’ takes up ‘Alma Redemptoris Mater’ as his death knell, the image brought to bear is striking, almost cinematic. Through a wailing “So loude that al the place gan to ryng,”<sup>83</sup> the Jews are judged and executed. Carried towards the abbey, away from the Jews and Jewerye, the ‘Litel Clergeon’ bellows “Give aid to a

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<sup>82</sup> Chaucer, line 492.

<sup>83</sup> Chaucer, line 613.

falling people / that strive to rise”<sup>84</sup> while the provost herds together and binds the Jews. The ‘litel clergeon’s’ singing swells to a “pitous lamencious” as he cries ‘have mercy on sinners’<sup>85</sup> as we imagine Jewish bodies mangled, torn and splintered by the whims of frightened wild horses. As the ‘litel clergeon’ speaks his final words the abbot removes the greyn from his tongue—a reversal of the sacrament of communion—silencing the boy and his hymn. Jewish corpses swing by ropes; a final funeral toll, soundless. In these stories this stresses the malice of the Jews towards Mary specifically and the Christian community in general.

“The Prioress’s Tale” and its miracle confirm Mary as the “Gateway of Heaven” as the clergeon is said to be delivered to heaven by Mary<sup>86</sup> but some particularly resonant reminders create a sort of dissonance between this antiphon and the murder of Jews. This is most obvious with the final line “have mercy on sinners” which is far off the message of the provost’s “Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve.”<sup>87</sup>

As Girard posits about myths, ideas around sacredness are often imposed on a tale post-facto. A hatred towards Mary requires at the very least a knowledge of the Mother-Virgin through the Gospels of the New Testament. One must understand Latin to be incensed by ‘Alma Redemptoris Mater.’ The reasoning that the Jews disposed of the body in a privy “in reproach of the Blessed Virgin” (as it is proposed in an C7<sup>88</sup>) only makes sense

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<sup>84</sup> Catholic Church, and Sylvester P Juergens. “Alma Redemptoris Mater.” In *The Roman Catholic Daily Missal, 1962: With Kyriale in Gregorian Notation*. (Kansas City, Mo.: Angelus Press, 2004), lines 4-5.

<sup>85</sup> Catholic Church, line 10.

<sup>86</sup> Chaucer, lines 665ff.

<sup>87</sup> Chaucer, Line 632.

<sup>88</sup> Broughton, C7, Lines 8-9.

from the perspective of the persecutors after the fact when Mary has performed her miracle. That a community of Jews killed the child for merely singing a Marion hymn is only palatable as a post-facto justification after the Jews are disposed of. “We [the Christian community] have eliminated our Jewish community and experienced a Marion miracle. The sacrilege of Mary must be why we killed the Jews.” It is also why in C7, like many other Marion miracles, the Jews fall from interest once the miracle occurs. The miracle is that which represents the murder and obscures it.

Compared to its analogues, the murder in *The Prioress’s Tale* is depicted in a more expedient and abstracted manner. The analogues fluctuate between making the murder a singular act or a communal one. Either a lone Jew, consumed with malice and rage at the chorister’s indiscretion, seizes the boy, murders him and defiles the corpse via its disposal or the malice towards the child is embodied in the Jewish community at large and a group of Jews commit the murder.

*The Prioress’s Tale* combines the two, having the Jewish community conspire to commit the murder, but have a hired ‘homycide’ complete the crime. Here we can most easily see the influence of the tale of young Sir Hugh and ritual murder accusations. The fact that the murderer was a hired killer has the effect on the reader of associating the manner of murder and disposal as what was practical for the killer rather than the will of the entire Jewish community. The homycide’s actions seem less driven by hate than indifference. Given that we know that Chaucer must be drawing from at least a chorister story—if not multiple—and the account of Hugh, it is surprising to inculcate the entire Jewish community without ritualizing the murder or having the ‘litel clergeon’ kidnapped for a time. C1 especially has echoes of a ritual murder accusation with its disembowelment of the victim through a cross cut in his stomach. Gavin Langmuir points this

out in “The Knight’s Tale of Young Hugh of Lincoln”, where he suspects Matthew Paris fabricated his account of Hugh’s death—with its torturous kidnapping of Hugh and accusations of entrail auguries—with direct inspiration from C1.<sup>89</sup> What is all the more peculiar is that this homicide is not mentioned again and rather “This provost dooth these Jewes for to sterve / That of this mordre wiste, and that anon”<sup>90</sup>; The Jews who knew (not exclusively the homicide or the Jews that conspired in the murder) are killed immediately without trial.

If we are to zoom out further, we can see what Chaucer might be doing with The Prioress’s Tale as a member of the greater literary tradition around Saint’s lives and miracles. Ann S. Haskell in “St. Nicholas and The Prioress’s ‘Cursed Jews’” stresses the competing influence of St. Nicholas and his medieval tales with Mary and her stories. Both “vied with one another for popularity” in the imagination of medieval peoples and within that imagination functioned as counterparts: Mary took the role as intercessor between God and humanity with St. Nicholas assisting humans with earthly aid.<sup>91</sup> Quick references and obscure allusions to St. Nicholas shade The Prioress Tale in its light as a Saint’s legend, revealing an uncomfortable penumbra to the Marian miracle subgenre.

Haskell points out another character in The Canterbury Tales who has at one point a greyn in their mouth, the hende Nicholas of The Miller’s Tale. Nicholas, bearing his saint’s name

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<sup>89</sup> Langmuir, Gavin I. “The Knight’s Tale of Young Hugh of Lincoln.” *Speculum* 47, no. 3 (1972): 459–82.

<sup>90</sup> Chaucer, lines 629-30.

<sup>91</sup> Haskell, Ann S. *Essays on Chaucer’s Saints*. Studies in English Literature ; v. 107. (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 51.

“cheweth greyn and lycorys, / To smellen sweete”<sup>92</sup> Along with Chaucer’s explicit connection of the ‘litel clergeon’ in line 514 of *The Prioress’s Tale*, this sweetness is associated with St. Nicholas<sup>93</sup>, and (Haskwell suggests) is connected with Chaucer’s description of the clergeon entombed “and in a tombe of marbul stones cleere / Enclosen they his litel body sweete”<sup>94</sup> Chaucer seems to explicitly encourage comparison of the legends of St. Nicholas to *The Prioress’s Tale* and therefore to the prevailing motifs in Marion miracles. Chaucer has swapped the lily of the virgin with this greyn of St. Nicholas. In legends of St. Nicholas, particularly in the *Jew and the Dishonest Christian*, Jews are portrayed sympathetically (Haskell 53) in comparison to particular Marion traditions which position Mary as representative of the new dispensation in opposition to the Jews and the old dispensation. This is not to say Nicholas miracles did not encourage conversion as an ideal, rather they appear to be more equanimous towards Jews. Legends of St. Nicholas, too, appear to end less in violent reprisal and more often in resurrection of the victim. The references to St. Nicholas, then, only serve to remind the reader that the violence of the tale is unnecessary, even unjust:

And that she [the Prioress] should be made to refer to St. Nicholas is especially ironic, since he is a saint not of revenge, but of compassion. Though his legends deal with murder—including the butchering of young boys—he is never vindictive. He never ‘blames,’ pronounces guilt or levies punishment. He is strong enough to forgive.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey. “The Miller’s Tale.” In *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann. (Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 2005), lines 3690-1.

<sup>93</sup> Haskell, 51. This association comes from the “scent and healing power of manna” legendarily said to drip from St. Nicholas’s tomb and, due to this, his subsequent assignment as patron saint of perfumers.

<sup>94</sup> Chaucer, “The Prioress’s Tale”, lines 681-82.

The Prioress's Tale not only critiques the state of contemporary sub-genres from within its genre, it is commented on by comparison to other miraculous legends.

If we are to take 'greyn' in the sense of grain, we are presented with a straightforward symbol of the eucharistic on the tongue of a devout believer. This leads to the rather striking image, "This hooly monk, this abbot, hym meene I, / His tonge out caughte, and took away the greyn, / And he yaf up the goost ful softly"<sup>96</sup> where the sacrament of communion is reversed. Rather than some element of Christ and holiness entering the body through the 'greyn,' the tongue is 'caughte' instead of presented and the holiness is pulled out, releasing the "goost" back to the immaterial world. The physical actions of the community end the miracle and subvert the work of Mary. The purported reason for this is so that Mary will fetch the child, but the monk's effective silencing of the child is so immediate and so abrupt the reader is left surprised if not shaken, the alacrity of the action calling one's mind to the murder itself.

#### A Dialogic First Stanza

While Chaucer wishes to reveal that the Jewish and Christian community he depicts is that, a single community, one which Jewish distinction was constructed to scapegoat Jews (as Moore points out as a means to ease economic and monarchic rivalries between the laity, the clergy and the court), The Prioress desires the opposite; she wishes to stress the difference of the Jews and the danger of their intermingling. Rather than stoking antisemitism, Chaucer uses the first Stanza in "The Prioress's Tale" to set up a dialogic about antisemitism, with the frame of *The Canterbury Tales* allowing his voice to converse and satirize the voice of the Prioress within the same lines. This satire of the Prioress is metonymic. The courtly and imitative superficiality of the Prioress, presented as minor foible in "The General Prologue," is a personal failing in

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<sup>95</sup> Haskell, 55.

<sup>96</sup> Chaucer, "The Prioress's Tale", Line 670-2.

critical exegesis and piety shown to have unjust systemic consequences throughout the world, especially if it is endemic in the nobility and part of Christian education like it was for the litel clergeon.

The Prioress's justification for the persecution of the Jews is their pollution of the community—a pollution she applies retroactively to her description of the community, constructing a Jewish ghetto where there would be none. The Jews cannot be a pollutant if they were always a part of and intermixed within the community. Therefore, they are made separate and the danger arises when Christians and Jews intermingle. The Prioress's rhetorical moves are that same ones which gave historical Christianity its sacrificial character. Readings that do not stress the universality of persecutory violence—that only attribute this violence to Jews—like the Prioress's own reading of her tale—or to anti-Semites—readings condemning Chaucer or the Prioress—fall into the same trap as the Pharisees and sacrificial Christianity, claiming a superiority to past violence while ultimately perpetuating it. If we imitate the Prioress's imitative piety, our readings will repeat persecutory violence rather than reveal it.

But the Prioress's reading of "The Prioress's Tale" is not the one Chaucer's text encourages. Chaucer provides us with moments of narrative dissonance which allows us to question the Prioress and her narrative and see that she is trying to construct a persecution text. This makes "The Prioress's Tale" a revelatory text, exposing the mechanics of Jewish persecution in Medieval English institutions and medieval tales. From this very first stanza of "The Prioress's Tale" (shown below) we see a focus on the mechanics of medieval persecution and a setting which primes the reader towards analysis rather than unthinking acceptance of the tale (the sort of faith the Prioress encourages):

Ther was in Asye, in a greet citee,

Amonges Cristene folk a Jewerye,  
 Sustened by a lord of that contree  
 For foule usure and lucre of vileynye,  
 Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye;  
 And thurgh the strete men myghte ride or wende,  
 For it was free and open at eyther ende.<sup>97</sup>

The peculiar setting immediately calls attention to itself. ‘Why Asia?’ is a question contemporaneous and modern readers alike must ask when the tale’s focus pivots to an undifferentiated community of Jews and Christians and a tale whose analogues have deep historical roots in not only Western Europe but England in particular. Chaucer’s contemporaneous readers, given the Prioress’s description in “The General Prologue,” could speculate immediately to her reasons; Sheila Delaney points out in “Chaucer’s Prioress, the Jews and Muslims” that ‘Asia’ was a fashionable topic among the nobility with which [The Prioress] identifies.”<sup>98</sup> Her invocation of ‘Asye’ is then a reminder to the reader of her “countrefete cheere / Of court.”<sup>99</sup> After the Prioress speaks to the virtue of her infant-minded piety in the prologue to her tale, Chaucer waits not a single line before he reminds us of the Prioress’s courtly aspirations and the dissonance this necessitates between real piety and its facile imitation.

No other analogue sets the tale so far away as “Asye.” Asia for Chaucer “likely includes the vast sweep of Central Asia as well as Turkey and the Arab regions” which, in the age of

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<sup>97</sup> Chaucer, lines 488-94.

<sup>98</sup> Delany, Sheila. “Chaucer’s Prioress, the Jews, and the Muslims.” In *Chaucer and the Jews*, 43–57. (Florence, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2002), 48.

<sup>99</sup> Chaucer, “The General Prolouge”, Lines 139-40.

Chaucer was almost entirely under Islamic rule.<sup>100</sup> The absence of Islam is a notable presence in the tale, especially as linking Jews and Muslims as members of “the great anti-Christian coalition”<sup>101</sup> was common after the thirteenth century. Without mentioning Islam but by placing Christians and Jews in a land alien to most English readers, Chaucer can defamiliarize the Jewish-Christian relationship so that readers may question the norms that relationship took in England and Europe. It encourages Christians to feel what Jews in a majority Christian country must feel by placing Christians in a majority Muslim country. While to a Christian audience this will recall their history of martyrdom and persecution, the text immediately pivots to the Jewish community, inviting the reader to see Jewish persecution in the light of Christian persecution. Muslims are not invoked because the focus is the mirroring of the Jewish and Christian communities. The Prioress’s “Counterfete” Asia<sup>102</sup> is used by Chaucer to construct an ideal situation for readers to realize for themselves the persecutory nature of Marian miracles and ritual murder accusations. The Asian setting stresses the Prioress’s courtly imitations while the alienating virtuality of her Asia works against her desire to make the Jews distinct and therefore appropriate scapegoats. To this point, ‘Asye’ as a setting is used to breakdown perceived hierarchy between Jews and Christians.

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<sup>100</sup> Delany, 43.

<sup>101</sup> Qtd in Delany, 48-49.

<sup>102</sup> The depiction of Asia in “The Prioress’s Tale” is a virtual one of the Prioress’s imagination. As we see in other depictions of Asia in *The Canterbury Tales* in “the Man of Lawe’s Tale” and “The Squire’s Tale” this construction of Asia is colored by The Prioress’s intentional ignorance. While trying to make her tale seem more contemporary and realistic, her virtual Asia makes it appear even more fantastic and the Jews as villains all the more unlikely.

We can see this in that Christians and Jews in this Asian city are grouped together with “Amonges,” suggesting an intermingled community further reinforced by how open the “Jewerye” or ghetto is to travel. Jill Mann, in her notes to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Canterbury Tales* points out that “[t]he Jewish quarter in medieval towns was usually surrounded by a wall, with a gate at each end, guarded by Christian gatekeepers,”<sup>103</sup> making the “Jewerye” in the tale a distinct imagining. Of note, there were no ghettos in the Islamic world and their cause and consequence—a forcibly Jewish moneylending industry—was nonexistent: “[t]here might be Jewish or Christian or Samaritan areas in a city, particularly around a synagogue or a church, but this was voluntary and carried no stigma. There would be no Jewish monopoly on moneylending because many other occupations were open to Jews” (Delaney 47)<sup>104</sup>. The ‘contree’ and the ‘Jewerye’ are both virtual.

What is “[h]ateful to Crist and to his compaignye” in this first stanza? The reading that likely seems most obvious to contemporary readers is that what is “[h]ateful to Crist and to his compaignye” is simply referring to Jews and ‘their’ practices collectively. We have a knee-jerk reaction to the text that it intends to persecute Jews, somewhat predicated on our belief that an antisemite would see this as evidence for Jewish villainy. We shouldn’t, however, dismiss this reaction as entirely modern or unintentional. According to Girard, the ability to decipher acts of collective violence and therefore witness persecution texts is available in the West after the introduction of the Gospels, with the ability increasing nonlinearly over time. And there are

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<sup>103</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann. (Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 2005), 985.

<sup>104</sup>Delany 46-7. It is possible that Chaucer knew of these practices as he had acquaintances who traveled and interacted with the Islamic world, but, regardless of this, the distancing effect of the Asian setting on the English reader encourages them to question if the distinctiveness of the Jews is inherent or constructed.

contemporary sources to Chaucer which do seem to decipher as noted previously in the work of Rex Richards. There are also instances such as one in a Strasbourg chronicle where medieval readers show clear awareness of the expedient and envy driven underpinnings of Jewish antisemitism and persecution. After Jews were burnt due to the accusation of well poisoning during the Black Death, the Chaucer contemporary Jacob von Königshofen concludes “The money was indeed the thing that killed the Jews. If they had been poor and if the feudal lords had not been in debt to them, they would not have been burnt.”<sup>105</sup> For an already revelatory reader, this opening stanza, rather than merely revealing the mechanics of persecution, reveals how pervasive persecution is in the Marian miracle genre and the institutions which parrot it.

While an antisemitic reading against the Jews is possible within this first stanza, it certainly isn't the only reading and isn't necessarily the clearest or most evident one. Multiple readings are facilitated by the syntactic ambiguity as to what exactly is “Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye.” If we work down the stanza, it appears what is “Hateful to Christ” can be the “Jewerye,” (either referring to the institution of the ghetto or Jews as a collective— i.e. “Jewry”); that a lord sustains the “Jewerye” (either that the lord allows Jews to inhabit a Christian community or that a lord ghettoizes the Jews); or the acts of usury and “lucre of vileyne” are hateful (either the acts themselves, The acts as typically Jewish acts or that a lord uses Jews to profit by these acts).

The last interpretation is remarkable as it is nearly identical to Moore's thesis as to how Jews became a persecuted class. The ghetto is “sustened by a lord of that contree.”<sup>106</sup> As we

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<sup>105</sup> “Jewish History Sourcebook: The Black Death and the Jews 1348-1349 CE.” (Accessed February 28, 2020).

<sup>106</sup>Chaucer, “The Prioress's Tale”, line 490. With the historical background I've given, one might've reasonable concluded that the sustaining lord referred to must be a Muslim and

know from Moore, Jewish ghettos in Western Europe were a product of politically expedient exploitation by kings, lords and others in power. The lord is made culpable whether the reader interprets Jews within the ghetto that is within the community or their ghettoization to be a crime against Christ et al. Since there is no pretense that ghettoization has occurred for the protection of either Jews or Christians within the text, the ghetto is sustained purely for the profit of the lord which is sinful, again either in its exploitation of Jews or its endangerment of Christians via contact with Jews.

So, are the Jews hateful to Christ, or is the Jewerye? Because the following sentence continues discussion on the Jewerye, we can safely assume the latter. But if it is that the Jewerye is hateful, is it hateful because it pollutes a pure Christian community with dirty Jews or is it hateful because a lord maintains a jewerye to immorally exploit Jews into performing his immorally questionable labor? Are the Jews or the manner in which Christians treat Jews the problem in these interfaith communities? Are the Jews a real threat or a scapegoat? Jewry hatred and “jewerye”(ghetto) hatred are equally plausible readings of this stanza. This Chaucerian ambivalence, which is found throughout *The Canterbury Tales* is essential to Chaucer’s Horatian satirical style. Ambiguous syntax requires the reader to think critically and provides the opportunity to decide for themselves. It makes the tale both dialogic and participatory. Chaucer

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rather than unraveling the fabric of Christian persecution of Jews, what Chaucer was really doing was casually blanketing the entire tale in the trappings of Islamophobia. However, a preponderance of literature on PrT believes the lord to be distinctly Christian. This is backed up by government officials being referred to in very English terms (i.e. “lord” and “provost”) and the fact that the incident described in PrT according to Islamic civil law “would normally have required a rigorous court proceeding, in which the Jews would probably have won” (Delaney 48). It seems that a simulacra of the medieval English judicial system was repurposed by the Prioress/Chaucer and stitched into the “Asye” setting, undermining the logos of the Prioress while this patchwork setting further renders the readers dichotomous social structure alien and open to scrutiny, allowing them to see the absurdity of blood libels, ghettoization and expulsion.

gives as fact that the “Jewerye” is hateful to Christ but leaves ambiguous to the reader *why*. The reader must then decide for themselves what makes “Jewerye” so bad, particularly one so casually traversed and whose conception is emphasized as virtual.

#### The Prioress’s Antisemitism Arises from Imitation

The Prioress’s perspective represents the side which sees Jews as hateful to Christ. The Prioress clearly sees Jewry as dangerous, as she personally curses the Jews and connects her tale to Hugh of Lyncoln. Chaucer thereby associates antisemitism with the characteristics of the Prioress for the reader, characteristics that he has portrayed ultimately as unattractive, weighting the reader’s decision towards seeing ghettos and Jewish persecution as what is hateful.

The tale is constructed in such a way that we are encouraged to never forget that the Prioress is the one telling this tale and that she has her own beliefs and goals that influence how the tale is told. Goals and beliefs which a reader may agree or disagree with. Several times throughout the tale, the Prioress interjects her voice in the story. The first of these interjections in the tale switches to the first person ‘I’ and marks this as the Prioress’s speech directly with “quod she,”<sup>107</sup> mirroring a dialogue tag first seen indicating her speech in her prologue.<sup>108</sup> Dialogue markers for tale teller interjections are conspicuously absent in all other tales. Because the tale is being told in the Prioress’s voice quod she is further peculiar as it should be unnecessary. It seems as if Chaucer wants to stress the ‘I’ in The Prioress’s Tale is the Prioress and not himself. So, perhaps more than any other tale, Chaucer wants you to think about the voice of the author (though he encourages you to do just that from the General Prologue). The lines emphasized to be in the Prioress’s voice then also happen to be the most blatantly antisemitic. Even if we are

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<sup>107</sup> Chaucer, “The Prioress’s Tale”, lines 572-581

<sup>108</sup> Chaucer, line 453.

lulled by the tragic pathos of the litel clergeon's death and desecration, we are reminded of the mediator of our story, who self describes her ability as weak and childlike,<sup>109</sup> who curses the Jews and presages the vengeance that will be wrought against them. When the Prioress's voice is made obvious, one can see she is more concerned with vilifying the Jews than mourning the death of the clergeon.

When she does talk of the clergeon, her focus is on making him a martyr—sacralizing him—rather than mourning the tragic death she concocted for him. She refers to him as a “martir” immediately after his death and her curse of the Jews, stressing his virginity quite out of the blue (the boy is seven) to emphasize his innocence and purity. His death becomes important as evidence against the Jews with the martyrdom justifying their persecution. Like myths, God and/or the Virgin Mary intercedes only after the murder rather than before because it is the death/murder of the clergeon that marks the Jews as scapegoats, leads to their persecution and ultimately the resolution of the mimetic crisis—the crisis of undifferentiation.

Moreover, the Prioress's construction of the clergeon as a martyr should not be taken as a given, nor are her reasons for doing so unmotivated. Dawn F. Colley Argues in “Creating a Martyr” that the Prioress elevates the rote imitative piety of the clergeon to the level of martyrdom to thereby justify her own superficial piety by the associations she draws between herself and the murdered chorister.<sup>110</sup> She engenders Jewish hatred to legitimize the clergeon's martyrdom and by extension legitimize her own imitative nature.

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<sup>109</sup> Chaucer, lines 481ff.

<sup>110</sup> Colley, Dawn F. “Creating a Martyr: Rhetoric, Chaucer's ‘The Prioress’ Tale,” and the Death of the “Litel Clergeon” (Accessed February 19, 2020). According to Colley, through this “Chaucer promotes cautious, critical analysis through his demonstration of the danger of dependence on meditated, ill-considered information.” otherwise we will allow those like the Prioress to “narrate appalling scenarios that suit our own ends.”

That the Prioress carefully signals the Jews as scapegoats to elevate herself should not be taken as unrelated to her imitations of court. Here we must consider why she brings up another child martyr, Hugh of Lincoln. Hugh of Lincoln is the most popular instance of a ritual murder accusation primarily because of its legitimization by Henry III. The Prioress linguistically mimics the actions of kings like Henry III, who ordered the death of Jews, or the actions of Lords, who sustained ghettos for the same reasons: she can benefit from their persecution. She parrots nobility by telling a story of child martyrdom for her own personal gain.

It is this superficial imitation of Christian piety and envious imitation of the nobility that causes her to resolve her issues through antisemitic scapegoating. Chaucer's local criticism of the Prioress is the emptiness and danger of this imitative piety. The Prioress's depiction as a noble mimicry ends up associating the nobility with Jewish persecution. If this association holds, then, if a reader concludes that Marian miracles scapegoat Jews, they must conclude that the nobility also scapegoat Jews. If they already believed such about the nobility, the pole reverses and reveals the antisemitism inherent in Marian miracles. Jewish expulsion, ghettoization and scapegoating are all products of this superficial piety.

It is superficial imitation of Christian ideas then which concerns Chaucer the most. In Girardian terms this is related to the Christian failure to understand that martyrdom isn't sacrificial; it is witnessing the truth of violence and refusing to answer it/perpetuate it with violence. A superficial understanding of the text brought about via imitation is what causes medieval Christians to see "only the structural analogy between the Passion and the sacrifices of the Old Law, and in doing so they [fail] to take into account an incompatibility."<sup>111</sup> A superficial

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<sup>111</sup> Girard, *Things Hidden*, 225.

understanding of Christian texts will reflect the scapegoating of Christ in the Passion but will miss the falseness of that violence which the Passion reveals.

### The Irony of Doubles

This is most clearly seen by the drawing and hanging of the Jews, justified by “Ivel shall have that ivel wol deserve” and that the Jews were hung “by the lawe.”<sup>112</sup> “Lawe” is another point of structured ambiguity appearing to refer both to Jewish law and Christian Law (of the land). Given the point of constructing Jewish villainy and differentiating the communities, this is a huge point of contention. That the laws of Jews and Christians are different is The Prioress’s essential premise required for the logic of the tale to work. Following Jewish law (which within the tale is following Satan) and respecting its reverence is what causes the Jews to kill the litle clergeon, the act which makes them a scapegoat and causes the reverent miracle at the heart of the tale. So, if Christian law can be conflated with Jewish law, any accusation against essential Jewishness will also apply to Christians rather than differentiating the communities. The Jewish hanging reasserts the doubling of Christians and Jews. The logic of violence fails. Drawing and hanging, too, is not the typical punishment for murder or accessory to a murder, but of treason, comparable therefore comparable to Christ and the crucifixion.

The prima facie irony here is that the Christians punish Jews by their own law.<sup>113</sup> According to the Prioress, Satan convinces the Jews to kill the clergeon because of his lack of reverence for Jewish law.<sup>114</sup> But the deeper irony lies with the Prioress and the Christian community depicted. If the purpose of this tale is as the Prioress’s says to “laude, as I best kan or

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<sup>112</sup> Chaucer, “The Prioress’s Tale”, lines 632, 34.

<sup>113</sup> Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed Jill Man, 990.

<sup>114</sup> Chaucer, “The Prioress’s Tale”, lines 560-4.

may, of thee [Lord] and of the white lilye flour [Mary]”<sup>115</sup> and the purpose of the drawing and hanging of the Jews is to augment the miracle that lauds the holy mother and father by showing how the miracle brought justice upon the “cursed Jewes,” it does so by ignoring essential Christian teaching, reverting instead to a reprisal based perception of Jewish law. In killing the Jews, Christians then perpetuate the law that supposedly makes them holier and superior to the Jews over their own teachings and whose reverence the Prioress claims causes the murder of the clergeon. It places the will to murder the Jews as the will of god rather than the Christian community. Given that the gods are the same it renders the murder false. When the prioress claims “Murder wol out” it too reflects against herself and the murder of Jews. The hanging without legal parameters show moreso that the will of the mob is what killed the Jews. The tale is but a whited sepulcher, beautiful in ornamentation hiding unclean death. The Christians in the Prioress’s tale condemn Jewishness and the Prioress tries to make the Jews distinct from Christians, but in doing so they perpetuate the very law they criticize. That Jewish distinction derives from something essential cannot hold.

This sort of doubling of Jews and Christians as mirror can be found throughout the tale, but is found most blatant in the double signification of lawe. As noted before, the situation of a Christian community in asye would be similar to that of a Jewish quarter in Europe. It is a mob of Jews egged on by the supernatural voice of satan which leads them to hire the ‘homyicide’ and it is Christian folk hearing “Alma redemptoris mater” that together call the provost to bind, draw and hang the Jews. This is a mob unanimously experiencing a supernatural event that leads to murder. There isn’t something Christians can accuse of the Jews that they are not implicated

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<sup>115</sup> Chaucer, line 460-1.

in or guilty of as well. It is quite clear that the Jews and the Christians are doubled, and the violence is mimetic with reprisals doubling.

### Voicing and Silencing

The tale also puts special attention on voicing and on groups unable to understand or refusing to hear the message of god. This failure to understand inevitably has violent consequences, whatever one's intent may be. This begins with the litel clergeon who decides to rote memorize "Alma Redemptoris Mater" "Noght wiste he what this Latyn was to seye"<sup>116</sup> and whose only information on the tale comes from an older student who too is "but small grammeere"<sup>117</sup> and only heard the meaning of this antiphon secondhand as well. Given that he did not understand the antiphon but hearing it "drough hym ner and ner,"<sup>118</sup> we can see the child was drawn by the aesthetic beauty of hearing the song rather than its aesthetic content. This is the sort of piety the Prioress compares herself to that even if they can express words of praise they certainly would know not what they mean. The litel clergeon's praise then is entirely imitative. Content does not matter because comprehension does not matter. That you praise is what is important. That meaning would be irrelevant to faith provided one mimics faith then renders and lesson in the bible as irrelevant. This is antithetical to the concept of teaching so that the clergeon's school is what perpetuates this is alarming. Yet as Mann states in her notes to *The Canterbury Tales* this sort of rote learning was common.<sup>119</sup> Another issue is that because of this sort of rote imitation's ubiquity even when the clergeon wishes to understand the antiphon his

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<sup>116</sup> Chaucer, line 523.

<sup>117</sup> Chaucer, line 536.

<sup>118</sup> Chaucer, line 520.

<sup>119</sup> Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed Jill Mann, 985ff.

knowledge remains incomplete and secondhand. The imitation ultimately obscures his ability to learn. His desire to learn the song also lead to our first reference to violence as he “shall be beaten thrice in an hour,”<sup>120</sup> for failing to learn his primer to learn his *Alma Redemptoris Mater*. This in and of itself is a strange gesture of worship as his Primer consisted of important liturgical texts, including the *Ave Maria*. His primacy of Mary over other teachings runs the risk of placing her at or above God and Christ, an criticism levied at saint cults, particularly marian ones from time to time. Though the child mimics religious teaching he does not understand it and in doing so runs the risk of sacrilege.

“Alma Redemptoris Mater, translated variolously as “[Loving][Gentle][Nourishing] Mother of the Redeemer” praises Mary as the path to heaven, expounds the mystery of the virgin birth and—importantly—implores Mary to give mercy to sinners. The antiphon is used to foreground the connection of Mary to the redemptive nature of Christ, the desire for the fallen people [humanity] to rise and the importance of mercy. Because of the universal failure to understand the antiphon within the tale (and of the Prioress), their fails to be redemption or mercy and a cycle of violence keeps people fallen.

The Jews are the next group to hear and fail to understand the antiphon. Unless we assume all Jews are fluent in Latin and hold in depth knowledge of Mary, It would be unknown to them whether christ’s words or the antiphon in particular were irreverent to Jewish law. (and as we see later, sacrificial Christianity is quite reverent to its conception of Jewish law). Only the virutal jew, the Jew as mirrored rival would have the equivalent knowledge of Christianity to see the child as blasphemous. That is, the Jews would have to have the same impression that the child singing an antiphon is a powerful religious symbol emblematic of good Christian piety. For

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<sup>120</sup> Chaucer, “The Prioress’s Tale” line 542.

their persecution to make sense, they have to agree with the Prioress that the clergeon's naïve piety has to be so powerful as to be dangerous. Jewish complaint towards *Alma Redemptoris Mater* are never voiced directly like the clergeon or his felawe. Instead Satan is given a voice in a way meant to goad the Jews into violence, citing the antiphon as "in youre despit" and that the subject is "against youre lawe's reverence"<sup>121</sup> In this conception of Judaism, to merely speak of Mary, redemption and mercy requires one to be silenced forever. It is the speaking itself which is seen as hateful, the Jewereye is not reified as a place or home for the Jews that is violated by the Christian child by his prescence. It is the doubly misunderstood words of the antiphon that are dangerous. This inability to understand of course leads the hiring of the homicide and the throat cutting of the clergeon. This creates a rather peculiar logic where Jews who shouldn't understand an antiphon kill a child who can't understand an antiphon. This does makes sense from a Girardian perspective however, especially the goading by Satan. Girard claims is "the name for the mimetic processes seen as a whole" where, like in the curse of the Pharisees and the Passion, it is the failure to understand Christ's words which cause his death but prove his point/divinity. It would then make sense that their failure to understand the doubling of the Christian and Jewish community and their failure to understand the words of Christ would lead their attempt to silence the innocent victim.

To this point, "The Prioress tale," like many stories of martyrdom attempt to reflect the story of Jesus. However, "The Prioress's Tale" ultimately effaces that message and reflects instead the sacrifices which the New Testament critiques. Sacrificial Christianity makes the misunderstanding distinctly Jewish while maintaining an essentially Jewish order. Rather than seeing Jesus's claims against the pharisees as universal, they become the fault of the Jews. This

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<sup>121</sup> Chaucer, Lines 563-4.

appears to be what the Prioress is trying to do, but the result of her imitative piety is to unintentionally but blatantly show the Christians do not understand Jesus's word either.

The key insight on scapegoating that must be kept in mind: when you are scapegoating someone, you cannot view it as scapegoating. Scapegoating breaks at its realization. If eliminating the scapegoat cannot be seen as resolving the issue, its futility is revealed and the act can no longer relieve mimetic rivalry, leaving scapegoating truly futile. Post revelation, this makes persecutory readings of persecutory texts unstable. The instability of the persecutory reading is essential to gospel revelation. Jesus is silenced violently by declaring that they violently silence people. Violence will always try to kill those committed to nonviolence. If god can be seen as nonviolent it will be revealed that those who assert god's will through violence are not godly. It is the disentangling of violence from the sacred at the core of revelation.

The underlying statement of the Curse Against the Pharisees and The Passion is that there is no just violence and the lie at the heart of human culture is that the every culture denies its own violence and claims nonviolence while it maintains its order through justified violence. It is the paradox in claiming we are not violent but our violence and the violence which made us was right and necessary. To refuse or expose this hypocritical violence will get you killed by that violence, ultimately proving violence's role in society. If you reveal a culture is based on violence you reveal the dirty bones under the whited sepulcher that sacralizes the murder of your fathers. The flaw of sacrificial Christianity is failing to universalize this message and blaming the Jews for all violence and hypocrisy which has the effect of repeating the failure of the Pharisees. It is to claim "if we were around in the time of Christ, we Christians would not have crucified Jesus." Despite the gospels transforming the Palm Sunday mob into the crucifying crowd and Jesus's disciples complicities in his death, sacrificial Christianity fails to see the continuity of

violence and thereby repeats it through its denial. Sacralizing the clergeon is sacralizing the murder of the Jews. If the tomb is sacred, it justifies violence while decrying violence.

Chaucer's criticism of the Prioress's imitative piety amounts to calling her a pharisee. The Prioress like the pharisees, claim spiritual authority while only maintaining its appearance. They do not understand what their religious texts are trying to show. Jesus's message is a conclusion he arrived at through the Old Testament, so the Pharisees appearance is all the more damnable in that their claim to spiritual authority, a simulacrum of real spiritual authority actually hinders people from receiving the message. The Prioress's push for her emulation of piety as a proper mode effectively does the same thing.

The criticism of Prioress as Pharisee is first signaled in her description in the General Prologue,<sup>122</sup> but echoes again with the entombing of the litel clergeon in "a tombe of marbul stones cleere"<sup>123</sup> (681) which appears to reference Matthew 23:27, "Woe to you, scribes and pharisees, hypocrites, that be like to *sepulchres whited*, which withoutforth seem fair to men; but within they be full of bones of dead men, and of all filth."<sup>124</sup> The literal image of clear marble stone would seem to mimic sepulchers whited, while figuratively 'cleere' implies a transparency to the tombe, i.e. What Jesus accomplishes with his curse. Clear stone would reveal what is inside the tomb which in "The Prioress's Tale" would be the filthy clergeon. Unlike analogues, "The Prioress's Tale" does not clean the clergeon after he is found in the privy, a peculiar oversight for the pollution obsessed prioress. The Prioress and her tale are Pharisees which

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<sup>122</sup> Rex, "The Sins of Madame Eglentyne" points to Prioress's clean 'cuppe' (GP 134-35) as highly reminiscent of Matthew 23:25-26

<sup>123</sup> Chaucer, line 681.

<sup>124</sup> Bible Gateway. "Bible Gateway Passage: Matthew 23:27 - Wycliffe Bible." Accessed March 27, 2020. Emphasis mine.

Chaucer reveals whose false imitative piety in effect tries to hide persecutory violence by pretending it is sanctioned by god through the work of miracles.

This reading of “The Prioress’s Tale” has firmly and unapologetically placed the antisemitism in the tale on the Prioress. The Prioress’s manufactures Jewish difference to legitimize her imitative piety, attempting to scapegoat the Jews to reassert a sacrificial understanding of Christianity. Chaucer does his best to capture the logic of a mind which creates persecution texts while providing moments of dissonance to allow his readers to develop critical skills and better recognize acts and texts of persecution.

Some have argued that asserting that the Prioress is being satirized through her association with antisemitism is antifeminist and that therefore Chaucer is asserting that something that is essentially female is what is causing The Prioress to be naively imitative and persecutory. While the rhetorical skill Chaucer gives to the Prioress should be enough to dissuade that he is attacking female intelligence, the criticisms Chaucer’s satire levies towards the Prioress are meant to be criticisms on the systems the Prioress is involved in. The Prioress is a warning about the dangers of superficial, imitative piety meant to be universalized. This warning is neither specifically about the Prioress nor the prioress is general, but it is not ignorant of them either. The false parroting is the problem and pushing women into priories whose sentiments lie elsewhere will not improve their lives or increase their spiritual development. Their imitation, too will affect all those who they influence which, with the often pedagogical role they have, will mean a huge swath of the church. The clergy will fail the laity and the nobility if they anywhere encourage an imitative spirituality. They will create a nest of pharisees at the heart of medieval estate society.

The Prioress is an effective exemplar of these systemic problems because criticizing her extends criticism often levied only at friars to the church at large. The larger criticism is the dangers of teaching a false piety to the laity, where the Prioress happens to be the point of contact in church of educating many people. According to Chaucer's criticism, this sort of superficial education will lead to a more exploitative government and increased persecution. To teach the Christianity poorly is to teach anti-Christianity. By having the Prioress's direct voicing so focused on antisemitism and justifying the clergeon's martyrdom—by emphasizing Jewish violence and the sacred miracle it causes—we can see that the Prioress is attempting to form a persecution text. Piety does not require hatred, but persecution does.

The intermingling or lack of differentiation of the Jews is what the Prioress fears more than murder. This is why the pollution of the litel clergeon's body is given a vulgar apostrophe while the murder takes up half a line and is reduced to a "kitte" of the throat,<sup>125</sup> rather than indulging in the elaborate tortures and mock crucifixions found in analogues and ritual murder accusation stories. It is the perceived pollution of the Jews which they viscerally transmit to the litel clergeon that the Prioress fears. The openness of the ghetto is a sign of Jewish threat unmitigated. It is the openness of this ghetto which is used as a sign of undifferentiation affixed to a group made differentiated for the very purpose of justifying their persecution. The Jews are made different, made a pollutant so that their original state as undifferentiated can be seen as polluting the community and therefore justifying their expulsion and/or murder as necessary to re-differentiate and restore the Christian community. The sleight of hand is that the Christian community does not exist as separate from the Jewish community until after Jewish persecution. This is the mythic lie. This is how persecution pulls itself up by its bootstraps. The sacrificial

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<sup>125</sup> Chaucer, lines 571ff.

order is applied retroactively as the norm which all crises must seek to return to. The atemporality of The Prioress's perspective is stressed by her reference to Little Hugh of Lincoln as 'a litel while ago'

Now we can see how Moore and Girard agree: Difference is constructed post sacrificio. The crime of pollution and undifferentiation is placed upon the Jews to justify or give reason to their persecution but its rationale only makes sense *after* the persecution. Jews, neither separate nor distinct before their persecution are made separate and distinct *by* their arbitrary persecution. It is then the violation of that separation which is used as the reason for their persecution. The ghetto in "The Prioress's Tale" then has a mythological aspect to it as it is a distinction that doesn't really exist in Asia but must exist in the Prioress's view for the violence to be not only justified but sacralized.

## Conclusion

When Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe he is claimed to have said “so you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war.” This apocryphal but incredibly famous literary quote expresses the desire among writers and literary scholars for literature to be a vehicle for social change and political progress. And yet, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the novel in question, may be most known after the nineteenth century for the slur Uncle Tom’ that emerged from it. Defined as “A black man who is considered to be excessively obedient or servile to white people,”<sup>126</sup> an Uncle Tom is one who maintains the system of racial hierarchy and differentiation, the obverse of *Cabin*. A modern reader too will likely find it difficult to not read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as dangerously stereotypical. If we are to believe in literature’s cultural impact and therefore give Stowe her due, we must in some way reconcile how a text can appear to both disavow and reaffirm persecution. Furthermore, we must find a way to discuss works like the films *Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with The Wind* and *Triumph of the Will*, persecutory works whose roots sink so deeply and clutch so strongly our cultural soil that they still impact modern cultural production, down to the very grammar it is expressed in.

Girard’s account of textual evolution—from affirming the violent and persecutory order of society to dismantling it—provides us with a schema to approach the meaning of persecution in texts. Rather than quibbling over whether or not a text is prejudice we can analyze moments of apparent prejudice and persecution and find ways for those texts to serve us whether we understand them as persecutory or revelatory. For Girard, *all* of literary history (and all of human culture) is born out persecutory violence, so excising the persecutory texts is moot to dangerous.

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<sup>126</sup> “Uncle Tom, n. and Adj.” In *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. (Accessed March 5, 2020).

Any attempt to excise it is at once impossible and, moreover reaffirms the persecutory texts order by obscuring or outright masking the persecutory violence. What Girard allows us to do instead is better understand how persecutory readers can become revelatory and how, like revelatory texts, we can make persecution texts revelatory through analysis.

Because of the slipperiness of violence and persecution, its revelation will also be piecemeal and stepwise. Even if a story points to the structure of persecution, does not mean it will not suffer from it at other moments. And because a revelatory text must dialogue and comment on a persecution text to reveal persecution as arbitrary, there is always a chance that we can mistake a text as persecutory, especially if we do not take it in its historical and genre contexts.

Our most fruitful reading of “The Prioress’s Tale” comes from a holistic reading on its persecutory and revelatory readings. It is valuable to understand why readers see it as justifying antisemitism, failing to justify antisemitism while nevertheless endorsing it (a persecution text), or revealing antisemitism as arbitrary scapegoating (a revelatory text).

Regardless If you as a reader finds “The Prioress’s Tale” persecutory or revelatory, it must be told. If one finds the tale strictly antisemitic (a difficult but not indefensible proposition), then it is a persecution text whose deconstruction should be disseminated, linking medieval antisemitism as a contiguous phenomenon with modern antisemitism and intrinsically embedded in western institutions and western literary tradition. As a persecution text, it does not make people antisemitic. There is no convincing logos on the truth of Jewish difference contained in “The Prioress’s Tale.” Rather, if it is a persecution text, it reasserts antisemitism and persecution as the default solution to any culture-wide mimetic crisis. Mimetic rivalry makes people antisemitic. Jewish persecution occurs in imitation of persecution texts. To point to this

continuity of antisemitism all the way back to the age of Chaucer is revelatory in and of itself. Moreover, “The Prioress’s Tale” is also local proof that expelling all the Jews failed to solve the issues within the community. The Jews were expelled from England more than a hundred years before *The Canterbury Tales* and, if anything *CT* is a testament to how much the people of England disagree and a monument to the problems in its society. We have scapegoated and sacrificed the Jews in the west in outbursts of violence that have increased in severity and number of victims, always as a final solution to end all violence and crises for hundreds of years and *it has never worked*. The violent mimetic crises have always returned. If teachers of literature assert that literature can be a source of good in the world, it is invaluable for them to point out the persistent attempts to make antisemitism and the murder of Jews the founding character of a persecutory west which has persistently failed. And the failure of antisemitic scapegoating needs to be universalized. “The Prioress’s Tale” as Putative persecutory text would be an abject lesson on how pervasive persecutory mindsets are even in those who should have the greatest ability to overcome that mindset (Chaucer or the Prioress or their readers).

The benefit If you, as I do, believe “The Prioress’s Tale” is a revelatory text, is that the tale not only teaches all of the above about the ubiquity and prevalence of persecution in the microcosm of the Prioress, but it helps you come to know how we have come to better understand persecution and reveal it as unjust. If the tale is revelatory, Chaucer is a teacher to all writers on how one can create satire that is revelatory to diverse readers. How Chaucer creates a double voiced and subtle satire which offers a path for the persecutory reader to see the absurdity and arbitrariness of antisemitism and reveals to the revelatory reader the structural mechanics of antisemitism in the fourteenth century and beyond can be a useful model for all of us on how one

can reveal the scapegoat mechanism. A text which ‘persecutes the persecutors’ with a too direct or too scathing a condemnation will only serve as justification for future persecution.

As Girard warns, that which reveals persecution very often becomes the next scapegoat. Unless we wish to repeat the mistakes of our literary fathers we must not bury and we must not entomb texts which persecute and texts which reveal persecution. We too, then, become like Pharisees, claiming discontinuity with our persecutory progenitors while reasserting the order which will inevitably lead to future persecution. We musn’t hide the uncleanness and filth if we are to ever become clean. Whether “The Prioress’s Tale” is persecutory or revelatory—As Chaucer has always asserted—is up to you, dear reader.

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