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Richard J. Schoeck

CHAUCER'S PRIORESS: MERCY AND TENDER HEART

IT IS, of course, a shallow, schoolboy enterprise to read attitudes of later ages back into one's interpretation of history or to read literature of the past with modern lenses: this we all recognize. No one today would seriously propose a criticism of the poetry of Provence of the twelfth century because it is not the Whitmanesque singing of a democracy. But modern readers must continually be on guard against the assumption that medieval men and women always shared our twentieth-century notions of gentleness and our abhorrence of physical cruelty. On the other hand, kindness is no modern discovery, and charity has been practiced for many centuries.

I want to reconsider the conventional reading of the cruelty of the Prioress's Tale in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. There is now, I take it, general acceptance of some irony in Chaucer's portrayal of the Prioress in the General Prologue to the *Tales*, though not yet universal agreement on how critical our view of her is to be. Curiously, however, there seems to be a widespread reading of her Tale itself as sincere, devout, and univocal. I should like to suggest another reading of the Prioress and her Tale, and to examine the complex of attitudes toward Jews and toward Christian-Jewish relations that is embodied in Chaucer's poem.

THE CANTERBURY TALES

LET us begin by reminding ourselves of the essential characteristics and qualities of Chaucer's great poem. In the Prologue, the pilgrims gather together to form their company for the journey to Canterbury,

*from every shire's end
In England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick
In giving help to them when they were sick.*

(p. 25; Prologue, lines 15-18)¹

1. The page reference is to Nevill Coghill's modernization of *The Canterbury Tales* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1952). The line reference is to F. M. Robinson's edition of *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933).

Sundry folk they are, some nine and twenty that fall into their fellowship for their long ride to Canterbury. Their companionship is one of the essential keys to understanding the *Canterbury Tales*: an enduring part of the appeal of this work resides in the sense of interpersonal relationships—the attitudes of the other pilgrims toward the Knight, for example, or the humor of the rivalry of the Miller and the Reeve, or the bitter clash of Summoner and Friar. This company forms and devises a plan (left incomplete by the poet's failure to carry it to fulfillment) for the telling of tales both going to and returning from Canterbury. Lots are drawn for the order of the stories, the Prologue ends, and the pilgrimage is under way.

This, we recall, is the general plan and procedure of the *Tales*. But no such bald summary can do justice to the rich sense of person that Chaucer develops within his characterizations of types, to the subtle nuance of attitude (of which I shall say more), and to the overwhelming feeling of reality. There are breaks in the continuity of social scaling, but the sense of the wholeness of the society projected is very strong. In a few words, "it is the concise portrait of an entire nation," and the stories "exemplify the whole range of contemporary European imagination."²

Even if Chaucer had completed the massive structure of his projected *Tales* (some hundred and twenty were planned, of which we have less than a quarter), we may be sure that no explicit moral would have intruded upon the poem as a whole. Still, Chaucer's poetry has its own kind of high seriousness, and many of the individual Tales end with an expression of proverbial wisdom; indeed, the last of the Tales in the order in which they have come down to us, the Parson's, is overtly didactic. Chaucer's work has so profound a relationship to our own life today that we cannot afford to ignore it or, worse, to dismiss it as "mere poetry," nor can we on the other hand read his poetry as though it had no significant relationship with ideas and problems of his own times.

Another essential point about Chaucer's style and poetic attitude must still be made. This is his

perfect *tact* towards the idea he is presenting. This enables him to express opposite attitudes to the same theme—such a theme, for instance, as the relation between a man and his wife—with equal sympathy and under-

2. Coghill, *ibid.*, p. 15.

standing. These opposite opinions are entertained and made credible, though seeming to come in all sincerity from the same mind, in virtue of Chaucer's variable manner or tone of voice, varied as it were by a kind of poetical politeness of a very wide range that is nevertheless always within the scope of a single master style.³

Respect for the idea, tact in handling the attitudes involved—these qualities mirror the most conspicuous characteristic of all: compassion. Not a compassion which brims over and sentimentalizes, but a tremendously open-eyed feeling for the "typical sorrows of ordinary human beings . . . the common human joys"⁴—a compassion for the individual as a unique person that is rare enough in our own times.

Thus Chaucer the poet. But his times were an extraordinarily complex compounding of gentleness and cruelty, of understanding and prejudice. This explains, in part, why generations of readers have apparently taken with little questioning the picture he gives of hatred of Jews.⁵

JEWES IN CHAUCERIAN ENGLAND

THERE is no need to document the sad lot of the Jews in medieval England and western Europe during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. European Jews were in effect excluded from Christian society. Viewed from within, their refusal to accept the Cross was a challenge to the growing sense of the essential unity of Christendom: no other group, in fact, posed so special a challenge to the Christian revelation. Viewed from without, theirs was the unfortunate fate of an enclave in an otherwise homogeneous culture. But however they are viewed, the Jews were allowed no place in Christendom in the late thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries; under Innocent III it was made clear that their place was outside the pale, and their exclusion was marked by the Badge.⁶

3. *Ibid.*, p. 19. One contemporary critical survey of Chaucer's poetry which, on the whole, gives evidence of awareness of this range of voice, is John Speirs, *Chaucer the Maker* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951).

4. Joan Bennett, *George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 180.

5. The exceptions are few: Alois Brandl many years ago, in Paul's *Grundriss der Germanischen Philologie* (Strassburg, 1889-93), II, i, 680, expressed the opinion that Chaucer meant the Prioress's Tale as a satire on childish legends, but in his authoritative edition Professor Robinson comments that this opinion was "certainly mistaken" (*op. cit.*, p. 840).

6. For the nadir, the half-century from 1198 to 1254, one may see the documents in S. Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century* (Philadelphia:

But can this be the full explanation of the Prioress's cruelly anti-Semitic Tale within Chaucer's Canterbury framework? Can the reader close his eyes to the unmistakable reality of the anti-Jewish theme and concern himself only with the literary form in which that theme finds expression? Can he be content with analyzing the twenty-seven and more analogues of the miracle of the Virgin as a literary type,⁷ or with performing similar functions of literary analysis, necessary, but meaningless when divorced from life? I think not. The interpretation which I am about to suggest is that in the Tale which Chaucer assigned to the Prioress, the widely circulated ritual murder legend is held up for implicit condemnation as vicious and hypocritical.

THE PRIORESS

WE MUST begin with the teller of the Tale, the Prioress herself, and look with some care at Chaucer's portraiture of her. One recent commentator has declared that the mere fact that she "is one of the Canterbury pilgrims is the first point of satire in a portrait that is satiric,"⁸ for prohibitions of nuns' going on pilgrimage were frequent. Of course, as a prioress, the head of her house, she would have found that a great deal of business took her outside the nunnery.⁹

Dropsie College, 1933), which prints the papal letters and conciliar decrees of the period. But there is a broader view in *The Jew in the Medieval World*, ed. by J. R. Marcus (Cincinnati: Sinai Press, 1938), and closer historical treatment in Cecil Roth, *History of Jews in England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941). Finally there is the work of Peter Browe, S.J., on *Die Judenmission im Mittelalter und die Päpste* ("Miscellanea Historiae Pontificiae," VI, 8; Rome: Pontificiae Universitatis Gregorianae, 1942).

7. This analysis—by Carleton Brown in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. by W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 447-485, and by Margaret H. Statler, "The Analogues of Chaucer's Prioress' Tale: The Relation of Group C to Group A," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, LXV (Sept. 1950), pp. 896-910—is painstaking and necessary scholarship: I do not mean to condemn it in itself. From his study of the analogues, Carleton Brown attributes the detail of making the child a seven-year-old to Chaucer: aside from obvious significations of the age, it is well worth noting how heavily Chaucer stresses the diminutive throughout the Prioress's Tale ("a little school," "her little boy," "his little book," "his little body," and so on)—this is consonant with the Prioress's excessive and false charity over her "little dogs."

8. Muriel Bowden, in her *Commentary on the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 93.

9. Consider the view developed by Eileen Power in her *Medieval People* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1951), pp. 92-94; and in her *Mediaeval English Nunneries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), *passim*. However, it must be pointed out that a rather different interpretation is offered by Sister Madeleva in

A gentlewoman by birth, yet there is a sense of straining in her manner

To counterfeit a courtly kind of grace,
A stately bearing fitting to her place,
And to seem dignified in all her dealings.

(p. 29; Prologue, lines 139-41)

Much of the phraseology that colors her portrait is taken deliberately from the medieval romance, particularly when she is said to be "simple and coy." Years ago Professor Lowes pointed out that this phrase set the stage for the many secularizing nuances of the Prioress which fourteenth-century readers "must have been quick to gather." Then her very name, Eglantyne, "exquisitely incongruous," for in each of the romances known to the century, "the lady bearing the name of Chaucer's Prioress is a beautiful, romantically worldly figure far removed from a nun." Her sparkling eyes, her small soft mouth, her beautifully broad forehead, her shapely nose—all these attributes are conventional in the cataloguing descriptions of medieval heroines.¹⁰ The point is double: not merely that she is physically attractive, but that the reader should be cognizant of that attraction. The Prioress could not help being beautiful, but the reader is being shown her attractiveness in the mode of the medieval romance with all its worldliness and sentimentalizing falseness of values.

Her manners are carefully those of polite society, and to the attentive fourteenth-century listener there was subtle but effective irony in Chaucer's evocation, for the manners described are taken from a famous account in the *Roman de la Rose* of what wiles a woman is to use to attract and hold her lover. But what is perhaps the most ironic touch of all, richly ambiguous and controversial, is the brooch whose significance is still debated by some Chaucerians. Hanging from her rosary, it is of

Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays (New York: Appleton, 1925); she (in Robinson's words, *op. cit.*, p. 755) "takes issue not only with the critics who have seen moral disparagement in Chaucer's portrayal of the Prioress, but even with Professor Lowes in his more sympathetic interpretation of the character" [cited in note 10].

10. John Livingston Lowes, "Simple and Coy," *Anglia Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie*, XXXIII (1910), pp. 440-451; and in his *Convention and Revolt in Poetry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), pp. 60-65. It must be remarked that Chaucer with great tact refrains from the exhaustive cataloguing of the conventional description—see D. S. Brewer, "The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, Especially 'Harley Lyrics,' Chaucer, and Some Elizabethans," *Modern Language Review*, I (July 1955), pp. 247-269.

shining gold, engraved with a crowned A and the motto *Amor Vincit Omnia*. In the earlier Middle Ages, this originally profane motto had been endowed with a connotation of sacred love, but by the fourteenth century the motto was again employed in its original sense—while of course the sacred connotation was still current. Lowes's questioning of the meaning of this brooch is justly famous:

Now is it earthly love which conquers all, now heavenly; the phrase plays back and forth between the two. And it is precisely that happy ambiguity of the convention—itsself the result of an earlier transfer—which makes Chaucer's use of it here, as a final summarizing touch, a master stroke. Which of the two loves does "amor" mean to the Prioress? I do not know; but I think she thought she meant love celestial.¹¹

One may wish to be chivalrous to the Prioress, but (and this is really the issue) how did Chaucer's audience see her? At the moment of their first viewing her in the dramatic narrative there was no certitude but only ambiguity: from the first hint in "simple and coy" of the discord between the woman and the nun so subtly suggested by the two contradictory sets of associations to the summarizing touch of the magnificently ambiguous brooch, we have a nun who is something less than the fulfillment of the spiritual ideal.

One final point:

*As for her sympathies and tender feelings,
She was so charitably solicitous
She used to weep if she but saw a mouse
Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bleeding.
And she had little dogs she would be feeding
With roasted flesh, or milk, or fine white bread.
Sorely she wept if one of them were dead
Or someone took a stick and made it smart;
She was all sentiment and tender heart.*

(p. 29; Prologue, lines 142-50)

What Coghill renders as "her sympathies and tender feelings" is in Chaucer "hir conscience." In Middle English, conscience had our primary denotation (the faculty which pronounces upon the moral quality of one's actions or motives), but also the secondary meaning, now

11. *Convention and Revolt in Poetry*, p. 66. Even if one conjectures a secular lady as the original owner, the force of the ambiguity remains.

largely lost, of "tenderness of feeling": both meanings are bound up in Chaucer's use of the word here. "To speken of hir conscience," "to speak of her conscience," Chaucer says—but we get nothing of her moral faculty, only her emotional tenderness. Moreover, the object of that tenderness, of her "charitable" nature, is not the neighbor but pets; and there seems little disputing that it was contrary to ecclesiastical regulations for a nun to have such pets as the Prioress's "little dogs"¹² (though earlier, to be sure, such religious as those addressed in the *Ancrene Riwe* were permitted them). The Dominican Bromyard, late fourteenth-century theologian of Cambridge, thundered from his pulpit against the wealthy who indulged themselves in pampered pets, especially at a time when food was scarce.¹³ One may well ask what kind of "charity" it is that Chaucer chose to describe as lavished on animals. The point is not (as one scholar has suggested recently) that this is "the sort of woman who would weep even over a dead mouse or a whipped dog";¹⁴ it is that she weeps only over such sentimentalized suffering and apparently ignores the human suffering so prevalent around her. It is that warped quality, as we shall see, which dominates her Tale.

Only this far does Chaucer go in the General Prologue, but with superbly controlled irony and devastating tact he has contrived to leave shadows of doubts, several kinds of uncertainty, and some strong implications about the Prioress in the mind of his audience. Beyond that, at this stage of Chaucer's developing portrait of this religious woman, we cannot declare.

THE PRIORESS'S TALE

PRECEDING the Prioress's Tale is a Prologue which, in Professor Robinson's words, "contains many ideas and expressions drawn from the

12. See Power, *Mediaeval English Nunneries*, pp. 305-309, and Note E ("Convent Pets in Literature"); also her *Medieval People*, pp. 90-91, 194. There are further references in E. P. Kuhl, "Notes on Chaucer's Prioress," *Philological Quarterly*, II (1923), pp. 302-309. J. M. Manly, in his edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (New York: Henry Holt, 1928, p. 506), cites an order of 1345 quoted in William Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum* (II, p. 619, no. xi): "Also we command that neither birds [perhaps falcons] nor dogs nor little birds be kept by any abbes or nun within the walls of the abbey or within the choir, especially while they should be engaged in divine services."

13. Quoted by G. R. Owst in *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 327.

14. Charles W. Dunn, *Chaucer Reader* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952), p. 41.

Scriptures, the services of the Church, and other religious poetry." As would be most appropriate to the Prioress, it recalls in particular certain passages of the Office of the Blessed Virgin; "it was a regular literary convention to prefix to a miracle or saint's legend an invocation to Christ or the Blessed Virgin."¹⁵ A carefully wrought prayer, this Prologue of hers, and rich in symbolism; the attentive reader may well be struck by the irony of having an anti-Semitic legend prefaced by a prayer rich in images from the Old Testament. The Prioress invokes Christ:

*in honor of Thee, as best I can,
Of Thee and of that whitest lily-flower
That bare Thee, all without the touch of man,
I tell my tale and will put forth my power.*

Then she calls Mary:

*O mother-maid, maid-mother, chaste and free!
O bush unburnt, burning in Moses' sight,*

and implores her:

*help me to tell my story
In reverence of thee and of thy glory!*
(p. 193; lines B 1650-3,
1657-8, 1663)¹⁶

Against this note of seeming sincerity and the subtly suggested background of the Old Testament roots of the Christian faith, we hear the Prioress's Tale: how the "wicked Jews" slew a happy child for no reason other than his joyful singing of the praise of Mary, and how the murder was revealed when, from the privy drain into which he had been cast,

*This gem of chastity, this emerald,
This jewel of martyrdom and ruby bright,
Lying with carven throat and out of sight,
Began to sing O Alma from the ground
Till all the place was ringing with the sound.*
(p. 197; lines B 1799-1803)

15. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 840.

16. It is likely that a great many of Chaucer's audience were not aware that the titles given here to Mary are taken from the Old Testament, the "Burning Bush" from Exodus, the "Lily" from the Song of Songs.

Having expanded on this "miracle" with great unction, the Prioress gratuitously links it with the thirteenth-century legend of the choir-boy Hugh of Lincoln:

*O Hugh of Lincoln, likewise murdered so
By cursed Jews, as is notorious,
(For it was but a little time ago) . . .*
(p. 199; lines B 1874-6)

It has long been remarked that her Tale displays a "fierce bigotry" (as Wordsworth put it). This is how she begins:

*In Asia once there was a christian town
In which, long since, a Ghetto used to be
Where there were Jews, supported by the Crown
For the foul lucre of their usury,
Hateful to Christ and all his company.*
(pp. 193-194; lines B 1678-82)

And this is how she accounts for the alleged murder of a Christian child by Jews:

*First of our foes, the Serpent Satan shook
Those Jewish hearts that are his waspish nest . . .*
(p. 196; lines B 1748-9)

That the Prioress's own words should convict her of bigotry is not enough; they must be seen as a clear contradiction of the mind of the Church, and to this end Dunn's comments in his *Chaucer Reader* can be of help:

Her tale is derived from a vague but ancient and widespread libel, already current in England before Chaucer was born, that Jews were accustomed to murder Christian children for ritualistic purposes. She does not, it is true, claim any firsthand acquaintance with the Jews and is, in fact, unlikely to have had it, for they were expelled from England in 1290 and were not readmitted until the seventeenth century; and she sets the scene of action in an unidentified part of distant Asia. But she accepts without question the validity of the legend underlying her tale and, in her epilogue, quite gratuitously cites an equally legendary English story of the boy named Hugh of Lincoln, who was reported in the thirteenth century to have been murdered by the Jews . . .¹⁷

17. Dunn, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

Let us single out these points for emphasis, so that later reference can easily be made to them: (1) the vague but widespread belief that Jews were accustomed to murder Christian children for ritualistic purposes; (2) the acceptance of the validity of the report without question, and the retelling of this report or legend; (3) implicit approval of the action taken against the Jews; and (4) the continuing or stirring up of old prejudices.

These points are specifically covered by several popes in bulls condemning the ritual murder libel and offering to the Jews the protection of the Holy See.¹⁸ I should like to quote here passages from that of Gregory X in 1272, not in the order in which they appear in the original but in accordance with the four points.

Point 1:

It sometimes happens that certain Christians lose their Christian children. The charge is then made against the Jews by their enemies that they have stolen and slain these children in secret, and have sacrificed the heart and blood. The fathers of the said children, or other Christians who are envious of the Jews, even hide their children in order to have a pre-

18. One of the earliest and most weighty papal condemnations of the blood accusation was addressed by Innocent IV to the Archbishops and Bishops of Germany in 1247: "We have received a mournful complaint from the Jews of Germany, telling how some princes, both ecclesiastical and lay, together with other nobles and powerful persons in your cities and dioceses, devise evil plans against them and invent various pretexts in order to rob them unjustly of their goods, and gain possession thereof. This they do without stopping to consider prudently that it is from the archives of the Jews, so to speak, that the testimonies of the Christian faith came forth. Holy Scripture pronounces among other injunctions of the Law 'Thou shalt not kill,' forbidding them when they celebrate the Passover even to touch any dead body. Nevertheless, they are falsely accused that, in that same solemnity, they make communion with the heart of a slain child. This is alleged to be enjoined by the Law, whereas in fact such an act is manifestly contrary to it. Moreover, if the body of a dead man is by chance found anywhere, [some nobles and powerful persons] maliciously ascribe the cause of death to the action of the Jews. On this, and many other fictitious pretexts, they rage against the Jews and despoil them of their possessions, against God and Justice and the privileges mercifully granted to them by the Holy See; notwithstanding that they have never been tried for these crimes and have never confessed them and have never been convicted of them. By starvation, imprisonment and many heavy persecutions and oppressions [some nobles and powerful persons] harass them, inflicting upon them divers kinds of punishment, and condemning large numbers to a most shameful death. Hence the Jews, who are under the power of the aforesaid nobles, lords and princes, are in a worse condition than were their fathers in Egypt, and are compelled to go into exile from localities where they and their ancestors have dwelt from time immemorial." Quoted by Cecil Roth, *The Ritual Murder Libel and the Jew* (London: Woburn Press, n.d.), pp. 97-98.

text to molest the Jews, and to extort money from them so as to pay their dues. They assert thereupon, most falsely, that the Jews have taken away these children and slain them, and have sacrificed the heart and blood. Yet their Law expressly forbids the Jews to sacrifice or to eat or to drink blood: even though it be of animals which have the hoof cloven. This has been confirmed in our *curia* on many occasions by Jews converted to the Christian faith. Nonetheless, on this pretext many Jews have frequently been seized and detained, against all justice.

Point 2:

Inasmuch as the Jews are not able to bear witness against the Christians, we decree furthermore that the testimony of Christians against Jews shall not be valid unless there is among these Christians some Jew who is there for the purpose of offering testimony.

Point 3:

No Christian shall presume to seize, imprison, wound, torture, mutilate, kill, or inflict violence on [the Jews]; furthermore, no one shall presume, except by judicial action of the authorities of the country, to change the good customs in the land where they live for the purpose of taking their money or goods from them or from others.

Point 4:

We decree that no Christian shall stir up anything new against [the Jews].

Moreover, if any one, after having known the content of this decree, should—which we hope will not happen—attempt audaciously to act contrary to it, then let him suffer punishment in his rank and position, or let him be punished by the penalty of excommunication, unless he makes amends for his boldness by proper recompense.¹⁹

At the end of the thirteenth and during the fourteenth centuries, the charge of ritual murder became more frequent; yet the popes had proclaimed the truth and set up an ideal against which these excesses and

19. For Point 1, see *ibid.*, pp. 21–22. Points 2, 3 and 4 are quoted from *The Jew in the Medieval World*, ed. by J. R. Marcus, pp. 151–154. Regarding such a decree there is always the twofold question of how effective it is and how generally known. The bull quoted could not have been very widely effective, and it may well be that the Prioress had not seen this bull; it was not her office to. Nor is it likely that Chaucer's listening audience would have had firsthand experience with a document like this, for it was the direct concern of ecclesiastical chanceries. But the view expressed was doubtless known.

tortures and false charges should have been seen for what they were.

Doubtless most of the company hearing Madame Eglantyne's Tale would not have seen a Jew in England—the situation is very much like that of the Shakespearean audience and Shylock²⁰—but most of them would have traveled in France, some of them perhaps as widely in Europe as Chaucer had traveled on the king's business, and the likelihood of acquaintance or contact with Jews would be correspondingly greater, for in England it seems fairly certain that only the smallest pockets of Jews were left after their expulsion in 1290.

By such a sophisticated court audience the disparity between the Prioress's professed devotion and her bigotry could doubtless have been more easily seen than by a county audience, less traveled, and therefore of narrower views. While not all could have measured the great distance of that disparity, surely readers have always recognized that other Tales (like the Pardoner's) present hypocrisy, or (like the Shipman's) knavery and deceit. For those who did discern the pious hypocrisy of the Prioress, there is a level of irony in the symbolism that reinforces this startling incongruity and develops the irony of her portrait in the Prologue. There is for example her reference to Rachel:

*His mother, swooning as they went along
Beside the bier, could not be reconciled,
A Second Rachel weeping for her child.*

(p. 197; lines B 1815–17)

The allusion is to the weeping of Rachel for her children—the sons of Jacob in captivity (Jer 31:15)—, used by the Prioress, we may be sure, as a conventional figure of lamentation and weeping. There is deep meaning in the fact that the First Nocturn of Matins on the feast of the Holy Innocents gives Jeremiah's poetical representation of Rachel, with its magnificent consolation in a bitter time: "Let thy voice cease from weeping and thy eyes from tears" (31:16). But this (like the Old Testament symbolism in the Prologue to her Tale, of which she is, I take it, unaware) is lost on the Prioress and is without influence on her conscience or charity. There is even more. Rachel's weeping is interpreted in the New Testament (Mt 2:18) as a prophetic parallel to the lamentation of the mothers whose children were slain at the com-

20. See Barry Ulanov, "Shylock: The Quality of Justice," *The Bridge*, I, 266–279.

mand of Herod the Great. The Third Nocturn on this day is a homily by St. Jerome:

When he took the Child and His mother, and fled into Egypt, he took them by night, and in darkness. And that darkness signified the night of ignorance in which he left the unbelievers from whom he fled. But when he returned into Judaea, the Gospel makes no mention of night or darkness; for at the end of the world the Jews shall be enlightened, and shall receive the faith again as once they received Christ returning from Egypt.²¹

In all this evocation of Old and New Testaments there is a compassion beyond the Prioress's reach of soul: bland and unmoved, indeed with merciless satisfaction in "the evils they deserve," she tells of the torturing of the Jews, how they were drawn apart by wild horses and then hanged (p. 198; lines B 1822-4). The culminating irony of her last lines is the echoing of her petition for a mercy of which she is herself incapable:

*Pray mercy on our faltering steps, that thus
Merciful God reach mercy down to us,
Though we be so unstable . . .*

(p. 199; lines B 1877-9)

One more point. The Prioress's bearing and Tale are not only opposed to the authentic mind of the Church; they also seem to be in contrast with much else in the *Canterbury Tales*. Though I do not wish to make too much of it, the Prioress's story is followed by Chaucer's own story of Sir Topaz, the *Tales'* one unmistakable burlesque, a satiric jousting with decadent knight-errantry of late medieval romances. Perhaps it is introduced in order to clear the air: the Prioress's Tale had left the company "sobered" for a moment, but then the Host began to "japen," he "again began his jokes" (p. 200; lines B 1881-3). There might well be more than one reason for him to feel that the company should be cheered

21. *Comm. Matth. 2 and Gloss.* (cf. PL 26:27). In connection with the kind of scriptural interpretation used here by St. Jerome, see D. W. Robertson, Jr., and Bernard F. Huppé, *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951); and my review of it in *Thought*, XXVII (Winter 1952-53), pp. 582-586. For an application of this method to one of the poems of the *Canterbury Tales*, see R. P. Miller, "Chaucer's Pardoner, the Scriptural Eunuch, and the Pardoner's Tale," *Speculum*, XXX (April 1955), pp. 180-199.

up at once. In any case, his reaction to the Prioress's story is most ambiguous.²²

Within the larger framework of the *Tales* one has only to look to the Plowman for a true model of the Christian, for here is one who follows Christ in loving, in true charity:

*Loving God best with all his heart and mind
And then his neighbor as himself, repined
At no misfortune, slackened for no content,
For steadily about his work he went
To thrash his corn, to dig or to manure
Or make a ditch; and he would help the poor
For love of Christ and never take a penny
If he could help it . . .*

(p. 39; Prologue, lines 533-8)

Or take his brother, the Parson:

*He was a shepherd and no mercenary.
Holy and virtuous he was, but then
Never contemptuous of sinful men,
Never disdainful, never too proud or fine,
But was discreet in teaching and benign.
His business was to show a fair behavior
And draw men thus to Heaven and their Saviour.*

(p. 39; Prologue, lines 514-20)

There are, then, within the poem models of right conscience, true charity, and proper tenderness to human needs and suffering.

JEW S AND THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY MIND

IT MIGHT be objected that Chaucer was a man of the fourteenth century and shared its limitations: how could we expect him to transcend them, to shatter the wall of prejudice?

I do not know what most Englishmen of the century thought about Jews. The answer may well be that for them there could be only "Jews!," not a Jew, and that they were to be found in unidentified distant re-

22. Chaucer's reference to Sir Topaz's hauberk (p. 205; line B 2053) as "Jewish work" has been interpreted by Kölbing and Brusendorff as used by Chaucer in ridicule (see Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 845), but it seems more likely that Chaucer is here simply reflecting conventional attitudes, as Langland does in speaking of the Jews as usurers. The Jews were in fact famous armorers.

gions or, as the Prioress places them, in the past. But certainly, there were those who did not hate them; there was at least one honest chronicler, William of Newburgh, who saw two sides to the slaughter of the Jews in York, and he was not afraid to speak the truth as he saw it.²³ Converted Jews like the fourteenth-century Strassburg banker Merswin followed Nicholas of Lyra in pleading that Jews could be saved.²⁴ On the other hand, Mannyng, an Austin canon of Bourne, complains in his early fourteenth-century *Handlyng Synne*, a realistic picture of medieval living, rich in its detailing of virtues and vices, that not only some of the "lewd folk" but even some priests say of the Jews that "we wot not whether they be saved or no." He attempts to controvert this, for "certes," he writes, "they are all in error."²⁵ Mannyng would doubtless not have charged as he did that the layfolk and priests erred in supposing it possible for Jews to be saved if there had not been quite a few who thought so.²⁶

In Langland's *Piers Plowman* later in the century, we find the thought defended that there must somehow be a place in heaven for the good Jew and for the good pagan, for if there is truth in a man, "the true God would never allow His truth to be dishonored." Along with such passing allusions as suggest the conventional ideas about Jews as usurers, at times connected with the Lombards, we see Langland holding up their kindness to each other as a measure against which he can charge his fellow Christians with lack of charity, speaking of the Jews as our "lores-men," our teachers. Deeper still:

23. Verification of his account (the Chronicles are to be found in volume I of the Rolls Series) is seen by H. M. Colvin, in *The White Canons in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), pp. 165-166.

24. Doubtless we must look behind Nicholas of Lyra (the Franciscan biblical scholar and commentator who died at about the time Chaucer was born) to the influential work of the Premonstratensian order and their preaching (see Petit François, *La Spiritualité des Prémontrés*, Paris: Vrin, 1947). At present, one can only speculate on how much the conversion of individuals like Merswin was due to the preaching of Nicholas and the Premonstratensians. Certainly relevant is the seminal work of Andrew of St. Victor who drew not only on traditional Christian, but also on Jewish, exegesis (see B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1952, pp. 166-185), for English mysticism of the fourteenth century learned a great deal from the Victorine tradition.

25. *Handlyng Synne*, Early English Text Society, 119 (1901), p. 298—its title suggests its purpose as a manual of sins.

26. That this thought was not rare in medieval England is supported by a passage in Matthew Paris (R.S. 57, vol. V, p. 546), and in Burton Chronicle (R.S. 36, vol. I, p. 346), to which my colleague, Professor M. A. Donovan, has called my attention.

*The Jews live in the law that our Lord wrote himself
 In stone, for it was steadfast and should stand forever;
 Love God and love thy neighbor is the law of the Hebrews.
 He took it to Moses, its teacher till the coming of the
 Messiah.
 And they live still in that law and believe it the best.*

True, they rejected the Messiah,

*But Pharisees and Saracens, Scribes and Greeks
 Are folk of one faith and hold the Father in honor.
 And since the Saracens as well as the Hebrews
 Know the first clause of our creed, Credo in Deum
 patrem omnipotentem,
 Prelates of Christian provinces if possible should teach
 them
 Little by little et in Jesum Christum filium,
 Till they can speak and spell et in Spiritum Sanctum,
 And render it and remember it, with remissionem
 peccatorum,
 Carnis resurrectionem et vitam eternam. Amen.*

But that Jews and Moslems, that all may so spell, Christian leaders, Langland pleads time and again, must "live as they teach us" and "every Christian creature should be kind to others."²⁷

There was not only Langland but also the quiet current of mysticism and scriptural study that was somehow indebted to the rabbinical tradition. (Though this influence would seem to have been strongest in the thirteenth century, there is much evidence of its continuing through the fourteenth.) When we look over the theological work of the Victorine school, and against the evidence of Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*, read the pleadings of Langland (and on the Continent, of Merswin and others) for a more tolerant, a more loving, view of the Jews, and add to all this the work of the Premonstratensians—then the view I am suggesting as the implicit framework within which the Prioress and her Tale are fitted is, I think, not implausible.

A fourteenth-century Englishman such as Chaucer or Langland could

27. The reference to Jews as our "lores-men" is from B, IX, 83-87. Other quotations are from Henry W. Wells's translation of *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1935), pp. 161, 212-214, 206, 124 (XII, 299; XV, 622-626, 647-655, 420; X, 384).

scarcely have questioned the laws and social forces that had excluded the medieval Jew from Christian society. Nor had the time yet come to condemn anti-Semitism the way Pius XI was to do when he reminded us that our faith, and hence our civilization, were born with Abraham's loving sacrifice and that, in the spirit, Abraham is every Christian's father. But there is in Chaucer's treatment of the Prioress a clear-eyed recognition of the inhumanity of her Tale, its violation of the deepest sense of charity which fourteen centuries of Christianity had been laboring to develop, and its failure to carry the burden of charity which is enjoined on all Christians but especially on religious. The Prioress is not condemned, however; rather is the poem's objective view one of understanding pity of her: further than this all of Chaucer's compassion could not go.

But how great a thing it was in such a complex social and cultural environment for a poet to insist that anti-Semitism could be viewed through the recognizable frame of such a woman as the Prioress, one who succumbed too easily to the worldly concern with things and manners, and whose charity was too much of this world.