

The Hugh of Lincoln and the *Prioress's Tale*

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The *Prioress's Tale* in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is based off of the legend of the Hugh of Lincoln to which the Jewish people are scorned due to the use of Christians as religious sacrifice. Chaucer writes in an anti-Semitic view and is hardly satirical at all within the tale, although the tale itself is not necessarily about ritual murder. Most critics agree that the *Prioress's Tale* comes from the C version of the ballad of "Sir Hugh," while many argue over whether Chaucer is actually being satirical in his work. The true historical aspects of the time period around when the legend of the Hugh of Lincoln came about, as well as when Chaucer began writing *The Canterbury Tales*, helps to assume how Chaucer chose this legend and geographic location for the plot and setting of the *Prioress's Tale*.

There have been thirty-three different versions of the tale of Hugh of Lincoln that have surfaced, and it was Carleton Brown who arranged them into three different groups, judging by the miracle displayed and the sequence of events within the tale (Statler 896). From the A, B, and C versions, Brown considers the *Prioress's Tale* to be absolutely from the C version because of the mention of the *Alma redemptoris*, and it also has "no influence from any version of the legend outside this group" (Statler 897). In all three versions, the story revolves around a boy who sings in honor of the Virgin Mary to show his loyalty to her and either one or more than one Jewish person becomes angry with the boy and kills him. The Virgin then "performs a miracle" on the boy, and the Jewish people are then punished in some way for their crime (Statler 898). Statler believes that the thirty-three different versions of the Hugh of Lincoln came about

because of the true historic violence against the Jewish religion and people and the common theme of medieval miracles during that era (Statler 898).

Statler continues to argue that because there were many historical events that lead to Jewish people being blamed for ritual murders, the tragic ending became quite common in the C versions, but were also tied in with the medieval miracle from the A versions, all of which were dated from much before 1200 (Statler 899). Statler compares the actual wording from the *Prioress's Tale* to the C 1 and A 4 versions where the boy is constantly singing as he goes to and from school:

Twyes a day it passed thurgh his throte, / To scoleward and homward whan he wente. / ...
As I have seyed, thurghout the Jewerye, / This litel child, as he cam to and fro, / Ful
merily than wolde he singe and crye / O *Alma redemptoris* everemo (Chaucer 644).

Something along the same lines as this happens also in the C 1 and A 4 versions. Also in both the C 1 and A 4 versions, the Jewish people's anger toward the child is extremely exaggerated, like when the devil is attempting to convince the Jewish people that they are experiencing something so horrible by continuing to allow the boy to sing his loyalty to the Virgin Mary (Statler 902).

The devil in the *Prioress's Tale* speaks to the Jewish people:

Is this to yow a thing that is honest, / That swich a boy shal walken as him lest / In youre
despyt, and singe of of swich sentence, / Which is agayn oure lawes reverence (Chaucer
646).

The devil makes this seem as if it is the worst thing in the world that this child is singing in spite of their religion and is being highly disrespectful to them in their own village. All three versions also talk about the Jewish people as conspiring against the little boy singing. Only in one version

of the C group was the boy lured into the home of a Jewish man instead of being captured (Statler 902). Lastly, all three versions also have the mother of the child ask the Jewish people of the village if they know anything about her son, and every single one of them denies knowing anything at all (Statler 903).

Statler also concludes that there is a lot of direct evidence that the A 4 and Chaucer's the *Prioress's Tale* are actually quite similar. In both versions, there is "the cruel seizing of the boy" and murder of him, while putting a lot of stress on the taking and killing of the boy. In C 1, the boy ends up having his organs taken out, while in A 1, the boy's throat is cut. In this regard, it seems that Chaucer has taken a few steps toward the A versions instead of the C (Statler 903).

However, it still seems more likely that Chaucer's tale is derived from the C text of the ballad. Much like Brown, Gavin Langmuir agrees that Chaucer's version of the *Prioress's Tale* draws from many versions of the C text of "Sir Hugh" that were collected from around 1215, but mainly the death of the Hugh of Lincoln in 1255 is the main background for the *Prioress's Tale*. The same similarities mentioned by Statler and Brown are also mentioned by Langmuir, like the boy singing in praise of the Virgin Mary and the occurrence of a ritual murder (Langmuir 459-460). From 1144 to 1235, two different ritual murder accusations occurred. It was believed that Jewish people crucified a young Christian male "to insult Christ and as sacrifice," and it was also believed that the Jewish people killed a young Christian male for his blood to be used in rituals or for medicinal purposes (Langmuir 642). Henry VIII intervenes after John de Lexinton forces a confession out of a Jewish man who is believed to have been named Copin. Henry VII had Copin executed, and the rest of the Jewish people who were thought to be involved were either imprisoned or executed (Langmuir 461). John de Lexinton is said to have investigated the crime to which he supposedly forces the false confession out of Copin who cries,

“What the Christians say is true.” Copin admits to kidnapping, calling upon other Jewish people, a crucifixion, and disposing the body. Although none of this was ever true, it was the confession that was written and documented in historical records by John de Lexinton which led the story of Hugh of Lincoln to fame (Langmuir 478). It wasn’t until 1896 that a Jewish historian concluded that the little boy had actually accidentally fallen into well of a Jewish man’s house on July 31, 1255 (Langmuir 461). Langmuir believes Chaucer may have learned of this incident because later on in the thirteenth century, a famous historian named Matthew Paris describes this story, and Chaucer was likely to have read it. Because Paris had a lot of fame as a historian, many neglected to seek other evidence of the act that proved it to be untrue until the nineteenth century (Langmuir 464). It is questioned whether John de Lexinton thought the event that had already taken place to be true afterward, but some believe he convinced himself that it was true to justify him having not only one innocent man executed, but also many more for taking part in the killing of the boy (Langmuir 481).

Chaucer also sets the setting of the *Prioress’s Tale* in “Asie, in a greet cite” or as Sheila Delany argues, Central Asia, Turkey, and the Arab areas (Chaucer 640). Only one other time is this “Asie” ever mentioned in any of Chaucer’s works, which is in his *House of Fame*. Chaucer speaks of “Asie” as in “Auffrike, Europe, and Asye,” allowing Delany to conclude that her argument is valid (Delany 198). Other critics disagree with this argument, like Magoun in the *Gazetteer* who says that the “Asia” Chaucer speaks of is actually Lydia or Asia Minor, which is what forms the Asian part of Turkey, and now is Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq (Delany 198). Magoun objects that Asia Minor is noticeably different than Asia Major, even though other critics only see it as a “tripartite division of Europe, Asia, and Africa” (Delany 198-199). In the fourteenth century, “Asia” is under Islamic rule and Delany proposes it is for this reason that

Chaucer chooses to make this the setting for the *Prioress's Tale*. Muhammad, the founder of Islam, wants Jews to convert their religion. All those who chose not to convert were massacred, which results in this setting being very controversial (Delany 199, 203-204). Islam during the fourteenth century, which was during Chaucer's time, seems to be very similar to the setting of the true story of the Hugh of Lincoln that involved Henry VIII and John de Lexington that Chaucer may have learned about through historical records. It's possible that because Chaucer was living through a period in time where something similar was going on, he decided to write the *Prioress's Tale* in a parallel setting.

From 1215 to 1290 in England, Jews were required to wear a "Badge of Shame" on their outermost piece of clothing over their heart starting from the age of seven (Hirsh 31). John Hirsh says that this law was quite widely known and it "easily could have endured into the next century" (Hirsh 31). Because of this, Chaucer may very well have known about this law put in place by the Lateran Council and made it a point to add it into the *Prioress's Tale* (Hirsh 31). Right at the start of the tale, Chaucer tells how there is "A litel clergeoun, seven yeer of age," which would make this little boy the exact age of when he would clearly stand out amongst others for being Christian instead of Jewish (Chaucer 642). The boy not wearing the Badge of Shame may have pointed him out to be an even bigger target along with the fact that he was "taunting" the Jews by singing praise songs of the Virgin Mary.

Roger Dahood confirms once more that Chaucer's the *Prioress's Tale* is derived from "Sir Hugh" because of the punishment of the Jews at the end of the tale. At the end of the *Prioress's Tale*, the Jews are drawn "with wilde hors" and are "heng...by the lawe" (Chaucer 650). Dahood brings up other critics who believe the word "drawe" to be the Jewish people being either "torn apart by wild horses," or equine quartering, just simply dragged by horses, or

disemboweled (Dahood 467). It is quite possible that Chaucer even knew of each of these different meanings of the word “drawe,” it makes it very unclear which meaning is actually meant. Although the idea of equine quartering reveals a very vivid image of the cruelty of which the Jews would have gone through as their punishment, it is more likely that Chaucer meant otherwise since equine quartering was quite uncommon in his time (Dahood 467-468). Even though disemboweling with hanging occurs in the thirteenth century, it is still unlikely that Chaucer meant this, either. It then becomes obvious that Chaucer means that the Jews were simply dragged by wild horses. Both before and while Chaucer was alive, dragging was quite common in England. The *Middle English Dictionary* defines “drawen” as “To punish by dragging (behind a horse, on a cart or sledge)” (Dahood 469). Dahood believes that the point of having the Jews being dragged by horses is to “ensure...public humiliation” as all of the Christians watch (Dahood 469-470). Chaucer writes that the Jews who knew of the child’s murder died “With torment and with shamful deth echon / This provost dooth thise Jewes for to serve” (Chaucer 650). Because there is no sense of sympathy for the Jews, the Prioress wants the Jews to experience torture and shame from this and to feel the same physical torture as the child went through (Dahood 470-471). Henry Ansgar Kelly also mentions that in both the Bible and Chaucer’s biblical tales, the antagonist is either “justly punished” or “forgiven and converted to a better life” (Kelly 73). This can be seen clearly from this form of punishment. To Chaucer, the only way for the Christians to seek justice is to horribly torture and embarrass the Jews by having the entire village of Christians look on. This kind of ending has a dramatic effect on the audience because it is so violent and unpredicted coming from a prioress or any person of the church.

The Prioress tells the story of the Hugh of Lincoln as she and the other pilgrims travel through two different time periods. The pilgrimage is taking place in the fourteenth century, but the tale the Prioress tells is actually from a century earlier. She begins by introducing the setting of “Asie” to make the pilgrim audience feel as if they are part of the story themselves or have been to that place before. She also ends the tale by saying, “O yonge Hugh of Lincoln, slayn also / With cursed Jewes, as it is notable -- / For it nis but a litel whyle ago” (Chaucer 654). The Prioress directs sympathy toward Hugh of Lincoln as if all the others on the pilgrimage have known him, and also narrows the gap of time that has happened since the Hugh of Lincoln has been killed and their present-day by saying it was just a little while ago although much more time has gone by than just a “litel whyle” (Krummel 123-124). The Prioress is successful at creating a real effect for the audience that induces sympathy toward the murdered Christian boy and hatred towards the Jews. Krummel argues that the Prioress may have told the tale just because she believed that it “merely reenacts Satanic darkness and Jewish aggressivity already authorized by historical accounts” (Krummel 125). Although it is true that the Prioress closed the gap between when the legend of this tale actually occurred and the pilgrims’ present-day, many other critics strongly suggest that this was not the submissiveness of the Prioress who has spoken a simple tale of history about the hatred of Jews by Christians; many believe this to be Chaucer attempting to hide behind a character to impose his own views about religion.

As defined by the *English Oxford Dictionary*, “anti-Semitism” is “hostility and prejudice directed against Jewish people; (also) the theory, action, or practice resulting from this” (“Anti-Semitism”). As stated by Albert Friedman in “The *Prioress’s Tale* and Chaucer’s Anti-Semitism,” to not only modern readers, but also readers from Chaucer’s own time, this tale reads as quite horrifying and touches upon the defamation of Jewish people by ritual murders

(Friedman 118). However, Friedman strongly believes this tale to not be about ritual murder. For a murder to be made by ritual purposes, the person killed must be “crucified ceremonially in contempt of Jesus’s sacrifice,” or their blood must be used for religious purposes, like in baking Passover bread (Friedman 118). Neither of these are the actual reason in which the child is killed in the *Prioress’s Tale*. He is actually killed because the devil makes the Jewish people believe they should be offended by the child’s singing about the praise of the Virgin Mary (Friedman 118). It is also never said that the child’s blood is ever taken to be used for another purpose; the Prioress just says that the Jews threw the child into a “wardrobe...Where as these Jewes purgen hir entraille” (Chaucer 646). Although still very gruesome, the tale is still not a tale about ritual murder. Dahood also claims that Chaucer obviously chose one of the most gruesome ways to punish the Jews, making it seem as if he favored this kind of treatment over others, especially considering the fact that there is no sense of sympathy found for the Jews being tortured (Dahood 472). This idea can be later linked with Chaucer’s own view of the Jewish religion and anti-Semitism.

The *Prioress’s Tale* is absolutely meant to be taken seriously because of the way the audience doesn’t really respond to the ending and the fact that someone of the church was telling a tale about the murder of a child. Friedman says that the only way it would be possible for readers to not think of Chaucer in a bad light were if his writings came off as obviously satirical, which, according to Friedman, they don’t (Friedman 119). There is nothing within the tale that makes it come off so noticeably clear as a satire or that the Prioress is not being serious in any way at all. People of the church are meant to be taken seriously, and in the general prologue, the Prioress is:

So charitable and so pitous, / She wolde wepe, if that she sawe a mous / Caught in a
 trappe, if it were deed or bledde. / Of smale houndes hadde she, that she fedde / With
 rosted flesh, or milk and wastel-breed. / But sore wepte she if oon of hem were deed
 (Chaucer 12):

It is assumed that since the Prioress is a nun who is told to be very charitable and loving towards animals that she will tell a nice tale, most likely about religion or the church. The end of the tale leaves the audience in a complete state of shock because this terrible tale came as an absolute surprise.

Chaucer writes this tale as a way of speaking about the problems involving the Jewish people against the Christians to a greater audience. Merrall Llewelyn Price insists that Chaucer wrote this through the voice of the Prioress as a way to “clear him of charges of antisemitism” (Price 197). Price also speaks of how the Prioress is anything but a proper nun by being concerned with the social aspects of life instead of the spiritual, but still is very caring, and then surprises the audience by telling a descriptive and gruesome tale of a child who is killed by a Jewish man who “hente and heeld him faste, / And kitte his throte, and in a pit him caste” (Chaucer 646). Price also notices the change in pronouns where Chaucer writes, “This cursed Jew” and then “Where as these Jewes” in the following stanza (Chaucer 646). It is believed that because some people did not agree with the Jewish religion, since one Jewish man committed the crime of murder, all the rest of the Jewish people are now equally as responsible (Price 200-201). He also mentions a clear example of the “contaminating effects of Judaism” by having the child thrown into feces; it would require another “purification ceremony,” which is done later on when the child has holy water cast upon him before he truly dies and is buried. Apparently during the thirteenth century, it was known that the Jewish people could “reverse” a Christian baptism

“through a latrine,” or feces (Price 201). Later on, Price claims that the Prioress is then “milking” the situation of the Christian boy’s mother crying out in distress, calling for much more attention and sympathy, while ignoring any empathy of the Jewish people’s as they are being hanged or drawn by horses (Price 206). Comparing the two articles of Friedman and Price about the anti-Semitic tale, it seems more likely that it is Chaucer’s own voice shining through the Prioress’s. It may also be possible that Chaucer thought by having a person of authority in the church tell the tale, his own appearance would not come off as poorly to the audience. Any which way it is looked at, the facts don’t seem to add up just right; the evidence seems more concrete that Chaucer was just voicing his own true views about religion and the ongoing battle of Christianity versus Judaism through the voice of the Prioress so that readers would not think any less of him.

Unlike Friedman and Price, there are many other critics that don’t agree with their view on the tale being Chaucer’s own voice on anti-Semitism. Emmy Stark Zitter argues that Chaucer was well aware of the fact that his audience would not find the *Prioress’s Tale* to be satirical or even funny at all. Zitter strongly believes that Chaucer purposely meant for this tale to be so dark and gruesome because of the way he builds up emotion in the characters, including the Prioress herself with her sympathy for animals. Zitter also insists that Chaucer is merely reflecting upon anti-Semitism rather than focusing on a satire (Zitter 277). The “tenderness of the *Prologue*” really is what sparks the emotion of the tale (Zitter 277). As stated before, the Prioress is said to have been very charitable and loving towards animals, even those so small, in the *General Prologue*. However, the *Prioress’s Prologue* also opens up with a hymn, allowing the audience and reader to automatically build compassion for the Prioress (Zitter 277). Also, according to Zitter, if this tale was written to make the audience be humored, “we must assume an audience that is in on the ‘joke,’ an audience that would perceive anti-Semitism as ridiculous at best, and

sinful at worst,” but during this time period, it seems highly unlikely that the audience would find this tale of murder to be funny (Zitter 277). Because of this, Zitter finds it hard to believe that Chaucer was voicing his own opinions on anti-Semitism because “a satirist can be only as effective as his audience’s attitudes will allow” (Zitter 278). Since tales of “martyred boys” were quite popular during Chaucer’s era, it is easy for Zitter to draw upon the idea that Chaucer is simply telling a tale that would have sparked interest for a large audience and was meant to be taken seriously and to criticize the Prioress herself (Zitter 278). To Zitter, Chaucer was using the Jews in the tale as a “conventional picture” that was popular during his time and was based on religious beliefs (Zitter 278).

Meanwhile, R. D. Eaton assures readers that the Prioress is her own voice and the tale is chosen and told because of her emotions. Eaton says, “An emotional woman herself, she is attracted by the powerful emotions that the tale represents and is likely to generate in its readers” (Eaton 495). To Eaton, it is also hard to find Chaucer accountable for the tale’s racism because of the Prioress’s strong emotions. However, Kelly still insists that Chaucer is the true voice behind the tale. He says, “Though the tale is adapted for a female speaker,...it fits her portrait only in being a celebration of the Virgin with stress upon a tenderness for small creatures,...and it has nothing about it of the idealized romance hero or satirized nun” (Kelly 74). To simply put it, it still doesn’t seem fitting for the Prioress to be the spokesperson of this tale when it goes along with nothing of which she was told about earlier on in the *General Prologue*. Trying to almost defend the Prioress, Daniel F. Pigg suggests that the general prologue was written after the actual tale. He fights by saying that, “If we permit a greater distance between the portrait and the *Tale*, we understand the voice of the *Tale* to be a discursive strategy appropriate to a nun or prioress” (Pigg 65). Supposedly the tales were not written in the same order that most modern-

day books of the tales now have them placed. Apparently to put the *General Prologue* before the tale ruins the idea that it was the Prioress telling the actual tale because the *Prologue* tells how kind and sincere the Prioress is (Pigg 65).

Sherman Hawkins takes a completely different approach and disregards anything previous critics have argued by explaining that Chaucer's the *Prioress's Tale* should not be read literally because if read literally, it becomes a story of religious prejudice instead of an allegorical tale about the supernatural (Hawkins 599). Hawkins explains that purely the setting alone of the *Prioress's Tale* "in far-off Asia places the action midway between fourteenth-century England and miraculous events of Biblical history" (Hawkins 599). Shannon Gayk expands upon the idea of the tale being supernatural in that the "greyn" placed on top of the child's tongue so he proceeds to stay alive sparks a lot of controversy over critics and may not even be a grain at all; it may be "a pearl, a prayer bead, medicine, a piece of manna, a Eucharistic wafer, or even a breath sweetener" (Gayk 138). Despite what this "greyn" may actually be, it obviously appears to have powers of the supernatural because while the boy is speaking of how the Virgin Mary had kept him alive, he says, "Me thought she leyde a greyn upon my tonge. / Wherefore I singe, and singe moot certeyn, / In honour of that blissful mayden free, / Til fro my tonge of taken is the greyn" (Chaucer 652). In the same article, Gayk speaks of Albert Friedman again to which Friedman claims that the "greyn" is nothing more than "a narrative prop, included solely to provide a way to end the little clergeon's song" (Gayk 145). In the same way that other critics see the Prioress as being charitable, loving, and giving toward animals, Hawkins sees these as her "venial faults" because she chooses to feed her animals bread instead of to the poor (Hawkins 600). It makes sense to think of the *Prioress's Tale* as being a tale about the supernatural and allegory because the tale's main character is cut in the throat and then continues

singing in praise of the Virgin Mary until Jesus leads his mother to him. However, Hawkins also tries to justify the Prioress's actions by saying that it's because she has never met a Jewish person because "they were driven from England a century before she told her tale" (Hawkins 604). This argument is clearly flawed, however, because it is not the Prioress who had written the tale; Chaucer had written it. Albert Friedman defends his argument by saying that just because one has never met a Jewish person before doesn't mean that one won't condone anti-Semitism (Friedman 119). John Archer even agrees that "we cannot escape the virulent anti-Semitism of the *Prioress's Tale*, even if Chaucer realized that diatribes against the Jews make for bad art" (Archer 46). To prove this, Archer reasons that the Jews are originally being protected by the secular law, at the end of the tale, this is no more because the Jews were "with wilde hors he dide hem drawe, / And after that he heng hem by the lawe" (Archer 52, Chaucer 650). It seems pretty clear that Chaucer was, in fact, freely speaking about anti-Semitism in his tale.

Disregarding all those theories, it still seems that it was Chaucer himself who was being anti-Semitic. Jerome Mandel also blames the furthering of anti-Semitism on Chaucer. Mandel observes that the word "boy" may have an entirely different meaning than one first expects in the *Prioress's Tale*. The only few times the word "boy" was used in the tale was when malicious or devilish acts were involved (Mandel 407). Mandel acknowledges that Chaucer writes the word "child" fourteen times throughout the tale, but it is never used in context of anything malicious-like (Mandel 408-409). For example, in one stanza of the tale Chaucer writes:

Oure firste fo, the serpent Sathanas, / That hath in Jewes herte his wasps nest, / Up swal and seide, "Oh Hebraik peple, allas! / Is this to yow a thing that is honest, / That swich a boy shal walken as him lest / In your despyt, and singeof swich sentence, / Which is agayn oure lawes reverence" (Chaucer 646).

Here, the devil seems to be forcing the Jewish people to kill the child because the child is doing the work of the devil by singing the praise of the Virgin Mary in spite of the Jewish religion. Mandel says that the actions done by a child are considered to be forgivable, but the actions done by a “boy,” or devil, “provoke murder” (Mandel 409). Comparing this to when the child is first introduced, Chaucer refers to him as “For sely child wol alday sone lere,” or “the innocent child always learns the sooner.” (Chaucer 642-643). In the following stanza Chaucer writes, “This litel child, his litel book lerninge, / As he sat in the scole at his prymer, / He *Alma redemptoris* herde singe, / As children lerned hire antiphoner” (Chaucer 642). Chaucer refers to him as a “child” here because he clearly says how innocent he is and that he is being religious by learning the song of *Alma redemptoris*. Going by Mandel’s evidence proven, it definitely seems that Chaucer was being anti-Semitic in his *Prioress’s Tale*, especially through the character of the young Christian child.

It is known and agreed upon by many critics that the *Prioress’s Tale* is based off of the legend of the Hugh of Lincoln. More specifically, it is based off one exact version of a ballad called “Sir Hugh,” as said by Gavin Langmuir. Not all critics agree upon whether the setting of the tale actually takes place in a vast area of Asia, Turkey, and Arabian areas, however, Sheila Delany proves some concrete evidence as to why her proposal is true. Albert Friedman talks about the anti-Semitism within the tale and agrees with Merral Llewelyn Price that Chaucer was the true voice behind the *Prioress* to express his views on religion without being criticized for it. R.D. Easton, on the other hand, still strongly believes that the *Prioress* was purposely chosen to tell the tale based off her emotions and really had nothing to do with Chaucer at all. This is an ongoing debate to which many critics have outstanding evidence, but is truly based on one’s own interpretation. Jerome Mandel even brings up the interesting topic of how whenever Chaucer

wrote the word “boy” instead of child, the Christian martyr is considered to acting devilish-like. All critics create appealing debates on different topics and can be look at from different angles for each presented, however, there seems to be much more concrete evidence that Chaucer was the true voice of the *Prioress's Tale* and portrayed his views of anti-Semitism and the Jewish religion and culture through the plot, setting, and characters within the tale.

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