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**MADAME EGLENTYNE IN
HER DAY AND IN OURS:
ANTI-SEMITISM IN *THE PRIORESS'S TALE*
AND A MODERN PARALLEL¹**

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of John Gilchrist, a great historian whose premature death is especially mourned by all those whose work involves the field of mediaeval Canon Law.

Insofar as the origins of a legend can ever be traced, the accusation of ritual murder, levelled throughout mediaeval Europe against the Jews, first arose through the unexplained death of a twelve-year old boy in the diocese of Norwich in 1144.² Ironically, this real event is ultimately responsible for the fictitious tale which Chaucer puts in the Lady Prioress's mouth two centuries later.

Twentieth-century scholarship has largely come to terms with Madame Eglentyne and her naïve worldly ways. Despite some dissenting voices, most scholars would concede that the Lady Prioress of the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* is presented more sympathetically than critically.³ Chaucer, as wide-eyed and observant pilgrim, admires the fine, would-be courtly lady who makes such obvious efforts to appear agreeable and charming, even while his description suggests that she lacks any genuine sense of religious vocation. Her piety, though real, is superficial and conventional; her refined sensibility masks mere sentimentality.

Because we continue to live under the shadow of the World War II Holocaust, modern scholarship has found it rather more difficult to come to terms with the *Prioress's Tale* — a subject over which critics are sharply divided. While Richard J. Schoeck, who was among the first to decry Madame Eglentyne's anti-Semitism, believed that Chaucer, her creator, might eschew such

a label, John Archer, twenty years later, said flatly, "We cannot escape the virulent anti-Semitism of the *Prioress' Tale*" (46). E. Talbot Donaldson praises the delicacy and piety inherent in the tale, but notes how its bigotry shows that "The exquisite Prioress is a creature of her age — and also, unhappily, of its more ignorant side. This explains her blind hatred of the Jews" (1097). He goes on to exonerate Chaucer himself, though for reasons which I would consider somewhat questionable.⁴

But the Church of which the Prioress was a nun harbored no such hatred . . . and indeed did everything it could to make clear the un-Christianness of an attitude like hers. Chaucer was, of course, aware of this, and the objectivity of his treatment of the *Prioress' Tale* should prevent us from identifying her views with his. (1097)

Representing the other side of the argument are those who accept what Madame Eglentyne relates at face value and for one reason or another consider any charge of anti-Semitism levelled against her as irrelevant. Alfred David, for instance, suggested as early as 1965 that the child-like Prioress is merely recounting a religious fairy tale in which the Jews play the traditional role of the wicked ogre.⁵ Such an argument is bolstered by the fact that the Jews were officially expelled from England in 1290, which makes it extremely unlikely that Madame Eglentyne would ever have had occasion to meet a professing Jew. Derek Brewer goes one step further and dispenses with any kind of *apologia*. Rejecting modern tendencies to undercut every mediaeval work with ironic interpretations, he refuses to concede that Chaucer might view Madame Eglentyne with a slightly critical eye, arguing that "such a reading is another example of the rejection of straightforward, traditional 'naive' reading in favour of an anachronistic critical realism" (192). Hence what Donaldson stigmatises as the dark side of popular mediaeval culture, Brewer accepts as the norm, claiming that "Chaucer shares with his gentle Prioress the normal love of children and hostility to the Jews of the Middle Ages" (192).

Amidst these varied interpretations, the cautious scholar will opt for a middle approach. Roughly outlined, such a position would run as follows: Madame Eglentyne knows no better. Chaucer, her creator, obviously does. But whether his understanding extends as far as noting the racial/religious bigotry involved here is questionable. Madame Eglentyne is more interested in the miracle wrought by the Virgin Mary than in the Jews who give rise to it. She herself does not know any Jews. And if there is, in fact, any ecclesiastical directive which she is infringing by slanting her tale as she does, the good lady is happily unaware of this fault. These points can be disputed,

but never conclusively proven either way. For this reason I am particularly interested in exploring the possible implications of an extraordinary modern parallel.

In 1985, while vacationing in Austria, I first became aware of the controversy surrounding the Tyrolean village of Rinn, in the diocese of Innsbruck. Adjacent to Rinn, and belonging to it, is a hamlet called Judenstein. Here, around the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1462, a three-year old boy was allegedly brutally murdered. He is known by the affectionate diminutive of "Anderl," or little Andrew. Recently, doubts have been raised that the child ever existed at all,⁶ but if he did, and was indeed murdered, then various possibilities, all of them unfortunately still with us today, suggest themselves. In mediaeval Europe, however, logical explanations tended to be disregarded, particularly when the child involved was male. Consequently, some time⁷ after the discovery of the child's body, a story began to circulate that instead of looking after him while his mother was working, Anderl's godfather had sold him to passing "Eastern" merchants. Eastern and Jewish were clearly synonymous — and hence the standard accusation of ritual murder arose. Judenstein, which literally means "the stone of the Jews," takes its name from a large rock in the hamlet on which Anderl was supposedly sacrificed. Originally he was interred at the parish church of Rinn; his story became part of folk legend. In the seventeenth century, however, a physician named Guarinoni became interested in this legend and produced a great deal of "evidence" in support of it. Consequently, in 1671 a small church was built in the hamlet, enclosing the rock where Anderl was supposed to have died, and the bones of the little "martyr" were transferred to this shrine, which became a place of pilgrimage. In 1753, Pope Benedict XIV granted permission for Anderl's feast to be observed throughout the diocese on the 12th of July.⁸

Until the summer of 1987, when the Bishop of Innsbruck finally succeeded in transforming the church at Judenstein into a shrine commemorating all innocently murdered children, the church was decorated with representations of Anderl's "martyrdom," including a truly grisly fresco on the ceiling, showing a writhing child and cruelly gesticulating merchants with hooked noses and black beards, brandishing sharp knives, and a goblet strategically placed to catch their victim's blood. To the right of the main altar, in full view of the congregation, was the rock on which the child had allegedly been sacrificed. The walls were covered with votive offerings, proclaiming Anderl's many miracles, and attesting to his powerful intercession with God. Since this is a holiday resort area, innumerable pilgrimages and

outings to this popular shrine took place, particularly among schoolchildren. And at every Feast of Corpus Christi, Anderl was represented in the public procession, together with Simon, the child from nearby Trient found murdered in 1475, Simon dressed in a little blue frock, Anderl in an identical one in red.

While the English Reformation destroyed all mediaeval shrines, in Catholic Austria the cult of Anderl was allowed to flourish; during the Nazi occupation, it was even exploited as a focal point for anti-Semitism. After World War II, the Roman Catholic Church slowly began to reassess former attitudes and directives which had unwittingly contributed to the horror of the Holocaust. Finally, in 1961, the Papacy forbade any further promulgation of such anti-Semitic legends as the ritual murder libel: shrines were to be dismantled, and churches dedicated to pseudo-martyrs like Anderl had to find themselves another patron saint. Among the last of these mediaeval reminders was the shrine of Simon of Trient; after it closed, only that of Anderl remained in the whole of Europe.

In June 1985, the story of Anderl of Rinn was very much in the headlines throughout Austria. For despite the Papal decree of 1961, despite a recent pastoral letter from the Bishop of Innsbruck, and despite the active cooperation of the parish priest of Rinn, a sizeable number of parishioners refused to relinquish their cult: though strictly prohibited, once again Anderl had played his traditional role in the Corpus Christi procession; leaflets advertising the devotion were readily available in the area. Finally, the Bishop had been forced to lock the church. Just before I left the country, the issue was aired on television in a panel discussion which lasted almost three hours. Among those present were the Bishop of Innsbruck, a Polish theologian, a historian, a young woman journalist who admitted to being Jewish, and an author from the Tyrol region, all of them concerned with laying an embarrassing anti-Semitic legend to rest; and opposing them, two very angry and formidable members of the parish who were determined to hang on to their Anderl.⁹

While all these participants were highly articulate and interesting, the figure who particularly captured my attention was one of the representatives for Rinn, an attractive middle-aged artist and sculptor who spoke with passionate zeal. This good lady listened to all the members of the panel, but never heard what any of them said. No one denied the existence of the child, or the fact that it might have been murdered. It was pointed out, however, that no motive other than aberration could be adduced, and that there never had been the slightest shred of evidence that more than one

person was responsible. Moments later, the artist, speaking of "the group" who had committed such a dreadful crime, had to be reminded of this fact. "Very well," she replied, "so perhaps it was only one poor, deranged person." However, three sentences later she was once again referring to a group of people. When the Bishop expressed concern that it was the young who were most affected by such a harmful legend, the journalist picked up this theme. She described seeing the schoolbooks of children shortly after they had been told the legend of Anderl, and how their catechisms contained pictures of Jews, all of whom had had their eyes stabbed out. The lady, defending herself and her community, insisted that in her own family, and among everyone she knew, the story was never used to promote anti-Semitism. Instead, it was told to children as a warning that they should obey their parents! The fact that such a warning implicitly implied the possibility of sharing Anderl's fate could not be brought home to her.

Vigorously denying any taint of anti-Semitism, the lady presented a lengthy argument exonerating her father's behaviour during the Hitler years when, she insisted, the family had helped many Jews. Presumably she spoke the truth. But her story was marred by the fact that she prefaced it with an aside, in which she noted that her father's first flourishing business had failed owing to unfair Jewish competition. In a dramatic confrontation, the Jewish journalist demanded, "Look at me right now. Consider me for a moment as a real human being. Can't you understand how a legend like that hurts me personally?" To this her only response was, "But the story is true. Anderl was an innocent child. And Anderl belongs to us. You can't take him away from us." The Bishop's point that the child was unquestionably innocent and therefore deserved proper Christian burial in the churchyard, but that he was in no sense a martyr and therefore could not be accorded public veneration, fell on deaf ears. "He is an innocent child," she reiterated over and over in the discussion. Even a quiet episcopal reproof, reminding her that the Church had officially forbidden Anderl's cult, did no good. Since the Church had now changed its mind, she argued boldly, who could say when the Church mightn't change it back again? And anyhow, had the parishioners no right to say what was to be done with their own parish church? As conclusive proof to justify their stand, both she and her companion alleged a number of Anderl's "miracles," including the cure of her own hopelessly ill grandchild. The Bishop's reply, that it was God who heard all prayers, even misdirected ones, and that cures came from him alone, meant nothing to either of them.

This particular Austrian TV panel program is open-ended. The skillful and sympathetic moderator finally drew it to a close shortly before one o'clock in the morning, with the remark that nothing more could be gained by the discussion and that the two sides were talking past each other. Considering the length of the debate, what I am presenting here are mere excerpts. They suffice, however, to show how little effect world opinion, the personal experience of living through cataclysms, or even among devout believers, the authority of the Church, seems to have when it comes to local traditions. Nor is such a stance limited to an illiterate peasantry. The charm and attention to appearance, the appeal to sentiment, the religious devotion, and the disregard for official Church discipline, coupled with cheerful dismissal of facts and logic—all these traits which we find in Chaucer's Prioress were apparent in the solid bourgeois artist from the Province of Tyrol.¹⁰

Since Madame Eglentyne's tale is not localized but takes place somewhere "in Asye, in a greet citee," her attachment to the story would not appear to be based on any local cult. In another sense, however, we can discern a specific location out of which it springs, namely her convent culture. The tale, which recounts a miracle performed by the Virgin Mary, is told in her honour. Madame Eglentyne, both as a nun and perhaps also as a woman living in fourteenth-century England, has a particular devotion to the Virgin. She considers it her religious duty to praise Mary by recounting her miracles. The tale has undoubtedly circulated in the Prioress's convent since time immemorial. As Sister Madeleva wrote as late as 1951, when dealing with the two tales Chaucer attributes to Madame Eglentyne and to her nun companion,

They are just the stories that Sisters are telling to the smaller and even the grown children in Catholic boarding schools the world over today; they are the stories that the children clamor for again and again and never tire of hearing. It was there that I heard them long before I knew of Geoffrey Chaucer; and the Nuns' tales took me back, not to manuscripts, nor sermons, nor even to the lives of saints, but to the stories told by Sisters in our recreations at boarding school. (57)

In her defence of the Prioress, Sister Madeleva seems to be as sentimental as the good lady herself. Perhaps for that very reason she captures better than any more academic critic the spirit in which Madame Eglentyne tells her tale.

The anti-Semitism in mediaeval tales is, of course, not primarily racial but religious. Any Jew who accepted baptism would have ceased to be

considered a Jew in the Middle Ages, so much so in fact, that recalcitrant Jews who had been forcibly baptized were treated as renegade Christians. That—in religious terms—Madame Eglentyne is anti-Semitic cannot be doubted. But does she realize the implications of her attitude any more than the lady from Rinn did? In many ways, it is tempting to equate the two figures because they seem so similar. The convent of Stratford-atte-Bowe to which the Lady Prioress belongs was somewhat provincial, and, socially, decidedly inferior to the house in Barking, only four miles away. Coupled with Madame Eglentyne's obvious efforts to appear well-bred (*pace* Sister Madeleva's defence, pointing to convent manners), this suggests that the Prioress belongs to the middle classes rather than to the aristocracy. She, too, might have been a wealthy merchant's daughter. On first reading, one is so impressed by her attempts to emulate a courtly lady that one assumes that she must be a young woman, though there is no direct evidence for this. Indeed, several critics have noted that with her forehead "a spanne brood" and her ready sympathy for the little clergeon and his widowed mother, she is far more likely to be a large, well-preserved woman of middle age—looking in fact rather like the handsome middle-aged Lydia Reitmeir of the Austrian TV panel discussion.¹¹ Given that Chaucer created Madame Eglentyne in the 1380s, less than one hundred years since the Expulsion of the Jews, and supposing that she is a woman in her fifties, from a merchant family, it is not inconceivable that she would remember stories about Jewish business practices. The opening of her tale (VII, 453–87) shows that she is aware of the historical fact that though deplored by the Church, secular lords frequently encouraged Jewish usury for their own financial benefit. This familiarity does not imply that she tells her tale about the wicked Jews and the innocent little boy because of any shady dealings she vaguely remembers having heard about at home, any more than the artist from Rinn defended the cult of Anderl because of business losses her father had once suffered. Nevertheless, a certain predisposition to accept such anti-Semitic stories whole-heartedly might well have been unconsciously implanted.

Yet even while one can speculate about the similarity between two women—one real, the other fictional, and separated by six centuries—a word of caution is called for. Granted that the Prioress's story is anti-Semitic, and that in some sense she must recognize this fact, would she have any reason to consider her recital blameworthy? It is true that a number of Papal bulls existed, forbidding the spread of slander against the Jews. Most of these, however, were primarily concerned with the ritual murder charge.¹² In the Prioress's Tale, on the other hand, neither ritual murder

nor crucifixion play any part, though obviously that kind of accusation lies back of her story. Madame Eglentyne herself blames the child's death on Jewish hatred and Satanic inspiration and seems no more aware of the unintentional provocation caused by the clergeon's behaviour — loudly singing a Marian anthem while walking through the Jewish ghetto — than, given her level of intelligence, one expects her to know what a ritual murder actually is.

Even if we grant that the injunctions in Papal bulls can be extended to any anti-Semitic story, designed to inflame listeners with hatred against the Jews, there still remains the question as to whether such a bull was to be found in England. Schoeck, quoting from a decree of Gregory X in 1271, concedes,

Regarding such a decree there is always a 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 firsthand experience with a document like this, for it was the direct concern of ecclesiastical chanceries. But the view expressed was doubtless known. (258, footnote 8)

Though a number of such Papal bulls in defence of the Jews were promulgated, all addressed themselves to specific situations on the Continent, and not a single one appears among English records. Nor have I been able to find any reference to England and its Jews in collections of Canon Law or in mediaeval commentaries on Canon Law. This suggests that known Papal bulls, expressing concern for the suffering of the Jews, albeit in very limited terms, and designed to deal with individual cases as they arose, never gained universal acceptance among those responsible for promulgating Church doctrine. Nevertheless, lack of proof, especially when after the Reformation, Papal documents in England were deliberately destroyed, is not conclusive evidence. Mediaeval England was, after all, part of Western Christendom. Schoeck's supposition that Gregory's bull was known in England receives a certain amount of corroboration from the participation of three Englishmen in the whole juridical process which Count Eduard of Savoy describes when confirming the sentence passed by his court in 1329, exculpating two Jews accused of ritual murder, and reaffirming the bulls of Innocent IV and Gregory X (Stern, *Urkundliche Beiträge*, 7-14). We should note that these Englishmen, whose names we know,¹³ were considered competent to take part in this trial, although at the time, officially, there were no longer any Jews in England.

Even more curious is the fact that earlier, in 1236, Emperor Frederick II of Germany, sceptical about the ritual murder accusations which had arisen in Fulda, asked Henry III of England to send him Jewish converts as witnesses regarding their former practices and beliefs. Henry complied with this request, but claimed never to have heard of such an accusation before. In his article on the Hugh of Lincoln story, Gavin I. Langmuir argues that the King must have been distinguishing between accusations of ritual murder, involving the alleged use of Christian blood, and accusations that Jews tortured and crucified Christian children in mockery and hatred of Christ, since the latter charge was well known in England. In fact, this was precisely the charge on which — in 1255 — nineteen hapless Jews were personally condemned by Henry for the death of little Hugh of Lincoln. Only eight years earlier, Pope Innocent IV had addressed his bull “*Lacrimabilem Judeorum*” to all the bishops of Germany, condemning the ritual murder accusation (Stern, *Päpstliche Bullen*, 10–13). Langmuir believes that “Henry III and his advisers doubtless knew of Innocent’s prohibition of the blood accusation” and argues that the King’s involvement in the Lincoln trial illustrates how the Papal pronouncement, by limiting itself to the ritual murder libel, left the door open to the crucifixion charge (479–80). However, two earlier bulls which Innocent IV had sent in May 1247 to the Archbishop of Vienne, demanding justice for the Jews of Valreas, referred quite specifically to the crucifixion charge, and the assumption that Henry was familiar with one prohibition but not with the other seems somewhat curious.¹⁴

If today it is impossible to establish what ecclesiastical directives governed the decisions of Henry III in such a notorious trial, how much less can we know about stories which circulated in convents and were considered to be edifying! The only definite conclusion that one can reach is that the Prioress’s attitude seems very similar to that of her modern counterpart, but that she would have had much more excuse than the latter for such a stance. No living Jewess ever confronted Madame Eglentyne and demanded, “Think of me as a human being!” Even if the Prioress were not too locked into her narrow convent world with its store of religious fairy tales to be able to comprehend any other viewpoint, popular devotional literature contained many stories of miracles in which the Jews were cast as the villains. Above all, there were as far as she was concerned, bona fide shrines of several boy martyrs. At the end of her story, to confirm its veracity, the Prioress links the fate of her little nameless clergeon to the one young Hugh of Lincoln allegedly suffered:

O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also
 With cursed Jewes, as it is notable,
 For it is but a litel while ago. (VII, 684-86)

A number of elements in Hugh's story — the fact that he was a school-boy, son of a widow, and was found in a well or cesspool near the house of a Jew, as well as the kind of punishment meted out to the chief of the alleged conspirators — all match elements in the Prioress's own tale.¹⁵ For her, this event that occurred over a hundred years before seems but as yesterday. We can read this response in a variety of ways: as the timeless "once upon a time" of the fairy tale; as vivid folk memory; or even as a natural disregard for the passing of chronological time on the part of someone whose life is bounded by the liturgical year in which events of long ago are always celebrated as present. One wonders how Madame Eglentyne would have responded if told that after nineteen Jews had been put to death for Hugh's murder, the rest who had likewise been condemned, were finally released through the good offices of the friars who did not believe the charge.¹⁶ Presumably, like her modern counterpart, she would merely point to the existence of Hugh's shrine and to the many "miracles" wrought there in proof of what she believes to be true — a belief still held centuries later by a surprising number of people.¹⁷

What of Chaucer himself? To argue that he shares his Prioress's viewpoint uncritically seems to me as misguided as the assumption that he satirizes her mercilessly for choosing to tell such a naïve tale that seems to delight in brutal details. If Harry Bailly, who constitutes himself Master of Ceremonies and arbitrator in the story-telling contest, provides any yardstick as to how Chaucer wants us to view Madame Eglentyne, then we must accord her the respect which she, as a fine lady, expects. "Oure Hooste," by profession a good judge of character, makes his request to her "As curteisly as it had been a mayde" (VII, 445-50) even if, as Alfred David points out (209-10), there is an element of exaggeration in his address. But then, how accustomed is Harry Bailly to dealing with a Lady Prioress? Furthermore, if audience reaction to the tale is another kind of yardstick, then we must note that the company is duly impressed by the Prioress's tale:

Whan seyð was al this miracle, every man
 As sobre was that wonder was to se. (VII, 691-92)

At the same time, however, Chaucer's real-life audience must be considered as more perceptive than his fictional one. For by allowing Harry and his fellow pilgrims to disapprove of the ridiculously clumsy tale that Chaucer the

pilgrim starts telling after the Prioress has finished (VII, 919–32), Chaucer is not only mocking himself but also, in some sense, the Canterbury pilgrims, since the real-life audience is in on a joke that they, the fictional characters, cannot share. Hence, even if they fail to do so, we are certainly meant to be aware of the Prioress's sentimentality, disregard of ecclesiastical discipline, and misplaced values, and need to remember—as Chaucer undoubtedly does—that this woman was supposed to set an example to the group of nuns subject to her.

Madame Eglentyne is obviously attractive and a pleasant companion on a journey. Though we might feel somewhat uneasy about the little pet dogs, a symbol of her attempts to emulate the courtly lady, we do not take this infraction of her Rule too seriously—that is, until we remember that she feeds them on luxury items while the poor outside her convent are left starving. The same two-fold viewpoint applies to her tale which is so gracefully and simply told, and which would inspire most members of her audience with greater devotion to the Virgin. It is, however, as naïve in its character portrayals and motivations as she is, reflecting the popular culture and prejudice to which it owes its origin. The measured tones of Chaucer's Physician show how a man of learning and sound judgment would treat a very similar theme, though naturally using a different genre. Here, too, the innocent Virginia dies, but the Physician leaves the ultimate punishment of the wicked judge to heaven (Aprius commits suicide while in prison), and, at the request of Virginia's father, the punishment of Aprius's chief accomplice is commuted from hanging to exile (VI, 1–286). If Harry Bailly and the pilgrim audience each give us a yardstick by which we can evaluate most of the Canterbury pilgrims and the stories they tell, then a third measuring rod is frequently the matching or contrasting tale one pilgrim provides for another. That the secular and sceptical Physician should prove more willing to allow for mercy than the nun who is supposed to live for and by the love of God, ought to make us reassess her naïve bloodthirstiness.

The fact that Chaucer treats Madame Eglentyne's weaknesses with such light irony, presumably recognizing that they are also manifested in her tale, still does not tell us anything about his attitude to anti-Semitism. Nor should we expect any definite information regarding this issue. Chaucer might well have had doubts about such popular prejudices. But he also valued his court connections. In his work, therefore, he hardly ever alluded to any political or religious controversies and was not inclined to raise anything that might encourage such questions. Indeed, as far as the Jews were

concerned, most members of the Court might be expected to share the popular view. In any case, Chaucer's interests were primarily social, rather than profoundly religious; only an unusually concerned Christian would be likely to dispute the common assumption that the Jews were guilty of all the crimes imputed to them, and would raise a voice in protest. The list of those who did so is not extensive. Aside from Papal bulls, which all too often were only sent out after the gravest injustices had already been committed, occasionally we find a cleric exerting himself on their behalf. In England, for example, there had been the friars who helped the Jews of Lincoln. Above all, there had been the saintly Bishop Hugh of Lincoln, who in the face of popular support and pseudo-miracles, had personally investigated and dismissed a supposed case of ritual murder, and at whose funeral the Jews wept, knowing that they had lost their greatest protector.¹⁸ Among Chaucer's own contemporaries, Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester and an outspoken critic of fourteenth-century social, political and ecclesiastical abuses, repeatedly compared Christian behaviour unfavourably with the moral and religious practices of the Jews. Since one of the sermons in which Brinton draws this comparison was probably preached during the procession held on July 17, 1377, the day following Richard II's coronation, Chaucer is likely to have known of it, and possibly was himself present on the occasion.¹⁹ But the Bishop's position allowed for explicit social criticism, while Chaucer's did not.

Before leaving that 1985 Austrian TV program, the contribution of one other panel member should be briefly highlighted here. The Tyrolean author had remained silent through most of the discussion, though he was obviously listening intently. When at last he was inspired to respond, he did so through a moving parable in which he told of a remote tribe living in isolation and, despite missionary efforts, stubbornly clinging to Pagan customs. Gradually, in the newly established schools, a few boys could be found who longed for a wider vision and for work other than the traditional tilling of the soil. The best of them were sent away for further training so that they too, in turn, might become missionaries. One of these boys, however, had instead become a writer. Many years later, he returned to visit the remote tribe. He found that the former fields had given way to asphalted roads and that the mud huts had been replaced by brick houses, looking like all houses everywhere else. Thus, his people had absorbed the worst of this new world that they had encountered. At the same time, they were still clinging to some of their Pagan customs — like venerating a

stone on which a certain ritual murder was believed to have been committed! With this, the young man fell silent again. He was clearly identifying himself with his Tyrolean background, while at the same time regarding it critically and a little sadly. He had also, as the theologian was quick to point out, put his finger on the question why the legend of the martyred Anderl had been so readily accepted in the first place and now was proving so difficult to eradicate: underneath the pseudo-Christian story were layers of Pagan associations, going back to a dim folk memory.

This young writer, with his profound concern for the social outcast, has already won an important place in modern Austrian literature.²⁰ Though born after the downfall of Hitler's Third Reich, he fully understood the implications inherent in the Rinn cult, whereas the grandmotherly figure, who admitted to knowing that the Hitler regime was evil and had actually lived through it, could see nothing wrong with the cult of Anderl. Comparison of two such different authors is really impossible, but should one credit Chaucer with less discernment because he allows Madame Eglentyne her say? Obviously not. However, lacking any fourteenth-century experience matching the kind of universal consciousness-raising to which the young Austrian writer had been exposed in the aftermath of the Nazi Holocaust, Chaucer had less reason to see the *Prioress's Tale* in terms of specific religious — let alone, of racial — prejudice, directed against an existing group of people. Through background, foreign travel, and connection with the port of London, he would have had far more opportunity than his Prioress to know real Jews, but the fairy tale villains we meet in her story cannot shed light on any such assumption. Nor does the unravelling of the tale give the slightest hint of Chaucer's feelings. For though he distrusted crowds and their fickle judgments,²¹ in no way are popular prejudice and mob violence linked here. The people who find the little clergeon and his weeping mother observe the letter of the law and promptly send for the Provost, on whom all the responsibility for the summary sentence falls (616–34). Lastly, any attempt to find significant irony in Madame Eglentyne's use of Old Testament figures — the praise of Mary, herself a Jewess, addressed as "O bussh unbrent, brennyng in Moyses sighte" (468) as well as the description of the little clergeon's mother, weeping at his bier, as "This newe Rachel" (627) — has to be attributed to our modern sensibility, not to Chaucer's. For he, like all his contemporaries, would have distinguished between those Jews who lived before the time of Christ and therefore had had no share in rejecting

and crucifying him, and those born after the Incarnation who were stubbornly continuing to reject their Messiah, despite all Christian attempts to enlighten them.

Ultimately, all that one can say with certainty is that Chaucer lets Madame Eglentyne tell such a tale because, being the kind of person she is, this is precisely the sort of tale that she would tell. He himself warns his audience that not all the stories in *The Canterbury Tales* are edifying. This disclaimer, placed in the Prologue to the *Miller's Tale*, here applies specifically to the "churls" among the pilgrims, for whom the narrator demands artistic license:

For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
 Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
 Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
 Or elles falsen som of my mateere. (I, 3172-75)

But the longer one studies *The Canterbury Tales*, the more one realizes that Chaucer's admonition, given both seriously and tongue-in-cheek, on some level applies to all his characters. His mild amusement at the Prioress's foibles certainly suggests detachment from her person and from the naïvete of her tale. Undoubtedly he is amused by the contrast between the Prioress's tears for the trapped mouse, and the relish with which she details the barbarous punishment meted out to the villains in her story. Perhaps Chaucer felt that such a contrast spoke for itself.

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NOTES

¹ This paper is a completely revised and greatly expanded version of one originally presented during the Twenty-First Medieval Conference at the University of Western Michigan in May 1986, under the title "Modern Light on Chaucer's Prioress: The Anti-Semitism of Madame Eglentyne."

² Roth (8-9) and Lipman (49-57) both discuss this point. Strictly speaking, this accusation is not totally new. As Lee M. Friedman points out, "The legend . . . that Jews crucify Christian children at the time of their Passover celebration . . . had been dormant for centuries since it was first recorded by the Alexandrian grammarian Apion in the first half of the first century A.D., and later repeated by the fifth century historian Socrates as a contemporary happening in Syria" (2). According to Gavin Langmuir, this story seems to have arisen again spontaneously in England in 1150 through the fertile imagination of Thomas of Monmouth, who decided to write the life of William.

³ While forcefully arguing that both tale and teller merely express the limitations of their age, Florence F. Ridley presents a good overview of the various critical voices raised in the fifties and mid-sixties when the debate over the Prioress was at its height.

⁴ Donaldson's idyllic picture of official Church attitude is very moving but unfortunately bears little relation to reality. The most cursory study of Canon Law regulations regarding the rights of Jews, as well as any examination of trials involving charges of ritual murder, tell a very different story. Only rarely did the highest ecclesiastical authorities intervene to stop active persecution; the basic attitude, which led to this persecution, was actually encouraged.

⁵ Public Lecture, University of Toronto, November 29, 1965. At a later date, Professor David expressed these views in print, writing, "I do not think that anything can be solved by attempting to account for the treatment of the Jews in terms of historical attitudes. . . . The fact is that the 'cursed Jews' represent a psychological rather than a historical reality. They are symbols of pure evil, and they belong to the large class of fairy-tale villains. . . . Chaucer, I believe, is fully aware of the kind of material he is dealing with and retells the story in such a way as to emphasize its fairy-tale structure. At the same time, however, I think he is also very much aware that fairy-tale justice and Christian mercy are incompatible and that the story moves us for reasons that have nothing to do with religion" (208-9).

⁶ This possibility was suggested to me during a discussion with the staff of the Innsbruck Museum of Tyrolean Folklore in May 1987. Since then, Dr Herlinde Menardi from the Museum has kindly drawn my attention to a local publication called "Das Fenster" in which Georg R. Schroubek discusses the question of Anderl's authenticity ("Hat das Anderl von Rinn jemals gelebt?," Heft Nr. 38 19. Jg. 1986, and "Das Anderl von Rinn," Heft Nr. 39, 20. Jg. 1986). Unfortunately, so far I have not had the opportunity to return to the Museum and examine these documents for myself.

⁷ Though Anderl was supposedly murdered in 1462, no action was brought against anyone at the time. According to the seventeenth-century physician Guarinoni, rumours about the circumstances of Anderl's death first came to light more than ten years later, in 1475. Guarinoni himself may be inventing the whole story, suggesting the "evidence" because he himself believed it *a priori*. On the other hand, in 1475, in nearby Trient, a three-year-old boy named Simon was found murdered and the unfortunate Jews, accused of the heinous crime, under severe torture confessed to it. That in the same year the good people of Rinn should have decided that their Anderl, who had died thirteen years earlier, had suffered the same fate as Simon is in itself suggestive. Throughout the whole region, Simon and Anderl became linked in iconographic representations and in popular devotion.

⁸ Since the Papacy did not officially accept accusations of ritual murder directed against Jews, what happened in this case is interesting. At Pope Benedict XIV's request, and in response to an urgent appeal by the Jews of Poland, Cardinal Lorenzo Ganganelli (later Pope Clement XIV) prepared a report in 1759, in which he examined all accusations of ritual murder. Ganganelli presented a lengthy reasoned argument, showing that such practices were totally against Jewish law and that all such accusations lacked any foundation and were invariably due to Christian malice and/or greed. In defence both of the Jews and of the Holy See, Ganganelli pointed out that the cult of these child "martyrs" had never received official Church sanction. However, he was forced to admit to an exception in the case of Simon and of Anderl. Simon's cause had originally been furthered by the Bishop of Trient who believed the ritual murder charges so implicitly that he did not wait for Papal approbation, which at first was denied but a hundred years later was granted. Anderl's cause waited even longer, but then was approved by Ganganelli's own patron, which accounts for Ganganelli's apologetic silence. Moritz Stern, one of the editors of Ganganelli's report, points out that already in 1584, Pope Gregory XIII referred to Simon as "Sanctus," and not merely as "Beatus," although no formal beatification or

canonization ever occurred. He is also the only one of the numerous children supposedly martyred by the Jews whose name was included in the Roman Martyrology.

In the copy of a document sent to me, apparently a pastoral letter of 1987, Bishop Stecher of Innsbruck noted that Papal approval for the already existing cult of Anderl appears to have been granted in the eighteenth century in exchange for valuable documents that the Papacy wanted and that the Abbey of Wilten, which had jurisdiction over Rinn, possessed. He also points out that this approval lacked the full weight of a Papal decree, saying: "Leider hat es auch im 18. Jhdt. einmal eine päpstliche Gestattung des bestehenden Kultes gegeben (keinen Seligsprechungsprozess!) Die Hintergründe dieses römischen Dekrets sind sehr dunkel. Es wurde im wahrsten Sinn des Wortes für ein paar wertvolle Urkunden, die das Stift Wilten besass, eingehandelt. Eine derartige römische Äusserung hat keineswegs das Gewicht einer Konzilerklärung oder gar einer päpstlichen Lehrentscheidung" (2).

⁹ The Austrian television programme to which I refer here took place in the last week of June 1985, in the series called "Club 2," under Axel Corti, author and film-director, as moderator. The participants of the panel were Dr Reinhold Stecher, the Bishop of Innsbruck; Josef Newiadomski, an open-minded and progressive Catholic theologian; the writer Felix Mitterer; Markus Sommersacher, who works with OFR, the official Austrian radio, and who, as far as I can recall, added a historical perspective; Roman Schmiderer, owner of a kiosk in Rinn, where souvenirs, tobacco; and the like were available for tourists; Lydia Reitmeir, the academic painter; and the journalist Nadine Hauer, to whom I am indebted for the above information, and who herself has been extremely active in the movement to rid the church at Judenstein of all its anti-Semitic trappings.

¹⁰ Whether or not Madame Eglentyne knows anything about a Papal bull forbidding the dissemination of libel against the Jews is highly doubtful; but she certainly knows that that she should not be outside her cloister, nor should she be keeping pets. There were plenty of episcopal injunctions regarding these infractions of religious discipline, all of which she ignores, as Chaucer's description of her in lines 118-62 of the *General Prologue* shows.

¹¹ Sister Madeleva saw Madame Eglentyne as definitely middle-aged and solidly built. So, earlier, did Gordon H. Harper, who argued that her forehead, which is "a spanne brood," describes a large forehead, but when linked to the comment that "she was nat undergrowe" suggests one in proportion to the generally large size of the Prioress (308-10). Edward H. Kelly believes that "the combined arguments of Sister M. Madaleva [sic] and Gordon H. Harper, in which the Prioress emerges as a nun heavy-set and in her late middle age, are most sensible and persuasive" (364). He goes on to note, "If Chaucer's emphasis on things small in the *General Prologue* is in fact designed merely to set in humorous relief the size of the Prioress, it would be difficult, I think, to call the description so much as mildly satirical. 'Comic' would be, perhaps, the most accurate word" (374).

¹² In pursuing the ritual murder accusation, I have consulted collections of Papal bulls and of similarly significant ecclesiastical documents dealing with the Jews made by Moritz Stern, Solomon Grayzel, and Edward A. Synan. Their mighty labours in the past have made my small contribution to the subject that much easier.

¹³ Count Eduard convoked a large body of examining magistrates. Stern's *Urkundliche Beiträge* lists them all by name on page 9.

¹⁴ Langmuir ignores the Pope's prohibition against the crucifixion charge by concentrating on the fact that the Jews of Valreas had been accused of crucifying a little girl and using her blood in a communion rite, thus involving some form of ritual murder

(480). But the Papal bull "Si diligenter" mentions *only* the charge of crucifixion, and then goes on to give a horrifying description of the physical tortures inflicted on the innocent Jews to make them confess to the crime (Stern, *Päpstliche Bullen*, 2-5, item I).

¹⁵ A number of contemporary accounts of Hugh's "martyrdom" exist, namely in Matthew Paris's *Chronica Majora* (516-19) and in two anonymous monastic annals, one from Burton (340-46, 348) and the other from Waverley (346-48). These accounts have been carefully reassessed by Joseph Jacobs as well as by Gavin Langmuir. The *Acta Sanctorum* give March 25 as the feastday of William of Norwich, another boy "martyr," and then go on to mention several other such incidents, including the story of little Hugh.

¹⁶ Depending on which contemporary account one consults, either the Franciscans or the Dominicans were responsible. Matthew Paris claims that it was the Franciscans; the Burton Annalist says that it was the Dominicans. The prejudiced chroniclers claim that bribery was involved.

¹⁷ Sir Francis Hill notes that "The popularity of the tomb declined . . . as the Jews became a memory, and in the accounts of 1420-1 the offerings made there were only 10¹/₂d" (229). Nevertheless, the story of young Hugh's murder by the Jews was accepted, albeit with some reservations, as late as 1898, as Green's edition of *Forgotten Lincoln* shows (26-27). *Forgotten Lincoln*, which was first published in 1897 in the "Lincoln Gazette and Times," must have been popular since it was re-issued the following year when its editor described it as the "most complete and reliable history of Lincoln that has ever been published. Early editions of *Butler's Lives of the Saints* also fully accept Matthew Paris's account of little Hugh's death (3: 264). Only the revised version of 1956 suggests that neither ritual murder nor crucifixion charges can be upheld, though admitting that Jewish hatred of Christians, to the extent of murder, might have been possible (3: 421-22); see also 1: 671-72 for similar comments on the Simon of Trient story.

¹⁸ Thurston, especially in 269-89. Thurston himself, who translated the French Carthusian Life of Hugh in 1898, is extremely cautious about dismissing all charges of ritual murder as totally unfounded. His feeling that there had to be some element of truth in them is a good example of how long this particular fabrication continued to flourish even among those who were essentially rational and well disposed people.

¹⁹ Sermon 44 is the one which Brinton is thought to have preached on the occasion of Richard's coronation. Sermon 43 and Sermon 90 also provide interesting comments. I am currently engaged in preparing a paper on this aspect of the fourteenth-century English homiletic tradition for publication.

²⁰ Felix Mitterer, of Tyrolean peasant stock, was born in 1948 and now lives in Innsbruck. He has produced works for radio and film, but is primarily known as the author of numerous dramas. The first of these, *Kein Platz für Idioten*, deals with the life of a disabled boy in a Tyrolean village (first produced 1977). Many others soon followed. Among these, *Stigma* caused an uproar when first produced in 1982 because it linked repressed sexuality and religious hysteria through its main character, a servant girl on a Tyrolean farm in the nineteenth century. *Kein Schöner Land*, first produced in 1987, explores the pernicious influence of National Socialism, beginning as early as 1933, within a nameless Tyrolean village that includes a totally assimilated cattle-dealer who turns out to be Jewish. The tragedy ends with an ironic epilogue that warns the Austrian audience about its tendency to shove the past under the rug and pretend that all is well. *Die Kinder des Teufels* (1989) is a horrifying and well documented study of the brutal interrogations, torture, and wholesale executions of the poor, including beggar children, in the principality of Salzburg during the witchcraft hunts of the seventeenth

century. Also from 1989 is *Sibirien*, the moving monologue of an old man whom society has discarded and pushed into a state-run home that he describes as worse than his imprisonment in Siberia during the war. As this selection from his works shows, Mitterer is primarily concerned with the outsider and the scapegoat, and attacks the evil of power politics, wherever these manifest themselves. His plays have a strong regional appeal and fall into the genre of the "Volksstück" drama, which is meant to speak directly to the people and can include a certain amount of dialect, as well as pathos, humour, song, and other conventional devices for this purpose. *Sibirien*, however, though also realistic, in the stark simplicity of its language, strikes me as closer to poetic drama than to prose.

²¹ At the beginning of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the innocent Criseyde fears for her life because the crowd, angry with her treacherous father, wish to burn her (I, 90-91). Later, they object to Hector's chivalric attitude and insist that Criseyde be exchanged for Antenor; knowing the outcome of the story, the Narrator comments ironically, "O nyce world, lo, thy discreiou!" (IV, 206). An even stronger indictment occurs in the *Clerk's Tale*, where the crowd first favours patient Griselda, and then is prepared to ignore her just claims to her husband's bed, impressed by the beauty of the much younger girl Walter has apparently chosen to replace her. In scathing words, the Clerk comments on the crowd's poor judgment, their desire for novelty, and their lack of constancy (IV, 995-1001).

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