

Anti-semitism and the Prioress: A Brief Exposition

The following are passages from both the Prioress's Tale that help identify the anti-semitic nature of the text...

Lines: 488 - 495

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488 **Ther was in Asye, in a greet citee,
489 **Amonges Cristene folk a Jewerye,
490 **Sustened by a lord of that contree
491 **For foule usure and lucre of vileynye,
492 **Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye;
493 **And thurgh the strete men myghte ride or
wende,
494 **For it was free and open at eyther ende.
495 **A litel scole of Cristen folk ther stood****************

These are the introductory lines to the tale. The Prioress has already positioned the Jewish population as an “outcast” crowd. She goes as far as to claim the God they praise resides only over this small Jewish “ghetto.” At the other end of this neighborhood there is a small Catholic school, and arriving to it requires one to pass through to the other end.

While this may not immediately come to mind upon first read, this passage can be read as the beginning of an underlying theme. The deliberate placement of the Catholic school at the *end* of the neighborhood can be connected to the idea that the school marks the end of a digestive tract, where excretions collect.[1]

[1] Price, Merrall Llewelyn. “Sadism and Sentimentality: Absorbing Antisemitism in Chaucer's Prioress.” *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2008, pp. 203. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25094427.

Lines: 558-564

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558 **Oure firste foo, the serpent Sathanas,**

559 **That hath in Jues herte his waspes**
nest,

560 **Up swal, and seide, "O Hebrayk peple,**
allas!

561 **Is this to yow a thyng that is honest,**

562 **That swich a boy shal walken as hym**
lest

563 **In youre despit, and synge of swich**
sentence,

564 **Which is agayn youre lawes**
reverence?"

This is a notable transition in the story as it comes off in somewhat of a robotic form. It first implies that “Sathanas” is in a sense “built in” to Jews, and as a wasps nest nonetheless. In other words, you may be able to kill a wasp, but there will always be another to take its place. There also seems to be a “harmony” of outrage amongst the Jews as the evil is “activated” within them. This contributes to the idea that the population as a whole does not contain unique and complex individuals, but rather a singularly minded army whose sole purpose is to maintain themselves and the evil they supposedly exist under.

Lines: 572-578

- 572 **I seye that in a wardrobe they hym
threwe**
- 573 **Where as thise Jewes purgen hire
entraille.**
- 574 **O cursed folk of Herodes al newe,**
- 575 **What may youre yvel entente yow
availle?**
- 576 **Mordre wol out, certeyn, it wol nat faille,**
- 577 **And namely ther th'onour of God shal
sprede;**
- 578 **The blood out crieth on youre cursed
dede.**

This passage ties into slide two's suggested allusion to a digestive system. Painted as "dirty" and "pig" like, excrement seemed to be a small but central theme when referring to the community. They threw the boy into a "privy" where feces is collected in their efforts to continue defiling the boy, but more so the divine power that enables the boy to sing.

This is also an intriguing moment for the Prioress as a character. She toggles her words between a story and a prayer/curse. She asks what the Jews are to gain from their evil as though she herself was a victim of the attack. She ironically uses God's name to curse them, alluding briefly to an epic poem in which Catholicism has the immaculate blessing to summon God's wrath at will through means of her telling the tale.

Lines 684 - 690

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684 **O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also**
685 **With cursed Jewes, as it is notable,**
686 **For it is but a litel while ago,**
687 **Preye eek for us, we synful folk unstable,**
688 **That of his mercy God so merciable**
689 **On us his grete mercy multiplie,**
690 **For reverence of his mooder Marie. Amen**

This passage exhibits some of the strongest evidence that affirms one of the main purposes of the tale is to affirm anti-semitism. Hugh of Lyncoln was a young boy allegedly murdered by Jews in 1255 whose story aligns very closely with the Prioress's. Because tales like these were common during the time that Chaucer was writing the Canterbury Tales, this allows the Prioress's Tale to be viewed more as Chaucer's attempt to make his own artistic version of a well known tale, and less of an opinion piece reflecting his personal sentiments.[1] Nonetheless, anti-semitism is the recurring theme that provides much of the structure for the text, art or not.

[1] Alexander, Philip S. "Madame Eglentyne, Geoffrey Chaucer and the Problem of Medieval Anti-Semitism." *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, vol. 74, no. 1, 1992, pp. 109–120., doi:10.7227/bjrl.74.1.8.