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Beyond the "Fishbowl": Navigating Ideology and Bias in Chaucer's Jewish Representations

Abstract
This article explores the complex portrayal of Jewish characters in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, particularly in *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Pardoner's Tale*. Using a New Historicist approach, the study investigates how Chaucer's depictions reflect the medieval religious and cultural climate rather than contemporary ideas of anti-Semitism. While *The Prioress's Tale* reinforces traditional anti-Judaic tropes to affirm Christianity, *The Pardoner's Tale* uses Jewish figures to critique Christian moral failings. Ultimately, the article highlights the duality of Jewishness as both desecrator and essential aid to Christian faith, demonstrating how Chaucer's Jewish characters are symbolic constructs rather than realistic depictions. This analysis underscores the necessity of avoiding anachronism in studying medieval texts and suggests that Chaucer's representations of Jewishness are foundational archetypes that shaped later English literary tradition.

Keywords: Geoffrey Chaucer, New Historicism, Medieval anti-Judaism, religious conflict, literary archetypes

Geoffrey Chaucer is widely regarded as the "Father of English Literature" and is often at the epicentre when it comes to studying and analysing late medieval English literature. His works, particularly *The Canterbury Tales*, offer a great variety of characters and narratives that reflect his time's social, religious and cultural complexities. One of Chaucer's most challenging aspects is his representations of Jewish people. Rooted in the historical context of fourteenth-century England, they often present depictions of Jewishness that are considered problematic by contemporary readers. This is exemplified in *The Prioress's Tale* with its use of the blood libel myth and the overall demonisation of the Jewish community, as well as in *The Pardoner's Tale*, which includes the figure of the Wandering Jew and a "Jewish relic" as tools to explore Christian moral failings. The examples showcase the complex social connections that shaped the figure of the Jew into a multifaceted symbol whose existence became crucial for defining Christian identity. This article will argue that a New Historicist approach offers a framework for exploring Chaucer's Jewish characters and the anti-Judaic tropes while maintaining a nuanced attitude towards their function within the historical context. By employing "thick description" and focusing on the cultural and historical reasons behind these representa-

tions, we can better understand the social and religious tensions of the period. At the same time, this approach can aid in examining the limits of literary interpretation and engage with the elusive categories of gender, race and sexuality. In this process, it is essential to remain aware of the potential for anachronism, which can obscure our understanding of medieval anti-Judaism and consequently to critically reflect on how our contemporary perspective blurs our view of the past. Ultimately, this article aims to demonstrate how a reading of Chaucer, through the lens of New Historicism can offer a better understanding of his historical context and the significance of his Jewish representations.

To begin, it would be appropriate to introduce *The Prioress's Tale* as it is one of the most prominent examples of Jewish representation in Chaucer's literary production. In *The Canterbury Tales,* keeping in mind the importance of the Church in the Middle Ages, it is not surprising that a substantial amount of the micro-society is comprised of religious figures. While they vary in gender and importance within the Church, the only superior figure is the Prioress. While her character moves away from certain stereotypes attributed to women in the Middle Ages, the tale she "chooses", or, instead, that Chaucer chose for her, is more stereotypical – a tale of martyrdom where an innocent child becomes a victim to the "evil" Jews because of his devotion to Virgin Mary. The act of becoming a martyr is seen in Christian literature as a way for an ordinary person to become more Christ-like, while in contrast, the Jewish people in the tale are ruled by the Devil, who instructs them to cut the boy's throat and throw him in a pit. Virgin Mary then performs her miracle by placing a grain on the boy's tongue so that he can continue to sing the *Alma Redemptoris Mater* – a song that praises Virgin Mary – "So loud that all the place began to ring" (Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, General Prologue, line 613). The boy then tells of Virgin Mary's miracle; the abbot removes the grain, and the child is buried while the Jews are hanged.

In the case of the Prioress's prologue and tale, Chaucer implements the Jewish characters as traditional figures, which were not only well-known to his audience through medieval drama and ballads but also firmly rooted in religious discourse about Christian piety, thus reaffirming the idea that medieval anti-Semitism is in actuality just Christian anti-Judaism.

One of the most obvious references to anti-Judaism is the repeated use of the word "cursed" to describe Jews in *The Prioress's Tale*: "For cursed folk, they never do amiss" (line 570), "O cursed folk of Herod's evilness" (line 574), and "This cursed Jew, him held I have in hate" (line 685). The divine wrath underlying the meaning of the word presents the Prioress as an individual with deep-seated prejudice. This is reinforced by the fact that she uses the term not only to describe the particular group of Jewish people that are responsible for the death of the little clergymen but to describe the entire "Hebrayk peple" (line 560), evoking the idea of collective guilt and fundamental evilness. This association of Jewish people with the Devil has longstanding traditions in medieval Christian literature. As Joshua Tracht-

enberg has noted, the medieval era saw the normalisation of the portrayal of Jews as "alien, evil, antisocial, and anti-human creatures, essentially subhuman," demonic people "born of a combination of cultural and historical factors peculiar to Christian Europe in the later Middle Ages" (2002: 6). Furthermore, the Prioress's language is designed to evoke a strong emotional response in the audience. The character of the little clergeon evokes a popular image associated with the Massacre of the Innocents, which foreshadows the crucifixion of Christ. In that event, thousands of young boys die in exchange for Christ's life. As John Archer states, "At a period in which the individual child was not looked upon with particular tenderness, parental sentiment found a communal channel in the idolisation of the Christ child and of the Innocents, the baby boys butchered in the first attempt to kill Jesus by Herod, the Jewish King" (1985: 50). Additionally, the audience is faced with a detailed description of the passionate clergeon and his desire to learn the *Alma Redemptoris*. This suggests purity and innocence, which heightens the emotional investment, making the tale more persuasive and the murder even more shocking. The emotional response is further heightened by the mother's grief. Paired with the emotional language of the Prioress, the audience is moved further away from rationality and closer to the tales of the cannibalistic, murderous Jews.

The tale solidifies this idea by referencing the blood libel myth. However, it should be pointed out that Chaucer's tale is not technically a ritualistic murder. It is neither a mockery of Christ's crucifixion, nor is it performed to provide blood for Passover bread. The only reason behind his murder is the hate towards Virgin Mary, which the Devil instils in the hearts of some Jewish people. However, the Prioress herself links the martyr of her story to that of an account of an actual ritualistic murder: "Oh young Hugh of Lincoln, slain also/ By cursed Jews, as it is well known" (VII.684–685). The mentioning of Hugh of Lincoln is actually essential to understanding how a medieval audience might have responded to the Prioress' tale. While the setting of the tale is far away and long ago, in a city in Asia, Hugh is presented as a recently martyred boy from a nearby English town. In reality, the supposed murder took place around 150 years before the moment the Prioress is telling her story. However, for the poetic purposes of the tale, bending time is essential for bringing the story closer to the English setting. Martyrdom is then perceived as timeless, and any true Christian listening to the tale must be able to grieve and experience the sorrow of the murder as if it really happened a little while ago. What is more, the story of Hugh of Lincoln was a popular tale and mentioning it at the end makes the audience more inclined to believe the Prioress' tale of the "evil" Jews. Another interpretation of the Prioress' Tale is as an allegory, with the Prioress representing *Ecclesia* (the Church) and the Jews representing *Synagoga* (the Synagogue). This juxtaposition is evident in other readings of Chaucer's texts such as Christine Rose's "The Jewish Mother-in-Law: Synagoga and the 'Man of Law's Tale'". In her analysis, the conflict focuses on two figures, the mother and daughter-in-law. Their conflict is represented as a reflection of the theological struggle between Christiani-

ty and Judaism, in which the mother-in-law is represented as Synagoga, a maternal figure representing the Jewish faith, while the daughter-in-law is related to Ecclesia, a reflection of the Christian doctrine. Synagoga is often portrayed as blind or veiled, which symbolises the Jews' supposed inability to see the truth of Christianity, while Ecclesia is depicted as having a clear vision. In "The Prioress' Tale" she and the martyred boy take on the role of Ecclesia as they show intense devotion to Virgin Mary. The Prioress tells of the miracle performed, reinforcing the Church's image as the guardian of truth and miracles and Christianity as a religion that shows divine grace to its followers. At the same time, the Jewish characters are associated with Synagoga as they remain blind to the truth of Christ, which eventually leads them to commit sins. The Chaucerian Jew is deeply rooted in their physical body and the material world. They serve as a direct challenge to the Christian concepts of love, compassion and divinity. They are frequently represented as less than human, virtually demonic. On a smaller scale, Chaucer reproduces the common medieval idea that Jewish people are responsible for Christ's death. In turn, this strips his Jewish characters of any individual identity and becomes just a repetition of medieval tropes. Ecclesia naturally triumphs over them as the miracle is performed, and the boy continues to sing. However, this allegory is flawed as the Prioress is far too imperfect to be regarded as Ecclesia. From the General Prologue, she is partially undermined by her distinctively feminine description, which would be more appropriate for a court lady. She expresses her typically feminine sensitivity by weeping and showing pity towards her dogs and mice caught in traps. Regarding her physical appearance, the accent is placed on her femininity rather than her spirituality. Her coral brooch is symbolic in that regard, as it is an expression of her desire to make herself more fashionable and attractive – something which does not conform to the ideal of Christian modesty. What is more, the brooch has the letter "A" on it, which, according to the text, stands for the Latin phrase "Amor vincit omnia." [Love conquers all.]. This motto is much more typical of a courtly lady than a nun. Even her name – Eglantyne – sounds more appropriate for a lady in a romance story. This has prompted some critics to describe the Prioress' prologue and tale as satirical and, therefore, one which describes the "anti-Semitic" tendencies of society but is not "anti-Semitic" itself. Critics, such as Ruth Ames, have claimed that Chaucer intentionally crafted the Prioress's narrative to criticise religious authority. She focuses on the idea that Chaucer was aware of the power of language and the complexities of human motivation and, as an individual, critical enough to question the validity of those tales of miracles (47-48). In support of those statements would be the work of Nicholas of Lyra, a prominent Biblical scholar and Franciscan of the 14th century who expressed respect for Jewish interpretations of scripture. A major philosopher of the 14th century, William of Ockham opposed the idea of conversion, and Pope Clement VI condemned violence against Jews during the Black Death, stating they were not to blame for the plague (see Zentner 2010: 43). However, those are more isolated cases of progressive thought rather than a widespread sentiment. Therefore,

to claim that Chaucer's tale is satirical would be unrealistic. For a satirical text to work its audience should be able to understand its implications. Since Jewish people had been expulsed in 1290, most of Chaucer's audience probably had never had contact with Jewish people and their only idea of who those people were came from religion and tales such as that of the Prioress, so they would have no reason to question the tale.

The punishment stanzas and the eventual execution of the Jews partially undermine the previously established Christian identity as merciful and spiritually superior. Traditionally, tales similar to that of the Prioress would end with the conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity. The primary purpose of such conversion works was not to persuade a Jewish audience to convert but rather to remind Christians of the power of their grace and thus renew their faith. However, had Chaucer given such an ending to the Prioress' tale that would have taken away the clear-cut boundaries between the oppositions presented in it – good and evil, martyrs and demons, Christians and Jews. On the other hand, had the ending been a conversion, the tale would have been more appropriate for a Christian nun, whose aim should be uplifting Christianity, and would have taken away at least some of the anti-Semitic elements. However, avoiding anti-Semitism in Chaucer's historical context was most likely something he was not concerned with. The punishment stanzas themselves are often regarded as extreme but are not the cruellest when compared to other works of the historical period. This is not to say that they completely lack cruelty, but they can also be considered as an example of 14th-century justice rather than the product of Chaucer's own hostility towards Jewish people. If he is to be attributed guilt when it comes to reinforcing anti-Semitic tendencies, it should be for the act of repeating the story and giving it an artistic form. Any efforts to acquit him of all guilt would be based on a contemporary perspective, which naturally perceives anti-Semitism as a terrible prejudice. However, for Chaucer of the Late Middle Ages, the anti-Semitic elements of his Prioress were nothing more but a common tool to bring forward the Christian religious identity and in this particular case, the miracle performed by the Virgin Mary. For her generosity to her followers to be depicted, it must be set against a contrasting character, which, in this case, is the collective image of the Jewish community. Had they not been demonised, the clergeon would not have been murdered and the tale of Mary's miracle would not exist. Some critics argue that Chaucer "cannot be allowed carte blanche to publicize any point of view purely and simply on the grounds that there are people who say such things" (Alexander 1992: 117). Such arguments are often extended to that "diatribes against the Jews (or against anybody) make for bad art" (Archer 1985: 46). This particular view on "The Prioress' Prologue and Tale" is one that is based on the idea of continuity, i.e. the idea that contemporary anti-Semitism, and even events such as the Holocaust, can be directly linked to the treatment of Jewish people in fourteenth-century England. Such a perspective is more so emotional and ethical rather than historical. David Nirenberg comments on this by saying that one must

be "more critical than we have previously been about attempts to link medieval and modern mentalities, medieval ritual murder accusations and modern genocide" (1996: 7). What's more, what Chaucer did with the Prioress' tale was to offer a small glimpse into the otherwise complex relationship between Christians and Jews in the Middle Ages by presenting one common for the era trope.

Jewishness in "The Prioress' Tale" is not a matter of physical description and stereotypical representation but a complex construction of a religious conflict. Whether or not Chaucer meant to criticize religious authority in a satirical tone or intended for the tale to be taken at face value as a tale of the triumph of Christianity over Judaism is a matter of analytical perceptions. However, what is abundantly clear is the fact that Chaucer's Jewish characters are more of a symbol, standing for everything that is perceived as threatening to the Christian world, rather than human beings. This symbolic dehumanization can be linked both to the physical absence of Jewish people and to their construct of the Other as subservient to the dominant culture.

It's important to mention that Chaucer's Jewish characters and concern with Judaism and religion in general are not confined to *The Prioress's Tale.* While *The Man of Law's Tale,* mentioned earlier in relation to the allegorical reading and Synagoga and Ecclesia, offers similar themes of faith and cultural conflict, *The Pardoner's Tale* redirects the conflict inwards, towards Christianity and the destructive power of greed. The tale still offers some distinctively anti-Semitic tropes such as the mysterious Old Man that alludes to the myth of the Wandering Jew. The Pardoner's relics, especially the shoulder bone of "an hooly Jewes sheep" (VI 351) is also a key element. This is a sham relic that supposedly dates from before Christ. It is encased in brass, which is meant to give it an air of holiness and is offered as a cure for virtually anything. The Pardoner's suggestion that the bone be dipped in a well is an allusion to the fact that the Jews were believed to have caused the pestilence through well-poisoning. It is a kind of dark humour that suits the tale but nonetheless refers to negative stereotypes. The spiritual blindness attributed to Jewish characters is also shown in the Pardoner's Tale as the rioters focused on material rewards fail to discern spiritual truth. As Lisa Lampert-Weissig states,

> The Wandering Jew saw Christ with his own eyes and heard him with his own ears but could only respond with arrogance and, in some versions, even with violence: he is sometimes depicted as not only insulting but striking Christ. The rioters, in refusing to heed the Old Man's warning, follow in the footsteps of the Wandering Jew. Had the young men chosen to inquire how the Old Man came to exist in such a unique state, they might have listened and properly understood and been saved both physically and spiritually. (2007, 344)

The Jewish character in this tale is therefore, again, symbolic. Instead of an actual Jewish person, Chaucer employs the Wandering Jew as a tool to showcase Chris-

tian moral failings and spiritual emptiness. The Pardoner is the closest to a Jewish character that this tale offers. He is depicted as a depraved figure, described in the General Prologue as "Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare" (684), which Lampert-Weissig attributes to evidence of his indulgence in sins of the flesh, embodying bodily corruption, which is also commonly associated with Jews. The Host also has a central role in the tale as, at the end, it alludes to the Jewish role in Christianity and the story of the finding of the True Cross. In the narrative, Saint Helena seeks the help of Jewish wise men to locate the cross, and one of them, Judas, is forced to reveal its whereabouts. Judas then converts and becomes Judas Cyriacus. This story underlines the importance of Jewish people for Christianity and their dual identity as both desecrators of the faith and a group that aids in reaffirming it.

The main focus of the tale, however, remains greed and the preoccupation with the material aspect of relics, whether real or fake. In the process of denouncing those traits in Christians, Chaucer draws upon deeply ingrained anti-Jewish tropes and ideas. Once again, the Jewish character exists in the periphery as an ephemeral vision that is simultaneously present and absent, which exemplifies a broader pattern in Chaucer's works. This is a reflection of the process of construction of Englishness and has great cultural significance, as the figure of the Jew was used "to think with" (Lampert-Weissig 2007: 338) and as a helpful tool for English society to conceptualise itself in contrast to Jewishness. The Chaucerian Jew is, therefore, a reflection of the time and setting rather than a reflection of Chaucer's personal sentiments towards Jewish people, as his characters are not actually structured as people but as symbols. These figures act as prototypes, shaping the way in which later authors engage with Jewishness. They represent foundational archetypes, tropes, and themes that integrate easily into the English literary imagination of the period as they respond to social tensions and offer a relatively easy outlet for them.

In the late fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote within a cultural and literary landscape that was deeply affected by the simultaneous absence and presence of Jewish people in England. As mentioned, the expulsion did not erase them from the English consciousness but instead made them an integral part of theological, visual and literary works. No longer a physical community, the Jew was transformed into a multifaceted symbol utilised in the process of defining Christian identity, the concepts of sin and morality, and the concept of Englishness itself. This paradoxical presence is evident in Chaucer's work, where references to Jewishness offer a complex interplay of prejudice, as well as a reflection of religious and social dynamics. His characters, although situated within a specific historical context, serve as foundational archetypes for many subsequent literary representations. The themes introduced by Chaucer would continue to resonate in English literature. His prominent position has led scholars to apply a diverse range of critical approaches when dealing with his works – from Marxist theory to gender studies to queer theory and postcolonialism, to name a few. However, what all theories have in common is that they mostly fit into two categories – ones that bring forward the textual un-

conscious (de-centre the author) and ones that place focus on the author. As David Matthews observes, recent critique on Chaucer has moved away from ideologies and from the idea that Chaucer is a vehicle for those ideas to manifest through his texts and has moved on to consider Chaucer as an individual who was fully aware and deliberate (Matthews 2008, 117). This development is not to be understood as a rejection of historical context but rather as a call for a more nuanced understanding of the author within that context.

One of the methods of literary analysis that offers a balanced approach towards such centering and de-centering of the author is The New Historicist approach, which observes literary works for their significance in a particular socio-historical context. Although the term defines is as "new", this is less of a temporal mark than it is a way to distinguish it from the preexisting form of historical literary analysis. New Historicism is based on poststructuralist theory and includes elements of the thinking of feminist, cultural and Marxist critics. Nowadays, the influence of critics who appropriate a queer angle of New Historicism has also grown, especially in Chaucerian readings, so much so that Carolyn Dinshaw has come up with the phrase "touch of the queer" (1999: 34) in regard to this phenomenon.

Unlike "old" historicism, New Historicism is less focused on historical events and less likely to stick to the teleological model of history, i.e. to perceive it as linear and progressing towards the future. This idea was predominantly informed by the philosophies of Nietzsche and Foucault, who shared the same belief that historical events are not part of a greater process. Having mentioned the influence of Nietzsche and Foucault, it is important to add Clifford Geerdz to this list, mainly due to the importance of the term "thick description" for New Historicism. Initially related to anthropology, new historicists use "thick description" in literary analysis in order to "blur distinctions, not only between history and the other social sciences but also between background and foreground, historical and literary materials, political and poetical events" (Murfin 2008: 118). "Thick description" allows for large-scale observation of the cultural and historical context, however, as Greenblatt states in *Renaissance*, for this historicist approach to be effective, one must remain "conscious of its status as interpretation" (1980: 4). Therefore, what one considers the past is, in fact, a reconstruction of it. Consequently, one cannot claim that there is a singular historical truth that emerges from literary analysis; rather, each literary work presents a mode of interpretation of its historical plane, which is also filtered through the critic's timeline. The new historicist perspective is one that is aware of the constantly evolving categories of gender, race, sexuality, etc., and for that reason, is able to filter out any contemporary bias towards the past.

When it comes to studying Jewish representations in the context of the late Middle Ages, New Historicism is particularly useful as it illuminates the historical and cultural reasons behind the aspects that are problematic from a contemporary standpoint. In fact, many historians consider the term "anti-Semitism" to be anachronistic when discussing the anti-Jewish rhetoric before the nineteenth century. That

is due to the fact that contemporary anti-Semitism stems from a completely different aspect, namely that of race and/or ethnicity, a category that suggests an inherent and unchangeable difference between groups of people. The term was coined in the late 19th century by Wilhelm Marr in Germany and is rooted in pseudo-scientific theories about biological and genetic differences. (See *Wilhelm Marr: The Patriarch of Anti-Semitism* by Mosche Zimmermann)

By contrast, the anti-Semitic tendencies observed in the Middle Ages and Early Modernity were tied to religion and would be more proper to be referred to as anti-Judaism, as this highlights the theological rather than the racial aspect. This distinction is crucial as it highlights the shift in motivation for prejudice against Jewish people. Anti-Judaism is based on the perception of the Jewish population rejecting Christian truth. Those theological differences evolved into portrayals of a malevolent and dangerous Jew who was a threat to all Christians. Later on, those negative portrayals found their intellectual justification and became deeply embedded in European culture. While there is a clear historical connection between anti-Judaism and modern anti-Semitism, the initial tropes and stereotypes have been repurposed (See *From Anti-Judaism to Anti-Semitism: Ancient and Medieval Christian Constructions of Jewish History* by Robert Chazan).

It is important to mention that the New Historicist approach is not without its limitations and there are certain aspects that should be considered when utilizing it for interpretation of literary representations of Jewish characters, both in Chaucer and in general. The problem of anachronism is particularly central when dealing with a sensitive topic such as Jewish representation. It requires an analysis devoid of modern ethical concerns or contemporary values as it can obscure the focus of the study, i.e. the Jew of Early Modern England or their predecessors in the face of the Chaucerian Jew. Another issue stems from the juxtaposition of cultural context and the author's intent. New Historicism partially de-centres the author, as it is more productive to observe society as a whole rather than focus on the author's singular persona. This naturally resolves the conflict of whether or not any of the authors was anti-Semitic as the term itself and all attached to it is anachronistic. That is not to say that New Historicism claims those authors were not anti-Semitic by contemporary standards. It is true, however, that it is irrelevant to the literary analysis. The author, on the other hand, is not excluded from society and was part of what shaped the culture of their time. Therefore, it would be incorrect to exclude them from analysis completely. Rather, the analysis should aim to consider the author's intent, considering their historical and social position as part of the cultural matrix.

Finally, the critic's own position is also worth considering. Applying the New Historicist approach entails putting great emphasis on the historical context which goes hand in hand with the self-awareness of the critic. It is a method of analysis that allows for self-reflection in the process of engaging with the past. Avoiding bias can be a difficult task, especially when faced with a narrative that has significant relevance in the contemporary context. A critic's perception of a text is, after all,

a reflection of their own social and cultural reality. In New Historicism, that is not a weak point. On the contrary, the critic's attempts to avoid bias can lead to a better understanding of its source, which in turn amplifies the relevance of the source material. A sensitive topic such as anti-Judaism (or anti-Semitism) more often than not involve an ideology that can function in a way that is concealed to us but at the same time deeply-ingrained into our subconscious. This observation is made by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* where she reflects on the normative white American identity, and is later referenced by Lisa Lampert-Weissig in her reading of Chaucer's Pardener's prologue and tale. The text that she references is the following:

> It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl – the glide and flick of the golden scales, the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills; the castles at the bottom, surrounded by pebbles and tiny, intricate fronds of green; the barely disturbed water, the flecks of waste and food, the tranquil bubbles travelling to the surface – and suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world. (Morrison 1992, 17)

Morrison's analogy showcases that an ideology can entrap us in a way that can completely skew our vision of the surrounding world, and yet we may not notice. That is, until something pushes us out of this fishbowl. That is the role of New Historicism – to make the fishbowl of our own historical timeline, visible. It challenges us to reflect on our own positions and values, to engage with the past in a critical manner, which is necessary not only for an accurate representation of the past but also for a more just present.

The English literary landscape was profoundly shaped by the presence and absence of Jewish people. Though expelled, they remained a powerful symbol. In *The Canterbury Tales,* figures like the Prioress and the Pardoner and their tales have become the foundational archetypes for Jewish representation in later English literature. Essential for understanding these representations is the New Historicist approach, which moves beyond the idea of Chaucer as a vehicle for his era's ideologies and examines his work within its specific socio-historical context. This approach acknowledges that the past is a reconstruction and, therefore, no single historical truth can emerge from the text. This method encourages a nuanced reading and awareness of the evolving categories of race, gender and sexuality. This naturally leads to the realisation that what we now label as "anti-Semitism" was, in the Middle Ages, rooted in religious differences rather than racial or ethnic differences and would be more accurately referred to as "anti-Judaism". The analysis of the Prioress's tale shows that the Jewish characters are not realistic portrayals of real people but rather traditional figures that were seen as the embodiment of evil and the ultimate opposition of Christianity. Tales such as hers served the specific purpose of reinforcing Christianity and cannot be attributed to any personal vendetta that Chaucer might have had

against Jewish people. The Pardoner's Tale, on the other hand, uses the Jew to point out Christian moral failings. The Jewish characters in this tale exhibit the duality of being both desecrators and aids of the Christian faith. In both tales, Jewishness is not an identity but a tool for exploring religious and moral themes.

As a counterpoint to Christian values, Chaucer's Jews are a reflection of the English identity taking shape through the contrast with the "Other". His characters are prototypes that exist in every other Jewish representation that followed in the English literary tradition. The community of imagined Jews continues to exist in a fishbowl of perpetuated tropes and prejudices as a complex interplay of social and cultural factors and ideologies that shape the era they belong to.

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