Turning Points and Transformations

Turning Points and Transformations: Essays on Language, Literature and Culture

Edited by

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We would like to recognize the hard work of our Associate Editors: Amanda Anderson, Jennifer Page, and Jennifer Roy. Their wholehearted and skillful editorial work helped to shape this collection for publication. We are especially grateful to Jennifer Roy who also worked hard as Editorial Assistant on this project, and whose work is always transformative.

INTRODUCTION

CHRISTINE DEVINE

From the Irish Cailleach and other shape-shifters of folk legends to modern movie "transformers;" from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to the moment when Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into an insect in Kafka's novella; from conversion narratives to slave narratives, turning points and transformations have always been central to literary works and to cultural developments. In fact, with Freytag's pyramid in mind, one could claim that all literary works focus on the trope of a transformation born of a turning point, because such moments comprise the very essence and vitality of human life and culture. But why are turning points necessarily transformational and in what way? And what brings about those turning points in language, literature, culture and human lives? These are essentially the questions the essays in this volume seek to answer.

The climax or crisis of many narrative plots could be described as a turning point, a moment or event that leads to a discovery or a reversal, and finally to a resolution or denouement. Gustav Freytag, in *Technique of the Drama* (1863), discerned this pattern in five-act plays that followed what he saw in terms of a pyramid or triangle consisting of rising action, climax, and falling action. Some version of this plot outline has been applied by critics to prose fiction as well. Of course, much debate could be and has been engaged in by critics attempting to fit plots into this pyramid, making it clear that while it seems to describe the movement of narrative plots in general, once we look at a specific novel, turning points, discoveries and reversals can be found throughout, and any attempt to squeeze the plot into the pyramid leads paradoxically to a flattening of the work instead. *Great Expectations* (1861), for instance, is a *Bildungsroman*, a genre very suited to a discussion of metamorphosis, since this term in the biological sense applies to the changing of an organism from the immature form into the mature adult form—caterpillar to butterfly, for example—and this is, of course, what the protagonist is destined to do in such a novel. Pip certainly transforms himself from the self-naming orphan whom his sister is bringing up "by hand," into the self-aware gentleman who is

sadder but wiser by the end of the novel. But in describing his journey from childhood to adulthood, the older Pip points out many moments that could be seen as crises, moments when discoveries are made and Pip's view of the world is changed, developing his character and helping him to mature. His view of the world is changed literally and figuratively when the convict turns him upside down in the graveyard early on in the novel, and forces him to steal, turning Pip into a guilt-ridden boy. He recognizes his own low-class status through Estella's comments on his hands and boots; "what coarse hands he has! And what thick boots!" says Estella.[1] This changes Pip; he writes, "I took the opportunity of being alone … to look at my coarse hands and my common boots. … They had never troubled me before, but they troubled me now, as vulgar appendages."[2] It is a turning point for Pip; he is transformed into an overly ambitious young man who wants to be a "gentleman." He discovers and is humbled by the fact that the benefactor who has transformed him into a gentleman is in fact Magwitch the convict, while his developing appreciation for the dying Magwitch transforms Pip into a caring and less self absorbed man, and his discovery of the fact that Biddy is married to Joe Gargery, helps him to recognize and appreciate Joe's true value. All of these moments are turning points that transform Pip—and many more can be found, demonstrating a series of pyramid-like sequences in the plot.

So why, then, bring up Freytag at all? What the pyramid shows is that the art of storytelling depends on change, transformation. And while this is not news to most readers, what might not be so clear is how pervasive this idea of transformation has been in literature and culture, reflecting the lived experience of everyday human life. But, curiously, the very notion that storytelling depends on change is, to an extent, contradicted in the sense that stories having been fitting Freytag's pyramid for centuries—suggesting a dependence on sameness, predictability and stability.

Literature from Ovid to Kafka has pondered the issue of the mutability of the universe, and the ephemeral nature of all things human. When Ovid wrote *Metamorphoses* in the last decade BCE, as his title suggests, he focused on constant flux, the idea that identities are not stable and appearances are deceiving because of the inevitability of change. When Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis* in 1915, he, too, suggested a similar idea: through the bizarre circumstance of Gregor turning into an insect overnight—the most obvious metamorphosis in the novella—the whole Samsa family is changed. Yet, oddly, much of the alienation and isolation Gregor feels seems to have been present before he "woke up" to the fact that he was a beetle. In other words, he undergoes a metamorphosis that

changes his family, but seems to leave him in many ways unchanged, other than physically.

Kafka's novella is a manifestation of the idea behind the literature of the absurd in that it rebels against the very notion of patterns in storytelling, or predictability, attempting to avoid the idea that order and meaning can be created out of the random, unfeeling, and meaningless universe. Similarly, while nineteenth-century novels seem to suggest that conflicts and crises can be resolved and life can have shape and meaning, recent critical theorists have suggested that the teleological bent and reader-satisfying endings evidenced in those works are simply camouflage to conceal from us for a moment the fact that the text—like life—is conflicted and contradictory. But art, especially narrative, can make us believe that the mutable, inexplicable universe is a meaningful, ordered, permanent whole, even while absurdists and deconstructionists want us to see through that illusion. For when Benjamin Franklin said that, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes," he should have added change. For one thing we can depend upon in life, literature and culture is change.

The essays in this volume examine turning points and transformations—personal, literary and cultural—brought about through the randomness of the universe as well as through human interference, and discuss ways in which humans in general and writers in particular, through their art, experience and cope with the ineluctable results. The essays are divided into four parts; each section highlights a specific aspect of the overall theme. The first part, "Transforming Genres," consists of two essays on literary transformation: one which focuses on Chaucer's *Prioress Tale*, and the other on Romantic poet Charlotte Smith's *The Emigrants* and *Beachy Head*. While writing centuries apart, both Chaucer and Smith were clearly cognizant of ways in which genre sets limits and encloses texts. Contributors Matthew J. Snyder and Melissa Richard argue that these English poets mark a turning point by breaking out of the genres in which they are writing, transforming those genres through their work.

The second part, "Transformations of Identity and the Question of Humanity," consists of four essays that shed light on very different texts, while showing how these texts examine transformations of identity, and in the process raise the question of what it means to be human. In his groundbreaking work on prison inmate writing, Christopher Hazlett discusses how American prisoners use writing to transform their condition as what he calls the "civic dead," (a condition that has caused their public identity to be dissolved) into a new condition. Analyzing a recent collection of writing by Death Row inmates, amongst other texts, this

essay searches for the meaning of humanity in the conflict between public and counter-public identities.

Turning to the literary world, Jennifer Page examines a character's search for human identity by looking at John Gardener's *Grendel*, and its eponymous character's quest for human evolution through language, while Matthew Slykhuis discusses an historical turning point for English society as reflected in poems by Coleridge and Byron, claiming that "ultimately, the very notion of humanity is at stake" when these two British poets, with very different approaches, express apocalyptic expectations in England in the decades between 1796 and 1816. He writes, "For many in England during this period, events like the French Revolution seemed to unveil a darker side of humanity" (60). Slykhuis concludes that, "In many ways the 1790s served as a turning point in English eschatological thought leading to a transformation in the way a large segment of that society viewed its identity and its place within the cosmos" (60). He claims that the two poems he examines "are of particular interest … for the way in which they reflect a change in English anthropology and theology that undermined foundational English assumptions about what it means to be human" (61).

John Ellis-Etchison's essay investigates the importance of the changes that such archetypal figures as Baba Yaga undergo while retaining their cultural power—in other words, he examines the transformation of a cultural symbol. Looking at this folk figure in the context of many tales written about her, he concludes that she changes over the course of this corpus. He writes that she is "no longer a one-dimensional sinister, child-eating ogress who drapes human bones around her hut" (89). Through this more extensive reading she becomes an elemental figure linked with the cycle of life—the ultimate trope of mutability.

Part III: "Racism in Readings Transformed by Historical Context," examines the importance of historicizing in order to appreciate the political significance of texts—especially with regard to racism. Through three very different American writers, Armand Lanusse, Toni Cade Bambara, and Eudora Welty, our three contributors to this section reveal otherwise unseen political dimensions in the texts they analyze. Nancy Dixon's perceptive essay shows us that a knowledge of the Censorship Law of 1830 and the system of *plaçage* as practiced in New Orleans in the nineteenth century helps to transform Armand Lanusse's "A Marriage of Conscience" into a politically subversive text. As a free man of color who published the first collection of poetry by African Americans in the United States in 1845, Lanusse was bound by law not to mention the race of the characters in his story. Placing this story within its historical context transforms this text into an important work of fiction that documents the

system of *plaçage*, and is a valuable example of writing produced by free people of color under the constraints of racial censorship in mid-nineteenth-century Louisiana.

Ashley David's premise is that Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters* demands such painful insight into injustice that critics and the reading public have denied its significance. She argues that examining Bambara's text in the context of the civil rights era in which it was written, as well as that of today's political climate will reveal that *The Salt Eaters* is "not a clever exercise in postmodern whimsy or experiment. Rather, Bambara's work is fundamentally political in that it prescribes a radical transformation if we are to rescue the planet."

Andrew Banecker's essay, "'No Cause was Cited for the Fracas': the Ambivalent Racism in Eudora Welty's 'Where is the Voice Coming From?' and 'The Demonstrators,'" examines these stories in light of recent critics' questioning of Welty's attitudes towards racism. But the focus of the essay is not an attempt to prove whether or not Welty's writing was political. Rather, he writes, "I will focus on her two most uncharacteristic works with respect to her anti-overtly-political bent … [these are] the two short stories Welty situates in and comments on the Civil Rights era racial tensions she, after years of prodding from critics, reviewers, et al., could no longer ignore in her fiction" (126). He notes, however, that these stories "are not a platform to urge for a specific course of action, but rather, they are a representation of racial and economic issues as murky and confused as the very time and place in which they were penned" (126).

Part IV: "Personal Turning Points," begins with an insightful essay that analyzes the significance of the personal turning points of Ernest J. Gaines's Miss Jane Pittman in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman*. In addition, this section also includes an autobiographical essay by Dale Bauer, an accomplished academic, whose moving essay, "Brain Surgery and Teaching English," analyzes the turning point she faced as an English professor and prolific writer when she underwent brain surgery for an aneurism and suffered a stroke, leaving her without her professional tools—language and voice—and therefore with a sense of having lost herself. Her account of her experience in regaining her ability to teach and earn her livelihood based on the nuances of using language, makes for gripping reading, and reveals the importance of turning points and transformations to the personal, the professional and the greater cultural spheres.

The final section of this collection, the Coda, contains a piece of creative non-fiction by award-winning novelist Rikki Ducornet. The essay

she contributes to this volume is a head-spinning account of transformation that seems both to embody and express the notion of metamorphosis.

This collection originates from the ninth Annual Louisiana Conference on Literature, Language and Culture that was held March 2010 in Lafayette, Louisiana and represents a diversity of disciplinary and theoretical approaches to the theme of "Turning Points and Transformations," by the most promising papers presented at that event by scholars from all over the United States as well as from Canada and Europe, along with essays by our two distinguished keynote speakers (respected feminist scholar Dale Bauer, and acclaimed author Rikki Ducornet). It is a collection aimed at scholars (faculty and graduate researchers) interested in crossing historical, regional and disciplinary boundaries in pursuit of the study of this central theme. While the focus of the collection is concentrated on transformations, the wide range of primary texts and topics and the variety of approaches to the theme will appeal to many. This volume also could work well as a themed course text for a special topics course interrogating this fascinating issue, and consequently we have included an Appendix that offers possible class activities for these readings, including discussion questions and writing prompts. The topics and themes generated from the readings will help instructors plan their courses, and the bibliography offers possible primary texts that can be read in conjunction with this volume.

Notes

[1] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861). (Peterborough, Ont: Broadview, 1998), 95.
[2] Ibid., 97.

PART I:

TRANSFORMING GENRES

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL TRAUMA, THE CRITIC, AND THE WORK OF MOURNING IN CHAUCER'S *PRIORESS'S TALE*

MATTHEW J. SNYDER

Of all Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, arguably none is more controversial than that of Madame Eglantine, the Prioress, one of his most artfully drawn pilgrim-narrators. To this day, the *Prioress's Prologue and Tale* together stand as an evocation of the historical traumas of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, and as the locus of one of the most intense, and intensely debated, collective anxieties in Chaucer studies.[1] This anxiety, as R. Howard Bloch has noted, is rooted in questions of agency and voice, both that of the poet and that of the critic: "Who speaks? Who speaks in Chaucer's texts? … And, who decides what one can and cannot say about Chaucer?"[2] In the particular case of the Prioress and her tale these questions give shape to the paramount cruces of its critical history. It is a Marian miracle story in which the Jews of a ghetto in an unnamed Asian city fall under the influence of Satan, murder a devout young Christian boy who passes through their quarter singing a hymn to the Virgin Mary, cast his corpse into a latrine, and are then found out, tortured, and put to death when the Virgin causes the dead child to continue singing her praises from his filthy grave. The difficulty that arises is whether we should trace the decidedly anti-Judaic and anti-Semitic thrust of the *Prioress's Tale* to Chaucer's narrator, the Prioress, or to the tale's author, Chaucer himself. Is the *Prioress's Tale* a masterful pricking of a culturally prevalent anti-Semitism that persisted even in the general absence of Jews from England after the Jewish expulsion of 1290—or is it a straightforward propagation of prejudice? To put it simply, was Chaucer an artful satirist or a hateful bigot?

The question presents a false dichotomy, for Chaucer clearly demonstrates his satirical brilliance in a number of the *Canterbury Tales*, including those of the Reeve, Friar, Summoner, and Merchant, and in many of his

characterizations, especially the Monk, the Pardoner, and the Prioress herself. What remains, rather than an establishment of Chaucer as satirist or Chaucer as bigot—as though he could be only one and not the other—is to indict Chaucer on charges of anti-Semitism or defend him from them in the specific instance of the *Prioress's Prologue and Tale*. As Bloch implies, however, to attempt either one of these approaches can be professionally perilous. To do so is to enter a sharply contested critical quarter—one prominent Chaucerian points out that many of the tale's critics "all but hate each other (and with some, get rid of the 'all but')."[3]

Most critical treatments of the *Prioress's Tale*, as Lawrence Besserman has summarized, fall into one of two opposing camps: "hard" and "soft" readings. The "hard" readings reject the idea that the tale constitutes a satire of late-medieval Christian antipathy toward Jews on the grounds that Chaucer, as a Christian himself, would naturally have shared such an antagonism. The "soft" readings attempt to establish Chaucer's satirical view of the "bloody-minded antisemitism" of the tale, often by showing its narrator, the Prioress herself, to be a type of ecclesiastical caricature typically encountered in Chaucer.[4] (These are not the only ways in which critics read the *Prioress's Tale*, as Besserman himself points out.[5]) While at least one critic has questioned the validity and value of readings that interrogate the ethics of the tale's handling of Jews to the detriment of its literary attributes,[6] we are left with a majority of *Prioress's Tale* criticism that can be categorized easily under Besserman's rubric of hard and soft.

I cannot claim that this essay will escape the hard/soft rubric, and I recognize Chaucer's powerful talent and affinity for the satirical treatment of certain entrenched cultural institutions of his day, its less enlightened citizens' penchant for maligning and mistreating Jews among them. His work is deeply invested with allegory and symbolism. When we add to this what we know of his life experience, we rightly should conceive of Chaucer as an educated, cultured, urbane, and extremely well-traveled man of his age.[7] However, it seems to me that any critical work on the *Prioress's Tale* that seeks merely to establish Chaucer's sympathy or antipathy for Jews perhaps misses an opportunity to explore an intriguing aspect of the tale and the historical trauma that at least partially informs it. That aspect is the role and work of mourning inherent in the tale and generated by it: Who mourns within it? For whom does it mourn? For whom do we, its readers, mourn? Finally, and perhaps most problematically: What is the net effect of all this mourning?

Before I move from the problem of the ethical dilemmas of the Chaucerian, the medievalist generally, and the literary critic writ large to the argument that follows, I should like to further lay its boundaries by

defining and delineating another key term that appears in this chapter's title. For Dominick LaCapra, the term "historical trauma" refers to an historical "limit event"[8]—his example *par excellence* is the Holocaust—that blots indelibly a moment in the timeline of human history. The term also encompasses the cultural and psychic reverberations of such an event, which ripple forward in time to alter fundamentally and irreparably the myriad ways in which humans both perceive and attempt to come to terms with that history.[9] It is the macroscopic equivalent of the "severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life" and especially the violently kinetic shocks (and aftershocks) experienced by the returning veterans of the First World War that Freud noted as the cause of certain "traumatic neuroses."[10] The writing—and reading—of a traumatic history should be difficult, a working-through (as one "works through" one's personal neuroses with one's analyst[11]), and LaCapra insists on "the need for empathic unsettlement, and the discursive inscription of that unsettlement, in the response to traumatic events or conditions."[12] While the ways in which its survivors and historians remember, repeat, and work through the trauma of the Holocaust through interviews and the production of historical texts is at the center of LaCapra's focus, he notes that "narratives in fiction may also invoke truth claims on a structural or general level by providing insight into [historically traumatic] phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust, by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible 'feel' for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods."[13]

The argument to follow, then, addresses the historically traumatic phenomenon of the legend of Jewish ritual murder widespread throughout Europe beginning in the twelfth century.[14] It then moves to a discussion of fictional accounts rooted in that phenomenon, such as Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* and its Latin analogues of Jewish-to-Christian conversion. Finally, it considers medieval studies' own troubled history of critical responses to both the phenomenon of the Jewish ritual murder legend and its representations in the period fiction. The *Prioress's Tale* is a considerably adapted instance of the Marian miracle tale—Chaucer substantially changes the traditional ending, substituting a pogrom in place of the Jewish-to-Christian conversion that is the standard for the genre. The tale refers specifically to the death, in 1255, of Hugh of Lincoln and metonymically to the tragic legal proceedings that followed Hugh's death. Given the evident adaptation and incorporation within it of reference to a specific historical occurrence, we can approach the tale as a meditation on martyrdom: not only of Christian but, critically, of Jew as well. This

approach, in turn, opens a dialogue that has the potential (although by no means the certainty) to lessen, if not close, the rift between critics committed to hard and soft readings of the tale. Additionally, Chaucer's reconfiguration of its ending marks a turning point in the history of the Marian miracle tale. By constructing the *Prioress's Tale* as an optic through which to read the historical trauma of Jewish as well as Christian martyrdom and not simply as a pat literary account of happy conversions of Jews to Christianity in the wake of the miracle, he breaks the constraints of the tale's textual tradition and thereby effects a transformation of its entire genre.

In the appeal to the Virgin Madame Eglantine offers in her *Prologue*, she exclaims, "To telle a storie I wol do my labour,"[15] establishing early on that the tale she will tell is no fabliau, no ribald jest or casual anecdote; it is a serious tale, a tale of pathos the telling of which will be work, rather than the play Harry Bailey intends his time-passing road game to be. Clearly, for the Prioress herself, the "labour" of the story is the work of mourning, and its inherent pathos is so great that in her *Prologue* she asks the aid of the Virgin in its telling, as she does in lines 473 ("Help me telle it in thy reverence!") and 487 ("Gydeth my song that I shal of yow seye"). By the tale's end, the work of mourning has been shared out, in some small respect, among the rest of her company; *The Prologue of Sir Thopas's*, which immediately follows the *Prioress's Tale* in Fragment VII, Group B^2, begins with the lines, "Whan seyd was al this miracle, every man / As sobre was that wonder was to se."[16] The sobriety of the "emotional tableau"[17] formed by the members of the company is all the more striking when one realizes that no other moment of absolute unity occurs among the fractious pilgrims of the *Canterbury Tales*, whose more characteristic reaction to stories Chaucer describes in the *Reeve's Prologue*: "Diverse folk diversely they seyde."[18]

An examination of the schoolboy's murder and brief resurrection in Chaucer's version of the tale will demonstrate how that ending deviates considerably from the standard conclusion of the *Alma Redemptoris* Marian miracle. The description of the clergeon's death and the events leading up to it are certainly horrific—although, curiously enough, not as horrific as in the tale's Latin analogues in the Marian miracle genre, which extend his torture and go into much more graphic detail.[19] He learns the *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, a hymn to the Virgin Mary, by rote and sings it constantly as he walks through the Jewish quarter to and from his school. One day, Satan—who, in the Prioress's conception, "hath in Jues herte his waspes nest"[20]—rises up within the collective body of the ghetto's Jews to

needle them regarding the clergeon's violation of their "'lawes reverence.'"[21] According to the Prioress,

> Fro thennes forth the Jues han conspired
> This innocent out of this world to chace.
> An homycide therto han they hyred,
> That in an aleye hadde a privee place;
> And as this child gan forby for to pace,
> This cursed Jew hym hente, and heelde hym faste,
> And kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste.
>
> I seye that in a wardrobe they hym threwe
> Where as thise Jewes purgen hire entraille.
> O cursed folk of Herodes al newe,
> What may youre yvel entente yow availle?
> Mordre wol out, certeyn, it wol nat faille,
> And namely ther th'onour of God shal sprede;
> The blood out crieth on youre cursed dede.[22]

As the mother sits and grieves for her lost child next to the very pit in which his body lies, its "throte ykorven," he quite incredibly sits upright and begins to sing the *Alma Redemptoris* once more.[23] The Christians in the area, who have heard that the child had gone missing, send for the provost; upon observing the miracle, he immediately orders that all Jews who know about the murder be placed under arrest.[24] The clergeon's body is then conveyed to the nearest abbey, and when the abbot asks the child what compelled him to sing, he gives an impassioned account of his love for the Virgin and her intercession on his behalf: she had placed a "greyn" upon his tongue, bidding that he sing his song until it should be removed, at which point she would come to fetch him to heaven.[25] The abbot removes the holy grain and the child dies.[26]

In A. G. Rigg's translation of the Latin MS Trinity College, Cambridge 0.9.38, compiled ca. 1450 from a number of analogues written much earlier, the story is the same as Chaucer's save for a few key details: the setting is Toledo, not a nameless city in Asia; and, crucially, the child does not die when the clergyman removes the grain from his tongue. Rather, he has the organs which the Jews have removed from his corpse for ritual purposes restored to him and wakes as though "from a deep sleep."[27] The congregation cries tears of exultant joy rather than grief, and even the guilty Jews of the tale enjoy a vastly different fate than their counterparts in Chaucer. Only the murderer is indicted, and the boy turns the other cheek (after, of course, identifying him for the legal authorities), expressing his pious desire that the man who had killed him not be

punished in any way, for he only had served to bring about the boy's meeting with his beloved Virgin. The boy is reunited with his overjoyed mother and exits the story. The murderer is so moved by the power of the Virgin that he asks to be baptized on the spot; he is absolved of the crime, converts to Christianity, and goes on to become a "most pious devotee" of the Virgin. Another Jew who has witnessed the miracle, this one very wealthy, also converts and goes on to found a church in honor of the Virgin.[28] The Latin analogues, therefore, exhibit happy endings all around.

Or do they? One should not overlook the intense focus of the *Prioress's Tale* on martyrdom, unlike the majority of its analogues which focus instead on miracle, or the idea that it is tied explicitly to the already-burgeoning history of ritual murder accusation and its accompanying Christian martyrdom in England by the Prioress's comparison of her tale's little clergeon with "yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also / With cursed Jewes, as it is notable."[29] Of the Prioress's linkage of the clergeon's murder with Hugh of Lincoln's death and her assertion that Hugh's death occurred "but a litel while ago,"[30] Gavin I. Langmuir writes:

> The ultimate source of the prioress' invocation was, of course, the events surrounding the death of Hugh of Lincoln in 1255, for which nineteen Jews were executed by King Henry III. Those events inspired two quite different literary and popular traditions. In the first place, the alleged ritual murder was described in three contemporary chronicles and an Anglo-Norman ballad, and Hugh's shrine at Lincoln and these writings preserved the memory of his fate for centuries. The event did not seem distant to Chaucer some 135 years later.[31]

The Hugh of Lincoln legend, as Langmuir shows, had dire sociocultural repercussions for England's Jews. It was the first time in English history that an allegation of Jewish ritual murder saw direct intercession by the monarch: Langmuir notes that "[w]hat distinguished the Lincoln affair from other accusations of ritual murder was that the king took personal cognizance and had one Jew executed immediately and eighteen others spectacularly executed later."[32] The cultural resonance of the event contributed to a rising Christian paranoia regarding the presence of Jews and was probably still fresh in the minds of the ruling authorities only 35 years later when the Jews were expelled from England in 1290.[33]

The story of the Hugh of Lincoln case is marked by a tragic confluence of people and events: a Christian child's accidental drowning; a large gathering of Jews from all over England who had congregated in Lincoln to attend a wedding between two important families; an influential advisor to Henry III, one John de Lexington, whose brother, Henry, was the

bishop of Lincoln's cathedral; Bishop Henry and his subordinates' desire to have a new saint for their cathedral; a monarch on progress through Lincoln; and finally—the key ingredient in any ritual murder fantasy—a generous seasoning of suspicion, innuendo, rumour, and outright fabrication.[34] John de Lexington, who personally obtained the initial confession of murder from a Jew, named Copin, through interrogation conducted "in diverse ways," managed to get Copin's confession to match up with the macabre details of ritual murder that the authorities already had concocted—including the accusation that the assembled Jews in Lincoln were present not for a wedding but specifically for the ceremonial starvation, torture, and dismemberment of a Christian child. The story gained traction despite the fact that Hugh's body had been in a well for a month and was in such an advanced state of decomposition that the Jews who had just arrived in town could not possibly have killed him. Langmuir underscores the obvious temporal gap and willful cognitive dissonance between Hugh's death and the arrival in Lincoln of the Jewish wedding contingent when he writes: "However embryonic medieval forensic medicine may have been, men should have been able to distinguish readily between a month old and a two-day old corpse, had they wanted to."[35] Copin, therefore, essentially "'confessed' to a Christian fantasy"; and, with his written confession in John de Lexington's hands, "the fame of Lincoln's new saint was assured."[36]

John de Lexington presented Copin's confession to Henry III, who promptly ordered that Copin be hanged. The other eighteen Jews held on suspicion of culpability in the ritual murder were hanged in London on 22 November 1255, but the reason for their being sentenced to die is perhaps the most intriguing detail of the case: Langmuir notes that they "refused to submit to the verdict of a jury to be composed only of Christians."[37] According to Langmuir, "[a] London chronicle which pays no attention to the events at Lincoln gives a brief but vivid description of the execution—which must have strikingly spread Hugh's fame,"[38] as well as intensifying, one assumes, Jewish notoriety and status as pariahs all across England.

The eighteen Jews hanged by order of Henry III may have chosen death as their only way of refusing to submit to a Christian jury. If this is the case, and the evidence seems to indicate that it was, then their choice may in fact have been a historical instance of *kiddush ha-Shem*, the term "denoting the highest positive and negative standards of Jewish ethics, the one indicating that everything within man's power should be done to glorify the name of God before the world, the other that everything should be avoided which may reflect discredit upon the religion of Israel and thereby desecrate the name of God."[39] While *kiddush ha-Shem* does not

ordinarily encompass death by choice, Kaufmann Kohler writes that "when the transgression is demanded as a public demonstration of apostasy or faithlessness the rule is that death should be preferred for the sake of the sanctification of God's name."[40] *Kiddush ha-Shem*, under these conditions, is known by another name: Jewish martyrdom.

We must now revisit the accu(r)sed Jews of Chaucer's tale and discover their fate in order to register its close correspondence with that of the Jews inexorably and unjustly drawn into the Hugh of Lincoln affair:

> With torment and with shameful deeth echon,
> This provost dooth thise Jewes for to sterve
> That of this mordre wiste, and that anon.
> He nolde no swich cursednesse observe.
> "Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve":
> Therfore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe,
> And after that he heng hem by the lawe.[41]

The Prioress's triumphant report that the provost passes a sentence of torture and death upon the Jews who know of the clergeon's murder bears the curious echo of the innocent Jews hanged by order of Henry III in the Hugh of Lincoln case, and all the more so because the Prioress herself references that case in her final stanza. The innocent Jews of the *Prioress's Tale* can be connected to the practice of *kiddush ha-Shem*, or Jewish martyrdom, in that our knowledge that they committed murder comes only by way of the tainted testimony of the Prioress herself, much the same way that the Jews in the Hugh of Lincoln case were damned by the confession that John de Lexington, who we now know to have been driven by a set of ulterior motives, coerced from Copin. We might consider what Richard Rex has to say on the matter:

> It is clear that Chaucer adopted a literary convention in order to heighten the sense of horror in the punishment inflicted upon the Jews. And the irony is inescapable: the Prioress condemns the "satanic" Jews to a vengeance as exaggerated as the evil being redressed—this in the name of the Virgin, whose aid she invokes in telling her tale and as an agent of justice. … But the supreme irony in this tale concerns the fact that equine quartering was a death traditionally associated with martyrdom, as frequently depicted in medieval art. One late fourteenth-century English contemplative work specifically refers to quartering as the death of martyrs. Thus, if Chaucer's "drawn" means "pulled apart," the Jews in this tale may be said to suffer a martyr's death.[42]

So we now can see that the endings of the earlier Latin analogues of the *Prioress's Tale*—the schoolboy returned to life, the joyful conversions of Jews enraptured by the power of the Virgin, their founding of churches, etc.—are not happy endings at all. Rather, they are debasements of the Jews of which they tell, for as the innocent Jews of Lincoln teach us, death is preferable to conversion or prostration under Torah law. And so, in Chaucer's tale, the little clergeon has to ascend to heaven a martyr; he cannot be restored to life, because the Jews must have their martyrdom as well. With martyrdom, naturally, comes mourning, and this is the work of the *Prioress's Tale*.

I do not, however, intend this essay to be a prescription for mourning or an injunction to mourn; such a prescription or injunction would be at odds with the theoretical goals of both Calabrese and LaCapra, goals with which I find myself very much in accord. Rather, I wish to underscore the way in which Chaucer himself, through the vehicle of the *Prioress's Tale*, recognizes the necessity (that is, on a humanistic level) of mourning as a way to acknowledge and come to terms with the death not merely of the Christian child, but of the Jewish martyrs as well, and the latter all the more tragically because their deaths are no accident.[43] The Jews of Lincoln—compromised by a conspiracy of false accusation, political wrangling, and the broken ethics of a number of men committed to obtaining a new cathedral in order to improve their own station—*become* martyrs specifically because, mired in that untenable compromise, they make the only choice they can under the rigorous doctrine of the faith to which they hold. They choose *kiddush ha-Shem*: death before debasement, the rope before the cross. We ought to consider the possibility that Chaucer, deeply invested as he is in the wonder, sanctity, sweetness, and sadness of all human life (not merely that of Christian children), embeds a reference to the Lincoln affair in his tale of Madame Eglantine in order to hint at the propriety of mourning the death of the *human*, not merely the Christian or the Jew. His portrayal of the Prioress, I would argue, is intended to ridicule those who share her literally and figuratively cloistered outlook. Trapped in the bubble of their provincial prejudice, ignorance, and unworldliness, they fail to understand or even willfully see that any death of any human is, at the level of humanity and of life itself, a loss to be mourned. Such a humanistic recognition might be of some help in reconciling the eternal *contretemps* of critics pledged to polarized readings of the *Prioress's Tale* and indeed of Chaucer the man as well as Chaucer the author.

For those Chaucerians who remain unconvinced, I would offer one more bit of supporting evidence from Chaucer biographer Derek Pearsall, who reminds us that:

> Chaucer, amid all the moving and pathetic circumstance of these tales[,] … remains aloof and uncommitted. This indeed is the whole point of *The Canterbury Tales*. …
>
> Hence the unease that most readers feel about Chaucer's religious tales, interesting and enjoyable as that unease may be. One suspects, in a word, his sincerity. There always seems to be a space left for scepticism, for a superior otherness of viewpoint which will see pathos as sentimentality and religion as religiosity.[44]

We need to respect the space for skepticism that Pearsall opens here within Chaucer's religious canon, whether we read those tales in ways hard or soft, whether we envision our own personal Chaucer as the laughing satirist or the Christian lay theologian. To do otherwise is to close off a potentially fruitful avenue of reading—in other words, to kill it, to martyr it to our own particular brand of ideological criticism—and to do so would be cause for us all, as critics of literature, to mourn indeed.

Notes

[1] As to the distinction between medieval anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, see Gavin I. Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1990).

[2] R. Howard Bloch, "Critical Communities and the Shape of the Medievalist's Desire: A Response to Judith Ferster and Louise Fradenburg," *Exemplaria* 2, no. 1 (March 1990): 204.

[3] R. A. Shoaf, email message to author, November 29, 2009.

[4] Lawrence Besserman, "Ideology, Antisemitism, and Chaucer's 'Prioress's Tale,'" *The Chaucer Review* 36, no. 1 (2001): 57.

[5] Ibid., 57.

[6] Michael Calabrese, "Performing the Prioress: 'Conscience' and Responsibility in Studies of Chaucer's Prioress's Tale," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2002), 73. Calabrese uses the *Prioress's Tale* and its many critical respondents as a test case for examining the current prevalence of ethical criticism in medieval studies: "The problem is this: though a politicized criticism carries the weight and authority of an ethical commitment and the confidence of ethical certainty, all such criticism that foregrounds the history of violence and difference in an attempt to practice critical ethics risks reducing the text under study to a type of historical hate crime. Such literary criticism is, further, very difficult to critique because it shields itself in ethical surety, in the language of

tolerance and social justice. When a critic performs ethics, who would dare oppose?" "Performing the Prioress," 69. See also Richard A. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature* 21, no. 1 (1997): 1-27.

[7] Derek Pearsall points out that, thanks to the 493 extant documentary records of Chaucer's life, a life spent "as a page, as an esquire to the royal household [of Edward III], and as a government and civil servant" as well as a poet, we know very much about him indeed— more so, in fact, than we do about Shakespeare. Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 1.

[8] Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 7.

[9] I should not be taken to infer here that LaCapra conflates the experience of trauma with the shock of history. From the beginning of his study, he is at pains to distinguish the stark difference between "victims of traumatic historical events and those not directly experiencing them." *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, ix. See *n*12 below.

[10] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1961), 10.

[11] See Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-through," in vol. 12 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 23 vols., trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), 147–56.

[12] LaCapra cautions, however, that "empathic unsettlement" must have its limits: "[T]here is an important sense in which the after effects—the hauntingly possessive ghosts—of traumatic events are not fully owned by anyone and, in various ways, affect everyone. But the indiscriminate generalization of the category of survivor and the overall conflation of history or culture with trauma, as well as the near fixation on enacting or acting out post-traumatic symptoms, have the effect of obscuring crucial historical distinctions; they may, as well, block processes that counteract trauma and its symptomatic after effects but which do not obliterate their force and insistence—notably, processes of working through, including those conveyed in institutions and practices that limit excess and mitigate trauma." *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, xi.

[13] LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* , 13.

[14] Alan Dundes writes that the ritual murder legend "refers to Jews killing Christians for some allegedly religious reason. … [The] Christian killed [is] usually a small child, typically male …" "Preface," *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), vii). In drawing this parallel, while I certainly do not mean to imply that medieval Christian antipathy toward Jews was a LaCapran "limit event" on par with the Holocaust, it bears some relation in its creation of a permanent underclass subjected to harsh state controls. Some of those controls, in turn, are haunting precursors of similar measures taken against Jews by the Nazi state: "Severe restrictions were placed on them [after Jews were accused of the ritual murder of William of Norwich in 1144]. They were confined to Jewries, [and] from 1218 were obliged to wear badges steadily increased in size …" J. A.

Cannon, "Jews," in *The Oxford Companion to British History*, ed. John Cannon (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 533.
[15] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Prioress's Tale,* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al., 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), l.463.
[16] Ibid., ll.684–85.
[17] Louise O. Fradenburg, "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the *Prioress's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 97.
[18] Chaucer, *The Prioress's Tale*, l.3857.
[19] "The lamb was seized by the wolves; one of them set a knife to his throat, and his tongue was cruelly cut out; his stomach was opened and his heart and liver taken out. They imagined that they were offering a double sacrifice, first by cutting the throat from which had emerged the voice of praise, and secondly by tearing out the heart which incessantly meditated on the memory of the Virgin." A.G. Rigg, trans., "The Story of the *Alma Redemptoris Mater*," in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteen Tales and the General Prologue, a Norton Critical Edition*, eds. V. A. Kolve and Glending Olson, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005), 441.
[20] Chaucer, *The Prioress's Tale*, l. 559 .
[21] Ibid., l. 564.
[22] Ibid., ll.565–78.
[23] Ibid., ll.605–6; 611–12.
[24] Ibid., l.620.
[25] Ibid., ll. 645–69.
[26] Ibid., ll.671–72.
[27] Rigg, "*Alma Redemptoris Mater*," 443.
[28] Ibid., 444.
[29] Chaucer, *The Prioress's Tale*, l.686. Gavin I. Langmuir notes that "little Hugh's story was vividly described by Matthew Paris, the most famous English thirteenth-century historian. His was probably the version known to Chaucer, Marlowe, Percy, and Lamb. … Yet Matthew should be suspected *a priori* because of his general carelessness, inaccuracy, unreliable dating of events within a given year, his stereotypy of non-English peoples and credulity about Jews, and his firm belief in the miraculous" "The Knight's Tale of Young Hugh of Lincoln," *Speculum* 47, no. 3 (July 1972): 464.
[30] Chaucer, *The Prioress's Tale*, l.686.
[31] Langmuir, "Young Hugh of Lincoln," 460.
[32] Ibid., 477.
[33] Cannon, "Jews," 533. See also Langmuir, who writes that the Hugh of Lincoln case "powerfully affected those predisposed to think evil of Jews then and for centuries to come." "Young Hugh of Lincoln," 481.
[34] Langmuir, "Young Hugh of Lincoln," 461, 468, 469, 477.
[35] Ibid., 468.
[36] Ibid., 478.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.