Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" ("The Prioress's Tale")
A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/geoffrey-chaucers-canterbury-tales-prioresss-tale.

Introduction

Written in the late fourteenth century in Middle English, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories told by pilgrims making their way to the shrine of Saint Thomas a' Beckett in Canterbury, England. The twenty-four characters Chaucer created are from various social strata and have been lauded by scholars because they provide a sociological view; the character depictions are seen as a way to learn about how people lived in Chaucer's England. In "The Prioress's Tale," a nun tells the story of a devout Christian boy who was supposedly snatched and brutally murdered by Jews as he was walking through a Jewish neighborhood on his way to school. Scholars have debated whether or not the character of the prioress and her treatment of Jews was meant to be ironic; some scholars argue that Chaucer is clearly being ironic and the prioress's anti-Semitism is in the story to critique the hypocrisy of the Church, while others argue that the prioress's anti-Semitism should be taken at face value. It is important to note that when Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, there were no Jews in England; Edward I ordered all Jews to be expelled from the country in 1290, and no Jews were allowed to return until 1657.

Cover image: Illustration of the Prioress from *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales,* ed. Alfred W. Pollard (London: Macmillan and Co., 1903).

Subjects

Anti-Semitism, Fiction, Great Britain, Religion

Reading and Background

- There are many translations of *The Canterbury Tales*, done in both poetry and prose. This Simon and Schuster edition closely follows Chaucer's text.
- Michael Murphy's edition of the original text with modernized spelling and glossary is available online. It also includes Murphy's commentary and explanatory notes.
- *The Jew in English Literature, as Author and as Subject* by Edward Nathaniel Calisch offers background on the various roles Jews have played in English literature.
- As Chaucer's text is quite old and is no longer under copyright, there are many versions available for free online. Although the formatting may not be up to current standards, these are great public resources. Librarius offers a Middle English and Modern English side-by-side version, and Harvard offers an online interlinear translation.
- For a historical overview of the libelous accusations made regarding Jews using the blood of Christians for ritual purposes, see the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. For a more comprehensive overview of the history of blood libel see *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol between Jews and Christians* by David Biale (University of California Press, 2007).
- For a deep dive into the history of the Massena, New York, blood libel case discussed in Resource 2 of this kit, see Edward Berenson's *The Accusation: Blood Libel in an American Town* (Norton, 2019).
- For a recent overview of the scholarship surrounding "The Prioress's Tale," see Heather Blurton and Hannah Johnson's *The Critics and the Prioress: Antisemitism, Criticism, and Chaucer's Prioress's Tale* (University of Michigan Press, 2017).
- Beverly Boyd's annotated edition of "The Prioress's Tale" (University of Oklahoma, 1987) provides an in-depth cross-disciplinary reading of Chaucer's story.

Resources

1: Woodcut, "Martyrdom of Simon von Trent," 1493.

Simon of Trent was a Christian child from the city of Trento, Italy, who lived in the late fifteenth century. When he disappeared and was subsequently murdered, local Jewish leaders were blamed. After his body was located, all of the city's Jews were rounded up and forced, through torture, to confess to killing Simon and using his blood for rituals.

Suggested Activity: Show students the woodcut depicting the murder of Simon of Trent. This print is from an early chronicle of world history as told through stories from the Bible. Who are the figures in the artwork? What's happening in it? Where is it set? What do the calligraphic words say? How do we know who's Jewish in this picture? What about the depiction makes it appear that these figures are conducting a ritualistic activity? What do you think the goal of the artist may have been in creating this work? What do you think the image would have conveyed about Jews to non-Jewish viewers in the late fifteenth century?

Chaucer's tale is a written account of a blood libel case; this image is an illustrated account of the Simon of Trent case. How do these methods of retelling—the narrative and the visual—differ from each other? What does each medium offer to the storyteller/artist?

Source: Michel Wolgemut and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, "Martyrdom of Simon von Trent," 1493, in *Hartmann Schedels Weltchronik (Schedel's World History)* (Nuremberg, 1493), plate 23, accessed online.

2: Newspaper excerpt, "Trooper Punished for Massena Action," New York Times, 1928.

In 1928, a young Christian child went missing in Massena, New York, a small town near the Canadian border. In response, the local police chief brought in leaders of the Jewish community for questioning. The *New York Times* published an article regarding the incident and the reaction from officials on Saturday, October 6, 1928.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the excerpt and ask them to reconstruct the events that occurred in Massena, New York, based on the information in the newspaper article. Review the letter written by Major Warner to New York Governor Alfred E. Smith, which is included in the article. Students should consider the police chief's reaction to the disappearance of a child and why he is being punished. Why did the police chief think he was being logical in questioning Jewish leaders during his investigation of the child's disappearance?

What, if any, echoes do you see between the Massena case from 1928 and the story of the prioress written by Chaucer in the fourteenth century? Are there specific words and phrases from the article that remind you of "The Prioress's Tale"?

Source: "Trooper Punished for Massena Action," the *New York Times* (Albany, NY), Oct. 6, 1928, accessed online.

3: Text excerpt, Lawrence Besserman's "Ideology, Antisemitism, and Chaucer's 'Prioress's Tale,'" 2001.

Some scholars believe that Chaucer was satirizing the prioress and aimed to show through her frivolousness and poor character how misaligned she was with Christian values of charity and fairness. Others believe that Chaucer would have almost certainly been steeped in anti-Semitism and unlikely to have critiqued it; they see "The Prioress's Tale" as deeply anti-Semitic.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the excerpt discussing different scholars' interpretations of the prioress's anti-Semitism. Ask students to think about and list the things that are important to the prioress in the prologue and the tale (e.g., table manners, her dogs, speaking French, being coy) and then to list the things they might expect a woman who dedicates her life to the Church to value. Is the prioress a good nun? Is she a likeable person? Ask students whether they think Chaucer portrayed her sympathetically or whether he exposed her faults, or both. Ask them: if Chaucer was indeed trying to point out the prioress's (and the Church's) hypocrisies and biases, was he successful in doing so? Is the tale anti-Semitic?

Source: Lawrence Besserman, "Ideology, Antisemitism, and Chaucer's 'Prioress's Tale,'" *The Chaucer Review* 36, no. 1 (2001): 48–72, accessed online.

4: Excerpt, "Matthew Paris's English history: from the year 1235 to 1273," translated from Latin, 1852; music and lyrics, "Sir Hugh," 1956; and music and lyrics, "Little Sir Hugh," 1975.

In the very last stanza of "The Prioress's Tale," Chaucer references "youngè Hugh of Lincoln, slain also/ With cursèd Jewès." The tale of Hugh of Lincoln was an early blood libel story concerning the murder of a young English boy in 1255. Some scholars believe that Chaucer based "The Prioress's Tale" on this story.

Suggested Activity: Matthew Paris was a monk and English chronicler who wrote exaggerated accounts of English history in the thirteenth century. Read Matthew Paris's recounting of the story of Hugh of Lincoln. What similarities do you notice between the story of Hugh of Lincoln and "The Prioress's Tale?" How are Jewish people portrayed in this story?

Long after the events occurred, the story of Hugh of Lincoln was popularized as a folk ballad throughout the British Isles and, later, in the United States. Listen to two different versions of the ballad (A. L. Lloyd's 1956 recording "Sir Hugh" and Steeleye Span's 1975 rendition, "Little Sir Hugh") while reading and comparing the lyrics.

What similarities do you notice between Matthew Paris's account and the story told in the song? Lloyd's recording explicitly names Jews as the murderers, while the Steeleye Span version elides this detail. Why might folk musicians choose to include or leave out this detail? What similarities do you see between Matthew Paris's account, the two ballads, and "The Prioress's Tale" (pay close attention to the figure of the young boy, the role of the boy's mother, and the boy's ability to speak after death)?

Sources: Matthew Paris, *Matthew Paris's English History: from the year 1235 to 1273*, trans. J. A. Giles (London: H.G. Bohn, 1856), 138.

A. L. Lloyd, "Sir Hugh," recorded in 1956, remastered in 2011, track 2 on cd 2 of *Bramble Briars and Beams of the Sun*, accessed online. Lyrics compiled by Sadie Gold-Shapiro.

Steeleye Span, "Little Sir Hugh," recorded in 1975, track 5 of *The Best of Steeleye Span*, accessed online. Lyrics compiled by Sadie Gold-Shapiro.