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*The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms,
1350-1500* (review)

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the egregious “value-added lectures.” Tolhurst’s discourse similarly reflects her adherence to the ongoing current para-pedagogic assault on the shibboleth of the magisterial, “top-down” teacher. This seemingly untroubled acceptance of the consumerist ideology underlying much of the drive toward “student-centered” techniques represents one of this volume’s missed opportunities. While there are numerous astute analyses of the pressures involved in communicating Chaucer to new-media-savvy undergraduates, there is a puzzling silence on the pressures of the institutional imperative to abandon challenging traditional pedagogic techniques in order to attract and retain students. Because of the many scholarly demands Chaucer studies places on information-age undergraduates, it offers a particularly fertile ground for exploring not just the technological opportunities but also the ideological stakes of transforming our teaching to accommodate our students. *Teaching Chaucer’s* frequently admirable pragmatism would have been helpfully complicated by such an exploration.

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ANTHONY BALE. *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350–1500*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xiv, 266. £45.60; \$85.00.

Meticulously researched and lucidly composed, Anthony Bale’s *The Jew in the Medieval Book* combines rigorous historicist readings with excellent manuscript work. The book contributes to the vigorous conversation that has unfolded over the past decade on the relation of England’s Jews to its literary culture. Scholars such as Sheila Delany, Denise Despres, Steven Kruger, Lisa Lampert, and Sylvia Tomasch (among literary critics); Ruth Mellinkoff and Debra Higgs Strickland (among art historians); and Jeremy Cohen, Kathleen Biddick, Robert Chazan, Gavin Langmuir, David Nirenberg, and Miri Rubin (among historians) have provided the foundation for Bale’s project. The book’s achievement is to have synthesized much of this work without offering a monolithic culmination or alternative. The analytical strength of *The Jew in the Medieval Book* derives from its rejection of the idea that the figure of the

Jew possesses a static role within some overarching hermeneutic. Bale employs an intertextual methodology to argue that the imagined Jew offers Christian writers a locus of discord and confusion where the past can be created, orthodoxy might be undercut, and the Other reveals “that which is inside” (p. 166).

As his starting date of 1350 indicates, Bale is interested in post-Expulsion depictions of Jews. Previous scholars have typically attempted to capture the Christian imagination of Judaism by deploying large conceptual frameworks: the virtual Jew (Tomasch), the spectral Jew (Kruiger), the hermeneutic Jew (Cohen), the Protean Jew (Despres). Without directly engaging such capacious epistemologies, Bale implicitly follows Nirenberg (*Communities of Violence*) in arguing that anti-Semitism is better understood as *antisemitisms*: what he calls “massive, transhistorical narratives” (p. 9) must yield to dynamic local histories. Even if stereotypes invoked by a text might seem universal, such recurring slanders are given definitive shape through specific context, serving particular strategies. Bale therefore stresses the lack of agreement among Christian interpreters over the meaning of post-Incarnation Jews, observing that “even as established Christian interpretive models existed, writers rarely chose to subordinate their impressions of contemporary Judaism to such a model” (p. 25). Rather than invoke the Jew to confirm some preexisting doctrinal position, medieval writers employed Judaism to create a space in which theology could be questioned and destabilized. Jews as imagined by medieval English writers therefore functioned not as an assimilated component of Christian universal history, but as perturbing figures through whom authors were able to grapple with the discontents such a transhistorical model generated (p. 31).

Bale structures his book around four medieval narratives, each typifying a genre: the Jew of Tewkesbury, who tumbles into a latrine and dies in excrement because of his reverence for his Sabbath (History); the miracle of the boy who, after his murder at Jewish hands, continues to sing a Marian hymn (Miracle); the worship of the child martyr Robert of Bury St. Edmunds, supposedly killed by Jews in imitation of the torture of Jesus (Cult); and the *Arma Christi*, a display of the instruments of Christ’s suffering that included a spitting Jew (Passion). Bale reads his texts within wide manuscript contexts. Thus the chapter on the caroling dead boy contains, as expected, a detailed examination of Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale*. Because the focus is on the “discontinuities and divergences,” however, this supremely literary rendition finds itself jos-

tled by versions of the same story from places both predictable (the Vernon manuscript) and surprising (an unattributed redaction of Chaucer's tale that was snuggled next to and finally intercut with Lydgate in BL Harley MS 2251).

The book is essential for any scholar studying late medieval piety, European literary culture, and social identity in its relation to alterity. The chapter examining Chaucerian materials will, however, be of special interest to the readers of this journal. Given that a series of original and highly influential articles have appeared over the past twenty years on *The Prioress's Tale* (especially the work of Aranye Fradenburg, Bruce Holinger, and Lee Patterson), it may seem that little space remains for new readings. Chapter 3 ("Miracle: Shifting Definitions in 'The Miracle of the Boy Singer'") opens with an invocation of the Wandering Jew, *terra cognita* to be sure, but then surprises with a follow-up interrogatory of "What of the wandering Christian?" If Jew and Christian are "ambivalently interconnected," Bale reasons, shouldn't Chaucer's itinerant text—a framework narrative in which its structuring pilgrimage fails to reach its destination—offer a meditation on the multiple possibilities that straying into Jewish space offers? Bale tracks in *The Prioress's Tale* two warring elements, each with its own trajectory: an expansive land- and soundscape characterized by "extreme physicality and loss of control"; and a "lapidary vocabulary" that would immure such vagrancy within the gemlike martyr and his marble tomb. Chaucer's tale, Bale argues, resists the reduction into timelessness that other versions of the story embrace. The desire to limit and bound the narrative he ascribes to the Prioress, and the desire to keep alive its "bodily, historical and geographical disjunctions" he grants Chaucer. Bale's contextualization of the *litel clergeon* into the whole of Fragment VII (a series of narratives obsessed with male bodies, boys, chastity, violence) could be better. Yet he offers a compelling meditation on the space the tale opens to explore problems of genre, authority, and orthodoxy.

The Jew in the Medieval Book does not engage with actual Jews. Disallowing that a fantasy may engulf some portion of a historical reality and carry that reality far forward in time, the book is in a way as *Judenrein* as England post-1290. Bale writes in the introduction: "I do not aim to enfranchise those 'hidden from history,' a target implicit in much writing on historical Jewry" (p. 5; if the Jews are "hidden from history," they are hidden in plain sight). While such a recovery project is clearly not one every medievalist should undertake, the separation of Jewish

reality from Christian imagining cannot so easily be assumed. Bale argues that “a contextualised, historically contingent antisemitism does not necessarily involve Jews but can stand alone in Christian culture” (p. 107). He is speaking about the events surrounding the cult of Robert of Bury St. Edmunds, a veneration that came into being as fifty-seven Jews lost their lives. The intimacy of its Jewish population to Bury’s economic and cultural systems has been well documented. The violence exacted by Robert’s cult was practiced against bodies onto which fantasies were projected, but these were also real bodies not nearly so passive as Bale’s formulation implies. Medieval Jews were, as the events at York demonstrated, a people who could resist. Could they also survive their own eradication? Is it possible to hear something of a Jewish history resounding, even deep within a Christian fantasy—especially because, as Bale has so brilliantly emphasized, such Christian fantasies tend to be internally incoherent, heterogeneous, impossibly full?

Miri Rubin in her book *Gentile Tales* stages an astonishing sequence in the text’s middle where the Jews answer back, giving them a voice that has much to say to the Christian fantasies she analyzes. Lee Patterson has done the same in his essay on *The Prioress’s Tale* . . . as has Bale himself in two brilliant essays that laid the groundwork for this volume. Bale lacks such a moment here, but he has nonetheless authored a tremendous book. Because *The Jew in the Medieval Book* seamlessly combines the theoretical (Deleuze and Guattari, for example, make a catalytic appearance in the Chaucer chapter) with the archival and the historical, and because its ambit is so capacious and its findings so well argued, this volume will be required reading in medieval studies for years to come.

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JOHN M. BOWERS, *Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. Pp. xii, 405. \$45.00 paper.

The last two decades have witnessed a move out from what had been the strongholds of Middle English scholarship, Chaucer and Langland.