“BE NAT AGAST”: CHAUCER, ADORNO, AND UGLY AESTHETICS

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By

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This thesis uses Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic theories of ugliness to reconsider the medieval/modern dichotomy implicit in much of medieval studies and contemporary aesthetic theory. I argue that Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is a piece of “oppositional art” that uses ugly aesthetics to upset and preclude a return to order and tradition and resists sublimation into the universal, theological, or cultic functions of medieval art. Attention to these aesthetic choices complicates medieval vs. modern artistic categories and shows how Chaucer’s work participates in what Adorno considers to be the project of modern artwork: a “determinate negation of a determinate society.” Part I surveys the current field of medieval literary studies and recognizes a place for renewed interest in aesthetic readings, while laying the theoretical foundation for how the use of contemporary aesthetic theories like Adorno’s are useful in reconsidering where we choose to locate the “break” between medieval and modern, cultic and oppositional, art. Part II then applies Adorno’s conception of ugliness in the form of “kitsch” to a reading of the aesthetics of Chaucer’s the “Prioress’s Tale.” I argue that ideological critiques of the tale have not, until this point, paid due attention to how Chaucer’s aesthetic choices work against the tale’s collusion with the cult function of the devotional Miracle story and raise ethical questions regarding scholastic notions of beauty and truth.
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INTRODUCTION

In *De Ordine*, Trygetius and Augustine position ugliness within the greater order of things. Trygetius begins with the life of the fool: “Should anyone then limit one’s attention to the narrow reality of that [fool’s] life, he would feel utterly disgusted by it. But on raising the eyes of the mind to such heights as to survey the whole universe, he would find nothing out of order, each thing perfectly fitting in its own assigned place” (65). Augustine then provides several examples, including the ugly anatomical features of some animals: “The order of nature wanted them where necessary, without however giving them undue prominence. Ugly as they are, they occupy their appointed place, leaving better places for better ones” (67). Because, for Augustine, order, proportion, and harmony are the physical manifestations of beauty and the markers of divinity, ugliness is never autonomous, is never “ugly for ugly’s sake,” but provides necessary balance in a larger beauty – the beauty of order, the universal whole, the divine. It is precisely because of ugliness that we are better able to recognize beauty, but for this recognition to be possible, ugliness must remain in its “assigned place,” inferior, and less prominent within the order, subject to the beauty which it enhances via its lowly position. In *De Ordine* ugliness is subsumed into a dialogue about beauty, divinity, and truth, and, as such, Augustine elevates it within the order of things. The otherwise base, sordid, or lowly becomes a natural and necessary part of creation. Feelings of disgust arise from focusing on the singular ugly object instead of imagining that object within the universal whole, where “each thing [is] perfectly fitting in its own assigned place.”

But as a necessary counterpart to beauty, ugliness’s existence is also necessarily denigrated. In this way, aesthetics as justification for a governing order carries detrimental social consequences, as Augustine’s treatment of prostitution makes explicit: “What is filthier, uglier,
and more disgraceful than whores, procurers, and such-like plagues of humanity? Remove prostitutes from the social order, however, and lust will destroy it. Let them rise to the same status as married women, and you will dishonor matrimony with an unseemly stain” (66-67).

Augustine would have it seem that a modern understanding of just plain “ugly,” whether manifesting in art, moral transgression, or humanitarian failures, existed, in fact needed to exist, in the Middle Ages only to justify the governing order, the divine, and the beautiful – ugliness really, within the proper perspective, could (and did) disappear completely within it. Still, this illustration shows what would happen if ugliness were to disrupt proper hierarchies. We see how ugliness might gain the potential to destabilize categories through usurpation, how its presence in places it does not belong can “dishonor” and “stain,” and, in the case of prostitution, threaten a patriarchal order. That Augustine must sublimate and subjugate ugliness’s disruptive potential within a greater design, a greater beauty, reveals both the threat that ugliness poses to ruling hierarchies and also, more significantly, how governing power structures are motivated to manipulate aesthetic sensibilities in order to maintain those hierarchies.

Though Augustine’s aesthetics can help us to elucidate medieval theological, artistic, and social structures, his consideration of beauty as a manifestation of the good, moral, and just pronounces a link between politics and aesthetics that characterizes the work of numerous “modern” aesthetic theorists, including Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, and Elaine Scarry. For example, in explaining how what he terms the modern “culture industry” seeks to control aesthetic tastes and taboos, Adorno recognizes the treatment of social ugliness in the twentieth century as similar to Augustine’s when he writes:

Powerful aesthetic values are set free by social ugliness… This process is comparable to the introduction of negative magnitudes that retain their negativity
in the continuum of the work of art. The status quo handles this by putting up with the portrayal of extremes, such as graphics of starving working-class children, arguing that these are documents of a benevolent heart whose beat can be heard even in the worst condition imaginable, which for that very reason, then, cannot be as bad as all that. It is this kind of collusion which radical modern art opposes by trying to excise through the language of form the traces of affirmation characteristic even of social realism. *(Aesthetic Theory 72-73)*

In short, maintainers of the “status quo,” the social order, will always attempt to read ugliness in service to and not disruption of the order. Prostitutes may be ugly, filthy, and disgraceful, but their sin protects society from crumbling under an insatiable lust. Starving children are not victims of unjust and ugly social stratification but inspiring examples of triumph and beauty in the face of adversity. According to Adorno, it is the job of “modern” art to oppose the “culture industry” by disallowing this type of sublimation, to retain its negativity, to remain ugly – or to at least try. But was this type of ugly art also possible in the Middle Ages?

There has been significant scholarship in the past decade that seeks to uncover how contemporary critical theory is indebted to medieval philosophical thought, despite the fact that the period is commonly leap-frogged in discussions of philosophical history and lineage.¹ Additionally, a survey of recent publications in the field of medieval studies shows a renewed interest specifically in aesthetics and literature. Still, though the use of critical theory within the field is routine, there remains hesitancy in applying modern aesthetic theory sustainably to the medieval text, despite what I find to be undeniably overlapping concerns (for instance, the place

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of social ugliness) between the two. This resistance, I argue, arises from an assumed otherness with regard to medieval aesthetic, political, and ethical sensibilities – that we could never posit “modern” and “enlightened” reactions to medieval art as wholly legitimate. This thesis seeks to challenge precisely this assumption by reading Geoffrey Chaucer’s the “Prioress’s Tale” through Adorno’s aesthetic theories of ugliness. By enabling the use of the “modern” concept of kitsch in a reading of the controversial tale, my thesis recognizes the potential for the medieval text to retain the negativity Adorno associates with modern artwork and refigures Chaucer as an artist critically conscious of art’s oppositional force. Through this reading, I hope to open more possibilities for interpretation of medieval aesthetics, trouble the waters that separate medieval and modern aesthetic and social histories, and suggest a reconsideration of how we write our cultural narratives – a project that is necessary if we still hope to defend the accessibility and relevancy of medieval works in our own time. While scholars like Bruce Holsinger, Maura Nolan, and Greg Wilsbacher have recognized the possibility of such a rich partnership between Adorno and the period, I will show that a practical and sustained application of Adorno’s theory both enlightens the medieval text and challenges our notions of enlightenment.
PART I: FIELD AND THEORY

“The Aesthetic Turn” and Vision of the Project

In 2004, Maura Nolan wrote, “The time is right for an ‘aesthetic turn’ within medieval critical practice, a turn that will allow us to approach the art of the Middle Ages from a different, and more productive, angle than recent models have allowed” (“Making the Aesthetic Turn” 551). A year later, The Chaucer Review published a special volume, edited by David Raybin and Susanna Fein, entitled Chaucer and Aesthetics (2005). This issue featured a collection of essays that examined not only the viability of excavating legitimate and vibrant philosophical, theological, and artistic traditions with regard to aesthetic concerns in the Middle Ages but also the formal aesthetic properties of some of Chaucer’s seminal literary works. Since then, several articles have been published on a variety of related issues, and scholars like John Parker (The Aesthetics of Antichrist, 2007) and Peggy Knapp (Chaucerian Aesthetics, 2008), have published significant manuscripts on the topic of aesthetics and the Middle Ages, indicating that the “turn” Maura Nolan anticipated may have already been initiated as a new critical direction in medieval studies. In many ways, my thesis is both an extension of and in conversation specifically with the scholarship of the past decade, but engaging in one way or another with the aesthetics of a text is really the essence of what has defined the job of the literary critic for centuries. Whether consciously or not, when we critique art (whether for what it reveals historically, socially, politically, or poetically), we are interested in aesthetics. Raybin and Fein note precisely the fluidity with which the aesthetic operates in literary discussions in their introduction to Chaucer and Aesthetics: “The concept [is relevant] to a wide variety of interests and agendas such that aesthetics does not always stand alone in literary study but is often articulated as an aesthetic of

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2 See, for example, Emily Steiner’s “Piers Plowman, Diversity, and the Medieval Political Aesthetic” (Representations 91.1, 2005), Mary Carruthers’s “Sweetness” (Speculum 81.4, 2007) and Niklaus Largier’s “Praying by Numbers: An Essay on Medieval Aesthetics (Representations 104.1, 2008).
something, some other realm of people, society, history, language, or value immanent in a literary work” (228). Indeed, Thomas L. Reed’s book *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (1990), critical to the development of my own argument in this thesis, enacts precisely this type of scholarly endeavor over a decade before the revitalization of aesthetic attention we find now in *The Chaucer Review* and other peer-reviewed journals. We should ask then, if aesthetics are always already a part of literary criticism and have, at times, been made explicitly a part of medieval literary studies, what constitutes an “aesthetic turn” as Nolan defines it, and does the scholarship of the past decade enact this type of critique? The remainder of Part I of my thesis will explore Nolan’s call for an “aesthetic turn” in the context of wider concerns and patterns of thinking in the fields of literature and medieval studies and sketch the theoretical background and critical goals of my reading of *The Canterbury Tales* as a work of what Theodor Adorno terms “oppositional art.” Part II will then enact Nolan’s proposal by close reading the aesthetics of the “Prioress’s Tale.”

In “Making the Aesthetic Turn: Adorno, the Medieval, and the Future of the Past,” Nolan engages with the work of Theodor Adorno, particularly his unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), in order to imagine “a consideration of history, periodization, and the aesthetic that helps to negotiate the demands of formalism, historicism, and theory within medieval literary studies” (550). Nolan’s thesis alerts us to the internalization of aesthetic inquiry within various types of critical approaches to medieval literature (“formalism, historicism, and theory”) and a necessity for such inquiry in a way that, at first, reads similar to Raybin and Fein’s recognition of an aesthetic “of something” – that the aesthetic works in service to, “negotiates the demands of,” other critical agendas and methodology. Yet, her argument concludes with what seems, in many ways, the exact opposite, with a gesture toward the privileging of art and aesthetics as social or

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3 Emphasis in original text unless indicated otherwise.
historical critique in and of itself. She writes, “In the end, the argument for an ‘aesthetic turn’ is an argument for art itself, for the recognition that the work of human creativity continually violates prohibitions and crosses boundaries as we work to contain it.” She continues, “It is in art that we find both history and freedom from it” (571).

I will return to the depth and nuance of Nolan’s argument and how her engagement with Adorno specifically leads her to such conclusions momentarily, but I would like first to address the potential for a misinterpretation of her particular conception of an “aesthetic turn” and the notion of a privileging of “art itself” more generally. This misinterpretation stems from both a defense of the critical trajectory of literary studies since the mid-1960’s and also wider ethical and aesthetic concerns that led Elaine Scarry to write in 1999 that “the conversation about the beauty of [poems, stories, paintings, sketches, sculpture, film, essays, debates] has been banished” from the academy (57). Recognizing their impact on her own work, Peggy Knapp summarizes such concerns succinctly in her essay “Aesthetic Attention and the Chaucerian Text.” She writes:

Aesthetic issues have been eclipsed by attention to ideological analysis in many English Department circles in their concern to restore ‘history’ to critical analysis… Such emphases were no doubt intended to counter the formalism and ‘affirmative culture’ of the early twentieth century, and with some justification… The various discourses of ‘egalitarian’ cultural studies and semiotics, which have transformed the character of literary study during the last thirty years or so, characterized the whole enterprise of aesthetics in that extreme posture and charged it with class elitism, antihistoricism, and social uselessness. It has been under particular attack from positions that stress ideology critique. (241-42)
Here, Knapp articulates an enduring academic recoil from aesthetics and aestheticism (the appreciation of beauty that Scarry discusses) that resists regression toward the New Critical and formalist practices of nascent literary criticism in favor of ideological critiques that privilege cultural and historical understanding and positioning of texts. Such a trend is easily observed in the prolific amount of historicist, feminist, queer, and other culturally centered work that has continued to dominate literary studies, medieval literature included, into the twenty-first century. Such scholarship is crucial to literature studies, and I do not mean to imply that these approaches are in any way inferior, passé, or otherwise irrelevant. I mean to argue that their privileged space in the academy may factor into why attention to aesthetics in critical discussion often makes art seem like an extension of an already existent historical/cultural narrative instead of an active participant in the creation and, often, disruption of such a narrative.

The case against aesthetic or, rather, “aesthetic only” readings of literature is two-fold and particularly convincing, specifically with regard to medieval works. Aesthetic critical work, even if unjustly, carries the aura of “art for art’s sake,” insinuating a divorcing of the text from the cultural, political, and historical conditions in which it was produced and privileging a subjective experience between text and reader. As noted, such a critique was influential in the turning away from New Criticism in literary studies in the mid twentieth-century toward more socially and historically conscious scholarship. By extension, aesthetics became, among such formalist approaches, indicted in larger ethical considerations in the academy. As Knapp indicates, aesthetic readings and evaluations have been characterized as elitist, antihistorical, and socially useless. Scarry contests a similar argument with regard to beauty when she writes, “The political critique of beauty… urges that beauty, by preoccupying our attention, distracts attention from wrong social arrangements” (58). In adopting a Kantian notion of subjective art and
disinterested art criticism, aesthetic readings seem inherently unconcerned with the ethical implications of their conclusions.

Initially, such objections seem logical, if not also somewhat obvious, especially for those scholars trained in the academy after the cultural revolutions of the 70’s. For medievalists, I argue that such suspicions of formalist approaches may seem even more legitimate and relevant as we consistently navigate the “otherness,” or “alterity,” of the period in consideration of our own. To discuss the aesthetics of an era, at least in a post-Kantian sense of the term, when the concept of aesthetics itself was “sine nomine,” as Warren Ginsberg describes it, seems, at first, anachronistic, and to assume that our contemporary reactions to the artwork of the Middle Ages would equal perceptions during the period seems historically and intellectually sloppy.

Especially in relation to representations of women, foreigners, non-Christians in Christian nations, and other cultural “outsiders” or politically/religiously oppressed, medieval aesthetics runs up against our own ethical and ideological evaluations and critiques – when medieval beauty is at odds with modern notions of social justice. In Part II of my thesis, I explore how Greg Wilsbacher’s concerns regarding the problematic representation of Christian-Jewish relations in the “Prioress’s Tale” leads him to question the project of aesthetic readings that are invested in proper representation and transmittance of medieval aesthetics and religious sensibilities but are at odds with modern ethical sensibilities regarding anti-Semitism. Such trepidation is indicative of the potential misinterpretation of what an “aesthetic turn” might mean, as Nolan imagines it. Making a case for studying “art itself” in the Middle Ages does not

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4 Aranye Fradenburg (then, Louise O. Fradenburg) addressed such difficulties in the first issue of Exemplaria. She writes, “If everything in the Middle Ages is Other to modernity, then an absolute boundary is in place; such totalisation, moreover, enables the splitting off from the Middle Ages of anything ‘anomalous’ or Other to its supposed Otherness” (73). She continues, “If we deny to our interpretive work the use of concepts of ideology and fantasy we risk losing our ability to distinguish between competing representations of reality, and between the Real and our (mis)recognitions of it” (76).

necessitate the divorce of literature from the period’s history or culture or our own contemporary ethical considerations. In Nolan’s words, it “means, most simply, writing more ‘imprudent’ histories, as Jameson would say; it means worrying both less and more about the integrity of past art – less that it remain somehow intact from our ministrations, and more that its moments of surprise, its archaisms, and its modernisms retain their true force within our own present” (571). Such a project creates possibilities for richer and more open explorations of medieval literature, its poets, and its readers, but by reimagining the role of history and historical consciousness in such explorations, it also invites a reevaluation of the relationship between such an age and our own, aesthetically, politically, and ethically. Because the work of modern aesthetic theorists like Adorno engages specifically with the intersection of aesthetics and ideology, it provides a useful tool for reintegrating aesthetic or “formalist” approaches into contemporary literary studies. It is this type of “aesthetic turn” that I hope to join with this project, and so I will speak briefly to the aspects of Nolan’s argument that have inspired and informed my own before turning to the specific theory with which I engage this project in my reading of Chaucer’s the “Prioress’s Tale.”

In considering the “absent/presence” of the medieval in Adorno’s work, Nolan argues that despite being the negative space against which the modern is defined, the medieval is inextricable from his dialectic of enlightenment and discussions of modernity and modern / archaic⁶ aesthetics but also implicated within the multi-temporal nature of the system itself. Because the notion of the modern depends on the conceptualization of the “medieval” as its

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⁶ For Adorno, the terms “modern” and “archaic” connote less a particular historical moment and more the condition of art and the conditions under which it is created. For example, he writes, “The archaic ugliness of primitive cult masks and painted faces was a substantive imitation of fear, diffused in the form of repentance. As the mythical fear grew weaker and as subjectivity grew correspondingly stronger, the ugly traits in archaic art became the target of taboo (whereas originally they has served as a vehicle for enforcing taboos). Their ugliness did not disclose itself until the idea of reconciliation was born in the wake of the formation of the subject and its nascent sense of freedom” (Aesthetic Theory 70).
other, this seldom-recognized tension in Adorno’s work (and in other theorists, including Mikhail Bakhtin and Frederic Jameson) might prove particularly useful for both medieval studies and contemporary aesthetic theory. Adorno associates modernity, and its manifestation in modern art, with a break from the universal, theological (the “unqualified claim to the truth of salvation”), and cultic, all of which are associated with the medieval period. What is created in the process is the individual, secular, and autonomous subject, what has the potential aesthetically to become “oppositional art,” independent from the society in which it is produced. He writes:

[Art] is social primarily because it stands opposed to society. Now this opposition art can mount only when it has become autonomous. By congealing into an entity unto itself – rather than obeying existing social norms and thus proving itself to be ‘socially useful’ – art criticizes society just by being there… The social deviance of art is the determinate negation of a determinate society. (321)

However, Adorno holds that the manifestation of these breaks, oppositions, and negations within works of art do not progress temporally linearly; neither is modernity inherently irreversible nor ever, in that sense, “finished”:

The difficulty of talking about the progress of art in general terms is the outgrowth of a difficulty in the structure of art history. This structure is non-homogenous. At most we are dealing with series, successions, continuities that invariably break off at some point, frequently under the pressure of society, including the pressure to conform. (298)

Nolan notes that this non-homogenous notion of modern subjectivity and artistic progress, coupled with what Adorno considers the “timelessness of art, its possession of stable

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7 Adorno, quoted in Nolan 558.
characteristics that may be discerned in both the present and the past” allows for a “paradoxically liberating quality, a potential for freeing us from the strictures of linear historicity and allowing the medieval to flourish in the modern” (551-53). It follows then that the art of what we consider to be the Middle Ages is not necessarily wedded, per se, to notions of universality, theology, or the cultic anymore than any other period, that there can be breaks within that aesthetic. Nolan reasons:

Because this break is located variously in time; on the one hand, it can be seen to coincide with the Reformation and the rise of the individual, while on the other, it becomes an effect of the Enlightenment… Medievalists might wish to push this break ever further back in time, to suggest that the processes which produced the notion of individuated subjectivity and created a crisis of universals were at work much earlier than either of these assert. (556)

Such a push threatens to undo, or at least trouble the boundaries of, what constitutes a “medieval” universal, thus destabilizing what is meant by the “modern” subject. This is the tension that Nolan finds within the negative space that the medieval occupies in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*.

For this push to occur would require a reevaluation of the aesthetics by which critics continue to define the medieval period, including, most fundamentally, the “truth-content” within notions of scholastic beauty8 that allows Adorno to associate medieval art with the universal and cultic. My thesis is an experiment in the type of “aesthetic turn” that Nolan posits, a reevaluation of medieval literature that seeks to determine what “breaks” or “crises” look like aesthetically in

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8 Umberto Eco’s *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986) remains a seminal study in medieval aesthetic concerns from the sixth through fifteenth centuries. Of scholastic notions of beauty, he writes, “When the scholastics spoke about beauty they meant by this an attribute of God” (5). Scholasticism reasoned that if the values of beauty could be identified as “a constant property of being a whole, then the beauty of the universe would be founded on a metaphysical certainty, and not on mere poetic sentiment” (20-21).
this period. It is also a meditation on how certain assumptions with regard to medieval/modern culture disrupt this experiment. Though aesthetic readings have been suspected of distracting critical attention from ideological concerns, I argue that the emphases placed on social and political, particularly linear, histories have instead subsumed aesthetics into their own narratives, disallowing the potential for an autonomous aesthetic that could oppose such histories, undermining the successful pursuit of any one theoretical line of inquiry in the process. If we wish to consider literatures as important to our understanding of the cultures in which they are produced, an emphasis on aesthetics is necessary for the productivity of our project, particularly if such understandings are problematically dependent on linear, progressive histories and notions of “otherness” and protective of conceptions of our own modernity. *The Canterbury Tales* is a piece of “oppositional art” that complicates precisely this notion of a medieval vs. modern aesthetic that governs several critical practices in the field of medieval studies and contemporary aesthetics. Specifically, in this thesis, I examine an aesthetic of “ugly” (in Adorno’s sense of the term), which, for reasons I will now develop more fully, is particularly useful in understanding how Chaucer’s literature participates in a “determinate negation of a determinate society” (*Aesthetic Theory* 321). Using the “Prioress’s Tale,” I show how ugliness in art (often manifesting as a disturbance to an anticipated form) can upset and preclude a return to order and tradition (the universal, theological, and cultic in the case of the medieval), initiating the development of Adorno’s modern subjectivity, troubling the characterization of medieval vs. modern art.
Ugliness as an Oppositional Force

Though critical attention with regard to medieval aesthetics has grown in the last decade, such attention, more often than not, has been primarily concerned with beauty, whether in poetic form or descriptive content. This is unsurprising for at least two reasons, one of which I discussed in my introduction. For medieval theologians, beauty existed as a physical manifestation of God’s divinity, of truth. Since there is a medieval theoretical tradition of aesthetics in this form, it makes sense that aesthetic readings of medieval literature would find rich sources in the writings of Augustine, Aquinas, Bonaventure and William of Auvergne. The work of Mary Carruthers and Peggy Knapp in recent years is exemplary scholarship in terms of medieval aesthetics within this context. Nolan also writes of beauty for a chapter in Paul Strohm’s Middle English (2007), though as a type of divergent aesthetic from theological preoccupations, with an emphasis on materiality as opposed to transcendentals. The second reason that such an emphasis on beauty should be expected is its privileged position within theoretical practices since Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten appropriated the term “aesthetic” in the mid-eighteenth century.9 “Aesthetics” as a critical practice is generally understood as the study of beauty (art, more casually) and formulation of critical taste. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as “the philosophy of the beautiful or of art; a system of principles for the appreciation of the beautiful, etc.; the distinctive underlying principles of a work of art or a genre, the works of an artist, the arts of a culture, etc.,” but also “the attractive appearance or sound of something.” Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgment (1790) is possibly the most influential treatise in the case of this understanding of the term. He discusses the aesthetic experience as the product of reflective judgments of agreeableness, beauty, and the sublime.

9 See Baumgarten’s Aesthetica (1750).
Judgments of beauty, in particular, are based on a disinterested feeling of pleasure. Though aesthetics, as we understand the critical practice today, does not exclude ugliness as a recognized property in artwork per se, the overwhelming consideration is, again, beauty, attractiveness. Given classical notions of “good” art, this makes sense. If art is ugly, if it does not please, is it not failed art? Is it art at all?

Adorno addresses the concept of art and pleasure as “aesthetic hedonism.” He writes, “Happiness is an accidental moment of art, less important even than the happiness that attends the knowledge of art. In short, the very idea that enjoyment is of the essence of art deserves to be thrown overboard” (22). Still, it is perhaps this preoccupation with beauty and pleasure that has also led many to overlook the importance of ugly in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory. Peter Uwe Hohendahl explains, “Since the concept of the beautiful is given a central place in Adorno’s theory, commentators have focused their attention on the link between classical aesthetic theory and the theory of the modern artwork, which stands at the center of Adorno’s endeavor” (170). He argues, however, that Adorno’s placement of a discussion of ugly before that of beauty in his work is indicative of its privilege within modernist aesthetics, namely that “the reversal between the beautiful and the ugly becomes necessary for a defense of the artwork against the impact of the culture industry and its commercialization of the beautiful… The autonomy of the artwork depends on its oppositional force, a quality that is enhanced by the ugly” (171).

Despite traditional definitions that emphasize beauty within aesthetics, ugliness has always been a recognizable part of art (and, as I will address, a particularly complex part in the Middle Ages), so it is important to address how Adorno understands the disparate functions of ugliness in traditional/classical and modern art. He explains that in traditional aesthetics, “the

10 For a more extensive analysis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment and aesthetic theory, see Douglas Burnham’s An Introduction to Kant’s Critique of Judgment (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).
ugly conflicts with the law of form that dominates a work; therefore it has to be integrated so as to confirm the primacy of form… Thus the ugly subject matter, it is said, becomes in some higher sense beautiful because it has a function in an overall pictorial composition or because it helps produce a dynamic equilibrium” (Aesthetic Theory 68). This understanding of ugliness should call to mind Augustine’s dialogue that I addressed in my Introduction: ugly must exist in order to confirm an overall order/beauty of things and once grasped as part of the whole, it will cease to be ugly. In modern art, however, ugliness disrupts such equilibrium. Its oppositional tendency becomes overwhelming and precludes pictorial unity. Hohendahl explains, “The ugly appears first and foremost as a formal moment, the result of techniques that refuse the final return from dissonance to consonance” (172).11 Dissonance, as Adorno tells us, is the “trademark” of modernism and “the technical term for what ordinary language and aesthetics call ugliness” (68). This refusal of consonance is key to his understanding of the development of autonomous artwork that does not serve a culture industry that assimilates, commercializes, and disseminates art objects as beautiful, pleasurable, or in some other way desirable, giving the “impression of being able to bring art closer to the masses, to restore to them, in heteronomous fashion, what they are alienated from” (Aesthetic Theory 25).

Within the conception of the culture industry, we find a bridge to the Middle Ages, how, in Nolan’s words, the medieval might “flourish in the modern” and also what Hohendahl finds to be one of the most important aspects of Adorno’s discussion of ugly: the cultic element in art. As outlined previously, the autonomy of art, for Adorno, is created through a break with its cultic function. What Adorno terms the “culture industry” forms the cult function previously filled by

11 Adorno has also written extensively on music, particular the work of Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky. His writing on general aesthetics often uses terms more readily associated with music such as dissonance, consonance, and harmony. Notably, my work with Adorno and his conception of “kitsch,” a term we now consider more strictly to define the visual arts, in my reading of the “Prioress’s Tale” pulls from an essay he wrote about modern music (See “Kitsch” in Essays on Music, trans. Susan H. Gillespie [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002]).
superstition, myth, and religion. Its existence characterizes one of the theses central to Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) in that the domination of rationalization or reason\(^\text{12}\) over magic (superstition, myth, religion) will regress again to a cult function through some re-formation of myth, proving “enlightenment,” in which art is implicated, is not evolutionary or inherently progressive. Adorno writes that “[ugliness] probably originated contemporaneously with the passage from the archaic to post-archaic art and it has marked the eternal reoccurrence of the archaic ever since” – a reminder of a “mythical fear” (70).\(^\text{13}\)

Even an examination of only the grotesque realism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or the carnivalesque body in Chaucer’s the “Miller’s Tale” suggests that artistic representations of ugliness in the Middle Ages are far more complicated than Augustine’s notions of aesthetic and moral equilibrium, that they are not readily inscribed within an arching cult function. In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Mikhail Bakhtin explores both of these aesthetics in the context of what he terms the unity of medieval “folk culture” and “folk carnival humor.” Beginning with an analysis of “ritual spectacles” like the medieval carnivals that took place around official church feast days, Bakhtin describes such practices as opposing the “consecration of inequality” inherent in these feasts and supreme hierarchies as an attempt to reverse, renew, and regenerate. He writes, “One might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchies, privileges, norms, and prohibitions… All were considered equal during carnival” (10). We find this same type of

\[^{12}\] Adorno’s use of “reason” should not be confflated with a medieval theological conception of reason. As Peggy Knapp notes in *Chaucerian Aesthetics*, “the serious beauties of the world are properly used by reason to contemplate the revealed, but difficult truths of Scripture and the church,” and it thus remains in service to a cult function (19).

\[^{13}\] See footnote 6.
celebration in something like the medieval fabliau, where the patriarchal order of the household is compromised through adulterous, often bawdy and humorous, liaisons.

Central to the liberation of carnival was laughter and debasement or degradation through an aesthetic of grotesque realism that emphasized the material body, particularly the lower stratum and its functions (eating, defecation, sexual intercourse, etc.). According to Bakhtin, laughter “degrades and materializes” the high seriousness of order, and such degradation “[lowers] all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and the body in their indissoluble unity” (19-20). Considering this aesthetic in relation to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Robert Levine writes that “excess – going beyond reasonable bounds – is a central characteristic of grotesque realism,” and notes the “slaughter, dismemberment, and bowels” that “proliferate in the hunting scenes” in particular (68). Such grotesque realism through degradation, I concede, is a manifestation of ugliness’s potential to usurp the general order of things, but only for a time. Images of bodily excess also extend to fertility and ample growth, emphasizing the element of eventual regeneration within carnival.

While the carnivalesque imagines a world of equality, an “upside down” world, so to speak, it does not tangibly threaten existing social hierarchies, possibly even reinforcing them. Indeed, such ritual spectacles like the “feast of fools” remained both sanctioned by an ecclesiastical calendar and markedly separated from the “official” world of order. Bakhtin writes that carnival “offered a completely different, non-official, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations… a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less.” It was “a utopian realm” (6-9). But while carnival can be read as a parody of extracarnival relations, it is “far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the
same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture” (11). Carnival may imagine a second life, a utopia, but its participants eventually return to officialdom, order restored. The manifestation of ugliness within grotesque realism and the carnivalesque, despite its liberal musings, is ultimately subsumed back into the order of things as institutionalized, ritual spectacle – a necessary dissonance that, once resolved, verifies the existing design.

Because, for Adorno, art’s oppositional potential is fundamental to its struggle against assimilation into the culture industry, which would use it to further social determinacy (the status quo), art must embrace the formal presence of ugly and resist this cultic sublimation back into the order of things, something that “folk carnival humor” cannot accomplish. He explains:

Art must take up the cause of that which is branded ugly. In doing so, art should not try to integrate or mitigate ugliness, or seek to reconcile it with its existence by employing humour, which is more repulsive than all the ugliness there is. Instead art has to make use of the ugly in order to denounce the world which creates and recreates ugliness in its own image. Incidentally, even such radical aesthetic sympathy with the oppressed runs the risk of being too affirmative and of colluding with the oppressor. (Aesthetic Theory 72)

“Ugly for ugly’s sake,” so to speak, functions socially through social negation and irreconcilability. By becoming socially useless, useless to the culture industry that is, it becomes socially invested in enlightenment. In this way, Adorno’s aesthetic theory both confirms and thwarts the common criticism levied against “aesthetic” approaches that I spoke to previously. Art is both, in some ways, “antihistorical” and “socially useless,” but is also a place of remarkable social radicalism when it acts against the order of things, when it acts against beauty: “The latent content of the formal distinction between ugly and beautiful has a social dimension.
For instance, when the peasants became a subject fit for art, this admission of ugliness into art reflected an anti-feudal impulse,” notes Adorno (72). Once sublimated into a new order however, such an admission will cease to be ugly, speaking also to an inescapable historicity and the notion that as our society becomes more “rational” our art becomes less oppositional. Adorno addresses this in his essay “The Aging of the New Music.” He writes, “The only authentic art works produced today are those that in their inner organization measure themselves by the fullest experience of horror” (200). As such, we can recognize the difficulty in finding truly autonomous or oppositional art, the difficulty of escaping the culture industry, which always promises the solace of oneness, reunification, and a panacea for human alienation; the opposite promises horror. Discernibly then, autonomous art, autonomous ugliness, must participate in while negating the power of myth. As Adorno and Horkheimer note in their introduction to Dialectic of Enlightenment, “Myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology” (xvi). The potential for each lies dormant in the other.

The remainder of my thesis is dedicated to a search for moments of opposition, autonomous ugliness, in the work of Geoffrey Chaucer. It seeks to recover a concept of “ugly for ugly’s sake” in medieval literature that usurps, disrupts, dishonors, and stains the order of things. It seeks an ugly that is base, disturbing, and irreconcilable, one that persists in spite of beauty and offers no hope of renewal, regeneration, or pleasure. Though cousin, aesthetically, in many ways to grotesque realism or the carnivalesque, both of which inform my work, this particular ugly could not be considered “folk humor,” and it services nothing. In many ways I am searching in medieval literature for what Adorno qualifies as the “fullest experience of horror,” for a type of

14 I might posit that such a notion also suggests that the most potential for autonomous art would be found in the least “rational” societies and time periods, what has been presumptuously termed the “Dark Ages.”
grotesqueness that Bakhtin claims did not exist until the Romantic era. It is in this era that the grotesque lost its “regenerative power” and turned into terror. He writes:

The world of the Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man. All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious, and hostile… On the other hand, the medieval and Renaissance folk culture was familiar with the element of terror only as represented by comic monsters, who were defeated by laughter. Terror was turned into something gay and comic. (39)

Such a claim is why I have decided to bypass the comedic ugliness implicit in the beheading games of the Green Knight and the “sex-capades” of Nicholas and Alisoun of the “Miller’s Tale” for a discussion of Chaucer’s Prioress. Though the “terror” of the Romantic era may present a false equivalence, I argue that the ugly aesthetic of this tale and teller disturbs the order of things in ways that preclude regeneration or a return to that order, and it does it from within. Where the carnivalesque unites a community, this ugliness fractures one. Where the carnivalesque produces laughter, this ugliness produces silence; this ugliness leaves us “agast.”

I turn now to a discussion of ugliness as kitsch in the “Prioress’s Tale,” which, when coupled with exaggerated violence and abjection, disrupts the appeal to religious sensibilities that critics have often read as the pinnacle of the tale’s aesthetics and poetic beauty. I read the silence that characterizes the closing of this tale as a result of the tales’ ugliness, which disturbs the pilgrim community and opposes a return to order, wholeness, and beauty. My conclusion gestures toward future aesthetic readings of Chaucer’s work and considers the implications and possibilities in granting a place for “modern” aesthetic sensibilities in medieval literature.
Harmony which tries to disown tensions that came to rest in it becomes false, disturbing, even dissonant.” – Theodor Adorno

In relation to ugliness and modernity, beginning a renewed aesthetic reading of The Canterbury Tales with the Prioress seems at once predictable, fitting, and a bit theoretically masochistic. No tale has caused more controversy in Chaucerian scholarship than Madame Eglentyne’s. With its meticulously crafted rhyme royal stanzas and allusive and symbolic language, critics have long considered the tale to be one of the most beautiful and poetically sophisticated pieces of Chaucer’s writing. Still, the Prioress’s anti-Semitism that permeates the story of the litel clergeon, who has his throat slit by Jews for singing to the Virgin Mary, complicates readings that seek only to acknowledge the pleasure of the tale’s lyricism. In any attempt to write critically on the tale, a scholar is forced to confront the Prioress’s hatred and determine the best way to account for and handle such distasteful content, particularly if he or she would still like to acknowledge the piece as having artistic value.

Michael Calabrese summarizes the four main critical approaches produced by such scholars to address this conflict:

Chaucer is anti-Semitic and we have to live with it; Chaucer’s culture\textsuperscript{15} is anti-Semitic and thus he is too by inclusion; Chaucer’s culture was not \textit{wholly} anti-Semitic, and Chaucer satirizes those who were by creating insipid anti-Semites; the Prioress, not her maker, therefore is anti-Semitic and Chaucer was a sensitive, tolerant man, ahead of his time and thus welcomed in ours. (74)

\textsuperscript{15} Emphasis in original text unless indicated otherwise.
No matter which approach one chooses, the anti-Semitism of the “Prioress’s Tale” requires historicizing of some sort and, as a result, either the redemption or condemnation of the poet. By their nature, these historicist projects have led to an increased understanding of not only Christian/Jewish relations in the Middle Ages but medieval multicultural views and representations as a whole, but even this work remains divided. There being “no Jews” in medieval England after King Edward’s Edict of Expulsion in 1290, some critics emphasize the “absent presence” of Jews in medieval English literature as a device used to foster a sense of Christian community via the degradation of the other, whether the other be actual Jews or a stand-in for diverse cultural representations.16 Noting the same historical events, other critics point to the significant amount of time between the Expulsion and that of Chaucer’s writing. They challenge the notion of widespread anti-Semitism in England, citing lack of historical evidence, and question the influence of Chaucer’s writing specifically even if such bigotry existed.17 Where one’s position lies in the debate, more often than not, determines the direction of one’s literary or aesthetic critique and also how anti-Semitic the tale becomes.

In the case of the Prioress and, as I noted in Part I of my thesis, medieval literature more widely, such historical and sociopolitical approaches have permeated scholarship for several decades. Though such work is important, even crucial, to our responsibilities as medievalists, if an aesthetic turn is to become as productive as it potentially can in our field, we must figure out a way to reconcile the discomfort we feel as scholars working with anti-Semitism post-Holocaust, or any other ethical/moral dilemmas, while maintaining both an open mind with regard to aesthetic representation across periods and also humility in our interpretations of a “medieval”

reception of those aesthetics. In this section of my thesis, my rehearsal of such a critique will read the complicated aesthetics of Chaucer’s “Prioress’s Tale” using a concept and image of kitsch as it relates to Theodor Adorno’s discussion of the interplay between the beautiful and ugly. As I position myself somewhere between the suggested approaches of Calabrese and Greg Wilsbacher, to whose arguments I will turn next, I cannot hope, and would not desire, to divorce such a reading from historical and sociopolitical context or my own ethics and responsibilities as a scholar. My goal is to acknowledge the sophistication of Chaucer’s aesthetic as a legitimate way of approaching and elucidating a complex cultural narrative in the Middle Ages. Embracing Alan T. Gaylord’s claim that Fragment VII of *The Canterbury Tales*, which includes the “Prioress’s Tale,” constitutes the “Literature Group,” and that these tales are metacritically concerned with the “art of story-telling,” I add a fifth critical approach to Calabrese’s outline: Chaucer was an artist, cognizant of art’s ability to affirm or oppose a cultural narrative, and intentionally manipulates the aesthetics of a religious miracle story, rendering it impotent in its service to the cult function (increased religious devotion) such a tale might traditionally serve. In the process, Chaucer raises aesthetic and ethical questions with regard to real life violence and suffering and its representation in devotional literature.

The Aesthetic Turn and Ethical Responsibility in the “Prioress’s Tale”: Two Discussions

While performing a case study of R.M. Lumiansky’s decision to leave the “Prioress’s Tale” out of the 1948 edition of the newly linguistically modernized *The Canterbury Tales*, Greg Wilsbacher argues for bridging the gap between aesthetics and ethics in medieval studies. Lumiansky, sensitive to audience reactions to anti-Semitic material (especially not long after the

18 “Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*: Harry Bailly as Horseback Editor” (*PMLA* 82.2, 1967).
Shoah), justifies his decision in the introduction to the edition: “The present day reader has modern reactions in literature, no matter when it was written. From this point of view, the Prioress’s story of the little choirboy who is murdered by the Jews possesses an unpleasantness which overshadows its other qualities” (qtd. in Wilsbacher 4). Wilsbacher reads this decision as a privileging of ethics over aesthetics, and it is a decision that not only borders censorship but also one that threatens the study of literature in the academy. He labels this conflict between ethical sensitivity toward a painful past and obligation to the objective study of that past “Lumiansky’s paradox” and posits that it may be solved, at least in the case of art, through an approach that does not deny the aesthetic experience, but uses that experience, in the form of pleasure or pain, to raise greater ethical questions. He writes, “The return of aesthetics to medieval studies holds much promise, but that promise will be short lived if the discussion does not move beyond the New Criticism’s problematic mode of aesthetic commentary, especially when dealing with ‘The Prioress’s Tale’” (9). The assumption is that any “aesthetic only” approach to the tale would make the reader complicit in the dissemination of its anti-Semitic sentiments. Emily Stark Zitter’s analysis of the tale supports such an assumption:

If Chaucer meant the Prioress’s Tale to criticize anti-Semitism, he simply would not have made the story work so well… Chaucer’s masterly hand has created a work that moves even modern-day readers and critics. Just as the Pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales were sobered by the story of the “litel clergeon” and the Jews, so are modern-day readers moved by this tale and especially by its fictional teller, despite their abhorrence of the anti-Semitism that the Prioress and her tale reveal. (277)
So well crafted, the tale even tricks modern readers into sentimentally privileging aesthetics over ethics, forgetting, at least temporarily, the reality of anti-Semitism. For Wilsbacher, it is just such readings that threaten the future. If we for a second abandon our abhorrence of bigotry, we put the future at risk of reliving such horrors as the Holocaust. In order that readers do not fall into this trap, Wilsbacher argues that modern ethics must inform any aesthetic approach to this tale or any other piece of literature that threatens the coherence and legitimacy of those ethics. He concludes, “The feelings signaled by *aesthesis* do, however, provide the opportunity to link the phrases of an aesthetic genre of discourse to those of an ethical genre, and it is the ethical genre that orients us to the future and to the other. Dwelling on the unpleasantness of the aesthetic affect of the poem is, I believe, vital for such linkage to happen” (20).

Not surprisingly, Wilsbacher’s own study of the “Prioress’s Tale” in this same article dwells on just that unpleasantness, reading the aesthetics of the tale as deepening a virulent anti-Semitism. Most notably, he reads the “sobre” silence of the pilgrims at the conclusion of the tale as tacit consent to such bigotry. Using Kant’s formulation for the possibility of a universally accepted judgment of beauty, he writes that “aesthetic judgments of the beautiful always gesture to a closure of debate and a desire for general consent, the type of consent manifest at the close of ‘The Prioress’s Tale’” (15). I will complicate his interpretation of this silence later in my own reading, but what I will point out for now is Wilsbacher’s emphasis on the resignation of the pilgrim community to what he views as a tragic lack of ethics caused by the pleasure they find in the aesthetic of the tale. He then connects this type of communal consent to the reading of the poem in the academy today. I find it necessary, both argumentatively and responsibly, to quote Wilsbacher here at length:

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19 However, Thomas L. Reed’s consideration of the “aesthetics of irresolution” that was recurring especially in medieval debate literature shows us that such employment of Kant’s formulation of consent and closure is not so neatly and universally applicable in the Middle Ages.
While the reasons for reading any work by Chaucer are complex, part of the expectation underlying the general validity of these types of judgments of beauty is that other critics, other members of this academic community, will read the tale and will share that state of mind. However, in the face of bigotry so obviously untenable to readers of the poem after the Shoah, “The Prioress’s Tale” continues to be read, and the aesthetic rationale for that reading exists on a continuum, at the far end of which sits the aestheticization of politics (i.e., the collapsing of the beautiful and the good into one) that played such a significant role in the rise of fascism in Nazi Germany. This, in no way, means that commentators on “The Prioress’s Tale” are fascists or bigots. Emphatically, they are not. Instead, I am contending that there is a similarity in the way that aesthetic rationales are treated in each instance: as a cornerstone of an idea of a unified community that seeks closure and consent rather than the non-closure of difference and debate. (16)

As an inscribed audience, the pilgrims serve as models, though, with respect to anti-Semitism, regretfully so, for the readers of the tale. For Wilsbacher, their consensus with regard to the beauty of the poem is eerily similar to the academy’s consideration of it as worthy of reading, enjoying and studying.

Wilsbacher enacts precisely the type of analysis that Calabrese argues may be detrimental to literary studies and, in so doing, performs, ironically, a version of the “closed” readings he fears proliferate in the academy. Calabrese warns that scholars and teachers “cannot proceed uncritically in the pursuit of ethics as an attendant aspect of our studies of the medieval. The new directions in our criticism have re-defined the role of the literary critic in dangerous ways; dangerous in that if critics are to become ethicists and social theorists, then our scholarly subject
will become undone” (69). The problem that Calabrese recognizes with such ethical readings like Wilsbacher’s analysis is that they take an authoritative position with regard to what particular responses certain literature should evoke from a modern subject. He notes this occurs frequently with the “Prioress’s Tale,” writing that “often not only the focus and framework of the arguments but also the rhetoric of Prioress studies are informed by political imperatives, encouraging a strong emotional reaction rather than thoughtful review from their readers” (74).

Because Wilsbacher carries present-day emotions associated with the Holocaust and a political/ethical project to the literature intentionally, he positions the poem as servant to one particular historical narrative, making any potentially conflicting reading difficult and uncomfortable to sustain. Such ethical projects run the risk, according to Calabrese, of “reducing the text under study to a type of historical hate crime” (70). Positioning itself as the moral authority, an ethically-based reading of the “Prioress’s Tale” discourages dissenting interpretations through the creation of a fear that such interpretations may be “accused of taking an inexcusable apolitical position, or, worse, of being insensitive to the history of violence and difference” (Calabrese 70). I would add that such readings also position contemporary ethical and aesthetic concerns as having greater importance and legitimacy than those of the Middle Ages, which also undermines our subject of study.

After positing that such ethical concerns become problematic when studying the “Prioress’s Tale,” Calabrese performs a reading of the poem that seeks instead to recontextualize it within Chaucer’s own time and attend to the literariness of the tale before raising any ethical questions with regard to medieval or modern sentiments. Taking the position that anti-Semitism was not as widespread in Chaucer’s England as some scholars have suggested, Calabrese focuses on the presentation of the tale by attending to the character of the Prioress. This leads him to the
other recurring scholarly conclusion regarding the intentions of the tale: the portrait of the Prioress as both nun and aspiring courtier, coupled with the overly sentimental religious story she tells, is ironic. The tale is not then a tool for the dissemination of anti-Semitism but, instead, a parody of absurd anti-Semites like the Prioress. My own interpretation of this tale, ultimately, aligns most closely with this reading, but my intention is not to divorce such a reading from the ethical questions it produces regarding the Middle Ages. Nor do I wish to debate the cultural significance of anti-Semitism in medieval England as justification for such an interpretation. Instead, I would like to submit that defensive maneuvers such as these might be a result of hesitancy to revise certain assumptions with regard to medieval aesthetics, and medieval culture more generally, because they might disrupt our understanding of the modern subject in relation to the medieval other. If medieval people or, at least, one medieval artist is capable of raising complicated ethical questions with regard to religion, violence, history, and art through an equally complicated and perhaps even “modern-looking” aesthetic, how do we define our own modernity? As Wilsbacher suggests, my analysis of the “Prioress’s Tale” will also “dwell on the unpleasantness of the aesthetic affect of the poem,” but I argue that Chaucer’s pilgrims and a medieval readership may have been dwelling there already.

**Ugly Art and Aesthetics of Kitsch**

Countless critics have noted that when it comes to the portrait of the Prioress in the “General Prologue” of *The Canterbury Tales*, something in the description seems off. Her title implies that she is the spiritual head of a priory, but the narrator’s description of her focuses

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20 Albert B. Friedman’s writing on the tale exhibits just such an inclination. He writes, “It is foolish to expect Chaucer in 1390 to show egregious charity toward the Jews when such broadmindedness was even impossible for Pascal 250 years later… The genial humanity that endears Chaucer to us stems from his being unreservedly and vividly of that time and of that place, bitter as it may be for us to accept his temporal and local limitations” (120).
primarily on her table manners, compassion toward animals, and aspirations of attending court, and not so much her religious convictions (lines 118-62 of the “General Prologue”). This initially superficial description has led many to question what exactly Chaucer meant by assigning her a tale as overly sentimental, religious, and brutally violent as that of the litel clergeon and cursed Jewes. Unlike the overtly critical portraits of other religious figures like the Monk, Friar, and Pardoner, the Prioress does not immediately strike the reader as ecclesiastically and overtly corrupt, perhaps just a little too well groomed or over zealous.

For several scholars who elect to read the “Prioress’s Tale” ironically, this portrait in the “General Prologue” is the key, but F.W. Bateson goes one step further in recognizing the tale as an English masterpiece of pastiche: “It is presented to us by a mature Chaucer primarily as a kind of story that this Prioress might be expected to tell...[neither tragedy nor parody], but a half-way condition between genuine pathos and strict literary satire, in which the author’s skill in fabricating what looks extraordinarily like a real article is displayed for our technical admiration” (qtd. in Rex 37). Different from what most critics label as parody, Richard Rex writes that such a “pastiche draws our attention to the ironic implications of the tale in relation to its teller, whereas parody would have focused satire on the tale itself: Chaucer is not satirizing miracle stories, although he readily exploits one for a satiric purpose” (37). The OED defines pastiche as a work of art that “incorporates several different styles” or is “made up of parts drawn from a variety of sources,” also a work “created in the style of someone or something else; a work that humorously exaggerates or parodies a particular style.” Rex then locates the fundamental working of pastiche, the irony, in “the extended emphasis on diminutives both in the tale’s prologue and in the tale” that exaggerate the Prioress’s sentimentality, especially in the similarities between her and the litel clergeon, who are both represented as naïve children used
as conduits for the Virgin’s miracle songs.

Ultimately, this satiric reading, for both Bateson and Rex, “reflects more precisely than any of the other Canterbury Tales the comic character of its speaker as she is delineated in such brilliant detail in the General Prologue” and that the “multiple ironies of her tale… causes us to reflect upon the true meaning of charity” (Bateson qtd. in Rex, Rex 41). While this critical work does well to emphasize the idiosyncrasies of the tale and also the important implications in considering the Prioress’s portrait in relation to the tale she chooses, I do not feel that irony, satire, or pastiche fully capture the aesthetic intricacy and nuance of the poem and, therefore, miss additional, potentially affective responses. For instance, such readings normally do not attend to the punctuated stanzas of extremely violent murders and the image of the mutilated body beyond recognizing them to be a result of the Prioress’s misplaced and overwrought emotional displays of piety and rhetorical skill in eliciting the same response from her audience. Though these moments may indeed be exaggerations of techniques used throughout the traditional telling of these religious stories, to read the satire as comedic or simply a stab at Christian misunderstanding or misuse of doctrine, or the genre of these tales more generally, glosses over some very disturbing imagery in the poem, confirming Wilsbacher’s fears that entertainment and pleasure might come at the price of ethics. Additionally, I argue, readings that do not fully attend to these shocking images, particularly the treatment of the body of the clergeon, do not fully acknowledge the sophistication of Chaucer’s artwork. I argue that kitsch (not pastiche or satire), understood as a particular flavor of ugliness, is a productive aesthetic to explore in the “Prioress’s Tale” and one that will account for such a disturbing revision of the miracle story and its implications for the tale, teller, pilgrims, poet, audience, and Adorno’s notion of “oppositional art.”
The history and etymology of the term “kitsch” are debated, but general consensus places its roots in mid-nineteenth century Germany, referring to inexpensive art and art objects often sold by Munich art dealers (Rugg). Defining exactly what kitsch is and does in any one historical, political, or aesthetic moment is an even greater task. Some art historians and theorists tie the concept specifically to the modernist art movement and avant-garde while others claim that the aesthetic can be applied in diverse cultures and historical movements more universally.\(^{21}\) In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Theodor Adorno defines kitsch, or “sugary trash,” as that which “defies definition.” In his essay regarding the term in relation to music, he writes, “If the interpretation is correct that derives the word from the English *sketch*, then this would mean, first of all, the quality of being unrealized merely hinted at” (“Kitsch” 501). The term today is used mostly pejoratively and implies a sense of bad art, low art, or non-art because of its inclination to appeal to wide audiences (presumably, those bereft of artistic sensibility) and be readily and massively reproduced. It is connected most closely to modern art and pop culture, but its reputation of being marketed to a less sophisticated audience of art consumers instills the term with an elitist invective. For this reason, kitsch is connected to capitalism more generally and, with more potential for psychological manipulation, to political propaganda.

However, Adorno’s understanding of kitsch’s aesthetics moves beyond such ready contemporary associations when he writes that “the one enduring characteristic it has is that it preys on fictitious feelings, thereby neutralizing real ones. Kitsch is a parody of catharsis,” and so kitsch can only imitate (341). Similarly, Matei Calinescu describes kitsch as being semiotically ambiguous. Kitsch is “intended to look both genuine and skillfully fake” (Calinescu 252). Overall, kitsch recognizes set rules with regard to predictable forms and aesthetic effects.

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\(^{21}\) For Adorno, kitsch is the product of history as “the concept is itself a frame that is always filled historically and has its actual justification only in polemics” (“Kitsch” 504).
Kitsch artists, “in addressing themselves to a well-defined audience of average consumers, apply definite sets of rules and communicate varieties of highly predictable messages in stereotyped ‘aesthetic packages’” (Calinescu 249). For the purposes of my analysis of the “Prioress’s Tale,” the most relevant aspects of kitsch are its “stylistic over determination” or “aesthetic overkill,” cathartic parody, and relationship to Adorno’s concept of the beautiful and the ugly (Calinescu 251, 230).

Though Adorno ultimately concludes that kitsch is indefinable in any practical sense, he speaks to what he finds amounts to its nature in relation to the beauty it strives to imitate. In chapter 3 of Aesthetic Theory, “The ugly, the beautiful and technology,” Adorno writes:

> Appropriated through negation, the ugly as antithesis of the beautiful gnaws away at the affirmative spiritualization of art. In art history the concept of the beautiful then can be said to have been absorbed into the dialectic of the ugly. In this connection, the phenomenon of kitsch or sugary trash is the beautiful minus its ugly counterpart. Therefore, kitsch, purified beauty, becomes subject to an aesthetic taboo that in the name of beauty pronounces kitsch to be ugly. (71)

Given what I’ve already covered in Part I with regard to the function of ugliness in art, this idea requires some unpacking. As art progresses toward autonomy and modernity, where the ugly more successfully “gnaws away at the affirmative spiritualization of art” (read, “cult function”), the traditional aesthetic principle that ugly affirms beauty is lost as ugliness becomes a positive formal component of the work. For Adorno, kitsch’s performance of beauty is exemplary of this process because in its “purified” state it lacks that which confirms classical beauty – ugly. Kitsch, in merely rehearsing what society has consistently affirmed as beautiful and attractive, lacks the internal conflict, the inner ugliness, and the inherent, internal opposition that, according
to Adorno, makes traditional beauty intelligible. Trite, banal, repetitive, predictable, sentimental, gaudy, cheap, and conventional are all words that have been used to describe kitsch, and because of this it has often been linked to the Gothic and Romanticism literary movements. When considering Adorno’s description of kitsch in relation to beauty, I find such comparisons useful. In particular, the Gothic’s medievalism exemplifies what Adorno views as the historical imperative within the aesthetic. He writes, “Kitsch is the precipitate of devalued forms and empty ornaments from a formal world that has become remote from its immediate context” (“Kitsch” 501).

However, in becoming ugly, in becoming what the “elite” artistic world (in which Adorno himself is often placed by critics of his theory) writes off as “sugary trash,” it would follow that kitsch may also harbor the potential for opposition. This tension speaks to why Adorno’s opinions of kitsch are torn and, ultimately, especially dependent on form, presentation and the historical/cultural moment. Thomson explains:

Adorno does object to what he calls “kitsch with ‘class’”, kitsch with pretensions to artistic sophistication, as much as he objects to any supposed art which does not push towards extremes: as ever his criticism seems to be mostly aimed at the comfortable middle-ground where something claims to be artistic without challenging conventions. Indeed he is concerned that attacks on kitsch have become a way of defending “a ‘moderate’ culture of the musical that no longer possesses any power.” (64)

Kitsch that tries to pass as actual art, that tries to appeal to a wide audience, that is readily commercialized, that works to “parody catharsis” or manipulate the behavior of the masses harbors no oppositional power. “The social moment is essentially constitutive of [kitsch],” writes
Adorno. “For by serving up past formal entities as contemporary, it has a social function – to deceive people about their true situation, to transfigure their existence, to allow intentions that suit some powers or other to appear to them in a fairy-tale glow. All kitsch is essentially ideology” (“Kitsch” 502). Kitsch that embraces its position as “good bad art,” however, has the potential to retain a sense of autonomy by embracing its own taboo, becoming self-aware of its own ugliness, and “excis[ing] through the language of form the traces of [cultic] affirmation” (Thomson 63, Aesthetic Theory 73).

Though kitsch as a recognized aesthetic category is an advent of modernity, Jeffrey F. Hamburger locates the aesthetic in the “ugly art” created by nuns in fourteenth-century Germany. He writes that Nonnenarbeiten, “nun’s work” in Germany and Northern Europe more generally, also known as Kleine Andachtsbilder, or “small devotional images,” “come dangerously close to what commonly is called kitsch, in Germany linked with the ‘feminine’ categories of Heim und Herz, or ‘domesticity and sentimentality’” (“Ugly Art” 13-14). The images to which he refers are particularly notable for an exaggerated grotesqueness in depictions of Christ’s wounds but also an overall deformed representation of the body, a sort of “unidealized physicality,” according to Hamburger, including an often-striking disproportionality. Hamburger notes that one particular assortment of such pieces, Adolf Spamer’s Das Kleine Andachtsbilder, has been called “a truly formidable collection of mawkish and trashy in six centuries of popular Christian art” (“Ugly Art” 14). Though Nonnenarbeiten was, for all intents and purposes, ugly, devoid of what modern or medieval aesthetic sensibilities would consider traditional (neo-Platonic) artistic merit, it served a greater affective purpose for the women that created it and for whom it was created, beyond the awkward, unseemly, and even disturbing aesthetic. In order to understand these images, “we must forget any preconceived notions of ‘Art’,” writes Hamburger. “Instead we

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22 What we often recognize today as camp.
must try to inhabit her world, removed from our own by the passage of time and the seclusion of the cloister” (*Nuns as Artists* 1-2).

We should consider such images to be in line with the aesthetics of affective piety more broadly, its close relationship with suffering and compassion. Within devotional art, according to Douglas Gray, “utility is normally put before beauty, and sometimes, though fortunately not always, excludes it altogether” (37). For many works, “naturalism of detail and a pietistic imagination can result in grotesque and overstrained expressionism” (27-28). Still, this is not how the nuns who created these images would have conceived them. Such overwrought representations of violence, like that of the crucifixion, were meant to elicit equally sentimental responses of pity and piety, not necessarily traditional artistic appreciation. Of one *Kleine Andachtsbilder*, in which Christ hangs on the cross completely covered in blood, Hamburger writes, “Not an object intended for viewing at a disinterested distance, it asks to be handled and touched… We are compelled to identify with the body and blood of Christ through the sheer livid profusion of ruddy ink that saturates the paper” (*Nuns as Artists* 1).

Hamburger’s use of kitsch to describe *Nonnenarbeiten*, although an aesthetically appropriate observation, aligns with colloquial notions of the term in describing “non-art,” art created with ulterior motivations, or art created by those lacking artistic skill. Hamburger tells us that *Nonnenarbeiten* were “made by and for nuns lacking both systematic training in art and wide-ranging contact with images outside the convent,” and we know that these images were created, first and foremost, to serve in devotion (“Ugly Art” 18). In describing such art as “ugly” and “kitschy,” Hamburger reasons why such images have been disregarded by the art world for so long. Embracing, however, the kitsch of *Nonnenarbeiten* in terms of Adorno’s aesthetics helps us to understand their cult function. Indeed, Hamburger notes in his article “Ugly Art” that when
asked for his opinion of Flemish art (apparently less aesthetically sophisticated), Michelangelo said that it will “generally please the devout better than any painting in Italy… and not through the vigor and goodness of the painting… It will appeal to women, especially the very old and very young, and also to monks and nuns and to certain nobleman who have no sense of true harmony” (qtd. in “Ugly Art” 9). Stripped of any artistic “harmony,” such devotional images become objects of pure affect, which can be imitated and reproduced in service to the greater religious function for which they are created. Though admittedly ugly, violent, and grotesque, these images are, above all, religiously useful. In many ways, they encapsulate Augustine’s vision of ugly as being in service to beauty, a part of a divine order and also more general Christian notions of formosa deformitas (beautiful ugliness). Hamburger notes, “Christ’s triumph in and over death matched and made good the oxymoron of the felix culpa of the Fall; in the words of Augustine: ‘He hung deformed on the cross, but his deformity was our beauty’” (Nuns as Artists 64). Within the walls of the cloister, for some of the most devout Christian women, ugly is beauty and suffering divine.

Adorno’s writing on the aesthetics of kitsch moves beyond a surface level “flea-market” conceptualization, so to speak, of how these art objects operate, particularly their potential in helping to elucidate a greater understanding of the relationship between beauty and ugliness and also the difference between autonomous/oppositional and commercialized/cultic art. This makes kitsch, an aesthetic that, as Nonnenarbeiten indicates, seems recognizable across art history, a useful tool in understanding the function of these key concepts in the artwork of the Middle Ages. If the ugliness of suffering, of Christ’s death, is reaestheticized as beautiful (evoking pity and piety) by the religious order, then the grotesque figures of Nonnenarbeiten are kitschy in their complete embrace and overwrought employment of such an aesthetic.
Adorno’s conception of kitsch is founded in his writing on music, but as it resurfaces in *Aesthetic Theory*, his use of a musical vocabulary remains apt. He, like Michelangelo, also describes the pleasure or sophistication of art in terms of harmony, as it depends on internal tension, competing forms and affects: “Harmony which tries to disown tensions that came to rest in it becomes false, disturbing, even dissonant” (69). In my reading of the “Prioress’s Tale,” a story with the accompaniment of a religious song, I find this particular sense of “harmony” useful in helping us to understand how, in Chaucer’s retelling of the story, the aesthetics of kitsch as “purified beauty,” can lead to an all together different affective response than has generally been offered in discussions of Madame Eglentyne and the *litel clergeon*. Chaucer’s oppositional aesthetics of kitsch expose the cult function implicit in miracles of the virgin by stripping the Prioress and her tale of genuine affective sensibility, creating instead a type of horror. While the Prioress is a devout religious figure, within the structure of the *Canterbury Tales*, she becomes, as do all the pilgrims, a storyteller, and an artist. An examination of Chaucer’s literature necessitates consideration of his tellers and, in the case of the Prioress, a nun as artist.

**Gauded Brooches, Litel Clergeons**

In his book *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (2001), Bruce Holsinger dedicates a chapter to the violence in the “Prioress’s Tale.” He works to uncover how despite the clergeon learning the *Alma redemptoris* outside traditional classroom teaching, the boy is still exposed to a type of violence that Holsinger links to the widespread instruction and reception of music in the Middle Ages. He notes that the clergeon learns the *Alma* by rote, unable to understand the Latin. Indeed, in the beginning of the tale, we
understand that the young boy relies entirely on what he has been instructed to do by his mother with regard to religious devotion. “As hym was taught, to knele adoun and seye / His Ave Marie, as he goth by the weye” (507-508). We are given no indication that he actually understands the practices, again emphasized by his learning of the *Alma redemptoris* from another schoolboy who admits to lacking a full understanding of the text as well. The boy is simply attracted to the beauty of the song itself and lacks the proper spiritual reflection that should accompany the viewing and singing of devotional images and music. Throughout this chapter, Holsinger performs an impressive reading of the violent implications of the clergeon’s untrained voice within medieval music instruction yet misses what I see as a particularly fruitful connection between the tale and its narrator, the Prioress, and what this relationship might then say about the wider aesthetics of the tale.

From the portrait of the Prioress in the “General Prologue,” we see that, like the clergeon, she has been well-instructed in outward “performative” techniques, particularly singing: “Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne, / Entuned in hir nose ful semely” (122-23). Also, she displays the highest degree of manners at meals: “At mete wel y-taught was she with alle: / She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle… In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest” (127-32). However, critics have long noted that this particular behavior, while seemingly innocuous and attractive, even beautiful, might call into question her motives as a Prioress. For one of such religious devotion, her attention to courtly etiquette, that it “peyned hire to countrefete cheere / Of court, and to been estatlich of manere, / And to ben holden digne of reverence” seems odd given her assumed duties to the Church (139-41). Like the young clergeon, she, admittedly, lacks the proper “konnyng” regarding religious devotion. Agreeing with Fradenburg, Holsinger, argues that “the Virgin’s body provides the Prioress with the ‘open door,’ the mediator, the easy
passage… imaged through the silence of the human ‘tongue’ which cannot, but need not speak” (264). When the Prioress prays, “Gydeth my song that I shal of yow seye,” she asks that the Virgin speak through her, that her body be used as vessel for the Virgin to say accurately what the Prioress may not be able to. It could be argued then that, like the Prioress, the clergeon also lacks the “konnyng,” the proper learning required to speak the true praise and “worthynesse” of the Virgin. Instead, she will speak through him. The Prioress may be able to perform religious devotion, but we are left to question whether or not she actually knows what it is meant to produce.

Focusing specifically on the description of the Prioress in the “General Prologue,” R.D. Eaton uses a rigorous and convincing etymological investigation to show that contrary to accepted critical interpretation, when Chaucer’s narrator speaks of the nun’s “conscience” he is not referring to her sensibility or emotional state but to her performance as a nun. In the case of the word’s occurrence in the Middle Ages, conscience refers to a type of “prescriptive work.” Eaton writes, “By means of its power and authority, [conscience] has kept or is keeping the soul pure, or it is relentlessly and unavoidably reminding the soul of its failures and of the need for atonement or the inevitability of harsh judgment” (505). He continues, “If someone is to ‘spoken of’ someone’s conscience in a late Middle English text, we would expect… to hear either about the person’s awareness of his or her own record of wrongs committed… or about his or her exemplary conformity to the prescriptive ideals of conscience” (505-506). The Prioress belongs in the latter, as a woman “pure and free of the stains of sin,” a trait that manifests literally, I would add, through her meticulous table manners: “Hir over-lippe wyped she so clene / That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene” (Eaton 506, “General Prologue” 133-34). Fradenburg reads the Prioress’s attempt at purification in her exaggerated praising of the Lord in her prologue:
“Praise is a linguistic surrendering of the interior of belief, an attempt at guiltless or ‘innocent’ speech, at having in one’s mouth only the words of the Lord, no filth, no rival creation, no presumptuous attempt to disembody the human by and through voice” (91). If we read the “Prioress’s Prologue and Tale” as exemplary of a type of linguistic legitimation of her own sinless state, she, in Eaton’s words, can be read as “staging emotions” (497). Reading the Prioress as a performer accounts for the perverseness of her portrait to which several critics allude. Eaton explains:

The Prioress believes that she can claim moral purity by demonstrating that she is charitable and pitous and that she can claim to be charitable and pitous because we can see that she weeps when she sees small animals being mistreated… The Prioress's claim to being a woman of conscience in any morally worthy sense fails, however. It fails because the terms of her defense are skewed and distorted, in a number of ways, under the influence of her egocentrism… It invites the suspicion, too, that the Prioress may be more interested in the ways that observed injustice or cruelty affect her than in the effect they have on their victims: “See how I weep when I witness such things,” is what she's really saying. (506-508)

Almost everything about the Prioress’s appearance, from her “fair forheed” to her singing, to her attire, screams “look at me!”

Though Eaton might be correct in that her performance of charity and pity read as “skewed and distorted,” I would argue that subtle speciousness characterizes the Prioress’s portrait in the “General Prologue” as a whole. She speaks French “ful faire and fetisly,” but it is an inauthentic French “after the scole of Stratford ate Bowe, / For Frenssh of Parys was to hire
unknowne” (124-126). It “peyned hire to *countrefete* cheere / of Court” (my emphasis, 139-140). Even within the description of her jewelry, we find the possibility of superficiality: “Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar / A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene, / And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene, / On which ther was first write a crowned A, / And after *Amor vincit omnia*” (158-62). Though the ostentation of this piece becomes evident in the length and detail of description alone, the word “gauded” reinforces the ornamentation of her portrait, requalifying the Prioress as a woman to be noticed, but also increases the sense of artifice. In addition to “a large ornamental bead in a rosary,” the Middle English Dictionary defines “gaud” (root of the modern “gaudy”) in its noun form as “a jest, joke, prank,” a “fraud, deception, trick, artifice,” or “a bauble, trinket.” Like the clergeon’s song, the brooch becomes an empty outward signifier, an aesthetic adornment, and a prop in her performance of religious devotion. Calinescu writes, “If we think of kitsch in terms of aesthetic deceptions and self-deception, there are obviously as many types of kitsch as there are possibilities of misusing or counterfeiting the signs of art” (235). Taken together, this portrait of Madame Eglentyne as an imitator, a woman cloaked in artifice who is constantly performing, is kitschy. The Prioress becomes a woman whom Chaucer “intended to look both genuine and skillfully fake” (Calinescu 252).

If Chaucer paints the Prioress as an object of kitsch in the “General Prologue,” she herself also becomes the kitsch artist of her own tale. She imagines the telling of her story as her “labour,” much in the way, as critics often note, Chaucer characterizes his own writing.

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23 “Countrefet” is defined by the MED as being “made to resemble something, made after a pattern, imitation,” when of a person, “disguised, impersonating someone else, false” and “deceptive, deceitful.”

24 The MED also defines “gauded” as meaning “yellowish” or “green.” However, because the description of the brooch includes the color specifically and separately from this adjective, it seems that “gauded” carried a different implication here in the text. Still, Richard Rex reads the color green in the Prioress’s portrait as an extension of the sense of irony in her description. He writes, “Irony is achieved by omission, in the fact that Chaucer did not choose either heavenly blue or virginal white and by the ambiguities inherent to the colors red and green within a context intentionally suggestive of courtly love poetry. Simply by his choice of colors Chaucer transforms a well-known symbol of religious devotion into one suggestive of carnal appetite and hypocrisy” (68).
(“Prioress’s Tale” 463). In surrendering herself to the Virgin who will “gydeth [her] song” the Prioress appears pious, but she also admits, as we have previously noted, that her “konnyng is so wayk,” a word that, according to the MED, means “ability or skill; competence (in a profession or other activity), mastery (of an art)” (“Prioress’s Tale” 481, my emphasis). For as humble as her prologue makes the Prioress appear, it also presents a woman who seems to conflate religious devotion and artistic skill. This, again, links her to the clergeon, who knows of the Virgin only through what he has been taught by image and song, tools of devotion.

Affectless Devotion and Chaucer’s Miracle of the Virgin

Speaking of artistic replication, Adorno writes, “it makes a world of difference whether art is ignorant of replication or whether it has the technique of replication under its belt, so to speak, but negates it through deliberate deformation, as is the case in modern art.” Such a distinction is important because “after having experienced the heteronomy that comes with replication, art will never forget what it has gone through, and will never return to what it once – for good reasons – negated” (Aesthetic Theory 53). Though the Prioress might suffer from a “wayk konnyng,” Chaucer’s deliberate deformation of an otherwise conventional miracle story becomes clear when examining the aesthetics of devotional literature more widely and sources for the “Prioress’s Tale” specifically.

The “Prioress’s Tale” is in many ways typical of the Marian devotional tradition, which was reaching its peak popularity in Chaucer’s time. According to Richard P. Batteiger, devotional art and literature, like Nicholas Love’s The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ (1410), relied heavily on powerful imagery, was “more concerned with piety and devotion than with theology,” and “sought to present the basic lessons of Christianity” through “direct appeal

25 Chaucer, in his “Retraction,” also addresses his “unkonnynge” in creating stories that might displease his readers.
to the emotions and imagination.” He continues, “It was necessary for the authors to strive for vividness and clarity rather than obscurity” (7-8). The “Prologue of the Prioress’s Tale” reads especially as a conventional religious invocation to Mary, employing several images associated with the Virgin, including the “white lylye flour,” the “bussh unbrent, brennynge in Moyses sighte,” and “the lyght” that “gyden us unto thy Sone so deere” (461, 468, and 479-80).

Particularly noteworthy is the Prioress’s emphasis on children, imagined first on the “brest soukynge” and then as herself, “a child of twelf month oold, or lesse, / That kan unnethes any word expresse” (458, 484-85). Again, such imagery is typical in several Middle English Marian lyrics, especially those that are concerned with the Annunciation and Nativity, which focus on Mary’s virginity and mother/child relationship with the Christ child. Karen Saupe writes, “The Annunciation provides the foundation for all Marian devotion… The news of the Annunciation invites joyful anticipation of Jesus’ birth” (20-21). The Prioress’s lauding of the Virgin creates this exaltation through the repetition of the exclamatory “O,” the first syllable in her prologue, through several lines: “O mooder Mayde, O mayde mooder free!” and “O blisful Queene” (467, 481). Her invocation becomes a rhythmically repetitive catalogue of the Virgin’s virtues, which hastens the pace of the lyric and heightens the sense of anticipation. According to Douglas Gray, “The Incarnation is linked with the renewal of nature and the rebirth of fertility in the earth” (105). He notes that St Bernard said that the Virgin’s womb was “a meadow verdant in an endless spring” that “brought forth a flower, whose beauty will never droop” (St Bernard qtd. in Gray 105). The Incarnation is rendered a pure act, implicating that “Christ did not take flesh of his mother but simply ‘passed through’ her” (Douglas 101). Such imagery aligns both with the children of the Prioress’s Prologue, who, new to the world, perform praise of the Lord and also the Prioress’s own surrendering to the Virgin’s guidance. By opening herself to the
“worthynesse” of the Virgin, the Prioress becomes the land by which the name of the Lord may be “ysprad,” a metaphor that materializes in her tale when the Virgin plants the grain in the clergeon’s mouth (“Prologue” 454).

With its perfected rehearsal of several key tropes of traditional Marian devotional lyrics, the “Prologue of the Prioress’s Tale” exemplifies why critics like F.W. Bateson and Richard Rex read the work as a type of pastiche, an instance of Chaucer fulfilling audience expectations with regard to the type of art a Prioress would offer and displaying it “for our technical admiration” (Rex 37). If the same can be said for her tale as for her prologue, then Chaucer displays what we now recognize generically as a miracle of the virgin, another manifestation of Marian devotion in the Middle Ages. But Chaucer’s revisions to the story of the clergeon emphasize not the technical articulation of a particular type of devotional literature per se but aesthetic manipulation of the imagery within it. What emerges in the tale is not pastiche but kitsch.

Particularly in relation to Nativity lyrics, the evocation of “littleness” to describe the Christ child lends to the aesthetic of sweetness and affective sentimentality. For example, one anonymous, highly alliterative, fourteenth-century lyric creates intimacy between the speaker and child by coupling the adjective with words like “dere” and “derlyng”:

Lullay, myn lyking, my dere sone, myn swetyng,
Lullay, my dere herte, myn owyn dere derlyng.
I saw a fayr maydyn syttyn and synge;
Sche lullyd a lytyl chyld, a swete lording.
That eche Lord is that that made alle thinge;
Of alle lordis he is Lord, of all Kynges Kyng… (Saupe 70)

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26 One need only to turn to “An ABC,” an early Chaucerian Marian lyric written for Blanche, the Duchess of Lancaster, for evidence of Chaucer’s technical mastery of devotional literature.
Rex, however, points to “the extended emphasis on diminutives both in the [Prioress’s] tale’s prologue and in the tale” as pastiche – what I call kitsch. So many things within the “Prioress’s Tale, from the clergeon to his schoolbook to the space of thought in Jesus’ heart (line 604), are “litel.” Though we begin the tale through the “mouth of children… on the brest soukynge,” an image aligned with that of traditional devotional lyrics that often feature the small Christ child at Mary’s pap, the Prioress’s extension of “littleness” to material objects like the clergeon’s schoolbook adds, if I may, litel sentimentality. Instead of conveying a sense of the clergeon’s innocence, such indiscriminate placement of “littleness” builds a literary aesthetic miniature of the world within the tale – the Prioress’s own Kleine Andachtsbilder. Our litel clergeon is reduced aesthetically to a figurine.\textsuperscript{27}

But size isn’t all that the “Prioress’s Tale” shares with this “ugly art” of nuns, women whom we can imagine to have shared experiences with Chaucer’s Prioress. The violent revisions Chaucer makes to the tale are on par with the more grotesque images in certain Nonnenarbeiten. When comparing the “Prioress’s Tale” with its possible analogues, one quickly notes distinct differences with regard to the representation of violence associated with not only the boy’s martyrdom but also the punishment of the Jews. In “The Story of the Alma Redemptoris Mater,”\textsuperscript{28} Christ resurrects our young clergeon after his people pray for this restoration. His “cut throat was allowed to breathe again, his previously torn flesh was restored fully, and his tongue, which sang divine praise was given back to him” (“Sources and Backgrounds” 443). Unlike the clergeon in the “Prioress’s Tale,” this boy is not martyred but restored to life, and the Jew guilty of his murder is instead moved by the miracle and baptized a true believer. The child “prayed

\textsuperscript{27} I would like to thank Kelley Wickham-Crowley for reminding me that the kitschy artwork of nuns extends into the twentieth century in the form of the hummel, first created from the artwork of Sister Maria Innocentia Hummel (1909-1946) in 1930’s Germany – the birthplace, according to Whitney Rugg, of kitsch.

\textsuperscript{28} Trinity College, Cambridge, MS O.9.38, fol.37 (Brown 448).
humbly but insistently that his murderer should not be condemned to die for the crime,” and “the Archbishop was more eager for the saving of a soul than for the punishment of the crime” (444). Despite the horrific depiction of the boys murder, “his tongue was cruelly cut out; his stomach was opened and his heart and liver taken out,” Christ cleanses and restores the scene in the end. Lessons are learned and all is forgiven. In “A Miracle of Our Lady,” we also see a violent depiction of the boy’s death. He is lured into the house of one “malicious” Jew who “cutte the childes throte alswithe” and “into a gonge-put fer withinne / The child adoun therinne he throng” (“Sources and Backgrounds” 40-49). However, after the boy’s mother and bishop find his body in the hole, the narrative focuses on the opulent funeral proceeding and the boy’s soul rising to heaven:

The bisschop with gret solempnete  
Bad bere the cors thow al the cite;  
And hymself with processioun  
Com with the cors thow al the toun,  
With prestes and clerkes that couthen syngen.  
And all the belles he het hem ryngen,  
With torches brenynge and clothus riche;  
With worschipe thei laden that holi liche.  
In to the munstre whon thei kem…  
The cors aros in heore presens,  
Bigon then “Salve sancta parens.” (129-42)

29 Vernon Version (Bodleian MS 3938) (Brown 448).
The murderer and remainder of the Jewish community drop out of the narrative entirely as the narrator ends with a prayer to Mary, that she, in her traditional role as intercessor, “help us to hevene that is so briht!” (152).

The analogues are representative of these types of miracle stories, particularly those that praise the Virgin, which were often compiled in collections called *mariales*. As these two examples indicate, these stories emphasized Christian piety and the grace of God, and most use the Jewish conversion conventionally as a type of mission work as well as a way of inspiring the renewal of Christian devotion. The endings in particular work toward this objective as they construct images of peace, beauty, and heavenly bliss for both the child and wider Christian community. The purpose and aesthetic technique emphasized in these source tales serve as a crucial traditional foundation for a reading of the explicit violence in Chaucer’s retelling. While the “Prioress’s Tale” begins with the aesthetics of Incarnation associated with rebirth and fertility, it does not end in either resurrection or conversion. Instead, the clergeon is kept alive with his “throte cut unto my nekke-boon” in order to sing the “Alma” and not only the Jew responsible for the murder but *all of the Jews* in the Jewerye are treated “with torment and with shameful deth echon” and the provost “with wilde hors he dide hem drawe, / And after that he heng hem by the lawe” (628-34). This exaggeration of violence and suffering calls into question the motives for such an explicit and disturbing retelling of this story.

Zitter reads the violence as indicative of the Prioress’s perverted or underdeveloped understanding of Christine doctrine:

That the Prioress's Tale differs from so many of its analogues points to the Prioress's own refusal to accept and renew this faith in grace. To have ended the tale with a conversion would undoubtedly have made the story less pathetic; it
would have lacked the clear-cut boundary between good and evil, martyr and devil, Christian and Jew, that gives the tale its impact. As a literary structure, however, it would have been more spiritually uplifting to a Christian audience and more in keeping with the character of a truly Christian nun. (279)

But if the Nonnenarbeiten that Hamburger studies is representative artwork of medieval Christian nuns, the violent revisions align with the grotesqueness found in the aesthetics of the priories, particularly in their attention to the exaggerated wounds and defilement of the clergeon’s body: “This cursed Jew hym hente, and heeld hym faste, / And kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste, / I seye in a wardrobe they hym threwe / Where as thise Jewes purgen hire entraille” (670-72). This attention to baseness in both the murder and act of defecation enacts a type of grotesque realism that was by no means foreign to medieval aesthetics. Indeed, the treatment of the clergeon’s murder in the tale’s source material is often equally exaggerated in its description of the slaughter, a depiction that is intended to elicit feelings of pity, much like that of Christ’s crucifixion in various Nonnenarbeiten. While several critics read the explicitness of the boy’s killing in conjunction with the additional execution of the Jewish community as indicative of the Prioress’s sense of warped justice, a type of violent catharsis, few acknowledge the lingering ugliness of the image of the clergeon’s body after “yvele [has had] that yvele wol deserve” (“Prioress’s Tale” 632). If the inclusion of the execution makes us question the Prioress’s understanding of Christian mercy, I argue that her depiction of the clergeon’s deformed and mutilated body exposes aesthetically the tale’s perverted cult function. What is created in the process is a piece of “oppositional art.”
Kitsch as Purified Beauty and the Animated Abjection of the Clergeon

Some have interpreted the extreme violence of the “Prioress’s Tale” as a manifestation of an extreme anti-Semitic sentiment during the Middle Ages. As I examined previously, Greg Wilsbacher reads the final “sobre” silence that follows the tale as an indication of communal consent to the violence that is exacted upon the Jews via a consensus regarding the aesthetic beauty of the tale. Bruce Holsinger also notes how violence is subsumed into the aesthetics of the tale via the singing of the mass, which both creates communal unity for the Christians and envelopes the murder of the Jews through a bracketed stanza:

The Christians, bearing the clergeon into the enclosed space of an ‘abbay’ and performing the requiem mass for him there, constitute and define themselves around his body and the music it produces. For the Jews, however, this same music serves to accompany the very annihilation of community and the fragmentation of the body, both individual and social… The Prioress attempts as well to collapse the massacre of the Jews and render it narratively insignificant; echoing the end of the first stanza (‘fro his beere’) in the first line of the third (‘upon this beere’), she represents the mass execution as a momentary distraction from the clergeon’s reclining. (286)

Though certainly an example of what seems to be a communal consent toward violence, this ritualistic and disturbing depiction of the murder of an entire Jewish community simply does not compare aesthetically with the pilgrims’ silence at the end of the tale. What Wilsbacher reads as consent and accord among the company I read as horror produced from an overall dissonant aesthetic that begins with the description of the Prioress in the “General Prologue,” as a woman obsessed with beauty and purity.
For Fradenburg, the “Priess’s Tale” is predominantly a story of enclosure. In “Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the Priess’s Tale,” she writes, “The Priess’s Tale registers its anxieties and desires – its fear of internal differences its desire for union – through a phobic narrative about the threat posed by the ‘outside’ (learning, criticism, Jews) to the ‘inside’” (82).

A need to separate inside from outside manifests within the tale through acts of purification, beginning with the Priess’s own surrendering of her body to the virgin in the prologue of her tale, leading to the execution of the Jewish community (the outsiders) and, finally, the closing of the clergeon’s body within the tomb. As the Priess takes pains to present herself as pure, stainless, and sinless, she works to accomplish the same within her tale through an aesthetic sweetness that glosses over the less palatable portions of the litel clergeon’s story. As I noted, Holsinger points to the disconcerting elision that occurs in the stanzas surrounding the murder of the Jewish community and numerous critics emphasize the sentimentality of the mother’s mourning over her lost child as attempts to redirect reader attention from the pain of the Jewish community to that of the Christian community. These poetic maneuvers to redirect and reaestheticize work to cleanse the tale of any internal ugliness, be that the existence of the Jewerye or the distasteful act of murdering that entire community. We see this again in the Priess’s description of the clergeon’s body found in the privy: “By mouth of innocentz, lo, heere thy myght! / This gemme of chastite, this emeraude, / And eek of martirdom the ruby bright, / Ther he with throte ykorven lay upright, / He Alma redemptoris gan to synge / So loude that al the place gan to rynge” (608-13). The abject state of the clergeon’s body is rewritten as a more aesthetically pleasing “gemme,” “emeraude,” or “ruby.” In the Priess’s purification of her tale, all ugliness must be cleansed, and this seems to include the mutilated body of the clergeon, which becomes a piece of jewelry, linked through color scheme (red and green) to the
Prioress’s brooch.\(^\text{30}\) The clergeon’s body, which, in its grotesqueness, should be the key image in production of the tale’s aesthesis, becomes another devotional prop, and one consistently used and abused.

Though the abbot’s claim that “yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve” seeks to restore a sense of judicial balance to the community after the assault of the clergeon, the Jews’ deaths providing the story with a vengeful symmetry (“an eye for an eye”), it is actually in the treatment of the clergeon’s body that we find poetic equivalency between the Jews and Christians. Just as “the cursed Jew hym hente, and heeld hym faste, / And kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste, / And the abbot with his covent / Han sped hem for to burien hym ful faste; / And whan the hooly water on hym caste, / Yet spak this child” (570-71, 637-39). The repetition of the rhyme in \textit{faste} and \textit{caste} connects these two stanzas through the expulsion of the clergeon’s body in both cases. Even after the miracle of the boy’s singing is recognized (his body is found, pulled from the pit, and “with honour of greet processioun / [the Cristene folk] carien hym unto the nexte abbay” [623-24]), aesthetic attention is placed again on the abjection of the clergeon’s body, which must, like the execution of the Jews, be quickly subsumed in the surrounding narrative. In various renderings of the tale, this would be the moment in which the Christians notice the grain on the boy’s tongue (sometimes a flower, pebble, or other type of small object), remove it, and send his soul to heaven or pray for his resurrection to the tune of ringing bells and a congregation in worship. The “Prioress’s Tale,” however, has the boy speak of both his wounded neck and his meeting with the Virgin:

“My throte is kut unto my nekke boon,”

Seyde this child, “and as by wey of kynde

I sholde have dyed, ye, longe tyme agon…”

\(^{30}\) Again, I would like to acknowledge Kelley Wickham-Crowley for pointing out this connection.
To me [the Virgin] cam, and bad me for to synge
This anthem verraily in my deyynge,
As ye han herd, and whan that I hadde songe,
Me thought she leyede a greyn upon my tonge…
Any after that thus seyde she to me:
‘My litel child, now wol I fecche thee,
Whan that the greyn is from thy tonge ytake.
Be nat agast: I wol thee nat forsake.’” (649-69)

Fradenburg reads this inclusion of the boy’s story as an additional purification or revision in the tale, writing, “the pain and horror of the body’s wound is both elided and appropriated by the vision that transforms him into a lapidary statement of the opposition of miracle to the vulnerability of human life” (100). Fradenburg’s use of the adjective “lapidary” here is apt and allows us to consider, again, the clergeon in the same way that we read the brooch on the Prioress’s arm: as an ornament, an engraved “litel” trinket that signifies devotion and reinforces the notion of the Prioress as a performer of Christian piety, the clergeon as her puppet. By depicting this teller, clergeon, and even the Jewerye within the tale (“it was free and open at eyther ende” [494]), as hollow vessels through which praise of the Virgin may pass, Chaucer also hollows the tale’s ability to inspire devotional reflection. Truly pitiful images are replaced by the Prioress’s “aesthetic overkill” as she attempts to “disown the tensions,” the ugliness, that come to rest in her story. The “Prioress’s Tale” becomes the object of kitsch – the mere surface, a sketch, of a miracle story.31

31 Derek Pearsall has noted that the lyrics of the fifteenth century begin also to display this type of aesthetic excess: “[Fifteenth-century lyrics] are totally lacking in the tenderness, intimacy, fervor, and pseudo-eroticism of the Bernardine and Franciscan traditions… The heaping-up of invocation, epithet, image, and allusions is meant to overwhelm with excess, hardly to be comprehended. The aim is not to stir to devotion, but to make an act of worship
Within this purification through “aesthetic overkill,” the tale reveals how kitsch, as beauty minus its ugly counterpart, becomes itself ugly. Adorno writes, “Harmony which tries to disown tensions that came to rest in it becomes false, disturbing, even dissonant” (69). Such dissonance is clear in the image of the clergeon’s revived body. In having the boy continue to praise the Virgin when, as the abbot alerts us in his gesturing toward the boy’s slit throat, he should not be physically able to do so, the Prioress, like the Virgin, reanimates the clergeon, attempting to purify what Julia Kristeva labels as the pinnacle of abjection – the corpse. She writes, “If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled. The border has become an object” (3-4). She continues, “The corpse represents fundamental pollution. A body without soul, a non-body, disquieting matter, it is to be excluded from God's territory as it is from his speech” (109).32

In reanimating the clergeon’s body so that it may speak, the Prioress attempts to deflect recognition of its pollution in death. However, in doing so, she both stalls the tale’s trajectory toward inevitable sublimation of the ugly corpse into the beauty of martyrdom (another manifestation of the medieval formosa deformitas) and calls attention to the ambiguity of the body’s condition, suspended between life and death. “‘My throte is kut unto my nekke boon,’ / Seyde this child, ‘and as by wey of kynde / I sholde have dyed, ye, longe tyme agon,” says the clergeon (649-51). In her attempt to cleanse the tale of one form of ugliness, the Prioress creates another. For Kristeva, abjection fundamentally signifies the recognition of ourselves as subjects, out of the elaboration of the artifact. The extraordinary vocabulary, the strained imagery, the alliteration, and the hypnotic repetition of invocatory sentence-patterns have much the same effect of assault on the sensibilities as the flamboyant decoration of the Gothic” (Pearsall 268, qtd in Saupe 18). Already, it seems, by the fifteenth century, such devotional art readily adapted the aesthetics of kitsch.32 Kristeva also notes, “Without always being impure, the corpse is ‘accursed of God’ (Deuteronomy 21:23): it must not be displayed but immediately buried so as not to pollute the divine earth,” possibly why the Christians hurry to bury the clergeon’s body upon finding it in the privy (109).
separate from the other (the object, the “abject”), and thus a part of the symbolic order. The corpse then disrupts that order by having us confront the sense of ourselves as objects (corporeal beings). “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, or rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite,” writes Kristeva (4). Stuck between subject and object, corpse and living being, the clergeon remains in a space of violence, the moment when the subject rejects the object. This space can also be read as the moment in which Adorno hypothesizes ugliness to have emerged. If I may recall, “[Ugliness] probably originated contemporaneously with the passage from the archaic to post-archaic art and it has marked the eternal reoccurrence of the archaic ever since,” a returning fear of the expulsion of the subject (Aesthetic Theory 70).

At this point in the tale, the clergeon lies precisely in the space of the abject. While his praise is in service to the divine order, the ambiguous condition of his body disrupts that very order, for only in death can the clergeon become a martyr and an object of compassion. Though he praises the glory of Christ and the Virgin, we are confronted aesthetically not with the corpse of the pitiful martyr but with his present state of abjection (he speaks not of his murder, rendering his injury in the passive voice, but what ties him still to the earth, to his abject state – service to the divine), his head all but completely severed, disallowing the tale’s attempt at subsuming pain and suffering into the vision of the miracle, the beauty of the divine. Though grotesque portrayals of Jesus on the cross are common in representations of the Passion, application of such an aesthetic to the body of a child is not. What emerges is ghastly, as the imagery struggles to confront the issue of the nearly decapitated yet still talking boy (does his voice emanate from his mouth or slit throat?), and for order to be restored, the boy must be killed a second time (by his own community in the removal of the grain: “The holly monk, this abbot,
hym meene I, / His tonge out caught, and took awey the greyn, / And he yaf up the goost ful softly” [670-72]). His corpse, now entombed and removed from sight, can again be a “litel body sweete” (682). Fradenburg comments, “And at the end of the poem is the body’s entombment, its enclosure in marble – an image of final immobility and inviolacy,” the disowning of an ugliness that no longer threatens a symbolic order (100).

Because the abject, as that which is “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite,” harbors such power in disrupting this order, “an unshakeable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside. Religion, Morality, Law,” writes Kristeva (16). In this sense, it is notable that ritual and law are most pronounced in moments when the space of the abjection is “thrust aside” in the “Prioress’s Tale,” whether the Jewish “lawes” the clergeon violates as he passes between the Christian and Jewish neighborhoods of his city (561-64), the ambiguous law to which the provost adheres in the killing of the Jews (633-34), or the rituals of Christian mass which both prepare the clergeon’s body for burial and resurrect him to speak again (635-41). Such order, however, breaks down aesthetically when ugliness usurps order and beauty, when the wounded body refuses to be silent. In his retelling of the story of the clergeon, Chaucer works from within the tale to deform it and disrupt the cult function it attempts to reinforce through replication: that suffering can be reconciled as service to a greater order, be that religious or political. The ugliness created through the abjection of the clergeon instead “denounce(s) the world which creates and recreates ugliness in its own image” by refusing, for the length of four stanzas, to be service to the narrative of martyrdom (Aesthetic Theory 72). Chaucer’s kitsch makes the tale affectively useless. In the Prioress’s “wayk konnyng,” she attempts to disown ugliness, to purify her tale, but instead she produces a dissonance that is revelatory of what is required for these devotional
tales’ creation of pathos and intended aesthetic, for their recreation of a divine order – the suffering, the killing of the *litel clergeon*.

**Sobre Pilgrims**

After the close of the “Prioress’s Tale,” the “sobre” silence that falls over the pilgrims during the “Prologue to Sir Thopas” becomes not tacit consent to anti-Semitism but an unsettling, ambiguous, and uncharacteristic cessation in the story-telling game, which the host must try to remedy through humor: “Whan seyde was al this miracle, every man / As sobre was that wonder was to se, / Til that oure Hooste japen tho bigan” (691-93). In a recent study, Adrienne Williams Boyarin claims that miracles of the Virgin were not actually as popular in medieval England as we once thought, even though England “invented” the genre. She notes, “It is not until well into the fifteenth century that the tales begin to show up in considerable numbers. Even then, English-language Miracles of the Virgin are, in general, not to be found in the form of collections, creating a gap of nearly 250 years between the creation of an apparently English genre and its popularity in the English language” (5-6). To that end, she also reads the pilgrims’ silence as an ambiguous response to an encounter with a “new” genre, the miracle of the virgin:

Generic confusion is embedded in Chaucer’s imagination of its immediate reception… Critics have offered variable interpretations of the word ‘sobre’, but these lines reveal almost nothing about the range of possible reactions…Yet this remains our best window into what force an exceptionally thoughtful medieval writer assigned to a Marian miracle, if not to the genre of which it was a part, and
we can say at least that the tale creates an uncomfortable moment, only partially
relieved by Harry Bailey’s awkward joviality. (151-52)

This confusion and discomfort is compounded by Chaucer’s aesthetics. He not only introduces
an unfamiliar genre; he relocates a vivid and grotesque devotional aesthetic, employed by nuns
who inhabited a world within the “seclusion of the cloister,” on a pilgrimage comprised of
people from all walks of medieval life (Hamburger 2). The reaction of the pilgrims indicates that
the Prioress’s art, outside of the priory, does not enact the same aesthetic effects as inside the
cloister. According to Adorno, “kitsch is the precipitate of devalued forms and empty ornaments
from a formal world that has become remote from its immediate context” (“Kitsch” 501).

Removed from the context in which it serves purposes of affective piety, the “Prioress’s Tale” is
empty and ugly. Boyarin writes, “The inclusion of a Marian miracle in a contest entered into for
the sake of ‘pleye’, and the ambiguity of the pilgrims’ response, questions the utility and status
of such tales” (152). The Prioress and the story she tells become mere artifacts of a world foreign
to many of her fellow travel companions.

But Chaucer’s manipulation of the aesthetics of this type of devotional literature provides
more than a peek into the artistic imaginariun of the cloister. Through kitsch, Chaucer reveals
not only how the feelings elicited by art are dependent on form but also how the form might
“prey[ ] on fictitious feelings, thereby neutralizing real ones” (Aesthetic Theory 341). In
rehearsing the tropes of a miracle story, deformed in order to emphasize the state of abjection of
the clergeon’s body, Chaucer calls attention to how such literature, in evoking feelings of
compassion and pity, offset fear and horror elicited by the image of the corpse. “Be nat agast,”
says the Virgin. In the process, the tale’s devotional function is exposed and negated, leaving the
reader with only an ugly image. However, upon the tale’s conclusion, the Prioress breaks the
narrative frame and reaches into England’s history: “O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also / With cursed Jewes, as it is notable, / For it is but a litel while ago” (684-86). This gesture links the image of the clergeon in the tale to the real life murder of Hugh of Lincoln, whose death in the thirteenth century led to the imprisonment and eventual execution of eighteen Jews. In doing so, Chaucer reminds his readers that the feelings that art elicits can translate, for better or worse, into reality. The artist, however, in controlling the form, controls the stakes of art’s dissemination: whether it will service a cult function or, like the “Prioress’s Tale,” become oppositional.
In the critically disputed “Retraction” that ends *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer beseeches the reader to pray for his soul, that he might be forgiven his “giltes,” his writings, especially his “translacions and enditynygs of worldly vanitees.” He then marks a separation of his artistic achievements (those which he wishes to retract and those which might be suitable for inclusion in “oure doctrine”), which seems to toe the line between the more “obviously” secular and “strictly” spiritual forms (“legends of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun”). However, before doing so, the poet specifically involves the reader in determining this distinction, asking that judgment be based, notably, on the reader’s pleasure:

> Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and goodnesse. / And if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonnynge and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyd better if I hadde had konnynge.

(1081-1082)

That Chaucer would include such a seemingly conservative retraction of his life’s literary work at the conclusion of a set of tales that read as anything but conservative has puzzled critics for decades, some, like Matthew C. Wolfe, even proposing that the “Retraction” isn’t a part of *The Canterbury Tales* proper at all: “At the heart of the problem with Chaucer’s Retraction is the fact that he seems to regret and reject those very works of his we enjoy the most and for the reasons we enjoy them” (Wolfe 427). Chaucer indicates that the tales that are religious in nature, feature moral exemplum, or otherwise script or invite devotion would be excluded from those he wishes
to retract. Yet, as my reading of the “Priess’s Tale” shows, in the context of *The Canterbury Tales*, such discernment may not be so simple.

Within the “Retraction,” Chaucer makes two interesting rhetorical moves: he conflates the aesthetic and the ethical/moral and, in the process, relocates the distinction between good/moral art and bad/immoral art within the feelings of the reader. Beauty, which pleases in his work, is also that which is moral, that which proceeds from God. That which “displeases” should be attributed to a fault of artistic skill or mastery, an ignorance of proper representation. In this conflation, Chaucer invokes the basis for medieval aesthetic theory, which we examined previously through Augustine’s *De Ordine*, with regard to judgments of the beautiful. According to Umberto Eco, a medieval perception of beauty was conceived as “moral harmony” and “an attribution of God” (5). Peggy Knapp describes this perception as “medieval trust in the convergence of the beautiful and the good” and develops how people in the Middle Ages may have practiced a type of aestheticism in what she terms “resoun ymaginatyf” (*Chaucerian Aesthetics* 39). Indeed, Elaine Scarry also traces her ideas regarding “beauty and being just” to the medieval theological texts of St Augustine.

Uncovering philosophical roots from Plato to Augustine to Kant, Scarry uses “symmetry” (in her words the “attribute most steadily singled out over the centuries” in the recognition of beauty) to link notions of equality and justice to a larger human desire for beauty in the world (96). In *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) she writes, “Beautiful things (which do not rely on us to create them but come on their own and have never been absent from a human community) hold steadily visible the manifest good of equality and balance” (97). To elucidate this point, Scarry reads Augustine’s descriptions of rhythm and beauty in *De Musica* to show that the theologian’s aesthetics emphasize proportion and equality. She infers that “for Augustine…
[there is] the conviction that equality is the heart of beauty, that equality is pleasure-bearing, and that (most important in the shift we are seeking to undertake from beauty to justice) equality is the morally highest and best feature of the world. In other words, equality is set forth as the thing of all things to be aspired to” (98). But Augustine’s prescription for how this “morally highest and best feature of the world” is perceptively recognized, as we find outlined in De Ordine, complicates Scarry’s reading of “symmetry” and “equality” within his formulation of beauty. His thoughts on poetics serve well in considering this complication:

Poets love what other people call grammatical errors or foreign words…. Remove such liberties from poetry, however, and it becomes spiceless food. Concentrate many of them in the same passage, and it will be sharp, pedantic, offensive. Use such words in ordinary speech, or in the market, and who wouldn’t run off to the theatre on hearing them? Order governs and moderates them… A rough sentence within a polished text makes the flight of fancy and the more ornate passage stand out. By itself it is cheap stuff, but without it, beautiful passages do not govern in their own realm as it were. They are obscured by their own brilliance, and all you get is confusion. (67)

Augustine, in expressing classical notions of beauty, makes clear that the symmetry Scarry reads as an appeal to equality, to balance and justice, depends on the existence of ugly. A desire for beauty, in Augustine’s terms, carries with it the opposing yet balancing force of ugly. Without it, beauty is “obscured by its own brilliance” into a type of chaos, an inability to make aesthetic distinctions. In this way, “beauty and being just” as a project that attempts to solve the world’s social and moral ugliness and injustice is its own worst enemy.
This aesthetic, political, and ethical paradox is elucidated through Adorno’s theories of ugliness and the cult function. Ugliness, and not beauty, itself is the defense against injustice, against its own denigration. By becoming irreconcilable, unreasonable, nonnegotiable, and unavoidable, ugliness is oppositional to the order (the cult) that tries to purify or reintegrate it within its system. The order has two options when this type of ugliness rises to prominence. It can adapt to accept and recognize its demands or excise it completely. For example, within the “Prioress’s Tale,” we see how the community chooses the latter: killing all the Jews and entombing the clergeon, whose corpse refuses to stop talking, refuses to be ignored. Still, though the order might be successful in such an excision, it can still be stained, unable to forget its temporary deformation. Judging from the reaction of Chaucer’s pilgrims to the “Prioress’s Tale,” we have to wonder if they will ever hear the Alma Redemptoris the same way again.

Adrienne Williams Boyarin suggests that the placement of the “Prioress’s Tale” directly before the “Tale of Sir Thopas” and “Melibee,” both told by Chaucer’s narrative persona, gives it particular significance with relation to the author: “It is furthermore, the singular narrative that prompts the Host to look for the first time to the pilgrim Chaucer and demand ‘What man artow?’ ‘The Prioress’s Tale’ invites examination of the author’s character and intentions” (152). The “Retraction” is the final time we are invited to examine Chaucer’s intentions, and what we find are elements that direct us back to the Prioress specifically. Like Madame Eglentyne, Chaucer indicates that he may lack the “konnynge” required of writing pleasing and morally instructive tales, but that if we should find such stories in his body of work, we should “thanken our Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and goodnesse”; Chaucer positions himself as the vessel through which God’s word is “ysprad.” This connection between the fictional Prioress
and the poet who writes her emphasizes, again, the importance of considering both, first and foremost, as artists, who rely on the use of powerful images to communicate with their audience.

By placing his “Retraction” at the end of a collection of tales that raises significant questions with regard to form, feeling, and function and placing the final verdict of its moral usefulness in the pleasure of the reader, Chaucer forces the reader to recognize the tales as constructions, whether made by nuns, poets, or God himself, and confront how his/her feelings are manipulated through the form of these constructions. Chaucer forces the reader to attend to his aesthetics, but, as we see with the ugliness of the “Prioress’s Tale,” such attention complicates distinction between tales that “sownen into synne” and those for which they should thank “oure Lorde Jhesu Crist.” In giving ugliness a place in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer makes the reader question if pleasure felt from beautiful objects, those attributes of God, is the most reliable way of deciding questions of morality and justice. Such a remarkable reconsideration is impossible without considering seriously Chaucer’s sophisticated aesthetics, which break from a medieval cult function and become oppositional.
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