



Semiotic Perception and
the Problem of Chaucerian "Prejudice"

Marcus A. J. Smith
Julian N. Wasserman

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A Brief Summers' Storm and The Problem of Prejudice

Like some deep-seated flaw in the marble of a wondrous statue, Chaucer's seemingly prejudicial attitudes have at turns puzzled, vexed, and even embarrassed twentieth century readers, especially those for whom the source of the poet's greatness is arguably his understanding of the universal human condition in his fellow pilgrims both medieval and modern.¹ Indeed, such pettiness in the midst of greatness seems to fly in the face not only of the claims we make for Chaucer but for those concerning the civilizing effects of literature or even of a liberal education. To be sure, the regularity of the appearance of this issue might well be taken as evidence of the fact that the stakes in this debate—whether tenets about the civilizing effects of literature or the conception of a revered poet—are high. Our constant return and the peculiarities (including the apologist, sometimes defensive tone of many studies)² demonstrates that many Chaucerians, at least on a gut level, feel that something important is being challenged, that more than just the text is being interrogated when we take up the issue.

For the most part, there have been two responses to the possibility of Chaucer's "prejudicial" attitudes.³ The first is an essentially "historical" interpretation by which one views Chaucer as a product of his times and, hence,

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subject to their cultural vices as well as virtues.⁴ In this regard, one might well consider the epistolary exchange that was waged some years ago over Melvin Storm's 1982 *PMLA* essay on the Pardoner, an essay that Claude Summers, a non-medievalist, found to be in violation of that journal's "editorial policy, which 'urges its contributors to be sensitive to the social implications of language and to seek wording free of discriminatory overtones'" (254). Storm's final response to this charge is the very embodiment of the historical approach: "Summers' quarrel, it would seem, is not with me, nor with the Editorial Board, but with the fourteenth century" (255). And, indeed, Summers does, in fact, unhesitatingly indict the whole period for its active intolerance of Jews, women, and homosexuals. One advantage of the historical approach is that it allows us to congratulate ourselves on how far we have come since the fourteenth century. A serious disadvantage is that it is distressingly similar to the Wife's ascribing her own shortcomings to the constellations under which she was born. Fairly or unfairly we expect more from Chaucer, that he should transcend the cultural constellations under which he was born. Another problem is recovering the history upon which the historical approach is based. Emmy Stark Zitter notes that "Most of Chaucer's audience undoubtedly had never had any contact with Jews, who had been expelled from England in the year 1290" (278). Paul A. Olson implies that Jews, presumably were known since they enjoyed roughly equal protection under the law (141).

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The second response to this most sensitive of matters Chaucerian is to see Chaucer as transcending, or at the least scrutinizing, the cultural limits of his age—as using Prioress’ anti-Semitism or the Merchant’s misogyny as self-revealing shortcomings whose exposure inevitably entails a self-deflation that reveals the poet’s condemnation of such attitudes.⁵ Although appealing from a humanistic point of view, this response is suspiciously convenient, an essentially Romantic, as opposed to medieval, one—relying as it does on a rather untypical defiance of the norm by a poet who in many ways is the embodiment of his age, by expecting the subtext of all creative acts to be *non serviam* rather than *caritas*. We see traces of such an approach in Summers’ reluctance to ascribe to Chaucer what he finds to be “noxious sentiments” while unhesitatingly condemning the entire period out of hand in regard to its intolerance. The list here is a long and impressive one. Muriel Bowden, in her highly influential handbook, deliberately contrasts anti-Semitism to the Prioress’ supposed piety in order to condemn the former and undercut the latter (99–100). Sr. Mary Hostia likewise finds the contradiction between piety and the tale indicative of Hypocrisy. Richard J. Schoeck presents the tale condemning the cruelty of the Prioress, finding deliberate irony and a “satire” of anti-Semitism. Talbot Donaldson (*Prioress*) finds the Prioress to be a person of her age, but insists that Chaucer was not, finding it inconsonant with the still influential construction of “Chaucer the Poet” which Donaldson found at the heart

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of the canon. The natural heirs to such "modern" ironic" and/or "satiric" readers of the tale are those whose critical methodologies are founded on "subversion," ideological "resistance," and "interrogation."

The question, then, of the exact nature of Madame Eglentyne's attitudes towards the Jews is, as her name implies, a thorny one in which far abler critics than ourselves have had recourse to the better part of valor. Larry Benson, who in his notes to the *Prioress' Tale* seems firmly in the "historical camp" on the issue of Madame Eglentyne's anti-Semitism, concludes by observing "On the whole Chaucer's characteristic ambiguity defies final definition of either his own attitude or his intent regarding the Prioress" (914). On the other hand, as the *Parliament of Fowles* demonstrates, such an open question is always an opportunity for the "parfit raison of a gose," so what we would like to do in this essay is to reopen this debate, however briefly, bringing to bear some recent as well as medieval literary and semiotic theory. What we would also like to do is to have our cake and eat it too (or in the case of the Summoner, to have it and wear it). Cloaking ourselves in the historicity of the first response, we will argue that Chaucer is traditional, that he is very much a person of his times, but that the tradition he follows is semiotic rather than a social in nature, and that a medieval, as opposed to a modern, semiosis might well mean that his use of persons in what to us seems a prejudicial fashion may well not be prejudice at all, at least in the modern sense in which the

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term is buffeted about in the Summers Storm over the *Pardoner's Tale*.

The Promise of Postmodernism

If as we have noted, the natural heirs to the popular "satiric" readings of the Prioress' anti-Semitism are readings which rely on contemporary "critical theory," the question properly posed is whether post-modernism offers anything more than new terminology in exposing the Prioress' un-Christian attitudes in the midst of (and relation to) her Christian piety. Indeed, given the Francophile basis of a good deal of Postmodernism, such approaches might well offer new insights into the question of Chaucer's relationship with the Prioress' anti-Semitism since, as Michael Weinograd notes in another context, "Every major contemporary French theorist has made some study of or pronouncement upon the Jews and their place in the West" (79). To be sure, Louise Fradenburg has shown value of deconstructive approaches to question of the Prioress, although her focus is more on critical responses to the Prioress' anti-Semitism than the anti-Semitism, itself.

Yet despite the possibilities, medievalists have not by and large brought to bear semiotic elements of contemporary critical theory (or for that matter key sociological studies of the nature and, most importantly semiotics, of prejudice)⁶ on the troubling questions raised by the Prioress and her Tale. In this, they have repeated the habits of their structuralist predecessors.

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For example, Emmy Stark Zitter, like many others, finds Chaucer using Jews in "conventional" fashion of the times (278, 279). Focusing solely on the content of the convention rather than how it works, Zitter presents its conventional signification without examining the underlying semiotic conventions of that signification. Indeed, reflecting the semiotic bases of much contemporary theory, Paul Olson, citing Kenneth Pike, argues,

When historical-sociological analysis is done meaningfully, the *Canterbury Tales* first receive what linguist Kenneth Pike calls an *emic* description, one that examines Chaucer's language from within the linguistic and semantic system available to the poet's court.... When we have achieved [an]... understanding [of Chaucer's way of life, language, and system of usage], we have done the critics first job. We may then, if we wish, despise his vision and dislike his artifice. We ought not to flinch. Better to reject the poet than to make him the Narcissus image of our own historical or semiological fantasies. (16–18)⁷

The Mirror that Holds the Image: The Nature (and Structure) of Prejudice

What has also not come under scrutiny are "Narcissistic" projections/assumptions that the prejudice in the Middle Ages is the same as prejudice in our own

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times.⁸ Ignoring a good deal of sociological research to the contrary, Chaucer criticism has by and large been rested on the premise that if you have seen one bigot you've seen them all. This, of course, is uncomfortably close to what many along with Summers would condemn as the "noxious" sentiment that—if you've seen one woman, Jew, Muslim or gay—you've seen them all. In short, that prejudice is immutable and that its modern mechanisms and practice are identical to its mechanisms and practices in the Middle Ages. Perhaps it's an understandable despair about the human condition combined with a dose of current events that leads us, in regard to prejudice, to a totalizing, essentialist tendency, even amongst those whose critical practice has been to reveal hidden assumptions and challenge just such formulations. Old historicism or New, Structuralist or Postmodernist, it would be hard to find a medievalist who would make the same claim for the unbroken continuity of, say, boasting (the *beot*) from the time of Beowulf to the present.

For the most part, the question of prejudice, both medieval and modern, has logically been treated primarily as a sociological issue, the major forces behind the phenomenon being historical, economic, political, and/or sexual rather than linguistic. (Parenthetically, we might note that the *PMLA* guidelines cited by Summers speak of "*social* implications of language." Indeed, Summers' concern is with the first word in the phrase. The fact that the medium is language is a matter of accident rather than

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of substance in Summers' objection.) In fact, with a few notable exceptions, even many linguists and semioticians have paid remarkably little attention to this area, including literary theorists many of whom have produced remarkable if impenetrably written analyses of the nature of metaphor. Discussions of the linguistic aspects of prejudice, the first heyday of which seems to have been in the period following World War II, appear mostly in regard to socio-linguistics rather than semiotics, *per se*.

By way of example, one might consider Haig A. Bosmajian's *The Language of Oppression* which provides an important study of the role of language in prejudice. Writing of "linguistic superiority" and the power of language, Bosmajian argues that "...if we can minimize the language of oppression we can reduce the degradation and subjection as human beings. If the nature of our language is oppressive and deceptive then our character and conduct will be different from that which would ensure from humane and honest use of language" (363). Whatever Bosmajian means here by "the nature of language," he certainly does not explore the semiosis involved in that language. Indeed, Bosmajian begins his study with a Positivist survey of the power of language, beginning with the initial linguistic act in the Biblical creation story to Adam's dominion through the naming of beasts through Nazi linguistic practices in the Holocaust. Certainly proof of Bosmajian's phenomenalizing of language is to be seen in the fact that his ultimate focus is on legal measures to

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control and contain speech which has been deemed dangerous and is therefore seen as a substantive threat.

As with Bosmajian, even today, such discussions tend to the problem of offensive language as a "social problem" rather than as a semiotic act. To wit, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) who certainly are not strangers to matters of linguistics, speak in a 1970 resolution of the "relation of language to public policy" and the need to define and isolate the language of distortion and oppression" (Bosmajian 139–40). Contrary to such a purely sociological approach, Prejudice, as it will be defined in this presentation, will be seen as an exercise in semiotics, as a matter of classification and definition, as the use of definable groups—such as women, homosexuals, Jews—as signs and in particular as metaphors, in both cases as pejorative ones.⁹

Word Fetishism and the Primitive Other (Which, by the Way, is Not Ourselves, Sort of)

Post-Saussurian semiotics has, to be sure, made much of the arbitrary and hence symbolic nature of language. Likewise much contemporary theory finds itself rooted in the recognition of the difference between signifier and signified. Part of the reason that the "cult of *difference*" originally had such a hard time gaining a toe-hold in medieval studies was its often self-congratulatory tone, partially in evidence in Pike, as though such observations had just freed us from a long

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"droghte of March" in regard to our belief in the fixedness of language. In Olson's recapitulation of Pike, one might note the assumption of the absolute alterity of the medieval. More importantly, although Pike attempts to mask the fact through the use of "fantasies," his underlying assumption is that the "real" is ourselves; the Narcissistic, and hence unreal, *image* is Chaucer. In the grand historical narrative implied the assumption is our own evolution, the expectation (and hence discovery) of the presence in Chaucer of prejudicial attitudes along with the assumption of our universal superiority. "We," not some of us, will do the rejecting. In the grand narrative implied, the Middle Ages are an indistinguishable part of the pre-Postmodern. At worst, because they are the remotest part, they are the essence of the Positivist, logocentric past from which current critical praxis divorces itself. What is suppressed here is the possibility that the eschewing of modern positivist, pre-Saussurian semiotics might *return* us to a pre-modern semiotics that shares much with postmodern and that the pre-modern is, in fact, the medieval.

No doubt part of the resistance to such a recognition is the universal ascription of "word fetishism"—a positivist conception of the relationship between signifier and signified—as belonging to the "primitive." Often, moreover, the "primitive" is identified with the temporally remote, since in the grand narrative that underlies much of our study of signification time is equated with "progress" away from a "primitive" state. S. I. Hayakawa, by ascribing the word fetishism

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associated with bigotry to “infantilism,” implies all these elements—primitivism (lack of development measured against our own adult progress) and historical remoteness (youth as opposed to our maturity) (207).

Such mythic certainty of the otherness of such linguistic practice can lead Egyptologist Hilary Wilson, without even a trace of irony or sense of contradiction, to follow her observation that until “the modern resurrection of his name,” Tutankhamen was a “non-person” with no real existence with a statement that “[s]ome primitive societies still maintain” fetishistic attitudes toward language and names (14–15). Similarly, Harvard scholar Margaret Schlauch can note,

From time immemorial men have thought there is some mysterious essential connection between a thing and the spoken name for it. You could use the name of your enemy, not only to designate him either passionately or dispassionately, but also to exercise a baleful influence. (13).

Yet as with Wilson, such primitivism is not necessarily confined to the remote past. Gordon Allport in a discussion of verbal realism notes that

The City Council of Cambridge, Massachusetts, unanimously passed a resolution (December, 1939) making it illegal “to possess, harbor, sequester, introduce or transport, within the city limits, any book, map, magazine, newspaper, pamphlet,

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handbill or circular containing the words Lenin or Leningrad (182).

Apparently such primitivism was not as temporally (or even geographically) remote as Schlauch would imply. In fact, one might credit as unlikely a group as an American association of egg producers with recognizing the yoke of our own cultural tendency to close the gap between metaphors and their analogical associations. In the 1970s the association expressed the producers' grave concern with a series of advertisements showing a fried egg with the caption, "This is your brain on drugs." Understanding the semiotic praxis of the egg-buying public, the egg producers feared an indelible connection between drugs and eggs might adversely affect sales of their product.

Back to the Future: Modern vs. Ancient (The Latter of Which is Not Ourselves, Sort of)

All this evidence to the contrary, as we see in Pike, there is often a "evolutionary" bias that assumes that the farther we go back in time the less enlightened are authors in regard to our lack of recognition of the prospects of semantic fluidity, with the Middle Ages by implication being reduced to the part of postilion, an age irretrievably lost in its own superstitious regard for the power of names. In short, as the term "Postmodernism" implies, the emphasis is always on the break from the recent past. There is never much of a sense that, because

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the modern broke with the medieval, the postmodern, far from being a break from all that has come before, is really a return to the pre-modern. Clearly the study of medieval semiotic theory reveals something quite the contrary. While finding that in many cases medieval symbols are "anything but arbitrary and subjective" (227), Gerhart Ladner, his comparison of medieval and modern symbols, also goes on to note that "science, philosophy, and art become more deeply involved than ever in symbolism but in new ways, in many instances stressing the arbitrariness and subjectivity of signs and symbols rather than their correspondence with an objective reality" (228). In the search for the what Pike calls "the linguistic and semantic system available to the poet's court," the "Narcissus image of our own historical or semiological fantasies" may be the totalizing universal ascription of a pre-Saussurean verbal realism to the Middle Ages and the assumption that the medieval period is simply "Modern" (as opposed to the Postmodern) in its semiotics, only more so because of its temporal remoteness.

To appreciate the break between medieval and early modern semiology, it is helpful to consider that most curious of early Renaissance exercises, the "Defense of Poetry." Such "defenses," of course, raise a number of questions, beginning with "Why *now* must poetry be defended?" Certainly poetry is not a medium new to the Renaissance, so "How have attitudes changed regarding its nature and status?" In part, the change which demands such a defense is the evolution of a modern

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(non-medieval) sense of the nature of signification. The issues are brought remarkably into focus in a essay by Alan Fisher entitled "Three Meditations on the Destruction of Vergil's Statue: The Early Humanist Theory of Poetry." Fisher's starting point is a symbolic beginning of the Renaissance, the moment in 1397 when Carlo Malatesta, Commander of the Florentine League, entered Mantua "and shortly afterward ordered the destruction of a statue of Vergil which had stood there 'for centuries' upon the poet's tomb" (607). Noting that Malatesta, "no mere military vandal," was himself "trained in the *bonae litterae*," Fisher explores both the reasons for Malatesta's suspicion of Vergil and in particular "three [separate, contemporary] cries of outrage... in private letters" that take up a defense of poetry (608). Interestingly enough, Malatesta's rationale was that "statues were for saints, not for poets or pagans. Poets did not deserve them because poets were nothing more than mimes" (609). The issue, then, is clearly a matter of signification. Mimes merely imitate. There is no Real (Positivist) connection between the mime or his representation and what the representation signifies. Malatesta, as a Renaissance Humanist is simply reviving the Platonic argument against the poets as "liars" and is insisting on a Platonic Positivist connection between signifier and signified with its corollary that poetry consists of lies for the very reason that it fails to demand and produce such connections. One of Malatesta's critics, the Chancellor of Florence, Coluccio Salutati, counters with the argument that "poets do not

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'imitate' at all. Their discourse is self-originating, not derivative, as men are *directly* the image of God...." (emphasis ours, 610). Note that Salutati, like Malatesta's other critics, has no quarrel with Malatesta's Positivism. For Salutati, poetry becomes what linguists might call "performatory language." Salatutti's complaint is not that Malatesta is wrong in defining and condemning mimes for lack of connection between signifier and signified. His complaint is that Malatesta is wrong in not recognizing the Positivist nature of poetry. As in Sidney's "defense," Poetry matters because it is "Real." It's the new "modern" demand for such realism (and the concomitant suspicion that such realism might not exist in poetry) that generates the defenses.

Such "modern" ideas are exactly the *ancien regime* cast off by Saussurian-based postmodern linguistics. If the postmodern is a rejection of a formalist/positivist fixity of meaning, a few minutes spent with Augustine will of course dispel the notion that postmodern semiotics are also an escape from all that is medieval. At the same time, a few moments spent pondering some of the issues in twentieth century medieval criticism will demonstrate the strength of *our* modern (as opposed to postmodern) identification of the signifier with the signified, an association which perhaps even explains a bit of the *elan* with which theorists announce the revolutionary nature of their own discoveries concerning the indeterminacy of text, the rejection of positivist ascription of signified to signifier.

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Something We can Finally All be Positiv(ist) About: Chaucer Criticism

Of course an advertisement for a movie that reads "Harrison Ford IS Indiana Jones" is fodder for introductory Linguistics courses throughout the country because it illustrates a positivist view of language, ridiculed in its informal name of "the Ding Dong" theory of signification, so evident in Bosmajian.¹⁰ Likewise, the strength of the Positivist theory as an unstated premise in the history of Chaucer criticism is evident in the fact that not until some five hundred years after the death of Chaucer was one of our best critics finally able to pry loose "Chaucer the Poet" from "Chaucer the Pilgrim." Viewed in one context such a separation of signifier (Chaucer the Pilgrim) and signified (Chaucer the Writer) is itself a radical act of deconstruction unraveling as it does the tautology that "Chaucer is Chaucer," vindicating what might be Malatesta's assertion that "Chaucer is *miming* Chaucer." Similarly, our libraries are still filled with articles, excellent ones at that, that argue that Alice of Bath is Alice Perrers or the Man of Law is Thomas Pynchbeck.¹¹ Indeed, what could possibly be a more positivist argument than the one that "Courtly Love" didn't exist in the Middle Ages' because the term did not exist until the Nineteenth Century.¹² And of course a large part of our criticism of the Canterbury pilgrims consists of moralizing concerning their hypocrisy, the condemnation of characters because the difference

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between what they are supposed to signify (priest, prioress, wife, for example) and what they are. In such matters, old habits die hard. The new historicism is in many ways saying "Chaucer IS the Middle Ages." For us the space between what is and what is represented by such categories is unrelentingly negative. Perhaps we have too quickly and unquestioningly seized upon the seemingly positivist Chaucerian dictum that the "word must be cosyn to the dede" without realizing that cousins may not be as identical as Palamon and Arcite and that "to cozen" is "to betray or cheat." Chaucer, to be sure, has his own way of raising such issues, sometimes by providing a defense before the charge is leveled, as he does in raising the question of "sodeyn love" in the case of Criseyde in Book II of *Troilus*. The symbolic equivalent of this is the Nun's Priest's preemptive "My tale is of a cok" as well as the claim that "Thise been the cokkes wordes and nat myne." It seems that whenever we are in danger of forgetting the gap between symbol and what is signified, when we come to think of Chaunticleer as a person rather than as a bird symbolizing a person, the proud rooster stops and pecks at a kernel of corn or scatches the dirt with his claws (Perhaps the equivalent of Criseyde's "What, may I nat [peck] here?"). If we don't take up these kernels ourselves, there is always Dame Pertelote to remind us of the confusion by asking "Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berd?" And, of course, the answer is "No, I'm a symbol for a man, not an actual man." And lest we go too far in the other direction, eliminating the gap

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between signifier and signified by doing away with the latter, the Nun's Priest concludes with an admonition to those of us who think the tale merely about "a fox, or of a cok and hen." No matter which direction one approaches the tale, difference must be maintained. Still despite, these warnings not to confuse fools and fowls, the Realist strain in Chaucer criticism may well justify the egg producers' concern over contemporary semiosis.

Among those studying Chaucer, then, there is strong positivist bent in spite of Augustine and perhaps in spite of Chaucer whose *Wife of Bath's Tale*, if we read it correctly, comes to a screeching halt when it becomes evident that the signifier is not the signified, when readers along with Dame Alice realize that Dame Alice is not the hag. The hag might represent qualities that the Wife sees in herself, but the fiction comes crashing down when the hag magically transforms herself offering both beauty and fidelity, qualities that the Wife cannot possess, underscoring the difference between herself as signified and the signifier with which she has chosen to represent herself in her tale. As we shall see, it is this very act of overlooking the gulf between signifier and signified that is at the root of prejudice. And, in parallel fashion, it is the strong predilection for closing that gap in criticism that has led many critics to see Chaucer's use of groups as prejudicial, despite the fact that he is, as we read the Wife's tale, warning us against such a confusion.

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The Prejudicial Sign of the Times: Performatory Signifiers as Signifieds

Scapegoating, an important element of prejudicial attitudes, is clearly a fetishistic attempt to locate, to localize, abstract concepts otherwise beyond the perceiver's control or knowledge, a definition that is remarkably close to that of metaphor where the remote is made known or felt more strongly through the linking of the known to objects, persons, things less foreign. The difference is that scapegoating inevitably has as its purpose the control of its subject. In regard to pejorative signs. The more one increases the distance between signifier and signified, especially the consciousness of the act as trope and hence the distance between knower and known, the more the result is metaphoric. Decrease that distance and the result is scapegoating.

It takes only a brief encounter with contemporary prejudicial material to see that groups victimized by prejudice are seen as the embodiments, the physical *loci*, of negative qualities they are alleged to possess. In our society, prejudice is an operation where the identification between signifier and signified collapses. If all x's *symbolize* bad quality y, we might well still come in contact with x without suffering the ill effects of exposure to that quality. We may play with the sign for fire without being burned. And perhaps we are even likely to do so because we know that it is *only* a sign and that signs by definition are something other than what

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they represent. Or the Wife may manipulate the sign she chooses for herself without, sad to say, benefiting from the manipulation. But if we change our proposition and make *x* embody bad quality *y*, if we close ranks between signifier and signified, then our relationship with all *x*'s become quite different. We cease our commerce with *x*'s for fear of the negative effects of exposure to bad quality *y*. In a rather effective turn of phrase, Rupert Brown describes prejudicial stereotypes as "hypotheses in search of confirmatory information" (117). In short, a stereotype is a signifier trying to establish a connection to signified. When the connection is made and the identification complete, the result is prejudice. For his part, Hayakawa defines prejudice as an "habitual confusion of symbols and things symbolized" (28). In his classic study of human prejudice, Gordon Allport offers the following observation at the close of a chapter entitled "The Language of Prejudice":

...to liberate a person from ethnic or political prejudice it is necessary at the same time to liberate him from *word fetishism*. This fact is well known to students of general semantics who tell us that prejudice is due in large part to *verbal realism* and to *symbol phobia*. Therefore any program of reduction of prejudice must include a large measure of semantic therapy. (Italics ours; 103)

In leading up to this conclusion, Gordon Allport notes that Margaret Mead "has suggested that labels of

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primary potency [those labels most likely to be prejudicial] lose some of their potency when used as adjectives" (176). Clearly nouns present the illusion of Reality of substance in regard to categories. Adjectives used this way are in fact called "substantives." Adjectives, on the other hand, when used as adjectives underscore their own arbitrariness. An adjective is but one of many qualities arbitrarily selected to describe a single thing. Adjectives by their implicit arbitrariness emphasize the gap between signifier and signified; nouns by their nature obscure it.

In this regard, one might consider a peculiar, although not unique, aspect of the vocabulary of anti-Semitism. All of us are aware of offensive, derogatory "names" for various ethnic groups. We are all familiar with terms for Blacks, Hispanics, Women, Gays, and Whites, for example. While the term "kike" certainly has some but evidently decreasing currency, in many circles the term "Jew" alone functions like derogatory ethnic slur. Hitler, it may be recalled, required all Jews simply to wear the inscription, "Jude." The word by itself was sufficient to stigmatize. In fact, "He's a Jew" may be a positive statement of fact, or a neutral, or a negative one, demonstrating the "element of un-definedness" that we will later see described by John of Salisbury in his writings about the meaning of words. While there are of course exceptions, we stand in little doubt as to the emotional "value" of, say, "Black," "Nigger," "Chinese," "Chink." etc. when used by members outside the category being named. "Jew,"

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however, demonstrates—to use another medievalism—competing *in bono* and *in malo* meanings. One senses this in the vocabulary of gentles who, in referring to Jews, prefer the adjective “Jewish” to the noun “Jew,” confirming Mead’s observation about the power of nouns as opposed to adjectives. Similarly, there is frequently among older Southerners a genteel inclination towards the term “Hebrew” as a term of good will which severs all connection with the bipolar “Jew.”¹³

The Wandering Sign: Nominalists and Realists, Medieval and Modern

At this point, we might consider the work one of the central voices in the development of French and subsequently “English” literary theory. Jean-François Lyotard, in *Heidegger and “the jews”* (*Heidegger et “les juifs”*), explains the unconventional form of his work’s title:

I write “the jews” this way neither out of prudence nor lack of something better. I use the lower case to indicate that I am not thinking of a nation. I make it plural to signify that it is neither a figure nor a political (Zionism), religious (Judaism), or philosophical (Jewish philosophy) subject that I put forward under this name. I use quotation marks to avoid confusing these “jews” with real Jews. What is most real about the Jews is that Europe, in any

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case, does not know what to do with them. "The jews" are the object of a dismissal with which Jews, in particular, are afflicted in reality. (3)¹⁴

Medievalists should find this familiar rather than alien, for it is the Nominalist discourse of one half of the great philosophical debate of the Middle Ages, the debate over the Reality of "names."

Interestingly enough, Michael Weingrad cites this very same passage in a revealing critique of Lyotard:

Here is a curious mixture of abstraction and specificity. Lyotard explains that we should not confuse "the jews" described in his book with real Jews. "The jews" are not to be taken as a political, religious, or philosophical entity. However, he also tells us that it is precisely real Jews who suffer the misfortunes of "the jews." What precisely is the difference? (83)

Here we see the other half of the debate, the voice of the "Realist" attempting to take "Nominalist" Lyotard to task. Significantly, Weingrad's indictment of Lyotard and French theorists is that in their writings the Jew as symbol is *divorced* from the Jew in history—that there is a lack of identification between the sign "Jews" and what it represents. Hence Weingrad can claim, "[Lyotard's] ultimate advocacy of "the jews" as postmodern good-guys is hardly flattering since it (1) displays little concern for knowledge of the intricacies

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of Jewish thought and history...(3) has little use for Jews who do not fall within this model" (82). Weingrad thus finds in French "Theory" "disturbing characteristics" since "...theory tends towards a surprising level of abstraction and reduction. Its treatments of Jewish history are marked by an extreme ahistoricism, with the details and specifics of Jewish life thought, and culture glossed over and ignored in favor of reductive schema" (79). "Abstraction"—removal from the particular—is "reduction" because it is secondary, a movement away from the "thing" (*res*) and "Reality." A Platonist would see the opposing movement from universal to particular as a loss.

Lyotard argues that there is no connection between signifier and signified; Weingrad that there is. Lyotard, in fact, does not say that the "real" Jews suffer the misfortunes of "the jews." What he is implying is that the real Jews suffer precisely because decoders of signs do not recognize the difference, because they achieve the very closure that Weingrad demands between "the jews" and the Jews. In fact what is notable here is Weingrad's tone. Implicit in Weingrad's argument is that Lyotard among other theorists is abetting anti-Semitism if not being anti-Semitic. And that is the whole point. When the space between signifier ("the jews") and signified (the Jews) is closed, the result is what we term "prejudice." When that gap is maintained, it is not. This is exactly the point made by Haig Bosmajian in his study of the Nazi metaphorization of both Bolsheviks and Jews: "The Bolsheviks were not like a dragon, they *were*

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a dragon; the Jews were not like a demon or a bacillus, they *were* a demon and bacillus" (25–26).

Weasel Words: Muslims, Jews and Unattached Signs

With these points in mind, let us for a brief moment consider medieval attitudes and practices toward practitioners of Islam in regard to their possible status as metaphors or scapegoats. To be sure, everywhere one looks the "followers of Mahoun" are portrayed as symbols of evil, and yet there is a great deal of commerce between Christians and Moslems during the Middle Ages. Much of that commerce is cross-cultural, and much of it strictly speaking not essential. This fact should alert us that it may have been possible for the medieval Christians to see Moslems as signifiers, as individuals that were different distinct from the negative qualities signified, a difference that allowed commerce of the sort just noted. Part of that ability might rest in the often discussed medieval practice of seeing in signs conflicting meanings. The same may be true of Jews, who appear ubiquitously as symbols of evil but who, as Olson notes, still receive equal protection under the law. If a single object might at turns and at times signify meanings *in malo* or *in bono*, then the meanings were signified by the object but not embodied there. At worst, in the case of *in malo* significations, they were there *in potentia* as opposed to actuality. Margaret Nims, in an excellent, although often overlooked, essay on the theoretical bases of medieval metaphor makes this very

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observation citing Geoffrey of Vinsauf's use of the term *convertibilitas* to describe the "metaphorical potential of words" (217). Nims goes on to cite John of Salisbury's claim that

A word standing alone has an element of un-definedness analogous to that of prime matter. It is to be sure, a unit of meaning, but much of its meaning is held in suspension, in potency, until its position in discourse stabilizes its grammatical form and elicits the relevant areas of its meaning. (216)

This aspect of medieval linguistic theory emphasizes the very aspect of selectivity and hence arbitrariness that Margaret Mead suggests be highlighted through the use of adjectives rather than nouns in order to minimize prejudicial use of signs. Its recognition would allow use of groups as signs without prejudice. As such it represents a semiotic practice far different from our own "modern" one.

We might add that the idea of semantic polyvalence of meanings *in bono* or *in malo* residing in a single sign (something like the green of the Green Knight) seems particularly difficult for our students. "Well which is it?" they ask expecting sameness, fixity explicitly refuted in Augustine's assertion in *De doctrina* that

Since things are similar to other things in a great many ways, we must not think it to be prescribed

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that what a thing signifies by similtude in one place
must always be signified by that thing. (8–9)¹⁵

Again, we have here a principle that strikes at the heart of the modern use of closed signifiers as signifieds. A fully developed and practiced semiotic theory inculcating this as well as several other of principles such as those described by Nims (or postmodernists such as Lyotard) would allow the use of groups as signs without fostering Summers' "noxious" tendency to judge individuals as the embodiment or event connected to the qualities that their class might be seen, in context, to embody.

Several other well-known examples from the medieval symbolic lexicon shed some light here. The weasel, thought to conceive through the ear, was taken to be an emblem—that is, sign—of the Virgin.¹⁶ Now if a weasel got into one's garden, one did not stay one's hand because killing the weasel was doing violence to the Virgin. The weasel in real life signified a quality of the Virgin but did not embody Her. Moreover, we might make parallel observations concerning the fart which has been taken by some critics as an emblem for divine grace. If we grant that the fart might in some context be an apt sign for the Holy Ghost or divine grace,¹⁷ we still do not posit that medievals sought out moments of flatulence for religious delectation. Similarly, it may follow that Jews as well as others may well have been used in pejorative ways and yet not ostracized or stigmatized on a day-to-day basis. Indeed,

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the medieval penchant for using scatological objects as emblems for divine concepts is a most difficult practice for modern readers, something that we believe provides evidence for the difference between our semiotics and theirs.

Armed with principles we usually associate with medieval sign theory, it may have been possible for medievals to deal with any other part of a constantly signifying creation that itself is often referred to as a "liber" as an individual, distinct part of reality separate from what its species or category might elsewhere connote. This ability, of course, flies directly in the face of prejudice which is to prejudge, to treat the individual not as individual but as part of a class, whether good or evil. The word fetishism of which Allport writes makes such prejudice possible because it treats the individual and the class or species as identical.

Another literary crux demonstrates the ability to treat an object that is a member of a signifying class as an individual object devoid of its generic signification. In the works of the *Gawain*-Poet, the most complex and fully articulated sign is, of course, the pearl.¹⁸ As such, pearls have of course received a great deal of critical attention. Yet in the midst of this poem filled with multivalent pearls, the dreamer finds himself in a middle ground where the stream has pearls for gravel (ll. 79–84). What is significant here is that these pearls are simply pearls, they are the objects themselves, devoid of any particular meaning. Readers in producing increasingly ingenious symbolic systems and

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progressions for the sake of interpreting those pearls simply ignore these exasperating pearls that are only pearls. But we often do so uneasily, guiltily, in spite of Augustine, in our belief that what is true for pearls as a class must be true for each individual pearl. Readers of James Joyce know that part of Joyce's uniqueness as a writer is his ability to give himself wholeheartedly and simultaneously to literal description (objects used solely for their own sakes) and symbolism (objects used solely for the sake of the "other" they suggest). This is what we believe happens with the gravel in *Pearl*. The ability to switch in midstream separates Joyce from his contemporaries, but it also separates medieval from the modern in use of signifiers.

Levels of Abstraction and a Tiny Retraction (The Authors', not Chaucer's)

Ultimately, what is at debate here is level of abstraction. Indeed, S. I. Hayakawa in an oft cited discussion describes prejudice as "a confusion of levels of abstraction" (203–05). As Hayakawa is clear, such confusions are socially constructed, declaring that, in regard to such "confusion," "society, itself is often to blame" (28). What, then, of a different—that is, "medieval"—society—one whose language constructs officially discourage rather than encourage such "confusion"? Would it be "blameless" of the charge of modern prejudice? So much of medieval literature is about this very question of levels of abstraction and

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hence the explicitly self-conscious use of metaphor. Poor Geoffrey of the *Book of the Duchess* must puzzle out the different levels of abstraction between a chess game, the loss of the Black Knight's lady, and the losses to which all humans, including himself, are liable. More specifically, we must ask, what is the nature of the "noxious and antiquated attitudes [Storm] attributes to Chaucer" and to the Middle Ages as a whole? What exactly is our objection to Chaucer's use of the Pardoner, or rather his homosexuality? Of course, the objection raised was to discuss the Pardoner's homosexuality in negative terms was to make a corresponding judgment of all gays. Assuming that Chaucer uses homosexuality as a signifier for love of similtude, one's own image, we must ask whether the homosexuality is

- a) the reflection of the Pardoner's individual narcissism (love of sameness)
- b) the reflection of the same quality in all homosexuals
- c) a reflection of the narcissism liable to found in all human beings.

In the same fashion, are the Wife's proclivities indicative of the virtues of Dame Alice? Women? Humans? Our modern discomfort lies in our belief that the answer in both cases is the middle option that the level of abstraction stops short of all humanity. Indeed, just such a question was raised by George Gopen in regard to Dame Alice at the Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo. Gopen went on to describe the Wife "as a

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voice, a codifiable point of view, not a woman *per se*." Her nature was described as an "aspect of her human nature, not her identity as a woman" so that in regard to many of her points, "Gender is not an issue."

Paul A. Olson's assessment of the Prioress' spiritual "incompleteness" ... "comes to focus in her representation of the triumph over tyranny" (139). He notes

In late fourteenth-century terms, the Prioress' main failure in the temporal sphere is not anti-Semitism; it is injustice. Injustice and violation of due process were not popular in the same England, and Jews in medieval England had status before the law comparable to that of other citizens. John C. Hirsh has incorrectly argued that the Prioress possesses a proper 'medieval' sense of law since the provost in her tale puts to death only those Jews 'that of mordre wiste' (B2, 1820; cf. B2, 1757). But Eglantine tries to establish the complicity of all the Jews in the tale by having the widow-mother ask every Jew about her child's whereabouts (B2, 1791). (141–42).

The fundamental legal mistake is the semiotic operation that underlies prejudicial use of symbols, the closure of the gap between the individual and the set to which the individual belongs, between the individual signifier and the signified. The root of the Prioress' prejudice is the root of her legal fallacy, her inability to read the

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individual and the general. She is, then, another in the long line of Chaucer's "misreaders" and false glossers.

Let us return, again, to Summers' objection to Storm's assessment of the Pardoner. To begin with, the essential argument is over the issue of distinction, of difference. Professor Summers complains, "Storm never distinguishes between his views and what he thinks are Chaucer's." Storm the critic who represents, that is *re-presents*, Chaucer to his readers is not fully set apart from Storm the person, holder of values. For his own part, Storm counters that the difference is obvious in "historical criticism" and that its underscoring is a cumbersome insult to a sophisticated readership. In short, Storm assumes the gap—the distinction between Storm and what he sees in Chaucer, between Chaucer and what he or his persona represents in the Prioress—is inherent in the literary act itself. Here, then, is the real issue: the distinction between signifier (in this case the one doing the signifying, Storm himself) and the subject of his discourse. The issues in the debate over the alleged prejudicial aspects of Storm's essay becomes remarkably congruent with the issue of "Chaucer the Pilgrim" and "Chaucer the Poet." Likewise it reflects the complaint of Weingrad against Lyotard. If the gap between Storm and his discourse is present, then Summers' objections are without foundation. If Chaucer were aware of gap between reality and the fictions or tropes used to portray reality, then he might likewise be excused.

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Are Chaucer in the *Prioress' Tale* or, for that matter, Shakespeare in *Merchant of Venice* anti-Semitic because they locate bad qualities in Jewish figures? Are they guilty of treating those figures unfairly? Is treating them unfairly mistreating "real" Jews? In the purely theoretical (and totalized) world of this essay, the answer is "yes" only if we believe in the positivist connection between signifier and signified. If the Prioress' Jews or Shakespeare's Shylock are theoretically real, in the sense that voodoo dolls are, then one can do harm to those embodied by the sign. Given a different "Nominalist" semiotics, Chaucer's practice would not conform to *modern* prejudicial practice. Shakespeare's, following the new Renaissance defense of poetry and especially without the buffer of an intervening narrator, would be more difficult to assess, and we leave it to the keepers of the Renaissance to (con)tend the monument to the Vergil of that Age.

Of course neither the Medieval or Renaissance worlds nor ours is a purely theoretical, and the harm and hurt of words are often real, or at least really felt. So it may be well for us to remember that while D. W. Robertson, Jr., in *A Preface to Chaucer*, ably demonstrated the theoretical ironic thrust of Andreas' *De Amore*, it was beyond Robertson's, or anyone's, ability to prove that Andreas' audience recognized such irony and avoided whatever "effects" might accrue in a more literal reading. So it is with Chaucer. Chaucer, the linguistic theorist, might well have recognized the arbitrary, multivalent, and hence non-prejudicial nature

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of his signs, but we cannot totalize his Age, nor even his audience, to assume they recognized the same, no matter what the authorized, patristic writings might contain, "whoso that kan may rede hem as they write." So if Chaucer, whatever his semiotic theory, might be taken to endorse—or this argument used to condone—what we ourselves find "noxious," we think it best to "arrette it to the defaute of [oure] unkonnyng, and nat to [oure] wyl." Will, whether good or bad, exists from moment to moment, and the same caveat might be applied to our vision of Chaucer, himself—dear as that image is. While the solidifying term "Chaucer" might, itself, be an apt name for a statue, fixed and permanent as statues are, it is certainly inadequate, at worst deceptive, as a way of signifying a human being subject to "decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse," for there's no reason to believe that Chaucer could be fixed "in a formulated phrase," whether it be "prejudiced" or "prejudice free"—a fact that allows us to hold prejudicial attitudes and at the same time say that "Some of my best friends are..." and thereby congratulate those friends for not being like the signifier, which to us in the non-theoretical world is real.... Sort of.

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Notes

1. For historical overviews of critical reaction to the question of Chaucerian prejudice, see the *Variorum* edition of the *Prioress' Tale*, pp. 43–50 as well as Benson, pp. 913–14.
2. For example, the *Variorum* edition of the *Prioress' Tale* begins with an epigram about anti-Semitism taken from Lincoln Cathedral. Emmy Zitter's intelligent reading ends with a personal judgment as she needs to go on record, calling the Prioress' attitudes "frightening and repugnant" (282).
3. Emmy Stark Zitter divides responses into "historical" and "ironic" (3).
4. On medieval anti-Semitism, see *The Variorum*, pp. 27–32. In regard to Chaucer's reflecting the anti-Semitism of his times, see Robert Worth Frank (1981): 259. Derek S. Brewer cautions that modern negative responses would not match those of Chaucer's contemporaries (151).
5. On the tale as "satire" see the *Variorum*, pp. 31–32. Zitter argues that the tale's "success" casts doubt on an ironic reading. Muriel Bowden, in her highly influential handbook, deliberately contrasts anti-Semitism to her supposed piety in order to condemn the former and undercut the latter (99–100). Sr. Mary Hostia likewise finds the contradiction between piety and the tale indicative of Hypocrisy. Richard J. Schoeck finds the tale condemning the cruelty of the prioress, finding deliberate irony and a "satire" of anti-Semitism.

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Donaldson ("Prioress") finds the Prioress to be a person of her age, but insists that Chaucer was not, finding it inconsonant with the still influential Chaucer which Donaldson found at the heart of the Canon. Arguably deconstruction seems to be more effective than recourse to "irony" in exposing the Prioress' un-Christian attitudes in the midst of (and relation to) her Christian piety.

6. Weingrad argues that French Theorists, themselves, while almost unanimously taking up the question of anti-Semitism have failed to "apply" the principles of theory, finding as he does, considerable "essentialism" in their studies of the subject.

7. Also cited in Fradenburg, p. 72.

8. Ian Robinson finds the Prioress' "hatred of the Jews unlike and less dangerous than modern anti-Semitism" (151). R. M. Lumiansky warns that "anti-Semitism was a somewhat different thing in the fourteenth century from what it is today" (43) Neither Robinson nor Lumiansky considers whether the symbolic or semiotic aspects of anti-Semitism have changed from the fourteenth century.

9. For helpful definitions of "Prejudice," see Allport, pp. 6–10 and Brown, pp. 3–9. On the role of classification/categorization in Prejudice, see Brown, pp. 39–80, as well as Allport, pp. 166–68, esp. 42–44, and Hayakawa, pp. 214–19.

10. The name comes from the notion that the *one correct, true name* for a given thing "rings a bell" and hence seems correct in the mind of the person who hears

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it. Thus when I consider something that I sit on, the term "chair" rings a bell in mind, while "fire" does not.

11. In the same fashion, only very late in the readings of *Pearl* were critics able to accept the possibility that the poem is not an elegy—that the Pearl-maiden might be a purely fictitious symbol, that the genesis of the poem might not be the death of a "real" child named Margaret.

12. See Moore. Donaldson ("Myth") takes up the problem of nomenclature as well (154–55).

13. This latter term has the additional semiotic force of removing the reference from the New Testament, in which "Jews" are stigmatized with the Crucifixion and relocating the term in the "Old" Testament before the rejection of the "Christ."

14. On the "problem" of defining "Jews," see Allport, pp. 116–23. See also Hayakawa, pp. 203–05.

15. For a discussion of medieval sign theory, especially medieval attitudes toward the polysemous nature of signs, see "Introduction," Ross G. Arthur, especially pp. 10–11. On the medieval notion of the arbitrariness of signs, see Wasserman, especially pp. 199–200 as well as pp. 215, note 2 and 216–17, note 7 for brief bibliographies on medieval semiotics.

16. See Debra Hassig pp. 29–32. We'd like to thank Laura C. Minnick along with other Chaucerletters for jogging our collective memories about this medieval zoological "fact."

17. See Benson, p. 879, note on line 2255 for a brief bibliography of the fart in the cartwheel as a "parody

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[of] iconographic representations of the descent of the Holy Spirit to the twelve Apostles.”

18. See Scholfield.

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