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► To cite this version:

Maria Greenwood. Pointless piety and pathos in Chaucer's "Prioress's tale". Colette Stévanovitch et René Tixier. Surface et profondeur. Mélanges offerts à Guy Bourquin à l'occasion de son 75e anniversaire, 7, Association des médiévistes anglicistes de l'enseignement supérieur, pp.179-198, 2003, GRENDEL, 2-901198-35-X. hal-04674726

HAL Id: hal-04674726

<https://hal.science/hal-04674726v1>

Submitted on 21 Aug 2024

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Pointless piety and pathos in Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale"

In Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale", presented as "a miracle of the Virgin", the passages of piety and pathos, while often movingly worded, do not succeed in producing a coherent edifying effect. To some critics like Priscilla Martin (1990) or Louise Fradenberg (1989) the tale appears positively wicked and so irreligious.¹ Even Robert Boenig (1995)² in a study of the text's closeness to the language of contemporary mystics, Richard Rolle or Marjory Kempe, cannot deny that the message of the "Prioress's Tale" is radically alien to theirs.

In the following article, I examine how piety and pathos are used to heighten the impact of the Prioress's narrative and promote her reputation for religious correctness, yet how, fundamentally, all aspects of her tale are undermined by pointlessness. Relying mainly on the critical methods of Mikhail Bakhtin, as in earlier studies,³ I posit a Prioress-narrator who is not just weak and foolish, but secretly either slightly or deeply vicious. So, prompted by Chaucer, or rather by his pilgrim Narrator to concentrate on the Prioress as the teller of the tale (the two uses of *quod she* in the "Prologue" (l. 454) and in the "Tale" (l. 581) indicate that the Narrator is distancing himself from the Prioress's words), I take the tale initially as a dramatic monologue which completes the characterization of the Prioress begun in the "General Prologue".⁴ Later, I investigate the real author Chaucer's part in both *fabula* and *syuzhet* (the real life events behind the story and the way it is told) and notice the opposition between what is told by the Prioress and what is suggested by the author (who,

¹ Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women*, London: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 36; Louise O. Fradenberg, "Chaucer and anti-Semitism", *Exemplaria*, 1 (1989), 69-116; rpt. in eds. Valerie Allen & Ares Axiotes, *Chaucer: New Casebook*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997, pp. 193-231.

² Robert Boenig, *Chaucer and the Mystics: The Canterbury Tales and the Genre of Devotional Prose*, London: Associated University Presses, 1995, pp. 71-101.

³ Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, 1975, trans. into French by Daria Olivier, Paris: Gallimard, 1978; Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*, London & New York: Routledge, 1990; Tzveran Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtine; le principe dialogique*, Paris: Seuil, 1981; Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997.

⁴ M. K. Greenwood, "Trust and Chaucer's Prioress: the Secrets of her Success", *Identités et différences*, ed. André Lascombes, Publication de l'AMAES, 17 (1992), 27-43.

here, merges with his Narrator). Finally, I am led to discover in Chaucer's dialogistic and Menippean text⁵ how the contrast between two languages,⁶ one marked by the polysemia and aporia of expressions of feeling and the other by the clarity and precision of plain factual exposition, allows the emergence of a satirical subtext.

If the Prioress's narration can impress and distress her audience so profoundly as, in the end, to leave them speechless, it is that from the start she has played on their feelings and manipulated them by her tone of piety. The Prioress's "Prologue" takes the form of a prayer addressed to the Lord and the Virgin simultaneously, and achieves the tone of exalted devotion by adapting the most poetic language of the Psalms. This pious invocation functions like a classical rhetorical introduction to epic, calling upon unseen powers and setting the mood of reverence suitable for utterance of an exalted kind. The ending of the prayer contrasts with its opening by alluding, in traditionally pious fashion, to the speaker's own ignorance and lowliness. The Prioress identifies with a child in arms and so sets up the two emotional poles of her story: on the one hand the divinely bestowed magnificence and power of the uniquely privileged Virgin Mother of the Lord, and on the other, the powerlessness and pathos of all children and all mortals, attributes shared by the Divine Child himself through the paradox of the Incarnation. As no doubt trained to do in her convent (the Marian cult had been spreading throughout the fourteenth century), the Prioress in her "Prologue" might be actually praying before a statue of the Virgin and Child, or at least demonstrating to her audience how this is properly done.

As we pass from the Prologue to the Tale itself, the exclamatory style is dropped in favour of the narrative, but the text continues to present the Virgin as a model of puissant purity, and to underline the pathos of those among her devotees whose own purity is linked to helplessness and suffering. Chief of these is the *little clergeon* who, while not saved from death by the Virgin's intervention, is welcomed, we are assured, into heavenly bliss by Herself in person, his murderers already satisfyingly punished. The Virgin is presented throughout with a sort of ecstatic glamour which justifies the *little clergeon's* extreme if childish devotion, which we are invited piously to approve and sentimentally to share.

At crucial moments in the tale, the Prioress bursts into prayerful apostrophe to remind us how she relies on the Virgin's guidance: notably in the stanza beginning *O martir sowed to virginity* (ll. 579-585) when she celebrates the *little clergeon's* recently acquired spiritual status of martyr as a result of his

⁵ See F. Anne Payne, *Menippean Satire*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981.

⁶ On Chaucer's use of distinct languages or discourse styles, see Jane Cowgill, "Portraits of Feminine and Masculine Persuasion in the *Melibee* and the *Parson's Tale*", in eds. C. David Benson & Elizabeth Robertson, *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990, pp. 171-184.

murder; and then in the lines just before his corpse is miraculously revealed. At this latter point, the eloquent language of a prayer to God includes naming the boy in terms of glittering jewels, so that we forget his actual position in a bed of filth:

O grete God that parfournest thy laude
 By mouth of innocentz, lo, heere thy myght
 This gemme of chastitie, this emeraude,
 And eek of martyrdom the ruby bright, (l. 607-610)

The Prioress then conjures up the sight of his lying upright with his throat cut as vividly as a picture,⁷ as well as the miraculous sound of his singing

Ther he with throte ykorven lay upright,
 He *Alma Redemptoris* gan to synge
 So loude that all the place gan to ryngre. (l. 611-613)

The hymn that we are told is miraculously heard is the *Alma Redemptoris*, the most popular hymn to the Virgin in the fourteenth century. At the end of the tale the Virgin reveals herself in an apparition to the dying child, as the child reports to the abbot, who reports to the Prioress, who reports to her audience. We then hear of the gift of the grain or pearl to be laid on the child's tongue to start and to stop the singing. Finally, the Prioress invokes a popular child martyr, Little St. Hugh of Lincoln who, also reportedly a victim of the Jews, can be called upon to corroborate the truth of her story and to intercede for sinners.⁸

If these outbursts of prayer are taken as expressing the Prioress's deeply felt piety, her story can be understood as innocent, or innocently meant, since their language is certainly beautiful and exalted and so reminiscent of that of the mystics. Yet as it is the story itself rather than the prayerful rhetoric that weighs more in the final effect, the Prioress's piety tends to fade on re-reading to mere wrapping, decorative but paper-thin, at best a sort of cover-up for incongruities and irrelevance. For on even cursory reflection, how can one reasonably accept a miracle so fundamentally useless? How is it possible to believe in divine intervention in a story that ends not in desirable outcomes but in disaster? However beautifully enhanced by the aura of martyrdom, it is a little boy's death, not life, that the Prioress sentimentalises over. Unlike all the Gospel accounts of the miracles of Christ, including His Resurrection, this particular "miracle" includes no restoration to life on earth. The oldest known version of the story has a more positive ending in that the child continues living and the accused Jews are converted, but in the Prioress's version the outcomes are finally negative and gruesome.

⁷ See the murdered girl with throat gaping in Hogarth's *The Third Stage of Cruelty*. J. Burke & C. Caldwell, *The Complete Engravings of Hogarth*, Paris, 1968, p. 226.

⁸ Little St. Hugh of Lincoln was, purportedly, a nine-year old whose death was blamed on the Jews when found in a Lincoln well in 1255. See Donald Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of the Saints*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965, 1974, p. 175.

By comparing the Prioress's version of the tale to others in extant analogues (as they have been listed and studied by Carleton Brown and others for almost a century),⁹ we notice how the apparent piety of the Prioress is maximised by a highly emotional, but often irrational, surcharge of pathos.¹⁰ In all her alterations and deliberate choices among the narrative elements of her tale, the Prioress picks those with the greatest pathetic effect. She tells her story in a series of sad pictures which move pity by instinct, not thought, and which produce a story-line of sweet pathos, the more pleasing in that it by-passes and neutralizes judgement. The tale is thus simultaneously shockingly distressing and reassuringly consoling for those listeners / readers who, by deploring the plight of the murdered child and his mother, feel that they have been rewarded for their worthy sentiments at the end by sharing in the divine approval of the Virgin Mary in heaven. The pathos and the piety promote a feeling, but a feeling only, that such a sensitive reaction to a crime is sufficiently righteous in itself and needs no further going into.

The Prioress adds to or alters the analogues as follows: a) the unhappy rather than the happy ending is preferred: the *little clergeon* dies, the Jews are not converted; b) the *little clergeon's* age is made younger, seven years old instead of ten; c) the more popular hymn to the Virgin, *Alma Redemptoris*, is chosen rather than the more suitable *Gaude Maria*, as the hymn miraculously sung, d) the *little clergeon* knows no Latin and so ignores the meaning of the words he sings, but the Jews do, e) an older school friend is introduced, who knows the hymn by heart and its general meaning but still not the meaning of the individual Latin words; finally, f) the (new) incident of the grain is added which, placed on the child's tongue by the Virgin and removed by the abbot, allows the child to start and to stop singing and to die peacefully.

In her descriptions of the characters kept from other versions: the *little clergeon* himself, the widowed mother, the holy abbot, and the severe provost, the Prioress intensifies pathos. By having them act their roles almost as allegorical figures not presented in very much depth, she creates an impression of somewhat flat, stereotyped characters, who are signalled as good in an iconic, emblematic fashion by how they appear in a purely visual sense. They are all four demonstrated as pious (the *little clergeon* particularly so) and shown as well as heard to pray, and each one also acting typically and apparently righteously: the child learning at school as a very good pupil; the mother concerned with her son's piety when he is with her, searching and weeping when he is lost; the

⁹ Carleton Brown, *A Study of the Miracles of Our Lady Told by Chaucer's Prioress*, Chaucer Society, Series 2, 45, London: Trubner, 1910; "Chaucer's Prioress's Tale and Its Analogues", *PMLA*, 21 (1906), 486-518; "The Prioress's Tale: Its Sources and Analogues", William F. Bryson and Germaine Dempster eds., 1941 (rpt. New York: Humanities Press; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), pp. 447-85.

¹⁰ Carleton Brown, *A Study of the Miracles of Our Lady*, p. 113.

provost responding to the call of duty by commanding swiftly and surely; the abbot responding to his call of duty by communing with the dead and the divine and performing ritual actions.¹¹ The Jews, on the contrary, hardly appear in a visual sense in the story¹² (except for the brief moment when they deny having seen the child), but are designated as evil from the start. We are told rather than shown that the actual murderer is Jewish (a point clashing oddly with the fact that, as one of the presumed conspirators, he was hired and paid to do something which he could have done for ideological reasons alone).

A mysterious character, named *a lord*, who keeps up the Jewry for his own ends, appears once in the tale in the third line, never to be heard of again. As he is clearly on the “wrong side” by supporting the Jews and their money business, the Prioress does not dwell on this figure, since as lord of the whole country he is also embarrassingly on “the right side” in that he must be obeyed by all. Indeed, his existence poses problems of ambivalence that do not fit into the Prioress’s initial black and white division into “good” and “evil”, since the lines about usury could apply to the lord as much as to the Jewry. Thus, if we refuse the Prioress’s shunting to a purely emotional reaction to the tale by paying some attention to this ambivalent “grey” character, we can take him as our starting point for looking at the story in the dispassionate light of reason.

Looked at thus, the chief weakness of the tale is seen to lie in the characters’ motivation. For although the tale is passed off on the Prioress’s lips as a miracle story, it is fundamentally a murder story, and like all murder stories presents the thematic interest of who is really to blame for the crime and how far real justice has been done in the punishment.¹³ For from a rational, rather than a purely emotional point of view, our reaction to crime, however sordid, must insist on according blame only where it is due, and meting out only just punishment. A rational scrutiny of the ways in which the Prioress has fashioned her own version of the story to heighten its piety and pathos, reveals this puzzling inattention to the logical coherence of the characters’ motivation and therefore to seeing that justice is done.

a) The unhappy ending

After the murder, the child is restored miraculously to the powers of utterance, but never to life, nor to his widowed mother. His miraculous singing

¹¹ On the attitudes of the laity to the privileged position of recognized holy men, see André Vauchez, *Saints prophètes et visionnaires: Le pouvoir surnaturel au Moyen Age*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1999.

¹² Carolyn Colette describes the Prioress’s Jews as “pale and shadowy”, in “Critical Approaches to the Prioress’s Tale and the Second Nun’s Tale”, in C. D. Benson & E. Robertson eds., *Chaucer’s Religious Tales*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990, pp. 95-110.

¹³ Louise Fradenberg makes this point by asking “...if the Jews were not responsible [...], who was?” (“Chaucer and anti-Semitism”, p. 223).

(by ensuring the prompt execution of his presumed murderers) avenges his death, but fails, as mentioned earlier, to convert the latter to better ways. Both the presumed murderers and their victim come to a terrible end. Now although we can see why the Prioress herself or any other teller of the tale might want to make the ending tragic and pathetic, indeed sensational, for rhetorical effect and impact on the audience, there is no convincing reason for the chief character in the narrative, the miracle worker, the Holy Virgin Herself, to desire such an outcome. The miracle seems pointless in that it does no real, earthly good to those involved and that its fruits are not general gratitude for restored happiness, but general disturbance and shock at denouncement, persecution, grief and death. The only visible benefit for the main protagonist is a second death more placid than the first, and a prestigious funeral service. The provost is presumably applauded for the public demonstration of his power, while the mother and the abbot and his monks may, like the *little clergeon* himself, gain only the prestige of piety, their one material consolation being that the child's unnatural singing finally stops. The miracle could possibly be thought to be in the style of the wrathful, avenging Lord of the Old Testament, but hardly in that of the meek Lord of the New Testament, and certainly not in that of the meek Mother of Christ who, according to any authoritative Christian doctrine, has never been thought of as an instrument of vengeance.¹⁴

On a truly Christian level, attributing such an unholy miracle to the Virgin is basically blasphemous and makes Her appear more like a fairy kidnapping a human child or a pagan goddess avid for mortal sacrifice than the benevolent Mother of Christ as described in the Gospels. For if this so-called miracle is compared to the miracles of the Gospels, in particular those which, because they are prompted by a desire for vengeance or for escape, Christ refuses to perform,¹⁵ this so-called miracle is decidedly un-Christian. With a popular, sensation-seeking, but wholly perverted Christianity, the Prioress presents the tragic ending as happy solely in that it promotes the *little clergeon* to the title of virgin martyr, welcomed into bliss by the Virgin Mother in person, and assured in the Virgin's last words that she will never let him down, a promise the easier to keep since he is already in heaven.

¹⁴ The Roman Catholic believer's attitudes to the Virgin Mary as opposed to the non-believer's was given striking example when the current Pope John Paul II had to encourage his would-be assassin to put aside fears of the Virgin Mary's sending down retribution on him for his attempted crime. Czeslaw Milosz, who knows the Pope personally, recounts the incident in his memoirs. Czeslaw Milosz, *Wspomnienia: rok myśliwego*, Krakow: Zak, 1991, p. 34.

¹⁵ See the Gospel accounts of the injunction to Peter to put up his sword when Christ is apprehended in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26 : 51-53), or the taunting on the Cross when He refuses to save Himself (Matt. 28 : 40-44).

b) The younger age of the *little clergeon*

Indeed, given that his life has been cut short at seven, these assurances of the Prioress's Virgin to the newly-dead child strike one as superfluous and indeed cruel. The figure of this child just learning to read, to speak Latin, to be pious is sentimentally touching, particularly since boys at his age are rarely so devout; but he cannot reasonably be considered to have deserved, since he could hardly have desired, his title of martyr or even of virgin.¹⁶ Yet the age of seven as the accepted age of reason means that the child can be accounted responsible for his actions, and that therefore his conscious desires and motives must be taken into account. Were he very much younger, like the Holy Innocents, the new-born babes slaughtered by Herod for political reasons at the birth of Christ,¹⁷ the questions of his responsibility or of his conscious desires would not arise. Here, however, they evidently do, and one must ask oneself how far the child's motivation makes narrative or moral sense. How justifiable is it to attribute to him titles (martyr, virgin) which rightly belong only to fully deliberate moral choice or to entire and unconscious innocence?

By having the *little clergeon* ten years old, the analogues provide sounder motivation both for the child and for his supposed murderers. A ten-year old can be wilfully provoking, whereas a child of seven is too insignificant and small to arouse such passionate reactions to his words or songs, nor can he be thought to mean the words of a hymn he does not understand or to cause outrage deliberately. However much he genuinely desired to praise the Virgin, he equally certainly did not desire to provoke the Jews: the only rules that the child himself recognises as breaking are those of school discipline, and the only injunctions he braves are those that tell him not to waste his time on songs, but to get on with his grammar.

c) The choice of hymn and the unknown Latin language

In the majority of versions, the *little clergeon* sings the *Gaude Maria*, which includes recognisable references both to the Virgin and to the Jews, while the *Alma Redemptoris*, the hymn in the "Prioress's Tale", does not. Again, as with the younger age of the victim, the motivation of the Jews is weakened since they have not been clearly even if inadvertently insulted. Furthermore, while neither of the schoolboys understands the meaning of the words the Jews surprisingly do. Other versions make more sense by having the Jews enquire the hymn's meaning of a Latin scholar.

¹⁶ Florence Ridley, indulgent to the Prioress, is equally indulgent to the two children of the story whom she admits are "not real"; Florence Ridley, *The Prioress and the Critics*, University of California English Studies, 30, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965.

¹⁷ See Marie P. Hamilton, "Echoes of Childermas in the Tale of the Prioress", *MLR*, 34 (1939), 1-8.

d) The added character

As for the older schoolboy who teaches the hymn to the younger, (according to Carleton Brown, "Chaucer's most important invention"),¹⁸ he too lacks motivation. It is strange that he agrees to teach the younger one out of school hours for no return, especially as both children recognise they are transgressing rules: the *little clergeon* is willing to be caned for neglecting his primer (ll. 1731-3), and the older boy, on the way to and from school, teaches the hymn in secret (*privily*, ll. 1734). Thus the older boy is aware that he is doing something wrong or dangerous but fails to suggest to the smaller one to sing *privily* too when on his own. One is also struck by the oddness of the smaller child begging the older boy to teach him, *on his bare knees* (ll. 1719) since however much this evokes the intense longing of the smaller one to learn, it hardly gives the older one much of a reason to teach. Small boys are usually attached to more tangible rewards than the mere show of superiority and inferiority, of domination and victimisation, and bigger boys with smaller boys on their knees in front of them suggest perverse bullying rather than sincere and innocent supplication.

e) The story of the grain

The ending of the miraculous grain, not found in any of the analogues, allows a kind of purely social promotion to the not-quite-dead child at the expense of the superior abbot. As with the older boy, the motivation of the abbot is puzzling, particularly before he has spoken to the child. Many questions arise out of his behaviour, and not only by the Prioress's going back on the epithet *holy* in her (decidedly coy) phrasing:¹⁹

This abbot, which that was an holy man,
as monkes been — ore elles oghte be — (l. 642-3)

Why is the abbot in such a hurry to get the miraculous singing over with and to bury the child? The child has been lying before the altar while mass is being said, presumably silent until the service comes to an end, when the abbot makes haste *to burien hym ful fast*; (ll. 637-38). But since at the touch of the holy water of the funeral rites the child starts to sing again, why does the abbot make no attempt to further the miraculous resuscitation into lasting life? Why does he solemnly ask the child what keeps him singing rather than how to make him better?

Tel me what is thy cause for to synge,
Since that thy throte is kut to my semynge? (l. 647-8)

¹⁸ Carleton Brown, *A Study of the Miracles of Our Lady*, p. 113.

¹⁹ *Riverside*, p. 211.

After the child has died, *full softly*, why exactly does the abbot shed tears? Because he was glad / sorry to obey the Virgin and remove the grain from the child's tongue? Or because the whole affair made him feel distressed and uneasy?²⁰

As we welter with the abbot in a lake of tears and aporia, we share his uneasiness. For the grain, the "magic object", as it is sometimes called,²¹ seems to leave the world of recognizable piety and to enter a stranger one of magic, no longer that of the mystics, but closer to pagan faiths and fairyland. From the literary point of view we might be perusing one of the early Latin novels such as *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius. The taking out of the grain from the child's mouth and then his "soft" departure into the other world have some of the nightmarish quality of the first incident in that tale, where a man murdered at night seems to be hale and living in the morning, until the moment he eats and drinks and his cut throat opens up again and he dies.²²

Even more puzzling is the irrational behaviour given to those characters of the tale who are present in almost all the versions, the provost and the widowed mother. The provost can (possibly) suggest piety by his haste to bring down punishment on the heads of the Jews, apparently immediately convinced by the miraculous song of the murdered child and the words of his distraught mother. But we notice that he asks nothing about the circumstances of the crime or about the identity of the actual murderer, and that, after a couple of prayers to *Crist ... And eek his mooder* (ll. 618-619), he has the Jews arrested, tortured and executed without trial. As for the mother, in contrast to the haste of the provost and the abbot, she is incomprehensibly slow in starting to search for her son, first waiting up all night as if for a youth of seventeen rather than a child of seven. Her anxiety and grief are displayed in vivid and pathetic vignettes, but there is an air of the set piece about these, when she poses in predictable attitudes, while her pious inspiration to act comes only in fits and starts.

At the beginning of the tale the scene has been set in clear and orderly fashion (and in language simple enough to seem dull after the fulsomeness of the "Prologue"), with indications of a regular routine and a familiar path to school. The mother knows, as we do (for this was explained in the first stanza), that the *little clergeon* passes through the Jewish quarter twice a day to reach the Christian school that is at the other end of a straight road. When the child disappears and the mother starts looking for him in the morning, she is told at the school that the child was last seen in the Jewish quarter, yet she only decides

²⁰ Albert B. Freidman, "The Mysterious 'Greyn' in *The Prioress's Tale*", *Chaucer Review*, 11 (1977), 328-33.

²¹ Carleton Brown, "*The Prioress's Tale*: Its Sources and Analogues", p. 458.

²² Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. William Adlington, rev. S. Gaselee, intro. James Morwood, Ware: Wordsworth, 1996, p. 11.

to go there after looking everywhere else. She must have already crossed the Jewry to get to the school, but instead of going back there immediately, seems unable to think clearly and runs round

To every place wher she hath supposed
By lyklihede hir litel child to fynde. (ll. 595-6)

It is only after tears and appeals to the Virgin, that *atte last* (l. 598), she thinks of enquiring among the Jews. On a sudden inspiration that the Prioress claims comes straight from Jesus, she calls out to her son and is miraculously answered from the cess-pit. Then she fades from the story. She is last seen at the funeral clinging²³ to her child's coffin, having been called with apparently unconscious irony *this newe Rachel*.²⁴ She is not allowed to remain with her still living son, nor be present at the abbot's interview but, for no convincing reason (except for the picturesqueness of the vignette) is dragged away.

As to the mother's interaction with the Jews, it seems to go against the Prioress's initial designation of them as the minions of Satan. Questioned by the weeping mother, the Jews in their entirety say that they have not seen her child, a statement that strictly can refer only to those Jews whom the mother actually addressed and who may well have been speaking the simple truth. Although we have been assured by the Prioress's words that "all" the Jews actually conspired to murder the child, this is patently an impossibility, on a practical level if no other. The insistence of *every*, designating the whole population of the ghetto, is one of those abusive generalisations which come all too easily to the tongue of those who pay no attention to exactness, and who make racist amalgams. The Jews could not "all" have taken part in the conspiracy (even had it really happened), and only the one hired murderer would know what he had done with the body. The Jews' guilt is not only not confirmed by the incident, but the case against them actually weakened. Events, however, move too quickly for this anomaly to be noticed, and with a return to pious mouthings, the Prioress-narrator has the provost take over centre stage from the mother and punish the Jews cruelly and expeditiously:

With torment and with shameful deeth echon:
This provost doth thise Jewes for to sterve
That of this modre wist and that anon. (ll. 628-30)

Now the Prioress has already told us that the Jews were responsible for the murder even before the mother missed her child. She has thus designated the perpetrators of the crime with the poetic license of the omniscient narrator, so that her audience is tricked into taking her word for it. Moreover she has, with her dramatising of Satan, and actually acting his part and speaking his very

²³ As does Griselda who, at last realising that her children had not been murdered, clings to them so hard that when she faints they have to be forcibly extricated from her grasp. See *Riverside*, ll. 1100-1103, p. 151.

²⁴ See Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women*, p. 36.

words directly, used terms so thundering that her audience is already cowed as if by a hell-fire bishop casting anathema. By putting the same words into the mouth of the provost as she has already used directly to her audience (*cursed* and *cursedness*, *yvel* as adjective and later as noun), she appears to be giving a thrilling pulpit demonstration of the wrath of Divine Retribution. But logically, realistically, according to the rules of plausible narrative, even of fiction, the Prioress is manipulating her audience along the lines of patent injustice and racial prejudice.

Critics who excuse the use of *cursed* to qualify the Jews maintain that the Prioress is simply traditionally unthinking, provincial and uninformed, that she merely wants a colourful bogey for her sensational tale, and has no experience of Jews, expelled from England for over a hundred years. To quote Derek Brewer, "by placing the story in Asia... (Chaucer) ... saves the gentle Prioress from an otherwise ugly anti-semitism".²⁵ Yet on close reading, it seems impossible not to suspect the Prioress of a confirmed taste for the sensational, sordid, gruesome and even sadistic. For, despite all her villifications, she simply does not furnish the Jews with credible motives for the murder.²⁶

The Prioress's story appears as a *fabula* full of holes, however cleverly she deals with the *sjuzhet*. Nor are these holes the innocent ones of an inexperienced story-teller to whom filling them would not occur. For she hides them, as we have seen, by a diversion into prayer, or by presenting images so vivid that one believes her as one would an eye-witness, as in the actual description of the murder. The Prioress conjures with words to make her audience believe in her tale, but does not seem to be concerned with believing it herself by attending to its internal coherence.²⁷ She may actually be pursuing unholy ends of her own of bolstering her own ego, gaining a sense of power by manipulating her audience's feelings, perversely compensating for her own powerlessness by fomenting racial hatred and persecution.²⁸ Her tale makes it finally impossible to think of the Prioress in terms of mild satire, or as (in Florence Ridley's words): "a kind-hearted, silly, somewhat misdirected woman ... unaware of her own worldliness."²⁹ On the contrary, the "mawkishness and grotesquery of her tale", as Arthur T. Broes puts it,³⁰ become the more apparent the more we study its exaggerated sleights of hand and fundamental pointlessness.

²⁵ Derek Brewer, *Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer*, London: 1982, p. 52.

²⁶ Most of the analogues prefer to set the tale far away from the country of origin: thus an English version has the story take place in Spain, while the Spanish version prefers England.

²⁷ Alan T. Gaylord, "The Unconquered Tale of the Prioress", *PMSAL*, 47 (1962), 630-34.

²⁸ See Wolfgang E. H. Rudert, "Gender-Crossing in *The Prioress's Tale*: Chaucer's Satire on Theological Anti-Semitism", *Cithara*, 33, ii (1994), 11-17.

²⁹ See Florence Ridley, *The Prioress and the Critics*, note 11.

³⁰ Arthur T. Broes, "Chaucer's Disgruntled Cleric: *The Nun's Priest's Tale*", *PMLA*, 78 (1963), 156-62.

So we come finally to Chaucer and his own creative hand in the "Prioress's Tale", to *his* literary creation, not the Prioress's, *his* authorial responsibility for *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, not hers. First of all, we can consider how her tale completes her characterisation as begun in the "General Prologue". It seems clear that there Chaucer is telling us that the Prioress's piety and emotionalism are superficial and that "all was sensibility and tender heart"³¹ should be taken as sarcastic. Her words in her "Tale" finally reveal little depth of feeling, of intelligence or of faith, and show that she is shallow and immature, but with a sufficiently sensational emotionalism and cunning to get her story through by a kind of trickery. Now, however, we can concentrate on the story itself and see its internal failures as a means for the author of going beyond the characterisation of the teller and as pointers to a sub-text. By taking the failures of rational consistency in the narrative as deliberately put in by Chaucer, we can read them as hints and clues to the real facts behind the story, which the teller, consciously or unconsciously, distorts. For if the two rhetorical poles of the Prioress's account as set up by her prologue were seen to be divine power and mortal powerlessness, Chaucer, the author, might be seen to be setting up, through the inconsistencies, different rhetorical poles: the more negative vision of, on the one hand, divine abstention from intervention or "powerlessness" and of, on the other hand, human pervasive, corrosive lust for power.

If we return to the one character in the story who is not clearly good or evil, the lord of the country, the *eminence grise* of the beginning, we can suggest for every character different motives from those that seem to drive them. Extracting the factual from the fanciful in the structure of the tale, we are left with a skeleton of about five incontrovertible facts: a lord in Asia supports a Jewry in his city for purposes of business, until the day the body of a boy with his throat cut is found in that district, whereupon the Jews are blamed for the murder and executed in their totality, according to the law. Put like that, it seems evident that the only person who has a serious motive for getting rid of the child is the one who wants to get rid of the Jews, in other words the lord who invited them there in the first place. Once they have served their turn, he wishes they would go away without demanding the vast sums of filthy lucre that he owes them. So the nameless lord, who is after all supreme ruler in the land, engineers the whole episode.

We can pick out from Chaucer's text a series of "clues" which enables us to construct the "true story of what happened", or the facts of the case, in Bakhtinian terminology the *fabula* that the Prioress has treated as *sjuzhet* in her own characteristic way. Starting with the first mentioned character in the tale, the lord, who must be there for a reason, we recall the ambivalence of the opening lines that relate to him:

³¹ *Riverside*, l. 150, p. 25.

Ther was in Asie, in a greet citee
 Amonges Christen folk a Jewerye,
 Sustained by a lord of that contree
 For foule usure and lucre of vileynye,
 Hateful to Christ and to his compaignye;
 And thurgh the strete men myghte ride or wende,
 For it was free and open at eyther ende. (l. 488-494)

The first four lines pass over this *lord* so glibly that, at first reading, one rarely stops to think that everything that happens in that Asian city is commanded and commandeered by the lord, who *sustains* maintains, allows a Jewish quarter in the middle of a Christian area and who drives a public thoroughfare right through it so that Jews and Christians are forced to mingle and the opportunities for both trade and conflict are plentiful. According to the Prioress (the emotional voice of the tale) the line *Hateful to Christ and to his compaignye* (l. 492) which is so poetically climactic, seems to qualify the Jews, but according to Chaucer (the rational voice of the tale)³² this line can only relate to the lord. For it is the lord who has deliberately seen to it that the street be *free and open at either end* (l. 494) and that everybody can go there, on horseback or on foot. The fact that there is a Christian school at its furthest end means that plenty of Christian children naturally pass through the Jewish quarter every day and that the Jews can easily be said to be provoked by Christian children. The social and politico-religious situation in the area is explosive, and the freedom of circulation is in fact a kind of trap for the more vulnerable.

Small children are particularly at risk both from material danger (the mixing of pedestrian and horse-drawn traffic) and ideological tension (they are crossing an ideologically alien area). Above all they are vulnerable because of their small size as compared with the large size of the *men* who, in that street, *myght ride or wende*, and of their little account in terms of authority and power.³³ The words *litel* and *smale* in a rational reading lose their sentimental overtones and take on the more measurable connotation of significance or force. Within this framework the very vague and impersonal *men* in the street can be seen as real persons whose social status of power is halfway between that of the lord who governs and the child just learning to read at school.

Having, on a rational reading, established the fact that the child is frequenting a place, the street, where he can come to harm and a school where the *doctrine* taught may lead to clashes with the Jewry, we can continue to interpret the story by giving an active role to the lord and his men, for those men

³² Carolyn Colette suggests defining Chaucer's two voices along gender lines in "Critical Approaches to the Prioress's Tale and the Second Nun's Tale", in C. D. Benson and E. Robertson, eds., *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990, pp. 95-110.

³³ A graphic picture of what happens to small children on busy unregulated city streets is given by Hogarth in the second plate of *Four Stages of Cruelty* where one sees a child that has just been run over by a cart. See Joseph Burke and Colin Caldwell, *The Complete Engravings of Hogarth*, p. 225.

are *riders* who, in a medieval text, correspond to “car-drivers” in a modern one, i.e. the wealthier, more powerful members of their community who are much closer to the lord above them than to the child below. While the tale explicitly focuses on the child being encouraged by his mother, the poor widow, to pray much to the Virgin so that he actually kneels down in front of every image of Her, one can wonder what effect this habit of his (which, it is intimated, is pursued in public) might have on the lord and his men. For if the lord is already casting around for reasons to get rid of the Jewry³⁴ he or his men might well notice the Christian child kneeling before an image of the Christians' Mother of God, where the lord himself has allowed such images to be publicly set up. The idea on how to make political capital out of the sight comes to him and he marks out the boy for murder at the opportune moment. His men (who, as Asians, i.e. Muslims, could be naturally enemies of both Jews and Christians), could be instructed how to engineer a “ritual” murder and then a “miracle” in order to inculcate the Jews as the perpetrators. All or nearly all the characters, the “supporting cast” to the *little clergeon*, could be thought to have acted on the bribes and instructions of the lord's men. Starting with the “new” character of the older school-fellow, one can reflect that, at the very least, this boy must have been told / taught by some one authoritative the general meaning of the hymn whose actual words he does not understand, but also warned to sing it *privily* as potentially dangerous and provocative. But since the older boy does nothing to convey this warning to the younger, he has also in all likelihood been told/ forced/ bribed by someone equally authoritative to teach the smaller child the words and encourage him to sing them out *boldly* in the Jewish quarter. The arrangement of these two words in the text as the first rhyme in the stanza, points to this thematically puzzling contrast between them, and invites readers to ponder:

His fellow taughte hym homward *prively*
Fro day to day, til he koude it by rote,
And thanne he song it wel and *boldely*,
For word to word, according with the note. (l. 544-47, my italics)

The very regularity of the two children's learning quietly and then the one child's singing loudly suggests directions from superiors, simply because such methodical discipline is not typical of children's behaviour when left to themselves. The smaller child is indeed trained to sing as loudly and as regularly as possible:

Twice a day it passed thurgh his throte,
To scoleward and homward when he wente;
On Cristes mooder set was his entente. (548-550)

So while the older boy seems almost certainly to be acting under instructions, the widowed mother has, possibly, not been included in the

³⁴ John Archer points out how the secular authority gains from getting rid of the Jews in “The Structure of Anti-Semitism in *The Prioress's Tale*”, *Chaucer Review*, 19 (1984), 46-54.

conspiracy, but simply told to encourage the boy's piety to the Virgin as well as her own. And since the Virgin has taken the child under Her protection, the mother has been told to show trust and use patience if her son is late home so as not to offend the Virgin by precipitous alarm. When, in the morning, the mother finally goes looking for the child and is by then distraught by his absence, she is easily persuaded that she can hear the murdered child singing where she stands in a Jewish courtyard. Among the lord's men there is one, no doubt, who possesses a high boyish treble which can counterfeit the voice of the murdered child. So the murderer and singer is / are joined by other of the lord's men who swear they hear and recognise the hymn, until a crowd collects and the provost comes running. The Jews are executed forthwith and it only remains for the child to be buried as a saint and virgin-martyr.³⁵

We can conjecture further that the supposed-to-be-holy abbot has been suborned and bribed, like the provost, to look after the funeral, and has been instructed to spread the story of his interrogating the child with all its charming fantasy of divine intervention and, finally, to perform the gestures that everybody can plainly see of taking out the marvellous grain with ostentatious energy, which he does. Once the boy is supposed to have stopped singing with the removal of the grain, the abbot sheds tears of relief. All the monks have been told to join him in paying reverence to the set-up "miracle" by prostrating themselves on the ground on his lead, which they do. And then... But here we can go back to the text itself, as it seems to me that for two lines, Chaucer, the author speaks unambiguously in his own (rational) voice. He shows the monks acting in such a surprisingly prosaic and unexalted way at the termination of what was supposed to be an extremely moving spiritual experience, that he invites us forcibly to review our opinions as to what has really been going on.

The monks have been acting as witnesses to the abbot's action of taking the grain from the tongue of the child and, like the abbot, lying on the ground, weeping, and supposedly "hearing" heavenly voices speaking and then, in two lines that seem not only unnecessary but very much in the nature of an anti-climax, we read:

And after that they ryse, and forth been went,
And token away this martir fro his beere: (ll. 679 -80)

Nothing could be more prosaic and less in keeping with the narrative logic of an inexplicable event. Chaucer, in his own voice, can thus provide a sarcastic intonation to the words *this martyr*, to intimate by his tone alone that the whole thing was a fake, a practical deception to manipulate opinion set up by authority.³⁶ But we do not even need to refer to the effects of an oral reading: the

³⁵ See Paul Olson, *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 142.

³⁶ Louise Fradenberg writes "the pogrom is [...] in the service of authority" ("Chaucer and anti-Semitism", p. 223).

punctual repetition in the text of a boring piece of writing (the sort of phrase that aspiring writers are taught to avoid) suggests that Chaucer the author, as is his wont, is "writing badly" on purpose.³⁷ The phrase in question is *And after that* which has already occurred twice in the tale at moments when a rational reading would, should and must insist on rational development and not just bland continuation, for *And after that* allows narration to proceed at the expense of understanding. The first instance of use occurs at the coming of the provost on to the scene of the crime at the moment of the "miraculous" singing:

The Christen folk that through the strete wente
In comen for so wondre upon this thyng,
And hastily they for the provost sente,
He came anon withouten tarryng,
And heerieth Christ that is of hevene kyng,
And eek his mooder, honour of mankynde,
And after that the Jewes leet he bynde. (l. 1803-1810, my italics)

By quoting the entire verse, we notice that the first *And after that* comes immediately after the short prayer, and leads straight into the arrest of the Jews with no words of enquiry or even explanation from the provost or the crowd. The provost acts as if he already had his instructions ready, already knew what was expected of him, and proceeds to punishment without even a gasp or a nod at the supposedly miraculous singing.

The second time the phrase is used is to round off the next episode of the "miracle". The child allegedly still singing (although the noise of the *pious lamentation* of the by-standers would obviously drown his song were it happening) has been whisked away in great pomp to the nearest abbey, where a mass happens to be in progress and a place ready in front of the main altar by an apparently happy chance:

Upon this beere ay lith this innocent
Before the chief auter, while the masse laste
And after that, the abbot with his convent
Han sped hem for to burien hym ful faste (ll.637-40, my italics)

So when it is all over and the abbot has played his role with some ostentation (the questions to the child, the listening to his account of heavenly visions, the pulling out of the tongue and the removal of the grain), the third *And after that*, (l. 678) already mentioned, with the monks getting up and going off to bury the body, ties up the whole episode neatly as with a well-rehearsed routine.

The Prioress's voice of sweet pathos now makes itself heard for the soothingly pretty and pious passage which covers up the bleakness of *And after that*,

And in a tomb of marble stone cleere
Enclosen they his litel body sweete;
Ther is he now, God leve us for to meete. (l. 681-3)

³⁷ On Chaucer's "bad writing" see Ann Mc Millan's introduction to her translation of *The Legend of Good Women: Geoffrey Chaucer*, Houston: Rice University Press, 1987.

The last stanza is again recognizably the Prioress, praying this time to St. Hugh:

... *yonge* Hugh of Lincoln, slayn also
 With *cursed Jewes, as it is notable*
 For it is but a litel while ago, (l. 684-6, my italics)

The Prioress refers to the character known as Little St. Hugh, and appears to be appealing to recognised authority when alluding to this supposed martyrdom of such recent date. In fact the event dates back to 1255, so to more than a hundred years earlier than the implied “now” of the Prioress’s utterance. However, the author Chaucer makes the Prioress continue in such a way that she reveals further inadequacies of her selective and distorting memory and her shallow understanding of former saints, when she says:

Preye eek for us, we synful folk *unstable*... l. 687 (my italics).

In the typically unthinking way of those who are prone to prejudice, she uses this word *unstable* without reflecting that she is in fact designating herself. Lack of consistency in their own thought and behaviour is essentially what the prejudiced are blind to, and the Prioress would probably deny hotly that she is sinning against both God and man by her profoundly irreligious tale.³⁸ Her grasp of truly religious principle is so poor that she does not realise that it is not to the almost certainly spurious Little St. Hugh that she should be appealing, but to the earlier, greater, more famous and immensely more admirable St. Hugh, twelfth century bishop of Lincoln who, on authenticated occasions (to quote Donald Attwater) “stood up alone to rioting mobs incensed against the Jews...”³⁹ It is evidently to this second St. Hugh, who courageously upheld the teachings of the most enlightened Christians faithful to Christ’s stand against violence and vengeance, to whom the Prioress should be praying for a better understanding of Christian charity and tolerance. By inserting those final words into her mouth, Chaucer alerts us to the superficiality of her pathos and piety, while allowing us to think through what were probably the true facts behind her story. These, the author intimates, were engineered by those in power, whether nominal Christians or non-Christians (significantly the lord’s religion is never stated), whose one desire was to exploit their authority for their own nefarious ends.

In this way Chaucer can be seen as shrewdly commenting on the events of his time, writing a tale which, heavily disguised in the lush sentimentality of crocodile tears over the out-and-out victimisation of the innocent, is in fact lucidly committed to an investigation of political power. Chaucer gives us to understand that we should read the story as a typical example of the emotionally fired prejudice which displaces blame for communal disasters onto scapegoats,

³⁸ See Richard Rex, “Chaucer and the Jews”, *MLQ*, 45 (1984), 107-22. See also same author’s *The Sins of Madame Eglentyne and Other Essays on Chaucer*, Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated Universities Press, 1995.

³⁹ Donald Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of the Saints*, note 8.

away from those with the strongest authority onto those whose authority is weakest. Chaucer demonstrates how racial hatred can be aroused among the powerless, frustrated and ignorant by any inexplicable communal outrage, and reveals the mechanisms by which such outrage can be defused and channelled away from themselves by those in power. Such evils as the plague, the great recurrent disaster of the fourteenth century, we know on historical evidence led to the numerous massacres of Jews in Europe, as amply recorded by such writers as Jacob von Königshofen.⁴⁰ Indeed, after a reading of "The Prioress's Tale" as a demonstration of the uses of power, it is hard to imagine Chaucer *not* to have read this writer on the cremation of the Strasbourg Jewry in 1349:

"And everything that was owed to the Jews was cancelled, and the Jews had to surrender all pledges and notes that they had taken for debts. The council, however, took the cash the Jews possessed and divided it among the working-men proportionately. *The money was indeed the thing that killed the Jews. If they had been poor and if the feudal lords had not been in debt to them, they would not have been burnt. After this wealth was divided among the artisans, some gave their share to the cathedral or to the Church on the advice of their confessors.* (my italics).

With such lucid contemporary assessments available to him, Chaucer could recognise and present one of the durable facets of prejudice, of anti-semitism, and of racism in general, the fact that religion and religiosity, ideology and political persuasions, can and will be seized upon as excuses for persecution by those who wish to use violence for their own ends against those powerless to resist them in the most vulnerable sections of the community.

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