

The Prioress's Tale

The *Prioress's Tale*: Relating to the Past, Imagining the Past, Using the Past

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An essay chapter from *The Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales* (September 2017)

Tools

Emotional Encounters with the Past

At the end of the *Shipman's Tale*, the Host chuckles over the story of a monk who sleeps with a merchant's wife and gets away with it. As he turns to the Prioress, the Host changes his demeanor, addressing that lady "As curteisly as it had been a mayde" (ShT 446) in anticipation of a more decorous tale. Indeed, as we already know from the *General Prologue*, the Prioress acts the part of a genteel lady who spoils her lap dogs and lisps in French. In the portrait, the contrast between her role as head of a nunnery (a rank just under that of an abbess)—a role that should involve charitable works for the human poor—and her "pitee" for trapped mice comes across as comic.



Nun with lapdog. (c) British Library Board, Maastricht Hours, British Library MS Stowe 17, f. 100r (1st quarter of the fourteenth century).

In her tale, however, the Prioress's mawkish sentiment is recast as piety and redirected toward the maimed body of a child. The *Prioress's Tale* asks, how does feeling like a nun make you a nun? Or to put this question more generally, how does your identity—who you are—depend on the way you express yourself emotionally towards others? For modern readers, these can be uncomfortable questions: how do we reconcile our feelings about the medieval past—especially

our feelings for Chaucer—with the Prioress’s feelings about martyred children, mice, and Jews? Although the tale is deftly told, its heightened emotions often seem too hot to handle. How should we react to its blatant anti-Semitism and full-on religious piety? In the prologue to the *Miller’s Tale*, the narrator recommends that squeamish readers choose another tale (MilT 3176-77). Yet this is easier said than done if we believe the Prioress that our emotional responses make us who we are.

As the Prioress indicates with her allusions to “Seint Nicholas” (PrT 514) and “yonge Hugh of Lyncoln” (684), the tale draws from the popular genre of saints’ lives (*vitae*), biographies of people with privileged access to the divine, as well as to a subgenre of saints’ lives, the lives of child-saints.^[1] In these stories, the child has a special claim to sanctity, either because he or she is spiritually precocious—the Prioress admires St. Nicholas because “he so yong to Crist dide reverence” (515)—or because he or she dies prematurely, as in the case of Hugh of Lincoln, who was murdered in 1255. Child-saints are supposed to elicit particular emotions, such as tenderness for the child’s age and anxiety for his or her wellbeing. The Prioress stokes these emotions by emphasizing the youth of the singing boy, who “so yong and tendre was of age” (524). In three harrowing stanzas, she charts the grief of the boy’s widowed mother, who after an anxious night, begins to search at dawn “With face pale of drede and bisy thocht” (589) and with mounting fear as she learns that he was last seen in the Jewry (i.e., the Jewish ghetto): “With moodres pitee in hir brest enclosed, / She gooth, as she were half out of hir mynde” (593-94). In general, medieval saints’ lives strive to move readers to devotion through emotion; if the reader can feel pity, love, or fear for a long-dead saint, he or she may try to emulate the saint’s piety or pray to them for heavenly intercession. In that sense, the goosebumps raised by such a tale have the potential to shape readers into good Christians: worshipful and repentant.

In child-saint *vitae*, as in the *Prioress’s Tale*, the lives of special children are often cut short by tragic, even sadistic events, which presumably make one’s feelings for them all the more acute. The *Prioress’s Tale* evokes a further subgenre of children-saints ritually murdered by Jews; in turn, these disturbing stories show us that emotion is always a function of our relationship to the past, whether that past is understood as recent or remote. The *Tale* is set in a non-specific “Asia” (as many medieval exempla are), yet we are asked to imagine that location specifically as an English town. The most notorious ritual murder cases in England were those of Little Hugh of Lincoln (and St. William of Norwich [d. 1144]), (neither officially canonized), both of whom were said to have been abducted by Jews and killed in imitation of Christ’s crucifixion. Although these accusations may sound farfetched—and they did not go uncontested by contemporaries—they had real-world consequences for England’s vulnerable Jewish minority. Following the accusation in Lincoln, for example, eighteen Jews were executed, and ninety were imprisoned in the Tower of London; in Norwich, a local sheriff saved the community from the mob, but its fortunes declined, as did those of English Jewry as a whole. On February 6th, 1190, the Norwich Jewish community was massacred by a pogrom; in 2004, archeologists unearthed a medieval well, in which they found the remains of seventeen members of one likely Jewish, Norwich family, with the children piled at the top.^[2] In 1290, Edward I expelled all Jews from his kingdom, their property forfeited to the Crown. Jews would not be readmitted to England for 365 years, but the intervening gap between expulsion and readmittance has affected the way that modern scholars and pre-modern writers interpret medieval stories of anti-Semitic violence.^[3]

The presence of Jews in the *Prioress's Tale* amps up its emotional charge. This is true not only because the Jews are accused of a crime understood to be peculiarly Jewish, but also because they embody a complex relationship between feeling and history for medieval readers as well as for modern ones. A century after the expulsion, Chaucer's English readers likely experienced Jews as specters, consigned to a baleful past or antagonistic future; or perhaps more potently as "absent presences," their very absence making them loom threateningly large.^[4] To put this idea a different way, the presence of Jews in the *Prioress's Tale* reminds us that proximity and distance can wreak havoc with our feelings about other people and not always in predictable ways. The Prioress, for example, historicizes her presentation of Jews by comparing them to villains from the Bible. She maximizes the rhetorical force of these comparisons: the Jews resemble Cain, whom God accuses of murdering his brother Abel in Genesis 4 (PrT 575); and King Herod who, in Matthew 2:16-18, is said to have massacred all infants under one year old, trying to rid himself of the newborn Jesus ("O cursed folk of Herodes al newe, / What may youre yvel entente yow availle?" [574-75]). Additionally, she links the scriptural past to the narrative present by alluding to recent but unspecified horrors, "as it is notable, / For it is but a litel while ago" (685-86). Even if, after 1290, medieval English readers were unlikely to meet Jewish people in person, their likely proximity to institutions of Jewish culture, such as the remains of synagogues or mikvehs (ritual baths), or books formerly owned by Jews, meant they continued to be in touch with a Semitic "real."^[5] Similarly, writers like Chaucer might expand or contract the time of Jewish enmity in order to meet the emotional demands of a particular narrative. We might ask, in the *Prioress's Tale*, how "real" (embodied, recent, or near) do Jewish people need to be in order to provoke an emotional response?

Modern readers' reactions to the tale, however varied, will presumably be quite different from those of medieval readers. This is in part because 21st-century readers have the opportunity to read the *Tale* alongside the history of European Jewry, which places the ritual murder accusation within a narrative governed by a different set of sympathies and advocating a different course of action (for example, tolerance, rather than persecution, of religious minorities). Readers might fear for the child and pity the mother and, at the same time, be repulsed by the slit throat, the desecration of the body, and the gory execution of the Jews, who, like traitors, are first dragged by wild horses and then hung. They may weep at the wonder of the grain on the tongue or be silenced by the ontological mysteries, like the living corpse, that are miracle stories' stock and trade.^[6] But they may also feel dismayed by the narrator's hatred for Jews and by the thought that medieval readers rejoiced in their punishment. Certainly, the fact that anti-Semitism survives today and continues to generate lurid tales about Jewish conspiracy challenges any easy opposition we might make between medieval and modern morality. A trickier moral problem may lie with the *Tale's* narrative ethics, the way that it provokes—and coopts—a huge range of emotions in the service of Christian piety. Modern readers, historically-minded, may be shocked more by Chaucer's representation of Jews than they are by the Jews' sensational crime. But can anger, shock, or pity, whatever their objects, ever succeed in making readers fully moral or fully modern? And, we might ask, does the success of the *Prioress's Tale* for modern readers depend on a certain view of English history, a history emptied of medieval Jews or haunted by their ghosts?

Text

Performing Emotion—Enacting the Past

Although the *Prioress's Tale* looks like a saint's life, the protagonist is not a saint but a nameless boy who goes missing and suffers a martyr's death (PrT 680). His anonymity is part of his appeal: anyone's child could be abducted on the way home from school. The diminutive language that pervades the tale highlights his generic littleness: this "litel child" attends "a litel scole of Cristen folk" full of "[c]hildren an heep" (495; 497), where he learns to read Latin with his primer ("his litel book lernynge" [516]), just as "smale children doon in hire childhede" (501). What makes this child unique is his intense worship of the Virgin Mary, who, for him, is a second mother.^[7] Medieval Marian tales often celebrate the Virgin's miraculous intervention into the lives of ordinary folk. In the *Prioress's Tale*, the miracle is twofold: the boy's focused piety, expressed by the Marian refrain "Alma mater redemptoris" (Hail, Mother of the Redeemer), and his postmortem singing, masterminded by the Virgin. The wonder of a boy so devoted to Mary that he sings after death unites the town's Christians in ritual community: the boy's "litel body sweete," wondrous to behold, is processed to the altar of the abbey church and buried with pomp in a marble tomb (681-82).

If miracle stories are supposed to trigger feelings—fear, tenderness, anxiety, horror, pity—for the Prioress, then these feelings are complex because she identifies with different characters in the tale, as a performer and as a supplicant, as a child and as an adult. First, she identifies with the singing boy, whose youthful innocence makes him the ideal worshipper. In the *Prologue* to her *Tale*, she compares herself to a tiny child, less than one year old, who can "unnethes any word expresse" (485). This comparison might be read as a humility topos—the Prioress is modest about her ability to praise the Virgin (in line 460, for example she claims to be a spiritual infant). But as her tale amply shows, some children are remarkable in their ability to praise God: "for on the brest soukyng / Somtyme shewen they thyn heriynge" (458-59). By comparing herself to a small child, the Prioress highlights her own ability to perform religious tales and associates herself with the most innocent of beings, a "gemme of chastite" (609).

Although the Prioress identifies with special children who perform praise, she also identifies with female supplicants who, through their devotion, form an emotional trinity with the Virgin and Child.^[8] In later medieval depictions of the Virgin and Child, the baby Jesus, traditionally portrayed as a miniature adult, stiff and regal, became more "baby-like," chubbier and more playful, and the expression on the Virgin's face fonder and more tender. The assumption behind such representations is that children are adorable, in the original sense of being "worthy of veneration"; through their startling littleness, they convert sentimentality into devotion. In many Virgin and Child images, a third figure joins the group, the donor, beneficiary, or artist, often drawn in smaller scale. Sometimes, as in figure 1, a painting of "The Virgin and Child with an Augustinian Canoness" in London's National Gallery, this third person is an abbess, gazing piously at the baby Jesus whom the Virgin dandles on her lap. In her tale, Chaucer's Prioress inserts herself into such a portrait: she triangulates herself emotionally between the Virgin and the baby Jesus, just as her singing boy is triangulated between his grieving mother and the Virgin. This triangulation of emotion allows for role-playing critical to Christian devotion.



Figure 1: Joachim Patinir, “The Virgin and Child with a Cistercian Nun” (1515)

The boy, too young to parse the meaning of texts, is content to repeat *Alma mater redemptoris*, over, and over, and over. The insistence of this refrain, sung even after death, makes him the ultimate performer. The repetition of prayer, whether uplifting or tedious, is liturgy’s triumph over the body, and the boy’s near-pathological commitment to one prayer—to one line even—ushers in the tale’s central miracle: the suspension of death.^[9] Yet the act of praising God, the *sine qua non* of Christian devotion, is itself something of a miracle. Medieval philosophers might say that the ability to praise God is natural: the created, by definition, should praise the Creator, and it is the created body that praises through voice, throat, and bended knee.^[10] But they would likely agree that the will to praise God is enabled by divine grace, through which God, like a ventriloquist, performs his own praise.^[11] The Prioress puts it this way, “O grete God, that parfournest thy laude / By mouth of innocentz, lo, heere thy myght!” (607-8). This act is all the more wondrous when the body cannot perform praise naturally, either because it is childlike and unformed—or because it is inert and, horribly, dead. In this view, the repetition of prayer is the body’s triumph over liturgy, insofar as it is animated by God.

For such miracles (the constant singing, the singing corpse) to happen, the body must be breached. In this sense, the singing boy recalls the Virgin Mary, whose intact body proves no obstacle to divine penetration; according to the medieval analogy, Mary was pierced by the divine spirit just as the sunbeam shines through glass. The Prioress, comparing Mary to the burning bush of Exodus, which burns but is not consumed, calls attention to the paradoxical body of the performer, sexually intact and yet violated: “O bussh unbrent, brennyng in Moyses sighte” (468). For the Prioress, virginity is essential to sacred performance, yet the tale shows how we come to know the sacred through violence and, more specifically, through the ways in which bodies and spaces are penetrated. To the boy, the *Alma mater redemptoris* is so sweet that he feels as if he has been stabbed in the heart: the “swetnesse his herte perced so / Of Cristes mooder that, to hire to preye / He kan nat stynte of syngyng by the weye” (555-57); and he swears he will learn the hymn even if he is beaten three times every hour for neglecting his primer (542). Like the sweetness of the song, the song takes control, passing unobstructed through the boy’s passive throat: “Twies a day it passed thugh his throte / To scoleward and homeward whan he wente” (548-49). Most significantly, the act which sets the miracle into

motion, the slitting of the boy's throat, both violates the body and is itself breached: the cut obstructs both voice and breath but is itself overcome through divine grace.

The sweetness that pierces the heart, the song that passes through the throat: these phenomena occur in the body of a child who walks twice daily between home and school down a street which cuts through a Jewish neighborhood. This link between the body and the built environment—both passable, both hazardous—is key to the way that the tale fashions its miracle. It also shows that Jews are intrinsic to the tale not just as narrative villains, but also as historical denizens of urban spaces. At the beginning, we are told that the Jewish community is propped up by a local lord who permits them to practice usury (lending at interest), a practice that was critical to economic development, but detrimental to Jewish-Christian relations.^[12] More sinisterly, we are told that the Jews' street is freely accessible, but we are led to suspect it ought to be closed off so as not to endanger—or contaminate—the rest of the town: “And thurgh the strete men myghte ride or wende, / For it was free and open at eyther ende” (493-94). This street functions as a narrative “short-cut” and as a directional one; when a character takes a short cut, he is sure to meet trouble. And just like the boy's permeable body, the Jewry, open but straitened, is a site of miraculous performance. From a different perspective, however, the tale is complicit with the centuries-long European project of ghettoizing the Jewish population, constricting its living space and sealing it off. Now, instead of picturing bustling neighborhoods, we remember medieval Jewish communities as one-block affairs, such as Winchester's Jewry Street and Jewry Lane in Canterbury.

Finally, this notion of passage links performance to poetics in the *Prioress's Tale*. The *Tale* is composed of rhyme royal stanza (rhymed ababbcc), which Chaucer reserved for elevated stories, heightened emotion, and higher-ranking narrators. Rhyme royal stanzas are stately with enough variation in rhythm and rhyme to capture entire narrative episodes. For example, lines 565-71 encapsulate the scene in which the Jews hire an assassin, who seizes the boy, cuts his throat, and throws him in a pit.^[13] Compared to the rhymed iambic pentameter in which most of the *Canterbury Tales* is written, rhyme royal is stylistically more ornate. Its intricate rhyme scheme, for example, showcases multiple linguistic registers, as we see with the many French-derived, multisyllabic rhymes in the *Prioress's Tale*, such as entraille-availle-taille; reverence-diligence; and lamentacioun-processioun. With the *Prioress's Tale*, Chaucer proves himself master of this stanza form. He uses it, for instance, to contrast the elevated poetics of rhyme royal and the childishness of the boy, as in the rhyme at 519-20: “As children lerned hire antiphoner; / And as he dorste, he drough hym ner and ner.”

Rhyme royal is also, like the body, a material form, its stanzas strung together like the beads on the rosary in the hands of the Christ child (see figure 1).^[14] Its stanzas give the impression of text rendered into material objects, just as with a rosary, one progresses through prayer from one bead to the next. In the case of the *Prioress's Tale*, these textual objects are precious, small wonders like the grain on the tongue or the saint's tiny body encased in jewels. These transformations of prayer to bead and text to gem are especially resonant in stanza 607-13, which describes the miracle of the singing corpse in lapidary form: “This gemme of chastite, this emeraude, / And eek of martirdom the ruby bright” (609-610).

Notably, Chaucer uses rhyme royal in four tales involving women and children (the Prioress's singing boy, Constance, St. Cecilia, Griselda), whose innocence and forbearance are tested in frankly abusive situations. Two of these tales are told by nuns, professionally chaste but still violable as liturgical performers. How does rhyme royal highlight the (in)violability of the body? Rhyme royal stanzas resemble the body, at once self-contained and vulnerable. They are bound by line number and girded by rhyme, like sonnets in miniature with couplets at the close. And yet they make up—and permeate—larger narratives, their rhymes wandering from one stanza to another, as with the repeated rhyme throte/note/rote and seye/weye. This dynamic between open and closed forms is exemplified by the Latin refrain *Alma mater redemptoris*, which travels from stanza to stanza, in various metrical positions: “He *Alma redemptoris* herde herde synge” (518); “‘*O alma redemptoris*’ everemo” (554); “He *Alma redemptoris* gan to synge” (612); and “Yet spak this child, whan spreyn was hooly water, / And song ‘*O alma redemptoris mater*’” (640-1).

Transformation

1. The *Prioress's Tale* offers a tiny window into medieval early education, a subject that historians such as Nicholas Orme have assiduously researched but which remains somewhat out of reach. What is the status of Latin literacy in this tale, as opposed to song, memorization, and performance?
2. Chaucer uses rhyme royal in several other tales, including the *Clerk's Tale*, where the stanzas often create enclosures that are at least as much psychological as they are physical. A well-known example is the stanza sequence in which the marquis, Walter, asks Griselda's father for his consent to marriage, which Griselda's poor father feels compelled to grant. How does rhyme royal produce different physical, psychological, and emotional effects in the *Clerk's Tale* and the *Prioress's Tale*?
3. The last ten stanzas of the *Prioress's Tale* take place in an abbey attached to a convent, a community of men or women bound together by canonical rule. The abbot, who presides over the miracle of the singing corpse, is deeply affected by what he sees, and he and the entire convent throw themselves to the ground, weeping and praying. In what other ways does communal religious life play a role in this narrative? How does institutional monasticism, its people, organization and architecture, impact the way the story is told?
4. Some of the *Canterbury Tales*, such as the *Knight's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale*, take pains to associate the narrator to the tale, through the framing links (for example, the Miller's competition with the Reeve) or through genre (the Pardoner, for instance, tells a tale related to the topic of his sermon). Others, such as the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, feel as if they could be told by anyone. The *Prioress's Tale*, appropriately, is told by a narrator with a strongly pious voice using a poetic form reserved for more elevated speakers and subjects. Is this voice also a strongly gendered voice, and if so, how do we know? Compare the Prioress to the Wife of Bath: how does gender matter to the construction of narrative voice?

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Notes:

[1] In this chapter I refer to the narrator as "the Prioress," because her tale-telling voice is so distinctive.

[2] <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-13855238>. Shortly after the discovery, the bodies were given a Jewish burial in Earlham cemetery in Norwich. Perhaps the most horrific documented conflict

occurred in York in 1190, where some 150 Jews were murdered in Clifford's Tower, where they had sought refuge, many of them committing suicide before they could be taken.

[3] For further reading on the history of the Jews in England, see Bale and Mundill (below).

[4] See Kruger, Tomasch, and Krummel (below).

[5] On proximity, Jews, and material culture, see Rouse (below).

[6] See Gayk (below).

[7] Though notably neither she nor the widow keep him safe from harm. See Price (below).

[8] The real children mentioned in her tale—the singing boy, St. Nicholas, Little Hugh of Lincoln, the innocents slain by Herod—all are closely linked to the Christ child seated in Mary's lap.

[9] On song, learning, and performance in the *Prioress's Tale*, see Holsinger and Donavin (above).

[10] Foundational texts are Augustine's commentary on Psalm 148 in the *Confessions*, and Basil's commentary on the same psalm in the *Hexaemeron*.

[11] See Mitchell (above) on the singing boy as automaton in *Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child*.

[12] Lavezzo (above) shows how important Jewish moneylending was to the building of Christian churches despite the Church's prohibition on usury and its demonization of Jewish usurers.

[13] It is this feature of rhyme royal that makes it useful for retelling saints' lives, such as the *Second Nun's Tale* of St. Cecilia, or romance, such as the *Man of Law's Tale* about the itinerant princess Constance, or the *Clerk's Tale*, a rags-to-riches story with a long-suffering heroine.

[14] See Donovan (above).



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