

Studia Anglica Posnaniensia 43, 2007

LITERATURE

CHAUCER'S CLERGEON,
OR TOWARDS HOLINESS IN *THE PRIORESS'S TALE*

ANNA CZARNOWUS

University of Silesia, Katowice

The brief appearance and subsequent disappearance of the child are illogical, ominous, and loaded with significance beyond the understanding of the other characters and of the reader

(Shahar 1991: 135).

ABSTRACT

A narrative aestheticized in Pre-Raphaelite visual arts and a politically charged issue in contemporary criticism, Chaucer's *Prioress's tale* focuses on the figure of an "enigmatic child", whose body is severed by the Jews. The boy's uncanniness and holiness are constructed in stages, while the ethnic identity of his persecutors may not be as important as some critics once thought, since the Jews function as yet another group of "infidels" in Chaucer. The clergeon symbolizes otherness through his deformity, which makes him similar to the Jews as embodiments of difference. However, only the contrast between the child and the Jews is emphasized. Middle English dramatizations of the Slaughter of the Innocents could be read as yet another source influencing Chaucer. A parallelism between the clergeon's suffering and the persecution of Christ typified by the slaughter can be traced in the two tales. At the end of *The Prioress's tale* the boy achieves holiness, while violence is directed against ethnic others. The highly aesthetic Victorian representation merely continues to show this narrative of violence as primarily a work about Marian devotion.

The Pre-Raphaelites, perhaps the first artists practicing aestheticization of the Middle Ages, who simultaneously introduced the epoch into the popular culture by supplying Victorians with a host of "medievalist" images, would also trans-

fer elements of Middle English literature into visual arts. A fascinating, but still ominous representation having a medieval text as its source is Edward Burne-Jones' cabinet decorated with scenes from *The Prioress's tale*, now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. The cabinet was a wedding present to William Morris and Jane Burden in 1859 and may be viewed as an instance of both romanticizing the Middle Ages and aestheticizing violence in literary texts.

Selected scenes from Chaucer's anti-Judaic tale are interspersed with angels, birds, flowers, and even, in the bottom panel, the author presented as a noble figure writing his text.¹ No Jews are discernible among the city-dwellers crowding, perhaps in awe at the miracle, in the background of the left-hand panel. The presence of the ethnic others is only suggested by the soldiers standing in the distance as they separate somebody, apparently the Jews, from the rest of the people. Therefore no crime or punishment is visible in this representation, while violence is hidden from sight also in the case of the boy. His neck, slit by the Jews, as we know from the text, is covered with a strange tunic reaching his chin, therefore even his throat, the body part which is the emblem of his martyrdom, remains hidden. The unusual condition he is in is only suggested by the grain that is being put in his mouth by the Virgin. Even though there are two excerpts from the poem on the two sides of the furniture, one from the beginning and one from the end, the story which instigated an enormous critical debate about Chaucer's (possible) anti-Judaism is here transformed into a set of aesthetically pleasing images about a holy child and the Virgin's mercy.² The disturbing tale becomes an enchanting narrative of religious devotion, a representation the Prioress herself would strongly support.

The combination of the story's violence with the fact that the cabinet adorned with it was intended for a wedding present and finally played that role may seem shocking to us now. Yet the Pre-Raphaelites should not be fully blamed for their lack of sensitivity towards such delicate issues, as the tale had been one of multiple similar narratives belonging to the genre called the miracle of the Virgin that was a part and parcel of the medieval popular culture.³ Pitifully, medieval audiences probably relished the stories propagating the so-called blood libel: the myth of the Jewish alleged want of Christian blood. This lack of

¹ Following Calabrese (2002) I will adopt the term "anti-Judaic" rather than "anti-Semitic", as the latter is more readily associated with the Holocaust and may be perceived as anachronistic in the medieval studies.

² Schoeck (1960) advocated Chaucer's use of irony in the tale, while such critics as Rudat (1994) accused him of sharing the Prioress's views; regardless of the author's personal stance Pearsall (1985), Rex (1995), and Cooper (1996) diagnosed the tale as vitriolic in its anti-Judaic message.

³ The section devoted to *The Prioress's tale* in *Sources and analogues of The Canterbury tales* edited by Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel contains as many as sixteen analogues of Chaucer's narrative (Broughton 2005: 599-647).

delicacy might have been satirized by Chaucer in the character of Prioress, superficially sensitive to suffering but actually perpetuating racial hatred with her story-telling.⁴

However, Calabrese claims that even nowadays (or *especially* nowadays) writing about *The Prioress's tale* is not an easy task, as the narrative "depicts Christian violence against the Jews in fictive, literary images that are tied to an actual history of oppression that is well documented and not in doubt" (2002: 66). Refraining from political matters seems almost impossible in the course its interpretation, since "there is no more politically charged issue in Chaucer studies" (Calabrese 2002: 66). Still, the critic very convincingly argues that adopting too emotional an attitude in relation to this literary work may lead to exaggerating its role: according to Calabrese the tale is not an event in the history of hatred directed against the Jews, hence critical attention should be shifted onto other issues, such as its sources and analogues or the ironic treatment of the Prioress as the teller (2002: 72).⁵

In this reading the relationship between the clergeon's deformity and the construction of his holiness will be delineated. Moreover, the story of the Slaughter of the Innocents in the Middle English mystery plays will become the background for reading the figure of the boy as a character analogous to Christ. The monstrosity of the boy's body may not have been obvious to the medieval audiences, who probably read the tale as merely another story of Marian devotion. Even in the Pre-Raphaelite representation the city is adorned with the statue of the Virgin, hence this element must have been central to the plot according to both medieval readers and, afterwards, the Victorian audience. Nevertheless, I personally feel that modern audiences are entitled to their own interpretation, since Chaucer's text still exerts considerable influence on our perception of medieval culture. Monstrosity remains a powerful metaphor of otherness and it seems that the unusual state the clergeon found himself in might have been fascinating to the medieval audiences not only due to his holiness, but also because of the difference he represented with his throat slit and still reproducing the anthem, *Alma Redemptoris Mater*. The boy himself may be diagnosed as a very specific type of child character, namely a representative of Kuhn's "enigmatic child", appearing in the plot only for a limited period of time and disappearing from it mysteriously and illogically (1982: 16). Nevertheless, he remains the focal figure of the story and both his presence and absence are highly meaningful.

⁴ Collette (1980) presents a convincing image of the relation between the Prioress and her tale (1980: 138-150).

⁵ Arguably the most productive readings of the tale are either those which treat the narrative metaphorically (e.g. Fradenburg 2002) or focus on its historical sources (e.g. McCulloh 1997, or Cohen 2004)

Curiously enough, at the time when Chaucer wrote the tale there were hardly any Jews still living in England. However, one has to bear it in mind that Jews were treated on a par with other "infidels": Muslims and pagans, or even the Orthodox Church believers. Calabrese maintains that in Chaucer's tale the characterization of Jews is no different from that of Muslims or even pagans (that is ancient Greeks) in other narratives:

... the Jews in the Prioress's Tale are not much different from the Muslims of the Man-of-Law's Tale, or, for that matter, the Athenians of the Knight's Tale, for each represents a certain non-Christian limitation or error. These depictions and the multivocality behind them are the historical events, rather than the violence itself (2002: 72).

The child is contrasted with the Jews as representatives of religious (and ethnic) otherness, but the characterization of this otherness as specifically Jewish will not be of interest for us here, even though a number of studies have been devoted to representing Jews mainly in a negative mode in, for example, visual arts.⁶ On the one hand, the figure of the martyr child is constructed antithetically to the Jews. On the other, this character repeats the pattern of difference they represent, even though in the end he approaches the state of utmost holiness.

The antithetical construction of "infidels" as opposed to Christians remains a standard device used by medieval authors, to support this statement only with an example from the anonymous *Sowdone of Babyloune*, one of the three Middle English versions of the Old French *Fierabras*, where Charlemagne is contrasted with the Sultan, Laban. The figures of the Frankish emperor and the Saracen ruler form a diptych, as Lupak (1990) convincingly proved in his critical introduction to the text. Absolute good and utter evil are strongly juxtaposed with each other, hence there is no space for abandoning the polarization at least partly in order to introduce more humane qualities into the Muslim's portrait. In *The Prioress's tale* the situation is similar: the Jews have to become evil adversaries of Christians in order to emphasize the holiness of the boy. Characteristically, the Jews have not been given any names and they remain anonymous throughout the plot. They epitomize numerousness and their names are of no consequence as Christian names have not been given to them during the sacrament of baptism.

The boy's holiness is a process that is achieved in stages, some of which involve severing or even deformation of his body. The clergeon's habit of praising Mary by singing while passing through the Jewish district seems to have been shaped by his upbringing: he is very likely unusually attached to his wid-

⁶ Mellinkoff (1993) and Schreckenberg (1996) construct a complex overview of those representations in their studies.

owed mother, who must have instilled the cult of the Virgin into him in his earliest years. Interestingly, the boy is here younger than in the analogous texts, where he was twelve rather than seven. As it has already been noticed by the Chaucerians interpreting the tale, such a change in the characterization increases the effect of pathos produced by the narrative.⁷ Moreover, the child's ambition amounts to more than singing only *Ave Maria*, since he aspires to learning other hymns as well. Here we do not have any allusions to more ordinary activities of children of his age, which makes the clergeon a representative of Curtius' *puer senex* topos (1990: 98-105). Even though the boy's body is yet undeveloped, his devotion is that of an adult saint and he is focused on spirituality and not the matters of this world as one might expect from someone "yong and tendre of age" (VII: 524).⁸

The next stage of the boy's progress to divinity is achieved by him when he hears another hymn praising the Virgin and learns what its words mean from a fellow schoolboy who is older than him:

But on a day his felawe gan he preye T'expouden hym this song in his langage, Or telle hym why this song was in usage; This preyde he hym to construe and declare Ful often tyme upon his knowes bare	to interpret knees (VII: 525-529).
---	--

As the fellow student proceeds to explain, *Alma Redemptoris* is the hymn whose goal is to bring solace to the dying: "To been oure help and socour whan we deye" (VII: 534). The phrase itself and the willingness with which the boy learns the hymn suggest that the events to follow might involve death. Moreover, at that point the central character declares his readiness for sacrifice through subjecting himself to possible corporal punishment inflicted by the teacher:

Now, certes, I wol do my diligence To konne it al er Cristemasse be went. Though that I for my prymer shal be shent And shal be beten thries in an houre, I wol it konne Oure Lady for to honoure!	learn for my not learning lessons; scolded (VII: 539-543).
--	---

The scene marks the beginning of the boy's plan, which he puts into practice by voicing the song on the way to school and returning from it. The performance is

⁷ For example Pearsall (1985: 248) emphasizes the pathos prevalent in the narrative.
⁸ All the quotations from *The Canterbury tales* will refer to Benson (1988).

the final stage of the plan: "On Cristes mooder set was his entente" [His plan was fixed on Christ's Mother] (VII: 550). Singing the song is already at this point described as rather mechanical, produced as if unthinkingly: "twies a day it passed thurgh his throte" (VII: 547), which implies an unconscious rather than a deliberate action. In fact such a perspective on his performance must be true if we consider the fact that the boy did not know Latin at all and had to memorize the song without realizing the meaning of respective words and phrases. His ignorance was then probably the reason why he might have sung the highly offensive phrase "Erubescat Judaeus infelix" [Let the unhappy Jew blush] that appears in some analogues of the narrative (Broughton 2005: 599-647). Moreover, there exists another translation of the word *infelix*: in reference to soil it denotes 'sterility', which introduces a thought-provoking perspective on the depiction of the Jews in the tale. They are numerous, therefore physically fertile, but spiritually sterile.

The boy's singing of *Alma Redemptoris* on his way to school and back is described as an activity devoid of any intention to spite the Jews:

The swetnesse his herte perced so
Of Cristes mooder that to hire to preye,
He kan nat stynte of syngyng by the weye

(VII: 555-557).

He is already a machine-like character here if the urge to sing the hymn becomes irresistible to him. The singing becomes an experience close to the mystical one, since it may be placed in the context of the affective piety that also characterized the writings of the English fifteenth-century mystics, who visualized Jesus as a loving mother.⁹ In Chaucer's text the anthem becomes the source of emotions so intense that they overcome the child to the point of his being unable to control them. As a result, his outburst of piety incites "oure firste foo, the serpent Sathanas,/ That hath in Jues herte his waspes nest" (VII: 558-559) to encourage them to murder the boy. The bodies of the Jews are therefore only superficially normative. Deep inside them there lingers Satan, which makes them devilish themselves.

Their plan consists in hiring "an homicide" [murderer] (VII: 567). Hence the murder is committed not due to negative emotions that overcome some of the members of their community, but is a cold-blooded crime, also involving the pecuniary aspect in the sense of being the crime that is paid for. The stereotype of a Jew as a ruthless banker is confirmed here. Even if the introductory passage identifies the setting of the tale in a vague way, the description of the act is unusually realistic:

⁹ Bynum (1982) devoted one of her magisterial studies to that theme.

This cursed Jew hym hente, and heeld hym faste, And kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste. I seye that in a wardrobe they hym threwe Where as this Jewes purgen hire entraille	seized him privy (VII: 570-573).
---	--

The child's body is both concealed from the outside world and desecrated, if we remember that in Christianity a human body is the site of God. The "wardrobe" as the place where the body is kept suggests that it is hidden in one of the houses, since one and the same interior was used for changing clothes and as a privy. Still, the narrator speaks of the concealment as temporary and the stock phrase "the blood out crieth on youre cursed dede" (VII: 578) presages the events to come.

After his death the boy becomes a "martir, sowded to virginitee" (VII: 579), the word "sowded" denoting here not only the firmness of uniting him in the state of virginity, but perhaps etymologically associated with the modern English word "soldered" with all its mechanical implications (Wicher 1996: 30). The body thus becomes more of a mechanism than the actual flesh and blood. The uncanny effect is further strengthened by the boy confessing that he is unable either to return to life or die and consequently rest in peace. Due to the fact that he has been murdered the boy cannot abandon his virginity since he enters the group of those who "nevere, fleshly [carnally], wommen they ne knewe" (VII: 585) and who will be saved in accordance with the words from the Apocalypse. Here the central character from *The Prioress's tale* approaches the ideal of chastity that Pearl from the poem by the Gawain-Poet also epitomized after her death. Both of those children are then uncanny figures who may provoke fear rather than the tenderness of heart that the Prioress would like her audience to have towards the protagonist. Virginity becomes an inseparable part of the boy's body as preserving the chastity is the goal of another "entente", this time carried out by the Virgin herself.

The Virgin thus transforms the child's body into a machine-like entity which continues to praise her even after the event that should have been fatal for him. The similarity between the child's body and an automaton was noticed by Wicher (1996: 31), who claims that, despite the capacity for singing that the Virgin endowed the boy with,

[t]he child's life is not . . . truly prolonged, he is turned into a sort of cyborg designed to reproduce incessantly and monotonously the anthem, *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, a paradoxical state which the boy himself accurately describes as "singing in my death" (l. 660). The paradox consists here also in the fact that the boy's only bodily function that is left, apart from his brief statement just before the ultimate death, is singing aloud, i.e. something that he is the least likely to be able to do because of the nature of his wound.

The body of the boy becomes an instrument whose function is praising the Virgin and his life is not even temporally restored to him, in contrast with the two other types of the tale's analogues where the boy becomes alive again as a result of the miracle worked by the Virgin (Broughton 2005: 599- 647). The instrumental function of the child's corporeal form is visible not only in the continuous act of singing the anthem, but also in the fact that the boy becomes a symbol of impeccable virginity due to his martyr death. Again in that aspect he resembles the central character of *Pearl*, whose very name is highly allegorical and who consequently might be associated with the values symbolically represented by various jewels. As Riddy (1997) insists, jewels constituted a significant component of medieval iconography and, generally, all visual arts, since their presence was commonly associated with a variety of Christian standards. The address to Chaucer's murdered boy as "this gemme of chastite, this emeraude, / and eek of martirdom the ruby bright" (VII: 609-610) may be read in the light of that tradition. Within it the emerald was treated as a means of protecting oneself against lechery, whereas the ruby symbolized Christ's blood, which made it particularly suitable for martyrs (Benson 1988: 916). Obviously, lechery was a sin that the boy could not commit and the metaphor only strengthens the effect of the child as another virgin, following in the footsteps of Mary and Jesus. The abandoned body whose integrity has been violated by the assault is suddenly transformed into the revered relics of a martyr saint, even if uncanniness remains their chief characteristics.¹⁰ The comparison of the martyr with Jesus suffering on the cross seems somehow unavoidable.

Another parallelism between Chaucer's clergeon and the figure of Jesus is the fact that the Mass of the Holy Innocents (known also as Childermas and celebrated on the 28th of December) can be traced as one of the tale's sources (Broughton 2005: 589). The story of the child's martyrdom may be read as partly inspired by the narrative of the martyrdom of innocent children, which involved the violence intended to be directed against very young Christ. In the story the Jewish king Herod becomes the prototype of an infidel torturing Jesus, and subsequently his believers. In Chaucer's tale the child's widowed mother is called "this newe Rachel" (VII: 627), who, apart from being a mother to the people of Israel, was also an epitome of inconsolable motherly grief after the death of children, while the Jews are likened to Herod and referred to as: "cursed folk of Herodes al newe [new Herods]" (VII: 574). The Slaughter of the Innocents was a highly inspiring narrative in medieval culture and consequently it reverberated also in the miracle plays, including the ones written in Middle English. *The death of Herod (Ludus Coventriae 20)*, belonging to the cycle which is now more correctly called the N-Town one, and *Candlemas day* and

¹⁰ On the etymological relationship between "wholeness" and "holiness" and the paradoxical co-existence of the two in the tale see Wicher (1996: 30).

the kyllyng of þe children of Israelle from the Digby manuscript indicate the parallelism between the event and Jesus' subsequent death on the cross.

Each of the two plays includes the scene where Herod's ominous intent provoked by the reported birth of the Messiah is announced. The Jewish king orders to kill all the male children in his kingdom, characteristically using the name "Mahound" in his speech, which contributes to the general effect of his being an infidel:

HERODES REX:
Now, kene knyghtys, kythe youre craftys,
And kyllyth knave chylideryn and castyth hem in clay,
Shewyth on your shulderys scheldys and schaftys,
Shapyth amonge [selcouthys] ashyrlyng shray

(28-31).¹¹

Interestingly, Herod's order involves the act of casting the corpses of the murdered children onto the ground, which sounds familiar in the context of *The Prioress's tale*, where the boy is also physically placed as low as it is possible once his throat has been cut. Here, as in Chaucer's story, innocent children are not only to be slaughtered, but their bodies have to be desecrated and abandoned rather than buried and revered as holy. The king's order does not take exception to any individual child, since his words are:

Lete no barne beleve on bete baftys,	remain with his back un-
	beaten
Tyl a beggere blede be bestys baye,	in the stall of beasts
Mahound that best may	will do the best

(34-36).

The ruler naturalistically describes the blood that will flow on his behest and the crude realism is repeated in the description of the mothers grieving over their children's bodies after the slaughter, even though the crudity is accompanied by references to the mothers' emotions:

I FEMINA: Longe lullynge have I lorn. Alas, why was my baron born? With swappyng swerde how is he shorn, The heed right fro the nekke, Shanke and shulderyn is al to torn	bairn
--	-------

(89-93).

¹¹ The numbers of the lines will refer to Happé (1975).

The beheading of a child seems to be a particularly loathsome crime and the event carries with it a huge potential for pathos. The play itself is, like *The Prioress's tale*, strongly associated with affective piety, the type of religiousness based on primary human emotions. The Innocents are a type of the future Passion of the Messiah, whose body will also be dishonored while simultaneously acquiring utmost holiness. The sacrilegious remark that Herod makes after the slaughter indicates the relationship between the first child martyrs and Jesus:

For be gracious Mahound more myrth never I had,
Ne nevyr more joye was inne from time of my byrth,
For no my fo is ded and premyd as a padde.
stuck like a frog

(209-211).

The image of Jesus' body likened to a frog is both ominous and original in its parallelism to the scene of Passion, when Jesus was indeed spread on the cross. The heathen king praying to Mahound has to die in return for his hideous crime. *Mors* [Death] comes to claim his body which is called here "wormys mete" [worms' food] (256) due to the absence of spiritual dimension in it.

Herod from the Digby manuscript is equally cruel, even if the descriptions there lack the naturalism of the play from the N-Town cycle. The king (not reminding one of Muslims to such an extent as the character from the play above) emphasizes his own ruthlessness by repeating the order he gives to his soldiers: "Sle alle the children, to kepe my liberte!" (96), "And sle alle the children pat come in your sight,/ Wiche ben within too yeere of age" (111-112), and "Make alle the children on your swords to dey!/ I charge you, spare not oon for mercy nor pyte!" (115-116).¹² That version of the Slaughter of the Innocents already involves the elements that hint at the myth of deicide, since Herod is a Jewish king who orders his Jewish soldiers to slay the Messiah. It is visible in the phrase that one of his soldiers uses: "Of alle Jurerye we hold you for chef regent" (125), which presages the betrayal of Jesus in the future. Then the association between child martyrs and Jews as their murderers is also visible in that narrative, which is particularly anti-Judaic in the conviction that Christ was finally killed by the Jews, who wanted to slaughter him when he was still a child.

While in the play from the Digby manuscript the "children of Israelle" (123) are killed and life cannot be restored to them, Chaucer's clergeon remains in his life-in-death state even when his body has been discovered. The function of performing the song consists in not only revealing the boy's whereabouts, but also in incessant glorifying the Virgin. As *Alma Mater*, nourishing mother, she gives vitality to the

¹² The numbers of the lines will refer to Baker – Murphy – Hall (1982).

child's body even when life has partly abandoned it and it will not be restored to it in the future. The child, whose body is deformed by the cut in his throat, speaks because of the holy water that he is sprinkled with. Nonetheless, even the water cannot halt the song coming from the tortured throat:

And whan they hooly water on hym caste,
Yet spak this child, whan spreynd was hooly water, sprinkled
And song *O Alma redemptoris mater!*

(VII: 639-641).

The holy water, able to work the miracle of magic beautification in numerous hagiographic tales and even in romances, here only activates the boy's ability to speak and consequently to tell his story to the congregation. He regains speech in order to explain why he became an automaton acting in accordance with the wish of the Lord and his Mother. He speaks about his own situation as that of a body paradoxically not dying despite the circumstances: "My throte is kut unto my nekke boon,/ Seyde this child, 'and as by wey of kynde/ I sholde have dyed, ye longe tyme agon'" (VII: 649-651). The mechanism that makes him continue the performance regardless of his own intentions confirms his machine-like identity. The Virgin, whom in accordance with the biblical tradition he calls "this welle [source] of mercy" (VII: 656), endowed his body with a material object which would force him to sing:

To me she cam, and bad me for to synge
This anthem verrailly in my deyynge,
As ye han herd, and whan that I hadde songe,
Me thoughte she leyde a greyn upon my tonge

(VII: 659-662).

His condition is therefore not at all "by wey of kynde" [in the natural course of events]: the object the Virgin placed on his tongue was a grain, which provoked plenty of speculation on the part of the scholars. In the analogues the object that sets the boy's tongue in motion is characterized by a more transparent symbolism: the child martyr, metaphorically addressed as an emerald or a ruby, has a pearl placed in his mouth in one of the analogues, whereas in others the object is more generally defined as a precious stone or a white pebble (Broughton 2005: 599-647). Still another object, a lily, constitutes an obvious symbol of innocence and chastity. The grain in *The Prioress's tale* has been identified as either cardamom, a breath sweetener also used as a remedy for aching throat, or a prayer bead (Benson 1988: 916). Cooper (1996: 291) presents us yet another interpretative option, where she skillfully associates the grain with the cult of St Thomas à Beckett:

The second Vespers of the Innocents includes a responsory and a prosa in his honour in which the image of grain appears, as a symbol once of martyrdom, once of the soul released of the chaff of the body and gathered up to heaven. The soul of the martyred child of the *Prioress's Tale* is released to heaven only when the grain is taken from his tongue.

The uncanny child from the tale becomes a character inextricably linked with St Thomas as the central figure of the frame tale including this narrative. In the light of that interpretation the child with a grain in his mouth becomes a symbol of holiness related to the cult of the saint whose tomb the pilgrims want to visit. The grain represents the soul which abandons the body once it has become possible. The boy's life-in-death condition is therefore an intermediary stage which nevertheless becomes indispensable for the religious cult to emerge. The clergeon, who once was unable to understand the words of the anthem he sang, now has the possibility of teaching a lesson to the believers who gather around his body.

Even though uncanny in his deformity, the child becomes another saint, which is stressed by the narrator. In contrast, the violence directed against the Jews presented as an act of justice, which marginalizes its racist dimension. Their bodies are torn apart by horses, a punishment reserved for traitors at the time, and then publicly displayed hanging. Aestheticization of the whole narrative is a latter phenomenon, but in the medieval text not much scope is devoted to this most gruesome legal murder, either. The Victorian medievalist representation seems only to continue the tradition of veiling hatred, as the passage situated on the right-hand side of the cabinet: "There he is now God leve us for to mete", referring to Christians going on pilgrimages to the boy's tomb, ends the narrative. Violence is silenced in the Pre-Raphaelite rendering, which is a natural continuation of hailing the martyr saint and concealing ethnic difference in Chaucer's tale. The parallelism between the Jews as symbols of otherness and the singing body as also disquietingly different becomes obliterated. The boy achieves eternal glory, while the Jews reach the state of oblivion. Aestheticized or not, the story remains the same, even if, fortunately, it is just a story and not a historical record.

REFERENCES

PRIMARY SOURCES

- Baker, Donald C. – John L. Murphy – Louis B. Hall Jr. (eds.)
 1982 *Candlemas day and the kyllyng of þe children of Israelle*, in: Donald C. Barker – John L. Murphy – Louis B. Hall Jr. (eds.), 96-115.

- Baker, Donald C. – John L. Murphy – Louis B. Hall Jr. (eds.)
 1982 *The late medieval religious plays of Bodleian Mss Digby 133 and E Museo 160*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Benson, Larry D. (ed.)
 1988 *Riverside Chaucer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boyd, Beverly (ed.)
 1964 *The Middle English miracles of the Virgin*. San Marino, California: Huntington Library.
- Happé, Peter (ed.)
 1975 *English mystery plays*. A selection. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Lupak, Alan (ed.)
 1988 *The Sultan of Babylon*, available at
<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/Teams/sultint.htm> (date of access: 18 Sep. 2006).

SECONDARY SOURCES

- Brewer, Derek – Jonathan Gibson (eds.)
 1997 *A companion to the Gawain-poet*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer. Broughton, Laurel
 2005 "The Prioress's prologue and tale", in: Robert M. Correale – Mary Hamel (eds.), 599-647.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker
 1982 *Jesus as mother. Studies in the spirituality of the high Middle Ages*. Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press.
- Calabrese, Michael
 2002 "Performing the Prioress: 'Conscience' and responsibility in studies of Chaucer's *Prioress's tale*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44/1: 66-91.
- Cohen, Jeffrey J.
 2004 "The flow of blood in Medieval Norwich", *Speculum* 79/1: 26-65.
- Collette, Carolyn P.
 1980 "Sense and sensibility in *The Prioress's tale*", *The Chaucer Review* 15/2: 138-150.
- Cooper, Helen
 1996 *Oxford guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury tales*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Correale, Robert M. – Mary Hamel (eds.)
 2005 *Sources and analogues of The Canterbury tales*. Vol. II. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Curtius, Ernst Robert
 1988 *European literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. (Translated by Willard R. Trask.) Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Fradenburg, Louise O.
 2002 "Criticism, anti-Semitism, and *The Prioress's tale*", in: Kathryn L. Lynch (ed.), 174-192.
- Kuhn, Reinhard
 1982 *Corruption in paradise: The child in Western literature*. London: University Press of New England.
- Lynch, Kathryn L. (ed.)
 2002 *Chaucer's cultural geography*. New York: Routledge.

- McCulloh, John M.
1997 "Jewish ritual murder: William of Norwich, Thomas of Monmouth, and the early dissemination of the myth", *Speculum* 72/3: 698-740.
- Mellinkoff, Ruth
1993 *Outcasts: Signs of otherness in Northern European art of the late Middle Ages*. Berkeley – Los Angeles – Oxford: University of California Press.
- Pearsall, Derek
1985 *The Canterbury tales*. London – New York: Routledge.
- Rachwał, Tadeusz – Tadeusz Ślawek (eds.)
1996 *Representations of the erotic*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- Rex, Richard
1995 "*The sins of Madame Englantyne*" and other essays on Chaucer. Newark – London: University of Delaware Press, Associated University Presses.
- Riddy, Felicity
1997 "Jewels in Pearl", in: Derek Brewer – Jonathan Gibson (eds.), 143-155.
- Rudat, Wolfgang E. H.
1994 "Gender-crossing in *The Prioress's tale*: Chaucer's satire or theological anti-Semitism?", *Essays in Judeo-Christian Tradition* 33/2: 11-17.
- Schoeck, Richard J.
1960 "Chaucer's Prioress: Mercy and tender heart", in: Richard J. Schoeck – Jerome Taylor (eds.), 245-256.
- Schrekenberg, Heinz
1996 *The Jew in Christian art: An illustrated history*. New York: Continuum Intl Pub Group.
- Shahar, Shulamith
1991 *Childhood in the Middle Ages*. London – New York: Routledge.
- Wicher, Andrzej
1996 "Sounding the limits of eroticism in Chaucer's *The Prioress's tale*", in: Tadeusz Rachwał – Tadeusz Ślawek (eds.), 29-37.