

Popular Canonization in the *Prioress' Tale*

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The *Prioress' Tale* is one of those short narratives called the miracles of the Virgin. This type of literature had its popularity among medieval people in the tradition of the cult of the Blessed Virgin and the saints. Various collections of the miracles of the Virgin circulated among Christian communities in the Middle Ages. Together with the story of the Virgin's life and death, the legends of Mary's miracles constituted a source of medieval devotional poetry and art. In composing the *Prioress' Tale* Chaucer adopted the story of a child victim of the Jews which was widespread among the reader of the miracles of the Virgin. While the poet uses the outlines of the story with few changes, he underlines the peculiarity of the Prioress as the narrator of the pious tale. The Prioress begins her story of a miracle of the Virgin's intercession appropriate for her ecclesiastical position. In the course of her narration, however, she shows excessive empathy for the boy murdered by the Jews and transforms the story of his suffering into the martyrdom of a child saint. The Prioress' inclination to canonize a child victim is typical of the popular mind in the Middle Ages.

The cult of the saints underlies medieval devotional literature. The worship of the saints was one of the regular devotional practices in the early Christian period. In the Middle Ages it greatly intensified and the lives of the saints became an integral part of literary writings and iconographic arts. Christian saints mainly consist of martyrs, confessors and virgins. The martyrs were the forerunners of Christian saints venerated in the Church. The term martyr originally denoted the Apostles who witnessed the life and death of Christ. In early Christian communities under persecution it came to include those who had suffered death for their faith. Acts of their martyrdom were compiled for liturgical use and their power of intercession was sought in regular services of their feasts. With the spread of the veneration of the martyrs from the fourth century, another category of saints called confessors appeared. Because of Constantine's toleration and favor to Christianity, actual death for the faith was no longer one of the requirements of sainthood. This resulted in the enlargement of the notion of saints. The Church Fathers and other prelates came to be venerated as equals of the martyrs. As André Vauchez discusses, the word confessor was eventually used of "all those who deserved to be venerated by the faithful as a result of the pain they had suffered, or inflicted on themselves, for the love of Christ."¹ General acceptance of the notion of the confessors in Christian communities made room for the increase in the number of saints and a new devotion to female saints like virgins, who opted for a life of renunciation to preserve their virginity.

As Christian missionaries extended to pagan countries from the fifth century, the worship of the saints

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was intensified by popular enthusiasm for holy relics. The barbarians were attracted by the remains of a saint after his death, which proved more efficacy than Christian dogmas in converting them to the new religion. The bodies of the martyrs were especially in demand. They were eventually dismembered into pieces and translated to newly established churches and monasteries. After Charlemagne's military campaigns against the Saxons in the end of the eighth century, a number of holy relics were translated from northern France and Rome to Saxony, where to possess one of these remains as the object of a new devotion was indispensable for the conversion of the Saxons.² The increasing demand for holy relics in pagan regions gave more impetus to the search for them and new findings of saints' bodies, major or minor, were added to the inventory of relics.

The surge of the cult of the saints and the increase in their number were the double-edged sword for the Christian Church. On one hand, their power of intercession gave momentum to the missionary campaigns of the Church; on the other, their popularity often led to the overestimation of martyrdom. In his study of popular heresy R. I. Moore mentions the eleventh-century heretics of Monforte, who, in the argument with Archbishop Aribert, maintained that martyrdom was the only and supreme means to salvation.³ Aside from universal sainthood such as the Blessed Virgin, John the Baptist and the Apostles, most of the saints were originally venerated by local people within their own dioceses. In the course of the rise of their cult, however, they came to gain devotees beyond their original sphere of influence. After the completion of the conversion of pagan peoples, the saints proliferated the Christian communities. The Church authorities were faced with the problem of how to curb the proliferation of the saints without diminishing their intercessory power. They concluded that papal canonization should be the best solution of the problem.

The first case of papal canonization was Bishop Ulric of Augsburg, who was declared a saint by Pope John XV in 993. Innocent IV, who led the Roman Church in the middle of the thirteenth century, defined canonization as follows: "To canonize is to decide, correctly and canonically, that a saint should be honoured as such, that is that he should be accorded a solemn cult as for other saints of the same category; so that if he is a confessor, the office of a confessor should be celebrated for him, if he is a martyr the office of the martyrs, and so on."⁴ Papal canonization generally took effect after a long legal procedure of inquiries about the candidate called the canonization process. The papacy's examination focused on virtues of the candidate in life and his or her miracles. This is succinctly stated by Innocent III as follows: "Two things are required before someone can be regarded as a saint: virtue of morals and truth of signs, that is, works of piety in life and evidence of miracles after death."⁵ As the Roman Church revised the conditions of the inquiries, the criterion of sainthood became more rigorous. Some applications for canonization ended in failure because of errors of form in the investigation. The papacy's preference for formalities sometimes led to the confrontation between local devotees of their alleged saints in their dioceses and the papal authorities who reserved the right to canonize. In the later Middle Ages many of the new cults of saints emerged and developed locally, regardless of papal approval or disapproval.

In spite of the papacy's comprehensive efforts to improve the canonization process, its canonized saints remained a small part of the whole sainthood in the medieval period. While the Church authorities were concerned with the authenticity of papal canonization, new devotions to saints developed with freedom among the local people. Objects of their veneration were not restricted to personages of fame. With their

own standards of sainthood in mind, they devoted themselves to obscure men and women who never lost sight of Christian faith to the death. As opposed to official sainthood in the Roman Church, the processes of popular canonization show the realities of medieval religious mind.

As Vauchez points out in his discussion of popular sainthood in the Middle Ages,⁶ almost all of the popular saints of the period died a horrible death in spite of their innocence. Many of their legends tell how formidably and unjustly they were murdered by vicious enemies. What is common to these popular saints is that they were regarded as martyrs because of the very fact of their hideous end. Vauchez explains the evolution of their martyrdom in popular cults as follows:

As today, when a condemned person is shown to have been the victim of a grave judicial error, the spectacle of innocent suffering is deeply shocking to the popular mind. The contrast between the severity of the punishment inflicted and its iniquitous character gives rise to an emotion which, immediately transposed onto the religious register, develops into a devotion. By virtue of a process which we may see as a law of popular affectivity, pity provokes piety. Victims become martyrs, hence saints, since, in the popular mind, these two notions overlap and there are no other saints than those who died a violent death on behalf of justice.⁷

Moreover, child victims of the Jews were included in the objects of these popular cults. The Christian Church had not acknowledged the membership of children in society. Aside from the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem, the Church authorities were reluctant to admit the sanctity of children, who were treated like servants or outsiders of the Christian communities. With the rise of popular canonization in the later Middle Ages, child martyrs became one of the constituent parts of popular sainthood. William of Norwich (1132-44) is an early case of the cult of this type. He had been known and venerated as a victim of Jewish ritual murder. The legend that the child had been crucified and murdered by the Jews during the Passover became a model of medieval anti-Semitic narratives. Hugh of Lincoln is another example of child martyrs, to whom the Prioress refers in the epilogue of her tale: "O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also / With cursed Jewes, as it is notable, / For it is but a litel while ago" (684-86).⁸ He is supposed to have been murdered by the Jews in 1255. According to the medieval ballad "Hugh of Lincoln,"⁹ Jew's daughter enticed the boy at play and stabbed him in the throat; she threw the body into Our Lady's well. When Hugh's mother in search of her son came near the well, she heard the boy's voice telling her to prepare his winding sheet. At last the mother found his corpse and the whole Lincoln mourned for the death of the child. There were historically major Jewish communities in Norwich and Lincoln. The murder cases of these two boys were known as the blood libel by the Jews. Although the Church took gentle approaches to the Jewish people in the early Middle Ages, the common Christians came to show hostility to them in the belief that "from the time Jesus had been crucified the Jews thirsted, particularly at Easter time, for the pure and innocent blood of Christian children."¹⁰ This explains for the redundancy of the shedding of blood in the stories of child martyrs such as the *Prioress' Tale*. The prayers of the Prioress to Hugh of Lincoln suggest that anti-Semitism and the cult of child saints were deeply rooted in pairs in the consciousness of medieval people.

In discussing the *Prioress' Tale*, we should first consider the mixed character of the Prioress as the narrator. In the General Prologue she is represented as a nun with courtly tendencies and expensive tastes. What underlies her behaviors is carelessness. Because of this temperament, she is hardly aware of the

discrepancies between her ecclesiastical position and actual neglect of religious discipline. The Prioress willingly joins the Canterbury pilgrimage with her juniors; but participation in pilgrimages was primarily prohibited by monastic orders which preferred stability to wandering. The nun's favorite oath is "by Seinte Loy" (St. Eligius); however, swearing was disapproved in medieval handbooks for priests such as the *Book of Vices and Virtues*. Her keeping of small dogs is a violation of nun's discipline. The impression is dominant that she is inapt at distinguishing the gap between what she should do and what she has actually done. In other words, her acquired ecclesiastical consciousness and native civil inclinations coexist in the character of the Prioress. The inscription on her golden brooch, *Amor vincit omnia*, is fit for the dubious person in that the phrase can be interpreted as the predominance of both divine love and earthly love.

The mixed character of the Prioress is to be seen in the prologue of her tale, too, which begins with intellectual compliments to the Blessed Virgin and ends with sentimental appeal for her assistance. The prologue as a whole is intended for the invocation to Mary appropriate for the miracles of the Virgin. It was a literary convention to introduce a devotional narrative with prayers to Jesus Christ or the Virgin. Conscious of her ecclesiastical position, the Prioress has an orthodox introduction to her story. The first stanza of the prologue of the *Prioress' Tale* consists of two devotional texts. One is the opening lines of matins in the Office of the Virgin; the other is a passage from the Mass of the Holy Innocents. The former is a series of brief prayers in honor of the Blessed Virgin made on the model of the Divine Office; the latter is a liturgical prayer to the innocent children massacred in Bethlehem, who had been in the Church regarded as the first to shed their blood for Christ. In the middle of the prologue the Prioress addresses the Virgin in various ways: "the white lylve flour" (461); "bussh unbrent, brennyng in Moyses sighte" (468). Both white lily and burning bush had been accepted as symbols of Mary in the Middle Ages. Moreover, to stress the mercy of the Blessed Virgin the narrator makes use of the works of Dante. So far the Prioress has kept her ecclesiastical stance in the treatment of the Virgin Mary. In the last stanza, however, she changes her attitude toward Mary: "But as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse, / That kan unnethes any word expresse, / Right so fare I, and therfore I yow preye, / Gydeh my song that I shal of yow seye" (484-87). This is to be interpreted as a kind of understatement or affected modesty in terms of literary convention. In the characterization of the Prioress as the narrator, this is an expression of her civil tendencies. She identifies herself with an inarticulate child, the opposite of an eloquent speaker such as what she was at the opening of the prologue. Not as a learned nun, but as a simple common Christian, she addresses to the Virgin and wishes for a good way to praise the mercy of Mary. The Prioress' twofold attitude toward the Blessed Virgin in the prologue reflects her possession of professional perspective and naive devotions.

The dual character of the Prioress becomes manifest when we examine her portrayal of the boy as a child martyr in the body of her tale. As in the prologue, she begins her narrative in an ecclesiastical manner appropriate for her position; in the course of her telling, however, she diverges from her professional statement to the spontaneous narration according to her civil inclinations. In describing the innocent piety and quickness of study of the seven-year-old schoolboy, the narrator aptly refers to St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children: "But ay, whan I remembre on this mateere, / Seint Nicholas stant evere in my presence, / For he so yong to Crist dide reverence" (513-15). St. Nicholas was one of the most

popular saints in the Middle Ages. The veneration for him had extended to the whole Christian communities including the Eastern Church. In his *Legenda Aurea* Jacobus de Voragine mentions the saint's piety and precocity in his childhood:

On the very day of his birth, while he was being bathed, Nicholas arose and stood straight up in his bath. Throughout his infancy he took the breast only once on Wednesdays and Fridays. As a youth he avoided all the pleasures of his companions and spent his time visiting the churches; all the passages of the Holy Scriptures which he heard there, he committed to memory.¹¹

The Prioress' reference to St. Nicholas is fitting for the context of the tale in another respect. In reply to the boy's question about the meaning of the *Alma Redemptoris*, his senior schoolmate says: "This song, I have herd seye, / Was maked of our blisful Lady free, / Hire to salue, and eek hire for to preye / To beenoure help and socour whan we deye" (531-34). The answer is based on the popular belief that the Blessed Virgin is the protector of children in peril. The same belief is to be seen in a miracle of St. Nicholas. According to the legend, when the saint served as a bishop in Myra, an innkeeper butchered three schoolchildren and placed them in a tub. Alerted by an angel, the bishop went to the inn and resuscitated the children. Because of this miracle St. Nicholas came to be venerated as the patron saint of schoolchildren. On one hand, the narrator stresses the innocent devotion of the boy to the Virgin, citing the name of St. Nicholas; on the other, she foreshadows the child's suffering by the mention of the saint.

In the scene of the murder the Prioress associates the death of the boy with the suffering of the Holy Innocents under the reign of Herod. She calls the Jewish plotters as follows: "O cursed folk of Herodes alnewe, / What may youre yvel entente yow availle?" (574-75). The association is sustained in the later scene of the burial procession where the boy's mother is called "newe Rachel" (627). The name of Rachel is originally found in Jeremiah's prophecy (Jer. 31.15). In the episode of the massacre of the Holy Innocents Matthew cites the name to show the fulfillment of the prophecy (Matt. 2.18). The children of Bethlehem massacred by order of Herod had been the object of devotion as the proto-martyrs from early Christian times. Medieval view of the Holy Innocents is to be seen in the *Legenda Aurea*:

The Holy Innocents are so called for three reasons: namely, by reason of their life, by reason of their martyrdom, and by reason of the innocence which their death procured for them. They are innocent by reason of their life, because they had an innocent life; that is, they were unable, while alive, to do ill to anyone. They are innocent by reason of their martyrdom, because they suffered unjustly, and without being guilty of any crime. Finally they are innocent by the effects of their death, because their martyrdom conferred baptismal innocence upon them; in other words, it purified them of original sin.¹²

As the first to shed their blood for Christ, their death came to be commemorated on their feast day like the other canonized saints. It is evident that the Prioress relates the suffering of the boy with that of the Holy Innocents in terms of martyrdom. Paraphrasing the passage from the Apocalypse of John (Rev. 14. 3-4), she calls the child "martir, sowed to virginitee" (579). In the later section of her tale she repeatedly takes the same attitude toward the child victim: "of martirdom the ruby bright" (610); "this martir" (680). What dominates her narration of the murder scene is her excessive empathy for the innocent boy who died a violent death. She plainly depicts the details of the child's murder, regardless of her ecclesiastical position. Moreover, she shows some toleration toward the severe punishment meted out to the Jewish murderers; in

the description of the execution she inserts the proverbial expression: "Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve" (632). This is at once the provost's remark and the narrator's comment on the justice of the punishment.

The Prioress' emotional rendering of the child martyr reflects her notion of martyrdom, a distortion of that of the Roman Church. The Church authorities had consistently acclaimed as the martyrs those who, at the risk of their life, professed Christian faith of their own free will. Children under the age of discretion, therefore, were out of the question. The Prioress shares the notion of martyrdom not so much with the clergy as with the lay people, who venerated as the martyrs any good Christians who, regardless of their age, fell victim to the evil Jews and died a violent death. What contributed to the development of her concept of the martyr is not her monastic experience, but her native inclinations such as her preference for small creatures, prejudice against the Jews. In his portrayal of the nun in the General Prologue, Chaucer notes her charity in an ironical manner:

But for to speken of hire conscience,
 She was so charitable and so pitous
 She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
 Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.
 Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde
 With rosted flessch, or milk and wastel-breed.
 But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,
 Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;
 And al was conscience and tendre herte.

(142-50)

The poet suggests that her charity, which should be given to the underprivileged, is in reality misdirected to her favorite small creatures. At the same time, he reveals that the Prioress has the same sensibility as the ordinary Christians. She easily feels pity for the sensational bloodshed of small animals. As an example of distorted martyrdom in medieval popular cults, Vauchez mentions the unjust death of a dog and its devotion.¹³ The dog was slain by its masters who mistook its defense of their child against a snake for its attack on the child. After the disclosure of its innocence a devotion to the dog developed among the peasantry and a number of miracles were reported. The Prioress' commitment to small creatures is deep enough to bring about the confusion of the suffering of those animals with that of the boy in her tale.

We should note that anti-Semitism underlies the Prioress' distorted notion of martyrdom. Pejorative remarks on the Jews are redundant from the first stanza to the last one in her narrative. On the whole, they form a sharp contrast with the innocence of the child victim. In the attitude toward the Jewish people the nun is allied with the common Christians, who often accused these people of their ritual murder and profanities. Medieval popular prejudice against the Jews is based on the simple dualism between good and evil. Any victim of the battle between good Christians and wicked Jews can be claimed to be a martyr in the popular mind. The Roman Church consistently attached importance to the authenticity of martyrdom and treated as martyrs only those who had expressed their Christian faith in a conscious and voluntary manner. On the contrary, the lay people had a wide range of devotion which encompassed the martyrs of

all ages. The violent death and the Jews' involvement justified them in calling the victim a martyr.

The Prioress' excessive empathy for the child, which was caused by her sensibility to violence and anti-Semitic tendency, drives her into a new devotion. In concluding her tale the narrator refers to Hugh of Lincoln, another child martyr in popular sainthood. It is evident that she identifies the boy with Hugh of Lincoln in terms of child victims of the Jews. Both of them are not qualified for sainthood by ecclesiastical standards; they are mere victims of the antagonism between Christians and Jews. But for this very reason they are entitled to enjoy popular veneration as distinct from the canonized saints.

Notes

1. André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), p. 15.
2. See Angus MacKay and David Ditchburn, *Atlas of Medieval Europe* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 50.
3. See R. I. Moore, *The Birth of Popular Heresy*, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 33 (1975; rpt. Univ. of Toronto Press, 1995), pp. 19-21.
4. Vauchez, pp. 30-31.
5. Vauchez, p. 36.
6. See Vauchez, pp. 147-56.
7. Vauchez, p. 151.
8. All references to Chaucer are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd. ed. (Oxford UP, 1988).
9. See *The Oxford Book of Ballads*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford UP, 1989), pp. 317-20.
10. MacKay, p. 145.
11. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (1941; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 17.
12. Jacobus de Voragine, p. 64.
13. See Vauchez, p. 153.