MYTHOLOGIZING THE JEWISH OTHER IN THE “PRIORESS’S TALE”

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For a religious system like Christianity to prosper, it must convince members that it is the divinely-sanctioned charter upon which the community is based, and it must adapt to cultural changes over time. These demands create a paradoxical situation: a theology must appear to be a timeless, fixed truth while at the same time reinventing itself as historical events reshape a community. To succeed, such a system needs “plasticity,” Raymond Firth’s term for the chameleon-like quality of myth to appear timeless while altering its form to fit new situations.1 As a mythological system, Christianity has its sacred origin in the Gospels’ narratives of Jesus’s crucifixion at the hands of his Roman and Jewish enemies and his subsequent resurrection. For the Christianity of late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the written legends of saints provided one means of revising the original sacred charter. Surrogates for Jesus, saints re-enacted this mythic origin with their martyrdom and miracles recorded in hagiography and provided variations that depart from the original myth by adapting to changing situations. Ritualistic celebrations of recorded saints’ lives allowed Christians to form a community and an identity separate from the Other who tried to vanquish their Christ and saints.2

In one medieval hagiographical tradition, Christian children—evoking the Christ Child who as an adult would be crucified—became martyrs at the hands of Jews, seen as the medieval descendants of those who participated in the deicide of Jesus Christ. During the Middle Ages, Jews were the Other, living unconverted in the midst of European Christians, whose difference was used to help define and forge Christian identity.3 In England the oldest known saint’s legend involving blood libel concerns St. William of Norwich, a boy found dead in 1144. Several years later a monk,

2 See, for example, Peter Brown, The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
Thomas of Monmouth, moved to Norwich and wrote what would serve as William’s hagiography: Thomas claimed that Jews crucified the child and that each year Jews commit a similar act of murder to re-enact ritualistically the mythic crucifixion of Christ in order “to express their hatred of Christ whom they could no longer attack directly.” Though Jews were not imprisoned or executed for this offense, William was seen as a martyr for the Christian faith, and Norwich became a popular pilgrimage site. A similar tale circulated about St. Hugh of Lincoln, purportedly murdered by Jews in 1255, whose cult attracted pilgrims to Lincoln Cathedral. In England the rise of these tales paralleled mounting violence against Jews in England—notably the massacre in York in 1190—culminating in the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290. Gavin Langmuir contends that the creation of this myth and the subsequent executions of Jews accused of the crime of ritual murder anticipate Christian England’s shift from anti-Judaism (objections to the religion of Judaism) to antisemitism (prejudice against Jewish people). This ugly myth casts Jews as the archetypal Other that simultaneously challenges yet reinforces the prevailing hegemony.

A century after the banishment of the Jews from England, Chaucer penned the “Prioress’s Tale,” a variation on this hagiographical tradition. A Christian boy is murdered at the instigation of Jews who have his throat cut and his body thrown in a pit, he is miraculously made to sing by the Virgin Mary when she places a grain upon his tongue, he is found by his mother and authorities who hear his singing, and he is avenged when the Jews are executed. The Prioress concludes her tale by alluding to “yonge Hugh of Lincoln” who was also slain by “cursed Jews.” Chaucer’s version strips away some sacred elements found in other ritual-murder myths—no canonization of the boy is mentioned and, instead of a ritualistic re-enactment of the Crucifixion, the Jews kill the little boy because he sings the *Alma redemptoris* in their ghetto, which is against their “lawes reverence” (l. 564). Chaucer’s secularization of this tale anticipates the secular trends of the early modern era when Chaucer himself undergoes a canonization to become the Homer of English literature, its Poet Laureate

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6 Langmuir, 305.