

THE MATTER OF ISRAEL:  
THE USE OF LITTLE CHILDREN IN THE MIRACLES  
OF THE HOLY VIRGIN DURING THE MIDDLE AGES

Chaucer's interest in the individual peculiarities of his, otherwise, stock characters have led many critics to consider him as a forerunner of Renaissance individualism, but, in fact, this conclusion might be but the consequence of our 20th century prejudiced approach to ideas about society. I believe that Chaucer was a child (a very educated one) of his own age, and, although the topics he dealt with, were not only medieval but of all times, the viewpoint was medieval: he was medieval in his view of human and divine love, he was so too in his approach to religion or to society which, in his time, was very much the same, and he had the cruelty of the age and the same prejudices; in no other tale can these characteristics be seen as clearly as in *The Prioress' Tale*. I am going to discuss it in comparison with the same story written by Gonzalo de Berceo included in *Los Milagros de Nuestra Señora*.

The Jews played a very outstanding role in Europe all through the Middle Ages. In the Dark Ages they were the dwellers of towns, much of the evidence can be seen from the "responsa" literature. Throughout the Dark and Middle Ages efficient urban colonists in both the Mediterranean area and North and West Europe but the Jews were not only the traders, they also supplied the court with doctors, astronomers and officials and, even as a religious belief, Judaism was tolerable in all Christendom until the preaching of the 1st Crusade in 1095, thereafter the position of the Jews deteriorated almost everywhere. They were still the best urban colonists, had useful trading networks, possessed rare skills, accumulated wealth quickly and were easy to tax. They flourished under the Carolingians. The emperor Louis the Pious, around 825, gave them a number of charters as inducements to settle, There was too, it is true, periodic trouble persecutions in France 1007, for example, forced conversions in Mainz in 1012- But on the whole Jewish communities did well and

spread specially throughout the Rhine basin, and from the lower Rhine to England after 1066.

However an accumulation of anti-Jewish feeling seems to have built up for some time and the preaching of the First Crusade at Clermont-Ferrand in 1095 unleashed it.

The antisemitic ideology and folklore which helped to detonate the First Crusade riots proved to be simply the plinth on which a vast superstructure of hostile myth and rumour was built. In 1144 there occurred an ominous incident at Norwich. The incident is very succinctly mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The Laud Chronicle dates for 1137:<sup>1</sup>

Now we want to say something of king Stephen's reign. In his days the Jews of Norwich brought a Christian child before Easter, and tortured him with all the same torments with which our Lord was tortured. On Good Friday they hanged him on a cross because of his love for our Lord, and afterwards buried him. They thought that his death would be concealed<sup>2</sup> but our Lord<sup>3</sup> showed that he was a holy martyr, and the monks took his body and buried him with great ceremony in the monastery church and wonderfully and in various ways he performs miracles through our Lord. He is called St. William.<sup>4</sup>

By this time the open mindedness of the first part of the Middle Ages had given way to a most cruel age: the time of religious fundamentalisms that was but the result of a great economic crisis that in England had been the consequence of a devastating civil war. (I quote from the Chronicle again):

I know not how to, nor am I able to tell of all atrocities nor all cruelties which they wrought upon the unhappy people of this country. It lasted throughout the nineteen years that Stephen was king and always grew worse and worse. At regular intervals the levied a

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<sup>1</sup> I am using N. Garmonsway's translation as it is the most modern one I had available.

<sup>2</sup> The same as Chaucer's child.

<sup>3</sup> In Chaucer's tale the Holy Virgin.

<sup>4</sup> Our knowledge of the details comes primarily from a hagiography: *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*, compiled by Thomas of Monmouth, a monk of Norwich Priory short afterwards.

tax known as “tenserie” <protection money> upon the villages, so that you could easily go a day’s journey without ever finding a village inhabited or a field cultivated. Then was corn dear, and flesh and cheese and butter, for there was none in the land. The wretched people perished with hunger; some who had been great men, were driven to beggary while others fled from the country.<sup>1</sup>

In Norwich the chief activity of the Jews was money lending on the security of lands and rents. In these circumstances, only naturally, the affair of the child William was made the occasion for an anti-Jewish demonstration. In the Christian towns people took their opportunity to turn against their money lenders. Slowly the legend expanded, canonisation -not yet centrally controlled by Rome- was conferred by popular clamour. And since the body of a Saint of this exciting type brought wealth to the church which owned it by attracting pilgrims, gifts and endowments accusations of ritual murder tended to be made whenever a child was killed in suspicious circumstances near a settlement of Jews: the case of Hugh of Lincoln (specially mentioned by Chaucer) took place in 1144, there were other cases at Gloucester in 1168, Bury St. Edmunds in 1181 and Bristol 1183.

The preaching of a new crusade always brought antisemitic sentiments to the boil. The 3rd. crusade launched 1189-90, in which England figured largely because Richard Lionhearted led it, whipped up the mob fury that had already been aroused by the ritual murder charges.

In fact the first great hecatomb of Jews in western Europe took place in England in 1190 as well as the first mass expulsion in 1290 which became the model for other expulsions: France 1306, Spain 1492, Lithuania 1495, Portugal 1495.

In the early Middle Age, and even as late as the early 14th century, Spain was the safest Latin territory for Jews. It had been from the 8th to the 11th centuries the most successful of Jews settlements. When the Muslims invaded the country in 711 the Jews helped them to overrule it. When Córdoba became the capital of the Ummayid dynasty who made themselves caliphs the Jews were treated with extraordinary favour and tolerance. During the reign of the great caliph Abd-al-Rahman III (912-61) his Jewish court

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<sup>1</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon chronicle*. N. Garmonsway’s Translation. Laud Chronicle 1137.

doctor Hisdai Ibn Shaprut, brought to the city Jewish scholars, philosophers, poets and scientists who never left the country and made it the leading centre of Jewish culture in the world.

The development of the cult to the Holy Virgin is parallel to the rise of oral public preaching and sermons. Clerics and monks needed tender and pathetic anecdotes in order to elaborate their sermons. Up to the 11th century the cult to the Holy Virgin had not been of great importance, now the devotion to the Mother of Christ starts one of the most important phenomena of our culture: the Holy Virgin is identified with the “New Eve” who comes to redeem us of the sins that had been introduced into the world by the “first Eve”. She is now considered as the necessary mediator between God and the sinning human beings who would be utterly unable to reach Christ and the entrance to Heaven if left to their own resources, without her intercession no one could be reconciled with God. She was the owner of the special graces called “*gratiae gratis datae*” or graces for the sanctification of the others. The initiator of this movement according to Joel Sagnieux: “*Literatura y espíritu medieval*” is Saint Anselm of Canterbury who died in 1109.<sup>1</sup> His writings, which changed the spiritual climate of the Middle Ages, are a long celebration of the graces of the Holy Virgin, a beautiful and noble lady thoroughly praise-worthy, thus she was immediately related to the development of courtly love.

Gonzalo de Berceo the earliest known Castilian poet was a simple monk who drew on scripture and Latin sources but who decided to write in “Roman paladino” that is, in the vernacular, so he could be understood by his neighbours next door: “En qual suele el pueblo falar a su vecino”,<sup>2</sup> and who lived 1195-1264, thus almost contemporary of the ritual murders of the English children. He used martyrdom as the topic for one of his most moving miracles of the Holy Virgin. The success of Berceo is based on his ability to approach the daily life to the listener. He leaves theological abstractions in order to send a clear message where the lyric emotion works directly on the feelings of the listeners, when he describes sinners he is never too harsh on them, his popular language is expressive and direct, his images immediate, so his stories, achieve a great realism. In all probability he had drunk more than a “vaso

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<sup>1</sup> Of course he forgets the previous influence of Ildefonsus of Toledo and Isidore of Seville.

<sup>2</sup> Berceo, Gonzalo de: *Obras*. Publicaciones del Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 1977.

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de bon vino” in the company of the Jews of his own town, so his story is surprisingly tender to a little boy of the universally hated race of Jews. He transforms the cruel story into a moving tale in which the hero is not a Christian but a little Jewish child, *el judiezno* (this is a very affectionate diminutive in Spanish), this little child who plays in the street in the company of his Christian friends is the only one who has the vision of Our Lady and only naturally was irresistibly attracted by her: “pagosé d’ella mucho/ quanto más la catava de la su fermosura/ más se enamorava.”<sup>1</sup>

His Jewish mother is a good and suffering woman who tries, with all her might, to defend her child from his irate husband. The evil Jew is just one cruel father which answers to the ingenuity of his son as if he had been possessed by the evil: “fazie’ figuras malas como demoniado.”<sup>2</sup> At the denouement of the story the one sinning Jew is punished, the Holy Virgin saves the little Jewish child from the furnace and there is no mention of the Christians taking their revenge.

By the time Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* the Jews had been banished from England for such a long time that we might be tempted to assert that he based his story just on literary sources. But perhaps the most outstanding characteristic of Chaucer is that he was a man of his time writing for the people of his own day -his curiosity is never antiquarian, when he draws on sources to other than contemporaries it is always to bring the topic to his own time. It is true that England “had got rid” of Jews much before Chaucer was born, but the topic of children being brutally killed by them, was all but forgotten. William of Norwich and Hugh of Lincoln were very popular saints of his time, worshipped all through the country. That Chaucer is quite conscious of this is clearly seen in his mention of Hugh of Lincoln: “likewise murdered so/ by cursed Jews.”<sup>3</sup>

So he clearly wrote a tale to suit the taste of the age, cruelty and filthiness being always sure ingredients that would be enjoyed by a wide audience. This would not prove that Chaucer was unnecessarily cruel or specially filthy or ironic on The Prioress, the tale, as we have seen has a historical background which is much more cruel than fiction.

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<sup>1</sup> Berceo’s *El Judiezno* p. 351, v. 358.

<sup>2</sup> Berceo’s *El Judiezno* p. 352, v. 361.

<sup>3</sup> Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales: The Prioress Tale*.

Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* during the last 14 years of his life. During the Medieval period the literary themes were shared by writers in all European countries. On the other hand Chaucer had (in all probability) visited Spain early in 1368 while he was at the service of the Black Prince whose victory in Najera meant the ascent of Pedro I El Cruel to the throne of Castile (cf. *The Monks Tale*). Moreover Chaucer's wife Phillipa was a lady-in-waiting to Edward III's queen and to Constance of Castile, John of Gaunt's 2nd wife. There is therefore little doubt that Chaucer knew the work of his Castilian contemporaries and that he must have had a curiosity for the works of the simple monk who had written his naive stories, in exchange, for a glass of good wine.

The two stories *The Judiezno* by Berceo and *The Prioress' Tale* by Chaucer have a great similarity, the differences however are not only those of time and country but of two great writers with very different personalities who leave their own print on the account of the same story.

Both tales follow the same pattern: a child at school is fascinated by the figure of the Virgin and undergoes a mystical experience; he is severely punished because of his Christian behaviour, his mother in desperation cries for help, the Holy Virgin bestows her Grace on him as a reward for the child's devotion to her.

The central figure of both stories is the Holy Virgin: she is praised, respected and worshipped. Her virginity identified with the "Mater Redemptio's" characteristic is described the Virgin as "gratiae gratis datae":

CHAUCER: ... our dear and blissful lady ... she  
will hear us when we turn to her and pray  
for help and comfort on our dying day.<sup>1</sup>

BERCEO: ... una bella figura  
... una hermosa suenna,  
tal es Sancta Maria que es de gracia plena  
por servicio de gloria por deservicio da pena.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer's *The Prioress Tale* p. 190 l. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Berceo's *El Judiezno* p. 351, v. 357.

However Chaucer adds a new diminution to the story associating clearly martyrdom with the idea of virginity, innocence and chastity:

... o martyr wedded to virginity ...<sup>1</sup>  
... Great God, that to perform thy praise hast  
called the innocent of mouth, how great thy might  
this gem of chastity, this emerald ...<sup>2</sup>

Thus the character of the story-teller the prioress comes to life, and the Prioress reveals herself emphasizing the one quality, chastity, that in a child is, obviously, redundant -the reader receives a clear message: she is more concerned with herself than with the child and even with the Holy Virgin, in fact the prioress does not seem to have a clear idea or rather a Christian idea of the Holy Mary and her miracles, and transforms her in a sort of kindly fairy who has to use a charm, not to save the child as should be expected, but to destroy the evil forces of which the Jews are a very clear symbol.

But Chaucer is never simple, he had introduced this fairy tale characteristic in the 1st lines of the story. While Berceo confers realism to his tale setting it on a real city: “ En la ciudad de Borges acaecio”. Chaucer gives it the “folk tale” perspective of “once upon a time and in a far off country”:

In Asia once there was a Christian town  
which long since ...<sup>3</sup>

Both towns have a very important coincidence, they have a Christian school where children learn “to read and sing”.

CHAUCER: A little school stood for the Christian flock  
And the instruction suited for their ear,  
That is to say in singing and in reading.<sup>4</sup>

BERCEO: Tenía en essa villa, como era menester  
un clérigo una escuela de cantar y leer.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer's *The Prioress Tale* p. 190, l. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Chaucer's *The Prioress Tale* p. 191, l. 120-23.

<sup>3</sup> Chaucer's *The Prioress Tale* p. 187, l. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Chaucer's *The Prioress Tale* p. 188, l. 8-12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Berceo's *El Judiezno* p. 351, v. 354.

Berceo does not seem to find it strange that the little Jew attends willingly and spontaneously to this Christian school:

Venía un judiezno natural del lugar  
por sabor de los ninnos, por con ellos jogar.<sup>1</sup>

perhaps that was not such an extraordinary thing in Spain in the days of Berceo.

Both little children are very well characterized: they are real children, innocent, naive and spontaneous their misfortune will be provoked by actions which they do not Christian mass with his school companions and takes the holy communion.

quando van Corpus Dómini prender la yent christiana  
prisole al judiezno de comulgar grant gana,  
comulgó con los otros el cordero sin lana.<sup>2</sup>

And Chaucer's Christian child sings a song in Latin, which of course he cannot understand, on his way to school unaware that he is crossing the Jewish quarters:

... This child would go along  
the Jewish street and, of his own accord  
daily and merrily he sang his song ...<sup>3</sup>

In both stories the climax is of course, the miracle of the Holy Virgin: Berceo's "judiezno" who has been thrown into a furnace is not burned, and Chaucer's little Christian though, cruelly tortured and murdered, still sings after his throat has been cut.

BERCEO: El fuego prqe bravo fue de grand cosiment  
no linuzio nin punto, mostroli buen talent;

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<sup>1</sup> Berceo's *El Judiezno* p. 351, v. 355.

<sup>2</sup> Berceo's *El Judiezno* p. 351, v. 356.

<sup>3</sup> Chaucer's *The Prioress Tale* p. 189, l. 64-66.



el ninnuelo del fuego estorció bien e gent,  
fizo und grand miraclo el rey omnipotent.<sup>1</sup>

CHAUCER: Lying with carven throat and out of sight  
began to sing O Alma from the ground.<sup>2</sup>

The social background is given in the two stories by the eyewitnesses of the miracles. In the Spanish tale the author does not establish a difference between Jews and Christians:

Preguntarolí todos, Judios e christianos  
como podió venger fuegos tan sobrazanos;<sup>3</sup>

They are the good citizens who are horrified of the action of one evil neighbour:

Prisieron al judio, el falsso desleal,  
al qe a su fíjuelo fiziera tan grand mal,<sup>4</sup>

In Chaucer's tale the witnesses are just the representatives of the Christian society, who are the judges of the crime committed by the whole community of Jews who stand collectively as a symbol of pure evil:

A shameful death in torment there and then  
On all those guilty Jews ...  
Evils shall meet the evils they deserve.<sup>5</sup>

The last stanza of the Prioress' Tale, very naturally brings to the memory of her audience the martyrdom of their popular St Hugh of Lincoln, stressing on the very same final judgement of all the cursed Jews and while Berceo's story has a very clear moral: that the Holy Virgin is the only judge who would re-

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<sup>1</sup> Berceo's *El Judiezno* p. 352, v. 365.

<sup>2</sup> Chaucer's *The Prioress Tale* p. 191, l. 124-25.

<sup>3</sup> Berceo's *El Judiezno* p. 352, v. 368.

<sup>4</sup> Berceo's *El Judiezno* p. 353, v. 371.

<sup>5</sup> Chaucer's *The Prioress Tale* p. 192, l. 143-45.

ward good deeds, but also punish sinful people because she is essentially just:

nunca repoyo' ella a los que la quisieron  
ni les dió en refierta el mal que le ficieron.<sup>1</sup>

The Christians of Chaucer's tale condemn the Jews of the town to a terrible and shameful death:

... to be drawn apart by horses. Then  
he hanged them from a cart.<sup>2</sup>

We have seen that the story: the martyrdom of little innocents has been used throughout the Middle Ages. and treated with very few differences by quite different writers, and as the story gets more and more cruel as times advance it is no wonder that the same tale, with much more embroidery, was used even in the Renaissance: In Australia three children were found drawn in a river and the Jews were accused of the murder, in 1421 the Archduke imprisoned all the Jews in Vienna and put a hundred of them to the fire to please the populace. These events were repeated in Trent 1475 when the child Simon died drawn in the river Adipio. After the subsequent hecatomb the villagers erected a statue of the little child in Frankfurt on the bridge leading to Saxenhausen. The problems were extended to Ratisbone 1480 and Passau 1478. At the end of the 19th century a study published in *L'Osservatore Catolico* recorded no less than 150 examples of the same ritual crimes.

It does not seem strange that when the Catholic Kings in Spain wanted to get rid of a population that had been such an important social element for centuries they do not have to change the motive, the old model still works: the story of "El Santo Niño de la Guardia" is a repetition of the ritual murder of William of Norwich, that took place in a little town in Spain in 1491. On the next year the Jews were banished from the country for ever.

Dionisia Tejera Llano

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<sup>1</sup> Berceo's *El Judiezno* p. 353, v. 371.

<sup>2</sup> Chaucer's *The Prioress Tale* p. 192, l. 146-47.

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