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In 1205, ten years before he would respond to the theological debate over the Real Presence by promulgating the dogma of transubstantiation, Innocent III sent to Peter de Corbeil, archbishop of Paris, a directive containing a curious accusation: “Whenever it happens that on the day of the Lord’s resurrection the Christian women who are nurses for the children of the Jews take in the body and blood of Christ, the Jews make these women pour their milk into the latrine for three days before they again give suck to the children.”¹ The passage mingles powerful associations of purity and pollution with bodily images of ingestion and evacuation, of infants like Christ nourished by breast milk with bodies resurrected and purified at the Last Day. Perhaps unknowingly, Innocent articulated the symbolic convergence of eucharistic symbols that would inform late medieval devotion to the Host. “In vernacular literature,” notes Miri Rubin, “a strong bond was created between the eucharistic body reborn at the mass and the original body born from a virgin womb,” thereby couching the sacred mystery of transubstantiation in a tangible, sensuous iconography.²

An earlier draft of this essay was presented at the 1991 meeting of the medieval Academy, Princeton University, in a session on “The Jews in Medieval Europe” organized by Professor Ivan G. Marcus. I am grateful to Professors Jeremy Cohen, Michael Curley, and Miri Rubin for generously providing direction on various points.


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Viewed from another perspective, however, Innocent’s letter fore-shadowed a cultic anti-Judaism grounded in fears of eucharistic desecration that would be given impetus for Christians by the 1215 legislation of the Fourth Lateran Council. The homilies, penitential manuals, Mass books, Marian miracles, and gospel harmonies produced in response to the council’s deliberations inscribe such ideological absolutes at their inception in an age of “classification.”

This article explores the relationship between eucharistic symbolism, particularly the pervasive child-as-Host motif, and anti-Judaism to determine how a powerful ideology of bodily and social purity could become salient for the fourteenth-century audience of Chaucer’s “Prioress’s Tale,” an audience who had no living association with and little historical memory of England’s Jews. While scholars have illuminated our reading of the tale in detailed studies of its liturgical, historical, and literary sources, we have yet to explore how a popular eucharistic iconography could provide a cultic foundation for the Prioress’s virulent brand of anti-Judaism. Cultic or ritual anti-Judaism could survive the absence of Jews, but to give meaning to the ritual of purification, definition, or exclusion that underpinned the Fourth Lateran’s teaching program and thus helped to shape the Christian community, the historical and symbolic presence of Jews (like that of heretics) had to be continuously reinvoked.

In 1983, Robert Worth Frank expressed the unease many scholars feel about Chaucer’s gruesome tale: “Why, one must ask, would Chaucer choose an anti-Semitic tale? There had been no Jews in England since they were driven from the kingdom in 1290. The choice seems gratuitous and perverse.” As a study in the social and spiritual dynamics of a late medieval Christian community, however, the Canterbury Tales provides precisely the context scholars ought to expect for such miracles. The “Prioress’s Tale” is powerful because Chaucer conflates sacrificial and commensal images to reveal a community purging itself of its impurities. My intent is not to determine whether he does so ironically or not (although I suspect not), but to explore the cultural and religious context for the tale’s central image: the small boy, lifted up to the altar, who is transformed.

Mary Douglas has argued that rituals of purity and impurity impose unity on experience, offering a vision of “one single, symbolically consistent universe” whose boundaries of purity and impurity become

distinguishable through patterns of signs.\(^5\) In certain conservative cultures, bodily perfection symbolizes an ideal theocracy, and these cultures construct symbolic patterns and rituals in which elaborate purification procedures provide a measure of internal control against evolution or change. The Fourth Lateran Council established purification rituals through the penitentials with their intense focus on bodily purity and social taboo; penance, however, was preparatory to and inseparable from the eucharistic ritual of the Mass. Always an important subject in the writings of the Church Fathers, the Host grew to be “the single most important image to Christians from the middle of the thirteenth century onward.”\(^6\) The eucharistic bread thus emerged as the central symbol of ritual action in the late Middle Ages and eventually exceeded its liturgical function to become a civic and sociological symbol.\(^7\) How medieval English devotional literature transformed this symbol to verify a historiography of Jewish ritual murder and a practice of persecution both before and after the expulsion of 1290 reflects a changing notion of the place of Jews in medieval Christian eschatology.\(^8\) The term “persecution literature,” as defined by René Girard, is an appropriate referent in a historically contextualized study that casts the “Priess’s Tale” as a semifictionalized account of real violence, often collective, told from the perspective of the persecutors, and therefore influenced by characteristic distortions.\(^9\) In writing this tale, Chaucer had to make the same kinds of authorial decisions as did such writers of persecution literature as Thomas of Monmouth, who composed the life of William of Norwich, or Guillaume de Machaut, who describes the persecution of the Jews in his *Judgement of the King of Navarre*. Because they purport to historical veracity, each of these narratives requires to be explored in its local historical, cultural, and political context.

By contrast with those in France, Jewish communities in England lacked full assimilation and a long historical presence. While it is beyond my scope to make claims for a “distinctive” brand of English anti-Judaism, it is relevant to point out that England was severe in

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implementing the fourth Lateran Council's anti-Jewish legislation. English communities also displayed a purgative compulsion as early as 1234, when Newcastle upon Tyne expelled its Jews—an example followed by several other communities. No doubt the transmitted accounts of Jews crucifying children, some legitimized with shrines, gained further credence in England through the eucharistic mythology disseminated to the laity after the establishment of Corpus Christi as a universal feast by the early fourteenth century.

Nonetheless, eucharistic miracle stories in which the Host appears as a child were found in Western Europe long before papal promulgation of transubstantiation. A Jew first appears in a story from the Vitae Patrum that figures St. Basil. This Jew, who witnesses communion, perceives the host as a small child, "membratim incidi in manibus Basilii" (cut apart limb by limb in Basil's hands). Naturally, he converts after this experience. While Miri Rubin divides eucharistic miracles into three major groups in contrast to Dennis Devlin's four, both agree that combinations of various major types are common. Jews tend to figure centrally in tales involving punishment for eucharistic abuse or conversion after they witness an anthropomorphic vision of the Real Presence. It is not surprising that such stories grew in number in the thirteenth century as sermon exempla for the feasts of Corpus Christi and Easter—the two holy days that focus most specifically on the union of the Christian community in the Eucharist.

By the fourteenth century the images of the bleeding-child-as-Host and the child-as-Host had become pervasive in English manuscript illustration and vernacular literature. Both are complicated


11. Roth, p. 82.


14. See, e.g., illustrations of King Edward's vision of the Host turning into the Christ child (Cambridge University Library, MS Ee. III 59, fol. 21r) reproduced as fig. 116 in Camille and fig. 5 (p. 117) in Rubin. Also see Queen Mary's Psalter: Miniatures and Drawings by an English Artist of the 14th Century Reproduced from Royal Ms. 2 B VII in the British Museum, intro. by Sir George Warner (London, 1912), p. 245; Cambridge Fitzwilliam
images that resist oversimplification, for both Jews and Christians experience visions of such miraculous transformations. Sometimes writers construe the images as horrific punishment, dramatically demonstrating alterity, whereupon the unbelieving are converted. At other times such visions are depicted as a special gift of grace. Here I will propose two fourteenth-century sermon exempla that conflate the eucharistic symbol with images of Jewish ritual murder as visual analogues to Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale." Since the "Prioress's Tale" specifically rejects the possibility of Jewish conversion that is favored in literary analogues, an understanding of the child-as-Host motif may partially explain Chaucer's narrative determination. Such "miracles" affirm that Jews, despite their expulsion from England, remained essential to symbolic patterns which defined the very essence of community for medieval Christians. In the popular imagination, such symbols linked the role of Jews as desecrators of the Host with the pure, redeemed body of Christians, likewise symbolized through the Host, and in the process recalled ritual murder discourse and narratives. Images of literalistic Jews tormenting the Host to discover its composition thus became integral to the ideological campaign for unquestioning faith and social purity that accompanied the Fourth Lateran legislation. Such images, however, also reflect a displaced anxiety about the credibility of this particular doctrine.

In this medieval iconography of a deviant reenactment of the Crucifixion, the laity were exposed simultaneously to the power and danger of Jews, conceived both as a symbolic presence in narrative and as a historical English reality. Jews simultaneously threatened the credibility of the notion of a pure society—a notion the Prioress celebrates—with their own disbelief and justified the same notion by their persistent presence in stories of purgation and renewal, of sacrifice and sacrament: the very ritual movement of the Mass. Mary Douglas has argued that the presence of pollution is integral to ritual in primitive cultures because it serves to ward off skepticism about the

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After elaborate systems of purification construct the connection between bodily purity and wholeness, rituals reintroduce pollutants to repeat the process of purgation and renewal.

The first exemplum I will explore is found in British Library Manuscript Royal 18 B. xxiii, which dates to the fourteenth century. The first thirty-seven folios of the manuscript are in Latin and contain thirty-five sermons, as well as some ecclesiastical statistics and theological commonplaces of interest to a clerical owner. The remainder of the manuscript is primarily in English, with the exception of folios 157v–158v, which contain notes on religious subjects in Latin and English. The English section contains fifty-five sermons, including three from John Myrc’s Festial, and two exempla without sermons. As the scattered remarks and directions to preachers indicate, the majority of the sermons in this manuscript were designed to be preached to the laity and thus contain topical allusions to popular doubt about the doctrine of Transubstantiation and the deception of the senses—a common theme in Corpus Christi sermons. Both of the Easter sermons in the English part of the manuscript address the doubts of Christians through stories about Jews, but one sermon does so specifically by evoking images of communal purgation, transubstantiation, and ritual murder. Its incipit, “qui manducat meam carnem et bibit meum sanguinem, in me manet et ego in eo” (who eats my flesh and drinks my blood, dwells in me and I in him), exemplifies the kind of eucharistic exposition that was often borrowed by preachers for the new feast of Corpus Christi. Since it lacked a lengthy textual tradition, preachers needed to be resourceful. The theme proclaims the sacramental power of the Eucharist to unite all individuals into the mystical body of Christ—an appropriate message for Easter, when many of the laity underwent yearly penance and received communion, as directed by the Fourth Lateran Council. This powerful and mystifying sermon exemplum, written in both Latin and English, illustrates the need for individual communicants to be pure but expands this directive to include communal purgation, which in turn employs eucharistic and ritual murder images to dramatize the process of bodily purgation and sacramental healing. Only the Eucharist can heal the physical body, polluted and desecrated by the Jews, by absorbing it into the mystical body of Christ.


The story begins in English with a Christian swearing lifelong brotherhood to a Jewish friend. Unaware of his peril, of his friend’s stronger allegiance to “pe nacion of Iewes,” the Christian informs him that he is going to church to be shriven and receive the Easter eucharist. The Jew urges his friend to make a “covenand” to return immediately after Mass (p. 64, line 2). The Christian keeps his promise, but when he returns he finds “a grett companye of Iewes taryinge and abydynge” for him (p. 64, lines 3–4). Binding his hands and feet, the Jews demand: “Tell vs in what place of þi bodie þou hast putt hym,” meaning the Host (p. 64, lines 15–16). In a furious attempt to lay their hands on the Eucharist, the Jews cut the Christian in half, probing his intestines and diaphragm for the precious mystery. At this dramatic point in the story, the scribe ceases to write in English, and he retells the narrative from the beginning in Latin. He thus describes the Jews discovering “medio [erat] corpus Domini in forma panis” (in the middle was the body of the Lord in the form of bread), but, blinded by a fierce light, they are unable to flee (p. 65, lines 9–10). When Christians exit from the Mass that is taking place nearby, they witness the blinded Jews and the mutilated body, but they are privileged to see something else as well: “Invenerunt talem Cristianum mortuum et cor suum per medium cesum et in medio corpus Domini in forma panis. Et postea mutauit se in forma pueri longitudinis vnius cubiti et stabat super cor et dixit, ‘Ego sum panis viuus qui de celo descendii. Qui manducat meum panem et bibit meum sanguinem in me manet et ego in eo’” (They came upon this dead Christian with his center cut through the middle and in the middle the body of the Lord in the form of bread. And after this he changed into the form of a boy of a single cubit’s length and stood above the center and said, “I am the bread of life who descended from heaven. Who eats my bread and drinks my blood dwells in me and I in him” ) (p. 65, lines 13–19). The Christians witness the miracle of transubstantiation in the form of the child who embodies and enacts the text for the sermon, reminding them that they are members of this mystical body. When the child is transformed back into the Host, the mutilated body is miraculously healed, and all of its organs return to their former positions. This miracle, in turn, brings about the healing of the communal body, for the Jews are compelled to convert, an action that is vividly symbolized by the graphic transformation of the severed corpse into a whole body. The Eucharist is thus certified as the symbol

of the inviolable body of Christ and his community, purged of its polluting elements—its unbelievers.21

While the vernacular rendition enables us to explore how the Jews were demonized in eucharistic exempla, the important details provided in the Latin rendition allow us to gloss the exemplum’s theology and clearly identify the sacrificial nature of this brutal act with the Crucifixion. In the Latin, for example, the manuscript states, “Et quando alto missa finibatur, Cristiani veniebant ab ecclesia” (And when the Mass was finished, the Christians were coming out of the church) (p. 65, lines 11–12). Thus the restorative miracle in the street coincides with the sacrifice of the Mass inside the church. I suggest that this parodic Crucifixion operates narratively both as a miracle and as a grisly analogue that would be instantly recognized by an audience who, like Chaucer’s pilgrims, were familiar with legends like Hugh of Lincoln’s. Furthermore, the community represented in the exemplum mirrors the audience for the sermon, a fourteenth-century English audience about to participate in the sacrament of the Eucharist, having been purged historically of its Jews and spiritually of its sins in preparation for Easter.

Although purgation in this story takes the form of conversion, there is often a sense that Jews perhaps cannot be assimilated fully into the body of Christ, despite their conversion and baptism. The Vernon Manuscript contains a Corpus Christi exemplum that reflects upon such uncertainty.22 As in the previous story, a Christian has befriended a Jew and, when he hears the Mass bells ring, asks his companion to wait outside the church for him. Growing impatient at his long wait, the Jew begins to “grucche” and decides to enter the church himself to see what is causing the delay (p. 175, lines 136–40). As he enters the church, the Jew sees the priest consecrating the Host, which he registers as a horrific spectacle:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Pen sauh he atte weuede} \\
\text{Pe Prest holde ouer his heuede} \\
\text{A feir child, I-woundet sore} \\
\text{In flot, in hond; 3it sauh he more} \\
\text{Pat per nas noupur wyf nor mon} \\
\text{Of alle pat in pe Chirche were on} \\
\text{Pat ne helde vp here hondes and sat on kne;} \\
\text{And from pat child sauh come fle}
\end{align*}
\]


The Jew is astonished and grieved to witness the multiplication of the wounded child and is also appalled at what appears to be a Thyestean feast. The conclusion he inwardly arrives at in hiding, “A grisly lyf haþ Cristen Man!” has a ring of good sense—until he disputes in a literalistic and broadly jesting manner with his Christian friend, wondering how he can eat at all for three days after ingesting so much meat!

When the Christian explains that he has not eaten earthly food that day, the Jew becomes narrowly contentious. In the end, the Jew agrees to convert, not because he believes a whit of the miraculous, but because he wishes never to see this gruesome ritual again. I would rather be a Christian, claims the Jew, “Pen euere seo such a siht aȝen” (p. 177, lines 200–203). The Jew is comforts to learn that, when he is a Christian, the “fflesch mihte so ben hud / wiþ-inne þe bred” (p. 177, lines 195–96). Rather than implying that the Jew can be assimilated into the Christian community, this exemplum illustrates how the bleeding child, the guilty legacy of his people, will haunt him until he truly believes in the sacramental power of the Host. “Þy kun made hym dye, / Perfore al blodi þou hym seeȝe,” explains the Christian (p. 177, lines 197–98). Faith shelters the believer from the physical ramifications of such sacramental eating—perfectly good theology advanced by canonists who regarded the believing reception of Christ’s invisible body as a test of faith. Thus, communicants who embraced the dogma of the Real Presence ingested the body of Christ without having to experience “horror at the blood.”23 Although the exemplum’s author presents this eucharistic story as a miraculous conversion, the Jew’s acceptance of the Real Presence is hollow. In turn, however, his inability to believe makes more exemplary the Christian’s theological conviction.

It would be historically misguided to distinguish rigidly between such exempla and what passed for reality—the phenomenon of ritual murder that medieval writers made credible through their creation of a narrative tradition.24 When medieval English Catholics encountered eucharistic exempla about Jews who saw (or could not see) bleeding children in the Host, did they distinguish the mystery of transubstantiation from ritual murder? Since the images have shared

roots in the Crucifixion, it would be peculiar if they had.\textsuperscript{25} While cultic anti-Judaism manifested itself in a variety of ways, it always sustained a symbolic connection between the desecration of the Eucharist and the search for a transcendental or apocalyptic state of social purity. Thus, Innocent III complained to the Count of Navarre as early as 1208 that Jews sold the residue of their crushed grapes to Christians, who unwittingly used this contaminated matter to make wine for the sacrament of the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{26}

The "Prioress’s Tale" provides one of the richest conflations of eucharistic images in late medieval persecution literature, in part because of its Marian context. While the relationship between Marian devotion and late medieval anti-Judaism requires a great deal of further study, scholars have thus far largely seen it as a strange paradox, reflected in Chaucer by the gentle Prioress’s stylized telling of an especially horrific Marian miracle.\textsuperscript{27} Several scholars have contributed to our understanding of the Prioress’s anti-Judaism by exploring the ritual murder and blood libel charges in England and the exegetical or figural treatment of the Jews in the tale.\textsuperscript{28} In my opinion, Louise Fradenberg’s recent analysis of cultural purity in the “Prioress’s Tale” offers the most probing exploration of its mutual sadism and elegance. Fradenberg notes that “the conflation, in the child-host miracle, of Incarnation and Passion . . . insist[s] upon the superior virtue that is beyond sight and flesh.” Like the Host itself, which transcends fragmentation of the Real Presence, Mary’s miraculous conception of Christ symbolizes fleshly integrity in the mystical body—a symbol visible only to believers; accordingly, many miracle stories feature Mary as “miracle-worker upon the bodies and body of the faithful.”\textsuperscript{29} Whatever the meaning of the “greyn” in Chaucer’s miracle, it is Mary’s role to transform corrupted or abused flesh into wholeness.

I noted earlier the connection between the Nativity and eucharistic devotion. This linkage between the Christ-child as Eucharist and


\textsuperscript{26} Simonsohn (n. 1 above), p. 93.


\textsuperscript{29} Fradenberg (n. 18 above), pp. 85–89.
Mary as the perfect vessel for the Incarnation is best demonstrated by the type of medieval statuette called the *Vierge Ouvrante*, one of which, in Durham Cathedral, was known as "Our Lady of Boulton." But it is also common in English medieval manuscripts to find illustrations of the Nativity in which Christ appears as a child upon an altar. Scholars have shown that Middle English writers imaginatively meshed images of the infant Christ with eucharistic feeding in their poems and plays as they explored the affective mysteries of the Incarnation and the Real Presence. Communal meals, like those the Prioress is depicted sharing with her fellow pilgrims in her "General Prologue" portrayal, have sacred analogues in the Eucharist—the meal that defines the boundaries of community, publicly confirming the brotherhood of sinners in one redemptive act.

That act is initiated by the abbot at the end of the "Prioress's Tale," where it becomes both crux and spiritual center. If we interpret the final, solemn, ritual action of the tale—the resting of the slain child "biforn the chief auter, whil masse laste"—as a eucharistic sacrifice familiar to its audience through the bleeding-child-as-Host motif, we may better understand the underlying symbols of Chaucer's tale. The abbot's sacramental removal of the grain from the clergeon's tongue effects a transformation from flesh to spirit, sacrifice to sacrament: "And he yaf up the goost ful softly" (p. 163, line 672). This miracle, eucharistic in nature and symbolism, draws the whole convent together in tearful wonder and adoration. When they remove the "martir" from his "beere" before the great altar, they enclose his small, sweet body "in a tombe of marbul stones cleere" (p. 163, lines 680–81). This image evokes a standard form of the tabernacle that reserved the Real Presence after celebration of the Mass, binding believers in the collective memory of Christ's own tomb and resurrection. Above all else, the effect of the story on the pilgrims attests to the potency of such sacramental images: they are uniformly silent in "wonder" (p. 164, line 692). At this moment, they unite as a Christian community bound commensally in the mystical body of Christ.

Why, then, is the Prioress assigned the telling of an anti-Judaic tale? Primarily, I would say, because her vision of an ideal theocracy,

30. Camille (n. 6 above), pp. 231–32.
33. "The Prioress's Tale," in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2d ed. (Boston, 1957), p. 163, line 635. All quotations from this tale are from this edition; subsequent references are incorporated in the body of my text.
symbolized by the inviolable body of Mary so eloquently described in her prologue, undergirds an authoritative medieval notion of community. Her tale is about purgation and hieratic order. It appropriately follows the “Shipman’s Tale” in Fragment VII (Group B2), a tale that revels in disorder, carnality, and deception. When the Hoost swears “by corpus dominus” (p. 160, line 435), he gives the Prioress an occasion to transform blasphemy into “laud” and impart to the pilgrims the same sense of awe that Mary creates within the tale through the purification of community and miracle of the clergeon’s body. The Prioress offers her audience univocal rather than polysemous symbols and imaginatively conjures a world without tangible ambiguities and bodily corruption. Like the audience envisaged for the sermon exempla, the pilgrims participate in a miracle of wholeness. But, as I noted earlier in citing Douglas, skepticism requires the routine reintroduction of pollutants in ritual or narrative, thence to be castigated and communally expelled. This dynamic, in significant measure, accounts for the Prioress’s anti-Judaism.34

As we have seen in the eucharistic sermon exempla, spatial ambiguity proves endangering to the Christian community. Religion helped to formulate a sense of “urban space, time, and community” in the Middle Ages—a social construction promoted in the anti-Jewish legislation of the thirteenth century requiring visible distinctions between Christians and Jews.35 The “Prioress’s Tale,” like the sermon exempla, formulates space symbolically to present a particular vision of the body social. At the beginning of the tale, the city is fragmented, for despite the positive connotations of a street “free and open at eyther ende” (p. 161, line 494), a Jewry exists in the midst of the Christians’ quarters. Its location confuses the boundaries of pure and impure and renders the innocent vulnerable—children in the “Prioress’s Tale” and the unsuspecting laymen who befriend Jews in the sermon exempla.

The bodily imagery that dominates the tale, from the image of Christ’s sinless conception to the Jews’ wardrobe, sensitizes the audience to connections between civic and personal purity, both spiritual and physical. Only the Jews in this story are noted as needing to “pur-gen hire entraille” (p. 162, line 573). Like the chamber pot inscribed with Hebrew letters which figures prominently in the Grünewald Altarpiece’s Nativity tableau, the wardrobe or pit in the “Prioress’s Tale” is the symbolic antithesis of purification through the sacrament of baptism. Late medieval anti-Jewish tales express “something more than the symbolic decay of the Old Law” in their focus on Jewish carnality

and defecation; they deliberately link “metaphors of pollution with unconverted Jews who stubbornly continue to reject Christ.” Thus, the peculiar late medieval Marian miracles in which Jews thrust statues of the Virgin down the privy and cast murdered Christian children into pits are as open to figural readings as the less obscene image of blind Synagoga but add a new dimension of carnality to the demonization of Jews.

Accusations like those in the anti-Jewish eucharistic exempla imply a Jewish earthboundness that inhibits conversion, trapping Jews in literalism and carnality. In Augustinian polemic, therefore, Jews remained witnesses to the tragedy of unbelief, their “dispersion and degradation . . . emphasizing the deplorable wretchedness of their error.” Although set in a contemporary late fourteenth-century townscape, the “Prioress’s Tale” evokes this larger historical continuum. Images of the Slaughter of the Innocents converge with the procession of maidens before “the white Lamb celestial,” offering the reassurance of a divine plan. Part of this plan, according to Augustinian eschatology, was the conversion of the Jews at the end of time. The “Prioress’s Tale,” however, participates in late medieval anti-Jewish ideology by revoking the policy of toleration and presenting Jews as active agents of Satan who require extermination rather than passive acceptance. The “wardrobe” or “pit” into which the Jews cast the clergeon, a secret place in their own ghetto, which in turn becomes the center of the Christian town, is a shocking detail not because it exists in the tale’s analogues, but because Chaucer has chosen to include this darkness in his poetic reworking. The privy is akin to the slash in the clergeon’s throat—a desecration, a wound, a shadowy reminder of the frailty of human flesh in contrast to the miraculous cleanliness and holiness that Mary and the clergeon represent in the Prioress’s imagination.

This focus on cleanliness, particularly in regard to bodily functions, clearly marks the description of the Prioress in the “General Prologue.” Chaucer’s description is one of an elegant, fastidious lady, but it conforms as well to the elongated, ethereal images of the Virgin in fourteenth-century English manuscripts based upon aristocratic standards of feminine beauty. While the Prioress’s eating habits have often been discussed as those appropriate to a romance heroine, I see them as equally (and not mutually exclusively) indicative of the bodily purity, even disembodiment, that typifies one strain of Marian

38. See, e.g., the illustrations of Marian miracles in Queen Mary’s Psalter (n. 14 above).
devotion. The cleanliness of Mary and the incorruptible nature of her body figure centrally in monastic and scholastic discussions concerning her role in salvation history.\(^{39}\) Similarly, the Prioress amazes her fellow travelers with her ability to ingest food without the human messiness, inconvenience, or animal appetite that remind us of human bodily need. Given that eucharistic piety was largely a female concern by the end of the thirteenth century, it seems natural that Chaucer should assign a narrative of Marian miracle with eucharistic overtones to a woman. As Caroline Bynum has shown, recorded eucharistic miracles indicate that obsession with spiritual feeding was typical mainly of holy women in late medieval Europe, and stories about their miraculous eucharistic experiences almost instituted “a female genre.”\(^{40}\) Bynum explains that “the association of Christ’s flesh with woman was reinforced in iconography, where Mary had a place of honor on eucharistic tabernacles. The modern historian Dumoutet has described a number of late medieval instances in which a figure of Mary actually is the tabernacle in which the consecrated host is reserved. . . . Retables tended to associate the consecration with the Incarnation by depicting together the officiating priest and scenes of the Annunciation or of Mary with her baby.”\(^{41}\) The “Prioress’s Tale” offers its Christian audience a conflation of sacred images linking Mary’s body—a sealed vessel—with eucharistic symbolism, implying that individual purity and communal wholeness are only possible in a closed society.

Thus the Christians in the “Prioress’s Tale” who congregate in the street “In coomen for to wonder upon this thyng” (p. 163, line 615) behold the child much as those in the sermon exemplum behold the disemboweled corpse. Faced with the reality of bodily fragmentation, with communal pollution, they must purge the Jews from their midst. Chaucer’s Jews, having attempted to destroy the body of the Christian community, are punished by starvation, dismemberment, and hanging. The procession that follows their punishment, in which the people carry the small martyr through the city streets to the abbey, takes on a function much like that of the Corpus Christi ritual. Miri Rubin notes that such ritual processions have two identifiable geographical functions: the demarcation of territories and the linkage of them; in England, particularly, the linking function is more common.\(^{42}\) Moving from the Jewry to the Abbey, from the geographical

\(^{42}\) Rubin (n. 2 above), pp. 267–68.
center to spiritual center, the procession in the “Prioress’s Tale” re-
claims all territory as Christian, restoring the desecrated space.
While scholars have tended to see pilgrimages and Corpus Christi
processions as uniformly employing bodily symbolism, however, the
“Prioress’s Tale” reminds us that all symbols are also open to personal
interpretation—even in the Middle Ages.43 The Prioress presents us
with an authoritative sense of order restored through a liturgical sym-
bolism taught in sermon exempla by the very clergy who assume sac-
erdotal power at the end of her tale. The Prioress warns the pilgrims
that “it is but a litel while ago” that Hugh of Lincoln was slain by Jews;
“synful folk unstable” must be continually vigilant (p. 164, line 687).
Like the Canterbury pilgrims, Chaucer’s audience lived in a post-
expulsion world, presumably purified of the Jews, with their dark
secrets and foreign influences. The English vernacular Corpus Christi
sermons I have discussed concern themselves more with Christian
doubt and the control of multiple interpretations of the Eucharist
than with actual Jews. Similarly, while the Corpus Christi processions
may have had a unifying intent encoded in their symbolism, historical
records and medieval texts themselves reveal many different perspec-
tives on Host symbolism depending upon gender, education, econom-
ics, and other variables which contribute to the cultural construction
of meaning. Theoretically, Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims ought to
represent the Christian community, motivated by the same reverence
in a shared spiritual enterprise. Instead, they are marked by personal
and professional envy, competition, irreverence, and venality. The
“Prioress’s Tale,” like the eucharistic sermon exempla, offers an image
of ritual that reaffirms doctrinally powerful directives for its audience.
Believe in what you can’t see, it promises, and you may experience a
miracle. The “wonder” in the Canterbury Tales (p. 164, line 692), acces-
sible to every pilgrim, consists in a momentary suspension of everyday
consciousness—wonderful because of the huge variety of everyday
motives and meanings that emerge in these pilgrims’ tales.
Like the elevation of the Host, the instant of perfect adoration and
sacramental wholeness celebrated by the Prioress and her fellows
is brief. She offers them her vision of a purified community—one
which, to judge from Chaucer’s serial portrayals in the “General Pro-
logue,” her own religious community fails to realize. That the pilgrims
respond to her narrative as they do testifies to the power of this at
once sacramental and social vision and to the success of its dissemina-
tion after the Fourth Lateran Council. In our own historically situated
and conflicted responses, we should not underestimate the appeal of
such a narrative to a late medieval English audience.

43. Ibid., pp. 269–72.