Medieval Women and Their Objects

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Following her long-standing interest in “The Prioress’s Tale” and her work on women’s roles in fourteenth-century ecclesiastical culture, I offer this essay to Carolyn Collette in gratitude for her long friendship and in admiration for her prodigious scholarship and warm humanity.¹ My aim in this essay is to offer a fresh analysis of the tale’s three central objects: the animated corpse of the little clergeon; the Marian antiphon “Alma Redemptoris Mater” he sings in life and in death; and the mysterious “greyn” the Virgin places upon the clergeon’s tongue after he is murdered. As Caroline Walker Bynum demonstrates in Christian Materiality, for medieval Christians, at moments of miraculous change, material objects were thought to hold a dual and paradoxical ontological status: they exist as physical entities within the natural order and at the same time they transcend that order.² It is with Bynum in mind that I consider the paradoxical materiality and transcendence of the miraculous objects in the tale. This transcendence makes itself felt in the tale’s long-standing dual status in Chaucer criticism, as both a satire on the flaws of a materialistic and worldly nun and a devout and moving expression of the Prioress’s spiritual piety. I end by suggesting a parallel between the “greyn” placed in the mouth of the little clergeon and Chaucer’s placement of the tale in the mouth of a fictional medieval woman, his enigmatic Prioress.

Bynum writes that “the eruption of the holy in matter was more than mere change. Whether in statues that spoke, hosts that turned suddenly to blood, or relics and images that induced fertility or health, the bursting forth of life could be understood as matter triumphing over exactly the change it represented. A miracle was, after all, a miracle, as Caesarius of Heisterbach underlined. At the moment of miraculous change, objects bodied forth tran-
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scendence and eternity as well as materiality. The miracle the Prioress envisions in her tale is a clear instance of Bynum’s point: although gruesomely murdered, the little boy sings and speaks as if he were still alive. The material object of his corpse has an audible spiritual life. It is contra naturam as we know nature, but holy in its own nature. It thus has a dual ontological status, existing within the natural order and at the same time beyond it.

An extension of the boy’s body is the mysterious “greyn.” At least partly a physical object, it is also a nonmaterial or spiritual object as well. Because its removal causes the boy’s supernatural singing to cease, it appears to function as a magical on-off switch within the natural order of things. As for the antiphon “Alma,” it is reasonable to say that singing—with or without words—is, in performance, more an activity than an object. In “The Prioress’s Tale,” however, “Alma” has a text as well as a tune, and a material and agential presence throughout. It is part of the narrative. To the little cleric as he hears it, the song is only a lovely succession of pitches, the notes of a Gregorian chant transposed in the Sarum practice to the fifth mode of C. They can only be sounds to him since he does not know the meaning of its Latin words. For him in his innocence, the hymn is entirely a sonorous object, by which he honors the Virgin. As performed over and over in the tale, however, when performed for those who understand its words, the song becomes heavily loaded, either positively or negatively depending on who is listening. Christians in and out of the story hear its words praising the Virgin prayerfully and piously, but those same words offend the Jews of the quarter grievously, inciting them (with Satan’s help) to murder.

This aspect of interpreting “The Prioress’s Tale,” in which our perception of the text depends essentially on where we stand, has been wittily described by Helen Barr in her 2010 “Rabbit and/or Duck?” essay on the tale, which convincingly shows how the historical context that a modern reader chooses to use determines the implications of the text itself. She takes orthodoxy and its Wycliffite criticism as her illustration of “oppositional inferencing” and notes that “One reader’s duck is another reader’s rabbit. But even to polarize thus is an oversimplification. For a reader possessed of both gestalts, the image shifts from one to the other, so much that the defining lines disappear altogether, leaving perhaps just an area shaded gray.”

Let us look more closely at Chaucer’s poetic text to see how the dual status of “Alma” and the “greyn” fits with the other features of the tale that have been read with oppositional inferencing. While “Ave Maria” or “Salve Regina” are more familiar to worshipers today, Audrey Ekdahl Davidson
has shown that “Alma Redemptoris Mater” was widely used in the liturgy of the Sarum Rite in Chaucer’s day, though not prescribed for the Mass of the Holy Innocents (December 28). Her recovery of its music following the Sarum rite is accepted by the Variorum Edition of “The Prioress’s Tale.” I reproduce her score as figure 3.1, and I quote and translate the text here:

Alma redemptoris mater, quae pervia caeli
Porta manes et stella maris, succurre cadenti,
Surgere qui curat populo, tu quae genuisti
Natura mirante tuum sanctum genitorem,
Virgo prius ac posterius, Gabrieli ab ore
Sumens illud Ave, peccatorum miserere.

[Kind mother of the Redeemer, who the open door of heaven
Remainest, and the star of the sea, help [your] fallen
People who try to rise: thou who gave birth,
While nature marvelled, to your own Begetter,
Virgin both before and afterwards, from the mouth of Gabriel
Receiving that “Ave,” have mercy on [us] sinners.]

(Latin text from Davidson, 459; my translation)

For Chaucer’s audience, this antiphon would have registered as beautiful and well-suited to the tale. The opening fourteen-note melisma on “Al-,” with its soothing motherly crooning, reinforces the meaning of “Alma” as “kind, nourishing” and the entire opening phrase, complete in itself as an invocation, is carefully crafted. The text of the antiphon is a petitionary prayer very like the “Ave Maria,” but it also emphasizes the paradoxical miracle of the Virgin Birth, both by the phrase “Virgo prius ac posterius” and musically in the wordplay of “tu quae genuisti . . . tuum sanctum genitorem” with its surprising B-flat in “geni-to-rem.” We cannot know if Chaucer chose “Alma” instead of “Gaude Maria,” the most frequently sung antiphon in other versions of the miracle, to avoid the latter’s pugnacious anti-Semitic conclusion, or to exculpate the little clergeon and his narrator the Prioress, or for some other reason. Indeed, as Andrew Albin writes, “the tale’s refusal to supply more than the Alma’s first three words suggests that we be wary of granting its text too much explanatory power, especially in a tale where few if any of its characters are capable of construing the song’s Latin to begin
Alma redemptoris mater

Al-ma re-dem-p-to-ris
ma-ter, quae per-ein-a cae-li Por-ta
man-non, Et stel-la ma-ri-sis,
suc-cu-re ca-de-ni ei sur-gere qui cu-re
po-po-lo. Tu-ques gen-u-is-it

Na-men mi-sar-iu, tu-sun sanct-un

gen-ni-to-rem: Vir-go pri-me

ac pos-su-rion, Ga-bri-el-is ob e-re

su-mens Il- lud A- ve, pec-ca-to-rum mi-se-re-re.


Fig. 3.1. Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, "Alma Redemptoris Mater: The Little Clergeon's Song," Studies in Medieval Culture 4, no. 3 (1974), p. 466. Reprinted with permission.
with... Instead, the tale repeatedly emphasizes that it is the aural quality of the song, not its semantic content, that entrances and overpowers.”

The aural qualities of the “Tale” itself have features similar to the antiphon. The Priorress in fact concludes her Prologue by praying to the Virgin, “Gydeth my song that I shal of yow seye” (487). The poetic texture of the twenty-nine stanzas of the narrative is not musical, of course, but its repetitions and vocalic smoothings are features common to prayer, especially the Psalms. Chaucer’s repetition of simple little words (like “litel”) and rhymesounds, especially in the three b-rhymes of the rhyme royal form, occurs with unusual frequency and intensity. For an ample illustration, too lengthy to quote, see particularly lines 495–529. Notably, the b-rhymes of those five stanzas are limited to the rhyme sounds of “-ere” and “-age,” a stunning poetic choice that cannot be accidental. These reduplicative strategies go hand in hand with the overuse of doublets of clichéd diction like “day to day” or “yonge and tendre” and redundantly doubled verbs of expression like “singen and to rede” (450), “sing and crie” (553), or “construe and declare” (528). Barr calls these and similar effects “Marian overwording,” in which “a dense cluster of vocabulary returns again and again to a single issue above the strict demands of the events of the story.” She goes on to say, “This Marian devotion is bolstered with liturgical reference... the tale appears overwhelmingly orthodox. Worship of Mary is reinforced through a narrative poetics that foregrounds affective devotional piety.”

It is a tour de force of expressive form, as Carolyn Collette emphasized in 1980.

One effect of this overwording style of piety, however, is a dilution of meaning. A single example must suffice:

His felawe taughte hym homward prively, 
Fro day to day, til he koude it by rote, 
And thanne he song it wel and boldely, 
From word to word, acordynge with the note. 
Twies a day it passed thurgh his throte, 
To scoleward and homward whan he wente; 
On Cristes mooder set was his entente. (544–50, my emphases)

In the b-rhymes here the “note” goes through his “throte” by “rote.” If we say only those b-lines, they will make sense on their own with just one omission and substitution in the first line:
Fro day to day he koude it [all] by rote
From word to word acordynge with the note
Twies a day it passed thurgh his throte

This gives the narrative sense of the whole stanza, and even in this reduction there are doublings in each of the three lines. Such an emphasis of sound over sense can be seen as positive or negative depending on what context we use as our vantage point.

The hymn itself is balanced in sound and sense, so that music and meaning reinforce each other. Davidson points out that the triple notes on G in “surgere” and “Gabrielis” produce musical balance and support the idea that we fallen people may rise upon Gabriel’s “Ave.” The melodic line at “manes” echoes “Porta” almost exactly, for emphasis: You, Mary, remain our door to heaven. There is a subtler sense in the quite exact musical repetition of “cadenti” and “mirante”: We, in our fallen nature, marvel at the Incarnation. The falling phrase at “cadenti” also mirrors the sense of its text, then tries to rise at the repeated G of “surgere,” only to fall again at “curat populo.” It is a thrillingly lyrical piece of orthodox devotion.

However, when we examine how “The Prioress’s Tale” presents the hymn, the rabbit begins to look like a duck. We never hear more of the text of the hymn than its “firste vers,” which the little clergeon gets “al by rote” (522). Twice it serves as the identifying title (528, 612), and three times it is quoted as the words he actually sings (554, 641, 655). In the three latter instances, it is prefaced by “O,” which does not occur in the actual antiphon. This usage aligns the first phrase of the boy’s song with the three famous apostrophes uttered by the Prioress as narrator (579, 606, 684). Within the context of devotional piety, both the “O” and the “Al-” signal “reuerente marueylynge and meke praysynge” as described in The Myroure of our Ladye, written for the nuns of Syon in the early 1400s. There, we learn that the attributes of the Virgin described in the hymn “O Trinitatis gloria” are such that we cannot really think them in our hearts nor fully express them with our tongue: “Therfore with reuerente marueylynge and meke praysynge ye begynne and say O.” Thus, while neither “O” nor “Al-” contains any semantic meaning, if we see a devotional purpose in their sonorous utterance, then both vocables convey genuine religious awe.

At the same time, the Myroure, which echoes Wycliffite strictures against liturgical excesses, follows St. Augustine in decrying the singing of the divine service for the wrong reasons:
There ys neyther syngynge, ne redynge that may please god of it selfe, but after the disposycyon of the reder or synger . . . they that reioyse them by vayne glory, or delyte them in the sweetnes or pleasaunce of theyr owne voyce, they please not god wyth theyr syngynge, but they offend hym, and please the fende . . . Therfore the more pleaunyte and fayrer that eny bodyes voyce ys, the more besy ought they to be aboute the kepynge of the harte in mekenes & in deuocyon, that yt may please in goddes syghte . . . Hereby ye may se how perylous yt ys to eny body to delyte hym other to hys owne voyce, or in the outwarde songe. For saynte Augustyne sayth in his confessyons, that as often as the songe delyteth hym more than the inward Sentence of the thynge that was songe, so often he knowledged that he synneth greuosly.19

“Alma” in and of itself, with its well-established place in the liturgy, is not to be criticized, any more than is the devout spirit of the clergeoun that moves him to sing it while alive nor the miracle that enables him to continue singing in death. But if intention is everything, as Augustine says, then the way the Prioress presents the antiphon, adding her own orotund “O’s,” and the way she stages its repetition in the development of the narrative, suggest that, from one contemporary angle of vision at least, the first musical phrase of the hymn could be seen to have only an empty beauty. To the degree that Chaucer makes the Prioress align it with her own apostrophic performances, there are grounds for seeing at least some criticism of her sensibility intended by Chaucer.20 From this angle of vision, her liturgical preoccupation appears to be mainly with the beauty of the song as she invokes it.

While Wycliffites might criticize this preoccupation as an empty vanity, poetry lovers and ontologists alike may be grateful that Chaucer wrote the two apostrophic stanzas that move the narrative to a higher religious plane where miracles occur:

O martir, sowded to virginitee,
Now maystow syngen, folwynge evere in oon
The white Lamb celestial—quod she—
Of which the grete evaungelyst, Seint John,
In Pathmos wroot, which seith that they that goon
Biform this Lamb and synge a song al newe,
That nevere, flessishly, wommen they ne knewe. (579–85)
O grete God, that parfournest thy laude
By mouth of innocentz, lo, heere thy myght!
This gemme of chastite, this emeraude,
And eek of martirdom the ruby bright,
Ther he with throte ykorven lay upright,
He Alma redemptoris gan to synge
So loude that al the place gan to rynge. (607–13)

The intensity of the imagery and the depth of feeling that generate these stanzas are interrupted by Chaucer’s calling attention to who speaks them: “quod she.” While that disruption distances us from the initial exclamation of line 607, the rest of that stanza hyperbolically reassures us that innocent blood crying out from a filthy privy (578) can be immediately converted to a pure song of praise in the procession of the “white Lamb celestial” in Apocalypse 14:1–5.

With this extended allusion, the narrative moves into an ontological hyperspace that combines the natural and the miraculous. The first two lines of the second stanza echo the opening of the Prioress’s prologue but with an important difference. Now it is God, addressed directly, who “parfournest” His own praise through the mouth of the innocent martyr, rather than it being “parfourned” by men of dignity and suckling babes. If “heere” in “lo, heere thy myght!” means “hear,” then God not only performs His own praise through the agency of the miracle, but He is also His own audience. In that case, the line points to the self-contained reality of the Godhead, a medieval notion dating back at least to The Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius. However, “heere” can easily be parsed as “here,” with “is” understood, in which case the lines draw a parallel between Psalm 8’s suckling babes and the miraculous song that concludes the stanza. Surely both meanings are present.

After the first exclamation, the rest of the stanza is all one sentence. First the lengthy appositives of the emerald of chastity and the bright ruby of martyrdom define the miracle not as a vile body but as the singing child’s spiritual qualities. Then comes the forceful word-order of line 611: “Ther he with throte ykorven lay upright.” The adverbial conjunction “Ther” locates him where he lies: not in heaven but still in the pit of the latrine. His “ykorven” throat takes on new significance coming right after the blood-red image of “the ruby bright.” The association of the two makes a single shocking image in the reader’s mind that expresses the paradoxical beauty of the child’s
martyrdom. This amalgamated image, typical of miracles that emphasize holy suffering of the body, is reinforced by the child lying face up, which appears to remain his position for the rest of the poem.22 Only in the next-to-last line of the stanza do we encounter the main clause of the sentence, “He Alma redemptoris gan to synge.” Because of the propinquity of lines 610–11, we can’t be sure if he sings through his mouth or through the fatal gash across his throat. That he can sing at all is such a miracle that, spiritually, the gash becomes a mouth, in effect.

The doubled apertures through which he may sing, like the double meanings of “heere,” suit the dual ontological status of the miracle. Although Chaucer draws extensively on the tropes of female devotional piety throughout the “Tale,” it is impossible for language to represent this miracle fully. Even the abbot, a close witness and auditor of the boy’s song in death, asks how he can sing “Sith that thy throte is kut to my semynge” (648, my emphasis), a line that expresses the uncertainty of human perception when confronted with transcendence. A miracle cannot be fully understood without full faith, and perhaps not even then.

However, with only a slight shift in perspective, the language here can also seem self-parodic:

And whan they hooly water on hym caste,
Yet spak this child, whan spreyn was hooly water,
And song O Alma redemptoris mater! (639–41)

The repetition of the when-clause could be regarded as a deliberately vacuous example of “Marian overwording,” and the close rhyme of “water” / “mater” can have an unfortunate jingling sound at odds with the wonder of the miracle. Yet miracles are by definition inexplicable by rational means and occur in a reality beyond our comprehension. So if one reads these three lines with a skeptical intention, of course they will sound slightly silly, and might have reminded a Wycliffite of the Myroure’s stricture on placing song above sense.

The rabbit/duck metaphor also applies when we consider the object of such a miracle in the eyes of the devout. Shannon Gayk has argued, from a modified thing-theory position, that the purpose of “The Prioress’s Tale” is to create wonder in its fictional and reading audiences, and she rightly emphasizes the ultimate unintelligibility of the miracle.23 Her argument leaves the purpose of wonder itself undefined. She notes with Bynum that many
collections of Marian miracles are didactic, and perhaps we could presume that the purpose of this particular Marian miracle is to increase faith and a commitment to a Christian life. Yet a Lollard rabbit (or is it duck) might just as well argue, as many Chaucerians have, that the purpose of “The Prioress’s Tale” is to create a strong affective response in which readers indulge in pious feelings for their own sake, as late medieval people sometimes did when dwelling excessively on the human aspects of Christ’s suffering. Again, we are left to choose, if we feel we must, between oppositional inferencings.

Gayk and Barr approach the text from different perspectives, but I concur with the conclusion they both reach: it is essentially impossible to arrive at a single definitive interpretation of the tale. This feature of the poem is especially well symbolized by the “greyn,” which, because it can mean so many things, remains opaque and itself perhaps not a symbol at all. It is the quintessential example of Barr’s gray area between the duck and the rabbit gestalts. The dead little martyr tells the abbot that he has been kept alive by the “welle of mercy, Cristes moorder sweete” (656) who bade him sing her anthem, which he does continually, thanks to the “greyn” she placed upon his tongue. Its ontological status as part of the miracle puts its identification beyond our understanding, but Chaucer could not have picked a more resonant or many-meaninged object to use in this context. As an agential object of holy ontology, however, it functions mainly as an on-off switch, as Gayk has said, connecting and disconnecting the human world as imagined in the “Tale” and the holy realm controlled by the Virgin.

Readers of the Canterbury frame-tale may find a parallel between the “greyn” placed in the mouth of the little clergeon and the placement of “The Prioress’s Tale” in the mouth of the Prioress. If so, a further critical question arises. We know that the tale was read by itself in other devotional manuscripts, without the Prioress’s Prologue or the two speaker-cues of “quod she.” It is possible that Chaucer composed it earlier as a separate poem before he added those cues and her Prologue, and before he wrote her portrait in the General Prologue. If first composed as a stand-alone poem, this might account for its availability for extensive oppositional inferencing. Once Chaucer has placed the tale in the unique context of the frame-tale pilgrimage, however, the three texts concerning the Prioress seem best understood as a male author ventriloquizing the language of female devotional piety, be it piously or satirically. The late Richard Osberg thoroughly documented the historical grounds for this view, and the idea of ventriloquism fits well with Chaucer’s frequent method of adapting the style of a tale to
the character of its teller. Whether the ventriloquizing is meant to invite Lollard criticism, or an assessment of the tale and its teller at once sympathetic and critical, must remain speculation. Perhaps all we can conclude is that Chaucer’s own object in the Prioress’s sequence is as indeterminate and elusive as in *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole.

Notes


4. Shannon Gayk discusses the “greyn” in “‘To wondre upon this thyng’: Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale,*” *Exemplaria* 22.2 (2010): 144–49. Her apt metaphor of it as an on-off switch appears at 148.


10. Davidson, “*Alma Redemptoris Mater,*” 465, notes that it is the only Marian antiphon that rises to the octave at the beginning.
11. Surprising because the flatted seventh is a tone “not proper to the mode.” Davidson, 461.

12. Boyd, ed., A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 10–11, prints the text of “Gaude Maria,” which ends with the line “Erubescat Judaeus infelix, qui dicit Christum Joseph semine esse natum” (“Let the miserable Jew be ashamed who says that Christ was born of the seed of Joseph”).


14. All citations of “The Prioress’s Tale” are from The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). I cite the tale by line number parenthetically in the body of the essay.


17. Line 655 could also be a reference to the title. More likely, it serves both purposes.


19. Ibid. 57–58.


21. Of course such metaphoric epithets can also be read from the Lollard perspective as ornate luxuries, comparable to the Prioress’s beads and brooch.

22. A familiar example is the intermingling of jewels and Christ’s blood on the Cross in lines 1–23 of The Dream of the Rood.

23. Gayk “‘To wonde upon this thyng,’” passim.


**Works Cited**


