Dark Chaucer: An Assortment
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Published by Punctum Books

Myra Seaman, et al.
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Suffer the Little Children, or, A
Rumination on the Faith of Zombies

Lisa Weston

In modern psychological parlance rumination names a
neurotic brooding, a persistent, relentless mental replaying of
a bad memory. In a more medieval context rumination is the
practice of “chewing over” a well-known and constantly re-
read text to achieve insight into the nature of God and the
universe. What follows here, in a way, a cross-temporal
rumination or (to alter the alimentary metaphor a little) a
worrying of a text that worries me.

The Prioress’s Tale’s narrative of the Litel Clergeon’s
death, partial resurrection and second death is a text that I for
one have never satisfactorily digested. The story is an (alas)
familiar medieval reflex of the blood-libel: a pious young child
is murdered by Jews as he walks the ghetto singing a Christian
hymn. But the lurid details of this narrative replay themselves,
I expect, in many a reader’s memory: the slaughtered child
hidden in shit; the frantic, weeping mother; the abbot,
astounded and confounded by the miraculous discovery of the
corpse; the outraged Christian crowd caught up in anti-
Semitic rhetoric and bloody vengeance; and especially, at the
center of it all, the grotesque body of the Litel Clergeon itself.
For it is not, after all, a living seven-year-old boy who sings: it
is, rather, his corpse that will not shut up. Nor is that corpse
merely moaning or shrieking: that it sings a hymn like O
Alma Redemptoris Mater, and might (theoretically) sing it
forever unless re-murdered, makes the dark grotesquerie of
the spectacle of this undead child all the more pervasive. Throat slit, as the Litel Clergeon says, “unto my nekke boon” (VII.649),¹ the child’s body serves as an eloquent witness to the power of God, yes, but hardly to anything like the mercy or love proclaimed in the hymn. For that ghastly singing body is stuck, zombie-like, forever on the verge of dying, a victim of violence producing future violence and propagating further victims.

“Zombie-like” is, of course, my early twenty-first century intervention into the late fourteenth-century text. Chaucer’s Litel Clergeon is by no means literally one of the shambling, decaying hulks that seem to be our monster-du-jour. Nor indeed even is he quite one of the mindless revenant slaves who, in Afro-Caribbean folklore and early films like Jacques Tournour’s 1943 film I Walked with a Zombie, horrify us because we might any of us fall victim (as they have) to malicious voodoo — at least if we (like them) venture into an exoticized and atavistic Haiti. Although by no means sundered from their (post)colonial origin, our current zombies are more fully at home in the contemporary (or near future) Anglo-American world. Our zombies — the zombies of films from George A. Romero’s seminal 1968 Night of the Living Dead through 28 Days Later (2002) and Zombieland (2009), of graphic novels like Robert Kirkman’s The Walking Dead (begun in 2003) and novels like Max Brodsky’s World War Z (2006), and even of the Center for Disease Control’s online Zombie Apocalypse Survival Guide² — have become, too, more the villains than the victims of their stories. Their voracious and mindless appetite turns those they do not completely devour into more of their own mutant species, swelling their legions of decaying flesh on the march. Indeed,

¹ All citations of Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale are from The Riverside Chaucer, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), by fragment and line numbers.
in our popular culture they hunger most specifically for brains: they consume, that is, the organ most symbolic of what distinguishes their victims from themselves. The original victim of the outbreak — Zombie Zero, if you will — may be a “pure” victim of a virus either natural or engineered, but any compassion soon fades into fear, or is at the very least complicated by that victim’s new role as a threat that must be exterminated. As the protagonist of the 2010 cable series *The Walking Dead* (based on the graphic novel) explains to a crawling torso that is severed (not at all neatly) at the waist, she probably didn’t deserve this fate. And he is sorry. But the most charitable thing he can do is to blow her brains out. Lacking any inner life beyond their instinct to consume, our zombies express our anxieties — sometimes about invasions and plagues of various sorts, political as well as biological; sometimes about conformity or mob violence; sometimes about our own mindless consumption and global scarcity of resources. The symbolic resonances are all the more fraught because (especially in each of these last instances) our zombies both are and are not our selves.

The Litel Clergeon is, of course, a zombie only by the most basic definition: one of the living dead, suspended between both life and death, and personhood and thingness, an object of both fear and compassion. And yet, despite the anachronism of my analogy, our modern pop-cultural obsession with creatures neither living not dead, neither fully part of our domestic present nor of some exotic place and time, can inform our reading and rumination of Chaucer’s text of a body similarly neither-nor and both human and thing, a body between categories. After all, for many today the Medieval period is itself inherently zombie-like, neither fully foreign nor domesticated, incompletely dead and past. And recent exhibitions like “Treasures of Heaven” (which has traveled between the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Walters
Art Gallery, and the British Museum) witness a modern fascination with the most characteristically medieval form of living death, the “quaint” and “weird” veneration through relics of neither/nor both/and dead saints and martyrs.

More significantly, perhaps, the Litel Clergeon’s elective mindlessness and denial of rationality even before his death is as dangerously fraught as that of our contemporary brain-eating Evil Dead, particularly in its ability to infect its world by exemplifying and provoking unthinking violence in the face of troubling uncertainty. As nameless as any Zombie Zero, the anonymous Litel Clergeon shows a devotion not associated with any understood faith per se so much as it is an artificially induced instinct. Having been taught by his widowed mother to say his Ave Maria and to venerate the Virgin, he does so to the exclusion of all else, learning the Alma redemptoris mater “al by rote” (VII.522), clueless as to what the Latin might mean. But the Litel Clergeon’s extreme reverence is a matter only of degree: even the older child who teaches him the song can only tell him that it praises the Virgin and invokes her aid on the day of our death. “I kan namoore expounde in this mateer,” he says; “I lerne song. I kan but small grameere” (VII. 535–536). Actively (or passively aggressively) ignoring the very lessons that might help him to understand the words he mindlessly but reverently repeats, and vowing to learn the hymn even though he should be beaten three times an hour for neglecting his studies, the Litel Clergeon is the more completely innocent and his faith is the more perfect because it is willfully and utterly unsullied by understanding.

To the Prioress the Litel Clergeon constitutes both an object of obsession and a model subject. Like the Litel Clergeon she sings her song to the Virgin, performing her “laude” (VII.455, 460) and praising Divine “bountee” (VII.436, 466, 474). Her ability, she demurs or maybe boasts,
is no greater than that of a year-old child, a child even younger (and therefore even more innocent of intellectual understanding) than the seven-year-old Clergeon. She aspires to be the saintly child who praises God even “on the brest soukynge.” (VII.458) She aspires, that is, to exceed her hero’s uncomprehending mindlessness: she aspires to intellectual zombie-nature. She desires, that is, a faith as “pure” as his, unencumbered by the complexities of ontological and ethical uncertainty, and as “innocent,” too, as untroubled by the moral responsibilities of thought. The Prioress’s inability to achieve that goal creates a dilemma: her willful narrative construction of this ideal faith depends fully on an even more willful choice of emotional over rational behavior — and on the instantiation of the most violent of regimes of control. For the Prioress, that the Litel Clergeon courts violence in his devotion by singing his Marian hymn as he walks through the ghetto only makes him all the more attractive as a hero. In the “logic” of the tale, perfect faith requires and implies perfect (mindless) victimhood.

The Prioress’s narration is peppered with effusive and all but ecstatic impositions of interpretation in the service of emotion and instinctive violence. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her repetition of the most lurid details of the child’s death: “I seye that in a wardrobe they him threwe, “ she insists,” whereas thise Jewes purgen hire entraille” (VII.573–574). She harangues her villains:

O cursed folk of Herodes al newe,
What may youre yvel entente yow availle?
Mordre wol out! Certeyn, it wol nat faile,
And namely, ther th’onour of God shal sprede.
The blood out crieth on youre cursed ded!
(VII.575–578)

Just as they replicate Herod’s ordering of the Massacre of the Innocents, so also must they replicate his ironic failure. If blood cries out, so does, quite literally, the child’s bloody body. Her images and her appeal to proverbial wisdom serve
to naturalize and make inevitable anti-Semitic violence like that which follows.

Her consequent construction of the child as a virgin martyr represents an incongruous confusion of hagiographic genres:

O martir sowded to virginitie,
Now maystow syngen, folwynge evere in oon
The white Lamb celestial, quod she,
Of which the grete evaungelist Seint John
In Pathmos wroot, which seith that they that goon
Biforn this Lamb and synge a song al newe
That nevere fleshly women they ne knewe.
(VII.579–585)

Her vision confuses the meaningful heavenly praise of the Book of Revelations with the meaningless song of the corpse. The lines also, of course, confuse the circumstances of this male child’s secret murder with the sexualized judicial torture and public execution of normatively female virgin martyrs.4 (Interestingly, a number of my students these days make the same cognitive swivel: perhaps because they live in a culture where child abuse by strangers is so often portrayed as child sexual abuse, they do not see this praise of the boy’s bodily virginity as entirely out of place. Some even assume child rape in this instance.) The Prioress’s further praise of “this gemme of chastite, this emeraude / And eek of martyrdom the ruby bright” (VII.609–610) prefigures the later management of the singing corpse as spectacle ritually contained by procession, mass and (after the child’s second death) his burial in a white

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4 The earliest exemplars of virgin-martyrdom, girls like Agatha, Agnes and Lucy, were (according to legend) denounced to Roman persecutions of Christianity by thwarted pagan suitors. Roman law did not permit the execution of virgins; before final death the girls are subjected to attempted sexual violation (both Agatha and the twelve-year-old Agnes were dragged to brothels) as well as exposure and gruesome torture (Agatha’s breasts are severed and Lucy’s beautiful eyes gouged out).
marble tomb. In the Prioress’s language the Litel Clergeon is already a relic, holy and unearthly matter, both dead and alive. His now silent body remains on earth a crystallized history of the violence inherent in his tale; his soul soars to the Heavenly Jerusalem envisioned by Saint John, where it shall sing forever.

Despite such valiant rhetorical efforts to decree a happy ending and to contain the tragic miracle (or miraculous tragedy) of the Litel Clergeon’s murder and partial resurrection, however, the universe of the Prioress’s Tale ultimately remains a dark and capricious one, a world as cruel and inscrutable as that of any twenty-first century zombie. It is a world defined by the emoticon pathos of bereft mothers and the schadenfreude of abused and murdered children. More, as much as in the world of any twenty-first century zombie, in the world of the Prioress’ Tale mindlessness defends against awareness of a cruel and ultimately inhuman universe. In contemporary horror tales that inhumanity may be that of Lovecraftian entities in deep space or of a godless military-corporate complex at home. In the Prioress’ Tale the inhumanity is exactly that of a God both immanent and distant, whose power is expressed in obscure hierarchies and motivations.

The tale is set in an anonymous town in a far off Asye (VII.488) even as it also evokes memory of Little Saint Hugh of Lincoln in the final stanza.5 This town is ruled by an anony-

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5 The body of nine-year-old Hugh was discovered in a well on 29 August 1255, a month after he had disappeared; under torture a local Jew admitted to killing the child, and was subsequently executed. Shortly afterwards, however, ninety other Jews were arrested and charged with involvement in ritual murder; eighteen of them were eventually hanged and their property confiscated by King Henry III. Lincoln Cathedral also profited from the erstwhile martyrdom, as pilgrims began to flock to the child’s shrine. The later date and the executions distinguish Hugh from a small group of mostly twelfth century English saints, William of Norwich (d. 1144), Harold of Gloucester (d. 1168) and Robert of Bury (d. 1181), all young boys
mous and apparently absentee lord, whose justice is administered by an equally anonymous provost. The abbot — “an hooly man, as monkes been or eles oghte be,” (VII.642–643) a telling ambiguity — pronounces the appropriate prayers over the singing corpse but cannot either explain or adequately contain the miracle and its aftermath. The most he can do is remove the mysterious greyne the Virgin had placed on the murdered boy’s tongue, and thereby silence the corpse, and then weep and fall prostrate on the ground before the bier.

Beyond these human rulers, the world is subject to cosmological control vested in the ostensibly compassionate Virgin and opposed in an almost Manichaean way by the malicious Sathanas. It is Sathanas, “oure firste foo, the serpent Sathanas” (VII.557), who out of his own inherent malignity incites the Jews to murder the Little Clergeon for his innocent hymn-singing, an act that he rhetorically inflates to a conscious attack on our laws reverence (VII.564). The language here ironically replays the primal Fall of Man, with Sathanas both tempter and representative of Law. But the Jews — a vague and (as ever in this tale) anonymous collective — do not act directly upon his urging with either visceral rage or legal outrage. Instead they hire a “homicide” (VII.367), a paid assassin. To the Prioress and the outraged Christian townspeople he may be “this cursed Jew” (VII.570), but although this phrase neatly collapses the agent and his employers, it cannot fully disguise the fact that his motive is money, not faith. Later, although the very existence of a ghetto in this town is underwritten by the Christian lord’s “foul usure and lucre of vilenye” (VII.491), when the child’s murder is discovered the lord’s provost responds to the mob by arresting not just the one killer but (all?) “the Jewes” and sentencing them to be drawn by wild horses and hanged. The specificity of the execution is typical of this narrative’s fascination with violence, but in this case it also reveals

whose unsolved murders were popularly attributed to Jewish ritual murder.
beneath seemingly simple (if not exactly innocent) emotional motivations a less palatable because more cynically calculating layer of economic self-interest.

It is, perhaps, to deny this political reality that the narrative offers up the Litel Clergeon as the perfect victim. His radical, Edenic innocence is, after all, oblivious to the fallen world of greed and homicide. A child, he cannot (and after his fortunate demise will never) know the adult world of authorities both secular and ecclesiastical, the world in which the Prioress (by reason of her office as much as her maturity) must operate. Unlike her, the child will never have to endure the world of knowledge, and therefore of sin and guilt. Childish innocence, preserved through his willful ignorance, makes him the ultimate martyr. To imitate and sustain this innocence the Prioress’s Tale deploys a pervasive and strategic denial. Sathanas and the Virgin, whose maliciousness and compassion are both recognizably (and understandable) human emotions, act within the tale itself. Behind them and allowing the conflict between them to play out, stands an inscrutable God even more effectively absent than the nameless town’s absentee lord. Denial of knowledge is the Prioress’ response to such a cosmos and such a God, a God who is inaccessible and, ultimately, unmoved by such things as either the child’s life or death or non-life. Or even by the purest and most innocent faith. And this last possibility is perhaps what the narrating Prioress takes most pains to deny.

In the face of such fundamental, denied realities, any reassurance about the Litel Clergeon’s purity, about his fortunate escape from the perils of adult sexuality, about his martyr’s crown, and his merited reception into heaven is futile. None of these “happy endings” can really redeem the horror of the divine revealed in a miracle that prolongs the child’s grisly non-life and provokes further tortures and judicial murders. That kind of horrifying miracle finally confounds both emotion and intellect. The singing corpse confuses categories and consequently disrupts all attempts, by emotion or intellect, to discern any sort of essential, ultimate Good.
In a world where corruption is rampant and where death and failure are so inevitable, the tale’s apparent anti-intellectualism, skepticism/distrust of authority, and its willful ignorance may represent the only (failed) way of remaining innocent. And that may be what we today find the most tragically recognizable in Chaucer’s text. Like the Prioress, we too require the Litel Clergeon’s suffering and especially his second death and transformation into an overcoded sign, something we can force to mean what we want (need?) it to mean. We too sometimes aspire to the faith of zombies. In the face of the latest disaster so luridly displayed on the evening news, some traumatized survivor is sure to give witness: “I still hope, because I believe in a benevolent God Who loves us.” The otherwise incomprehensible event is thereby given meaning: it offers an opportunity for faith and “proves” the existence of a paradoxically “cruel to be kind” God. But what if that God is too far beyond human emotions like love, too far beyond human labels like “benevolent,” to be intelligible? Be careful, the Prioress’s Tale suggests, when you pray to such a God. Because if you ask for a miracle, a sign from (and of) God, you might just get one.