

The Symbolism of the Pit in the *Prioress's Tale*: Jewish-Christian Disputes over the Virgin Mary

Sunghyun Jang

The University of Iowa

In the *Prioress's Tale*, Chaucer's version of the miracle of the boy singer, the Jews dump the body of the boy they murdered into a "wardrobe" (i.e. a cesspit), where "thise Jewes purgen hire entraille" (572-73). In her commentary on the tale, Helen Cooper remarks that this description of the pit is "gratuitous" and "reflect[s] most badly on the Prioress" (289). A few pages later, Cooper reiterates this point: "the definition of a cesspit is scarcely necessary" (292). Gratuitous and scarcely necessary? The Prioress's addendum to the cesspit, as we shall see, is crucial to understanding the function of the pit in the tale. The "wardrobe" is a pit into which the body of the child is discarded. But it becomes a site for a miracle of the Virgin Mary when the murdered child begins to sing the *Alma Redemptoris Mater* (i.e. "Gracious mother of the Redeemer") to her in response to his mother's seeking of him. That is to say, the pit, the scene of the Jews' heinous crime, emerges as a place where Mary proclaims her victory over the Jews, her chief enemies, who could not even bear to hear the boy singing a Marian

hymn. This victory is all the more glorious when we consider that the pit in which the Jews' excrement is heaped—the fact that the Prioress intentionally underscores—dramatically metamorphoses into a Marian miracle site. I see the symbolism of the pit as a key element of the story. The cesspit in the Jewish community, I will be arguing, functions as an arena for a bitter doctrinal dispute between Christianity and Judaism over Mary—specifically over her womb in which, according to the Christian theology, Jesus was miraculously conceived through the Holy Spirit when she was still a virgin.

Let me articulate this argument more fully. The controversy surrounding Mary's womb is at the center of Jewish-Christian polemical relations. Alexandra Cuffel writes in her *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* (2007): "Of all the stages of the incarnation in which Mary played a role, the one about which Jews and Christians became most exercised were the nine months of Jesus' fetal formation and nourishment in Mary's womb" (124). I suggest an analogy between Mary's womb and the privy pit in the *Prioress's Tale*. This analogy does not simply rely on the shape similarity of the womb to a pit. More importantly, I note interesting parallels between the Jewish cesspit being a site of Mary's miraculous intervention and medieval Christian polemics against Judaism over issues concerning Mary's womb. Whereas Christians venerated Mary's womb as a holy place where God became incarnate as a man, Jews refused to see the womb of Jesus's mother any differently from those of ordinary women, which they condemned as stinky, dark, and unclean places—just like a cesspit. For Christians, the purity of Mary's body was an absolute prerequisite for the divinity of her son, Jesus, and hence for their faith in him. In my view, therefore, the transformation of the pit from a filthy hole full of human excrement to a miracle site in the Tale represents Christian rejection of the Jewish idea that the pit-like womb of Mary is entirely unsuitable for God's dwelling.

My essay is divided broadly into two parts. In the first part, I will review the Jewish-Christian debates that raged over the Virgin Mary during the later Middle Ages, and examine how the Jews became—or, became known as—arch-enemies of Mary. On this subject, I would like to acknowledge my debt to Miri Rubin, the author of *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary*). The second part of my paper will be devoted to a discussion of the *Prioress's Tale*. My discussion will focus on how the analogy of pit/womb in the story renders it a polemic against Jewish views on Mary's body. In fact, the pit/womb parallel is not unique to Chaucer's tale. There are other Middle English Miracles of the Virgin in which a little boy is killed by Jews and thrown into a pit-like place: for example, "The Child Slain by Jews" and "The Jewish Boy," both of which are included in the Vernon manuscript. In these stories, the Jews throw the body of a child martyr into a "gonge-put" and a "hovene" respectively. These two Marian tales also draw an analogy between a pit-shaped place and Mary's womb. But I would like to stress that in comparison to the tales from the Vernon, the Prioress makes this analogy more obvious, and more meaningful, by adding a definition of the pit—that is, a place where "Jewes purgen hire entraille." This definition, which Cooper dismisses as gratuitous and unnecessary, actually leads us to identify a close link between the pit and Jewish condemnation of Mary's womb, and thus to understand the symbolic role of the pit in the Prioress's anti-semitic discourse.

To begin with, I will investigate how the Jews challenged Christian (Roman Catholic, to be precise) views on Mary. In *The Account of the Disputation of the Priest*, a Jewish tract from the tenth century that launches a polemical attack on Christian theology, a Jewish priest named Nestor writes to a Christian bishop:

I wonder about you that you are not embarrassed to worship him who dwelled in the oppression of the womb, close enough to hear his

mother's flatuses when she moved her bowels like any other woman, remaining in deep darkness for nine months. How can you say that any aspect of divinity dwells in such an ugly place? (qtd. in Rubin 75)

What this priest finds absolutely abhorrent about Christianity is an idea of the Incarnation, a God's taking flesh in a woman's womb, an ugly place shrouded in utter darkness as described above. Nestor the Jew continues to disparage a womb as being "close to the place from which the stench of excrement exists" (qtd. in Rubin 75). These depictions of the womb support my claim that the Prioress's narrative forms an association between Mary's womb and a pit, where, as she emphasizes, the Jews empty their bowels. I also want to point out that Nestor describes a womb using the image of *sheol*, a Hebrew word that is variously translated as "underworld," "abode of the dead," and "pit." This link of the womb with *sheol* (i.e. a pit) in Jewish thought made the idea of a God taking on human form within the womb wholly unacceptable to the Jews. Their repugnance at the womb finds expression in *A Disputation with a Jew, Concerning the Advent of Christ, the Son of God* (ca. 1106), too, a Christian polemical text by Odo of Tournai, a Benedictine abbot. In this tract, Leo the Jew, with whom the abbot engages in a dispute as to the Incarnation, condemns a womb as "the uncleanness of woman, the obscene prison, the fetid womb"—once again, a depiction connecting a womb to a pit (qtd. in Rubin 163). Moreover, Cuffel indicates that Jewish polemicists often replaced Mary's name with *hari'a*, a Hebrew term for excremental waste. The purpose of this grossly offensive pun was to dehumanize the mother of the Christian savior. To quote the words of Cuffel, "Lengthy, graphic argumentation designed to invalidate the Christian doctrine of the incarnation . . . has been reduced to a single word—*shit*" (130, emphasis in the original). To make a pun on different meanings of "shit," the Jews' rejection of the Incarnation as "shit" derived from their view of the womb as a place filled with the smell of

“shit”—that is, a place like a cesspit. Jews felt revulsion at the notion that the Messiah they had eagerly waited for would have gestated and grown in a woman’s uterus, and therefore did not acknowledge the divine nature of Jesus. This meant that they rejected the virgin birth of Jesus, a central doctrine of Christianity. From the Jewish point of view, Mary’s conception of Jesus needed no miracle, since he had a natural father.

In fact, many of Jewish polemical writings aimed to undermine the Christian doctrine of the virginal conception of Jesus; and part of their strategy for this was attacking Mary’s marital fidelity—that is, she was an adulteress. The most notorious example of such a diatribe against Mary was the *Toledoth Yeshu* (“family history of Jesus”), a pseudo-gospel that had begun to appear in its complete form from the tenth century and that was circulated widely in the medieval period. According to *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* (2005), this anti-Christian tract dismisses Virgin Birth as “the result of a rape or an abandonment by the father” (425). Some versions of *Toledoth Yeshu* claim that Mary was a *niddah*—a Hebrew term referring to a woman during her menstrual period—when she slept with a Roman soldier named Panthera and became pregnant with Jesus. Since Jewish law prohibits sexual relations with a *niddah*, i.e. a menstruating (and thus ritually impure) woman, Jesus’s birth was regarded as illegitimate from a Jewish perspective. For this reason, Jews insultingly called Jesus *ben ha-niddah*, the son of the *niddah*, or *ben zonah*, the son of whoredom or lust. The ultimate aim of *Toledoth Yeshu* is to deny Jesus’s claim to divinity by depicting him as a *mamzer*—a Hebrew word, often incorrectly translated as “bastard,” that refers to a person born as a result of prohibited relationships such as incest or adultery (See Rubin 58-59).

Other Jewish writings in the Middle Ages followed in the tradition of *Toledoth Yeshu* and disparaged Jesus as a *mamzer*. For example, Rabbi Kalonimos, a Jewish poet, wrote in his *piyyut* (a poem of lament): “The gentiles call their holiness which is a *sin of lechery* / Your chosen ones reject

the lineage of *the woman of lechery*" (qtd. in Rubin 165, emphasis added). In addition, when the Crusaders massacred the Jews of Mainz in 1096, Jewish maidens are reported to have hurled insults at Jesus in public before committing suicide. According to the Jewish chronicler, they called him "a bastard son conceived by a menstruating and wanton woman" (qtd. in Rubin 166). The chronicler also relates a story about Master David, a respectable Jew of Mainz, who vented his fury on the Christian crowd before he was slain: "Alas, you are the children of whoredom, believing as you do in one born of whoredom. . . . You, however, *descend to the deep pit*, to eternal obloquy, condemned together with your deity—the son of promiscuity, the crucified one!" (qtd. in Rubin 166, emphasis added). This curse merits special attention with regard to the *Prioress's Tale*, for the story enacts the curse by literally having a Christian descend into a pit, a *sheol*-like hole where he would suffer from "eternal obloquy." In this respect, the first half of the Tale presents itself, in Freud's terminology, as some kind of *wish fulfillment* of the Jews. Master David's death wish to throw all Christians into a deep pit, along with their savior who was actually a *mamzer*, finds fulfillment—though partial—in the story in which the body of a Christian boy is thrown into a privy pit. In summary, the disgust that Jews showed with a female womb—as demonstrated in their connecting of it with *sheol* or a pit—led to their wholesale dismissal of the key ideas of Christianity: the Incarnation and the Virgin birth of Jesus. To put it another way, these doctrines were incongruent with the Jewish belief that a womb is a dark, ugly place, filled with the fetid stench of excrement.

But at the same time, it should be noted that the Christian attitude toward a woman's womb was no less hostile than the Jewish one. With "essentially the same medical traditions and texts," Jews and Christians were alike in pouring invective on the womb (Cuffel 115). In particular, Christians found menstrual blood more repulsive than any other matter discharged from the womb. Richard Rambuss informs us that menstruation

was seen during the medieval period as “a postlapsarian marker . . . of female sinfulness,” as visible evidence to prove that women were more driven by sexual desire than men (83). The menses, Rambuss goes on to say, was thought to increase “feelings of lust”; and a woman was believed to take “twice the man’s pleasure in sex,” because “she both expelled seed and took it in” (84). It is also noteworthy that, as Bettina Bildhauer has observed, medieval texts tended to associate menstruation with monstrosity. It was often the case that scribes wrote *menstrum* (menstrual blood) in place of *monstrum* (monster), regarding the two words as being identical (91). Furthermore, according to Bildhauer, serious blood loss during a menstrual period was considered to be a common cause of “monstrous births” (90).

While regarding menstrual blood—and the womb from which it flows—with an intense loathing, medieval Christians affirmed the purity of Mary’s blood and body. According to medieval embryology, which was grounded on the discoveries of Aristotle and Galen, Jesus took his human flesh from Mary’s blood (See Cuffel 110). Therefore, the purity of Jesus’s body rested entirely upon the purity of his mother’s blood. As mentioned above, “monstrous births” were commonly attributed to excessive bleeding at menstruation. Not only menstrual blood, but female blood *per se*, as Cuffel has noted, was frequently “linked to disease, decay and uncleanness . . . which were seen as anathema in God,” that is, the consequences of original sin (113). By contributing to the formation of the fetus, female blood was thought to transmit the effects of Adam’s sin to all humans. In stark contrast to this corrupted blood of womankind, however, Mary’s blood from which Jesus’s humanity was derived, the Church maintained, was untainted by original sin. This meant that Mary did not inherit a sinful nature from her mother (Saint Anne) when she was conceived: the doctrine of her immaculate conception. And this belief in Mary’s purity from sin (and hence carnal lust) led to the formulation of another doctrine that she

remained a virgin for all her life, even after giving birth to Jesus. This doctrine holds that Mary's virginal womb was kept intact at the birth of Jesus. In other words, he passed through his mother's hymen, a physical mark of virginity, without rupturing it (Rubin 162).¹ As a result, Mary did not suffer from bleeding and pain in childbearing, and accordingly, was not obliged by Jewish law to practice purification ritual (Cuffel 123). The Church asserted Mary's perpetual virginity on the grounds that her womb never lost its integrity. As Carole Rawcliffe remarks, these Marian doctrines "set an unbridgeable gulf between" ordinary women and Mary, who was represented as "the pure and unspotted antithesis to Eve" (98).² Passionate devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary necessarily entailed the construction of anti-feminist discourses around the sinful descendants of Eve. Cuffel addresses the same point, too, saying that the twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed the emergence of "a theology of Mary's body that set her flesh above the corruptible impurity characterizing most human existence" (109).

The idea that Mary's body was sanctified and free of all the effects resulting from the Fall of Man has its origins in the writings of early Church Fathers. But it was in the late medieval period that this idea assumed great significance. This period saw not only the increasing popularity of Marian cults among the masses,³ but also the full

¹ These two Marian doctrines—the immaculate conception and the perpetual virginity of Mary—are not universally accepted outside the Roman Catholic Church. Protestant churches firmly oppose these doctrines and teach only Mary's virginal conception of Jesus.

² For a view of Mary as the Second Eve, see Clarissa W. Atkinson's *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (109-10). According to Atkinson, the Church Fathers presented Mary as "the Second Eve, whose obedience reversed the damage done by the disobedience of the first" (109).

³ For a discussion of Mary-worshipping cults in the later Middle Ages, see Ronald C. Finucane's *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England*, especially 195-97.

development of Mariology, the theoretical study of Mary. One of the major factors that caused the late-medieval Church to elaborate upon Marian dogmas was, I want to emphasize, Jewish disparagement of Mary. This is evidenced by Christian writers' propensity to make claims about Mary in the presence of Jewish disputants. Some of their polemical writings were based on the discussions that had really taken place between Christians and Jews, but it is notable that many writers preferred to accentuate their polemical points in imagined disputations with Jews. Christian polemicists needed Jews, whether real or imagined, as "sparring partners" (Rubin 75).⁴ For example, Odo of Tournai's treatise on the Incarnation, which I mentioned earlier, takes the form of a dialogue with Leo the Jew, a fictional character that the author invented. Odo exploits anti-semitic sentiment for polemical purposes by casting Leo as a disparager of Mary who makes condemnatory statements about her womb. In the following passage, the abbot rebukes the Jew and then defends the inviolacy of Mary's womb:

Confess, you wretch, your stupidity . . . The secret places of her blessed womb were the more holy, or rather the more divine, the more intimately divine mysteries grew there . . . What in all creation is more holy, more clean, more pure than the virgin from whom was assumed what God became? O womb, O flesh, in whom and from whom the creator was created, and God was made incarnate. (qtd. in Rubin 163)

Odo's affirmation of the purity and sanctity of Mary's womb (which directly relates to her virginal conception in his thinking) has two purposes: asserting the divinity of Jesus who was conceived in that womb, and thereby refuting Judaic views on Mary and Jesus, that is, Mary as an adulterous wife and Jesus as a *mamzer*. In Odo's tract, the use of a Jew as sparring partner proves highly effective in stressing the integrity of Mary's

⁴ For Rubin's discussion of "the use of a Jew as interlocutor" in theological texts, see her book (162).

sinless body. Moreover, Odo declares Mary's victory over her detractors at the end of his work by having Leo the Jew agree wholeheartedly with his argument.

Odo's presentation of his tract as an imaginary debate with a Jewish protagonist throws light on one of the crucial questions that the *Prioress's Tale* poses. When Chaucer composed the Tale, probably in the 1390s, there were no Jews around him, because all of them had been expelled from England in 1290 by order of Edward I. Their formal return was not allowed until 1657. What particular significance does, then, attach to the writing of an anti-semitic tale after the banishment of the Jews? Lisa Lampert's 2004 article on the Tale concludes that "it is in relation to Jews and Judaism that Christians continually negotiate what it means to be Christian" (100). Considering that veneration of Mary played a central role in medieval Christianity, Christian identity was defined and established in terms of Marian beliefs, which Jews deemed completely unreasonable. For Christians, therefore, confrontation with Jews over Jesus's mother was an occasion for their exploration of what it meant to be Christian. It mattered little whether this encounter was real or imaginary. The *Prioress's Tale* illustrates how heavily Marian devotion—an essential element of Christian identity—relied on the perception of the Jews as Mary's enemies, a perception that had been shaped by Jewish-Christian relations since the early days of the Church. As Rubin remarks, "Jews were deeply embedded in imagery and biblical exegesis, in liturgy, devotional practices and popular drama" (228). Lampert calls this construction of the medieval Jew "the hermeneutical Jew"—the Jew who is "implicated in the broader engagement of the *Tales* with questions of meaning, understanding, and authority . . . beyond the ghetto of the *Prioress's Tale*" (58-59). Hermeneutical representations of the Jews continued to provide, even after their expulsion from the country, a solid base for producing anti-semitic tales like the *Prioress's* as well as promoting practices of devotion to Mary.

As is the case with Odo's treatise, the *Prioress's Tale* uses the hermeneutical Jew with the purpose of celebrating Mary's triumph against Jews. This triumph, I would argue, brings a hermeneutic dimension to the privy pit. The significance of the pit in the Tale lies in the fact that main events of the story take place in it: the boy is thrown into it and reveals his murderers by singing the *Alma redemptoris*. As a result, the pit becomes a miracle site for Mary's intervention on behalf of her believers. Yet in relation to Jewish-Christian controversy concerning Mary, what makes the pit hermeneutically significant is that it represents Mary's womb. Not only is the pit similar to the womb in shape, but more importantly, its elevation to a Marian miracle site dramatizes Christian refutation of Judaic views on Mary's womb. The description of the pit as a smelly hole in the ground in which—as the Prioress strategically calls our attention—"Jewes purgen hire entraille" parallels a Jewish notion of the womb as a dark, filthy prison "from which the stench of excrement exists," to quote the words of the Jewish priest Nestor again. To Jews, the womb of a woman was a place like *sheol*, which is rendered into English as "underworld" or "pit." When Master David shouted curses at Christians before he was killed—"You descend to the deep pit, to eternal obloquy, condemned together with your deity"—he would have certainly meant *sheol* (i.e. underworld) by the deep pit. But it is also tempting to suppose that what David had in mind for the pit was Mary's womb, which evoked the image of a pit in the Jews' mind. In this respect, David's curse turns out to be a mockery of the Christian idea that God took on human flesh by being conceived in Mary's womb. He is actually saying, "You Christians, go back to the stinky womb where you claim Christ became flesh!" Accordingly, in the eyes of the Jews, the "litle clergeon" dumped in the pit in Chaucer's tale is representative of all Christians being condemned to eternal punishment in *sheol*. In light of the pit-womb analogy, however, we might say that the child symbolically entered the womb of Mary by being discarded in the cesspit—the womb

not as a bodily organ that arouses revulsion to both Christians and Jews, but rather as the holiest shrine in the world, a place where the greatest miracle, i.e. the incarnation of Christ, occurred.⁵

“The Jewish Boy,” a Vernon version of the miracle of the boy singer, also conjures up this image of the child in Mary’s womb. In this version, the Jewish father throws his son into a “hovene . . . [t]hat glemede as glowyng as a glede” in a fit of anger because the boy went to Holy Communion (90-91). The father thinks that the boy was burned to death in the “hovene,” the depiction of which reminds us of hell that is often taken to be the same place as *sheol* in the Old Testament. To put it another way, the Jewish boy is condemned to hell, or *sheol*, as punishment for having taken Communion. The Virgin Mary’s intervention, however, dramatically changes this image of the “hovene” as a place of hellfire:

The child sat there, bothe hol and sound,
 No nouht iharmet, hond ny her,
 Amidde the gledes of the ground
 As he seete in cool erber. (133-36)

It seems not far-fetched to suggest that this boy being intact in the flaming “hovene” conveys an image of the baby in the womb. The “hovene”

⁵ Odo’s celebration of Mary’s womb as the holiest place in which “divine mysteries grew” suggests, it seems to me, that medieval theology drew a close analogy between Mary’s womb and the Most Holy Place (or the Holy of Holies) of the Jewish Temple. The Ark of the Covenant, which was kept in the Most Holy Place, contained stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. By envisioning Mary’s womb as the new Holy of Holies, Odo replaces the Tablets of the Covenant, which represents the Old Law, by the worship of Mary – which, in Finucane’s account, emerged as “a more distinguishable feature in ‘official’ as well as ‘popular’ religion in Europe and England” during the later Middle Ages (195). Mary’s body itself became the dwelling place of God. Unlike the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, a historic building, this new temple is an imaginary one, constructed entirely from the emotional responses of the masses to Marian devotion.

parallels Mary's womb in particular, not simply because it looks like a womb, but also because the boy's miraculous survival, like the Incarnation, is a result of divine intervention. What initially appeared to be hell wherein a Jewish convert is doomed to eternal suffering transforms into a miracle site that recalls Mary's womb. The pit in Chaucer's tale and the "hovene" in "The Jewish Boy" undergo a similar change: from *sheol* (or hell) to Mary's womb, and from a loathsome place to a blissful place.

Turning back to the *Prioress's Tale*, this image of the child protected in Mary's womb, in my view, is reinforced by his joining the Holy Innocents—the male infants of Bethlehem slaughtered by King Herod when Jesus was born—after his death.⁶ This enrollment is anticipated when the narrator refers to the Jews as "cursed folk of Herodes" (574) and the child's mother as "newe Rachel" (627). By entering Mary's womb, the child is reborn as an infant whose human nature is not depraved due to original sin. To put it differently, the martyred boy is conceived again, immaculately, in the pure womb of Mary. The boy's being thrown into the pit symbolizes his immaculate conception within Mary's womb; and the freedom from original sin that is granted by this conception sanctifies him as one of the Holy Innocents, who, as the Prioress describes, are singing "a song al newe" (584) before "the white Lamb celestial" (580).

Given that the Innocents, according to the biblical narrative, are infants under two years old, it is interesting that these *infants* (meaning "unable to speak" in Latin) are described as *singing* anthems. The Prioress adds later in her story: "O grete God, that parfournest thy laude / By mouth of innocentz" (607-08, emphasis added). What is noteworthy here is that the praise coming from infants, who lack the ability to speak, is God's own performance. It is not that these children give praise to God of their own accord, and the same is true of the little clergeon in Chaucer's miracle

⁶ For the biblical story of the Massacre of the Innocents, see Matthew 2:16-18.

story. The Prioress has the boy memorize the first verse of the *Alma Redemptoris*—"he the firste vers koude al by rote" (81)—even before he learns what the hymn means from an older boy. The *Alma* hymn instills a deep sense of Marian devotion in the child's mind, despite his inability to comprehend Latin grammar. The boy singer from "The Child Slain by Jews"—another Marian miracle from the Vernon manuscript—also sings the *Alma* hymn, but what he actually sings is its English version: "Godus Moder, mylde and clene, / Hevene yate and sterre of se, / Save thi pople from synne and we" (24-26). This means that the boy from the Vernon story grasps at least what the hymn is about. He knows, it appears, the basics of Marian theology that the hymn teaches.⁷ The boy from the *Prioress's Tale*, however, possesses no knowledge of the Marian doctrines outlined in the hymn; these doctrines are far beyond his intellectual grasp. For this reason, the Prioress says that the hymn "passed thurgh his throte" (548), a passage illustrating the high intensity of the boy's "intuitive devotion," to use Cooper's term (294). This sense of spirituality appears consistent with what Lee Patterson identifies as "the theme of innocent ventriloquism—of mimicking a cultural form without understanding it" in his analysis of the Tale (510).⁸ The clergeon most clearly shows himself to be a ventriloquist when the sweetness ("swetnesse") of Mary pierced ("perced") his very soul so strongly that "[h]e kan nat stynte of syngyng by the weye" (555-57). Concerning these lines, Rambuss remarks that Mary makes the little boy "a kind of human host" through which the *Alma* hymn reproduces itself (88). In my reading of the Tale, the child's joining the

⁷ According to Anthony Bale, the *Alma* hymn nicely sums up Catholic doctrines of the Virgin Mary. In particular, the value of the anthem lies in its demonstration of "Marian devotion at its most basic . . . [which is] free of theological paradox or sophistication" (78). The *Alma* hymn perfectly matches the Prioress's emphasis on childlike piety.

⁸ Actually, Patterson discusses the theme of ventriloquism in relation to the Boy Bishop rituals. Concerning the Boy Bishop, see his footnotes 7 and 8.

company of the Holy Innocents completes this process of turning him into a host. When the corpse of the boy was lifted out of the pit, he is reborn, symbolically, from Mary's womb. The seven-year-old boy becomes a baby, who, in the Prioress's words, "kan unnethes any word expresse" (485). The boy has completely lost his capability for speech, hence literally an infant, and now is making only babbling sounds before the Lamb along with other infants.

The Prioress maintains, however, that this inarticulate babble is more than adequate to express devotion to Christ and his mother. At the beginning of her prologue, the Prioress says:

For noight oonly thy laude precious
 Parfourned is by men of dignitee,
 But by the mouth of children thy bountee
 Parfourned is, for on the brest soukyng
 Somtyme shewen they thyn heriyng. (455-59)

Here, the Prioress appears to place the same value on the devotional practices by "men of dignitee" and the babblings of a baby sucking at its mother's breast. But she gives priority to the latter soon, saying that: "Lady, thy bountee, thy magnificence, / Thy vertu and thy grete humylitee / Ther may no tonge expresse in no science" (474-76). In other words, no highly elaborate discourse (probably by "men of dignitee") is good enough to celebrate the virtues of Mary. The Prioress's comparison of herself to "a child of twelf month oold, or lesse, / That kan unnethes any word expresse" reveals that she considers linguistic incompetence to be something to emulate in Marian devotion. As Lampert remarks, the *Prioress's Tale* proposes "a model of Christian piety that is specifically unlettered and unlearned, associated with children in a time before speech itself" (81). For the Prioress, the "ventriloquism" that infants (i.e. those

incapable of speech) perform—or, are controlled to perform—qualifies as the most ideal form of worship to the Blessed Virgin.

This penchant for what is infantile that the Prioress shows in the Prologue explains, I would argue, why she enrolls the little clergeon in the company of the Holy Innocents (infant saints) in the latter part of her tale. That is to say, the Prioress needs the clergeon to return to an infantile stage in order to make him emblematic of childlike spirituality, which she deems a crucial component of Mariolatry, i.e. veneration of Mary.⁹ In this respect, it is significant that the *Prioress's Tale* brings down the protagonist's age from ten—as it is in most other retellings of the boy singer miracle—to seven years. Poised “on the margin between infancy and childhood,” according to Rambuss, the seven-year-old boy is presented as “a model of moral and linguistic innocence” (87). Although being able to speak, hence no longer an infant in its literal sense, the clergeon has a limited understanding of what he is singing because, as the Prioress stresses, “he so yong and tendre was of age” (524). It is therefore said that the Latin words of the *Alma Redemptoris* “passed thurgh his throte” twice a day. The reduction of the child's age proves insufficient to satisfy the Prioress, however. She aspires to a purer form of devotion to Mother Mary, a devotional performance that precedes any development of linguistic and mental abilities. With this end in view, the Prioress makes the boy conceived again in Mary's holy womb, which is the Jewish privy in my reading. Free from all stain of sin, the boy (now an infant in its literal sense) is elevated to sainthood, and by his mouth, God “parfournest thy laude.” In relation to this, it is worth noting that Virgin Mary in Chaucer's tale does not bring the boy back to life as in many of its analogues, e.g.

⁹ It should be also noted that childlike piety is one of Jesus's teachings in the Gospel. Jesus says, “Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3, KJV). The clergeon literally becomes a little child and ascends to heaven.

"The Child Slain by Jews" and "The Jewish Boy." A growing child does not fit with the Prioress's predilection for the childlike. She prefers to leave the clergeon in a perpetual state of innocence, innocence characterized by a lack of rational understanding. The little martyr remains a "gemme of chastite" forever (609).

In summary, the symbolic significance of the privy pit in the *Prioress's Tale* lies in its transformation from a filthy, stinky sewer—which the Prioress specifies as a place in which "Jewes purgen hire entraille"—to a miracle site where the Virgin Mary's victory against her Jewish disparagers is celebrated. The Prioress's spiteful remark on the pit—which may appear ridiculously gratuitous to some readers—makes this transformation look more dramatic. What is more, the remark helps us notice that the Prioress is drawing a close analogy between the pit and Mary's womb. Deriving from Jewish-Christian disputes about the status of Mary's womb, this analogy forms the basis of my contention that when deposited in the privy, the little boy, the tale's protagonist, enters the immaculate womb of the Virgin. The Prioress's penchant for the childlike, intuitive faith in Mother Mary does not allow the boy to return to his former, earthly life. Instead, he is reborn as an infant saint, the epitome of Mary's true devotee from the Prioress's perspective, and joins the procession of the Holy Innocents—a group of perpetual children who, unable to speak on their own, are ventriloquizing unstinting praise to Christ and his mother.

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ABSTRACT**The Symbolism of the Pit in the *Prioress's Tale*:
Jewish-Christian Disputes over the Virgin Mary****Sunghyun Jang**

My study examines the symbolic role of the privy pit in the *Prioress's Tale*. I note that Mary works a miracle in the privy where, as the Prioress emphatically states, "Jewes purgen hire entraille," and link this to medieval Christian writers' rejection of the Jewish notion that Mary's womb, like those of other women, was a dark, stinky, and filthy place—namely, a pit. Mary's intervention on behalf of her young devotee in the Jewish privy represents her victory over the Jews who have condemned her womb and hence Christ who was conceived in it. I maintain that the Prioress draws a close analogy between the pit in the Jewish ghetto and the womb of the Virgin Mary. When thrown into the pit after his death, therefore, the little child symbolically enters—it can be argued—the holy, pure womb of Mary. The rebirth of the child as an infant saint reflects the Prioress's penchant for childlike piety. In her view, the linguistic and intellectual innocence of young children should be admired and emulated in Marian devotion.

Key Words | Geoffrey Chaucer, Mary, Jews, Christian, Womb