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Chaucer's Canterbury Tales

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### Devotion and Aspiration With Chaucer's Prioress

Flawed religious characters in the Canterbury Tales are nothing unusual. Nicholas Watson notes that the tales are “dismissive of the ideals of the professional religious orders,” a fact which is plain to see in the majority of such portraits, prologues, and tales (100). However, where most of the other professionally religious characters seem to be singularly concerned with the ways in which their positions can be exploited for their own benefit without any concern for exhibiting sincere devotion, the Prioress is slightly different. It is a matter of debate whether she simply uses her status as a member of the religious life in order to serve her own worldly desires or if she actually possesses some authentic devotion (or at least inclination towards it), however flawed the execution of it may be. Ultimately, Chaucer's Prioress presents the reader with a portrait of a flawed Christian, as well as a deeply problematic religious leader. While her tale tells of pure religious devotion, the Prioress's own sincerity is less certain. Read together with her narrative voice in the prologue to her tale, the Prioress's characterization in the General Prologue promotes a skeptical reading of her own piety as well as her self-identification with her tale. While she is not an irredeemable character, nor is she much more flawed than most of the other religious figures, the Prioress nonetheless presents herself as a character that is not as sincere as she hopes to be.

In his article, “Refiguring Martyrdom: Chaucer's Prioress and Her Tale,” Daniel F. Pigg notes that the Prioress's portrait in the General Prologue “was probably written after the

*Prioress's Tale*" (65). For Pigg, this indicates a weaker connection between the General Prologue's portrait and the teller of the tale. However, the significance of the picture presented by Chaucer's ultimate combination of the portrait with the tale should not be dismissed. While on its own, the Prioress's prologue and tale read as sincerely devoted, if rather naïve or misguided, the General Prologue portrait reflects the tale in a different light.

In the prologue to her tale, the Prioress does not provide much insight into herself; rather, she quietly accepts her turn in the tale-telling – “‘Gladly,’ quod she, and seyde as ye shal heere” – and launches straight into setting the mood around her tale (Benson 208). Her tale's prologue is succinct and takes the form of a prayer rather than an apologia or an exchange between various pilgrims. While she uses personal pronouns and describes herself, the Prioress does not give us affirmations of her own character; rather, she tells what she is not, and what she is incapable of: “My konnyng is so wayk... I ne may the weighte nat susteene” (Benson 209). Her self-effacement is deliberate, yet this does not necessarily mean that it's falsely felt or wished for.

Her desire to shape herself as small, innocent or ignorant, and infantilized before “oure Lord” and “mooder Mayde,” in addition to being a particularly feminine expression of piety, also could be evidence of her aspirational desire to self-identify with the “litel clergeon” at the center of her tale (Benson 209-10). As Pigg notes, the Prioress's praise of the child, particularly in terms of his virginal status, is “an extension of her own station” (68). The Prioress's tale is both self-reflective and aspirational. Her tale tells of a condition of martyrdom in which the clergeon is deprived of life and dies in a state of virginal purity. Pigg argues that the character of the clergeon is an open character, with which the Prioress wishes to identify, and that this self-identification is clearly established in the tale's prologue: “The *Prologue of the Prioress's Tale* establishes a voice for the tale and allows the speaker to reconceptualize herself so that she may

enter the fiction in the form of the ‘litel clergeon’” (69). The fact that the child is not given a name opens him up for a variety of identifications. He may serve as a faith model towards which the teller and her listeners may strive, while also reflecting classic Christian martyrs and saints, the figure of Christ himself, or even the transubstantiated Eucharist. Thus, the Prioress’s tale not only indicates her own understanding and aspiration of her station, but, inasmuch as it is chosen for and directed toward her audience, it also is intended as a potential instruction or inspiration for her audience. Her tale is “an act of ritualistic devotion,” rather than just a story intended for entertainment (Pigg 70).

In such a reading, the Prioress sees her celibate withdrawal from the secular world as a reflection of the tradition of martyrdom, in keeping with the contemporary ideas surrounding monastic life (Pigg 67). The Prioress’s religious life is intended to be akin to martyrdom, but in a way of spiritual rather than physical death to self, in which the sacrifice is “hidden whenever the soul is eager and ready for suffering even if there is no open persecution” (Pigg 69). However, while the vague knowledge of the Prioress given by her self-effacing, liturgically-inspired opening prologue might leave room for such an interpretation, the portrait given by the pilgrim Chaucer in the General Prologue clashes with the image of a religiously consecrated woman who is prepared for serious, self-sacrificing suffering.

Between the very little that is told of her before the opening of her tale and her description in the General Prologue, there are some coherences. She is described as “smylyng... ful symple and coy,” which fits with her monosyllabic yet not antagonistic acknowledgement of the Host when he requests that she tell her tale (Benson 25, 208). Similarly, she is described as being rather delicate and unusually polite, especially in the context of her uncouth companions: “Hire grettteste ooth was but by Seinte Loy; And she was cleped madame Eglentyne” (Benson

25). To Chaucer's narrating pilgrim, the Prioress successfully affects the demeanor of a lady who is both childlike and dignified. Yet the narrator unwittingly gives away evidence of ways in which the Prioress's apparent piety may not actually be all so sincere. His observations of her careful attempts to "countrefete cheere Of coutre," the "smale houndes... that she fedde With rosted flessch," and her richly adorned dress betray her preoccupation with worldly status symbols, as well as her prioritization of such frivolous things above the things with which she ought to be concerned as a member of the religious community, ostensibly devoted to poverty and service (Benson 25-6).

The Prioress's fastidiousness with regard to her table manners and appearance are indicative of her similarly attentive concern for religious righteousness and propriety in approaching her tale. Just as her concern for her manners and appearance are so overwrought as to reflect how unnatural and socially aspirational they are, the prologue to her tale seems contrived and insincere, especially when read in the context of the General Prologue's description. Her social aspiration and religious aspiration are thus linked. Just as manners associated with higher classes signifies a haughty social standing in relative relation to those around her, the Prioress's insistence on conspicuously displaying her own piety indicates her self-centered desire to implicitly occupy a higher moral ground. Yet it is this very preoccupation that makes her words so insincere. The Prioress is a prime example of a person who is religious, but not spiritual. Perhaps similarly to her clergeon, the Prioress knows how to parrot the outward signifiers of devotion, but has not necessarily understood the meanings of them. However, whereas the clergeon internalizes the sacredness of his religious practice, even as he does not understand its full significance, the Prioress has not reached this point of conversion, and therefore continues to inconsistently proclaim devotion while living in a way that doesn't honor

the commands of such an otherworldly faith. The Prioress's evidence of her own faith, as much as we are given, is expressed through outward, worldly signifiers, such as her "ful semyly... wymphul" and her conspicuous pleas for humility (Benson 25). Ironically, her religious posturing serves to cast suspicion on the sincerity of her faith, rather than affirm it.

Particularly to a modern reader, the Prioress's virulently anti-Semitic attitude towards the Jews is potentially another proof of her lack of convictions consistent with Christian belief, although the degree to which this is part of a negative characterization of her devotion is questionable, considering the fact that Chaucer himself likely held similarly anti-Semitic views. And yet, there is something to be explored in the Prioress's treatment of the Jews, which can at the same time be interpreted as an affirmation of her faithfulness as well as an indictment against the sincerity of it. In terms of how the Prioress's attitude toward the Jewish community is to be read, "what has been at debate is the degree of Chaucer's irony and the extent of the Prioress's self-knowledge" (Hirsh 31). Returning to Pigg's commentary, he convincingly, albeit briefly, argues that the Jews are not necessarily to be viewed in terms of a characterization of an actual group of people, but rather "in terms of interpretive/hermeneutic strategies" (66). In such an analysis, which is consistent with the content and impulse of the tale, the Jews are not so much actual human beings as a scapegoated group symbolizing those who reject Christianity.

The resonances with Christ's Passion signify the Jews as not merely a differing religious group, but rather a sinful population diametrically opposed to the Christian mission. Given such a reading, the Prioress's hatred of the Jews is less clearly evidence of a failure of faith, since her loathing is motivated by an allegiance to her faith. Nonetheless, however, ultimately even this cannot justify her inhumanity in regards to the Jews, since her apparent desire (inasmuch as it is depicted in her tale) is not for their rejection of sin and conversion to Christianity. Rather, she

wishes for their destruction in revenge for the murder of the child: “‘Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve’” (Benson 211). The Prioress’s sense of justice is a worldly rather than a faithfully inspired one. Such an inclination is consistent with her characterization as a social climber, eager to show herself as superior, while at the same time implicitly suggesting the failures, both socially and morally, of others.

However, this is not the only way to interpret the Prioress’s attitude towards the Jews. The Riverside Chaucers references Alfred David’s more sympathetic view of the Prioress: “The piety is sincere but naïve; the kindness verges of sentimentality; the morality is the justice of fairy tale” (914). This interpretation grants some flexibility to the strictness of judgment with which the Prioress is evaluated, but even with this freedom, her case as a sincerely devoted believer is not strengthened much. Her tendency to view the world in terms of fairy tale characterization, morality, and justice distances her from the unsentimental realism necessary to possess and practice actual faith in the context of the world. Her mercy is directed only towards the blameless and pitiful, which for her take the form of small animals and little children, rather than the flawed, sinful human beings in service to whom Jesus sacrificed his life: “She was... so pitous She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde” (Benson 25). Yet such an attitude, which gives mercy only where it is most easy and obviously warranted while condemning “torment and... shameful death” to those who are sinful does not benefit one whose “soul is eager and ready for suffering” on behalf of her faith (Benson 211; Pigg 69). And yet, as John C. Hirsh notes, “Empathy with innocent and pathetic suffering is... a hallmark of late medieval devotion,” and religious texts instructing in affective meditations similar to the one delivered by the Prioress were “enthusiastically received,” despite the humility which they encouraged readers to practice (38). In itself, the Prioress’s practice of affective piety

is not necessarily evidence of insincere or misguided religious faith. Rather, it is the narrator's unsuspecting observations of the Prioress's straining toward worldly affirmation that makes her inclinations towards the performativity of affective piety suspect.

Hirsh suggests that the insincerity and inappropriateness of the Prioress's aspirational, worldly expressions of piety are somewhat mitigated by her ignorance, although not completely: "the woman will hardly be an authority on religion," therefore, according to Hirsh, there is justification for viewing her with some sympathy (31). Indeed, as embarrassing and offensive her social strivings and sanctimonious attitudes may be, the Prioress is certainly not irredeemable. As with other flawed yet redeemable characters, the pilgrim Chaucer describes her physical appearance positively, noting her beauty (Benson 25-6). The description simultaneously proves her observance of worldly standards of beauty and courtly-style status as well as her redeemable character, consoling the reader with the affirmation that she possesses some qualities worthy of praise, even if they're not as deep as one might hope.

Additionally, the description of her in terms of the typical physical characteristics of a romance heroine indicate that she is, or potentially could be, worthy of the "reverence" towards which she strives (Benson 25). While her current aspirations "to ben holden digne of reverence" are precisely what preclude her from warranting it, the implication is that she already possesses at least some of the qualities that inspire respect and honor, and she has the potential to warrant such responses (Benson 25). However, first she must become disinterested by such worldly honors, and orient herself towards purely spiritual goals, rather than seeking the affirmation of the world.

However, this potential conversion remains as an open question. The "extent of [her] self-knowledge" remains a mystery, and the possibility of her redemption rests on this unknown

answer (Hirsh 31). Given the discrepancy between the description of the Prioress's lifestyle and her prayerful proclamations of helplessness and humility, readers are justified in taking her narration with a dose of skepticism. From the evidence given, it seems that the Prioress has no intention of altering her lifestyle in order to be more authentically convicted in the faith that she proclaims. Rather, she attempts to have the benefit of both the acceptability and renown gained by adhering to the upper class standards of the court, as well as the reverence and moral superiority attached to the appearance of holiness. In such a split desire, she is quite ordinary and authentically human, although not quite authentically Christian.



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