

Chaucer's Prioress and the Ladies Of Romance

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I

Amongst Chaucer's pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales, the Prioress holds a special place. People in general tend to think that nuns must be complete strangers to the ways of the world; or that they must lead an isolated cloistered life and must never direct their thoughts or feelings towards worldly aspiration. Chaucer's Prioress seems to defy this cold belief in a charmingly human and dignified manner. She is not only a respectable pious nun, but a woman too with all that follows of feminine foibles and venial weakness.

Her pilgrimage with such undignified characters like the Miller, the Cook and the Summoner has aroused a great deal of controversy. Her manner, her speech, her dress have all resulted in ambivalent reactions towards her. Is she truly religious, or is she merely imitating the superficiality of fashionable ladies of romance? Critics' views have been varied.¹ N. Guildford, for instance, thinks it is, at first, difficult to realize that this fine lady "is a member of a religious order, who has vowed to put aside all worldliness and consecrate her life to thoughts and acts of religion alone. Her mind is absorbed in many other things than religion."⁽²⁾ W. Benjamin believes that the prioress's motives "are mixed of both religion and worldly aspiration. She went on pilgrimage to catch once more a glimpse of the world."⁽³⁾ To Emile Legouis, she is

some sort of a religious coquette "mettant de la coquetterie jusque dans sa devotion." ⁽⁴⁾ S.S. Hussey describes her as a charming representative of high society, full of romantic pretensions. ⁽⁵⁾ G.G Coulton Sees her (and her companion nun) as a "pair of aristocratic pussy-cats on a drawing room hearthrug." ⁽⁶⁾ In general, she is seen to have in her not only "immortal but very mortal longings." ⁽⁷⁾

What the above criticism fails to see is that the Prioress is never meant to be a pattern nun, or an ideal. Chaucer is by no means depicting an ideal – or a caricature. It seems out of place therefore, to try to judge her by the ordinary standards, as it is equally impossible to judge her harshly. She has something childlike and innocent about her and Chaucer's attitude, even when he writes of her with sharp criticism, is gentle, kind spite of the satiric thrusts at her worldliness and "fashionable pretension." Chaucer teases his Prioress in a way that would not be immediately apparent except to a contemporary who would appreciate certain traits in her that would seem out of place in modern times. indeed it is difficult to find nun with so many privileges as the Prioress but it becomes less surprising and quite understandable if we read into the history of nunneries in the middle Ages. It is necessary to understand what manner of women took the veil in them, and from what social classes were the nuns drawn and for what reason did they enter the convent.

Medieval English nunneries were essentially "aristocratic institutions." They were the refuge of the gently born, and were almost entirely recruited from among the upper classes, as Eileen Power explains:

Nuns were drawn from no lower class; poor girls of the lowest rank-whether the daughters of artisans or of country labourers – seem never to have taken the veil. A certain degree of education was demanded in a nun before her admission and the poor man's daughter would have neither the money, the opportunity, nor the leisure to acquire it. ⁽⁸⁾

Because nuns in Chaucer's day were almost always drawn from the upper classes, it seems fitting that the portrait of the Prioress should follow that of the knight, for instance, and his attendants. "This gracious gentlewoman" , as Eileen Power says, "probably began life as a dowryless daughter, and, as in countless similar situations in the Middle Ages, the convent then proved to be a not unhappy solution to a perplexing economic problem."⁽⁹⁾ Undoubtedly, many nuns must have taken the veil because of a true vocation, but "it would seem that a large majority did so because it was the only possible life for them."⁽¹⁰⁾ Most probably Madame Eglantyne became a "nun because her father did not want the only career for a well – born lady who did not marry."⁽¹¹⁾

It is thus to be safely assumed that Chaucer's Prioress has an aristocratic background: a lady of importance, attended by three priests and a nun, spoken to with great respect (notice how the host, Harry Bailey, addresses her with utmost courtesy), wearing fine clothes keeping a pet and taking pains to 'countrefete chere of court'. No wonder she has many

of the characteristics of the ladies of romance and of the court.

To begin with, she is 'ful symple and coy'. In describing her as such, Chaucer has used the very words that belong to medieval romance. Every lady who is eulogized for her charms is endowed with simplicity and coyness (denoting modesty) ⁽¹²⁾ – notwithstanding the fact that these qualities fit the description of a nun as well. The Prioress resembles the fair ladies of romance not only in that she is 'ful symple and coy' or that she bears the flower-like name of Eglantyne, but also in that she has certain physical characteristics which were used to describe every heroine of romance:

Hir nose tretys, hir eyen grey as glas,
Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed,
But sikerly she hadde a fair forehead,
It was almost a spanne brood, I trow,
For, hardily, she was not undergrowe.

Joune Lowes has pointed out that in the literature of romance heroines are introduced by exactly the same words: the same Grey eyes, the fair smooth forehead, 'tretys' nose and soft red mouth and the same flower-like name – Eglantine.⁽¹³⁾ Besides, the Prioress's other characteristics of the ladies of romance and of the court are her excellent table manners and her fine clothes and ornaments:

At mete wel ytaught was she with alle,
She leet no morsel from her lippes falle,
That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.

As to her dress:

Ful fetys was was hir clock, as I was war.
 Of smal coral about hire arm she bar ,
 Apeire of bedes , gauded al with grene,
 And thereon heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
 On which her was first write a crowned A ,
 And sfter Amor Vincit Omnia.

In describing the table manners of his Prioress, Chaucer sums up the chief points of etiquette which a medieval lady must always have attempted to acquire. As to her dress, It is true that the Benedictine rule provided that nuns were to be poorly garbed; but they were to have, like the monks, better garments when they went travelling.⁽¹⁴⁾ It was difficult to prevent the nuns from adopting secular modes as long as long as they mingled feely with secular women. Hence the bishops' war against fashion in the cloister was in vain. this connection with the outside world, a world, a world of fashion and romance perhaps explains why the Prioress was carrying such expensive beads – i.e. the rosary.⁽¹⁵⁾ the more controversial issue however is the medal with the inscription 'Amor Vincit Omina'. As Lowes wonders: "which of the two loves does 'amor' mean to the Prioress? The earthly or the celestial "?⁽¹⁶⁾ Chaucer does not explain. Being a religious the Prioress must have been thinking of celestial love which after all must conquer all other loves. The medal itself as an ornament might betray a naïve interest in the Prioress's personal appearance; but this is only because a woman's vanity is everywhere, among the rich and the poor, the religious and the secular.

Not only in their clothes did medieval. nuns seek to "enliven existence" after the manner of their lay sisters, the fashionable ladies of romance, but in another custom: the keeping of pet animals. we their

the custom was in vogue or whether the Prioress's 'smale houndes' were an indication of her need "of some object upon which to lavish a natural human affection, "⁽¹⁷⁾ Chaucer seems to object to it. He must have been aware of the many poor people in the Middle Ages who have never had or even never had or even saw 'rosted flessh, or milk and wastel breed'.

The Prioress's oath by St. Loy is another trait that links her with the fashionable world. John Manly believes that the Prioress swore by St. Loy merely because the name was fashionable. It has become so when the countess of Pembroke, one of the greatest ladies of the day, gave an image of St. Loy to the high altar of Grey Friars and that this church was the fashionable church of the time.¹⁸ This might be the case, bearing in mind the Prioress's background and her contact with the "ladies of the day ". St. Loy however is also the patron saint of all travellers.

It might seem strange to modern readers to know that Prioress took proper part in the service of her convent 'Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne; / Entuned in hir nose ful semely' - something that would again connect her with sophisticated airs; but in doing so she was only following the requirement of the day. as Eileen Power tells us: " the requirement seem to be that the nun should be able to take part in the daily offices in the quire for which reading and singing was essential. "⁽¹⁹⁾

We have to yet to mention the Prioress's French:

And French she spak ful fair and fetisly
 Afetr the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,
 For French of Parys was to hire unknown.

Here too she is thought to be taken up with the fashionable. But it was essential for her, as a prioress, to speak some sort of French, for the visiting bishops issued their "unjunctions in French throughout the fourteenth century."⁽²⁰⁾

This then is Chaucer's Prioress : a pleasant and amiable character in spite of her imitations of the polite behaviour. Her manner, dress and behaviour are all courtly . Chaucer has depicted a true to type character . one find it difficult to agree with Mathew Browne who claims that the Prioress was affecting "courtly manner and had usual false sentiment of over-accomplished women in any age ."⁽²¹⁾ Her position in life and her being an important person, the head of her convent, who enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom both to her convent and to the outside world, required this kind of attitude which also accorded with her feminine and coquettish nature . was she religious, or was she merely a lady of romance in a nun's dress ? more quaintly, as A. Hoffman puts it: " What kind of woman is the prioress, and what kind of prioress is the woman " ?⁽²²⁾ Chaucer does not tell us. It is obvious from the way he presents the prioress that he was more interested in emphasizing her human qualities which in their turn have made her dedication to the religious life more significant and perhaps more heroic. It is this combination that keeps her alive and human, not just a prototype.

When the Prioress was called upon for a table, she "laid her other femininities aside, forgetting her little vanities in grave dedication to her them."⁽²³⁾ In other words, here we find a different Prioress – one whose spiritual qualities overpower her worldly ones. This is clear from the way she begins her story – by an invocation to the Blessed Virgin:

O mooder Mayde , O Mayde Mooder free!
O bussh unbrent, brennyng in Moyses signte.
That ravyshdst down from the Deitee.

This invocation establishes "the mood of pious exaltation " in which the tale is both told and heard.

The source of her story has not been fully discovered. It was believed that the was based upon one of the oldest stories, which have been propagated, at different times, to excite the persecution of the Jews "upon the charge of murtheirng (sic) Christian children."⁽²⁴⁾ This belief was given fresh impetus two centuries before Chaucer's day by the martyrdom of St. William of Norwich, a lad of twelve who was thought to have been lured into a Jew's house and crucified during Passion Week in the year 1144. As rumours of the fate of St. William passed through England and Europe , other tales of boy - martyrs came into popularity. The most famous was that of St. Hugh Lincoln whom the Prioress mentions by name at the of her story:

O young Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also
With cursed Jewes, as it is notable.

It is also believed that the story is related to the legend of St. Mauritius near Switzerland – a miracle by which a grief-stricken mother was consoled through hearing her son's voice. ⁽²⁵⁾

Whatever is the source, the story is very appealing and the prioress makes it even more enriching by alluding to several passage from the Office and the Mass of Innocents of Innocent: "O Lord, our Lord, thy name how merveillous, / Is in this large world ysprad". this is a translation of the Introit of the Mass for the Holy Innocents.

The weeping mother and her child is also from the mass – Rachel bewailing her children – and the triumph of the little boy in the tale is from the Epistle of the Mass which deals with the triumph of Rachel's children over death. The Prioress connects her story with the Feast of Holy Innocents and the weeping mother (which brings to mind Christ's mother, Mary, weeping at the Cross) in full realization that the legend, with all its Christian echoes, was not only appealing, but it laid hold on the medieval imagination, especially the passage about the weeping mother. As Marie Hamilton says, "the symbolic figure of Rachel had a central place in the liturgical dramas dealing with the slaughter of the Innocents."⁽²⁶⁾

Because the Prioress told a story about a little boy, critics have described her tale as a psychological study of "thwarted" maternal instinct. Professor Kitteredge argues: "what can the Prioress know of a mother's feeling? Everything. Nowhere is the poignant trait of thwarted motherhood so affecting as in this characters of the Prioress."⁽²⁷⁾ It may be that the

Prioress's reference to emerald, 'this emeraude' , which is supposed to be an especial protection in childbirth, has emphasized such as assumption. But the emerald, as well as the ruby and the pearl which the Prioress mentions each has a symbolic. The assignment of precious stones to the various months is ancient, as is the belief that certain qualities ascribed to the various gems passed to the wearer. The emerald assigned to the month of May, which, in the Catholic chucer, is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mother, is believed to have the power to preserve the chastity of its wearer. The Prioress must have quit aware of this for she says , 'this gemme of chastite, this emeraude...'The ruby assigned to the month of July, which is set for special devotion to the Precious Blood, typifies the martyrdom of Christ in the crucifixion. Of this too the Prioress must have been aware as she says, "and eek of martirdom the ruby bright. "The pearl had long been thought of as symbolic of the Virgin Mother because of it's whiteness which represents of Mary. The combination of the qualities represented by the three gems, bring together martyrdom, virginity and heavenly perfection, all of which must have appealed strongly not only the Prioress but to the pilgrims too. The Prioress herself is a delicate and innocent person and to have chosen therefore a delicate and innocent hero for her story seems very appropriate.

Finally, what is Chaucer's purpose in depicting his Prioress in this mixed garb of religion and romance? Is he attacking the world of fashion and romance or the worldliness of the church in the person of the Prioress? Perhaps a little of each and perhaps, as M. Chute says, he intends to show that

the "church and the world can lodge comfortably side in one innocent woman's heart, and that when the Prioress glanced down at the gold brooch on her rosary, with its motto 'Love conquers all', she would not think of the connotation that would occur at once to the unregenerate reader."⁽²⁸⁾

The Prioress's little affectations and imitations of the polite behaviour and of the fashionable ladies of romance were not only conventional but very human. It is this clash of associations "between the two sets of conventions that creates (this charming) character."⁽²⁹⁾

Notes

- (1) See Florence H. Ridley, The Prioress and the Critic, (Ins Angeles: University of California, 1965).
- (2) Nicholas Guildford, The Pageant of Medieval England, (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1925), pp. 28-30.
- (3) Benjamin Wainwright. "Chaucer's Prioress Again: an Interpretive Note", Modern Language Notes, XLCIII, (Jan. 1993), 34-87.
- (4) Emile Legouis, Chucer, (Paris: Blous et Cie., 1910), p.226.
- (5) S.S Hussey. Chaucer: An Introduction, (London: Methuen & Co., 1971), pp. 106-7.
- (6) G.G. Coulton. Chaucer: and His England, (London: Methuen & Co., 1965), p.129.
- (7) John L. Lowes. Convention and Revolt in Poetry, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919), p.60.
- (8) Elieen Power, Medieval English Nunneries, (Cambridge: University Press, 1922), p.13.
- (9) Medieval English Nunneries, p. 4.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Elieen Power. Medival People, (London: Methuen & Co., 1925). pp. 60-68.
- (12) John L. Lowes, "Simple and coy", Anglia, (1910), 440-451. See also Sister M. Madeleva, Chaucer's nuns and Other Essays, (New York: D.

- (13) Appleton & Co., 1925), pp. 7-8. Also, Sister Mary Byrne. The Tradition of the Nun in Medieval England, (Washington D.C., Catholic University of America, 1932).
- (14) Lowes , Convention and Revolt in Poetry, p.64.
- (15) The Rule of st. Benedict, trans. with an introduction by cardinal Gasquet, (London: Catto & Windus ,1925) , p.96. In Chaucer's Nuns, Sister Madeleva relates the whole conduct of the Prioress, the physical and the spiritual, to the Benedictine Rule. See pp.6-41.
- (16) See Sister Mary Ernestine Whitmore, A.M, Medieval English Domestic Life and Amusements in the Works of Chaucer (Washington D.C., Catholic University of America, 1937), p.129.
- (17) Lowes, Convention and Revolt in Poetry, p.66.
- (18) John M. Manly. Some New Light on Chaucer, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1926), .p215.
- (19) Ibid. p.212.
- (20) Eileen Power, Medieval English Nunneries, p.245.
- (21) Ibid. p.246.
- (22) Mathewe Brwone, Chaucer's England, Vol. I (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1869), p.178. In her conduct, the Prioress follows the example of the Knight "the flower of chivalry ". On this subject see, William Henry Schofield, Chivalry in English Literature: Chaucer, Malory, Spenser and Shakespear (Cambridge: Harvard University 1912), pp. 11-72.
- (23) Arthur W. Hoffman, "Chaucer's Prologue to pilgrimage: The Two Voices" in Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism edited by Edward Wagenknecht (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p.247.
- (24) Nevill coghill , The poet Chaucer (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp.134-136.
- (25) Robert D. French, A Chaucer's Handbook, 2nd. edition (New York: F, S. Crofts & Co., 1949), p. 233.
- (26) Gordon Greould. "An early Analogue of Chaucer's Prioress's Tale", Modern Language Notes, 24, (1909), 132-3.
- (27) Marie P. Hmilton. "Echoes of Childermas in the Tale of the Prioress", Modern Language Review, 34, (1939), 1-8.
- (28) G.L. Kittredge. Chaucer and His Poetry, (Cambridge: Howard University Press , 1915), p.175.
- (29) Marchette Chute. Geoffrey Chaucer of England, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1946), p. 25.
- (30) Lowes, Convention and Revolt in Poetry, p. 61.

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- (3) Chute, Marchette . Geoffrey Chaucer of England, New , York: E.P. Dutton, 1946.
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- " Simple and Coy ", Anglia, 33, 1910 , 440 - 451.
- (12) Medeleva, Sister Mary. Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1925.
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- (21) Whitmore, Sister Mary Ernestine, A.M., Medieval English Domestic Life and Amusements in the works of Chaucer, Washington D.C, Catholic University of America, 1937.

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