“That Wonder Was to Se”: Some Thoughts on the Prioress’s Sobering Effect

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Of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, the “Prioress’s Tale” is unique. It is the only tale after which Chaucer explicitly states that the merry rout of pilgrims has been sobered and rendered mute. He writes, “Whan seyd was al this miracle, every man / As sobre was that wonder was to se” (VII.691-2). What is it about this tale that silences the company, even the Host, and brings about sober faces? Their reaction could betoken reverence, but such miracles of the Virgin were common enough in Chaucer’s day, according to Robert Worth Frank, Jr. (178). Why should this one have an effect that “wonder was to se”?

The place to start in any study of one of the Canterbury Tales is the “General Prologue.” There we will find Chaucer’s description of the “Nonne, a PRIORESSE,” who will tell our tale. There is, of course, debate about what sort of portrait is presented here. Muriel Bowden likens the Prioress’s portrait to that of the typical heroine of medieval romance (94), while Hardy Long Frank finds everything about her description to be “unquestionably and unparadoxically” Marian (346). Both views are well-founded, and perhaps they both are correct. Chaucer certainly had the knowledge and the artistic capability to create such a juxtaposition. Regardless, the Prioress is not herself a saint and does not appear to aspire to such status. What she does aspire to is to be thought well-bred. Chaucer says she took pains “to countrefete cheere / Of court, and to been estatlich of manere / And to ben holden digne of reverence” (VII.139-41). Her other dominate trait is her sensibility. According to Carolyn P. Collette,

> Her concern with emotion, tenderness, and the diminutive are part of the late fourteenth-century shift in sensibility, which . . . produced the flowering of English mysticism, a highly particularized, emotional style in the arts, and the ascendancy of the heart over the reason in religious matters. (138)

Collette’s account would seem to indicate that the Prioress was not alone in her emotionalism. Florence H. Ridley sums up Chaucer’s portrait of the Prioress best when she says, “it seems obvious that Chaucer intended to satirize her simplicity, emotionalism, and frustrated femininity with an air of mild amusement” (35).

Chaucer’s description is important, but the key point is—how did the other pilgrims see her?

Her apparent good breeding and her sensibility were probably clear to the others. She also would have undoubtedly commanded respect by virtue of her authoritative position as a Prioress. This is borne out by Harry Bailey addressing her "As curteisly as it had been a mayde" (VII.446). Such deference befits her authority and her apparent refinement. One wonders why a similarly gracious expression of thanks is not forthcoming from the Host at the conclusion of her tale?

We can begin to find the answers to our questions by looking at the Prologue to the "Prioress's Tale." Sumner Ferris has shown that the Prologue is theologically correct in that it assigns the proper degree of worship to God (*latria*) and to Mary (*hyperdulia*) (234-6). It also accurately presents "all the important theological attributes of the Virgin Mary . . . and only those attributes, in what is apparently their order of importance" (236). This is well and good, but there are some puzzling, if not disturbing, aspects to this Prologue.

The opening stanza paraphrases the beginning of the eighth Psalm. This Psalm states that God has allowed his praise to come "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings." Why? "Because of thine adversaries, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger" (Ps 8.2). The Prioress does not mention the adverb clause in this passage in her prayer, but it seems likely that her audience, or at least some of them, would have known it. Does this work as a foreshadowing of the "Prioress's Tale"? In life and in death, the "litel clergeoun" certainly sings Mary's praise, which can by extension be seen as honoring God, but how does this "still the enemy"? Does it not seem that a true stilling would have led to conversion rather than to murder? The Prioress adds that not only God's "laude" but also his "bountee" will be performed by such children. I wonder if the child's widowed mother felt that the death of her son was an instance of God's generosity, his "bountee"?

Another incongruity of the Prologue is the Prioress's statement that the Holy Spirit was "ravysedest doun from the deitee" by the Virgin Mary (VII.469). The sexual implications of "ravysedest" may not have troubled the pilgrims, but the phrase is theologically suspect. The sense of the word is of a seizure, implying some force. Can it properly be said that Mary in some way forced God to come to her? And by extension then, is Mary able to compel her Son to grant the prayers and petitions that come to him through her? Ferris finds that Chaucer in the "Prioress's Tale" demonstrates that "whatever the Lollards might say, the Blessed Virgin has an appropriate place in Catholic worship" (252). Perhaps, but could Chaucer not also be saying that people like the Prioress can all too easily misinterpret and misrepresent that place? This is worth considering, especially if we believe Richard Rex when he says that there "is a strong probability that Chaucer was personally acquainted with

[John] Wyclif; certainly he was influenced by his thought" (114). A similar complaint can be raised regarding the Prioress's contention that "er men praye to" Mary, she "goost biforn" to guide them to her Son (VII.477-80). This ability to intercede, before a prayer is even uttered, seems to usurp the role of the Holy Spirit. Scripture says, "we know not how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom 8.26). Might not some of the pilgrims have been bothered by the Prioress's theological shortcomings?

Finally, one can question the propriety of the Prioress identifying herself with "a child of twelf monthe oold or lesse" (VII.484). The children of Psalm 8 are seen as God's instruments. Is the Prioress asking the pilgrims to hear her as speaking for God? Is she misappropriating an instrumentality that is not hers? Or, is this an example of her excessive sensibility? Perhaps her identification with an infant in this passage and her fondness for diminutives throughout are a demonstration of her lack of maturity. She is more concerned with the little things, like mice and pampered little dogs, than the important human problems that should concern an adult. The realization that a Prioress, a woman in authority, is immature could be a troubling revelation for some of the pilgrims.

Now we come to the tale proper. In the first stanza the Prioress speaks disparagingly of the Jews. They are the agents "For foul usure and lucre of vileynye, / Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye" (VII.491-2). The implication is that if Jews are not hateful to you, then you are not of Christ's company. It is doubtful if this beginning found universal approval among the pilgrims. Rex points out that John Wyclif was known to preach tolerance of the Jews, and that however "prevalent the hatred of Jews, if only for religious reasons, the fact remains that many of Chaucer's more enlightened predecessors and contemporaries did not find such hatred consistent with Christian teaching" (113).

We are soon introduced to our "litel clergeoun" and the song he learns and sings. This song has been identified as "Alma Redemptoris Mater." Matthew Britt says that this song is "Ascribed to Hermann Contractus (1013-1054)" (86), so it is sufficiently ancient to have been known to Chaucer's age. Liturgically this song fits because it is used in the Advent and Christmas season, which jibes well with the child's intention to learn it before "Cristemasse" (VII.540). The problem is that the Prioress says that the song asks Mary "To been oure help and socour whan we deye" (VII.534). Compare this with the following prose translation of the lyrics, provided by Britt:

> O loving Mother of the Redeemer, who dost remain the ever accessible portal of heaven, and the star of the sea, aid thy fallen people who strive to rise: thou who, a Virgin both before and after receiving that Ave from the mouth of Gabriel, didst, while nature

wondered, give birth to thy Holy Creator; have pity on us sinners. (87)

There is nothing in this song about Mary being our help and succor when we die. Perhaps she was confusing it with the prayer, "Ave Marie" ("Hail, Mary"), and some of the pilgrims must have been aware of this. Some also must have seen the irony of the song's plea for compassion and the lack of same in the Prioress's tale.

Before long, we have arrived at the telling of the actual murder of the child. Maybe none of the pilgrims would have questioned how any person could be so cruel as to kill a child for singing, or why Jews "sustened by a lord of that contree" (VII.490) would be so incensed at this song that they would jeopardize their own livelihoods and lives, but could any of them have failed to noticed that the Prioress could not stop at casting the child into a pit? Why did this woman of supposedly fine sensibilities feel compelled to elaborate and explain that the boy was thrown in a "wardrobe" "Where as thise Jewes purgen hire entraille" (VII.572-3)?

The Prioress's description of the widowed mother's search for her now slain child is appropriately pitiful, but we soon hear another jarring note. We find that Jesus "of his grace" puts the thought into the mother's head which leads her to the body. Then the Prioress says, "0 grete God, that parfournest thy laude / By mouth of innocentz, lo heere thy myght!" (VIII.607-8), and the throat-cut boy begins to sing. Are the auditors to understand from this that God will not intervene to prevent a murder but will act to ensure the finding of the body, and all this in order to have God's praises sung? It seems that the singing of God's praise is the only effect of this "miracle." When all is said and done, the boy is dead, his mother is alone, and some Jews have been summarily executed. What is uplifting about this? Emmy Stark Zitter points out that most of "the analogues for the *Prioress's Tale* end with the conversion of the Jews" (279). Certainly, that type of ending would have been more spiritually beneficial to the pilgrims. Or, at least, the Prioress could have fashioned a ''miracle'' tale that told of the child being brought back to life, like Lazarus, which would indeed have been something to praise God for! So then, what does the Prioress's version tell us about her? Her values are skewed. The singing of God's praise takes precedence over human lives. Might not some of the pilgrims have found it somewhat blasphemous to depict God as so bloodthirsty?

A couple of other incidents in this tale also show the Prioress in a strange light. Her "provost" proclaims "torment" and "shameful deeth" for the guilty Jews (VII.628-9), and the Prioress describes the execution as follows: "Therfore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe, / And after that he heng hem by the lawe" (VII.633-4). There is a sense of overkill here, whichever way one looks at it. "Drawe" in this

sense could mean either dragging the prisoner behind a horse, or it could mean to draw asunder, that is, drawing and quartering. To drag the person and then hang him was a common procedure, but one wonders about the need for "wilde hors." A wild horse, I presume, would be riderless. It seems to me that you would need to have some control over a horse if you wanted it to drag someone, thus a rider would be essential. So does the Prioress want us to understand "drawe" as tearing asunder? Wild horses could probably be used for this operation; a rider would not be necessary. But then, is it not rather bizarre to draw and quarter someone and *then* hang him? I doubt that that was the usual order in which these things were done. Perhaps none of this disturbed the pilgrims, but calling for "wilde hors" seems a bit much for a religious woman of fine sensibilities. A similar observation could be made in relation to her finding it necessary to specify that the "litel clergeoun" had his throat cut unto his "nekke-boon" (VII.649). Was that gory detail really necessary?

There is one more aspect of this tale that needs to be addressed. Perhaps the sober silence of some of the pilgrims was a result of confusion. Consider the following incongruities. The child "Up taken was, syngynge his song alway" (VII.622). Nowhere does the Prioress say that his singing stops, yet she says that he begins singing again when sprinkled with holy water (VII.640). So did he or did he not stop singing? And if he did not, does this mean that he sang all through the Mass that was being said, and if he is still singing, why are they in such a hurry to bury him (VII.638)? Then the boy says, "I sholde have dyed, ye, longe tyme agon" (VII.651). So is he dead or not? And if he is still living, why does the abbot remove the "greyn" and make death final? Also, if the singing of this song is such wonderful praise to God, why should anyone stop it at all? Should it not be left to God to decide when to end the miracle? The Prioress says that after the child gives up the ghost, the abbot begins to rain tears and falls to the ground at seeing this "wonder" (VII.672-6). Is the finality of the boy's death the greatest wonder the abbot has seen this day? These things make my head spin, and I can imagine pilgrims, especially drunken ones, being rendered silent and thoughtful as they try to figure out just what has happened in this tale.

We see, then, that there are many reasons why this merry company might have been soberly silent at the end of the "Prioress's Tale." Some probably were experiencing emotion and reverence as the Prioress intended. The Second Nun is a good candidate for this reaction. Others, such as the Lollard Parson, may have been contemplating the Prioress's theological shortcomings. Some pilgrims may have been trying to figure out how a woman with such an immature approach to life could have risen to a position of authority. Possibly there were one or two in the rout who believed that the principles of

Christian love dictated at least a tolerance of Jews. The Prioress's anti-semitism could have troubled them; perhaps Chaucer the pilgrim was one of these. Other Christians might have been trying to square the facts of the tale with the compassion and mercy that the song and the Prioress's closing prayer call for. In the minds of some pilgrims, the Prioress's well-bred appearance and fine, genteel sensibility were probably in stark contrast to the gory details she brought to her tale. Harry Bailey, if one of these, may have been reconsidering his previous deferential treatment of this woman. Finally, there were those who were just plain confused by the story and who were silent in their befuddlement. All in all, it is easy to see that the "Prioress's Tale" raises more questions than it answers, and a plethora of questions is sure to elicit a thoughtful, serious, and sober silence.

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