CHAUCER'S PRIORESS AND HER
TALE OF SOUND AND FURY

A Thesis

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Christian K. Zacher
Advisor
To my mentor and my love,

my daughter, Elizabeth
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Scholarship on the Prioress and her tale tends to fall into one of two categories: courtly influences on her behavior or the question of her anti-Semitism. While I agree that both these issues are important to understanding the Prioress, I do not think that an understanding of her character is defined by these two issues. Chaucer is well known for sharply perceiving and subtly portraying a wide variety of qualities in human nature, and I think he has given the Prioress a multi-faceted personality. He has not merely taken the stock figure of a nun and overlaid it with another stock figure, that of a romantic heroine, while painting a bit of anti-Semitism in the background. Her character is multi-dimensional and complex.

In this paper I will examine the various techniques Chaucer has used to create the character of the Prioress. Her personality is indicated in her portrait and so I will begin my analysis there. However, it is the tale she chooses to tell which most delicately and definitively illustrates her character, and so I intend to focus most of my attention on the tale as a means of defining the Prioress. She selected a miracle of the Virgin, a genre of simple,
pious, gentle stories. Yet her particular tale is extraordinarily atypical of the genre in many ways. I will describe the ways in which the story deviates from the pattern of other stories in this genre, and attempt to determine how these deviations reveal idiosyncracies of the Prioress's character. One of the most apparent differences is that the Prioress's tale is singularly vicious, and filled with anger. The Jews are the apparent target of her hostilities but the intensity of her attack makes one wonder whether this may be a smoke-screen and her rage might be subtly directed elsewhere. Or, was the Prioress simply anti-Semitic? If so, would this have been shocking, or would Chaucer and his pilgrims have shared her views?

In an effort to understand what Chaucer's attitude might have been, I will discuss some contemporary papal bulls and government documents concerning Jews. It is only in grasping Chaucer's environment that one can become aware of the possible range of attitudes a prioress may have had. For example, if a pope was anti-Semitic, then a nun would very likely find it an acceptable mode of thought. On the other hand, some papal statements were made in defense of the Jews. It is important to determine whether Chaucer would have been influenced by these and other pro-Jewish
pronouncements in order to decide whether anti-Semitism was an unquestioned way of thinking in his times.

I would also like to examine the historical social framework surrounding Hugh of Lincoln since this is the story upon which the Prioress's tale is based. At the time Chaucer wrote The Canterbury Tales, the story of Hugh's murder was considered historically accurate. The event itself was relatively recent since it happened only about a hundred years earlier. The Prioress seems to consider Hugh's story almost a current event as she says, "For it is but a litel while ago..." (1,686). One does not usually think of medieval nuns as being concerned with news items; they are generally portrayed as being concerned only with the kingdom of heaven. In this section of the paper I will attempt to determine the significance of her interest in this event.

When the Prioress's story is viewed from all the above mentioned perspectives, the personality of the nun gradually emerges. The quality of her compassion become clear, as do her attitudes towards Jews. Through her story she shows concerns about the practical applications of her theology. She empathizes with mothers and finally she reveals her attitudes toward children.
In the final section of this thesis I will try to discover what Chaucer's attitude towards the Prioress might have been. Chaucer often comments on one tale with the following one. We might expect, then, that he would use "The Tale of Sir Thopas" in a similar way. However, the two appear to be diametrically opposed. "Thopas" is a burlesque of metrical romances, the first burlesque in the English language.\(^1\) It is, at first, impossible to believe that a burlesque could provide insight into a miracle of the Virgin. Yet "The Tale of Sir Thopas" is filled with words, phrases, and images which link this story to "The Prioress's Tale." I do not think that "Thopas" is used to parody the Prioress in the strictest sense, but rather to link the two tales in an effort to parody certain elements of "The Prioress's Tale" and to gently nudge the audience into perceiving that the Prioress may be using piety to cover her own very human frailties.

The delicate shadings Chaucer uses to create such a three dimensional character are first apparent in the portrait which is a kind of prologue to "The Prioress's Tale." The most intriguing and enlightening definitions of her character, however, are revealed in Chaucer's choice of tale which stretches the limits of the genre almost to the
breaking point. Through this technique he shows us how the
Priorress pushes the social boundaries of her role so that
she can enjoy areas of life not generally included in the
regimen of a nun. Yet she never goes the one step too far;
therefore she always manages to appear appropriate.
Finally, "The Tale of Sir Thopas" functions as a kind of
afterword, Chaucer's subtle commentary on the Priorress.
In the Prioress's portrait we are given many clues to her character. Chaucer uses clues, though in such an ambiguous manner that readers cannot make definite conclusions about the Prioress; instead we are left with questions which greatly influence our reading of the tale. A number of questions about the character of the Prioress are raised in this indirect way. Although the scholarship which interprets the clues in the portrait is well known, I must summarize some of it in an effort to fully examine the significance of the introduction to this pious pilgrim. I will combine the results of previous studies with my own research to come to a new conclusion about the purpose of the portrait.

The portrait of the nun begins with her enigmatic smile, "ful symple and coy" (1.119). To a medieval reader the meaning of "coy" would have been ambiguous. The Middle English Dictionary defines "coi" as "quiet, modest... reserved." John H. Fisher, in his notes to "The Prioress's Tale," defines "coy" as "reserved or affecting reserve." One would expect a prioress to be reserved, but affecting reserve is rather different since it would indicate that this quality was not natural to her. Still, she is subject to the frailties of human nature and if reserve does not come naturally to her, then she should not be faulted for
trying to acquire it. However, the word "affecting" suggests a pretense rather than a sincere effort. The definition of "coy," which incorporates the opposing possibilities of sincerity and insincerity, is in keeping with the subtle ambiguity of the whole portrait. The Prioress gives the impression of being reserved; whether genuine reserve is a hallmark of her character or only an affectation is unclear at this point. In any event, the quality of reserve is an issue which is important to the Prioress; knowing this, we direct our reading of the tale to find evidence of reserve or excess in the Prioress.

John Livingston Lowes saw the words "symple and coy" as representing a different sort of ambiguity. He said that this phrase came directly from popular French romances and was intended to alert Chaucer's audience to secularizing qualities in the Prioress's portrait which they would have recognized instantly. He further argued that her physical description -- eyes, nose, mouth, forehead -- is a classic description of the standard romantic heroine. Her forehead, though, does cause one to pause. It was "fair" but "almost a spanne brood." (11. 154-155). A high forehead was considered lovely, but should it have been exposed to the extent that the size could have been ascertained? This may not have been altogether appropriate for a nun. In the
next line, "For hardly, she was not undergrowe" (1.156) Chaucer implies that she may have been rather fat. The suggestion of fatness, following a list of romantic physical qualities, is humorous. It lends a touch of reality to a physical description otherwise tinged with fantasy. There is also a vague implication in this line that she may be wealthy. During the fourteenth century food was not plentiful in England; therefore, plumpness was an indication of wealth. Further evidence of wealth can be found in the lines that follow which describe her elegant cloak, her coral rosary, and her golden brooch. How very different the Prioress's life must have been from the austere existence of the anchorites in Ancrene Wisse! It makes one wonder what sort of priory our nun governed.

Chaucer says that the Prioress was from Stratford-at-Bow. Scholars determined that if Chaucer were basing his character upon an existing prioress from Stratford-at-Bow, she would have been associated with the Convent of St. Leonard's at Bromley. At that same convent was Queen Phillipa's sister, Elizabeth of Hainault. In her will, Elizabeth bequeathed to various people her gowns, jewels and furs. If such finery was acceptable for Elizabeth, the Prioress's wealth was probably also acceptable. It may not have been in keeping with the ideal of the anchorites, but
it would not have been scandalous either. Certainly it would be understandable for the Prioress to want to be like the Queen's sister. Also, the fact that she took pleasure in material possessions would have been an indication of her humanity. None of her possessions was inappropriate; a nun needs a cloak, a rosary is certainly not inappropriate, and the brooch endorses love. There is, of course, a secular tinge to the fact that the cloak is elegant, rather than plain, and the rosary has coral beads instead of colored glass or plainer stones; but, perhaps, if the Prioress was spending time with royalty whose material goods far exceeded her own, preference for the ornate rather than the ordinary would go unnoticed or seem a modest indulgence. The brooch falls into a slightly different category because of the ambiguity of the motto "Amor vincit omnia." Originally this motto was considered profane but in the early Middle Ages it acquired a connotation of sacred love; by Chaucer's day it was used in its former sense while still retaining the sacred connotation.12

The ambiguity of the brooch causes us to wonder whether the Prioress is concerned only with the love of God or whether she is allowing herself to toy with the thought of secular love, albeit only in the remotest sense. The world of a nun does not encompass thoughts of earthly love. But
the Prioress has managed to bring into her life many concerns which nuns usually exclude: the qualities of the romantic heroine, the implications of wealth, and the imitation of royal behavior and interest. This is the second major issue regarding the Prioress; she does not limit herself to the world of the ascetic nun. Scholars have written a great deal about the possibilities of wealth and romantic and courtly qualities of the Prioress. I would like to suggest that all these details about the nun are provided to alert the reader to secular qualities in what might otherwise be considered a wholly pious tale.

Another facet of the Prioress's character is reflected in her self-conscious table manners. Most scholars see some gentle humor here since she seems to be affecting courtly manners. Sister Mary Madeleva holds an opposite view, saying that it is entirely reasonable for a nun to have careful manners because one must keep one's habit clean; as she says, "a spot without is a spot within." If the nun were trying to imitate the Blessed Virgin then perhaps this emphasis on appearance is to be expected. The medieval concept of the Virgin is that she was spotlessly clean; in fact, even in childhood her nose never needed to be wiped. That the Prioress had neat table manners is a fact; whether this sprang from a desire to imitate the Virgin or the Court
is unclear. The fact that both motives can be argued means that we are left with another ambiguity. At this point it becomes striking that her manners are discussed at all. While it is true that table manners can reflect courtly behavior, they are not a standard item in the description of a character. Chaucer did not, for example, comment on the Knight's table manners. The fact that the Prioress's manners are described in such detail in an indication that this mundane, superficial aspect of life is extremely important to this character.

This curious comment on her personality is illustrated in the way she wipes her mouth. She is careful to be sure that the upper lip is wiped so well that not the tiniest drop of grease can be seen in her cup. No mention is made at all of the lower lip. Did she not wipe her lower lip since it would not show grease in a cup? Grease on her lower lip or chin would be far more significant (and also far more noticeable to everyone other than the Prioress) than grease in her cup. This description is a subtle suggestion that the Prioress was inordinately concerned with the superficial aspects of life, that she focused on what was instantly apparent to her with little concern for what lay beyond her immediate regard. A desire to relate to the superficial is the third issue raised in her portrait.
The Prioress’s dogs provide another intriguing set of suggestions about her character. Sister Mary Madeleiva, ever the defender of the Prioress, says that she was probably an old nun and was the sort who gathered bread crusts for the birds as well as meat scraps for the dogs. As I understand it, she sees the Prioress as a big-hearted, old woman with a "waste not, want not" attitude. This is possible, but it is an unrealistic explanation. Wild birds are not dependent on people for sustenance, but pets are, whether scraps are available or not. This indulgence in pets is a slight extravagance, like her cloak, rosary, and brooch.

In medieval England a restriction prohibited any abbess or nun from keeping either dogs or birds within a choir or abbey. Perhaps the Prioress circumvented this regulation by bringing the dogs on the pilgrimage where they are neither within a choir or abbey. This would be a rather devious approach, though, and there is no evidence to indicate that she was other than forthright. Old nuns were, in some cases, permitted to keep dogs, but Chaucer gives no clue as to her age and an old person would probably lack the stamina to make a pilgrimage. The greater likelihood is
that she simply kept the dogs openly and honestly, just as she had her cloak, beads, and brooch.

One can hardly fault the Prioress for wanting pets. Most people do, and, especially, it seems, people who do not have children. One must conclude, though, that (1) she does not adhere strictly to the rules and the attitudes of the church, (2) she has human needs which she leaves the sacred world to meet, and (3) that the secular realm is important to her.

Finally, her compassion is expressed in terms of the dogs; no mention is made of her love for human beings, of sisterly or maternal affection for the other nuns. Her tender feelings are focused only on the dogs. Chaucer does not, however, indicate that she is a misanthrope. In fact, he says, "And sikerly she was of greet desport,/ And ful plasaunt, and amyable of port" (11. 137-138). It is significant that in the same sentence he concludes, "And peyned hire to countrefete cheere/ Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,/ And to ben holden dignе of reverence" (11. 139-141). The implication is not that she sought fellowship with the others but that she sought their high opinion of her as a dignified, courtly person.
The portrait that we are given is of a woman who is strongly influenced by the world around her, a "courtly" nun. However, the linking of secular and sacred is not as extraordinary as one might think. Hardy Long Frank says, "The cults of the Virgin and of amour courtois fed each other; if the earthly lady was idealized, almost deified, the heavenly Lady, dazzlingly beautiful, often lured her lovers by disarmingly mundane coquettish airs and graces, fits the jealous pique, and promises of kisses and warm beds with celestial comforts." He goes on to cite the phrase "symple and coy" in French poetry to the Virgin, and to examine most of the references generally thought of as romantic, proving them to be found equally in Marian literature. His arguments that the languages of courtly love and Marian literature are the same are convincing. Still, this does not negate the ambiguity present in the portrait; rather it heightens it. The presence of the same phrases in works with such different purposes is intriguing; to highlight the similarities through this use of language is a way of drawing attention to the differences as well.

The Virgin certainly had human qualities but in her they were pure. For example, when, in a given legend, she kissed a monk her kiss was pristine and sufficient in itself without holding the promise of other physical pleasures. It
was a celestial sensation expressed in human terms, very different from the kiss of courtly love which held the promise or at least the possibility, of physical love in a socially appropriate and simple kiss. One only need think of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the reaction to the courtly kisses of the Third Fitt. The fact that the language used for Marian literature is the same as that found in courtly romances intensifies the ambiguity rather than obviates it, making the discussion of each world more careful, more deliberate, and more subtle.

If, as Professor Lowes suggests, Chaucer's audience was immediately aware of the language of courtly romances in the description of the Prioress, then it is possible that the Prioress was not unaware of her own apparent ambiguities. When Chaucer said that she tried to have a dignified courtly manner rather than a dignified pious manner I think we are being told that she enjoyed the ambiguities. She knew that she was being "courtly" but she also knew that her courtly behavior could always be called "pious." Perhaps she found it rather exciting to move from one world to the other without ever being considered improper.

Chaucer is particularly adept at describing his characters through juxtaposition with other characters and
with other tales. For example, we can assess the Prioress's courtliness by comparing her with the Knight. This gives us the sense that courtly behavior is quite natural in the Knight but rather studied in the Prioress. The juxtaposition of tales also defines characters. Putting "Thopas," a burlesque of a romance, beside the Prioress's tale is a way of pointing out the fact that her story is no more standard and ordinary a miracle of the Virgin than "Thopas" is a typical romance. The subtlest juxtaposition, however, exists within "The Prioress's Tale" itself because in reading it we mentally place it beside a typical miracle of the Virgin and see the dramatic deviations from the genre. It is this last juxtaposition which ultimately defines the character of the Prioress and reveals answers to the questions raised in the portrait, including the issues of reserve or excess, superficiality, and compassion. Finally, and most importantly, Chaucer brilliantly plays with the boundaries of the genre of miracles of the Virgin in a way which reflects the Prioress and her toying with the self-imposed limits of ecclesiastical existence.

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"The Prioress's Tale," a miracle of the Virgin, is not infrequently treated as a saint's legend. Because there is some justification for this confusion, I would like to begin my study of the genre of "The Prioress's Tale" by distinguishing her miracle of the Virgin from the genre of saint's legends. Miracles of the Virgin have definite patterns of structure which are unique to the genre. I will describe these patterns in an effort to demonstrate the ways in which "The Prioress's Tale" deviates from the predictable structures. In order to interpret the significance of the unique qualities of "The Prioress's Tale," I will trace the influences of the story of Hugh of Lincoln and the historically and socially pervasive elements of anti-Semitism.

It is understandable that "The Prioress's Tale" is mistakenly termed a saint's legend, since certain elements of its plot are standard fare in saints' lives: a resolutely religious hero is tortured for his faith and eventually killed at the hands of heathens. Such a saint's legend can be found in "The Second Nun's Tale," the story of St. Cecilia; first she is put into a bath of boiling water (though, miraculously, she remains unharmed) and then she suffers partial severing of her head, which allows her three final days of proselytizing before she finally succumbs to
death. Even the little clergeon's vocalization after death can be seen as prototypical of the description of saints since it can also be found in the story of St. Edmund. After decapitating Edmund, the heathens hide the head. But, through a miracle, the head speaks so that the followers of Edmund can locate the head and bury it. Nonetheless, however many similarities exist between "The Prioress's Tale" and saints' legends, the story is not of that genre. It is a miracle of the Virgin. The Prioress's intention is not to praise the behavior of her child hero -- who is not a saint -- but, rather, to praise the Virgin. As she says in her prayer in her prologue:

Wherfore in laude, as I best kan or may,
Of thee and of the white lylye flour
Which that the bar, and is a mayde alway,
To telle a storie I wol do my labour --

(11. 460-463)

The Second Nun also praises the Virgin, but this praise is not the point of her tale. The Second Nun makes it clear that she wants to tell a story about St. Cecilia for the general edification of all:
And for to putte us fro swich ydelsen,
That cause is of so greet confusion,
I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse
After the legende in translacioun
Right of thy glorious lif and passioun --
Thou with thy gerland wroght of rose and lilie,
Thee meene I, mayde and martyr Seint Cecilie.

(11. 22-28)

It is the intention of the tale which ultimately defines "The Prioress's Tale" as a miracle of the Virgin. However, her tale is extraordinarily atypical of the dramatic pattern of the genre of miracles of the Virgin. The stories almost always begin by describing an individual's devotion to the Blessed Virgin. The faith is pure and simple. The hero does not question any element of dogma nor examine knotty theological arguments. Although a devout Christian, he or she is also a very human figure who makes a mistake, often as the result of a temptation. The mistakes are not represented as despicable or contemptible, but rather as understandable human frailties. Still, these frailties will have grave, eternally regrettable consequences. The hero becomes aware of the tragic nature of the wrong but appears to have no recourse. Disaster is certain. At this point the Holy Mother, who has been
watching sympathetically all along, intervenes on the hero's behalf. Through a divine act of compassion for man's essential weakness, she creates a miracle which rectifies man's folly. The result is not only restoration of the hero's mental and emotional tranquility, but also a recognition of Mary's power by the onlookers.

Although the Virgin of the Middle Ages has some human qualities, like anger or even jealousy, her feelings never result in human reactions such as retaliation. For example, she does not punish the hero's enemies, she simply saves the hero. She is magnanimous, kind, forgiving. Her actions, possibly because they defy anticipated human reactions (in addition to the fact that they are truly miracles), result in awe for the onlookers -- a strengthening of faith for the believers and conversion for the heathens.

I would like to illustrate this pattern using the story of "The Merchant's Surety." The devout Theodorus is a rich merchant who, through an excess of generosity, becomes poor. He borrows money from a wealthy Jew named Abraham, using only St. Mary for collateral. Theodorus sails to Alexandria where he regains his wealth and forgets about repaying the loan until the night before it is due. He realizes his mistake and knows that he cannot sail to
Constantinople in time. So he puts all the money he owes to Abraham into a small chest which he throws into the sea, praying Our Lady to send it to Abraham. She does so and in the morning Abraham finds it — but then craftily hides it.

When Theodorus returns to Constantinople, Abraham publicly accuses him of defaulting on the loan. They return to the image of the Virgin before whom they had made their contract. The Virgin, in a second miracle, simply says: "Jeuh, thou hast thi gold;/ And in the botm of thyn ark/
Ther thou hast leid every mark." (11. 156-158) Her simple statement of truth saves Theodorus from wordly shame and absolves him of further financial obligations to Abraham. We can assume that this double miracle reinforces Theodorus's already strong faith. But what of Abraham?

No punitive measures are taken against the Jew either by the onlooking citizens or the Virgin. No justice is meted out. The Virgin's words have a stunning effect on all. Abraham is ashamed and acknowledges the veracity of the Virgin's statement. All those who believe as he does, presumably all other Jews, are equally ashamed. Abraham converts. We assume that since they are as ashamed as he is they are also as ready to convert as he is. In any case,
all wrongs are righted and the story ends with the praise of the Virgin.

The Prioress's tale begins according to the same formula. We are shown that the little clergeon is devout when he begs to be taught the "Alma Redemptoris." The purity and simplicity of his faith are illustrated by his not knowing what the song meant, just that it was sung in praise of the Virgin. At this point the story begins to shift away from the pattern. The little clergeon is not faced with any temptation nor does he make a mistake. At the age of seven he could not have been expected to know that singing a Christian hymn in a Jewish neighborhood would provoke the inhabitants to murder. His song simply praises the Virgin and is not specifically inflammatory to the Jews.21

According to the plot pattern of miracles of the Virgin, the little clergeon must next recognize his error and the resultant impending doom. Since the little clergeon has made no error, he cannot anticipate his own demise. The Virgin does intercede with a miracle, but it is not to rectify man's wrong. It would be in keeping with the pattern of miracles of the Virgin for her to prevent the murder. However, that does not happen. The purpose of the
miracle is to help the child's distraught mother locate the body.

Although death is not uncommon in the miracles, the murder of a child is nonexistent. In Wynkyn de Worde's collection, for instance, seventeen of the forty-nine stories involve death in some way, but in nearly all of these death follows prolonged illness or advanced age. Death is treated as a natural, anticipated event of life rather than a shocking, cruel twist of fate. The stories focus on a miracle which accentuates the benefits of faith at the time of death. Death is a wonderful moment when the Blessed Virgin rewards with miracles those who have loved her. The sense one has after reading these stories is that death comes to us all, that it is a natural conclusion to life, and that death is not a frightening, horrible time but rather a time when the Blessed Virgin rewards those who honor Her.

In "The Prioress's Tale" one does not have the same sense of peace about death. In fact, death of the child is the most disturbing divergence from the pattern of the miracles of the Virgin. Not only is it different from the other stories in the genre, it is very different from most of the versions of this same story. Carleton Brown's
exhaustive studies of Chaucer's sources for "The Prioress's Tale" describe most of the versions of the tale as typical of the genre of miracles of the Virgin; he calls this the "happy ending group." In these, the boy is revived by a miracle of the Virgin and continues to live. The Jews perceive this miracle and all convert. The Jews are not condemned to death.

In only two other Middle English miracles of the Virgin does death confront children. In one, a little Jewish boy is thrown into an oven by his father as punishment for entering a Christian church. Naturally, we assume he is dead, but, when the oven door is opened, the townsfolk discover that the Blessed Virgin has kept him from harm. He is removed from the oven, sound and healthy.

In the second story, a mother kills herself and her two children to punish the father for seeing another woman whom he claims to love more than his wife. When the father sees the dead bodies of his children and wife, he grieves for them, chastizing himself for the "joke" he played on his wife since the other woman was really an image of the Blessed Virgin. He goes to the image again and prays for her help because, besides suffering a personal tragedy, he knows that his fellow citizens will assume he himself killed
his family and his own life will be in jeopardy. The Virgin
goes to Hell to fight for the souls of the dead family. She
is successful. Miraculously, the Virgin restores life to
the children and mother.28

I have been unable to find any tale in which a child
dies except the one which the Prioress tells. I have not
found any other tale in which the hero is murdered. In some
cases a person may want to enter heaven and as a great gift
the Virgin bestows death. For example, in one story an
aging man with failing health does his tumbling act and the
Virgin shows her appreciation by taking him with her to
Heaven.29 However, death as a gift from the Virgin is very
different from murder.

The second peculiar element of this tale is the aspect
of vengeance.30 The Prioress devotes several lines to
describing what happened to the people who murdered the
child. More significant than the number of lines, though,
is the tone. There is nothing of the "Judge not, lest ye be
judged" attitude in the Prioress's statement: "Yvele shal
he have that yvele wol deserve" (1. 632). That the Prioress
is rectitudinous is probably to be expected, but the obvious
pleasure she takes in the justice to which these people were
brought is shocking. It goes beyond the Old Testament
justice of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Not only was the little clergeon's murderer killed; everyone who had any knowledge of the murder was also killed. And not only were they executed, they were killed as the Prioress says (1, 628) with "torment and with shameful death." This kind of angry retaliation would be startling in any circumstances, but in light of the fact that vengeance does not exist in any other story of this genre it becomes most peculiar. Perhaps vengeance is simply not necessary in the other tales because when the Virgin prevents disaster there is little to punish.

This tale is a curiosity of the genre of miracles of the Virgin because compassion and forgiveness, hallmarks of the genre, are absent in this story. The Jews' mistakes are not forgivable. This is in direct contrast to the Virgin's character in the stories of this genre in which compassion and forgiveness are extended to all. The Virgin certainly does not condone wrongful actions on the part of infidels but she does not punish them. Rather she prevents the disaster. They are then given the opportunity to see the error of their ways, as does Abraham in "The Merchant's Surety." The Prioress, on the other hand, has compassion only for the select few, such as the little clergeon and dogs.
This deviation from the pattern of miracles of the Virgin can also be considered a way of pushing back the boundaries of the genre to include the secular world since neither compassion nor forgiveness was given to the Jews involved with Hugh of Lincoln. The Prioress's story has obviously been strongly influenced by the story of Hugh, whom she mentions in her closing lines (11. 684-686). He is mentioned at the end of her story, not only because she is thinking of him, but, more importantly, because she wants her audience to think of him. The reason is that Hugh's story is the epitome of an intensely emotional and sensational type of tale usually referred to as Jewish child ritual murder stories. To mention Hugh serves two functions: first, it incorporates the secular world into the religious world and second, it "borrows" some of the impact of the most sensational example of a group of stories filled with emotionalism.

The Jewish child ritual murder stories centered on the idea that periodically Jews mocked the crucifixion of Christ by murdering a Christian child. These stories began in England in 1144 when a little child named William was found dead in a wood outside Norwich. Although the death was attributed to a Jewish ritual murder, neither secular nor
church authorities took any action against the Jews; this would indicate that at the time the body was discovered no one seriously considered death to be the result of Jewish ritual murder. Still the story had enough popular appeal that people came to the place where William was buried to seek miracles. The concept of ritual murder became enormously popular in England. By the mid 1200's, countless accusations of Jewish ritual murder had been made, four of which resulted in shrines to the victims.32

This kind of extreme persecution would certainly allow the Prioress the dignity of self-righteousness and allow her to give vent to her sentimentality. As we might expect, she would not choose a relatively unheard of story of Jewish child ritual murder; she chose the well-known Hugh of Lincoln tale. While other stories of this type affected local communities, Hugh's story shook all of England. The Prioress, who wants to impress the pilgrims, tells a tale which impressed a king and his entire nation. Because these widespread repercussions begin in the tale, I would like to summarize the story here. I will use Matthew Paris's version since it is probably the one with which Chaucer would have been familiar.33
Paris says that Hugh was missing on June 29, 1255. The Jews then were called from all over England to Lincoln. In the interim, Hugh was fed for ten days so that he could sustain the tortures inflicted upon him until the appointed time for his sacrifice. When all the Jews were gathered, each one stabbed Hugh with a knife. Then the child was stabbed in the heart and disemboweled. The child's entrails were used, presumably, for the practice of some sort of magic. The Jews buried the body but the ground threw it out again. Then they threw the body into Copin's well. When Hugh's mother, Beatrice, asked the child's playmates and her neighbors where her son might be, she was told that he had last been seen going into Copin's house. She went there herself and discovered the body but she remained calm until after she had returned with the bailiffs, when she became hysterical.

In the crowd which gathered when Beatrice lamented was Sir John de Lexington, who brought up the possibility of Jewish ritual murder. John said he would grant immunity to Copin if he confessed. So the Jew signed a confession. However, when King Henry III arrived he found the crime so ghastly that he had Copin drawn and hanged and the other Jews sent to London.34
As if this were not sufficiently dramatic, Henry then
gave orders that no Jews could leave the kingdom and any who
tried would be imprisoned. This astonishing reaction on
Henry's part must have underscored the "veracity" of Paris's
story. If the public had considered the story might be
tainted by rumor, Henry's reactions must have served to
establish the story as "true." Surely the Prioress could
feel justified by both the church and the court in her
contempt for the Jews. Also, reminding her audience of Hugh
at the end of her tale might have been an effective way of
giving them a small jolt of recognition of the importance of
her tale.

Many readers of "The Prioress's Tale" are struck with
the anti-Semitism they find there. Ever since the
Holocaust, Chaucerians have been especially eager to find an
explanation for this ugly element existing in the works of
so brilliant and enlightened a man. Most people search for
a way to explain that Chaucer was not anti-Semitic, but that
he assigned this intolerance to the Prioress in an effort to
discredit the sincerity of her Christianity and to reveal
her hypocracies. We can never know exactly what Chaucer
himself thought about anti-Semitism, but it is helpful to
understand the setting in which Chaucer lived to determine
how Jews were viewed.
The church had no formal doctrine concerning the Jews and the popes did not have uniform opinions about them. Pope Innocent III was clearly anti-Semitic. For example, in 1205 he said that French Jews tried to live among Christians so that they could secretly murder them (citing a tale of "a poor scholar found dead in their latrines,"). Pope Innocent IV, on the other hand, saw the Jews and also the Christians, differently, especially in terms of ritual murder. According to Soloman Grayzell:

Clearly Innocent IV recognized that the underlying motive for the charge was not Christian zeal, but the greed for Jewish property on the part of nobles and prelates. There was no one to assure the Jews an honest investigation, let alone a fair trial. Torture, burning at the stake, forcible baptism of their children, and exile were the results for the Jews because the accusation afforded an opportunity for legitimatized robbery. It was so successful a method that, as the Pope said, "no matter where a dead body is found, their persecutors throw it among the Jews." 37

After Innocent IV, Pope Gregory X made lengthy statements, in 1271, about false accusations of the Jews. 38
One royal figure, Emperor Frederick II also defended the Jews against ritual murder charges in 1236. The general picture is that although the people tended to be anti-Semitic, some leaders were not. It has been argued that although anti-Semitism may have existed among the people, enough leaders publicly defended the Jews that tolerance of the Jews could have been considered an enlightened alternative. Presumably, since Chaucer was enlightened in so many other ways, he would have found anti-Semitism intolerable.

Although there is some merit to this argument, I question whether the people in England, including Chaucer, felt the influence of such international leadership; the English were primarily influenced by their own kings' actions, especially those of Henry III. Then, when the Jews were banished in 1290 they became an unknown quantity. Another flaw to this "enlightened alternative" argument is that all the papal statements supporting the Jews were made to Germany, not England. We have no way of knowing whether Chaucer had access to this information. A final difficulty is that these papal statements were made about a hundred years before Chaucer wrote "The Prioress's Tale." This distance of time as well as place further decreases the
likelihood that these edicts had an effect on Chaucer and his audience.

In researching the issue of attitudes toward Jews, I have found that anti-Semitism existed essentially uncensored in Chaucer's day. Even though a few leaders said it was wrong, anti-Semitism did not carry the awesome ugliness that it has acquired since World War II. In medieval times, anti-Semitism was not an emotionally charged issue. Although people occasionally were excessive in their reactions to Jews, as with the ritual murder accusations, a certain level of bigotry was acceptable and not considered particularly noteworthy. In the words of Florence Ridley, one of the many scholars to have closely examined the question of anti-Semitism, "The attitudes for which Madam Eglantine is condemned by the twentieth century critics were shared by most of her countrymen, and we have no real reason for believing that those attitudes were condemned rather than shared by Chaucer himself."43

Anti-Semitism is not an end in itself. Chaucer has taken advantage of the ambiguities of this issue just as he has done with all the peculiar elements of this tale, especially the sensationalism and sentimentality of the story of Hugh of Lincoln and the wandering divergence of the
story from its genre. He has used these elements to subtly convey to us the uniqueness of the Prioress, to create a strongly individuated person rather than a type. Chaucer's Prioress is multifaceted compared with the flat two-dimensional nuns of the miracles of the Virgin, who were either stereotypically good or benignly negligent, e.g., they failed to concentrate while saying their prayers.44 He has taken a cardboard figure and given her many dimensions. The way he has achieved this is through his extraordinary manipulation of the genre. The particular ways in which the tale deviates from the norm reveals facets of the Prioress's character which make her seem very human. Chaucer has intrigued his readers for centuries with his keen perception of human nature, which, like human musculo-skeletal structure, does not change from one generation to the next. The particular qualities of human nature which he has given to the Prioress are presented in indirect ways throughout the tale and the portrait. Yet when these puzzle-like pieces of information are all put together we realize Chaucer has given us a very complete picture of who the Prioress is.

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Reserve is the first of the Prioress's characteristics which we question in the portrait. Chaucer gives us hints of excess in her personality, particularly in his description of her table manners, which seem comically excessive. When we look at the tale, we can see indirect answers to the question of reserve. Nearly every element of the tale is excessive: the child is entirely good, with no hint of human failing; the Jews are entirely evil; the schoolfellows are entirely innocent, and so on. The Prioress does not present any character in moderate terms, which would certainly make them more believable. Instead, she presents characters whose traits are exaggerated to the extent that they are sentimentalized. Reserve may be a character trait for which she herself aspires, but sentimentality with its emotional excesses comes more naturally to her.

The desire for reserve can be seen in her choice of genre. Although no restrictions were placed on the pilgrims in their choices of genre for their stories, it would have been extremely inappropriate for the Prioress to have chosen a non-religious genre, for example, a fabliau. As a Prioress, rather than a nun of lower rank, she would appropriately tell a miracle of the Virgin -- the highest female figure on the religious ladder -- rather than a
saint's legend. St. Cecilia might be interesting enough for the Second Nun but certainly not for the Prioress. This is also in keeping with Chaucer's comment that she wanted "... to ben holden digne of reverence." (1. 141) Who could be more revered than the Blessed Virgin? The Prioress's choice of genre lends her some of the reserve and dignity of the Blessed Virgin herself.

Oddly enough, in this tale the Virgin has a great deal of reserve, but very little compassion. This is the most conspicuous deviation from the pattern of miracles of the Virgin. It is also the most apparent way in which the Prioress's reserve is lost. To have compassion requires moderation and an ability to temper rigid personal reactions enough to be able to see another's point of view. The Prioress's excess allows no room for moderation. The Jews, for instance, are so evil that it is unthinkable that they could recognize their mistake, repent, be forgiven, and start a new life of good works. The Prioress gets carried away with the righteousness of her tale and abandons the reserve which makes compassion possible. A kind of compassion does exist for the Prioress, but only in the most rigid, severe theological sense.
The Blessed Virgin performs two acts of compassion: first, she allows the boy's body to be found and, second, she removes the grain from his tongue so he can stop singing. The first miracle does seem important to a twentieth-century reader who hears news reports daily about the tragedy of missing children. However, in the genre of miracles of the Virgin no one ever had to learn to live with a tragic loss -- the Virgin performed miracles to restore all loss. Chaucer's audience would have anticipated that the child not only be found but, more importantly, restored to life. The Blessed Virgin's compassion is incomplete, and as such, rather austere. Her second act of compassion allowed the boy to stop singing and enter Heaven. Since all baptized children are permitted to enter Heaven, the Virgin's miracle allows him silence. Since silence is the natural state of the dead, this act, too, seems like meager compassion. The Virgin has enormous dignity in this story, but where is the power of her love?

"Amor vincit omnia" the Prioress's brooch reads. The religious implications of this phrase when juxtaposed with this story result, at first, in cognitive dissonance for the reader. What, exactly, did love conquer? The mother and child love the Virgin but were denied the miraculous restoration of the child's life. The power of the Virgin's
love usually conquers the Jews in that they are so bedazzled by her miracles that they convert to Christianity. But the Jews in "The Prioress's Tale" were not conquered, they were killed. It is ironic that love conquers all yet leaves a hideous trail of death. As the story ends, the mother is left alone in her grief. Presumably, she continues to rely on the Virgin's compassion for solace.

The love and compassion which the Prioress describes in this story are peculiarly inconsistent with Christian theology, especially in light of Christ's often quoted words: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44) In the portrait we are told that the Prioress loves dogs, but we are not told that she had any sisterly or maternal love for any human being. The pathos is striking in her motto, "Amor vincit omnia." The tale she tells is filled with emotion but only the narrowest love and compassion -- and it conquers only in the most destructive fashion. The excessive and sentimental qualities of her tale indicate that she has a shallow grasp of human relationships.

Her portrait shows that she has no reason to be otherwise. Surely she had parents and siblings whom she left to enter the convent, and she must have come to know
some of the nuns. Yet her compassion is not expressed in terms of her family or her sisters, only in terms of her dogs. This suggests that she remains as emotionally isolated from everyone as she does from the other pilgrims. How could she be expected to have a profound knowledge of compassion when she never really has an opportunity to learn? One could argue that in view of Christ's words in the Book of Matthew, the Prioress's compassion is superficial and excessively simplistic. At the same time, one cannot deny the pathos inherent in the emotional isolation that could result in so narrow an interpretation of compassion.

The Prioress's emotional isolation is hinted at in the portrait when Chaucer says that she was amiable in order to impress people with her courtliness. The Prioress does not embrace the sacred world and live comfortably in it. If so, she probably would not feel compelled to impress anyone, but if she did, she would want to impress the pilgrims with her piety or some other aspect of religious life. The fact that she is so concerned with courtly behavior is an indication that her life in the priory is not sufficient to satisfy her. This dissatisfaction permeates her entire existence and is symbolized in the most basic survival needs of food, clothing and shelter. Her food she uses to show her courtly manners and to feed her pets, a distinctly clerical
extravagance. Her clothing is essentially clerical but shows the secular influences of extravagance in her cloak, beads, and brooch. She has left the shelter of her priory to join the people on the pilgrimage. Yet, the Prioress does not interact with the pilgrims except in an effort to impress them. The result is further emotional isolation. The pilgrims respect her but have no sense of comradery with her.

The Prioress does not and cannot belong to the courtly world but she cannot truly become one with the religious world. She seems to long for a secular existence, but at the same time, she is committed to religious life. Although most women were wives and mothers, the Prioress chose, for whatever reason, to isolate herself from the world at large by becoming a nun and to focus her existence on the worship of God. Even though we are not told why the Prioress chose to become a nun, or whether the decision was made for her, the fact that she was a Prioress rather than a lower ranking nun is an indication that the lifestyle suited her and in all likelihood was rewarding. If she had been miserable as a nun, she would not have sought or been given the additional responsibilities of a prioress. Still, she cannot or will not altogether let go of the world she supposedly left. In her portrait Chaucer shows us a woman
who has an elegant cloak, ornate rosary, and a golden brooch; this is a woman who openly enjoys mingling in the secular world and never, to her mind, inappropriately. Her careful manners as well as her selection of material pleasures suggest that she is very concerned with what is appropriate. Although her life is permeated with a vague dissatisfaction and a need to reach out into the world beyond the priory, her life is governed by a concern for being appropriate.

These three elements are central to the character of the Prioress: 1) dissatisfaction, 2) a need for the secular world, and 3) a concern for propriety. However, the Prioress has one other characteristic which influences each of the aforementioned; she is superficial. Chaucer prepares us for this in a comical way when he describes the way she carefully wipes her upper lip, but does not touch her lower lip or chin, since those areas would not reveal grease in the wine cup. Only what was readily apparent to her was important; it did not occur to her that the pilgrims would be far more aware of her chin. The same kind of superficiality exists in the three central elements of her character. Her dissatisfaction is not profound; if it were, she would not be a prioress. Her need for the secular world is limited to material pleasures; if it went any deeper she
would seek truly to befriend the pilgrims in an effort to interact emotionally with them.

Finally, her concern for what is appropriate is very much like her lip-wiping. It is so superficial that it is almost ridiculous. An example in the portrait is her brooch, which is appropriate in that Christ commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves, but the carnal connotations of the motto were so easily recognized as to make the nun slightly ludicrous. The chances are that she was well aware of these connotations, but chose not to recognize the fact that others would also know. If it appears to her to be appropriate, then it is, regardless of how others might see it. This is analogous to her mannerly attention to her mouth. If she thinks it is sufficient to wipe her upper lip only, then it is settled in her mind, regardless of how others might react to a greasy lower lip and chin.

The superficial regard for the appropriate is most evident in her story selection. She surely felt that a miracle of the Virgin would have been the most appropriate genre, just as love is an appropriate topic for a motto. And, just as Chaucer's audience must have been surprised at the motto, they probably were shocked when they did not hear a story which dazzled them with the power of the Holy Mother
to restore peace and safety in the threat of danger. On the other hand, the story itself was entirely appropriate to the character of the Prioress. Her tendency toward excess is well expressed in the sensationalism of the story of Hugh of Lincoln. What it lacked in hard fact it more than made up for in intensity of emotion. And, of course, the reverberations of that story were felt across all of England. The Prioress wanted to impress the pilgrims and so she chose a story that had impressed a king. All the references in the portrait to her worldliness prepare us for a story with its roots as much in the secular world as in the religious.

This tale is perfectly suited to the Prioress because it allows her to indulge vicariously in the secular world as she identifies with the mother; at the same time she can mentally wander back into the religious world by identifying with the saint-like little clergeon. Although I think that much of the Prioress's pleasure in telling her story is in alternating her sympathies with the representatives of these two different worlds, for the purpose of this study, I will separate them by beginning my discussion with the widow.

Some of the most moving lines in "The Prioress's Tale" describe the mother's anguish as she searches for her child.
The Prioress's identification with the mother is intense, at least until the Virgin performs her miracle. The initial attraction of this story for the Prioress is that she can not only identify with a member of the secular world, but she can also imagine what it would be like to have a child. If the Prioress were to have a son, surely he would be pure, innocent, and faithful, just like the little clergeon, and have close connections with the church. Also, if the Prioress does strive to imitate the Holy Mother, then her imaginary child would be Christ-like, as the little clergeon is...pious, good, gentle, and perfect. She would want very much to have a child exactly like the little clergeon.

Human nature is such that if we want something very much, and know we cannot have it, we resent its very existence. There is a rather primitive part of every person that responds with an attitude of "If I can't have it, nobody gets it!" This is one reason the Prioress has chosen this oddly atypical miracle of the Virgin; it is satisfying to a subtle hostility towards all children to have the little clergeon brutally murdered.

Another reason this story works well is that the Prioress can conclude she was wise not to have chosen motherhood; the poor widow's life as a mother became a
nightmare. Our nun can decide in telling this story that she is not missing out on much in denying herself this particular facet of life. In fact, she is sparing herself considerable misery. Even the best mother, the Holy Virgin, had an agonizing experience of it. Of course, it would be socially unacceptable to give even the slightest indication that she derived any kind of solace from the death of a child. She would also recognize that it would be wise to make an attack before the audience has time to question her reaction to the child, so she directs her anger towards the Jews. The historical truth is that it was socially acceptable to blame almost anything on the Jews. Her vehement attack on them might cause one to think that her purpose in telling the tale is to inflame anti-Semitic sentiment, and, in a sense, it is. But the purpose of arousing this excessive sentiment is to shift the focus of anger. However, as one critic has commented, "Paradoxically, the Prioress's indulgence in pathos and sentimentality, instead of establishing the purity of her heart, encourages suspicions that her pious hatred may mask a streak of cruelty."44

There is undeniable hostility in her story. The Prioress's sentimentality is offensive because it is self-indulgent and dishonest. She indulges her own feelings
of hostility towards the child, while dishonestly laying the source of this anger at the feet of the Jews.

At the same time that she identifies with the widow, the Prioress identifies with the child. The Prioress begins this mode of thought when she refers to herself in her prologue as a twelve month old child (1. 484). Both the Prioress and the little clergeon derive their identity from their affiliation with the church, and both display their piety through praising the Blessed Virgin. However, if she is identifying with the child, why does she tell a version of the story in which the child dies? Aside from enjoying the sentimentality of a death story, the Prioress is putting a theological theory into a real life situation, and imagining the outcome. We are told in the Bible that we must have the faith of a child, so she imagines a child whose faith is pure and simple. The story shows a sad fact of life, though. A truly innocent person cannot exist in the real world. In the cloistered walls of a religious institution, simple and pure childlike faith is all one needs, but the same approach to life in the world can be quite dangerous, as we witness in the fate of the little clergeon. Perhaps the Prioress has an ambivalent attitude about her instruction to be like a child; her prologue indicates that she desires that state, yet in her tale the
child is frighteningly vulnerable and, in fact, unable to survive. The Prioress has committed herself to a life which depends on the walls of the abbey for protection. Some of the hostility in this tale is directed towards religion which may not always provide protection for us. In the genre of miracles of the Virgin the faithful are always rescued by the Blessed Virgin. In real life, though, evil does befall good people. Still, all works out well in the end as the Prioress completes the illustration of her theology. Christ instructed his followers to have the faith of a child in order to get into heaven. The little clergeon does, we assume, go to heaven, since the Holy Virgin says that she will not forsake him (1. 669). Christianity also teaches that it is a great mistake to place emphasis on worldly existence. For everyone, life on earth is short compared to the eternal joy of heaven afforded to those whose faith is pure.

The Prioress's theology as she states it cannot be faulted. Even so, in her concluding lines, as she says, "Preye eek for us, we synful folk unstable," (1. 687) the Prioress herself seems to be left with a vaguely disquieted spirit, as though she knows her story to be misdirected in some subtle way that she cannot quite pinpoint. Our sympathies for her are aroused as she prays to God for
divine mercy (11. 688-690). Mercy is in short supply in her tale. Although there may be a kind of mercy for the mother in locating her child and for the child in allowing him to stop singing and die, there was not the slightest mercy in allowing the child to be murdered. Absolutely no mercy was given to the Jews. It is a final ironic twist that the Prioress, as ambiguous as her brooch, ends with a prayer for the one element of Christian theology severely lacking in her tale -- a recognition that all people have not only a longing but a crucial spiritual need for divine mercy.

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AN AFTERWORD: The Prioress Through Topaz Colored Glasses

As the prologue to "The Tale of Sir Thopas" begins, we have the sense that "The Prioress's Tale" has not quite finished. This effect is subtly conveyed through Chaucer's use of meter. Throughout The Canterbury Tales, the headlinks are usually written in heroic couplets whether they are connecting tales written in stanzaic form or prose. This headlink, though, is written in rhyme royal, as is "The Prioress's Tale." This is the first of many links between the two stories which allow "The Tale of Sir Thopas" to function as a kind of afterword to "The Prioress's Tale."

Chaucer often uses one tale to comment on the preceding tale. For example, "The Miller's Tale" parodies "The Knight's Tale." "The Tale of Sir Thopas" works in this way also; it is filled with phrases and plot structures which echo "The Prioress's Tale." The purpose of this parody is not to mock the Prioress, but rather to soften the audience's response to her. She has told a violent, vicious tale which makes her appear severe and rather frightening. Any religious person who has little compassion seems vaguely threatening. To make light of certain elements of her tale, and hence, her character, is to make her less intimidating
as the darker side of her character becomes less important. The effect of linking a burlesque like "Thopas" with a sentimental religious story like "The Prioress's Tale" is not to create a burlesque of the miracle tale, but only to cause us to question our initial response to the miracle, to make us recognize that we do not need to weep the sentimental tears that the Prioress expects from us.

It may seem unthinkable, at first, that parodic elements of the little clergeon exist in Thopas, but the two heroes have much in common. In the first place, the little clergeon is a child, only seven years old (1. 503) and Thopas is also called a "child" (11. 810, 817). In Thopas's case, the word is used to mean knight. However, Middle English contained many words for knight. The fact that "child" is used can be considered a conscious selection designed to reinforce the links between the two heroes. Of course, the Prioress refers to herself as a child in her prologue (1. 484), where she began with a religious ideal of innocence which she personified in the little clergeon. Chaucer caricatured the little clergeon, and, therefore, the Prioress, with the ridiculous young knight, Thopas. If Chaucer had openly caricatured the Prioress in the comparison with Thopas, the humor would become too sharp and biting. To use the little clergeon is to make the
comparison more subtle, and in so doing, to soften the effects of the parody.

Chaucer intertwines these three characters throughout "The Tale of Sir Thopas," occasionally linking Thopas more strongly with the Prioress than with the little clergeon. The physical description of Thopas is an example of this. Thopas had "sydes smale" (1. 836), white complexion (1. 725), "lippines rede as rose" (1. 726) and golden hair (1. 730). These terms sound as though they belong to the description of a romantic heroine. Others have said they can describe a person who is effeminate and timid. 47 It seems to me that physical characteristics which would be called "effeminate" or "timid" might appropriately describe a young teen-aged boy. Chaucer may be saying that although the little clergeon is truly a child, Sir Thopas is an overgrown child. However, these effeminate and romantic descriptions also call to mind the Prioress. The humor here is that she would probably enjoy being described in these terms if they were not also used for the idiotic Thopas.

In line 734 of "Sir Thopas," Chaucer says that "His robe was a syklatoun;" this was an expensive material 48 which was used by the Knights of Bath, royalty, and ecclesiastics. 49 To dress Thopas in this cloth re-
establishes connections between Thopas, since he was a knight, and the Prioress and her hero, since they are both associated with the church. The fact that royalty also wore this fabric reminds us of the Prioress's pleasure in sharing elements of royal and religious existence.

This sharing can be rather odd, as is evident in line 871, where Thopas swears on ale and bread. Knights usually swear on fancier creations, such as the peacock, swan, or heron. This oath might be a reference to the departing knight-errant's mass. Even if it is not a specific reference to that, it certainly is a crude reference to the sacrament of communion, which Christians used to celebrate the redemption of mankind through the death of Christ. This recalls the hymn "Alma Redemptoris" from "The Prioress's Tale." Interestingly, the effect of this particular link is not humor, but a recognition of the vaguely inappropriate qualities of the knight. Because the Prioress and Thopas are so intertwined, the reader is left questioning the Prioress's interpretation of appropriateness.

Both the little clergeon and Thopas love women who are referred to as queens. The little clergeon loves Mary, the Queen of Heaven (called a queen in 1. 481), and Thopas loves the elf-queen (1. 788). These two queens are further
connected by sharing a symbol: the lily flower. In the prologue to the Prioress's tale this flower is used as a conventional symbol of the Virgin Mary. In Thopas, the knight's armour is "As whit as is a lilye flour" (1. 867) and in his helmet he wears a lily flower. One critic, Mary Hamel, said that the lily on his helmet has the same function as the red sleeve the Maid of Astolat gave to Lancelot -- that of a token of a lover to be worn in a tournament. Because Thopas's lady is the elf-queen, the lily flower becomes her symbol.52 These women are powerful and immortal. The comparison is comical because the more they have in common the more apparent the major difference becomes; the elf-queen is not holy. For Chaucer, the pilgrim, to listen to the Prioress's story and "innocently" be reminded of another similar figure is to trivialize the Prioress's attitude about the Blessed Virgin. Because this blunder is made with such innocence, it is devoid of acidic satire -- it is somewhat silly, gentle humor.

Both Thopas and the little clergeon would like to hear stories involving religious people. The child wants to know the story of the "Alma Redemptoris," while Sir Thopas wants to hear romances "Of popes and of cardinales, And eek of love-likyng" (11. 849-850). Juxtaposing ecclesiastics with romances can only bring to the reader's mind the Prioress
and her motto. Chaucer hints at the Prioress's interest in romantic life in the portrait; to state openly that Thopas finds the topic of ecclesiastics and romance good story material is quite humorous. One has a sense that Thopas has innocently exposed the Prioress's secret which others may well recognize, but out of respect for her rigid dignity would not acknowledge.

With both Thopas and the little clergeon singing is a driving force. It is the little clergeon's effort to memorize the song that offends the Jews, and it seems to be through the repeated singing of it that the child is filled with the religious sentiment which inspires him to continue to sing it. No thinking process is involved in this effort; it is not a decision he makes. Nor does it seem to be a truly emotional response. It is emotion which is impelled by a kind of hypnotic repetition. Thopas has a similar experience when he "fil in love-longing, Al whan he herde the thrustel synge, And pryked as he were wood." (11. 772-774). It seems that the thrustlecock's singing is the sole inspiration for Thopas's love. He did not thoughtfully consider what he was doing, nor did he develop an emotional response; the bird simply sang and he was instantly in love. The Prioress also sings. She sings quite correctly, but without much reflection, just as she tells her story.
correctly, without much insight. For us to respond emotionally to the Prioress's tale would be a superficial sorrow, and as absurd as for Thopas to fall in love at the sound of the bird's voice.

In "The Prioress's Tale" the Jews were Satan's instrument of destruction for the little clergeon. In Thopas, they were also an instrument, but this time for protection. The hero wore "A fyn hawberk" (1. 863) which "Was al ywrght of Jewes weork." (1. 864). Jews were considered superb metal craftsmen throughout history. Thopas's "fyn hawberk" was an important and effective piece of armour which the Jews provided. They were also an instrument of protection, in another sense, for the Prioress in her tale. She trusted that she could use the Jews to protect her from unintentionally revealing her true feelings about the death of the child.

The little clergeon is referred to as being chaste (line 609) and Thopas is also called chaste (line 745). However, it is a rather small virtue since neither was faced with any sort of temptation. This is certainly to be expected in the case of the child, and it is made comically apparent in "The tale of Sir Thopas." "Thopas" is full of sexual imagery, none of which seems to lead to any real
temptation on the hero's part. Both Thopas and the little
clergeon are referred to as jewels, symbolic of chastity.
The child is an emerald (1. 609) and Thopas, of course, is a
topaz. The emerald signifies true innocence, while the
topaz is used by those who need help maintaining their
chaste state. The Prioress, too, has a jewel...a golden
brooch, ironically engraved with a motto of love, which
could be considered both profane and sacred. The humor is
in the ambiguity of "Amor vincit omnia." Should this phrase
be interpreted to mean the love of God conquers all evil or
that earthly love conquers all obstacles?

"The Tale of Sir Thopas" functions as an afterword by
setting up a pattern of comparisons. After having been
shown serious characteristics of the little clergeon,
Chaucer shows similar characteristics in Thopas, but the
young knight is idiotic and a cartoonish version of the
little clergeon. Where then does this put the Prioress who
has identified with the little clergeon? Is she also
caricatured by Thopas? Does she take on a kind of idiocy by
association? Government figures do not necessarily become
foolish through political cartoons; they become more human.
The effect is much the same for the Prioress. She wanted to
acquire the dignity of the Blessed Virgin by telling a
miracle of the Virgin. She did, momentarily, though she did
not get any compassion. In her unintentional association with Thopas she does not acquire his idiocy, but she loses her "borrowed" dignity. The humor in the parodic elements of Thopas softens our response to the Prioress, allowing her to become less removed from other people and therefore less threatening. Although "Thopas" does not change our concept of who the Prioress is, it does change our attitude toward her. The austerity of her tale left us with a distant coldness as though we saw her through an ice blue light. This tale, through its gentle humor, changes that light to a warmer hue, the soft golden color of the topaz.
NOTES


5Lowes 440.

6Lowes 441.

7Fisher 12.

8Fisher 12.


10Moorman 29.


13Lowes 441.


16Madeleva 15-16.

18Manly, New Light 206.

19Frank 347.

20"The Merchant's Surety" is found in Beverly Boyd, Middle English Miracles of the Virgin, (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1964), 44-49.

21The hymn is as follows:

Alma redemptoris mater, quae pervia cael;
Porta manes et stella maris, succurre caderti,
Surgere qui curat, populo. Tuquae genuisti,
Natura mirante, tuum sanctum genitorem,
Virgo prius ac posterius, Gabriellis ab ore
Sumens illud "Ave." peccatorum miserere.

[Loving mother of the Redeemer, open door to heaven
star of the sea, come quickly to the aid of your
people, fallen indeed but striving to stand again.
To nature's astonishment you were the mother of your
Holy Creator without ceasing to be a virgin,
and heard from Gabriel that greeting "Hail."
Have pity on us sinners.]

Both versions of this hymn are found in John C. Hirsh, "Re-opening 'The Prioress's Tale'," Chaucer Review, 9 (1975): 36.

22Wynkyn de Worde, Miracles of Our Blessed Lady, Wynkyn
de Worde, [1519]. This extensive collection is not
paginated, nor are the stories titled. I have assigned
them numbers in the order in which they appear. The
exceptions to the pattern are Story #7, in which people are
killed but revived, and Story #13, in which two adult monks
drown.

23For example, in de Worde's Story #15 roses spring
from the mouth that had prayed to the Blessed Virgin. In a
similar story, a lily springs from the grave of a good monk.
On each leaf "Ave Maria" is painted in gold. When the lily
is uprooted, the roots are found to be growing from the
dead monk's mouth (Story #16). In one of the more unusual
death stories, the monk who continues to say "Ave Maria's"
as he lay dying, miraculously has sweet breath. When he
finally dies, the fragrance of his breath lingers and the
whole town is filled with its sweetness (Story #27).


26 Brown 509. Essentially the same findings were produced in Brown's later work: The Miracle of Our Lady Told by Chaucer's Priorress, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner and Co., 1910). Brown discovered twenty-seven versions of the story, including the one told by the Priorress. Of these nineteen do not have the child die at all; in the remaining eight versions, five versions have life restored to the child.

27 "The Jewish Boy" is found in Boyd, pp 38-43. This is the only tale, other than the one the Priorress tells in which someone is punished. The boy's father is thrown into the oven as punishment for throwing his son into the oven. This same story is also found in "Miracles of the Virgin," ed. Ruth Wilson Tryon, Publication of the Modern Language Association, 38 (1923): 351-352, and in the "Element Series" compiled by Prior Dominic of Evesham in 1100-1150 and described by J. C. Jennings, "The Origins of the 'Element Series' of the Miracles of the Virgin," Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 6 (1968): 92.

28 "The Good Knight and His Jealous Wife" is found in Boyd, 92-104. This story is also included in Wynkyn de Worde's collection, Story #7.

29 "Of The Tumbler Of Our Lady" in Of The Tumbler Of Our Lady and Other Miracles, introduction and notes by Alice Kemp-Welch, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1909).

30 The one exception to this is the story of "The Jewish Boy" described in note 27, although the vengeance in this story is far less than in the Priorress's tale.


32 Langmuir 461.

33 It is interesting to compare the Paris account with that of the noted historian, Joseph Jacobs, who wrote in the late 1800's. His account is as follows:

On July 31, 1255, an eight year old child named Hugh (the son of a widow named Beatrice) fell into a cesspool
which was attached to the home of a Jew. For twenty-six days the body decomposed before it rose to the surface. In the meantime, Jews had gathered from all over England to celebrate a wedding in Lincoln. When they discovered the body they secretly carried it away from their houses and put it in a well. It was discovered on August 29. A crowd gathered around the well. John de Lexington, a canon of the cathedral, was among this crowd. He reminded the people of the rumor that Jews crucified Christian children. Little Hugh's body then received a martyr's funeral and was buried in the cathedral. A Jew named Copin or Jopin, influenced by John de Lexington, confessed to a ritual murder. Henry III, who came to Lincoln later, had Copin executed and all the Jews imprisoned in London. Of those, eighteen were executed, not because they were found guilty of the crime, but because they refused to subject themselves to the decision of a Christian jury. All the other Jews were freed in 1256.

34Langmuir 464-465. It is an odd fact that Paris had the mother discover the body in the house when all other accounts of the story had the body found elsewhere. Langmuir explains this by suggesting that Paris allowed his story to be influenced by the Marian legends in which the mother discovers her child singing. Also, he thinks that Paris's addition of disembowelment for augury or magic, which is also not included in other accounts, is borrowed from a version of the same Marian legend in which the child's belly is cut with the sign of the cross and the entrails removed and dumped in a privy along with the child's body. (pp. 466-467.)

35Langmuir 461.


37Grayzell 79. The Pope's words are item #116, July 5, 1247.

38Schoeck 258.

39Hirsh 31.

40Hirsh and Schoeck.

41Schoeck 253.

42Schoeck 258.
The one exception to this is the story of a nun who leaves the monastery with a man. The Blessed Virgin assumes the nun's shape and performs all her duties for her until she returns. This story was quite popular and can be found in a number of sources, including de Worde, #43.


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---. Miracles of Our Blessed Lady. Wynkyn de Worde [1519].