THE PRIORESS AND HER TALE

and

The Words of the Host to Chaucer the Pilgrim

The Interruption of Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas

The Epilogue to the Tale of Melibee

The Prologue to the Tale of the Monk
The Prioress is the head of a fashionable convent. She is a charming lady, none the less charming for her slight worldliness: she has a romantic name, Eglantine, wild rose; she has delicate table manners and is exquisitely sensitive to animal rights; she speaks French -- after a fashion; she has a pretty face and knows it; her nun's habit is elegantly tailored, and she displays discreetly a little tasteful jewelry: a gold brooch on her rosary embossed with the nicely ambiguous Latin motto: Amor Vincit Omnia, Love conquers all.

Here is the description of the Prioress from the General Prologue

There was also a nun, a PRIORESS, head of a convent
That of her smiling was full simple and coy. modest
120 Her greatest oath was but by Saint Eloy,1
And she was clep’d Madame Eglantine. called
Full well she sang the servici divine
Entunèd in her nose full seemély.2
And French she spoke full fair and fetisly nicely
125 After the school of Stratford at the Bow,
For French of Paris was to her unknow.3

Her good manners

At meaté well y-taught was she withall: meals / indeed
She let no morsel from her lippès fall,
Nor wet her fingers in her saucé deep.
130 Well could she carry a morsel and well keep handle
That no drop ne fell upon her breast.
In courtesy was set full much her lest: so that
Her over lippè wiped she so clean upper lip
That in her cup there was no farthing seen small stain

1 120: The joke that presumably lurks in this line is not explained by the knowledge that St. Eloy (or Loy or Eligius) was a patron saint of goldsmiths and of carters.

2 123: Another joke presumably, but again not adequately explained.

3 126: This is a snigger at the provincial quality of the lady's French, acquired in a London suburb, not in Paris. Everything about the prioress is meant to suggest affected elegance of a kind not especially appropriate in a nun: her facial features, her manners, her jewelry, her French, her clothes, her name. Eglantine = "wild rose" or "sweet briar." Madame = "my lady."
135 Of greasè, when she drunkèn had her draught.
Full seemly after her meat she raught,  
And sikerly she was of great desport  
And full pleasànt and amiable of port,  
And painèd her to counterfeit cheer

140 Of court,¹ and be estately of manner,
And to be holden digne of reverence.

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Her sensitivity

But for to speaken of her conscïence:
She was so charitable and so pitóus
She woulde weep if that she saw a mouse
Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bled.
Of smallè houndes had she that she fed
With roasted flesh or milk and wastel bread,
But sore wept she if one of them were dead
Or if men smote it with a yardè, smart;
And all was conscience and tender heart.

Her personal appearance

Full seemly her wimple pinchèd was,
Her nose tretis, her eyen grey as glass,
Her mouth full small and thereto soft and red,
But sikerly she had a fair forehead.

155 It was almost a spannè broad, I trow,
For hardly she was not undergrow.
Full fetis was her cloak as I was 'ware.
Of small coral about her arm she bare
A pair of beads gauded all with green,
And after: Amor Vincit Omnia.²

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¹ 139-40: She took pains to imitate the manners of the (king's) court.

² 161-2: The gold brooch on her rosary had a capital "A" with a crown above it, and a Latin motto meaning "Love conquers all," a phrase appropriate to both sacred and secular love. It occurs in a French poem that Chaucer knew well, *The Romance of the Rose* (21327-32), where Courteoisie quotes it from Virgil's *Eclogue* X, 69, to justify the plucking of the Rose by the
THE PRIORESS'S TALE

Introduction

The tale of the Prioress is, appropriately, a pious story, suitable to both her profession and to aspects of her personality that we have seen in the General Prologue. It is a tale designed to appeal more to the feelings than to the mind, not to convince or persuade, but to move to devotional feeling. It has some interesting contrasts: pious sentimentality side by side with ethnic bias and ready acceptance of the terrible punishment of the guilty; a stress on simplicity side by side with a modified "aureation" in the verse; praise of virginity together with intense feeling for motherhood, a virgin telling a tale about a Virgin Mother and a widowed mother — the first good for inspiring devotion, the second pity. There are some other well-known elements of affecting narrative or drama: the innocent little son of the widowed mother, murdered on the way home from school and his body thrown in a privy; the poor mother, frantic when he does not come home, eventually finding him dead; his miraculous revival to sing and speak in honor of Our Lady and then pass away finally to go to his eternal reward.

Alfred David regards the story as a kind of fairy tale turned into hagiography (the lifestory of a saint), complete with innocents and uncomplex villains who have no "personalities," no psychologies, but who are simply good or bad (Strumpet Muse, 209). The boy is "little," "young," "tender" etc. The villains are "cursed," "a wasp's nest of Satan" who "conspire" to murder the little boy. Fairy tale and hagiography have villains who are impossibly bad and victims who are impossibly good. But the Prioress's tale is affectingly sentimental in ways that the folk tale or the saint's legend rarely are. It is also uninterested in the sometimes gruesome details that characterize the descriptions of the penances of the saintly or the tortures of the martyred in collections of saints' lives like The Golden Legend. We are always told by critics that her tale is a "Miracle of the Virgin" class of story, which it is; but it is also a saint's life both like and unlike those in The Golden Legend. Critics who remark on the Prioress's "pitiless attitude towards the murderers" or her "overt streak of cruelty masked as pious hatred" are neglecting medieval hagiography where they would read as Chaucer and his Prioress read

Lover, a decidedly secular, indeed sexual, act of "Amor".
Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And in the upshot purposes mistook
Fallen on the inventors heads.

The life of St Quentin in The Golden Legend gets much of this into one page. More fully developed versions can be found in the life of almost any martyr. Take, for example, the Life of St Catherine where, among other things, the instruments of blood and torture literally fall on the inventors' heads, and one is spared few of the other horrible details. The casual way in which bloody and unnatural acts are recounted in the Prioress's tale is really part of the genre, and says little about her personally. It is matched again and again in the hagiographical collections, but with the difference that Madame Eglantine's fastidiousness (or Chaucer's) spares us most of the ugly details.

Unlike most saints' legends there is a strange namelessness to the milieu and characters of this story, which takes place in an unconvincing "Asia" (pagan?), with Christians and Jews, none of whom has a name, living in a nameless town with a provost whose affiliation remains unnamed.

The Jewish villains are no more sharply conceived than the city or the other citizens. As David Benson remarks (p. 132), they are the villains as the Muslims are in The Man of Law's Tale or the Romans in The Second Nun's Tale; they are all "infidels" of one sort or another. Since the Second World War we have all become more conscious of nominating villains in that sort of stereotyped way, especially Jews. Only recently, with the case of Salman Rushdie and The Satanic Verses, have we been sensitized perhaps to the feelings of another and even larger group of people, the Muslims, an easy contempt for whom can sometimes be found in medieval writers totally ignorant of their beliefs. In English, for example, "maumet" meant an idol, and "maumetry" idolatry, although Mohammed expressly forbade idolatry.

Jews or Muslims or Romans are the villains in some of these medieval tales, as Catholics became in much English literature from the Reformation onwards, most markedly in Gothic novels of the Monk Lewis variety where the wicked "immorality" of the monk or nun is not just casually mentioned, but is painted in full vivid colors, savoring every cruel or lascivious moment, a kind of pious pornography made safe for the prurient reader by the "given" wickedness of the perpetrators. The Prioress's Tale is chaste and restrained by comparison. Jews or Muslims were to the medieval
audience who had met neither, as vaguely sinister or as wicked as monks and nuns were to many 19th-century Anglo-Saxons who had never met either. An ironic turn of Fortune's Wheel.

The tale's mixture of sentiment, pathos and horror succeeds as well with the other pilgrims as the fabliau of the Miller or the romance of the Knight. They are all momentarily hushed with a kind of awe more appropriate to the pilgrimage mentality than we have seen up to now.
PROLOGUE to the PRIORESS'S TALE

Domine Dominus noster. (Psalm 8)  
O lord, our lord.

O Lord, Our Lord, thy name how marvellous  
Is in this large world y-spread (quod she),

For not only thy laud precious  
Your praise is celebrated
Performèd is by men of dignity,  
Praise but by the mouth of children thy bounty
But by the mouth of children thy bounty  
Praise Performèd is, for on the breast sucking
Sometimes shown they thy herying.

Wherefore in laud, as I best can or may,  
In honor Of thee and of the white lily-flower
Which that thee bore, and is a maid alway,  
Who gave you birth To tell a story I will do my labouř;
Not that I may encreasen her honoůr,

For she herself is honour and the root  
Honor / salvation Of bounty, next her son, and soul's boote.¹

O mother maid, O maiden mother free!  
Free from sin? O bush unburnt, burning in Moses' sight,
That ravishedest down from the deity,  
Drew down / Godhead Through thy humblesst, the Ghost that in thee alight,
Of whose virtue, when He thine heartē light,  
Power / gladdened Conceivèd was the Father's Sapience²
Help me to tell it in thy reverence.

Lady, thy bounty, thy magnificence,

Thy virtue and thy great humility
There may no tongue express in no science.

For sometimes, lady, ere men pray to thee,

¹ 1655-6: "Next to her Son she is the source or all honor and salvation."

² 1658-62: The Burning Bush which Moses saw burning but not burnt (Exodus 3), was regarded as a symbol of Mary, both virgin and mother. She conceived Christ (the Wisdom of the Father) by the power (virtue) of the Holy Spirit which alighted upon her, and hence remained a virgin even after she had conceived.
Thou go’st before of thy benignity, of your goodness
And gettest us the light, of thy prayer, by thy
To guiden us unto thy Son so dear.

My cunning is so weak, O blissful Queen, understanding / blessed
For to declare thy greaté worthiness,
That I ne may the weighté not sustain;
But as a child of twelve months old or less,
That can unneth any word express scarcely
Right so fare I. And therefore, I you pray, Just so am I
Guideth my song that I shall of you say. about you

THE PRIORESS'S TALE

There was in Asia in a great city,
Amongst Christian folk, a Jewery, Jewish section
Sustainèd by a lord of that country
For foul usúre and lucre of villainy usury / wicked gain
Hateful to Christ and to his company.¹ His followers
And through the street men mighté ride and wend, & walk
For it was free and open at either end.

A little school of Christian folk there stood
Down at the farther end, in which there were group
Children a heap, y-come of Christian blood,
That learnèd in that schoolè year by year education
Such manner doctrine as men usèd there. (to go) to / custom

This is to say, to singen and to read,
As smallè children do in their childhood.

Among these children was a widow’s son,
A little clergeon seven years of age, student
That day by day to schoolel was his wone. (to go) to / custom
And eke also, where as he saw th’imáge in addition / statue

¹ 1680 ff.: Strictly speaking, usury (charging interest on money lent) was condemned by theologians and was illegal in Christendom, but since rulers often needed large loans, they sometimes allowed Jews to be interest-charging bankers, and protected them.
Of Christe’s mother, had he in uságe,
As him was taught, to kneel adown and say
His “Ave Mary” as he goes by the way.

Thus hath this widow her little son y-taught
Our blissful Lady, Christe’s mother dear,
To worship aye; and he forgot it not,
For silly child will alday soonere.
But aye when I remember on this mat té, Saint Nicholas stands ever in my presénce,
For he so young to Christ did reveréncé.²

This little child his little book learning,
As he sat in the school at his primer,
He "Alma Redemptoris"  heard sung,
As children learned their antiphoner;
And as he durst, he drew him near and near,
And hearkened aye the words and the note,
Till he the firste verse could all by rote.

Nought wist he what this Latin was to say,
For he so young and tender was of age;
But on a day his fellow gan he pray
T’expounden him this song in his language,
Or tell him why this song was in uságe.
This prayed he him to construe and declare,
Full often time upon his knees bare.

His fellow, which that elder was than he,
Answered him thus: "This song, I have heard say,

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¹ 1699–1701: “This widow has taught her little son to honor always Our Lady, Christ’s mother.”
² 1704–5: When an infant at the breast, St. Nicholas used to feed only once a day on Wednesdays and Fridays! Note that in “presence” and “reverence” the accent was on the final syllable as in a number of other words derived directly from French.
³ 1708: A Latin hymn whose opening words "Alma Redemptoris Mater" mean "O dear mother of the Redeemer."
PRIORESS’S TALE

Was makèd of our blissful Lady free,
Her to salue, and eke her for to pray
To be our help and succour when we die.

I can no more expound in this mattèr.
I learnè song; I can but small grammér."

"And is this song makèd in reverence
Of Christè's mother?" said this innocent.

"Now certès I will do my diligence
to con it all ere Christmas is went.
Though that I for my primer shall be shent
And shall be beaten thricè in an hour,
I will it con Our Lady for t’honoúr."

His fellow taught him homeward privily,
From day to day, till he could it by rote.
And then he sang it well and boldly,
From word to word, according with the note.
Twice a day it passèd through his throat,
To schoolward and homeward when he went;

On Christè's mother set was his intent.

As I have said, throughout the Jewèry
This little child, as he came to and fro,
Full merrily would he sing and cry
"O Alma Redemptoris" ever mo'.

The sweetness hath his hearté piercèd so
Of Christè's mother, that to her to pray
He cannot stint of singing by the way.

Our firstè foe, the serpent Satanas,
That hath in Jews' heart his wasps nest,

Up swelled, and said: "O Hebraic people, alas!
Is this to you a thing that is honést,
That such a boy shall walke as him lest
In your despite, and sing of such sentence,
Which is against your law's reverence?"
From thenceforth the Jews have conspired
This innocent out of the world to chase.
A homicide thereto have they hired
That in an alley had a privy place.
And as the child gan forby for to pace,
This cursed Jew him hent and held him fast,
And cut his throat, and in a pit him cast.
I say that in a wardrobe they him threw,
Where as these Jews purgen their entrail.
O cursed folk of Herod’s all new,¹
What may your evil intent you avail?
Murder will out, certain it will not fail!
And namely there the honor of God shall spread,
The blood out crieth on your cursed deed!

O martyr souded to virginity,
Now mayst thou singen, following ever in one
The White Lamb celestial (quod she)
Of which the great Evangelist Saint John
In Patmos wrote — which says that they that gon
Before this Lamb and sing a song all new,
That never — fleshly — women they ne knew.²

This poor widow waiteth all that night
After her little child, but he came not.
For which, as soon as it was day’s light,
With face pale of dread and busy thought
She has at school and elsewhere him sought;
Till finally she gan so far espy,
That he last seen was in the Jewery.

¹ 1764: The reference is to Herod the Great who was responsible for the massacre of the Innocents at Bethlehem around the birth of Christ (Matthew 2).

² 1769-75: A reference to the 144,000 virgins who follow the Lamb in heaven and sing “as it were a new canticle before the throne.” The reference is to the Apocalypse XIV of St. John the Evangelist who supposedly wrote on the island of Patmos.
With mother’s pity in her breast enclosed
She goes, as she were half out of her mind,
To every place where she hath supposed
By likelihood her little child to find.
And ever on Christe’s mother, meek and kind,
She cried. And at the last thus she wrought:
Among the cursèd Jewès she him sought.

She fraineth and she prayeth piteously
To every Jew that dwelt in thilk place
To tell her if her child went ought forby.
They saide nay; but Jesus of his grace
Gave in her thought, within a little space,
That in that place after her son she cried
Where he was casten in a pit beside. ¹

O greatè God, that performest thy laud
By mouth of innocents, lo, here thy might!
This gem of chastity, this emerald,
And eke of martyrdom the ruby bright,
There he with throat y-carven lay upright
He ”Alma Redemptoris” ’gan to sing
So loud that all the place began to ring!

The Christian folk that through the streete went
In comen for to wonder on this thing,
And hastily they for the provost sent.
He came anon, withouten tarrying,
And herieth Christ, that is of heaven king,
And eke his mother, honour of mankind,
And after that the Jewès let he bind.

This child with piteous lamentation
Up taken was, singing his song alway,
And with honoúr of great procession

¹ 1794-6: “Put it into her head after a little while that she should cry out for her son at the spot where he had been cast into the pit.”
They carry him unto the next abbey.

1815 His mother swooning by this bier lay.
Unneth might the people that was there
This newë Rachel bringen from his bier.¹

With torment and with shameful death each one
The Provost doth these Jewës for to starve
That of this murder wist, and that anon,
He wouldë no such cursedness observe:
"Evil shall have what evil will deserve!"
Therefore with wilde horse he did them draw; ²
And after that he hung them by the law.

1820 That of this murder wist, and that anon,
He wouldë no such cursedness observe:
"Evil shall have what evil will deserve!"
Therefore with wilde horse he did them draw; ²
And after that he hung them by the law.

1825 Upon his bier aye lies this innocent
Before the chief altar, while mass lasts;
And after that the abbot with his convent
Have sped them for to bury him full fast;
And when they holy water on him cast
Yet spoke this child when sprend was holy water
And sang "O Alma Redemptoris Mater."

This abbot which that was a holy man,
As monks been — or elsë ought to be —
This youngë child to conjure he began,
And said, "O dearë child, I halsë thee,
In virtue of the Holy Trinity,
Tell me what is thy causë for to sing,
Since that thy throat is cut, to my seeming."
"My throat is cut unto my neckë-bone"

1830 Said this child, "and as by way of kind
I should have died, yea, longë time agone.
But Jesus Christ, as you in bookës find,

¹ 1817: The reference is to the liturgy for the Feast of Holy Innocents which has the reading from Matt.
² 1823: "horse" is plural, as in "a regiment of horse".
Wills that his glory last and be in mind;  
And for the worship of his mother dear  
Yet may I sing `O Alma` loud and clear.

"This well of mercy, Christè's mother sweet,  
I loved always as after my cunning;  
And when that I my life should forlete  
To me she came, and bade me for to sing  
This anthem verily in my dying,  
As you have heard. And when that I had sung,  
Me thought she laid a grain upon my tongue.

Wherefore I sing and singè must, certáin,  
In honour of that blissful maiden free,  
Till from my tongue off taken is the grain;  
And after that thus said she unto to me,  'My little child, now will I fetch thee  
When that the grain is from thy tongue y-take.  
Be not aghast, I will thee not forsake."  
This holy monk, this abbot, him mean I,  
His tongue out caught, and took away the grain;  
And he gave up the ghost full softly.  
And when this abbot had this wonder seen,  
His saltè tears trickled down as rain  
And gruf he fell all plat upon the ground,  
And still he lay as he had been y-bound.

The convent eke lay on the pavèment  
Weeping, and herying Christè's mother dear.  
And after that they rise and forth been went  
And took away this martyr from his bier.  
And in a tomb of marblestonès clear  
Enclosed they his little body sweet.  
Where he is now God leve us for to meet!

O youngè Hugh of Lincoln, slain also  
With cursèd Jewès, as it is notáble
(For it is but a little while ago)¹
Pray eke for us, we sinful folk unstable,
That of his mercy God so mercifull
On us his great mercy multiply,
1880 For reverence of his mother Mary.
Amen

The Words of the Host to Chaucer the Pilgrim

When said was all this miracle, every man
As sober was that wonder was to see;
Till that our Hoste jape he began,
And then at erst he lookèd upon me,
1885 And sayde thus: "What man art thou?" quod he.
"Thou lookest as thou wouldest find a hare,
For ever upon the ground I see thee stare.

?Approache near and look up merrily!
Now, ware you, sirs, and let this man have place.
1890 He in the waist is shape as well as I:
This were a puppet in an arm t'embrace
For any woman, small and fair of face!
He seemeth elvish by his countenance,
For unto no wight does he dalliance.

1895 Say now somewhat, since other folk have said:
Tell us a tale of mirth, and that anon. "
"Host," quod I, "ne be not evil apaid,
For other tale, certès, can I none,
But of a rime I learned long agon,"
1900 "Yea, that is good," quod he. "Now shall we hear
Some dainty thing, me thinketh by his cheer."

¹ 1874-6: Hugh of Lincoln was supposed to have been murdered by Jews in 1255, hardly a short time ago for someone writing or speaking in the 1380's or 1390's.
The Pilgrim Chaucer tells his tale of Sir Thopas, a ridiculous knight (we omit it here). It is a parody of English verse romances of a kind common in and before Chaucer's time which were written in a jog-trot kind of verse that quickly becomes tedious. The Host cannot stand it for more than about 200 lines and interrupts rudely:

Interruption of Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas

"No more of this, for God's dignity,"

2110 Quod our Hoste, "for thou makest me
So weary of thy very lewèdness
That, all so wisly God my soul bless,
My earès achen of thy drasty speech.
Now such a rime the devil I beteach.

2115 This may well be rime doggerel," quod he.
"Why so?" quod I. "Why wilt thou lettè me
More of my talè than another man.
Since that it is the bestè rime I can?"
"By God," quod he, "For plainly at a word,
Thy drasty riming is not worth a turd!
Thou dost naught elsè but dispenderst time:
Sir, at a word, thou shalt no longer rime.
Let's see whe'r thou canst tellen aught in geste,
Or tell in pros somet, at the least,

2120 In which there be some mirth or some doctrine."
"Gladly," quod I. "By God's sweetè pain,
I will you tell a little thing in prose
That ought to liken you, as I suppose,
Or else certès you be too daungerous.

2125 It is a moral talè virtuous,
Albeit told sometime in sundry wise,
Of sundry folk, as I shall you devise.
As thus: You wot that every evangelist
That telleth us the pain of Jesus Christ

2130 Ne saith not all things as his fellow doth;
But natheless, their sentence is all sooth,
And all accorden, as in their senténce,  
All be there in their telling difference.  
For some of them say more and some say less

When they his piteous passion express;  
I mean of Mark and Matthew, Luke, and John;  
But doubtèless their sentence is all one.  
Therefore, lordings all, I you beseech,  
If that you think I vary as in my speech,

As thus, though that I tellè somewhat more  
Of proverbès than you have heard before  
Compre'nded in this little treatise here,  
To enforcen with th' effect of my mattér,  
And though I not the samè wordès say

As you have heard—yet to you all I pray  
Blameth me not, for as in my senténce  
Shall you nowhere finden difference  
From the sentence of this treatisè lite  
After the which this merry tale I write.

And, therefore, hearken what that I shall say,  
And let me tellen all my tale, I pray."

THE TALE OF MELIBE

Chaucer the Pilgrim now tells a long "tale" in prose and full of proverbs, about Melibee and his wife Prudence, a woman who incarnates her name, especially in urging upon her husband the virtue of restraint, even when his anger is justified. It is more "treatise" than tale, and is salutary, no doubt, but not very entertaining, and it strains our suspension of disbelief to think of it as being told to the pilgrims. In fact in the lines above Chaucer the writer does slip and has "this merry tale I write." It is not a "merry" tale by any standards, and is omitted here, but the Host's response to this tale about a woman so different from his own wife is included.

EPILOGUE TO THE TALE OF MELIBE

When ended was my tale of Melibee
And of Prudence and her benignity,
Our Hostè said, "As I am faithful man!
And by that precious corpus Madrian, 
I had lever than a barrel ale
That Goodelief my wife had heard this tale!

For she is nothing of such patience
As was this Melibeus' wife Prudéncé!
By God's bones, when I beat my knaves,
She bringeth me the great clubbèd staves,
And crieth: 'Slay the doggès, every one,
And break them bothè back and every bone!'
And if that any neighbór of mine
Will not in church unto my wife incline,
Or be so hardy to her to trespass,
When she comes home she rampeth in my face
And crieth: 'Falsè coward, wreak thy wife!
By corpus bone, I will have thy knife
And thou shalt have my distaff and go spin!' From day to night right thus she will begin:
`Alas,' she says, `that ever I was shape
To wed a milksop or a coward ape,
That will be overled of every wight!
Thou darest not standen by thy wife's right!' This is my life, but if that I will fight.
And out at door anon I must me dight,
Or else I am but lost, but if that I
Be like a wildè lion foolhardy.
I wot well she will do me slay some day
Some neighbór and thennè go my way;
For I am perilous with knife in hand,
Albeit that I dare not her withstand,
For she is big in armès, by my faith.
That shall he find that her misdoth or saith
But let us pass away from this matter.

PROLOGUE TO THE TALE OF THE MONK

My lord the Monk," quod he, "be merry of cheer,
For you shall tell a talè truly.
Lo, Rochester stands herē  ē by!
   ē lord, break not our game!
   ē not your name.

Whe'r shall I callē you my lord Daun John?

Or Daun Thomas or else Daun Alban? 1

Of what house be you, by your father's kin?

I vow to God, thou hast a full fair skin.

It is a gentle pasture where thou goest!

Thou art not like a penitent or a ghost!

Upon my faith, thou art some officer,

Some worthy sexton, or some cellarer,

For by my father's soul, as to my doom,

Thou art a master when thou art at home,

No poor cloisterer, nor no novice,

But a governor, wily and wise,

And therewithal of brawnēs and of bones

A well-faring person for the nones!

I pray God give him confusion

That first thee brought into religïon.

Thou wouldst have been a treadēfowl aright.

Hadst thou as great a leave as thou hast might

To perform all thy lust in engendrúre,

Thou hadst begotten many a créâtūre!

Alas, why wearest thou so wide a cope?

God give me sorrow but, an' I were Pope,

Not only thou, but every mighty man,

Though he were shorn full high upon his pan,

Should have a wife, for all the world is lorn;

Religious hath take up all the corn

Of treading; and we burel men be shrimps!

Of feeble trees there comen wretched imps;

This maketh that our heirès be so slender

And feeble that they may not well engender;

This maketh that our wivês will assay

Religious folk, for they may better pay

Of Venus's payments than may we.
God wot, no Lusheburghès payen ye!
But be not wroth, my lord, though that I play:
Full oft in game a sooth I have heard say."

This worthy Monk took all in patience,
And said, "I will do all my diligence,
As far as soundeth into honesty,
To telle you a tale or two or three.
And if you list to hearken hitherward,
I will you say the life of Saint Edward.
Or else, first, tragedies will I tell,
Of which I have a hundred in my cell.
Tragedy is to say a certain story
(As old books make us memory)
Of him that stood in great prosperity
And is y-fallen out of high degree
Into misery, and endeth wretchedly.
And they be versified commonly
Of six feet, which men clepe hexametron.
In prose eke be endited many a one
And eke in meter in many a sundry wise.
Lo, this declaring ought enough suffice.
Now hearken if you liketh for to hear.
But first I you beseech in this matter,
Though I by order tell not these things,
Be it of popes, emperors, or kings,
After their ages as men written find,
But tell them some before and some behind,
As it now comes unto my remembrance;
Have me excused of my ignorance."

As he has promised, the Monk tells a series of "tragedies", that is, in his own
definition, stories about people who have fallen from "prosperity" and "high degree"
and have died "in misery". This kind of story was a genre in itself in the Middle Ages,
sometimes referred to as "De Casibus Illustrium Virorum" (Concerning the Fall of
Great Men). The Monk's stories (omitted here) range from the fall of Lucifer and the
fall of Adam in Paradise, through secular and sacred history, to the "modern
instances" of men like Peter de Lusignan, King of Cyprus, who had led the capture
of Alexandria at which the Knight of the pilgrimage had been present. Peter was assassinated in 1369. It has been suggested that this story provides a good excuse for the Knight to intervene and stop what has become a rather tedious list. Donald Fry suggested that the Knight is distressed to hear of the fate of his old commander; more sardonically Terry Jones says that the Knight interrupts because he sees his old commander being represented as coming to a bad end because of the kind of wicked things he had done, including the sack of Alexandria.

The Knight’s intervention is vigorously supported by the Host who asks the Nun’s Priest for a more cheerful tale. He cheerfully obliges.