

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

<p>There was also a nun, a PRIORESS, That of her smiling was full simple and coy. 120 Her greatest oath was but by Saint Eloy,¹ And she was clepèd Madame Eglantine. Full well she sang the servicè divine Entunèd in her nose full seemèly.² And French she spoke full fair and fetisly 125 After the school of Stratford at the Bow, For French of Paris was to her unknow.³</p>	<p><i>head of a convent</i> <i>modest</i> <i>called</i> <i>nicely</i></p>
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Her good manners

<p>At meatè well y-taught was she withall: She let no morsel from her lippès fall, Nor wet her fingers in her saucè deep. 130 Well could she carry a morsel and well keep That no drop ne fell upon her breast. In courtesy was set full much her lest: Her over lippè wipèd she so clean That in her cup there was no farthing seen</p>	<p><i>meals / indeed</i> <i>handle</i> <i>So that</i> <i>v. much her interest</i> <i>upper lip</i> <i>small stain</i></p>
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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 seemèly after her meat she raught, And sikerly she was of great desport And full pleasánt and amiable of port, And painèd her to counterfeitè cheer	<i>reached for her food certainly / charm behavior imitate the manners</i>
140	Of court, ¹ and be estately of mannér, And to be holden digne of reverence.	<i>thought worthy</i>

Her sensitivity

145	But for to speaken of her conscience: She was so charitable and so pitóus She wouldè weep if that she saw a mouse Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bled. Of smallè houndès 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;	<i>sensitivity moved to pity fine bread a stick smartly</i>
150	And all was conscience and tender heart.	

Her personal appearance

155	Full seemèly 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. It was almost a spannè broad, I trow, For hardily 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,	<i>headdress pleated handsome / eyes and also certainly handsbreadth / I guess certainly / short? thin? elegant / aware bore, carried A rosary decorated</i>
160	And thereon hung a brooch of gold full sheen On which was written first a crownèd A And after: Amor Vincit Omnia. ²	<i>shining Love Conquers All</i>

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 largè world y-spread (quod she),
 1645 For not only thy laud precious *your praise*
 Performèd is by men of dignity, *is celebrated*
 But by the mouth of children thy bounty *praise*
 Performèd is, for on the breast sucking
 Sometimes shown they thy herying. *thy praises*
- 1650 Wherefore in laud, as I best can or may, *in honor*
 Of thee and of the whitè lily-flower
 Which that thee bore, and is a maid alway, *who gave you birth*
 To tell a story I will do my labour;
 Not that I may encreasen her honoúr,
 1655 For she herself is honour and the root
 Of bounty, next her son, and soulè's boote.¹ *honor / salvation*
- 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*
 1660 Through thy humbless, the Ghost that in thee alight, *descended*
 Of whose virtue, when He thine heartè light, *power / gladdened*
 Conceivèd was the Father's Sapience² *Wisdom*
 Help me to tell it in thy reverence. *honor*
- Lady, thy bounty, thy magnificence,
 1665 Thy virtue and thy great humility
 There may no tongue express in no sciéce. *branch of learning*
 For sometimes, lady, ere men pray to thee, *before*

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*
 1670 To guiden us unto thy Son so dear.

My cunning is so weak, O blissful Queen, *understanding / blessed*
 For to declare thy greatè worthiness,
 That I ne may the weightè not sustain;
 But as a child of twelve months old or less,
 1675 That can unnethè 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,
 Amongest Christian folk, a Jewery, *Jewish section*
 1680 Sustained 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 mightè ride and wend, *& walk*
 For it was free and open at either end.

1685 A little school of Christian folk there stood
 Down at the farther end, in which there were
 Children a heap, y-come of Christian blood, *group*
 That learned in that schoolè year by year
 Such manner doctrine as men usèd there. *education*

1690 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 schoolè was his wone. *(to go) to / custom*
 1695 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 Christè's mother, had he in uságe,
 As him was taught, to kneel adown and say
 His "Ave Mary" as he goes by the way.
- it was his habit
 (to) him
 Ave Maria i.e. Hail Mary*
- 1700 Thus hath this widow her little son y-taught
 Our blissful Lady, Christè's mother dear,
 To worship aye; ¹ and he forgot it not,
 For silly child will alday soonè lere.
 But aye when I remember on this mattér,
 Saint Nicholas stands ever in my présénce,
 1705 For he so young to Christ did reverénce.²
- blessed lady
 always
 young / always / learn
 always*
- This little child his little book learning,
 As he sat in the school at his primer,
 He "Alma Redemptoris" heardè sing, ³
 As children learnèd their antiphoner;
- 1710 And as he durst, he drew him near and near,
 And hearkened aye the wordès and the note,
 Till he the firstè verse could all by rote.
- elementary book
 heard sung
 hymn book
 dared / nearer
 listened / music
 knew by heart*
- Nought wist he what this Latin was to say,
 For he so young and tender was of age;
- 1715 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.
- He didn't know / meant
 fellow student / ask
 To explain to him
 was used
 translate / explain*
- 1720 His fellow, which that elder was than he,
 Answered him thus: "This song, I have heard say,

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."

- Was makèd of our blissful Lady free, *made about / gracious*
 Her to salue, and eke her for to pray *greet*
 To be our help and succour when we die. *and aid*
- 1725 I can no more expound in this mattér.
 I learné song; I can but small grammér." *I don't know much grammar*
- "And is this song makèd in reverence
 Of Christè's mother?" said this innocent.
 "Now certès I will do my diligence *do my best*
 1730 To con it all ere Christmas is went. *To learn / before C.*
 Though that I for my primer shall be shent *schoolbook / punished*
 And shall be beaten thricè in an hour,
 I will it con Our Lady for t'honour." *will learn it*
- His fellow taught him homeward prively, *privately*
 1735 From day to day, till he could it by rote. *knew it by heart*
 And then he sang it well and boldly,
 From word to word, according with the note. *with the music*
 Twice a day it passèd through his throat,
 To schoolward and homeward when he went;
 1740 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'.
 1745 The sweetness hath his heartè piercèd so
 Of Christè's mother, that to her to pray
 He cannot stint of singing by the way. *cannot stop*
- Our firstè foe, the serpent Satanus,
 That hath in Jews' heart his wasps nest,
 1750 Up swelled, and said: "O Hebraic people, alas!
 Is this to you a thing that is honést, *allowable*
 That such a boy shall walken as him lest *as he pleases*
 In your despite, and sing of such sentence, *To insult / doctrine*
 Which is against your law's reverence?"

- 1755 From thenceforth the Jewes have conspired
 This innocent out of the world to chase.
 A homicide thereto have they hired *murderer*
 That in an alley had a privy place. *secret*
 And as the child gan forby for to pace, *to pass that way*
- 1760 This cursèd Jew him hent and held him fast, *seized*
 And cut his throat, and in a pit him cast.
- I say that in a wardrobe they him threw, *cesspool*
 Where as these Jewes purgen their entrail. *empty their bowels*
 O cursèd folk of Herodes all new,¹ *Herod*
- 1765 What may your evil intent you avail?
 Murder will out, certain it will not fail! *without fail*
 And namely there the honor of God shall spread,
 The blood out crieth on your cursèd deed!
- O martyr souted to virginity, *devoted to*
- 1770 Now mayst thou singen, following ever in one
 The White Lamb celestial (quod she)
 Of which the great Evangelist Saint John *Revelations XIV, 1-4.*
 In Patmos wrote — which says that they that gon *go*
 Before this Lamb and sing a song all new,
 1775 That never — fleshly — women they ne knew.² *sexually*
- 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
- 1780 She has at school and elsèwhere him sought;
 Till finally she gan so far espy,
 That he last seen was in the Jewèry.

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,
 1785 To every placè where she hath supposed
 By likelihood her little child to find.
 And ever on Christè's mother, meek and kind, *always to*
 She cried. And at the lastè thus she wrought: *did*
 Among the cursèd Jewès she him sought.

1790 She fraineth and she prayeth piteously *asks*
 To every Jew that dwelt in thilkè place *that place*
 To tell her if her child went ought forby. *had passed there*
 They saidè nay; but Jesus of his grace
 Gave in her thought, within a little space,
 1795 That in that place after her son she cried *she called out for*
 Where he was casten in a pit beside. ¹

O greatè God, that performest thy laud *praise*
 By mouth of innocents, lo, here thy might!
 This gem of chastity, this emerald,
 1800 And eke of martyrdom the ruby bright, *And also*
 There he with throat y-carven lay upright *cut / lay face up*
 He "Alma Redemptoris" 'gan to sing
 So loud that all the place began to ring!

The Christian folk that through the streetè went
 1805 In comen for to wonder on this thing,
 And hastily they for the provost sent. *magistrate*
 He came anon, withouten tarrying, *at once*
 And herieth Christ, that is of heaven king, *praises*
 And eke his mother, honour of mankind,
 1810 And after that the Jewès let he bind. *had them tied up*

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

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.
 Unnethè might the people that was there *hardly*
 This newè Rachel bringen from his bier.¹
- With torment and with shameful death each one *torture*
 The Provost doth these Jewès for to starve *has them killed*
 1820 That of this murder wist, and that anon, *Those who knew about*
 He wouldè no such cursedness observe: *forgive*
 "Evil shall have what evil will deserve!"
 Therefore with wildè horse he did them draw; ² *had them torn apart*
 And after that he hung them by the law.
- 1825 Upon his bier aye lies this innocent *continually*
 Before the chief altar, while mass lasts;
 And after that the abbot with his convent *group of monks*
 Have sped them for to bury him full fast; *hurried*
 And when they holy water on him cast
 1830 Yet spoke this child when sprend was holy water *sprinkled*
 And sang "O Alma Redemptoris Mater."
- This abbot which that was a holy man,
 As monks been — or elsè ought to be —
 This youngè child to conjure he began, *to call upon*
 1835 And said, "O dearè child, I halsè thee, *I beg*
 In virtue of the Holy Trinity,
 Tell me what is thy causè for to sing,
 Since that thy throat is cut, to my seeming." *it seems to me*
- "My throat is cut unto my neckè-bone"
 1840 Said this child, "and as by way of kind *according to nature*
 I should have died, yea, longè time agone.
 But Jesus Christ, as you in bookès find,

¹ 1817: The reference is to the liturgy for the Feast of Holy Innocents which has the reading from Matt.
 2: "A voice in Ramah was heard, lamentation and great mourning, Rachel bewailing her children and would not be comforted because they are not."

² 1823: "horse" is plural, as in "a regiment of horse".

- 1845 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. *wishes / should last*
- "This well of mercy, Christè's mother sweet,
 I loved always as after my cunning;
 And when that I my lifè should forlete
 To me she came, and bade me for to sing
 1850 This anthem verily in my dying, *as best I knew*
 As you have heard. And when that I had sung, *lose*
 Me thought she laid a grain upon my tongue. *song*
It seemed
- ?Wherefore I sing and singè must, certáin,
 In honour of that blissful maiden free,
 1855 Till from my tongue off taken is the grain; *blessed / gracious*
 And after that thus said she unto to me,
 `My little child, now will I fetchè thee
 When that the grain is from thy tongue y-take. *taken*
 Be not aghast, I will thee not forsake.' " *afraid*
- 1860 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. *died quietly*
 And when this abbot had this wonder seen,
 His saltè tearès trickled down as rain
 1865 And gruf he fell all plat upon the ground, *face down / flat*
 And still he lay as he had been y-bound.
- The convent eke lay on the pavèment
 Weeping, and herying Christè's mother dear. *praising*
 And after that they rise and forth been went *and go out*
 1870 And took away this martyr from his bier.
 And in a tomb of marblestonès clear
 Enclosen they his little body sweet.
 Where he is now God leve us for to meet! *God grant*
- 1875 O youngè Hugh of Lincoln, slain also
 With cursèd Jewès, as it is notáble *By / well known*

(For it is but a little while ago)¹
 Pray eke for us, we sinful folk unstable,
 That of his mercy God so merciáble *mercifull*
 On us his greaté 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 *Prioress tale*
 As sober was that wonder was to see;
 Till that our Hosté japen he began, *to joke*
 And then at erst he lookéd upon me, *first*
 1885 And saidé thus: "What man art thou?" quod he.
 "Thou lookest as thou wouldest find a hare,
 For ever upon the ground I see thee stare.

?Approachè near and look up merrily!
 Now, ware you, sirs, and let this man have place. *stand aside*
 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, *mysterious*
 For unto no wight does he dalliance. *talks to nobody*

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, *annoyed*
 For other talé, certès, can I none, *know I*
 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." *pleasant*

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

- 2110 "No more of this, for Godè's dignity,"
 Quod our Hostè, "for thou makest me
 So weary of thy very lewèdness *foolishness*
 That, all so wisly God my soul bless, *as surely as*
 My earès achen of thy drasty speech. *wretched*
 Now such a rime the devil I beteach. *send*
- 2115 This may well be rime doggerel," quod he.
 "Why so?" quod I. "Why wilt thou lettè me *stop 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,
- 2120 Thy drasty riming is not worth a turd!
 Thou dost naught elsè but dispendest time: *waste*
 Sir, at a word, thou shalt no longer rime.
 Let's see whe'r thou canst tellen aught in geste, *whether / alliteration?*
 Or tell in prosè somewhat, at the least,
- 2125 In which there be some mirth or some doctrine."
 "Gladly," quod I. "By Godè's sweetè pain,
 I will you tell a little thing in prose
 That ought to liken you, as I suppose, *to please*
 Or else certès you be too daungerous. *hard to please*
- 2130 It is a moral talè virtuous,
 Albeit told sometime in sundry wise, *Although*
 Of sundry folk, as I shall you devise. *By different f. / tell*
 As thus: You wot that every evangelist *Y. know / see 2141*
 That telleth us the pain of Jesus Christ
- 2135 Ne saith not all things as his fellow doth;
 But natheless, their sentence is all sooth, *sense, contents / true*

And all accorden, as in their sentence,
 All be there in their telling difference. *all agree*
 For some of them say more and some say less *Although there is*
 2140 When they his piteous passion express;
 I mean of Mark and Matthew, Luke, and John; *the Evangelists*
 But doubtless their sentence is all one. *meaning*
 Therefore, lordings all, I you beseech,
 If that you think I vary as in my speech,
 2145 As thus, though that I telle somewhat more
 Of proverbès than you have heard before
 Compre'nded in this little treatise here, *contained in*
 To enforcen with th' effect of my mattér, *to reinforce*
 And though I not the samè wordès say
 2150 As you have heard—yet to you all I pray
 Blameth me not, for as in my sentence *contents*
 Shall you nowherè finden difference
 From the sentence of this treatisè lite *little*
 After the which this merry tale I write.
 2155 And, therefore, hearken what that I shall say,
 And let me tellen all my tale, I pray."

THE TALE OF MELIBEE

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 MELIBEE

3080 When ended was my tale of Melibee
 And of Prudence and her benignity, *goodness*
 Our Hostè said, "As I am faithful man!"

	And by that precious corpus Madrian,	<i>by St. Hadrian (?)</i>
	I had lever than a barrel ale	<i>rather than</i>
	That Goodélief my wife had heard this tale!	
3085	For she is nothing of such patience	
	As was this Melibeus' wife Prudénce!	
	By Godé's bones, when I beat my knaves,	<i>servants</i>
	She bringeth me the greatè clubbéd staves,	<i>sticks</i>
	And crieth: `Slay the doggès, every one,	
3090	And break them bothè back and every bone!	
	And if that any neighebor of mine	
	Will not in church unto my wife incline,	<i>yield to</i>
	Or be so hardy to her to trespass,	<i>so rash / offend</i>
	When she comes home she rampeth in my face	<i>screams</i>
3095	And crieth: `Falsè coward, wreak thy wife!	<i>avenge</i>
	By corpus bonès, I will have thy knife	<i>By God</i>
	And thou shalt have my distaff and go spin!	<i>stick for spinning</i>
	From day to night right thus she will begin:	
	`Alas,' she says, `that ever I was shape	<i>was born</i>
3100	To wed a milksop or a coward ape,	
	That will be overled of every wight!	<i>walked on by everyone</i>
	Thou darest not standen by thy wife's right!	
	This is my life, but if that I will fight.	<i>unless I</i>
	And out at door anon I must me dight,	<i>quickly exit</i>
3105	Or else I am but lost, but if that I	<i>unless I</i>
	Be like a wildè lion foolhardy.	
	I wot well she will do me slay some day	<i>cause me to kill</i>
	Some neighebour and thennè go my way;	
	For I am perilous with knife in hand,	
3110	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	<i>offends in deed or word</i>
	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,
 3115 For you shall tell a talè truly.

	Lo, Rochester stands here	è by!	
		è lord, break not our game!	
		è not your name.	
	Whe'r shall I callè you my lord Daun John?		<i>Whether</i>
3120	Or Daun Thomas or elsè Daun Alban? ¹		
	Of what house be you, by your father's kin?		<i>monastery</i>
	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!		
3125	Upon my faith, thou art some officer,		
	Some worthy sexton, or some cellarer,		<i>monastic posts</i>
	For by my father's soul, as to my doom,		<i>in my opinion</i>
	Thou art a master when thou art at home,		<i>You're in charge</i>
	No poorè cloisterer, nor no novice,		<i>monk</i>
3130	But a governor, wily and wise,		
	And therewithal of brawnès and of bones		<i>muscle</i>
	A well-faring person for the nones!		
	I pray God give him confusion		<i>ruin</i>
	That first thee brought into religion.		
3135	Thou wouldst have been a treadèfowl aright.		<i>rider of hens</i>
	Hadst thou as great a leave as thou hast might		<i>permission / virility</i>
	To perform all thy lust in engendrúre,		<i>procreation</i>
	Thou hadst begotten many a creätúre!		
	Alas, why wearest thou so wide a cope?		<i>cloak</i>
3140	God give me sorrow but, an' I were Pope,		<i>I declare if I were</i>
	Not only thou, but every mighty man,		
	Though he were shorn full high upon his pan,		<i>shaved / head</i>
	Should have a wife, for all the world is lorn;		<i>robbed</i>
	Religious hath take up all the corn		<i>R. (life) / best</i>
3145	Of treading; and we burel men be shrimps!		<i>breeders / laymen</i>
	Of feeble trees there comen wretched imps;		<i>shoots</i>
	This maketh that our heirès be so slender		
	And feeble that they may not well engender;		
	This maketh that our wivès will assay		<i>try</i>
3150	Religious folk, for they may better pay		
	Of Venus's payments than may we.		

- God wot, no Lusheburghés payen ye! *knows / bad coins*
 But be not wroth, my lord, though that I play: *joke*
 Full oft in game a sooth I have heard say." *truth*
- 3155 This worthy Monk took all in patience,
 And said, "I will do all my diligence, *my best*
 As far as souneth into honesty, *as is becoming*
 To tellé you a tale or two or three.
 And if you list to hearken hitherward, *if you care*
- 3160 I will you say the life of Saint Edward.
 Or elsè, first, tragedies will I tell,
 Of which I have a hundred in my cell.
 Tragedy is to say a certain story
 (As oldé bookés maken us memory) *remind us*
- 3165 Of him that stood in great prosperity
 And is y-fallen out of high degree
 Into misery, and endeth wretchedly.
 And they be versifiéd commonly
 Of six feet, which men clepe hexameton. *call hexameters*
- 3170 In prose eke be endited many a one *also / written*
 And eke in meter in many a sundry wise. *different ways*
 Lo, this declaring ought enough suffice. *this preface*
 Now hearken if you liketh for to hear. *if you please*
- 3175 But first I you beseech in this mattér,
 Though I by order tellè not these things,
 Be it of popès, emperors, or kings,
 After their ages as men written find, *in chron. order*
 But tell them some before and some behind, *earlier / later*
 As it now comes unto my rémembránce;
- 3180 Have me excuséd of my ignoránce."

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.