

## Elements of the Grotesque in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Prioress's Tale*

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**Abstract:** This essay examines unusual aspects of *The Prioress's Tale* by Geoffrey Chaucer and makes the case that the story's moral protagonist releases a vicious anti-Semitic tale in the guise of Christian devotion. The essay explores the Prioress's depiction in *The General Prologue*, highlighting the contradiction between her seeming compliance and underlying problems by drawing on the theories of John Ruskin. Ruskin's theory of the grotesque acts as a mirror through which one can view the anxieties and biases that society has ingrained in her story. The essay also looks at Chaucer's use of premonition, using *The Prioress's* as a cautionary tale and advising readers to look past outward appearances. It talks about anti-Semitic attitudes from the Middle Ages, the opinions of critics, and the story's applicability to modern culture. Ultimately, it highlights Chaucer's continuing critique of society and the Prioress's position as a problematic figure in *The Canterbury Tales* through a comparative analysis of prejudices in the mediaeval and contemporary times.

**Keywords:** *The Canterbury Tales*, *prioress*, *grotesque*, *antisemitism*, *John Ruskin*, *The General Prologue*, *social critique*, *foreshadowing*, *societal prejudices*, *social commentary*.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, written in the latter part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, is a literary gem that provides a comprehensive look at mediaeval society via the stories of its varied characters. Chaucer's masterwork, a compilation of stories recounted by various travellers travelling to Canterbury during pilgrimage, offers astute insights into the complexities of human nature, societal structures, and prevalent cultural perspectives. One such character that stands out as a complicated personality is the Prioress, whose supposedly lofty moral demeanour produces a violent and gory tale of rabid antisemitism. This essay makes the case that the Prioress's story has aspects of the grotesque, a theory put out by critics such as John Ruskin. Furthermore, it suggests that Chaucer purposefully employs the Prioress's portrait in *The General Prologue* as a foreshadowing device, pleading with readers to look past outward manifestations and investigate the more profound – and frequently unsettling – truths concealed within the stories told during the pilgrimage to Canterbury. Essentially, the story of the Prioress is meant to act as a warning, asking readers to examine cultural biases and identify the hideousness behind the mask of social conventions.

The Prioress, a character in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, appears in *The General Prologue* and displays an overall air of gentility and purity about her. The first part of Chaucer's description is a detailed analysis of her appearance (Chaucer 1987: 3-4). The Prioress's features are delicate, and she has a sense of aristocratic grace with her "forehead fair of spread" and coy smile. Her precise and measured demeanour, befitting anyone proficient in courtly protocol, highlights her immaculate manners and polite behaviour. But beyond the polished exterior lies a character with subtleties that demand closer examination. Chaucer deftly exposes the Prioress's contradictions through his astute detail selection. Her speech and elegant manners, frequently marked by fake civility, don't seem to reflect her personality; rather, they are an act of deliberate conformity to social norms. The focus on her refined table manners and her pretentious French pronunciation, masked by a fake accent, cast doubt on the integrity of her presentation. The poet uses the Prioress's portrayal as a person complying with social norms as a literary ploy to hide the deeper problems in her. The Prioress seems to represent the idealised representation of a woman of her status, according to the mediaeval society's expectations of femininity and religiosity (Chaucer 1987: 6). But this conformity hides more nuanced aspects, suggesting a contradiction between the character's actual nature and what society expects of her.

Chaucer purposefully employs the Prioress's devotion to social conventions in order to highlight the contrast between appearance and truth. The Prioress poses an important question regarding the integrity of external demonstrations of virtue by complying with social conventions and reflecting the cultural norms of her period. When considering her story through the prism of John Ruskin's thoughts on the grotesque, the contrast between her ostensibly moral exterior and her disturbing cognitive and emotional nature becomes even more stark, emphasising how unpleasant the nature of this contradiction really is. The Prioress in *The General Prologue* captures social standards and their frequently ignored nuances as the poet deploys the Prioress's elegant manner and social uniformity to gently comment on the divide between truth and appearance, setting the stage for her horrible story.

Scholars and authors have long been fascinated by the grotesque in literature, which violates aesthetic rules to evoke complex emotions. The grotesque combines the macabre, weird, and absurd in order to challenge beauty and order. As we attempt to draw the moral portrait of the Prioress, John Ruskin's opinions help us to understand the frightening elements embedded in her personality. According to renowned Victorian critic John Ruskin, the grotesque is an aesthetic form that breaks with classical conventions, stressing inconsistency, deformation, and the interaction between the lovely and the hideous (Beauvais 2020: *np*). According to Ruskin, the grotesque acts as a mirror revealing the unsettling truths under the surface of social order. Essentially, it upends accepted notions and forces viewers to face difficult realities. The grotesque is shown more subtly when Ruskin's views are applied to Chaucer's portrayal of the Prioress in *The General Prologue*. Although the Prioress appears to fit the mould of what society considers to be

gentility and beauty, a fundamental deformation is hiding beneath the surface as the Prioress's elegant exterior contrasts with the unpleasant nature of her story, generating a dissonance consistent with the grotesque, highlighting Ruskin's emphasis on irregularity and distortion.

The Prioress's is a horrific tale, a tableau with strong antisemitic connotations and unnerving scenes of brutality and religious devotion gone awry. Chaucer's skilful use of the Prioress to uncover medieval preconceptions and prejudices echoes Ruskin's use of the grotesque for social critique. The killing and disfigurement of a small child in the Prioress's narrative symbolises society's biases and fears. The grotesque dominates the plot, pushing readers to confront society's painful truths. The juxtaposition between the Prioress's outward obedience and her weird narration strengthens Ruskin's contention that the grotesque functions as a vehicle for societal introspection. It pushes readers to question the societal norms of the world they live in. Chaucer's use of the grotesque in the Prioress's story supports Ruskin's views by subverting aesthetic norms to emphasize societal issues. Chaucer uses the weird to urge readers to look past appearances and critically evaluate medieval society's anxieties and biases, in this particular case, the English Christians' religious intolerance and hatred against the Jews.

The story of the Prioress takes place against the backdrop of a pious Christian community, where a little boy devoutly sings songs honouring the Virgin Mary (Rose 2021). The story takes a sad turn when the innocent youngster is murdered by a group of Jews, who are shown in a negative light in stark opposition with the former's steadfast adherence to his beliefs. The youngster miraculously keeps singing after his death, setting off a chain of events that results in the Jews being discovered and persecuted (Rose 2021). The story, which is supposedly about religious devotion, is tainted by its gruesome depiction of violence and overt antisemitic implications.

The story of *The Prioress* is rife with violent antisemitism, mirroring the widespread biases of mediaeval society. The stereotypical attributes of the Jewish characters are employed to represent their evil intent and moral decay (Kaufman & Paul 2021). The story perpetuates destructive tropes and unfavourable preconceptions that, regrettably, were common in Chaucer's England. It is a detailed account of the brutal kidnaping and killing of the defenceless Christian youngster, emphasising how horrible the act was in imagery and overtones bordering on sadism. In addition to being narrative devices, the violent imagery and antisemitic libels also act as vehicles for the reinforcement and propagation of societal prejudices. The sharp contrast between the pious environment and the savagery of the events is one way by which the grotesque becomes apparent in the Prioress's story. A horrible tension is created by the contradiction between the horrific act carried out by the Jews and the holy environment conjured up by young devout Hugh (Beauvais 2020: *np*). The magical aspect of the dead boy's continued singing blurs the lines between the real and the imaginary, emphasising the bizarre even more. In line with Ruskin's beliefs on the grotesque as an expression that challenges traditional rules, this dissonance upends the intended order.

The story of the Prioress reflects the deep-rooted prejudice and social anxieties that characterised mediaeval England. The demonisation of Jewish characters serves to reinforce negative stereotypes by reflecting the pervasive biases of the day. Chaucer develops the story as a literary tool to highlight society's prejudices and fears, making them appear ludicrous compared to the narrative's ethical and religious undertone (Leach 2023: 6). As the story's narrator, The Prioress serves to spread these stereotypes while gently enticing readers to examine their prejudices and consider the social mores that support such bigotry. Essentially, the story experiments with the grotesque in order to reveal the social undertones of Chaucer's day, going beyond a straightforward moral tale of Christian martyrdom. The author challenges readers to critically interact with the biases and anxieties ingrained in mediaeval society by using the story's violent imagery, its grotesque aspects, and antisemitic themes. These carefully constructed tropes also push readers to look past the surface of reality and unearth the uncomfortable truths lying beneath.

By discreetly introducing hints or clues early on, foreshadowing is a potent literary device that portends future events in a story. It increases suspense, fosters character development, and imparts a sense of inevitable resolution to the story. Chaucer uses deft foreshadowing techniques in *The Canterbury Tales* to assist readers in comprehending greater shades of interpretation (Cooper 2023). Chaucer, a gifted storyteller and connoisseur of the human nature, uses *The General Prologue* as a foreshadowing tool, carefully incorporating hints into each pilgrim's description. The Prioress's portrayal is a foreshadowing device since it emphasises tactful manners, elegant discourse, and seeming piety. Chaucer's deliberate detail selections hint at a complexity that the Prioress conceals while adhering to social norms. This hint lays the groundwork for her story's eventual disclosure of her personality's darker, more sinister sides.

Examining the poet's recourse to foreshadowing to encourage readers to look past appearances, we notice that Chaucer uses foreshadowing as a thematic device that prompts readers to look past outward appearances beyond simple narrative anticipation (Adler 2022). As a character, The Prioress comes to stand for the widespread cultural propensity to make decisions based on standards set by others. Chaucer challenges readers to examine the validity of seeming virtues and to be aware of the possibility of discrepancies between appearance and truth by using the foreshadowing lens to foster a critical mindset. Through the technique of foreshadowing, the Prioress's character and her later story are intertwined and serve as a warning to readers. *The General Prologue's* supposedly moral façade effectively warns readers to approach her story with caution by hinting at the uncomfortable nature of what it has to offer. By making this connection, the poet highlights the larger social foresight present throughout his writings: the need to confront uncomfortable truths hidden behind societal expectations, to question and challenge accepted norms, and to recognise the possibility of darkness beneath the surface of piety. Chaucer uses the literary device of foreshadowing in *The General Prologue* to prepare readers for the disclosures that will occur in the Prioress's story. It takes on the role of a thematic

tool, promoting a critical and discerning interaction with the individuals and their stories while acting as a social cautionary tale about the dangers of passing judgment on things based only on looks.

Understanding Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* as a socially congenial whole requires navigating the complex web of attitudes that characterised mediaeval society, especially the widespread antisemitism that was common at the time. Deep-rooted anti-Jewish biases that were driven by cultural, theological, and economic causes characterised the Middle Ages. Religious differences, economic scapegoating, and accusations of ritual murder all contributed to an environment that fostered prejudiced sentiments. In this historical setting, Chaucer's writings mirror the dominant attitudes of the day, and the Prioress' story clearly illustrates the pervasive antisemitism of the day. Known for his ability to analyse human nature, Chaucer uses the vast range of characters in *The Canterbury Tales* to make social commentary (Khuder 2023: 43-55). Chaucer can parody and attack established conventions by using the pilgrims to represent various facets of mediaeval society. As such, the writer employs the Prioress, who appears to be in line with religious and social norms of her time, to expose the social problems deeply ingrained in mediaeval society. Chaucer allows readers to observe the interactions between various personalities and social tensions by setting his characters within the context of a pilgrimage, which serves as a microcosm of society.

With its strong anti-Semitic overtones, The Prioress's story mirrors the biases prevalent in Chaucer's day. The story's representation of Jews reinforces negative preconceptions and represents the general prejudices towards this religious group. The story becomes a means of reinforcing and maintaining cultural prejudices rather than just providing a moral lesson. The poet challenges viewers to consider the uncomfortable realities of societal biases and the legitimacy of such discriminating sentiments through the horrific components of the story. Chaucer's purposeful effort of social critique goes beyond simple storytelling to reveal societal shortcomings. The figure of The Prioress embodies the conflicts between conventional norms and the more sinister undercurrents that Chaucer aims to expose. By incorporating the grotesque into the story, Chaucer forces his audience to consider the prejudices and anxieties ingrained in their culture. The poet wants readers to be aware of and confront the social injustices that still exist in their day, but he also wants to provoke thought and reflection.

There is a wealth and diversity of scholarly discussion over the Prioress's story and character in *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's desire to present the Prioress as a seemingly moral character whose story contains unsettling anti-Semitic elements has been examined by many literary critics (Alimonda 2019). Some think Chaucer's speech is a subtly critical analysis of the Church, stressing the hypocrisy of any religious leader who feeds (on) negative preconceptions. Others analyse Chaucer's narrative devices and nuances of his poetic language in order to uncover the layers of commentary concealed within the Prioress's story.

Critics have examined the Prioress's gruesome story from different angles. Chaucer's use of the grotesque to highlight societal inequities has been

argued to reflect the moral uncertainty of the time by contrasting violent imagery with religious virtue. Some even stated that the horrible psychological effects triggered by the story require readers to face their preconceptions and the cultural environment they live in. There exist diverse views of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* in terms of societal criticism, which is perceived differently by scholars. Some claim Chaucer's principal goal is satire, mocking specific people and social norms, while others are more nuanced. They contend that Chaucer's social commentary is multifaceted, covering a wider range of societal structures, cultural attitudes, and direct critiques of specific individuals. In this context, The Prioress serves as a vehicle for a deeper examination of human nature and a symbol of society's failings.

The Prioress's story displays enduring themes that are relevant even today. Antisemitic beliefs are still prevalent throughout the world, and the story is a historical relic that invites contemplation on how persistent prejudice can be. The story's examination of prejudice, adherence to society, and the effects of baseless animosity has relevance in contemporary conflicts, making it a cautionary tale that goes beyond its mediaeval beginnings.

Examining Chaucer's societal warnings and the persistent applicability of his social caveats, ingrained in the stories and characters of *The Canterbury Tales*, is still relevant today. With its macabre undertones, The Prioress's story warns against blindly following social norms and spreading damaging stereotypes (Jorgensen 2022). Readers are prompted to examine themselves critically, to question authority and the social standards of the age. By Chaucer's critique of the Church and through the moral ambiguities he reveals in his stories, valuable moral lessons are delivered for the readers, lessons that have remained relevant for centuries.

If we were to attempt a comparative analysis of mediaeval and modern prejudices, we can safely state that Chaucer's observations remain relevant even after paralleling mediaeval and modern preconceptions. The general concepts of bias, societal expectations, and the effects of discrimination hold despite differences in the details. The Prioress's story, which serves as a microcosm of mediaeval prejudices, challenges readers to think about the similarities in their society and emphasises the significance of facing and eliminating prejudice that endures throughout history. Within the complex fabric of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the Prioress is shown as a figure whose outwardly pure appearance belies a story full of violent, disgraceful, and antisemitic connotations. In this succinct essay, we have attempted to reveal Chaucer's complex social critique by examining the Prioress's representation in *The General Prologue*, the grotesque elements in her story, and the socioeconomic background of mediaeval England. Chaucer's literary masterwork offers a more complex interpretation of the Prioress's function as a warning through the skilful use of foreshadowing, the grotesque, and the examination of societal biases. By examining the Prioress's story, this essay has contended that the violent, grotesquely antisemitic story embodies John Ruskin's views.

Within *The General Prologue*, the persona of The Prioress serves as a foreshadowing tool, motivating readers to see past outward appearances. True

to his line of argument, Chaucer purposefully employs the Prioress to highlight social anxieties and prejudices while challenging readers to consider the cultural biases of mediaeval England. The poet's decision to contrast the Prioress's outward conformity with the disturbing nature of her tale highlights the societal dissonance of his time, when social stratification tied people to their specific occupational caste, allotting them roles to play on the canvas of collective conventionalism. The Prioress's Tale, with its disturbing themes and hideous imagery, goes beyond the limits of a mere story and emerges as a poignant warning within *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer warns against the perils of unquestioningly adhering to social standards and continuing unjustified prejudices by revealing the preconceptions embedded in mediaeval society. This warning is therefore ageless. Through her story, The Prioress transforms into a terrifying cautionary element that forces readers to examine their own cultural views, challenge established wisdom, and face the harsh truths about human nature that have persisted throughout the ages. As we go through the maze of Chaucer's literary world, the Prioress's story reminds us that, beyond the surface of social norms, the dreadful realities of human nature require careful examination and analysis.

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