

Chaucer's Prioress: A Representation of 14th Century

Womanhood

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Abstract

Womanhood in the fourteenth century was synonymous to suppression particularly in Europe. Dowry was at its height when the question of the marriage comes. Women were not allowed to choose her counterpart. Arranged marriage was a tradition and moreover a matter of false prestige. A woman had to live being mere a puppet at his man's hand. Her position in the society depends upon her husband's position. They were indirectly compelled to live an artificial life in order to establish their identity that is too actually according to the expectations of the males in the society. This paper makes an attempt to peep in that society though the character of Prioress.

Key words: Nunship, sophisticated, imitating, identity, artificial.

Chaucer's Prioress, who being an orphan and therefore could not arrange dowry was compelled to accept nunship. She is the perfect example of the status of women's search for identity in the 14th century in which she tries to establish herself by imitating the courtly mannerism which is in sharp contrast to nunhood.

The Prioress was highly sophisticated. She could speak French to perfection as she had learned French in her convent at Stratford Bow. Chaucer points out, "And Frenssh she spakful faire and fetisly/ And the scole of Stratford atte Bowe/ For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe" (124-26). She spoke French fluently and excellently which was in the fashion of the modern people but she did not know much about the French of Paris. French was considered to be the language of the learned, aristocratic and the intelligent people of the fourteenth century.

Chaucer portrays the character of the Prioress as charming and well-mannered woman. She knows all the table manners. Neither a morsel falls out of her lips nor do her

fingers ever dip into the sauce. She knows how to lift a morsel and how to keep it up so that not a single drop at all fell upon her dress. She wiped her lip so neatly that no oil could be seen no her cup after she had drunk from it. Chaucer utters:

And fulplesaunt, and amyable of port,
And peyned hire to countrefetecheere
Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,
And to ben holdendigne of reverence. (138-41)

This explores that the Prioress' greatest pleasure lay in courtesy. She was extremely charming, sweet and amiable in bearing all such courtesies. As G.G. Coulton rightly states, “. . . snowy linen of Madam Eglantine and her fellow nun, clean and dainty and demure, like a pair of aristocratic pussy-cats on a drawing room hearthrug” (129). She gave extreme heeds in imitating courtly manners. She tried to be dignified in her manners. All these worldly characteristics should not be there in a nun. A nun is supposed to be a symbol of sacrifice for other but here the Prioress took great pains in her manner and courtesy.

The Prioress pretends to be extremely compassionate. Chaucer speaks about her, “She was so charitable and so pitous” (143). She would 'wepe' if she saw any mouse trapped in cage, dead or beaded. As she also represent high-class woman she would like to keep dogs as aristocrats do. The dogs were fed with best food. On the one hand, she was so kind that she would weep at the sight of a bleeding mouse while on the other hand she fed her dogs with roasted meat. She would also weep badly, if anyone of them died or was hurt by someone badly. Chaucer explains:

She woldewepe, if that she saugh a mous
Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or blcddc.
Of smale hounds hadde she that she fedde
With rostedflessh, or milk and wastel-breed. (144-47)

Her kind nature and her feeding of dogs with meat is a great contrast in her nature. Chaucer subtly presents the picture of her nature. “And al was conscience and tender herte” (150). All her manners and position in her society made her tender hearted. Though she is charitable and piteous but Chaucer nowhere told that she is charitable for the poor and the needy, which ought to be a necessary quality of a nun. All these tender qualities of her character seem to be blended with sophistication and pretense.

The appearance of the Prioress reveals the depths of her vanity and consequently, her despicable character. The nun is dissatisfied with her status in life. She seems to have entered the church not out of choice but perhaps out of compulsion by virtue of being orphaned or victim of dowry or being widowed. The Prioress, it is evident that is an aristocrat. She along with placing significance upon frivolous behaviors such as courtly manners and etiquette is consumed with materialism and lacks piety. Her clothing is far from simple and indicates her ungodly ideal:

Fulfetys was hircloke, as I was war.

Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar

A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene.

(157-59)

The brooch that the Prioress wears is perhaps the most perplexing aspect of the nun's appearance with its inscription "Amor vincit omnia" that is love conquers all tests the boundaries of religious devotion (162). Chaucer raises the question as to whether she admires celestial or earthly love but above all it is established with question that she is not what she seems. In addition to wearing an elegant cloak and jewelry, she also pinned her veil in a manner as to reveal her forehead. Chaucer says, "But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;/It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe" (154-55). The veil should have instead covered the forehead just above the eyebrows. Here Chaucer describes the clothing in a manner as to hint clothing as a binding artifice because the uniform of the Prioress binds her to a world she does not want to be in. Here Chaucer expresses his disapproval of the prominence of clothing in a very subtle voice yet making his criticism apparent without making any harsh or subjective judgments. In this context Suddard is in the view that one of characters in the "Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales* "is the Prioress, whose charms are described at length" (156). Her nose was welt shaped and slender. Her eyes were grey colored like glass. Her mouth was small, soft and red in color. Her forehead seems broad in her simple face. She had a good height and an impressive personality.

Thus, Chaucer's Prioress presents an excellent example of fourteenth century womanhood in Europe.

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