

Canterbury Tales

Prioress's tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This Canterbury tale has been translated and retold from: Walter W Skeat (Ed), 1912, reprinted 1973. Chaucer: Complete Works, edited from numerous manuscripts. Oxford University Press. With reference to The Riverside Chaucer, 2008 Edition. Oxford University Press.

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Bihold the mery wordes of the Host to the Shipman and to the lady Prioresse

‘**W**el seyde, by *corpus dominus*,’ quod our hoste. ‘Now longe moot thou sayle by the coste, Sir gentil maister, gentil marineer! God yeve this monk a thousand last quad yeer! – Well said, by the body of Christ,’ shouted the Host. ‘May the future hold easy voyages for you, Sir gentle marineer, and may God give this monk a shifting cargo for evermore! My companions, be on your guard against such trickery. This monk made a monkey out of the merchant, and out of his wife as well, by Saint Austin! Offer no hospitality to monks, this is my advice.’

‘But enough. Let me look around and see who shall be the next to tell a tale.’ And with this his manner changed completely. He became as calm and as polite as a courteous maiden. ‘My lady prioress,’ he said, ‘by your leave, and if it should be to your liking, I would ask, if this should be desirable to you, whether you may wish to tell the next tale?’

‘Gladly,’ she replied, and began as follows.

The Prologe of the Prioresses Tale

‘**O** Lord our lord, they name how merveillous is in this large worlde ysprad – ‘Oh Lord,’ she said, ‘how wonderfully your marvellous name is spread throughout the wide world. Not only are your precious devotions performed by clergymen but by children and babies, as they mumble their prayers at their mother’s breast. And so I shall do my best to tell a story in honour of the white lily flower who gave birth to you and who is forever a virgin – not that it is possible to increase the honour in which she is held, for she is honour itself and the root of all goodness, next to her son.’

Oh mother maid! Oh made mother free! Oh unburnt bush, aflame and uncorrupted in the sight of Moses, who drew down the spirit that burns within you and mistakenly assumed its virtue to be that of the father’s wisdom! – help me to tell this tale in reverence of you.

‘Lady, no tongue is able fully to express the goodness, the magnificence and virtue, and the great humility that you possess. In times past, before men had learned to pray to

The anti-Semitic sentiments in this Canterbury tale have made it notorious. But although regrettable, it is not puzzling, given the widespread Christian attitude that was current at that time, in England as elsewhere. What is genuinely puzzling is the true climax of this tale, often overlooked, in which a Christian priest removes a seed from a little boy’s mouth in order that he may be allowed to die. The seed has been placed there through divine female intervention, in this particular case by the Virgin Mary, and the little boy cannot die unless it is removed, even though his throat has been cut.

A seed placed by a female deity through which a boy may (inadvertently) receive everlasting life on Earth if it is not removed; by a Christian priest. There is no mention that it was a pomegranate seed.

This tale from the Prioress follows the tale from the Shipman in all versions, and is another of Geoffrey’s Canterbury Tales – a collection of short stories each recounted from the mouth of a pilgrim on the way to Saint Thomas Becket’s shrine in Canterbury Cathedral.

you, you provided us with the light that guides us to your dear son. But my skill is so inadequate, Oh joyful queen, that by trying to express your worthiness I can hardly bare the weight of it. Like an infant of twelve months old or less I can scarcely utter a word; and therefore, I beseech you, guide the verses that I shall say of you.’

Here beginneth the Prioresses Tale

There was in Asie, in a greet citee, amonges Christen folk, a Jewerye sustened by a lord of that contree – There was once a great city in Asia that had a Jewish quarter within its largely Christian population, an enclave that was sustained by the lord of that city for the financial services that they offered through the lending of money for interest, a profession that is hateful to Christ and his followers. This district was not closed to traffic, for there were no gates closing it off, and at one end there was a school for Christian boys and girls who learned, as the years went by, such things as were taught to young children in those days, that is to say, singing and reading.

Among those who attended this school was a widow’s son, a little choirboy who was then seven years old. His mother had taught him always to worship our Blissful Lady and he did not forget to, for little children are quick to learn. He happily attended school every



day and it was his habit, whenever he saw an image of Christ’s dear mother, to kneel down and say his ‘Hail Mary’ as he passed. And always, when I tell this story, I think of Saint Nicholas, who gave particular reverence to Christ at a similarly young age.

This little child was sitting at his book in school one day when he heard the *Alma redemptoris* being sung by some older children in another class, and as his courage grew he moved himself nearer to the sound until he had learnt the tune and committed all the words of the first verse to memory. Of course he was so young that he could not know what the Latin meant, but he soon found a school-fellow he could ask, even if it meant a little friendly persuasion beforehand with his fists! This friend, who was a little older than he was, said: ‘I think it is a song about our Blissful Lady, to give us hope and to ask her to be our friend and comfort when we die. I don’t know any more than this; I know the song but I’m not very good at my Latin grammar.’

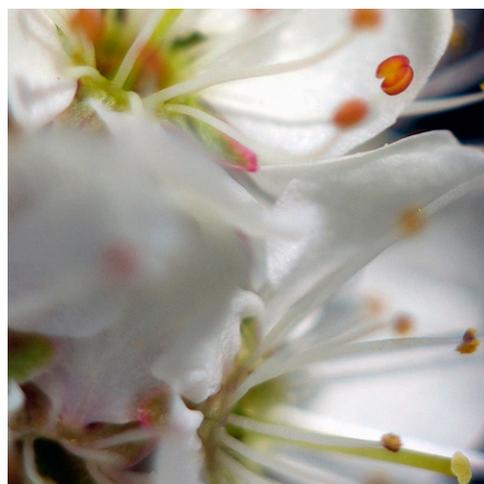
‘If it is a song sung in reverence of Christ’s mother,’ this young child said, ‘then I shall learn it by heart. I shall do so before Christmas, even if it means getting a beating three times an hour for not paying attention to my schoolwork.’ So the little boy’s older friend taught him the verses as they walked home from school each day until he knew them all by heart. And when he knew them all, he sang them loudly and perfectly twice a day. He sang them as he walked to school and then again as he came home again in the

afternoon; his whole attention as he went along was on Christ's mother.

So, as I have said, this little boy sang his *Alma redemptoris* as he walked back and forth through the Jewish quarter of the city. His love for Christ's mother was so strong that he could not help but sing. But Satan, who has planted a wasp's nest in Jewish hearts, rose up and exclaimed: 'Oh you Hebrew people! Is this a thing that can be permitted? Should such a small boy be allowed to walk where he pleases through your streets, giving offense by uttering things that go against your hallowed laws?' And certain rough elements of this community made plans to chase this little boy off the face of the Earth. They hired a murderer who had made his hideout in one of their secluded alleys, and as the child passed nearby, this cursed Jew grabbed him, held him fast and cut his throat, then dumped his body in a pit; in a cesspit, I say, they threw him, a place where they came to expel their excrement! Oh cursed folk! Such behaviour is no different from what it was in King Herod's time! What can you hope to gain from it? Murder will be uncovered, be sure of that! The honour of Christendom can only gain from the iniquity of such a deed.

Oh little martyr! You died as an innocent virgin and now you may sing as one with the heavenly Lamb! – for the great evangelist Saint John wrote in Patmos that those who die chaste shall go before the Lamb singing with a fresh voice.

This poor widow waited all night for her little son to return and when he did not appear at her door, as soon as day had dawned, with a face that was pale with worry and with her thoughts racing, she searched the school and everywhere else she could think of until she learnt that he had last been seen



in the Jewish quarter of the city. Her heart was aching with a mother's anguish as she searched everywhere she could think of, as though out of her mind, and forever calling upon the Virgin Mary for help. She pleaded with everyone she could find to tell her whether they had seen her child. They all said: 'No.' But Jesus inspired her to call out for him near to where his body had been cast into the pit.

Oh Christ, you who choose to be worshipped by the singing of boys in church, lo, witness your might! This jewel of chastity, this emerald, this very ruby of martyrdom, lying face up with his throat cut, began to sing his *Alma redemptoris*. The sound rang out so loudly that the Christian folk who happened to be walking along the main street nearby all ran up and gathered around the body in wonderment at what they were hearing, and at what they were seeing. The town provost was sent for. He arrived quickly and ordered all the Jews to be rounded up. The child was carried off to a nearby abbey. And as they all followed his body in piteous lamentation, this child still sang the *Alma redemptoris* as they went.

When they arrived at the abbey, the child's mother lay in a swoon beside her young son. The town provost ordered a quick and shameful death for all those who were in any way implicated in this murder. He wanted to see that no such crimes were ever committed again in his town. He had them pulled apart by wild horses and then, when they had suffered terrible injuries, had their broken bodies hanged by the neck, as the law required.

The innocent child lay on a slab before the high altar while a Mass was sung, and when the service was over the abbot gathered all the monks together to carry the body quickly to the graveside for burial. But as they sprinkled holy water on him, the little boy began to sing once again: *O Alma redemptoris mater*. The abbot, who was a holy man, as monks usually are, or should be, began to question the child: 'In the name of the Holy Trinity,' he asked, 'I beg you, tell me what is causing you to sing, for I can see quite clearly that your throat has been cut.'

'My throat has been cut all the way down to my neck bone,' said this child, 'and I should have died many hours ago. But Christ desires, for the worship of his dear mother, that I am able to sing *O Alma* loudly and clearly. I have always loved Christ's dear mother, the fountainhead of all mercy, as far as my comprehension has allowed me to. And when it was time for me to die, she came to me and asked me to sing this hymn to her as I lay dying. When I had sung it all the way through, she laid a seed upon my tongue. And so I sing, and I must sing, in honour of this joyful, free and generous mother who is forever a maiden, until the seed is taken from my mouth. For she said to me: "My little child, I shall come for you when the seed has been taken from your body, so do not be frightened, I will keep my promise."'

The abbot opened the boy's mouth and removed the seed from his tongue, and the child quietly died. And when the abbot had seen this miracle, the tears ran down his cheeks like rain down a wall, and he fell flat upon his face and lay there as though he had been tied up with rope. All the other monks, too, lay face down on the flagstones, weeping and praising Christ's dear mother; and after this they got up, carried the body from where it lay and encased it in a marble tomb. It is still there, may God grant us to believe it.

Oh young Hugh of Lincoln, killed in a similar way by similar folk, as we all remember because it was such a short while ago, pray for us, we sinful folk, that God, through his great mercy, might increase his blessings upon us out of reverence for his mother Mary. Amen.