

The Prioress's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer



The Prologue of the Prioress's Tale

*Domine, dominus noster*¹.

O Lord, our Lord, how marvelously is Your name spread through this great world! For not only is Your worthy praise performed by worthy adults, but by the mouth of children Your goodness is celebrated, for sometimes when sucking at the breast they show Your praise. For this reason, as best I can, I will do my duty to tell a story in praise of You and of the white lily-flower² who bore You, who is a maiden³ forever. Not that I can increase her honor, for she herself is honor and, next to her Son, the root of bounty and the remedy of souls. 466

O mother-maiden! O noble maid-mother! O bush unburned⁴, though burning in the sight of Moses, that through your humility did draw down from the Deity the Spirit that alighted in you; of whose virtue, when He had illumined your heart, was conceived the Father's Wisdom! Help me to tell my tale in your honor. Lady, no wit and no tongue can express your kindness, your nobility, your might, and your great humility. For sometimes, lady, through your benignity, you even go before men's prayers, and procure for us, through your intercession, the light to guide us to your dear Son. 480

My skill is so weak, O blessed queen, to declare your great worthiness that I cannot sustain the burden; but I proceed like a twelve-month-old child that can scarce utter any word. Therefore I pray, guide my song which I shall say of you. 487

Here begins the Prioress's Tale.

In a great city in Asia among the Christian people was a Jewish quarter, maintained by a lord of that

¹ Domine, dominus noster. Lord, our Lord.

² Lily-flower. A symbol of the Immaculate conception of Christ, i.e., that Mary conceived and bore Jesus though still a virgin.

³ Maiden. I.e., the Virgin Mary.

⁴ Unburned bush. Another symbol of Mary's virginity.

country for foul usury⁵ and shameful profit, hateful to Christ and His followers. And men could ride or walk all through the streets of it, for it was open at either end. Down beyond the farther part stood a little school of Christian people, in which were many children of Christian blood. Year by year they studied such things as were in use in that country, that is to say, singing and reading, as small children do. Among these little school-boys was a widow's son, seven years old. On his way to school, day by day, wherever he saw the image of Christ's mother he would kneel down and say his *Ave Maria*⁶. Thus had the widow taught her little son to honor our Lady, Christ's dear mother, and he did not forget it, for a good child will learn quickly. But always, when I think of this thing, St. Nicholas⁷ stands in my memory, because he did reverence to Christ so young. 515

As this little child sat in school, studying his little book of prayers, he heard the *Alma redemptoris*⁸ sung, as the children learned their book of antiphons, and he drew nearer and nearer as he dared, ever listening to the words and the melody until he knew the first verse entirely by heart. He knew nothing of what the Latin meant, he was too young and tender of age, but one day he begged his friend to explain this song to him in his own speech or tell him why it was in use. Many times on his bare knees he begged him to translate and explain it to him. 529

His friend, who was older than he, answered, "I have heard tell that this song was made to honor our blessed Lady and ask her to be our help and aid when we die. I cannot explain more of it. I learn singing; I know only a little grammar." 536

⁵ Usury. The practice of charging interest on loans was largely unheard of at this time, and therefore it was termed usury.

⁶ Ave Maria. Hail Mary, the name of one of the most popular prayers, the first sentence being derived from the words of the angel Gabriel at the moment of the annunciation, the second sentence being the words of Elizabeth (the mother of John the Baptist) when she hears the news that Mary is with child. (Hail Mary, full of grace, may the lord be with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.)

⁷ St. Nicholas. Fourth-century bishop of Myra, who was a precocious child and, as an infant, would only nurse at his mother's breast on Wednesdays and Fridays, apparently in honor of God. Later he becomes a benefactor to poor children and, of course, is known as Santa Claus.

⁸ *Alma redemptoris*. "Glorious [mother] of the Redeemer," an antiphon sung in praise of Mary throughout Advent and until Candlemas (February 2).

“And is this song made in honor of Christ’s mother?” said this innocent one. “Now I will do my duty, surely, to learn it all before Christmas is past. Even if I will be scolded for not learning my own lessons, and beaten thrice in an hour, I will learn it in honor of our Lady.” 543

On the way home from day to day his friend taught him secretly until he knew it all by heart, and then he sang it boldly and well word for word following the melody. Twice a day it passed through his throat, as he went to school and home again through the Jewish section, always singing and crying so merrily *O alma redemptoris*. His mind was set ever upon our Lady; the sweetness of Christ’s mother had so pierced his heart that to pray to her he could not cease his singing on the way. 557

Our first foe, the serpent Satan, who has his wasp’s nest in the Jewish heart, swelled up and said, “O Hebrew people, alas, is this honorable to you that such a boy shall walk at will in spite of you and sing of such matter as is against the reverence due your faith?” 564

From this point on the Jews conspired to drive this innocent one out of the world. To this purpose they hired a murderer who took up a secret place in an alley, and as the child went by, this cursed Jew seized and held him tight, and then cut his throat and cast him into a pit. I must say that they threw him into an outhouse, where these Jews purged their bowels. 573

O cursed race of modern Herods⁹, what good is your evil intent? Murder will be revealed, truly it will not fail, and chiefly where it touches the honor of God. Blood cries out on your cursed deed. O martyr made strong in virginity (the Prioress cried), now may you sing, following always the white celestial Lamb¹⁰. St. John, the great evangelist, wrote of you in Patmos¹¹, and said that they, those who never knew women in the flesh, go before the Lamb and sing an ever-new song. 585

This widow waited all that night for her little child, but he did not come. Therefore, as soon as it was day,

⁹ Herods. A line of Herods served as King of Judea, most notably Herod the Great who reigned at the time of the birth of Christ and ordered the execution of all the newborn Jewish males. His part on the medieval stage was a remarkable one, as, following the historical records, he was portrayed as a madman. See Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*, line 3384.

¹⁰ Lamb. I.e., Christ, the Lamb of God.

¹¹ St. John . . . Patmos. The reference is to John’s vision in the Book of Revelation, or Apocalypse.

with her face pale from fear and anxiety she sought him at school and elsewhere, until finally she learned that he was last seen in the Jewish section. With mother’s pity in her breast, as if half out of her mind she went to every place where she supposed it likely to find her little child, and ever she called on Christ’s mother, the meek and tender; and at length she sought him among the cursed Jews. 599

She questioned every Jew that dwelt there and prayed them piteously to tell her if her child had passed by. They said “No.” But Jesus through His grace presently put it into her mind that she cried out to her son, where he was cast in the pit beside the road. 606

O great God Who performs your praise by the mouth of innocents, behold here your power! This gem of chastity, this emerald, and this bright ruby of martyrdom, where he lay with his throat cut, he began to sing *Alma redemptoris* so loudly that the entire place rang. The Christian people passing through the street came to marvel upon the deed and in haste sent after the magistrate. He came there and did not delay, and praised Christ, the King of heaven, and His mother as well, the glory of mankind. And then he ordered that the Jews should be bound. With piteous lamentations the child was taken up, ever singing his song, and carried to the nearest abbey with a great and noble procession. 624

His mother lay by the bier swooning; scarcely could the people draw this second Rachel¹² away from the bier. The magistrate ordered each one of the Jews who knew of this murder to be murdered in torment and by a shameful death, and immediately. No such cursedness would he tolerate. He who deserves evil shall have evil. Therefore he had them drawn with wild horses and after that hung them, according to the law. 634

Upon his bier before the chief altar this innocent one lay all the while the mass went on, and then the abbot and his convent hastened to bury him. But when they sprinkled holy water on him, the child spoke again, and sang, *O Alma redemptoris mater!* This abbot, a holy man, as monks are (or else ought to be), began to entreat this young child. “O dear child, I beseech you, in the name of the holy Trinity, tell me why you sing, since to my eyes your throat is cut.” 648

¹² Rachel. Biblical mother who was likewise inconsolable at the death of her children. Matthew 2:18 names her as one of the mothers of the innocents slaughtered at the command of Herod.

“My throat is cut to my neck-bone,” said this child,
“and in the course of nature I should have died, yes,
long ago. But as you will find in books, Jesus Christ
will have His glory remain and be remembered.
Therefore, in honor of His dear mother, I still may
sing loud and clear O *alma*. I always loved Christ’s
sweet mother, this well of mercy, as best as I knew
how; and when I was about to lose my life, she came
to me and told me to sing this anthem in my death, as
you have heard, and as I sang it seems to me she laid
a grain on my tongue. For this reason I sing and sing
I must in honor of that blessed noble maiden until the
grain is taken from my tongue. And afterward she
said to me, ‘My little child, now will I come for you
when the grain is taken from your tongue. Be not
afraid; I will not forsake you.’” 669

This holy monk, the abbot I mean, drew out the
child’s tongue and took off the grain, and he softly
yielded up the spirit. When the abbot saw this marvel,
his salt tears trickled down like a shower, and he fell
flat upon the ground and lay still as if he had been
bound. The convent as well lay weeping upon the
pavement, blessing Christ’s dear mother. At length
they rose and went forth and took this martyr from
his bier, and enclosed his little sweet body in a tomb
of pure marble-stones. He is there now, God grant
that we may all see him 684

O young Hugh of Lincoln¹³, slain also by cursed
Jews, as all men know (for it is only a little while
ago), pray also for us, sinful unstable people, that
God in His mercy may multiply His grace upon us in
reverence of His Mother Mary. Amen. 690

Here is ended the Prioress’s Tale.

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¹³ Hugh of Lincoln. A child who was reportedly murdered during the reign of Henry III, who executed nineteen Jews for the murder in 1255. A contemporary ballad, “Sir Hugh or the Jew’s Daughter,” retells the story.