

The General Prologue of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales

Character analysis of the Squire and the Prioress

MIC, ENGLISH, SEM- IV

The Squire is the Knight's son, a young man of about twenty, who is training to follow in his father's footsteps. Unlike the Knight, a dignified and sincere veteran of the crusades, the Squire is far more focused on courtly love and romance than war, likely because of his age and relative inexperience. He dresses lavishly, sings, and rides well, necessary traits for the Medieval bachelor. The Squire's Tale, which is a Medieval romance of the sort very much in fashion in Chaucer's time, echoes the Squire's character. Like him, his tale follows Medieval trends, such as telling stories set in far-off lands, and it is focused on brave and romantic deeds. Scholars have also commented on the length of the Squire's tale. Although the Squire has already begun a third part when the tale cuts off, the plot has barely gotten underway. Citing the Franklin's interruption, some even suggest Chaucer intentionally left the Squire's Tale unfinished to emphasize that despite the Squire's enthusiasm for his subject, he takes too long to tell it, which is a youthful sort of blunder.

The Prioress Character Analysis

The Canterbury Tales The Prioress Character Analysis

The Prioress, Madame Eglentyne, is another example of corrupt Church leadership. The Narrator spends much time describing her table manners and ability to copy courtly etiquette, but he provides no description of her clerical work. Pointedly, when the Narrator describes her as "so charitable," he goes on to give examples that only involve animals, not of any of the people nuns should serve. She feeds her dogs roasted meat and "wastel-breed," or white bread eaten only by the rich, far better food than most of the English populace ate. She dresses in fine, expensive clothes, demonstrating again that she prioritizes her own appearance over her role. Her golden brooch is inscribed with "amor vincit omnia," or "love conquers all," a quote from the Roman poet Virgil. This brooch is inappropriate for a prioress both because it's a show of wealth and because it references a pagan text concerned with romantic love. As a nun, she is meant to be a bride of Christ and concerned wholly with divine love. In fact, the Narrator's description of the Prioress makes no mention of Christianity, and she herself only delves into religious matters during her tale.

The Prioress's tale is famously and virulently antisemitic. It is based on popular Medieval stories of miracles of the Virgin Mary, in which Jewish people often took on the role of the boogeyman. One possible way to understand the extreme violence and hatred in this story is to read it, as we do with the other tales, as at least partially a commentary on its teller. Jewish people were expelled from England in 1290 by King Edward I, and so the Prioress as a character would have had no contact with them. Nevertheless, she devotes her entire story to portraying them as violent. Considering that the Prioress seems to have such little consideration for her role, and likely even misuses her priory's funds for her own vanity, her intense focus on Jewish people can be read as scapegoating. By evoking the specter of Jewish people, the Prioress uses her tale to distract from her own corruption, using the extreme emotions inspired by such a tale to divert focus from her excesses and greed.