The Priory

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Canterbury Tales (ca 1387–1400)

General Prologue, lines 122–1

In the General Prologue to his Canterbury Tales Chaucer provides descriptions of some of the pilgrims. The following text is given in a modern English version since Chaucer’s language is quite difficult to understand for contemporary readers of English. The text below presents the readers with the first woman pilgrim of the whole party, a Nun.

There also was a Nun¹, a Prioress,
Her way of smiling very simple and coy².
Her greatest oath³ was only ‘By St Loy!’⁴
And she was known as Madam Eglantyne.

And well she sang a service, with a fine
Intoning through her nose, as was most seemly⁵,
And she spoke daintily⁶ in French, extremely,
After the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe⁷;
French in the Paris style she did not know.

At meat her manners were well taught withal⁸;
No morsel⁹ from her lips did she let fall,
Nor dipped¹⁰ her fingers in the sauce too deep;
But she could carry a morsel up and keep
The smallest drop from falling on her breast.

For courtliness she had a special zest¹¹,
And she would wipe her upper lip so clean
That not a trace of grease was to be seen
Upon the cup when she had drunk; to eat,
She reached a hand sedately¹² for the meat.

She certainly was very entertaining,
Pleasant and friendly in her ways, and straining
To counterfeit¹³ a courtly kind of grace,
A stately bearing fitting to her place,
And to seem dignified in all her dealings¹⁴.

As for her sympathies and tender feelings,
She was so charitably solicitous
She used to weep if she but saw a mouse
Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bleeding¹⁵.
And she had little dogs she would be feeding
With roasted flesh, or milk, or fine white bread.

And bitterly she wept¹⁶ if one were dead
Or someone took a stick and made it smart¹⁷;
She was all sentiment and tender heart.
Her veil was gathered in a seemly way,

Her mouth was very small, but soft and red,
Her forehead, certainly, was fair of spread¹⁸,
Almost a span across the brows, I own\(^9\);
She was indeed by no means undergrown\(^{20}\).
Her cloak, I noticed, had a graceful charm.
She wore a coral trinket\(^{21}\) on her arm,
A set of beads\(^{22}\), the gaudies tricked in green\(^{23}\),
Whence\(^{24}\) hung a golden brooch of brightest sheen
On which there first was graven\(^{25}\) a crowned A,
And lower, *Amor vincit omnia*\(^{26}\).

**COMPREHENSION**

1 **READ** the passage and fill in the missing information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Profession</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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2 **MAKE** notes about the appearance of the Prioress in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eyes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mouth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forehead</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Height</td>
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What is the Prioress like? Provide a list of adjectives.

3 **FOCUS** on the clothes of the Prioress.
1 The monastic rules forbade to uncover the forehead. Did the Prioress respect them in the way she wore her veil?
2 Focus on the rosary.
   A What is it like?
   B What hung and what should have hung from it?
   C What is the meaning of the Latin phrase written on the brooch?

**ANALYSIS**

4 **FOCUS** on the rhyme scheme and write it down.

5 **FOCUS** on the Prioress’s behaviour. Fill in the table below.
Does Chaucer insist on outward behaviour or inward behaviour?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviours expected of a Nun</th>
<th>The Prioress’s behaviour</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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Consider her personality. Chaucer emphasises some qualities such as shyness, charity and elegance. Do you get the impression he actually admires the Prioress? Quote from the text to support your answer.

Focus on the portrait of the pilgrims. The tone of the author changes according to the character he is dealing with. He uses:
- humour to describe good qualities or human weaknesses;
- irony to make the reader aware of the faults and defects he doesn’t approve of;
- satire to attack vices and corruption openly.

How would you define Chaucer’s tone in describing the Prioress?