

COMMENT AND RESPONSE

A RESPONSE TO RACHEL SHARE

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In her essay “Ethos, Pathos, and Logos of Chaucer and His Prioress,” Rachel Share analyzes the presence of Aristotelian appeals in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, specifically examining the use of these rhetorical theories in “The Prioress’s Tale.” Share examines the Prioress’s creation of ethos, pathos, and logos to demonstrate the Prioress’s failed attempt at these appeals and her inability to persuade. Thus, Share suggests: “Despite her grand and deliberate Aristotelian appeals, the Prioress’s attempt to persuade her audience is ravaged” (103–4) and “inevitably fails” (98). Share spends a significant amount of her analysis examining the reasons why the Prioress’s elaborate appeal to ethos, specifically, is impaired. Referring to Aristotle’s theory that ethos should not be affected by any prior knowledge of the speaker, Share reasons that “The Prioress’s Tale” fails because “it comes from a character the audience already seems to know, as a result of the narrator’s detailed description of her in ‘The General Prologue’” (98).

My interest in this essay is to expand Share’s brief discussion of how the Prioress’s contradictory nature in Chaucer’s “General Prologue” further impairs her ethos. While Share makes exceptional, well-proven claims, her study still leaves several unanswered questions about the significance and influence of the Prioress’s contradictory nature, and these are questions that I will address. Therefore, I analyze both the “General Prologue” and “The Prioress’s Tale” and offer an additional perspective on the Prioress’s failed appeal to ethos, building upon Share’s thorough research. I hope that my analysis will provide further insight into how Chaucer’s use of a rhetoric of contradiction in depicting the Prioress establishes her as a person lacking “good sense, good moral character, and goodwill” (Share, quoting Aristotle 98), ultimately impeding her ability to persuade and communicate her message with believability.

Bringing together the varying divisions and uncertainties of the Prioress’s character, or ethos, becomes difficult, because Chaucer’s Prioress embodies a juxtaposition of contradictory qualities. Despite being a woman of Christ, the Prioress is nevertheless depicted in the “General Prologue” as if she had stepped out of a French romance story; as Johan Livingston Lowes notes, she is a religious figure described by language appropriate to a romance heroine (qtd. in Edwards and Spector 213). Her flawless table manners, radiant beauty, extravagant clothing, and elegant eating habits are, according to Lowes, “steeped in reminiscences of the poetry of courtly love,” creating a “delightfully imperfect submergence of the woman in the nun.” Thus, the “General Prologue” contains qualities that seem misdirected and contradictory. The Prioress’s concern for physical spotlessness mocks the true interest of a religious figure, the concern for spiritual spotlessness.

The refined spotlessness of the Prioress in the “General Prologue” is contrasted in “The Prioress’s Tale” by the Prioress’s description of the bloody child cast into a privy. This point is made by scholars Edward H. Kelly in “By Mouth of Innocentz: The Prioress Vindicated,” Percy Van Dyke Shelly in *The Living Chaucer*, and Kemp Malone in *Chapters on Chaucer*. Malone observes that in

the “The Prioress’s Tale,” the “earlier characterization of the prioress as a tenderhearted worldling is simply dropped. It is several thousand lines away, and the reader or hearer has probably forgotten it by this time” (219).

The several juxtapositions of condemnation and mercy, the damned and the saved, the objects of hate and of sentimentality, illustrate Chaucer’s rhetoric of contradiction embodied in the Prioress and her tale. Calling on the Virgin Mary to guide her tale, the Prioress tells of an angelic seven-year-old boy who attends a school located at the edge of a Jewish ghetto. The boy is a devout Christian who frequently sings “Alma Redemptoris” (Gracious Mother of the Redeemer). While he is singing the song on his way through the Jewish ghetto, the Jews become provoked, and the Prioress suggests both the Jews’ association with the devil and their assumed willingness to kill in defense of their law:

That serpent known as Satan, our first foe,
Who has his wasp’s nest in the Jewish heart,
Swelled up and said, “O Hebrew people! Woe!
Is this a thing of honor for your part,
That such a boy should walk at will, and start
To sing out as he’s walking such offense
To spite you, for your laws no reverence?” (558–64)

The Prioress continues with allusions recalling the conspiracy against Christ and the Slaughter of the Innocents, explaining that the Jews hire a Jewish murderer who seizes the child, cuts his throat, and casts him into a privy. Referring to Herod (another allusion to the Slaughter of the Innocents), then to Cain’s killing of Abel, the Prioress reaches an emotional tone similar to her earlier prayer:

Into a privy place, I say, they threw
Him, where these Jews would purge their bowels. Wail,
O cursed Herod’s followers anew!
Your ill intent shall be of what avail?
Murder will out, for sure, it will not fail;
That God’s honor increase, and men may heed,
The blood cries out upon your cursed deed. (572–78)

The Jews lie to the boy’s mother, denying that he ever passed through the Jewish ghetto. Yet, through the intervention of the Virgin Mary, the dead boy, his throat cut, sings the “Alma Redemptoris.” The Christian people hear the song, recover the boy’s body, and send for the magistrate. The magistrate murders the guilty Jews by dragging them by horses and then hanging them, acts of which the gentle Prioress completely approves. The Prioress concludes by imploring young Hugh of Lincoln, also slain by cursed Jews, in a ritual blood slaughter, to intervene so “That gracious God, in mercy from his throne, / Increase his grace upon us as we tarry” (688–89).

Although she is undoubtedly a creature of love, the Prioress includes in her tale a hostility, directed toward Jews, that is as passionate as her earlier prayer in the “General Prologue.” Consequently, the Prioress’s religious authority, credibility, and character seem weakened by her spiritual superficiality and her contradictory nature. As Share suggests, the Prioress not only signifies an important alteration to Aristotle’s rhetorical principles, she also demonstrates the problem of rhetoric when it becomes imbued with contradiction.

I would like to thank Dr. Sean O’Rourke for his continuous support and encouragement as a professor, faculty advisor, and mentor.

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