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GEOFFREY CHAUCER

THE PRIORESS'S TALE

THE PROLOGUE.

"WELL said, by *corpus Domini,"* quoth our Host; *the Lord's body*
"Now longe may'st thou saile by the coast,
Thou gentle Master, gentle Marinere.
God give the monk *a thousand last quad year!* *ever so much evil* <1>
Aha! fellows, beware of such a jape.* *trick
The monk *put in the manne's hood an ape,* *fooled him*
And in his wife's eke, by Saint Austin.
Drawe no monkes more into your inn.
But now pass over, and let us seek about,
Who shall now telle first of all this rout
Another tale;" and with that word he said,
As courteously as it had been a maid;
"My Lady Prioresse, by your leave,
So that I wist I shoulde you not grieve,* *offend
I woulde deeme* that ye telle should *judge, decide
A tale next, if so were that ye would.
Now will ye vouchesafe, my lady dear?"
"Gladly," quoth she; and said as ye shall hear.

Notes to the Prologue to the Prioress's Tale.

1. A thousand last quad year: ever so much evil. "Last" means a load, "quad," bad; and literally we may read "a thousand weight of bad years." The Italians use "mal anno" in the same sense.

THE TALE. <1>

O Lord our Lord! thy name how marvellous
Is in this large world y-spread! <2> (quoth she)
For not only thy laude* precious *praise
Performed is by men of high degree,
But by the mouth of children thy bounte* *goodness
Performed is, for on the breast sucking
Sometimes showe they thy herying.* <3> *glory
Wherefore in laud, as I best can or may
Of thee, and of the white lily flow'r
Which that thee bare, and is a maid alway,
To tell a story I will do my labour;
Not that I may increase her honour,
For she herselven is honour and root
Of bounte, next her son, and soules' boot.* *help

O mother maid, O maid and mother free!* *bounteous
O bush unburnt, burning in Moses' sight,
That ravished'st down from the deity,
Through thy humbless, the ghost that in thee light; <4>
Of whose virtue, when he thine hearte light,* *lightened, gladdened
Conceived was the Father's sapience;
Help me to tell it to thy reverence.
Lady! thy bounty, thy magnificence,
Thy virtue, and thy great humility,
There may no tongue express in no science:
For sometimes, Lady! ere men pray to thee,
Thou go'st before, of thy benignity,
And gettest us the light, through thy prayere,
To guiden us unto thy son so dear.
My conning* is so weak, O blissful queen, *skill, ability
For to declare thy great worthiness,
That I not may the weight of it sustene;
But as a child of twelvemonth old, or less,
That can unnethes* any word express, *scarcely
Right so fare I; and therefore, I you pray,
Guide my song that I shall of you say.
There was in Asia, in a great city,
Amonges Christian folk, a Jewery,<5>
Sustained by a lord of that country,
For foul usure, and lucre of villainy,
Hateful to Christ, and to his company;
And through the street men mighte ride and wend,* *go, walk
For it was free, and open at each end.
A little school of Christian folk there stood
Down at the farther end, in which there were
Children an heap y-come of Christian blood,
That learned in that schoole year by year
Such manner doctrine as men used there;
This is to say, to singen and to read,
As smalle children do in their childhead.
Among these children was a widow's son,
A little clergion,* seven year of age, *young clerk or scholar
That day by day to scholay* was his won,** *study **wont
And eke also, whereso he saw th' image
Of Christe's mother, had he in usage,
As him was taught, to kneel adown, and say
Ave Maria as he went by the way.
Thus had this widow her little son y-taught
Our blissful Lady, Christe's mother dear,

To worship aye, and he forgot it not;
For sely* child will always soone lear.** *innocent **learn
But aye when I remember on this mattere,
Saint Nicholas <6> stands ever in my presence;
For he so young to Christ did reverence.
This little child his little book learning,
As he sat in the school at his primere,
He Alma redemptoris <7> hearde sing,
As children learned their antiphonere; <8>
And as he durst, he drew him nere and nere,* *nearer
And hearken'd aye the wordes and the note,
Till he the firste verse knew all by rote.
Nought wist he what this Latin was tosay,* *meant
For he so young and tender was of age;
But on a day his fellow gan he pray
To expound him this song in his language,
Or tell him why this song was in usage:
This pray'd he him to construe and declare,
Full oftentime upon his knees bare.
His fellow, which that elder was than he,
Answer'd him thus: "This song, I have heard say,
Was maked of our blissful Lady free,
Her to salute, and eke her to pray
To be our help and succour when we dey.* *die
I can no more expound in this mattere:
I learne song, I know but small grammere."
"And is this song y-made in reverence
Of Christe's mother?" said this innocent;
Now certes I will do my diligence
To conne* it all, ere Christemas be went; *learn; con
Though that I for my primer shall be shent,* *disgraced
And shall be beaten thries in an hour,
I will it conne, our Lady to honour."
His fellow taught him homeward* privily *on the way home
From day to day, till he coud* it by rote, *knew
And then he sang it well and boldely
From word to word according with the note;
Twice in a day it passed through his throat;
To schoole-ward, and homeward when he went;
On Christ's mother was set all his intent.
As I have said, throughout the Jewery,
This little child, as he came to and fro,
Full merrily then would he sing and cry,
O Alma redemptoris, evermo';

The sweetness hath his hearte pierced so
Of Christe's mother, that to her to pray
He cannot stint* of singing by the way. *cease
Our firste foe, the serpent Satanas,
That hath in Jewes' heart his waspe's nest,
Upswell'd and said, "O Hebrew people, alas!
Is this to you a thing that is honest,* *creditable, becoming
That such a boy shall walken as him lest
In your despite, and sing of such sentence,
Which is against your lawe's reverence?"
From thenceforth the Jewes have conspired
This innocent out of the world to chase;
A homicide thereto have they hired,
That in an alley had a privy place,
And, as the child gan forth by for to pace,
This cursed Jew him hent,* and held him fast *seized
And cut his throat, and in a pit him cast.
I say that in a wardrobe* he him threw, *privy
Where as the Jewes purged their entrail.
O cursed folk! O Herodes all new!
What may your evil intente you avail?
Murder will out, certain it will not fail,
And namely* where th' honour of God shall spread; *especially
The blood out crieth on your cursed deed.
O martyr souded* to virginity, *confirmed <9>
Now may'st thou sing, and follow ever-in-one* *continually
The white Lamb celestial (quoth she),
Of which the great Evangelist Saint John
In Patmos wrote, which saith that they that gon
Before this Lamb, and sing a song all new,
That never fleshly woman they ne knew.<10>
This poore widow waited all that night
After her little child, but he came not;
For which, as soon as it was daye's light,
With face pale, in dread and busy thought,
She hath at school and elleswhere him sought,
Till finally she gan so far espy,
That he was last seen in the Jewery.
With mother's pity in her breast enclosed,
She went, as she were half out of her mind,
To every place, where she hath supposed
By likelihood her little child to find:
And ever on Christ's mother meek and kind
She cried, and at the laste thus she wrought,

Among the cursed Jewes she him sought.
She freined,* and she prayed piteously *asked* <11>
To every Jew that dwelled in that place,
To tell her, if her childe went thereby;
They saide, "Nay;" but Jesus of his grace
Gave in her thought, within a little space,
That in that place after her son she cried,
Where he was cast into a pit beside.
O greate God, that preformest thy laud
By mouth of innocents, lo here thy might!
This gem of chastity, this emeraud,* *emerald
And eke of martyrdom the ruby bright,
Where he with throat y-carven* lay upright, *cut
He Alma Redemptoris gan to sing
So loud, that all the place began to ring.
The Christian folk, that through the streete went,
In came, for to wonder on this thing:
And hastily they for the provost sent.
He came anon withoute tarrying,
And heried* Christ, that is of heaven king, *praised
And eke his mother, honour of mankind;
And after that the Jewes let* he bind. *caused
With torment, and with shameful death each one
The provost did* these Jewes for to sterve** *caused **die
That of this murder wist, and that anon;
He woulde no such cursedness observe* *overlook
Evil shall have that evil will deserve;
Therefore with horses wild he did them draw,
And after that he hung them by the law.
The child, with piteous lamentation,
Was taken up, singing his song alway:
And with honour and great procession,
They crry him unto the next abbay.
His mother swooning by the biere lay;
Unnethes* might the people that were there *scarcely
This newe Rachel bringe from his bier.
Upon his biere lay this innocent
Before the altar while the masses last';* *lasted
And, after that, th' abbot with his convent
Have sped them for to bury him full fast;
And when they holy water on him cast,
Yet spake this child, when sprinkled was the water,
And sang, O Alma redemptoris mater!
This abbot, which that was a holy man,

As monkes be, or elles ought to be,
This younger child to conjure he began,
And said; "O deare child! I halse* thee, *implore <12>
In virtue of the holy Trinity;
Tell me what is thy cause for to sing,
Since that thy throat is cut, to my seeming."
"My throat is cut unto my necke-bone,"
Saide this child, "and, as *by way of kind,* *in course of nature*
I should have died, yea long time agone;
But Jesus Christ, as ye in bookes find,
Will that his glory last and be in mind;
And, for the worship* of his mother dear, *glory
Yet may I sing O Alma loud and clear.
"This well* of mercy, Christe's mother sweet, *fountain
I loved alway, after my conning:* *knowledge
And when that I my life should forlete,* *leave
To me she came, and bade me for to sing
This anthem verily in my dying,
As ye have heard; and, when that I had sung,
Me thought she laid a grain upon my tongue.
"Wherefore I sing, and sing I must certain,
In honour of that blissful maiden free,
Till from my tongue off taken is the grain.
And after that thus saide she to me;
'My little child, then will I fetche thee,
When that the grain is from thy tongue take:
Be not aghast,* I will thee not forsake.'" *afraid
This holy monk, this abbot him mean I,
His tongue out caught, and took away the grain;
And he gave up the ghost full softely.
And when this abbot had this wonder seen,
His salte teares trickled down as rain:
And groff* he fell all flat upon the ground, *prostrate, grovelling
And still he lay, as he had been y-bound.
The convent* lay eke on the pavement *all the monks
Weeping, and herying* Christ's mother dear. *praising
And after that they rose, and forth they went,
And took away this martyr from his bier,
And in a tomb of marble stones clear
Enclosed they his little body sweet;
Where he is now, God lene* us for to meet. *grant
O younge Hugh of Lincoln!<13> slain also
With cursed Jewes, — as it is notable,
For it is but a little while ago, —

Pray eke for us, we sinful folk unstable,
That, of his mercy, God so merciable* *merciful
On us his greate mercy multiply,
For reverence of his mother Mary.

Notes to the Prioress's Tale

1. Tales of the murder of children by Jews were frequent in the Middle Ages, being probably designed to keep up the bitter feeling of the Christians against the Jews. Not a few children were canonised on this account; and the scene of the misdeeds was laid anywhere and everywhere, so that Chaucer could be at no loss for material.

2. This is from Psalm viii. 1, "Domine, dominus noster,quam admirabile est nomen tuum in universa terra."

3. "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast Thou ordained strength." — Psalms viii. 2.

4. The ghost that in thee light: the spirit that on thee alighted; the Holy Ghost through whose power Christ was conceived.

5. Jewery: A quarter which the Jews were permitted to inhabit; the Old Jewry in London got its name in this way.

6. St. Nicholas, even in his swaddling clothes — so says the "Breviarium Romanum" —gave promise of extraordinary virtue and holiness; for, though he sucked freely on other days, on Wednesdays and Fridays he applied to the breast only once, and that not until the evening.

7. "O Alma Redemptoris Mater," ("O soul mother of the Redeemer") — the beginning of a hymn to the Virgin.

8. Antiphonere: A book of anthems, or psalms, chanted in the choir by alternate verses.

9. Souded; confirmed; from French, "soulde;" Latin, "solidatus."

10. "And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. These are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb." — Revelations xiv. 3, 4.

11. Freined: asked, inquired; from Anglo-Saxon, "frinan," "fraegnian." Compare German, "fragen."

12. Halse: embrace or salute; implore: from Anglo-Saxon "hals," the neck.

14 A boy said to have been slain by the Jews at Lincoln in 1255, according to Matthew Paris. Many popular ballads were made about the event, which the diligence of the Church doubtless kept fresh in mind at Chaucer's day.