

Portray the Characters of the Prioress in “The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales”

Writer: Geoffrey Chaucer | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

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"The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" by Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) presents a colourful exhibition of characters. Each of the characters has their different qualities and personalities. Among them, the Prioress is a nun. She is called Madam Eglantine. The Prioress is depicted as devoutly religious, with her primary concern being her spiritual duties. Chaucer describes her as not an ideal nun and is not strict in her divine service.

The Desire for Nobility and Aristocratic Manners: The Prioress desires aristocratic manners and behaviour despite her religious calling. Chaucer describes her as someone who speaks French fluently and adopts the refined manners of the upper class. Her efforts to imitate the manners of the nobility suggest a certain degree of social aspiration or an attempt to distance herself from the common folk. Chaucer says about her,

And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,

After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,

Concern for Appearance and Vanity: Alongside her religious devotion, the Prioress display a certain concern for her appearance and vanity. Chaucer notes her efforts to maintain a genteel image with her carefully arranged veil and neatly pleated wimple. While these details may seem insignificant, they highlight the Prioress's focus on outward appearances. It suggests a degree of vanity or pride in her appearance, which contrasts with the humility expected of a

nun. Chaucer notes her attention to outward appearances, describing,

At mete wel y-taught was she with-alle:

She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,

This attention to manners and refinement suggests a concern for worldly decorum that may overshadow her spiritual priorities.

Contrast with Ideal Religious Virtues: Despite her praiseworthy qualities, the Prioress falls short of embodying the ideal virtues expected of someone in her position. Her emphasis on outward appearances, aristocratic manners, and sentimental nature is seen as departures from the strict religious asceticism and humility expected of a nun. Through her character, Chaucer offers a nuanced portrayal of religious figures. It highlights their humanity and imperfections and acknowledges their devotion to their faith.

In termination, the Prioress in "The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" is depicted as a righteous, elegant nun with a tender heart. Yet, she also exhibits vanity traits and a desire for aristocratic manners. Through her character, Chaucer provides insight into the complexities of religious life in medieval society.