Chaucer’s NUN’S PRIEST’S TALE, VII, 3444-4

Nobody has as yet given a satisfactory explanation of the Nun’s Priest’s reference to “my lord” (3445) in the conclusion of his tale. In a marginal note in the Ellesmere MS., the “lord” is identified as the Archbishop of Canterbury: Dominus archiepiscopus Cantuariensis. Even though this gloss, as Robinson observes, is of “uncertain authority,” and a “considerable search has been made, without success, to find a similar form of benediction associated with that prelate” (Works, p. 755), some modern editors still believe that the priest is referring to a fourteenth-century clergyman. A. C. Baugh, for example, explains the “lord” as “presumably the Nun’s Priest’s lord, who was the Bishop of London” (Chaucer’s Major Poetry [New York, 1963], p. 381). Robert A. Pratt glosses “lord” as “bishop,” and suggests that lines 3444-46 contain a benediction which “may echo an episcopal benediction” (The Tales of Canterbury [Boston, 1974], p. 252).

What is often overlooked in the search for an historical prelate, however, is that the literal meaning of these last three lines of the poem makes it unlikely that the Nun’s Priest is referring to such a person or to any other human lord. The priest prays that if it be His will, “As seith my lord,” God will make “us alle goode men,/And brynge us to his [lord’s] heighe blisse.” Obviously he is referring to a lord who is already in heaven, not to a bishop still living or to a deceased bishop who has not yet been canonized a saint.

Apparently following this line of reasoning, John H. Fisher has tried to resolve the crux by capitalizing “Lord,” and by omitting any reference to bishops or episcopal blessings (The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer [New York, 1977], p. 307). The effect of his reading is to suggest that the Nun’s Priest is referring to the Lord Jesus Christ or to the Lord God. But as Robinson has also noted, if we are to understand the reference to be to Christ, then “our lord” would be more natural than my lord” (Works, p. 755). And, in like manner, it could be argued that if by “Lord” (3445) we are to understand “goode God” (3444), then “your heighe blisse” would be more natural than “his heighe blisse.”

I believe, therefore, that the priest is referring not to some English bishop nor to Christ or God, but to “my lord” St. Paul. It would not be unusual for Chaucer to refer to St. Paul as “lord”: elsewhere in The Canterbury Tales he refers to “that lord that clepid is seint Yve” (SumT, 1943; ShipT, 1417). And the priest’s words “goode God, if that it be thy wille,/...so make us alle goode men” clearly echo the Apostle’s words in 1 Thessalonians, 4:3: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (Haec est enim voluntas Edi, sanctificatio vestra).

Thus, inspired by a text from St. Paul, whom moments before (3441-42) he had just quoted directly, the Nun’s Priest has devised for the end of his tale an original little prayer which may be paraphrased as follows:

Now, good God, if it be thy will, as says
my lord (St. Paul), make us all good men,
and bring us to his (Paul’s) high bliss. Amen.

Instead of echoing an episcopal benediction, this prayer bears a striking resemblance

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to the concluding words of a homily for the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul that appears in an early fifteenth-century handbook of sermons compiled for parish priests:

Wherfor ych man take good ensampull, whyll he ys here, by Saynt Paule, and amend hym whill he hat space and tyme of amendyng. And he þhat so doþe, he schall come to Saynt Paule and have þe ioye þat euer schall last. To þe which ioye God bring us all, yf hyt be his wyll. Amen.


—ROBERT M. CORREALE, Wright State University

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THE FLOWER

These are thy wonders, *Lord of Love,*
To make us see we are but flowers that glide:
Which when we once can find and prove,
Thou hast a garden for us, where to bide.
Who could be more,
Swelling through store,
Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

—GEORGE HERBERT

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TO BLOSSOMS

Faire pledges of a fruitfull Tree,
Why do yee fall so fast?

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But you are lovely Leaves, where we
May read how soon things have
Their end, though ne'r so brave:
And after they have shown their pride,
Like you a while: They glide
Into the Grave.

—ROBERT HERRICK

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