



The Bishop's Tale

Margaret Frazer

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Prime crime from the Edgar-nominated author of The Servant's Tale. In London to mourn the passing of her uncle, Sister Frevisse is taken aback when a scoundrel at the funeral dares God to strike him down--and he summarily collapses and dies. Bishop Beaufort prevails upon the Sister for help in solving the baffling case.

The Bishop's Tale Details

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Cat says

Sister Frevisse haas received word at St. Frideswide's that her uncle, Thomas Chaucer, son Geoffrey, is gravely ill and wishes to see her before he dies. She is given permission to travel to Ewelme, the family estate where she was raised, with Sister Perpetua as her travelling companion and two outriders. When they arrive, they learn that Thomas Chaucer has already passed. However, he has left her a bequest outside his will, given to her by Bishop Beaufort, a close friend of her uncle for many years. The gift is wrapped in cloth but appears to be a book; we never learn for certain which book, but are given a glimpse from her memory of what might be inside. At the feast following the funeral, one guest, Sir Clement Sharpe, an onerous man who relishes scaring people with unwarranted threats, rises and leans in to the family's priest, and cries out, "But if I'm wrong in this matter, may God strike me down within the hour!" Apparently this was often his way. This time, though, he was seized with a fit and strangling for breath. The general belief is that God had indeed struck him down. Nevertheless the Bishop thinks otherwise and asks Sister Frevisse, of whose talents and perspicacity her uncle had spoken highly, to look into the matter, which she does with appropriate diligence, learning that Sir Clement was indeed murdered. The means of death became obvious early on; the only question was who did the killing. Frevisse, with the Bishop's help, manages to sort it out in a neat and tidy denouement.

Logophile (Heather) says

Sister Frevisse is a nun in the 15th century so the story is all medieval-y, and she solves mysteries. Seemed well-researched and well-written. It's a nice, sedate read.

Beka says

I think this is showing a good improvement in Sister Frevisse's mysteries. The mystery was less convoluted (possibly too little, I definitely saw part of it coming long before she did) and her involvement made more sense. I'm looking forward to seeing if the next few books continue as positively as this one did.

Diane K. says

I found this a very interesting plot. The means of murder was quite clever, and, for its time, must have been quite extraordinary. I was saddened at the loss of Dame Frevisse's uncle and dearest friend, but we're introduced to her cousin Alice, who becomes a strong recurring character in later works. Not to mention the bishop, who, despite also being a good friend of Thomas Chaucer, and a very clever, insightful man, just somehow irritates Frevisse, although she is properly obedient to his wishes.

However, there was a minor side point at the beginning of the story that so startled me (not to mention the two nuns it affected) that I found my thoughts returning to it again and again. At the end of the previous book, Frevisse was left feeling guilty for not having prevented one of the deaths that occurred. To my mind,

she's taking on too much. She hadn't seen the person in question for sixteen years, and couldn't have known how he would react to the situation. Anyway, Domina Edith names her as sacrist in order to give her more time in the church to pray and reflect. That's fine. Perhaps to cover any idea of favoritism, or perhaps simply because it was time, she also changes around the other offices that the nuns hold--such as pulling Dame Alyce from her tyrannical position as cellarer. (BTW, for a long time I thought Alyce was simply a servant, with the courtesy title of "Dame" because of her obnoxious attitudes. I was surprised to realize that she was also a nun!) This is also a good idea. It keeps the nuns from falling into a rut, and helps them develop other skills. HOWEVER...Domina Edith also pulled Dame Clare from her position as infirmarian and installed Sister Thomasina in her place. This was utterly absurd. What was she thinking? What was Margaret Frazer thinking? An infirmarian might not be an accredited physician, but it was the closest thing they had to it. Think about all such a person would have to know: a knowledge of illnesses and how to treat them, knowledge of wounds ditto. Knowledge of herb lore: which herbs are good for what, how to grow them, how to harvest them, how to preserve them, how to distill them into balms, salves, tinctures, and so on, and so on. And Domina Edith proposed to throw the youngest, least experienced nun into this position? "Oh, you'll pick it up in a week or two!" No doubt poor Thomasina was left constantly rushing to consult with Clare. I'm wondering how many people wrote to point out this absurdity to Frazer, because I noticed that about two books later, Dame Clare was quietly reinstalled in her place. Still later, one of the newer nuns, Johane (?) appears to have become an apprentice of sorts, which is the intelligent way to go about it, because sooner or later they're going to need a new (and properly trained) infirmarian.

Kilian Metcalf says

I love Margaret Frazer's stories and was saddened by her death this year. In her honor, I am rereading my way through her work, beginning with the Dame Frevisse novels, followed by the Joliffe the Player novels. She has a gift for blending together history and fiction into compelling stories of the lives of real people. If Dame Frevisse is a reflection of Frazer, then the writer was a keen observer of human nature. Dame Frevisse engages us as we journey with her through her life of conflict as she struggles to reconcile her very real love of God with her strong intellect and desire to be free. In a society where the only role for a woman of her class was that of wife and mother, she chose a paradoxical freedom in the religious life. Outwardly circumscribed by the routines of the enclosed religious, regulated by bells and the routines of church services, she finds the intellectual freedom she requires to prosper.

The occasional murder adds interest to an already fascinating life and gives her the excuse to leave the cloister now and then to respond to the needs of others. Her fictional relationship to the very real son of Geoffrey Chaucer and his daughter Alice, give us a peephole into some of the major players in the Wars of the Roses. Chaucer's wife, Philippa, is sister to Katherine Swynford, mistress and then wife to John of Gaunt. One of their children, Henry Beaufort is the Bishop of Winchester, cousin to Chaucer's son Thomas. When Thomas lies dying, Dame Frevisse his niece crosses paths with the formidable bishop, to their mutual admiration.

I like that Frazer chose not to use stilted dialogue to suggest the age. It would be like reading The Canterbury Tales and would require translation. Instead, they talk like real people. In one author's note, she defends her choice because they didn't know they talked funny. Historical accuracy can be taken too far, but Frazer knows when to stop.

Jill Holmes says

This fourth novel in Margaret Frazer's series centering on Dame Frevisse, a Benedictine nun, has both personal and global aspects for Frevisse. She has hastened (in the early winter of 1434) to the village of Ewelme to her Uncle Thomas Chaucer's manor hoping to be in time to spend his final hours with him. She is too late. It makes a dreadful loss even worse; Thomas had cared for her growing up, introduced her to books, and been a dear friend in adulthood. She is less close to her nattering Aunt Matilda and her cousin Alice, now married to the powerful Earl of Suffolk. At the house in mourning, she is surprised to meet Bishop Beaufort, a Cardinal of the Church and uncle to the boy king Henry VI, and, as she learns, the best friend and cousin of Thomas Chaucer. Thomas not only entrusted a personal message to Frevisse by way of Beaufort but had clearly spoken often to his friend about his learned, wise, and insightful niece. At the funeral feast, a boastful man disliked by all is stricken and later dies. Beaufort asks Frevisse to talk among the servants and guests and seek possible poisons. The dead man's ward and likely his next wife had he lived, Lady Anne, is suspect because she can now marry the man of her dreams. A jealous lover lurks in the background; he also has motive for Sir Clement Sharpe's death. Beaufort calls the large assemblage of suspects into a room and waits with them all for Frevisse to name the murderer. Can she? Will she? And will Beaufort see her as a trusted, useful ally or a country-bred nun who should return posthaste to convent life?

Carol Flatten says

I have enjoyed all seven of Frazer's Sister Frevisse mysteries. Each one is unique and each one develops the characters of the nunnery a bit more. In the Bishop's tale, we meet the bishop who will play a part in later stories, plus Frevisse's cousin Alice. The story takes place at the estate of her uncle, who has died and Frevisse is there as a family member. Of course, there is a mysterious death, which in the story she finds is a well planned murder. In this story, as in the others, the food and customs of England at Henry VI's reign. The political scene is also touched upon with the lives of several of the characters in this story..

Robin says

This volume of the Sister Frevisse series is a very personal one for the main character because her uncle Thomas Chaucer dies. He had raised her from the time she was orphaned and had been a constant source of acceptance, understanding, respect and care. He had always encouraged her to pursue her education and develop her first-rate mind. I will be sorry to no longer have that relationship in Frevisse's life because it draws out a part of the character no one else does. Frevisse's relationship with her cousin Aly, which proves to be a critical relationship in future novels of the series, is introduced in all of its complexities. The mystery is absorbing, and Frevisse is always at her best when drawn into the affairs of high and mighty. The device of including the Benedictine offices is not as seamless in these novels as it usually is, but it is not distracting either.

Allison says

Another wonderful mystery with Sister Frevisse at the center!

This one revolves around the death of her beloved Uncle Thomas. While attending to her aunt and the

funeral events, another man, one disliked by virtually everyone who knew him, is struck dead in front of all the visitors during the funeral feast. Naturally, Sr. Frevisse is asked to look into the situation and determine if the man was struck down by God or man.

The Sister Frevisse mysteries, while obviously set in a completely different time period, with clearly very different characters etc., have come to mean as much to me as the Nancy Drew mysteries of my childhood.

There is Sister Frevisse, of course, who is smart, articulate, and who sees things others do not. She is not afraid to speak up when the need calls for it. She is depended upon by everyone from those in the Stable to those in the highest levels of the Church. She is a woman ahead of her time, who loves both the Lord and the Body of Christ, loves her sisters in the convent, cares for those around her, even the one who is identified as the murderer in each book. I relate to her on a very deep level.

There are recurring characters: those in the nunnery, those in the village, those of her family and so on.

Furthermore, the research and writing in these books is marvelous. Set in and around the Years of Our Lord 1430-1440, these books give the reader insight into the times and trials of those who lived in England during these years.

I highly recommend the Sister Frevisse mysteries!

Kathy Davie says

Fourth in the Sister Frevisse medieval mystery series revolving around a very intelligent nun.

"Best Novel" nomination at the 1995 Minnesota Book Awards

My Take

It's odd but I can't believe it's only been four stories. I feel as though I've known Dame Frevisse forever. Frazer has done an amazing amount of research on the time period for she sets the time period for us beautifully. From furniture to clothes, manners to law, travel to architecture, Frazer takes you back to that era.

This one is interesting for its look at funerary protocols for a man who is wealthy and highly respected at court, in the city, and in the countryside. Well, and for the explorations Frevisse undertakes to discover why the victim died. Galen's book is quite the authority. It was also fascinating to read of Chaucer's extensive library and makes me ever so grateful for the ease of acquiring books today as well as our access to libraries and the Internet. What would Chaucer or Frevisse have thought of any of that?

I must confess that in some ways, I almost regret the largesse, but only because it is so easy today to find new books to read whereas then the few they had meant reading and re-reading past having them memorized. I always envy people's ability to spout quotations. For one to begin a quote and for another to finish it. Still, I'd not give up today's riches.

Yet another contrast is the...gullibility...*it's not really a fair word to use* of people then in believing it was God's will. We have the benefit of science and greater knowledge to explain such things now. Then again,

perhaps we rely too much upon what can be theorized over and proved scientifically.

It's inevitable I suppose that if you get any group of people together, you can find those who hate another. Probably more true when it's a group of such people who expect their station in life to allow them so much more leeway. Or greater strictures!

Frazer does give us a peek at a different side to Beaufort when he reminisces about his loss. The loss of a trusted friend in whom he could find and be assured of wise counsel. Thomas had not been a man ambitious for power or a life at court. Unlike Beaufort.

I realize that Frevisse was in a difficult position, attempting to question witnesses without having visible authority and without tipping people off, but this was the least successful part of the story. I'm not sure if it's because I knew what she was doing or because I'm too unfamiliar with people's expectations of the time were of women's intellect.

The Story

Thomas Chaucer is dying and has a personal bequest he trusts the bishop to carry out for him. He hopes for one last word with Frevisse, but the illness is progressing as it will. All that's left to Frevisse is to provide what comfort she can to her Aunt Matilda even as she sorely grieves the man she saw as her best friend.

It's Bishop Beaufort's assessing gaze on Frevisse that bothers her and when she learns of her uncle's words to the bishop, Frevisse is yet more concerned. As bishop, she is subject to his commands and when one of the guests at the funeral feast dies, Thomas' words come back to haunt Frevisse.

For the bishop expects her to discover if it was indeed God's hand or man's.

The Characters

Dame Frevisse is still mourning the decisions she made in *The Outlaw's Tale*, struggling with the guilt.

Dame Perpetua has been sent as companion with Frevisse when she travels to her uncle's deathbed. Both sisters are associated with St. Frideswide's Priory of which **Domina Edith** is still the prioress, but barely.

Thomas Chaucer is her uncle by marriage but her best friend in life. **Matilda** is his wife and Frevisse's aunt. A lady given to talking, talking, talking, and a firm belief in suitable occupations for women. A bit of a nitwit. Thank goodness, their daughter **Alice**, the current Countess of Suffolk, Frevisse's cousin and a bane of her childhood, took more after Thomas. **William de la Pole** is the earl of Suffolk. Chaucer had mentioned that Alice was the brains and William the rank for he certainly hasn't the wit. **Sir Philip** is the household priest, a recommendation of the bishop's. His advancement can only come at the bishop's hands limited as he is by his birth. **Master Gallard Basing** is Sir Phillip's brother and the household usher. **Master Broun** is the snippy doctor who tries to help the victim. It's sweet that Thomas took such care of his clerk **Master Lionel**'s pride and life.

Cardinal Bishop Henry Beaufort of Winchester is his cousin through their mothers and considers him his best and most trustworthy friend. Beaufort's mother had been the Duke of Lancaster's mistress bearing him four children including Henry. It wasn't until late that Lancaster married his mistress and Richard II legitimized the children.

Mourners who come to share their grief over Thomas' passing include the nasty **Sir Walter Fenner** (see *The*

Novice's Tale) although it does bring young **Robert** as well (*It's nice to get caught up with what's happening in the Fenner household. Well, for us, anyway.*); the sour, agitating **Sir Clement Sharpe** with his nephew **Jevan Dey**, his heir **Guy Sharpe**, and his ward **Lady Anne Featherstone**; **Sir Ralph** and **Lady Eleanor**; **Sir Edward**; and other assorted merchants and nobles.

The Cover

The very bland heavy cream cover differs somewhat from the earlier covers in that the framing pillars are gone and the Gothic window has been enlarged. It's still a masterpiece in granite---a deep gray brown this time with burgundy marbled insets in the window's side supports and ending in a green marbled panel at their base. The squared bottom portion of the window provides a peek at a bishop's miter and a just-blown candle in its overflowing holder. The stained glass insert that fills the peak appears to be of a white temple with a pointed golden roof and a border of red diamond shapes in a white ground and bordered on both sides in a lapis lazuli blue inset with small golden squares. The blank space above the curved upper window frames is filled with carved acanthus leaves in a triangular frame.

The title is all about the very important Bishop Beaufort making it *The Bishops' Tale*.

Laura Edwards says

This book really started out with a bang. Such an interesting premise. Did Sir Clement die by the hand of God or was he murdered? However, a little over halfway through, the pace bogged down a bit.

I'll miss the witty and affectionate repartee between Frevisse and Thomas Chaucer.

I do like reading about a character who is confident in her faith, yet still undergoes her personal struggles. I also like that the reader shares Dame Frevisse's spiritual journey as well as other aspects of her life. Too many series featuring nuns or priests use it as a sidebar, but the Frevisse series addresses all aspects of Frevisse's life and character, including the part which should obviously be the most important to her. And it is.

Margaret says

Certainly a mystery series that doesn't overreach vis-à-vis drama; but of course the main character is a nun, so there's an understandable limitation in that regards. Sister Frevisse is clever and shows off her cleverness here, although even then it wasn't a stretch to figure this one out. The one noteworthy plot point, to me, is that the Bishop of the title is Bishop Henry Beaufort, the second son of John of Gaunt (Duke of Lancaster) and his mistress, and later wife, Katherine Swynford, she of the novel "Katherine". This was an interesting period in English history - well, almost all of it is interesting - and from the Duke's line came one half of the War of the Roses. So, in this small book, I found the depiction of the Bishop's character to be of note - one can read more about him here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_B...

Andrew Doohan says

Another good yarn from Margaret Frazer that this times see Dame Frevisse, and her companion, outside the walls of her Benedictine house to attend a family funeral, and all that comes with it.

It is there that Frevisse gets drawn into the kind of intrigue and mystery that is at the heart of this series.

Aside from being a good story, and an intriguing mystery, I also appreciate the way in which Frazer attempts to capture something of the society of the day, and its complexity, while weaving her story. In this volume, Frazer does that well, and draws the reader not only into the mystery being faced by Dame Frevisse but also the late medieval period in English history.

Thoroughly recommended.

Dempse Kb says

Now that I've warmed up to the series, it was nice to see Sister Frevisse outside the convent for once. I enjoyed the description of outlaw life, and middle class freeman life. It's nice to read a book that sweeps you along and gives a few possible motives and potential villains. An entertaining read, a surprise ending and looking forward to the next book!

Karen Brooks says

This is the second Sister Frevisse book I've read in Margaret Frazer's award winning series and, for the most part, it was a very good read.

In this book, Sister Frevisse leaves the nunnery to attend to her Aunt in the wake of her beloved Uncle Thomas' death. While at the feast for all those attending the funeral, Sister Frevisse witnesses (along with many others) a rather unpleasant character fall ill in rather dramatic circumstances. What follows has physicians and priests wondering: did God have a hand (quite literally) in this man's fate or was it something far more mundane and sinister? Unconvinced that God played a role, one of the guests, Bishop Beaufort, asks Frevisse to investigate.

A bit slow-moving for my taste, the book is nonetheless sprinkled with wonderful historical detail and some real figures (the Bishop of the title for example) and evokes the Middle Ages so well. What I found a bit tiresome was Sister Frevisse's need to prove her searing intellect (and which is evident when she opens her mouth and through her deportment) by quoting from various sources to impress others (that it does is no help). Overall, however, the characters ring true, the plot is tight and the cause of death interesting (the author's explanation of why she used such a method is as well).
