

CHAUCER'S PRIORRESS

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Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

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August 1970

Blacksburg, Virginia

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RLB 7-25-71

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## CHAPTER I

### THE PRIORESS AND HER CRITICS

Chaucer's Prioress, Madame Eglentyne, has been an enigma to the scholars who have tried to understand her. Upon reading various critics' interpretations, one wonders whether these critics are indeed speaking of the same lady. (Some critics see her as a worldly woman, hypocritical, insincere in her religious profession--one going so far as to find her unconfessedly lustful;) some say that she is devoted to the Church and warmly human at the same time; a few see her in a comic perspective; still other critics speak of the ambiguities in the Prioress's portrait and commit themselves to no conclusions; several critics see her as the blameless woman one would expect a prioress to be. But even those two critics who have produced the most credible and the most deeply researched analyses of the Prioress are still not in complete agreement. Chaucer himself would read what the scholars say and chuckle gleefully at his own success in creating the lady Prioress whose portrait he achieved in forty-five short rich lines and about whom countless pages have been written.

The fundamental point of contention about the Prioress among major critics centers upon the question: "Is Chaucer presenting the Prioress in a satirical light, another in his gallery of tainted figures supposedly dedicated to the Church but worldly in their pursuits; or is Chaucer picturing the Prioress as a devout and sincere member of the clergy, typical

of those who fulfilled the requirements laid down for them by the Church?" It is the purpose of this paper to show that the Prioress was typical of the many prioresses of her day.

Although it would not be feasible to discuss each critical statement made about this aspect of the Prioress's portrait, one can see the problem as it is explicated by outstanding modern critics.

Muriel Bowden carefully provides historical background to legitimize her analysis of the dominant problems of the Prioress's portrait as given by Chaucer. (First Chaucer is telling us, according to Bowden, that the mere fact of the Prioress's presence on a pilgrimage discredits her.) (Understandably the Church would not have wished nuns to travel on secular business.) When one considers the bawdy nature of many medieval pilgrimages, it is not surprising that early in the fourteenth century the bishops <sup>prohibited</sup> interdicted pilgrimages for nuns.

\* (Bowden claims that Chaucer treats the Prioress with irony albeit accompanied by sympathy. All ladies praised for their charms in medieval romance are described as simple and coy, "coy" meaning "modest" or becomingly quiet. Madame Eglentyne resembles fair ladies of romance also in her flower-like name which means "sweet-briar" and in certain physical characteristics such as her straight nose, grey shiny eyes, small red mouth, and broad forehead. Like the ladies of romance and of the court as well, continues Bowden, the Prioress has exquisite table manners and wears fine clothes and ornaments, notably a rosary of red coral and green gauds,



hanging therefrom a golden brooch engraved with the motto "Amor vincit omnia." In Virgil's Eclogues, this adage concerned profane love; the Church early adopted it in a sacred context, but by the fourteenth century the motto was again used in its original sense and one can only "wonder what the Prioress herself may have thought about the words." Whatever she thought, she was disobeying the bishops in wearing any ornaments at all. There is a satiric touch here in her love of feminine vanities, as there is in her keeping of pets. Repeated injunctions against nuns having pets did not prevent Madame Eglentyne from keeping small dogs and lavishing tender care and luxurious food on them, "an extravagance by even the most lenient of fourteenth-century standards." Though the reader smiles indulgently when she from tenderheartedness weeps as someone reprimands her dogs, he finds that the Prioress is not without fault. For the most part, Miss Bowden says, Chaucer looks kindly upon the Prioress, but there is sterner criticism implied when he says that the suffering of a mouse in a trap calls forth the Prioress's charity, pity, and sympathy; there is an intimation that the suffering of her fellow man did not greatly concern her. )

(Madame Eglentyne's overweening concern for the vanities of courtly fashion is further pointed out by Bowden in her discussion of the Prioress's oath.) In swearing by St. Loy, Bowden declares, the Prioress showed restraint, good taste, and piety in an age when swearing by all the parts of the bodies of God and Christ was common. But St. Loy (or Eligius

or Eloi) was a courtier artist who founded a school of enamel work at Limoges. This saint, a man of physical beauty and a lover of personal adornment, had enormous popular appeal. Aware of all this, sly Chaucer artfully chose him as the Prioress's swearing saint.

\* Bowden does exonerate the Prioress from the charge of vanity in speaking French and intoning the divine service through her nose. Since the visiting bishops, she points out, issued their injunctions in French throughout the century, the Prioress was obliged to have a working knowledge of the language, and it was considered wise to intone the divine offices through the nose to avoid strain on the vocal chords. Despite this one defense, however, Bowden's interpretation of Chaucer's attitude is trenchantly summarized:

Chaucer's Prioress is gentle, demure, aristocratic in her worldly and culpably indifferent outlook on life. She is the nun who remembers life beyond the convent wall, and who longs sufficiently for some of the more innocent yet nevertheless forbidden pleasures of that life to circumvent politely her conventual restrictions. Chaucer was no reformer in any sense, but certainly he and his audience knew what the reformers were saying, and much of the exquisite humor of the Prioress's delicate yet penetrating portrait lies in that knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

The Prioress's preponderant charm and dignity obscure a real

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<sup>1</sup>Muriel Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (New York, 1948), pp. 92-104.

flaw not unnoticed, Bowden believes, by her creator-poet.

(Taking a similar view of Chaucer's attitude toward Madame Eglentyne, Kemp Malone describes the Prioress as interested above all in elegance and refinement of manners, using the royal court as her model, "the most ladylike of all ladylike ladies." As Malone sees it, Chaucer's description of her is a delicate, dainty, humorous passage in which the author takes her lightly but does not poke open fun at her. Religion hardly enters Chaucer's portrait of Madame Eglentyne, a departure from his pictures of other pilgrims who follow religious life. When he touches on the subject, it is with a worldly twist:)

\* Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne )  
 Entuned in hir nose ful semely.

This, Malone says, is an act of devotion become a performance of propriety. (The lack of any genuineness in the Prioress's character, Malone argues, is borne out by her deliberate exhibition of hypersensitivity in weeping at a dead mouse killed in a trap.)

\* From the point of view taken by Malone, there is little excuse for the pets, fine clothes, gold ornaments, and other creature comforts adopted by a prioress who had taken the vow of poverty, although one might rationalize that technically she had not broken that vow because she had no possessions-- in theory they were for her use only, and the order to which she belonged was probably wealthy enough to provide luxuries

as well as necessities for its members. Chaucer himself does not accuse the Prioress of avarice but rather (treats her worldliness "with a kind of amused tolerance.") Her esteem for "gaudes," Malone seems to say, is merely a part of what Chaucer is trying to show as her overconcern for the impression of elegance she wishes to create for herself.<sup>2</sup> (Thus in Malone's eyes the Prioress is a trivial sort of person.)

E. Talbot Donaldson speaks at some length about the Prioress--an amiable, polite, pretty, and sentimental lady, says he, a human mixture of benevolence and weakness. (Viewing the Prioress as one not wholly dedicated to the Church, Donaldson points out that medieval nunneries were often a refuge for dowerless but well-born women. Madame Eglentyne's fine table manners, her apparent devotion to courtly love, her spoiled pets, her fashionable clothing, pretty face, and good figure all make an attractive woman of the world, Donaldson alleges, but they "do not make a woman into a nun.")

\* As to her conscience, Donaldson declares that it is "dissipated among tears and prettiness" while her charity--the word then connoted "the whole range of Christian love--gets lost among dogs and mice." Moreover, he continues, (too many (of the Prioress's preoccupations were forbidden to fourteenth century nuns--dogs, brooches, pleated headdresses, even pilgrimages.) Although Chaucer did not recognize the significance

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<sup>2</sup>Kemp Malone, Chapters on Chaucer (Baltimore, 1951), pp. 181-185.

of these details, Donaldson says, they raise questions about the Prioress that do not admit of a final answer.

That famous ambiguous motto "Amor vincit omnia," although originally referring to earthly love, had long since been taken to refer to love of Christ, affirms Donaldson. The question Donaldson asks is to which love did the Prioress intend the motto to point. The answer, he remarks, is perhaps suggested in the naive enthusiasm that Chaucer feels for the Prioress. While the motto could be a vantage point for caustic satire, it suggests vaguely that God's love is big enough to include the "gentle, well-intentioned, misdirected" Madame Eglentyne.<sup>3</sup> She is well-meaning but shallow in Donaldson's book, a portrait of the Prioress rewritten for Chaucer under the misconception that Chaucer himself really did not know what he was doing.

Benjamin Wainwright offers a most unflattering view of Madame Eglentyne, saying that her motives were mixed and that she probably hid from herself those less lofty ones, those human yearnings hidden in her heart. Wainwright avers that the Prioress had a warm human affection for St. Loy who had a handsome face and a superb physique. Think too, he says, of the delight that she, a woman bound to celibacy, must have derived in the recesses of her mind from wearing a brooch adorned with the inscription "Amor vincit omnia." She would have insisted that this alluded to celestial love, but "it is

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<sup>3</sup>E. Talbot Donaldson, Chaucer's Poetry (New York, 1958), pp. 883-885.

only natural that a woman who has long dwelt in the odor of sanctity should have desired another sort of fragrance." Then Wainwright magnanimously insists that his own interpretation of the Prioress belittles her by no means but rather humanizes her, making her commitment to the cloister more significant and even heroic.<sup>4</sup>

John Livingston Lowes leads the way in finding the Prioress devout but human. (Readers even today, he says, cannot fail to see certain salient points: the incongruity of the nun's self-chosen name, the incongruity of the brooch's motto, the worldliness of her dainty manners.) But Lowes centers his revealing analysis upon Chaucer's consummate skill in the use of connotative words and phrases in his portrait of the Prioress and his unerring art in showing that the lady's spirit hovers between "love celestial" and "chere of court." The key to the whole, says Lowes, is set by the famous second line, for here begins a description steeped in reminiscences of the poetry of courtly love whose nuances were not lost on the readers of Chaucer's day.

Lowes cites the words "simple and coy", a stock phrase of fourteenth century love poetry, as revealing much about the Prioress. In Lowes's words, the use of the phrase is "raacy with the flavor of its soil," and he himself has found innumerable examples of the phrase or a part of it in the works of

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<sup>4</sup>Benjamin Wainwright, "Chaucer's Prioress Again: An Interpretative Note," Modern Language Notes, XLVIII, no. 1 (1933), 34-37.

some fourteenth century writers like de Couvin, de Semilli, Machaut, Froissart, Raynaud, de Lescurel, and de Pisan who attached to the word "coy" the same coquettish connotation commonly recognized today.

Less obvious perhaps, Lowes says, (is the Prioress's physical description which might have come from any fourteenth century lover's description of his mistress. This description suggests youthful flesh and blood; but in its restraint in confining its catalogue of charms almost entirely to the facial characteristics of the Prioress, it leaves the lady charmingly human without a suggestion of the sensuous. In his account of the feminine foibles of the Prioress and in his choice of words and phrases, Chaucer intimates "the delightfully imperfect submergence of the woman in the nun."<sup>5</sup> )

\* In the same vein as Lowes but perhaps more congenial toward the coexistence of devotion and humanity in the personality of the Prioress, John Matthews Manly terms her devout but warmly human. Manly has observed that the carefully drawn portrait of the Prioress (renders her an individual rather than a generalized type, since the reader is given a great deal of specific information about her.) Drawing upon the background of historical research which has provided "new light" on so many Chaucerian characters, he sees the Prioress as a devoted clerical figure who is nevertheless admirably human--a real

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<sup>5</sup> John Livingston Lowes, "Simple and Coy. A Note on Fourteenth Century Poetic Diction," Anglia, Band 33 (1910), 440-451.

person drawn in part from another real person of Chaucer's acquaintance.

( There is no doubt, he says, that Madame Eglentyne belonged to the Benedictine nunnery of St. Leonard's, Bromley, in Middlesex. It is the nunnery with which Chaucer would have had occasion to become familiar since it was near London and housed from time to time certain royal ladies. One of these ladies, Elizabeth of Hainaut, died at St. Leonard's in 1375 leaving a will which throws a little light on Chaucer's Prioress. Elizabeth willed a variety of rich objects: a cockle cup, a fillet of pearls, beads of gold, a gold brooch, a gold ring set with a ruby and an emerald, and articles of clothing. Clearly residence as an inmate in the convent precluded neither ownership of jewelry nor enjoyment of beautiful clothing.)

On the matter of the Prioress's oath Manly supports his analysis with an historical note. The Prioress swore by the most elegant and courtly saint, St. Loy, who stands for the feminine tastes retained by the Prioress along with her religious devotion. Since the Countess of Pembroke gave an image of St. Loy to the high altar of Grey Friars, the fashionable church of the day, swearing by St. Loy may have been in vogue at the time. That this was the Prioress's greatest oath only adds to her delicate fastidiousness since by standards of her day she was hardly swearing at all.

( It is a fact, Manly notes, that nuns were sometimes permitted to keep hunting dogs. The Prioress's "smale houndes" were pets which merely gave her an object upon which to expend



some affection, looked on by strict zealots, Manly remarks, as "interfering with entire devotion to God.")

Manly points out, moreover, that Chaucer implies no silly affectation on the part of the Prioress as he describes her intoning of the service. He cites a statement by Dr. J. Lewis Browne, an authority on Gregorian music, who says that while the solos of the church service are sung with clear, pure tone, it was and is now the practice to chant nasally the long recitative passages simply because it is less fatiguing to the vocal organs.

As to the supposed affectation indicated by the Prioress's French, Manly states that since the queen's sister resided at St. Leonard's, hers was probably the model for the speaking of French, a French not of Paris but of Hainaut in what is today Flanders. Chaucer's slight derision of the Prioress's French might have been nothing more than a private joke to him because his wife was from Hainaut and her French would have been the same as that described for the Prioress.<sup>6</sup>

Helen Corsa takes yet a different stance and considers the Prioress an obviously comic character. What the Prioress is as a woman and what she ought to be as a nun, Corsa says, form a clear contrast. Innately harmonious, Madame Eglentyne is a most feminine lady with fine manners and admirable piety who performs efficiently in her capacity as a prioress. This apparent harmony, however, stems from a "tension" within her

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<sup>6</sup>John Matthews Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer (New York, 1926), pp. 202-220; reprinted Gloucester, Mass., 1959.

between the secular and the sacred; it does not threaten her serenity, but it makes her a comic figure. As Corsa analyzes the structure of Chaucer's description:

The details that outline the portrait are placed in a sequence that defines the tension; they may be described as "sacred, secular, sacred, secular" in almost exact alternation. The beginning and the end of the portrait, both "sacred" in nature, contain the discordancies that are inherent in the whole. And so exact has been the "secular-sacred" alternation that it is impossible to determine which element in her nature predominates. Is she more spiritual than she is secular? Or is she more worldly than she is religious?

Although her manners and social graces are ladylike, they are also prioresslike. (Tenderhearted, charitable toward small animals, she is mindful of her position as a female religious administrator.) (On the other hand, her attention to her clothing, her undeniable beauty, and her awareness and cultivation of it hardly tend toward glorifying God.) Her unawareness of the worldly and spiritual elements coexisting within her makes a complex portrait and creates a character, clearly limited but not simplified, for amused contemplation.<sup>7</sup>

Corsa's analysis, fairly unusual in identifying the element of high comedy in Chaucer's portraiture, is nevertheless based upon that same ambiguity apprehended by other serious but less tolerant scholars.

Representative of those critics who insist upon the

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<sup>7</sup>Helen Storm Corsa, Chaucer, Poet of Mirth and Morality (Notre Dame, 1964), pp. 81-83.

fundamental ambiguity in the portrait of the Prioress are Arthur Hoffman and Richard Schoeck. Hoffman speaks of the ambiguity or "delicate balance" in the portrait. Like Muriel Bowden, Hoffman says the fact that the Prioress was on the pilgrimage at all is the first touch of satire. As Hoffman relates it, bound to the cloistered life which requires no seeking of a shrine to worship, (prioresses were specifically forbidden to join pilgrimages; but some of them did, nevertheless, journey as pilgrims. Such was the Prioress, who was thereby disobeying the rules of her order) though not departing from the normal behavior of her peers. We can deduce from her portrait, Hoffman says, what kind of woman she was, but what kind of prioress she was is only implied.

According to Hoffman, it does not necessarily follow that Chaucer was satirizing the Prioress, but the emphasis on the woman does create a tension between the woman and her office. (Of the forty-five lines which describe her, more than three-fourths deal with her eyes, nose, mouth, forehead, ornament and dress, table manners, pets, the quality of her French, and her tenderness about mice. Chaucer works skillfully with surfaces, making them reveal what lies beneath. This double view shows up both in ambiguity of surfaces and in an implied inner range of motivation. The name "Eglentyne" and the words "simple and coy" both have romantic connotations) although at the same time it surely is appropriate for a nun to be simple and modest. Duality proliferates when one sees that the coral beads and green gauds are a rosary, the pleated

wimple and revealed forehead are a nun's habit, and the golden brooch is a religious medal.

Which shall be taken as principal, which as modifying and subordinate? Are the departures or the conformities more significant of her nature? Are her Stratford French and her imitation of court manners more important than the fact that she sings well and properly the divine service? Do we detect vanity in her singing well, or do we rely on what she sings and accept her worship as well performed--to the glory of God?

The ambiguity of these surface descriptions leads into the implied range of motivation in the motto "Amor vincit omnia" on the brooch, in which the implications of the portrait as a whole are tightly bound up. The motto itself was originally profane; it came to have sacred meaning and eventually signified both the sacred and the profane. On the one hand, profane or earthly love can overcome all, even ultimately the dedication to celestial love, usurping the whole character. Conversely, no matter what the Prioress's motives, the motto as worn by one in her office means that God's love is triumphant over all that of which the Prioress may be guilty--shallowness, misdirection of love, breaking of vows--powerful enough to vanquish human failings and make this nun's ecclesiastical office valid.<sup>8</sup>

In general agreement with Hoffman, Schoeck explicates more fully the background against which ambivalences in the

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<sup>8</sup> Arthur W. Hoffman, "Chaucer's Prologue to Pilgrimage: The Two Voices," in Chaucer, Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York, 1959), pp. 36-39.

Prioress's character would have been incontestable to an audience contemporary with Chaucer. The medieval romance strongly colors the portrait of the Prioress, says Schoeck. She is an attractive woman, and Chaucer wanted the reader to know this. Certainly her beauty was not her own creation, "but the reader is being presented with her attractiveness in the mode of the medieval romance with all its worldliness and sentimentalizing falseness of values."

The fourteenth-century audience would have been alert to the irony intended by the Prioress's polite-society manners--manners reflective of an account in the Roman de la Rose of the strategies a woman should employ to attract and hold a lover. Hanging from her rosary is an ambiguous, controversial golden brooch containing the motto made famous in secular application in the Roman. The Prioress fell short, Schoeck says, of the fulfillment of the medieval spiritual ideal.

Yet another claim for ambivalence in Chaucer's Prioress is made by Schoeck on etymological grounds. The word "conscience" in Middle English had the secondary meaning, largely lost now, of "tenderness of feeling." Of the Prioress, Chaucer says "To speken of hir conscience" and then proceeds to speak of her emotional tenderness, giving no mention of her moral faculty. This tenderness manifests itself toward dogs and mice, not people; Madame Eglentyne, acting counter to the rules of her order in keeping pets, says Schoeck, "weeps only over such sentimentalized suffering and apparently ignores the human suffering so prevalent around her. It is that warped

quality . . . which dominates her tale.<sup>9</sup>

The renowned scholar George Lyman Kittredge finds the Prioress sympathetically conceived and delicately portrayed as a clerical figure. That she commands the respect of the assemblage of pilgrims, he points out, is evidenced by the usually boisterous Host who assumes a softness and courtesy in speech and manner when he addresses Madame Eglentyne as "my lady Prioress" and "my lady deere." Kittredge maintains that the aura of the cloister is preserved for the Prioress in three ways even when she is without the walls of the convent: first, by her own dignity and gentleness which are her best protection; second, by the nun who is her secretary; and third, by the attendant priests who presumably would guard her from any unpleasant contacts.

In Kittredge's view the lines

She peyned hire to countrefete chere  
Of court, and to been estatlich of manere

have been misinterpreted as displaying Madame Eglentyne's high regard for courtly behavior. They imply rather, he points out, that the Prioress, who is ever pleasant and amiable, had courtly manners touched with precision and finish which indicated that her position in the convent probably demanded such qualities of her. Kittredge states that her table manners achieved

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<sup>9</sup>Richard J. Schoeck, "Chaucer's Prioress: Mercy and Tender Heart," in Chaucer Criticism, eds. Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame, 1960), pp. 247-249.

the ideal of fourteenth century daintiness; Chaucer was not poking fun at her. Like her choice of the sweet, feminine, liquid expletive "by St. Loy," her manners were a tribute to delicacy. Again defending the Prioress, Kittredge points out that the anxious affection for her pampered dogs so frequently scorned by critics betrays merely thwarted motherhood.<sup>10</sup> Clearly then Kittredge does not see the Prioress as an object of satire but as a character who had Chaucer's respect and even his affection, a proper worthy prioress commanding respect and deference from those around her.

A rich and full treatment of the Prioress as a saintly figure is provided by M. Madeleva, herself a nun, in a work that demands full attention. She says that a nun is not a woman upon whom the religious life has been superimposed but a woman whose life has undergone a change more subtle and spiritual than marriage but quite as real. This change is effected in two ways: first, by a mystical but real relation between the soul and God; second, by the rules, customs, and religious practices of the particular community in which the individual seeks to perfect that mystical relation. Individual personality is a thing apart, and that which makes nuns different; the mystical relationship and the practices which promote its development are that which makes nuns alike. Manifestly, then, Chaucer was not dealing merely with a woman

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<sup>10</sup>George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), pp. 175-178; reprinted 1967.



wearing a particular and conspicuous costume symbolic of religion but a woman whose whole self had undergone a subtle change by reason of the two influences just named.

A nun must be interpreted, Sister Madeleva says, in relation to her rule, its customs, and the community prayers which regulate her life. Chaucer's Prioress lived under the Rule of St. Benedict. The spirit of this rule required graciousness and congeniality from its members toward strangers; smiling would be the very minimum of hospitality which Chaucer's Prioress would have displayed to the other pilgrims.<sup>11</sup> With one stroke Sister Madeleva has disposed of adverse criticisms of the Prioress aimed at her "smylung . . . ful simple and coy."

Another point which Sister Madeleva clarifies in terms of the rule by which the Prioress was bound is the matter of her intoning "in hir nose ful semely." She finds significant focus in Chaucer's qualifying phrase "ful semely." Aside from the Mass, the Divine Office is the most solemn liturgical prayer of the Church. Its seven parts are recited daily by all priests and chanted in choir in such monastic orders as the Benedictine. The Rule of St. Benedict, Chapter XIX says on this subject: "Lohe ye do yure seruisse als ye stode by-fore god almihti. And lokis, when ye sing, that yure herte accorde

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<sup>11</sup>Another clerical critic, Dom Maynard J. Brennan, O.S.B., makes an interesting point concerning the Prioress's smile. St. Benedict imposed a ruling on laughter--laughter should be controlled, unaffected, and silent. That the Prioress smiled quietly, Brennan avers, means that she was mindful of the rules of her order. Dom Maynard J. Brennan, O.S.B. "Speaking of the Prioress," Modern Language Quarterly, X, no. 4 (1949), 452-453.



wid yure voice; than sing ye riht." It is therefore a matter of conscience with every religious to intone the Office "ful semely," as it is the most important of all vocal prayers. Chaucer must have been at some time in the audience at a convent in order to know this, to choose the liturgical prayer done "ful semely" as a vital part of the Prioress's portrait.

(A great deal has been made of the Prioress's dainty table manners as evidencing secular tendencies.) Sister Madeleva explains that they actually stem from a practice endorsed by her order. Since Madame Eglentyne was traveling, Sister Madeleva explains, she was permitted by her order to wear better clothes than she wore every day at the convent. Her habit was new and clean, and she was obliged to keep it that way because she would be expected to surrender it on her return. Moreover, a sister's habit is holy to her, and St. Bernard's "I love poverty always but dirt never" is applied to clothing almost more than to anything else in religious life. Sister Madeleva finds that these facts better account for the Prioress's fastidious conduct at table than to interpret it as affectation or an aping of the manners of the world, two things highly repugnant in a religious community.

Sister Madeleva again contests a secular interpretation of the Prioress by pointing out that the meat, milk, and best bread for the small dogs would be an open extravagance as some critics claim except that these scraps were gathered from the table after the meal was over, a custom as old as St. Francis.

The Prioress's fancy wimple as depicted by Chaucer is

also defended by Sister Madeleva as an approved custom of her order. An important and impressive part of the Benedictine habit is the well-pinched wimple. Fitting closely around the neck, the white linen wimple forms a series of concentric circles, a feature of the habit sure to elicit admiration for its neatness. Not vanity but duty prompted the Prioress's concern for her uniform and bade her wear it modestly and becomingly as the outward symbol of her high vocation.

As to the "gaudes" so much discussed by critics as exhibitions of vanity, the coral beads carried by the Nun, as Sister Madeleva clarifies it, were of course prayer beads commonly used by religious and lay persons alike since the thirteenth century. They were at that time called Paternosters from the prayer most often said on them. Their use was so widespread that there was a specific craft guild called the Paternosters absorbed in their construction; therefore the beads of Madame Eglentyne were hand carved and probably of exquisite beauty. In that day when the useful was often beautiful as well, this pair of beads may not have been an extravagance prompted by vanity.

The potential ambiguity of the motto on the Prioress's brooch receives Sr. Madeleva's special attention, with supportive evidence designed to dispel any dual interpretation such as those endorsed by Schoeck, Hoffman and Corsa. The motto "Amor vincit omnia," she states, is a common epigram among the religious. One can find it cross-stitched in samplers or painted and framed in convents today, even in America. Chaucer

probably had seen it himself in a convent parlor. No more typically religious motto could have been engraved upon the brooch. This brooch was most likely a medal, a type of common sacramental in the Catholic Church designed to remind the owner of some religious truth and to lead him to virtue. As to the possible ambiguity of the inscription, Sister Madeleva takes issue with Professor Lowes who said that Chaucer suggested "still youthful flesh and blood behind the well-pinned wimple" and "the delightfully imperfect submergence of the woman in the nun." Sister Madeleva believes rather that the Prioress was a decade or more beyond middle age,

sweetened and spiritually transformed by the rules and religious practices of her choice, who can be in the world without being of it, gracious without affectation, friendly without boldness. . . . The cheerful, dignified, kindly woman of fifty years, perhaps, is what the religious reads out of Chaucer's Prioress, and she is decidedly a more complex character to penetrate and portray than a sister with the natural gaiety and exuberance of youth still about her.

To support her theory of the Prioress's devout nature, Sister Madeleva provides a combination of internal and external evidence. Even today the keeping of pets is forbidden either by rule or custom in a religious community. There is small doubt that abuses of this regulation grew up; however, when an exception to a rule is made in a convent, it is usually made in favor of an older member. Whereas a sister of thirty would not dream of such a thing, a sister of fifty or sixty may with propriety own a bird, a dog, or a cat. Sister Madeleva

feels that the "smale houndes" indicate the age of the Prioress and support an integrated theory of Chaucer's Prioress as an orthodox religious. There is every likelihood, as Sister Madeleva points out, that Chaucer's acquaintance with the rules of the order was extensive enough to incorporate the exception made in regard to pets for older nuns, and that this detail was a deliberate indication of the maturity of Madame Eglentyne.

Chapter LXVII of the Benedictine Rule informs:

Let the brethren who are about to be sent on a journey commend themselves to the prayers of all the brethren and of the Abbot, and at the last prayer of the Work of God let a commemoration always be made of the absent. Let the brethren that return from a journey on the very day that they come back, lie prostrate on the floor of the Oratory at all the Canonical Hours . . . and beg the prayers of all on account of their transgressions, in case they should perchance upon the way have seen or heard anything harmful, or fallen into idle talk. And let no one presume to relate to another what he may have seen or heard outside the Monastery; for thence arise manifold evils.

This Sr. Madeleva says, is the spirit in which a nun would undertake a journey and this indicates her responsibilities in regard to it. Only an "urgent spiritual quest" could have persuaded her to leave the cloister and become a member of such a worldly group and to take part in such a public procession. The rule was no doubt subject to many abuses, but Chaucer does not indicate that the Prioress was of a derelict order; moreover, contends Sister Madeleva, Chaucer states directly that the

Prioress is worthy of reverence and respect.<sup>12</sup> Sister Madeleva believes that Chaucer so constructs the portrait not to satirize the Prioress but to exhibit the influence of her prayers and the rules of her Order upon her.

These critical statements, then, represent the gamut of opinion concerning Madame Eglentyne but still do not bring the reader to an unalterable conviction of the lady's true nature. To seek an ultimate solution to the puzzle of Chaucer's Prioress and to determine whether she represented the ecclesiastical norm, one must obviously look further than contemporary criticism. Logic would dictate a search into historical studies which give a realistic picture of medieval monasticism as it actually existed.

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<sup>12</sup>Sister M. Madeleva, Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays (Port Washington, N. Y., 1925), pp. 3-31.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MILIEU OF THE Prioress

The pursuit of a valid conclusion about the nature of the Prioress may be furthered by a look now at the Prioress's milieu, the medieval nunnery, and its lady superior--not as they should have been ideally but as they were in reality.

Two works, The English Church in the Fourteenth Century<sup>1</sup> by W. A. Pantin, and Monastic Life in the Middle Ages<sup>2</sup> by Cardinal Gasquet, are considered bibles in the study of monastic life. Strangely or not, in neither Pantin nor Gasquet does one find information relevant to the study of Chaucer's Prioress. Fortunately a detailed study of the medieval nunnery does exist. Dr. Eileen Power's comprehensive study, Medieval English Nunneries,<sup>3</sup> is the richest single source, as interesting and at times amusing as it is informative. Power exerted much effort poring over bishops' visitation reports and other ecclesiastical records from medieval convents in order to give readers a realistic picture of the

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<sup>1</sup>W. A. Pantin, The English Church in the Fourteenth Century (Cambridge, England, 1955).

<sup>2</sup>Cardinal Francis A. Gasquet, Monastic Life in the Middle Ages (London, 1922).

<sup>3</sup>Eileen Power, Medieval English Nunneries (Cambridge, Eng., 1922); reprinted New York, 1964. The information in this chapter is drawn primarily from Power. Every effort has been made to assist the reader in locating specific bodies of material by footnoting inclusive pages. Wherever Power's work is specifically supported by other historical studies, those studies have been cited in footnotes.

medieval nunnery as it was in actual life. Power's work is happily supported by numerous other historical works.

The total nature of the English nunnery in fourteenth century England, in all its complexity, is not the subject of discussion here, however. The study herein will therefore proceed to focus specifically upon the medieval prioress or abbess and related aspects of medieval monasticism as they are delineated by Power and her supporters and thus become revelatory of the Prioress in Chaucer's Prologue to his Canterbury Tales.

( English medieval nunneries in the fourteenth century were essentially aristocratic institutions, the membership recruited from the nobility and the upper classes. This was true of even the poorer institutions whose members begged for alms. If a girl of gentle birth did not marry, the convent was her only recourse. Noble ladies moved in a narrow sphere; occupations, although honest, were not looked upon as respectable for a lady of rank. Although not all families of rank would have been wealthy, they would have had enough money and leisure to supply the women in the family the education demanded of a young lady before her admission to the convent.

(The girl who entered the nunnery as a novice might have done so for a number of reasons. For those who entered of their own will, religion was a profession or a vocation.<sup>4</sup> It was, moreover, an honorable career for superfluous girls

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<sup>4</sup>Power, pp. 4-14.



who were unwilling or unable to marry,<sup>5</sup> and they might assume it in a spirit of sincere devotion. To some girls forced there by callous elders, the nunnery was a jail: unwillingly incarcerated, they were too frightened to resist. Sad to say, nunneries were occasionally used as dumping grounds for the bastard daughters of the nobility and for girls who were half-witted or deformed or suffering from some other incurable defect.<sup>6</sup> A fourth category in the cloister was the elderly women, mostly widows, who sought the convent for its serenity and promise of the peaceful life.<sup>7</sup>

Many a father with several daughters realized the economy to be found in making nuns of at least some of his girls. Although never officially sanctioned by the Church, a modest fee was required of the novice upon her entry into the convent. In addition, her family had to provide her with clothing, some furniture, and a proper celebration on the day that her novitiate ended and she became a nun.<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding all of these expenses, consigning a daughter to a nunnery was cheaper than marrying her off. A prospective husband of her own class would have demanded a dowry much larger than

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<sup>5</sup>Sir Arthur Bryant, The Medieval Foundation of England (New York, 1967), p. 88. Power, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Power, pp. 30-31.

<sup>7</sup>Bryant, p. 88. Power, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup>Power, pp. 6-7.



the outlay required by the nunnery.<sup>9</sup>

Since leaving the cloister was often viewed by the Church as apostasy, committing a girl to a nunnery was as final as death<sup>10</sup> but carried with it none of the risk attaching to murder. A nun, since she was considered dead to the world, could not inherit.

If a lady of the higher nobility retired to a convent, she was quite apt to become its prioress eventually. The head of the nunnery was usually drawn from this category. Three queens and two princesses were included in the line of well-born abbesses of Barking Abbey in Essex. When one knows that at the age of twenty-two Katherine de la Pole, daughter of an earl, was abbess there, one suspects that her birth was a factor in the choice. It was well for the convent that the prioress have rich connections and local influence since the religious house would likely profit thereby.<sup>11</sup>

The lady superior of the convent was elected,<sup>12</sup> subject only to the bishop's approval, and the election often proved tedious and expensive since it involved some journeying to consult the patron and the bishop and the paying of fees to

<sup>9</sup>George Gordon Coulton, Five Centuries of Religion, IV (Cambridge, England, 1935), pp. 121-122; reprinted 1950. Power, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup>Power, p. 54. George W. Previte-Orton, The Shorter Cambridge Medieval History, I (Cambridge, England, 1952), p. 284.

<sup>11</sup>Power, pp. 42-43.

<sup>12</sup>Bryant, p. 70. Power, p. 45.

a legal clerk and to the bishop's official for installing the new officer. Frequent notices in the episcopal registers show that the bishop had to declare an election null and void from time to time on account of some technical fault. Usually, however, this was merely a formal action, and he almost always appointed the candidate of the nuns' choice.

(The stipulations to qualify for the head of a nunnery were that the candidate be above the age of twenty-one, born in wedlock, and of good reputation.<sup>13</sup> Further,

she should be learned in divine law, be chaste, sober, merciful, not be turbulent or anxious-minded, not obstinate, not a zealot or unduly suspicious . . . considerate . . . not necessarily a disciplinarian nor a saint but endowed with good sense and wise direction. When she makes a correction, she should do it prudently without overdoing it lest in trying to rub off the rust she break the vessel.<sup>14</sup>

As the "pivot upon which the life of the convent turned,"<sup>15</sup> the prioress or abbess of a nunnery was an absolute monarch in her little kingdom<sup>16</sup> and could rule until her death. She was subject only to the rules of her order and to the guidelines of her bishop, whose inspection visits were widely spaced. The nuns were committed body and soul to her keeping,

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<sup>13</sup>Power, pp. 42-45.

<sup>14</sup>Dom Cuthbert Butler, Benedictine Monachism (Cambridge, Eng., 1924), pp. 186-189.

<sup>15</sup>Butler, p. 184.

<sup>16</sup>Bryant, p. 67. Power, p. 64. Previte-Orton, p. 185. J. R. Tanner, C. W. Previte-Orton, Z. N. Brooks, The Cambridge Medieval History (Cambridge, Eng., 1926), p. 658; reprinted 1964.

and any free will which they were allowed to exercise came solely from her dispensation.<sup>17</sup>

(One of the paramount restrictions governing the conduct of an abbess or prioress was a general regulation that she was never to leave the confines of the cloister unless it was for the service of the nunnery or for a matter of utmost necessity.) Old accounts show clearly, however, that the rule was widely interpreted to include some temporal business. Even during their long struggle to keep nuns cloistered, the bishops seem to have recognized that the heads of religious houses must of necessity do some traveling, and they granted some dispensations to have divine service celebrated wherever the nuns might be. It is a matter of record that prioresses managed craftily to combine business and pleasure in their journeys.<sup>18</sup> Being of good kin, they were welcomed in the great houses as visitors, often paying extended visits to friends and relatives.<sup>19</sup> They also left the convent to attend the deathbeds of relatives, to attend funerals and weddings of great folk, and, rarely, to act as executrixes of wills.

As early as 791, however, nuns were strictly forbidden to go on pilgrimages, and the rule was still in force in the fourteenth century.<sup>20</sup> In view of extant fourteenth century

<sup>17</sup>Butler, p. 187. Power, p. 64.

<sup>18</sup>Power, p. 376.

<sup>19</sup>William W. Capes, The English Church in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries (London, 1909), p. 302. Power, p. 376.

<sup>20</sup>There is vital disagreement here between Madeleva and Power which will be elaborated upon in Chapter III.

historical records, it is clear that Chaucer's picture of a pilgrimage did not stretch the truth. Pilgrims got as drunk as the Miller, sang lecherous songs, and told dirty stories; and prostitutes plied their trade at inns where the pilgrims were sure to stop. There is the story of a nun who on a pilgrimage went the way of all flesh, going to live with a married man in London. She returned to the fold later, contrite, much the worse for her experience.<sup>21</sup>

(The Church authorities felt that they had good reason to distrust the nuns' long absences from the convent which aimed always at keeping the nuns unsullied even by temptation.<sup>22</sup> Although the nuns' conduct might be exemplary outside the convent walls, there was nothing to actually prevent their joining in secular revelries, practices viewed by the Church as possible occasions for unseemly and licentious behavior. The church fathers considered it unwise to risk depending upon the nuns' strength of character alone as a deterrent from such activities.<sup>23</sup>)

When St. Benedict was constructing the set of rules which were to govern monastic life, he apparently did not foresee the coming of the convent, for there are in his Rule no regulations specifying the make-up of a nun's garb. The

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<sup>21</sup>Power, pp. 374-375.

<sup>22</sup>H. S. Bennett, Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century (Oxford, 1947), p. 23. Power, p. 376.

<sup>23</sup>Power, pp. 374-378.

dark habit, the wide pleated collar, the head covering which revealed the face from just above the eyebrows to the chin, and the black veil flowing down the back comprise the universally accepted outfit for Benedictine sisters.) (The evolution of the uniform including the headdress which was to cover the forehead to the eyebrows was complete by the fourteenth century and thus was a specification for the obedient prioress in Chaucer's time.<sup>24</sup>)

Some nuns, however, mostly prioresses and abbesses, took the unlicensed liberty of decorating themselves with furs and exotic fabrics.<sup>25</sup> Such luxurious attire was strongly and specifically forbidden to any religious by the rules of the order. (For weary centuries the bishops waged war to keep contemporary fashion out of the cloister,) but in vain. Generous friends and relatives gave the nuns gifts of money, and it was spent happily by the sisters on pretty pins and other worldly objects of adornment.<sup>26</sup>

(The crusade against modish secular dress was waged no more successfully than the crusade against the pets which nuns sought to enliven existence. The practice of keeping pets was carried to the extreme when the sisters took with them to the divine services dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, and an

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<sup>24</sup>Bennett, p. 26. F. N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1933), p. 653.

<sup>25</sup>Bennett, p. 23. Bryant, p. 89. Power, pp. 73-74.

<sup>26</sup>Capes, p. 281. Power, pp. 76-77.

occasional monkey.) One archbishop had to forbid the Abbess of Romsey from keeping monkeys and dogs because she was stinting her nuns in food.<sup>27</sup> Although the practice was forbidden, it seems that the visiting bishop's scruples were overcome on more than one occasion by the welcome of a thumping tail, and he discreetly closed his eyes.

(Since prioresses were customarily drawn from the wealthy class and had been accustomed to riches all their lives, temptation often led them to the possession of a most unmonastic luxury.) An amusing story of the flea and the gout as recounted by Power illustrates that the self-indulgent prioress was already a byword early in the thirteenth century: The flea and the gout were discussing their activities of the night before. The flea had found a juicy, corpulent prioress to nibble upon, but with the aid of her nuns the lady routed the flea from her bed. The gout had pricked the toe of a poor woman who promptly waded into cold water so that from his own discomfort gout took his leave of her. The flea suggested that the two of them exchange victims for the coming night. They met again the next morning to discuss the results. The flea was pleased and satiated, saying that the poor woman had ignored him, and he had feasted sumptuously on her blood. The gout too was gratified, for the prioress had proved an excellent hostess. As soon as he had pierced her great toe,

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<sup>27</sup>Capes, p. 303. Power, p. 61.

she had cossetted him hugely, wrapping him in fur and letting him lie in the softest part of the bed. Therefore the gout declared that he would stay always with the prioress for she made much of him. And the flea vowed that he would remain with the poor who disregarded him, thus allowing him to eat his fill. The moral is clear: the prioress was accustomed to gout, the disease of the rich and over-indulgent.<sup>28</sup>

Margaret Fairfax, prioress of Nunmonkton, exemplified the worldly prioresses, women who regarded themselves as the great ladies they were by birth and who acted accordingly. Margaret Fairfax wore furs and silken veils and frequently kept company with John Munkton in her room where the two drank and played backgammon.<sup>29</sup>

Some prioresses, too, had to be enjoined from time to time not to entertain too lavishly and not to give their kin-folks convent rents and goods. Nuns often complained that the prioress took everything of first quality for herself, leaving only dregs for her sisters. Another common complaint was that the prioress showed favoritism toward certain sisters.

Although the sisters frequently had complaints to give the bishop when he came for an inspection visit, rarely did the complaints equal those brought forth by the nuns under Prioress Margaret Wavere of Catesby. In her frequent fits of

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<sup>28</sup>Power, pp. 74-75.

<sup>29</sup>Capes, p. 305. Power, p. 77.

anger toward the nuns, it was not unusual for her to tear off their veils and drag them around by the hair in the very choir of the church, calling them beggars and harlots at the top of her voice. She was known to beat and imprison sisters who gave evidence to the bishop, and she aroused great resentment among the nuns by compelling them to spend an egregiously large part of their days in manual labor. The most serious charge concerned her conduct with a priest named William Taylor with whom she was surprised by a nun in a position compromising to say the least.

The sordid details of Prioress Wavere's reign should not be accepted as a picture of the typical medieval prioress. Convent life produced some saints as well as some sinners. Two excellent saintly examples are Abbess Euphemia of Wherwell and Prioress Joan Wiggenhall of Crabhouse. Abbess Euphemia increased the number of her nuns from forty to eighty and administered to them in sickness and in health the necessities of life with piety, prudence, care, and honesty. She increased the clothing allowance for the sisters and set them an example of charity and discipline at all times. She had constructed a farmery with a watercourse flowing underneath to carry away refuse, and she had constructed as well a chapel of the Blessed Virgin, well landscaped outside, providing a place for the nuns to take the air. Other buildings were added to the nunnery at her behest, and much formerly useless and barren land was cultivated, made serviceable and pleasant. The house prospered and grew during her reign; her nuns lived in a



spirit of peace and harmony.

Joan Wiggshall was a mighty builder also who, undaunted by adversity, undertook a program of construction worthy of a twentieth century college president. She had wealthy friends who helped her, and she had the blessings of her sisters who for twenty-four years lived with her a proud though uncomfortable life amid clouds of sawdust and the unending noise of construction.<sup>30</sup>

The typical medieval prioress as Power finds her and believes her exemplified in Madame Eglentyne, was neither a Margaret Wavere nor a Euphemia of Wherwell. As one can picture her from some hundred and fifty visitation reports,<sup>31</sup> she was a lady well meaning but not always provident, sometimes at a loss to know how to make both ends of an inadequate income meet.<sup>32</sup> She burdened her successor with debts as her predecessor had burdened her. The democratic ideal of convent life was difficult for her to achieve: it was so much quicker and easier to be an autocrat and do things herself than to consult with her sisters. She joyed that her position gave her the opportunity to escape the confinement and monotony of the convent. "Rarely a vicious woman but nearly always a worldly one," she could not resist silks, furs, and small pets

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<sup>30</sup>Power, pp. 70-93.

<sup>31</sup>Power, p. 94.

<sup>32</sup>Capes, p. 280. Coulton, p. 142. Power, p. 94.

like those of the ladies who visited in her guest room. Rarely was she so weak and impious that disorder and disunity in her house resulted; more often was she a noble lady, strong and pious though worldly, whose house bore witness to her strength and piety.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Power, pp. 94-95.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE CHARACTER OF THE PRIORESS

On the basis of historical studies it becomes apparent that the average prioress herself was an ambivalent figure. So she becomes apparent in Power's study. Power's concept of the Prioress as a worldly cleric, arrived at after painstaking, meticulous study and documentation, is based on what prioresses in general were like in the Middle Ages. She feels that there is no reason to expect Madame Eglentyne to be different from others of her rank. This historical ambivalence is reflected in the work of scholars whose interest centers upon the ambiguity which they find in Chaucer's portrait. Critics male and female, secular and orthodox, continue to be fascinated by the Prioress, whose very name is ambiguous, and to nourish their speculations upon their own points of view. Some have taken an extreme stance seemingly based on a disregard for Chaucer's lines. Others, who have endeavored in the main to be honest and impartial, have come to resolutions which have not satisfied those who insist on a clear-cut decision.

(A rough paraphrase of the forty-five line description of Chaucer's Prioress as it is presented in the Prologue to The Canterbury Tales reveals only that she had a simple, <sup>and coy</sup> modest smile and swore by St. Loy; she sang the divine services very well, spoke non-Parisian French, and had excellent table manners; (she was pleasant and amiable, aiming to be stately and courtly in manner). ~~Worthy of reverence~~, she was charitable

and tenderhearted; she fed her small dogs well and wept if one died or if one were hit with a stick; her nose was well formed, her eyes grey, her mouth small, soft, and red, her forehead broad and fair, and she was not spare; her cloak was well made. About her arm she wore green beads from which hung a golden brooch engraved with the words "Amor vincit omnia."

This is the extent of what Chaucer says about the Prioress. However much she may pique the curiosity of the reader, he may learn nothing more from Geoffrey Chaucer about her. Since this prioress exists only as a person in fiction, should not her character analysis be confined to a logical and unstrained extrapolation restricted by historical fact and by the concrete details as Chaucer presented them rather than elaborated into a critical creation augmented by hypothetical biographical data? It is impossible not to find suspect critical comments not so restricted.

(For example, both Muriel Bowden and Richard Schoeck feel that Chaucer, in pointing out the Prioress's sympathy for the mouse caught in a trap, is intimating that the suffering of her fellow man did not greatly concern her.) It is well known that a nun did not always enter the convent willingly; thus it is at least possible that Madame Eglentyne was forced to the cloister by a penurious father or by a grasping relative who wanted her inheritance. If such were the case, would she not naturally commiserate with any trapped creature because she herself felt trapped? There is at least historical precedent as a basis for this conjecture; on the other hand,

Bowden and Schoeck base their conjectures on nothing factual.

That Kemp Malone sees the Prioress's singing of the divine service a devotional act become nothing more than an affectation indicates that Malone did not look into the matter of liturgical singing to see how it was properly done. If he had done so, he would have discovered Madame Eglentyne's wisdom in intoning through her nose--a practice universally espoused to diminish strain on the vocal chords.

Whereas Chaucer says merely that she was not undergrown and that her cloak was well made, Talbot Donaldson jumps to the conclusion that the Prioress had a good figure and wore fashionable clothing. Further, Donaldson's conclusions become tenuous when he contends that Chaucer did not recognize the significance of the details he used in his own description of his own lady Prioress.

(The Prioress's dainty manners have caused many critics, John L. Lowes among them, to denominate her worldly.) It is most difficult to understand why dainty manners should connote worldliness. Madame Eglentyne would have been the gossip of the convent had she dipped her fingers in the sauce too deeply and dribbled it on her habit. An aristocratic lady, was she to forget her mother's instructions in table manners when she became a nun? Furthermore, since all nuns were of good family, it is safe to assume that the Prioress's manners were no different from those of her clerical sisters. They were the polite manners of the upper classes of the day.

Sometimes a critic seems not only to leap to illogical

interpretations of Chaucer's words but even to supply conclusions with no identified basis in the forty-five line description. There is, for instance, little in Chaucer's description of Madame Eglentyne to verify Helen Corsa's contention that the Prioress was aware of her beauty and actually cultivated it, except that "sikerly she hadde a fair forheed." But Corsa does not point to this evidence as a basis for her generalization. Perhaps Corsa moves too quickly to support generally received critical opinion here without supplying her reader a clue. Perhaps like some other critics attacking the Prioress's "vanity" in the cultivation of her beauty, Corsa means to imply that the Prioress's desire for cleanliness in her clothing was an indication of vanity; but Corsa does not state the matter, and common sense would not support it. Perhaps, again, in claiming the Prioress was devoted to her beauty, Corsa is building upon the unfounded assumption of various critics that the attractive wimple was an outcropping of egregious personal pride; but the wimple style has been proven to be a demand of the Prioress's order. (The only other possible evidence of vanity in personal appearance would be the "mouthful smal, and therto softe and reed," a phrase which could be construed to mean that the Prioress had heightened the color of her lips.) Corsa does not mention this item, however, and it is a part of the indivisible facial picture critics refer to as reflecting the heroine of medieval romance. Not one critic has mentioned the redness of the Prioress's lips, leaving the student free to accept the viable assumption that

the rosiness was natural rather than artificial.

The apex of illogical interpretations is reached by the critic who can find the Prioress lustful. The pathetically warped misconstructions of Benjamin Wainwright are incredible. Rich in imagination if not in perception, Wainwright sees the Prioress as a frustrated lecher. Any lady—even a fictional lady—undamned by overt misbehavior deserves more respect than he accords the Prioress. His image of her, buoyed by thin air, bears no resemblance to the lines drawn by Chaucer.

Even a wise and respected critic sometimes finds himself a victim of simple foolishness in random remarks about the Prioress. If, as George L. Kittredge says, the Prioress's affection for pets betrays her thwarted motherhood, the depth and exactness of Kittredge's psychological analysis ought to prove fascinating to say the least to men and women who are pet fanciers as well as parents.

It is not that these same critics had nothing logical and sensible to say about the Prioress, but hasty statements like those just cited tend to frustrate the student who expects consistent scholarly analysis and to anger the student who demands, moreover, an unbiased and logical treatment which recognizes the proper bounds for conjecture not aberrated by loose remarks or personal bias.

A different kind of bias in interpreting the Prioress is observable in critics whose analyses become inexact by omission rather than commission. As a critic of the Prioress

and therefore a critic of her figure as a potential bit of Chaucer's anti-clerical satire aimed at the Roman Catholic Church, Sister Madeleva had to fight personal bias but did not succeed in every instance. In her understandable and forgivable loyalty to the Church, Sister Madeleva, although she aims to be objective, cannot bring herself to admit that the medieval Church was as fraught with corruption as history shows it was. In a careful historical study expanded by her own knowledge and by her training in orthodoxy, she nevertheless refuses to discuss the Prioress's exposed forehead, a manifestation of personal vanity since a broad forehead as the Prioress possessed was fashionable at the time. Nor does Sister Madeleva concede that Madame Eglentyne was without question on a Church-forbidden pilgrimage, not a journey involving the business of her convent. In Chaucer's Prioress, Sister Madeleva can see only saintliness.

It is interesting that the respective interpretations of Power and Sister Madeleva, the two critics whose studies are based most painstakingly on fact, are essentially disparate. Power examined Chaucer's Prioress in the light of what she found prioresses historically were like and found nothing in the portrait to indicate that Madame Eglentyne was different from most prioresses who, says Power, were almost always worldly. Sister Madeleva examined the Prioress against the rules of the Benedictine Order and voiced her opinion that nothing in Madame Eglentyne's portrait denotes any departure from the rules of the order. To Sister Madeleva she is an ideal prioress.



Madame Eglentyne would be the image of the perfect prioress as Sister Madeleva sees her were it not for three considerations: (Sister Madeleva admits that the Prioress is on a journey but does not consent to call it a pilgrimage; she ignores the detail of the bare forehead; she fails to challenge the fact that Chaucer undeniably described the Prioress in terms of the worldly medieval heroine of romance.) Contrary to Donaldson's assertions, Chaucer does describe her in those terms and--artist that he was--he must have done so with some purpose in mind. Sister Madeleva's omissions in an otherwise convincing argument do leave uncontested ambiguity. Obviously an impasse still exists. To come to terms with this impasse, the only direction in which one can go is to resort again to Chaucer's poetic method to see if there be any further evidence which may be brought to bear upon an interpretation of those areas slighted by Sister Madeleva.

Somewhat invidious application of the connotative terms from the medieval romance has been made to the Prioress by critics such as Schoeck and Hoffman. Evidence supplied by these critics to this effect is convincing and adds markedly to the student's appreciation of the portrait. On the other hand, there is a cognate lens which could possibly provide some further illumination upon Chaucer's artistry and upon his attitude toward the Prioress.

For several decades it has been known that Chaucer was writing in a climate well aware of astrological and physiognomical lore, and that application of these principles to his

writing fortifies some of the portraits of the Canterbury pilgrims. Walter Clyde Curry in his study Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences<sup>1</sup> brought to light Chaucer's use of this lore. This scholar's work has markedly enlivened the reader's appreciation of, to name a few, the Miller, The Reeve, and the Wife of Bath. The Prioress is among those to whom he does not show application of this device which Chaucer used in selecting concrete details for his descriptions. However, would it not be entirely viable to apply in reverse the same procedure endorsed by Curry: to show that the absence of certain physiological characteristics in the description of the Prioress is significant in the light of current physiognomical and astrological lore and that one can draw valid inferences by inverse implication concerning Chaucer's view of Madame Eglentyne?

Chaucer is specific about her "fair forheed," "hir mouth ful smal," and "hir nose tretys." Medieval scientists believed that a red or florid complexion in a woman indicated that she was "immodest, loquacious, and given to drunkenness." In saying that Madame Eglentyne had a "fair forheed" might not Chaucer have intended to show in her fairness the very opposite of "immodest, loquacious, and given to drunkenness"—that is, modest, quiet, and sober? In medieval physiognomical science, a large mouth branded its owner as pugnacious, gluttonous,

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Clyde Curry, Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences (Oxford, 1926); reprinted New York, 1960.

audacious, harmful, and irreverent. The Prioress's mouth was "ful smal" and might indicate that Chaucer saw her as serene, temperate, retiring, harmless, and reverent.

Medieval physiognomists believed that the nose, above all parts of the body, was the "most infallible indication of character." A flat, low pug-nose with wide flaring nostrils, for example, proved its owner lustful, desirous of coition, easily angered, and prone to "filthy luxurious practices."<sup>2</sup> The Prioress's nose was "tretys" meaning well-formed, straight, probably aquiline. Her "tretys" nose then signifies that the words "lustfulness," "quick temper," or "dissipation" would be entirely out of place in any discussion of this prioress. In addition to the configuration of the nose, the presence or absence of a mole or wart thereon was a matter of importance. A wart or mole on the nose was proof of a like mark in "some private place," and it proclaimed to the world that its possessor was libidinous and subject to shameful fornication. There is no mention of Madame Eglentyne's nose being marred by a wart or a mole. Chaucer was not one to omit such a telling detail had it been in evidence. Finally, the total absence of any facial imperfection in the Prioress's portrait must indicate that Chaucer wanted to picture her as chaste and pure.

Chaucer did not disclose to his readers any information about the Prioress's horoscope. We do not know the ruling

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<sup>2</sup>Curry, pp. 85-87.

planet under which she was born, but it may be possible to infer that planet from the characteristics given in the portrait. Madame Eglentyne probably enjoyed music because "ful weel she soong the service dyvyne." It would be difficult indeed to sing well if one did not enjoy it. It is noteworthy, however, that, although she delights in music, she confines her singing to the intoning of the church services. Chaucer never says that she was guilty of joining in a chorus of a ballad or other common song. The Prioress was fond of beautiful colored objects of quality and value. Her rosary was "of coral . . . gauded al with grene," and her religious medal was "of gold ful sheene." Her love of pretty colorful things, however, manifests itself only in her possession of religious objects. She wears no tiara nor finger rings.

In addition, Chaucer's Prioress was "of great desport, ful pleasaunt, amyable of port . . . charitable . . . pitous. And al was conscience and tendre herte . . . she was nat undergrowe": she had a happy, sociable disposition, charity and pity toward the helpless or needy; she was tenderhearted, and she had a stately figure. According to the astrological lore drawn upon by Chaucer, the description of Madame Eglentyne reveals a child of Venus, who is identified by a tall figure, a love of music and pretty colored objects, a happy, amiable disposition, charity and pity toward the helpless or needy, tenderheartedness, and love of God.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Curry, pp. 100, 108, 110.

Significantly, the physiognomists and astrologers of Chaucer's time were unequivocal about the fact that children of Venus led noble lives.<sup>4</sup> There is no reason to believe that in describing the Prioress, Chaucer intended to emphasize anything other than nobility of mind and heart. She was amiable and pleasant, but not frivolous; she was friendly, but not forward; she endorsed beauty, but only as an attribute of goodness. It is important to note here that not all children of Venus were made in the mold of the Wife of Bath who, it must be remembered, drew her dominant characteristics from Mars, an especially corrupting influence giving the Wife of Bath the aggressiveness and sensuality not found in the Prioress.<sup>5</sup> The Prioress may have been born a child of Venus, but evidently a child of Venus uncorrupted by the confluence of other planets. Such a child of Venus can coexist with a child of God, though seldom, in the same personality; and when they do, the result is "a wonder now," the elusive rarity of the innate lady-- that rarity which accounts for Chaucer's deferential treatment of the Prioress.

If one accepts the validity of the suggestion that Chaucer was drawing the physiological characteristics of the Prioress from the same matrix of astrological and physiognomical lore that Curry has shown he employed to picture other

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<sup>4</sup>Curry, p. 110.

<sup>5</sup>Curry, pp. 100-101.

pilgrims, one must conclude the weight of evidence tends to prove Chaucer's Prioress far more noble than ignoble. Despite the fact that Madame Eglentyne was described in terms of the courtly heroine, she is the courtly heroine who is the child of Venus uncorrupted by the influence of other planets. Sister Madeleva has shown that in dress and action she is devout, sincere, and justly respected. Nothing indicates, moreover, that she departed from the orthodox specifications for a prioress as enumerated by Butler; she is chaste, sober, merciful, amiable, and serene. Any weight that one accords the application of Curry's scholarship to the analysis of the Prioress places the balance of conviction upon the side of Sister Madeleva's contention. When one assimilates this further viewpoint into the critical statements of Sister Madeleva and Power, Madame Eglentyne emerges predominately worthy of reverence.

But there is still the categorically banned pilgrimage and the forehead which, though fair, is forbiddenly displayed.

Though on a far smaller scale than a number of critics find it, some ambiguity still does exist in Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress. Although the evidence of her worldliness steadily diminishes against the picture of nobility which Chaucer presents, against a background of Power's study which found prioresses generally worldly, Madame Eglentyne is largely typical of the historical medieval prioress.

One incontestable conclusion at least can be made:

Chaucer was more interested in portraying the intricacy of human character than he was in presenting either an exemplary prioress or a hypocritical prioress. Madame Eglentyne, once one has savored her word picture, cannot be dismissed with a tolerant shrug. One can only admire Chaucer and his skillful craftsmanship in weaving into the portrait of Madame Eglentyne those compounded dimensions which are the seed of wonder and which promote an untiring interest in her character.

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APPENDIX

Ther was also a Nonne, a Prioresse,  
 That of hir smylyng was ful symple and coy;  
 Hire gretteste ooth was but by Seinte Loy;  
 And she was cleped madame Eglentyne.  
 Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne,  
 Entuned in hir nose ful semely,  
 And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,  
 After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,  
 For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe.  
 At mete wel ytaught was she with alle:  
 She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,  
 Ne wette hir fynGRES in hir sauce depe;  
 Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe  
 That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.  
 In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.  
 Hir over-lippe wyped she so clene  
 That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene  
 Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte.  
 Ful semely after hir mete she raughte.  
 And sikerly she was of greet desport,  
 And ful plesaunt, and amyable of port,  
 And peyned hire to countrefete cheere  
 Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,  
 And to ben holden digne of reverence.  
 But, for to speken of hire conscience,  
 She was so charitable and so pitous  
 She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous  
 Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.  
 Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde  
 With rosted flessh, or milk and wastel-breed.  
 But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,  
 Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;  
 And al was conscience and tendre herte.  
 Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was,  
 Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,  
 Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed;  
 But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;  
 It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe;  
 For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe.  
 Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war.  
 Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar  
 A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,  
 And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,  
 On which ther was first write a crowned A,  
 And after Amor vincit omnia.

From the Prologue to The  
Canterbury Tales in The  
Works of Geoffrey Chaucer,  
 ed. F. N. Robinson.

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## CHAUCER'S PRIORESS

Barbara H. White

Chaucer's Prioress has been an enigma to scholars who have tried to understand her. The fundamental point of contention about the Prioress centers upon the question: "Is Chaucer presenting her as a satiric figure supposedly dedicated to the Church but worldly in her pursuits, or is Chaucer presenting her as a sincere member of the clergy, typical of those who fulfilled the requirements laid down by the Church?" A study of selected critical statements brings one to no resolution of the question. The statement of one orthodox critic, Sister M. Madeleva, who measured the Prioress against the Benedictine Rule, does not end the search since this critic chooses to discuss only points on which she can score the Prioress saintly, thereby ignoring vital details in Chaucer's portrait.

One must look at historical studies of the English medieval nunnery to see Madame Eglentyne in her milieu. The exhaustive study, Medieval English Nunneries by Power, supported by historical evidence, indicates medieval prioresses generally were strong and pious though worldly. Power feels there is no reason to believe Chaucer's Prioress departed from that norm.

One returns to Chaucer's poetic method to search for further evidence on those areas slighted by Sister Madeleva. A study based on W. C. Curry's work reveals the Prioress as more noble than ignoble, atypical of the norm, but the balance of conviction is on the side of Power's contention that the Prioress is typical of prioresses of her day.