

GET THEE TO A NUNNERY: REHABILITATING
CHAUCEER'S PRIORESS

by

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The Prioress's contrasting depictions in the "General Prologue" and "The Prioress's Tale" maintain a reputation for ambiguity and poetic irony. Historical evidence and a closer reading of Chaucer's text suggest that critical analyses of the Prioress's portrait and tale have neglected to consider the role of Chaucer the pilgrim and his representation of Madame Eglentyne. Exploring the narrator's role in painting Madame Eglentyne provides the audience with a greater comprehension of the Prioress and her spiritual circumstance.

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I.

Introduction

Literary critics thrive on the ambiguities enveloping the Prioress's portrait and tale. In her portrait, Chaucer paints Madame Eglentyne not as a nun concerned with the spiritual duties of her office, but as a woman obsessed with secular convention. The "Prioress's Tale" reveals a Madame Eglentyne who comprehends the religious aspects of her vocation. The Prioress does not narrate a story to entertain the other pilgrims, but delivers a harrowing religious tale that subdues the merry group. While many critics contend that the recalcitrant nun of the portrait is the same woman who offers the tale of St. Hugh, the incongruencies between the Madame Eglentyne in the "General Prologue" and the Prioress who delivers the tale demand recognition and interpretation. Chaucer's contrasting depictions of the Prioress in the "Prologue" and the "Tale" are deliberate. Why does Chaucer establish a dichotomy between the portrait and the tale? Does he mean to heighten the audience's awareness by juxtaposing a nun with a romance heroine, Madame Eglentyne with a secular woman and the Prioress's portrait with her tale? What understanding

should the audience bring to the Prioress's portrait in the "General Prologue" and her tale? The Prioress's portrait and tale must be viewed as two parts of one whole--Madame Eglentyne. Only when the Prioress's portrait is considered in terms of her tale and vice versa can the audience discern Chaucer's purpose in presenting the contrasting images of the Prioress.

Historical evidence supports that female representations adhered to a masculine construction of a female dichotomy. The medieval woman was usually portrayed in text and image as an extension of the virgin, Mary, or a daughter of the sinner, Eve. Classical scribes and medieval clerics cultivated male suspicion of women and perpetuated notions of inherent female inferiority. Early Christian writers took the classical evidence for women's subordination step a further. They drew support for female inferiority from not only the basic biological differences between men and women, but they used the Bible to sustain their misogynist notions. Eve became the primary culprit in man's expulsion from Paradise and, therefore, men could blame all of their mortal misfortunes on her descendants, women. The Virgin Mary characterized the ideal woman; however, very few men furnished their representations of

Mary. Medieval women saints did garner positive depictions in male constructed hagiography, but, in many portraits of women, male clerics failed to consider Mary's virtue as adequate retribution for Eve's sin. Women could be portrayed as representatives of Mary in literature, but male scribes saw women as Eve. Ultimately, women had the Herculean task of reconciling themselves to the masculine constructed and contrasting depictions that defined the intellectual perceptions of medieval women.

Even medieval nuns did not escape the ramifications of Eve's transgression. Historical research into the lives of real life nuns shows that they, like all women, were suspected of ulterior carnal motives and spiritual corruption. In the later Middle Ages, portraits of wayward nuns became popular genres of art and literature. After the thirteenth century, Church officials ventured to sever the ties between female religious institutions and male monastic houses while, simultaneously, they labored to maintain control of the nunneries. In theory, nuns existed as extensions of the Virgin Mary, but in art and literature they were sometimes portrayed as the physical manifestation of Eve's sin. The male inspired illustrations of medieval women adhered to the intellectual conceptions of women

fostered by classical writers and Church scribes. Intellectual views of the female position were used by male clerics to justify the monastery's attempt to divorce itself from its adjunct female house. By the late fourteenth century, when Chaucer painted his portrait of Madame Eglentyne, female houses had allegedly resisted male clerical attempts to reform the convents and, consequently, the nunneries maintained a suspicion for internal chaos and spiritual perversion.

The Prioress's portrait and tale illustrate the female paradox that permeated medieval society. In the portrait of the "General Prologue," Madame Eglentyne earns the adoration of Chaucer the pilgrim. Although she is a nun, Madame Eglentyne's portrait in the "General Prologue" intimates that she is Eve, the seductress of men and debaser of mortal souls. In her tale, the Prioress venerates the Virgin Mary and, like the Mary of her tale, she provides spiritual nourishment for the pilgrims' tainted souls. Upon examining the historical facts of real life nuns and women in medieval society, how should the audience reconcile Madame Eglentyne's two contrasting portraits? Is the Prioress a corrupt nun or a defender of the Faith? Is she Mary or is she Eve? Chaucer destroys the myths of the medieval female

paradox as he, with his contrasting portraits of the Prioress, encourages his audience to recognize that the female dichotomy evident in medieval art and literature was perpetuated by the male intellectual society and was not an aspect of the real medieval woman. Chaucer suggests that, like Madame Eglentyne, women are not one or the other, Mary or Eve, but singular beings who do not deserve to be labeled solely as sinners or as saints.

II.

Historical Background

The images of medieval women rely on the male cleric's opinion Eve, and her perceived role in man's expulsion from Paradise. Church fathers deemed women the descendants of Eve and, therefore, the physical reminders of a woman who used her feminine wiles to lure Adam into a life of struggle and adversity. Eve's sins not only condemned mankind to a life of temporal hardship, but cultivated the disdain of the Church fathers who, in their misogynist writings, damned women to a life of inferiority subject to masculine suspicion. Female depictions showed the medieval women as stained by Eve's capitulation to appetite. Unfavorable portraits of women both inspired and justified the notion that sexual sins were more likely to be committed by women. All women were thought to be much more lustful than men and more easily given to debauchery.¹ As the daughters of Eve women were considered inconstant by nature, labeled a threat to public order, and assigned a subordinate place in the medieval hierarchy.

Eve's role in Original Sin not only condemned women to a life of inferiority, but inspired a concrete definition of

feminine features. In manuals for confessors, a special section was reserved for the characteristic sins to be expected in women.² The particular faults attributed to women included vanity, pride, and fickleness.

Interestingly, these lists of special sins attributed to women were generated by celibate clerics.³ Simone de Beauvoir, believing that the medieval Church extended to women the same privileges as to lepers, contends that the charity male clerics offered women was "mere tokenism."⁴ These religious men considered the feminine predilection toward carnal perversion as primarily a menace to male chastity. Males did not identify with Eve and, therefore, masculine corruption was not explored to the extent of female perversion. Chaucer may have recognized this double standard in the medieval Church when he placed these criticisms of celibate clerics in the Wife of Bath's mouth:

By God! If women hadde written stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They would han written of men moore wikkednesse
Than all the mark of Adam may redresse.⁵

As Chaucer illustrates with the Wife of Bath's remark, male clerics were quick to condemn women for their status as mere

females and their perceived threat to masculine continence. Chastising women supplied male clerics with a vehicle by which to exult their celibate condition. The male religious considered all female actions subject to masculine suspicion and, therefore, a woman's every move was scrutinized by the patriarchal church and society whose unfavorable female depictions intimated that it was unsympathetic to women.

Women also garnered the reputation of being naturally melancholic. Neurotic behavior in medieval women, however, would not be a surprise considering the cross of Original Sin these women had to bear.⁶ Everywhere the medieval woman turned she was hit with the guilt of Eve's transgressions. The Church Fathers supplied a cornucopia of writings to justify woman's corrupt state and her culpability in Original Sin. St. Jerome, a fourth-century churchman, produced voluminous writings to justify the subordination of women. Although Jerome esteemed celibate religious women, his words on The Fall secured women's guilt by association. St. Jerome writes, "Remember always that a woman drove the tiller of Paradise from the garden that had been given him."⁷ What woman could refute the assertions of renowned Fathers of the Church? Even the female saints exhibited awareness of their subordinate role in society.

Catherine of Siena apparently feigned ignorance of Latin as she explained to male clerics that God had guided her hand and the formations of her words. Some aristocratic women were illiterate and even those who could read and write often had no exposure to Church manuscripts. Women could not examine the religious and classical foundations for female subordination in order to question the plight of women in medieval society.

Since she often had no access to academic and religious texts, the medieval woman could not disprove the sins inherently attributed to her sex. Her mere existence supplied celibate clerics with a means to perpetuate earlier misogynistic themes. To refute established Church doctrine was deemed heresy and the medieval woman had enough sins attributed to her person without adding apostasy to the list. The medieval woman was held up to an ideal that she neither resembled nor could achieve, but she was continually chastised in text and image for the feminine association with Eve's transgressions. As a consequence of the female position in society, often medieval literature described women as melancholic, or to utilize a modern term, depressed. Apparently, it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a woman to extricate herself from the bonds

of medieval misogyny. Even the most virtuous female realized her implied affiliation with Eve and melancholy resulted when she was lead to suspect her own chastity and femininity.

As a consequence of Eve's sin, women were subject to Church and social laws that defamed and subordinated women. The laws of medieval society were designed by men who considered women not only inferior, but also dangerous, since all women defied by definition the bounds of reason.⁸ Medieval males, influenced not only by misogynist Church fathers, but also by Aristotle, viewed reason as a masculine quality and appetite as a feminine characteristic. Appetite in a woman, as defined by the fourteenth century writer Richard de Bury, resulted from her close association with animals. In one of his many misogynistic writings, de Bury adopted the persona of books who lament the man's affiliation with the weak and fickle woman:

Our place is usurped . . . by that two legged animal with whom clerics have been long since forbidden to live together and whom we have taught our pupils to shun even more than a snake or a cockatrice.⁹

According to de Bury, a woman was more closely related to farm beast than to a human being. He claims that the

medieval woman had the ability to deter man from his academic pursuits. While de Bury's assertions appear ridiculous to a modern audience, the implications of such male literature had severe ramifications in medieval society. Both men and women were reminded of the female predilection for debauchery and her inherent capacity to corrupt the unsuspecting and virtuous male. Women wielded some power because they provided an impetus for male writings. It appears that men both feared and were fascinated by women. Undoubtedly, male authors perpetuated the belief in women's innate passion so as to rationalize their own misogynistic views of the medieval woman; however, masculine beliefs shaped a society which denigrated women for their mere status as females.

While women were the daughters of Eve, they were also the spiritual descendants of the Virgin Mary. Mary embodied truth and virtue while Eve symbolized female inconstancy. In the twelfth century, the Virgin Mary resurfaced in art, literature, and the Church as an important facet of religious doctrine.¹⁰ For some reason male clerics had side-lined Mary as a religious symbol, down-playing her female role in Christ's birth while focusing on her son's endeavors and his sacrifice for mankind. Thus, the

development of the concept of the sanctity and the special role of Mary and her redemption of Eve's sin led to the partial rehabilitation of women.¹¹ Medieval religious men remembered Mary for her chastity and her function as the mother of Jesus Christ--redeemer of Eve's sin. Mary had a real power that women in twelfth-century literature possessed merely symbolically in male authored works.¹² Often, only in literature could a woman achieve the autonomy denied to her by the medieval patriarchy. Female characters were not depicted as real people with temporal difficulties, but as representations of male concerns. Joan Ferrante explains that, in twelfth-century literature, "women are symbols, aspects of philosophical and psychological problems that trouble the male world."¹³ Even Mary's venerated position in medieval society did not relieve her of the conception of female inferiority. Despite her revered feminine position, Mary remained subordinate to the men in her life: Christ and of course, God. She was held partially responsible for deliverance of mankind from the effects of Eve's sin; however, Mary's role in female redemption was not absolute. Sometimes women were deemed the beneficiaries of Mary's virtue in literature, but still held accountable for Eve's weaknesses.

Despite the advent of Mary as a representation of the feminine ideal, women in the twelfth century lost significant power. The increasing control of the state and the rise of formal education significantly reduced the control of aristocratic women.¹⁴ Women saw changes in inheritance laws and dowry practices which limited their domestic, economic, and legal autonomy. In the years preceding the Norman Conquest, women, particularly widows, had the ability to run their own estates and supervise the inheritance of minor children. Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple have discovered similar alterations in the autonomy and authority wielded by religious women. Ecclesiastical reforms advocated by the Cluniac and Gregorian movements reduced the considerable control employed by the abbesses of the early Middle Ages.¹⁵ Clerical emphasis on Eve's transgression and general female depravity significantly decreased the number of endowments for nunneries and augmented the male monastic control of female orders. While the Virgin Mary was venerated by male clerics and secular authors, the number of female saints also declined. Jane Schulenberg suggests that the decrease of female saints stems from the purging of women from the twelfth century social sphere.¹⁶ Women participated in more private than

public activities and the hagiographers did not document domestic enterprises as justification for female sainthood.

The medieval scribe's recognition of strong biblical women provided medieval portraits of women with a respite from Eve's sin. Joan Ferrante explains that the medieval audience did not consider powerful biblical females real women, but symbols for Christianity. Although the Bible ascribes great moral strength to Judith, Ester, and Ruth, these biblical heroines were divested of their human nature by commentators and were made to represent impersonal abstractions like the Church.¹⁷ Often, the celibate church fathers refused to acknowledge active feminine participation in the defense of Christianity. Male clerics, authors, and orators preferred to ignore the potentially unpleasant ramifications a masculine acknowledgement of active female defenders of the Faith might bring to the patriarchal society. Instead, male clerics hammered the medieval audience with reminders of Eve's transgression and her perceived responsibility in man's expulsion from Eden. The male Church fathers left women few vehicles by which to achieve independence or to garner glory. Even Biblical literature dealing with women was suspect. If a woman was bad then, of course, she was a real woman; however, when a

woman saved her people, defended the Faith, and earned spiritual fame, she was considered a detached symbol of the Church.

While Mary redeemed the portraits of women in some literature, medieval females remained under the male constructed Eve/Mary paradox in both secular literature and Church thought. Religious doctrine portrayed woman as extensions of the Virgin Mary, while at the same time regarded women as besmirched by the temporal stains of childbirth and menstruation. After the advent of the devotion to the Virgin Mary in the twelfth century, the medieval woman was painted as venerable and virtuous and, in some literature, she was portrayed in divine form. While the Church fathers recognized, theoretically, that carnal indulgences equally debased men and women, these male authors, significantly, did not address men's corrupting influence on women: they highlighted women's depraved power over men. Thus, the Church recognized that both men and women were tainted by the Fall; however, woman's perceived responsibility in Original Sin left females open to greater criticism and subordination. In medieval society, a woman's power depended on her ability to prove her spiritual purity and preserve her corporeal chastity. Any act that would

allude to the fact of Eve's corruption reinforced the medieval male's idea of women's subordinate role.

Many male theologians and philosophers exposed poor opinions of women in their intellectual works. While the classical writings of Aristotle expounded on the natural subordination of women, early Christian scribes, like Paul, perpetuated the beliefs of Aristotle by constructing a conception of women that maintained a "natural" female inferiority to males. Aristotle supports his misogynistic claims by asserting that between men and women the "inequality is permanent."¹⁸ Aristotle contends that females should not govern and, the most damaging of all, that they are defects of nature, while Paul claims that women should not preach.¹⁹ Paul explains that women cannot preach because they lack the capacity to lead: they are naturally subordinate. He ordered that women cannot teach because a teacher is a prelate or presider; a women cannot lead, she can only follow since she is defective in reason, which is essential to leadership.²⁰ Male subordination of women did not discover its origins in medieval society; however, it did find many celibate clerics eager to continue the views of women expounded by earlier misogynist scribes.

Although historical evidence shows that she participated in pilgrimages and sometimes preached, St. Hildegard of Bingen agreed with Paul that women should not hold priestly offices. Shahar notes that female mystics, like Hildegard, "did not dispute their inferior status in this world and accepted women's secondary role in creation."²¹ Hildegard was an active agent of the Church, but she understood the position of women in the Church hierarchy. Undoubtedly, Hildegard perceived the male construction of the inferior female body when she agreed with the misogynist scribes. Hildegard says that "woman is the creation of man."²² Perhaps Hildegard realized that the safest means for her to continue her religious activities and fulfill her spiritual calling was to support Church doctrine by acknowledging the inferior female condition. Female saints were esteemed by male scribes; however, most were canonized after their deaths.²³ Perhaps the patriarchy could not bring itself to glorify the spiritual excellence of living women.

Medieval clerics subscribed to the opinions of their classical and religious predecessors. They believed that a woman who preached would inspire "immoral thoughts" in her audience.²⁴ Even if a female preacher was virtuous, she

could not remain untainted by the male suspicions surrounding her gender. Any word from the mouth of the corrupt female was designed an aberration to the male ear. Lee Patterson agrees that "for the male audiences [of the time] feminine speaking is never wholly divested of the titillating ambivalence of eroticism."²⁵ Although female orations were, in theory, suspect Hildegard of Bingen preached and was, ultimately canonized. But in the intellectual sphere medieval women could not escape their status as the physical reminders of Eve's sin and, therefore, they were reminded that it was not their place to preach. Men might be affected by Original Sin, but their association ceased with the natural stain of every mortal soul. In medieval images, women had to bear the burden of not only a besmirched soul, but an implicit inferior corporeal and mental condition.

Undoubtedly, the medieval literature written by males deserves the close scrutiny of its feminine depictions. Joel Rosenthal warns of male medieval works, "There is little escape from the basic picture: most men who wrote about women did so to denigrate them, and most of those who wrote for other purposes were apt to give women the short shrift."²⁶ While these male-authored medieval works are

sometimes held to be the manifestations of misogyny, they were more likely the consequence of masculine ignorance of the feminine body, mind, and daily duties. Celibate church men really had no insight into the daily existence of medieval women. Their sole sources of feminine inspiration did not derive from interaction with actual females, but sprung from earlier church literature and pre-Christian texts. Hays suggested that the "eunuch-like" representations of the male clergy were a fundamental aspect of a Christian doctrine which exalted virginity, spurned carnal relations, and deemed that only unmarried individuals were chaste.²⁷ Sexuality, especially female sexuality, was, therefore, suspect long before the medieval male began his depictions of women.

Misogynistic literature was, perhaps, the effect of the innate fear men harbored of women. Clerics, as men, appeared mystified by the capabilities of the female body--childbirth or menstruation--both functions reserved solely for women. Like many individuals who came before and would follow, male clerics feared what they did not know and could never experience. Men manufactured their own images of medieval women and, thus, they created for themselves explanations of female physiology which subverted the

woman's position and secured the superiority of men. When male authors considered women as real people, they chose to view them as temptresses or child-bearers and, with this vision of women, the potential depictions of women were slight or negative.²⁸ Men knew women to be the daughters of the ultimate sinner, Eve, yet male-authored literature, while it condemns Eve's transgression, seems sometimes fascinated by the sexual dynamo that was termed "woman."

The continual subordination of women in the Church, art, and literature, left women few options for an existence independent of male and Church supervision. Medieval society expected a woman to marry and take her place as the bride of either man or Christ. If women did not fulfill their reproductive role in the medieval marriage, they were designated to remain virgins and, thus, marry their hearts and souls to Christ. St. Jerome declared that if a woman was not married to a temporal man then she should make a commitment to chaste widowhood or virginity.²⁹ As dictated in Church literature, a woman could not be held responsible for her own corporeal and spiritual chastity: she needed either a man or Christ to assure her subordinate position. Virgins and chaste widows did not transcend their status as women, but they did achieve a greater position in medieval

society than married women. Chaste widows and virgins redeemed themselves from the stain of Eve's transgression by imitating the male celibate clerics, denying their sexuality, and, therefore, becoming more like men.

The inequality between the sexes perpetuated by both Paul and Aristotle declared that a woman's natural role is silence. Aristotle contends that "Silence is a woman's glory."³⁰ Paul continues Aristotle's classical opinion as he recommends that women should be silent in the Church. Paul claims:

Women must keep quiet at gathering of the Church. They are not allowed to speak; they must take a subordinate place as the law enjoins. If they want information they should ask their husbands at home; it is disgraceful for women to speak in Church.³¹

He prescribed silence for women: they were, after all, loquacious by nature. Not only could a woman not speak in Church, but she was forbidden to enter the priesthood. Because of her status as a female, Paul claimed that women could not hold priestly offices. Only men were worthy of direct communion with God. Even Hildegard agreed that women were created from and subordinate to men. Thus, male and

female religious concurred that a woman's tainted soul had no place in the inner sanctum of the Church.

The Church fathers had definite opinions regarding not only women, but feminine apparel. Paul deemed women licentious by nature. His works portray women not as the inheritors of Mary's virtue, but the living extensions of Eve's sin. He forbade women to wear rich apparel--they might tempt men's libido. Paul viewed all women as the daughters of Eve and, therefore, he claimed that women were inherently weak. Like Paul, Tertullian regarded women as the inheritors of Eve's transgression. Tertullian proclaimed that any woman cognizant of her female status and her responsibility for the Fall should:

affect meanness of appearance, walking about as Eve, mourning and repentant, in order that by every garb of penitence she might more fully expiate that which she derives from Eve,--the ignominy . . . of first sin and the odium of . . . human perdition.³²

A woman, therefore, should recall Eve's responsibility for the Fall and behave accordingly: she should remain perpetually contrite and neither enhance her appearance nor revel in her physical beauty. Tertullian concedes that natural female beauty is not criminal, but "it is to be

feared."³³ As Tertullian prescribed, veils and other garments were necessary to conceal a woman's visage from the eyes of men. A woman could corrupt a virtuous man with a mere glance and her debased nature prescribed her inferior position. Paul and Tertullian generated writings that warranted the subordinate position of women in medieval society.

While the writings of influential religious men, like Paul and Tertullian, placed women in a subordinate position, some means for female autonomy did exist in medieval society. Fasting offered medieval women the control and revered position they were denied by the patriarchal society. Through fasting, women internalized as well as escaped patriarchal and religious structures.³⁴ They used fasting as a means to depart the role of food nurturer and food preparer. Women, therefore, turned toward a more radical piety in their push for autonomy. They fasted longer than men and, often, these fasts culminated in death. Women carried their fasts to such extremes because, for them, it was the only vehicle of expression available. In a fast-induced trance, women could speak directly to God without the interference of a male intermediary and only by fasting could a woman achieve the control of her religious

and secular circumstance. Fasting not only ceased the physical reminders of women's perceived sinful position, but offered some women an avenue to real autonomy.

Women controlled far more than their own bodies through fasting. Fasting women manipulated their families, their male religious superiors, and God himself.³⁵ Fasting was not merely a ploy for control of circumstance, but it was part of suffering. In the Middle Ages, suffering was considered productive activity; it redeemed both participant and society. Women's extreme fasts, therefore, were not bizarre behavior that afflicted a few individuals, but part of a broader design that included eucharistic devotion, food multiplication miracles, and devotion to Christ's compassion.³⁶ Although fasting was a dangerous means to female autonomy, the specific illness of not being able to eat was embraced by medieval women. Despite their subordinate position in the patriarchal society, fasting women gained personal control and male respect.

Repudiation of temporal nourishment offered a means for women to prove their piety and gain esteem within the community. Catherine of Siena was repelled by all worldliness, absolutely declined to accept any bridegroom but Christ, and focused on the conquest of her body. She

refused to marry the man her family had chosen. To avoid being wedded to a temporal bridegroom, extensive fasts and mystical visions proved Catherine's holiness to her family. According to Catherine, there was no way that she would have accommodated society and married. She must obey God and not men.³⁷ Fasting was preparation for a mystical alliance, being fed by Christ, and temporal marriage might despoil this spiritual union. Catherine was able to escape her father's household and live on her own, provided that she maintained her corporeal chastity and translated her mystical associations with Christ. Women like Catherine, who the patriarchy deemed holy, were free to run their own lives and remain unmarried while they fasted and communed with God. By virtue of her extreme fasting, mystical visions, and virginal state, Catherine of Siena garnered both the admiration of Church officials and sainthood.

Some medieval women fasted not only to achieve a closer union with God, but to deny the basic biology of their femininity.³⁸ Fasting provided a means for women to cleanse themselves of a physical reminder of Eve's transgression: menstruation. By fasting to an unhealthy extreme, a woman could cease menstruation and, thus, become more like a man. In a time when the Church and literature

viewed women only on the basis of their reproductive value and the feminine manifestations of Eve's sin, the woman who denied her femininity exhibited unheralded control of circumstance. Not only did women, like Catherine of Siena, achieve autonomy in the patriarchal society, but they often earned sainthood. Starving to death, however, was a high price to pay for recognition and canonization. Women who took their religious zeal and push for control to such extremes were products of the far-reaching constraints of the medieval patriarchy.

Extreme fasts were not the only means for medieval women to gain autonomy. Virginity was a useful and powerful feminine asset: it was not linked to sex, but, rather, a means to achieve freedom from gender.³⁹ Often, virginity was a medieval woman's ticket to power and authority. As a virgin, the medieval woman could remain autonomous, simply by escaping the bonds of matrimony. As Vern L. Bullough writes in his essay "Medieval Medical Views of Women," "the easiest way for a woman to approach the male level of rationality was by remaining a virgin."⁴⁰ The most revered woman had to imitate the qualities of the supreme virgin, Mary. Thus, a woman not only achieved control of her body, but she gained some social autonomy. A virgin liberated

herself from her subordinate status as a woman, by denying the basic biological truths of her existence. St. Jerome writes of female virginity, "as long as a woman is for birth and children, she is different from man. But if she wishes to serve God, she will cease being a woman and be called man."⁴¹ Church literature attests, if a woman was to free herself from the effects of Eve's sin, she had to relinquish the physical reminders of her corrupt female state.

Excluding women who fasted to the point of biological shutdown, most females could not deny the basic natural facets of their existence: menstruation and childbirth. Virgins and nuns could forgo childbirth, but few women, save the medieval anorectic, could escape menstruation. Poorly nourished women might cease to menstruate; however, they did not consciously will their own biological shutdown. When considering women, male clerics often reflected not only their own prejudices, but those of both classical and medieval science.⁴² Menstruation was deemed to represent feminine impurities and signify "bad thoughts."⁴³ The man who touched a menstruating woman defiled his own thoughts. Thus, the male cleric used the perceived stains of menstruation and childbirth to justify the medieval woman's subordinate status. Both menstruation and childbirth, two

natural functions lacking in males, were considered punishments for Eve's responsibility in Original Sin. Menstruation proved that women could not achieve masculine perfection and was itself the ultimate manifestation of female inferiority and evidence for their inherent "deformities."⁴⁴ Menstruating women, even nuns, were not allowed to enter the Church.

Male conceptions of female anatomy inspired a glut of literature regarding feminine biological function and subsequent societal status. The connection between menstrual blood and pregnancy was discovered long before the Middle Ages; however, some medieval writers purported that menstruation itself was a feminine difficulty resulting as a consequence of Eve's transgression. Innocent III intimated that the Fall was woman's fault when he declared that women suffered in childbirth as a consequence of their "kinship" with Eve.⁴⁵ The medieval conception of feminine anatomy and physiology justified a woman's basic "sinfulness."⁴⁶ Male scribes perpetuated the female myths by declaring that childbirth and menstruation signified the stain of Eve's sin. Theoretically, a woman was debased by her biological condition.

Not only did the medieval virgin or chaste widow subscribe to the masculine level of rationality, but male scribes deemed chastity more healthful for both men and women. Adhering to a tradition of natural female inferiority, medieval scribes continued the ideas concocted in ancient works. Classical medical writers often deemed sexual intercourse a detrimental activity. Philo, an Alexandrian Jew born in the first century A.D., claims that females represent the senses while men symbolize the rational soul. Since virgins denied the biological function of their female status, Philo continually refers to virgins as the "best kind" of women.⁴⁷ Soranus (second century A.D.), in a discourse on gynecology, declared that "permanent virginity" was the epitome of female health because intercourse was deemed "harmful."⁴⁸ Like Aristotle, Soranus compares women to animals to elucidate his opinions. To support his assertions Soranus reminds his audience that "even among dumb animals we see that those females are stronger which are prevented from having intercourse."⁴⁹ Indeed, evidence exists which supports that medieval nuns did live longer than their secular counterparts. The nuns' longevity, however, could probably be attributed to the fact that they did not suffer the

physical ailments related to childbirth and daily domestic duties.

While religious sentiment may have influenced some women to take the veil, many were not consulted about their entry into the cloister. Medieval families placed their daughters in convents at a very early age. The canonical age was sixteen, but many daughters were placed in the cloister when they were five or six years old. Leaving was not a real option for these women sent to the nunnery by their families. They were not forbidden to refuse the veil, but the Church viewed rejection of the cloistered life as apostasy.⁵⁰ The number of marriageable women undoubtedly exceeded the number of marriageable men and, therefore, an outlet for the overflow of single women was a necessary fact of medieval society. C.H Lawrence accounts for such an imbalance by stressing "the normal female longevity and the inroads made upon the male population by warfare, the hazards of merchant travel, and the clerical celibacy."⁵¹ The placement of extraneous females within the cloister combined the effect of their feminine condition with economic reality. Families discovered that it was easier to pay a small dowry and pawn their unwanted female child off

on a convent than to try to provide a temporal dowry and find the girl a husband.

Virgins were not the only women in residence at female monastic houses. Chaste widows, repudiated wives, and women whose husbands had entered a monastery also discovered sanctuary within the walls of female religious institutions. Some of these women took the veil as a consequence of deep religious sentiment: they desired to pursue the ascetic relationship with God denied to secular women. A great number of women, however, chose to enter the convent because there were few other occupations available unmarried women. In the Middle Ages few women could live independently. They required the protection, instruction, and surveillance of either a father or a spouse. Thus, nunneries were a refuge for those who had nothing to offer a prospective mate, an outlet for women who had no inclination to provide the prescribed role of wife and mother, and an agreeable haven for widows who did not choose to remarry. Often married women who lived under monasticism were victims of the "matrimonial chess game."⁵² Men wanted heirs and, if a wife failed in this capacity, she was banished to a convent.

Lay founders were responsible for many of the female foundations that were erected during the Middle Ages. These

lay founders included members of the medieval aristocracy who wished to prove their spiritual and social superiority by establishing their own religious houses. According to Power, "In England there were in all between the years 1250 and 1540, between 126 and 136 nunneries, excepting the Gilbertine ones of which there were 10."⁵³ During the Early and High Middle Ages, nunneries were primarily endowed as places for the spiritually inspired daughters of the landed gentry. Establishing a nunnery allowed its founder to reap the spiritual benefits of the foundation: the women who entered these houses prayed for their benefactors. Nunneries also provided locations for the education of the family's children.⁵⁴ Founding a nunnery became a fashionable deed for the nouveau riche and, consequently, many family houses were established within a relatively short time.

Not all men built female religious houses to glean spiritual piety, some founded convents to support the family members of monks. In 1056, St. Hugh convinced his brother to donate lands at Marcigny for the purpose of a female monastic house. Family "pietas" was Hugh's primary motivation: he desired a female monastic house for the maintenance of his mother and the wives of the men who had

become monks at Cluny.⁵⁵ Marcigny housed 99 nuns and was headed by a claustral prioress. The title and position of abbess was retained for the Virgin Mary. Thus, an empty seat remained in the convent for the Virgin Mary to whom, even the Prioress, was a subordinate. These nuns were relegated to strict enclosure and their duties were supervised by a male prior. The austere rules developed by St. Hugh for the nuns at Marcigny illustrates the influence classical and early Church scribes had on medieval monastic life. Hugh left the nuns no autonomy: he required continual male supervision of the nuns' daily affairs and religious life.⁵⁶

The Cluniac nuns were fortunate to have been provided a set of rules by a male religious figure because nuns often felt marginalized by monastic doctrine that was inapplicable to female religious houses. The infamous Eloise realized that Benedictine law was written for men and could not be transferred to nuns. Consequently, she asked her former lover and now monk Abelard to develop a monastic creed for women. In 1129, Eloise accepted her former lover Abelard's invitation to relocate at Paraclete. She claimed that the Benedictine rule was not a realistic mode of existence for religious women.⁵⁷ Benedictine law prescribed manual labor

and, since nuns were patrician women and could not work in the fields, the Benedictine rules provided no spiritual direction for her nuns. Also, abbots were expected to entertain and, as Eloise pointed out, it would be completely inappropriate for the prioress to fulfill the same duties.

Abelard responded to Eloise's appeal. For the nuns he prescribed moderation in all things. The nuns' feeding and fasting habits were not a large concern for Abelard. He would, however, not allow nuns to partake of Christ's blood: wine. Abelard, the castrated former lover of Eloise, declared women, "a sensual and turbulent thing, entirely opposed to continence and silence."⁵⁸ The double standard was obviously in evidence here. Men could indulge in the spiritual mystification of wine, but religious women were denied that association with Christ: they were to be his handmaids and not his soulmates. Strict enclosure and complete silence finished Abelard's guide to female monastic life. One wonders if Abelard prescribed strict enclosure to keep the nuns cloistered for their own religious benefits or for his personal spiritual safety. Whatever his design, Abelard's final note ensured that the female house would remain under the control of the nearby monastery.

Nunneries fulfilled a vital role in medieval society by providing a sanctuary to unmarriageable widows and daughters of the aristocracy. "Unmarriageable" denoted two female circumstances: either the women refused to marry, or no acceptable male suitor could be found. Nuns were recruited from a limited group and, therefore, the nunnery was a class institution.⁵⁹ Even prioresses from the smallest and most impoverished convents were from patrician families. No daughters of the lower echelons of medieval society took the veil. Unlike the aristocratic class, the lower classes needed no social vent for their unmarried women.⁶⁰ Unmarried aristocratic women could not work to support themselves, while women from the lower classes could perform the duties of domestic servants in patrician homes. If a plebeian woman lived within the cloister her function was that of domestic servant. Thus, nunneries supplied a means for aristocratic women to pursue an ascetic existence and, subsequently, provided a useful function for unmarriageable, undesirable, and unhappy gentlewomen.

Convents furnished a wealth of opportunities for the nuns and society.⁶¹ The cloister offered women the environment necessary to achieve the monastic ideal: in some places the nun could gain the individual perfection and

religious devotion which garnered her a celebrity status and "veneration by posterity."⁶² More practically, the cloister provided women with a medium for education, organization, and responsibility. The medieval woman might achieve, through the cloister, the professional position denied to her secular counterpart. To the lower classes, the nunneries ensured the livelihood of the community. Nuns were both landlords and employers. As aristocrats and as women, nuns could not be expected to work the land, make repairs on the estate or to maintain the property. Laborers were necessary to cook and clean the convent. The only circumstance where a nun would do the domestic work herself was when the convent was too poor to pay the help. In the more wealthy female monastic establishments, the nuns sometimes employed private servants. When Dissolution occurred in the sixteenth century, it was no surprise that the laborers in the community exhibited some anxiety at the prospect of losing their livelihood: the convent.

Nunneries not only supported the community, but existed as a temporary haven for secular women. The nunnery was utilized as a boarding house for aristocratic wives and widows.⁶³ Men needed someplace to keep their womenfolk during their sojourns from home. These temporary secular

lodgers occasionally influenced the nuns' behavior and dress. Perhaps the lodgers ignited a desire in the nuns to live vicariously through their secular visitors, while the nuns took their aspirations one step further by parroting courtly etiquette and mirroring temporal convention. According to Eileen Power, the nuns imitated the visitors by copying their secular attire and pet dogs.⁶⁴ Power appears to have Chaucer's Prioress in mind when she presents a portrait of nuns frolicking with the visitor's dogs and even adopting dogs of their own. The Church disagreed with the nuns' taking in secular boarders, and bishops discouraged the practice; however, many nuns tended to disregard the negative approval of male clerics--they needed the cash.

Money was always a concern for the often poorly endowed nunneries and male church leaders frowned upon the dowry that a woman's family had to offer the convent. A dowry was the accepted practice within the nunnery because it allowed the prioress or abbess to help meet the costs of clothing and feeding the nuns; however, the gift, as a condition of the woman's acceptance into the religious house, was deemed simony by the male church leaders.⁶⁵ A gift of property or a financial endowment was a nice addition to the nunnery's accounts--as long as the financial reward was not a

prerequisite to a woman's entry to the cloister. Nunneries were audited for their apparent practices of simony and, in 1215, the Lateran Council chastised nunneries for their corrupt practice of exacting payment from recruits: "the stain of simony has so affected many nuns that scarcely are any received without a price."⁶⁶ The nuns who were charged with simony were sentenced to a penitential existence within the walls of a more austere order.

Despite the charges of simony, many nunneries were not wealthy establishments. If the prospective nun did not offer the house some financial remittance as a means of acceptance into the cloister, the nuns could not afford to take them.⁶⁷ Few of the nunneries were endowed in the grand scale of the male monastic houses.⁶⁸ In fact, male monasteries viewed their female counterparts as exacters of their own resources and, therefore, many male monasteries dropped the women's foundations from their charters. It was not easy to maintain a monastery or nunnery. Many of them included large properties that had to be tended by someone. The men could farm their own lands; however, women had to employ men or recruit monks to maintain the properties. Often, women became a financial burden to the males who shared their charters. While some nuns may have been

degenerate religious women, it is worthwhile to note that the charges of female corruption might have been augmented, or even fabricated, to justify the monastery's economic separation from the nunnery. The nuns were of no use to work the land and the male's workload was doubled by the existence of female monastic holdings.

Although convents represented a financial burden to the monasteries, nunneries often served as schools for the children of religious patrons. The establishment of female foundations as schools required that the nuns be both educated and educators. Female education was not egalitarian instruction. For many years, women slated for childbirth were not taught to write and, therefore, nuns frequently were the only medieval females who were fully literate. Perhaps the reason for the dearth of nuns' autobiographical lives results from the fact that female writings were considered dangerous until the thirteenth century.⁶⁹ After all, women were portrayed as great temptresses and the living agents of the sinner Eve: theoretically, female words should be viewed with appropriate patriarchal suspicion and scrutiny. While men claimed that female writings would taint the minds of readers, perhaps the real reason for the lack of medieval

women writers stems from a male fear of having Church doctrine questioned by women. If women remained illiterate then writing could remain an exclusive male occupation into which no woman, patrician or plebeian, could intrude and threaten the foundations of an entire misogynistic civilization.

In the early Middle Ages the nuns' standard of education was high, but the ensuing scholarship of nuns declined. Things were generally written in the vernacular in the thirteenth century because only nuns and aristocratic women were expected to have more than the "bare minimum of Latin required for their devotions."⁷⁰ By the fourteenth century, the nuns demonstrated no knowledge of Latin and, in the fifteenth century, nuns no longer spoke, or read French.⁷¹ With their own education in decline it is amazing that the nuns fulfilled the capacity of teachers. It is possible that by the later Middle Ages many nuns could not even write. They taught their students piety and good breeding, but probably did not instruct them in literacy.⁷²

While the nun's education was fairly lax, her daily routine remained highly structured.⁷³ Most monastic rules and regulations derived from the Benedictines and, therefore, the nuns maintained a religious and predictable

life. Their existence was characterized by the Benedictine balance of prayer, study, and labor. For the most part, nuns carried out their religious duties in silence. If they had to communicate, they did so in sign language. The nun had seven monastic offices per day. Her daily routine began at 2 am when she arose to attend choir for Matins, followed by Lauds, and returned to bed for a three more hours of sleep. The day actually began at 6 am, when the nun awoke and said Prime. She participated in three Vespers and Compline throughout the course of the day. After the last set of prayers, at 7 in the winter and 8 in the summer, she was expected to return to her room and retire immediately. Variety was not an aspect of the average nun's existence and, it is not surprising that when secular women came to visit the nuns welcomed the diversion.

The nun's victual habits were as structured as the rest of her daily routine. She had three meals during the course of the day. Breakfast consisted of bread and ale and immediately followed prime, dinner coincided with reading aloud at midday, and supper was a brief repast following vespers. The nun's meals had as little variety as the rest of her life. Some sort of digression from this strict existence was allowed the nuns. From 1 until 5, they were

required to devote themselves to some sort of labor "interspersed with a certain amount of sober recreation."⁷⁴

Although the nuns maintained a similar spiritual life to that of their male counterparts, many male religious leaders lobbied to sever the ties between the Church and the convents. In 1198, Pope Innocent III ordered that nunneries be removed from the charters of male monasteries. The ensuing ecclesiastical reforms indicate that, in later centuries, the Church did not give up its intention of eradicating nunneries from the auspices of the male clergy. As mentioned previously, in 1215, the Lateran Council hit the nunneries with charges of simony. By admonishing the practice of simony and its relation to the nunneries, the Church facilitated the disassociation of the female financial liability from the more important male monasteries. The Church may have censured the nuns for a corrupt religious practice, but the primary motivation for breaking with the nunneries appears to have been economic: the nunneries were costing the Church and the monasteries a fortune.

In spite of the Church's attempts to sever female religious ties with male foundations, nunneries were not abolished, but serious consequences did follow this monastic

reformation. In the thirteenth century, the Church began to discourage lay founders from establishing female monastic houses. As a result of Church reforms, it was no longer deemed fashionable to be the benefactor of a female house. Ironically, the separation of the nunneries and the associated monasteries may actually have aided the status of women. Despite the fact that abbots remained the overseer of the nuns' activities the official break between the houses allowed nuns to cast off their roles as handmaids and become autonomous religious communities.⁷⁵

While nunneries gained some autonomy with their splits from male religious orders, Eileen Power reports that female houses went into decline during the later Middle Ages.⁷⁶ As Power examines the reports filed by male clerics regarding the secular activities of the nuns, she agrees that some nuns became infatuated with the temporal world and imitated the secular behavior. Power claims that the increasing superficiality and secular behavior are documented in Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress. She remarks, "It is not for nothing that Chaucer remarks how well pinched was Madame Eglentyne's wimple, how elegant her looks, and how fine her coral rosary and gold brooch." The nuns' secular dress and behavior attracted the notice and

the censure of the bishops. The male Church authorities recognized the hazards of the nuns' worldliness and they attempted to end the corrupt behavior. By the late fourteenth century, female monastic institutions no longer seemed responsive to reproaches and the bishops saw their reprimands ignored. Male clerics reported that women brought their pet dogs into Church and neglected their spiritual duties. Eileen Power attests that nuns continually defied male Church authorities and, after the bishop left, the nuns often would call back the dogs and take them into church.

Although Power describes the nuns' secular dress as a consequence of corruption within the cloister, evidence exists to prove that nuns were wearing secular garments in the twelfth century. In 1154 the abbess Relind was appointed abbess at Hohenburg and her presence at the nunnery inspired many aristocratic women to flock to the convent. Herrad, the daughter of an aristocratic family, came to the nunnery and further encouraged the intellectual and artistic endeavors of the nuns. Thus, the nunnery became known as "Herrad's Garden."⁷⁷ These women all assumed the title of nun, but their dress is described as secular. The nuns' dresses were of vivid color, none wore

wimples and the only recognizable facet of the nun's garb was their white turban, or headdress.⁷⁸ No mention, however, is made of corruption in these convents, perhaps, because the nuns maintained their spiritual piety in spite of their secular clothing.

During the late fourteenth century, pet dogs and secular dress were not the only degenerate behavior evident in the cloister. According to the accounts of male agents, internal discipline relaxed simultaneously. Nuns may have been bored with the monotony of their existence and their secular visitors did nothing to alleviate the nuns' fascination with the outside world. While visitors came and went, some nuns even wandered outside the cloister. Reportedly, corrupt behavior characterized the convents. Rather than performing their religious duties in the prescribed silence, nuns spoke on their way to meals and vespers.⁷⁹ Eileen Power seems to forget, as she writes her history of medieval nuns, that the same male clerics who perpetuated the Mary/Eve dichotomy in medieval text and images were responsible for the accounts of the real nuns' tardiness and spiritual corruption. Although bishops also complained of male monastic laxity, it seems that religious women attracted greater attention and gained more celebrity

with their spiritual misdeeds. The bishops tried to keep the nuns "shut up" and, in 1300, Pope Boniface published the Bull Periculoso which forbade the nuns from leaving the cloister and from receiving unapproved visitors. The Bull, however, was not successfully enforced. When the Bishop came to read the Bull to the nuns at Lincoln, they responded by chasing him to the gate and hurling the Bull at him as he rode off.⁸⁰

The male clergy appears to have some effect on the decline in female monastic piety. Nuns were unrepresented in the sovereign body of the monastic order.⁸¹ Abbesses could not participate in monastic policy making and the abbesses, often of aristocratic birth, were disinclined to submit to the orders of men with whom they had no contact. Because they had no daily contact with the female houses, the male clergy experienced difficulty when attempting to control any nunnery. Nuns were not even allowed to travel with the male clergy. They were required to ride in a separate carriage so that they could "neither see about them or be seen."⁸² Despite their attempts to keep the nunneries under control, male-determined separation from the female religious left the nuns with more autonomy in supervising their own activities. Nuns had control of their

own finances, meager as they might be, conventional seals and, significantly, the prioress was subordinate only to the Master of the Order.⁸³ Thus, her social and religious subordination afforded a woman who took the veil the professional potential to garner personal power and recognition in a society headed by males.

The degeneration of the nunneries mirrored the decline of the entire monastic system. By the time Chaucer fashioned his portrait of the Prioress in 1387, reports supply evidence that male and female monastic houses had gone into progressive economic and spiritual decline..⁸⁴ The monastic ideals of poverty, chastity and obedience were ignored by men and women alike. Many of the female houses were poorly managed by the nuns: they were extravagant, ran up debts and mortgaged the land.⁸⁵ Only some of the women inhabiting the nunneries expressed a profound spiritual vocation and, thus, the female monastic houses were sometimes populated by either women fleeing secular existence or women placed in the cloister against their wills. The primary function of the nunnery had deteriorated: it was no longer only a place for those with a spiritual purpose or religious devotion, but a house where

nuns attempted to reclaim the temporal effects denied them within the cloistered life.

The history of medieval nunneries probably is not complete. Few records exist that offer information beyond the nun's religious duties. Fire, floods, political trouble and poverty all contributed to the dearth of records concerning the medieval English nunneries. Poverty may have been the largest reason why no history exists for some of the nunneries. Nunneries hovered on the brink of financial ruin and, consequently, did not have the funds to purchase a charter. What historians are able to piece together regarding the nunneries came from male clerical writings and a few charters. Few nuns wrote about their experiences in the convents and those nuns who did produce manuscripts were the exception and not the rule. The life of the medieval nun can only be re-created by constructing a portrait for which there exist many lost pieces--the voices of the nuns. From primarily male-authored documents and literature, the historian can glean that, in theory, the medieval woman was elevated by her status as a nun, but defamed by her female position. The paradox of the medieval woman's portraits in text and image touched secular and religious women--even the Brides of Christ did not escape male scrutiny and suspicion.

III.

The Prioress's portrait and tale

Historical evidence regarding the plight of real life medieval women and nuns culminates in a scholarly examination of Chaucer's Prioress. Does the Prioress adhere to the definition of the wayward nun illustrated in Eileen Power's work? Or is the Prioress of Chaucer's tale not only the victim of male ideas regarding female monastic houses, but also a casualty of the male defined dichotomy among women--the Mary/Eve paradox? It is vital to the academic examination of Chaucer's Prioress that scholars recall that Madame Eglentyne is not a real character, but merely a literary figure created by her author for purposes that have become the academic's livelihood. Some critics have extended their evaluations of the Prioress to include ideas of repressed female sexuality and Chaucer's perceived anti-feminism; however, Madame Eglentyne is the product of a medieval author, and to impose the ideologies of the ensuing centuries on Chaucer's Prioress is not only unfair, but unwarranted. Chaucer should not be criticized for promoting a supposed anti-feminist attitude. The Middle Ages had a different conception of women's role in society than do many

modern critics. Misogyny was a fact of ancient and medieval society and, therefore, the medieval status quo did not include twentieth-century feminism. Freud's development of anal eroticism has been used by critics to prove the sexual nature of the Prioress's tale and, while medieval society may have been fascinated by the sexual nature of its people, the "Prioress's Tale" reveals a woman who is not sexually repressed, but who adheres to the major literary genre of the Middle Ages by telling a saint's life. David Benson reminds his colleagues:

Although the tellers and their interactions are certainly a part of Chaucer's total conception, modern critics, influenced by the anachronistic ideas of characterization drawn largely from the realistic novel, have given them too much importance. Very often the artistic complexity of the tales has been sacrificed to a futile search for psychological depth in tellers.⁸⁶

Benson's comment on the methods of scholarly examination suggests that Chaucer's depiction of the Prioress and the construction of her tale should not be subject to post-medieval social and gender concerns. Chaucer the poet does not draw Chaucer the pilgrim and the Prioress so that the audience can receive a greater understanding of the personal motivations behind the fictional characters. The poet who

constructs both figures does not intend for his fictional creations to represent real individuals. He uses the Prioress and Chaucer the pilgrim to illustrate the intellectual conception of the medieval woman and the female representations in medieval literature.

Many medieval scholars are inclined to agree that the Prioress's portrait and her tale teem with incongruencies. Florence Ridley contends that the Prioress's portrait in the "General Prologue" to the Canterbury Tales "attracts more comment and controversy than any of the other pilgrims."⁸⁷ While her portrait depicts a woman consumed by secular deportment, the "Prioress's Tale" is an undeniably religious story with severe spiritual significance. How should scholars reconcile these two conflicting illustrations of the Prioress? Is Madame Eglentyne Eve in her portrait and Mary in her tale? In the portrait, she hardly appears a conscientious nun. Chaucer draws a woman who transgresses the basic tenets of her profession in order to appeal to secular society; however, her tale reveals a woman who comprehends the spiritual significance of her office. The Prioress narrates a story that adheres to the dominant genre of the Middle Ages, hagiography, as she details the life of Saint Hugh. A discrepancy is apparent between the nun

obsessed by temporal convention who appears in the portrait and the competent agent of the Church who tells a saint's life that subdues her otherwise jovial audience.

Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress maintains a reputation of ambiguity for many reasons. Many scholars view his depiction of the Prioress as an ironic portrait of a recalcitrant nun. Indeed, the Prioress's apparent obsession with refined manners more resembles a caricature of a medieval nun than the appropriate behavior of a Bride of Christ. How should the reader behold the Prioress? Who is Chaucer satirizing in his undeniably ironic construction of Madame Eglentyne? It appears that many scholars unquestioningly accept the irony of her portrait as Chaucer's censure of the medieval nun. Who offers the reader a portrait of Madame Eglentyne? Is it Chaucer the poet or Chaucer the pilgrim who reveals the character of Madame Eglentyne? Obviously, Chaucer the poet constructs the reader's view of Madame Eglentyne; however, he does so through the eyes of his protagonist, Chaucer--the pilgrim. Chaucer the pilgrim tempers her portrait with his perception of Madame Eglentyne and, if the reader considers the source of the Prioress's portrait, her characterization takes on an entirely different scope. The apparent disharmony of her

portrait becomes clear when it is recognized that the reader receives his depiction of the Prioress through the somewhat colored lens of Chaucer the pilgrim. Perhaps the real ironies of the Prioress's portrait lie not in the deportment of Madame Eglentyne, but in Chaucer the pilgrim's vision of the Prioress. The inconsistencies revealed in her portrait may not be executed by the Prioress, but imposed by a beguiled Chaucer--the pilgrim.

Most literary critics regard Chaucer's Prioress as a mildly corrupt nun. She had been called a "gentle sinning creature" and viewed as a religious failure.⁸⁸ Chaucer the pilgrim divulges that the Prioress derived great pleasure, not in God, but in refined deportment. "In curtesie was setful muchel hir lest" has been offered as evidence of the Prioress's debauchery as it demonstrates her inattention to religious service and spiritual devotion while it proves her preoccupation with temporal ceremony.⁸⁹ Thus, in the portrait the Prioress does appear to be a misdirected nun. Certainly, many readers interpret the description of her "nose trtys, hir eyen greye as glass" as reminiscent of a romantic heroine and, undoubtedly, an attribute of the idealized female of courtly literature. Her romantic visage and secular behavior are considered ambiguities of a nun's

portrait and the references to her fastidiousness, sensibilities, and romantic appearance allegedly support the critics who regard Chaucer's Prioress as an extension of the wayward nun genre in medieval literature.

It is easy to disregard the source of the Prioress's portrait. Chaucer the pilgrim is not in the limelight as he provides the audience with a description of each pilgrim on the road to Canterbury; however, he is the character who relates the apparent deficiencies of the Prioress's constitution. The only portrait Chaucer, the poet, offers of the pilgrim Chaucer is that he has a large stomach. It is vital that the reader and the critic recall that each portrait is constructed by Chaucer the pilgrim. The figure who weaves the portrait of the seemingly corrupt Prioress can be seen as "easily impressed by important people and good companions and a bourgeois exposed to the splendors of high society."⁹⁰ A woman who is a nun, but more importantly an aristocrat and perhaps a virgin, could provoke the curiosity of a common man--Chaucer the pilgrim--and, therefore, her portrait might be more germane to Chaucer the pilgrim's idealized vision of the woman than the Prioress's "true" manifestation of secular deportment. Chaucer the poet complicates the critic's assessment of the

inharmonious portrait and tale by presenting the Prioress's depiction in the "General Prologue" through the fallible eyes of Chaucer the pilgrim.

A distinction must be made between Chaucer the poet and Chaucer the pilgrim: they are not one in the same person. Chaucer the poet constructs the entire Canterbury Tales, but in the "General Prologue," it is the poet Chaucer, who through the eyes of Chaucer the pilgrim, paints his portraits of each pilgrim. Contemporary conceptions of "character consistency" do not affect Chaucer's use of his protagonist. Chaucer "uses his first person narrator freely to create many different effects."⁹¹ E. Talbot Donaldson considers the protagonist a puppet of Chaucer the poet and while the pilgrim is "to be sure permitted his lucid intervals, in general he is the victim of the poet's pervasive irony."⁹² As Chaucer the pilgrim relates the characters of each pilgrim, the audience should remember that Chaucer the poet constructs Chaucer the pilgrim--who should be subject to the identical criticism that surrounds the other pilgrims. The pilgrim Chaucer offers each portrait a piece of his own opinions, fantasies, and comedy. As the audience considers the Prioress it may be that the poet Chaucer is not gently mocking the Prioress with the

pilgrim's description of her temporal manners, but, rather, he might be having fun with his bourgeois narrator.

It is Chaucer the pilgrim who regards the Prioress and reports back to the audience her attractive countenance and courtly deportment. Some critics have claimed that the Prioress is not a complex woman, but her short portrait is one of the most perplexing in English literature.⁹³ In fact, it has been suggested that Chaucer did not really care if the Prioress was or was not an exemplary nun.⁹⁴ If this is indeed the case, then it would appear that Chaucer's design lies in the reaction of his pilgrim Chaucer to the Prioress and the narrator's view of what he perceives to be a romance heroine in nun's garb. Perhaps, her portrait appears more complicated than the Prioress herself because the narrator, Chaucer the pilgrim, distorts his own description of Madame Eglentyne. Chaucer the pilgrim focuses on Madame Eglentyne's apparent devotion to secular decorum and he appears to intentionally ignore the spiritual facets of her character. He briefly relates her religious office, but seems more intent on verifying the tangible aspects of her clothes and her countenance.

Chaucer the pilgrim introduces Madame Eglentyne to the audience not with a description of her spiritual piety, but

with meticulous attention to the details of her appearance that denote a secular and aristocratic character. Chaucer the pilgrim's description of the Prioress begins by identifying her religious vocation; however, he immediately embarks on the illustration of her courtly attributes.

"Ther was also a NONNE, a PRIORESSE\that of her smylyng was ful symple and coy."⁹⁵ Immediately, the pilgrim throws his audience off guard. While the listeners and the readers expect the identification of a Prioress to continue with an exposition of her religious virtues, Chaucer the pilgrim focuses on what he wants to see in the Prioress--a beautiful and enticing smile. An obvious irony exists in the description of a nun who maintains a seductive smile and apparently come-hither-look. Does Chaucer intend for his protagonist to merely report what he sees in the Prioress? Or is Chaucer the poet satirizing a narrator who searches for a provocative glance from the Prioress? Certainly, the portrait is ambiguous. If Chaucer does aim to poke fun at his narrator's perception of the Prioress, then perhaps the Prioress is not a degenerate nun, but merely an attractive woman. Discerning an author's literary intent certainly is not an exact science; however, critics and admirers of Chaucer's work must concede that there exists more than one

way to interpret the Prioress's portrait. Chaucer the poet may be constructing in the "General Prologue" a Madame Eglentyne who is solely the creation of Chaucer the pilgrim.

Certainly, the Prioress's apparent attention to courtly convention implies that she is at least mildly degenerate. Eileen Power's historical research attests that "Chaucer's description of [her deportment] might have been taken straight out of the feudal book of deportment for girls."⁹⁶ Madame Eglentyne's preoccupation with the courtly method of nourishment would certainly suggest that she has lost sight of the spiritual aspects of her religious vocation. Chaucer the pilgrim designs his portrait of the Prioress as a courtly lady obsessed with projecting a worldly air despite her religious office.

At mete wel ytaught was she with alle;
 She let 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 her brest.⁹⁷

By reaching for her meat daintily, Madame Eglentyne fits the medieval conception of the courtly lady. The detail Chaucer's pilgrim gives her courtly eating habits is "damaging when applied to a religious woman because the

description of the much vaunted manners of Madame Eglentyne are carefully rehearsed to make her exactly *ala mode*."⁹⁸ Thus, the Prioress's absorption with courtly etiquette appears cemented in the pilgrim Chaucer's brief description of her eating habits. Food held a spiritual as well as a temporal importance in the Middle Ages and a nun, like Madame Eglentyne, who feeds her dogs wastrel bread and perceives the meal more as a theatrical admission of her worldly preoccupation, could only be deemed in violation of her religious vows.

While Madame Eglentyne's courtly manners would draw the censure of a medieval audience the identical display of niceties by a secular woman would evoke the appreciation of her male companions. Again, it is vital to recall that it is Chaucer's pilgrim who provides this damning portrait of Madame Eglentyne. Chaucer the pilgrim may be projecting the ideals he expects to be emulated by the aristocratic Madame Eglentyne onto an otherwise devoted nun. The narrator reveals that the Prioress attempts to reconcile her religious duties with her secular obsession as he suggests that it "peyned hire to countrefete cheere of court, and to been estatlich of manere."⁹⁹ The word "countrefete" can be evaluated as a double entendre and the term may be another

of Chaucer's poetic ironies. "Countrefete" in Middle English can denote imitation, but it also signifies deception. If "countrefete" does indeed hold dual meanings, then how should the audience interpret the significance of the line? Does Chaucer the poet paint Madame Eglentyne as an Eve figure who seduces the narrator with her courtly etiquette and romantic air? Or does Chaucer the pilgrim unwittingly subscribe to the female paradox and design his own Eve from the Prioress's figure? Recognizing that the audience receives its picture of the Prioress from Chaucer the pilgrim, it is worthwhile to note that, while Madame Eglentyne may, or may not, be duplicating courtly fashion. Chaucer the pilgrim may be deceiving himself that this medieval nun is a courtly woman.

Further examination of the lines in her portrait suggests that the irony in Madame Eglentyne's depiction may not be as many have assumed it is: a nun preoccupied with the manners of the court. From historical evidence, the contemporary audience can comprehend that medieval nuns of the late fourteenth century were more worldly than their predecessors, but that does not necessarily cement their spiritual corruption. Chaucer the pilgrim illuminates Madame Eglentyne's inattention to her spiritual vocation by

highlighting her courtly attention to the meal. Thus, Chaucer the pilgrim's narrative may not accurately relate the actions that Madame Eglentyne exhibits. His description of Madame Eglentyne may actually uncover the courtly behavior he projects onto the Prioress. Evidence for the pilgrim's admiration of the Prioress courtly etiquette follows his portrait of the seemingly wayward nun. It is Chaucer the pilgrim who tells the audience that "In curtesie was set ful hir lest" and he then continues his description of her attention to temporal behavior. Perhaps Chaucer the pilgrim is the product of a male-defined perception of women and, therefore, the ambiguities of Madame Eglentyne's portrait illuminate his construction of Eve from the figure of an otherwise devoted nun.

In the "General Prologue," Madame Eglentyne displays courtly behavior, but Chaucer the pilgrim seems to possess a blueprint of the features an aristocratic woman should exhibit in male company. The Prioress does not speak in the "General Prologue" and Chaucer the pilgrim's detailed account of her actions intimates that he is an admiring male and not a religious censor. Yes, the Prioress must eat; however, the exact details of her mealtime behavior are provided by Chaucer the pilgrim. It is the narrator who

tells the audience that "Hir over-lippe wyped she so
 clene\That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene."¹⁰⁰

Perhaps Madame Eglentyne is merely wiping her mouth after a meal and Chaucer the pilgrim is taking her action to indicate more than the action demands of the situation.

Donaldson relates of Chaucerian irony, "Chaucer knows what he sees but directly interprets the evidence he presents in a manner contrary to what we expect. The proposition ought to be expressed in reverse: the reporter is usually acutely unaware of the significance of what he sees no matter how sharply he sees it."¹⁰¹ Donaldson's comment would suggest that Chaucer the poet satirizes his infatuated narrator and the true ironies of the Prioress's portrait lie in the pilgrim Chaucer's conception of how the Prioress should behave rather than how she actually exists.

Undoubtedly, analyses of the Prioress's portrait in the "General Prologue" are complicated by Chaucer the pilgrim's report and revision of the Prioress's character. Donaldson reminds the reader that "the tension between what is and what is not expected exists primarily in the mind of the beholder."¹⁰² If the ambiguities of the portrait lie in what the reader expects of a medieval nun and what Chaucer the pilgrim reports of her countenance and character, then

it would appear that the irony of the portrait does not reside in how the Prioress behaves or what the reader expects from the introduction of a nun on the journey to Canterbury. The true ambiguities would not derive from the Prioress's inattention to spiritual devotion, but in Chaucer's romantic appreciation of Madame Eglentyne the woman. Chaucer the pilgrim may not be painting his portrait of an aristocratic beauty with his description of the Prioress, but be constructing an Eve in nun's clothing.

Madame Eglentyne may be the personification of either Eve or a romance heroine, but whatever her design, Chaucer the poet purposefully constructs a narrator who offers his view of Madame Eglentyne. Chaucer the pilgrim is "swept away" by the qualities that he deems her "sensibilitie" and as a consequence he "misses much of the point of what he sees."¹⁰³ In fact, it may be the modern critic who misses the point of what he sees. It is Chaucer the pilgrim who paints the portrait of the Prioress and, if he is carried away by her beauty, then his report may not necessarily be accurate. The Prioress may neatly fit the portrait of Eileen Power's historical nun, but may not be a woman so completely obsessed by secular convention that she disregards the nature of her profession. When the male

beholds an attractive woman, he undoubtedly attributes his own expectations of her to his characterization of the woman. Donaldson contends "an attractive woman requires even more complex handling, for she is likely to provoke in a man certain emotional responses that become, in any fiction, part of her reality."¹⁰⁴ Perhaps he unconsciously draws his feminine ideal, Madame Eglentyne, as an Eve figure disguised in a nun's habit and, therefore, Chaucer, the pilgrim, may be projecting his own opinions of how an aristocratic woman should behave on a nun who embodies the spiritual facts of her religious vocation.

As his attention to her perceived secular deportment attests, Chaucer the pilgrim seems in awe of Madame Eglentyne's courtly manners and physical appearance. In her portrait, the pilgrim Chaucer uses the word *ful* seven times.¹⁰⁵ "*Ful*" in Middle English can be translated in modern English as denoting the term "very." Why does Chaucer the poet feel compelled to stress, in the pilgrim's portrait of the Prioress, that her smile is very "*symple and coy*," that she was very taken with deportment, and that very "*semyly her wympul pynched was*?" Does Chaucer the pilgrim mean to reassure his audience of the Prioress's attention to secular convention, or does he attempt to construct his own

fantasy of how a woman of the Prioress's status and visage should act? It would certainly appear that Chaucer the pilgrim is the individual who enhances the aspects of her figure. Elaine Tuttle Hansen contends that by writing for males, "[Chaucer] sustains the myth of women's mystery."¹⁰⁶ If the audience considers the Prioress as a manifestation of Chaucer the pilgrim's masculine conditioning and the Mary/Eve dichotomy, then Madame Eglentyne certainly bewilders her portrait's narrator. As a member of a higher social class, a nun, and a woman, the Prioress was undoubtedly foreign to the bourgeois pilgrim. He may have enhanced what he perceived to be her attractive aristocratic feminine characteristics in order to create his own fantasy of what Madame Eglentyne should be--not what she was.

That "[h]ire gretteste ooth was but by St. Loy" is often critically viewed as evidence for the Prioress's lack of religious vocation and preoccupation with temporal existence. The fact that a religious woman took even a mild oath would be deemed a violation of both moral and monastic codes. There is some conflict over the significance of an oath to St. Loy and its medieval and twentieth-century meanings. Gabriela Daichman asserts that St. Loy was invoked in the Middle Ages as it may still be today by the

"petites ouvriers" of Paris when they desire a vision of their future husbands to be revealed to them in their dreams.¹⁰⁷ If the Prioress had indeed sworn to St. Loy, her oath would merely augment the evidence critics have gathered to promote her corruption. Other critics who deny that Chaucer is satirizing the apparently corrupt nun argue that her oath merely indicates her "daintiness" and does not detract from her status as a devoted religious woman.

While modern critic sometimes cite the Prioress's oath as evidence for her spiritual corruption, Gabriela Daichman concludes that the Prioress's expletive was not an intentional ambiguity. Daichman asserts: "Most likely Chaucer was not aware of the added significance of making the Prioress swear by St. Loy--it has special significance for twentieth-century readers."¹⁰⁸ If Chaucer the poet did not know the relevance of an oath to St. Loy, then his use of the oath might be completely innocent. Perhaps the oath is included only to demonstrate the "commonness" of the narrator and, therefore, Chaucer the pilgrim may be responsible for the attention literary critics have paid to the Prioress's oath to St. Loy. It is Chaucer the pilgrim who relates that the Prioress "swore." While even a mild oath would earn the Prioress censure of ecclesiastical

authorities and aristocratic individuals, a swearing bourgeois, like Chaucer the pilgrim, would probably not attract much attention. It may very well be Chaucer the pilgrim's term and not the expression of the Prioress. Recalling that it is Chaucer the pilgrim who is narrating the Prioress's portrait, his use of the word "ooth" would be completely appropriate to his class. Thus, it may not be the Prioress who swears, but the ignorant bourgeois Chaucer who reports her swearing as he narrates her portrait. Chaucer the poet may not be depicting a wayward nun in the Prioress's portrait, but satirizing his bourgeois narrator.

Further evaluation of the Prioress's portrait supports the notion that it is Chaucer the pilgrim who is accentuating the Prioress's secular qualities and not the Prioress who demonstrates attention to temporal concerns. Madame Eglentyne is the only aristocratic woman on the pilgrimage to Canterbury and, therefore, it is logical that she receives the bulk of masculine attention. The Second Nun, after all, is described only in terms of the Prioress. "Another NONNE with hire hadde she\that was chapeleyne."¹⁰⁹ Obviously, the Second Nun does not draw the admiration of Chaucer the pilgrim. Is the Second Nun a "plain Jane" whom Chaucer the pilgrim passes over because he is more attracted

to the elegant Prioress? Who knows? It appears that Chaucer the pilgrim admires the Prioress. But does he perceive her eating habits, her necklace, and her dress to suggest a meaning that the Prioress does not intend? Certainly, that which is purposefully made ambiguous in her portrait is made clear, and damning, only by Chaucer the pilgrim.

Chaucer the poet uses his narrator to create the fastidious, comic and degenerate Prioress. Eileen Power contends in her book, Medieval People, that Chaucer's (the pilgrim) depiction of the Prioress "might have been taken straight out of one of the feudal books of deportment for girls; even her personal beauty--straight nose, grey eyes, and little red mouth--conforms to the courtly standard."¹¹⁰ Chaucer the pilgrim, a commoner and, more importantly, a man, may have expected the Prioress--especially with a name like Eglentyne--to exhibit the characteristics of the female aristocrat. He, like the medieval male author, constructs his Eve from a previously defined idea of what a woman should represent to a male audience. In fact, Chaucer the pilgrim's portrait of the Prioress seems to have a specific point: his words are too gentle to be a censure of her behavior. If Chaucer the poet draws his protagonist as an

ignorant observer, then his adoration and projection of courtly ideals onto Madame Eglentyne appears totally appropriate to the pilgrim's station. He desires, as a commoner, to make the Prioress an aristocrat and to paint her as Eve.

Although Chaucer the pilgrim draws the Prioress as Eve, he also adds his own conception of the romance heroine to her portrait. It is not Madame Eglentyne's religious behavior that seduces the pilgrim Chaucer, but her seemingly romantic physique. In fact, the portrait of the Prioress presented by Chaucer the pilgrim provoked Donaldson to call Madame Eglentyne "a romance heroine masquerading as a nun."¹¹¹ Perhaps, the opposite is true: Madame Eglentyne is a nun masquerading in the "General Prologue" as a romance heroine. Chaucer the pilgrim draws the Prioress's physical attributes:

Ful semely hir wympyl pynched was,
 Her nose tretys, hir eyen grey as glas,
 Hir mouth ful small and thereto softe and reed.
 But sikerly she hadde a foreheed;
 It was almost a spanne brood, I trowe;
 For hardily, she was nat undergrowe.
 Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I war.¹¹²

From the passage it is evident that Chaucer the pilgrim admires her wimple and the way it sits upon Madame Eglentyne's head as he draws Madame Eglentyne "as I war." The description of the Prioress offered by Chaucer the pilgrim appears very strange and obviously male. After all, a heroine must live up to the romantic ideals of her male admirer. Some critics have suggested that one of the portrait's ironies lies in the description of the Prioress's forehead. These critics purport that Chaucer may be mocking the Prioress who fancies herself an example of refined deportment. An unusually large forehead would not make her visage attractive, but, rather, be considered a beauty flaw. A subtle distinction pervades Chaucer the poet's construction of his pilgrim's perception of the Prioress's forehead. Her forehead could resemble the high forehead of the romance heroine or it could be large and unattractive. As a commoner, Chaucer the pilgrim might not realize the distinction and, if he views the Prioress as a courtly lady he may see only what he, as the romantic idealist, wants to see. Thus, Chaucer the poet paints a clumsy reporter who affixes a beauty to Madame Eglentyne that might not exist. The true irony of the Prioress's portrait resides not in the presentation of a temporally preoccupied nun, but in the

romantic attributes the pilgrim Chaucer provides his courtly lady, the Prioress.

As with the Prioress's broad forehead, many critics have claimed that the Prioress may be hiding a flowing mane beneath her pinched wimple. If Chaucer does intimate that the Prioress has retained her hair as an reminder of her temporal life, then it may be through Chaucer the pilgrim that he makes the suggestion. Certainly, a bourgeois man, consumed by romantic ideals, might imagine that so beautiful a woman harbors some remnants of her secular existence. Chaucer the pilgrim might be unable to fathom a Prioress with a roughly shorn head. She would not fit his romantic ideal. Thus, it may not be the Prioress who preserves her hair, but the besotted pilgrim who imagines a Madame Eglentyne with the plaited hair of her secular counterparts. It would certainly seem that critics of the Prioress fail to consider Chaucer the pilgrim as the reporter who offers Madame Eglentyne's damning portrait.

Some critics discover evidence for the Prioress's supposed obsession with the temporal world in Chaucer the pilgrim's depiction of Madame Eglentyne's brooch. Chaucer the poet leaves the significance of the brooch ambiguous. Does the Prioress consider the brooch to mean divine love or

temporal love? Many critics contend that the brooch signifies the Prioress's earthly preoccupation and, consequently, her spiritual corruption. But the medieval Church did indeed adopt Virgil's "Amor vincit omnia" and used the term to mean sacred love, *caritas*.¹¹³ The Prioress may wear the phrase in honor of her divine office and not as a residual from her secular life. Perhaps, the ambiguity of the brooch derives from its description by Chaucer the pilgrim. He describes the brooch, "And thereon heng a brooch of gold ful sheene, \On which ther was first write a crowned A, \And after Amor vincit omnia."¹¹⁴ If he desires a romance heroine in place of a nun, then Chaucer the pilgrim may want the brooch to denote earthly love. Lowes says of the Prioress's brooch: "Which of the two loves does amor mean to the Prioress? I do not know but I think she thought she meant love celestial."¹¹⁵ To the Prioress, the brooch may have denoted divine love; however, to the infatuated pilgrim Chaucer the words may have had another significance. Perhaps it is not the Prioress, but Chaucer the pilgrim who "thought she thought she meant love celestial." It may be Chaucer the pilgrim who has designed a romance heroine from the scaffolding of a medieval nun and cannot fathom his ideal courtly lady as devoted to divine

love. He would, undoubtedly, rather fantasize that she meant cupiditas, earthly love, and not caritas, love divine.

Although the phrase on the brooch is one of the portrait's greatest ambiguities, the design of the brooch draws much critical comment. Power reveals that nuns did wear gold. In fact, fifty years after Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales, some nuns told the Bishop of Lincoln that their Prioress displayed a gold necklace. The Prioress, they reported ". . . has on her neck a long silken band, in English lace, which hangs down below her brest and there on a golden ring with one diamond."¹¹⁶ Chaucer is, therefore, historically accurate in his depiction of the Prioress's gold brooch. Power reports that the narrator missed not even the smallest detail of the nuns' appearance even "for all that he rode always looking at the ground."¹¹⁷ Here, Power may be confusing Chaucer the poet with Chaucer the pilgrim. We know that Chaucer the pilgrim is looking at the ground as Harry Bailly asks him to liven up the crowd after the Prioress's sobering tale. But the Prioress's gold brooch is not so extraordinary. For more than six centuries bishops had labored, in vain, against secular fashion in the cloister.¹¹⁸ Thus, the Prioress's brooch serves as a

historically accurate presentation of nuns' actual adornment.

Admittedly, the gold brooch intimates the Prioress's worldliness; however, it does not prove her religious perversion. Although religious writers such as Paul and Tertullian warned women against finery and ornamentation, it was certainly a facet of the garb of both secular and religious women. The Prioress, at least, rehabilitates this temporal adornment by employing a mention of love celestial on the brooch. The phrase on the brooch is admittedly ambiguous in the portrait, but, if she does intend divine love, then the gold brooch does not taint her religious devotion. Edward Craney Jacobs sees the brooch as a tribute to love celestial. He says, "What better use could a Prioress make of gold than to devote it to the love of God that binds up and conquers all. St. Augustine would find no quarrel here. Perhaps neither should we."¹¹⁹ The Prioress is a nun of her day and critics should not look for corruption where it does not exist. A gold brooch does not prove the Prioress's debauchery, the adornment merely indicates that she is a woman rooted in her time.

Even Eileen Power encounters difficulty in separating Madame Eglentyne the character from Madame Eglentyne the

nun. Power's history of medieval women and medieval nuns is not and, should not be, contested. She is the supreme source for the historical accuracies surrounding the lives of actual nuns. Yet Power's use of Madame Eglentyne as a real medieval nun should be viewed with caution. She unwittingly may have lead literary critics to believe that Chaucer's Prioress was an actual person and not a fictional character. In her book, Medieval People, Power devotes an entire chapter to Madame Eglentyne. In this chapter, Power describes the life of Chaucer's Prioress.

So the nuns probably said to each other that what with [Madame Eglantyne's] pretty ways and her good temper and her aristocratic connexions, wouldn't it be a good thing to choose her for the prioress when the old prioress died? And so they did, and she had been a Prioress for some years when Chaucer met her. At first this was very exciting, and Eglantyne liked being called mother by nuns who were older than herself, and having a private room to sit in and visitors to entertain.¹²⁰

Although it may not be her intent, Eileen Power suggests that Chaucer's Prioress was indeed a real nun whose life before the Canterbury Tales can be found in the historical evidence disclosed in Medieval People. Perhaps, Power is simply using Madame Eglentyne to gain the reader's interest in her historical research; however, she presents a

convincing argument for Madame Eglentyne's actual existence. Eileen Power, like Chaucer the pilgrim, offers the reader not a true account of the Prioress of the "General Prologue" and "The Prioress's Tale," but projects her own view of Madame Eglentyne onto the nun in the portrait. The critic must ask this question: Has Chaucer's Prioress shaped Power's presentation of her historical research regarding real life nuns, or has Power's research shaped Madame Eglentyne?

Despite Power's dubious portrait of Madame Eglentyne as a real medieval nun, her historical research has had tremendous influence on the scholarly examination of Chaucer's Prioress. Most critical works concerning the Prioress mention Power as a source for the historical truths of real life nuns they expound upon in their analyses of Madame Eglentyne. To be sure, Power's historical research on medieval people, particularly medieval nuns, is beyond reproach; however, she has influenced every critic's reading of the Prioress. Power claims "But the historian knows, he has all sorts of historical sources in which to study nunneries, and there he meets the Prioress at every turn."¹²¹ Power seems to have Chaucer's Prioress in mind as she relates the findings of her historical research and,

while this may have inspired her work, it offers the reader little leeway into alternative considerations of the Prioress's portrait. The Prioress's portrait still commands some critical attention, but it appears that most critics who regard her portrait accept the implied degenerate aspects of her character. Critics appear to have turned their attention away from the Prioress of the "General Prologue," accepting all the intimations Chaucer the pilgrim suggests in her portrait as a true depiction of a real life nun and, consequently, they have turned to the more meaty tale. The debate concerning the historical accuracies of her portrait appears to be exhausted. Eileen Power's work is historically sound and the Prioress seems to be the literary manifestation of all Power's historical evidence: case closed.

While Eileen Power focuses on the Madame Eglentyne depicted in the "General Prologue," many critics point to the "Prioress's Tale" as confirmation of the ambiguous characterization of Madame Eglentyne. The Prioress narrates the story of a little clergon¹²² who is murdered by the evil Jews, but remains constant in his devotion to the Virgin Mary. Why does the Prioress, a woman apparently absorbed by the niceties of the temporal world, relate such

a powerful spiritual and violent religious tale? Certainly, the portrait and the tale are inharmonious. But, if the pilgrim Chaucer projects his ideals of the courtly woman onto Madame Eglentyne, then does her tale offer the Prioress's true portrait? Her tale is certainly not tempered by the bourgeois admiration of Chaucer the pilgrim. To glean the real portrait of Madame Eglentyne, the audience must examine the "Prioress's Tale." In her narrative Madame Eglentyne not only competes for the story-telling honors proposed by Harry Bailly, but she offers a glimpse of Chaucer the poet's real Prioress: a competent religious woman who maintains her spiritual piety and executes the professional duties required of her religious office.

Commentary on the "Prioress's Tale" reveals some truly amazing insight into Madame Eglentyne's spirituality, morality and worldliness. Some literary critics describe the "Prioress's Tale" as a story of "thwarted motherhood."¹²³ Others maintain that the Prioress identifies with the seven-year old clergon of her story. Her tale evokes critical response which includes reducing the story of the little clergon to a pre-Freud anal-erotic fixation of the Prioress. The Jews do throw the little boy into a latrine, but is this really a Freudian move on

Chaucer's part? Does the Prioress have an anal-oral obsession? Or does the Prioress merely add some style to her tale by juxtaposing a spiritually pure child with the filth that appears to be a characterization of the Jews? Is Madame Eglentyne's alleged anti-Semitism a product of her era and her religious station? Twentieth-century critics, horrified by the events of the Holocaust, may unfairly apply their enlightened view of anti-Semitism to a prioress who simply adheres to medieval conventions of religious prejudice. Although modern readers want to focus on the anti-Semitism in the tale and believe that Chaucer too was appalled with the Prioress's anti-semitic narrative, the Prioress's veneration of Mary complicates the assessment of the Prioress as simply anti-Semitic. The apparent anti-Semitism is an aspect of her society and the true nature of her tale resides in the veneration of Mary and the spiritual fulfillment of her office. Although Chaucer the pilgrim views Madame Eglentyne as Eve, the Prioress identifies more closely not with the temporal mother of her tale, but the mother of mankind--the Virgin Mary.

Whatever the bent of the critic examining her tale, obvious incongruities exist between the Prioress's depiction in the "General Prologue" and the tale she narrates while on

the road to Canterbury. Chaucer the pilgrim draws the portrait of Madame Eglentyne as his ideal of a "romance" heroine and a courtly lady, but the Prioress herself narrates her tale. The inharmonious aspects of the two depictions may offer not more ambiguity, but give the audience a crystalline view of Madame Eglentyne's spiritual state and religious position as she, created by Chaucer the poet, reveals it. The Prioress's portrait in the "Prologue" is not a pure, but an intentionally mediated, revelation of her religious character: another, perhaps "truer" spiritual state of Madame Eglentyne resides in her veneration of Mary and her attention to God and Christ that she exhibits in her poignant religious narrative.

The Prioress's portrait might suggest that Madame Eglentyne is a corrupt nun, but her tale indicates that she is a competent religious woman. "The Prioress's Tale" unveils a Madame Eglentyne who harbors none of the secular habits evident in her portrait. Madame Eglentyne appears to understand the duties of her office; her story of the little clergon definitely fits the conception of how a prioress should behave and the type of religious tale she should tell to educate her fellow pilgrims. Hardy Long Frank defends the Prioress's religious station:

it is in the tale that [Chaucer] has artfully assigned to her that we see fully unambiguously displayed the qualities that have made her a prioress--the diplomacy, the finesse . . . that her professional role demands.¹²⁴

Madame Eglentyne's tale is certainly a narrative worthy of a nun. By supplying her audience with a saint's life, the Prioress adheres to the dominant literary genre of the Middle Ages. Harry Bailly seems to respect Madame Eglentyne as a religious woman. He asks her to tell her tale with a deference he accords no other pilgrim but the knight to offer his story. Bailly says "as curteisly as it had been a mayde,\ "May lady Prioressse, by youre leve\So that I wiste I sholde yow not greve,\I wolde demen that ye tellen sholde."¹²⁵ Bailly's invitation to the Prioress proves his respect for Madame Eglentyne and an appropriate reverence for her religious station rather than her position as a courtly lady. Not only the Prioress's visage and social status evoke the admiration of Harry Bailly, but he also seems impressed by "the consummate piety and professionalism manifest in her tale."¹²⁶

While Madame Eglentyne does not speak in the "General Prologue" to offer any validation for Chaucer the pilgrim's portrait of a worldly obsessed nun, Chaucer the poet

utilizes the feminine voice in her tale. Judith Ferster suggests that "the anomalous "quod she" that intrudes twice in the tale reminds [the reader] that the speaker is a woman."¹²⁷ The information Chaucer provides his audience is indeed significant: the Prioress narrates a tale that is unsoiled by the romantic ideals of the pilgrim Chaucer. The "Prioress's Tale" offers greater insight into her spiritual character than her portrait in the "General Prologue." George Lyman Kittredge contends, "the pilgrims do not exist for the sake of their stories, but vice versa."¹²⁸ If Chaucer the poet constructs the "Prioress's Tale" as an aspect of her character, then it would appear that she is not the corrupt nun who Chaucer the pilgrim paints in the "General Prologue." Benson agrees that the tales reflect the characters of their narrators: "the dramatic interpretation . . . which asserts that each tale, whatever its other purpose is designed to reveal the personality of its teller."¹²⁹ As Benson suggests, the Prioress's portrait would contain not the only, let alone the most accurate, evaluation of her character. The Prioress's portrait primarily exists to expose the character of Chaucer the pilgrim and his Eve-like portrait of the Prioress, while her tale renders a more accurate assessment of her spiritual

state. Perhaps Chaucer the poet deliberately established the dichotomy evident in the Prioress's portrait and tale to emphasize the dual position of women that pervaded the medieval intellectual society. Madame Eglentyne is a nun, but, as her male painted portrait in the "General Prologue" reveals, she cannot transcend the literary convention that portrayed women as the ultimate sinner, Eve.

While Chaucer the pilgrim's portrait of the Prioress in the "General Prologue" features her secular attraction and temporal actions, the "Prioress's Tale" rehabilitates Madame Eglentyne as a Prioress. The "Prioress's Tale," Collete argues, "in both its theme and structure reflects late fourteenth century ideas, that the Prioress's stress on love, emotion, and pity are all consonant with what we might call a fashion in religious taste."¹³⁰ The Prioress's tale is completely in a religious vein and, while twentieth-century readers may balk at the blatant anti-Semitism of her tale, Madame Eglentyne's censure of the Jews is secondary to the religious nature of her tale. Sumner Ferris argues that the "Prioress's Tale" is "a compact masterpiece of poetry, human sentiment, and religious devotion."¹³¹ In her tale, Madame Eglentyne delivers a whopping spiritual story that rivals the "Reeve's Tale" in violence and competes with the

"Knight's Tale" in moral theme. The Prioress comprehends the significance of her religious office and, therefore, her tale redeems her as a devout nun and proves that she is not a debauched woman. Saints' lives were esteemed narratives in the Middle Ages and the Prioress proves her spiritual and professional piety by choosing to enlighten her fellow pilgrims with the story of St. Hugh. Undoubtedly, the Madame Eglentyne of the "Prioress's Tale" contrasts the portrait of the secular woman depicted in the "General Prologue" because the two are not the same Prioress: one woman is the object of Chaucer the pilgrim's female fantasy and the other is a nun who manifests the spiritual condition appropriate to her religious vocation.

Madame Eglantyne's veneration of the Virgin Mary not only establishes the Prioress as the other half of the female dichotomy, but signifies the religious content of her tale. By choosing Marian legend for Madame Eglantyne's tale, Chaucer rectifies his narrator's tainted portrait of the Prioress in the "General Prologue." In the late fourteenth century, the veneration of Mary was a common artistic, literary, and religious practice.¹³² The "Prioress's Tale" subscribes to not only the saint's life genre, but also the Marian doctrine. Thus, the Prioress

cements her spiritual purity by appealing to a religious medium. As Marina Warner points out, "the Virgin Mary figured for the Middle Ages the inviolacy of the Church, the unassailability of its beliefs, and its perdurability throughout history."¹³³ The Prioress, by choosing the Marian legend for her tale, demonstrates that she is not at all the degenerate Eve of her portrait, but a shrewd religious officer who realizes the political effect of her tale and the professional duties of her vocation.

Not only does Madame Eglentyne show reverence for the Virgin Mary, but her tale depicts a recognition of food's importance in medieval society. Seemingly, the Prioress's manipulation of the meal, in her appeal to secular convention, would cement her religious corruption; however, in her tale the Prioress portrays the Virgin Mary providing spiritual nourishment to the little clergon. While the little clergon, with his throat slit by the Jews, sings Ave Maria, the Virgin Mary places food on his tongue and says "My litel child, now wol I fecche thee,\Whan that the greyn is fro thy tonge ytake.\Be nat agst, I wol nat thee forsake."¹³⁴ Madame Eglentyne illustrates that food is not a substance to be wasted on dogs and played with at meals, but a means of spiritual nourishment. In the "Prioress's

Tale," Christ's mother nourishes not only the little clergon, but mankind.

The seed she gives the little boy has no erotic bent--the Prioress is not slipping Freudian symbolism into her tale; however, the grain the Virgin Mary gives the little clergon before he ascends into heaven is significant. In the late fourteenth century mystic visions and art revealed a medieval obsession with receiving nourishment from the breast of Mary. Many religious women allegedly fasted for years while accepting the same nourishment as the little clergon. It seems unlikely that Chaucer intended to portray the Prioress as a displaced mother. Instead, he may have constructed her tale to reveal the spiritual condition of Madame Eglentyne that is virtually ignored by the unreliable narrator of her portrait. While Chaucer the pilgrim depicts a tainted Prioress, Madame Eglentyne rehabilitates herself in the tale as she nourishes the other pilgrims with her harrowing religious story.

Historical evidence supports that some nuns did leave the cloister and participate on pilgrimages; however, the Church forbade women to preach. The "Prioress's Tale" can be viewed ostensibly as an example of female oration that should be censured by the Church. There exists an obvious

incongruity in the characterization of a Prioress who revels in secular pleasures yet delivers a powerful and violent religious narrative. Perhaps, the only real spiritual crime the Prioress commits on the road to Canterbury is telling her tale. Not only is her tale a form of preaching, it venerates a woman and, perhaps, reveres all women religious. In fact, Judith Ferster suggests that Chaucer veils the Prioress's veneration of Mary with the ambiguities of her portrait because "he insists on recuperating for the patriarchy the Prioress's subversive interest in Mary's power and in women as religious speakers."¹³⁵ The Prioress may neither identify with the little clergon, his mother, or the courtly lady, but she may equate her spiritual condition and religious office with the Virgin Mary.

Theories regarding Chaucer's depiction of his female characters emphasize the same ambiguities critics apply to the Prioress's portrait and tale. Robert Sturges comments that the Prioress and the other women

are concerned with the kinds of power women can attain, and, perhaps more significantly, each of the female narrators attempt . . . to create, not merely a single authoritative female figure, but a whole female tradition of authority, in which powerful women are invoked to pass their authority to other women, including the narrator herself.¹³⁶

Sturges regards Chaucer the poet as a male who is sympathetic to the women who have been portrayed unfairly as Eve in Church literature and medieval works. Chaucer implements the female paradox evident in religious and secular culture in his contrasting depictions of the Prioress. By emphasizing the secular nature of her attire and manners in the "General Prologue," Chaucer the poet sets the stage for the later role he places the Prioress in--strong female and pious religious women. By juxtaposing the two contrasting characterizations of Madame Eglentyne, Chaucer utilizes a poetic device bound to slap the reader in the face: a nun who desires a secular lifestyle but who delivers an extremely hard-hitting religious tale.

IV.

Conclusion

People often see what they want to see when they cast their gaze upon another individual. By adhering to a preconceived notion of who or what the object of our affection should be, we perpetuate the myths that shape our society. If a woman resembles Marilyn Monroe then she must be a sex symbol. Or if a man has dark hair and eyes, then he must be mysterious. Once we actually meet the person about whom we have fantasized, we are often disappointed: de-mystifying another individual upsets our perception of that person by offering us a view of who the person really is. Eileen Power attempts to clarify the Prioress's character in the book, Medieval People; however, she only continues the illusion of the Prioress initiated by Chaucer the pilgrim. Power attempts to create a real life nun from the pieces of the Eve-like puzzle designed by Chaucer the pilgrim. The historical facts that Power presents in her books on medieval people are uncontestable, but her construction of Madame Eglentyne as real life nun deserves critical censure. In the "General Prologue," Chaucer the pilgrim paints a portrait of the woman he desires the

Prioress to be--not a nun, but a romance heroine who subscribes not only to the medieval conception of a courtly lady, but who adheres to the Eve/Mary paradox that typified the male author's perceptions of the dichotomous ideal and imperfect women whose images pervaded medieval art and literature.

A dichotomous portrait characterizes Madame Eglentyne in both her tale and the "General Prologue." In the portrait, Chaucer the pilgrim projects his vision of who the Prioress should be onto Madame Eglentyne and, therefore, her portrait in the "Prologue" offers a picture of a nun who would rather frolic in the park and feed her dogs wastrel bread than pray for her own sins and those of mankind. Madame Eglentyne's tale rehabilitates her as a Prioress and stands in marked contrast to her depiction in the "General Prologue." When the parts of her figure are taken together Madame Eglentyne's depiction in the "Prologue" and her tale, parallels the Eve/Mary paradox of medieval intellectual society. The two depictions offer the audience the male, Chaucer the pilgrim and Chaucer the poet's, view of the Prioress. Both men, fictional and real, reveal, through their seemingly ambiguous reports of the Prioress secular

and religious features, the myth and the mystery surrounding the portraits of women in medieval texts and images.

Chaucer's intent may not be as mysterious as the riddle surrounding the Prioress's portrait and tale. The poet Chaucer establishes the dichotomy between the Madame Eglentyne of the tale and the Prioress painted in the portrait. The two contrasting illustrations of Madame Eglentyne remind the audience that the myths which characterize a society are often exaggerated and do not report the truth. By adopting the persona of Chaucer the pilgrim, Chaucer the poet is able to fashion the disparaging depictions of Madame Eglentyne. If Chaucer was at all conscious of the inconsistent picture he painted of the Prioress, then his design may have been to encourage his medieval audience to search for the true portraits of women among the female myths. Perhaps, he invites the audience to look beyond the Prioress of the "General Prologue" and to discover that what is considered mysterious is not and that the ambiguities we construct in others may simply be our own erroneous perceptions.

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