

CRITICAL VIEWS OF CHAUCER'S prioress

by

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Many students of Chaucer, if asked to name their favorite character in the Canterbury Tales or to cite the most memorable of Chaucer's pilgrims, would answer with the Pardoner or the Wife of Bath. And these two creations are justly famous. The Wife of Bath stands side by side with Falstaff as one of the most unforgettable comic figures in English literature. The complex Pardoner, on the other hand, has elicited more critical commentary than any other Canterbury pilgrim and prompted the broadest spectrum of interpretation. Yet John Livingston Lowes was referring to the quiet, comely Prioress, not the boisterous Wife or the often-analyzed Pardoner, when he praised "one of the most finished masterpieces of subtly penetrating characterization in English poetry".¹

As Lowes' remark suggests, the portrait of the Prioress is a delicate one, and most interpretations have been concentrated well within the limits of the "saint" or "devil" labels that have, for example, favored the Pardoner. In seeking the key to the Prioress' character, scholars have carefully studied every detail of the colorful description in the forty-five lines of the General Prologue which are devoted to Madame Eglentyne:

Ther was also a Nonne, a Prioressse,
That of hir smyling was ful symple and coy;
Hire gretteste ooth was but by Seinte Loy;
And she was cleped madame Eglentyne.
Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne,
Entuned in hir nose ful semely,
And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,
After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,
For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe.
At mete wel ytaught was she with alle:
She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,
Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;

Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe
 That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.
 In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.
 Hir over-lippe wyped she so clene
 That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene
 Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte.
 Ful semely after hir mete she raughte.
 And sikerly she was of greet desport,
 And ful plesaunt, and amyable of port.
 And peyned hire to countrefete cheere
 Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,
 And to ben holden digne of reverence.
 But, for to speken of hire conscience,
 She was so charitable and so pitous
 She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
 Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.
 Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde
 With roasted flessch, or milk and wastel-breed.
 But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,
 Of if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;
 And al was conscience and tendre herte.
 Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was,
 Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,
 Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed;
 But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;
 It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe;
 For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe.
 Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war.
 Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar
 A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,
 And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
 On which ther was first write a crowned A,
 And after Amor vincit omnia.²

Those items which have evoked the most controversy are her smile which is "symples and coy"; her oath; her romantic name, "Eglentyne"; her French; her genteel table manners; the "smale houndes" that she fed with milk and white bread; her "semyly" pleated wimple and "fetys" cloak; and finally the beads of "smal coral" upon which hung the "brooch of gold" that was inscribed with the words "Amor vincit omnia."

A discussion of commentary on the many facets of the Prioress' description, the subject with which this paper is concerned, is difficult in that most of the cruces in Madame

Eglentyne's portrayal have been interpreted in varying shades of commendation and disapproval. Evaluations can, however, be generally divided into those interpretations which are completely favorable to the Prioress and those which consider the portrayal of Madame Eglentyne to be in some degree ironic.

Most scholars have discovered gentle irony, or at least ambiguity, in the portrait of Chaucer's Prioress. One of the most often-quoted comments about the Prioress, and one that implies an essential ambiguity in her character, is that of Lowes, who says that "what Chaucer is depicting is the engagingly imperfect submergence of the feminine in the ecclesiastical."³ Eileen Power views her as "rather a worldly lady,"⁴ and the opinion of Muriel Bowden is much the same. She considers Madame Eglentyne to be a "nun who remembers life beyond the convent wall, and who longs sufficiently for some of the more innocent yet nevertheless forbidden pleasures of that life".⁵ Power, Bowden and many others see the Prioress as a woman who has not yet completely divorced herself from worldly interests. Most critics who hold this view, however, have agreed that the frailties of the Prioress are to be smiled at rather than condemned.

Other commentators have found no trace of worldliness about the Prioress and interpret her as a completely religious woman, venturing out from the cloister on a strictly spiritual quest. George Lyman Kittredge considers the Prioress to be of noble blood, a lady brought up from youth in a religious order. He suggests that her companions were not winking at her dress or her courtly behavior, but rather that the favorable impression left

upon the other pilgrims by Madame Eglentyne is underscored by the courtesy with which the normally rough Harry Bailey invites her to tell a tale. Kittredge concludes that "Of all the Canterbury Pilgrims none is more sympathetically conceived or more delicately portrayed than Madame Eglentine, the prioress."⁶ In answer to those who find the Prioress to be worldly, Edwin J. Howard points to her sympathy for mice, puppies, and little children and finds her gentle nature to be her outstanding quality.⁷

Although many scholars have sought to interpret favorably one or two aspects of the Prioress' description, an almost complete defense of the Prioress has been written by a critic who is also a member of the religious community. In "Chaucer's Nuns," an essay which was first published in 1925, Sister Madeleva sought to answer the theories of Lowes and others. Favorably explaining each controversial point in the Prioress' description, she discovers no terrestrial desires submerged, imperfectly or otherwise, within the Prioress. She sees no irony or ambiguity in her portrait and finds her to be an older woman, about fifty, who has been "sweetened and spiritually transformed by the rules and religious practices of her choice, who can be in the world without being of it, gracious, without affectation, and friendly without boldness."⁸

Apparently ignoring the possibility that the Prioress' religious vocation might be a weak one, Sister Madeleva goes on to write of two forces which bring about a subtle and spiritual change in the life of a woman who becomes a nun, a woman who presumably has knowingly and willingly devoted her life to the

service of God. (As will be seen later, however, desire for divine service was not the sole force that motivated young ladies to enter the medieval nunnery.)

The forces by which this change is effected are two: the first, a mystical but most real relation between the soul and God; the second, the rules and customs and religious practices of the particular community in which the individual seeks to perfect that mystical relation.⁹

Chaucer writes that the Prioress spoke French "After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe", and most critics, including Sister Madeleva, have agreed that the Prioress belonged to the Benedictine nunnery of St. Leonard's at Bromley, Middlesex, adjoining Stratford Bow. Therefore, since the Prioress was a member of the Benedictine order, Sister Madeleva concludes that she should be interpreted in light of the Benedictine Rule to discern whether the portrait is ironic or, as Sister Madeleva contends, a true-to-life representation of "the visible effects of a spiritual life" which Chaucer recorded but perhaps did not understand.¹⁰

Sister Madeleva finds no impropriety in Madame Eglentyne's "smyling . . . ful symple and coy", and she goes to the North Verse version of the Rule of St. Benedict to prove it:

A priores hir fast sal breke
And silence, when sho sold not speke
To myrth hir gestes in that scho may.

"Considering that this is the spirit of the rule under which the Prioress had enlisted, one feels that her smiling was the minimum of hospitality which she must have felt for strangers, at home or abroad".¹¹ A Benedictine monk, Dom Maynard J. Brennan, finds a further and more specific reference in Benedictine

legislation to "simple and coy": "The Rule has always admonished that laughter should be controlled, unaffected, and silent."¹² This regulation would make the phrase "simple and coy" particularly appropriate to a Benedictine nun, since the meaning of "coy" in Chaucer's time was "silent."

Many critics have commented upon the Prioress' romantic sounding name, Madame Eglentyne, (Lady Sweetbriar) implying that her choice is one more indication, however slight, of her worldly interests. Although Sister Madeleva agrees that the name is "lovely and romantic", she relates three customs which prevail in the choice of a Sister's name and concludes that the chances are two to one against the name being self-chosen. In some communities nuns keep their family names. Apparently this is not the general practice of Benedictine nunneries, however. In many of the smaller nunneries, a Sister is allowed to choose her own name, but in most large ones she has no choice, although she may express a preference which is sometimes considered. One prerequisite for any choice is that it either be a saint's name or carry, for some reason, traditions of sanctity.¹³

Sister Madeleva is unable to relate the religious significance of "Eglentyne," but Ernest P. Kuhl offers the suggestion that the name is holy because, according to John Mandeville's Travels, written earlier in Chaucer's century, the crown that Christ wore when he died on the cross may have been made of Eglantine:

'And afterward he was lad in to a Gardyn of Cayphas, and there he was crowned with Eglentier. . . . And of this Croune, half is at Parys, and the

other half at Costantynoble. And
 this Croune has Crist on his Heved,
 whan he was don upon the Cros; and
therefore oughte Men to worshiþe it
and, hold it more worthi than ony of
the othere.¹⁴

Kuhl concludes that the Prioress chose her name because of the religious rather than the romantic associations of the rose.

Apparently the spiritual significance of Eglantine may not have been as great as Kuhl suggests, however, for R. T. Davies, using the same text that Kuhl had employed,¹⁵ has discovered that Kuhl failed to include several important lines in his quotation (the one above) and that, according to Mandeville, Christ died with a crown of "Jonkes" or Rushes of the Sea on His head, not "Eglentier". Although "Eglentyne" might seem to be a more religious name for Chaucer's Prioress than was thought previous to Kuhl's article, since it did compose one of the crowns used in the Passion, Davies suggests that the author of the Travels may have invented the kinds of thorn used in the crowns. He knows of no other reference to the use of Eglantine in the crowns and doubts that Chaucer was familiar with such a legend.¹⁶

Her name is not the only particular of her description that critics have cited to prove a romantic inclination, or at least awareness, on the part of the Prioress. What, for example, of the inscription "Amor vincit omnia" on her golden brooch? Does this refer to celestial love, or is it an indication of more mundane interests? It "is one of the commonest of epigrams among religious," according to Sister Madeleva, who is sure that it could be found framed on the walls of many modern nunneries:

"It is, in three words, the most typical motto that could have been engraved upon the brooch."¹⁷ Skeat defines the "Amor" as Charity, the greatest of all the Christian graces.¹⁸

Skeat is also one of the few scholars who favorably interprets Chaucer's reference to the French, spoken by the Prioress "After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe":

There is nothing to shew that Chaucer speaks slightly of the French spoken by the Prioress. . . . The poet, however, had been himself in France, and knew precisely the difference between the two dialects; but he had no special reason for thinking more highly of the Parisian than of the Anglo-French. He merely states that the French which she spoke so 'fetisly' was naturally such as was spoken in England.¹⁹

Kittredge, who has such high esteem for the Prioress, disagrees on this point, and in a review of Skeat's edition of Chaucer's works he calls this "the very worst note ever written on a passage of Chaucer."²⁰

Although few scholars have defended the Prioress in her manner of speaking French, several have rallied to her side in the explanation of her singing the divine service "Entuned in hir nose ful semely". Sister Madeleva says that this is the proper method of chanting the Latin Office.²¹ Robinson goes further and includes the parts of the Mass which are sung: "This mode of nasal intonation is traditional with the recitative portions of the church service."²² Manly originally thought that the line indicated an "affectation of piety." However, he later learned from Dr. J. Lewis Browne, an eminent American authority on Gregorian music, that "it was, and still is, the

practice to chant the long passages of recitative in a manner accurately described as 'entuned in the nose'." Manly also notes that personal experience has taught him that this method of singing produces less strain upon the vocal chords.²³

Maynard Brennan, a Benedictine Monk, cannot accept the theory that nasal recitation is traditional in the Catholic Gregorian Chant. Although he is unable to present fourteenth-century evidence to that effect, he states that the present-day practice of monastic choirs is to sing in clear, pure tones. St. Vincent Archabbey, Pennsylvania, the oldest Benedictine monastery in North America, demands clear voices in all of its singers, basing this rule "on the Tyrocinium Benedictinium which emphatically states that the Office is to be chanted non . . . de naribus sonando."²⁴ Brennan takes this to have been the tradition for at least the last two hundred years.

Sister Madeleva quotes a passage from Chapter 51 of the Rule of St. Benedict in defense of the Prioress' genteel table manners ("Ful semely after hir mete she raughte"). Nuns on a journey were given new habits which they were expected to keep as clean as possible until their return to the convent. This is the explanation not only of her dainty conduct at table but also her "fetys" cloak.²⁵ Kittredge's interpretation is much the same:

As to her table manners, which often make the uninstructed laugh, they are simply the perfection of mediaeval daintiness. Nothing is farther from Chaucer's thought than to poke fun at them.²⁶

Although Sister Madeleva attempts to explain favorably

many of the details in Madame Eglentyne's description, the Prioress' most adamant defender does not discuss her oath. The third line in the passage, "Hire greeteste ooth was but by Seinte Loy", appears to have a longer and fuller history of critical commentary than any other single point of controversy in the description of the Prioress. In addition, contrary opinions about the identity of St. Loy, and the appropriateness of the various identifications, offer a variety of interpretations of the Prioress which is representative of the entire body of criticism on Chaucer's nun. Opinions range from views of the Prioress as a properly religious woman to explanations of her oath to "Seinte Loy" as an indication of a subconscious physical attraction toward a handsome saint.

One reason for the number and variety of comments on the Prioress' oath lies in the difficulty of positively identifying the saint by whom alone the Prioress will swear. So far St. Louis, St. Eligius, and most recently St. Eulalia have been offered for consideration.

Thomas Warton suggested that the Prioress was referring to "Saint Lewis,"²⁷ but he gave no further information as to how he came to his conclusion or why it was particularly appropriate. Walter Skeat dismisses Warton's interpretation with the comment that the phonetic laws of Old French must have been unknown in Warton's time. Skeat sees St. Loy as St. Eligius, a seventh-century French goldsmith. He says that the Latin "Eligius" necessarily became Eloy in O. French, and is Eloy or Loy in English, the latter form being the commoner."²⁸

The most recently suggested candidate, St. Eulalia, a virgin

martyr of the third century is also phonetically possible, according to James J. Lynch.

Saint-Eloi (Eloy), a locality in the department of Ain at the border of Burgundy, is referred to in fourteenth-century documents as S. Eulalia (and in the thirteenth century as Saint-Alay). The phonetic development of the place-name, and of the underlying saint's name can be reconstructed as follows: Eulalia must have become by dissimilation Euladia (as the Prov. Eulazie would suggest), which would give *Eulaye, *Euloye; since these forms begin with a vowel, which would elide with that of the preceding adjective, the resulting 'compound name' (Sainteloye) must have been regarded as containing saint + Eloye. This 'masculine' interpretation would then cause the fall of the final 'feminine' e.²⁹

The establishment of the phonetic possibility of identifying St. Loy as St. Eligius or St. Eulalia is only the first step, however, in the presentation of a convincing case. It must then be shown why it is appropriate that the Prioress should elect to swear by the virgin-martyr Eulalia or the handsome courtier Eligius. Thus the identification of St. Loy may reveal a good deal about the character of Madame Eglington.

One of the earliest attempts to favorably interpret the oath, and thus the Prioress herself, appears in 1881. F. J. Furnivall, noting the difficulty of identifying St. Loy, presents the suggestion, received by him in a letter from a Benedictine nun, that St. Loy did not exist at all, that it was only an expression and therefore did not constitute a real oath. The nun, identified only as residing in an abbey in southwest England, admits that she has come to her conclusion because swearing without necessity is strictly forbidden to every member

of the Benedictine order. Finally the Benedictine nun suggests that her interpretation may be correct because the Prioress' oath "nas but" by St. Loy. Why the "nas but", she asks, unless St. Loy means an imaginary quantity? The two words indicate that the Prioress was swearing by something below the common form, yet, she says, neither "St. Louis" nor "St. Eloy" was anything out of the ordinary in Chaucer's time.³⁰

The "nas but" may perhaps be explained by a glance at some of the oaths by other Canterbury pilgrims or characters in their stories. For example, the drunken revelers of The Pardoner's Tale make a game of swearing by parts of Christ's body:

Hir othes been so grete and so dampnable
That it is grisly for to heere hem sweare.
Oure blissed Lordes body they totere.³¹

Harry Bailey swears by the "naylis" and "blode" of Christ, and the Summoner "by Goddes armis two." Compared to this dismemberment of Christ's body, then, the Prioress's oath is quite mild. Yet one question remains: If the phrase, "was but by Seinte Loy", is intended to indicate the mildness of her oath, as most scholars agree, why is swearing by St. Loy more delicate than an oath by any other saint? J. W. Hales in 1891 was the first to suggest a possible answer.

Hales' interpretation is similar to that of Furnivall's nun, for he agrees that the Prioress is not guilty of swearing at all. Taking St. Loy to be St. Eligius, Hales refers to an incident in the life of St. Eligius when he was called upon by King Dagobert³² to swear by the relics of the saints. He

refused, and when the king insisted, Eligius began to weep. The king then relented and agreed to take the word of Eligius without his swearing an oath. Therefore, says Hales, when Chaucer tells us that the Prioress swore only by St. Eligius, a man who himself refused to swear, he means that the Prioress never swore at all.³³ Skeat relates Hales' theory but does not comment upon it, saying of the oath that "At any rate, it was a very mild one for those times."³⁴ Lowes, however, calls Hales' interpretation "hopelessly forced." He notes that the anecdote about St. Eligius was not generally known, and he says that the use of "by" in the phrase "by Seinte Loy" to mean that the Prioress acted the same as St. Eligius was "absolutely without parallel." "And there is not a shred of evidence that the very common oath by St. Loy ever meant any such thing."³⁵

An interesting refinement of the problem is offered by John Steadman who does not believe, as Hales did, that Chaucer meant by the oath that the Prioress never swore at all. However, he considers the incident in the life of St. Eligius cited by Hales to be the key to the concept that the Prioress' oath was a very mild one. "Even more 'indicative of her extreme delicacy' than her refusal to dismember the body of Christ was the fact that out of all the saints in the calendar she made her 'gretteste oath' in the name of a man who refused to swear."³⁶ Therefore, by such an oath "she achieved the ultimate refinement--the hypothetical vanishing point--in swearing. An oath by St. Loy was, in effect, the mildest conceivable expletive".³⁷ Steadman considers the mildness of the oath to be the primary meaning of

the line.

Eleanor Hammond, unlike Furnivall's nun or Hales, writes that the Prioress did swear, but no criticism is implied, for Miss Hammond sees the oath to St. Loy as an invocation to a patron saint of travelers. Noting that Skeat has said that Lydgate is often our best commentator on Chaucer, Miss Hammond quotes a line from The Virtue of the Mass by Lydgate which indicates that St. Loy has been considered a protector of travelers: "And Seynt loye youre journey schall preserve".³⁸

Kittredge does not attempt to identify St. Loy, but he does find the sound of the oath to be delicate and appropriate because he considers the Prioress to be a lady: "Could there be a sweeter or more ladylike expletive? It is soft and liquid, and above all, it does not distort the lips."³⁹ The brief comment by Kittredge in 1915 represents one of the last attempts for some forty years to view the oath to "Seinte Loy" in a light completely favorable to the Prioress, for in 1914 John Livingston Lowes' landmark commentary on the Prioress' oath was published.⁴⁰ In his discussion of the oath to St. Loy as an important facet of a delicately ironic portrayal, Lowes sets the tone of critical opinion on this point for the next four decades.

The tendency from the time of Lowes has been toward an increasingly critical view of Madame Eglentyne's oath. This tendency has been sharply reversed, however, with the arrival on the scene of a new heir to the title of "Seinte Loy," the young maiden, St. Eulalia, who was martyred in 304 at the age of twelve.⁴¹ The phonetic possibility of interpreting "Seinte Loy"

as St. Eulalia has already been presented. James J. Lynch also considers St. Eulalia to be highly appropriate on the grounds of her martyrdom and her virginity. The only recorded event in the life of this saint tells of her heroic refusal under torture to reject her Christian faith. Even when her body was torn by hooks, and fire was applied to the wounds, she shouted no denials of her faith, only thanksgivings, and finally a white dove issued from her mouth. An oath by a saint who would speak no evil word, and whose very name means "sweet spoken," would be a delicate and gentle oath indeed.⁴²

That the Prioress would have special veneration for such a saint as Eulalia is demonstrated by the tale she herself chooses to tell of the 'litel clergeon,' whom she apostrophizes with words that would as well suit St. Eulalia: 'O martir, sowded to virginitee.'⁴³

It has already been seen that Sister Madeleva attempts to explain each detail of the Prioress' description in a light completely favorable to the Prioress. Between this wholesale vindication on the one hand and the large body of material that has found the Prioress to be less than an ideal representative of her order and her position, on the other, lies a middle way. The keynote of these interpretations appears to be the ambiguity of the portrait and the delicate balance between celestial and worldly interests. As Sister Madeleva is the champion of the completely religious Prioress, John Livingston Lowes has been instrumental in the initiation of a view of Madame Eglentyne, without condemning her, as "the devout and gentle Prioress, who has not only immortal but very mortal longings in her."⁴⁴ Lowes'

evaluation of the 45 lines of the General Prologue suggests the height of Chaucer's accomplishment in creating a far more complex character than either a wholly good or obviously negligent Prioress:

The sketch of the Prioress, in the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, is a masterpiece of subtly penetrating characterization. Every stroke tells; every concrete detail carries with it an aura of associations, and it is these associations that blend into the delicately ironical yet exquisitely sympathetic portrayal of a clash of ideals too lightly touched to be even remotely tragic, too deftly suggested at point after point to miss its delightfully human appeal.⁴⁵

Lowes finds the ambiguity of the character of the Prioress to be emphasized in the final lines of her description. First there is the contrast of the golden brooch, hanging on the coral prayer beads, which, "sums up in a master-stroke the subtle analysis of the Prioress's character--the delicately suggested clash between her worldly and her religious aspirations."⁴⁶ Even more brilliant is the ambiguity of the inscription on the brooch, "Amor vincit omnia", which Sister Madeleva protests is the most characteristically religious motto that could have been engraved on the brooch. However, as Lowes notes, the celestial connotation of the phrase was acquired after the words became well known in the context of earthly love:

The line ('love conquers all things') is, as everybody knows, from one of Virgil's Eclogues. There it refers, of course, to the way of a man with a maid. But by a pious transfer, which took place long before Chaucer, and had behind it the strange jumble of mediaeval superstitions about Virgil, the line was converted to the use of love celestial. Now it is earthly love that conquers all, now heavenly; the phrase plays back and forth between the two. And it is precisely

that happy ambiguity of the convention--itself the result of an earlier transfer--that makes Chaucer's use of it here, as a final summarizing touch, a master stroke. Which of the two loves does 'amor' mean to the Prioress? I do not know; but I think she thought she meant celestial.⁴⁷

According to Francis Manly a very similar ambiguity exists in connection with the Prioress' rosary, made of "small coral". Apparently from ancient Roman times coral was considered an amulet against the "evil eye." This legend developed into the theory that coral could protect the wearer from the temptations of the devil, and many medieval lapidaries after the twelfth century insisted that the stone did have this protective power. Therefore a rosary of coral would be doubly potent against evil, for not only the prayers said on the beads but also the beads themselves would guard the Prioress from the malice of the devil. The original tradition about the evil eye also incurred another alteration, however, for it apparently also became known as a love charm: "whoso bereth this stone upone him or one his fynger, he schal get love." Although this is a fifteenth-century reference, Manly believes the tradition to be much older and perhaps classical in origin.⁴⁸

Arthur Hoffman considers that the Prioress' very presence on the pilgrimage is itself an indication of the delicate balance of the portrait. The Prioress had undertaken a journey to pray at the shrine of the "hooly blisful martir" Thomas a Becket, yet as a Benedictine nun she was supposed to remain in her cloister. As Hoffman says, "The very act of piety is not free from the implication of imperfection".⁴⁹

Although few critics who interpret the portrayal as ironic have found Chaucer's Prioress to be an extreme violator of the rules of her order, the majority of commentators do consider the scales to be weighted more on the side of the female than the ecclesiastical in the Prioress. Most critics have found more that is worldly than is religious in discussing her oath to St. Loy, her smile and her courtly manners, her mode of speaking French, her uncovered forehead, and her possession of pet dogs.

It has already been mentioned that Lowes' view of the Prioress' oath as delicately ironic set the tenor of interpretations on this point for approximately four decades. Prior to a discussion of Lowes' theories, however, it should be noted that he was not the first to show that the oath to Saint Loy might indicate a bit of worldliness in the Prioress. In his edition of Chaucer's works, Walter Skeat suggested that perhaps the Prioress "invoked St. Loy [St. Eligius] as being the patron saint of goldsmiths; for she seems to have been a little given to a love of gold and corals".⁵⁰

Lowes accepts Skeat's statement as valid but suggests that it does not go far enough. He says that twentieth-century readers, in order to fully appreciate the aptness of the Prioress' invocation to "Seinte Loy," must understand how the fourteenth century thought of St. Eligius. It was not simply as the patron saint of goldsmiths.

He was at once, in a word, an artist and a courtier and a saint, a man of great physical beauty and a lover, in his early days, of personal adornment. And those who glorified him as a saint did not forget the striking characteristics of the man.⁵¹

As a young boy Eligius became an apprentice to a goldsmith. When his reputation as an artist began to grow, he went to Paris, where he gained the friendship of the king, Clotaire II. He remained at court during the reign of Dagobert from 629-639. When Dagobert died in 639 Eligius withdrew from worldly affairs, and was made a bishop in 641. After he entered the religious life he directed his artistic talents to the creation of holy objects of great beauty. Hymns to St. Eligius are numerous during the fourteenth century, according to Lowes, and many stress "his peculiar office of lending beauty to the symbols of holiness."⁵²

Still the particular appropriateness of swearing by St. Eligius is not clear. Why should the Prioress have a special devotion for a saint who was a goldsmith, a courtier, and a bishop? And what does this devotion tell us about the character of the Prioress? According to Lowes, an oath by St. Eligius is particularly consistent with many of the other details of Madame Eglentyne's description. A woman "who peyned hir to countrefete chere of court, and been estatlich of manere" would naturally find a handsome courtier-saint appealing. St. Eligius was also known in his youth to have had a weakness for personal adornment.

. . . his appeal would not thereby be lessened to the nun who paid no small attention to the pleating of her wimple; whose cloak was 'fetis' enough to strike a shrewd observer's eye; whose smiling mouth was still soft and red.⁵³

Lowes' convincing commentary ushered in a new era of interpretation of the Prioress and her oath. For many years

most scholars have agreed with his conclusions and sought to add to the basic structure that Lowes erected. Manly has high praise for the work done by Lowes.

. . . I think [Lowes] disposed finally of the suggestion that the Prioress invoked St. Loy as a patron of travelers or that she never swore at all. She did swear, and she swore by the most elegant and courtly saint in the calendar, one thoroughly representative of the feminine tastes which she preserved in spite of her devotion to religion.⁵⁴

Manly also offers a point, missed by Lowes, which he says may suggest an element of fashion in Eglentyne's swearing by St. Loy that had not formerly been realized. Apparently one of the great ladies of the day, the Countess of Pembroke, gave an image of St. Loy to Grey Friars, which was the most fashionable church of the time.⁵⁵

Clarence Wentworth goes a little farther than Lowes or Manly in arriving at his theory about the aptness of the Prioress' oath. Wentworth concludes that, in swearing by a man who had during his life worn vestments of gold adorned with jewels, and yet became a saint, the Prioress is attempting to justify her "Indulgence in little luxuries, trivial and harmless in themselves, but contrary to the spirit of her religious vows."⁵⁶

Benjamin Wainwright's interpretation of the Prioress' motive for swearing by St. Loy suggests a great deal more of the "feminine in the ecclesiastical" than any other commentary upon the subject. But even Wainwright does not imply that the Prioress has a "tarnished character," though he finds "very human yearnings hidden in" her heart. His "interpretation is that unwittingly the nun admired the superb physique and handsome face of this versatile

and attractive saint. . . . To put it succinctly, I believe that unconsciously she had a very human affection for the artist-saint."⁵⁷

Although it is impossible for modern readers to understand the nuances of the description of Madame Eglentyne as Chaucer's original audience did, a fuller comprehension of some of the subtle, ironic touches of those 45 lines has been afforded by the efforts of scholars who have revealed that, in several instances, Chaucer described the Prioress in the language of the medieval romance. Lowes writes that the entire passage is filled with reminiscences of the poetry of courtly love, but he points in particular to the Prioress' smile which is "symple and coy":

There were two words with which every reader of French poetry in Chaucer's day (and everybody in Chaucer's circle read French poetry) had clearly defined and inevitable associations--'simple' and 'coy.' For 'simple' alone, and 'coy' alone, and 'simple and coy' together, belong to the stock phraseology of fourteenth-century courtly poetry. The lady's eyes were simple as a dove; so was her look, her face, her voice, her speech, her smile, her bearing, and herself. 'Coy' (which meant 'quiet,' with a touch sometimes of the demure, though not of coquetry) was applied by the lover to his mistress incessantly. . . . In a word, the phrase, so far as I know, was confined to the poetry of courtly love, and any lover to any lady was pretty certain to employ it. . . . To every one of Chaucer's readers its distinctly earthly rather than heavenly flavour was unmistakable.⁵⁸

An even more specific instance of the influence of the medieval romance upon Chaucer's description of the Prioress exists in the lines relating her dainty table manners, which are copied from Le Roman de la Rose. A few lines from a translation by Skeat will serve to make the similarity apparent:

. . . and takes good care not to wet her fingers
up to the joints in broth. . . . And so daintily she

contrives to drink, as not to sprinkle a drop upon herself. . . she ought to wipe her lip so well as not to permit any grease to stay there, at least upon her upper lip.

Skeat says simply that "Such were the manners of the age."⁵⁹

Lowes says that the passage was one of the precepts in a code of conventional directives to lovers and their ladies and that the lines about dainty table manners in Le Roman de la Rose were as familiar to Chaucer's audience as Hamlet's soliloquy is to modern readers.⁶⁰ Muriel Bowden considers the humor to lie not simply in the borrowing from romance, because the etiquette described was practiced by polite society, but in the original setting of the lines: "For this is part of the account given by the Beldam, La Vielle, of the wiles a woman uses to attract and hold her lover."⁶¹

Many critics who consider the portrait of the Prioress to be ironic have pointed to her manner of speaking French "After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,/ For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe." Tyrwhitt concludes "that Chaucer thought but meanly of the English-French spoken in his time."⁶² He goes on to say, however, that some sort of French is appropriate to the Prioress, not only because she affects the character of a woman of fashion, but also because she is a religious. Apparently this was the language used in communications to the nuns from their superiors: "The instructions from the Abbot of St. Albans to the Nuns of Sopewell, in 1338, were in the French language."⁶³ George Coulton presents a similar, if more ironic, commentary upon the Prioress' French. He considers the Prioress to be the most conspicuous

example of "Chaucer's sly humour" but feels it is necessary to have a familiarity with ecclesiastical records in order to fully appreciate the most delicate touches, for while visitational injunctions from bishops to the nuns were written in Norman-French, similar directives were addressed to the monks in Latin.⁶⁴

Robinson thinks that the comparison of the Prioress' French with the "Frenssh of Parys" is deprecatory: "Chaucer can hardly mean that she spoke a dialect that was just as good."⁶⁵ Kuhl, on the other hand, thinks that it is the fact that the Prioress spoke French "After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe" which is disparaging.⁶⁶ It has already been noted that Stratford atte Bowe is generally considered to be a reference to the Benedictine nunnery of St. Leonard's which was at Bromley, Middlesex, adjoining Stratford-Bow. About four miles beyond St. Leonard's was situated another Benedictine nunnery at Barking. Kuhl writes that St. Leonard's was a poor and obscure convent "not having at any time in its history wealthy members or patrons of gentle birth."⁶⁷ He finds the situation at the other nearby Benedictine convent to be quite different:

Barking, on the other hand, was patronized by the aristocracy as well as by persons of gentle birth; its prioresses in Chaucer's day were members of the distinguished family of the earl of Salisbury, a veteran ambassador at foreign courts. Hence it follows that the head of Barking would know Parisian French. Moreover, it would not be necessary for her to imitate court manners, she was already, in a sense, a member of court.⁶⁸

Kuhl concludes that the references in the Prioress' description to her Anglo-French and her "aping of the gentles" were intended to be a joke, meant for an intimate gathering, which Chaucer

himself enjoyed greatly, since he had two relatives at the more wealthy convent of Barking at that time. "It was a humorous dig at the cultural and professional standing of a less fortunate neighboring convent".⁶⁹ Kuhl decides that St. Leonard's was "less fortunate", and therefore the butt of Chaucer's joke, partly because he can uncover no records "that would indicate any interest on the part of the aristocracy in this Benedictine order almost within the walls of London."⁷⁰ Manly finds records to the contrary which suggest that Chaucer's joke may not have been aimed at St. Leonard's but that the target may have been closer to home.

On September 12, 1356, while Chaucer was in the household of The Countess Elizabeth of Ulster, the wife of Prince Lionel, the countess went to the convent of St. Leonard's. Perhaps she went there to visit Elizabeth of Hainaut, the sister of Queen Philippa of England and the aunt of Prince Lionel, for Elizabeth of Hainaut died at St. Leonard's almost twenty years later, in 1375, and at that time, according to Manly, it is likely that she had been a member of the convent for many years.⁷¹ If the sister of the queen had once been a resident of St. Leonard's, the reference to the French of the Prioress, which was "After the scole of" that convent, cannot have been as disparaging as some critics have thought. Manly has an interesting comment which gives further insight into the nature of the joke about the Prioress' French:

One may be sure that while so greet a lady as the queen's sister was resident at Stratford, she

would have furnished the model for the speaking of French. But her French was not that of Paris, but like that of the Queen herself, the kind of French spoken in Hainaut, a province of what we now call Flanders. When I recited these facts to Sir Frank Heath, one of the editors of the well-known Globe edition of Chaucer, he remarked, "And wouldn't Chaucer's enjoyment of his joke have been the greater because his wife Philippa was also from Hainaut and probably also spoke 'after the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe?'"⁷²

Other critics consider the reference to the Prioress'

French to be deprecatory. Lounsbury writes that the lines place the matter of Chaucer's opinion of Anglo-French beyond any reasonable doubt and concludes that "he made no effort to veil his contempt" for it. Since Parisian French in the fourteenth century had become the language of French literature, all other forms of the language were relegated to the position of dialects. Lounsbury attempts to confirm that this was the general opinion of Anglo-French by citing one of Chaucer's contemporaries on the matter, the author of "The Testament of Love":

In Latin and French" he wrote, "hath many sovereign wits had great delight to endite, and have many noble things fulfilled; but certes there be some that speak their poesy matter in French, of which speech the Frenchmen have as good a fantasy as we have in hearing of Frenchman's English."⁷³

Lumiansky thinks that in his description of the Prioress' clothes her interest in etiquette and her manner of speaking French, Chaucer is laughing at Madame Eglentyne.⁷⁴ Warton says that she is "distinguished by an excess of delicacy and decorum, and an affectation of courtly accomplishments."⁷⁵

Several critics have concluded from studies of the lines about the Prioress' forehead that she is a violator of her

religious rule or that she may be a more broadly humorous character than has generally been thought.

But sikerly she hadde a fair foreheed;
It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe;
For, hardily she was nat undergrowe.

It was the fashion among stylish ladies of Chaucer's time to have high foreheads, but according to Eileen Power, "The nuns were supposed to wear their veils pinned tightly down to their eyebrows, so that their foreheads were completely hidden". Apparently some of the nuns, however, including Madame Eglentyne, yielded to the desire to be fashionable, for if the Prioress' forehead had not been uncovered, how would Chaucer have known either that it was "fair" or "almost a spanne brood"?⁷⁶

Thomas Clark has concluded that the "spanne brood" forehead was much larger than the average. According to medieval physiognomy, a particularly large forehead meant a foolish and irresponsible person. But Clark sees such an interpretation of the forehead, as the Prioress herself, as inconsistent with Chaucer's description of her "tretys" or beautiful nose and her sparkling eyes, "greye as glas". Clark feels that the line "For, hardily, she was not undergrowe" rescues the description from incongruity and throws the balance in favor of an interpretation of the Prioress as a beautiful woman rather than a dull and stupid one. "'For, hardily she was not undergrowe'. . . means simply that the Prioress was well - proportioned: She had a broad forehead, but it was not out of proportion to her body."⁷⁷ Gordon Harper takes this interpretation to what seems to be an almost necessary conclusion and theorizes that if the forehead of the Prioress, which was very broad, was proportionate with the

rest of her body, then she herself must have been quite large. Harper then interprets the mention that the Prioress "was not undergrowe" to be almost the "punch line" of an increasingly humorous description:

Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress is generally considered to be only gently satirical; she is "likable and a little ridiculous." I think, however, that Chaucer intended to give her the broadly humorous character of a spinster of unusually large physical proportions. She was fat in fact. Chaucer's humor lies in the delayed disclosure of the Prioress's bulbous figure after he has carefully built up a picture of affected manners usually associated with daintiness.⁷⁶

According to this discussion, the Prioress may be a comic figure, but no real criticism is implied. However, several commentators have found cause to condemn the behavior of the Prioress, and it is interesting and even surprising that her "smale houndes" have brought forth the only criticism of the Prioress, as she is described in the General Prologue, which can actually be considered harsh.

Sister Madeleva herself cites a regulation in the Ancren Riwe against the possession, by a Sister, of any animal except a cat. She notes, however, that the rules were relaxed for older nuns.⁷⁹ Manly makes the same point in Some New Light on Chaucer. In attempting to judge the extent of the Prioress' impropriety in keeping pets, it would, therefore, be convenient to know her age. Opinions on this point vary, naturally. Lowes sees "still youthful flesh and blood behind the well-pinchd wimple:"⁸⁰ while Sister Madeleva envisions "a woman a decade or more beyond middle age." In an attempt to prove that the Prioress is past middle age, Sister Madeleva gives a list of qualities which are

considered desirable in any prioress--prudence, compassion, patience, industry, and charity--and calls them "the very reverse of youthful virtues".⁸¹ Yet the fact remains that the Prioress could as easily have been young as old. It is not impossible that a virtuous young Sister might have possessed the qualities mentioned by Sister Madeleva. Neither was it impossible for a young woman to become the head of a house for, according to Eileen Power, the only actual qualifications for a prioress were that she "be above the age of twenty-one, born in wedlock and of good reputation".⁸²

Whether the prioress is an old woman or not, the possession of pets was against the strict letter of the law. Eileen Power considers the violation, like the broad forehead, to arise out of a desire to imitate the fashions of the world, for great ladies often amused themselves with pets.⁸³ John M. Steadman does not think that the small dogs "that she fedde / With roasted flessh, or milk and wastel breed" indicate simply a bit of worldly vanity on the part of the Prioress. The dogs, their food, and the way the Prioress weeps over them when they are killed or hurt show, according to Steadman, that Madame Eglentyne was remiss in her duty with regard to four aspects of the Benedictine Rule:

- (1) The regulations against keeping pet animals or permitting dogs to enter the monastic buildings,
- (2) Benedict's strictures against eating flesh,
- (3) the performance of works of charity or misericordie,
- and (4) the discharge of duties pertaining to the office of prioress.⁸⁴

Unless the discipline at St. Leonard's was lax, by simply having the dogs the Prioress was violating a rule of her own convent. Benedictine law also cautioned against indulgence in soft living, which might be taken to include roast meat, milk and

wastel breed. Although a dispensation to eat meat four times a week was authorized in 1336, strict Benedictines continued to follow the original rule of total abstinence from the meat of quadrupeds (fowl was not explicitly forbidden). Therefore, says Steadman, "unless the 'roasted flesh' was indeed fowl, it represented an obvious relaxation of the original rule."⁸⁵

Although Steadman's comment on the 'roasted flesh' does, perhaps, indicate that the Prioress is not one of the reformers seeking a return to total abstinence, there is obviously no violation here. To criticize her for not following the stricter rule on abstinence is like condemning a Catholic today for eating meat on Friday.

Some critics have, however, suggested that it is something of an extravagance for the Prioress to be feeding her puppies such delicacies as meat, milk, and white bread, and Sister Madeleva says it would be so, were it not for the fact that the food is probably left over from the Prioress' own meal.⁸⁶ Yet it appears that the Prioress herself may have been eating very well, for Skeat describes the "wastel breed" as cake bread,⁸⁷ and Kuhl notes that it was the second best of four grades of bread made at that time.⁸⁸ An interesting concluding comment on the food eaten by the Prioress is that of Florence Ridley who says that had Chaucer wanted to suggest luxuriousness in the Prioress, he could have had her sitting down to something like a roast swan, a delicacy relished by the Monk.⁸⁹

According to Steadman, the primary import of the lines about the Prioress' dogs lies in their relation to the concept of charity.

Rules concerning abstinence or pets are secondary. Chaucer shows the Prioress lavishing affection on dogs and dead mice, but he omits any reference of charity toward God or man. Therefore, Steadman thinks that the motto Amor vincit omnia should be considered ironic. He also concludes that her pity for dogs and mice is misdirected, for misericordia which was "heartfelt sympathy for another's distress, impelling us to succour him if we can" as defined by St. Augustine should be expended upon one's neighbor, not upon mere beasts.

She bestowed food, drink, and presumably shelter--but on dogs. . . . She showed compassion for captivity, physical suffering, or death, but the objects of this compassion were dogs or mice. . . . Thus, instead of examples of the actual works of misericordia, Chaucer has introduced a virtual parody of them.⁹⁰

A similar interpretation of the Prioress' weeping over dogs and mice is that of Warton, who says that "She has even the false pity and sentimentality of many modern ladies."⁹¹ Muriel Bowden, like Steadman, thinks that the tears for the animals indicate a lack of feeling for human beings:

It is only thus far, Chaucer implies that the Prioress's charity and pity are roused; it is the suffering of a mouse which calls forth her sympathy; she is not greatly concerned over the suffering of her fellow-man. This implication is later strengthened by her own Tale in which she tells with perfect blandness of the tortues visited upon the Jews; and by the fact that when Chaucer writes of the charity of his Parson, he is explicit and clear in pointing out that here is a man who follows truly all the teachings of Christianity in loving his neighbour as himself. . . . Despite her charm and dignity, she possesses a real imperfection not unmarked by the poet who has created her.⁹²

Miss Bowden's mention of the Prioress' Tale may give some

indication of the rough treatment the Prioress has received in many explications of the tale. Some critics have found the story of the "litel clergeon", who is murdered by Jews, to be anti-Semitic and even sadistic.

It can be seen that Steadman is not alone in his criticism of the Prioress, but of the commentators on the General Prologue, he appears to carry his conclusions the farthest. During the latter half of the Middle Ages, monasteries--including those of the Benedictine order--were the primary charitable institutions for the relief of the poor. However, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, many of the members of the richer monasteries became accustomed to a luxurious existence and neglected their charitable obligations. Therefore, says Steadman, "Chaucer's ironic account of the Prioress' charitable activities would seem, accordingly, to be an indirect attack on contemporary neglect of the works of misericordia required by monastic rule." Not only that, but since the Prioress herself is lax in following the Benedictine Rule, then evidently Chaucer is also implying that discipline at St. Leonard's, the convent under her control, is no longer strict either.⁹³

If Steadman's conclusions about the possession and treatment of the puppies are accepted, criticism of Madame Eglentyne can be far-reaching. But an overall view of the Prioress should not be based solely upon the interpretation of a single stroke in this portrait, for one detail may imply irony or even criticism, while another may indicate that the Prioress is simply conducting herself in the manner expected of a woman of gentle birth. The

complexity of Chaucer's creation becomes apparent when it is realized that several critics who have made close studies of two or more pieces of the puzzle that is Madame Eglentyne have found the parts to be contradictory and apparently would have some difficulty in fitting them together to form a consistent whole. For example, Steadman's evaluation of the "smale houndes" is highly critical of the Prioress, yet he also demonstrates that Madame Eglentyne's oath by St. Loy was the mildest expletive she could have uttered. Kuhl shows that her French "After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe" was an inferior brand, but he also attempts to prove that her name had a highly religious significance. Even Lowes emphasizes the irony of the Prioress' oath by a handsome courtier-saint, while he applauds the ambiguity of the brooch inscribed with "amor vincit omnia." It can be seen, therefore, that a final view of the Prioress must include a consideration of all important facets of her description.

A foundation of historical information about the background of the average medieval prioress and some of the rules that regulated her life may aid in viewing Madame Eglentyne's portrait in a proper light. Medieval ecclesiastical records show, for example, that the Prioress should not have been on the pilgrimage in the first place. The narrator of the Canterbury Tales would never have seen Madame Eglentyne in Harry Bailey's inn had she not been breaking an enclosure rule and ignoring three specific injunctions against making pilgrimages. Sister Madeleva has asked that the rule of St. Benedict be applied to the behavior of the Prioress, since she is a member of the Benedictine order.

This application is appropriate at this point, for St. Benedict did have something to say about the cloistered clergy's venturing into the world: According to Eileen Power "The famous chapter LXVI of the Benedictine Rule enunciated the principle that the professed monk should remain within the precincts of his cloister and eschew all wandering in the world."⁹⁴ This rule applied to nuns as well as to monks.

As a matter of fact there was nothing of which the church disapproved more than this habit, shared by monks and nuns, of wandering about outside their cloister; moralists considered that intercourse with the world was at the root of all the evil which crept into the monastic system. The orthodox saying was that a monk out of his cloister was like a fish out of water; and it will be remembered that Chaucer's monk thought the text not worth an oyster.⁹⁵

Power also says that the Prioress may not have been as "Simple and coy" as everyone thinks, for somehow she managed to convince her bishop that he should allow her to make the pilgrimage, and at that time a request to go on a pilgrimage was considered a very poor excuse for leaving the cloister. The practice was prohibited by edicts in 791 and 1195, and in 1318 nuns were expressly forbidden to leave their convents to make a pilgrimage, even if they had made a vow to do so. As Power notes, one need only recall some of Madame Eglentyne's fellow pilgrims, and some of the tales they tell, to understand the bishops' opposition.⁹⁶

Sister Madeleva says of Chaucer's nuns that "Nothing but a very urgent spiritual quest could have induced them to leave their cloister and join so worldly and public an excursion."⁹⁷ But the reasons most often given in medieval ecclesiastical records for prioresses' leaving their convents are rarely "spiritual."

The general injunction about visitations stated that a prioress could venture out into the world only "'for the obvious utility of the monastery or for urgent necessity'", but this rule was often broken. Journeys were made to conduct the business of the abbey, and many prioresses took the opportunity of their supposed business trips to visit friends and relatives or to attend the funerals of important people.⁹⁸

Thus it is apparent that Madame Eglentyne was breaking some rules by being one of the twenty-nine pilgrims, but it is also quite clear that she was not alone in her violation. Many heads of religious communities were given to wandering and worldliness in general. Eileen Power cites a record of complaint by the nuns in a medieval convent about their prioress, who almost sounds as though she could be Madame Eglentyne. The complaint arose out of the fact that their convent was in debt.

" . . . and this principally owing to the costly expenses of the prioress, because she frequently rides abroad and pretends that she does so on the common business of the house although it is not so, with a train of attendants much too large and carries too long abroad and she feasts sumptuously, both when abroad and at home and she is very choice in her dress, so that the fur trimmings of her mantle are worth 100s".⁹⁹

Accusations of over-adornment brought in 1441 against Clemence Medforde, the prioress of Ankerwyke, have an even more familiar ring:

"The Prioress wears golden rings exceeding costly with divers precious stones and also girdles silvered and gilded over and silken veils, and she carries her veil too high above her forehead, so that her forehead, being entirely uncovered, can be seen of all".¹⁰⁰

A life of worldly ease prior to the entrance into the

nunnery may have been responsible for the luxury desired by many prioresses, for most nuns in the middle ages were of gentle birth.¹⁰¹ There were several reasons for the high proportion of upper class ladies in the convents. If, when they were young they could not find a husband, or their fathers could not afford the dowry that would be required by a mate of equal rank, the girls could not simply work in the fields or get a job, as the daughters of laborers in similiar situations did. The only honorable "occupation" open to them was the sisterhood. On the other hand, few girls of lower rank became sisters because they had neither the education nor the dowry which were required for admission into a convent.¹⁰²

Further information about the medieval nun is given by Eileen Power, who tells of the various reasons why girls of noble birth took up the veil. One has already been mentioned. Those who did not marry often entered the convent simply because there was nothing else to do. The majority of the girls did so for this reason, as a career rather than a vocation. Some, of course, joined because they had a religious vocation, but the youth of many of the girls (16 and under) often make a full realization of the import of their vows improbable. Some wealthy young ladies were forced into nunneries by elders desiring to be rid of them or relatives seeking to steal their inheritance, for a nun was dead in the eyes of the world and, therefore, could not fall heir to her father's estate.¹⁰³

Most nuns in the medieval convent were of the upper class, and prioresses were almost certain to be so. Advancement was

greatly aided by good birth and wealthy relatives who might contribute freely to the convent's coffers. The list of prioresses at the Benedictine abbey of Barking, for example, included two princesses and three queens.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, it is more than likely that Madame Eglentyne was well-born. Perhaps, as Coulton suggests, she was of even nobler blood than Chaucer's Knight.¹⁰⁵

Whatever might have been the family background of the head of a convent, once she attained the position of prioress, according to Eileen Power, she immediately became an important person:

Socially in all cases, and politically when their houses were large and rich, abbots and abbesses, priors and prioresses, ranked among the great folk of the country side. They enjoyed the same prestige as the lords of the neighboring manors and some extra deference on account of their religion. It was natural that the Prioress of a nunnery should be 'holden digne of reverence.'¹⁰⁶

With historical information about the probable social background of most prioresses, it becomes apparent that some of the details in the description of Madame Eglentyne may be less ironic than has often been thought--for instance the fifteen lines (126-141) that relate her genteel table manners and her dignified and courtly behavior. The Prioress had doubtless been a lady, perhaps a great lady, before she entered her convent. Therefore, she was not simply assuming good manners or dignity because of her acquired importance as a prioress. This behavior probably came to her naturally. The second class social status of St. Leonard's, the abbey linked with the Prioress, has already been noted in comparison to that of the neighboring

Barking. Still, it seems that "cheer Of court" would be quite natural to a member of a convent that, as Manly tells us, had been graced with the presence of the queen's sister for many years.

Yet it is impossible to deny that Madame Eglentyne is a worldly lady. A comparison of her portrait with the passages of complaint about the two other nuns indicates that the Prioress is guilty of some of the same violations, although to a lesser extent. From her description it also appears that she may have been one of the well-born girls who entered the convent for other than spiritual reasons. Were it not for her wimple and the mention of the divine service, Chaucer might have been describing one of the fashionable ladies of the day. The forty five line sketch contains conventional details which were often used to describe the beautiful, courtly heroines of the romance. Her nose is "tretys", her "eyen greye as glas, / Hir mouth ful smal," and naturally it is soft and red. There are echoes throughout from the medieval romances which Chaucer's audience would readily have recognized as an ironic way of describing a bride of Christ.

Madame Eglentyne also likes pretty clothes and wears a "fetys" cloak. She takes care to expose her broad forehead, and she amuses herself with lap dogs in the manner of a lady of fashion. But despite the fact that Chaucer's Prioress is not the paragon of virtue that Sister Madeleva suggests, it is also difficult to see any severe criticism in her portrait. Unlike the two nuns previously mentioned who were charged by their peers with indulging themselves in luxuries, Madame Eglentyne is neither

draped with furs nor dripping with jewels. She has only a handsome cloak and an expensive coral rosary, hung with a gold brooch.

The Prioress is worldly, but she is not, after all, a great sinner. Chaucer appears to view her with amusement rather than severity. The description of her only attempt at a spiritual act--the singing of the divine service--invokes the comic vision of her singing out with a nasal twang. And after Chaucer describes her in the terms of the courtly heroine, he adds "hardily she was not undergrowe." Apparently she dined often on roast meat, milk, and "wastel-breed."

Much of the interest in the Prioress arises out of the fact that she is neither wholly religious nor completely worldly. She is both. Although the balance appears to lie in favor of the "feminine" over the "ecclesiastical," she does sing the divine service. And her description is capped with the ambiguous motto, "Amor vincit omnia." The Prioress doubtless intends the words to refer to celestial love, for she does not appear to be aware that there is anything wrong with her dress or her behavior.

John Livingston Lowes, as usual, has the most appropriate comment upon the Prioress. He calls her description a "fourteenth-century Portrait of a Lady."¹⁰⁷ The Prioress has all the mystery and complexity of any lady that ever lived, and few ladies of literature, medieval or modern, have intrigued as many readers as Madame Eglentyne.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹John Livingston Lowes, Convention and Revolt in Poetry, 2nd ed. (London, 1938), p. 40.
- ²The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Fred N. Robinson, 2nd edition (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p. 18. I (A) 118-162. All Chaucer citations in my paper are from this edition.
- ³Lowes, p. 41.
- ⁴Eileen Power, Medieval People (New York, 1956), p. 93.
- ⁵Muriel Amanda Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the 'Canterbury Tales' (New York, 1948), p. 103.
- ⁶George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), pp. 175-6.
- ⁷Edwin J. Howard, Geoffrey Chaucer (New York, 1964), pp. 166-7.
- ⁸Sister M. Madeleva, A Lost Language and Other Essays on Chaucer (New York, 1951). p. 45.
- ⁹Madeleva, pp. 31-2.
- ¹⁰Madeleva, pp. 32-3.
- ¹¹Madeleva, pp. 34-5.
- ¹²Maynard J. Brennan, "Speaking of the Prioress," MLQ, X (December 1949), 451.
- ¹³Madeleva, pp. 35-6.
- ¹⁴Ernest P. Kuhl, "Chaucer's Madame Eglantine," MLN, LX (May 1945), 326. [Kuhl's italics and ellipsis].
- ¹⁵Edited by J. O. Halliwell, 1883.
- ¹⁶R. T. Davies, "Chaucer's Madame Eglantine," MLN, LXVII (June 1952), 400-1.
- ¹⁷Madeleva, p. 43.
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CRITICAL VIEWS OF CHAUCER'S PRIORESS

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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In seeking the key to the character of Chaucer's Prioress, scholars have carefully studied every detail of the colorful description in the forty-five lines of the General Prologue which are devoted to Madame Eglentyne. Those items which have evoked the most controversy are her smile which is "symple and coy"; her oath; her romantic name, "Eglentyne"; her French; her genteel table manners; the "smaile houndes" that she fed with milk and white bread; her "semyly" pleated wimple and "fetys" cloak; and finally the beads of "smal coral" upon which hung the "brooch of gold" that was inscribed with the words "Amor vincit omnia."

A discussion of commentary of the many facets of the Prioress' description, the subject with which this paper is concerned, is difficult in that most of the cruces in Madame Eglentyne's portrayal have been interpreted in varying shades of commendation and disapproval. Evaluations can, however, be generally divided into those interpretations which are completely favorable to the Prioress, and those which consider the portrayal of Madame Eglentyne to be in some degree ironic.

Most scholars have discovered gently irony, or at least ambiguity, in the portrait of Chaucer's Prioress. One of the most often-quoted comments about the Prioress, and one that implies an essential ambiguity in her character, is that of John Livingston Lowes, who says that "what Chaucer is depicting is the engagingly imperfect submergence of the feminine in the ecclesiastical." Lowes and many others see the Prioress as a woman who has not yet completely divorced herself from worldly

interests. Most critics who hold this view, however, have agreed that the frailties of the Prioress are to be smiled at rather than condemned.

Other commentators have found no trace of worldliness about the Prioress and interpret her as a completely religious woman, venturing out from the cloister on a strictly spiritual quest. Although many scholars have sought to interpret favorably one or two aspects of the Prioress' description, an almost complete defense of the Prioress has been written by a critic who is also a member of the religious community. In "Chaucer's Nuns," an essay which was first published in 1925, Sister Madeleva sought to answer the theories of Lowes and others. Favorably explaining each controversial point in the Prioress' description, she discovers no terrestrial desires submerged, imperfectly or otherwise in the Prioress.