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CHAUCEER'S COSTUME RHETORIC IN HIS PORTRAIT OF THE PRIORESS

*Rice University*

Ph.D. 1985

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RICE UNIVERSITY

CHAUCER'S COSTUME RHETORIC IN HIS  
PORTRAIT OF THE PRIORESS


by


LAURA F. HODGES


A THESIS SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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## ABSTRACT

### CHAUCER'S COSTUME RHETORIC IN HIS

### PORTRAIT OF THE PRIORESS

by

Laura F. Hodges

In Chaucer's General Prologue there is a complex cultural code embodied in costume signs which, when decoded, enriches our perception of his portraits. Critics have never discussed the costume signs in Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress with consideration given, simultaneously, to contemporary historical records, literature, and visual arts that inform these signs. It is the purpose of this dissertation to begin a study of the Prioress with an examination of her costume and Chaucer's costume rhetoric, an approach opposite to the traditional approach that first assesses the Prioress' character as deserving mild satire and refers to her garments and accessories as supporting evidence. In contrast, this study demonstrates that Chaucer's costume rhetoric portrays the Prioress in appropriate costume according to late fourteenth-century standards.

To this end, Chapter I refutes the criticism of

impropriety in the Prioress' headdress, providing the background for appraisal by examining convent rules, visitation records, wills, and Sumptuary Laws. In addition, an analysis of literary treatment of nuns' headdresses, with special attention to rhetorical traditions of the description of womanly beauty, traditions that parallel those of the visual arts in presenting depictions of beautiful ideals as lovely women, reveals that Chaucer's description of the Prioress' headdress conforms to these ideals.

Chapter II establishes the propriety of the Prioress' cloak with evidence from historical records, literature, and the visual arts. This cloak is bien fait, according to historical data; further analysis of the literary treatment of nuns' habits demonstrates that Chaucer follows the pattern of Le Roman de la Rose in its presentation of hypocrits whose actions belie their proper costumes. Evidence from medieval visual arts further supports the thesis of the Prioress' proper cloak.

The Prioress' rosary and brooch are analysed, in Chapter III, and found appropriate for a prioress and pilgrim, according to historical, scientific, literary, and religious data. Contemporary iconographic traditions support this interpretation of Chaucer's costume rhetoric. Chaucer's eclectic costume rhetoric places the Prioress within religious, artistic, literary, scientific, and historical

traditions; analysis of this rhetoric enables us to separate her proper exterior from her actions, thus providing kaleidoscopic views of the Prioress.

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I must acknowledge here, also, that all dating of manuscript illuminations mentioned in this dissertation derive from the catalogues and handlists of the British Library and the Bodleian Library, unless otherwise acknowledged in my notes.

The photographs in my Appendix are reproduced here with the kind permission of the British Library, the Conway Library of the Courtauld Institute of Art, James Austin, the Museum of London, and Clay Henderson.

Also, I should like to express my gratitude to my committee members whose help was, I always knew, available to me, and especially to my Chairman Dr. Jane Chance whose knowledge and encouragement were ever-present.

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## Introduction

There is, in Chaucer's General Prologue, a complex cultural code embodied in costume signs which, when decoded, enriches our perception and understanding of his portraits. Literary critics take for granted that Chaucer describes his pilgrims' clothing as part of his method of characterization, and they frequently make minor references to costume, using these descriptions to support their critical arguments for or against a character interpretation.<sup>1</sup> However, such comments, scattered among many articles and books (and most frequently in notes),<sup>2</sup> have never been collected, nor have they been systematically analyzed in an attempt to discover a general pattern or patterns in Chaucer's method of employing costume as a sign. No critic has ever discussed costume signs in order to reveal to what extent the Prioress does or does not conform in her costume to the fourteenth-century norm, with consideration given, simultaneously, to the historical records, literature, and visual arts of the period that form and inform the signs from the many traditions Chaucer incorporates in his portrait of the Prioress. These signs form a complex cultural code; Chaucer employs costume signs that derive from this contemporary cultural code, and that make up a rhetoric of costume; it is only through a

coordinated approach that these signs may be decoded and Chaucer's rhetoric of costume properly understood.

The purpose of this study is to begin this work of understanding Chaucer's rhetoric of costume by explicating the costume rhetoric in the portrait of the Prioress. To begin a study of the Prioress with a study of her costume and Chaucer's costume rhetoric is the opposite approach to that of the majority of critics who first assess the Prioress' character and generally find it to be the deserving subject of mild satire, after which, or at the same time, they refer to her garments and accessories as illustrative of and subjects of the same satire. Critics vary as to the relative impropriety of her costume, but the consensus is that the Prioress is dressed in a manner more befitting an aristocratic lady than a nun; they cite her elegance of habit as contrary to the Benedictine Rule and episcopal injunctions.<sup>3</sup> A small group of critics who interpret the Prioress in the Marian tradition defend her aristocratic dress as being in accordance with the principles of this tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to either of these points of view, this dissertation will offer evidence to support the thesis that, as presented in Chaucer's costume rhetoric, the costume of the Prioress is most probably appropriate according to conventual rule and general custom of the medieval period and

is illustrative of her status as nun, Prioress, and lady; it exemplifies her social class, her interest in propriety, her profession of the contemplative life, and the virtues associated with it as part of the Marian tradition. That this is so needs saying because her costume is so often used as part of an argument evaluating her character. Clearly, the length of Chaucer's description of her appearance indicates its importance and just as clearly, if it is to be used as evidence of Madame Eglentyne's character, it is important to read Chaucer's costume rhetoric as objectively as possible.

A critical approach which begins with an analysis of costume based on historical, literary, and artistic evidence presumes that we examine how each costume sign operates within the cultural code to define a personage of the General Prologue, the Prioress, the pilgrim, Madame Eglentyne.<sup>5</sup> According to Arnold Williams' definitions, Chaucer's pilgrims are personations, "a personage whose name indicates his nature." A personation "begins as a conceptual entity, some sort of abstraction," as opposed to figurations who "begin as specific individuals, historical, mythological, legendary, or even fictional"; however, Williams states that "Each kind of personage . . . we may consider as points along a line from abstract to concrete for personations, from concrete to abstract for figurations."<sup>6</sup> Williams also speaks of "generic"

characters in his discussion of personations. Included in this category are the dreamer, the lover, and the pilgrim which is the generic figure that is important to this study. Chaucer's pilgrims are not generic characters, however, precisely because they are defined by signs, signals, and structures in such a way that each portrait is both individual as well as general, as is indicated in literary criticism of the General Prologue which includes both studies of literary type antecedents and historical persons. Although sign, signal, and structure tend to fuse in actual practice, it is the sign, "something which belongs to the personage, his appearance, his clothing, the articles he carries or uses,"<sup>7</sup> that we will consider as the basic unit of Chaucer's rhetoric of costume. Such basic units associated in one portrait create "a temporary but signifying association, analogous to the one uniting the words of a sentence,"<sup>8</sup> as Roland Barthes posits in his "garment system." Similarly, a structure of such "signifying associations" makes up rhetoric. Thus, we may posit that both Chaucer's General Prologue and each portrait within it contain such a structure, a structure which derives from both artistic and socio-economic traditions.

We may gain a better understanding of such a structure of "signifying associations" from a brief survey of the garment metaphors ordinarily employed in Chaucer's day.



These metaphors find a major source in the writing of Augustine who wrote of the body as the vestment of the soul.<sup>9</sup> He describes an inner and outer vestment in his Sermon 37 on the strong woman of Proverbs XXXI, 10-31, which Jean Pépin describes:

Elle travaille de ses mains "la laine et le lin" (XXXI. 13); entendez par là, commente Augustin, les actions extérieures et les dispositions de l'esprit; car l'ordre de nos vêtements veut que ceux de lin soient endessous, ceux de laine en-dessus; or, toute action de la chair est perceptible à chacun, alors que toute démarche de l'esprit demeure secrète.<sup>10</sup>

Augustine also speaks of the process by which the outer garment is divested through purification of the inner,<sup>11</sup> and of "tunics of skin" which represent that animal mortality which was the result of Adam and Eve's sin.<sup>12</sup> Pépin conveniently summarizes a number of other garment metaphors which appear in Augustine's writing: Adam and Eve's vestments of innocence before the fall, the Prodigal Son's vestment of repentance, the wedding vestment of the parable, the Christ-as-vestment that one puts on, and the vestment of immortality. He also discusses the manner in which baptism is discussed in garment metaphors: the person to be baptised is undressed of his "habits"--a particularly apt term in French, meaning behavior and dress at the same time--which signifies the putting off of the old man and the return to that innocence that existed before original sin; after

baptism, a white garment is donned to represent the putting on of the new man, the recovery of the purity of the soul, the white vestment of the transfigured Christ, the glory of the martyrs after their death, and the resurrection of the body.<sup>13</sup>

These garment metaphors became part of the exegetical tradition, and part of the literary tradition on which Chaucer drew. There is ample evidence, in Chaucer's Clerk's Tale, Wife of Bath's Tale, and others, that he was familiar with these metaphors.<sup>14</sup> However, he dramatizes the metaphors, rather than stating them explicitly as the Pearl poet, Langland, Wyclif, and Dante do. Possibly as a consequence, critics do not discuss the clothing of the pilgrims in the General Prologue in the light of these metaphors. However, a brief glance at these metaphors in the works of other poets provides a greater appreciation of the same ideas when we meet them in Chaucer's dramatizations.

Certain literary traditions derived from patristic exegesis are especially appropriate for this examination of clothing metaphors. One such idea expressed metaphorically is that each soul is clothed according to and in its spiritual health, clannes, or, conversely, in filthiness, depending on the soul's "habits" as discussed above. Spiritual filthiness is expressed in clothing metaphors such as the wearing of torn hats or a harlot's hood. An example

of this metaphor may be seen in the following excerpt from  
Cleanness, by the Pearl Poet:

For wonder wroth is the wyy that wroght alle thinges  
 Wyth the freke that in fylthe folwes hym after,  
 As renkes of relygious that reden and syngen  
 And aprochen to hys presens, and prestes arn called.

Thay teen unto his temmple and temen to hymselfen;  
 Reken with reverence thay rychen his auter;  
 Thay hondel ther his aune body, and usen hit bothe.  
 If thay in clannes be clos, thay cleche gret mede,

Bot if they conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont,  
 As be honest utwyth and inwith alle fylthes,  
 Then ar thay synful hemself, and sulped altogeder  
 Bothe God and his gere, and hym to greme cachem. . . .

As so says, to that syght seche schal he never  
 That any unclannesse has one, auwhere abowte;  
 For he that flemus uch fylthe fer fro his hert  
 May not byde that burre, that hit his body neghe.

Forthy hyy not to heven in hateres totorne,  
 Ne in the harlates hod and handes unwaschen.  
 For what urthly hathel that hygh honour haldes  
 Wolde lyke if a ladde com lytherly attyred,

When he were sette solempnely in a sete ryche,  
 Abof dukes on dece, with dayntys served?<sup>15</sup>

Another metaphor that works here, and one that is most important to an understanding of costume in the portrait of the Prioress, is that of false vestments. Some hypocritical priests who celebrate Mass wear on their bodies the vestments that are holy, but their souls are clothed in filth; therefore, their vestments are false and convey a message that is not true to those who see them. This metaphor is made explicit in Langland's Piers the Ploughman, as may clearly be seen in his many comments on friars in clothing of

false status, meaning friars who preach falsely while wearing a holy garment (Prologue). Conversely, there exists another metaphor that equates the outer appearance of real garments with the inner condition of the soul; this metaphor in its positive form is exemplified by the Pearl Maiden in The Pearl, and in its negative form by Piers Ploughman's portrait of Haukyn in which Haukyn's bad works or sins are manifest in his dirty and torn clothes. In another metaphor, good works are called the clothing of the soul; one may approach God without fear in such clothing. In a variation on the theme of good works as clothing for the soul, Iohannes Wyclif speaks of caritas as a virtue:

his vertu cloþis man at domus-day wiþ  
 bride-cloþis, & þis cloþe may neuere be lost  
 in þis world ne in þe toþure. for noman may  
 come to heuene but he haue þis cloþinge, ne  
 no man may haue þis clothe, but if he come to  
 heuen.<sup>16</sup>

In the context of garment metaphors, the generic pilgrim's costume is doubly interesting as metaphorically described in "The passionate mans Pilgrimage, Supposed to be Written by One at the Point of Death," a poem by Sir Walter Raleigh:<sup>17</sup>

GIVE me my Scallop shell of quiet,  
 My staffe of Faith to walke vpon;  
 My Scrip of Ioy, immortall diet  
 My bottle of saluation;  
 My Gown of Glory hopes true gage,  
 And then Ile take my pilgrimage.

Among the many metaphors included in this poem is that of the

"gown of glory," which, in this poem, appears to mean an appropriate and humble pilgrim's costume, that costume in which the speaker will make his pilgrimage, and in which he will be an aspirant to heavenly glory. In his combination of the literal elements of pilgrim's weeds with metaphors, especially in his evocation of the "gown of glory," Raleigh's poem describes, at one time, that attire in which a pilgrim might go on pilgrimage, and the spiritual costume which he hoped to achieve. The "gown of glory" metaphor is treated differently in Dante's The Divine Comedy. Moreover, his poetic treatment serves both to highlight and illuminate the idea behind Raleigh's "gown of glory." Dante gives Solomon the words which explain such a gown:

"As long as the feast of Paradise shall last,  
so long our love shall radiate this vesture  
about us. Its brightness answers to our  
ardour, the ardour to our vision, and that is  
in the measure each has of grace beyond his  
merit. When the flesh, glorified and holy,  
shall be put on again, our person shall be  
more acceptable for being all complete, so  
that the light freely granted to us by the  
Supreme Goodness shall increase, light which  
fits us to see Him; from that must vision  
increase, the ardour increase that is kindled  
by it, the radiance increase which comes from  
that. But like a coal that gives flame and  
with its white glow outshines it so that its  
own appearance is preserved, so this  
effulgence that now surrounds us will be  
surpassed in brightness by the flesh which the  
earth still covers."<sup>18</sup>

In this canto, as Sinclair points out, each soul is called a splendour, splendor, and the brightness of each soul is a

reflection of God's light, which Dante describes as "the glory of Him who moves all things."<sup>19</sup> Later in the Paradiso, St. Peter Damian explains his own gown of glory:

"A divine light is focused upon me, piercing through this in which I am embosomed, whose virtue, joined with my own vision, raises me so far above myself that I see the Supreme Essence from which it is drawn. From this comes the gladness with which I am aflame; for to my sight, in the measure of its clearness, I match the clearness of my flame."<sup>20</sup>

And finally, Dante the pilgrim describes the experience of seeing the glorified person of Christ: "through the living light the shining substance showed so bright in my eyes that they could not bear it."<sup>21</sup> Here we have the gown of glory and the source of all gowns of glory, the resurrected Christ, an image that Sinclair describes as "Christ seen in a flash, His glorified human person gleaming through the glory of His soul."<sup>22</sup>

Although his pilgrims are not generic, Chaucer's rhetoric of costume demonstrates that he was well aware of the construct, the generic pilgrim; it sets a standard of proper costume and is a construct that carries implications for the propriety of the Prioress' costume. Sidney Heath calls the historical model for such a generic the "professional pilgrim," and he describes his standard costume in detail. It consisted of

a long, coarse, russet gown, with large sleeves, sometimes patched with crosses, a leather belt round the shoulders or loins,

with a bowl, bag and scrip suspended from it, a large round hat decorated with scallop-shells, or small leaden images of the Virgin and saints; a rosary of large beads, hung round the neck or arm, and a long walking staff (the bourdon), hooked like a crosier, or furnished near the top with a hollow ball, or balls, which<sup>23</sup> were sometimes used as a musical instrument.

The Sarum Missal describes the "Blessing of Scrip and Staff" which was customary for religious pilgrims to acquire before setting out. After sprinkling the scrip with holy water, the priest places it around the pilgrim's neck and says, "'In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ receive this scrip, the habit of thy pilgrimage that after due chastisement thou mayest be found worthy to reach in safety the Shrine of the Saints to which thou desirest to go: and after the accomplishment of thy journey thou mayst return to us in health.'" Then the pilgrim receives his staff and, if bound for Jerusalem, a garment with a cross on it that has been sprinkled with holy water.<sup>24</sup> This costume for the generic pilgrim was commonly called "pilgrim's weedes," as may be seen in the very old ballad "Friar of Orders Gray."<sup>25</sup> Pilgrims wore these weeds for their journey and went directly to their chosen shrine, still wearing pilgrim's weeds, as indicated in John Urry's published continuation of the Canterbury Tales, written soon after Chaucer's time. Shortly after visiting the shrine of St. Thomas, according to this account, Chaucer's pilgrims bought "signs of Canterbury brooches" (such as the pilgrim's sign representing St. Thomas mounted on horseback now in the

British Museum),<sup>26</sup> after which they returned to the Chequer, an inn, for dinner. After a meal they changed clothes and went out to enjoy themselves, "eche man as hym lest," until time for the evening meal.<sup>27</sup> Apparently, this is the first change of garments for the pilgrims since their pilgrimage began.

Chaucer was surely aware that the barefooted ascetic pilgrim or the pilgrim fulfilling an assigned penance dressed very humbly. Even the more usual and voluntary pilgrim, who rode horseback and did not beg for food, maintained some aspects of this traditional costume,<sup>28</sup> as does the Prioress. It is important to understand that there existed at the same time these two types of pilgrim and that the pilgrims of the General Prologue belong more properly to this second group. However, the costume of the generic pilgrim is that of the first, the ascetic or enforced penitentiary pilgrim.

Chaucer's knowledge of the norm for pilgrim attire, pilgrim's weeds, is indicated in his portraits in the General Prologue, although he describes no single one of his pilgrims as wearing the complete costume. Still, there are vestiges of the norm scattered among his portraits: the shipman wears a "gowne of faldyng to the knee" (391), clothing which may have been his ordinary attire as well. Falding, also called frieze (OED), was a coarse woollen cloth which required minimum skill in weaving.<sup>29</sup> Such a cloth would have been



suitable for peasant wear generally, as is the "coarse russet" mentioned by Heath. Russet, "a coarse homespun woollen cloth of a reddish-brown, grey or neutral colour, [was] formerly used for the dress of peasants and country-folk" (OED).<sup>30</sup> Proper pilgrim's weeds made of these fabrics would indeed be a humble costume and a humbling one when worn by an affluent pilgrim.

The "leather belt round the shoulders or loins," of Heath's description, finds its counterpart in the Yeoman's belt, in which he tucks his arrows (105), or in his green "bawdryk" which holds his horn (116), although a proper pilgrim's belt supports the bowl and scrip. Other possible corollaries might be the Guildsmen's girdles and pouches (368), and the Franklin's white girdle with silk gipser (357-358); however, both of these bespeak a sumptuousness unsuitable to pilgrim's weeds. The pilgrim's scrip appears in the Pardoner's portrait. Chaucer tells us that he "trussed up" his hood "in his walet" (680-681), and wallet is another name for scrip (OED). The one of Chaucer's characters whom we know to be an experienced pilgrim, the Wife of Bath, wears "an hat / As brood as is a bokeler or a targe" (470-471), although Chaucer does not tell us that it is decorated with scallop-shells such as the hat Heath describes. However, pilgrims' signs and accessories are not missing elsewhere--the Pardoner's cap has a vernicle sewn on

it (685); the Yeman wears a silver St. Christopher medal on his breast (115); and the Prioress, appropriately, carries rosary beads.

Since they ride horseback, none of Chaucer's pilgrims carries the walking staff; nevertheless, there is a bourdon in the General Prologue--the "stif bourdoun" which the Somoner bears to the Pardoner's secular love song (672-673). Heath describes two kinds of bourdons, one of which has a "hollow ball, or balls, which were sometimes used as a musical instrument." This idea of music is alive in Chaucer's description, as the bourdon which the Summoner bears is glossed as "ground melody,"<sup>31</sup> although the line is also usually understood to contain a sexual pun. If there is a pun here, it is a highly sophisticated one, combining phallic imagery, music terminology, and the pilgrim's weeds. A second, but unambiguous, walking staff mentioned in the General Prologue is that carried by the Parson of a Town when he visited his parishioners: "Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf" (495). Here we see the visible sign of the Parson's everyday pilgrimage; although we do not know that he brings his staff with him to Canterbury. Still, we may envision his staff as being like the first one Heath describes, "hooked like a crosier," the staff of the good shepherd Chaucer tells us the Parson is (514).

Thus, the costume of pilgrim's weeds of the generic

pilgrim is visibly present in the General Prologue, and it is the basic structure upon which Chaucer's costume rhetoric depends and the standard by which each pilgrim's costume may be evaluated, including that of the Prioress. Although "the intellectual or cognitive cell of the costume, its basic element, is the sign,"<sup>32</sup> when Chaucer mentions an item of clothing, it has both an individual connotation and a meaning that is derived from comparison with pilgrim's weeds; as Barthes says of his garment system, "clothing always draws on costume." In Barthes' terms, clothing is speech, and costume is language. He defines speech in his garment system as the "individual way of wearing (size of the garment, degree of cleanliness or wear, personal quirks, free association of pieces)"; language is "the dialectic which unites . . . costume," i.e., "the oppositions of pieces, parts of garment and 'details', the variation of which entails a change in meaning," plus "the rules which govern the association of the pieces among themselves."<sup>33</sup> That Chaucer understood these principles is manifest in his careful distribution of the signs of the pilgrim's weeds throughout the General Prologue, a continual rhetorical reminder to his audience that the clothing signs of the personations which he describes might be compared to the generic.

The socio-economic implications incorporated in the costume rhetoric of the Prioress' portrait compose another

important part of the cultural code present in the General Prologue. Among medieval authors, Geoffrey Chaucer was singularly fitted to include contemporary socio-economic significations in his rhetoric of costume, as he does in his description of Madame Eglentyne. He was controller of the customs and subsidy of wool, hides, and woolfells from June 12, 1374 to December, 1386, and was controller of the petty customs from April, 20, 1382 to the end of 1386, in the port of London. For the second office he had a deputy, but for the first, it was necessary that he keep rolls with his own hand.<sup>34</sup> Since his father, also, had been a collector of export duties on woolen cloths from the ports of Southampton, Chichester, Seaford, Shoreham, and Portsmouth<sup>35</sup> and we know that Chaucer had first-hand experience with cloth trade imports and exports, it is reasonable to assume that Chaucer knew fabrics and their monetary value.

He would have also known the social value of different kinds of fabrics from two perspectives (both of which provide insights into his rhetoric of costume in the Prioress' portrait, as will be discussed later): 1) The woolen and cloth industry of Chaucer's time was extensive, and fabrics of all kinds were made to specifications set by law. For example, "cloths called monks' cloths" were required to be at least twelve yards long and five quarters in breadth. Cloths called canon cloths must be five yards long and seven

quarters wide. These cloths were made specifically for the use of monks and canons, but they came in various qualities which were also specified by law.<sup>36</sup> 2) In addition, sumptuary laws attempted to regulate which fabrics could be worn according to the income of the wearer.

The fact is that these sumptuary laws were practically unenforceable,<sup>37</sup> but they are pertinent to this study, as background information, because they describe the social distinctions and attitudes, in terms of clothing, that were current among all classes of people in England at the time of Chaucer's writing.<sup>38</sup> The first sumptuary law passed in England relating to dress, enacted by Parliament in March of 1337, reveals clearly that the members of parliament equated the right to dress sumptuously with social status, and that, of course, is not surprising. However, what is both surprising and equally clear is that, in this law and in later ones, Parliament equates social status with income, not with birth when the two are not in agreement.

The sumptuary legislation of 1337, 1362 (repealed 1363-1364), 1378-1379 (proposed but not passed), and much later, in the third year of Edward IV's reign, illustrates socio-economic attitudes with which Chaucer would certainly have been familiar. Granting this and recalling his familiarity with cloth imports and exports, we must assume that when Chaucer specified the fabric worn by a pilgrim, he

knew precisely what the fabric signified to his listening or reading public, and he expected such signs to be interpreted according to the cultural code of his time. In addition, when he fails to specify fabric of a particular kind, he implies that there is nothing remarkable in the costume he sees, an implication that is pertinent to our understanding of the Prioress' costume.

It is only sensible that someone should try to reassemble the disparate traditions described above. That it will never be possible to completely regain the understanding of Chaucer's original audience is a given of such a task. Still, to make a coordinated approach, considering artistic and socio-economic implications of Chaucer's pilgrims' clothing as a sign, is the task I propose for myself, beginning with the portrait of the Prioress in this study. I plan to analyse this portrait in order to uncover, if possible, the intricacy of Chaucer's pattern of using clothing as a sign of character, an intricacy which remains unexplored.

Arnold Williams suggests that the study of allegory is most fruitfully pursued through "an examination of the elements which make up the total piece, [with attention given] to its personages, the signs that define them, the signals that point the meaning of their actions, the structures that provide unity."<sup>39</sup> Costume works in each of

these ways in Chaucer's portrait of Madame Eglentyne, but it is the signs that are the basic keys to his sophisticated pattern. As Roland Barthes says, "Fashion clothes (as written about) are the language at the level of vestimentary communication and speech at the level of verbal communication."<sup>40</sup> As he posits an "alimentary rhetoric," for the food system, I posit a costume rhetoric in Chaucer's portraits, from which that of the Prioress will serve as an example. I propose, in my dissertation, to decode Chaucer's costume signs in this portrait in order to be able to read the language, the cultural code, and finally, to properly appreciate his rhetoric.

We are ready now to consider the general context in which we may read the implications of Chaucer's costume rhetoric in his portrait of the Prioress. The question we must answer is: how would Chaucer's fourteenth-century audience have perceived the Prioress in this description? The probability is that they would have found her dress, table manners,<sup>41</sup> singing of the divine service, and pronunciation of French all proper according to English social and religious practices of the day, and her beauty consistent with both rhetorical and visual arts presentations of womanly and spiritual beauty.<sup>42</sup> That Chaucer draws a detailed picture of her lovely and probably proper habit, symbolic of spiritual cleanness, spiritual and physical

chastity, sets up a contrast with his portrayal of her human potentia for sin. His rhetoric continually suggests this potentia even while he describes Madame Eglentyne's proper religious habit.

The Prioress' table manners serve to illuminate this potentia both because they emphasize her interest in propriety and because they belong to a second structure that interacts with that of costume. In this context, we note Kevin Kiernan's comments on Chaucer's "use of articles of clothing to highlight parts of the body." He continues, commenting on the order of the description which "descends and reverts, from mouth to nose to mouth to fingers to breast to mouth. Other words, 'ooth,' 'soong,' 'spak,' 'dronken,' keep the reader's attention focused on the mouth," and on her dainty eating.<sup>43</sup> Here we find an apt description of Chaucer's method that amounts to literary sleight of hand: he emphasizes Madame Eglentyne's table manners, and behind that, her eating; he emphasizes her headdress, and behind that, her broad forehead which, in turn, emphasizes and is consistent with her large stature; he emphasizes her rosary, and through that, her arm which reaches after her meat in a seemly fashion. Chaucer does indeed, as Kiernan says, use costume to take the place of parts of the body, but it is not in order to describe a beautiful woman, nor to describe "an unusually large, possibly fat, person,"<sup>44</sup> but, instead, to



describe the potential for gluttony and obesity. The order of the entire description, as well as the diction, which Kiernan describes so well, serves to emphasize the Prioress' mouth, as we shall see. If the Prioress is less than perfect, here is the feature which indicates the potential for that imperfection which is the object of Chaucer's focus.

Chaucer's costume rhetoric supports this choice of focus and it does so in a way that reveals Chaucer's sophistication. He follows, and yet does not follow literary tradition. As will be discussed in depth in Chapter II, literature of his and earlier periods contains descriptions of pious nuns who are perfect in habit and habits, and also descriptions of worldly nuns who wear luxurious garments, or wish to. This practice of luxuria is sometimes encapsulated in the phrases "wide" or "full habits" and "large robes." An excerpt from Lydgate's The Temple of Glas, which mentions nuns "In wide copis perfeccion to feine," is a case in point. However, Chaucer does not portray Madame Eglentyne in either of these two manners in which the outer appearance equals the inner truth of character. If she wears large robes, it is because she is "nat undergrowe" (156), an oh-so-delicate suggestion of the potential for the largeness that is obesity which underscores the fact of her reaching for meat, however daintily, and hints at the ever-present

temptation of gluttony,<sup>45</sup> at the same time it recognizes the correctness of her manners. That this "nat undergrowe" stature is also consistent with rhetorical and sculptural portrayals of personified virtues, all of whom have larger-than-life stature, in no way detracts from the double vision we gain here; in fact, such vision is enhanced since the virtues were so frequently portrayed in the company of their opposite vice.

Chaucer's practice in the portrait of his Prioress improves, because it is more subtle, on that of the authors and illuminators of Le Roman de la Rose who achieve a similar effect by portraying Pope-Holiness,<sup>46</sup> False Seeming, and Constrained Abstinence (fig. 1) in religious habits and pious accessories which are the signs of spiritual cleanness, while demonstrating through their actions that no such cleanness exists within their souls; elements of all three characters may be identified in Chaucer's description of his Prioress, and his method of portraiture is illuminated by an understanding of that employed in Le Roman de la Rose. The technique is made explicit in False Seeming's statements:

I am lodged where I think that I am better  
hidden. The safest hiding place is under the  
most humble garment. . . . I have in mind the  
false religious, the malicious criminals who  
want to wear the habit but do not want to  
subdue their hearts. (11011-11022)

He excludes the truly religious from his condemnation and states that "I can indeed assume their habit, but I would

rather let myself be hanged than desert my main business,  
 whatever face I put on it" (11033-11036). Further, he lives  
 with the worldly who

pretend to be poor, and they live on good,  
 delicious morsels of food and drink costly  
 wines. . . . To the world they present an  
 argument in which there is a shameful  
 conclusion: this man has the robe of religion;  
 therefore he is religious. This argument is  
 specious, nor worth a knife of privet; the  
 habit does not make the monk. (11044-11058)

We find the crux of his argument in his statement,

Certainly by my habit you would never know  
 with what people I dwell, any more than you  
 would from my words, no matter how simple and  
 gentle they were. You should look at actions  
 if your eyes have not been put out; for if  
 people do something other than what they say,  
 they are certainly tricking you, whatever  
 robes they have or whatever estate they  
 occupy, clerical or lay, man or woman, lord,  
 sergeant, servant, or lady. (11006-11082)

And the idea is reiterated as False Seeming says, "I prefer  
 to pray in front of people and cover my foxlike nature under  
 a cloak of pope-holiness" (11522-11524).

Thus, in Le Roman de la Rose we see that the actions of  
 the characters listed above speak and contradict those ideals  
 expressed by their pious and proper appearances. Such a  
 method presupposes that the costumes described by the author  
 will be appropriate, and with this in mind, indeed, not much  
 attention is wasted on them: Pope-Holiness "was shod and  
 clothed as if she were a nun. In her hand she held a  
 psalter." False Seeming wears many disguises (11202-11222),

none of which are described, although he tells us, "I am one of Antichrist's boys, one of the thieves of whom it is written that they have the garment of saintliness and live in pretense" (11713-11716), and "I wear a simple robe, under which I have worked many a great evil. . . . if I have a simple, demure face, do you think that I may cease doing evil?" (12999-12004). He wears a "simple robe," not "large robes" which would reveal his worldliness; his is an apt disguise. For this same reason, Constrained Abstinence dons the costume of the pious pilgrim (fig. 1):

Tantost Abstinence Contrainte  
 Vest une robe cameline,  
 Et s'atorne comme beguine,  
 Et ot un large quevrechief  
 Et d'un blanc drap covert le chief.  
 Son psaltier mie n'oublia,  
 Unes patenostres y a  
 A un blanc las de fil pendues. (12044-12051)

[Constrained Abstinence straightway put on a robe of cameline and fixed herself up as a Beguine; she covered her head with a large kerchief and a white cloth, and she did not forget her psalter. She had paternosters hanging on a white thread-lace.]

In complement to this costume, Constrained Abstinence carries two more signs of the professional pilgrim--the bourdon and wallet; however, they are allegorically characterized as a stick of larceny and a bag full of cares (12077-12030).

Significantly, Constrained Abstinence is described as follows:

I would describe her as a woman of fine stature, but a little pale of face. She

resembled, the dirty bitch, the horse in the  
 Apocalypse that signified the wicked people,  
 pale and stained with hypocrisy.  
 (12065-12070)

Chaucer achieves a more subtle approach than the one above in his depiction of Madame Eglentyne's "fair" forehead and his suggestion of her large stature in his statement that "hardily, she was nat undergrowe," even though his portrait of her is reminiscent of Constrained Abstinence's "pale" face and "fine stature." We note that Chaucer buttresses the idea of the Prioress' stature with his diction. His traductio, the repetition of "ful" eleven times,<sup>47</sup> emphasizes this point. That he does so may attest to "The extreme degree to which the prioress held various qualities, attitudes, and habits," as Roger P. Parr states. Nevertheless, it also attests to what Chaucer emphasizes: her fullness. The Prioress' smiling is "ful symple and coy"; her singing is done "ful weel" and entuned "ful semely"; her French is spoken "ful faire and fetisly"; "In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest"; she reaches after her meat in a "ful semely" manner; she is "ful pleasaunt" of port; her wimple is "ful semely" pinched; her mouth "ful smal"; her cloak "ful fetys"; and the gold of her brooch "ful sheene." Chaucer couples this repetition with other traductio of "wel" and "so," and with such expressions of extremes as "greateste," "peyned," "soore," "sikerly," "hardily," and the final "omnia" of her motto.

Certainly, Chaucer gives full expression to the fullness, the omnia, of this personage. He is too sophisticated to resort to stating that she wore a wide habit. This metaphor was a blatant one, as blatant as the repeated authorial explanations for the hypocritical character images in Le Roman de la Rose. Instead Chaucer arranges that we may see, behind her proper singing of the service, proper Stratford at Bowe French, proper table and social manners, and proper pity and charity (however inappropriately bestowed), that the "nat undergrowe" Madame Eglentyne, perhaps, eats more than she should. If we must find fault with her, let us do so where Chaucer gives us overt evidence. She eats meat on pilgrimage--the very place where penance would be appropriate. This fact, plus Chaucer's tractio and the order of his description which begins with her mouth, circles about her person, and ends with the rosary over her arm, emphasizing the arm which reached so daintily, all support this idea. The Prioress' probably proper habit may also be "wide" or long but not because it is made of more fabric than is needful. And wearing it, she may well be feigning perfection, to use Lydgate's phrase, just as Constrained Abstinence, described in the text and shown in manuscript illuminations of Le Roman de la Rose, feigns perfection in her proper nun's habit and pilgrim accessories.<sup>48</sup> But Chaucer the pilgrim, holding the

Prioress "digne of reverence," does not say so; he literally circles the issue. Nevertheless, Chaucer the poet, who may well have read this portrait aloud, should have been able to make this point verbally, as he repeated "ful," with all due emphasis. The suggestion of sinful potentia is omnipresent; it is not so much the woman who is not submerged in the nun, as it is the human nature which is everpresent beneath all aspirations to perfection and which is not subdued by religious garb.

That Gluttony is the focus of Chaucer's suggestive rhetoric is further supported by the other two interesting symbols in this portrait: the mouse, and the small hounds.<sup>49</sup> The first serves to bring out the fact of the Prioress' abundant pity and tears; the second to illustrate her "charity." However, the mouse, besides substituting, in the standard way, for sin beneath the feet of a saint in the illumination of St. Gertrude, in B.M. MS. Harley 2962, Horae beatae Virginis cum calendario, orationibus ad sanctos & aliis, fol. 41 (fig. 2), is also more specifically the symbol of gluttony.<sup>50</sup> Considering the two symbols together and in the context of a discussion of gluttony, we find that both are concerned with the consumption of food. The small hounds<sup>51</sup> kept by the Prioress are indeed well-fed on roasted meat, milk and wastel-bread, and the implication is clear that she herself regularly dines this well if not better.

The idea that the Prioress overeats from time to time is encouraged in Chaucer's choice of diction. That "raughte" may be translated to mean the Prioress reached after [for] meat is the standard interpretation, but it might equally mean that she belched after meat. This interpretation is based on the etymological possibility that either bræcan or ræcan might be the source for "raughte."<sup>52</sup> Again we experience the double vision which recognizes correct manners and behind them the potential for sin encapsulated in the possible belch of surfeit. In addition, if there is enough milk to spare for the feeding of hounds in Madame Eglentyne's Priory, there is almost the "plenty" of milk that is mentioned in the satirical "Order of Fair Ease," to be discussed in Chapter II.<sup>53</sup> But even this image pales beside the idea that the Prioress weeps when a mouse is trapped, killed, or injured. On a literal level, the image of the Prioress weeping over a mouse indicates that her husbandry of Priory resources is exceptionally poor, while on a metaphorical level such an image suggests that she could not bear to have the sin of gluttony exorcized in her Priory, perhaps in herself.<sup>54</sup>

Additional evidence supporting the thesis that in describing her actions Chaucer portrays the Prioress' potentia for gluttony may be found in medieval illuminations of the vice and its opposite virtue, temperance.



Illuminators frequently depict personifications of both temperance and gluttony in a scene with table and food. In the early fourteenth-century B.M. MS. 28,162, fol. 4v (fig. 3), Temperance, in the upper righthand quadrant, instructs a woman in the practice of eating moderately. The table holds a platter containing a fish; a decorously kneeling servant holds a pitcher and offers a goblet. In this same copy of Somme le Roi, fol. 10v, upper right quadrant, we find Gluttony in the figure of a man who sits to eat while he still wears his hood; a woman touches the hood as if to remove it. The man holds a bowl under his chin with his right hand. Wavey lines from mouth to bowl depict steam or dribbling gravy, or perhaps even vomit. At the same time, his left hand reaches for and holds the tail of a fish in a bowl. His table contains two bowls of fish as well as pitcher, knives, and a plate which a servant touches. In the lower register of this same folio, a banqueting scene with guests holding their cups also shows a dog in front of the table stealing a fish from a platter, indicating the kind of waste, or animalistic behavior, that occurs when Sobriety (depicted in the upper lefthand corner of the folio) is abandoned. In a similar vein, Temperance is depicted instructing a woman at table in B.M. MS. Royal 19Cii, fol. 49. The table is set with a plate of fish, covered pitcher, and knife before the woman receiving instruction. In front

of the table, Gluttony is depicted kneeling and drinking from a cup. The contrast between Gluttony's actions here and those of the decorous servant, of fol. 4v in Somme le Roi mentioned above, underscores the message of this illumination. Gluttony drinking from a bowl is also portrayed in Bodleian Library MS. Douce 104, fol. 29, which illustrates l. 349 of a circa 1427 copy of Piers Ploughman.<sup>55</sup> That Chaucer depicts the Prioress in the process of eating and drinking parallels common presentations of Gluttony, while at the same time, he draws attention to her delicate table manners. However, as R. F. Yeager points out, one of the branches of gluttony is "'Delicacie' in eating," as is swearing, both of which come under the heading of sins of the mouth in the moral tradition of Somme le Roi, Avenbite of Inwit, Pricke of Conscience, and Handlyng Synne.<sup>56</sup>

It follows, then, that in the Augustinian and metaphorical sense, the Prioress will be clothed spiritually in her deeds, her habits, her behavior, which is less than perfect. John Wyclif expresses this idea succinctly:

þis vertu [charity] cloþis man at domus-day  
 wiþ bride-cloþis, & þis cloþe may neuere be  
 lost in þis world ne in þe toþure. ffor noman  
 may come to heuene but he haue þis cloþinge,  
 ne no man may haue þis clothe, but if he come  
 to heuen; & so men þat schulen be dampned han  
 but feyned charity. But lyue wele after  
 goddis lawe & hope to haue þis loue, for no  
 man schal knowe ne trowe to haue it but if god  
 wole telle him priueyly.

and so freris, þat louen more her habite

þat þei han ordeyned hem þan þe cloþe of  
 charite þat god haþ schapen his sones, þen  
 yuel disposid to haue þis cloþe of charite;  
 Siþ þer loue is turned amys to charge more  
 here habite, to lesyn it or leeuene it, to  
 cloþe þerwiþ þer bodye, þan to lese þis  
 charity to cloþe þer-wiþ þer soule. . . .<sup>57</sup> and  
 þis is open heresie by many kyn skylles.

As we can see, Madame Eglentyne's social demeanor and religious habit may be spotless, but she will be scantily clad in her charitable actions, since the poor should be the recipients of the meat, milk, and bread which she bestows on the hounds and probably, because of her pity, to the mice as well. The warning in Matthew 23: 25-26 is especially appropriate to the Prioress as we recall her conscientious treatment of the pilgrims' communal cup: "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but within you are full of rapine and uncleanness."<sup>58</sup> Clearly the uncleanness or cupiditas focused on in this portrait is the potential for gluttony and not that of pride in dress as described in the moral of the "Tale of the Knight and Monk who loved New Fashions":

But þe clerk was wode al gate  
 To were a cloþe aþens hys state.  
 here now 3e se þat god ys wroth  
 with hem þat dysgyse here cloþe. (3393-3396)<sup>59</sup>

We should also note the author's further statement on pride in dress:

what sey 3e men of ladyys pryde  
 þat gone traylyng ouer syde:  
 3yf a lady were ryghtly shreue,

Better hyt were yn almes 3eue;  
 To soule helpe hyt my3t do bote,  
 þat trayleþ lowe vndyr þe fote. (3439-3444)<sup>60</sup>

Clearly, the question of the proper bestowal of alms to the poor points again to the need for "soule helpe," in order to gain that proper gown of glory spun of charitable heart and deeds which clothes the righteous on the day of Judgement. Although Peter S. Taitt did not grant the Prioress a proper habit, we must agree with his statement that "Chaucer has successfully juxtaposed the ideal and the real by details of dress and behaviour."<sup>61</sup> In Madame Eglentyne's portrait, we see both the ideal and its opposite, the means by which it may be corrupted: a woman lovely in appropriate nun's habit, with a taste for the luxury of meat.

Having discussed the context or background against which we may view the Prioress' costume, we turn now to a consideration of the evidence for the thesis of this work that the costume worn by Madame Eglentyne is appropriate. It is in an attempt to recapture, as much as is possible, an understanding of the late fourteenth-century cultural code that I have chosen to collect and present data from historical documents and the visual arts, as well as literature in this study and to organize it whenever possible by means of comparisons and contrasts, in an effort to determine how we should perceive the Prioress' costume. The

questions these chapters will pose are 1) what light can these facts shed on individual garments or accessories of the Prioress' costume? 2) what insight can this information offer into Chaucer's costume rhetoric? and 3) how do these parts relate to the portrait as a whole--what do we learn about costume and rhetoric of costume that aids our understanding of the Prioress as a literary character? Further, 4) what insights can we gain into Chaucer's overall method of characterization by costume, a method which might be equally applicable, for instance, to the Knight (whose costume was so recently described by Terry Jones as that of a mercenary rather than that of the epitome of ideal chivalry) and to other characters in the General Prologue and The Canterbury Tales?

To this end, Chapter I will deal with the Prioress' headdress, her veiling and wimple, and will refute the traditional critical stance that both are inappropriate. This chapter will also demonstrate the difficulties inherent in the reading of Chaucer's costume rhetoric when one approach, alone, is used in interpretation. And it will include a discussion of certain fallacies in interpretation of diction that have become part of the critical tradition for the portrait of the Prioress. This chapter will also provide the necessary historical background information for an objective appraisal of the Prioress' headdress. Here the

religious ideal of convent rules and the secular ideal of Sumptuary Laws will be compared and contrasted with historical records of convent visitations and wills: the ideals versus the reality. Both are important to an understanding of the fourteenth-century cultural code. Knowledge of both is necessary to a proper evaluation and placement of the Prioress' costume somewhere on the continuum between two poles, ideal and scandalous. Although there will be no facts here that cannot be found in print in previously published records, yet these several groups of facts have not been previously assembled and arranged with the express purpose of providing the basis for and means by which the costume of Chaucer's Prioress might be systematically analysed. Further, their juxtaposition sheds an interesting light on Chaucer's costume rhetoric and on the character of the Prioress.

In addition, the literary traditions in the treatment of nuns' headdresses in the literature of Chaucer's time will be the subject of scrutiny in Chapter I. Special attention will be given to the rhetorical traditions of the description of womanly beauty including dress of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of the Virtues, especially Prudentia who is often depicted in the visual arts dressed as a nun, as both traditions offer insight into Chaucer's costume rhetoric in the portrait of Madame Eglentyne. Chapter I will also present

a survey of manuscript illuminations, taken from manuscripts of a serious didactic nature, in which nuns are portrayed in a variety of headdresses. From this survey, both a "typical nun" of manuscript illumination can be determined, as well as the kinds of variation presented in such representations. This survey is especially revealing in regard to Chaucer's description of the Prioress' wimple and his non-description of her veil. An additional insight is gained concerning the interdependence between the arts as we come to see how closely these illuminations of nuns follow the principles set forth in the rhetorical tradition discussed earlier in this chapter. The artistic tradition in which those virtues most appropriate to nuns are portrayed in the visual arts as personified virtues in nuns' habits and the accompanying conflation of iconography in portrayal of nuns, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and personified virtues will be discussed as they relate to the portrait of the Prioress and to Chaucer's rhetoric of costume.

In Chapter II we will prove that the Prioress' cloak is appropriate garb for a Prioress. We will follow the same procedure as in Chapter I and present evidence from the same sources. Particular attention will be paid to refuting the perjorative connotation of the adjective "elegant" as used by critics in describing the Prioress' cloak. Special attention will also be given to the techniques and metaphors employed

in the satirical treatment of descriptions of nuns' habits in medieval literature. In addition, a survey of dress indiscretions of medieval nuns will be presented, a survey which amply illustrates a variety of forbidden dress items, all of which provide a startling contrast to Chaucer's description of Madame Eglentyne's habit. This so-called "negative evidence" provides the background against which we may judge Chaucer's description. And, finally, a selection from the variety of proper nuns' habits as illustrated in illuminated manuscripts will be discussed--again, contributing to an objective evaluation of Chaucer's costume rhetoric.

Chapter III includes an analysis of the significance of the two accessories to Madame Eglentyne's costume: her rosary and the book, a standard detail in portraits of medieval abbesses and prioresses and a detail that, although literally missing from this portrait, may be suggested in Chaucer's statement concerning the manner in which the Prioress sings her service. Information from historical, scientific, literary, and religious sources as well as from the visual arts forms an integral part of this analysis. Such a collection of data serves as the basis of comparisons and contrasts from which we can infer that the Prioress' accessories are appropriate, regardless of how we may interpret her actions as described by Chaucer.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Kristine Gilmartin Wallace, "Array as Motif in the Clerk's Tale," Rice University Studies, 62, ii (1976), 99-110; James I. Wimsatt, "The Blessed Virgin and the Two Coronations of Griselda," Mediaevalia, 6 (1980), 187-207; Sister M. Madeleva, "Chaucer's Nuns," in Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1965). I am able to locate only one extensive treatment of a single Chaucerian character's costume: Helen Sherwood Houghton, "'Degree' and 'Array' in Chaucer's Portrait of the Reeve: A Study of Idiom and Meaning," Diss. University of York (England) 1975.

<sup>2</sup> See F. N. Robinson, ed., The Poetical Works of Chaucer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957); Thomas Jay Garbaty, "Chaucer's Weaving Wife," Journal of American Folklore, 81 (1968), 342-346; John Livingston Lowes, "Simple and Coy," Anglia, 33 (1910), 440-451; Sister Mary Raynelda Makarewicz, The Patristic Influence on Chaucer (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953); Roger P. Parr, "Chaucer's Art of Portraiture," Studies in Medieval Culture, 4 (1974), 428-436; Eileen Power, "Madame Eglentyne," in Medieval People, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925), pp. 59-84.

<sup>3</sup> See Florence H. Ridley, The Prioress and the Critics (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), for a survey of critics' attitudes toward the Prioress and the individual garments and accessories of her costume.

<sup>4</sup> See Mary Hardy Long Frank, "Chaucer's Prioress and the Blessed Virgin," Chaucer Review, 13 (1979), 346-362, and her "The Prioress and the Puys: A Study of the Cult of the Virgin and the Medieval Puys in Relation to Chaucer's Prioress and Her Tale," Diss. University of Colorado 1970.

<sup>5</sup> In this process, I follow the thesis advanced by Arnold Williams in "Medieval Allegory: An Operational Approach," in Poetic Theory/Poetic Practice: Papers of the Midwest Modern Language Association, ed. Robert Scholes (Iowa City: Midwest Modern Language Association, 1969), pp. 77-84.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, pp. 78-79.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Imagination of the Sign," in Critical Essays, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 206.

<sup>9</sup> Augustin, Enarr. in psalm. 101 II 14, PL 37, 1314, as quoted in Jean Pépin, "Saint Augustin et le symbolisme néoplatonicien de la vêtue," in Augustinus Magister, Congrès international augustinien, Paris, Septembre 1954 (Paris: [1954-1955]), I, 294.

<sup>10</sup> Pépin, I, 295.

<sup>11</sup> Augustin, Contra academicos, I, 8, 23, ed. Knoll (Cambridge Studies in English Literature, 63), p. 21, 7-10, as quoted by Pépin, I, 300.

<sup>12</sup> Pépin, I, 301-304.

<sup>13</sup> Pépin, I, 306, n. 2.

<sup>14</sup> See Robert P. Miller, Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>15</sup> Cleanness, in Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. A. C. Cawley and J. J. Anderson (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1976), pp. 51-52, ll. 5-16, 29-38.

<sup>16</sup> The English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted, ed. F. D. Matthew, E.E.T.S. O.S. 74 (London: Trübner and Company, 1880), p. 351.

<sup>17</sup> The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh, ed. Agnes M. C. Latham (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> Dante Aleghieri, The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), III, 203.

<sup>19</sup> Dante, 204-205; Sinclair, 211-213.

<sup>20</sup> Dante, 307.

<sup>21</sup> Dante, 333.

<sup>22</sup> Sinclair, 342.

<sup>23</sup> Sidney Heath, Pilgrim Life in the Middle Ages (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911), p. 121. See, also, H. D. Traill, and J. S. Mann, eds., Social England: A Record

of the Progress of the People (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), II, 375.

24 Extract from Sarum Missal quoted by Alan Kendall, Medieval Pilgrims (London: Wayland Publishers, 1970), pp. 36-37. Kendall's book includes good line drawings of pilgrims pp. 18-19, 39; rosaries appear in figs. on pp. 19 and 39. See also, Heath, pp. 121-122. G. G. Coulton, Chaucer and his England (Williamstown, Mass.: Corner House Publishers, 1976), p. 138, comments on the pilgrim's special sacred status indicated by his pilgrim dress, his scrip, staff and gown. The figure of the pilgrim is a well-documented one; see Julia Bolton Holloway, "The Figure of the Pilgrim in Medieval Poetry," Diss. University of California, Berkeley 1974, especially pp. 328-329. Numerous visual representations of him exist in the art of the period; see B.M. Royal MS. 2B vii, fol. 68 for an illumination of an early fourteenth-century barefooted pilgrim wearing a loose tan tunic, green pilgrim hat (with wide brim), carrying a staff with a knob on the end, and a green book in his left hand. B.M. MS. Egerton 859, which has a picture of St. Loe on fol. 17, contains two especially fine representations of pilgrim staves: fol. 23 contains a pilgrim in pilgrim hat, with book and staff with knob, spikes on the bottom, and three rings separating four graduated sections of the staff. The staff on fol. 37 has only two sections separated by another such wooden ring, a knob on top, and a sharp point on the bottom that appears to be of metal. Its barefooted owner wears a large round pilgrim hat with a scallop shell on the front, and carries a book with a cover of yellow-green. This pilgrim is labeled St. Iacob. See, also, Rosemond Tuve, Allegorical Imagery: Some Mediaeval Books and Their Posterity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), Chapter III, for many reproductions, especially p. 206, fig. 69, which contains an illustration of the pilgrim from Guillaume's Pilgrimage meeting Pride, reproduced from Paris (Verard), 1511, sg. i 6v; Joseph Strutt, A Complete View of the Dress and Habits of the People of England, from the Establishment of the Saxons in Britain to the Present Time: Illustrated by Engravings Taken from the Most Authentic Remains of Antiquity (London: The Tabard Press Limited, 1970), 2 vols., pl. CV, for reproductions of the pilgrim figure taken from medieval manuscripts, and II, 207-209, for his discussion of pilgrim's weeds. Among literary pilgrim figures, an especially interesting pilgrim costume is that of the pilgrim in Lydgate's "Englisht" version of Guillaume's Pilgrimage, The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man, ed. F.J. Furnivall, E.E.T.S. E.S. 77 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Company, 1899), pp. 17-20, ll. 609-747. This pilgrim is dressed by "Grace dieu" in a surcoat of white, and girt with green tissue. Much attention is given to the fact that he lacks

both scrip and staff at the beginning, and delays his pilgrimage because of this lack--he does not acquire his scrip until l. 8452. In addition, for commentary on the biblical background for this subject, see Samuel C. Chew, The Pilgrimage of Life (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 175; for comments on Richard Alkerton's sermon on pilgrim attire (B.M. Additional MS. 37677, fols. 57-8), London 1406, see G. R. Owst, Literature and pulpit in Medieval England (Cambridge: University Press, 1933), p. 104.

25 Heath, p. 122.

26 The museums of London contain numerous examples of such signs, usually made of pewter, and each well-known shrine had its standard pilgrim signs. Heath, pp. 130-131, discusses and has a picture of the Canterbury pilgrim sign of St. Thomas on horseback.

27 "The Prologue, Or, the mery adventure of the Pardonere and Tapstere at the Inn at Canterbury," in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, compiled by John Urry (London: Bernard Lintot, 1721), pp. 595-596.

28 Edward L. Cutts, Scenes & Characters of the Middle Ages, 7th ed. (London: Simpkin Marshall, Ltd., 1930), p. 177. See Coulton, Chaucer and his England pp. 140-143, for comments on the deterioration of the nature of pilgrimages.

29 John James, History of the Worsted Manufacture in England (London: Frank Cass and Company, Ltd., 1968), p. 52.

30 See, also, Allan H. Bright, New Light on 'Piers Plowman' (London: Humphrey Milford, 1928), p. 48.

31 Robinson, n. 673, p. 667.

32 Roland Barthes, "The Diseases of Costume," in Critical Essays, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 46.

33 Roland Barthes, Elements of Semiology, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968 [trans. from the French Éléments de Sémiologie, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1964]), p. 27.

34 John Matthews Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1926), pp. 31, 33-34.

35 Manly, p. 27.

36 James, p. 74.

37 Frances Elizabeth Baldwin, Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Regulation in England, John Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, XLIV, No. 1 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1926), pp. 10-65.

38 Baldwin, p. 10, states that the motivations behind these sumptuary laws are:

(1) the desire to preserve class distinctions, so that any stranger could tell by merely looking at a man's dress to what rank in society he belonged; (2) the desire to check practices which were regarded as deleterious in their effects, due to the feeling that luxury and extravagance were in themselves wicked and harmful to the morals of the people; (3) economic motives: (a) the endeavor to encourage home industries and to discourage the buying of foreign goods, and (b) the attempt on the part of the sovereign to induce his people to save their money, so that they might be able to help him out financially in time of need. Sheer conservatism and dislike of new fashions or customs might be mentioned as a fourth factor which led to the passage of the English sumptuary laws.

39 Williams, p. 84.

40 Barthes, Elements of Semiology, p. 25. Elizabeth Ewing, Women in Uniform: through the centuries [sic] (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1973), p. 11, states,

There is . . . in all fashion a slant towards uniformity as part of the life of any community with a claim to being orderly. Costume moves out of this, its ordinary and natural context, and into uniforms when a section of the community stands apart, voluntarily or by compulsion, for some specific purpose and identifies this by adopting a distinctive mode of dress.

41 See Patrick Bowles, "Chaucer's General Prologue, 133-136," Explicator, 35, iii (1977), 5-6, regarding the Prioress' treatment of the pilgrims' communal cup, a fact that necessitates her care in wiping her upper lip clean of grease before drinking. See also, Alan T. Gaylord, "The Unconquered Tale of the Prioress," Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters, 47 (1962), 620-621, who equates the Prioress' table manners with those espoused in Roman de la Rose by LaVieille (ll. 13385-13456) as being

helpful in acquiring a lover. Gaylord follows J. L. Lowes attribution of source in "Simple and Coy: A Note on Fourteenth Century Poetic Diction," 441. To accept the argument that the Prioress' manners, or the motivation behind them, are suspect because they are the same as those described by la Vieille is to besmirch every female of that and later times who wished to use proper table manners. The fact that such correctness may be attractive to men and may be employed as one tool of designing women in satirical literature should not automatically taint the character of all subsequent mannerly ladies, or make good manners suspect in themselves.

The subject of proper table manners is one that is treated in Early English Meals and Manners, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, E.E.T.S. O.S. 32 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1868). See The Boke of Curtasye, p. 179, in this work where the advice is "Drye ~~by~~ mouthe ay wele and fynde / When ~~þu~~ schalle drynke oþer ale or wyne" (81-82); also Richard Weste's Booke of Demeanor, p. 210:

Let forehead joyfull be and full,  
it shewes a merry part,  
And cheerefulnesse in countenance,  
and pleasantnesse of heart. . . .

Let thy apparrell not exceede,  
to passe for sumptuous cost,  
Nor altogether be too base,  
for so thy credit's lost.

Be modest in thy wearing it,  
and keep it neat and cleane,  
For spotted, dirty, or the like,  
is lothsome to be sene.

This for thy body may suffice,  
how that must ordred be:  
Now at the Church thou shalt observe  
to God how all must be. (37-40; 161-172)

See also the repetition of Aristotle's idea of the importance of good manners over that of being able to play a musical instrument, as recorded in School of Vertue, pp. 232-233; this work also provides the following:

Thy fyngers se cleane	that thou euer kepe,
Hauynge a Napkyn	thereon them to wype;
Thy mouth therewith	Cleane do thou make,
The cup to drynke	In hande yf thou take
(463-471)	

Finally, in this same E.E.T.S. edition we find the Babees Book, pp. 255-256, which counsels,

Whanne ye shalle drynke, your mouthe clence  
with a clothe;  
Youre handes eke that they in no manere  
Imbrowe the cuppe, for thanne shulle  
noone be lothe  
Withe yow to drynke that ben withe yow yfere.  
(155-158)

<sup>42</sup> See Gerald Morgan, "Rhetorical Perspectives in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales," English Studies, 62, v (1981), 411-422, especially 418-19 in which he interprets "nat undergrowe" as meaning "proper size, stature, consistent with descriptions of praiseworthy looks of ideal beauty."

<sup>43</sup> Kevin S. Kiernan, "The Art of the Descending Catalogue, and a Fresh Look at Alisoun," Chaucer Review, 10 (1975), 3.

<sup>44</sup> Gordon H. Harper, "Chaucer's Big Prioress," Philological Quarterly, 12 (1933), 308. See, also, Edward H. Kelly, "By Mouth of Innocentz: The Prioress Vindicated," Papers on Language and Literature, 5 (1969), 364, who agrees that the Prioress is a heavy-set nun.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen P. Witte, "Muscipula Diaboli and Chaucer's Portrait of the Prioress," Papers on Language and Literature, 13 (1977), 230, 234-237.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, Le Roman de la Rose (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1974), and Charles Dahlberg, trans., The Romance of the Rose, by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun (1971; Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983), ll. 407ff.

<sup>47</sup> Roger P. Parr, 433, points this out.

<sup>48</sup> A similar image is that of the white cape that is fair on the outside and foul on the inside worn by Pride and pictured in the manuscript illumination on fol. 72 of Bodleian Library MS. Douce 300, an early fifteenth-century copy of Guillaume de Deguileville's "Le Pelerinage de la Vie humaine en Francois," originally composed 1330-1331.

<sup>49</sup> I have found no good symbolic associations for mice; however, there are many for hounds. For example, they love their masters, defend homes, jeopardize themselves for their

masters, help in hunting by running to take prey, will not forsake their masters' dead bodies, fight against thieves, protect their masters' dead bodies from animals and birds, make the slayer of their master confess to the killing, and fight against enemies in battle, according to Robert Steele, Mediaeval Lore From Bartholomaeus Anglicus (London: Chatto and Windus, 1907), pp. 145-146.

<sup>50</sup> Witte, 227-237; H. David Brumble, "Chaucer's General Prologue: Canterbury Tales," Explicator, 37 (1978), 45.

<sup>51</sup> Note the story of the lady who loved her dogs and therefore fed them with sops of milk and meat in The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry, rev. ed., E.E.T.S. O.S. 33 (1868; London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1906), pp. 28-29. She was chastised by a friar who told her this was not right when people were starving. This angered her and she continued to do as before. After she died, the dogs licked her mouth which then turned black, proving the moral which the friar had tried to teach her.

<sup>52</sup> R. A. Copland, "A Line from Chaucer's Prologue to the Canterbury Tales," Notes and Queries, 17 (1970), 46.

<sup>53</sup> Such wealth is consistent with the description of the Benedictine nunnery of St. Leonard's Bromley, better known as Stratford atte Bowe, according to Marie Padgett Hamilton, "The Convent of Chaucer's Prioress and her Priests," in Philologica: The Malone Anniversary Studies, ed. Thomas A. Kirby, and Henry Bosley Woolf (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1949), pp. 179-182, 185, 187-188, 190, and n. 24.

<sup>54</sup> Eileen Power, Medieval English Nunneries, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, ed. G. G. Coulton (London: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p. 316ff., describes the manner in which monastic rules regarding food were disregarded and/or relaxed during this period.

<sup>55</sup> Other depictions of Gluttony in manuscript illuminations include the following: Luxuria at table with cup in hand, fol. 18 of B.M. Cotton MS. Cleop. Cviii, Prudentius Psychomachia (early eleventh century); Gluttony, a man eating a joint of meat, holding a plate that contains another joint, carrying a cask slung from his arm, and seated on a pig which feeds from a trough, fol. 72v of Bodleian Library MS. Bodl. 283, The booke that is called the Mirroure of the world and that some calleth Vice and vertu (early to mid-fifteenth-century); Gluttony or January, fol. 55 of B.M. MS. Royal 19Ci, Poems etc. in Provencal by Matfre Ermengau (last half of thirteenth century); Gluttony, a hag carrying a bottomless bag between her teeth signifying her bottomless



appetite, followed by Luxury riding on a swine of whom the handlist says, "She is said to be finely dressed, but her clothes are mud-stained, so that she hides her face in her hood," on fol. 92 of Bodleian Library MS. Douce 300; the gluttonous being roasted, damned souls bound on trestle tables over a fiery pit, fol. 44 of Bodleian Library MS. Douce 305, "Le Pèlerinage de l'âme" (1435); Gluttons (at table with devils) eating loathsome and poisonous things (such as a toad) as their punishment, fol. 85v of Bodleian Library MS. Douce 134, *Livre de la Vigne notre Seigneur*, a treatise on Antichrist, Judgment, Heaven and Hell (1450-70); and Gluttony, a man with two wives, fol. 195 of B.M. MS. Royal 6Evi, Jacobus Omne Bonum.

56 R. F. Yeager, "Aspects of Gluttony in Chaucer and Gower," in Studies in Philology, 81.1 (1984), 43-49. See, also, Ancren Riwle: A Treatise on the Rules and Duties of the Monastic Life, ed. and trans. James Morton (London: Camden Society, 1853), p. 205, where "Too Daintily" is the name of the second pig born of "The Swine of Greediness."

57 The English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted, pp. 351-352. See, also, Iohannis Wyclif, "Sermo XV," Sermones, VIII, ed. Iohann Loserth (1889; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1966), pp. 114-122, regarding the thirteen garments useful for Christians. The garments are virtues, such as spiritual mercy, kindness, humility, etc.

58 Douay-Rheims Bible; U. C. Knoepfelmacher, "Irony Through Scriptural Illusion: A Note on Chaucer's 'Prioress,'" Chaucer Review, 4 (1970), 180, states that Chaucer provides a pun on "grace" in his use of "grease."

59 Robert of Brunne's "Handlyng Synne" A. D. 1303, With Those Parts of the Anglo-French Treatise on which it was Founded: William of Wadlington's "Manuel des Pechiez", ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, E.E.T.S. O.S. 119 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1901), p. 118.

60 Robert of Brunne, p. 119.

61 Peter S. Taitt, Incubus and Ideal: Ecclesiastical Figures in Chaucer and Langland, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, No. 44 (Salzburg, Austria: Institut Für Englishche Sprache Und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1975), p. 67.

## Chapter One

### The Prioress' Headdress

The critical tradition for the portrait of the Prioress in Geoffrey Chaucer's General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales holds that the Prioress' headdress is improper--her veil is worn too high on her forehead and her wimple is inappropriately "pynched." Both practices are interpreted as evidence of her vanity, a trait inconsistent with a nun's vocation. Such assumptions find their factual base in selections from convent visitation records dating primarily from the middle of the fifteenth-century, and fail to consider evidence from other sources and earlier times. In this chapter we will refute the critical tradition that finds the Prioress' headdress inappropriate. Chaucer's description of the Prioress' veil and wimple will be compared to descriptions of the nun's proper headdress found in convent rules and medieval literature, depictions of inappropriate headdresses described in visitation injunctions and in literature, and representations of nuns' headdresses in illuminated manuscripts and sculpture; also to be considered is the manner in which the rhetorical tradition of the period contributed to Chaucer's description of Madame Eglentyne's

veil and wimple. A study of this evidence reveals that she wears an appropriate headdress, consistent with her interest in propriety, and illustrative of her status as nun, Prioress, and lady.

Kevin S. Kiernan quotes Geoffroi de Vinsauf's remark that "'the discretion of the wise man observes what is said through what is left unsaid,'"<sup>1</sup> as being a useful idea to keep in mind when reading Chaucer and it is an idea that will be employed in this study. However, before we can apply this advice to our analysis of the Prioress, we must start with what Chaucer said:

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 almost a spanne brood, I trowe;  
 For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe. (151-156)

Simply stated, the Prioress' headdress reveals the dimensions of her forehead, and her wimple is "ful semyly" "pynched."

A critical problem is posed by the Prioress' veil which Chaucer does not mention, but which has nevertheless spawned many comments in the criticism concerned with Madame Eglentyne's "fair forheed." Florence Ridley provides a handy, although now nearly twenty years old, summary of the criticism on the subject of the Prioress' forehead, noting that Preston, Coulton, and Power think it should not be visible, while Clark, and Robertson take positions on the physiognomical implications of its broadness; Harper thinks

this broadness proportionate to a body which is "nat undergrowe," while Muriel Bowden discusses the Prioress' forehead in terms of medieval styles of beauty, citing Curry and the lover in Confessio Amantis.<sup>2</sup> Bowden's point is important to Eileen Power's argument as well: Power stresses the importance of high foreheads to worldly ladies who went to such lengths as shaving to achieve the desired effect; she states that nuns could not resist this fashion. But she goes even further, and posits that in an effort to be fashionable, they "could not resist lifting up and spreading out their veils," and follows this comment with an interesting question: "for how otherwise did Chaucer know that Madame Eglentyne had such a fair forehead?"<sup>3</sup>.

G. G. Coulton clarifies the ongoing critical attitude toward the Prioress' veil and/or forehead in a forthright statement. He states the puritanical point of view: "This nun had no business to possess any forehead at all, so far as Chaucer was concerned."<sup>4</sup> No one else states this idea so plainly, and nowhere else is there such an openly expressed attitude of critic toward characters--Prioress and Chaucer the narrator-pilgrim. Yet many critics imply such a judgment. These judgments generally cite episcopal and convent visitation records as proof that bare foreheads were forbidden to nuns, but they fail to mention that the records pertinent to this point were dated approximately fifty years

after the General Prologue was written.

In addition, one word in particular poses a special problem in the canon of criticism concerned with the Prioress' headdress: "fluted," a word which the critics employ but which Chaucer does not. F. N. Robinson notes that a letter from G. G. Coulton states that this wimple "should have been plain, not fluted."<sup>5</sup> This note has evoked numerous comments about the Prioress' fluted veil, and more than one judgment made upon such fluting although it is nonexistent.

In general, the Prioress is viewed by the critics as a nun who wishes to dress in accordance with the courtly tradition, although a few see her as dressed in accordance with the Marian tradition and thereby excuse what they call her "elegance." H. P. Weissman's evaluation of the Prioress and her costume is made in the former of these two perspectives. She places Madame Eglentyne in the class of the "new woman," the lady of courtly literature, whose function it is "to allure from her pedestal and lead men to wisdom through love," and who has "transcending virtue" which attracts men to her tower. For Weissman, this is the function of the courtly lady, the lady she designates as the wrong new woman image, which the Prioress follows.<sup>6</sup> From such a perspective, the Prioress' costume is naturally pictured as the visible result of her efforts to allure and attract love.

In this vein, also, Gerald Morgan remarks the Prioress' "elegance of dress and . . . physical beauty" [quoting ll. A 146-54]. In his judgment,

All these details ostensibly enhance her as a courtly figure, but they have been carefully chosen to focus upon the violation of her profession as a nun, for nuns were not allowed to keep dogs, their wimples were to be plain and not fluted and, their foreheads should not have been exposed.

Those critics who place the Prioress within the worldly, courtly tradition rarely fail to mention her wimple, as Morgan does, or her raised veil, as S. T. Knight does. Knight judges that the Prioress wears her veil high on her forehead "for the sake of a totally worldly fashion."<sup>8</sup>

Under the classification of proponents of the Marian tradition, we find Mary Hardy Long Frank's defense of the courtly characteristics of this portrait as being at the same time unparadoxically Marian since Mary was "in every immaculate sense of the word, mistress to the Christian world."<sup>9</sup> She cites the rose symbolism of her name and her manners as being imitative of the Virgin, and her handsome dress as customary to the Marian tradition.<sup>10</sup> However, even Frank cannot find an excuse for the bared brow of critical tradition, although she assumes that the Prioress assumes the Virgin would "excuse in a devoted servant such innocent peccadilloes as a bared brow or small dogs."<sup>11</sup>

Before we discuss the reputed inappropriate height of

the Prioress' veil and her wimple, a definition of terms is necessary. For convenience, the term "headdress" will designate both veiling and wimple or barbe, the entire ensemble of various styles which nuns wore during the Medieval Period. By "veil" we shall understand the single, lined or unlined, cloth which covered a nun's head and did or did not cover all or part of her forehead. In visual representations such as illuminated manuscripts and sculpture which reveal two veils (usually a black one over a white), they will be designated as an "overveil" and "underveil." On occasion when it cannot be determined whether an underveil or a wide band across the forehead is worn, the term "underveil" will be used.

In this study, the term "wimple" will be defined as a small garment worn in such a way that the sides of the face are covered and the neck is covered from side to side and from the chin downward. This differs from the OED definition: "1. A garment of linen or silk formerly worn by women, so folded as to envelop the head, chin, sides of the face, and neck: now retained in the dress of nuns." Subsequent quotations after 1500 listed in OED sometimes mention both wimple and veil, for example circa 1530 Court of Love 1102: "And eke the nonnes, with vaile and wimple plight."

The definition chosen for wimple in this study is more

exclusive than that appearing elsewhere. The term "wimple" has also been used to describe the two white linen bands or "fillets" worn by ladies in the mid-thirteenth century in northern Europe. One band was worn under the chin and over the crown of the head, covering the ears, and the second went across the forehead and circled the top of the head, covering the side of the first.<sup>12</sup>

Since "wimple" is a somewhat nebulous term, in this study we will do as the author of Court of Love did and separate wimple from veil as in the definition stipulated above. Such a separation has other precedents. For example, Mary G. Houston makes the same kind of separation in terminology, in her definition of wimple: "A veil covering neck and chin, popular for women in the thirteenth century and afterwards survived in the dress of many of the Religious Orders."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Joan Evans separates veil from wimple. She dates the wimple as a fashionable item of dress for all thirteenth-century women, and as such it was mentioned in a 1273 sermon by Gilles d'Orleans, Chancellor of the University and, ultimately, at the conclusion of the century by Jean de Meung as he comments on the way the style had been converted to the ornate and extravagant cornettes, in Le Roman de la Rose. Evans asserts that, after the wimple's demise as high fashion, it continued to be worn by widows and nuns. With a hanging veil behind it, it "was regarded as the most decorous



of head-tires."<sup>14</sup> We must note, however, that these definitions do not cover all the possibilities for nuns' headdresses. Nor do they always correspond to the less precise descriptions provided in convent rules and historical records. Nevertheless they will serve as useful descriptive terms for the purpose of comparison in this study.

#### The Prioress and the Rhetorical Tradition:

We begin, now, with our analysis of Chaucer's rhetoric of costume in the Prioress' portrait and it is appropriate to do so with the Prioress' headdress, discussing first her veil(s) and, later, her wimple. Chaucer does not describe the Prioress' veil. However, his comment on her fair forehead appears to indicate his personal knowledge of its dimensions, knowledge which could have been acquired by observation of a veil worn high above the forehead in the secular style of his time. His comment is suggestive. If there is impropriety here, however, it might well rest with the pilgrim Chaucer who notices beauty and says so:

But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;  
It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe. (154-155)

Nevertheless Eileen Power's question that, if he had not seen the Prioress' forehead, "how otherwise did Chaucer know?"<sup>15</sup> is pertinent. We need not assume that his description can suggest only the Prioress' impropriety, the wearing of high

fashion, as opposed to modest attire. It is time now to notice what Chaucer does not say: Regarding the Prioress' forehead, Chaucer does not say, "I know," only, "I trowe"; the span of difference in meaning between the two phrases is considerable. Chaucer does not know; therefore, the question of the proper height of the veil may be a moot one. Nevertheless, because this question has been so frequently discussed in the past, it is necessary to take it up here. Although she defends the remainder of the Prioress' habit,<sup>16</sup> Sister Madeleva does not address the question of appropriateness of her veil. However, the rhetorical tradition of the medieval period provides a partial answer to this question.

Rather than to assume that Chaucer indicates impropriety in his description, we might just as easily find the mention of the Prioress' fair forehead suggestive of the rhetorical tradition of the medieval period, that of the description of nuns as brides of Christ, the tradition of courtly/spiritual treatment of the Virgin, the descriptive tradition of Song of Songs, and the tradition of descriptions of the Virtues (especially Prudentia), who were often depicted as nuns in manuscript illuminations. This placing of the portrait of Madame Eglentyne within the rhetorical tradition of courtly/spiritual literature offers an explanation for Chaucer's comment about the Prioress' forehead, as well as

for her stature that was "nat undergrowe," that goes beyond that of a pilgrim-poet's open admiration for physical beauty, whether imagined or seen, although there is no reason why we should not accept both explanations, for they confirm and enrich each other.

Critics primarily favoring a rhetorical approach find the ambiguity of the Prioress' portrait fascinating perhaps because they have focused on what they conceived to be Chaucer's portrayal of a beautiful woman, as opposed to a portrayal of womanly beauty. Such an approach appears to highlight her ambiguity. Since so much attention has been given to this aspect of the portrait, we might well ask, what part does Chaucer's costume rhetoric play in it? According to Kiernan, Chaucer uses a rhetorical convention "which was supposed to be used to describe a beautiful woman to describe a nun,"<sup>17</sup> and this is a usage which creates discomfort because it compels the reader to concentrate on the attractive physicality of the woman, instead of the spirituality of the nun, according to Kiernan. Significantly, the attractive costume of the Prioress adds to this effect. Here we have a confusion between cause and effect; the confusion lies in Kiernan's assumption that Chaucer wished to describe "a beautiful woman." Instead, Geoffroi de Vinsauf's directions for this convention are written for anyone who wishes "to describe womanly beauty, Femineum plene si vis

formare decorem," 1.567.<sup>18</sup> Such a description would be made in physical terms, it is true, but the emphasis is on "beauty," not on "woman." This convention derives from tradition, for example, the description of the bride of Christ in Song of Songs,<sup>19</sup> and was later applied to ladies in courtly literature, as well as to descriptions of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Chaucer does not take a courtly literature tradition and apply it to a prioress, as Kiernan's statement above suggests. Nevertheless, Kiernan's statements on the rhetorical tradition provided the stimulus for several fruitful lines of investigation which have a bearing on an understanding of the Prioress' portrait.

The convention of a nun portrayed as a beautiful bride is important to our study of the Prioress' costume and Chaucer's costume rhetoric for this convention has its own rhetorical pattern, a pattern which Chaucer follows in his portrait of the Prioress. This rhetorical tradition is specifically relevant as it relates to the question of the propriety of her veil because we find in such rhetoric an explanation for Chaucer's praise of Madame Eglentyne's fair forehead. The rhetorical pattern of the nun as bride is presented in literature in the following manner: the presentation of spiritual beauty is described in metaphors of physical beauty of body (feet, hands, stature), face, and speech, as illustrated in Guibert of Tournai's

thirteenth-century sermons, based largely on texts from the Song of Songs and the Book of Wisdom.<sup>20</sup>

Gautier de Coincy's La Chasteté as Nonnains provides a second example in this tradition. Here, God is the courtly lover; the nun is his bride who must adorn her soul as the courtly lady adorns her body in luxurious garments. These modest nuns wear linen that is "well pleated and tied."<sup>21</sup> The description of their habits and the ideals they stand for figure largely in Gautier's poem, in which the beauty of these nun-brides is associated with flowers, their spirituality is demonstrated in the giving up of luxurious dress and the donning of black or white habits, and their courtliness is directed to their true "friend," their spouse Christ. The combination of these ideas reaches its peak in the idea that the beauty of their proper behavior symbolized in their dress and their Christ-directed courtliness will become the vesture of their souls. Then they will have not the false joy of the world, but true joy.:

Voz indés fleurs, vous violetes,  
 Qui les grans plices d'erminetes,  
 Qui la soie, le vair, le gris  
 Avez laissiez por les dras bis,  
 Qui por les ames faire blanches  
 Vestez les fros as noires manches,  
 Sachiez que Diex em paradis  
 De voz fera ses fleurs de lis.  
 Voz, blanches fleurs, vois de Cistiax.  
 Qui afublez ces blanz mantiax.  
 Qui les pliçons et les chemises  
 Por blans buriax avez jus mises,  
 Ja sont ou ciel apareillies  
 Blanches chemises deliies

Et les robes a or batues  
 Dont vos ames seront vestues.  
 Por Dieu, por Dieu, blanches et noires,  
 Gardez ne prisiez pas .ij. pooires  
 De cest fax mont la fause joie,  
 Car toz les siens guile et faunoie.  
 S'en vo biauté, s'en vo jouvent  
 Tenez le veu et le couvent  
 Que voz avez a Dieu pramis,  
 Com vrais espeuz, com vrais amis  
 De paradis voz doera. (1059-1083)<sup>22</sup>

The ideal of spiritual cleanness is emphasized in this kind of literature through the metaphors of physical beauty, courtly terminology, and clothing used to describe the nun-brides of the courtly lover-Christ. Jill Mann especially notes the poet's statement that "their flesh is sweeter than violet, rose or 'eglentiers,'" suggestive of the name Chaucer gives to his Prioress. Finally, Mann states,

Both Guibert and Gautier see the nun not just as the bride of Christ, but as his courtly mistress. They attempt to turn aristocratic fastidiousness into spiritual scruple, and not to discourage a girl from romantic dreams, but to attach them to a new hero.<sup>23</sup>

The idea of such "aristocratic fastidiousness," or cleanness of soul, is expressed much earlier in lines taken from The Revelations of Saint Birgitta: The opening section of her Revelations begins with the summary, "Owr lorde Ihesu Cryst tellyth seynte Birgitte why he chesyth hyr to be hys spovse, and how as a spowse she awyth to aray hyr and be redy to hym." And his instructions are encapsulated in the following: "To the spovse þer-for it longyth to be redye when hyr spowse wyll make hys weddyng, that she be semely arayde

and clene."<sup>24</sup>

Considering the portrait of Madame Eglentyne within the dual tradition of courtly/spiritual literature offers an explanation for why Chaucer mentions her fair forehead (a point that is relevant to the discussion of her veil), and the texts for Guibert's sermons, mentioned above, provide a seminal example. A description of the forehead figures in the Song of Songs IV.3, a verse interpreted as Christ's description of his bride, the church: "Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks." And in VI.7 the bride professes her faith in Christ and employs the same language: "As a piece of a pomegranate are thy locks." We may understand Chaucer's remark concerning Madame Eglentyne's fair forehead as part of this rhetorical tradition, a recognition of her beauty, expressed in the current terms of fashion, a beauty which he may or may not have seen.

An understanding of the rhetorical tradition that treats nuns as the beautiful virgin brides of Christ is important to a proper understanding of Chaucer's costume rhetoric, and of the evaluation of criticism which places Madame Eglentyne within the Marian tradition, and in the tradition of the manifestation of the Virtues. This rhetorical tradition is necessarily allied to that of descriptions of the Blessed Virgin Mary who is portrayed throughout the medieval period

in what G. G. Coulton terms "supersensual loveliness."<sup>25</sup> One example of such a portrayal, actually comprising a summary of this tradition, may be found in a description of the Virgin by a Franciscan, Oswald Pelbart (circa 1475), included in the Golden Legend. He describes her as having perfection of body of necessity since she conceived of the Holy Ghost and gave birth to Christ. Since Christ was "beautiful above the sons of men," according to the laws of nature which say that like begets like, the Virgin must be of comparable perfection. Pelbart follows Albert the Great in declaring that the Virgin "had a due and proper stature, neither too great nor too small, but according to the size of a tall woman." This is, he says, in accord with the Song of Songs which says (VII.6): "How beautiful art thou, and how comely, my dearest, in delights! Thy stature is like to a palm-tree." Although tall like the palm tree, the Virgin is neither too fat nor too thin. Her coloring is the noblest, made up of red and white, and he reasons that her hair and eyes must be dark, making up a balance of fair and dark.<sup>26</sup> The description continues with an in-depth explication of her dress.

Part of the ambiguity in the portrait of the Prioress, so noted by critics, is due to the fact that she, too, is described in the conventional rhetoric of womanly beauty. Chaucer's choice of her name, Madame Eglentyne, and his remark about her stature being not undergrown (although she



is not compared to a palm tree), are compatible with such rhetoric. There appears to be some idea among critics that a pious nun should not appear to be beautiful to the eyes of the beholder, for example, the pilgrim-poet. Yet, conventionally beautiful in looks and in their particular costume is precisely how pious nuns are portrayed, as a survey of medieval manuscript illuminations, discussed later in this chapter, will reveal; in addition, in being portrayed as beautiful women, nuns are in excellent company, in literature and the visual arts--that of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the personified virtues. Alan of Lille's description of Prudentia in Anticlaudianus serves as another example of this rhetorical tradition:

Her well-ordered brows, in proper balance arranged, neither too light nor beclouded with luxuriant growth, resemble twin crescents. Her radiant eyes give forth starlight, her forehead stands forth lily-like, her nose gives balsam-odour, her teeth rival ivory, her mouth, the rose. Living colour glows upon her face and no adventitious lustre makes its disgraceful contribution to the image of a beauty so great. Lilies wedded to roses have chastened the face's brightened glow and a rosy tint prevents a cloak of paleness from overshadowing its fair. . . . No space, marked off with set measurements, impedes the movement of her body or checks it with definite limits. Now going further away, she strikes the heavens with her head . . .

Her robe was woven of fine thread; it does not fake its colour and by no trick does it deceive our eyes . . . . A white garment, woven from Egyptian papyrus, clothes her. She does not impair its beauty and its beauty does her no disservice. Raiment and beauty unite

in a charming marriage, and each pays its own  
homage to the other.<sup>27</sup>

This description of Prudence follows the convention of using worldly terminology to describe the delight present in spiritual qualities. When we compare this portrait with that of the Prioress, we find many dissimilarities between them, for example, Prudence's restrained demeanor and the Prioress' cheer of court. However, like the Prioress, Prudence is beautiful; she is not undergrown, and her costume is "fetis": "She does not impair its beauty and its beauty does her no disservice."

Thus we find the proper context for a consideration of the Prioress' veil. Chaucer mentions her fair forehead<sup>28</sup> as part of his portrayal of external womanly beauty. The fact that her external beauty is not reflected in her actions is not important here. He employs so many features of the rhetorical tradition described above we cannot doubt that he intends for us to read the physical description of the Prioress in the light of conventional descriptions of the nun as bride of Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and personified virtues. Therefore it is more reasonable to assume that Madame Eglentyne's veil is appropriate than to think she wears a veil draped according to secular fashion. It is more reasonable to take Chaucer at his word, "I trowe," than to think he knew, as Power believes, because he had the Prioress' bared forehead in clear view. However, as a survey

of convent rules, and later, a survey of evidence from the visual arts of the period will show, it is quite possible that the pilgrim-Chaucer could have seen enough to formulate a judgement about the size of Prioress' forehead without the Prioress being guilty of wearing an indecorous headdress.

#### The Prioress' Headdress and Historical Evidence:

We turn now to a short survey of convent rules in order to demonstrate that the requirements of a proper headdress for a nun were of much greater variety than has been recognized by literary critics, and that there are no indications that the relationship of veil edge to eyebrow was among the concerns of those who wrote these rules. According to this survey, the Prioress' headdress as described by Chaucer meets all of the requirements of convent rules, none of which mention specific details concerning veil height or wimple style. Instead, they are concerned with maintaining economy in type of fabric used and the prohibiting of all unsuitable decoration. These are concerns which we find echoed in convent visitations right up to the time of Alnwick in the mid-fifteenth century as we shall see later.

We begin this survey with the Benedictine Rule, since it is likely that Chaucer meant us to understand, from his reference to Stratford-at-Bowe, that Madame Eglentyne was a

Benedictine. The Benedictine Rule includes no provision which would indicate that the Prioress' veil is inappropriate. The Rule of St. Benedict for monks, with some modifications, was the basis of the habits for Benedictine nuns as well, and although there is no specific mention in this Rule of veiling, it does include several salient points, applicable to veiling, concerning the quality of fabric to be used in habits. The Rule of St. Benedict specifies that monastic garb should be suitable to local climate. Habits should be made from fabrics of different weights according to seasonal needs and of goods from local producers or from the cheapest available source. Additional provisions are made for those who are sent on a journey. They are to receive from the wardrobe a pair of drawers, a cowl, and a tunic "which are to be a little better than those they ordinarily wear," all of which are to be given back to the wardrobe upon return.<sup>29</sup> The Benedictine Rule describes the general outlines for a religious habit that bespeaks humble dedication to God. Thus we may understand that locally-produced inexpensive cloth was used for nuns' veils and wimples, with a somewhat better quality being used on the occasions when nuns were required or allowed to travel away from their convents. This Rule would eliminate the use of silk veils for fourteenth-century English nuns since that fabric would be expensive to import, not being produced in England until the sixteenth century.

The headdress of the nuns of the Benedictine Abbey at Elstow will serve as a general model for that worn by medieval nuns. It consisted of a white pleated barb or draped wimple, covered by a head-veil (fig. 4).<sup>30</sup> This thirteenth-century headcovering may be seen in the portrait of St. Claire, depicted in her nun's habit, in the late fifteenth-century manuscript of the Sforza Book of Hours, British Museum Add. MS. 34294. Other illuminations showing nuns in this habit appear on pp. 418, 420, and 510.

The Ancren Riwe provides a more precise prescription for humble habits than that in the Benedictine Rule, although it, also, does not specifically mention nuns' headdresses. Nevertheless, from this description in the Ancren Riwe we may understand that a headdress might be either black and/or white and should be plain and well-made, neither of which stipulations is contrary to Chaucer's description of the Prioress' headdress.

Because no man seeth you, nor do ye see any man, ye may be well content with your clothes, be they white, be they black; only see they be plain and warm and well made--skins well tawed; and have as many as you need . . . [but not] any such thing that is not proper for you to have.<sup>31</sup>

The Ancren Riwe is concerned with propriety, and is clear in its emphasis on the common knowledge of suitability in the last phrase of the passage quoted above, in which nuns are enjoined from wearing any such thing "that is not proper for

you to have." This rule also states, "If ye would dispense with wimples, have warm capes, and over them black veils."<sup>32</sup>

Propriety is also a concern in the Additions to the Rules of Syon. The rules include a description of the duties of the Chambress who is in charge of the nuns' wardrobe and the acquisition of both clothes and bedding, including the following:

cowles . . . wymples, veyles, crounes, pynnes, cappes . . . al suche other necessaryes after the disposition of the abbes, whiche in nowyse schal be ouer curyous, but playne and homly, witheoute weuyng of any straunge colours of sylke, golde, or syluer, hauynge al thyng of honeste and profyte, and nothyng of vanyte, after the rewle.<sup>33</sup>

Significant on this list of "proper" items are the pins because items designated as gold and silver "pins" are forbidden elsewhere; although the exact nature of the Syon pins is not specified, they are probably not decorative pins, but are the necessary pins, usually called tiring pins, for securing the headdress described in the Rule.

We find in this Rule a number of separate items that are part of a nun's headdress; besides wimple and veil there are listed cowls, crowns, and caps. And we note that these additions to the rule specifically forbid certain items of dress: colors of silk, gold and silver (all used in decorating such items as the belts or girdles mentioned in visitation records, but the gold and silver mentioned may refer to tiring pins made from these metals)--an indication

that luxurious decoration is one area in which some nuns have transgressed in the past, a supposition which convent visitation records bears out. Significantly, the restrictions mentioned are that articles of dress should not be "ouer curyous." It is interesting to note here that "curious," when applied to the clothing of the religious, carries a negative connotation. The MED gives the following definition: "2. Of things: carefully, skillfully, artistically, or elaborately designed or made; artistic, exquisite, fine; costly, sumptuous." According to the Rules of Syon, nothing worn by a religious should be over curious. Therefore, we assume that such items might be carefully or skillfully made, "well made" as the Ancren Riwe specifies, but once a garment becomes artistically or elaborately designed, exquisite, costly or sumptuous, it might be described as "over curious." Embroidery in silk, gold, and silver would certainly create this effect. It is a matter of degree, a point which is relevant to the Monk's "ful curious pyn," and to the Prioress' rosary and brooch. However, we note that these post-1415 Additions evince no concern for height of veil.

A more detailed description is given of the headcovering and headdress for Bridgettine nuns in the Rule of Syon written for the monastery founded in 1415 by Henry V based on the modified order of St. Augustine:<sup>34</sup> each nun was given a

hood of grey cloth. The sleeves of the hood were not to be longer than the middle finger. Normally the folds hung around the hand, but were bound to the arm by a clasp when manual services were performed. The headdress consisted of a "fillet" or band which surrounded forehead and chin, which was fastened by means of pins at the back of the head. A black linen veil was provided to be worn over this fillet arrangement, and this veil was to be fastened by three pins placed at the forehead and at the ears. A white linen cap on which five pieces of red cloth were sewn, "like five drops, allusive to the five wounds of our Saviour," was the last garment described as standard issue for these nuns. It was to be worn over the black linen veil.<sup>35</sup>

Garments for covering the head, then, in Syon House, would consist of a grey cloth cowl, the grey cloth probably indicating the locally produced fabric designated as russet whether or not it was of grey, beige or rusty hue, and a combination of black linen overveil, white linen band and wimple, and white linen cap with the symbolic red cloth decoration attached. Grey cloth and linen, as the accepted fabrics, denote humility as opposed to the vanity denoted by silk.

Again, no attention is given to height of fillet over eyebrows or to the style of the wimple except for the manner in which it was to be secured. And once again we find



nothing to indicate that Chaucer's Prioress' headdress is in any way inappropriate. Convent rules are concerned with providing a headdress and a habit that symbolize the Christian ideals, spiritual cleanness, espoused elsewhere in their rules. That the rules take care to prohibit expensive fabrics and decorations tells us the nature of the specific problems confronted in these convents. These same concerns are reflected in both the historical records of the period and in its literature.

Historical records provide plenty of evidence that nuns, prioress, and abbesses of the medieval period wore a variety of headdresses, some of which were worn specifically against their convent rules. The violations of rules usually consisted of wearing hoods trimmed or lined with unlawful types of fur, silken veils and wimples, and gold and silver tiring pins in their veils, all of which they would have acquired as private property since the convent itself would not have provided them. And we note here that Chaucer's description of the Prioress' headdress includes none of these clothing indiscretions.

An early example of inappropriate headdress is provided in an account of a group of nuns in the early eighth century who curled their hair with curling irons and exchanged the wearing of the dark head veil for white or colored headdresses that reached the ground and on which bows of

ribbon were sewn, as described and forbidden by St. Alchelm.<sup>36</sup> Both before and after this flagrant disregard for convent rules bishops and archbishops struggled to maintain suitability of convent dress, a struggle which continued past the years in which Chaucer was writing. Archbishop Greenfield, 1314, issued a decretum to the nuns of the Priory of Nunkeeling forbidding them to make themselves remarkable by wearing "anything unsuitable to religion."<sup>37</sup> In another example, Archbishop Melton visited the Priory of Nunburnholme in 1318 after which he directed the Prioress and nuns not to wear garments "which did not accord with religion."<sup>38</sup>

More specifically, the council of Oxford, 1222, forbade nuns to wear silken wimples, silver or gold tiring-pins in their veils; forbade garments made from burnet or other unlawful cloth. They were instructed to make the dimensions of their habits adequate but not superfluous,<sup>39</sup> an instruction which would not have been necessary but for excessive practices already in evidence. In 1237, monks, canons and nuns were forbidden habits of any color other than black. Nuns were forbidden dresses with trains and pleats (but no mention is made of pleats in the headdress), or any excessive length; they were forbidden, again, silver tiring-pins in their veils.<sup>40</sup> The lack of success of these admonitions may be imagined when we see that William of Wykeham finds it necessary to repeat the same rules in his

1387 injunctions to Romsey and Wherwell.<sup>41</sup>

Nuns were forbidden to wear silken veils time and again.<sup>42</sup> Still, we note that during a visitation of the Priory of the nuns of Rothwell in Lincoln, 1442, Sister Margaret Staple, the prioress, stated that she herself wore a silken veil.<sup>43</sup> Disregarding the danger to their souls, the nuns were able to satisfy their desires for fashionable garb through several means, all of which depart from the Rule of St. Benedict which forbade ownership of private property or receipt of private gifts of any sort:<sup>44</sup> their annual allowance of pocket money (peculium), pittances and gifts of money and goods, legacies, and wages from their own labor.<sup>45</sup> However, it is by means of legacies that much of the improper clothing was acquired. Clothing for the upper classes of this period was made of expensive fabrics and frequently was decorated with jewels, furs, and embroidery of silk, gold, and silver. Such clothing was listed in wills along with personal jewelry and household goods, and, often enough, it was bequeathed to a friend or relative in a convent. In 1404, even the Bishop of Durham, Walter Skirlaw, bequeathed to his sister, the Pricress Joan of Swine, a number of garments decorated and lined with fur, among them furred hoods: "'Item a robe of murrey cloth of Ypres (?yp'n) [sic] containing a mantle and hood furred with budge (?purg') [sic], another hood furred with ermine.'"<sup>46</sup>

We also note the record of visitation to the Priory of Nun Monkton on 30 April 1397 made by Thomas Dalby, Archdeacon of Richmond. During this visitation, objections were voiced to the Archdeacon that Prioress Margaret Fayrfax wore various kinds of furs, even grey, as well as silk veils. Records reveal that this Prioress had been the beneficiary of a will dated 7 June 1393, made by her brother John Fayrfax, rector of Prescott. He left her an "armilansa" of black cloth, furred with grey and "other valuables,"<sup>47</sup> which she apparently wore in the priory. Archdeacon Dalby's injunctions against such improprieties were issued 8 July 1397: "None were to use silk clothes, especially not silken veils nor valuable furs."<sup>48</sup> These injunctions included the mention of pleated tunics (laqueatis) which were forbidden, but no mention of pleating in regard to headdresses.

The account of the personal wardrobe, assembled for her veiling in the nineteenth year of Richard II's reign (22 June 1395-21 June 1396), for Joan Samborne, an Austin nun of Lacock, describes individual garments to be made for her and the amount of money to be spent on them. However, it also includes: "Item paid to John Bartelot for veils and linen cloth 102s,"<sup>49</sup> the high cost of which indicates that this item may have been for the convent supply, not just for Joan. However, official visitation records provide additional evidence that the prohibition of private property was

frequently disregarded.

The typical worldly nun or Prioress owned private property and wore it, as did Clemence Medforde, Prioress of Ankerwyke, in 1441. Here in the 1440's we find the first evidence that the height of a veil is a matter of propriety or impropriety. According to her nuns' complaints written fifty years after The Canterbury Tales,

The Prioress wears . . . silken veils, and she carries her veil too high above her forehead, so that her forehead, being entirely uncovered, can be seen of all. . . . Also she wears above<sup>50</sup> her veil a cap of estate furred with budge.

If this fifteenth-century Prioress, Clemence Medforde, defies her Rule concerning appropriate habit, she is but following in the erring footsteps of a long line of worldly nuns.

However, it was Alnwick's often cited injunction that contains not only the omnipresent prohibition against silk veils and silver pins (probably tiring pins since they are mentioned in conjunction with veiling), but also the first declaration that veils should come approximately to eyebrow level:

None of yow, the prioresse ne none of the couente, were no vayles of sylke ne no syluere pynnes . . . ne cappes of astate abowe your vayles . . . and that ye so atyre your heces that your vayles come downe nyghe to your yene.<sup>51</sup>

On the subject of veils, Alnwick was indeed fighting a losing battle, and it is one that is of particular interest

to a consideration of the Prioress' headdress and Chaucer's costume rhetoric. In 1440, after a visit to Langley Priory, Alnwick instructed the nuns as follows: "That henceforth they wear not silken veils. That they keep their veils [down] to their eye-brows. That they wear not their robes so long and flowing." The last two instructions contain matter not mentioned in the nuns' complaints as recorded in the visitation record, and thus must have arisen from Alnwick's own observations. In 1442, Alnwick visited the Priory of the nuns of Catesby, and commented that "the nuns do not wear their veils down to their [eyebrows], but do keep their foreheads bare." However, in the 1442-43 visitation of the Priory of Harrold, Dame Alice Decun complains to Alnwick that the nuns "all wear their veils spread up to the top of their foreheads," yet Alnwick's injunctions to these nuns contain no mention of veils. It is impossible not to wonder if Alnwick was being worn down by the collective disobedience of the nuns and had given up the attempt to fight this losing battle of the veil.<sup>52</sup>

One last set of restrictions on nuns' costumes must be considered before this survey of the historical background is complete: the fourteenth-century sumptuary laws. These laws, apparently never enforced, perhaps because unenforceable, provide rules based on factors of birth and income for the wearing of clothing. Here the economic factor is the

determining one and one which contributes to our understanding of contemporary perceptions of the Prioress' costume because it indicates the attitude of the Parliament toward dress of the religious.

The Prioress, if she possessed the wherewithal to spend £100 per year, according to the 1337 Sumptuary Law (and disregarding religious rules for the moment), might have worn fur on her clothes, as did the King and his immediate family. That some prioresses did so, on hoods and elsewhere, we already know. Others besides the royal family allowed to wear fur were church prelates, earls, barons, knights and ladies, and people of Holy Church "which may expend by year an Cli [£100 per year] of their benefices at the least, to the very value."<sup>53</sup> No one in England, Ireland, Wales, or Scotland, except the king, queen, and their children, was allowed to wear garments made of cloth woven outside of those countries,<sup>54</sup> a rule which would have eliminated the wearing of silk. With an income of less than £100, Madame Eglentyne would have been limited by the 1362 law (which apparently ignored or superceded the earlier law) to garments of cloth not exceeding 4 1/2 marks per whole cloth and could not display gold, silver, precious stones, or fur.<sup>55</sup> Silk and furs other than lamb, coney, cat and fox<sup>56</sup> were forbidden to esquires and gentlemen (and their families) below the rank of knights "who did not possess land or rents to the value of a

*hundred pounds a year*"<sup>57</sup> [my italics]. Thus, income per year, rather than status attained by birth alone, appears to be the criterion by which everyone, including people of Holy Church, may assume apparel belonging to a given level of society. And the texts of two later laws (one of which was not passed) repeat these and similar ideas.

Although this 1362 law was repealed the next year (1363-1364), perhaps signifying the impossibility of enforcement, it nevertheless clearly sets forth the attitudes toward social status, income, and clothing that were prevalent during Edward III's reign. Another attempt to regulate clothing by legislation was made by the Parliament of 1378-1379. Here the proposed law provided that cloth of silk might be worn by those who can spend £40 per year. Richard II, who was well known for his taste in unparalleled personal finery, was not interested in pursuing this legal course; he rejected this petition and it was not considered in the next parliament.<sup>58</sup> However, the proposal of it indicates that such ideas were still current among members of Parliament.

We have no records of court cases in which England's sumptuary laws were defended; the laws were apparently ineffective. Nevertheless, they represent attitudes toward propriety in dress by which we may measure the Prioress' costume. Chaucer might have described her veil and wimple as



being silken and thus indicated that she flouted both convent rules and secular attitudes against luxurious dress held for the majority of the fourteenth century by members of parliament. That he did not provide the Prioress with a silken veil is a significant fact since we are mindful of de Vinsauf's statement that the wise man observes what is said through what is left unsaid. In this case, such an omission supports the argument that Chaucer provides the Prioress with a headdress that is correct.

Historical records of Chaucer's time, as we have seen, pay no attention to the height of nuns' veils nor the particular style of their wimple. In short, they reveal concern for religious propriety as this criterion affects what were obviously considered the larger issues of the question of propriety: veils and wimples should be securely fastened and not with gold and silver tiring pins; both veils and wimples should not be made of expensive fabrics such as silk or burnet ("a wool-dyed cloth of superior quality, orig. of dark brown colour," according to the OED). The objective in regulating headdresses in this particular manner, and habits as a whole, was to demonstrate convent values such as humility and prudence, as opposed to pride and excessive attention to worldly things or vanity. Similarly, the literature of the Middle Ages pays little attention to nuns' headdresses other than to consider them as part of a

symbolic habit.

The Prioress' Headdress and Literary Descriptions  
of Nuns:

The medieval poem, "Why I Can't Be a Nun," presents the idea that the nun's habit, including her headdress, symbolized the virtues that were the spiritual goals of monastic life. The idea expressed here is that the habit stands as a sign of a nun's professed spiritual vows, and that her spiritual state should be consistent with the holiness of her habit:

Yowre barbe, your wympple and your vayle,  
Yowre mantelle and yowre devowte clothyng,  
Maketh men wyth-owten fayle  
To wene 3e be holy in levyng.  
And so hyt ys an holy thyng  
To bene in habyte reguler;  
Than, as by owtewarde array in semyng,  
Beth so wyth-in, my ladyes dere. (ll. 350-357)<sup>59</sup>

This inward-outward consistency as a way of life is further illustrated in Giovanni Bocaccio's comment that the veil, worn by abbess and nuns in his fictional convent in Lombardy, was called by the nuns "the psalter."<sup>60</sup>

In general medieval literature pays little specific attention to nuns' headdresses, although they may be mentioned in passing, such as the brief references in "priere d'amour d'une nonnain a un jeune adolescent" to "tourel, voille on guymple,"<sup>61</sup> and in "The Court of Love" to "the

nonnes with vaile and wymple plight."<sup>62</sup> Gautier De Coincy describes nuns wearing linen "well pleated and tied":

Mout sont sobres, blanches et netes  
 Et plus assez que vicletes  
 Defuient tai, fumier et fanc.  
 Mout sont lor chainze bel et blanc  
 Et bien ridé et bien lié<sup>63</sup>  
 Soëf flairant et delie.

Here, La Chastée as Nonnains describes the manner in which nuns' headdresses are properly secured, a description consistent with evidence provided from the visual arts of the period which we will discuss later. We find in Gautier's description the suggestion that Chaucer's line, "Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was," is a depiction of a wimple properly gathered or pleated at the ends for pinning or tying in place.

Conversely, when a nun in medieval literature fails to live up to her vows, the medieval poet frequently indicates this by reference to her inappropriate habit, a subject to be discussed in detail in the next chapter; in only one instance is a detailed reference made to a nun who wears an improper headdress. In the Boccaccio story mentioned above, the Lombardic nuns refer to their veil as "the psalter," but their actions belie their verbal reverence. Both a wayward nun and the abbess of this convent break their vows of chastity. This broken vow is symbolized when the abbess hastily places on her head not her "psalter," but the breeches of the priest who is her lover. Here the literary

character's outward appearance reveals her inward state. The wayward nun who has been caught in bed with her own lover is able to escape punishment when she calls attention to her abbess' telltale "coif" where "the points . . . hung down on this side and that."<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, for the majority of this story, both unchaste nun and abbess wear "false vestments," that is, habits which symbolize cleanness, a cleanness that is not reflected in their actions and, consequently, their souls.

An improper headdress wished for is described in "Plangit nonna fletibus," an eleventh-century song. There a nun longs for a bridal veil, ribbon or coronet to wear, as well as jewelry and rich furs.<sup>65</sup> Clearly, she finds the wearing of a nun's headdress unsatisfactory. However, we cannot agree with Jill Mann that the Prioress "resembles" this description of a worldly nun.<sup>66</sup>

We come now to an analysis of Chaucer's costume rhetoric concerning the subject of Madame Eglentyne's wimple: "Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was" (151). The OED defines "seemly" as "of a pleasing or goodly appearance, fair, well-formed, handsome, 'proper,'" and states that it was "in early use chiefly applied to a person of high rank or lineage," an application that would be consistent with its use in reference to a Prioress.<sup>67</sup> Thus, Chaucer tells us that the wimple, as his Prioress wears it, is both pleasing and

proper. Because Chaucer's assurance of seemliness has not been deemed adequate in the past, however, we must deal with the erroneous idea that the Prioress' wimple is "pynched" in an unseemly manner, that is, that this wimple "should have been plain, not fluted."<sup>68</sup>

We shall first deal with the most perjorative term in the quotation above. The word "flute" or "fluted," referring to clothing, does not appear in the MED as a Middle English word. It appears only as part of a definition, and then it is applied to the preparation of pastry crust, as in "pinching or fluting," a description that twentieth-century readers, but not medieval women, would understand. However, what we would describe as fluted or frilled veils were indeed a fashionable item. Such a veil, in the medieval period, was designated in the following ways: "goffered" veils, or "nebula headdress."<sup>69</sup> Examples of fluted, or frilled, headcoverings may be seen on monumental brasses at Wood Ditton Church, Cambridge, Spilsby Church, Lincolnshire, and East Harling Church, Norfolk,<sup>70</sup> as well as on the early fourteenth-century statue of St. Anne (Vienna, Staatsmuseum),<sup>71</sup> and worn by the donatrix in her picture of the Crucifixion page of a circa 1350 Missal possibly belonging to Louis de Male.<sup>72</sup> A goffered headdress may also be seen in the De Bobun Psalter, Bodleian Library MS. Auct. D. 4.4 (circa 1370), in a miniature in the initial D on the

left-hand side of fol. 223v. We are fortunate to have an example in a manuscript illumination, dated 1421, of a Benedictine nun's slightly frilled (in the twentieth-century understanding of that term) wimple; the artist shows only a tiny ripple effect along the lower and side edges of this garment (fig. 8).<sup>73</sup> However, it is important to note that the illumination of this frilled wimple also shows the fabric falling in folds that form lines of drapery. In other words, it is also "pynched" in the sense that it has been gathered at the upper corners and secured by pins (in a manner which we cannot see) and, therefore, the fabric falls in folds.

In any case, "fluted" is not the same as "pynched." If "flute" and "fluted" are not entries in the MED, the verb "pinchen" is, and is defined as follows: "of clthing or a wimple: pleated, gathered, having folds or tucks." The examples given for this definition include Chaucer's description of the Prioress, as well as the following quotation from "How a Louer Prayseth Hys Lady," from MS. Bodl. Fairfax 16, fol. 306 a (circa 1450): "The forheȝe playn and wommanysshe To discryue my hert slepyth for faut of englysshe..No thyng pynchyȝ lyke a nonnys wymple, Ne forowyȝ drye lyke a nabbesse gymple" (l. 326). In this example, the speaker is describing the absence of wrinkles in a forehead and uses the pinched wimple and furrowed "gymple" as similes for a wrinkled surface. Such a simile appeals to common

knowledge, the kind of common knowledge evident in numerous manuscript illuminations as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Thus, the MED bears out Sister Madeleva's contention that the Prioress' pinched wimple was a normal part of her habit, and not illustrative of vanity.<sup>74</sup> In addition, since the MED also defines pinching as being gathered or having folds, it tends to make this entire debate groundless, for one has only to look at the numerous manuscript illuminations of wimples<sup>75</sup> to see that when the illuminator is capable of portraying wrinkles, folds or gathers in a wimple, he does so. These are realistic touches, for it is impossible to drape fabric around the contours of the face and across the neck without creating folds or wrinkles. Formal pleating, in the twentieth-century sense, would be the most orderly treatment of such a garment, and folds or wrinkles the most natural. Usually, what we see in manuscript illuminations is what we will designate as draping (cloth hanging in loose folds), the larger folds produced in wimple fabric by contour of body and movement; however there were several other styles of wimples, all of which were considered to be not only proper, but even the epitome of prudence, as we shall see in the ensuing explication of evidence from the visual arts.

#### The Prioress' Headdress and the Medieval Visual Arts:

If we picture the Prioress' headdress against a background knowledge of the wide variety of headdresses presented in the visual arts of the Middle Ages, we may see clearly that Chaucer's description of her was in no way intended to be perjorative. As convent rules and historical records reveal, medieval nuns wore a variety of appropriate headdresses, and this is a circumstance which medieval literature in general reflects, with scant commentary upon. Ignoring the inappropriately fur-trimmed and silken headdresses, we see, in medieval visual arts, that even the appropriate headdresses were worn in a number of different styles and combinations. With this in mind, we return here to two questions: at the time of Chaucer's writing of the General Prologue, what was a proper height for a nun's veil, and how plain (to borrow a word from Coulton) should a proper wimple be? Answers to both questions may be found in a survey of nuns' headdresses found in the visual arts of the period, beginning with manuscript illuminations.

From a survey of medieval illuminations depicting nuns we can ascertain, first, how they are depicted and answer the question, is there a typical nun of manuscript illumination tradition? And second, we can determine what kinds of variations are present in this tradition. A survey of manuscript illuminations in serious didactic works answers



these questions. It reveals that the typical nun of visual art is depicted as being ideally beautiful in facial features and figure, according to the medieval aesthetic described by Geoffroi de Vinsauf. The most interesting data found in this survey of illuminations is the great variety in headdresses that is revealed and it is a variety that includes several styles in wimples including those that are draped, tucked, pleated, and frilled, as well as veils worn at a variety of heights above the eyebrows, most of which are far enough above the eyebrows for an observer to be able to judge the size of forehead beneath. Thus, we may say that the typical nun of manuscript illumination possesses ideal loveliness and this loveliness is framed in veil and wimple made and worn in a number of different styles. Both of these answers are relevant to a discussion of the manner in which Chaucer portrays the Prioress, because here we find the visual evidence that supplies an explanation for the question of propriety in Madame Eglentyne's veil and wimple.

Before presenting the evidence from manuscript illuminations, however, it is necessary to discuss the pitfalls inherent in using such a source. We shall never know what kinds of instructions were given to the illuminators of most medieval manuscripts. It is, however, commonly known that there were from time to time discrepancies between the written text and the illumination

depicting it. Therefore, we could not cite the Ellesmere manuscript illuminations as visual proof of what Chaucer's pilgrims looked like and wore even if the date of this manuscript was 1387 instead of 1410-1430. What we can be certain of when examining manuscript illuminations that are neither caricatures nor grotesques is that the artist drew on both artistic tradition and personal experience in his work and, on occasion, both would be subject to his ability to depict what he knew and had seen. We must assume, for example, that the depiction of a halo, behind the figure of a nun-saint, or the crown on the head of such a figure known to be of royal blood, stems from artistic tradition, while the arrangement and style of her headdress may derive either from artistic tradition in which a "standard" or "ideal" nun is portrayed or from experience, generalized or particular.

In a small sample of illuminations, we may see the range of variation in the number of headdress garments worn by Benedictine nuns. The first example derives from thirteenth-century illuminations of Benedictine nuns which have been cut out and pasted in a French Book of Hours (circa 1430-1450), B.M. Additional MS. 28,784B. The Benedictine nun on fol. 7 wears a black habit, black overveil, and white wimple and underveil. On fol. 10, however, the same costume is reproduced, but without the wimple (fig. 6). Another Benedictine nun may be seen in Breviarium Romanum (undated),

B.M. Harley MS. 2975, fol. 73v. Here, a nun kneels by the crucified Christ. She wears a black habit, black overveil, and a white wimple showing draping. She wears no underveil; her forehead is completely uncovered and delicate shading in a flesh tone shows that her brow is wrinkled. A final example is that of the nun shown in the English Bodleian Library MS. Auct. D.4.4, De Bohun Psalter (circa 1370), fol. 219v. She wears no veil or wimple; her forehead is bare, although a hood attached to her black cloak covers her head. The complete headdress for these nuns consists of white wimple and underveil, covered by black overveil. The wimple is consistently depicted as falling in draped horizontal folds, and the veils are portrayed falling in linear folds that indicate the softness of the fabric, and general shape of the head beneath.

The nuns in Breviarium Romanum and De Bohun Psalter are not the only one to be painted with bare forehead. The nuns in the thirteenth-century French Bodleian MS. Bodley 270<sup>b</sup>, fol. 12 c 2, have bare foreheads. In addition, they wear no wimples; wimples did not become fashionable until the latter half of the thirteenth century<sup>76</sup> and this illumination may depict either the nuns' headdress in pre-wimple state or their resistance to a new style. This illumination depicts the strife of the good (represented by monks and nuns) and the bad (men shown wearing Jewish hats). Other nuns with

bare foreheads may be seen in an illumination of a later date. A fourteenth-century manuscript (circa 1330-1350) of Jacobus,<sup>77</sup> Omne Bonum, B.M. Royal MS. 6Evi, includes an illumination of a Benedictine abbess instructing her nuns, fol. 27 (fig. 5). The abbess wears a white wimple which is draped; her veil is black and she wears no white underveil. The forehead of this abbess is completely uncovered as is that of each of the seven nuns being instructed.

An additional detail revealed in manuscript illuminations is the position of a nun's veil relative to the eyebrows. Another early fourteenth-century manuscript, a Psalter in Latin, B.M. Royal MS. 2Bvii, provides an illumination of a Benedictine abbess blessing a nun, fol. 219. This is a line drawing with grey shading, but it is clear that both wimples are draped, and the veils of both nuns are raised, translating the difference in scale from illumination size to lifesize, an estimated one to two inches above the eyebrows.<sup>78</sup> Veils worn this high above the eyebrows are also shown in a northern French Bodleian Library MS. Douce 118, a Psalter from the second half of the thirteenth century, fols. 25v, 85, and 136v, and in the 1454 French work, Bodleian MS. Laud. Misc. 570, fol. 16. The veil is worn by the figure of a nun representing Continenace in a scene with other virtues.

B.M. Harley MS. 2962, Horae beatae Virginis cum

calendario, orationibus ad sanctos & aliis (undated), provides an illumination of another Benedictine nun with a slightly raised veil, a picture of Gertrude portrayed as a saint, fol. 41 (fig. 2). She wears a black overveil that either has a white edge, or else the artist meant to portray a white underveil. She also wears a white draped wimple. There is a space of forehead visible between eyebrows and the edge of her veil. Allowing again for the difference in scale, approximately one inch of her forehead shows, enough for an observer to estimate the breadth of her forehead. Another noteworthy detail, since we are interested in Chaucer's Prioress, consists of the manner in which the illuminator has chosen to portray the saint's overcoming of vice. Several portraits of saints in this manuscript show them standing over various small monsters. St. Gertrude's portrait shows her standing by four tiny mice, one of which is at her hemline, and one is scampering up her crozier.<sup>79</sup>

Another Benedictine abbess, St. Ethelburger, is pictured with raised veil in Horae Beatae Virginis, B.M. Harley MS. 2900 (late 1420's), fol. 68v (fig. 7). Clearly, the illuminator is combining traditions here--the accuracy of his portrayal of a Benedictine abbess is combined with the symbolic tradition in which saints are portrayed in crown and royal robes.<sup>80</sup> She is shown with a gold halo and crown over a black veil, under which approximately two inches of forehead

shows. Her white wimple shows draping.

The picture of a complete Benedictine headdress (i. e. one including all of the usual garments) with veil reaching down to the eyebrows may be seen, finally, in a very late manuscript: the early sixteenth-century Horae Blessed Marie Virgines, Sec. Usus Sarum, B.M. Kings MS. 9, fol. 64v. This is a picture of Saint Etheldreda as abbess carrying crozier and book. She wears a white tunic, black cloak and overveil, and white underveil and draped wimple. Her veil comes down to her eyebrows. In this manuscript executed in Flanders, St. Etheldreda is the epitome of delicate decorum.

As we have seen, there is considerable variation in the way in which the veiling of Benedictine nuns is portrayed in manuscript illuminations. The variety described above is both confirmed and shown to be even greater, when we include illuminations of nuns of other orders. For example, the Horae Sanctae Crucis of the latter part of the fifteenth century, B.M. Additional MS. 28,784A, includes pasted-in thirteenth-century illuminations that show fol. 59 a Carmelite nun whose veil is approximately two inches higher than her eyebrows. A variation on the raised veil is provided by the English Bodleian Library MS. Laud Lat. 114, fol. 148. This is a Psalter, from the Augustinian nunnery of Acornbury, which was originally intended for the nunnery of St. Mary and St. Bernard (Lacock? Wilts.).<sup>81</sup> Fol. 148 dates

from the third quarter of the thirteenth century and contains an illumination of a nun wearing a black overveil, white draped wimple, and white band of fabric across her forehead, the lower edge of which is one and a half to two inches above her eyebrows.

The same amount of forehead is showing in the fifteenth-century illumination of St. Birgitta contained in The heavenly revelations unto blessed Bride, princess of Nerice in the realm of Swecie, B.M. Cotton MS. Claud. B.i. Fol. 117 portrays St. Birgitta in black habit, and white draped wimple and veil. Her gold halo attests to her saintliness. Another picture of her appears on fol. 34. The contour of her forehead shows plainly in the draping of her veil around her lovely delicate face.<sup>82</sup>

Even the model abbess Heloise wears a slightly raised veil, as depicted by the illuminator of Poestes De Charles, Duc D'Orleans (circa 1500), which includes "Epitres de L'Abbesse Heloys du Paraclit," B.M. Royal MS. 16Fii, a manuscript probably executed in England in Flemish style. Fol. 137 shows Heloise wearing a white tunic and draped wimple, with black overveil which seems to be bordered in white although the artist may be attempting to show an underveil, and black cloak. Her veil is raised approximately an inch over her eyebrows and the modeling of its fabric reveals some forehead contours.

An interesting variation in wimples may be seen in Liber Animarum capituli monasterii Sancti Quirini Nussiensis (1421), B.M. Additional MS. 15,456. Fol. 2 (fig. 8) reveals four Benedictine nuns praying. They wear black habits, black overveils, and very interesting white underveils and wimples, which have a tiny ripple around the face and bottom edges, such as the slightest goffering produces.<sup>83</sup>

Yet another style of wimple may be found in illuminations of the fifteenth century. A saintly nun in the Sforza Book of Hours, B.M. Additional MS. 34294, p. 420 (late fifteenth century), wears a black veil, and a white wimple that is moulded tightly to her neck in tiny folds or tucks (fig. 4). The other nuns with her wear the same headdress with moulded wimple. The saintly nun is shown a second time wearing the same style of wimple (p. 510). The moulding of this style of wimple is achieved by means of many tiny tucks or folds which allow the wimple to adhere to the contours of the neck.

From this sample of manuscript illuminations we may get some idea of the lack of standardization in nuns' headdresses. They sometimes lack underveil, sometimes overveil, sometimes wimple. Where loose wimples are shown, they are invariably shown falling into draped contours; that is, they are "pynched." Veils, too, drape and sometimes reveal the contours of the wearer's head, and this happens



more frequently as the fifteenth century is approached. A veil worn down to the eyebrows is not to be found earlier than in late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century English and French manuscripts of the British Museum Library and Bodleian Library.<sup>84</sup> Commonly, nuns' veils in these medieval illuminations are worn at a height of one to two inches above the eyebrows--high enough for an observer to be able to judge the breadth of forehead beneath.<sup>85</sup> And we add to this generalization concerning height of veiling the idea that there was also variation in wimple styles, beginning early in the fifteenth century, as witness the fifteenth-century jewel of this sampling which gave us the wimple with the slightly rippled edge. Saints, abbesses instructing nuns, and ordinary nuns, all wear these styles in illuminations in serious didactic works. The artists were either portraying the appearance of a "traditional" or "ideal" nun, in which case we must assume that such headdresses were considered to be appropriate frames for this beauty, or the illuminators were portraying nuns' headdresses as they had seen them in actuality, and presenting them as being acceptable. We can only suppose these styles must have been acceptable until after Chaucer's time, since we know from visitation records that the objections to slightly raised veils did not manifest themselves until the middle of the fifteenth century.

This sample of manuscript illuminations has been chosen

from religious and didactic works, rather than from satirical works. And yet, it is in a satire that we find a manuscript illumination which portrays another nun with her veil worn down to her eyebrows. The circa 1490 copy of Le Roman de la Rose, B.M. Harley MS. 4425, contains an illumination of Strayned Abstinence, leman of Faus Semblant, fol. 108 (fig. 1).<sup>86</sup> Strayned Abstinence is dressed as a nun wearing draped white wimple and veil, and a black cloak. No tunic shows. She carries walking staff, book and red (coral?) rosary beads. Outwardly, all is correct; inwardly, all is false, as we know from her name and actions. And this is as it should be, for it is an apt portrayal of the beloved of Faus Semblant: a perfect exterior covering a false interior. The artist does not paint her in wide habit (showing the excessive use of fabric), or bared forehead; her veil covers her eyebrows. The semblance must be perfect in order for it to be a "false vestment" giving the semblance of holiness to the false person wearing it, the suitable object of Faus Semblant's love.<sup>87</sup> Apparently, by the time this illumination was painted, in 1490, the idea of the eyebrows as marking the appropriate level for a nun's veil had finally taken root, making it desirable for the illuminator to present Strayned Abstinence, wearing "false vestments," in suitably decorous headdress. However, another copy of Le Roman de la Rose (circa 1400), a French Bodleian Library MS. Douce 371,

depicts Hypocrisy (Papelardie) on fol. 4, wearing nun's garb including a white draped wimple and a black overveil which completely covers her forehead down to the eyebrows.<sup>88</sup> (An earlier French manuscript of this same work, dated early fifteenth century, shows Contrainte-Abstinence wearing a black veil or hood over white forehead band that is positioned approximately two inches above her eyebrows. This illumination is on fol. 77 of Bodleian Library MS. Douce 188.) In contrast to the satirical illumination in the 1490 Le Roman de la Rose manuscript, which may be making a special point of the lowered veil, are the nuns in illuminations of both satiric and didactic manuscripts described above, in which the full variety of the illuminator's observations from life might be portrayed, and apparently accepted by patrons and/or church.

An idea argued earlier in this chapter that Chaucer's description of the Prioress is consistent with de Vinsauf's rhetorical tradition and the medieval concept of ideal beauty is further supported by one other generalization derived from this sampling of illuminated manuscripts: nuns are consistently painted as possessing ideal beauty; the face (and figure) of every nun depicted is as lovely as the artist's talent allows. Their features are delicate; their mouths small. It is clearly traditional to depict nuns as possessing such ideal beauty, even when the observance of

universal beauty among the orders cannot possibly have been within the illuminators' experience. The extent to which this ideal beauty of nuns is portrayed may be seen in Le Sacre, Couronnement Et Entree de Claude, Royne de France (1517), B.M. Cotton MS. Titus A.xvii, fol. 33 (fig. 9). Here four Dominican nuns, representing the four cardinal virtues, are painted in the lower register. They wear black tunics, white mantles, white wimples, and either a white underveil, or else a black overveil with a white border positioned approximately one and a half to two inches above their eyebrows. The black overveil has a tab extending over the top and ending at the front edge. The nuns' faces are conventionally pretty, and this prettiness is enhanced by the contrast provided in the depiction of seven women painted above the nuns. These seven women are figures of women of the court arranged three on either side of Claude de France's daughter who is in the center. These seven figures all wear elaborate secular costumes. Although their costumes are delightful, the artist has carefully given these secular figures markedly less refined features; this is particularly true of the six ladies of the court. The feature which is most pointedly different is the nose, which appears to jut rather than to flow naturally from the contours of the face of each secular lady.

In further answer to the questions, concerning height of

veil and plainness of wimple, posed at the beginning of this chapter, we can say that the typical nun of manuscript illumination illustrates the medieval concept of ideal feminine beauty. As a frame for her delicate facial features, the typical nun in manuscript illumination usually wears a draped white wimple, although there are exceptions as mentioned above. Such a draped wimple, as plain as may be found in medieval visual arts, would have been aptly described by the adjective "pynched," in fourteenth-century fashion terminology. In addition, over her head, the typical nun wears one or two veils which usually, but not always, cover her forehead down to within one to two inches of her eyebrows. Such a collective portrait is consistent with Chaucer's decription of the Prioress, and we may conclude that, if he was not consciously emulating this manuscript tradition, neither was he violating it.

Chaucer's knowledge of the Prioress' fair forehead might well have stemmed from casual observation of a proper veil, pinned properly in place. The visual arts tradition as represented in illuminated medieval manuscripts provides ample evidence that nuns' veils were scarcely ever worn down to their eyebrows. Although we cannot guarantee that illuminators faithfully represented what the writer of the text intended with his words, nevertheless, we can expect that a survey of depictions of nuns in these works would

produce a reliable record of the typical nun of artistic tradition and include in matters of detail aspects derived from the artists' experience. Assuming illuminators painted what they had seen, sometimes even when it was at variance with the text they illuminated, it is safe to say that nuns wearing veils at one to two inches above their eyebrows were an ordinary sight. A veil worn in this manner affords an observer ample view of the breadth of a forehead; the drape of soft fabric could easily reveal the height. Thus, it would not have been necessary that the Prioress wear a veil raised exceptionally high for Chaucer the pilgrim to comment as he does on her fair forehead.

The illuminated manuscript tradition then, offers one possible explanation for Chaucer's comments concerning the Prioress' forehead and by implication her veil. The pilgrim-poet could judge the dimensions of her forehead from the part which would normally be visible. However, a brief glance at B.M. Harley MS. 4425 (fig. 1) and B.M. MS. Harley 621, in part, provides another explanation. Here, although the foreheads are not completely uncovered, the shape and height of the forehead is discernible, because the fabric used for the veil is soft enough to adhere to the contours of the head. Such modeling of fabric also appears in a Robert Campin portrait, circa 1430, and in a Rogier van der Weyden portrait, possibly of his wife, of the same time, in which

the veil worn by the subject is slightly transparent,<sup>89</sup> but the transparent style only serves to emphasize the modeling, a phenomenon which is apparent in earlier pictures.

An additional answer to the question of the disposition of the Prioress' veil and how Chaucer knew the width of her forehead is suggested in the pursuit of Ernest Gallo's argument that Byzantine art is perhaps the source of Geoffroi de Vinsauf's dictum that the outline of the head should be traced by Nature's compass. If the Byzantine canon was the standard adopted by medieval painters, and Gallo cites Erwin Panofsky's Meaning in the Visual Arts as proof that it was, then it might well be the standard which Geoffroi de Vinsauf is following. So goes Gallo's argument.<sup>90</sup> The Byzantine standard adopted by medieval painters and rhetoricians could be a standard Chaucer followed as well. One has only to examine several plates of Byzantine madonnas to see how Chaucer could know how broad the Prioress' forehead was; the shapes, height and breadth of the madonnas' foreheads are clearly visible beneath the fabric of their veils.<sup>91</sup>

Depictions of personified virtues portrayed as nuns in the visual arts of the Middle Ages provide additional support for the idea that there is no implication of improper veiling in Chaucer's description of the Prioress' forehead. Also they provide additional support for many of the points already discussed in this chapter. Figures of the virtues,

as well as early manuscript depictions of nuns, support the contention that the rule that a nun's veil should be worn down to her eyebrows was a relatively late phenomenon in the medieval period. The one statement clearly stating this rule is Alnwick's, dated 1440, as described earlier in this chapter; prior to this time, visitation records of the fourteenth century evince continual reminders only that veils and wimples of silk were forbidden to nuns. The evidence from the visual arts, however, suggests that completely bare foreheads were acceptable for nuns until the middle of the thirteenth century, possibly later, after which women's foreheads were covered according to the fashion in headcoverings for both nuns and secular women. This fashion of wimple swathing the neck and veil covering some of the forehead began to decline in vogue around the middle of the fourteenth century,<sup>92</sup> having lasted approximately a century although it was retained by nuns, widows, and older women, who did not adopt the new secular styles which revealed the entire forehead and neck. Clearly, fashion changes occurred and were adopted at a very slow rate during the Middle Ages. Not until approximately fifty years after the time in which Chaucer wrote the portrait of the Prioress do we find a record of the fact that it was necessary to enjoin nuns to keep their foreheads covered. However, Chaucer, who must have seen many Virtues figures in the visual arts of his and



previous centuries and who was familiar with the rhetorical tradition of portraying spiritual beauty in terms of feminine beauty, a tradition which always included mention of the forehead, may have felt obligated to mention the Prioress' forehead, whether or not he intended his audience to understand that her entire forehead was visible, and to indicate that it conformed to the standards of such conventional beauty. Similarly, that he does mention it in such a way is further proof that he was drawing on the virtues tradition as manifested in both literature and the visual arts. That he follows this tradition argues against the idea that he is portraying the visual aspect of the portrait, the Prioress' physical appearance, as being somehow incorrect in the manner of veil or wimple.

A survey of the nuns' costumes depicted in twelfth- and thirteenth-century virtues figures sheds additional light on the question of Chaucer's Prioress' veil. Again, a wide variety of nuns' headdresses may be found in these representations. For example, the nun on the ladder of virtues in Herrade de Landsberg's Hortus Deliciarum wears a white band across the upper part of her forehead and a short blue veil covers her head. She wears no covering wimple on her neck.<sup>93</sup> Her headdress is consistent with the general style of her period. The nun-virtue sculptures, however, generally wear only a headcovering, and frequently it is part

of an all-encompassing cloak or mantle. Foreheads and necks are bare. Indeed, were it not for the obvious contrast with the secular costumes of the accompanying vice figures, we should miss the fact of their being dressed as nuns altogether. For example, at Amiens Cathedral, the quatrefoil containing the figure of Prudence shows her short veil wrapped around her head with the end thrown over her shoulder (fig. 10). Chastity, identified by the sign of Virgo, the sheaf of wheat she holds in one hand, has a similar headdress. Both have bare foreheads. These plain headdresses are highlighted by the contrast provided by the secular headdresses shown in the corresponding vice portraits which frequently accompany depictions of the virtues. Lust (fig. 11), the vice opposed to Chastity (fig. 12), is depicted by two figures in secular clothing: a man kissing a woman who wears a headdress of the kind fashionable at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth century,<sup>94</sup> a style that is fashioned from a linen band wrapped around the crown of the head (which gives the appearance of what twentieth-century fashion editors describe as a pillbox) and that has another linen band (a barbe) attached at each side covering each ear and going under the chin. Violence, a woman shown striking a servant, also wears this secular headdress, as do some of the vice figures depicted in the sculpture at Strasbourg Cathedral (fig. 13).

Other female figures, such as Avarice at Amiens, Luxury at Chartres, and others are bare headed. Both secular headress, distinctive in form, and uncovered head clearly contrast with the modest head covering worn by all the virtue figures depicted in nun's dress.

We also understand, from a survey of virtues figures portrayed as nuns, that the wearing of a wimple signifies that modesty becoming to a nun and to the virtue of prudence. It was a conservative garment in any of its various styles: draped, slightly ruffled, tucked or pleated, and was even more conservative after it was no longer fashionable toward the end of the fourteenth century. It is necessary to recall here that while convent visitation records repeatedly decried silk wimples and veils, gold and silver tiring pins, nowhere do they specify the style of wimple to be worn. Further, we note that in B.M. Additional MS. 28,162, fols. 4-10, Prudence is the only one of the personified virtues to wear a wimple as well as crown and veil (fig. 3). The significance of deviation is underscored when we note that all of the virtues in these illuminations wear fur-lined cloaks except Sobriety. Again in B.M. Cotton MS. Titus A.xvii, fol. 37v, Prudence wears a wimple when other virtues do not and in B.N. MS. 9,186, fol. 304, among the four cardinal virtues Prudence and Fortitude wear wimples while the other two virtues do not wear this fashion that had

been out of vogue for more than a century, during which time it had become the hall-mark of nuns, widows, and the elderly. Thus, we may conclude that the wearing of a wimple of any style was a sign connoting prudence,<sup>95</sup> modesty, piety, and as such, remained a part of the habits of nuns long after secular fashion gave up this garment, indeed, until the middle of the twentieth century.

Consequently, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, personified virtues, most frequently Prudence, continued to be frequently depicted in nuns' garb, including veil and wimple. Prudence wears a black habit, white wimple and veil in Maitre du Mansel's Fleur des histoires, Brussels, Bibliotheque Royale, MS. 9232, fol. 448v.<sup>96</sup> And in N. Oresme's Ethique d'Aristote, vol. ii (circa 1454), Rouen, Bibliotheque Municipale, MS. 927, fol. 17v, Faith wears a black and white habit with white wimple and veil; she carries a church on her head, and a book in her hand.<sup>97</sup> Ecclesiastical Power, too, is dressed as a nun with veil and wimple, although she also wears a crown, in the French, mid-fifteenth-century Bodleian MS. Bodl. 338, fol. 1. And once more we must mention the four Dominican nuns who depict the four cardinal virtues on fol. 33 of B.M. Cotton MS. Titus A.xvii (fig. 9). Continence, too, is appropriately painted wearing a black habit, a white wimple and veil showing two inches of forehead, in Bodl. MS. Laud. Misc. 570,

fol. 16, which is a late copy of a 1403 manuscript made for the Duke of Berry by Jehan de Courtecuisse.<sup>98</sup> Here Continence is one of the subsidiary virtues belonging to Temperance. Both of the other two subsidiary virtues, and Temperance as well, wear secular clothing and neither wimples nor veils. We note, also, the depiction of Glad Poverty, in Boccaccio de Casu illustrium virorum et foeminarum, B.M. MS. Harley 621, fol. 71, who wore clothing made in a nun-like style including draped wimple and veil showing approximately two inches of forehead above the nose but covering the sides of her forehead completely, although her tunic was orange. This costume is cited by Joseph Strutt as being illustrative of a nun's habit, and he reproduces a line drawing of it in his plate CXXXIV. (We have to wonder here if this might not be the artist's attempt to equate Glad Poverty with Prudence who is so often depicted, when dressed in secular clothing, wearing orange, possibly representing the fabric designated as russet.) Chastity, too, is depicted as a nun in the French manuscript of Le Roman de la Rose (1487-95), Bodleian MS. Douce 195, fol. 63v. Here Chastity wears black robes, white draped wimple, and black veil with white lining that reveals approximately one inch of her forehead. Similarly, Chastity is again depicted with white draped wimple and headband positioned two inches above the eyebrows on fol. 26v of the early fifteenth-century French Bodleian Library MS.

Douce 188 of Le Roman de la Rose.

It is clear that the proper attributes of the typical virtuous nun appear as personified virtues in the visual arts of the medieval period, and they do so frequently enough to say that the connection was an ordinary one to make. Nowhere is the connection between certain virtues and the typical virtuous nun, who stands as a symbol of these virtues, more clear than in the correspondence in appearance between the Ellesmere MS. depiction of the Prioress and Second Nun<sup>99</sup> and that of the statue of Discipline (fig. 14) now in the Museum of London, formerly part of the facade of the London Guildhall. Both date from 1400-1430, and both reveal a woman wearing a nun's habit which includes a pleated wimple. The pleats are vertical. They are quite definitely pleats, an attempt to handle the fullness of the fabric that was more usually allowed to fall naturally into drapery. We are left with the fact that such a style must have been acceptable for a nun at that time, for a nun carved in stone to represent Discipline, in conjunction with the three other Cardinal Virtues, must be considered as a serious representation of correct habit in every sense of that term.

From a survey of the tradition of personified virtues depicted as nuns we may see again that styles for nuns' headaddresses changed slowly over the centuries, but they did change. Nevertheless, we may assume that those costumes worn

by nun-virtues figures would represent appropriate habits. We cannot know if a pleated wimple, acceptable on the Guildhall statue of Discipline in 1430, would have been considered appropriate on a living Prioress in 1387, even if we may posit, by analogy, that the Ellesmere illuminator, working at the same time as the Guildhall sculptor, intended no scandal in so depicting Chaucer's nuns wearing a wimple like that worn by Discipline. It is reasonable to assume that either the illuminator or his sponsor, perhaps both, found nothing exceptional in Chaucer's description of Madame Eglentyne's veil. In addition, all the evidence points to the fact that a wimple of any style, made out of suitable fabric, was considered a prudent garment. Thus Chaucer's Prioress, wearing a wimple "pynched" "ful semyly", would have been dressed appropriately. As for her veil, we may assume propriety there as well, since the only suggestion to the contrary is amply refuted by evidence that Chaucer's description of the Prioress' forehead derives from his following of artistic tradition, rhetorical and visual, rather than from contemporary convent costume transgressions. Such recorded veiling transgressions as occurred in regard to height of veil on forehead were approximately fifty years too late to inspire Chaucer's portrait. Had Chaucer wished to portray Madame Eglentyne in inappropriate headdress he would have been far more likely to

have dressed her in a silken veil and wimple, pinned in place with gold or silver tiring pins, since these were the commonly known transgressions of nuns which would have been recognized by an audience of his time. Instead, keeping in mind that "wimple" is a term that frequently was used to mean what this study describes as both veil and wimple, we are left with Chaucer's words:

Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was. (151)



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kevin S. Kiernan, "The Art of the Descending Catalogue, and a Fresh Look at Alisoun," Chaucer Review, 10 (1975), 3, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Florence H. Ridley, The Prioress and the Critics (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1965), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Eileen Power, Medieval People, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925), pp. 77-78. Of Madame Eglentyne's veil, Power states,

If she had been wearing her veil properly, it [the forehead] would have been invisible, and the father of English poetry may be observed discreetly but plainly winking the other eye when he puts in that little touch.

Power includes the brooch and "that fetis cloak of hers" to this list of garment indiscretions, in her equation of Madame Eglentyne with historical prioresses who transgressed their rules. In defense of her critical stance, Power cites nuns' complaints about their prioress (Clemence Medforde, Prioress of Ankerwyke, in 1441), written fifty years after The Canterbury Tales:

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, and she wears furs of vair. Also she wears shifts of cloth of Rennes, which costs sixteen pence the ell. Also she wears kirtles laced with silk and tiring pins of silver and silver gilt and has made all the nuns wear the like. Also she wears above her veil a cap of estate, furred with budge. Item, she has on her neck a long silken band, in English a lace, which hangs down below her breast.

<sup>4</sup> G. G. Coulton, Medieval Panorama (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1944), p. 276.

<sup>5</sup> F. N. Robinson, ed., The Poetical Works of Chaucer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), p. 756, n. 151.

<sup>6</sup> Hope Phyllis Weissman, "Antifeminism and Chaucer's Characterization of Women," in Geoffrey Chaucer: A Collection of Original Articles, ed. George D. Economou (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), pp. 94-96, 104.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald Morgan, "The Universality of the Portraits in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales," English Studies, 58 (1977), 489.

<sup>8</sup> S. T. Knight, "'Almoost a spanne brood,'" Neophilologus, 52 (1968), 179.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Hardy Long Frank, "Chaucer's Prioress and the Blessed Virgin," Chaucer Review, 13 (1979), 346.

<sup>10</sup> Frank, 348, 350, 354.

<sup>11</sup> Frank, 355.

<sup>12</sup> See Stella Mary Newton and Mary M. Giza, "Frilled Edges," Textile History, 14, no. 2 (1983), 141-152.

<sup>13</sup> Mary G. Houston, Medieval Costume in England & France: The 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1965), p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> Joan Evans, Dress in Mediaeval France (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 23-24, 36.

<sup>15</sup> Power, Medieval People, p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> Sister M. Madeleva, "Chaucer's Nuns," in Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays (Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1965).

<sup>17</sup> Kevin S. Kiernan, "The Art of the Descending Catalogue, and a Fresh Look at Alisoun," Chaucer Review, 10 (1975), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ernest Gallo, The 'Poetria Nova' and its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine (The Hague, Paris: Mouton and Co., 1971), pp. 44-45.

<sup>19</sup> See Gallo, pp. 182-187.

<sup>20</sup> Guibertus, Tornacensis, Sermones ad oēs status de novo correcti & emendati (Ab. s. Guenyard: Lugduni [1510?]). See especially "Ad Moniales et religiosas Sermo," as it

incorporates the texts of Song of Solomon II, IV, and VI.

21 Gautier de Coinci, "Le sermon en vers de la chasteé as nonains," Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemian Toimituksia: Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae (Helsinki: [no publisher given], 1938), Sarja B. nro. 38, no. 10, pp. 145-146, ll. 404-406. Also see Jill Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), p. 136, for a discussion of these lines.

22 Gautier de Coinci, pp. 180-181.

23 Mann, pp. 134-137.

24 The Revelations of Saint Birgitta, ed. from the fifteenth-century manuscript in the Garret Collection in Princeton University Library by William Patterson Cumming, E.E.T.S. O.S. 178 (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 1-2. Pp. 17-20 include a discussion of the three types of fabric considered for use by a spouse of Christ: linen, wool or leather, and silk. The analogy is drawn between proper types of behavior and these types of fabric. Silk is rejected as being unsuitable.

25 G. G. Coulton, Five Centuries of Religion (Cambridge: University Press, 1923), p. 158. Note, also, Mace, in Rousselot, "La sainte Vierge dans la poésie française du moyen âge," Revue du clergé française, 42 (1905), 474-475. He was a French curate of the first part of the fourteenth-century, who treated the Virgin in that manner coexistent in poems of courtly love:

En li s'esforssa tant nature  
Et tant monde et nete et pure  
De totes grans bontez la fist  
Que nules tache en le ne mist  
Une blancher ert en son vis  
Tot aussi comme flor de lis  
Et par de sus ot color fine  
Tot autresi comme rousine  
Les sorciz ot fins a devise  
Q'une voye blanche devise  
Le nes par desoz si tretiz  
Qu'il n'ert trop grantz ne trop petiz  
Si cheviol n'estient pas sor  
Estre semblant de fin or  
Ses cos estoit fez a esteuure  
Qu'il ressembloit estre d'inuyre  
Le front avoit blanc et benigne  
Qu'il ressembloit de color signe

Ou noif nouellement negee  
 Qui n'est marchee ni follee  
 Et li dui oyl quel ot ou front  
 Ainssi comme II estoilles sont  
 Les dens blanches a grans mervoilles  
 Par dedans les leures vermoilles  
 Eraint si posees en ordre  
 Que nus ni trovoit que remordre  
 En chascune de ses .II. mains  
 Avoit .V. doiz dougez et plains  
 Et toz ses autres membres ot  
 Au meaux fez que nature sot  
 Et autresi comme ses cors  
 Fu de beaute plains par dehors  
 Aussi fu ses cuers repleniz  
 De totes vertuz et garniz.

26 Pomerium Sermonum de B. Virgine, pars III, art. ii, c. I, quoted by Coulton, Five Centuries of Religion, pp. 158-161.

27 Alan of Lille, Anticlaudianus, or the Good and Perfect Man, trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1973), pp. 56-58.

28 "The Book of Physiognomy" in The World of Piers Plowman, ed. and trans. Jeanne Krochalis and Edward Peters (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), p. 222, provides evidence for another possible reason for Chaucer's mention of the Prioress' forehead. If Chaucer had in mind to ally each character with astrological signs or planets, then the Prioress as a virgin might be aligned with the moon. "The Book of Physiognomy" states that

The signes of luna ben þese: þe fface is pale and  
 clere; brode ffronte; brow is bente; þe eyne meke;  
 a low nose; noseþrellis openyd; a littil mouthe; a  
 opyn chynn; and neygh þe chekis sone hore; a ffatt  
 navell; moche thenkyng on erthely þingis.

We may see William Spencer's comments in "Are Chaucer's Pilgrims Keyed to the Zodiac?" Chaucer Review, 4 (1970), 153-54, as an extension of the commentary on the Prioress as virgin; Spencer posits that many of Chaucer's pilgrims correspond to the scheme of the Zodiac, and that the Prioress has the characteristics that correspond to Cancer and the Moon, which Chaucer elsewhere equates with Diana who has "smale houndes al aboute hir feet (A 2076), and who is a "chaste goddess . . . Goddess of maydens" (A 2297-2300). Spencer cites Alchabitius who says "that the Moon est significatrix matrum (p. b iiiir, 'signifies mothers')." The

Prioress is a kind of mother-figure, by virtue of the religious office she holds. Paradoxically she is also a virgin, and so expresses the Moon's link with Diana. . . . This link Prioress - Moon - Diana is made clear by another detail [the hounds].

Spencer also cites Bonatti who asks, "'Why is Cancer the mansion of the Moon?' and explains: quod concordat cum Luna in foemineitate, mobilitate, frigiditate, atque humiditate (col. 36, 'because [Cancer] agrees with the Moon in femininity, mobility, frigidity [or coolness] and humidity'). The Prioress shows all four qualities [her humidity comes from Chaucer's two references to her weeping]. . . ."

Spencer continues, citing Lilly that the Moon signifies "'a soft, tender creature . . . Timorous, Prodigal, and easily Frighted,'" Albohali that the person born with the Moon in Cancer erit magnae autoritatis, Firmicus that the Moon makes one respected, and magno corpore, large-bodied. See his n. 20, 21.

The connection, which may sound strained to many twentieth-century readers, is one typical of mythographers of the fourteenth century and one Christine of Pisan makes very clear in The Epistle of Othea to Hector: or the Boke of Knyghthode, trans. Stephen Scrope, ed. George F. Warner (London: J. B. Nichols and Sons, 1904), p. 37, written in the last part of the fourteenth century. In this work, Othea, personifying Prudence, instructs the knight Hector in Christian chivalry:

Off Dyane remembre besely  
For the honeste of thi body;  
For his plesyth no vileyns lyffe,  
Ne non dyshoneste ne stryffe.

Then, Christine explains the allegorical meaning of her verse:

Dyane, that is the mone, and as ther is no thyng so evile but that it hath some goode propirte, the mone gyffeth chast condicion; and thei named it after a lady that so was called, the which was full chaste and was euer a vergyn. So it wolde be seyde that honeste of the body is full wele longgyng to a good knygh. And to this purpose Hermes seith, "He may not be off perfyte wite that hathe in hym no chastite."

And for to bryng to mynde the Articles of the

Feyth to owre purpose, wythowte the which a good sperit may lytell avayle, ffor Dyane we shall take God of Heuen, the which is withowte onv spotte of onclen love, to whome a thyng foulede with synne may not be agreable. To the knyghly spirite than it is necessari to beleve opou the Maker of heuen and of erthe, as the fyrst Article of the Feyth seith, the which Seynte Petir the apostel sete, ["Credo in Deum Patrem Omnipotentem, creatorem coeli et terrae"].

29 The Rule of St. Benedict, ed. and trans. D. Oswald Hunter Blair, 4th ed. (Fort Augustus: Abbey Press, 1934), Ch. xxxiii, pp. 98-99, Ch. lv, pp. 144-149.

30 Visual representations of nuns' habits are discussed in each chapter of this study as the separate garments of the habit are taken up, but for a brief overview the following information is given: This thirteenth-century headcovering may be seen in the portrait of St. Claire, depicted in her nun's habit, in the late fifteenth-century manuscript of the Sforza Book of Hours, British Library Add. MS. 34294. Illuminations showing nuns in this habit appear on pp. 418, 420, and 510. See also Mary G. Houston, p. 152. Her fig. 266, p. 153 shows a brass of Abbess Herwy, circa 1525 at Elstow, Bedfordshire which duplicates the style of habit in earlier pictures. The style of this habit is illustrated in La Sainte Abbaye, c. 1300, British Library Add. MS. 39843. See also Joan Evans, pl. 74, for a reproduction of this illumination.

Other illustrations of this basic habit may be seen in two illuminated manuscripts: British Library, Harley MS. 4425, fol. 108, Le Roman de la Rose, c. 1490; British Library Harley MS. 621, fol. 71 Boccaccio's "History of Noble Men and Women." In addition to the features described in the text, these illustrations have another merit for the purposes of this study--they are dressed as religious pilgrims, as their accessories attest: the nun in B.M. MS. Harl. 4425 carries a rosary and a book (perhaps it contains her office?); the nun in B.M. MS. Harl. 621 wears the pilgrim scrip or bag and a wide-brimmed hat hung by its neck cord down her back; and both carry a walking staff or bourdon. The patches on the habit of the nun in this last manuscript indicate her allegorical function in the story she illustrates; she is Glad Poverty. Line drawings of these nuns may be seen in Joseph Strutt, A Complete View of the Dress and Habits of the People of England, from the Establishment of the Saxons in Britain to the Present Time: Illustrated by Engravings Taken from the Most Authentic Remains of Antiquity, (London: The Tabard Press Limited, 1970), II,

Plate CXXXIV, fig. 2 and fig. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Ancren Riwe: A Treatise on the Duties of Monastic Life, ed. and trans. James Morton (London: Camden Society, 1853) Part 8, pp. 418-421. See also, Power, Medieval English Nunneries, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, ed. G. G. Coulton (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1922), pp. 530-531.

<sup>32</sup> Ancren Riwe, Part 8, pp. 418-421. "Wimple" here may refer to the fillets usually worn under the chin and around the head by women of this period since this work is dated circa 1225-1235.

Mann, p. 130, states that "Pleating or 'ipinchunge' of the wimple is specifically disapproved of," in Ancrene Wisse, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien, E.E.T.S. O.S. 249 (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), edited from Cambridge MS. Corpus Christi College 402, fol. 53a. We must disagree with her interpretation; the line in question speaks against the recluses' tendency to overdress in the matter of their veiling, "ueil of heued claß," and to overdo adornment in matters of color or pleating, "to ouegart acemunge oßer in heowunge. oßer epinchunge," in girdles. We cannot understand from this passage that pleated wimples are forbidden, since "wimples" are not mentioned; furthermore, the syntax of the sentence lends it self more readily to the reading given here, that it is pleated girdles that are forbidden. The full sentence is as follows: "Her to falleð of ueil of heued claß. of euch oßer claß. to ouegart acemunge oßer in heowunge. oßer epinchunge. gurdlesant gurdunge o dameiseles wise."

No other thirteenth-century manuscript of the Ancrene Rule includes this statement, indicating that the problem of pleated or colored girdles was not widespread. However, a copy entitled Ancren Recluse, dated "? al425 (c 1400)" by MED, contains the statement, "Alle þise & many mo cleped to ouer girt, as meninge oþer heißeinge, in penchinge, in girdles girdyng of damoisels wise." (100/7)

<sup>33</sup> Additions to the Rules of Syon, George James Aungier, in History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery, the Parish of Isleworth, and the Chapelry of Hounslow, ([London]: J. B. Nichols and Son, 1840), Appendix, p. 392. See also, Power, Nunneries, pp. 132-133.

<sup>34</sup> George James Aungier, History of Syon Monastery ([London]: J. B. Nichols & Son, 1840), p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> Aungier, pp. 22-23, and ns. 2 and 1 respectively.

Aungier, intro. p. 11 also informs us that "The ceremony of consecration and the imposition of the veil were of very early origin" and that "wearing veils originated with the Pontiff Soter, about the middle of the second century." In addition, pp. 314-316, he gives us a copy of the blessing and vesting ceremony in English, taken from B.M. Additional MS. 5,208. The language of this ceremony implies no particular significance to any single garment.

36 This information from St. Aldhelm's De Laudibus Virginitatis is from Lina Eckenstein, Woman under Monasticism (Cambridge: University Press, 1896), p. 115.

37 The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, ed. William Page (London: Archibald Constable and Company, Ltd., 1913), III, 120.

38 The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, III, 119.

39 David Wilkins, Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae I, (London: 1737) pp. 590-591. "Adhaec, quoniam fexum muliebrem, contra versutias hostis antiqui minus fortem, multiplici remedio necesse est efficacius communiri, decernimus, ut moniales, et caeterae mulieres divino cultui dedicatae, velum vel peplum fericum non habeant, nec in velo acus argenteas vel aureas audeant deportare. Nec ipse, vel monachi feu canonici regulares habeant zonas sericas, vel auri vel argenti ornatum habentes, vel burneto vel alio panno irregulari de caetero utantur. Metiantur etiam juxta dimensionem corporis vestem suam, ita quod longitudinem corporis non excedat, sed pede, sicut decet, subducto sufficiat eis indui veste talari; et sola monialis consecrata deferat annulum, et uno solo sit contenta. Si quae autem contra hanc nostram prohibitionem venire praesumpferit, et commonita se non correxerit, regulari subiaceat disciplinae."

40 Wilkins, Conc. I, p. 660. "Item monachis et canonicis regularibus, necnon et monialibus tam vestimenta quam coopertoria interdiciamus colorata, nisi fuerint nigro tincta. Et cum equitant, decentibus sellis utantur, ac fraenis ac superselliis. Moniales autem vestibis caudatis et crispatis, aut proprii corporis longitudinem excedentibus, non utantur, nec pellibus delicatis aut coloratis; nec in velo acus argenteas audeant deportare."

41 Power, Nunneries, p. 586, citing New Coll. MS., fol. 86.

42 See Power's description, Nunneries, pp. 585-87, with



numerous citations. Power's summary of causes and results of this struggle between nuns and bishops, Nunneries, p. 316, is pertinent here:

It seems as though the craving for a certain privacy of life, a certain minimum of private property, is a deeply rooted instinct in human nature. Certainly the attempt of monasticism to expel it with a pitchfork failed. Step by step the rule was broken down, more especially by a series of modifications in the prescribed method of feeding and clothing the community.

In particular, according to Power, p. 663, the "world never called more seductively to medieval nuns than in contemporary fashions." See also pp. 16, 43, 73, 207, 220, 305, 518, 624.

<sup>43</sup> Visitation of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln: Alnwick's Visitations (1436-49), ed. A. Hamilton Thompson, Canterbury and York Series, No. 33 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), III, ii, 319. See, also, p. 361, for Prioress Dame Eleanor Cobcote's statement "that the nuns wear silken veils and robes," in the account of the 1445 visitation of the Priory of Studley, of the Order of St. Benet, of Lincoln.

<sup>44</sup> The Rule of St. Benedict, pp. 144-149, 204.

<sup>45</sup> Power, Nunneries, pp. 322-323. "The fact that the peculium was a payment made from the common funds and not the privately owned income of an individual allowed it to escape the charge of proprietas, but it was nevertheless an obvious departure from the Benedictine rule, which forbade the individual disposal of property and made quite different arrangements for the provision of clothing." Also, see p. 329, for an extensive discussion of wills and bequests to nuns which includes lists of other items of value besides clothing which is the primary interest of this study.

<sup>46</sup> Testamenta Eboracensia, or Wills Registered at York Illustrative of the History, Manners, Language, Statistics, &c., of the Province of York, From the Year MCCC Downwards, ed. James Raine (London: Surtees Society, 1836-1902), I, 308, 317, 322, 324.

<sup>47</sup> See The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, III, 122-123, n. 6 for a description of John Fayrfax's will which is recorded in Test. Ebor., I, 186.

<sup>48</sup> The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, III, 122-123.

49 Rev. W. G. Clark-Maxwell, "The Outfit for the Profession of an Austin Canoness at Lacock, Wilts. in the Year 1395, and Other Memoranda," The Archaeological Journal, 69, 2nd ser. 16 (1912), 118. This is his translation from the Latin.

50 Visitation of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln: Alnwick's Visitations (1436-49), ed. Alexander Hamilton Thompson, Canterbury and York Series, No. 24 (London: Canterbury and York Society, 1919), II, i, 3-5. See also Power, Medieval People, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925), pp. 77-78.

51 Visitations of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln, II, i, 8.

52 See Visitations of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln, II, 47, 118, 130, 176, for these injunctions against improper veils. See, also, III, ii, 361.

53 Frances Elizabeth Baldwin, Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Regulation in England, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science 44, No. 1 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1926), pp. 31, 32, 34.

54 Baldwin, p. 30.

55 Baldwin, pp. 31-32, 34, 48-49.

56 Baldwin, p. 48, citing Stat. L., vol. ii, pp. 164-165.

57 Baldwin, p. 48-49.

58 Baldwin, p. 60, citing Rot. Parl., vol. iii, p. 66.

59 "Why I Can't Be a Nun," Early English Poems and Lives of Saints, ed. F. J. Furnivall (Berlin: Transactions of the Philological Society, 1858), p. 147, edited from British Library MS. Bibl. Cotton, Vesp. D. ix, fol. 179.

60 Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron (1930; rpt. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1973), II, 9th day, Novel II, p. 233.

61 Recueil de poesies françoises des XV<sup>e</sup> et XVI<sup>e</sup> siecles (Paris: Chez P. Jannet, Libraire, 1858), VIII, 173.

62 This is the pseudo-Chaucerian Court of Love in The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. R. Morris (London: Bell and Daldy, 1866), IV, 38-39.

<sup>63</sup> Gautier de Coinci, "Le sermon en vers de la chastée as nonains," pp. 145-146, ll. 404-406.

Very modest, white and clean are they, and more than violets do they shrink from dirt, filth and mud. Their linen is fair and white, well pleated and tied, sweet smelling and fine and delicate.

The translation is Jill Mann's. See n. 21 above.

<sup>64</sup> Boccacio, p. 234.

<sup>65</sup> 'Plangit nonna fletibus,' ed. Peter Dronke, Medieval Latin and the Rise of the European Love Lyric (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), II, 357, ll. 19-27.

Fibula non perfruor,  
flammeum non capio,  
strophum assumerem,  
diadema cuperem,  
heu misella!--  
monile arriperem  
si valerem,  
pelles et herminie  
libet ferre

[I have no brooch to enjoy, can wear no bridal-veil, how I'd long to put on a ribbon or coronet--woe is me! I'd get a necklace if I could, and wearing ermine furs would be lovely.]

This is Mann's translation; on p. 130, she quotes and comments on ll. 19-27.

<sup>66</sup> Mann, p. 130.

<sup>67</sup> Power, Nunneries, p. 69, states:

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

<sup>68</sup> Robinson, ed., p. 756, n. 151.

<sup>69</sup> C. Willett Cunningham and Phillis Cunningham,

Handbook of English Mediaeval Costume (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1952), pp. 94-95. See, also, Newton and Giza, 141-152.

70 Cunnington and Cunnington, pl. 39, p. 4.

71 Stella Mary Newton, Fashion in the Age of the Black Prince: A Study of the Years 1340-1365 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1980), pl. 28, p. 88.

72 Newton, Fashion, pl. 35, p. 98.

73 B.M. Additional MS. 15,456, fol. 2.

74 Sister Madeleva, pp. 16-17.

75 See Cunnington and Cunnington, pl. 31, p. 76.

76 An English Bodleian Library MS. Univ. Coll., Oxford 165, Bede's Life of St. Cuthbert (first half of the twelfth century), p. 69, depicts the Abbess Aelfflaed and a nun cured by St. Cuthbert's girdle. They wear no veils or wimples; the artist has given some attention to depicting their hair which is uncovered.

77 He is an Englishman, possibly a Cistercian.

78 A line drawing of this illumination may be seen in Edward L. Cutts, Scenes & Characters of the Middle Ages, seventh ed. (London: Simpkin Marshall, Ltd., 1930), p. 57.

79 R. L. P. Milburn, Saints and Their Emblems in English Churches (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), p. 113, describes Gertrude (A.D. 620-659) as the abbess of a double monastery at Nivelles, in Brabant, who was invoked to ward off rats and mice. Further, he states that she is "occasionally shown in English churches as an abbess writing in a book, or with mice on her crozier," apparently because her feast day (March 17) occurs at the time when the hibernation of field mice is over and they begin to make a nuisance of themselves again.

80 Sister Marguerite De Scornay is depicted similarly in a brass commemorating her election as abbess of the Abbey of Nivelles in Belgium in 1443. She wears a nun's habit including a draped wimple, and a cloak that is fur-lined. St. Margaret, who introduces Sister Marguerite to the Blessed Virgin Mary, is dressed in elaborate secular fashion.

81 This information is derived from the Summary Catalogue.

82 A picture of St. Bridget of Sweden, composer of the rule for Syon Monastery, is included in George Aungier's History of Syon Monastery, facing p. 17, taken from "an ancient Wood-Engraving in possession of Earl Spencer." Aungier quotes Mr. Jackson's "Treatise on Wood-Engraving" concerning this work, pp. 66, 67, and in a note, pp. xiii-xiv, includes the following description and explanation:

The pilgrim's hat, staff, and scrip probably allude to her pilgrimage to Jerusalem . . . she was induced to make in consequence of a vision. . . . The lion, the arms of Sweden, and the crown at her feet, are most likely to denote that she was a princess of the blood royal of that Kingdom.

. . . Her gown, as well as the pilgrim's hat and scrip, are of a dark grey; her veil, which she wears hoodwise, is partly black and partly white; and the wimple which she wears round her neck is also white. The . . . pilgrim's staff . . . the nimbus surrounding the head of St. Bridget, and that of the Virgin, are yellow.

According to Aungier, pp. 17-19, St. Bridget (1302-1372) journeyed to Palestine, returning via Rome, to visit saints' relics. She was canonized by Boniface IX in 1391 on the 7th October and declared enrolled among the Saints on 1st February 1415 by the general council of Constance. Her canonization was again confirmed by Martin V in 1419.

83 Fabric is said to be goffered when frills or tiny pleating is achieved by the use of a hot goffering tool (OED); however, such an effect was also achieved through a special technique of weaving. According to Newton and Giza, p. 141, such frills or goffering were high style in the 1360's, and the nobility wore "veils edged with a forest of frills in airy layers almost impossible to count," which may be seen in illuminations and sculpted tombs such as the effigy of Lady Berkeley in Tewkesbury Abbey. (I am indebted to Stella Newton for her illuminating conversation on this topic, as well as for an offprint of her article with the correction of date which I have incorporated in this note.)

84 This is not true of nuns depicted in Italian art. In the National Gallery, London, Italian paintings frequently depict nuns with foreheads covered down to the eyebrows. Examples are: "A Group of Poor Clares," no. 1147, by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, painted circa 1331 and deriving from the Chapter House of San Francesco, Siena; "Christ glorified in the Court of Heaven," no. 663, by Fra Angelico, part of an altarpiece circa 1430-1435 for the church of San Domenico near Florence;

"The Coronation of the Virgin," no. 569, in the style of Orcagna, painted circa 1370-1371 for the Benedictine church of San Pier Maggiore in Florence; "The Virgin and Child with Saints Catherine of Alexandria and Siena," no. 298, by Ambrogio Bergognone who was active between the years 1481 and 1523.

<sup>85</sup> Houston, p. 40, figs. 50 and 51 are taken from Abbé Tiron's History. They depict thirteenth-century nuns wearing veils and wimples. Approximately three inches of forehead is showing in fig. 50, and one inch in fig. 51.

<sup>86</sup> This illumination is reproduced in a line drawing in Strutt, pl. CXXXIV, fig. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Strayned Abstinence is depicted in nun's habit, with book and pilgrim staff, in Bod. MS. Douce 332, fol. 115.

<sup>88</sup> See also Bodleian Library MS. Douce 332, fol. 4v, and MS. Douce 195, fol. 4.

<sup>89</sup> Margaret Scott, The History of Dress Series: Late Gothic Europe, 1400-1500, ed. Aileen Ribeiro (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980), pp. 117, 123.

<sup>90</sup> Gallo, p. 186.

<sup>91</sup> See, especially, the Blessed Virgin Mary in the triptych by Ducciodi Buoninsegna, no. 566 in the National Gallery, London, and the illumination of the Virgin and the Angels in B.M. MS. Cotton Nero C.iv. Reproductions of these may be seen in Otto Demus, Byzantine Art and the West (New York: New York University Press, 1970), pp. 241, 175, figs. 217 and 175. In this same work, see figs. 124, 153, 155, 176, 241, and Plate I.

<sup>92</sup> Houston, pp. 86-87.

<sup>93</sup> For black and white reproductions, see Adolf Katzenellenbogen, Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Mediaeval Art: From Early Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1964), pp. 13, 24, figs. 25 and 26. See also, the Ladder of Virtues in Hortus Deliciarum, B.M. MS. 42497. For a color reproduction, see Herrade de Landsberg: Hortus Deliciarum, A. Straub and G. Keller, eds. (Strassburg - Paris: Éditions F.-X. Le Roux, 1952), where L'Echelle des Vertus is reproduced in plate 38. The Sancti monialis on this ladder wears a red tunic with sleeves that widen as they lengthen, blue head veil, white band across upper forehead, and black shoes. Also see the

reproduction of nuns on the Ladder of Virtue from a late twelfth-century Speculum Virginum, Troyes, Bibliotheque Munic. MS. 252 in C. R. Dodwell's Painting in Europe 800-1200 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971), plate 199.

94 This style, too, was called a "wimple," but to distinguish it from the larger draped version, I shall refer to it only as a fashionable headdress. It may be seen also in the thirteenth-century French MS. Bodl. 270b, fol. 12 (A. 1) as worn by Sarah when Pharoah banishes her and her husband Abraham. Houston, pp. 46-47, 49, provides the dating for this headdress, and provides illustrations of it from a late thirteenth-century Franco Flemish manuscript called "The Health Book," B.M. MS. Sloane 2435, and another manuscript of 1280 or later, B.M. Additional MS. 38116, fol. 8v 13 in which Eve spins.

95 For example, Prudence in Bodleian Library MS. Laud. Misc. 570 (1454), fol. 9v, wears a veil and wimple while the six virtues around her have uncovered heads.

96 A reproduction of this illumination may be seen in Rosemond Tuve, "Notes on the Virtues and Vices," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 26 (1963), part I, opposite 279.

97 See Tuve, "Notes on the Virtues and Vices," part I, opposite 279, for a reproduction of this illumination.

98 A reproduction may be seen in Rosamond Tuve, Allegorical Imagery; Some Mediaeval Books and Their Posterity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 73, fig. 16.

99 For a reproduction of the Ellesmere manuscript illuminations, see The Ellesmere Miniatures of the Canterbury Pilgrims, ed. Theo Stemmler (Mannheim: University of Mannheim, English Department, 1977).

## Chapter II

### The Prioress' Habit

In this chapter, we shall be concerned with the remainder of the Prioress' habit and will demonstrate that the Prioress' habit is entirely proper, a position that opposes the majority view of critical tradition. This majority view holds that Chaucer presents Madame Eglentyne to us in "elegant" dress and in so doing reveals her pride, vanity, and/or love of luxury. The minority position excuses such "elegance" in that it is consonant with portraying the Prioress as a devotee of Mary, dressed in the Marian tradition. Both positions assume that the Prioress' "elegance" of dress must be either condemned or explained and thereby excused. On the contrary, this study will demonstrate that neither condemnation nor explanation is needed for Madame Eglentyne's "elegance" because as a perjorative description of her it is anachronistic. In addition, through a comparison of Chaucer's description of the Prioress with convent rules for nuns' habits, the implications of contemporary historical records, sumptuary legislation, and other literary descriptions of nuns, we see that Chaucer implies approbation not only in his very brief



description of the Prioress' habit, but also in his obvious omission of the numerous clothing indiscretions of nuns which were so frequently included in other medieval literature.

Chaucer gives his brief description of the Prioress' habit in a single line:

Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war. (157)

Kevin Kiernan's comment that Chaucer uses "articles of clothing to highlight parts of the body, and sometimes even to take the place of parts of the body,"<sup>1</sup> is analogous to Chaucer's evocation of costume as well. Here Chaucer supplies only the imagery of a cloak which must, in this case, signify the entire habit--shift, tunic, girdle, scapular, and cloak. We cannot know the details of Madame Eglentyne's dress and must, therefore, assume them to be consistent with the cloak which is "full fetys," a description which, prior to this study, has been assumed to be perjorative by most critics.

We have already seen in the previous chapter that more than one critic implies that an attractive prioress, in her person or in her clothing, should be suspect. This attitude manifests itself again in numerous comments concerned with the Prioress' "Ful fetys" cloak; for example, Edward Craney Jacobs equates the "handsome cloak" with worldliness.<sup>2</sup> Gerald Morgan, also, remarks the Prioress' "elegance of dress and a physical beauty": the beautiful details of her portrait

"ostensibly enhance her as a courtly figure, but they have been carefully chosen to focus upon the violation of her profession as a nun."<sup>3</sup> In this vein, too, we find Phyllis Hodgson's statement that "the rich garb of the Prioress . . . would be seen as the suit of Pride" in the tradition of moral abstractions as presented in the literature of the Seven Deadly Sins with which a fourteenth-century audience was familiar.<sup>4</sup> Hodgson reminds us that the Prioress and Idleness of *Le Roman de la Rose* share many features.<sup>5</sup>

Mary Hardy Long Frank remarks on the Prioress' "modest confusion of elegance and grace" that is forgiveable in light of the tradition of dressing Mary in elaborate costume and "more probably she reflects unabashedly the spiritual beauty of her mistress whom Chaucer himself called 'Virgine, that art so noble of apparaile.'"<sup>6</sup> Again, we note that the word "elegance" appears in criticism as a term of relative disapprobation. Frank also points out that it would be in character for Chaucer to write in the Marian tradition; she documents the strength of the London puy, a literary society dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, that met regularly at St. Mary's Guildhall in London during Chaucer's and his father's lifetime; she reminds us, as well, of Hoccleve's poetic portrait of Chaucer: "How he thy servaunt was, mayden Marie."<sup>7</sup> In addition, Frank's works serve to document how likely it is that Chaucer employed aspects of the rhetorical

tradition in descriptions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the portrait of the Prioress.

Surveying critical tradition, we see that the "fetis" cloak worn by the Prioress has become an "elegant" cloak, a description which is almost invariably interpreted negatively because it appears to violate dress restrictions of the Benedictine Rule, a point we shall refute. Subsequently, this unfavorable sense of "elegant" has become "handsome," "rich," "lavish," or even "flamboyant." A case in point is Ridley's reference to the Prioress' love of "ornate garb."<sup>8</sup> In order to refute this negative progression, we must return to an examination of what Chaucer said; we must come to terms with "that fetis cloak."<sup>9</sup>

The pilgrim poet's attitude again intrudes, as it did in the matter of the Prioress' fair forehead, coloring critical apprehension of the cloak's appearance: "Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war" (157). Chaucer's awareness implies an appreciation for what he sees that has, perhaps, been prejudicial to an objective view of what he says. He describes only the Prioress' outer garment, not a fashionable houppeland, or a girdle embroidered with silver or gold. He is simply aware that the cloak is "ful fetys," that is, very "cleverly fashioned, neat, elegant." This MED definition is accompanied by seventeen examples of usage for "fetis", among which is Chaucer's description of the Prioress; sixteen of

these examples are positive in connotation, and one is described as ironic--it is not Chaucer's. We should note here that "elegant," so often used as an equivalent, is a modern definition of "fetis." It does not appear as an entry in the MED, nor in dictionaries of Old French, where we find faitis.<sup>10</sup> "Elegant" appears in English in the late fifteenth century (the first OED example is dated 1485), and at that late date is defined as "1. Tastefully ornate in attire, sometimes in unfavourable sense: Dainty, foppish" [my italics]. It is this unfavorable sense of elegant that a number of critics have seized upon, in spite of the fact that it is a secondary definition of a modern definition of a Middle English word. It is more likely that Chaucer intended "fetis" to mean elegant in the sense of bien fait, bien faconne, joli, as Godefroy defines faitis.

Chaucer does not say that the cloak is curiously fashioned, a perjorative description, as discussed in the previous chapter. Nor does he say that the cloak is over- or excessively elegant; he mentions no unauthorized fabric or color, nor does he mention fur, although Madame Eglentyne might properly have worn certain furs, skins "well-tawed." It is entirely possible that Chaucer means that the Prioress wears a very neat, well-made cloak, just as she should. According to the Benedictine Rule, she would naturally wear a better cloak for traveling than for daily wear. And she

would have her position in the church to consider.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, she should dress in a manner that would do reverence to her position, and wear garments that are well made, neat, and properly suitable to her status when she traveled. Why should we expect a Prioress who concerns herself with proper table manners to be less concerned with proper dress?

We may appreciate the restraint of Chaucer's description of Madame Eglentyne when we compare her cloak with other descriptions of cloaks and/or habits. We shall see then that Chaucer describes neither Madame Eglentyne's cloak, nor her costume as a whole, in the mode of either the typical historical or literary luxurious abbess or prioress. However, before comparing the costume of Madame Eglentyne to costumes worn by nuns who broke the rules of propriety, we shall first compare it to those ideals which she emulated.

#### The Prioress' Habit and Historical Evidence:

A survey of convent rules reveals the genuine problems concerning costume faced by the Catholic Church hierarchy in England in the Middle Ages. One of their concerns was that nuns' habits should be inexpensive or humble in materials and therefore suitable to a religious vocation; another was that the garments illustrating such humility should be suitable to

both climate and particular occupation. A certain amount of attention is given to the idea that the garments should be well-made but not "over curious." The distinction is a fine one and important to the judgment made in this study that the Prioress' cloak and by implication her habit is appropriate when compared to these standards.

Here we recall the specific instructions, mentioned in the previous chapter, provided in the Rule of St. Benedict for monks and adapted for nuns as well that a special issue of clothing should be made for one who was to make a journey. These clothes, drawers, cowl, and tunic, were to be "a little better than those they ordinarily wear," and must be returned to the general wardrobe at the conclusion of the journey. The vice of private ownership of clothing is abhorred;<sup>12</sup> in addition, private gifts of any sort are forbidden.<sup>13</sup> As we shall see, these provisions were ones that, by the end of the fourteenth century, were widely ignored.

The habit of the nuns of the Benedictine Abbey at Elstow will again serve as a general model for that worn by medieval nuns. In addition to providing for the headdress discussed earlier, the habit consisted of a long white tunic or gown, called cotte in French, covered by a black mantle or wide-sleeved surcoat,<sup>14</sup> although the color of the tunic, scapular, and outer garment varied, according to the order

and, perhaps, according to the convent.

Worth repeating here is the more precise description of an appropriately humble habit provided by the Ancoren Riwe because it emphasizes the idea that a habit should be "well made" and uses the phrase "skins well tawed" in what may be a metaphor to describe this phenomenon:

Because no man seeth you, nor do ye see any  
man, ye may be well content with your clothes,  
be they white, be they black; only see they be  
plain and warm and well made--skins well  
tawed; and have as<sub>15</sub> many as you need, for bed  
and also for back.

The Bridgettine Rule of Syon provided for two chemises of white flannel, called "stamen" in B.M. MS. Arundel 146, that were issued to each nun. (Two separate changes allowed for alternate wearing and laundry.) In addition, each was given the gown and a hood of grey cloth, mentioned earlier. The hood's sleeves were not to be longer than the middle finger and would normally hang around the hand in folds except when clasped to the arm when performing manual services. A mantle of grey cloth was also issued, "not plaited or finely made, but tight and plain, the whole being for use, not vanity; single in summer, but in winter lined, not with delicate skins, but with those of lambs or sheep." This was in accordance with the Canons of William Corboys or Corbyl, who was Archbishop of Canterbury in 1127. He decreed "that no abbess or nun should use more costly apparel than such as is made of lambs' or cats' skins."<sup>16</sup> In addition each

sister was allowed a pilch made of either lamb or cat skins, for winter wear. The Rule specified that this pilch should be fastened at the neck with a wooden clasp, and that there should be a "palm's breadth" between the bottom of the pilch and the ground.<sup>17</sup> This description accords with that of the duties of Chambress who was to acquire clothing for the nuns as described in the Additions to the Rules of Syon. Among the items she was to keep on hand are: "rewle cotes . . . mantelles . . . pylches, mantel fures," all of which fall under the general admonition not to be "ouer curyous, but playne and homly, witheoute weuyng of any straunge colours of sylke, golde, or syluer, hauynge all thyng of honeste and profyte, and nothyng of vanyte, after the rewle."<sup>18</sup>

The pylches, cloaks "of skins or fur,"<sup>19</sup> and mantle furs, which are a concession to climate, were considered proper. These skins make up the customary tunics of locally attainable furs worn generally by the religious, over which a white linen garment was worn. And we recall that "skins well tawed" were among those materials allowed in the Ancren Riwe, a phrase which may have been either a literal description or a metaphor for the appropriate workmanship of the habit that should be "well made."

Duranti, writing circa 1286 on the Divine Offices, describes this garment of fur and its linen covering, the superpellicum (now called surplice). The linen covering



represents the robe of innocence purchased for humanity by Christ; while the robe of animal skins signifies man's fallen nature, since this is, according to tradition, what Adam wore after the fall:

Dictum est Superpellicium, eo quod antiquitus  
super tunicas pellicias de pellibus mortuorum  
animalium factas induebantur, quod adhuc in  
quibusdam Ecclesiis observatur,  
repraesentantes quod Adam post peccatum  
talibus vestitus est pelliciis.<sup>20</sup>

Thus we see that the Prioress' "full fetys" cloak, so far as we know, meets all the requirements of convent rules in that it is cleverly fashioned, neat, well-made, "bien fait, bien faconne." If in meeting these requirements the result is one which corresponds to Godefroy's third definition of faitis as "joli," that is, it is attractive to the eye, the wearer can hardly be faulted for that beauty which lies in the eye of the beholder, Chaucer the pilgrim-poet who says he is "war." And, while we note what Chaucer says, we must also note what he omits. Had he wished his audience to think of the Prioress as being in inappropriate habit, he could have provided her with, for example, a girdle exhibiting the embroidery of colored silks, gold, and silver forbidden in the Additions to the Rule of Syon and so many visitation records, as we shall discuss further. Instead, the greater part of the Prioress' habit is modestly covered by Chaucer's choice of costume rhetoric: the "full fetys" cloak.

Had Chaucer wished to draw on contemporary examples of nuns who wore inappropriate costumes as models for his Prioress, he had a variety from which to choose. Historical records provide numerous detailed descriptions of such inappropriate costumes as Chaucer might have copied if he had wished to portray the outward appearance of the Prioress as being indecorous. The fact that he does not do so speaks volumes when we consider the repetitive regulations issued by church councils, the apparently common practice of private ownership of expensive clothing by prioresses, abbesses, and their nuns as well, and the clothing practices revealed in visitation records, all of which would have provided him with ample data for satirizing the appearance of the Prioress, *per se*. Instead, in his so brief description of the Prioress' habit epitomized only by her "full fetys" "cloke," he pointedly omits all perjorative references afforded him by the long-standing struggle of church hierarchy against violations by its nuns of the rules for clothing.

However carefully rules were laid down with the thought that the habit makes the nun, both literature (which will be discussed later in this chapter) and church records indicate that this goal was unattainable by this means. The social and historical reality of medieval nuns' habits, expressed in church documents and wills, forms a direct contrast to the ideal of convent rule. These documents reveal that, in the

matter of obedience and perfection expressed in religious habits, the bishops proposed, but the nuns disposed. As mentioned earlier in a different context, the council of Oxford, 1222, forbade nuns to wear belts of silk, or those embroidered with silver or gold, and habits made of burnet or other unlawful cloth. They were instructed to use sufficient but not superfluous fabric in their habits,<sup>21</sup> an instruction necessary because of evident excessive practices which are described in visitation records. In 1237, black<sup>22</sup> became the only officially designated color of habits for monks, canons and nuns. Dresses with trains and pleats, or any excessive length were forbidden to nuns, as were "delicate or coloured furs,"<sup>23</sup> rulings which were repeated in William of Wykeham's 1387 injunctions to Romsey and Wherwell.<sup>24</sup> The list of the many items of clothing forbidden to nuns is a long one: gowns with wide bottoms, sleeves turned back showing fur at the wrist, wide girdles or plaited belts which men might see, mantles and kirtles with openings in seams (probably decorative slashes), large collars, barred girdles, laced shoes, red dresses and the long supertunics of the "secular" type, silken clothing, especially silken veils, rings other than their consecration ring, tunics that laced up or that fastened with brooches, the secular style called "gownes" (probably houppelandes), kirtles of fustian or worsted.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, we may see that the typical worldly nun described

in historical records who wore these garments frequently enough to have elicited these specific injunctions was indeed a follower of current fashion. Chaucer's Prioress, however, is not patterned in this mould; whatever the makeup of her habit, it is modestly covered by her cloak. The implication is that of propriety. There is, for example, no wide girdle or plaited belt which men might see, no fashionable gown, no fur, no unauthorized fabrics or excessive fabric used in train or pleats. However, Chaucer need not have limited himself to these transgressions of the rules. Historical records provide a variety of improper details of habits which he might have attributed to the Prioress.

As stated earlier, legacies were the source of much of the elaborate clothing worn by worldly nuns. Claustrated nuns frequently received gifts of clothing made of expensive fabrics and decorated with jewels, furs, and/or embroidery of silk, gold, and silver, bequeathed to them by friends and relatives, some of whom were themselves members of the church hierarchy. An example of such a legatee is Joan, Prioress of Swine, who in 1394 received from the will of "Agnētis Relictae Domini Johannis De Sancto Quintino Militis" "j guylt de serico, & j par lynthiaminum de panno de reyns."<sup>26</sup> The Prioress of Swine also benefited from the will of Anne St. Quintin (1393) and received, among other things, "one cloak of black cloth furred with gray, one round silver basin and

ten marks of silver.'<sup>27</sup> In addition, the Bishop of Durham, Walter Skirlaw, in 1404, mentioned in the previous chapter in regard to his bequest of furred hoods, bequeathed furred mantles, cloaks, and robes to his sister, this same Prioress Joan of Swine: "'Item a robe of murrey clth of Ypres (?yp'n) containing a mantle . . . furred with budge (?purg') . . . a cloak furred with half vair, a long robe (garnach') furred with vair.'<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in a will dated 7 June 1393, John Fayrfax, rector of Prescot, left to his sister Margaret an "armilansa" of black cloth, furred with grey and "other valuables." That the gift was not used for charitable purposes is evident from the visitation record for the Priory of Nun Monkton for 30 April 1397 made by Thomas Dalby, Archdeacon of Richmond. During this visitation, complaints were made to the Archdeacon that Prioress Margaret Fayrfax wore various kinds of furs, even grey, as well as silk veils. In addition, "She frequently wore a surplice (superpellitio) without a mantle, in quire and elsewhere, contrary to the manner of dress of nuns and the ancient custom of the priory." Archdeacon Dalby's injunctions, issued 8 July 1397, specifically forbade such sartorial splendor:

None were to use silk clothes, especially not silken veils nor valuable furs . . . nor tunics pleated (laqueatis) . . . nor any jupis, anglice<sup>29</sup> 'gounes,' after the fashion of secular women.

Ladies from aristocratic background seem to have inflicted upon the bishops the largest share of fashion problems, for Archbishop Melton, at Hampole in 1314, found it necessary to instruct the prioress to correct her nuns wearing fashionable clothing, the "new-fashioned narrow-cut tunics and rochets," contrary to the rule of the order, "whatever might be their condition or state of dignity." The nuns were instructed as follows:

[They should] use uncut garments of the old fashion, long time observed in the house, to the honour of religion. The archbishop also ordered that all the irregular clamides of the nuns, to wit those of black colour, should be removed within half a year, and that in future they should use clamides of russet colour according to the old fashion of the house and institutes of the order.<sup>30</sup>

We may conclude, based on the list of clothing and accessory items listed above as being forbidden to nuns, that certain nuns wore at least some of the items they received as bequests, while others may have been remade into church vestments and altar pieces, and indeed some luxurious worldly garments were bequeathed to convents for that express purpose.

Although the Benedictine Rule prohibited the possession of private property, in the late fourteenth century this prohibition was either no longer in force or unenforceable. In addition to the evidence provided in the wills cited above, bequests were sometimes made with the express purpose

of providing the habit for a specified nun. The Benedictine Rule provided that clothing belonged to the order and would be dispensed as required to a nun. However, the following quotation both indicates the extent to which nuns of the later Middle Ages possessed private property and gives the specific fabric and style of an apparently acceptable habit:

Expensae Factae Super et pro Elizabetha Sywardby Facta Moniali in Munkton. Et dicunt se solvisse et dedisse Priorissae et Conventui de Munkton, pro quodam feodo quod dicta Priorissa et Conventus ex consuetudine clamant habere, et habere solent de qualibet moniali in ingressu suo, iiij li. Et de denariis solutis pro habitu dictae Elizabethae Sywardby et pro aliis utensilibus corporis sui, una pro lecto competenti, iiij li. xiiij s. viij d. ob. Et in expensis factis super Priorissa et Conventus praedictis, et super. amicis dictae Elizabethae insimul commorantibus in Dominica proximo post festum Nativitatis B.M.V. anno<sup>31</sup> Domini MCCCCLXX mo, iiij li. xj s. iiij d.

Here, Elizabeth Sewardby is provided with a personal habit, and suitable bedclothes. This same will provides a list of items included in her habit to be provided at a given cost of £3 13s. 7 and 1/2d. and it lists the fabrics used:

Et pro X paribus solularium emptis pro eadem Elizabeth, et expensis, iiij s. vj d. Et pro factura unius togae cum le coler, ac pro j pari caligarum pro eadem Elizabetha, xij d. Et soluti pro ij ulnis panni ruset, emptis pro j toga facienda eidem Elizabetha, ij s. iiij d. Et pro j uln. et di. panni blodii, pro j tunica pro eadem, ij s. j d. Et pro factura dictarum togae et tunicae, et factura j<sup>32</sup> paris caligarum et ij camiseorum, ij s. j d.

However humble a toga, or cloak of russet, and a tunic of blue<sup>33</sup> cloth may have been, neither garment is dyed black,

the color specified for nuns' habits in Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae I; they are, instead, in keeping with Archbishop Melton's 1314 instructions to the Prioress at Hampole, mentioned earlier in this chapter. And we note that the garments listed, apparently, are intended to be the personal property of the recipient.

However, witness the account given of the more luxurious wardrobe, assembled for Joan Samborne's veiling (22 June 1395-21 June 1396), mentioned in the previous chapter, at the Austin nunnery of Lacock. Besides the large item of 102s. paid for veiling and linen cloth mentioned earlier, it includes:

Item for a mantle 10s. Item for a furring of shankes [defined as cheap fur made from the underpart of rabbit skin according to Halliwell Philipps] for another mantle 16s. Item for white cloth for lining the first mantle 6s. 8d. Item for white cloth for a tunic 10s. Item a furring for the pilch [the furlined undergarment (pellicea)] aforesaid 20s. . . . Item for another mantle of worsted bought 20s.<sup>34</sup>

The total cost of her habit cannot be computed because the large amount (£5 2s) paid for veils and linen indicates that this purchase may have been for the entire convent and not for Joan alone. Also, her complete habit would include shoes and/or boots, socks, and possibly some type of girdle; however, we should note that altogether, there are three mantles; one of worsted, an expensive fabric. And it should also be noted that Lacock was a "royal foundation" which was



customarily composed of persons of good family, and, therefore, the expenses of entering would be high.

Official visitation records provide additional evidence that the prohibition of private property was frequently disregarded. Clemence Medforde, Prioress of Ankerwyke, in 1441, besides wearing silken veils high upon her forehead and estate caps furred with budge above these veils, also owned and wore a number of other forbidden items of clothing:

The Prioress wears . . . girdles silvered and gilded over . . . and she wears furs of vair. . . . Also she wears shifts of cloth of Rennes, which costs sixteen pence the ell. . . . Also she wears kirtles laced with silk and tiring pins of silver and silver gilt and has made all the nuns wear the like.<sup>35</sup>

Altogether, Clemence Medforde epitomizes the typical worldly nun whose fondness for things of the world manifests itself in luxurious dress. However, she wears clothing that is no more luxurious than that of the early eighth-century nuns who wore the fine linen vests of violet under hooded scarlet tunics and sleeves striped with silk and trimmed with red fur forbidden by St. Aldhelm (as well as the voluminous beribboned headdresses made of colored and white fabric mentioned previously).<sup>36</sup> The records of Chaucer's own century, too, describe worldly nuns in fashionable garb such as those of the Priory of Wilberfoss in 1308 who were instructed by Archbishop Greenfield's decretum not to "wear red, or unsuitable clothes, nor supertunics too long, like

secular women, as some had begun to do."<sup>37</sup> This same Archbishop, in 1314, issued a decretum to the nuns of the Priory of Nunkeeling in which he forbade them to make themselves remarkable in their girdles or shoes, "or anything unsuitable to religion."<sup>38</sup> And this struggle against impropriety was continued by Archbishop Melton after his 1318 visitation to the Priory of Nunburnholme. He directed Prioress and nuns "not to use mantles, tunics or other garments, over long or adorned in a manner which did not accord with religion."<sup>39</sup>

We find this struggle to maintain proper habits for nuns continuing in the fifteenth century, for Alnwick's injunction forbids other clothing excesses beyond the silken veils and silver tiring pins mentioned earlier:

None of yow, the prioresse ne none of the couente,  
were . . . no gyrdles herneyssed with syluere or  
golde . . . ne that none of yow vse no lased  
kyrtels, but butoned or hole be fore.<sup>40</sup>

We cannot ignore the fact that it would have been common to see a nun or prioress dressed in secular clothing or luxurious garments in the fourteenth-century, although there must surely have been those who dressed according to their convent rules. When the evidence presented above is considered, individual socio-economic factors, as opposed to religious rules, appear to be the ones determining what was worn by many nuns. Some of those who inherited wealth in the form of garments wore their wealth contrary to the rule, but

certainly not contrary to what must have been the ordinary, if not official, custom in certain convents. Yet, Chaucer's Prioress presents to our view only her "full fetys" cloak.

We may also assess the suitability of the Prioress' cloak or habit by another set of standards--those secular attitudes illustrated in the fourteenth-century sumptuary legislation. A comparison of these attitudes with the historical records discussed in this chapter, coupled with the fact that this legislation was apparently unenforced or unenforceable, indicates that clothing restrictions were ineffective for all parts of English society and that economic prosperity worked on all levels to subvert such rules. Considering these factors, the Prioress' costume, sans fur, sans silk, sans embroidered girdle, and as judged by the attitudes expressed by members of England's parliament, is a model of restraint, not a model of license.

Had the convent rules been followed explicitly, fourteenth-century nuns, whom we know to have been drawn primarily from the ranks of the nobility and wealthy merchant classes, would have worn habits that conformed in expense and lack of decoration to those secular rules laid down for grooms, yeomen and handicraftsmen, the lowest levels of society mentioned in England's second sumptuary law, that of October 13, 1362 (37 Edward III). In this law Parliament set detailed clothing standards according to occupation, even

though, once more, personal income continued to be the final determinant of what an individual might lawfully wear without penalty of confiscation. Grooms and those possessing material goods valued at 40 s. or less were restricted to clothing made of blanket cloth, the cheapest kind of cloth, and russet, also an inferior type of cloth.<sup>41</sup> Such cloth would conform to the requirements of the Benedictine Rule described earlier. Grooms, servants of lords, "they of mysteries and artificers, "and their wives and children were not to wear "'for their vesture or hosing,'<sup>42</sup> any cloth which should exceed in price two marks for the whole amount of cloth needed," nor "anything made of gold or silver, embroidered, enamelled, or made of silk, 'nor nothing pertaining to the said things.'" The women could not wear veils or kerchiefs exceeding 12 d. in price.<sup>43</sup> For yeomen and handicraftsmen, the price limit per whole cloth was forty shillings. It was thought necessary to stipulate that this group was forbidden "to wear precious stones, cloth of silver, silk, girdles, knives, buttons, rings, brooches, chains, etc. of gold or silver, and embroidered or silken clothing." Their wives and children could not wear "silken veils or kerchiefs, nor any fur nor budge, except lamb, coney, cat and fox."<sup>44</sup> These restrictions form a sharp contrast with what we know some prioresses and abbesses wore, but they are compatible with the restrictions contained in

convent visitation records against the very same items of clothing. Clearly, to be properly dressed as a nun was to give up all idea of upper-class status as acquired by birth or expressed in clothing. Nuns' clothing would not even reflect that status accorded to esquires and gentlemen below the rank of knights of the income less than £100 per annum who might wear clothing made of a somewhat better quality than did those in the category of grooms. These esquires and gentlemen might wear cloth, costing up to four and one half marks per whole cloth; however, their wives were forbidden trimmings and edgings on their clothing.<sup>45</sup> This category appears to be sartorially well above that intended by the writers of the Benedictine Rule, since the Rule specifies locally produced fabric obtained from the cheapest source, and clearly, the price limit of two marks for grooms, and forty shillings for yeomen and handicraftsmen indicates a less expensive fabric than that allowed to esquires and gentlemen.

The economic equation, one which affects our understanding of the Prioress' costume, in which income, not birth alone, finally determines social status, becomes even clearer in the provisions which allow merchants, citizens, burgesses, etc. to wear clothes similar to those of esquires and gentlemen possessing £100 per year, if these merchants "possess goods and chattels worth five hundred pounds." Any

owning property worth £1000 may dress like esquires and gentlemen who have an income of £200. Similarly, knights possessing incomes of less than £200 per year are forbidden cloth of gold, clothing furred with miniver, sleeves of ermine, and garments embroidered with jewels "or with anything else." Their wives may only wear precious stones on their hands. "However, all knights and ladies with incomes of from 400 marks to £1000 a year may wear anything they please, except ermine." Clerks having less than 200 marks income a year were instructed to dress like esquires of £100 income; clerks of more than 200 marks income shall "wear and do as knights of the same rent."<sup>46</sup>

In the Sumptuary laws we see that income is more important than birth in determining attitudes toward dress, and we have already demonstrated that the income versus religious rules conflict was all too often resolved in favor of income, in the case of certain cloistered but worldly nuns, some of whom dressed in a way suitable to the category of those mentioned in the second law who could wear anything they pleased, except ermine, because their income was 400 marks to £1000. In fact, some worldly nuns even possessed garments trimmed with ermine, as we have discussed. Conversely, for pious nuns, and they may even have been the silent majority, the religious habit was a humble one, made of humble fabric, although provisions were clearly made for

protection from inclement weather and outdoor work. Such an humble habit would appear to fall into that category described as suitable for grooms whose income was less than forty shillings a year. The length and width of nuns' habits were specifically limited--only enough fabric to reach the top of the foot and to go around the body with sufficient ease was to be used. These ideas were repeated so often that we cannot help knowing they were often abused. That longer and wider fabrics (automatically more costly) were used indicates, even if we had no records to prove it, that the nuns transgressing in this way possessed the money to buy these goods or other means by which to acquire them, such as inheritances. Attitudes of superiors in certain convents must have been relatively compliant toward this practice, or it could not have been so widespread; similarly, attitudes of parliament toward income expressed in the Sumptuary Laws acknowledged and accepted the fact that economic factors break down social restrictions.

However, Chaucer provides no information in his description of Madame Eglentyne concerning her possible expenditure by the year, or her income, except that he tells us she travels accompanied by a retinue, one suitable to the prioress of a prosperous priory. If we follow this indication we might expect the Prioress to dress as some of her historical counterparts did, in luxurious clothing.

Instead, Chaucer mentions no specific fabric, such as double-worsted, or trimming, such as grey fur, to provide an index of cost. There is only his statement that the Prioress wears a "full fetys" cloak, a statement which must connote propriety when compared to attitudes implicit in the foregoing historical records.

#### The Prioress' Habit and Descriptions of Nuns'

##### Habits in Literature:

The repeated religious injunctions and sumptuary legislation bespeak an ongoing social conflict over costume, one which was manifest in all levels of society. On the one hand, religious and many secular authorities alike objected to any manner of dress judged to be extravagant, and on the other, they appear virtually powerless to curb what they condemned. This condemnation of extravagance finds full expression in the literature of the period, in which persons of all social classes are castigated for spending money on decoration (embroidery, jewels, dagging or scalloped edges), but most especially on the new styles which required expensive fabrics and the use of excessive amounts of fabric. Both secular<sup>47</sup> and religious writers deem that certain virtues and vices are demonstrated in costume, a point that is very important in an assessment of Chaucer's



portrait of the Prioress: prudence and wisdom are demonstrated in conservative costume; vanity, pride, and wastefulness are illustrated in extravagant costume. "Earth to Earth" encapsulates the religious attitude toward such piling up of sartorial treasures on earth:

He that gose appone erthe gleterande as golde,  
 Lyke als erthe neuer mare goo to erthe scholde,  
 And 3itt schall erthe vnto erthe 3a rathere  
 þan he wolde.  
 Now why þat erthe luffis earthe, wondire me  
 thynke,  
 Or why þat erthe for erthe scholde oþer swete  
 or swynke,  
 For when þat erthe appone erthe es broghte  
 with-in brynke,  
 Than schalle<sup>48</sup> erthe of erthe hafe a foulle  
 stynke.

In the case of literary descriptions of nuns, this general condemnation finds an apt satirical metaphor, indicating the use of excessive amounts of fabric used in the making of a garment, in the phrase "large robes" and variations of this phrase. This "large robes" metaphor and its variants encapsulate the concept of the worldly nun who is satirized in the literature of the later Middle Ages, and a knowledge of how the metaphor works aids our understanding of how Chaucer's costume rhetoric works.

It is worth noting the irony present in the evolution of metaphor in a phrase used by church officials and later, with a difference, by writers of satire to describe the basic garment of the religious habit. Vestis talaris (also sometimes referred to as talaris tunica and pellicea) is the

term used to describe the appropriate cassock or tunic, a close-fitting garment which covered the full length of the body from the neck down to the feet, and which was prescribed by the church for its religious. It was originally the ordinary dress of both male and female prior to the end of the sixth century; however, it was necessary for church officials to rule for the maintenance of this garment when fashion changed for the laity and men adopted the short tunic.<sup>49</sup> The Catholic Church hierarchy emphasized the need for its clergy and nuns to wear sober, modest clothing, and the length of the vestis talaris is specified again and again, as in the Rule of Syon which says there should be the width of a hand between the bottom of the tunic and the ground.

Yet, this very insistence became a source of literary satire, as poets described, for example, nuns who maintained chaste exteriors, such as those in the first satire on nuns in English literature, Nigel De Longchamps' twelfth-century Speculum Stultorum,<sup>50</sup> but who, beneath their proper habits and behind their convent walls,<sup>51</sup> were quarrelsome, vain, and sexually immoral. Their hypocrisy is precisely stated by Rutebeuf's "La Chanson des ordres," as we shall see. And Lydgate captures the inherent irony here in his line, "In wide copis perfeccion to feine." The poetic suggestion that such nuns hid their impropriety behind their habits was

succeeded by poetic description of the convergence of actions and costume so that the nuns' immoderate behavior was reflected in their religious garments in a wideness of those garments that was contrary to the rule. A case in point is the satirically proposed Order of Fair-Ease, described in the poem of that name, which would wear gowns so long they would trail on the ground. But the "larges robes" metaphor which could mean long, or wide, or both simultaneously, came to encapsulate all of these suggestions, as did variants of the metaphor such as the more specific description "wide copis."

Thus we see that the metaphorical difference between correctness and incorrectness in religious costume may be expressed semantically and metaphorically in the difference between talaris tunica and "large robes." The difference is both important and ironic and it may be even more precisely measured when "wide" is the adjective used. Wideness implies excessive cost in the amount of fabric consumed, if narrow pieces had been sewn together, as well as the possibility of the use of costly fabric, for the wider the piece of woven cloth was, the more costly it was. Wideness also implies the possibility of the use of forbidden construction methods in making the tunic, such as pleating and tucking, which are not expressly forbidden in wimples, but are forbidden in gowns. Indeed, the ironic distinction between vestis talaris and "clothes wide" is all the more important for the fact that in

discussing this particular point it has been absolutely necessary to avoid the use of the term "habit."

It is against this background of the "large robes" metaphor used to epitomize the costume indiscretions of nuns in medieval literature that we must analyse the Prioress' costume. Since so many critics have judged Madame Eglentyne to be the object of mild satire and the description of her costume to be part of that satire, the questions we now address are: 1) how does the Prioress' costume differ from that of other nuns and prioresses described in literature, and 2) how does Chaucer's costume rhetoric differ from standard practices? In answer to both questions, we find that the Prioress' costume and Chaucer's costume rhetoric are more characteristic of the literary treatment of pious nuns, personified virtues, and the Blessed Virgin Mary than they are of satirized nuns; however, this is not to say the same for the Prioress' actions and Chaucer's description of them.

The fact is, and it is one that literature makes as clear as do historical records, the habit did not make the nun,<sup>52</sup> contrary to episcopal hopes. It is worth repeating here the medieval poem "Why I Can't Be a Nun," which states the problem succinctly:

Yowre barbe, your wympple and your vayle,  
Yowre mantelle and yowre devowte clothyng,  
Maketh men wyth-owten fayle  
To wene 3e be holy in levyng.  
And so hyt ys an holy thyng  
To bene in habyte reguler;

Than, as by owtewarde array in semyng,  
Beth so wyth-in, my ladyes dere. (ll. 350-357)<sup>53</sup>

The author of this poem goes on to advise nuns not to frequent taverns whose doors bear the ivy garland, and not to be found drinking there, "Ellys yowre habyte ys no trew token" (ll. 358-365). The point here is that the habit is the sign of a nun's vows, and that her spiritual cleanness should equal this holy sign. This is the concept of the typical pious nun: her outer propriety signifies her spiritual purity. However, implicit in "Why I Can't Be a Nun," as it is in Chaucer's portrait of Madame Eglentyne, is the recognition that such inner-outer consistency was not always the case.<sup>54</sup> This idea is expressed in an excerpt from the medieval poem "Priere d'amour d'une nonnain a un jeune adolescent":

It est bien vray que tourel, voille on guymple,  
Fort scapulaire ou autre habit de corps,  
Ne rend jamais homme ou femme plus simple,  
Mais rompt souvent l'union et accords  
Mectant divorce entre l'ame et le corps. . . .<sup>55</sup>

False Seeming in *Le Roman de la Rose*, also, argues this same point about those in religious orders who are worldly: "To the world they present an argument in which there is a shameful conclusion: this man has the robe of religion; therefore he is religious. This argument is specious" (ll. 1044-11056).

Some nuns in medieval literature, Madame Eglentyne for example, present a perfect exterior to the world while living

in a way that violates their vows; these, following the example set by the Pearl poet, we shall say are wearing "false vestments." Or, we may express this idea by following False Seeming's description of himself; these wearers of false vestments cover their "foxlike nature under a cloak of pope-holiness" (11523-11524). Other nuns in medieval literature, however, are depicted in a manner which expresses their spiritual uncleanness in their luxurious wearing apparel, and these we shall refer to as typical worldly nuns or religious. The typical worldly religious of literature, comparable to the worldly nun of historical records, wears over-curiously garments or accessories, and his or her costume is distinguished by either unauthorized luxurious fabric, the use of an excessive amount of fabric, or the possession of an excessive number of luxurious garments and/or accessories. John Wyclif plainly describes such religious stereotypes:

3if þei gederen to hem self many wast and  
 precicus clothes bi feyned beggerie and sotil  
 ypocrisie, and partiþ not with pore nedy men  
 þat han nakið sidis and torne sleues and here  
 children steruen for cold . . . hou cloþe þei  
 nakið men, whanne bi ypocrisie þei drawn from  
 hem þis bodily almes bi whiche þes poralis  
 schulden be cloþid and kept fro deþ. certis  
 þei ben cursed disceyueris boþ of pore and  
 riche, and ben irreguler bi-for god for  
 myschefous deþ þat þes nedy men suffren. <sup>56</sup>

Friars, especially, were castigated by Wyclif for their too-wide and, therefore, too costly habits, but the attitude he expresses concerning Friars' habits applies equally to the

habits of the other religious as well. He asks "lord, what helpiþ wydnese of habitis of þise ordris?" and answers that it aids the "fend" and wastes God's goods, "& so ilche þreed of sich cloþis that ben two wast & too costliche berip with hym a wrong boþe to god & man" because the poor should have received the benefit from the money spent on luxurious clothes. He then compares the wearers of such habits to "trees turned vpsodoun, for roote & inward of hem ben shewid wiþ-oute to þe world, and falsnesse of here entent is hid fro men bi þis turnyng."<sup>57</sup>

Most frequently, as Wyclif did, writers express the discrepancy between the ideal and the worldly nun metaphorically through the description of the latter wearing a wide habit, "large robes" i. e. a habit which has been made out of more material than is necessary, thus consuming fabric and/or money which might have otherwise been given to the poor. Such a case is presented in Lydgate's The Temple of Glas:

Yentred were into religioun,  
Or þei hade yeris of discrecioun,  
That al her life cannot but complein,  
In wide copis perfeccion to feine,  
Ful couertli to curen al hir smert,  
And shew þe contrarie outward of her hert.<sup>58</sup>

Rutebeuf's "La Chanson des ordres" provides another example of the "large robes" metaphor:

Beguines a où mont  
Qui larges robes ont;  
Desous lor robes font

Ce que pas ne vous di.<sup>59</sup>

In a second poem, "Les Ordres De Paris," Rutebeuf again employs this metaphor in describing the promiscuous Beguines who wear robes "large et pleniére" (41).<sup>60</sup> "The Court of Love" provides yet another example of women who have taken the veil and nuns' vows:

Here thought is, thei ben in confusion:  
 "Alas," thay sayn, "we fayne perfeccion,  
 In clothes wide and lake oure libertie;  
 But all the synne mote on oure frendes be."  
 (1103-1106)<sup>61</sup>

These nuns place the blame for their confusion, the disparity between their holy habit and their unholy liberties, on those close to them who forced them to become nuns against their wishes (1111-1112). Nevertheless, the disparity remains, and it is expressed in the phrase "clothes wide."

Naturally, these larges robes, wide and/or long, are the required habit for the satirical Order of Fair-Ease, described in the poem of the same name, in The Political Songs of England From the Reign of John to that of Edward II. The brothers and sisters of this unholy order imitate the Hospitalers in their courtly luxury:

Un point unt tret de Hospitlers,  
 Qe sunt mult corteis chevalers,  
 E ount robes bien avenauntz,  
 Longes desqu'al pié traynantz,  
 Soudlers e chausés bien séantz,  
 E gros palefrois bien amblantz;  
 Si deyvent en nostre Ordre aver  
 Les freres e sueres, pur veyr.

[A point they have taken from the  
 Hospitallers, who are very courteous knights,



and have very becoming robes, so long that they drag at their feet; shoes and breeches which fit elegantly, and great palfreys that amble well; so in our Order, in truth, the brethren and sisters must have them.]<sup>62</sup>

Since Chaucer portrays his Prioress-on-pilgrimage in a setting that is both religious and yet social, it is important that we, too, perceive her description from the standpoint of the social context. The "larges robes" metaphor of condemning sermon and religious satire is but part of a wider convention which includes the ostentatious dress of all segments of society. Caesarius of Heisterbach includes in the thirteenth-century The Dialogue on Miracles a colorful story of a woman of Mainz who was guilty of overdressing. This woman who "dressed out with all kinds of adornments" Caesarius compares to a peacock. She wore skirts "which she was dragging far behind her" and on which a citizen saw a number of tiny black hand-clapping and leaping demons sitting. Caesarius describes her long trailing skirts as a "chariot of demons." The citizen who saw this vision prays that others will see the same vision. His prayer is granted and the woman is ultimately converted from her haughty extravagance to humility. Caesarius' moral is clearly stated: "for in truth feminine extravagance is a net of the devil."<sup>63</sup>

Caesarius speaks of feminine extravagance expressed in garments made of excessive fabric, but other writers speak of masculine extravagance as well. The practice of daggging (the

finishing of the edge of a garment in scallops or other geometrical shapes) the costumes of courtiers and the cost of such decoration is castigated in "On the Deposition of Richard II."<sup>64</sup> In contrast to the luxurious and costly dress of the courtiers, the poet describes the costume of the allegorical character Wisdom as follows:

welle homelich yhelid  
in an holsume gyse,  
not overe lenge, but ordeyned<sup>65</sup>  
in the olde schappe.

Thomas Hoccleve, too, in Dialogus inter Occliff et Mendicum<sup>66</sup> condemns the practice of using a yard of broad cloth to make one tippet; Hoccleve calls it a "foule waste of cloth."<sup>67</sup> Significantly, it is the change in fashion, the adopting of a new manner of dress, and one which includes the use of greater amounts of fabric that bothers Hoccleve the most:

this . . . is an evil, to see one walking in  
gownes of scarlet twelve yards wide, with  
sleeves reaching to the ground, and lined with  
fur, worth twenty pounds, or more; at the same  
time, if he had only been master of what he  
paid for, he would not have had enough to have  
lined a hood.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, we see that excessively wide and excessively long garments are considered to be evidence of vanity, pride, and wastefulness, no matter who wears them, and the frequent repetition in writing of this attitude leaves no doubt that the metaphor of "large robes," used in literary descriptions of nuns, conveyed the sum of the details expressed elsewhere

in complaints of the new fashions of Richard II's reign.

In addition to employing the "wide habit" metaphor, poets who portray nuns with worldly tastes in clothing occasionally describe the specific materials used in unauthorized garments. In "A Disputation between a Christian and a Jew," the two debaters come upon a scene of feasting at an unnamed nunnery (198) where the boards are decked out in "schire clothes and schene" (209-210). The nuns, "mony a derworþe dame," wear "Dyapre ðere," and are escorted by "Squi3ers in vch a syde / In þe wones so wyde" (199-202).<sup>69</sup> The fabric called "dyapre" was indeed dear or costly. The OED describes it as a fabric described in Old French and medieval Latin, which was "apparently of silk, woven or flowered over the surface with gold thread,"<sup>70</sup> and lists early French references to diaspre "'que fu fais en Constantinoble' and 'dyaspre d'Antioch and [which] associate it with other fabrics of Byzantine or Levantine origin.'" That Chaucer knew this diamond-shape patterned fabric is clear, since he mentions it in the Knight's Tale: "Couered in clooth of gold dyapered weel" (1300). Apparently, diapre was not always white; the OED states that in Old French diaspre is often described as blanc, a designation that would be unnecessary if the fabric was customarily white, although the name of the color might be included in literary descriptions for its symbolic value. However, the point of describing

nuns wearing diapre in "A Disputation" is not that they are, or are not, dressed in white, but that they wear costly fabric against the provisions of their rule.

The author of "The Land of Cokaygne" is less specific in that he does not use a fabric name such as diapre to pinpoint extravagance of dress, but the nuns he describes are no less luxuriously circumstanced. They reside in a

fair nunnerie.  
Up a riuer of swet milke.  
Whar is plente grete of silk.<sup>71</sup>

This poem emphasizes the sin of gluttony--the adjacent abbey of grey and white monks is made of various foods (pastry walls, cake shingles, etc.); the mention of "plente grete of silk" is but an aside, but the juxtaposition of the two remind us of the message of "Earth to Earth," quoted above, and the final outcome of hunger for the pleasures of this earth. It is no wonder that such nuns wearing silk, diapered or plain, might be described as the Kildare nuns are in "Of Men Lif that Wonith in Lond":

Hail be 3e nonnes of seint mari house,  
goddes bourmaidnes and his owen spouse,  
ofte mistredid 3e 3ur schone, 3ur fete bes  
ful tendre,  
dapeir 3e sotter 3at tawid 3ure lefir.<sup>72</sup>

They mistread and their shoes are made of skins not "weltawed." Is the poet suggesting that these nuns walk in the wrong paths and that, thus, Satan is their cobbler and makes the shoes which cause their feet to be tender? Another

possible meaning is that their feet are too tender to wear the shoes prescribed by their superior.<sup>73</sup> In either case, the implication is that these nuns cannot live up to what their order requires of them, and this implication is expressed in terms of clothing. Similarly, although on a grander and more specific scale, the obviously worldly nun of the eleventh century "Plangit nonna fletibus" longs for ermine to wear, fur that is later reserved solely to the royal family in English sumptuary laws, in addition to wishing for a brooch, a bridal veil, a ribbon or coronet, and a necklace.<sup>74</sup>

Neither is there any doubt about interpreting the literary figure of the luxurious abbess who slept among gay coverlet, soft and delicate sheets, and furs, as portrayed in the history of the flea and the gout from An Alphabet of Tales,<sup>75</sup> or the luxurious prioress in purgatory, described in The Legend of St. Patrick's Purgatory; its later Literary History. Of this Prioress, the fiends in hell state,

"It is wel knowen . . . þat she was more  
cosluer in puler [furl] weryng, as of girdelles  
of siluer and overgilt and ringes on hir  
fingers, and siluer bokeles and ouergilt on  
hir shone, esy lieng in nyghtes as it were [a  
quenel or an emprise in the world, not daynyng  
hir for to arise to goddis servis; and with  
all delicate metes and drinks she was  
fedde."<sup>76</sup>

Thus the typical worldly nun of literature wears "large robes," or more explicitly, indulges in the luxury of excessive personal expense in the amount of fabric and/or in

the kind of fabric consumed. And, although the last few examples in the quotations above include several or more costume details, usually medieval writers found it sufficient to mention only one detail that indicated excess or luxury in order to indicate that the nun was attached to things of the world. They could do so because living examples of this principle were so available, and furnished such a fund of detail, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Conversely, the typical pious nun in literature wears an appropriate habit, demonstrating that she comprehends and values the concept expressed in "Earth to Earth," quoted above. Such pious nuns are one part of another tradition, that of the description of nuns as brides of Christ, as discussed in the previous chapter and it is worthwhile repeating here the excerpt from Gautier de Coincy's La Chastee as Nonnains which illustrates the ideal nun who wears a proper habit for God her courtly lover. The nun-brides of this poem are concerned with the adornment of their souls and the analogy made is that of the courtly lady concerned with the adornment of her body in luxurious garments, each lady being concerned with that aspect of life which is her own proper sphere. The nuns' spiritual "cleanness" is symbolized in their renunciation of secular clothing and wearing of appropriate convent habits, their courtliness redirected to their bridegroom Christ. Their proper behavior then becomes the

beautiful vesture of their souls:

Voz indes fleurs, vous violetes,  
 Qui les grans plices d'erminetes,  
 Qui la soie, le vair, le gris  
 Avez laissiez por les dras bis,  
 Qui por les ames faire blanches  
 Vestez les fros as noires manches,  
 Sachiez que Diex em paradis  
 De voz fera ses fleurs de lis.  
 Voz, blanches fleurs, vois de Cistiax.  
 Qui afublez ces blanz mantiax.  
 Qui les pliçons et les chemises  
 Por blans buriax avez jus mises,  
 Ja sont ou ciel apareillies  
 Blanches chemises deliies  
 Et les robes a or batues  
 Dont vos ames seront vestues.  
 Por Dieu, por Dieu, blanches et noires,  
 Gardez ne prisiez pas .ij. pooires  
 De cest fax mont la fause joie,  
 Car toz les siens guile et faunoie.  
 S'en vo biauté, s'en vo jouvent  
 Tenez le veu et le couvent  
 Que voz avez a Dieu pramis,  
 Com vrais espeuz, com vrais amis  
 De paradis voz doera. (1059-1083)<sup>77</sup>

In the poem quoted above, pious nuns wear pious clothing. However, Chaucer employs the same rhetorical technique to depict the outer appearance of Madame Eglentyne while at the same time describing her actions which belie the cleanness of her costume. Thus, we can say that she wears "false vestments"--her habits contradict her habit: the basic opposition which creates the fascinating tension in this portrait. And we recall that this is the same technique employed in Le Roman de la Rose in the descriptions of Pope-Holiness dressed as a nun, False Seeming who wears a "simple robe," and Constrained Abstinence who assumes the

costume of Beguine and pious professional pilgrim, complete with psalter and rosary. When the rhetoric is compared in the disparate literary traditions presented in this chapter and the previous one, we find many more similarities between Chaucer's physical description of the Prioress in costume and those which portray pious nuns, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and personified virtues, than we find between Chaucer's costume rhetoric and that of typical worldly nuns in medieval literature. That is not to say that there are correspondences on all points--we should be disappointed if that were so. Still, Chaucer does not use the "large robes" metaphor of satire in his description of the Prioress' costume, although he is capable of doing so in subtle ways: for example, the friar's double worsted "semycope," a description that indicates a short cloak made of expensive fabric which was wider, according to law, than lesser cloths such as monk's cloth or canon's cloth. Neither does Chaucer describe the Prioress as wearing diapre nor any other kind of silk. She does not wear expensive fur such as the monk's gris, or the vair and erminette which the nuns in La Chastee as Nonnains have also given up. She wears no shifts made of cloth of Rennes (at sixteen pence the ell), no pleated girdle, no girdle embroidered in silk, silver or gold, no kirtles laced with silk or made of fustian or worsted, no pleated gowns, no gowns of silk or with trains (and no



extravagant shoes). Nor does she go about in a surplice without a mantle "contrary to the manner of dress of nuns and the ancient custom of the priory" as the historical Prioress Margaret Fayrfax did.<sup>78</sup> So far as we know, she wears acceptable fabrics that are appropriate in length, width, and color; she wears a "full fetys" cloak. We can say at this point that the Prioress' habit is both attractive and prudent and that these two adjectives are not mutually exclusive.

#### The Prioress' Habit and Medieval Illuminations:

Manuscript illuminations provide ample evidence that Chaucer might have been more explicit in his description of the Prioress' habit. Just as there was great difference in styles of headdresses properly worn by medieval nuns, so was there variety in habits.<sup>79</sup> We have already noted that while by a 1237 council order the proper color for nuns' habits was black, nevertheless Archbishop Melton, in 1314, enjoined the nuns at Hampole to return to their old habit of wearing clamides of russet color,<sup>80</sup> Elizabeth Sewardby's habit included a cloak of russet and a tunic of blue cloth,<sup>81</sup> and the Rule of Syon provided for grey cloth gowns, hoods, and mantles. Clearly, nuns' habits were not all the black and white we might expect. Besides the numerous nuns in some combination of black and white garments to be found in

medieval illuminations, there are quite a few interesting variations in habits, some of which were so distinctive that they could be identified as the habit of a particular convent. If we visualize Chaucer's simple description of Madame Eglentyne's habit against knowledge of the variety of habits portrayed in medieval visual arts, we may find additional support for the idea that he was portraying an ideal exterior rather than a particular one.

A case in point is furnished by B.M. Additional MS. 39843, the French La Sainte Abbaye, circa 1300. In this manuscript the artist has painted nuns who wear habits made in the traditional style complete with white wimple and underveil, and black overveil. However, the colors of the remainder of the nuns' habits are painted in delicate blue, gray, orange, white, and combined shades of these hues, highlighted with goldleaf. Fol. 29 contains a nun who wears a gray-blue tunic, covered by a cloak of pale grayed orange, and a white veil and wimple. On fol. 6, the habits of pale orange alternate with those of blue-grey. There is the distinct possibility that the artist was more concerned here with aesthetic values in his variation of shades than he was in portraying the actuality of his experience. However, it is also possible that his exquisite color scheme is intended to represent habits made of humble fabric<sup>82</sup> such as those provided for Elizabeth Sewardby in the will previously

quoted. The date given for this French manuscript is circa 1300, much later than the 1237 English Council ruling that nuns should wear only black habits. It is entirely possible either that black habits for nuns became obligatory for French nuns at a later date, or that individual ecclesiastic authorities exercised their authority in the choice of fabric and color as did Archbishop Melton, as previously described.

We find a habit of another interesting color scheme depicted in the circa 1250 English, Salisbury, Bodleian MS. All Souls College 6, fol. 6. It contains the portrait of a kneeling nun of Amesbury who is dressed in the habit of Fontevrault composed of a blue cloak over a green tunic. Another such portrait is on fol. 4.

Still another interesting habit is illustrated by B.M. Harley MS. 621. This is a copy of nine books of Boccacio de Casu illustrium virorum et foeminarum. The illumination on fol. 71 is cited by Joseph Strutt as being illustrative of a medieval nun's habit, and he reproduces a line drawing of this nun in his plate CXXXIV. Indeed, the style of the garments is that of the traditional religious habit (simple outer garment, draped wimple and veil), with the exception that the habit has obvious patches on it. This nun is especially interesting because she carries a pilgrim wallet and walking stick, and wears a broad-brimmed pilgrim hat hanging down her back. An examination of the text reveals

that this figure is Glad Poverty--hence both the patches, and the nun-like style of the clothes. Nothing in the text explains the artist's choice of colors--why Glad Poverty wears an orange tunic with yellow patches (unless here, again, we have a depiction of a tunic made of russet), or why the second woman in the scene, Fortune (whom the text says wears purple), wears a yellow tunic, and black veil, no wimple, and a gold chain around her neck. The illuminator of this manuscript is not nearly so talented as the one who painted La Sainte Abbaye, and his work exhibits no sense of organized aesthetics, so that his color choices appear to be arbitrary. Still, the portrayal of Glad Poverty's accessories is similar to illuminations of other nuns depicted in habit with pilgrim accessories, especially illuminations in copies of Le Roman de la Rose. and the design of her costume is the same as that of other nuns in medieval illuminations, if the color appears at first glance to be unusual.

An even greater variety in nuns' habits exists, if colors in manuscript illuminations may be believed even in part. In an English manuscript of the second half of the thirteenth century, Bodleian Library MS. Auct. D.5.9., fol. 322, a nun wears a blue cloak over a black tunic.<sup>83</sup> Franciscan nuns wearing mauve cloaks appear on fols. 25v and 85 of a French manuscript, Bodleian Library MS. Douce 118, of

the second half of the thirteenth century. In this same manuscript the nun on fol. 129 wears a brown cloak, while on 136v (St. Odile of Alsace?) a nun wears a black cloak. However, the majority of nuns appearing in medieval manuscripts appear only in some combination of black and white.

The depictions of nuns' habits, dependent on the artist's skill, are hampered in the cases when black over black, or white on white, must be shown, and this prevents our seeing any great detail such as individual scapulars worn over tunics and under cloaks. For this reason, scapulars will not be mentioned in the following descriptions. If worn, they are indistinguishable from the tunic or undiscernible beneath the cloak. (While the wearing of scapulars may be an issue in terms of a study of the history of costume, it is less important to a study of Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress, since he permits not even a glimpse of what she wears beneath her cloak.)

However, the typical nun of manuscript illumination wears a tunic and cloak that are consistent with the prescriptions of her rule, unless the artist is conflating his depiction of the nun with that of the saint. In this case, her cloak may be fur-lined (or trimmed with gold braid?), indicating a spiritual nobility. In some cases, the saints depicted were also members of the secular nobility,

and such noble cloaks would have a dual significance. Illuminations of St. Gertrude and St. Ethelburger illustrate this point. St. Gertrude from B.M. Harley MS. 2962, fol. 41 (fig. 2), mentioned earlier in the survey of headdresses, wears a white tunic under a black cloak. There are two gold lines around the bottom of her cloak (possibly intended to depict braid). St. Ethelburger, in Horae Beatae Virginis, B.M. Harley MS. 2900, fol. 68v (fig. 7), wears a crown and royal robes, and there is a white lining to the sleeves of her black tunic. Over this tunic she wears a blue cloak, of the shade that the twentieth century designates as "royal blue," lined with ermine. We should note the realistic detail provided in this last illumination, the white lining of the sleeves. This detail of sleeve lining may also be seen in the fifteenth-century illumination of St. Birgitta in The heavenly revelations unto blessed Bride, princess of Nerice in the realm of Swecie, B.M. Cotton MS. Claud. B.i, fol. 117, where she wears a black habit, with sleeves lined with a grey-blue fabric. On fol. 34 she appears again, and much more sleeve lining shows.

However, the majority of nuns identifiable in medieval illuminations are depicted in a habit of black and white that reveals few distinguishing details beyond, for example, a brief glimpse of white tunic if the black mantle is not completely closed in front, or the wrist ends of tight tunic

sleeves showing below the edges of the looser sleeves of the cloak. Examples of this generalization are numerous: Thirteenth-century illuminations of Benedictine nuns pasted into a French Book of Hours (circa 1430-1450), B.M. Additional MS. 28,784B. The nun on fol. 7 wears a black habit as does the Benedictine nun in Breviarium Romanum (undated), B.M. Harley MS. 2975, fol. 73v. Nevertheless, we also note the circa 1490 copy of Le Roman de la Rose, B.M. Harley MS. 4425, which contains an illumination of Strayned Abstinence, leman of Faus Semblant, fol. 108.<sup>84</sup> Strayned Abstinence is dressed as a nun wearing a brown cloak; no tunic shows (fig. 1).

When the subject of the illumination is an abbess and/or saint, the illuminations frequently show white tunics under black mantles or cloaks as does that of a Benedictine abbess in a manuscript (circa 1330-1350) of Jacobus' Omne Bonum, B.M. Royal MS. 6Evi, fol. 27 (fig. 5). Similarly portrayed are the Benedictine habit of St. Etheldreda as abbess in the early sixteenth-century Horae Blessed Marie Virgines, Sec. Usus Sarum, B.M. MS. Kings 9, fol. 64v, a manuscript executed in Flanders, and the habit of a saintly nun, accompanied by other nuns, from Sforza Book of Hours, B.M. Additional MS. 34294, p. 420 (late fifteenth-century) (fig. 4). The abbess Heloise, in Poestes De Charles, Duc D'Orleans (circa 1500), which includes "Epitres de L'Abbesse Heloys du Paraclit,"

B.M. Royal MS. 16Fii, fol. 137, is also portrayed in this manner. The color scheme is reversed in the case of Dominican nuns, such as the four representing four virtues, painted in the lower register of fol. 33, in Le Sacre, Couronnement Et Entree de Claude, Royne de France (1517), B.M. Cotton MS. Titus A.xvii (fig. 9), who wear black tunics under white mantles.

Chaucer, however, gives us less detail about the Prioress' habit than the majority of manuscript illuminators. No ermine trim appears on her cloak such as that shown on St. Ethelburger's blue cloak in the illumination described above; no gold braid trims its edges as is the case for St. Gertrude's black cloak, also described above. We will never know whether Madame Eglentyne wears a russet or a white tunic because Chaucer provides no glimpse of tunic beneath her cloak, and no mention of cloak or sleeve lining, colored or otherwise. We cannot know for certain even the color of her cloak, although we may assume that it is black, in the ordinary Benedictine fashion. Given the visual evidence above of the many small details which might have been included in Chaucer's description, we understand that the description we receive from Chaucer is sparse indeed: "Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war" (157). This one-line treatment is comparable to his treatment of her wimple, when the misunderstood description of her fair



forehead is properly removed from consideration: "Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was" (151). The Prioress wears a wimple draped and pinned in a fully seemly manner and a cloak that is very well-made, Chaucer tells us, and then proceeds to lavish five lines of verse on what must have appeared to him to be a more important subject--her rosary, which we shall discuss in the next chapter.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kevin S. Kiernan, "The Art of the Descending Catalogue, and a Fresh Look at Alisoun," Chaucer Review, 10 (1975), 3, 5.
- <sup>2</sup> Edward Craney Jacobs, "Further Biblical Allusions for Chaucer's Prioress," Chaucer Review, 15 (1980), 152-153.
- <sup>3</sup> Gerald Morgan, "The Universality of the Portraits in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales," English Studies, 58 (1977), 489.
- <sup>4</sup> Phyllis Hodgson, ed., "General Prologue" to the "Canterbury Tales," (London: Athlone Press, 1969), p. 22.
- <sup>5</sup> Hodgson, pp. 24-25. Similarly, Julia Bolton Holloway, in "The Figure of the Pilgrim in Medieval Poetry," Diss. University of California, Berkeley 1974, p. 370, finds that the Prioress is modeled on Faus Semblant's leman, Strayned-Abstinence who dressed in nun's garb.
- <sup>6</sup> Mary Hardy Long Frank, "The Prioress and the Puys: A Study of the Cult of the Virgin and the Medieval Puys in Relation to Chaucer's Prioress and Her Tale," Diss. University of Colorado 1970, p. 10.
- <sup>7</sup> Frank, "The Prioress and the Puys," p. 28, quoting Thomas Hoccleve's Governail of Princes, ed. Wright, p. 179, stanza 713. See also pp. 133, 151.
- <sup>8</sup> Florence H. Ridley, The Prioress and the Critics (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1965), p. 21.
- <sup>9</sup> Eileen Power, Medieval People, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925), pp. 77-78.
- <sup>10</sup> See Frédéric Godefroy, Dictionnaire de L'Ancienne Langue Française et de tous ses dialectes (Paris, 1884; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint Corp., 1961), III, 709.
- <sup>11</sup> See n. 67 in Chapter I.
- <sup>12</sup> The Rule of St. Benedict, ed. and trans. D. Oswald Hunter Blair, 4th ed. (Fort Augustus: Abbey Press, 1934),

Ch. xxxiii, pp. 98-99, Ch. lv, pp. 144-149.

<sup>13</sup> St. Benedict, Ch. liv, pp. 144-145, n. U, p. 204.

<sup>14</sup> See n. 30, Chapter I.

<sup>15</sup> Ancren Riwe: A Treatise on the Duties of Monastic Life, ed. and trans. James Morton (London: Camden Society, 1853) Part 8, pp. 418-421. This Rule also states,

Next your flesh ye shall wear no flaxen cloth, except it be of hards and of coarse canvass. Whoso will may have a stamin [a shirt made of woolen and linen, used instead of a penitentiary hair shirt.--Fosbrooke.] and whoso will may be without it. Ye shall sleep in a garment and girt. Wear no iron, nor haircloth, nor hedgehogskins; and do not beat yourselves therewith, nor with a scourge of leather thongs, nor leaded; . . .

Let your shoes be thick and warm. In summer ye are at liberty to go and to sit barefoot, and to wear hose without vamps, and whoso liketh may lie in them. A woman may well enough wear drawers of haircloth very well tied, with the strapples reaching down to her feet, laced tightly.

<sup>16</sup> George James Aungier, History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery, the Parish of Isleworth, and the Chapelry of Hounslow ([London]: J. B. Nichols & Son, 1840), pp. 22-23, and ns. 2 and 1 respectively.

<sup>17</sup> Aungier also states that for summer wear, ankle-high shoes and knee-high stockings were provided; for the winter, cloth-lined knee-high boots and stockings were issued.

<sup>18</sup> Additions to the Rules of Syon, George James Aungier, in History of Syon Monastery, ([London]: J. B. Nichols and Son, 1840), Appendix, p. 392. See also, Power, Nunneries, pp. 132-133.

<sup>19</sup> James Robinson Planché, A Cyclopaedia of Costume or Dictionary of Dress (London: Chatto and Windus, Piccadilly, 1876), I, 398.

<sup>20</sup> Duranti, Rationale, lib. III, cap. I, quoted by Daniel Rock, Hierugia; or, The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, 3rd ed. rev., ed. W. H. James Weale (London: John Hodges, 1892), II, 256-257. For a history of ills deriving from costume beginning with Adam, see D'Étienne de Bourbon, Anecdotes Historiques: Légendes et Apologues (Paris: Société

de l'Histoire de France, 1877), p. 235.

<sup>21</sup> David Wilkins, Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae I, (London: 1737) pp. 590-591. See n. 39, Chapter I for the full Latin quotation.

<sup>22</sup> Black-dyed cloth would have been an expensive fabric and, as such, violated the intent spelled out in the Benedictine Rule that the religious should wear clothing made of inexpensive cloth. Apparently, this Benedictine ruling was violated in order to achieve another end, that of attaining a more sober color for habits than that provided by the inexpensive natural fabrics on the market, such as russet. Kenneth G. Ponting, A Dictionary of Dyes and Dyeing (London: Mills & Boon Limited, 1980), p. 18, explains why dyeing a fabric black was expensive in the Medieval Period. It was a problematical process made by mixing the three primary colors:

Without doubt most blacks were dyed either by producing a very dark navy, dyed with woad and then topping with a yellow dye such as weld, or possibly a red like madder, or by dyeing a medium blue and then cross-dyeing with first yellow (weld) and then red (madder). By this method, a good black was obtained but the lengthy process was not good for the material.

See also Kenneth G. Ponting, The Woolen Industry of South-West England (Bath: Adams & Dart, 1971), p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Wilkins, Conc. I, p. 660. See n. 40, Chapter I, for full quotation.

<sup>24</sup> Eileen Power, Medieval English Nunneries, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, ed. G. G. Coulton (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1922), p. 586, citing New Coll. MS., fol. 86.

<sup>25</sup> See Power's description, Nunneries, pp. 585-87, with numerous citations. Also, see n. 42, Chapter I of this study.

<sup>26</sup> Testamenta Eboracensia, or Wills Registered at York Illustrative of the History, Manners, Language, Statistics, &c., of the Province of York, From the Year MCCC Downwards, ed. James Raine (London: Surtees Society, 1836-1902), I, 332.

<sup>27</sup> Testamenta Eboracensia I, 325-326 gives the Testamentum Willielmi Heghfeld De Swyn: "Item lego eidem tria coclearia argentea, et cistam meam quae est apud Swyn, et j

malesadill, et j togam longam de nigro." Power, Nunneries, pp. 327-328, discusses this same bequest, citing Testamenta Eboracensia I, 187-189.

28 Testamenta Eboracensia I, 308, 317, 322, 324.

29 The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, ed. William Page (London: Archibald Constable and Company, Ltd., 1913), III, 122-123; see n. 6 for a description of John Fayrfax's will which is recorded in Test. Ebor., I, 186.

30 The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, III, 164.

31 Testamenta Eboracensia, III, 168.

32 Testamenta Eboracensia, III, 168.

33 "Blodi" is defined by the MED as "bluish, somewhat blue." See, also, R. E. Latham's Revised Medieval Word-List from British and Irish Sources (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press), p. 52, for the entry "blodium".

34 Rev. W. G. Clark-Maxwell, "The Outfit for the Profession of an Austin Canoness at Lacock, Wilts. in the Year 1395, and Other Memoranda," The Archaeological Journal, 69, 2nd ser.16 (1912), 118. This is his translation from the Latin.

35 Visitation of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln: Alnwick's Visitations (1436-49), ed. Alexander Hamilton Thompson, Canterbury and York Series, No. 24 (London: Canterbury and York Society, 1919), II, i, 3-5. See also Power, Medieval People, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925), pp. 77-78.

36 This information from St. Aldhelm's De Laudibus Virginitatis is from Lina Eckenstein, Woman under Monasticism (Cambridge: University Press, 1896), p. 115.

37 The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, III, 125-126.

38 The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, III, 120.

39 The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, III, 119.

40 Visitations of Religious Houses in the Diocese of

Lincoln, II, i, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Frances Elizabeth Baldwin, Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Regulation in England, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science 44, No. 1 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1926), pp. 49-50.

<sup>42</sup> Baldwin, p. 47, n. 108, citing Stat. L., vol. ii, p. 164.

<sup>43</sup> Baldwin, citing Stat. L., vol. ii, p. 164.

<sup>44</sup> Baldwin, pp. 47-48, citing Stat. L., vol. ii, pp. 164-165.

<sup>45</sup> Baldwin, pp. 48-49.

<sup>46</sup> Baldwin, pp. 49-50.

<sup>47</sup> See n. 38 in Introduction regarding motivations for the Sumptuary Laws.

<sup>48</sup> "Earth to Earth," in Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse, ed. George G. Perry from Robert Thornton's MS. (circa 1440) in the Lincoln Cathedral Library, E.E.T.S. O.S. 26 (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1867), p. 95.

<sup>49</sup> Rev. Henry J. McCloud, Clerical Dress and Insignia of the Roman Catholic Church (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1948), pp. viii, 47; Rev. Adrian Vigourel, A Synthetical Manual of Liturgy, trans. Rev. John A. Mainfa (New York: John Murphy Company Publishers, 1907), p. 50; David Wilkins, Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae I (London: 1737), pp. 590-591; A Dictionary of Christian Antiquities, ed. William Smith and Samuel Cheetham (Hartford, 1880; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint Company, 1968), I, 582.

<sup>50</sup> Nigel De Longchamps, Speculum Stultorum, ed. John H. Mozley and Robert R. Raymo (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), p. 171.

<sup>51</sup> Nigel Longchamp, A Mirror for Fools, or The Book of Burnel the Ass, trans. J. H. Mozley (Oxford: B. H. Blackwell, Ltd., 1961), pp. 60-70.

<sup>52</sup> This statement parallel's False Seeming's statement regarding monks, in Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, Le Roman de la Rose (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1974), l. 11058.

<sup>53</sup> "Why I Can't Be a Nun," Early English Poems and Lives

of Saints, ed. F. J. Furnivall (Berlin: Transactions of the Philological Society, 1858), p. 147, edited from British Library MS. Bibl. Cotton, Vesp. D. ix, f. 179.

54 See also Power, Nunneries, p. 511, for an account of The Nun who Loved the World.

55 Recueil de poesies françoises des XV<sup>e</sup> et XVI<sup>e</sup> siecles (Paris: Chez P. Jannet, Libraire, 1858), VIII, 173.

56 The English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted, ed. F. D. Matthew, E.E.T.S. O.S. 74 (London: Trübner & Co., 1880), p. 14. See also Iohannis Wyclif, Operis Evangelici Liber Tertius et Quartus sive De Antichristo Liber Primus et Secundus, English side-notes by F. D. Matthew (London: Trubner & Co., 1896), p. 15, ll. 18-29, on "how the pharisees of to-day deceive the people in dress and ceremonies," by wearing clothing that consumed more money than was in the seamless tunic of Christ.

57 The English Works of Wyclif, pp. 315-316.

58 John Lydgate, The Temple of Glas, ed. J. Schick, E.E.T.S. E.S. 60 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1891), p. 8.

59 Rutebeuf, "La Chanson des ordres," Fabliaux et Contes Des Poètes François Des XI, XII, XIII, XIV et XVe siècles, ed. E. Barbazan, (Paris: Chez B. Wareae oncle, Libraire, 1808), II, 300, edited from Bibliotheque Imperiale MSS. 7218 and 7633.

60 Rutebeuf, "Les Ordres De Paris," Fabliaux et Contes, II, 294, from Bibliotheque Imperiale MSS. 7218 and 7633.

61 This is the pseudo-Chaucerian Court of Love in The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. R. Morris (London: Bell and Daldy, 1866), IV, 38-39.

62 "The Order of Fair-Ease," The Political Songs of England From the Reign of John to that of Edward II, ed. and trans. Thomas Wright (London: The Camden Society, 1839), p. 140, from British Library M.S. Harley 2253, fol. 121, from the reign of Edward II.

63 Caesarius of Heisterbach, The Dialogue on Miracles, trans. H. Von E. Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1929), I.vii, 327.

64 Political Poems and Songs Relating to English History, Composed During the Period From the Accession of

Edw.III to that of Ric.III, ed. Thomas Wright (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1859), I, 400.

65 Political Poems and Songs Relating to English History, I, 402. Changes in fashion, in general, are the work of the Devil, according to many medieval writers, and the castigation of daggging mentioned above is only one illustration of this point of view. See the poem "On the Times," from Trinity College, Dublin, E.5, 10(c), in Political Poems and Songs Relating to English History, I, 270-278.

Richard Rolle de Hampole, in Pricke of Conscience, ed. Philological Society (Berlin: A. Asher & Co., 1863), pp. 43-44, ll. 1522-1602, states that gay clothing, the new fashionable clothing, turns men away from God and constitutes one of the list of things he condemns about the upsodoun fourteenth-century world.

The growing extravagance of costume present in the second half of the fourteenth century and reaching a high point in Richard II's reign is a well-established phenomenon, one which needs no further documentation. I present here only a sampling of literay protests against such costume, among them a summary of the evidence for the presence of this protesting attitude in Joseph Strutt's survey of English dress, A Complete View of the Dress and Habits of the People of England, from the Establishment of the Saxons in Britain to the Present Time: Illustrated by Engravings Taken from the Most Authentic Remains of Antiquity (London: The Tabard Press Ltd, 1970), II, 137. Regarding the time of Richard II, he quotes Hen. Knyghton who says,

At this time the vanity of the common people in their dress was so great, that it was impossible to distinguish the rich from the poor, the high from the low, the clergy from the laity, by their appearance. The fashions were continually changing, and every one endeavouring to outshine his neighbour in the richness of his habit and the novelty of its form.

In this same vein are lines from Harding's Chronicle, Chapter 193, quoted by Strutt, II, 137-138, who attributes these lines to Harding written on the authority of Robert Ireleffe, clerk of the Green Cloth to Richard II:

There was great pride among the officers;  
And of all men, surpassing their compeers,  
With rich array, and much more costious  
Than was before, or sith and more precious.



Yeomen and gromes, in cloth of silk arayed.  
 Sattin and damask, in doublettes and gownes;  
 In cloth of grene, and scarlet for unpaid,  
 Cut worke was great, both in court and townes,  
 Bothe in men's hoodes, and also in their gownes;  
 Broudur and furies, and goldsmith's work, all newe,  
 In many a wyse, each day they did renewe.

The anonymous Eulogium, of about this same time, quoted by Strutt, II, 138, gives an even more detailed account of the lengths to which vanity and pride are indulged through personal dress:

The commons were besotted in excess apparel; some in wide surcoats reaching to their loins; some in a garment reaching to their heels, close before, and strutting out on the sides, so that at the back they make men seem like women; and this they call by a ridiculous name, gowne; their hoods are little, tied under the chin, and buttoned like the women's but set with gold, silver, and precious stones; their lirrripes, or tippets, pass round the neck, and, hanging down before, reach to the heels, all jagged; they have another weed of silk, which they call a paltock; their hose are of two colours, or pied with more, which they tie to their paltocks, with white lachets called herlots, without any breeches; their girdles are of gold and silver, and some of them worth twenty markes; their shoes and pattens are snouted and piked more than a finger long, crooking upwards, which they call crackowes, resembling devil's clawes, and fastened to the knees with chains of gold and silver.

66 British Museum MS. Harley 4826.

67 Strutt, II, 139.

68 Strutt, II, 138. Thomas Hoccleve also condemns the pride of the lower classes who imitate the extravagant dress of the rich, as well as the great lords who allow this. He looks backward to earlier times when dress accurately reflected rank. See, also, Strutt, II, 122-123, for his repetition of the advice written by a Norman knight (circa the end of the fourteenth-century) to his daughters (from British Museum MS. Harley 1764) on "superfluous usage of cloth, in making of garments wider and longer than decency necessarily required." He recounts the story of the wife who is judged with her good deeds weighed against her evil deeds. When a fiend adds her excessive wardrobe to the evil deeds, the wife is awarded to the Devil who threw wife,

clothes and jewels into the "irremediable lake of fire."

69 The Minor Poems of the Vernon MS., ed. F. J. Furnivall, E.E.T.S. O.S. 117 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1901), Part II, 490.

70 OED gives the following reference: "See Francisque Michel, Recherches sur les Etoffes de Soie, d'Or et d'Argent [Paris 1852] I. 236-244."

71 Early English Poems and Lives of Saints, p. 160.

72 Early English Poems and Lives of Saints, p. 154, edited from British Library MS. Harl. 913, p. 7.

73 See Graciela S. Daichman, "The Figure of the Wayward Nun in Late Medieval Literature: The Ambiguous Portraits of the Archpriest of Hita's Dona Garoza and Chaucer's Madame Eglentyne," Diss. Rice University 1983, p. 99, for this interpretation.

74 'Plangit nonna fletibus,' ed. Peter Dronke, Medieval Latin and the Rise of the European Love Lyric (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), II, 357, ll. 19-27. Jill Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1973), p. 130, quotes, translates, and comments on ll. 19-27.

75 An Alphabet of Tales, An English 15th Century Translation of the Alphabetum Narrationum once attributed to Etienne de Besancon, ed. M. M. Banks, E.E.T.S. O.S. 126 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., Ltd., 1904), No. XV, pp. 13-14.

76 J. P. Krapp, The Legend of St. Patrick's Purgatory: its later Literary History (Baltimore: John Murphy Co., 1899), pp. 75-76.

77 Gautier de Coinci, "Le sermon en vers de la chasteté as nonains," Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemian Toimituksia: Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae (Helsinki: [no publisher given], 1938), Sarja B. n:o. 38, no. 10, pp. 180-181.

78 The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, III, 122-123; see n. 6 for a description of John Fayrfax's will which is recorded in Test. Ebor., I, 126.

79 See Abbé Tiron, Histoire et costume des ordres religieux, civils et militaires, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Bruxelles: A La Librairie Historique-Artistique, 1845), for

illustrations of a great variety of religious habits.

<sup>80</sup> The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, III, 164.

<sup>81</sup> Power, Nunneries, p. 586, citing New Coll. MS., fol. 86.

<sup>82</sup> I am most grateful to Stella Mary Newton for making the initial suggestion that the blue of these manuscript illuminations might stand for legitimate colors worn by the orders such as the grey of the Franciscan order. It was this suggestion that caused me to remember the blue and russet of Elizabeth Sewardby's habit, described in Chapter II.

<sup>83</sup> There is some dispute about whether or not this figure is a nun. She illustrates the Canticles.

<sup>84</sup> This illumination is reproduced in a line drawing in Strutt, pl. CXXXIV, fig. 2.

### Chapter III

#### The Prioress' Accessories

Finally we turn to the question of Madame Eglentyne's accessories, her rosary with its pendant brooch and the book, an object that may be suggested in the description of the Prioress' singing of her service. This chapter will offer argument and evidence that opposes the negative strain in critical tradition which finds in the Prioress' rosary and brooch additional proof that her costume reflects her character defects as a nun. Such a perspective is refuted by a survey of historical records of the period which reveal no church injunctions against the ownership by nuns of rosaries made of any material, although other specific personal items, such as rings made of precious metals, are forbidden. In addition, these records indicate that medieval nuns frequently owned rosaries made from coral and other materials, some of them received as gifts from members of the clergy. A comparison of the Prioress' rosary with others of the time reveals, also, that her rosary cannot be classified as "curious" or "overcurious"; it is, in fact, ordinary. We find, too, that the materials and colors of this rosary are appropriate symbolically for a prioress and for a pilgrim.

(We are not arguing the issue here of how appropriate it is for the Prioress to be on pilgrimage, for that is an issue relevant to her actions, not her appearance.) Similarly, the ambiguity of the motto on the brooch fades when this motto in Latin is compared to other mottoes of the Middle Ages, as do ideas concerning the possible impropriety of owning a brooch of gold when her brooch is compared to other brooches of the time. Finally, examples of nuns with rosaries in medieval illuminations demonstrate that in describing Madame Eglentyne with rosary over her arm Chaucer puts the finishing touches on his portrait of a prioress, ideal in appearance if less so in actions.

Also, in this chapter we will present a discussion of the implications of a book as a standard accessory and iconographic sign for a prioress or abbess, for the virtue Prudence, and for the Blessed Virgin Mary. The suggestion of the Prioress holding a book supports the thesis that Chaucer presents her as visually representing the ideal.

We return now to Chaucer's description of the first accessory under consideration--the rosary. Chaucer devotes five lines of verse to this accessory and, in doing so, attests to its beauty.

Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar  
 A peire of bedes, gauded all 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 (158-162)

Simply, the Prioress' rosary is made of small beads of coral interspersed with green gauds or larger beads, from which hangs a gold pendant, engraved with a crowned A and a motto.

The critical tradition for the Prioress' rosary and pendant brooch is a chequered one. The question of propriety is the central issue with this accessory item, as it was with previously discussed items of costume. Critics frequently fault the Prioress for her possession of this coral rosary and its gold brooch and for the motto which the brooch bears. Such judgments stem from the critics' classification of the rosary with its pendant as a beautiful personal possession or even as an item of jewelry, both classifications which are denied by the evidence in historical records which will be presented subsequently.

Regarding Madame Eglentyne's gold pendant, or brooch, Robinson's comment continues to be pertinent. He states that the brooch and motto have "often been misunderstood and the whole spirit of the passage consequently misrepresented." Further, he acknowledges that the motto was "applicable alike to religious and to romantic love, and carries no implication that the Prioress was 'acquainted with the gallantries of her age.'"<sup>1</sup> Illustrating the kind of continuing misunderstanding to which Robinson refers, Charles Moorman characterizes the Prioress as a pretentious hen; he says the Nun's Priest's Tale characterizes her in this manner. Further, he cites her

beads and gold brooch as evidence of her "love of flamboyance as opposed to courtly elegance," and her liking for "costume jewelry." Such a liking is in character because Madame Eglentyne, Moorman says, is a cockney.<sup>2</sup>

In a similar vein Peter S. Tait refers to Madame Eglentyne's rosary as a "coral bracelet with its gold brooch."<sup>3</sup> Such language on the part of a critic implies that the Prioress sins through personal vanity--a bracelet is decorative in function; the gold brooch appears to be decoration on top of decoration. He designates the bracelet and motto as "a worldly touch, a petty feminine vanity," and comments that "its motto serves as a gentle reminder of the opposition of the ideal and real in its wearer."<sup>4</sup> Further, Tait reads the Prioress' costume accessory as proof that she has, in short, deviated from the path of true love of God.<sup>5</sup>

This is an assessment with which Alan T. Gaylord agrees: "The Prioress has not proved she truly understands what celestial love means,"<sup>6</sup> and he cites the ambiguity<sup>7</sup> of the rosary and the brooch's Latin motto as support for his judgment. However, Gaylord credits the Prioress with pious simplicity, in that he is certain that she would not think of Amor in earthly terms. In other words, if there is ambiguity present, it does not consciously derive from her. He comments that "the Prioress is good about representing charity on jewelry but not so good about defining it."<sup>8</sup>

Although the Prioress may here be absolved of intentional ambiguity in carrying such a motto, still the ambiguity remains. It is an ambiguity which stems from the source of the motto--Virgil's Eclogues where the reference is to the love of man and woman, as John Livingston Lowes points out, while he also explains that in the "strange jumble of mediaeval superstitions about Virgil" the motto began to be used to refer to celestial love, long before the fourteenth century, a circumstance that resulted in an "ambiguity of convention."<sup>9</sup> It is an "ambiguity of convention" which may be more important to twentieth-century critics than it was to Chaucer, for it allows a process of guilt by association with source to occur. Similarly, Phyllis Hodgson reminds us that the Prioress and Idleness of Le Roman de la Rose share many features, and that the words on her brooch are spoken by Courtesy to persuade Fair Welcome to surrender the Rose in this same work.<sup>10</sup>

Yet another perspective on Madame Eglentyne's brooch is provided by Edward Craney Jacobs who assesses the Prioress' brooch and motto in the light of the theological tradition of the New Testament passages II Peter 1:1-7, I Corinthians 13:1-13, Colossians 3:12-14, I Peter 3:3-4, and I Timothy 2:9-10, and finds irony in the difference between biblical injunctions regarding dress and the Prioress' mode of dress, especially that she wears "elegant beads, bound together by a



gold brooch with such a motto, and worn band-like about her arm," when she should wear caritatem, which Paul defines as the "'band of perfection,'" rather than amorem.<sup>11</sup> Jacobs suggests that "perhaps Chaucer found 'Amor vincit omnia' so exactly right for his Prioress because it carefully subverted Paul's words in a playfully ironic way."<sup>12</sup> He equates the wearing of gold, as well as the "handsome cloak," with worldliness, but ends in equivocation, stating that St. Augustine would not quarrel with such practices in dress, dedicated to the love of God, and "perhaps neither should we."<sup>13</sup> Jacobs' article provides both the insights attainable through some careful attention to vocabulary and those inherent in theological background information. However he, too, considers the rosary to be an item of personal adornment, rather than an aid to prayer, and this perspective is maintained by his judgment that the Prioress carries an "elegant" rosary rather than an ordinary one.

In a positive vein, Sister Madeleva finds Amor vincit omnia to be a frequent and an innocent motto displayed in past and present-day convents.<sup>14</sup> As further proof, she mentions a ring with the same inscription found in the environs of a Benedictine convent of Chaucer's time.<sup>15</sup> The Prioress' brooch was, as Sister Madeleva attests, a most usual sacramental object in the Catholic Church. Because it is made of gold, she describes the brooch as "a good, but not

an over-elaborate, medal."<sup>16</sup> Sister Madeleva's assurances are valuable as much for inside experience in the matter of convent attitudes toward dress and accessories as for her critical appraisal of the Prioress' habit.

A most helpful critical approach to an understanding of Chaucer's costume rhetoric is that illustrated in a discussion which begins with part of the costume, an accessory, discusses it in the light of a current and long-standing medieval medical tradition, and then applies this understanding to Chaucer's work. Far from being extraordinary, the Prioress' rosary might actually "underscore her simple piety," states John Block Friedman. He describes the medieval belief in the apotropaic power of coral.<sup>17</sup> Friedman's survey of lapidaries provides considerable insight into this tradition, especially his repetition of material from Thomas of Cantimpre's De Naturis Rerum. He concludes that the Prioress has knowledge of the medical properties of precious stones and that her possession of coral beads is as much for her knowledge of their apotropaic powers as for any aristocratic connotations they might have,<sup>18</sup> a point to which we will return later in this chapter.

#### The Prioress' Rosary and Historical Evidence:

Convent rules, visitation records, and church council rulings provide no indication that it was inappropriate for nuns to possess rosaries. They do specifically mention, however, those accessories which must have been the subjects of frequent misuse: the girdles embroidered with silver, gold, and/or silk are repeatedly forbidden, as are gloves, silver and gold tiring pins, finger rings, and brooches worn for decoration. For example, the council of Oxford in 1222 forbade nuns to wear silver or gold tiring-pins in their veils as well as belts embroidered with silk, silver, or gold.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the Ancren Riwe states, "Have neither ring nor brooch, nor ornamented girdle, nor gloves, nor any such thing that is not proper for you to have."<sup>20</sup> and from the Rules of Syon Monastery we see that the nuns are to have

al suche other necessaryes after the  
disposicion of the abbes, whiche in nowyse  
schal be ouer curyous, but playne and homly,  
witheoute weuyng of any straunge colours of  
sylke, golde, or syluer, hauyng al thyng of  
honeste and profyte, and nothyng of vanyte,  
after the rewle.<sup>21</sup>

We find another example of the specificity of objections to accessories voiced in historical records in Archdeacon Thomas Dalby of Richmond's injunctions issued 8 July 1397 to the Priory of Nun Monkton which included orders aimed at eliminating all practices that would be considered secular. Coming under attack was the wearing of rings on fingers, and tunics made more decorative either by pleats or by brooches

(laqueatis).<sup>22</sup> Such injunctions no doubt arose, at least in part, as a result of legacies received even by ordinary nuns.<sup>23</sup> From a will dated 24 August 1354, Margaret, sister of William Heyroun, vintner, who was a nun at Barking ("Berkyngge"), received from Isabella, widow of a London pepperer, Thomas Corp, a legacy which included three gold rings, with emerald, sapphire and diamond respectively, besides a dozen silver spoons, a silver-plated cup with cover, and "divers household goods."<sup>24</sup> Such practices in real life, documented in historical records, no doubt inspired other literary imitations besides the one recorded in The Legend of St. Patrick's Purgatory; its Later Literary History. Here the luxurious prioress in Purgatory wears "ringes on hir fingers, and siluer bokeles and ouergilt on hir shone."<sup>25</sup>

Again the complaints made against Clemence Medforde, Prioress of Ankerwyke, in 1441 provide an illustration of the exact costume indiscretions as regards accessories being committed by medieval nuns before and after Chaucer's time:

The Prioress wears golden rings exceeding costly, with divers precious stones. . . . Also she wears . . . tiring pins of silver and silver gilt and has made all the nuns wear the like. . . . The prioress has on her neck a long silken band, in English a lace, which hangs down belcw her breast, and thereon a golden ring with one diamond.<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, the wearing of inappropriate accessories such as these were partly to blame for Alnwick's often-quoted

injunction of the mid-fifteenth century:

None of yow, the prioresse ne none of the  
couente, were . . . no syluere pynnes ne no  
gyrdles herneyssed with syluere or golde, ne no  
mo rynges on your fyngres then oon, ye that be  
professed by a bysshope . . . ne that ye use  
no lasas a bowte your nekkes, wythe crucyfixes  
or rynges hangyng by thayme.<sup>27</sup>

The specificity of these records leaves no doubt as to what improper accessories were commonly worn in the Middle Ages. We must suppose that, had the possession and carrying of rosaries been considered to belong in the category of inappropriate accessories, they, too, would have been among the items mentioned since Alnwick specifically excludes cricifixes worn on a neck lace.

The sumptuary laws provide one other means by which we may judge whether or not it was appropriate for the Prioress to carry a rosary made of coral and green beads with gold pendant. However, we note first that there are no signs that a rosary was ever considered by anyone in the Middle Ages to be an item of wearing apparel or personal decoration, in spite of the fact that to carry a rosary over the arm or hanging from a girdle was ordinary. Yet many rosaries were made of precious and semi-precious stones and because of this we may match the Prioress' possession of coral, green, and gold with the descriptions of decorative items described in sumptuary legislation in order to assess their relative merits.

That jewels served as a sign of rank<sup>28</sup> is evident in the sumptuary laws, laws which include members of religious orders, subject to their own religious rules. Clergy and scholars were treated as knights of the same income, and the sumptuary law of 1363 allowed knights of 400 marks to £1000 income to dress as they pleased with the exception of wearing ermine.<sup>29</sup> Apparently, jewels of all sorts were considered appropriate to this income group. Since we have no record of cases tried under these laws, we can refer to them only as they indicate the attitude of the ruling classes.

Knights with incomes less than £200 per annum were not allowed to wear garments embroidered with jewels "or anything else," and their wives could wear precious stones only on their hands."<sup>30</sup> Here we find the group from which some ordinary nuns would come. Beneath this group was that of esquires and gentlemen below the rank of knights with land or rent valued at less than £100 per annum who were forbidden to "display harness of gold or silver, precious stones, pearls."<sup>31</sup> Yeomen and handicraftsmen were not allowed to wear "precious stones . . . rings, brooches, chains, etc. of gold or silver."<sup>32</sup> And lower still on this socio-economic scale were those described by the second fourteenth-century sumptuary law as grooms, servants of lords, and their families who were forbidden "'for their vesture or hosing . . . anything made of gold or silver, embroidered,

enamelled.'<sup>33</sup>

The third attempt to regulate clothing by legislation, made by the Parliament of 1378-1379, included a petition to the king for a law that would stipulate "'that no man or woman in the said kingdom, except knights and ladies, shall use any manner of precious stones . . . cloth of gold, or ribbon of gold . . . unless he can spend £40 a year, on pain of forfeiture or whatsoever he uses contrary to this.'" The king, Richard II, in effect, rejected this petition, replying, "'Le Roi s'avisera tan q a prosch' Parlement'" and the petition was not considered in the next parliament.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, we see that convent rules and sumptuary legislation agree that those persons who should dress humbly, whether for spiritual or secular reasons, should not wear or display secular jewels, gold and silver jewelry or embroidery (and even cloth made of these substances). We find a regulation forbidding display of gold and silver horse trappings; however, nowhere can we find a rule forbidding the owning or carrying of a rosary, whatever materials it might be made of, nor any indication that it was considered as an item of personal adornment.

Chaucer lived and wrote in an age in which it was considered not only proper, but commendable, to create religious objects of extraordinary beauty; medieval Gothic cathedrals are monumental examples of this principle. It was

not extraordinary that Madame Eglentyne should possess such a lovely a coral and green rosary, since rosaries were among those items most frequently bequeathed to prioresses and nuns in the Middle Ages, as the bequests of Sir Thomas Cumberworth (d. 1451) attest. He left rosaries to the prioress of each of the following religious establishments: Coton, Irford, Legburn and Grenefeld; he requests that each be given "a pare bedys of corall, as far as that I haue m[any] laste, & after yiff yam gette bedes." Sir Thomas' will continues:

& I will that my nese Dam Elizabet Melton hafe xl s. of the iij pound that sche ows me to by hir a pare bedes with to pray for me, & sche to giff as my [gift to] Maude & dam Johan wade . & dam Elizabet Thorp to ilkon vj s. viij d. in hall the hast to by yam bedes with to pray for me opon.

Also, I will thar be gyfyn to the v. nones, Iohn of Cumberworth doghtyrs, & to my ij. cosyns nones in Stayn-feld [Priory] & to dam Alys Bolman & to Ilkon of yam a pare bedys of gete & of mony trebull of almus that schall be gyfyn to odyr nones.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, Matilda Latymer, in a will dated 1416, left coral beads to her daughter, a nun at Buckland,<sup>36</sup> and Margerie de Crioll bequeathed, in 1319, her "pat'nost' of coral and white pearls, which the Countess of Penbrok gave me," to Elizabeth de Pavenham, a nun of Shaftesbury.<sup>37</sup> From these bequests we may see that, far from being unusual for a Prioress to possess such a rosary as Madame Eglentyne's, it was actually ordinary for her nuns to do so as well. And, having such rosaries, it was common for pilgrims to take them along on



pilgrimage, as has already been mentioned in the Introduction. We note, also, that even St. Josse (by whom the Wife of Bath swore) is depicted as a pilgrim with staff and rosary in a pilgrim badge now at the Museum of London.<sup>38</sup>

In order to fairly evaluate the rosary carried by the Prioress, it is necessary to know where to place it on a continuum of plain to elaborate rosaries. The stock of a London jeweller, Adam Ledyard, in 1381 included "paternoster beads of white and yellow ambers, coral, jet and silver gilt, and aves of jet and blue glass as well as cheap sets of maple-wood (mazer) and white bone for children."<sup>39</sup> A plain rosary would have been made of wooden (mazer) beads, such as those on display in the Museum of London. These restrung twenty-eight beads include among them one large bead, and two medium beads. Perhaps Chaucer holds such a rosary in the portrait of him in B.M. Royal MS. 17Dvi, fol. 93v, although the color of these beads appears faintly olive green now. His rosary is made up of two decades of smaller beads plus larger beads at the beginning, between decades, and at the end, all strung on red cord (or silk?). The strand begins with a loop, and ends with a tassel. Another portrait of Chaucer may be seen in B.M. Harley MS. 3866, fol. 88. Here, too, he holds a rosary. Showing is a single strand, a one decade (nine beads show, with the hand covering the probable tenth) rosary of black, perhaps representing jet which was a

common material for less expensive rosaries. Again, the beads are strung on red cord or silk, and again the strand ends with a tassel. It is just possible that the sight of Chaucer holding his rosary was an ordinary one; it can only be speculation. However, these two depictions of his rosary are distinctive. I have seen in no other manuscript illumination a rosary that is single strand ending in a tassel. In general, rosaries are shown made in a circle, with or without larger beads at intervals. The difference in color of beads in the two Chaucer portraits might be accounted for in that, in the first portrait, the position of the body means that the beads must be shown against Chaucer's black robe, and thus, black beads would not have shown up so well. The care with which both artists portrayed Chaucer's appearance, his robe, his characteristic penner,<sup>40</sup> leads inevitably to the delightful theory that his rosary was just as distinctively characteristic. In any case, the tradition of depicting Chaucer with rosary continued into the late sixteenth century when a full-length portrait was painted of him based on the miniature in Thomas Hoccleve's circa 1412 De Regimine Principum. This portrait, now in London's National Portrait Gallery, shows Chaucer in black hose and boots, below-the-knee-length brown gown and matching cap, with penner in right hand and rosary in left. This rosary is depicted as a full circle of beads made up of alternating

amber and black beads on a gold chain and having a gold cross suspended from it.

That the Prioress carries a beautiful rosary on pilgrimage should not need defending on religious grounds, for rosaries<sup>41</sup> came into more common use in the fourteenth century and, at this time, were more often made of finer materials than in the previous century. They appear frequently in fourteenth-century English illuminated manuscripts, for example: B.M. Royal MS. 6Evii, fols. 75v, 89, 90v, 108v, 109v, and B.M. Additional, MS. 42,130, fol. 53, the last of which contains a rosary of alternating red and gold beads. In addition, the Prioress' beads are not "over curious." We can know quite a bit about medieval rosaries because they are among those items frequently mentioned in wills, a fact that attests to their material and spiritual value. However, depending on materials and workmanship, the material value varied considerably. For example, "two pairs of amber paternosters" worth 6s. are mentioned in a London fishmonger's city house inventory of 1373,<sup>42</sup> and a pair of beads 2s., a pair of amber beads 5s., a pair of red coral beads 6s. 8d., and a pair of coral beads with an agnus dei 23s. 4d. appear in a different inventory.<sup>43</sup> From these accounts, we may have a somewhat limited idea of the relative value of coral beads. William de Escrik, a priest, bequeaths to Alicia de Roudon "one pair of coral

beads with a gold ring appended" and the will indicates that money might be substituted if they chose to the amount of 6s. 8d.<sup>44</sup> Another list of goods belonging to Thomas Cuteler, London grocer, 1389, includes silver paternosters 3s. 4d., gilt paternosters with crucifix 4s., and amber paternosters 20d. Thus, we see that workmanship must play some part in valuation since here silver and gilt paternosters are worth less than the coral and amber beads listed above. That it was ordinary even for middle class citizens to own rosaries of the types listed above is amply attested in numerous wills of the medieval period.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, many descriptions of rosaries owned by members of the merchant class were much more elaborate than that belonging to the Prioress. Some of the more interesting descriptions include goldsmith Robert de Walcote's 1361 bequest to John Leycestre of "a pair of paternostres of amber with gaudes of silver and a silver fermail,"<sup>46</sup> wife of the late vintner John de Barton, Beatrix's 1379 bequest to Matilda Morton of a pair of "bedes of blak gett with gilt gaudes,"<sup>47</sup> and Avise Grenyngham's 1394 bequest of a pair of paternostres with "silver fermails hanging thereto."<sup>48</sup> Another interesting bequest comes from Roger Flore in 1424-5. He bequeaths to the Maister of Manton "my pair of bedys that I vse my self, with the x aues of siluere, and a paternoster ouer-gilt, preying him to haue mynde of me sumtime whan he seith oure lady sawter on hem."<sup>49</sup>

Among those occupations represented in these wills are those of burreller, goldsmith, draper, glazier, fishmonger, vintner, as well as others. Clearly, the merchant class owned and bequeathed rosaries of more value than common mazer beads, although they may have possessed those also.

At the opposite end of the rosary continuum is the "Langdale Rosary," which, based on presumptive evidence, belonged to Lord William Howard (1563-1640), is dated as late fifteenth-century, and which may be seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.<sup>50</sup> Although a bit late for our study, it nevertheless shows how elaborate rosaries became in time. The rosary is enamelled gold and consists of

fifty oval AVE beads, six lozenge-shaped PATERNOSTER beads, and a large rounded knop. Each bead is hollow and has on its back or front a subject, either a saint or a scene from the Life of Christ, the title of which is inscribed in black-letter on the rim.<sup>51</sup>

Although the Langdale Rosary may serve our purposes to illustrate the degree to which a rosary might be elaborate, it is helpful as well to know how far this process of elaboration had gone in Chaucer's time. A single gold rosary bead, inscribed (Glo)ria, dated late fourteenth century, may be seen at the Museum of London, indicating that elaborate rosaries did not originate in the fifteenth century. Also, while Matilda Latymer, mentioned above, willed only coral beads in 1416 to her daughter, a Buckland nun, she left a more elaborate pair to Isabella Hull: "a set of long beads of

gold with large beads of coral (de longe bedys auri cum gaudeis de Corall)."<sup>52</sup> In addition, Joan Evans describes several fourteenth century rosaries which are as elaborate, or more so, than that belonging to Chaucer's Prioress. The two belonging to Raoul de Clermont (1302) were made of jet aves and crystal paternosters, and Scotch pearl aves and garnet paternosters, respectively. As the century progressed, rosaries grew more varied; Queen Jean d'Evreaux owned one, in 1372, containing a hundred pearls and ten gold "seignaux."<sup>53</sup>

A Rosary of "smal coral" and "grene" Gauds:

No, the Prioress' rosary was not extraordinary and its coral might actually be illustrative of her simple piety as posited by John B. Friedman, quoted earlier. The apotropaic power of coral, according to medieval belief, "warded off phantasms from the dark side of man's mind and their concrete embodiment in the devil and demons, who continually tempt mankind to the sins of the flesh," because coral appeared in the form of a cross.<sup>54</sup>

Thomas of Cantimpre, in De Naturis Rerum, says that the association of coral with the cross "provided mediaeval men with an excellent rationale for the use of this gem in the making of rosary beads. And it was widely used by the

wealthier classes, particularly for the beads of pilgrims and travelers."<sup>55</sup> (And we recall that "a rosary of large beads, hung round the neck or arm" was a standard part of the costume of the professional pilgrim.)<sup>56</sup> Such information as provided by Friedman sheds additional light on the education of the Prioress. She knew the properties of coral, and also of emeralds (gem of chastity) and rubies (representing martyrdom), according to Friedman, for both are appropriately employed in her tale. And he concludes that this knowledge is "evidence that she owned coral beads at least as much for their apotropaic powers as for their association with wealth and privilege."<sup>57</sup>

However, we need not let our analysis rest on Friedman's evidence alone. Early Christian lapidaries all attribute both "curative and preventative powers," and the claims for their powers increase in number in medieval lapidaries.<sup>58</sup> A survey of lapidaries quickly reveals that coral, emerald and jasper are among those stones most frequently mentioned.<sup>59</sup> Such claims of medicinal value were recognized by the Catholic Church in, for example, the statutes of the Hotel-Dieu of Troyes (1263) which forbade any religious to carry rings or precious stones for reasons others than "maladie."<sup>60</sup> Chaucer's knowledge of the virtues in precious stones is evident in his translation of *Le Roman de la Rose*:

Rychesse a girdel hadde upon,  
The bokel of it was of a stoon

Of vertu greet, & moche of might; . . .  
 The mourdaunt, wrought in noble wyse,  
 Was of a stoon ful precious,  
 That was so fyn & vertuuous,  
 That hool a man it coude make  
 Of palasye, & of tooth-ake.

In addition, the apocalyptic gems embodied spiritual significance, and among them were emerald, expressing the strength of faith in adversity, and jasper which figures the truth of faith.<sup>61</sup> Vertuous attributions and spiritual significations abounded during the medieval period for precious and semi-precious stones, and included the ideas that the emerald was symbolical of John the Evangelist, who soothed sinful dejected souls with a divine oil and through doctrinal grace constantly strengthens the faith of Christians, and that jasper was symbolical of St. Peter, whose love for Christ was ever strong and fresh and whose fervent faith made him shepherd and leader of the Christians.<sup>62</sup> Coral, according to Albertus Magnus, had several powers:

To still tempests and traverse broad rivers in safety was the privilege of one who bore either red or white coral with him. That this also staunches the flow of blood from a wound, cured madness, and gave wisdom, was said to have been experimentally proved.<sup>63</sup>

The traditional spiritual value of coral is further attested to by its depiction in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century paintings of Virgin and infant Christ in which Christ holds or wears a coral rosary. He plays with a very long rosary in "Virgin and Child" by Bernard van Orley



(Prado Museum, Madrid); He holds a coral rosary that has three gold crosses hanging from it in "The Virgin and Child" by Ambrogio Berogagnone who was active from 1481 to 1523 (National Gallery, London); He wears the rosary around His neck in "Maria mit Kind" by Meister des Aachener Altares (Alte Penakothek, Munchen) and in "The Virgin and Child," Flemish School (National Gallery, London); and He wears the rosary in the manner of a baldric in "The Virgin and Child" by Gerard David (National Gallery, London). The rosary in the Flemish School painting is especially interesting as it has gauds of crystal.<sup>64</sup>

Now we return to our costume analysis, and to the Prioress' green gauds<sup>65</sup>--they are presumably those aids to meditation or to counting prayers which were later called paternosters--possibly of emerald, signifying any number of possible virtues, among them chastity. Or, the gauds might have been made of jasper, or of some other material enameled in green. However, the tradition of the emerald frequently includes the idea that is present in the earliest English lapidary (eleventh century): "Feortha smaragdus, se ys swith grene."<sup>66</sup> Since almost these identical words appear in subsequent fifteenth-century lapidaries, it is possible that the phrase "gauds of green" would automatically signify emeralds.

Since Madame Eglentyne's rosary is the final image of

her portrait, one which occupies five lines of verse, and is a dominant accessory to her costume, it is worth pursuing the green gauds one step further, although it is entirely possible that this "grene" signifies no more than Chaucer's need for a word that rhymed with "sheene," a word that, in poetry, carries connotations of spiritual spotlessness, as, for example, in the Pearl Poet's works. On the other hand, medieval color symbolism includes the following associations for the color green: it was the color of love;<sup>67</sup> it was a color "particularly suitable for the clothing of newly-weds";<sup>68</sup> it was the most commonly worn color of church vestments,<sup>69</sup> as well as carrying negative connotations such as inconstancy, in contrast to blue which symbolized truth.<sup>70</sup> In the Chateau d'Amour, for example, the body of the Blessed Virgin Mary is depicted allegorically as a castle. The green foundation of this virgin/castle signifies faith:

So is the foundement al grene  
That to the roche faste lith,  
Wel is that ther murthe isihth,  
For the greneschiþe lasteth euere,  
And his heuh ne leoseth neuere.  
Sethen [aboue] that other heuz  
So is inde and eke blue,  
That the middel heuz we clepeth ariht,  
And schyneth so feire and so bright.<sup>71</sup>

There were other associations for the color green, but none of them offers a better explanation for Chaucer's selection than these positive associations of love, bridal clothes, ecclesiastical vestments, and faith.

The Prioress' Brooch and "Amor vincit omnia":

Although we have established the fact that a coral and green rosary was an acceptable aid to prayer for a Prioress to own, we have not yet accounted for the often misunderstood pendant, despite Robinson's corrective note, mentioned earlier.<sup>72</sup> This gold pendant brooch would indeed indicate "petty feminine vanity"<sup>73</sup> if it were in fact suspended from a "bracelet." And Sister Madeleva's assurance that the pendant and motto were and are both correct and common among the religious has not sufficed to eliminate this kind of criticism.

Nevertheless, there is other evidence concerning this motto that has yet to be examined and in doing so, we shall see how plain Madame Eglentine's brooch pendant really is. Brooches with mottoes were quite ordinary in the fourteenth century. Ring brooches, with or without mottoes, were the traditional means by which tunics were fastened at the neck. Numerous examples are described and illustrated in Joan Evans' History, many of which are evidently "love gifts." One of these reads, "IO SVI FLVR DE FIN AMVR", or "I am a flower of perfect love."<sup>74</sup> Others contain good wishes for the wearer, or couple an amuletic formula with an expression of love, as, for example, the brooch which reads, "AMI AMET DE

LI PENCET. IHESVS NAZARENVS REX IVDÆORVM."<sup>75</sup> The Prioress' motto appears on several examples which may be seen in the Museum of Shakespeare's Birthplace, the British Museum, and the Nantes Museum.<sup>76</sup> In the British Museum, the fourteenth-century brooch with the motto "AMOR VINCIT OMNIA"<sup>77</sup> is the size of a United States dime and is very thin. It is the smallest of medieval gold brooches on display there and is less than a quarter of the size of the much heavier heart-shaped gold brooch (circa fourteenth-century) with the motto reading "you are my earthly joy."<sup>78</sup> And the smaller brooch is much less elaborate than the gold heart-shaped brooch covered in ribbon patterns in enamel which is engraved, "Je suy vostre sans de partier (I am yours for ever)."<sup>79</sup> Gold brooches of the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, are again both larger and more elaborate than the small gold AMOR VINCIT OMNIA brooch at the British Museum. However, the Victoria and Albert Museum contains one other item that illuminates the Prioress' brooch; her motto is engraved on one side of a thirteenth-century gold ring described in the catalogue as a "projecting four-claw bezel set with a sapphire. Lion-mask shoulders. The hoop inscribed in lombardic characters: AVE MARIA GRA and AMOR VINCI(T) O(M)NIA."<sup>80</sup> Here, the Prioress' motto is not ambiguous; the link with the Blessed Virgin makes the

sentiment patently religious, although this should not be a point of debate, for people in the medieval period were surely well acquainted with the idea expressed in the description of the ladder of charity in Jacob's Well, the ladder of which "o syde is love to god, the other syde is loue to man."<sup>81</sup>

In addition, an examination of the range of mottoes on posey rings<sup>82</sup> supports the position that Amor vincit omnia is a motto with religious intent. From such an examination, the following generalization may be made: religious inscriptions are usually written in Latin; romantic inscriptions are usually written in French, the traditional language of the romances and fin amour. Apparently, this Latin motto, Amor vincit omnia, was quite common. In addition, the collection of Mr. John Hunt contains an A-shaped brooch bearing the inscription "IO.FAS.AMER.E.DOZ.AMER" and also the cabalistic AGLA,"<sup>83</sup> of which Evans comments that "such devotional inscriptions as appear on these brooches seem for the most part to be prophylactic and magical in intention."<sup>84</sup> A ring brooch with motto, then, is a basic wardrobe item, having both a practical and a spiritual and/or social function. However, the small gold brooch bearing the motto of the Prioress' brooch, now at the British Museum, could never have served any practical function, being too small and too delicate. Nevertheless, suspended from a rosary it might

well have served a prophylactic purpose.

Variations of the basic design for ring brooches were achieved by varying the choice of metal (gold naturally being the most expensive choice), the motto, the decoration, and the shape. Evans describes brooches that include the following shapes: an octagonal ring brooch, a silver gilt brooch of two triangles producing a star-shaped effect, a brooch with four lobes curving inward, one of eight lobes decorated with cockatrices, cabochon jewels, and projecting ribs simulating claws, brooches with projecting jewels, with clasped or praying hands, with projecting flowers of metal, and many that are elaborately jeweled. The heart-shaped brooch was a favorite of lovers and contained obvious "amatory" inscriptions. One of these has a ribbon entwining the heart and the inscription, "VOUS ESTES MA IOY  
ROUDEINE."<sup>85</sup> There is no ambiguity here.

When we compare the inscribed pendant on Madame Eglentyne's rosary to these more worldly brooches, we achieve a different perspective than that achieved when we concentrate on her brooch alone. Clearly, her brooch is plain in comparison, even though it is of gold. Her inscription is ordinary, and acceptable according to religious standards, although it may have been equally acceptable to secular lovers. Considering the conventions of medieval lyric poetry which frequently refers to the Blessed

Virgin Mary in the language of secular chivalry, we can hardly fault the Prioress for displaying a motto written in the same language, because we say this language is ambiguous. A language that uses one word "Amor," to refer to many personal expressions of feeling, is at fault here. Her motto does not say, after all, that earthly joy conquers all. The shape, too, is not exotic, or if it is, Chaucer does not say so. The crowned A may symbolize "Amor," of course, but it also calls to mind the A of "I am the Alpha and the Omega." That the love of Christ is the beginning of "the way," "the straight and narrow" way of the earthly pilgrimage, is a given of Christian thought.

An additional consideration regarding the crowned A is suggested by the presence of two fourteenth-century pewter pilgrim badges in the Museum of London collection.<sup>86</sup> Both of these badges are in the shape of a crowned A. The museum catalogue card suggests possible attributions of "Alban, Agnes, Amor?" [sic]. In short, no one knows for certain which pilgrim shrine the badges might represent, and the "Amor?" suggestion is simply reasoning backward from the evidence provided by Chaucer. However, these pilgrim badges do suggest that the symbol may have been a recognizable one for a given shrine, and their presence gives rise to the idea that the Prioress' brooch may be another pilgrim badge made of a more expensive material. In light of the Pardoner's "vernycle,"

the Yoeman's silver St. Christopher medal, and the plausibility that the Wife of Bath would have worn badges on her large pilgrim hat from the numerous pilgrimages she made, the possibility that the Prioress carries another such badge of gold is within reason.

However, we must still consider what carrying a pendant of such a design indicates in terms of vanity. The Prioress' brooch, with its motto and crowned A, is quite plain when compared to the Founder's Jewel, left by William of Wykeham to New College, Oxford, in 1404. Brooches made in the shape of letters were fairly common in the late fourteenth century and afterward. The Founder's Jewel was a Lombardic E, crowned, having the Virgin and Angel of the Annunciation in a frame within the double arch of the letter. The letter is jewelled with cabochon emeralds, rubies, and pearls. The central line of the letter is a stem of the Annunciation lily which rises from a vase made of a shaped stone. Parts of the brooch are enameled--the lillies in white, the angel's wings in green. It was donated by Wykeham as a religious jewel, and Evans comments that "it may be that this brooch was designed as a cope clasp or morse; it is equally likely . . . that it was once a secular jewel."<sup>87</sup> By comparison, the Prioress' pendant with its crowned A and motto is plain indeed! But, it is also clear, from other such examples described by Evans, that whatever the original secular intent



of a jewel, when it was dedicated to a religious purpose, it became a religious item. Since the Prioress' brooch is suspended from a rosary, its intent may be inferred from context and is plain enough.

The Prioress' brooch, then, was a rather plain religious medal, a "good, but not an over-elaborate, medal."<sup>88</sup> The comparison, made above, with other rosaries and jewelry of the period supports this judgment.

The Prioress' Accessories and Iconography in Illuminated Manuscripts:

Rosaries, pictured by themselves or being handled by someone, are depicted in many medieval manuscripts of a serious didactic nature such as in Jacobus Omne Bonum (1330-1350), B.M. MS. Royal 6Evii, fol. 90v where a group of people, kneeling, pray before an altar. Other Rosaries in this manuscript are on fols. 75v, 89, 108v, 109v. The Luttrell Psalter (fourteenth-century), B.M. Additional MS. 42130, also contains a miniature on fol. 53 of a pilgrim carrying a small child; the pilgrim carries over his wrist a rosary of 13-14 alternating red and gold beads. In addition, we note Bodley Library MS. Douce 248, a Book of Hours in Dutch of the first half of the fifteenth century, which contains an illumination of a half figure of a nun holding a

red rosary in her hands. This figure is cupped in a flower on the right-hand side of the page.

We do not find many such pictures of nuns with rosaries in serious didactic works of the late Middle Ages.<sup>89</sup> Instead, nuns, abbesses, or prioresses are generally shown with book in hand or on lecturn when the artist wishes to depict them in prayer. However, because the rosary was understood to be a pious devotional aid frequently carried by pilgrims, and because it was included in the literary description of Constrained Abstinence (fig. 1), it naturally served illuminators of manuscripts of Le Roman de la Rose as a suitable additional iconographic sign for their depictions of this personification who dresses as a nun-pilgrim, and this additional sign was sometimes added to the figure of Papelardie or Hypocrisy, who was most often depicted as perfect in outward appearance although inwardly sinful. Illuminators of these manuscripts appear to lavish pious signs on these less than perfect "nuns," frequently bestowing all or several signs on one figure, such as kneeling posture, book, pilgrim staff, bare feet, and rosary. It is in this tradition that Chaucer creates the Prioress, giving her the outward signs of spiritual cleanness in the signs of her headdress, habit, and rosary while depicting her actions as falling short of the ideal she has professed in her vows and signified in her habit.

This artistic tradition may be seen in a number of fourteenth-century manuscripts of Le Roman de la Rose. For example, Papelardie in B.M. Additional MS. 31840, fol. 6, kneels before an altar holding an open book in both hands. She is dressed as a nun and has a white rosary of which ten beads show. In B.M. MS. Egerton 881, fol. 5v, this same nun figure kneels with an open book held in both hands, and she is shown in B.M. MS. Royal 19Bxiii, fol. 8, kneeling again at an altar with open book. This pious iconographic matrix was shared by Constrained Abstinence, leman of False Seeming, as she too appears in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts with some or all of the outward signs of being pious. In B.M. MS. Royal 20Axvii, fol. 5v, Papelardie wears a black habit girdled by a knotted rope such as friars wear; Constrained Abstinence wears identical clothing, but carries a pilgrim wallet and staff, and goes barefooted. A variation of this portrayal may be seen in Bodley Library MS. Douce 371 (circa 1400), fol 79v, which contains an illumination of Constrained Abstinence in nun's habit, wearing a pilgrim wallet, and carrying a pilgrim staff, and a rosary showing twenty-five beads over her wrist and hand. An early fifteenth-century copy of this work, Bodleian MS. Douce 188, fol. 77, shows Constrained Abstinence in nun's habit, carrying a closed red book (illustrating l. 10481). She has a white rosary, of which fourteen beads show, which may be

hanging from her wrist. In this same manuscript, fol. 23 contains an illumination of Amis, wearing nuns' clothing, instructing the Lover (representing l. 3123) which shows a white rosary hanging from what must be her girdle. The rosary has ten to eleven beads (one may be a blob of paint). Similarly, a personification of Hypocrisy is depicted in Bodleian MS. Douce 195 (1487-1495), fol. 4, with a red rosary, and Constrained Abstinence with pilgrim staff, and a rosary of red beads on white cord may be seen on fols. 108 and 108v of B.M. MS. Harley 4425 (circa 1490) (fig. 1).<sup>90</sup>

It is impossible to determine whether the visual arts tradition of portraying both Hypocrisy and Constrained Abstinence with rosaries began before Chaucer wrote his portrait of the Prioress or after, since the dating of "fourteenth-century" for the earliest examples (in this selection from the British Museum and Bodleian Library) is too general to be of help. We can only know that the text of Le Roman de la Rose describes both figures as wearing nuns' habits and having a book or psalter, while only Constrained Abstinence is specifically described as having a rosary, strung on a white thread-lace or cord. However, we note that in the fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century manuscripts of Le Roman de la Rose examined for this study the rosaries in the illuminations are invariably white although the description of the one carried by Constrained Abstinence only

specifies a white thread-lace and not the color of the beads. Not until the late fifteenth century in Bodleian MS. Douce 195 do we find red beads on a white cord in the illuminations of Hypocrisy and Constrained Abstinence. Here we might theorize that Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress influenced the illuminator, although other factors, such as the popularity of coral rosaries for pilgrims, may have been equally or more important.

We have seen that personified vice figures such as Hypocrisy and Constrained Abstinence are efficiently depicted in nuns' habits because these habits are an outward sign denoting spiritual cleanness, a sign which these figures betray by their actions and thereby fulfill the nature of their allegorical names, as the text of *Le Roman de la Rose* makes clear. And we have seen that a book, representing Divine Wisdom or pious devotion, is a standard iconographic sign in medieval illuminations of Pope-Holiness and Constrained Abstinence portraying these hypocritical figures in a virtuous attitude or activity. This virtuous sign also figures regularly in representations of prioresses and abbesses, the personified virtue Prudence, and the Blessed Virgin Mary (see figs. 2, 3, 7, 15, and 16). Not infrequently, in the cases where nuns are depicted with open book, its pages contain tiny musical notes. Because virtuous and pious figures and those wishing to appear so are so

frequently portrayed with book in hand or on lectern, the General Prologue (122), evokes this same image and associations as Chaucer says of the Prioress, "Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne"; this line suggests the image of the Prioress holding a book, although Chaucer does not literally say that she does. The absence of a literal book in this portrait of a Prioress is a subject that must be briefly examined because a book is such a prominent sign in the iconographical tradition in which Chaucer worked.

A summary of the manner in which the signs in the separate strands of this iconographical tradition are interlaced demonstrates why Chaucer's literal omission of a book in this portrait is notable and why, also, his mention of the Prioress' singing of divine service suggests the same object Chaucer omits. One strand in this iconographical tradition is that of the personified virtues while a second is that of the representation of nuns in their holy habits that signify those virtues associated with spiritual cleanness; however, these strands cannot be completely separated. Frequently and significantly, in the medieval period, the identifying costume for virtues in the visual arts is nuns' garb. In some cases all of the virtues depicted are dressed as nuns; in others certain virtues wear nuns' habits and others wear secular dress. In cases such as this, the virtue most frequently dressed as a nun is

Prudence. A study of these visual representations of virtues in nun's garb is important to our evaluation of the Prioress' costume because their obvious aim is to represent an ideal, the virtue in question, and the manner in which this virtue is dressed may be understood to represent the ideal nun's habit. Further, more often than not, the accessory of a book completes the costume of such an ideal nun. When we recall, here, Arnold Williams' statement, mentioned in the introduction, that the study of allegory should be pursued through an examination of all the elements including the personages and their defining signs, we may understand that accessories may be the key to a deeper understanding of the personage.

In general, these visual representations of virtues in nuns' habits follow the same pattern as that described in the previous chapter: ideal facial beauty, variety in headdress, tunic and cloak of proper length. However, the accessories accompanying the Virtues take on additional significance when they appeared in representations in which the Virtues wear secular noble costume<sup>91</sup> or voluminous classical drapery rather than nun's garb.<sup>92</sup> These accessories or signs of a Virtue became her emblems and created for her an instant recognition such as that enjoyed by saints such as St. Catherine, recognizable by her wheel.

The idea that Chaucer is drawing on this virtues

tradition, especially that of Prudence, in his portrayal of the Prioress (not, certainly, to the exclusion of everything else) is further supported by his inclusion of other iconographical details in her portrait such as his characterization of her smiling as "symple" as well as coy, as well as in his comment, "Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne," an oblique suggestion that the Prioress holds a book. Comparable iconographical symbols attest to Prudence's possession of divine wisdom and simplicity. The virtue Prudence, in pictorial art, frequently carries a book (a sign that is also prominent among visual depictions of abbesses, prioress, and the Virgin Mary), symbolizing her ability to discern good and evil. Other emblems are frequently but not always added, beginning in the twelfth century, and Prudence sometimes carries a snake and/or a dove, symbolizing wisdom and simplicity, according to Matthew X, 16: "Be ye therefore wise as serpents and simple as doves."<sup>93</sup> In later art, she carries a sieve, indicating her ability to separate good from evil.<sup>94</sup>

However, in the visual arts and in literature, it is the iconographical symbol of a book, that sign of the contemplative life and the correlative activity of teaching, that most easily connects the representation of Prudence, so often portrayed instructing other virtues<sup>95</sup> with that of abbesses or prioresses, designated instructors of their



abbeys and priory convents. The crowned Prudence, wearing secular clothing, may be seen holding a book in Rouen, Bibl. munic. MS. 927, fol. 93v.<sup>96</sup> In this illumination, she is surrounded by four other virtues. In B.N. fr. 938 (dated 1294), Prudence appears at a lecturn teaching.<sup>97</sup> Prudence, wearing a classical robe of orange, appears without headcovering in B.M. Royal MS. 19Cii, fol. 48v, where she instructs pupils from a book on a podium. She may be seen again in classically draped blue cloak over an orange tunic, surrounded by books, holding a globe and compass, in B.M. MS. 15,685, fol. 60v.

From this sample we may easily see that teaching and books are an important part of the iconography of Prudence, although a book is frequently pictured as an accessory in illuminations of other nun-virtue figures. For example, Faith is depicted as a nun with a church on her head and holding a book in her hand in N. Oresme's Ethique d'Aristote, vol. ii (circa 1454), Rouen, Bibliotheque Municipale, MS. 927, fol. 17v.

It is clear from this brief survey of the vices and virtues tradition in the visual arts that the signification of emblems was transferable from one context to another. The book as a sign of piety and/or wisdom in the Virgin Mary's hands becomes, in Prudence's hands, the symbol of her nature, and in a nun's hands, the sign that she emulates the Blessed

Virgin and seeks divine wisdom. In the case of Chaucer's Prioress, her chanting of the divine service recalls the many illuminations of nuns holding books of music, such as those in B.M. Additional MS. 39,843. Her possible possession of a book need not denote possession of wisdom--only the appearance of seeking for it. At the same time, we note that Chaucer does not specifically state that the Prioress carries a book. We may only speculate about why he omitted, in a literal sense, such a standard sign from his description of the Prioress' virtuous appearance. In any case, on this speculative note we complete the discussion of iconographic signs that make up Chaucer's costume rhetoric, the rhetoric in which he portrays the outward appearance of a proper Madame Eglentyne, imitator of that other most holy rose in appearance and name, if not in actions.

Thus, we see that Madame Eglentyne's array may well be entirely proper, according to her degree as Prioress. Her pynched wimple is full seemly, and her cloak neat and bien fait, just as Chaucer stated. There is no reason to suppose that her veil was worn higher on her forehead than convent standards allowed, in a style which could have been described as unseemly. Instead, we must assume that, following literary rhetorical tradition, visual arts tradition, and Byzantine aesthetics, Chaucer mentions the forehead, the

broadness of which would have been suggested to him both by contemporary fashion in womanly beauty and by portraits of madonnas and Virtues (just as these last share her "not undergrown" stature). In addition, the good, but not "over curious," rosary carried by the Prioress indicates a devotional intent; the mere act of carrying it on pilgrimage is a prayer in action. Here there is no love of "ornate garb."<sup>98</sup> When we begin the examination of Chaucer's costume rhetoric with an analysis of the individual garment and accessory items as signs, we find no reason to suppose Madame Eglentyne's costume less proper than her table manners.

Chaucer's costume rhetoric places the Prioress within religious, artistic, literary, and historical traditions--another juxtaposition of the ideal and the real--and, finally, an analysis of this rhetoric enables us to determine which is which: we may separate her proper exterior from her actions. We may follow the direction of Chaucer's description to his final point of emphasis: the rosary on the arm of the Prioress. For if the world, or "mete," was only an arm's reach away, "celestial paradise" represented by the rosary, and in the name Eglentyne,<sup>99</sup> was right at hand. As The Book of Vices and Virtues: A Fourteenth Century English Translation of the Somme Le Roi of Lorens D'Orleans states, citing Ambrose: "bedes beddynges is a good scheld a3ens alle þe brennyng dartes of þe deuel"; the

same work cites Isadore to the effect that "bedes is þe remedie a3ens all temptacions of synne; renne to þe bedes þer whiles þe enemy assailed þe herte."<sup>100</sup>

Equally important, an analysis of Chaucer's costume rhetoric affirms the idea that we need not see Madame Eglentyne in only one way; we may see that she visually represents the virtuous religious life while falling short of perfection in her actions. Her physical description may correspond rhetorically to that ideal beauty of Prudence<sup>101</sup> (and to those rhetorical descriptions of other virtues as well) while her actions are imprudent. She is both the Prioress and Madame Eglentyne, and both titles have rich associations, spiritual and secular, which remind us that the physical three-day journey from the Tabard Inn in Southwark to Canterbury Cathedral,<sup>102</sup> where lay the relics of St. Thomas a Becket, was symbolic of the spiritual journey of the soul. The Canterbury pilgrims move from the teeming worldliness of Southwark, epitomized in the Tabard, named for a secular garment, toward the Cathedral representing the spiritual Jerusalem and enshrining those symbols of St. Thomas' martyrdom, his hair shirt and breeches.<sup>103</sup> The apt and subtle clothing symbolism reminds us that the purpose in making a pilgrimage was to put off the "old man" and to put on the "new," to put off worldliness and to put on holiness, to doff the tabard and don the hair shirt. And the portrait

of the Prioress wearing proper religious habit amply illustrates the fact that, on the pilgrimage that is religious life, it is not enough to avoid ostentatious, flamboyant, expensive and expansive clothing and that even wearing the physical garments of holiness need not mean that one acquires the spiritual garments of Christianity as well. In Chaucer's rhetoric of costume all of these ideas are embodied, contrasted, compared in order that the pilgrim-reader may choose his own pilgrim path and dress accordingly.

This study of Chaucer's costume rhetoric in the portrait of the Prioress illustrates the necessary part knowledge of the culture plays in interpretation of costume descriptions in medieval literature. Further, it demonstrates the importance and pervasiveness of clothing metaphors in medieval rhetoric. From this study of her costume we may gain a kaleidoscopic view of the Prioress, seeing first the external epitome of the virtuous, contemplative life, then the lady of courtly manners and education, and finally the human being whose potentia for gluttony is depicted in her actions. Such a view contrasts sharply with the usual understanding of Chaucer's characterization technique, which is that outer appearance illustrates inner truth of character.

In addition, such a kaleidoscopic view suggests that

Chaucer might employ a variety of characterization techniques in his General Prologue (and other works) just as he does in his portrait of Madame Eglentyne, a variety that should prove fruitful to investigate. For example, if the Prioress, who is the first member of the first estate described in the General Prologue, illustrates both the ideal and its opposite, perhaps Chaucer treats the Knight, first member of the second estate, in a similar manner. It is an anomaly that the Knight's deeds appear to have brought him worldly fame, yet his costume does not illustrate high estate; the Knight wears a besmotered gypon, carries no arms, wears no armor, exhibits no coat of arms or badge of allegiance. Terry Jones interprets this costume according to some historical evidence as that of a mercenary soldier. The lack of other knights wearing dirty clothing in medieval literature provides no basis for comparison. Just what we might learn from a more comprehensive investigation of Chaucer's costume rhetoric and its cultural significance in the portrait of the Knight and other characters in medieval literature remains to be seen, but it is a rich vein that should be mined.

It is entirely probable that the eclectic Chaucer employs a variety of characterization techniques and that within these techniques he manipulates garment metaphors to convey both blatant and subtle meaning. If the critical

tradition can be wrong regarding the Prioress' costume, then all previous assumptions regarding costume in Chaucer's works, and in medieval literature, should be reexamined in the light of the visual arts, historical documents, and literary evidence.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> F. N. Robinson, ed., The Poetical Works of Chaucer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), headnote, p. 755.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Moorman, "The Prioress as Pearly Queen," Chaucer Review, 13 (1978), 27, 30-32.

<sup>3</sup> Peter S. Taitt, Incubus and Ideal: Ecclesiastical Figures in Chaucer and Langland, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, No. 44 (Salzburg, Austria: Institut Für Englishche Sprache Und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1975), p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Taitt.

<sup>5</sup> Taitt, p. 62. Taitt's overall assessment of the Prioress, based partly on his interpretation of her costume, is clear:

The motto on her brooch seems to suggest that her pursuit of worthiness has become an end in itself, for her attention to dress and courtly manners, her sentimentalized sympathy for suffering, have pushed her aside from the path of a true love of God and her fellow men to which her calling as a nun should direct her.

<sup>6</sup> Alan T. Gaylord, "The Unconquered Tale of the Prioress," Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters, 47 (1962), 623.

<sup>7</sup> See Francis Manley, "Chaucer's Rosary and Donne's Bracelet: Ambiguous Coral," MLN, 74 (1959), 388. John Block Friedman, "The Prioress's Beads 'of smal coral,'" Medium Aevum, 39 (1970), 301, refutes Manley's judgment because it is based on fifteenth-century data.

<sup>8</sup> Gaylord, 623.

<sup>9</sup> John Livingston Lowes, Convention and Revolt in Poetry (London: Constable & Co Ltd, 1930), p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Phyllis Hodgson, ed., "General Prologue" to the "Canterbury Tales," (London: Athlone Press, 1969), pp. 24-25.



<sup>11</sup> Edward Craney Jacobs, "Further Biblical Allusions for Chaucer's Prioress," Chaucer Review, 15 (1980), 151-152.

<sup>12</sup> Jacobs, 152.

<sup>13</sup> Jacobs, 152-153.

<sup>14</sup> Sister M. Madeleva, "Chaucer's Nuns," in Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays (Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1965), pp. 18-19. Sister Madeleva states,

This is one of the commonest of epigrams among religious, and I know that one could find it worked in cross stitch, or painted in all the varying forms of realistic and conventional art and framed as a motto in dozens of our convents in our very unmystical and unmedieval United States today.

<sup>15</sup> Sister Madeleva, citing Life Records of Chaucer, III (2d series), 135.

<sup>16</sup> Sister Madeleva, pp. 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> Friedman, 301-302, citing De Naturis Rerum, an encyclopedia by a thirteenth-century Dominican, Thomas of Cantimpre. Of coral, Friedman states,

It warded off phantasms from the dark side of man's mind and their concrete embodiment in the devil and demons, who continually tempt mankind to the sins of the flesh. This power belonged to coral because, in its branching state, it took the form of Christ's cross, one of the most powerful of apotropaic signs in the Middle Ages.

<sup>18</sup> Friedman, 303-304, n. 4, citing De Naturis Rerum, B.M. Royal 12 F vi f. 103<sup>f</sup>, Lib. XIV xv.

<sup>19</sup> David Wilkins, Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae I, (London: 1737), pp. 590-591.

<sup>20</sup> Ancren Riwe: A Treatise on the Duties of Monastic Life, ed. and trans. James Morton (London: Camden Society, 1853), Part 8, pp. 418-421.

<sup>21</sup> Additions to the Rules of Syon, George James Aungier, in History of Syon Monastery, ([London]: J. B. Nichols and Son, 1840), Appendix, p. 392. See also, Eileen Power, Medieval English Nunneries, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, ed. G. G. Coulton (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1922), pp. 132-133.

22 The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, ed. William Page (London: Archibald Constable and Company, Ltd., 1913), III, 122-123; see n. 6 for a description of John Fayrfax's will which is recorded in Test. Ebor., I, 186.

23 See Power, Nunneries, p. 165, for a longer discussion of bequests to nuns of lesser rank.

24 Reginald R. Sharpe, ed., Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting, London, A.D. 1258-A.D. 1688, (London: Corp. of the City of London, 1889), Part I, 688. One example of a bequest of money to a nun is that made by Alice de Hodesdon to her daughter Margery, a nun of Haliwell of an annual rent from a shop in All Hallows de Graschirche parish for twenty-five years or until her death; "remainder to the Prioress & Convent of Halliwell," included in this same Calendar, Part I, p. 628.

25 The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Yorkshire, III, 125-126.

26 Visitation of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln: Alnwick's Visitations (1436-49), ed. Alexander Hamilton Thompson, Canterbury and York Series, No. 24 (London: Canterbury and York Society, 1919), II, i, 3-5. See also, Eileen Power, Medieval People, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925), pp. 77-78.

27 Visitations of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln, II, i, 8.

28 Joan Evans, A History of Jewellery 1100-1870 (Boston: Boston Book and Art, 1970), p. 47.

29 Frances Elizabeth Baldwin, Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Regulation in England, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, Series XLIV, No. 1 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1926), p. 50.

30 Baldwin, pp. 49-50.

31 Baldwin, pp. 48-49.

32 Baldwin, p. 48, citing Stat. L., vol. ii, pp. 164-165.

33 Baldwin, p. 47, citing Stat. L., vol. ii, p. 164.

34 Baldwin, p. 60, citing Rot. Parl., vol. iii, p. 66.

35 Lincoln Diocese Documents, 1450-1544, ed. Andrew Clark, E.E.T.S. O.S. 149 (London: Kegan Paul, Tranch, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1914), p. 50. In this same section of his will, Sir Thomas leaves coral beads (or jet, if there is not enough money) to seven male heads of religious houses. P. 46 contains another bequest of beads made by Sir Thomas to the Archbishop of York: "a pare bedys of gold meynghlied with corall," and one to the Abbot of Santasse: "a pare of bedys of xij bedys, with the gaudys gilt."

36 Rev. F. C. Hingeston-Randolph, The Register of Edmund Stafford (A.D. 1395-1419 (London: George Bell & Sons, 1886), p. 416.

37 Early Lincoln Wills 1280-1547, Alfred Gibbons, abstractor (Lincoln: James Williamson, Printer, 1888), p. 5.

38 A picture of this badge is on the cover of The London Archaeologist, 4.11 (Summer 1983). The badge was found on the Swan Lane excavations, City of London; see 4.10 (Spring 1983), 276.

39 Evans, A History of Jewellery, p. 50.

40 R. Evan Davis, "The Pendant in the Chaucer Portraits," Chaucer Review, 17 (1982), 193-195, suggests that what is commonly supposed to be a penner is an ampulla of St. Thomas a Becket's blood. Such vials were common Canterbury pilgrim signs. Davis indicates that an ampulla would have been put in the portraits of Chaucer as a tribute to him as author of the Canterbury Tales.

41 Wilfrid Lescher, The Rosary (London: Burns and Oates, Limited, 1888), pp. 41-44.

42 Edith Rickert (compiler), eds. Clair C. Olson and Martin M. Crow, Chaucer's World (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), pp. 59-60.

43 The inventory of articles in the house of Richard Toky, a London grocer, 1393, from London, Corporation, Calendar of Select Pleas and Memoranda, A. D. 1381-1412, ed. Thomas, pp. 209-213, in Chaucer's World, p. 64.

44 Canterbury, Prerogative Court, North Country Wills, 1383-1558, quoted in Chaucer's World, p. 383.

45 Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting, London, A.D. 1258-A.D. 1688, ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London: Corporation of the City of London, 1889), for amber:

Part I, 653, 694; Part II, 11, 25, 51, 214, 216, 233, 316, 599, 698; for jet: II, 210, 214; for silver or silver gilt: II, 25, 210, 698; with brooch, "a fermail": II, 214, 310. Part I covers the years 1258-1358; Part II, 1358-1688.

46 Calendar of Wills . . . London, II, 24-25.

47 Calendar of Wills . . . London, II, 209-210.

48 Calendar of Wills . . . London, II, 310.

49 The Fifty Earliest English Wills in the Court of Probate, London: A.D. 1387-1439, copier and ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, E.E.T.S. O.S. 78 (London: Trübner and Company, 1882), p. 58.

50 CASE 12, Board D, #7.

51 Victoria and Albert Museum catalogue no. M.30-1934. See also the rosaries of the passion in fifteenth-century B.M. MS. 15,525, fols. 27, 38, 49, 60, 71, 82, 93.

52 Rev. F. C. Hingeston-Randolph, p. 416.

53 Evans, A History of Jewellery, p. 50.

54 Friedman, 301-302, citing De Naturis Rerum, an encyclopedia by a thirteenth-century Dominican, Thomas of Cantimpre.

55 Friedman, 304, n. 4, citing De Naturis Rerum, B.M. Royal 12 F vi f. 103r, Lib. XIV xv.

56 Sidney Heath, Pilgrim Life in the Middle Ages (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911), p. 121.

57 Friedman, 303-304.

58 Joan Evans, Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Particularly in England (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1976), pp. 29-50, 96.

59 See "Marbode's Lapidary," First French Version, from MS. Paris, Bibl. Nat. lat. 14470, pp. 28-69, for jaspis: p. 33; smaragdus: p. 36; corallium: p. 47, in Joan Evans and Paul Studer, Anglo-Norman Lapidaries (Paris: Librairie de la Societe de l'Histoire de France et de la Societe des Anciens Textes Francais, 1924). Also see early fifteenth-century Douce 291 (MS. B), fifteenth-century Bodl. MS. Add. A106 (MS. C), and the earliest English lapidary, eleventh-century, Cotton MS. Tiberias Aiii (MS. A), fol. 101v, in Joan Evans

and M. S. Serjeantson, English Medieval Lapidaries, E.E.T.S. O.S. 190 (Oxford: Humphrey Milford Oxford University Press, 1933), for emeraude: pp. 13, 20, 40; iaspes: p. 23; coral: p. 53.

60 "The statutes of the Hotel-Dieu of Troyes, drawn up in 1263, declared: 'Nulle (religieuse) ne doit porter anneaulx ne pierres precieuses, se ce n'est pour cause de maladie.'" See Evans, Magical Jewels, citing Laborde, p. 446, s. v. Pierres.

61 George Frederick Kunz, The Curious Lore of Precious Stones (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1913), p. 305, citing Rabani Mauri, "Opera Omnia," vol. v, col. 470, Patrologia Latina, vol. cxi, Parisiis, 1864.

62 Kunz, pp. 311-312, citing Patrologiae Graecae, ed. Migne, vol. cvi, Parisiis, 1863, cols. 433-438.

63 Kunz, p. 68, citing Alburtus Magnus, "Le Grand Albert des secretz des vertus des Herbes, Pierres et Bestes."

64 I wish to express my gratitude here to Miss Maureen Pemberton, Bodleian Library, for bringing to my attention the tradition in art of portraying Virgin and Child with coral rosary beads.

65 For information on gauds, see Beverly Boyd, "Chaucer's Prioress: Her Green Gauds," Modern Language Quarterly, 11 (1950), 404-416. Boyd's research on rosaries indicates that these gauds may not be paternosters as they would be in present-day rosaries since the prayers of the rosary did not begin to reach this form until the middle of the fifteenth century. Instead, the Prioress' gauds were likely the reminders to meditate on the five joys of the Virgin, while reciting the Aves of Our Lady's Psalter. Entire strings of beads, in the Middle Ages, were also called Paternosters if that was the prayer being recited repetitively. In either case, the gauds served as counters.

66 "The fourth, Emerald, is very green," Evans, and Serjeantson, p. 13 (manuscript citation in note 59 above).

67 Joan Evans, Dress in Mediaeval France (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 42.

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71 The Middle English Translations of Robert Grosseteste's "Chateau d'Amour, ed. Kari Sajavaara (Helsinki: Societe Neophilologique, 1967), p. 283.

72 Robinson, headnote, p. 755. See also John M. Steadman, "The Prioress's Brooch and St. Leonard," English Studies, 44 (1963), 350-353, for an explanation of the ironic contrast between associations of the motto and the shrine of St. Leonard at the Benedictine Abbey at Bromley in Middlesex.

73 Taitt, p. 61.

74 Evans, A History of Jewellery, pp. 46-47.

75 Evans, A History of Jewellery, p. 47.

76 Evans, A History of Jewellery, p. 47, n. 1.

77 Franks Bequest, 1897, M&LA AF2687.

78 Franks Bequest, 1897, M&LA AF2699.

79 MA&LA, 1967, 12-8, 8, from hoard found at Fishpool, near Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, 1966 (probably buried early in 1464).

80 M.181-1975, West European.

81 Jacob's Well: An Englisht Treatise on the Cleansing of Man's Conscience, ed. A. Brandeis, E.E.T.S. O.S. 115 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1900), p. 3.

82 Joan Evans, English Posies and Posy Rings (London: Oxford University Press, 1931).

83 Evans, A History of Jewelry, p. 47, n. 2, citing Roach Smith, Collectanea Antiqua, IV, 109.

84 Evans, A History of Jewelry, p. 47.

85 Evans, A History of Jewelry, pp. 58-59.

86 Catalogue numbers 8858 and 8731. Although these brooches are kept with the pilgrim badges, there remains the possibility that they were entirely secular. I owe a debt of thanks to John Clark of the Museum of London who kindly allowed me to see the museum's reserve collection of pilgrim badges, and to Brian Spencer of the Museum of London who has made a special study of these badges and whose article "London--St. Albans Return," the London Archaeologist, Spring 1969, 34-35, 45, answered my questions concerning what the usual St. Alban's pilgrim sign looked like.

87 Evans, A History of Jewelry, p. 60.

88 Sister Madeleva, pp. 19-20.

89 However, Elizabeth Ewing, Women in Uniform: through the centuries (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1975), in plate 3, p. 13, reproduces an illumination of a Benedictine nun holding a book and rosary in her hands (from a manuscript in the Mansell Collection).

90 This illumination is reproduced in a line drawing in Strutt, pl. CXXXIV, fig. 2.

91 According to Morton Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins (Michigan: State College Press, 1952), pp. 84, 163, citing Hugo (d. 1141), Expositio moralia in Abdiam [Migne, Pat. Lat. CLXXV, 371], the twelfth-century exposition of the correlations between groups of the seven chief sins, the seven petitions of the paternoster, the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, the seven virtues, and the seven beatitudes furnished the theoretical materials out of which artists forged traditions that revealed growing naturalism. In this naturalistic tradition of portraying the virtues and vices in contemporary costume, and engaging in everyday activities, we find the rationale behind the pairing of Chaucer's Prioress and the Wife of Bath. Although another nun accompanies the Prioress, nevertheless, in the General Prologue, she is a recessive figure; thus, the Prioress and the Wife, as the only two women described in detail in the General Prologue, stand forth in opposition to each other, for several reasons: as representing the contemplative life and the active life, the aristocratic lady and the middle-class woman, the vow of chastity and the practice of luxuria, and there are other oppositions which might be named in a study aimed at a thorough analysis of their corresponding characteristics. They are both figures the pilgrim Chaucer meets in his pilgrimage, just as the pilgrims in many medieval literary works meet representations of the vices and virtues en route. The juxtaposition of chastity with luxuria is a

standard pair of opposites; they are paired in many other places, for example, by Walter Hilton (d. 1396) in Chapter 87, "How we should crucify this image of sin, and quicken the image of Jhesu," in Scale of Perfection:

Slay then and break down ire and envy and raise up  
love and charity to thine even-christian; also in  
stead of covetise have poverty in spirit, in stead  
of accidie fervour of devotion with a glad  
readiness to all good deeds, and in the stead of  
gluttony and lechery sobriety and chastity in body  
and soul. Thus counselled Saint Paul.

This quotation is taken from Walter Hilton, The Scale of Perfection, ed. Evelyn Underhill (London: John M. Watkins, 1923), Book I, pp. 209-210. Hilton, on the subject of lechery, p. 181, says that the effort made to overcome this vice will be "ghostly, as by prayers and ghostly virtues, and not bodily by no bodily penance. For . . . though thou wake and fast and scourge thyself and do all that thou can, thou shalt never have that cleanness and that chastity without the gift of God and the grace of meekness," thus making it clear that chastity and cleanness are equated and are opposed by the vice of lechery. Also, see Rosemond Tuve, Allegorical Imagery; Some Mediaeval Books and Their Posterity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), Appendix, p. 442, for a list of commonly paired vices and virtues.

The juxtaposition of chastity with luxuria may be seen again in the seven-line verse prayer, "The Seven Deedly Synnes" of MS. Bodley 549, fol. 78.

92 A survey the evolution of this tradition enables us to understand how it fits into the pattern of medieval art. According to Adolf Katzenellenbogen, Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Mediaeval Art: From Early Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1964), Intro., p. vii, early tradition reveals dual artistic trends: on the one hand, a heroic battle between the personified vices and virtues, and on the other hand, a representation of moral concepts as types, not in conflict, which "gives the observer theoretical insight into the essential nature of those forces and their relations to one another." The fifth-century Psychomachia by Prudentius depicts the opposing forces of the soul by personifying them as females, and they are dressed in classical female garments, according to Katzenellenbogen, pp. 1, 4, which was the ordinary costume of that time, although some representations of this idea show these figures wearing armor. The influence of Prudentius' work was extensive in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and Harrod of Landsberg



(late twelfth century), followed this tradition, but also introduced a new element in her dramatic representation of the ladder of virtue in which representatives of different classes, including members of the religious orders, climb upward, thus combining the ethical and social concepts.

For black and white reproductions, see Katzenellenbogen, pp. 13, 24, figs. 25 and 26. See also, the Ladder of Virtues in Hortus Deliciarum, B.M. MS. 42497. For a color reproduction, see Herrade de Landsberg: Hortus Deliciarum, A. Straub and G. Keller, eds. (Strassburg - Paris: Editions F.-X. Le Roux, 1952), where L'Echelle des Vertus is reproduced in plate 38. Also see the reproduction of nuns on the Ladder of Virtue from a late twelfth-century Speculum Virginum, Troyes, Bibliotheque Munic. MS. 252 in C. R. Dodwell's Painting in Europe 800-1200 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971), plate 199.

Katzenellenbogen, p. 7 and n. 7, also tells us that a miniaturist, in 1289, contributed another realistic element, one which is pertinent to Chaucer's Prioress and Wife of Bath pairing. He illuminated a manuscript (P<sup>4</sup>) of the Psychomachia and chose to paint the virtues as nuns and the vices as townswomen, thus placing the "action in a setting of greater reality, that of the world around him." See fig. 6, from fol. 53v. See also the depiction of sins as exemplified by typical women of English towns in Robert Mannyng de Brunne's 1303 adaptation and translation of Manuel des Pechiez, entitled "Handlyng Synne" A.D. 1303, With Those Parts of the Anglo-French Treatise on which it was Founded: William of Wadlington's "Manuel des Pechiez", ed. F. J. Furnivall, E.E.T.S. O.S. 119 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1901).

In this mode, also, we find the Strasbourg Cathedral cycle (circa 1280), in which the vices are portrayed as burgher's wives. Each vice is paired with a virtue, there being twelve groups present in the jamb figures on the north portal of the Cathedral's west front. I am indebted to the Courtauld Institute of Art's Conway Library for permission to study its excellent photographs of these and the other French sculptures in this tradition. See, also, Katzenellenbogen, pp. 19-20, and fig. 19. (See photos in Appendix.)

Additional visual evidence of what Morton Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins (Michigan: State College Press, 1952), p. 83, calls "the growing Naturalism," in the thirteenth-century, may be seen in the vices and virtues sculptures on the west front of Amiens Cathedral, on the south transept porch reliefs at Chartres Cathedral, on the north portal of the west front of Laon Cathedral and in the

apse stained glass window at Lyons Cathedral. Also, see Charles Rufus Morey, Mediaeval Art (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1942), p. 259, and for descriptions of vices and virtues conflicts illustrating the ideal and realistic elements of this tradition in architecture and murals, see pp. 240, 246, 280, 285, and fig. 112 facing p. 203.

Continuing evidence of this trend in the Middle Ages is provided in the sculpture of the Portal of St. John, the north door of the west front of Sens Cathedral, and the figures beneath the portal of the last judgment at Notre Dame Cathedral (See Katzenellenbogen, p. 78, for additional comments on this topic), as well as the mural (circa 1400) in the church at Ingatestone, Essex. For further information see Bloomfield, pp. 83, 199; D. Ives, "Seven Deadly Sins," University of London, M.A. Thesis 1931, pp. vi-vii. See C. E. Keyser, A List of Buildings in Great Britain and Ireland Having Mural and Other Painted Decorations of Dates Prior to the Latter Part of the Sixteenth Century, with Historical Introduction and Alphabetical Index of Subjects, 3rd ed., enlarged (London: Science and Art Departments of the Committee of Council on Education, 1883), for the locations of other murals where vices and virtues are portrayed in a realistic manner.

In addition, a statue of the virtue Discipline (here a substitute for Prudence) wearing a nun's habit (1430), part of a four cardinal virtues sequence formerly on the facade of the Guildhall, London, and now part of the Museum of London's collection, bears witness to the fact that the tradition of virtues dressed in nuns' clothing continues in the fifteenth century. See John Edward Price, A Descriptive Account of the Guildhall of the City of London: Its History and Associations (London: Corporation of the City of London, 1886) for drawings of these statues facing p. 71. See also Caroline M. Barron, The Medieval Guildhall of London (London: Corporation of London, 1974), pp. 25-27; a note on p. 48 includes the following poem, attributed to William Elderton, a one-time attorney in the Sheriffs court at the Guildhall, describing the statues:

Though most the images be pulled down  
And none be thought remayne in Towne,  
I am sure there be in London yet,  
Seven images such, and in such a place,  
As few or none I thinke will hit;  
Yet every day they shew their face,  
And thousands see them every yeare,  
But few I thinke can tell me where,  
Where Iesu Christ aloft doth stand,  
Law and Learning on eyther hand,

Discipline in the Devil's necke,  
 And hard by her are three direct,  
 There Iustice, Fortitude and Temperance stand,  
 Where find ye the like in all this land?

Manuscript illuminations provide additional material for a study of this tradition. Another example of a virtue being depicted in the habit of a nun is included in the Brussels, Bibl. Royale, MS. 9232, Maitre du Mansel's Fleur des histoires, fol. 448v, in which Prudence wears a black habit with white wimple and veil. See Rosemond Tuve, "Notes on the Virtues and Vices," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 26 (1963), part I, 279, for a reproduction of this folio. This tradition continues into the sixteenth century where we see four virtues in Dominican nuns' habits--white tunic, black cloak, white wimple and white underveil, or else a white edge to the black overveil, on fol. 33 of La Sacre, Couronnement Et Entree de Claude, Royne de France (1517), B.M. Cotton MS. Titus Axvii. The lower register of fol. 39 in this same manuscript contains examples of the vices in secular clothing.

Thus we may follow the process that costume plays in the depiction of these concepts: the virtues and vices of the fifth-century Psychomachia wear classical gowns which are the ordinary clothing of that period. Certain manuscript illuminators of the twelfth century followed this tradition in intent, dressing virtues as nuns, and vices as townswomen, in the customary habits and dress of their century, and this same schema was followed by manuscript illuminators and by artists occupied with the monuments mentioned above--the sculptors of the Strasbourg cycle being particularly illustrative of this tradition.

It must be acknowledged that another tradition existed after the fifth century in addition to that of depicting both vices and virtues in contemporary clothing. Medieval sculptors and manuscript illuminators simultaneously emulated the literal content of the tradition begun by Prudentius, and these emulators continued to portray the virtues dressed in the flowing draped garments of the classical period, even when vices were dressed in contemporary costume or portrayed as monsters. For example, Prudence may be seen crowned, wearing classical robes (By the phrase "classical robes" I mean those flowing voluminous draperies typical of the classical period, as distinguished from the tunic, scapular, and cloak worn by nuns who were forbidden the use of excess fabric in their habits), in a manuscript dated 1311, Paris, Arsenal, MS. 6329, fol. 96v. See Rosemond Tuve, "Notes on the Virtues and Vices," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 27 (1964), part II, 43, for a reproduction of

this folio. Tuve says that B.N. fr. 938, dated 1294, is the seminal manuscript in this tradition. It is described by L. Delisle in Recherches sur la librairie de Charles V, i, 1907, pp. 236-247, and this description includes a copy of the instructions that were given for the illuminations of several of the manuscript copies of Somme le roi.

A late fourteenth-century French example is provided by Le livre des vices et de vertus, B.M. Royal MS. 19Cii, fol. 48v, in which Prudence wears a loose orange classical robe and no head covering. Prudence in B.M. MS. 15,685, De Luco Scachorum by fratrem Jacobum De Cessolis, fol. 60v, written in Italy circa 1400, wears an orange tunic partially covered by a drape of blue. Still later, Prudence in the late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century B.M. MS. 11,866, fol. 7v, Horae B. Mariae Virginis et alia Officia, secundum usam ecclesiae Parisiensis, cum calendario praemisso, painted by an Italian artist, is depicted wearing classical robes.

Yet a third tradition may be discerned in the picturing of virtues types in contemporary secular dress of the nobility or royalty. In an early fourteenth-century manuscript, B.M. Additional MS. 28,162 fol. 4v, Somme Le Roi (French), Prudence wears a white wimple and headveil topped by a crown, a blue tunic with a narrow blue girdle that has white dots on it indicating some type of decoration (embroidery or pearls?), and an orange cloak with white fur lining. This is elegant secular clothing. She is again depicted in secular dress, wearing a crown without veil or wimple in Rouen, Bibl. munic. MS. 927, fol. 93v, dated circa 1454, a Rouen copy of Aristotle's Ethics in Oresme's glossed trans. See Rosamond Tuve, Allegorical Imagery, p. 64, fig. 13.

The three modes of depicting Prudence (and other virtues) described above existed simultaneously. However, it is the first of these that is especially pertinent to this study.

93 Katzenellenbogen, pp. 54-55.

94 See Bodleian MSS. Laud misc. 570, fol. 9v; Canon. Ital. 38, fol. 31v on which Prudence holds an open book; and B.N. MS. fr. 9186, fol. 304. See also Tuve, Allegorical Imagery, p. 74, for a comment on the sieve as representing Circumspectio which Prudence is.

95 Manuscript illuminations showing conventual leaders instructing their nuns are so ordinary that it is necessary to mention only a representative sample, from circa 1300 to circa 1500. Two nuns (one holds a book) are being instructed

by another (she holds a sheaf of wheat, symbolic of Virgo) in the left quadrant of fol. 1, in B.M. Additional MS. 39,843 (fig. 15, my appendix). (The sign of the Maiden, Virgo, holding her sheaf of wheat may also be seen in the Hunterian Psalter, written and illuminated in northern England, circa 1170, Glasgow University Library, MS. Hunter 229, fol. 4v.) The hand gestures of the Benedictine abbess in the historiated initial on fol. 27 of B.M. Royal MS. 6Evi show that she instructs seven nuns. Heloise, Abbess of the Paraclete, addresses one pupil, and a group of ladies in the background are obviously listening, in B.M. Royal MS. 16Fii, fol. 137. Each of these nuns follows the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary as depicted in B.M. Additional MS. 18,850, a French manuscript Horae et Officia, known as the Bedford Missal (presented in 1430). In the upper left-hand corner of fol. 199v (fig. 16, my appendix), the Virgin, with book on podium, instructs a nun who also has a book on a podium.

Mrs. Henry Jenner, Our Lady in Art (London: Methuen and Co., 1908), p. 15, states that a book as an iconographical symbol represents the Blessed Virgin Mary herself when the book is closed and sealed. Open, it is the Book of Wisdom, being opened at the seventh chapter. Further, "Those numerous pictures called 'Sedes Sapientiae,' which represent Mary reading, are mystical representations of Mary as the seat of Wisdom, and she is reading the words, 'For she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty; therefore can no defiled thing fall into her, for she is the brightness of the everlasting Light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of His goodness.'" And Mrs. Jenner reminds us, pp. 18-19, that Mary is frequently invoked as S. Maria della Sapienza and as S. Maria del Libro (when she holds the Book of Wisdom).

A nun-saint pictured holding a book in her hand is an equally ordinary subject. In B.M. Harley MS. 2900, fol. 68v (fig. 7), the Benedictine Abbess and saint, Ethelburger, carries her crozier and a beautifully bound book. The Benedictine nun, Gertrude, here depicted as a saint, similarly holds a crozier in her left and a book in her right hand, on fol. 41 of B.M. Harley MS. 2962 (fig. 2). This is doubly appropriate now since she is renowned as a mystic and her fame derives largely from the 1536 printing of her Latin writings [according to David Hugh Farmer, Oxford Dictionary of Saints (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978)]. And in a very late manuscript, the Benedictine Abbess and saint, Etheldreda, also carries crozier and book on fol. 64v, B.M. MS. Kings 9 (early sixteenth century).

96 See reproduction in Tuve, Allegorical Imagery, p. 64, fig. 13.

97 Tuve, "Notes," part II, 43, says that this was the activity expected of her at this date.

98 Florence H. Ridley, The Prioress and the Critics (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), p. 21.

99 The emblem of the rose may be seen in the arcade of the north porch of Chartres Cathedral. In its depiction of the fourteen joys of body and soul in heaven, Pulchritudo is shown with the emblem of four roses. The tradition in which this emblem flourished provides the spiritual background for the Prioress' name and Chaucer's description of her beauty, dressed in nun's garb. Katzenellenbogen, p. 69, cites the Speculum Virginum in his discussion of the rose. This work contains a conversation between presbyter Peregrinus and the nun Theodora, and was a widely circulated book of devotions. In it, the rose is the symbol of the "mystical paradise" which "flourishes in a mysterious way," and includes the cardinal and theological virtues.

100 The Book of Vices and Virtues: A Fourteenth Century English Translation of the Somme Le Roi of Lorens D'Orleans, ed. W. Nelson Francis, E.E.T.S. O.S. 217 (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 229. This work contains many negative references to over-curious and costly clothes.

101 According to The Book of Vices and Virtues, p. 122, "prudence kepeþ a man þat he ne be bi no queyntise of his enemy [the devill] bigiled."

102 Julia Bolton Holloway, "The Figure of the Pilgrim in Medieval Poetry," Diss. University of California, Berkeley 1974, p. 49, provides another symbolic relationship for our consideration in that London was the city of St. Thomas' birth and Canterbury of his martyrdom, a progression which symbolizes his life-pilgrimage which Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims seek to imitate. See her footnotes 96-102 regarding St. Thomas. Also, see Edmund Reiss, "The Pilgrimage Narrative and the Canterbury Tales," Studies in Philology, 67 (1970), 300-301, regarding symbolism of the journey, although it is necessary to state that the Tabard Inn was as close to a church and abbey as it was to the Bell, a Southwark brothel, a juxtaposition which Reiss found particularly significant.

103 The comparison was suggested to me by comments in Daniel Knapp's article "The Relyk of a Saint: A Gloss on Chaucer's Pilgrimage," Journal of English Literary History,

39 (1972), 5ff. Knapp contrasts St. Thomas' saintly hair shirt and breeches with the worldly tabard of Edward, the Black Prince (which may still be seen exhibited in Canterbury Cathedral). The hair shirt and breeches were generally kissed by visiting pilgrims who saw them.

## APPENDIX



maie tre fortee et victorieuse



Coment faulz semblat armon  
 Des se habie et pue se toune  
 Qui et abstinent contrainte  
 Vre mal se louche tout y faulx

fig. 1 Constrained Abstinence dressed as a pilgrim Beguine from B.M. MS. Harley 4425, fol. 108, a circa 1500 copy of *Le Roman de la Rose*.



fig. 2 St. Gertrude, Benedictine nun and visionary, c. 1302, from B.N. MS. Harley 2962, fol. 41, an undated copy of *Horae beatae Virginis cum calendario, orationibus ad sanctos & aliis*.



fig. 3 Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, and Justice, from B.N. Additional MS. 28162, fol. 4v, an early fourteenth-century French copy of the 1279 *Somme Le Roi* by Friar Laurent.



fig. 4 St. Claire, from B.M. Additional MS.  
34294, p. 420, the late fifteenth-century Sforza  
Book of Hours.



fig. 5 Abbess teaching nuns, from B.N. MS. Royal 6Evi, fol. 27, a circa 1330-1350 copy of Jacobus Omne Bonum.



fig. 6 Benedictine nun in initial I at left, from B.M. Additional MS. 28784 B, fol. 10, a thirteenth-century miniature pasted in a circa 1430-1450 French Book of Hours.

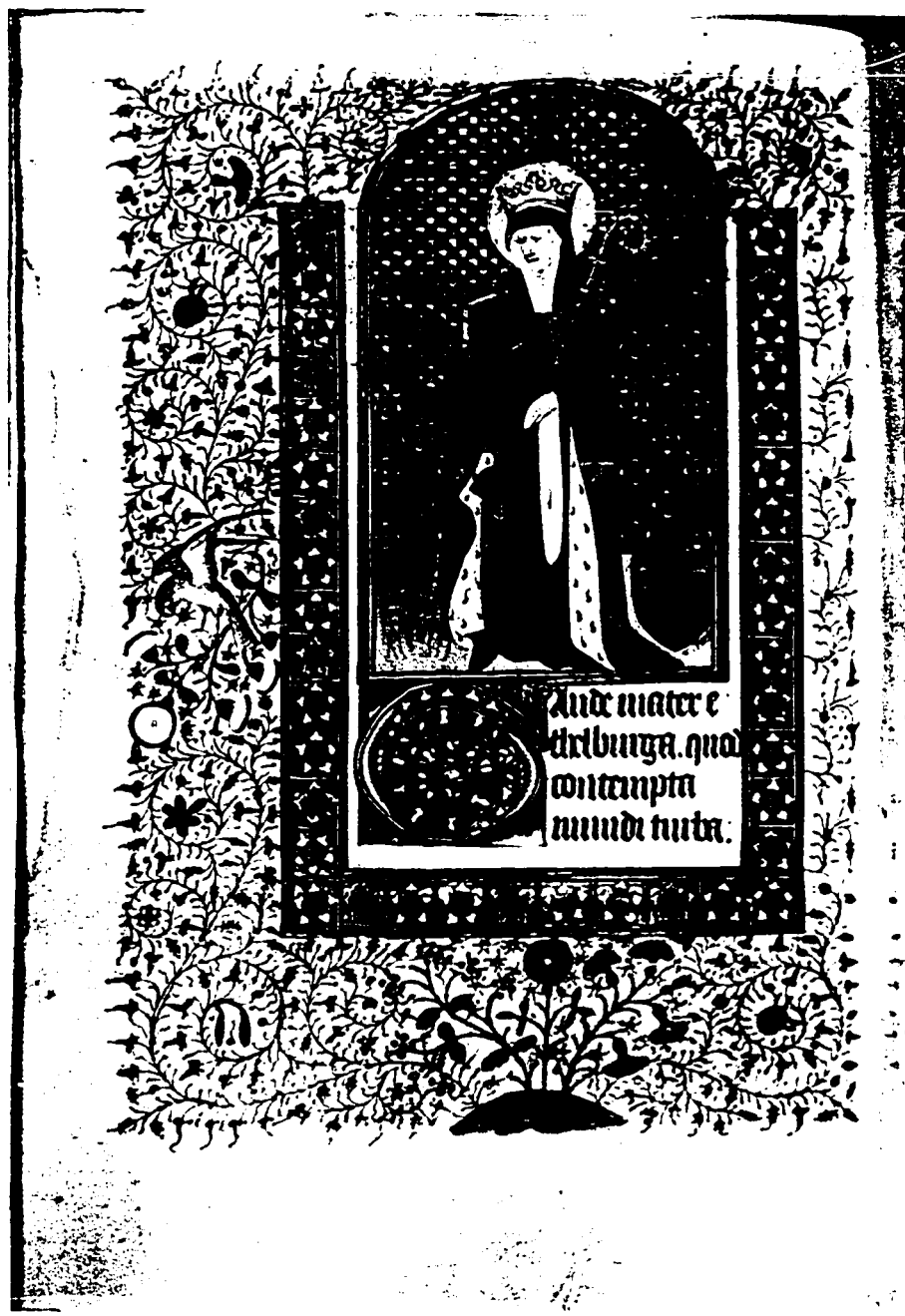


fig. 7 St. Ethelburger, Benedictine Abbess, from B.M. MS. Harley 2900, fol. 68v, the circa 1425-1430 *Horae Beatae Virginis, cum calendario, vigiliis mortuorum, commendationibus animarum, etc.*



fig. 8 Benedicting nuns, a detail from B.M. Additional MS. 15456, fol. 2, the 1421 Liber Animarum capituli monasterii Sancti Quirini Nussiensis.





fig. 9 Four cardinal virtues with Prudence at the left in the lower register, from B.M. Cotton MS. Titus A.xvii, fol. 33, the 1517 copy of *Le Sacre, Couronnement Et Entrée de Claude, Royne de France*.



fig. 10 Prudence dressed as a nun, Amiens Cathedral. Photo by James Austin.



fig. 11 Lust dressed in secular clothes, Amiens Cathedral. Photo by James Austin.



fig. 12 Chastity dressed as a nun, Amiens Cathedral. Photo by James Austin.



fig. 13 Virtues figures standing over vice figures dressed in stylish contemporary clothing, north portal of Strasburg Cathedral. Photo from the Conway Library of the Courtauld Institute of Art, London.



fig. 14 Discipline (so called instead of Prudence) as one of the four cardinal virtues statues formerly on the facade of the London Guildhall, now in the Museum of London. Time exposure photo by Clay Henderson.



fig. 15 Nun holding sheaf of wheat, symbol of virginity, instructing two nuns, lower lefthand quadrant from B.M. Additional MS. 39843, fol. 1v, a circa 1300 French La Sainte Abbaye.



fig. 16 The Blessed Virgin Mary instructing a nun, a detail from B.M. Additional MS. 18850, fol. 199v, the Horae et Officia known as the Bedford Missal, presented in 1430.



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