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Chapter Six

The Prioress and the Second Nun

Katherine J. Lewis*

Approaching the Prioress

Only three female pilgrims appear in the 'General Prologue' and of these only two have full portraits: the Prioress and the Wife of Bath. Nevertheless, flourishing academic interest in the status and experience of medieval women from the 1980s onwards has rendered them among the most popular of the pilgrims for scholarly analysis. But despite the wealth of existing scholarship on the Prioress, the relationship of her gender to her authority has received comparatively little attention. As we shall see, her carefully presented femininity has been discussed at length, but the implications of this performance for an office-holding woman have not been much considered. It is worth emphasising that Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress is not just the traditional critique of the shortcomings of the female religious, but, more specifically, describes a rare and potentially troubling female 'power broker' in medieval society.¹ Helen Phillips, who has considered this issue, contends that the portrait can be seen as 'a sexist "hatchet job"' which creates only to ridicule and destroy the idea of female independence.² Focusing on this issue gives us a new perspective on the satire involved in her portrait. Taking account of the Prioress's potential for authority in an analysis of her representation suggests that Chaucer's depiction of her was rather less ambiguously indulgent and more deliberately disparaging than has often been allowed.³

Debating the Prioress

There is a vast array of interpretations of the Prioress's appearance and demeanour available, presenting competing claims as to what these intimate about her character or about the nature of later medieval female monasticism.⁴ The constituent elements of the Prioress's portrait

have frequently been invoked as evidence for both 'positive' and 'negative' readings of her character and conduct.⁵ A classic example of such conflicts of interpretation is provided by critical disagreements about the significance of her coral rosary, 'gauded al with grene' (I: 159) with the suspended 'brooch of gold ful sheene' (I: 160) bearing the motto '*Amor vincit omnia*' (I: 162). Some describe the rosary as mere 'costume jewellery' or a bracelet, valued by the vain Prioress for its pretty appearance, but Laura F. Hodges challenges this claim by establishing its similarity to other contemporary rosaries, contending that its style and appearance was entirely appropriate to its devotional function.⁶ Even the question of the exact measurement of the Prioress's 'fair forheed' (I: 154) has been a matter of debate because this, and the related appearance of 'hir wympul' (I: 151), supports contentions that her dress is, or is not, inappropriately flamboyant, which, in turn, has implications for the quality of her commitment to a vowed religious life.⁷ There is a general scholarly consensus that the Prioress is an inherently ambiguous figure, which in itself helps to explain the sheer range of opinion that she has generated.⁸

While identifying ambiguity in the Prioress, commentators generally adduce a degree of conservative moral satire of her within her portrait.⁹ But there is broad agreement that the satire Chaucer employs to depict her is rather less barbed than in some of the other portraits in the 'General Prologue'.¹⁰ Moreover, the Prioress is first of the professed religious pilgrims to be introduced, and escalating criticism has been traced in Chaucer's handling of the Prioress, and the other pilgrims who belong to religious orders who follow her in the 'General Prologue': the Monk and the Friar.¹¹ The Prioress's name is Eglentyne (I: 121), which means 'Sweet Briar'. Picking up on this and elements of her physical appearance such as her 'nose tretys', 'eyen greye as glas' (I: 152) and 'mouth ful small, and therto softe and reed' (I: 153), her similarity to a beautiful romance heroine, such as Emaré, is frequently noted, along with the suggestion that Chaucer the pilgrim (if not Chaucer the poet) views her with enchanted indulgence as a result.¹² In contrast a vituperative and indignant tone permeates other interpretations of the Prioress.¹³ This is especially marked in some analyses of the relationship between her portrait in the 'General Prologue' and the anti-Semitic content of her tale, which is held to reveal the cruel, uncharitable bigotry lying behind her pleasing facade.¹⁴

Such debates about the relative proportions of vice and virtue in the Prioress's make-up often discuss her conduct in relation to the social status which Chaucer ascribed to her. Thus his observation that the Prioress's French was not of Paris, but 'After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe' (I: 125) and that with her dainty table manners she 'peyned hire to countrefete

cheere/Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,/And to ben holden digne of reverence' (I:139-41) has been held to describe a non-aristocratic woman who was seeking to imitate courtly behaviour.¹⁵ But her performance is regarded by some as discernibly, indeed laughably, imperfect, serving only to emphasise her provincialism.¹⁶ Explanations as to why the Prioress improperly directs her energies towards giving an impression of aristocratic refinement are often based on the assumption that she has little or no genuine religious vocation. Indeed, one persistent approach sees her failings as evidence that she is inherently frustrated and unfulfilled either sexually (because she is not a wife) or emotionally (because she is not a mother).¹⁷ It appears then that the Prioress is neither a proper nun, nor a proper lady.¹⁸ This therefore begs the question, what is she? It is difficult to be certain about the meaning/s of the Prioress. But it does not necessarily follow that Chaucer's portrait is therefore 'open ended' and that he strove to avoid the possibility that moral judgement could be passed on the Prioress at all (which is Jill Mann's conclusion), or that to suggest the primacy of some interpretations over others is to distort her meaning (as claimed by C. David Benson).¹⁹

The Prioress is one of two professed religious women whom Chaucer included in the band of pilgrims; she is accompanied by the Second Nun, who has received far less scholarly attention in her own right. Admittedly the 'General Prologue' gives us very little to go on, stating only that she served as 'chapeleyne' to her superior (I: 164), i.e., as a sort of secretary or administrative assistant. In lieu of a portrait, the Second Nun's Tale is used here as a means of demonstrating how the representation of both the Prioress and Second Nun draw on and respond to the state of contemporary female monasticism and to discourses of female power and holiness. This is not to say that their portraits should be viewed as a straightforwardly reliable likeness of later medieval English nuns. Nonetheless, scholarship on the Prioress has been dominated by an understanding that her depiction mirrors the reality of nuns' lives, although there has been stark disagreement about the nature of that reality.

Traditional approaches to the Prioress and female monasticism

Critical consensus long held that the portrait of the Prioress constitutes a satirical yet largely accurate representation of the shortcomings of late-medieval female monasticism, an interpretation strongly influenced by Eileen Power's groundbreaking study of English nuns.²⁰ The Prioress, Monk and Friar have all frequently been read as buttressing other contemporary critiques of the professional religious, whose lifestyle had supposedly degenerated from the

high standards of their forebears.²¹ With specific reference to nuns, anti-clerical discourse both affirmed the essentially admirable nature of their way of life whilst also claiming that most (but not all) women were temperamentally unsuited to it by definition. Notable here is the early-fifteenth-century poem 'Why I Can't Be a Nun'.²² The narrator, Kateryne, a devout young woman who wishes to become a nun, is made to realise that convents are places of sham and hypocrisy, inhabited almost entirely by vain, dissolute women. Her eyes are opened partly by her father, who warns her that 'Ye seyde ye wolde be a nune,/But ye may not fulfyll in dede/The purpose that ye have begun' because of the widespread corruption pervading convents.²³ The veracity of her father's contentions is proved by a dream vision in which Kateryne visits a monastery in the company of Lady Experience. She discovers that it is run by Dame Pride, with the assistance of Dame Veyne Glory, Dame Envy, Dame Lust and Dame Disobedience amongst others, who have contrived through their malice to deprive Dame Mekenes and Dame Devowte of any position, and Dame Chastyte is so little regarded that she contemplates leaving altogether. Similarly, in *Piers Plowman*, Wrath recounts the 'joutes of janglyng' which he creates amongst nuns by playing on their vaunted sense of self-worth and manipulating competitive jealousy among them: 'Til "Thow lixt!" and "Thow lixt!" lopen out at ones/ And either hitte oother under the cheke;/ Hadde thei had knyves, by Crist! Hir either hadde kild oother'.²⁴ The cumulative picture which emerges from these and other examples of contemporary estates satire is that the essential nature of women cannot be amended by monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience; nuns are still governed by failings which they share with the vast majority of women.²⁵

Power drew on the records of episcopal visitations to convents to test the accuracy of such anti-clerical accusations.²⁶ These records outline instances of irreligious, immoral and rebellious behaviour and so Power used them to argue that most nuns had little or no vocation, were not suited to their way of life and made scant attempt to observe it properly. The moral degeneracy of convent life was seen as testament to other failings too. With the exception of substantial royal foundations the majority of convents were small-scale and had limited resources, an impecunious state of affairs which was supposedly compounded by the 'fact' that nuns were incompetent administrators.²⁷ Power's influential conclusion was that the quality of professed female religious life in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had declined markedly from the high standards of the early and high Middle Ages. This view only began to be seriously questioned and revised in the later twentieth century.²⁸

Reassessing late-medieval female monasticism

In judging the Prioress some modern commentators have relied on a 'timeless' version of monasticism which does not reflect the extent to which its standards and practices had been adapted and modified by the later fourteenth century. But at this time there was no single, fixed version of monasticism in general, or female monasticism in particular, instead there was ongoing debate and negotiation.²⁹ There is now a wealth of revisionist scholarship challenging the traditional picture of English convents as financially and morally bankrupt institutions inhabited by women of low devotional, intellectual and administrative capacity.³⁰ Nuns in Chaucer's period were generally of prosperous urban or parish gentry status and entered their local convent, maintaining ties with family and friends outside, sometimes sharing their church with the local laity, benefitting from, and in many cases dependent upon their patronage. Sustained lay support of convents suggests approval of the quality of religious life within. Most women became nuns in their mid teens, apparently as a result of genuine vocation and this way of life enjoyed a continued, steady popularity in later medieval England.³¹ Moreover visitation records indicate that immorality, especially sexual, was relatively uncommon among nuns, which stands in stark opposition to the salacious emphasis of estates satire.³² A substantial re-evaluation of the intellectual and spiritual character of religious women's lives drawing on the evidence of book ownership and circulation demonstrates that many nuns engaged actively both with their profession, and with contemporary devotional trends, such as affective piety with its emphasis on the suffering of Christ, which were also of great interest to contemporary lay women readers.³³ Modern critics who identify the Prioress as emotionally unfulfilled are arguably complicit with the invective of estates satire by failing to acknowledge the potential for relative self-determination and self-expression which a professional religious life could offer to medieval women.³⁴

These changing interpretations of the nature and quality of female religious life in late-medieval England have informed some readings of the Prioress which focus on the dissonances between Chaucer's depiction of her and what we know of real nuns.³⁵ This approach calls into question readings of the Prioress as a recognisable personification of the widely agreed 'problem' of female religious and their lifestyle which have so frequently been offered. Indeed, reappraisals of convent life have been used by some scholars to argue, in opposition to Power, that in fact, the Prioress is essentially a 'good' nun. For example, while acknowledging the ambiguity of her representation Henry Asgar Kelly nonetheless contends 'Chaucer wished her to emerge, I think, as a religious superior who is very attentive to

religious duties and to external decorum.’³⁶ However, regardless of whether the Prioress is judged to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’, using the historical context to measure the ‘accuracy’ of her representation is problematic in its assumption that her portrait directly reflects reality.³⁷ In creating the Prioress Chaucer drew on stereotypical conventions for depicting nuns which would have been familiar to his readers. Rather than trying to relate these tropes to what nuns were ‘really like’ it is more fruitful to consider how their deployment in the Prioress’s portrait engages with ideologies of gender, and, specifically, with the gendering of authority.

The Prioress as Power Broker

Chaucer’s portrait of the Prioress has usually been assessed by criteria which applied to nuns (and indeed women) in general. As a result, little attention has been paid to her specific status and responsibilities as the head of a religious house.³⁸ But reading the Prioress as an office-holding woman adds a further dimension to our understanding of her portrait and its implications. A convent superior, whether an abbess or a prioress, was elected by her fellow nuns.³⁹ In essence she was intended to be a maternal figure, setting an example of virtuous living, as defined by the Rule of St Benedict, through her own conduct, and firmly (but even-handedly) correcting the abuses of those who fell short of this. Valerie Spear has produced the most substantial study of English female superiors and establishes that the ideal candidate was called on to inhabit a dual model of leadership ‘bearing the attributes of both authoritarianism and submission’.⁴⁰ She explores the significance of the Latin eulogy of Euphemia, Abbess of Wherwell (died *c.* 1257), which was copied into the abbey’s cartulary in the mid-fourteenth-century, as a guide to the qualities which were looked for in a female superior.⁴¹ Euphemia was celebrated in this hagiographic account as an extremely successful leader, and, alongside more strictly spiritual qualifications, the eulogy emphasises her efficient and prudent administration of Wherwell’s holdings.⁴² The prioress was responsible for the financial wellbeing of her house, overseeing its resources, keeping careful and transparent account of its income and expenditure with the help of a steward or bailiff and other employees, who were answerable to her. Any prioress’s track record rested not only on her own abilities but also on the efficiency and conscientiousness of these officials.⁴³ The ideal candidate therefore had to be an accomplished manager. But the versions of the monastic rule written for women in later medieval England give little guidance on this dimension of a superior’s role, or on how she should engage with the outside world on business matters.⁴⁴ Given that most nuns were professed in their teens, it seems that many prioresses therefore learned on the job by holding a series of lesser administrative roles

within the house, such as cellaress, sacrist, almoness or mistress of the novices, before being promoted to superior. In this way a woman could rise through the ranks by dint of her ability, rather than her birth; individual personality and accomplishments were clearly very important.⁴⁵ A further implication is that prioresses were mostly well into middle age before they were appointed.⁴⁶ This is worth bearing in mind in relation to Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress, as part of his satire could be based on the implication that she is too old to be acting like a romance heroine.⁴⁷

Prioresses were significant figures in their local communities, even in the case of smaller houses. Convents held manor courts and often had other privileges such as proving wills, holding fairs or the right of advowson (even appropriation) to local churches.⁴⁸ It could be a tricky balancing act for a superior to satisfy the expectations and demands, variously, of the nuns, the bishop and the local population. Those who patronised the convent (paying for the upkeep of the church for example) might expect a more tangible reciprocal arrangement than simply the prayers which religious houses traditionally offered for their benefactors, such as taking in family members as boarders. The varying financial fortunes of individual convents are testament (in part) to the capability of individual superiors, with those who departed substantially from leadership ideals in the minority. However, unfortunately there is a dearth of detailed evidence for the character, activities and self-perception of those individuals and, as a result, Spear warns of the dangers of reducing them to a representative 'type'.⁴⁹

However, with the Prioress we must, perforce, engage with a type. So, what does this brief survey of female superiors help us to understand about her representation and its possible meanings? The Prioress may not be an aristocrat, in fact, but she is a female lord by virtue of her office.⁵⁰ As befits that status she is accompanied by a small entourage: the Second Nun (perhaps one day her successor) and also 'preestes thre' (I: 164). It has been argued that the text of the 'General Prologue' originally only included the single Nun's Priest who tells a tale and that the three mentioned in the 'General Prologue' were added by a later scribe.⁵¹ But these priests became a standard element of the Prioress's portrait, regardless of their origin, providing her with a retinue which implies that she is a person of some standing and significance. This calls into question the simple dismissal of the Prioress as a woman trying to 'pass herself off as an aristocrat', and criticisms which view an aristocratic demeanour as being incompatible with her vocation.⁵² In fact her careful appearance is fitting to her position. As a Prioress she certainly should not be shabby and uncouth.⁵³ She embodied the 'public persona' of the house in its frequent dealings with the local community and on

occasion would entertain guests at the convent, which meant providing appropriate fare and knowing how to conduct herself at the table.⁵⁴ Thus being a respectable, well-bred woman (whether strictly by birth or by conduct) was intrinsic to her role.⁵⁵

This reading of the Prioress is supported by the evidence of a text written for nuns: an early fifteenth-century Middle English life of St Edith of Wilton (961-84), written at Wilton Abbey.⁵⁶ The life includes detailed account of Edith's clothing which is not that of a nun, but rather reflects her high social status: she was the illegitimate daughter of King Edgar (died 975). She dresses in 'a curtull of purpur byse,/ Enbroudrid with gold../ with other clothus above þat were of grette pryse', but under these always wore 'an harde hayre full securlye/... both day and nyȝt.' St Æthelwold (bishop of Winchester) challenges Edith about this finery 'and sayde þat he herde never of non/ þat went to Paradys one þat aray'. Edith answered him 'mekelyche', but in terms which unequivocally claimed justification for her dress:

Fader, wher þe holy gost wolnot as gladlyche wone

under a mantyl yfurned with bever ryȝt welle,

and with as gode wyll take þere his habitacyon,

as under a mantyl yfurned with a row gotus fell?

Jhû, holy Fader, þat us dere bouȝt,

Take not only hede to monnys clothyng,

bot also to his gode worchyng.

Y chawe, my lord, God in my þouȝt as redy,

and þenk upon his gret passioun both nyȝt and day,

And with as gode wyll y cholve hym servy,

as þaw y were arayed in ryȝt pore aray.

St Æthelwold holds this to be a good answer and is reassured that Edith 'loved bettre God and holy chirche/ þen ony wordelyche ryche appayreylle.'⁵⁷ Mary Dockray-Miller suggests this be read as an indication that the immediate audience 'was acquainted with fine possessions, and perhaps wanted authorization to continue using and wearing them.'⁵⁸ Nuns

often received bequests of clothing and may on occasion have worn these unmodified.⁵⁹ The life of St Edith can thus be read as lending legitimacy to contemporary practices.⁶⁰ It also lends legitimacy to the Prioress's appearance, because Edith is both a high status lady and a nun (the former is not subsumed into the latter), and she is also a saint.⁶¹ Evidently nuns themselves did not see display and courtliness as conflicting with their vocation, although this is perhaps not altogether surprising. Nonetheless we need to consider courtliness seriously as an aspect of their self-definition as professed religious women, and apply this to an understanding of the Prioress. This avoids a simplistic reading of her own appearance in the moral terms of estates satire as 'proof' that real nuns were obsessed with 'pretty dresses' and therefore evidently did not take their vocations seriously.

The Problem of Female Authority

Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress is all about her appearance and 'curteisie' (l: 132); there is nothing in it that gives any palpable sense of her role, status and authority (apart from the brief reference to those travelling with her). If we were not told she was a Prioress, how would we know she was one? The only indication that she is even a nun is provided by the reference to her singing 'the service dyvyne,/ Entuned in hir nose ful semely' (l: 122-3). By foregrounding the Prioress's gender, Chaucer's satire therefore occludes her profession. Approached in this fashion the quality of that satire appears neither gentle, nor unresolved, as so many critics have claimed.

One of the much vaunted attractions of the celibate religious life for women (advertised to them from the earliest days of Christianity) was that virginity (or at least chastity) would allow them to overcome the supposed weakness of their female nature so that, in effect, they became like honorary men.⁶² For example, in his discussion of the Old Testament heroine, Deborah, St Ambrose explained: 'She showed not only that widows have no need of the help of a man, but that they can be reinforcements for men. Without being at all restrained by the weakness of her sex, she undertook to perform the duties of a man – and did even more than she had undertaken.'⁶³ Exactly the same rhetoric was used to praise Euphemia of Wherwell's management of her abbey in the fourteenth century: 'she also so conducted herself with regard to external affairs that she seemed to have the spirit of a man rather than a woman.'⁶⁴ This was not simply moral rhetoric but was evidently regarded as the best way to describe a woman who was endowed by her office (and hence implicitly her accomplishments, rather than her birth or her status as someone's wife) with the type of authority and agency that was

usually the preserve of men.⁶⁵ The fact that the Prioress is the only one of the religious pilgrims who is a superior helps to explain that she is introduced in the 'General Prologue' before the Monk and the Friar, and also indicates that status could trump gender on occasion.

Positive acknowledgements of women's potential to take on 'manly' qualities and employ these effectively were sometimes produced as an explicit riposte to the comprehensive denigration of female morality and intelligence reiterated frequently in anti-feminist texts.⁶⁶ Yet positive assessments of women remained in the minority, and neither these, nor the evidence of capable leadership provided by women who managed convents, estates and businesses, challenged the powerful ideologies underpinning a social hierarchy in which women were viewed as inherently inferior to men. Indeed, the Prioress is shown to be entirely unsuited to a position of leadership in explicitly gendered terms, with her 'smylyng... ful symple and coy' (l: 119), her 'conscience and tendre herte' (l: 150) and her tearful sympathy for trapped mice and 'smale houndes' (l: 146) who had suffered a beating. One can hardly imagine her going through the priory's accounts, giving informed instruction to her bailiff or punishing an errant novice.

Euphemia's 'manliness' stands in striking contrast to the ultra-femininity of the Prioress. One way of accounting for this is to read the Prioress as testament to a concern that capable female superiors challenged the assumption that women lacked the temperament required to hold office and exercise authority. Hence, unlike Euphemia, the Prioress cannot be allowed to escape her gender, despite her position. It colours everything about her, just as it does in estates satire where femininity is constantly identified as the explanation for women's inability to dedicate themselves properly to religion. Similar concerns underpin the papal deed *Periculoso*, issued in 1298. This sought to enforce strict enclosure upon nuns and prevent them from having any direct dealings with the outside world (significantly there was no equivalent decree for monks).⁶⁷ The impetus behind *Periculoso* and attempts to enforce it may partly have been to constrain nuns from playing a more active role in the style and substance of their way of life.⁶⁸ In the counter-arguments which nuns made against the strict observation of the decree can be detected a measure of their frustration at attempted external interference and a wish to be left to govern local matters which they understood best.⁶⁹ More tangible evidence of this frustration can be seen in the reaction of the nuns of Markyate in 1300 to the order of John Dalderby (bishop of Lincoln) that they observe *Periculoso*:

But when the Bishop was going away, certain of the nuns, disobedient to these injunctions, hurled the said statute at his back and over his head, and as well the Prioress as the convent appeared to consent to those who threw it, following the bishop to the outer gate of the house and declaring unanimously that they were not content in any way to observe such a statute.⁷⁰

In fact, *Periculoso* was rarely observed in England during the fourteenth century. Its enforcement was impractical and was recognised as such by bishops who regularly granted permission for nuns to leave their houses for fixed periods of time, for reasons of business, health or pilgrimage (like the Prioress herself).⁷¹ However, when outside the convent it was vital that a nun's chastity be observable in her appearance and demeanour, because it was not encased behind (theoretically) protective walls.⁷² Certainly *Periculoso* constitutes a concerted effort to portray nuns as essentially in need of male protection, which attempts to obliterate any claims they may have made for autonomy deriving from their vocation.⁷³ Thus although the Prioress is outside of her house, her potential for authority is enclosed and inhibited by her femininity instead.

Conclusion: Contrasting the Prioress with the Second Nun

Reading the Prioress as a figure who undercuts the idea of female agency lends weight to the views of those critics such as Marsha L. Dutton and Rebecca Stephens who see the Second Nun as a deliberate foil to the shortcomings of her superior. They claim the Second Nun as a more 'proper' nun than the Prioress because she is quiet and self-effacing, with no individual identity.⁷⁴ That lack of identity derives from the lack of a portrait of her in the 'General Prologue', but the Second Nun does tell a tale. Lynn Staley and Catherine Sanok among others have explored the significance of the Second Nun narrating the life of St Cecilia, the legendary virgin-martyr, depicted as a figure of bold and eloquent female heroism.⁷⁵ The tale and its prologue pre-date the composition of the *Canterbury Tales*.⁷⁶ Although it is uniformly attributed to the Second Nun in surviving manuscripts, it is not clear if Chaucer himself assigned it to her, or whether this was the work of a later scribe. But regardless of whether he did or not, the ascription is significant and makes sense in contemporary terms because of the observable connection between hagiography (especially the lives of female saints) and women readers, both lay and religious. For example the nunnery of Tarrant Crawford in Dorset is associated with a number of versions of the life of another virgin martyr, St Margaret of Antioch: one was painted on the walls of the nuns' church in the fourteenth

century and another was represented in a psalter belonging to them in the following century.⁷⁷ The altarpiece of the Dominican priory at Dartford which dates from about 1400 depicts the Virgin Mary with St Margaret (the co-patrons of the priory), St Katherine of Alexandria, Mary Magdalene, St Catherine of Siena and Dominic.⁷⁸ In the mid-fifteenth-century the Augustinian friar Osbern Bokenham wrote thirteen female saints' lives (including those of Cecilia, Margaret, Mary Magdalene and Katherine) a number of which were requested by or dedicated to named female patrons.⁷⁹ The lives were subsequently anthologised in a single manuscript for an unidentified house of nuns, possibly the Franciscan convent of Aldgate and Denny.⁸⁰ The link between women, hagiography and female saints is also underlined by the 'Prioress's Tale' which recounts a miracle of the Virgin.⁸¹

St Cecilia, like other female saints, displays virtue, intelligence and bravery in confronting and trouncing the evil pagan persecutor who insists that she forswear Christianity or die. The 'Second Nun's Tale' highlights Cecilia's authoritative spiritual status, especially in the explicit identification of her preaching, an activity which was forbidden to women in fact.⁸² Overall the narrative constitutes a dramatisation of female superiority which stands in stark contrast to misogynistic diatribes which denied women any such facility.⁸³ In using the life of Cecilia to flesh out the Second Nun it is vital to acknowledge the status of this narrative (and others like it) as a potential authorisation of women's capacity for spiritual (even social) autonomy and intellectual endeavour.⁸⁴ Indeed, this potential may help to explain the popularity of female saints' lives among female audiences.⁸⁵ Perhaps tellingly, the forthright qualities of female saints were downplayed in fifteenth-century versions of their lives.⁸⁶ For example in Bokenham's translation of the *Legenda Aurea* instead of being teachers and preachers they are more generic models of decorous conduct applicable both to lay women and men; in this transformation they lose much of their radical possibilities.⁸⁷

Arguably this development reflects the same anxieties about the figure of an authoritative woman identified above in relation to the portrait of the Prioress. It also lends significance to the fact that the voice of the Second Nun's prologue is male, the speaker self-identifying as 'I, unworthy son of Eve' (VIII (G): 62). Perhaps the text was simply not edited to take account of its allocation to a female narrator. But, in the light of the admiration noted earlier for a woman who had taken on the properties of a man, this could be interpreted as a performance on the part of the Second Nun indicating that she, like Cecilia, has assumed the rational manliness so clearly lacking in the feminine Prioress, and is thus a worthy successor to her.⁸⁸ Thus Chaucer's depiction of both the Prioress and the Second Nun can be related to

contrasting contemporary responses to representations of female holiness and to the attitudes towards women's capacity for intellectual and social autonomy which they reveal. It is commonplace to use the Wife of Bath as a means of understanding medieval gender ideology and the role of women, but the Prioress's portrait clearly sheds light on the contradictory discourses surrounding female authority.⁸⁹ Moreover, both she and the Second Nun also suggest something of the negotiations between anti-feminist theory and the actualities of everyday life which women had to make in order to wield it.

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¹ 'Power broker' adopted from Valerie G. Spear, *Leadership in Medieval English Nunneries* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005), xii.

² Helen Phillips, *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales: Reading, Fiction, Context* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000), 38.

³ The approach here has been influenced by S.H. Rigby, *Chaucer in Context: Society, Allegory and Gender* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 43-55.

⁴ For an excellent guide to the range of scholarship on the Prioress see Laura F. Hodges, *Chaucer and Clothing: Clerical and Academic Costume in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 29-111; see also Carole M. Meale, 'Women's Piety and Women's Power: Chaucer's Prioress Reconsidered', in A.J. Minnis, Charlotte C. Morse and Thorlac Turville-Petre, eds, *Essays on Ricardian Literature: In*

Honour of J.A. Burrow (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 39-60; for an earlier survey Florence H. Ridley, *The Prioress and the Critics* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1965).

⁵ For 'soft' and 'hard' approaches to the Prioress see Edward I. Condren, 'The Prioress: A Legend of Spirit, a Life of Flesh', *ChR.*, 23 (1989), 192-218, see also Maureen Hourigan, 'Ther Was Also a Nonne, a Prioress', in Laura C. Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin, eds *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales* (Westport: Greenwood, 1996), 38-46.

⁶ Hodges, *Clerical and Academic Costume*, 82-111.

⁷ Hodges, *Clerical and Academic Costume* 30-63; see also Thomas J. Farrell, 'The Prioress's Fair Forehead', *ChR.*, 42 (2007), 211-21; as discussed in Chapter One of this volume (above, pp. 000) her 'smale houndes' (l: 154) are another element which has been subject to varying interpretations.

⁸ E.g. Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales* (second edition; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 29.

⁹ E.g., E.L. Ridsen has recently argued that the Prioress's portrait conveys a lesson about giving up worldly attachments and focusing on the afterlife instead, "'A Revelation of Purgatory" and Chaucer's Prioress', *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 35 (2010), 105-11.

¹⁰ Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 129-31.

¹¹ Cooper, *Canterbury Tales*, 30; also noted by Martin Heale in this volume.

¹² Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, 128, 132; Joel Fredell, 'Late Gothic Portraiture: The Prioress and Philippa', *ChR.*, 23 (1989), 181-91, 183-85 for discussion of the Prioress in relation to Gothic standards of beauty. It is often pointed out the description of the Prioress's table manners derives from the *Romance of the Rose* (Benson, *Riverside Chaucer*,

804). Emaré survives in an early-fifteenth-century manuscript, for the full text see *The Middle English Breton Lays*, eds Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), available online

<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/emarefrm.htm> (consulted 23 June 2013).

¹³ Hodges, *Clerical and Academic Costume*, 29, and explored by her at length, 29-111.

¹⁴ For examples of differing approaches to the ‘Prioress’s Tale’: Albert B. Friedman, ‘The “Prioress’s Tale” and Chaucer’s Anti-Semitism’, *ChR.*, 9 (1974), 118-29; Louise O.

Fradenburg, ‘Criticism, Anti-Semitism and the “Prioress’s Tale”’, *Exemplaria* 1 (1989), 69-115; Helen Barr emphasises that both orthodox and heterodox readings can be drawn from the tale and that this was probably as evident to Chaucer’s contemporary audiences as it is to modern critics, ‘Religious Practice in Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale: Rabbit and/or Duck’, *Studies in the Ages of Chaucer* 32 (2010), 39-65.

¹⁵ E.g. Meale, ‘Women’s Piety’, 53-5.

¹⁶ Meale, ‘Women’s Piety’, 53-5 for the identification of class as central to Chaucer’s satire against the Prioress.

¹⁷ This approach discussed and critiqued by Meale, ‘Women’s Piety’ 55; Hardy Long Frank, ‘Seeing the Prioress Whole’, *ChR.*, 25 (1991), 229-37, at 229-30; Karma Lochrie,

Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn’t (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 47-70, especially 60.

¹⁸ Cooper, *Canterbury Tales*, 38.

¹⁹ Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, 133; C. David Benson, ‘The *Canterbury Tales*: personal drama or experiments in poetic variety?’ in Piero Boitani and Jill Mann, eds,

The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer (Second edition; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 127-42, at 130-1.

²⁰ Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275-1535* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), especially 42-96; 499-562.

²¹ Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, 17-54; 128-36 and essays on the Monk and Friar in this volume.

²² 'Why I Can't Be a Nun', in see *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*, ed., James Dean (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), available online <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/nonunfrm.htm> (consulted 23 June 2013).

²³ 'Why I Can't Be a Nun', ll. 37-9.

²⁴ William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-Text*, ed., A.V.C. Schmidt (London: Dent, new edition 1987), V: 156, 161-3.

²⁵ Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, 128-30. The same discourse informs the decree *Periculoso*, discussed below. For a survey of the nun in medieval literature, see Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, 499-562.

²⁶ For edited examples with parallel translation see *Visitations of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln: Injunctions and Other Documents from the Registers of Richard Flemyng and William Gray Bishops of Lincoln A.D. 1420 to A.D. 1436*, 3 vols, ed. A. Hamilton Thompson, Lincolnshire Record Society, Volumes 7 (1914), 14 (1918), and 21 (1929).

²⁷ Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, 161-236, especially 203-on the for mismanagement of resources by heads of houses.

²⁸ This is part of a wider historiographical narrative of decline which encompasses monasticism more widely, for discussion and rebuttal see Martin Heale, *Monasticism in Late Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 1-74.

²⁹ Heale also makes this point in relation to the Monk in this volume.

³⁰ E.g. Robert Gilchrist and Marilyn Oliva, *Religious Women in East Anglia: History and Archaeology c. 1100-1540* (Norwich: University of East Anglia, 1993); Roberta Gilchrist,

Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women (London: Routledge, 1993); Paul Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality in Late Medieval English Society: The Dominican Priory of Dartford* (York: York Medieval Press, 2001); Spear, *Leadership*. These studies do not claim that all nunneries were successful and well run, but contend that those which were not were in the minority.

³¹ Lee, *Nunneries*, 58-66; Oliva, *Convent and Community*, 38-40, 45, 48-51; 53-61; Gilchrist and Oliva, *Religious Women*, 51-6, 58-67.

³² Spear, *Leadership*, 152-5, she notes the voyeuristic interest in the sexual conduct of an all-female community revealed by contemporary parallels drawn between convents and brothels (155).

³³ Felicity Riddy, “‘Women Talking About the Things of God’: A Late-Medieval Sub-culture”, in Carol M. Meale, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain 1150-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 104-27 (where this shared literary culture is identified as a target for Chaucer’s satire in the Prioress’s portrait); David N. Bell, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995); David N. Bell, ‘What Nuns Read: The State of the Question’, in James G. Clark, *The Culture of English Monasticism* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), 113-33; for discussion of this aspect of English nuns’ lives within a broader European context see V. Blanton, V. O’Mara and P. Stoop, eds, *Nuns’ Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Hull Dialogue* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

³⁴ For detailed discussion of the ‘ideological scripts’ for nuns as ‘at once constraining and empowering’ see Nancy Bradley Warren, *Spiritual Economies: Female Monasticism in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 3 and passim; see also Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture: Virginité and its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 189-256.

³⁵ E.g. Meale, 'Women's Piety', 44- 51 for Chaucer's 'partial' depiction of female monasticism in the Prioress and the contention that he was well aware that she was not representative of 'resourceful and independent' nuns who displayed 'a determination to direct their own religious lives' (45).

³⁶ Henry Asgar Kelly, 'A Neo-Revisionist Look at Chaucer's Nuns', *ChR.*, 31 (1996), 115-32 (128); Hourigan also draws on revisionist approaches to female monasticism to argue that the Prioress is a 'good' nun (Hourigan, 'Ther Was Also a None', *passim*); for another positive re-reading of the Prioress which focuses on her French speaking see W. Rothwell, 'Stratford at Bowe Revisited', *ChR.*, 36 (2001), 184-207.

³⁷ For further critique of such approaches to the Prioress see Thomas Hahn, 'The Performance of Gender in the Prioress', *Chaucer Yearbook*, 1 (1992), 111-34.

³⁸ E.g. by Hourigan, 'Ther Was Also a None', 40-3.

³⁹ The heads of the largest and richest female abbeys (such as Shaftesbury or Romsey) were abbesses, prioresses were heads of lesser, smaller houses, but their roles were essentially the same. Spear, *Leadership*, 20-6 for the election process.

⁴⁰ Spear, *Leadership*, 125-6, quotation at 186; see also Kimm Perkins-Curran, "'Quhat Say Ye Now, My Lady Prioress? How Have Ye Usit Your Office, Can Ye Ges?'" Politics, Power and Realities of the Office of a Prioress in Her Community in Late Medieval Scotland', in Janet Burton and Karen Stöber, eds, *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008), 124-41.

⁴¹ Spear, *Leadership*, 217-8 for a translation of the entire text; see also Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives*, 201-3.

⁴² Spear contends that this portrait could have been known outside the house, possibly by those responsible for supervising convents (Spear, *Leadership*, 117).

⁴³ Bell, *What Nuns Read*, pp. 7-10 for a useful survey of the range of income and expenditure which Prioresses would have to administer, see also 12-3.

⁴⁴ Spear, *Leadership*, 91, 125-6.

⁴⁵ Oliva, *Convent and Community*, 84-102 for the variety and hierarchy of these roles, see also 106-9. There could also be other interests governing the appointment; particular families held something of a monopoly on the top job in some houses (Spear, *Leadership*, 36-7).

⁴⁶ Oliva, *Convent and Community*, 109.

⁴⁷ Fredell, 'Late Gothic Portraiture', 187.

⁴⁸ Spear, *Leadership*, 155-7; Oliva, *Convent and Community*, 27-33.

⁴⁹ Spear, *Leadership*, 118, 126-7, 188, 191. Much of what detail exists tends to recount failure to perform the role properly, as already discussed.

⁵⁰ 'Female lord' is a more appropriate term than 'lady' in this context because while 'lady' is the feminine equivalent of lord, and some aristocratic women did exercise the power and responsibilities of a lord, such authority was not inherent to 'ladyship' in the way that it was to lordship. The term also encapsulates the contemporary notion that a woman adopting a lord's position was held to have assumed masculine qualities in so doing (see further below).

⁵¹ Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 806.

⁵² E.g. Cooper's contention that the Prioress's portrait essentially rests on the distance between the woman and her office (*Canterbury Tales*, 39).

⁵³ Oliva, *Convent and Community*, 85.

⁵⁴ Spear, *Leadership*, 147.

⁵⁵ Spear, *Leadership*, 40 for these qualities being taken into account in the election of a Prioress.

⁵⁶ Mary Dockray-Miller, *Saints Edith and Æthelthryth: Princesses, Miracle Workers, and their Late Medieval Audience* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009); there is no direct evidence of

authorship and it is possible that this text was written by one of the nuns. Earlier examples of saints' lives definitely written by nuns in English convents are known, e.g. Clemence of Barking's late twelfth-century life of St Katherine of Alexandria (Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives*, 227-45).

⁵⁷ Dockray-Miller, *Saints Edith and Æthelthryth*, p. 110, ll. 1186-8, 1183-4, 1195-6, p. 112, ll. 1205-16, 1223-4.

⁵⁸ Dockray-Miller, *Saints Edith and Æthelthryth*, 18.

⁵⁹ Hodges, *Clerical Costume*, 68-72.

⁶⁰ Dockray-Miller, *Saints Edith and Æthelthryth*, 18, where she also speculates that it may have been intended 'as something of a marketing device for the professed life at Wilton.'

⁶¹ The lives of Anglo-Saxon nun saints, most of them superiors, were increasingly written in Middle English in the later medieval period. For a comprehensive survey, see Kerryn Olsen, 'Questions of Identity: Rewriting Anglo-Saxon Female Saints in Post-Conquest England c. 1066- c. 1500' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Auckland (2009)).

⁶² Margaret R. Miles, "'Becoming Male": Women Martyrs and Ascetics', in her *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 53-77

⁶³ Alcuin Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 60.

⁶⁴ Spear, *Leadership*, 217.

⁶⁵ As also observed by Spear, *Leadership*, 186.

⁶⁶ Blamires, *Woman Defamed*, passim, for examples of anti-feminist diatribe and of texts which seek to counter this.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth M. Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: Periculoso and its Commentators, 1298-1545* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997).

⁶⁸ Spear, *Leadership*, 16-7.

⁶⁹ Makowski, *Canon Law*, 19-21.

⁷⁰ Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, 352. The bishop returned the next day and imposed a penance on the four ringleaders, and on the whole convent for consenting to their actions. He subsequently threatened them with major excommunication for failing to keep the decree.

⁷¹ Elizabeth Makowski, *English Nuns and the Law in the Middle Ages: Cloistered Nuns and Their Lawyers, 1293-1540* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), 11-28.

⁷² Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 137-52.

⁷³ Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, 138-9; this also relates to arguments about the anxieties aroused by nuns' access to vernacular theology, see Warren, *Spiritual Economies*, 31-54.

⁷⁴ Marsha L. Dutton, 'Chaucer's Two Nuns', in Benjamin Thompson, ed., *Monasteries and Society in Medieval Britain* (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1999), 296-311; Rebecca Stephens, 'Another Nonne With Her Hadde She', in Lambdin and Lambdin, *Chaucer's Pilgrims*, 47-54, which takes a traditional approach to the failings of later medieval nuns.

⁷⁵ Lynn Staley, 'Chaucer and the Postures of Sanctity', in David Aers and Lynn Staley, eds., *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 179-259 (198-213); Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 145-73.

⁷⁶ Benson, *Riverside Chaucer*, 942.

⁷⁷ Jenny C. Bledsoe, 'The Cult of St Margaret of Antioch at Tarrant Crawford: The Saint's Didactic Body and its Resonance for Religious Women', *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 39 (2013), 173-206.

⁷⁸ For a reproduction see Christopher Norton, David Park and Paul Binski, *Dominican Painting in East Anglia: The Thornham Parva Retable and the Musée de Cluny Frontal* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1987), 37-8, pl. 61; also discussed by Lee, *Nunneries*, 156-7.

⁷⁹ For the full text: *Legendys of Hooly Wummen by Osbern Bokenham*, ed., Mary S. Serjeantson, E.E.T.S., 206 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938); for discussion of the named patrons see A. S. G. Edwards, 'The Transmission and Audience of Osbern Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*', in A. J. Minnis, ed., *Late-Medieval Religious Texts and their Transmission: Essays in Honour of A. I. Doyle* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994), 157-67.

⁸⁰ Edwards, 'The Transmission and Audience of Osbern Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*', p. 157.

⁸¹ Meale, 'Women's Piety', 58-9 for connections between miracles of the Virgin and female readers.

⁸² Sherry L. Reames, 'The Sources of Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale', *Modern Philology*, 76 (1978-79), 111-35; Sherry L. Reames, 'A Recent Discovery Concerning the Sources of Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale', *Modern Philology*, 87 (1990), 337-61; Alcuin Blamires, 'Women and Preaching in Medieval Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Saints' Lives', *Viator*, 26 (1995), 135-52.

⁸³ Christine de Pizan used female saints as part of her response to misogynistic discourse, assigning them pride of place in her 1405 work, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans., Rosalind Brown-Grant (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), pp. 201-37. For the significance of St Cecilia to the twelfth-century recluse Christina of Markyate and to the female mystic Julian of Norwich, who was a direct contemporary of Chaucer's, see Riddy, 'Women Talking', 105.

⁸⁴ Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 98-111; Katherine J. Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000), 215-56; Christine Walsh, 'Erat Abigail Mulier Prudentissima: Gilbert of Tournai and Attitudes to Female Sanctity in the Thirteenth Century', *Studies in Church History*, 47 (2011), 171-80.

⁸⁵ This is not to say that men had no interest in these narratives, but a particular connection with female readers emerges from the contemporary sources and has been explored by a number of studies, among them Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives* and Sanok, *Her Life Historical*; see also Veronica O'Mara and Virginia Blanton, 'Cambridge University Library, Additional MS 2604: Repackaging Female Saints' Lives for the Fifteenth-Century English Nun', *The Journal of the Early Book Society for the Study of Manuscripts and Printing History*, 13 (2010), 237-47. The most popular female saints were multivalent in their meaning and function, which helps to explain their widespread appeal, see Virginia Blanton, *Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St Æthelthryth in Medieval England, 695-1615* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

⁸⁶ Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, 112-46.

⁸⁷ Simon Horobin, 'Politics, Patronage and Piety in the Work of Osbern Bokenham', *Speculum*, 82 (2007), 932-49.

⁸⁸ The argument here has been influenced by the analysis of the Second Nun's 'theatrical cross-dressing' in Sanok, *Her Life Historical*, 170-1.

⁸⁹ Gail Berkeley Sherman, 'Saints, Nuns, and Speech in the Canterbury Tales', in Renate Blumenfeld-Kosiniski and Timea Szell, eds, *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 136-60; notes at 139 'the critical displacement of

gender issues [from the Prioress] onto the Wife of Bath'; see also Meale, 'Women's Piety', 41, n. 7 for the lack of explicitly feminist scholarship on the Prioress.