MEDIEVAL PEOPLE

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"I counsel thee, shut not thy heart nor thy library."
—CHARLES LAMB

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And al was conscience and tendre herte
Ful semely hir wimpel pinched was:
Hir nose tretys; her eyen greye as glas;
Hir mouth ful smal, and ther-to softe and reed;
But sikerly she hadde a fair foreheed;
It was almost a spanne brood, I trowe;
For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe.
Ful fetis was hir cloke, as I was war.
Of smal coral aboute hir arm she bar
A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene;
And ther-on heng a broche of gold ful shene,
On which ther was first write a crowned A,
And after, *Amor vincit omnia!*

— GEOFFREY CHAUCER
Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*

EVERY ONE KNOWS Chaucer's description of the Prioress, Madame Eglentyne, who rode with that very motley and talkative company on the way to Canterbury. There is no portrait in his gallery which has given rise to more diverse comment among critics. One interprets it as a cutting attack on the worldliness of the Church; another thinks that Chaucer meant to draw a charming and sympathetic picture of womanly gentleness; one says that it is a caricature, another an ideal; and an American professor even finds in it a psychological study of thwarted maternal instinct, apparently because Madame Eglentyne was fond of little dogs and told a story about a schoolboy. The mere historian may be excused from following these vagaries. To him Chaucer's Prioress, like Chaucer's monk and Chaucer's friar, will simply be one more instance of the almost photographic accuracy of the poet's observation. The rippling undercurrent of satire is always there; but it is Chaucer's own peculiar satire – mellow, amused, uncondemning, the most subtle kind of satire, which does not depend upon exaggeration. The literary critic has only Chaucer's words and his own heart, or sometimes (low be it spoken) his own desire to be original, by which to guide his judgement. But the historian knows; he has all sorts of historical sources in which to study nunneries, and there he meets Chaucer's Prioress at every turn. Above all, he has the bishop's registers.

For a long time historians foolishly imagined that kings and wars

and parliaments and the jury system alone were history; they liked chronicles and Acts of Parliament, and it did not strike them to go and look in dusty episcopal archives for the big books in which medieval bishops entered up the letters which they wrote and all the complicated business of running their dioceses. But when historians did think of looking there, they found a mine of priceless information about almost every side of social and ecclesiastical life. They had to dig for it of course, for almost all that is worth knowing has to be mined like precious metals out of a rock; and for one nugget the miner often has to grub for days underground in a mass of dullness; and when he has got it he has to grub in his own heart, or else he will not understand it. The historians found fine gold in the bishops' registers, when once they persuaded themselves that it was not beneath their dignity to grub there. They found descriptions of vicarages, with all their furniture and gardens; they found marriage disputes; they found wills full of entertaining legacies to people dead hundreds of years ago; they found excommunications; they found indulgences to men for relieving the poor, repairing roads, and building bridges, long before there was any poor law, or any county council; they found trials for heresy and witchcraft; they found accounts of miracles worked at the tombs of saints and even of some quite unsaintly people, such as Thomas of Lancaster, and Edward II, and Simon de Montfort; they found lists of travelling expenses when the bishops rode round their dioceses; in one they even found a minute account of the personal appearance of Queen Philippa, then a little girl at her father's Court at Hainault, whom the Bishop of Exeter had been sent to inspect, in order to see if she were pretty and good enough to marry Edward III: she was nine years old, and the bishop said that her second teeth were whiter than her first teeth and that her nose was broad but not snub, which was reassuring for Edward.[1] Last, but not least, the historians found a multitude of documents about monasteries, and among these documents they found visitation records, and among visitation records they found Chaucer's Prioress, smiling full simple and coy, fair forehead, well-pinched wimple, necklace, little dogs, and all, as though she had stepped into a stuffy register by mistake for the *Canterbury Tales* and was longing to get out again.

This was the reason that Madame Eglentyne got into the register. In the Middle Ages all the nunneries of England, and a great many of the monasteries, used to be visited at intervals by the bishop of their diocese – or by somebody sent by him – in order to see whether they were behaving properly. It was rather like the periodical visitation of a school by one of Her Majesty's inspectors, only what happened was very different. When Her Majesty's inspector comes he does not sit in state in the hall, and call all the inmates in front of him one after another, from the head mistress to the smallest child in the first form, and invite them to say in what way they think the school is not being properly run, and what complaints they have to make against their mistresses and which girl habitually breaks the rules – all breathed softly and privately into his ear, with no one to overhear them. But when the bishop came to visit a nunnery, that is precisely what happened. First of all, he sent a letter to say he was coming, and to bid the nuns prepare for him. Then he came, with his clerks and a learned official or two, and was met solemnly by the prioress and all the nuns, and preached a sermon in their church, and was entertained, perhaps, to dinner. And then he prepared to examine them, and one by one they came before him, in order of rank, beginning with the prioress, and what they had to do was to tell tales about each other. He wanted to find out if the prioress were ruling well, and if the services were properly performed, and if the finances were in good order, and if discipline were maintained; and if any nun had a complaint, then was the time to make it.

And the nuns were full of complaints. A modern schoolgirl would go pale with horror over their capacity for tale-bearing. If one nun had boxed her sister's ears, if another had cut church, if another were too much given to entertaining friends, if another went out without a licence, if another had run away with a wandering fluteplayer, the bishop was sure to hear about it; that is, unless the whole convent were in a disorderly state, and the nuns had made a compact to wink at each other's peccadilloes; and not to betray them to the bishop, which occasionally happened. And if the prioress were at all unpopular he was quite certain to hear all about her. 'She fares splendidly in her own room and never invites us,' says one nun;

'She has favourites,' says another, 'and when she makes corrections she passes lightly over those whom she likes, and speedily punishes those whom she dislikes'; 'She is a fearful scold,' says a third; 'She dresses more like a secular person than a nun, and wears rings and necklaces,' says a fourth; 'She goes out riding to see her friends far too often,' says a fifth; 'She-is-a-very-bad-business-woman-and-she-has-let-the-house-get-into-debt-and-the-church-is-falling about-our-ears-and-we-don't-get-enough-food-and-she-hasn't-given-us-any-clothes-for-two-years-and-she-has-sold-woods-and farms-without-your-licence-and-she-has-pawned-our-best-set-of spoons; and no wonder, when she never consults us in any business as she ought to do.' They go on like that for pages, and the bishop must often have wanted to put his fingers in his ears and shout to them to stop; especially as the prioress had probably spent half an hour, for her part, in telling him how disobedient and ill-tempered, and thoroughly badly behaved the nuns were.

All these tales the bishop's clerk solemnly wrote down in a big book, and when the examination was over the bishop summoned all the nuns together again. And if they had answered 'All is well', as they sometimes did, or only mentioned trivial faults, he commended them and went his way; and if they had shown that things really were in a bad way, he investigated particular charges and scolded the culprits and ordered them to amend, and when he got back to his palace, or the manor where he was staying, he wrote out a set of injunctions, based on the complaints, and saying exactly how things were to be improved; and of these injunctions one copy was entered in his register and another was sent by hand to the nuns, who were supposed to read it aloud at intervals and to obey everything in it. We have in many bishops' registers these lists of injunctions, copied into them by the bishops' clerks, and in some, notably in a splendid fifteenth-century Lincoln register, belonging to the good bishop Alnwick, we have also the evidence of the nuns, just as it was taken down from their chattering mouths, and these are the most human and amusing of all medieval records. It is easy to see what important historical documents visitation reports are, especially in a diocese like Lincoln, which possesses an almost unbroken series of registers, ranging over the three centuries before

the Dissolution, so that one can trace the whole history of some of the nunneries by the successive visitations.

Let us see what light the registers will throw upon Madame Eglentyne, before Chaucer observed her mounting her horse outside the Tabard Inn. Doubtless she first came to the nunnery when she was quite a little girl, because girls counted as grown up when they were fifteen in the Middle Ages; they could be married out of hand at twelve, and they could become nuns for ever at fourteen. Probably Eglentyne's father had three other daughters to marry, each with a dowry, and a gay young spark of a son, who spent a lot of money on fashionable suits.

> Embroidered . . . as it were a mede
> All ful of fresshe flowers white and rede.

So he thought he had better settle the youngest at once; and he got together a dowry (it was rarely possible to get into a nunnery without one, though Church law really forbade anything except voluntary offerings), and, taking Eglentyne by the hand one summer day, he popped her into a nunnery a few miles off, which had been founded by his ancestors. We may even know what it cost him; it was rather a select, aristocratic house, and he had to pay an entrance fee of £200 in modern money; and then he had to give Eglentyne her new habit and a bed, and some other furniture; and he had to make a feast on the day she became a nun, and invite all the nuns and all his own friends; and he had to tip the friar, who preached the sermon; and, altogether, it was a great affair.[2] But the feast would not come at once, because Eglentyne would have to remain a novice for some years, until she was old enough to take the vows. So she would stay in the convent and be taught how to sing and to read, and to talk French of the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe with the other novices. Perhaps she was the youngest, for girls often did not enter the convent until they were old enough to decide for themselves whether they wanted to be nuns; but there were certainly some other quite tiny novices learning their lessons; and occasionally there would be a little girl like the one whose sad fate is recorded in a dull law-book, shut up in a nunnery by a wicked stepfather who wanted her inheritance (a nun could not inherit

land, because she was supposed to be dead to the world), and told by the nuns that the devil would fly away with her if she tried to set foot outside the door.[3] However, Eglentyne had a sunny disposition and liked life in the nunnery, and had a natural aptitude for the pretty table manners which she learnt there, as well as for talking French, and though she was not at all prim and liked the gay clothes and pet dogs which she used to see at home in her mother's bower, still she had no hesitation at all about taking the veil when she was fifteen, and indeed she rather liked the fuss that was made of her, and being called *Madame* or *Dame*, which was the courtesy title always given to a nun.

The years passed and Eglentyne's life jogged along peacefully enough behind the convent walls. The great purpose for which the nunneries existed, and which most of them fulfilled not unworthily, was the praise of God. Eglentyne spent a great deal of her time singing and praying in the convent church, and, as we know,

> Ful wel she song the service divyne,
> Entuned in hir nose ful semely.

The nuns had seven monastic offices to say every day. About 2 a.m. the night office was said; they all got out of bed when the bell rang, and went down in the cold and the dark to the church choir and said Matins, followed immediately by Lauds. Then they went back to bed, just as the dawn was breaking in the sky, and slept again for three hours, and then got up for good at six o'clock and said Prime. After that there followed Tierce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline, spread at intervals through the day. The last service, compline, was said at 7 p.m. in winter, and at 8 p.m. in summer, after which the nuns were supposed to go straight to bed in the dorter, in which connexion one Nun's Rule ordains that 'None shall push up against another wilfully, nor spit upon the stairs going up and down, but if they tread it out forthwith'![4] They had in all about eight hours' sleep, broken in the middle by the night service. They had three meals, a light repast of bread and beer after prime in the morning, a solid dinner to the accompaniment of reading aloud in the middle of the day, and a short supper immediately after vespers at 5 or 6 p.m.

From 12 to 5 p.m. in winter and from 1 to 6 p.m. in summer Eglentyne and her sisters were supposed to devote themselves to manual or brain work, interspersed with a certain amount of sober and godly recreation. She would spin, or embroider vestments with the crowned monogram M of the Blessed Virgin in blue and gold thread, or make little silken purses for her friends and finely sewn bands for them to bind round their arms after a bleeding. She would read too, in her psalter or in such saints' lives as the convent possessed, written in French or English; for her Latin was weak, though she could construe *Amor vincit omnia*. Perhaps her convent took in a few little schoolgirls to learn their letters and good manners with the nuns, and when she grew older she helped to teach them to read and sing; for though they were happy, they did not receive a very extensive education from the good sisters. In the summer Eglentyne was sometimes allowed to work in the convent garden, or even to go out haymaking with the other nuns; and came back round-eyed to confide in her confessor that she had seen the cellaress returning therefrom seated behind the chaplain on his nag,[5] and had thought what fun it must be to jog behind stout Dan John.

Except for certain periods of relaxation strict silence was supposed to be observed in the convent for a large part of the day, and if Eglentyne desired to communicate with her sisters, she was urged to do so by means of signs. The persons who drew up the lists of signs which were in use in medieval monastic houses, however, combined a preternatural ingenuity with an extremely exiguous sense of humour, and the sort of dumb pandemonium which went on at Eglentyne's dinner table must often have been more mirth-provoking than speech. The sister who desired fish would 'wag her hands displayed sidelings in manner of a fish tail'; she who wanted milk would 'draw her left little finger in manner of milking'; for mustard one would 'hold her nose in the upper part of her right fist and rub it'; another for salt would 'fillip with her right thumb and forefinger over the left thumb'; another desirous of wine would 'move her forefinger up and down the end of her thumb afore her eye'; and the guilty sacristan, struck by the thought that she had not provided incense for the Mass, would 'put her two fingers into

her nostrils'. In one such table drawn up for nuns there are no less than 106 signs, and on the whole it is not surprising that the rule of the same nuns enjoins that 'it is never lawful to use them without some reason and profitable need, for oft-times more hurt hath an evil word, and more offence it may be to God'.[6]

The nuns, of course, would not have been human if they had not sometimes grown a little weary of all these services and this silence; for the religious life was not, nor was it intended to be, an easy one. It was not a mere means of escape from work and responsibility. In the early golden age of monasticism only men and women with a vocation, that is to say a real genius for monastic life, entered convents. Moreover, when there they worked very hard with hand and brain, as well as with soul, and so they got variety of occupation, which is as good as a holiday. The basis of wise St Benedict's Rule was a nicely adjusted combination of variety with regularity; for he knew human nature. Thus monks and nuns did not find the services monotonous, and indeed regarded them as by far the best part of the day. But in the later Middle Ages, when Chaucer lived, young people had begun to enter monastic houses rather as a profession than as a vocation. Many truly spiritual men and women still took the vows, but with them came others who were little suited to monastic life, and who lowered its standard, because it was hard and uncongenial to them. Eglentyne became a nun because her father did not want the trouble and expense of finding her a husband, and because being a nun was about the only career for a well-born lady who did not marry. Moreover, by this time, monks and nuns had grown more lazy, and did little work with their hands and still less with their heads, particularly in nunneries, where the early tradition of learning had died out and where many nuns could hardly understand the Latin in which their services were written. The result was that monastic life began to lose that essential variety which St Benedict had designed for it, and as a result the regularity sometimes became irksome, and the series of services degenerated into a mere routine of peculiar monotony, which many of the singers could no longer keep alive with spiritual fervour. Thus sometimes (it must not be imagined that this happened in all or even in the majority of houses) the services became empty forms, to be hurried

through with scant devotion and occasionally with scandalous irreverence. It was the almost inevitable reaction from too much routine.

Carelessness in the performance of the monastic hours was an exceedingly common fault during the later Middle Ages, though the monks were always worse about it than the nuns. Sometimes they 'cut' the services. Sometimes they behaved with the utmost levity, as at Exeter in 1330, where the canons giggled and joked and quarrelled during the services and dropped hot candle wax from the upper stalls on to the shaven heads of the singers in the stalls below![7] Sometimes they came late to matins, in the small hours after midnight. This fault was common in nunneries, for the nuns always would insist on having private drinkings and gossipings in the evening after compline, instead of going straight to bed, as the rule demanded – a habit which did not conduce to wakefulness at 1 a.m. Consequently they were somewhat sleepy at matins and found an almost Johnsonian difficulty in getting up early. Wise St Benedict foresaw the difficulty, when he wrote in his rule: 'When they rise for the Divine Office, let them gently encourage one another, because of the excuses made by those that are drowsy.'[8] At the nunnery of Stainfield in 1519 the bishop discovered that half an hour sometimes elapsed between the last stroke of the bell and the beginning of the service, and that some of the nuns did not sing, but dozed, partly because they had not enough candles, but chiefly because they went late to bed;[9] and whoever is without sin among us, let him cast the first stone! There was a tendency also among both monks and nuns to slip out before the end of the service on any good or bad excuse: they had to see after the dinner or the guest-house, their gardens needed weeding, or they did not feel well. But the most common fault of all was to gabble through the services as quickly as they could in order to get them over. They left out the syllables at the beginning and end of words, they omitted the dipsalma or pause between two verses, so that one side of the choir was beginning the second half before the other side had finished the first; they skipped sentences, they mumbled and slurred what should have been 'entuned in their nose ful semely', and altogether they made a terrible mess of the stately plainsong.

So prevalent was the fault of gabbling that the Father of Evil was obliged to charter a special Devil called Tittivillus, whose sole business it was to collect all these dropped syllables and carry them back to his master in a big bag. In one way or another, we have a good deal of information about him, for he was always letting himself be seen by holy men, who generally had a sharp eye for devils. One Latin rhyme distinguishes carefully between the contents of his sack: 'These are they who wickedly corrupt the holy psalms: the dangler, the gasper, the leaper, the galloper, the dragger, the mumbler, the fore-skipper, the fore-runner and the over-leaper: Tittivillus collecteth the fragments of these men's words.'[10] Indeed, a holy Cistercian abbot once interviewed the poor little devil himself and heard about his alarming industry; this is the story as it is told in *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*, written for the delectation of the nuns of Syon in the fifteenth century: 'We read of a holy Abbot of the order of Citeaux that while he stood in the choir at matins he saw a fiend that had a long and great poke hanging about his neck and went about the choir from one to another and waited busily after all letters and syllables and words and failings that any made; and them he gathered diligently and put them in his poke. And when he came before the Abbot, waiting if aught had escaped him that he might have gotten and put in his bag, the Abbot was astonied and afeard of the foulness and misshape of him and said unto him: What art thou? And he answered and said, I am a poor devil and my name is Tittivillus and I do mine office that is committed unto me. And what is thine office? said the Abbot. He answered: I must each day, he said, bring my master a thousand pokes full of failings and of negligences and syllables and words, that are done in your order in reading and singing and else I must be sore beaten.'[11] But there is no reason to suppose that he often got his beating, though one may be sure that Madame Eglentyne, busily chanting through her nose, never gave him the slightest help. In his spare moments, when he was not engaged in picking up those unconsidered trifles which the monks let fall from the psalms, Tittivillus used to fill up odd corners of his sack with the idle talk of people who gossiped in church; and he also sat up aloft and collected all the high notes of vain tenors, who sang to their own

glory, instead of to the glory of God, and pitched the chants three notes higher than the cracked voices of their elders could rise.

But the monotony of convent life sometimes did more than make the nuns unconscious contributors to Tittivillus's sack. It sometimes played havoc with their tempers. The nuns were not chosen for convent life because they were saints. They were no more immune from tantrums than was the Wife of Bath, who was out of all charity when other village wives went into church before her; and sometimes they got terribly on each others' nerves. Readers of *Piers Plowman* will remember that when the seven deadly sins come in, Wrath tells how he was cook to the prioress of a convent and, says he,

> Of wycked wordes I, Wrath . here wordes imade,
> Til 'thow lixte' and 'thow lixte' . lopen oute at ones,
> And eyther hitte other . vnder the cheke;
> Hadde thei had knyves, by Cryst . her eyther had killed other.

To be sure, it is not often that we hear of anything so bad as that fifteenth-century prioress, who used to drag her nuns round the choir by their veils in the middle of the service, screaming 'Liar!' and 'Harlot!' at them;[12] or that other sixteenth-century lady who used to kick them and hit them on the head with her fists and put them in the stocks.[13] All prioresses were not 'ful plesaunt and amiable of port', or stately in their manner. The records of monastic visitations show that bad temper and petty bickering sometimes broke the peace of convent life.

But we must be back at Eglentyne. She went on living for ten or twelve years as a simple nun, and she sang the services very nicely and had a sweet temper and pretty manners and was very popular. Moreover, she was of good birth; Chaucer tells us a great deal about her beautiful behaviour at table and her courtesy, which shows that she was a lady born and bred; indeed, his description of this might have been taken straight out of one of the feudal books of deportment for girls; even her personal beauty – straight nose, grey eyes, and little red mouth – conforms to the courtly standard. The convents were apt to be rather snobbish; ladies and rich burgesses' daughters got into them, but poor and low-born

girls never. So the nuns probably said to each other that what with her pretty ways and her good temper and her aristocratic connexions, wouldn't it be a good thing to choose her for prioress when the old prioress died? And so they did, and she had been a prioress for some years when Chaucer met her. At first it was very exciting, and Eglentyne liked being called 'Mother' by nuns who were older than herself, and having a private room to sit in and all the visitors to entertain. But she soon found that it was not by any means all a bed of roses; for there was a great deal of business to be done by the head of a house – not only looking after the internal discipline of the convent, but also superintending money matters and giving orders to the bailiffs on her estates, and seeing that the farms were paying well, and the tithes coming in to the churches which belonged to the nunnery, and that the Italian merchants who came to buy the wool off her sheeps' backs gave a good price for it. In all this business she was supposed to take the advice of the nuns, meeting in the chapter-house, where all business was transacted. I am afraid that sometimes Eglentyne used to think that it was much better to do things by herself, and so she would seal documents with the convent seal without telling them. One should always distrust the head of an office or school or society who says, with a self-satisfied air, that it is much more satisfactory to do the thing herself than to depute it to the proper subordinates; it either means that she is an autocrat, or else that she cannot organize. Madame Eglentyne was rather an autocrat, in a good-natured sort of way, and besides she hated bother. So she did not always consult the nuns; and I fear too (after many researches into that past of hers which Chaucer forgot to mention) that she often tried to evade rendering an account of income and expenditure to them every year, as she was supposed to do.

The nuns, of course, objected to this; and the first time the bishop came on his rounds they complained about it to him. They said, too, that she was a bad business woman and got into debt; and that when she was short of money she used to sell woods belonging to the convent, and promise annual pensions to various people in return for lump sums down, and lease out farms for a long time at low rates, and do various other things by which the convent

would lose in the long run. And besides, she had let the roof of the church get into such ill repair that rain came through the holes on to their heads when they were singing; and would my lord bishop please to look at the holes in their clothes and tell her to provide them with new ones? Other wicked prioresses used sometimes even to pawn the plate and jewels of the convent, to get money for their own private purposes. But Eglentyne was not at all wicked or dishonest, though she was a bad manager; the fact was that she had no head for figures. I am *sure* that she had no head for figures; you have only got to read Chaucer's description of her to know that she was not a mathematician. Besides the nuns were exaggerating: their clothes were not in holes, only just a little threadbare. Madame Eglentyne was far too fastidious to allow ragged clothes about her; and as to the roof of the church, she had meant to save enough money to have some tiles put on to it, but it really *was* very hard to make two ends meet in a medieval nunnery, especially if (as I repeat) you had no head for figures. Probably the bishop saw how the land lay, so he ordered her never to do anything without consulting the convent, and he shut up the common seal in a box with three different sorts of locks, to which Madame Eglentyne and two of the senior nuns had the keys, so that she could not open it alone and so could not seal any business agreement without their consent. And he ordered her to keep accounts and present them every year (there are bundles of her accounts still preserved in the Record Office). Finally he deputed a neighbouring rector to act as custodian of the business affairs of the house so that she should always have his help. Things went better after that.

Eglentyne, it seems, was never really interested in business, and was quite pleased to have her time taken up with looking after internal affairs and entertaining visitors, with an occasional jaunt outside to see how the estates were getting on. And she began to find that she could lead a much freer and gayer life now that she was a prioress; for the prioress of a convent had rooms of her own, instead of sharing the common dormitory and refectory; sometimes she even had a sort of little house with a private kitchen. The abbess of one great nunnery at Winchester in the sixteenth century had her own staff to look after her, a cook, and an under cook, and a house-

maid and a gentlewoman to wait upon her, like any great lady in the world, and never dined with the nuns except on state occasions. But a superior generally had with her one nun to act as her companion and assist her in the choir and be a witness to her good behaviour; this nun was called her chaplain, and was supposed to be changed every year, to prevent favouritism. It will be remembered that when Madame Eglentyne went on her pilgrimage she took her nun chaplain with her, as well as three priests; that was because no nun was ever allowed to go out alone. One of Madame Eglentyne's duties as prioress was to entertain visitors with her celebrated cheer of court, and we may be sure that she had a great many. Her sisters, who were now grand ladies with husbands and manors of their own, and her old father, and all the great people of the county came to congratulate her; and after that they used often to drop in for a dinner of chickens and wine and wastel bread if they passed the house on a journey, and sometimes they spent the night there. One or two ladies, whose husbands were away at the wars or on a pilgrimage to Rome, even came as paying guests to the convent and lived there for a whole year, for nothing pleased the country gentlemen or wealthy burgesses better than to use nunneries as boarding-houses for their women-kind.

All this was very disturbing to the peace and quiet of the nuns, and especially disturbing were the boarders, for they wore gay clothes, and had pet dogs and callers, and set a very frivolous example to the nuns. At one nunnery we find a bishop ordering: 'Let Felmersham's wife, with her whole household and other women, be utterly removed from your monastery within one year, seeing that they are a cause of disturbance to the nuns and an occasion to bad example, by reason of their attire and of those who come to visit them.'[14] It can be easily imagined *why* the bishops objected so much to the reception of these worldly married women as boarders. Just substitute for 'Felmersham's wife' 'the Wife of Bath' and all is explained. That lady was not a person whom a prioress would lightly refuse; the list of her pilgrimages alone would give her the *entrée* into any nunnery. Smiling her gap-toothed smile and riding easily upon her ambler, she would enter the gates, and what a month of excitement would pass before she rode away

again. I am sure that it was she who taught Madame Eglentyne the most fashionable way to pinch a wimple; and she certainly introduced hats 'as broad as is a buckler or a targe' and scarlet stockings into some nunneries. The bishops disliked it all very much, but they never succeeded in turning the boarders out for all their efforts, because the nuns always needed the money which they paid for their board and lodging.

It is easy to understand that this constant intercourse with worldly visitors would give rise to the spread of worldly habits in Madame Eglentyne's nunnery. Nuns, after all, were but women, and they had the amiable vanities of their sex. But Authority (with a large A) did not consider their vanities amiable at all. It was the view of Authority that the Devil had dispatched three lesser D's to be the damnation of nuns, and those three D's were Dances, Dresses, and Dogs. Medieval England was famous for dancing and mumming and minstrelsy; it was Merry England because, however plague and pestilence and famine and the cruelties of man to man might darken life, still it loved these things. But there were no two views possible about what the Church thought of dancing; it was accurately summed up by one moralist in the aphorism, 'The Devil is the inventor and governor and disposer of dances and dancing.' Yet when we look into those accounts which Madame Eglentyne rendered (or did not render) to her nuns at the end of every year, we shall find payments for wassail at New Year and Twelfth Night, for May games, for bread and ale on bonfire nights, for harpers and players at Christmas, for a present to the Boy Bishop on his rounds, and perhaps for an extra pittance when the youngest schoolgirl was allowed to dress up and act as abbess of the convent for the whole of Innocents' Day. And when we look in the bishops' registers we shall find Madame Eglentyne forbidden 'all manner of minstrelsy, interludes, dancing or revelling within your holy place'; and she would be fortunate indeed if her bishop would make exception for Christmas, 'and other honest times of recreation among yourselves used in absence of seculars in all wise'. Somehow one feels an insistent conviction that her cheer of court included dancing.[15]

Then, again, there were the fashionable dresses which the visitors introduced into nunneries. It is quite certain that Madame Eglentyne

was not unmoved by them; and it is a sad fact that she began to think the monastic habit very black and ugly, and the monastic life very strict; and to decide that if some little amenities were imported into it no one would be a penny the worse, and perhaps the bishop would not notice. That is why, when Chaucer met her,

> Ful fetis was hir cloke, as I was war,
> Of smal coral aboute hir arm she bar
> A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,
> And ther-on heng a broche of gold ful shene.

Unfortunately, however, the bishop did notice; the registers are indeed full of those clothes of Madame Eglentyne's, and of the even more frivolous ones which she wore in the privacy of the house. For more than six weary centuries the bishops waged a holy war against fashion in the cloister, and waged it in vain; for as long as nuns mingled freely with secular women, it was impossible to prevent them from adopting secular modes. Occasionally a wretched bishop would find himself floundering unhandily, in masculine bewilderment, through something like a complete catalogue of contemporary fashions, in order to specify what the nuns were *not* to wear. Synods sat solemnly, bishops and archbishops shook their grey heads, over golden hairpins and silver belts, jewelled rings, laced shoes, slashed tunics, low necks and long trains, gay colours, costly cloth, and valuable furs. The nuns were supposed to wear their veils pinned tightly down to their eyebrows, so that their foreheads were completely hidden; but high foreheads happened to be fashionable among worldly ladies, who even shaved theirs to make them higher, and the result was that the nuns could not resist lifting up and spreading out their veils, for how otherwise did Chaucer *know* that Madame Eglentyne had such a fair forehead ('almost a spanne broad, I trowe')? If she had been wearing her veil properly, it 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; his contemporaries would see the point very quickly. And that brooch and that fetis cloak of hers. . . . Here is what some tale-bearing nuns told the Bishop of Lincoln about their Prioress, fifty years after Chaucer wrote the *Canterbury Tales*.

'The Prioress,' they said with their most sanctimonious air, '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 and there on a golden ring with one diamond.'[16] Is it not Madame Eglentyne to the life? Nothing escaped our good Dan Chaucer's eye, for all that he rode always looking on the ground.

Moreover, it was not only in her dress that the Prioress and her sister nuns aped the fashions of the world. Great ladies of the day loved to amuse themselves with pet animals; and nuns were quick to follow their example. So,

> Of smale houndes had she, that she fedde
> With rosted flesh, or milk and wastel-breed.
> But sore weep she if oon of hem were deed,
> Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte.

The visitation reports are full of those little dogs and other animals; and how many readers of the Prologue know that the smale houndes, like the fair forehead and the brooch of gold full sheen, were strictly against the rules? For the bishops regarded pets as bad for discipline, and century after century they tried to turn the animals out of the convents, without the slightest success. The nuns just waited till the bishop had gone and then whistled their dogs back again. Dogs were easily the favourite pets, though monkeys, squirrels, rabbits, birds and (very rarely) cats were also kept. One archbishop had to forbid an abbess whom he visited to keep *monkeys and a number of dogs* in her own chamber and charged her at the same time with stinting her nuns in food; one can guess what became of the roasted flesh or milk and wastel-breed! It was a common medieval practice to bring animals into church, where

ladies often attended service with dog in lap and men with hawk on wrist; just as the highland farmer brings his collie with him today. This happened in the nunneries too. Sometimes it was the lay-boarders in the convents who brought their pets with them; there is a pathetic complaint by the nuns of one house 'that Lady Audley, who boards there, has a great abundance of dogs, insomuch that whenever she comes to church there follow her twelve dogs, who make a great uproar in church, hindering the nuns in their psalmody and the nuns thereby are terrified!'[17] But often enough the nuns themselves transgressed. Injunctions against bringing pet dogs into choir occur in several visitation reports, the most amusing instance being contained in those sent to Romsey Abbey by William of Wykeham in 1387, just about the same year that Chaucer was writing the *Canterbury Tales*: 'Item,' runs the injunction, 'whereas we have convinced ourselves by clear proofs that some of the nuns of your house bring with them to church birds, rabbits, hounds and such like frivolous things, whereunto they give more heed than to the offices of the church, with frequent hindrance to their own psalmody and to that of their fellow nuns and to the grievous peril of their souls – therefore we strictly forbid you all and several, in virtue of the obedience due to us that ye presume henceforward to bring to church no birds, hounds, rabbits or other frivolous things that promote indiscipline. . . . Item, whereas through hunting dogs and other hounds abiding within your monastic precincts, the alms that should be given to the poor are devoured and the church and cloister . . . are foully defiled . . . and whereas, through their inordinate noise divine service is frequently troubled – therefore we strictly command and enjoin you, Lady Abbess, that you remove the dogs altogether and that you suffer them never henceforth, nor any other such hounds, to abide within the precincts of your nunnery.'[18] But it was useless for any bishop to order Madame Eglentyne to give up her dogs, she could not even be parted from them on a pilgrimage, though they must have been a great nuisance in the inns, especially as she was so fussy about their food.

For Chaucer's prioress, we must admit, was rather a worldly lady, though her pretty clothes and little dogs were harmless enough on modern standards and one's sympathies are all against the

bishops. She probably became more worldly as time went on, because she had so many opportunities for social intercourse. Not only had she to entertain visitors in the convent, but often the business of the house took her away upon journeys and these offered many opportunities for hobnobbing with her neighbours. Sometimes she had to go to London to see after a law-suit and that was a great excursion with another nun, or perhaps two, and a priest and several yeomen to look after her. Sometimes she had to go and see the bishop, to get permission to take in some little schoolgirls. Sometimes she went to the funeral of a great man, whom her father knew and who left her twenty shillings and a silver cup in his will. Sometimes she went to the wedding of one of her sisters, or to be godmother to their babies; though the bishops did not like these worldly ties, or the dances and merry-makings which accompanied weddings and christenings. Indeed her nuns occasionally complained about her journeys and said that though she pretended it was all on the business of the house, they had their doubts; and would the bishop please just look into it. At one nunnery we find the nuns complaining that their house is £20 in debt 'and this principally owing to the costly expenses of the prioress, because she frequently rides abroad and pretends that she does so on the common business of the house although it is not so, with a train of attendants much too large and tarries too long abroad and she feasts sumptuously, both when abroad and at home and she is very choice in her dress, so that the fur trimmings of her mantle are worth 100s'![19]

As a matter of fact there was nothing of which the church disapproved more than this habit, shared by monks and nuns, of wandering about outside their cloisters; moralists considered that intercourse with the world was at the root of all the evil which crept into the monastic system. The orthodox saying was that a monk out of his cloister was like a fish out of water; and it will be remembered that Chaucer's monk thought the text not worth an oyster. Indeed most of the monks managed to swim very well in the air, and the nuns too persisted in taking every sort of excuse for wandering in the world. Right through the Middle Ages council after council, bishop after bishop, reformer after reformer, tried in vain to keep them shut up. The greatest attempt of all began in

1300, when the pope published a Bull ordering that nuns should never, save in very exceptional circumstances, leave their convents and that no secular person should be allowed to go in and visit them, without a special licence and a good reason. This will make the modern reader pity the poor nuns, but there is no need, for nobody ever succeeded in putting it into force for more than five minutes, though the bishops spent over two centuries in trying to do so and were still trying in vain when King Henry VIII dissolved the nunneries and turned all the nuns out into the world for ever, whether they liked it or not. At one nunnery in the Lincoln diocese, when the bishop came and deposited a copy of the Bull in the house and ordered the nuns to obey it, they ran after him to the gate when he was riding away and threw the Bull at his head, screaming that they would never observe it.[20] The more practical bishops indeed, soon stopped trying to enforce the Bull as it stood and contented themselves with ordering that nuns were not to go out or pay visits too often, or without a companion, or without licence, or without a good reason. But even in this they were not very successful, because the nuns were most prolific in excellent reasons why they should go out. Sometimes they said that their parents were ill; and then they would go away to smooth the pillow of the sick. Sometimes they said that they had to go to market to buy herrings. Sometimes they said that they had to go to confession at a monastery. Sometimes it is really difficult to imagine *what* they said. What are we to think, for instance, of that giddy nun 'who on Monday night did pass the night with the Austin friars at Northampton and did dance and play the lute with them in the same place until midnight, and on the night following she passed the night with the Friars' preachers at Northampton, luting and dancing in like manner'?[21] Chaucer told us how the friar loved harping and how his eyes twinkled like stars in his head when he sang, but failed perhaps to observe that he had lured Madame Eglentyne into a dance.

It is indeed difficult to see what 'legitimate' excuses the nuns can have made for all their wandering about in the streets and the fields and in and out of people's houses, and it is sorely to be feared that either they were too much of a handful for Madame Eglentyne, or else she winked at their doings. For somehow or other one suspects

that she had no great opinion of bishops. After all Chaucer would never have met her, if she had not managed to circumvent her own, since if there was one excuse for wandering of which the bishops thoroughly disapproved, it was precisely the excuse of pilgrimages. Madame Eglentyne was not quite as simple and coy as she looked. How many of the literary critics, who chuckle over her, know that she never ought to have got into the Prologue at all? The Church was quite clear in its mind that pilgrimages for nuns were to be discouraged. As early as 791 a council had forbidden the practice and in 1195 another at York decreed, 'In order that the opportunity of wandering may be taken from nuns we forbid them to take the path of pilgrimage.' In 1318 an archbishop of York strictly forbade the nuns of one convent to leave their house 'by reason of any vow of pilgrimage which they might have taken. If any had taken such vows she was to say as many psalters as it would have taken days to perform the pilgrimage so rashly vowed.'[22] One has a melancholy vision of poor Madame Eglentyne saying psalters interminably through her tretys nose, instead of jogging along so gaily with her motley companions and telling so prettily her tale of little St Hugh. Such prohibitions might be multiplied from medieval records; and indeed it is unnecessary to go further than Chaucer to understand why it was that bishops offered such strenuous opposition to pilgrimages for nuns; one has only to remember some of the folk, in whose company the prioress travelled and some of the tales they told. If one could only be certain, for instance, that she rode all the time with her nun and her priests, or at least between the Knight and the poor Parson of a town! But there were also the Miller and the Summoner and (worst of all) that cheerful and engaging sinner, the Wife of Bath. It is really quite disturbing to think what additional details the Wife of Bath may have given the prioress about her five husbands.

This then was Chaucer's prioress in real life, for the poet who drew her was one of the most wonderful observers in the whole of English literature. We may wade through hundreds of visitation reports and injunctions and everywhere the grey eyes of his prioress will twinkle at us out of their pages, and in the end we must always go to Chaucer for her picture, to sum up everything that historical

records have taught us. As the bishop found her, so he saw her, aristocratic, tender-hearted, worldly, taking pains to 'countrefete chere of court'; liking pretty clothes and little dogs; a lady of importance, attended by a nun and three priests; spoken to with respect by the none too mealy-mouthed host – no 'by Corpus Dominus' or 'cokkes bones' or 'tel on a devel wey' for her, but 'cometh neer, my lady prioress,' and

> My lady Prioresse, by your leve
> If that I wiste I sholde yow nat greve,
> I wolde demen that ye tellen sholde
> A tale next, if so were that ye wolde.
> Now wol ye vouche-sauf, my lady dere?

He talks to no one else like that, save perhaps to the knight. Was she religious? Perhaps; but save for her singing the divine service and for her lovely address to the Virgin, at the beginning of her tale, Chaucer can find but little to say on the point;

> But for speken of hir conscience (he says)
> She was so charitable and so pitous,

and then, as we are waiting to hear of her almsgiving to the poor – that she would weep over a mouse in a trap, or a beaten puppy, says Chaucer. A good ruler of her house? again, doubtless. But when Chaucer met her the house was ruling itself somewhere at the 'shire's ende'. The world was full of fish out of water in the fourteenth century, and, by sëynt Loy, said Madame Eglentyne, swearing her greatest oath, like Chaucer's monk, she held that famous text not worth an oyster. So we take our leave of her, characteristically on the road to Canterbury.