

Geoffrey Chaucer’s Hybrid Woman: The Prioress in *The Canterbury Tales**

Geoffrey Chaucer’ın Melez Kadını: Canterbury Hikayelerindeki Başrahibe

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Abstract

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* presents pilgrims whose status in the medieval three estates is not clearly defined. The Prioress is one of those pilgrims who experiences in-betweenness as she lives in what Bhabha terms the “territories” (1994, p. 28) of her former and present estates, the nobility and the clergy respectively. In fact, the members of medieval monasteries were mostly of the noble origin. Generally, it was not the choice of the members of the nobility to enter monasteries; yet, it was the wish of their families. Thereby, most of the noble men and women had to leave their previously secular and worldly life behind and live in full compliance with the monastic rules which required an entirely ascetic life. Accordingly, in most cases, the noble members of monasteries had difficulty in adjusting to monastic life which put them in between the territories of their former and present estates, in what Bhabha terms “a third space” (1994, p. 28). As they neither completely belonged to the nobility nor to the clergy, those nobles of monasteries lived in a third space contesting the territories of both estates. Thus, they became medieval hybrids. Similar to her historical counterparts, Chaucer’s Prioress of noble birth can find a fixed status or identity neither in the nobility nor in the clergy, and she has to live in between them. That is, the Prioress develops a hybrid identity at the interface between her former and present estates. Within this context, this paper aims to discuss Chaucer’s Prioress in *The Canterbury Tales* as a medieval hybrid who occupies a medieval third space on the borders between the nobility and the clergy.

Keywords: Chaucer’s Prioress, hybridity, medieval estates, in-betweenness, third space

Öz

Geoffrey Chaucer’ın *Canterbury Hikayeleri* Ortaçağ’ın üç sınıfında yeri tam olarak belli olmayan hacıları resmeder. Eski (soylular) ve yeni (ruhban) sınıfları arasındaki Bhabha’nın deyişiyle “alanlarda” yaşam sürdürdüğü için arada kalan Başrahibe bu hacılardan biridir. Ortaçağ’da manastır mensupları genellikle soylulardan oluşurdu. Soylular manastırlara çoğunlukla kendi tercihlerinden değil, ailelerinin istekleri doğrultusunda girerlerdi. Bu yüzden, bu asil erkek ve kadınların çoğu laik ve dünyevi hayatlarını arkalarında bırakıp, bütünüyle dünyaya kapalı bir hayat gerektiren manastır kuralları doğrultusunda yaşamak zorunda kalırlardı. Dolayısıyla, manastırın asil mensupları çoğunlukla manastır hayatına ayak uydurmakta zorluk çekerler ve Bhabha’nın “üçüncü alan” olarak tanımladığı eski ve yeni sınıflarının arasında yaşamak zorunda bırakılırlardı. Tam anlamıyla ne soylu nede ruhban sınıfına ait olmayan manastırın bu soylu mensupları iki sınıfında alanlarını kapsayan üçüncü bir alanda yaşayarak Ortaçağın melez bireylerine dönüştüler. Tarihteki emsallerine benzer bir şekilde, kendine ne soylular nede ruhban sınıfında

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kabul gören bir konum ya da kimlik bulamayan Chaucer'in asil kökenli Başrahibeside bu iki sınıfın arasındaki alanlarda yaşamak zorunda kalır. Başka bir deyişle, Başrahibe eski ve yeni sınıflarının arasındaki alanlarda melez bir kimlik geliştirir. Bütün bu bilgiler ışığında, bu makale Chaucer'in *Canterbury Hikayeleri*'ndeki Başrahibesini Ortaçağın soylu ve ruhban sınıfları arasında "üçüncü alanda" yaşayan melez bir kimlik olarak ele almaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Chaucer'in Başrahibesi, melezleşme, Ortaçağ'ın üç sınıf kavramı, arada kalmışlık, üçüncü alan

Introduction: Fourteenth-Century English Society and the Three Estates

Fourteenth-century English society underwent a process of great structural change and mobility due to the social, political and economic circumstances of the time, mostly related to the Hundred Years War, the Black Death of 1348, 1361 and 1369, and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Within this process of transformation, traditional boundaries, power relations and institutions were challenged, and ultimately medieval identities were blurred and redefined. In this regard, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is particularly significant as the representation of the social change and mobility of the period, which created a "middle-grouping"¹ not entirely belonging to the traditional medieval three estates model. Accordingly, the people belonging to the middle-grouping were in search for identity on the borders of the well-accepted three estates of the time— the clergy, the nobility and the commoners—and disrupted the borders between "Us" and "Them" based on the three-estate principle.

The three-estates structure, along with feudalism, pointed to a hierarchical society that can be most clearly traced in the regulation of food and clothing for the different estates including separate values and norms for each estate. The significance of estate in the medieval period has been underlined by various critics. Mortimer, for example, states that medieval people believed that society consisted of three sections or estates which were created by God. These three estates were those of the nobility, the clergy, and the commoners respectively. The nobility were those who fought for and defended those who prayed and those who worked. The clergy did the praying on behalf of those who fought and those who worked. The commoners were those who worked to provide food for those who fought and prayed (Mortimer, 2009, p. 40). In fact, the idea of the three estates suggested that each estate eagerly accepted its duties as they were predestined by God. Hence, estates model sustains that society operates in the best way if each class acts in accordance with its role (Bisson, 1998, p. 143).² In this context, the three estates suggested three acknowledged or determined identities; thus, the people of the middle-grouping—the medieval people caught in between or among those identities—possessed hybrid identities in-between those three estates as in the case of Chaucer's Prioress who inhabits an in-between space between the nobility and the clergy.

1 The medieval people who did not fit into any of the three estates are mostly described as the members of "the middle-grouping" "strata" or "class". For the use of the term, among several other critics, see Bishop, 1971, p. 308; Strohm, 1989, pp. 4-5; and Turner, 2006, pp. 29-30. Yet, in this paper, apart from the acknowledged members of the middle-grouping such as franklins, millers, merchants or yeomen, the Prioress, a member of the clergy, is evaluated within the medieval middle-grouping as she does not completely fit into her estate.

2 For a detailed study of the three estates and the transformation of medieval English society, see, among others, Strayer and Munro, 1959; Dyer, 1994, and Coulton, 1961; and 2004.

Monasticism and the Nobility

The Prioress belongs to the first estate, the clergy, according to the medieval estate theory. Perhaps, the most apparent distinction between the clergy and the other two estates was that nobody was born into the clergy. Therefore, the members of the clergy joined the order with their distinctive qualities deriving from their original estate, the nobility or the commoners, signalling their in-between position (Lepine, 2003, p. 368; Forngeng and McLean, 2009, p. 27). As it is a result of her adoption of the monastic life that the Prioress develops a hybrid identity, the monastic life and its norms should be explained. Monasticism referred to exercise, or *exercitium* in Latin, in the war against wrongdoings, and it pledged itself to a completely pious and poor life which was similar to that of Christ (Partridge, 2006, p. 2033). Hence, the nuns, like the monks, needed to concentrate solely on their relation with God, and they had to fight against earthly aspirations.

It was the sixth century when monasticism was introduced to England by Augustine who was sent by Pope Gregory the Great to convert the Saxon kings of southern England (Lepine, 2003, p. 363). The Benedictine Rule, founded by Saint Benedict in A.D. 529 at Monte Cassino in Italy, set the first rules of the monastic life. In a century, the Benedictine monastic life was so well-received that it stretched out across Europe. It is estimated that in 1569, there were 37,000 Benedictine monasteries, and they included eleven emperors, twenty kings, fifteen sovereign dukes and electors, thirteen sovereign earls, nine empresses, and ten queens (Hilpsich, 1958, p. 14, Cranage, 2010, p. 114; Hermann, 1996, p. 71).

Monasticism was at the centre of medieval life, and it required a genuine answer to the divine calling. Yet, as Hermann points out, it was mostly not the case in the Middle Ages: “[T]he modern notion of religious vocation as a ‘divine calling’ does not apply to medieval monasticism, which was usually determined by societal and familial, rather than individual, choice” (1996, p. 69). Similarly, in Chaucer’s time, owing to their reluctance, people began to join monasteries as a matter of career rather than vocation. Therefore, those people did not fit into monastic life, and ruined its principles as it was difficult and unpleasant to them (Power, 2000, p. 82, Hermann, 1996, p. 69). In general, it was the nobles who joined monasteries out of their consent as they had to join them in accordance with the wishes of their families. In other words, the wishes of the noble boys and girls were not taken into consideration, which meant a mandatory option for them. This life of the nobles in the cloister embodied, in Bhabha’s terms, “the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—” (1994, p.2) in the different territories of the nobility and monasticism. Accordingly, the reluctant change of status or estate along with the mixture of different values and norms of the nobility and monasticism led to hybridity in medieval context.

Indeed, it was not easy for the members of the nobility to withstand the severe conditions in monasteries as they used to have a comfortable and luxurious life in every respect. Their former estate was identified with a worldly and extreme display in terms of wealth, spending and clothing, which Saul defines as “culture of display” (2011, p.52) and Kaminsky as social grandiosity (1993; p. 703). Entirely different from the life in monasteries, the nobles might even lose their noble status, if they did not live in accordance with this “culture of display” (Keen, 1990, pp. 169-170). In the cloister, contrary to their former habits and customs, they were supposed to have a simple life dead to the world by living without any property. They had to dress in cheap and humble clothes, pray, work, read, and even eat, sleep and talk in a strictly specified manner (Rossignol, 2006, p. 62, Hans-Werner, 1993, pp.71-73, 100; Kerr, 2009, pp. 46, 50; Koslin, 1999, p. 63; Cranage, 2010, p. 20).

Although the life in monasteries and nunneries contradicted with the splendid life of the nobility in every respect, the wealth and power of the nobility turned its members into the most possible candidates for the cloisters. In fact, it was not easy to join monastic society, if you were not a member of the nobility. As Hans-Werner explains, there were some requisites for admission into a medieval monastery. For example, a volunteer endowment was necessary which later turned into compulsory. Furthermore, in the Benedictine Rule, one had to give up his /her wealth to join monasteries since at least a section of one's property was donated to monasteries (1993, p. 85). Gradually, these alms developed into considerable land donations. Thus, "before one could become a monk one had to be a landowner, so that many monasteries eventually became monasteries for the nobility alone" (Hans-Werner, 1993, p. 85). Contrary to the early years of monasticism when it was possible for everybody to enter monasteries, in time there appeared "social exclusiveness" (Hans-Werner, 1993, p. 87) because they mostly welcomed the members of the nobility. In other words, although the strict monastic life did not seem suitable for the nobility, there was a strong relationship between the nobility and the clergy. This close yet complex relationship was the very reason for the emergence of noble hybrids in medieval monasteries and nunneries. Those noble hybrids inhabited in what Bhabha terms "an in-between site of transition: the beyond [was] neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past" (1994, p.1). This medieval in-between site of transition brought about composite identities for the nobility as they were neither totally included nor excluded from the different territories of the nobility and the clergy. Therefore, as Bhabha suggests for migrants in a postcolonial context, noble nuns and monks lived in the merging points or in-between spaces, and they became the members of a kind of medieval "borderline community" (1994, p. 12).

Chaucer's Prioress as a Hybrid Nun of Noble Origin

Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* presents the members of the above-mentioned borderline community and his Prioress is one of them. As indicated in her physical traits and manners (*CT*, I, 164-67)³, Chaucer's Prioress is a lady of high birth. She is most probably a fourteenth-century Benedictine nun. In addition to the possibility of Barking Abbey, she might be the prioress of St. Leonard's since St. Leonard's was the only abbey belonging to Stratford at Bow, and it was a Benedictine abbey which Chaucer visited (Hourigan, 1996, p. 39). She had been taught French and instructed in table manners from her childhood onwards. According to Werthamer, she most probably became a nun as she had no marriage dowry (1993, pp. 18-19). Then, she might be a victim of familial or monetary concerns. Indeed, similar to her noble counterparts in history⁴, Chaucer's Prioress is a noble hybrid in that her life is formed out of the values of the nobility and the clergy as she adopts the values and norms of her noble and clerical estates together. Since the Prioress is a noble woman, if she cannot marry in line with her noble status, her sole option is to enter a nunnery and to become a nun. Yet, being ac-

3 All Chaucer quotations are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*. (2008). Larry Dean Benson (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4 Female monasticism came to England in the early seventh century and rapidly developed in the second half of the same century in the entire continent (Lee, 1997, p. 150). The strict rules of the cloister for the nuns were specified by the medieval instruction manuals such as *Ancrene Wisse* and *the Benedictine Rule* which mainly included the orders related to prayers and key directions in relation to clothing, food and possessions (Lee, 1997, pp. 94, 103-104; Savage and Watson, 1991, pp. 51-52). Apart from becoming abbesses, many medieval women spent the last years of their life as nuns and some of them became nuns after they were widowed.

customed to a very different life, the Prioress experiences a kind of identity crisis and lives in a space between the territories of her former and present estates, the nobility and the clergy. Accordingly, the in-between status of the Prioress exemplifies the third space which, as Bhabha remarks, emerges from the junction of “two original moments [. . .] [deriving from her two estates], [and] enables other positions to emerge [by] set[ting] up new structures” [. . .]” (“Third Space” p. 211). As the Prioress keeps the characteristics of both her original and current estates; she can neither be a real member of the nobility nor of the clergy, but turns into a hybrid trying to find a suitable place for herself on the borders of those two estates. Power’s words in relation to the ties of the Prioress with her family, thus with her previous estate, openly demonstrate the in-between position of her:

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 [. . .] [s]ometimes 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. (2000, pp. 91-92)

Thereby, like her counterparts in history⁵, the Prioress’ contact with her family members after she was cloistered is one of the reasons for her in-betweenness. Indeed, as aforementioned, there were two main routes for the medieval noble women. They had the alternative of marrying or taking a monastic vow since marriage was taken as the second preferable option after a life of chastity. With the exception of those taking monastic vows, marriage was common and women married men who were mostly two times older than themselves. The youngest or unmarried daughters of the nobility mostly became nuns to be able to avoid paying a dowry. The cloistered life remained as the mere option for a lady of high birth who did not or could not marry. Hence, marriage was of utmost significance for the future of the noblewomen (Power, 2000, p.78, Bennett, 2003, p. 90, Rudd, 2001, p. 20). In other words, if a woman of noble birth was not an heiress and could not marry in accordance with her status; her mere option was to become a nun. Power describes this unfortunate and compulsory position of the medieval noblewomen as “the disadvantage of rank” due to “the narrowness of the sphere to which women of gentle birth were confined”, and notes that nunneries turned into the refuges of the gentle born (1964, pp. 4, 5). In this respect, it is more likely that the nuns who wanted to run away from monastic seclusion were in majority since they did not prefer the monastic career willingly. Additionally, although girls could legally become a nun at twelve years old; there are numerous documents stating that they entered nunneries younger than twelve (Daichman, 1986, p. 14). Therefore, the entrance of the noble girls into nunneries was not largely upon their request but upon familial concerns as they were not mature enough to take such a serious decision. Power depicts the situation of the little girls who had to enter nunneries unwillingly as follows:

5 Livingstone (2006) discusses in detail the tight bonds between the clerical and secular spheres of the noble members of monasteries which contributed much to their hybrid identities since they could not totally leave their noble background behind and become real members of the clergy.

[M]any [. . .] nuns entered religion as a career while still children, with no particular vocation for the religious life. To such, even though they may experience no longing for the forbidden pleasures of the world, the monotony of the cloister would often be hard to bear. Their young limb would kick against its restrictions and the changing moods of adolescence would turn and twist in vain within the iron bars of its unadoptable routine. (1964, p.290)

What is more, many medieval legacies documented this desperate situation of the noble girls. According to those legacies, “fathers left dowries to either an earthly or heavenly lord, with many fathers indicating exactly which convent the daughter was to “attend” at her age of legal puberty” (Daichman, 1986, p. 13). The famous proverb of the time also indicated the inevitability of a secluded life for the medieval woman: “*aut virium aut murum oportet mulierum habere*— a woman ought to have either a husband or a wall— the convent cell’s wall” (Daichman, 1986, p. 13). Expectedly, as depicted in their writings, nuns mostly described their joining a nunnery as a traumatic event, and they were mostly in a search of the answer of why they were cloistered (Winston-Allen, 2004, p. 23; Shahar, 2003, p.42).

In fact, it is not possible to know exactly whether the noblewomen took the veil as they willingly wanted enclosure or they had to do it for familial or monetary concerns. What is certain is that the acceptance into nunneries necessitated financial support, yet this amount of money might have been less than the amount of money to be paid for a dowry (Ward, 1995, p.195). After joining a nunnery, the noble nuns could go on their education in French, sewing, and etiquette (Grode, 2010, p. 27). However, they, as Lee affirms, mostly had difficulty in adapting themselves to the monastic life, to its strict rules: “[T]hey did not seem to live as comfortable a life in the convent as they had lived in the world” (1997, pp. 145-46). In a similar vein, Winston-Allen depicts the dilemma of a fourteen years old nun of noble birth, who was placed in a nunnery when her father died and her mother wanted to marry again. The girl had very difficult times trying to adjust herself to her new life in the cloister:

When she came to live here she was a nice, likeable girl of about fourteen years of age who in better days had been tenderly raised by her mother. And therefore it was exceedingly difficult for her when she had to leave her mother. But, because she saw that her mother desired it and it was her wish, she acquiesced, although it was trying and difficult for her. For she had been high spirited and merry and now had to behave in a *restrained, subdued manner*[my emphasis]. Oh, this life seemed so unsettling to her that her heart failed her when she thought that she must spend her life here. [. . .]When she was young, this good sister often had to master herself with great effort, for she was very merry and lively by nature and loved talking with people. Thus her nature and this life were like *light and darkness* [my emphasis]. And therefore she had a hard, difficult life and had to overcome her nature and break it. I believe that many a saint in heaven did not have as hard a time of it as this life was for her. (2004, pp. 24-25)

Similar to this noble girl, the Prioress, as Power suggests, might be sent to her nunnery by her parents and there she had to get into a new *habit* [my emphasis] along with a bed (2000, p.78). Another example is a Latin song in early eleventh century, which exemplifies the dilemma of a nun of noble birth. In the song, the nun bemoans the dullness of singing divine office, and tells about the luxuries she yearns for:

Fibula non perfruor, flammeum non capio, strophum assumerem, diadema cuperem, heumisella!—monile arriperem si valerem, pelles et herminie libefferre.
(I have no *brooch* (my italics) to enjoy, can wear no bridal-veil; how I'd long to put on a ribbon or a coronet - woe is me!—I'd get a necklace if I could, and wearing ermine furs would be lovely). (cited and translated in Mann, 1973, p. 130)

Moreover, like the Prioress, due to their noble lineages, it was most probable that the noblewomen would be the relevant nominee for prioress which was a usual practice in the Benedictine nunneries (Shahar, 1990, pp.38-39). Yet, undeniably, as it has been suggested so far, the clash between the life of the nobility and the clergy and the strict rules of the convent pushed the noblewomen into violation of the monastic rules. These were the deciding factors in their hybridity, too, as in the case of Chaucer's Prioress. As a lifelike character, the Prioress embodies the very characteristics of her historical counterparts due to her yearnings for her former noble habits and violation of the monastic rules. The Prioress clearly disregards the monastic rules with her noble traits and habits: her apparel—her forehead or headdress along with her gold brooch—and her courtly identity embodying her name, eating habits/table manners and her dogs. These traits and habits of the Prioress point to her hybrid existence on the borders between the nobility and the clergy besides her noble origin.

In the first place, the forehead or headdress of the Prioress is a mark of her hybrid identity along with her noble origin. The forehead of the Prioress is described in *The General Prologue* as such: "But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;/ It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe;/ For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe." (CT, I, 154-56). For Farrell, the Prioress shows her skin which is a sign of vanity. She has a broad forehead as she is mostly interested in her physical well-being, eating and drinking rather than in the spiritual world (2007, p. 211). As Cooper notes,

[a] wide forehead was an attribute of beauty, but eight inches is too much—and the third line insists that it is not just poetic license. 'Nat undergrowe' cannot, in this context, mean 'well- proportioned': it is a litotes, like Rome being no mean city or death no small thing. The Prioress is a large woman. (1996, p.3)

Yet, to some scholars, "nat undergrowe" (CT, I, 156) means that the Prioress is extraordinarily tall, or she has excessively big bosoms. Evidently, the Prioress is tall and overweight which might be taken as a sign of her former estate since the members of the nobility were fat and tall as they ate better. Apart from her physical size, the problem seems to be that the Prioress does not cover her forehead as required. Similar to Farrell, Hodges states that the Prioress' headdress is inadmissible because "her veil is worn too high on her forehead and her wimple is inappropriately "pynched" (CT, I, 151), which display her vanity, a characteristic improper to her occupation (2000, p.46). In fact, the nuns were

expected to wear their veils attached firmly down to their eyebrows to cover their foreheads entirely. High foreheads were popular among secular ladies and they even shaved their foreheads to keep them higher. Thus, it seems that the Prioress could not resist the trends of the nobility (Curry, 1916, p. 42, Power, 2000, pp.89-90), which might be taken as a continuation of her former usual habit. Hence, the Prioress experiences an in-betweenness as a result of the clash between her former noble habits and her present religious responsibilities. Indeed, the rules related to clothing were one of the most significant issues the nuns had to observe; yet, some of the rules about clothing were also the most violated ones. Like in the case of the Prioress, the rules in relation to clothing were especially violated by the nuns of noble birth who used to wear expensive clothes of fur, silk and velvet as a sign of their noble status before joining a nunnery (Grode, 2010, p. 14). Chapter 55 of the Rule of St. Benedict included clothing pointing to the vow of poverty:

Let clothing be given to the brethren according to the nature of the place in which they dwell and its climate; [...] The sisters should not complain about the color or the coarseness of any of these things, but be content with what can be found in the district where they live and can be purchased cheaply; and that each nun should have—two tunics and two cowls, to allow for night wear and for the washing of these garments. (pp. 85-86)

Chapter 55 also stated that the apparel of the nuns “should be the sort that can be found in the country where they live or bought at the cheapest rate” (p. 85). As mentioned above, it was mostly the nuns of noble lineage who did not observe the rules about clothing since they wanted to follow the fashion of the nobility. Consequently, in 1314, the Archbishop Melton at Hampole asked the prioresses to warn their nuns who wore clothes in style improper to the regulations of the order, no matter what their status was (Hodges, 2005, p. 138).

Undoubtedly, the inheritance due to their noble heritage was the origin of the expensive dresses of the noble nuns. They were mostly given presents of attire of costly material embellished with gemstones, furs, silk, gold, and silver inherited from their friends and kin (Hodges, 2005, pp.136-137, 140). The interest of the noble nuns in expensive clothes was also improper to the rule of the Benedictine order forbidding private property (Thompson, 1984, pp. 3-5). Yet, as Hodges suggests, for a nun of noble birth, to dress in accordance with the order meant to abandon the entire notion of high class position deriving from birth (2005, p. 145). In fact, this necessity of leaving aside the privileges of the nobility upon becoming a member of the clergy formed the basis of the hybridity of the noble nuns. On the borders of the nobility and the clergy, the noble nuns lived, in Bhabha's terms, “in the “place[s] of emergence [...] from which something begins its presencing” (1994, p. 5). In the medieval context, this new presence emerging out of the borders of the nobility and the clergy referred to the identity of the hybrid nuns who, like the Prioress, tried to find an alternative existence for themselves on the margins of their former and new estates.

As in the case of her forehead or headdress, the luxurious clothing of the Prioress has been generally regarded as the sign of her worldliness. Erol, for example, notes that the apparel of the Prioress indicates her incapability “to become the person of her station and profession. Each detail concerning her costume is a trespass in itself of the rules of the convent” (1981, p. 83). The most notable item of the costume of the Prioress is her golden brooch which has also been regarded as a sign of her vanity. Chaucer describes the golden brooch of the Prioress as such

Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar
 A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,
 And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
 On which ther was first write a crowned A,
 And after, *Amor vincit omnia*. (CT, I, 158-62)

In fact, among the other striking items of the Prioress, the inscription on her brooch has provoked the most prevailing criticism among scholars. Like in the case of her forehead, there are two main perspectives on the brooch of the Prioress. According to the first view, the beads with a brooch on which is written *Amor vincit omnia* (love conquers all) stands for her spiritual devotion. On the contrary, the second perspective considers it as a token of her vanity as it symbolises earthly love (Grode, 2010, p. 73). The ambiguity of the Prioress' brooch reflects on her religious and noble hybrid identity. As Lowes argues, the Prioress is "hovering [. . .] between two worlds" as depicted in the ambiguous motto on her brooch (1965, p. 375). Similarly, Phillips writes:

The worldly element in the portrait, the sense that the woman vowed to God, and administrating a convent, cultivates the airs and graces the airs and graces of an upper-class, sexually attractive lady, is encapsulated in the ambiguity as to whether he all-conquering *Amor* of her brooch's motto is heavenly or earthly love. (2000, p. 39)

That is to say, the Prioress' brooch underlines the ambiguity of her portrait with its secular and religious elements as it embodies the characteristics of her two estates. Therefore, the Prioress' brooch marks her as a hybrid figure. Moreover, the brooch of the Prioress is gold, "brooch of gold ful scheene," (CT, I, 160). As gold was an expensive and usually a noble material, the Prioress' brooch appears to be a very expensive religious item for it is attached to a rosary. The sumptuary laws of 1363 banned medieval people from wearing gold brooches apart from those who kept the highest-rank in state and clergy. It is not clear if the Prioress' rank is high enough to wear a gold brooch, especially a gold brooch with a problematic divine message. As mentioned above, there are two nunneries which the Prioress is associated with: Barking Abbey and St. Leonard's. Barking Abbey was prosperous, and its prioress with a gold brooch absolutely would not shock people. Yet, St. Leonard's was to some extent more impoverished; thus, a gold brooch of the prioress of St. Leonard's would have been more incoherent (Grode, 2010, pp. 71, 73). Moreover, the way the Prioress wears her rosary is suggestive of her hybridity:

She wears her rosary beads about her wrist, too, like a court lady's beaded bracelet. Readers must also consider the coral and green colour of her rosary beads. Gaily coloured rosary beads were often worn/used by court women, but nuns were expected to employ less colourful, less noticeable rosaries, either black or dark brown. (Phillips, 2000, pp. 30-31)

Then, the gold brooch with its controversial inscription is clearly a sign of the hybridity of the Prioress. She has the right to wear a gold brooch as her original estate is the nobility, and she still keeps her personal property. Yet, her present estate, the clergy, does not let her wear it. It is also no-

teworthy that the Prioress' wearing a gold brooch is less shocking if she is of aristocratic origin. This renders her position as a prioress problematic and points to her in-between position.

The hybrid identity of the Prioress can be clearly observed in her name as well: "she was cleped madame Eglentyne." (*CT*, I, 121). The name of the Prioress, Madame Eglentyne, does not have something to do with a saint or with the Bible. On the contrary, Eglantine is a lovely and romantic name. What is more, the name "Eglentyne" evokes romance heroines (Hanning, 1977, p. 586). Accordingly, it seems that the Prioress adopts Eglentyne as a name because of its courtly overtones.

The in-between position of the Prioress is apparent in her eating habits, too. Unlike the way the noble nuns used to do before joining a nunnery, they were to eat food accepted by the order at the accepted time in nunneries. The same food was served in each meal as imposed by the Benedictine Rule in Chapter 39:

We think it sufficient for the daily dinner, whether at the sixth or the ninth hour, that every table have two cooked dishes [...] Therefore let two cooked dishes suffice for all the brethren; and if any fruit or fresh vegetables are available, let a third dish be added. [...] Let a good pound weight of bread suffice for the day, whether there be only one meal or both dinner and supper. (p. 65)

Nuns were to be slim and their diet was under strict control; thus, they had almost no option with respect to the time and kind of meal they ate. Among the noble nuns of the nunneries those who tried hard to adapt to the dietary rules and rigid fasting were apparently in the majority. Consequently, the nuns of noble birth had hard times in the convent as in the case of a noble nun who had to steal food as she was very hungry (Servey, 2000, pp. 49-50; Lee, 1997, pp. 145-146). Likewise, the difficulty of the Prioress in giving her former eating habits up is visible in her table manners. The table manners of the Prioress indicate her noble origin. Chaucer gives the details of the Prioress' table manners as follows:

At mete wel ytaught was she with alle;
She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,
Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;
Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe
That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.
In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.
Hir over-lippe wyped she so clene
That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene
Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte.
Ful semely after hir mete she raughte." (*CT*, I, 127-36)

The Prioress' table manners and diet are proper for a noble lady. Obviously, the Prioress is more experienced in eating than fasting as she is a very neat and well-practiced eater. Her experience in eating displays that she frequently attended the gatherings where there were other courteous eaters (Rossignol, 2006, p. 113). Besides her familiarity with eating together with other nobles, as the line "nat undergrowe" (*CT*, I, 156) suggests, the Prioress is a fat nun. The fatness of the Prioress is problematic because the nuns were supposed to observe rigid dietary rules and avoid overeating. They were supposed to devote themselves to spiritual perfection rather than physical fulfilment. Yet, the Prioress

eats much even on the way to pilgrimage (Servey, 2000, p. 59).

Another courtly quality of the Prioress depicting her hybrid identity is her pet dogs. The Prioress owns dogs and feeds them with the best food (*CT*, I, 146-47) which is quite acceptable in her former estate. Chaucer describes the Prioress with her dogs as follows:

But for to speken of hire conscience,
 She was so charitable and so pitous
 She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a maus
 Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.
 Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde
 With rosted flessch, or milk and wastel-breed.
 But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,
 Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;
 And al was conscience and tendre herte. (*CT*, I, 142-50)

Chaucer associates the Prioress' misdirected Christian charity and piety with the dogs she keeps; thus, he combines the characteristics of her two estates. As a nun, she is charitable and pious, and as a noble lady she keeps dogs and feeds them with the best food. The sympathy of the Prioress for mice and little dogs might be taken as a sign of her gentleness. On the other hand, her interest in mice and dogs also displays her estrangement from religious values (Hourigan, 1996, p. 44). In fact, keeping animals was forbidden in nunneries and keeping dogs, the favourite of nuns, was included in the three ills/evils, as Power calls it, three D's: dances, dresses and dogs (2000, p.88). The ban on animals in nunneries was well documented in the edicts of the time stating that the abbesses or nuns could not keep dogs or birds within the walls of the cloister (Bennett, 2003, p. 96).

However, nuns usually violated the ban on keeping of pets which the bishops constantly had to struggle against although they came to nothing. As in the case of clothing, the women of the nobility enjoyed themselves by keeping pets and nuns imitated them. Besides dogs, monkeys, squirrels, rabbits, birds and cats were the favourite animals of nuns. Apparently, the Prioress violates the ban on keeping dogs, too, as she cannot leave her dogs behind even on a pilgrimage (Power, 1964, pp.305-307; 2000, p.90). Indeed, for the noble Prioress, keeping pets was a usual habit which was not easy to abandon. Power notes that

[i]n addition to money for their lodging and meals, boarders also brought their worldly trappings—fashionable clothes and small dogs—with them, tempting those gently born prioresses who shared the spirit, manners, and tastes of their race. (1964, p.9)

Having seen her noble sisters in stylish clothes with their small dogs, it seems natural that a lady of aristocratic birth recalls and wants to maintain her previous habits, fashionable clothes, gold brooches and small dogs, which have been generally regarded as mimicking. Like Chaucer's Prioress, the fashion-conscious noble nuns used to live in luxury mostly spent the supply of the convent to imitate their previous life styles. They mostly spent money on costly foods and luxurious clothes (1964, pp.161-75). Then, the Prioress, like her counterparts in history, is not necessarily a corrupt, negligent prioress but rather a noblewoman trying to adapt to the strict life of the convent.

Conclusion

It can be suggested that the hybrid identity of the Prioress is a consequence of the circumstances of the period which brought two separate estates, the nobility and the clergy, together under the roof of monasticism. That is to say, the hybridity of the Prioress arises from the clash between her noble traits deriving from her noble lineage, which she does not relinquish, and the rules of the cloister which she is expected to follow in accordance with her current status. At first glance, the portrait of the Prioress, a nun with courtly manners, suggests an ambiguous character. In her headdress, brooch, eating habits/table manners and keeping dogs, the Prioress seems to imitate noble ladies. Yet, rather than imitation, she is a noble lady who does not want to give up the habits and customs of her original estate. That is why she becomes a hybrid nun who “seems to have an uneasy foot in both camps” in both her religious and earthly divisions (Hopper, 2006, p. 77). Thus, the Prioress possesses in what Bhabha terms an “unhomely presence” (1994, p. 13) and an “interstitial existence” (1994, p.16) in the cloister. As a Bhabhanian hybrid, the Prioress adopts a new, hybrid identity formed by a mixture of the characteristics of the nobility and the clergy; yet, she never entirely belongs to any of them. In relation to the Prioress, Werthamer asks: “Isn't it understandable that a well-bred young woman should want to keep some of the innocent pleasures of worldly life in a convent?” (1993, p. 20). The answer to this question was definitely not positive in medieval society in which the three estates structure directed the minds and lives of the people and created borderline identities as observed in Chaucer's Prioress.

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