

Measuring the Prioress's Forehead: Beauty and Piety

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ABSTRACT

When observing Madame Eglentyne's white beautiful forehead, the narrator exclaims: "It was almost a spanne brood, I trowe" (GP 155). What does it mean by the term "a spanne brood"? Is it "too much" for a forehead? Does it imply intelligence or "boldness"? Is it a sign of beauty or "stupidity"? Is it apposite for a religious woman to expose her forehead in public? In what way should a nun wear her wimple? By discussing these questions, this essay will inspect the misreading and misunderstanding of the Prioress caused by the ambiguous concept of the term "span." This research proceeds in two aspects: 1) investigating the various definitions of the term "span" in the Middle Ages; 2) examining the portraits of courtly and religious ladies depicted in a number of medieval paintings and artworks. By analyzing and comparing the data, this essay intends to offer a more exact measuring of the Prioress's forehead and will also propose that Madame Eglentyne's broad forehead is simply a sign of beauty and that her beauty has little relevance to her piety.

Keywords: span, wimple, piety, romance heroine, religious paintings.

The most controversial nun in English literature is perhaps Chaucer's Madame Eglentyne. Scholars question about almost every detail of the narrator's description of her person; they cavil at her romantic name, her courtly manners, her excellent French speaking ability, her tender heart, and, especially, her attractive appearance:

Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas
Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed.
But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;
It was almoost a spanne brood, I trow
For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe (152-6).¹

A handsome nose, clear grey eyes, a small mouth with soft and red lips, a broad forehead, as well as a tall and slender body—this “provincial”² nun seems a rare beauty. The description of the Prioress's extraordinary appearance, however, is often deemed as more appropriate for a courtly lady or a romance heroine than for a religious woman. Robert W. Hanning, for example, notes: “we can see that her small red mouth, grey eyes, and ‘tretys,’ or well-formed, nose evoke the typical description of the romance heroine” (586). Joel Fredell also observes that Chaucer's physical description of the Prioress is “remarkably similar” to the sculptural portrait of Philippa of Hainault, queen of Edward III (183-4).³ And Muriel Bowden points out that Madame Eglentyne “resembles the fair ladies of the romance” not only in that she is “ful symple and coy,” but in that she has certain physical characteristics which call to our attention “the fact that this is the description of every heroine of romance” (94).⁴ Although scholars never specified how Chaucer's Prioress (or any nun) should look like, most of them simply query whether a religious woman should look courtly or beautiful—Madame Eglentyne is after all not a courtly lady; she just “peyned hire to countrefete cheere of court” (i.e., she is a phony, GP 139-40).

Due to her mistaken social identity, the Prioress's beauty also becomes dubious in readers' eyes. Some critics doubt whether the Prioress is a true beauty, or her appearance truly resembles a typical beauty in Chaucer's age. Helen Cooper, for

¹ All quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford 2008). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by fragment and line numbers.

² Many readers speculate the Prioress's provinciality from the aspects of her birth, French accent, ways of emulating the courtly manners, as well as the kind of tale she tells (see Sheila Delany, 211; Hardy Long Frank, “Chaucer's Prioress and the Blessed Virgin,” 356; Carol M. Meale, 53; Helen Cooper, 38; and Stephanie Gaynor, 385 & 387).

³ By examining high Gothic portrait sculptures, Fredell has discussed the relationship of Chaucer's portraits to the medieval genre of portraiture. He finds that the first three lines (GP 154-6) of Chaucer's description of the Prioress's image “use details directly mirrored in Philippa's face: well-formed, proportionate nose, small mouth, and ‘fair forehead’” (184).

⁴ See also Frank, “Chaucer's Prioress and the Blessed Virgin,” 346; Cooper, 38; Maureen Hourigan, 44; Karma Lochrie, 60; Jill Mann, 135; and Priscilla Martin, 33.

instance, objecting to the more conventional interpretation of the phrase “nat undergrowe” as “tall”⁵ and “well-proportioned”⁶ by speculating the size of the Prioress’s forehead, declares that Madame Eglentyen is “a *large* woman” (38). “Plumpness” is a word often used to describe the heroines’ bodies or arms in medieval romance, but never “fatness” or “largeness.”⁷ As it is, the “obese” Prioress, despite her remarkable features, does not seem a beauty in the opinion of many. Obesity is not just a physical condition to a number of critics; treating it as a presentation of figurative language, Madame Eglentyne’s “nat undergrowe” body signifies something deeper. Chauncey Wood, for example, by studying Chaucer’s portraits as “signs,” alleges that “Chaucer meant us to think of the Prioress as corpulent,” and that her large body rightly reveals that she is a religious who “does not partake enough heavenly food” and “eats too much earthly food” (97). In other words, Madame Eglentyne’s fatness, like metonymy, appropriately reflects her spiritual deficiency. Richard Rex holds a similar opinion in regard to the Prioress’s spiritual state: “[Madame Eglentyne] is simply fat... the true anchoress is thin in evidence of her hard life, whereas the false anchoress is fat as a sign of her gluttony and deceit” (125). Although the Prioress is not an anchoress, a female hermit that lives and prays in seclusion,⁸ her supposed obesity is no less regarded as an indication of her dietary excessiveness⁹ and moral paucity. In sum, Madame Eglentyne, because of her “large” body, is considered an intemperate woman and a female religious shamefully lacking of moral and spiritual essence.

Besides her “nat undergrowe” body, the Prioress’s span-broad forehead is another feature that has caused confusion in the judgment of her beauty. What size is “a spanne brood”? What does it signify to have such a forehead? Is it “too much” (to borrow Cooper’s words, 38)? Is it a sign of beauty or “stupidity”¹⁰? Does it imply

⁵ Derek Brewer observes that Boccaccio “seems to have favoured tall women—both of his Emilia and his Criseida are tall,” and that Chaucer was affected by Boccaccio in the description of his heroines’ height (265).

⁶ See Thomas Blake Clark, 314.

⁷ In discussing the portraying of beauty in medieval poetry, Brewer points out that “ladies are either tall, or ‘not to tall,’ and they are usually plump, but sometimes slender” (259), and referring to a contemporary court poet Machut, he quotes: “Her chin is cloven. She is in general pink and white, plump and tender with long arms and fingers...” (263). In the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer praises arms for both plumpness and slenderness (U. 953-4).

⁸ Several critics point out that the Prioress is not a “litle lady” whom “we can dismiss so airily,” but a “competent, shrewd professional woman,” an “estate manager,” who manages a prosperous religious house of perhaps “thirty nuns” (see Frank, “Seeing the Prioress Whole,” 229-30; David Wallace, 511; and *Riverside Chaucer*, 803). Henry Ansgar Kelly also observes that she is “a religious superior” who pays attention to her religious duties and external decorum (128); and Michael M. Sheehan recognizes her status as a “Mother Superior” who “exercised one of the most responsible roles open to women during the Middle Ages” (196).

⁹ According to Thomas J. Farrell’s study, the Prioress has been read as an “overeater” since the 1930s (219).

¹⁰ See Clark: “It is strange that Chaucer... would endow her with a forehead indicative of dullness, and foolishness, stupidity and slowness” (314).

intelligence or “boldness”¹¹? In what way should a nun wear her wimple? Is it apposite for a religious woman to reveal her forehead in public? In this point, many critics, again, like their queries over the Prioress’s “nat undergrowe” body, seem to show more interest in what the narrator insinuates by a forehead “a spanne brood” than what the term “a spanne brood” literally means. This persistent interest has for decades confused the reader’s understanding and appreciation of Madame Eglentyne’s beauty and piety. Actually, the confusion is mainly caused by the discrepancy between how the Prioress appears to be and how people (Chaucer, his contemporaries as well as modern readers) think she should be. This article aims to match up the discrepancy and clarify some of the confusions with a focus on the scrutiny of the phrase “a spanne brood.” Measuring the actual size of the Prioress’s forehead by investigating the various definitions of the term “spanne” in the Middle Ages and examining the portraits of courtly and religious ladies in a number of medieval paintings, I hope to testify that Madame Eglentyne’s broad forehead is simply a sign of beauty and that her beauty has little relevance to her piety.

* * *

Chaucer tells us that the Prioress had “a fair forheed” and it was “almost a spanne brood.” Readers wonder at the breadth of the forehead and what that breadth signifies. The usual definition of a “span” in Chaucer’s age was seven to nine inches¹²—the distance from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the little finger when the hand is fully extended,¹³ or “the whole length of the hand from the wrist to the finger-tips.”¹⁴ This breadth seems over large in some critics’ opinion. Cooper, for example, remarks: “A wide forehead is an attribute of beauty, but eight inches is too much”; and judging from the phrase “nat undergrowe”—“a litotes, like Rome being no mean city or death no small thing”—she comes to the conclusion that the Prioress is a *large* woman. That is, unless the breadth of the Prioress’s forehead is out of normal proportion to her stature, Madame Eglentyne cannot be a slender woman.

The Prioress’s wide forehead, to Rex (probably the severest critic of Madame Eglentyne)¹⁵, does not just imply her having an obese figure (caused by her gluttonous diet); he further discovers a “plausible explanation” abundant in “biblical and moral significance,” and claims that Madame Eglentyne’s “unusually large forehead” is

¹¹ See Rex, 124.

¹² See Colin Wilcockson, 95; Cooper, 38; and Fredell, 184.

¹³ See Farrell, 212.

¹⁴ See S. T. Knight, 179.

¹⁵ In his book *The Sins of Madame Eglentyne” and Other Essays on Chaucer*, Rex approaches the Prioress’s “sins” from various aspects, exploring in full length (nine chapters) and citing widely to persuade the reader that every detail of the Prioress’s portrait indicates an aspect of her evil character. Under Rex’s scrutiny, Madame Eglentyne is not just unerringly sinful; she is *the* incarnation of evil.

the harlot's eyebrow—which at Jer. 3:3 is a figure for the hypocrisy of unrepentant sinners: “The forhed of a strumpet womman is maad to thee; thou woldest not shamen” (124).

Interestingly, though Chaucer only expresses wonderment at the Prioress's big forehead, modern critics assure us that she, having a broad brow, is not only corpulent but sexually promiscuous.

Although many critics consider the Prioress's forehead “overgrown,” there are contrary opinions. Thomas J. Farrell argues that Madame Eglentyne's fair forehead “offers no meaningful foothold for objecting her,” and that “readers are overreacting when they criticize the Prioress on the basis of its ‘spanne’” (218). I agree with Farrell more, but my judgment is simpler: unless the innocent pilgrim Chaucer is being foolish, a fat, and therefore ridged, forehead cannot appear “fair” in any audience's eye (medieval or modern), and Chaucer the author, according to Brewer's comparison of him with his forerunners and contemporaries, could not have sacrificed his art just for the sake of being comic or satiric (264). Actually, a person's forehead appears not so large if his/her cheeks are fat: it is a matter of visual effect and proportion. In his study of Gothic portraiture and Queen Philippa's sculptural portrait,¹⁶ Fredell states: “‘broad’ signifies the proportions typical of high Gothic female faces...: as if the face were an egg standing on its narrow point, with the forehead being the widest breadth in the ovoid form... High gothic sculptural conventions dictated an ideal feminine forehead to be broad in proportion to the rest of the face” (184). Indeed, whether one's forehead is large or not is not an absolute measurement, but a comparative one. If the Prioress is a fat lady, her plump and flabby cheeks would only make her forehead appear smaller and narrower; or to put it another way, the Prioress's face is rather thin—or to use a litotes, not fat at all; and that condition, plus the phrase “nat undergrowe,” make the Prioress a tall and slender lady.

The ambiguity created by the breadth of the Prioress's forehead is not just caused by modern critics' negligence of proportion, but also by the varied definitions of the term “span” in the medieval times. Some ancient measurements seem to be quite inexact, such as foot, cubit, and span. The measurement foot is originated from the

¹⁶ Philippa of Hainault (1314-69), Queen consort of King Edward III of England. Her funerary portrait was carved by Jean de Liege c. 1367. The effigy, in addition to broad forehead, straight nose, and small mouth, has “a voluminous triple chin,” plump drooping cheeks, and a prominent abdomen. Fredell observes that Philippa's portrait shows the “type” of beauty (including the triple chin, plump cheeks, and large abdomen) in that age (182). However, the corpulent parts of the portrait may only be a truthful reflection of the aged queen, for Philippa's other portraits (her younger images) do not show these “obesity” problems.

length of a human foot—despite the different sizes of human feet. Cubit is the distance from elbow to the tip of the middle finger—again the length varies accordingly (eighteen to twenty-two inches). But the definition of span is perhaps the most diverse of the three. Farrell has discovered more than ten different definitions of measurements all called by the word “span” (the texts in which the word is found cover the period from 1000 to 1483), and one of which is: “four fingers equal a span” (215-6). But even when a span indicates “measure of the hand,” the hand could be measured in “either its longitude or its latitude” (Ibid. 214). Furthermore, how to read Chaucer’s “spanne” adds variables to the definitions. Most scholars interpret “almost a spanne brood” as the distance from temple to temple. S. T. Knight, however, proposes a different reading of the phrase. By referring to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which says a span is “a measure of length, equivalent ... to the breadth of the hand..., i.e. about three to four inches” (179), Knight suggests that Chaucer’s “spanne” may indicate the height (not the traditional width) of the Prioress’s forehead. A forehead of three to four inches high is still very large—unless the Prioress’s hair-line is plucked back.¹⁷ Yet, I find that if we read Knight’s suggestion of height with Farrell’s definition of “four fingers,” the Prioress’s forehead then is large, but not too large or “unusually large.” Certainly, the techniques of measurement also count. Farrell maintains that “an average contemporary woman’s head, measured at its widest point, is ... 5.67 inches broad... Even a measurement along the arc of the forehead... would barely reach six inches...” (212). Namely, measuring by calipers (point to point) and by linear measurement (across the curve space) cause different results. If the Prioress, looked from the front view, appears to have an eight-inch wide forehead, she would indeed look “grotesque” (to borrow Farrell’s word, 212); but if that eight inches means the linear measurement from temple to temple, or the linear measurement of the forehead is about the length of a palm,¹⁸ then Madame Eglentyne’s forehead just has a good size and is not at all “too much” as some critics have thought.¹⁹

I believe that when the pilgrim Chaucer exclaimed “It was almost a spanne brood, I trowe,” he was merely showing his wonderment of the Prioress’s white, smooth, broad, beautiful forehead, and the tag “I trowe” shows that he had just used a

¹⁷ Eileen Power notes: “high foreheads happened to be fashionable among worldly ladies, who even shaved theirs to make them higher” (*Medieval People* 89). Knight also points out that “many Madonnas, many portraits of beautiful ladies who show the high forehead, who even show a forehead which looks curiously bulbous because the hair-line has been plucked back” (179). Similar to Cooper, Rex, and many other critics, Knight likewise regards the Prioress’s high forehead as an appropriate correspondence to her “considerable size” of body (179).

¹⁸ *The Oxford English Dictionary* shows that the word “span” is “constantly glossed in the Middle English Period as *palmus*,” which means “a hand-span in our modern sense” (Knight 179).

¹⁹ Perhaps oriental people’s heads are larger (and faces flatter), a forehead of eight inches is merely a good size to the proportion of their faces. I did an investigation in a class of about sixty students, and only twenty-three of them have a forehead slightly smaller than 20 cm. (about 7.87 inches).

hyperbole. Indeed, imagining the Prioress's forehead to be over-large and signifying negative implications only spoils the linguistic congruity and narrative unity of the poet's depiction of the Prioress's faultless features. Chaucer certainly needs not sacrifice his poetic renown for an inconsistent satire. From the following line that describes the Prioress's tall and slender body as well as the images of many pious ladies presented in contemporary artworks (will be discussed later), it is evident that Chaucer is on the whole more inclined to create an impeccable appearance for the Prioress than makes ugly her image.

In a way, modern critics are not so much displeased by the Prioress's large forehead as *why* she exposes that "expanse of skin" (Farrell 211) in public. Scholars, by either referring to the Middle English *Ancrene Wisse* or the Benedictine Rule, usually assert that a nun's wimple should cover her whole forehead. Eileen Power maintains:

The nuns were supposed to wear their veils pinned tightly down to their eyebrows, so that their foreheads were completely hidden... If [the Prioress] had been wearing her veil properly, [her forehead] would have been invisible. (*Medieval People* 89)

In Power's comment, that Madame Eglentyne, who happened to be blessed with a fair forehead, "could not resist lifting up and spreading out" (ibid 89) her veil not only reveals a worldly character, but shows that she has blatantly disobeyed the conventual rules. Knight also maintains that the Prioress's wimple should at least cover her forehead "in company," and, recognizing the "sharply ironical point" made by the poet, displays the Prioress's problem even more directly: "[The Prioress's] wimple is improperly high, and further, it is improperly high for the sake of a totally worldly fashion" (179). By stressing "improperly high," Knight obviously also considers that the Prioress has exposed too much of her forehead. Rex's opinion, again, is severer than the others. He claims that the fact that Madame Eglentyne "does not cover her forehead" should be interpreted "in a metaphorical or biblical rather than a literal sense," and asserts that Chaucer, by exposing the Prioress's "fair forehead," aims to describe "the sinful state of nuns who have forsaken devotion for hypocrisy and pride" (125). Actually, we are not sure if the Prioress has exposed all or too much of her forehead (Chaucer never specified it), but via her observable fair brow, the Prioress, in the view of many critics, not just breaks the conventual rule, betrays her religious devotion, but flaunts a worldly and prideful character openly.

Besides *why*, *how* the Prioress displays her forehead is also contemplated by many critics. Chaucer tells us: "Ful semyly hir wymple pynched was" (GP 151),

which, according to *The Riverside Chaucer*, means that the Prioress's wimple ("a head dress that covers all but the face"²⁰) is "properly pleated."²¹ Many critics discover a problem in this properly-pleated wimple. Jill Mann remarks:

The author of the Middle English *Ancrene Wisse* warns religious women against rings, brooches, girdles, gloves, and attention to their wimples. Pleating or "ipinchunge" of the wimple is specifically disapproved of (130).

Recognizing "pynched" as "pleated," Chaucer's Prioress, "with an elaborate manner of dress ill-fitted to [her] professions of humility," Mann thus observes, "fits easily into the tradition of estates satire," (Ibid). Mann's observation in this point, however, only confirms the poet's mock of the Prioress, but has not distinguished other possible meanings of the word "pynched." Critics also tend to regard Madame Eglentyne's well pleated wimple as a manifestation of her vainglorious character. Rex, for example, points out that "a pleated, or 'semeliche,' wimple was considered a sign of vanity," and, alluding to the *Book to a Mother*,²² affirms:

...religious were not expected to emulate secular fashions... if pleated garments were indicative of vanity when worn by secular persons, the pleated wimple of a nun was a veritable badge of her continued devotion to the world's vanities (118).

If "semyly pynched" means "properly pleated," as the note in *The Riverside Chaucer* indicates, then the Prioress's wearing a properly pleated wimple, from some critics' point of view, is itself an improper behavior—or to put it another way: the Prioress seems to wear her wimple pleated properly in order to expose her forehead improperly.

This paradox reveals an unawareness of the functions of wimples. Wimples, like most parts of fashions, change accordingly. Nowadays, most nuns do not wear wimples; for those who still do, the style of wimples has become very simple: it only covers the hair, but not the whole forehead and usually not the ears (nuns also need to work; they need to hear well). Medieval nuns wear medieval habits; modern nuns wear modern clothes—that is a plain logic.²³ We must note that Madame Eglentyne

²⁰ See note 151 on page 25, *Riverside Chaucer*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² I am not able to find this book. According to Rex, *Book to a Mother* was a late fourteenth-century devotional treatise, written by "an unknown priest to instruct his mother (about to become a nun) and other lay people on the reasons for conventual life" (117).

²³ My statement is not based on any academic reference. It is an understanding from my close association with Catholic sisters since college days (I attended a Catholic university as a student and

does not wear a wimple because she is a nun; the Wife of Bath also wears a wimple (“Ywympled wel,” GP 470). Actually, wimples were merely part of medieval women’s customary outfit.²⁴ And if the illustration on the front cover of Cooper’s *Oxford Guides* is reliable,²⁵ women were not the only sex that wore “wimples” in the Middle Ages. At least two figures (noticeably male)²⁶ in the cover picture of Mann’s *Estates Satire*²⁷ wear a head dress which looks similar to what the figure wears on the other book—to keep warm, no doubt, since pilgrimages usually start in April and England is still very cold in that month.²⁸ Evidently, the essential function of a wimple is not to distinguish a female religious from a lay woman, but to keep the head, the neck, and the chin warm.

Some critics dislike the way Madame Eglentyne’s wimple was “semyly pynched” mainly because they construe “semyly pynched” not just as “well” pleated but “prettily or nicely”²⁹ pleated. “Pynched,” however, does not necessarily mean *pleated* (though it is glossed so in the *Riverside Chaucer* and widely accepted by scholars), and “semyly” (literally means properly) does not much indicate *prettily* or *nicely*—although when a wimple is properly pinned, it may look nice or even pretty. In my judgment, the phrase “semyly pynched” should be more correctly interpreted as “tightly or properly pinned”—i.e., pinched tightly/properly by pins. The lady in the painting titled *A Woman* by Robert Campin (c. 1375-1444) wears a typical medieval wimple on which two pins are clearly visible; obviously, the functions of the pins are

have been working in another Catholic university as a teacher). The style of religious wimple also alters in accordance with weathers and regions: e.g., Catholic sisters in the Philippines do not wear heavy veils or high collars because of the tropical weather.

²⁴ *Wikipedia* writes that at many stages of medieval culture, “it was unseemly for a married woman to show her hair”—from this statement, covering hair or not is one of the customary ways to distinguish married women from unmarried ones rather than to distinguish religious women from secular ones (This is similar to the custom in many cultures; for example, in ancient China, married women had to comb back all their hair while unmarried ones—including spinsters—wore bangs). Numerous paintings, drawings, miniatures, and illustrations from the Middle Ages depict women of different estates wearing wimples both indoors and outdoors. In Franco Zeffirelli’s movie *Romeo & Juliet*, Juliet’s nurse (a widow) at all occasions wears a wimple and a veil exactly like a nun’s, which shows that what we are familiar nowadays as a Catholic sister’s headdress is actually a customary outfit for medieval women.

²⁵ The words on the back cover indicate that it is “a woodcut of the Wife of Bath”; but since a long rosary hangs from the right hand of the figure and the figure’s facial expression is “ful symple and coy,” I judge that the character presented in the woodcut is the Prioress, not the Wife of Bath (besides, Chaucer never mentions anything hanging from the Wife’s hand).

²⁶ See also the illustration on the cover page of Power’s *Medieval People*: the head dress of the man is little different from that of a nun’s. All the existent portraits of Chaucer also show him wearing a headdress like a wimple.

²⁷ The picture, taken from Lydgate’s *Troy Book* in the British Museum, depicts “a group of fifteenth-century pilgrims.”

²⁸ The average temperature in London in the springtime nowadays is from 4 °C. to 10 °C.

²⁹ In discussing the phrase “semyly pynched,” Chauncey Wood explicates: “... the seemliness or nicety of its pleating is what is stressed...” (151). Rex also claims that the pleating of clothing is “after the fashion of secular women” (118), indicating that the “pleating of clothing” looks prettier in people’s eyes.

to hold the several thicknesses of cloth together—thus, the woman’s wimple looks, so to speak, “semyly pynched” (tightly and properly pinched) by the pins. If a lady does not want her wimple to fall loose or be blown apart by cold winds when riding abroad in company, her wimple indeed should better be “pinched properly.” The Wife of Bath, as above mentioned, is also “ywympled wel”; as this line follows closely the line “upon an amblere esily she sat,” it apparently indicates that the Wife also wears her wimple properly³⁰ so that it does not get loose or fall open during riding. In sum, when Chaucer says “ful semly hir wymple pynched was,” he is observing that the Prioress is an extremely neat and orderly person rather than implying that she is vain and emulating the worldly fashions.³¹ This reading is closer to truth if we examine the placement of this single line: it is between the description of the Prioress’s “conscience and tender herte” and that of her perfect features. Therefore, Madame Eglentyne’s meticulousness³² in pinching her wimple properly not only echoes her conscientious emotionality in the previous lines but also naturally leads forward to the descriptions of her exact, flawless features and then her tall and slender body in the following lines. If this line was mainly for indicating the Prioress’s vanity, as some critics have alleged, it not only is misplaced but interrupts the linguistic congruity of the passage (lines 148-54).

Indeed, no matter how much the Prioress tries to expose herself to the world outside the convent,³³ her forehead is not unduly revealed, nor does she need to reveal all of it—her wimple “improperly high,” as Knight highlights (179)—to let her fellow pilgrims notice that she has a good forehead. As above mentioned, critics have observed that nuns, according to the Benedictine Rule or the guidance in *Ancrene Wisse*, should pin their wimples “down to their eyebrows.” Quite a few portraits from the Middle Ages, however, show that the rule might just be taken as

³⁰ The *Riverside* glosses “ywympled wel” as “wearing a *large* wimple” (see note 470, p. 31; italic mine). “Well” is usually the adverb of “good” or “fine,” but hardly of “big” or “large.” Interpreting “well” as “large” is evidently influenced by Chaucer’s following depiction of the Wife’s broad, shield-like hat: “on hir heed an hat / As brood as is a bokeler or a targe” (GP 470-1). Judging from this line, the wimple is obviously not the outmost headgear for medieval people (as the cover picture of *Estates Satire* also shows). At any rate, it is hard to imagine the Wife wearing a huge hat over a large wimple—that clumsy image only marks down Alisoun’s taste in fashion and her estheticism as an experienced cloth-maker.

³¹ William Rothwell also stresses that “semyly” cannot possibly be used as a “debased form of language”; as it is, the phrase “ful semly hir wymple pynched was” should be read as complimentary rather than ironic (187).

³² According to Rothwell’s comment (“Chaucer’s meticulous portrayal of Madame Eglentyne...”), the meticulousness is rather on the poet’s part (Ibid. 185).

³³ However, Frank asserts that we need not to accuse the Prioress of breaking the rule of *clausura*, since in the medieval times it was not unusual for a prioress to travel; he writes: “[A] prioress was not uncommonly upon the road. Whatever the Rule might say, however the bishops might fulminate, the practical reality in the fourteenth century was that an abbess or a prioress might well travel for business or even for pleasure. Estate matters, legal matters, church matters--all might take Chaucer's Prioress up to London, even perhaps down to Canterbury” (232).

suggested guidelines rather than moral decrees. The painting *Saint Veronica with the Sudarium*³⁴ presents St. Veronica with a fully exposed forehead and the inner cloth of her wimple “well pleated” and pinched by a pin under her chin. St. Veronica’s face looks pious and solemn; her high forehead does not at all suggest the boldness of “the harlot’s brow” as Rex accuses Madame Eglentyne of. A couple of more examples can be seen in Power’s book *Medieval Women*. Number 40 of the illustrations depicts ten nuns in the choir (86); all of their foreheads are well visible.³⁵ Another one in the same book (no. 41), *Nunnery Officials*, presents, in the bottom row, eight nuns walking and singing in procession:³⁶ at least five of them have high and wide foreheads “almost a spanne brood” (I trowe) and the rest’s are also clearly shown. The nuns (six of them) walking behind the priests are all tall and slender (“nat undergrowe”), and look very graceful with smiles “ful symple and coy.” Chaucer may or may not have seen the pictures.³⁷ If he had, his depiction of the Prioress is only conventional and thus may not connote so much sarcasm or criticism as most modern critics have inclined to think. If Chaucer had not, then the similarity between his depiction and that of the pictures only reflects the general appearance of nuns in the Middle Ages rather than the poet’s deliberate configuration for his Prioress.

Besides the paintings and the pictures mentioned above, the medieval Madonnas give us even more demonstrations of the standardized image of female piety (as far as the correlation between the wimple and the forehead is concerned) in Chaucer’s age. The most often portrayed lady in the Middle Ages is none but the Virgin Mary. Though not a professed nun, she is constantly depicted as the model of female piety, with or without veils. For example in *The Wilton Diptych*, Mary and the female saints around her and the Holy Infant all have bare foreheads³⁸—though in wimples—high, broad, and even bulbous as Knight has observed.³⁹ Many more paintings with the titles *Madonna and Child* or *The Virgin and Child* also present Mary with a large, smooth forehead, such as the ones by Masaccio⁴⁰, Don Silvestro Dei Gherarducci,⁴¹ Giotto di Bondone,⁴² Antoniazio Romano,⁴³ and Adriaen

³⁴ Master of Saint Veronica, ca. 1420.

³⁵ See Page 99: *Nuns in Choir*, miniature of Poor Clares from the “Psalter of Henry VI,” French, fifteenth century.

³⁶ See page 87. It is a miniature from “La Sainte Abbaye,” French, c. 1300 (99).

³⁷ In her study of Chaucer’s depiction of the Prioress’s facial expression, Martin points out that “the visual arts contribute to the effect” as the Prioress’s *symple* smile is “fashionable in the spiritual sphere: the tender smile on the face of the Madonna develops in the sculpture of the fourteenth century” (34).

³⁸ See also the one by Master of the St. Lucy Legend (1480-1510), *Virgin Surrounded by Female Saints*, c. 1488, and the one by Gerard David, 1460-1523, *Virgin and Child with Female Saints*.

³⁹ See n. 17.

⁴⁰ Masaccio, 1401-1428, was the first great Italian painter of the Quattrocento period of the Italian Renaissance. He is best known for recreating lifelike figures and movement.

⁴¹ Don Silvestro Dei Gherarducci, 1339-99, was an Italian painter and illuminator; he became a monk and later a prior in Florence where he started work on illustrations for manuscripts.

Isenbrandt,⁴⁴ as well as many a work by Leonardo da Vinci⁴⁵—to name but a few.⁴⁶ It might be mentioned as well that the Mary of Michelangelo’s world-famed *Pieta* has a well exposed forehead, too, high and broad, just like, though with a woeful face, that of any traditional beauty. I have not read any rebuke of immodesty or impropriety on those medieval artworks concerning women’s exposed foreheads, not even on those with Madonnas baring a feeding breast.⁴⁷

Besides the Virgin Mary, female saints are also prevalent figures for the theme of piety in the medieval arts. In Adriaen Isenbrandt’s painting *St. Mary Magdalene Reading*,⁴⁸ the female saint is presented with a high, broad, and smooth-looking forehead; because of an undersized wimple and delicate coloring, the figure looks tender and pious and the ambience of the picture solemn and tranquil. Figures of saints often appear on the church windows, too. Three panels (dated to about 1340) currently in the south aisle east window of St. Nicholas Church, Stanford-on-Avon, present three saints (one is captioned as the figure of St. Agnes and the other two unidentified) in wimples; all of the three figures have high and broad foreheads fully exposed to the viewers. Judged from these artworks, the opinion that the Prioress’s probably uncovered forehead indicates her pride, vanity, and impropriety as well as a lack of piety cannot stand.

The Prioress actually does not need to expose all her forehead in order to let her observer perceive that she has a fine-looking one—hence, the traditional viewpoint that the Prioress is wearing her wimple too/improperly high may have been mistaken. In truth, Chaucer never specified how the Prioress wore her wimple (the Wife of Bath was succinctly “ywympled wel”), or how her forehead was exposed: e.g., half, all, or not at all. But as far as the size is concerned, by just half or even one third of the

⁴² Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337), better known simply as Giotto, was an Italian painter from Florence. His masterwork is the decoration of the Arena Chapel in Padua; the fresco depicts the life of the Virgin and the life of Christ.

⁴³ Antoniazio Romano, 1430-1510, was an Italian Early Renaissance painter, the leading figure of the Roman school during the fifteenth century. His Madonna’s forehead is high, round, and radiant.

⁴⁴ Adriaen Isenbrandt, 1480 (?) -1551, was a Flemish Northern Renaissance painter. His Madonnas have extremely high, broad, and bulbous foreheads.

⁴⁵ Leonardo da Vinci, 1452-1519, an Italian polymath, is widely considered one of the greatest painters of all time. The well-known Mona Lisa’s smile is typically “ful symple and coy.”

⁴⁶ Appreciate also the paintings by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), Cosimo Rosselli (1440-1507), and statues by many anonymous medieval sculptors. Botticelli has painted many Madonnas; all look “ful symple and coy” and have beautiful foreheads.

⁴⁷ Adriaen Isenbrandt, Leonardo da Vinci, Jan Provost (1465-1529), and many an artist have painted this subject.

⁴⁸ Scholarship in the late 20th and early 21st century comes to recognize that historical tradition has misidentified Mary Magdalene (or Mary of Magdala) as a repentant prostitute, and wrongly depicted her in art as a weeping sinner wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair. Mary was the leader of a group of women disciples who were present at the cross and the burial, a devoted follower of Jesus, accompanying his travels and following him to the end. According to the Christian *New Testament*, she was the first person to see the resurrected Christ. Mary Magdalene is considered by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches to be a saint, with a feast day on July 22nd.

brow revealed, the narrator and the other pilgrims were still able to appreciate—and measure as well—Madame Eglentyne’s fair forehead. In addition to the many fully exposed and well presented foreheads referred to above, there are numerous artworks that draw Madonnas, saints, or pious women with partly covered foreheads. In Rogier Van Der Weydon’s renowned *The Magdalen Reading*,⁴⁹ Magdalen is depicted with a wimple covered down to two thirds of her forehead. The proportion of the forehead to the face and the shape of it (round and large), however, are well expressed. Several paintings by the Italian painter Pietro Lorenzetti (1280-1348) depict Madonnas with wimples partly covering the foreheads which, nevertheless, still appear wide and even protruding to the viewers, for example the works entitled as *Madonna Enthroned with Angels* (1340), *Madonna col Bambino*,⁵⁰ and *Madonna of the Sunset* (c. 1330).⁵¹ A couple of paintings by Duccio⁵² in which Madonnas’s foreheads, though covered to almost the eyebrows, can still be observed as wide and broad. Judging from those paintings and many others in the same age, we may propose that Chaucer does not need to see the whole of the Prioress’s forehead in order to measure and describe its size. With a number of contemporary paintings, drawings, and statues around him, presenting the Virgin Mary and female saints with high, wide, smooth, and radiant foreheads, Chaucer could simply give Madame Eglentyne a comparable one without considering too much whether that expanse of skin or how much of it should be exposed. By this same postulation, we may further propose that Chaucer was not only influenced by his contemporary artists’ depictions of pious women when he was portraying the Prioress, but probably also exerted influence upon artists of later generations that continue to work on female images of piety. Evidences are sufficient. For instance, Raphael’s Madonnas all have large foreheads, some of which are so round and high that they look apparently more than a “spanne brood”;⁵³ a number of Giovanni Bellini’s Madonnas have big foreheads, too,

⁴⁹ Rogier Van Der Weydon, 1399-1464, known as the third (by birth date) of the three great Early Flemish artists, was considered one of the most profound and influential painters of the fifteenth century. He is famous for religious triptychs and altarpieces. *The Magdalen Reading* (before 1438) is a fragment, 62.2x54.4 c.m., cut from an altarpiece.

⁵⁰ Libero Video offers a video (6:59) titled *Madonna col Bambino in Arte*, presenting hundreds of Madonnas painted in the medieval times and early Renaissance. Interestingly, only a few Madonnas have covered or partly covered foreheads.

⁵¹ Pietro Lorenzetti, an Italian painter who introduced naturalism into Sienese art with his younger brother Ambrogio, was a prolific painter on religious themes. Most of his Madonnas have fully exposed foreheads.

⁵² Duccio di Buoninsegna, c. 1255-1318, was born in Siena, Tuscany, and one of the most influential artists of his time. He is known for many important works in government and religious buildings, and is considered to be the father of Sienese painting and, along with a few others, the founder of Western art.

⁵³ Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, 1483-1520, better known simply as Raphael, was an Italian painter and architect. Raphael was enormously productive; for the very large and bulbous foreheads of the Virgin Mary, appreciate for example his *Madonna with Christ Child Blessing and St. Jerome and St. Francis*, c.1502, *Madonna and Child with the Book*, c. 1503, *Madonna and Child with the Infant Baptist*, c.

uncovered or partly covered;⁵⁴ and the Spanish painter Murillo⁵⁵ also present his Madonnas with good-sized foreheads which make the figures look only more soft, tender, and beautiful. Although it is hard to decide whether those Renaissance painters have read Chaucer's Prioress (very likely they have), the standards of beauty in the Middle Ages are obviously quite consistent in either the descriptions of romance heroines or the artistic presentations of pious women. Anyhow, a broad, radiant, and smooth-looking forehead is definitely a sign of beauty for both the medieval and Renaissance periods (and probably for all times). And though Chaucer's portrait of Madame Eglentyne is full of ironies and ambiguities, we need not distort the traditional standard of beauty or mistrust the Prioress's piety because Chaucer mocks her hard.

1509, *Madonna of Foligno*, c. 1511, and many others.

⁵⁴ Giovanni Bellini, 1430-1526, an Italian Renaissance painter, has painted a large number of Madonnas.

⁵⁵ Bartolome Esteban Murillo, 1617-1682, though also produced many paintings of contemporary women and children, was best known for his religious works.

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