It goes without saying that medieval English misericords are some of the finest intricate wooden carvings to have come down to us from the Middle Ages. Besides their aesthetic value, they are valuable as records of contemporary medieval society. Through close study of these works of art the everyday lives and beliefs of medieval people can be illuminated. How medieval woodcarvers chose their motifs for misericords sheds some light on their mental attitude. Apparently, motifs were chosen at random as a product of the carver’s imagination, and there was clearly much freedom of choice about what was carved. However, motifs were frequently chosen for their multiple symbolic meanings.

Let’s take an example from St. Lawrence’s, Shropshire, England. Here, in this parish church, there is a series of very interesting misericords of the fifteenth century. If we examine them closely, we notice that these carvings convey sharp satire
comments on women’s sexual charms which medieval man thought ensnared him into damnation. (Fig. 1)

M. D. Anderson argues that many of the recurrent motifs on late medieval English misericords can find parallels in the exempla inserted in sermons by the contemporary friars. The numerous sermons the friars delivered show that they preached Christian ways of living by giving practical moral instruction rather than by attempting to explain abstract theology. They preached that the wages of sin are death, and narrating an exemplum taught the laity how to avoid the temptations of the Devil. The chief target of the friars, or at least of the misogynistic friars, was the moral inferiority of woman. They insisted that a woman’s pride, vanity, and lechery drove man to evil. The exaggerated emphasis on female vanity and sensuality was certainly a keynote of much medieval sermon literature in those days. The misericord carvers of the fifteenth century followed the preaching of the friars and were quick to introduce, in some cases comically, the satirical view of women or anti-feminism in their carvings.

This brief paper will deal with the headdress motif in medieval English misericords and literature, and discuss its symbolic role. Since costume is what we might call a social signature, it could inform the observer of a wearer’s class, religion, taste, and character. Particularly, the women’s headgear is always very noticeable, acting as a mirror in which changing social values are sharply reflected. We will focus on two existant misericords describing a headdress or a hennin — those at Ludlow (Shropshire) (Fig. 2) and at Minster-in-Thanet (Kent) (Fig. 3) — and then relate the symbolism to the four adjoining misericords (133-134; N-16 to N-20) at Ludlow Parish Church.

The N-14 (p. 133) misericord at Ludlow (c1435) portrays a grinning, bridled female figure (a scold) with an outrageous horned headdress. The supporter on its right is a figure holding a tabor and stick, and it appears to be ridiculing the scold.

The headgear on this scold was very popular in the first half of the fifteenth century, and it was called a horned hennin or a horned headdress because its ends protruded like horns. The hennin, probably derived from the courts of Burgundy, France, was originally a simple headdress, tall and of conical shape. It was made of velvet, brocade, silk, or other fine fabrics. Hiding all or most of the hair, it usually had a long, diaphanous veil suspended from its peak and reaching down to shoulders or even
the ankles. As it emphasized the height of the wearer’s forehead, the sign of her physical beauty and charm, in time it rose higher and more pointedly. This headgear was usually beautiful and expensive. Later, it evolved into the horned hennin with two protrusions, like horns.

Before the fourteenth century, northern Europeans thought that a woman’s virtue could be measured by how well she covered her hair. Married women were naturally expected to cover their hair as much as possible, since head coverings were a symbol of their fidelity to their own husbands and of their contrition before God. Therefore, to discard this custom and show expanse of skin from brow to hairline, and to decorate the head, particularly with a gigantic, elaborate headdress, was considered as the most arrogant and provocative conduct against God. In spite of this tendency to denounce towering headgear, however, by the fifteenth century, submissive veils had been quickly replaced by elaborate horned headdresses or jewelled caulps (nets). Tall and ornate, they became more and more exaggerated in height and width as well as in quality. Accordingly, the headdress assumed more importance, and in order to achieve its dramatic effect and attract people’s attention, it became the fashion to pluck the hair on the forehead and on the back of the neck. Finally, steeple headdresses assumed gigantic proportions during the 1420s and 1430s, exaggerated and ornamented to such an absurd extent that moral preachers could only complain of them as a truly devilish fashion. They denounced all forms of female finery as snares of the Devil, but these tall, peaked gigantic headdresses were considered particularly disgraceful. They were criticised for revealing more of the face and neck than the former simple linen veils. In literature and art of the same period we find many allusions to these strictures. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Robert of Brunne, a canon of the Gilbertine order, attacked women in round fashion. In Handlyng Synne (1303), he condemns women for pride in hair, chaplet, and face powder. He also warns wives not to dress to entice men.

Be nat proud of ‘y croket, 
Yn ‘e cherche to tyfe and set, 
At home myst ‘ou ‘y croket werche, 
And nat at ‘y messe yn ‘e cherche.

...Of proud wymmen wuld y telle,

But 'ey are so wroth and felle;
Of 'esse 'at are so foule and fade,
'at make hem feyrene 'an god hem made
with olaunchere ou' er floure,
To make hem whytter of coloure,
Grete pryde hyt ys, and outrage,
'at she ys nat payd of god dys ymage.3

Awedded wyle may atyre here
'at here husbande loue noun but here;
For hys loue she may hyt do,
But for none ou'er manyss so.
gyt swyche y rede, 'at 'ey so fare
'at here pryde make hem nat bare.4

He also attacks women who wear long flowing gowns with wide sleeves, because devils could sit on them. It was particularly towering horned headdresses, however, that became the medieval preacher’s most frequent target of condemnation.5 Dan Michel of Northgate in his Ayenbite of Inwy (1340) renounces those ladies who curiously deck themselves out, or who make great horns of their hair, for which shrift must be made meekly.6 John Bromyard, a Dominican preacher, likens those who cover their heads with glistening headgear and “horns” to “the painted tombstone that covers a rotting corpse within.”7 He says “Those that paint and adorn themselves proudly to appear fairer than they are should reflect how in place of their crisping hair there will one day be but a skull, and so forth.”8

4 Ibid., 3335-340.
6 Dan Michel’s Ayenbite of Inwy or Remorse of Conscience, ed. Pamela Gradon, EETS, OS 23 (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 177.
8 Owest 396.
John Waldeby, an Austin Friar and later Archbishop of York, compares women who are outwardly graceful and white, but full of smoke and blackness within, to chimneys. He says: “They [these wanton women] ornament their heads like the chimney-tops with garlands, crowns and gems set therein: nevertheless nothing comes forth thence but foul smoke and temptation to lechery.”

These wanton women present themselves in public like graceful columns, yet within they are as empty as a chimney, because they lack virtue. Such victims of fashion display their bodies as weapons of the Devil, which destroy the souls of men.

Another critic, Robert Rypon of Durham, (late fourteenth century) says “Wheresoever Beauty shows upon the face, there lurks much filth beneath the skin.” He, therefore, denounces rich and costly costumes and fashionable headgear as tempters of vice. In one of his sermons on Mary Magdalen, he attacks: “be they men or women, such as adorn themselves in their garments or by means of some other artificial decoration, to give wanton pleasure to each other, are well compared to a painted sepulchre in which lies a foul corpse, or to a dung-heap covered with a vine. So, for a surety, beneath such adornment of the body, whether artificial or even natural, there lurks the vilest filth, yea, rather, a soul befouled with the vilest sins. Wherefore, men and women adorning themselves to excite lust, without a doubt, in the eyes of God are more shameful and foul than the foulest corpses of dung-hills.” So, according to Rypon, steeple headaddresses were to be condemned because wanton women wore them to increase their bodily charms and excite lust. As a result, their souls were “befouled with the vilest sins.” These headdresses symbolized the vanity, lechery, and lust of the women who have been tempted by the Devil. Moreover, such extravagance and exaggeration meant insolent pride against God because by rejoicing more in artificial beauty than in natural beauty, women desired along with Lucifer, to be equal to God. They thus ignored Him, which was a devilish act, and the most serious of the Seven Deadly Sins.

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9 Quoted in Owst, 392.
10 Quoted in Owst, 48.
11 Quoted in OWST, 404-05.

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John Lydgate, the monk of Bury, who lived during the reign of Henry VI, also speaks of the horned dresses in his ballad: “a Dyte of Womenhis Hornys.” In this ballad he insists that beauty is the gift of God and Nature only, and that no counterfeit is worth anything. True quality shines through regardless, and so it is with beauty. He persuades the ladies to lay aside their horns because they are no addition to their beauty, for beauty, he says, will show itself, though the horns be cast away. Further, Lydgate says that the beautiful heroines of old needed no horns; horns are for beasts; and the Virgin Mary wore only a kerchief, though, she was of highest birth.

The knight, Geoffrey de la Tour Landry, compiled a famous manual of moral treatises ca. 1370) to guide his three young daughters. It contains advice and directions for the regulation of their conduct through life. He warns his daughters, through an exemplum, of excessive finery of costume. He relates the didactic story of a wanton lady. She lived near the church, but on Sunday, she took so long to dress herself and kept the congregation waiting so long for mass that they grew tired and cursed her. However, on one particular Sunday when she had taken longer than usual to dress herself upon looking in the mirror, she saw the devil there. She was so terrified that she amended her conduct and thereafter went to church at the correct time. She thanked God that He had chastised her so that she might mend her ways. Here, the knight reproves her not only for the richness and superfluity of her costume, but also for wasting time in decorating herself, which might cause her to neglect more essential duties, particularly religious ones.

The knight, Geoffrey, also gives his daughters advice on “highe horns” by quoting a sermon by a learned bishop: Noah’s flood was God’s punishment for the pride of dress among women, which lead to lechery. Women wearing horns, he continues, are like snails, harts, and unicorns. By indulging in such absurd decoration they mock God. When vainly dressed people go to church, the devil sits on their heads and makes them bow down
for fear of the holy water.15 Geoffrey de la Tour Landry reserved special condemnation for the extravagance of women’s clothes because they encouraged vanity and pride. In this context, steeples, luxurious headdresses, are closely associated with the Devil.

Figure 4 – The man between two stools...
Photo by Misericordia International

On two misericords, at Ludlow and Minster-in-Thanet, we find clear allusions to this stricture. On a misericord at Minster (N-06, c.1410), a lady with a large horned headdress is portrayed, while a devil grasping the sides of the headdress peers between her “horns” (peaks),16 so that he might inspire her with evil thoughts. (Fig. 4) This misericord clearly shows the carver’s intention to relate amorous women to the Devil. The Devil seated between the points of her headdress may well indicate the diabolical thoughts passing through her mind. Similar images of the Devil sitting among, astride, or hovering over the people appear on the misericords at Ely (Cambridgeshire), Enville (Staffordshire), (Fig. 5) New College, Oxford, and Gayton (Norfolk).

15 Wright 62-63.
16 It was generally believed in the Middle Ages that the Devil wears a high hat to conceal his horns, which partly explains why he sometimes sits on a horned headdress. Anderson points out that in medieval imagery Herod often wears a crown “within which rises a peaked cap ending in a demon’s face.”(Anderson, op. cit., 163) Like this demon cap, the horned and peaked headdress is the Devil’s favorite.

To return to the Ludlow misericords N-15 (133:2) and N-14 (133:3), both reflect the carver’s satirical, or anti-feminine view of women as tempters of evil, as with the Minster misericord.

The N-15 misericord presents a monster, or a sort of harpy, with a young female face, again wearing a horned headdress. (Fig. 6) She has bat’s wings and feet and a short thick tail. Here, the monster symbolizes “the fair, yet unscrupulous woman, rapacious and craving gratification,”17 who uses her charm to destroy her man. Apparently, as Tasker points out,18 the harpy on this N-15 misericord seems to have lost her ferocious appearance because it has a woman’s head with an attractive headdress. However, the very nature of this headdress shows that she is disguised and very dangerous. The supporters on either side are bats, creatures of darkness, implying that she, like them, is an evil creature. (Fig. 6) Peter Klein’s guide to Ludlow misericords suggests that this misericord tells a cautionary story, a remembrance of Eve’s role in the tempting of Adam in the Garden of Eden.19

19 Cf. Klein, op. cit.
The carver of the Minster-in-Thanet misericords may have had similar symbolism in mind when he carved the N-01 (Fig. 8) (73:1, c.1410) adjoining the N-06. The N-01 portrays a bird siren, again wearing a horned hennin. The right and left supporters have a snake with a female head wearing a hennin, (Fig. 9) and perhaps this is an allusion to the Virgin-Headed Serpent of the Fall-of-man in the Garden of Eden.20

The N-12, neighboring N-15 at Ludlow Parish Church is another good example as it shows the Devil as a woman’s tempter. (Fig. 10) A devil carries off the naked soul of a woman, with her short measuring tankard in hand, towards the Mouth of Hell, the ultimate destination for all who are damned. This famous misericord depicts a dishonest ale-wife, who has given short measure and still stubbornly clutches her deficient jug, thrown over the shoulder of the Devil. This dishonest ale-wife was such a popular figure in sermons, imagery, and drama in the Middle Ages that the medieval carver chose her as the first to be condemned to hell.

20 Cf. Remnant, op. cit., 73.
What is particularly worth mentioning here, however, is that this ale-wife is completely naked (a nude figure stands for a dead soul), except for a peaked, luxurious headdress.\(^2\) The carver had the clear intention to associate this with those of the Seven Deadly Sins she committed during life, especially pride, vanity, and lechery. The damnable nature of her behavior and dress is further exaggerated by the supporters. On the right, a female figure is cast into the Mouth of Hell, which shows the ale-wife’s destiny. (Fig. 11) On the left, Tutivillus, a recording devil from Hell, will read many names from the long list on Judgment Day. In the Chester “Harrowing of Hell” play, the dishonest ale-wife is the only soul left in Hell after Christ has harrowed Hell and freed the souls of the righteous. She is even offered marriage by Secundus Demon:

Welcome, sweete ladye! I will thee wedd,  
for manye a heavye and dronken head  
cause of thy ale were brougto to bedd  
farre worse then anye beaste.\(^2\)

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\(^2\) Grössinger argues that her nudity indicates the disreputable nature of life in taverns which also served as brothels. (Christa Grössinger, *The World Upside Down: English Misericords* (London, Harvey Miller, 1997), 81.

She is hornyd like a kowe
A new-fon syn
The culer hyngys so side now,
Furrid with a cat-skyn.
All thise ar for you;
That ar commen of youre kyn.¹³

Secundus Demon assures his companion that there are more scrolls describing the evils of womankind than he is able to carry.

So far we have tried to analyze the symbolic meanings of headdress motif, in medieval English misericords and literature. The moral lesson to be learned from these woodcarvings is “Beware of women who will drive men to damnation.” The message is a deep anti-feminist, or misogynistic one in which women are weak, likely to follow the desires of the flesh, and they are subject to pride and vanity. What should be stressed here, however, is that in spite of such moral delinquency, women are so naturally attractive and beguiling that they ensnare men and lead them to destruction simply with their bodily charms.

Finally, we find the summary of this analysis on the misericord N-13 (133:4) at Ludlow. (Fig. 12) It presents a mermaid holding a mirror in her right hand and a comb, now missing, in her left, an exceedingly popular motif in medieval English misericords and literature. As mermaids were believed to lure sailors to destruction with their beauty and sweet songs, so men were believed to be sent to Hell by women’s lust and lechery.²⁴

Did the medieval church carvers really believe in the irresistible power of woman’s charm? Or was it simply a great comfort for celibate ecclesiastics to believe that women are devils? This is a puzzle to be more fully discussed elsewhere.

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²⁴ Mermaids stand for feminine beauty in its most beguiling and destructive form. On a misericord in Bristol, for example, a mermaid is shown in the company of a dragon and a devil to emphasize her association with danger and death.