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Sex, Enclosure, and Scandal in Medieval Monasteries

In her essay “Pregnancy and Productivity: The Imagery of Female Monasticism within and beyond the Cloister Walls” Nancy Warren explores the Middle English version of the story of the pregnant abbess from the *Alphabet of Tales*. “The abbess’s sexual activity clearly violates her monastic vow of chastity. In breaking her vow of chastity she has sinned against her divine spouse, and this sin may be aligned with the worldly category of transgression against the husbandly authority so crucial in maintaining masculine privilege” (Warren). To Warren, the tale of the pregnant abbess further illustrates society’s anxiety over women and is used to “mobilize female monasticism to provide solutions to these anxieties through the regulation of women’s material and spiritual practices,” i.e. full enclosure (Warren). Though written as an exploration of relationships between nuns and male clergy during the Reformation, Mary Laven’s argument in her article “Sex and celibacy in Early Modern Venice” could also apply to medieval monasticism when she argues that “the constraints of enclosure conditioned the nature of celibate desire, promoting a model of heterosocial engagement” (865). It was this “heterosexual engagement” which would plague church reformers as they sought to remove obstacles that could cause scandal for the Church. As much as the Church hated sin, it hated scandal even more and one such example was the barbarous

tale of the *Nun of Watton*, who was handed over to the nunnery at an early age and later had an affair with a teenage monk causing her pregnancy and the brutal torture of her lover.

To a modern reader the constraints of enclosure which were so strictly enforced in medieval monasteries may seem extreme. One could argue that some oblates found themselves subjected to a position they never desired, hence acted out against the rules of celibacy and enclosure. In order to better understand why a woman who had vowed to devote her life to religion would act this way one must understand medieval women's motives for entering a monastery for these circumstances could be the "determining factor for their behavior once inside" (Daichman 12). Women forced into the monastery for political or social reasons often did so against their will and with little or no inclination for a religious life. Some reasons included a desire to protect one's daughter or dispose of them, to deprive a young girl of their inheritance, or the established custom in large families for one or more daughters to become nuns (Daichman). A case similar to this can be found in the story of the *Nun of Watton*, who was handed over to the nunnery at an early age and who it would seem had no desire for a religious life. Besides those wishing to join the convent, and those forced, other women included widows, wives, or daughters of vanquished enemies, as well as the illegitimate offspring of the clergy. This issue of illegitimate offspring of the clergy would be a key issue for reformers "pursuing the theme of celibacy as a mark of separation between clergy and laity (as) clerics children made manifest their fathers' double failure; both failure to remain celibate and failure to withdraw themselves from the ties of obligations of kinship that came with carnal relationships" (Wertheimer 396). Though the writings of reformers may

have focused on children of male clergy, children of female clergy were also targeted as monasteries that had once provided support to the offspring began declining such support in the 14th century.

To woman not wishing to marry and procreate, the options were very limited since the monastic system was not yet established in the 4th century; chaste marriage would seem the only scandal free option. Female virgins wishing to remain so needed protection and the obvious solution to the problem was the cloistering of the virgins. With the foundation of the monastic system came the double monasteries as a form of spiritual marriage and protection, though even in the 5th and 6th centuries virgins were still dependant on their families for shelter and protection because access to recently established convents was so restricted. While the clergy would come to see the superior virtues of celibacy as an idea to be monopolized by the clergy, laity continued to practice their own form of celibacy through chaste marriage. While the ideology of chaste marriage did not succeed of purifying the clergy it did “nevertheless enjoyed a continuing modest popularity among certain segments of the laity. The appeal of the virginal life, or of chastity embraced at some later period, was not lost on the nonclerical population” (McNamara 26).

While the early Christian Church viewed marriage as a “divinely ordained institution,” the Church also preached the observations of Paul that the “celibate were free to pursue the service of God,” unlike the married, who only thought of each other (McNamara 23). These two irreconcilable ideas often further complicated church teachings regarding sex and celibacy, especially in regards to women who encountered more difficulties than men in attaining a celibate life. This idea of chaste marriage

seemed a perfect solution to the problem of married clergy, however it was “greeted with limited enthusiasm by most of the clergy and their wives” (McNamara 23). The 4th century Council of Elvira attempted to impose celibacy on the clergy and to separate married priests from their wives; however the Church looked more favorably on the compromise that clergy would simply abstain permanently from sexual relations with their wives. Although only a small step, the Council of Elvira would help “set the tone of further action to preserve the sacredness of the ministry” (Frazee 114). Years later reformers would go as far as to attempt to annul the marriages of clergy during the 1st Lateran Council, and would later argue that Holy Orders invalidated the marriages of clergymen during the 2nd Lateran Council. Rules written especially for the male clergy could in reality have been applied to the female clergy as well. “The ‘Rule for Nuns’ of St. Augustine was simply a feminized version of the rule he wrote for monks with the wording of the actual expected practices and virtues of the monastic remain exactly the same; only the language was feminized” (Smith 7).

Early English monasteries for women were few and far between. From the years 500-600 no women’s houses existed in Britain, in comparison to 37 houses for men. “During the formative years, many English women with religious learning, having few religious communities of their own, crossed the channel and took vows in establish cloisters of France” (Schulenberg 267). While the popularity of monasticism increased so to did the formation of homes for women which saw an increase from 0% to 31% of all new homes being built specifically for women during the years 600-649. Yet following this increase was a decline in the number of new communities for both men and women which lasted through the 10th century until the 11th century brought about a “revitalization

of monastic life” (Schulenberg 269). It was a time of reform and “heightened enthusiasm” for the monastic life however the number of foundations for women continued to decline compared to those for men. “For the years 1000 to 1049, only 6.3 percent of the new monasteries were founded for women” (Schulenberg 269). There was a brief increase of women’s monastic foundations following the Norman Conquest in 1066 as noble women, afraid of being raped by the Norman invaders joined monastic communities. While the 11th century afforded many opportunities for men wishing to join the monastic community, there was little opportunity for women. “During this period of reformed and renewed monastic activity, women’s options within the Church and expectations were narrowed: they began to diverge substantially from those of their male contemporaries” (Schulenberg 270).

Early monasteries and nunneries had always served as an ideal of hospitality, often acting as resting places for traveling clergy and laity, as well as schools for women and hospices for the poor. While reformers were looking at the idea of clerical celibacy, they were also questioning the original structure of monasticism. Double monasteries soon came under criticism and suspicion as reformers sought to separate the two forms of religious life, suggesting the nuns should be strictly enclosed for their own protection. Reform policies “aimed to eradicate corruption, abuse, and irregularities of practice amount male and female religious” (Schulenberg 277). The decline of the double monastery would coincide with the strict rules of enclosure forced upon the female clergy, yet stories of fornicating nuns flourished during the years monastic enclosure was becoming stricter. In fact as Aelred of Rievalux points out the “exquisite machinery for

the exclusion of vice” in the Gilbertine order seemed to not prohibit the young girl from breaking her vow of chastity in the enclosed monastery (*Nun of Watton*).

The 12th century has often been referred to the golden age of monasticism because it witnessed the increased prosperity of existing monasteries and the foundation of a number of new monastic and religious orders. A wave of enthusiasm for the life of a monastic spread throughout Western Europe at the same time an increase of pressure from reformers to restrict the movement of the female religious. A pamphlet, written about the year 1190 by the monk Idung of the Benedictine monastery of St Emmeran in Bavaria, shows that professed religious women in the district he was acquainted with went about as freely as the monks but argues that nuns are the frailer vessel and needed protection. No doubt the view held by this monk was shared by others, and public opinion fell in with it, and insisted on the advantages of seclusion referenced in the nunnery rules.

The penitential and nunnery rules played a fundamental role in the Christian Church and articulated the norms for women’s behavior according to the religious authorities in medieval Europe. The realities of the penitential and nunnery rules were “the intentions of the clergy to condition women’s behavior through the imposition of sanctioned behavioral expectations” (Smith 6). Women’s movements were dominated by male expectations, and the nunnery rules were intended to structure these movements within the confines of the nunnery enclosure. Churchmen felt that any freedom of movement would threaten the reputation of the nun and therefore “by association the entire Christian enterprise” (Smith 7). The area of women’s lives to receive the most

detail in the penitential was women's sexuality which focused on appropriate intercourse in marriage as well as deviant sexual behavior. When looking at both the penitential and the nunnery rules one can begin to see the bigger picture of why churchmen endeavored to restrict religious women's experiences to only the enclosed nunnery spaces, given that the "penitential recognized that women could not always be sexual self-determining" (Smith 8).

Enclosure of the female religious not only protected them from scandal and sin but also prevented any temptation for the male clergy, whose spirituality was seen as more important than the imperfect spirituality of their female counterparts. While nuns may have been considered the virginal brides of Christ, with a special place and rank in heaven, they were considered imperfect in comparison to monks and therefore needed to be secluded. This was one matter which troubled clerical and monastic reformers as previously religious women had chosen a cloistered life for both safety and to live a life which "allowed them to remain closely in touch with worldly matters and to move with relative ease between the cloister and a more secular environment" (Smith 175). While not always successful in their efforts to restrict the female religious, reformers did believe in the ideal that a woman wishing to live a religious life was expected to live in an enclosed monastery and to remain a nun permanently.

If medieval nunneries were meant to encourage conditions which would minimize sexual temptation, why are there so many references to the sexuality of nuns in the penitential? Did the rules of celibacy and "enclosure condition the nature of celibate desire" as argued by Laven in her article "Sex and Celibacy in Early Modern Venice"? The ideal of strict enclosure served two basic concerns: the first was the protection of the

nun from external attack and the second was the “anxiety for their chaste reputations which were susceptible to public scrutiny and censure” (Smith 178). Any scandal to a nun’s reputation not only had a detrimental affect on her, but also the monastery and the Church as a whole. “The chastity of nuns was part of the foundation for the public image of the Church” (Smith 178).

Reports of immoral behavior in the convent date as far back as the early 12th century but did not become common until the end of the 14th and increasing in severity through the 15th. Historical documents of the period show a decline of religious men and women entering the monastic life in the 14th century as well as an increase of misconduct in the religious houses. Stories of sinful nuns can be found throughout medieval writing though punishments for such fornication seemed less severe than the punishments inflicted in the *Nun of Watton*. Some punishment for guilty nuns included sitting last among her sisters, wearing no veil, or being shut up in her room for a year. More severe punishments for clergy included excommunication or exile. It would appear there was no standard resource of punishment for sinful clergy.

While the church may have been lenient on guilty nuns there was one particular sin that was extremely punishable to the Catholic Church: abandoning the nunnery to return to the world. Nuns who ran away unusually returned to the monastery to undergo the appropriate punishment after a combination of threats and pleas from the Church. For the Church, sinful nuns who were allowed to leave the confines of the monastery could in turn damage the reputation of the whole Christian Church, as seen in the *Nun of Watton*. Once the girl was discovered to be pregnant the other nuns “considered what they should do about this. If they expelled her, her infamy would rebound upon them all” and instead

decided to confine the young girl until she gave birth (*Nun of Watton*). So prevalent was the issue of nuns bearing children and leaving the monastery that in 1348 the Church issued an injunction that any nun who gave birth was required to spend the rest of their lives within the confines of the monastery (Daichman).

Most instances of misconduct by the clergy came out as a result of Episcopal visitations which were the outcomes of serious accusations. Once confronted with the multiples abuses in the convent by the clergy, the church argued that the cause of the misconduct was the result of the nuns ability to wander outside the cloister, however “because of the need to secure an income for the community and to buy and provide for it was so pressing, the enforcement of enclosure became extremely complicated” (Daichman 20). The statutes on monastic enclosure that were quoted throughout 13th and 14th centuries “provided for the nuns a constant reminder of the life they had left or had perhaps been made to leave behind” (Daichman 23). As ordinances became stricter the monastery became more like a prison. An injunction issued in 1441 to prevent the Benedictine nuns of Augsburg from receiving friends required the iron railings in the windows to be replaced by walls, “and then the walls had to be built higher and guarded by town soldiers” (Daichman 26).

A nun who broke all the rules could set a bad example for the rest of the nuns “who were subject to the same pressures and the same temptation even if they resisted for the moment” (Daichman 11). When the Gilbertine nuns discover the disobedience of their young oblate they respond with savagery; “oh how terrible was the sorrow of all! Particularly, the laments of the holy virgins multiplied as they feared that the crime of one should impinge on them all, for they felt exposed to the eyes of all those who would

mock them, and they expressed their betrayal with gnashing teeth” (Nun of Watton).

Punishments, similar to the one inflicted by the nuns in the *Nun of Watton*, were a necessary evil for one breaking their vows of chastity and were needed to maintain order within the community. As the saying goes, one bad apple can spoil the bunch, and to the laity who were addressed in the penitential for their sins of fornication and adultery, these terms were not very culpable unless indulged in by the clergy. Nuns and monks were considered above base human nature and were to be thought as divine, one who could forgive you of your sins. How would the laity react to a nun or monk who was not only breaking the vows of clerical celibacy but the rules laid down by God regarding the evil of sex? “Breaches of the rule of vows were perceived as so detrimental to the spiritual well-being of any nun that it was regarded as appropriate to apply corporal punishment rather than risk her eternal damnation which was the alternative” (Smith 213).

As the late middle ages progressed so to did the rules of enclosure become more strict, coincidentally as the stories of the fornicating nun and monk became more wide spread. Besides the story of the *Nun of Watton* is the story of the Amesbury monastery which was dissolved in 1189 after the abbess was said to have given birth three times. This charge of immoral conduct was one such example of the very scandal the Church was trying to avoid by enacting stricter laws of enclosure for its female members whose reputation of chastity was always considered fragile and regarded with suspicion. Taking this into account it is understandable why some nuns would go to extreme measures to avoid scandal in their monastic foundation

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