

# Subversive Habits: The Study of Nuns from the Sixth Century to the Early Modern Era

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## ABSTRACT

Through examining Boniface's correspondence with female friends of his circle, a *vita* of Saint Radegund, an anonymous medieval story of a pregnant abbess, the tale of Chaucer's Prioress, and Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta*, I seek to uncover nun's "real selves" in contrast to their often-uncomplimentary portrayals in medieval and early modern literature. The vivid and diverse literature nuns composed or the works that were written about them reveals how they saw themselves or were perceived by others. Because these women's creative and intellectual abilities add richness and multilayered perspectives to the realm of medieval literature, their importance and visibility are vital to study, reflect, and discuss to a comprehensive audience of both laypersons and specialists.

## Introduction

What does a modern Western audience think of when there is a reference to “nuns?” Do people think of the salacious and cruel women in Matthew Lewis’s 1796 novel *The Monk*, or do they imagine most nuns to be like the figure of Mother Teresa? Typing “nun” in Google Image will get hundreds of returns ranging from Audrey Hepburn in her habit to inappropriate links about how nuns are secretly masochists and have everything but the Lord on their mind. For example, there were numerous medieval tales of nuns who had affairs with local men or gave birth to children. In the early modern era, sixteenth-century author Thomas Robinson accused the English Brigittine community of Lisbon as weak, depraved, and carnally inclined (6).

Perceptions of nuns as encapsulating an *either/or* binary causes individuals to believe that nuns are only one-dimensional and constrained by their life choices, which is a narrative that has been portrayed since the medieval era. This simplistic mindset does a great disservice to their rich and complex lives as religious women. I will focus on the themes of friendship, encouragement, obedience, and agency, as well as the bleaker aspects of corruption and irresponsible behavior which encapsulates the range of actions and attitudes that were demonstrated by the nuns discussed in this work.

This paper will explore a variety of religious women in literature from the historical Radegund, a sixth-century queen who became a saint, to Christopher Marlowe’s fictional Abigail, a Jewish woman who chose the life of a nun. Their lives were fruitful and multifaceted and further suggest they practiced self-agency and were not constrained by their roles as both women and nuns. Instead of identifying medieval nuns as one-dimensional, I argue that they are well-rounded and multi-dimensional individuals. I am applying the term “well-rounded” to mean that the nuns whom I discuss are well-learned, had a liberal arts education in the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, and used this education to either show off their accomplishments or to use their knowledge to argue their point in debates and arguments. Some talented nuns were also artists, authors, and translators, who used their skills for the glory of God and for their communities. For the term “multi-dimensional” I contend that beyond devoting their lives to religion, these nuns have their own personal flaws and positive attributes. They should not be viewed in black or white, but as possessing various “shades” of emotions and beliefs. Some nuns, such as Radegund, came from a royal background and used their power for their religious ideals while others, such as Christina of Markyate, had to combat both her parents and the local ecclesiastical authorities to follow her desire to dedicate her life to Christ. These different examples

show that both nuns and their lives were unique and did not follow one exact pattern of either how to be a nun or how to transition from one stage (secular) to the next (religious).

The sources used in this paper draw attention to the rich array of women's voices that can be heard across time, such as correspondence, saints' lives, and drama. Religious women's voices not only heard in these sources, but are also a valuable tool to demonstrate that religious women's lives were well-rounded and multidimensional. In her 1997 book *To The Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts*, Joan Ferrante focuses on the positive aspects of women's roles during the medieval era, such as what they could do, rather than what they could not. She peels away the narrative that all medieval women were weak, passive, or viewed with suspicion by their male associates. Ferrante argues that, "Despite the period's intense misogyny... women could be respected colleagues, friends, relatives, whose affection, support, even advice was sought and cherished" (4). Ferrante's optimistic and progressive outlook demonstrates that medieval women should not be viewed in wholly black or white perceptions, especially in regard to their relationships with men. Ferrante is a part of an ongoing and exciting discipline that continues today to discover and reveal new ways of looking at how medieval women, including nuns, lived, and what they accomplished in their lives.

#### Friendship

In order to explore how nuns were multidimensional, I begin with the concept of friendship. I contend that friendship between monks and nuns challenges the narrow belief that monastics only cultivated friendship with each other, or that their relationship concentrated only on spiritual or scandalous matters. The early medieval texts of Baudonivia's *vita* of Saint Radegund and Boniface's *Letters* to various religious women, reveals an abundance of references about these religious women cultivating friendships not just with each other, but with male figures also. Enduring and passionate remarks of care and devotion are especially noticeable in the correspondence between Boniface and such figures as Leoba, Eangyth, or Eadburga. These different correspondents do not just ask for the consolation of each other's prayers or for composing and illuminating books, but they earnestly desire their support, encouragement, and advice about life-changing experiences.

Eangyth, for example, writes to Boniface about her difficult life as an abbess for a double monastery, which is a monastic house comprised of men and women who were ruled by an abbess. The constant stress and strain of having to provide materially for her religious community combined with her frustration with the constant

outflowing of money of her community's: "obligations to the king and queen, to the bishop, the prefect, the barons and counts" which has caused her to be, "overworked and dejected" (6). Her overwhelming burdens and strife that comes with dealing with a monastery full of men and women has caused her to long to go on a pilgrimage with her daughter, as she tells Boniface that she has "long wished to go to Rome, once mistress of the world, as many of our friends, both relatives and strangers, have done" (7).<sup>1</sup> This is no pleasure jaunt, she insists because she wants to seek forgiveness of her sins, "I [am] more advanced in years and guilty of more offenses in my life" (7). However, even though she knows that Boniface and others of her acquaintance recognize her spiritual longing, Eangyth tells him that she is conscious that other individuals urge her to stay within the precincts of her own double house.

Even if Eangyth uses Scriptures to make her point about the righteousness of her aspirations, she still yearns for support and guidance from Boniface. She wants Boniface to be her intercessor, as she refers to him as "our Aaron," and asks his advice on what choice she should make: "whether to live on in our native land or go forth upon our pilgrimage" (7). Eangyth's writing to Boniface emphasizes that she trusts his judgement. She also believes that he will give an answer that will aid her in deciding what choice she should make. Her letter to Boniface calls attention to how he is her friend and how she relies not just on his prayers, but on his judgement and wisdom. Since Eangyth feels as if she has no one to turn to except for Boniface as she states in an earlier passage that she has "neither son nor brother father nor uncle," she then declares that Boniface is "the friend whom we have wished, prayed, and hoped for" (6-7). Eangyth's warm words highlights her happiness in finding a sympathetic friend, as she claims that Boniface is her "brother in the spirit, most loyal, beloved" (7). These warm and affectionate terms that describe Boniface show that they do not just have a caring and meaningful relationship, but that Boniface is Eangyth and her daughter's support system.

In a letter pleading for intercessory prayers on behalf of her family, Leoba reminds Boniface that he is "bound to [her] by ties of kinship" and hopes he does not forget his "ancient friendship for my father" (9). Leoba's request demonstrates that a strong connection to far-flung relatives is crucial for her emotional wellbeing.

Their correspondence not only shows Boniface and Leoba's burgeoning

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1. Women who were abbesses during the early medieval era were often widows or divorced from their husbands. Many convents and monasteries were filled with noblewomen who chose to devote their lives to God, such as Eangyth and her daughter, Bugga. In this letter to Boniface, Eangyth and her daughter desire to go on a pilgrimage together.

relationship, but also Leoba's creative talents: "I have composed the following verses... to exercise my little talents" (9). Leoba's artistic abilities in her letter to Boniface points out that letters between monks and nuns also contained poetry or literary works that the recipients shared, critiqued, and praised. Leoba then hopes that their relationship will continue and transcend their earthly lives: "May the bond of our true affection be knit ever more closely for all time" (9). Boniface's and each of the nuns' that are in correspondence with him accentuate the pattern of mutual trust and concern for each other. Boniface's friendship with women, such as Leoba, brought comfort and respite to all, even if they were separated by geographical distances.

The Frankish Baudonivia's *vita* of Radegund discusses not just her wide-ranging miracles or how her motivations for her abbey were both politically and religiously inclined, but Baudonivia also demonstrates the intimate relationship between Radegund and the nuns in Poitiers. Baudonivia highlights the closely connected and affectionate relationship between Radegund and the community of nuns by relating how she performed the role of their loving but strict parent. This spiritual-parental bond causes Radegund to act as the leader of various religious practices, as Baudonivia relates: "She...at once first eagerly applied herself to and then afterwards showed the community how to do it, as much by her word as by her example" (5). While living, Radegund sets a precedent of exercising her religious faith so that her community can follow her good example. After her death, Baudonivia breaks out into lamentation about the loss of Radegund and how much her nuns miss her presence and the influence she had on all of their lives: "We, her humble sisters, miss the teaching, the appearance, the countenance, the personality, the knowledge, the holiness, the kindness and the sweetness of her whom God set specially apart from the rest of humankind" (12). Although these words to a modern audience may seem hyperbolic and the nuns' grief extreme, Radegund fulfilled her role as a religious leader so well that her nuns could hardly imagine life without her. They miss their spiritual mother so much that Baudonivia wishes Radegund had demanded of the Lord: "The right to send on ahead of you the sheep which you had collected together! You, following the Good Shepherd, would have handed your flock over to the Lord" (12). Because of the gaping hole that Radegund had left in her community in the wake of her death, Baudonivia and the rest of the nuns assert that they should have followed her in death so they would not be separated from Radegund's powerful and compassionate figure.

Baudonivia's *vita* of Saint Radegund reveals that nuns created networks of supportive and encouraging relationships. Boniface's letters to such varied figures as

Leoba, Eadburga, or Eangyth show that such close-knit relationships among women, were also made outside the convent as well. These two sources demonstrate that men and women viewed their interactions with each other as collaborative, warm, and mutually beneficial. The *Letters* of Boniface and the *vita* of Radegund point out the positive and comforting aspects of frequent advice-giving and encouragement in the lives of these nuns. Even though there were times of dissatisfaction and infighting in nuns' communities, these recollections by Baudonivia and the wide-ranging correspondence between Boniface and his female correspondents show that nuns did have positive interactions with each other; their advice, comfort, and gifts were highly valued by the recipients and made their lives even more enjoyable.

#### To Encourage and Support

Turning now to twelfth-century Italy and Prague, Italian Claire of Assisi wrote to the Bohemian Princess Agnes of Prague because she had received news that Agnes gave up her secular lifestyle as a royal woman to become a Franciscan nun. Even though Claire of Assisi and Bohemian Princess Agnes of Prague had never met each other, they sent letters to one another to support and uplift one another in their shared pursuit of living for Christ. Although Agnes's original letters do not survive, we can still surmise how much Claire's letters meant to her. Their friendship transcended geography and politics. Claire writes to her with admiration, "Spurning all these things with your whole heart and mind, you have chosen instead holiest poverty and physical want, accepting a nobler source, the Lord Jesus Christ" (3). Instead of Agnes becoming Empress of the Holy Roman Empire, she decides to give away her dowry and become a nun.

Claire's letters to Agnes were aimed at urging her to remain true to her vocation and to support Agnes as a new nun. Although Claire praised her decision, however, Agnes's plans to follow her Franciscan calling became threatened by the Pope's interest to absorb her monastery and hospital into a Benedictine order. Like Agnes, Claire had undergone the same issues with the Pope and offered her advice as she contends: "be mindful... of your founding purpose always seeing your beginning" (1.11), and she asserts, like a holy chant, "What you hold, may you continue to hold, what you do, may you keep doing and not stop" (1.11). If Claire could overcome the Pope's suggestions on how she should run her monastery, then so could Agnes. Agnes's agency demonstrates her evasion of Gregory IX's endowments, which were contrary to the Franciscan ideal of giving away personal wealth to emulate Christ's poverty. Agnes only accepted the bare minimum of what Gregory IX offered her. This tactic was shrewd since Agnes could not afford to outwardly thwart him both

politically and financially. If Agnes had visibly challenged Gregory IX's plans for her monastery/ hospital, he could have excommunicated her or withdrawn all support from her monastery/ hospital. In each of the four letters that Claire wrote to Agnes, each displays sympathy, cheerfulness, and support for Agnes and her community. Claire's letters to Agnes undoubtedly eased Agnes's concerns about her choice as a follower of St. Francis.

Claire helps Agnes balance her obligations to her foundation and papal intervention as she frequently exhorts Agnes to be serene in God's care, act in a shrewd manner, and have a positive outlook: "may you go forward tranquilly...trusting in no one and agreeing with no one because he might want to dissuade you from pursuing your founding purpose....and embrace the Poor Christ" (l. 13-14,18). Their epistolary friendship deepened because both were Franciscan religious women who had the same goals and dreams to grow in their faith and be more like the "Poor Christ" (l. 18). This is made apparent in Claire's third letter to Agnes: "I am filled with such great joy about your well-being...and your favorable successes" as well as adding that Agnes is, "embracing with humility, the virtue of faith, and the arms of poverty" (l.3-7). This praise of Agnes demonstrates that she is following the precepts that St. Francis and Claire, his co-associate, had created to fight back against the leniency and corruption of their contemporary church. Agnes's growth in the Franciscan faith, delights and awes Claire, who continues to both uplift and guide Agnes in their shared manner of spiritual living.

Lastly, the English Christina of Markyate cultivated a wide-spread and diverse network of religious figures. Instead of writing to others for support and encouragement, Christina's friendships were from her own community. Her network of religious individuals not only helped her escape from her family, but also protected her from their anger as well. Individuals such as Sueno the canon, Roger the hermit, and Ælfwynn, a female recluse, supported her choice to live her life for God. Several of these figures lied to Beorhtred, Christina's spurned husband, who went looking for her on behalf of Christina's family. As he tried to bribe a follower of Roger to find out where she was, the man answered indignantly, "It is with greatest difficulty that a woman is allowed here even in broad daylight," while the recluse Ælfwynn insisted, "Stop imagining that she is here with us" (35). These blatant lies were essential in protecting Christina from harm from her family's wrath since she earnestly longed to devote herself to God and not marry an earthly spouse. Even though Christina practiced agency in escaping her family, which I will discuss in a later section, these individuals proved valuable to her as they offered guidance in how to live her life as

well as kept her safe from her family. From a helpful member of Roger's community to the recluse Ælfwynn, each of these individuals extended support and encouragement in Christina's religious endeavors, and they demonstrated that religious friendship and networks were closely interwoven.

In these medieval texts, it is noticeable that every one of these individuals offered reassurance, guidance, and the joy of their mutual interaction to uplift each other in difficult or trying circumstances. From Baudonivia's memories of Rade Gund, who cared deeply about her community of nuns, to the wide-ranging correspondence of Boniface, these various texts highlight the lively and intertwined relationships of nuns with not just each other, but with men as well. Claire's letters to Agnes reveal that women's friendship can be supportive and create positive experiences with each other even if the correspondents had never met. In Christina of Markyate's *vita*, vital religious networks were viewed as crucial to give support and assistance to Christina as she escaped from her family. The wide-ranging network of local recluses that populate her *vita* also show that these relationships between Christina and individuals such as Roger the hermit or Ælfwynn highlight a common bond of shared devotion and similar cultural values. These various examples of historical nuns, such as Leoba or Saint Rade Gund, with their positive and rich relationships, reveal that their interactions with both men and women were not just essential in the spread of religious beliefs, but also for their emotional wellbeing. The intertwined bonds of kinship and friendship demonstrate that these relationships were cultivated to endure throughout both individuals' lifetimes. These tightknit and beneficial interactions demonstrate that medieval nuns could and did have a satisfying relationship with not just their own communities, but with male acquaintances as well. The cultivated friendships between both nuns and monks demonstrated that they cared deeply for each other through their advice, spiritual care, and exchanges of poetry and books.

#### Agency versus Obedience

Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe argues in her work *Stealing Obedience: Narratives of Agency and Identity in Later Anglo-Saxon England* that: "attention to narratives of monastic obedience in both the polish of their surfaces and the fractures those surfaces conceal shows us the intimate interconnections between monastic identity and a construction of agency markedly different from our own" (6-7). She puts forth the idea that the concept of obedience is a balancing act of free will and submission. She further argues that a conversion: "illustrates the contemporary understanding of the operation of individual will within an individual's orientation to the divine will" (80).

O'Brien O'Keeffe then asks what constitutes both obedience and agency

during the Anglo-Saxon time period, which connects to how the Christina of Markyate viewed her competing claims of her obedience to God and to her obedience as a daughter to her family. Since the act of obedience is one of the most important vows a nun takes, it is understandable that Christina views her will as being subject to God, yet her parents, Auti and Beatrix, believe that Christina should have been submissive to their wishes for her to marry. They argue that she should be married instead of living her life as a nun, because Christina's *vita* points out that: "She was so shrewd in understanding, so prudent in affairs. . . , For if she remained chaste for the love of Christ, they feared that they would lose her and all that they could hope to gain through her" (21). However, Christina yearned to be a nun and prayed: "O Lord God. . . . Deign to grant me, I beseech thee, purity and inviolable virginity" (6). Christina has made a private vow to God to dedicate her virginity to His service. Christina's commitment to God reveals that she wants to live her life devoted to God and not conform to her parent's wishes of secular marriage and influence. However, in the description that her anonymous hagiographer gives in her *vita*, Christina of Markyate had a painful and difficult journey in becoming a "bride of Christ."

Agency and obedience are connected to the idea that nuns are multifaceted individuals. The concepts of agency and obedience are complicated, and not mutually exclusive in Christina's *vita*. The text contains confrontations of many types of obedience: obedience to God, obedience to family, and obedience to religious leaders. Furthermore, the idea of agency is interwoven throughout this work as Christina uses persuasive speech to subvert her parent's will, hides to escape from the threat of rape and violence, and even uses a disguise to escape her home to live as a recluse.

As she plays out the *passio* of her namesake, a fourth-century martyr who was beaten by her father and imprisoned, Christina is also ill-treated, mocked, and psychologically terrorized by her parents who want her to give up her vow of chastity and marry their choice of a husband, Beorhtred. When they try to lock her in her room with Beorhtred, she reverses her parent's "script" of rape and confinement; she tells the story of Valerian and Cecilia, a married couple who practiced chastity, to influence her betrothed. She persuades him to think about a marriage that is not based on desire, but chastity: "So let us, insofar as we can follow their example so that we may become their companions in their eternal glory" (11-12). Christina uses her agency of reciting saints' lives to attempt to persuade Beorhtred to influence his viewpoint about marriage, and to dissuade him from rape by telling a story. Her tale had its effect as he "eventually left the maiden" (12). Her parent's household soon mocked him because they viewed her subversion of their work as, "deceitful tricks and naive

words" (12). Christina's "tricks" saves herself from a potentially frightening situation, and her quick-thinking helps her evade what her parents had envisioned for her. She used her agency to continue to keep herself pure for God. Throughout most of her *vita*, however, she would be criticized and ridiculed by her family and acquaintances for her choice in remaining chaste and pure.

Throughout Christina's conflict with ecclesiastics such as Ranulf Flambard, Fredebert, or Robert Bloet who attempted to force her to accept her marriage to Beorhtred as valid, their reluctance to believe her truthfulness highlights an issue of what I call the "pseudo-religious" woman. As Fredebert states to Christina: "Perhaps you are rejecting marriage with Beorhtred in order to enter into a more wealthy one" (18); this assertion demonstrates that some women claimed to want to be a nun to avoid marrying the man their family had chosen for them. I argue that these women who claimed to want to be nuns in order to circumvent their parent's wishes and marry someone else, caused a disturbance between the scorned betrothed, the ecclesiastical authorities, and the woman herself. Christina swears that she is sincere in her desire to live a holy and chaste life: "I must fulfill my vow, which through the inspiration of his grace I made to the only son of the eternal King, and with the same grace I mean to fulfill it" (19). This problem illustrates that some women could make their own decisions about love, political connections, and affluence. Even though Christina resolutely practiced agency to follow her dream of devoting her life to God, this "double-minded" choice on the part of "pseudo-religious" women, portrays them as multifaceted and fully capable of determining on how they wished to live their lives.

Unlike those women, who were, as Christina charged: "anxious about worldly things and how to please my husband" (33), she instead yearned to live for Christ no matter the cost. Her determination on fulfilling her religious desires is evident in a specific passage in her *vita* as she displays subterfuge toward her family. After making plans with a supporter's servant, she then deceived her sister Matilda by giving her the keys to the house and a garment to take back with her: "Christina set off as if she were going towards the monastery, but then turned her steps towards the meadow" (34). After she misled her sister and caused her to return toward their house, Christina continued in her plan to escape her family and accomplish her dream to live her life as a recluse. Throughout Christina's *vita*, it is clear that God's will was stronger and of more significance than any plans her family might have had for her. God's plan for her is made evident in a vision that Christina had, as Christ urges her to: "Fear not. For I have not come to increase your fears but to bring you reassurance" (42). This heartening statement demonstrates that she is following the "right path" of devoting

herself to God.

As Christina prepared to escape her home, she then urges herself to not be afraid: "Put on manly courage and mount the horse like a man" (34). Instead of embracing fear, Christina chooses to be daring in order to leave her family and fulfill her vow to God. By deceiving her family and utilizing various networks to fulfill her desire of being a female recluse, Christina both obeyed the higher authority of God and used her agency to escape the life that her family members wanted her to achieve. This highlights that even deceit and dishonest behavior can be used to further a nun's life toward God. Although the concepts of guile and deception are not viewed as acceptable behavior for a religiously inclined person to pursue, for Christina, these actions show that they can be used for a higher purpose. As O'Brien O'Keefe argues: "obedience is both the stuff of monastic identity" and "an identity in which self-will is left behind and...is conceived to lie in the cheerful, immediate, and complete accession to the will of another" (93).

For example, Boniface is a bishop and a dear friend to most of the women in his correspondence, thus it is important for them to abide by his advice. For Abbess Bugga, who wants to go on a pilgrimage to Rome, Boniface first begins with a non-committal statement: "I dare neither forbid your pilgrimage on my own responsibility nor rashly persuade you do it" (8). Boniface does not want to forbid her to go, but he also has no desire to persuade her to go on a dangerous journey to jeopardize her life and to potentially break her vows of chastity. He further adds if she cannot find rest and peace among her inmates at her monastery, then she: "should obtain freedom of contemplation by means of a pilgrimage," only on the conditions that she is strong enough to go and able to make the arduous journey (8). Even though we do not have Bugga's reply to Boniface's recommendation, it is certain that she probably took his words seriously. His sound advice in this double role of friend and bishop likely helped her make a prudent decision about the next step in her religious life.

The relationship of Bugga and Boniface rests in the concept that she, as an abbess, must allow her own will to bend to Boniface's because he is a bishop and has a higher ecclesiastical authority over her. If Boniface had answered Bugga with an immediate denial of her desire to go on a pilgrimage, she would have had to accede to his wishes. The concepts of obedience and agency frequently clashed in monastic institutions, but as O'Brien O'Keefe points out: "Obedience is never perfected, never finally achieved, for its end is only continued obedience" (93). This assertion highlights that the individuals living in monastic establishments constantly had to negotiate their own desires and wishes with those of a higher authority.

This conflict between an individual's will being subsumed into other authoritative ecclesiastical figures is continued in the *vita* of Queen Radegund. It is a reasonable assumption that she would have had difficulty in submitting her will to the abbess's authority since she had been a powerful female ruler. However, her biographer Baudonivia presents a different image. Baudonivia states that once Radegund entered the monastery at Poitiers, she: "handed over to [the abbess] herself and her possessions" (3). Although Baudonivia lauds Radegund for being so humble that she did not want to be abbess herself, this move may have been unusual, since many queens became heads of their monasteries in deference to their rank and power. Baudonivia further adds that Radegund, "kept none of her own rights to herself" (3). However, this obedience to the abbess further strengthened Radegund's decision of placing herself entirely in God's care: "She handed herself over to her Bridegroom with such complete devotion that she embraced God with a pure heart and felt that Christ was dwelling within her" (3). Baudonivia's declaration connects Radegund's humble acceptance of the abbess ruling over her whole self to Radegund's unconditional willingness of handing herself over to God's care and mercy. This type of obedience to a religious leader leads to a fuller and richer experience of trust and obedience with God. This conscious choice of setting aside an individual's own will in order to accept and follow a higher authority demonstrates that the concepts of obedience and agency were not just a major part of a nun's life— this could also lead toward an intimate relationship with God.

From Christina of Markyate, who used her agency to escape from her family's plans for her, to Queen Radegund's actions of power and agency, which were cast aside to embrace both her abbess's authority and God's, the struggle between an individual's free will and the concept of wholehearted obedience in a monastic setting is diverse and unique to each individual. The figures' stories who have been discussed in this section, namely Radegund and Christina of Markyate, show that even though there is a struggle between following an individualized concept of self-will and agency, being humble and deferring to a higher authority can be satisfying. Because acts of obedience and agency are conscious choices on the part of the individual nun, deciding to follow God has more significance and consequence than what a nun's family or friends desire. By examining these historical nuns, agency and obedience are layered and conflicting, but these concepts can also lead to having a deeper relationship with God.

Uncovering Corruption, Recognizing Humanity

Moving away from historical nuns and their diverse ways of devoting their

lives to God, the fictional religious women such as the abbess in a fifteenth-century miracle story, Geoffrey Chaucer's Prioress, and Abigail in Marlowe's drama *The Jew of Malta*, exhibit a form of cynicism in each of their respective works. Cynicism and lukewarm religious faith among monastics are a common stereotypical belief during the medieval to early modern period, which has influenced how individuals view nuns even today. These texts usually have a nuance of cynicism and a vocalization of the problems with the church and clergy that were rampant during the late fourteenth century throughout the early modern period in England. These deviations from the monastic norm reveal the issues and anxieties of audiences for each of these works.

In *The Alphabet of Tales* by Etienne Besançon, which was translated in the fifteenth century into English, the abbess is not portrayed in a wicked manner, nor does she behave in a stereotypical fashion. Nevertheless, she lapsed into sin as she: "let her carver, that was her own kinsman, have his way with her / so that she conceived and was with child" (1). When the abbess hears that the bishop is coming because of the suspicions that her nuns have told him that she is pregnant, she is filled with despair: "And this abbess was great with child, made great sorrow and was did not know what she might do." (1). She is undoubtedly distraught that the bishop will recognize that she is with child, while her melancholy and embarrassment cause her to go into her own "private chapel" that is situated in her own chamber (1). When the bishop comes to visit her community and the abbess goes to sit beside of him, he reproves her and commands that she "leaves the chapter (chapterhouse)" and further orders that two clerks "examine her, and to search whether she was with child or not" (2). Even more humiliatingly, the bishop does not believe the clerks who have examined her, but he insists that he will "search her himself" (2). Much to his embarrassment, he also does not find any sign that the abbess is with child.

However, the abbess explains to the ashamed bishop that she had a dream-vision of the Virgin Mary who rescued her from her plight. The Virgin Mary, who does not rebuke her for her lapse into sin, but instead reassures her: "I have heard thy prayer and I have gotten of my son forgiveness of thy sin and deliverance of thy confusion" (2). The Virgin's solution is to deliver the child: "to a hermit" and the Virgin Mary "charged him to bring it up until it was seven years old; and he did as she commanded him; and at once our lady vanished away" (2). The abbess awakens from her dream-vision, much lighter in both body and spirit, as she amazedly: "grasped herself and felt herself delivered of her child and whole and sound" (2). The abbess has been granted a new and chaste body through the grace and compassion of the Virgin Mary. To further underscore her humanity, the narrator of *The Alphabet of Tales* points out

that although the abbess became pregnant, she continued in her abbatial duties and responsibilities until it became obvious that she was pregnant as she: “waxed great and drew near her time.” (1). Her actions still indicate that she is a good person because she continues to be responsible toward the spiritual welfare of her nuns.

Overall, this story about the pregnant abbess demonstrates the reality of what occasionally occurred in monasteries such as sexual scandals or corruption. Although this unnamed abbess had a child, her portrayal is not stereotypical, as she is not like the immoral and disillusioned religious women of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. This is evident in Filostrato’s tale where one of the nun’s scorns the idea that they should keep their virginity for God’s sake: “We are constantly making Him promises that we never keep! He can always find other girls to preserve their virginity to Him” (196). The abbess of Besançon’s *The Alphabet of Tales* may have failed to be chaste, but her transgression points out her humanity. Even the most well-intentioned nuns may stray which shows their multifaceted behavior. In *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns for Two Millennia*, Jo Ann McNamara asserts that: “Criticism often went hand in hand with correction” (358). The pregnant Abbess may have been created to point out the issues of laxness and permissible behavior that intermittently happened in various monasteries. Even though this translation could have been a reminder for nuns reading this story to change their behavior before they were corrected by a higher authority, there is always grace to be found.

On the other hand, Geoffrey Chaucer’s Prioress is urbane and portrayed ambiguously by him. Even though religious women were meant to stay cloistered, as Graciela Daichman states in her work *Wayward Nuns in Medieval Literature*, “in the year 791 a council had forbidden religious women to participate in pilgrimages” (137). However, the Prioress is on a pilgrimage to Canterbury with a train of nuns and priests.

Madame Eglentyne’s entourage she has with her also signifies her high status as she is the Prioress of her community. On her pilgrimage, she has her secretary, which is the “Second Nun,” and three priests. This train of people demonstrates her secular display and presentation. Religious women should not have a procession of people, especially on a pilgrimage, because it suggests too much importance on a secular lifestyle. Madame Eglentyne should be concentrating on living humbly, as Christ did, and scorning worldly pomp, instead of embracing opulence and magnificence. Daichman further adds Madame Eglentyne’s presence would: “cause a medieval audience to smile in tolerant amusement at a frequent real-life situation” (137-138). Although Madame Eglentyne is breaking her monastic vow by leaving her monastery to participate on a pilgrimage, her reasons for doing so may demonstrate

a concern for her spiritual wellbeing. Chaucer comments in his General Prologue: “The holy blessed martyr for to seek, / That they hoped he would help them for what they sought” (l. 17-18), which suggests that Madame Eglentyne wanted to go to Canterbury to supplicate Thomas à Becket for spiritual guidance or to give thanks for being healed from an illness. Chaucer leaves the reason for Madame Eglentyne’s pilgrimage up to his readers, thus further suggesting his ambiguity about her as a character.

On the other hand, Madame Eglentyne’s temperament is characterized as: “charitable and so piteous” (l. 143) and her figure is parallel to a romance heroine as her eyes are, “grey as glass” with a “mouth very small and therefore softe and reed” (l. 152-153). Her romantic ideals clash with her religious profession. Her beads: “gilded all with green” (l.159) and her golden brooch, “On which there was first written a capital A, / And after [that] *Amor vincit omnia*” (l. 161-162) show off what wealth she has, as well as point out that her motto can either be applied to secular or spiritual love, underscoring her ambiguity. Her motto could be about holy love which is connected to the Virgin Mary’s beauty and how it relates to the Prioress’s own loveliness and chastity. The opacity of her motto adds another layer of uncertainty about her religious values.

Even though Madame Eglentyne is meant to be inside her monastery and was not supposed to shower love and affection on her dogs: “that she fed / With roasted meat, or milk, and wastel-bread” (l. 146-147), her devotion to her dogs is understandable. Her absence from her monastery and her owning possessions and pets are a challenge to the monastic rules of having everything in common with the rest of the nuns and its erasure of individuality. While Mary Laven’s book *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloistered Lives in the Renaissance Convent* concentrates on Venetian nuns, the focus on institutional issues was undoubtedly viewed similarly in England, as: “personal possession was an institutional reality and an accepted fact of convent life” (5). Instead of behaving as an unworldly nun, Chaucer portrays the Prioress acting in a secular manner. Not only is she outside of her religious house, but she is also devoted to her animals, which was viewed as standard behavior of nuns during this period.

Horacio Sierra, in his book *Sanctified Subversives*, contests the concept of nuns as stereotypical figures. He states in his first chapter: “By eschewing bawdy, lewd, and propagandistic literature about lusty nuns that serve as whores to priests who act as pimps, this book [*Sanctified Subversives*] employs mature works to tease out how canonical writers employed the role of the nun to showcase the powerful potential these women possessed in acting as sanctified subversives” (4). The figure

of Madame Eglentyne can balance Chaucer's ambiguity of her as well as point out her individualistic pursuit of living. While reading both "The General Prologue" and "The Prioress's Prologue," she is portrayed as a believable though flawed character. Her flaws show how human she is, instead of a caricature.

In the "Prologue" of her tale about a child martyred by Jews, she gives praise and attention to the Virgin Mary, who was widely venerated throughout Europe as an intercessor and the Queen of Heaven. The Prioress's focus on the Virgin in her prayer links her to Mary's incomparable femininity, goodness, and might. The intertwined notions of Mary's inviolable virginity with the Prioress's own chastity are encapsulated with the phrase: "white lily flower / [. . .] and is a maiden always" (l. 1651-1652). Since the Virgin Mary is regarded as a perpetual virgin, the Prioress can link Mary's chastity with her own, since she has been consecrated as a nun. Her concentration on the Virgin Mary in both her "Prologue" and "Tale" could signify devotion to her, such as the ardent phrases: "she herself is honor and the root / Of bounty (l.465-466), "O bush unburnt" (l.468), or "This well of mercy, Christ's mother sweet" (l. 656-657). These statements would be a positive attribute to a figure who is often viewed by critics with derision. I argue that her affection for her dogs, her love of fine clothing, and her determination to go on a pilgrimage demonstrate her humanity and her unwillingness to proscribe to the Church's mandates about giving up personal property for the common welfare of the religious community.

Turning from Chaucer's medieval Prioress to the early modern era, we find further instances of nuns in works of fiction that subvert traditional views of how nuns are perceived. *The Jew of Malta*, a revenge tragedy composed by the controversial Christopher Marlowe, focuses on the crafty and murderous Jewish merchant, Barabas, and his plans of revenge against the Governor of Malta. Since this play was written after the Reformation, Marlowe depicts in a stereotypical manner how monks and nuns' way of life is depicted. Barabas's daughter Abigail would do anything to help her father succeed in his plot, even pretending to convert to Christianity and become a nun.

Abigail's feigned conversion to the nunnery is part of a plot to reclaim Barabas's gold. Her decision to aid her father in his dishonest behavior, shows that she is not sincere, but only acting on her father's orders. In reply to Abigail's unease with pretending to be a Christian, he reassures her: "A counterfeit profession is better / Than unseen hypocrisy" (l. ii. 302-303). His statement depicts how Marlowe's audience viewed nuns and monks and their lifestyles as false and corrupt. Abigail performs the part of a devout and earnest convert so well, that the abbess permits her to go into

the nunnery: "Fearing the afflictions which my father feels / Proceed from sin or want of faith in us, / I'd pass away my life in penitence, / And be a novice in your nunnery" (I. ii. 333-336). The abbess's reply to Abigail's feigned religious conversation is depicted as one of simple acceptance: "Well, daughter, we admit you for a nun" (I. ii. 341). Even Don Mathias is deceived by her "conversion" to Christianity as he remarks in wonder that is Abigail is now a "strangely metamorphos'd nun." (I. ii. 394). Nevertheless, Abigail is easily allowed entrance into the nunnery that was formerly her home, which shows that Marlowe viewed the admittance into a religious house as permissible and lax. Although Abigail is claiming to be a nun because she wants to assist her father in his pursuit of revenge, her words are believable enough, as she states in one passage: "First let me as a novice learn to frame / My solitary life to your strait laws" (I. ii. 342-343). Her contradictory and misleading stance demonstrates that some women who entered a monastery viewed this lifestyle with less enthusiasm than their sisters who were genuine about their choice.

Later on in the play, Abigail undergoes a radical transformation from a woman who pretends to be a nun to one that has lived: "Chaste, and devout, much sorrowing for my sins" (III. vi. 14-15). Marlowe gives several references that, on the other hand, the Friars Jacomo and Barnardine are not as holy and chaste as they appear. In retaliation of Abigail's sincere choice to become a nun, Barabas poisons the whole nunnery, including Abigail, who dies "a Christian" (III. vi. 40). However, Friar Barnardine adds on to her statement with the remark: "Ay, and a virgin too; that grieves me most" (III. vi.41-42). Barnardine's remark reveals that he and Friar Jacomo view the nuns as potential partners of promiscuity. There are also a few phrases throughout this scene which relates that the abbess must also confess her sins and Friar Barnardine quips that it will be a "sad confession" (III. vi. 4-5), while Friar Jacomo adds that he must hear "fair Maria" confess her sins as well (III. vi. 6-7). Does this exchange imply that these women had or were going to have relationships with the two friars? Marlowe's suggestive language highlights the frequent observations about licentious behaviors in which both monks and nuns participated. Comments made by Barabas who claims that the nuns and monks are: "not idle, but still doing, / 'Tis likely they in time may reap some fruit" (II. iii. 87-88) or Ithamore who asks Abigail: "have not the nuns fine sport with the friars now and then?" (III. iii. 36-37) focus on sexual immorality between religious men and women. The remarks made by the friars are especially relevant since Marlowe wrote his play after the decades of the Dissolution of the Monasteries, when the monastic way of life was viewed with suspicion and hostility.

Abigail's untrustworthy performance about converting to Christianity

and becoming a nun soon changes after her lover Don Matthias is killed in a duel. Distraught by his death, she becomes sincere in her desire to dedicate her life to God. Thus, she transforms not only herself, but the trajectory of her life within the play. Abigail concludes that her father's act of revenge and Jewish faith no longer have any meaning for her, and she decides to commit herself fully to the life of a nun: "But I perceive there is no love on earth, / Pity in Jews, nor piety in Turks" (III. iii.33-34). This realization causes her to implore friar Jacomo to: "get me admitted for a nun" (III. iii. 61). Yet, Friar Jacomo reminds her: "it is not yet long since / That I did labour thy admission, / And then thou didst not like that holy life" (III. iii. 62-63). Her reply is authentic as she explains: "I was chain'd to follies of the world; / But now experience, purchased with grief, / Has made me see the difference of things" (III. iii. 66-68). Abigail believes that the nunnery will ease her heartache and provide her comfort as she pleads with Friar Jacomo: "let me be one, / Although unworthy, / of that sisterhood!" (III. iii. 75-76). Abigail undergoes a major shift in behavior from her duplicitous attitude to her earnest appeal to become a genuine nun.

Abigail's trajectory from a "pseudo religious" woman, only intent on abetting her father in his plans for revenge, to a nun who is concerned for the salvation of her soul, reveals that even though a nun may not be an enthusiastic member of the collective religious community at first, a significant situation may change her mind. A shifting of priorities or tumultuous events may cause a nun to change from cynicism to devout behavior. Although some readers may view the figure of Abigail entering a nunnery for the second time as counterfeit, since her lover was killed in a duel, this more genuine choice reflects her altered viewpoint of the religious life as a place of safety and healing from life's harsh vicissitudes. Marlowe's Abigail balances the contradictory conceptions of a nun as either discontented about religious life or content in following monastic rules. Abigail's shifting attitude about religious life and being a nun is a vivid example of being human with its countless attitudes and emotions. Thus, the examples given of the anonymous abbess, Chaucer's Prioress, and Christopher Marlowe's Abigail in *The Jew of Malta*, all show that the breaking of their monastic vows reveals their multidimensionality and their humanity as fallible human beings— not caricatures of frivolity, licentiousness, and greed.

#### Conclusion

The examination of wide-ranging and unique figures such as the historical Queen Rade Gund to the fictional character of Christopher Marlowe's Abigail argues against the belief that nuns are constrained by the binaries of extreme or stereotypical behavior. As shown in this paper, medieval nuns demonstrated a wide and varied

range of behaviors and viewpoints while they lived their lives in the pursuit of their religious ideals. The religious life was, for many nuns, not just a genuine vocation, but a place of joy, and a space to pursue their creative and intellectual interests. However, other depictions of nuns demonstrate that the religious life was not always consistent with the ideal monastic image of the monastery being an enclosed paradise. I conclude that medieval and early modern nuns were not as stereotypical or caricatures of sensuality and greed as writers have sometimes portrayed them. They were not passive or one-dimensional, but independent, creative, and resolute in living their life for God.

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