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PROMISCUOUS MONKS AND NAUGHTY NUNS:
POVERTY, SEX, AND APOSTASY IN LATER
MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

CHRISTIAN D. KNUDSEN

Introduction: The ‘naughty nun’ in literary tradition and historical reality

In a particular fifteenth-century manuscript containing mostly copies of theological works, there is a curious collection of love poetry, written by some anonymous clerk, most likely a student doing practice exercises common to artes dictaminis.¹ Within this collection, however, there is a particular short original creation, which one nineteenth-century scholar labeled “an absolutely obscene poem.”² The piece in question is posed as a dialogue between an amorous nun and a clerk:

Monacha: Deponam velum, deponam cetera quaeque,
ibit et ad lectum nuda puella tuum.
(I will take off my veil, I will take off everything else,
and a naked girl will go to your bed.)

Clericus: Si uelo careas, tamen altera non potes esse.
Vestibus ablatis non mea culpa minor.
(Clerk: Even if you take off your veil, you would not be any different and my sin would be no less with your clothes gone.)³

¹ Hermann Hagen, Catalogus codicum Bernensium (Bern: B.F. Haller, 1875), 381. See also Philip Schuyler Allen, Medieval Latin Lyrics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), 61.
² “Assolutamente oscena è un’altra poesia metrica [. . .]”, Umberto Ronca, Cultura medievale e poesia latina d’Italia: nei secoli XI e XII (Rome: Società Laziale Editrice, 1892), 159.
³ The translation is mine. See Hermann Hagen, Carmina Medii Aevi maximam partem inedita. Ex bibliothecis Helvetici collecta (Bern: Georgius Frobenius, 1877), 206.
This racy little fifteenth-century clerical fantasy is actually part of a familiar literary topos—the wayward nun. From the fabliaux and Chanson des Nonnes to the courtly elegance of Chaucer’s Madame Eglentyne, the ‘naughty nun’ and, to a lesser extent, the ‘promiscuous monk’ were popular medieval stereotypes. The literary and cultural phenomenon of the ‘naughty nun’ is well known and documented, and it still provides titillating interest to this day if the continued popularity of sexy nun costumes worn every Halloween is any indication. The body of medieval literature utilizing the topos has been the subject of a number of studies, the most ambitious being Graciela Daichman’s 1986 book. Thus, in many respects, the ‘naughty nun’, perhaps unfairly, has eclipsed the ‘promiscuous monk’ in our popular imagination. Over the past century, scholars have debated the degree to which this medieval topos was reflected in the reality of late medieval women’s monastic institutions. While many earlier scholars delighted in relating lewd reports found in episcopal visitation records as evidence of a general monastic decline during the closing centuries of the Middle Ages, more recently historians have tended to eschew these anecdotal conclusions and instead present misconduct as a rare anomaly in an otherwise vibrant late medieval female monastic life. Inextricably tied to the debate about sexual misconduct is the role that poverty played in the lives of late medieval nuns.

Like sexual misconduct, the poverty of late medieval female monastic houses in England has been also been an important element in what might be termed the ‘monastic decline narrative’. This narrative, sometimes employed by scholars to argue the ‘inevitability’ of the sixteenth-century Dissolution, has been an abiding theme in English medieval historiography. Certainly, for most early scholars, evidence of this decline and decay of English monasticism towards the end of the Middle Ages seemed self-evident and this was particularly true for women’s
institutions. By the time Henry VIII began dissolving the monasteries in England in 1536, many if not most convents were desperately poor and in massive debt. Poor financial management, wasteful extravagance, and outright corruption within convents were often cited as reasons for this poverty. Numerous studies have also argued that during this period, increasing numbers of both male and female communities seem to have had trouble maintaining the rigorous monastic standards of the past and also experienced increasing accusations of sexual misconduct. Both spiritually and temporally removed from the vibrant monasticism of the early Middle Ages, late medieval monks and nuns were a far cry from the austere ascetics required by the sixth-century *Regula Sancti Benedicti*. Most early scholars seemed, however, to reserve the severest of their monastic decline narrative for women’s monastic institutions. English convents were variously described as dumping grounds for unwanted daughters, rife with scandal, devoid of religious vocation, and stricken with debilitating poverty. Confessionalist historians, such as George Coulton, maintained that this decay was embarrassing in its mass and variety and pointed to conventual pregnancies, regular lapses of enclosure, run-away apostates, lax discipline, and extravagant waste by the abbesses and others as evidence of it. Religious vocation or spiritual enthusiasm, Coulton argued, could hardly be thought of as consistent with the late medieval English nun.

In this essay, I will challenge this implied prevalence of ‘naughty nuns’ by examining evidence of sexual misconduct amongst fifteenth-century English religious men and women found in the episcopal visitation records of William Alnwick. The data collected from these records will show that sexual misconduct was, statistically at least, uncommon for either sex but especially so for women. In addition, my data will demonstrate the importance of examining monastic poverty rates alongside misconduct, since for both sexes there seems to have been a strong co-relationship. I will also argue that poverty and sexual misconduct, both traditionally part of the English monastic decline narrative, are at best problematic markers and evidence of this narrative. I will deal with the former more from a historiographic perspective as it has been re-examined and re-conceptualized in the past thirty years by scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum, Roberta Gilchrist, and Marilyn Oliva. Thus, as monastic poverty may be viewed in a different light, so too may sexuality.

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8 Examples include: Coulton, *Five Centuries of Religion*, 409; Power, *Nunneries*, 472.
10 See for example Power, *Nunneries*, 472; Daichman, “Misconduct in the Medieval Nunnery: Fact, not Fiction.”
The recent historiography of late medieval English nuns

The vision of the late medieval English nun as a woman oppressed by poverty and devoid of religious vocation remained the standard for most of the twentieth century. However, beginning in the 1980s, a number of scholars not only began to challenge the picture that late medieval nuns were devoid of vocation, but also began to claim that the poverty within their convents was, in fact, the very expression of that vocation. It was the beginning of a complete re-conceptualization of our understanding of late medieval and early modern English nuns. However, although these studies have gone a long way to show that a type of poverty could be central to late medieval feminine spirituality, they do not explain away all of the complaints about poverty made by the nuns themselves or the frequent lapses in discipline cited in the historical record. Sexual misconduct, apostasy, and ‘unwanted poverty’ are still there.

My work on this subject adds to the growing body of research, which has tested the assumptions of the past with regard to late medieval nuns. If sexual misconduct was increasing, it is important to ask why, and if not, its existence still illuminates much of the social environment in which these women lived. As Joyce Salisbury put it, sexuality is “intimately associated with what it means to be human,” and thus it cannot be disassociated from any study of the human condition. Yet traditionally, sexuality has not been a common theme in monastic studies. Among the early scholars, Eileen Power was the only one who attempted to approach monastic sexual misconduct in any systematic way, including a chapter on the subject in her pioneering 1922 book *Medieval English Nunneries*. However, she excluded any comparison with male monastics from her conclusions and has been criticized by some scholars, perhaps a little unfairly, for an overly anecdotal portrayal of the subject, and a “lack of critical analysis.”

More recently, Graciela Daichman also attempted to reconcile the historical ‘naughty nun’ to the literary one but her study was heavily criticized for her clumsy approach to primary sources. Although there has been no significant work on the subject for England since Eileen Power, in the late 1980s, Penelope Johnson

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14 See for example Oliva, *Convent and Community*, 2.

15 See for example Penelope D. Johnson, review of Daichman’s *Wayward Nuns in Medieval Literature*, *Speculum* 63 (1988): 388–90; Janet Summers, review of *Wayward Nuns in Medieval*
dedicated a portion of her book to examining instances of sexual misconduct in France in the thirteenth century.\(^\text{16}\) As opposed to Power and Daichman, Johnson looked at both male and female monastic sexual misconduct. Her detailed and careful study, which was based on the extensive visitation records made by Archbishop Eudes Rigaud in Normandy over a twenty-year period, is the only statistical approach on the subject to date. Although her study is based on a different place and time period, it can provide a useful reference point for comparison and context with late medieval English monks and nuns.

Unfortunately, comparative approaches such as Johnson’s are rare in monastic history, and this is particularly true for English studies which have tended to be written about one sex, usually male, even when they purport to be ‘general’ histories. One of the most glaring examples is David Knowles’ massive and influential three-volume history of English monasticism, *The Religious Orders in England*, in which, through over twelve pages, he dedicated only six short paragraphs to nuns.\(^\text{17}\) Although the medieval English nun has hardly been ignored over the past few decades in the way that she was in the first half of the twentieth century, the more recent studies have tended to suffer from a reverse focus. Indeed, Bynum recently lamented this deficit of comparative work, arguing that one cannot say anything about nuns’ “activities or institutions as characteristically ‘female’ without comparison to male institutions.”\(^\text{18}\) To my mind, it seems all the more important to include comparison when discussing sexuality since an exclusive focus can lead to erroneous or misleading generalizations such as the ‘wayward nun’ depicted by Daichman, whom she described as common and frequent in medieval society.\(^\text{19}\) This study on the sexual misconduct of monks and nuns in the diocese of Lincoln will challenge Daichman’s conclusion. In its comparative approach, it also will represent a small step towards reversing the trend of studying English monks and nuns in exclusion of one another. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the ‘naughty nun’ and her place in medieval society without the ‘promiscuous monk’. In addition, this study will build upon the recent work on feminine monastic poverty by scholars such as Oliva and Gilchrist, by offering an alternative means of interpreting poverty rates in late medieval nunneries.

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\(^\text{19}\) Daichman, *Wayward Nuns*, 5.
Sources and methodology: Bishop Alnwick and his visitations, 1436–1449

My research for this essay has focused on one set of episcopal records from the diocese of Lincoln, specifically the register of Bishop William Alnwick, which covers the years 1436 to 1449. Included in Alnwick’s register are detailed reports of his numerous visitations to colleges, monasteries, and convents during his episcopate. In general, surviving ‘visitation reports’ are rare for late medieval England. More often, episcopal registers are filled with the more mundane activity of the diocesan see, such as the awarding of benefices, form letters, and records of prebends. Although other examples exist for late medieval England, none can match the detail or scope found in Alnwick’s records. In fact, Alnwick’s visitations are often cited as one of the most valuable sources for monastic social history for all of Europe, along with the thirteenth-century register of Archbishop Eudes Rigaud of Normandy, which Penelope Johnson used in her study, and the fifteenth-century German visitations of Johann Busch.

Nevertheless, as valuable as Alnwick’s records are, they still present some limitations. First, they represent a rather small sample size. For instance, over the thirteen years they cover, Alnwick visited only twenty different female houses comprising just two hundred and seventeen nuns. In addition, not all monasteries in Alnwick’s diocese are represented in these records. Many, particularly Cistercian houses, had exemption from episcopal oversight. Thankfully, however, this was rarely true with women’s houses since for the most part a bishop claimed jurisdiction over all female monastics in his diocese, regardless of order. Thus the nunneries belonging to orders, in whose male houses Alnwick wouldn’t dream of interfering, still receive attention. Despite these exemptions, however, the sheer number of male houses in England compared to female houses means that male houses outnumber female houses in Alnwick’s visitation records by two to one. Over the years of his episcopate, Alnwick visited fifty different male houses comprising over five hundred monks and canons, more than twice the number of nuns.

Generally, the surviving English episcopal visitation records are quite formulaic, and Bishop Alnwick’s records are no different. Each visit always strictly followed the standard procedure for episcopal visitations. The record normally assumed a narrative and chronological format, listing first the business of the bishop’s arrival at the monastery. In the usual form, the bishop would begin with a sermon in front of the monks or nuns. Subsequently, the abbot or abbess, as it may be, would present documentation of their election, confirmation by the diocesan see,


22 Power, Nunneries, 670.
and the financial account records of the convent—all of which the record would note. At this point, the record would normally contain a notation about whether the convent was in debt and by how much. This is an important detail since my data show that there was a strong co-relationship between monastic poverty and sexual misconduct. After these preliminaries were over, the bishop would then conduct a general chapter meeting with everyone, after which he would meet with each of the monks or nuns individually. The evidence recorded from these separate testimonies is called the *detecta* in the visitation record. The *detecta* are recorded without any comment or analysis from the scribe or bishop. Thus, they will often contain conflicting testimony. Following these testimonies, the record generally contains the *comperta*, which was the information discovered by the bishop over the course of his investigation. Finally, the record often contains the injunctions and mandates that the bishop issued to the monastery to correct whatever abuses he deemed were present. It is from the records of the *detecta* and occasionally the *comperta* that the majority of cases of sexual misconduct and apostasy may be found.

**Locating sexual misconduct and apostasy**

For the purpose of my investigation, I have recorded instances in Alnwick’s records in which accusations were made concerning either sexual impropriety or apostasy, which in this context means the abandonment of religious vows and return to the secular world. Why track apostasy? Indeed, sexual impropriety and apostasy were considered very different crimes by medieval ecclesiastical authorities. However, for the purposes of studying monastic sexuality they cannot entirely be separated, since one often equates to the other. That is, the reason a nun or monk abandoned the religious life and went into apostasy could often be the result of an illicit relationship. This may have been even more relevant for women, as Donald Logan also suggested in his expansive study on medieval English apostasy. 23 Pregnancy, a continual threat to the 'naughty nun', may have prompted more than one to escape the bounds of the cloister out of necessity. In addition, since rampant apostasy, along with poverty and sex, often forms part of the traditional English monastic decline narrative, instances of it may illuminate the existence of the others. However, although Logan’s study on apostasy was impressive in its scope, his chapter on the motivations for it was largely speculative. 24 Tracking specific conditions at monasteries may help provide the social framework for both types of misconduct—sex and apostasy.

Instances of sexual misconduct are noted by many different phrases in Alnwick’s visitation records. Occasionally, it is simply stated in no uncertain terms: someone is accused of de lapsu carnis or a lapse of the flesh. However, the phrase is often more circumspect and a nun or monk is noted to be diffamatus cum, or “defamed with someone.” If the crime included a married woman or man, then the additional charge of adultery was usually levied. We also find instances where a “lapse of the flesh” is described as incest.  

This was usually the case when both parties were recorded to have been members of the church, i.e., religious, such as a nun and a chaplain. Since they were part of the family of the church, sexual contact between them was considered incestuous. However, over time this distinction was lost and certainly by the mid-fifteenth century, when Bishop Alnwick made his visitations, the term could be used to describe any illicit relationship with a professed religious person. The records are often quite frank and to the point, as was the case in 1441 at Dorchester Abbey, when Bishop Alnwick’s scribe recorded that an Augustinian friar named John Shrewsbury was accused of having had sexual congress with a certain woman of ill repute in the bell tower of the abbey church.

If sexual misconduct could be noted in numerous ways, apostasy on the other hand was always noted specifically as apostasy. And this was, of course, the more serious crime in the eyes of the church. A lapse of the flesh was a sin but was considered something that was easily fixed by confession and penance. Apostasy, however, was a very serious sin. The person had literally left the church, gone on the run, and abandoned his or her vows and profession. Although, in most cases, no specific reason was given for apostasy, occasionally it was clearly associated with an illicit relationship such as in 1441, also at Dorchester Abbey, when John Bengeworth was recorded to have gone into apostasy with a nun from Godstow.

The question of poverty

Since traditional studies have also included poverty along with conventual scandal or misconduct as a component part of the so-called general monastic decline in England during the closing years of the Middle Ages, any examination of sexual misconduct should at least test that assumption. This is all the more important since it is the traditional conception of poverty which has undergone the most radical redevelopment in recent years. True monastic poverty, freedom from personal possessions, was of course an ideal of both men’s and women’s monasticism. Other types of poverty, however, are more difficult to categorize as desirable or undesirable. Earlier historians classified any instance of physical poverty, such as descriptions of

25 See for example when Richard Gray is accused of “sacrilégii et incestus” after impregnating a nun in 1442: Visitations, 2: 352.
26 Visitations, 2: 73.
27 Visitations, 2: 91.
dilapidated conventual buildings, poor food, or physical suffering, as an undesirable type. However, since the late 1980s historians such as Roberta Gilchrist and Marilyn Oliva have argued that this assumption is problematic. Based on the work of Bynum, Gilchrist re-interpreted archaeological evidence, arguing that the founding of female convents on poor land and on the margins of society was purposeful and fit their form of isolated female monasticism. 28 Similarly, Oliva argued that the poor conditions within female houses could be “understood as integral parts of a gender-specific female monasticism.” 29 Nevertheless, as Oliva herself admits, this certainly does not mean that all poverty is “desirable.” 30

For the purposes of this study, I have tried to avoid the debate about ‘poverty’, which is clearly a problematic term at best in monastic studies. However, I have tried to track the financial or environmental conditions under which misconduct occurred. In her similar analysis of sexual misconduct in French monasteries during the thirteenth century, Johnson compared the existence of ‘poverty’ to instances of sexual impropriety. According to Johnson’s criteria, a house was poor when its total assets were less than the mean assets of all the houses of the same sex. She was able to perform this analysis since Rigaud’s visitation records generally recorded the debts and assets of each house. 31 Unfortunately, Alnwick’s records do not contain any notice of conventual assets, only the presence of debt, and this alone is an unsatisfactory indication of the social conditions of the monastery. Debt can, of course, be good or bad. Indeed, indications suggest that many houses managed their debt well, using it to survive lean harvests and repair conventual buildings, something that Oliva also found in her work on the diocese of Norwich. 32 Similarly, a lack of debt does not mean that a nunnery is not poor or that the nuns did not begrudge their conditions. Thus, to compensate for the ambiguity of debt, I have tracked when monks or nuns actually complained about their ‘poverty’ to the bishop. This is a better indication of environment than debt alone, since it speaks to the perception of their financial condition held by the nuns themselves. Even if a nunnery was rich in comparison to its neighbors, if the nuns themselves felt they were living in intolerable conditions, then for all intents and purposes they were ‘poor’. Thus, by using these complaints as an indicator, we can determine which houses considered themselves poor. By comparing this list of poor houses to those with and without documented instances of sexual misconduct and apostasy, we may determine if a relationship between poverty and misconduct actually exists.

28 Gilchrist, Gender, 66.
29 Oliva, Convents, 9.
30 Oliva, Convents, 96–97.
31 Johnson, Equal in Monastic Profession, 121–22.
32 Oliva, Convents, 96–97.
Monastic misconduct in Lincoln:  
Tracking sexual misconduct

William Alnwick became bishop of Lincoln in September of 1436, and he held the see until 1449. We have surviving monastic visitation records to 1445, over which time he made a total of seventy-nine visitations at seventy different houses. Fifty of these were visitations at male monasteries or colleges, and twenty were at female houses. The number of visitations is slightly higher in both cases than the houses since Bishop Alnwick visited some houses more than once. In total, there were fifteen accusations of sexual misconduct or apostasy levied against women, and eighty-nine levied against men.33 The first interesting finding from my analysis is that the overall percentage of houses which had problems of either apostasy or sexual misconduct was not the same for men and for women. An average of 40% of the male houses had such accusations compared to only 25% of female houses. However, men and women appear more similar when one looks at the numbers of accused individuals. Only nine nuns out of a total of two hundred and seventeen were accused of sexual misconduct, or 4%, which is not that far off from the monks and canons where approximately 8% of their number of five hundred and twenty-eight were sexually active. However, these percentages tend to mask the much larger difference in scale: forty-three sexually active monks or canons to just nine sexually active nuns.34 Other telling differences between the male and female monastics were the numbers of accusations per house. There was an average of 1.52 accusations per male house, whereas only 0.45 per female house. Clearly, at a societal level the ‘promiscuous monk’ was a more common figure than the ‘naughty nun’.

33 Occasionally, accusations of both apostasy and sexual misconduct were levied at the same time at the same person. For instance, in 1440, a nun of St. Michaels Priory, Agnes Butyle, was accused of running into apostasy to live with a harp player named Robert in Newcastle (Visitations, 2: 348). In such cases, I counted each aspect of the accusation separately in terms of sexual misconduct and apostasy, but only once for the overall total of accusations.

34 The total population of monks and nuns in Lincoln, of course, fluctuated over time. In the appendix to the first volume of his edition of Lincoln visitation records, Thompson noted the number of monks or nuns for every community at the time of each of Alnwick’s visitations. The highest total monastic population recorded during Alnwick’s episcopate is five hundred and twenty-eight men and two hundred and seventeen women. See Injunctions and Other Documents from the Registers of Richard Flemyng and William Gray, Bishops of Lincoln, 1420–1434, in Visitations, ed. Thompson, 1: 153–71.
Table 1. Bishop Alnwick’s Monastic Visitations 1436–1449

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nuns</th>
<th>Monks / Canons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of visitations</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of houses visited</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average size of houses</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total accusations of sexual misconduct</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total apostates</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # individual accusations</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses with either accusation</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
<td>20 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average # of accusations per house</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even more striking in this regard was the tendency for male monastics to have multiple accusations levied against them, whereas women were usually only accused once. For the women, with only one exception, the ratio was one accusation per nun, but for the men it was entirely different. The entire seventy-six accusations of sexual misconduct were levied against only forty-three men. Thus male religious were more likely than nuns to be having more than one sexual relationship. The abbot of Dorchester Abbey, for example, was accused of maintaining multiple relationships with a number of married women. During one visitation, he was described by an older canon of the monastery as being

[. . .] of most unclean life. He is not diligent in quire by either day or night; he makes no corrections of the transgressions of the canons. He keeps several women whose names I don’t know, but these I do know: Joan Baroun, with whom he was taken in the steward’s chamber; he keeps John Forde’s wife, he keeps John Roche’s wife, John Prest’s wife and Thomas Fisher’s wife—all of whom he supports with the goods of the monastery.\(^{35}\)

One wonders, had this accusation been true, how the abbot managed to pull off this rather ‘three’s company-ish’ love triangle (or perhaps hexagon). However, the case actually represents a trend among the male accusations. When a man is accused, he is often accused of having more than one sexual transgression. It seems rarer, on the other hand, for a woman to be accused of having more than one illicit relationship.

\(^{35}\) *Visitations*, 2: 83.
Figure 1. Sexual Partners of Accused Male Religious and Nuns

Other major differences between male and female accusations, as shown in figure 1, were the sexual partners of the accused. Not surprisingly, nuns were far more likely to have a relationship with a member of the clergy than male monastics were with female religious. In particular, chaplains seem to be a preferred choice for the ‘naughty nun’. This seems fairly understandable, considering that female monastics, by their nature of strict enclosure, tended to have less contact with non-ecclesiastical men. Chaplains, however, often had easy access to convents where they performed the duties of saying mass and hearing confession for the nuns. It seems inevitable that occasionally this resulted in an illicit affair. Monks, on the other hand, rarely had access to female monastics, and vice versa. Consequently, there was only one instance in all the records I examined in which a monk ran off with a nun.36 Monks and canons seem to have had relationships equally with both married and unmarried women. When starting this research, I expected to find more instances of sexual misconduct within monasteries, i.e., monks with other monks, or nuns with other nuns, but this seems to have been less common.37 There was a canon named John Dey at Leicester New College who was accused in 1440 of committing sodomy with a number of his fellow canons, and then trying to bribe one of them with a pair of boots to be quiet about it, but these were the only male same-sex sexual relationships recorded in Alnwick’s register.38 In another instance,

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36 The only example is from 1445 when John Bengeworthe, a monk of Eynsham Abbey who had been imprisoned for disobedience, was reported to have escaped and gone into apostasy, taking with him a nun of Godstow: Visitations, 2: 91.


38 Visitations, 2: 188.
the prioress of Littlemore Priory was chided for having one of the nuns sleep with her privately in bed.\textsuperscript{39} The second instance is more relevant for the female numbers since it makes up one of the only nine cases of sexual misconduct in the records, or 11%. Although John Dey’s transgressions are likewise the only recorded male cases, the higher overall male sexual transgression numbers makes their percentage seem smaller than the women, at just 5% of the male total. Nevertheless, whether or not female monastics were more likely to engage in homosexual relationships is unclear since the single instance may be an anomaly. In addition, the possibility exists that it does not represent a sexual relationship at all since the dormitory of the convent in which it took place was also described to have been quite cold.

Monastic misconduct in relation to poverty

Table 2. Incident rate in Houses with Debt or Financial Misconduct

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nuns</th>
<th>Male Religious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Houses in Debt</td>
<td>11 (55%)</td>
<td>27 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses with either financial misconduct or complaints of poverty</td>
<td>15 (75%)</td>
<td>27 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # accusations (sexual misconduct and/or apostasy)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of accusations in solvent houses</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>29 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of accusations in insolvent houses</td>
<td>100 %</td>
<td>71 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The conventual financial picture is also revealing with regard to these accusations. Although female houses were only slightly more often in debt than male houses, with 55% of the female monasteries compared to 46% of the male ones, when one compares debt along with recorded complaints about poverty, dilapidated buildings, and financial mismanagement, a more significant difference emerges. In this analysis, 75% of the female monasteries had some sort of ‘undesired’ financial problems, whereas only 54% of the male ones did. These financial problems also seem to have had a strong connection to the numbers of accusations of sexual misconduct and apostasy, and this was particularly true for the women. While the percentage of male accusations occurring in these houses is high, 71%, 100% of the female accusations occurred in ‘poor’ houses. Those female houses visited by Alnwick had none of these financial factors, that is, no debt or complaints concerning poverty, and these houses also had absolutely no sexual misconduct or apostasy accusations

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Visitations}, 2: 217.
whatsoever. Every single female accusation occurred in a convent where the nuns themselves complained about their financial situation.

Interestingly, these figures are similar to Johnson’s findings for France two centuries earlier, where she also found a stronger connection between poverty and sexual misconduct in female houses than in male ones.\footnote{Johnson, \textit{Equal in Monastic Profession}, 121–22.} Using the records of monastic debt and assets found in Bishop Rigaud’s thirteenth-century visitations, she calculated that the mean debt for nunneries with sexual offences was £6, whereas in those houses without offences there were mean assets of £119. She concluded that the wealthier a convent was, the less likely they were to have instances of sexual misconduct. In a footnote, she further states that she ran “two-, three-, and four-way multivariable statistical analyses” on her numbers and found a 13% correlation between involvement in sexual activity and living in a poor female house, compared to only a 6% correlation in male houses. Unfortunately, however, Johnson does not show us the numbers from which she calculated these conclusions. Nevertheless, in comparison with my own findings, the connection between poverty and sexual misconduct does seem to have been a more important factor for women than for men, in both thirteenth-century Normandy and fifteenth-century Lincoln.

**Tracking apostasy**

Another interesting observation from my findings is the relative share of apostasy accusations. For both sexes, there seems to have a strong relationship between apostasy and poverty. As I have already noted, 100% of the accusations (of any type) against females occurred in poor houses. However, for the men there was also a strong poverty to apostasy correlation, since 91% of the male apostates came from poor houses. Overall, however, apostasy seems to have been rarer for men than sexual misconduct. Only 16% of the male accusations were for apostasy compared to 53% of the female ones. There are a number of reasons why this may be the case. First, given that overall male houses seemed to have complained less about poverty than female houses, this could have led to lower male numbers for apostasy. Many of the apostates of both sexes may have been fleeing from what they perceived as intolerable poverty, and since this seems to have been a more common situation for women, one would expect greater female numbers. Second, as suggested by Donald Logan in his study on English apostasy, pregnancy could also be a strong motivator for female apostasy, and this obviously was not a factor for monks.\footnote{Logan, \textit{Runaway Religious}, 83–85.} Indeed, while at least two of the female accusations of apostasy (or 25%) can be directly attributed to an illicit relationship, this is the case with only one of the male accusations (or
8%). In theory, therefore, an illicit relationship with a nun was more likely to lead to apostasy than it was for a monk or canon.

Conclusions: Putting the ‘naughty nun’ in context

In the end, can we accept any of these accusations at face value? Not surprisingly, there are a number of problems with accepting *detecta* literally. For obvious reasons, a bishop’s visitation and the subsequent private audience with an outside power figure provided many monastic men and women with the means to play out their own private vendettas and to spread gossip. The *detecta* are fascinating for this reason. They reveal internal power struggles at monasteries, petty disputes, and monks or nuns dissatisfied with the religious life or the performance of their abbot or abbess; and they can detail many lurid things that may or may not be based in fact. Lies could easily be told to destroy the reputation of another, or to remove a rival from a position of power, or simply to sow discord. It must have been difficult enough for the bishop at the time to tell the difference between fact and fiction, between jealousy and legitimate complaints; but for the historian these problems are compounded exponentially. And this, indeed, is one of the problems that not nearly enough historians have taken into account when concluding that late medieval nunneries were rife with scandal. One can cherry-pick lurid accounts containing accusations of conventual prostitution, pregnancies, and sex-crazed nuns and conclude as did confessionalist historians, such as Coulton, that late medieval nuns were distinctly in the naughty category. Other historians, however, have not been so quick to accept these reports as strongly reliable. Even as early as 1895, Mary Bateson noted that one should approach the often scandalous reports of late medieval English nuns with an eye of suspicion, since the witnesses who reported to visiting bishops and their emissaries often gave “rambling and gossiping answers” that “bear obvious traces of human nature.”

Indeed, the *detecta* are incredibly gossipy and by their very nature tend to emphasize faults over devotion. Personal disagreements between nuns, jealousy, petty fights, and struggles for power are all too evident. Thus, to a certain degree, the accusations of sexual misconduct or apostasy must be taken with a grain of salt. An example of this complexity is Alnwick’s 1442 visitation of Catsby Priory, a female Cistercian house. According to the record, once the preliminaries of the visit were over, the accusations began to fly. A number of nuns told the bishop that the prioress, Margaret Wavere, was letting the house go to ruin, several of the conventual buildings were falling down, and the house was in massive debt. In addition,

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43 *Visitations*, 2: 46–53.
she was pawning the jewels and other valuables of the house for her own gain and for that of her mother, who was being maintained in the house at the expense of the priory. Worse, there seemed to be a growing disagreement brewing between the prioress and one nun in particular, Isabel Benet, whom the prioress accused of having an illicit relationship with one William Smyth, a chaplain. According to the prioress, Isabel had even conceived a child from this man. Other nuns described the tyrannical nature of the prioress and her mother, who they state rule the convent in all but name. After the previous visitation report by Alnwick’s predecessor had leveled a number of injunctions against the prioress, she subsequently had threatened prison to any nun who spoke ill of her to any ecclesiastical official again. The nun accused of having the illicit relationship, Isabel Benet, was in open rebellion against her. Isabel, for her part, stated that the prioress was evil and when she was enraged pulled the nuns’ hair and called them whores. She admitted that she got pregnant but insisted it was with another man, not William Smyth. Moreover, she counter-accused that the prioress was in fact having a relationship of her own with another man, William Taylour.

The account gets even more confusing. The prioress denied wholesale any illicit activity with William Taylour and the other nuns suggested that Isabel was starting this rumor because she hated the prioress. Another nun gave more damning testimony against Isabel and stated “that the said dame Isabel on Monday last past did pass the night with the Austin Friars at Northampton and did dance and play the lute with them in the same place until midnight, and on the following night, she passed the night with the friar preachers at Northampton, luting and dancing in like manner.” The bishop was left to deal with numerous conflicting testimonies in his injunctions against the priory. This seems to be a clear example of an internal power struggle using the visitation as a weapon. In the end, Alnwick seemed to place more importance on the fact that the convent was in financial ruin and that the prioress and her mother seemed to be committing larceny and enriching themselves, than on the various illicit relationships of Isabel Benet. In an odd twist of events, he removed the prioress from control of all temporal affairs of the convent, and appointed Isabel Benet, the same nun accused of the illicit affairs, along with another nun, to perform an audit of the priory’s finances and report back. No indication of any penance or penalty for the illicit affair was ever noted. Obviously, this is an extreme example, but it demonstrates that the leveling of accusations could be a weapon in a power struggle itself, and it may not have reflected reality. Furthermore, one woman or man ill-suited to the religious life who strayed from the path did not indicate that everyone at a convent or monastery was likewise devoid of vocation.

I also question the assumed notion that these offences were somehow increasing towards the end of the Middle Ages, and that the nuns of the fifteenth century

\[44\] *Visitations*, 2: 50.
were somehow less pious than those of the twelfth. Although only a more thorough study can reveal for sure, I suspect that the increase in recorded sexual misconduct will correspond exactly to the increase in episcopal visitation and record-keeping beginning in the thirteenth century. Somehow, it would be naive and presumptuous of us to believe that women of an earlier time were less human, or more holy. This view fails to recognize the humanity of these men and women who lived the religious life, which was little changed from the twelfth to the fifteenth century.

Thus the importance of putting the ‘naughty nun’ in context: recent scholarship by historians such as Oliva, Gilchrist, and Bynum has overturned the old notion that the poverty of late medieval English nunneries meant decay. They showed that for many women during that time period a stricter form of poverty could be desirable and that poverty itself could be an expression of feminine spirituality. This, of course, does not discount the possibility that some convents were simply too poor to support themselves, or that many nuns felt they were too poor, as evidenced by the numerous complaints about poverty found in visitation records, but it does suggest that both could be true at the same time. A nun could be poor and spiritual or poor and miserable. Both could, and likely did, co-exist. So, if the new theories about poverty do not necessarily replace the old, but expand it, so too a re-evaluation of the ‘naughty nun’ may be able to do the same. At the very least, the ‘naughty nun’ should be noted to have been far less common than the ‘promiscuous monk’ in medieval society, and the ‘promiscuous monk’ was hardly widespread either. There also seems to have been a strong co-relationship between poverty and misconduct. This certainly complicates the idea that poverty might be intentional or positive, at least for late medieval nuns. The data from Lincoln suggest that monastic poverty, intentional or not, came with a dramatically increased risk of both sexual misconduct and apostasy. Thus, when earlier scholars simply created laundry lists of offences, we were left with an incomplete picture of late medieval English monasticism. Similarly, however, when modern scholarship discounts or minimize instances of poverty, sexual misconduct, or apostasy in a rush to disprove the conclusions of earlier scholars, we also run the risk of obscuring the past. If we are going to understand the nature of the boundaries of medieval sexuality and of religious vocation for men and women in the later Middle Ages, we must strive to keep both lapsus carnis and poverty in context. We must understand the ‘naughty nun’ neither as a standard nor anomaly, but as a tiny yet predictable human element within medieval monastic life.

45 For example, a comparison of my findings with those of Johnson, who catalogued sexual misconduct found in the register of Archbishop Eudes Rigaud in Normandy in the thirteenth century, reveals similar numbers despite the fact that her study is based 200 years earlier. She found that 28% of the female convents in Rouen had complaints of sexual misconduct, which is very similar to mine (25%), suggesting that sexual misconduct tends to occur at a predictable and consistent rate in monastic houses. See Johnson, Equal in Monastic Profession, 123.