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Elizabeth Allyn Woock, 'Nuns in Action: A Graphic Investigation into a Graphic Issue' (2020) 10(1): 10 *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.189

GRAPHIC SUBMISSION

Nuns in Action: A Graphic Investigation into a Graphic Issue

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This article in comics form looks at an under-investigated phenomenon of nun characters appearing in contemporary comics as a unified trope. Appearing with a strong degree of uniformity, these stock characters share a unique costume, weaponry, repeated storylines, and most importantly, are couched in medievalism. To explain the development of these characteristics, which can seem wholly contemporary, the comic looks back at the textual and visual representation of nun and religious female characters —such as saints— from their early medieval origins, through their visual recodification in the Victorian era, up to applications of the nun character in the twentieth century. Examining this issue from different perspectives, this article argues that despite the presence of nuns in the contemporary world, the stock character in comics is dependent on some degree of medievalization, and maps these characteristics as they evolved over time, finding that, thanks to the medievalization itself, nun stock characters present a unique model of superheroine in comics.

Keywords: comic books; medievalism; nun; religion; superheroes

Introduction

This article in comics form looks at an under-investigated phenomenon of nun characters appearing in contemporary comics as a unified trope. Appearing with a strong degree of uniformity, these stock characters share a unique costume, weaponry, repeated storylines, and most importantly, are couched in medievalism. To explain the development of these characteristics, which can seem wholly contemporary, the comic looks back at the textual and visual representation of nun and religious female characters —such as saints— from their early medieval origins, through their visual

recodification in the Victorian era, up to applications of the nun character in the twentieth century. This issue is examined from different perspectives, including the heroism of early Christian saints (McNamara 1996), the shift in attitudes towards nuns in Victorian literature (Griffin 1996) and art (Pagliarini 2007; Moran 2004; Casteras 1981), and how the nun fits into the world of comics (Madrid 2009), action (Brown 1996) and medievalism (Bishop 2016; Bennett 1993). This article argues that despite the presence of nuns in the contemporary world, the stock character in comics is dependent on some degree of medievalization, and maps these characteristics as they evolved over time, finding that, thanks to the medievalization itself, nun stock characters present a unique model of superheroine in comics. Medievalism informs the weaponry of the nun, her miraculous superpowers, her connection to a community, and her character costume.

This topic is given a graphic treatment, rather than a traditional presentation. The spatial organization of the comic serves to structure the argumentation, wherein the presence or lack of frames, the layout of the page, the repetition of symbols or graphic references all serve the purpose of the academic presentation of the subject. What would have appeared in footnotes or as parenthetical details are better integrated as visual elements, and the ability to combine the written and visualized leads to a greater economization of text and maximalization of graphic descriptions. To present this research in comic form was to partly discuss it in its own language. The visual language chosen for the illustrations in this comic are intentionally referential to the visual language of the comics where nun characters appear, while the Socratic dialogue between the subject of inquiry (manifested as the Mini Nun), and the authorial voice (manifested as Arthur) attempts to utilize the unique possibilities of the format. The choice of font, the finishing of the frames and the inclusion of colloquial interjections throughout aim to replicate the narrative ease and amiability often found in academic writing from North America, in contrast to the more sombre, cerebral and strict realism of works like *Unflattening* (Sousanis 2015).

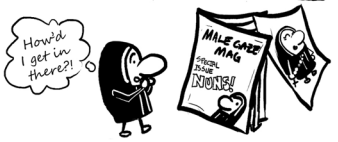
NUNS IN ACTION

A Graphic Investigation into a Graphic Issue.

Written and illustrated by E. Allyn Woock

This graphic investigation looks at the presentation of the nun stock character in the now globalized comic book industry. An attempt to address the phenomenon of nuns in comic books can doom itself to become mired in a mess of shocking, isolated examples. Henry A. Kelly warns : "There are lots of pitfalls in dealing with all historical subjects, but religious topics have some peculiar dangers." Kelly 1996, p: 115

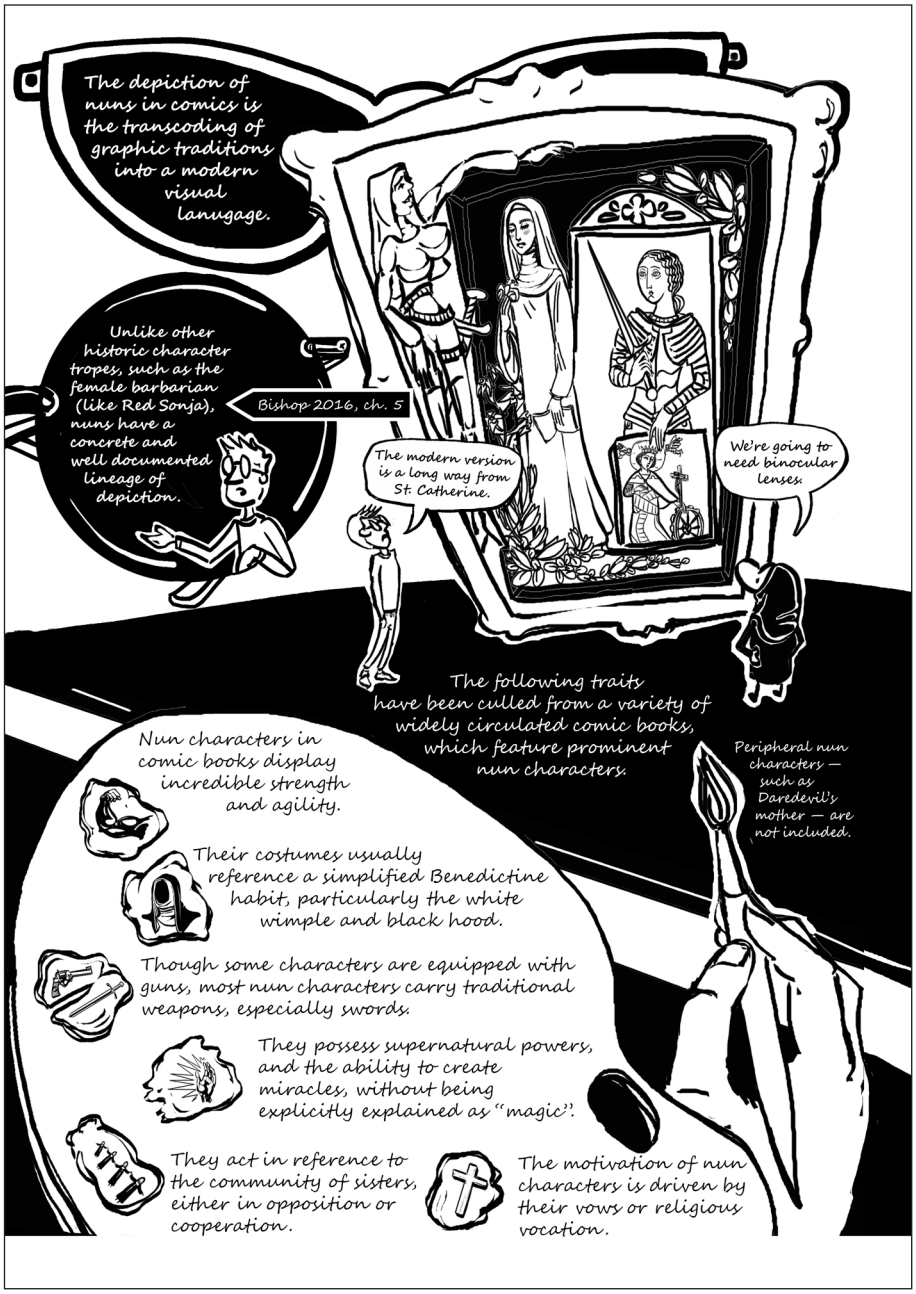
John W. Waterhouse's depiction of St. Eulalia 1885

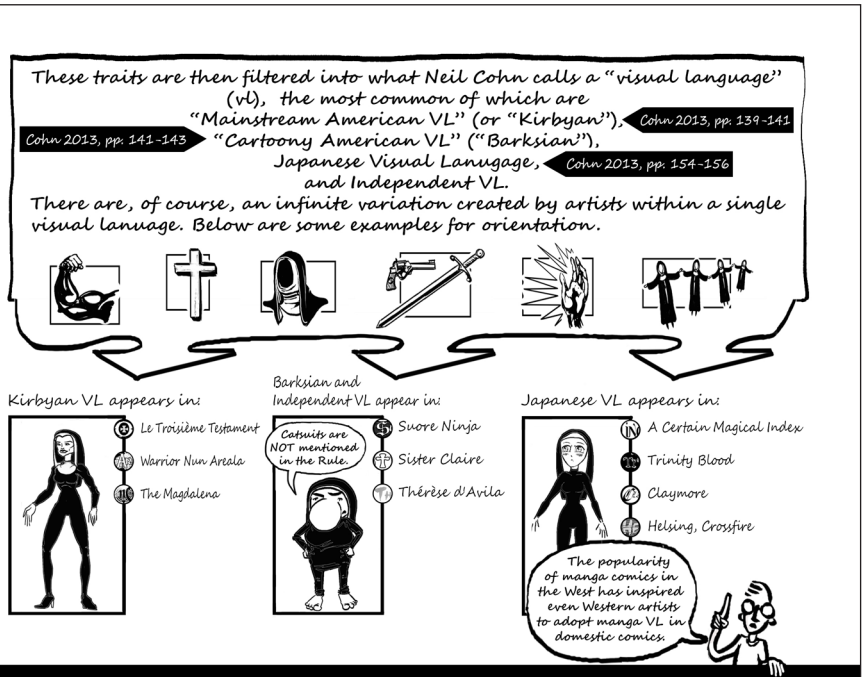


While scholarship on female monasticism is rich, nuns in comics have not been addressed. This graphic article will look at the historic foundations behind the visualization of nun characters in contemporary comics, considering the roles of gender, religion, and popular media.

Identifiable without introduction — like the cowboy or the mad scientist — nuns populate comics with the same regularity and standardization that comic book consumers expect of other flat, stock characters. Nuns can also be easily adapted into the form of various archetypes as main characters. However, nuns and other religious female characters must navigate a unique cultural terrain of both inherited and modern issues, through a range of comic book traditions, from the Marvel universe to manga and bande dessinée.

Wait a minute. Who are you?
I'm the authorial voice manifest. You can call me Arthur for short.
Now, let me show you how you got into this comic.
The first narrative portrayal of nun characters occurred in Early Christian hagiography, and it's just gotten more complicated since then.
here be gender issues
MEDIEVALISM
Romanticism
isolated stereotypes
anti-Catholicism
objectification
Whims-of-the-Artist
consumer preferences
Yikes! I'm glad I brought my hiking habit.
You're going to need a lot more than that. Let's get academic!
In order to broach a temporally and culturally complex issue "the reader must inhabit a double-time, simultaneously both early Christian and modern."
Moran 2004, p: 479
And, while approaching through this double-time gaze, we must maintain an "essential epistemic humility"
Bennett 1993, p: 322
in order to avoid an anachronistic analysis of a historic subject, or conversely, to avoid judgement of modern phenomena along our lived experience.
Then on top of that, there are many different lenses to choose from when examining the subject.
What lenses are you wearing?
Mine are peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary bifocals.
A double gaze is insufficient without comic book literacy and contextualization of the nun character within her graphic evolution. Let's start with a historic lens and look at the essential elements that define religious women in comic books and investigate their possible origins.


The depiction of nuns in comics is the transcoding of graphic traditions into a modern visual lanugage.
Unlike other historic character tropes, such as the female barbarian (like Red Sonja), nuns have a concrete and well documented lineage of depiction.
Bishop 2016, ch. 5
The modern version is a long way from St. Catherine.
We're going to need binocular lenses.
The following traits have been culled from a variety of widely circulated comic books, which feature prominent nun characters.
Peripheral nun characters — such as Daredevil's mother — are not included.
Nun characters in comic books display incredible strength and agility.
Their costumes usually reference a simplified Benedictine habit, particularly the white wimple and black hood.
Though some characters are equipped with guns, most nun characters carry traditional weapons, especially swords.
They possess supernatural powers, and the ability to create miracles, without being explicitly explained as "magic".
They act in reference to the community of sisters, either in opposition or cooperation.
The motivation of nun characters is driven by their vows or religious vocation.



This graphic article will aim to focus on the visual elements unique to nun characters. The two primary components are the habit, and the medieval iconography which informs the weapons or 'superpowers' of nun characters.

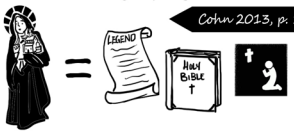
DRESS

Superheroes, when engaged in the actions which define their character exhibit physical change. Friedrich Weitzlen separates the uncostumed secret identity and the costumed superhero, labeling these feminine and the masculine. Weitzlen 2005

Nuns are always simultaneously 'in costume' and 'uncostumed', creating a space between genders and between the superhero and secret identity. Even more than the habit, the occupation of in-between space is characteristic of the nun.

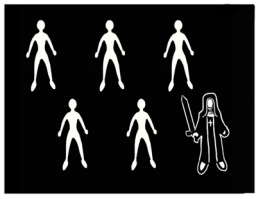
ATTRIBUTES

Cohn applies Charles Sanders Peirce's types of reference to comics, but the form **iconic = resembling** doesn't encompass the complex references wrapped up in the application of medieval iconography to comics. Cohn 2013, p. 19



Networks of saints are shown together also as a symbol. Not unlike the vigilante collective in The Justice League, popular medieval combinations of heroic virgin saints imagine the promise of an inclusive, super-powered alliance. Fawaz 2015, p. 64

Nun characters in certain visual languages appear sexual and athletic, as is characteristic of all female characters in that particular visual language. This may be a shocking way to see nuns for readers with narrower comic book literacy, but issues surrounding unrealistic physical portrayal touch all female characters. More significant are the features that cohesively tie all nun characters together, differentiating them from other stock characters.

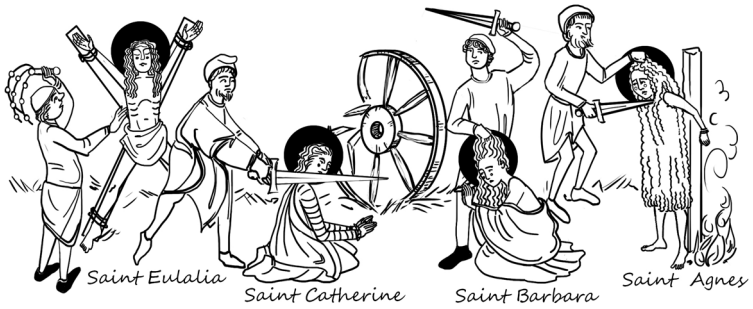


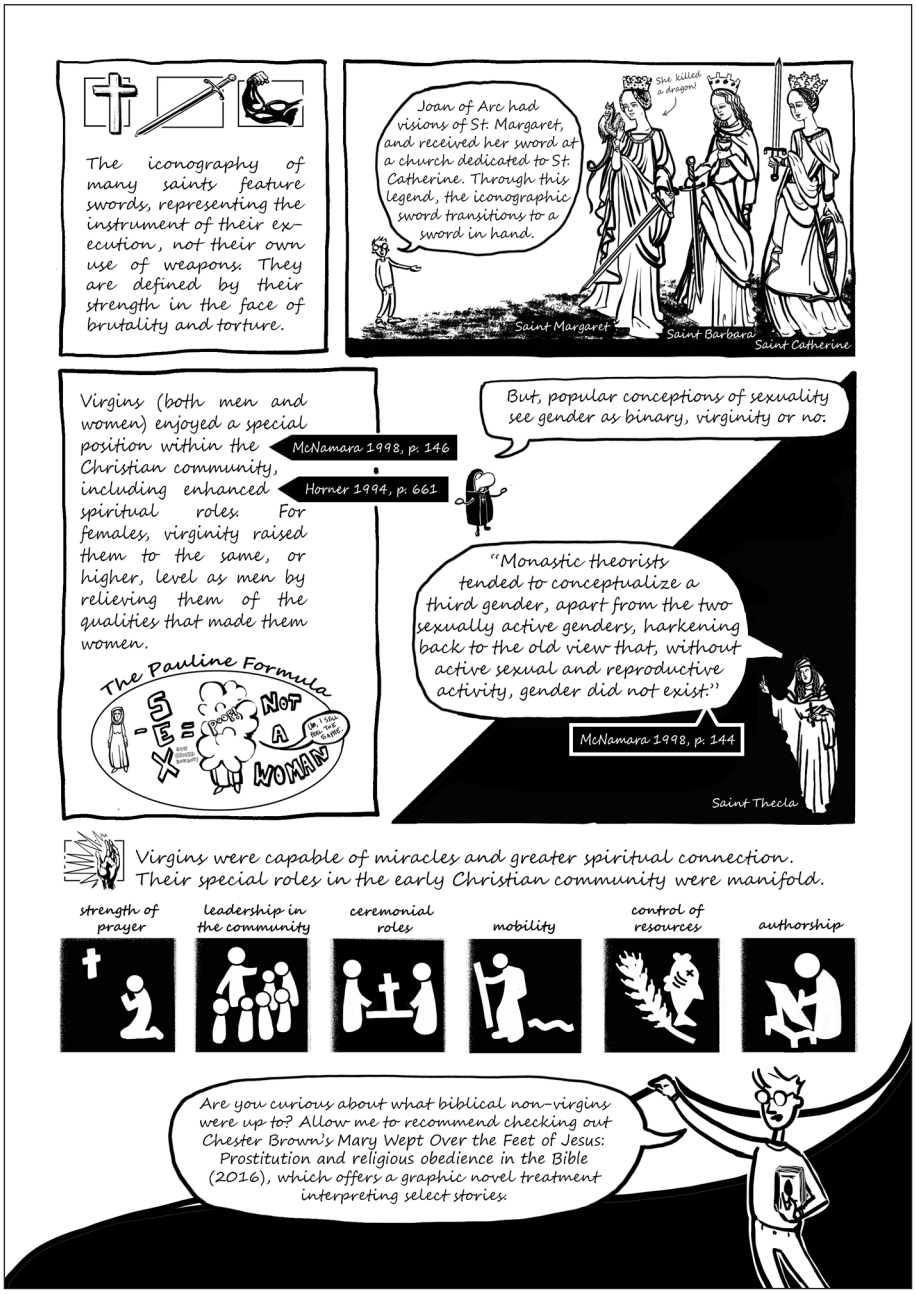
The portrayal of adventurous Christian women through the ages!

These features are neither accidental nor innovative. Rather, the most significant characteristic of religious women in comic books is their dogged reliance on historic tropes.

The first presentation of religious women, both in image and in text, came through the hagiography of early Christian martyrs. For example, in the story of Perpetua, in order to brave the ordeals of the arena "she systematically stripped herself of all that had made her a woman", and the strength which allowed her to bear her violent fate is characterized as masculine. McNamara 1998, p. 31

Many martyrs endured torture and exhibited super-human acts of resilience and grace.




The iconography of many saints feature swords, representing the instrument of their execution, not their own use of weapons. They are defined by their strength in the face of brutality and torture.
Joan of Arc had visions of St. Margaret, and received her sword at a church dedicated to St. Catherine. Through this legend, the iconographic sword transitions to a sword in hand.
She killed a dragon!
Saint Margaret
Saint Barbara
Saint Catherine
Virgins (both men and women) enjoyed a special position within the Christian community, including enhanced spiritual roles. For females, virginity raised them to the same, or higher, level as men by relieving them of the qualities that made them women.
McNamara 1998, p. 146
Horner 1994, p. 661
The Pauline Formula
SEX = NOT A WOMAN
But, popular conceptions of sexuality see gender as binary, virginity or no.
"Monastic theorists tended to conceptualize a third gender, apart from the two sexually active genders, harkening back to the old view that, without active sexual and reproductive activity, gender did not exist."
McNamara 1998, p. 144
Saint Thecla
Virgins were capable of miracles and greater spiritual connection. Their special roles in the early Christian community were manifold.
strength of prayer
leadership in the community
ceremonial roles
mobility
control of resources
authorship
Are you curious about what biblical non-virgins were up to? Allow me to recommend checking out Chester Brown's Mary Wept Over the Feet of Jesus: Prostitution and religious obedience in the Bible (2016), which offers a graphic novel treatment interpreting select stories.

Sorry, change of management.
Sexual misconduct!
Better off married!
Not capable!
Theology grew to understand female monastics as weak and burdensome, and "virginity lost its transformative power when virgins were thus reduced to allegorical brides."
McNamara 1998, p. ix
This re-feminized role opened the door to the sexualization and consequent demonization of womanhood. Women took more restricted, cloistered roles.
In claustration, the community became inseparable from the identity of a nun. The visual signifiers of a spiritual vocation were formalized.
So... now that the convent is closing you won't be needing these relics anymore.
In the twelfth century cura monialium required male houses to provide material and pastoral care for female houses of the same order. This led to the transfer of wealth from nunneries, added to resistance towards the expansion of female communities, and in some cases erased female houses from the order's history, as Constance Hoffman Berman demonstrates in the Cistercian order.
Berman 2000
Undeterred, throughout the High Middle Ages nuns (and Beguines!) continued to do miraculous acts and accumulate dramatic iconography and impressive Vitae and legends, stepping outside of female models.
I have religious studies lenses for this! Though miracles and visions can seem unscientific, Ian Netton warns us to set aside 'contemporary scholarly standards'
Netton 2019, p. 8
and remember Dierdre Jackson's conclusion that miracles 'operated within a particular conceptual framework' in medieval manuscripts.
Jackson 2007, p. 43
strength of prayer
Saint Clare defended her sisters and convent from an entire army by wielding the Blessed Sacrament in a monstrance.
leadership in the community
Saint Agnes of Bohemia founded a male order and was their abbess, to control the care and resources for the nuns.
That reminds me of superpowers! Let me get out my comics studies visor! Ramzi Fawaz argues that The X-Men shifted focus from "the messianic hero's suffering male body" to "the vital body of the female superhero audaciously announcing her visual presence on the comic book page" through "quasi-mystical graphics that linked female acts of superhuman energy projection, telepathy, and telekinesis to sumptuous displays of feminist empowerment."
Fawaz 2015, p. 188
authorship
Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote seven books of mysticism and visions, in her vernacular dialect.

Let's bridge this to modernity through the nineteenth century, shall we?

Frances Dolan notes that while the nun "of the popular imagination can tell us very little" about actual practicing nuns, "she is still an important figure because of what she can tell us about attitudes toward women's sexuality, agency, and authority". Dolan 2007, p. 512

Late Middle Ages Pagliarini 2007, p. 227

1. weak spiritual and social roles
2. women helpless in the face of their own sexuality
3. nuns seen as a threat and burden

Victorian Era Casteras 1981, p. 157

1. similar
2. same
3. yes

However, Victorian art experimented with more scandalous portrayals of religious women. Casteras 1981, p. 182

Saint Elizabeth 1512

Hans Holbein the Elder's painting of St. Elizabeth (The Ausberg Tryptich)

Saint Elizabeth 1891

Philip Hermogenes Calderon's "St. Elizabeth of Hungary's Great Act of Renunciation",

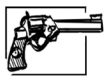
Amid anti-Catholicism, social conservativism, and medievalism, nuns were viewed with both suspicion and romanticism. They became the subject of fantasy, literature and art.

"For this symbolic lily of virginity and spirituality, much like her secular sister in real life, was enshrined in an atmosphere of mystery and unattainability that made her simultaneously innocent and repugnant, titillation in her hortus conclusus of femininity and chastity." Casteras 1981, p. 182

Sensational fiction claiming to be true accounts of abuse at convents, like "The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk" were popular. Clive Bloom goes so far as to classify Monk's story as 'pulp': "marketed as pornography or religious tract - it is all one," both censored and yet later reprinted with illustrations. Monk 1836 Bloom 1996, p. 35

Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk (1971):

The cover claims "One of the most powerful accounts of depravity ever written."



In contrast to Victorian feminine ideals, some nun characters in Gothic literature manifest masculine qualities, as in the work of Charlotte Dacre. Later in the twentieth century, the portrayal of religious women again recalls questions of gender and violence, while placing nuns in decidedly non-monastic adventures. This was further complicated by the feminist movement. Dunn 1998, p. 326

Second wave feminism gave nuns a new definition: "In the wide gulf between the sexually liberated single girl and the loving and lovable domestic goddess, nuns were a third option that fired up dreams of feminine independence while smothering any possibility that the flames might spread out of control." Sullivan 2005, p. 12

In her study on postwar cinema, Rebecca Sullivan finds a link between male military service and religious life, where nuns could stand parallel to war heroes, while also complying to gender expectations of the time, as in the character Sister Angela in the film Heaven Knows, Mr Allison (1957). Sullivan 2005, p. 70

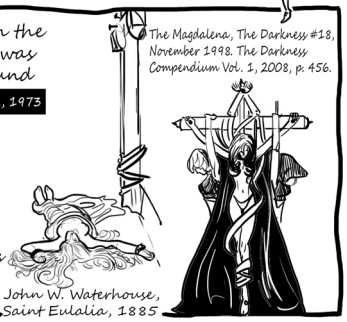
As female equivalents of popular action heroes began to appear in comics, some even appeared as heroines of their own series. In the context of early feminist discussion, these drew accusations of "cross-dressing": male roles acted out by female characters for the sake of entertainment. Brown 1996, p. 53

However, there's no male equivalent for nuns in popular media. Monks do not represent a true counterpart.

Now it's time to put away the historical lenses, and follow our map to the open waters of gender studies and nuns in contemporary comics.

Nun characters were employed to grapple with the gender politics of the time. Anti-Catholicism was vented through caricatures of nuns. Underground comics like Tales of the Leather Nun Brand et al., 1973 indulged in open fetishism of nuns.

The sexualization and aesthetic treatment of violence, particularly appearing in medieval, and moreover Gothic, contexts has been explored by Elisabeth Bronfen (2006); images of super-heroines in bondage are common, as Edward Avery-Natale notes for Wonder Woman in particular. Avery-Natal 2013, p. 82

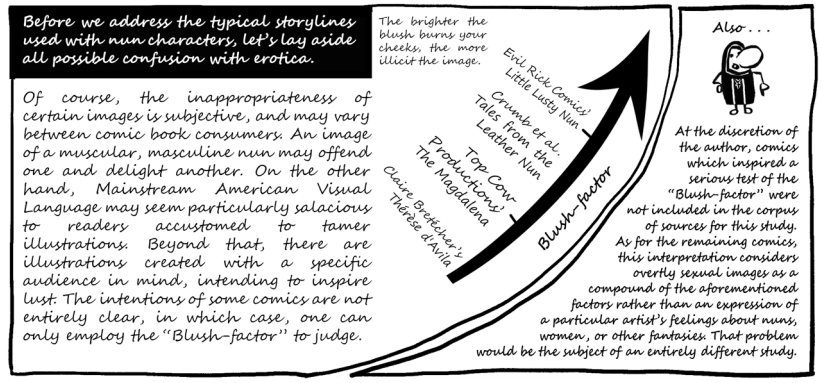


John W. Waterhouse, Saint Eulalia, 1885

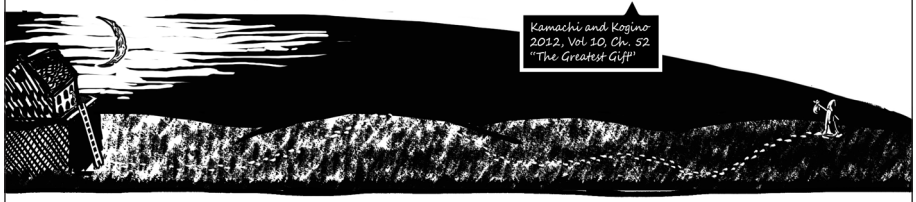
The Magdalena, The Darkness #18, November 1998. The Darkness Compendium Vol. 1, 2008, p. 456.

Before we address the typical storylines used with nun characters, let's lay aside all possible confusion with erotica.

Of course, the inappropriateness of certain images is subjective, and may vary between comic book consumers. An image of a muscular, masculine nun may offend one and delight another. On the other hand, Mainstream American Visual Language may seem particularly salacious to readers accustomed to tamer illustrations. Beyond that, there are illustrations created with a specific audience in mind, intending to inspire lust. The intentions of some comics are not entirely clear, in which case, one can only employ the "Blush-factor" to judge.

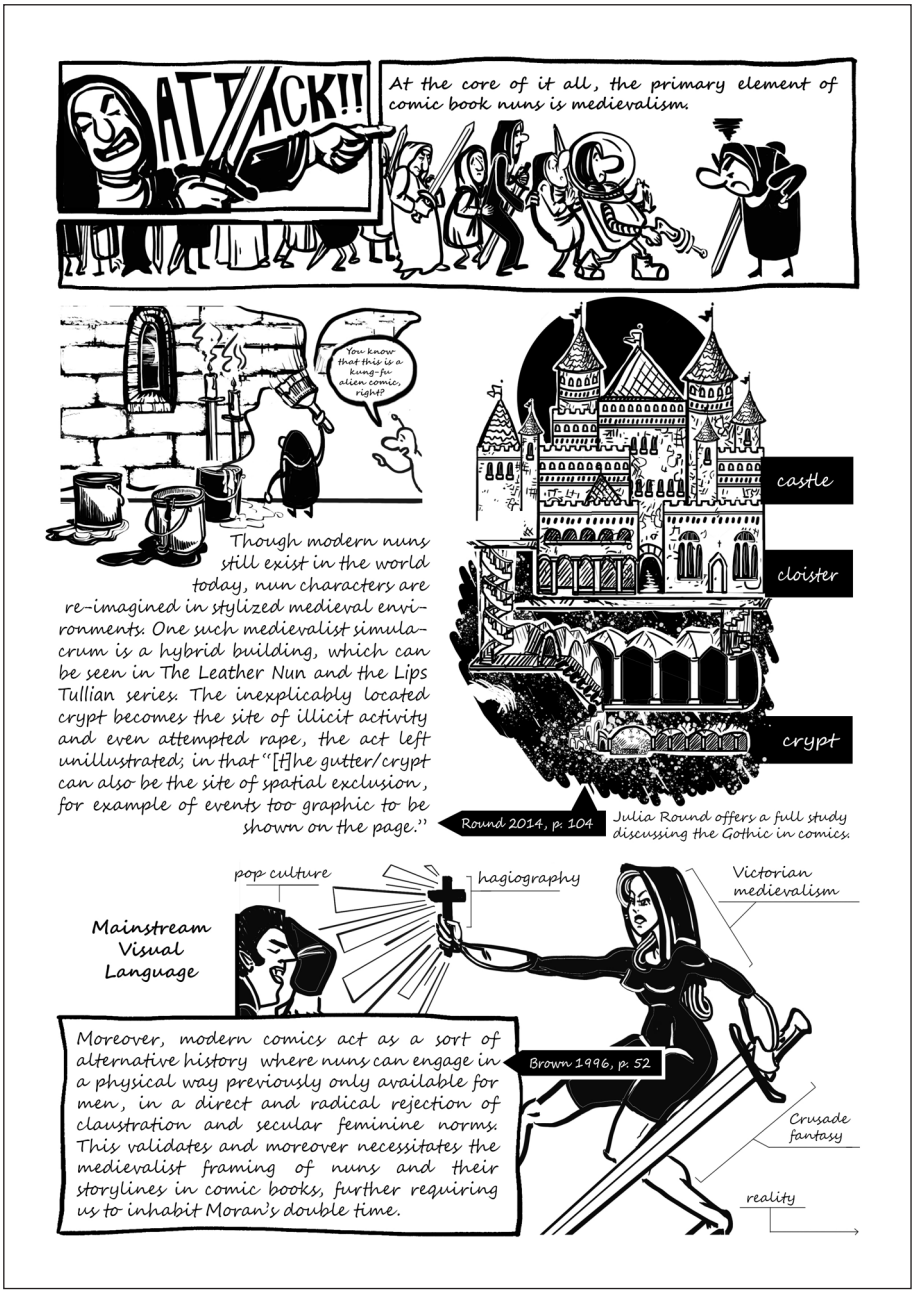


The "escape nun" plot is a popular storyline, with roots in the nineteenth century in texts such as Maria Monk. Griffin 1996, p. 93 As part of the anti-Catholic movement, and spurred on by Protestant suspicions of Catholic practices in Antebellum America, the escape story was used to vilify monastic institutions with fabricated and exaggerated details of girls escaping convent life, demonizing the convent as a brothel or prison overseen by crooked priests. Medieval sources were held up as examples of the truth about the corruption of Catholic nuns. The escape plots of modern comic books trade heavily in these features, wherein the woman is victimized by the convent environment, or abused by the clergy. One series, A Certain Magical Index, presents attempts by agents of the Anglican church to rescue a Catholic nun.



Other storylines focus on the nun acting as an agent for her monastic community, or the Church. Comics founded on this basic plot include The Magdalena, Suore Ninja, and Claymore. In a variation of this dynamic, some comics pit their heroine against the community, or in tension with it, such as in Sister Claire, or A Certain Magical Index. In some series, the nuns represent antagonists, and in others, such as Thérèse d'Avila, the plot references historic events.

Finally, Japanese comics often pair vampire themes with storylines revolving around nuns or members of the clergy. Elements of this appear in the Helsing and Trinity Blood series. Rebecca Suter terms the adoption of anachronistic medievalisms in Japanese manga as "creative misreadings" and notes that "the treatment of history and gender in mainstream shojo manga" remains a lacuna in comics scholarship. Suter 2009, p. 242


ATTACK!!
At the core of it all, the primary element of comic book nuns is medievalism.
You know that this is a kung-fu alien comic, right?
Though modern nuns still exist in the world today, nun characters are re-imagined in stylized medieval environments. One such medievalist simulacrum is a hybrid building, which can be seen in The Leather Nun and the Lips Tullian series. The inexplicably located crypt becomes the site of illicit activity and even attempted rape, the act left unillustrated; in that "[t]he gutter/crypt can also be the site of spatial exclusion, for example of events too graphic to be shown on the page."
castle
cloister
crypt
Round 2014, p. 104
Julia Round offers a full study discussing the Gothic in comics.
Mainstream Visual Language
pop culture
hagiography
Victorian medievalism
Moreover, modern comics act as a sort of alternative history where nuns can engage in a physical way previously only available for men, in a direct and radical rejection of claustration and secular feminine norms. This validates and moreover necessitates the medievalist framing of nuns and their storylines in comic books, further requiring us to inhabit Moran's double time.
Brown 1996, p. 52
Crusade fantasy
reality

If we accept the nun character in comic books this way, what does it mean for the reader? Especially, how does this character fit into in the current debate about role models and the movement to create "strong female characters"? There are two casual measures regarding female characters in comics: The Smurfette Principle and the Bechdel-Wallace Test.

Kershner and Landler 1991

Bechdel 1986, p. 22

The Smurfette Principle holds that media not directly focused on a female audience will include just one female character, like April in The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Gamora in Guardians of the Galaxy, or Black Widow in The Avengers, who shoulder the entire burden of representing women. Often the token female serves as a love interest.

Meanwhile, the Bechdel-Wallace test is not a perfect measure of feminism but a rather low standard on which to orient. For a work to pass, it must:

1) include at least two women,
2) who have at least one conversation,
3) about something other than a man or men.

Nuns are generally not used as token female characters in comics, because their connection to a convent contextualizes them in a community of women. In comics such as 1602: Witch Hunter Angela, the convent becomes a logical environment to abandon heteronormativity in the protagonist's love story. In the Suore Ninja series, romance is altogether left out, because the sisters are too busy fighting zombies.

Sullivan shows that nuns appeared in film in the 1950s as "instantly identifiable, sexually unassailable, and assuredly non-confrontational."

Sullivan 2005, p. 19

Now, nun characters in series such as The Magdalena and Warrior Nun Areala are confrontational, Sister Clare directly addresses immaculate conception and other Christian dogma, and nun characters are portrayed as aggressive and threatening in comics such as Marvels' Ghost Riders: Heaven's on Fire series, which features the Gun Nuns.

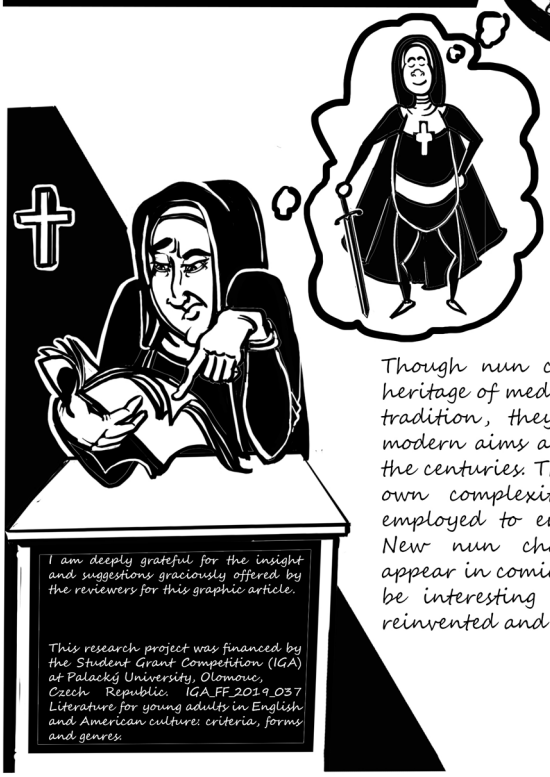
Rather than the above test and principle, Hillary Chute proposes "embodiment" as a measure of feminist engagement in comics, hinging on visibility, or "making the hidden visible". Nuns are on the page and present in modern comics.

Chute 2015, pp. 200-201

Pugnacious sisters – sisters in arms spiritually and literally – channel not only Victorian romance but also medieval paradigms of martyrdom and sacred heroism that the nuns of those idealized times themselves embraced.

"[A] male concept of female spirituality serves very effectively to anchor women to a traditional gender role, but women themselves rarely indulge in its implicit eroticism in their writings. More often, they identify with the Virgin Mary in her maternal or queenly aspects or model themselves on the heroic virgin saints, Catherine, Margaret, Thecla, and Ursula."

McNamara 1998, p. ix



Though nun characters represent a heritage of medieval iconography and tradition, they can be adapted to modern aims as they have been over the centuries. They grapple with their own complexities while they are employed to embody societal issues. New nun characters continue to appear in comic book series, so it will be interesting to see how they are reinvented and reimagined.

I am deeply grateful for the insight and suggestions graciously offered by the reviewers for this graphic article.

This research project was financed by the Student Grant Competition (IGA) at Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic. IGA_FF_2019_037 Literature for young adults in English and American culture: criteria, forms and genres.

Author's Note

I am deeply grateful for the insight and suggestions graciously offered by the reviewers. This article is an output from a research project funded by the Student Grant Competition (IGA) at Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic; IGA_FF_2019_037 Literature for young adults in English and American culture: criteria, forms and genres.

Editorial Note

This article is a piece of research that underwent double blind peer review by two external reviewers, and it is part of the Graphic Science Special Collection edited by Nicolas Labarre and Ernesto Priego. Our gratitude to the peer reviewers. Parts of the medieval history overview on pages 6 and 8, and the escape stories on page 10 of the comic appeared with a different treatment in Woock 2015: 159–170.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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