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## MANIFEST INSIGNIFICANCE - THE CONSECRATED VEIL OF MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS WOMEN

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(I regret that the visual material used when reading this paper cannot be included in these Proceedings, as many of the collections from which they come have severe restrictions in regard to reproduction. I have also excluded shelfmark references for individual manuscripts as some of them are previously unpublished.)

The theme of this paper is part of my dissertation in medieval art history entitled “The Dress of Monastic and Religious Women as Seen in Art from the Early Middle Ages to the Reformation”. I would like to introduce some basic concepts relating to female monasticism before I focus on the nun’s black veil and the white one of other religious women and how they are represented in the visual arts. This humble textile, solemnly blessed at the nun’s consecration, functions in several ways: as textile object, social signifier and symbol.

My richest primary sources are in the medieval illuminations of liturgical and secular manuscripts, in texts such as the Rules of the various Orders, the records from bishops’ visits to female convents, and in monastic documents such as wills and administrative records. In the later period, panel painting also offers valuable information. Other medieval art media, including textiles, funeral brasses, stone and wood sculpture and stained glass also contain details for interpretation. Until recently, and with exception for the important contributions by Lina Eckenstein (1895) and Eileen Power (1922),<sup>1</sup> the secondary literature on women’s monasticism has been scant. But from the 1970’s with the emergence of Women’s Studies as an academic discipline, a number of works on medieval women religious have been published by scholars in various disciplines although none has focused on their textiles, dress and visual representations.

Women were early, perhaps the first participants in the monastic ideal of leading communal lives in imitation of Christ, the *vita apostolica*, by observing the tenets of poverty, chastity and obedience. During the first centuries of Christianity the role of women in the Church was in flux; some are known to have been central figures, even preachers in the congregations, a practice soon stopped by the Church Fathers and Councils. If a single factor must be separated out to explain why women’s cloistered lives throughout western religious history have been so precarious, it is the (until very recently) strict prohibition against women performing sacerdotal functions, especially that of celebrating mass. As these rituals took place on a daily basis in medieval life, cloistered nuns had to hire male secular or monastic clerics to say masses, hear confessions and perform any other religious ceremonies for the nuns’ communities and their parishioners. This created a dependency on visiting or residing male clergy that caused economic, administrative and social problems.

Both men’s and women’s institutions could also become, paradoxically, victims of their own success. To strictly follow the monastic vows is extremely difficult, and the series of monastic reforms which punctuate the history of Christianity are proof of this. These religious movements often resulted in the founding of new, more stringent orders, or

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<sup>1</sup> Eckenstein, Lina, *Women under Monasticism*, New York 1963 reprint, and Power, Eileen, *Medieval English Nunneries c.1275 to 1535*, Cambridge 1922.

in the suppression of other communities, deemed heretical. A newly reformed order observing most rigorously the vow of poverty may have found itself so successful in acquiring members that it had to expand, manage endowments and lands on which it depended for its survival; it therefore often became lax and luxury-loving. Conversely, a convent in strict observance without sufficient secular support might have been forced to abandon its common life and dissolve the monastery. Monastic history offers examples of both, but the nunneries' double dependency cited above explain their particular vulnerability.

Scholars have noted the many medieval voices of misogyny of Church Fathers, supervisors and reformers who railed against bothersome and undisciplined nuns. Such 'presentist issues', to borrow a phrase from Carolyn Walker Bynum,<sup>2</sup> are justifiable and necessary, but they also need to be seen against the many manifestations of profound concern and solicitous activities of many clerics who provided for women's spiritual advancement within the confines of medieval society. They had women's welfare foremost; Robert of Arbrissel (1045-1116) and Gilbert of Sempringham (c.1083-1189) established their orders specifically to include poor women, and the first foundation of St. Dominic (1170-1221) was to provide a women's house to combat the heretical Cathar movement in the south of France. Mainstream clerics frequently founded nunneries for female relatives, and important secular families gave lands for their kinswomen's convents.

The long period we call the Middle Ages also shows great diversity in the social origin of religious women. With a broad brush one could depict the early period's nunneries as having members who came exclusively from royal families and the upper aristocracy. By the late eleventh century women from the lower and middle classes were gaining entry; and Marilyn Oliva has convincingly shown that in East Anglia of the later period, thirteenth to sixteenth century, the great majority of nuns came from these lower social strata.<sup>3</sup> In this respect the indices in the visual arts are fascinating and challenging - was the artist following a patron's dictates, stylistic conventions or implying a social commentary? As to the implication and significance of luxury textiles and dress over time, would it have been harder for the early, royal monastics to give up the rare, fine textiles to which their family rank entitled them, than it was for the later period's mainly middleclass women to abandon theirs for a humbler dress? The texts seem to support this. In the seventh century, bishop Aldhelm of Wessex addressed the nuns at the royal Barking Abbey, condemning them for dressing 'in fine linen shirts, in scarlet and blue tunics, in necklines and sleeves embroidered with silk'.<sup>4</sup> In the mid-twelfth century Abbess Tenxwind of the recently reformed Andernach nunnery reproached her colleague Hildegard of Bingen for letting her nuns with loosened hair sing the psalms in church on feastdays 'wearing white silk veils so long that they touch the ground'.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, and whether living cloistered under a rule or not, religious women in the thirteenth century's reform fervor with enthusiasm rejected rich clothes for hairshirts and harsh rags, finding simple dress a sure way to establish a social identity in a rapidly changing society. The Rule of St.

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<sup>2</sup> Bynum accounts for the many current approaches within medieval studies in 'Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective', *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Autumn 1995), 1-33.

<sup>3</sup> Gilchrist, Roberta and Marilyn Oliva, *Religious Women in Medieval East Anglia*, University of East Anglia, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Aldhelm, Saint, *Aldhelm The Prose Works*, Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren trs., Ipswich and Cambridge 1979, 128.

<sup>5</sup> Boockmann, Hartmut, 'Gelöstes Haar und seidene Schleier: Zwei Äbtissinnen im Dialog' in Beck, Reiner, ed. *Streifzüge durch das Mittelalter: Ein historisches Lesebuch*, Munich 1995, 213.

Clare of 1253 allows each nun only three tunics and a mantle as she states, 'I plead and exhort my sisters to always wear plain and inexpensive garments'.<sup>6</sup>

Monastic dress was meant to set the spirituals apart from the worldly. As the religious renounced possessions as well as sexual relations, their dress represented denial and self-effacement, its material signalled insignificance. In contrast to the gendered and ever-accelerating fashion changes in secular society, monks and nuns wore identical garments, a plain, sleeved woollen tunic, usually belted to separate the upper and lower body zones, and often accompanied by a scapular, originally a protective apron. Some orders allowed linen undergarments, but the original Rule of St. Benedict specifically forbids it as too comfortable. Wide-sleeved overtunics were worn during service in the choir, and mantles were to be used for the rare ventures outside the convent walls. The colors seen in the tunics, mantles and scapulars which later would so clearly distinguish the various orders were not yet uniform in the central medieval period. While 'black nuns' refer to Benedictines and 'white nuns' the Cistercians, the term 'grey sisters', for instance, for the Franciscan tertiaries belongs in the post-reformation era. Only one early rule, that of bishop Cesarius of Arles (d.542), gets specific as to color; it should be 'simple and dignified, never black, never all white, but always of a natural color'.<sup>7</sup>

It is in the headdress that nuns and monks differ. While men would show their tonsured pates and wear a hood attached to their cowls or tunics, women's heads were covered with a veil to hide their hair. The veil had been a marker of marital status of ancient standing for women in the Mediterranean region; Helen, abducted to Troy as a bride, is seen veiling herself in archaic Greek art. The much disputed statement by Paul in I Corinthians, 11:2-16, on the covering of women's heads has been lucidly summarized and applied to the late antique context by Ross Kraemer.<sup>8</sup> In medieval practice it meant that unmarried young women could expose their hair, while married women and widows must cover theirs.

The nun's veil also carried a profound, metaphorical significance beyond acting as a social marker and carrying on traditions established in classical Rome. During the *velatio*, the veiling consecration ritual for the fully professed nun, she became *sponsa Christi*, Bride of the Heavenly Bridegroom. The medieval *pontifical*, a liturgical manual for bishops, contains details of the veiling ceremony; and although the great majority of pontificals preserved are not illustrated, several examples of the later period contain depictions of the rites which the bishop/archbishop was required to perform. Among these illuminated, costly pontificals only a few include complete cycles of images of all episcopal duties. 'Historiated initials' in the pontificals frequently show the initiation of young women to the novitiate, the consecration and veiling of virgins as professed nuns, and the benediction of an abbess. More rarely is the ordination of a deaconess seen, or the blessing by the bishop for a recluse or anchoress, a woman living singly in seclusion.

The *velatio* took place only on designated days of the liturgical year, the Feast of the Ascension foremost among them, a day when the Heavenly Bridegroom would surely be

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<sup>6</sup> Sources Chrétiennes No 325: *Claire d'Assise Écrits: Introduction, texte latin, traduction, notes et index*, Becker, Marie-France et al., trs. and eds. Paris 1985, 131.

<sup>7</sup> Sources Chrétiennes No 345: *Césaire d'Arles Œuvres Monastiques, Tome 1, œuvres pour les moniales, Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes*, Adalbert de Vogüé and Joël Courreau, trs. and eds., Paris 1988, 229.

<sup>8</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard. *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman World*, New York 1992, 146-7. Kraemer's application of Mary Douglas's grid/group theory can equally well be assigned to the medieval secular and religious women expressed in terms of headdress as a guide to social changes in medieval society.

available. The length of the novitiate or probation period preceding the veiling varies over the medieval period, but a year's span of reflection was standard. The mature age of twenty-five for the *velatio* and taking of full vows had been established already in the fifth century, but it is not clear how strictly this was adhered to later and elsewhere. The nun's consecration ritual took much effort to standardize and incorporate into the Church's hierarchy because many important, spiritual women during the early period had proclaimed their rights to declare themselves ordained to a chaste life, a body of evidence which Donald Hochstetler has surveyed carefully.<sup>9</sup> In the prescribed ritual, which underwent many smaller changes during the Middle Ages, the bishop conducts Mass to the end of the Collect, at which point he sits down in front of the high altar. The white-dressed novices approach the bishop carrying their tunics, holding unlit candles in their left hands. The bishop questions them, and the women announce their willingness to enter the Order. Their garments are blessed, sprinkled with holy water and given to the virgins who leave to put them on. They then return to the altar with the candles lit, a clear allusion to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, the triumph of chastity, as well as to the torches carried in the nuptial procession in antiquity. The veils are then brought before the bishop who blesses them as each of the novices go up singly to the altar to be veiled, kneeling by the bishop who intones, 'Accipe virgo Christi velamen virginitatis...' (Receive, virgin of Christ, this veil of virginity..), as he places the veil on the nun's head. A ring is similarly blessed and given to the nun, after which Mass is concluded with Communion.

For the three following days the new nun must observe complete silence and fasting, her veil drawn around her chin. At the Mass of the Resurrection on the third day the veil is lifted, she can again speak, and a solemn banquet follows at which the now consecrated nuns are treated as brides. The elaboration of this ritual involving the outer and inner person relies heavily on the symbolism vested in the change of garments and the posing of the veil by the Vicar of Christ, symbolizing the passage from the secular life to the religious - or from the temporal to the everlasting.

The pontificals also illustrate the benediction of an abbess, whose headveil color would be black if she had previously been a nun, or white if she had come to the monastery as a widow, which was not uncommon. A previously married woman could not be consecrated as a nun since she presumably was no longer a virgin. In the visual arts, however, this aspect was often overlooked. The Swedish fourteenth-century St. Birgitta, was founder of the Order of St. Savior and a mother of eight children, several of whom joined her Order. She should be seen in only in a widow's white veil, but she will sometimes be given the nun's black one. Tertiaries also had white veils; this term derives from a division of the religious into three groups: monks being the first, cloistered nuns the second, and lay religious the third, tertiary order. This is an attempt to classify the many faithful who aspired to the *vita apostolica* outside the convent walls. These religious men and women, who form a bewildering and poorly surveyed group, often lived communal lives, sometimes under a Rule or the guidance of a local cleric. They generally led working lives in secular society, frequently in the textile manufactures. The Beguines of northern Europe depended on it as did the Humiliati of northern Italy. In an illustration, the Humiliati sisters are seen working wool, spinning, warping and weaving. A panel painting of the mid-fifteenth century Roman school displays Sa Francesca Romana clothed by the Virgin, while the angel miraculously carries on the warping undisturbed by the dogs and cats, another cloth enveloping Francesca's community of sisters.

In a series of illuminations from a manual belonging to a Florentine Franciscan tertiary house of the late fifteenth century, a veiling ceremony of a somewhat different

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<sup>9</sup> Hochstetler, Donald, *A Conflict of Traditions: Women in Religion in the Early Middle Ages 500-840*, New York 1992, for instance 99-104.

character is portrayed. A priest officiates here, first giving the postulant a tonsure *in rotundum* as St. Clare's 1253 Rule prescribes. All of her worldly goods and secular garments are divested with the help of the abbess and given to the poor. The postulant kneels to receive her novice garments, and at joining her order she is given three tunics and a mantle. She is next seen being veiled by the priest, with a white veil as the other sisters.

In male-authored texts throughout the medieval period the nuns are instructed to view these humble garments, especially the simple black veil, in their metaphorical significance. John Alcock in the late fifteenth century 'quotes' the early martyr St. Agnes as saying, 'Christ has covered my soul inward and my head with a veil, and if I will love any man better than him I shall go to the color of my veil and that is everlasting death'.<sup>10</sup> The previously cited Aldhelm also vents his ire on those nuns who corrupt the 'decrees of canon law and the norm of the regular life', and who have 'the hair of their forelocks and the curls at their temples crimped with a curling iron; darkgrey veils for the head give way to bright and colored headdresses, which are sewn with interlacings of ribbons and hang down as far as the ankles.'<sup>11</sup> Similar sentiments of clerics, secular authors and social critics continue to appear in the texts during the next several hundred years.

The medieval visual arts allow us to see evidence of these attempts at subversion on the part of the women religious. It is in the veil's material, apparent costliness, and visible decorative additions that we find some of the reasons for the quoted expressions of clerical sumptuary censure. The role of the artist in this process is a thorny issue - if he or she were monastics, was the interpretation rendered by convention or observation? If unfamiliar with the cloistered life, was the artist instructed by his/her patron as to monastic dress details, or was license taken with whatever information was available? In the images a range of interpretations seem possible: when the early eleventh-century abbess Hitda offers her evangiliary to her patron St. Walburg there appears to be no question that the very long, elaborately frilled and pleated veil underscores the abbess's status and authority. In a mid-twelfth century martyrology illustration (in which, highly unusually, both the scribe, nun Guta, and the artist, monk Sintram, are named); does her blue veil signal a forbidden exception to nun's black or is it an arbitrary choice from the artist's pallet?<sup>12</sup>

The nun's black veil was made of wool or precious silk, while the wimple and underveil<sup>13</sup> usually were made of linen, sometimes silk. In depictions the differences between the fabric qualities are made very clear - a veil's very deep black could refer only to wool, as it, unlike linen, could be dyed into saturated shades. When the black veil is rendered as transparent, expressed through hatching, and with elegant draping quality, silk seems to be indicated. Both kinds of representation are frequently seen in illuminations and panel paintings. Since works of art were costly to produce and commission, it stands to reason that the patrons would be interested in seeing themselves depicted in their finest, even if forbidden. The fourteenth-century image of Franciscan sisters' transparent white wimples seem then to signal a breach in their humble dresscode, and in a depiction of Augustinian hermit nuns, the beaded appearance of their underveils' edging implies a precious silk or finest linen with perhaps an early form of lace trim.

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<sup>10</sup> Alcock, John, (*Spousage of a Virgin to Christ*) *An Exhortacyon made to Relygyous Sisters* (Westmynstre (Wynken de Worde) n.d.), facsimile Amsterdam 1974, unpag. 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit., 128.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander, J.J.G., *Medieval Illuminators and Their Methods of Work*, New Haven 1992, 18-19. Here is addressed, from a great many perspectives, the act, meaning and intent of medieval representation.

<sup>13</sup> A term I use to indicate the cloth frequently seen with the black veil, and distinct from the wimple (some other languages have words for this: French 'couvrechef', Swedish 'dok' and German 'Gebende').

Where groundplans of the medieval nunneries can be reconstructed, they frequently included spaces reserved for spinning and other textile occupations, but unlike the large male monasteries which had extensive manufactures and export, nuns seem to have performed their textile production and sewing primarily for in-house consumption and their fine needlework for ritual needs. When records do survive, account rolls frequently mention payments made to professionals who spun, wove and fulled the cloth for the nunneries. Surviving documents do not allow us to estimate the extent of nuns' textiles made for secular use as this was at variance with their vow of poverty, although various sources reveal that medieval women obtained their finely worked silk purses and other 'nun's work' from convents.

In 1222 the Council of Oxford decreed, '...nuns and other women dedicated to divine worship shall not wear a silken wimple, nor dare to carry silver or golden tiring pins in their veil.'<sup>14</sup> Such pins can be seen rendered in white and red respectively throughout two English mid-thirteenth-century prayerbooks. They were made by the same artist for two different nunneries, belonging to different subgroups of the Benedictine order. Their dress is, nevertheless, rendered in identical fashion and includes the headveil's pins; this seems to confirm the continuance of this form of abuse addressed by the Council, perhaps even a conceit of the artist's. Augustinian canonesses, an order allowing private property to cloistered women, had early introduced a sign of the cross at center front of their underveil, stitched in red silk on white fabric. As their dress usually is depicted as solid black, like the Benedictines, and as they would have been more visible in the secular medieval landscape, this cross may have served a purpose of identification. This custom was adopted by the Cistercian nuns, for whom the red cross was to symbolize the blood of Christ, but they added it to a white cloth 'crown' over their black veils. In a similar striving for a uniform marker, the Brigidines in the late-fourteenth century adopted this Cistercian crown, altering it by introducing five red dots to signify the wounds of Christ.

This brief sampling is intended as an introduction to the rich variety seen in the much-neglected images of medieval nuns and religious women and the textiles they made and wore. Their history was imperfectly recorded, and the depictions in the visual arts are therefore especially useful to aid in a fuller understanding of their society. Although I have not had time here to include the making of artworks in the nunneries, including book production, tapestries and embroideries, such objects offer further clues and will round out my investigation.

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<sup>14</sup> Power (1922) 585.

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