

How were Medieval Nuns Depicted in Welsh Poetry?

This essay is concerned with how medieval nuns were depicted in Welsh poetry. The essay will consider a range of factors to establish the historical context of the establishment of women's religious houses in medieval Europe.¹ The essay will consider the importance of praise poetry in medieval Wales.² The essay will use different genres of Welsh poetry about nuns and for nuns, such as eulogy poems, the cywydd poems, and gift request poems that were written on behalf of abbesses or nuns. The essay will seek to understand the religious fever spreading across Europe in the Medieval era and society's response to new communities of Religious women.³ The essay will also compare the depiction of medieval nuns in Welsh poetry to other Welsh forms of praise poetry aimed at the nobility, with a view to find unifying or dissimilar factors between the praise poetry of different socioeconomic and gender groups.⁴ The essay will finally compare the depiction of nuns in Welsh poetry to their depiction in other medieval culture's poems.⁵ This should enable the essay to understand whether the Welsh poet's depiction of medieval nuns can be considered reasonable and what kind of societal factors affected the depiction of Welsh medieval nuns.

Praise poetry was an important part of Medieval culture; this genre of poetry existed in many forms across Medieval Europe. The tradition of praise poetry gained pace in the Middle Ages and would continue to flourish until the seventeenth century.⁶ Much of European praise poetry was written to praise men of high status such as rulers as well as the Saints lives.⁷ It appears that the tradition of praise poetry was an established formula that poets could adopt and use as an outlet for their Christian devotion.⁸ For example, praise poetry provided an outlet for expressing devotional emotion for the Virgin Mary.⁹ However, the majority of surviving examples of Medieval praise poetry praise men of high status.¹⁰ Praise poetry contains the agenda of expectation, the poet hopes to flatter the receiver into gifting them a reward.¹¹ This shows that praise poetry aimed at high status individuals functioned within an exchange economy between poet and the object of the poem.¹² One of the main functions of a praise poet was to reaffirm the established political and social

¹ R, A, McDonald, 'The Foundation and Patronage of Nunneries by Native Elites in Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Century Scotland,' In *Women in Scotland c.1100- c.1750*, ed. By Ewan, E and Meikle, M, (Tuckwell Press: Devon, 1999) p. 3

² J, Hunter, 'A Feast of Words: Conspicuous Consumption and Praise Poetry in Medieval Wales,' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 14 (1994) p. 40

³ H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p. 87

⁴ J, Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales,' In *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p. 207

⁵ C, H, Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism* (Routledge: Oxon, 2015) p.216

⁶ J, A, Burrow, *The Poetry of Praise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p.3

⁷ IBID p29

⁸ H, Fulton, 'The Encomium Urbis in Medieval Welsh Poetry,' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 26 (2006) p. 72

⁹ P, Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric* (D.S Brewer: Cambridge, 1996) p.45

¹⁰ IBID p.62

¹¹ IBID p.173

¹² IBID p.174

hierarchy by the praise of their patron.¹³ This shows that praise poets functioned as devices that aided their communities and Christian culture by the constant reaffirmation of rulers and Christian culture. When high status men were the object of praise poetry, they were praised for their male virtues such as their generosity and strength.¹⁴ This mirrors the medieval societal expectations of men, as men were expected to function as providers and protectors of their kin groups and in the case of high-status men, the wider community as well. The abbots of medieval monasteries were praised in a similar fashion in praise poetry, for example, by giving generous hospitality and building works.¹⁵ This shows that to a secular mindset, abbots still exhibited male virtues. The abbot was able to provide for his monastic kin group and the wider community and protected and promoted Christian culture by building for God's glory. Praise poetry where a woman was the object promoted ideals of womanhood; women's virtues included beauty, passivity and piety.¹⁶ This again mirrors societal attitudes to women and reaffirms women's place in society. Praise poetry to nuns and abbesses also praise them according to established forms of female virtue.¹⁷ This again shows that praise poets re-established the social order, in this case by continuing to prescribe gender ideals of subsets of society. This evidence has shown that praise poetry was an integral part of medieval society that constantly reaffirmed social order and gender ideals, even when these ideals are not necessary. For example, it seems entirely unnecessary to depict the beauty of a cloistered nun as beauty serves no part of monastic life. This may indicate that praise poets and their patrons felt the ideals of female beauty were just as important to reaffirm as the virtue of piety and this affected their depictions of medieval nuns. The evidence presented so far shows the importance of praise poetry in Medieval societies and its use as a device for reaffirming the status quo. Women's roles in community life were diminished as the female ideal was presented as passive and ornamental.¹⁸ The gender norms of society were still idealised within the sub communities of the Religious, and despite the potential for greater opportunities for women in the medieval era, their appearance remains an integral part of their worth to society.¹⁹ This is mirrored by the praise poetry aimed at women that continued to praise their beauty.

Medieval Europe was gripped by a religious zeal at the beginning of the thirteenth century and as an outward display of Christian devotion the nobility class founded monastic houses in greater numbers than before.²⁰ This led to a great rise in the number of monastic houses in places such as, Ireland, England and France. This rise widened opportunities for women across Europe and gave the option of an alternative lifestyle to marriage.²¹ Examples of English and continental praise poetry to nuns show the nuns being praised for their virginity, beauty and piety. This while

¹³ J, Hunter, 'A Feast of Words: Conspicuous Consumption and Praise Poetry in Medieval Wales,' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 14 (1994) p. 40

¹⁴ J, Burton and K, Stober, 'The Social Network of Late Medieval Welsh Monasteries,' In *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, by Burton, J and Stober, K (Boydell and Brewer: Suffolk, 2008) p.24

¹⁵ J, Burton and K, Stober, 'Dafydd Johnston – Monastic Patronage of Welsh Poetry,' In *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, by Burton, J and Stober, K (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013) p. 186

¹⁶ H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p. 99

¹⁷ IBID p.99

¹⁸ IBID p.99

¹⁹ R, A, McDonald, 'The Foundation and Patronage of Nunneries by Native Elites in Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Century Scotland,' In *Women in Scotland c.1100- c.1750*, ed. By Ewan, E and Meikle, M, (Tuckwell Press: Devon, 1999) p. 3

²⁰ D, Watt, *Medieval Women in their Communities* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997) p.93

²¹ R, A, McDonald, 'The Foundation and Patronage of Nunneries by Native Elites in Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Century Scotland,' In *Women in Scotland c.1100- c.1750*, ed. By Ewan, E and Meikle, M, (Tuckwell Press: Devon, 1999) p. 3

reaffirming standards of female virtue, does indicate a degree of respect.²² This however was not the case for Medieval Welsh women, where there were few foundations for women's religious houses. During the Middle Ages only four religious houses for women were established in Wales.²³ This indicates not only a lack of opportunities for Welsh women compared with other European women but also a lack of societal provision for women.²⁴ This lack of provision for the Welsh female Religious may also indicate that Welsh society did not encourage women to join monastic houses, and this is mirrored by some of the praise poetry written where Welsh nuns are the object of praise.²⁵ From the point of view of the Church, female religious houses solved the problem of women in Christian culture.²⁶ Women have always posed something of a problem to Catholic culture where notions of the female ideal are closely linked to the perfection of the Virgin Mary.²⁷ The ideal of eternal female virginity presented by the Church was at odds with the need of Welsh society which seemed to require women to be wives and mothers.²⁸ This may be a symptom of the lower population of Wales when compared with neighbouring countries that founded significantly more female religious houses.²⁹ In short, the lack of provision for women to become nuns maybe due to the lack of surplus women in Medieval Welsh society. In Wales women were encouraged to marry, produce children and worship as a secular individual.³⁰ This in turn caused hostility to those who choose to join nunneries, and this is reflected in the sub-genre of praise poetry, the cywydd. Cywydd poetry addressed Welsh nuns as if they were available for courtship.³¹ The cywydd genre of poetry seems to function as a dismissal of a nun's vows and indicates that the female Religious of Wales were not respected by the secular male population.³² This may further suggest that male secular poets continued to assign established female virtues to nuns as a way of reaffirming the status quo, as was their primary societal function.³³ It may also show how the secular mind set struggled to negotiate a relationship with new communities of religious female communities.³⁴ This shows that Welsh society was somewhat uncomfortable with female monastic houses, leading to them developing a negative reputation quite quickly.³⁵ The negative opinion of female religious houses may have been caused by the hostility of secular men to their establishment. For example, nunneries to a secular mindset were economically unproductive; religious houses in Wales remained poor

²² H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p. 87

²³ IBID p.94

²⁴ J, Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales,' In *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p.183

²⁵ L, M, Bitel, 'Women's Monastic Enclosures in Early Ireland: A Study of Female Spirituality,' *Journal of Medieval History* 12.1 (1986) p. 22

²⁶ B, Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Pennsylvania, 1995) p.1

²⁷ IBID p.5

²⁸ L, M, Bitel, 'Women's Monastic Enclosures in Early Ireland: A Study of Female Spirituality,' *Journal of Medieval History* 12.1 (1986) p. 22

²⁹ D, Hall, 'Foundation of Nunneries in Medieval Ireland,' In *Women and the Church in Medieval Ireland c.1140-1540* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008) p. 95

³⁰ J, Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales,' In *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p. 207

³¹ H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p. 87

³² J, Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales,' In *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p. 177

³³ J, Hunter, 'A Feast of Words: Conspicuous Consumption and Praise Poetry in Medieval Wales,' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 14 (1994) p. 40

³⁴ J, Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales,' In *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p. 177

³⁵ IBID p.185

while their continental counterparts were more economically secure.³⁶ The nuns in Wales usually brought a dowry to their respective houses as a way of securing a place. Poor women hardly ever became nuns as they lacked a dowry, and the nunneries could not support them.³⁷ The securing of funds from nuns thus made sense to cash strapped institutions, however these dowries would usually have been part of a marriage agreement and secular men may have resented the loss of marriage partners who would have brought their wealth into secular hands rather than the Church. Further to the loss of wealthy females, nunneries often needed community support to keep functioning; this was an additional financial burden on Welsh communities.³⁸ These reasons may have been contributing factors in the depiction of Welsh nuns in medieval poetry. It would seem that Welsh communities did not want to encourage the growth of female religious communities, and this was reflected in the cywydd poetry that seems to have functioned to discredit women's ability to keep their religious vows.³⁹ Secular society was concerned about the lack of male supervision in nunneries and questioned how cloistered nuns were from the temptations of the secular world.⁴⁰ Nunneries could not be entirely free from male aid as priests or monks were required for mass, and secular men were at times required by nunneries who kept farm animals.⁴¹ This concern is mirrored by the cywydd poetry that suggests that nuns could be convinced to break vows and make illicit meetings with secular men; this shows a distrust of female's ability to remain chaste without the direct supervision of men.⁴² This campaign against the female Religious of Wales went further by possibly subtly criticizing the economic ability of nuns and abbesses to run such establishments and suggesting that they had been spending money on luxury goods and exotic pets.⁴³ For example, in a praise poem that was supposedly written on behalf of the Abbess Annes, it requested the gift of an ape.⁴⁴ Poems of gift requests were an important genre of Medieval Welsh poetry that helped forge social networks and bonds.⁴⁵ However, it seems somewhat unlikely that the abbess would ask for a gift knowing that it might incur criticism and also the abbess of a poor Welsh abbey might not have been able to sponsor the gift requesting praise poem.⁴⁶ While the poem retains the respectful formula of a traditional gift request poem, it remains unclear whether Abbess Annes actually existed and the poem maybe a satire meant to mock frivolous nuns and their exotic pets.⁴⁷ There were three longstanding monastic houses for women in Medieval Wales, and also a short lived fourth at Llansanffraid yn Elfael. This nunnery may have been the victim of a propaganda campaign as the abbot Enoc supposedly could not resist the temptations of the nuns and several were

³⁶ L, M, Bitel, 'Women's Monastic Enclosures in Early Ireland: A Study of Female Spirituality,' *Journal of Medieval History* 12.1 (1986) p. 23

³⁷ H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p. 96

³⁸ D, Hall, 'Foundation of Nunneries in Medieval Ireland,' In *Women and the Church in Medieval Ireland c.1140-1540* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008) p. 95

³⁹ J, Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales,' In *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p. 194

⁴⁰ C, H, Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism* (Routledge: Oxon, 2015) p.202

⁴¹ L, M, Bitel, 'Women's Monastic Enclosures in Early Ireland: A Study of Female Spirituality,' *Journal of Medieval History* 12.1 (1986) p.20

⁴² J, Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales,' In *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p. 190

⁴³ J, Cartwright, 'Abbess Annes and the Apes,' In *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, by Burton, J and Stober, K (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013) p. 197

⁴⁴ IBID p.192

⁴⁵ J, Day, 'The Imagery of the Brigandine in Two Fifteenth Century Welsh Request Poems,' *Studia Celtica* 47.1 (2013) p.167

⁴⁶ J, Cartwright, 'Abbess Annes and the Apes,' In *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, by Burton, J and Stober, K (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013) p. 199

⁴⁷ IBID p.199

impregnated.⁴⁸ There is however no evidence to suggest this rumour was true and it could be a reflection of society's lack of enthusiasm for female monastic houses. This campaign also shows secular distrust of female virtue. Views of women were confused in the Medieval era, women were expected to emulate the Virgin Mary, but were distrusted because women were seen to have inherited Eve's propensity for temptation.⁴⁹ This vision of the Religious female population is reflected in the entertainment produced in Medieval Wales; plays and praise poetry continually undermined the female ability for virtue by depicting nuns as temptresses and deceivers.⁵⁰ Biblical traditions of females have undoubtedly affected the depiction of women in the Medieval era as people struggled to reconcile idyllic female virtue with the reality of women's societal duty.⁵¹ Nuns being depicted as temptresses and perhaps economically frivolous marginalised female religious communities by constantly suggesting that women lacked the ability to display socially acceptable Christian behaviour without direct continual male authority. This may also suggest that secular males were hostile to their authority over women being usurped by the Church.

Further to the economic concerns about women running establishments without direct male supervision, poetry written with nuns as the object of lust indicate that secular men found it difficult to accept that religious women were unavailable to them.⁵² It is also fair to suggest that nuns fitted in to established forms of love poems that were popular in the medieval era, for example themes such as unobtainable love and unrequited love.⁵³ This again shows that a secular mindset remained in regards to nuns and gender norms of women being presented as objects of male appreciation continued to be used.⁵⁴ This again shows that medieval Welsh nuns enjoyed lower spiritual status than their male counterparts.⁵⁵ This indicates that secular society took time to reconcile its relationship with new types of female communities. The virginity of nuns remained an integral part of a nun's identity and the Church promoted virginity as the ideal state for women.⁵⁶ This teaching is at odds with the needs of secular society and caused confusion over female sexuality.⁵⁷ To the Medieval mindset virginity in all women was desirable, but Medieval society had a different understanding of virginity to modern society. Virginity was seen as simultaneously a physical and spiritual virtue that was to be protected by and taken by men.⁵⁸ Thus virginity in women was a male prerogative and protected until a female of their kin group married and their virginity was gifted to their marriage partner. The Church not only removed some women from secular society, but it also institutionalised female virginity and removed it from secular male control.⁵⁹ This is perhaps why poets wrote poems that address nuns as if they were still available to secular men as lovers or

⁴⁸ IBID p.191

⁴⁹ K, Normington, 'Holy Women,' In *Gender and Medieval Drama*, by Normington, K (Boydell and Brewer: Suffolk, 2004) p. 93

⁵⁰ IBID p.91

⁵¹ IBID p.93

⁵² J, Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales,' In *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p. 190

⁵³ H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p. 92

⁵⁴ IBID p.98

⁵⁵ L, M, Bitel, 'Women's Monastic Enclosures in Early Ireland: A Study of Female Spirituality,' *Journal of Medieval History* 12.1 (1986) p. 30

⁵⁶ B, Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Pennsylvania, 1995) p. 8

⁵⁷ H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p. 101

⁵⁸ B, Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Pennsylvania, 1995) p.30

⁵⁹ S, Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (D.S Brewer: Cambridge, 2001) p.1

wives.⁶⁰ The poems sexualised nuns and made them an illicit fantasy figure. Sexualising nuns was not entirely unique as the Beguinage order of nuns in Antwerp were the subject of Hadewijch of Antwerp's erotic fiction.⁶¹ The depiction of nuns that made them the object of courtly affection and lust caused nuns to become a forbidden fruit fantasy.⁶² The sexualisation of female virginity was not unique to poems about nuns, the corruptibility of virgins is also a theme of poems addressed to secular maidens.⁶³ This shows that poems reflected male perceptions of female sexuality and further suggests that male poets enjoyed their authority over female virginity and asserted that authority through the popular media of praise poetry. It must be remembered that poems depicting nuns as sexual objects of male lust were not designed for a female audience, these poems were written for male audiences.⁶⁴ This shows secular males seeking to influence the sexual behaviour of other men by constantly reinforcing the Medieval ideal of female virginity.⁶⁵ The poet was able to reinforce the ideas of gender norms and male authority through poetry that sexualised and marginalised virgins and nuns and presented them as females waiting for men to own and corrupt their virginity.⁶⁶ By depicting nuns as the objects of male lust that cannot resist the temptation of men, their vows are further diminished, and nuns are once again shown in a negative light. By suggesting that nuns were corruptible the poet is supporting the notion that women are spiritually inferior.⁶⁷ This may have influenced men to not allow women of the kin group to join female monastic communities, leaving fewer opportunities for Medieval Welsh women compared to some of their European counterparts for example Irish Medieval women.⁶⁸ This evidence suggests that praise poetry may have also functioned as a form of social control and behaviour modification. This view of female virgins was contrasted by praise poems that addressed married women. The cywyddau poems aimed at married women praised their chastity and piety and did not sexualise them.⁶⁹ This indicates that married women enjoyed a higher social status than nuns. Married women lived under the direct supervision of men and had the potential to aid communities by the production of heirs. These poems also reinforce social norms and reflect the Medieval Welsh opinion that women should marry and remain chaste within marriage and worship as secular individuals.⁷⁰ This also suggests that female roles in the community and within marriage were dismissed as passive. Whether part of the religious or secular community women's roles were never passive, but their depiction as passive suggests a diminishing of women and the wish of male secular society to promote the ideal of the passive female. This again suggests praise poetry was a form of behaviour modification continuing to promote the idea of female passivity and male dominance. Women in every sphere of the Medieval community were productive members of society and they were not mere passive instruments of

⁶⁰ C, H, McAvoy, '9 Anchorites and Medieval Wales,' In *Anchoritic Traditions of Medieval Europe*, by McAvoy (Boydell and Brewer: Suffolk, 2010) p. 210

⁶¹ C, H, Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism* (Routledge: Oxon, 2015) p.216

⁶² J, Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales,' In *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p. 207

⁶³ IBID p.193

⁶⁴ H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p. 105

⁶⁵ IBID p.101

⁶⁶ J, Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales,' In *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p.177

⁶⁷ L, M, Bitel, 'Women's Monastic Enclosures in Early Ireland: A Study of Female Spirituality,' *Journal of Medieval History* 12.1 (1986) p. 30

⁶⁸ D, Hall, 'Towards a Prosopography of Nuns in Medieval Ireland,' *Archivum Hibernicum* 53 (1999) p. 3

⁶⁹ C, H, McAvoy, '9 Anchorites and Medieval Wales,' In *Anchoritic Traditions of Medieval Europe*, by McAvoy (Boydell and Brewer: Suffolk, 2010) p. 210

⁷⁰ J, Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales,' In *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p. 207

male authority.⁷¹ Women filled positions of responsibility in communities and female religious communities, had trade links to local populations and were in no way passive in shaping their local communities.⁷² The need to constantly ignore the societal contributions of women and present them as passive in praise poetry and other forms of entertainment suggests that popular media was indeed used to promote ideals of female virtue and diminish female independence to reinforce the social hierarchy and reaffirm male authority. For example, The Mabinogi also reinforces ideals of female passivity; the character of Rhiannon meekly submits to her husband's authority despite her innocence.⁷³ The character of Rhiannon reinforces correct Christian female behaviour. By contrast, the character of Aranrhod refuses to accept male authority and is dismissed by her kin group.⁷⁴ This shows how other forms of popular media also reinforced correct social behaviour. Praise poetry that addressed nuns as the object of male lust also make the nuns passive recipients of male authority and control.⁷⁵ The nun's vows are not taken seriously and the nun is not named, which gives the nuns a faceless nonentity quality.⁷⁶ This suggests that the poem reinforces secular male dominance over nun's sexuality and a hostility to the Church's authority over nun's virginities. The nun addressed in the poem is faceless and nameless, the message promoted through the poem is that nuns are corruptible at the hands of secular males and therefore reinforces male dominance over female sexuality. Praise poets were able to draw on the native tradition of praise poetry aimed at women and able to add new dimensions.⁷⁷ The theme of unrequited love can be used with an added humour that the nun is unobtainable.⁷⁸ Love poems addressed to nuns that did not additionally make them the object of lust still objectify nuns as an object of male affection and shows how poetry reflects a secular mindset to nuns.⁷⁹ The poems indicate the male inability to accept that nuns were not available to them as perspective wives or lovers and continued to depict nuns as available and corruptible. This again also suggests that secular society took time to adjust to new female monastic communities and females in their community not being under secular male authority. The male insecurity of the loss of power over some women and potentially more, is reflected in praise poetry that continued to objectify and sexualise nuns who had removed themselves from the realm of male sexuality, which in turn shows a dismissal of female wishes. Praise poetry and the Lives of female saints show that women in all spheres of life could not separate themselves from male sexuality and the male possession of female sexuality. For example, the Lives of female saints began at puberty, rather than birth as with male saints. This gives the impression that female life was worthless until confronted with male sexuality.⁸⁰ As praise poetry aimed at women adopted Christian culture within the native bardic tradition, perhaps it is natural that praise poetry that contained the Christian obsession with female virginity carried over into forms of popular entertainment.⁸¹ The virginity and

⁷¹ D, Watt, *Medieval Women in their Communities* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997) p.198

⁷² J, Burton, and K, Stober, 'The Social Network of Late Medieval Welsh Monasteries,' In *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, by Burton, J and Stober, K (Boydell and Brewer: Suffolk, 2008) p. 11

⁷³ S, Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007) p.17

⁷⁴ IBID p. 55

⁷⁵ H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p. 95

⁷⁶ IBID p.95

⁷⁷ H, Fulton, 'The Encomium Urbis in Medieval Welsh Poetry,' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 26 (2006) p. 72

⁷⁸ H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p. 99

⁷⁹ J, Cartwright, 'The Desire to Corrupt: Convent and Community in Medieval Wales,' In *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p. 177

⁸⁰ J, Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales,' *Medium Aevum* 71.1 (2002) p. 13

⁸¹ H, Fulton, 'The Encomium Urbis in Medieval Welsh Poetry,' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 26 (2006) p. 72

beauty of women was of great importance in medieval society and had the power to enhance the status of males in their kin group.⁸² The similarity between praise poetry whether it be noble woman, secular maiden or nun show that important female virtues are reinforced and that society had yet to create a new appropriate tradition for nuns and abbesses, so old traditions were applied to the new groups of the female Religious.⁸³ This could be because Wales lacked surplus women and therefore felt no urge to encourage women to join female monastic houses.⁸⁴

The depiction of women in the medieval era were largely written by secular men to serve a male audience and reflected feminine ideals rather than social realities.⁸⁵ Poetry and other medieval texts sought to reaffirm the current established social order but also reflected society's concerns and hint at attempts to modify the behaviour of those in medieval communities.⁸⁶ For example, praise poetry that bestowed fame and honour on patrons, re-establish the accepted social hierarchy, reflects society's gender norms and show others correct behaviour to emulate.⁸⁷ This pattern is the same when women are the object of poetry. Noble women were honoured in praise poetry for their beauty, chastity and passivity. The social hierarchy is acknowledged and respected as the poem also reflected societal expectations of female behaviour and provided a model of correct behaviour for other women to mimic.⁸⁸ These forms of accepted poetry which incorporated Christian culture into native poetic traditions were then applied to new religious communities of monastic houses.⁸⁹ This suggests that medieval society saw gender as more important than a person's spiritual status; it could also be a symptom of society negotiating new relationships with new types of community. In Wales fewer female monastic houses were established, this is likely due to multiple factors including the lower population and economic pressures.⁹⁰ It could also be suggested that Medieval Welsh nobles were influenced by the poor reputations of Welsh nunneries and the suggestion of low morality amongst the nuns.⁹¹ For example, noble families may not have wanted the suggestion of monastic scandal attached to their family and this led to people not founding female monastic houses and allowing their kinswomen to join nunneries. The depiction of nuns as temptresses may have impacted people's decisions to join nunneries or allow women under their control to join. This depiction of nuns as temptresses was not unique to poetry, in medieval literature and plays they were also depicted as such.⁹² It is clear that the rise in female opportunities in the Medieval era due to female monastic houses was not shared by Medieval Welsh women who were encouraged to display Christian behaviour within marriage bonds.⁹³ It is also clear that removing themselves from

⁸² H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p. 98

⁸³ IBID p.98

⁸⁴ D, Watt, *Medieval Women in their Communities* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997) p.95

⁸⁵ IBID p.116

⁸⁶ J, Hunter, 'A Feast of Words: Conspicuous Consumption and Praise Poetry in Medieval Wales,' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 14 (1994) p. 40

⁸⁷ J, Burton, and K, Stober, 'Dafydd Johnston – Monastic Patronage of Welsh Poetry,' In *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, by Burton, J and Stober, K (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013) p. 177

⁸⁸ H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p. 98

⁸⁹ H, Fulton, 'The Encomium Urbis in Medieval Welsh Poetry,' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 26 (2006) p. 72

⁹⁰ H, Fulton, 'Medieval Welsh Poems to Nuns,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991) p.94

⁹¹ L, M, Bitel, 'Women's Monastic Enclosures in Early Ireland: A Study of Female Spirituality,' *Journal of Medieval History* 12.1 (1986) p.23

⁹² K, Normington, 'Holy Women,' In *Gender and Medieval Drama*, by Normington, K (Boydell and Brewer: Suffolk, 2004) p. 91

⁹³ R, A, McDonald, 'The Foundation and Patronage of Nunneries by Native Elites in Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Century Scotland,' In *Women in Scotland c.1100- c.1750*, ed. By Ewan, E and Meikle, M, (Tuckwell Press: Devon, 1999) p. 3

the Medieval marriage market and joining a nunnery did not allow Medieval Welsh women to escape male sexuality and notions of male possession over the female body.⁹⁴ The depiction of nuns in poetry and other forms of popular culture show a dismissal of women's contributions to Medieval Welsh society and tells us more about the secular male mindset towards religious women and societal expectations of women than a true reflection of the experiences of nuns.⁹⁵ The evidence presented in this essay suggests that more research is needed into the Medieval female experience and depiction in popular culture and behaviour modification. It would also be interesting to consider whether popular forms of entertainment were used as a device by which society could negotiate community relationships with new forms of sub communities, like the new communities of female monastic houses.

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⁹⁵ C, H, Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism* (Routledge: Oxon, 2015) p.199

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