Graphic Submission


Published: 23 September 2020

Peer Review:
This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

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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 medi- evalization, 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 new 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.”

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.

John W. Waterhouse’s depiction of St. Elizabeth 1885

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 adopted 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.
And, while approaching through this double-time gaze, we must maintain an “essential epistemic humility.”

Jennett 1999, 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.

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 language.

Unlike other historic character tropes, such as the female barbarian (like Red Sonja), nuns have a concrete and well-documented lineage of depiction.

The modern version is a long way from St. Catherine.

The following traits have been called from a variety of widely circulated comic books, which feature prominent nun characters:

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.
These traits are then filtered into what Neil Cohn calls a "visual language" (vL), the most common of which are "Mainstream American vL" (or "Kirbyan"), "Cartooney American vL" ("Barksian"), Japanese Visual Language, and Independent vL.

There are, of course, an infinite variation created by artists within a single visual language. Below are some examples for orientation.

**Kirbyan vL** appears in:
- Li Tieqian’s Tianmen
- Warren Kimble’s Pogo
- The Moundros

**Barksian and Independent vL** appear in:
- Barks and Ditko
- Steve Ditting’s The Rock
- Sister Claire’s The Yarns of Sister Claire

**Japanese vL** appears in:
- A Certain Magical Index
- Trinity Blood
- Claymore
- Healing, Creative

The popularity of manga comics in the West has inspired even Western artists to adopt manga vL in domestic comics.

**PRESS**

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

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 Pierce’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.

Networks of saints are shown together 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.
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.

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 historiography 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. *Dullemen 1998, p. 31*

Many martyrs endured torture and exhibited superhuman 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.

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 relating them to the qualities that made them women.

Virgins were capable of miracles and greater spiritual connection. Their special roles in the early Christian community were manifold.

But, popular conceptions of sexuality see gender as binary, virginity or not.

“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!”

Are you curious about what biblical non-virgins were up to? Allow me to recommend checking out Charlotte Brown’s Mary Wept Over the Feet of Jesus: Prostitution and religious obedience in the Bible (2016), which offers a graphic novel treatment of interpreting select stories.
Woock: Nuns in Action

Theology grew to understand female monastics as weak and burdened, and “virgins” lost its transformative power when virgins were thus reduced to allegorical brides. This re-feminized role opened the door to the sexualization and consequent demonization of womanhood. Women took more restricted, cloistered roles.

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 crossed female houses from the order’s history, as Consolata Hoffmann-Beiman demonstrates in the Cistercian order.

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.

Saint Clare defended her sisters and convent from an army by holding the Blessed Sacrament in a monstrance.

Saint Agnes of Bohemia founded a male order and was their abess, to control the care and resources for the nuns.

I have religious studies lenses for this! Though miracles and visions can seem unscholarly, tenet Nesbitt warns us to set aside “contemporary scholarly standards” and remember Dorothee S. H. Jackson’s conclusion that miracles “operated within a particular conceptual framework” in medieval manuscript.

That reminds me of superheroes. Let me get out my comics studies notes! Ramona Fournier argues that The X-Men shifted focus from “the messianic hero’s suffering male body” to “the relatable body of the female superhero audaciously announcing her visual presence on the comic book page!” through “gusii-mystical graphics that linked female acts of superhuman energy projection, telepathy, and telekinesis to panopticon displays of feminist empowerment.”

Woock, p. 9

Beiman, p. 29

Nesbitt, p. 8

Fournier, p. 117
Let's bridge this to modernity through the nineteenth century, shall we?

**Late Middle Ages**
1. weak spiritual and social roles for women, helpless in the face of their own sexuality

**Victorian Era**
1. similar
d. same

Amid anti-Catholicism, social conservatism, and medivalism, nuns were viewed with both suspicion and romance. They became the subject of fantasy, literature, and art.

“...There is a lily of virginity and spirituality, much like her secular sister in real life, ensnared in an atmosphere of mystery and uneasiness that made her simultaneous-ly innocent and repugnant, hitherto in her hortus conclusus of femininity and chastity.”

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 reflects questions of gender and violence, while placing nuns in decided non-monastic adventures. This was further complicated by the feminist movement.

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*Art. 10, page 10 of 20*
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).

As female equivalents of popular action heroes began to appear in comics, some even appeared as heroes 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.

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 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 Elizabeth Bronfen (2006): images of super-heroes in bondage are common, as Edward Avey-Noble notes for Wonder Woman in particular.

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.”

Sullum 2005, p. 12

Brown 1994, p. 42

Avery-Noble 2015, p. 42

John W. Waterhouse, “Sister Evangeline,” 1887
Before we address the typical storylines used with nun characters, let’s lay aside all possible confusion with tradition.

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 calculate to readers accustomed to tame 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 myths such as Maria Monk. 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, Sucre 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 vampiric themes with storylines revolving around nuns or members of the clergy. Elements of this appear in the Hellsing and Trinity Blood series. Rebecca Suter terms the adoption of anachronistic modernism in Japanese manga as “creative misreadings” and notes that “the treatment of history and gender in mainstream shōjo manga” remains a lacuna in comics scholarship.
Though modern nuns still exist in the world today, nun characters are re-imagined in stylized medieval environments. One such medievalist simulation is a hybrid building, which can be seen in The Leather Nun and the Lips Tuillen 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.”

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 clausrophobic and secular feminine norms. This validates and mortifies narratives of medievalist training of nuns and their storylines in comic books, further requiring us to inhabit Moran’s double time.
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.

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 shoulders 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 judge. 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 man.

Sullivan shows that nuns appeared in film in the 1930s as “instantly identifiable, sexually unassailably, and assuredly non-confrontational.”

Wooock: Nuns in Action

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 Marvel’s Ghost Riders: Heaven’s on Fire series, which features the Gun Nun.

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.
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 criticism in their writings. More often, they identify with the Virgin Mary in her maternal or queenly aspect or model themselves on the heroic virgin saints, Catherine, Margaret, Thecla, and Ursula.”

McNamara 1998, p. 16

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.
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.

References


