

religious houses, and that it may have operated as a recreational as well as a liturgical or para-liturgical activity, even if no complete scripts now survive. In 1526, to give one example, visitation records show that the Benedictine nuns of Carrow Priory in Norwich were enjoined not to undertake their Christmas entertainment in which one (or more) of the younger nuns would perform as an Abbess:

*Item habent in festo Natalis Domini juniorem monialem in abbatissam assumptam, jocandi<sup>8</sup> gratia; cujus occasione ipsa consumere et dissipare cogitur quæ vel elemosina vel aliorum amicorum largitione acquisierit.*<sup>9</sup>

Item: At the feast of the Nativity of our Lord, they have a young nun taking on the role of Abbess, for the sake of play; on which occasion it is thought that they ate up and squandered what had been acquired, either as alms or through the generosity of other friends.<sup>10</sup>

This description, along with the precision that the entertainment took place at the feast of the Nativity, both suggest a form of ‘Girl Abbess’ ceremony or

43–67 and Dunbar H. Ogden *The Staging of Drama in the Medieval Church* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002).

8. The *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* suggests a correction to the original editor’s reading here, proposing *jocandi gratia* for *vocandi gratia*. See *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* edited R.E. Latham, D.R. Howlett and R.K. Ashdowne (Oxford: British Academy, 1975–2013) sv *abbatissa*, sense b.
9. *Visitations of the Diocese of Norwich, A.D. 1492–1532* edited Rev. A. Jessopp (Camden Society, 1888) 209; we are grateful to Veronica O’Mara for drawing our attention to this document. James Stokes gives many further examples of nuns’ involvement in dramatic activities in the diocese of Lincoln: ‘Women and Performance: Evidence of Universal Cultural Suffrage in Medieval and Early Modern Lincolnshire’ in *Women Players in England, 1500–1600* edited Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) 25–43, at 36–7. David Klausner has recently discussed an example of monks undertaking extra-liturgical theatrical activities: ‘Playing the Crucifixion in Medieval Wales’ *METH* 38 (2015) 57–67. Abigail Young has suggested that sisters within Canonsleigh Abbey in Devon may have been leaving the convent to attend lay ‘spectacles’ or performances, a practice which was discouraged by their Visitor in 1329: ‘Theatre-Going Nuns in Devon.’ *Early Theatre* 22 (1997) 25–9. These various examples suggest that the nature and purpose of performative activities undertaken or attended recreationally within and by members of medieval religious houses was very wide-ranging indeed.
10. Our thanks to Sarah Carpenter for help with this translation.

game. The emphasis placed on the consumption and dissipation of resources suggests that the Carrow sisters took the opportunity to indulge in an extended festive role play which perhaps involved food, drink, and communal entertainment alongside the traditional reversal of ceremonial and liturgical roles between senior and junior members of the community.<sup>11</sup>

While it does not, of course, ‘stand in’ unproblematically for lost English scripts and detailed documentation, the evidence from Huy provides us with a more precise sense of what we might provisionally term the recreational drama taking place in English women’s religious houses may have been like. For this reason, the Huy Carmelite plays are a particularly important set of materials for students of medieval English theatre. The precise performance contexts, purposes, and audiences of this kind of convent theatre are difficult to recapture; the convent at Huy, for example, may have used its plays in a number of ways and played them before quite different audiences. The medieval source-play in Chantilly 617 specifies *tresdouche suers* (‘sweet sisters’) as its primary audience, suggesting, at that stage, members of the convent *only* as both participants *and* audience, and situating the plays as a community exercise in creative devotion. Surviving account books, however, show that the Huy Carmelites operated a school at the time the medieval manuscript was copied, a fact which opens up the possibility that the fifteenth-century scriptural plays (and, indeed, the other plays which accompany them in the Chantilly manuscript) may have been used in an educative context and that the performers may have been the nuns’ pupils rather than the sisters themselves.<sup>12</sup> The seventeenth-century *Huy Nativity* begins with an *Anoncement d’icilyu Jeux* (‘announcement of this play’) which addresses the *Reverande Dame Prieure* (‘reverenced Lady Prioress’) and the *chere Dames* who

11. See Marilyn Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998) 72–3.
12. The essays in *Drama and Pedagogy in Medieval and Early Modern England* edited Elisabeth Dutton and James McBain (Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 31; Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2015) discuss the widespread overlap between theatrical and pedagogical practices in the late medieval and Tudor periods. Andrea Knox documents a sixteenth-century manuscript which makes reference to a play about the life of St Mary Magdalen written by female pupils in the Irish Dominican convent of Valladolid, Spain (founded 1545): ‘Her Book-lined Cell: Irish Nuns and the Development of Text, Translation and Literacy in Late Medieval Spain’ in *Nuns’ Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Kansas City Dialogue* edited Virginia Blanton, Veronica O’Mara, and Patricia Stoop (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015) 67–86, at 75.