

**What the Nuns Knew, What the Bishop Thought:  
Episcopal Visitations of Some English Convents**

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Episcopal visitation records are among the most colorful sources for medieval monastic history, but their use has long been problematic. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century historians, even one as humane as Eileen Power, tended to take on some of the negative perspective of the bishops who elicited evidence of wrongdoing in convents and issued orders for improvement.<sup>1</sup> More recently, historians of women have tended to devalue the records because of the same negative bias.<sup>2</sup> Even Penelope Johnson's admirable analysis of Eudes of Rouen's records focuses mainly on determining how frequently the religious of Normandy violated their vows.<sup>3</sup> But because our concerns as historians are seldom the same as those of medieval bishops, findings that were negative in a bishop's eyes need not be negative in ours. In other words, we can use these sources without adopting their stance. In this paper I will use some examples from fifteenth-century visitation records, originating in the English diocese of Lincoln, to propose two more positive approaches to the analysis of this source material. Both approaches look at interaction between nuns and bishop. The first reads the records for nuns' voices expressing their own observations and concerns. The second model focuses on the bishop as mediator.

I.

The bishop came on his visitation ostensibly to inspect, correct, and enforce. To carry out this mission, he heard the oral testimony of various parties, but most important were his private interviews with the nuns themselves. What the nuns said to the bishop was written down in the

records called *detecta*. Later the bishop issued his injunctions. Of these two types of visitation record, injunctions survive in far greater numbers than *detecta*, but the *detecta* are, of course, closer to the testimony of the nuns themselves.

While the episcopal visitation had some similarities to an accreditation visit to one of our own institutions, there was an important difference. The religious were not given an opportunity to present both strengths and weaknesses in a self-study document. The bishop came to find fault, if any was to be found. This negative tendency in the system was reinforced by the nuns themselves. Where the community was prosperous and functioning smoothly, the nuns usually had few complaints for the bishop, and the *detecta* consist mainly of one nun after another recorded simply as saying “omnia bene.”<sup>4</sup> Even a poor house, if the sisters lived in general harmony, might produce *detecta* like those of the Cistercian priory of Fosse in 1440. Here the prioress “says that all things are well, save that the house is poor and needs repairs, yet, in so far as they are able, they make good the defects as they befall them.” This optimistic assessment was echoed by her five nuns, three of whom mentioned the house’s poverty as a problem, but all of whom said that (otherwise) “all things are well.”<sup>5</sup> From such testimony the historian gathers little specific information.

At the other end of the scale, the longest lists of *detecta* were produced at houses where there was a flood of complaints to be laid before the bishop. These records reveal communities in conflict, often at odds with their superiors. Here the nuns often criticize the abbess’s or prioress’s stewardship: she does not obtain the chapter’s approval in business matters, crucial repairs have not been made, treasures have been pawned or sold, the nuns are not provided with proper clothing or food. Often these complaints are accompanied by more personal accusations: the superior is harsh with her nuns, she lives luxuriously, she consorts too freely with lay women and

men, and so on. Such problems are rehearsed in lengthy detail in the *detecta* from Ankerwyke in 1441, from Gracedieu in the same year, and from Catesby in 1442.<sup>6</sup>

Such cases certainly do give a negative impression. But they clearly reveal situations in which the nuns themselves were deeply unhappy—not with their destined way of life *per se*, but with perceived poor treatment or poor management of the convent. Anyone who has experienced the deep differences that can arise within a modern academic department, for example, can understand the nuns' eagerness to put their concerns to the bishop, and can sympathize with a group of eight or ten women, bitterly at odds, and with no prospect but to spend the rest of their lives working and living side by side. Such communities were, to use current parlance, highly dysfunctional. My own study of a small number of such records suggests that systematic analysis will reveal much about the problems faced by religious communities and the coping strategies employed by their members: for example, alliances formed, standards used for criticism, and, ultimately, appeals to the bishop's authority.

Most houses fell somewhere between the two extremes. In almost all the lists of *detecta*, though, there are nuggets—and sometimes goldmines—of glimpses into convent life, whether happy or not. Again, the circumstances of the visitation meant that these were often cast as shortcomings; nevertheless they illuminate the lives of ordinary religious women for us as few sources can, and in ways not intended by the bishop. For example, most episcopal visitors had no particular interest in exploring issues of literacy and education in the convent. Yet we learn that the young nuns at Ankerwyke and Catesby, in the midst of all the other turmoil there, were yearning for instruction in the religious life and the liturgy.<sup>7</sup> The prioress of Gokewell did not have a literate clerk to write for her; the prioress of Catesby was in the same plight and claimed,

“As for chaplains, ... none can be had.”<sup>8</sup> And we find a nun of Ankerwyke recalling in 1441 that “there used to be beautiful psalters kept in the house, ten in number...”<sup>9</sup>

In other cases the personality of an individual nun emerges from her testimony. Agnes Wylde, a nun of Godstow in 1445, was the only one to complain “that swine do come into the churchyard and root up the earth and befoul the churchyard in other ways,” and also that the lay servants and women visitors came into the cloister to use the nuns’ latrine. Agnes’s active interest in matters of hygiene makes her come alive on the page.<sup>10</sup>

In taking the *detecta* as genuine expressions of the nuns’ knowledge and concerns, I do not mean to ignore the important ways in which they were filtered and shaped by the bishop and his staff, by means of both questioning the nuns and choosing whether and how to record what they said. At Rothwell Priory in 1442 the prioress’s only recorded statement to the bishop is “that she herself wears a silken veil.”<sup>11</sup> It seems unlikely that this information was offered spontaneously, or that it was the only thing the bishop discussed with the prioress, and this in turn suggests that *negative* answers to episcopal questions were simply never recorded. Another case where questions seem to have been asked comes from Littlemore Priory in 1440: “Dame Isabel Sydnale says that she herself lies every night in the same bed with the sub-prioress. Dame Christine Colberde ...[says that] she lies at night in the same bed with the prioress.”<sup>12</sup> It is unlikely that bishops regularly asked who slept in whose bed; here the first statement probably prompted the visitor to ask the next nun about sleeping arrangements. In contrast, bishops do seem to have regularly asked about the number of separate households within a convent.<sup>13</sup>

The factual accuracy of the *detecta* could also be distorted, of course, from within the convent. Individually and collectively, the nuns presented the picture they wanted the bishop to see. Self-interest was a strong influence: in the *detecta* I have read, no nun ever accuses herself of

immoral behavior, for example. At Fosse in 1440, as we have seen, a struggling but cohesive community showed a positive face and a united front when the bishop came to visit. Problems may have been concealed by mutual and probably tacit consent. There were also sometimes overt attempts to suppress potentially damaging testimony; occasionally these were revealed to the visitor. Thus at Ankerwyke in 1441 a nun reported that “the prioress invited several outside folk from the neighborhood to this visitation, at great cost to the house, saying to them, ‘Stand on my side in this time of visitation, for I do not want to resign.’”<sup>14</sup> More serious allegations emerged at Catesby in 1442: one nun told the bishop that “after the previous visitation, ... the prioress said that for a purse of money a clerk of the said bishop told her what every nun had disclosed in that visitation.” Another nun confirmed this, saying “that, because the nuns at the last visitation disclosed [to the bishop] what they were supposed to disclose, the prioress whipped some of them...”<sup>15</sup>

In virtually all these cases, we are reading what the nun in question wanted (or was willing) to tell the bishop. In many cases we are reading about her own observations and concerns, voluntarily revealed to an outsider for a particular purpose; thus the *detecta* can be regarded as “constructed narratives” that tell the nuns’ stories.<sup>16</sup> The bishop, when he visited a convent, was officially the enforcer of the Rule and church policy, come to apply certain standards. This was a test that the convent usually wished to pass, but the nuns did not usually wish to follow the Rule and other regulations to the letter; hence they had good reason to conceal certain facts and to “spin” others. It is not only the bishop’s bias that we have to bear in mind when working with these sources, but also the more complex biases created by the nuns themselves.

## II.

Despite the adversarial element often present in a visitation, it would be a mistake to assume that the bishop's only role was that of enforcer. In fact he was often a mediator. Most obviously, the bishop might mediate among the nuns during internal conflicts. The case of Ankerwyke shows how this happened. One nun here brought accusations against the prioress that fill more than a full printed page. Four other nuns brought additional complaints. Then the prioress was asked to respond to the charges in front of the whole convent, with the bishop sitting "in his capacity as judge" (*negocio iudicialiter*).<sup>17</sup> The prioress's replies were written in against the individual charges from the *detecta*. Here is a sample:

Dame Margery Kirkby says that ... the prioress alone keeps and always has kept the common seal of the house, so that she can do with it whatever she will, without the knowledge and advice of the nuns. [The prioress] admits that she alone has kept the seal at times, ... and sometimes with other nuns, when there have been any women of discretion among them.... [Dame Margery says that] the prioress wears very costly golden rings with precious stones, and also silver and gilded girdles, and silken veils, and she wears her veil too high on her forehead... [The prioress] admits the use of several rings and girdles and silken veils and the high position of her veils... She has sworn that she will correct these things, having taken her oath thereto.<sup>18</sup>

Where the prioress denied some of the charges in this case, the bishop ordered further investigations. When the prioress in turn called Dame Margery a thief, the bishop required Dame Margery to clear herself on oath. He assigned joint custody of the convent seal to the prioress and another nun to be chosen by the sisters; they chose Dame Margery. The bishop publicly admonished the prioress to be loving and gentle to her nuns, and he admonished the community

to obey her. Reading the account, one wonders how much hope there was for peace at Ankerwyke, but as it happened, the prioress died the following year, and Dame Margery was elected to succeed her.<sup>19</sup> At the visitation, though, the bishop did his best to address the nuns' concerns fully and to develop a blueprint for peace.

More surprisingly, the bishop often played a mediating role between the nuns on the one hand and stricter authorities on the other. One area in which this role is evident is that of enclosure. Since 1298 the papal bull *Periculoso* had required strict enclosure of all nuns.<sup>20</sup> Nuns resisted *Periculoso*, both by overt challenges<sup>21</sup> and by simply ignoring it, continuing to leave their convents for all sorts of reasons, and welcoming numerous lay guests into their communities. These matters frequently attracted episcopal attention. But rather than try to impose the letter of papal law on the nuns, bishops strove to delineate a middle way between strict enclosure and the complete freedom of movement and behavior that nuns sometimes tried to exercise. A sampling of episcopal injunctions demonstrates this:

To Godstow Abbey, in 1432: "...that no nun travel forth or go out to the villages near the monastery, nor to Oxford, nor to other places near or far, unless with sufficient voucher and with the special permission of the abbess..."<sup>22</sup>

To the prioress of Nuncoton, in 1440: "...that when your sisters shall visit their friends, you assign them a certain day on which they shall come home, so that they not abide with their friends above three days, without great and reasonable cause."<sup>23</sup>

To the prioress of St. Michael's, Stamford, in 1440: "...that you allow no sister of yours to speak with any secular persons, save father and mother and other that by law are not suspect, except if another sister ... is standing by to hear and see their [conversation]."<sup>24</sup>

(And my personal favorite) To Elstow Abbey, in 1422: “That no nun admit secretly into her chamber any seculars or other men of religion, and that, if they be admitted, she do not keep them there too long.”<sup>25</sup>

Not only was enclosure not strictly enforced, but even in the same diocese and within a short period of time, different houses might well receive different episcopal guidance regarding the matter. The same is true of other recurring issues, such as children boarding in the convent, the maintenance of separate households, dining in the refectory, and so on. Bishops could take a house’s own history and condition into account when deciding how strictly to interpret the Rule or other authorities in each case. There were even instances in which the bishop intervened to relax some strict observance that was causing difficulty for the nuns. The 1432 injunctions to Elstow include the provision that “when parents or friends or kinsfolk of nuns, or other persons of note and honesty, shall journey to the same monastery, to visit any nuns . . . , the same nuns shall not be bound to observe frater that day”—that is, they are excused from communal meals in order to eat privately with their visitors.<sup>26</sup>

In conclusion, I hope that these few examples have shown that visitation records have much to tell us about female monastic life, that they reveal complex relationships between the nuns and their bishops, and that far from imposing a negative view of medieval women, visitation records are sources from which women’s own voices can speak to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries, c.1275 to 1535* (Cambridge, 1922), especially pp. 285-498.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Greatrex, "After Knowles: Recent Perspectives in Monastic History," in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, ed. James G. Clark (Woodbridge, 2002), 35-47, at p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Penelope Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.90, 118.

<sup>5</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.91-2.

<sup>6</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.1-5, 46-50, 119-21.

<sup>7</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.4-6, 49.

<sup>8</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.49, 50, 117.

<sup>9</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.2.

<sup>10</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.115.

<sup>11</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, iii.319.

<sup>12</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.217. For the significance of beds to the late medieval nobility, see W.M. Ormrod, "In Bed with Joan of Kent: The King's Mother and the Peasants' Revolt," in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain, Essays for Felicity Riddy*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 277-92 (p. 280), citing P. Eames, "Furniture in England, France, and the Netherlands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century," *Furniture History*, 13 (1977), 1-303 (p. 86).

<sup>13</sup> e.g., *Lincoln Visitations*, iii.345.

<sup>14</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.4.

<sup>15</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.48-9.

<sup>16</sup> For court cases as constructed narratives, see Noel James Menuge, "Reading Constructed Narratives: An Orphaned Medieval Heiress and the Legal Case as Literature," in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain, Essays for Felicity Riddy*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 115-29.

<sup>17</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.5-6.

<sup>18</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.3.

<sup>19</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.2n., 6.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Markowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: Periculososo and Its Commentators, 1298-1545* (Washington, DC, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Lincoln, Lincolnshire Archive Office, Bp. Reg. 3, fol. 10v.

<sup>22</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, i.67.

<sup>23</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, iii.252.

<sup>24</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, iii.350.

<sup>25</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, i.51.

<sup>26</sup> *Lincoln Visitations*, ii.