

Honors Thesis

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Foundational Paper: An Exploration of the Writing Process of Harvest Moon

*Introduction*

I see the Honors Thesis as a project representing the culmination of my studies as an English Major focusing on Creative Writing, an Art History Minor, and a student in the CSU Honors Program. In pursuing this ethos, I chose to work on a creative project that has, until now, existed primarily in random notes and various collections of pictures on Pinterest. The main characters Noora and Avi have gone through numerous transformations and matured greatly as I have matured through my college experience. From the start, I viewed this thesis as a step toward my dream of becoming a writer. It is a beginning and an experiment. It is a chance to discover my skills and find a path toward telling this story, which has taken on a multitude of meanings and themes that I never imagined when I first started writing about these characters. Even when I turn in the final draft of my thesis, I don't think I will be able to think of it as complete. My goal was to explore character, setting, and theme rather than produce a finished product. The novel is tentatively titled Harvest Moon and it is in the fantasy fiction genre. It centers around the protagonist, Noora, who finds herself embroiled in a magical world in which nuns worship magic, pray to the moon and stars, and cure fatal illnesses with drafts of mysterious herbs. While

this world is entirely fictional and unique to my imagination, I will be the first to admit that it also relies on many influences from various sources.

I started my research on Medieval nuns because the primary setting of my book is a priory inspired by medieval ascetic life. However, the nuns at this priory do not worship God or any other religion we know of in our world. Instead, they worship magic. The sources I read on nuns have relayed the scant amount of evidence we have that details the lives, customs, values, and pursuits of nuns in the Medieval period. For me, it is essential to understand the nature of conventual life because my book intends to subvert this nature to its purposes, thereby commenting on the nature of religion, worship, and highly regulated communities. After all, magic has historically been viewed as the antithesis of religion, especially Christianity. My research on Medieval nuns and nunneries has informed much of the structuring of the aforementioned priory, while my research on medieval emotion studies and herbalism has informed my creation of my magic system. In this paper, I will first discuss the genre of fantasy fiction, including its history and major thematic concerns. Next, I will discuss how my research has informed the structure of the priory and of my magic system. Finally, I will discuss my process as a writer and some of the things I have learned in working on this project.

### *Fantasy Fiction*

The quintessential example of fantasy fiction has always been J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Many consider it the first true fantasy series and the example from which the subsequent genre emerged. The scale and depth of Tolkien's world, *Middle Earth*, represents a classic model of the high fantasy genre, which relies on creating a world entirely apart from our own. Of course, Tolkien was one of several contemporaries who wrote similarly fantastical

stories - many of which featured worlds and creatures that defied the rules and orders of our typical human experience. However, these works did not originally fall into the fantasy fiction genre because it did not exist until the latter half of the twentieth century, largely due to the popularity of *Lord of the Rings* and a niche in the publishing market for these kinds of stories. Thereafter, the fantasy genre was born and the elements common in those early books became the cannon that later fantasy fiction authors emulated. At this point, I would like to state that I owe the above information to a class I took while studying abroad at the University of Edinburgh: *The Making of Modern Fantasy*, taught by Anna Vaninskaya.

While fantasy fiction defies definition, a common element of most fantasy books is “the deliberate violation of norms or facts we regard as essential to our conventional conception of ‘reality,’ to create an imaginary counter-structure or counter-norm” (“Problems of Fantasy,” 37). In other words, most fantasy stories rely on fantasy worlds that do not adhere to the rules of our world. This element of fantasy fiction has generally demoted it in the eyes of literary critics because it is seen as escapist, meaning it is written to pull the reader out of the world as opposed to making the reader think about the world more deeply. However, every book ever written pulls the reader out of the world and into the world of the book to get the reader to think about our world from a new perspective, and I argue fantasy does the same thing. S. C. Fredericks argues this is especially important in our current world, in which “our notion of what realities are possible is less certain every decade” and fantasy narratives highlight the “relational interplay between the real and imaginary,” (“Problems of Fantasy,” 41) allowing us to gain a better understanding of how we shape our realities and what is real to us.

Vaninskaya implies that two of the primary shaping aspects of our reality are time and death, which were some of the defining themes of the fantasy genres in its infancy and continue

to remain important today. While no fantasy book, especially from the earliest renditions of the genre, gives the reader a conclusive reading of time or death, one of the “key figures of romantic fantasy” is the “wanderer in search of lost time and an escape from death” (8). In the fantastical otherworld, sometimes called Fairyland, there almost always exists the opportunity for and the pull toward immortality - the ability to forsake one’s humanity and exist outside of the constraints of time. Early fantasy books diverge on conclusions about whether or not immortality is desirable, but it is clear that time and death are two of the driving themes of the genre and remain important to this day. As Vaninskaya eloquently states, “Death and time’s passing cause us to dream, and our dreams preserve that which death and time destroy” (“The Game of Life and Death,” 16). I find this inspiring because while it implies the escapist nature of fantasy fiction, it reminds us that stories and imagination are essential to the human experience and they allow us to remember times gone past. I would agree with this notion of fantasy and I believe my current ideas for my book adhere to this tradition. However, like most fantasy stories, my book also explores themes through the exploration of a fantastical world. The world is more than an escape, and because it is deeply entangled in theme, it remains essential to the story.

### *Structure of the Priory*

I started researching medieval nuns because the primary setting of my book is a priory. However, the nuns at this priory do not worship God or any other religion we know of in our world. Instead, they worship magic. The sources I read on nuns have relayed the scant amount of evidence we have at this time that details the lives, customs, values, and pursuits of nuns in the Medieval period. For me, it is essential to understand the nature of monastic life because my book intends to subvert this nature to its purposes. I have found many sources of inspiration, big

and small, throughout this research, but most of them have spurred ideas for plot points in my outline.

Firstly, I have learned throughout this research that many religious houses, especially in Scotland, were under constant threat of raids by Vikings. Karen Stöber states that the popularity of monastic life in the early Medieval period fell into decline “on account of successive Viking raids” (4), and was not truly revived until after the Norman Conquest in 1066. Rosemary Power describes a well-documented raid on the abbey in Iona in 1210 (a religious house founded by Saint Columba in 563 and most probably the original home of the famous Book of Kells) in her article “Dating Iona’s Nunnery.” Scandinavian powers held control of huge areas of coastal Scotland in this era and the raid on Iona was probably due to various reasons including “an attempt under a relatively stable Norway to claim outstanding tribute from the Hebrides, through a royally-sanctioned expedition which descended into a raiding party” (283). In the context of my book, I think a Viking raid would create a dramatic climax that also touches on themes of colonialism, occupation, and male dominance. Furthermore, a raid on the priory in my book would allow me to explore the nuns' vow of chastity and the obsession with a pure female body.

The purity of the female body is an essential theme of female religiosity throughout the Middle Ages. According to legends and traditions explored by Jane Cartwright in “Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales,” most Medieval female saints led “brutal and violent [lives that] centre around the perpetual struggle to preserve the saints’ virginity” (9). The lives of nuns in this period revolved around preserving their virginity until they could attain “perpetual virginity” (13) in death and join their lifelong husband, Christ. To connect to Power’s article, Cartwright mentions the extreme lengths female saints would go to to avoid rape during Viking raids, including those who “plucked out their eyes or cut off their noses” (14). Furthermore,

“virginity appears to have been considered a mental as well as a physical attribute,” (16). In other words, nuns who never felt sexual desire or allowed sexual images into their minds were truly virginal. While the passion to keep the female body pure and innocent for the nuns' eventual marriage to Christ in death is nothing new, I find Cartwright's article revealing of the sheer commitment this condition demanded. While the nuns in my book are not committed to Christ, the purity of their body and mind remains essential for their use of magic. The female body acts as a vessel for the sacred magic flowing through these women from the external energies of the universe. Additionally, the mind and emotional state of the nuns must remain pure as the mediators of this magical energy. The traditional beliefs of the priory stipulate that sexual energies, desire, and romantic love sully the vessel of this sacred energy and consequently stain the magic released from the vessel.

One way that both nuns and monks maintained sexual purity was the separation of nunneries and monasteries. Generally, nunneries evolved as daughter houses of a previously established monastery. The nuns were subordinate to the monks and the abbess or leader of the nunnery answered to the abbot or leader of the preceding abbey. However, in Chapter 12 of *Medieval Monasticism*, authors C. H. Lawrence and Janet Burton describe an increasing tendency of monasteries to separate themselves from nunneries in an attempt to forestall temptation. Nuns, despite their vowed chastity and commitment to the Virgin Mary, often assumed the guise of the “temptress” (201) in ascetical literature. Most religious men appeared to associate all women, including nuns, with Eve and the original sin: “Sin began with a woman and it is through her that death comes to all of us. Without doubt, you cannot long be chaste if you dwell among women.” (qtd. in “Sisters or Handmaidens” 204).

While I find this separation fascinating, I think a subversion of this trope emphasizes themes I want to pursue in my novel a bit better. To clarify, my book focuses on the sanctity of women and femininity. If I were to follow the historical views of nuns defined above, I think I would undermine my proposed theme. Instead, I want these traditions to switch places. At some point in the book, I plan to introduce the presence of a male monastery that also worships magic. It will be these men who are viewed as temptations or distractions for the nuns hoping to maintain bodily and mental purity. The two houses were separated because of the negative effects of the monastery instead of the priory (I have yet to explore how the monks view this separation). In this way, I hope to emphasize the importance of femininity within the magical tradition. Separating nunneries from their mother monasteries often afforded nunneries the advantage of increased autonomy. In a couple of documented cases, the nuns “had control of the monies and the conventual seals, and the prioresses were answerable only to the Master of the order,” (“Sister or Handmaidens,” 208). In the context of my novel, the separation of the monastery from the priory will increase independence for both. In the original arrangement (which was in place before the events in my novel), the monastery and the priory had joint power over the nuns and the monks and the abbot and abbess worked together to run both religious houses.

Power hierarchies hold extreme importance in my novel, as they did in medieval times. While some nunneries were allowed a rare independence, many were scrutinized closely for any sign of negligence or infringement on the rules of the order. This supervision was, according to Lawrence and Burton, especially prevalent in Cistercian nunneries, which outproportioned monasteries in Germany and the Low Countries and proved hard to control simply because of their abundance. Additionally, these nunneries were often headed by aristocratic ladies, who

were “accustomed to managing their affairs in relative freedom [and] did not take kindly to the constraints of a highly disciplined organisation that was governed by men” (“Sisters or Handmaidens,” 210). Even so, there was no question of who held the power of organizing and managing these nunneries. Women could not be priests, and therefore some of the most integral elements of ascetical life (like mass, for example) could not be performed without the presence and oversight of a man.

Nevertheless, this dominating climate did not stop women from defying their leaders and defending their right to autonomy. In “Reading Between the Lines” J. Mecham cites an account of the reforming efforts of an Augustinian monk upon the Cistercian convent of Wienhausen in Lower Saxony, and the ensuing rebellion of the nuns through the writing of private prayer books. The prayer books found in the Wienhausen convent archive exhibit “variations in construction and content” that reveal the individual concerns of various nuns at the convent before and during the reformation process (112). Most importantly, these prayer books were “hidden beneath the floor of the nuns’ choir” (113) and, therefore, escaped the male censorship that most nuns’ written works were subjected to at this time. While none of the content in these books could be considered particularly rebellious, the act of hiding these books from the male reformers and refusing to submit themselves to censorship is an inherent act of non-compliance.

I find the nuns' belief in their right to autonomy and defense of their beliefs exceptionally powerful, and it has changed my view of convents as strictly conforming communities in which disobedience was harshly punished. I am inspired by the strength and bravery of these ascetical women, and I want to include a similar struggle between power hierarchies within my novel. One thing I’m interested in is the values and beliefs of younger generations of nuns. I have previously discussed how the traditional beliefs held by the convent value the female body as a

sacred vessel for magic which rules out the possibility of sexual or romantic desire. However, My magic system also relies on emotions, and the stronger the emotion the more potent the magic. Desire and love are not exempt from magical outputs, and they can be incredibly powerful emotions. So while the traditional beliefs of the priory uphold specific values surrounding magic, younger generations of nuns struggle to overlook the potentiality of emotions derived from desire and love. It's this tension and struggle that make up the primary conflicts within my story. Noora, the main character, represents a younger generation that does not agree with the antiquated values of the priory and wants to experiment with new forms of power. However, in reality, this power is delicate, complex, and difficult to control. The use of such fickle emotions when channeling magic can lead to disastrous consequences, which I intend to explore later in crafting my story.

### *Magic System*

I will now discuss how my research has informed the creation and structuring of the magic system in my book. My magic system relies primarily on the power of emotions, which makes it abstract and a bit difficult to comprehend (even to me, as I'm still developing it). However, the primary conception of my magic system relies on medieval conceptions of emotion. For example, one concern of medieval emotions studies questions the connection between emotions, body, and soul. Some medievalists believed Greek physician Galen's theory that "emotions were occurrences external to the person, imprinting first the soul and then the body." Other medievalists were more convinced by the theories of Muslim philosopher and physician Avicenna, who saw "emotions as part of the *virtutes animalis*—that is, a natural state of the body" (50, "A Moving Soul"). I am more inclined to agree with Avicenna, as I see

emotions as a combination of physical and mental reactions to external stimuli. My definition of emotions also aligns with Italian physician Gentile da Foligno, who asserted “that the movement of the body should be seen as equal to the movement of the soul and not only as a result of it” (53, “A Moving Soul”). In other words, I believe emotions have physicality and they can be expressed and released physically.

However, other scholars believed emotions to have an unbalancing effect that moved the body away from its natural state (Cohen-Hanegbi, 58). This view relates to the study of the four humors, a concept pioneered by Hippocrates that gained popularity in the Middle Ages. The four humors (black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood) are supposedly fluids in the body that relate to emotionality, and the amount of each depends on one’s disposition and emotional state. Most medieval physicians believed it their job to “monitor the fluctuation of the humors” (Cohen-Hanegbi, 59) and determine whether a humoral imbalance was related to an emotional irregularity. In the context of my book, emotions and magic are related to the body in a way similar to that of the four humors. Magic can settle in the body in various places related to social conceptions of where certain emotions stem from. For example, love, anger, and hatred all settle around and within the heart, and - being close to the heart - retain the incredible power of it. While my magic system is still a work in progress, the connection between emotions and the body described above is a good starting point to describe how magic relates to the individual and the world around them.

Another important element of my magic system relies on the use of herbalism. The priory in my book houses a garden modeled on medieval physics gardens, which hold medicinal plants and herbs. The priory also houses an apothecary in which these herbs are processed, stored, and used in magical elixirs and tinctures. In folklore, herbs generally gain magical properties by

“being picked at dawn...on the borders of fields...or from rituals and prayers that accompany their application” (“Witches Herbs on Trial,” 184). I have found folklore to be a useful source of information regarding the priory garden and apothecary, which houses herbs and plants that become magical by the processes stated above. As stated by Ostling, “Emphasis rests on sacred substances, on ritual actions, and on prayer, rather than on the properties...of the herbs themselves” (184). Ostling article “Witches Herbs on Trial” provides a comprehensive list of herbs cited in the Polish witch trials and the lore surrounding them. I have found it a useful inspiration for my magical system, and I’m sure it will continue to be useful as I continue to develop this system.

### *My Process*

As I discussed earlier in this paper, I have approached this project as an exploration. I have uncovered themes surrounding the sanctity of the female body and the relationship between emotionality and the body. I am particularly interested in the physicality of magic in an individual and communal sense. I am also interested in human desire and love: I want to explore what it means to love someone and the power of those emotions. I’m specifically interested in the difference between obsession and love and I want to explore what happens when they overlap. Finally, I want to explore how power hierarchies can work in conjunction with these themes, especially when the people in power attempt to control and regulate female bodies. These themes are slightly disjointed, but they represent some of the issues I want to examine in my book. I think, in the midst of conflicting views on femininity and the body, the romantic relationship between Noora and Avi could take some interesting turns. If Avi spends an extended amount of time at the priory with Noora, what will that do to their relationship? How might

Noora's body, mind, and abilities take precedence over his in a distinctly female environment? How might Avi react to this radical power dynamic? How might Noora? These are all questions I want to explore further as I delve into the world of the priory further.

However, it has taken some time to arrive at these questions and they represent a tiny percentage of the questions I have asked throughout writing this paper. At the beginning of the semester, I was interested in medieval concepts of emotion and I wanted to understand them more deeply as a background to my magic system. However, the research I did was not as relevant as I expected it to be. One source I found described how emotions were represented in literature through gardens. While I originally found this interesting because plants and herbalism play important roles in my magic system, the article explored gardens as representing certain emotional states. The garden, in my book, is more like a haven of possibilities that acts as a tremendous resource for the nuns of the priory, but it does not represent the emotional states of specific characters. I am now focused on learning more about herbalism and herbal remedies to fill out the details of the priory garden. Additionally, I did a lot of research on astrolabes at the beginning of the semester because celestial bodies acted as an incredible source of information historically. The moon has also been historically associated with femininity and the menstrual cycle, which I want to explore in my book. However, I have since learned that I do not need to understand the history and mathematics of astrolabes to talk about the connection between femininity and celestial bodies, so I am tabling this avenue of research for now.

In short, my research on this project has led to several inspirations and several dead ends. However, by learning what I don't want to do with this project, I believe I'm getting closer to understanding what I *do* want to explore. I think I have experienced this through exploring theme, but I have also experienced this to a great extent with character. Most of the writing

portion I have done so far focuses on describing characters and character relationships, and while this information is important, I want to work on refining it to suit my story better. In the future, I hope to focus on the setting of the priory and what happens to the characters in this setting while filling in the gaps of the past. Much of my process with this project has produced a lot of content I don't like, but it has led me toward new avenues of research and new ideas. I am excited to continue exploring this project after I graduate and hopefully turn it into a full-length novel.