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The Little Hours: A Costume Analysis

The movie I decided to watch was *The Little Hours*. The movie is set in Garfagnana and Lunigiana, Italy in 1347. The location is full of greenery and classic elements of the medieval period (e.g. a small convent building with appropriate imagery and a castle). The movie revolves around a convent of nuns with a mother/prioress (the head nun of the convent) and a father (priest). Specifically, the movie focuses on three nuns, all of which are different from each other. One nun is a witch, another is a Jewish lesbian, and the last nun is perfect and holy until she meets a man. The movie also switches its focus to a lord, his wife, and their life in a castle. Later in the movie, a slave is brought to attention; he serves the lord and his wife wine while also engaging in sexual activities with the lord's wife. Once the lord catches him for his terrible acts, the slave runs away into a nearby forest. There he finds the father of the convent drunk—actively losing fabric in a river. Both men decide to work together to get past their wrongdoings; the slave then is forced to act as a mute gardener for the convent (replacing the old gardener). After his arrival, the slave bonds with each nun, having a natural attraction to the perfect nun. Eventually, the lord's guards find him and bring him back to the lord. Meanwhile, a bishop comes to the convent only to see that many unholy things are happening within it. Towards the end of the movie, the nuns band together to free the slave and live happily ever after. ¹

¹ *The Little Hours*, directed by Jeff Baena (2017; Gunpowder & Sky, Universal Pictures, 2018), Film.

The movie consists of imagery that effectively places the viewer in the set period, the late 14th century. A scene that caught my attention was when one of the nuns was staring out of the window as she was sewing (Fig. 1a). In particular, how her habit was draped around her face and over her head intrigued me. First, I noticed the white fabric placed firmly on her forehead and over the top of her head (coif). An additional piece of white fabric draped under her chin (wimble) with black fabric (veil) laying on top of her head to complete the headdress—creating a stark contrast between both fabrics (Fig. 1b). An accompanying scene that further illustrates a full view of a nun's habit was when the same nun and the prioress/mother were walking in a field (Fig. 2). The scene beautifully encapsulates the drapery of their gambits and the difference in the hierarchy within the convent. Specifically, the scene shows the lower portion of the habit; it is an oversized dress (surplice) with short yet wide folded-back cuffs. Moreover, the depiction of a mostly white garment highlights the nun's purity. The size of their garments diminishes a man's temptation due to the oversized look. The prioress' habit highlights a difference in status due to the color and decoration of the garment she wears. For instance, her habit is mainly black except for the white wimble and the white lining for the veil. The fabric also includes a large red cross, possibly alluding to the blood of Christ on the cross. Lastly, both habits are belted with rosary beads (beads used to pray the rosary, “a scripture-based prayer”²) and knotted rope, further demonstrating the holy nature of both figures.

A work that closely resembles the nun's habit in *Little Hours* is *The Lamentation*. It is a painted and gilded wood sculpture made in 1480 CE in Castile-La Mancha, Spain. The work is also a part of an altarpiece (Fig. 3). The work is a very emotional depiction of multiple figures grieving over Jesus's dead body. St. John is on the left, somberly looking down at Jesus while

² “How to Pray the Rosary,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.usccb.org/how-to-pray-the-rosary>.

placing a hand under his head for support. The surrounding figures of the Virgin Mary and Jesus are other biblical figures named Mary. Each of them displays a variation of grieving. The Mary above St. John looks down towards him with her hands clasped together; the veil of her habit covers most of her face as she lightly sheds a tear. The Mary next to her wears a different garment with her face and hairline exposed. Her hands are also clasped together, and her eyebrows are slightly furrowed, showing another form of grief. The Mary below her (Mary Magdalene) shows more expressive sadness due to her furrowed eyebrows and act of wiping off her tears with her veil. Not to mention, Mary Magdalene looks away from Jesus while also gently holding his hand; this gesture illustrates how deeply sad she is, and she is so traumatized from Jesus' death that she cannot bear to look at him. In the center of the work, the Virgin Mary is looking over and carrying her dead son. She also wears a typical nun's habit with a black veil and surplice with a white coif and wimple. Lastly, Jesus' lifeless body lies in Mary's arms with an open wound on the side of his ribs and holes in his feet, referencing the crucifixion. His body is also a direct correlation to the transubstantiation or the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ done by the priest during Mass. On the other hand, each figure is painted, including the cityscape in the background. The work shows the fore, middle, and background with varying levels of relief alongside encompassing elements of two-dimensional design through the painted background. Specifically, the foreground figures are in high relief as the middle ground with the other biblical Mary's is in lower relief. As for the composition, the work directs the viewer in a circular motion from figure to figure. The direction begins with the Mary at the top left and leads the viewer to Mary Magdalene. The Mary at the top right looking down at Mary Magdalene completes the circle. The composition is also noticeably packed. On another note, the wooden border has a brocade pattern (a raised pattern typically on fabric) along

with a faded pomegranate and thistle design on the inside walls. Stylistically, the work portrays Netherlandish and Flemish influences within its realistic human features and drapery design in fabric. A painting by Rogier van der Weyden (*A Descent from the Cross*) also inspired the artist to illustrate a similar scene--Jesus' descension from the cross and the lamentation.³

Although the movie is set in 1347 CE, the habits worn within the movie are not synonymous with the century. Instead, the habits resemble what was worn in the late 15th century as shown in *The Lamentation*. In comparison to the movie, both *The Lamentation* and the movie scene show similar habits except for minor differences in the drape of the overall garment. For instance, the white coif in *The Lamentation* loosely covers the top of the Virgin Mary's face while the nun's coif in *The Little Hours* is tightly wrapped around her forehead. Not to mention, *The Lamentation* is the work of a Spanish artist; thus, the movie's location also displays an inaccuracy. A more appropriate depiction of a nun's habit in the 14th century is a panel from the *Altenberger Altarpiece* (Fig. 4a) (a German-painted, fir wood triptych from 1330 CE) called *St. Elizabeth of Hungary Clothing a Beggar* (Fig. 4b)⁴. Although the work is from a different location in Europe, it is set within the appropriate period. In this work, the large figure in the center (St. Elizabeth) kneels as she is crowned and gives a disabled man a cloak.⁵ St. Elizabeth's habit is more fitted than the habits worn in *The Little Hours*. She wears a tightly fitted white wimple with a white veil over her head; St. Elizabeth also wears a black surplice with fitted sleeves and a red cloak with a cross-shaped closure below the neckline. The work not

³ Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker, "The Sopetrán Lamentation in Wood," Smarthistory, October 16, 2020, <https://smarthistory.org/the-sopetran-lamentation/>.

⁴ "The Wings of the Altenberg Altarpiece," Städel Museum (Städel Museum, March 2, 2021), <https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/en/work/the-wings-of-the-altenberg-altarpiece>.

⁵ Margaret Schaus, ed., "St Elizabeth of Hungary Clothing a Beggar," *Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index* (University of Iowa Libraries), accessed March 8, 2021, https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/DetailsPage.aspx?Feminae_ID=32417.

only shows the movie's inaccuracy in terms of fit, but it also lacks in color compared to a typical habit worn in the late 14th century.

The filmmaker made the choice of portraying nun's habit in the 15th century rather than the 14th century possibly due to the depiction of nuns today. In other words, the filmmaker wanted to display an easily immersive world. The use of the 15th-century habit allows the viewer to understand through the familiar depiction of a nun—showing the viewer who the characters are and what the movie will contain.

Another movie scene that piqued my interest was when a lord's guards stood in the dining room (Fig. 5). The scene begins with the lord and his wife sitting across from each other at their dining room table. They are eating a meal as the lord talks about a seemingly uninterested topic. The scene also hints at a relationship between the wife and a servant/slave that holds a metal pitcher of wine. The wife makes flirtatious looks at the slave as she simultaneously tries to act as if everything is normal. The guards stand behind the lord with blank stars as they do their job. Another scene that shows the overall dress of the guards is when they are chasing a runaway slave (Fig. 6). The guards are wearing a coif (a long hood) made of chain mail over top of their cloth armor. In detail, the armor is a charcoal grey tunic-like garment with a particular repeated box pattern with gold studs on each corner. The tunic has three visible slits—one in the center front and two on each side seam. Also, there are slits at both armhole seams. The tunic ends just above the knees and has short sleeves. The guards also wear fitted black undergarments and possibly ankle-high black boots.

The closest resemblance of the guard's aventail (hood made of chainmail) is a *Basinet Helm with Aventail (mail hood) and "Dog-Faced" Visor*. This German work was made of "steel, iron, and brass with modern leather, cord, and restorations" around 1360-1370 CE (Fig. 7). The

steel helmet has an angled egg shape. The shape effectively covers the back and top of the head while also reaching an imaginary hairline. The helmet's round edges are covered by a brown strip of leather (a strap for the aventail). To attach the two pieces, it was drilled to the helmet with vervelles (small bolts). Moreover, a string goes through the vervelles to further secure the aventail to the helmet. The center front of the helmet has a metal clasp and hinge that connects the visor (face protector) to the helmet. The visor has a unique shape, especially regarding the nose area (flat edges on top with a rounded bottom). This portion gives the wearer more space and, with the help of the large holes on the snout, more room to breathe. Another feature is the thin slit openings placed at the top of the visor; this allows the wearer to see while also receiving maximum protection. Lastly, the work demonstrates an aventail made of chain mail underneath the helmet and visor. The mail was created by interlocking curved iron hoops. Cut and relinked loops produce seams. Moreover, the links show wear and tear through the rust.⁶

The Little Hours' depiction of the chainmail aventail is almost accurate. The curvilinear lines of the iron pieces and overall links between each loop show a great sense of detailed attention to the period. A minor inaccuracy is the lack of seams in the hooded aventail. More specifically, the aventail in *The Little Hours* only covers the back of the head, neck, throat, and top of the shoulders (Fig. 8). On the other hand, the *Basinet Helm* work looks as if it could have extended further down along the torso and back due to the seams (referring to the center front seam). Not to mention, the guards in the movie are not wearing a helmet nor a visor. However, to illustrate a lack of conflict and hint at the absence of a potential threat, the guards did not wear any additional armor. Even though they may be guarding the lord and his wife from harm, there

⁶ "Basinet Helm with Aventail (Mail Hood) and 'Dog-Faced' Visor," Worcester Art Museum ECollections (Worcester Art Museum), accessed March 8, 2021, <https://worchester.emuseum.com/objects/50434/basinet-helm-with-aventail-mail-hood-and-dogfaced-visor?ctx=7d596861-83c6-4d3f-a311-39041b72e0d9&idx=0>.

is not an indication of one. Furthermore, to explain the reasoning for no seams in the guards' aventail is probably due to advanced methods of creating the aventail and a lack of necessity for the seam since it is a small garment piece.

Finally, another scene from *The Little Hours* contains comparable work. The scene at hand involves the father having a conversation with a visiting bishop (Fig. 9). The bishop arrived at the convent to ensure everything is running smoothly and that no one is committing crimes against the Bible. The bishop and the father converse in the father's office to talk about the convent. A portion of the setting is what intrigued me; there was a faded triptych on the wall. Although it is difficult to see what the triptych entails, one can see hints of Madonna and child in the center panel. Therefore, I researched for works that would closely compare or at the very least question its accuracy.

A work that appeared to be very similar to the triptych in the movie was the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Angels, Anthony Abbot and Venantius Triptych*. This work was made in 1354 CE by Puccio di Simone and Allegretto Nuzi; the medium of the work is tempera on a panel (Fig. 10). The first notable thing within the work is the drastic difference in scale; the four main figures (Madonna, Child, and Saints Anthony Abbot and Venantius) are large and fill up most of the panel space. The angels, however, are small in comparison; because of that, the artist can include multiple angels to surround Madonna and her child. Also, Saint Anthony Abbot appears in both the center and left panels. In the center panel, he is the same size as the angels; the artists made his appearance in the left panel just as large as Madonna, Child, and Saint Venantius. Regarding composition, a model made in Bernardo Daddi's shop (an Italian artist in 1320) or by Pucci di Simone was the basis for the center panel. Within the center panel, Madonna (also known as the Virgin Mary) is holding her child with a "gold-embroidered cloth"

wrapped around his hips⁷. Moreover, Mary points at him in a playful parental gesture. The child wears a gold-chained necklace with a pendant; he also holds onto a bird in his left hand while tugging on his mother's garment (a navy blue and gold hemmed mantle or overcoat) in the other. As for the surrounding angels, there are nine of them--referencing the "nine choirs of angels"⁸. Furthermore, Mary and the Christ Child are on a throne with two steps below them. At the bottom of the steps are four saints—(left to right) Saint Catherine of Alexandria, Saint Benedict, Saint Anthony Abbot, and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary. On the top of the panel within the border (gable) lies a depiction of the Crucifixion; the specific shape and same he resides in is called a quatrefoil medallion due to the four rounded edges. As for the left panel, this panel is for Saint Anthony Abbot. He is wearing a heavily draped dark brown garment over a black hooded garment. He also looks towards Mary and her child in the center panel, and he raises his left hand while holding onto a staff in his right. This panel also has a three-edged medallion that illustrates Gabriel, the "Angel of the Annunciation"⁹. Lastly, the right panel shows Saint Venantius wearing a colorfully embroidered, long-sleeved tunic with blue fabric draped over his shoulder. He is also looking towards the center panel at Mary and the Christ Child while holding onto some variation of a cane or long stick. The medallion above him is of the Virgin Annunciate—Mary being interrupted by the Annunciation Angel. On another note, the work's panels were not all painted by the same person or persons; the artists instead dedicated their hands to one or more panels. Simone painted the right and center panels while Nuzi painted the left panel. The

⁷ "Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Angels, and Saints Anthony Abbot and Venantius [Entire Triptych]," National Gallery of Art (National Gallery of Art), accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.206126.html>.

⁸ "Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Angels, and Saints Anthony Abbot and Venantius [Entire Triptych]," National Gallery of Art (National Gallery of Art), accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.206126.html>.

⁹ "Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Angels, and Saints Anthony Abbot and Venantius [Entire Triptych]," National Gallery of Art (National Gallery of Art), accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.206126.html>.

difference in style is noticeable; for instance, the left panel is muted and darker than the center and right panels.¹⁰

In direct comparison to the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Angels*, *Anthony Abbot and Venantius Triptych*, the movie's triptych is somewhat similar. Specifically, both illustrate Mary and the Christ Child in the center panel, and it displays two other figures in two separate panels. The difference lies within the shape of the triptych and the detail within each work. The movie's triptych has more rounded triangular edges while the gold edges of the *Madonna and Child Enthroned Triptych* are stricter and more rigid. Not to mention, the movie's faded triptych is challenging to comprehend and does not appear to hold some of the details within the *Madonna and Child Enthroned Triptych* (e.g. the medallions and the angels). Overall, the movie's triptych is somewhat accurate for the period and setting. The filmmaker probably chose to show a triptych to illustrate the wear and tear of the work overtime. However, if the work was created in the same century as the *Madonna and Child Enthroned Triptych*, then it should not be worn down; it should look as good as new.

After watching the movie, *The Little Hours*, analyzing it, and researching for works that question the movie's accuracy, I learned that producing a movie set in the past requires a lot of research. A movie's job is to make the setting and period easily understandable. If done incorrectly, the viewers might be confused. The course impacted how I viewed the movie by transforming the movie from entertainment to a work used for research and analysis. Normally, when I watch a movie, I never pay attention to the details of the set design, costume design, or overall look. Once I could only view it with an analytical eye, the movie could not entertain me.

¹⁰ "Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Angels, and Saints Anthony Abbot and Venantius [Entire Triptych]," National Gallery of Art (National Gallery of Art), accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.206126.html>.

However, I was surprised at the many components needed to make the story somewhat believable; I marveled at their dedication to accuracy. As a satirical movie, it was not necessary for the setting and costume to be as accurate; however, the work was commendable.

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Object Illustrations



Figure 1a. Screenshot from *The Little Hours* of a nun sewing.



Figure 1b. Screenshot from *The Little Hours* of a nun staring out of a window.



Figure 2. Screenshot from *The Little Hours* of a nun and mother (prioress) walking in a field.



Figure 3. *The Lamentation*, painted and gilded wood, Castile-La Mancha, Spain. 1480 CE



Figure 4a. *Altenberger Altarpiece*, painted fir wood triptych, German. 1330 CE



Figure 4b. *St. Elizabeth of Hungary Clothing a Beggar*, panel from *Altenberger Altarpiece*, painted fir wood triptych, German. 1330 CE



Figure 5. Screenshot from *The Little Hours* showing a lord and his wife eating with guards and a servant/slave.



Figure 6. Screenshot from *The Little Hours* of two guards in a field after attempting to chase down a runaway slave.



Figure 7. *Basinet Helm with Aventail (mail hood) and “Dog-Faced” Visor*, steel, iron, and brass with modern leather, cord, and restorations, German. 1360-1370 CE



Figure 8. Screenshot detail from *The Little Hours* of a guard’s aventail in the dining room scene.



Figure 9. Screenshot from *The Little Hours* of a priest and bishop conversing in the priest's office.



Figure 10. *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Angels, Anthony Abbot and Venantius* Triptych, Puccio di Simone and Allegretto Nuzi, tempera on panel. 1354 CE