

HABITS OF SEDUCTION: ACCOUNTS OF PORTUGUESE NUNS IN BRITISH OFFICERS' PENINSULAR WAR MEMOIRS*

JENNINE HURL-EAMON

Trent University

ABSTRACT. *In their published memoirs of the Peninsular War, a surprising number of British officers mentioned visits to Portuguese convents and openly confessed to having flirted with the sisters – occasionally to the point of outright seduction – and abandoned them when the regiment moved on. This seems like a very negative self-fashioning to modern readers, but can best be understood in the context of the political and cultural climate in which these memoirs were produced. This article argues that officers' descriptions of convent visiting and their professions of sympathy for cloistered women revealed the influence of gothic, erotic, romantic, and travel literature on military life writing. Their depiction of nuns differed from nuns' portrayal by common soldiers due to its infusion with masculine ideals of chivalry and sensibility. Elite memoirists saw no need to justify their abandonment of nuns because they viewed it in light of other literary accounts of soldiers who broke nuns' hearts. At the same time, they contrasted themselves with the barbarism of the French, believing themselves to be far more compassionate and tolerant of Catholic strictures. Officers' portrayals of Portuguese sisters can thus also be seen as an expression of Britons' sense of their relationship with Portugal in the war.*

In July of 1813, while on campaign in Portugal against Napoleon, the 18th Hussars were posted to Olite. George Woodberry, a lieutenant with the regiment, recorded in his diary his pleasure at finding a convent opposite his quarters with 'twenty-two nuns'. He quickly secured audiences with the sisters, singling out a particularly attractive nun for his special attentions and

Trent University, 1600 West Bank Drive, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada K9J 7B8 jenninehurl@trentu.ca

* The author wishes gratefully to acknowledge the assistance of Jennifer Avis, Gemma Bagshaw, Joanne Bailey, Ivana Elbl, Sarah Goldsmith, and Andrew Monnickendam. Thanks also to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding the research for this project.

dubbing her his 'religious fair'.¹ There are hints that romantic entanglements with nuns went well beyond Lieutenant Woodberry in Olite. Lieutenant Thomas Thompson's young wife was apparently 'afraid of [his] being run away with of something in a wimple and a veil' during his service in 1813–14.² 'To let you into a secret', another officer wrote his sister-in-law from Vizen in 1812, 'there is a young, & pretty damsel at the Convent, who...sings beautifully'. He described the visitors' parlour at the nunnery 'crowded with young officers, & even a general or two every day', and admitted that he himself would, 'when it rains...pass an hour or two there, to have his eyes & ears gratified!!'.³

Descriptions of convent flirtations are not limited to officers' private wartime writings. A surprisingly large group of published Peninsular memoirs mention British officers' romantic interactions with Portuguese nuns, some noting titillating violations of monastic restrictions. When Lieutenant Joseph Anderson penned his autobiography at the end of his life, he vividly recalled his daily visits with the sisters of Santarem. Though he and his fellow officers viewed the nuns through a barrier, Anderson still gloried in the fact that they could see and even *touch* the women, though 'the gratings between us were so far apart that we could only reach the tips of their fingers'.⁴

Britain's military men had long been infamous womanizers, but these officers' predilection for nuns during their sojourn in Portugal is distinct and deserves further examination.⁵ Gavin Daly and Catriona Kennedy acknowledge nuns' presence in Peninsular memoirs, but they do so only as part of much larger projects and thus have missed some key insights.⁶ This article suggests that the memoir descriptions of romantic encounters with Portuguese nuns

¹ Diary of Lieutenant George Woodberry, 3 and 25 July 1813, Olite, National Army Museum, Chelsea (NAM), 1968–07–267, p. 189.

² Thomas Perronet Thompson to his wife, n.d., Hull History Centre, Hull University Archives (HHC) U DTH/5/14/46 (transcription of letter for a draft biography by his granddaughter, Edith Thompson).

³ James Macdonald to Louisa Macdonald, 29 Dec. 1812, Vizen, HHC U DDBM/32/14. In Godfrey Macdonald to Louisa, 14 Jan. 1813, 'Beveses near Vizen', U DDBM/x2/2, Louisa's husband (and James's brother) told her that the talented singer was 'a secular, not a nun, who dwelt in the convent', but most officers do not make this distinction.

⁴ Lt. Colonel Joseph Anderson, *Recollections of a Peninsular veteran* (London, 1913), p. 31.

⁵ On womanizing as a key component of masculinity in Napoleon's army, see Michael J. Hughes, *Forging Napoleon's Grand Armée: motivation, military culture and masculinity* (New York, NY, 2013), pp. 123–35. For the British army, see J. Hurl-Eamon, *Marriage and the British army in the long eighteenth century: 'the girl I left behind me'* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 101–11.

⁶ Gavin Daly, *The British soldier in the Peninsular War: encounters with Spain and Portugal, 1808–1814* (New York, NY, 2013), pp. 164–5, 184–5, and Catriona Kennedy, *Narratives of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: military and civilian experience in Britain and Ireland* (New York, NY, 2013), p. 99. Kennedy mistakenly assumes the encounters to be with 'Spanish' not Portuguese convents. Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in arms: Catholic nuns through two millennia* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), pp. 565–8, focuses on the devastation to Iberian convents caused by the French revolutionary army, but ignores any impact of the British on nuns.

shed light on both the authors' masculinity and readers' appetites. The conflicting themes of conquest and rescue that coloured these accounts illustrate the dual nature of Georgian masculinity and Britain's attitude toward Portugal. They also reflect the complexity with which nuns have been treated in travel accounts, gothic literature, and erotica, and in turn demonstrate the influences of these other genres on military memoirists.

While it is tempting to view the publications of Peninsular veterans as unfiltered war accounts by eyewitnesses, it is important to recognize that they were written and published after – in some cases, many decades after – the end of the war. The earliest print account of interactions with Portuguese nuns can be found in 1809, but the majority of such publications appeared in the 1820s and 1830s. Catriona Kennedy chose to limit her study of Peninsular War writing to work produced during the war years precisely because later writings 'are more likely to reflect the cultural climate in which they were written' and she wished to avoid such distortions.⁷ Because the figure of the seduced nun was such a long-standing literary trope, however, the differences between the war period and its aftermath are not as sharply drawn.

Literary scholars and cultural historians have uncovered a British fascination with nuns that began in the mid-eighteenth century and continued in the Victorian era. Building on the 'cloister theme' already established by scholars of the gothic literary tradition, Maria Purves argues that the period between 1790 and 1816 romanticized the nun as a figure of beauty and spirituality.⁸ While anti-Catholicism played a role in gothic presentations of nuns, Purves argues that fears of Jacobinism caused many Englishmen and women to value nuns' piety and devotion. Though this abated slightly in the first decade of the nineteenth century, it had regained strength by 1810.⁹ Purves's study ends in 1816, but Susan Casteras charts an 'increased interest' in nuns as the subject of popular art from 1839.¹⁰ Susan O'Brien's work furthermore reveals that the Catholic orders that emerged in Victorian England were welcome and respected in their communities.¹¹ Thus, there is ample scholarship on the sustained cultural significance of nuns throughout this period.

Published encounters of soldiers with Portuguese nuns thus need to be seen in the context of the broader history of reading and writing in the romantic age. Memoirists' frank confessions of their convent womanizing were meant for an audience steeped in Enlightenment ideals and nationalist pride.

⁷ Kennedy, *Narratives*, p. 8.

⁸ Maria Purves, *The gothic and Catholicism: religion, cultural exchange and the popular novel, 1785–1829* (Cardiff, 2009), pp. 93–169.

⁹ Purves, *The gothic and Catholicism*, p. 46.

¹⁰ Susan P. Casteras, 'Virgin vows: the early Victorian artists' portrayal of nuns and novices', in Gail Malmgreen, ed., *Religion in the lives of English women, 1760–1930* (Bloomington, IN, 1986), p. 140.

¹¹ Susan O'Brien, 'French nuns in nineteenth-century England', *Past and Present*, 154 (1997), pp. 142–80, at pp. 175–7.

Readers were eager for personal accounts of war and other political events, and British book buyers eagerly consumed memoirs of the Peninsular War.¹² The ideal reader of the time was the male reader able to divorce himself somewhat from ‘over-identification with the characters’, and thus somewhat impervious to the tragedy of the seduced women in officers’ memoirs.¹³ Moreover, H.J. Jackson argues that readers of the romantic era ‘had more in common with the behaviour and attitudes of their counterparts two hundred years earlier than with ours two centuries later’.¹⁴ This article thus argues that the accounts of Peninsular War convent visiting jar more harshly with modern audiences than they would have with contemporaries.

Modern readers cannot help but wonder why officers would write so sympathetically about the cloistered women of Portugal, yet also describe romancing and abandoning them. The following paragraphs probe this apparent disconnect, and make three fundamental points. First, memoirists were influenced by gothic and romantic imagery of nuns. In imagining these Iberian maidens as gothic heroines, military men were exhibiting some of the elements of chivalry and polite sensibility that historians have discerned in their civilian counterparts for this period.¹⁵ Though Michèle Cohen argued that chivalry did not extend to martial masculinity, it is abundantly visible in men’s depiction of their desire to rescue nuns from their religious seclusion.¹⁶ Officers also contrast themselves sharply with common soldiers in their treatment of Iberian women. Second, in openly portraying officers seducing nuns, Peninsular memoirs simply echo the depictions of gentlemen at convents in travel literature, romances, and erotica. Contemporary notions of polite or chivalrous

¹² Neil Ramsey, *The military memoir and romantic literary culture, 1780–1835* (Farnham, 2011), pp. 33–41. See also Diana Chlebek, ‘Romanticism and the nineteenth century’, in Gabrielle Watling, ed., *Cultural history of reading. II: World literature* (Westport, CT, 2009), p. 204.

¹³ Kate Flint, ‘Women and the reading of *Vanity Fair*’, in James Raven et al., eds., *The practice and representation of reading in England* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 252.

¹⁴ H.J. Jackson, *Romantic readers: the evidence of marginalia* (New Haven, CT, 2005), p. 300.

¹⁵ Sympathy – such as elicited by the notion of a heartbroken girl retreating to a convent – was a key component of the man of sensibility, and true manliness emerged in ‘patriarchal protectiveness’. William Stafford, ‘Gentlemanly masculinities as represented by the late Georgian *Gentleman’s Magazine*’, *History*, 93 (2008), pp. 47–68, at pp. 57–8. At the time of these memoirs, chivalry had also emerged as a concurrent form of masculinity (connected with the rise of gothic culture) and would replace politeness by the end of the period. Michèle Cohen, ‘“Manners” make the man: politeness, chivalry, and the construction of masculinity’, *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), pp. 312–29. See also George Barker-Benfield, *The culture of sensibility: sex and society in eighteenth-century Britain* (London, 1992), pp. 247–50; Philip Carter, *Men and the emergence of polite society in Britain, 1660–1800* (Harlow, 2001), pp. 102–5; Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic feminism: the professionalization of gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (Philadelphia, PA, 1998), pp. 89–90; Simon Bainbridge, *British poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars: visions of conflict* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 67–80, 85, 112–20, 158–63; Lynn Abrams, ‘The taming of highland masculinity: inter-personal violence and shifting codes of manhood, c. 1760–1840’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 92 (2013), pp. 100–22, at pp. 112–16.

¹⁶ Cohen, ‘“Manners”’, p. 321. Kennedy, *Narratives*, p. 174, found chivalry to ‘be a vital element in the “pleasure culture of war”’ for civilians.

masculinity allowed for seduction narratives. Finally, the article shows that British officers' perception of Portuguese nuns mirrored Britons's sense of Portugal as an ally. Memoirists and readers accepted the convent seduction tales as another example of the British providing benevolent aid to Portugal, yet respecting its Catholicism.

I

It is clear that gothic and romantic literature influenced officers' perceptions of the mysterious convent dwellers with whom they came into contact. Authors recollected stories of sisters who had joined an order following a tragic love affair, a common trope in romantic writing. Stationed in Santa Clara in 1811, army surgeon Walter Henry quickly learned of 'one acknowledged beauty amongst' the nuns there, 'who, crossed in love, had thrown herself into the convent'. Though he never laid eyes on her, Henry listened attentively to the hidden nuns at choral service, in fond belief that the 'one voice pre-eminently sweet' in the convent choir was hers.¹⁷ 'Those poor girls were forced into convents by the aid and advice of crafty priests', lamented another officer. 'I often had conversations with them through their iron grating, hearing them wailing and lamenting their unhappy fate, and pining for liberty' he recalled.¹⁸ Colonel Joseph Moyle Sherer was powerfully touched by the sombre figure of a nun who was reputed to have 'been disappointed in love early in life, and sent into the convent'. Interestingly, she was 'neither young, nor beautiful', but the mournful airs that she sung at the grate during their visits would reduce her military audience to tears.¹⁹ 'Sherer imagined himself at times in a Peninsular world of Ann Radcliffe-like scenes and characters', according to Gavin Daly.²⁰ In the minds of officers like Sherer, the convent seemed a tragic refuge for broken-hearted damsels.

Officers were stirred by romantic notions of nuns as tragic prisoners. When introduced to a young woman who was to become a sister of the Convent of Villa Nova, Cavalry officer E. W. Buckham professed himself struck by her prettiness, and her calm acceptance of the upcoming ceremony. 'She said it wanted just four months to her burial, which is the usual expression for taking the veil; at the expiration of which time...she will become dead to the world', he wrote.²¹ Joseph Scherer expressed regret that the officer who had befriended another innocent novice had not supplied her with 'a ladder of ropes, and a promise

¹⁷ Walter Henry, *Trifles from my portfolio; or, Recollections of...adventures during twenty-nine years' military service...by a staff surgeon*, 1 (Quebec, 1839), p. 46.

¹⁸ George Bell, *Rough notes by an old soldier...* (London, 1867), p. 22.

¹⁹ Colonel J. M. Sherer, *Recollections of the Peninsula* (5th edn, London, 1827), p. 136.

²⁰ Daly, *The British soldier*, p. 160.

²¹ E. W. Buckham, *Personal narrative of adventures in the Peninsula during the war in 1812-1813 by an officer late in the staff corps regiment of cavalry* (London, 1827), letter II, dated Oporto, 10 May 1812, pp. 20-1.

of assistance and protection'.²² The chivalric undertones are even more clear in Sir George Bell's story of an army doctor in his cups who 'bolted off to a convent to release the nuns like a gallant knight' but was thwarted by 'the watchful and wily priests'.²³ Rather than immediately lusting after these admittedly attractive young women, officers wanted to appear as chivalrous rescuers.

Some memoirists explicitly connected the cloistered women they met in Portugal with the nuns they knew from the popular art and literature of the time. Army physician Adam Neale wrote in 1808 of his eagerness to visit a convent for the purposes of 'beholding some of those fine expressive countenances, such as Guercino, Guido, and other Italian painters have often depicted'.²⁴ 'The history of Rousseau's nun was here realized in a hundred instances', wrote one colonel of the convent adventures he and his fellow officers enjoyed in Portugal.²⁵ One can only assume that he was referring to the long-standing best-seller *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's epistolary novel of 1761. Though Julie did not become a nun, Rousseau had openly modelled his story on the famous tale of Héloïse and Abélard, star-crossed lovers doomed to heal their broken hearts in monastic seclusion. Alexander Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard*, first published in 1717, also relayed the twelfth-century story. Pope's account of Héloïse's struggles to transcend her mortal feelings and find a more divine calling 'romanticized the spiritual experience of the Catholic nun', according to Maria Purves.²⁶ The story maintained its popularity, appearing in approximately thirty reprints and adaptations in the latter half of the century.

It was still popular among genteel Peninsular veterans and helped fuel their passion for nuns. A poem published by a subaltern in Gallegos and distributed among his fellow officers thinly parodied the tale, according to Catriona Kennedy.²⁷ The most compelling evidence, however, comes from Colonel Joseph Sherer. Shortly after his arrival in Lisbon in 1809, Sherer found 'a small convent of Irish nuns' at Belem, where a pretty novice 'asked me, with great innocence, if I did not admire Pope's Epistle from Eloisa to Abelard'. She went on to confess that an English officer had loaned her the poem.²⁸ The officer apparently imagined the Irish novice as an Eloisa-like figure.

²² Sherer, *Recollections*, pp. 2–33.

²³ Bell, *Rough notes*, p. 41. On the treatment of women dictated by chivalric masculinity, see Cohen, "Manners", pp. 319–20.

²⁴ Adam Neale, *Letters from Portugal and Spain: comprising an account of the operations of operations of the armies...by Adam Neale,...physician to his Majesty's forces* (London, 1809), letter XXXVIII, dated Salamanca, 30 Nov. 1808, p. 229.

²⁵ Robert Ker Porter, *Letters from Portugal and Spain, written during the march of the British troops under Sir John Moore...* (London, 1809), p. 185.

²⁶ Purves, *The gothic and Catholicism*, p. 65.

²⁷ Catriona Kennedy, 'John Bull into battle: military masculinity and the British army officer during the Napoleonic Wars', in Karen Hagemann, Gisela Mettele, and Jane Rendall, eds., *Gender, war and politics: transatlantic perspectives, 1775–1830* (New York, NY, 2010), p. 143.

²⁸ Sherer, *Recollections*, pp. 32–3.

Indeed, his desire to find such a real-life parallel likely prompted his visit to the convent in the first place. Accounts of nuns in Peninsular memoirs reveal officers with romantic notions of nuns from contemporary art and literature.

Though some officers' memoirs were published many years after the end of the war, similar sentiments can be discerned at the time in which these convent visits occurred. Hussar George Woodberry recounted a nun investiture he witnessed at Tafalla in a diary entry for 1813. 'There was something I perceived in her looks that I think plainly told her dislike to her present prospects', he recalled. 'Poor miserable creature', he added, believing that she was likely 'compell'd to that life by a Cruel father or mother, to enrich some more favourite childe'.²⁹ Later reflecting on the tragedy of the scene, he recalled that 'the young Lady I saw last Sunday was rather pretty: and appeared about 18 years old'.³⁰ Woodberry's account, as Catriona Kennedy has argued, 'could have been lifted straight out of a gothic novel'.³¹

Woodberry's thoughts differed little from those of female contemporaries upon beholding such scenes. Captain Courtenay Ilbert's wife's unpublished journal records her voyage with his artillery regiment to Quebec in 1807. One of her most ardent wishes upon arrival was 'to see the interior of a Nunnery', a desire which was fulfilled on 20 October of the same year.³² She was particularly struck by 'a Beautiful & interesting young Nun, she is an English woman & so handsome that even her *dress* could not disguise her'.³³ 'Seeing such a pretty sweet looking creature shut up in a Convent made my heart ache', Ilbert reflected. Though the captain's wife acknowledged that the nun 'seemed happy', Ilbert was nonetheless 'grieved that she had not the power of making a good husband so'.³⁴ Seventeen years earlier, Helen Williams expressed pity for men who came into contact with beautiful nuns, believing male hearts to be 'placed in a perilous situation; for where can a young woman appear so interesting?'³⁵ Nothing else 'in all the ostentation of female dress', she observed, was 'so likely to affect a man of sensibility, as that dismal habit which seems so much at variance with youth and beauty, and is worn as the melancholy symbol of an eternal renunciation of the world and all its pleasures'.³⁶

Peninsular officers presented themselves as just such men of sensibility in their writing, both during the war and in their subsequent recollections.

²⁹ Diary of Lieutenant George Woodberry, 15 Aug. 1813, Olite, NAM 1968-07-267, p. 212.

³⁰ Diary of Lieutenant George Woodberry, 18 Aug. 1813, Olite, NAM 1968-07-267, p. 216.

³¹ Kennedy, *Narratives*, p. 99. See also Daly, *The British soldier*, pp. 160 and 184.

³² *Voyage across the Atlantic, 1807*, a journal kept by Mrs Courtenay Ilbert, wife of 2nd Captain Courtenay Ilbert, Royal Artillery, 24 Sept. 1807, NAM 1996-06-136-1, p. 56 (photocopy of a transcript).

³³ *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20 Oct. 1807, p. 65.

³⁵ Helen Maria Williams, *Letters written in France in the summer 1790, to a friend in England; containing various anecdotes relative to the French Revolution*, ed. Neil Fraistat and Susan S. Lanser (Peterborough, ON, 2011), p. 111.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Descriptions of chivalry toward nuns tend to appear only in officers' accounts. This fits with Neil Ramsey's sense that common soldiers' Peninsular memoirs exhibited a distaste for glorifying war and a shift from the moral message of earlier spiritual biographies.³⁷ The single mention of Peninsular nuns in Private Joseph Donaldson's *Recollections of an eventful life*, published in 1824, presented an unvarnished picture of nuns as lewd infanticides, quite different from the tragic prisoners presented by his officers:

To the convent, in which we were lodged, was attached a nunnery; and, through its latticed windows, we often saw the nuns peeping, while we were on parade. They did not seem to be so rigidly kept in as they are reported to be. I remember seeing a newborn child exposed, naked and dead, on the leads beneath their windows: how it came there I cannot pretend to say, but there it was; and our men were *charitable* enough to believe that it belonged to some of themselves.³⁸

There is similar cool scepticism of nun's chastity in Maempel's *Adventures of a young rifleman*, which came out in London in 1827.³⁹ No other published Peninsular memoirs by common soldiers even mention nuns. It thus seems clear that the aura of gothic romance and tragedy with which officers' viewed their cloistered sweethearts did not hold for the lower ranks.

Indeed, officers' memoirs convey their sense that chivalry was concentrated in the upper echelons of the army. Common soldiers could occasionally fall prey to baser urges, but the British Peninsular officer stood firm. In the aftermath of the battle of Bajadoz, when British privates rampaged through the town, for example, officers later recalled themselves risking life and limb to try to protect local and British women from the crazed mobs of drunken soldiers. 'Three times I narrowly escaped with life [sic] for endeavouring to protect some women', Captain Robert Blakeney wrote of the horrific occasion, adding a lengthy account of his and a fellow officer's ingenuity in aiding a woman in childbirth during the melee.⁴⁰ Surgeon Sir James McGrigor was shocked to see the men of his previous regiment attempting to drag away a general's daughters, and was roused to join the two officers who 'gallantly defended them at the peril of their lives'.⁴¹ British officers' memoirs celebrated their chivalry and civility, and their interactions with nuns were included as additional proof.

This was not the first time that military officers prided themselves on possessing a martial masculinity of sensibility and refinement in contrast to their

³⁷ Ramsey, *The military memoir*, pp. 114–15, 132–5. See also Kennedy, *Narratives*, pp. 79–81.

³⁸ [Joseph Donaldson], *Recollections of an eventful life, chiefly passed in the army* (Glasgow, 1824), p. 115, emphasis in original.

³⁹ Johan Christian Maempel, *Adventures of a young rifleman, in the French and English armies*. translation by author, ed. and preface by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (2nd edn, London, 1827), pp. 291–2.

⁴⁰ Robert Blakeney, *A boy in the Peninsular War* (1899; repr. London, 1989), pp. 273–7.

⁴¹ Sir James McGrigor, *The scalpel and the sword: the autobiography of the father of army medicine*, ed. Mary McGrigor (Dalkeith, 2000), p. 184.

men. Sarah Knott has found evidence of sensibility among the officers of the American Revolutionary War, for example.⁴² What sets Peninsular accounts of convent visits apart from earlier exhibitions of polite sensibility is their sheen of gothic romance. Peninsular officers were entering Portugal's convents at the height of the gothic novel's 'initial flowering between 1796 and 1825'.⁴³ Rather than being overtly and simply intent upon seduction, Peninsular officers were moved by pity for the cloistered women and sometimes – as the previous examples indicate – explicitly connected the Portuguese sisters with the romantic representations of nuns in popular art and literature. The sensibility displayed in officers' convent visits has been overlooked by literary historians of military masculinity, but it is another symptom of the rebirth of the 'feeling and imagining' model of manhood Simon Bainbridge discerns in this era.⁴⁴ This was a key time in which 'the [British] nation was coming to fall in love with the soldier in the guise of the tasteful, serious and morally reformed literary author', Neil Ramsey has argued.⁴⁵

There was another side to the depictions of convent visits that does not appear to fit with this image of 'morally reformed' masculinity, however. The next section explores the varying levels of seduction in officers' accounts of their adventures in Portuguese nunneries.

II

Memoirists were quite open about the amorous nature of their convent conversations, including it in printed accounts of the Peninsular War for an avid readership. There was little pretence that officers kept their dialogue to 'safe', chaste topics that respected nuns' vows. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Anderson's memoirs unabashedly stated that he had 'chatted and made love for hours daily', with the nuns of Santarem.⁴⁶ Captain Kincaid proudly noted that he had 'never yet asked a nun, or an attendant of a nunnery, if she would elope with me, that she did not immediately consent, – and that, too, unconditionally'.⁴⁷ Rifle officer Jonathan Leach also proposed marriage as part of his idle entertainment at the Santarem convent.⁴⁸ Peninsular War veteran George Gleig described the Azores nuns he encountered on his journey to fight in America as 'quite as fond of flirting as any set of young ladies at a boarding

⁴² Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009), pp. 153–94; p. 166, notes, however, that 'such fierce and entitled claims to sensibility were not shared by rank-and-file soldiers'.

⁴³ Jacqueline Howard, *Reading gothic fiction: a Bakhtinian approach* (Oxford, 1994), p. 18.

⁴⁴ Bainbridge, *British poetry*, p. 75.

⁴⁵ Ramsey, *The military memoir*, p. 176.

⁴⁶ Anderson, *Recollections*, p. 31. While the use of the term 'made love' does not quite have the sexual connotations it does in modern parlance, it is nonetheless transgressive as a characterization of men's interaction with nuns.

⁴⁷ John Kincaid, *Random shots from a rifleman* (2nd edn, London, 1847), p. 224.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Leach, *Rough sketches of the life of an old soldier...* (London, 1831), p. 73.

school'.⁴⁹ There can be little doubt that the officers frequently veered from chaste or spiritual topics into romantic terrain.

There are also several indications that officers had sex with their cloistered sweethearts. Colonel Robert Kerr Porter's account left little doubt:

So much for vestals in will as well as in deed! I must give you a hint of some who are so only in name; I mean the fair inhabitants of a few nunneries which lie on the Portuguese frontiers: they did not even keep a threshold between our curiosity and their seclusion. We found as free ingress into their cells as if we had been a regiment of confessors; their veils were thrown aside, their holy abstinence neglected, and adventures truly romantic ensued...However, not intending to betray their secrets,...I shall drop the subject.⁵⁰

Captain Gronow mentioned the tale of a Colonel Daniel Mackinnon who had ventured beyond the grille of a convent on the outskirts of Lisbon. 'It was generally supposed that it was neither his first nor his second visit', Gronow said suggestively, adding that he 'might say more about Dan's adventures in the convent, but have no wish to be scandalous'.⁵¹ While there is a clandestine flavour to such anecdotes, it is nonetheless clear that officers relished retelling events such as this as much as – if not more than – they had enjoyed living them. Captain Kincaid talked of having 'compared notes with [his] companions' when his marriage proposals met with success.⁵² In fact, officers' characterizations of their convent flirtations bore the same sporting character as those of their conquests of laywomen. I have written elsewhere of the 'tomcatting' culture that pervaded the British army on campaign, and these convent adventures are simply another form of the same type of activity.⁵³ The homosexual environment of the military fostered a sense of conquest that equated seduction with other martial victories.

The sexual rather than spiritual or cultural source of officers' fascination with nuns was visible in their frustration if they discovered only elderly nuns upon gaining admission to a convent. When he and his comrades were denied entry into a Belem nunnery, Lieutenant-Colonel Leach was later comforted by learning 'that they were old and ugly'.⁵⁴ Captain Kincaid acknowledged that each time the regiment encountered a new convent the officers quickly investigated the relative attractions of its inhabitants and informally circulated a list of names of the most beautiful.⁵⁵ William Graham was disappointed to discover that the nunnery at Cea was 'inhabited by a few old nuns – certainly no

⁴⁹ George Gleig, *A narrative of the campaigns of the British army at Washington and New Orleans... in the years 1814 and 1815* (London, 1821), p. 58.

⁵⁰ Porter, *Letters*, pp. 184–5.

⁵¹ R. H. Gronow, *The reminiscences and recollections of Captain Gronow, being anecdotes of the camp, court, clubs and society, 1810–1860*, 1 (London, 1900), pp. 61–2.

⁵² Kincaid, *Random shots*, p. 225.

⁵³ See Hurl-Eamon, *Marriage and the British army*, pp. 101–11.

⁵⁴ Leach, *Rough sketches*, p. 78.

⁵⁵ Kincaid, *Random shots*, pp. 224–5.

great objects of admiration'.⁵⁶ Later, upon entering Spain in 1813, his party was met by a delegation of nuns from a local convent. Though they brought Graham and his men food and drink after their long march, the nuns were still unwelcome to Graham because they were 'old' and 'looked ghastly'.⁵⁷ Virtually every officer's quarry was the young pretty sister.

Even those who apparently refused to participate in the romantic dalliances in convents joined in the sport by grudgingly acknowledging their prevalence and relaying others' salacious adventures. Adam Neale relished repeating the titillating tale of 'an officer of [his] acquaintance' who was stationed at Guarda and was able to secure a solitary midnight tryst with a 'lovely vestal' who contrived to admit him 'within the holy portals'. Neale went on to relate how 'early the next morning he left her, regretting that so charming, so amusing a female, should be enclosed within the precincts of a convent'.⁵⁸ Neale had little direct interaction with nuns, but Charles Boutflower later said he found those of his acquaintance to be 'most worthy people', indicating that the flirtation was one-sided in his view and that the nuns merely tolerated it out of hospitality. Boutflower noted in his journal that 'Conversations daily take place between' the sisters of a Melo convent 'and (I am ashamed to say,) certain British Officers, from which the most abandoned women in England would turn away with disgust'.⁵⁹ Even Kincaid acknowledged that the nuns seemed to acquiesce to his elopement proposals because 'the good souls were overflowing with the milk of human kindness, and could not say nay while they possessed the powers of pleasing'.⁶⁰ He went on to state that this impression was widespread among his fellow officers. At least some of the sisters must have patiently accepted British military men's frequent romantic attentions as another of their duties, yet the officers freely reported how they took advantage of this affability.

Other nuns may have been more genuine in their affections, but they received the same shallow treatment. The memoirs do little to dissuade readers from thinking that convent romances ended exactly the same way as any other amorous entanglement in which British officers found themselves abroad. When the men received marching orders, they left with nary a backward glance. There are no accounts of officers who attempted to return on their own or who even thought much about their habited sweethearts after they had parted ways. Sherer noted that a young sister's premature death from a sudden illness had left the officer who had regularly visited her 'much affected'

⁵⁶ William Graham, *Travels through Portugal and Spain during the Peninsular War* (London, 1820), p. 23. On p. 33, Graham was permitted inside the cloistered space of a Portuguese convent, but still 'all the young nuns were invisible'.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵⁸ Neale, *Letters*, letter xxxviii, dated Salamanca, 30 Nov. 1808, pp. 230–1.

⁵⁹ Charles Boutflower, *Journal of an army surgeon during the Peninsular War* (Manchester, 1912), p. 39.

⁶⁰ Kincaid, *Random shots*, p. 225.

but added the important qualifer: ‘at the time’.⁶¹ Captain Kincaid had apparently discussed detailed plans for elopement with ‘particular’ nuns of his acquaintance, yet he never followed through. His memoirs boasted that the sisters who accepted his marriage proposals ‘invariably pointed out the means, by telling me that they were strictly watched at that time, but if I returned privately, a week or two after the army had passed, they could very easily arrange the manner of their escape’.⁶² He never did, but he freely told his readers that he had repeated the same deceit on several nuns. Lieutenant-Colonel Leach was equally candid in his account of the Santarem convent, confessing that two nuns declared themselves ‘ready and willing...to share our fortunes in the “tented field”’.⁶³ Though he admired their courage in flouting the rules of their order, which he believed put them at risk of horrible penalties, he never followed through on these elopement plans.

Rather than preying upon innocent maidens, memoirists often depicted themselves as participating in a pleasant game of mutual give-and-take. John Murray believed that the Azores convent he encountered on his journey to fight in America at the conclusion of the Peninsular War had carefully orchestrated his exposure:

the younger and fairer members of the sisterhood...chatted, sung, and presented [Murray and his fellow officers] with artificial flowers, and then retiring made way for the old and the ugly, who requested a little money for the good of our souls and their bodies...[T]he consequence was, that we soon discovered it to be quite as expensive an amusement to flirt with a nun, as with any other belle in London or elsewhere.⁶⁴

Far from victimizing women, Murray presented himself as having more than repaid the privilege of ‘flirting’ with the Azores sisters.

The openness with which memoirists displayed this cavalier treatment of nuns needs to be understood within the context of Georgian masculinities, contemporary erotica, and the literary influences outlined in the previous section. For many ‘polite’ men of the era, refined masculinity could lapse at any given moment, and Philip Carter has argued that polite society needs to be understood ‘as a history of competitions played out’.⁶⁵ James Boswell, for example, acted as a model of refined masculinity one minute, and descended into wild

⁶¹ Sherer, *Recollections*, p. 136.

⁶² Kincaid, *Random shots*, pp. 224–5.

⁶³ Leach, *Rough sketches*, p. 73.

⁶⁴ Gleig, *Narrative*, pp. 58–9.

⁶⁵ Carter, *Men and the emergence of polite society*, p. 8. Carter went on to suggest generational competition as one example, a point also made by Michael Roper and John Tosh, ‘Historians and the politics of masculinity’, in Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds., *Manful assertions: masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London, 1991), p. 17. For more on the contested nature of male sensibility and politeness, see Carter, *Men and the emergence of polite society*, 88–123; Henry French and Mark Rothery, *Man’s estate: landed gentry masculinities, 1660–1900* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 149–50.

womanizing the next – though the latter was done secretly and his ‘sexual rapacity’ was the antithesis to ‘sensibility’.⁶⁶ Officers’ scepticism of nuns’ chastity and/or ambivalence to the repercussions for the women of their romantic overtures resonates with Georgian notions of male sexuality, where female consent was often ambiguous and a ‘normal’ scenario of heterosexual sex consisted of male aggression conquering female reluctance.⁶⁷ Chivalry, too, allowed its adherents to express undying devotion to a woman yet also leave her. The chivalric lover was enflamed by ‘his passion for war’, Michèle Cohen argued, ‘inspiring him to earn his beloved’s regard by valorous deeds and heroic martial ventures taking him far away from her rather than requiring him to spend time in her company’.⁶⁸

Images of the vestal virgins of gothic romance also co-existed with much more long-standing depictions of lewd women who eagerly violated their vows when given the chance. Nuns figured prominently in pornography and salacious accounts in travel literature.⁶⁹ Men inside and outside of the military were intrigued by nuns’ charms, and eagerly violated the sanctity of the cloister when they had the chance, fuelling salacious tales that only increased the eroticism of the wimple and veil. In 1749, for example, Lady Wortley Montague wrote of her horror at an Avignon convent where ‘the Grate permits all Liberty of speech’ and one could ‘as soon put a Girl into the playhouse for Education as send her amongst them’.⁷⁰

The fact that the Peninsular War romances between officers and nuns have escaped historical attention is especially surprising given the long-standing popularity of the Portuguese nun and soldier as a literary pairing. *Five love letters from a nun to a cavalier*, translated into English in 1678, told the story of a nun who had been seduced and abandoned by a French officer serving in Portugal. The letters were extremely popular in Britain and were ‘almost universally assumed for two centuries’ to be true historical documents.⁷¹ There are other models from the age of Napoleon that are also illuminating. Ebenezer Elliott’s poem, *Night*, for example, published in 1818, highlighted martial

⁶⁶ Carter, *Men and the emergence of polite society*, pp. 195–6.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English society, 1650–1850: the emergence of separate spheres?* (London, 1998), pp. 68, 75.

⁶⁸ Cohen, “Manners”, p. 320.

⁶⁹ Julie Peakman, *Mighty lewd books: the development of pornography in eighteenth-century England* (New York, NY, 2003), esp. pp. 148–52, and Margaret Miles, *A complex delight: the secularization of the breast, 1650–1750* (Berkeley, CA, 2008), pp. 123–4. Michael Gamer, ‘Genres for the prosecution: pornography and the gothic’, *PMLA*, 114 (1999), pp. 1043–54, argues that, in the minds of some readers, gothic and pornographic genres blended together in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

⁷⁰ Lady Mary Wortley Montague, *The complete letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montague*, II, ed. Robert Halsband (Oxford, 1966), p. 420, to Lady Bute, Feb. 1749.

⁷¹ Warren Chernaik, ‘Unguarded hearts: transgression and epistolary form in Aphra Behn’s “Love-Letters” and the “Portuguese Letters”’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 97 (1998), pp. 13–33, at p. 14.

men's powers of attraction for cloistered maidens. *Night* depicted a Quebec nun deeply in love with the French General Montcalm. Montcalm, famously defeated by Wolfe in the battle that took both their lives in 1759, had supposedly captured Sister Miranion's heart with his personal attributes and military prowess: 'Loftier seem'd/His martial beauty, darker his large eye/With triumph fir'd'.⁷² In the fictitious account of their brief meeting where Miranion warned him of Wolfe's secret ambush, Montcalm was momentarily entranced by her beauty but quickly 'turned in thought away' to focus on military matters.⁷³ The poem ended with the heartbroken Miranion resting in 'a hapless virgin's modest grave'.⁷⁴

Veterans' accounts of convent visiting become considerably less jarring when viewed alongside such anecdotes. Peninsular officers' frank revelations of their convent flirting fit within contemporary notions of military men's treatment of nuns. When Robert Kerr Porter glibly told readers of 'having seen [nuns] left to their tears', he was only echoing the natural ending to virtually any convent seduction tale known to his readers.⁷⁵ Even in his private diary, Woodberry expressed no guilt or pity for apparently breaking one sister's heart. He had narrowed his attentions to one special young sister at the Olite monastery until he was diverted by two local maidens that he met walking. 'I shall give up the Nun', he decided, and stopped visiting.⁷⁶ When he tired of the village girls and returned to the convent, he found that his 'old favourite...would not on any account see me'. 'So much the better; I am very glad of it', Woodberry recorded in his diary.⁷⁷ This reaction is best understood if officers like Woodberry are seen as imagining themselves analogous to the French officer of *Five love letters* and similar tales. Toni Bowers has argued that the 'formal and thematic influences' of *Five love letters* 'can be traced in seduction stories for generations to come'. For tales set on the continent, Bowers argued, the heroine was now cast as 'a Roman Catholic novitiate – chaste, devout, and (of course) impossibly beautiful', in emulation of the Portuguese nun of *Five love letters*.⁷⁸ Interestingly, France was Portugal's ally in the famous tale. Thus, the male seducer of the Portuguese nun came from an army vowed to protect Portugal from her enemies. In the Peninsular War, Britain had taken on this role. The next section argues that these memoir accounts of convent visits replicate their authors' and readers' attitude to Portugal in certain key ways.

⁷² Ebenezer Elliott, *Night, a descriptive poem in four books* (London, 1818), p. 90.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁷⁵ Porter, *Letters*, p. 185.

⁷⁶ Diary of Lieutenant George Woodberry, 25 July 1813, Olite, NAM 1968-07-267, p. 189.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5 Sept. 1813, Olite, NAM 1968-07-267, pp. 228-9.

⁷⁸ Toni Bowers, 'Seduction narratives and tory experience in Augustan England', *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 40 (1999), pp. 128-54, at pp. 135-6.

III

Though no other historians have recognized it, the fact that these convent visits occurred only in Portugal and not in Spain is integral to their historical significance. The nuns in the memoirs symbolize a willing Portugal, grateful for British aid and attention. The condescension and indifference of the officers to nuns' vows or their fate after the men's departure was emblematic of Britain's blindness towards other Portuguese resentments.⁷⁹ The paragraphs that follow provide a mirror to aspects of Anna Klobucka's arguments on the impact of *The Portuguese nun* on Portuguese national identity. Where Klobucka argues that the seventeenth-century novel of a nun seduced and abandoned by a French soldier became a symbol for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Portugal's marginalization in Europe, this section will argue that British officers infused their accounts of convent flirtations with their own perception of British–Portuguese relations.⁸⁰ Such insights reinforce the theme of Britain as 'the chivalric protector of feminized Portugal' that Simon Bainbridge discerned in Peninsular era poetry.⁸¹

Nuns presented an enticing challenge because they were arguably the most inaccessible women in Europe. The counter-reformation council of Trent strictly cloistered female religious so that they could 'maintain their virginity intact as a gift for their celestial spouse'.⁸² Those who transgressed the rigid rules of enclosure could face severe penalties.⁸³ There were exceptions, such as the convents frequented by Portugal's John V and his noblemen in the first half of the eighteenth century, which, according to Marques, 'had become centers of pleasure and brothels for the aristocracy rather than religious houses'.⁸⁴ However, such practices had undoubtedly declined by the reign of the notoriously pious Maria I, who took the throne in 1777.

Thus it was that some officers in Portugal wishing to defy the strictures of monastic seclusion met with resistance. The British army was – if not outright oppressive – at least dismissive of Portuguese authorities. Lieutenant Woodberry's diary provides an illustrative example. His account makes it clear that British officers could be aggressive when Portuguese officials showed unease about British attentions to their cloistered women:

⁷⁹ Maria Clara Paulino, 'The "alien" European: British accounts of Portugal and the Portuguese, 1780–1850', in Martin Farr and Xavier Guégan, eds., *The British abroad since the eighteenth century*, 1: *Travelers and tourists* (Houndmills, 2013), p. 106, has observed a similar British blindness in travel accounts at the time, calling it 'startling' that almost no authors noted 'a problem with the British attitude toward their oldest ally'.

⁸⁰ Anna Klobucka, *The Portuguese nun: formation of a national myth* (Lewisburg, PA, 2000).

⁸¹ Bainbridge, *British poetry*, p. 158. Cohen, "'Manners'", pp. 322–5, connected the chivalric code with an inherent Britishness that contrasted sharply with the effeminacy of a Frenchified education that fostered polite models of masculinity.

⁸² Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: a history of convent life, 1450–1700* (Oxford, 2007), p. 43.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁸⁴ A. H. De Oliveira Marques, *History of Portugal*, 1 (New York, NY, 1972), p. 420.

I am most cursedly annoy'd, I went as usual to see my Nuns when the Old Hag of an Abbess, told me, she had orders from the Alcade to deny me admittance, and requested I would come there no more:—hang me, if I am not inclined to annoy the old lass for this:— I will too.⁸⁵

This is followed by a triumphant entry six days later, confirming that he 'got admittance again into the convent' and was permitted to make future visits 'as usual'. 'I spoke rather free upon it', Woodberry boasted, stating that he had forced the Alcade to 'withdr[a]w his order respecting the admittance of officers'.⁸⁶

Veterans' published accounts expressed a similar sense of frustration with what they considered unnecessary interference from ecclesiastical authorities. Walter Henry lamented that the authorities at the Santa Clara convent in Coimbra had become so anxious about the proliferation of 'heretics...in their immediate neighbourhood', they took extra precautions to prevent what Henry considered even 'the most harmless intercourse' by 'block[ing] up' the 'grille and turning box'.⁸⁷ After great success in Santarem, Lieutenant-Colonel Jonathan Leech described how he and his comrades 'tried in vain...to get a peep at the nuns' of the next monastery.⁸⁸ Nowhere, however, did they meet with more resistance than in Spain.

Spanish nunneries were impenetrable. According to Ronald Fraser, the Spanish patriot soldiers' lax observance of Catholic sexual rules prompted the church to become excessively vigilant of feminine modesty. Catholic officials believed that female chastity was vital to gaining the divine aid necessary to be victorious over the French infidels.⁸⁹ The convents were an obvious avenue by which to exert this control. Thus, though British officers made frequent visits to Portuguese sisters, they had considerably less luck in gaining an audience with their counterparts in Spain. An Army physician openly acknowledged this, noting that 'the nuns [of Portugal] are less ceremonious in receiving the visits of strangers' than those of Spain.⁹⁰ William Graham observed that the only contact he had with Spanish sisters occurred outside the convent walls, from whence the women had temporarily emerged to offer the soldiers food. Neither he nor his fellow officers were permitted in the gates and, as an added precaution, 'the young nuns...had been secured out of the way'.⁹¹ The officers of the 95th were similarly foiled in their desire to see the nuns of Coria 'who, we were assured, were young and handsome'.⁹²

⁸⁵ Diary of Lieutenant George Woodberry, 17 July 1813, Olite, NAM 1968-07-267, p. 183.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 23 July 1813, Olite, NAM 1968-07-267, p. 187.

⁸⁷ Henry, *Trifles*, p. 46.

⁸⁸ Leach, *Rough sketches*, pp. 78, 79.

⁸⁹ Ronald Fraser, *Napoleon's cursed war: Spanish popular resistance in the Peninsular War, 1808-1814* (London, 2008), pp. 320, 331.

⁹⁰ Neale, *Letters*, p. 230.

⁹¹ Graham, *Travels*, p. 44.

⁹² 'We undoubtedly had to thank the lady-abbess for their non-appearance at their prison gates', wrote Lieutenant-Colonel Jonathan Leach, *Rough sketches*, p. 79.

Spain, it was clear, was highly suspicious of officers' intentions and Catholic officials strictly controlled their access to convents.

It is important to note, however, that the Portuguese were nonetheless passionate in their Catholicism. The inquisition was in operation until 1820, wielding authority over all ranks of society, including the monarch. As L. M. E. Shaw has observed, 'the Portuguese maintained the crusading zeal advocated by the counter reformation [sic] longer than most other catholic countries'.⁹³ Men and women were so eager in their observance of the faith that they were known to attempt to force ailing Protestants to choose Catholicism on their deathbed, or kidnap Protestant children and convert them. This was a particular problem for the significant group of English merchants living in Portugal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who faced difficulties over burying their dead and lost children to traps laid by Portuguese aristocrats.⁹⁴

Indeed, the accessibility of Portuguese convents probably had more to do with the unique trading relationship Portugal had shared with the English than any laxity of religion in Portugal compared to Spain. The Methuen treaties of 1703 had guaranteed a market for Portuguese wines over their French competitors in England and granted British woollen cloth a similar monopoly in Portugal. This agreement lasted for over a century, replaced in 1810 by the Anglo-Portuguese treaty, which expanded British access to include Portugal's Brazilian colonies. Although Portugal benefited from Britain's military and economic assistance, it was an uneasy relationship and Portuguese resentment boiled over in the Revolution of 1820.⁹⁵ Many Portuguese historians have argued that the British relationship was highly oppressive.⁹⁶ English veterans' life writing gives little sense that they had any awareness of such a perspective, however.

Officers portrayed themselves as highly respectful of their Iberian hosts, and believed the Portuguese to be humbly grateful, unlike the Spanish.⁹⁷ Ensign John Aitchison observed this directly in 1809:

the civility we [the Third Regiment of Foot Guards] have received in Portugal has formed a contrast to the brutal coldness of the Spaniards towards us. We are

⁹³ L. M. E. Shaw, *The Anglo-Portuguese alliance and the English merchants in Portugal, 1654–1810* (Aldershot, 1998), p. 181.

⁹⁴ On the difficulties faced by English Protestants in Portugal, see Shaw, *The Anglo-Portuguese alliance*, pp. 170–84.

⁹⁵ For descriptions of Portugal's unease at its long alliance with Britain, see David Birmingham, *A concise history of Portugal* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 64, 96; Shaw, *The Anglo-Portuguese alliance*, especially pp. 187–98; A. H. De Oliveira Marques, *History of Portugal*, II (New York, NY, 1972), p. 1; and Paddy Griffith, 'Oman's *Peninsular War* today', in Paddy Griffith, ed., *A history of the Peninsular War*, IX: *Modern studies of the war in Spain and Portugal, 1808–1814* (Mechanicsburg, PA, 1999), p. 37.

⁹⁶ Shaw, *The Anglo-Portuguese alliance*, pp. 187–9.

⁹⁷ See also Daly, *The British soldier*, pp. 19, 103–8.

everywhere met with open arms and the Portuguese, sensible of their own weakness, are emulous of the appearance and conduct of our men.⁹⁸

In the minds of these officers, Portuguese hospitality extended to its convents, while Spain ungratefully refused access to its nuns, even after Wellington began ousting the French in 1812.

Indeed, Englishmen's memoir accounts of nuns show how oblivious they could be of their Portuguese allies' discomfort. Despite recording numerous occasions where they were refused access to convents, Peninsular veterans tend to depict the nuns as eager recipients of their attentions. An air of strut and swagger pervades officers' recollections of breaching convent walls. 'At Portalegre we used to frequent the grates of two nunneries, and all the sisters seemed flattered by our attentions', boasted Joseph Moyle Sherer.⁹⁹ Cavalry officer E. W. Buckham bragged that a convent in Braganza housing sisters of the poorer classes made 'no scruple to open the upper half of the door in the vestibule, where we are allowed to converse with the nuns under the surveillance of two or three of the more antient damsels of the order'.¹⁰⁰ John Kincaid accounted it his fellow Rifle Brigade officers' 'usual morning's amusement' to visit local convents. 'We had only to ring the bell, and request the pleasure of half-an-hour's conversation with one of the prettiest amongst them, to have it indulged', he attested.¹⁰¹ In Santarem, 'the mother abbess paid us great attention, and not only entertained us occasionally with fruits and sweetmeats, but allowed us daily to visit the convent and see the nuns', then-Lieutenant Anderson fondly recalled of his month there in 1809.¹⁰²

According to Peninsular veterans, these convent interchanges had mutual benefits. Officers felt that they provided welcome comfort to women cut off from what the men considered the rightful pleasures of secular society. In return for their warm reception by the convent of Santarem in 1809, which included long visits with the nuns accompanied by tables of sweetmeats, the officers of the 24th Regiment 'sent our band to play under the convent walls every other evening'.¹⁰³ Another regiment 'often' arranged for a military band to enter 'the outer court of the sacred prisons' of the nuns of Portalegre 'for their amusement'.¹⁰⁴ Lieutenant-Colonel Leach considered his 'notes or love-letters, written in villainously bad Portuguese', a valid exchange for the 'preserved fruits, nosegays, and all sorts of fine things' the sisters passed him through 'the *whirligig*' mechanism in the

⁹⁸ John Aitchison, *An ensign in the Peninsular War: the letters of John Aitchison*, ed. W. F. K. Thompson (London, 1981), p. 44, letter dated 13 June 1809.

⁹⁹ Sherer, *Recollections*, p. 135.

¹⁰⁰ Buckham, *Personal narrative*, p. 130.

¹⁰¹ Kincaid, *Random shots*, p. 224.

¹⁰² Anderson, *Recollections*, p. 31.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–2.

¹⁰⁴ Sherer, *Recollections*, p. 135.

convent visiting-room.¹⁰⁵ Joseph Moyle Sherer felt that his and his comrades' presence 'soothed' the 'wounded heart' of the tragic nun in Santa Clara. She was 'very fond of the English officers' he affirmed, 'in whose countenances... she...observed an expression of manly pity'.¹⁰⁶ The assistant-surgeon of the 3rd Regiment of Foot Guards observed that 'the nuns protruded their heads through the railings of the convent to welcome our arrival' when the regiment entered Oporto in 1809.¹⁰⁷ Commissariat Officer William Graham beheld a similar scene on the march through Palencia when 'the nuns, as we passed the convents, thrust their arms out of the lattice work, and waved white handkerchiefs for a welcome'.¹⁰⁸ Rather than seeing the nuns as patiently indulging the men's intrusion, these officers imagined them to be full of gratitude.

Wartime letters and diaries also spoke of the welcome entertainment soldiers provided to cloistered women. A dragoons captain presented 'a Beautiful Nun' with 'a tame Partridge' he had caught.¹⁰⁹ Another officer was said to have 'entertained the nuns very much...with his drollery – he took off dogs & cats, & the crowing of a cock, Turkeys, &c, and ended with Chaunting – and imitated old men with craked voices, and took off Female voices old & young'.¹¹⁰ After hearing that the convent had an order of silence among the women that lasted from eight o'clock in the evening until seven the next morning to allow for the contemplation of God, Lieutenant Woodberry instead suggested that God 'would be more pleased with them if they danced Fandangoes with the 18th Hussars than sitting mute for so many hours, during which their thoughts could be on no good'.¹¹¹ Both during and after the war, Peninsular officers displayed an unapologetic scepticism of these women's vows or spirituality and considered themselves a happy diversion for women denied the feminine joys of wifehood and motherhood. These Englishmen congratulated themselves for the temporary relief they provided to the most helpless of Portugal's women.

¹⁰⁵ Leach, *Rough sketches*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁶ Sherer, *Recollections*, p. 137.

¹⁰⁷ Assistant-Surgeon Good, quoted in Anthony Goodinge, *The Scots Guards (The 3rd Guards)* (London, 1969), p. 30.

¹⁰⁸ Graham, *Travels*, p. 45, entry dated 7 June 1813.

¹⁰⁹ He expected her to keep it as her pet and was delighted when she 'kissed it a Thousand Times' but appalled when she 'produced it *dead* [emphasis in original] at the Grate in about 5 Minutes'. William Bragge, *The letters of Captain William Bragge, Third (King's Own) Dragoons*, ed. S. A. C. Cassels (London, 1963), p. 46, letter to 'Capt. Adney, South Devon Regiment, Nottingham, England', dated 'Alpalhão, a dirty village one League distant from Niza, 21 April 1812'.

¹¹⁰ Godfrey Macdonald to wife Louisa, 14 Jan. 1813, Beveses near Vizen, HHC U DDBM/x2/2.

¹¹¹ Diary of Lieutenant George Woodberry, 5 Sept. 1813, Olite, NAM 1968-07-267, p. 229. See also 15 Aug. 1813, *ibid.*, p. 212, for an account where the officers are presented as having front-row seats 'near the Altar' to witness the 'grand' ceremony whereby a novice was invested in the order.

The desire to liberate nuns from inhumane confinement had roots far beyond gothic romance. From the early decades of the Reformation, zealous male Protestants dreamed of liberating nuns from what they perceived to be the unnatural life of the convent.¹¹² In 1687, Thomas Penson remarked upon a beautiful English nun he had met in a convent in Antwerp, whom he likened to ‘being buried alive’ because she was ‘immured within the confines of these walls’.¹¹³ Distaste for the cloistered state took on new life with the Enlightenment focus on nature and women’s natural roles.¹¹⁴ Thomas Marriott’s treatise for women, published in 1759 with subsequent editions in 1760 and 1775, lamented the ‘unnat’ral Vows’, that kept maidens in a ‘barren’ existence, deprived of the chance to ‘be happy, with a happy Spouse’ and children.¹¹⁵ Eighteenth-century travel writers tended to the view that cloistering young women was an unnatural restraint that would lead them to wilder transgressions.¹¹⁶ Men like Alexander Drummond, who published an account in 1754 of a nun’s investiture witnessed during his grand tour of Italy, considered the monastic life to ‘defraud’ women ‘of their liberty, and those innocent joys for which they are so well adapted by nature’.¹¹⁷

However, there is little evidence that such Enlightenment attitudes toward nuns existed among military men until the Peninsular era. It was only after British officers entered the war in Portugal and Spain that the descriptions of military interaction with nuns changed. There are remarkably few references to nuns in British soldiers’ writing before the Peninsular War.¹¹⁸ While the general lack of military memoirs and letters for the earlier period might help

¹¹² See, for example, Evangelisti, *Nuns*, pp. 33, 38; McNamara, *Sisters in arms*, pp. 420–2; and Stephen Ozment, *Protestants: birth of a revolution* (New York, NY, 1993), pp. 154–5.

¹¹³ T. Penson, *Penson’s short progress into Holland, Flanders and France, 1687*, quoted in Liesbeth Corens, ‘Catholic nuns and English identities. [sic] English Protestant travellers on the English convents in the Low Countries, 1660–1730’, *Recusant History*, 30 (2011), pp. 441–59, at p. 447. Corens found Englishmen’s overall attitude to their cloistered countrywomen to be respectful and positive.

¹¹⁴ McNamara, *Sisters in arms*, p. 547.

¹¹⁵ Thomas Marriott, *Female conduct: being an essay on the art of pleasing: to be practiced by the fair sex, before, and after marriage...* (London, 1759), p. 204.

¹¹⁶ Rosemary Sweet, *Cities and the grand tour: the British in Italy, c. 1690–1820* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 41–2, and Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and guilt on the grand tour: travel writing and imaginative geography, 1600–1830* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 91–2.

¹¹⁷ Alexander Drummond, *Travels through different cities of Germany, Italy, Greece, and several parts of Asia...* (London, 1754), p. 75.

¹¹⁸ Major Richard Davenport left several hints of nuns’ attractions in his letters to his brother during the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War, but his interest was purely sexual. See W. O. II C. W. Frearson, ed., ‘“To Mr Davenport” being letters of Major Richard Davenport (1719–1760) to his brother during service in the 4th Troop of Horse Guards and 10th Dragoons, 1742–1760’ (London, 1968), pp. 16, 76–7, letters dated Ghent, 3 Jan. 1743, and Bramsche, 8 Feb. 1760. *Rivington’s New York Gazetteer*, 5 May 1774, contains the lyrics to *Hot Stuff*, a popular ballad reputed to have been written by a sergeant while battling the French in North America during the Seven Years War. The final verse promises that ‘each soldier shall enter the convent in buff’ and give the nuns ‘hot stuff’.

to explain this paucity of material on soldiers and nuns, the evidence that is available suggests that nuns did not become tragic figures to British officers until the Peninsular era. The gothic romantic undertones outlined in the first section offer part of the explanation, but the army's vaunted religious tolerance also helps to explain why memoirists wrote cheerfully of abandoning their convent sweethearts.

At least one author used the treatment of nuns as a positive contrast between the tolerant British and the godless French:

Our general orders were carefully to avoid everything that might shock the superstitious prejudices of the people but they [the French] spared nothing, and we were told...that they took with them several Portuguese women who were supposed to have been forcibly and against their wills taken out of some of the nunneries with which the country abounds. Had those who saw them walking beside the French soldiers, weeping as they went along, possessed force in any degree comparable to the hatred and rage which the scene excited, few indeed of that army would have been left to relate the history of the rest.¹¹⁹

Surgeon Walter Henry considered it 'a high compliment to the character and discipline of the British Army' that the women forced to abandon the convents of the Bastan valley were shown 'great kindness, tenderness and inviolable respect' on their retreat from the front. 'The soldiers carried their little bundles and helped them along', Henry recalled, 'and it was pleasing to observe the unsuspecting confidence with which many of these old ladies trusted themselves and their portable property to the protection of our rough grenadiers'.¹²⁰ Ensign John Aitchison noted that the French respected 'neither age nor sex' in inflicting cruelties on Portuguese civilians.¹²¹ British officers considered their 'superior position' to be particularly visible in the fact that they did not 'tyrannize...over women but treated them with humanity', Catriona Kennedy has observed.¹²²

Wellington 'knew that by shewing respect to the religious institutions of other countries, he best secured for himself those feelings which are only to be substantially acquired by deference to [alternative] customs', Andrew Leith Hay

¹¹⁹ John Stevenson, *A soldier in time of war; or, the military life of Mr. John Stevenson: of the executive committee of the new British & foreign temperance society...twenty-one years in the British Foot Guards...* (London, 1841), pp. 132–3.

¹²⁰ Henry, *Trifles*, p. 117.

¹²¹ Aitchison, *An ensign in the Peninsular War*, p. 44, letter dated 13 June 1809.

¹²² Kennedy, 'John Bull into battle', pp. 140–1. See also Kennedy, *Narratives*, pp. 103–4. Hughes, *Forging Napoleon's Grand Armée*, pp. 127–9, 134, suggests that the French army encouraged rape in this period, but he also notes (pp. 182–3) that Napoleon's officers stopped their own troops from ravaging women during the capture of Löbeck, conduct similar to that of the British officers at Bajadoz described above. Hughes's strongest example of the rapist culture of Napoleon's army comes from a rape account in a French ballad, but there are British examples that sound like rape as well. See, for example, 'The Soldier's Cloak' (Nottingham: Burbage and Stretton, 1797–1807), Bodleian Library, Harding B 12 (162).

proudly averred of his general.¹²³ Scholars of the period have adequately demonstrated that a wide variety of attitudes prevailed toward Catholics in Britain.¹²⁴ The army was arguably at the more tolerant end of the spectrum. Michael Snape found evidence of Catholics admitted into the ranks ‘as early as the 1740s’, and ‘Catholic gentlemen could obtain commissions by’ the start of the American revolutionary war by colluding with army officials in a convenient ‘subterfuge’.¹²⁵ The religious plurality of the army’s composition was accentuated by many men’s open apathy to spiritual matters.¹²⁶ That is not to say that there were no anti-papist remarks from Peninsular veterans, but rather that these comments cannot singly explain memoirists’ behaviour towards nuns. Colonel M. Sherer accorded it a ‘blessing’ of Napoleon’s invasions that ‘ecclesiastical government, monastic pride, and the withering tyranny of the priesthood, have shrunk before them’.¹²⁷ At the same time, he and other men who wrote of romantic dalliances with nuns exhibited idle curiosity for Catholic rites and rituals.

Memoirs paid tribute to the sisters’ spirituality and the beauty of their devotional practices. Rifle Brigade officer John Kincaid praised the inherent goodness of these devout Catholic women, describing them as ‘overflowing with the milk of human kindness’.¹²⁸ Despite his anti-Catholic views, Colonel Sherer assiduously attended the Sunday service at the convent of the Estrella when he was stationed there, commenting particularly on ‘the soft melodious voices of some of these nuns, as they chant the responses, or sing the

¹²³ Andrew Leith Hay, *A narrative of the Peninsular War* (4th edn, London, 1850), pp. 236–7.

¹²⁴ See, for example, Purves, *The gothic and Catholicism*; Jane Stabler, ‘Devotion and diversion: early nineteenth-century British women travelers in Italy and the Catholic church’, in Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler, eds., *Unfolding the south: nineteenth-century British women writers and artists in Italy* (Manchester, 2003), pp. 15–34; and the introduction by Andrew Monnickendam in Christian Isobel Johnstone, *Clan-Albin: a national tale*, ed. Andrew Monnickendam (Glasgow, 2003), pp. xviii–ix, xiv–xv. Emma Major, *Madam Britannia: women, church and nation, 1712–1812* (Oxford, 2012), p. 125, argues that there was some admiration for nuns, and ‘the idea of the Church of England as a *via media* between Roman Catholicism and dissenting Protestantism gained particular strength during the eighteenth century’.

¹²⁵ Michael Snape, *The redcoat and religion: the forgotten history of the British soldier from the age of Marlborough to the eve of the First World War* (London, 2005), pp. 10–11, 123. Snape also argued (pp. 9–12, 159–64) that Catholicism was widely tolerated in the British army in this period; pp. 165–7 note the bond shared faith wrought between Catholic soldiers and the Portuguese and Spanish allies.

¹²⁶ See, for example, Snape, *The redcoat and religion*, pp. 80–1, and Hurl-Eamon, *Marriage and the British army*, p. 149.

¹²⁷ Sherer, *Recollections*, p. 31. For more anti-papist comments, see Graham, *Travels*, pp. 54, 87, and Boutflower, *Journal*, pp. 38–9.

¹²⁸ Kincaid, *Random shots*, p. 225. Another volume of his memoirs relates a story where some refugee nuns generously shared their cornbread with Kincaid when he was suffering from hunger. He gave them a dollar to share and a kiss apiece, remarking upon the fact that they were more reluctant to receive the money than the kiss, which each permitted ‘as an unusual favour’. Captain John Kincaid, *Adventures in the rifle brigade in the Peninsula, France, and the Netherlands, from 1809–1815* (London, 1830), p. 63.

anthem', and noting their power to 'touch the very soul'.¹²⁹ These sentiments reflect the gothic distaste for Enlightenment rationalism and thirst for the supernatural or sacred observed by many scholars of the genre.¹³⁰ Through it all, however, most authors continued to believe that these women would rather have been freed from their vows. They considered themselves to be nuns' champions, tantalizing symbols of a more fulfilling life among the laity, hampered by their promise to bow to the ecclesiastical dictates of their hosts. Colonel Porter recorded a Portuguese laywoman assuring some nuns that 'she had seen more charity exercised by the heretics [in the British army] than she had ever met with in any religious assembly that Portugal produced'. Porter stated his suspicion that the sisters' 'hearts whispered a warm assent to her arguments'.¹³¹ Memoirists saw themselves as enlightened and tolerant, romancing willing nuns while keeping a weather eye for anything that would too blatantly violate their hosts' religion.

IV

In depicting soldiers' fascination with nuns, art imitated life, and life-writing, in turn, was altered and enhanced by these artistic representations. British officers, titillated by the innocence and beauty of lovelorn nuns in prose, poetry, and paintings, sought out real-life heroines during their time away from the battlefields of the Peninsular War. The increased popularity of gothic romances drew these British officers to Iberian convents, and their newfound self-perception as men of sensibility heightened their interest in the pretty young women behind the grille. Writers' identity as Britons played a role as well. In their minds, a grateful Portugal opened its convents as a way of recognizing British aid, and this gratitude was repaid tenfold by the entertainments officers provided to the nuns within.

This article has offered a closer look at veterans' accounts of these flirtations to demonstrate the complexity of their portrayal. British officers could celebrate their sensibility and respect for faith without seeing the discrepancy. They considered themselves to be a welcome respite for cloistered women, yet simultaneously tolerant of the strictures of Portuguese Catholicism. This apparent contradiction can only be understood by reading memoirs as literary texts authored by men steeped in portrayals of nuns in romantic, gothic, erotic, and travel literature. The British officer who swooped in and momentarily rescued the Portuguese nun from the tedium of her religious seclusion resonated with memoirists' sense of Britain's kind treatment of its lesser Portuguese ally. These accounts of convent flirtations reveal military authors

¹²⁹ Sherer, *Recollections*, p. 33.

¹³⁰ See, for example, Howard, *Reading gothic fiction*, p. 26; Jerrold E. Hogle, 'Introduction: the gothic in western culture', in Jerrold E. Hogle, ed., *The Cambridge companion to gothic fiction* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 14–16; Hoeveler, *Gothic feminism*, pp. 64–5.

¹³¹ Porter, *Letters*, p. 232.

who inadvertently placed themselves in the role of the heartless philanderer for posterity, despite their desire to portray the chivalrous rescuer. The prevalence of these seduction tales in published memoirs is a testament to readers' appetites as well, and thus gives insights far beyond the history of officers in the Peninsular War. It suggests that the broader public in this era shared these authors' sense that chivalric masculinity and British–Portuguese relations were not tarnished when British officers violated the rules of the cloister.