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## The Little Hours

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# The Little Hours

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *The Little Hours* (2017), directed by Jeff Baena.

*The Little Hours*, an adaptation from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, might principally attract attention for its comedic qualities, and with a cast from *Saturday Night Live* (Molly Shannon and Fred Armisen), *Parks and Recreation* (Aubrey Plaza), plus John C. Reilly, that's understandable. This story of wayward nuns and priests behaving somewhat like the farmyard animals that they tend to really is quite funny. Yet the film is successful not because we need to laugh, but because of the way it uses what is familiar to give something much more than laughter — in this case insight into perhaps a lesser known and underappreciated understanding of corruption in religion.

What we are all familiar with, at least in general terms, is Boccaccio's criticism of the medieval church, his satirizing of drunken, randy priests and nuns (surely the *Decameron* is ground zero for the term *randy*), selfishness, greed, theft, bribery, and irreverence. Many of the stories in the book reveal the corruption of the Church vividly, and the term corruption is what's key here, both with regard to the familiar that we laugh at in *The Little Hours*, and the insight that emerges, if we allow our sense of that crucial word to be sufficiently altered.

The film is set in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and opens with a young nun pulling a hesitant donkey through the forest, and then to a cloistered convent and church. Chanting is in the score, and before long we'll see the nuns in a religious service, one of the "little hours" that punctuate the day with ritual devotion to God. And yet that separate churchly order is soon violated when two of the nuns, sisters Fernanda (Plaza) and Ginevra (Kate Micucci) see the convent caretaker glancing at them and curse him out like sailors. There's good reason the cliché isn't "curse like nuns," and that's the humor of the scene: their unbridled, full throated, endless, impassioned profanity. As a viewer of the film, it's discordant and we might be tempted to see *this* as the corruption of the Church: the ruin of sanctity due to foul-mouthed nuns. Alas, the state of the Church. And when Father

Tommaso (Reilly) gets drunk on communion wine we might again think it's the corruption of the body of the Church.

But the film is better than simply working the humor of curses and drunkenness in a seemingly sacred setting, satirizing the decline of religion. And, oddly, Nietzsche might be our best guide as to why that is. Five hundred years after Boccaccio, the German philosopher praised corruption for the eruption of feelings that become possible when we are not bound within a "common faith" and order. "Innumerable private passions" become possible and the individual "spends [their energies] lavishly," he writes. In a memorable image, Nietzsche says that "The times of corruption are the seasons when the apples fall from the tree."<sup>1</sup> *The Little Hours* follows three little apples falling from the tree and the exuberance of their lavish (largely female) private passions is exhilarating for the life they give them and us.

To enable us to see how far they eventually fall, the film gives each of the sisters a role in everyday convent life: Sister Fernanda cares for the donkey, and does the laundry; Sister Ginevra does the laundry, too, but also nervously spies on the other nuns for the Mother Superior, Sister Marea (Shannon); and Sister Alessandra (Alison Brie) is maybe better off – her father donates to the convent, and so she spends her time in a slightly more spacious bedroom, practicing her needlepoint and gazing out the window while imagining a happier future. A future, by the way, that may never come true due to the failure of her father to produce a dowry.

Together they do their chores and fulfill their other responsibilities as sisters of faith, and what is familiar to us, again, is the comedy of their antics and bad behavior as they operate in the churchly world. The list of their sins grows as the film goes on, as does the hilarity and severity of them. There's a point where we don't think they could possibly get worse after all three sisters have found a way to sleep with the groundskeeper, Massetto (Dave Franco). But they exceed even

that when Sister Fernanda ties poor Massetto up and drags him at knifepoint into the woods at night to be lain on the altar of sacrifice for her witch cult.

But where the real insight of the film lies, and what is less obvious than broad comedy, are the “innumerable private passions” of the nuns that are expressed through these sins which are far from being the sort of corruption that rots the core. With the progression of the film, as each of the sisters rolls farther from the churchly tree, we see more and more life, unrestrained life, exuberant life, and we might be reminded of William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* where he equates religions with “life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life.”<sup>2</sup> Crucially the film seems in sympathy with the women’s disorderly (and, James would say, religious) passion.

Sister Fernanda, who was seen in the opening sequence leading an escaped donkey back to the convent through the woods, isn’t, it turns out, returning that which strays. She is astray with the beast. Later she caresses and combs the donkey in a way that’s hard not to see as sensual, and then we discover that she has staged the donkey’s escape to enable her rendezvous with witches whose fire-centered ritual dance has far more passion than the rote and soulless rituals led by Father Tomasso. She uses a single drop of poisonous belladonna to entice and bewitch the reluctant Massetto into bed. In a different film, it’s a reckless assault, evidence of the criminals hidden within the cloister. But in this film, it’s evidence of the complicity of nature and desire, a different religious ritual, as Nietzsche would put it, “lavishly spent” in the service of greater life.

Sister Alessandra is in the convent awaiting a husband, and when her wealthy family’s prospects dim, she’s dismayed that she will wither like the old nun who teaches her needlepoint. But she uses that careful art to seduce Massetto, and does it with the old nun in the same room. It is broad comedy, but it is also how these women subvert the little hours to live through their innumerable passions.

Ginevra is initially the least rebellious of the group, yet when she turns her talent for spying for the Mother Superior to her own benefit, she is able to experience the belladonna-fueled, unrestrained sexual pleasure that Sisters Fernanda and Alessandra have seized upon.

Though the nuns are clear sinners, the film sees them more as Nietzsche would. “Those who reverence the old religion [would] complain of corruption,”<sup>3</sup> he wrote, and the bishop (Armisen) dutifully details a vivid list of sins, “abusive language, lustfulness, homosexuality, apostasy, heresy, revelings, eating blood” – their sins make their earlier confession (“I took a turnip”) as blandly vegetative as their lives were when they were confined in the old religion. But Bishop Bartolomeo pronounces a mild penance that belies his mock outrage (“do you think I’ve even written down eating blood before?!”). For it’s a film that celebrates a corruption that creates a “quantity and quality of expended energy that is greater than ever,” in Nietzsche’s words. And as viewers of this film we say, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1974), pp. 96-98.

<sup>2</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 399.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, p. 96.