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communities. This chapter reveals continuities across time in the ways in which Sainte-Croix's nuns critiqued their abbesses and the methods they used to attempt to expel an abbess from office.

In her conclusion, Edwards connects her study of Sainte-Croix to broader themes within feminist historical inquiry. She argues that Sainte-Croix was not as exceptional as some assume and that other abbeys may well have followed its example. This book serves as a valuable example of the benefits of studying a single abbey across a *longue durée* to identify broader patterns. It also reminds us not to take misogynists at their word and to continue to seek examples of women's authority in the later Middle Ages. Working across scholarly discourses and media, Edwards offers a more capacious history of a convent and its abbesses than has generally been achieved and contextualizes this narrative within medieval French history as well as within ongoing conversations in feminist medieval studies. Readers interested in women religious and gender in the Middle Ages from multiple disciplines will find a great deal of value in this well-researched and compelling account of abbesses' authority.

Alexandra Verini

Ashoka University

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Nuns' Priests' Tales: Men and Salvation in Medieval Women's Monastic Life, by Fiona J. Griffiths. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. Pp. 349. ISBN: 9780812249750.

Fiona J. Griffiths has published a well-researched analysis of relationships between nuns and clerics in which she both challenges and builds upon widely accepted scholarship on gender relations in the early and high medieval periods. By examining an understudied group, nuns' priests, she articulates several important new arguments. Griffiths goes beyond the work of scholars like C. Stephen Jaeger, Gerald Bond, Constant Mews, and Jo Ann McNamara, among others, to show that strong bonds between religious men and women were not

exceptional or restricted to individual experiences.³ Griffiths writes, “ordinary priests, who served ordinary nuns, could see in these women a gendered spiritual power from which they felt they could benefit” (178). She asserts that, all too often, scholars have centered the misogyny of the Middle Ages to the detriment of studying these symbiotic relationships between the sexes.

Griffiths asserts that scholars have ignored biblical and early Christian models upon which religious men drew to shape their relationships with nuns. Griffiths’s study makes a significant and in-depth contribution to such inquiry through her careful analysis of language, and it is obvious that she meticulously combed through an exhaustive number of primary documents ranging from saints’ *Lives*, to letters, to manuscript illuminations and liturgical textiles.

She argues for the importance of pious apostolic and early Christian models, like John the Evangelist and Jerome, as instruments by which nuns’ priests could defend their ministry to women against charges of impropriety and hold up as exemplars of religious commitment. Griffiths makes an especially convincing case when she concludes that Jerome served as the model of the persecuted male spiritual companion of women who was cited as justification for religious men’s controversial relationships with nuns. These interactions were an act of *imitatio Christi* and filled a spiritual need *for men*. She provides extensive evidence to prove that clerics, such as Goscelin of St. Bertin, Christina of Markyate’s hagiographer, and Peter Abelard, consistently acknowledged Jerome as a model for men’s interactions with women.

3 Gerald Bond, *The Loving Subject: Desire, Eloquence, and Power in Romanesque France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Jo Ann McNamara, “The Herrenfrage: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050–1150,” in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster, Clare A. Lees, and Jo Ann McNamara (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

According to early Christian practice religious individuals eschewed familial bonds. Yet this study posits that during the Middle Ages bonds of kinship served to legitimize spiritual relations between men and women, particularly between siblings. Brothers, along with other male relatives, provided spiritual care for women while simultaneously creating a new mechanism by which they strove for spiritual perfection. Griffiths notes, for instance, that St. Augustine shunned his female relatives during his life; yet his bond with his mother, Monica, was reinterpreted in the Middle Ages so that clerics viewed it positively. However, any association with women, even kinship connections, might lead to men's sexual corruption, a concern backed by the biblical story of Tamar and Amnon.

Griffith's chapter on the intercessory power of women's prayer is less revelatory than other chapters. For instance, she analyzes the initial in the St. Albans Psalter depicting Christina of Markyate as an intermediary between Abbot Geoffrey (and his monks) and God. This observation has been noted before;⁴ however, its inclusion in Griffiths's study lends support to her assertion that men expected spiritual gains via their relationships with nuns, and she considers the Christina initial alongside comparative evidence, such as Peter Abelard's epistolary request for female prayers. Although religious men asked other men for prayers, too, the gendered language that men invoked in their requests addressed to women stands out because of its emphasis on female sexuality. Because they identified nuns as the chaste brides of Christ, religious men were able to benefit spiritually because they acted as Christ's *paranymphus*, or bridesman.

One of the most fascinating and unique chapters of the book is Griffiths's conclusion, in which she analyzes spiritual bonds between the sexes from the perspective of women. Here she argues that nuns believed men owed them spiritual service, citing evidence like one of Heloise's letters to Abelard in which she drew on biblical precedent for male support. Griffiths further proves that nuns actively exercised

⁴ <https://www.albani-psalter.de/stalbanspsalter/english/essays/initials.shtml#christina>. See also Jane Geddes, "The St. Albans Psalter: The Abbot and the anchoress," in *Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser (New York: Routledge, 2004).

the spiritual authority that priests believed they wielded through the creation and donation of liturgical textiles. Clerics recognized women's spiritual presence at the altar via textiles and other gifts. For example, Griffiths cites Ivo of Chartres's letter to Matilda of England in which he thanked her for bells that engendered thoughts of the queen when they rang during Mass. Thus women's claims of spiritual authority were conscious, public, and not uncommon. Like the priests who sought their association, they were aware of biblical models that justified their spiritual authority. Women carved out space for themselves in areas where they were otherwise excluded and reminded priests of female power's significance in their own spiritual journeys. This topic is one worthy of further research.

Griffiths makes a strong case that priests acting in the service of women believed their relationships with nuns helped them gain access to the divine, specifically because of the unique spiritual power that women held. Griffiths has crafted a study greater in scope than much previous work on the subject of male–female spiritual relationships. Her monograph is one of exceptional breadth that does not sacrifice depth, proving these mutually beneficial relations between priests and nuns were common. She has made a significant contribution to the study of medieval gender relations, masculinity, and spirituality. Positive spiritual relations shared by clerics and nuns should not be overshadowed by the misogyny of the medieval period.

Holle Canatella

Lock Haven University

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