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Fiona J. Griffiths's study sheds light on the complexity of gendered identities in the Middle Ages by elucidating the symbiotic relationship between religious men and women. It considers how priests, who were involved in the pastoral care of nuns (*cura monialium*), understood themselves and the women they served. The chronological emphasis is on the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but there is significant treatment of the late antique and the early Middle Ages, and a few references to the late Middle Ages. Geographically the study concentrates mainly on Germany, France and England.

Chapter 1 establishes that medieval monasticism required that priests minister to nuns and canonesses, yet sources that reveal the quotidian interactions between these men and women are scant. Griffiths argues, however, that well documented men like Peter Abelard (d. 1142) – priest to Heloise (d. 1164) and her nuns at the Paraclete — and Guibert of Gembloux (d. 1214) — priest to Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179) and the sisters of Disibodenberg-Rupertsberg — are 'more representative than scholars allow' (p. 36); their attitudes toward their female wards point to more widespread trends that become apparent when we look at their self-expression within the larger monastic tradition.

Griffiths examines biblical exegesis in Chapter 2 and patristic sources in Chapter 3 that treat male/female religious exchange. For example, she shows that John 19:26–27, which portrays the moment at the Crucifixion when Jesus commended his mother Mary and his disciple John to each another, was interpreted by some exegetes as a command by Jesus for chaste interaction and mutual obligation between the sexes. Such exegetical themes were incorporated into the works and lives of medieval monastic leaders like Abelard and Robert of Arbrissel (d. 1116). Abelard evoked exegetical authorities that condoned chaste interaction between the sexes to dispel any suspicions regarding his position as priest to his one-time lover and wife Heloise. Griffiths shows that Jerome (d. 420), who by the central Middle Ages had become a symbol of chasteness and a promoter of female learning, was appropriated by nuns' priests as a significant role model. Abelard declared himself a second Jerome. The Benedictine writer Hugh of Fleury (d. 1135) defended his dedication of one of his works to a woman by referencing Jerome who had 'often honoured holy Paula and her daughter Eustochium with many writings' (p. 97).

Chapter 4 assesses attitudes regarding spiritual intimacy and kinship. Examples include: Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394) and his sister Macrina; Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) and his mother Monica; Benedict of Nursia (d. 547) and his sister Scholastica; Leander of Seville (d. 600) and his sister Florentina; and the visionary nun Elisabeth of Schönau (d. 1164) and her brother and priest Ekbert. These pairings are significant illustrations of familial interaction within religious life, but more discussion of the nature of kinship in relation to these examples, which are diverse in their chronological and geographical range, would have clarified their implications. Griffiths, nevertheless, establishes that kinship within twelfth-century monastic life in Europe allowed for interaction between the sexes relatively free from suspicion, where men underlined the spiritual superiority of their female relatives.

Chapter 5 further considers this spiritual superiority of female religious. Griffiths examines textual and visual evidence that portrays priests' perception of nuns as spiritually and physically close to the divine through the intercessory power of prayer. The common motif of nuns as brides of Christ who spoke directly to their heavenly husband was a powerful belief held by some priests. Abelard, for example, believed in this celestial proximity, commending his soul to the prayers of the Paraclete nuns. Griffiths discusses men's strong sense that women were intimate with Christ in her careful analysis of the twelfth-century St Albans Psalter. [One of illustrations in This-this](#) codex depicts a nun, who may possibly be Christina of Markyate, praying for the Benedictine monks of St Albans as Christ's hand and hers physically touch.

The concluding chapter concentrates on how nuns perceived their relationship with priests. Nuns and also secular women saw priests as intermediaries between themselves and the sacraments. This is evident, for example, in the way women sometimes embroidered priests' fine liturgical vestments with images of female saints, virgin martyrs, and nuns. Griffiths speculates that when priests wore these liturgical vestments it allowed women to approach the altar symbolically as the priest celebrated the Mass, something denied to women in practice.

This intimate interaction between nun and priest articulates the book's main argument: there was a complex relationship between religious men and women that often entailed gendered exclusivity but not necessarily misogyny. On the contrary, nuns' priests were often enthusiastic champions of female spiritual expression. Griffiths ultimately shows that affirmative portrayals of women in the medieval world are not as rare as first assumed.

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