
H-France Review Vol. 18 (September 2018), No. 193

Fiona J. Griffiths, *Nuns' Priests' Tales: Men and Salvation in Medieval Women's Monastic Life*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. x + 349 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4975-0.

Review by John W. Coakley, New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw a considerable expansion of women's monasticism, and therefore an increase in the number of men who provided the women pastoral care and other services. As Fiona Griffiths writes, those men--whom, borrowing a later phrase from Chaucer, she calls "nuns' priests"--must have had a conspicuous presence in the monastic world of the time. But their presence in the sources that have survived is not conspicuous. "The emphasis that medieval observers place on women's attraction to the religious life...was not matched by a parallel or positive discussion of the priests" who worked among them, and when such nuns' priests are described in the sources, it is often as "objects of derision and opprobrium" (p. 9). The reticence and negativity about these men reflects a male monastic anxiety about the dangers of interaction with women that long pre-dated this period, but which was magnified by the very increase in the need for the men's services and the spirit of the opposition to clerical marriage that was a major thrust of the great reform movement of those years. Accordingly, modern scholars, many of them influenced by the formative work of Herbert Grundmann,^[1] pictured the men as providing those services only reluctantly. (And Griffiths devotes a chapter to the fact that not a few of the figures we do know about who were nuns' priests were siblings, or otherwise kinsmen, of a woman they served, and thus pointedly not suspect of ulterior motives.) Griffiths here aims to paint, by contrast, a more positive portrait of the nun's priest, showing that men could also display a strong sense of the value and importance of their role as providers of care for women, as well as a willing commitment to their mutual sharing of the monastic life.

Given the paucity of sources in the period in question that directly describe the work of the nuns' priest, Griffiths builds her portrait from sources that for the most part witness to it only indirectly. What she provides is not so much a description of what such a man actually did, but rather an exploration of how he thought about women and about his relationship with them, and in this sense it is an exploration of his own inner world. Some of her sources are iconographic, such as images from the so-called Guta-Sintram codex and the St. Albans Psalter (both from the mid-twelfth century), which represent nuns and priests in relation to each other. But her principal sources are literary: letters, sermons, and treatises by well-known men who in fact served as nuns' priests--even if in some cases it might not occur to us at first to

characterize them mainly as such--in which they address and/or reflect on women. Among these were the theologian Peter Abelard, whose letters to his wife Heloise and sermons to her nuns at the monastery of the Paraclete show him thinking deeply about the spiritual life of women and his relationship to them; the monastic reformer Guibert of Gembloux, who wrote letters defending his cohabitation with nuns during the three years he spent at the monastery of Rupertsberg as literary assistant to Hildegard of Bingen; and three men, Robert of Arbrissel, Gilbert of Sempringham, and Norbert of Xanten, who famously founded monastic houses that included women as well as men.

Fundamental to these men's discourse about women and the care of women, as Griffiths presents it, were biblical themes and images which validated that care or provided models for it and which, through being frequently invoked, constituted a kind of affirmative "vocabulary" (p. 38) for treating the subject. Above all these came from the New Testament witnesses to women's status as close friends of Jesus, and to their presence at the foot of the Cross, and to their role as the first witnesses and proclaimers of the Resurrection. Particularly important was the image of the crucified Jesus's commendation of his mother to the disciple John, who accordingly stood as exemplar for the men's own attentiveness to women. (Griffiths, incidentally, associates this role with the epithet "friend of the bridegroom," but does not mention that in the New Testament that phrase is applied not to the disciple John but to John the Baptist [John 3:29]: were these figures then conflated?). Alongside the biblical figures, the fourth-century church father Jerome and the high-bred women who became his disciples and colleagues in the ascetic and scholarly life--Hedibia and Algasia from Gaul, Marcella and Paula from Rome, and Paula's daughters Eustochium and Blesilla--also had a large place in the nuns' priests' discourse. They provided examples not just of the value of women or the commitment of men, as in the New Testament cases, but of the terms and tenor of their interaction, as witnessed especially by Jerome's correspondence. And one particular notion found in Jerome began to take on special importance in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, namely the idea that, as Abelard pointed out in a sermon to nuns, citing Jerome, only a woman could be a "bride of Christ" and this fact made her into a being by definition superior to himself, and made him to be, by implication, but her servant (p. 105).

If overall the Bible and Jerome provided the men a language for an appreciative conception of the value of women and of their own role in relation to them, the "bridal metaphor," as Griffiths terms it, was central to their sense of benefit they saw for themselves in that role. That benefit can be simply stated: it consisted in access to God, which the men acquired through what they saw as the women's privileged and gender-specific power of intercession. Women, at any rate, appeared to these men to be by nature intercessors--a point on which Abelard elaborated in one of his letters to Heloise, citing a variety of biblical and historical examples as well as the everyday reality that wives pray for their husbands. As for the route that connected this general perception to the potent "bridal metaphor," (p. 153) Griffiths, making reference to the recent work of Dyan Elliot,^[2] traces the metaphor itself to the third-century church father Tertullian, who "promoted the idea that consecrated virginity constituted a form of spiritual marriage" with the effect that female virgins were bound "to their sexed bodies" and accordingly to "a firmly gendered hierarchy" such that the prayers that they offered had all the effective power of "the intercession of a wife with her husband" (pp. 153-54). This logic seems to have had particularly strong appeal in Griffiths' period--she cites among others Abelard again, and Anselm of Canterbury's biographer Eadmer--and, beyond explicit references, it seems to have functioned implicitly in the nuns' priests' construction of their world to fuel their

very commitment to their task, defining their responsibilities *to* the women, as a “counter payment” (p. 167) for their prayers. Abelard, for instance, in his sermon 30 (an excerpt of which Griffiths includes in an appendix) adduced, in support of this understanding of the nuns’ priests’ role, Jesus’s parable of the property manager who used the resources of his position to gain “friends” who could help him when those resources would be no longer available to him (Luke 16:1-13).

Such is Griffiths’ picture of the nuns’ priest. To put that picture in perspective, I point now to two methodological moves that she has made in constructing it. These moves constitute responses to, respectively, two problems that are familiar to any historian of religious life but have been particularly pressing for students of medieval monastic movements.

One of these problems regards the propriety of using texts by extraordinary or, as Griffiths puts it here, “exceptional” (p. 33) persons as sources to illuminate the world of persons who were *not* extraordinary or exceptional. The men whose writings Griffiths analyzes, that is, are not examples of the ordinary run of nuns’ priests. Rather they are rare and famous literary figures, and in most cases their reputation as such is not even based on the day-to-day work of care for monastic women. Yet she claims in the account she gives of their views and outlook, to be able to generalize these to apply to those other nuns’ priests of the day-to-day sort who have not left a record of themselves. She does so explicitly, arguing that she is concerning herself not with the individual achievements or notoriety of her authors so much as with “the ideas that they held in common and above all the motifs that they adopted in defending and discussing their pastoral care of women” (p. 38). She construes these “ideas” and “motifs” that are not particular to individuals as, in turn, suggestive of a broader “male monastic culture in which spiritual service to nuns was accepted and valued” (p. 25)—that is, a culture presumably also shared by their silent colleagues. She makes something of a leap here, and this needs to be noted, though—the body of evidence being as extensive as it is—I do find I am able to make that leap with her.

I myself considered this issue of the pitfalls of reading extraordinary sources as witnesses to ordinary situations in an afterword to *Partners in Spirit*, the recent collection of essays edited by Griffiths along with Julie Hotchin, which examined men in late-medieval women’s monasteries in German-speaking lands and showed them, in general, maintaining a steady presence and participating with the women in a complex interplay of responsibilities.[3] I acknowledged the fact that the essays spoke of a reality that one might not guess at from the highly gendered hagiographical accounts of “holy women” in the same time period about which I have written,[4] in which women’s authority, derived from their powerful charisms, tends to be contrasted with the institutional and hierarchical authority of men as possessors of ecclesiastical office. I suggested that that in general the imaginative world of the vitae of holy women by male authors should only with great caution be taken to illuminate the everyday life of monastic women in their interaction with men. But now having read *Nuns’ Priests’ Tales*, I wonder if I overstated the matter, in the sense that, as Griffiths suggests, men’s perception of women as brides of Christ and thus as of an order of being above their own—which, I would say, is the perception at the heart of the highly gendered hagiography about holy women—may have been, at least from the twelfth century onward, a function of everyday monastic life after all. Griffiths says in her conclusion, after evoking the example of the “extraordinary” figures of female hagiography, that she has shown that, for her period, “ordinary priests, who served

ordinary nuns, could see in these women a gendered spiritual power from which they felt that they could benefit: nuns could be approached as brides of Christ, a status to which no monk or priest, before the twelfth century, imagined he might have personal or direct access” (p. 178).

The second methodological problem that Griffiths has addressed is how to use sources by men in a way that does not relegate women to the margin of the narrative, but rather keeps them, as actors, thoroughly within the frame of reference. Her own previous monograph, on the *Hortus Deliciarum*, a manuscript compiled under the authority of the twelfth-century abbess Herrad of Hohenberg, demonstrated that Herrad and her monastic community should not be approached—in a way that has become familiar in treatments of medieval women in recent decades—as “ancillaries” to the mainstream male monastic culture of the time, with a “separate and even subversive discourse” that set them apart from dominant authority. They were, she argued, full participants in that culture, with a place among its “intellectuals and reformers” in their own right.[5] There, of course, she was relying, in effect anyway, on a female author as her source, and here in *Nuns’ Priests’ Tales*, by contrast, the authors of her sources are all male. Yet remarkably she claims here to achieve something similar: “an underlying goal of this book has been to add to our knowledge of nuns...,” she writes, and her very reliance on *men’s* perceptions to serve that goal, in the sense that highlighting “the positive ways in which men perceived their spiritual service to women” provides evidence that “the pastoral relationship could be fulfilling and spiritually prized by both nuns and their priests” (p. 178). In other words, the very fact that men could have an appreciative perspective on service to women itself constitutes evidence about women’s own perceptions—i.e., that they too could view their relationship with the men positively. To be sure, she is not being naive when she makes this assertion. She is careful to explain that she is not picturing women as passive or equating their perceptions with those of the men. For as many other scholars have pointed out as well, it was men and not the women themselves who developed and employed the bridal metaphor. And by way of suggesting how they may have viewed themselves, though this has not been her purpose in the study as a whole, she includes at the end of the book a discussion of the images sewn by women on certain liturgical textiles as indications of a claim, made on their own behalf, of a place for themselves in the otherwise male space at the altar. And with those explanations in mind I am glad to stay with her here, to see the men’s writings as witnessing to an atmosphere of mutuality and thus supporting a picture of monastic life in which women and men appear together in the center of the frame.

NOTES

[1] Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements of the Middle Ages*, translated by Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

[2] Dyan Elliot, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

[3] Fiona J. Griffiths and Julie Hotchin, eds. *Partners in Spirit: Women, Men, and Religious Life in Germany, 1100-1500* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2014).

[4] John W. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

[5] Fiona J. Griffiths, *The Garden of Delights: Reform and Renaissance for Women in the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 8, 23.

John W. Coakley
New Brunswick Theological Seminary
jcoakley@nbts.edu

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies

ISSN 1553-9172