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Fiona J. Griffiths, Nuns' Priests' Tales: Men and Salvation in Medieval Women's Religious Life

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allow. Much light is shed on the significance of St Edmund by comparison with St Romanus. Their elevation in status appears to have passed over earlier, local, and, in the case of St Edmund, less anti-Danish, versions of their cults, a finding with important implications for interpretation of the St Edmund coinage.

Cross could have given more prominence to her view that contact with Scandinavia was a critical underlying reason for the divergent treatment of Scandinavian ancestry. She argues in the conclusion that, in England, continued contact with Scandinavians meant that writers failed to develop a consistent vocabulary to describe ethnic groups. Conversely, in Normandy, it was a cessation of contact with Scandinavia that enabled a consistent Norman viking identity to develop; one that assisted the ducal regime in their most pressing concern: their relationship with the Frankish world. Ethnic identities, as committed to writing, did not map neatly onto cultures, but were situational and responsive, perceived, rather than real. This book is essential reading for all students of medieval ethnicities.

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Fiona J. Griffiths, *Nuns' Priests' Tales: Men and Salvation in Medieval Women's Religious Life* (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). ix + 349 pp. ISBN 978-0-8122-4975-0. \$69.95.

Fiona Griffiths's *Nuns' Priests' Tales: Men and Salvation in Medieval Women's Religious Life* challenges the widely held assumption that the late eleventh-century ecclesiastical reformers' campaign for clerical celibacy, based on misogynistic rhetoric that associated women with sin, encouraged ordained men to avoid the *cura monialium*, or pastoral care of nuns. Griffiths exposes the problems with this assumption, noting that the objectives of religious reform attracted significant numbers of women to the religious life, women who relied on priests to provide pastoral care. Indeed, the nuns' priest was, as Griffiths argues, a 'routine presence' (p. 1) in medieval women's communities, a fact that historians ignore to the detriment of a fuller understanding of both medieval men and women.

The aim of Griffith's study is to amplify a generally overlooked counter-narrative that emphasized the spiritual value of priests' relationships with the women they served. In the absence of direct testimony from the mostly nameless priests who ministered to religious women, Griffiths relies on letters, chronicles, sermons, manuscript illuminations, wall paintings, and hagiographies attesting to close relationships between nuns and priests. Within these sources, Griffiths identifies a 'defensive vocabulary' (p. 20) based on scriptural, patristic, and early

monastic motifs and traditions (or 'tales'), demonstrating that many ordained men viewed contact with women not as a distraction but rather as an opportunity to serve God and reap significant spiritual rewards.

Chapter 1 presents the central historical puzzle of the nuns' priest: suspect yet crucial to women's religious communities, ubiquitous yet largely absent from the historical record. Portrayed by contemporaries as suspicious for their intimacy with women, modern historians have generally viewed nuns' priests as reluctant, resentful, and often neglectful ministers to women's communities. Yet this assumption, Griffiths asserts, not only ignores a significant subset of ordained men who found spiritual value in their service to nuns, it also perpetuates the argument that the reform period had a uniformly deleterious effect on nuns and their communities.

In chapters 2, 3, and 4, Griffiths shows that ordained men found plenty of justification for the *cura* in scriptural, patristic, and medieval traditions, which they 'adopted and repurposed ... to explain and defend their spiritual service to nuns' (p. 4). Throughout, Griffiths makes the case that this spiritual service was not exceptional but rather part of a 'venerable tradition'. Particularly prominent in these chapters are the writings of several well-known medieval clerics, especially Peter Abelard and Robert of Arbrissel, which provide robust defences of the *cura*. Although several of these justifications are well known, scholars have typically portrayed Abelard (or Heloise, the woman to whom so many of his writings were directed) as 'exceptional' and therefore unrepresentative of men's relationships with women during the reform period. Putting these writings in the context of a broader 'culture of support' for the work of the nuns' priest, Griffiths argues that these sources express a perspective more prevalent than modern scholars have acknowledged.

Chapter 5 wraps up the book by addressing the question of *why* medieval priests valued their pastoral service to women, arguing that medieval priests viewed nuns as brides of Christ and natural intercessors to the divine, believing that the women's prayers were more efficacious than those of men. While perhaps not a surprising conclusion, Griffiths's book provides important context for recent studies by Erin Jordan and others who have disproven the once commonly held assumption that medieval patrons placed little value on the prayers of nuns. Overall, Griffiths's book is a well-researched and engaging study that advances a more nuanced understanding of the reform period, women's monasticism, and male spirituality in the central Middle Ages.