GENDERED LESSONS: ADVICE LITERATURE FOR HOLY WOMEN IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I examine the impact of gender on the spirituality of religious women. I consider a number of texts dating from approximately 1080-1200 written specifically for women that I refer to as religious advice literature, or prescriptive literature. By advice literature, I refer to a variety of genres including letters, sermons, saints’ lives, and visionary texts. Religious men such as Peter Abelard, Osbert of Clare, Goscelin of St. Bertin, and Conrad of Hirsau designed these prescriptive texts to address what they perceived as the issues that directly affected the lives of women. These issues included the preservation of sexual purity and the practice of monastic meditation. I argue that they described traditional metaphors for monastic activity in gendered language. This technique served to make their texts relevant to the lives of religious women. I also consider the potential reactions of female readers. To this end, I consider the writings of female authors such as the Heloise, abbess of the Paraclete in France and Hildegard von Bingen, German abbess and renowned visionary. I also examine the writings of men that were influenced by religious women such as the Life of Christina of Markyate and the Second Life of Robert of Arbrissal. While there are far fewer examples of advice literature written by women, those that have survived reveal a wealth of information and allow us to gauge the reactions of women to monastic living.

These prescriptive texts reveal that religious men and women rarely agreed about the nature of the female sex and in particular its capacity for learning and monastic living.
They also debated extensively about the site of gender difference and the relationship between female physicality and spirituality. I explore these questions from two perspectives—the men who wrote for religious women and the women who read their works and occasionally wrote their own responses.
Dedicated to Kitty
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak; but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached? –I Corinthians 14:34-36

With the apostles having been scandalized in the passion of the Lord, and having despained concerning his death, the devotion of holy women persisted immovable and did not at all recede from the bone of Christ; since they retained such great constancy either of hope or of charity, so they were not separated [from him] by death either in mind or body.—Peter Abelard, Sixth Letter to Heloise

Women and Christianity have always existed in a complex relationship. Born at the intersection between several ancient religious systems, early Christianity absorbed the misogyny of the surrounding world. Its sacred religious texts are filled with statements defaming the nature of women. Ancient and medieval church leaders limited the autonomy and leadership roles of female worshippers and generations of women internalized these negative ideas about themselves. At the same time, Christianity offered women unprecedented opportunities for spiritual fulfillment, education, and independence. Individual women and men have always grappled with these inherent contradictions.

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In this dissertation I examine the conundrum of gender and spirituality in the context of the European high middle ages. I consider a number of texts dating from approximately 1080-1200 written specifically for religious women that I refer to as advice literature, or prescriptive literature. By advice literature, I refer to a variety of genres including letters, sermons, saint’s lives, and visionary texts. Their authors designed these works for nuns and other women who had taken religious vows, to aid them in their spiritual quest for virtuous living and eternal salvation.

Religious men and women existed in a compulsory relationship, albeit an uneasy one at times. Monks had renounced fleshly desires and feared the potential sexual temptation that women presented. At the same time, they could not ignore the needs of religious women. Nuns could not live entirely without the company of men as they required the care of priests. This care of women was known as the *cura monialium*. The major focus of the *cura monialium* was the performance of the sacraments, but religious men could also act as teachers and business managers for women. Fulfilling the requirements of the *cura monialium* while obeying vows of chastity led men to view religious women with suspicion and even disgust. In addressing the spiritual needs of women, they had to negotiate between an ingrained misogyny and an obligation to help fellow religious people.

In the following chapters, I explore how these tensions emerged in literature. As men wrote the vast majority of the surviving prescriptive texts, I am interested in seeing what issues they considered important for women and how they chose to express them
through language. Did they explain their lessons in gender neutral ways or did they attempt to make them relevant for religious women? How did they convey the importance of such matters as cloistering, meditative prayer, virginity, and literacy in Latin?

I also consider whether female-authored prescriptive texts portray similar or different concerns. While there are fewer examples of advice literature written by women, those that have survived reveal a wealth of information. The correspondence of Hildegard von Bingen illustrates how religious women communicated with each other. The letters of Heloise offer an example of a woman who questioned the spiritual advice that she received. Other women did not author texts directly but were closely involved in their creation, as is the case with the visionary texts of Elisabeth of Schönau. These prescriptive texts allow us to gauge the reactions of religious women to monastic life.

At the heart of many religious texts for women lay an ongoing consideration of the inherent worth of the female gender. Were the qualities of the female sex mostly negative, as contemporary wisdom put forth, or did they possess their own spiritual and intellectual gifts? Writers, their patrons, and their correspondents argued over the nature of the female sex and in particular its capacity for learning and monastic living. They also debated extensively about the site of gender difference and the relationship between female physicality and spirituality. I explore these questions from two perspectives--the men who wrote for religious women and the women who read their works and occasionally answered them back.
While the issues of the *cura monialium* and gendered patterns of piety are relevant to any period of Christian history, I have chosen to explore how they unfolded specifically during the twelfth century. The twelfth century was a time of creativity and experimentation for both men and women in religious life. New religious orders such as the Cistercians and the Premonstratensians emerged and encountered extreme popularity. People explored diverse forms of religious expression such as itinerant preaching and eremetic living. New religious houses proliferated. The number of women’s houses in Northern France, England, and German lands rose dramatically. Women of different classes now had the opportunity to participate in monastic life. In order to acknowledge the uniqueness of twelfth-century monasticism, it is necessary to understand the developments of the preceding centuries. In the following section, I briefly summarize the major advances and setbacks that monastic women experienced before c. 1080. I also demonstrate the similarities in English and French monastic institutions which first expanded and then declined at roughly the same time. Monasticism, as well as Christianity, took root in German lands much later, leading to several notable differences.

Suzanne Wemple presented the thesis that during times of political chaos and weak central government, women possessed greater autonomy and influence in both religious and political institutions. They lost this power when the government regained authority. Stephanie Hollis has also demonstrated that during periods of missionary

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activity, women participated alongside men in the spread of Christianity.\(^3\) Once the survival of Christianity was assured, men began limiting the movement of women and shutting them out of key positions. Both English and French monasticism followed these patterns. Frankish religious women had possessed the greatest autonomy during the Merovingian period of the sixth and seventh centuries. During these centuries as well, they received donations from noble and royal patrons and spiritual aid from religious men. Suzanne Wemple termed this period the “the flowering of female monasticism.”\(^4\) She dated its beginning to the arrival in Gaul of the Irish monk Columbanus in 590. Columbanus found Frankish noblewomen to be avid patrons of his ideas. They sheltered him, recommended him to their husbands, and under his tutelage, they founded new monasteries. Columbanus himself founded the monastery of Luxeuil, training new monastic recruits and imbuing them with a sense of respect for women.

These Irish-trained Frankish men and Frankish women of the aristocracy began building a novel institution—the double monastery. These double monasteries offered innovative solutions to the problems of the *cura monalium*. With men close at hand, nuns received spiritual care, manual labor, and physical protection. Unlike the majority of the twelfth-century institutions I will explore in subsequent chapters, an abbess ruled these double monasteries, taking charge of both men and women, or else an abbot and an abbess ruled in equal partnership. Such was the case at Laon, Jouarre, and Chelles,

which existed under an abbess, and at Nivelles, Marchiennes, and Hasnon, under both an abbot and an abbess. Another notable characteristic of these institutions was that they did not require stringent separation of men and women. Monks and nuns prayed in the same church and collaborated on manuscript production and other intellectual endeavors. Nuns also brought up male children, both oblates and secular aristocrats.

As the Carolingians exerted authority over both the government and the church, women gradually lost their voice. These circumstances prevented women from participating in the Carolingian Renaissance, as they could not travel to the preeminent cultural centers, such as other monasteries and the royal courts. Charlemagne’s goals for improving religious life in his empire included proper performance of the liturgy, which favored male houses. Many monasteries suffered loss of property under Charlemagne, but nuns could not travel to episcopal centers to ask bishops to intercede with them.

During the more anarchic period of the late-ninth, tenth-and eleventh-centuries, monasteries suffered from the increasing violence. The Carolingian Empire disintegrated and the Vikings, Normans, and Hungarians ravaged the land. Monasteries were robbed, burned, and their female inhabitants found themselves victims of rape. Monastic living, however, never declined to the extent that it did in Britain. Through the eleventh century,

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5 Wemple, Women in Frankish Society,
powerful French noble families continued to found monasteries. These houses were single-sex and the membership was limited to aristocratic and royal women.

English monasticism for women experienced a similar pattern of growth and decline before the revival that occurred during the twelfth century. Historians generally have considered the Anglo-Saxon period, particularly the seventh and eighth centuries, as a golden age for women, both secular and religious. As Christine Fell has described, “from the time that Christianity came to England men and women shared equally, not only in conversion to the new faith, but in the learning that accompanied it.” Religious men valued the contribution of women during the seventh and eighth centuries. The majority of these women were noble or royal. The English royal families of Wessex, Northumbria, Mercia, Kent, and East Anglia played a key role in founding monasteries for women. They appointed their female relatives as abbesses. High-born women shared in the efforts to Christianize England by founding double-houses with their personal fortunes and ruling over them as abbesses. Hilda founded the double monastery of Whitby where she ruled as abess until her death in 680. She developed a school for both monks and nuns and also presided over the synod at Whitby where the leading religious figures and the Northumbrian King debated about whether to adopt the Roman date for Easter. Her life illustrated the prominence women could achieve, based on their high

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birth and the need to spread the faith throughout Britain. Anglo-Saxon men and women joined forces in missionary activity abroad as well. Boniface, the missionary to the Saxons and Frisians, invited his kinswoman, Leoba, to join him in his conversion efforts in Germany. Leoba, a nun at the double monastery of Winbourne, left her home to join him. Boniface appointed her abbess of the monastery at Bischofsheim. With the survival of the church in pagan lands at stake, men were willing to enlist the aid of women.

A variety of factors such as the brutal years of Viking invasions and the impact of tenth-century monastic reforms would contribute to the decline of female monasticism over the coming centuries. According to Stephanie Hollis, female influence within Anglo-Saxon monasticism had begun to wane as early as the eighth century, when the institution of the double monastery came into question. A growing number of male religious, including Theodore of Tarsus and Bede disapproved of the double monastery. They saw a number of problems inherent in the institution--the authority of an abbess over men, the interactions between monks and nuns, and the relations between the monastery, and hence, the women, with local lay communities. Sarah Foot has suggested that the Carolingian regulations that limited the mobility of nuns and restricted

the autonomy of female houses also affected England. Hollis’s observations about the decline of the Anglo-Saxon double house corresponded to Suzanne Wemple’s thesis concerning women in medieval Christianity. While men welcomed women as partners during periods of conversion and growth, they pushed them into diminished roles during periods of institutional stability. Another major factor that contributed to the decline of the status of Anglo-Saxon nuns was the Viking invasions. After the early-eighth century the foundation of women’s houses had already slowed, but the effects of the Viking raids destroyed or displaced the communities already in existence. Beginning in 793 with the ravaging of Lindisfarne, Danish marauders attacked and burned monasteries, initiating almost of century of monastic decline for both men and women. Communities broke up as nuns and monks fled from the invaders. The Viking raiders naturally targeted coastal communities so that in Kent and Northumbria, no communities for women remained. As Sarah Foot has pointed out, no one with any means was interested in founding houses for men or women during this time of crisis.

At the time of the Norman Conquest the foundations that remained for women were single-sex houses with ties to the Wessex royal family. In the late ninth century, when Alfred the Great began to rebuild monasteries and churches, he turned to the counsel of bishops, who disapproved strongly of double monasteries. It is significant

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14 Foot, *Veiled Women*, 74.
that he founded two separate houses, one for men, Athelney, and the other for women, Shaftesbury. His family continued this trend of founding and endowing single-sex monasteries. His wife, Ealswith, founded the female house, Nunnaminster. During the tenth-century monastic reform, the royal family and leading church officials continued to establish and patronize single-sex communities. Around 965, King Edgar and Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury, founded a community for nuns at Barking, the site of a monastery abandoned during the invasions. Edgar’s widow, Aethelthryth founded the female houses of Amesbury and Wherwell. These houses were generally located in the southwest, the heart of West Saxon power. Due to the decline of the other English royal houses, there were no new foundations in the once thriving areas of Northumbria and Kent. Difficult to glean from the sources, but still visible, a number of widows and single-women still lived pious existences on their family lands. Until about 1130, there were few opportunities for post-Conquest women to enter into a religious life. Directly after the Norman Conquest, only eight houses for women existed, Barking, Wilton, Amesbury, Shaftesbury, Winchester, Romsey, Wherwell, and Chatteris Abbey.

In contrast to Northern France and England, German monasticism did not begin to flourish until the tenth century. According to Karl Leyser, the Germans of the tenth and eleventh century lived in an early medieval society. Under the Ottonian dynasty, religious men and women lived in a situation similar to Merovingian France and Anglo-Saxon

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England. Between 919 and 1024, thirty-six female communities emerged. These communities were wealthy and filled with women of the aristocracy. Karl Leyser has argued that the chaotic nature of Saxon society was largely responsible for the prominence of female foundations. Owing to the constant feuding, noble rebellions, encounters with Muslims, Slavs, and Poles, and expeditions abroad, Saxon men frequently died young. Noble women tended to outlive their male relatives, inheriting the family estates. Daughters who outlived their brothers also received the family estates. Many women, therefore, controlled huge fortunes, which they could use to found monastic houses. Fathers who had lost their sons built monasteries to serve as family memorials, and installed their daughters as abbesses. Female foundations also solved a problem that recurred in the nobility with every generation—the need to provide for widows and spinsters in a manner befitting their social station. Families overburdened with daughters needed an secure home for the ones they could not afford to or were unwilling to dower. Left unmarried in their parent’s houses, these extra relatives existed as constant temptations to unwelcome suitors. Other noblemen could kidnap them, instigating feuds that could last for generations. The other danger—that single women would enter in relationships with lower-class men—would have brought disgrace to their families. Monasteries offered an appropriate outlet, where noblewomen could live

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comfortably, even luxuriously, among members of their own class. The importance of religious women, and hence, religious foundations, extended beyond practicalities, however. Perhaps because they led such dangerous and violent lives, men relied upon the prayers of their female relatives for remittance of their sins. Any Saxon noblemen might reasonable expect to commit murder during his career, and thus would be concerned about the fate of his soul. The knowledge that a sister, daughter, or mother was praying on his behalf would have come as a comfort.

As in England and France, Saxon foundations possessed close ties to members of the imperial family who contributed generously to their status and wealth. They often boasted members of the imperial family as members and rulers. An immediate relative of the emperor nearly always ruled as abbess in the two imperial houses, Quedlinburg and Gandersheim. Shortly after his coronation, Otto I’s wife Matilda founded Quedlinburg. Their daughter Matilda ruled until 999, when her granddaughter, Adelheid, the child of Otto III succeeded her. At Gandersheim, between 1001-1044, the daughters of Otto II and Theophanu, Sophie and Adelheid, ruled successively, followed by Henry III’s daughters, Beatrix and Adelheid. The royal family visited Quedlinburg to celebrate Easter and to begin their royal hunts. The house of Gandersheim contained permanent apartments for the royal family. Smaller female houses such as Alseleben, Drubeck, Gernrode, and

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20 Leyser, Rule and Conflict, 64-65.
21 Leyser, Rule and Conflict, 72.
Frose were also situated along major roads of the royal itinerary or within a day’s journey of the larger houses. The royal family and their court would rely upon the resources from these areas during their travels. Even when the royal court was elsewhere, female houses helped to perpetuate royal power by governing these market towns in the name of the rulers.

Monastic living was not the only form of religious expression for women. Under the Ottonians there was a longstanding tradition of female recluses. Lower class women, particularly widows, could choose to bypass institutionalized religious life and commit themselves to solitary reclusion. These women, known in German as Inclusen, often lived on the outskirts of monasteries, and received spiritual care from their local monks. The late-ninth-century widows, Salome and Judith, for example, lived on the outskirts of the Benedictine monastery, Niederaltaich. Unlike England and France, German monasticism did not experience a sharp period of decline because it had not really started to grow until after the worst of the invasions. As the Emperors exercised increasing authority over their lands, they relied less upon monastic foundations as power bases. The number of women’s houses remained stable and, as with English and French houses, they were mainly for women of the highest social classes.

The total number of female houses in the early eleventh century was small. There were entire dioceses and ecclesiastical provinces with no foundations, including the archdioceses of York, Rouen, Tours, Auch, and Aix-en-Provence. After the ravages of the Viking invasions, powerful noble families began to rebuild monasteries. Until 1080, they generally founded single-sex Benedictine houses for men and women. Beginning around 1080 for the Continent and 1130 for England, monastic houses for women underwent dramatic changes.

These changes included a growth in the number of foundations, different types of founders and patrons, new orders, some of which were especially designed to accommodate the needs of women. Sharon Elkins has identified the years 1130-1165 as the pinnacle of monastic foundation for English women. Between these years alone, about eighty-five new houses for women came into being, with an average of about two a year. Altogether, during the twelfth century, there were 120 new English foundations solely for women. In twelfth-century England, women enjoyed more opportunities to participate in the monastic life than they had since the eighth century, the height of female influence within the Anglo-Saxon church. A new group of lay patrons founded and contributed to religious houses. Knightly families founded houses for women and gave donations to existing ones. They possessed more wealth due to economic growth. Nuns could rely upon grants of land and privileges from local families for their support.

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28 Sarah Foote, *Veiled Women*, 61-85
These years included the anarchic period of Stephen’s reign, and Elkins argued that lords took advantage of the political disorder to achieve control of local lands. Building and endowing a religious house was a mark of status. Bruce Venarde dated the growth of female houses in France and England to 1080-1170. Venarde also applied Suzanne Wemple’s thesis to the twelfth century, arguing that the lack of political centralization influenced more nobles to found religious houses, previously a task for royalty and the wealthiest magnates. Since local nobility founded religious houses, they expected that their female relatives would find permanent accommodations with them. The proliferation of these houses meant that not only could more women enter the religious life but also women from a wider class range could join monastic orders.

Another important reason for the increase in religious women was that religious men founded communities for their benefit. As Giles Constable argued in the *Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, at perhaps no other time in Christian history did male religious sympathize with women and appreciate their contribution to religious life.²⁹ Charismatic male leaders founded experimental new communities for both women and men. Robert of Arbrissal founded the house of Fontevrault for nuns bound by the Benedictine Rule and canons bound by the Augustinian Rule. Norbert of Xanten founded the Premonstratensian order for both men and women. In the north of England, Gilbert of Sempringham founded the Gilbertines, also a double community. The purpose of these double communities was for men to help women with the liturgy and sacraments.

Male monastic houses also founded small priories for women, as occurred with St. Albans and Markyate. In Bavaria and Swabia, monks from the monastery of Hirsau founded numerous double houses.30 They built women’s houses alongside already existing male foundations. Many of these women’s houses brought local recluses into cenobitic living and the supervision of monks. These double communities were all meant to aid in the *cura monialium*. The monks were responsible for acting as priests, confessors, and in many instances, as teachers, to their female neighbors.31

In the following chapters, I explore the kinds of literature that these developments in monasticism produced. How did the spiritual relationships between men and women express themselves in prescriptive literature? I examine how men formulated old models for the new demands of religious living. Did prescriptive literature reflect the changes in monasticism, particularly the diverse kinds of women who now lived in monasteries? Whenever possible, given the limitations of evidence, I look at the words of religious women themselves. Were women completely reliant on men, especially in these double communities, or did they find ways to bypass male authority? Do we know how they reflected upon their role in monasticism?

Several medieval scholars have greatly influenced the direction of my study. They have made enormous contributions to our understanding of the relationship between

spirituality and gender in the middle ages. In her article, “Flaws in the Golden Bowl: Gender and Spiritual Formation in the Twelfth Century,” Barbara Newman posed the question that originally inspired this dissertation—to what extent were the lives of religious women gendered or gender neutral? To begin answering this question, she examined forty-five prescriptive texts that she termed as part of a “literature of spiritual formation.” These texts dated between 1075-1225 and with the exception of Heloise and Hildegard von Bingen, the authors of these texts were male. She compared the texts that writers intended for men with those for women. She argued that “to a perhaps surprising extent, the texts do present a gender-neutral ideal, as befits the angelic life that chastity was meant to confer.” Both men and women struggled to reach Heaven, to avoid sin, and to achieve virtuous living. The goal of monastic living may have been similar for men and women, but writers were highly conscious of gender and allowed it to inform the content of their texts and even the language they used. They described male characteristics as normative and labeled negative characteristics such as loquacity and curiosity as “feminine.” She argued that in the eyes of male writers, women never escaped their sex. They were women first and foremost and that made all their accomplishments even more remarkable. “Monks, hermits, and canons are advised not as males but as religious who have professed a particular vocation . . . [while] holy women

formed a class unto themselves.” They stressed the importance of chastity disproportionately when writing to women, encouraging them to view virginity as their most important possession. Newman’s work is important to this study because I too explore the interpretations of gender in prescriptive literature. I pursue the questions she raised regarding gender through close analysis of a selected number of works. I demonstrate how both religious men and women viewed the role of gender influencing the specific issues of meditation prayer, cloistering, virginity, education, and friendship.

Another medieval scholar, Caroline Walker Bynum, has been pivotal in exploring the eliding ideas of masculinity and femininity in religion as well as the different forms that male and female piety could take. In *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, her study of late medieval religious practices, she demonstrated how essential gender was to religion—that men and women used different symbols based on their life experiences. Men tended to focus on ideas of reversal such as the renunciation of wealth and power, elements of society to which they had access. Women, on the other hand, summoned images of “ordinary and biological social experiences,” such as the preparation of food, pregnancy, giving birth, and nursing. Although she has focused on a later period, I continually return to her arguments concerning the basic differences between male and female devotion. I explore the extent to which religious men and women were concerned with gender difference and how they expressed their ideas.

Penelope Johnson has also given a theoretical grounding to this work. In *Equal in Monastic Profession*, she presented the idea that until the thirteenth century, nuns possessed an extremely positive self-image. They considered themselves “equal in monastic profession,” that is, they defined themselves through their vocation rather than their gender. This point is central to Johnson’s explanation of female monastic identity and one to which she frequently returns. “A concentration on gender—or on its denial—was not primary to their self-definition, despite the insistence of certain highly visible and vocal male religious reformers and organizers that nuns had to reject their female nature to live the religious life.” Despite the tradition of misogyny in male clerical writing, Johnson argued that women existed in “a different—but just as real—psychological space in which they defined themselves by their useful spiritual and social activities . . . . The two differing psychological spaces coexisted.” Like Bynum, Johnson raised the argument that just because patristic and medieval texts dictated ideas about female sexuality, women did not always take them to heart. This theory underlines one of my main arguments regarding the self-perception of religious women. Nuns certainly learned ideas from sermons and male-authored prescriptive texts but they also must have learned from each other. Nuns watched their abbesses interact with powerful lay people, conduct business, and command servants. These models of behavior may have influenced them to an equal or greater extent than the misogynistic literature that.

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taught them women were weak and inadequate to lead others. They also conversed with each other about topics as diverse as their vocation, their emotions, and feelings of inadequacy. They formed mutual friendships, social networks, and surrogate families with other religious women. The models that women presented to each must be considered in any analysis of the creation and reception of prescriptive texts.

I have chosen a variety of texts—saint’s lives, visionary texts, letters, and sermons—that all served a didactic function in the lives of religious women. Anne Clark Bartlett has examined prescriptive religious literature for women as a genre. She has raised the issue of how male authors transmitted spirituality to a female audience. They faced the dilemma of making their lessons in spiritual fervor appealing, uplifting, and accessible to women readers. They also needed to negotiate between constructive criticism of the female sex and blatant misogynist language that could potentially undermine their goals. Bartlett described the “counterdiscourses” that male authors employed to reach out to their readers. While discussing Christian lessons, authors drew upon the tactics of other literary genres including courtly romances, treatises on spiritual friendship, mystical bridal poetry, and Passion narratives. These texts could initiate a variety of responses from the audience. They offered women readers numerous female identities—bride, aristocratic lover, devoted mother, visionary—to try on as they explored their spirituality. While her questions have proven valuable to the studies I

41 Anne Clark Bartlett, Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1995.
42 Bartlett, Male Authors, Female Readers, 3.
pursue here, the focus of our research is different. Bartlett focused almost exclusively on
Middle English literature from the later middle ages. The female readers of this literature
ranged from nuns to aristocratic laywomen to merchant-class wives and mothers. While
such issues as author and audience in devotional literature are central to my analysis, I
consider them through studying Latin texts of English, French, and German origin. The
women who read them were monastic women from the minor or greater nobility. There
has been no full-length analysis devoted to Latin prescriptive literature for monastic
women, which is why my work fills a gap in the study of gender and spirituality.

I begin by considering the role of prayer in prescriptive texts. In Chapter I,
examine the instructions that men such as Conrad of Hirsau, Osbert of Clare, and
Goscelin of St. Bertin gave religious women to teach them the best ways to immerse
themselves in prayer. As I demonstrate, they used traditional images of monastic
mediation such as bedrooms, tears, and seals in order to explain the mechanics of prayer.
They also interpreted these images according to what they perceived women
needed—enclosure, protection from religious and secular men, potential lack of literacy,
and strength in their struggles against sexual temptation. I then compare these works
with two texts that women were closely involved in creating—the vita of Christina of
Markyate and the visionary books of Elisabeth of Schönau. I consider in what context
these women used prayer in their religious lives and whether they also perceived it as
essential to their mental and physical well-being.
In the next chapter, I look closely at one particular text that a religious man wrote for a woman, the Rule that the English monk Aelred of Rievaulx composed for his sister, an anchoress. I examine the type of meditations he instructed her to pursue as well as the models of feminine spirituality he recommended for her. Aelred did not give his sister’s name anywhere in the text. I argue that her anonymity was both deliberate and essential to the life he envisioned appropriate for her as an anchoress. It symbolized her renunciation of all secular and biological ties as well as her willingness to reform herself into the image of the Virgin Mary.

According to patristic and medieval male writers, virginity was the most important possession for religious women. While it was important for men as well, it was absolutely essential for women and superceded all other virtues. In Chapter III, I consider the images of virginity that appear in prescriptive texts. I examine the negative exempla these writers presented of women who had lost their virginity and why they did not distinguish between participants in consensual sex and victims of rape. I also discuss the possibility of alternative models to the ideal of virginity in prescriptive texts. In the twelfth century, with the proliferation of new orders and forms of religious life, these models would have been particularly relevant to the number of married woman and adult converts living in monasteries.

I turn next to the debates Abelard and Heloise conducted with each other over the nature of gender. Neither of them ever developed one consistent argument but rather continually reformed their ideas through years of epistolary debate. They were interested
in the role that gender played in religious experience not only for themselves but for the nuns who lived at the Paraclete, the community that Abelard had founded and Heloise ruled. I demonstrate that although they argued over the nature of gender difference, they were both convinced that religious women required education in Latin literacy, equal to and even superceding that which religious men received.

Having examined the writings of men for women and when possible, the replies of these women, I next analyze a collection of all-female correspondence. In Chapter V, I discuss the correspondence of Hildegard von Bingen, particularly the letters she wrote to religious women and the ones she received in return. These letters are a valuable resource as they illustrate the advice women gave to each other. Hildegard offered women a unique opportunity to bypass male authority when seeking spiritual aid. Her letters also offer a wider glimpse into the world of female monasticism. They demonstrate that religious women formed social networks and surrogate families with each other for their mutual spiritual and material benefit.

I do not intend to present an overly optimistic a view of twelfth-century women. I am certainly not suggesting that all religious women managed to ignore the misogyny of their culture or shared the goals of modern feminists. Rather in the following chapters, I illustrate the models that existed in prescriptive literature as alternatives to traditional views that heralded virginity as the ultimate possession of medieval women, emphasized their sexual weakness, stressed that rape was the same as sexual consent, and insisted that there were no drawbacks to renouncing earthly love and children. These alternatives may
have influenced women to an equal or greater extent than misogynist defamations of their sex.
CHAPTER 2

ENTER THE BEDCHAMBER OF YOUR SOUL: ADVICE FOR WOMEN AT PRAYER

When monks and nuns prayed in the middle ages, they did so with their minds and their bodies. The act of worship combined reading, prayer, and meditation, sometimes referred to as meditative prayer or contemplative meditation. Meditation was central to monastic life. In her book, the *Craft of Thought*, Mary Carruthers has described the process of meditation. “Monastic meditation is the craft of making thoughts about God.”

Monks based their meditations on the sacred texts of the Bible—they used biblical images and stories to formulate their ideas about God. These texts remained in their minds and inspired creative action such as literature, art, and prayer. Carruthers explained that what a twenty-first century person would consider an act of imagination, a medieval person would consider an act of memory. They remembered the texts they had learned and used those memories to formulate new ideas.

The end purpose of meditation was to aid religious men and women to achieve union with God and closeness to Heaven. This goal, as Jean Leclerq has explained, embodied the overriding purpose of monastic life. Religious men and women

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44 Mary Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 68.
participated in many activities—charity, prayer, and study, but they did so in order to eventually attain knowledge of heaven.\textsuperscript{45}

In this chapter, I consider the degree to which the contemplative meditation of religious women was gender specific. I look first at the prescriptive literature that monastic authors such as Conrad of Hirsau, Osbert of Clare, and Goscelin of St. Bertin composed for the benefit of religious women. I examine the way these authors taught women how to embark upon the path of reading, prayer, and meditation. I look at the images they used to describe meditation and why they chose them. Some of these images such as mirror, seals, and feasts were common to texts for men as well. As I demonstrate, however, authors could also tailor their advice to respond to what they considered the specific needs of religious women. I next consider two texts that women themselves were involved in creating, the \textit{vita} of Christina of Markyate and the visionary writings of Elisabeth of Schönau. I explore their accounts of praying, reading, and immersion in visions in order to determine how important a role meditation played in their spiritual experiences.

Contemplative meditation involved both reading and praying. Jean Leclercq has eloquently explained the connection between these actions. Medieval readers generally pronounced words aloud as they read them, turning reading into an act of prayer. After reading a text, they developed not only visual memory of the letters but also an aural memory of how they sounded and a physical memory of forming the words aloud. The

body, senses, and mind therefore came together in the act of reading. This degree of involvement served to “inscribe . . . the sacred text in the body and in the soul.”46 The vast number of memories a religious person possessed created powerful imaginations that were constantly engaged in colorful visualization.47 Mental concentration on a particular picture acted as a starting point for meditation. One could begin their creative development with a particular image, such as Noah’s Arc or Jacob’s ladder. This picture might arouse successive pictures, until a new series of thoughts had been born in one’s imagination.

Religious people found inspiration for their imaginations in the texts of the Bible. When someone continuously read and thought about the Bible, they could call to mind an infinite number of stories, phrases, and images. Leclercq referred to this thought process as “the sanctification of the imagination.”48 Since biblical images and stories formed the basis of most meditations, it is important to consider the way that religious men and women read and understood the Bible. In his Polycraticus, John of Salisbury wrote that, “the pages of the divine books, each of whose letters are full of divine revelations, should be read with such great seriousness precisely because the treasure trove of the Holy Spirit, by whose finger they were written, can never be exhausted.”49 Beginning with the patristic writers of late antiquity, writers found an unlimited number of meanings in the

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46 Leclercq, Love of Learning, 73.
47 Leclercq, Love of Learning, 75.
48 Leclercq, Love of Learning , 75.
Bible. When exegetes read a biblical story, they possessed four paths of interpretation—historical, tropological or moral, allegorical, and anagogical. They believed that the events of the Bible had occurred in historical time. As Henry de Lubac explained, however, “all that Scripture recounts has indeed happened in history, but the account that is given does not contain the whole purpose of Scripture in itself.” The historical sense was only the beginning. The moral or tropological sense of the story offered lessons that helped readers enhance their relationship to God. This interpretation offered guides to proper behavior. The allegorical sense considered the connections between the Old and New Testaments. The anagogical sense examined a story’s relevance to eschatology, placing it in the history of mankind’s salvation or damnation at the end of time. One story held a myriad of truths, depending on the moral and intellectual levels of the readers.

Another aspect of the flexibility of scriptural interpretation was its adaptability to different audiences. An exegete could draw several meanings from a text and tailor them to his or her specific audience. All of these meanings would be correct. Noah’s Arc, for example, was the ship that Noah built and symbolized the Arc of the Covenant, the Christian church, or an individual soul storing memories. Henri de Lubac summarized the views of medieval exegetes as follows, “Let us then seek, let us dig deep; but let us

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not entertain the hope of exhausting the depths of the Scripture. We cannot ever hope to come to the end of the investigations that Scripture demands.”

Gilbert of Hoyland referred to the words of the Bible as grapes that continually yield wine. These multiple interpretations ensured that a specific biblical story could teach gender neutral lessons for Christian souls or could reveal special lessons specifically for the edification of women.

Meditation on God was as important for women as for men, and it stood out as one of the central concerns in letters of advice. “So anoint your eyes with eye-salve, that is occupy yourself perpetually in meditation on Holy Scripture, and so permeate yourself with it, that it is to be seen that God pours himself into you,” Osbert of Clare instructed Adelidis, the abbess of Barking. Meditation was the beginning of a spiritual existence, and from this action the virtues of Christian women would arise—“for where the root has been planted the tree will not lack leaves and fruit.” The skill of meditation required both instruction and practice. All the letters that men wrote for women tried to emphasize the indescribable bliss that contemplation of God would bring. Since the art of prayer was a learned skill, authors devoted pages to its practice and developed a number of metaphors to aid women in their efforts. Some emphasized that gender was meaningless in the act of prayer. Others chose to teach women by employing gender specific images that emphasized the value of female virginity and humility. These writers repeatedly

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53 De Lubac, *Four Senses of Scripture*, 76.
54 De Lubac, *Four Senses of Scripture*, 79.
expressed their concern that women preserve their chastity by avoiding the company of men, even religious men. While teaching women to pray, authors cautioned them about leaving their monasteries or allowing outsiders access, encouraging them to be content with a cloistered existence. In this way they adapted the rhetoric of monastic meditation to what they viewed as the concerns of religious women.

**Entering a Bedchamber**

Monastic meditation often began in a bedchamber, in Latin, a *cubiculum*, *thalmus*, or *lectulus*. According to Mary Carruthers, the bedchamber was a common trope in monastic literature. The practice of retreating to a bedchamber had Roman antecedents. Roman orators composed their speeches in private rooms of their homes. This technique allowed them to work without distraction. In Christian writing, the bedchamber took on a spiritual dimension, inspired by a verse in the Gospel of Matthew. “But thou when thou shalt pray, enter into thy chamber (*cubiculum*), and having shut the door, pray to thy Father in secret, and thy father who seeth in secret will repay thee.” For monastic authors, a bedroom symbolized an internal space of creativity where one could retreat from worldly cares and focus on God. Anselm had begun his treatise on the contemplation of God, the *Proslogion*, with these words from Matthew. “Come now, O insignificant man, flee a while from your basic tasks . . . Enter into the chamber of your mind, exclude everything, besides God and what can be of help in seeking him, and close

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56 Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 176-183.
57 “. . . tu autem cum orabis intra in cubiculum tuum et cluso ostio tuo ora Patrem tuum in abscondito et Pater tuus qui videt in abscondito reddet tibi,” Matthew, 6:6.
the door to seek him.” He had written these words as prior of Bec, at the request of his monks to teach them the best ways to pray. As in the words of Matthew, the act of entering into a cubiculum symbolized a mental technique for concentration.

The bedchamber motif was also central to the bridal imagery of the Song of Songs, an Old Testament text whose sensuous language pervaded monastic writing. Read literally, the Song expressed the love longing of a bride awaiting her bridegroom. Medieval commentators widely interpreted the Song as an allegory of meditation on God. The bride could symbolize an individual Christian soul desiring communion with God. For a great deal of the Song, the bride remained in a bedroom preparing herself to receive her lover. In keeping with the allegorical interpretation, the bedroom could therefore act as a place of contemplation. In a series of sermons that he never completed, Bernard of Clairvaux explored the Christian significance of the rich imagery of the Song of Songs. In his twenty-third sermon, Bernard said that the bedroom stood for “the mystery of divine contemplation.”

To the Christian soul in the bedroom, God was a figure of love and mercy. “He is neither fearsome nor awe-inspiring, he wills to be found

60 During the twelfth century, an alternative interpretation became popular, in which the bride was the Virgin Mary and the Bridegroom was Christ. See Fulton, From Judgment to Passion, 289-350.
there in the guise of love, calm and peaceful, gracious and meek, filled with mercy for all who gaze upon him." The bride was a gender-flexible metaphor. Even though they were men, Bernard encouraged his monks to identify with the bride and he stated that he had done so as well. As Caroline Walker Bynum has demonstrated in her book, *Jesus as Mother*, it was not unusual, particularly among the Cistercians, for men to adopt feminine imagery. The image of the bride in her bedroom symbolized the joys of divine contemplation for both men and women.

When applied specifically to women, however, the symbol of a bride in her bedroom could take on gender-significant dimensions. The idea of a bride awaiting her bridegroom resonated with women who could view Christ as their spiritual bridegroom and a positive alternative to earthly men. The bedroom also reinforced common beliefs that religious women required cloistering. For Osbert of Clare, it acted as a place of safety as well as a place of contemplation. In his letter to Adelidis, the abbess of Barking, Osbert used the metaphor of a *cubiculum* as a starting point for the meditation that he outlined. She needed to enter into the *cubiculum* of her soul. There she could leave behind her earthly self and assume the heroic qualities of the biblical Judith, who had saved the Jewish people from the Syrians by murdering their general, Holofernes. Pretending to love him, Judith seduced Holofernes into a drunken stupor and then beheaded him. “You must, then, go secretly into the chamber of your soul and take on

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the nature of Judith, so that you may seize the sword, and, with Holofernes lying dead, you may free the Jewish towns from danger.” 64 As applied to Judith, seizing the sword meant steeling herself against external temptations of sex and vanity. Later in the letter, Osbert turned to the bed or lectulus of the Song of Songs to explain the value of contemplation. He compared Judith directly to the Bride. “That lectulus, daughter of Syon, is that in which you must seek the man whom your soul loves; you must be wise and understand the quiet of contemplation although it appears ‘in a glass and darkly,’ for in the night of this mortal life the eye is clouded and cannot see the perfect vision of God.” 65 The man she awaited was her bridegroom, Christ, the only acceptable lover for a nun. She needed first to seek him, that is, devote herself to meditation. Her desire for her beloved bridegroom would allow her to experience contemplative meditation while at the same time strengthen her resolve to be chaste.

In his letter to his niece Cecelia, a resident of Barking Abbey under the guardianship of Adelidis, Osbert also compared her inner private chamber to a biblical bedroom, in this case the bedroom of the Virgin Mary at the moment of the Annunciation. Beginning in the twelfth century, an alternative interpretation of Song of Songs appeared in monastic literature, in which the Bride symbolized the Virgin Mary

64 “Ingredere proinde secreto in cubiculum animae tuae tecum, et assume formam Iudith, ut arripias gladium et Oloferne prostrato liberes a periculo municipia Hebreorum,” Osbert of Clare, Letters, 161.
65 “Lectulus iste, filia Syon, in quo quaequerere debes viru, quem anima tua diligit, quietem contemplantium, solerter itellige, quae quanquam per speculu, etin aenigmatethe videatur, tamen a perfecta visione dei in nocte huius saeculi oculus caligat,” Osbert of Clare, Letters. 170.
awaiting her bridegroom, Christ. Osbert utilized this definition to instruct Cecelia on the joint merits of virginity and prayer. “Consider the glorious virgin talking always in her secret bedchamber with the angel, consider her conversing in Nazareth, so that you may learn to place your dwelling in the flowers of modesty, and to join the discourse in internal quiet with celestial messengers.”

Cecilia could model herself on Mary who was also a devout Virgin. The bedchamber here became a gendered image as it supported female enclosure. As Osbert explained to Cecilia, Mary was not outside gossiping with other women but inside in the midst of diligent prayer. “For while they [religious women who] live with themselves inwardly and they, proudly, do not wander outside, they speak with the lord through secret inspiration, and they are refreshed pleasantly with internal sweetness.”

The bedroom became not just as a place of contemplation, but a place of safety from the dangers of the outside world.

Osbert subsequently launched into a diatribe against pregnancy and childbirth as a contrast to the life of a nun. “How noble are the offspring which the virtues bear; in which chastity does not suffer the expense of modesty and the woman giving birth is not defiled in the chamber of the bridegroom.” The woman who remained in her bedroom, specifically an interior room, received Christ as her bridegroom with all his delights. They devoted themselves to prayer while remaining chaste. Those women who explored

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66 “Aspice gloriosam semper virginem in secreto cubiculo cum angelo fabulantem, aspice in Nazaret conversantem, ut discas in floribus pudicitiae mansionem tuam constituere, et in interna quiete cum supernis nuntiis sermonem miscere, Osbert of Clare, Letters, 92.
the outside had abandoned their bridegroom and were doomed to lives of painful childbearing with earthly men. If she wished to remain a Bride in the manner of Mary, Cecelia needed to stay in her interior room.

This description of a nun’s interior room was not just symbolic, however. The sleeping areas of nuns were literally the interior rooms of their monasteries. In her fascinating study of gender and archeology, Roberta Gilchrist has demonstrated that the dormitories were located in the center of houses for women, making them the most difficult to access.68 In the English house of Burnham, for example, one would have had to cross four “levels of permeability,” that is, layers of rooms, in order to reach the dormitory. In male houses, however, the central space was reserved for the chapel, as it was “the heart” of the community. The chapels of women tended to be situated on the outskirts of the house so that the priest would rarely have to venture inside the quarters of the nuns.69

The necessity of enclosure of women was a concern for monastic communities, particularly in the twelfth century when so many houses contained both men and women. The Speculum Virginum (c. 1140) included a cautionary tale to this effect. Peregrinus, the clerical narrator, told the story to Theodora, his virgin pupil. The story took place in a typical double house, where clerics lived alongside nuns to aid in their religious life. A young cleric became consumed with desire for the prioress. He broke into the female

69 Roberta Gilchrist, Gender and Material Culture, 165-166.
dormitory and found the bed of the one he loved. As soon as he climbed onto the bed, however, God struck him dead instantly. The prioress prayed every day for a year for his immortal soul. After Peregrinus related the story to Theodora, she exclaimed, “Frequent access of men to women, even premortuas [dead already, i.e. dead to the world?], provokes a spark to a flame.” The design of religious communities attempted to protect women not just from the secular men outside world, but from the men who were responsible for their spiritual care.

The Speculum originated in Swabia, but this concern is evident in English and French sources as well. The English Gilbertine Rule is a prime example. The Order’s original leniency regarding male and female association had opened them up to scandal, particularly in the case of the Gilbertine house of Watton. Around 1160, a young nun became pregnant by a lay brother. The other nuns imprisoned the couple. They beat the girl and forced her to castrate her lover. As a final humiliation, one of the nuns stuffed the mutilated penis into the girl’s mouth. The man returned to his brethren and the girl remained in prison. Miraculously, shortly before her expected delivery, all traces of her pregnancy disappeared. The resulting scandal affected the future of the Gilbertine order, particularly the structure of its Rule. The Rule zealously prohibited any contact between the nuns, the canons, and the lay-brothers. The women lived in separate dormitories from the men and were never to leave them without a companion. They

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70 Frequens virorum accessus ad feminas, etiam premortuas, ad flammam commovet favillas,” Conrad of Hirsau, SV, 52.
never visited the male quarters. The canons, in turn, only entered the women’s quarters to administer sacraments or in the case of emergencies. As Brian Golding has noted, “the rigid segregation institutionalized in the Gilbertine Rule was given physical shape in the topography of the double priories.” According to excavations archeologists have conducted at the English monasteries of Sempringham and Watton, a wall surrounded the entire community, separating it from the outside world. The women’s quarters stood inside a second wall as well as a ditch. They had their own church. The canon’s church, office, and living quarters were far to the east at the opposite end of the enclosed community. While canons, lay-brothers, nuns, and lay-sisters shared a main church for the celebration of mass, they never saw each other since they sat on either side of a wooden screen that stretched from floor to ceiling. Although both Sharon Elkins and Brian Golding have pointed out the Rule’s stress on the separation of the sexes, many aspects of the Gilbertine Rule were not unusual. The French Cluniac house of Marcigny also employed a screen to separate men and women in the church. There was never a common church at the double house of Fontevraud. A small group consisting of a priest, a clerk, and a deacon constituted the only male presence at the women’s church and they performed the mass behind a screen.

As the archeological and textual evidence suggests, religious women lived in the center of multiple layers of enclosures. According to the authors of advice literature,

nuns were constantly in danger of violent attack or seduction. They could find a measure of safety in a monastery, but this was not enough. Men—priests, canons, lay-brothers, monks—were a regular presence in religious communities, and they were vulnerable to the same urges of their secular brethren. Women could protect themselves only by remaining in their interior rooms, mentally and physically. They had to commit to the preservation of their virginity in their mind and they had to shun the company of men, even religious ones. Given the religious needs of women, avoiding men was not actually a viable option. Women required men for confession and performance of the other sacraments, not to mention the manual labor that came with monastic living. The stories acted as warnings, however, so that women would always be vigilant in the company of men. If they followed the advice of Conrad and Osbert, these warnings were inscribed into the action of prayer so that the act of meditation was a specifically female experience.

Patterns of Goodness

One way that religious men and women could immerse themselves in contemplative meditation was through imitation of holy people such as saints, martyrs, or biblical figures. One could retreat into their imaginations and enter the stories of others. By doing so, they would not only experience the trials of others but would ideally acquire their virtues. The images of patterns and mirrors were traditional ways of expressing the imitation of others through contemplative meditation. An image on a seal impressed onto wax was an ancient metaphor for memory that appeared in the works of writers such as
Cicero, Quintilian, and Augustine. Medieval writers such as Anselm employed this idea in their own works. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the same image also acted as a metaphor for the connections between God and mankind. Gerhoch of Reichersberg and Honorious Augustodunensis each explained that the Jesus had impressed his own image into man as one would dip a seal into wax. According to Honorius in his commentary on the *Song of Songs* 8:6, “The seal is the humanity of Christ, and the wax is the human soul, formed in the image of God.” Osbert of Clare employed the image of a seal to describe the mechanics of imitation of a holy figure. In his letter to Adelidis, Osbert encouraged her to imitate the qualities of noble women of the past such as the biblical heroine Judith and the Anglo-Saxon abbess of Barking Ethelreda. He explained this idea by using the concept of a pattern or a mould that she could imprint on her soul. “For that reason the pattern of goodness is set out for you in Judith, that virtuous woman, so that first you go down to the valley and shall be baptized in the spring, and from this you may ascend purified, and make your prayer to the Lord if you follow his way.” Osbert employed a similar image in the same letter. “In the same way faithfully imitate the example of Judith, and impress her form spiritually on your eyes, so that at night you shall go outside into the valley of Bethuliae and you shall baptize yourself in the fountain

76 Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, 257.
77 “Iccirco in Iudith, virtutis femina, forma tibi est salubris impressa, ut prius descendas in valle et baptizeris in fonte: ex quo purificata ascendas et sic orationem ad dominum facias,” Osbert of Clare, *Letters*, 166.
of water.” Here, the mechanics of the image are even clearer. When she prays, Adelidis becomes wax that will be stamped with Judith’s seal. Osbert wanted Adelidis to remember Judith by impressing her image into her memory. Since memory was an active process, by remembering Judith, Adelidis will obtain her virtues of spiritual strength and bravery in the face of danger.

The mirror as a metaphor for moments of prayer followed a similar logic to that of a seal’s impression. Since antiquity, mirror imagery had appeared in Christian literature to symbolize self-reflection, imitation of positive role models, and prayer. Authors such as Augustine found Paul’s famous line in Corinthians an ideal description of the desire for Heaven. “We see now through a mirror in an enigma: but then face to face. Now I know in part: but then I shall know even as I am known.” Heaven was something to grasp at but never to seize fully during one’s lifetime. In the same way, mirrors in the middle ages reflected half-formed or distorted images. Gazing into a mirror produced the same effect as prayer—a partial glimpse of a greater reality. Biblical texts could act as mirrors because they revealed infinite lessons and in doing so demonstrated the discrepancy between the reader and the virtues described. In the *Moralia on Job*, Gregory the Great, loosely quoting Augustine’s *Narratio in Psalmos* wrote “Holy Scripture presents a kind of mirror of the eyes of our mind, that our inner

79 “videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate tunc autem facie ad faciem nunc cognosco ex parte tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum,” I *Corinthians* 12:13.
face may be seen in it. There truly we learn our own ugliness, there our own beauty.”

Readers could actively engage these texts, reading them, ruminating upon them, and remembering them. By doing so they incorporated the lessons learned into their own characters.

Mirrors could also describe the process of imitation of others. In his study of mirror imagery in medieval literature, Herbert Grabes identified a type of “exemplary mirror.” A virtuous person could function as a mirror for others striving for self-improvement. Osbert of Clare encouraged Adelidis to consider Ethelreda, the dedicatory saint and first abbess of Barking, as a role model to imitate and he described her as a mirror. “Ethelburga, glorious, renowned, and dearest bride of the highest king, has provided you with a mirror of holy virginity.” Mirrors also possessed associations with feminine beauty and vanity. Osbert believed that the reading of his letter would spark contemplative meditation and therefore described it as a mirror “in golden luster and precious stones,” into which Adelidis should “give heed attentively to the fine apparel of heavenly wisdom.” Women, he suggested, used mirrors to look at their physical selves

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80 Gregory the Great, Moralia in Job II, I (PL 75, 553D).
82 “ . . . gloriosa et insignis et pretiosa sponsa summi regis Athelburga tibi sanctae virginitatis effecta est speculum,” Osbert of Clare, Letters, 175.
and fuel their narcissism. Adelidis could instead employ his letter/mirror as a medium for self-reflection, to study her inner self.

The metaphor of the mirror as an instrument for female physical enhancement acted as the major theme of the *Speculum Virginum*. The *Speculum* was a manual of monastic life for women. This work originated in the monastery of Hirsau located in Germany’s Black Forest. According to later Hirsau chroniclers, the author was a monk named Conrad, who lived c. 1080 – 1150. The *Speculum* is a complex work of spiritual encouragement designed for women living a monastic life. Conrad was deeply interested in the promotion of female spirituality. Conrad of Hirsau composed the *Speculum* as a dialogue between a priest, Peregrinus, and a nun, Theodora. Peregrinus taught her about the glorious life that awaited a woman if she chose to remain a virgin and to cultivate important virtues such as humility and charity. He relied heavily upon imagery from the *Song of Songs*, teaching Theodora that virgins were the brides of Christ who became their eternal bridegroom when they entered the religious life. The mirror of the title functioned as a feminine image in multiple ways. Mirrors were tools of women attempting to beautify themselves. Conrad therefore described his book as a mirror, because “virgins hold mirrors before their eyes to see whether their beauty has increased or diminished.” His book, he explained, should act as a mirror to reflect their spiritual beauty rather than their physical attributes. By continuously studying the mirror, they

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84 “Specula virgins oculis suis applicant, ut ornatus sui vel augmentum vel detrimentum intelligent,” *SV* 2.
could measure the growth of their character. The mirror could also reflect the images of ideal women that readers could emulate. To this end, Peregrinus described female heroines of the pagan, Jewish, and early Christian past who had achieved remarkable feats. Some had maintained their virginity against all odds while others had outwitted men. These women functioned as role models for the *Speculum* audience. Readers could look into the spiritual mirror of the *Speculum* and view pictures of virtuous women. By modeling their own behavior on these female exempla, their own image would eventually match the ideal ones in the mirror.  

The mirror imagery in the *Speculum* also referred to the collective virtues of women. Conrad used a biblical story from *Exodus* that involved both women and their mirrors. According to God’s commandments, Moses constructed a laver of brass from the mirrors of the Hebrew women. The laver was for Aaron and his sons, the first high priests of the Hebrews. “He made also the laver of brass, with the foot thereof, of the mirrors of the women that watched at the door of the tabernacle.”86 In the praefatio to the *Speculum Virginum*, Conrad of Hirsau offered an exegesis of these verses specifically in praise of women. As he interpreted the biblical verses, the mirrors were for the benefit of the women themselves, and by extension, all women.

For the mirrors of the women are divine eloquence having been set before the sights of holy souls in which they always consider how they either please their

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86 “. . . fecit et labrum aeneum cum base sua de speculis mulierum quae excubabant in ostio tabernaculi,” *Exodus* 38:8.
eternal spouse with the ornament of a holy conscience or displease him with the foulness of sin."\(^8^7\)

The Hebrew women used their mirrors as the readers of the *Speculum* would use the book, as devices to measure to the state of their souls. The mirrors were outside a tabernacle which Conrad depicted as a symbol of Heaven. Mary Caruthers has explained how the Hebrew tabernacle could act as monastic tropes for Heaven as well as images to inspire meditative prayer.\(^8^8\) The women waited outside the tabernacle without entering, Conrad explained, because most people cannot reach heaven during their lifetime. They can only desire it, that is, wait outside the door of Heaven. In the same way, people only saw God through an unclear mirror, not directly. The tabernacle also acted as the famous mirror of Corinthians that prevented humankind from seeing God clearly.

Next, they are said to stand outside of the entrance of the tabernacle, since, while they stay in this flesh, they will not enter the holy of holies of our celestial mother, Jerusalem. Therefore, when the enigma and the mirror, by which God is known now in part, has passed away, what now is sought in the scriptures, invisibly, will be seen face to face.

Conrad compared himself to Moses as they both had constructed “lavers” of divine law—in this case, his actual book. The *Speculum Virginum* would act as a purifying bath built out of the words of the Bible. When nuns read his book, they would bathe themselves spiritually. Bathing became another metaphor for reading and self-reflection.

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\(^8^8\) Caruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 221-276.
The lessons they learned would lead them to finally enter the tabernacle, that is, to allow them to reach Heaven and to see God without an obscurring mirror.

Therefore, in this bath composed from divine law, blessed virgins of Christ, bathe your conscience, so that the image of God will shine brightly, portrayed in you, and what now is concealed from mortals, as divine, shall appear more clear than the sun at midday.  

Conrad described his book as the medium through which women could begin their prayers. He gave them a plethora of images—mirrors, baths, tabernacles—to focus on as they thought about Heaven. As we know, prayer and reading were inseparable. The action of reading aloud contributed to the physical creation of memory and the inspiration of imagination. Reading the *Speculum* and thinking thoughts of Heaven could take place simultaneously, submerging women in the joys of meditation.

Conrad may have been envisioning an audience incapable of reading, however, which places a twist on the forms that meditation could take. Morgan Powell has suggested that a number of the female students who benefited from the *Speculum* may not have been fully literate in Latin. They could have accessed the book through a male cleric who could have read aloud from the text or paraphrased sections. In the *praefatio*, the *Speculum* acknowledged this potential relationship between literate teacher and illiterate student.

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In the mirror that I have sent, attend the appearance of your hearts, where if you are not able to understand all things that are written, no small part of knowledge is to listen and to love one who does understand.\textsuperscript{90}

The text also invited its female audience to “audi, filia,” or “listen, daughter,” that is, to rely upon the oral instruction of their teachers in matters of Scripture.\textsuperscript{91} After examining the medieval manuscript transmission of the \textit{Speculum}, Matthäus Bernards found evidence for this type of instruction as well. He concluded that Conrad had designed the work primarily for the use of male teachers rather than the private reading of women.\textsuperscript{92} All the Latin copies today survive from male houses, which is surprising since the \textit{Speculum} has obviously gendered instructions. Bernards argued, therefore, that monks employed it for the purpose of the spiritual care of women, imitating the relationship between Peregrinus and Theodora, which became “not only recorded experience, but prescriptive method.”\textsuperscript{93}

How did this affect the nature of monastic contemplation? Could women lose themselves in contemplation if they were part of a learning group or engaged in conversation with one other person? If they were illiterate and required an intermediary to read religious texts they also would not be able to experience the \textit{lectio} aspect of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{90} “In speculo, quod misi, vultus cordium vestrorum attendite, ubi, si omnia non potestis, quae scripta sunt, intelligere, non parva pars scientiae est intelligentem et audire et amare,ˮ \textit{SV} 4.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Morgan Powell, “The Mirror and the Woman: Spiritual Instruction for Women and the Emergence of Vernacular Religious Poetry,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1997), 144-145.
\item \textsuperscript{92} Matthäus Bernards, \textit{Speculum Virginum: Geistigkeit und Seelenleben der Frau im Hochmittelalter}, (Köln: Bohlau-Verlag, 1955), 6-13.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Powell, “The Mirror and the Woman,” 134.
\end{itemize}
meditation. They could of course take the lessons they had absorbed with others and explore them further while they were alone. The *Speculum* also contained illustrations in each chapter of similar design and placement in most medieval manuscript copies. Morgan Powell has demonstrated the key role that illustrations played in the *Speculum*. Each chapter contained at least one that acted as “starting points and structuring patterns of discussion.”94 As Powell has argued, women unable to read Latin could understand the basic meaning of the chapter through the pictures. A male instructor, such as a confessor or teacher, could then expand upon the meaning of the picture and its relationship to the text.95

At the same time, women could examine the pictures and use them as the starting points for solitary contemplation. Mary Carruthers has explained how one tangible image could commence an entire series of meditations. Pictures were pivotal in inspiring meditations particularly when they were located at strategic points within texts. Pictures were most effective at the beginning or the end of a text or section within a longer text. A picture at the beginning “serve [ed] as orienting maps of summaries of the matters which are developed within the work.”96 The reader could keep this image in their minds as they read over the following text. Carruthers pointed out many pictures could consist of a vivid written description but that others were actual images. “*Pictura* is a cognitive

instrument, serving invention in the same manner as words do.” For pictures to be effective mnemonic techniques, they needed vivid colors such as red and lines indicating shading and texture. They did not need to be realistic, just striking enough to imprint itself on a memory.

The illustrations of the Speculum reinforced the lessons in virtue and could also inspire further private meditation. I will describe the structure of the fourth book as an example. This book focused on the superiority of humilitas (humility) to superbia (pride). Humilitas, as Peregrinas had explained to Theodora, represented every virtue for which a virgin should strive—“the death of vices, the instrument of justice, the diligent nurse of discipline.” Although superbia specifically translates as pride, according to Peregrinus it encompassed a multitude of evils. It led to “the death of virtues, the source of vices, the mark of confusion, the mother of error, neglect to teachers, contempt of discipline.”

In the context of a monastery, where discipline and respect ruled daily life, superbia symbolized anarchy. Humilitas, in contrast, promoted order. Peregrinus had chosen Yael and Judith, the Hebrew warriors from the Old Testament, as examples of female humilitas. Judith, the Jewish heroine of the Book of Judith, had seduced and assassinated the Syrian general Holofernes. In the Book of Judges, Yael had defeated the warrior Sisera in battle. According to Peregrinus, women embody humilitas by nature because

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97 Carruthers, The Craft of Thought, 201.
99 “Porro humilitas regina virtutum est, mors viciorum, instrumentum iusticiae, nutrix sedula disciplinae . . .” Conrad of Hirsau, Speculum Virginum, 104.
100 “Superbia mors virtutum est, origo viciorum, nota confusionis, mater erroris, neglectus magisterii, disciplinae contemptus . . .” Conrad of Hirsau, Speculum Virginum, 101.
they are the weaker sex. A woman who achieved victory over men, either by guile or by force symbolized the victory of *humilitas* over *superbia*. Yael and Judith illustrated *humilitas*, because they had reversed the order of nature—the fragile sex overcame the stronger one. This concept was an abstract rendered tangible and memorable by the illustrations.

In Book IV of the *Speculum Virginum*, all Latin manuscripts contain illustrations of *humilitas* prevailing over *superbia*. The two earliest manuscripts, Arundel 44 and Köln W 276, each dating from the latter half of the twelfth century are particularly similar. They offered a clear visual summary of the textual lessons regarding the relative qualities of *humilitas* and *superbia* by demonstrating female strength defeating male weakness through a physical battle between women and men. Three women appear in the picture. Yael and Judith stand triumphantly overtop the prone figures of Sisara and Holofernes. In the center background, *Humilitas* in the form of a woman wields the death blow with a sword to a protesting *Superbia*. The figures of *Suberbia*, Holofernes, and Sisara are all men with helmets, shields, long flowing robes with decorated sashes and armbands. Sisara and Holofernes are already dead, and Judith and Yael are crushing their bodies with their feet. The figure of *Humilitas* is in the process of stabbing *Superbia’s* chest—blood is spurting out of his wound as he raises his arm to shield himself.

The colors of the two manuscripts are different but each striking in its own way. In the Arundel manuscript, there are three central colors — red, yellow, and green.

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Superbia’s dress, Sisara’s robe, the palm sprig in Judith’s hand, and that the spurting blood coming from the bodies of the male figures are red. The three women each have bright yellow hair that matches the helmets of the men. Red and yellow are each bright colors that would specifically stand out in a person’s memory. Yael’s green gown, Suberbia’s green robe, and Judith’s brown gown are in softer colors that set off the brighter ones. The Köln manuscript is entirely in black and red outlines with no shading. The gown of Humilitas is red. The red outlines set off the black ones in the same way as rubricated letters divided a manuscript page into clear subheadings. Mary Carruthers has explained that these colors worked not just as organizing principles but as mnemonic aids. The striking two-toned images of the Köln illustration could imprint themselves on the memories of a female audience, even an illiterate one which had learned the lessons of humilitas vs. superbia through oral instruction. They could ruminate upon these lessons in solitude, using them as a basis for prayer and meditation. Conrad recognized the need religious women possessed for a form of monastic meditation. He adapted his text to the limited abilities of women unable to read Latin fluently.

Meditation as Consumption

“Spiritual Nutrition” was another way of describing contemplative meditation. Mary Carruthers has argued that the metaphors of eating and digestion are so ubiquitous in monastic writing that they “should be considered another basic functional model for the complementary activities of reading and composition, collection and recollection.”

102 Mary Carruthers, The Book of Memory, 166.
The reader spoke the words with his mouth, swallowed them, and digested them. They then remained in his body as nourishment. “To meditate is to attach oneself closely to the sentence being recited and weigh all its words in order to sound the depths of their full meaning. It means assimilating the content of a text by means of a kind of mastication which releases its full flavor.”

Monastic writers used images of savoring and consumption to express the impact of reading, meditation, and prayer. The stomach could act as an image for the memory because it turned food into nourishment for the body as memory turned prayer into nourishment for the soul.

Goscelin of St. Bertin (c. 1040-1114) wrote an exhortatory text, the Liber Confortatorius, for his former pupil Eve (c. 1058-1120). Eve had been a nun at the aristocratic women’s house of Wilton where she had met Goscelin. Eve was a young child when she entered Wilton as an oblate c. 1064. The nuns at Wilton were of noble birth and received training in Latin literacy. Goscelin was probably a chaplain at Wilton. He may have held the official post of her tutor or he may have informally acted as her mentor. After 1078, Goscelin left for Wiltshire and returned to find that Eve had moved to Saint-Laurent du Tertre in Angers in order to become an anchoress. Around 1080, Goscelin wrote the Liber for Eve both to express his intense sadness and to encourage her new choice. It is the earliest prescriptive text for an anchoress to come from England.

The Liber is a different kind of exhortatory work from the Speculum or the letters of

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103 Leclercq, Love of Learning, 73.
105 Hollis, Writing the Wilton Women, 1-3.
Osbert of Clare because Goscelin was deeply in love with Eve. At the same time that he encouraged her spiritual growth he attempted to convey the depth of his loneliness. In terms of its emotional intensity, the Liber is similar to the letters between Abelard and Heloise.

Goscelin encouraged Eve to achieve spiritual betterment through meditation. Rebecca Hayword and Stephanie Hollis have examined the dynamic structure that governed the Liber Confortatorius. They described the shape of progressive spirals that characterized each book. The text is replete with images of reading, prayer, renunciation, and desire for Heaven. Goscelin continually described prayer in terms of consumption and digestion. He referred to scripture as wholesome food for the spirit. He used metaphors of abundance—the food that scripture provided was always a feast, never meager or lacking.

Understand therefore this also, that our thoughts sometimes did not bear fruit, but our spirits, that is, those powers that were given to our souls as aid, are fed and refreshed from the hearing of holy scripture, just as if from divine and rational food. Why do I say that divine virtues are fed and feasted in us, if we offer the words of divine scripture from our mouths? Our Lord Jesus Christ, if he finds us giving time to these things and paying attention to studies and exercises of this kind, will not only deign to be fed and refreshed in us, but also, if he sees these feasts prepared in us, think it worthy to bring his father with him.

Greed was not a positive characteristic for a religious woman, particularly an anchoress.

The point of a reclusive existence was denial of physical comfort, which included rich

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107 Goscelin, Liber Confortatorius, 141.
food and drink. When it came to the food of Scripture, however, Goscelin encouraged Eve to be gluttonous.

And thus I pray, beseech and implore this: that you take possession of sacred volumes with avidity and praiseworthy gluttony, and hunger for it as for the bread of life and thirst for it as for the fountain of life, to sharpen your little intellect, to draw on it with nectar, to fill your lamp with oil and to kindle it more and more to heavenly love.  

These images from a man to a woman are surprisingly gender neutral; they greatly resemble male monastic descriptions of contemplative meditation. At the beginning of his work, Goscelin stated his belief that gendered lessons were not necessary for spiritual growth. “These arms and this bravery, to which you are called forth, are not dependent on sex, age, or physical strength, but on mettle, on constancy, on a soul incomparable in the conquest of things.” Goscelin’s work differed from the prescriptive texts of Osbert and Conrad in its lack of concern over sexual purity. In contrast to Osbert’s letters and the Speculum Virginum, Goscelin is solely concerned with Eve’s spiritual success. He never warned her about safeguarding her chastity. His focus on her climb towards heaven over the maintenance of her virginity expressed itself in copious examples of traditional metaphors for contemplative meditation. The Liber adds fuel to the debate concerning the status of religious women, that is, did men view women as “equal in monastic profession” or did they constantly keep gender differences in mind?  

108 Goscelin, Liber Confortatorius, 163.  
109 Goscelin, Liber Confortatorius, 11.  
In his letter to Adelidis Osbert of Clare also used food metaphors, but in this case to represent her hospitality and kindness. He wrote this letter after having been her guest at Barking. As his hostess Adelidis had not only fed him tangible food but nourished him with friendship and goodwill.

Woman of virtue, never fear to extend your hand, since yesterday you have strengthened us in regaining our strength, you restored our mind not our stomach, you sent us out burdened not with eatables but with (indulgences?) . . . I esteem this reward more precious than another reward since in that one is appreciated affection not wealth, bounty is not paid but goodwill.\footnote{“... femina virtutis, ne formides manus extendere, quia nos hesterna solidasti refectione, refecisti mentem non ventrem, nec eduliis sed obsequius oneratu, remisisti. . . quod pretium omni pretio pretiosius aestimatur, quia in illo appreciatur affectus non census, nec largitas pensatur sed voluntas,” Osbert of Clare, \textit{Letters}, 154.}

While food acts symbolically here, it does so in a traditional feminine sense. Food and food preparation was a valued virtue associated with women in their capacity as managers of households.\footnote{Caroline Walker Bynum, \textit{Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 29-30.} While the evidence of the letter indicated Osbert’s deep commitment to the spiritual fulfillment of Adelidis, he never forgot for a moment that she was a woman. His continued use of female-related language demonstrated that for him, monastic meditation was a gendered experience. The \textit{Liber} of Goscelin revealed that not all men felt this way. Whether it was his familiarity with religious women at Barking and Wilton that influenced him or his personal attachment to Eve, Goscelin believed she could participate in meditation without the aid of gender specific metaphors.
Meditation from a female perspective

We know that authors such as Osbert, Conrad, and Goscelin considered monastic meditation a central aspect of female spirituality. Do we know how women received this advice regarding meditation and its spiritual benefits? How important was meditation to the women themselves? Did they take this advice to heart? Did they connect meditation with the struggle to remain sexually pure? One of the major issues we have in considering the monastic spirituality of women would be the question of literacy. Reading was an essential part of traditional meditation, but during the twelfth century, with the increase of adult converts and the number of women from the minor nobility who joined new orders, religious women were not always literate in Latin. How did this affect their ability to participate in monastic contemplation? We have no testimonials from the readers of Osbert and Conrad, unfortunately. We do have several texts that can give insight into the experiences of religious women at prayer. I will explore the firsthand accounts of Heloise and Hildegard von Bingen in subsequent chapters. For the remainder of this chapter, I will consider two texts that focus on specific women and the forms that their personal spirituality took, the vita of Christina of Markyate and the visionary texts of Elisabeth of Schönau.

Christina did not write the vita herself, but she was acquainted with the author.\textsuperscript{113} While many vites are formulaic, this one reveals intimate details that she had related to the author, probably a monk at the monastery of St. Albans. The author related a singular

tale of religious fervor. Her parents had destined her for marriage, so she did not enter a
monastery as a child oblate. She did not learn the skills of contemplative meditation as a
child. The extent of her literacy, therefore, is uncertain. She may have been able to read
Old English (her family was Anglo-Saxon) and not Latin, making her illiterate according
to the medieval definition of the word.\textsuperscript{114} Despite her lack of Latin literacy, contemplative
meditation comprised an important facet of her spirituality. In her \textit{vita}, whenever she
was beset by external troubles, she sought refuge in meditative prayer. At these
moments, she immersed her entire being in prayer, oblivious to her external
surroundings.

Christina’s efforts to devote her life to God brought her a great deal of trauma.
She was born around 1096-1098 as the daughter of Anglo-Saxon nobles. She desperately
wanted to remain a virgin and take the vows of a nun but her parents thought they could
find her a wealthy and noble husband for her. Christina spent her adolescence trying to
escape would-be seducers and to thwart her parents’ plans to marry her. She found her
first moments of freedom when she ran away to live under the care of a hermit, Roger.
So that her family would not find her, Christina hid in a back room of his cell which
Roger locked from the outside. He did not unfasten the door until the evening so that
Christina spent her days in solitude and physical discomfort. At night, however, Roger
unlocked the door and Christina was free to pray unhindered. Roger himself taught her
the pleasures of prayer.

\textsuperscript{114} Jane Geddes, \textit{The St. Albans Psalter: A Book for Christina of Markyate} (London: The
British Library, 2005), 114.
She prayed earnestly in those moments at night when she was free to devote herself to prayer and contemplative meditation, just as her friend Roger had trained her, first by word, then by example. Indeed, he taught her things about heavenly secrets which are hardly credible, and acted as if he were on earth only in body, whilst his whole mind was fixed on heaven.  

Roger possessed incredible concentration. As Christina witnessed firsthand, he could forget the circumstances of his immediate environment. Christina marveled to her hagiographer about a moment when Roger was so rapt in prayer that he failed to notice when his cowl caught fire. They prayed together in his chapel every day. Christina was a willing pupil. Her prayers led her to experience moments of pure joy, often bringing her to tears. “O how many tears of heavenly desire did they shed: on what rare delicacies of inward joy were they feasted!” Jean Leclercq has discussed the significance of tears in religious texts. Just as Christina’s hagiographer described, tears in the context of monastic prayer were not tears of sadness but tears of desire for heaven. These [tears were] . . . engendered by the perception of God’s sweetness, by the desire to enjoy it eternally.” Although Christina may not have known Latin, she could clearly enjoy the pleasures of contemplation. She may have learned certain biblical texts such as the Psalms by heart from listening to Roger’s prayers. Even though she could not read Latin phonetically, she could still have used books as memorial aids, combining her oral memory of prayers with the sight of a written page.

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115 Life of Christina, 105.
116 Life of Christina, 107.
117 Leclercq, Love of Learning, 58.
118 Geddes, The St. Albans Psalter, 114.
During Christina’s stay with Roger she also developed the ability to lose herself so entirely in prayer that she received visions of Heaven, Christ, and the Virgin Mary. These visions helped her resolve internal conflicts.

Wherefore a wonderful thing, more wonderful than any wonder, happened. For once when she was at prayer and was shedding tears through her longing for heaven, she was suddenly rapt above the clouds even to heaven, where she saw the queen of heaven sitting on a throne and angels in brightness seated about her.

In her vision, Christina’s power of sight was altered. She could stand to look directly at the incomparable brightness that surrounded the Virgin Mary. Mary asked Christina what she wished, and Christina replied that she longed to live in Roger’s cell after his death. Roger had already expressed this wish to her, but Christina had been reluctant to accept of her own accord. When Mary gave her consent, Christina felt certain that she should take over the hermitage. As Jean Leclercq has described, a vivid imagination was essential for contemplation. “It [imagination] permitted them to picture, ‘to make present,’ to see beings with all the details provided by the texts.”\(^\text{119}\) Prayer included the creation of realistic mental pictures.

Christina prayed intently when she felt herself falling victim to sexual temptation. After the death of Roger, she shared the cell of another man. The two developed a strong physical attraction for one another, no doubt intensified by their close living quarters. Christina tried to starve and whip her body into submission but she could not repress her desire. She eventually fled back to Roger’s cell, and “there day and night she knelt in

prayer, weeping, and lamenting and begging to be freed from temptation.”

She eventually found relief in another vision; Christ, in his boyhood form, appeared to her. Christina embraced him and felt her lust dissipate. This anecdote is remarkably honest about the extent of her passion. “She used to be so inwardly inflamed that she thought the clothes which clung to her body might be set on fire.”

As Osbert and Conrad had recommended to their female readers, Christina immersed herself in thoughts of Heaven when she felt her resolve slipping in the face of sexual desire.

After the death of Roger and before she took in disciples whom she needed to oversee, Christina spent her solitary days entirely devoted to prayer. Alone with her prayers she was at her happiest.

The maiden therefore remained in her solitude free from care: she took advantage of the peace which she had so long desired to meditate on the mercy with which Christ had delivered her from so many perils. And being astonished at the greatness of the grace, she offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving everyday to her deliverer. This then was her one joy, her only purpose, to spend her time in praising God and in giving thanks.

Christina was no stranger to sexual desire but she viewed prayer as its perfect antidote. It is notable that Christina did not fear the attentions of men despite the very real dangers all of sexual assault she had faced from Burthred and others. There are no warnings in the vita against interaction with men or the need for religious women to remain separate themselves. Christina felt herself able to handle men even when they approached her with hostility. Prayer gave her strength to escape from potentially dangerous situations or

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120 Life of Christina, 117.
121 Life of Christina, 117.
122 Life of Christina, 119.
to steel herself against physical attraction to others. She was not concerned with the
enclosure of herself or other nuns, particularly as she relied upon men for financial aid as
well as meaningful friendships. After she attracted more women to Markyate, she began
interacting with men more than ever. She required the financial and spiritual aid of the
monks of St. Albans. In her dealings with St. Albans, she formed the most significant
relationship of her life with abbot Geoffrey. As Sharon Elkins has explained, “men were
her main mentors, and they were the ones who gave form to her religious life.”

Even though Burthred had threatened her chastity, Roger had hid her and taught her how to
pray. Bishop Ralph of Durham had attempted to rape her but the canon Sueno had
couraged her to persevere in her vows. She never suggested that religious men and
women required segregation.

The next text I will examine is the collection of visionary writings of Elisabeth of
Schönau. They offer a unique view of the experiences of female contemplative
meditations. She herself did not physically write the original manuscripts; her brother
Ekbert acted as her editor. He organized her visions into a coherent text and composed
introductions. Ekbert did, however, greatly respect his sister’s connection with the
divine, devoting his entire life to her care. Originally a canon at Saint Cassius in Bonn,
he took monastic vows and joined Schönau in order to act as her confessor, secretary, and
editor. It was his life’s work to record her words as faithfully as possible. From the
evidence of her visionary texts, therefore, we can determine that prayer, reading, and

\[^{123}\text{Elkins, } \text{Holy Women}, \text{ 38.}\]
meditation were integral to the spirituality of Elisabeth. As with Christina, her prayers led her to experience visions, but of a different variety than those of Christina or the monks who wrote about contemplative meditation. Elisabeth’s visions prefigured those of later women like Christina the Astonishing, Catherine of Siena, and Hadjwich of Brabant. Most of those women were not members of traditional Benedictine monasticism but rather lived as beguines, recluses, or even in secular family settings. They tended to be from merchant or middle class backgrounds. Like these women, Elisabeth’s visions were all-consuming, accompanied by illness and ecstasy but unlike them she was from a noble background and a traditional monastic background.

She entered the monastery of Schönau c. 1141 at the age of twelve and her parents were probably minor nobles dependent upon the Laurenberg counts, the aristocratic patrons of Schönau.124 Her first vision occurred in 1152 at the age of twenty-three. At first, she could not always control when she experienced visions. They seized her during moments of great illness. They were accompanied by fits of ecstasy in which she lost all control of her words and movements. During her illness, the attending nuns scribbled down the words she shouted out. In her state of delirium, she described horrifying imagery of devils tormenting her. At other times, she found comfort in the presence of the Virgin Mary at the foot of her bed. The nature of her visions continued to evolve, but their source never dried up. Until her death around 1165, she endured grave illness followed by floods of visions. Her visionary books included the following: the Liber

Viarum Dei, modeled on the Scivias of Hildegard von Bingen, the Revelatio, a compilation of her visions concerning St. Ursula, and the Visio de Resurrectione Beate Virginis, her visions concerning the corporeal ascension of Mary.\textsuperscript{125}

We do not know for certain the extent of Elisabeth’s Latin literacy. In the First Book of Visions, Eckbert insisted that her visions must come from God because Elisabeth shouted Latin phrases she could never have learned.

\ldots after a long trance, when her spirit had been gradually restored, she would suddenly utter in Latin certain very divine words that she had never learned from anyone else and that she could not have made up herself since she was unlearned and had little or no skill in speaking Latin.\textsuperscript{126}

Eckbert also explained that she cried out in a mixture of Latin and German so that when he recorded her words he translated the German into Latin. Anne Clark has pointed out, however, that Eckbert used Elisabeth’s illiteracy to emphasize the divine nature of her visions. He also did so to minimize his own role in the production of her texts, perhaps to counteract accusations that he had composed them himself.\textsuperscript{127} Anne Clark has argued that she may indeed have been literate. Having lived in a monastery since the age of twelve, Elisabeth could have learned to read Latin. If her parents had intended her for a monastic life since early childhood, they could have also given her instructors. At one point, she described herself as reading a copy of the Psalter. She may have been entirely literate or she may have memorized the Psalms and other biblical passages through a

\textsuperscript{125} See discussion of Elisabeth and Hildegard in Chapter V.
\textsuperscript{126} Elisabeth of Schönau, “First Book of Visions,” 41.
\textsuperscript{127} Anne Clark, Elisabeth of Schönau, 30.
lifetime of repetition. If this was the case, however, it did not affect her ability to immerse herself in meditative experience.

Elisabeth’s visions were deeply entwined with her experiences of reading and prayer. Her first visionary episode came after days of extreme illness that left her weak and unable to consume food. She also felt deep depression which she described as “walking in shadows.”128 As she first began to succumb to despair, she tried to find comfort in reading the Psalter, indicating she could at least follow the structure of the text. She felt overwhelmed by the Devil and threw the book away. Over the following days, she had visions of phantoms during moments of communal prayer. They generally occurred during the monastic services. One day during Matins, she saw a fiery bull with talons which then changed into a hideous dog.129 On the following Saturday during the Mass of Our Lady the Blessed Virgin, the horrific visions finally ceased and in her words, she “sank into ecstasy.” She had her first vision of the Virgin Mary surrounded by dazzling light. During Vespers and Compline that same day and the following she saw a variety of images including bulls, Mary, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. The images of beauty and light frequently appeared as she lay prostrate in prayer or during moments of reading.

. . . on the feast of the blessed martyrs John and Paul, at the time of Matins, while I was reading fifty psalms in honor of these martyrs, I saw them standing together in a very glorious light, facing east with their backs turned toward me. When I

128 Elisabeth of Schönau, “First Book of Visions,” 44.
finished my prayers, I very diligently entreated them to deign to turn their faces to me.\footnote{130} Her visions were connected to the subjects of the prayers to which she was listening. She saw Mary Magdalene at Vespers on the vigil of her feast. She likewise viewed Peter and Paul at Vespers on their feasts, the eleven thousand holy virgins on their feast, and so on.

As her visions progressed, she understood this pattern and could predict their arrival. “. . . with the feast of the Lord’s birth approaching, for two days before the feast I prepared for my impending suffering. Indeed, as often as I thought about the dignity of the upcoming solemnity, I was distressed and all my strength was sapped as if I were about to go into ecstasy.”\footnote{131} As she grew older, she was able to control the moment when she entered into a visionary state and even the nature of her encounters with the divine. Her brother Ekbert and other religious men asked her specific questions and she would deliberately experience a vision in which she sought the answer. The \textit{Revelatio}, for example, chronicled a series of visions she experienced at the specific request of the Bishop of Cologne. Builders had discovered a Roman graveyard outside the walls of Cologne, and contemporaries assumed them to be the remains of St. Ursula and her eleven thousand virgin martyrs, early Christian women who had traveled from Briton to visit Rome, but ended up in a horrific massacre with pagan men. To the puzzlement of the Bishop of Cologne, however, the remains of men and children were also uncovered. The Bishop asked Elizabeth to direct her visions towards this unexpected discovery. She

\footnote{130} Elisabeth of Schönau, “First Book of Visions,” 51.\footnote{131} Elisabeth of Schönau, “First Book of Visions,” 65.
specifically envisioned conversations with Verena, a companion of Ursula. Verena explained that the traveling community consisting not only of Ursula and other female virgin, but their confessors, betrothed husbands, nieces, and nephews as well. The group of men and women all lived together in perfect chastity and were therefore compatible with the story of Ursula. Elisabeth recorded that she received her visions through private prayer during the celebration of the Mass.

For a while I was thinking about these things and hoping to receive from the Lord the revelations that were demanded of me. . . . While the office of the Mass was being celebrated for them, a certain torment of heart came upon me that I used to suffer when the mysteries of God had first begun to be revealed to me.\textsuperscript{132}

The subsequent ecstasy led to her first encounter with Verena who began to tell her lengthy tale of departure from Britain. As Elisabeth listened, she asked Verena questions based upon her own knowledge of the story. As she explained, “I juxtaposed what she has said with what is read in the history of virgins.”\textsuperscript{133} Although she did not use traditional images such as tears or digestion, she was describing a process similar to the practice of monastic prayer and reading using what she had learned, either read, or memorized, or some combination with prayer, allowing her to enter into a state of extremely active meditation, so active that she could converse with the subject of her prayers.

Christina and Elisabeth used prayer as a starting point for their visions. Most of Elisabeth’s ecstasies occurred during communal prayer or private meditations. Both


\textsuperscript{133} Elisabeth of Schönau, “Revelations,” 216.
Elisabeth and Christina found meditation deeply affecting. Elisabeth never connected it to a need to maintain her virginity; this was not a concern that she voiced. Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that women who had grown up in monasteries were less likely than adult converts to worry about sexual temptation.\textsuperscript{134} Since Elisabeth had spent her life in a monastery, she may have possessed a stronger sense of herself as a religious person rather than a woman with all her inherent weaknesses. In her \textit{vita}, Christina displayed a constant fear of sexual assault or seduction. Many of the men she encountered related to her sexually. Despite her constant need to defend her chastity, she did not fear the urges of men. In every instance, she displayed confidence that she could resolve the situation through prayer. She never suggested that she was safest behind walls among other women. Men acted as her protectors as well as her assailants. It was male authors such as Conrad and Osbert who expressed the desire to segregate religious women from men. Neither Christina nor Elisabeth had internalized the idea of womanly vulnerability to such an extent that they felt the need for protection from religious men.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Conrad, Osbert, and Goscelin all agreed that meditation was important for women. When composing prescriptive texts for women, they relied upon the rich imagery of monastic prayer such as tears, bedrooms, mirrors, consumption, and tabernacles. Some authors chose to add feminine interpretations to these symbols to make them more relevant to the lives of religious women, particularly to warn them about

\textsuperscript{134} Bynum, \textit{Holy Feast, Holy Fast}, 28-29.
the importance of sexual purity. They could best accomplish this by avoiding secular men and maintaining their distance from religious ones. In the Liber of Goscelin, we see less concern about sexual purity. Along with this, the traditional metaphors appear in a gender neutral context, demonstrating the lack of any singular view on religious women. Conrad of Hirsau and the male clerics who used the Speculum for the cura monalium recognized the importance of meditation even when the Latin literacy of women was limited. For those women who may have known only the vernacular, the users of the Speculum hoped to create a different kind of meditative contemplation, one based on images and oral lessons.

In texts that express a woman’s perspective, at least to some extent, we also see the centrality of contemplative meditation for female spirituality. Both Elisabeth and Christina found meditation an essential component of their spirituality. Christina used meditative prayer to give her strength during her many trials. Elisabeth used prayer as an entry point into her visionary world. Neither of them considered the level of their literacy to be a hindrance in their prayers. They also did not shape their meditations with gender specific imagery such as mirrors or enclosed bedrooms. At the same time, they did not focus their prayers disproportionately on the idea of retreat from men or described themselves as more vulnerable than men to sexual assault or temptation. The gender neutral nature of their prayers supports the argument that Penelope Johnson first raised regarding eleventh and twelfth-century nuns—that they viewed themselves as religious
people rather than religious women, that is “equal in monastic profession” to men. In subsequent chapters I will explore female spirituality further by examining the works of Heloise and Hildegard. I consider how they negotiated between spiritual growth and their gender.

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CHAPTER 3

THE ANONYMOUS HEROINE: AELRED OF RIEVAULX’S RULE FOR HIS SISTER

“For many years, now, you have asked me, sister, to impose spiritual exercises to which you will be able to direct your ways and the necessary things of religion. Would that you had sought and obtained for that purpose a more wise person, one who did not forget with conjectures any way you please but taught others with experiences. Certainly since I to am to you your brother in flesh and in spirit, I am not able to deny whatever you impose upon me.”

Aelred of Rievaulx

Aelred, the abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Rievaulx, (c. 1110- d. 1164), began his book of spiritual guidance, known as De Institutione Inclusarum or the Rule of Life for Recluses with the above passage. He composed this work for his sister, an anchoress in Yorkshire. Anchoresses were religious women who lived in solitude as if they were dead to the world. Aelred designed his Rule both to address the practical requirements of her life and to offer her meditative models. Although he offered a few hints about their past relationship, Aelred gave little substantial information about his sister’s background or personality. This is in stark contrast to his own literary persona.

137 Aelred of Rievaulx “De Institutione” 635-682.
In this work and others he shared deeply personal stories about himself as abbot and friend in order to instruct his readers. Despite being the subject and recipient of the Rule, Aelred’s sister is an enigmatic character, devoid of personal characteristics, background, and most significantly, a name. In this chapter, I begin exploring the spiritual lessons of Aelred’s Rule by considering how he constructed his sister’s identity and why he chose to conceal her name. I also consider the implications of her identity, or lack of identity, for feminine spirituality. I argue that the anonymity of Aelred’s sister is pivotal to the understanding of her spiritual experience.

By withholding his sister’s name, Aelred concealed a great deal of personal information about her. Her name would provide knowledge of her connection to other people as well as endow her with a recognizable social status. It might evoke a godparent, a patron saint, or a relative. We are missing other vital information about her as well; we do not know her age or the circumstances that led her to chose a religious life. Aelred made a deliberate choice not to reveal his sister’s name. Medieval writers commonly introduced their texts by describing its intended dedicatee or patron. Such an introduction could describe the nature of the project, the virtues of the recipient, and the inadequacy of the author to live up to the task. By not including her name, Aelred was deviating from a common pattern, and we can, therefore, interpret her anonymity as significant.

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Biographical Information

Aelred’s sister has suffered from a lack of interest among modern scholars. The majority have considered that there is simply too little information about her life. Aelred’s most well-known modern biographer, Aelred Squire, discussed the outline of the Rule but barely mentioned its recipient.\textsuperscript{140} A more recent biographer, Brian Patrick McGuire, regarded her as incidental to Aelred’s life and focused on both her and the Rule only briefly. Over the past twenty years, the Rule itself has attracted attention as an example of contemplative mediation that drew its emotional center from experience. Bernard McGinn discussed its bridal mysticism and emphasis on experiential theology in his study of medieval mysticism. In an insightful article, Marsha Dutton has argued convincingly that the mystical yearning for Heaven stands out as the central theme of the Rule. While these readings of the Rule are essential to understanding its contemplative potential, I argue that we can also learn a great deal about the relationship between Aelred and his sister. Knowledge of this relationship will in turn lead us to a greater understanding of how he perceived feminine spirituality.

We have some limited knowledge of her based on the Life of Aelred by Walter Daniel, a Cistercian monk of Rievaulx, as well as the few hints Aelred himself offered in the Rule. Walter Daniel mentioned her once while discussing Aelred’s writings:

And after these [his previous works, including Spiritual Friendship] he wrote a book to his sister, the chaste virgin who was a recluse, in which he traced the

\textsuperscript{140} Aelred Squire, Aelred of Rievaulx: A Study (London: Cistercian Studies Series, 1969).
course of this kind of profession from the ardor of the entrance into the same to its perfection.141

We know from the *vita* as well as other sources that Aelred and his siblings were born in Hexham in Northern England. Aelred himself was born around 1110.142 Their father and their grandfather, both named Elias, had been priests. Aelred and his sister were, therefore, the children of either a married priest or a priest and his concubine. During the lifetime of Eilas, the custom of priestly marriage had begun to receive a great deal of criticism but it had not yet died out.143 In 1138, Eilas became gravely ill. He took the vows of a monk at the monastery of Durham, dying shortly afterwards. He had at least four children, Aelred, his sister, and two brothers, Samuel and Ethelwold.144 We know little of their mother or whether all four children shared the same mother. Aelred made clear, however, that he and his sister did share the same two parents.

And up to this point we have run together, sister, for whom the same condition was one, who the same father bore, who the same womb embraced, who the same flesh and blood poured out. Now in me, sister, heed how much the Lord has done for your soul. For he has divided you and me from each other, just as light and shadow from each other, preserving you for him, relinquishing me to myself.145

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145 “Hucusque simul cucurrimus, soror, quibus una fuit eademque conditio, quos idem pater genuit, idem venter complexus est, eadem viscera profuderunt. Iam nunc in me, soror, adverte, quanta fecerit Deus animae tuae. Divisit enim inter te et me quasi inter lucem et tenebras, te sibi conservans, me mihi relinquens,” Aelred of Rievaulx, *De Institutione*, 673-674.
Marsha Dutton has suggested that Aelred was the youngest of the brothers followed by his sister. She pointed to Walter Daniel’s letter to the Abbot Maurice, in which he recounted an incident from Aelred’s childhood. An Archdeacon named William of Thole came to visit Aelred’s parents when their son was a baby “lying in his cradle” and during his stay he marveled at the joy the boy felt at the presence of the sun in the sky. When Aelred was older, his parents and his brothers often repeated the story to him. The omission of his sister suggested that she had not been born yet. At some point before 1134, Aelred left his family to serve at the court of King David of Scotland.

In 1134, Aelred permanently joined the Cistercian monastery of Rievaulx. He spent most of his life living apart from his sister. In the text of the Rule, however, Aelred demonstrated a close and affectionate connection to his sister and maintained contact with her throughout his lifetime. He spoke of their personal conversations as both children and adults. “Call to mind, if you please, my foulnesses, on account of which you lamented for me and have reproached me often, as a girl to a boy, as a woman to a man.” These words suggest that they were relatively close in age. If Aelred and his sister were indeed the two youngest siblings, as Dutton suggested, that might explain their close relationship during childhood and adulthood. We do not know the exact nature of this “foulness” but Aelred reported that he was most ashamed of his

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148 “Recole, si placet, illas foeditates meas pro quibus me plangebas et corripiebas saepe puella puerum, femina masculum,” Aelred of Rievaulx, De Institutione, 674.
indiscretions as a young man serving at the court of King David and his early behavior at Rievaulx. In order for his sister to have chastised him as a woman as well as a girl, they must have continued to communicate with each other through letters and visits after Aelred had departed his childhood home. Brian Patrick McGuire, Aelred’s recent biographer, has insisted that Aelred’s relationship to his sister was distant at best, both as a brother and a spiritual advisor.149 “Aelred conveys himself as a man who had little room for women in his emotional and spiritual life.”150 McGuire’s view dismissed the significance of the Rule and downplayed Aelred’s commitment to his sister and the sensitivity he displayed to the concerns of female recluses. McGuire suggested that Aelred may have been in fosterage as a small child and he connected Aelred’s perceived disinterest in his sister, and women in general, with his distant relationship to his mother. Since we know even less about Aelred’s mother than about his sister, I do not find this argument valid. Aelred interacted with many people during his lifetime, and he only wrote texts for a few of them. The existence of the Rule indicated his concern for his sister on a personal level. His careful consideration of the specific issues she faced as a woman dedicated to God demonstrated his interest in the spiritual needs of women.

McGuire believed that Aelred would have received no benefit from adult communication with his sister, insisting that Aelred was not interested in the spiritual needs of women and preferred the all-male world of Rievaulx. Fiona Griffiths, however,

150 McGuire, Brother and Lover, 30.
has recently demonstrated the importance of the brother-sister relationship in medieval monastic culture. The tie between a brother and a sister constituted one of the few acceptable relationships for religious men and women.\footnote{Fiona Griffiths, “Family Ties and Contact between the Sexes within the Medieval Religious Life,” Unpublished Paper.} She explained that twelfth-century monks viewed the paradigm of fraternal and sororal affection as an answer to the questions of sexual purity surrounding the \textit{cura monalium}. Men needed to care for religious women, but they had to do so in a way that would not endanger their own souls. Fears of sexual temptation generally did not apply to encounters between blood relatives, as they would have between unrelated men and women. Multiple precedents of saintly brother and sister pairs such as St. Benedict and Scholastica existed to lend these relationships legitimacy. As I discuss in Chapter V, brothers and sisters who joined religious houses kept in touch with each other through letters and sometimes visits. There are multiple twelfth-century examples including Christina of Markyate and her brother Gregory of St. Albans, and Abbot Geoffrey of St. Albans and his sister Lettice of Markyate. Although this was not the case for Aelred and his sister, siblings could also live together in double houses, as did Elisabeth and Eckbert of Schönau. It is true that we do not know how long Aelred’s sister lived as a secular woman before devoting herself to a religious lifestyle. Penelope Johnson and Mayke de Jong have explained, however, that families did not lose touch with their relatives in monasteries because they valued their
connections to a more spiritual way of life. They hoped for the intercessory prayers of their less sinful relatives. Monks and nuns existed in wider social networks that included their biological relatives and their monastic brethren. It is more than conceivable, therefore, that Aelred and his sister remained in contact with each other as adults and that the Rule is the only written evidence of a lengthy and meaningful relationship.

Marsha Dutton has suggested that she was a fictional character, an exemplary figure Aelred created in order to instruct a female audience. There were medieval writers who addressed texts to anonymous friends that they actually intended for a wide audience. Abelard, for example, wrote his Historia Calamitatum supposedly to inform an unnamed acquaintance about his troubles. The information that Aelred provided about their relationship, however, indicates that this woman was indeed a real person, and there is nothing about what we know of her life that is not plausible given the context. She was the daughter of a minor Anglo-Saxon gentry family and the product of a union between a priest and his wife or concubine. She possessed at least one brother who took monastic orders and she herself pursued a religious life. The details of her life resemble those of a contemporary woman about whom we know a bit more—Christina of Markyate. Christina’s parents, minor Anglo-Saxon nobles, were lawfully married, but her aunt

Alveva was involved in a long-term relationship with Ralph, the bishop of Durham and bore him several children. Christina, as well, pursued a semi-solitary religious life, and received the aid of sympathetic male mentors. Several of her siblings entered the religious life—her brother Gregory and sister Margaret. Walter Daniel, Aelred’s hagiographer, was acquainted with Aelred and composed much of the *vita* from his own observation. He substantiated the existence of Aelred’s sister and we have no reason to doubt his word. No one has suggested that the other dedicatees of Aelred’s works such as Yvo of Wardon were fictional.

**The Anonymity of Aelred’s Sister**

Given the strong relationship that I believe Aelred enjoyed with his sister, why did he choose to conceal her name? An examination of their relationship alone will not provide the answer, as Aelred was an author as well as a brother. The *Rule* was more than a collection of intimate words to a beloved sister; it was also a text that he constructed with all the force of his considerable literary talent. As he mentioned several times, he was aware that other women to whom he was not related might have the opportunity to read it. Why then would an author deliberately create an unnamed character, specifically a female character? Christian medieval literature has several examples of unnamed female characters, particularly the personal narratives of Augustine and Guibert of Nogent. I explain now how these texts may shed light on Aelred’s intentions. In his *Confessions*, Augustine never named his long-term concubine, although

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she stands out to many readers as one of the most memorable figures.\textsuperscript{155} We know that he lived with her during his youth and that she bore him a beloved son, Adeodatus, the gift of God. He repudiated her at the request of his mother Monica who had arranged a marriage for him with a respectable virgin.\textsuperscript{156} The marriage never took place, as Augustine would turn towards celibacy and eventually Christianity. Augustine briefly but eloquently referred to his passionate attachment to his mistress. He described his heartbreak over their separation as a physical wound to his body. Despite the intensity of his emotions, he referred to her only as “a woman.” “In those years I had a woman.” Her name was of little importance to the arc of his life story. As a concubine, she was a woman with no social status and no family connections. Her name would have signaled nothing to a potential audience. Peter Brown pointed out that “our curiosity about her is a very modern preoccupation, which Augustine and his cultivated friends would have found strange.”\textsuperscript{157} What was significant about her identity was her gender. She was a woman, and therefore a participant in Augustine’s physical pleasure and the bearer of his child. “She [a Roman gentleman’s concubine] would be his housekeeper, the mother of his sons, of considerably lower class than himself.”\textsuperscript{158} His description of the sexual nature of their relationship was also necessary to emphasize the strength of his later conversion to celibacy. In this sense, he told all that was necessary about her.

\textsuperscript{156} Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, 109.
\textsuperscript{157} Peter Brown, \textit{Augustine of Hippo} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970) 62.
\textsuperscript{158} Brown, \textit{Augustine}, 62.
In his autobiographical work *De Vita Sua*, Guibert of Nogent (c. 1055-c. 1155) vividly described the impact of his mother upon his early years. Mary Martin McLaughlin has analyzed their complex relationship extensively, describing the love, jealousy, and resentment that Guibert felt towards her. His father died shortly after his birth, and his mother refused to marry again, despite the entreaties and threats of her in-laws. She engaged a tutor for Guibert who acted as a father figure for the young boy. Guibert admitted feeling jealousy towards him when he witnessed him engaged in lengthy conversations with his mother. When Guibert turned twelve, she gave away her wealth and devoted herself to the life of an urban recluse. She entered a cell attached to the abbey church of St. Germer-de-Fly and arranged for Guibert to finish his education among the monks at the abbey. Guibert was distraught over this abandonment. As he related, “while she was divorcing herself from the world in the manner I have described, I was left without a mother, teacher, and master. . . . Possessing a perverted liberty, I began without any self-control to abuse my power.” Although she overshadowed the entire narrative, Guibert never gave her name to his readers. Unlike Augustine’s mistress, she was an aristocratic woman with family connections and sizable property. Guibert’s

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161 Guibert of Nogent, *Self and Society*, 76.
decision to exclude her name from the narrative may have been entirely selfish.\textsuperscript{162} For Guibert, her role as his mother surpassed every other aspect of her life. He had been jealous of any other man in her life, including his father, and frustrated at his inability to keep her by his side when she became a recluse. Denying her a name in his memories can be read as an act of ultimate possession. For centuries of readers, she would be known only through the motherhood that she had relinquished.

For both these authors, their memories of these women were intensely personal. Augustine’s mistress and Guibert’s mother were not the main subjects of the narrative. They are valuable in terms of the greater context of women’s history, as they testify to women’s relative lack of education and the relative scarcity of texts in their own words. The dynamics behind Aelred’s sister’s anonymity, however, are more subtle and perhaps more complex. Unlike Augustine’s mistress, she was clearly of equal social stature to her brother, and their relationship was both permanent and respectable. Unlike Guibert’s mother, their relationship was positive and not tinged with repressed sexual guilt and feelings of abandonment. These two women, compelling characters though they may be, are secondary players in a larger narrative about the development of male spirituality. Aelred’s sister, in contrast, figured as the main subject of the text and the reason for its creation. The \textit{Rule} described her dynamic journey towards spiritual fulfillment and

entrance into Heaven. If applying the standards of a novel, she would stand out as the heroine. Despite our lack of knowledge about her background, her presence permeated the pages of the Rule. We still need another work of literature, even another literary genre, with which to approach the questions Aelred’s sister presents to us.

Daphne du Maurier’s 1938 novel, Rebecca, offers a modern example of a nameless heroine that may illuminate the issues surrounding Aelred’s sister. Rebecca has been the focus of a great deal of feminist criticism that considers the tension surrounding an unnamed woman. Without losing sight of the historical context that influenced Aelred’s writing, I will use the framework of Rebecca to discuss the significance of anonymity in a female character. In her greatest bestseller du Maurier created a modern retelling of the Bluebeard fairytale, in which an innocent virgin marries a wealthy older man only to discover that he has murdered all his previous wives. Variations of this theme have appeared as well in such classic novels as Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre and Samuel Richardson’s Pamela. At the beginning of the story, the heroine of Rebecca recalled her how she met the man who transformed her life. She had been a penniless orphan who earned a meager living as a companion to an older woman. On a seaside vacation in Monte Carlo, she met Maxim de Winter, a wealthy widower haunted by the memory of his recently deceased wife, Rebecca, who had drowned during a boating accident. Within a few days, Maxim proposed to her, attracted by her youthful innocence. Her marriage instantly elevated her to the status of a wealthy society lady as

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well as the mistress of Manderley, Maxim’s ancestral mansion in Cornwall. From the instant the couple arrived at Manderley, however, the heroine felt overshadowed by the presence of Rebecca. The sinister housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers, terrified the heroine and continually referred to her as “the second Mrs. de Winter.” As the novel unfolded, the second Mrs. de Winter experienced an increasing sense of dread over her husband’s indifference, her inability to function in society, and the continual reappearance of characters from Rebecca’s past. Her attempts to assert her own identity failed drastically. The story took a dramatic turn when Rebecca’s body resurfaced, and Maxim admitted that in reality he had hated Rebecca bitterly and murdered her in revenge for her repeated infidelities. A court eventually acquitted Maxim of Rebecca’s murder, but the couple returned to Manderley only to find the mansion in flames, possibly at the hand of Mrs. Danvers. The de Winters turned to a life of aimless traveling in order to escape the persistent rumors of murder.

Despite being dead before the novel’s opening, Rebecca not only possessed a name but a full-fledged personality as well. The reader learns of both her public persona as the charming hostess of Manderley as well as her secret sexual proclivities which included incest and possibly lesbianism. The novel discussed aspects of her life such as her chic fashion sense, her skill at riding, sailing, and hunting, and her firm handwriting. Du Maurier described her physical appearance in detail while she kept descriptions of the heroine vague. The heroine, on the other hand, began the story with no identity. We only know that she is not Rebecca, and therefore, the opposite of the sum of Rebecca’s
parts. She has no money, no family, no skills, and no self-confidence. Through the voices of her friends and relatives, Rebecca is a fully-realized figure, while the heroine consisted of an absence of characteristics. To use a medieval metaphor, she was a wax seal waiting for an imprint.

For the majority of the novel, the heroine feared the powerful memory of her husband’s first wife. She dreaded the constant reminders of Rebecca, believing herself to be inferior in every way. Only after she learned that Maxim had not loved Rebecca did she acquire any degree of self-confidence. Feminist literary critics such as Alison Light Avril Horner, Sue Zlosnik, and Tania Modeleski, however, have considered the power of Rebecca as a positive force in the second Mrs. de Winter’s life. They viewed the confident and determined Rebecca as an ideal role model for the shy and retiring heroine. The novel chronicled the second wife’s transformation into a Rebecca-like persona. Throughout the novel, the heroine found herself assuming Rebecca’s physical appearance (she unwittingly wears Rebecca’s costume for a masquerade ball), her social attachments (Rebecca’s husband and in-laws), and her lifestyle (society hostess). Her assumption of another woman’s life was not difficult, due to her own lack of identifying characteristics, social ties, and family. Characters such as Mrs. Danvers actively encourage this submersion. She placed the second Mrs. de Winter in Rebecca’s office with Rebecca’s

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stationary and letters, she dressed her in her clothes, and she coaxed her to replicate Rebecca’s actions. Mrs. Danvers later positioned the heroine as the object of her own erotic fantasies about Rebecca.

Despite her resistance to Rebecca’s memory, the heroine eventually shed her own unassuming personality and became more like her dead rival—assertive, forceful, and sexually aware. While some readers perceived Rebecca’s presence as threatening, the feminist reader comes to realize that Rebecca unwittingly inspired the shy and bland heroine. When she replaced her own painful past and unassuming personality traits with Rebecca’s self-possession, she truly became a confident adult who could, albeit briefly, enjoy her new life as a married woman. “Her quest must therefore be for knowledge, and the opening of the novel shows us a woman who eventually gains that knowledge.” The heroine’s emergence into a second Rebecca, therefore, was a rewarding, if painful experience. Feminist scholars have viewed the story as a coming-of-age tale as well as Gothic thriller. The travails of the heroine have fashioned her into an adult, mature in wisdom as well as age.

We have some insight, finally, into Aelred’s sister. The function of her anonymity, I would suggest, most closely conformed to that of Rebecca’s heroine. Like the novel, the Rule is a dynamic text, one that both detailed an interior journey for the subject/heroine to take and instigated one in the reader/recipient, the sister. Just as

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165 Horner and Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier*, 123.
166 Horner and Zlosnik, 103.
Maxim’s wife and Rebecca’s successor went from mousy nonentity to confident adult, Aelred’s sister began the *Rule* as one person and became a better one by the end.

The end result here is not the same, naturally, because we are dealing with different worlds and genres. In the world of the Gothic novel, or neo-Gothic novel, the goal is the shedding of a past life to achieve marriage, social status, and self-possession; in Aelred, the goal is the relinquishment of a past life to achieve spiritual growth and the attainment of Heaven.  But the texts, however, reveal strikingly similar constructions. In each a woman must leave behind her old self completely and experience a total breakdown of everything familiar in order to emerge as a new and better self. The lack of a name is incredibly significant in both cases, I argue, for similar reasons, because it prepared them to accept a new and better spiritual or emotional state.

Aelred’s sister’s name was a characteristic that did tie her to world as it identified her as a being with familial and social ties. These aspects of her self bound her to her secular life, which Aelred hoped she would eventually forget during the course of her new life as an anchoress. An anchoress was different from a nun who embraced a cenobitic lifestyle. Her living situation separated her from the secular world, or even human companionship. The occupations of the anchoress was manual labor, usually in the form of needlework, as well as reading and prayer. She was meant to avoid friendship and even casual conversations with visitors. She may have retained a female servant who could undertake errands. Aelred specifically cautioned her against chatting with those...

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outside her cell, friends, neighbors, the curious who passed by. He forbade her to teach local children, as her affection for them would distract her from thoughts of Heaven.

This process of separating oneself from human companionship was essential to the life of anchoress. A successful anchoress was one who had achieved a state of living death. The initiation ceremonies for an anchoress expressed this idea of symbolic death to the world:

English medieval enclosure ceremonies varied in length and complexity. Some were more dramatic than others, but all concluded with the sealing of the door of the anchorhold after the anchorite had entered. The psychological impact of the walling up of the recluse forces the modern mind to thoughts of incarceration as punishment, the cell as a prison, and the anchorite existence as a living death. All of these themes were in fact accepted and even utilized in the medieval period.\(^{169}\)

Ceremonies also included the Office of Extreme Unction and prayers for the dead. In the Rule, Aelred described the state of mind he hoped his sister would achieve as a kind of living death. “This is your part, most dear one, that dead to the world and also buried, you ought to be deaf to all those people of the world who are listening and mute to all those who are speaking, nor ought you to be distracted but engrossed, not filled but drained.”\(^{170}\)

Her mind could not be preoccupied with earthly concerns, but should be entirely wrapped up in thoughts of Heaven. This death had to take hold of her body as well. Through fasting and other forms of asceticism she would negate her body to such an extent that her physical needs were practically nonexistent. Lust, hunger, cold, and heat would no

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169 Warren, Anchorites and Their Patrons, 92.
170 “Haec pars tua, carissima, quae saeculo mortua atque sepulta, surda debes esse ad omnia quae saeculi sunt audiendum, et ad loquendum muta, nec debes distendi sed extendi, impleri non exauriri.” Aelred of Rievaulx, De Institutione, 660.
longer trouble her. Her body would lose everything that kept her bound to her physicality. She had to reach the point when she surrendered her natural human instinct to survive, and joyously longed for death. At this point, she would have achieved the elimination of her self, her fleshly bound body full of individual sins which was what the extreme anchoritic lifestyle strove to extinguish. Her humanity tied her to life, and Aelred’s instructions were meant to bring her closer towards death. As an anchoress, she would wait for the moment when life had become so meaningless that she longed for death and the joys of Heaven that death would bring. By endowing his sister with anonymity, Aelred suggested that she had already begun taking the crucial steps in the direction of self-denial, or rather self annihilation, that would be necessary for her to reach Heaven.

The Virgin Mary as Role Model

For Aelred’s sister to attain not only a religious lifestyle but also entry into Heaven, she needed to lose her self, her ego, and become solely a vessel of virtue. Aelred tried to persuade her that in terms of her spiritual growth, her personal idiosyncrasies were of little value. By emptying herself of the burdens of personality, she could immerse herself in the lives of greater, more worthy women who had come before her. Rebecca presents another parallel here as well. Rebecca’s heroine had to lose her childlike identity to embrace the adult personality of her husband’s first wife. In similar fashion, by trying on the role of another woman, Aelred’s sister could explore her spiritual potential. Her lack of identity was a necessary precursor to meditation, in which
she immersed herself in the experiences of greater examples of feminine action/virtue, particularly the Virgin Mary. In the following section, I consider describe Mary’s appearances in the meditative exercises that Aelred constructed for his sister. I consider how Aelred envisioned his sister relating to this model of womanhood and how he intended the Virgin’s experiences to inform her spiritual struggles.

Aelred wrote three meditations for his sister, which appear in the third section of the Rule. They corresponded to the past, the present, and the future. In the section on the past, he described the infancy, youth, and passion of Jesus. In the present section, Aelred examined his relationship to his sister and the respective states of their souls. In the future section, he encouraged her to envision her experiences after death. I will focus on the first meditation on the past. Aelred described scenes from the Gospels in detail, instructing his sister to envision them as vividly as possible. Aelred taught her to immerse herself in the events of the Gospels through contemplation. She was to place herself as a character within these stories and act as accomplice, witness, and comforter to the different characters, particularly the Virgin Mary. As she lived the Virgin’s existence, she would experience her emotions, from joy to abject sorrow.

Therefore, so that the sweet love of Jesus will thrive in your affection, you will need a triple meditation, concerning remembrances of the past, concerning experience of the present, concerning consideration of the future.171

171 “Itaque ut ille dulcis amor Iesu in tuo crescat affectu, tripli meditacione opus habes, de praetertorium recordatione, de experientia praeuentium de consideratione futurorum,” Aelred of Rievaulx, De Institutione, 662.
As she became more involved in their stories, they would become her reality, and she would experience their emotions as her own. Aelred Squire noted that during this meditation Aelred’s sister was free to express all the emotions she would otherwise dismiss as reminders of a secular past. If done correctly, her affective involvement would produce physical reactions, such as physical shaking and actual tears.

The narrative of the Virgin formed the backbone of Aelred’s meditation. Mary acted as more than a role model or positive exemplum for Aelred’s sister. If she followed his instructions, his sister would try to literally become her, if only for a few moments, by assuming her own experiences. Through Mary’s relationship with her son, Aelred’s sister would undergo a spectrum of sensations, from complete happiness to utter despair. The intensity of these emotions was incomparable because they had figured in the greatest story of humanity. The Virgin Mary’s pleasures in her young son eclipsed those of any other mother—they expressed the ultimate heights of maternal love. Her sorrow at the Cross, on the other hand, represented the greatest sorrow a human could experience, or had ever experienced, as no event in history had been more tragic than Christ’s suffering. By entering this story through the story of Mary, Aelred’s sister would experience these emotions in their purest form. Mary’s dramatic memories were to become her own, even though she lived her life in the confines of an anchorite’s cell. At the cessation of her meditation, Aelred’s sister would retain the memory of Mary’s goodness and incorporate it into her own life.

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It was important for Aelred’s sister to imagine the physical space of the Gospel stories. Aelred instructed her to begin the meditation by envisioning herself at the time of the Annunciation in the bedroom, or cubiculum with Mary. As I have discussed in Chapter I, the cubiculum was a traditional place to begin meditative exercises. It could act either as a location for the physical body or a mental image upon which to fixate. In this case, Aelred used a bedroom that already existed in the bible—where according to the Gospel of Luke, the Virgin Mary had awaited the annunciation. Aelred envisioned the bedroom not as a literal place of retreat, but as a mental space. From there, his sister could launch into creative wanderings. Her own environment, her cell, was inconsequential to her mental life—it was a transitional space that allowed her to enter into the worlds of her meditations.

Aelred’s sister’s first experiential emotion would be joy, the joy of Mary at learning that she had been blessed among all women with her divine pregnancy. After rejoicing with Mary, Aelred’s sister would embark along a mental journey through the stories of the Gospel of Luke. She would next follow Mary to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, herself pregnant with John the Baptist. Aelred instructed her to marvel at the promise of such double blessings.

What are you doing, oh virgin? Run, I beg, run, and involve yourself in such joys, and prostrate yourself at the feet of each, and in the womb of one embrace your Bridegroom, in the womb of the other, indeed, venerate his friend.

173 See Chapter I.
174 “Quid agis, o virgo? Accurre, quae so, accurre, et tantis gaudiis admiscere, pro sternare ad pedes utriusque, et in unius ventre tuum Sponsum, amplectere, amicum vero eius in alterius utero venerare,” Aelred of Rievaulx, De Institutione, 663.
She was not just to witness this remarkable act, but to literally involve herself in the
drama. As the meditation continued, she participated more in Mary’s young
motherhood. When the time came for Mary to give birth, she would follow her to the inn
at Bethlehem and help her through the delivery. Her reward would be the pleasure of
adoring Jesus as a baby. “Embrace that sweet stable/crib, let love conquer modesty, let
affection expel fear, so that you may fix your lips to his most sacred feet and kiss them
both.”

Aelred encouraged her to delight in Jesus through all the stages of his
childhood, not just jumping from the more common images of infancy straight to
adulthood. “Moreover, do you think no sweetness will be gained for you, if you would
contemplate him at Nazareth as a boy among boys, if you would consider him obeying
his mother, assisting his foster father with working?” If she followed the meditation
correctly, Aelred’s sister would first produce tears over Jesus at precisely this age. The
desire for Heaven, as Jean Leclercq has explained, could inspire tears of unsatisfied
yearning. The sensation they produced was not entirely unpleasant since meditation on
Heavenly delights could lead to pure happiness, or the sweetness that Aelred suggested.
Aelred’s sister’s pleasure at contemplating the childhood of Jesus was tinged with
concern. She also experienced the worries of a mother over her child. The precipitating

\[175 \text{“Amplectere dulce illud praesepium, vincat verecundiam amor, timorem depellat}
 affectus, ut sacratissimis pedibus figas labia, et oscula gemines,” Aelred of Rievaulx, } \textit{De}
\textit{Institutione}, 663-664.\]

\[176 \text{“Praeterea nihilne tibi suavitatis aestimas accessurum, si eum apud Nazareth puerum}
inter pueros contempleris, si obsequentem matri, si operanti nutricio assistentem
intuearis?” Aelred of Rievaulx, } \textit{De Institutione}, 664.\]
event came from the Book of Luke, when the twelve-year-old Jesus visited Jerusalem with his parents. Unbeknownst to them, he remained behind in Jerusalem, leaving his parents frantic with worry.

What if you would seek him for three days with his mother, at the age of twelve, going to Jerusalem with his parents and, with them returning and remaining in the city? O how many copious tears will flow, when you would hear his mother lashing her son with a rebuke [partly sweet?], “Son why have you dealt so with us? Behold your father and I have been looking for you in sorrow.”

Bernard McGinn described this process, which he considered typical of Cistercian writing, as “experiential appropriation.” Having vowed herself to virginity, Aelred’s sister would presumably never know the cares, worries, or joys of a mother, but her meditation would allow her to realize them to such an extent as to provoke a physical reaction. The older Jesus became, the more emotionally involved Aelred’s sister was to become with his life, until she arrived at the culminating affective moment, the Passion.

The culminating affective moment for Aelred’s sister was the slow death of Mary’s son on the Cross. By this time in her meditative practices, Aelred’s sister not only agonized with the suffering of Jesus as a Christian to her Lord, but felt the specific sorrow of a mother watching her child in pain. Aelred encouraged his sister to stand beside the Virgin before the suffering body of Jesus. At this point in the meditation, she has become more than a witness; she is a fully involved participant. She would share

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Mary’s heartbreaking sorrow at the sight of her son battered and tortured upon the Cross.

Her grief would manifest itself physically, with tears and trembling.

What of you? It is no wonder that if the sun having mourned, you will mourn, if with the earth having trembled, you will tremble all over, if with the rocks have split, you heart is split, if with the women next to the cross having cried, you weep.  

Rachel Fulton has demonstrated that affective identification with Mary’s sorrow was an important medieval meditative model for both men and women, beginning in the twelfth century. Worshippers contemplated the extent of her sadness, sympathizing with her as a tender mother whose heart broke constantly throughout eternity. This image of Mary, both Rachel Fulton and Marina Warner have explained, replaced an earlier conception of her as a heavenly queen, regal and forbidding. Penitents who prayed to Mary during the eighth through the tenth century viewed her as perpetually unmoved. The benefit she offered the worshipper was that of intercession—she could plead the case of a sinner before her son, and so avert terrible judgment. Prayers to Mary, therefore, focused on the sadness of the sinner, their human wretchedness, not the feelings of Mary herself. In twelfth-century monastic writings, Mary appears more fragile, more gentle, and entirely more human, overcome as she is with emotion. Rachel Fulton cited the meditations and prayers that Anselm of Canterbury wrote for Matilda of Tuscany as the first devotional

179 “Quid tu? Non mirum se sole contristante, tu contristaris, si terra tremiscite, tu contremiscis, si scissis saxis, tuum cor scinditur, si flentibus iuxta crucem mulieribus, tu collacrymaris,” Aelred of Rievaulx, De Institutione, 670.
exercise that expressed interest in Mary’s own emotional response to the Passion. Like Aelred’s Rule, Anselm designed his meditation to inspire emotions in Matilda. Within about a generation, Mary’s experiences at the Cross would find complex expression in the writings of Rupert of Deutz, Philip of Harvengt, and William of Newburgh.

This interest in the suffering of Mary was directly tied to a rising concern with the humanity of Christ. Mary’s sorrow was the sorrow of humanity, she was reachable in a way that even the most tender conceptions of Christ never could be.

[Mary’s] pain . . . more closely approximated the pain of the devout Christian in prayer than did Christ’s, whose pain was arguably unique in its intensity, no person having ever suffered bodily as the Godman did as he died for the sins of the entire world. Accordingly, it was her pain that provided the model for compassionate response to Christ’s pain, her pain that taught Christians what it was like to have seen Christ die on the Cross.

Although Mary’s pain was that of a grieved mother, any male or female Christian, could experience it. It was the sorrow brought about by human love, and therefore applicable to all regardless of gender. We thus have a great number of texts in which religious men share Mary’s grief, feeling a mother’s love for Christ, and in a reversal of imagery, look to Christ as their own mother. Caroline Walker Bynum has demonstrated, indeed, that male Cistercian authors often employed maternal imagery to describe their relationship

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181 Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, 70-192.
183 Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, 199.
with Christ, because they associated motherhood with love, tenderness, and concern. They found these qualities ideal for depicting Christ’s feelings towards humanity.\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{185}}

Despite the flexibility of Mary’s image that made her emotions available to both men and women, Aelred’s \textit{Rule} was a gendered expression of love for Christ, a lesson in spiritual growth directly applicable to a female audience. By relating the story of the Gospels through Mary, he constructed her as the emotional center of Christ’s life. In his retelling, her story expressed some of the most primal of human emotions—love, fear, sorrow and thus represent the points at which a Christian can enter the narrative of the Gospels, or rather, the moments through which humans can relate to a tale of divinity.

\textbf{Specific Concerns for Women}

I explain how Aelred’s interest in the Virgin Mary is one aspect of the concern for the specific spiritual needs of women that he consistently displayed. I disagree with Brian Patrick McGuire’s argument that the \textit{Rule} was merely an anomaly in Aelred’s corpus and that he was mainly concerned with the needs of his fellow monks. Aelred Squire has taken a more sympathetic view of the \textit{Rule}, demonstrating the extreme care with which Aelred combined asceticism and gentle piety. He did suggest, however, that Aelred felt “timidity and inexperience in dealing with the problems of women.”\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{186}} While he may have been inexperienced, Aelred strove to find ways to enter the specific mindset of religious women.

\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{185}} Bynum, \textit{Jesus as Mother}, 140-143.  
\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{186}} Squire, \textit{Aelred of Rievaulx}, 127.
In his other works such as *Jesus at the Age of Twelve* Aelred has famously explored the spiritual potential of Christ as a mother with the power to nurse others. Brian McGuire has contended therefore that Christ’s own mother, the Virgin Mary, held little interest for Aelred. He was far more concerned, McGuire argued, with Christ as mother than Christ as the child of a mother. McGuire extended this argument into a dismissal of Aelred’s interest in women in general, despite the evidence of the *Rule*. “Aelred lacks much feeling at all for religious women and their concerns. . . . Anyone who reads this treatise carefully must come away with a sense that Aelred was not especially concerned with the world of the religious recluse.”  

Instead of considering the needs of religious women, McGuire suggested, Aelred merely reflected upon his own past and wrote his own desires and fears into the text, hence his concern that recluses, denied male company, would feel lustful towards other women. I have formed quite a different view of the *Rule* and have demonstrated the central role he gave to the Virgin Mary as a model for feminine spirituality. Aelred carefully pulled out female experiences from the Gospels and tied them together to create a narrative specifically to appeal to a woman reader.

Not only was Aelred interested in relating the experiences of the Virgin Mary directly to a female audience, but he also considered issues that might trouble women who had left the world behind in order to reach God. In the first part of the *Rule*, dealing with outward circumstances, he explained how solitary religious women could experience the joys of secular women, while still preserving their virginity. Unlike other

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male religious writers such as Ambrose, Osbert of Clare, and Peter Abelard, Aelred understood the particular appeal of small children for women who would never be mothers. When he instructed his sister not to teach small children, as many anchoresses apparently did, he recognized how difficult this decision would be for her, as children could be sweet and charming.

Never grant boys and girls access to you. Certainly, there are recluses who are occupied in teaching girls and they turn their cell into a school. She sits at her window, they reside just outside. She looks attentively at each one, and amidst their girlish gestures, now she is angry, now she laughs, now she threatens, now she flatters, now she strikes, now she kisses, now she calls close one crying on account of the scourging, she strokes her face, she presses her neck, and in throwing her arms around her now she calls her daughter, now she calls her friend.188

As I described in Chapter I, prescriptive writers from Ambrose to Osbert of Clare generally described children as ungrateful monsters who would bring heartache to their mothers, and encouraged religious women to think that they had avoided a horrible fate by choosing celibacy. Aelred, in contrast, acknowledged that relinquishing motherhood and the company of children could be one of the most painful aspects of religious life for women. He worried that his sister might use young pupils as substitute children. These affective bonds, however, would tie her to the secular world she had vowed to avoid.

“What sort of memory of God is amidst this scene, where secular things and carnal things

188 “Pueris et puellis nullum ad te concedas accessum. Sunt quaedam inclusae quae docendis puellis occupantur, et cellam suam vertunt in scholam. Illa sedet ad fenestram, istae inporticu resident. Illa intuetur singulas, et inter puellares motus, nunc irascitur, nunc ridet, nunc minatur, nunc blanditur, nunc percutitit, nunc osculatur, nunc flentem pro verbere vocat proprius, palpat faciem, stringit collum, et in amplexum ruens, nunc filiam vocat, nunc amicam,” Aelred of Rievaulx, De Institutione, 640-41.
are as if painted before her eyes; even if they are not executed, she could still be
disturbed.\textsuperscript{189} He counseled her to be content with her two attendants. It is notable that he
recognized how natural the affections of a mother could be for her. While solitude and
celibacy would prove rewarding to women in Heaven, they could be difficult to maintain
while on earth.

In his section on outward circumstances, he also paid close attention to the sexual
temptations inherent in the life of a recluse. He directed her to avoid desire for others,
including other women. McGuire viewed Aelred’s concerns as merely a reflection upon
his own life, as he had struggled to overcome lust for other men, arguing that “. . . a
close look at the text indicates how in many places Aelred says much more about himself
than he does about his sister and her needs.” We can view his warnings, instead, in the
context of a growing concern about female sexuality. Kathryn Staples and Ruth Karras
have discussed this theme in prescriptive literature.

Although sexual temptation remained a focus of concern in male saints’
lives, in the twelfth century scholars and clerics began to place more
emphasis on women as subject to the dangers of desire. During this century,
there was an increase in writings emphasizing that women, too, were
susceptible to perilous feelings of lust.\textsuperscript{190}

They have analyzed the detailed scenes of sexual temptations in the \textit{Life of Christina of
Markyate} in this context. Christina’s resistance to very real feelings of lust that

\textsuperscript{189} “Qualis inter haec memoria Dei, ubi saecularia et carnalia, etsi non perficientur,
moventur tamen, et quasi sub oculis depinguntur,” Aelred of Rievaulx, \textit{De Institutione},
641.

\textsuperscript{190} Kathryn Staples and Ruth Karras, “‘Christina’s Tempting: Sexual Desire and
Women’s Sanctity,’” in \textit{Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman} eds.
threatened to overcome her body and mind served to emphasize her sanctity. In this light, Aelred’s apprehensions about female sexuality revealed his sensitivity to problems that could affect an anchoress, hinder her spiritual growth, and prevent her eventual entrance to Heaven.

Were we to believe McGuire’s argument that Aelred’s concerns for his sister really reproduced his own personal concerns, we would be admitting that his sister is entirely invisible. She would not be the recipient and subject of the text, but rather the excuse for a self-reflective exercise. In the Rule, we have an entire text written for a specific woman by someone who knew her personally. This occurrence is rare in the twelfth century. By choosing to ignore the implications of this, and saying it only really tells us about men, we would be effectively doing what John Benton did in claiming that Heloise had not authored her own letters. As Barbara Newman perceptively pointed out, the debate over the authenticity of Heloise’s letters replicated twelfth-century attempts to repress women’s voices, including Heloise’s own. Heloise and Abelard themselves had debated about the extent of her authority. “There is, in short, an uncanny resemblance between the debate about the text and the debate within the text.”¹⁹¹ McGuire’s statement that Aelred possessed little interest in female spirituality also ignores the importance that many twelfth-century religious men placed on the cura monalium, whether it be for their sisters, former wives, or women in general.

Conclusions

I have argued in this chapter that Aelred’s *Rule* contains gendered instructions. We know from his own words that he cared for his sister. For the sake of his affection for her or for an interest in the *cura monialium*, he carefully considered the needs of religious women and the singularity of their experience. Although Aelred created a *Rule* particularly suited for women, he utilized the kinds of meditative techniques common in Benedictine and Cistercian monasticism. The anonymity of his sister was essential to the type of religious experience he hoped she would achieve, one in which she would lose all ties to her secular past, her friends, family, social position, and even her name. She would do so in order to experience the living death of an anchoress and in meditating upon the experiences of the Virgin Mary become someone greater than herself. Aelred considered virginity so essential to his sister’s religious life that he could not conceive of an anchoress in any other way. In my next chapter, I consider the importance of virginity as an ideal state for religious woman. I examine the portrayal of virginity in prescriptive texts and explore the potential reactions of women readers.
CHAPTER 4

A UNIVERSAL IDEAL? VIRGINITY AND ITS ALTERNATIVES FOR HOLY WOMEN

Twelfth-century prescriptive texts frequently discussed female virginity—both its possession and its loss. Virginity was the ideal for all Christians and it was essential for religious women. By examining the works of Conrad of Hirsau, Osbert of Clare, Peter Abelard, and others, I discuss how men depicted the importance of virginity to female readers. They described not only the glories that virgins could expect in Heaven, but also the shame that would ruin women who had lost their virginity. I also explore why they rarely differentiated between those women who had engaged in consensual sex or were victims of rape. In the second part of the chapter, I explore the reactions of religious women to these prescriptive descriptions of virginity as the ideal. Bruce Venarde and other scholars have demonstrated that a number of widowed (non-virginal) women were in religious houses and that “virgins rarely constituted an overwhelming majority of
professed women.”¹⁹² In the twelfth-century especially, a number of social developments ensured that many religious women had experienced marriage and motherhood. I consider how these women may have experienced an ideal that they could not apply to their lives. I consider further whether any alternative models to total virginity existed in monastic literature.

According to male-authored twelfth-century prescriptive texts for religious women, virginity was essential. As Jane Schulenburg has argued, “for women, the preservation of virginity was the single most essential prerequisite for a life of Christian perfection; and through it they would be granted entry into heaven or the celestial gynaeceum.”¹⁹³ They portrayed the preservation of one’s virginity as a constant struggle, because women were weak physically and emotionally. Because they were weak emotionally they could easily succumb to temptation by the lure of romantic love. Romantic love promised happiness but it would inevitably lead to misery in the form of worry over children and unfaithful husbands. In order to avoid this trap, they needed to pray constantly and meditate upon the love of Christ, the only worthy bridegroom. They were also physically weaker than men and could therefore fall prey to a rapist and not be able to defend themselves. Even though they might resist, their frail flesh would probably succumb to desire whether they willed it or not. It was their own carelessness, brought on by laziness or distraction, that had most likely brought them into such a

dangerous situation in the first place. Having lost her virginity, even through force, a woman forever lost her status as a bride of Christ. These were the lessons that a number of male authors such as Conrad of Hirsau and Osbert of Clare continually reiterated to nuns and other religious women. Their arguments were not original; in most cases they were retelling the same ideas that patristic writers such as Ambrose and Jerome had first discusses.

Jane Schulenburg and Peter Brown have discussed the extent to which patristic literature contrasted the glory of virginity with the horrors of human sexuality.\textsuperscript{194} Virginity was important for men as well, but writers emphasized it far more for women. They were convinced that women’s bodies were weak and prone to lust. It was essential, however, that women fight a constant battle with their physical desire. “The bride of Christ must spend her earthly life balanced precariously between a continual fear of defilement and the steadfast hope of eternal life with her bridegroom, Christ.”\textsuperscript{195} Loss of virginity even in the case of lawful marriage, could only lead to heartbreak. This was how Jerome described marriage to Eustochium, the daughter of his good friend Paula.\textsuperscript{196} Jerome praised Eustochium’s virginity, vividly contrasting it with “the drawbacks of marriage, such as pregnancy, the crying of infants, the torture caused by a rival, the cares of household management, and all those fancied blessings which death at last cuts

\textsuperscript{195} Schulenburg, \textit{Forgetful of Their Sex}, 129.
short.” He lamented the fate of Eustochium’s sister, Blaesilla, whose husband had died after only seven months of marriage. How difficult must it be for her, he stressed, to have sacrificed her virginity for such short-lived pleasures. Blaesilla had surrendered her virginity willingly (we surmise) as she was legally married, but there were other women who had hoped to remain virgins and fallen victim to rape. Augustine discussed these women in the City of God (413-426). He was considering specifically those women who had been raped during the Germanic invasions. He comforted them with the advice that if they had truly not willed it to happen and subsequently not enjoyed it, then the rape had not affected the state of their souls. This situation, however, was highly unlikely, given the general weakness of feminine flesh.

However, violence inflicted on the body of another can arouse not only pain but also lust, and such a deed as this, though it does not dislodge from pain the mind the purity maintained so steadfastly, none the less engenders a sense of shame, for fear that people believe that the rape involved also mental consent, since perhaps it could not have been endured without some physical pleasure.

Women, in other words, could almost never experience the sexual act without feeling pleasure. Augustine, however, did not advocate these women committing suicide as they should bear their burdens with Christian patience and not “add crime to crime by committing murder on themselves in shame.” He differed here from his contemporaries Jerome and Ambrose (340-97). While they did not actively encourage suicide among

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197 Jerome, “To Eustochium,” 23.
198 Jerome, “To Eustochium,” 27.
defiled virgins, Jerome in *Against Jovinian* and Ambrose in *Concerning Virgins* both held up as heroic examples of pagan and Christian women who had done just that. The message from these prescriptive texts was clear—anything less than total virginity of body and soul was unacceptable. Whether legitimately married, willfully seduced, or violently raped, any woman who lost her virginity lost her privileged status.

Early medieval prescriptive texts continued to contrast the glories of virginity with the horrors of childbirth and marriage. In his *Concerning Virginity*, the Anglo-Saxon Aldhelm (d. 709) addressed the nuns of Barking Abbey, particularly the Abbess Hildelith. Aldhelm extolled virginity as the ideal for religious women. He compared the nuns to bees because he believed they regenerated spontaneously rather than through sexual intercourse. While he did praise the learning of the nuns, he made it clear that their virginity constituted their most important virtue.

> Therefore, if the glory of holy virginity is believed to be next kin to angelic beatitude, and the beauteous company of the heavenly citizens wins praise for the merit of chastity, it ought to be extolled with the acclaim which is its due, since among the other ranks of the virtues it is singled out to wield the scepter of the highest sovereignty and the sway of government . . . . the divine majesty—though I speak however with the peace and indulgence of those saints once bound by the ties of matrimony—set the special attribute of virginity before all the ranks of virtues in general which are enumerated in the list of the gifts (of the Holy Spirit).

They should go to any lengths to preserve their hallowed state. Like Jerome and Ambrose, he suggested that suicide was an honorable option for women faced with rape.

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He offered models of virgin martyrs who had died or undergone horrific torture such as Thecla, Cecilia, Agatha, and Felicity as inspiration. “For I thought that no other little present would be more pleasing and more respectable to virgins of Christ, than that the rewards of chastity be revealed to the chaste and the benefits of purity to be published to the pure.”202 These women had suffered at the hands of the Romans rather than recant their Christianity. Although the days of the Romans had ended, Aldhelm insisted that women could still be martyrs, not just for the sake of their religion but for the sake of their chastity.

In her book Forgetful of their Sex, Jane Schulenburg has explained how early medieval hagiographical works depicted holy women who committed suicide or self-mutilation in order to avoid either rape or marriage. The eight-century St. Eusebia at the monastery of St. Cyr in Marseilles cut off her nose to avoid rape by Saracens. Her nuns followed suit, “The Lessons of the Office of Saint Eusebia” commemorated her actions as heroic martyrdom, The Chronicle of Roger of Wendover described how St. Ebba and the other nuns of Coldingham cut off their noses and upper lips during the late ninth-century Danish invasions. These stories occurred against the background of the unstable world of the early middle ages during which marauders, Vikings, Arabs, Saxons, and Magyars threatened monasteries. In 870, the Danish invaders destroyed Barking Abbey and burned the nuns alive. In 980, the Danes burned St. Mildred’s monastery in Thanet.

Forty-five years later, St. Mildred’s was once again the victim of a Viking raid; Sven Forkbeard captured their abbess and the remaining nuns escaped. (144-145)

“. . . Self-mutilation as an actual defense against sexual assault can definitely be understood against the background of the period: an age obsessed with the value of sexual purity, yet filled with violent, traumatic situations for women.”

Even during the relatively more stable years of twelfth century, hagiographical works still depicted women undertaking drastic measures in order to preserve their virginity. Two twelfth-century saint’s lives, the *vita* of Christina of Markyate and the lesser known *vita* of Oda of Hainault described the trials of these women as they struggled to avoid the marriages their parents had arranged for them. Although the threat in this case was marriage rather than rape, the end result would have been the same—loss of virginity. Both women defied their parents and placed themselves in extreme physical danger. During her wedding ceremony, Oda refused to go through with the marriage and fled from the church. To escape her parents, she locked herself into her mother’s bedroom. She then cut off her nose with a sword. Having made herself repulsive to her prospective bridegroom, she received grudging permission from her father to enter a monastery. Christina continually frustrated the efforts of her parents who tried to force her into an advantageous marriage with a nobleman named Burthred. They knew that she wanted to remain a virgin so they resorted to increasingly violent

203 Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 171.
methods to force her to accept her fate as a secular woman. They let Burthred into her locked room at night so that “if he found the maiden asleep, he might suddenly take her by violence and overcome her.”\footnote{Life of Christina, 51.} Having anticipated his entrance, Christina managed to talk Burthred out of consummating their future marriage through descriptions of the glories of virginity. To her relief, he left her alone in their bedroom. As soon as Burthred encountered her relatives, however, they goaded him into returning another time. To escape him a second time, Christina hid behind a tapestry hanging from a nail on the wall. He entered her room yet a third time, and she ran out a back door and jumped over a fence and ran away. “Then she said, ‘Truly in escaping him, I have escaped the devil I saw last night.’”\footnote{Life of Christina, 53.} She eventually ran away to hide in the cell of an elderly hermit named Roger. As I described in Chapter I, Roger sheltered her for several years and taught her the art of monastic meditation. Christina and Oda demonstrated not only the extremes to which women would go to preserve their virginity but they also acted as positive models for nuns. They demonstrated that virgins possessed the strength to outwit the most cruel predators. Even though Christina and Oda endured hideous trials, they ended their lives as saints who entered Heaven to live with Christ for all eternity.

Prescriptive literature, however, contained more than positive models of heroic women who had endured pain and even death to maintain their virginity. There were also negative examples that demonstrated the ignominy that awaited women who had indeed
lost their virginity, even unwillingly. I will now consider the images of lost virginity and rape that appear in the works of two twelfth-century authors who wrote for religious women, Osbert of Clare and Conrad of Hirsau. They reiterated the concerns of patristic and early medieval writers about the damaging effects of sexual behavior on female virtue and the primary importance of virginity for a bride of Christ. They described examples of rape victims from ancient pagan literature and biblical texts as negative examples of female behavior and they contrasted them with examples of women who had committed suicide or experienced martyrdom in order to preserve their chastity. These stories illustrated not only the importance of virginity but also the importance of strict cloistering for religious women.

Concern over rape was a notable theme in the letters of Osbert of Clare, the prior of Westminster. In his letter to Matilda, a nun from the Norman house of Darenth near Dartford, he warned her about the fate of Dinah, a tragic figure from the book of Genesis. Dinah, the only daughter of Jacob, had left her father’s camp to see the women of a neighboring gentile village. Her beauty attracted the attentions of the son of a local gentile leader, Sichem, the son of Hamor. Sichem took advantage of the solitary girl and raped her. He fell in love with her and asked her brothers for permission to marry her. Simeon and Levi swore revenge for her dishonor. They agreed to the marriage, provided that Sichem and all the men of his village circumcise themselves. Sichem and his men complied. While they recovered, Simeon and Levi attacked the village, slaughtered all the men, and rounded up the women and children as slaves. When they returned home,
their father, Jacob, reproached them for provoking such trouble between the Hebrews and their neighbors. “Shall we let our sister be used as a strumpet?” they asked. The account ended there, with no further reference of Dinah’s fate. Osbert interpreted Dinah’s story as a harsh lesson on the dangers that male sexuality posed to female innocence. He described her rape as a repetition of an age-old struggle between evil and innocence. Dinah “was forced to an evil act through the devilish fornicator of an unclean conscious.” Osbert considered Sichem, her attacker, as the worst kind of sinner.

Women seduced into giving up their virginity, such as Dinah, or betraying their vows of chastity had been lured by the work of the devil. Hearkening back to the message of Jerome, Osbert insisted that loss of their virtue would destroy forever their hopes of being a bride of Christ and subject them to a life of physical and emotional misery that would include pregnancy, labor pains, breastfeeding, and continual sorrow over unfaithful men and ungrateful children.

In the same letter, Osbert of Clare compared Dinah specifically to another biblical woman, the daughter of Jeptha. According to Judges 11:31-40 after winning a military victory, Jeptha had vowed that he would sacrifice the first living thing he saw in gratitude to God. Upon returning home, his daughter came out to greet him. The distraught Jeptha

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207 “... egressa est autem Dina filia Liae ut videret mulieres regionis illius quam cum vidisset Sychem filius Emor Eveh princeps terrae illius adamavit et rapuit et dormivit cum illa vi opprimens virginem,” Genesis 34:1-2.


209 Osbert of Clare, Letters, 142-143.
informed her of his unfortunate vow. “And she said to her father: Grant me only this, which I desire: Let me go, that I may go about the mountains for two months, and may bewail my virginity with my companions.”210 She retired to the mountains with a number of virgins. At the end of her two months, she willingly submitted herself for sacrifice. Every year, the Hebrew maidens celebrated her sacrifice.

Although Jeptha’s daughter had not committed such a horrible sin as Dinah, Osbert still interpreted her in a negative light. She should not have mourned or “bewailed” her virginity, regretting that she had never married and borne children. She should have been thankful when her father thoughtlessly promised away her life, as he had actually saved her soul. Osbert criticized her as “with the virgins of her own age she mourned more that she had begun to run the track of virginal exercise so late.” She should have “chose [n] with her whole heart to keep herself away from the union of childbearing.”211 It was not enough to remain a virgin begrudgingly; one had to embrace this fate.

In a letter to the Abbess Adelidis of Barking, Osbert offered another example of a female rape victim, Sylvia, the mother of Romulus and Remus. Osbert’s story of Sylvia closely followed Book III of Ovid’s Fasti, a series of verses celebrating the seasonal

210 “. . . dixitque ad patrem hoc solum mihi praesta quod deprecor dimitte me ut duobus mensibus circumeam montes et plangam virginitatem meam cum sodalibus meis;” Judges 11:37.
211 “. . . cum coaevis virginibus amplius lugebat quod tam sero incepit virginalis gymnasi stadium currere quam quod debeat carnalis geniturae copulam a se exclusam praeordialiter legere,” Osbert of Clare, Letters, 143.
holidays of Rome. Ovid began Book III with the month of March, named for Mars, the warrior God, and in this case, the rapist of Silvia. As Osbert related, Sylvia was both a princess and a virgin of Vesta. Sylvia went to a riverbank to wash the sacred articles of Vesta and fell asleep. Mars found her sleeping and raped her, conceiving twin sons (Romulus and Quiranus in Ovid’s version, changed to Romulus and Remus in Osbert’s retelling). When Sylvia awoke, she was unaware of her defilement, but had a strange dream. She had seen herself in the temple of Vesta, keeping watch over the sacred flame. Two palm trees rose from her virgin garment, one spreading its leaves across the world and into the heavens. Her uncle Amulius tried to cut down the tree, but a woodpecker and a she-wolf fended off his attack. Silvia returned to the temple and eventually gave birth to her twin sons. During her labor, Vesta’s altar shook, and the goddess covered her own eyes with horror. The sacred flame of Vesta, that her priestesses carefully tended, went out for the first time. Sylvia’s sons went on to kill their uncle and establish a glorious dynasty of Roman leaders, one that culminated in the Emperor Caesar Augustus.

After the late eleventh century, Ovid enjoyed renewed popularity among medieval scholars. University masters glossed his works. Stories from Ovid often appeared in *florilegia*. Osbert, however, could certainly have read the *Fasti* in its entirety. There were several twelfth-century manuscripts in England, including one at Canterbury, not far

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from his home at Westminster. Although he never mentioned how he first encountered the story, he found Silvia’s plight ideal for the exhortation of religious women.

Osbert compared Sylvia specifically to a Christian nun. She had lived among other virgins, he explained, dedicated to the worship of a higher being. As Osbert explained, Vestals believed a virginal lifestyle was the ideal, even though the worship of pagan gods motivated their beliefs. Like nuns, the Vestals had received the respect of their contemporaries. “In the temple of Vesta, there were virgins, clinging to her indulgences, so that we may learn to conclude from such an example that cleanliness and chastity of life were beloved even by the gentiles.”

The life of a virgin was all the more praiseworthy because even godless men and women had understood its value. “Even among those who had no concept of their Lord and creator, we read virginity to have been precious.” Having set up the comparison between Vestals and nuns, Osbert could interpreted Sylvia’s fate as a lesson on the value of divine love (love of Christ) versus human love, and by extension, physical love. Human desire, he insisted, had destroyed Sylvia. This desire brought out the worst in people, because “love is shown to be irrational and stupid.” Instead of concentrating on their own passion, lovers should focus on the image of Christ, his love for mankind, and his teachings of chastity. Anyone

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tempted by physical urges who forced themselves to think of Christ’s love would soon forget about their petty human desires. “Anyone who has applied his mind to this meditation on this [Christ’s love] will be able to heal his heart which was wounded by perverse love: and while he experiences the pleasantness of so much sweetness he will empty himself of the taste of sinful love.”

By portraying Sylvia’s downfall as a warning, Osbert reiterated a key theme of his letter to Adelidis. A virginal life would save women from the normal fate of their sex—the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth. “Without that, other women give birth, who, from corruptible flesh produce flesh that will die, I say, that they conceive sin from sin, and sometimes they purchase results with expense to their own life.” Virgins would safely give birth to the spiritual offspring of Christ their bridegroom, free from pain and suffering.

According to Osbert, the stories of Sylvia and Dinah provided Christian maidens with a valuable lesson, one that Adelidis and Matilda should learn and then share with their communities. If nuns succumbed to the power of physical desire, either through consent or coercion, they would lose their privileged status as the beloved of their bridegroom. Dinah and Sylvia, of course, had not lost their virginity through their own free will but had found themselves the victims of male violence. As the patristic writers had done earlier, Osbert did not differentiate between rape and consensual sex.

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According to his explanation, both rape and consent led to the same results—the censure of one’s community, the physical pain of childbirth, and the loss of Christ’s love. As I explain below, his views corresponded to legal and medical opinions on women’s complicit involvement in rape.

The story of Dinah featured as a negative lesson in a contemporary prescriptive text for nuns, the *Speculum Virginum* of Conrad of Hirsau. Conrad of Hirsau explicitly used Dinah’s story to argue in favor of strict cloistering for nuns. As Peregrinus the narrator explained to his fictional student Theodora, when women chose to join a monastic community, they could devote themselves to love of their bridegroom, Christ, without the distractions of life in the world. The protection of an enclosed community also kept them safe from predators, namely, men who would attempt to steal their virginity. Even when women wanted to leave, they should be forced to stay for their own good. Peregrinus pointed to examples of both men and women who had found salvation in an enclosed space. Think of the countless number of people, he exclaimed, who had died violently in battle! They could have saved themselves if only they had enclosed themselves in houses where their enemies could not have reached them. The people who enclosed themselves in Noah’s arc saved themselves from the flood, while those outside had perished. Esau had wandered outside his home to hunt, and in doing so, had lost his rightful inheritance. Jacob, his younger brother, had remained inside his father’s tent and
received his father’s blessing. Then Peregrinus brought up the familiar instance of Dinah. If she had not succumbed to such “noxia curiositas,” she could have saved not only her virginity, but the lives of her gentile neighbors, whom her brothers ruthlessly put to the sword. Dinah’s actions had roused the uncontrollable anger of her brothers. Peregrinus made it clear that Dinah was responsible for her own fate, and should be censured, not pity. “If Dinah would have remained quiet, enclosed in her tabernacle, the loss of her virginity would not have occurred, nor would the paternal sword have been unsheathed over his enemy, her lover in the flesh.” Like Dinah, a nun who lost her virtue, even against her will, would receive little pity. Women were safe inside their cloister in the company of other women; those who left the safety of enclosure risked their physical and spiritual wellbeing.

Both Conrad of Hirsau and Osbert of Clare created gendered interpretations of Dinah. Other monastic writers such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Stephen of Sawley, Hugh of Fouilloy, and Peter of Celle discussed Dinah in prescriptive literature for men. Barbara Newman has demonstrated that literature for men did not refer specifically to Dinah’s gender. Rather than a warning against sexual temptation, Dinah’s fate illustrated the effects of idle curiosity. Curiositas was an undesirable trait in the monastic lifestyle. As

202 “Mille milia hominum gladio periere in bello, qui mortem evadere possent, si se ab hoste domi inclusissent. . . . Quos arca noe incluserat, salvati sunt, extra inventi fluctibus profocantur. . . . Vagabundus Esau perdit primogenita, Iacob secreto contentus paterna benedictione stabilitur,” SV, 44.
212 “Si Dinam curiositas noxia non emisisset, gemino malo fratres non turbasset,” SV, 44.
222 “Si Dina quieta, si tabernaculo suo inclusa manisset, virginitatis damna non incurriisset nec paternum gladium super hostem, carnis amatorem evaginasset,” SV, 44.
Mary Carruthers has explained, *curiositas* was the opposite of *attentus*. A curious mind could not focus on prayer or important tasks. A monk trying to contemplate God would find his mind overly crowded with unnecessary thoughts.\textsuperscript{223} Stephen of Sawley, for example, briefly made reference to Dinah in his *Mirror for Novices*. In the final section, he advised men to avoid a multitude of temptations, including pride, laziness, idle curiosity, and restlessness. “When a desire to ride horseback plagues you, remember what happened to Dinah who had only gone outside to take a walk.”\textsuperscript{224} Stephen of Sawley wanted young novices to avoid the enticement of the outside world, but he was not concerned with their virginity or their chastity. He believed, rather, that monks who dreamt of the secular life would possess divided hearts, and would never come to love their chosen path. Stephen of Sawley and other men such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter of Celle, and Hugh of Fouilloy, who wrote specifically for men, discussed Dinah to counsel their readers about the repercussions of curiosity in a general sense, “but in writings directed to women, Dinah’s story suggests a more concrete application and a graver warning.”\textsuperscript{225} Dinah’s fate, these works insisted, could befall any virgin who exposed herself to the dangers of men.

Peregrinus taught a similar lesson about the importance of women avoiding the sight of men through the biblical story of Susannah, from the Book of Daniel. Susannah was a virtuous Hebrew woman who married a man named Joachim. The elders of her community desired her for her beauty. Two of them hid in her husband’s orchard and spied on her while she was bathing. When she had sent away her maids, they revealed themselves and propositioned her. They threatened to have her killed if she refused. Susannah insisted upon remaining true to her husband, and in retaliation, the elders accused her of adultery. The other villagers believed them, and agreed to execute her. At the last moment, the prophet Daniel saved her by delivering an impassioned speech in her defense. As Pereginus explained, although Susannah was no longer a virgin, as she was a married woman, she had remained committed to chastity. Unlike Dinah, she had managed to escape the peril in which she had found herself, choosing certain death rather than seduction. Peregrinus made clear, however, that Susannah bore some of the fault. Although her morals were unquestioned, she had put herself at risk by bathing in an orchard.\footnote{“Si femina sancta in dormo dedisset nec tantis terroribus exagitata vitae discrimen sub accusantiu, gladiis incurisset,” SV, 53.} Men would always possess lust—it was up to religious women to ensure that they had no way of satiating it. Theodora agreed with her mentor that Susannah’s lack of modesty had placed her at risk. “I affirm, undoubtedly, that if the holy woman had not appeared in the orchard, the desire in the profane elders may not have shown itself to be
explained nor even to be exposed.”  Women religious should avoid all questionable situations by removing themselves from the unsupervised company of men.

In their critiques of Dinah, Sylvia, and Susannah, Conrad and Osbert were expressing a common medieval attitude towards rape victims, one that ran through both law and medical literature. Ancient writers such as Galen and Aristotle believed that women, composed of wet and cold humors, were more lustful than men, an idea that became commonplace in medieval thought. The coldness of women longed for the hot humor of men. William of Conches (d. 1174), author of *On the Philosophy of the World*, compared the nature of women’s lust to wet wood. Men found it more difficult to light wet wood, but once they had succeeded, it produced a strong and intense flame. Those people who accepted the innate lustfulness of women found it difficult to believe that on some level, they had not been complicit in their own rape. Rape victims such as Sylvia who became pregnant were even less likely to receive pity or justice. A school of thought that included writers such as the thirteenth-century Vincent of Beauvais, argued that when aroused, women, like men, produced a flow of seed necessary for conception. Following this logic, a women who conceived during a rape must have experienced desire. According to William of Conches and the *Post-Salentinan Questions*, a dialogue concerning reproduction, while a woman might initially fight back, her instinctive desire.

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227 “Indubitanter affirmo, quod si sancta femina in pomerio non apparuisset, in profanies presbiteris concupiscientia non explanda nec quidem ostendenda latuisset,” SV, 53.
229 Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies*, 37.
lustfulness would take over, allowing her to enjoy the encounter. Other medical theories
did exist; Aristotle, for example, firmly denied the existence of female seed.²³⁰

The image of women as overly-sexed, however, permeated the legal practices of
medieval England and France. Barbara Hanawalt has demonstrated how English women
rarely won rape cases.²³¹ The burden of defense was on the victims. They needed to
demonstrate that they had actively resisted their attackers—bruises, torn clothing, etc. .
²³² The only women who attracted any sympathy were wealthy or noble women, nuns.
extremely young virgins, or those severely beaten.²³³ Pregnant women found it
impossible to win a rape case in court; conception implied consent. Until 1285 rape did
not count as a felony, punishable by death. During the twelfth century, the standard
punishment was castration, although the few cases that went to court tended to end in
acquittal. The parties involved resolved other cases through the payment of fines to the
woman’s family, or marriage between the rapist and the victim.²³⁴

Kathryn Gravdal has argued that medieval rape laws were not about the victim at
all, but rather about “maintaining peace among men.”²³⁵ A Germanic law allowed the
rapist to live provided he married his victim, thus rectifying the honor of her family.

²³⁰ Joan Cadden, _Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Age: Medicine, Science, and
²³¹ Barbara A. Hanawalt, _Crime and Conflict in English Communities, 1300-1348_,
²³² Hanawalt, _Crime and Conflict_ , 36, 105.
²³⁴ Hanawalt, _Crime and Conflict_ , 104.
²³⁵ Kathryn Gravdal, _Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature
During the twelfth century, canon lawyers such as Gratian inscribed this trend into codified law. According to Gratian’s definition of rape, the victim could only receive protection if the rapist had abducted her from her father’s house and they were not already engaged. The relationship that rape affected was that between the father and the rapist. “The legal personality of individual women” were effectively invisible under the law and those who were married, engaged to their rapists, or prostitutes received no protection. “If, in the legal text, raptus can be the legal prelude to marriage, and if the victim could conceivably consent to marry her rapist, just how serious was this crime?”

If rape did not always possess serious repercussions for the perpetrator, it irrevocably changed the life of the female victim. A secular woman with a living male relative to speak for her could find financial security in marriage but if she followed the advice of prescriptive texts, a religious woman would have lost the part of herself that defined her identity. In this context we see that the prescriptive texts of Osbert and Conrad reflected legal views of rape that negated the needs of the victim and highlighted the uncontrollable sexuality of women. Had Dinah and Sylvia been twelfth-century women, their rape would have signified the loss of social and legal acceptance.

The attitudes of Conrad and Osbert seem harsh to twenty-first century audiences, but we know that their descriptions of rape accorded with general opinions about female sexuality. Perhaps these attitudes appeared harsh to some medieval writers as well.

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Could it really be possible that medieval writers possessed a uniform view of rape victims as both culpable and irrevocably flawed? Did any alternative images exist for religious women? Peter Abelard composed a lament for Dinah for Heloise and her nuns at the Paraclete. 239 This was part of a series of six elegies he had written based on characters from the Old Testament. I argue that in this poem, Abelard offered another image of rape for religious women, one that empathized with the emotions of the victim and suggested that secular experience was not inimical to monastic living.

Abelard was interested in recreating Dinah’s own emotional response to the violent episodes of rape and revenge. Unlike Osbert and Conrad, he represented Dinah as speaking in the first person. He portrayed her as a young girl bewildered and miserable over the suffering she had unwittingly caused. It was true that she had been overly curious.

Why did it please me to see foreigners?  
How badly I am thought of  
Wishing to know them!240

Her curiosity, however, paled in comparison to the cruelty her brothers had inflicted on their gentile neighbors in the name of her lost honor. They were victims as well as she, as she told her brothers:

You have equated innocents  
In punishment to the one who did the hurting.241

240 “Quid alienigenas/ Iuvabat me cernere?/ Quam male sum cognita/ Volens has cognoscere!” Abelard, “Planctus Dinae,” 223.
Even though Dinah’s sad refrain in the poem indicated that she blamed herself, she could not understand why such a seemingly innocent action had led to such horrible events.

    Woe to miserable me,
    Having been betrayed through myself.242

She was young, after all. Her brothers ought to have taken into consideration “the light and less prudent age of youth,” and their anger “ought to have been mitigated.”243

Abelard also presented a unique view of Sichem, her rapist. Sichem appeared more as a foolish boy than a monster. Dinah’s brothers Simeon and Levi had forcibly circumcised Sichem and his family; Abelard described this event as both tragic and pointless, an act of castration. Dinah regretted his death, and insisted that he would have received God’s forgiveness. He brothers had judged him more harshly than God would have. She referred to him as a youth who ought to be pitied, and indicated that perhaps she had loved him. Abelard’s portrayal of Sichem bore no resemblance to that given by Conrad and Osbert, who had presented him as the devil in human form, reenacting a primeval moment of temptation.

What happened to Dinah after her disgrace? Dinah is absent from the end of the narrative. The story from Genesis ended with a conversation between men, with Jacob criticizing his sons for their hasty reaction. Neither Osbert nor Conrad had considered the ultimate fate of Dinah; the lesson they wished to teach existed in the act of losing her

242 “Vae mihi miserae/ Per memet proditae!” Abelard, “Planctus Dinae,” 223.
virtue. After that critical moment, she could no longer be a bride of Christ. Abelard did not give an answer within the poem, but his own past provided one. He and Heloise had taken monastic vows only after their marriage and the public scandal of his castration. Abelard was writing for the women of the Paraclete community who were under the rule of Heloise. They could surely draw the parallels between the miserable girl Dinah and the wise woman who acted as their leader and mother.

Abelard’s alternative interpretation of Dinah raises another issue regarding the portrayal of virginity in prescriptive literature—how relevant did religious women find these images? Did these stories of rape horrify them? Did they view themselves as continually struggling to control their physical urges, as Osbert and Conrad portrayed them? In order to answer these questions, we must consider the question of audience. The ideal nun entered the monastery as a young child and never left its confines. She lived her life devoted entirely to Christ, who became her bridegroom, lover, and child. In the twelfth century, however, how realistic were these expectations? Even the recipient of Osbert’s lecture on Sylvia, Adelidis, had been married before she joined the abbey of Barking. In twelfth-century French, English, and German lands, women who entered monasteries were equally likely to be married with children than to be young maidens. In his study of twelfth-century monasticism, Bruce Venarde has explained that French and English women often turned to a religious life after a youth of marriage and motherhood.244 “Convents were diverse communities that included virgins, widows, and

244 Venarde, Women’s Monasticism, 96-101.
wives, young and old.” If even a portion of any particular audience of religious women had been married, we must consider that they did not consider images of virginal perfection applicable to their own spirituality. In the following section, I first discuss the reasons that more married women entered monasteries during the twelfth century. I then discuss whether any prescriptive texts specifically addressed the needs of these women and provided an alternative view of the virginal ideal.

These changes were due to a variety of developments in both secular and religious society. The practice of child oblation began to decline in the twelfth century. Mayke de Jong explained several of the reasons for the waning of such an established practice. Twelfth-century noble parents could choose from a variety of career options for their sons, including study and teaching at universities, administrative or secretarial positions at royal courts, or a military life. Aelred, the abbot of Rievaulx spent his youth in the service of King David of Scotland before choosing to take Cistercian vows and enter Rievaulx. The existence of new orders also presented further choices for those seeking a monastic lifestyle, and several of them, like the Cistercians, would only take adult converts. A growing interest in personal consent had also arisen in legal matters. Marriage law, for example, focused on issues of consent. The drop in rates of child oblation was a gradual process, however, and twelfth-century examples certainly existed. At the age of eight, Hildegard von Bingen left the home of her parents and became an

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247 de Jong, *In Samuel’s Image*, 301.
anchoress. Two of her favorite nuns, Richardis and Adelheid von Stade, entered under her care as young children. Hildegard’s mentor Jutta of Sponheim, on the other hand, chose an anchoretic life only as an adolescent after she became inspired during an encounter with a clergyman. There were other reasons adult women entered monasteries. As more adult men chose to take religious orders, they required a place for their wives. The female house at Marcigny began as a home for the female relatives of men who wished to enter Cluny.

Another reason for the increase of adult women in monasteries was a change in the number and nature of monastic founders. In the twelfth century, Bruce Venarde argued, a new group of lay patrons founded and contributed to religious houses. These families, not from the highest circles of nobility, now possessed more wealth due to economic growth. As a result of political instability, under King Stephen, for example, more members of the minor nobility in England founded religious houses as a mark of status and to assert local control. As a result, the number of women’s houses in Northern French and English lands rose dramatically. Nuns could rely upon grants of land and privileges from local families for their support. Sharon Elkins found similar results for England. From c. 1130-c. 1160, the number of English women’s house reached unprecedented heights. Elkins argued that lords took advantage of the political disorder to achieve local control. These lay families who endowed religious houses often expected that their female relatives would rule as abbesses. Lay women themselves, filled with fervor towards the new variety of monastic orders, acted as patrons of monasteries that
they would later enter as widows. Many abbesses, therefore, had been wives and mothers, with experience of running large households. In practical terms, these were desirable traits in a woman who oversaw the organization of people, animals, and lands. They brought not only their skills, but wealth and treasures they had accumulated during their years of marriage. Before she founded the small monastery of Paulinzella in her native Thuringia, St. Paulina had been married twice. During her second marriage, she had accompanied her husband on three pilgrimages to Rome, collecting precious holy relics that she could then use to glorify Paulinzella.

Did prescriptive literature that praised virginity and condemned sexual knowledge benefit the former wives and mothers who lived alongside virgins in increasing numbers in twelfth-century monasteries? Did women who had chosen a monastic life of their own free will after years of secular temptations believe that they were less worthy to become a bride of Christ than those women who had spent their lives in a cloister? Did resentment exist between adult converts and former child oblates? We see hints of the kind of frustration some secular women entering monasteries may have experienced in the second vita of Robert of Arbrissel, written by the monk Andreas. Although the author of the vita was a man, a woman, Petronilla of Chemillé, the first abbess of Fontevraud in western France, was actively involved in its creation. She had been a married woman and a mother. She was not the only former wife among the residents of Fontevraud and its

daughter houses. The first prioress Hersende of Montsoreau had been widowed twice. Around 1107, Robert founded the monastery of Orsan on the lands of Alard of Châteaumeillant, the local lord. Alard’s former wife Agnes became the first prioress. Bertrade of Montford, wife of Philip I of France, joined first Fontevraud and then a daughter house, Hautes-Bruyères as a widow. Another former queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, would end her days at Fontevraud. As I demonstrate below, the second *vita* of Robert that Petronilla commissioned praised the value of managerial skills and secular experience for religious women as superior to virginal seclusion.

Even before he began founding religious houses, Robert of Arbrissel had attracted a mixed following of men and women. Robert had studied in Paris but by 1095 he fled to the forest of Craon, in Brittany, where he became a hermit, shunning human society in order to seek God. His holy reputation, however, prevented him from living a solitary life, as more and more followers, both men and women, flocked to his side. Over the next five years, he turned to the life of a wandering preacher. Wherever he traveled, his disciples followed him. In 1101, Robert had established the monastery of Fontevraud in order to provide a permanent home for his disciples, particularly his female ones. He had received criticism from Bishop Marbod of Rhennes for allowing his male and female followers to cohabitate. Although the monastery had both a house for men and one for women, he appointed two women, Hersende and Petronilla as head of the entire establishment. In 1103, when Robert left to continue his preaching throughout France, he left them in charge. Robert continued his wondering until his death in 1116. His
followers immediately revered the holy man as a saint. His body was buried behind the altar of Fontevraud.  

After his death, Petronilla immediately commissioned a monk named Baudry of Dol to write the *vita* of Robert. She was so dissatisfied with the result that within a few years she commissioned the monk Andreas to write a second one. It is not difficult to see why—Baudry spoke disparagingly of Petronilla’s married life, her ability to act as abbess, even her success as a patroness, and diminished her role after Robert’s death. In his *vita*, Baudry voiced the tension that people felt about married women in monasticism. He went out of his way to criticize Petronilla and to minimize her impact on Robert of Arbrissel. He begins by complaining that Petronilla has not provided him enough information to properly write the *vita*. He described the early days of Fontevraud, and states that Robert had actually hoped to appoint Hersende as the first abbess.

Unfortunately, she died before she could assume office, and Robert was forced to turn to Petronilla. Baudry spoke contemptuously of her life as a married woman. Her secular past was his central critique; she should have been a virgin. “Once instructed in a holy way of life, you forgot your relatives and your father’s house [Ps 44/45:11], and through Lord Robert’s efforts under the guidance of the Holy Spirit you were promoted to

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abbess—even though you had formerly done service in the marriage bed.”

He also left Petronilla out of the most dramatic scene of the vita, Robert’s death. According to Baudry, Petronilla was not at his bedside and played little role in his funeral. In fact, in Baudry’s version Robert spoke very little of his nuns at Fontevraud and spared them almost no thought upon his deathbed. Baudry also advised Petronilla about how to become a successful abbess.

With such a steward, I say, these women [the nuns of Fontevraud] could be supported, inasmuch as they accepted poverty for God’s sake. You do well if you exert yourself wholly in providing for them, if you offer yourself up as a beast of burden to the responsibility you have shouldered and consider yourself to be the least of your sisters.

At the time of his writing, she had been acting as abbess for approximately three years, and had expanded the monastery’s holdings substantially. Considering her economic successes, Baudry’s advice implied great condescension on his part.

Two years later, Petronilla commissioned a second vita. This text revealed far more of her influence. The author was Andreas of Fontevraud. Andreas had probably been Robert’s private chaplain and remained at Fontevraud in service to the nuns after Robert’s death. There are clear differences from Baudry in his portrayal of Petronilla’s character and her success as an abbess. Petronilla is a central character of equal importance to Robert himself. Rather than criticize or excuse her previous life as a

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wealthy married woman, Andreas praised it as the key to her success. While Baudry had portrayed her as Robert’s second choice, Andreas states that Robert had specifically wanted her for her experiences managing a household and thought she could apply these skills to managing Fontevraud. He described in detail the election of Petronilla as abbess. Sensing that death was approaching, Robert gathered together a council of local nobles and religious leaders and asked them if he could appoint a lay convert as head of Fontevraud. He specifically addressed potential critiques of her secular past:

I know, I know: the dignity of this office calls for a virgin, for indeed it is written that whosoever watches over virgins should be a virgin. But how will any claustral virgin, who knows nothing except how to chant psalms, be able to manage our external affairs suitably? What earthly matters has she effectively ‘sung,’ who has always been accustomed to spiritual labor? How, I say, will she who knows nothing but the joys of contemplation shoulder the burden of the active life? With what skill will a tongue accustomed from childhood to speak with the Lord in prayer, singing, or reading reply concerning external affairs? Moreover, it is very difficult to force one who rejoices in her washed feet to put back on the dress of temporalities.

After he had persuaded his council, Robert thought the matter over and chose his longtime religious companion Petronilla. “Although she is once-married it seems to me that by virtue of necessity nobody is more suited to the prelacy. She knows our estates better than anyone and . . . she knows how to give an opportune response to the wise and how to condescend fitly to the simple.” Robert may indeed have said these words, or something similar, but they represented the situation of Petronilla and other married women at Fontevraud quite accurately.

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Petronilla had not necessarily chosen the better part of Mary, but her practical work on behalf of the monastery allowed numerous other women the economic freedom to devote their time to prayer. Penelope Johnson has demonstrated that the nuns most content with their choice to live a religious life resided in wealthy houses.\textsuperscript{258} Women were most likely to break their vows—to steal, to disobey their superiors, and even to have sex when they lived in poor houses. A well-to-do monastery led to a greater quality of life, which led to greater spiritual satisfaction.\textsuperscript{259} She also pointed out that women’s houses were more likely to fall into economic distress. They received fewer donations of money and land. At the same time they could not hire out their services to perform the sacraments as women could not receive ordination. They also had to spend more money hiring male priests.\textsuperscript{260} Joseph Lynch has found that nuns continually took in students, despite the cloistering rules that forbade this, because they were too poor to forego the fees that children would bring.\textsuperscript{261} A female monastery with a less than vigilant abbess existed in a precarious financial position. An intelligent abbess with business sense and secular experience such as Petronilla could make all the difference. There was dignity to the active life; not only dignity, but practicality.

As a manager and businesswoman, she would achieve great success on behalf of Fontevraud. Until her death in 1149, she used her secular experience to expand the


\textsuperscript{259} Johnson, \textit{Equal in Monastic Profession}, 130-132.

\textsuperscript{260} Johnson, \textit{Equal in Monastic Profession}, 208-216.

holdings of the monastery considerably. A number of charters testified to her tenacious business drive. She also oversaw the management of over fifty daughter houses, the greatest period of growth for the Order of Fontevraud. Until the French Revolution, it would remain “the largest and wealthiest federation of monasteries for women in Catholic Europe.” As Andreas suggested in the second vita of Robert, Petronilla’s past was an asset to herself and her monastery rather than a liability. His description of her as “of sounder counsel than many wise people,” proved quite fitting.

It is interesting to note that in his Rule for the Paraclete, Abelard displayed a similar kind of admiration for the skills of secular women. In his Rule for the Paraclete, Abelard had praised the skills that secular women brought to the position of abbesses. He lauded the merits not only of life experience but particularly of sexual experience.

And so I am much surprised that the pernicious practice has arisen in the Church of appointing virgins to this office rather than women who have known men, and often of putting younger over older women. Yet Ecclesiastes says: ‘Woe betide the land where a boy is king,’ and we all approve the saying of holy Job: ‘There is wisdom in age and long life brings understanding.’ It is also written in Proverbs: ‘Grey hair is a crown of glory if it should be won by a virtuous life,’ . . . Thus in every way care must be taken when electing or consecrating an abbess to follow the advice of the Apostle, and to elect one who must be above all the rest in her life and learning, and of an age to promise maturity in conduct; by obedience she should be worthy of giving orders, and through practicing the Rule rather than hearing it she should have learned it and know it well.

262 Venarde, Women’s Monasticism, 116-120.
263 Venarde, Women’s Monasticism, 120.
His praise of experienced women lends further significance to the lament for Dinah. With Dinah, Abelard presented a woman who had experienced the loss of her virtue and public disgrace. Her plight equated her with Heloise to some degree. Heloise, however, was probably not the only nun of the Paraclete who had experienced marriage and motherhood. Abelard may have intended the *planctus* for Dinah not just as consolation for Heloise herself, whose life paralleled Dinah’s, but also for those nuns whose experiences were far removed from Dinah. The sympathetic and even tragic characterization of Dinah instructed them to view Heloise and nuns like her with understanding. The reading of Dinah’s lament changes when we think of its intended audience—a mixed community that combined virgins with widows, wives, and mothers. Women who had lost their virginity were not doomed to a life of disgrace outside the love of Christ, as the interpretations of Dinah in Osbert and the *Speculum* insisted. As Heloise’s example demonstrated, even a women who had succumbed to her lover’s seductions and borne his illegitimate child could become the respected abbess of a monastery. The poem also had a message for adult converts, namely that God was forgiving of sexual sin, and that their pasts would pave the way for a spiritual conversion.

**Conclusions**

From the patristic writers through the middle ages, there was a tradition of prescriptive literature that presented physical virginity as the ideal for religious women. The loss of this virginity, either through coercion or consent, would lead to the loss of a woman’s treasured status as a bride of Christ. Scholars have demonstrated however that
medieval convents, particularly but not exclusively beginning in the twelfth century were
diverse communities and contained a number of married women and mothers. I have
argued that religious women and the men who advised them needed to address the
discrepancy between ideal and reality. Certain religious texts such as the Second Life of
Robert and the planctus for Dinah presented an alternative to the virginal ideal that spoke
to the merits of secular women who converted as adults. In my next chapter, I examine
closely the relationship between Heloise and Peter Abelard. They were both adult
converts to the monastic life. Throughout their correspondence, they discussed the
impact of their secular past on their spirituality. I will consider how they negotiated
between their sexuality and their goals as religious leaders and what they considered to be
the role of gender in monasticism.
CHAPTER 5

IS VIRTUE PERFECTED IN INFIRMITY?: DEBATING GENDER DIFFERREDCE IN
THE WRITINGS OF ABELARD AND HELOISE

In this chapter, I examine Abelard and Heloise’s discussions of gender
difference. They argued about the nature of the female sex and in particular its capacity
for learning and monastic living. Their views on men and women arose in the context of
their discussions regarding the direction of the community of nuns at the Paraclete under
Heloise’s care. I consider first their debates over the site of gender difference. Could one

266 I consider the correspondance between Abelard and Heloise to be authentic. For an
opposing viewpoint see John F. Benton, “Fraud, Fiction, and Borrowing in the
Correspondance of Abelard and Heloise,” in Pierre Abelard-Pierre le Venerable. Les
courants philosophiques, litteraires et artistiques enoccident au milieu du XIIe siecle: [actes et memoires du colloque international], Abbaye de Cluny, 2 an 9 juillet 1972
(Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherché scientifique, 1975), 469-506 and “A
Reconsideration of the Authenticity of the Correspondence of Abelard and Heloise,” in
Petrus Abelardus (1079-1142): Person, Werk, and Wirkung ed. Rudolf Thomas, (Trier:
Paulinus, 1980), 41-52. Benton argued in the first article that all the letters were fictional
and in the second one that Abelard authored both sides of the correspondence. For a
summary of both sides of the arguments see John Marenbon, The Philosophy of Peter
Abelard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 82-93 and M.T. Clanchy, “The
Letters of Abelard and Heloise in Today’s Scholarship,” in The Letters of Abelard and
scholars M.T. Clanchy and Barbara Newman have effectively argued that Heloise wrote
the letters attributed to her. See M.T. Clanchy, Abelard: A Medieval Life (Oxford:
Blackwell, 1997), 9-16 and Barbara Newman, “Authority, Authenticity, and the
Repression of Heloise,” in From Virile Woman to WomanChrist, (Philadelphia :
University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 46-75. The contributors to Bonnie Wheeler’s
2000 edited volume, Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Woman (New
York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000) take the stance that Heloise was a writer with a distinct
authorial voice.
locate the essence of sexuality (bringing up the possibility of removing it), or was it organically linked to the soul’s entirety? Heloise and Abelard deliberated these questions in light of their own past relationship as well as the future of the Paraclete nuns. I also examine Abelard’s evangelical history of the female sex, in particular how he employed the imagery of women in the Gospels such as the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene to support his arguments regarding the innate virtues of women. I turn, finally, to the couple’s discussions regarding the propensity of women for education. At the heart of their dialogues lay an ongoing consideration of the inherent worth of the female gender. Were the qualities of women innately weak and inferior to men, or did they possess their own spiritual and intellectual gifts?

The sources I examine here include the prescriptive literature Abelard composed for Heloise and the nuns of the Paraclete, particularly his seventh letter to Heloise on the origin and history of nuns.\textsuperscript{267} In this letter, Abelard concentrated primarily on the spiritual inheritance of the nuns. He outlined a timeline of salvation, one in which mythological and Jewish women lived virtuous lives and outshone their men in terms of piety and bravery. These women were the precursors of the female figures in the Gospels, who had participated directly in the crucial moments of mankind’s salvation. Abelard described significant moments in the Gospels that demonstrated the special relationship between Christ and his female relatives such as the Virgin Mary and his friends such as Mary Magdalene. According to Abelard’s history, in every stage of Jesus’

life, women had offered him guidance, mercy, recognition, or were simply present to receive his blessings. Their special role had been to care for his human bodily needs, making sure he was fed, clothed, and comforted. Abelard argued that the Gospel women demonstrated the natural virtues that women universally possessed.

I also consider a series of sermons that Abelard composed for the Paraclete. In these sermons, Abelard used his discussions of the Virgin Mary to explore the nature of gender difference and the implications it possessed for the salvation of humanity. Abelard described the important stages of the Virgin Mary’s life through a series of sermons designed to correspond to the feasts associated with her, the Annunciation of Mary, the Purification of Mary, and the Assumption of Mary. The Annunciation referred to the Angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that she had conceived Jesus Christ. The Purification was Mary’s return to church after a mandatory waiting period following her delivery. The Assumption was a feast that celebrated the ascension of Mary’s body as well as her soul into Heaven upon her death. Abelard explored the femininity of Mary’s body and what it signified about the nature of women. In these three sermons, he considered the Virgin’s relationship to the rest of humanity and in particular her role as a model for religious women. As a comparison to the work of Abelard, I consider the writings of Heloise, including her letters to Abelard and the *Problemata Heloissae*, a

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collaborative work of Heloise, Abelard, and their students at the Paraclete. Using these sources, I argue we can trace a complex argument regarding the location of gender difference and the nature of the female sex that Abelard and Heloise continued throughout their lives.

**Where Did Abelard and Heloise Locate Gender Difference?**

At the heart of Heloise and Abelard’s discussions lay a debate about the location of male and female sexual identity and its significance to Christian spirituality. In Abelard’s fifth letter to Heloise, he praised her for rising above the weaknesses of the female sex and devoting herself to her new life as a Benedictine nun. Her dedication to her role as abbess had allowed her to effectively overcome her woman’s body.

Nor would you have been more than a woman [in the secular world], whereas now you rise even above men, and have turned the curse of Eve into the blessing of Mary. How unseemly for those holy hands which now turn the pages of sacred books to have to do the obscene degradations of women’s work!²⁷⁰

Heloise responded to his praise with a request that he write a new monastic Rule for the nuns at the Paraclete. Benedict had originally composed his Rule for men, she explained, and it was therefore inappropriate for a community of women.

Through lack and need of this [Rule] it is the practice today for men and women alike to be received into monasteries to profess the same Rule, and the same yoke of monastic ordinance is laid on the weaker sex as on the stronger.²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ Abelard, “The Personal Letters, X.
²⁷¹ “Cuius quidem rei defectu et indigentia nunc agitur ut ad eiusdem regulae professionem tam mares quam feminae in monasteriis suscipiantur, et idem institutionis
As she elaborated upon the reasons for her request, she raised questions concerning the role of the physical body in monastic life for both men and women. Contrary to Abelard’s words of praise, she suggested that a monastic Rule for women or for men both needed to incorporate the functions of the body, yet at the same time, not privilege them above the needs of the soul. This exchange illustrated the difference in their attitudes towards the importance of gender within the context of spirituality.

Abelard located human sexuality, and thus the human proclivity to sinfulness, in the sexual organs and their functions. In his own case, he believed that castration had ended his sexual desire and diverted him from a life of sinful lust.

And so it was wholly just and merciful, although by means of the supreme treachery of your uncle, for me to be reduced in that part of my body which was the seat of lust and sole reason for those desires . . . in order that this member should justly be punished for all its wrongdoing in us. 272

He applied this logic to Heloise as well. The violent act of castration had disconnected him from human sexuality; entry into a monastic lifestyle had brought her to the same profitable end. In his fifth letter to Heloise, Abelard praised Heloise for having devoted herself to her religious vows, thus rising above the natural infirmity of her sex and specifically “the curse of Eve.”273 The “curse of Eve,” to which he referred included menstruation and childbearing. Medical and scholastic texts argued that menstruation marked women irreparably as the carriers of Eve’s original sin. Even female animals did

272 Abelard, “The Personal Letters,” X.
273 See above.
not menstruate, they believed, and thus menstruation had less to do with biology than with women’s connection to Eve.274 In her book about medieval views of blood, Peggy McCracken described how“ in many medieval discourses menstruation is a polluting blood, a feature of the imperfect female body whose imperfections mirror the perfections of the male body.”275 Medical authorities repeated Pliny’s warnings that a menstruating woman could sour wine or ruin mirrors.276 As a consequence, some women deliberately tried to rid their bodies of this physical manifestation of human, and specifically female, sin. Caroline Walker Bynum has explored the lack of menstruation as a marker of sanctity. In Holy Feast and Holy Fast, she examined female saints who provoked amenorrhea through prolonged starvation.277 For Abelard, menstruation was a curse, as were all the sexual organs and their productivity. Although he perceived Heloise’s conversion as essentially spiritual, it possessed clear physical repercussions. Care of her spirit had allowed her to sever connections with her feminine body. Abelard commended her for choosing to give birth to multiple spiritual daughters as an abbess rather than bringing forth children biologically.

When he praised her for overcoming the curse of Eve, Abelard was utilizing a traditional way of complimenting holy women. According to didactic texts, women who

276 Joan Cadden, Meaning of Sex Difference, 174.
devoted themselves to ascetic practices such as chastity, fasting, and prayer had risen above their weak natures and womanly bodies. In an ideal woman, therefore, spirituality was disconnected from physicality. This view of the body was at the heart of ascetic practices. Peter Brown has traced the denial of the flesh in writings from the patristic authors of antiquity into the middle ages. In her study of female saints between the sixth and eleventh centuries, Jane Schulenburg outlined the history of this idea in regards to women. St. Jerome’s letter to Eustochium had praised her mother for having achieved such a virtuous lifestyle that she had grown “forgetful of her sex.” By the twelfth century, hagiographers had bestowed this compliment on female saints from Radegonde to St. Catherine.

In her third letter to Abelard, Heloise responded to Abelard’s compliments with the proposal that he write a monastic Rule for the Paraclete. As she stated her reasons for this request, she directly contradicted Abelard’s praise in his previous letter. A separate Rule for women was necessary, she argued, because the Rule of Benedict focused on physical behavior, and men and women were physically different from each other. By calling her “more than a woman,” Abelard believed that physical difference could be overcome; Heloise argued that it could not. At the same time, she explained that undue attention to outward behavior should not be the focus of a religious Rule. The Rule she

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challenged Abelard to write would examine the inner workings of the heart over the functions of the body.

Heloise’s critiques of the Rule of Benedict’s appropriateness for women centered around their biological differences from men, including menstruation, bodily weakness and their ability to consume wine. Heloise described menstruation as the most physical manifestation of gender difference. Women could not wear the clothing that Benedict had prescribed. “What is it to women what is written there concerning cowls, drawers, or scapulars? Or indeed, with tunics and woolen garments worn next to the skin, when the monthly purging of their superfluous humours must avoid such things.” She next explained that women could absorb wine quickly than men, so Benedict’s prohibition against excessive eating and drinking were not applicable to them.

Moreover, nature too herself has provided for us, indulged cautiously and also lightly by all kinds of food, so that she protects our sex namely by the greater virtue of sobriety. Of course it is known by how much more sparing cost and how much less nourishment women are able to be sustained than men; natural science states them not so easily to be intoxicated.

The physical labor that the Rule required was also a problem for women, whom Heloise acknowledged to be weaker physically. And you yourself I implore . . . thus to moderate

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280 “Ut enim cetera nunc omitta Regulae capitula, quid ad feminas quod de cucullis, femoralibus et scapularibus ibi scriptum est? Quid denique ad ipsas de tunicis aut de laneis ad carnem indumentis, cum earum humoris superflui menstruae purgationes haec omnino refugiant?” Heloise, “Heloise on Religious Life,” 242.

instructions of works so that they are appropriate to our weak nature, and so that we are especially able to be free for the offices of divine praise." She explained that women did not wish to escape physical labor out of laziness. They wished they could devote as much of their attention as possible to celebrating the divine office rather than to focus on "those things of the body." With all these points, Heloise demonstrated that the *Rule of Benedict* in its existing form was inapplicable to women.

Linda Georgianna first raised the argument that Heloise intended to critique not just the *Rule of Benedict*, but the purpose behind such a Rule, and therefore, the aims of the monastic life as a whole. As Georgianna explained, Heloise “moves away from a theology of perfection as defined by Abelard and St. Benedict as well,” suggesting that the *Benedictine Rule’s* concerns with diet and clothing were insignificant compared to a person’s spiritual growth. “Heloise mounts an argument that love, not the law, is the object of the spiritual life; thus rules regulating outward behavior are inadequate and perhaps irrelevant to the ideal of personal, spiritual perfection.”

The Rule Heloise hoped for would differ from the *Rule of Benedict* in two significant ways. It would respond more specifically to the needs of women, or at least

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acknowledge their presence in monasticism, but at the same time it would not focus so closely on outward behavior. The Rule centered almost entirely on ways to control the body’s behavior—mortifying it, forcing it to be celibate, to engage in work during certain hours and prayer during others. All these rules, Heloise insisted, ignored the workings of the heart. This regulation of the outer man did nothing to enrich the inner spiritual growth, ignoring Mary’s quest for learning.

Whence whoever are truly Christians are thus occupied wholly in respect to the interior man, namely so that they may adorn him with virtues and purify him from vices, so that they assume minimal or no care for the exterior one.

Christ’s apostles, for example, had been preoccupied with thoughts of the Lord and had therefore been rough and careless with their manners. No one would doubt, however, the veracity of their faith. The Lord himself had excused their behavior, Heloise explained.

Certainly such devotion of the soul is held greater by the Lord, so much the less the soul is occupied in exterior things, and we serve him with so much greater humility and also we think to owe him more, so much the less we have confidence in exterior things that may happen.

Heloise critiqued the praise Abelard had offered her as irrelevant. The goal of monastic living was not to overcome one’s gendered body, but rather to enrich one’s soul. What

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did it matter if she had given birth to spiritual daughters instead of physical ones—she remained a women who still suffered from menstruation if not from labor pains. If the body and its functions remained secondary to the soul, people could focus on their inner lives through study and prayer.

Unlike Abelard, Heloise did not believe gender difference was centrally located in the sexual organs or intrinsically connected to reproductive activity. Separation was impossible—removing Abelard’s sexual organs had not rendered him less male just as the running of a successful convent or sexual abstinence had not made her less female, despite his suggestions to that effect.

Abelard, however, argued that human sexuality could be transcended, or in his case, deliberately removed. With this view, he proposed the existence of gender neutrality, which he traced back to the Garden of Eden. In his sermons for the Paraclete, he focused on the shared humanity of men and women, suggesting that male and female flesh was primarily human flesh. They both possessed the capacity to transcend this flesh through prayer and virtuous living. Gender differences mattered little in an eschatological context because both male and female bodies had contained the seeds of sin and redemption. In his sermon on the Annunciation of Mary, Abelard offered the Paraclete nuns an explanation of the Creation story of Adam and Eve that emphasized their physical similarities. God first formed Adam from the earth, and then formed Eve
from Adam’s rib. Adam and Eve consequently consisted of the same substance—a combination of earth and flesh. Neither gender, therefore, could bear the full burden of human sin. Although Eve, falling prey to her womanly weakness, had eaten the forbidden fruit, her weakness stemmed from Adam, whose flesh she shared. Abelard turned to the Virgin Mary as the proof of his argument. What mattered was the humanity of men and women, because it was their human bodily substance that connected them to Christ through Mary. Mary, Eve’s descendent, was the source of humanity’s salvation. She was the product of God’s original act of creation that formed men and women from the same substance. “In the one sex grace existed, just as in the other the blame preceded, and the same natures, though the wound is inflicted, offer the medicine of healing, and where plague is introduced, so the poultice is wonderfully completed.”

Men shared women’s sin, and at the same time, the grace they carried as the gift of the Virgin Mary. Women did not bear a greater burden of sin, according to Abelard’s explanation. Masculinity and femininity, Abelard implied, were not as polarized as general religious thinking had taught. Women and men shared much of their physical substance.

In his “Sermon on the Assumption of Mary,” Abelard explained that Mary and Christ had experienced the relationship of Adam and Eve in reverse. Eve was born from

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289 “Primus Adam de terra plasmatus non de femina est natus; imo de eius costa femina est formata,” Abelard, “Sermo Primus,” PL 178 Col.0380A.
290 “. . . in utroque sexu consistetera gratia, sicut in utroque praecesserat culpa, et eadem naturae, per quas vulnus est inflictum, curationis afferent medicamentum, et unde illata plaga, inde mirabiliter conferetur cataplasma,” Abelard, “Sermo Primus” PL 178 Col.0380A-Col. 0381A.
Adam’s rib, while the physical body of Mary, the new Eve, was the vehicle that had allowed the new Adam emerge into the mortal world of sin and decay. At the same time, God had created Eve inside Paradise, and Adam outside, as at the moment of her Assumption, Christ had raised Mary from earth into Paradise. With the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, she and Christ had reenacted this eternal truth about gender. At the origins of the universe, as at the origins of Christianity, male and female flesh had been the same.²⁹¹

Why was the location of gender difference so important for Abelard and Heloise? For Heloise, the essential argument was whether or not the female gender was a weakness to be overcome, as contemporary wisdom dictated. She argued that the female gender could never be surpassed through virtue because it was located firmly in the physical body. Neither, however, did women need to suppress or rise beyond their feminine bodies, because that should not be the goal of a monastic life. Those living in monasteries should look inward rather than concentrate on their physicality. Her arguments suggested that men and women would not require separate Rules to govern their spirits.

Abelard’s arguments regarding the shared inheritance of men and women acted a justification for his *cura monialium*. He admitted that he had received some criticism for the attention he had paid to the Paraclete nuns. Mary Martin McLaughlin pointed out that having failed as a member of the male communities of St. Gildas and St. Denis, he required the cooperation of Heloise and her nuns in order to explore his ideas for monastic reform.

Seen in this light, the women for whose edification and instruction he produced so remarkable—indeed, unique—a body of works were in a sense his surrogates, the agents of his frustrated and, in less charitable eyes, somewhat equivocal monastic vocation.\(^{292}\)

When he argued about the similarities between men and women he was encouraging Heloise and her nuns to achieve success in their spiritual vocation, and also to rationalize his own considerable actions on their behalf. Despite his deliberations about the eschatological importance of the female gender, in his mind, gender, be it male or female, represented the evils of sexual sin. Gender, therefore, was a weakness for both men and women to overcome.

**Evangelical Justifications for Gender difference**

Abelard, never developed a single theory of gender difference. While in his sermons, Abelard explored the ontological ties that bound together the genders and blurred their differences, in other writings, he chose a different line of argument. In his

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seventh letter, on the origin of nuns, which I focus on this section, he described in detail the experiences of Jesus’ female disciples in order to analyze the many differences that constituted women as both dissimilar from and superior to men. Although he also considered the important role of pagan and Jewish women in shaping salvation history, as Mary Martin McLaughlin has pointed out, the crux of the letter “is the force and direction of the argument that derives its special power from the firmness of its foundation in the teachings and actions of Christ and their Gospel sources.” Abelard insisted upon female physical weakness as a marker of spiritual strength and that the shortcomings of women’s bodies indicated greater wells of virtue.

In all his arguments, the Virgin Mary supplied the ultimate example of female spiritual strength in a faulty vessel. In his sermon, written for the Paraclete nuns, on the Assumption of Mary, Abelard explained that holy women were directly following the path that Mary had set out.

The Lord, about to ascend, promised his disciples that he was going to prepare a place with them. And therefore, you virgins, or any women devoted to Christ, as students of the greatest virgin [Mary], you undertake the lesson of the holy proposition from her.

He also referred to this idea in his sermon “On the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary.” Abelard explained that virtue was naturally greater in women. He attributed this to the precedent that the Virgin Mary set with her flawless lifestyle. Women, the spiritual

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294 “Ascensurus Dominus discipulis promisit, se ire parare illis locum. Et vos ergo, virgins, vel quaecunque feminae Christo devotae, huius summae virginis tanqua, discipluiae, a qua sancti propositi documentum suscepistes,”
descendants of Mary, were more likely to follow her example and choose a life of
virginity than men were likely to follow the example of Christ’s virginity. “For in fact,
we find few men who imitate Christ in the virtue of virginity. This grace of Mary has
many followers among you [the nuns], of whom so much greater the virtue, so much
weaker the sex.” The greater number of female virgins was due precisely to their
feminine nature, which contained the necessary weakness for grace to flourish, because
“virtue is perfected in infirmity.”

Abelard used the examples of Jesus’ disciples to demonstrate the special qualities
that rendered women superior. He was adamant that the followers of Christ had included
both men and women. From the opening lines of his history, Abelard expressed this
belief and explained that the disciples were the predecessors of both monks and nuns.

Sacred histories diligently contain how with devotion these most blessed women
and in truth, nuns were faithful followers of Christ, and how much grace and
honor Christ and afterwards the apostles showed to their devotion.

The Paraclete nuns shared in this special grace that Christ had always bestowed upon
women. The lesson was relevant for nuns such as Heloise and her community as they had
were the spiritual descendents of these female disciples, both in terms of their devotion to

295 “Paucos quipped virorum reperimus, qui in virtute virginitatis Christum imitentur. Multas sequaces haec Mariae gratia in vobis habet, quarum tanto virtus gratior, quanto sexus infirmior,” Abelard, “Sermo Primus,” PL 78 Col. 0383D.
296 “Virtus quippe in infirmitate perficitur,” Abelard, “Sermo Primus,” PL 178 Col. 0383D.
297 “Quam devote autem Christum hae beatissimae mulieres ac vere moniales secutae fuerint, quantamque gratiam et honorem devotioni earum tam ipse Christus quam postmodum apostoli exhibuerint, sacrae diligenter historiae continent,” Abelard, “Abelard’s First Reply,” 254.
Christ and their imitation of Mary. While early Christian women had been equal to men in status, Abelard continued, they had been superior in terms of faith. Women of the Gospels had displayed consistent loyalty to Christ, never doubting him or abandoning him. The Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and other women had remained faithful to Jesus during his greatest sufferings. All four of the Gospel writers had described how women had waited faithfully at the Cross. This image of faithful women mourning a suffering Christ appeared in other works of twelfth-century prescriptive literature for women. Morgan Powell has demonstrated the importance of this image in the illustrations of the St. Albans Psalter, a manuscript that members of the monastery of St. Albans had commissioned for Christina of Markyate and her nuns. The Psalter contained an illustration of Jesus surrounded by devoted women. In her study of the Psalter, Jane Geddes has also explored the centrality of this illustration and the prominence in accorded to women. Fiona Griffiths has analyzed the use of the Crucifixion in twelfth-century monastic literature. She examined references to the events at the Cross in works such as the second vita of Robert of Arbrissel, the vita of St. Gilbert, and the vita of Mathilde of Tuscany. She focused particularly on the moment in the Gospel of John when Jesus turned to his mother and said, “mother, behold your son,”

and then turned to John, saying, “Behold your mother.” As she argued, writers employed this scene as a model for the *cura monalium*, the mandatory care of religious men for religious women. For men, the image portrayed the *cura monalium* as a both a necessary and pleasurable duty that Christ had mandated. For women, the image served to remind them of their affective relationship with Christ as well as the benevolent support men would provide for their lifestyle.

The intense bond between Christ and Mary Magdalene was among the most important male-female relationships in Abelard’s narrative of the passion. Mary Magdalene acted as the example par excellence of the superiority of female loyalty and thus the ultimate justification for gender difference. She excelled in love of Christ. Abelard stressed the strength of Mary’s faith, which fear or despair could not shake. Not only did she remain at the Cross, but she waited up all night mourning at the Jesus’s tomb.

Certainly, with the leader of the apostles himself having denied him, and with the beloved one of the Lord having fled, with even the apostles having dispered, these brave women persisted, nor was any terror or desperation able to separate them from Christ, either in passion or in death.  

Abelard contrasted Mary Magdalene’s actions with the startling behavior of the apostles, who continually failed Jesus in his hour of need. In the Garden of Gethsemen, the

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apostles fell asleep instead of keeping him company. Peter denied knowledge of Jesus three times. Thomas had doubted his resurrection. Of the twelve men, only John waited at the Cross. Unlike the apostles who could not remain awake with Christ, Mary Magdalene and her companions waited up all night at his tomb. As with the Sibyls, the Vestals, and others who appeared in Abelard’s history, this episode illustrated the disparity between male and female behavior. Women, be they pagan or Christian, had always displayed greater virtue, wisdom, and faithfulness than men.

Abelard explained that Jesus rewarded Mary Magdalene for her faithfulness by allowing her to witness the miracle of the Resurrection, when she first saw Jesus in bodily form. Abelard drew particular significance from the fact that Mary Magdalene reported the news to the apostles. This privilege, he explained, designated her “the Apostle over the Apostles.”

And from these [sayings] we infer these holy women to have been appointed as if apostles over the apostles, when they announced the greatest joy of the Resurrection to them, having been sent to them either by the Lord or by angels, which was expected by everyone, so that through them, the apostles first learned that which afterwards they proclaimed to the entire world. . . . The women, leading a sleepless night in tears at the tomb, deserved to see first the glory of the Resurrection, for he whom they had loved faithfully in death as in life they showed not so much in deeds as in words.”

304 “Insomnem ad sepulcrum illius noctem in lacrymis feminæ ducentes, resurgentis gloriæ primæ videre meruerunt. Cui fideliter in mortem quantu, dilexerint vivum, mon tam verbis quam rebus exhibuerunt . . . Ex quibus colligimus has sanctas mulieres quasi apostolas super apostolos esse constitutas, cum ipsæ ad eos vel a Domino vel ab angelis missæ summam illud resurrectionis gaudium nuntiaverunt, quod exspectabatur ab omnibus, ut per eam apostolic primum addiscerent quod toti mundo postmodum praedicarent,” Abelard, “Abelard’s First Reply,” 257-258.
Abelard was not the first writer to describe Mary Magdalene as “the apostle to the apostles.” Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170-c. 235) employed the term in his exegesis of the Song of Songs. He was the first writer to endow the Hebrew poem with Christian imagery and to equate Mary Magdalene and Christ with the bride and her royal lover. 

Abelard was interested in the anonymous women who anointed Christ in the Gospels, whom he associated with Mary Magdalene. Medieval scholars believed that Mary Magdalene was the same person as the woman who appeared in each Gospel account to anoint Christ with oil. Beginning in the fourth century, Christian writers began merging these women together. In the Western tradition, Ambrose first raised the question whether Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany may have been the same person. Augustine suggested that Mary of Bethany may have also been the nameless woman from Luke, although he was not willing to state this argument definitively. In the late-sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great settled the question, announcing in a sermon that Luke’s sinner, Mary Magdalene, and Mary of Bethany from the Book of John were the same woman. 

Abelard accorded enormous importance to these women. For him, the act of women anointing Christ underscored the two main functions of the Gospel women—service and loyalty. There are four separate accounts of the anointing scene in

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306 In her study of the imagery of Mary Magdalene, Susan Haskins has demonstrated how this blending of the female gospel characters directly contributed to Mary Magdalene’s association with prostitution, Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, 90-97.
the Gospels. In John 12.1-8., Christ and his disciples visited the home of Lazarus of Bethany, and his two sisters Mary and Martha. Lazarus sat at the table with his guests, Martha served them, and Mary anointed Christ’s feet with ointment and wiped them with her hair. Judas Iscariot criticized her for wasting expensive oil that could have been sold for money to the poor. Christ rebuked him, intoning that the poor would always be with them, but he would not. He said ominously that Mary should keep the ointment for his burial. In Matthew 26.6-13, Christ visited the home of Simon the Leper. A woman opened a box of ointment to anoint his head. The disciples grew angry, arguing that the money she spent on the ointment should have gone to the poor. In this version as well, Christ leapt to her defense, demanding of the disciples, “Why do you trouble this woman? For she hath wrought a good work upon me.”307 A similar incident occurred in Mark 14.3-9. At the home of Simon the Leper, a woman broke an alabaster box of oil, and poured the contents on his head. Those present grew angry over the waste, so Christ defended her action. In Luke 7.37-7.38, Christ has dinner at the home of Simon, a Pharisee. A woman entered the house, anointed first his head and then his feet with oil, and then kissed them fervently. Simon angrily accused her of being a sinner. Christ defended her, pointing out that Simon had neither kissed him nor anointed him. Turning to the woman, he pronounced her forgiven of her sins.

Abelard employed the examples of these anointing woman as he had those of the female disciples and Mary Magdalene at the sepulcher—to illustrate how important the

307 “... quid molesti est mulieri opus bonum operata est in me,” Matthew 26.11.
nurturing abilities of women had been to the history of salvation. In every account Christ continually defended the loving attentions of women against male accusations. The anointing women possessed a central function among the followers of Christ. Abelard explained that only the women in the Gospels saw to the comfort of Christ. “The Evangelical Scriptures relate that no one except women ministered to the Lord, for whom they even dedicated their own means in daily alms and they procured the necessary things of life especially for him.”

Throughout all the Gospels, men are never concerned with his nourishment, health, or relaxation. The male disciples, on the contrary, Abelard pointed out, had criticized the women for wasting the expensive ointment, prompting Christ to jump to their defense. Women had also anointed Christ’s head with precious balm, an act to which Abelard attributed major significance. He argued that the woman was anointing Christ as king, in the tradition of the High Priest who had anointed the Hebrew kings. Women, whom the Catholic Church did not permit to perform the sacraments, he pointed out, had executed the greatest sacred action of all. “Christ was anointed by a woman; Christians by men.” Their anointing of Christ was an extension of their loving care for him, and because he valued their attention so much, it assumed sacral implications.

Abelard asserted the central role that women had played not only in the life of Christ, but in the history of human salvation. They had received this

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privilege because of the great love Christ had bestowed upon them.

Abelard connected the many examples of female loyalty as opposed to male weakness found in the Gospels to the physical nature of male and female bodies. He compared the Gospel women to the skin and apostles to the flesh, flesh in this instance meaning the substance, or the interiority of the body, as opposed to an epidermal covering.

Moreover, in the body, the [pars] is the interior and the flesh the exterior. The apostles, therefore, by preaching, reaching out for the food of the interior soul, and women, procuring the necessary things of the body, are compared to the flesh and the skin. Therefore, when flesh was consumed, the bone of Christ adhered to the skin, since, with the apostles having been scandalized in the passion of the Lord, and having despaired concerning his death, the devotion of holy women persisted immovable and did not at all recede from the bone of Christ, since they retained such great constancy either of hope or of charity, so that they were not separated [from him] by death either in mind or body. And men are naturally stronger than women, so in body as in mind. And whence the nature of men, which is nearer to the bone, deservedly, is designated through the flesh, the infirmity of women is designated through the skin.  

Abelard, in this passage, drew upon the traditional line of thinking that connected men to the heart or the head, and women to the flesh, or alternatively, men to the spirit and women to the body. He complicated this tradition, however, portraying women’s

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physical weakness as the source of their spiritual strength. Their weakness, he argued, had allowed the women of the Gospels to enjoy emotionally intimate bonds with Christ, entrusted with the care of his physical body.

The association of women with frail and sedentary bodies originated in the writings of Galen, Hippocrates, and Aristotle, and later appeared in medieval medical and philosophical texts. Medieval medical thought attributed cold and wet humors to women. These qualities produced smooth and hairless bodies, unfit for physical labor and unable to create active semen. Men, on the contrary, possessed warmth that resulted in strength and virile semen. As Joan Cadden has discussed extensively, these qualities justified women’s secondary role in society on numerous levels. Women, viewed as childlike and passive, existed under the legal protection of male relatives. Religious women found that monks and bishops placed limits upon their freedom to travel, interact with the laity, and leave their cloisters. Abelard, however, argued that the association of women with the physical body was the root of their close relationships to Jesus. Women took care of his physical needs, and in fact, were the only disciples permitted this privilege. He equated women with the physical body and its external coverings but he explained that these feminine qualities were why Christ had valued them. Christ was human, through his mother, and his own physicality therefore required care; women provided him with this vital service. Unlike the apostles, they offered him nourishment and comforting oils. These refreshing ministrations were portents of the unswerving loyalty the women would

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312 Joan Cadden, *Meaning of Sex Difference*, 184-188.
later demonstrate at the Cross.

Abelard’s insistence on Christ’s human body made sense in the greater context of contemporary spiritual trends. Caroline Walker Bynum and Rachel Fulton, among others, have demonstrated that the late eleventh-and twelfth-centuries witnessed the emergence of affective piety that focused on Christ’s humanity. Care of his human body which women had undertaken was not incidental but glorious. Beginning with the female disciples and extending to nuns throughout the ages, religious women were connected to Christ’s humanity. It was fitting, therefore, that the female disciples had concerned themselves with the needs of his physical body.

Through his interpretation of the Gospels, Abelard entered into a larger conflict with the Christian Church, one that struck at the very heart of the nature of religious women. He dealt with the “the enduring ambivalence in the Christian tradition between the teachings and actions of Christ regarding women and the currents of anti-feminism that often flagrantly opposed them.” What was most notable in his writings concerning women was his opinion concerning what Mary McLaughlin has termed, “the dignity of the female sex.” Women were certainly the equals of men in intelligence, mercy, and chastity. In terms of Christ’s love, they were superior. Everything that rendered the Paraclete nuns inferior in the minds of their contemporaries—their propensity to lust,

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314 Mary Martin McLaughlin, “Peter Abelard and the Dignity of Women,” 296.
their physically weak, unclean bodies, rendered them more worthy of grace and forgiveness.

**Abelard and Heloise on Educating Women**

In this section, I consider how Abelard and Heloise viewed the effects of gender difference on the female capacity for monastic learning. Heloise and Abelard were two of the most educated and intelligent people of their generation. Their philosophical arguments still fascinate readers. Both of them, however, devoted a great deal of their lives to teaching others. In several of their letters, they focused on the most profitable way to educate their pupils. Their ideas often contradicted contemporary views of women’s intellectual abilities, which equated women with illiteracy. Abelard and Heloise envisioned a rigorous course of study for nuns that included patristic writings, scriptural studies, and pagan texts, all read in the original Latin. We know from Abelard that Heloise knew Greek and Hebrew, so it is possible that she transmitted this knowledge to her nuns. They both, however, justified their educational program in different ways. Abelard considered women especially suited to study because of their weak physical bodies. Heloise connected the pursuit of learning with a richer spiritual life.

From the evidence of their correspondence we can infer that Abelard and Heloise envisioned her education as the model for the nuns under her care. The combined efforts of Abelard and her uncle Fulbert had ensured that Heloise had received an extensive education.

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315 Abelard, “Epistola IX,” *PL*, Col. 0332A.
education. In her introduction to the edited volume, Listening to Heloise, Bonnie Wheeler pointed out that of all the great abbesses of her day, Heloise was the only one to receive an education similar to a male student of a Parisian master. She did pass on a considerable portion of her knowledge including language skills and biblical exegesis to her nuns. The Problemata Heloissae provides insight into the educational practices at the Paraclete. The Problemata Heloissae consisted of forty-two questions addressed to Abelard regarding Scriptural interpretation. Heloise explained that these were not her questions alone but also belonged to the women under her care.

We are disturbed by many questions, we become sluggish in our reading, and are led to love less what we are most ignorant of in the sacred word, until we feel unfruitful the labor in which we are engaged. Therefore as disciples to our teacher, as daughters to our father we send certain small questions, praying and begging that that you will not disdain to turn your attention to solving them at whose exhortation and command we have mainly undertaken this course of study.

The evidence of the Problemata Heloissae suggested that Heloise conducted intense study sessions and conversations regarding Scripture with her nuns and that they read the texts in Latin. The questions related to Scriptural inconsistencies, such as when the Gospels related the same event different ways. For her fifth problem, for example, Heloise asked Abelard why Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all named different women to have been present at the risen Christ’s first appearance. Other questions, particularly those dealing with the Old Testament, related to historical context. Commenting on the Book of Samuel, Heloise inquired about Elkanah, the father of Samuel, the high priest.

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317 Heloise, Problemata Heloissae, 112.
What does it mean in the first book of the Kings, when it says of Elkanah, “this man used to go up on the appointed days, to worship.” (1 Sam 1:3) By whom or what were these days appointed?\(^{318}\)

Heloise also stated that the subjects of the questions did not follow the order of Scripture but rather “as they daily occurred to us, we set them down and direct that they be solved.”\(^{319}\) Her description suggests a spontaneous atmosphere of intellectual inquiry.

Heloise attributed the source of these questions not only to curiosity but to a desire for a richer spiritual understanding. She equated knowledge with pleasing Christ.

Very often you recommended the teaching of the Sacred Scripture, calling it a mirror of the soul by which its beauty or deformity may be perceived, so that no spouse of Christ should be allowed to be lacking this mirror, if she would wish to please him to whom she belongs. Moreover, you used to add for our own exhortation that Scripture read but not understood is like a mirror placed before eyes unseeing.

It was not enough to read without understanding. In the introduction to the *Speculum Virginum*, Conrad of Hirsau had used mirror imagery to convey a similar message. Both scenerios involved women asking men questions regarding texts they did not understand.

In the mirror that I have sent, attend the appearance of your hearts, where if you are not able to understand all things that are written, no small part of knowledge is to listen and to love one who does understand.\(^{320}\)

Conrad, however, envisioned women listening to his text, which was itself a commentary on the Bible for women, and then listening to a male cleric explain the lessons behind its

\(^{318}\) Heloise, *Problemata Heloissae*, 162.

\(^{319}\) Heloise, *Problemata Heloissae*, 112.

\(^{320}\) “In speculo, quod misi, vultus cordium vestrorum attendite, ubi, si omnia non potestis, quae scripta sunt, intelligere, non parva pars scientiae est intelligentem et audire et amare,” *SV* 4.
passages. Heloise and her nuns composed complex questions based on readings of biblical passages. It was important for them to understand themselves, not only to listen to one who understood for them.

The community of canonesses at Hohenbourg under Herrad offered a contemporary example of educated women learning in a group setting. In her book, *The Garden of Delights: Renaissance and Reform for Women in the Twelfth Century*, Fiona Griffiths explored the intellectual environment of that produced the *Garden of Delights*, a beautifully illustrated salvation history. Herrad, she argued, produced this manuscript for the edification of her nuns. She herself would act as the teacher, leading discussions in Latin. “Herrad assumed a female audience that was literate in Latin and both spiritually and intellectually capable of understanding complex theological ideas.” Griffiths pointed out the similarities between Herrad’s community and that of Heloise. The Paraclete nuns were able to comprehend the scriptures as well as the patristic writings in Latin and propose complex questions on their own.

The *Problemata* brings up questions concerning the linguistic studies at the Paraclete. Heloise and her nuns were able to compose their questions in Latin and to receive the answers that Abelard had written in Latin. In his ninth letter, Abelard stated twice that Heloise had learned Greek and Hebrew as well as Latin. He first encouraged the nuns of the Paraclete to learn from her example and study these languages.

I remind you, and I desire to implore you incessantly, that while you are able, and you have a mother experienced in these three languages [Greek, Hebrew, and

Latin], you may be borne to this perfection of study, so that whatever doubt concerning different translations might arise, through you, the testing may be able to be ended.\footnote{322 “Hunc zelum tanti doctoris, et sanctarum feminarum in Scripturis divinis considerans, monui, et incessanter implore vos cupio, ut dum potestis, et matrem harum peritam trium linguarum habetis, ad hanc studii perfectionem feramini: ut quaecunque de diversis translationibus oborta dubitatio fuerit, per vos probatio terminari possit,” Abelard, “Epistola IX,” \textit{PL}, Col. 0332A.}

He later explained that she had surpassed her male contemporaries by acquiring knowledge of all three of these three languages.

In your mother you have a teacher, who is able to supply all things to you, namely, so to the example of virtues as to the teaching of letters: she who alone in this time seems not free of letters, having obtained experience of the three languages, not only of Latin but truly even so in Hebrew as in Greek . . . \footnote{323 “Magisterium habetis in matre, quod ad omnia vobis sufficere, tam ad exemplum scilicet virtutum, quam ad doctrinam litterarum potest: quae non solum Latinae, verum etiam tam Hebraicae quam Graecae non expers litteraturae, sola hoc tempore illam trium linguarum adepta peritiam videtur . . .” Abelard, “Epistola IX,” Col. 0333B-Col. 0333C.}

Mary Martin McLaughlin suggested that this praise of Heloise’s linguistic abilities was mere exaggeration. Mary Elisabeth McNamer, however, argued that Heloise could have learned Hebrew from a local Rabbi. Andrew of St. Victor had acquired his Hebrew in the same way. There was a Jewish academy at Troyes, eighteen miles from the Paraclete, and a thriving Jewish community at Quincy, two kilometers from the Paraclete.\footnote{324 May Elisabeth McNamer, \textit{The Education of Heloise}, 69.} If Heloise received tutorials in Hebrew from a local Jewish scholar, McNamer continued, it possible that she brought other nuns to her study sessions or taught them on her own.

While it is impossible to prove this theory, and we may not know how Heloise acquired her knowledge, I do not doubt that she possessed it. Abelard had no reason to lie about
Heloise’s abilities in a letter that she would read and hardly would have encouraged the nuns of the Paraclete to seek knowledge they would have no way of acquiring.

While Heloise was the abbess of the Paraclete and directly oversaw the studies of her nuns, Abelard remained deeply involved in these endeavors. Not only did he compose the letters and sermons under discussion in this chapter, but as the *Problemata Heloissae* attested, he responded to the questions they posed to him. He encouraged them to pursue study of the Bible, the patristic writers such as Jerome, and the study of languages. He also encouraged them to challenge his knowledge, reminding them that Jerome’s pupil Marcella had never hesitated to question him. According to Abelard, women were even more suited than men for carrying on the monastic tradition of learning. Women were unsuited for physical work, he explained. On this point he was in agreement with Heloise who had brought this up as one of the key reasons that the Benedictine Rule was not applicable to women. “what about gathering in the harvest—has it ever been the custom for convents of nuns to go out to do this, or to tackle the work of the fields?”325 As Linda Georgianna had pointed out, Helosie used this argument, along with others concerning menstruation and constitution, to suggest that a new Rule should privilege the inner over the outer.326 Abelard, however, argued that since women were too frail for physical labor, they should spend their time studying Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. Knowledge of these languages was necessary for anyone who

325 Clanchy, *Abelard*, 96.
truly wished to understand the meaning of the Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, he insisted.

But if we were to study to translate them fully we should have to seek in that fount itself rather than in the streamlets of translation, particularly since the varying translations create ambiguity rather than certainly for the reader.  

It is noteworthy that Abelard envisioned the Paraclete becoming a community of scholars. He never suggested that their understanding of holy ideas could be limited or that their educational needs were less than those of men. This attitude was quite different from that of the author of the *Speculum Virginum*, who assumed that his female audience could be illiterate and reliant upon male teachers. Indeed, Abelard thought that the Paraclete possessed the potential to surpass male communities in learning. Abelard blamed monks for society’s loss of the language skills of Greek and Hebrew. As he had in his history of nuns, he argued that once again women would need to compensate for the faults of men.

What we have lost in men, we shall recover in women, and to the condemnation of men, and the judgment of the stronger sex, the queen of the south again searches out wisdom in the words of true Solomon. To which work you are able to give so much, as nuns are able to exert themselves in work of the hands so much the less than monks, and from the quiet of their work and also the infirmity of their nature they are more easily able to be given way into temptation.

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The passage indicated that women were indeed weak, both in terms of physical strength and spiritual resilience, an odd point that directly contradicted his other letters. Women were prone to temptation, which in monastic terms could be any vice from idleness and vanity to sex and heresy. These qualities accorded with traditional high medieval views of female physical and spiritual fragility. According to Abelard’s paradoxical explanation, however, weakness equaled greater capacity for mental exercise. There was little else that women could accomplish successively, since they were hampered by physical weakness and a lack of mental resolve against sin. Since their bodies rendered them unfit for physical labor, women could concentrate on honing their mental skills. Devotion to learning would not only serve the greater good by preserving knowledge, but it would aid women in their spiritual quests. Learning would occupy their minds, preventing their weak natures from succumbing to temptations.

Abelard here played with the traditional gender imagery that equated physical strength with mental strength. Although medieval medical theorists rarely agreed on universal sex characteristics, they tended to associate women with the colder and wetter humors. These qualities rendered them both physically and mentally weak. According to medieval theories of medicine and education, women, with their weak bodies and smaller minds, were ill-suited to learning. Abelard suggested that women’s physical weakness, on the contrary, constituted their mental strength. As we have seen above, Abelard’s

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330 Ibid.
insistence on female frailty as the source of their best attributes is a theme that permeated his prescriptive literature to women.

The evidence of Abelard and Heloise’s letters as well as the Problemata suggests the existence of a lively learning environment at the Paraclete. Heloise’s obituary record in the Chartulaire of the Paraclete testified to her reputation for erudition. “Mother of our monastic way of life, first abbess, famous for her learning and her monastic way of life.” Her nuns chose to remember her for her knowledge, suggesting that they valued learning as much as she did. Abelard considered their gender an asset in monastic education, while Heloise and her nuns certainly did not consider their female sex a liability when it came to learning. Abelard and Heloise disagreed on many points regarding gender difference but they both agreed on the centrality of education for religious women.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that both Abelard and Heloise thought extensively about gender difference. They believed that issues relating to gender were essential to their understanding of their role as leaders of a monastic community of women. Considerations about maleness and femaleness were central to their mission as leaders. According to Abelard, virtue was indeed perfected in infirmity—the inherently weak and fleshly qualities of women rendered them suitable for education, amenable to virginity,

and beloved by Christ. At the same time, the more devoted to religion and learning they became, the more they would overcome their femaleness. Heloise was less concerned with the positive or negative qualities of the female sex. In her letters to Abelard, she argued that all considerations of the body were secondary to spiritual concerns. Her words implied that men and women were equal in their spirits.

One question I have yet to explore is how the nuns themselves felt about the questions of gender difference. They were exposed to the arguments of Abelard and Heloise through their sermons and letters. How did they negotiate between the viewpoints of their two mentors? We do know that they possessed the intellectual capacity to consider questions along with their leaders. Due to the efforts of Abelard and Heloise, the nuns did not have to accept the arguments of either of them at face value—they could look up the sources for themselves and form their own opinions. In this way, they were far more intellectually independent than Theodora and the audiences of the *Speculum*, who learned about texts as mediated through a male cleric. The popularity of the Paraclete within Heloise’s lifetime may help answer these questions. Women wished to join the community and local families wanted Heloise to admit their daughters and other relatives. Heloise maintained excellent relationships with the secular community; the name Heloise was popular in Champagne. These facts tell us nothing specifically about the way that the nuns felt about their abbess’s views on education and gender, but they do suggest a contented religious community. We do know that under the

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332 Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession*, 234.
leadership of Abelard and Heloise the Paraclete was a community that was constantly rethinking itself and its mission in terms of gender.

In my next chapter, I consider the writings of a woman equal in influence and fame to Heloise, Hildegard von Bingen. Like Heloise, Hildegard ruled over her own communities of women. She is unique, however, in leaving behind a huge number of letters to multiple religious and secular people. Among them are letters to other religious women. Her letters offer an opportunity to examine the interactions of religious women and how they advised each other on spiritual matters.
CHAPTER 6

WOMEN WRITING FOR WOMEN: THE LETTERS OF HILDEGARD VON

BINGEN

In this chapter, I consider letters of advice that religious women wrote for each other. This chapter will act as a contrast to my previous ones in which I study women in terms of their spiritual and literary relationships with men. I have focused on the cura monialium as a responsibility that men and women had to negotiate. Religious women, however, also cared for the spiritual wellbeing of other women. This situation raises several questions. What types of relationships did they form with each other? Did monasticism favor the creation of certain kinds of friendships? Did they form mother/daughter or alternative family arrangements? To explore these questions, I will examine the letters of Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), the famous German abbess of Disibodenburg and St. St.Rupertsburg.333 We have a huge collection of letters that she wrote and received. Fifty letter exchanges are between Hildegard and other religious women—nuns, abbesses, or entire female communities. In several letters to men Hildegard discusses various issues regarding religious women of her acquaintance. These letters demonstrate that nuns formed meaningful relationships with each other and participated in social networks involving secular and religious women. They testify as well to the mobility of certain religious women. Women’s interests differed from those

that men expressed in their encounters with women, or as Anne Winston-Allen explained, they told each other different stories.\textsuperscript{334} These letters are fascinating not just for what they reveal about Hildegard but also for what they demonstrate about religious women and their concerns and desires. Hildegard wrote many volumes on different subjects; her enormous corpus has received attention from numerous scholars, but the memories of these other women sometimes only survive in their letters to her. These letters are a valuable source for women’s history not only because of what they tell us about the famous visionary, but also for what they reveal to us about the networks that religious women formed for social advancement and spiritual and emotional support.

**The Life of Hildegard and Modern Criticism**

I will begin with a brief summary of the major events of Hildegard’s life before moving on to consider her letters. We know a great deal about Hildegard from her *vita*, written by Theodoric of Echternach and Godfrey of Disibodenberg.\textsuperscript{335} Before her death, Hildegard was involved with the creation of her *vita* and contributed several passages in the first-person. Hildegard was born in 1098 as the tenth child to Hildebert and Mechthilde of Bermersheim, noble dependents of the Sponheim counts. When she was eight years old, her parents gave her over to the care of Jutta, the daughter of Count

\textsuperscript{334} Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing about Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 22.

Stephen of Sponheim. Jutta was of marriageable age but she had decided to leave behind
the secular world and become an anchoress. She willingly enclosed herself in a cell
attached to the monastery of Disibodenberg with Hildegard and one other girl. Jutta
brought up the two girls. She taught them the rudiments of Latin in order to read the
Psalter as well as to play the psaltery. We have no details about their cell except that they
could hear the monks sing the offices. At some point between 1112 and 1115, Hildegard
took the formal vows of a nun before Bishop Otto of Bamberg. She also received
instruction from a monk at Disibodenberg named Volmar who eventually became her
secretary and beloved friend. More young women joined Jutta, effectively turning
Disibodenberg into a double cloister. In 1136, upon the death of Jutta, the growing
community of nuns elected Hildegard as magistra. Although she had been receiving
visions since early childhood, in 1141 she began to dictate them to Volmar. Her
dications formed her first book of visions, Scivias, which earned her the respect of both
Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugenius III. In 1147 at the Synod of Trier, the Pope
read aloud passages from the Scivias and gave her apostolic license to continue writing.

In 1151, after completing the Scivias, she wrote Subtilitatem diversarum naturarum
creaturarum libri novem, a scientific and medical encyclopedia that included a

336 Hildegard von Bingen, Scivias, ed. Adelgundis Führkütter, CCCM vols. 43-43a
(Turnhout: Brepols, 1978).
337 Barbara Newman, Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine,
comprehensive herbal, bestiary, and lapidary. She later wrote the *Liber simplicis medicinae*, a combination of herbal lore and ancient medical traditions. At the same time, she composed liturgical lyrics and music, now known as the *Symphonia*. Two more visionary books followed the *Scivias*—in 1163, the *Liber vitae meritorum, per simplicem hominem a vivente luce revelatorum* and in 1173, *De operatione Dei*. Her other works include a *Life of St. Disibod* and collections of unknown words. The circulation of Hildegard’s books, particularly her visionary works, led to a flood of letters from people of all social classes. They asked her advice on matters from spiritual care to medicine.

Hildegard’s fame contributed to the growth of the female community at St. Disibodenberg. In 1150, to the dismay of the monks of Disibodenberg, Hildegard chose to found a new convent at Rupertsberg by the town of Bingen. Hildegard left with eighteen of her nuns, placing her new house under the protection of Arnold of Mainz. She eventually founded a daughter-house at Eibigen. In 1158, Hildegard traveled east along the river Main on her first preaching tour. In 1160, she undertook a second tour going south to Lorraine. Between 1161-1163 she traveled along the Rhine. After 1170 she visited monasteries in Swabia such as Hirsau and Zwiefalten. Many of the

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religious people she had met on these preaching tours wrote to her for advice and reminded her of their acquaintance. Hildegard spent her last year engaged in a lengthy dispute with the clergy of Mainz over whether or not a man she had buried in the churchyard at Ruperstsberg had died as an excommunicate. Because of the conflict, Hildegard’s community was placed under interdict for a time. In March of 1179 the community was absolved and Hildegard died six months later.

Because of the overwhelming volume of secondary literature dealing with the many aspects of Hildegard’s work, I will focus on those authors who specifically consider Hildegard as a correspondent. We have several hundred letters that Hildegard and her correspondents sent to each other. The letters begin after 1147, when the Pope approved the *Scivias*. The bulk of these letters date to the period of her preaching tours, when she encountered numerous religious men and women from the different monastic communities that she visited. Scholars agree that Hildegard was a careful and understanding correspondent. She was deeply interested in the state of pastoral care for both men and women and she considered the position of abbot and abbess as sacrosanct. Many leaders of monastic communities wrote to her desiring to relinquish their positions of authority. With only one exception, Hildegard advised them all to continue as leaders. To her mind, a solitary life was a selfish one. Other scholars have focused on the attitudes of the men and women who wrote to her. They all admired her talents; there were stylistic differences, however, according to their gender. Her female correspondents expressed a great deal of affection for her. They looked to her as a mentor, a sister, or a
mother figure. Only a few men, Manegold the Abbot of Hirsau for example, wrote to her in such intimate terms. For her part, Hildegard felt less of a need to remind women of the authority she claimed because of her visions.

Gillian Ahlgren has studied Hildegard’s rhetorical techniques in her correspondence. She looked specifically at how Hildegard varied her writing style according to the gender of the recipient. To do so she identified three kinds of literary formulae—reportorial, instrumental, and representative—to describe her visionary experiences. For the reportorial technique Hildegard stated that she herself had seen and heard a vision, for the instrumental technique she related the message of the vision stressing her participation as a vessel for divine revelation, and for the representative technique she merely offered advice. These three techniques, Ahlgren argued, “permit us to assess the intensity of her need to claim authority.” The first two techniques helped legitimate Hildegard’s advice. Ahlgren found that Hildegard frequently employed the first technique in her letters to men, as direct descriptions of her visions gave her the most authority. She was more likely to dispense advice without recourse to visionary authority when writing to other women. Ahlgren pointed out how Hildegard negotiated between her gender and her position of authority in a male world. Referencing her visions underscored her relationship to the divine and justified her role as a vocal force among

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monastic men. She demonstrated that Hildegard was highly conscious of her gender when corresponding with both men and women.

In her study of medieval female friendships, Ulrike Wiethaus also pointed out the impact that the gender of her addressee had on Hildegard’s tone.\footnote{Wiethaus, “Medieval Women’s Friendships,” 99.} Like Ahlgren, she observed that in her letters to men, Hildegard frequently employed her authority as a visionary. At the same time, she was more likely to denigrate herself as a “poor little woman” in order to soften the impact of a powerful female voice. “... One might say that Hildegard’s same-sex correspondence generally impresses as being more direct, frank, and emotional.”\footnote{Wiethaus, “In Search of Medieval Women’s Friendships: Hildegard of Bingen’s Letters to Her Female Contemporaries,” in Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993) 93-111.} Because she was less worried about her public image when writing to women, Wiethaus suggested, Hildegard was willing to reveal more of her own personality in these letters. She spoke as a friend and an abbess rather than the voice of the Living Light. There were certainly exceptions; Hildegard enjoyed close friendships with certain men, like Guibert of Gembloux, whom she had known for many years. With almost all women, however, even those she barely knew, Hildegard did not need to search to find the proper mix of humility and authority.

Joan Ferrante has studied Hildegard’s correspondence, paying particular attention to what her letters reveal about her personal life and her individuality. “The letters with few exceptions do not tell us much about Hildegard’s own feelings or even about her life. This is not because she was reticent—she seems to have spoken openly to her biographers—but because it is primarily God’s advice that is being asked and given.”

She considered Hildegard’s letters to those closest to her, her secretary Volmar and her favorite nun Richardis. In these letters, Ferrante pointed out, one can view Hildegard’s own emotions and the depths of her feelings. Ferrante and Barbara Newman have both looked at Hildegard’s letters to numerous abbots and abbesses who asked her advice. Many of them longed to resign their positions in favor of a solitary lifestyle and they wanted her blessing. In almost every case, Hildegard advised them to shoulder their burdens and remain in their positions. The path to virtue lay in helping others. “It is perhaps not surprising that someone who saw herself as a chosen instrument of God, compelled to carry out the tasks she was given as visionary and as abbess, despite illness and advanced age, should see others in the same light.”

Barbara Newman noted, as did Joan Ferrante, Hildegard’s firm belief in the importance of communal living and the need for strong leaders. “In the lure of the hermitage, Hildegard saw only a spurious and irresponsible pietism. Far better is the onerous but necessary care of souls in fidelity to a

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347 Joan Ferrante, “Correspondent,” 92.
348 Joan Ferrante, “Correspondent” 97.
vow one had taken.”\textsuperscript{350} The priority for an abbess and abbot should be care of their flock, no matter how much they longed to relinquish their responsibilities.\textsuperscript{351} As I will demonstrate, this advice accorded with Hildegard’s belief in the importance of the monastic community as surrogate family and emotional center.

Joan Ferrante also considered the role that Hildegard played in the lives of religious women, noting that they freely displayed warmth as well as admiration towards her. “She is a cherished friend or surrogate mother to many of them, to some a role model, a mentor.”\textsuperscript{352} A few men, such as Volmar and Abbot Manegold, abbot of Hirsau, shared strong friendships with her as well. Ferrante suggested that the majority of her correspondents valued her advice for its sense and compassion. Having been a member of a religious order since the age of eight, she understood the anxieties inherent in monastic living.

She offered moral support, practical wisdom (however disguised in parables), and compassion—gifts less striking perhaps than her divine revelations of the future or her stirring attacks on corruption but far more valuable for their lives. To men and women alike she was a cherished counselor just as she was a revered prophet.\textsuperscript{353}

The evidence of her letters reveals that women in particular longed for her emotional support as well as her visions.

These studies have all explored the sensible and brilliant persona that Hildegard’s letters reveal. In this chapter, I will build upon these studies while looking specifically at

\textsuperscript{352} Joan Ferrante, “Correspondent,” 104.
\textsuperscript{353} Joan Ferrante, “Correspondent,” 108.
the letters that religious women wrote to Hildegard and how she answered them. I will consider the concerns they shared with each other and what they hoped to accomplish through continued correspondence. I will also examine these letters for the evidence that they reveal about the existence of social networks and surrogate family relationships among women religious and their relatives.

The Monastic Community as Surrogate Family

Religious women wrote to Hildegard for a variety of reasons. Like many of her male correspondents, they wished to renounce their duties and retire to a solitary life or a smaller community. They hoped that Hildegard would support their plans. Other women needed to confess feelings of depression or anxiety to a sympathetic person and hoped for tenderness and kind words. Elisabeth of Schönau hoped that Hildegard would act as her mentor. Many of her correspondents had met her during one of her preaching tours and wanted to continue the acquaintance through letters and subsequent visits. It is clear that Hildegard’s female correspondents did not write to her for one-time advice. They hoped their letters would begin a continuing relationship with Hildegard. They envisioned these relationships based on mother-daughter models, sister models, and sometimes models of friendship. The letters that religious women exchanged with Hildegard contained familial imagery—they refer to her as their mother or their sister. While these relationships are metaphorical, we know that monastic relationships could equal biological ones in their intensity.
Penelope Johnson has demonstrated that familial relationships, both biological and created ones, were one of the most positive aspects of monasticism. Although women who entered monastic communities gave up marriage and biological motherhood, they not only maintained ties to their kin groups, but they formed surrogate relationships with other nuns. “The family orientation of medieval monasticism contributed powerfully to the satisfaction that life provided for nuns and monks and helped keep it a viable option for many centuries.” The language of the monastic community reflected that of a family, with abbots and abbesses ruling as fathers and mothers over their children. Monks referred to each other as brothers and nuns referred to each other as sisters. While they employed this language for non-relatives, nuns often lived in communities with their biological sisters and other blood relations. One of Hildegard’s sisters, Clementia, joined her at St.Rupertsburg. Her two favorite nuns, Richardis and Adelheid von Stade, were aunt and niece. Christina of Markyate’s community included her sister Margaret. Paulina of Paulinzella’s two daughters Engilsint and Bertrada became canonesses at Gernrode. Gisela, a third daughter, died before she could join her sisters. In medieval French monasteries, sisters were the most common grouping of biological relatives, possibly because there were fewer houses for women than men. Having multiple female relatives (and male relatives) in one house also allowed families

357 Sigibot, “Vita Paulinae,” *MGH SS* 3000:2, 909-938.
to concentrate their monetary donations and land grants, “create [ing] localized material and spiritual networks.”

The German double cloisters of the twelfth century also allowed women the opportunity as well to live in close proximity to their brothers and other male relatives. Hildegard’s younger contemporary, Elisabeth, spent most of her life at Schönau with her sister as well as her brother Eckbert who acted as her secretary and liason to the outside world. Paulina’s son Werner joined his mother’s small foundation of Paulinzella. Other women had male relatives who lived in other monastic houses or held religious positions and with whom they corresponded. Richard, the brother of Tenxswind, the magistra of Andernach was the provost of Springiersbach in Trier. When Richardis von Stade left St.Rupertsburg to become abbess of Bassum, she lived under the jurisdiction of her brother, archbishop Hartwig of Bremen. In 1176, Hildegard’s brother Hugo, a precenter at Mainz Cathedral, acted as her secretary for a short time. Christina of Markyate’s brother, Gregory, became a monk at the neighboring monastery of St. Albans. The abbot of St. Albans, Geoffrey, in turn, had a sister, Lettice, who joined Christina at Markyate. Nuns also kept in touch with their family who remained in the secular world. They could go home for extended visits to nurse ailing family members or to attend weddings or other major events. Christina of Markyate, for example, kept in touch with

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358 Johnson, Equal in Monastic Profession, 20.
her married sister Matilda and her brother-in-law. As Johnson has demonstrated, “. . .
the natal family routinely became intertwined with the monastic family.” Both women
and men could activate these extensive networks when they needed a favor or hoped to
make a drastic change in their lives.

Hildegard’s letter to the Margravine Richardis von Stade illustrated this
intertwining of biological and monastic familial relationships. The Margravine was the
mother of Hildegard’s nun, also named Richardis, and the grandmother of Adelheid.
According to her own words, Adelheid viewed Hildegard as a teacher and nurturer.
Richardis and Hildegard shared a close relationship and, for Hildegard’s part, a
passionate one. The von Stade family was powerful and connected to many secular and
religious figures. The Margravine was the daughter of the count of Magdeburg and the
niece of the Archbishop of Magdeburg. Her son Hartwig, the brother of Richardis, was
Archbishop of Bremen. Another daughter Lutgard (d. 1152), the mother of Adelheid,
had married King Eric of Denmark. In previous years, the kinship connections of her von
Stade nuns had worked in Hildegard’s favor. She herself was part of this extended kin
group, as her own mentor and foster mother, Jutta, was a cousin of the Margravine (their
grandfathers were brothers, sons of Count Eberhard of Sponheim, d. c. 1051). For this
reason, or for the sake of her daughter’s and granddaughter’s attachment to Hildegard,
the Margravine had supported her in her fight to leave Disibodenburg by interceding with

360 Life of Christina, .
361 Johnson, Equal in Monastic Profession, 248.
363 See discussion below.
the Archbishop of Mainz.\textsuperscript{364} Before the Richardis incident, the Margravine may have enjoyed her own affectionate relationship with Hildegard—it was not accidental that she sent first her daughter and then her granddaughter to be raised in her care. Around 1151, the two women both began negotiations to leave St.Rupertsburg in order to become abbesses at Bassum and Gandersheim respectively. In an effort to keep her monastic family together, Hildegard wrote numerous letters to their biological relatives.

She appealed first to the Margravine, suggesting that it was the Margravine’s own ambitions that had influenced Richardis and Adelheid to seek their appointments.

“Beware, lest by your will, advice, and support, their senses and souls are deprived of that high state of honor. For this position of abbess that you desire for them is certainly, certainly, certainly not God’s will, not compatible with the salvation of their souls.”\textsuperscript{365} Hildegard recognized the feelings of motherhood that both she and the Margravine shared regarding the two young women. She had acted as their spiritual mother, and under her care Richardis and Adelheid had learned to live virtuously. “I see them now glowing in the dawn and ornamented with pearls of virtues.” She accused their biological mother (and grandmother), the Margravine, of trying to undo her work because of a misplaced love of secular honors. If the Margravine truly wished to act as their mother, Hildegard warned, she should not seek to harm their everlasting souls for the sake of fleeting glory. “Therefore, if you are the mother of these your daughters, beware not to become the ruin

\textsuperscript{364} Life of Hildegard, 164.
\textsuperscript{365} Hildegard von Bingen, Letters, Letter 323.
of their souls, for, afterward, although you would not wish it, you would grieve with bitter groans and tears.”

At the same time as she criticized her, Hildegard was acknowledging the emotional power the Margravine possessed over her daughter and granddaughter. Adelheid and Richardis had clearly remained in close contact with her even after entering Disibodenberg. Despite the affection Richardis may have felt for Hildegard, she still relied upon her biological mother for help. The von Stade family initiated the elections of Richardis as abbess of Bassum, allowing her to move away from St.Rupertsburg. It was her extensive family connections, (Bassum belonged to the diocese of her brother Hartwig, the archbishop of Bremen) that most likely helped her gain this position and that definitely blocked Hildegard’s attempts to keep her at St.Rupertsburg. The desire to leave, however, must have originated with Richardis herself. As Peter Dronke explained, “the von Stade family clearly had a whole network of influential family connections in the Church throughout Germany. Yet they would scarcely have taken advantage of these had they not been prompted by Richardis’ own desire to leave.”

In this instance, Hildegard viewed the needs of the biological family as selfish and intrinsically opposed to the harmony of her monastic family at St.Rupertsburg.

The biological family did not always take precedence, however. Nuns formed intense ties with each other that rivaled blood relationships. The letters to Hildegard contain multiple examples of tender devotion between religious women. The abbess of

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Niedermunster in Regensburg addressed her letter “to her intimate friend Hildegard.”

The abbess of St. Ursula at Cologne longed to visit Hildegard so that she could confide all her problems in her. Her words expressed feelings of tenderness beyond epistolary convention. “I long to see you and to unfold to you the grief I bear in my heart, a grief that finds no human consolation, and I desire to regard you, who are full of all love, as my mother.” The Abbess of Kaufungen wrote to Hildegard acknowledging the respect she was due, but hoping that they could enjoy a sisterly bond. “Forestalled by the unexpected haste of this messenger, I was unable to write anything very polished to you, lady and mother, but could only manage very common language as if to a beloved sister.”

Hildegard enjoyed close ties with the community of Wechterswinkel. Her friend and former patron, Gertrude von Stahlk, had joined the convent as a widow. Abbess Mechtild wrote on behalf of her community asking Hildegard to act as their mother. “We hope also that . . . we may be associated with you as our mother, as far as our puny condition warrants. Therefore, sweet mother, we implore your sanctity with all the affection of our heart to accept us as your children and to deign to foster us with the protection of your holy prayers . . .”

Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out how religious women derived their basic symbols from “. . . ordinary biological and social

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Their experiences as mothers, daughters, and sisters informed the way that monastic women related to each other.

Hildegard herself formed intense personal relationships with some of her fellow nuns. We know little about her feelings towards Jutta of Sponheim, but the elder woman took on the role of teacher and surrogate mother. Jutta was also the one who first pointed out the singularity of her visions.

But because of my fear of people at the time, I did not dare tell of the manner in which I saw. Nevertheless, a certain noble woman to whom I had been entrusted for instruction, observed these things and laid them before a certain monk [Volmar] known to her.373

Sabina Flanagan has suggested that their relationship may not have been entirely warm, citing Hildegard’s much more passionate response to Volmar’s death. Hildegard, however, did confide her visions to Jutta. The love between a mother and daughter is a prevalent theme in Hildegard’s writing. Since she spent the majority of her childhood in Jutta’s care, it is possible that she was inspired by her relationship with her foster mother.

While the nature of Hildegard’s feelings for Jutta may be ambiguous, there is no doubt that she loved the nun Richardis with passionate devotion. The intensity of this relationship that was formed in a monastery was equal to any biological tie. Ulrike Wiethaus has described it as “equal in tragic passion and depth to the letters between Heloise and Abelard.”374 Hildegard considered Richardis a sister, a mother, and a friend.

373 The Life of Hildegard, 159.
The letter she wrote to Richardis has fascinated scholars. Even when they differ in their interpretations, they agree that this letter revealed a great deal of Hildegard’s personal feelings. Hildegard sent the letter after 1152, when Richardis had departured from St.Rupertsburg for the monastery of Bassum. As we know, Hildegard had already made a great deal of effort to retain Richardis, writing letters Richardis’ brother the Bishop of Bremen, her grandmother, and even the Pope. In those letters, she had expressed anger and desperation, but to Richardis she conveyed tenderness and regret. She referred to herself as a bereft mother. “Daughter, listen to me, your mother, speaking to you in the spirit: my grief flies up to heaven.”

Hildegard had been in a position in terms of age and authority to act as a mother figure to Richardis. Richardis had entered Disibodenburg as a young girl, leaving behind her biological mother for the care of Hildegard, much as Hildegard had grown up under Jutta’s care. She also had acted as Hildegard’s assistant and secretary during the creation of the Scivias, Hildegard’s first visionary text. Ulrike Wiethaus demonstrated how Hildegard reversed the mother-daughter imagery at one point in her letter, placing herself as the daughter. Quoting from the Gospels, Hildegard beseeched the younger woman, “Now I say again: Woe is me, mother, woe is me, daughter, ‘Why have you forsaken me like an orphan?’” She suggested that Hildegard placed herself as the daughter figure because she was dependent on Richardis for help during the loneliness and illness that accompanied her visions. “Richardis obviously was able to break through Hidlegard’s feeling of isolation at a

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375 Hildegard von Bingen, Letters, Letter 64.
crucial creative period and affirmed Hildegard both emotionally and intellectually.”

Hildegard admitted that she had trusted Richardis almost more than she had trusted her god, and this misplaced emotion had led to her suffering. “... one should not depend on a person of high birth, for such a one inevitably withers like a flower. This was the very transgression I myself committed because of my love for a certain noble individual.”

Later in the letter she admitted to Richardis, “I so loved the nobility of your character, your wisdom, your chastity, your spirit, and indeed every aspect of your life that many people have said to me: What are you doing?”

Susan Schibanoff interpreted Hildegard’s words not as love between a mother and a daughter but as evidence of her erotic desire for Richardis. Hildegard used language from the Song of Songs and the Psalms to express this desire. Since the imagery of the Song of Songs frequently appeared in devotional prayer, it allowed Hildegard to veil her love for another woman in terms acceptable to both her and any outside readers. “... A poetic devotional discourse, rooted in Canticles, made it possible for her to imagine and express what medieval moral discourse was bent on making ‘unspeakable.’” While there is no evidence to prove or disprove the erotic nature of Hildegard’s feelings for Richardis. Schibanoff’s approach appears to underestimate the importance of alternate family relationships in monastic life. Religious women did form strong attachments that

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377 Hildegard von Bingen, Letters, Letter 64.
paralleled the mother-daughter connection. When monastic writers experienced erotic desire towards one another, as did Abelard and Heloise, Christina of Markyate and Geoffrey of St. Albans, and Goscelin of Bertin towards Eve, they were not at a loss to express their feelings. This clarity of emotion held true for passion between members of the same sex, as Aelred of Rievaulx demonstrated when he admitted his sexual attraction to other men. As Hildegard’s medical texts revealed, she too was well aware of the existence and variety of sexual desire. I argue that Hildegard’s letter to Richardis supports the importance of the monastic community as a type of family, one capable of intense possessiveness and jealousy as well as love and tenderness.

Ulrike Weithaus interpreted the incident as a triumph of aristocratic alliances over female friendships. “The feudal ties among the family of the von Stade proved to be stronger than the ties of love Hildegard claimed to exist between Richardis and herself.”380 There is another way to analyze the situation, however. The departure of Richardis ended in sadness for all parties involved, since she died before she could reconcile herself to Hildegard. Had she lived longer, however, she may have gained Hildegard’s forgiveness and once again enjoyed the concern of two mothers. Hildegard wanted the company of her spiritual daughter so desperately that she even wrote to the Pope asking to keep her and alienated her aristocratic secular supporters. At the same time, Richardis’ biological mother the Margravine was willing to fight with a beloved friend to help her daughter out of a situation with which she had grown discontent.

Richardis possessed two families, both of whom devoted their energies and connections to keeping her close. The emotions that the departure of Richardis engendered demonstrated not only the strength of the monastic family but the affective bonds that remained between religious women and their secular biological relatives. In the following section, I will consider other kinds of attachments that bound together religious women for their mutual benefit.

**Social Networks and Friendships**

The letters of Hildegard also provide information about the social networks among religious women. Historians of women have examined the ways that women could use friendships within the social and legal boundaries that restricted their freedoms. Women created extended connections with friends and relatives which they kept up through letters, gifts, favors, visits, and fosterage of each other’s children. Barbara Hanawalt looked at the networks of sixteenth-century English noblewomen, particularly Lady Honor Lisle.\(^3\) She illustrated how through “her networks of well-connected kin and friends, she could expect access to decision makers and she would assume a major role in patronage that could influence the lives of those below her.”\(^3\)\(^8\) Anne Winston-Allen has examined histories and sister-books from later medieval German convents in order to discover how religious women formed a system of relationships amongst

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\(^3\)\(^8\)\(^2\) Hanawalt, ‘Lady Honor Lisle’s Networks,” 189.
The evidence revealed the extensive connections that existed between religious women. “Their letters to family members, for example, and the correspondence between prioresses recording exchanges of gifts and advice indicate some of the social networks in which convent women were engaged and the personal contacts they maintained.”  

There is far less female-authored material of this type from the twelfth century but Hildegard’s letters are a fascinating exception. The letters that women wrote to Hildegard reveal several of the ways they established and maintained their social networks.

Nuns did not always stay in the same monastic house they had originally joined. A nun who moved to another house created a connection between her previous community and her new one. Sometimes several women broke away from one monastery to form another, again forming a link between the two groups of sisters. Abbess Hazzecha of Krauftal, like many of Hildegard’s correspondents, wrote requesting her approval to leave her monastery and relinquish her position of authority. She hoped to retire to a forest with two close friends. Women could also seek to transfer to another house if they wanted a specific connection with a member. The abbess of Niedermunster in Regensburg requested to transfer to St. St.Rupertsburg specifically to be near Hildegard. If this could not be possible, however, she still wanted contact with Hildegard and her nuns. “If a place or means of serving you is denied me, my affection for you still

383 Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles*, (pages)
has a remedy: letters between the two of us will quickly assure me of your wellbeing.”

Although Hildegard was the main attraction, the abbess also indicated her affection for the nuns at St.Rupertsburg. “By your gracious leave, I greet our sisters faithfully and lovingly with the obedience of the service I owe them, for they have stood firmly by me in the spirit of God’s might and strength, and, if I may say so, by the example of your good deeds, they kept me safe and sound when I was falling into the jaws of death.” Perhaps she had written letters to them that have not survived, as they would not have been included in Hildegard’s collection. Other women chose to leave for personal advancement. They hoped to switch to more prestigious houses or to communities where they could immediately assume the position of abbess. Such was the case with both Richardis and Adelheid von Stade, who left St.Rupertsburg against Hildegard’s wishes. In the case of both women, however, they regretted the unhappy circumstances of their departure and longed to keep in touch with their former spiritual mother and sisters. Richardis died shortly after her move, but according to her brother Hartwig, her last thoughts had been regret over her estrangement from Hildegard and her sisters at St.Rupertsburg.

. . . Filled with her usual Christian spirit, she tearfully expressed her longing for your cloister with her whole heart. . . . Thus I ask as earnestly as I can, if I have any right to ask, that you love her as much as she loved you, and if she appeared to have any fault—which indeed was mine, not hers—at least have regard for the tears that she shed for your cloister, which many witnessed.

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Hartwig reported that had illness not stricken her so suddenly, Richardis would have come to Hildegard as soon as she could have received permission, whether for a visit or to return permanently, he did not say. Adelheid lived to rule as both abbess of the imperial monastery of Gandersheim and to take over the leadership of Quedlinburg as well. She died in 1181, only three years after Hildegard. After she left her care, she wrote to Hildegard, expressing her continued concern for the St. Rupertsburg nuns who had previously been her sisters. She wanted to keep up with them and maintain friendships with them through letters. “I pray also that you work out a kind of alliance between your sisters (nay, mine also) and mine, and, when a messenger becomes available, send us a letter informing us, in Christ, what you feel about this matter, as well as any other.”  

She also expressed her desire to visit her former home. “I myself, God willing, will not delay a visit to you when the time becomes available, so that we may speak face-to-face, and hand in hand, do what is good. In this way, our ancient friendship will be strengthened.”

Her affection for Hildegard had not diminished either.

“. . . you ought to keep me frequently in mind, since, as is well known, I am joined to you in intimate closeness of love and devotion. I do not want the flower, nursed so gently in former days, to dry up in your heart, the blossom that once vitally flourished between the two of us at the time when you were gently educating me.”

Having brought up their previous relationship of teacher and student, Adelheid requested that it continue even with their geographic distance. Just as Hildegard had gently

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educated her in the past, she now hoped to receive an “approving letter” from her former mentor. We do not know how Hildegard responded to this particular request, but Hildegard did forgive Adelheid and sent her at least two letters of advice over the next twenty years. The editors of Hildegard’s correspondence agree that her surviving letters could not be answers to the surviving letter from Adelheid. Hildegard spoke of particular anxieties of Adelheid and never mentioned her pleas for reconciliation. The disjunction between the letters suggests that there are a number of missing letters between the two women and that they maintained the bond they had formed at St.Rupertsburg.

Not only did they exchange letters, but nuns were able to travel between monastic communities in order to visit friends and relatives. The letters of Hildegard reveal how mobile religious women could be. Before 1153 Abbess Sophia of Kitzingen wrote to Hildegard discussing her plans to visit. She announced that she was going to bring a friend of hers as she wanted to introduce her and Hildegard. This friend was a nun in Sophia’s monastery. “Venerable mother, worthy of all praise, I am bringing with me a well-born peer of mine, a praiseworthy nun, a sister acceptable in every way, whom the heavenly Father has created as my spiritual sister. It is God’s will that the two of us make your acquaintance.” In 1156 Elisabeth of Schönau traveled to St.Rupertsburg to meet Hildegard, with whom she had been corresponding.

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394 Clark, A Twelfth-Century Visionary, 22.
Friendships between religious women could be both gratifying emotionally as well as advantageous. When two women felt genuine affection for each other, they could use their resources and connections for mutual betterment. In addition to exchanging letters, they could help each other out of difficult situations by interceding with relatives and friends or offering financial help. Barbara Hanawalt has examined the beneficial aspects of friendships among women as well as men. “Everyone [could be] . . . potentially useful. The arrangements were reciprocal; one expected to perform the same services for those within one’s power in exchange for friendship.\textsuperscript{395} Hildegard enjoyed this kind of mutually favorable relationship with the noblewoman Gertrude von Stahleck. Gertrude possessed powerful family connections; she was the sister of Emperor Conrad III and an aunt of Emperor Frederic Barbarossa. Gertrude and her husband, Count Herman of the Palatine, had financially supported Hildegard’s new community at St.Rupertsburg. They kept up their relationship as Gertrude eased from a secular life into a religious one. In 1156, after the death of her husband, she entered the Cistercian monastery of Wechterswinkel. She was unhappy there and this time Hildegard drew upon her own connections to help her former patron. In 1157 she wrote to the bishop of Bamburg hoping to find Gertrude a more suitable location.

Now, however, her mind is being squeezed dry by great anxiety, like a grape in the winepress. Therefore, for the love of Him who was before the beginning and has filled all things with compassion, help her as much as you can, so that the vineyard in this daughter may not be destroyed.\textsuperscript{396}

\textsuperscript{395} Hanawalt, “Lady Honor Lisle’s Network,” 192.
\textsuperscript{396} Hildegard von Bingen, \textit{Letters}, Letter 30.
Bishop Eberhard founded a hospital for Gertrude attached to Bamburg Cathedral. After 1161, Gertrude wrote to her, expressing her feelings of sincere friendship and filial devotion towards Hildegard. Her words revealed their intimacy and the mother/daughter relationship that bound them together. “To Hildegard, her beloved mother in Christ, from her own Gertrude.”

She regretted the distance that now kept them apart. “I could almost believe that it would have been better for me never to have seen you at all, never to have known your kindness and maternal feeling towards me, for now separated from you by so great a distance, I grieve over you without ceasing as if you were lost to me forever.”

She conveyed the hope that they would see each other again. Either in response to this letter or to another, Hildegard wrote to Gertrude delighting in her religious conversion. She compared Gertrude to a turtledove, as turtledoves (according to medieval bestiaries) remained faithful to one mate and remained alone after its death. The two women had been able to help each other in times of distress. “The interests and needs each woman brought to the relation appear to be balanced. The dependencies seem mutual—Hildegard was obliged to Gertrud financially; Gertrud needed the advice of the older woman and perhaps also her network of connections.”

Gertrude and Hildegard clearly cared for each other, but they could also help each other out of difficult situations. Like Gertrude, many women who wrote to Hildegard hoped for vocational advice. The abbesses who wrote to Hildegard often expressed their feelings of unhappiness or

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399 Weithaus, “Medieval Women’s Friendships,” 100.
unsuitability for their leadership responsibilities. Hildegard was able to advise them from her own experience. Since it had taken her ten years to complete *Scivias*, she was well aware of the time management problems and stress that troubled many abbesses, turning them into busy Marthas when they longed for the peaceful contemplation of Mary. Hildegard’s female correspondents did share some similar concerns to her male ones. Several of the abbesses who wrote to Hildegard expressed intense anxiety about their ability to control others. Before 1173, a prioress wrote to Hildegard of her feelings of unworthiness. “Therefore blessed mother, forgive me, and bear with my folly [cf. II Cor 11.1], nay, rather, my great foolishness, so that I may open up the grief of my heart to you. . . . For I bear an intolerable burden, since it is my duty to correct the waywardness of my sisters—and this despite the fact that I can scarce fight off the dangers that surround me on every side.”  

Abbess Sophia of Altwick conveyed her longing to leave “the heavy burdens of administration” behind and wanted to know if the Lord approved of her decision. “With humble prayers I beseech you, pious lady, to ask the Lord if my contemplated change pleases Him.” Abbots as well as abbesses longed to relinquish their positions and retire to a smaller community. This was a frequent theme in both male and female letters, suggesting how severe were the pressures on leaders of both sexes. Manegold, the Abbot of Hirsau, for example, suffered continuous distress over his ability to lead others. While we only have one of his letters to Hildegard, we have fourteen of her letters to him. She offered him comfort, but as with her other correspondents, male

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and female, she encouraged him to live up to his responsibilities and take control of his monastery.

While Hildegard wrote to abbots and other abbesses, she had few opportunities to communicate with other women who wrote. She was almost entirely unique in her production of visionary texts. A notable exception occurred when she wrote to the younger visionary, Elisabeth of Schönau. Hildegard was able to act as a counselor to the unhappy and frightened woman, encouraging her to continue her path. Elisabeth first wrote to Hildegard between 1152 and 1156. Abbot Hildelin of Schönau had publicized her visions and they had been met in some cases with accusations and ridicule. This incident had distressed Elisabeth, who had been reluctant to come forward in the first place. “. . . I have been disturbed, I confess, by a cloud of trouble lately because of the unseemly talk of the people, who are saying many things about me that are simply not true.”

Elisabeth wrote to Hildegard because she understood that Hildegard had undergone similar experiences and she hoped for advice about several matters. She first and foremost needed comfort and sympathy for her unusual situation. Her visions had also attracted a great deal of attention. An adolescent girl in a large monastery may have been enjoyed the attention of her older brother and abbot to some degree, but Elisabeth has clearly been overwhelmed by the response. She felt that others had manipulated her and twisted her words and she hoped that Hildegard would reassure her.

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Hildegard wrote to Elisabeth to encourage her confidence. Even though her symptoms were different, she explained that she too suffered physically and emotionally from her visions. As Barbara Newman pointed out, Hildegard herself had needed assurance from an older “established” writer when she first committed her visions to writing. “Just as Hildegard had written in her uncertainty to Bernard, the outstanding saint of the age, so Elisabeth wrote to Hildegard—and, like the abbot of Clairvaux, the abbess of Bingen knew how to console her young protégée while warning her to remain humble.”

Hildegard, however, had to ask a man for approval, as there were no known women in a similar position at the time. Even before they first communicated, Elisabeth knew Hildegard by reputation. When she began to experience her frightening and painful symptoms, she was able to turn to the example of Hildegard, a high-born woman who wrote down her heavenly visions for others to read. Instead of disgrace and condemnation, Hildegard received the admiration of men and women alike. Elisabeth had few other models of female prophets, all from the distant past. When her brother Eckbert introduced her second book of visions, he compared her to women of the Old Testament such as Deborah. Hildegard must have appeared marvelous to Elisabeth, a living nun on whom she could model herself.

According to Ulrike Weithaus, Hildegard and Elisabeth enjoyed a kind of “professional friendship, as they discussed their mutual vocation—writing, prayer,
visions, public authority. Both men and women could engage in professional friendships. At the same time, they both dealt with the conflict between gender and authority.

“Visionary and publicly recognized authority, however, is fraught with anxiety for both women. More unusual among men, it is the tension between private self-definition and public image about which Elisabeth and Hildegard write and which they try to resolve through their relationship.” 405 This tension took tangible form in the infirmities that struck the two women. Elisabeth’s visions brought her intense physical pain. In her letter, she carefully described these symptoms, perhaps trying to provoke recognition in Hildegard. “Suddenly my joints went slack, and I became dizzy and fell into a state of ecstasy.” 406 As we know from her visionary texts, the physical sensations that accompanied Hildegard’s visions were different than Elisabeth’s. She did not undergo ecstasy, but instead saw her otherworldly images at the same time as she saw what was tangible around her. She spoke of a constant illness that “wore out my flesh and sapped my strength.” By their own admittance, the poor health of the two women was partially psychological in origin.

Both Hildegard and Elisabeth experienced mental and physical anguish due to their uncertainty as to whether to speak of their visions or keep silent. Elisabeth described this internal battle in her First Book of Visions:

At various times it happened that although I had planed to hide in my heart the things shown to me by the Lord, such a great torment seized my heart that I thought I was close to death. Yet whenever I revealed what I had seen to those

405 Weithaus, “Medieval Women’s Friendships” 103.
around me, I was immediately relieved. But I admit that I am not as yet totally sure what is best for me to do. For I acknowledge that it is dangerous for me to keep silent about the mighty works of God, and I greatly fear that it is going to be more dangerous to speak out. I understand that I have less discretion than I would need to discern which of the things revealed to me should be spoken and which should be honored with silence. And behold, in all these matters I am put in danger of doing wrong. For this reason, my beloved, my tears do not stop and my spirit is continually distressed.”

In her own first book of visions, Scivias, Hildegard related a similar struggle.

But although I saw and heard these things, because of doubt and a low opinion [of myself] and because of the diverse sayings of men, I refused for a long time the call to write, not out of stubbornness but out of humility, until weighed down by the scourge of God, I fell onto a bed of sickness.

According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, authors of The Madwoman in the Attic, “patriarchal socialization makes women sick, both physically and mentally.” They were speaking particularly of nineteenth and early twentieth-century women writers. They noted the chronic mental and physical illnesses that plagued women like George Eliot, Charlotte, Anne, and Emily Bronte, Emily Dickenson, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath. The two latter ones committed suicide at a young age. The texts these women produced as well contained reoccurring images of insanity, anorexia, amnesia and aphasia. All these women suffered from feelings of inferiority that hindered their desire to produce art. They were torn between their longing to create and the dictates of a

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society that told them women who wrote were mad, hideous, or witch-like. Elisabeth and Hildegard also lived in a patriarchal system that discouraged women from speaking out and writing for an audience. Despite their different symptoms, Hildegard and Elisabeth both felt ill when they found their ability to speak out thwarted. They both ignored divine commands to relate their visions to the world because they believed so strongly in their unworthiness. Hildegard may have recognized her own psychosomatic illness in Elisabeth’s accounts of her painful ecstasies.

She encouraged Elisabeth not only to accept the visions she received but to pronounce them to the world. To do so, she chose the symbol of a trumpet to describe her role in relating the word of the Divine. “I too cower in the puniness of my mind, and am greatly wearied by anxiety and fear. Yet from time to time I resound a little, like the dim sound of a trumpet from the Living Light.” Elisabeth, for her part, would eventually become more comfortable with her ability to speak out. She continued to dictate her visions to her brother. She also found in Hildegard not only a mentor but a stylistic model. In 1156, she visited Hildegard at St. Rupertsburg. Shortly after her visit, she began working on the Liber Viarum Dei, or the Book of the Ways of God, a text similar in imagery to Hildegard’s Scivias. She filled the book with abstract natural imagery that revealed truths through colors and textures. It was a clear departure from her earlier narrative works. In chapter six of her Liber, Elisabeth acknowledged her authorial/visionary debt to Hildegard by describing a conversation she had with an angel.

. . . One day in the previous year, while I was in a trance, he [the angel] had led me as if into a meadow. A tent was pitched there, and we entered it. He showed
me a great pile of books . . . and said, ‘Do you see those books? All of these are still to be dictated before the judgment day,’ Then raising one from the pile, he said, ‘This is the Book of the Ways of God, which will be revealed through you after you have visited sister Hildegard and listened to her.’ And immediately after I returned from Hildegard, it did indeed begin to unfold in that way.⁴¹⁰

Even though Elisabeth believed her revelations to stem from a divine source, not a human one, she recognized that Hildegard had influenced her ability to speak and write the words of the Lord with confidence. Elisabeth’s vision was a unique one. During her lifetime, there were few piles of books, visionary or actual, that contained a book that could claim female authorship.

The relationship of Elisabeth and Hildegard contributes a great deal to our knowledge of female social networks. The two women wrote to each other and later developed their friendship through a visit. Hildegard also offered Elisabeth advice regarding her spiritual vocation that would only have been effective coming from another woman. Elisabeth’s doubts about her visionary abilities stemmed from her perception of her own inadequacies as a woman. She did have men who encouraged her, particularly her Abbot Hildelin and her brother Eckbert. Their had not experienced her internal struggle, however, a struggle that had literally made her sick. Hildegard could relate to precisely this struggle, however, which made her advice so valuable. Hildegard and Elisabeth were unique in this sense, of course, because at this time they were the only two well-known female visionaries living in German monasteries. Their near contemporary, Herluca of Epfach (d. c. 1127), experienced visions but never received more than local

fame. Their example suggests, however, that other religious woman experienced similar relationships. An abbess could relate to her nuns in ways that a monk never could, no matter how devoted he may have been to the cura monialium. Unlike Hildegard and Elisabeth, most religious women did not possess the fame or the literary skills to ensure that their words would survive for hundreds of years. If these two exceptional women were able to comfort each other, however, then there may have been other letters and certainly other conversations in which women shared their spiritual experiences with each other. In the following section I will examine exactly what Hildegard could offer to her female correspondents (and they to her) that religious men either could or would not.

Conclusion: A Comparison with Male Prescriptive Texts

Hildegard has been the first woman in this study to dispense spiritual advice to other women. Heloise, as abbess of the Paraclete, probably offered consolation to the nuns under her care, but unfortunately we have no records to study. Nor do we have records of the thousands of conversations that occurred among medieval religious women. With Hildegard we have the opportunity to examine how one twelfth-century nun spoke to another about their vocation. We can also compare her letters to the prescriptive texts that men wrote for women. There are several key differences between them that relate to issues of sexuality, enclosure, and authority.

In her letters, Hildegard did not express concerns about the dangers that either rape or sexual temptation held for women. In this way her work differed drastically from

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411 Paul Bernreidensis, “Vita B. Herluca,” AASS 2 April Col. 0552A-Col. 0557E.
that of Conrad of Hirsau, Osbert of Clare, and Peter Abelard. As I explained in chapters I and II, these men constantly feared what could occur when religious men and women interacted too freely. They did not trust the urges of either men or women. They considered women weak-willed objects of male lust and they described men as predators. Hildegard did not warn women against male attention; she was more concerned with such issues detrimental to monastic life as boredom, overzealous asceticism, and spiritual ennui. Even though she did not counsel women about the perilous potential of their sexuality, she was not naïve about the potential variety of relationships between men and women. She interacted with secular people as well as religious ones. She had a reputation for healing that attracted pilgrims and local peasants, most of whom were married.412 Among her friends, she counted women who had been sexually active and the parents of children, such as the Countess Gertrude von Shalek and the Margravine von Stade. In her Causae et Curae, she composed several colorful descriptions of human sexuality.413 She compared male desire to a thirsting stag and female desire to a threshing-floor pounded with strokes. As Barbara Newman explained, these descriptions “. . . bespeak a women who, virgin though she was, had clearly come to terms with her own sensuality, and in all likelihood talked with other women about theirs.”414 Hildegard clearly did not lead a sheltered life and her experiences had not encouraged her to develop a fear of human sexuality. She did not fear the proximity of religious men or

412 Theodoric of Echtemach and Guibert of Gembloux, Life of Hildegard, 161-162.
413 Hildegard von Bingen, Hildegardis Causae and Curae, ed. Paul Kaiser (Lipsiae: B.G. Teubneri, 1903), Need pages.
their potential ill intentions towards women, perhaps due to her own experiences. Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out that women who had grown up in monasteries were less likely “to see the female as weak and vulnerable.” It was women who had joined monasteries or other religious institutions as adults who tended to fear human sexuality and internalize images of women as overtly lustful. Hildegard had spent her childhood after the age of eight living in close proximity to the company of men. In her cell at Disibodenburg, she listened to their voices at prayer for most of the day and night. Volmar, a monk at Disibodenburg, had acted as her teacher. Although Hildegard found that religious men thwarted her will at several keys points during her life, for example when she tried to move to St. Rupertsburg, they had also been a constant and generally benevolent presence in her life.

The second major way her work differed from male prescriptive texts concerns her views on enclosure. Despite her contentment with monastic living, the world outside held no dread for her. Hildegard did not exhort women to remain in their interior rooms and view their own monastery as the sole haven of safety. In Chapter I, I discussed how many devotional texts encouraged women to avoid the outside world. These lessons reflected anxiety about the mobility of religious women and their interactions with the secular world. According to the German historian Urban Küsters, the early to mid-twelfth-century witnessed a movement by German monks and clergymen to regulate solitary women more closely. The desire to turn recluses into nuns prompted monks to

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build them monasteries. The monasteries of Admont and Paulinzella had begun with one or two women.\textsuperscript{416} Men could more easily limit the mobility of women who lived in supervised communities. During the thirteenth century, the new orders brought opportunities for men but limited the independence of religious women. The mendicant orders of the Franciscans and Dominicans attracted huge numbers of women. Unlike their male counterparts, however, these women lived in strict claustration. In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII published \textit{Periculoso}, a decree that brought the perpetual cloistering of women into universal church law, a watershed moment in the history of religious women. Between 1300-1500, all new religious orders for women followed cloistering laws. Elisabeth Makowski has explored how \textit{Periculoso} led the prestige, autonomy, and financial status of later medieval nuns to drastically decrease.\textsuperscript{417}

These efforts to enforce cloistering existed before, after, and during Hildegard’s lifetime. She did not allow them to restrict her autonomy. We know from the evidence of her \textit{vita} and her letters that Hildegard did anything but remain enclosed in her monastery. She traveled throughout the German lands on preaching tours. While Hildegard was the exception among women in this instance, the letters from her female correspondents reveal how clearly mobile they were as well. They visited each other and


they transferred to different houses when they were unhappy in their situation or hoped from social advancement. Their movement allowed them to maintain social networks with other religious women and to keep up contact with their secular family members.

The third important difference between the letters of Hildegard and the letters of male writers relates to issues of authority. Abbesses and nuns had to negotiate their role as leaders of women while living under male authority. Hildegard gave her female correspondents a unique opportunity to bypass male authority as she was in a position to give spiritual advice from her visions. Ulrike Weithaus has stated that “the most obvious difference [between male and female friendships] is certainly that all medieval women, unlike medieval men, experienced their friendships against the background of patriarchal structures.”

Nuns referred to monks as their brothers or their fathers in the same way that they referred to nuns as their mothers and sisters. Sisters, however, were equal, and mothers did not carry the same legal authority over their daughters as fathers did. The women who wrote to her did so not only because she was a visionary but because she was a woman—her female correspondents longed for her to act as a mother and sister as well as spiritual advisor. Hildegard’s role was singular at this point in religious history; even Elisabeth of Schönau did not produce the same volume of texts or travel to the same extent. The responses she provoked from other women, however, were neither unique nor original. Hildegard’s letters reveal the existence of both surrogate monastic families and social networks of women. These networks were in place before Hildegard. They

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\[418\] Weithaus, “Medieval Women’s Friendships,” 95.
brought women material help, such as intercession with male clergymen or the chance to transfer to a different monastery—one more prestigious or more suited to their personality. They also gave women emotional support when they underwent difficult times with their sisters or their spiritual development. These networks existed outside male authority—they did not reproduce the power structure in which men were superior to women. Rather than create these situations because of her visionary authority, Hildegard was integrated into them because of her gender and religious calling.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

When I first began this project I was interested specifically in studying prescriptive literature. Two texts had inspired me—first, Peter Abelard’s letter on the origin of nuns and the multiple contradictory and unusual lessons it contained and second, the Speculum Virginum, a work that impressed me with its sheer volume. The existence of such texts indicated the great interest that male religious took in their female counterparts. I found this interest surprising, as my impression had been that many monks and clergymen found the cura monialium burdensome. In an effort to analyze male attitudes towards nuns, I began comparing and contrasting several twelfth-century prescriptive texts.

I soon realized that this project was too narrow as it focused extensively on the viewpoint of the authors and left out the impressions of the women readers. In order for an analysis of the intentions and effectiveness of prescriptive literature to be effective, I needed to consider audience as well as authors. The study developed into an exploration of the relationship between gender and spirituality for religious women. I viewed

prescriptive literature as a valuable medium with which to approach this subject.

Monastic life was essentially about bettering oneself—one’s mind, one’s morality, one’s soul, and one’s understanding and appreciation of the joys of Heaven. Literature that is didactic in nature spoke to the heart of monasticism. Prescriptive texts also illustrated the connections that existed between men and women, and between women and women. Men wrote the majority of the texts that women wrote, but women did write some themselves or influence their creation through patronage. It is therefore possible to study both the attitudes of religious men towards women, female responses to male texts, and female alternatives to male textual authority.

The texts I examined do not reveal any one uniform thesis about the viewpoints of either men or women. These differences in opinions are natural, and it would be unexpected if people of different social classes, genders, and religious orders possessed the same thought processes. The texts demonstrate, rather, several major implications. First, as I demonstrate in chapter one, a number of religious men did concern themselves with the needs of women. The authors I have looked at took the demands of the cura monialium seriously. Even when they viewed women as more prone to sin or less worthy than men, they were determined to provide them with the highest quality of monastic life. They designed their prescriptive texts to address what they perceived as the issues that directly affected the lives of religious women. At the forefront of these issues was the preservation of virginity and sexual purity. Male authors also portrayed prayer as essential to monastic life. They were concerned with teaching women how to pray as a
religious person—reading and meditating upon God. Authors such as Osbert of Clare and Conrad of Hirsau attempted to make meditation relevant to nuns. They did so by feminizing traditional metaphors for prayer such as entering a bedchamber, tears, and digestion. They also recommended that they imitate the morally correct behavior of female saints or biblical women.\footnote{See Chapter I.}

Men writing for women also understood that they needed to take the issue of literacy into account. They were aware that their female audiences may have possessed varying degrees of Latin literacy. Some may have had no formal training but absorbed bits of Latin during the course of listening to the liturgy. Others may have known only the vernacular. Even though meditative prayer was directly tied to the act of reading texts in Latin, prescriptive writers found ways for women to enjoy this essential aspect of monasticism. Conrad of Hirsau included pictures that corresponded to the text and could act as starting-points for meditation. He also recommended that women look to a male teacher for explanation of difficult passages. Peter Abelard’s response was not to adapt texts to a potentially illiterate audience but rather to recommend that all religious women undertake formal training in Latin.\footnote{See Chapters 1 and 4.}

The second major point I have made is that the women frequently shared different concerns from men. As I demonstrated in chapters one, three, four, and five, the issues on which men concentrated such as the continuing battles against sexual desire, the primary importance of virginity, and the need to avoid the presence of men did not

\footnote{See Chapter I.}
always resonate with female readers. Few women recorded any evidence of fear over their sexuality. Elisabeth of Schönau never referred to her sexuality at all. Christina of Markyate’s sexuality did play a role in her life, but she always felt herself capable of handling it through a combination of prayer and creative ingenuity. Hildegard von Bingen counseled women about practicing obedience to authority, avoiding overly harsh asceticism, and overcoming depression, but only in once case about sexual sin.

Men and women did agree on the importance of prayer. Prayer was central to the monastic experience; it was the starting point for visionary experience and it helped them through depression, spiritual weakness, and sexual temptation. Prayer also rewarded religious men and women with the greatest pleasures by giving them a small taste of the joys of Heaven. Aelred of Rievaulx recommended that his sister immerse herself in meditative prayer. Although we do not know his sister’s reaction to his Rule, we do know how other contemporary and near contemporary women felt about the meditative experience. Christina of Markyate loved prayer above all else; it made her defiance of her parents and her harsh physical conditions worthwhile. Elisabeth of Schönau’s visions occurred either during her private prayers or community prayers. The freedom to immerse oneself in prayer was in many cases the major attraction to monasticism, something both men and women understood.

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424 See Chapter II.
425 See Chapter I.
A third point that I explored throughout the dissertation and especially in chapter four concerned the nature of gender difference according to the perceptions of male and female religious writers. Is it always secondary to men? Are the female mind and body less suited than the male for monastic living? Heloise and Abelard discussed the definitions of male and female extensively in their letters to each other. In their own ways, they found the emotional and biological differences to be beneficial differences. Heloise argued against the idea, found in saint’s lives and other religious literature, that women of great virtue could rise above their sex. Women were not lesser or weaker men, but beings complete with their own advantages and disadvantages. Abelard proffered many arguments relating to gender difference but he too often concluded that the specific nature of women possessed numerous advantages, and that these rendered them eminently suitable for monastic life. Women compensated for their physical weakness with mental acuity. Their spiritual and biological connection to the Virgin Mary ensured they were more likely than men to choose perpetual virginity. Women were linked universally to the flesh and its needs; they were naturally nurturing, and the women of the Gospels had employed these talents to help Jesus in his human form.426

I questioned, finally, whether religious women felt the need to bypass male authority and how they were able to do so. As I stated in the introduction, I do not believe that medieval women were feminists in the sense of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They did not necessarily view their society in terms of systematic injustices

426 See Chapter 4.
against women and desire to change legal strictures as well as people’s perceptions. They did feel the affects, nevertheless, of a patriarchal system that denied them autonomy. They revealed their frustrations quite clearly in the textual evidence.

Hildegard succumbed to a paralyzing illness while Abbot Cuno refused to allow her to leave Disibodenburg with some of her nuns to found a new monastery. He did not believe that she was truly ill until he visited her and tested each of her limbs. Hildegard, in the meantime, sought help from outside patrons. Petronilla of Fontevraud was so discomfited by Baudry of Dol’s dismissal of her talents as abbess in the Life of Robert of Arbrissal that she commissioned a second writer to retell the story. These instances foreshadow the well-known protestations against patriarchy—Christine de Pizan’s arguments in the *Book of the City of Ladies* and the Wife of Bath’s questioning as to who painted the lion. So if some medieval women did feel the injustices of male dominance, how did they circumvent them? As I have demonstrated in Chapters IV and V, religious women formed networks for friendship, social advancement, and spiritual consolation. Abbesses provided other women with examples of female authority. They also told their own stories to each other.

I would like to raise one overarching question that applies to the work as a whole. I have looked specifically at monastic women in the twelfth century, mostly Benedictine nuns or women under the guidance of Benedictine monks and German reform movements that espoused strict adherence to the rule. What is the place of this topic in the larger scope of female spirituality? The later middle ages, particularly the late
twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries witnessed the explosion of female visionaries. These women were from a variety of backgrounds—Cistercian and Dominican nuns, anchoresses, beguines, and even laywomen.\textsuperscript{427} Their experiences possessed many continuities to the twelfth century women I examine. Birgitta of Sweden and Heloise both came to a monastic life after a colorful secular past of marriage and motherhood.\textsuperscript{428} Catherine of Siena and Christina of Markyate had to fight their relatives in order to avoid marriage and to pursue a religious life. All these women, regardless of their station in life, lived in a world where the balance of secular and religious power lay in male hands. They needed to negotiate with this imbalance of power in order to pursue the life they wished. The arguments that Clare of Assisi and Agnes of Prague had with Popes in order to keep their Franciscan ideal of voluntary poverty are reminiscent of Hildegard’s fight with the monks of Disibodenburg to leave and establish Rupertsburg.\textsuperscript{429}

In both cases, the women needed to be stubborn, to rely upon secular relatives or supporters, and to resist male authority in order to live up to their spiritual principles. They also supported each other in these endeavors with letters and words of encouragement. Clare of Assisi wrote two letters to the younger Agnes encouraging her

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\textsuperscript{429} Joan Mueller, \textit{The Privilege of Poverty:  Clare of Assisi, Agnes of Prague, and the Struggle for a Franciscan Rule for Women} (University Park:  University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).
\end{flushright}
to stand fast to her ideals despite the pressure of the Pope. Hildegard, likewise, enjoyed the support of Richardis as well as secular women like Gertrude von Stahleck.\textsuperscript{430}

A number of these women dealt with similar issues in the transmission of their ideas. They had their voices filtered through male confessors and secretaries who in many cases translated their words from the vernacular to Latin. Brigitta wrote down her visions in Swedish, and her three confessors translated the work into Latin.\textsuperscript{431} During her fits of ecstasy, Elisabeth of Schönau shouted out her words in German and her brother wrote them down in Latin. Catherine of Siena dictated her \textit{Dialogues} and her male confessors to recorded them.\textsuperscript{432} Since the words of these women went through several steps before they reached the pages, we have to consider whether the texts we have now are authentic representations of their ideas.\textsuperscript{433} In the case of each woman, scholars have to work through the process of transmission to determine how much of their own voice emerges and the answer varies extensively. Religious women were aware of these issues; Elisabeth worried about how others would misrepresent or misread her visions and she sought advice from Hildegard.

One could ask, given all these similarities between the experiences of religious women, is the research I present here necessary? If medieval women faced the same challenges regardless of what centuries in which they lived, why single out the twelfth

\textsuperscript{430} Mueller, \textit{The Privilege of Poverty}, 67-70.
\textsuperscript{431} Sahlin, \textit{Birgitta of Sweden}, 25-33.
\textsuperscript{432} Bynum, \textit{Holy Feast, Holy Fast}, 165-182.
century as a focus of study? Have the gendered implications of medieval religious literature for women and by women not already received extensive attention? There are several distinct reasons to consider the texts at hand as an individual group. The literature I examine here is exclusively in Latin. A great deal of prescriptive literature for women existed in the vernacular, the majority of which dates between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{434} The twelfth century authors who wrote in Latin therefore believed their female audiences would possess at least a rudimentary knowledge if not a complete proficiency. They also understood that Latin could be applicable to women’s lives. This use of language suggests a feeling of what Penelope Johnson has named, “equality in monastic profession.”\textsuperscript{435} Morgan Powell has demonstrated that the vernacular possessed associations with both women and the laity. Both fell under the category of unlearned, or \textit{idiotae}.\textsuperscript{436} Herbert Grundmann has illustrated how vernacular religious literature developed for the needs of beguines and Dominican and Poor Clare nuns who possessed the spiritual hunger for literature but lacked the capacity to read in Latin.\textsuperscript{437} Latin thus existed as a masculine or gender-neutral language, and male monasticism was the normative kind. The men who wrote in Latin for women attempted to give women a

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\textsuperscript{434} Anne Clark Bartlett, \textit{Male Author, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.\\
\textsuperscript{435} Penelope Johnson, \textit{Equal in Monastic Profession},\\
\textsuperscript{436} Morgan Powell, “The Mirror and the Woman: Spiritual Instruction for Women and the Emergence of Vernacular Religious Poetry,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1997), 4-16.\\
\textsuperscript{437} Grundmann, \textit{Religious Movements}, 192-201.
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normative, or masculine religious experience, while using symbols and techniques to ensure it remained relevant.

Another reason to study twelfth-century prescriptive literature for women is a temporal one. The twelfth century was a unique time in religious history because many people viewed it as a new beginning in monasticism. They were willing to experiment with new orders and forms of religious living. Women especially, possessed unprecedented opportunities to participate in monasticism and they took advantage of them. At the same time, the opportunities for women remained limited. There were never enough institutions available for all the women with a monastic calling. Women, like Heloise, could legitimately question the place and future of women in monasticism and suggest a different understanding of the vocation. Later women would continue to question their place in monasticism and eventually develop alternative forms of female religious living, such as beguinages.

In terms of the visionary aspect of female spirituality, women such as Hildegard and Elisabeth are particularly interesting to examine as a group, as they had few recent examples on which to model themselves. They recorded their uncertainty over the nature of their visions as well as their fears of speaking out. They are also unique in that major struggles over their spiritual callings occurred internally rather than externally. Their contemporaries believed in their visions with little question. Later women would struggle to prove the veracity of their experiences. Margery Kempe faced constant

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ridicule and rejection from ecclesiastical figures. Other women such as the beguine Margaret Porete and Joan of Arc were condemned as heretics, while women such as Theresa of Avila faced constant questioning. The Dominican nun Mechtilde left Magdeburg for Helfta due to the harassment of disbelieving clergymen. Twelfth-century women who saw visions received the veneration of their contemporaries who viewed their visions as an extension of meditative experience and a sign of divine blessing. Female visionaries also illustrated the principle that God worked through the lowliest instruments.

This project suggests several other directions for further research. While I have pointed out the uniqueness of the twelfth century for religious women and for monasticism as a whole, it would nevertheless be a worthwhile task to explore female spirituality in terms of thematic rather than temporal limits. Dates are, of course, impositions of hindsight. Although historians describe Elisabeth of Schönau, Herluca of Epfach, and Hildegard von Bingen as prefiguring later medieval visionaries such as Mechtild of Magdeburg or Catherine of Siena, these women would naturally have looked to the past for validation of their behavior. It is certainly possible that religious women viewed themselves as having less in common with their contemporaries than with women across the boundaries of time. In her book *The Spiral Staircase*, Karen Armstrong

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described her experiences in a Jesuit convent during the 1960’s.\textsuperscript{440} Having entered at the age of seventeen, she explained that she felt completely alienated from contemporary British teenagers. She identified instead with fourteenth-century mystics and she longed to emulate their experiences of feeling close to God. She also admitted to being attracted to a life that excluded male dominance. After witnessing her mother subjugate her career to the demands of marriage, motherhood, housework, and oppressive sexual relationships, Armstrong believed that the convent offered her a way to opt out of this path. Although medieval Europe was an entirely different from twentieth-century England, many medieval women found monasticism an appealing alternative to unwanted marriages. Penelope Johnson has described how monasticism allowed women to bypass the gender restrictions of medieval France and enter into the small group of rulers and administrators. A thematic approach to female spirituality, while complementing existing studies that focus on historical context, could reveal a great deal of insight into the emotional and mental experiences of religious women.

This study is therefore the beginning of a long term inquiry into the relationship between gender and spirituality. I started with a basic question—what were the emotional implications of religious experience for medieval women? This question is a valid one to pursue for multiple times and places. The twelfth century offers a unique opportunity to consider such issues as literacy, authority, and gendered symbols in the context of

monastic growth and experimentation. It illuminates ideas that scholars such as myself can explore in other historical contexts and across temporal boundaries.
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