Sisters Between

Gender and the Medieval Beguines

by Abby Stoner

> There are among us women whom we have no idea what to call, ordinary women or
> nuns, because they live neither in the world nor out of it.
>
> - Franciscan Friar Gilbert of Tournai, 1274

The Beguines of northern Europe have been called the first women's movement in Christian
history.[1] This group of religiously dedicated laywomen, who took no permanent vows, followed
no prescribed rule, supported themselves by manual labor, interacted with the "world," and
remained celibate, flourished in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries--a time when the Church
had defined two legitimate roles for pious women: cloistered nun and keeper at home. With their
freedom of movement, economic independence and spiritual creativity, the Beguines carved out an
unusually expansive--and controversial--niche for female religious expression.

Although the Beguine way of life has been of considerable interest to feminist scholars and
women's historians, few researchers have approached the subject with a focus on gender.[2] Yet
notions of "femaleness" and its boundaries--conceived by the devout women themselves and the
male clerics with whom they came in contact--played a central role in creating, fostering, and
restricting the religious development of the Beguines. Their position as "sisters between" the two
sanctioned spheres of home and convent was both the source of their success and the cause of their
downfall: they derived power and freedom from their ill-defined gender space, but the ambiguity
of their place as women in the Church proved ultimately too unsettling for the male authorities to
tolerate.

A Space Opens: The Medieval Reformation

The origins of the Beguines can be traced to two important medieval religious reform movements:
monastic mysticism and the vita apostolica, or "apostolic life." Monastic mysticism, which
combined the practice of ascetic, contemplative devotion with efforts to attain personal union with
the divine, found its most influential proponent in a Cistercian monk, Bernard of Clairvaux
(1090-1153). Bernard, echoing the Old Testament book "Song of Songs," allegorized the
relationship between the individual and God as a spiritual marriage between a human bride (the
soul) and a heavenly Bridegroom (Christ).[3] This marital imagery, which highlighted the intimacy
between the believer and Christ and engendered the soul as female, provided a basis upon which
women mystics of the thirteenth century, including Beguines, developed their distinctive form of
nuptial spirituality.

Another type of monastic mysticism was conceived by Bernard's friend, William of St. Thierry
(1085-1148), who was known as the "reasonable mystic" and the "learned lover."[4] William, a
native of Liège, the birthplace of the Beguine movement, described in emotional terms the human
desire to know God in perfect love--a theme which further inspired the Beguine mystics.[5]

Also contributing to the birth of the Beguine movement was the vita apostolica, popularized most
effectively by St. Francis of Assisi in the early thirteenth century. Charismatic laymen such as St.
Francis advocated a return to the ideals of Jesus and his early followers, committing themselves to
a life of absolute poverty, simplicity, and heartfelt devotion to preaching the Gospel. The founding
of the mendicant Franciscan and Dominican orders in 1215 legitimized a new, active route to

spiritual perfection which had widespread appeal, especially among the urban laity of all classes.[6]

These two movements, representing what Brenda Bolton has called the "Medieval Reformation," brought to the fore the most gender-ambiguous area in the Christian religion: the realm of the Spirit.[7] "In Christ Jesus," says the Scriptures, "there is no male nor female."[8] Spiritual power may dwell in anyone who is in contact with the divine; God is no respecter of persons. In the supernatural world it is possible for any person, including a woman, to bypass the male-dominated ecclesiastical structure while remaining within the confines of orthodox doctrine. According to the Church, direct contact with God could be attained through prayer, asceticism, visions, the Eucharist, or mystical contemplation; and prophesying--warning against evil, predicting the future, counseling, advising, criticizing leaders--was allowable for anyone who had received genuine revelations from God. For medieval women, who were excluded from the priesthood, the new reform movements, with their emphasis on prophecy and evangelism, opened a theologically permissive "space" wherein they had liberty to develop their spirituality.

There were limits to the window of freedom, because devout women could receive revelations from God, but were physically restricted to two main spheres: the home and the convent. In both domains they found themselves externally constrained, either by a man--usually a father, husband, or priest--or a clearly defined religious rule, or both. A woman with a spiritual vocation was subject to strict claustration (enclosure). Although she had taken vows of chastity, the medieval church considered her to be both more susceptible to sexual temptation and more likely to be a source of sexual temptation than a man.[9] In addition, her intellectual weakness made her more subject to demonic deception as well as more prone to be an instrument of deception.[10] This medieval construction of female gender as morally and intellectually vulnerable held great significance for men in their perceptions of women, but was of lesser importance to women themselves in forming their own identities. Women with a strong religious calling of any sort were more likely to see themselves as Christians first, and females second.[11] This tension, between male attitudes towards women and female conceptions of themselves, constituted a major determinant in the course of the Beguine movement.

The decision as to which of the two acceptable spheres women were to inhabit was usually not theirs to make. Young girls were sent to convents if no husband could be found for them, and women who had been married at young ages were not allowed to take a vow of chastity without their husband's consent.[12] A life dedicated to God almost always meant sexual continence; thus, a woman usually made the decision to join a convent before the age of betrothal, or in middle age, as a widow. The vow was irrevocable; leaving a convent was viewed as apostasy--turning away from the faith. Further limiting a medieval woman's choices was the requirement of a large dowry to enter a convent, which denied the religious life to almost all women, except those from the upper or upper-middle classes. Even if a woman had the means to become a nun, and received a call to do so, she did not always find convent life to her liking: the mixture of nuns who were genuinely devout with those who had been enclosed involuntarily often created ill-will and an environment of mediocre morality.[13]

The charismatic preachers of the vita apostolica, like Jesus himself, addressed their message to the common people and attracted a large number of female followers. This new reform movement also coincided with the presence in late medieval Europe of a large number of women who were unable to find suitable husbands--a problem historians have termed the frauenfrage, or the "women question."[14] Many of these female "floaters" embraced religion with enthusiasm, but, as David Herlihy has pointed out: "In medieval thought . . . [t]he idea of women without a place--without a family or convent to anchor them in society--was extremely disturbing."[15] It was particularly unsettling for the Dominican and Franciscan friars, who, while favoring the development of female religiosity, were ill-prepared to handle the great number of women who wished to adopt their way of life.

The Space Closes: Marginalization

The new orders' usual solution to the frauenfrage was the cloister. This confinement excluded women from a major part of the vita apostolica: the ministry of evangelizing in the secular world. Although prophesying was allowed for women, preaching was not: preaching was necessarily public, whereas prophesying could be practiced in private or through letters. For the Dominicans and Franciscans, the concept of a non-cloistered, unmarried religious woman, even if chaste, was disturbing; they too shared the prevailing conception of the female gender as dangerous and potentially contaminating.[16] St. Francis himself--who had placed his co-worker Clare in a convent--was able to say of his order's association with her nuns that "Up to now the disease was in our flesh and there was hope of healing, but now it has penetrated our bones and is incurable."[17] Women were also seen as burdensome, both financially and spiritually, and the mendicants resisted any obligations that might keep them from their primary task: preaching.

The contemplative monastic orders also expressed a revulsion for women and avoided them as detriments to their moral purity. According to R.W. Southern:

> No religious body was more thoroughly masculine in its temper and discipline than the Cistercians, none that shunned female contact with greater determination or that raised more formidable barriers against the intrusion of women.[18]

Early Cistercian statutes stated that women were to be avoided at all costs, and one specifically stressed that no Cistercian abbot or monk should bless a nun.[19] Pressure from women wishing to join the order finally forced the monks to allow Cistercian nuns, but the monks expressed increasing concern about "disciplining" them and keeping them cloistered, and in 1220, they issued a statute decreeing that no more women were to be accepted into the order.[20]

Although some groups were initially sympathetic to lay women's participation, as were the Premonstratensians (founded early-twelfth century), their policies eventually changed in favor of claustration. The Premonstratensians' founder, Norbert of Xanten, allowed sisters to do charity work "in the world," but his successor, Hugh of Fosses, stressed the superiority of the contemplative life for the order as a whole. Premonstratensian nuns, who, according to Carol Neel, were the Beguines' precursors, managed to carve out an active niche for themselves contrary to their leader's desires, but in 1198, women were completely expelled from the order.[21] Such exclusionary policies, based largely on male constructions of the female gender as dangerous and susceptible to sin, served to enmarginate the great number of women who felt called to imitate Christ. They were therefore forced to authorize themselves, within the nebulous sphere of spirit and prophesy, to communicate with God and speak as His instruments.

A New Space Opens: Mary d'Oignies' and Self-Authorization

The diocese of Liège in the Low Countries, the home of the Premonstratensian order and the site of much reform activity, was also the birthplace of the Beguine movement.[22] The first woman to be recognized as a Beguine was Mary d'Oignies (1177-1213), whose vita was composed by her most ardent supporter, the Dominican friar Jacques de Vitry (1170-1240).[23] Although historically unreliable, the vita sheds light on both Mary's self-perceptions as a Beguine and Jacques's attitudes as her confessor and disciple.[24]

Mary's authorization to play an active role in the vita apostolica came from her personal contact with the spiritual world. A contemporary of St. Francis, Mary was in many ways his female counterpart. She renounced her wealth, practiced severe asceticism, and was one of the first women to receive the stigmata.[25] Originally married, Mary convinced her husband to live with her in chastity, and the couple thereafter worked in a leper hospital. By the time Mary's reputation for piety reached Jacques de Vitry at the University of Paris, she had acquired a large group of followers, both female and male. Jacques describes her as performing great feats of self-

mortification and displaying gifts of the "spirit" such as deluges of tears, visions, and ecstasies.[26]

Because Mary's life is inaccessible apart from Jacques' filtration, the only reliable clue to her sense of gender identity is her willingness to adopt a public, active, and authoritative role. Yet, this boldness is significant in itself. By persuading her husband to adopt a religious life, ministering in a public setting (the leprosarium), and accepting both female and male followers, Mary showed that she had assumed the imitatio Christi to be a gender-neutral, or, at least, gender-ambiguous way of life. Unlike most male religious reformers, Mary seemed either to have ignored or transcended the male constructions of women as weak and dangerous morally, and therefore was not afraid to operate independently from a set rule or cloistered environment.[27]

The Space Is Defined: Jacques de Vitry's Perceptions

As Jacques de Vitry's approval was instrumental in the Beguines' success, it is important to understand how he accepted the notion of an uncloistered religious woman. At first glance, it might be assumed that he had an enlightened, "liberated" view of the female gender. That he did not, however, is clear from one of his sermons:

> [T]he husband is his wife's head, to rule her, correct her (if she strays) and restrain her (so she does not fall headlong). For hers is a slippery and weak sex, not to be trusted too easily. Wanton woman is slippery like a snake and mobile as an eel; so she can hardly be guarded or kept within bounds. Some things are so bare that there is nothing by which to get hold of them. . . . so it is with woman: roving and lecherous once she has been stirred by the devil's hoe.[28]

Jacques' misogyny, which echoes that of Church fathers such as Jerome, would appear to preclude any support for the in-between, unconfined Beguines.[29] But like Jerome, who had close female friends while despising the female gender as a whole, Jacques saw Mary's ability to overcome her "natural" fleshly lust--by her chastity and denial of physicality--as the key to her acceptability. Read with this in mind, Jacques' vita becomes a testament to Mary's total "otherness"--her role as someone to gaze upon with wonder, a mystical superstar by virtue of her "femaleness." He writes:

> Having once tasted the spirit, she held as nothing all sensual delights until one day she remembered the time when she had been gravely ill and had been forced, from necessity, to eat meat and drink a little wine for a short time. . . . In vehemence of spirit, almost as if she were inebriated, she began to loathe her body when she compared it to the sweetness of the Paschal Lamb and, with a knife, in error cut out a large piece of her flesh which, from embarrassment, she buried in the earth. Inflamed as she was, however, by the intense fire of love, she did not feel the pain of her wound and, in ecstasy of mind, she saw one of the seraphim standing close by her.[30]

The mutual admiration between Mary and Jacques was such that she frequently criticized him with impunity; and according to Jacques, her correction and advice advanced his career. He viewed her as a genuine prophet by virtue of her sanctity, and he was not afraid of being "tainted" by her, despite his opinion of women as "roving and lecherous."[31]

The conceptual strategy Jacques employed to differentiate Mary from the "slippery sex" was the key to his support of the Beguines. His emphasis on her extreme piety and abhorrence of the flesh indicate that he had opened up a third gender distinction to contain her and her spiritual sisters: "Holy Female." Unlike the majority of friars, monks, and clerics, Jacques found a way to cloister the Beguines intellectually, thereby creating a less unsettling category for them. His effort to establish the Beguines as an official order also underscored his need to apply at least some structure to the "between-ness" of their form of piety: the Beguines could find a legitimate place in the Church, but its boundaries had to be clearly defined.

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council prohibited the establishment of new orders. Nevertheless,

Jacques, by virtue of his recent appointment as a bishop, was able to secure verbal approval from Pope Honorius III for "pious women, not only in the diocese of Liège, but also in France and Germany, to live in communal houses and encourage each other to do good by mutual exhortation."[32] Although Jacques' inability to secure the Beguines' status as an order caused him to lose his original zeal for their cause, in 1233, Pope Gregory IX issued a bull, Gloriam virginalem, which formally brought "chaste virgins in Teutonia" under Papal protection.[33] With this official sanction, the movement thrived, and within its broad boundaries women from all walks of life found their calling.

The Space Expands: The Mysticism of Hadewijch and Mechthild of Magdeburg

The height of the Beguine movement produced two of the greatest mystics of the Middle Ages: Hadewijch of Antwerp (ca. early to mid-thirteenth century) and Mechthild of Magdeburg (1212-1281/1301). These women enlarged the sphere of Beguine piety to include profound experiences of divine union, and the composition of original and theologically complex works of literature. Both women displayed a creativity and freshness of style that reflected their spiritual freedom as Beguines; their sense of self-confidence, divine authority, and personal intimacy with Christ often surpassed that of nuns, yet their contact with the secular world imbued their works with emotional immediacy. As Caroline Bynum has noted:

> For the first time in Christian history certain major devotional and theological emphases emanated from women and influenced the basic development of spirituality.[34]

Hadewijch, whose works are considered to be the earliest vernacular prose in the Low Countries, wrote thirty-one letters, forty-five poems in stanzas, fourteen visions, and sixteen poems in couplets. She was familiar with the Latin language, rules of rhetoric, numerology, Ptolemaic astronomy, many of the Church fathers, and most of the canonical twelfth-century writers.[35] Mechthild of Magdeburg was also an innovator in vernacular literature: she was the first German mystic on record to have composed her works in the common language, and is considered one of the founders of Die deutsche Mystik, or German Mysticism. Her visions and dialogues with God were transcribed by her spiritual counselor as The Flowing Light of the Godhead.[36]

Both Hadewijch and Mechthild saw themselves as vessels of divine inspiration; they received the authority to speak for God from their ecstatic visions and charisma of the spirit. While they acknowledged the possibility that writing might be an exclusively male prerogative, they turned their apparent "weakness" as females into a strength. Asserting that God uses the weak to confound the strong,[37] Mechthild introduced the Flowing Light with the pronouncement:

> This book is to be joyfully welcomed, for God Himself speaks in it... The book proclaims Me alone and shows forth My holiness with praise... Ah! Lord God! Who has written this book? I in my weakness have written it, because I dared not hide the gift that is in it.[38]

Hadewijch also described her spiritual power as being an awesome and almost irresistible force:

> Since I was ten years old, I have been so possessed by a wholehearted love for God that in the first two years when I began to love Him so, I should have died, had He not given me greater strength than most people have, and given to my nature the power of His nature.[39]

With this sanction--even compulsion--from God Himself, the women were able to disregard and transcend the misogynist ideology propounded by male clerics. Like Mary d'Oignies, Hadewijch and Mechthild viewed prophecy and the imitation of Christ as permissible for anyone in contact with the spiritual world; gender distinctions were earthly, secular, and temporal. Hadewijch, as leader of a group of Beguines, wrote several Letters to a Young Beguine, offering encouragement

and support. In these letters, she revealed her belief in the liberating potential of mysticism, and her willingness to ascribe qualities of potency to women:

> [D]o not believe that anything which you must do for Him whom you seek will be beyond your strength, that you cannot surmount it, that it will be beyond you. . . . If you would act according to the being in which God has created you, your nature would be so noble that there would be no pains which you would shun, it would be so valiant that you could not bear to leave anything undone, but you would reach out for that which is best of all, for that great oneness which is God. . . . [40]

Despite the mystics' assumption of spiritual power, which was based on an androgynous interpretation of the prophetic calling, Mechthild and Hadewijch still saw themselves as female. Theirs was not a gender-annihilating mysticism; it was rather a transcendence of the earthly plane which culminated in a total absorption in the love of God. As writers, they used the nuptial imagery of the "Song of Songs"--the Biblical poem of love between a Bride and her Bridegroom-- as a metaphor to portray their mystical union with Christ. Expanding upon the tradition of Bernard of Clairvaux, who had viewed the human soul (anima) as female, the women placed themselves--as women--in the role of the bride, which allowed them to express their love for the human, masculine Christ. Both Mechthild and Hadewijch, who as Beguines associated freely with the secular world, combined the language of courtly love with verses from the "Song of Songs" to describe their intense emotional experiences. Occasionally, their raptures could turn frankly erotic, as shown by Hadewijch's vision of the Eucharist:

> With that he came in the form and clothing of a Man, as he was on the day when he gave us his Body for the first time; looking like a Human Being and a Man, wonderful, and beautiful, and with glorious face, he came to me as humbly as anyone who wholly belongs to another. Then he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament, in its outward form, as the custom is; and then he gave me to drink from the chalice, in form and taste, as the custom is. After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported.[41]

For the mystics, the spiritually sexual, yet physically asexual role of sponsa Christi--or bride of Christ--offered a sense of selfhood which incorporated both gendered and androgynous attributes. By assuming the identity of neither wife nor nun, the Beguines were able to assimilate the most desirable characteristics of both.

With the works of Mechthild and Hadewijch, Beguine spirituality reached its apogee. Pressing against invisible gender barriers, the Beguines enjoyed only a brief period of relative freedom before their activities drew official opprobrium. After several years as a leader, Hadewijch was forced out of her Beguine colony; it is not clear why or how, but some scholars have speculated that her eviction was related to her fervent love mysticism.[42] Her zeal undaunted by the harassment of Church authorities, Hadewijch gave this advice to her charges before she was made to leave:

> Stand always ready to do [God's] bidding, never failing, never paying heed to others: let them mock, let them approve, let them rail, let them bless, let them do as they like.[43]

Mechthild, who took it upon herself to denounce immoral clerics and politicians as "goats" and "Pharisees," was dogged throughout her career by Dominican friars who accused her of heresy.[44] Like Hadewijch, Mechthild stood firm in her position as God's intended mouthpiece, and appealed directly to Him for protection:

> I was warned about this book and told by many that it should not be preserved, but

rather thrown to the flames. Then I did what from childhood I have done when trouble overcame me: I betook myself to prayer. . . . "Lord, now I am troubled: Must I walk uncomforted for Thy Glory? Though hast misled me for Thou Thyself commandest me to write!"[45]

In the end, however, Mechthild's resolve buckled; at the age of sixty-two, she fled to the monastery at Helfta, a center of German piety. Although the two great mystics, with their powerful pens and original minds, appear to have internalized very few constraining attitudes toward their own femaleness, they were not able to withstand the harassment of the male-dominated Church. As the sphere of self-determination for pious laywomen narrowed to the point of imperceptibility, Mechthild's retreat to conventual life was typical of many Beguines' destinies in the last years of the thirteenth century.

The Space Narrows: Institutionalization

By around 1300, the Beguine way of life had become virtually indistinguishable from traditional monasticism. In many areas in northern Europe, Beguines lived communally in a convent-like setting called a beguinage, where they followed a strict group of statutes, and were usually not allowed to leave without permission from their superior. This greatly hampered their spontaneity. In the Church's efforts to institutionalize the Beguines, the fear of in-between women had taken its toll, and the movement no longer provided a broad range of opportunities for religiously inclined women seeking to live the vita apostolica.

The Space Is Distended: The "Heresy" of Marguerite Porete

Despite the inherent threat of persecution, a few Beguines continued to assert their spiritual right to autonomy and freedom of movement. Perhaps the most outspoken of these was Marguerite Porete, a French mystic who was burned as a heretic in 1310. In her 60,000-word treatise Mirror of Simple Souls Who Are Annihilated and Who Only Remain in the Will and Desire for Love, Marguerite employed imagery similar to that of Hadewijch and Mechthild to describe seven stages in the soul's ascent to complete union with God.[46] Like the other mystics, she claimed authority using the very basis on which others would deny it to her--her female "weakness":

> God has nowhere to put his goodness, if not in me . . . no place to put himself entire, if not in me. And by this means I am the exemplar of salvation, and what is more, I am the salvation itself of every creature, and the glory of God. . . . For I am the sum of all evils. For if of my own nature I contain what is evil, then I am all evil. . . . Now if I am all evil, and he is all goodness, and one must give alms to the poorest being, or else one takes away what is hers by right, and God can do no wrong, for otherwise he would undo himself--then I am his goodness because of my neediness. . . .[47]

Marguerite was more pointedly anti-clerical than her predecessors, however. She claimed to have knowledge of an invisible, ideal church in the spiritual world made up of "free and simple souls" who were called to judge the "little church" established on Earth.[48] Moreover, she spoke in her own voice, not that of God, and castigated all those in the ecclesiastical hierarchy who failed to heed her unique insights:

> Theologians and other clerks, you won't understand this book--however bright your wits--if you do not meet it humbly, and in this way Love and Faith make you surmount Reason: they are the mistresses of Reason's house.[49]

But even more audacious than Marguerite's writings was her insistence upon wandering, preaching, and disseminating material from her book, which eventually strained to the breaking point the authorities' waning tolerance for an uncloistered woman.

Marguerite was called before the inquisitors on suspicion of promoting the heresy of the Free

Spirit.[50] This was the belief that it is possible for a human being to attain spiritual perfection in the present life, and that once an individual has attained such a state, he or she may then commit any sin with impunity. Also known as libertinism or antinomianism, the heresy of the Free Spirit frightened the inquisitors because of its perceived threat to the Church structure. Of particular importance was the equation in the inquisitors' eyes of the Free Spirit heresy with all Beguines and their much less numerous male counterparts, the Beghards. Not only were the authorities concerned with the unregulated status of both groups--its very purpose being "freedom"--they were also mindful of the gender-specific stricture against the autonomy of women. Both attitudes worked against the unfortunate Marguerite Porete.

Although Marguerite had been warned several times about her book's purported heretical beliefs, she sent the Mirror to three noted scholars, all of whom approved of it. Nevertheless, she was called a second time before the inquisitors and told to recant. Holding to her beliefs, Marguerite was thrown into prison, where she stubbornly refused to testify. The friar in charge of her case then extracted parts of the Mirror out of context and sent them to the theological regents of the University of Paris, who declared them heretical. She was pronounced a "relapsed heretic" due to the many warnings she had received, and was burned at the stake in 1310.

Although Marguerite went further in her description of the union of the soul with God than most mystics, she was not a follower of the Free Spirit in the libertine sense. What apparently disturbed the inquisitors more than the content of Marguerite's book was her assumption of an independent, public, and active persona. In Robert Lerner's view:

> Marguerite was probably a heretic, but had she been submissive and content to enter a cloister, like Mechthild of Magdeburg, with whom she is compared, she probably would have attracted little notice. Her active life, her pertinacity, and the political situation surrounding her arrest [in which the Inquisitors wished to make an example of her] certainly contributed to her death.[51]

It can be seen how the opposing male and female attitudes toward a woman's authority to speak in the public sphere could have fatal consequences. The radical mysticism of Marguerite and her boldness in promoting it only served to reinforce the Dominicans' conception of the female gender as dangerous, intellectually weak, and susceptible to deception. In the inquisitors' view, the "free" status of the Beguines meant "Free Spirit" heresy. Within two years of Marguerite's death, the "in-between" space for pious laywomen was officially dissolved.

The Space Is Dissolved: The Council of Vienne

In 1312, the Council of Vienna formally condemned both the Heresy of the Free Spirit and the Beguine way of life. Pope Clement V's decree, Cum de quibusdam mulieribus, censured women "commonly known as Beguines" who took no vows of obedience nor followed an approved rule. In the decree's words, these women wore a special habit, and "as if insane" discoursed on the Trinity and the divine essence. They spread opinions contrary to the articles of the faith and sacraments of the Church, leading simple people into error under the pretense of sanctity.[52] Clement's gender-specific terminology is noteworthy: Beguines were "insane" to discuss theology, they were only making a "pretense" of sanctity, and they were "leading simple people into error." Although Clement later added an escape clause, stating that "truly pious" Beguines should be allowed to live "penitently," he failed to define what constituted a "truly pious" Beguine. Because of his lack of clarity, authorities failed to make distinctions between Beguines and proceeded to dissolve orthodox beguinages all over Europe.[53] After public outcry from Beguine sympathizers, Pope John XXII in 1318 attempted to clarify the definition of a "good" Beguine: she was a woman who stayed in her house and did not dispute about the Trinity.[54] In essence, a good Beguine was not a Beguine. Furthermore, due now to the ambiguity of John's wording, authorities adopted a wide variety of policies toward the Beguines, leading some women to join established orders, others to stay in non-controversial Beguinages, and still others to suffer the stake as heretics. Thus, after

1320, it would be safe to say, the Beguine movement retained only the hollow shell of its former glory.

Conclusion: The Medieval Beguine Movement

The saga of the Beguines--from their origins as a marginal offshoot of a larger, male-dominated movement, through their development as a semi-respectable group, to their institutionalization and persecution--can be used as a model for the study of many other women's groups in history. Both male and female constructions of gender, specific to the religious and cultural milieu, played a large role in shaping, expanding, and constraining the course of the Beguines' freedom of expression as women. At issue was the Beguines' position as "sisters between" the spheres of home and convent, an ill-defined gender-space that was invigorating for women, but disturbing for men. The dialectic between the women's conceptions of their own authority as instruments of God, and the male clerics' attitudes toward the Beguines' independent expressions of faith, acted in tension to open, widen, contract, or close the window of freedom.

For Jacques de Vitry and the inquisitors, it was the equation of femaleness with moral and intellectual weakness that presented the point of controversy. Because of the clerics' fear of women as potential sources of sexual immorality and heresy, two dangerous contaminants in religious life, the position of the Beguines as women without the external constraints of male authority, written rules, permanent vows, or enclosure in a cloister presented the men with an almost insurmountable conceptual difficulty. Only Jacques and other friars who saw the Beguines as "special cases"-- women so holy they almost ceased to be "female"--were able to find a way to assimilate the uncloistered Beguines in their consciousness.

The Beguines themselves, however, did not seem to share the male attitudes toward their gender as intellectually and morally impotent. They saw themselves as brides of Christ and vessels of God, imbued with spiritual power and gifts of wisdom. Both their mysticism, through which they gained direct access to the heavenly realm, and their asceticism, by which they transcended their fleshly bodies, allowed them to form female identities devoid of the corruption men believed they could not escape. It was this self-authorization, as evidenced by the Beguines' impassioned lives and writings, that produced the outpouring of religious devotion so characteristic of the movement.

In following the dialectic between the male and female perceptions of gender through the course of the Beguine movement, it must be kept in mind that the gender attribution which so disturbed the clerics and oppressed the Beguines--women's supposed moral weakness and their corresponding need for restriction--was not necessarily inherent in the Christian religion, despite all the references to Eve and the serpent. Even within an overarching ideological framework such as Christianity, constructions of what constitutes maleness and femaleness, and what is acceptable or dangerously upsetting, vary throughout time, from men to women, and from subgroup to subgroup. The Protestant Reformers, for example, who decried celibacy and put emphasis on the family, began a process by which the "Christian" idea of the female gender as sexually immoral was to be gradually transposed into its polar opposite. By the 19th century, the "cult of true womanhood" equated femaleness with delicate purity and moral superiority due to women's roles as nurturers of children. As a corollary--perhaps surprising in light of the previous discussion--women were encouraged to travel freely as missionaries, but were not allowed to prophesy, which was considered usurpation of male authority.

Such a gender-focused look at the Beguines, as the first "women's movement" in Christian history, may be used as a tool for scholars of all persuasions who wish to investigate the role of women in reformist or revolutionary movements--whether religious, social, or political. An analysis of attitudes towards "femaleness" and its boundaries sheds a great deal of light on the conditions which enable or deny women the fullest opportunities for participation in their society.

Endnotes

1 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 6. The etymology of the word "Beguine" is uncertain, but several suggestions have been offered. Medieval chroniclers first assumed that the name derived from Lambert le Bègue, an early patron of the movement, but this theory has now been rejected as historically inaccurate. While some modern scholars posit that "Beguine" was related to the beige habit worn by many of the women, the most probable explanation is that the word came from "Albigensian," a type of heretic (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1989 ed., s.v. "Beguines and Beghards," by Robert E. Lerner). Although Beguines were most numerous and best organized in the Low Countries, similar groups of pious laywomen existed throughout the Continent, and were known as papelardae in France, pinzochere in Italy, and beatas in Spain (see e.g. Brenda Bolton, "Daughters of Rome: All One in Christ Jesus!" in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978], 103).

2 Gender here is defined as the cultural construction of sex differentiation. The most valuable of such gender analyses have dealt almost exclusively with Beguine spirituality and have not attempted to study the movement as a whole (see Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*; *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982]; and Ulrike Wiethaus, "Sexuality, Gender, and the Body in Late Medieval Women's Spirituality: Cases from Germany and the Netherlands." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7 [Spring 1991]: 35-52).

3 Allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs appears to have been introduced by the mystical and severely ascetic Greek Father, Origen (185-254), who believed that Solomon's intention in writing the Song was to instill "into the soul the love of things divine and heavenly, using for his purpose the figure of the Bride and the Bridegroom" (quoted in John Bugge, *Virginitas* [the Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975], 76). Origen also held that true Christian gnosis, or spiritual knowledge, was revealed in a manner similar to sexual rapture. In his homily on the Song, he wrote: "How beautiful, how fitting it is to receive a wound from Love! . . . do you lay bare your members and offer yourself to the chosen dart . . . for God is the archer indeed" (quoted in Ibid., 77).

4 Harvey Egan, S.J., *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 153.

5 Don Christopher Nugent, "The Harvest of Hadewijch: Brautmystik and Wesenmystik," *Mystics Quarterly* 12 (September 1986): 119.

6 Brenda Bolton, *The Medieval Reformation* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), 26.

7 Ibid., 11.

8 *Galatians*, 3:28.

9 Some of the earliest and most influential polemics depicting women as corruptresses were unleashed by Tertullian (155/160-220), who blamed Eve and the female gender for the Fall of mankind: "The judgment of God upon this sex lives on in this age; therefore, necessarily the guilt should live on also. You are the gateway of the devil; you are the one who unseals the curse of that tree, and you are the first one to turn your back on the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the devil was not capable of corrupting" (quoted in Alcuin Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992], 51).

10 The "weaker mind" idea was emphasized by St. Augustine (354-430), who asserted that there was a "natural order observed among men, that women should serve men, and children their parents, because it is just that the weaker mind should serve the stronger" (quoted in Ibid., 77).

11 Penelope Johnson, "Mulier et Monialis: The Medieval Nun's Self-Image," *Thought* 64 (Sept. 1989): 242.

12 Both husband and wife were bound by the "marital debt," according to I *Cor.* 7:3-5a: "Let the husband

render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer."

13 Graciela Daichman, "Misconduct in the Medieval Nunnery: Fact, Not Fiction," in *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity*, ed. with an introduction by Lynda L. Coon et al. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 97-99.

14 David Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1990), 67. The term frauenfrage was first coined in 1882 by Karl Bücher, who at that time was the foremost economic and demographic historian of medieval Germany (Martha C. Howell, *Women, Production and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986], 1).

15 Herlihy, 67.

16 The injunction to protect women from sexual temptation was occasionally taken to extremes. To cite one example: elaborate curtains were erected lest a dying nun see the priest who administered last rites (Rosemary Reuther, ed., *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974], 244).

17 Frances and Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1978), 88.

18 Sally Thompson, "The Problem of the Cistercian Nuns in the Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Centuries," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 227.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 238-39.

21 Carol Neel, "The Origins of the Beguines," *Signs* 14 (Winter 1989): 334.

22 In the 10th-twelfth centuries, Liège was called the Athens of the North because of its cathedral school, which attracted Germans, French, English, and Slavs (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Belgium").

23 One of Jacques' main objectives in recording Mary's life was to promote the Beguines as an orthodox alternative to women's ministries in heretical sects.

24 For an analysis of the historical validity of hagiography, see Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

25 Dennis Devlin, "Feminine Lay Piety in the High Middle Ages: The Beguines," in *Medieval Religious Women*. Vol. 1, Distant Echoes, ed. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 191.

26 "The Life of Mary Oignies, by Jacques de Vitry," in Elizabeth A. Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 179.

27 A possible modification of the view that Mary had a non-gendered sense of authority was Jacques' claim that the Beguine was aware of the restrictions on women's preaching, and so "prayed to God to send her a preacher through whom she could save souls." Here Jacques was also careful to add that her answer came in the form of himself (Devlin, 187). As it remains unclear whether this story was an actual acknowledgment by Mary of the restrictions on her gender, or was simply an effort on Jacques' part to defend the Beguine's orthodoxy or to assert his own importance, any conclusions about Mary's own sense of herself must be drawn primarily from the broad outlines of her life.

28 Quoted in Blamires, 146.

29 In Jacques' introduction to the vita, he cites Jerome's accounts of virtuous Christians as the inspiration for his own writings about Mary and the Beguines. Jerome (347-420), who was a vehement champion of celibacy, extolled the piety of female virgins on the one hand but wrote scathingly about women generally on the other. His works were frequently quoted in the Middle Ages to support the construction of femaleness as weak and evil (see esp. Eleanor Commo McLaughlin, "Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Woman in Medieval Theology," in *Religion and Sexism*, ed. Rosemary Reuther [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974]; also Bugge, *Virginitas*; and Blamires, *Woman Defamed*).

30 Petroff, 180.

31 That Jacques' friendship with Mary bordered on the unacceptable can be seen in a remark made by his student, Thomas de Cantimpré. In his preface to the vita, Thomas noted that Jacques had too much "very human love" for Mary, and also added that the Beguine in turn was overly adulatory of her confessor, "kissing the ground on which he had walked" (John Coakley, "Gender and the Authority of Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and Dominicans" *Church History* 60 [December 1991]: 455).

32 Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 133.

33 Ibid., 229.

34 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 172.

35 Petroff, 177.

36 "Mechthild of Magdeburg, `Selections from The Flowing Light of the Godhead,'" in Petroff, *Visionary Literature*, 212-21; also in Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 247-56.

37 I *Corinthians*, 1:27.

38 "Mechthild, 'Flowing Light,' in Petroff, 23.

39 "Hadewijch, 'Visions,' translated by Mother Columba Hart," in Ibid., 194.

40 "Hadewijch, 'Letters to a Young Beguine,' translated by Eric Colledge," in Ibid., 191.

41 Hadewijch, 'Visions,' in Ibid., 196.

42 Ibid., 177.

43 Hadewijch, 'Letters to a Young Beguine,' in Ibid., 191.

44 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 237.

45"Mechthild, Flowing Light," in Petroff, 23. 46 Although Marguerite's book was condemned, it was later translated into Latin, Italian, and Middle English--probably because until the 1970s, the Mirror was thought to be either anonymous or the work of another, more respectable mystic (Petroff, 281).

47 Quoted in Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 277.

48 Petroff, 282.

49 Quoted in Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 81.

50 The inquisitors referred to here are the Dominicans, whose order had been authorized in the early thirteenth century to eradicate the Albigensian heresy in Southern France. This loosely organized group of investigators, who cannot technically be considered an "Inquisition" in the formal sense, should not be confused with the two

later institutions of the Spanish Inquisition (founded in 1478 to root out apostate former Jews and Muslims), and the Roman Inquisition (founded in 1542 to combat Protestantism). (See Richard Kieckhefer, *Repression and Heresy in Medieval Germany* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979], 2-5.)

51 Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1972), 208.

52 Ibid., 47.

53 Loc. cit.

54 Loc. cit.

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