

The Historical (Mis)Perceptions of the Thirteenth-Century Beguines

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	2
Introduction.....	3
1. “Neither in the World nor Out of It:” Historians’ Perceptions of the Thirteenth-Century Beguines.....	9
2. “Sometimes Martha, Sometimes Mary:” Medieval Perceptions of the Thirteenth-Century Beguines.....	19
3. “The Untutored Mouth Instructs the Learned Tongue:” Self-Perceptions of the Thirteenth- Century Beguines.....	34
Conclusion.....	50
Bibliography.....	55

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Introduction

Marcella Pattyn was born in the Belgian Congo on August 18, 1920. At the age of twenty-one, after being rejected from several evangelical Christian orders because of her blindness, she was welcomed into a community of laywomen in the Sint-Amandsberg suburb, outside of the Belgian city of Ghent. It is in this quiet community that Pattyn spent forty years of her life. Tall curtain walls enclosed convents, houses, gardens, an infirmary, and a chapel.¹ The community's centerpiece was a lofty neo-gothic church with a long centre isle, castle-like towers, and arched windows and entryways. In 1960, Pattyn joined a second community of laywomen, this one located in the Belgian city of Kortrijk. This group was much smaller, totaling only nine, but the women were veritable cultural icons among the larger community. Pattyn was a musician, weaver, and knitter. When she was not in prayer or contemplation, she could be found cheering up the sick with musical performances or selling handmade dolls to passersby. On April 14, 2013, at the age of ninety-two, Pattyn died in a nursing home, and her passing marked the end of a tradition that began over eight centuries earlier, in the medieval Low Countries.²

Pattyn was not a nun, but the last beguine, and the communities she lived in were not nunneries, but beguinages. The beguines were Christian laywomen who adopted personal and informal vows of chastity and poverty, and led lives of contemplation, prayer, and community service. Textual references to a group of holy women, known in Latin as the *mulieres sanctae* or

¹“Great Beguinage St-Elizabeth,” Visit Ghent, accessed March 4, 2018, <https://visit.gent.be/en/great-beguinage-st%E2%80%93elizabeth?context=tourist>.

²“Obituary: Marcella Pattyn,” The Telegraph, accessed March 4, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/10062339/Marcella-Pattyn.html>.

mulieres religiosae, first began to emerge in Liège, Belgium, during the late twelfth century. Cardinal James of Vitry wrote in 1212 of women who “scorned the temptations of the flesh, despised the riches of the world for the love of the heavenly bridegroom in poverty and humility, earning a sparse meal with their own hands.”³ The term *mulieres religiosae* came to refer to thirteenth-century nuns like Lutgard of Aywières, recluses like Julianna of Liège, and laywomen like Mary of Oignies.⁴ By the mid-thirteenth century, the latter and pious laywomen like her were commonly known as beguines. The beguine movement evolved significantly over the course of the 1200s, from its grassroots among the Liège *mulieres religiosae*, to its expansion mid-century when communities began cropping up across Europe. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, 205 beguinages had formed in Liège alone, and some 37,000 beguines existed in Europe more generally.⁵ Although systematic persecution caused the number of beguines to decline by the end of the sixteenth century, the movement persisted, subdued but not eliminated, a fact to which Marcella Pattyn is testimony. The beguines remain a significant historical phenomenon, for these divinely-empowered women attempted to carve out a new social space in which they could explore their spirituality in a secure and supportive environment, thereby breaking with the traditions of medieval religious and secular society.

³James of Vitry, *The Life of Mary of Oignies*, trans. Margot H. King (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2006), 547.

⁴M. Zita Wenker, “Following the Lamb Wherever He Goes: The Story of St. Lutgard,” in *Medieval Women Monastics: Wisdom's Wellsprings*, ed. Miriam Schmitt and Linda Kulzer (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 197.

⁵William J. Bausch, *Pilgrim Church: A Popular History of Catholic Christianity* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 2004), 218.

Like the movement itself, the term *beguine* is of uncertain origin, and throughout the Middle Ages it was used as both a complimentary and pejorative term.⁶ The designation is also ambiguous because it referred to a large group of people with diverse ways of life. Some beguines were recluses while others lived in semi-cloistered communities. Some beguinages were simply loose associations of women, and some, particularly as the movement progressed, were well-organized communities with a church and cleric.⁷ Largely but not entirely an urban phenomenon, beguine communities were often microcosms of the cities in which they were located, and were composed of women from a wide variety of social milieus and economic statuses. One significant thirteenth-century beguinage was that of St. Elizabeth, in Ghent, which was home to somewhere between 600 and 710 beguines.⁸ The beguinage of St. Elizabeth remained active until the nineteenth century, when it was replaced by that of Sint-Amandsberg, Marcella Pattyn's home of forty years.

Because of the movement's noticeable diversity, it is difficult to typify the scope and character of the beguine way of life. Most beguines withdrew from the world and eschewed material desires in order to devote themselves to a life of study, prayer, and contemplation. While they did not take religious vows, they almost always adhered to the monastic ideals of chastity, poverty, and manual labor. Some beguines, like Marcella Pattyn, were laborers, and earned a living through the sale of clothing. Others, including Mary of Oignies, were mystics. Beguines often engaged in acts of charity, caring for the poor, the elderly, and the sick. Many

⁶For a discussion of the etymology of *beguine*, see Helen Rolfson, "The Low Countries, the Beguines, and John Ruusbroec," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 330.

⁷Rolfson, 330-331.

⁸Walter Simmons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 103-104, 54.

communities also had schools for the education of young girls, and some solitary anchoresses trained apprentices. The beguines' clothing differed from community to community, but was typically composed of a black habit with a white cowl.⁹

The history of the beguines is fascinating and puzzling in equal measure because the women occupied an undefined position within both medieval religious and secular society. They were neither wives nor nuns, neither worldly nor unworldly. Most beguines adhered to traditional monastic ideals, but, at least during the thirteenth century, were free to leave their communities and receive visitors at will. Although they embraced lives of poverty, they, unlike nuns, did not relinquish their wealth upon joining a community and could bequeath it as they saw fit. In fact, beguines often convinced other girls or widows to follow the same way of life through monetary gifts.¹⁰ The women formed powerful bonds with other members of their communities, even while maintaining strong familial relationships.¹¹ Although they followed the regulations of orthodox medieval Christianity, the beguines exhibited significant agency in determining the direction of their spiritual lives.

Their indeterminate social space, at least by the standards of the medieval religious hierarchy, led the beguines to be interpreted in a variety of ways. Some of their contemporaries found the beguines to be a source of inspiration, others a cause of frustration. Yet to others the women appeared enigmatic due their unclear role in both secular and spiritual society. Moreover, despite being a subject of renewed historiographical interest in the twenty-first century, the beguines have proven to be as equally polarizing and perplexing to historians, as the latter face

⁹Simmons, *Cities of Ladies*, 61-90.

¹⁰Simmons, 72.

¹¹Tanya Stabler Miller, *The Beguines of Medieval Paris* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 55.

the same challenge of explaining a phenomenon that developed outside the norms of traditional medieval society. Part of the difficulty stems from a scarcity of firsthand beguine accounts. Instead, what little is known about the beguines generally comes from the writings of male churchmen, like James of Vitry's *The Life of Mary of Oignies*. Yet, whether a defender or detractor of the beguines, a male church cleric could only describe the movement from the perspective of an outsider. Indeed, when compared to the writings of the women themselves, many of these male-produced works contain misrepresentations of the scope and character of the beguine movement.

The first chapter of this project provides an overview of beguine historiography. The beguines, particularly during the thirteenth century, had neither a central authority figure nor a specific set of religious vows. This amorphousness, coupled with the lack of foundational documents describing the movement's origins, has resulted in a noticeable absence of consensus among historians on the nature of the women's beliefs and the role they played in medieval society. Questions such as the connection between the development of monastic mysticism and the proliferation of the beguine way of life have left historians divided.

The second chapter describes the polarizing effect of the beguine movement on thirteenth-century churchmen. While the beguines of the fourteenth and fifteenth century were almost all regarded with suspicion, and those of the sixteenth century with cool indifference, the thirteenth century was a time when one man could describe the women as models of piety, while another could dismiss them as a detestable sect.¹² Even as men like James of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré campaigned for papal approval and canonization of the Liège beguines, others who attended the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the Council of Vienne (1311-1312) declared the

¹²James of Vitry, *The Life of Mary of Oignies*, 39.

women anathematic and outlined grounds for their elimination. The chapter concludes with speculation on why the beguines proved to be so divisive.

The final chapter compares and contrasts male perceptions of the beguines with those of the women themselves. Both detractors and supporters of the beguines often misrepresented the women, particularly the significance of their gender, their reasons for becoming beguines, and the nature of their spirituality. Moreover, an overreliance on sources written by men has unfortunately caused historians to perpetuate some of the same misconceptions. This project attempts to reconstitute the agency of the thirteenth-century beguines, and, in doing so, challenge overly simplistic views of medieval female spirituality.

1. “Neither in the World nor Out of It:” Historians’ Perceptions of the Thirteenth-Century Beguines

“Each creature God made, must live in its own true nature;
How could I resist my nature, that lives for oneness with God?”

—Mechthild of Magdeburg,
“A Fish Cannot Drown in Water”

In 1274, Friar Gilbert of Tournai brooded over the nature of a new group of laywomen, known as the beguines, that had emerged in the Belgium diocese of Liège: “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.”¹³ Since its thirteenth-century emergence, the scope and character of the beguine movement has baffled its contemporaries and historians alike. A lack of foundational documents, an absence of both unified leadership and adherence to a specific set of religious vows, as well as a unique social position somewhere between wife and nun, has made it difficult for scholars to characterize the beguines. Indeed, historians’ perceptions of the women are as varied and, oftentimes, contradictory as those of the beguines’ contemporaries.

The story of beguine historiography begins in the eighteenth century when German historian Johann von Mosheim published a commentary on the beguines and their male counterpart, the beguards.¹⁴ Although the beguine movement reached its zenith in the Late Middle Ages, some communities remained active well past the thirteenth century, including a community in Lübeck, Germany, Von Mosheim’s place of birth. Von Mosheim thus offers unparalleled insight into the beguine phenomenon, for he stands as one of the sole historians who was also a contemporary of his subjects.

¹³Gilbert of Tournai, *Collectio de Scandalis Ecclesiae*, ed. Ignaz von Dollinger (Vienna: Manz, 1882), 197.

¹⁴See Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, *De Beghardis et Beguinabus Commentarius* (Leipzig: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1790); Von Mosheim’s commentary on the beguines was not published until 1790, after the scholar’s death.

Although the beguines featured in several of the era's important literary works—notably, Charlotte Brontë's 1853 *Villette*, whose protagonist, Lucy Snowe, passes a beguinage during her travels in France—the women received little academic interest in the century following von Mosheim's publication.¹⁵ It was not until the early twentieth century that scholars began to once again investigate the topic. In a ground-breaking fashion, Herbert Grundmann situated the beguine phenomenon within a larger medieval movement of women seeking active religious participation and apostolic perfection. Of significance to this project, Grundmann argues that the beguine movement was the result of a surplus of pious women during the thirteenth century who could not gain entry into other mendicant or monastic orders; he argues that the beguines “never represented a planned form of religious life [but] rather they were the result of the women's religious movement insofar as it did not find reception into the new orders.”¹⁶ He further posits that the longevity of the beguine way of life was only possible for those women who submitted to male ecclesiastical authority and forged close associations with Dominican or Franciscan spiritual advisors who were able to provide both pastoral care and protection from persecution.¹⁷ Grundmann thus depicts the beguines as unsuccessful nuns, and denies the intentionality of the beguine movement.

Like Grundmann, early twentieth-century scholar Joseph Greven also describes the women as would-be nuns, and argues that the movement was the result of a failing of traditional

¹⁵Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (London: J.M. Dent and Co., 1853), 230.

¹⁶Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Link between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, trans. Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 139. Grundmann's book was first published in German in 1935.

¹⁷Grundmann, 143-144.

female religiosity.¹⁸ In a similar manner, Greven's contemporary Karl Bücher portrays the beguines as groups of women who, being unmarried, banded together for mutual protection.¹⁹ Yet, they seem not to have considered that the reason many women adopted a beguine vocation was not because they were barred entry at other institutions or because they were jilted spinsters in need of mutual protection, but because they believed this particularly lay expression of piety to be their religious calling.

By the mid-twentieth century, North American scholars began to follow Grundmann's lead and study the beguines as a distinct religious phenomenon. In 1954, Ernest W. McDonnell drew on a plethora of primary sources—from saints' lives to papal bulls to personal letters—to discern the relationship that existed between the beguines, their spiritual advisors, and other religious and secular authorities. A significant claim in McDonnell's book is that although the Catholic Church often denounced the movement as heretical and censured its followers, the teachings and beliefs of the beguines were in fact highly orthodox, and any immoral practises, like religious hypocrisy, were actually less pronounced than in other mendicant institutions.²⁰ McDonnell praises both the beguines and the beghards for their staunch adherence to the *vita apostolica*, a way of life modeled after Christ and his apostles, which he considers particularly notable in light of the thirteenth-century papacy's devolution into political corruption and instability.

¹⁸Joseph Greven, "Der Ursprung des Begenwesens," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 35 (1914): 26. See also his *Die Anfänge der Begenen: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Volksfrömmigkeit und des Ordenwesens im Hochmittelalter* (Münster i. Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1912).

¹⁹Karl Bücher, *Die Frauenfrage im Mittelalter* (Tübingen: H. Laupp, 1910), 1.

²⁰Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture: With Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1954), 1.

Robert E. Lerner also argues in favour of the beguines' orthodoxy, suggesting that they were targeted because of their excessive piety and ambiguous relationship to certain censured mendicant orders, and not because they harboured significant heretical beliefs themselves. Practitioners of the *vita apostolica* were often the subjects of intense suspicion during the thirteenth century because of their potential affiliation with the Waldensians, a reformative Christian sect that arose in the twelfth century as a reaction to the significant wealth and moral corruption of the Catholic Church. The Waldensians were fierce proponents of the *vita apostolica*, and rejected several orthodox Catholic teachings, including the notion of purgatory and the doctrine of the seven sacraments. Following the Fourth Lateran Council, the Waldensians became the targets of harsh persecution. Lerner suggests that, as fellow advocates of the *vita apostolica*, the beguines incurred the same suspicion that had been cast upon the Waldensians. However, he argues that most beguines were "motivated by piety and for that reason they always had their defenders despite the steady rain of abuse and intermittent papal anathemas."²¹

In addition to a growing interest in the beguines from American scholars, the mid-twentieth century also witnessed the advent of many important European publications on the women, such as the works of German historian Otto Nübel, Dutch historian Florence Koorn, and French historian Michel Lauwers.²² What many of these scholars have in common is that they

²¹Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 44.

²²See Otto Nübel, *Mittelalterliche Beginen und Sozialsiedlungen in den Niederlanden. Ein Beitrag zur Vorgeschichte der Fuggerei* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1970); Florence Koorn, *Begijnhoven in Holland en Zeeland Gedurende de Middeleeuwen* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981); Michel Lauwers, "Expérience Béguinale et Récit Hagiographique: À Propos de la 'Vita Mariae Oigniacensis' de Jacques de Vitry (vers 1215)," *Journal des Savants* 1 (1989): 61-103.

reject Grundmann's earlier perception of beguines as second-rate nuns, and, instead, emphasize alternative reasons for the movement's development. Scholars like McDonnell and Lerner view popular piety not as a defect of traditional religiosity, but as an admirable cause that allowed men and women to pursue religious experiences that were not dictated by the papacy.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, historiographical interest in the beguines increased. While the topic continued to fascinate medieval and religious scholars, it now also entered the purview of gender historians who emerged on the scholarly scene during the late twentieth century. Female scholars increasingly began to study the beguines, and question the assumptions that had traditionally dictated the historiographical understanding of these medieval women. Although such scholars often repeat Grundmann's notion that the beguine movement represented an important development in medieval female spirituality, they emphasize that it unfolded outside the confines of male authority, adding that religious participation thereby served as a significant source of female empowerment.

Carol Neel, for example, believes that "the beguines represented a distinctly feminine expression of popular piety" since "these medieval women were independent of male authority in marriage and in the church to a degree otherwise unknown in their culture."²³ Neel highlights the beguines' distinctive position in medieval society, suggesting that their "awkward, middling posture produced a constant and finally destructive tension between themselves and thirteenth-century society, which had little sympathy for anomalous persons."²⁴ Like several of her colleagues, Neel suggests that it was the women's aberrant social position that caused the Council of Vienne to condemn them as heretical.

²³Carol Neel, "The Origins of the Beguines," *Signs* 14, no. 2 (1989): 323-325.

²⁴Neel, 323.

More recently, Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane has also made significant contributions to the growing awareness of late medieval female spirituality. Her work challenges both the historical understanding of the beguines and the historiographical reception they have received. Deane argues that historians frequently represent beguines “in terms of awkwardness, absence, and failure—or refusal—to fit into binary categories such as wife and nun, lay and religious, or orthodox and heretical,” categories which do not suit the beguines’ unique spirituality.²⁵ Deane suggests that while “the perspective of beguines as awkward and ill-defined women ... certainly shaped attitudes in the later Middle Ages,” it was not a sole or representative opinion, as many religious and secular authorities supported and protected the beguines.²⁶ for instance, “Parisian theologians regarded the women of King Louis IX's royal beguinage as spiritual models, and Hamburg beguines were under ecclesiastical authority and had access to spiritual courts and privileges.”²⁷ Deane argues that beguine history must thus be approached with a fresh perspective, and that the critical constructs through which discussions of the past are traditionally organized must be re-evaluated.

Although the recent revival of interest in the beguines has produced a greater scholarly understanding of female mysticism and spirituality during the Late Middle Ages, historians have not been able to reach a consensus on the relationship between the beguines and the religious and secular societies to which they belonged. While Grundmann depicts the beguine movement as a spontaneous development resulting from the women’s inability to find reception in other female religious orders, Neel challenges this interpretation, stating that “the beguine way of life,

²⁵Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, “Did Beguines have a Late-Medieval Crisis? Historical Models and Historiographical Martyrs,” *Early Modern Women* 8 (2013): 282.

²⁶Deane, 281.

²⁷Deane, 284.

contrary to its description in much modern historiography, followed the road opened by sisters of earlier monastic communities in regard to both its spiritual and social directions.”²⁸ She suggests that the movement has traceable antecedents, and thus was not a spontaneous development, but an intentional movement of devout women inspired by past exemplars and attracted to a life of popular piety. As yet, historians have not been able to unanimously explain the origins of this unique lay group.

The importance of beguine mysticism is also a controversial topic among historians. Hans Geybels proposes that “beguines were best known for their 'mystic spirituality' [which] was central to their self-identity.”²⁹ Yet Penny Galloway rebuts this conclusion, arguing that “the spirituality expressed by [the beguine mystics] was, almost by definition, atypical. There is ... no evidence of ecstasy as a routine feature of religious life in the majority of beguine communities.”³⁰ While Geybels considers mysticism to be a defining characteristic of the beguines, Galloway argues that only a small number of the women were mystics while the spirituality of the rest was less extraordinary.

Indeed, beguine scholarship is characterized by this notable lack of consensus regarding the scope and character of the movement. An absence of firsthand accounts describing its origin and composition has often hampered beguine research and contributed to this wide array of perceptions among historians. Neel herself suggests that “beguine history is less well documented than ... many other movements in medieval religious life, in part because ... the

²⁸Neel, “The Origins of the Beguines,” 323.

²⁹Hans Geybels, *Vulgarite Beghinae: Eight Centuries of Beguine History in the Low Countries* (Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2004), 14.

³⁰Penny Galloway, “Neither Miraculous nor Astonishing: The Devotional Practice of Beguine Communities in French Flanders,” In *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liege and Their Impact*, ed. Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1999), 107.

beguines' experience frequently was recorded by great men of the Church, outsiders to their way of life, whose descriptions are muddled with tendentiousness.”³¹ Many of the beguine *vitae* were written by male church authorities like James of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré, and while such men were strong supporters of the beguines and their way of life, their accounts cannot offer historians a complete understanding of the movement’s importance to those it touched personally.

Moreover, each beguine community recognized different leaders and followed different statutes, which further inhibits the easy categorization of this diverse group. For instance, three beguinages in Strasbourg followed a statute written by Frederick of Ersteheim, a man who served as their confessor and authority figure.³² A beguinage in Paris was under the direction of its founder, King Louis IX.³³ Meanwhile, other beguine communities, such as those of Hyères and Marseilles, did not recognize male authority figures, but answered only to their founder and first prioress, Douceline of Digne.³⁴ Grundmann suggests that “because beguines lacked central leadership and organization, they had evolved into such a variety of forms that no general ordinance could be issued or applied to them all.”³⁵ Indeed, it seems that this statement can also be applied to historiographical perceptions of the beguines, for no single narrative can take into consideration the movement’s diverse membership, organization, and beliefs.

Much of this uncertainty among historians also comes from the beguines’ ambiguous relationship to both medieval secular and religious institutions. While exceedingly pious,

³¹Neel, “The Origins of the Beguines,” 322.

³²Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, 149.

³³Miller, *The Beguines of Medieval Paris*, 1.

³⁴*The Life of Saint Douceline, a Beguine of Provence*, trans. Kathleen Garay and Madeleine Jeay (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer Publishers, 2001), 31.

³⁵Grundmann, 147.

beguines neither took religious vows, nor belonged to a specific monastic order. Upon entering a beguinage, most beguines were not expected to relinquish their worldly possessions or relationships. Indeed, the beguines' awkward social and religious position, at least by the standards of a strict medieval hierarchy, has hindered historians' ability to understand the movement, since their traditional historical categories do not suffice to describe its complexity.³⁶

Scholarship on the beguines is also notable for its lack of common terminology. The term *beguine* was the subject of a wide array of definitions during the Late Middle Ages. During the early thirteenth century, the term had a pejorative meaning because of its association with the heretical Cathars in the south of France.³⁷ However, the beguines later reclaimed the appellation for their own purposes. Douceline of Digne, for instance, said that "the name *beguine* pleased her greatly and ... [she] held it in great esteem."³⁸ By the mid-thirteenth century, the term had developed a more positive meaning, as many people, both lay and clergy, began to associate it with an order of pious and charitable women.³⁹ Even so, many male church authorities, such as those who were present at the ecumenical councils of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, continued to be suspicious of the term because the women's status as heretical or orthodox was yet undetermined.

Grundmann further suggests that the term *beguine* was used simultaneously to describe two separate and distinct groups: "While one part, doubtless by far the greater part, led a regulated life in beguinages, often with ties to mendicant houses, earning their way with

³⁶John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 1.

³⁷Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, 81.

³⁸*The Life of Saint Douceline*, 34.

³⁹Grundmann, 81.

handcrafts, the other part stimulated complaints against women who kept no enclosure and wandered about without restraint, preferring alms to work.”⁴⁰ Thus, the term *beguine* referred to both un-cloistered laywomen like Hadewijch of Brabant and semi-cloistered prioresses like Douceline of Digne. Historians, in turn, are not always clear which sense of the term they employ in their historical accounts, an ambiguity that can lead them into disagreement with one another. For instance, while Geybels employs the first meaning of the term to describe the beguine mystics, Galloway applies it primarily to those women living in beguinages. This lack of clear etymology and common terminology has equally contributed to the several contradictory understandings of the beguines, because a single term is used to refer to separate and distinct phenomena.

Even as the medieval beguines continue to fascinate and frustrate historians in equal measure, they proved no less confusing for their contemporaries, who also faced the challenge of understanding a phenomenon that did not easily conform to traditional religious and secular categories. Like historians, the opinions of medieval religious authorities were often deeply divided over the question of the beguines. As the next chapter demonstrates, while some men were proponents of the women and their lifestyles, others were skeptical of their unusual conduct and considered them to be a threat to orthodox Christianity.

⁴⁰Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, 147.

2. “Sometimes Martha, Sometimes Mary:” Medieval Perceptions of the Thirteenth-Century Beguines

“They are cruel to me, for they wish to dissuade me
from all that the forces of Love urge me to.
They do not understand it, and I cannot explain it to them.
I must then live out what I am.”

—Hadewijch of Brabant, “To Live Out What I Am”

The thirteenth century was a turbulent era for the growing beguine movement, and the women certainly polarized the opinions of their contemporaries during this time. Many beguines formed close relationships with male spiritual advisors who admired the women for their devotion and fought for their papal approval. At the same time, however, other church authorities dismissed the beguines as heretics, and some even considered the women to be entirely irreligious. This chapter explores the construction of attitudes that surrounded the thirteenth-century beguines, and suggests that the division may be traced to issues of classification and questions of control.

Sometime around the year 1211, canon and chronicler James of Vitry settled in the small French town of Oignies. Although his reason for moving to this remote location after studying at the bustling University of Paris is unknown, one possibility is that he was curious to witness for himself the pious laywoman living in Oignies whose reputation preceded her. James of Vitry and the beguine Mary of Oignies soon formed a close relationship, and a few years after her death in 1213, James completed her biography. *The Life of Mary of Oignies* is both the story of a woman whose devotion to God was so great that she “shone wondrously among the others like a jewel among other stones,” and a vigorous religious defense of the beguine way of life.⁴¹

⁴¹James of Vitry, *The Life of Mary of Oignies*, 4.

Mary of Oignies was born in Nivelles in 1177 to wealthy parents. From a young age she showed a desire to live in accordance with the teachings of the early saints: for instance, “when her parents ... wished to adorn her in delicate and refined clothing, she was saddened and rejected them” because the teachings of the apostles Peter and Paul forbade such acts of vanity.⁴² In an imitation of Jesus’ suffering on the Cross, Mary engaged in corporal mortification, sleeping on planks and binding her body with tight cords. As a young woman, she married John of Nivelles, but the couple remained chaste and cared for the sick in the nearby leper colony of Willambroux. By the time she met James of Vitry, Mary had moved to the nearby town of Oignies, in the diocese of Liège, where she lived as an anchoress. Mary’s charitable works and fervent devotion attracted the attention of other pious women, who soon formed a community of beguines with Mary as spiritual director. Until her death in 1213, Mary devoted herself to a life of humility, poverty, and contemplation.

The relationship between James of Vitry and Mary of Oignies is exceptional. James was both Mary’s spiritual confessor and her most fervent admirer. According to James, when Mary performed miraculous works of healing, or received visions and prophecies from God, James became the disciple, and she the master; although he ultimately retained authority over her through his position as her spiritual advisor, in matters of religiosity James considered Mary his equal, if not his superior.⁴³ Historian John Wayland Coakley argues that James believed himself to be “personally indebted to [Mary] for the aid she [provided] him through her extraordinary

⁴²James of Vitry, *The Life of Mary of Oignies*, 52-53; for the teachings of the Apostles Peter and Paul, see 1 Pet 3:3 and 1 Tim 2:9.

⁴³James of Vitry, 84.

gifts” and intimate relationship with God.⁴⁴ Considering that male religious authority was traditionally considered superior to its female equivalent, James and Mary’s relationship of mutual respect is particularly striking.

James of Vitry’s colleague, Thomas of Cantimpré, was another fervent admirer of the pious women of Belgium. Thomas was trained as a canon regular at the Abbey of Cantimpré before becoming a Dominican friar. Around 1230, he published a companion piece to James’ biography of Mary, titled *The Supplement to James of Vitry's Life of Mary of Oignies*, which reemphasized the holy woman’s remarkable nature. Thomas was also the hagiographer of several other celebrated religious women, including a beguine named Christina the Astonishing.⁴⁵ Although it is unknown whether Thomas actually met any of the women of whom he wrote, he shared James’ sense of indebtedness to the beguines for their holy gifts and charitable acts.

Thomas of Cantimpré’s *The Life of Christina the Astonishing* was written in 1232, a few years after the subject’s death. The beguine Christina was born to a noble family in the Belgium town of Sint-Truiden. Like Mary, she demonstrated a propensity towards self-mortification: “she would throw herself into roaring fires which she found in people's houses, or else she at least thrust her feet and hands into flames and [would hold] them there for so long that they would have been reduced to ashes had it not been a divine miracle.”⁴⁶ After suffering a cataleptic episode in her early twenties, Christina devoted herself to the care of the sick. She also embraced a life of extreme destitution and penance, and was incarcerated on at least two occasions, under

⁴⁴John Wayland Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 79.

⁴⁵See also Thomas of Cantimpré’s *The Life of Margaret of Ypres* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2008), and *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2008).

⁴⁶Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, trans. Margot H. King and Barbara Newman (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2008), 134.

suspicion of being possessed. Thomas considered his contemporary audience to be indebted to holy women like Christina, “who [suffered] so many torments and punishments not for [themselves], but for [their] neighbours.”⁴⁷

Perhaps the most exceptional relationship between beguine and churchman is that of the mystic Hadewijch of Brabant and the canon John of Ruusbroec. Little is known about Hadewijch, but she is believed to have been the head of a beguine community before turning to a life of wandering and begging.⁴⁸ Sometime during the fourteenth century, a manuscript which contained her letters, poems, and visions came into the possession of Flemish mystic John of Ruusbroec. Hadewijch’s writing had a significant influence on John’s own theology: he incorporated into many of his works her metaphor of courtly love and even recommended her manuscript to several of his fellow canons.⁴⁹ Historian Jessica Boon argues that John treated Hadewijch no differently than he would a male mystic, and considered both female and male understandings of the divine as equally valid.⁵⁰ According to Boon, Hadewijch was one of John’s chief religious influences, and he saw her gender as having no bearing on her abilities as a theologian.

James of Vitry, Thomas of Cantimpré, and John of Ruusbroec, through their close relationships with the women and their interactions with their teachings, developed deep respect and admiration for the beguines and for their way of life. They acknowledged the exceptionality of the women’s behaviours and beliefs, but argued that they should be imitated, instead of

⁴⁷Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, 154.

⁴⁸Mary Suydam, “The Touch of Satisfaction: Visions and the Religious Experience According to Hadewijch of Antwerp,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 12, no. 2 (1996): 5.

⁴⁹Jessica Boon, “Trinitarian Love Mysticism: Ruusbroec, Hadewijch, and the Gendered Experience of the Divine,” *Church History* 72, no. 3 (2003): 484-485.

⁵⁰Boon, 487.

decried as heretics. Thomas, for instance, argued that one should make “an example of [Christina’s] life,” while James stressed that Mary’s remarkable humility and piety were not the products of heresy, but the result of a strict adherence to Christ’s teachings.⁵¹

Indeed, James of Vitry’s biography of Mary is perhaps the most obvious defense of the thirteenth-century beguines. In July of 1216, James wrote to Pope Honorius III requesting official approval of the beguines in not only Liège, but also France and the Holy Roman Empire.⁵² James was harshly critical of his contemporaries who disparaged the piety of laywomen like Mary, and he went as far as stating: “do not slander the innocent. For how has she harmed you if she counselled her friends in a salutary fashion, if she told the truth as she had heard it from God? But if you who often pour over the pages of Gratian ever look into this little book, you may scorn the vision of this handmaid of Christ as fantasies or dreams, laughing as is your wont.”⁵³ The *Decretum Gratiani* to which James refers was the collection of Canon laws compiled in the twelfth century that strictly forbade women from administering any sacraments such as Baptism or the Eucharist. James considered Mary a model of saintly religiosity, and his biography venerates both her and her fellow laywomen of Liège.

At the same time as men like James of Vitry were defending the beguine way of life, the movement came under harsh attack. Philip the Chancellor, a French theologian and poet, was a staunch critic of the beguines and the beghards, and denounced the hypocrisy of those women who professed chastity but became pregnant.⁵⁴ Franciscan Simon of Tournai believed that the

⁵¹Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, 155.

⁵²James of Vitry, *Lettres de Jacques de Vitry, 1160/1170-1240, Évêque de St.-Jean d'Acre*, ed. R. B. C. Huygens (Leiden: Brill, 1960), ep. 1.76-83:74.

⁵³James of Vitry, *The Life of Mary of Oignies*, 104.

⁵⁴Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit*, 37-38.

beguines presented a public peril as uneducated women attempting to interpret theological material.⁵⁵ A few years later, the Fourth Lateran Council, convoked by Pope Innocent III, censured all mendicant religious orders that arose following the thirteenth-century upsurge in popular piety. The council's thirteenth canon states: "lest too great a diversity of religious orders lead to grave confusion in the Church of God, we strictly forbid anyone in the future to found a new order, but whoever should wish to enter an order, let him choose one already approved."⁵⁶ The decree prohibited the formation of any new religious groups, and while it does not mention the beguines by name, it declared that pious men and women must join established and accepted orders, like the Dominicans or the Franciscans, instead of forming separate and distinct groups. The censuring of new religious orders was repeated at the Second Council of Lyons (1272-1274), which further banned any order founded after 1215 that had not received papal approval.⁵⁷ While certain beguine communities, like those in Liège, had received papal approval prior to this date, this decree would have had significant implications for any yet-unapproved houses.

The beguines faced a far more direct attack at the 1311 to 1312 Council of Vienne. Here the beguines were addressed by name, and decried not only as heretical, but as irreligious. The council's sixteenth decree states:

The women commonly known as beguines, since they promise obedience to nobody, nor renounce possessions, nor profess any approved rule are not religious at all, although they wear the special dress of beguines and attach themselves to certain religious to whom they have a special attraction ... We perpetually forbid their mode of life and remove it completely from the church of God. We expressly enjoin on these and other women, under pain of excommunication to be incurred automatically, that they no longer follow this way of life under any form, even if they adopted it long ago, or take it up anew.⁵⁸

⁵⁵Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, 145.

⁵⁶H.J. Schroeder, ed., *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (St. Louis: Varlag Herder, 1937), 255.

⁵⁷Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 326.

⁵⁸Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 374.

The council members feared that the beguines' "misguided" teachings were leading good Christians astray, and thus denounced the movement as a threat to orthodox Catholicism. Following the council, any woman who identified as a beguine risked excommunication and persecution.

This risk was made clear in the council's *Ad Nostrum* bull, which outlined several errors of beguine theology. One such error was the apparent beguine notion that "those who have reached [a] degree of perfection and spirit of liberty are not subject to human obedience nor obliged to any commandments of the church, for, as they say, where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."⁵⁹ It is unsurprising that the counsellors found this denial of human authority objectionable, particularly during the thirteenth century. The era witnessed a revival of papal supremacy, which was based on the assertion that the pope, as the successor of Peter the Apostle, enjoyed supreme and universal power over the Catholic Church. Thirteenth-century popes like Innocent III and Clement V wielded significant spiritual and secular power, and thus the beguine notion of God as the sole supreme being may have been construed as a repudiation of papal authority. The other alleged errors are discussed more fully in the following chapter of this thesis. For the moment, it is sufficient to observe that the bull was riddled with misinformation and misrepresentations of the beguines' beliefs.

The council's sixteenth decree and the accompanying *Ad Nostrum* bull were a harsh response to the entire beguine movement, and particularly targeted laywoman and reputed beguine Marguerite Porete, who was burnt at the stake in 1310, only one year prior to the council. Her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, was identified as containing elements of the

⁵⁹The *Ad Nostrum* bull is translated in McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, 524.

Heresy of the Free Spirit, an indefinite set of heretical beliefs that circulated from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. The heresy had two core attributes: autotheism, the belief that the soul can become one with God, and antinomianism, the belief that moral law can be ignored in favour of faith alone.⁶⁰ The Free Spirits were frequent deniers of the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church, which caused great unease among church leaders. For years after Porete's death, the Heresy of the Free Spirit continued to be closely associated with the beguine movement, even if most of the women did not entertain this set of beliefs.

Although misinformed, the arguments against the beguines at the Council of Vienne were not entirely without reason. Beguines neither took religious vows nor owed obedience to a single authority figure, but they wore a distinctive habit and formed close relationships with certain male clergy. While professing piety and devotion, they were reported to express contrary opinions to Catholic doctrine with regards to the Trinity, the articles of faith, and the holy sacraments.⁶¹ Thus the counsellors at Vienne had some cause for considering the women's behaviour to be an inexcusable display of religious hypocrisy, something which they believed negated their claim to devoutness.

Accordingly, the *Ad Nostrum* bull permitted inquisitors and other ecclesiastical officials to make inquiries into the beliefs and behaviours of suspected beguines and to impose punishment as they saw fit.⁶² However, the bull did contain an escape clause for a beguine under question: inquisitors were only permitted to impose punishment on individuals who refused to

⁶⁰Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, 1. Lerner argues that almost all charges of antinomianism laid against the Free Spirits were unfounded. In his opinion, they were not a revolutionary group, trying to undermine the authority of the Catholic Church, but a devout group of individuals seeking religious perfection.

⁶¹McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, 524.

⁶²McDonnell.

repent the error of their ways.⁶³ Thus, as long as a woman did not commit any of the offences outlined in the *Ad Nostrum* bull or claim to be a Free Spirit, she was able to lead a life of piety. The counsellors proposed that they “in no way [intended] ... to forbid any faithful women, whether they [promised] chastity or not, from living uprightly in their hospices, wishing to live a life of penance and serving the Lord of hosts in a spirit of humility.”⁶⁴ In this manner, the men at Vienne differentiated between “good” beguines like Mary of Oignies, those devout women living in communities and serving God through hospice works and other acts of charity, and “bad” beguines like Marguerite Porete, the intractable mystics wandering about the countryside preaching heresies.

Indeed, sometime during the thirteenth or fourteenth century, the term *beguine* had come to refer simultaneously to semi-cloistered laywomen and wandering mystics.⁶⁵ A thirteenth-century poet, Nicholas of Bibra, wrote that “good” beguines “work day and night,” spinning yarn, fasting, and praying, while “bad” beguines “connive under cover of a false religious leisure.”⁶⁶ Friar Humbert of Romans was a harsh opponent of female mendicants, but he dedicated a sermon in 1274 to the “beguines, happy and worth of all praise ... following a most holy life in the midst of a perverse nation.”⁶⁷ The counsellors at Vienne recognized this same distinction.

To the majority of thirteenth-century churchmen, the semi-cloistered beguines were less objectionable than their un-cloistered sisters. During the thirteenth century, female mysticism

⁶³McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, 524.

⁶⁴Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 374.

⁶⁵Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, 147.

⁶⁶Cate Gunn, *Ancrene Wisse: From Pastoral Literature to Vernacular Spirituality* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 41.

⁶⁷Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, 147.

and heresy were often considered synonymous, since several eminent mystics—notably, Marguerite Porete—reputedly believed in the heretical notion of personal deification, the idea that a soul can become unified with God and elevated to a position of divinity. Moreover, mysticism, particularly in its female form, was considered mysterious and disconcerting. While Christian mystics had existed for as long as the religion itself, the thirteenth century witnessed a surge in lay mysticism, due, in part, to an increased literacy rate.⁶⁸ Because lay mysticism was a relatively new and poorly understood phenomenon, the beguine mystics were often the subjects of significant distrust. The semi-cloistered beguines, on the other hand, were perhaps more easily accepted by their thirteenth-century contemporaries because their expression of piety bore a closer resemblance to that of traditional cloistered nuns.

Additionally, while un-cloistered laywomen could wander from city to city, preaching heretical ideas and destabilizing the theological authority of the Catholic Church, semi-cloistered beguines, and their teachings, were confined within the walls of beguinages. Historian Sara Poor argues that “the policy of cloistering religious women ... can be seen as an attempt to control women’s religious activity and served to enforce their silence.”⁶⁹ In an age when female initiative and independence were considered questionable at best and objectionable at worst, beguinages were likely seen an effective means to contain and regularise an unconventional religious movement.

Despite the attempt to distinguish between “good” and “bad” beguines, fourteenth-century inquisitions had the effect of greatly decreasing the movement’s numbers. Grundmann believes that “measures [taken] against ‘unregulated’ wandering beguines, [dragged] ‘regulated’

⁶⁸Denys Hay, *Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 335.

⁶⁹Sara Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 65.

beguines into a common catastrophe.”⁷⁰ In 1320, “misbehaving” beguines were expelled from the beguinage of St. Christophe, in Liège.⁷¹ In communities across Europe, women stopped identifying as beguines to avoid inquiry, instead calling themselves “good women who serve God and used to be called beguines” or just “good women.”⁷² Persecution also forced the dissolution of many small beguinages in the Low Countries. While some larger communities were maintained under the jurisdiction of secular or religious authorities, many others were absorbed as Dominican or Franciscan tertiaries.⁷³ Out of fear of persecution, the beguine movement waned, and many of its followers were swallowed up by other accepted religious orders.

As the movement lost steam, interrogation of the beguines slowed, and by the middle of the fourteenth century, the inquiries ended with the full exoneration of those women living in court beguinages (like that founded by Louis IX). However, the damage to the movement was largely irreversible. Historian Walter Simmons argues that following the inquisitions of the Late Middle Ages, it was almost impossible for a woman to become a beguine if she did not belong to an established community or court.⁷⁴ The wandering way of life of beguine mystics like Hadewijch of Brabant and Mechthild of Magdeburg was effectively eradicated. However, despite the change in its composition and the reduction of its numbers, the movement persisted within the walls of court beguinages, and women continued to call themselves beguines, while quietly and devotedly serving God, to the present day.

⁷⁰Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, 148.

⁷¹Simmons, *Cities of Ladies*, 133.

⁷²Simmons, 134.

⁷³Simmons, 120.

⁷⁴Simmons, 135.

What produced this array of responses to the thirteenth-century beguines? Why were some men devoted to the women and their cause, while others attacked them as heretics and fiends? There are likely no easy answers to such questions. Because the beguine population was highly diverse, ranging from solitary anchoresses living in church cells, to groups of women organized in semi-cloistered communities, to wayward mystics traveling and preaching across the countryside, knowing one was not necessarily knowing another. Moreover, each man, whether a beguine supporter or critic, likely had a unique and highly personal reason for perceiving the women as he did, and no single explanation can encompass this breadth of opinions. Even so, it is worthwhile to consider some broad, speculative explanations for this discrepancy in perception.

A poem by a thirteenth-century French troubadour, Rutebeuf, highlights an element of beguine faith that may have strongly divided their contemporaries. In his poem, titled “Le dit des Beguines,” he states that “if [a beguine] cries, it is out of devotion. If she sleeps, she is in ecstasy. If she dreams, it is a vision.”⁷⁵ He adds that “her vows, her profession, are not for all her life. This year she cries, that year she prays, and that year she takes a husband. Sometimes she is Martha, sometimes she is Mary.”⁷⁶ What may at first seem like a straightforward understanding of beguine belief is on closer inspection a harsh critique. Rutebeuf depicts the beguines as hypocrites whose excessive displays of piety merely conceal their weak commitment to the religious life. He suggests that the beguines played both the roles of the biblical sisters Mary, the devout, and Martha, the domestic.⁷⁷ According to Rutebeuf, the beguines constantly flitted

⁷⁵Rutebeuf, “Le dit des Beguines,” *La Joie des Poètes*, accessed February 10, 2018, <http://www.ipoesie.org/rutebeuf-le-dit-des-beguines>, lines 7-9.

⁷⁶Rutebeuf, <http://www.ipoesie.org/rutebeuf-le-dit-des-beguines>, lines 13-17.

⁷⁷See Lk 10:38-42.

between these two identities, sometimes playing the role of the devout, weeping nun caught in ecstatic rapture, and sometimes that of the hardy, domestic wife caring for the sick and earning a living. Just as Jesus admonished Martha for her domestic distractions, Rutebeuf believed that because the beguines refused to adhere to a strict set of religious vows and to abandon worldly relationships and possessions, their piety was a mere pretense.

Perhaps without knowing it, Rutebeuf had captured in his poem something which made the beguines so polarizing to their thirteenth-century contemporaries: their refusal to take religious vows. Many churchmen had great difficulty making sense of the beguines because of what they perceived to be their ambiguous commitment to the religious life. Some clerics, like Thomas of Cantimpré and James of Vitry, did not seem to find it problematic for beguines to play the roles of both Martha and Mary, to be both worldly and unworldly. These men shared close relationships with beguines and witnessed firsthand their miraculous acts, and thus it was impossible for them to doubt the depth of their piety. However, men like Rutebeuf, who viewed the beguine movement from the vantage point of an outsider, likely believed that the women could not be as devout as they claimed because they hypocritically refused to abandon all material attachments.

The variety of attitudes towards the beguines was not only an issue of classification, but also a question of control. Following the thirteenth-century surge in popular religious movements, the Catholic Church may have felt their spiritual authority to be in question. During this time, mystics and laypeople, like Marguerite Porete, could increasingly read and write. Sometime in the late thirteenth century, a vernacular copy of the Bible even circulated among a

French beguine community.⁷⁸ In an unprecedented—and for many, objectionable—manner, women began to enter religious debates in earnest. They could interpret the Bible on their own terms and produce books, like *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, that introduced new understandings of the text. Theology and biblical interpretation were no longer the purview of the clergy alone. Thus, the beguines may have been opposed and persecuted not because they were heretical in doctrine, but because they represented a threat to traditional religious power structures.

Their supporters, on the other hand, perhaps did not feel so readily this challenge to their authority. While James of Vitry describes a unique inversion of power in his relationship with Mary, he readily points out that “a preacher is simply an instrument through which the Lord speaks.”⁷⁹ James implies that Mary’s unique authority in matters of theology was not self-derived, but something that God bestowed upon her, and thus it was God who retained ultimate authority, and not Mary herself. Moreover, Mary was answerable to not only God, but also to James as her spiritual advisor. Indeed, in matters of Church law, Mary remained ever an “obedient daughter.”⁸⁰ Because spiritual advisors like James had direct control over the beguines they served, they perhaps felt that their spiritual authority was not challenged by these exceptional women.

While some of the beguines’ spiritual advisors may have accepted the women because they did not challenge their authority, it may be unfair to suggest that all of their closest supporters could not, or would not, recognize alternate, female forms of spiritual authority. It is

⁷⁸Hildegund Keul, “The Bible as Center of Innovative God-Language in Mechthild of Magdeburg and Gertrude of Hefta,” in *The High Middle Ages*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 242-243.

⁷⁹James of Vitry, *The Life of Mary of Oignies*, 101.

⁸⁰James of Vitry, 115.

highly plausible that some of the beguines' supporters truly considered gender to be irrelevant to one's ability as a theologian, and believed that both men and women could exercise spiritual authority. The unique relationship between Hadewijch of Brabant and John of Ruusbroec, in which he treated her exactly as he would a male theologian, certainly hints at such an acknowledgment. Historian John Coakley further confirms that the *vitae* of men like James and Thomas "suggest a period in which it was thoroughly imaginable for both sorts of authority, in their distinctly gendered forms, to coexist and even to build upon one another."⁸¹ Regardless of whether their advisors and associates acknowledged it or not, the beguines and other spiritual women of the thirteenth century firmly demonstrated that true piety had never been reserved for men alone.

Whether loved or despised, the beguines were not an easily understood phenomenon. Indeed, both supporters and critics of the beguines developed, and conveyed in their writings, misunderstandings of the women's identities. As the next chapter demonstrates, both groups oversimplified the women's motives for joining the movement, exaggerated the importance of their gender, and distorted the essence of their spirituality and beliefs. Because of the movement's many peculiarities, the thirteenth-century beguines have long been the victims of historical—and, arguably, historiographical—misrepresentation.

⁸¹Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*, 4.

3. “The Untutored Mouth Instructs the Learned Tongue:” The Self-Perceptions of the Thirteenth-Century Beguines

“She would say that that the name beguine pleased her greatly
and that she held it in great esteem
because it was humbled and scorned by the world’s pride.”

—*The Life of Saint Douceline, a Beguine of Provence*

In general, men wrote the history of the beguines, and most of what is known about these exceptional women is drawn from the hagiographies of James of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré. Because such individuals were noted theologians and writers, their works have been reproduced and translated for posterity, and are thus easily available to academics and laypeople alike. Yet, these *vitae*, alongside the decrees of the thirteenth-century ecumenical councils, only provide a limited view of the beguines, and say more about the authors and how they perceived their subjects than they do about the women themselves. Even so, it was these churchmen who had the power to determine how the beguines would be remembered.

Yet, male representations of the beguines must be approached cautiously, because they often contain misunderstandings of a phenomenon that the authors could not personally experience. Indeed, a comparison of these external perceptions of the beguines to those put forth by the women themselves reveals that they were often misunderstood and misrepresented by their contemporaries (and sometimes their historians), particularly when it came to the importance of their gender, their reasons for joining the movement, and the essence of their spirituality. To highlight this tension, the self-perceptions of three notable beguines—Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Douceline of Digne—will be juxtaposed with those representations that were outlined in the previous chapter.

The intricacies of gender in the Middle Ages cannot be articulated fully in a few paragraphs. In a broad sense, the medieval Catholic Church often depicted women as inherently

sinful, stemming from Eve's betrayal in the Garden of Eden.⁸² Women were considered lustful and seductive, and seen as having little control over their bodies. For instance, Dominican Vincent of Beauvais's widely-read encyclopedia, *The Mirror of Nature*, described women as not only more lustful than men, but as the second most lustful female animal (the first being the mare).⁸³ Women were seen as more easily corrupted and prone to demonic possession.⁸⁴ For example, in the *vita* of Saint Liutberga, a ninth-century nun, the male author refers repeatedly to the "imbecility of her sex."⁸⁵ Virginity and marriage were considered important means to circumvent a woman's inherent sinfulness, and, thus, a beguine, neither a nun nor a wife, would have been a particularly disagreeable woman. Gender indeed emerges as a significant focus in the *vitae* of the thirteenth-century beguines, and even the women's greatest supporters depicted their femininity as an obstacle to their spiritual journey.

In *The Life of Mary of Oignies*, James of Vitry suggests that the titular beguine had to bind her body with cords to resist its urges, because "she clearly did not have power over [it]."⁸⁶ He adds that once married, Mary had to struggle to remain chaste in the face of an abundance of sexual delights.⁸⁷ Like Vincent of Beauvais, James perpetuates the idea that women, even those

⁸²See Gn. 3:1-23.

⁸³Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Naturale* (Venice, Hermannus Liechtenstein, 1494), 1622, 1625-26.

⁸⁴See, for instance, the works of the Christian author Tertullian (155-140 C.E.), who considered Eve and her female descendants to be responsible the Fall of humanity: "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.

⁸⁵G.H. Pertz, ed., *The Life of St. Liutberga*, trans. Jo Ann McNamara, Medieval Sourcebook, accessed March 20, 2018, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/liutberga.asp>.

⁸⁶James of Vitry, *The Life of Mary of Oignies*, 54.

⁸⁷James of Vitry, 55.

as virtuous and pious as Mary, must struggle to resist sexual temptation. James' beliefs are made further transparent in a quotation from one of his sermons, in which he suggests that "the 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, ... roving and lecherous once she has been stirred by the devil's hoe."⁸⁸ Thomas of Cantimpré was also concerned with the demonic susceptibility of women. In his *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, he states that the beguine Christina was often thought to be possessed.⁸⁹ She even once became so violently stirred up by a spirit, presumably a demonic one, that she immersed herself in a baptismal font to escape it.⁹⁰ Like James, Thomas considered the beguines' female gender, and their "inherent" corruptibility, to be an obstacle to their spirituality.

Historian Penelope D. Johnson believes that medieval religious women probably "saw themselves less consciously as women than as religious people who happened to be female."⁹¹ A concentration on or denial of their gender was not central to their self-identity, despite the insistence from certain male clerics that women had to reject their female nature to live religiously.⁹² For example, a twelfth-century nun, Hildegard of Bingen, wrote that despite being an unlearned female, she was, through the guidance of Saint Benedict and the grace of God, able to understand complex and obscure theological treatises.⁹³ Similarly, beguines Mechthild of

⁸⁸Quoted in Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 146.

⁸⁹See Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, 132, 134, 137-138.

⁹⁰Thomas of Cantimpré, 139.

⁹¹Penelope D. Johnson, "Mulier et Monialis: The Medieval Nun's Self-Image," *Thought* 64, no. 254 (1989): 242.

⁹²Johnson, 242.

⁹³Hugh Feiss, trans., "Explanation of the Rule of St. Benedict, by Hildegard of Bingen," *Matralogia Latina* 14 (1990): 1.

Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Brabant concluded that their gender was of no consequence to their spiritual journey.

Mechthild of Magdeburg was born sometime in the early thirteenth century. As a young woman, she left her family to become a beguine in the German city of Magdeburg. In her sixties, fearing persecution, she joined the Cistercian nunnery of Helfta, in Saxony, though she never took Cistercian vows.⁹⁴ While at Helfta, Mechthild completed her book, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, a compendium of prayers, visions, reflections, and poetry. Both Mechthild and her fellow beguine, Hadewijch of Brabant, wrote in vernacular prose, and produced original and complex works of theology.

The women considered themselves to be vessels of divine revelation. Of her book, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, Mechthild states that one should “receive [it] eagerly, for it is God himself who speaks the words.”⁹⁵ Hadewijch also displayed a fervent compulsion to serve God, and described her love for him as a madness.⁹⁶ Both women argued that an apostolic life in service of God was permissible for anyone, regardless of earthly characteristics like gender or age. For example, in her poem “Who Loves God Triumphs over Three Things,” Mechthild uses both male and female pronouns, which suggests that she considered the prophetic calling to be an experience that touched both genders equally. She further proposed that evil and sinfulness were overcome through love for God, for both men and women.⁹⁷ Hadewijch, for her part, did not

⁹⁴Leone M. English, “An Analysis of Power in the Writing of Mechthild of Magdeburg,” *Feminist Theology* 14, no. 2 (2006): 191-193.

⁹⁵Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998), 39.

⁹⁶Hadewijch of Brabant, “The Madness of Love,” Poetry Chaikhana, accessed February 17, 2018, <http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/Poets/H/Hadewijch/madnessoflov/index.html>, lines 1-2.

⁹⁷Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light*, 46.

adhere to the traditional belief that femininity represented an obstacle to sanctity. In a letter to a young beguine, Hadewijch advises her to “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.”⁹⁸ Instead of depicting women as naturally sinful and weak, as do James of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré, Hadewijch argued that God granted women the gifts of nobility and strength in preparation for a life of service to Him.

Mechthild seems to have been particularly aware of the Church’s attitude towards women. In *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, she reveals that she “was warned about this book and people told [her] that if it were not protected, it could be thrown on the fire.”⁹⁹ Mechthild wondered why God would choose her, an unlearned woman, as his mouthpiece, saying: “if I were an educated, religious man, and You had worked this singular, great wonder in him, then You would have had eternal honour from that. Now, how can anyone believe of You that You have built a golden house in a filthy quagmire.”¹⁰⁰ If a learned man had written *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, the book would be praised as a divine miracle, but because it was written by a woman, it risked destruction and its author persecution. She thus wondered why God would choose to make manifest his word in the form of “a filthy quagmire”—that is, a book that would

⁹⁸Hadewijch of Brabant, “Letters to a Young Beguine,” trans. Eric Colledge, in *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Petroff (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 191.

⁹⁹Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Selections from The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Elizabeth A. Andersen (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 47.

¹⁰⁰Mechthild of Magdeburg, 48.

likely be ignored or destroyed by its thirteenth-century male audience. God answered Mechthild's questions by saying that the receivers of His gifts are not the most learned, but the humblest, and that "many a wise master versed in scripture ... is a fool in [His] eyes."¹⁰¹ In saying this, Mechthild suggests that learning, like gender, is irrelevant to divine knowledge, and that when aided by the Holy Spirit, "the untutored mouth ... instructs the learned tongue."¹⁰² While male accounts of the beguines emphasize the limitation of their sex, the women themselves often suggested that piety was not constrained by such an earthly quality.

The importance of gender is not the only misperception that pervades beguine literature. Male clerics—as well as some historians—have incorrectly explained the women's motives for joining the movement. Despite being receptive to non-cloistered forms of piety, Thomas of Cantimpré was a true man of the thirteenth century. During the Middle Ages, becoming a nun was generally seen as an admirable occupation for young and old women alike, and nuns were highly respected for their holiness and wisdom. Nunneries, like Chelles in France and Gandersheim in Germany, were known centres of scholarship, and some abbesses, like Hildegard of Bingen, even enjoyed significant spiritual authority.¹⁰³ As historian Sandy Bardsley states, "for a woman of means who wanted to live a religious life, becoming a nun was ... the most accepted and expected route."¹⁰⁴ Although he remained a supporter of the Liège beguines, Thomas was a product of his time and he continued to view the cloistered form of female piety as superior to its non-cloistered equivalent. In his biography of the nun Lutgard of Aywières,

¹⁰¹Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Selections*, 48.

¹⁰²Mechthild of Magdeburg.

¹⁰³Sandy Bardsley, *Women's Roles in the Middle Ages* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 36.

¹⁰⁴Bardsley, 39.

Thomas describes life in a Cistercian nunnery as the most "holy and perfect."¹⁰⁵ Throughout his lifetime, Thomas wrote hagiographies of both nuns and beguines alike, and was thus in an excellent position to evaluate the different forms of female spirituality. In keeping with the norms of the thirteenth century, Thomas considered life in a nunnery as superior to life in a beguinage.

Unsurprisingly, the beguines' detractors also opposed their unique form of spirituality. The Fourth Lateran Council decreed that the beguines must take the less objectionable path, and join established nunneries instead of forming a distinct order. The Council of Vienne criticized the beguines because they claimed to be religious women, and yet, in refusing to take vows of obedience or follow an approved rule, they did not conform to the standards expected of a medieval nun. Moreover, the escape clause to the 1312 *Ad Nostrum* bull, meant to distinguish between "good" and "bad" beguines, was ambiguous, which made it difficult for inquisitors to distinguish between these two groups. To clarify the clause, Pope John XXII declared in 1318 that a "good" beguine was a woman who stayed within the walls of her community and did not publicly dispute theology; essentially, a "good" beguine was not a beguine, but a nun.¹⁰⁶ Many beguines, including Mechthild herself, were forced to join nunneries out of fear of persecution, and by the fourteenth century they were almost indistinguishable from traditional nuns. Despite their opposite reactions to the beguine movement, Thomas of Cantimpré and the counsellors at the Fourth Lateran and Vienne Councils considered traditional monasticism to be the superior vocation for religious women.

¹⁰⁵Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 238.

¹⁰⁶Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit*, 47.

In their early twentieth-century studies, historians Grundmann and Greven depict beguines as failed nuns, arguing that the movement was the result of a surplus of pious women who could not be accommodated into other orders. This posits that women did not become beguines because they felt compelled to do so, but because they could not become nuns. Like many of their thirteenth-century forebears, these scholars consider traditional monasticism to be a more appropriate way of life for religious women. Grundmann, for example, suggests that the most successful beguines were those who submitted to male authority and became Dominican or Franciscan tertiaries—essentially those who attempted to adopt the qualities a traditional nun.¹⁰⁷

While Grundmann is certainly correct that a woman was more secure as a nun than as a laywoman, his conclusion that the beguines were merely unsuccessful nuns overlooks the women's agency in the formation of the beguine movement. Most women chose to become beguines, not because they were unable to become nuns, but because they believed that particular spiritual life to be their religious calling. The biography of Saint Douceline of Digne illustrates the beguines' agency most aptly. Douceline was born sometime around 1215 to a wealthy family in Provence. As a young woman, she received a vision which compelled her to establish a beguine community in the town of Hyères. She later formed a second beguine community, this one on the outskirts of Marseilles. The author of Douceline's biography is unknown, but it is generally attributed to the beguine Philippa of Porcellet, a noble woman who belonged to the community in Marseilles.

Douceline's biographer emphasizes that she became a beguine because she sincerely believed that this was the best way she could serve God. As a young woman, Douceline asked

¹⁰⁷Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, 143-144.

God “to let her find an order and a way of life that would be pleasing to [Him].”¹⁰⁸ After much prayer, Douceline determined that God’s wish was for her to become a beguine. Although she was pious from a young age, Douceline never considered becoming a nun or adopting any other religious life than that of a beguine. Unlike many of her contemporaries, she even suggested that the beguine way of life was the superior form of religious expression; she uncompromisingly adopted the designation of *beguine* because she believed that, scorned as it was by thirteenth-century churchmen, it most aptly conveyed her humble devotion to God.¹⁰⁹ Douceline’s continued commitment to the beguine movement, despite the significant risk of persecution, suggests that she truly believed it to be God’s wish.

Other religious women also became beguines in the communities of Marseilles and Hyères not because they lacked other options, but because they believed it to be their divine calling. Douceline served as a significant source of inspiration for such women, and “the holiness of the work she did in starting her establishment, the type of habit that she took, [and] the high degree of her perfection ... showed and convinced people that she was assured of God’s goodness and that he wanted her to take on that appearance and that way of life.”¹¹⁰ Like Douceline, other women also believed that the pious, charitable, and penitential beguine way of life allowed them to serve God most faithfully. Beguines were not “failed nuns,” but agents who joined an order that upheld ideals that best suited their personal understanding of piety.

The beguines saw their spirituality as having both divine ordination and saintly precedent. As her hagiographer states, Douceline “modeled herself on all she saw and knew of

¹⁰⁸*The Life of Saint Douceline*, 29.

¹⁰⁹*The Life of Saint Douceline*, 34.

¹¹⁰*The Life of Saint Douceline*, 30.

the Saints, both men and women."¹¹¹ The beguine movement did not emerge spontaneously, but derived clear precedent from the way of life of saints such as Francis of Assisi, who, like the beguines after him, attempted to imitate the life and work of Christ. Followed closely by Saint Francis, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was the most popular of the beguines' patron saints, for she embraced many of the same contradictions characteristic of beguine life. For example, she was chaste and virginal, but also married and a mother.¹¹² Among a list of fifty-six individuals whom she considered to be religiously perfect, Hadewijch cites Mary as the first.¹¹³ The beguine veneration of Mary was not only in keeping with Catholic teachings, but also lent strength and authority to their way of life. Historian Frank Tobin agrees with this assertion when he states that "the reason motivating women to undertake this way of life... [was] the wish to return to the ideals of early Christianity and imitate more closely the lives of the apostles," rather than as a last-ditch attempt to lead a religious life after finding themselves excluded from other orders.¹¹⁴

It is not only the significance of the women's gender and their reasons for joining the movement that have been misrepresented in both primary and secondary sources of the beguines, but also the nature of their beliefs. While some medieval laywomen may have entertained heretical thoughts, the spirituality of most self-professed beguines was highly orthodox. Indeed, the women were innocent of nearly all of the theological errors outlined in the *Ad Nostrum* bull of 1312.

¹¹¹*The Life of Saint Douceline*, 47.

¹¹²Simmons, *Cities of Ladies*, 87.

¹¹³Hadewijch of Brabant, *These are the Perfect, Clad as Love. Hadewijch Saw Each of Them With His/Her Seraphim*, trans. Helen Rolfson, in "List of the Perfect by Hadewijch of Antwerp," *Vox Benedictina: A Journal of Translations from Monastic Sources* 5, no. 4 (1988): 277.

¹¹⁴Frank Tobin, *Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of Godhead* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998), 1.

The first error described in the bull was the apparent beguine belief that “a person in this present life can acquire a degree of perfection which renders him utterly impeccable and unable to make further progress in grace.”¹¹⁵ This notion of finite progress was objectionable to the counsellors at Vienne because orthodox Catholicism emphasized that good Christians must make constant progress in both knowledge and faith. Yet, despite what the counsellors claimed, most beguines did not believe in human perfectibility and instead fervently desired to further their knowledge and love of God, to the point that they often adopted exceptionally rigorous schedules of prayer and contemplation. Mary of Oignies, for example, each day “read the entire psalter and recite each individual psalm while standing upright.”¹¹⁶ Similarly, Mechthild of Magdeburg’s strenuous spiritual effort often left her tired and sick.¹¹⁷ Historian Jane McAvoy even argues that one of Mechthild’s main intents in writing her book, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, was to demonstrate that furthering one’s knowledge and love of God is a complex and ongoing struggle.¹¹⁸ Hadewijch of Brabant, for her part, was a fierce advocate of the importance of intellectual progress, and believed that God gave each human the gift of reason for instruction and enlightenment.¹¹⁹ Indeed, most of the thirteenth-century beguines did not believe that any living being could reach religious perfection, and even though they felt they shared a close union with God, they constantly and fervently attempted to make further progress in His grace.

¹¹⁵McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, 524.

¹¹⁶James of Vitry, *The Life of Mary of Oignies*, 65.

¹¹⁷Mechthild, *The Flowing Light*, 72.

¹¹⁸Jane McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life: Medieval Women Mystics on Atonement* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 43.

¹¹⁹Patricia Ranft, *A Woman’s Way: The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 69.

Not only did most beguines reject the notion of human perfectibility, but this women's movement was at its most fundamental level one of religious progress. During the Late Middle Ages, several religious groups, like that of the beguines, embraced the concept of *vita apostolica* and its principles of imitation of the early church, love for others, and evangelical poverty. This cult of poverty, as the movement became known, was a reaction to both the wealth of the Catholic Church and the increasing instability and complexity of medieval society. Its followers believed that an apostolic life could rejuvenate those souls in urban centres who could not escape to the quiet contemplation of monastic institutions.¹²⁰ The *vita apostolica* concept was one of reform and criticism, and the beguines were a product of this movement that sought a means to further one's spirituality in an increasingly politicized and centralized world.

The *Ad Nostrum* bull further accused the beguines of believing that "it [was] not necessary to fast ... after gaining [a] degree of perfection, for then the sensitive appetite has been so perfectly subjected to the spirit and to reason that one may freely grant the body whatever pleases it."¹²¹ It is almost needless to say that the beguines were innocent of this charge. Mary of Oignies neither ate meat nor drank wine, but sustained herself solely on fruits, vegetables and legumes, while Mechthild of Magdeburg was often weak from a lack of sustenance.¹²² Indeed, all the beguines discussed so far indicated that they engaged in extreme, and arguably dangerous, periods of fasting.

The counsellors at Vienne also charged the beguines with denying the importance of chastity, which was perhaps a legitimate complaint. It was true that the beguines did not submit

¹²⁰Ernest McDonnell, "The *Vita Apostolica*: Diversity or Dissent," *Church History* 24, no.1 (1955): 15-17.

¹²¹McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, 524.

¹²²James of Vitry, *The Life of Mary of Oignies*, 61; Mechthild, *The Flowing Light*, 72.

to strict vows of abstinence, nor was it uncommon for a woman with a husband and children to join a beguine community. Yet, the denial of celibacy was by no means a central component of beguine theology, as the bull seems to suggest. On the contrary, many beguines remained chaste. Mary of Oignies, for example, was married, but her relationship was sexless. Douceline of Digne punished young beguines in her community for merely looking at men.¹²³ Even mystics like Hadewijch of Brabant, who did not have to submit to the rules of a head beguine, considered themselves to be the brides of Christ, and believed that chastity was necessary to achieve a complete union with Him.¹²⁴ Indeed chastity was a far more fundamental element of beguine theology than was its denial.

Historian Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane convincingly argues that during the Late Middle Ages, the routine lives of faithful beguines living in communities were effaced by the more dramatic image of those wayward and disobedient beguines who did not belong to a specific beguinage.¹²⁵ Arguably, the entire beguine movement became tarred by the heretical beliefs and behaviours of the Free Spirit, Marguerite Porete. Despite her unclear connection to the movement, Porete was labeled a beguine in her trial documents, and her inquiry and execution in the year 1310 set a precedent for investigating other female mystics and laywomen.¹²⁶ Because of the lack of any clear distinction between what constituted “good” and “bad” laywomen, even orthodox beguines had to fear persecution. For many thirteenth-century churchmen, women like Porete, with their seemingly heretical beliefs and provocative theologies, were the face of the

¹²³*The Life of Saint Douceline*, 43.

¹²⁴Paul Mommaers and Elisabeth M. Dutton, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 33.

¹²⁵Deane, "Did Beguines have a Late-Medieval Crisis?," 280.

¹²⁶Sean L. Field, *The Beguine, The Angel, and the Inquisitor: The Trials of Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 31.

beguine movement, and any woman who subsequently called herself a beguine was regarded with the same suspicion. It was thus a type of guilt-by-association that witnessed the orthodox beguines persecuted for the actions of heretics like Porete. Moreover, this image of the beguines as dangerous nonconformists was reproduced frequently during the subsequent centuries, to the point that even today it is impossible to talk about the women without including a discussion of heresy.

Yet the beguines should not be remembered as heretics or nonconformists, for instead of challenging the traditions and beliefs of the Catholic Church, they adhered to an extreme version of its teachings. Historians Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Marie-Élisabeth Henneau suggest that “heresy is not so much the opposite of orthodoxy [but] a strong or reformist version of it, defined as heretical only retrospectively by those who succeed in suppressing it.”¹²⁷ While this statement may not apply to all charges of heresy during the Middle Ages, it certainly pertains to those made against the beguines. Most beguines adopted a strict, ascetic way of life—with rigorous schedules of prayer, self-imposed seclusion, and severe flagellation—that far exceeded that of the average medieval Christian. Mary was said to genuflect eleven hundred times both day and night, and Douceline to bind her body with cords and an iron girdle. Christina threw herself into fires and boiling cauldrons, Hadewijch fasted to the point of weakness, and Mechthild described in her writings ecstatic visions such that few Christians could ever hope to experience. The beguines were zealots, and even some of their strongest supporters recognized their religious excess. James of Vitry, for example, often had to reprimand Mary for crying and wailing while

¹²⁷Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, and Marie-Élisabeth Henneau, "Introduction: Liège, the Medieval "Woman Question," and the Question of Medieval Women," in *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liege and Their Impact*, ed. Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1999), 6.

praying.¹²⁸ The men also believed that although faithful Christians should strive to do so, the asceticism of the beguines was not easily imitated. Thomas of Cantimpré, for instance, reports that “some jealous nuns slandered [Christina’s] stricter way of life—which they could not imitate.”¹²⁹ It was arguably this matchless nature of the beguines’ spirituality that aroused jealousy and opposition in their male and female contemporaries alike.

Most beguines did not wish to challenge orthodox Christianity, but to strictly abide by its rules. Historian Brenda Bolton confirms that the women had a simple wish—to live religiously.¹³⁰ Yet, their religious excess blurred the lines between acceptable and unacceptable devotional practices, which made them the ready targets of persecution. Their excessive piety was considered unmatched at best and hypocritical or heretical at worst. Men who could not experience their spirituality firsthand declared the beguines to be social and religious outliers because they did not fit the mold of what was traditionally expected of a thirteenth-century religious woman.

It is unfortunate that so few firsthand accounts of the spirituality and way of life of the thirteenth-century beguines survive today. While the sources of male hagiographers aptly reveal how the beguines were perceived by their contemporaries, they cannot provide a complete or personal insight into the minds of the women themselves. Indeed, when compared to the women’s writings, it becomes apparent that male sources frequently misrepresent the beguines. It seems that the women’s critics tended to construct their attitude towards the beguines on the

¹²⁸James of Vitry, *The Life of Mary of Oignies*, 57.

¹²⁹Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, 222.

¹³⁰Brenda Bolton, "Thirteenth-Century Religious Women: Further Reflections on the Low Countries 'Special Case'," in *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liege and Their Impact*, ed. Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1999), 137.

basis of a small minority of heretical laywomen at the expense of the orthodox majority. In the case of the beguines, the reputation of the few overshadowed the reputation of the many.

Conclusion

When Marcella Pattyn passed away in 2013, and periodicals like *The Economist* published her obituary, the history of the beguines received a temporary surge in interest from the general public.¹³¹ The religious order to which Pattyn belonged was shrouded in obscurity, and virtually unknown outside the borders of a handful of European cities and the minds of a few scholars and antiquarians. A quick google search probably satisfied most people's curiosity, and since that time the beguines have, once again, quietly faded from public attention.

Yet, the beguines remain a truly important historical phenomenon. To start with, the beguines and other popular piety groups helped to democratize medieval religion. Like secular society, religious society was governed by a strict social hierarchy, with the pope and clergy located at the top, and laymen and women at the bottom. The upper strata exerted a hegemonic control over church dogma and doctrine, while laypeople, who were both uneducated and the subordinates of a power structure, had little opportunity to contribute meaningfully in church affairs. Ecclesiastical leaders were quick to suppress any religious dissidence from members of the laity, since some groups of this nature, like the Waldensians, represented a very real threat to clerical authority.¹³² Despite belonging to the suspect Christian laity, the beguines did not wait for the Catholic Church and its hierarchy to sanction their activities but, rather, they derived their right to play an active role in both secular and religious society, whether it was caring for the sick or engaging in theological debates, directly from God. Indeed, the beguines pursued a

¹³¹Google Trends indicate that the terms “beguines and beghards” received the highest search interest of the last five years in April 2013—the month of Marcella Pattyn’s passing; “Beguines and Beghards,” Google Trends, accessed April 4, 2018, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=%2Fm%2F069sq4&date=today%205-y>.

¹³²Tanya Stabler Miller, “What’s in a Name? Clerical Representations of Parisian Beguines (1200-1328),” *Journal of Medieval History* 33 (2007): 61.

religious experience that was dictated not by the pope nor some other clerical authority, but by personal choice.

The beguines attempted to carve out a new space in secular and religious society in which they could explore their spirituality in a secure and supportive environment. It is for this reason that the movement was as much a women's movement as it was a religious one. Traditionally, a medieval woman had few life choices: she could become a wife, a nun, or a beggar. However, the advent of the thirteenth century offered women the additional option of becoming a beguine. Unlike Cistercian nunneries, which required novices to pay a significant entrance dowry, the doors of beguinages were opened to women of every economic status.¹³³ In fact, during the later centuries, most beguines emanated from the middle or lower social strata.¹³⁴ Single women, who were generally regarded with suspicion by the greater medieval society, were welcomed into beguine communities alongside married women and widows. Some women even became beguines to avoid arranged marriages. Moreover, if they later changed their mind, beguines were free to leave their communities and marry without repercussion, unlike renegade nuns who risked excommunication.¹³⁵ This is not to say that life as a beguine was idyllic, or superior to life as a nun. The movement's expansion, however, did ensure that female spiritual exploration was neither constrained by wealth nor marital status.

Walter Simmons rightly argues that the beguine phenomenon should be remembered as the only movement in medieval monastic history that was created by women for women, and

¹³³Kate Crawford Galea, "Unhappy Choices: Factors That Contributed to the Decline and Condemnation of the Beguines," *Vox Benedictina* 10, no. 1 (1993): 1.

¹³⁴Simmons, *Cities of Ladies*, 303-304.

¹³⁵Simmons, 68.

outside the purview of male control.¹³⁶ Yet, it would be anachronistic to describe the beguines as medieval feminists, for their intent was not to reject all forms of male authority. Indeed, most early beguines demonstrated significant reverence for, and deference to, their local priests and confessors. It is, in fact, due to this partnership of mutual respect between beguine and confessor that the phenomenon constitutes an early and distinctive women's movement. The beguines were not meek, uneducated girls who needed the constant guidance of male clerics, but divinely impassioned women who, by virtue of their spiritual gifts, frequently gained a significant level of authority over their confessors. Moreover, beguines like Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Brabant refused to let the professed weaknesses of the female sex impede their spiritual journey and, despite their lack of education, produced new and innovative works of theology. In so doing, they quietly but adamantly challenged not only the hegemony of the clergy in matters of religion, but also the hegemony of men in such matters more generally.

It is this carving out of a new space for religious women and the challenging of medieval social norms that made the beguines the target of persecution and the cause of division. The women represented a new and unusual phenomenon by the standards of thirteenth-century Europe, and while they saw their way of life as having saintly precedent and divine ordination, not all their contemporaries agreed.

The persecution of the beguines not only influenced how they were perceived in their own time, but has also had a lasting effect on how they have been understood throughout history. By the sixteenth century, the beguine movement had been regularized to the point that the women were almost indistinguishable from traditional nuns. They had been placed under institutional control and confined to cloistered communities, or else absorbed by other monastic

¹³⁶Simmons, *Cities of Ladies*, 143.

or mendicant orders. Those characteristics that had defined their thirteenth-century sisters—autonomy, unconventionality, self-regulation—had been stamped out of the later beguines. Because their distinctiveness was essentially eradicated, the historical beguines now tend to be located in textbooks and on history shelves as subsets of established religious orders, and are often labeled as “beguine nuns,” a veritable contradiction in terms.¹³⁷ Yet, this categorization of the beguines as “other nuns” underplays the movement’s early significance; the thirteenth-century beguines were not merely trying to replicate life in a nunnery in a non-cloistered setting, but to carve out an entirely new social space for female religious expression. The beguines have been treated as a curious but trivial phenomenon in a way that disregards the complexity of the movement and their social significance.

This thesis argues that while all accounts of the medieval beguines are valuable simply because there are so few, male sources ranging from the reverential hagiographies of James of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré to the iron-fisted decrees of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century ecumenical councils tend to create and perpetuate misrepresentations of the beguines. They depict the women as hampered by their female gender, their way of life as inferior to traditional monasticism, and their spirituality as at best inimitable, and at worst heretical, representations which the women then refute in their own writings. By extension, some of these same misrepresentations are echoed in the writings of historians, particularly the canonical work of Herbert Grundmann. This is not to say that his contribution to the understanding of medieval

¹³⁷This problematic terminology is used, for example, in Sylvanus Urban, *The Gentlemen’s Magazine and Historical Chronical for the Year MDCCCV* (London: J. Nichols and Son, 1805), 430; Theo Hermans, ed., *A Literary History of the Low Countries* (New York: Camden House, 2009), 11; Thomas Roscoe, *The German Novelists: Translated from the Originals with Critical and Biographical Notes* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1880), 97; As well as on the website “The Beguinage (Begijnhof),” Visit Bruges, accessed March 17, 2018, <http://visit-bruges.be/see/places-interest/beguillage-begijnhof>.

female and popular piety is any less valuable, but that the historiographical conceptualization of the beguines is evolving as more and more scholars ask new historical questions and recover the agency of their subjects.

Further research into the early origins of the beguines will help to iron out the significant disagreements between historians as to whether the movement was a spontaneous or precedented development and whether the women's theology was atypical or typical, as well as establish a basis for common terminology. This will necessitate an increased prioritization of first-hand accounts of the beguines, whether it is the writings of Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Douceline of Digne, or other female actors, because such sources offer clearer and more profound insight into the women's motivations and how they managed and conceived their social roles. When the women's sources are given as much attention as those of men in positions of clerical authority, the medieval beguines will begin to shrug off the mantle of being the victims of historical misrepresentation and trivialization. They will inevitably come to be perceived not as feeble women, unsuccessful nuns, or dangerous nonconformists, but as active agents that determined the course of their own spiritual lives. It is apt to conclude with a quotation from Hadewijch of Brabant: "What use is it for me to force my nature? For my nature shall always remain what it is and conquer what belongs to it, however men may narrow its path."¹³⁸

¹³⁸Hadewijch of Brabant, *Strophische Gedichten*, trans. Mother Columba Hart in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 188.

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