

Spiritual Life of Medieval German Women - review article

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Both Mulder-Bakker's study and, especially, the edition and translation of the *Life* of Gertrude Rickeldey, promise to be valuable resources for those studying the lives of lay religious women in the later Middle Ages. The text itself engages with intersecting questions of the legal and social identities of such women, and of their roles in urban communities. Having such a work available in English translation is a great asset for undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. The relevant historiography, needless to say, is overwhelmingly vast. Mulder-Bakker selects thoughtfully from it, and the notes demonstrate a familiarity with the most recent studies on women's religious life [\(1\)](#), although somewhat fuller references or fuller explanations of how she frames her own methodological choices relative to other scholarship might have been helpful. A case in point is her decision to avoid the contentious prefixes quasi- or semi- when discussing Gertrude and Heilke, and those like them. Mulder-Bakker's positions appear to be informed by close investigation of primary texts and secondary literature alike, but are incompletely elucidated. This is particularly true for her apparent distinction between those women who took religious vows and those who did not. She claims that Gertrude and Heilke, 'unlike nuns, did not take vows or renounce their possessions. They did not abandon their own decision-making power. Instead, they were mistresses of their own lives and developed into theologians and *ethicae* of stature' (p. 2). This seems to suggest a problematic dichotomy, especially in view of the scholarship on how vowed women shaped their communities and external relationships. [\(2\)](#) Mulder-Bakker does not fully explain the ways in which she understands the text as the women's 'own view into their ways of living and thinking' (p. 3). The fact that the life is crafted as a textual self-presentation to the world is of course significant. Tantalizingly, the text does offer rare opportunities to approach elusive answers to many questions about the lives of late medieval religious women. From my

reading, however, I also maintain that it is conspicuously shaped by legal and social expectations of religious women's conduct and spirituality; this could be more fully explored.

The source for the *Life* is a unique manuscript, presumed identical with another since lost. Mulder-Bakker argues that it was designed for reading aloud, and for emulation, rather than to function as a vita, as it contains no miracles and was written in the vernacular (p. 20-3). The text is bound together with a Middle High German adaptation of a text by Gertrude of Helfta, altered to include pious women living in the world alongside vowed religious, and a beguine text. Again Mulder-Bakker seems to create an anachronistic opposition in proclaiming that 'None of these women allowed themselves to be sequestered in a convent, but actively stood by fellow believers immersed in secular life'. The manuscript, owned by a member of the convent of St.-Nicholas-in-Undis, with close ties to beguines and others, would seem itself to give the lie to this categorization (pp. 15-20). The third chapter explores the ways in which Gertrude's chosen way of life did and did not represent a discontinuity with her life in her natal and marital households. Intriguingly, Mulder-Bakker describes Gertrude and Heilke as composing a 'nuclear family and noble household', and includes a useful discussion of the material culture of that household, an unusual focus which could provide a useful model for further studies (pp. 31-9). The richly varied vocabulary used for religious women in the *Life* itself could have benefited from more sustained attention in the study. Chapter three translates 'geistliche frowen' as 'secular religious women' or 'religiously living laywomen' (p. 30); Gertrude's first step towards living a 'dedicated spiritual life' is to live with an 'arme swester' (p. 31). In Gertrude and Heilke's latter years, they took up residence in a convent; according to Mulder-Bakker's convincing hypothesis, they did so after concluding a donation *inter vivos* with tertiaries, or 'regel swestern' (pp. 39-40). The implications of these connections and evolutions would repay further attention.⁽³⁾ While Gertrude and Heilke's social and religious networks are evaluated, more comparative references might be useful.

Chapter four develops further the discussion of the religious networks in which Gertrude and Heilke were embedded. Mulder-Bakker views Gertrude's choice of the 'geistlich Leben' as influenced by Franciscans and 'independent religious women', and not necessarily a claim to quasi-clerical authority. (p. 42-4). She further argues that 'The autonomous religious way of life must ... not only be distinguished from the life in a cloistered convent in obedience of a Rule and an abbess, but also from the legally acknowledged life of Beguines' (p. 44). Mulder-Bakker suggests 'that we reserve the term "Beguine" for those enjoying some kind of status beguinagii'. In doing so, she is following her understanding of how Gertrude's biographer uses the term; but she notes that this distinction is a contentious one. It is, I would argue, one of only localized relevance, in view of the fact that Latin and vernacular terms for beguines were used contemporaneously for women living outside beguinages.⁽⁴⁾ In evaluating Gertrude's inclination towards the contemplative and Heilke's towards the active life, little is made of possible literary shaping of these roles in the *Life* (pp. 47-8). Mulder-Bakker's discussion of Gertrude and Heilke's probable education and reading material, together with their involvement in Franciscan and mystical 'communities of discourse', is useful, though the assertion that Gertrude's decision was primarily based on conviction risks eliding other factors (pp. 49-60). Her claim that, while Gertrude and Heilke's shared life 'did not earn them any kind of canonical status, it did afford them a large measure of socio-religious prestige' (p. 60), is rich with implications for the study of the late medieval religious life, even after the Council of Vienne. The question of how the *Life* does and does not invoke the legal criteria of religious status should prove of considerable interest to scholars of legal and religious history alike.

Chapter five, 'Heralds of divine love on the Upper Rhine', focuses on Gertrude and Heilke's engagement in the world, through care for the sick-poor in the hospital of Strasbourg and beyond it, as well as through the provision of alms. The discussion of Gertrude's progressive embrace of poverty is weakened, in my view, by reliance on the argument that Gertrude was guided throughout by moral intentions (pp. 67-72). Nothing is more likely; but further consideration of the legal and economic complexities of her situation would be valuable. I would certainly agree with Mulder-Bakker's assertion that documents of practice do not bear out the apparent 'persecution' of beguines found in conciliar sources (pp. 73-4), but the biographer's observation that certain women were forced to give up the habit is, it seems to me, more significant than Mulder-Bakker grants. The habit was legally and socially an important marker of identity, as conciliar legislation makes

abundantly clear. The most interesting contention of the chapter is that Gertrude and Heilke, alongside mendicant houses and other independent religious women, were instrumental in precipitating socioeconomic change in 14th-century Strasbourg through their interventions on behalf of workers and artisans (pp. 74-83). This would repay further investigation. The sixth and final chapter of the study, 'House of souls,' defines the 14th-century term *Seelhus* or *domus animarum* as 'the ascetic domestic household' (p. 85). This is another place where more ample discussion might have made this more clearly an intervention in the existing historiography, as well as a commentary on the *Life*. Mulder-Bakker takes the life of Elizabeth of Thüringen as exemplary for this type of life, and argues that it is for such a form that Jacques de Vitry obtains permission from Honorius III (pp. 87-92). Mulder-Bakker defines it as a life of 'contemplation in action within a secular setting' pursued by women in their own homes and of independent livelihood (p. 108); it would be interesting to further examine how this affected the demographic composition of such houses. The third characteristic factor that Mulder-Bakker identifies is that the members of such households 'worked for the salvation of their fellow Christians' (p. 108), an assertion inherently difficult to delimit or define. More problematic, in my view, is the claim that the *Life* is 'a primordial embodiment of the literate practice in which learned Lesemeister and lay religious women inspired each other and developed a shared inner-worldly spirituality' (p. 109). There is indeed ample evidence for textual and social communities shared by religious women - both vowed and lay - and the priests who worked with them.⁽⁵⁾ To describe the textual witness to such collaboration as merely a 'primordial embodiment' risks to minimize the women's agency that Mulder-Bakker undertakes to investigate at the outset.

The translation and edition is commendably careful in its language, which makes both the specificity and the generality of the vocabulary used for Gertrude, Heilke, and their way of life admirably clear. This precision is a vital tool, allowing the complex - and sometimes apparently competing - understandings of these religious women to emerge. Notes are also offered on the connotations of the MHD vocabulary, e.g. on the contemporary implications of *geistlich lebend*, and scholarly debates concerning the same. I also appreciated the notes on the vocabulary for the women themselves, e.g. *frouwe*, *jungfrouwe*, terms inherently ambiguous, but invested with specific cultural meanings. The text itself is remarkably rich, a useful teaching tool for graduate and undergraduate classes on late medieval spirituality and urban life. Heilke and Gertrude are integrated in their urban economy and in intersecting networks of religious women, parish communities, and monastic houses. The discussion of the women's reception of the Eucharist, and their relationship to their Franciscan confessor (pp. 215-218), is particularly valuable. Defining religious poverty is clearly a fraught question for both women, and their relationship to possessions evolves over the course of their life, represented as responding to the divine will. Notably, too, Heilke and Gertrude have different relationships to possessions and poverty, and this is not represented as the result of one woman more truly following God than the other. The fact that 'no one knew and respected' the women in Strasbourg is mentioned as a trial they are forced to undergo, offering potential insight into mobilities and social networks (p. 112). The translation of the *Life* is a rich resource for those wishing to explore such questions further.

The value of Claire Taylor Jones's *Ruling the Spirit: Women, Liturgy, and Dominican Reform in Late Medieval Germany* to wider scholarly conversations is self-evident: even when the narrative of reform and decline is not explicitly made, it can shape scholarship, not only in the case of the Dominicans. Even in the introduction, with its anecdote of a communal mystical experience in a convent recently reformed under the Dominican order (pp. 1-3) Jones challenges readers to confront the question of how what we are looking for shapes what we see in the rich and multilayered sources for late medieval women's religious life. Particularly valuable is the organization of the book into chapters around the source materials they consider, bringing diverse genres and diverse perspectives to bear on late medieval women's communities within the Dominican order. Throughout, close reading and contextualization of the sources is scrupulous. It takes a wider scope than would seem to be implied by the title and even the chapter headings. Jones' robust bibliography does a good job of integrating Anglophone and German scholarship, and of bringing together both recent historiography and the information made available through German studies of the early 20th century, often valuable if comparatively difficult to access.

Chapter one offers a discussion of differences in liturgy and practice between male and female Dominican

houses in the 13th century. In practice, Dominican women's houses, using the Augustinian rule, were closer to Benedictine houses than their male counterparts in terms of observance. Furthermore, while directions as to how to observe the rule were laid down, specifics of what the sisters were to say and sing, liturgically, are conspicuous by their absence. It was Humbert of Romans who laid down additional constitutions in 1259, given official legal force by the papal decree of Clement V. Not before the intervention of Humbert was a standardized set of rules set; attitude, rather than practice, was emphasized in the extant prescriptive texts. This fits into larger patterns of regulation, in ways that would repay further attention.⁽⁶⁾ Of interest are the instances, as in the Little Hours of the Virgin, where the women are given different directions than the men for handling the same texts.

Chapter two is concerned with writings of the Dominican friars Heinrich Seuse and Johannes Tauler, connecting their theological writings to the networks and norms of the order in the 14th and 15th centuries. Jones compares the circulation of their writings, from Seuse's Latin and vernacular works to the solely German sermons of Tauler, arguing, contra historiographical trends, that diverse textual genres, e.g. sermons, exempla, and saints' lives, with differing emphases, nonetheless are animated by a similar view of Dominican spirituality, which they share in turn with the Dominican sister-books (p. 28-9). This breaks down a gendered binary (artificial, as she argues) concerning the production and reception of such texts. In discussing the paradoxes inherent in the spiritual concept of *Gelassenheit* (simultaneous reliance on God with the sensation of having been left by him), Jones offers a coherent and concrete explanation of concepts that can be seen to underline Gertrude's spirituality in Mulder-Bakker's work (pp. 29-36, 41-7). Jones undertakes close readings of selected passages, as well as analysis of the structure of both works, to argue that for both authors, liturgical observance and spiritual experience were linked, rather than antithetical; a view that has also, she argues, been overlooked in the sister-books. While Seuse and Tauler's use of liturgy to structure their texts was more private than the sister-books' method, she argues that it held for all a similar significance.

Chapter three concerns itself with 'Liturgical devotion and visionary order in the fourteenth-century sisterbooks'. Jones asserts that 'The sisterbooks held the mirror of the past up to the future; they were a collaborative effort by women to memorialize their forebears and thereby to instruct and edify their future sisters' (p. 57). Jones discusses the two linked historiographical trends of viewing the mysticism of the sisterbooks as primarily bodily and affective, and as dangerous/opposed to the goals of Observant reform (pp. 58-64). Life under the Dominican order, as she argues, was 'not always treated as a foregone conclusion' or as the default, but rather as one option among many (pp. 64-5). Jones maintains that obedience (*gehorsam*) 'represents a formal aspect of regular life, one which is critical for developing spiritual grace. Multiple anecdotes depict obedience to the order as the precondition of mystical union with Christ (pp. 65-9). Reading the sister-books in light of both liturgy and reform literature, Jones makes a convincing argument that education was necessary and observance of the liturgy was framed both as end in itself and as potential gateway to mysticism.

Chapter four offers a cogent reading of chiefly legal sources on the reform of multiple houses, demonstrating that reform of women's and men's houses was undertaken in similar (sometimes identical) ways, and that the general chapters of the Dominican order framed liturgy routinely as a central means of reform (pp. 86-96). Concern about mysticism as a threat to authority is conspicuous by its absence. Chapter five, 'Contemplative visualization vs. liturgical piety in Johannes Nider', both examines the intersections in the reception communities of the laity (men and women) who heard Nider's sermons, and the houses of Observant mendicant women where his Harps and its translation circulated. The writings of Cassian were necessary to understanding an Observant approach to devotion; it could circulate without for its use by the laity in pursuing a modified form of spiritual discipline and liturgical observance. Jones argues that laywomen and religious women should not be lumped together as a reception community, despite the fact that, as she demonstrates, devout laywomen often brought their libraries with them into the religious life. Unusually rich documentation enables the examination of the agency of Kunigunde Niklas, librarian of St. Katherine's in Nürnberg, in commissioning and organizing texts (p. 101-2).

Chapter six examines Johannes Meyer's agency as compiler, translator, and distributor of books, discussing Töß, St. Katherinen in Nürnberg, and other convents. Jones provides a detailed study of liturgical observance and enclosure as pillars of identity, and on the former as marking the ceremonies of the latter, affirming both conventional identity and the ongoing relationships of women's houses and the cloistered sisters with the urban communities of which they formed a part (pp. 135-42). Her claims are wide-reaching, but never less than well-supported. For example, the assertion (p. 143) that 'Meyer's translation formed an important part of the normative material to instruct and govern Observant communities' is supported by the fact that 'every single surviving manuscript of the Book of Duties also contains at least one other German-language regulatory document'. Instruction for individual practice is routinely linked to the liturgical observance of the entire community. Exemplary spirituality, for Meyer, was defined by desire for full participation in the community in a way that would edify and educate others, as well as cultivating individual piety. The conclusion of the work is somewhat abrupt, but the work as a whole is a very impressive achievement that will demand to be taken into consideration in further studies of the region and women's religious life within it.

Notes

1. Notably *Labels and Libels: Naming Beguines in Northern Medieval Europe*, ed. Letha Böhringer (Turnhout, 2014). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Recent examples include Sherri Franks Johnson, *Monastic Women and Religious Orders in Late Medieval Bologna* (Cambridge e, 2014); Heidi Febert, 'The poor sisters of Söflingen: religious corporations as property litigants, 1310-1317', *Traditio* 68 (2013), 327-40; *Female vita religiosa between Late Antiquity and the High Middle Ages: Structures, Developments, and Spatial Contexts*, ed. Gert Melville and Anne Müller (Berlin, 2011); Franz Josef Felten, *Vita religiosa sanctimonialium: Norm und Praxis des weiblichen religiösen Lebens vom 6. bis zum 13. Jahrhundert*, (Korb, 2011); Christine Kleinjung, *Frauenklöster als Kommunikationszentren und soziale Räume. Das Beispiel Worms vom 13. bis zum Beginn des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Korb, 2008). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. In addition to the work of Franks Johnson and Kleinjung, other relevant studies include Brigitte Flug, *Äußere Bindung und innere Ordnung. Das Altmünsterkloster in Mainz in seiner Geschichte und Verfassung von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des 14. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 2006); and Katherine Gill, 'Scandala: controversies concerning clausura and women's religious communities in late medieval Italy', *Christendom and its Discontents: Exclusion, Persecution, and Rebellion, 1000-1500*, ed. Peter D. Diehl and Scott L. Waugh (Cambridge, 1996). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, "'Beguines' Reconsidered: Historiographical Problems and New Directions,' *Commentaria* 3461. <http://monasticmatrix.osu.edu/commentaria/beguines-reconsidered-historiographical-problems-and-new-directions> [3]. Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (University of Pennsylvania, 2003), pp. 2-4, 84. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See, most recently, Fiona Griffiths, *Nuns' Priests' Tales: Men and Salvation in Medieval Women's Monastic Life* (Philadelphia, PA, 2018); but also Erin L. Jordan, "Pro remedio anime sue: Cistercian nuns and space in the Low Countries", in *Women in the Medieval Monastic World*, ed. Janet Burton and Karen Stöber (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 279-98; Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, 'From case studies to comparative models: Würzburg and Vienne', in *Labels and Libels: Naming Beguines in Northern Medieval Europe*, ed. Letha Böhringer (Turnhout, 2014), pp. 53-82; John A. Nichols, 'Medieval Cistercian nunneries and English bishops', *Distant Echoes. Medieval Religious Women*, vol. 1 (Kalamazoo, MI, 1984) 237-49, among others. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See for example Elizabeth Makowski, 'A Pernicious Sort of Woman': *Quasi-Religious Women and Canon Lawyers in the Later Middle Ages* (Washington, DC, 2005). [Back to \(6\)](#)

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