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Claire Taylor Jones

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Ruling the Spirit

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ABBREVIATIONS

BdRP Meyer, Johannes. *Buch der Reformacio Predigerordens.* Ed. Benedict Maria Reichert. 2 vols. Leipzig: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1908–1909.

DLL Achnitz, Wolfgang, ed. *Deutsches Literatur-Lexikon: Das Mittelalter. Autoren und Werke nach Themenkreisen und Gattungen.* 8 vols. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011–2015.

DS Seuse, Heinrich. *Deutsche Schriften im Auftrag der Württembergischen Kommission für Landesgeschichte.* Ed. Karl Bihlmeyer. Reprint. Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1907.

MBK *Mittelalterliche Bibliothekskataloge Deutschlands und der Schweiz.* Vol. III/3. München: Die bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften in München, 1939.

PT Tauler, Johannes. *Die Predigten Taulers. Aus der Engelberger und der Freiburger Handschrift sowie aus Schmidts Abschriften der ehemaligen Straßburger Handschriften.* Ed. Ferdinand Vetter. Berlin: Weidmann, 1910.

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Introduction

> Mitt wie grosser minnender begird sy geflissen wer den orden an allen stuken ze haltend, da von wer fil ze sagen [Of the great and loving desire with which she zealously observed the order in every detail there would be much to tell].
>
> —Töss Sisterbook, Life of Margret Fink

Toward the beginning of her *Büchlein der Gnaden Überlast* (*Book of the Burden of Grace*, c. 1345), Christina Ebner illustrates the power of the Dominican liturgy with a tale about Sister Hailrat, the Engelthal convent's first choir mistress. The event occurred in the early days of the convent, during the first Advent in which they performed the Office according to the Dominican Rite.

> In dem ersten advent da sie nach dem orden sungen . . . da sie nu komen zu dem virden suntag im advent, da sie sungen die metin, da sie nu komen hintz dem funften respons "Virgo Israel," und der vers "In caritate perpetua," daz sank sie teutsch und sank so unmenschlichen wol, daz man brufet, sie sunge mit engelischer stimme. . . . Diser heilig covent wart von grozer andaht sinnelos und vilen nider als die toten und lagen also biz sie alle wider zu in selber komen: do sungen sie ir metin mit grozer andaht auz.[1]
>
> During the first Advent that they sang according to the order . . . when they came to the fourth Sunday in Advent, while they were singing matins and had come to the fifth responsory "Virgo Israel" and the verse "In caritate perpetua," she sang it in German and with such inhuman beauty that one thought she was singing with an angel's voice. . . . This holy convent became senseless from great

> devotion and fell down as if dead and lay thus until they had all come to themselves. Then they sang their matins to the end with great devotion.

While singing the solo verse of a responsory, the choir mistress had been seized by divine insight, spontaneously translating the Latin song into her mother tongue and performing the inspired text with inhuman beauty. Rather than responding with the prescribed text of the chant response, the rest of the community fell, rapt in ecstasy.

This story exemplifies some commonly accepted characteristics of late medieval female piety: liturgical devotion, embodiment, vernacularity, ecstatic experience, and community. In keeping with Caroline Walker Bynum's analysis of bodiliness and embodied response as a trait of women's spirituality, the Engelthal sisters are physically overcome by the beauty of Hailrat's song.[2] A vernacular translation replaces the Latin of the Office, supporting the frequent association of women with vernacularity.[3] Peter Ochsenbein has interpreted the story as an example of mystical exceptionalism, arguing that Hailrat was so overcome by a private experience of grace that she disturbed the performance of the Office for the entire convent.[4] Erika Lauren Lindgren, on the other hand, asserts that the episode "emphasized the communality of monastic life," since Hailrat mediates and communicates extraordinary devotion to her sisters.[5] This account of communal ecstasy is indeed a rich testament to fourteenth-century female piety. Yet if one attends to the event's context in the convent's history, another aspect emerges: praise of life under the Dominican order.

Like many of the southern German Dominican women's houses, the Engelthal community had begun as an assembly of beguines, that is, women living a pious life together but without having taken vows and without being enclosed in a convent.[6] Their road to incorporation in the Dominican order was a long one, and they adopted some of the order's practices, including the Dominican liturgy, before being fully incorporated. As Christina Ebner informs us, this experience of ecstatic song was granted to the community in the first Advent sung *nach dem orden*, that is, according to the Dominican Office. The miracle that graces their newly ordered liturgical song thus confirms the early Engelthal sisters in their decision to join the Dominican order by demonstrating the worthiness of its practices. Standing at the beginning of the sisterbook, the story foreshadows the importance of the order as a font

of spiritual experience throughout the sisters' lives as portrayed within the book.

Ruling the Spirit suggests a new paradigm for female liturgical piety in late medieval Germany by intervening at the nexus of two productive spiritual movements: fourteenth-century female Dominican spirituality and the fifteenth-century Observant reform. Rather than placing works *by* German Dominican women in conversation with spiritual writings by women of other orders and nationalities, I examine texts *for* German Dominican women for their statements about the Dominican order and the role of the order in fostering piety. *Ruling the Spirit* argues three related claims. First, contrary to received opinion that the Dominicans were not particularly interested in the liturgy, the friars placed the Divine Office at the center of Dominican women's spiritual lives from the order's origins through the end of the Middle Ages. Second, female Dominican liturgical piety was not a subversive expression of resistance or an attempt to wrest spiritual power away from the friars, but the fruition of the spirituality that the order's *forma vitae* was intended to entrain. Third, fourteenth-century mysticism does not represent a moment of radical ecstatic spirituality that had to be stamped out by the fifteenth-century Observant reform. Rather, these two devotional movements represent two points in a continuous devotional history of ordered liturgical piety.

I approach this literature with the understanding that no texts exist, or ever existed, that record mystical experience as such. As Werner Williams-Krapp has argued for Heinrich Seuse (Henry Suso),[7] the texts that purport to record mystical experience are always already mystagogy. Their primary purpose is not to relate a past experience but to teach others how to achieve spiritual fulfillment. Even the lives of Dominican nuns as recounted in the sisterbooks do not provide access to past performance. The experience of hearing Hailrat's song is unavailable to us. All we can know is that the author, Christina Ebner, valued the Dominican Office as a source of devotion.

Pushing this argument even further, *Ruling the Spirit* is not, in a sense, about the lives of Dominican women at all. Rather, it is about the normative ideals presented to them in a variety of texts and genres by the friars responsible for their spiritual care. This holds true even in the case of the fourteenth-century sisterbooks, on which I focus in Chapter 3. These female-authored narratives present exemplary models of piety as much as they recount the lives of historical women. Moreover, they were revived and put back into circulation in the fifteenth century by the Observant reformer Johannes Meyer, who saw their pedagogical value. The Observance witnessed another

blossoming of female chronicling, and Anne Winston-Allen and Heike Uffmann have done invaluable work bringing the first-hand accounts of fifteenth-century German religious women to scholarly attention.[8] Whereas their work recovered women's participation in and reactions to the late medieval regular reforms, this book examines the rhetoric of pious observance of the order in German Dominican normative literature produced primarily by friars for women from the early fourteenth through the fifteenth century. With remarkable continuity across genres and centuries, this literature encourages strict observance of the Dominican order and devotion to its Office as the wellspring of spiritual experience and reward.

The Southern German region, encompassed by the Dominican province of Teutonia, lends itself to such a study for two reasons. First, the imbalanced proportion of Dominican sisters over friars in this province made the *cura monialium* a special concern. Second, within this region the Observant reform movement enjoyed an unusual degree of success. In 1303, the General Chapter of the Dominican order carved the province of Saxony out of Teutonia's northern regions, leaving the southern province with the vicariates of Brabantia (encompassing the Rhineland up to and including Cologne), Alsatia (which also contained Switzerland), Suevia (together with Franconia), and Bavaria (including Austria).[9] At this time, a total of 141 communities of women were under Dominican care. Sixty-five of these lay within the province of Teutonia alone.[10] The friars of Teutonia, possessing in 1303 only forty-seven houses, were significantly outnumbered by the houses of sisters.[11] A hundred years later, Teutonia would become the first province to establish a reformed Observant friary;[12] it would bury the first Master General to support the Observance;[13] and it would see the greatest institutional success of the movement.[14] The disproportionately large number of Dominican women and the success of the Observant reform (to which the women contributed no small part[15]) made Teutonia fertile ground for vernacular devotional and didactic literature urging adherence to the order and spiritualizing performance of its Office.

I ground my study in the library collection of the Dominican convent of St. Katherine's in Nürnberg. Every text I treat was held by the convent library in the fifteenth century. St. Katherine's was reformed to the Observance in 1428 and grew to be one of the most significant Observant women's houses in the province, both by virtue of its zeal in sending reforming parties to sister houses and because of its vast library of books, both received from outside and copied by the sisters themselves.[16] By the end of the fifteenth

century, St. Katherine's owned at least 726 manuscripts, of which 161 were Latin, primarily liturgical manuscripts. The remaining 565 contained a broad variety of German texts.[17] Most importantly, a library catalog and two table readings catalogs survive. The library catalog and the second table readings catalog were drawn up in the 1450s by Kunigunde Niklas, who served St. Katherine's as a prolific scribe before becoming librarian in 1451. Her catalogs reveal information about reception and use of the convent's holdings. For example, Kunigunde Niklas allotted Johannes Tauler's sermons, discussed in Chapter 2, for extensive reading before the community when they assembled for a meal. The surviving epistolary exchange between St. Katherine's in Nürnberg and the convent of St. Katherine's in St. Gallen, Switzerland, also contains information about the use and reception of this literature. The women of Nürnberg sent their St. Gallen sisters Johannes Meyer's *Book of Duties* and the *Book of the Reformation*, discussed in Chapter 6, in order to help them in their effort at self-reform.[18] The presentation and transmission of these texts as recommended reading supports my methodological decision to read these texts as didactic or edifying literature rather than as mystical accounts.

One further concern requires preliminary discussion. My argument deals with ideals and exhortations for Dominican women's liturgical spirituality. As a study of didactic and devotional literature, *Ruling the Spirit* does not, nor does it aim to, recover the realities of late medieval women's Latinity. Nevertheless, the extent to which Dominican sisters understood the Latin Office texts affected their ability to participate in liturgical piety, and many of the arguments I make, especially in Chapter 3, assume a basic level of Latin comprehension. Although it was long assumed that late medieval nuns of all orders were generally Latin-illiterate, a growing body of scholarship argues for reassessing the Latinity of medieval religious women, often by adding nuance to the very notion of literacy.[19] Adjusting our lens in this way allows us to move beyond reliance on women's original compositions or reception of prose literature as a means of assessing Latin comprehension to address liturgical Latin as a unique competency. Liturgical literacy and accuracy was an essential component of the order; reading theological treatises (for women) was not.

Despite evidence of flourishing vernacular literacy, the state of Latin fluency among the Dominican women of Teutonia remains an open question. While the library collections of several Southern German convents have been studied in some detail, the vast preponderance of German-language

devotional material has led scholars to focus on vernacular sources within these collections.[20] Marie-Luise Ehrenschwendtner has conducted the most comprehensive study of the educational expectations and practices of Southern German Dominican women. She notes that recruits to Dominican convents were expected to be *litterata* and able to read the psalter upon entrance to the novitiate.[21] The sisterbook of St. Katherine's St. Gallen records that the Nürnberg sisters expected a novice to learn to read a little Latin from the psalter as well as singing and solmization before entering the convent.[22] Dominican novices would have developed literacy either at home or in a city school.[23] However, "literate" could mean anything from phonetic decoding to nuanced comprehension. Ehrenschwendtner assumes that the designation *litterata* did not imply understanding the Latin language but simply deciphering the signs on the page.[24] In her recent study of the Observant Dominican convent of St. Katherine's in St. Gallen, Simone Mengis largely concurs with Ehrenschwendtner.[25] Latin instruction in St. Gallen was practical and performance-oriented, so successful mastery did not necessarily entail comprehension of the Latin words, only accurate recitation.

The composition of the Latin holdings of St. Katherine's conforms to Ehrenschwendtner's and Mengis's assessments. Of the 161 Latin-language manuscripts, only 19 (12 percent) contained prayers, sermons, and treatises, while the rest were liturgical. None of these, nor any Latin text, are indicated as table readings in the catalog.[26] It is possible that the few Latin prose manuscripts were not for the nuns at all but rather for the use of their male confessors, as Marie-Luise Ehrenschwendtner has argued for Altenhohenau and Simone Mengis for St. Katherine's in St. Gallen.[27] It seems not even Latin regular documents were used; St. Katherine's owned multiple manuscripts with German translations of the Augustinian Rule and the Dominican Constitutions.[28] The broad vernacularization of the order's legislation leads Mengis to conclude that a revival of higher standards of Latin literacy among women was not part of the Observant reform program.[29] Although the Dominican women of Nürnberg avidly acquired and read vernacular literature, there is no evidence that they read Latin prose.

Eva Schlotheuber argues for a more optimistic assessment of late medieval religious women's Latin. She insists that in the Middle Ages *litteratus/litterata* always indicated facility in Latin language, not just phonetic literacy.[30] She disagrees with the assumption that Latin-language volumes must have been intended for a male chaplain, and points to Karin Schneider's identification of several scribes among the Dominican nuns who copied liturgical Latin fluidly