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Agnes Blannbekin, Viennese Beguine

Life and Revelations

ULRIKE WIETHAUS

Agnes Blannbekin, Viennese Beguine: *Life and Revelations*

Translated from the Latin with Introduction, Notes and Interpretive Essay

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For Peter Dinzelbacher

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Introduction to the *Life and Revelations* of Agnes Blannbekin (d. 1315)

Biographical Background: Agnes in the Context of the Beguine Movement

It has no doubt been more difficult for Christian women than for their male counterparts to pursue a purely religious lifestyle. Medieval European cultures defined women's proper role through their reproductive potential as mothers in a social system that privileged the rights of families over individuals and the rights of men over women. Girls were frequently married off at the onset of puberty and were expected to fit smoothly into the husband's family household economy through their domestic labor and the production of heirs to their spouses' lineage. Married women's right to own property and, once widowed, to inherit a sufficiently large proportion of wealth to keep them from a life of poverty, was severely regulated and differed widely across geographical regions and social classes.[1] Among the nobility, "surplus" daughters could be sent to a monastery with a dowry, often at a young age. Many of them used the cultural and financial resources of a monastery to develop their formidable talents as writers, composers, theologians, and educators. If a family had developed strong ties to a particular monastery, it could also use it as a safe and respectable retirement home for its widows, whose inheritance and personal wealth added to the monastic coffers.[2]

1 On medieval widows, see most recently Cindy L. Carson and Angela Jane Weisl, eds., *The Construction of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). Widows are explicitly mentioned in chapter 139 of the *vita*.

2 Perhaps no female writer of the Middle Ages has more eloquently described the difficulties, opportunities, and even joys of navigating through the vicissitudes of women's life stages and their options as daughters, wives, and widows than Christine de Pizan, who ended her remarkable life in a monastery that also housed one of her daughters. For an analysis of de Pizan's writings in relation to Beguine literature, see most recently Jane Chance, "Speaking *in propria persona*: Authorizing the Subject as a Political Act in Late Medieval Feminine Spirituality", in Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, eds., *New Trends in Feminine*

Daughters from poorer families could participate in the cloistered life as so-called lay sisters. They were not permitted to sing the daily liturgical offices in the choir like noble nuns (the so-called "choir nuns"), were only minimally educated in reading and writing skills, and had to perform the many menial tasks necessary to maintain the smooth daily operations of a monastery. Many female saints' stories tell us about a budding saint's brave refusal to get married and her determination to espouse herself to the heavenly bridegroom Christ instead. Such refusals could carry negative social consequences for the family if the daughter could not find a respectable niche, especially since for many of them admission to a monastery was not possible. Apart from a cloistered life in a well-respected monastic community, young women, widows, and sometimes even married women could try to find one or more sponsors who would support them financially if they chose to live as anchoresses. Julian of Norwich (ca. 1343–after 1416) is perhaps the best-known medieval anchoress today.[3] Her remarkable theological writings testify to the educational possibilities available to a woman who chose this path. On the other end of the anchorite spectrum, we find the sad story of Christina Mirabilis (d. 1224), who tried to pursue the life of a hermit but was brutally persecuted by villagers when she searched for a place to live outside her village. She was eventually brought back to the village, bound with iron chains, and her legs were broken. It is likely that her maltreatment was possible because she lacked sponsorship and the protection of male family members.[4]

Medieval women, whether unmarried or widowed, found a third option that gave them more independence than enclosure as a nun or anchoress could afford them: communal same-sex living with pooled resources, daily liturgical practices, prayer services for the poor, the sick, and the dead, but also relative freedom of self-governance. Eventually, members of these groups came to be named "Beguines", and their living quarters a "Beguinage". Some architectural remains of Beguinages can still be found in towns and cities today, especially in the Low Countries. Despite this common name, communities

Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and their Impact (Turnhout, Belg.: Brepols, 1999), 269–95.

3 See, e.g., Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK and Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1993).

4 See Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*. Latin text with facing English translation, translated by Margot King with assistance from David Wiljer (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 2nd edition 1999).

could differ in many details, from size, material well being, and rules to loose pastoral and theological affiliation with either Franciscans or Dominicans. Some women who very likely were Beguines, such as Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1212–82 or 1292), also eventually joined monasteries in their old age.

The first woman recognized as Beguine by the Church is Marie d'Oignies (1177–1213), whose life has been preserved for posterity by two illustrious biographers, Jacques de Vitry (1170–1240) and Thomas of Cantimpré (ca. 1200–70). Marie's life exemplifies the spectrum of medieval Christian women's choices discussed above: she was married at the age of fourteen, remained childless, and perhaps as a consequence chose to live as an anchoress for some years.[5] Later in life she became the revered leader of a group of like-minded religious women. As is true for other Beguines, Marie's contributions as a "cultural worker" should not be underestimated. Because of her exemplary lifestyle, her experience as a married woman, and also her charisma, a woman-centered cult arose around her that sought to ensure healing and especially safe delivery during childbirth. The anonymous *History of the Church of Oignies* thus reports to us that

> In those day there flourished at Oignies that most precious pearl of Christ, Marie d'Oignies. Those who enjoyed her patronage have transmitted to posterity the story of her life, which was endowed with the virtue of many miracles. In God's name she cured the sick, cleansed lepers, and drove out demons from possessed bodies and, what is more, raised the dead. Her very clothing is in our reverent possession still. When women in labor are wrapped in it, they are freed from the danger of death and rejoice in a happy birth.[6]

We find most evidence about Beguinages in the Low Countries, northern and southern France, and Germany.[7] In Italy, a similar movement developed, although the communities rather quickly

5 For a study on Beguines and women's roles as daughters and mothers, see Alexandra Barratt, "Undutiful Daughters and Metaphorical Mothers among the Beguines", in Juliette Dor et al., op. cit., 81–105.

6 *The Anonymous History of the Church of Oignies*, translated by Hugh Feiss, in *Two Lives of Marie d'Oignies*, trans. by Margot King and Hugh Feiss (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing 1993), 265–69, quotation p. 268.

7 The classic and still valuable study of the Beguine movement and its contexts remains Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, translated by Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1995. Originally published as *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter* [Leipzig: Ebering Verlag, 1935]).

attached themselves as so-called tertiaries or Third Order to the Franciscan and Dominican orders. It is against this broadly sketched background that we can approach Agnes Blannbekin's spirituality.

The known facts of Agnes Blannbekin's life are quickly told, since our only source of information about her is her *Life and Revelations.* Her date of birth is not recorded. According to the *vita*, she was the daughter of farmers (perhaps from a village named Plambach)[8] and displayed a religious vocation early on in her life. Blannbekin learned to read but not to write, and she dedicated herself to the celibate life of a Beguine in Vienna.[9] We do not know whether she worked for a living like so many other Beguines, whether she lived alone or with other women, and whether others recognized her as a holy woman to the degree that her anonymous confessor and scribe did. Her reputation might have been ambiguous, since contemporaries sometimes derided her and thought her to be odd, for example, when she compulsively bowed toward a basement window that she passed on her way across town (chapter 44). In this incident, Agnes regained respectability only after a stolen Eucharistic wafer was discovered in the basement. On occasion, she felt wrongly accused and defamed (chapter 178).

Much of Blannbekin's autobiographical information follows well-established patterns of thirteenth-century women's mysticism: penitential exercises, fasting, eucharistic piety, visions, ecstasies, and auditions, prayers for others, and a strong attachment to the mendicant orders.[10]

The liturgical year and the reading of hours determined Agnes's daily religious activities. Personal devotional and ascetic exercises increased in frequency and intensity during the holy seasons (e.g., chapter 76). Compared to other women mystics, however, descriptions of Blannbekin's asceticism are remarkably moderate, except for the emphasis on her self-flagellation before Easter. Her daily devotional routine was organized not only temporally but also spatially.

8 See Anneliese Stoklaska, "Die Revelationes der Agnes Blannbekin: Ein mystisches Unikat im Schrifttum des Wiener Mittelalters", in *Jahrbuch des Vereins für Geschichte der Stadt Wien* 43 (1987): 7–34, p. 10. Stoklaska also offers a careful analysis of the role of the scribe in the production of the text.

9 See Peter Dinzelbacher, "Die 'Vita et Revelationes' der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin (d. 1315) im Rahmen der Viten- und Offenbarungsliteratur ihrer Zeit", in *Frauenmystik im Mittelalter*, edited by Dinzelbacher and Dieter R. Bauer (Stuttgart: Schwabenverlag, 1985), 152–78.

10 Walter Simons, "The Beguine Movement in the Southern Low Countries: A Reassessment", *Bulletin de l'institut historique belge de Roi* 59 (1989): 63–105.

She seems to have known the schedule of Masses in all Viennese churches, and is depicted as visiting church after church to attend as many Masses as possible. After Mass, she engaged in a devotional act especially dear to her but somewhat risqué, given that women were forbidden to transgress the spatial boundary surrounding the altar. Agnes had the bold habit of approaching the altar after Mass to kiss it with a great display of emotion, frequently followed by paranormal sensations (see, for example, chapter 40). Her usurpation of masculinized space is repeated and symbolically enhanced in a provocative vision, where she sees her own faith as a beautiful young woman dancing around an altar (chapter 211).

We also learn from her scribe that like him, she suffered from spells of sadness (e.g. chapters 79–84, 185), that she endured frequently intense pain (e.g. chapters 106, 208, 209), and that she enjoyed theological reflection (e.g. chapter 108). She proved to be a trusted advisor to her confessor (chapter 171) and taught him about spiritual matters (chapter 180). She was a source of comfort not only to him but also to others in their circle (see, for example, chapters 227–28). Friends and companions of both sexes are mentioned with such frequency that we gain the picture of a lively religious subculture comprising Franciscans, encloistered nuns (chapter 137) and religious lay women, some of whom were Beguines (see chapters 41, 139, 142, 143, 144). Not everybody in this group was of an urban "bourgeois" background. At least one of the Franciscans, like Agnes, was of peasant stock (Friar Otto, chapter 39), and the confessor acted at times on behalf of the duchess who appears to have been part of the circle, perhaps as benefactress (chapters 142–43).

Given the many complaints about the human imperfections of the Viennese religious community in the text, whether among its male or female members, we can almost palpably feel the struggle to create and maintain passable standards of religious conduct. Among the woes that affected the community we find a priest who raped a young woman and then celebrated Mass in a state of impurity (chapter 41). Lecherous confessors were titillated by unnecessary inquiries about the sexual practices of their confessants (chapter 71). A promising young monk escaped the Franciscan house in the middle of the night, taking some money with him (chapter 107). The bishop imposed an unjust interdict (chapter 169); and at least according to the book, there was too much jesting and joking among the friars (e.g. chapter 117). Last, but not least, a Beguine was criticized for succumbing to the material pleasures of the court (chapters 142–43).

As the *vita* tells us, Agnes Blannbekin died in Vienna on May 10,

1315. All traces of her anonymous confessor are lost, but we know the name of someone who copied his manuscript perhaps as early as 1318, a scribe by the name of Ermenrich.

Scholarly Interpretations

Although the text of Agnes's *Life and Revelations* paints such a lively picture of daily life in a religious subculture, modern scholars and writers have ignored the richness of Blannbekin's accounts in favor of a select few of her visions that challenged their own norms and world-view. The following quotations may serve as illustrations of such selective appropriations of the *Life and Revelations*: "Agnes Blannbekin, a Viennese Beguine, d. 1315, provides repulsive proof of the impact of the imagination on female visionaries"; her visions are "more than questionable", "unusual and exotic [*befremdlich*] in their bizarre character", of "strongly obscene mystical content". The mystic herself is "scurrilous" and "adventurous", a "vacuous [*blutleer*]" yet "delicious" Viennese virgin.[11] These unfavorable interpretations have only recently been replaced by a younger generation of medievalists, whose views no doubt have been shaped by greater appreciation for the cultural achievements of medieval Christian women mystics and the impact of the feminist "third wave".

In stark contrast to earlier approaches, recent studies have praised her visions for their "poetically amazing descriptive images". She herself is lauded as an "accomplished writer", "advanced" in her use of mystical metaphor; rather than being an eccentric, she is now defined as "solidly loyal in faith and practice to the institutional church".[12]

The fault lines of the current interpretive approach to Blannbekin's accounts lie not in the area of female religious respectability, but in contemporary Western concerns about female power and authorial independence. Concomitantly, we find a focus on issues of social dissent and the related question of mysticism as an

[11] Quoted in Peter Dinzelbacher and Renate Vogeler, *Leben und Offenbarungen der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin (d. 1315)* (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1994), 36–39.

[12] "Poetically amazing . . . accomplished . . . advanced": Albrecht Classen, "The Literary Treatment of the Ineffable: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Margaret Ebner, Agnes Blannbekin", *Studies in Spirituality* 8 (1998): 162–87, quotation pp. 181 ff. "Solidly loyal . . .": Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350)* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 180.

expression of medieval (female) emancipation. Thus, scholarly evaluations of the 1990s tried to gauge the degree of influence of Blannbekin's anonymous confessor, who put into writing and also commented upon her orally communicated experiences, stories and insights (see, e.g., chapter 92). As can be expected, opinions range from the claim of Blannbekin as sole author to speculations about the authorial dominance of her confessor/scribe to the point of his erasure of any specifically "feminine" perspective from Agnes.[13] A related concern is that Blannbekin was not accustomed to Latin, which removed her even further from the scribe's sphere of influence. In this case, however, it might be of some comfort that the scribe's Latin, in Dinzelbacher's words, is "not only simplistic, but . . . simply bad".[14] I like to think that it is of such inelegant quality exactly because its grammatical and rhetorical structure is so close to Middle High German and thus Blannbekin's and her confessor's language of conversation and exchange. It might be another clue that much of the text was written during or immediately after a meeting between the two, especially given the fact that much of its compositional structure is in the form of a "diary".[15] It seems that the events recorded are listed without a uniform overarching compositional intent. Apart from the first few chapters which are programmatic in character, they generally follow the flow of the liturgical year and reflect the random patterns of town scandals, unrest caused by military conflicts, times of illness and health, emotional ups and downs, and so on. I know of no other medieval text that reflects the format of a diary in quite this way.

The quest for authorial independence in medieval women's literature, however, can miss two significant issues. The first is that in our need to counteract centuries of misogyny, we may become blinded to the fact that despite their inferior social position, medieval women, like their male counterparts, were still moral agents. Medieval women, like medieval men, had the choice to support or subvert Christianity's efforts to marginalize and persecute groups such as

[13] Classen (op. cit.) unambiguously assumes Blannbekin's sole authorship; Anneliese Stoklaska (in "Die Revelationes der Agnes Blannbekin", pp. 16 ff.) bemoans the textual erasure of any "feminine" perspective.

[14] Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Leben und Offenbarungen der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin*, 16.

[15] McGinn claims that the text was composed after her death, but there is nothing in the ms. to support his view. He probably mistook the final statement by Ermenrich to reflect on the text as a whole. See McGinn, op. cit., 18.

homosexuals, lepers, Jews, and people of color. Thus we find Agnes repeating the widely known legend about the death of sodomites at the birth of Christ (chapter 193–94). She repeatedly condemns Jews (chapters 181, 190, 193–94), presents a negative portrayal of Ethiopians and associates dark skin with evil (chapters 205, 122, 123), and interprets leprosy as a sign of moral corruption (chapter 28). When read from the perspective of any of these marginalized groups, Agnes's religious beliefs are put into sharp relief as an example of Christian hegemonic strategies, often successful, to employ its subaltern members to its own ends.

The second issue overlooked easily is the importance of literary genres in the construction of authorial personae. Blannbekin's *Vita et revelationes* is exemplary of a distinctly medieval genre in the history of Christian women writers: the co-authored devotional text. Illiterate, semi-Latinate or non-Latinate female religious specialists would dictate revelations, autobiographical reflections, letters, and devotional teachings to male and sometimes female scribes, who often, but not always, also served as the female specialist's confessor, secretary, mentor, or pupil. It is still a matter of contention to what degree of precision the textual influence of male scribes can be categorized and classified. No doubt, each case of such collaboration must be studied carefully to determine the extent to which a female mystic and visionary controlled the final written product.[16]

As the product of a collaborative process, such devotional texts take a complex transitional position between oral transmissions of religious knowledge and the single-authored literary texts to which we are used today. For reason of their unique mode of production, co-authored texts demand special attention, yet they also deserve to be treated as legitimate literary outlets for medieval Christian women. Other female authors besides Blannbekin who employed male scribes include the German visionary Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), the Italian holy women Angela of Foligno (1248–1309) and Catherine of Siena (1347–80), and the English lay woman Margery Kempe (ca.

[16] Joan M. Ferrante analyzes other forms of literary cooperation between men and women, especially cases in which women functioned as patrons of a male writer or instigated a particular writing project on a topic of their interest. The frequency of these female/male collaborations on literary texts should challenge the relevance of traditional notions of singular authorship in the analysis of these texts; see Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997). See especially pp. 39–68 for a religious context.

1373–1438), to name just a few.[17] Clearly, the practice of co-authorship transcends not only boundaries of gender, but also of religious orders (it can be found among the Benedictines, the Dominicans, the Franciscans), of class (noble, peasant, bourgeois), of geography, and of the divide between laity, monks, and clerics.

The *Life and Revelations* of Agnes Blannbekin exemplifies several characteristics of this widely used hybrid genre. These include the admiration a male scribe often voiced for his female co-author. Unusual also is the close cooperation between two celibate members of a Church which judged any encounter between men and women as potentially dangerous and sinful and the authority each role permitted.[18] Also worthy of attention are the points of contact between stereotypically "learned" (celibate, male, clerical) and "experiential" (female, monastic, Beguine, or lay) approaches to medieval spirituality and theology, and, finally, the complex ways in which women's voices survived in and became part of the written heritage of medieval Christian culture.

In Agnes's case, her anonymous scribe identified himself only as a "most insignificant and unworthy Brother of the Franciscan Order" (preface).[19] He disclosed himself as her confessor (chapter 38). According to his testimony, Agnes repeatedly resisted sharing her extraordinary mystical experiences with him, and only after requesting and receiving affirmative signs from the Divine did she proceed to pass information on to him. "And although she was strengthened by God through such signs, she almost always talked to me with fear and shyness, prompted by me with frequent requests" (chapter 38; see also chapter 37).[20]

The Franciscan scribe's image of an ever-reluctant Agnes reproduces the humility formula required of female visionaries and should

[17] On Angela of Foligno, see Catherine M. Mooney, "The Authorial Role of Brother A. in the Composition of Angela of Foligno's Revelations", in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance*, edited by E. Matter and John Coakley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 34–64.

[18] McGinn judges this to be "one of the most remarkable characteristics of the new mysticism of the later Middle Ages", op. cit., p. 18.

[19] On the Franciscans in late thirteenth-century Vienna, see Peter Dinzelbacher, "Die Wiener Minoriten im ausgehenden 13. Jahrhundert nach dem Urteil der zeitgenössischen Begine Agnes Blannbekin", in *Bettelorden und Stadt. Bettelorden und städtisches Leben im Mittelalter und in der Neuzeit*, edited by Dieter Berg (Werl: Dietrich Coelde Verlag, 1992), 181–91.

[20] *Et quamvis tot indiciis confortata a domino, tamen quasi semper cum timore et verecundia mihi referebat et exacta a me precibus frequenter.*

not necessarily be taken at face value. It protected both Agnes and her confessor from possible slander about their frequent contacts. It would be more surprising if the formula was missing, because in that case, both Agnes and her confessor would have violated medieval communal standards of appropriate public self-representation. The almost exclusive focus on Blannbekin, the fact that conversations are reported verbatim, and the many instances in which Blannbekin is depicted as an outspoken religious agent and observer suggest strongly that the relationship between scribe and visionary was mutually desired. Frequently, chapters include matters of subjective "feminine" concern, such as Blannbekin's own psycho-spiritual pregnancy (chapter 195), her hesitation to leave her house at night and go into the street (chapter 127), and her fear of getting crushed by the Maundy Thursday crowds because of her lack of physical stamina (chapter 75). On a material level, medieval confessors were financially reimbursed for their services; the mendicants especially received gifts and alms from the women in their care. These financial and material transactions contributed to greater equity in their relationships with female visionaries, authorial and otherwise (see chapters 166 and 167 for a description of Agnes asking friars to read Mass for her and to share bread and wine with her).

Agnes determined the textual content more than the humility formula would let us believe, yet the process of textual production no doubt also left leeway for the scribe's own concerns. Whatever the medieval scribe's influence on the *Life and Revelations* might have been, however, it pales in comparison not only to a modern devaluation of Blannbekin's spirituality, but also to the unusual act of eighteenth-century censorship in response to the first printed edition of the *Life and Revelations* in 1731. Immediately after its publication, efforts began to (and eventually succeeded in) withdrawing the text from the public and putting it under lock and key. No doubt, Blannbekin's critical comments about the papacy and immoral priests and monks contributed to the confiscation of the first edition of her works, despite the fact that the book appears to have found immediate appeal among Catholic and Protestant readers alike. A pamphlet printed in 1735 noted the visions' "superstitious" and "unusual" content, which jarred baroque Catholic sensibilities.[21] Perhaps the censors were also irked by Blannbekin's usurpation of masculinized space, such as in her practice of kissing the altar, in her

[21] See Dinzelbacher, *Leben und Offenbarungen der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin*, p. 35.