

Beyond Boundaries: Testing the Borders of Monastic Reform in the Twelfth Century Holy Roman Empire

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Abstract

In the unstable and politically charged atmosphere in the Holy Roman Empire during the twelfth century, there were multiple systemic changes that derived from secular and clerical institutions, which targeted the scope of authority and daily behavior of individuals who had taken monastic vows. This article questions the narrative that these systemic changes were boundaries that females were made to capitulate to overcome or subvert. By using Elisabeth and Eckbert of Schönau's involvement in verifying the sanctity of the remains of male individuals discovered amongst St. Ursula's entourage of 11,000 virgin martyrs in Cologne as a case study, I examine how these changes provided religious, male and female, with new opportunities to create opportunities to cultivate and voice their individual interests. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how targeted case studies of individuals who are navigating the prescribed borders of their sociopolitical context can captivate the attention of nascent historians and inspire seasoned scholars.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Monasticism, Mysticism, Reform, Religious Life

The Narrative

The events and actions taken by the individuals surrounding Elisabeth of Schönau (1129-1164/65) and the cult of the 11,000 virgins provide all of the hallmark elements that an historian needs to illustrate the tension between ecclesiastical and monastic authorities, as well as those between male and female religious. These are, after all, the traditional opposing binaries inherent to religious institutions in the Holy Roman Empire during the twelfth century. Moreover, the story of how Elisabeth came to certify the authenticity of the relics of the virgin martyrs is demonstrative of systemic manipulation of monastic authorities by the clergy and of female religious by males, both monks and clerics. In constructing this narrative, the historian sets the scene by starting with the problem facing Gerlach of Deutz.

Gerlach (r. 1146-1159/60.) was the abbot of Deutz, a monastic house founded by archbishop Anno II of Cologne (r. 1056-1075) and had shared in the largesse enjoyed by its presiding cathedral as the epicenter of the cult of St. Ursula and her 11,000 virgin martyrs.¹ Here, the historian establishes that the abbot's authority is predicated on the good graces of a higher, ecclesiastical authority.

Awareness of the saint's legendary pilgrimage to Rome and martyrdom at the hands of the Huns increased due to the distribution of *Regnante Domino*, a *vita* of St. Ursula distributed in 1100. The extant

¹ Wittekind, "Two Sainly Archbishops, Their Cult, and Their Romanesque Shines," 27.

corpus of nearly 100 manuscripts of the *Regnante Domino* bears testament to its popularity.² Only six years after this new hagiography began to circulate, holy roman emperor Henry IV (r. 1084-1105) fortuitously stumbled on the remains of a Roman cemetery whilst overseeing the construction of new fortifications around Cologne. During the excavation, several of the workers experienced visions of St. Ursula. The remains were identified to be those of the saint's martyred retinue and were distributed as relics to churches throughout the Rhineland and beyond.³

Fifty years later, Gerlach of Deutz bore the brunt of his predecessors' overzealous generosity. The virgins' relics had become so prolific that Cologne had waned as a site of religious pilgrimage. Archbishop Arnold II of Cologne (r. 1151-1156) ordered a fresh excavation of the cemetery in 1155 to procure new relics for the cathedral. He placed Gerlach and his sacristan, Theoderich, in charge of the endeavor, which would continue until 1164.⁴ Within the first year of excavations, Gerlach and Theoderich had unearthed countless graves, many of them bearing inscriptions with the names of interred. As the number of epitaphs grew, so did Gerlach's unease. The evidence was irrefutable—several of the names belonging to the individuals buried amongst the sacred virgins were male. This discovery threatened the authenticity of any relics uncovered at the site and could even call the sanctity of the blessed virgins into question. Cologne's reputation as the steward city of Ursula's cult hinged on securing a plausible, innocent explanation for the masculine presence in the cemetery.

Having impressed upon the reader the stakes in place and the pressure placed upon Gerlach by ecclesiastical, and, by extension, secular leadership, the historian is able to introduce the next historiographical binary when the abbot finds a solution to his problem less than seventy kilometers away in the Premonstratensian monastery of Schönau.

There, a monk named Eckbert (c. 1132-1184) was hard at work recording the dictations of his sister, Elisabeth. (Here, the historian holds their breath and hopes that the reader will not question the apparent inversion of power in a male acting as secretary for a female.) Tales of Elisabeth's prowess as a mystic who received divine visions through the intercession of an angel was well known by this point. Her prophetic message was received in Cologne with mixed wonder and derision late in the year 1154 when her abbot, Hildelin (d.1165/66,) preached of an impending apocalypse that she foretold.⁵ However divisive the public's initial reception of Elisabeth's visions were, Eckbert must have seen the potential in his sister's gift. He had quit a promising career as a canon at St. Cassius and Florentius in Bonn to become Elisabeth's secretary, and by extension, intermediary between her and those who read her vision texts.⁶ Even from Bonn, Eckbert had

² Montgomery, 35.

³ Flynn, "Hildegard (1098-1179) and the Virgin Martyrs," 109-110.

⁴ Flynn, 141.

⁵ Elisabeth of Schönau, "Die Visionen der hl. Elisabeth: Liber Tercius," 69-74. Elisabeth was mortified by the experience. She explained in a letter to Hildegard of Bingen that she did not wish to reveal this prophecy to her abbot but was compelled by the angel that spoke to her. "*Significavit etiam mihi per angelum suum frequenter, qualia ventura essent super populum suum in his diebus, nisi agerent penitentiam de iniquitatibus suis, atque, ut palam hec annuntiarem, precepit. Ego autem, ut arrogantiam evitarem, et ne auctrix novitatum viderer, in quantum potui, omnia hec studui occultare.*"

⁶ Harrison, "Eckbert of Schönau's 'Sermones Contra Katharos,'" 385.

appealed to his sister to ask the angel questions regarding the fate of the souls of the deceased on behalf of himself and others. Once he made his home in Schönau, Eckbert recorded Elisabeth's responses to inquiries made from family members, abbots, and abbesses who sought her council through letters.⁷

Due to the lack of dates included in letters written by Eckbert after his arrival at Schönau, we cannot know if Gerlach knew Eckbert personally before seeking out his sister's help, though it is certainly possible. Eckbert and Elisabeth's family was well connected to multiple religious institutions throughout the empire. Their brother, Ruotger, was a prior of another Premonstratensian house at Pöholde, Ruotger's son, Simon was provost of St. Gereon in Cologne, and they had three kinswomen, Guta, Hadewig, and Regelindis, at the convent of St. Thomas in Andernach.⁸ Moreover, their family had ties to the abbey of Deutz through their great-uncle, Eckbert's namesake, who was the bishop of Münster from 1127 through 1132. He was a friend and frequent correspondent of Rupert of Deutz.⁹ Perhaps no one was better connected than Eckbert himself, having attended school in Paris from 1140-1145 with Rainald of Dassel, the future archbishop of Cologne (r. 1158-1167), and arguably the closest confidant of the holy roman emperor Frederick I, Barbarossa (r. 1152-1190).¹⁰ While none of these connections directly link Gerlach and the siblings as Schönau, they demonstrate the breadth of their social network. Even if the abbot of Deutz did not know the two personally, finding an acquaintance who could make an introduction on his behalf would not have been a challenge. However they connected, later textual evidence demonstrates that Eckbert was more than amenable to help Gerlach solve his problem using Elisabeth's gift. Whatever questions the reader harbored regarding the peculiarity of Eckbert's apparent submission to his sister are answered here. Eckbert is using his position to harness the fame of his sister for his own purposes. The traditional hierarchy is restored.

Gerlach's coercion of Elisabeth included sending multiple relics and their corresponding inscriptions to the monastery at Schönau.¹¹ The significant logistical planning of transporting these items from Cologne and the commotion that the arrival of such precious artifacts would have created at Elisabeth's monastery must have engendered an inescapable sense of obligation to comply with the abbot's requests.¹² In June of 1156, Elisabeth experienced the first of a series of visions that would comprise the *Liber revelationum Elisabeth de sacro exercitu virginum Coloniensium*.¹³ Eckbert transcribed and compiled the collection in which St. Verena, one of the first recently excavated individuals gifted to Schönau by Gerlach, appeared to Elisabeth and described the journey of Ursula and her companions to Rome and of

⁷ Elisabeth of Schönau, Eckbert of Schönau, and Emecho of Schönau, *Die Visionen der hl. Elisabeth und die Schriften der Aebte Ekbart und Emecho von Schönau*.

⁸ Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works*, fn 1; Harrison, 385.

⁹ Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: Twelfth Century Visionary*, 11.

¹⁰ Harrison, 385.

¹¹ Elisabeth of Schönau, "*Liber revelationum Elisabeth de sacro exercitu virginum Coloniensium*."

¹² Elisabeth's reluctance to participate in the endeavor and the coercion to which she was subjugated is preserved in the introduction to her vision text on the sacred virgins. "*De his enim me silere non permittunt quidam bone opinionis viri, qui ad hec investiganda diutina me postulacione multum renitentem compulerunt*," Elisabeth of Schonau, "*Liber revelationum Elisabeth de sacro exercitu virginum Coloniensium*," 123.

¹³ Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works*, 16-17.

their untimely end in Cologne.¹⁴ These accounts expanded on extant traditions of the 11,000 virgin hagiographies by including the presence of bishops and other male prelates that were sent to accompany the retinue by Ursula's father, king Maurus.¹⁵

Due to Elisabeth's (reluctant) help, the cult of St. Ursula and the 11,000 virgins persisted and expanded, gaining recognition throughout Europe. The remains of the excavated saints helped re-establish the cathedral of Cologne as a center of pilgrimage.¹⁶ Her inclusion of the male figures in Ursula's retinue was accepted by her contemporaries, most notably Elisabeth's fellow visionary mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, who composed an antiphon specifically praising the male religious who accompanied the virgins on their journey.¹⁷ By the end of the twelfth century, the *Liber revelationum* eclipsed the popularity of *Regnante Domino* as the preferred *vita* of the saint.¹⁸

The narrative is complete. The historian has successfully illustrated the how the bifurcated power dynamics functioned in the medieval Rhineland. Archbishop Arnold II of Cologne exercised his authority over the abbey of Deutz, compelling Gerlach to lead the excavation of relics for the sake of financial gain, and in doing so, managed to illustrate the systemic exploitation of monastic religious leaders by the bishopric, and of the laity, whose alms would contribute to aggrandizement of the seat of the archdiocese in order to curry imperial recognition.¹⁹ Gerlach and Eckbert's manipulation of Elisabeth and her visions are perfectly demonstrative of traditional historiography that asserted that the result of monastic reform was increased subjugation of female religious under male authorities.²⁰

Thus, this account of Elisabeth's coerced authentication of the Cologne relics suffers from the same shortcomings as all narratives. Salient facts that contradict the hierarchical boundaries between cleric and monk, male and female are not addressed or are omitted entirely. Complex motivations are simplified for the sake of making an historiographical argument, multi-faceted historical agents are made into archetypical villains and victims, and Elisabeth and Eckbert are deprived of their own agency.

Fortunately for Elisabeth, Eckbert, and their contemporaries, modern historians are casting a critical eye at the supposed intractability of the binaries of traditional historiography, as well as at the notion that coercion was unidirectional. This method of inquiry necessitates a

¹⁴ Elisabeth of Schönau, "*Liber revelationum*," 123-124.

¹⁵ Elisabeth of Schönau, "*Liber revelationum*," 126. "*Pater beate Ursule rex Britannie Scottice, Maurus nomine, vir fidelis [...] ut filia sua, quam tenerrime diligebat, viros, quorum solatio tam ipsa quam exercitus eius indigebat, in comitatu suo discedens haberet.*"

¹⁶ Although this accomplishment was rivaled by the addition of reliquary of the three magi, plunder from Milan which Frederick I gifted to Rainald of Dassel leading a successful sack on the city in 1163. Geary, "The Magi and Milan," 244.

¹⁷ Hildegard of Bingen, "*Riesenkodex*," 472r. "*De patria etiam earum et de aliis regionibus viri religiosi et sapientes ipsi adiuncti sunt qui eas in virginea custodia servabant et qui eis in omnibus ministrabant.*"

¹⁸ Flynn, 143.

¹⁹ This was a practice that started in the tenth century. Cologne's archbishops had proven to be very effective at using this custom to their advantage, as several were chosen to the position of chancellor to the holy roman emperor. Howe, *Before the Gregorian Reform: The Latin Church at the Turn of the First Millennium*, 86-99; Wittekind, "Two Sainly Archbishops."

²⁰ Beach, *The Trauma of Monastic Reform: Community and Conflict in Twelfth-Century Germany*, 75.

close examination of evidence that contradicts former suppositions and acts that were previously omitted or thought to be unimportant.

Testing the Borders

The boundaries that divided members of the clergy and those of religious houses, the clergy and the laity, and cloistered males and females have long since been called into question by scholars. Recent scholarship disputes the idea of “monastic reform” as a cohesive movement that was incited by the Gregorian Reforms, designed to gain autonomy from secular authorities.²¹ As Steven Vanderputten points out, the idea that monasteries aspired to reform for the purpose of emancipating themselves from ecclesiastical oversight is undermined by the fact that reform of monastic liturgy, rule, and/or physical buildings were often instigated by archbishops.²² Alison Beach’s case study of the anonymous chronicle *Casus Monasterii Petrishusensis*, illustrates how the poor discipline and lack of devotion described in the written record prior to a monastery’s reform may be exaggerated as a coping mechanism to the sudden, comprehensive changes that reform brought to the residents of Peterhausen.²³ Chronicles describing monastic reform, written decades after the fact, often fall into the pattern of depicting their pre-reformed monasteries as fallen from a golden age of spiritual devotion. Reform was the mechanism by which their institutions could return to their prelapsarian state. Both Beach and Vanderputten argue that these trends call the veracity of the primary sources’ content into question.²⁴ Studies of orders and individuals that occupied the liminal space between laity and clergy have become innumerable in the last twenty years.²⁵ While not denying the prescribed delineation between religious authorities and lay Christians, these scholars demonstrate how porous the membrane that separated these groups could be in practice.

Perhaps no aspect of medieval monastic reform has been subject to more critique and redefinition than the idea of female subjugation due to enclosure in the twelfth century. Female monasticism experienced a marked increase during this period. Sarah Margaret Ritchey estimates that between 1100 and 1250, the number of monasteries that included women in the Holy Roman Empire increased from 150 to 500, bringing the total number of women religious to somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000. Ritchey attributes this influx to the growth of popular Christianity and the religious fervor generated in the wake of the Gregorian Reforms.²⁶ Fiona J. Griffiths and Julie Hotchen posit that movements such as the Hirsau reform, which transformed extant religious houses into double monasteries, increased interest in

²¹ Newman, “Reformed Monasticism and the Narrative of Cistercian Beginnings,” 539-541.

²² Vanderputten, “Monastic Reform from the Tenth to the Early Twelfth Century,” 605.

²³ Beach, *The Trauma of Monastic Reform*, 11-22.

²⁴ Beach, *The Trauma of Monastic Reform*; Vanderputten, “Monastic Reform,” 599-600.

²⁵ For a recent collection that exemplifies this trend, see Deane and Lester, *Between Orders and Heresy*.

²⁶ Ritchey, *Holy Matter: Changing Perceptions of the Material World in Late Medieval Christianity*, 25-26.

monastic life for males and females who were lured by the idea of emulating the early Christian ascetics.²⁷

The surge in female monasticism coincided with a growing preoccupation with the role of sex amongst the clergy following the dissolution of clerical marriages in the canons of the first two Lateran Councils. Theological treatises speak to a considerable amount of anxiety regarding sex in general, and the idea of men and women sharing the same roof with the intention of remaining chaste seemed impossible to some. Bernard of Clairvaux expresses his thoughts on the matter in no uncertain terms in the sixty-sixth sermon of his collection on the Song of Songs:

As I have said, you must separate men from the women although they claim to be leading chaste lives, and require the women to live with others of their sex who are under similar vows, and similarly men with men of the same way of life. In this way, you will protect the vows and reputations of both, and they will have you as witnesses and guardians of their chastity. If they do not accept this, you will be completely justified in expelling them from the Church to which they have caused scandal by their blatant and illicit cohabitation.²⁸

While many scholars would argue that this inclusion was designed to subjugate women to the authority of a male abbot, this single explanation dismisses the contributions of male religious who did not share Bernard of Clairvaux's view on the separation of genders. Instead, they extolled the virtues of men and women working together in the service of God. Peterhausen's anonymous chronicler included a defense of double-monasteries, citing Jesus' appearance to the disciples, including Mary Magdalene and Joanna in the Gospel of Luke, explaining:

It should also be noted here that pious women soldiered for God equally with the holy disciples. And on account of this example, it is not blameworthy, but rather very laudable, when religious women are received in the monasteries of the servants of God so that each sex, kept separate from one another, is saved in one place.²⁹

Julie Hotchin and Jirki Thibaut caution scholars not to fall into the trap of perceiving all male religious as a monolithic, oppressive force that sought to subjugate cloistered females to an equal degree. If we make this error, we can only react by boxing female religious into another fallacious binary, that of a proponent or opponent of this subjugation under the guise of "reform."³⁰ However, if we compare the extant sources of male religious' opinion on females like those of Bernard and the anonymous chronicler, we see how clearly this monolithic narrative breaks down, as the boundary between male and female would vary between monasteries according to the opinion of the abbot.

Having embraced the plasticity of these once impenetrable boundaries that defined the socioreligious landscape, historians have moved to the next, logical step: a revision of "[...] interpretations that

²⁷ Griffiths and Hotchin, "Women and Men in the Medieval Religious Landscape, 8.

²⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, "Sermon 66."

²⁹ Beach, *The Trauma of Monastic Reform*, 75.

³⁰ Hotchin and Thibaut, "Debating Identities: Women and Monastic Reform in the Medieval West, c. 1000-1500," 10.

argue for a radically diverse picture of reform based upon regional and local studies."³¹ Or, as Vanderputten has stated, most scholars have arrived at "an understanding that reform is at the same time highly diverse, highly contextualized, and highly reliant on the personal agency and intentions of the individuals involved."³²

In other words, we have tested the borders that created the framework of the original narrative, discovered that borders that created the context, while extant, were too narrow to accommodate all of the idiosyncrasies and contradictions we encountered. Now, by turning to individual case studies that examine the "personal agency and intentions of the individuals involved," we are attempting to make the subjects of our research fully realized human beings. By doing so, we allow ourselves to pursue avenues of research that are not beholden to extant historiography, thus freeing the subjects of study from the confines of our own narratives.

In the remainder of this article, I intend to provide an analysis of the most apparent anomaly in the narrative presented above: Elisabeth of Schönau's relationship with her brother, Eckbert. I shall demonstrate how this connection reveals the porous nature of the traditional social and institutional boundaries that surrounded her. I will also argue that rather than being an unwilling pawn, Elisabeth used this relationship and the *Liber revelationum* to further her own interests. I hope that, in doing so, I am able to help erode the archetypes of the "subjugated female religious" and "manipulative male promoting a secular agenda" that Elisabeth and Eckbert respectively represent and reveal some of the idiosyncrasies that made them unique individuals.

Beyond Boundaries

If Elisabeth were male, the events surrounding the confirmation of Cologne's relics' sanctity would have played out very differently. Setting aside statistical unlikelihood of a male version of Elisabeth experiencing visions, as a female religious, Elisabeth was subject to rules which her male counterparts were not.³³ Several of these female-specific regulations allowed males within her social sphere to coerce her, using her visions to their personal advantage.

The most confining of these regulations was Elisabeth's enclosure. The Hirsau rule that governed the monastery at Schönau stipulated that men and women be segregated from one another within the confines of the monastery. The only male permitted to enter the women's enclosure was the priest in the rare case that he had to distribute the sacrament to a nun who was unable to leave her bed.³⁴ The reality of how strictly this practice was carried out likely varied from house to house.³⁵ In Elisabeth's case, enclosure of women seems

³¹ Hotchin and Thibaut, 5.

³² Vanderputten, "Monastic Reform, 615.

³³ Based on a statistical analysis of 864 "holy people" between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries, one-third of the individuals who experienced visions were female, compared with one-tenth who were male. Mooney, "Interdisciplinarity in Teaching Medieval Mysticism," 17.

³⁴ Ritchey, *Holy Matter*, 27.

³⁵ For example, textual evidence records that Jutta of Disibodenberg (d. 1136), the *magistra* at Hildegard's abbey, would work in the fields to help grow food for the cloister and receive visitors, even though she and the other female religious were said to have

to have confined them to the grounds of the monastery, at the very least. There is only one documented occasion when she left Schönau, in 1156 to visit Hildegard at Rupertsberg.³⁶ This presented a problem when Elisabeth was compelled by her angel to preach of the coming apocalypse to the people of Cologne in 1154. Unable to carry out the command personally, Elisabeth entrusted the task to her abbot, Hildelin. Although she does not accuse the abbot of any wrongdoing regarding the mixed reception of her message in her letter to Hildegard, she was clearly distraught by the damage to her reputation.³⁷ There is a gap in her vision texts between the 15th of August 1154 and the 14th of May 1155. Anne L. Clark surmises that her emotional turmoil stifled her visions (or at least, her interest in dictating them to anyone) during this time, since it also coincides to when she wrote the letter explaining the incident to Hildegard.³⁸

Male relatives, siblings in particular, were a rare exclusion from the totality of female religious enclosure, making Eckbert an ideal candidate to be Elisabeth's secretary.³⁹ Before he arrived in Schönau, Elisabeth's visions had been transcribed by her fellow sisters and/or abbot Hildelin. However, the Cologne incident had weakened Elisabeth's trust in her abbot, making her more reluctant to disclose the content of her visions. After Eckbert's arrival early in 1156, Elisabeth experienced her most prolific period of visionary dictation.⁴⁰

The reason for Eckbert's departure from the canonry at Bonn, a position he held for a decade, is a divisive question amongst scholars and one that holds special significance in the matter of Elisabeth's agency regarding the relics from Cologne. For almost four years, Eckbert was apprised consistently of the content of his sister's visions. When Elisabeth began dictating her visions in May of 1152, the texts appear to have been written with Eckbert as the intended audience. In her second recorded vision, she interrupts the narration with an abrupt address to her brother ("*Petis a me, frater [...]*")⁴¹ We can be certain that the "brother" is Eckbert, rather than another biological or spiritual brother, due to the content of other visions which included information that pertained to individuals at the cathedral of St. Cassius and Florentius.⁴² If Eckbert was performing the role of censor to object in the event that Elisabeth dictated any content that could be construed as heretical, he seemed to have been effective from Bonn. So, why the abrupt career change?

As Clark suggests, abbot Hildelin may have requested his presence at the monastery when Elisabeth withdrew from him. However, Eckbert arrived nearly two years after Hildelin's disastrous preaching tour in Cologne. Elisabeth had dictated eighteen more visions, likely to Hildelin himself, in the meantime.⁴³ According to Eckbert himself,

been enclosed behind a wall of solid stone. Felten, "What Do We Know About the Life of Jutta and Hildegard at Disibodenberg and Rupertsberg?", 15-20.

³⁶ Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: Twelfth Century Visionary*, 21.

³⁷ Elisabeth of Schönau, "*Die Visionen der hl. Elisabeth: Liber Tercius*," 69-74.

³⁸ Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works*, 15.

³⁹ Griffiths, "Siblings and the Sexes within the Medieval Religious Life."

⁴⁰ Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: Twelfth Century Visionary*, 32-33.

⁴¹ Elisabeth of Schönau, "*Die Visionen der hl. Elisabeth: Liber Primus*," 2.

⁴² See Elisabeth of Schönau, "*Die Visionen der hl. Elisabeth: Liber Primus*," 16, 17, and 27.

⁴³ Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works*, 15.

he retired from the canonry to Schönau for no other reason than the love of God. Emecho (d. 1197), Eckbert's successor as abbot of Schönau and biographer, records that Eckbert came to Schönau after Elisabeth wrote to him following his ordination in Rome in 1155. In the letter she describes a vision in which Eckbert defeated the devil, but only after receiving the monastic habit from St. Benedict.⁴⁴

Shrewd scholars cannot help but note that within six months of Eckbert's arrival, Gerlach appealed to him to obtain Elisabeth's assistance in explaining the problematic relics in Cologne. In *The War on Heresy*, R. I. Moore hints at collusion on Eckbert's part, though he stops short of directly accusing him of moving to Schönau for the purpose of coercing Elisabeth for the benefit of Cologne:

[Eckbert] stepped aside from this path to high office in the church to become a monk in Schönau in 1155, and in effect secretary and interpreter to the outside world of his sister Elizabeth [*sic*], a nun in that house, who had a growing reputation as a visionary. It was in this capacity that he described and circulated revelations of his sister's vindicating the authenticity of the newly discovered relics.⁴⁵

Moore's implication that Eckbert's move from canon to glorified secretary was a suspicious career misstep is worth consideration. Eckbert's education in Paris under the same master as the future chancellor and archbishop, Rainald of Dassel, and career as a canon in Bonn represent an ambitious upward trajectory indicative of an individual who might have sought to find a place in the emperor's administration. If we are to consider that Eckbert dedicated his *Sermones contra Catharos* collection to Rainald in 1165, it would appear as though his ambition never receded. In which case, his election to stay at Schönau must have been driven by an underhand deal or perhaps even due to the fame he could acquire through the manipulation of Elisabeth's visions. Again, Moore very nearly asserts that this is the case, when, in the course of opposing Eckbert's claims regarding the beliefs of the Cathars, he states:

Eckbert is not an ideal witness. We have already seen good reason for suspecting him on other occasions [...] of being ready to manipulate or even create information in the interests of his patron Rainald of Dassel, whose record, personality and current activities must have appalled and scandalized Cologne's apostolic dissenters.⁴⁶

Although Moore does not specify which information Eckbert was willing to "manipulate or even create," his only previous mention of Eckbert regards his work as Elisabeth's secretary.

The primary flaw in this argument is Eckbert's loyalty to Rainald as motive for playing the mediator in this relic authentication scheme. Rainald of Dassel was not archbishop of Cologne in 1155 when the cemetery containing the remains of the 11,000 virgins were unearthed. He was not appointed to lead the archdiocese until 1159 and retained the title *in absentia* due to his involvement with Frederick I's Italian

⁴⁴ Sadly, this letter does not survive. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*, 37.

⁴⁵ Robert Ian Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 167.

⁴⁶ Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 168.

campaign. He would not return to Cologne until 1163.⁴⁷ As stated earlier, Arnold II was archbishop of Cologne in 1155 and it was he who ordered Gerlach of Deutz to disinter the saints' remains.⁴⁸ If Eckbert did take vows at Schönau for the sake of using his sister to authenticate the dubious remains at Cologne, he would have done so at the urging of Gerlach of Deutz. As previously established, we have no evidence regarding their acquaintanceship that predates Gerlach's appeal to Eckbert for help in 1156. One has to ask, if Eckbert did agree to such a duplicitous scheme, what did he gain from it? He lived out the rest of his life in the monastery of Schönau. If he reaped any material rewards from coercing Elisabeth into verifying relics that he knew to be unaffiliated with Ursula's entourage, they did not warrant enough attention to be noted in the extant record of works surrounding his life.

As unlikely as it seems, in this case, the once worldly, ambitious canon might have experienced a genuine change of heart, believing that his sister's visions were truly divinely inspired.⁴⁹ Interestingly enough, the most compelling evidence of this comes from a letter that Eckbert wrote to Rainald after his election to the archbishopric. After congratulating him on his election, Eckbert proceeds to plead with Rainald not to neglect his spiritual duties to his clerical subordinates for the sake of his secular obligations as chancellor to the emperor. Letters of admonition amongst religious peers had become a genre in its own right during the politically tumultuous twelfth century. However, this particular admonition was atypical in its length, covering the front and back of six folios. In it, Eckbert begs that Rainald emulate the archbishops of Cologne's past who were lauded for their commitment to the faith. He bemoans the fallen state of the Church of the present day which is mired in corruption due to the leadership of prelates who were fornicators and simoniacs, more concerned with worldly gains than the rewards they would store up in heaven.⁵⁰

At the time of his election to the archbishopric in 1159, Rainald demonstrated no interest in a career in the service of the Church, save for the prestige that befitted the title of archbishop. He is credited with fomenting an uprising imperial uprising against pope Adrian IV (r. 1154-1159) in 1158 and refused to have his appointment to the archdiocese confirmed by pope Alexander III (r. 1159-1181), who he viewed as an illegitimate pontiff, having supported Frederick I's installment of Victor IV (r. 1159-1164.)⁵¹ He was the embodiment of all of the qualities that Eckbert condemned in his letter, a fact of which Eckbert was well aware. He could not have hoped to have been thanked or rewarded for his advice. If he believed that Rainald would have capitulated to some of his suggestions out of respect for their shared history, it was in vain. In the words of the anonymous Archpoet, Rainald had "little time for the scruples of the cloister and less patience for the meddling of monks."⁵² Eckbert's appeal to his former schoolmate's non-existent conscience is indicative of a genuine

⁴⁷ Geary, "The Magi and Milan."

⁴⁸ See fn. 5.

⁴⁹ Anne L. Clark has a stronger opinion on this topic, "Only a naïve cynic would imagine that Eckbert himself created them: he would not have abandoned his promising ecclesiastical career and become a monk merely to engage in intellectual fraud." Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works*, vii.

⁵⁰ Eckbert of Schönau, "Epistola Ecberti ad Reinoldum Coloniensem electum," 311-319.

⁵¹ Freed, *Frederick Barbarossa*, 205. Newman, *Voice of Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, 21.

⁵² Carty, *The Political Message of the Shrine of St. Heribert of Cologne: Church and Empire after the Investiture Contest*, 119.

desire to help reform the church, marking a distinct transition from his former life.

All of Eckbert's writings, whether in Elisabeth's voice or his own, indicate that the unexpected transition from canon to monk/secretary was motivated by his conviction that his sister's visions were genuine divine messages. This conviction did not prevent him from influencing the content of her visions, as we have seen in the case of Elisabeth's hesitant verification of the Cologne artifacts. Moreover, after his arrival at Schönau, the subject matter of Elisabeth's ecstasies shifts from visions of the saints appearing on their feast days, to answers to questions posed to Elisabeth's angel regarding matters of theological doctrine.⁵³ The content of these questions reflected the Eckbert's Parisian education, which carried with it all of the anxieties stirred up by scholasticism and the translation of texts previously only accessible to a Greek-speaking audience.⁵⁴

On one of these occasions, we see an example of Elisabeth asserting her control over the content of her visions. During the course of identifying the Ursuline relics, Eckbert appears to test the veracity of her claims, asking if one of the martyrs, who she identified as a member of the high nobility, Potentinus of Gaul, was a contemporary of bishop Maximinus of Trier. Eckbert knew that the two did not live at the same time. In response, Elisabeth reported to Eckbert that her angel and St. Stephen appeared to her and were offended by his attempt to test their divine wisdom. The angel demanded that Eckbert atone for his audacity by holding a mass in his honor. Eckbert refrained from recording his response or whether or not he capitulated to the angel's request.⁵⁵ This incident illustrates that Elisabeth could and did control the narrative of her visions, even if she was not holding the quill herself.

For all of Eckbert's protestations that Elisabeth's grasp of Latin was weak and that he had to translate some of her dictations from German, we have no way of knowing if this was an accurate description of Elisabeth's linguistic skill or if this was a way of emphasizing the miraculous nature of her visions, which, when provided in the voice of her angel, were spoken in perfect Latin.⁵⁶ Since all of her letters and vision collections were dictated rather than written in her own hand, we can assume that she was not able to write. This does not preclude the possibility that she was able to read what Eckbert had written. Whether due to the nagging of his own conscience, or because Elisabeth was reading over her shoulder, Eckbert recorded Elisabeth's voiced hesitations when she was uncomfortable answering a question or when she expressed doubt regarding a subject.⁵⁷ He also indicated to his audience that Elisabeth was reluctant to answer a question by recording how many times he had to remind her when she "forgot" to relay his inquiry to her angel.

⁵³ Elisabeth of Schönau, *"Die Visionen der hl. Elisabeth: Liber Secundus"*; Elisabeth of Schonau, *"Die Visionen der hl. Elisabeth: Liber Tercius."*

⁵⁴ Such inquiries included the orthodoxy of Origen of Alexandria's writings, the filioque clause, details of the angelic hierarchy, and the number of angels that fell with Lucifer. Elisabeth of Schönau, *"Die Visionen der hl. Elisabeth: Liber Tercius,"* 62-63, 65, 68-69.

⁵⁵ Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*, 38-39.

⁵⁶ Embach, "Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179): A History of Reception," 292; Heinzer, "Unequal Twins: Visionary Attitude and Monastic Culture in Elisabeth of Schönau and Hildegard of Bingen," 105.

⁵⁷ Elisabeth of Schönau, *"Liber revelationum,"* 159. *"Cum ergo essem mecum admirans super his, et cogitans omnino incredibile esse secundum tenorem hystorie, quod et sponsus sancta Ursule huic martirio interfuisset [...];* See also fn. 12.

As paradoxical as it may seem from the narrative of her involvement in the Cologne relic incident, Elisabeth wielded the most autonomy over the record of her visions during the latter part of 1156. Anne L. Clark states that this was the most prolific period visionary period of Elisabeth's life.⁵⁸ While dictating the *Liber revelationum*, Elisabeth also dictated two other works, the *Liber viarum dei* and *De resurrectione beate virginis matris domini*.

The *Liber viarum dei* provides us with unparalleled insight into how Elisabeth perceived her role as a female religious and how vital the role of females were to monastic life. In doing so, she built on an extant literary tradition that was introduced c. 1140. in the book *Speculum virginum*, written by a monk from the monastery of Hirsau.⁵⁹ The *Speculum* was a handbook designed to assist priests in the pastoral care of cloistered nuns. Within the pages of this book, not only were the roles ascribed to both sexes in double monasteries delineated, but the ideal of a monastic reformation was actualized in a very real etymological sense. According to the *Speculum*, it was within the confines of the monastery that the world would be restored to its prelapsarian state. For the male religious, this re-making of the world was accomplished by manual labor. For women, the world was remade through their enclosure that allowed them to hone their virtue and maintain their virginity. Through virtue and virginity, the cloistered women emulated the virgin Mary, and paradoxically, the brides of Christ, This emulation and symbolic marriage gave them the power to symbolically give birth to the God of creation, essentially "re-forming" the world.⁶⁰

Although we cannot be certain that Elisabeth was familiar with the *Speculum virginum's* thesis that virginal female religious were vessels by which the world would be remade, there is no doubt that she holds the role of females in enclosure in the highest esteem, especially when juxtaposed with the laity and the prelates. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in her *Liber viarum Dei* wherein she describes a vision in which three paths rise up to the summit of a mountain. She describes the paths as follows:

The one appearing closer to the green path was pleasant, but was entirely surrounded and covered over by dense thorn bushes. Those walking on it would inevitably be pricked unless, cramped up and bent over, they proceeded very carefully. There also appeared a delightful path, narrow, and hardly worn. It had no thorns, but on both sides was abundantly surrounded by pleasant grass and flowers of various kinds. The middle one between these two was wider than the others and was smooth, as if it were paved with red tiles. While I was carefully looking over it, the angel of the Lord who was standing by me said, 'You gaze upon this path and it seems lovely and easy to walk on, but it is dangerous and those advancing on it easily slip.'⁶¹

The paths correspond to the ways of the married laity, the chaste, and the prelates, respectively.

⁵⁸ Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works*, 16-17.

⁵⁹ Rainini, "From Regensburg to Hirsau and Back: Paths in 11th-12th Century German Theology," 12.

⁶⁰ Ritchey, *Holy Matter*, 27-28, 58-59.

⁶¹ Translation provided by Anne L. Clark. Elisabeth of Schönau, "The Book on the Ways of God," 162.; Elisabeth of Schönau, "*Liber viarum dei*," 88-89.

Elisabeth did not merely endure the cloistered life, she celebrated enclosure. It must have been a measure of relief to know that she could voice her anger with the prelates or instruct members of other monastic houses without having to leave the cloister at Schönau. Indeed, though she did not hold back in castigating the church leaders, they do not seem to be target audience of her works. All but two of the extant twenty-two letters that she dictated were written to monastic leaders and members of religious houses.⁶² In these missals, she encouraged other enclosed religious to find fulfillment within the walls of their houses. When writing a letter to Abbot Burchard of Odenheim, she informs him that one of the brothers at his abbey had asked her advice concerning whether or not he should take a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Her reply was to the contrary, maintaining that pilgrimage was reserved as an act of penance for sinners. The monk would not find the Lord in Jerusalem if he could not find him in his own abbey.⁶³

Her opinion on the superiority of life in the cloister brooked no exceptions, not even for her brother. On her deathbed, she elicited Eckbert's promise that he would remain at the monastery.⁶⁴ Though he would venture beyond its wall on occasion, he kept the spirit of his promise. Eckbert became abbot of Schönau shortly after Elisabeth's death in either 1165 or 1166. He died within its walls in 1184.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The boundaries that we use to define the human experience, past or present, prove themselves to be elastic, flimsy, or even imaginary upon close examination. That is not to say that they do not exist or do not have utility as a didactic tool, especially when attempting to communicate complex information to novices in the field. In practice however, individuals rarely conform to the strict boundaries that support these narratives. Though I am not so naïve that I believe we can ever truly understand the psychology of historical actors who are removed from us in time by nearly a millennium, I am optimistic that modern historiographical methods are successful in pointing us in a direction that allows a more accurate understanding of historical actors. Moreover, by turning our attention to individuals like Elisabeth and Eckbert, who demonstrate that they were constantly negotiating between the borders of their contexts to eke out a space that accommodated their personal identities by acting unpredictable ways, we make the discipline of history itself a more welcoming, accessible environment to future historians.

⁶² Elisabeth of Schönau, "Die Briefe," 139-158.

⁶³ Elisabeth of Schönau, "Die Briefe der hl. Elisabeth von Schönau," 142-143.

⁶⁴ Eckbert of Schönau, "Eckberts Trostschriften über den Tod Elisabeths an die Nonnen von St. Thomas in Andernach," 277.

⁶⁵ Duvernoy, *La Religion des Cathares: Les Catharisme*, 14.

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