



History of
Women and Confession:

From Empowerment to Pathology

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In the thirteenth century, western Europe (or, more precisely, Latin Christendom) witnessed a truly astonishing surge of popular piety. This wave of religious fervor tended to foreground women, particularly laywomen, in an unprecedented way. And, women, on the crest of this wave, would in turn be conceived as confessing subjects.¹ There are some pragmatic reasons for this representation. First, we have to consider clerical bias. In the life of any holy woman, the figure of the confessor usually hovers somewhere on the horizon. He could loom large or small, according to his discretion, since he was generally responsible for recording his penitent's life and revelations.² Then there was the fact that confession was one of the most basic ways of affirming a holy woman's orthodoxy, and a partisan confessor would, of course, avail himself of this opportunity. But clerical representations suggest that the association between women and confession extends far beyond pragmatism and that confession is positioned at the very center of female spirituality. Women were not only regarded as especially prone to frequent confession, but their spiritual lives were seemingly organized around their confessional needs and desires. Yet assuming that such a sacramental dependency did exist, I would argue that it was a costly one. For if confession enriched the spiritual lives of some, it brought

¹ For a Foucauldian discussion of the construction of the "confessing subject" in the context of trials for heresy, see John Arnold's *Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc* (Philadelphia, 2001), esp. 98–110.

² See Dyan Elliott, "Dominae or Dominatae? Female Mystics and the Trauma of Textuality," in *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom: Essays in Memory of Michael M. Sheehan*, C.S.B., ed. Constance Rousseau and Joel Rosenthal (Kalamazoo, 1998), 47–77.

infamy and danger to others. My purpose here is to assess the pendulum-like swing of the association between women and confession, with its many vacillations from empowerment to disempowerment, and the places in between.

Two roughly contemporaneous vignettes from northern Europe provide an interesting point of departure for an exploration of the vexed subject of women and confession. The first is from the life of Mary of Oignies, as rendered by her confessor Jacques de Vitry shortly before her death in 1213. The work constitutes one of the earliest notices of the Beguine movement. It is also considered to represent the ur-life of a female mystic.

If sometimes it seemed to her that she had committed a little venial sin, she showed herself to the priest with such sorrow of heart, with such timidity and shame and with such contrition that she was often forced to shout like a woman giving birth from her intense anxiety of heart. Although she guarded herself against small and venial sins, she frequently could not discover for a fortnight even one disordered thought in her heart. Since it is a habit of good minds to recognize a sin where there is none, she frequently flew to the feet of priests and made her confession, all the while accusing herself and we could barely restrain [ourselves] from smiling when she remembered something she had idly said in her youth.³

The invocation of "the habit of good minds" is a direct, albeit silent, quotation from the letter to Augustine of Canterbury attributed to Gregory the Great.⁴ Jacques then proceeds to describe how, every Vespers, Mary would carefully search her day's activities to ascertain that they had been properly regulated, and then proceed to make a fearful confession. The various clerics in the community could themselves discover no real faults in Mary's behavior: "in this alone we sometimes reprimanded her, seeking consolation for our own sloth, because she would confess these small sins we mentioned above more frequently than we would have wished."⁵ Mary's exemplary confessional habits are framed by the lengthy prologue to her life in which Jacques reminds Bishop Fulk of Toulouse, to whom the life is dedicated, that when the latter was visiting Liège while on the run from Cathar heretics, he marveled over how many of the Beguines would weep more for a single venial sin than the men of his own country would have wept for a thousand mortal sins.⁶

³ Jacques de Vitry, "Vita B. Mariae Oignacensis," in *Acta Sanctorum* (Paris and Rome: Victor Palmé, 1867) [hereafter AA SS], June, 5:551; *The Life of Marie d'Oignies*, trans. Margot King (Saskatoon, 1986), 20.

⁴ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* 1.27, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), 92–93.

⁵ AA SS, June, 5:551; *Life of Marie*, trans. King, 20–21; cf. AA SS, June, 5:567, *Life of Marie*, trans. King, 88.

⁶ AA SS, June, 5:547; *Life of Marie*, trans. King, 3.

My second vignette, from the chronicle of the monk Richer of Sens, describes the nefarious activities of a certain Dominican, Robert of Paris—now identified as one of the earliest papal inquisitors, Robert le Bougre. Richer relates that one day a beautiful matron attended Robert's preaching. Sizing her up, Robert told her to wait for him after the sermon. When she obediently followed him to a private spot "where she expected to make her confession to him," he attempted to seduce her. Robert countered her resistance with the threat of having her burned for heresy. On the next day he made good his threat, interrogating her in public. Placing his hand (which contained a concealed piece of parchment inscribed with certain magical words) on her forehead, she was compelled to confess herself a heretic even though she was innocent of such an offense. The woman was saved by her son, who fortunately learned of the ruse from someone familiar with Robert's techniques. Thus appearing at the bishop's consistory where his mother was to be reexamined, the son wrested the parchment from Robert's hand, breaking the spell and permitting the woman to protest her innocence. Robert was perpetually enclosed in a stone prison.⁷

The two tales may, at first, seem to have little in common. In one, the confession is voluntary; in the other, magically constrained. One concerns an exemplary sacramental confession; the other, the devolution from sacramental confession into a bogus confession of heresy. Similarly, the clerics in question are at a variance: a sympathetic confessor versus a ruthless inquisitor.

But the stories are nevertheless united by deeper, more enduring structures. Confessor and inquisitor should in no way be construed as terms of opposition that cancel each other out. From its inception, the Dominican order was intended to help detect heresy and supplement the overtaxed parochial clergy in the hearing of confession. The Franciscans likewise assumed parallel pastoral and disciplinary functions. The potential conflation or perhaps even confusion in functions is suggested by the tale wherein the matron is drawn into a private interview with the confessor/inquisitor, anticipating the performance of one kind of confession, but enacting another. The respective roles are likewise fixed: the priestly interrogator is, by definition, male, even as the suppliant is female. And both tales suggest a pronouncedly female affinity for sacramental confession, intrinsic to which is—what most Christians would agree to be a virtue—a willingness to accuse oneself.

⁷ *Richeri gesta Senoniensis ecclesiae* 4.18, ed. G. Waitz, *MGH SS* (Hanover, 1880), 25:307–308. On Robert's career, see Charles Homer Haskins, "Robert le Bougre and the Beginnings of the Inquisition in Northern France," in *Studies in Mediaeval Culture* (Oxford, 1929), 193–244, esp. 210 ff. The episode described here is translated on pp. 225–226. Cf. Robert's parallel persecution of the matron Petronilla of La Charité in 1236, whom Robert refused to acquit even after her canonical purgation. She eventually appealed to the pope successfully (see Lucien Auvray, ed., *Registres de Grégoire IX* [Paris, 1896], vol. 2, no. 3106).

Auricular confession did not come easily to western Europe. When annual confession was first made mandatory at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 (Lateran IV), Christendom required considerable coaching—parish priests and the laity alike. The new mendicant orders were partially created and soon streamlined into teams of professional confessors, whose incursions into the parish structure were vigorously defended by mendicant spokespersons, such as Bonaventure.⁸

But the promotion of confession needed something more than just the right amount of clerical personnel. Professional confessors called out for professional penitents, and this personnel was very often female. Unlike the Franciscans, whose lay character was effaced within a couple of decades of the death of its founder, women, however pious, were frozen in an eternally lay condition that not only rendered them recipients, versus administrators, of the sacraments, but further cast the power of sacerdotal sacramentalism into sharp hierarchical relief. Thus Jacques de Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré, early sponsors of the Beguine movement, were especially intent on modeling correct confessional habits by emphasizing the exemplarity of their holy charges. As is evident from the above description, Mary's confessional practices far outstripped the bare requirements of Lateran IV, anticipating the recommendation for daily confession that would later be advanced by authorities such as Raymond of Peñafort.⁹ Moreover, this confessional avidity eddied outward. For example, Mary and the other Beguine mystics were miraculously sensitive to the unconfessed sins of others. Their supernatural radar was akin to the ability that this same group of women possessed to discern unconsecrated hosts, in keeping with female eucharistic piety described by Caroline Walker Bynum.¹⁰ And indeed, the two types of sacramental devotion were closely connected insofar as confession was progressively understood as a precondition for communion.¹¹

Moreover, Beguine spirituality, generally, did not only corroborate the newly emphasized importance of confession, but accommodated most as-

⁸ Norman Tanner et al., ed. and trans., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (London, 1990), Lat. IV, c. 21, 1:245. Also Bonaventure, *Opusc. XIV*, "Quare fratres minores praedicent et confessiones audiant," in *S. Bonaventurae . . . Opera Omnia* (Florence, 1898), 8:375–385.

⁹ See Raymond of Peñafort, *Summa de poenitentia et matrimonio* 3.34.6 (Rome, 1603; reprint Farnham, Hants., 1967), 442.

¹⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987), 141, 228–29.

¹¹ As Louis Braeckmans demonstrates, this sequence was not mandatory until the Council of Trent. Even so, the association between confession and communion was already discernible in the mid-thirteenth century with the writings of Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure (*Confession et communion au moyen age et au concile de Trente* [Gembloux, 1971], 14–15, 42–43, 46, 47). Note that many eminent confessors' manuals do not make this association (p. 72).

pects of the penitential system. Mary of Oignies can again be seen as representative here. Her vigorous acts of penance, both on behalf of herself and others, emphasized that certain works on earth could affect one's destiny in the afterlife. The visions and supplicatory interventions of Beguine mystics on behalf of individuals in purgatory not only secured the still nebulous existence of this supernatural zone of expiation but also helped to fill church coffers by reifying the need for indulgences and masses for the dead.¹² This kind of sponsorship, though perhaps beginning with the Beguine movement, did not stop there. Not surprisingly, it is a prominent part in the profile of sanctity for the few women who actually achieved formal canonization—mystics such as Bridget of Sweden and Frances of Rome.¹³

In fact, the institutional gains in the foregrounding of female confessional practice were so palpable that a skeptic might wonder whether the practice was invented to suit the exigencies of the church's sacramental program. But I doubt that clerical masterminds like Jacques de Vitry invented women's confessional virtuosity, nor do I think it originated with the Beguines. There is fragmentary but compelling evidence that this tendency was already present in female spirituality. For instance, when the penitential movement was beginning to make itself felt, one of the first life confessions on record was made by the German Empress Agnes to Peter Damian. (Many historians would argue that she had a lot to be sorry for in forwarding the goals of the papacy against the Empire.) Her care was such that she began to review her faults from the age of five—that is, two years before an individual is *capax doli* (capable of deceit) and considered truly culpable.¹⁴ By the same token, the relations between Robert of Arbrissel

Female
penitence

¹² On Beguine mysticism and its role in validating purgatory, see Jo Ann McNamara's important analysis arguing that certain economic shifts unfavorable to women between 1050 and 1150 transformed the role of the pious female from almsgiver and patron of the living to intercessor on behalf of the dead: "The Need to Give: Suffering and Female Sanctity in the Middle Ages," in *Images of Sainthood*, ed. Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Szell, 199–221, esp. 213ff. Cf. Barbara Newman's analysis of women's important intercessory role on behalf of souls in purgatory, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia, 1995), 109–36.

¹³ A number of Bridget's *Revelations* turned on this capacity. See particularly her vision of her deceased husband, Ulf, in *Revelaciones Extravagantes* 56, ed. Lennart Hollman, *Samlingar utgivna av Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet*, ser. 2, *Latinska Skrifter*, vol. 5 (Uppsala, 1956), 178–79. Cf. article 32 of Bridget's process, concerning her ability to see the destiny of souls (*Acta et processus canonizacionis Beate Birgitte*, ed. Isak Collijn, *Samlingar utgivna av Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet*, ser. 2, *Latinska Skrifter*, vol. 1 [Uppsala, 1924–1931]). Also see Barbara Obrist, "The Swedish Visionary: Saint Bridget of Sweden," in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina Wilson (Athens, Ga., 1984), 234–35. Cf. Frances of Rome's visions of purgatory described in the life written by her confessor, John Matteotti in *AA SS*, March, 2:172, and her process of canonization in Placido Tommaso Lugano, ed., *I processi inediti per Francesca Bussa dei Ponziani (1440–1453)* (Vatican City, 1945), art. 40, 81–82; art. 43, 85.

¹⁴ Henry Charles Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church* (London, 1896), 1:196.

and the Countess Ermengard of Brittany in many ways anticipate the spiritual intimacy prevailing between later holy women and their confessors.¹⁵ A socially constructed reading of this female drive is also close at hand. In the high middle ages, everything was expanding except women's social role, which was proportionately contracting. Men, socially enabled, could search the world. Women, socially hobbled, could search their souls. From the negative standpoint, women could be understood as victims who could not resist the pressures toward internalizing the rhetoric of blame that extended from Eden to medieval wives' manuals. From the positive standpoint, however, they could be seen as finally turning this disparaging rhetoric to their advantage.

Nor should these exemplary Beguine penitents be regarded as mere pawns in the church's larger sacramental agenda. Scholars such as John Coakley have made the mutual gains of confessor and female penitent sufficiently clear that my comments in this context will remain gestural.¹⁶ The individual priest provided the mystic with an experience of the Godhead that was intrinsic to his office: paralleling the priest's Christological role in the course of the mass, the confessor, admitted to the secrets of the penitential forum, had the privilege of "knowing as God," and this authority was frequently played back to him by his penitents. The confessional relationship also provided the priest with the direct experience of divine alterity since the female penitent's mystical revelations were frequently revealed in the context of sacramental confession. Indeed, some clerical authorities, such as Jean Gerson, would assume confession to be the natural medium through which these revelations were disclosed.¹⁷ But certain shared propensities make the confessional relationship potentially self-indulgent for both priest and penitent. From Gerson's perspective, clerics were often prone to the vice of curiosity, which he also characterizes as a quintessentially female character flaw. Women "itching with curiosity" are more inclined to turn away from the truth, both embracing and generating novel

¹⁵ See René Nidurst, "Lettre inédite de Robert d'Arbrissel à la comtesse Ermengarde," *Bibliothèque de l'École de Chartes* 3,5 (1854), esp. 232-35.

¹⁶ See particularly John Coakley's "Gender and the Authority of the Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and Dominicans," *Church History* 60 (1991): 445-60, and idem, "Friars as Confidants of Holy Women in Medieval Dominican Hagiography," in *Images of Sainthood*, ed. Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Szell, 222-46. Also see Elizabeth Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York, 1994), esp. pt. 3, 139-60; Elliott, "Dominæ or Dominatæ?" and the recent collection of articles assessing the relations between various holy women and their assisting clerics, *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine Mooney (Philadelphia, 1999).

¹⁷ See Jean Gerson, *De probatione spirituum*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Palémon Glorieux (Paris, 1960-1973), 9:184; trans. Paschal Boland, in *The Concept of "Discretio spirituum" in John Gerson's "De probatione spirituum" and "De distinctione verarum visionum a falsis"* (Washington, D.C., 1959), 39.

teachings.¹⁸ Scholarly curiosity, a vice Gerson would frequently stigmatize in his writings, would render clerics especially susceptible to the novelty of female revelations.¹⁹

Female Hand Out of Patriarchal Glove

Thus far I have been examining ways in which women's confessional practice could be harnessed by the church in support of the penitential system to the advantage of both parties. But there are also ways in which women could make tactical use of confession to achieve certain personal goals that were frequently at odds with the interests of patriarchal authorities. Such an instance occurs in 1276 when Philip III sent two representatives on a delicate mission. He wanted to know if his beloved second wife, Mary of Brabant, had had a hand in poisoning his son by his first marriage, as his enemies claimed. At the time, there were three local "pseudo-prophets," two of whom were male. But the third and most efficacious of these soothsayers was a Beguine named Isabella, whom some scholars have since associated with the controversial stigmatic, Elisabeth of Spalbeek. The bishop of Laon, a relative to the chamberlain, Peter of Brocia, who was behind the campaign to malign the queen, got there earlier and had the advantage of questioning Isabella first. Indeed, by the time the other representative, the abbot of St. Denis, arrived, she refused to answer his questions altogether. Moreover, when the bishop returned to court, he likewise rebuffed questions, claiming that he had heard her testimony under the seal of sacramental confession. The exasperated king's retort was that he hadn't sent the bishop to hear her confession, but to learn the truth. A second application was made to the prescient Beguine, on which occasion she testified to the queen's innocence.²⁰

¹⁸ Gerson, *De probatione*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 9:184; trans. Boland, in *Concept of 'Discretio spirituum'*, 37; cf. *De examinatione doctrinarum*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 9:468, 473.

¹⁹ See particularly his *Contra curiositatem studentium*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 3:224-49. A section of this has been translated in Steven Ozment's, *Jean Gerson: Selections from A deo exiit, Contra curiositatem studentium and De mystica theologia speculativa*, *Textus minores*, 38 (Leiden, 1969), 26-45.

²⁰ William of Nangis, *Gesta Philippi tertii Francorum regis ann. 1276*, in *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, ed. Danon and Naudet (Paris, 1840), 20:502. It is the French version that claims the Beguine was more renowned than the other two prophets. Also see Ch.-V. Langlois, *Histoire de France illustrée*, ed. E. Lavis (Paris, 1901), 3, 2: 104-5; Ernest McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, with Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1954), 331-32. For an identification of the Beguine with Elisabeth of Spalbeek, see A. Mens, "L'Ombrie italienne et l'ombrie brabançonne: Deux courants religieux parallèles d'inspiration commune," *Etudes franciscaines* annual supplement 17 (1967), 27, n. 1. Elisabeth's life appears in the *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum Bibliothecae regiae bruxellensis* (Brussels, 1886), pt. 1, 1:362-78. Also see W. Simons and J.E. Ziegler, "Phenomenal Religion in the Thirteenth Century and Its Image: Elisabeth of Spalbeek and

Clearly the bishop cannily chose to avail himself of the seal of confession in order to frustrate the king's will. By agreeing to make her confession to the bishop, Isabella was either the unwitting dupe of his machinations or she was complicit with his aims. The fact that she initially refused to respond to the king's second messenger, the abbot of St. Denis, suggests the latter because the seal of confession only bound the priest—not the penitent. But temporary complicity with episcopal goals was, in itself, opportunistic. Since Isabella would eventually help to clear the queen's name, she may have fallen in with the bishop's plan momentarily in order to buy time. Presumably, prophecy has its own internal timing that may or may not be aloof from the exigencies of politics.

Isabella demonstrates a tactical use of sacramental confession that permitted her subtly to control and time her intervention in public affairs. A second instance, also from the thirteenth-century Beguine milieu, demonstrates ways in which the confessional relationship itself could be tactically deployed. The chronicler Richer balances his account of Robert le Bougre's deception by immediately following it up with a parallel example of female treachery. A certain woman of the city of Marsal in the archdiocese of Metz, appropriately named Sybil, was envious of the visibility achieved by the local Beguines, and self-consciously imitated their spiritual practices in order to con the entire diocese.²¹ Her web of deception extended from the parish priest, to the bishop, to both mendicant orders—who were avidly preaching the virtues of Sybil. Some highlights of her fraudulent repertoire were her three-day raptures, during which she ostensibly refused food and drink, only to indulge herself late at night;²² conversations with angels (after which she spread aromatic spices to simulate the angelic presence); struggles with demons (punctuated by the feathers of torn pillows); and conversations between demons and angels (with Sybil ventriloquizing each voice). For obvious reasons, most of Sybil's chicanery was perpetrated in privacy, with the admiring populace on the outside of a closed door, but

the Passion Cult," in *Women in the Church*, ed. W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood, *Studies in Church History*, vol. 27 (Oxford, 1990), 117–26.

²¹ Richer, *Gesta* 4.9, MGH SS, 25:309–10.

²² For another spectacular case of fraudulent raptures, see Dyan Elliott, "The Physiology of Rapture and Female Spirituality," in *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*, ed. Peter Biller and Alastair Minnis (Woodbridge, 1997), 169–71. Note that fraudulent raptures were not invariably evil. See Caesarius of Heisterbach's account of how a cleric feigned raptures to win the trust of a heretical ring of theologians who were eventually burned at Paris (*Dialogus miraculorum* 5.22, ed. Joseph Strange [Cologne, 1851], 1:306; trans. H. Von E. Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland, *The Dialogue on Miracles* [London, 1929], 1:350). But generally, feigned miracles were associated with false prophets—biblical and those again anticipated in the period surrounding Antichrist. See especially Peter d'Ailly's discussion of feigned miracles in *De falsis prophetis*. Note, however, that he grants that sometimes false prophets can perform true miracles "for sometimes grace is infused in hypocrites by God not only for doing good works but also for performing miracles or predicting the future" (printed in L. E. du Pin's edition of Gerson's works, *Opera omnia* [Antwerp, 1706], vol. 1, col. 521).

there was one important exception. Sometimes in the evening she would sally forth dressed in a hairy demon-suit, which she fondly referred to as her *larva* (specter or hobgoblin), in order to terrify the populace with vociferous threats against that pious virgin Sybil. Thus disguised, she once railed against Sybil's intervention on behalf of a recently deceased individual, reputed to be wicked, whose soul she swept up in a three-day rapture. The "demon" complained that Sybil's tearful suffrages and prayers had managed to preserve the deceased from the flames that he had so richly deserved. And the demon had been so looking forward to leading his "friend" around his delightful field, "always scattered with the dew of sulfur and fire; there are my happy reptiles and viperous animals, and serpents, and snakes, and toads . . . [where] I live with my beloved friends and make jokes." Sybil's sartorial aspirations were not limited to representations of the demonic, but extended to material expressions of celestial glory. On the day after her successful demonic caper, the bishop entered her chamber to discover her rosy-faced, as if sleeping, beneath a subtle white material that did not seem to have been made by human hands. In answer to the bishop's questions, her host volunteered that Sybil was often discovered in this mode after her celestial raptures.²³ The angels themselves provided her with such otherworldly ornaments, in addition to making her bed. Clearly, Sybil's jaded imitation of Beguine spirituality would be immediately put to shame by the mere presence of a Christina Mirabilis,²⁴ but no such apologies are in order for her inventiveness, which is worthy of a Jean de Meun.

Sybil was eventually exposed while simulating a debate between angels and demons that ostensibly occurred while she was in rapture. Someone looked through a chink in the door to discover her holding this remarkable colloquy while making the bed herself. Sybil's short-lived success was entirely contingent on the assistance of her "familiar" priest—who secretly provided her with food and drink to sustain her during her raptures and acted as her intermediary with the world. It is not surprising that a vernacular source claimed that the whole ruse was initiated so the couple would have the opportunity for sexual dalliance.²⁵ But it is much more likely that

²³ Cf. an incident in Sulpicius Severus's life of St. Martin in which an individual, who claims communication with angels, promises to appear in angelic robe that will prove "the power of God." This beautiful robe of unidentifiable substance disappears when the attempt is made to lead him before Martin (*Vie de Saint Martin* c. 23, ed. Jacques Fontaine, *Sources Chrétiennes*, no. 133 [Paris, 1967], 1:304–7; trans. Alexander Roberts, *The Life of Saint Martin, Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church*, vol. 11 [Ann Arbor, 1964], 15).

²⁴ See Thomas of Cantimpré's *The Life of Christina of Saint-Trond*, trans. Margot King (Saskatoon, 1986). Also see Barbara Newman's discussion of Christina's career in "Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century," *Speculum* 73 (1998): 463–68.

²⁵ See *Gesta*, MGH SS, 25:308, n. 1.

theirs was not an affair of the heart, but the kind of relationship that would later be stigmatized by Gerson in his denunciations of "those who cherish the false miracles and revelations of these little women so that they will obtain profit or honor."²⁶ Thus, in addition to the exchange of sacramental power and supernatural services, we can see the deployment of the prophet for profit. Through her coalition with a small-scale patriarch, here signified by the "familiar" priest, Sybil took on and befuddled a large-scale patriarch, here represented by the bishop.

This point could have been made with practically any partnership between a mystic and her attendant priest. But I have chosen this rather provocative example because notable failures make visible the shared components that are seamlessly displayed, and hence, frequently concealed, in notable successes. Moreover, I want to draw attention to a fact that was never lost on the higher clergy: that the would-be mystic and attendant cleric legitimized one another in their respective roles—regardless of whether the mystical experiences at the center of their relationship were legitimate.

A Torn Glove, A Festering Hand (or Gloves Off?)

The very factors that render confession (or, in the largest sense, the penitential system) efficacious as a potential source of female empowerment contribute to its currency as a mechanism of disempowerment and containment. We need only remind ourselves of the conditions under which confession was introduced to ascertain why this should be so. When Lateran IV first made annual confession mandatory for Latin Christendom, this was part of its many-pronged initiative to counteract the threat of heresy. Even if confession was not precisely instituted with the detection of heresy in mind, a point that scholars such as Pierre-Marie Gy have vehemently urged, there is little doubt that within a couple of decades this understanding was annexed to confession.²⁷

Moreover, women's prominent role as penitents would necessarily cast their less tractable sisters into unfavorable relief. Consider, for example, the well-known case of the Beguine mystic, Marguerite Porete. Her indiffer-

²⁶ Gerson, *Centilogium de impulsis*, no. 65, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 8:143. This invective is grounded in the comparison of these fraudulent contemporaries with the female prophet whom Paul condemned, despite her endorsement of his mission. He was thus persecuted by her followers in an effort to protect this valuable asset (Acts 16.16).

²⁷ See Pierre-Marie Gy's "Le Précepte de la confession annuelle (Lateran IV, c. 21) et la détection des hérétiques: S. Bonaventure et S. Thomas contre S. Raymond de Peñafort," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 58 (1974): 444–50. Note, however, that in Bonaventure's later analysis of c. 21, one of his arguments is that regular confession helps priests to discern heretics ("... ut discernantur obediens ab inobediens vel hareticis per observantiam talis statuti," Bonaventure, *Opusc. XIV*, "Quare fratres minores praedict et confessiones audiant," in *Opera*, 8:376).

ence to presenting herself in the context of some recognizable confessional relationship—whether from the perspective of a stable confessional practice or a confessor to vet and record her revelations—ultimately meant that she would end up at a different confessional tribunal altogether: an inquisitional tribunal for heresy. When the cleric, Guiard de Cressonessart, attempted to defend Marguerite before this dire forum, thus providing her with suitable clerical cover, she rebuffed his overtures.²⁸

But compliance with Lateran IV could furnish as many difficulties for women as resistance to its strictures. From the beginning, there were problems with the observation of the celebrated seal of confession. An ominous exemplum by Jacques de Vitry, for example, relates some awkward confessional exchanges that occurred between the early Dominicans and various religious women in the Low Countries.

Certain of the said women showed their infirmities and temptations and the failing of their fragile nature to those men just as they would to religious, so that they would be helped specially by their prayers. But those men not only suspected them with temerity to be otherwise but in different lay and clerical congregations . . . they preached that the renowned communities of holy virgins were really prostitutes rather than religious groups and thus the defects of the few were poured out to all . . . [and] they scandalized many.²⁹

In the case of the Prussian mystic, Dorothea of Montau, a frank disclosure of her revelations to an unsympathetic priest in the course of confession led directly to an accusation of heresy, stimulating a handful of clerics to insist on her immolation.³⁰

Furthermore, female volubility, however commendable, was almost immediately problematized, particularly among the mendicants. The Franciscan statutes of the general chapter at Narbonne in 1260 already determined that the frequency of women's confession should be limited. Noncompliant friars would be denounced to their superiors by well-wishing brethren.³¹

²⁸ The documents for the trial of Marguerite and Guiard have been edited by Paul Verdeyen as "Le Procès d'inquisition contre Marguerite Porete et Guiard de Cressonessart (1309–1310)," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 81 (1986): 47–94. Verdeyen also includes select chroniclers who discussed the trial.

²⁹ Jacques de Vitry, *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. Thomas Frederick Crane, Folklore Publications, no. 26 (London, 1890), no. 80, 36. The confessors in question are, in all likelihood, marked as mendicants—not only because they are designated preachers but also because their presence in the area was in order to preach and hear confession.

³⁰ I discuss this episode in "Authorizing a Life: The Collaboration of Dorothea of Montau and John Marienwerder" in *Gendered Voices*, ed. Mooney, 187–8.

³¹ Michael Bihl, ed., "Statuta generalia ordinis edita in capitulis generalibus celebratis Narbonae an. 1260, Assisii an. 1279 atque Parisiis an. 1292. Editio critica et synoptica," in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 34 (1941): Narbonne, 1260, 6.5, 70. Also see Donato Soliman, *Il ministero della confessione nella legislazione dei frati minori*, Studi e testi Francescani, no.

Though these constraints were partially inspired by limited resources in personnel, fear of intimacy between the sexes was also undoubtedly an issue. St. Francis's reluctance to assume responsibilities for female orders is a case in point. A parallel caution is apparent on a more local level as well; the first rule of Francis already barred friars from receiving vows of obedience from women.³² In a similar vein, Bonaventure would develop an elaborate twelve-point series of justifications for the Franciscan refusal to promote the Third Order, the sixth of which turns on the risk that pastoral responsibilities to women entail.³³

But even those who worked hardest to foreground female virtuosity in the penitential system could rarely restrain their fears of the potential dangers that might arise from the privileged rapport between confessor and penitent. Despite his impeccable credentials as a promoter of the Beguine movement and his personal spiritual indebtedness to the influence of Lutgard of Aywières, Thomas of Cantimpré's anxieties are especially palpable.³⁴ In the course of his work *Concerning Bees*, in which he ostensibly sets out to write a history of the Dominican order but does so by meandering amid various contemporary scandals, a potentially staggering insight emerges: that many clerics are more tempted by women who appear to have embraced a religious way of life. Likewise women, who would automatically spurn the attractions of secular men—stimulated by the devil and spurred on by twisted minds—frequently cannot resist the allure of holy men, monks, or other ecclesiastics. Thomas associates the perverse logic informing such attractions with Pliny's ruminations on the nature of the pig which, when agitated by the furies of lust, will rush at any person dressed in white.³⁵

28 (Rome, 1964), 145. Cf. fourteenth-century efforts to limit female frequency of confession (147).

³² Caietanuss Esser, *Opuscula sancti patris Francisci Assisiensis* (Rome, 1978), c. 12, 265. (This is what is, in fact, referred to as the first rule. The original rule, which Francis presented to Innocent III in 1209 or 1210, has not survived, however.) See Soliman, *Il ministero della confessione*, 145. Also see the general council of Narbonne in 1260, which forbids a friar to assume responsibility for a female house and repeats the first rule's prohibition against receiving a vow of obedience from a woman (ed. Bihl, "Statua generalia," 6.6, 70–71).

³³ See Bonaventure, *Opusc.* 17, pt. 2, q. 16, in *Opera*, 8:368–9.

³⁴ Thomas's *vita* of Lutgard has been translated by Margot King, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières* (Saskatoon, 1987). See particularly 2.32, 59, where she is referred to explicitly as *mater spiritualis*. On Thomas and his instructions regarding confession in *De apibus*, see Alexander Murray, "Confession as a Historical Source in the Thirteenth Century," in *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. H. C. Davies and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill (Oxford, 1981), 286–305.

³⁵ Thomas of Cantimpré, *Bonum universale de apibus* 2.30.44 (Douai, 1627), 348–49; cf. Pliny, *Hist. nat.* 10.63. Thomas also enlists a porcine analogy in the preceding warning to women to be resistant to masculine suasions even as the Virgin initially was to the angel Gabriel's words. Citing Aristotle, he invokes the behavior of the sow who, as long as she is holding her ears rigid, is resisting the male pig's sexual overtures. A relaxation in the ears corresponds to her sexual receptivity (2.30.42, 346–47). For more on the attraction between clerics and holy women, see 2.30.19, 329; 2.30.46, 351–53.

This not very edifying reflection is buttressed by an example concerning a friar named Dominic, who was a monk at the same monastery as the order's founder. The friar's reputation for sanctity had so impressed the king of Castile that when a certain prostitute claimed that she could seduce him, the outraged monarch threatened to execute her for slander—a charge that forced her to make good her boast. The prostitute accordingly attended Dominic's sermon, during which she feigned a tearful, credible conversion. The cleric felt exhilarated at such puissant proof of his impact as a preacher. He heard her confession and advised her to assume a more seemly manner of dress. For her part, the woman simulated the demeanor of a humble and obedient penitent to perfection. This performance was crowned with an exaggerated sorrow, punctuated by a becoming flood of tears, though the reason for her bitter compunction was veiled in mystery. Eventually, at the preacher's urging, she revealed the reason for her grief: that she needed to sleep with him once in order to be saved. Now fully alerted to her ruse, the preacher nevertheless promised to fulfill her desire at an appointed place and time. She accordingly summoned the king to witness the downfall of his saintly favorite. They arrived to find the holy man, in the spirit of the hagiographical ordeal, on a bed of live coals, from where he invited the woman to join him. The king's men rushed up to coax him out of the fire, while the prostitute took his place, being burned at the king's orders.³⁶ Thomas thus advises confessors to behave with circumspection, keeping their comments brief, harsh, and rigid.

protest
of
mendicant

Nor should they be the less avoided if they seem to be of good character and honest life; because by how much more religious they are, by that much more do they entice; and under the guise of religion the vitals of lust [*viscus libidinis*] especially flourish. Believe me: I speak as a bishop [i.e., as bishop's penitentiary] and an expert.³⁷

The capstone for such warnings recalls a recent and lamentable example from Cambrai, this time involving two individuals of good will. A cleric, chaste from youth, was a canon in a conventual church. Out of zeal for pastoral work, he relinquished his prebend for a parish, in which he piously toiled for seven years. But then on a fateful day, the sixty-year-old virgin who was accustomed to wash the priest's hair shirt entered his bedroom unattended: "Before the woman and the priest separated, they were both deprived of their long preserved lily of virginity and chastity." The woman

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³⁶ Thomas of Cantimpré, *De apibus* 2.30.45, 349–51. For other instances in which saintly chastity is demonstrated through parallel ordeals involving fire, see Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, 1993), 70, 77, 90, 129, 272.

³⁷ Thomas of Cantimpré, *De apibus* 2.30.46, 352. Note that when he claims to speak as a bishop he means as someone who hears confessions on behalf of the bishop.

soon died of sorrow; the man, reveling in his vice, went from bad to worse.³⁸

Thomas's hortatory examples, though effective, lack the sophistication of some later treatments. The literature of spiritual discernment, which flourished in the later middle ages, would provide a slightly more dignified analysis on the transformation of spiritual into carnal love by interpreting it in terms of demonic occlusion. Hence Henry of Freimar censures the initially innocent, but all the more dangerous, impulse that will seek private and excessive conversations with a devout person.³⁹

The manuals produced to assist the clergy in hearing confession would eventually become replete with detailed advice for deflecting the temptations afforded by female penitents. Raymond of Peñafort had instructed the priest to make a woman sit across from him and to avoid looking into her face. Gerson concurs, but adds that the confessor should assume a stance in which he is least likely to be aroused—even if this entails full prostration. By Antoninus of Florence's time, women were only to be confessed in public with witnesses. Nor should priests tarry, rather imposing a strict time limit on women "who wish to confess excessively frequently. . . [The priest] should always use harsh and terse words with them rather than gentle."⁴⁰ Antoninus further condemns priests who hear daily confessions, thinking it a waste of time and source of scandal. Similar views would be expressed by John Nider.⁴¹ Therefore, if we approach confession from the vantage point of social control or the kind of Foucauldian surveillance associated with power, the above discourse—grounded in a concern with clerical purity and peppered by antifeminism—would add an additional layer to these mechanisms of constraint. The net result would inevitably work to the diminution of female power.

Thus far, I have outlined some of the ways that women could be derailed from the careful observance of the sacrament through outer constraints. But there were also dangers that allegedly arose from within, whereby an exacting penitent might sink too deeply into the sacrament—inadvertently crossing a subtle barrier beyond which a virtue can be deformed into a vice. We can already see this transformation beginning in the thirteenth

³⁸ Ibid., 2.30.47, 353.

³⁹ See Henry of Freimar, *De quatuor instinctibus*, in *Insignis atque preclarus de singulari tractatu de quatuor instinctibus* (Venice, 1498), 4th sign, fol. 61r. Henry claims to be following the contours of Augustine's *De trinitate* and the Ps.-Augustinian treatise *De singularitate clericorum*.

⁴⁰ Raymond of Peñafort, *Summa de poenitentia* 3.34.30, 464–65; Gerson, *De cognitione castitatis*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 9:63; Antoninus of Florence, *Confessionale Anthonini* (also known by its first word, *Defecerunt*) 3.11 (Paris: Jehan Petit, 1507?), fol. 28r.

⁴¹ Antoninus of Florence, *Confessionale* 3.11, fol. 28v. Cf. John Nider's *Confessionale sue manuale confessorum fratris Johannis Nyder ad instructionem spiritualium pastorum valde necessarium* (Paris, n.d.), see 2.1, 6th rule. (This edition is unpaginated.)

century when theologians such as Thomas Aquinas went to work on Gregory's characterization of the "habit of good minds to recognize a sin where there is none" by asking if someone could go so far as to confess a sin that he or she had not really committed, concluding that this was impermissible.⁴² This problematization of confessional practice continued apace among pastoral theologians, such as Jean Gerson, under the rubric of scrupulosity or pusillanimity.⁴³ Gerson's discussion is grounded in the premise that fear is a passion, and that someone predisposed to this passion is especially prone to suffer from scrupulosity of conscience.⁴⁴ Complexion might further be a contributing factor. If an individual had thin, cold blood, and their natural moisture was dominated by phlegmatic humors, he or she would be prone to fear and pusillanimity, which was frequently associated with a weakness of the heart.⁴⁵ Nor is Gerson oblivious to the potential good inherent in a fearful disposition. To this end, he foregrounds the statement in Proverbs "Blessed is the man that is always fearful" (Prov. 28:14) in his writings on spiritual discernment.⁴⁶ And yet, the devil, disguised as the angel of light, works on the passions in different ways. For instance, he is capable not merely of exciting lust but also repressing it, hence simulating spiritual tranquility and sweetness.⁴⁷ Similarly, pusillanimity can also masquerade as a virtue. The naturally timorous suffer from defects in their complexion that are open to demonic exploitation. The ensuing fear should thus be fled rather than embraced.⁴⁸

From Gerson's perspective, a classic case of needless scrupulosity is an individual's concern about insufficient attention during prayers—something that, to Gerson's mind, is perfectly understandable, and hence excusable, considering human frailty. Even so, there are many who think themselves insufficiently contrite, wearing themselves and their confessors out over such light sins—hence putting their own deficiencies ahead of God's clemency. Such individuals who "from infirmity have accidentally excessively fluxible phantasies [*fluxibiles nimis habent phantasias*] and are dis-

⁴² Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super sententiis*, bk. 4, dist. 21, q. 2, art. 3, resp. and resp. ad 4 (Paris, 1947), 4: 1066, 1067.

⁴³ On scrupulosity, see Thomas Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton, 1977), 156ff.

⁴⁴ Gerson, *De remediis contra pusillanimitatem*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 10:381. An alternative title to this work is *De scrupulis conscientiae*. Also see the French translation of this treatise in *Oeuvres complètes*, 8:386–398. Glorieux is unclear as to which version came first, but believes that the Latin was written before 30 July 1405 (see his introduction to the French, 8:386). Gerson returns to the problem of scrupulosity in many different contexts. See, e.g., his *Regulae mandatorum* no. 8, 9:97; *De signis bonis et malis*, 9:163; *De praeparatione ad missam* consideratio 3, 9:37–39; *De meditatione cordis* c. 17, 8:82, 83; *Traité des diverses tentations de l'ennemi*, 7:346, ff.

⁴⁵ Gerson, *De passionibus animae* c. 18, c. 20, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 9:17, 20.

⁴⁶ Gerson, *De distinctione revelationum*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 3:49.

⁴⁷ Gerson, *De remediis contra pusillanimitatem*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 10:378.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 10:379.

tracted willy nilly from their proposition by a light breeze of wind to other things" are not in any way culpable.⁴⁹

But there were other dangers implicit in scrupulosity that were more costly than either the penitent's niggling self-torture or the confessor's exasperation. The impulse to confess every sinful or potentially blasphemous thought could have the effect of reinforcing the thought.⁵⁰ Even more alarming ramifications occur if an individual manages to convince him- or herself that a morally neutral act is sinful or that a venial sin is a mortal sin. Such convictions become self-fulfilling prophecies because the conscience constitutes a tribunal unto itself. To go against what conscience prompts is sinful, even if its dictates are wrong.⁵¹ Moreover, while Gerson is constantly reproving the scrupulous that their fearfulness puts divine clemency and even divine grace in doubt, what is also at issue is the priest's power of absolution.⁵²

In other words, the scrupulosity of the Beguine milieu had been an important prop in promoting the sacrament of confession, but by the time Gerson was writing, this same trait had come to undermine the sacrament. Mary of Oignies exhibited precisely the kind of sorrow over the commission of a venial sin that Gerson would target as suspect. The confessional profile of Mary's contemporary, Lutgard of Aywières, was even more vexed, at least when regarded through a late medieval lens. Not only was insufficient attention over the saying of her hours a constant concern for Lutgard, but this anxiety was not restricted to her own religious practice. She also (correctly) predicted a plague on the nuns who served in the infirmary of her community for similar inattention.⁵³ Moreover, Lutgard's fears for herself were eventually assuaged, not through confession, but through the mysterious arrival of a shepherd from afar who reassured her, in the presence of her entire community, that she was pleasing to God.⁵⁴

Already in Gerson we find a predisposition to be especially concerned

⁴⁹ Gerson, *De remediis contra pusillanimitatem*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 10:381. This exculpation does not apply to those who are simply carnally minded and slothful (pp. 381–82). Cf. Gerson's parallel evocation of the recitation of the hours and scrupulosity (*De praeparatione ad missam*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 6th consideration, 9:43). See Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1999), 27–29.

⁵⁰ Gerson, *De remediis contra pusillanimitatem*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 10:382, 385.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 10:381; cf. *Regulae mandatorum* no. 7, 9:96; no. 8, 9:97; no. 23, 9:100.

⁵² Gerson, *De remediis contra pusillanimitatem*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 10:381. Tentler points out that the tradition of consolation of the scrupulous is at least partially intended to build up the church's power against the overscrupulous who have doubts regarding sacerdotal power (*Sin and Confession*, 158).

⁵³ Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard* 2.17, trans. King, 45–46; 3.2.14, 90, and 3.22, 101–2; cf. the way Margaret of Ypres was likewise obsessed with the saying of her hours (Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres* c. 20, trans. Margot King, 3d ed. [Toronto, 1999], 35–36).

⁵⁴ Thomas of Cantimpré, *Life of Lutgard* 2.2.17, trans. King, 45; cf. *idem*, *De apibus* 2.52.4, 482–83.

with scrupulosity in women. In a confessional context, scrupulosity increases the contact between confessor and penitent, enhancing the chances of a gradual devolution from spiritual to carnal love.⁵⁵ But even more important, Gerson created a framework for stigmatizing and even pathologizing scrupulosity. Predictably, others would move in and gender this pathology as female. When reviewing the reasons for excessive scrupulosity in his *Consolation of a Timorous Conscience*, John Nider leads off with a discussion of complexions. Women, particularly old women and individuals with a melancholic complexion, are especially liable due to excessive coldness. In women especially, a certain constriction of the heart attends their fearfulness, and they frequently tremble, while the members attached to the heart are the more afflicted. The voice falters and the lips quaver, as is evident with respect to the woman with flux who fearfully approached Christ for healing (Mark 5:25), who is thus rendered as something of a type for scrupulosity. This association invites the resurfacing of a suppressed subtext for the entire issue of scrupulosity. For the original context of Gregory the Great's "habit of good minds" was over the question of whether a menstruating woman should be permitted to receive communion—a context withheld in Jacques de Vitry's later appropriation of this characterization. Although Nider does not invoke Gregory explicitly at this point, his analysis nevertheless unerringly rejoins scrupulosity with the flawed, bleeding, female body. Elsewhere, Nider will invoke Albert the Great, who alleges that the combination of woman's lack of heat and dominant moisture "into which terrible things are poured" render her naturally fearful. In addition to this complective propensity, other factors, such as retention of corrupt menstrual blood, inordinate vigils, fasting, care, solitude, or deep thought can also intrude to stimulate the disease of mania or melancholy (which is distinct from a naturally melancholic disposition)—the main symptom for which is excessive fearfulness. Certain individuals—referred to as *energuimini* or, more conveniently still, lunatics—are affected by the movement of the moon, which manipulates the moisture in their heads causing them to howl with fear. Demonic temptation can also wreak havoc with a healthy complexion, afflicting it with a black jaundice (*colera nigra*) likewise associated with fear.⁵⁶ When differentiating scrupulosity from the other passions, Nider makes the telling point that "it is that much more dangerous by the extent

⁵⁵ Cf. the comments regarding the scruples that arise in the course of meditation that appear in one manuscript of *De meditatione cordis*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 8:83–84. Also see his account of a recently converted matron who, in her fervor, was directed by her intense attraction to various religious who might easily have taken advantage of her, had they not been stronger (*De simplificatione cordis*, 8:95). See his condemnation of priests whose carnal lust interferes with the performance of God's work—the example evoked being a confessor who prefers a beautiful over an ugly penitent, or young over old, or male over female penitent (*De signis bonis et malis* 9:166).

⁵⁶ John Nider, *Consolatorium timorate conscientie* (Paris, 1502?) 3.4–5 (unpaginated).

to which it is falsely reckoned a virtue.⁵⁷ He will accordingly trim Gregory's "habit of good minds" with Aquinas's interpretation of "good" in terms of the perfection of justice.⁵⁸

The disinvestment in women as confessional exemplars, associated with Jean Gerson and sustained in the work of John Nider, interestingly corresponds with a parallel, but independent, Wycliffite critique of the sacrament. Gerson was a prime mover at the Council of Constance in 1415, during which views attributed to John Wyclif, including his rejection of auricular confession as a papal invention and a demonic snare, were condemned.⁵⁹ The same council consigned Hus, a continental exponent of Wycliffite views, to the flames. But their followers would continue to reject what had become the standard penitential package of the high middle ages. Thus a vernacular Wycliffite treatise on confession excoriates the practice, pointing out that Christ neither practiced confession nor taught it; that both Mary Magdalene and Peter were reconciled without confession, as was the woman taken in adultery. Nor was confession a practice of the early church. Confession as it came to be known in the later middle ages was nothing other than the invention of Innocent III and a device of the Antichrist.⁶⁰ Another Wycliffite treatise asks if it were at all likely that a God who values chastity "ordeyned sich a lawe to men, that prestis & wymmen shulde turne her faces to-gider, & speke lustful thoutes & dedis, which myght do harme to hem bothe; but this lawe gyueth occasioun to do synne as it fallith off"?⁶¹ In other words, both orthodox and heretical exponents were similarly apprised of how the sexual risks implicit in confession might far outstrip any possible spiritual benefits.

The Iron Glove: Confession and Inquisition

Nider's *Consolation of a Timorous Conscience* presents scrupulosity as a potentially lethal affliction, which could generate the life-threatening sin of despair.⁶² His colorful *Formicarium*, moreover, adduces data in support of this point. A nun from Nuremberg named Kunegond was in constant fear that her confession was insufficient—a concern that Nider describes as natural in the fragile sex. The inordinate fear that she had committed a mortal sin, compounded by excessive fasts, not only caused her confessors to be concerned for her sanity but actually delivered her to death's door. Fortunately, God effected a timely removal of the fear of damnation a mere three

⁵⁷ Ibid., 3.2.

⁵⁸ Nider, *Consolatorium* 3.16; cf. 3.15.

⁵⁹ Session 15, arts. 9–11; Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Council*, 1:422–23.

⁶⁰ F. D. Matthew, ed., *The English Works of Wyclif*, EETS o.s., 74 (London, 1880; rev. ed., 1902; reprint, Millwood, N.Y., 1973), 328–29.

⁶¹ Ibid., 330.

⁶² Nider, *Consolatorium* 3.2.

days before her death. The pious widow and prioress, Catherine de Westhusen, afflicted by the identical concern, was likewise liberated under similar circumstances.⁶³

Yet there were also instances in which the inward disposition of scrupulosity could lead to external dangers that, to the modern mind, might seem even more pressing than the fear of damnation. In particular, the propensity for confession and self-accusation could lead to the kind of self-incrimination that would facilitate the merging of the penitential forum with its harsher double: the inquisitional forum against heresy.⁶⁴ At this juncture, I should add that from a theological standpoint, even the confession of an unrepentant heretic is protected by the seal of confession. In theory, he cannot be denounced by his confessor. Canonical authorities, however, in particular, Raymond of Peñafort, believed that a heretic had relinquished the privilege of sacramental secrecy and that his confessor should denounce him to the inquisition—a view that, however contested, would remain in circulation due to the immense popularity of Raymond's manual for confessors.⁶⁵ We have also seen that at least one of Dorothea of Montau's confessors availed himself of Raymond's fiat.

~~But~~ female scrupulosity often dispensed with the need for clerical denunciations. Indeed, following the basic contours of William of Auvergne's juristic analogy of the sacrament of penance, the perfect penitent was both culprit, accuser, arraigner, and prosecutor of him- or herself.⁶⁶ Even so, we should attempt to differentiate between two basic groups. First, there were those who, in the spirit of Gregory's "habit of good minds to recognize a sin where there is none," would accuse themselves without any real warrant. Stephen of Bourbon, a Dominican inquisitor who was active in France in the 1230s, tells of a noblewoman in a city where he was conducting heresy trials. "Holy and innocent, she approached me saying that she offered herself to me for burning as a heretic worse than all the others who were burned for infidelity, as she was thinking the worst things about the articles of the faith and the sacraments." When she acknowledged that she

⁶³ Nider, *Formicarium* 2.12 (Douai, 1602), 175–76. Cf. a similar instance, this time concerning a monk (176–77).

⁶⁴ On the parallels between these two confessional fora, see Annie Cazenave, "Aveu et contrition. Manuels de confesseurs et interrogatoires d'inquisition en Languedoc et en Catalogne (XIIIe–XIVe siècles)," in *La piété populaire au moyen âge*, Actes du 99e Congrès National des Sociétés savantes, Bescançon, 1974 (Paris, 1977), 333–52.

⁶⁵ Raymond of Peñafort, *Summa de poenitentia* 3.34.60, 490–91.

⁶⁶ William of Auvergne, *De sacramentis (De sacramento poenitentiae)* c. 3, in *Opera omnia*, 1: 461; cf. 486; see also William's earlier *Tractatus novus de poenitentiae* of ca. 1223, where he outlines a similar plan (c. 1, in *Opera*, 1:571 [570–92]). Also see Nicole Beriou, "La Confession dans les écrits théologiques et pastoraux du XIIIe siècle: Médication de l'âme ou démarche judiciaire?" in *L'Aveu: Antiquité et Moyen Age*, Actes de la table ronde organisée par l'École française de Rome avec le concours du CNRS et de l'Université de Trieste, Rome 28–30 mars 1984 (Rome, 1986), 275–76.

never consented to these thoughts, he convinced her of her innocence and she left happy.⁶⁷ The scrupulosity of Aude, whose tortured doubts about the Eucharist soon brought her to the attention of Bishop Fournier's inquisition, seems to be of the same caliber.⁶⁸ Both women were fortunate in that inquisitional attention ultimately resulted in exculpation. But this was not invariably the case. For instance, Constance de Rabastens, one of the several female prophets who arose during the papal schism anticipating Joan of Arc, was sufficiently concerned about the orthodoxy of her revelations that she submitted them to the inquisitor of Languedoc. She was ultimately imprisoned for her scrupulosity.⁶⁹

A second category might consist of women who were actually implicated in heresy, in which case the impulse to confess would be injurious to their personal safety, however salubrious for their souls. It is also worth noting that in the primarily female heresy of the Guglielmites, several women came forward without being summoned and confessed to the inquisition voluntarily, while none of the men did.⁷⁰ The testimony of the Olivite Na Prous Boneta, moreover, gives the impression of the kind of preparation for confession advocated by the clergy so that the penitent can easily "vomit forth her virus"—as Gerson would have it.⁷¹ Her "confession," proffered without contrition or repentance, however, places her somewhere at the crossroads between the well-prepared penitent and the sacrificial witness at the center of a martyr's *passio*.⁷²

But however we characterize the different kinds of confession, it is important not to be misled by the medieval emphasis that confessions be made *sponte*—voluntarily or even spontaneously. Medieval confessions were not "spontaneous" self-disclosures in the modern sense of the word. Rather, they were sponsored or elicited self-disclosures that are shaped within a patriarchal structure. The occasion and framework for any confession are institutional, as are the officers responsible for assessing the culpa-

⁶⁷ *Anecdotes historiques, légendes et apologues tirés du recueil inédit d'Etienne de Bourbon*, ed. A. Lecoy de la Marche (Paris, 1877), no. 227, 196.

⁶⁸ See Peter Dronke's discussion of her case in *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (d. 203) to Marguerite of Porete (d. 1310)* (Cambridge, 1984), 213–14.

⁶⁹ See Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski's "Constance de Rabastens: Politics and Visionary Experience in the Time of the Great Schism," *Mystics Quarterly* 25 (1999): 147–68.

⁷⁰ See, e.g., the testimony of Petra de Alzate and Katella de Gioziis, who sought out the inquisitors and confessed spontaneously without having been cited, in Marina Benedetti, ed., *Milano 1300: I processi inquisitoriali contro le devote e i devoti di santa Guglielma* (Milan, 1999), 116–20. They had been explicitly warned by the ringleader of the heresy, Mayfreda, not to reveal their heretical beliefs to their confessors. She further enjoined them to consult with her before seeing the inquisitors in the event that they were summoned. The inquisitors ordered that they reveal their errors in sacramental confession.

⁷¹ See Gerson, *De confessione castitatis*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 9:63.

⁷² See the translation of her testimony by Elizabeth Petroff, in *Women's Visionary Literature* (Oxford, 1986), 284–90.

bility of penitent and defendant alike. However, these self-disclosures also emerge in the course of a relationship. Thus, according to Antoninus of Florence's *Confessionale*, "In truth, every confession occasions a revelation which cannot exist without the revelation of one and the perception of another."⁷³ The roles are determined in a fixed and gendered hierarchy. And yet, like all relationships, confession can be easily derailed and transformed by an imbalance in power.

The incident of Robert le Bougre and his nameless female victim can be read as a potential repository for social anxieties on the subject of confession—probing and possibly critiquing the essence of the confessional relationship. The occurrence lends itself to analysis as the monkish chronicler's encoded characterization of the mendicant orders and their auspicious (though resented) papal authorizations or even their lead in the newfangled learning of the schools. On a more figurative level, however, the episode can be read as a commentary on the relation of writing and monopolistic learning to coercive power. The fact that the central act of conjuring is effected by a cleric wielding an obscure piece of writing requires little commentary from a lay perspective: inquisitorial registers were permanent records of individual and familial guilt. In a context where a relapse into heresy meant death at the stake and the detection of heretical ancestry meant confiscation of inheritance, these records were feared every bit as much as the inquisitors themselves.⁷⁴ The parchment further effaces the boundaries demarcating the penitential forum and the heretical forum and, ultimately, between the heretic's stake and the martyr's pyre, suggesting the illusory nature of such divisions.

But in addition to the overt magic of the parchment, there are more subtle forces at work. First, there is the female predisposition to confess, whether this is understood in terms of complexion or social construction. This predisposition has the effect of minimizing the distances between the dutiful confessee, the heretic, the blameless defendant, and the shameless seductress. And then there is the woman's beauty that, from a clerical perspective, is capable of working its own magic—transforming a preacher into a confessor, a confessor into a seducer, a seducer into an inquisitor, and an inquisitor into an agent of the devil. Like any relationship, confession was potentially transformative, frequently incalculable, and never safe.

⁷³ Antoninus of Florence, *Confessionale Anthonini*, fol. 32v.

⁷⁴ See James Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society: Power, Discipline, and Resistance in Languedoc* (Ithaca, 1997), 25–51; Arnold, *Inquisition and Power*, 82–88.