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GENDER, PALEOGRAPHY, AND THE QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP IN LATE MEDIEVAL DOMINICAN SPIRITUALITY

In defining the Sisterbooks as "a collection of texts written by female authors in Dominican communities of fourteenth-century Germany," Gertrud Jaron Lewis presents a model of authorship largely absent from studies of late medieval women writers of Teutonia.¹ Unlike the works of Hildegard of Bingen, Marie de France, and Christine de Pisan, which long ago succeeded in gaining acceptance among the elite medieval authors of both genders,² the authorship of devotional, biographical, hagiographic, and didactic literature composed by women of the Order of Preachers has been accorded marginal status, either ascribed to the anonymous work of women's collectives within religious houses³ or else filtered through the influence and sometimes the editorial voices of powerful confessors, on the model of the *cura monialium*.⁴ In the former case, the names, identities, and oeuvres of the authoring sisters are submerged in formulas such as "wir hatend

ain swester"; in the latter case, the identity of the author, no matter how venerated, is linked forever in a kind of editorial subservience to that of her confessor or counselor.

Such marginalization is more than merely the natural consequence of the canon's patriarchal legacy; it reflects historically documented attitudes of contemporary figures such as Meister Eckhart, who valued theology over hagiography, Latinity over vernaculars, speculative mysticism over pure revelation, and institutionally approved modes of self-abnegation over extreme asceticism.⁵ Feminist scholars have brought eyesight to this critical blindness by slipping on the perceptual sandals of other contemporaries such as Heinrich Seuse, who claimed to have visited the house of contemporary theology and to have found no one home; who composed predominantly in the vernacular in full knowledge of his intended audience of sisters; who featured visions and revelations as the primary means of accessing God's truth on earth, and who asserts in the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* that human beings are superior to the angels, because the angels have never had to suffer.⁶ Through the eyes of Seuse or of his "spiritual daughter" Elsbeth Stagel, the value of such "didactic literature suffused with mystical elements" becomes obvious, and it is no longer possible to relegate this "literature of asceticism with catechistic-pedagogical aims" to the "margins of mysticism," as medievalists have so often done.⁷

In keeping with the theme of this volume of *MFN*, I shall examine how decisions and assumptions made by paleographers or critical editors have served to problematize the model of autonomous women's authorship, first in the case of the Töss Sisterbook (=TSB), the authorship of which was long attributed to Elsbeth Stagel, and then for alterations made in the autograph manuscript of the revelations of Elsbeth von Oye (=Z). I use the term "manuscript tradition" as a poor substitute for the German word "Überlieferung" in order to account either for the lack of extant "originals" and/or for centuries of adaptation. Despite basic differences in genre and in transmission, the above-mentioned works share unambiguous claims to authorship. In each case a particular stage of textual production is linked to one woman writer, she is named, and venerated both for her writing and for its effect on her community. In both traditions the *cura monialium* plays no significant role. The two Elsbeths are portrayed as acting and writing autonomously. Indeed, we recognize in Elsbeth Stagel's collection of spiritual biographies and in Elsbeth von Oye's "notebook" of unstructured revelations the model of authorship described by Lewis, along with the essential insight that a single religious woman could experience the Divine, by whatever means, and could compose texts in which such experiences were preserved for generations of sisters to come.

II. Silencing Elsbeth Stigel

Among the many legacies of feminist medieval scholarship, clearly the most enduring will be the recovery and rediscovery of so many women writers and texts that were once marginalized or ignored. In the question of Elsbeth Stigel's authorship of the TSB, however, this process has worked in reverse. The original editors of the TSB, and of Heinrich Seuse's *vita*, Ferdinand Vetter and Karl Bihlmeyer, respectively, and the first German medievalist to accord the Sisterbooks serious study, Walter Blank, accept at face value the unambiguous attribution of authorship to Stigel.⁸ In the case of the TSB, Vetter sees Stigel's original compilation being emended through the addition of the *vita* of Elizabeth of Hungary, and also through the final reordering and framing of the original material by Johannes Meyer, which included his own prologue and the *vitae* of Elsbeth Stigel herself and of Seuse's mother.

Stigel's role in the compilation has since been called into serious question by Klaus Grubmüller's 1969 paleographical tour de force.⁹ Through a painfully precise comparative study of the four extant manuscripts, in which he focuses on the Donaueschingen manuscript instead of the Nürnberg (Meyer-influenced) version, Grubmüller reconstructs the manuscript tradition of the TSB in six stages: 1) a collection of *vitae* composed in Töss which formed the basis for the entire tradition; 2) the organizing and framing of the collection through a prologue and the Bechlin-*vita* by an unknown nun or nuns; 3) the addition of the *vita* of Elsbeth von Cellikon from material collected by Stigel herself; 4) the addition of the *vita* of Elizabeth of Hungary; 5) the addition of a second *vita* of Elizabeth of Hungary; 6) the final reorganization and second framing by Johannes Meyer. At his conclusion, Grubmüller is able to announce triumphantly: "Elsbeth Stigel's place within this many-faceted manuscript tradition can now be established only on the far periphery."¹⁰ And, indeed, in his reshaping of the textual tradition, he disassociates the name and fame of Elsbeth Stigel from the authorship of the TSB. In place of an autonomous woman writer, we are left with an anonymous "author's collective," which engaged in a haphazard process of compilation in which "true mysticism" played only a sporadic and inconsequential role.¹¹ This view has since gained almost universal acceptance among German medievalists.¹²

Much of Grubmüller's reconstruction is convincing, especially the manner in which it reflects the usual process by which these collections came to be. Medievalists now agree that fifteenth-century reformers took texts they found stimulating or interesting and assembled them in codices from which didactic readings could be drawn, often without much attention to authorial identity and textual integrity, and sometimes with false attribution. Yet Grubmüller's marginalization of Elsbeth Stigel's authorship can only succeed if one ignores or refutes the clear attribution of authorship—both of the TSB and at least parts of her and Seuse's spiritual biography—in Heinrich Seuse's *vita*, a text which enjoys

unquestioned status within the canon.¹³ Here is the key passage in Seuse, as Tobin translates it:

In the convent, where she lived among the sisters as a model of all virtues, and despite failing health, she completed a very good book. In it, among other things, one can read about the departed holy sisters, how blessed their lives had been, and what marvels God had worked through them (Tobin, 132).¹⁴

Here we have as clear an attribution as one could possibly imagine, in a roughly contemporary text, of Stigel's authorship of the TSB.

In attempting to circumvent this passage, Grubmüller does a wonderful job of having it both ways. First he uses the passage as a measure of authenticity to show that Meyer merely reworks it for his own prologue, thus debunking the authenticity of Meyer's claim for Stigel's authorship. Then Grubmüller cites two of the most respected medievalists of the "old school," Julius Schwietering¹⁵ and Kurt Ruh,¹⁶ in asserting that the many statements about Stigel's erudition and authorial accomplishments in Seuse's *vita* are a part of a fictional narrative framework adapted from Arthurian romance, in which Seuse is depicted as combination of "miles Christi" and Parzival.¹⁷ Upon closer examination, Ruh's assertions have little business being cited in the first place, since they are made in passing, as part of a sweeping survey of research on mysticism. Ruh himself does not base his speculations on the kind of preeminent paleographical work or careful literary analysis for which he is renowned, but rather merely plays off of Schwietering. Schwietering's inventive reading of Seuse's *vita* as Arthurian romance deserves serious consideration, but also has serious limitations. Schwietering focuses on the *vita* itself, thereby passing over unambiguous references to Stigel's work and talents as a author which are found in the prologue to Seuse's *Exemplar* and also in the *Briefbüchlein*, passages where the Arthurian model no longer applies. Schwietering's model also works wonderfully only for the initial phases of Seuse's spiritual journey and does not analyze Stigel's *vita* beyond her failings as a spiritual beginner, thereby effectively obliterating half the text, including the work's conclusion, in which Stigel transcends all that Seuse taught her and ascends into heaven. Furthermore, even if historians no longer accept many claims made in the *vita* as historical truth, they still adhere to the notion that at least some biographical basis for the *vita* can be asserted.¹⁸ Some literary historians also continue to attribute to Stigel at the very least a substantial role as scribe and compiler in the creation of the *Exemplar*.¹⁹

Yet the damage has been done. A claim of "fictionality" is used somewhat anachronistically to undermine clear assertions of Elsbeth Stigel's authorship of the TSB, thereby completing the marginalization of one of the most important

women writers within the Order of Preachers.²⁰ Even granting the veracity of Grubmüller's reconstruction, it is equally possible, and even more logical, given the claims in Seuse's *vita*, to attribute the initial compilation of Töss *vitae* to Elsbeth Stigel herself. In this sense, feminist medievalists lost the battle before we realized it had been fought.

III. Erasing Elsbeth von Oye

The revelations of Elsbeth von Oye continue to languish outside the canon.²¹ This has long been understandable because no reliable edition of her works exists. But the issue of her extreme asceticism remains to be dealt with, the descriptions of which remain repellent to many medievalists, even to feminists committed to the mission of recovering marginalized women authors from the past. In a current book-project I seek to place Elsbeth's blood-mysticism in the context of the drastic forms self-abnegation could take in Dominican convent culture. My commentary here focuses on paleographical issues.

How often does one find oneself as a medievalist naively wishing for the discovery of an "original" manuscript of *Erec* or *Parzival*, so that questions arising in the lack of comparative versions or in conflicting manuscript accounts could be settled once and for all? Yet in the one case where we have such a manuscript, that of a nun of Oetenbach, Elsbeth von Oye, more questions are raised than could ever be answered. Here, too, decisions made by paleographers and editors will determine what model or models of authorship apply in Elsbeth's case. The appearance of Wolfram Schneider-Lastin's edition, to include the rediscovered conclusion to the Oetenbach Sisterbook (=OSB), will help to settle many of these questions. Schneider-Lastin has already presented many of the paleographical issues in two articles, so that Elsbeth-specialists are aware of what is at stake.²² In discussing Elsbeth's case, I hope to bring this awareness to feminist medievalists working in other languages and fields.

Elsbeth's works survive in the form of loosely-structured and heavily edited revelations, written by Elsbeth herself in the first-person form common to that genre. Horrific descriptions of self-imposed suffering by means of a cross of nails and flail precede *auditiones*, in which divine avatars exhort Elsbeth to suffer further so that God may relive the passion of Christ. Direct connections are asserted between the blood that Elsbeth physically sheds and the spiritual exchange of blood- and marrow essence that made possible, at least for Elsbeth and her sisters, the cleansing power of Christ. As a document, the Zürich manuscript (Z) allows us an unmediated look into the "raw material" of mystical experience, what editorial methods were employed, how other texts could be included or appended, and how the manuscript itself could become the setting for censorship or passionate defense.

The Zürich revelations or an earlier version subsequently served as the basis for a major revision and truncation by a Dominican brother—as Schneider-Lastin reads it—in which, in the context of a *vita*, all overt descriptions of suffering are repressed, the narrative perspective shifts from experience of the divine to a didactic dialogue with divine avatars—“a person wished to know . . .,”²³ and the focus shifts from an exchange of blood-essence to divine descriptions of the spiritual dimensions of such an exchange. This version, said by Schneider-Lastin to duplicate almost three-fourths of Elsbeth’s *vita* as transmitted in the conclusion to the OSB, became Elsbeth’s chief legacy, excerpted and copied until the middle of the seventeenth century, when it was even translated into Latin. The surprising staying power of this manuscript tradition would seem to reinforce the notion that Elsbeth’s revelations were depersonalized as part of the process of making them palatable to the wider spiritual circles who consumed them. Apparently compilers and reformers of the next three centuries were more intrigued by the obscure formulations that Elsbeth attributed to God than they were by her spiritual struggles and the bleak physicality of her asceticism.

The Zürich manuscript itself poses different and, in some ways, less conventional problems. There are numerous emendations of missing words, changes that Schneider-Lastin attributes to Elsbeth herself, through which the text is made legible and in which one sees no evidence that changes in meaning or emphasis were sought. Then at several points in the manuscript the text is crossed out and another text is substituted. Here quite often it seems that clarity—rather than censorship—was at stake. Most intriguing, however, are the many passages that are simply eradicated. Several of these erased passages cannot be reconstructed and will remain forever undeciphered unless another Elsbeth manuscript is discovered. Some were apparently partially restored decades later by two different scribal hands; others earlier by a third hand. In passages where the erasure was not sufficient to render them illegible, Schneider-Lastin could determine that this third hand made substantial changes in wording and meaning.

Substantial disagreement has arisen regarding the role of these unrecoverable passages and the identity of the “third hand.” Here, as with Elsbeth Stigel, the older and younger generations see things differently. Haenel and Ochsenbein see the erasures as the product of censorship by the Order of Preachers, yet another occasion when the controlling hand of male confessors intervened to silence what certainly was a controversial voice. Schneider-Lastin, citing the incomplete and haphazard nature of the erasures, in addition to the drastic changes attempted when eradicated text is replaced, asserts that Elsbeth herself undertook the erasures as a response to the controversy her views provoked in Oetenbach. Here suddenly medievalists are confronted with a modest yet monumental paleographical decision. If the third hand is that of a monk, Z documents actions of censorship and oppression that reflect the manner in which women’s voices

were often silenced in the Middle Ages. Schneider-Lastin's reading, on the other hand, grants Elsbeth von Oye considerable autonomy, but simultaneously evokes an image of self-censorship in response to the criticism of her own community. In this case feminist medievalists must come to terms with a women's community capable of silencing its own voices.

In support of Haenel and Ochsenbein, one must note that the introduction to Elsbeth's *vita* in the original OSB carefully speaks of the necessity of preserving the sense of Elsbeth's writings even when many editorial changes are called for. This voice, whether of a monk, as Schneider-Lastin claims, or of a nun, as Lewis supposes, is also resolute in its defense of Elsbeth's asceticism, citing it as the primary reason for the respect and love she enjoys in Oetenbach.²⁴ An even stronger response may be found in the vehement defense of Elsbeth with which Z concludes, dated by Schneider-Lastin some fifty years following the initial completion of Z and attributed to a friar. Elsbeth's high standing in the community is further documented by the presence in OSB of her veneration of the life of Hilda von Opsikon. In response to Elsbeth's prayers, God reveals the news of Hilda's deliverance and provides a short description of his divine nature which shows many affinities with the third-person account of Elsbeth's revelations that survived three centuries. The above evidence can also be read in defense of Schneider-Lastin as documenting the existence of the kind of controversy that made such passionate defenders necessary in the first place.

IV. Conclusion

It is to be hoped that this brief commentary on the fates of Elsbeth Stigel and Elsbeth von Oye has demonstrated how paleographical decisions can serve to alter global assumptions concerning women creating and compiling texts for their own communities. At stake is whether Lewis' model of independent authorship might be applied to a single woman author. Elsbeth Stigel's authorial identity depends in the last analysis, not so much on hard paleographical evidence as on whether we choose to read Seuse's account of Elsbeth Stigel's authorship as a fictional construct. Attaching the "third hand" of Z to the oeuvre of Elsbeth von Oye transforms our understanding of interactions in Oetenbach from one that is consistent with traditions of patriarchal oppression into documentation of dissension and self-censorship in Dominican women's communities. Further discoveries and new interpretations will show which views shall prevail, but it is incumbent upon the community of feminist medievalists to remain vigilant regarding editing practices that serve to tip the scale one way or another.

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1 This model is featured prominently in the title of her recent book, *By Women for Women about Women. The Sisterbooks of Fourteenth-Century Germany*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996, here, p. xi, and reflects Lewis' aggressive response to years of condescending and dismissive research. See her chapter, "Reaction to the Sisterbooks," pp. 58-75, in which she calls the findings of most past research "paradigmatic of the reception of women's literature in general and women's religious texts in particular." See also Ursula Peters, *Religiöse Erfahrung als literarisches Faktum. Zur Vorgeschichte und Genese frauenmystischer Texte des 13. und 14. Jahrhunderts*, Hermaea, n.F. 56, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988; Siegfried Ringle, *Viten- und Offenbarungsliteratur in Frauenklöstern des Mittelalters: Quellen und Studien*, München: Artemis Verlag, 1980, MTU 72; and Peter Dinzelbacher, *Mittelalterliche Frauenmystik*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 1993, for studies in German that have helped to correct this injustice. The body of literature in English is much richer. One may profitably consult any of the volumes by Caroline Walker Bynum, beginning with *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, or by Elizabeth Petroff, beginning with *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

2 Peter Dronke surveys this canon in *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

3 See Lewis, *By Women*, p. 47.

4 For a cogent survey of such relationships, see Peters, *Religiöse Erfahrung*, pp. 101-188.

5 Cf. Otto Langer, *Mystische Erfahrung und spirituelle Theologie: zu Meister Eckharts Auseinandersetzung mit der Frauenfrömmigkeit seiner Zeit*. MTU 91. München: Artemis Verlag, 1987.

6 See Tobin's edition of the BdEW, pp. 249-50.

7 Klaus Grubmüller, "Die Viten der Schwestern von Töb und Elisabeth Stagel," *ZfdA* 98 (1969), 171-204, here p. 203, quotes Spamer in asserting "ihre Begründung liege in ihrem Zweck: sie sei als reine Erbauungsliteratur gedacht" and in calling the Sisterbooks "asketische Literatur mit katechetisch-pädagogischen Absichten."

8 See the introductions to Ferdinand Vetter, ed. *Das Leben der Schwestern zu Töb*, Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1906; and Heinrich Seuse, *Deutsche Schriften im Auftrag der Württembergischen Kommission für Landesgeschichte*, ed. Karl Bihlmeyer; Stuttgart, 1907; Rpt. Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1961. See also Walter Blank, *Die Nonnenviten des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Diss. Freiburg, 1962.

9 See above, n. 7.

10 "Elisabeth Stagel's Ort läßt sich innerhalb dieser Schichtung nur an recht peripherer Stelle sichern." See pp. 201-204.

11 Grubmüller, with a nod to Gerhard Müller, describes the TSB as an "von einem Autorenkollektiv aufgeschichtetes Erbauungsschrifttum, aus mystischen Zusammenhängen nur in dem Sinne genährt, wie 'grobe und subtile Aszetik, Meditation, erworbene und eingegossene Beschaauung' ihren gemeinsamen Grund in der 'Einheit des geistlichen Lebens' haben" (p. 203).

12 See, for example, the comments by Alois Haas concerning Stagel's authorship in the most recent edition of the *Verfasserlexikon*, Vol. 8, Sp. 222-225.

13 See Henry Suso, *The Exemplar with Two Sermons*, ed. Frank Tobin; New York: Paulist Press, 1989. For useful introductions to research, see Ephrem Filthaut, ed., *Heinrich Seuse. Studien zum 600. Todestag 1366-1966*; Köln: Albertus Magnus Verlag, 1966, and Rüdiger Blumrich and Philipp Kaiser, eds., *Heinrich Seuses Philosophia spiritualis. Quellen, Konzept, Formen und Rezeption*, Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 1994.

14 "In dem kloster, da si wonete under den swoeustran als ein spiegel aller tugenden, do braht si zuo mit irem kranken libe ein vil guot buoch; da stet an under andren dingen von den vergangnen heiligen swoeustran, wie selklich die leptan und waz grosses wunders got mit in wurkte, daz vil reizlich ist ze andaht guotherzigen menschen" (Bihlmeyer, 97,1-5).

15 Cf. "Zur Autorschaft von Seuses 'Vita,'" in *Altdeutsche und altniederländische Mystik*, ed. Kurt Ruh, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964, 309-323.

16 "Altdeutsche Mystik. Ein Forschungsbericht," *Wirkendes Wort* 7 (1956-57), 221-223.

17 To Grubmüller's credit, he admits the tenuity of this point (p. 196), but he also presents the task of undermining all claims for Stigel's authorship in Seuse's vita as a "work in progress."

18 Walter Senner, OP, "Heinrich Seuse und der Dominikanerorden," in *Heinrich Seuses Philosophia spiritualis. Quellen, Konzept, Formen und Rezeption*, ed. Rüdiger Blumrich und Philipp Kaiser, Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 1994, pp. 3-31.

19 Christine Pleusner, "Tradition und Ursprünglichkeit in der Vita Seuses," in *Heinrich Seuse. Studien zum 600. Todestag 1366-1966*, ed. Ephrem Filthaut, Köln: Albertus Magnus Verlag, 1966, pp. 135-160.

20 I find anachronistic the equation of "idealization" or "allegorization" of the saintly life with the modern concept of the "fictional frame." In the former case we have documented methods of composition by which biography became hagiography in the Middle Ages, while in the latter case we have a notion of fiction that applies more accurately to a modern narrator/character like Serenus Zeitblom in a work like *Doktor Faustus*. This is not to say that medieval authors did not use such constructions, however the context and expectations surrounding such idealization/allegorization are entirely different. Under such a standard, one might also question why Seuse's account of submitting parts of the text to the Dominican prelate Bartholomew is taken at face value, while his attribution of an important role in the text's production to Stigel is not.

21 Haenel's 1958 Göttingen dissertation was never published. We do have two excellent articles by Peter Ochsenbein, who initially was involved in preparing a critical edition. See his "Die Offenbarungen Elsbeths von Oye als Dokument leidensfixierter Mystik," in *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter. Symposium Kloster Engelberg*, ed. Kurt Ruh, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986, pp. 423-442; and "Leidensmystik in Dominikanischen Frauenklöstern des 14. Jahrhunderts am Beispiel der Elsbeth von Oye" in *Religiöse Frauenbewegung und mystische Frömmigkeit im Mittelalter*, ed. Peter Dintelbacher and Dieter Bauer, Köln: Böhlau, 1988, 353-372. The only treatment of Elsbeth in English is my "The Spirituality of Suffering in the Revelations of Elsbeth von Oye," *Mystics Quarterly* 21 (1995), pp. 121-147.

22 See Wolfram Schneider-Lastin, "Das Handexemplar einer mittelalterlichen Autorin. Zur Edition der Offenbarungen Elsbeths von Oye," *Editio* 8. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1994-1995, pp. 54-70, including some reproductions of pages from the Zürich manuscript, and his "Die Fortsetzung des Ötenbacher Schwesternbuchs und andere vermisste Texte in Breslau," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, 124 (1995), pp. 201-210. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Schneider-Lastin for his generosity in making a transcription of the Zürich manuscript available. I also thank the Zentralbibliothek Zürich for access to a microfilm copy of the manuscript and the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich for allowing access to two versions of the adaptation.

23 "ein mensch begert zuo wissent . . ."

24 In my own reading of Z, plus the OSB and the third-person accounts such as are found in Karlsruhe, Landesbibl. St. Peter pap. 16, I can find no conclusive evidence that the author of the adaptation was a friar. Indeed, the prologue to the OSB and the concluding prologue to Elsbeth's *vita* (not contained in the Nürnberg ms.) seem to support the notion that nuns were responsible. Schneider-Lastin will surely address this issue conclusively in the critical edition.

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