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Barnes, Rex D.

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## NEGOTIATING MASCULINITIES WITH THE BEGUINES

REX D. BARNES III

In the prologue to the *Vita Mariae* of Mary of Oignies (1177-1213), the medieval hagiographer James of Vitry (1160-1240) writes about a visit from the Bishop of Toulouse, "You said to me that you were filled with wonder by certain women who wept more for a single venial sin than the men of your land wept over a thousand mortal sins" (1989, 17). Vitry's comment hints at the moral superiority of a particular group of religious laywomen over the men of the Low Countries<sup>1</sup> in Europe. His praise can be understood as a compliment for the women (later to be named "Beguines") whose lives, according to Vitry, were to be used as exemplary models for Christian orthodoxy during the thirteenth century. From this perspective, the *Vita Mariae* explicitly honors Mary of Oignies for her Christian values, lifestyle, piety, apostolic virtues, and precocious devotion. Yet, one particularly intriguing aspect of the author's writing in the *Vita* is its tacit relation to his medieval context and the masculine ideologies therein.

Vitry belonged to the all-male medieval clergy in which priests represented a prominent form of masculinity in and around the Christian Church. It is significant that, as a cleric, Vitry's admiration for a woman indicates a will to supplement and fulfill his own masculine power, authority, and identity. Such an interpretation exhibits the extent to which James of Vitry employed Mary's extraordinary example as a means to disparage theological opponents and to secure his own clerical status. By examining the writings of James of Vitry, we are able to perceive how he empowered his clerical status through Mary of Oignies as a means to reaffirm his own masculinity. This was possible specifically by critiquing priests for failing to enact their clerical responsibilities and labeling alternative religious groups "heterodox". In other words, the *Vita Mariae* demonstrates the author's adroit ability to sustain his ecclesiastical authority through his masculine clerical identity, while using his hagiography as a means to castigate lesser masculine figures in the wake of institutionalized clerical celibacy in the thirteenth century.

In order to properly complete this survey, a basic understanding of masculinity and femininity at Vitry's time is required, along with what the Beguines represented

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<sup>1</sup> The medieval Low Countries historically comprise what is now the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Northern France, and Western Germany (West of the Rhine River).

and the medieval context in which they lived. I shall begin with a brief analysis of social perspectives of masculine power between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries that exhibit tropes medieval clergy employed to reaffirm their ecclesiastical identities. Both broad theological and historical examinations contribute thereafter to the interpretation of ways in which Vitry and other ecclesiastics were able to maintain and manipulate their positions to and perceptions of the Beguines. Finally, I shall examine the writings of Vitry and another contemporaneous Beguine hagiographer, Thomas of Cantimpré, in relation to their similar positions of institutionalized Church authority. Both were ecclesiastics, and their hagiographies thus relate through their masculine church identities. In addition, there is an intriguing link between the mystical tenets in their respective texts. Therefore, a brief analysis of mysticism, its historical context, and reception, is also required because I shall argue that both authors intended to enhance their authoritative masculinities by attesting to the mystical experiences of their subjects. The relevance of mysticism in this regard is considerable for both hagiographers in securing a higher standard of perceived mystical authority and in emphasizing the proper stature of the Church. In this way, both authors asserted their masculine positions through the Beguines to reinforce the institution of the Christian Church and consolidate their own authority.

#### MEDIEVAL MASCULINITIES AND MALE POWER

The construction of manliness and male power in the Middle Ages exhibits not one hegemonic masculinity but a series of masculinities existing in multiple social and political systems. Medieval societies formed various expectations for men (and women) through speech and action. Individuals acted and spoke in accordance with norms by performing accepted roles, although medieval masculine identities were not always consistent with cultural expectations and often broke monolithic understandings, such as man dominated woman. Ruth Karras distinguishes multiple lines of social cleavage—indicating difficulty in always identifying medieval forms of domination—that divided medieval individuals and groups, “noble from peasant, rich from poor, Christian from Jew, and so forth [which] helped construct different forms of masculinity” (2003, 157). It is important to recognize the complexities of such social differences; not all men were equal, nor were their political, religious, and social circumstances uniform. Therefore, understanding medieval masculinities entails overcoming perspectives of the Middle Ages in which man dominated woman because

both men and women exerted various forms of authority and power over other men and women.<sup>2</sup>

For a large part, women in the Middle Ages prominently lacked any ecclesiastical opportunity and were excluded from several public privileges. Richard Woods explains that in the Middle Ages, “women were deprived of legal status except as property, and found themselves hedged in by restrictive moral and physical sanctions not applicable to males” (1994, 148). In addition, “careers [for women] in law, medicine, commerce, teaching, much less military service, were virtually nonexistent” (1994, 148). Men could thus partake in a variety of social positions that were restricted to most women. Again, this is not to say that all men enjoyed great privileges, or that all women were unable to determine their own livelihood. Rather, Woods explicates common social restrictions for women (i.e. owning property, public professions in law, medicine, commerce and teaching), which often did not apply to Christian men.

In addition, a considerable masculine assertion of ontological authority over women was firmly grounded in theological teachings. Frances Beer traces the origins of misogynist trends in the Middle Ages to interpretations of the Christian and Hebrew Bibles, Hellenistic philosophers, and Aristotle, among many others (Beer 1994, 80). The beliefs stemming from ancient sources generally depicted women as physically inferior to men, unfit to preach in public, and ultimately defective males. One version of belief descending from Paul in the Christian Bible reads,

Women should be silent in churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Cor. 14, 34-35)

Paul’s verse marshals a tradition in which it was believed that something was lacking in women, which men conversely held, thus granting men social, political, and religious advantage. Likewise, James of Vitry, in one of his sermons, argues that woman is naturally inferior to man because man was created first and made in God’s image according to Genesis (1: 26-27). Vitry preached, “Man was made without intermediary by God, but woman was made through man...so man, and not woman, is the beginning of all men and women, and man by nature has more reasoning ability than woman” (Muessig 1999, 18). Medieval Christian theology generally afforded Christian men a

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<sup>2</sup> Noble women, for example, were often granted favorable positions due to their royal affiliations—depending on the circumstances. As we shall see later in this paper, women were afforded many privileges that were not commonly associated with their gendered status. For the purposes of this paper, I am framing masculine discourse in the Middle Ages.

favorable position because of the Christian order in creation, just as medieval norms in the Low Countries indicated a prevalent social advantage for Christian males.

We see in these examples both theological and social perspectives of the cultural context in the Middle Ages that potentially emphasize performances that could be ascribed as masculine. The normative gender economy of this period generally promoted ideals in which women were perceived as lesser beings and Christian men often enjoyed social advantages women could not. Looking specifically at medieval men, Jo Ann McNamara offers a functional social order as based upon a statement given by the Bishop of Limerick between 1110 and 1130 who asserted, "I do not say that the function of woman is to pray or toil, let alone to fight, but they are married to those who pray, toil and fight and they serve them" (1994, 3). McNamara thus divides the social placement of medieval males into "those who pray, those who fight, and those who labor" (1994, 4). Christian men were distinct as either a part of the Church, part of the military, or working in a specialized trade (carpenters, thatchers, smiths). Moreover, Vern Bullough narrows the definition of masculinity in the Middle Ages to activities including "impregnating women, protecting dependents, and serving as provider to one's family" (Bullough 1994, 34). According to Bullough, men enacted sexual intercourse and were protectors and providers within the family unit. From the perspectives of both McNamara and Bullough, men broadly defined themselves by their ability to bear and provide for their children, pray, engage in military service, and complete labor.

For this paper, I am specifically interested in a small group of men occupying a publically authoritative position: the medieval clergy. Clerics were identifiable as masculine figures leading prayer and directing individuals towards proper piety and devotion through an empowered position validated by the Church (Murray 2004, 28).<sup>3</sup> Priests of this era were not secluded, as most monks and ascetics often were, but tended to hold active positions in society and were married with a family life. However, the Gregorian Reform brought an abrupt end to clerical marriage in 1074, thereby distorting normative, masculine clerical identities. Pope Gregory VII refashioned the Church into a centralized hierarchical organization and declared that all clergy who did not immediately abandon their female companions would be deposed from their priestly office (Vauchez 2009, 184). This move towards social readjustment appeared to affirm a masculine monopoly of the priesthood through spiritual authority. Its instigation organized the Church—with clerics securing an authoritative position within its

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<sup>3</sup> Murray (2004, 28) maintains, "By comparison, the monastic was superior in piety although, given his status as a lay brother, he was no doubt of inferior social standing to the priest." This indicates the social prominence of priests within the medieval world.

hierarchical framework—while removing women from the proximity of priestly men within the family unit. Women, therefore, no longer had any contact with priestly offices, no matter how indirectly. In this way, “the Gregorian revolution aimed at a church virtually free of women at every level but the lowest stratum of the married laity” (McNamara 1994, 7).

The Gregorian Reform’s new declarations, nonetheless, proved problematic because celibacy “deprived masculine individuals of objects for the sexual demonstrations that proved their right to call themselves men” (McNamara 1994, 8). The move towards clerical primacy through celibacy threatened priestly masculinity specifically because by enforcing a life of men without women—of denied sexuality—the church restricted priests from their masculine performances as sexual beings. This was because the privileging of sexual abstinence seemed likely to obfuscate gender differences and masculine clerical identities. Normative medieval practice for men, as outlined by Bullough above, included sexual activity and bearing children. Without the liberty to express their sexuality through masculine acts of fornication with women, clerics were confronted with a lesser, emasculated masculinity, compared to the layman, who was allowed public sexual relations. Therefore, the imposition of celibacy issued exclusive masculine control in the arena of clerical positions through conceptions of ecclesiastical difference; members of clergy were prescriptively to be viewed as more pure and better than laity (Karras 2005, 44). The Gregorian Reform’s implementation of clerical celibacy was meant to assert the difference between priests and lay individuals. Demonstrating celibacy prescriptively exhibited the priests’ elevated position in controlling their bodily desires. However, this change also removed the priest’s former, sexually active masculine identity, which in turn, problematized the extent to which clerics could engage in intercourse with women.

These institutional adjustments left clergy with strong currents of change in which establishing a masculine identity necessitated masculinization of the role for clerics without sexual activity. The clergy had to thus reform their approach towards defining themselves as men while adhering to the dictates of the Gregorian Reform. James of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré were two ecclesiastics to employ examples of women to affirm their masculine identities through the reforms of the eleventh century. In this way, the women’s movement, known as the Beguines, presented unique opportunities for proving manhood without sexual practice. This was largely due to the fact that the Beguines were religious groups of women, active in urban areas, similar to the clergy. Vitry and Cantimpré then wrote about Beguine women and the extent to which their (the Beguines’) examples shamed other men as a means to solidify an ecclesiastical masculine identity without sexual demonstration.

## THE BEGUINES AS A MASCULINE UTILITY

The Beguines were a small, laywomen's, semi-religious (meaning "unofficial" and without solemn vows) movement that arose primarily in the Low Countries, Rhineland, and France. These women recognized no definite constitution or rule of life and sought no authority figure to govern them; women could join or withdraw from the movement at any time. The Beguines, like the Franciscans, lived a life of intentional poverty, chastity, and piety, but unlike the friars, who begged for charity, the Beguines were completely self-sufficient. They supported themselves, in other words, through their own manual labor. Moreover, the Beguines worked to help others in their communities that were in need by aiding the sick and the poor, although in the latter half of the thirteenth century, they also performed labors including work within hospitals and textile industries (Murk-Jansen 1998, 3-5).

The significance of the Beguines within their medieval context is seen in their communal associations as women striving to achieve a way of life similar to the contemporaneous Franciscan and Dominican orders. The principle reasons motivating women to pursue a Beguine lifestyle entailed the wish to revive the ideals of early Christianity and a drive to imitate the lives of the apostles (Tobin 1998, 1). The Beguines, however, were not an officially sanctioned movement, like the mendicant orders, and thus did not possess the ecclesiastical authority afforded to male clerics, monks, or friars. Walter Simons, nevertheless, succinctly notes that the Beguines were "the only movement in medieval monastic history that was created by women and for women—and not affiliated with, or supervised by, a male order" (2001, 143). From this perspective, the Beguines represent a remarkably novel and unique religious initiative by laywomen that produced a supportive environment specifically for women with similar religious ambitions.

The historical information we have concerning the Beguines derives largely from scarce sources that originate in a collection of eleven *vitae* of individual women involved with the movement between 1190 and 1250. Walter Simons' work in *Cities of Ladies* discusses the origins of the first *vitae* in which the histories of these women were frequently written shortly after their death by male ecclesiastics—such as James of Vitry and Thomas Cantimpré—in order to promote their own cults (2001, 37).<sup>4</sup> The history of

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<sup>4</sup> Simons also discusses the importance of hagiography as an accepted form for providing sacred and biographical knowledge of holy or saintly figures. Moreover, it is important to note that hagiography was a rich tradition that begun well before the Middle Ages. Moreover, while Mary of Oignies was not canonized during Vitry's lifetime, the fact that he wrote her *Vita* demonstrates his desire for her to be recognized by the Church.



the Beguines, according to the *vitae*, is thus not completely theirs because the male clerical authors often had little personal experience with the Beguine communities and commonly utilized the Beguine lifestyle as a strategic move to encourage ecclesiastical values.

Dyan Elliot asserts the initial function the Beguines served (through their *vitae*) was as a promotional and clerically sponsored program for Christian orthodoxy (2004, 47). Beginning in the eleventh century, a thriving European economy produced “laity that was wealthier, more literate, and more conscious of its own social and culturally identity – which included an interest in experimenting with new forms of religiosity” (Merlo 2009, 229-230). The various forms of religiosity included the Beguines (and Beghards<sup>5</sup> for men), but also several other movements that were considered more aggressive and in need of control by the Church. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 thereafter launched attacks against the unofficial founding of new religious movements. In particular, the Church took issue not with the Beguines but with arising religious groups teaching contradictory eschatological principles such as those taught by Albigensian or Cathar movements.<sup>6</sup> The Church set out to bring these actions to a halt by labeling the Cathars “heretical” for their beliefs and teachings, especially those revolving around claims denying the efficacy of prayer to saints and the nature of the afterlife in which martyrdom and purgatory were non-existent (Elliot 2004, 58-62). James of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré utilized the *vitae* of Beguines as discursive tools for advocating “true” ecclesiastical morality and theology to refute the heterodox positions of the Cathars and Albigensians.

Vitry, a cleric, and Cantimpré, a Dominican, found common ground for gendering heresy and orthodoxy in accordance with decrees against heterodoxy. In this way, the Beguines suited the needs of the institutional Church for the purpose of reifying Christian orthodoxy. Vitry and Cantimpré, in particular, employed rhetorical strategies to castigate the Cathars and their sympathizers. Symbolically, the Church assumed the masculine position of naming discordant groups and individuals heretical, effeminate, and weak. As McNamara points out, clerical men “had to persecute with ever-increasing severity anyone who threatened the uncertain inner core of that image

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<sup>5</sup> The Beghards were the male counterparts of the Beguines. My discussion will not cover the Beghards specifically. It is important, however, to recognize that the Beguines are believed to have preceded the Beghards, and therefore, the Beguines are an extremely amazing example of medieval men imitating initiatives of pious women. For a detailed analysis of the Beghards, see McDonnell (1969).

<sup>6</sup> The Cathars were a dualist Christian sect the Church declared heretical in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council. Albigensians were Cathars from the French city of Albi. For a detailed account of Cathar beliefs see Merlo (2009, 229-237). I shall discuss some of their religious beliefs further below.



[the Church as an institution]" (1994, 22). Heretics, such as the Albigensians, were criminalized and emasculated into controllable factions that were forced to conform. Significantly, masculine ecclesiastics reaffirmed their own masculinities by denigrating other religious movements expressing inconsistent values with their own. Vitry and Cantimpré arranged their masculine statuses as priest and mendicant to fit with the Church's definition of orthodoxy.

We see here the extent to which the issue of heresy provided a space within which Vitry could rhetorically elaborate a kind of masculine identity over against heretics, as well as for orthodox clerics. The Church viewed the Cathars and Albigensians as a threat to the institutional and hierarchical structure implemented in the Gregorian Reform. Therefore, clerics and mendicants also perceived Cathar opposition as a challenge to ecclesiastical masculinities. That some lay communities searched out new avenues of religious expression—that is, some communities supported Cathar theology and practice—indicated a need to establish a firm definition for orthodoxy for the Church, one that could significantly invigorate ecclesiastical masculine ideology. Ecclesiastics then began employing the Beguine ideal as a means to combat Cathar heterodoxy but also for criticizing other clerics. We find one of the first recorded accounts of these critiques in the *Vita* of Mary of Oignies.

#### JAMES OF VITRY AND HIS USE OF MARY OF OIGNIES

The first known Beguine, as recorded by James of Vitry, is documented in the *Vita* of Mary of Oignies (d. 1215). Vitry was a cleric who had studied in Paris, having briefly served as a parish priest in the French town of Argenteuil. Having heard of the woman named Mary and her extraordinary religious devotion, Vitry settled in Oignies around 1211 where he became a regular canon at the Augustinian priory. Thereafter, Vitry lived and worked as a preacher in Oignies where "a very tender and lasting friendship was formed between the two [Mary and Vitry], and Jacques de Vitry never ceased to have for her the deepest reverence" (Vitry 1967, xxv-xxvi). In fact, he resided in Oignies for the final years of Mary's life and was with her through her final moments in 1213.<sup>7</sup>

The *Vita Mariae* is fascinating, on one hand, because it is the earliest hagiographical account of a Beguine (although Vitry never employs the word

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<sup>7</sup> See introduction by Thomas Crane in Vitry (1967, xxv-xxvi). Note that my discussion of Vitry and the *Vita* approaches the text from the perspective that Vitry is attributing a masculine identity to himself implicitly (note: masculinity as a modern construct did not exist at this time), although explicitly Vitry hopes for the canonization of Mary—an event that only occurred after Vitry's lifetime.

“Beguine” in the *Vita*, instead he often refers to them as *mulieres religiosae* or *mulieres sanctae*, which translates to “holy women”) in which new forms of devout life were created outside traditional religious institutions. On the other hand, the *Vita* is equally significant because Vitry includes himself as a character, but presents himself distinctly as a priest, whereas Mary is recognizably a laywoman, albeit a reputedly pious one. John Coakley offers an intriguing argument for Vitry’s rhetorical emphasis on their two statuses in the world. Coakley argues their positions are meant to “explore the possible balance and interaction of informal and institutional powers, and accordingly he treats the saint’s charismatic authority as occupying a sphere of its own in clear distinction from the authority of clerics” (Coakley 2006, 68). Vitry asserts that the unique—that is, the non-traditional, non-institutional, and non-clerical—powers of Mary, a laywoman and Beguine, are not incompatible with clerical powers, although hers are not subordinate to clerical direction (Coakley 2006, 68). Coakley’s interpretation of Vitry’s hagiography signifies the textual and rhetorical ability of Vitry to draw Mary’s charismatic power unto himself in his clerical position. The Gregorian Reform posited the role of the priest as always hierarchically superior in contrast to a layman or woman’s authority. Vitry, instead, uses Mary to conflate her Christian devotion with his own ecclesiastical status. In this way, Mary drew clerics and Christians, such as Vitry, unto herself and the author highlights Mary’s ability to do so. Moreover, her example is, according to Vitry, undeniably important for establishing proper orthodoxy because Mary’s life in the *Vita* represents her extraordinary ability to set an ideal example. He wishes to portray Mary as a religious figure whose ostensible power reinforces his own as a masculine priest vying for ecclesiastical authority and influence.

The source of Vitry’s power is then his hagiographical representation of Mary as the ideal, penitent, and devout Christian. He often describes his experiences with Mary in first person plural and singular. In one account, Vitry professes, “I call God as my witness that I was never able to perceive a single mortal sin in all her life or conversation” (Vitry 1989, 34). Mary is, for Vitry, the quintessential Christian. Rhetorically, Vitry wants his audience to recognize the moral superiority Mary represents over against other immoral Christians. That is, Vitry plays off the undeniable nature of sin for Christians, which Mary highlights as a righteous woman devoid of vice. Other depictions of Mary similarly show that Vitry and other clerics in the Oignies community never saw immoral actions,

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 confessions, all the while accusing herself and we could barely

restrain [ourselves] from smiling when she remembered something she had idly said in her youth (1989, 34).

Vitry invests Mary with symbolic meaning that is intentionally profound. In the pious life that the author witnessed, she was incapable of sin. Moreover, Vitry now hints that other priests—not just Vitry—experienced Mary’s penitent life in order to convey her pervasive influence. He continues with the anecdote, “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” (1989, 34). Vitry exhibits Mary’s need for confession, even when she could hardly retrieve sinful memories. Dyan Elliot proposes that, “Mary’s sense of unworthiness, the urgency of her need to confess, and the apparent relief confession brought were linked with her intense devotion for the priesthood, an indispensable trait at a time of heretical anti-clericalism” (2004, 52). From these perspectives, Vitry claims his, and the Church’s, masculine, clerical identity by means of utilizing the piety and devotion afforded to Mary in her *Vita*. Contrary to the “heretical” assertions of the Albigensians/Cathars, who argued against confessional practice in relation to salvation, the *Vita* expounds the need of clergy through confession and the vindication of clerical authority in important Church matters. Vitry hoped to produce an image of Mary in which Christians understood the false allegations (as deemed by the Church) of the Cathars, as opposed to the requisite ecclesiastical and Church ideals.

In light of the Gregorian Reform, Vitry also assumes his own individual masculinity as superior to that of those priests breaking their vows of celibacy. Vitry writes that Mary had been married, but she nonetheless became chaste. Thereafter, “the Lord commended a chaste woman to a chaste man...and He left her a faithful provider” (1989, 29). Again, Vitry speaks through the *Vita* to illustrate that a “woman” is morally superior to those priests who cannot control their sexual desires. In this way, Mary exemplifies a laywoman whose own chastity surpasses other lesser men’s masculine control of their sexuality. Mary is deliberately depicted as different from normative conceptions of medieval women in which women were generally thought to be more lustful than men. Ruth Karras maintains, “The general expectation was...that women were temptresses who led men astray...To be too involved with women...was to turn away from higher things and to become like a woman, bound to the body” (2005, 28-29). Therefore, Vitry intentionally delineates a woman that neither tempts nor is tempted by men; she reaches beyond the masculine control of men’s own sexual drives. This portrayal is meant to trump the authority of those priests whose celibate vows were not honored, thereby disparaging immoral clerics and denigrating their clerical

identities.<sup>8</sup> By projecting Mary as a woman in control of her desires, Vitry emasculates those priests unable to handle their sexual inclinations.

The scope of Vitry's success in promoting the *mulieres religiosae*, and thereafter gaining clerical prominence, can be seen in the succession of ecclesiastical positions he accrued in his lifetime.<sup>9</sup> He began as an ordinary priest that worked his way to the top as a cardinal-bishop directly under the pope. All of this was made possible through his ability to educate the clergy and laity by preaching. The historical, social, and political circumstances of twelfth and thirteenth century Europe provided Vitry the opportunity to defend the Church and define himself consistently with theologically masculine values and identity. The Beguines—especially Mary of Oignies—were a key starting point for Vitry in preserving his own masculinity and authority.

#### BEGUINE MYSTICISM: A FURTHER DISCURSIVE TOOL

In addition to the active life of Beguine participants, mystical works also played a fundamental role in a number of Beguine communities.<sup>10</sup> The portrait of Mary—reported by Vitry in her *Vita*—is limited in its focus on the revelatory aspects of her experiences, but nonetheless, features her mysticism aiding others in bringing them to Christian devotion. Furthermore, Mary's status as a female mystic highlights the spiritual *ethos* permeating her historical context. Steven Ozment comments that medieval mystics were male and female individuals “who claim to have experienced God intimately” (1980, 115). Ozment also states, “True mystics...were always considered rare,” however, “mysticism nonetheless became a recognized feature of

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<sup>8</sup> To underscore the struggle surrounding clerical celibacy after the Gregorian Reform, McNamara (1994, 7) points out that “clerical celibacy was not easily imposed.” Moreover, she argues that laws were constantly renewed with ever stronger sanctions for failure to comply. There were riots over the issue in 1074, and the struggle continued throughout the Middle Ages with various papal interventions renewing the conflict. See McNamara (1994, 7 footnote 13).

<sup>9</sup> See Muessig (1999, 10-11). He was ordained to the priesthood in 1210 and joined the community of Augustinian canons at Oignies in 1211. After Mary's death, Vitry received permission from Pope Honorius III (1216-1227) for Beguines to live communally as a religious movement in 1216 and was elected bishop of Acre in the same year. Finally, in 1229, he was elected cardinal-bishop of Tusculum and assisted Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241) for the remainder of his life.

<sup>10</sup> See Murk-Jansen (1998, 59) where Murk-Jansen explains, “The vast majority of Beguines were not unusually creative or high-powered theological thinkers.” This is important for understanding the major development of the Beguine movement. The Beguines were for the most part a laywomen's religious movement involving an apostolate similar to the mendicant orders, although a few were also mystical authors.

medieval intellectual and religious life. All agreed that the mystic had reached the summit of piety, the highest possible religious goal of earthly life" (1980, 115). Mystics were infrequent yet commonly occupied a position that was considered theologically influential and socially acceptable because they had achieved the "summit of piety."<sup>11</sup>

Significantly, the *Vita Mariae* illustrates a contemplative state in which, according to Vitry, Mary was "purged from the cloud of all corporeal images, without any fantasy or imagination, and she received simple and divine forms as though in a pure mirror in the soul" (Quoted in Coakley 2006, 72).<sup>12</sup> The *Vita* indicates Mary's reception of divine knowledge, which Vitry and the Church authorized as a testament to her actions and story. In this case, Vitry also promulgated his right to proclaim his powerful, clerical position, which was higher than regular priests (without a mystical subject), because of Mary's mystical status. By gathering Mary's companionship and projecting her approval of his priestly office, Vitry imbues his masculine, clerical identity with the persuasive mystical tenet of union or experience with the divine. Not only is Mary an exemplary model for Christian piety and devotion to be used against Cathar heresies and guide immoral priests; she has had profound and rare experiences with Christ. Rhetorically, Vitry further invests his identity with a kind of mystical authority that other men could not hold. That is to say, Vitry's masculine identity is solidified and legitimated through enacting his religious vocation as Mary's hagiographer because she had achieved the influential status of being a mystic.

Thomas of Cantimpré, another medieval hagiographer, knew James of Vitry and consequently wrote a supplement to the *Vita* of Mary of Oignies. The Dominican, Cantimpré, also composed his own *Vita* of the Beguine mystic, Christina of St. Trond, also known as Christina Mirabilis (1150-1224), eight years after her death in order to fulfill a function similar to Vitry's, albeit with focus more on Christina's mysticism. The *Vita* of Christina tells of her life as the youngest of three sisters, a poor orphan working in a pasture and herding animals when she received her revelations. In attesting to the historical truth of the life of Christina, Cantimpré states that she underwent a mystical death where she visited hell, purgatory, and heaven. In heaven, Christ spoke to

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<sup>11</sup> Steven Ozment also importantly discusses the rich tradition of mysticism, which includes several variations and diverse male and female adherents. Included in his examination are Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, Bonaventura, Bernard of Clairvaux and several others. Also Mechthild of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete were Beguine mystics to be considered in this complex tradition. For the full discussion see Ozment (1980, 115-134).

<sup>12</sup> Coakley offers the suggestion that perhaps Vitry's modest focus on a mystical tenet within the *Vita* could be due to his primary emphasis on the power relation between the institutional priestly office and her charismatic devotion. Note that this quote is taken from Coakley because I could not find the exact quote in the *Vita Mariae* translated by Margot King.



Christina, offering the choice “to remain with me [Christ] now or to return to the body and suffer there the sufferings of an immortal soul in a mortal body without damage to it” (Cantimpré 1989, 7). If she returns, Christ commissions Christina in “the example of [her] suffering and [her] way of life to convert living *men* to me and to turn aside from their sins” (Cantimpré 1989, 7).<sup>13</sup> Cantimpré portrays Christina as having had the mystical experience of speaking directly with Christ, who enlists her as an example for men to learn from and to offer public prayer that will encourage repentance for sins. According to Andrea Dickens, Cantimpré articulates the *Vita* because “Christina’s actions come to indict the men who did not carry out their clerical duties as required” and, therefore “Thomas means to shame the clergy” (52). Cantimpré goes on to demonstrate Christina’s appropriate ability to preach—a trait not often made available to women. Cantimpré says,

By the example of her life and with many words, with tears, lamentations and boundless cries she taught more and shouted louder than anyone we have known either before or since through writings or by report about the praise and glory of Christ who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit is God living and reigning forever and ever. Amen (46).

From the *Vita* of Christina, we see in what ways Cantimpré, like Vitry, orchestrates his admiration for Christina as more than an average lay Christian. He uses her speech as a mouthpiece through which to speak. Her devotion and mysticism marshal understandings in which Christina’s popularity and praise indicate failures within clerical communities. Christina’s extraordinary status as a Beguine mystic includes prophetic events revealing inadequate performance on the part of the clergy. Cantimpré utilizes Christina’s feminine life, which from a medieval perspective surprisingly includes preaching—a normative practice of medieval ecclesiastics. Cantimpré writes, “She assisted the dying most willingly and gladly and exhorted them to a confession of their sins, to the fruit of penance” (49). One clear example of this service is seen in Christina’s interactions with a Count, who “recited to her all his sins...He did this not for absolution which she had no power to give but rather that she be moved by this atonement to pray for him” (49). Dickens interprets this passage as an exhibition of Christina’s role in shepherding people into the afterlife, thereby depositing them in purgatory and guaranteeing their salvation. Christina’s *Vita* is thus, in part, an example meant to bring errant clergy back to their Christian practices. As with Mary’s *Vita*, there is the emphasis on confession and penance, but with Christina’s *Vita* in particular, she actually completes this service. The reader should remember that, according to Paul’s verse and Genesis in the Christian Bible, women should not preach and are believed to

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<sup>13</sup> Emphasis on *men* is my own.



be the “weaker” of the two sexes. Cantimpré’s rhetorical text reaffirms his own masculinity by destabilizing clerical identities, which are not as efficacious when compared to the life of the laywoman and mystic, Christina Mirabilis. Cantimpré thus seeks to humble the clergy failing to live up to the ideals of the clerical office, thereby strengthening his own masculinity.

The distinction of both Vitry and Cantimpré, which Grace Janzten points out, regarding the Beguines and the readers of the *vitae* is that Mary and Christina were models to wonder at but not to emulate (1995, 213). Part of constructing the hagiographical accounts of these women—meant in part to empower the masculine identities of Vitry and Cantimpré—included teaching clerics and the laity that while these women were examples of extra-regular piety, the Beguines were, nonetheless, exceptions to what was considered “normal”. The Fourth Lateran Council ensured that the Beguines would not become an official religious order. The Council led to the ultimate demise of the movement, although for a century the crux of the Beguine apostolate exhibited the weakened masculine authority of groups such as the Cathars and those clerics failing to complete their vows.<sup>14</sup> In this way, we see Vitry and Cantimpré deploying a model, which the Beguines (including mystics) represented, but that model was regarded as extremely unique, thereby limiting any practical imitation. The reasons for mystical occurrences usually indicated a problem within the Christian communities. That is, the reason Christina and Mary had these experiences, according to the hagiographers, was because clerics were not fulfilling their priestly tasks. By taking up the position of writing about these women, Vitry and Cantimpré sought to ensure the perceived obedience of the Beguines to the Church and its causes. However, rhetorically the authors also argued for an innovative status to reinforce their unique

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that the examples of Vitry and Cantimpré and their *vitae* contributed to the original acceptance of the Beguines as a sanctioned movement (though they were not considered an official religious order), which occurred mostly as a result of the Cathar heresies. However, during the late thirteenth century, a major tilt in the medieval ecclesiastical perception of the Beguines happened in which the Beguines were persecuted for their “semi-religious” lifestyle; the fact that they were not bound by a formal constitution left them with too much freedom to determine their own religiosity. Thereafter, many poetic satires and condemnations of the Beguines are recorded. For the purposes of this paper I shall not discuss the decline of the movement, but it is nonetheless significant that the Beguines were only supported at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Once the Cathars disbanded, many clerical and mendicant writings discourage laity and the Church to accept the Beguines. In 1310, the Beguine mystic, Marguerite Porete, was burned at the stake, and then in 1312, the Council of Vienne officially banned these women because their mystical life could not be left in the hands of women. For a detailed account of their decline and the comments of the Church officials see Janzten (1995, 205-207).

masculinities in which Vitry and Cantimpré were orthodox and enacting proper ecclesiastical practice.

#### MEN CRITIQUING MEN -- CONCLUSIONS

The examples of Vitry and Cantimpré's writings serve to show in what ways they employed the *vitae* of Beguine women to demonstrate and critique masculine clerical praxis. Whether ecclesiastics focused more on the Beguines' mystical experiences or their apostolic lifestyles, the *vitae* and representations of the Beguines invested these men with masculine identities, enabling them to guide other men and women towards the Church's understanding of proper piety. The significance of their "guidance" is that it represents power and authority over others. The portrayals of laywomen whose lifestyles and experiences shamed and indicated ecclesiastical shortcomings in priestly offices consequently strengthened the ecclesiastical authority of Vitry and Cantimpré. From the view of the medieval Church, clerics were defined largely by their ability to preach piety and encourage Christian devotion. Priests' examples of prayer and their vows determined clerical masculinity as a reflection of their own religious practice. The social adjustments of the Gregorian Reform and Fourth Lateran Council necessitated alterations in what it meant to be an ecclesiastical man, as sexual demonstration was no longer an option. The Church enforced strict celibacy, condemned Christian sects for heresy and officially recognized new mendicant and religious orders. In the wake of these events, Vitry and Cantimpré moved to adapt and preserve their masculinities as effectively as they could.

This essay has served as only a preliminary introduction to the masculinities of Vitry and Cantimpré, as well as medieval ecclesiastics as a whole. Other provocative issues, such as Cantimpré's will to supplement Vitry's *Vita Mariae* could offer insightful discoveries into the relationship these men had together, as well as into what ways the mendicant and clerical identities clashed or cooperated to secure a masculine identity. This is especially compelling when interpreted from the perspective of both men masculinizing the Beguines so as to emasculate other failing clergy and heretics. Another avenue of research could further investigate exactly what effect the Gregorian Reform had on priestly offices. I only briefly examine this issue, but considering the lack of sexual identity offered to clerics, the possibility of homosexual nuances in clerical writings at this time could instigate compelling results. Also, we saw Vitry aligning himself with priestly masculinities and, at the same time, critiquing them in order to secure his own masculine position. I do not discuss the paradox of this position. Nevertheless, I have endeavored here to tease out themes of medieval Christian

orthodoxy during the thirteenth century, in conjunction with clerical identities, which exhibits masculine drives to authenticate modes of authority. As a result, we have seen in what ways both Vitry and Cantimpré labored to project their masculinities through the women they wrote about.

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