

The importance of medieval women mystics in the European literary canon

Francesca Barresi
University of Bologna

Abstract

The remarkable growth of interest in the study of female mysticism witnessed in the past few decades in religious studies does not seem to have seen the same enthusiasm in the literary sphere. From a strictly literary point of view, it is remarkable how few mystical writers have found their position in a broader European literary and academic canon: despite much ground-breaking work of textual rediscovery that has uncovered many long-neglected women writers having been done, the choice is still somewhat limited, a few synoptic presentations and critical edition exist, and the majority of them are unsatisfactory or inadequate in the light of a more contemporary appraisal of the phenomenon. This contribution aims to analyse the common points in the works of two medieval mystical writers, Hadewijch of Brabant and Angela of Foligno, both living during the XIII century, in order to investigate, through a comparative analysis, the intersections in their works and re-evaluate their historical, spiritual and literary experience.

Keywords:

Medieval literature, Women's studies, Mystical literature, Christian mysticism, Dutch literature, Italian literature.

INTRODUCTION: THEME, PROBLMES, OBJECTIVES, CHRONOLY AND SPACE

In her 1994 study named *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism*, renowned scholar of mystical literature Elizabeth Petroff argued that “medieval mystical texts by women will not fit into a traditional Western notion of literature because they derive from a different experience of the body, a different epistemology, and a different relationship to language”: it is only “if we radically challenge prevailing ideas of what constitutes literature that we might become able to recuperate the experience of medieval women as expressed in mystical texts”.¹ The present moment, where “alternative voices” are getting a wider resonance in literary studies, seems to call out for a more complete and critical knowledge of medieval women mystics, a deeper analysis of the linguistic and scientific form of their thought and new and more precise translations in order to finally try to listen to their direct voice, which will allow one to approach the inner meaning of their message with all its nuances, geographical overtones and historical peculiarities. The remarkable growth of interest in

¹ Elizabeth Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994.

the study of female mysticism witnessed in the past few decades in religious studies does not seem to have found the same enthusiasm in the literary sphere and from a strictly literary point of view it is remarkable how few mystical writers have found their position in a broader European literary and academic canon: despite much ground-breaking work that has uncovered many long-neglected women writers having been done, the choice is still somewhat limited, a few synoptic presentations and critical editions exist and the majority of them are unsatisfactory or inadequate in the light of a more contemporary appraisal of the phenomenon.²

Medieval women's writings are thus often classified into the vague description of "medieval literature", most often judged as a representative of where a literature has developed at a certain time, but their authors are not yet evaluated as original and consistent thinkers, which opened the door to one of the most creative eras in the history of women, female writing and thought. This submerged knowledge that transpires from medieval culture and unexpectedly has women as protagonists is extremely relevant for medieval studies and through the analysis of mystical writings, the Middle Ages, wrongly considered the period of greatest women's oppression, will be understood as the historical phase of brand new intellectual genesis, where a new female subjectivity is formed, and where women, through literature, could participate in a context of male, hierarchical, exclusive and discriminating domination.

It is today interesting to analyze how this "neglected canon" actually broke the traditional notions of knowledge, triggering fundamental changes in the perception and mental representation of the history of our civilization. This project aims to analyse the common points in the works of two late medieval mystical writers, Hadewijch and Angela of Foligno, as their experience presents many historical and conceptual similarities that allow a comparative reading of their literary and spiritual paths. In order to better understand the impact of their contribution to European cultural history it is necessary to briefly outline the historical context and the spiritual environment where their works were produced as a reassessment of some of the prevailing opinion on the social and cultural backgrounds of their writings, which may help us obtain a sharper picture of their places in literary history.

² Cristina Mazzoni, "Mystical and Literary Texts: Meeting the Other, and Each Other, at the Borders of Language", *Annali di Italianistica* 25 (2007).

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Hadewijch of Brabant and Angela of Foligno both lived in the 13th century, one in Brabant and the other in Umbria, two privileged areas for feeling the environment of the spiritual revolution that was happening in Europe at the turn of the twelfth to the thirteenth century when in urban and wealthy communities a popular desire for apostolic emulation and reform caused the development of new forms of religious life to which women made extremely important contributions. In Flanders, France, Germany and Italy an increasing number of women took hold of their destiny in the name of a different way of understanding their life as enthusiastic, fervent and courageous female Christians. By the end of the twelfth century, slightly before St. Francis of Assisi cast off his garments and embraced Lady Poverty, a movement of women in the Low Countries was metaphorically doing the same thing: there, lay women which the documents of the time call *mulieres religiosae* or *sanctae mulieres*, and that were later known as *beguines* also cast off their wealth, honor, even social standing to live an apostolic life of charity, poverty and prayer. From the Low Countries, their movement spreads throughout all Europe, as much as that the phenomenon has been analyzed as a whole and eventually defined as a continental *Religiöse Frauenbewegung* by groundbreaking historian Herbert Grundmann.³ The European cities tingled with these women, who were called by different names according to the country where they lived: *Begijnen* in the Flemish region, *Papelarde* in France, *Coquennunnen* in Germany, *Humiliatae* in Lombardy and *Bizzocche* in central Italy.⁴ They all lived a religious life without becoming “religious” in a strict sense, as they never took official vows as nuns, but came together with the aim of helping others, of serving God among the poor and the sick, as true testimonies of the *vita apostolica*, which seemed to be long forgotten by a Church all busy with material and political affairs, far from the instances of the people. Without being associated to a pre-existent monastic order, they avoided the major condition of female religiosity of their time, that was enclosure; at the same time, they rejected marriage because, just like nuns, they felt themselves promised to the divine Groom. In a society where women could be either wives or nuns (*tertium non datur*: actually, the third possibility was to be

³ Herbert Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter: Untersuchungen über die geschichtlichen Zusammenhänge zwischen der Ketzerei, den Bettelorden und der religiösen Frauenbewegung im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert und über die geschichtlichen Grundlagen der deutschen Mystik: Anhang, Neue Beiträge zur Geschichte der religiösen Bewegungen im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1935).

⁴ For a complete picture of the beguinal movement, see: Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in medieval culture: with special emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (London: Octagon Books, 1969); Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2003); Alcantara Mens, *Oorsprong en betekenis van de Nederlandse Begijnen- en Begardenbeweging* (Antwerp: Standaardboekhandel, 1947).

or become a prostitute) the beguinal way of life was really something revolutionary. Beguines lived alone in their home as hermits or together in all-female groups, and they independently organized their life, which was lived as half active, which involved charity and manual work, and half contemplative: thanks to their affective engagement with the word of God, many of these women were particularly inclined to mystical experience. It is impossible not to notice them, admiring them as saints or speaking of them as false devotees, dangerous hypocrites, carriers of heresies and disorders. Active in places of misery, pain and despair, they comfort people in need speaking of the unknown love for a merciful God, who knows and loves the derelicts and the oppressed, having himself shared by choice their bitter fate, a Lord who promises relief to those who ask but do not find any helping hand, to those who call for justice and do not get it.

The Italian case is particularly interesting because the spreading of the beguinal ways fits into the Franciscan context of its origins: here, religious women who lived outside the convent as beguines were known as *bizzoche* and were often affiliated with the third order of Saint Francis.⁵ In this regard it is interesting to note how the flourishing of the beguinal movement was parallel to the revolutionary outbreak of the mendicant orders, and the same religious manifestations that with San Francis led to an unparalleled spiritual renewal in Umbria which existed independently in the brabantine area as well: in both cases, on the social basis of a distinctly urban civilization and great economic prosperity, a vital religious aversion to clericalism led to an evangelical life embraced with an unknown radicalism.

The spiritual link between these forms of *vita religiosa* is highlighted by Saint Francis, who was himself conquered by the spiritual ardor of the people of what he calls “Gallia Belgica”, and expressed the desire, according to his *Vita Antiqua*, to go there and do apostolate. His desire would be fulfilled only during the last quarter of the thirteenth century, when the Franciscans, heading north, spread in Germanic speaking countries and found that lay communities of women and men (known as begards) were already sensible to their ideals and sought support because were often persecuted by the Inquisition.⁶ This is the time when the two currents actually merged in the same spiritual expression: according to Alcantara Mens, the only scholar who has ever studied their affinities in detail, “it is the fusion between the Beguinal and the Franciscan movement

⁵ Mario Sensi, *Storie di bizzoche tra Umbria e Marche* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1955).

⁶ The beguinal movement was to be condemned on suspicion of heresy by the Council of Vienne in 1312. See: Elizabeth Makowski, *A Pernicious Sort of Woman: Quasi-Religious Women and Canon Lawyers in the Later Middle Ages* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2005); Giuseppe Alberigo, Giuseppe Dossetti, Perikles Joannou, Claudio Leonardi, Paolo Prodi (eds.) *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 2013), p. 374 [16].

which inaugurates the golden age of medieval popular mysticism in vernacular”.⁷

Some of these women, coming from wealthy families, were indeed literate and endowed with exceptional literary talent: scattered throughout all Europe, they mark the beginning of our literatures since they start talking about the experience of divine love in their “mother tongues”, i.e., in the different vulgar variants of the European languages. It is through them that God stops speaking the language of the learned, of the rich, of the Church, to start speaking with the words of daily life, of work, of love.

Hadewijch of Brabant was the spiritual mistress of a group of beguines. Poet, visionary, mystical author and vernacular theologian of the thirteenth century, Hadwijch occupies a unique place in medieval Church history as she is one of the most significant and original beguine mystics whose written works have survived until today. When her texts were discovered, only in the middle of the 19th century, scholars were initially particularly fascinated by the 45 love *Songs (Lieder)* in the manuscripts, which also contained 14 *Visions (Visioenen)* and 31 *Letters (Brieven)* in prose, along with 16 *Poems in Couplets (Mengeldichten)*. All those text are written in a brabantine variety of Middle Dutch, they are all addressed to her community of fellow beguines, and they all deal with one single theme: *de minne*, the mystical love between the soul and God, and how men and women, through *minne*, can find God within themselves.

What is astonishing about the poetry of Hadewijch is the fact that in order to construct her concept of love she draws on two fundamental genres of medieval literature: the French courtly lyric of *trouvères* and *trobadors*, of which she assimilates all the themes and techniques, and the mystical tradition of twelfth century, the *Brautmystik* inspired by the *Sermons on the Song of Songs (Sermones Super Cantica)* written by Bernard of Clairvaux for his fellow Cistercian monks.

Hadewijch conveys the monastic and the courtly discourse in a way that they can function together and they can reinforce each other, challenging the opposition between sacred and profane love. Her exceptional contribution lies indeed in the way in which she managed to integrate in her writings different types of conflicting discourse: Latin theology and sensual mysticism; religious beliefs and profane love poetry; traditional medieval gender roles and new roles for women; male God-language versus female representations of the divine; God’s transcendence versus becoming one with God. She developed a unique integration of all these different themes while shaping Middle Dutch as a mystical language with the tools of her great culture, intelligence, sensibility and

⁷ Alcantara Mens, “L’Ombrie italienne et l’Ombrie brabançonne: deux courants religieux parallèles d’inspiration commune”, *Études Franciscaines* supplement 17 (1967).

mystical grace. In her works, Love is womanly figure, divinely beautiful and seductive, and only those “knights” who are brave enough to embrace the fight and be “completely swallowed up in her abyssal essence” will eventually be the soul’s union with the divine. The mystical union is described in a more extensive way in the *Visions* and her spirituality explained in the *Letters* that she writes to some of her beguine friends for guidance. When Hadewijch talks about the ways of knowing the divine essence, she uses the verb *gebruken*, “to have fruition of”, a fruition that affects both the body and the mental faculties and leads to a state of conscience which overcomes all opposites and differences, in a complete identification with the abyssal harmony of the Trinitarian movement, as she writes in Letter IX:

“Where the abyss of his wisdom is, God will teach you what he is, and with what wondrous sweetness the loved one and the Beloved dwell one in the other, and how they penetrate each other in such a way that neither of the two distinguishes himself from the other. But they abide in one another in fruition, mouth in mouth, heart in heart, body in body, and soul in soul, while one sweet divine nature flows through them both and being in each other they are both one and they remain completely one – forever”.⁸

Contemporary of Dante Alighieri and Jacopone da Todi, Saint Angela of Foligno was born a few miles away from Assisi, shortly after the time of Saint Francis. Back then, her birthplace was an important center of Franciscan spirituality and many monasteries for women were being founded in the near surroundings: nevertheless she decided to live in her home as a *reclusa*, with a friend named Masanzuola.⁹ According to her “auto-hagiography”, the *Liber de Vera Fidelium Experientia*, Angela had her conversion at the age of 37 and before that she led a life of luxury and sin, which eventually led her to a great suffering and a frightful fear of eternal damnation. She is therefore “a mystic for the third millennium”, because before her conversion she leads a full earthly life, in complete pleasure and without moral constraints. She is not “born saint”, she rather “became” one: starting from the very bottom of sin, she manages to reach the highest mystical summits. The conversion begins and reaches its acme in 1291, when during a pilgrimage to Assisi she is touched by mystical grace and, as the Holy Spirit abandoned her, she caused public scandal weeping in front of the Basilica Maggiore, where she compulsively cried and shout: “*Love unknown, why do you leave me, and why and why and why?*”. This episode was followed by dramatic mystical visions which led Angela to believe that she might be the prey of the devil’s deception and made her confess everything to her relative Arnaldo, a Franciscan friar whom she will later decide to dictate

⁸ Hadewijch, *The complete works*, trans. Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 66.

⁹ This is one of the elements that allow to consider her as a *bizzoca*, who afterwards joined the Third Order of St. Francis.

an account of all her mystical experiences. This is the genesis of her *Liber*, a work that has indeed an exceptional literary caliber, as it is the result of a very complex linguistic mediation: Angela gives in the dialect of Foligno the record of how she came to embrace love, suffering and poverty through a very sharp Franciscan spirituality while Brother Arnaldo transcribes it into a rare immediacy of Latin, imbued with Italianisms, both in lexicon and syntax, which gives the impression of a slightly “alienated” and dialectical Italian. The drafting of the document took four years, and it presents fractures and voids: the story has no external unity, although it has an interior one, almost lyrical. The work proves to have a deep theological and mystical complexity for which, shortly after her death, she has been named *magistra theologorum*. In her mystical itinerary, Saint Angela reaches the highest contemplative degree that the history of mysticism knows, that is the direct vision of God and of the Trinitarian mystery: not only in darkness, something common to mystics, but even *supra tenebram*, above darkness: she reaches God and then she loses him in darkness, but then again, through love, God rises up above the obscurity and she is united with him again in what she calls the “highest divine darkness”:

“It is not the ordinary fire that sometimes burns, but a very sweet fire of love. I have no doubt when such a fire is in the soul: then all my limbs separate and so I want it to be; then all my limbs feel an unspeakable joy, in which I would like to remain forever. [...] and the limbs of the body agree with the soul, and the soul is a whole thing with the heart and with the whole body, since it is in unity with them and answers for all of them. Then the soul is raised from every darkness and a knowledge of God comes to her, more than I thought possible, with so much clarity and so much firmness and so very deep abyss that there is no heart that can then understand it and think it, in no way”.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

The simultaneous existence of the Beguinal and the Franciscan movement seems to be inspired by the same spiritual themes and the same driving principles since the same spiritual, social and historical reasons that brought to the genesis of the Franciscan movement, manifested themselves simultaneously and independently from it in Brabant. Scholars have therefore talked about an “Umbrian Brabant” or a “Brabantine Umbria” because in both cases, among an urban civilization and great wealth, a current of religious opposition which wanted to go back to evangelical life in a very radicalistic way was developed.¹¹

¹⁰Angela da Foligno, *Il Libro* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2009), 77.

¹¹ See: Alcantara Mens, *Op. Cit.*, and Romana Guarnieri, “Beghinismo d'oltralpe e bizzocchismo

The simultaneous existence of these two currents, one in the north and the other in the south of Europe, which were inspired by identical spiritual themes and guiding principles, leads to the conclusions that both of these manifestations are to be located in the formation of a common heritage, not only spiritual but also literary; yet only a few studies have attempted to focus on the similarity of the Italian and the Brabantine extra-regular experiences from a religious point of view, but no one focused on a comparative analysis of the literary works that were produced in these contexts. Essentially, what the Franciscans were doing in the south, the Beguines were doing in the north of Europe – as with the vulgarization of the religious literary production – and that is the reason why I thought it would be stimulating to compare the experience of a beguine mystic, Hadewijch of Brabant, and a franciscan mystic, Angela of Foligno: their shared backgrounds create a shared spirituality, which formed intertwined literary expressions of the same spiritual substrate.

Although we do not know whether any of these women writers were aware of similar work being done by other women, there is a surprising consistency in the central metaphors employed for their experiences – more consistency than can be explained by the Christian culture they all shared. One remains struck and surprised by the intimate harmony emanating from spiritual groups from such diverse geographical regions as they present a common, fundamental tone that is completely new, and mystical literature shows the peculiarities that indicate a significant turning point in the experience of the spiritual and cultural life of Europe in the thirteenth century. The challenge for us is the re-evaluation of the voices of these “women theologians” would show them as original and consistent thinkers, who opened the door to one of the most creative eras in the history of women, female writing and thought. This submerged knowledge that transpires from medieval culture is relevant for medieval studies because, overturning a consolidated stigmatization, the Middle Ages, wrongly considered the period of greatest women’s oppression, will be understood as the historical phase of brand new intellectual genesis, where a new female subjectivity is formed, and where women, through literature, could participate in a context of male, hierarchical, exclusive and discriminating dominant.

italiano tra il secolo XIV e il secolo XV” in id., *Donne e chiesa tra mistica e istituzioni, secoli XIII-XV* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2004), 51-59.