Convent Chronicles

Women Writing About Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages

Anne Winston-Allen

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Introduction

Women Writing in the Late Middle Ages

In the year 1503, on the Feast of the Epiphany, an anonymous woman completed a *Book of Sisters,* an account of the lives of sixty-six nuns of the cloister of St. Agnes at Emmerich on the Rhine. Her narrative opens with these words:

> Here begins the prologue of the book of the sisters of St. Agnes in Embrick [Emmerich], under the rule of St. Augustine, the life and converse of the honorable sisters serving God at the cloister of St. Agnes, which was founded in the year of our Lord 1419. . . . Thus have I undertaken to write a little—to the honor of God and the Virgin—in praise of those who lived and for the edification of those who will come after [us]—a consolation to all devout souls. And because I am simple and uneducated, I desire that those who read or hear this should not disdain it, but examine the lives and virtues of those who are described in this book.[1]

Despite the author's request for remembrance, her book reached few readers and was all but forgotten for the next five hundred years. The one surviving copy was discovered and edited by Anne Bollmann and Nikolaus Staubach in 1998. This kind of literary-historical obscurity is more the rule than the exception for works by monastic women of the late Middle Ages. It has led to the mistaken assumption that they left no substantial written records about themselves. But, in fact, they did.

A survey of the remains of women's convent libraries turns up many similarly obscure vernacular convent chronicles, historical accounts, and other kinds of writings. This book surveys works composed by women in monastic orders during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

Produced in fifty-two different women's communities, they include, besides the Emmerich text, two other books of sisters, twelve women's cloister chronicles, five foundation narratives, six accounts by nuns of the reform of convents, plus numerous other annals and historical writings. While four of the women's accounts are in Latin, the others are all in dialects of German and East Netherlandish. Also included are three women's chronicles from a later period that cite verbatim from fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century annals. These works, along with letters, poems, and mystical and devotional texts comprise only a small part of medieval women's writings, which are still extant but unstudied in cloister, regional, and national archives.[2]

The female monastics who produced these works represented a significant presence in medieval society. Like many northern convents, the St. Agnes cloister in Emmerich had originally been founded as a house of Sisters of the Common Life but by the middle of the fifteenth century had become a monastic community. Women's houses of Devout Sisters were the first to be founded by the *devotio moderna* or Common Life movement, which began in the Netherlands toward the end of the fourteenth century, and constituted the majority of Common Life establishments. Even though only thirteen of the women's communities were officially admitted to the Windesheim Congregation (the movement's monastic branch), houses of Sisters of the Common Life outnumbered those of the Brothers by a ratio approaching three to one.[3] John Van Engen's more conservative estimate counts some forty male and ninety female houses spread throughout Holland and Germany at the end of the fifteenth century.[4] Despite their numerical majority, however, the women of the movement were largely ignored by the scholarly community until 1985, when Gerhard Rehm published a groundbreaking study of the Sisters of the Common Life in Germany. By Rehm's estimate German sister-houses numbered about seventy as compared to twenty-five for the Brothers.[5] Still, it took another twelve years before the first extensive study of the cloister life and writings of the women of the Windesheim Congregation appeared.[6]

In the more traditional monastic orders, the ratio of women's to men's houses is less imposing than in the Common Life movement but remains substantial. The number of female religious in Germany alone, c. 1250, has been estimated at between 25,000 and 30,000.[7] From its founding c. 1220, the women's branch of the Dominican order grew so rapidly that, by the

early fourteenth century, there were seventy nunneries to forty-six friaries.[8] Particularly in southern German cities such as Strasbourg, which alone was home to no fewer than seven houses of Dominican nuns, religious women constituted an important presence.[9] In northern Germany, the high ratio of nunneries to priories was primarily in the Cistercian order. Here one finds in the sixteenth century forty-three women's as compared to fifteen men's houses.[10] Although nuns were outnumbered by male monastics in Europe as a whole, the number of women religious approached or even exceeded that of men in many places.[11]

Despite the significant numbers of these religious establishments, relatively little is known about the day-to-day lives of the many women who inhabited them from the point of view of the sisters themselves. Jeffrey Hamburger's recent books on medieval nuns as artists have provided essential information on the spiritual and artistic inner workings of German-speaking communities. Yet, as Hamburger points out, this geographic region and historical period have long been neglected by North American medievalists as compared with studies of French, Italian, and English nuns. Much research remains to be done.[12] Women were, for example, active participants alongside men in the reform movements that swept the German-speaking areas in the fifteenth century. They left behind accounts that offer a different perspective on the struggle for renewal and reform on the eve of the Reformation. Consequently, to fully understand the dynamics of change that resulted in the radical religious upheavals of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, those records require further study.

In their comprehensive history of women in Europe, Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser argue against the idea that the "invisible majority" had "no history" or achieved little that is "worthy of inclusion in the historical record."[13] Other women's historians have asked provocatively whether a "master narrative," which does not include half of the population, is legitimate.[14] Clearly, the past looks different, Joan Ferrante asserts, "just with women sharing the stage."[15] Fortunately, it is a very large stage and there is plenty of room on it. The task now is to rewrite the action with faces, names, and firsthand accounts from the women whose own histories and works, like the Emmerich *Book of Sisters,* have long been gathering dust in the archives.

Aside from a few mystical works composed by female visionaries, almost all primary texts used by modern scholars to study medieval women were

recorded by men.[16] In addition to the vitae of charismatic, radically ascetic, and even sometimes deranged women composed by their male confessors, the most common documents studied have been court protocols, visitations records, registers and charters.[17] Perhaps it should not surprise that the largest single source of information on the everyday life of medieval women has been criminal court proceedings.[18] A sampling of these kinds of protocols, along with scholarly and popular accounts, can be found in Eileen Power's classic *Medieval English Nunneries* (1922), still the most widely used authority on medieval convent life. For all its excellence and splendid wealth of information, however, Power's landmark study is almost entirely lacking in sources actually written by women. Worse yet, many of the popular songs, ribald and moral tales it includes depict nuns satirically as naive, silly, vain, spiteful, or sexually unchaste.[19] Critiquing these kinds of salacious sources, Shulamith Shahar cites a typical twelfth-century nunnery description attributed to Renart, in which a nun leaves her own infant unattended in order to serve as midwife to other nuns who are about to give birth.[20]

Reacting against such depictions, Caroline Walker Bynum asserts that "the stories men liked to tell about women reflected not so much what women did as what men admired or abhorred. . . . It is crucial not to take as women's own self-image the sentimentalizing or the castigating of the female in which medieval men indulged." To overturn stereotypes like these Bynum recommends studying "works in which women wrote about their own visions and mystical experiences and about life among the sisters in their households, beguinages, and convents."[21]

Unfortunately, these kinds of texts are hard to find. Although many prominent women mystics' writings can be documented, especially from the thirteenth century on, in most cases their revelations were edited or recorded not by the women themselves but with the assistance of well-meaning and sympathetic male collaborators. The philological difficulties this creates have led scholars to question whether a "female voice" can be distinguished at all.[22] A step in the right direction is Albrecht Classen's search for alternative sources. Classen suggests four areas or genres where female voices from the Middle Ages can be identified. Listed are (1) religious songs, (2) love poetry in books of popular song, (3) letters for public or private consumption, and (4) religious pamphlets of the Reformation era.[23] By broadening the range of texts to encompass writings that are less

conventionally "literary," one can identify many more works by women. These include histories, eyewitness reform reports, and cloister annals, as well as more nontraditional sources such as prioresses' manuals, books of advice, and New Years' addresses to their communities, books of sisters, personal devotional books, meditational exercises and interpretations of biblical texts, and even student compositions. This study comprises these primary sources, along with more conventional types of writings.

One eye-opening effort to present some of these alternative tests to an English-speaking audience is Daniel Bornstein's translation of Bartolomea Riccoboni's chronicle and necrology of the convent of Corpus Domini in Venice (1395–1436).[24] Bornstein concludes that "far from being closed in upon themselves and interested exclusively in their own spiritual lives, the sisters of Corpus Domini were deeply engaged in the world beyond their walls." Indeed, the picture of women that emerges in Sister Bartolomea's chronicle diverges significantly from conventional wisdom about what nuns in the late Middle Ages thought and were like. Bornstein asserts that Sister Bartolomea's chronicle is noteworthy because it records and illuminates "a particularly dramatic moment in the long history of the Catholic Church," namely, the schism created by the election of three rival popes and the great church councils subsequently called to deal with it.[25] There are, however, other reasons for studying this and other women's accounts.

The texts collected in this study recall a similarly dramatic moment in the history of the medieval church: the intense struggle for reform waged by fifteenth-century activists in the Observant movement. But they also record another important juncture. From the point of view of women's history, the fifteenth century constitutes a critical period in religious women's efforts to find new avenues of engagement and self-expression. To these women, activism in the Observant movement, to which most of them belonged, offered alternatives to the old avenue of influence that had been closed off to women by censorship of mystical and visionary writings. At the same time that the Observance imposed a stricter rule, it placed some women in positions of authority and created conditions that encouraged literary production, new networks of exchange between women's cloisters, and a more active role in the late medieval discourse on religious piety and practice.

In the religious transformations that preceded the Reformation, both male and female monastics were deeply involved. The fifteenth century,

dominated by the great church councils, calls for religious change, and efforts at top-down reform, was a time of intense religious ferment that spawned countless middle- and lower-level reform initiatives.[26] The Observant reform advocated, on the one hand, a return to the strict piety practiced by the founders of the orders and, on the other, a new spirituality similar to that of the *devotio moderna* or Common Life movement (which was spreading at the same time from the Netherlands across northern Europe).[27] Although the Observant revival was brought to prominence by the great reform councils, its origins date back to the previous century. Having begun in the 1330s among Franciscans in Italy, the reformed piety was promoted among Augustinians in the 1380s, Dominicans in the 1390s, and reached the upper Rhine valley by the turn of the century. From there the movement spread in the 1400s throughout the German-speaking territories. By the early sixteenth century, it had achieved a majority hold in the fatefully important province of Saxony, where Martin Luther, himself an Observant, was a leader in the reformed faction of Augustinians.[28] Local initiatives such as these and a growing participation by secular authorities in reforms paved the way for more radical and rapid changes to follow, affecting the whole populace.

Among Dominicans, an approximately equal number of men's and women's religious communities had joined the Observance by the 1480s. In spite of women's participation and eye-witness reports, studies traditionally have cited only accounts written by male activists, usually those by Dominicans Johannes Nider and Johannes Meyer, and Augustinian Johannes Busch. Even Constance Proksch's 1994 monograph on chronicles of the reform movement, which draws on thirty-five convent histories, uses only chronicles written by men.[29] The chronicles and accounts written by female reform activists have not been studied in a systematic way. Yet, in these accounts, one reads of prioresses soliciting help from other prioresses to introduce the Observance in their own communities, of groups of sisters accompanying male activists on missions to reform other cloisters, and of struggles inside convents between Observants and opponents of the reform. By examining these and other texts, this study thus explores the distinctive nature of women's religious and literary activities at a key moment in both the history of Western Christianity and the ongoing construction of a history for women. The accounts of the Observant reform from women's perspective are texts that must be integrated into the history of the Obser-

vant movement. Moreover, they call for a reconsideration of late medieval women's role, agency, and attitudes about themselves.

For the medieval female population, even more than for men, religion was of critical cultural importance. Feminist historian Gerda Lerner has called it "the primary arena on which women fought for hundreds of years for feminist consciousness."[30] Yet the fifteenth-century Observant reform presents something of a dilemma in the feminist context. On the one hand, the imposition of strict claustration on female monastics and the requirement that all goods be held in common are seen as attempts to subjugate women and to appropriate their wealth.[31] Understandably, then, feminist scholars applaud their plucky medieval sisters who fought the efforts of reformers to encloister them and place their private possessions in the convent's hands. In some convents women resisted physically, as did nuns at Nuremberg, who for a time held off male reformers by brandishing a large crucifix at them.[32] In many other places, nuns left reformed cloisters for other communities rather than join the Observance against their will. On the other hand, at the same time that many women opposed the reform there were others who supported it and were as committed to its goals as male activists. Voting with their feet, many joined the rapidly expanding new Observant communities. Others took part in the effort to spread the movement, working side by side with men and sometimes independently. What are scholars to do, for example, with women like Katharina von Mühlheim who set off with parties of reformers to introduce the Observance at three other cloisters, or with prioresses like Sophie von Münster, Margareta Zorn, and Margareta Regenstein, who each engaged in the reform of four cloisters? Clearly, it is difficult to decide who the heroines are here: the women who fought for the movement or those who fought against it. Most women religious opposed the strict seclusion, austerity, and renunciation of private property demanded by the reformers. But, while women who supported the reform constitute only a small group, they left numerous records. Pictured in their own writings, these women saw themselves as active agents with positive political and spiritual agendas. It is now clear that more studies are needed of women on both sides of the reform controversy, as well as examinations of their agency and relationships to their male mentors.

Feminists do not object to women launching reform efforts of their own but rather to programs imposed on them from outside, especially when

what male reformers imposed was "control."[33] Yet to say that women were subject to the machinations of religious and secular overlords is not to say that female religious were uninterested in reform. What has been missing is women's own perspective on their situation, their struggles, aims, and hopes. In her 1997 study, historian Joan Ferrante cautioned that many medieval women may rightly be characterized as "victims," but for scholars to concentrate too much on misogyny and the negative is to play into the hands of the patriarchal view that "women were able to do little, therefore they did nothing valuable." Instead, Ferrante advocates studying what she calls "examples of positive practice," that is, women who "were active and effective" despite prejudices and the constraints placed upon them.[34] One does not have to look far to find such accounts. The sources this study examines are filled with portraits of active and effective women. These are not queens and saints but less high-profile, more ordinary women, though still of the patrician classes, whom female chroniclers celebrate for their practical resourcefulness, leadership and personal virtue.

Because so little is known about cloister life from the point of view of the women who lived it, Chapter 1 reviews recent scholarship, combining it with women's own depictions of life inside the walls of a medieval convent. Does the assertion that convent life was repressed and monotonous, a "horrible tedium," agree with nuns' own descriptions?[35] Can the conflicts that arose over reform justly be called "trivial nuns' squabbling," as another scholar asserts?[36] A look at women's own narratives about their lives inside the convent reveals a surprisingly broad range of theatrical, literary, and artistic pursuits. Far from a sense of repression, these nun's self-portraits convey a very positive opinion of themselves and their spiritual work. As educational and living establishments for the upper classes, medieval convents played an essential role in the "economy of social prestige." Admission to an exclusive convent was often a coveted position and a way of achieving higher social status. In narratives by medieval women, who had few options, often none desirable, the convent is frequently depicted as a safe haven offering them an alternative and a choice.

Besides preserving the extensive and influential family connections of the convents' inhabitants in medieval society, women's religious houses served important roles as money-lending institutions, adjudicators of legal disputes, and recorders of wills, deeds, and transactions. Beyond this, women's religious houses constituted a significant presence through the religious

services their parish churches provided, their performance of the liturgical offices, the keeping of lists of the dead, and the offering of prayers for the souls of the deceased. The extent of these multiple, interlocking social, financial, and spiritual links between religious houses and the lay community are reflected in the intense engagement of the lay populace in conflicts over convent reforms that erupted in the fifteenth century.

Chapter 2 examines how the environment for women religious changed from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, as reflected in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century narratives. In these works, the sisters depict the origins of their communities as beguine settlements. They celebrate how the ''founding mothers'' established religious houses in the thirteenth century and tell stories about women seeking an alternative religious lifestyle, setting up their own communities, supporting each other financially, and working together in strikingly nonhierarchical relationships with male advisors. Their foundation stories depict the women's struggle to achieve regular status, acceptance into religious orders, and the sanction of the church hierarchy. While some of the foundation histories were written in the fifteenth century, others date from the fourteenth century and earlier. All the stories, however, were written for female audiences and all feature female protagonists as active, self-directed agents.

By the fifteenth century, conditions had begun to change rapidly as divisions within the Catholic church reached crisis proportions. At the same time that church councils and new religious movements took up the banner of reform, city councils and territorial princes stepped in to demand greater control and oversight of religious institutions. Dominican women's houses—by then recognized fixtures of the religious establishment—became subjects of the newly influential laity's vision of a more pious society. Themselves members of the increasingly powerful and affluent urban non-noble class, Observant reformers questioned the privileges and immunities of the old religious elite and campaigned to open cloisters to a wider spectrum of the population. Thus, for some women of the burgher classes, reform gave access to positions of leadership in convents.

After tracing the development of the Observant movement, the following chapters will look at the women who supported and opposed it. Chapter 3 focuses on those who took part in spreading the Observance, both women who willingly undertook or even initiated it and those who were drafted to go out with reform parties. Not all of the nuns who participated

as reformers wrote about it, but several of them left firsthand accounts. Like the convent foundation narratives, these reform artifacts place women in the foreground and portray them with agency and initiative, with strong, capable, and dedicated personalities. They particularly prize leadership abilities, the same qualities, ironically, that enabled women to successfully oppose the reform.

Chapter 4 looks at these opponents. Examining case studies of the reform's most famous failures, it reviews the strategies women used to fend off takeovers by reformers. In successful resistance campaigns, women were able to solicit effective support from their networks among the minor nobility. Rejecting any interference in the internal affairs of their houses, abbesses fought to stay in power and avert infringements of the convent's independence or social prestige. In elite houses, the critical issue was often loss of privileges for the nobility and the admission of women of lower rank. While some Conventual houses supported a more moderate kind of reform, they staunchly resisted the loss of private property and more austere practices, insisting that their traditional piety and way of life were in no way inferior.

Always at the core of this conflict was the difficult issue of enclosure. More complicated than merely an effort by the church hierarchy to further subjugate women, the move was bound up with public pressures of an economic, political, and social nature. Among the Observants, the ideal of withdrawal from the world was advocated as a spiritual necessity and proposed for men as well as women. Surprisingly, enclosure was used, in some instances, by women as a way to limit secular access and outside interference in their affairs. But the opponents of the reform were unmoved and resisted enclosure, often quite successfully, to defend their interests both as individuals and as communities.

Chapter 5 examines the explosion of scribal activity that occurred in Observant women's convents. Especially in the houses reached by the Bursfeld reform, primarily Benedictine and Cistercian communities, much effort was put into copying the new liturgical texts that had been mandated as part of the Bursfeld program to simplify and standardize the liturgy. But in all orders, books and often a program of education were some of the most important things reforming sisters brought with them. For Dominican women, reformer Johannes Meyer promoted a reading plan and a booklist. Under the Observance, communal and individual reading assumed signifi-

cance as a means of introducing the newly reformed sisters to the spirituality of the movement.

The result was what Werner Williams-Krapp has called a "literary explosion" of text production.[37] Library collections expanded at a rapid rate as books were copied and exchanged among Observant houses through a network of interlibrary loans. Although almost all of the collections built up in this expansion of women's libraries have since been dispersed or destroyed, a few medieval catalogues of what was contained in them remain. These inventories are impressive. The largest library to have partially survived was that of the Dominican sisters of St. Katharina in Nuremberg, which comprised some 500 to 600 volumes. In its time, the library at St. Katharina constituted the largest collection of German-language manuscripts of the Middle Ages. In most houses, the greatest expansion occurred in the first fifty to seventy-five years following the reform. Even though only ten percent of cloisters belonged to the Observance, this small number of houses produced ninety percent of the manuscripts from the period.[38] At St. Katharina, approximately half of the volumes housed there were copied by the sisters themselves.

Authorized by the Observance to keep records, write histories, and copy works to supply the growing demand for devotional literature, the women began to make their own translations from Latin into the vernacular. They also composed original poems, interpretations of biblical texts, devotional works, tracts, books of practical advice, accounts of the reform, and convent chronicles. For their personal study and reflection they compiled collections of excerpts from religious works. In addition, they collected sermons by their own "house preachers" and by guest preachers. Some sermons were copied, others summarized or reconstructed from notes. The result is that virtually all of the surviving vernacular sermons were preserved and made into collections by women, producing a literature primarily for female audiences. Despite the long neglect of women's works, it is becoming clear that, in both Germany and the Low Countries, the fifteenth century constituted a period of extremely active religious literary and scribal engagement on the part of women.

Drawing some conclusions about the nature and aims of feminine writing and its distinctiveness, Chapter 6 considers the strategies used and roles played by religious women in late medieval piety. While in earlier centuries mysticism had given them a voice and a means of exercising power, by the

fifteenth century this power had been heavily eroded through increased censorship. Deprived of visionary revelations as a route to influence, women began to focus on other literary modes. Accordingly, the portraits they draw of themselves in fifteenth-century chronicles differ from those of earlier mystical works and from what nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary historians asserted was innately and typically "female." The self-portraits of women in fifteenth-century chronicles are just as much literary fictions as those in earlier visionary writing, but they serve different aims. Instead of charismatics who fall into trances, the new heroines are portrayed as *in* the world rather than out of it. They are models of spiritual fervor but also of practical skills and attainable virtues. The chronicles depict convent inhabitants as aware of their history, contrast the old with the new, and celebrate the introduction and continuation of the Observance. Aimed at a new generation, they seek to inspire their audiences to persevere in the reform.

The larger range of texts that are available in the fifteenth century makes it possible to compare parallel works by men and women and circumvent some of the problems of mediation that have always plagued studies of "women's" writing. In form, convent writings do not conform to established models but tend to be idiosyncratic and eclectic. The language used by the female vernacular chroniclers is less educated and bears a closer resemblance to spoken than conventional written language. The tone is immediate and personal, unlike that of conventional chronicles. Women frequently use the first person, address the reader directly, and speak of the community as "we" and "our." Their texts concentrate much more than the men's on the religious life itself. Yet women's concentration on reformed spirituality does not have only an internal focus. Perhaps the most surprising discoveries of my research are examples of convent sisters editing texts specifically for distribution to the laity. For these sermon transcribers and editors, the Observance provided an arena for active engagement in the religious conversation of the day.

The sources upon which this study relies illustrate many of the difficulties of working with women's texts. First of all, they are texts of many types, dispersed over a large region (see map, page xviii) and a 300-year timespan. Besides letters and various kinds of devotional works, they include fourteenth-century Dominican women's collections of mystical vitae that contain convent foundation narratives (Adelhausen, Engelthal, Katha-

rinental, Oetenbach, Töss, and Unterlinden), fifteenth- and sixteenth-century vitae of sisters in houses of the New Devout (Deventer, Diepenveen, Emmerich), chronicles, housebooks, annals, and journals (Altomünster, Ebstorf [2], Heiningen, Herzebrock [2], Maihingen, Marienthal, Pfullingen, St. Gall, Überwasser, Zoffingen), reform accounts (Kirchberg, Kirchheim, Nuremberg, Pforzheim, Steinheim), and manuals or handbooks (Preetz, St. Gall). In addition, there are two chronicles in manuscripts that extend beyond this time period but cite excerpts verbatim from New Years' addresses by Prioress Ursula Haider in 1495 and 1496, and excerpts from the old Inzigkofen chronicle of 1525.[39] The Wienhausen chronicle, from a manuscript dated 1692, is included because it contains entries copied from the earlier Low German, fifteenth-century chronicle.[40]

The problems of establishing women's authorship are fewer than might be supposed. In the best cases, as in the Adelhausen sister-book, the writer identifies herself with the colophon, "I, Sister Anna von Munzingen, who composed this book."[41] Similarly, the "Book in the Choir" at cloister Preetz begins with the words, "In the year of our Lord 1487, on the vigil of St. Michael, this book, which was begun by me, Anna von Buchwald, in 1471, was completed and finished."[42] In other cases, a writer may be anonymous because she identifies herself only as "I, Sister Anna, Prioress," as in the Maihingen "Housebook," for example, where three prioresses have compatible dates and bear this first name.[43] Often the author does not name herself but interjects revealing personal comments, as does the chronicler of Pfullingen, who says, "As I write this, I have great hopes that the Lord will not abandon us," and "Pray to God for the writer, she composed this for you out of love."[44] In the chronicle of Ebstorf, the narrator uses the pronoun "we," and speaks of her colleagues as "the daughters."[45] In cases where sufficient internal clues in the text itself are lacking, the gender of the writer and sometimes even the name have been revealed by other convent documents. Because institutional documents were continually added on to, however, the issue becomes problematic when the earlier entries were recopied by later hands. Sometimes, as at Maihingen, the abbess collected the materials and prepared an outline, which scribes completed.

An example of the complicated, layered history of many of these texts is the case of the Töss sister-book, some, but clearly not all, of which was composed by Elsbeth Stagel (d. ca. 1360).[46] In the fifteenth century, a prologue, an epilogue, a vita of Henry Suso's mother and one of Elsbeth herself

were appended to the work by Johannes Meyer (1422–1485) who copied and edited three of the nine sister-books (those of Töss, Katharinental, and Oetenbach). Meyer, one of the earliest and most radical of the Dominican Observants, realized that the women's texts of the previous century, with their emphasis on poverty, virtue, and spiritual devotion, could supply spiritually edifying vernacular readings for women in newly reformed cloisters. Yet Ruth Meyer, who compared other manuscripts of the St. Katharinental sister-book to Johannes Meyer's version of it (in the same manuscript with the Töss sister-book), finds that Meyer's changes to the body of the text were limited to modifying chapter headings, rewording unclear passages, and removing three sections that he did not consider sufficiently edifying. Meyer's prologue and epilogue are the only parts not found in other manuscripts of the Katharinental text.[47] Since they do not differ appreciably from the sister-books that Meyer did not edit, the three sister-books abridged by him are regarded as essentially the women's own work. Scholars agree that, unlike other women's texts of the fourteenth century, sister-books were conspicuously lacking in the influence of confessors either as initiators or as advisors to their composition.[48]

Another difficulty is that many of the sources in this study are accessible only as unpublished manuscripts or as transcriptions made in the eighteenth or nineteenth century and printed whole or in excerpted form in regional or difficult-to-access periodicals. Magdalena Kremer's chronicle of the reform of cloister Kirchheim is available, for example, in a collection of documents on the history of the counts of Württemberg, published in 1777. Except for the Dominican sister-books, preserved in multiple copies made by the Observants, almost all of the women's chronicles, manuals, journals, and reform accounts have survived from the Middle Ages in only one single manuscript copy, often still located in a convent library or regional archive. Like Magdalena Kremer's chronicle, printed because it recounts deeds of three of the counts of Württemberg, the parts of women's chronicles that have been published most often are those that contain accounts of wars and revolts. The only sections of the chronicle of Überwasser in print are episodes that relate the Anabaptist uprising in Münster in 1534–35.[49] Thus, in many women's works, the sections dealing with "important events" have been deemed worthy of publication, while the rest has not.

The question of genre is complicated by the fact that even internally these texts are not of one type. Typically, they are hodgepodge collections,

combining letters, inventories, financial accounts, and general advice, interspersed piecemeal within a sort of chronicle format. As such, they do not conform to conventional notions of "literature" or belong to established genres. Indeed, many of these institutional annals are such idiosyncratic hybrids as to defy categorization. Rather, they constitute a subgenre of their own that has so far received no attention. Even institutional texts by named writers such as Anna von Buchwald and Magdalena Kremer are not included in the *Verfasserlexikon,* the standard reference work on German medieval writers. Because these and other women's institutional writings do not fall into traditional categories or qualify as literary texts in the conventional sense, they have long been excluded from the most broadly defined canon.

Their character as hybrid works makes dealing with them "whole" problematic, since they can be read in so many different ways. Anna von Buchwald's "Book in the Choir," although largely about liturgical reform, is also a chronicle and ledger book that can be read as an economic and social history of the cloister. Yet it is just as much an autobiography of Anna herself. Moreover, in dealing with texts that cover events extending from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, a single study can focus only on a few of the many topics and in a limited time frame. Since the chronicles were written in the wake of the Observant movement, a primary theme in them is reform. As noted, the last chapter of this study examines the complex question of how they were composed, what political agendas the women had in mind, and the relationship between power and text production.

For the most part, these women's texts are not finished literary works or intended as such, but examples of utilitarian record keeping and narrative accounts that were written down "for the record," as a witness to current and future generations. Yet, despite all the factual, historical, and financial data contained in them, cloister chronicles are also representations that select out of the everyday certain events to which the writer wants to give particular significance. Although not considered "literature" in the traditional sense, chronicles are literary fictions just as much as they are "documents," a distinction that New Cultural historians have for the most part abandoned as moot, if not meaningless.[50] Indeed, the move of literary and cultural historians from an aesthetic to a more anthropological perspective has led to a more inclusive approach, one that views literary texts as parts

of a larger cultural discourse encompassing all kinds of written artifacts. In this context, then, convent annals do not need to be upgraded to ''literature'' to be worthy of study.

Examining only parts of hybrid works, each one with its own complicated history, has its limitations. In drawing from a diverse set of writings from fifty-two different houses, this study cannot treat more than a few of them whole. Instead, I have attempted to put together a broader composite picture from the fragments and disparate sources that have survived—a mosaic like the works themselves. Dealing with the texts piecemeal and anecdotally does not assume, however, that they constitute a transparent window on the past. Clearly, each has, along with a complex textual genesis, its own recognized discursive agenda.

From the point of view of gender identity, however, the women's own words are also important. These surviving accounts from the Middle Ages have been neglected for so long that these female voices are heard here in many cases for the first time. It is exactly because they are so unfamiliar that they have been allowed to speak as much as possible, for themselves and anecdotally in their own words. No longer can it be said, as one scholar has observed: ''Apart from a few exceptions—accounts about women in the Middle Ages were written only by men: at first almost exclusively by clerics, then more and more often lay persons, but again only men. Behind these [men's] accounts we perceive only the murmuring of numberless, nameless—or named but not consulted—unheard women.''[51]

Before long, as more and more women's accounts are recovered, this statement will be ancient history. Women will acquire names, their murmuring will become distinct speech, and their contributions will be recognized. This study brings onto the stage and into the spotlight many women whose names, lives, and writings were previously little known. It demonstrates that women did not murmur but spoke distinctly in written records of many different kinds beyond the mystical works that are most often associated with them. In addition to examining the written records these religious women left behind, this study recognizes their contributions as users, selectors, and transmitters of texts. For in the late Middle Ages it was women who constituted the principle audience for sermons and devotional literature in the vernacular. Moreover, as makers of personal collections of extracts and sermon summaries, as well as compilers of anthologies, convent women's choices and collective reading preferences influenced the

selection, promotion, and transmission of the works that have come down to us. By preserving these works in their libraries and repositories, by exchanging them among themselves and with the laity (even editing some), convent women were major participants in and helped to shape the vernacular discourse on religious piety and reform in the period leading up to the Reformation.