Did Beguines Have a Late-Medieval Crisis? 
Historical Models and Historiographical Martyrs 

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In the groundbreaking study revisited in this volume, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” Joan Kelly spotlighted the profound disconnect between historians’ frameworks and women’s historical experiences. Forty years later, many new critiques of European periodization have emerged, including Judith Bennett’s challenge to the “Great Divide at 1500” between medieval and modern and Howard Kaminsky’s dismantling of the “late-medieval crisis model.” Despite the fact that their critiques are rooted in distinctly different scholarly concerns, both Bennett and Kaminsky share Kelly’s dissatisfaction with traditional period divisions. As the editors of a recent volume on gender and historical chronology put it, “Periodization hinges on the privileging of particular vantage points and the selection of ‘symbolic markers’ according to ‘the weight given to distinct fields of human activity.’”

Employing traditional models thus comes with a price, one that has been often paid by gendered phenomena. By taking a closer look at the built-in distortions of prevailing interpretive models, we may clarify

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historical contexts long overshadowed by the very methods that scholars designed to illuminate the past.

My exemplum is the history of beguines, or lay religious women, whose experiences and historical significance have been obscured as a consequence of historiographical habit and periodization models. In the following I suggest that unconscious attachment in English-language scholarship to an entrenched set of scholarly habits has rendered the diverse historical circumstances of beguines and their historical meanings virtually incomprehensible. At the root of the problem are three specific interpretive habits: first, overreliance on hostile clerical sources; second, privileging of binary categories; and third, dependence on the overarching “late-medieval crisis” model of European historiography. The cumulative effect of these tendencies has been to privilege a teleological narrative of beguine history unduly shaped by notions of threat, persecution, and disappearance.

Despite the flourishing of gender and religious studies in the past several decades and the deeply integrated nature of lay religious women within medieval society, beguines have received very little sustained attention. Apart from the foundational work of Ernest McDonnell in 1954 and Walter Simons in 2001, few studies place beguines at the analytical center.

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4 Although not as influenced by the historiographical habits I discuss here, the patchwork nature of continental scholarship on lay religious women—fragmented by divisions of language, nomenclature, and regional focus—has arguably also contributed to a tendency to treat beguines as rather historically peripheral.

Readers are therefore more likely to encounter the history of lay religious women not in specialized scholarship but rather through one of the general studies of medieval heresy and inquisition, whose subject matter necessarily dictates emphasis on conflict and persecution.⁶ Broader scholarly treatments tend to incorporate lay religious women only tangentially, as a rather marginal feature of the religious landscape of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Europe.

Among these, a striking number frame beguine history in a rise-and-fall narrative emphasizing conscious resistance to the institutional church (the women have no rule, no order, no overarching organization) and ending in fourteenth-century persecution and disappearance from the

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⁶ Beguines are featured in influential studies such as Robert E. Lerner’s *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), and Richard Kieckhefer’s *The Repression of Heresy in Medieval Germany* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979). Both of these classic volumes were informed in turn by the German scholar Herbert Grundmann’s groundbreaking *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter: Untersuchungen über die geschichtlichen Zusammenhänge zwischen der Ketzerie, 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*, 2nd ed. (Hildesheim: Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1961; originally 1935), which was translated into English in 1995 as *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women’s Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century*, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism, trans. Steven Rowan, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). One of Grundmann’s major contributions was the framework of a thirteenth-century women’s religious movement in which he firmly located the beguine phenomenon; at the same time, however, he depicted such women as occupying a strange middle ground between lay and clerical and emphasized clerical attempts to “bring beguines to order” (140).
historical scene. Beguines, for example, “insisted on fashioning their own life of piety not only outside the authority of the family, but also outside the institutional Church” (my emphasis). The inside/outside model of female insistence posits rebellious independence as characteristic of beguine life, rendering almost inevitable the subsequent phrase following the quote above: “From the 1260s to the beginning of the fifteenth century, religious and secular authorities turned against the Beguines and eventually brought about the dissolution of the movement.” However, this interpretation does not square with the massive, if scattered, archival evidence documenting broad and wide-ranging support for lay religious women as well as the persistence of beguine life through the early modern period.

Within the context of the Low Countries, the setting best known among English speakers, the survival of beguine life far past 1500, including an early modern revival, is uncontroversial. In northern France, beguines continued to occupy diverse socio-spiritual niches past the fourteenth century. Further southeast, lay religious women on the Italian peninsula (known as bizzoche or pinzochere among other names) thrived: fifteenth-century Rome, for example, was home to at least sixty case sancte or beguine houses inhabited by pious women committed to active Christian service in the world. In Germany, lay religious women’s communities known variously as beguine houses, soul houses, and sisterhouses remained a vital element of towns and villages well into and even beyond the eighteenth century. Comparable phenomena in the Iberian west and the Bohemian and Polish east also await sustained analysis.

Given the evidence for long-term continuity of the lay religious mode of life, where does the depiction of beguines as doomed by controversy come from, and what accounts for its persistence? The source is not poor research or inattentiveness to gender constructs: for example, the volume quoted from above is the A History of their Own, edited in 1988 by Judith Zinsser and Bonnie Anderson, an outstanding collaborative work spanning pre-historical to modern contexts and firmly grounded in feminist

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8 Ibid., 224.
efforts to bring women’s experiences into the historical record. Moreover, the newer research cited throughout this article was selected specifically from excellent publications in order to emphasize that this analytical pattern permeates even the very best and most thoughtful work. I therefore see the persistence of the negative outlook on beguines not as a consequence of failed research but rather as an example of how the accumulated layers of historiographical habits can establish the very parameters of analysis. Frameworks and paradigms are still determining which sources we read and how we interpret them, rather than the other way around.

**Overreliance on Hostile Sources**

Compared to scholars in other fields during the latter half of the twentieth century, historians of heresy have been particularly attentive to beguines and to the relationship between lay religious movements and the institutional Church. Since emphasis upon heresy requires careful treatment of ecclesiastical attitudes, such scholarship is particularly likely to draw on hostile primary sources and to focus on periods of controversy. This persecution model is evident throughout medieval and early modern publications. Yet the surviving sources pertaining to beguines and their communities range far beyond ecclesiastical writings, inflected by ideology or polemic, to an array of bequests, house rules, statutes, and other local evidence of beguine life found within European archives. In contrast to the piecemeal, functional, and highly localized nature of the latter, clerical writings appear to offer a ready-made authoritative synthesis and categorical framework. Little wonder that they are more frequently cited, and therefore that negative frameworks emphasizing unease with beguines have predominated.

One regularly cited staple is the following quotation from the apparently bewildered Franciscan theologian Gilbert de Tournai in a letter to Pope Gregory X (1273): “There are among us women whom we have no idea what to call, ordinary women or nuns, because they live neither in
the world nor out of it.”

Gilbert’s “we” seems to have extended to modern historians, who frequently echo the definition of beguines as neither nuns nor wives who thus somehow fail to fit the social dyad. Even more influential has been the language of the two Vienne decrees pertaining to beguines, published in 1317. “Ad nostrum” (decree 28) targeted supposedly antinomian heretical beguines and their male counterparts (beghards) in Germany, accusing them of believing that “those who have reached the said degree of perfection and spirit of liberty, are not subject to human obedience nor obliged to any commandments of the church.”

In contrast, “Cum de quibusdam” (decree 16) focused less on doctrine and more on lay religious women’s status and behavior: “The women commonly known as Beguines, since they promise obedience to nobody, nor renounce possessions, nor profess any approved rule, are not religious at all, although they wear the special dress of Beguines and attach themselves to certain religious to whom they have a special attraction.” These reportedly wicked beguines are condemned and excommunicated. Yet the decree’s language and structure amplifies the very tension it attempts to belie, ending with the famous exemption for good beguines: “Of course we in no way intend by the foregoing to forbid any faithful women, whether they promise chastity or not, from living uprightly in their hospices, wishing to live a life of penance and serving the Lord of hosts in a spirit of humility. This they may do, as the Lord inspires them.”

The routine lives of faithful women in their dwellings have been largely effaced by the more dramatic image of the unnamable, independent, and generally recalcitrant beguines who regularly (if tangentially) appear in secondary literature. Indeed, the negative definitions and sense of alarm from Gilbert’s letter and the Vienne are echoed in the scholarly literature: beguines “did not become a Church institution . . . they never introduced a

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11 Tanner, Decrees, 374.

12 Ibid.
regular hierarchy, a uniform rule or a general supervisory system . . .”¹³; they are women “neither precisely clerical nor precisely lay, [who] recognized no rule, and affiliated themselves with no religious order, and thus existed outside the standard ecclesiastical chains of command.” Their apparent awkwardness and marginality therefore “rendered them susceptible to charges of heresy.”¹⁴

Such interpretations are in one sense correct, as persecutions did occasionally erupt, most notably as a consequence of ecclesio-political struggle in the fourteenth-century German Rhineland and northeast. My point, however, is that the paradigm itself rests on the assumption of a causal relationship between awkwardness and disappearance, the assumption of one reinforcing the other. Ironically, the periodic persecution of beguines derived not from their marginality but rather from their very embeddedness within local contexts. Gilbert’s motif of the ill-defined beguine was hardly the prevailing attitude in the late thirteenth century, any more than the ambiguous language of the Vienne decrees accurately represented broader fourteenth-century perspectives. Examples abound of strong contemporary support for such women among both lay and clerical circles, and what once looked like the extinction of German beguines now appears instead to be the (temporary) disappearance of the label “beguine.” That words changed, not ways of life, could only be demonstrated by a return to the archives.¹⁵

¹³ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1983), 54–55. Shahar further suggests on p. 55 that fifteenth-century beguinages were more often houses of shelter than religious communities, no longer involved in theological disputes or able to support themselves. While it is true that the later medieval context witnessed a growth of institutions for social care, this depiction undervalues the caritative aspect of earlier houses, the spiritual dimensions of later houses, and the fact that the association between beguines and work varied substantially by region.


By regularly invoking a standard set of hostile ecclesiastical documents, therefore, scholars have inadvertently privileged an elite ecclesiastical point of view. Walter Simons has noted the early critical tendency to regard beguines as “women without history;”\textsuperscript{16} we seem now to have a model depicting them primarily as “women persecuted out of history.” Something is evidently missing — namely, research that places the beguines and their communities and experiences squarely at the center of analysis.

**Binary Frameworks**

Such an analytical shift has been hindered by the continued use of binary categories, which, although much in keeping with medieval ecclesiastical ideology, appear to have had little relevance to the actual situation. A brief list of these influential categories includes clerical/lay, nun/wife, orthodox/heretical, regulated/unregulated, institutional/non-institutional, and good/bad. As discussed further below, even the pairings of medieval/early modern and Catholic/Protestant impose unwarranted assumptions on beguine history. Unpacking binary oppositions has long been a goal of feminist scholarship, but Joan Scott’s argument thirty years ago that “we must become more self-conscious about distinguishing between our analytic vocabulary and the material we want to analyze”\textsuperscript{17} still holds and is certainly relevant to the beguine case. Routinely represented in terms of awkwardness, absence, and failure — or refusal — to fit into binary categories such as wife and nun, lay and religious, or orthodox and heretical, beguines have been subjected to an inappropriate analytical framework that flattens the intricate multiplicity of their socio-spiritual networks. To be sure, this perspective of beguines as awkward and ill-defined women “on the loose” certainly shaped attitudes in the later Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{18} However, it was hardly the sole or representative vantage point: the contemporary mock-

\textsuperscript{16} Simons, Cities of Ladies, ix.

\textsuperscript{17} Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988; rpt. 1999), 41.

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ery, condemnation, and confusion about lay religious women’s households so often cited in the secondary material primarily reflect anxieties about the Church’s own orthodox categories. The residents, families, clergy, and leaders of European rural and urban locales in which such women’s communities took root had few such problems.

In a surprising historiographical twist, the binary model of good and bad beguines was reinforced in the latter decades of the twentieth century by feminist scholars, who were eager to see in beguines the very “will to independence” and dangerous self-sufficiency suggested by the Vienne decrees. As Kelly herself put it,

The Beguines of the late medieval cities were also certainly “feminist” in the sense given above, as opposing misogyny and male subjection of women. . . . Taking only temporary religious vows, [beguines] escaped two of the major institutions of male power: the family and the Church. Social acceptance was another matter, however, and when state and Church combined to crush the movement, they succeeded. Nonetheless, the will to independence from male authority was clearly present with the Beguines.

Yet this description of an intended escape from male authority is not supported by the primary source evidence either. Beguines, like all Christians, were subject to the spiritual authority of their local priest, and no evidence

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19 A strong feminist strain of interpretation also influenced German beguine historiography during the 1980s and 1990s. Interestingly, a comparable dynamic is observable in other settings and periods. For example, Susan Mumm notes in her study of nineteenth-century Anglican sisterhoods that scholarly approaches have either emphasized the social problem of “superfluous women,” (much as earlier twentieth-century beguine scholarship did) or as proto-feminist communities seeking escape from male control. Even those more nuanced approaches that view sisterhoods as providing a valuable socio-spiritual alternative are, she observes, based almost exclusively on secondary sources. Susan Mumm, Stolen Daughters, Virgin Mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), xi-xii.

speaks to lay religious women’s conscious attempt to reject church structures. On the contrary, surviving material speaks to the enduring interest of beguines in developing closer pastoral relationships with mendicants, regular clergy, and bishops and seeking clerical patronage, sometimes extending all the way to the pope himself.\(^{21}\) Likewise, accounts of clerical and monastic resistance to beguines have also been exaggerated at the expense of a more inclusive vantage point.

Closer attention to the array of sources reveals how insufficient such binary perspectives are for representing the complex contexts of lay religious. For example, beguine communities were generally founded with approval and supervision by parish priests and/or civic authorities; at the same time, they were endowed specifically for spiritual service and held to a high moral standard of behavior. Parisian theologians regarded the women of King Louis IX’s royal beguinage as spiritual models, and Hamburg beguines were under ecclesiastical authority and had access to spiritual courts and privileges despite their mobility and their simple rather than solemn and binding oaths. Naming patterns in both vernacular and Latin sources frequently conflate beguine, sister, virgin, holy women, and even nun and tertiary; indeed, according to Brigitte Degler-Spengler, a tertiary or female member of a Third Order is better understood not as in opposition to beguines, due to the presumption of regulated status, but rather as a type of beguine.\(^{22}\) House rules often mirrored key aspects of or passages from monastic rules, and although statutes were locally and independently drafted, they share surprisingly consistent features firmly rooted in the apparent grey area between lay and clerical. As others have argued, the sharp distinctions of medieval legal categories are not always reflected in the lived experiences of women and men. Even the Catholic/Protestant

\(^{21}\) See, for example, the essays in Fiona J. Griffiths and Julie Hotchin, eds., *Partners in Spirit: Women, Men, and Religious Life in Germany, 1100–1500* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

binary is challenged by the bi-confessional Schwarze house of Bocholt, whose members reportedly included only two Catholics in 1602.\(^\text{23}\)

So binary models are fundamentally insufficient frameworks to apply here, even though the premodern Church’s routine use of oppositional categories, was a historical factor influencing the medieval religious landscape. Approached from a different vantage point, beguine history reminds us of the creative solutions medieval people developed to negotiate their circumstances; simultaneously, it reminds us that although critique of binary categorization is now a commonplace in scholarship, much work remains in developing more richly dimensional and multifaceted analytical frameworks.

### Division and Crisis Models

My final suggestion is that the ongoing tendency to privilege hostile sources and binary models has been exacerbated by medieval periodization models, particularly the deeply embedded concepts of “late-medieval crisis” and the “Great Divide at 1500.” Both of these ideas — crisis and division — rest on assumptions not only of drastic change in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries but also of a necessary medieval decline before the emergence of the early modern period and/or the Renaissance. In his critique of the lingering power and tenacity of Johann Huizinga’s “waning model,” for example, Kaminsky argues that the “prevailing view of the Later Middle Ages as a time of waning, decadence, and crises has been determined not by the surviving evidence but by preemptive constructions of the dialectic of lateness and the Waning model.”\(^\text{24}\) Kaminsky vividly describes the “specters of senescence, decadence and termination” that intellectually haunt historians and persuasively argues that crisis is hardly a useful category of historical analysis.\(^\text{25}\)


\(^{24}\) Kaminsky, “From Lateness to Waning to Crisis,” 120.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 86.
One regularly encounters in the secondary literature a selection of events pressed into service to foretell the imminent demise of “high” institutional culture and its downward slide into the late-medieval: the condemnation in 1277 of Aristotelianism at the University of Paris, the collapse of the lofty Beauvais cathedral in 1284, the issuing by Pope Boniface VIII of the bull *Periculoso* in 1298, which ordered immediate and permanent cloistering for every member of a female order, the Council of Vienne in 1311–12, and the circulation of the beguine decrees in 1317. Images of crisis pervade accounts of the later medieval centuries and coincide with persecution narratives. For example, André Vauchez argues that “the condemnations of Beguines . . . signaled a decisive change,” a reversion, in which the late-medieval church failed “to define a peculiarly Christian usage of the world for those living in it.”26 In his brief but thoughtful treatment of lay religious women, Robert Swanson refers to the “crisis over the beguines in the fourteenth century,” which pushed the women into orders.27 Similarly, Craig Harline describes the beguines of the Rhineland as having “died out as they obediently became members of approved groups (often the Franciscan third order),” although he notes the continuation of beguine life in the Catholic Netherlands.28 Most recently, Clifford Backman charted an innovative course by concluding his textbook *Worlds of Medieval Europe* by considering the impact of ecclesiastical “closings in” (*Periculoso*) and “closings out” (beguines).29 His decision to periodize with beguines represents a productive step in a new direction, one that in fact sparked the present inquiry. Yet, however, the cumulative impact of these approaches

has been to reinforce the model of a fifteenth-century endpoint for lay religious women.

Both the overreliance on clerical sources and the tendency to view the premodern past through a binary lens have fostered an image of beguines that justifies and is justified by the historiographical model of a late-medieval crisis. Indeed, the traditional view of a besieged, institutional Church that suppresses independent and vulnerable women makes a satisfying narrative, and so does the story of beguine oppression as yet another example of late-medieval crisis and a harbinger of the looming Great Divide at 1500. As Bennett put it twenty years ago, “the master narrative of a great transformation is under attack in many areas of research, yet remains curiously strong in the paradigmatic assumptions of women’s history.”

Whether one represents beguines as suspect figures sowing the seeds of heresy or as independent, proto-feminist women seeking an alternative path free from male domination, a presumed break at 1500 renders invisible both important continuities and unexpected variations for lay religious women. Joan Kelly’s observation that “we have been led astray by terms that did not really fit women’s situation” speaks directly to beguine history and historiography. The teleological crisis model of the Great Divide demands victims; beguines neatly fit the paradigm and are pressed into service as martyrs to a historiographical framework.

In conclusion, beguines did not have a late-medieval crisis, or at least not as it has traditionally been understood. If we approach the rich array of archival and local secondary materials from a fresh perspective and with an eye for multiplicities, networks, spectra, and other more dimensional frameworks, we encounter a very different historical landscape.
Kelly wrote that “women’s history has a dual goal: to restore women to history and to restore our history to women.”

Hundreds of books on women’s and gender history later, it may be time to transform the critical constructs through which we organize the past and to develop new symbolic markers that better allow us to approach women’s historical situations in and on their own terms.

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