

## The Construction of a Mystical Self: The 'Revelations' of Katharina Tucher

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The various ways in which female mystics in the German-speaking world contributed to the texts written by, about or for them has been in the midst of scholarly controversy for a number of years. Basically, at the heart of the debate is the question of the specific character of mystical *vitae* and *revelationes* and their value as historical sources. Popular within recent German literary scholarship has been the opinion that such texts are based on hagiographic models and are primarily – some would even say exclusively – mystagogy in the form of legends. There are, of course, voices which propose to look more closely at the historical value of such texts and even go as far as to psychologically and medically examine mystics and their experiences as described in the works pertaining to them. Whereas a view of mystical literature as purely literary constructs with an exclusively didactic agenda seriously limits any effort at a historical interpretation of the contents, the other extreme ignores both the immense importance of hagiographic traditions in the stylization and self-stylization of mystics and the narrative strategies employed by the authors, who were, as a rule, members of the learned clergy.<sup>1</sup>

Of primary importance when approaching this subject matter is the analysis of the author's agenda and the genre chosen for this purpose. The most clearly hagiographical texts are Latin biographies written by members of the learned clergy for the literate community, mostly with the obvious or pronounced pur-

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<sup>1</sup> See S. Ringler, *Viten- und Offenbarungsliteratur in Frauenklöstern des Mittelalters: Quellen und Studien*, Münchener Texte und Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters 72 (München, 1980), and S. Ringler, 'Die Rezeption mittelalterlicher Frauenmystik als wissenschaftliches Problem, dargestellt am Werk der Christine Ebner', in: P. Dinzelsbacher and D.R. Bauer, eds., *Frauenmystik im Mittelalter* (Ostfildern, 1985), pp. 255-270. An even more radical approach is taken by U. Peters, *Religiöse Erfahrung als literarisches Faktum. Zur Vorgeschichte und Genese frauenmystischer Texte des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts*, Hermea, N.F. vol. 56 (Tübingen, 1988). The historian Peter Dinzelsbacher reads mystical texts as factual accounts of true experience: 'Zur Interpretation erlebnismystischer Texte des Mittelalters', in: P. Dinzelsbacher, *Mittelalterliche Frauenmystik* (Paderborn, 1993), pp. 304-331 (a revised version of the same article first published in 1988). – For a more subtle approach see S. Köbele, *Bilder der unbegriffenen Wahrheit. Zur Struktur mystischer Rede im Spannungsfeld von Latein und Volkssprache*, Bibliotheca Germanica 30 (Tübingen/Basel, 1993); W. Williams-Krapp, 'Literary Genre and Degrees of Saintliness. The Perception of Holiness in Writings by and about Female Mystics', in: A. Mulder-Bakker, ed., *The Invention of Saintliness* (London/New York, 2002), pp. 206-218; for a recent critical discussion of this controversy see S.S. Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Middle Ages Series) (Philadelphia, 2004), pp. 1-12.

pose of promoting a cult following and canonization – for example the *vitae* of Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena. The anonymous *vita* of Agnes Blannbekin, a Viennese beguine, who, before she died in 1315, purportedly dictated her life and revelations to her anonymous Franciscan confessor,<sup>2</sup> of Dorothea of Montau, the East Prussian widow whose university-educated mentor, Johannes Marienwerder, initiated a campaign for her canonization that began in 1404,<sup>3</sup> or of Christina of Stommeln, which was written by her close confidant Peter of Dacia, who personally observed her raptures, are all aimed at an audience anticipating scholarly hagiography.<sup>4</sup> A *vita* that only survives in its German translations, the biography of Elsbeth Achler, a Franciscan Tertiary from Reute near Lake Constance, is of a similar quality.<sup>5</sup> It was the *veritas latina* of the scholarly world and its elitist literary traditions that formed the basis for the elevation of religiously exceptional individuals to credibility and, possibly, sainthood. A *vita* or *revelationes* in the vernacular simply lacked the necessary authority attached to hagiographic writings composed by the *litterati*.

The next highest level of veracity was attributed to the works dealing with the nuns Gertrud of Helfta and her sister Mechthild of Hackeborn, who were remarkably well educated and able to write in Latin. Of the five books making up the Latin *Legatus divinae pietatis* only the second one was authored by Gertrud herself, the rest by an anonymous equally educated sister in Helfta. Included in the *Legatus* is a Gertrud-*vita* in the classical tradition of scholarly hagiography. In the *praeformatio* indulgences are promised for merely reading the *Legatus*, followed by a claim that the text's veracity had been confirmed by seven noted theologians. Clearly there is a case being made for sainthood.<sup>6</sup> Of all the *vitae* of

<sup>2</sup> P. Dinzelbacher and R. Vogeler, eds., *Leben und Offenbarungen der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin († 1315)*, Göppinger Arbeiten zur älteren Germanistik 419 (Göppingen, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> A. Triller, 'Marienwerder, Johannes', in: K. Ruh et al., *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*, 2. ed., vol. 6 (Berlin/New York, 1987 - ), col. 56-61; R. Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago, 1984), *passim*; W. Williams-Krapp, 'Kultpropaganda für eine Mystikerin. Das Leben der Dorothea von Montau im Sendbrief des Nikolaus von Nürnberg', in: N. Miedema and R. Suntrup, eds., *Literatur – Geschichte – Literaturgeschichte. Beiträge zur mediävistischen Literaturwissenschaft. Festschrift für Volker Honemann zum 60. Geburtstag* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), pp. 711-720.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. Ruhrberg, *Der literarische Körper der Heiligen. Leben und Viten der Christina von Stommeln (1242-1312)*, Bibliotheca Germanica 35 (Tübingen/Basel, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> K. Bihlmeyer, 'Die Schwäbische Mystikerin Elsbeth Achler von Reute († 1420) und die Überlieferung ihrer Vita', in: G. Baesecke and F.J. Schneider, eds., *Festgabe für Philipp Strauch zum 80. Geburtstag*, *Hermæa* 31 (Halle, 1932), pp. 96-109; S. Ringler, 'Konrad Kügelin', in: *Die deutsche Literatur* (see n. 3), vol. 5, col. 426-429.

<sup>6</sup> For the nuns of Helfta see K. Ruh, *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik*, vol. 2: *Frauenmystik und Franziskanische Mystik der Frühzeit* (München, 1993), pp. 296-340.

German mystics only Gertrud's legend was ever translated in order to be added to a German legendary *per circulum anni*.<sup>7</sup>

Mystical literature was, however, generally written in the vernacular and therefore lacked the authority of the academic tradition. The works written in German and Dutch were not aimed at a learned audience but at other *illiterati*. Therefore the vernacular *vitae* of women mystics – be they written by the women themselves, their confidants or as a collaborative effort – are quite diverse. Siegfried Ringler has aptly named this genre 'Gnadenviten' (*vitae* of Godly grace), for, as opposed to legends used for canonization appeals in the late Middle Ages, they do not tell of heroic deeds – for instance martyrdom – or miracles, but rather of an often brutally austere and pious life and the spiritual rewards afforded by God for this behavior, much in the tradition of the *Vitaspatrum*. For Ringler 'Gnadenviten' are mystagogy in the form of hagiography and therefore not intended to be read and understood as true legends. For Ringler typical examples for Gnadenviten are the *vitae* of the Dominicans like Margarete Ebner from the cloister Maria Medingen or those in the nunnery of Engelthal, Christine Ebner and Adelheid Langmann as well as the odd life of a Dominican priest couched as a female mystic, Friedrich Sunder.<sup>8</sup> All of them offer biographies focusing almost completely on mystical or paramystical experiences and strict asceticism, thus diverting from classical hagiographic models of the day, which require saints to perform miracles for the benefit of others. All of the works I've discussed have been more or less thoroughly edited by men of learning, who carefully sorted out possible 'misunderstandings', which could be interpreted as theologically ambiguous or even heretical.

This brings me to my topic. How are mystical texts constructed that have not gone through the scrupulous hands of critical clerics, but communicate to the reader the immediacy of the spiritual experience as recorded by the writer? Within the rich traditions of German and Dutch mystical German literature there are a number of works which allow us to study such a phenomenon. Hade-wijch's œuvre is clearly mystagogical and even the most remarkable work by a German woman mystic, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* by Mechthild of Magdeburg, is also not entirely free of clerical control. Beyond that it had been already critically prepared for circulation by Mechthild's educated sisters in Helfta before it was modified again by the group of translators of her work from Low German into Alemannic, headed by Heinrich of Nördlingen. The translation of the work into Latin filters out even more of what could possibly be considered problematic reading matter, such as erotic imagery from the Song of

<sup>7</sup> O. Wieland, *Gertrud von Helfta, ein botte der göttlichen miltekeit*, Studien und Mitteilungen zur Geschichte des Benediktinerordens und seiner Zweige 22, Ergänzungsband (Augsburg, 1973); Williams-Krapp (see n. 1), p. 209.

<sup>8</sup> Williams-Krapp, *Literary Genre* (see n. 1), p. 214.

Songs. Nonetheless the *Flowing Light* communicates a form of personal immediacy that the hagiographically constructed *vitae* don't. Mechthild's work is the result of many years of writing and, in the end, of being written for by her sisters in Helfta. The *Flowing Light* is divided into seven books, written over a period of thirty years: They include not only Mechthild's visionary experiences, but also prophecies, criticism of the clergy, allegories, reflections and prayers; Mechthild uses prose and verse, dialogue and lyric.<sup>9</sup> This mixture of many genres separates her work clearly from traditional hagiography.

An interesting example of the way in which mystical texts came into being is the *vita* of Margarete Ebner who at the behest of Heinrich von Nördlingen wrote a sort of mystical autobiography. Margareta had written a number of letters to Heinrich asking him for his opinion on experiences she had had. Her 'Gnaden-vita' is obviously based on her own records, which she in collaboration with another sister shaped into a narrative for the edification of others. After her death this was fashioned into an 'official' biography most likely by a member of the clergy, possibly by Heinrich himself. Adelheid Langmann's *Revelations* can be seen in a similar light. Her *Vita*, given its final polish post mortem, obviously draws on Adelheid's personal version because it has in a few instances not been thoroughly transformed from the first to the third person.<sup>10</sup>

Two works, written a century apart, allow us to study mystical literature written without the guiding and/or censoring hands of the learned: The *Revelations* of the Dominican nun Elsbeth von Oye from the monastery Oetenbach near Zurich<sup>11</sup> and the bewildering 'diary' of Katharina Tucher, a young widow from Nuremberg, who for three years recorded what she obviously considered to be true mystical experiences.<sup>12</sup> The most important difference between the two works is that Elsbeth wrote with the ambition that her writings were to be read by others, Katharina's diary was clearly only meant for herself, no-one – not even members of her closest family – could have been able to comprehend most of what she recorded.

<sup>9</sup> Ruh, *Frauenmystik* (see n. 6), pp. 247-295; Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg* (see n. 1).

<sup>10</sup> For extensive introductions to the mysticism in Engelthal see S. Bürkle, *Literatur im Kloster. Historische Funktion und rhetorische Legitimation frauenmystischer Texte des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Bibliotheca Germanica 38 (Tübingen/Basel, 1999); see also J. Thali, *Beten – Schreiben – Lesen. Literarisches Leben und Marienspiritualität im Kloster Engelthal*, Bibliotheca Germanica 42 (Tübingen/Basel, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> An edition is being prepared by Wolfram Schneider-Lastin. He has kindly allowed me the use of his manuscript. See his article 'Das Handexemplar einer mittelalterlichen Autorin. Zur Edition der Offenbarungen Elsbeths von Oye', in: *editio* 8 (1994), pp. 53-70. See the articles in B. Helbling et al., eds., *Bettelorden, Bruderschaften und Beginen in Zürich. Stadtkultur und Seelenheil im Mittelalter* (Zürich, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> U. Williams and W. Williams-Krapp, eds., *Die 'Offenbarungen' der Katharina Tucher. Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literaturgeschichte* 98 (Tübingen, 1998).

Elsbeth was probably born around 1290 and died 1340, she entered the monastery – as did Gertrud of Helfta – at a very early age (she was six). This means, of course, that she never really experienced life beyond Oetenbach's walls. For nine years she reports of having willingly endured a life of exceptionally brutal asceticism, castigating herself in ways that must have shocked not only her immediate surroundings but also – probably by way of her writings – members of the Dominican clergy.

Elsbeth raised her descriptions of self-affliction to a whole new level of brutality in the context of German mystical literature. Her *Revelations* have survived in an autograph, in which Elsbeth frequently revised her original version in order to enhance her narrative. She represents the prime example of a form of spirituality that to a certain degree propagated monstrous self-torture as an almost certain way of arriving at mystical and paramystical experiences. Elsbeth tells of horrendous attacks of anxiety and describes gruesome self-destructive practices: she drives a nail-studded crucifix into her flesh and ties it to her body with a belt, she sits endlessly in her rotting habit and does nothing to ward off the worms and maggots gnawing at her flesh, she flagellates herself with a nail-studded whip etc. As she is experiencing this Elsbeth is in contact with Christ, Mary and John the Evangelist who actually encourage her to continue with her practices, even though the pain and suffering have become almost unbearable. Heinrich Seuse (Suso) indirectly criticized her self-imposed punishment in his often misunderstood *Vita* by mirroring Elsbeth's asceticism through the horrendous and almost identical self-mutilations performed by the Servant of Divine Wisdom. In Seuse's *Vita* the Servant is told by Eternal Wisdom to desist from such self-affliction. Seuse clearly distinguishes between male and female ascetic practices, and thus characterizes Elsbeth and the Servant's asceticism – if anything – as distinctly male.<sup>13</sup>

Elsbeth's *Revelations*, although relatively unstructured, are eloquent literary constructs, plainly designed by her to impress a reading audience. She is a well-educated woman, as can be seen in her impressive narrative, in which she often resorts to the language of Meister Eckhart, with whom she was acquainted, or of his students. This is no simple *illiterata* rambling on about her monstrous attempts at an *imitatio* of Christ's passion, but a woman who through the authority accorded her by the divinity assumes the role of a spiritual guide. Obviously her writings were, in spite or just because of their bizarre contents, successful – there are 25 extant manuscripts. Elsbeth was well aware of the interest her spectacular revelations would generate.

<sup>13</sup> W. Williams-Krapp, 'nucleus totius perfectionis. Die Altväterspiritualität in der „Vita“ Heinrich Seuses', in: J. Janota et al., eds., *Festschrift für Walter Haug und Burghart Wachinger*, vol. 1 (Tübingen, 1992), pp. 405-421; W. Williams-Krapp, 'Heinrich Suso's „Vita“ between Mystagogy and Hagiography', in: A. Mulder-Bakker, ed., *Seeing and Knowing. Women and Learning in Medieval Europe* (Leiden, 2004), pp. 35-47.

Of a completely different quality are the so-called 'Revelations' of Katharina Tucher. Katharina is an enigmatic figure, whose biography, however, can be reconstructed fairly well. She was born in Nuremberg around 1390 but was not a member of the famous patrician family of that city, since Tucher was obviously not her maiden name. She was married to a wealthy man, Otto Tucher, who, because of criminal activities, was banned from Nuremberg and forced to move back to his native nearby Neumarkt. He then married Katharina, who was undoubtedly much younger than he. Otto died between 1417 and in 1419 Katharina, now a widow with a daughter, did not, as she writes, feel at home in Neumarkt and therefore returned to Nuremberg in 1420. Around 1440 she entered the reformed Dominican convent St. Catharine's in Nuremberg as a lay sister, bringing with her a personal library of 26 manuscripts, the largest number of books ever donated to St. Catharine's by an individual, almost all of them religious works in the vernacular. In the years until her death in 1448 she also wrote numerous manuscripts for the convent library; her advanced age probably kept her from becoming a nun.

Katharina's 'diary' consists of 94 entries, written between 1418 and 1421. The fact that she generally begins her entries with phrases such as *Iesv Cristvm zu lob sein lieplichen funf bynden* (In praise of Jesus Christ and his sweet five wounds), that the color of the ink changes continuously – even if only slightly – and that the handwriting can vary somewhat from entry to entry leaves no doubt that she was keeping a journal over a longer period of time. The *Revelations* are recorded on three quires, each with a different watermark, consistent with the dating afforded by Katharina in her entries. The manuscript evidence suggests that probably nothing is lost and that Katharina for reasons unknown simply discontinued her writings.

Katharina obviously had at least heard of, if not read the works by or dealing with Bridget of Sweden, who had also been a widow, as she notes in entry Nr. 5. I also assume she had read the *Vita* of Adelheid Langmann, the mystic from nearby Engelthal. In any case the entries in the diary reveal a woman suffering from mental distress, who obviously found solace in the mystical discourse. Her conviction that God was directly addressing her fears and anguish, creating a 'mystical self', enabled her to better accept her problematic existence. Her conversations with Christ and the saints are in general of a didactic nature. She takes her problems to them; they in turn teach or admonish her. She has experiences that begin with the phrase *Mir ward gegenbvrting* ('there appeared to me'), a phrase which is never really qualified. In only two entries Katharina speaks of a possible *unio*-experience, but this is of so little importance within the context of those entries that she could also be only resorting to the typical topoi of mystical literature.

Katharina's mental leaps and the lack of a narrative framework make her writings all the more baffling. As a rule, however, her invocation is followed by

dialogues between her and Jesus or Mary or just a lesson with which they educate her in spiritual and further matters. On some occasions John the Evangelist or the devil, who tries to prevent her from worshipping Mary, converse with her. Usually the partner of the dialogue has to be gleaned from the contents of the discussion, since Katharina rarely reveals who is speaking. Since her 'Diary' is of a very private nature, mentioning the speaker is unnecessary. In entry Nr. 3 she speaks of having had a vision, in Nr. 55 she only hears God speak to her. In some cases Katharina sees herself as being present at biblical events such as the birth and childhood of Christ and at his passion.<sup>14</sup>

Especially bizarre are stories that appear to have been drawn from dreams. In one such story God is a king leading a party on a deer hunt, which not Katharina but the soul is accompanying riding on a lamb. The king dresses the naked soul. The stag, which has three antlers, is, however, not slain but brought to the court where the king affords him protection. The hunting party rides on and encounters a giant bear, a wild man and a serpent, all of which the lamb (no longer the soul) fears. All threatening situations are overcome. In the end the king, the lamb and the stag ride to Jerusalem. Is Katharina possibly attempting to interpret a dream allegorically?

Equally baffling is entry Nr. 44. Here she sees herself (the first-person narrator) and a partner (Christ?) as a pair of doves flying through the forest, she is frightened by an owl. Both finally perch in a ramshackle mill. There she sees an animal „much like a cat“, which is the devil. The miller brings a sack into the mill. As the two want to fly away she cannot because of the weights attached to her wings. Her partner undoes them with his beak but she still has trouble keeping up with him. End of entry.

In spite of the unfiltered immediacy of Katharina's writings it is nevertheless extremely difficult, if not impossible, to gather fully reliable biographical information from her 'Revelations'. She is, after all, too adept in using the language of mystical literature and obviously indulges in self-stylization, as can be expected from an individual who sees herself as especially blessed. This makes it difficult to assess the reasons for the frequent reprimands she gets because of her sinful ways. Repeatedly she is chastised for her sexual exploits. In entry Nr. 17 she is compared to Lucifer because she has recruited more than 300 virgins to be sexual partners (for whom?). In Nr. 28, in a biblical scene, she is brought into the temple by angry Jews because of an extramarital affair, to which she admits and for which she begs forgiveness. Finally Jesus chastises her because she has been unfaithful to her husband and to him. As he counts up her ten worst traits, unchastity tops the list, followed by anger. Mary warns her not to

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<sup>14</sup> Similar experiences can be found in the revelations of Agnes Blannbekin; see Dinzelbacher and Vogeler, *Agnes Blannbekin* (see n. 2).

want another man, whereby she does not mean another husband, because Mary is warning her not to commit mortal sins.

Approximately halfway through the 'Revelations' the tenor of the entries appears to change. In entry Nr. 48 Christ tells Katharina to begin an austere life. Up to this point her contacts to her mystical partners were basically portrayed as being pleasant, now her sinful habits, contrition and punishment dominate the discourse. Christ is pleased to see that her acts of self-affliction are bringing on improvement in her behavior. Now Katharina's thoughts also dwell much more on the souls in purgatory, whose lot she wishes to improve. There is talk of serious personal conflicts casting a dark shadow on her life.

Of course, no-one would claim Katharina's 'Revelations' to be a work of literature in any way comparable, say, to Mechthild of Magdeburg's writings; her language is simple and unsophisticated, her style certainly not very literary. What makes the 'Revelations' especially fascinating is to see what influences literature and art had on what Katharina perceived to be mystical experiences. In an article by Deborah Rose-Lefmann<sup>15</sup> the vast influence images had on Katharina's mystical experiences is extensively analyzed.

Because the article was published before our edition, some of Rose-Lefmann's data concerning Katharina's biography need correction, but her analysis of the popular use of devotional images in the 'Revelations' has – as in most mystical texts – shown to what extent the images revealed in visions resembled existing religious images.<sup>16</sup> As Jeffrey Hamburger aptly put it: '[...] we are dealing here with a common stock of images, rooted in Scripture and liturgy, assimilated to experience through prolonged meditation and recitation and available to artists and mystics alike.'<sup>17</sup> For example, Katharina is ordered to go to a cross and „hear what the Lord says". On another occasion she is told to bow before a picture of Mary and pray an Ave Maria; this helps her to dispel demons which haunt her. She is also asked to look at a panel painting, a *tafel bild*, which is most likely a painting depicting the crucifixion. In one of the longest entries (Nr. 21) Mary relates to Katharina how she experienced the passion of her son. She tells her how she fainted ten times that day, how she had wished to be crucified together with Jesus. Then she corrects the way art has portrayed the aftermath of the Deposition. Her son was not placed in her lap „as it is painted", for she had been actually unconscious as they took him from the cross.

<sup>15</sup> D. Rose-Lefmann, '„As It Is Painted". Reflections of Image-Based Devotional Practices in the „Confessions" of Katharina Tucher', in: *Studia Mystica* XVII, N.S. Nr. 2 (1996), pp. 184-204.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 189.

<sup>17</sup> J. Hamburger, 'The Visual and the Visionary: the Image in Late Medieval Devotions', in: *Viator* XX (1989), pp. 161-182, here p. 168-169.



Especially interesting is her use of imagery from a broadsheet and poem called *Christus und die minnende Seele* (Christ and the loving Soul).<sup>18</sup> The broadsheet consists of 20 scenes with accompanying quatrains depicting the mystical ascent of the Soul, the *sponsa*, to a union with Christ, in which „the shifting and evocative imagery of the Song of Songs“ is rearranged „to form a coherent narrative“.<sup>19</sup> Christ and the Soul are depicted as in a comic book with each speaking a couplet in every episode. The broadsheet was designed as a spiritual aid for women, in which „the viewer acts vicariously as a protagonist through identification with the Bride.“<sup>20</sup> Of course it was essential to know the theological implications of the depicted scenes. They could otherwise be viewed as highly erotic imagery that could lead the viewer in a direction definitely not intended by the creator of the broadsheet. Katharina obviously owned a copy, as can be seen in many entries in which she sees herself as the bride of Christ and alludes to scenes and text as can be found in *Christus und die minnende Seele*.

The broadsheet is to be viewed and read from bottom left to bottom right, then right to left etc. In the first picture Christ awakens the Soul and then demands an austere lifestyle: she is to fast, he blinds, cripples and chastens her. He then forces her to strip off her clothes in order to figuratively detach herself from all earthly things. She is put on a cross to raise her above the temptations of the world. He flees and hides from her as she seeks him. She shoots an arrow of love into the heart of the lover, she binds him and she is allowed to kiss him. Of special interest are the scenes in the top row which depict the love between bride and bridegroom. Christ asks her to dance while he is playing the fiddle and the drum. Finally the bride is crowned. In other versions the two are united as a couple, symbolizing the *unio mystica*.

In entry Nr. 8 Christ wants to first dress Katharina like a queen and then to play the fiddle and to break roses, lilies and violets with her, with which the sexual act could be implied. But later on the image is clarified: The flowers are more likely meant for a bridal wreath. After the wreath has been made, both are in a *locus amoenus*, where the lover hides and finally hangs her (on a cross?). It appears that Katharina misunderstood the proper order of the broadsheet,

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<sup>18</sup> An extensive analysis of Katharina's understanding of 'Christus und die minnende Seele' is forthcoming in Amy Gebauer's Augsburg dissertation. The broadsheet is reproduced in W. Williams-Krapp, 'Bilderbogen-Mystik. Zu „Christus und die minnende Seele“. Mit Edition der Mainzer Überlieferung', in: K. Kunze et al., eds., *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Editionen und Studien zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters. Kurt Ruh zum 75. Geburtstag* (Tübingen, 1989), pp. 350-564, here p. 354; H.E. Keller, *My Secret is Mine. Studies on Religion and Eros in the German Middle Ages*, Studies in Spirituality, Supplements 4 (Leuven, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Hamburger (see n. 17), p. 171.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

because she stylizes her love-relationship with Christ by reading *Christus und die minnende Seele* from top to bottom.

It is hardly surprising that Katharina's visions are influenced by imagery, especially paintings, but Katharina was also a somewhat educated woman, which was not untypical for lay women of her social status in fifteenth century Germany. As can be seen in the amount and the types of books she brought with her upon entering St. Catharine's Convent it is certainly understandable that her experiences are often described as taking place in a biblical context. She owned a translation of a gospel harmony and a number of other works dealing with biblical subject matter. As previously mentioned, I am convinced that she also had access to the works of other female mystics, probably via the nearby Dominican monastery Engelthal, home of the aforementioned Christine Ebner, Adelheid Langmann and Friedrich Sunder. In various entries it appears as if Katharina was attempting to give her entries a certain literary quality, in order to properly secure her place among the true mystics – even if only to reassure herself. In one entry she writes of a dispute between Body and Soul, which appears to be modeled after the so-called *Visio Philiberti*.<sup>21</sup>

This, of course, seriously complicates any attempt at analyzing the historicity of Katharina's diaries. Without a doubt much of what she writes is based on actual events in her daily life. But it would be absurd to attempt to evaluate the state of her psyche more closely, as a number of scholars have undertaken with other mystics in the past years. However, there can be little doubt that Katharina was a troubled woman, especially at the time in which she wrote the second half of her diary. There she speaks of the many trials and tribulations confronting her, of her fears of not being accepted in Neumarkt and that certain problems are overwhelming her. In entry Nr. 70 Christ reprimands her for her explosive fits of anger and her excessive drinking: „Stop your drinking ... and then I'll forgive you for only lying around and being so full of anger." In another entry we find out that she had been unjustly venting her anger at her servant. Christ reprimands her even more severely nine entries later (Nr. 79): „Stop drinking wine!" „Dear lord, then I shall die." „Now you simply have no confidence that you can refrain from drinking and you think you are not committing a mortal sin unto me. So be aware that drunkenness is one the most evil sins of all."

Of all the mystical literature known to me I have never encountered a mystic writing of having an alcohol problem, in spite of the typical admissions of guilt and of confessions of sinful behavior in such works. Did a possible problem with alcohol influence Katharina's 'mystical experiences'? This is a secret that Katharina took to her grave.

<sup>21</sup> See N.F. Palmer, 'Visio Philiberti', in: *Die deutsche Literatur* (see n. 3), vol. 10, col. 412-418. Katharina owned a copy of a German version: Nürnberg, Stadtbibliothek, Cent. VI 43<sup>d</sup>, 101<sup>f</sup>-111<sup>v</sup>.

In spite of the elements of literary ambition as can be, for instance, seen in the way she uses mystical imagery, Katharina's diary definitely had to leave even readers of her time completely puzzled by its contents. The three quires with her 'Diary' were later bound together in St. Catharine's with a number of other fascicules without being given a title or attributed to Katharina. The quires are not mentioned in the meticulous medieval library catalogue of St. Catharine's in spite of the fact that it was written by one of the sisters who knew her personally.<sup>22</sup> Obviously the *Revelations* were deemed to be of a very private nature – similar to personal letters –, something that needed to be archived but not considered to be edifying literature for members of the convent.

It seems likely that the time in which Katharina had mystical experiences was only a short phase in her life and was then brought to a halt by influential Nuremberg clerics like the Dominicans Eberhard Mardach and Johannes Nider, who severely criticized women who claimed to be or just imagined themselves to be true mystics, insisting that these foolish individuals were in general being deceived by the devil. Especially widows were seen as very susceptible to such delusions.<sup>23</sup> The Dominicans were definitely the most influential pastoral institution in Nuremberg.<sup>24</sup> Nider's writings were a source of the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum*, which was used as a judicial case-book for the detection and persecution of witches<sup>25</sup>.

Even if of very limited literary value, Katharina's diary offers remarkable insights into the significant role the mystical discourse could play in the lives of secular, semi-educated women, particularly of widows. 'Mysticism' or whatever

<sup>22</sup> Nürnberg, Stadtbibliothek, Cent. VI, 57, 263<sup>f</sup>-292<sup>f</sup>; the medieval shelfmark was M IX; see P. Ruf, ed., *Mittelalterliche Bibliothekskataloge Deutschlands und der Schweiz*, Band III/3: *Bistum Bamberg* (München, 1939; repr. München, 1961), p. 626, 10-14.

<sup>23</sup> W. Williams-Krapp, 'Dise ding sint dennoch nit ware zeichen der heiligkeit. Zur Bewertung mystischer Erfahrung im 15. Jahrhundert', in: *Zeitschrift für Literatur und Linguistik* 20 (1990), pp. 61-71; U. Williams and W. Williams-Krapp, 'Eine Warnung an alle, dy sich etwaz duncken. Der „Sendbrief vom Betrug teuflicher Erscheinungen“ (mit einer Edition)', in: H. Brunner and W. Williams-Krapp, eds., *Forschungen zur deutschen Literatur des späten Mittelalters. Festschrift für Johannes Janota* (Tübingen, 2003), pp. 167-189; 'Die Dominikaner im Kampf gegen weibliche Irrtümer. Eberhard Mardachs „Sendbrief von wahrer Andacht“ (mit einer Textedition)', in: H.-J. Behr, I. Lisový and W. Williams-Krapp, eds., *Deutsch-Böhmische Literaturbeziehungen: Germano-Bohemica. Festschrift für Václav Bok zum 65. Geburtstag* (Hamburg, 2004), pp. 427-446.

<sup>24</sup> W. Williams-Krapp, 'Die Bedeutung der reformierten Klöster des Predigerordens für das literarische Leben in Nürnberg im 15. Jahrhundert', in: F. Eisermann, V. Honemann and E. Schlotheuber, eds., *Die literarische und materielle Kultur der Frauenklöster im späten Mittelalter* (Leiden, 2004), pp. 311-329.

<sup>25</sup> W. Tschacher, *Der Formicarius des Johannes Nider von 1437/38. Studien zu den Anfängen der europäischen Hexenverfolgung im Spätmittelalter* (Aachen, 2000); for Nider's German works see M. Brand, *Studien zu Johannes Niders deutschen Schriften*, *Dissertationes historicae* XXIII (Rome, 1998).

the individual considered to be direct contact with the Divine could also be of therapeutic value for the troubled psyche, the divine authority could direct the mystic not only toward accepting her personal misery and desolation but also to optimistically reinterpreting these aspects of her existence as signs of being exceptionally blessed. That these reinterpretations were considered to be signs of extreme hubris by the clergy, hubris that had to be of demonic origin, once again limited not only women's possibilities at a form of spirituality that was independent of Church control and offered a certain degree of personal autonomy.

Returning to the scholarly debate with which I began, it has become clear through Katharina's diary that the historicity of mystical writings must always be interpreted with the greatest of care. Even Katharina, who only wrote for her own *memoria*, resorted to the symbols, topoi and images that drew on works of the mystical tradition. It shows that any rigorous positions claiming, like Peter Dinzelsbacher on the one hand, that works by mystics should be read as factual accounts of mystical experience or, like Ursula Peters on the other hand, insisting that these texts are pure literary constructs, do a disservice to a text like Katharina's *Revelations*. Undoubtedly her writings draw on actual experiences of a woman whose life can be historically traced, but in her description of these events she clearly draws on the literary conventions of the mystical discourse, disguising forever what actually transpired. Just for this reason this unassuming diary shows that an either/or approach to mystical literature is misleading, there is an interconnectedness between these two aspects that needs to be considered carefully whenever we begin to approach what the authors of mystical literature actually considered to be ineffable.