Chapter 13

Religious Experience in Fourteenth-Century Mystical Writing: The Revelations of Elsbeth von Oye

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Mystical texts contain descriptions of ecstatic visions and auditions, which often directly relate to exceptional experiences of physical pain. Pain, in this context, is conceived as an indication of God’s great love, which becomes apparent in the suffering of Christ. This construction of pain as proximity to the divine is particularly prominent in the case of a fourteenth-century nun of the Dominican convent Ötenbach in Zurich, Elsbeth von Oye (c. 1289–1339). She offers explicit descriptions of torment, her self-inflicted mortification, and mystical experiences in a surviving autograph (Zurich, Central Library, Ms. Rh 159) – a rare case for the vernacular. Despite the large number of female biographical and autobiographical texts from medieval Germany, none of the sources possess such a degree of immediacy in their description of sensory experiences as this text. Unusually, it is written in the first person perspective.1 Furthermore, in contrast to comparable mystical accounts from the same period, such as those of Margareta Ebner (1291–1351) and Dorothea von Montau (1347–1394), there was no involvement of a confessor who might have influenced the content of the descriptions, in order to assure favourable treatment in subsequent canonization processes.2 By looking at the comparatively

1 In this regard, Elsbeth’s writing differs from what is considered to be the earliest surviving autobiography in English, The Book of Margery Kempe. It is attributed to the mystic Margery Kempe (c. 1373–after 1439), whose scribe transferred most of her narration into the third person. See Nicholas Watson, “The Making of ‘The Book of Margery Kempe,'” in Voices in Dialogue: Reading women in the Middle Ages, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 395–434.

2 See Urban Federer, Mystische Erfahrung im literarischen Dialog: Die Briefe Heinrichs von Nördlingen an Margaretha Ebner (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), who analyses the written conversation between Margareta Ebner and her confessor, the priest Henry of Nördlingen. Several Latin accounts and one German version of Dorothea von Montau’s life were written by her confessor Johannes Marienwerder and later used to support the long-drawn out process of her canonization. See David Wallace, Strong Women: Life, Text, and Territory, 1347–1645 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1–61, and Almut Suerbaum and Annette Volfing (eds.),
eccentric and lesser known revelations of Elsbeth, this essay seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion about mystical experience, a specific kind of religious experience, here understood as the immediate contact and union of the soul with the divine in this life. Elsbeth’s account is particularly suitable, as it does not exhibit a secondary interpretation of her experience, but rather her own description, where interpretation and experience seem almost intrinsically connected.

Only minimal scholarly work has been undertaken on this text, due to the lack of an edition of the Zurich manuscript, but also because of its problematic, if not confusing, character. When Peter Ochsenbein presented his re-discovery of the revelations of Elsbeth at a conference in 1984, he declared them in the subsequent discussion as pathological and masochistic, and concluded that “a God who wants what is being described here, is no longer a God, but the devil”. The first and only major study on the manuscript, an unpublished dissertation by Klaus Haenel from 1958, resulted in the unchallenged hypothesis that it is indeed Elsbeth’s own writing. However, Haenel’s conclusion to classify the manuscript as a ‘diary’ has been strongly criticized. As Elsbeth’s self-torment and mystical experiences apparently took place in privacy, Peter Ochsenbein generally agreed that her manuscript could be viewed as a private, diary-like document; ultimately, however, he rejected this notion and concluded that it was, from the very beginning, intended for other readers. According to him, Elsbeth was not concerned with verbalizing her mystical experiences, rather with mystical teaching and justification in the context of ascetic exercises.

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Dorothea von Montau and Johannes Marienwerder: Constructions of Sanctity (Oxford: Modern Humanities Research Centre, 2010).


4 I would like to thank Wolfram Schneider-Lastin who provided me with a draft version of his edition, from which I have taken the quotations.


8 Ibid.