Gender and the Authority of Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and Dominicans

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As some recent historians have argued, the phenomenon of "gender," that is, the way in which a society or group perceives and articulates difference between the sexes, can provide that society or group with fundamental terms in which to understand itself and explain or justify its actions. Consequently, historical evidence of the way groups or societies have perceived and articulated sexual difference—have constructed gender—may therefore take us beyond matters of sexuality per se to wider revelations about the perceivers' sense of themselves. In the case of the mendicant friars of the thirteenth century, there is a rich vein of such evidence to be found in the several surviving writings by Dominican and Franciscan friars who described and reflected on their own or other clerics' relationships with particular devout women. Those writings are the sources for this essay. I shall argue that they show the friars in question to have intently observed distinctions between the women and themselves, and that those distinctions gave them a means of addressing the matter of their own relationship with the divine, and the extent and limits of the ecclesiastical authority they possessed as friars. Thus gender served as a tool that helped them fashion a medium of encounter with issues at the heart of their calling.

Although only particular relationships will concern us, a word is first in order about the larger phenomenon of thirteenth-century mendicant contact with devout women. Encounters with such women were a widespread, and not incidental, feature of the friars' activity. It was a matter of course, that, zealous to preach in lay society, friars should find women among their

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responsive hearers. This was already apparent early in the careers of the founders themselves: Dominic helped to establish the convent of Prouille near Toulouse for female converts from Catharism in 1206, when he had just begun his preaching, and Francis vested the young Clare with her habit in 1212, when his friars still numbered few. In the ensuing decades scores of female convents either came into being under mendicant influence or else, once formed, gravitated toward it. Efforts of both orders to evade responsibility for oversight of these convents eventually failed, as papal bulls of 1263 (for Franciscans) and 1267 (for Dominicans) set down that responsibility definitively. Indeed, both orders based those efforts not merely on conventional monastic suspicion of excessive association with women, but also a concern not to drain their energy from the preaching which, as it happened, was the very activity that brought them into contact with women in the first place. Meanwhile, they retained close associations with devout women outside the cloister. Thus, in many northern towns, it was Dominicans who were appointed to direct the groups of beguines who emerged in this period, and contemporary observers apparently assumed Dominicans and beguines to be closely linked. Likewise in Italian towns, friars took strong pastoral interest in the many devout women of marginalized status, for instance widows or single women from the countryside, who tended either to become cloistered

2. Dominic was also to found two other convents of women, in Madrid (1218) and Rome (1219–1221), whereas Francis resisted bringing any convent but Clare’s convent of St. Damian under the care of his friars. Herbert Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter, 2nd ed. (Hildesheim, 1961), pp. 208–213, 253–255. Francis may not, however, have been ultimately opposed to a female branch of the Franciscan order; see Roberto Rusconi, “L’espansione del Francescanesimo femminile nel secolo XIII,” in Movimento religioso femminile e Francescanesimo nel secolo XIII (Assisi, 1980), pp. 279–282.

3. Grundmann, pp. 208–273, 296, 308. Each of these dates is important only as marking a rather anticlimactic end to a complicated struggle lasting several decades, in which the papacy on the whole supported the efforts of the women’s convents to achieve an institutional connection with the mendicant orders, which the latter officially resisted. For detailed accounts, see Grundman, pp. 199–318, and Micheline de Fontette, Les religieuses à l’age classique du droit canon: recherches sur les structures juridiques des branches féminines des ordres (Paris, 1967). Friars continued, however, to cultivate the cura monialium even while their orders were working against it; see John B. Freed, “Urban Development and the ‘Cura Monialium’ in Thirteenth-Century Germany,” Viator 3 (1972): 511–527. Furthermore popes’ advocacy for the women did not imply an identity of interest; the papacy’s singleminded policy to cloister devout women could be in tension with the women’s desire for an apocalyptic life that was freely chosen. See Edith Pásztor, “I papi del duecento e trecento di fronte alla vita religiosa femminile,” in Il movimento religioso femminile in Umbria nei secoli XIII–XIV, ed. Roberto Rusconi (Florence, 1984), pp. 44, 64, and Raoul Manselli, “La chiesa e il Francescanesimo femminile,” in Movimento religioso femminile e Francescanesimo, pp. 259–261.


under mendicant influence or else to become tertiaries, members of the mendicant Third Orders.  

This broad encounter between friar and devout women produced, in specific cases, the sources used—those surviving vitae, letters, and other writings which record friars’ own descriptions of, or reflections on, relationships with such women.  

Two of those sources bear witness to relationships between cloistered women and friars. One of these is a collection of letters sent by the Dominican Master General Jordan of Saxony (d. 1237) between 1222 and 1236 to the nun Diana of Andalô (d.1236), whom he had assisted in founding the convent of Saint Agnes in Bologna, and for whom he subsequently served as a spiritual director.  

The other is the vita of the nun Lutgard of Aywières (d.1246) written shortly after her death by the Dominican Thomas of Cantimpré (1200–1272) who had known Lutgard personally and made reference to his relationship with her.  

Three other of our sources concern uncloistered women associated with the beguinal movement. Two of these are other works by Thomas of Cantimpré, the vita of Christine “the


7. The criterion for choice of these sources therefore is that they contain friars’ explicit testimony to their own or others’ role in relationships with holy women. I have thus not included the revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg, for the Dominican Henry of Halle, who assembled them, did not write in his own voice of his relationship with her (although he is once quoted questioning her use of “masculine words,” Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit, ed. G. Morel [Darmstadt, 1980], 5.12). While I hesitate to claim that the sources listed in this paragraph and the notes accompanying it are all of those that meet the criterion, I have included all that are known to me. Furthermore, such descriptions of saints’ personal relationships with individual confidants in this period are a feature only of works about women, as I will argue in, “Friars, Gender and Sanctity: Mendicant Encounters with Saints, 1250–1325,” in the forthcoming Medieval Masculinity, ed. Clare Lees. The lack of comparable description of encounters with male saints underscores the importance of gender in the sources discussed here.  


Marvellous” of St. Trond (1150–1224) and the Supplement which Thomas wrote to the vita of Mary of Oignies (d. 1213) by Jacques de Vitry. In these works, Thomas commented on the women’s interactions with the friars or clerics around them although he had known neither woman personally.  

The other of our present sources that concerns a beguine is the corpus of documents assembled by the Dominican Peter of Dacia about the beguine Christine of Stommeln (1242–1312), which includes his correspondence with her from 1269 to 1288 as well as several narratives in which he described his personal encounters with her. Finally, our sources include three works that give evidence of or reflect on relationships between female Italian tertiaries and Franciscan friars. One of these is the vita of the widow Humiliana dei Cerchi (d. 1246) in which the author, the Franciscan Vito of Cortona, described this tertiary’s interactions with her confessor, a Franciscan named Michael. The second is the vita of the penitent of Margaret of Cortona (d. 1297) written shortly after her death by her confessor, Giunta Bevignati, who included abundant reference to Margaret’s relationships with Giunta and other friars. The third is the book of revelations of the widow Angela of Foligno (d. 1309), in which the Franciscan friar Arnold, who served as her


scribe, included his own impressions of Angela and transcribed portions of their conversation.\textsuperscript{14}

A fundamental principle of the broad encounter between friars and women was that operant ecclesiastical authority was in the hands of the friars. This authority included the authority to preach, which implied in the friars' case the vigorous assertion of orthodoxy. It is well to remember that such authority could have harsh implications for devout women, even if the particular women who concern us here escaped these; a work of the beguine Hadewijch of Antwerp, for instance, makes mention of another beguine whom the Dominican inquisitor Robert le Bougre caused to be executed for heresy in 1235.\textsuperscript{15} The friars also had a specifically sacerdotal kind of authority over the women, in mediating divine grace through the sacraments, especially penance and eucharist. And they had a more broadly pastoral authority over the women, both to oversee convents' affairs, and in general to give spiritual direction to women, cloistered or not.\textsuperscript{16} William of Saint Amour, the most prominent opponent of the friars, complained that in undertaking pastoral visitation of beguines they were exercising a prerogative that belonged to secular clergy, and it would seem likely that their desire to extend their own influence over against the seculars served them as a motive for establishing pastoral relationships with the women.\textsuperscript{17} In any event, the friars functioned thus as figures of authority over the women in several respects.

The authority that the friars exercised over the devout women with whom they came into contact is clearly in evidence throughout the testimonies that I shall be discussing. But alongside the exercise of that authority, another element also becomes clear in the testimonies, namely the friars' admiring fascination with the women—introducing into these relationships another


\textsuperscript{15} Robert E. Lerner, The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages, p. 64 and bibliography there. Jo Ann McNamara has suggested a link between Dominicans' promotion of orthodoxy and their interest in holy women "whose mystical revelations validated their teachings." McNamara, "The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and the Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy," in Maps of Flesh and Light, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{16} In the struggles over the cura monialium (note 3), convents' temporalia and spiritualia were distinguished. Both orders especially resisted responsibility for the former. Grundmann, pp. 274–284, 297–303, 305–310.

dynamic altogether. This fascination carried with it a strong sense of women's difference from themselves, such as Caroline Bynum and others have found to be typical of male religious writers in this period. In these friars' case, the fascination and sense of difference were focused on the women's relationship to the divine, which the friars saw as privileged, unique, and remote from their own experience. The fact of the women's privileged relationship with the divine had, moreover, a bearing on the friars' own authority. It was not that the women challenged that authority; on the contrary, in the friars' perceptions at least, they accepted it. Nonetheless, recognition of the women's privileged contact introduced ambiguity into the friars' authority over them, in the implication that the women had more direct access to the very source of that authority. But given their fundamental submission, the apparent fact of the women's privileged access to God was something the friars did not ignore or deny but instead welcomed. Thus these friars' strong sense of difference from the admired yet submissive women could give them a safe occasion to articulate doubts about themselves and confront the limits of their powers; at the same time, the services which the women provided by virtue of their supernatural contacts could help the friars make up for those limits.

1.

The figure of Jordan of Saxony, whose letters to Diana of Andaló are the earliest of our sources, exemplifies both the authority and the fascination that friars could bring to their encounters with devout women. Jordan's relationship with Diana was in the first place that of a director to a subordinate, and

18. In comparison to female writers, for whom gender difference is not a prominent theme, male writers "use more dichotomous images, are more concerned to define the female as both positive and negative, and speak more often of reversal and conversion." Bynum, "...And Woman His Humanity: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," in Gender and Religion, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Steven Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston, 1986), p. 261. See also Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 278–294 (on male and female writers' respective use of "symbolic reversal") and Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 110–169 (on the symbolic power femaleness had for male Cistercians, quite apart from actual contact with women). Karen Glente has also noted this tendency of male writers to invest women with the symbolic power of otherness, showing how Thomas of Cantimpré pictured holy women, as women, as embodiments of a personal closeness to God which appeared unattainable to himself, and therefore as objects not of imitation but of wonder and admiration. Karen Glente, "Mystik erinnerviten aus männlicher und weiblicher Sicht: Ein Vergleich zwischen Thomas von Cantimpré und Katerina von Unterlinden," in Religiöse Frauenbewegung, pp. 252–253. There is a parallel in late twelfth- and thirteenth-century clerics' emphasis on persuasiveness as a particularly female trait, which gave women a unique power to evangelize (directed toward husbands) notwithstanding its association with Eve and weakness. Sharon Farmer, "Persuasive Voices: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives," Speculum 61 (1986): 517–543, esp. 538–543.
the exercise of Jordan’s authority is the most obvious feature of the letters. It takes the form, for instance, of admonitions to Diana to moderate her austerities so as not to be, as he put it once, “in too great a hurry” about getting into heaven.\(^\text{19}\) His stance of director by itself excluded much personal mutuality; thus he comforted her on the death of several of her kin, but asked no comfort from her when mourning the death of a colleague, and acknowledged Diana’s anxieties about his health by telling her, “you love me more than you are loved by me.”\(^\text{20}\) He set out, moreover, a division of labor between them: his and the friars’ work was “to win salvation for souls,” and her work was to pray for theirs.\(^\text{21}\) To these ends, Jordan made his recruiting efforts for his order a major topic of the letters. He gave Diana regular reports of the prospects for finding new friars in various university towns and statistics of his successes in enlisting them, with instructions to make, variously, prayers of thanksgiving or intercession for this work.\(^\text{22}\) He preached, she prayed; he gave direction, she took it.

Alongside these roles which were defined by the nature of the authority Jordan had over Diana, there appears in the letters a different set of roles, which emerged from his admiration of her and the fascination she held for him. These were Diana’s role as an embodiment of holiness and Jordan’s role as witness to that holiness. He wrote to her that he had had a dream in which she told him that God had said to her, as though on her behalf, “‘I Diana, I Diana, I Diana . . . am good, am good, am good.’ Please know [he wrote her] what a great consolation this seemed to me.”\(^\text{23}\) It seems to have been this perception of some intrinsic goodness in her that interested and gratified Jordan, rather than anything she did for him; indeed her expressed concern for his health only alarmed him since it seemed to upset her.\(^\text{24}\) It was her goodness that he liked especially to reflect upon. Accordingly he wrote of her and himself together in imagery that brought Christ also into the picture. He made himself out as the “paranymphus,” the friend of the bridegroom Christ, whose job was to escort to Christ the bride Diana. The image, which is

20. *Epist.* 44, pp. 50–51; 33, p. 39. A tone of mutuality is not entirely lacking; *Epist.* 13, p. 15, speaks of their mutual consolation through the letters.
22. Reports on his recruitment are to be found in twelve of the fifty-five letters: *Epist.* 1, 7, 8, 16, 19, 20, 21, 26, 32, 40, 42, 50.
taken from the Gospel of John (3: 29–30) where it applied to John the Baptist as the one who gladly “stands and hears” the bridegroom, makes Jordan the happy promoter and observer of Diana’s privileged relationship with Christ rather than her superior per se.  

It is well to notice that in Jordan’s case, the role of admirer of Diana did not impinge upon his conception of his role of superior, which remained unambiguous. Even the image of the “paranymphus” served to associate Jordan with Christ in the business of conveying grace rather than with Diana in the business of receiving it. In other words, he was thinking in a priestly mode in that his own actions paralleled or extended Christ’s. Similarly, he compared his own letters, in their effect on her, to the “book of life” visible in Christ on the cross, and he compared the visits she received from him to those she received from Christ. In either case, it was Christ who naturally gave the “far sweeter consolation,” yet the comparison makes his own doings and Christ’s generically similar. Still, the care with which he thus distinguished his role from hers did not hinder him from passionately admiring her, whom he spoke of as his “better part.”

2.

The roles of personal admirer and ecclesiastical superior which appear in Jordan’s stance toward Diana appear also in the other friars who interacted with holy women. Jordan’s awareness of his authority was ultimately unaffected by his admiration of Diana; this is not always the case with the other figures under consideration, whose admiration sometimes informed the authority they held over women. Those friars’ admiration tended to carry with it an awareness of something lacking in themselves, specifically the privileged contact with God that they ascribed to the women. In this respect, they could experience themselves as inferior to the women, for all their undisputed superiority of office. Precisely when they observed the powers that the women seemed to possess by virtue of their status with God, and which their own office clearly did not give them, the friars encountered some of the limits of their official authority.

The letters of Peter of Dacia illustrate the sense of deprivation of divine

26. “Suadeo tamen ego qui amici sponsi gero officium, qui ipso committente paranymphus vester sum, qui vos aemulor Dei aemulatione, qui vos despondi uni viro virginem castam exhibere Christo, suadeo, inquam, ego ut dignas vos exhibeatis eius amplexibus.” Epist. 11, p. 13.
27. Epist. 15, p. 17 (comparison of his letters to Christ’s sacrifice); 48, pp. 54–55 (comparison of his visits to Christ’s visits); see also 24, p. 28: “Nolite ergo flere, filiae Jerusalem, super vos, quod ego corpore recesserim a vobis, sed gaudete super sponso vestro, qui in medio vestri est.”
contact that encounter with a holy women could elicit. Although Peter could certainly adopt the stance of a superior in his letters, especially as he became older, it was his admiration of Christine, and curiosity about her, that preoccupied him. Christine displayed various paramystical phenomena, undergoing ecstasies and enduring public buffeting by demons. These things Peter considered to be a godsend to himself, in answer to a prayer which he had begun to pray as a very young man, to be shown "some one of [God's] servants... in whom I might learn the conversation of his saints not only in words but also in deeds and examples, surely and clearly."

The prayer had long been unanswered, he wrote, until as a young student he met Christine, and the fascination she held for him continued to be linked to a sense that he had been missing something. As he wrote her, he had not experienced the delights of the spirit as she evidently had. His narratives point up this contrast by juxtapatning Christine's experience of things divine with the academic knowledge on which his life as a young Dominican student at Cologne and Paris was centered. He described how on one occasion, for instance, while he was giving a learned talk on the Ptolemaic universe to a small audience which included Christine, she entered a state of conspicuous ecstasy, which attracted everyone's attention including his own, and ended his discourse.

Peter's case also illustrates how a friar's perception of his own lack of direct divine contact might introduce a sense of inferiority to the woman whom he perceived to possess it. Peter pictured himself as third party to earthly bride and heavenly bridegroom, just as Jordan had done, but in his neediness Peter construed the role in a strikingly different way. He imagined himself not as a bridegroom's assistant but as an ugly older sister to a beautiful Christine who alone had attracted Christ's attentions. His strategy, he wrote her, would be to "show myself intimate with my sister and devoted and obedient to her husband, so that she might at least communicate to me something of her flood of joys and knowledge of her secrets."

Here, in other words, we see a friar pairing himself with the woman rather than with Christ, as her lesser associate in receiving grace rather than Christ's assistant in conveying it, and in the process making up for an experience of the divine his office did not give him. Though his office gave him a superiority, which was assumed, he nonetheless he experienced himself as her lesser companion.

29. An example of his adoption of the stance of superior is his command to her to produce a memoir of her life which she had promised him. Letter 34 (written in 1384), Vit. Chr. St., p. 217.
30. Vit. Chr. St., p. 2.
31. "Nam licet per experientiam non noui, per scripturam tamen cognoui, quam amarum sit et acerbum talibus deliciis frustrari, talibus consolationibus defraudari ei, qui semel talia degustauit." Letter 5, Vit. Chr. St., p. 80.
33. Letter 9, Vit. Chr. St., p. 97.
Other examples suggest that the women’s privileged contact with the divine, even while not undermining the authority of the friars could nonetheless have the effect of pointing up the friars’ shortcomings or at least what lay beyond their control. In the vita of Humiliana dei Cerchi by Vito of Cortona the authority of Friar Michael as Humiliana’s spiritual director is clear enough; it was because he refused permission, for instance, that she forebore extreme fasting. Yet the vita also tells how, in effect, Humiliana criticized one of Michael’s evangelistic efforts. He had been working to persuade a certain woman to leave the “vanity of the world” and dedicate her virginity to God, and had been acting as though this were an accomplished fact. Humiliana, in praying about her, received a revelation that the woman did not really want to be a virgin; and she soon proved Humiliana right by marrying. The story suggests that the Franciscan author saw Humiliana to be connected immediately to a divine source of knowledge which was not directly accessible to her Franciscan confessor and which exposed his shortcomings, in this case overconfidence. Or again, there is the case of Margaret of Cortona, whose devotion to the services of priests was intense, and yet as an index of her respect for their vocation we find her receiving revelations informing her which priests were unworthy of it. In each of these instances we see the woman not challenging the friar’s authority per se but nonetheless in her own right standing as a powerful reminder of its limits and judge of its motives.

3.

Thus there were instances in which the powers that the women possessed by virtue of their contact with God could point up friars’ limits or shortcomings. The friars in our sources did not hesitate to document such instances, indeed seem to have taken special interest in them. Why?

Friars could be receptive to such reminder of their limits because of a predisposed ambivalence about their exercise of ecclesiastical authority in lay society. It was an ambivalence which arose no doubt from that simultaneous renunciation of and involvement with the world that was a trademark of the mendicant orders. An example of such ambivalence is the Dominican Thomas of Cantimpré. Thomas’s work displays both a very friar-like enthusiasm for preaching, and a pronounced suspicion of preachers for their typical temptations and shortcomings. He expressed all of this through his portraits of women. Thus in his work on Mary of Oignies, Thomas presented Mary as overtly adulatory of her confidant and biographer Jacques de Vitry, kissing

34. Vit. Um. 3.28.
36. Vit. Marg., 2.12 (on her extreme devotion to the mass and preaching, for which she gave up her work as a midwife); 7. 179 (a revelation of priests’ unworthiness); Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast, p. 141.
the ground on which he had walked because it was revealed to her that “God has chosen to lift him out gloriously from among mortals so as to save souls through him in a marvellous way.” But on the other hand, she is shown criticizing him sharply because he, as she told him, “walked according to your own judgements,” putting his ambitions above his utility to others.37 (In a postscript Thomas stated in his own voice this two-sided assessment of Jacques, castigating him for his prideful acceptance of a cardinal’s hat but suggesting that he himself found that action offensive precisely because of his long and deep-felt admiration for Jacques as a preacher.)38 A seesawing passage in the vita that Thomas wrote of Christine of St. Trond describing her attitude toward clergy nearly sums up the ambivalence found everywhere in his work. Christine, Thomas wrote, miraculously learned Latin and the scriptures by herself even though she was illiterate, and could answer the “most obscure questions,” that is, rival the scholars. But, he went on to add, she did so “very reluctantly and very rarely, saying that expounding Holy Scriptures was something proper to clerics, a ministry that did not belong to her;” and indeed, “she venerated clerics, and especially priests, wonderfully and out of a great love.” Nonetheless, he continued, she had “suffered many injuries from” clerics, and she found it necessary to “admonish” them often, being nonetheless careful to do so secretly and reverently.39 Ambivalence indeed.

A second answer to the question why the reminder of the limits of friars’ powers emerges strongly in this literature is that it was through women that these friars tried to make up for the limits. Here the second of the two dynamics we are keeping in sight here—the friars’ admiring fascination which presupposed a strong sense of women’s otherness—took on a utilitarian cast. Typically the sources show friars relying on women for services that emerged from their holiness, and that the friars themselves could not perform. Most often this meant serving as oracles. Humiliana seems to have provided the Franciscans in Florence a source of certain spiritual assurances which they otherwise lacked. One friar unfortunately asked her for a revelation, which she eventually obtained for him, about the state of his soul; another asked her to procure him relief from his temptations. And when her confessor Michael asked her to pray for him because he was spiritually “all dry,” she complied and “immediately he was infused with such grace, that it appeared that he could not receive it all.”40 A few decades later in the case of

37. Supp. 1.2; 4.21.
38. Supp. 4.27.
39. Vit. Chr. Mir., 4.40. Thomas similarly portrayed Lutgard as both solicitous and admonitory of priests: it was she who criticized Jacques de Vitry for inappropriate love of a female religious, which was taking him from his preaching, and she saved him from it by her prayers. Vit. Lut. 2.1.3.
Margaret of Cortona, we get the impression that for the Franciscans of Cortona, Margaret was a sort of a staff oracle, and a busy one. In one revelation she received for her confessor and hagiographer Giunta, Christ gave her some directions which suggest a neat division of roles: "Say to my servant whom I gave you as confessor and spiritual governor, that he should put zeal into everything that is to be done, that he may be called my son by right. And as for you, invite me more reverently into your prayers, and say, when will I come to you and find you, God my savior?" 41 Thus Giunta’s job was to be out doing, hers was to make the contacts with God. This division is much like what was assumed in Jordan’s letters to Diana, except that Margaret’s functions as contact person were more active and extensive than Diana’s had been. She received revelations instructing and advising the friars in an array of matters. To the friars collectively she issued cautions on their choice of tertians, reminded them to focus their preaching on the Gospels and Epistles, obtained from Christ (at her confessor’s request) a catalog of the virtues of a “true friar,” confirmed that it was important to interrogate penitents, and reported Francis’s location in heaven. 42 She also responded to requests from individual friars on the basis of revelations, telling one that the problem with his preaching was a lack of boldness, informing another that he was about to become an inquisitor, relaying to still another a precise answer to the question how often, given his particular spiritual state, he ought to take the eucharist. 43 The assumption seems to have been not only that these women possessed supernatural contacts which the friars lacked, but that their chief function was to use these for the friars’ benefit. The friars were therefore beneficiaries of extraordinary contact with the divine, although they specifically lacked the ability to make that contact themselves. The women’s powers thus became a source of supply for the very deficiencies they exposed.

4.

Friars had reason, therefore, to make the most of holy women’s extraordinary contacts with the divine. But there was a potentially dangerous implication in doing so. For the acknowledgement and use of those contacts also implied the possibility of an outright reversal of roles whereby a woman’s evident superiority would cause a friar to see himself as subordinate to her, and run the risk of compromising the authority he otherwise exercised. Such reversal appears in the sources, and the danger suggested itself especially when the women in question were uncloistered. Still it was a danger that remained muted.

There could be hints of such reversal of roles even with cloistered women. Thus Thomas of Cantimpré wrote of his relationship with the saintly nun Lutgard that although ostensibly she was “uncultivated and very simple,” such was her wisdom that it was he who appeared to himself to be stupid.44 Any thought of a real supplanting of priestly authority over the women was, however, far from the mind of Thomas. It is relevant that Lutgard was in a cloister, which perhaps itself separated a woman from the friars’ activity in the world clearly enough to make any reversal a safe game.

When the woman lived outside the cloister, the situation was different. Margaret of Cortona, for instance, was a laywoman who was as much a part of daily life in the city as were the friars themselves. Here reversal carried a risk. If the woman in privileged contact with God were actually the friar’s neighbor, and sharing his ministry, then the question would tend to suggest itself: did she not in some way supplant his authority? Naturally the answer had to be no, or else there had to be a way to deflect the question. In the case of Margaret, a need to deflect the question may help to explain what otherwise is a very remarkable feature of the vita by Giunta, namely that it makes her out frankly as a sinner. Constancy being inseparable from virtue, it was usual practice among medieval hagiographers to treat even sins prior to a saint’s conversion with the greatest reticence.45 Yet according to Giunta, Christ’s revelations were always reminding Margaret not only of the scandalous life she had led before her conversion, but also of her present imperfection. Thus Christ questioned whether she really loved him, told her she was not worthy of an embrace when she asked for one, and exhorted her more than once to direct her attention to the cross in terms that suggested she needed the reminder.46 Giunta himself wrote that the fact of her having been a sinner made her a mirror for sinners, an aid for the friars in reaching the lost, and no doubt that was part of the point.47 But it also probably made her, for them, a safer oracle.

The dangers in reversal could come closer to the surface. At roughly the time that Giunta was serving as confessor to Margaret of Cortona, another laywoman, Angela of Foligno, was dictating revelations to the Franciscan Arnold. Angela made great claims for her revelations; she was annoyed when told that scripture did not always corroborate what she said about God, and she remarked to Arnold that all of scripture was to the vastness of God, which

44. Vit. Lut. 1.1.15.
46. Vit. Marg. 4.79, 6.147, 5.101, 5.96, 5.118.
47. For example, Vit. Marg. 4.65, 4.71.
she had glimpsed, what a single point is to the whole world.\footnote{Il libro, ch. 7, p. 324; see also ch. 9 p. 386: “Scriptura divina est tantum altissima, quod non est aliquis homo ita sapiens in mundo, etiam si habeat scientiam et spiritum, quod possit eam intelligere ita plene quod non superetur intellectus eius ab ea; et tamen aliquid balbutit. Sed de illis ineffabilibus operationibus divinis illus minfostare Dei quae fiunt in anima, nihil omnino loqui vel balbutiere potest.”} Arnold had had early doubts about her genuineness but overcame these to display an almost groveling adulation, and although he heard her confession and gave her the eucharist, he served her rather as obedient scribe than as spiritual director. Thus he took extraordinary care to record her revelations faithfully, read everything to her for her approval, and dutifully gave the reader her comments on what he had written, generally to the effect that although it was not in error, it failed to convey the sublimity of what she had said.\footnote{Il libro, ch. 7, p. 310.} She made it clear that it was by God’s will alone rather than by Arnold’s authority that the revelations were being made known to him; as she reported Christ to have said, “you have told him many things, but if I had not wanted you to speak to him, you would not have been able.”\footnote{Il libro, ch. 2, p. 172; ch. 9, p. 400.} These revelations Arnold faithfully reported.

We may wonder whether, in thus portraying himself as subservient to Angela, Arnold was skating on thin ice, risking a compromise of the superiority which went along with his ostensible authority over this woman. If so, the ice was however not thin enough to break. It is true that Arnold’s apparent submission to Angela, or at any rate his attentions to her, seem to have rankled his fellow friars; he wrote of his “fear” of them, and the “impediments and prohibitions” they brought against him.\footnote{Il libro, ch. 2, pp. 170–172. Her responses: on one occasion she professed not to recognize her words, on another said he that had written “drily and without flavor (sicce et sine omni sapore)” and on another that though his words helped her remember her own words, they obscured her meaning. Il libro, ch. 2, p. 172; see also ch. 4, p. 218 and ch. 4 p. 222. Nonetheless, Arnold felt that he was not capable of noting anything down unless purified by confession of his own sins; ch. 2, pp. 172–174.} But these apparently did not result in censure of either Angela or Arnold. On the contrary, Arnold had his writings approved, other friars followed him as her scribe, and her cult was well established soon after her death.\footnote{Il libro, ch. 5, p. 250; she reported herself unable to pray for an oracle in response to a certain request because it was prideful and stupid (ch. 5, p. 252); she received a spontaneous revelation of a friar’s impending appointment to a position of authority (ch. 6, p. 264).} For in the end, Angela’s revelations did not directly challenge the ecclesiastical authority that Arnold represented, however personally subordinate he made himself. And as long
as that authority was not challenged, then Arnold remained within the safe
realm of the admiring subservience to holy women which, in small measure
or great, characterized all the men discussed here. The articulation of
difference in terms of gender thus still served to supplement rather than
challenge the friars’ authority.

5.

On the whole, the sources considered here suggest that the thirteenth-
century friars whose voices they preserve experienced holy women as mark-
ing a boundary that defined the friars’ own limits as persons of authority.
Thus by means of gender—by the way they perceived sexual difference and
articulated it through action and word—these friars traced the boundary of
their authority, and it was as boundary figures that the women acquired
particular importance for them.53 Thus it was in the course of exercising their
ecclesiastical authority that these friars perceived the women as having a
privileged contact with the divine which they themselves desired yet which
was beyond their power to possess. At the same time, the women apparently
submitted themselves to the authority that the friars did possess; to the extent
that the friars’ voices hint at a danger that the woman’s powers might
undermine their own, that danger remained far from realization, and in any
event the women do not appear to have been trying to bring it closer.
Accordingly, the boundary that the women represented was fundamentally
undisputed, and perhaps since they did not perceive the women as assailing
their authority, the friars could feel themselves free to give expression to the
array of reactions that the women’s reports of divine contact elicited in them.
These reactions, all mixed with the fascination which the women held for
them, included self-doubt, wistful desire, and intense curiosity about things
divine, as well as a resolve to make their own use of the supernatural
knowledge to which only the women had privileged access. To the extent that
encounters with holy women confronted these friars with the limits of their
authority, the confrontation seems to have been wholly salutary from their
point of view. It summoned up deep religious longings, it bestowed practical
benefits—and it left their authority undiminished.

53. They were therefore, in Victor Turner’s term, “liminal personae,” in the sense here that
they had no status of office, and the powers the friars attributed to them are those
‘powers of the weak,’ or, in other words, the permanently or transiently sacred
attributes of low status or position,” observable in “most societies.” Victor Turner, The
“Women’s Stories, Women’s Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner’s Theory of
Liminality,” in Anthropology and the Study of Religion, ed. Robert L. Moore and Frank E.
Reynolds (Chicago, 1984), pp. 105–119, for the important caveat that “women are fully
liminal only to men” (p. 118), and not to themselves. The present essay, it is well to
remember, concerns men’s views of women, not their views of themselves.
Gender is not a static phenomenon, and the significance of holy women for friars would eventually change. Friars' accounts of their own relationships with holy women were to become rare by the early fifteenth century in the wake of clerical reaction against the influence which female visionaries had possessed during the decades of the Great Schism. It would seem that at that moment, friars were avoiding close encounters with holy women, which may suggest that they were perceiving the women as a real threat to their own authority. But for the friars whom I have been discussing, that moment was still far off, and such close encounters were still something to prize.

54. On this reaction, see McNamara, "The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy."
55. André Vauchez has suggested that female mystics over the course of the late middle ages were ultimately subversive of clerics' authority in the sense that their individualistic notion of the religious life implicitly bypassed the authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and indeed anticipated the Reformation. Vauchez, "Prophéteses, visionnaires et mystiques en occident aux derniers siècles du moyen age," in Les Réformes, enracinement socioculturel, ed. B. Chevalier and R. Sauzet (Paris, 1985), pp. 71–72.