

# **Death and Dying in the Middle Ages**

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# **The Role of the Beguines in Caring for the Ill, the Dying, and the Dead**

**Christine Guidera**

## **Introduction**

In recent years, the semi-religious women of medieval France, Germany, and the Low Countries, generally referred to as Beguines, have become an increasingly common subject of scholarly attention. Undoubtedly, much of this newfound popularity stems from the fact that the study of these women, whose existence combined aspects of the contemplative life of the convent with charitable and economic activity in the lay community, offers scholars from a wide range of disciplines great insight into the nature of medieval life and faith. Feminist historians have been attracted to the Beguines as the initiators of a new movement in feminine lay piety, which was not founded or controlled by the male Church hierarchy. Literary scholars have looked to the visions, poems, and letters of Beguine authors as important contributions to the development of vernacular literature. Social and economic historians have sought to understand the connections between popular religion, demographic trends, and economic necessity which led to the birth and growth of the Beguine movement. And, most recently, art historians have tried to understand the components of Beguine religious life by examining the types of devotional images which these women commissioned for their own use.<sup>1</sup>

However, despite this flood of scholarly interest, many aspects of Beguine life are still poorly understood and inadequately researched, most notably the role that the Beguines played within their communities, both among their Beguine sisters and among the townspeople with whom they interacted. In the pages that follow, I hope to help clarify one small component of this larger question by exploring the

important work which the Beguines performed in the care of the ill, the dying, and the dead. While this subject has not attracted a great deal of interest among present-day scholars, clear evidence of the Beguines' participation in these activities can be found in many medieval documents. By exploring a variety of such sources, including Beguinage cartularies, the testaments of townspeople and of the Beguines themselves, texts of sermons, hagiographic documents and works of art, this essay will offer concrete evidence that the Beguines were intimately involved in caring for their societies' most vulnerable members.

At this point it should be noted that despite the existence of evidence regarding these matters, locating substantial information about the charitable activity of the Beguines often feels like the proverbial search for a needle in a haystack. In part, the root of this difficulty can probably be traced to the fact that much of this activity was charitable. Evidence of a Beguine visiting critically ill townspeople in their homes, washing their corpses after death, accompanying bodies to their burial places, and offering prayers for their souls on the anniversaries of their deaths, might not find its way into the written record if the townspeople had not been of sufficient status to have drawn up wills requesting such services, or if no payment had been rendered in exchange for them. In addition, the very ordinariness of a woman performing these actions seems to have contributed to their going unnoticed. As Caroline Walker Bynum has noted in her discussion of the Beguines, the type of work in which these semi-religious women were engaged was the same work routinely performed by ordinary lay women.<sup>2</sup> Thus a Beguine who occupied herself with weaving, caring for the sick, preparing dead bodies for burial, caring for young children, or spinning thread, would probably not have struck contemporary observers as something which needed to have particular attention drawn to it.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, although documentation surrounding the care which Beguines gave to the dying and the dead is neither extensive nor particularly accessible,<sup>4</sup> it certainly can be found in a variety of sources. In the pages that follow I hope to contribute to a richer understanding of the nature of the works performed by the Beguines, women who did much to alleviate the physical and spiritual pain in their communities.

### The Charitable Activities of the Beguines

That the performance of such activities was an important component of Beguine life and spirituality is well known, and historians have fre-

quently commented on the Beguines' involvement in nursing, both within municipal hospitals<sup>5</sup> and within the hospitals established behind the walls of the large *curtis-type begijnhoven* of the Southern Low Countries.<sup>6</sup> The Beguines are also known to have set up Holy Ghost Tables which provided sustenance to the urban poor, and to have distributed alms to the indigent out of the income which they earned from textile work.<sup>7</sup> However, although modern historians have given a basic outline of the Beguines' involvement in such activities, it is necessary to return to medieval documents in order to form a clearer picture of the specific charitable functions performed by these women.

The Rules of the Beguine houses are a rich, and under-utilized, source for understanding the actions and spirituality of the Beguines. Often, charitable behavior is not specifically demanded within the Rule, yet evidence of it can be found by reading between the lines.<sup>8</sup> For example, the early Rule of the Beguinage of St. Elizabeth's at Ghent does not mandate that the women take care of the sick, yet the document makes it clear that they did so. In a very lengthy section of the Rule devoted to controlling the behavior of the Beguines when they left the protective walls of the Beguinage, it states that in addition to avoiding weddings, Christmas celebrations, and sharing meals with men, Beguines were not to go and care for a sick man if there were no woman in the home.<sup>9</sup> The inclusion of this prohibition within the Rule, a document with which all the Beguines at St. Elizabeth's would be familiar, certainly suggests that visiting the houses of ill townspeople was a regular occupation of these women in Ghent.

Rules from other houses were even more explicit in their demands for charitable activity and are suggestive of the fact that the Beguines continued to care for those around them even after death. As Joanna Ziegler has pointed out in her ground-breaking book *Sculpture of Compassion: The Pietà and the Beguines of the Southern Low Countries*, the Rule of the Beguinage at Bruges specifically demanded that the Beguines there perform the charitable activities of distributing alms<sup>10</sup> and caring for the sick. Beguines in this city were not only to attend to the ill by "making them soft beds, preparing their food properly and washing their feet," but were additionally instructed to try to keep their charges from falling into melancholy and despair.<sup>11</sup> Ziegler also notes that the Rule for the Bruges Beguinage contains a clause prohibiting its inhabitants from "playing" (presumably, acting frivolously) during the wakes of the dead whose bodies they were supposed to be guarding.<sup>12</sup> This certainly suggests that Beguines of this city played some role in funerary practices, though the specifics of this role are not made clear.

The Beguines of St. Elizabeth's in Ghent also had a role in funerals, but possibly only in those of their fellow members. In a laudatory letter of visitation written by the Bishop of Tournai in 1328, the excellent care which Beguines gave to their dead is one factor of their lives which draws particular praise. Under the heading of *De Suffragiis pro Mortuis*, the bishop noted that:

Whenever anyone was touched by death, the convent singly and one by one visited the funeral with devoted prayers and intercessions, and everywhere, devoted intercessions of abstinence, vigils, psalms and prayers were rendered for other dead in order that they be maintained.<sup>13</sup>

Because of the consistent use of the feminine when referring to the dead, I believe that it is likely that the Beguines of St. Elizabeth only took part in the funerals of those who were members of the Beguinage.<sup>14</sup> However, an examination of other sources suggests that such women living in other cities did take part in the funerals of ordinary citizens.

The wills left by townspeople are an excellent source for determining the connection between the Beguines and those around them. The testaments of the inhabitants of Tournai, for example, show that people in that city often remembered the Beguines in their last days and occasionally wanted the women to play a role at their funerals. In one case, the testament of a husband and wife, dated 1416, requests that their bodies be carried to the cemetery by young women from the Beguinage of Saint Catherine's, although the couple is not to be buried in the Beguines' cemetery.<sup>15</sup> In another testament, dated 1445, Maigne Wallequine left twenty *solidi* to eight young women from the local Beguinage as their salary for carrying her corpse to burial.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the document refers to this money as a salary (*sallaire*) might suggest that bringing corpses to their burial sites was a regular source of income for the Beguines in this city.

In an intriguing, but seriously flawed work, one historian has even suggested that performing services for the dead was the predominant occupation for the Beguines of several cities. In his 1978 publication *Mort d'une Hérésie: l'Église et les clercs face aux béguines et aux bégards du Rhin supérieur*, Jean-Claude Schmitt has argued that the rents received by the Beguines of Strasbourg in return for their accompanying bodies to burial and praying for the souls of the deceased, were their primary source of income.<sup>17</sup> Schmitt also mentions that these women made frequent appearances in the wills of Rhineland

townspeople, who often made use of the Beguines as intermediaries for their own charitable activity by requesting that they give out alms to the poor at their funerals.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, Schmitt's most provocative statements are frequently vague and are often unaccompanied by footnotes, so the specifics of the Rhineland Beguines' activities remain somewhat obscure. A reexamination of the archival evidence is clearly needed before Schmitt's claim that "les bégues semblaient presque exclusivement vouées à telles fonctions funéraires"<sup>19</sup> can be accepted.

Another important issue that Schmitt raises, which certainly deserves more investigation than it has received to date, is the idea that the contact which Beguines had with the dead and sick bodies of others contributed to the hostility that some felt toward them. Since they were unmarried, uncloistered women, often totally free of any male supervision, some of their contemporaries felt that they were particularly vulnerable to seduction or lust.<sup>20</sup> Schmitt suggests that it was the Beguines' familiarity with the bodies of the deceased and their often intimate care of the ill which encouraged the less than flattering view some had of them, and he quotes the Bishop of Constance who referred to them as a "race adultère" in the beginning of the fifteenth century.<sup>21</sup> As Lyndal Roper's important work *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* has presented compelling evidence that women's association with the care of dead and diseased bodies continued to be a source of suspicion of unwholesome activity well into the Early Modern period,<sup>22</sup> this appears to be a particularly fruitful avenue for research, and one wishes that Schmitt had offered more concrete evidence for his views.

However, despite some problems with documentation, Schmitt does offer very interesting proof of the Beguines' taking part in funeral processions. For example, he cites a fifteenth-century sermon preached by the Alsatian humanist, Geiler von Kaysersberg, in which he reproaches the bourgeoisie of Strasbourg for not accompanying their own dead to the cemetery, but instead allowing the Beguines and their male counterparts, the Beghards, to make up the entire funeral procession.<sup>23</sup> While von Kaysersberg might have grossly exaggerated the practice for rhetorical effect, his complaint certainly suggests that the Beguines, in Strasbourg at least, had come to be intimately associated with the burial of the dead.

The death-bed requests of prominent people are also suggestive of the important role played by the Beguines in the care of the sick and

the dead. For example, Schmitt relates that when Jean Wörnher, the *seigneur* of the town of Zimmern, was dying in 1495, he made it clear that he wanted only the guardian of the Franciscan convent in Munich to assist in his death, specifically noting that he did not want the presence of the Beguines.<sup>24</sup> The wording of the document seems to indicate that this was an unusual request and that normal practice would be to engage the services of these women when one was seriously ill and facing death.

A recent article by Walter Simons on the Beguines of Douai also suggests that Beguines in this city played a role in funeral practices. Simons's research has determined that in at least two testaments from the first half of the thirteenth century, specific requests were made to have Beguines accompany the deceased to his or her final resting place.<sup>25</sup> Simons has also found that some citizens of Douai left wills which called for the establishment of small convent-type Beguinages and which asked for the prayers of the women who would be housed therein. One such testator, Bernard Pilate, left a legacy for the establishment of two small Beguine convents and requested that these women pray for his soul daily before a statue of the Virgin Mary. On the five feast days of the Virgin, as well as on Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and All Soul's Day, a candle was to be lit and more elaborate prayers were to be offered before the statue on behalf of his soul, the souls of his parents, and those of some unspecified benefactors.<sup>26</sup>

In her article "Reality as Imitation: the Role of Religious Imagery Among the Beguines of the Low Countries," Joanna Ziegler also notes the significance of Bernard Pilate's testament. For Ziegler the document is doubly important, first because of the insight it offers into the daily devotional practices of Beguines living in small convents, like those in Douai, but also because the existence of such a bequest suggests that "the secular community recognized the Beguine's special access to the favors of the Virgin."<sup>27</sup> In addition, the testament illustrates that the townspeople of Douai, even well-off burghers such as Bernard Pilate, thought it would be beneficial to their souls and the souls of those they loved to seek the prayers of the Beguines at the hour of their deaths.

Though the records detailing the activities of the Beguines in cities such as Douai tend not to be as extensive as those of locations which housed more elaborate *curtis*-type Beguinages,<sup>28</sup> documents from these areas nevertheless offer many clues about the activity of these women with regard to their care of the dead and dying. The municipal records

of Tournai are also an excellent source for understanding Beguine activity there. For example, one collection of wills edited by the *Société Historique et Archéologique de Tournai* contains the testaments of five people who wished to be buried in the cemeteries of Beguinages between the years 1400 and 1492, most of which left sizable legacies in return for this service.<sup>29</sup>

Of these five testaments, three mention a desire to be buried next to a loved one who was already interred in the Beguines' cemetery. One of the most interesting of these documents is the will of a Beguine named Marguerite Fromage, who requested that she be buried near the body of her grandmother. It is not clear from the document whether Marguerite's grandmother had herself ever been a Beguine, but the testament certainly raises many interesting questions about familial connections to Beguinages as well as about medieval burial patterns.

The will of Jeanne Bourgoise is also suggestive of how medieval people selected their final resting places. Jeanne is described as the widow of a certain Jehan de Cordes, yet in her will she requests burial in the cemetery of a Beguinage, where, as the testament informs us, her father is buried. Perhaps Jeanne's late husband was also interred there, but if this is so, it is not mentioned in the document. However, regardless of where Jehan de Cordes was laid to rest, Jeanne's will indicates that strong connections were maintained by married daughters with their families of origin, and that they wished to uphold these ties even after death. Her testament, along with the four others mentioned above, also suggests that many inhabitants of Tournai felt that the cemetery of a Beguinage was a particularly desirable place to be buried.

Although the people of Ghent could not be buried in the cemetery of St. Elizabeth's, since interment there was limited to inhabitants of the Beguinage,<sup>30</sup> they often remembered the Beguines in their wills. The cartulary of this large and wealthy Beguinage contains several testaments which leave money to the women housed there, with the request that prayers be said for the soul of the donor on the anniversary of his or her death.<sup>31</sup> One of the most elaborate of these testaments is that made by a certain Mergriete, the widow of Buekel van Craeyenwerve, which requested the establishment of three anniversary observances of her husband's death. In this document, dated 9 October, 1311, Mergriete requested that, in addition to other services spelled out in great detail, Buekel's anniversary should be commemorated by having a Beguine go care for the sick and by having each of the Beguines at St. Elizabeth's say a *miserere mei Deus*.<sup>32</sup>

Whether Buekel had himself received the type of sick care which his testament requested on behalf of others is not mentioned in the document, but it seems possible that he might have. In fact, a number of the wills of townspeople in Ghent leave specific bequests to the Beguinage's hospital,<sup>33</sup> which at least raises the question of whether or not they themselves, or perhaps a loved one, ever received care there. As mentioned before, the Rule of St. Elizabeth's demonstrates that its Beguines were certainly active in the care of the ill, even visiting them in their own homes, and it would not be surprising if the recipient of such care demonstrated his or her gratitude with a bequest. Just how extensive the Beguines' care of the seriously ill was has not yet been ascertained, but one curious document found in St. Elizabeth's cartulary suggests that the Beguines of Ghent might have been involved in the care of lepers.

In this text, dated 1304, a man named Willem de Juede and his wife, Allise, made a donation to Luusberghe, which Béthune suggests was the popular name for the leprosarium of St. Marie, located in the vicinity of St. Elizabeth's.<sup>34</sup> Neither the Beguines nor Saint Elizabeth's are directly mentioned in the document, leading Béthune to conclude that its inclusion within the cartulary of the Beguinage might have been an accident. However, since these women were at times involved in the care of lepers (Marie d'Oignies, perhaps the first Beguine, worked in a leper house alongside her husband), and since the women of St. Elizabeth's were known to have left the protective walls of the Beguinage in order to care for the sick, it seems at least possible that they might have given service to the inmates of Luusberghe.

As of yet, I have not found any evidence that the Beguines of St. Elizabeth's continued to provide care for townspeople after their deaths, and I am inclined to believe that they did not furnish such services. As mentioned above, those who did not reside within the Beguinage could not be buried in St. Elizabeth's cemetery, and, so far, I have come across no testaments requesting the presence of the St. Elizabeth Beguines at a burial or in a funeral procession. Some of the research presented by Philippe Ariès in his monumental work *The Hour of Our Death* raises the possibility that the inhabitants of this large and well-endowed Beguinage, whose comings and goings were more carefully supervised than those of women living in less elaborate and self-sufficient establishments, might have been kept away from lay funerals by those who wished to protect them from scandal.

In a chapter entitled "Place of Burial," Ariès cites several medieval statutes which tried repeatedly to prohibit people from using the cem-

etery as a combination "marketplace; place for announcements, auctions, proclamations, sentences; scene of community gatherings; promenade; athletic field; haven for illicit encounters and dubious professions."<sup>35</sup> Ariès also suggests that the frequency with which the same actions are decried makes it probable that the statutes were consistently ignored. If conditions in Flemish graveyards resembled those of France, the *grootmeestresses* of St. Elizabeth's might have had good reason to limit the women under their tutelage to attending only the funerals of other Beguines, held safely within the walled enclosures of their own cemetery.

Research into whether the women who lived in small convents or private residences were more likely to take part in funeral rites or to have contact with dead bodies than were those who lived in the large *curtis begijnhoven* of the Southern Low Countries has yet to be undertaken. Certainly, the benefits of such an investigation would be immense, offering scholars crucial information about attitudes toward care of the dead and the Beguines.

### The Cellites

Another important, and woefully neglected, path to understanding the role of the Beguines in the care of the dead and dying is the connection between these women and another extra-regular group known as the Cellites.<sup>36</sup> Referred to in documents variously as *Cellebroeders* and *Celleswesteren*, *Mate-Wiven* and *Mate-Mannen* (Poor-Women and Poor-Men), and as *Lollaerts* (or murmurers, from the Dutch verb *lollen*), the Cellites appear to be almost indistinguishable from Beguines and Beghards, except that burial of the dead came to be their main occupation, particularly in the years following the Black Death. Appearing in the diocese of Liège in the thirteenth century and spreading rapidly after the appearance of the Black Plague in the fourteenth, the Cellites, like the Beguines and the Beghards, began as small bands of pious lay people dedicated to charitable works, but belonging to no established order, although the Cellites eventually came to adopt either the Third Rule of St. Francis or the Augustinian Rule. However, even after the Cellites joined regular orders, it remained almost impossible to detect significant differences between them and the Beguines and Beghards, and the documentary evidence suggests that the distinctions were often lost upon their contemporaries, who frequently used the names Beghard and Cellite interchangeably.<sup>37</sup>

The *Celleswesteren*, or Cellsisters, and the Beguines also appear to have had a great deal in common. While Joseph Laenen has asserted that the major difference between the Beguines and the Cellites was that the latter placed a greater emphasis on the care of the sick and the dead than did the former,<sup>38</sup> even this distinction seems to be questionable. For instance, Ernest McDonnell notes that the Cellsisters living in Amsterdam derived a portion of their income from spinning wool and sewing "in the manner of Beguines."<sup>39</sup> He also mentions that the Beguines of both the cities of Amsterdam and Leiden "were wont not only to nurse the sick, but also to prepare the corpses for burial."<sup>40</sup> Clearly some Beguines emphasized care of the sick and the dead over other activities, while some Cellsisters supported themselves by performing work associated with the textile trade.

Indeed, the differences between the two groups does not always seem to have been significant to the women who were a part of them. In Louvain, for example, the Cellsisters were founded by a woman who either was or had been a Beguine. According to fifteenth-century records, a woman named Elizabeth came to Louvain in 1438, wearing the habit of a Beguine. She soon attracted a number of women around her who occupied themselves by going to the houses of the ill in order to care for them.<sup>41</sup> The women were eventually given their own chapel, and they adopted the Augustinian Rule (as the Cellbrothers in this city had done). Whether these women continued to have any connection with the Beguines is unknown; however, the narrative does raise some interesting questions about the relationship between the Beguines and the Cellsisters, particularly around issues of the fluidity of the boundaries between them.

A more thorough investigation of the relationship between the Cellbrothers and the Cellsisters themselves should also be undertaken in order to determine if there were significant differences between the duties performed by male and female Cellites. For example, it is known that the Cellbrothers of Louvain were granted an exclusive right to bury the dead of that city in the late fifteenth century,<sup>42</sup> but whether the Cellsisters of this city also participated in this activity is not yet evident. The Louvain Cellbrothers administered a pest-house and cared for the insane, in addition to their duties to the dead, but again, whether or not their female counterparts fulfilled these functions as well seems to have escaped the concern of the few historians who have examined the Cellites. Since the Cellsisters there were supervised by the superior of the Cellbrothers,<sup>43</sup> and since they were uncloistered women

who went out to care for the sick in their own homes, it seems reasonable to assume that they might have played some role in helping the brothers care for those who died of their illnesses, perhaps by washing corpses or by making burial shrouds. The Cellites in general, and the Cellsisters in particular, have been sorely neglected by historians over the last forty years, and a reexamination of the archival evidence which concerns them is in order.

### The Hagiographic Connection

Another type of source that deserves reconsideration is the hagiographic literature concerning the Beguines. In the early thirteenth century, the Augustinian Canon and later Bishop of Acre, Jacques De Vitry, wrote a *Vita* of Marie d'Oignies, a pious young woman from the diocese of Liège, who is generally considered to have been the first Beguine. Soon his work was joined by those of the Dominican Thomas De Cantimpré, who penned a *Supplement to the Life of Marie d'Oignies*, as well as *Vitae* of two other women associated with the early Beguine movement: Christina Mirabilis and Lutgard of Aywières.

With the exception of the visionary literature produced by Beguine authors, these hagiographic works are probably the most frequently consulted sources in the arsenal of Beguine scholars and thus might seem to be an unlikely wellspring for important new information. However, since scholars have tended to examine these works in isolation from other types of documents in order either to explore the mystical and visionary practices of women involved in urban lay piety movements, or to illustrate the relationship between the Beguines and the Church hierarchy, there is great reason to hope that a re-examination of the hagiographic literature, combined with a study of Beguinage Rules, cartularies, wills and municipal documents, could offer many new insights into the connection between the underpinnings of Beguine spirituality and their care of the sick and the dead.

Some benefits that can be gleaned by comparing the ideals espoused in the *Vitae* of the early Beguines with other sources have recently been demonstrated in the work of art historian Joanna Ziegler. In her article "Reality as Imitation: The Role of Religious Imagery Among the Beguines of the Low Countries," she has provided strong evidence that the wording of several Beguinages' Rules closely follows the wording used by Jacques De Vitry to describe Marie d'Oignies's manner of dress, behavior and spirituality. While of course De Vitry's

main concern was to establish the sanctity of his subject by demonstrating her wonder-working abilities, Ziegler has suggested that many of the more mundane details of Marie's life were taken up by the composers of Beguinage Rules, who felt they provided an appropriate example upon which all such women could model their actions.<sup>44</sup>

Caring for the ill, the dying, and the dead is one prominent feature of Marie's life, and several chapters in her *Vita* describe her performing a variety of charitable functions on behalf of those in her community. As De Vitry describes it:

Therefore, from the abundant piety of her heart she busied herself as far as she was able in the external works of mercy. But in these works of mercy, she above all occupied herself in assisting the sick and being present at deathbeds for contrition or at interments where she very often received many things concerning the heavenly secrets through a revelation of God.<sup>45</sup>

To illustrate Marie's virtues, De Vitry then relates the story of how Marie once sat in attendance at the death bed of the gravely ill sister of an Augustinian canon. Seeing a horde of demons surround the dying woman, Marie forgot her customary reserve and immediately leapt to the woman's side, to the great surprise of the Augustinian Brothers who were also present.<sup>46</sup> Marie's fight with the unclean spirits did win the woman enough time to feel contrition for her sins and thus avoid damnation, while Marie continued to offer prayers for the woman's soul to decrease her time in purgatory.

The next four chapters of her *Vita* recount how Marie was present at the deathbed of a female religious and enjoyed a vision of the Virgin Mary fanning the dying woman;<sup>47</sup> how she attended the sickbed of a blessed old man and saw a multitude of angels rejoicing as he bypassed purgatory and ascended directly to paradise;<sup>48</sup> how she assisted and consoled the mother of one of the brothers at Oignies and caused herself physical harm in order to win the old woman relief from her pains;<sup>49</sup> and how people with broken limbs and other ailments came to her for a cure, particularly after unsuccessful encounters with medical doctors.<sup>50</sup>

I mention these stories, not to demonstrate Marie's impressive supernatural powers, but because I think that they reveal a great deal about her daily activities, and thus those of the Beguines in her circle. What emerges from these tales is the undeniable fact that going out into the community to care for the sick and the old, often in their own homes, was an important component of Marie's spirituality. The au-

thor of the *Vita* might dwell on Marie's miraculous cures and divine visions, but his words also make it clear that much of her healing was on a more practical level: Marie sat by the beds of the sick and the dying, she comforted them, she fed them, and she laid her hands on their diseased and wounded bodies.<sup>51</sup>

Christina Mirabilis, another woman associated with the early years of the Beguine movement, also ministered to a dying man on at least one occasion. According to Christina's biographer, Thomas De Cantimpré, when Louis, the Count of Looz, was on his death bed, he called Christina to his side and requested that everyone else leave the room. The Count then "lay fully prostrate before the feet of Christina"<sup>52</sup> and confessed his sins to her.

Thomas readily assures us that Louis did not do this for absolution, but only out of a desire for Christina's prayers. However, regardless of the Count's true intentions, the story does illustrate how a prominent person might be so moved by the piety of a woman associated with the Beguine movement, that hers was the only company he desired in his final moments, and that hers were the prayers he thought would be most effective in decreasing his purgatorial punishments. The citizens of Ghent, Tournai, Louvain, and Douai, who asked that the Beguines tend to them in their illnesses, pray for their souls, accompany their bodies to burial, or bury them in cemeteries belonging to a Beguinage, were probably moved by similar sentiments.

The hagiographic sources mentioned above also suggest that the Beguines continued their care of those around them, even after death, through their extremely effective prayers, and that their concern for alleviating suffering was directed toward those in purgatory as well as toward those on earth. De Vitry, for example, speaks frequently of Marie's compassion for suffering souls, noting that she "entirely overflowed with a profound loving kindness towards those who were being tortured in purgatory," and that "not content with her own prayers . . . she obtained many intercessions from the prayers and Masses of other people."<sup>53</sup>

The *Vitae* of other women associated with the Beguine movement also contain episodes that suggest that the fate of souls weighed heavily upon them. For example, Christina Mirabilis's strange life, in which she performed such acts as throwing herself into ovens where bread was baking, standing in freezing water up to her neck for days at a time, hanging herself on gibbets and entering tombs, was meant to serve as a living sermon on the torments of purgatory to her contem-

poraries and move them to contrition.<sup>54</sup> Another of these *muliers sanctae*, Lutgard of Aywières, went so far as to blackmail God, demanding that He either bestow forgiveness on the soul of one of her friends or erase her name from the book of life.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Lutgard's *Vita* contains so many tales either of her praying or mortifying her flesh on behalf of suffering souls that Jacques Le Goff has dubbed her purgatory's patron saint.<sup>56</sup>

Though the mystic and visionary Beguines mentioned above were of course extremely unusual, there is abundant proof that their more ordinary counterparts learned some lessons about what it meant to be a Beguine from their examples, or at the very least, were affected by many of the same spiritual currents. We have already seen how the composers of Beguine Rules were influenced by the *Vitae* of Marie and her circle, but there is other evidence as well. For example, Nicole Beriou has studied the sermons preached to a group of French Beguines during the second half of the thirteenth century. Her research indicates that mendicant preachers quite frequently exhorted these women to pray for souls in purgatory, who, they were told, would not be ungrateful for their efforts.<sup>57</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum also offers evidence that the sufferings of those in purgatory were of great concern to Beguines not blessed with mystical abilities. In one striking example, she tells of an early fourteenth-century Beguine who argued that laywomen could offer up their communion for the souls in purgatory and that this would be as effective as a priest offering a Mass.<sup>58</sup> It certainly appears that these women were encouraged from a variety of quarters to offer assistance to the dying and to the dead, both physically and spiritually, and that they took these encouragements to heart.

### Conclusion

A wide range of documents, many of them under-utilized, offer tremendous insights into the role which the Beguines played in the care of the ill, the dying, and the dead of their cities, and should be the subject of sustained research. A comparison of Beguine Rules from different locations would help us to understand whether or not charitable activity was proscribed in a particular city, or whether or not the types of activity performed by the Beguines varied with their geographic area or with the size of their Beguinages. An examination of the wills and testaments found in the cartularies of Beguine houses and in the municipal records of various cities would also be useful.

These documents can tell us much about whether or not the Beguines of a certain area took part in burials or funeral processions, or how often the inhabitants of a city remembered the women on their death-beds and requested their prayers. A reexamination of the hagiographic literature, studied in combination with Beguinage Rules and the texts of sermons preached to Beguines, can teach us a great deal about the types of spirituality which the founders of Beguine houses and those in the Church hierarchy wished to foster among the Beguines of their cities. In addition, a close reading of the language used in various documents can reveal important connections between the Beguines and other lay groups, such as the Cellites, whose employment as caretakers of the dead is well established.

Finally, one type of source that might offer scholars important information about the types of charitable activities with which the Beguines and other groups of pious lay women were associated is works of art. A careful examination of paintings, woodcuts, and sculptures which either depict Beguines, or were used by them in their own religious practices, might offer insights into the work of these women in a way that written documents do not. Some important research has recently begun in this area, with very promising results. For example, Joanna Ziegler's 1992 publication *Sculpture of Compassion: The Pietà and the Beguines in the Southern Low Countries c.1300–c.1600* seeks to understand why the Pietà became such an important and widespread devotional object among the Beguines. She suggests that this image had a particular resonance for them because it gave the women an appropriate model to imitate. Mary was not a cloistered nun, yet she was a holy woman, as the Beguines strove to be. She also showed compassion by ministering to the dead or dying body of another, as the Beguines often did.<sup>59</sup> An examination of other images favored by the Beguines might add additional insights into their devotional practices. The testaments of the citizens of Tournai record at least two instances of townspeople gifting images or sculptures to the Beguines, offering another type of source which could be employed in this study.<sup>60</sup>

Clearly the time is ripe for sustained research concerning the role which the Beguines played administering help to the dead and dying of their communities. It is evident from a variety of sources that many Beguines took an active part in providing service to those members of their society who needed it most. Caring for the sick and the dying, the Beguines continued their pastoral care of others even after death.

Preparing corpses for burial, accompanying the deceased to their final resting places, and offering many prayers for the souls of the dead in purgatory, the Beguines gave much needed help and hope to those around them. The frequency with which they appear in the wills of those who lived near them suggests that the service they gave was noticed and appreciated. Historians of the present day should be made more aware of the important ministration performed by the Beguines for their communities and undertake more studies which would enrich our image of these important women. While this essay represents only a very rough beginning, I have attempted to take a preliminary look at some of the sources available for such projects and have tried to raise some of the important questions which future research should address.

## Notes

- 1 For examples of feminist treatments of the Beguines see Brenda Bolton, "Muliers Sanctae," in *Sanctity and Secularity: The Church and the World. Studies in Church History* 10, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973):77-96, and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991). For literary treatments see Kurt Ruh, "Beginenmystik: Hadewijch, Mechthild von Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 106 (1977): 265-77, and Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). For social and economic treatments of the Beguines see Dayton Philips, *The Beguines in Medieval Strassburg: A Study of the Social Aspects of Beguine Life* (Palo Alto:Stanford University Press, 1941) as well as Lester Little's *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978) and David Herlihy's *Opera Muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). Finally, for information on the connection between the Beguines and art, see Joanna Ziegler's *Sculpture of Compassion: The Pietà and the Beguines in the Southern Low Countries, 1300-1600* (Brussels and Rome: Brepols, 1992), as well as her article "Reality as Imitation: The Role of Religious Imagery among the Beguines of the Low Countries" in *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experiences of Medieval Women Mystics* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993): 112-126. Of course, the standard English language work on the Beguines remains Ernest McDonnell's 1954 *magnum opus*, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, with a Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1954). More recently, important work on the Beguines has been done by Walter Simons, whose 1989 article "The Beguine Movement in the Southern Low Countries: A Reassessment," *Bulletin van het Belgisch Historisch Instituut te Rome*, 59 (1989): 63-105, is one of the most significant English language pieces written on the Beguines since McDonnell.
- 2 Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 47.
- 3 This seems to be true among contemporary historians as well. For example, David Herlihy's recent work, *Opera Muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe*, devotes much more attention to those exceptional women who attempted to practice medicine as paid professionals, including the possibly fictitious Trotula, than to those countless anonymous women whom he admits provided most of the medical care medieval people received. See Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria*, under the heading of "Medicine" and "Women as Healers."
- 4 Many sources have not yet been edited and those that have are generally available only in Middle French and Middle Dutch.

- 5 For a good introduction to the standards of care in medieval hospitals, see Roberta Gilchrist, "Christian Bodies and Souls: The Archeology of Life and Death in Later Medieval Hospitals," in *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 100–1600*. Ed. Steven Bassett (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992): 101–118.
- 6 See, for example, McDonnell under the heading "Beguines and Hospitals" and Joseph Laenen, *Kerkelijk en Godsdienstig Brabant vanaf het begin der IVe tot in de XVIe eeuw of Voorgeschiedenis van het Aartsbisdom Mechelen* (S'Hertogenbosch: G. Mosmans Zoon, 1935): II, 76–77.
- 7 In his visitation of the Beguinage of Saint Elizabeth in Ghent, the Bishop of Tournai praised the members for being burdensome to no one despite their poverty and for giving to the poor what little they had. The Bishop also commented on the role that these pious women played as educators of young girls, whose parents believed the influence of the Beguines would well prepare their daughters for a life either in the convent or in the world. See Jean Béthune, *Cartulaire du béguinage de Sainte Elisabeth à Gand* (Bruges: Zuttere, 1883). 74–76.
- 8 Throughout his book, McDonnell seems to suggest that caring for the sick and dying may have been more common for the Beguines of the Northern Netherlands and the Rhineland than among those of the Southern Low Countries. A systematic comparison of the Rules of Beguine houses from several different geographic regions would be an important first step in clarifying these types of differences.
- 9 "insghelycx ne gheen huusen bewaren oft siecken dienen ende bewaren, die gheen vrouwe ten huuse en behoort." Bethune, *Cartulaire*, 20.
- 10 Ziegler, *Sculpture*, 102.
- 11 Ziegler, *Sculpture*, 102.
- 12 Ziegler, *Sculpture*, 91.
- 13 Béthune, *Cartulaire*, 75. The original reads: "Quando vero aliquam mori contigit, conventus singuli singillatim funus cum devotis orationibus et suffragiis visitabant, ac quelibet pro alia mortua devota suffragia abstinentie, vigilarum, psalmorum et orationum, ut tenebatur persolvbat."
- 14 The testaments of Beguines from the city of Tournai suggest that Beguines there may have also played a special role in the funerals of their Beguine sisters. In at least two cases these women leave money to other Beguines who are to read the Psalter while attending the testators' corpses. For example, the will of Sainte Glachons, dated 1316, leaves money "ij béguiunes qui liront le Sautier de David entour men cors." The testament of Bietris Fouke gives fifteen deniers to each of the twenty Beguines who will read the Psalter at her funeral. See the testaments of Sainte Glachons, and Bietris Fouke in the *Annales de la Société Historique et Archéologique de Tournai*, 15 vols. (Tournai: H. & L. Casterman, 1897): II, 42 and 43–44, respectively.

- 15 Testament of Pierre des Campiaux and Marie de Bary, *Annales de la Société Historique et Archéologique de Tournai*, vol. II, 168–69. The original reads: “Item, volons et ordonnons que nous soyons, après nos trespass, portés en terre par les demiselles demorans emprès S. Caterine.” St. Catherine’s was the name of one of Tournai’s Beguinages.
- 16 Testament of Maigne Wallequine, 1445, in *Annales de la Société Historique et Archéologique de Tournai*, II, 15, n. 1. The original reads: “A viii demiselles du Béghuinage pour leur sallaire d’avoir porté le corps d’icelle defuncte en terre, xx s.”
- 17 Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Mort d’une Hérésie: l’Église et les clercs face aux béguines et aux bégards du Rhin supérieur du xive au xve siècle* (Paris and New York: Mouton, 1978): 46–48.
- 18 Schmitt, 46.
- 19 Schmitt, 46.
- 20 McDonnell, for example, cites the satirical work *The Roman de la Rose*, by Jean le Meung, in which a Beguine appears under the name “Constrained Abstinence” along with other works in which these women were accused of using their outward piety as a cover for illicit sexual behavior. See his *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, 473, and under the heading “Beguines, ridicule of.”
- 21 Mandement de Marquard, bishop of Constance, 28 December, 1405. Cited in Schmitt, 98 and 228 n. 12.
- 22 Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 188–190.
- 23 Geiler von Kaysenberg, *Postill über die fyter Evangelia*. III folio 86. Cited in Schmitt, 46 and 220, n. 25.
- 24 “durant sa maladie, il ne voulut avoir auprès de lui aucune béguine, ni aucune personne de plus grande piété,” *Zimmerische Chronik*, I (Tübingen: 1881): 579–580. Cited in Schmitt, 150 and 238 n. 14.
- 25 See testaments from July 1317 and 20 April 1338 in the *Archives Municipales Dowaai*, 862. Cited in Walter Simons, “Begijnen en begarden in het middeleeuwse Dowaai,” *De Franse Nederlanden/Les Pay-Bas Français* 17 (1992): 191 and 196, n. 43.
- 26 Simons, “Begijnen en begarden in het middeleeuwse Dowaai,” 191–92.
- 27 Ziegler, “Reality as Imitation,” 124.
- 28 For an excellent account of the differences between the *curtis*-Beguinages and the smaller convent-type Beguinages, see Ziegler’s article “The *Curtis* Beguinages in the Southern Low Countries and Art Patronage: Interpretation and Historiography,” *Bulletin van het Belgisch Historisch Instituut te Rome* (1987): 31–70.

- 29 See the wills of Jehan de Havraincourt, 1400; Miqueil de Flamengh, 1400; Catherine Castegniere, 1432; Jeanne Bourgoise, 1434; and Marguerite Fromage, 1492, in the *Annales de la Société Historique et Archéologique de Tournai*, II, 118–19; 124; 214; 217 and 337, respectively.
- 30 The Cartulary of St. Elizabeth's, an act of 1242, which authorized the establishment of a cemetery in the Beguinage, states, "nulla persona manens extra mansum illum Beghinarum possit in eodem cimiterio sepeliri." Béthune, *Cartulaire*, 6.
- 31 For just a few examples of these types of testaments, see the will of Alise van Lede and Gertrude van den Kerchove, who left twenty solidi to the Beguines' Holy Ghost Table in 1298, in return for a yearly observance of their deaths and the deaths of their parents: Béthune, *Cartulaire*, 48–49. Or see the 1280 testament of a certain Hymmasota, who left ten solidi to the Beguinage's infirmary in return for an anniversary being established for her brother's death: Béthune, *Cartulaire*, 34.
- 32 The original reads: "Ende deze drie jaerghetiden esmen sculdech eewelike te doene in der manieren die hier naer ghescreven staet: dat es te verstane dat eene beghine es sculdech te gane int hof ende onder de zieke omme bedinghe, eende teeschene ven elker beghinen eenen miserere mei Deus." Foundation made by Bueckel van Craeyenwerfe, 1311, in Béthune, *Cartulaire*, 64–65.
- 33 See, for example, the testament of Hugheman van Striene, 1306, and that of Eustache van Vinderote, 1311. Béthune, *Cartulaire*, 57–58 and 64, respectively.
- 34 Donation of Willem de Juede, 1304. Béthune, *Cartulaire*, 34.
- 35 Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Knopf, 1981): 69–70. In particular, Ariès mentions the 1231 Council of Rouen's prohibiting dancing in the cemetery and a record of prostitutes conducting business at the cemetery of the Saints-Innocents in the late twelfth century.
- 36 The etymology of the term Cellite has fostered almost as much controversy as that of the name Beguine. Some historians have asserted that the word *cella* referred to the grave, suggesting the role of the Cellites in burying the dead; others have claimed that it refers to an ordinary cellar and still others have maintained that it refers to a hermit's cell. For a good summary of the various theories and their supporters, see McDonnell's short chapter on the Cellites in *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, 266–269.
- 37 In an act from the cartulary of the Hospice of St. Gertrude in Brussels, dated 1364, one reads "die Cellebroeders die men heet breetbogarde." A fourteenth-century inscription in the *Annals of Flanders* notes that "In Flandria se illis sociabat sectae quaedem novae quae Lollardi, Cellani et Beggardi vocantur." Cited in Alexandre Henne and Alphonse Wauters, *Histoire de la Ville de Bruxelles*, 3 vols. (Bruxelles: Editions Libro-sciences, 1968) III, 470, n. 1, as well as in McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, 267, n. 7.

- 38 Laenen, *Geschiedenis van Mechelen*, 334–51, cited in Walter Marx, *The History of Charity in Medieval Louvain* (Yonkers NY: Author's publication, 1936): 68.
- 39 McDonnell, 267 n. 7.
- 40 McDonnell, 266 n. 1. He cites L.J.M. Philippen's *magnum opus*, *De Begijnhoven, Oorsprong, Geschiedenis Inrichtig*, as his source for this information, but unfortunately, I have not been able to secure a copy.
- 41 Joseph Laenen, *Kerkelijk en Godsdienstig Brabant vanaf het begin der IVE tot in de XVIe eeuw of Voorgeschiedenis van het Aartsbisdom Mechelen* (see above, n. 6), II: 84, and Marx, *The History of Charity in Medieval Louvain*, 71–72.
- 42 Marx, 71. The Cellbrothers were given a stipend of four solidi per corpse for this service, with the understanding that they would bury the corpses of the poorest inhabitants of Louvain without compensation.
- 43 Marx, 70–71.
- 44 Joanna Ziegler, "Reality as Imitation: The Role of Religious Imagery Among the Beguines of the Low Countries," 118–119.
- 45 Jacques DeVitry. *The Life of Marie d'Oignies*, second edition, tr. Margot King (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1989): 66. Italics mine.
- 46 DeVitry, *The Life of Marie d'Oignies*, 66.
- 47 DeVitry, 68–69.
- 48 DeVitry, 69–70.
- 49 DeVitry, 70.
- 50 DeVitry, 70–71.
- 51 In his account of ill and injured people coming to Marie, De Vitry mentions that some were cured by touching her or by having her touch them by a laying on of hands (70–71).
- 52 Thomas De Cantimpré. *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, tr. Margot King (Toronto: Peregrina Press, 1986): 33.
- 53 De Vitry, 68.
- 54 God actually takes Christina to Paradise and gives her the choice of remaining with Him or going back to earth in order to suffer and thus deliver souls from purgatory and to convert the living, accumulating even greater merit. She, of course, chooses the latter. Thomas De Cantimpré, 13–14.
- 55 Thomas De Cantimpré. *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, tr. Margot King (Toronto: Peregrina Press, 1987): 90.
- 56 Jacques LeGoff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 1984): 324.

- 57 Beriou's findings are summarized in Le Goff, 318-319.
- 58 Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987): 234.
- 59 Ziegler, *Sculpture*, 146-47 and 169-172.
- 60 The Testament of Katherine le Flamenghe, dated 1386, leaves the Beguines two candles and "une ymage de Nostre Dame" while that of Simon Thiébault, 1430, gives them a crucifix, a candle and a devotional book on Christ's Passion: *Annales de la Société Historique et Archéologique de Tournai*, II, 106 and 211, respectively.