Religions **2012**, *3*, 646–661; doi:10.3390/rel3030646

OPEN ACCESS

religions

ISSN 2077-1444

www.mdpi.com/journal/religions

Article

Penitence, Confession, and the Power of Submission in Late Medieval Women's Religious Communities

Rabia Gregory

Department of Religious Studies, University of Missouri, 221 Arts & Science Building, Columbia, MO 65211, USA; E-Mail: gregoryra@missouri.edu

Received: 7 July 2012; in revised form: 23 July 2012 / Accepted: 25 July 2012 / Published: 6 August 2012

Abstract: This article argues that depictions of penance and confession in late medieval "Sisterbooks," which were written by women religious for communal use, show that medieval women understood religious authority to be enhanced through submission and service to community members. These collections of the lives and reminiscences of deceased sisters and father confessors construct idealized piety and religious authority through public acts of obedience and submission which built a reputation for sanctity, not just for the individual penitent, but for her entire community. Thus in the Sisterbooks, obedience to a confessor or spiritual director for both male and female penitents shifts the locus of spiritual authority from the confessor to the penitent and her community through communal observation and evaluation. These medieval Christian women understood the relationships between confessors and confessants as one which conferred power and authority to the penitent, complicating Foucault's influential claim that the sacrament of confession granted all power to the confessor who heard sins in secret. In the Sisterbooks, interactions between women religious and their confessors are depicted as relational, complex, and constantly in flux.

Keywords: women; gender; authority; leadership; power; religion/religious; confession; Medieval Convents; Sisterbooks; women authors; Medieval Christianity

1. Confession and the Construction of Authority

The private revelation of sin through confession and subsequent public show of pious remorse through acts of penance are staple scenes in late medieval holy women's lives. Most scholarship on

medieval women's participation in confession has focused on the binary between confessor and penitent, exploring a disparity in power presumed to accompany submitting entirely to the will of another by revealing personal secrets. These examinations of medieval confession have depended on a body of instructional literature for both confessors and penitents known as the penitentials, and on accounts of ascetic penance in saints' lives. Medieval penitentials outlined sins, including explicit catalogues of sexual acts and their punishments, as well as proper comportment during confession. Many of these guides developed following the Fourth Lateran Council's 1215 decree requiring annual confession for all Christians. These medieval accounts of idealized confession closely match Foucault's presentation of post-Tridentine sacramental confession in *The History of Sexuality* as the powerless penitent's secret revelation of sexual shame [1,2]. Following Foucault, and focusing on prescriptive literature like the penitentials, historians of medieval Christianity consequently often assume that penance and confession were gendered sacraments that authorized the (silent, listening) male confessor while feminizing and disempowering the (speaking) submissive penitent in an exchange that, while not always sexual, was sexualized. Even feminist historians who analyze these hagiographies and penitentials as idealized male-authored narratives of medieval women's experiences of confession fall into Foucaldian readings when discussing the gendering of spiritual authority [3–5].

This article reconsiders the implications of secrecy, obedience, and power for late medieval women and their confessors by re-examining confession as it was depicted by the women who compiled collections now known as Sisterbooks. The Sisterbooks were compiled in Dutch, German, and Latin by members of women's religious communities to preserve memories of the struggles and spiritual achievements of deceased sisters. Many also include entries for community confessors and chaplains, which are a rare example of female-authored biographies for medieval men. In the Sisterbooks, encounters between female penitents and their spiritual fathers were subtle and sometimes contradictory exchanges of authority that took place in private, but were publicly validated by communities. Because confessors lived within and among close communities, their reputations developed over decades, through relationships with each of the women in their care. These entries describe sacramental confession, as well as informal confession of sins and faults to the members of religious communities, as a daily feature of religious life. Some entries show women criticizing confessors. Others describe confessors pushing sisters past a spiritual obstacle to a new level of virtue by requiring acts of penance which were extremely difficult or distasteful. Perceived failures to respect and support women religious [muleries religiosae] did, however, meet resistance, even when the authors of the Sisterbooks sided with deceased confessors over complaining sisters. Unlike contemporary male-authored accounts of confession, the Sisterbooks construct both male and female spiritual authority through acts of submission by situating the locus of power with the penitent, rather than the confessor. Entries depicting acts of submissive self abasement emphasized the authority and exemplarity of the penitent—whether male or female. The authority of confessors, in turn, was dependent not on the hierarchical power of the office itself, but on whether he willingly prioritized the spiritual progress of the women in his care over his own personal desires.

The Sisterbooks' accounts of relationships between confessors and women's communities are characterized by shifts in authority from confessor to penitent. As Foucault posited, father-confessors, by assigning penance, absolving sin, and exacting submissive obedience, assumed a public role of authority. But submitting to a confessor earned female penitents a reputation for piety and virtue and

granted respect and authority over others within their own community. And, as women recorded these events for communal use, they took control over their own pious narratives, judging and evaluating not just their sisters but also their confessors. Unlike penitentials, confession manuals, and legal proceedings, the Sisterbooks were interested in evaluating the piety of penitents and inspiring heartfelt penance and submission from members of a community. Thus the confessed sin itself was less important than the public performance of submission and penance, which initiated community participation in evaluating the piety of *both* confessor and penitent.

Though they are, as Gertrud Lewis rightly stresses, by, for, and about women, the Sisterbooks were also about, read by, and sometimes edited by men engaged in reforming women's communities. Thus information about confessors within the Sisterbooks must be understood as commentary on that larger communal project of group salvation. Consequently, the interactions between women and their confessors I shall discuss in this essay were, though gendered, not simply hierarchical. In the Sisterbooks, confession and penance were only one small parts of a network of relationships that established authority within women's convents. Relationships between confessor and penitent, and between confessor and community, unfolded within external hierarchies marked by rank and gender, which were secondary to spiritual hierarchies framed by submission and abstention. Confession in medieval convents, much like confession outside the cloister, was an improvised sort of public theater that positioned the clerical confessor in a central location, visibly dispensing grace to those who approached his seat [4]. The literature on this aspect of late medieval piety, especially for women religious, is abundant [6,7]. In *Related Lives*, a study of confessor-confessant collaborations in late medieval and Early Modern Spain, historian Jodi Bilinkoff described relationships between confessors and penitents as "perhaps the only culturally sanctioned possibility—for a man and woman to have a deep, mutually satisfying relationship outside marriage" [8]. These relationships were intense, intimate, and endured for decades, characteristics shared with relationship between confessors and nuns described in the Sisterbooks. As the Sisterbooks remind us, the private relationship between confessor and penitent was also observed, responded to, understood, and eventually narrated, by those with whom they lived.

2. The Sisterbooks as Records of Women's Religious Authority

Sisterbooks are edifying theological histories of women's religious communities consisting of biographical entries chronicling the spiritual conversions and virtues of deceased sisters in ways which both inspired imitation from a new generation and recorded the grace and works of God within a community. Only recently identified as a distinct genre, Sisterbooks have been described as a new style of religious biography, distinct from hagiography but related to it. Wybren Scheepsma describes Sisterbooks originating in the circles of the *Devotio Moderna* as "good points [*goede punten*]," positive characteristics sisters noticed about each other or reported about themselves, which were later collected into a hagiographic framework, while Sigfried Ringler has posited that the German-language Sisterbooks associated with the Observant Reform movement should be viewed as "grace lives [gnaden-viten]" [9,10]. As I have argued elsewhere, these anecdotes, including accounts of exchanges between confessors and confessants, acted as quasi-miracles that simultaneously inspired admiration and imitation from the reading audience [11]. They also maintained a sense of trans-generational

sisterhood between living and dead members of a community. My intention here is to read the Sisterbooks not as historical evidence of how confession and penance occurred in late medieval convents, but instead as literary accounts of how medieval women constructed spiritual authority through confession and penance.

The surviving manuscripts from which the editions I cite are edited are generally larger codices in double-columns, and, as Anne Winston-Allen has posited, were possibly used for communal reform. Most extant copies date to the fifteenth- and sixteenth centuries, compiled and recopied long after the deaths of their subjects [12–17]. Following Scheepsma's usage, I refer to the lives of sisters and confessors compiled into Sisterbooks as *Lives,* in contrast to the lives of canonized saints, which I describe as hagiographies. I have used Sisterbooks, rather than following Gertrud Lewis' suggestion that fifteenth-century Dutch books should be called "books of Sisters" while fourteenth-century German books should be called "Sisterbooks" or "Sister-books" to clarify provenance. In my view, both the Dutch and the German books belong to the same genre of writing. These stories should be viewed, above all, as having been recognized as useful to communities over several generations. In my view, what unifies these collections of holy lives from distinct religious and linguistic sites is not their language or their format, but their very specific origin in women's communities. Written *by* women for use within the communities they chronicled, the Sisterbooks are both histories of a community's relationship with God and testimony to the links between the living and the dead which represent a bond of sisters helping one another achieve salvation *as a community* [18–21].

The Sisterbooks offer an understanding of spiritual authority based on relinquishing personal desire and physical comfort to serve the community which applied to both men and women. Both male and female religious gained respect and authority through submission and penitential practice, which allowed medieval women to gain authority over their male confessors. My reading of relationships between father-confessors and women's religious communities will demonstrate how public and communal aspects of medieval confession granted women religious authority. In doing so, I shall also reassess the implications of Foucault's assertions about private confession and public punishment through the dynamic relationships presented in medieval Sisterbooks. Because the Sisterbooks were written by women for use by communities of women, they offer a very different aspect of the medieval relationship between confessor, penitent, and community than do hethe confessor's manuals and trial records for inquisition or canonization which have informed other models of power dynamics in confession.

As Amy Leonard points out, refusal to accept the confessor assigned to their community caused censure and criticism for several fourteenth century German women's communities [22]. Sisterbook authors rarely voiced criticism of father confessors directly, but did record dissenting voices. This suggests that although women's communities had fewer opportunities to select, censure, or replace unsatisfactory confessors than did independent women religious, sisters did protest when a confessor was unsuitable. Accounts of convent confessors were necessarily ambiguous, simultaneously praising the virtues of the men and women they chronicle and publicizing the complex nuances of authority and obedience in confessorial relationships. Several longer *Lives* of confessors survive in addition to the brief entries in Sisterbooks. From the south German Dominican context, two longer biographies survive for the confessors Henry Suso and Freidrich Sunder. In addition, a significant amount of information survives about exists on male confessors and pastoral care in the *Devotio Moderna*. Of

these more documented confessors, Iohan Brinckerinck and Hendrik Herp have been particularly influential in reconstructing the relationships between confessors and women's communities. However, the written narratives of these men's lives have often been characterized as transferring qualities of female piety onto male subjects—Herp, Sunder, and Suso weep, wed Christ, practice harsh asceticism, and are blessed with numerous visions [10,23–26]. But, as their female biographers stress, these men received revelations within the context of their collaborations with women's communities, and earned respect because they submitted to penance and served tirelessly the women in their care. Confessors had authority as males, clerics, and performers of the sacraments, but in the *Lives* written about them by the women in their care, confessors were often depicted as spiritually exemplary authorities when they wept for their sins, taking up the seemingly subordinate role of penitent. Rather than suggesting that convent authors feminized their confessors, these narratives reveal a model for religious authority that prioritized proximity to God, grace and pious behavior over gender or the sacraments of holy orders.

Within medieval Germany and the Low Countries, a single confessor might serve the needs of several communities, both male and female, and his involvement with the women might be highly curtailed by enclosure practices. For enclosed communities, confessors were allowed entrance only in emergencies. Communication took place primarily through confession windows, typically placed near the cloister church, limiting women's opportunities to build meaningful relationships with their confessor [20,22,27]. Without services of a father-confessor, women's communities could not operate. Women needed the services of these confessors to fulfill their religious vocations but had to avoid contact with men to maintain their own reputations. Consequently, the Sisterbooks struggle to balance praise for pastoral care with the necessary modest distancing expected of good confessors.

An entry from the Weiler Sisterbook characterizes how female authors expressed concerns about male religious upon whom they depended for pastoral care. The author mentions a Franciscan whose interest in the convent was sparked by observing a gathering of whitest doves in the field outside the convent wall. He also heard a voice explaining that the doves were "a sign of the pure maidens who serve God in this cloister at Weiler [bezichet die reynen megde, dy got da dinen in dem kloster zu Weyler]" [15]. After hearing this voice and seeing the birds, the Franciscan began kneeling to pray in the direction of Weiler as a sign of his devotion. This passage simultaneously promotes Weiler's reputation, which has been recognized both by heaven and by local clerics and rebukes the Franciscan, who previously had not thought highly of the women of Weiler.

Interpreting these exchanges requires a close and careful reading of the sources. Although the Sisterbooks offer a rare example of medieval women writing about men, these are not candid descriptions of events. Instead, they preserved the history of God's work within a specific community and provided exemplary models for future generations [18]. Even moments of strife are often cast in the language of piety and virtue, subtly alluding to female resistance to inadequate confessors, but also repeatedly asserting that public penance and the practice of confession invited women religious to evaluate both their confessors' and their sisters' piety. Authors from communities in both Germany and the Low Countries used the same techniques to describe how some sisters tried to correct and reprimand their own confessors. Some entries hint that women subverted power hierarchies by reprimanding or reporting an inadequate confessor. Others draw attention to the former inadequacies of an improved confessor by describing the moment of renewed vocation. Through the intimacy of

confession and the public spectacle of penance, female authors memorialized the struggles of their sisters as well as their confessors.

3. The Power of Submission in Medieval Penance

Two very different types of relationships between confessors and the women in their care have been the focus of recent investigations of gender and power: productive relationships between confessors and the female saints they promoted, and destructive exploitative relationships, especially those preserved in inquisitorial trial documents [6–8,28]. These relationships have been characterized alternately as potentially obstructive and abusive or mutually rewarding and productive, leading to decades of collaboration. Even productive relationships leading to canonization have been read as confessorial abuse of penitent women, as is in Ulrike Wiethaus's examination of St Elizabeth of Thuringia [29]. As Bilinkoff, Coakley, and others have demonstrated, confessors regularly collaborated with, supported, and promoted the women in their spiritual care [7]. Yet not all relationships between confessors and female penitents were productive collaborations between kindred spirits. Stephen Haliczer's investigation of sexual assault and impropriety in early modern confession confirms that sexual exploitation of female penitents by confessor were not just the fantasies of polemical Protestants [6].

Each of these studies engages Foucault's understanding of confession as a "ritual discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement" and recognized the silent role of confessor as "not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile" [30]. Though Karma Lochrie and other medievalists challenged this model in the 1990s, Foucault's presentation of confession as a binary relationship between one powerful and one powerless person remains largely unquestioned [1,31,32]. Though not a medievalist, post colonial theorist and anthropologist of religion Talal Asad, corrected Foucault's reading of confession, arguing penitential asceticism and monastic rules both make central the role confession. According to Asad, "the Benedictine monk's truthful self was the continuous work of a structured community" [33]. Asad recognizes that the powerful confessor becomes powerless when voicing his own sins, but considers this exchange only for all-male communal settings, where confessor and confessant can easily switch roles. The Sisterbooks, which are descriptive rather than prescriptive, confirm Asad's observations about torture, asceticism, community, and confession as a locus for social fluidity, but introduce two other factors: the inability of the female penitent to act as confessor, and the opportunity for groups of women to examine and correct the behavior of one another, as well as their confessors.

Central to both Foucault and Asad's understanding of confession is the private and intimate exchange between confessor and penitent. In the Sisterbooks, however, the initially private moment of confessing a secret sin sets into action an intentionally public series of events centered on the performance of penance. Thus confession immediately becomes public and communal. As Michel De Certeau suggests, secrecy is a "play between actors [that] circumscribes the terrain of strategic relations [binding] together those who hunt for it, keep it, or reveal it. It is the center of the spider web spun around it by lovers, traitors, jealous protagonists, pretenders, or exhibitionists." Though De Certeau was writing of mystics, his observation applies just as effectively to the curious and concerned

sisters within medieval religious communities [34]. The secret cause of remorse—a sin or personal fault—was like the empty space in the center of a spider web, outlined by network of self-discipline, prayer, and conversation. Connections between secret, sin, confession, penance, and public exposure are not always confined to the sacrament of confession itself, or to the binary relationship between confessor and penitent. In women's religious communities, more frequent confession and more extreme penance exacerbated these tendencies—the penitent was never anonymous, the penance rarely private.

4. The System of Confession, Penance, and Spiritual Authority in the Sisterbooks

In accounts of submission to a confessor in the *Life* of a pious sister, convent authors both promoted the virtue of obedience within communities and preserved valuable examples of how submission and penance made confessors more likely to grant a sister's requests. In contrast, entries recording the lives and accomplishments of father-confessors used scenes of hearing confession and issuing penance to evaluate a confessor's service to the community, and scenes of a confessor's own penitence to demonstrate his spiritual authority and piety. In this way, the authors of the Sisterbooks gained interpretive authority over the male religious entrusted with their spiritual care. I offer here two representative examples of how submission and publicly acknowledged penitential practices destabilized hierarchies of gender and power. In the first, a Dominican nun gains permission from her confessor to perform ascetic practices so austere they may result in her death. In the second, a Dominican confessor is praised for his dual role as penitent and enforcer of penance. In each case, the act of relinquishing personal desire and physical comfort to a confessor earned the penitent communal respect and religious authority.

Sister Jützi of Schultasin, an extremely pious and sickly Sister at Engelthal in Töss, frequently meditated on Christ's wounds and pain. The Sisterbook records that she became concerned that she would be guilty of suicide if she died as a result of her contemplative practices and asked her confessor, a Brother Hugo,[1] if death through devotional practice is suicide, and thus a sin, and he assures Jützi that this would not be a problem, encouraging her to "Die, just die! [sterb, so sterb]" [17]. With these words, Hugo permitted Jützi to risk death through devotion and offers to vouch for her in the afterlife if necessary. Hugo's encouragement to "Die, just die," has suggested to some modern readers a dangerous lack of consideration for Jützi's situation and a lack of concern for the physical and spiritual safety of his spiritual daughter.[2] Both Ehrenschwendtner and Lewis have argued that this is a mystical exchange based on mutual trust and respect between Jützi and Hugo, rather than a pedagogic example of penitential behavior and confessor-confessant relations [18,27]. But the relationship between Jüzi and Hugo is not simply one of trust and obedience, nor is the purpose of this exchange to record visions and miracles. Instead, the medieval author's focus is Jützi's humble submission of her case and her will. When Jützi asks Hugo for permission to risk suicide-by-penance, she is empowered. Hugo's acquiescence authorizes and legitimizes Jützi's devotional practice, but it is

---

[1] Hugo was not the community's designated confessor. He may have been either Brother Hugo von Staufen, a Provincial, prior, or Hugo von Vaucemain, General of the Dominican Order [17].

[2] Though I have offered my own translation and paraphrase, this passage is also partially translated by Gertrude [18].

Jütz's submission, rather than her extreme and publicly visible behavior that both Hugo and the sisters of Töss associate with sanctity.

A more complicated relationship between submission, penance, and authority is evident in a brief memorial entry for Brother Walther, who served as confessor to the Dominican convent of Gotteszell, sometimes known as Kirchberg, in Constance. The entry includes testimony about Walther from within the women's community, as well as from other male Dominicans. One, Berchtholt of Horbe, averred that Walther "never punished any person in confession [but that] they improved from it."[3] Though praised as a skillful and attentive confessor, Walther's spiritual authority was embellished by reports of his submission to harsh penance. Walther had "fasted for more than 30 years consistently both summer and winter, and he ate neither fat nor meat and he wore a heavy iron [chain] so that he was greatly wounded. He took greatly immoderate disciplines daily. For nearly 30 years his bed was an unkempt straw pallet... [he] wept so greatly that he did not want to stay among people, and he was still young when he came to us."[4] Walther's asceticism is explicitly modeled after St Dominic's, ["Er nach volget unserm grossen heiligen vater Dominicus dar an..."] and, like Dominic, Walther's private devotional practices become the public proof of his extraordinary piety [16]. He wept so excessively during confession that his own confessor, Brother Berchtolt of Messekirch, had to take him out into the woods to hear confession. Walther is, in his role as confessor, a strict and harsh exacter of penance, but his ascetic practices drew attention to his other, more private role as a sinner and confessing penitent. His personal spiritual life, private faults, and even the intimate details of his body—how he slept, what he wore, what he did or did not eat—were documented as testimony piety and virtue.

These brief glimpses into fourteenth-century convents show how perceptions of penitential practice reinforced perceptions of piety in close-knit religious communities. For the women who would read these *Lives,* Jütz Schulthasin and Walther of Gotteszell provided inspirational examples of submission and contrition. In both lives, the protagonist-penitent holds more spiritual authority than the confessor, whether the penitent is male or female. Walther's spiritual authority as a confessor and community servant derives primarily from his penitential practices, rather than an acknowledgment of his hierarchical authority as confessor and priest. Hugo, Walther, and Berchtold assisted holy sisters to progress further in virtue through self-abasement when they listened to confession—they were facilitators at most. But when Jütz and Walther submitted to penance, they were acquiescing not just to the command of a confessor, but to observation and evaluation by other members of the community.

---

[3] Das sprach bruder Perchtholt von Horbe, das er nie kein mensch straffet in der peicht, es pessert sich da von [16].

[4] Si het wir einen Caplan der hiess bruder Walther, der was auss genomen an tugenden und an recht heiligem leben. Sein leben was als recht streng, das man es wol mag geleichen den heiligen altvern hie vor in den welden. Er vastet mer denn dreissig jar stetiklichen sumer und winter, und das er nie smalcz noch fleisches enpaiss, und trug an ein eisnein das er gar ser verserte was. Unmessig gross disiplin nam er teglich. Da wart sein strosack in dreissig jaren nie ainest uber gekert. Bruder Berchtolt von messekirch was sein peichtiger, und wenn er wolt gancze peicht tun, so must er mit im in den walt gen, als unmesslich weinet er, das er pei den leuten nicht mocht bleiben, und was er doch junck, da er zu uns kom. Sein gewant was hert und demutig. Wie er altag vastet, da wolt er nicht wann ein gesoten essen essen, im ward auch in den jaren allen nicht wann zwen pfening umb fisch geben. Sein gepet was stet und gar gross, manigvaltig und andechtig und recht inhiczig und inprunstig von groser minn, die er het zu got. Er nach volget unserm grossen heiligen vater sant Dominicus dar an, das er all nacht drei stunt auf sunt, und petet.

Penance not only absolved the confessant's sin, it was the center of a relational network that allowed women as a community to evaluate, chastise, and correct their sisters, their confessors, and future generations.

5. Forced into Piety

The shifting locus of power in relationships between confessors and confessants is reaffirmed in episodes involving father-confessors within the circle of the *Devotio Moderna* helping their confessants relinquish affection to children and animals. Unlike the two examples from German Dominican Sisterbooks I discussed above, which focused on punishing and reforming the body, the incidents I now turn to were intended to encourage women to relinquish ties of love and friendship that interfered with their spiritual progress or distracted a recent convert from devotion to God. In the first, Sister Nyese van Mekeren is chastised for petting a cat; in the second, Sister Jutte Ahaus drowns her pet dogs at the behest of her confessor. In both anecdotes, confessors are instrumental in helping sisters break their ties to the world; thus, though they advocate what we now would see as cruelty to animals, the Sisterbook authors view these confessors are acting with good intent. Both episodes also fit into a broader pattern in lives from the *Devotio Moderna* of emphasizing the need for perfect obedience as a first step towards spiritual progress, even when obeying contradicts strictures to love, protect, and be kind to the helpless. Breaking away from the world, resisting the impulse to offer kindness to others, and submitting entirely to a confessor are recurring themes in other entries from the Dutch Sisterbooks, and in their medieval context these passages are meant to show praiseworthy religious commitment. Neither Sisterbook author intended to depict individual sisters and their confessors as cruel or hard-hearted. Instead, these passages emphasize the importance of obedience and submission and the need for communal help to tear the self away from the comforts of the secular world and focus entirely on religious devotion. Emotional anguish over these steps towards perfect conversion were common. For instance, the beautiful widow Elsebeth Hasenbroek's conversion began with the death of her husband, daughters, and pet, and her perfect submission of will her confessor Iohan Brinckerink, while Sister Vlent Siberts, Schwester (d. 5/21/484) struggled with cutting off her beautiful hair [12,14]. But these scenes also exemplify the exchanges of power that I have argued take place in relationships between confessors and women religious.

Nyese van Mekeren from Master Geert's House, the first gathering of Sisters of the Common Life in Deventer, was a kind natured woman who paused on her way to confession to pet a cat, then, confessed this as a failure to break her attachment to the material world. Nyese's confessor, who was not generally strict, wanted to "mortify her a little bit, [veroetmoedigen]" and ordered Nyese to take her next meal in the kitchen, with the cats. She was to "crawl to the base of the kitchen counter, where the cat usually ate, and sit and eat there for one meal. And she should also set her dish by the cat's dish, and if the cat came over and wanted to eat out of her dish, she should not forbid this." Nyese humbly obeyed, crawling on and eating off of the floor [13].[5] The author of this Sisterbook uses this episode as

[5] Ende want oer bichter vry tot her was, soe wolde hi sie wat veroetmodigen, ende hiete oer doen, dat sij solde crupen onder die richtebanck, daer die katte oer stede hadde te eten; ende daer solde si alsoe ene maeltijt sitten eten.Ende si solde oer schottele setten bi der katten schottele, ende weert, dat die katte dan tot oer queme ende wolde mit oer uuter schottelen eten, soe en solde sijs oer niet verbieden... Ende genck aldus oetmodelike ende croep onder die richtebanck, ende sat daer ene hele maeltijt, ende aat alsoe vander eerden.

proof of Nyese's good and humble nature, using the scene to authorize Nyese's frequent recommendation that the younger sisters of the community should obey in all matters, as if they were children. Nyese's perfect obedience and dehumanization, enabled by the confessor's attempt to "mortify" her, shifts control and authority from confessor to penitent. By humbly obeying the penance set for her—which counters the fault of worldly attachment expressed as kindness to cats, Nyese models the perfect obedience she encourages of her juniors.

In another scene praising perfect obedience, the wealthy Jutte Ahaus, who had left an unreformed religious community to participate in the new movement of the *Devotio Moderna*, could not bear to leave behind the two small dogs that she had grown up with. Her confessor, Iohan Brinckerinck, (himself the subject of another entry in the Sisterbook), recognized that Jutte could not make her profession at Diepenveen as long as she remained attached to the dogs. Brinckerinck eventually commanded her to drown the puppies, which she did "even though it was very difficult for her." As a sign of her obedience and religious conversion, Jutte called a servant to fetch a sack, then, when it had arrived, "took the two little dogs with her own hands and tied them up in the sack and drowned them as she had been commanded...the internal torments of her heart were made clear on her face," as she drowned the poor dogs. This, according to the author, marked a "good beginning to true and perfect obedience" [12].[6] I find this passage difficult to read historically and dispassionately—kindness to animals is an important part of modern western culture. And indeed, the language in the original is poignant, emphasizing the significance of Jutte's obedience by stressing four times in a brief paragraph that it was "difficult [swaer]" for her to give up the dogs. The medieval author's attention to Jutte's human suffering illustrates the necessary emotional state of compunction, while her stoic drowning of the dogs is a praiseworthy disentanglement from her past life. Despite the violence and cruelty which strike modern readers of this scene, the medieval narrator carefully used these episodes to establish the exemplary piety of two important founding members of the community. Jutte van Ahaus would rise to prominence as one of the founding members of the prestigious Augustinian house at Diepenveen after serving as Abbess to an unreformed community in Westfall. Her spiritual director, Johannes Brinckerinck, who was a key advocate and confessor for the women of the *Devotio Moderna*, appears in the lives of several other sisters, and was the subject of a brief biography in another unedited Sisterbook. [7] There, Brinckerink's authority is constructed through his service to the community and his own personal modesty and austerity, and Jutte is depicted making her profession from her sickbed

---

[6] Op een tijt, niet lange eer sie myt allen aver trat, doe was sie toe deventer om hoer dinge te vercallen myt onsen weerdigen vader. Doe hadde sie twie hondekens by hoer, als dat heerschap pleget, die sie alte lief hadde ende hoer swaer weren over te geven. Ende doe onse vader onder ander woerde vernam dat hoer soe swaer weren over tegeven. Ende doe onse vader onder ander woerde vernam dat hoer soe swaer solde wesen die hontkens te verlaten Soe hiet hij hoer doen, als sie weder toe vreden queme, dat sie dan beyde die honde solde rencken Als sie ock dede, al hoe swaer dattet hoer was. Ende als sie dan weder te huys gecomen was, hiete sie een eersam persoen, die by hoer was, dat sie hoer enen sack solde halen. Ende vanynwendiger perssen hoers herten was sie ontdaen in hoer ansichte So dat sie hoer daer alte seer in te sterven hadde mer sie en hadde daer niet vele woerde van. Ende doe die sack quam, nam sie beyde die hontkens ende stack sie daer in ende drenckte sie myt hoers selves hande als hoer doen was geheyten. Dit was een guet beghin der volcomenre gehoersamheit, die sie noch na maels volcomelike solde vervullen.

[7] Correspondence between the two has survived (Stads- en Athenaeumbibliotheek, deventer Supp. 198 (101 E26), fol. 103v–131r, as well as a Latin translation of Jutte's *Life (*Koninklijke Biblotheek Brussel, Handschriften 8849–8859).

the day that Diepenveen is enclosed; she died the next morning. Clearly, the relationship between Brinckerink, Jutte, and the other women who joined Diepenveen involved far more than confession and penance. Their lives were intertwined, and each contributed to the sanctity and spiritual progress of the other.[8]

With Jutte, as with Nyese, a woman's submission to a debasing and dehumanizing command unfolded in a public space. There, her "fault"—excessive love and a failure to break fully with the world—and from her obedience to a confessor—were displaced by a communal appreciation for the penitent's spiritual progress. Later, whether during her lifetime or after her death, members of the community spoke about and then wrote down these events, making the penitent sister an authoritative model. Like the many other ambiguous narratives of relationships between confessors and women's communities, these examples of confessors forcing sisters to let go of their compassion for animals show how obedience to a confessor might help establish a woman's own religious authority.

6. Ambiguous Narratives and Fragments of Discord in the Lives of the Confessors

In the examples I have discussed so far, both sisters and confessors gained spiritual authority by submitting to penance and winning respect from their communities. Even when confessors pushed penitents to harm themselves or others, this represented a transmission of power that increased the authority of the penitent within a community. But although Sisterbook authors valued confessors who pushed penitents beyond their own limits, they also record that even the holiest and most dedicated of confessors were not universally admired. Sisterbooks, hagiographies, and convent records hint at tense confrontations with confessors who misunderstood, misled, abused, and sometimes even impregnated the women in their care. The Sisterbook from St Agnes at Emmerich, an Augustinian community belonging to the Windesheim congregation of the Modern Devotion, contains frankly critical views of confessors raised by dissenting members of the community.

During the twenty years Peter van Gendt served at St Agnes, he won respect for his authority and piety despite protests about his longwinded preaching, offensively harsh assignment of penance, and unavailability [14]. The Sisterbook entry turns each of these critiques into evidence of Peter's strong vocation. His dedication and zeal made him a long-winded preacher, even though the same passage praising him for fiery and intelligent sermons acknowledged that "some pious people complained that his orations were too long during mass."[9] When he heard these complaints, Peter wrote the famed preacher John van Brugman, (c.1400–1473 OFM) asking for advice and support [35–37]. The entry also notes that Peter took special care in phrasing and wording probing and punishment, to the extent that he sometimes went to apologize to sisters who had misread his motives. Though Peter actively embraced his role as confessor, ready to hear confession at any hour of day or night, serving in winter even though he sometimes all feeling in his hands and feet, then beat warmth back into his extremities before retiring alone in the dark to his room to pray, he also spent all of his time with this gathering of brothers to protect the reputation of the women's community.Another Emmerich confessor, Coernelis van Mechelin (d. October 6th, 1494), was similarly praised for his dedication to hearing confession

---

[8] I have not been able to consult the manuscript, unfortunately, and rely here on the modernized edition of Brinckerink's life based on the DV manuscript of the Sisterbook from Diepenveen [19].

[9] het gheviel eens dat sommijge geistelicke personen hem bewroeden dat hi sijn missen toe lange vertoch.

and criticized for his harshness. According to the chronicler, Coernelis, through God's grace, could sense unspoken sins and would show up, unasked, to hear confession. Perhaps because his probing during confession went beyond what was customary, Coernelis took special care to present punishment and penance through gentle language, so that he would not be perceived as sharp or vindictive. He also would humbly apologize to any sister who took offense at this probing and the harsh censures that followed admitting sins, or to anyone who was upset with him [14].

Was Coernelis a skilled and attentive confessor, or a nosy man who came uninvited and demanded confession take place, even in absence of sin? Was Peter a constant presence at St Agnes, humble, chaste, and polite, quick to apologize for misunderstandings, or instead a long winded, harsh spoken, and distant man who neglected the women in his care to spend time at the nearby men's community? Clearly some of the women at St. Agnes in Emmerich disagreed with and disliked Peter van Ghent and some may also have complained about Coernelis's handling of confession. Though these dissenters are portrayed as foolishly misunderstanding their confessors, including these details, the Sisterbook entries acknowledge the protests, showing that sisters actively guided and corrected the men serving their community. The Emmerich Sisterbook's entries for Coernelis van Mechelin and Peter van Ghent show that even the best confessors, over the course of several decades' involvement with a community, would certainly have had conflicts with the women in their care. Respect for and obedience to superiors did not preclude voicing formal complaints. These conflicts stemmed from sisters' perceptions that confessors were too self-absorbed and cared too little for the women in their care. Skillful narration blended these moments of conflict with praise and fond reminiscences, but did not deny that members of the community openly confronted, evaluated, and praised their confessors.

7. Conclusions

As the Sisterbooks reveal, interactions between confessors and communities of women in medieval Europe extended well beyond the instant of sacramental confession. Though Foucault and others have argued that medieval confession was monologic, with all power residing in the listening confessor rather than the speaking penitent, submitting to penance sometimes granted authority. In the Sisterbooks, power is situated neither with the male, clerical, educated confessor nor the women taking control through penance, but in the community acknowledging and valorizing submission. A partial explanation for this exchange of authority through public submission may lie in Foucault's observations about the premodern spectacle of execution. Foucault recognized execution as "the principle communication between the crime and the punishment" involving the audience through ritualizing and judging the convict's tortured body. Medieval penance and ascetic practice may have operated in a similar fashion, as the onlooking community both evaluated the crime (sin) of a penitent and took part in the process of judging and absolving [38]. Medieval penitents were not tortured and executed like criminals, though their suffering was redemptive, exemplary, and transformative. Because penance was not a punishment but a process, a ritual of pain that yielded peace and absolution, Foucault's model for punishment is inadequate. The convicted sinner lives and is reborn through a modified torture to which she willingly submits. Depictions of relationships between confessors and women religious in the Sisterbooks valorized submission to *any* religious authority,

whether male or female, undoing the Foucauldian gendering of medieval confession—speaking female disempowered, silent male in authority—sometimes found in accounts of penance written by men.

The laity experienced a very different theater of confession and penance than that depicted in late medieval convent chronicles, and both settings for medieval confession differ significantly from the post-Tridentine records of confession upon which Foucault based his own readings of confession. Though confessors certainly held the power of absolution over penitents even as they sat above them on a specially designed seat, the power-dynamic in annual community confession could be upturned in relationships where confession and penance became an important part of daily devotion. In the very specific context of late medieval women's communities, however, publicly acknowledged penance and obedience drew attention to private disciplinary conversations with their spiritual directors, thereby subverting secrecy, publicizing the private, and controlling the characterization of their obedience. In the Sisterbooks, when an individual, whether male or female, made a confession, that moment represented a private conversation whose contents could not be recorded, and in that moment, the penitent submitted to the worldly authority of a confessor. However, when a confessor assigned penance or otherwise intervened to chastise and reform an individual's behavior, the locus of authority shifted as the confessor stepped aside and the penitent stepped back into a public space to begin making amends. While in that public space, the power of evaluation then shifted from the confessor to the community as the penitent's comportment was evaluated and, if deemed exemplary, later adapted for use in the spiritual reform of others either in subsequent years or in another community. The Sisterbooks thus offer an alternate model of religious authority that depends not on religious rank, gender, or class, but instead on relationships marked by submission and shifts between public and private spheres. When a penitent submitted to a confessor, he or she gained authority; and when a confessor sought to reform a group of women, he also submitted to their evaluation.

Foucault’s analysis of power in the private moment of confession and the public punishment of criminals’ exchange of power through submission depended on accounts from early modern archives. He most likely neither knew of, nor could be expected to account for, the relationships between confessors and confessants described by the medieval women who compiled the Sisterbooks. The confessor-confessant relationships found in the Sisterbooks, recast the role of submission in the construction of power as the fulcrum in a system of communal interactions which collectively established spiritual authority. Women gained power over their confessors by submitting, but also, as I have argued, by drawing attention to private conversations, personal secrets, and inviting communal judgment of actions and relationships. These male-female interactions shifted the locus of power from the male confessor to the female body through the written and spoken words. Though most visible in the Sisterbooks, the dichotomies posed by the power-dynamic of medieval confession extended beyond women's communities. Even if some confessors were half-educated, lecherous, disinterested, or misunderstood the women in their care, relationships between late medieval women religious and their confessors unfolded as a series of exchanges—private to public, submissive obedience to potent agency, masculine to feminine, spiritual guidance to spiritual progress—mediated by the community and the collective experience.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Johanna Kramer, Emma Lipton, and Jennifer Welsh for their comments on an earlier draft and advice with some translations, and to thank the generous readers at *Religions* for their enormously helpful comments.

References

1. Karma Lochrie. *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, p. 292.
2. David Aers. *Culture and history, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992, p. 213.
3. Pierre J. Payer. *Sex and the New Medieval Literature of Confession, 1150–1300*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2009, pp. ix, 249.
4. W. David Myers. *"Poor, Sinning Folk": Confession and Conscience in Counter-Reformation Germany*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996, pp. xii, 230.
5. John T. McNeill, and Helena M. Gamer. *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal "Libri Poenitentiales" and Selections from Related Documents*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. xvi, 476.
6. Stephen Haliczer. *Sexuality in the Confessional: A Sacrament Profaned*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 267.
7. John Wayland Coakley. *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and their Male Collaborators*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, pp. x, 354.
8. Jodi Bilinkoff. *Related Lives: Confessors and their Female Penitents, 1450–1750*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005, p. 181.
9. Wybren Scheepsma. *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The 'Modern Devotion', the Canonesses of Windesheim, and their Writings*, translated by D. F. Johnson. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004, pp. xii, 280.
10. Siegfried Ringler. *Viten- und Offenbarungsliteratur in Frauenklöstern des Mittelalters: Quellen und Studien*. München: Artemis Verlag, 1980.
11. Rabia Gregory. "Obedient cats and other not-quite-miracles in Sisterbooks from the Devotio Moderna." *Medieval Perspectives* 22 (2007): 41–63. In print, 2012.
12. D. A. Brinkerink. *Van den doechden der vuriger ende stichtiger susteren van Diepen Veen: ('Handschrift D')*. Leiden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1904.
13. D. De Man. *Hier beginnen sommige stichtige punten van onsen oelden zusteren: naar het te Arnhem berustende handschrift met inleiding en aanteekeningen uitgegeven*. 's-Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1919.
14. Anne Bollmann, and Nikolaus Staubach. *Schwesternbuch und Statuten des St. Agnes-Konvents in Emmerich*. Emmerich: Emmericher Geschichtsverein e.V., 1998.
15. Karl Bihlmeyer. *Mystisches Leben in dem Dominikanerinnenkloster Weiler bei Esslingen im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert: S.-Abdr. aus den Württembergischen Vierteljahrsheften für Landesgeschichte. Neue Folge 25. 1916*. Stuttgart: Druck von W. Kohlhammer, 1916, pp. 61–93.

16. F. W. E. Roth. "Aufzeichnungen iiber das mystische Leben der Nonnen von Kirchberg bei Sulz." *Alemannia* 21 (1893): 103–48.
17. Elsbet Stagel, and Johannes Meyer. *Das Leben der Schwestern zu Töss*. Berlin: Weidmann, 1906.
18. Gertrud Jaron Lewis. *By Women, For Women, About Women: The Sister-books of Fourteenth-century Germany*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996, pp. xiii, 329.
19. Wybren Scheepsma. *Hemels verlangen*. Amsterdam: Querido, 1993.
20. Anne Winston-Allen. *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing about Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004, pp. xvii, 345.
21. Gerhard Rehm. *Die Schwestern vom Gemeinsamen Leben im nordwestlichen Deutschland: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Devotio Moderna und des weiblichen Religiosentums*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1985, p. 369.
22. Amy Leonard. *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. xiii, 218.
23. Heinrich Seuse. *Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*, translated by F. J. Tobin. New York: Paulist Press, 1989, pp. xvi, 416.
24. Jeffrey F. Hamburger. "Overkill, or History that Hurts." *Common Knowledge* 13 (2007): 404–28.
25. Mathilde Van Dijk. "How to be a good shepherd in the Devotio Moderna: the example of Johannes Brinckerinck." *Dutch Review of Church History* 83 (2003): 139–54.
26. Katrien Heene. "Hagiografisch herschrijven in de vijftiende eeuw: de casus Johannes Brinckerinck." *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 79 (2005–8): 251–84.
27. Marie-Luise Ehrenschwendtner. *Die Bildung der Dominikanerinnen in Süddeutschland vom 13. bis 15. Jahrhundert*. Stuttgart: Steiner, 2004, pp. x, 399.
28. Dyan Elliott. *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2004.
29. Ulrike Wiethaus. "Naming and Un-naming Violence Against Women: German Historiography and the Cult of St. Elisabeth of Thuringia (1207–1231)." In *Medievalism and the Academy*, edited by L. Workman, K. Verduin, and D. D. Metzger. Studies in Medievalism. 1. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997, pp. 187–209.
30. Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, 1st ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.
31. Jacqueline Murray. "Gendered Souls in Sexed Bodies: The Male Construction of Female Sexuality in Some Medieval Confessors Manuals." In *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, edited by P. B. a. A. J. Minnis. 1998, pp. 79–93.
32. Peter Biller, and A. J. Minnis, eds. *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*. Rochester, NY: York Medieval Press, 1998.
33. Talal Asad. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
34. Michel de Certeau. *The Mystic Fable*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. v.
35. Nico Lettinck, and Johannes Brugman. *Praten als Brugman: de wereld van een Nederlandse volksprediker aan het einde van de Middeleeuwen*. Hilversum: Verloren, 1999, p 80.
36. Willem Moll. *Johannes Brugman en het godsdienstig leven onzer vaderen in de vijftiende eeuw: grootendeels volgens handschriften geschetst*. Amsterdam: G. Portielje, 1854.

37. John H. Van Engen. *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: the Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, pp. ix, 433.
38. Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979, p. 333.