

VOICES *in dialogue*

Reading Women
in the Middle Ages

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AND

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ranging from Antiquity to the Renaissance and tries, unsuccessfully, I believe, to show influence from Aelred of Rievaulx and Peter of Blois. He does not come to firm conclusions about the authorship and date of the letters, but he does urge two hypotheses of their origins: "Die in Frankreich oder Italien entstandenen Briefe sind entweder die Überarbeitung von Stifftungen (nicht Münster-briefen) einer Schule der späten *Ars dictaminis* oder eine literarische Bravourleistung frühhumanistischer Briefkunst." The work is a valuable study of the intellectual and rhetorical tradition of the love letters, but his attempt to refute the ascription to Abelard and Heloise (which he dismisses as "diletantisch") is far from conclusive, and his arguments for a dating in the fourteenth century, for influence of "docte stil nuovo" and humanism, are forced. In the framework of the present exchange it must be said that an immensely learned specialist on medieval Latin love literature and intellectual traditions has not come to conclusive results on the dating, authorship, or circumstances of composition of this unique collection of texts. Authorship by Abelard and Heloise remains to my mind the most probable of the theses yet put forward.

FOUR

Listening for the Voices of Admont's Twelfth-Century Nuns

ALISON I. BEACH

Between 1715 and 1717, Bernard Pez (d. 1735), an Austrian historian and monk of Melk, traveled across Austria, Bavaria, and Swabia with the Maurists as his model, searching the libraries of Benedictine monasteries for the writings of the Order's authors. When he arrived at Admont—a community set on the banks of the Enns River in the Austrian province of Steiermark—Pez made an exciting discovery.¹ In Admont's library he found twelve manuscripts containing more than 250 original biblical commentaries and sermons. Many of these texts were the work of Irmbert (d. 1176) who would serve as abbot from 1172 to 1176.² The majority, however, were written anonymously. This did not stop Pez from printing them in his *Treasaurus anecdotorum novissimus* under the name of Godfrey, who was abbot from 1137 until his death in 1165.³ But there is no evidence, either medieval or modern, in the manuscripts or elsewhere, that Godfrey wrote these or any other texts. For Pez, it seems, the simplest explanation was that the anonymous sermons were the work of the monastery's most visible twelfth-century *man*—a high-profile and long-lived abbot who also had the attraction of being prolific Irmbert's older brother. When Jacques-Paul Migne (d. 1875) reprinted Pez's version of the sermons in the *Patrologia Latina* in 1874, he retained Pez's attribution to Godfrey. Recent scholars have noted the tenuous, even non-existent, connection between Godfrey and the sermons.⁴

If not Godfrey, then who wrote these unattributed homilies? This question draws us into the fascinating world of twelfth-century Admont, where both men and women

participated in, and contributed to, the community's vigorous intellectual life. There, in schools patterned after those at the reform monastery of Hirsau, students—both male and female—were trained in the liberal arts. While some students learned only the basics, others moved on to more advanced training in scriptural interpretation and dictamen (the art of formal letter writing). At the center of all of this literate activity were two busy and prolific scriptoria—one staffed by nuns, the other monks—which produced the manuscripts needed for all aspects of community life: liturgical books, the books of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, patristic and medieval theology and biblical commentary, saints' lives, canon law collections, and texts for individual devotional reading.

Although men and women were strictly segregated, a spirit of cooperation is evident both in written accounts of life at the monastery and in the manuscripts that survive from the period. In the scriptoria, teams of scribes—as many as six at a time—worked together to produce books, carefully coordinating script and parchment for uniformity.⁵ In the women's chapter house, nuns took dictation as Irmbert preached, and together they transformed his spoken word into a written text. As other sermons were written, scribes copied them into individual booklets that would later be bound into manuscripts, which, thanks to careful coordination of parchment, ruling, and script, had a remarkably unified appearance. This tendency toward collective effort at Admont, either emerging from or reflecting a strong sense of community and common purpose, tends to obscure the accomplishments of individuals. While the group worked to record and edit a new sermon, the identity of its author could recede into obscurity. The community, it seems, was not interested in telling us who wrote individual sermons. Some questions, however, are hard to ignore: was it the nuns? Can we add any more examples to the relatively short list of texts written by medieval women?

Several scholars have mentioned the possibility that some of the Admont sermons were written by nuns, and a considerable amount of evidence points in their direction.⁶ Women first entered the religious life at Admont during the first half of the twelfth century, following the introduction there of the customs of the Hirsau Reform. Irmbert tells us that the women conducted their own daily chapter meetings, where the *magistra*, as the head of a female community associated with the Hirsau Reform was called, was in charge. The women generally relied upon a monk to appear at the window of their chapter house—allegedly their only point of contact with the outside world—to deliver the daily sermon. On important feast days, Irmbert explains, when the monks were occupied with their own rituals, one of the nuns would preach. Some, he tells us, were highly experienced students of scripture.⁷

Irmbert knew what he was talking about: he had a special familiarity with their intellectual abilities through their collaborative work. It was the nuns, Irmbert suggests, who initiated this effort during the 1140s by secretly taking down his words as he

preached to them on Ruth and Judges 19–21. Soon their idea was out in the open, and two women were assigned to assist him full-time.⁸ The nuns took dictation on parchment or wax tablets, and then drafted successive versions of the text. Because Admont's nuns were strictly cloistered, we must imagine that they passed a working copy of the text out of their enclosure for delivery to the men's house where Irmbert read it over, made or requested corrections and additions, and returned it to the nuns. These men and women knew how to work together as a group to get the job done, in spite of the rules that required that the two sides of the community be physically separate.

This interaction is evident in the four surviving recensions of Irmbert's *Commentary on the Book of Ruth*: Vorau MS 193, Admont MS 650, Admont MS 682, and Admont MS 17. Vorau 193 (f. 186r–214v) was the first copy the nuns made from their notes, taken in dictation as Irmbert preached. This earliest version of the commentary contains the hand of three nun-scribes who shared the work of copying the main text. At least three hands—two of which are not identifiable as female scribes and therefore possibly scribes in the men's workshop—made corrections in the margins and on stubs of parchment that were bound into the manuscript. One corrector dominates the margins, and his (or less likely, her) corrections are taken up seamlessly into subsequent recensions of the text. A second corrector dominates the stubs, and these corrections, too, appear in all three later recensions. Except for Irmingart, who was the main scribe of the Ruth text and who copied a section of text on the last stub in the manuscript (f. 211r), the identity of the correctors is not known. It is possible that one of these was Irmbert, or that one or more were male scribes working for Irmbert in the monks' scriptorium.

The two intermediate recensions of the text, Admont MS 650 and MS 682, show the same group of female scribes at work on the text, with corrections made in the margins by a number of other hands, including the primary marginal corrector of Vorau 193. Both of these copies contain fewer marginal corrections and stub additions than Vorau 193, probably a reflection of a later stage in the textual editing. The two are similar in size and format, and the textual differences between them are not great. It is possible that one copy was produced for the nuns' library, and one for the monks'. Admont 650 evidently belonged to the monks and Admont 682 to the nuns. The variants in Admont 17, the final version of the commentary copied by the nuns, generally follow the corrected text in Admont 682, suggesting that MS 682 was the nuns' primary exemplar. Patterns of copying and correcting clearly show both ongoing work on the text and the nuns' continued involvement in the process.

The manuscripts do not reveal, however, the extent to which the text reflects the exegetical voice or voices of the nuns, and to what extent it reflects Irmbert's exegetical voice. In the process of taking dictation and creating a working draft of the commentary, the scribes must have made editorial decisions—we cannot expect their render-

ing of the sermon to be a verbatim representation of what was actually spoken.⁹ As they heard Irimbert speak, they made choices—either consciously or unconsciously—about what to write down, how to write it down, and what to omit. It is clear that there was an active process of modification and correction taking place, though, and it seems that the nuns should get credit, if not for co-authorship, then for helping to give the text its literary shape and Irimbert his exegetical voice.

But did the nuns write any of the anonymous sermons themselves? They certainly had the intellectual skills, thanks to their internal school and its focus on training in biblical exegesis, as well as the experience they must have gained working with Irimbert. They had materials, skilled labor, and a workshop at their disposal. They also had access to a resource essential for the research and study required for writing sermons and commentaries: a good library. The nuns' book collection was tended by an in-house librarian, whose title was important enough to warrant mention in the house necrology by the beginning of the thirteenth century.¹⁰ The librarian was in charge of an impressive library, which included biblical texts, patristic and medieval homilies, service books, saints' lives, and collections like the *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin* for spiritual edification and guidance. An even larger selection could be found right across the way in the monks' quarters.¹¹ The men's library was especially strong in patristic and medieval theology and biblical interpretation, including a particularly impressive collection of the works of Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Rupert of Deutz. A late medieval notation in Admont MS 232, a collection of patristic and medieval homilies, states that the monks had borrowed the book from the women's library, and it may be that the nuns had similar borrowing privileges. There is no evidence of any restriction on women's reading material.

A closer look at the nuns' library suggests still more about the origins of the anonymous homilies. Significantly, it was the nuns, not the monks, who seem to have owned Admont MS 58, MS 62, MS 63, MS 73, and MS 455, the carefully produced volumes containing the final recensions of the Admont sermons. Further, paleographical analysis suggests that these volumes were products of the nuns' scriptorium. All five volumes contain sermons for Sundays, and two, Admont MS 58 and MS 62, contain homilies for feast days—the days on which Irimbert tells us the nuns themselves preached.

Images in two of these volumes strengthen the connection between these manuscripts and the nuns. In MS 62 (folio 2r) a nun appears above the arch framing the table of sermon *incipitias* (see figure 1). The nun, wearing a monastic habit (painted in blue and red), gazes straight out at the reader. Her facial features are not stylized; this appears to be the portrait of a woman, with large eyes, an oval face, broad nose, and small mouth. She holds a large book upright against her chest, her left hand supporting its weight, and her right hand raised. The distance between her right hand and the book is unclear. The artist may have intended to show the nun's hand resting on the book, or perhaps lifted in a gesture of preaching. Is this an image asserting the nuns' ownership of the book or some closer connection between the woman and the text? A

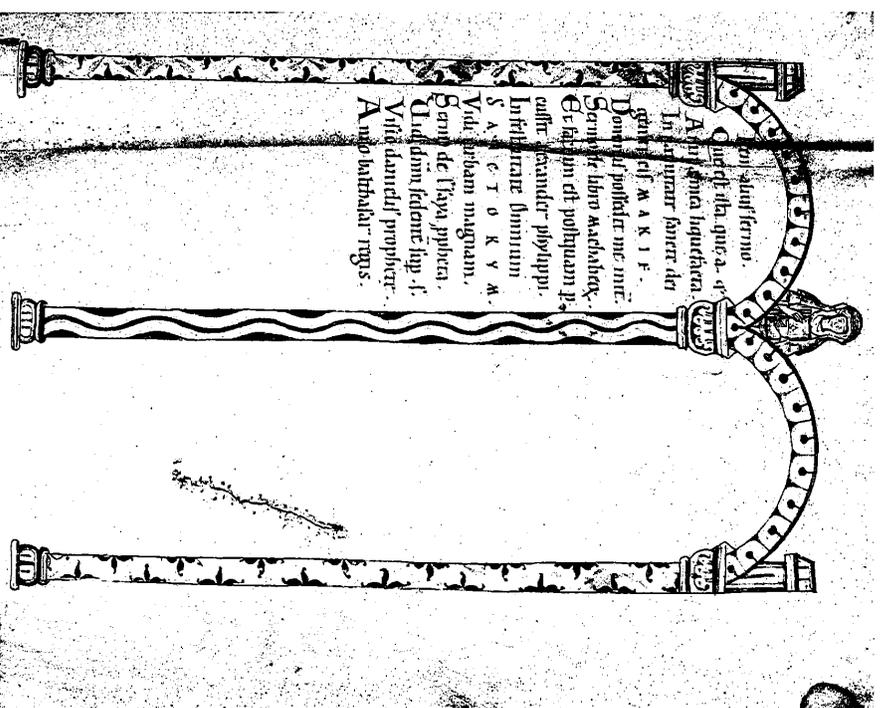


FIGURE 1. Nun Preaching, in Admont MS 62, folio 2r. Reproduced by permission of Stift Admont.

parallel image in Admont 58 (folio 1v) is equally intriguing (see figure 2). Here another nun appears above the arch framing the table of contents. This second woman wears the same head covering as the first, and the sleeves of her habit extend beyond the folds of an outer garment. Her face, which is similar to that of the nun in the first image with its large eyes and broad nose, is turned slightly away from the reader. Cradled in her right arm is a book (perhaps MS 58 itself, or a copy of the Bible) not much wider than her

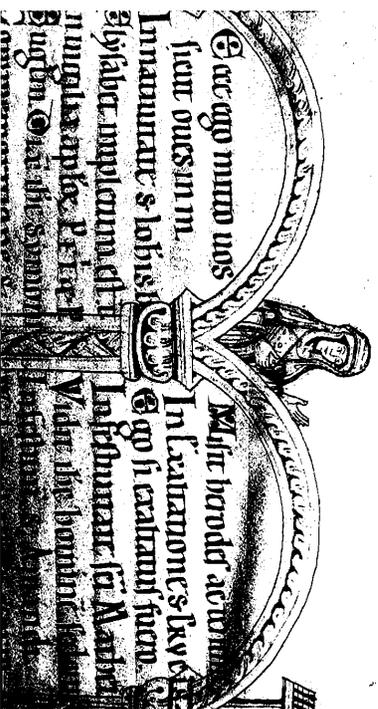


FIGURE 2. Nun Holding a Book, in Admont MS 58, folio 1v. Reproduced by permission of Stift Admont.

hand, and her left hand is raised. This nun is clearly preaching. If we compare this with an image of Irmbert in Admont 17 (p. 471)—one that can certainly be interpreted as an author's portrait—we see a similar gesture: Irmbert stands, replacing the letter I in the opening line of his commentary on Ruth. In his left arm he holds a book, and his right hand is raised in a gesture of preaching or teaching. There is no doubt that Irmbert was the author of the text associated with the image. The juxtaposition of the image of the preaching nun in MS 58 and the sermons contained in that volume clearly suggests some connection between the two.

Two other books owned by the nuns show that they were serious enough about their biblical studies to reach out to regional experts when their questions exceeded their own expertise and that of the local monks. Admont MS 579, a copy of Honorius Augustodunensis' *Hexameron* and *Sign of Saint Mary*, contains a copy of a letter written by the theologian Gerhoch of Reichersberg (d. 1169) to the Admont nuns. A second copy is preserved in one of the nuns' liturgical books (Admont MS 602). In the letter, Gerhoch indicates that he is replying to a letter from the nuns, which is now lost, in which they solicited his interpretation of Psalm 50.¹² Gerhoch wrote another letter between 1145 and 1169, this time explaining the image of the centurion in Matthew 8:5–13. Here he refers to the women who had made the inquiry only as "his beloved sisters in Christ," but these may well have been Admont's nuns.¹³

Although the letters of exegetical inquiry to which Gerhoch referred have not survived, other letters written by the women are preserved in the remnants of a late twelfth-century copybook recently discovered in the monastery's archives. It is in these letters that we hear most clearly the exegetical voices of the nuns, and it may be possible to establish an intellectual and spiritual connection between them and the anonymous sermons.¹⁴ In several cases, the writer of a letter introduces a biblical image, and then uses this core image, sometimes quite subtly, to make a rhetorical point. In one letter, a woman writes to a kinsman who has left the monastery and failed to make his promised return:

I know, and it grieves me to know, that I do not have a faithful kinsman in you, but rather a reedy stick, useless and worthless that if a man leans on it, it shall pierce his hand. (Isa. 36:6).

This image serves to illustrate vividly that he is a source of harm rather than of help, but it may also have evoked a wider spiritual meaning for the sender and the recipient. Among the anonymous homilies preserved at Admont is one that explicates this particular chapter of Isaiah, setting forth a moral interpretation in which the story of Hiezekiah and the king of the Assyrians becomes a story of perseverance in the religious life in the face of the temptations of the flesh and the pull of the world.¹⁵ The reedy stick (*baculum*) in this moral reading is the "strict discipline of the spiritual life."¹⁶ Fasting, vigils, and flagellation are practices that produce proximate pain, but that lead to joy as a reward in eternity.¹⁷ It is the devil, in the guise of the king of the Assyrians and his messengers, who whispers into the ear of the person living the spiritual life that the pain and striving brought on by the *baculum* are in vain—a whispering that causes many to despair and, presumably, to leave the monastery with unfulfilled promises to return.¹⁸ "But inasmuch as you have made your faith vain and you cared little to fulfill your promises, I grieve more for you than for me because you have lost the favor and love of the entire congregation." But here it is her kinsman who is this woman's *baculum*. Perhaps he is the source of her proximate pain, which having been endured will prove spiritually beneficial. Whether the writer or the monk-deserter were aware of this particular homily on Isaiah—either reading it or hearing it preached—is unclear. In any case, the *baculum* provides a powerful central biblical image that suited the rhetorical purposes of the letter. In their letters, the nuns made sophisticated use of biblical imagery, not simply citing passages, but also using particular images to frame and to motivate entire letters.

In another case, the writer introduces the image of the Canaanite woman who appears in the gospels of Matthew (Matt. 15:22–28) and Mark (Mark 7:24–30) and begs Jesus to cast out the demons that are plaguing her daughter. The author, who makes an impassioned plea for the return of her daughter who has been abandoned with

strangers, returns to this image several times as she uses its power to make her point to the recipient:

Carrying her in my arms, therefore, I have recourse to you, lord father, and throwing myself down, I place her before the feet of your lordship, and I wail and cry out in the place of and in the voice of the Canaanite woman: Lord, have mercy on my little daughter.

She transfers herself, via biblical reference, into the presence of the addressee, the archbishop of Salzburg, speaking “in the place and voice,” of this other panic-stricken mother. The writer thus uses an image from the Bible as a vehicle through which she could “visit” a person outside the monastery.

This tendency toward epistolary visitation suggests another possible intellectual and spiritual connection between the nuns and the anonymous sermons. Alf Härdelin has pointed out the persistence of the idea of visitation (*visitatio*) in the anonymous homilies, and he considers this to be one of the “fundamental structures of that reform centre’s spiritual thought.”¹⁹ He cites the example of a sermon on Luke 19:41–47, in which the preacher discusses Jesus’ *visible*, physical visit to Jerusalem and then uses this image to signify Jesus’ ongoing, *invisible*, approach to the individual soul. Härdelin notes the presence within the sermons of many different “modes” in which God is said to approach God’s people.²⁰ There is a possible parallel here between the concept of visitation in the sermons and the kind of epistolary visitation that the nuns attempt. To be sure, there are also significant differences. The visiting that takes place in the sermons and commentaries is primarily theological: God approaches the faithful through a kind of mystical visitation. In the letters, it is the woman who appears to the recipient, not in a theological sense, but arguably in a mystical, or at least spiritual one. It may be that the possibility of spiritual visitation was appealing to a group of cloistered women, for whom physical visitation was out of the question. Neither of these parallels proves that the women wrote the anonymous sermons preserved at Admont, but they do reflect the nuns’ engagement in biblical exegesis, both passively in the form of hearing or reading exegetical sermon-commentaries and actively in the form of their own biblically framed letters. These women clearly had the intellectual skills and the resources to write their own sermons, and patterns of scribal activity and book ownership suggest that they did.

Another possibility must not be overlooked: Irmbert himself may have written some of the anonymous sermons. Stephan Borgehammar, who has worked extensively on Irmbert’s exegesis, notes that while the language of the sermons tends to be more florid, there are strong stylistic similarities between his commentaries and the anonymous sermons. Both emphasize sound and rhythm, and both follow the model of the

formal classical homily, which was considerably outmoded by the twelfth century.²¹ The close connection between Irmbert and the nuns, and particularly the nuns’ intense familiarity with his style and methods, could well account for these similarities. Irmbert himself seems to have patterned his exegetical method after that of Gregory the Great, and the nuns may have consciously followed the model of the monk who was their teacher and collaborator.

The most plausible answer may be the one suggested by Alf Härdelin, that Admont’s anonymous sermons and commentaries were “collective works.”²² Although sharing a similar style that could suggest that they are the work of a single author, they represent the collective achievement of the monastery’s twelfth-century scholars and preachers, both male and female—I imagine this as a kind of parallel to the highly developed, regular bookhand used by the community’s scribes. Just as this uniformity makes the identification of individual scribes difficult, the teaching and use of a common exegetical style complicates our ability to discern individual authors among the sermons and, as John Van Engen points out in this dialogue, we must not assume that the nuns learned exegesis from Irmbert; perhaps they learned from one another. Van Engen is also correct to say that the next step must be to look within the sermons themselves for distinctive voices, and emphases, and images. Admont’s collaborative spirit, though, tends to blur the voices of individuals and blend their achievements. We may never know which individuals wrote these sermons, perhaps because we were never meant to know more than that they were the work of Admont.

Assigning authorship of an anonymous medieval text to any author—male or female—is a difficult business, but attributing texts to medieval women is particularly difficult even, as in the case of Heloise and her letters to Abelard, when the writer appears to have identified herself. The suggestion of female authorship is often countered with myth, sometimes quite complex, counter-possibilities.²³ *A priori* assumptions about what women did or did not do during the Middle Ages move in to the foreground and can define the boundaries of the debate. Perhaps the work was written by a man claiming to be a woman—perhaps a bored and clever monk-scribe. Perhaps a school master instructed a male student to write in the voice of a woman. This tendency to doubt the possibility of female authorship led nineteenth-century historian Wilhelm Preger (d. 1889) to suggest that Hildegard of Bingen was not a woman, but a female *persona* dreamed up and given life by an inventive medieval monk.²⁴ Another nineteenth-century German historian, Joseph von Aschbach (d. 1882), claimed that humanist Conrad Celtes (d. 1508) forged—rather than discovered—the work of the tenth-century German playwright Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim in order to glorify Germanic culture. Von Aschbach based this assertion on his assumption that no woman would have had access to the education necessary to write the works in question.²⁵ Frequently when I speak about my own work on female scribes, a member of the audience will suggest

that a copyist who identified herself as Sophia, or another as Diemut, might in reality have been a man using a feminine pen name (i.e., the personification of wisdom or humility: "Wisdom wrote this" rather than "Sophia wrote this").

To be sure, all of these suggestions are viable on some level: Sophia *could* have been a monk, and Heloise's letters *might* have been written by a man. But such hypotheses violate the logical principle of Ockham's razor, which states that the simplest theory should be given investigative priority. Begin with the most straightforward explanation, and move into more complex alternatives only as simpler explanations fail. Perhaps more importantly, they demonstrate the power exerted by a historian's assumptions about the lives of medieval women as he or she evaluates new evidence. Scholars attempting to identify female authors frequently bump up against the intellectual barriers erected by such assumptions, and therefore must shoulder a double burden of proof. First he or she must prove that a woman *could* have behaved or worked in ways that contradict long-held suppositions about women's intellectual activities. This can be difficult to do when individual cases of "atypical" activity are dismissed as exceptions or as unusual—too far outside the accepted paradigm—to be taken at face value. Patterns of skepticism and rejection based on *a priori* assumptions prevent the accumulation of the critical mass of evidence required for a paradigm shift.

For Admont, the evidence is clear: learned nuns, experience with scriptural exegesis, excellent library resources, an active scriptorium, images of preaching nuns in books of sermons copied by and owned by nuns. Women wrote some—and possibly many—of the anonymous sermons from twelfth-century Admont. The burden of proof is on those who, in the face of such evidence, would argue otherwise.

Notes

1. Admont was founded in 1074 by Archbishop Gebhard of Salzburg as a Benedictine monastery for men, and the community has been in continuous operation since that time. For a general history, see Jakob Wichner, *Geschichte des Benediktinerstiftes Admont*, 4 vols. (Admont, 1874); and Rudolf List, *Stift Admont, 1074–1974. Festschrift zur 900-Jahrfest* (Reid im Innkreis: O. Landersevel, 1974). On the nuns' community, see Jakob Wichner, "Das sternalige Nonnenkloster O. S. B. zu Admont," *Wissenschaftliche Studien und Mitteilungen aus dem Benediktiner-Orden* 2 (1881): 75–84 and 288–319.

2. A monk who may have been raised at Admont from boyhood, Trimburt was charged with preaching to the community's nuns. Standing at the window of their enclosure, their only point of regular contact with the outside world, he would deliver regular sermons. Trimburt left Admont in 1147 to serve, briefly and unsuccessfully, as abbot of Seon, and then transferred to the monastery of St. Georgen an Längsee, where he again was given the job of preaching to the nuns. It was at St. Georgen in 1151 that he began to compose a series of sermon-commentaries on the Books of Kings,

which he continued and completed at Admont after his return there at the end of the same year. Trimburt was especially active between 1151 and 1153, completing his work on Kings, a long commentary on the Book of Joshua, and a shorter one on Judges 1–18. These commentaries appear in their final form in two carefully executed, large format volumes: Admont MS 16 (1–4 Kings) and MS 17 (Joshua, Judges, and Ruth). Earlier, still evolving, versions of these works appear also in three smaller, less elegant volumes—Admont MS 650, MS 651, and MS 682—where they are bound together with numerous anonymous sermons.

3. Bernard Pez, *Thesaurus anecdotorum norissimus*, 6 vols. (Augsburg, 1721–1729).

4. Fritz Peter Knapp, *Die Literatur des Früh- und Hochmittelalters in den Bistümern Passau, Salzburg, Brixen, und Trent von Anfangen bis zum Jahre 1273*, *Geschichte der Literatur in Österreich von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* 1, ed. Herbert Zeman (Graz, 1994): 75–77.

5. Alison I. Beach, "Causation and Collaboration between the Sexes in the Twelfth-Century Scriptorium," in *Monks and Nuns, Saints and Outcasts: Religion in Medieval Society*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Barbara H. Rosenwein (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000): 66–67.

6. Alf Härdelin, "God's Visiting: A Basic Theme in the Homilies Ascribed to Godfrey of Admont," in *Manikarnas Och Mystikernas Medeltid: Tjugofyra kapitel om teologi, spiritualitet och kultur*, *Opuscula selecta* 1 (Skellefteå: Artos, 1996): 213 n. 9. See also Karl Brunner, "Quae est ista, quae ascendit per desertum. Aspekte des Selbsterständnisses geistlicher Frauen im 12. Jahrhundert," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 107 (1999): 271–310, and Stephan Borgehammar, "Who Wrote the Admont Sermon Corpus—Gottfried the Abbot, His Brother Trimburt, or the Nuns?" in *De Thomae ad sermone: Histoire de la prédication médiévale*, ed. Jacqueline Hamesse and Xavier Hermand (Louvain-La-Neuve, 1992): 47–51, at 49, where he suggests that the nuns might have given some of the sermons their literary form.

7. "They hold chapter themselves each day, with the *angitia* or her representative presiding. On feast days, when the abbot is not able to come to them, there are persons among them able to give the sermon. Indeed, they are exceedingly literate and wonderfully trained in the knowledge of sacred Scripture" ("Capitulum suum inter se quotidie habent, Magistra vel eius Vicaria praesidente. Et in festis diebus, cum Abbas ad eas non poterit venire, sunt inter eas personae ad verbum exhortationis faciendum dispositae. Valde quippe sunt litteratae, and in scientia sacrae scripturae mirabiliter exercitatae) (Bernard Pez, ed., *Bibliotheca ascetica antiquo-nova*, 8 vols. [Regensburg, 1725] 8:460).

8. "difficulate earundem sororum utringue recreatus sum liberalitate, ut duas michi sorores ab omni occupatione liberatas deputarem, quae me dicta in tabulis excipii potuissent" (Johann Wilhelm Braun, "Trimburt von Admont," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 7 [1973]: 320).

9. See Nicole Berton, *La prédication de Rimplaire de la Hohenloersee: Sermons aux clercs et aux simple gens à Paris au XIII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1987), 159–64, for a discussion of the interaction between speaker and hearer in creating a written record of an orally delivered sermon.

10. *Adlheit in n.c. amaria*, Monumenta Germaniae historica, Necrologia Germaniae 2, 297.

11. As the library is preserved today, it contains the consolidated collections of both the women and the men. Once maintained as two separate libraries, the nuns' books were handed over to the monks following the closing of the women's community in the sixteenth century. Admont's twelfth-century library was exceptionally large: over 200 books are today preserved in the monastery's

- library, many of which were copied at Admont. By comparing two late medieval book lists from the monks' library with the most up-to-date catalog, it is possible to identify surviving volumes that belonged to the men. Surviving books that were not owned by the men—and there are forty-seven of these—may have belonged to the women. See Alison I. Beach, *Women as Scribes: Book Production and Monastic Reform in Twelfth-Century Bavaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
12. Gerhoch, Letter 27, *Patrologia Latina* 193, Col. 607C/D; Damien Van Den Bynde, *L'Œuvre Littéraire de Gerhoch de Reichersberg*, Spicilegium Pontificii Athenaei Antoniani 11 (Rome, 1957), 198–99; Peter Classen, *Gerhoch von Reichersberg. Eine Biographie* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1960), 404.
 13. Classen, *Gerhoch*, 404–405 and Van Den Bynde, *L'Œuvre*, 288. Van Den Bynde suggests Reichersberg (p. 288), while Classen suggests Admont.
 14. Alison I. Beach, "Voices from a Distant Land: Fragments of a Nuns' Twelfth-Century Letter Collection," *Speculum* 77, no. 1 (January 2002).
 15. *Patrologia Latina* 174, col. 72D–82A.
 16. *Patrologia Latina* 174, col. 76C.
 17. *Patrologia Latina* 174, col. 76B.
 18. *Patrologia Latina* 174, col. 77A–77B.
 19. Hårdelin, "God's Visiting," 212.
 20. *Ibid.*, 203–205.
 21. Borgelhammar, "Admont Sermon Corpus," 8.
 22. Hårdelin, "God's Visiting," 213 n. 9.
 23. I am thinking here in particular of the recent controversy surrounding Constant Mews's recent work, *The Last Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).
 24. Barbara Newman, *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1.
 25. Larissa Bonfante, trans., *The Plays of Hrotswitha of Gandersheim* (Oak Park, Ill.: Botchazy-Carducci, 1986), x.



The Voices of Women in Twelfth-Century Europe

JOHN VAN ENGEN

Alison Beach offers us a startling image of literary life at Admont in the mid-twelfth century: cloistered women taking down sermon notes in Latin, transforming corrected notes into polished homilies, transcribing biblical commentaries expertly on parchment, even preaching and teaching themselves on feastdays and Sundays. These literate women, working together in community, also with monks in adjoining wings of their monastic complex, cooperated so fully that individual contributors to a given commentary or sermon have become impossible to sort out in the finished whole. Beach's work, in this essay and in her book on women scribes,¹ challenges us to rethink on two fronts. She shows what a close reading of texts, more especially of codices, can yield. She has recovered the work of these women from folio volumes that remained on site, more or less, for the past eight hundred years, their existence and contents known since the eighteenth century, the books themselves accessible to scholars (in situ or on film) for a generation or two. But no one before, it seems, read them closely enough—more importantly, with historical imagination enough—to see what their form and content might have to tell us about the lives of those who first produced them. It requires patience, also skill, to see in these folio pages, in their variants, corrections, and scripts, the possible lives and purposes of their scribes, that is, the women who first wrote them out. Beach's act of scholarly "seeing" goes to the heart of the way medievalists have practiced their craft for a generation or two now, and it poses a question: Is it truly possible to gain from these codices and scripts, from the material remains of a departed