CHAPTER 5

TWO WOMEN OF EXPERIENCE, TWO MEN OF LETTERS, AND THE BOOK OF LIFE

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The new genre of the “book of life” results from the cooperation of (prophetic) women whose experiential knowledge is embodied as experientia and articulated as prophetia with learned men.

What happens when so-called women of experience come into contact with men of letters? Or rather, what happens when religious discussions undertaken by women of experience are registered by men of letters and recorded by them in writing? Who is to be considered as the author or authors? What is the nature of their texts and how do they represent the women in question? In this essay, I wish to explore these issues by referring to two examples.

The first is Juliana of Cornillon from Liège (1192–1258), a religious woman (but not a nun) whose history was recorded in French by Éve, anchoress of Saint-Martin, and subsequently reworked into an official Latin vita by a learned hagiographer. Both texts were produced within a few years of Juliana’s death. The French text has been lost, but can be partially reconstructed; the Latin vita, which is the one I will consider here, is available in a sumptuous codex from Cornillon itself dated c. 1280.1

The second case is that of Agnes Blannbekin, also a religious woman but one living in Vienna a half century after Juliana (before 1244–1315). Her visions were written down by her confessor, a Franciscan from Vienna, and the text is available in an early edition based on a fourteenth-century manuscript entitled Vita et Revelationes [Life and revelations].2

Both women lived long enough to accumulate a great deal of experience; moreover, they were lettered and well versed in church doctrine.
We should therefore consider them to be female theologians or “common theologians,” as I have called them elsewhere. Their biographers were proficient in Latin and were therefore men of letters. What, then, does a study of their texts reveal about the nature of these writings? I will argue that a “book of life” is created, a composition that is not a saint’s Life, as frequently supposed, but a “book” that has become “life.” I view it as a new genre emerging in the late Middle Ages and gaining the status of a book of wisdom or vademecum. Two anecdotes will introduce my argument.

Juliana of Cornillon

Juliana, the prioress of a lepers’ convent near Liège and in her later years a free roaming beguine and anchoress, was the originator of the Feast of Corpus Christi—a main festival in the Roman Catholic Church to this day. She composed a Latin office for the feast, Animarum Cibus or “Food for souls.”

Juliana had a studious nature from her early youth. She would take advantage of every opportunity, however brief, to study or to meditate; “semper meditativa erat” [she was always deep in contemplation] writes her biographer. As a child, she had her own cell into which she could retreat; as an adult, she lived apart from her fellow sisters and passed her final years as an anchoress in an anchorhold. Growing up as a rich orphan in Cornillon, Juliana was given every opportunity to blossom intellectually. She could read and write at an early age, and mastered Latin too. She could recite the Psalms from heart, as well as the basic texts of the Christian faith. She studied the Bible in both French and Latin, along with a number of the writings of Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux. She knew an entire series of the latter’s sermons by rote, especially the sermons on the Song of Songs. “In studying, she forgot her sex and her age,” says her biographer, making what is for us an intriguing remark. At a young age, she was brought into contact with scholars outside the convent. There is some question about whether she even went to one of the Latin schools in the city to which girls were regularly admitted. She was strongly drawn to her disciple, Eve. There was an intimate bond between the two, so that Juliana was able to reveal herself to Eve more than to any other. The two women understood each other impeccably. When Eve allowed herself to be enclosed in Liège as an anchoress of Saint-Martin, Juliana regularly visited her and lived with her in the anchorhold, sometimes even for lengthy periods. As a result, Eve was in a favorable position to write the history of