In 1423, John Gerson famously denounced ascetic women who claimed to receive divinely inspired visions with such vivid language that he has been credited with inspiring the anti-witch writings of John Nider, and then, through Nider, the *Malleus Maleficarum*.¹ In his treatise titled *De examinatione doctrinarum* (On the examination of doctrine), Gerson denounced such women for attempting to address “great and wonderful” topics that exceeded their abilities, reporting the effects of brain lesions caused by epilepsy and melancholy as miracles, and claiming to speak directly for God through unmediated revelations. The men who were foolish enough to let themselves be taught by these women, he warned, nourished themselves in such a way that they might find themselves obeying the devil incarnate as they should obey their own superiors.² In this and other warnings, which occur throughout Gerson’s writings, Gerson contributed to a discourse that thoroughly discredited the very notion of uneducated ascetic women’s ability to commune with the divine or their capacity to speak with any authority on contemporary intellectual or political matters.³

Recent studies of Gerson’s thought tend to characterize Gerson’s attempt to discredit ascetic women visionaries as part of a broader effort by the male clergy to establish their authority over the laity’s religious practices and beliefs. These studies have centered upon the creation of discernment treatises, which have been portrayed in modern scholarship as systematic treatises exploring the provenance of the spiritual experiences that formed the basis of ascetic women’s claims to visionary or prophetic authority.⁴ Gerson’s discernment treatises have been identified as some of the most openly misogynist and influential of late medieval discernment treatises, and also as an important resource for both the prosecution of Joan of Arc and the descriptions of witches circulated by John Nider.⁵
Dyan Elliott has suggested that the Anglo-Burgundians’ employment of similar strategies to discredit and condemn Joan, whom Gerson supported, demonstrates the effectiveness of his method in rendering all women’s claims to visionary experiences immediately suspect. Gerson’s and others’ discernment treatises accomplished this act of censure and silencing by arguing that such experiences and the behaviors that accompanied them resulted from mental illness, prideful ambition or diabolical illusion. By establishing hierarchical obedience, ordered physical comportment and gender-appropriate humility as signs of orthodoxy, sanity and good will, these authors robbed ascetic women visionaries of the charismatic basis of their authority. No longer would their ability to go without food, tendency to be caught up in ecstatic states that removed them completely from their senses, or constant battle with demons signify an ascetic women visionary’s communion with the divine.

All of these arguments usefully place Gerson’s discernment treatises within a broader trajectory of clerical attitudes concerning women’s authority, and as a result, map Gerson’s contributions to a rapidly evolving and incredibly harmful misogynist discourse. That Gerson contributed to this discourse is clear regardless of what might be said about his intent in making these comments or the occasions when he decided to defend or praise women as class, particular women, or women visionaries. Our understanding of the significance of this discourse, the forces that pushed Gerson to contribute to it, and the other consequences of his discernment treatises, however, may be improved upon by a more intensely contextualized reading of these treatises that focuses on Gerson alone and thus is intended to complement existing treatments of Gerson’s work that locate him in a wider debate about discernment.

Although all accounts of Gerson’s criticism of women visionaries recognize that he wrote these works against the backdrop of the crisis of authority caused by the papal schism, most underestimate the tenuous nature of Gerson’s authority within the specific historical contexts of the late medieval Church, the politically unstable kingdom of France, and the university as a whole. Assuming that Gerson critiqued women’s visionary experiences from a securely authoritative position, they ascribe Gerson’s vigorous attempts to control female authority to either his own particularly aggressive brand of clerical misogyny, his opposition to the activities or messages of particular visionaries, or a general clerical panic in response to the crisis in authority represented by the papal schism. A careful examination of Gerson’s career, late medieval ecclesiastical and political debates, and the rhetorical strategies Gerson