

Conclusion

Sensual Encounters

The sensual environment of the medieval monastery was a key element in the spirituality of German Dominican women. Seeing and hearing played pivotal roles in both the reception of material religious culture and the women's expression of their religiosity. Although less explicit, the sense of touch also played a part—the acute physicality of much of the women's piety shows how vital this part of the sensual environment was. Smell and taste are much harder to pin down and do not seem to hold the primacy that the other senses do for monastic women, perhaps in keeping with the ascetic lifestyle practiced by many of these nuns and lay-sisters. 1

The life of Kathrin Brümsin illustrates how interconnected the sensual environment of female Dominican spirituality was.¹ Kathrin was the St. Katharinenthal novice who had the dream-vision in which Saint John the Evangelist celebrated Mass for the community and then taught her the twenty-four verses of his sequence *Verbum dei deo natum* out of a book with golden letters. In her dream-vision, the spatial, visual, textual, and acoustical environments became her spiritual environment. Her spirituality and her religious expression cannot be separated from the surroundings and items around her. And although the event occurred in a dream, it was a dream grounded in her monastic reality, one she perceived and interpreted through her senses. This environment created and constructed her spirituality, just as her spirituality relied on the various elements of her environment to express itself. It was a reciprocal exchange that had no clear beginning or end, marked by intertwined influences that ran in all directions. 2

The setting of her dream-vision in the nuns' choir—a space heavy with meaning for Dominican women—is crucial. The sacredness of this place served to draw Dominican women to it. It was the most frequented space for spiritual expression, whether liturgical or paraliturgical. Kathrin's choir stall, the altar, her movement between the two, the performance of the Mass, all these elements had significance not only in the context of her life, but also in the lives of her religious sisters. These environmental elements played a role in allowing Dominican women to define space in their own terms, giving it special significance that was different from that imagined by the Order's officials. However, the choir was not the only space in Kathrin's dream-vision. The entire event took place while she slept, implying that the St. Katharinenthal dormitory was also a factor. Her miraculous acquisition of the liturgy occurred in a space not normally seen as sacred, but which through Kathrin's dream became a place where the miraculous was possible. Although this is a passive example of how Dominican 3

women transformed the use and meaning of their living spaces (Kathrin was asleep during the event), other nuns experienced gifts of grace or practiced their piety in the various spaces of the monastery while they were awake.

The acoustical and textual elements of Kathrin's dream-vision can be seen in the convent's singing, the book with golden letters, and the sequence *Verbum dei deo natum* which Kathrin was required to memorize in order to properly perform the liturgy and in Saint John's words, pray to him. Such Latin words played an important role in the spirituality of Dominican women, casting an aura of divinity upon those who used them. As the language of communal, as opposed to individual, spirituality, Latin was a constant in the lives of all choir nuns, if not all women in the Order. Even if the women did not entirely understand every word of Latin, it could still carry meaning for them. The words could become symbols, even more sacred because of their mysteriousness, as can be seen in the case of Mezzi Sidwibrin who became obsessed with the word *Ecce* from a sermon she had heard. That Kathrin learned Saint John's sequence out of a book, albeit a visionary one, indicates one of the many roles that texts could perform in Dominican spirituality. In Kathrin's case, the book was the source of knowledge to which Saint John guided her. 4

The appearance of John the Evangelist also tells us more specifically about Kathrin's spirituality. The strength of his cult at St. Katharinenthal and that fact that Kathrin was learning the liturgy for his Feast made him the logical saint to pray to for assistance. He was a figure of authority for the women, a fact established when he appears as an archbishop in the dream-vision and further when he served as a teacher to Kathrin, instructing her in proper liturgical behavior and speech. Thus in Kathrin's dream-vision the multiple connections, both explicit and implicit, between her spirituality and her environment become abundantly clear. 5

The wealth of the individual monastery, its income in rents and goods, its patronage by local and not so local families of means and social prestige, all these factors could positively or adversely affect the texture of the material environment within the house. The relative wealth or poverty of a house may have affected how the women's spirituality was expressed, and how well the modern historian can reconstruct that house's material culture. But lack of wealth did not negate the spirituality of Dominican women. Spiritual meaning could be found in any kind of environment, rich or poor. 6

The spaces within the monastic environment that helped support the wide variety of German female Dominican piety and spirituality were all within the cloister walls. Although the women found some spaces more conducive to devotional activities than others (the choir comes to mind here), all places within the monastery could become the *loci* of ascetic behavior and even mysticism. No place—the cloister arcade, chapterhouse, infirmary, dormitories, refectory, kitchen, workrooms, or even the gardens—escaped the notice of Dominican women and their many forms of religious expression. The women's very active spirituality often 7

redefined the use of spaces, so that a kitchen might become a place of prayer and the infirmary a choir. The nuns cuddled real or visionary figures of the Christ Child in the dormitory, were served by the saints and the Virgin Mary in the refectory, and conversed with Christ in the gardens. The women also ignored the gendering of spaces that could be considered male preserves, particularly the altars of their churches, often by simply ignoring the presence of the priest. But they did so particularly by having eucharistic visions elsewhere in the monastery.

It was most often when the lives of saints, such as John the Evangelist and John the Baptist, intersected with the life of Christ, that the devotion of German Dominican women was inspired. While John the Baptist was a martyr, his martyrdom garnered little attention in the women's spirituality. Of more significance were other aspects of the saint's life when John the Preacher, patron of their Order was the first to recognize Christ and then baptize him. These were important to Dominican women, who honored the saint because of his connections to Christ. At the same time, the compassion that John the Evangelist felt at the foot of the cross elevated him to the status of martyr in the eyes of the women. He was the saint who was not martyred, and yet he suffered all the agony of Christ's death. They focused on this John as the Beloved of Christ, the author of Christ's life, and a representative of authority in Christ's Church. The closeness with Christ that these saints possessed was something in which Dominican women wanted to participate and share. **8**

As with the women's devotion to the two Johns, the visual environment was strongly Christocentric. Artwork let them tap into or create visual connections with Christ. Crucifixes which displayed Christ's own suffering humanity, Mary and her sorrow over the dead body of her Son in the *Vesperbild*, and Christ's love for a believer in the Christus-Johannes-Gruppen, all these images gave Dominican women a conduit for directing their piety toward Christ. When the visual environment and spirituality intersected, some kind of interaction was called for. This interaction could be mental, as when a woman contemplated the ideas or concept behind an image, or very physical and tactile, where the object was touched or manipulated as the woman expressed her devotion. Art could also be renounced, denied as a worldly sight that might bestow pleasure upon the viewer, and hence worthy of abstinence. Images from art and manuscript illuminations found their way into the women's visions as well as their forms of expression. The women used what was familiar to them to describe what was unfamiliar. They used their senses of sight, hearing, and touch to absorb as well as express their spiritual ambitions. **9**

The acoustical environment was crucial to Dominican women's conceptions of their own spirituality. Silence was promoted for monastics of both sexes, but especially for women since medieval culture considered women to be fickle creatures whose tongues were, at best, prone to gossip, and at worst, the root of all sin. And silence did have its place. The observation of silence was usually a practice of renunciation or a discipline, like flagellation, or the wearing of **10**

a hair shirt or an iron girdle. Other times it allowed women to focus on their interior spiritual development. Silence, however, was not primary in the acoustical environment, rather sound was. Despite the attitudes of the Order and larger society, Dominican women embraced words and sound as fundamental to their spiritual expression. They preached to one another and to those who visited them, their words almost unstoppable. They consoled each other, offering words of encouragement and prophecy. They used sound to express their devotion to God, Christ, and the saints, whether in prayer, song, or in the cries they produced as they flagellated their bodies or contemplated the Passion of Christ.

Likewise the language and expressions that the women learned or memorized from their books, their Psalters, Graduals, and Processionals, became the language of their dreams. The words of these familiar texts were repeated in the women's prayers and visions, in their mouths and in the mouths of Christ and the saints. For the women, the Divine spoke with the Divine words found in the texts which the women read and recited in honor of the Divine. The languages of spirituality, Latin and the vernacular, provided the women with a larger scope of expression than one language could possibly give them. The formal rituals of the liturgy retained their sanctity through the use of Latin while the women's more personal piety was usually, although not always, carried out in German. **11**

The voices in the Sister-Books give us a unique view into medieval ideas and concepts about spiritual behavior and the role the senses played in them. While some women experienced mystical phenomena (levitation, visions, auditions, light phenomena, prophecy, states of grace, ecstasies, and mystical unions with God), others led more sedate lives, adhering strictly to the Rule and constitutions, observing silence at the appropriate times and places, fasting when required, caring for the sick, taking part in communal work (usually spinning), and diligently and faithfully performing the liturgy. These women too were seen as highly spiritual by their sisters. **12**

With the dense settlement of female Dominican houses in southwestern Germany in the thirteenth century and their flourishing as centers of religious devotion in that century and the next, we have a fairly well-documented collection of communities that contribute much to our understanding of the culture of medieval religious women. Integral to that religious culture was the place of spirituality, often difficult to codify and quantify, but unmistakably a constant presence in the lives of these women. This spirituality of German Dominican women was environmentally constructed through their senses. For them, the sensual environment and spirituality were tightly woven together, dependent upon each other. These religious women utilized their entire environment to create and carry out their expressions of piety and religious devotion. The architecture in which the women dwelt, the objects they viewed and touched, the silences they observed, the words they spoke, the sounds they made, the books they read, heard, memorized, and wrote, all nurtured that spirituality. Dominican women used the sounds, sights, and silences of their surroundings to create the language of their **13**

religious behavior. In turn, their religious behavior gave their environment meaning beyond mere books, words, or walls. In the lives of German Dominican women we can see the workings of the senses, gender, and culture in medieval monastic spirituality. Spirituality was a cultural and environmental construction of its practitioners with changing expectations and shifting criteria. As such, these Dominican women created their own spirituality. They were not passive practitioners or recipients of religious rituals imposed upon them by male superiors; rather they were the creators and molders of their own spiritual expression, in which they actively transformed required ritual and expected behavior into something they claimed as their own, indelibly marked by the environment in which they lived their lives. It was an environment that they actively used to achieve their goal: to encounter the holy.

Notes

Note 1: KSB, 124, 159.