

Muddy With Her Footprints
On Rewriting the History of the Early Beguines
Jonas Eika

Mairie D'Oignies (1177–1213) was married at fourteen and convinced her husband to be celibate. Together they left their home in Nivelles—south of Bruxelles—to take care of lepers in a hospital in Willambroux. Word of her reached many women and they followed her, and even more hadn't heard but around the same time were taken by a similar spirit, a desire to live in a new and ancient way: poor and devoted like the apostles, but still connected to the world. It was the first time in Christian Europe that large groups of women began to live outside marriage and the cloister, belonging to neither a divine nor earthly husband. Soon they were living in communities small and large in Belgium, Holland, and Flanders, and then in France and Germany too. They settled on the outskirts of cities and in the fields near hospitals and churches, caring for the sick, working as teachers, weavers, and blacksmiths, tending to the land and God and each other.

The *Beguines*, the movement was later called, and I came to them through a line of female mystics — Simone Weil, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, Hadewijch of Brabant — women who all, in their understanding of the soul's path to God, imagined the self as radically open, something that could give way to an external desire. The believer approaches God not by an act of will, but rather by emptying herself of the "I": that force which longs to assert itself, to exercise its own will and arrange the world in its image. And in the same movement she becomes so full with God that she cannot be distinguished from him.

I write "him" because this is the pronoun they used for God. And even though submitting one's will to a male god may not seem a particularly feminist strategy, I would argue that there is something subversive about the medieval female mystic's notion of emptying the self, or "decreation," as Simone Weil put it many years later: "to make something created pass into the uncreated."¹ It had the potential to take the believing woman where the patriarchal order couldn't reach her

(more on this later), and to rework the image on which the power of the church rested: that humans were sinful by nature and required the church to keep them in check. The mystics, however, saw the human as open to influence and desire that could take them out of themselves and change them beyond recognition, so that they might eventually “become God with God,” in Hadewijch’s words.²

I’ve long been drawn to this idea of the human self, both as an anarchist alternative to the ontology of the modern nation state—in which the political subject is a limited and coherent entity with representable interests—and also because it aligns better with my own experience of what makes love possible. In close friendships, romantic relationships, and political engagements³—spheres that sometimes overlap—I am sometimes taken outside of myself, emptied and taken hold of, even if only briefly. Part of my self recedes or dissolves and makes room for something that might be called love to enter. For me, all love and desire is bound to this feeling of not being whole, of being traversed by—and subject to—forces external to myself. It’s also a feeling of not being a man, at least in binary, patriarchal terms, where the male subject is seen as sovereign, impenetrable, never the object of someone or something else. But I’ve also wondered whether my attraction to the idea of emptying or destroying the self has to do with the fact that I as a cis-man have been socialized to take up space and exercise my will in most spaces. Is there some element of catharsis in my experience and idea of decreation? Or am I, in my idealization, overlooking the different meanings and implications it might have if one, like a woman during the middle ages, doesn’t have any kind of autonomy?

My encounter with the beguines is also an encounter with these questions: How can I, as a man today, connect with a religious wom-

1. *Gravity & Grace*, Simone Weil, Routledge Classics, 2002.
2. *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, transl. Mother Columba Hart, Paulist Press, 1981.
3. As the writing collective Tiqqun puts it: “In order to become a political subject in the modern State, each body must submit to the machinery that will make it such: it must begin by casting aside its passions (now inappropriate), its tastes (now laughable), its penchants (now contingent), endowing itself instead with interests, which are much more presentable and, even better, representable. In this way, in order to become a political subject each body must first carry out its own autocastration as an economic subject.” *Introduction to Civil War*, Tiqqun, Semiotext(e) / Intervention Series, 2010.

an’s movement from the 13th century? And also: how might a political community informed by the radical notion of decreation look? The beguines were by all accounts trying figure out exactly this. This essay is an attempt to reach them across the historical and experiential distance that separates me from them—and to wrest their history out of the hands of the patriarchy that has written it in its own image.

There are few historical records of the early beguines. These consist primarily of eleven hagiographies: biographical accounts of the lives of individual women written with the intention of having them canonized. This creates a few problems for someone trying to understand them. First, because life in the loosely organized, more or less autonomous beguine communities often appears as a parentheses, a stop on the road to a more conventional monastic life. Second, because these accounts are written by priests, monks, and bishops, which is to say men who lived in a patriarchal society that divided the world into body and spirit, feeling and rationality, and declared women the incarnation of the basest of these dualisms. Locating the actual person in a hagiography is a matter of searching for cracks in the male gaze, sifting through layer after layer of paternalism, morality, and sublimated male desire. But occasionally, underneath the most far-fetched interpretations and justifications, you can make out one of her real actions, a little bit of the life she tried to live.

This is also the case with Mairie D’Oignies. The majority of her *Vita*—her *Life*, as this kind of hagiography is so despotically entitled—revolves around her piety, repentance, and humility, how she, even as a child, indeed “almost from the womb,” lived for God, renouncing all worldly things.⁴ But once in a while, there are signs of something else, something excessive. In paragraph 17, her confessor and hagiographer, Jacques de Vitry, recounts a Maundy Thursday mass during which she cried so loudly at Jesus’s suffering that the priest asked her to get a hold of herself and pray in silence. Since she did not feel capable of that, she left the church and prayed to God to let the priest understand that no one had the power to restrain such tears. Back in the church, in the middle of the mass, the priest was overcome by tears; he sobbed and stuttered, almost choking. And then Mairie cried day and night. Her tears

4. *Two lives of Mairie d’Oignies*, Jacques de Vitry & Thomas de Cantimpré, transl. Margot H. King & Hugh Feiss, Peregrina Publishing Co. 2002

streamed, so heavy and unceasing “that the ground in the church became muddy with her footprints.”

Although expressions of compassion by women were encouraged and celebrated — as a sign of inner piety, a kind of emotional stigmata — a woman’s disruption of a masculine domain, such as the church, was strong evidence of heresy. That Jacques includes this episode nevertheless — followed by a moralizing miracle — suggests that it really happened. It appears, moreover, to be a variation on a theme that runs through the *Vita*, often requiring justifications on his part: that Mairie was *too much*. Too much of what she was she was supposed to be.

She gave herself too extravagantly to the asceticism encouraged by the church. Her fasts were spontaneous, inspired by “visitations” from one of her favored saints, and could last up to eleven days. Sometimes, after receiving communion, she would remain in her bed in silence, not eating for weeks at a time. At other points in the hagiography, Jacques praises her for maintaining a high work ethic on a minimal diet—and for her ability to work and pray at once—but here, fasting makes her useless. She becomes inaccessible to the priests and to the pilgrims and laypeople who come to see her. And if she knows they are coming, she might run into the forest to hide.

Her acts of her self-harm—her “humiliation(s) of the flesh”—were also too much: one day, she sliced off a large piece of her own flesh and buried it in the ground. Earlier, when she had just been married, she would spend her brief nights of sleep on wooden planks with a coarse rope bound tightly around her. This is one of the few places in the *Vita* where Jacques makes clear to his readers—which included not only the Vatican but also religious women and laypeople—that Mairie’s practice was to be admired, but not imitated. Her acts of self-harm were a sign of her piety, but also an excess not to be emulated.

Especially when confronted with the extreme asceticism and self-mutilation of this period’s religious women, it is like an abyss opens in front of me, a chasm of history and gender: I am rarely touched without giving some form of consent; I am not seen as others’ property. With few, momentary exceptions—at certain parties, certain gay bars, a sudden hand in my pants, a tongue in my mouth, a command⁵—I have always, as a cis-man, had a foundational autonomy. I have never felt that I didn’t have power over my own body in the way that women today do when they are victims of assault, or women in the middle ages, who were forced to marry, sent to a convent, and suspected of heresy. Their bodies always potentially belonged to someone else, and yet they were all that

they had. This is essential to understanding their acts of self-harm, their long fasts and vigils, their ecstatic visions: that the body was the only material they had to work with. And if they didn’t take it into their own hands, then men most likely would.

As a woman, Mairie was pure body and sinful in the eyes of the church, at the mercy of her own needs and desires. In many ways, she needed to overcome her body to be seen as pious, and to be able to live a life outside both the cloister and reproductive marriage. With this in mind, it can be tempting to interpret her self-harm as either a kind of internalized misogyny or planned performance, something that would convince Jacques and the other clergy members of her holiness. But both of these readings seem insufficient. They suggest a form of female spirituality that was at most an imprint, a photo-negative, of the patriarchy that surrounded it.

There is, moreover, nothing in the historical records to suggest that the violently ascetic and at times self-mutilating religiosity of these women was strategic. In fact, the few surviving texts written by the 13th century beguines bear witness to an intense attempt to become one with God through a kind of self-directed violence. In *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, a kind of manual to achieve mystical union, Marguerite Porete⁶ describes the seven stages the soul must pass to overcome original sin and become one with God. In the first stage, the soul is touched by grace

5. I wonder whether the rape culture that also exists in gay environments—the large number of homosexual men raped by other men—can be linked to the old, Freudian paradigm of gay men as womanly souls trapped in male bodies. And whether this might also be seen as a form of misogyny: is a certain degree of feminization, or ascription of womanhood, inherent to every form of assault or harassment?
6. Marguerite Porete likely lived as a beguine at the end of the 13th century. She was neither married nor part of a convent, and instead wandered from place to place. At some point between 1296 and 1305, her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, was declared a work of heresy, and the circulation of the book and ideas was banned, an order she did not respect. In 1308, probably after having delivered a copy of the book to the Bishop of Châlons-en-Champagne, Marguerite was imprisoned and summoned to be tried for heresy. For two years she refused to speak with her inquisitors and refused to take the oaths necessary to question her. On June 1st, 1310, she was burned at the stake in Paris.

and filled with the desire to exercise God's will. But in order to do so, it must detach from its own will; it must dismantle or empty the self, a process that becomes physical and violent in the third stage: "One must crush oneself, hacking and hewing away at oneself to widen the place in which Love will want to be."⁷

Self-harm, taken literally or figuratively, is in fact a necessary part of inner transformation. Motivated by grace, it creates an opening in the self for something else, namely love, to enter and take shape. It vacates this space for a new subjectivity: a self neither autonomous nor self-contained, but rather open to greater forces.

Self-annihilation is not, first and foremost, a strategy, a means of worldly liberation; the relationship between the two is different: to destroy the self, one must have a certain level of autonomy, a self to destroy. As the French mystic and philosopher, Simone Weil, wrote more than six hundred years after Marguerite Porete, "We possess nothing in the world—a mere chance can strip us of everything—except the power to say 'I'. That is what we have to give to God—in other words, to destroy."⁸

In medieval Europe, however, women did not have the power to say "I"—at least not in a way that bore weight against their brothers, husbands, or the church. If a woman refused to be married, it was to save herself for a male God, her "heavenly bridegroom."⁹ She was either to remain in the home, subject to the authority of a father or husband, or be subject to the church under monastic rule, which demanded that nuns be completely isolated from the world. Mairie D'Oignies began to harm herself "because she clearly did not have power over her own body." That's how Jacques de Vitry puts it, who probably meant that she couldn't control her desire, but his words suggest something else, perhaps truer: that her body belonged to a man. She had just been married, but hadn't yet convinced her husband to be celibate. Her self-subjugation might therefore be seen as a way of reclaiming her right to her body. A subjugation *of herself for herself*.

7. *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*, transl. Ellen Babinsky, Paulist Press International U.S., 1993
8. *Gravity and Grace*, Simone Weil, Routledge 1952.
9. *Two Lives of Mairie D'Oignies*

Is this also the case of self-harm in general? Might it also be a way of simultaneously destroying and claiming power over oneself? That is, in any case, how I have experienced it, from both the inside and outside — when I've been so full of grief or shame that I didn't know what else to do, or when I've been close to someone who hurt themselves: an enclosed, self-sufficient activity, a loop that shuts out everything else. In Mairie's case, the men to whom she was beholden, whose authority she had to circumvent not to be seen as a heretic or completely without protection. First her husband, and then later Jacques and the other priests of Oignies, and then all the pilgrims and wealthy men who came to claim something from her: counsel, a prayer, an exorcism.

A thought: the ascetic and self-mutilating religiosity that occasionally shines through the hagiographies of Marie and the other ten women constituted a threat to the patriarchy because it simultaneously challenged masculine authority and made the religious woman inaccessible to men, taking both the form of attack (self-generated stigmata, the muddy footprints on the church floor) and withdrawal, into the forest, into the commune, into the long, silent fasts that rendered these women useless. And beneath it all an inner transformation was taking place: a becoming-nothing that is also a becoming-God, insofar as God might fill the space the self has left behind. In Marguerite Porete's words, in the sixth stage: "This Soul, thus pure and illumined, sees neither God nor herself, but God sees himself of himself in her, for her, without her ..."

But when the soul lives within a woman who herself lives within a patriarchal system as dominant and pervasive as it was in 13th century Europe, self-annihilation does not necessarily lead to liberation, but can also take the form of self-effacement. "Because she could not endure the company of the men whose devotion frequently impelled them to visit her," writes Jacques, Mairie left the hospital in Willambroux in 1207 and traveled to Oignies, where she lived as a hermit in close contact with a local Augustinian cloister. This was likely to find peace and quiet, not constantly to have to negotiate her position with the church, but it was also a capitulation, a preparation for death. On her arrival, Mairie already predicted she would die in Oignies, and told Jacques exactly where in the church her body should be buried. Over the following years, she prayed, held vigils, and fasted in increasingly manic rhythms, until she was no longer capable of much else. In the last ten chapters of the *Vita*, Jacques describes how she embraces her self-prophesied death, how she called on it, made it arrive: many days of uninterrupted hymns, prayers, and half-visionary, half-rambling biblical interpretations, and then, silence and unbroken fasting. Lying in the bed that had been

placed in the middle of the church, and then, under the open sky, she ate nothing for fifty-three days, languished, lost consciousness, and breathed her last breath.

Mairie disappears here. First, she is veiled by Jacques' gaze, which makes her protracted death appear a celebratory liberation from her flesh, her frail limbs relics, her last day a wedding day. And then she becomes inaccessible to me, as she was to those around her. She plunges into herself, becomes mute.

There is a kind of suffering here I don't understand. It might seem obvious to see her death as a last act of resistance — or last subjection — but I don't feel capable of interpreting it. I know that aversion to food, the desire not to consume anything, but for me it lasts a few days at most, and is indistinguishable from my desire to be *less*, less of a *man*. The aversion to inhabiting a gender always looking to satisfy its desire, to assimilate the world in its image. (A key aspect of the male gaze of the hagiographies: the complete failure to grasp the one turned away. The tendency to take the one turned away, and especially the woman, as an invitation. Even when she is beside herself or unconscious, even when she is dead, she offers meaning.)

Still, this sense that my attempt to empty myself comes from a position of excess and autonomy. That my desire to destroy my enclosed and willful self is also a form of resisting the position I've been gendered to occupy. But is it also possible that the autonomous and impenetrable subject—who occupies such a central place in the misogynistic and anthropocentric culture of the West—is, in reality, a subject created in the image of a man? And in that sense, not worth anyone striving for?

That thought also makes it necessary to insist that the self-destructive spirituality practiced by Mairie and her contemporaries possibly constituted a project of liberation, which didn't need to end in self-effacement, and might have led to new ways of life. Before she moved to Oignies to begin her slow process of dying, Mairie lived near the hospital in Willambroux for fifteen years, surrounded by a group of trusted female companions. Jacques writes little about this period of her life, which makes me imagine things: their lives without men, how they took care of each other and created the necessary structures for their ascetic practice, their ecstasies and visions. How they read and wrote and taught each other, working to increase their strength: tending the land, taking care of the animals, building houses, trying to become self-sufficient so that they could materially divest from the patriarchy as well.

It was around this time, between 1190 and 1225, that beguine movement started and had its first, informal phase.¹⁰ Mairie D'Oignies was previously thought to be a kind of founder, but most historians today agree that the movement started spontaneously and didn't have any unifying figure: small communities of women looking for something similar—often leaving parents, husbands, and children behind to find it—sprang up in multiple places in the Low Countries within a short period of time. They had no established rule or central order. They organized themselves in small, non-hierarchical communes that shared their land and traded freely, a kind of anarcho-communism. Most of them worked, either with textiles or the land, or as nurses and teachers, so that they could support the withdrawn life of contemplation that seems to have been so important to them while still playing an active and visible role in social life. They became a kind of threshold figure, capable of crossing the border between the religious and worldly spheres, over the course of a life or a day: beguine and celibate for a period of time and then married, or vice versa; wandering from their houses, which often lay on the city outskirts, to the church and back again, working in town or the fields during the day to retreat into prayer, reading, and mediation at night.

Their border-crossing quickly became a threat to those in power. Around the year 1230, local and regional lords — in collaboration with the church and a number of religious orders, especially the Dominicans — began to gather the beguines in large, enclosed architectural complexes, known as “court beguinages,” which consisted of apartments and workshops set around a centrally-located church. The complexes were a kind of town within a town; they could accommodate up to 1500 people. And they were legitimated by language that strongly recalls that used by contemporary nation states to legitimize discrimination, increased police force, and states of emergency: they were “a necessary protection against a threat.” In a number of foundational charters of 13th century court beguinages, both ecclesiastical and worldly authorities claim that they intend to protect the local beguines from the danger of sexual assault associated with wandering through market squares and inns on

10. My account of the history of the beguines is primarily based on Walter Simons's *Cities of Ladies – Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200–1565*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

their way to church and back home.¹¹ It makes me wonder whether the kinship between the patriarchy and the modern states is exactly that: both legitimize their existence by claiming to protect against a threat that they are responsible for creating. The state uses a “state of emergency,” the patriarchy the threat of sexual violence. And to give this threat the appearance of a necessary condition, of a law of nature, both the state and the patriarchy rely on an image of humans, and especially women, as inherently sinful. Christianity delivers it in the form of original sin, a burden that the women of the middle ages bore the greatest weight of: in the story of the Fall they became the cause of sin, and in medieval, neo-Platonic images of the world as pure body and desire, the source of all kinds of sin, even when they were victims of sexual assault (the blame, which, to this day, is often placed on victims of sexual assault can accurately be called medieval).

In reality, the patriarchy’s problem with the beguines was not that they were women wandering freely about town, but that they no longer could be identified as such. As the Franciscan theologian Gilbert de Tournai wrote in a letter to the Pope: “There are among us women whom we have no idea what to call, ordinary women or nuns, because they live neither in the world nor out of it.”¹²

In their very way of life, the beguines broke with the categories that the patriarchy used to classify a woman’s life: worldly (*in* the world, under the authority of a father or husband) or religious (outside of the world, under the authority of God by the laws of the cloister). A beguine

11. The vicar of Tongeren, wrote, with the support of the Dominican order, of the motivations for the construction of court beguinages in 1245: “Since devout maidens commonly called beguines chose and acquired houses for them in our parish of Tongeren, outside the gate known as the “hospital gate,” in order to pursue more peacefully the contemplation of the divine and to be further removed from the disorder and clamor of lay people, we wish to grant them that just peace. Therefore, so as not to allow the opportunity or reason for them to run about and err, which might result from attending parish churches in the town, especially because they live so far away from these churches that they must pass market squares and streets and even by inns, and because on high feasts they find themselves submerged by crowds of the populace in the main church of Tongeren, where they might eagerly observe these people while being dangerously exposed to them (...)” (Simons, *Cities of Ladies*).

12. *Gender and the Medieval Beguines*, Abby Stoner: www2.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/beguine1.htm

life was neither, *neither nor*; it wasn’t classifiable. Sidestepping the *worldly/religious* binary, the beguines were able, for a time, to escape the category of “woman” as defined by the patriarchy and took on the power to define themselves. The historical sources don’t say much about how, only that there was—as there is beyond any binary—a proliferation of possibilities: of ways of life, of collectives small and large, of various handcrafts, saints to pray to, male and female too: the Virgin Mary as bride, Jesus as mother, nursing with his open wound, drawn closer and closer to his breast.¹³

I think it was the possibility of the beguines’ autonomy, glimpses of power to define themselves or not, that the patriarchy couldn’t handle. That was why they were gathered in these complexes. Their daily routes delineated by the roads and paths that ran through them, always along a wall or in the shape of a cross. Unlike nuns, they were allowed to leave the complex during the day, but now that all their activities were gathered in one place, they had little reason to do so. Official rules were enforced, a prioress was appointed and a scriptural father assigned to be their confessor. It was a way to manage them, to monitor them for orthodoxy. Otherwise, they couldn’t know what they were doing in their houses at night, what they were teaching each other and their students, which new forms of theology they were making, which forms of knowledge they shared and how. When a form of life collapses existing identity categories, when bodies no longer correspond to their labels, a space opens in which actions, thoughts, and practices cannot be controlled — in which even bodies themselves cannot be identified. Here, by way of conclusion, an attempt to let the beguines speak:

Beguine. Most use the word about religious women not bound to a cloister; others to describe our gray-brown clothes, neither bleached nor dyed. But some have told me that it comes from Albigensis, or Albi, the lecherous town in southern France where there was the outbreak of heresy. And others that it refers to one

13. Caroline Walker Bynum provides a particularly thorough and insightful account of the multifaceted—and often fairly queer—forms of female spirituality in the High Middle Ages. See, for example: *Jesus as Mother – Studie in the spirituality of the high middle ages*, University of California Press, 1984, and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast – the religious significance of food to medieval women*, University of California Press, 1988.

who stutters, mumbles, speaks unclearly, as if fallen into their prayers, a prayer so private it cannot be heard. I think that the latter must be right because the learned always suspect us of our language. That we read the scriptures unlearned and misinterpret them, that we say one thing and mumble another; once we were depicted with bulging, amber eyes, and forked tongues. Not here, but in the house of our sisters on the other side of the river, and above the painting there stood: Beguine. And yet some of us have begun to take the name, those who have purchased property; they call their residences "beguinages" and have appointed a magistra, a prioress, someone in charge, approved by a priest or prior. I know that Clarisse occasionally acts the role of leader here, but that was never the intention. We meant to live together, in our collective renunciation of power: of what follows from property and the ability to say I, to exercise one's will, to decide for others. I thought that the latter would be gone with the former. I understand that the knowledge of the suspicions that surround us make Clarisse afraid and make her cherish what the others say we are. But are we even beguines? Are we not mere women living together in poverty, from our own harvest and the work of our hands? Are we not mere farmers, doctors, teachers, weavers, and blacksmiths? Did we not labor on our ancestral land, did we not stand in the field, feel the grain-brown expanse pulling ourselves out of ourselves and know: we could be so full of God that nothing else would be left? And did we not take to the cities to find each other? Or to find support in chastity, when a farmer bought the land and thought we should be part of the purchase? Or were we already in the city, finding each other through the tenderness of our hands? Do we not observe the canonical hours, morning, afternoon, and evening, and make the time between an unbroken prayer? And do we not forget them if Jesus's wound draws us in, if he asks us to drink or stick a finger inside? Do we not think of him, if it is him we love most? Or of the Virgin, if it is she? Does she not pass us her child, as a mother gives her son to a nurse, and do we not receive him and kiss his face, as if we were eating a piece of fruit? And do we not let ourselves be married to her, if that is what she wants of us? Do we not know our desire, and do we not follow the path that will make it flourish until it too exceeds us? Is it not so? Are we not many?