Proceedings of the World Conference on Women's Studies, Vol. 9, Issue. 1, 2024, pp.1-9

ISSN 2424-6743 online
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17501/24246743.2024.9101

THE BEGUINES. EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF FAITH, INDEPENDENCE AND LABOR IN LATE MEDIEVAL BELGIUM

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Abstract: This paper explores the complex dynamics of women's choices in late medieval Belgium, focusing on an often-overlooked option in the rest of Europe: becoming a Beguine. In a society where women were largely constrained to the roles of wives, mothers, or nuns, the Beguine movement emerged as a groundbreaking alternative for unmarried women, offering a unique blend of religious devotion and economic independence. Drawing on extensive research conducted at the Universitätsbibliothek und Bibliotheksturm in Leuven and the private archive of theologian Hans Geybels in Scherpenheuvel-Zichem, this study examines the lives, motivations, and socio-economic structures of the Beguines and their Beguinages. It highlights their contributions to the textile industry, education, and charitable work, showcasing how these communities challenged traditional gender roles and established themselves as economically self-sufficient entities. By enabling women to live autonomously and circumvent patriarchal constraints, the Beguines opened new pathways for spiritual fulfillment and independence. Ultimately, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of women's agency, positioning the Beguines as pioneers in redefining women's roles within the constraints of late medieval society.

Keywords: Beguine, work, religion, financial autonomy, labor, medieval

Introduction

In the Late Middle Ages, the relationship between women and credit was highly significant in Italy and Europe. Women possessed property in the form of a dowry, and they had two main choices: marriage or entering a convent. The dowry market was one of the most significant economic and social phenomena from the Middle Ages to the early modern period, revealing the high price paid by women, often sacrificial victims to mercantile society (Lightfoot, 2009, p. 43). The condition of women characterized all levels of medieval culture. Even though medieval society and its cultural expressions were largely shaped by male dominance, women made important contributions to technical innovations in both rural and urban work, as well as to economic development—critical for major changes in the organization of labor and the formation of a new relationship between work and daily life (Molho, 1995). Formally, dowries were considered the property of the wife, though their administration and control typically remained in the hands of her husband. Despite the limited freedom women had to manage their dowries, the underlying economic mechanisms can be better understood through a broader and more intricate examination of their lives (Olivero, 2017, pp. 80-85). The status of women during the medieval period was deeply entrenched in the prevailing culture, reflecting a society marked by male dominance (Bellavitis, 2001).

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In the case of marriage, the property passed from the hands of the father to those of the husband. Even though the married woman remained the owner of the dowry credit, she couldn't exercise any rights over it. The administration of the dowry was the responsibility of the husband, and in the event of widowhood or separation, theoretically, it reverted to the woman's family, such as fathers or brothers.

Many orphaned or poor women lacked a dowry, giving rise to a particular institution, the Monti dotali, with the *Monte del Matrimonio* of Bologna being a significant example (Chabot & Fornasari, 1997; Carboni, 1999). In a society that expected women to become wives or daughters, another seemingly independent option emerged: taking the "veil". In this case, monastic life, free from familial and marital constraints, provided a space for intellectual promotion where women could read and hold specific and recognized responsibilities. However, whether or not a woman had a dowry determined the type of life she would lead within the convent. A woman without a dowry was less likely to enter a monastery, just as she was unlikely to marry. The act of leaving home, cutting one's hair, taking control of one's destiny, and choosing a different life was a symbolic gesture of freedom.

The dowry became a significant financial contribution to the husband's economic activities and the success of establishing a new family during the 13th to 15th centuries. Merchants' household accounts from that period consistently recorded the dowry amount alongside debts and credits, highlighting its importance. The presumed freedom of choice women had in the medieval and early modern periods, whether opting for marriage or the convent, was often constrained by family strategies and social and financial considerations (Carboni, 1999, p. 11). The dowry influenced the marriage and social position of married women, while the convent offered an alternative path for those wishing to avoid a traditional life. However, it is important to note that, in both cases, women brought wealth with them. In the case of higher social classes, such as daughters of kings or aristocrats, the dowry had great value, and these women were treated with respect. They did not impoverish anyone because the interested parties had wealth, unlike those in lower social classes (Carboni, 1999, pp. 26-29). Even though the administration of the dowry was in the hands of the husband, women were not bought; rather, they brought wealth to the future family. In medieval society, women held various roles, including peasants, aristocrats, and merchants. They interacted with credit not only as beneficiaries but also as benefactors. Especially among high-ranking women, such as queens and princesses, dowries often included royal possessions, which were sometimes used to find female monasteries. This demonstrated these women's ability to act autonomously (Rapetti, 2019). Women also played a role in urban economies, especially in the commercial and artisanal sectors, where their skills were valued. However, to obtain credit and trust, financial resources—often represented by dowries—were necessary. Marriage and monastic vocation represented two sides of the same coin in the female condition during the Middle Ages and early modern period.

The Beguines, however, offered a distinctive third option—a communal and independent lifestyle blending religious devotion with economic self-sufficiency. Based on extensive research conducted at KU Leuven University in Belgium, this study examines the lives of the Beguines, their motivations, and the socio-economic framework of the beguinages through the study of bibliographic and archival sources. Thanks to access to the Universitätsbibliothek und Bibliotheksturm in Leuven and the private archive of theologian Hans Geybels in Scherpenheuvel-Zichem, this paper references three fundamental texts for analyzing the relationship between faith, independence, and work in the beguinage: *De Begijnhoven - Oorsprong, geschiedenis, inrichting* by Jozef Maria Philippen

(1918); *Oorsprong en betekenis van de Nederlandse begijnen en begardenbeweging: vergelijkende studie: XII.-XIII* by Alcantara Mens (1947); and *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* by Walter Simons (2001).

This study adopts a historical-comparative approach, based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources, including archival documents, historical texts, and recent studies, to explore the role of the Beguines in late medieval society; this approach aims to contextualize their experience in relation to the alternative life choices available to women of the time, such as marriage and monastic life. The study also sheds light on the Beguines' contributions to the textile industry, education, and charitable work, challenging traditional gender roles and showcasing the role of the community as an economically independent entity, allowing women to live autonomously and escape the constraints of patriarchal structures. Ultimately, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of women's agency in late medieval Europe, highlighting the Beguines' role as pioneers in forging alternative paths for women seeking spiritual fulfillment and independence in a society that predominantly restricted their choices.

Freedom, Ambiguity, and Complexity in Women's Lives

The Beguinage emerged as a third option for women who did not wish to marry or enter a monastery. This movement spread primarily in Northern Europe, particularly in Belgium and the Netherlands, but also in France, Germany, and Italy under different names (McKelvie, 1996; Böhringer, Kolpacoff & van Engen, 2014; Miller, 2014). These were evocative places where one can still sense a magical atmosphere that seems to transport one back to the 13th century. Each Beguinage had a unique energy and a different story to tell. However, few know the true history behind these places. There is the story of “many holy maidens (sanctae virgines)” who “had gathered in various places [in the diocese of Liège]; they despised the temptations of the flesh, scorned the riches of the world for the love of the heavenly spouse in poverty and humility, earning their meals with their own hands. Although their families were wealthy, they preferred to endure difficulties and poverty, leaving the family and the father's house rather than live in riches or remain in danger amid worldly splendor” (De Vitry, 1215, p. 547).

To understand the history of the Beguinage, one must start with the women who lived there. We know about them from *vitae* written after their deaths by men who promoted their lives. These men wrote favorably about them, seeing them either as ascetics under strict ecclesiastical supervision or as potential nuns (Simons, 2001, p. 47). But was this only the impression of the *vitae* authors, or was it perhaps the only reason they supported them?

The Beguines were women living a life free from institutional constraints. The movement’s origins can be traced back to the 11th and 12th centuries, consisting of women who no longer wanted to lead the lives they had and were consequently marginalized. They chose a life free and independent from family ties. Some opted for a cloistered life, while others joined convents and communities of like-minded women. Still, others embraced the uncertain life of wandering. However, all of them strove for celestial perfection, achieved only by those who lived by the work of their hands. Many women were Beguines for a short time before transitioning to traditional monastic life. They concluded their lives as nuns following a monastic rule, such as Ida of Leuven or Hadewijch of Antwerp. Hadewijch,

a 13th-century mystic and poet, played a significant role in the Beguine movement in the Low Countries. Known for her visionary writings, letters, and poetry in Middle Dutch, she deeply influenced spiritual figures like John of Ruysbroeck and is recognized for her profound theological insights and literary mastery (Beukes, 2020). While Ida of Leuven, initially drawn to a Beguine-like life, pursued her religious calling despite her father's opposition. She first dedicated herself as an anchoress, a solitary religious figure akin to a Beguine, living in devotion without formal vows. Later, she joined the Cistercian Abbey of Roosendael, fully embracing monastic life (Faesen, 2007).

The status of Beguines remained obscure to the outside world. There was no clear social category to place them in. They eluded categorization and standardization, challenging dominant authority with their existence and defying socio-cultural assumptions (Leenhardt et al., 2022). They lived according to the ideal of piety: chosen chastity, gratuitousness, and obedience. The Beguines were not the creation of a single individual but of a group of women—a *Communitas*. They never constituted an orthodox monastic order. While religiosity and piety guided the foundation and daily routine of Beguinages, these communities differed radically from monastic convents. Beguines could leave the Beguinage to marry or reintegrate into secular society (Frigo & Fernández, 2019). Women took care of themselves, initially dividing into two groups: those leading a sedentary life in convents or Beguinages and those leading a nomadic life preaching and begging "Bread for (the love of) God."

By the 12th century, convents were already overcrowded, and matters worsened with the Fourth Lateran Council's decree in 1215, which banned the formation of new religious orders. The ecclesiastical authorities did not always have a clear understanding of these small groups that emerged, split, transformed, or merged. This raises the question of why some women, often poor and defenseless beggars, preferred to face the Inquisition's stake, being labeled as heretics, rather than reintegrate into society.

In 1216, Jacques de Vitry obtained permission from Pope Gregory IX to establish a community of disciplined Beguines. Later, in 1233, Pope Gregory IX himself recognized the Beguine movement through the bull *Gloriam Virginalem*. In 1262, Urban IV took the protection of all Beguines in the diocese of Liège and ordered the city's dean to ensure their safety (Dufrasne, 2009). However, during the Council of Vienna (1311-1312), there was a violent reaction against these "suspect" groups of Beguines, and repression continued until all sisters were "transferred" to enclosed and well-ordered communities. Clement V condemned the Beguines and Beguinages as heretical during this period. Only in 1318 did Pope John XXII, with the bull *Ratio Recta*, reintegrate the Beguines into the Church after six years of exclusion. This episode underscores the complexity and fluctuations in the Church's perception of the Beguines and their movements, initially suspecting and persecuting them, then accepting and reintegrating them into the ecclesiastical community.

After 1318, local ecclesiastical authorities began to regard the Beguine lifestyle as a significant transitional phase between secular life and the strict regimen of convent life. It was seen as suitable for "all virtuous daughters or widows who desire to escape the dangers of the world and serve the Lord worthily, as virgins or widows, but who are not strong or ready enough to make permanent vows and enter the cloister, or who desire to attempt a separation from the world through this beginning [step], and then perhaps take more severe and perfect orders" (Simons, 2001, p. 34). Scholars such as Alcantara (1947) and Philippen (1918) highlight the limited opportunities within established religious orders as a driving force behind the emergence of Beguinages. Constraints on the expansion of

monasteries prompted the formation of female communities, initially near monastic or hospital settings, which eventually evolved into distinct Beguinages. The proliferation of Beguinages in the 13th century was attributed to the liberties afforded by urban environments. Rather than living solitary lives, some women preferred the autonomy of communal living, enabling them to pursue a religious vocation while engaging in occupations such as teaching for sustenance.

Unlike traditional nuns, Beguines refrained from taking vows of poverty but committed to leading humble, modest lives through labor and refraining from worldly demands (Simons, 2001, p. 35). However, their reliance on secular sources of income suggests that a significant portion of their daily activities were non-religious. Consequently, a woman seeking purely religious fulfillment within a Beguinage might have found herself disillusioned, as the semi-religious lifestyle might not have aligned with her vocational aspirations, potentially leading her to seek fulfillment elsewhere.

Being a Beguine: Faith and Work

While many women in Belgium faced limitations in their rights, such as the inability to inherit or manage their fortunes independently, the Beguines stood out for their economic autonomy. However, "no Beguine was accepted unless she was considered reputable and authoritative, sound in mind and body for at least two years prior to entry, and entirely free from any hidden ailments. She was also required to possess a bed with matching linens and attire suitable for a Beguine" (Olyslager, 1978, p. 226).

In contrast to the restrictions imposed on other women, Beguines could inherit, make wills, and manage their properties. This financial independence allowed them to bring their belongings to the Beguinages, where, although part of the property became communal, they retained the right to possess and acquire individual properties through their work (Frigo & Fernández, 2019).

"Some women are rich and have rents, but most own little more than their clothes, personal effects they keep in chests, and their beds. Yet they are not a burden to anyone, for they work with their own hands, sustain themselves, spin wool, and finish fabric" (Simons, 2001, p. 48). This economic diversity among the Beguines emerged within the Beguinages themselves. For example, in the Beguinage of Ghent in 1328, some Beguines were wealthy, owning properties and rents, while others owned little more than their personal effects (Philippen, 1918, p. 281). The ability to own property and engage in a wide range of economic activities was not an exceptional phenomenon in the context of Northwestern Europe. Each Beguine was required to live with her purse and personally cover the expenses of accommodation and maintenance. Through textile production and wage labor, the Beguines not only ensured their subsistence but also lived independent and autonomous lives. This was particularly significant in an era when many societies were more patriarchal, highlighting that the Beguines lived in ways unimaginable in more traditional settings.

An important aspect of understanding Beguinages as institutions of collective action lies in their dependence on economies of scale and risk-sharing. The Beguines aimed to mitigate economic uncertainties by forming communal bonds, which also provided them physical protection, as seen in the nighttime closure of the enclosing walls surrounding many Beguinages (Philippen, 1918, p. 288). Economically, the statutes of the Beguines established strict criteria for admission, requiring women

to possess adequate income or be capable of working. Only women who met these requirements could be admitted.

Unlike idleness, the Beguines integrated contemplative prayer and humble work, following the model of Mary and Martha. This approach reflected roots in tertiary convents and other active female congregations. In Christian tradition, the figures of Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, represent two complementary models of spiritual life. The Gospel account in Luke (Lk 10:38-42) tells that while Jesus was a guest in their home, Martha was busy serving, while Mary sat at his feet to listen. When Martha complained that Mary was not helping with the household chores, Jesus responded that Mary had chosen "the better part". referring to her contemplative attitude. The Beguines, inspired by this duality, combined Martha's industriousness with Mary's contemplative prayer, seeing in these two sisters an ideal balance between action and meditation. This model suited their lay lifestyle well, as they led an intense spiritual life without entering formal religious orders while also engaging in practical work and serving the poor (Leclercq, 1957).

Within the Beguinages, social divisions persisted. Wealthier Beguines could afford to live alone in private houses, while poorer ones resided in convents or infirmaries. Notable were the contributions of noble families financing these communities, giving Beguines the responsibility to organize their communal life with a well-defined hierarchy and rotation of responsibilities.

Despite economic disparities, many Beguines sustained themselves through manual labor, specializing in weaving, a primary craft associated with this community. Weaving also included the garment finishing process, such as removing straw and wood pieces and knots from the fabric to prevent yarn entanglement. Initially limited to wool preparation, they obtained permission to weave in 1245. Even during textile industry crises, Beguines adapted by engaging in simpler activities like garment repair. The education of daughters of affluent citizens was another crucial aspect of their social commitment, demonstrating their influence in society (Philippen, 1918, p. 270). Beguines transitioned to embroidery, mending, laundering, and ironing linen.

In addition to textile activities and charitable works, some Beguines participated in agricultural work and raising animals, cultivating vegetables for the urban market. This demonstrates the remarkable diversification of their activities. Through weaving and other endeavors, the Beguines not only ensured their subsistence but also actively contributed to the urban economy. Furthermore, their involvement in charitable works, education for the young, and participation in various activities like agriculture reflects the diversity of their lives.

Despite challenges, such as repression during the Council of Vienna and condemnation by Clement V, the Beguines demonstrated remarkable resilience over the centuries. Their longevity can be attributed to a combination of structural and social factors that favored women's individual choices, including a decline in parental authority and a more favorable position for women in the labor market. Structurally, in addition to their distinctive architectural style, the internal organization of Beguinages diverged significantly from conventional convents or female communal arrangements. Rather than mirroring religious establishments, Beguinages exhibited structural traits akin to secular institutions like guilds. While referred to as "female guilds" in some literature, this association primarily stems from their involvement in textile production. They shared similarities in their grassroots establishment and substantial autonomy, lacking centralized coordination, a singular point of origin, or a founder

figure. While the convent model exerted some influence, it did not encompass the entire organizational framework of the Beguinage, which primarily consisted of individual dwellings.

Conclusions

In conclusion, exploring the history of the Beguines in the late Middle Ages reveals a complex and fascinating panorama of women's lives in Belgium and surrounding regions. Confronted with patriarchal restrictions and the prohibition on establishing new religious orders, these women found in the Beguine movement a unique path to pursue a religious vocation while achieving economic independence. The Beguinages, structured with a mix of religious principles and organizational elements similar to secular guilds, offered a valuable alternative for women seeking lives beyond the traditional roles of wives or nuns. Through the ability to inherit, manage property, and support themselves, the Beguines fostered self-sufficiency, blending contemplative prayer with manual labor and social engagement.

This autonomy allowed women to transcend societal expectations without facing the usual consequences of non-conformity. The Beguinages operated as economically independent communities, managing their own resources, properties, and legal obligations such as taxes and legacies. For centuries, the Catholic Church, often uneasy with women in positions of leadership, minimized the importance of Beguine achievements, preferring domestic roles for women. However, recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the Beguines' contributions as models of semi-religious independence and community-driven economy, thereby expanding our understanding of historical female agency. Moreover, in Northwestern Europe, favorable family structures and marriage patterns allowed women greater autonomy in shaping their lives, contributing to the emergence and growth of the Beguine movement. This flexibility fostered the spread and consolidation of Beguines across the region, unlike in the Mediterranean, where women faced more restrictive family expectations. Understanding these broader socio-economic factors helps contextualize the Beguines' endurance and success as a social movement that provided support, community, and an acceptable lifestyle choice within a largely patriarchal society.

The Beguines' financial independence and active participation in the economy, through activities like weaving, teaching, and agriculture, can be seen as early expressions of the modern pursuit of wage equality and financial autonomy for women. Their self-sustaining communities also serve as historical precedents for today's cooperative ventures and women-led economic initiatives. The Beguines' communal lifestyle resonates with modern movements such as co-housing and intentional communities that emphasize sustainability, equality, and cooperation.

The Beguines' mutual aid system remains relevant, especially as public welfare systems become increasingly limited, leaving communities to create their own support networks. Their community-led welfare approach offers lessons for contemporary feminist movements, challenging traditional dependency structures and pushing for expanded choices in women's lives, including the option to remain unmarried or follow non-traditional family paths. In parallel, their autonomy within a spiritual framework reflects current debates on women's leadership in religious communities.

While this study provides a foundation, the Beguine movement's significance promises ample opportunities for further exploration. Firstly, comparative studies between the Beguines in Belgium and similar communities in France, Germany, and Italy could reveal how diverse cultural and religious contexts shaped women's economic and social roles. Another promising avenue lies in quantifying the Beguines' economic impact through the analysis of financial records, tax data, and property transactions, which could illustrate the scale of their contributions to local economies.

Further research could also examine the cultural legacy of the Beguines, investigating whether their model influenced later movements for women's rights and economic independence. Additionally, the modern resurgence of Beguinages in Belgium invites an analysis of how historical models of communal living have been adapted to meet contemporary needs. By comparing these modern communities with their historical counterparts, researchers might uncover insights into the enduring appeal of collective and sustainable lifestyles, particularly for women seeking autonomy and support.

In sum, understanding the Beguines' legacy offers valuable perspectives for future research in gender studies, economic history, and social movements, deepening our appreciation for their pioneering role in the quest for female autonomy.

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