

## Power and Sainthood. The Case of Birgitta of Sweden

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POWER AND SAINTHOOD

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## HOW TO STUDY POWER AND SAINTS

**B**irgitta of Sweden (1302/3–1373) was a mother, visionary, counselor to a king, inventor of her own rule, saint, and one of the best-known medieval women in history. This study focuses on Birgitta of Sweden as an exerciser of power. I will concentrate on the beginning of her career when she still lived in Sweden; my main interest lies in the years between 1340 and 1349. This was an important period for Birgitta as a visionary, since she received the greater part of her recorded revelations during these years. She left Sweden for Rome in 1349 and lived there until her death. The main sources for my study are Birgitta's revelations. Birgitta and her collaborators started to record her revelations in 1344, and approximately seven hundred of them survive. Most of her revelations were written down in Sweden between 1344 and 1349.

I argue that Birgitta was a living saint who succeeded in gaining authority and exercising power, uncommon among women. I maintain also that the crucial factor behind her authority was that she was able to convince her different audiences by performing her sanctity successfully. My central questions are the following: What do power and authority mean in Birgitta's case? What were the conditions for her exercising of power as a woman and how did her use of power function in practice? I am particularly interested in investigating how Birgitta succeeded in establishing her status as a visionary and how she used power and authority. My approach is to contextualize Birgitta and her revelations historically as far as possible and to find out case by case how Birgitta exercised power during her early career. Although the chapters are built around certain themes, they are arranged chronologically. In this way Birgitta's development from a wife and widow to a powerful visionary will be investigated so that the significance of the context can be better clarified. Central concepts for my study are the notions of the living saint, performance, power, and authority.

### The Living Saint

Saints were such an everyday phenomenon in medieval times that Thomas Heffernan has proposed that “it is fair to assume that virtually everyone in the Middle Ages was exposed to the lives of the saints in one form or another.”<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Werner Williams-Krapp has observed that people perceived sainthood as a broader category than that established by canonization. Many people, even the “illiterati,” could venerate a person as saint even if she or he was never officially canonized. Usually medieval authors and scribes introduced the putative saints with the help of a biography, known as a *life*, or a *vita*. Revelations of the saint were typically a part of the *life*.<sup>2</sup> The hagiographical production contained many genres, for example, lives of martyrs and confessors, lives of ancient and recent saints, and lives written for the first time as well as rewritten lives. From the perspective of a historical approach, the recent or new saints’ lives are the most interesting. The eyewitnesses were still alive when they were recorded.<sup>3</sup> In Sweden, in Birgitta’s time, both ancient and recent saints were well known and the general features that defined sainthood were public knowledge. The same characteristics could be applied to living saints as well. To recognize a saint in their midst, people had to know what was meant by a saint.

The Italian historian Gabriella Zarri introduced the term “living saint” in her famous article “Le sante vive: Per una tipologia della santità femminile nel primo Cinquecento” in 1980.<sup>4</sup> She defined living saints as persons whom their contemporaries saw as saintly figures when they were still alive. According to Zarri, their prophecies and revelations could assure them an irreplaceable political and social role.<sup>5</sup> Aviad Kleinberg adopted the concept and developed its definition further in his famous study *Prophets in their Own Country. Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*:

The living saint could be given no formal (papal or other) recognition, for one could never be certain about his or her future activities. The saintly status of a living person was never established once and for all; the tacit “pact” between saint and community had to be constantly renegotiated.<sup>6</sup>

One could not become a living saint in an isolated place, in solitude. The saint needed followers, devotees, and supporters, who determined whether he or she was a saintly person. Interaction between the saintly person and her or his audience created the living saint. Unlike the status of a canonized saint, the status of a living saint was not permanent; it could be called into question at any moment. Consequently, the living saint had to renegotiate and confirm her position. It is this interplay—the

activity between Birgitta as the living saint and her audience—that occupies a major role in my study. In this respect, the most interesting situations are the ones that involved conflicts of some kind between Birgitta and other people. These cases are useful for showing what elements of power were at play. However, there are surprisingly few descriptions of such situations among Birgitta’s revelations.<sup>7</sup> It was therefore necessary to widen my approach and seek manifestations of Birgitta’s power among all kinds of revelations. In doing so, I paid particular attention to those revelations that seemed to be addressed to specific persons.

Anneke Mulder-Bakker represents one type of idea of the living saint in her book, *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*. The anchoresses in question are the mother of Guibert of Nogent (her name is not known), Yvette of Huy, Juliana of Cornillon, Eve of St. Martin in Liège, and Lame Margaret of Magdeburg. These women lived in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the Lowlands of northwest Europe. These five cases resemble the life of Birgitta in many aspects.<sup>8</sup> I argue that, similar to the recluses in Mulder-Bakker’s study, performing saintliness formed an important part of Birgitta’s day-to-day life as a living saint.<sup>9</sup>

Birgitta’s gender and the prevailing gender system were significant in determining the possibilities that Birgitta had and how she was perceived. My view on gender, shared with many other scholars, could be described as constructionist. I find the definition that Samantha Riches and Sarah Salih give in the introduction to their book, *Gender and Holiness*, especially useful: “Constructionist theories of gender need objects which are distanced in time or space in order to trace other constructions: it must be assumed that ‘male’ and ‘female’ are not constants.” They also suggest that “the boundaries between ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ are permeable, and that individuals could move on occasion between genders or adopt the attributes of another gender.”<sup>10</sup> This is apparent, for example, in cases where women imitate male saints as their role models. In Birgitta’s case, it is not only “womanhood” that is constructed as a social concept but also the understanding of what constitutes “widowhood” and “virginity” is negotiated. They are modes that define and confine Birgitta’s identity and options. Nevertheless, although the conventional limits frame women’s lives, it is also possible, within those limits, to create new opportunities for women to act in public, especially as widows.<sup>11</sup>

The age at which many medieval visionaries had their public breakthrough has recently been discussed in detail. There were many medieval women who, like Birgitta, were in their 40s when they began their public career, for example, Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) and Margery Kempe (ca. 1373–d. after 1438).<sup>12</sup> Anneke Mulder-Bakker says, regarding

the possibilities for these women in their 40s: “The examples show that many women from the Middle-Ages to the seventeenth century experienced the prime of their lives when they had reached maturity, while still not being of old age.”<sup>13</sup> The reasons for why the age of 40 is said to be the turning point in the lives of many women include the following: (1) since women were no longer of reproductive age, they were not physically important in this regard; (2) in their 40s the social life of women changed: for many their children had left home and many had become widows; and (3) in consequence, these women had the time and sometimes the opportunity to begin something different from their earlier life.<sup>14</sup>

Following the same line of thought, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski draws the following conclusion about the newly widowed Birgitta:

[Birgitta] began a “second career” after her husband’s death when she had reached the age of forty-one. Although she had had her first vision at age ten, it was only in her widowed and post-menopausal state that she began to receive divine revelations in great numbers and spoke out on many political and moral issues. She confidently put the state of widow above that of virgin and thus derived her authority from her age and widowed state, though her aristocratic family background also played a role in the great recognition granted to her.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, becoming a widow could mean a change for the better for a woman. She could be more independent and gain more power than earlier. This could happen, for example, by her taking over a part of her husband’s business. Religious writers emphasized that remaining a widow could mean newfound respect for a woman. However, remarriage was not uncommon, especially if the widow was young. If she was over 40, the question of remarriage was not seen as important, because conceiving children was no longer necessarily possible. However, if the widow was wealthy, she naturally became more attractive in the eyes of potential husbands or relatives.<sup>16</sup>

These are relevant issues for understanding Birgitta and her power after her husband’s death. Nevertheless, I would be more cautious than Blumenfeld-Kosinski in regard to how easy Birgitta’s transition to her “second career” was. The following questions are important to my study: How did Birgitta’s career as a visionary begin? How did widowhood and her past as a married woman affect her with regard to her wish to be noticed as a living saint? I will also seek to find out what the elements in her success as a visionary were. Was the key factor the fact that she was an aristocratic widow?

### Power and Authority

The issue of power has been discussed time and again in studies concerning medieval women, but there is no ready structure for the analysis of women and power in the Middle Ages. A general supposition is that, in a patriarchal society, women did not have access to “direct power,” which usually means being in charge of ideological, political, economical, or military power.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, in order to exercise power in male dominated areas women had to develop suitable strategies. Birgitta has been regarded as a powerful woman. But if she did not have access to “direct power,” how, then, did she exercise power in practice? I will seek the answer to that question with the help of research that has been done on power and authority.

The issue of power and medieval women has been touched upon in many studies and compendia.<sup>18</sup> Usually they do not provide a definition of power itself but allude to different aspects related to power. David Aers and Lynn Staley even deliberately decided not to offer any definition of power. They explained their decision as follows: “We are analyzing some extremely diverse relations of power and resistances to power, of domination, subordination and rebellion in thoroughly different, if related, domains of life; thus in our book the term power will develop a range of inflections as we respond to different materials and questions.”<sup>19</sup> Although I find this approach quite sensible I would not cease searching for definitions too easily. Even if these historians see defining the term “power” as futile or difficult, nevertheless, they use studies and concepts that derive from attempts at definitions. Although resisting definitions, the language that is used in scholarly discourses is not unaffected by the existing definitions.

For some scholars, generalizing women’s relation to power is unproblematic. Daniel Bornstein states that although women were barred from political office and subjected to the authority of their male relatives from around the year 1100 onward, they assumed public roles of unprecedented prominence in the religious culture of the time. Bornstein boldly maintains that active participation in religious life supplied women with access to power in all its forms, power that was otherwise denied them. “By carefully exploiting the institutional church...and by astutely manipulating religious precepts, which were principal source of the ideology of female inferiority, women were able to carve out for themselves broad areas of influence.”<sup>20</sup> Judging from the numerous studies about medieval women, Bornstein is in the right when he states that, although subjected to male authority, women did get access to power and influence. This did, indeed, often happen through exploitation and manipulation, but the question of how this was actually possible still remains unanswered.



As these few examples show, scholarly output concerned with the issue of power uses the term “power” in various ways. This reflects the multifaceted nature of both power and the sources. Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, the editors of *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, suggest that while power has usually been equated with “public authority,” scholars have now started to uncover many different dimensions and power relations. Instead of offering any direct definition of power, Erler and Kowaleski propose that female power is women’s agency in power relations and influence on other people. The important question of the conditions under which the female exercising of power is possible is addressed in their essays. Erler and Kowaleski, as do all the contributors in that volume, challenge the old dominant function of the so-called master narrative:

Whatever stance scholars adopt in analyzing changes in women’s power and influence, however, the current trend—itsself an outgrowth of post-structural inquiry—is to criticize the prevailing master narrative for its excessive reliance on political and institutional themes, its adherence to periodization that privileges clearly demarcated transformations in public authority, and its inattention to gender as a category of analysis.<sup>21</sup>

Although a great deal of research on women and, gradually, on gender as well<sup>22</sup> has been conducted over the last 30 years,<sup>23</sup> rewriting the master narrative of the Middle Ages so that it includes women as well as other neglected social groups will still take time. Specialized studies on issues that have been left out of the old narrative—whether affecting elite members of society or larger groups of people—are needed. In the best case, it will be realized that the old master narrative can be replaced with many new narratives, all equally significant for understanding the human being in his or her social contexts. Although the power narrative is not the only one lacking, it is still an important one.

The problem with different theories is this: it is impossible to find a definition that would be applicable to all cases. As Steven Lukes puts it, “It is more likely that the very search for such a definition is a mistake. For the variations in what interests us when we are interested in power run deep . . . and what unites the various views of power is too thin and formal to provide a generally satisfying definition, applicable to all cases.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, in what follows I will present those theorists who I think are most helpful in my search for a working definition of power and women in the Middle Ages. The sociologist John Garrard defines power in a more general way as “the ability to achieve intended effects.”<sup>25</sup> Another, somewhat similar definition is given by Michael Mann: “Power

is the ability to pursue and attain goals through the mastery of one's environment."<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, who is perhaps the most famous scholar in current discussions on power, emphasized that he was more interested in what makes a human being a subject than in power. However, he soon realized that a human being is placed in very complex power relations. Therefore, power is active in any relationship in which one wishes to direct the behavior of another. Foucault also suggested, echoing Max Weber's idea of resistance,<sup>27</sup> that "in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations."<sup>28</sup> Of particular interest for the Middle Ages is Foucault's idea of what he called "pastoral power." According to him this was more typical in Christianity than any other religion. Pastoral power is defined by the following features:

1. It is a form of power the ultimate aim of which is to assure individual salvation in the next world.
2. Pastoral power is not merely a form of power that commands; it must also be prepared to sacrifice itself for the life and salvation of the flock. Therefore, it is different from royal power, which demands a sacrifice from its subjects to save the throne.
3. It is a form of power that does not merely look after the whole community, but each individual in particular, during his entire life.
4. This form of power cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies knowledge of the conscience and the ability to direct it.<sup>29</sup>

Through these four aspects, Foucault manages to describe important aspects of the spiritual power of pastors in the Middle Ages. The importance of considering the afterlife, individual salvation, and knowing the inner thoughts of people were important ingredients of that power. The last issue connects knowledge and power, which is central in the exercising of religious power.

Foucault understood that power is always present in human relations and he emphasizes that when he uses the word "power," it is usually shorthand for "the relationships of power."<sup>30</sup> Following Foucault's ideas is Bruce Malina's definition of power in the context of early Christian asceticism: "By power here I mean the social recognition of a person's ability to control the behavior of others based on the implied sanction of force."<sup>31</sup> In this definition, it is essential that other people recognize a person's power.<sup>32</sup> The implied sanction of force is equivalent to what Foucault meant by assuring one's salvation in the next world. These

aspects are also relevant when applied to fourteenth-century Western Europe: any probable sanction Birgitta could impose would have been of the spiritual type, the ultimate sanction being the destruction of one's immortal soul. The transcendent dimension was strongly present and most people took it seriously.

To investigate Birgitta's exercising of power it is important to discuss how she used it in practice. In order to do this I will concentrate on the manifestations of her power having first established where such manifestations are to be found.<sup>33</sup> The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theories are particularly useful in identifying these manifestations. Bourdieu is less interested in the normative political theory, "public authority," than understanding socially instituted limits on ways of speaking, thinking, and acting.<sup>34</sup> In Bourdieu's terms, the power that Birgitta had could be identified as "symbolic power," which Bourdieu defines as follows:

Symbolic power—as a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world itself, an almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic), by virtue of the specific effect of mobilization—is a power that can be exercised only if it is *recognized*, that is misrecognized as arbitrary.<sup>35</sup>

For Bourdieu, symbolic power takes place in and through a given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it. The belief in the legitimacy of words and of those who utter them creates this power.<sup>36</sup> In this respect, Bourdieu's view resembles Foucault's idea that power is always relational.

Some of Bourdieu's other concepts, such as habitus, symbolic capital, and field, are also useful in studying medieval women and power. According to Bourdieu, an individual's habitus is an outcome of his or her social background and personal experience. It can be described as internalized modes of thought and behavior and it changes from situation to situation.<sup>37</sup> In Birgitta's case, her rank, upbringing, education, and experiences of the world all contributed to her habitus.

Habitus is similar to symbolic capital, which consists of social networks, artistic abilities, and cultural knowledge. The field is a hierarchically structured social arena. Often the different fields overlap each other. Bourdieu calls the actors in the fields as "players." To succeed in different fields requires "a feel for game" because the circumstances are changing continuously and the players need a talent for innovation.<sup>38</sup> As regards the religious field, Bourdieu maintains that theologians exercised power over

lay people. In his opinion, agency was limited to religious professionals, whereas the laity did not have any instruments of symbolic production.<sup>39</sup> The laity is seen as a group of passive objects. This, as will be shown, is far too simple a picture of the laity's role in the religious field.

Many definitions of power contain overlapping aspects. Bourdieu's "players" might be defined, as Amy Allen does when searching for a definition for power, as using "power-over," "power-to," and "power-with." Allen has sought to provide a working definition of power by combining the ideas of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Hannah Arendt. Her aim has been to find a concept that illuminates domination, resistance, and solidarity. She suggests that concepts of power-over, power-to, and power-with should be defined as follows: Power-over is "the ability of an actor or set of actors to constrain the choices available to another actor or set of actors in a nontrivial way." Power-to means "the ability of an individual actor to attain an end or series of ends." Power-with is defined as "the ability of a collectivity to act together for the attainment of an agreed-upon end or series of ends." Allen draws this last definition from Hannah Arendt's idea of power as "the human ability not just to act but to act in concert." It is important to note that all three aspects may be present in the same situation.<sup>40</sup>

As I have pointed out above, the precise configuration of power varies from one context to another. To sum up the discussion thus far, my own starting point concerning Birgitta best resembles Foucault's definition of power: power means an individual's ability to act and to influence people to do as he or she wants. Allen's definitions of power-over, power-to, and power-with also succeed in capturing the dynamic and complex nature of power. The critical moment for those seeking power is whether their claim to power is recognized by an audience. This brings me to the concept of authority and its relation to power.

It sounds self-evident that a person who has power usually also has authority. But it is seldom asked what authority means. In her study of bishops in the early Christian period, Claudia Rapp has divided authority into three categories; this division may be useful for the study of medieval women and authority as well. Rapp calls the first type "spiritual authority." Its source is outside the individual; it can be called a *pneuma*, a gift of spirit given by God. This authority is self-sufficient in the sense that it exists in an individual independent of its recognition by others. But in order to exercise power with this kind of authority, the individual has to convince others. Second in Rapp's list is "ascetic authority," which is accessible to all. This form of authority is visible and depends on the recognition of others. It becomes manifest in an individual's appearance and lifestyle. The third type is "pragmatic authority," which is based on

action. These actions should benefit others. The public recognition of this type of authority is thus dependent on the extent and success of a person's actions.<sup>41</sup> I will keep in mind Rapp's three aspects of authority in my analysis of how Birgitta's authority was constituted. What was the role of Birgitta's experience of God or other heavenly creatures in regard to spiritual authority? And what kind of roles did ascetic and pragmatic authority play in how Birgitta was perceived?

Through examining the sources, I have come up with a simple working definition of how authority manifests in action: to have authority means to be listened to. This means that one not only attracts attention but also is paid attention to. This definition is especially helpful when determining whether a person has power or not. It helps the "measuring" of power because it shows whether the actions of a person had an effect or not. As regards the living saints, they had authority because people listened to them and believed in them. Their speech and other utterances were found to be significant by the audience, and this provided them with authority.

Grace Jantzen has posed the rhetorical question, "What better basis for authority could possibly be claimed than a direct vision from God?"<sup>42</sup> However, the mere claim to be spiritually inspired has never been sufficient to convince others. To gain public acceptance the living saint had to induce her audience to accept her authenticity. For this to be successful, social networking was valuable. Women in particular needed help from other people, particularly from theologians. As Bernard McGinn states about the medieval context, "It was virtually impossible for a woman to create new ways of living the gospel without the cooperation and approval of men."<sup>43</sup>

In the Middle Ages, spiritual authority was identified with the ability to teach *ex beneficio*, by the gift of grace. Henry of Ghent's (d. 1293) writings illuminate what this meant. He was concerned with the question of "whether a woman can be a doctor of theology." In practice, the issue was whether a woman could teach theology in public. Henry wrote a treatise on this subject in 1290. His conclusion was that there are two ways of teaching, *ex officio* teaching, which was purely a male domain, and *ex beneficio* teaching, in which the laity could also take part. Women were naturally allowed to enter the latter arena only, but there were two conditions: the woman had to have sound doctrine and only teach other women.<sup>44</sup>

Henry's position meant that any woman who claimed to speak on God's behalf should be investigated theologically. If the woman passed the test, only then she should be listened to. In other words, women had to prove to the theologians that their calling was genuine. The prerequisite that

women should only teach other women was not always followed, since often the divine inspiration delivered messages to all people, regardless of their gender. This was in accordance with the definition of prophecy in the New Testament: it should benefit the whole Christian community (1 Cor. 15:1–5).

Therefore, the discernment of spirits, *discretio spirituum*, which was stressed already in the New Testament (1 Cor. 12:10; 1 John 4:1) and which had always been important in the history of Christianity, became extremely popular during the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries.<sup>45</sup> The reason for this was that both learned clerics and the mystics themselves wanted to be on a sure footing about whether their visions were authentic. In his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, Augustine distinguished between three kinds of seeing: corporeal, spiritual (imagistic), and intellectual. John's visions in Revelations were an example of imaginative visions but, according to Augustine, the highest seeing was "through a direct vision and not through a dark image, as far as the human mind elevated by the grace of God can receive it."<sup>46</sup> Barbara Newman has observed that, in practice, as regards visions in the Middle Ages, Augustine's hierarchy of visions is not useful. Almost all the visions fell into the middle category, *visio spiritualis*. Visions of this type could be either false or true compared to intellectual visions, which were always true. In the intellectual visions, the soul could not be deceived.<sup>47</sup>

The importance of *ex beneficio* teaching for Birgitta was that it provided an official way for her to make her voice—and divine truths as she believed them to be—heard. An interesting question in my research is how the theologians around Birgitta related to this teaching, which they presumably knew well.

The aforementioned conditions belong to the so-called background perspective, as feminist theorist Amy Allen defines it. She suggests that a distinction between foreground and background perspective ought to be made. According to her, "from the foreground perspective, the aim is to describe the power relation that exists between individuals or discrete groups of individuals"—which, in Birgitta's case, was her and her audience. The background perspective offers a larger aspect, allowing the particular power relation to be situated in its historical and cultural context. The following issues could be considered as belonging to the background perspective: First, what kind of subject positions were available for individuals? Second, what kind of cultural meanings were given to concepts such as femininity, masculinity, and sexuality? Third, what social practices were relevant and how were they developed? Fourth, what institutional contexts need to be taken into account? They constitute the arena in which subject positions, cultural meanings, and social practices

are played out. Finally, it is important to understand the structural aspect of power relations.

Allen makes a further distinction between *deep* and *surface* structures. She clarifies the difference between these two as follows: “One might say that viewing power from the perspective of deep structures involves examining the ways in which power relations actually structure our social situation, whereas from the surface perspective, power relations are viewed as structure.”<sup>48</sup>

The two perspectives of background and foreground will help in analyzing and illuminating the richness and the complexity of medieval power relations and power of holiness. Interestingly, they also seem to coincide with the goal of performance studies as described by Richard Schechner.

### Performance

Richard Schechner, one of the leading figures in the field of performance studies, has described the goal of performance studies as follows:

We in performance studies need to pay closer attention to behaviors, to actions enacted, and of course to the complex social, political, ideological, and historical contexts not merely surrounding behavior, but profoundly interacting with it. Meaning radiates from these interactions, from what happens among performers and between performers and performance contexts.<sup>49</sup>

In general, Schechner’s description could be applied to the study of history as well. This quotation reveals what the new field of performance studies might bring to the study of history: the emphasis on interaction and the continually changing relations of actors can help a historian detect meanings and dynamics that are not easily observed in a static text.

The concept of performance helps answer the question of how Birgitta convinced people of her sanctity. Performance studies widen the perspective of the study of medieval living saints by taking the audiences into account. What is decisive for a performance is that it consists of the interaction between the performer and her audience. In conjunction with Kleinberg’s ideas, this inspired me to think of living saints as performance artists. They performed their sanctity and messages in front of different audiences and in different spaces.<sup>50</sup> An interesting analogy can be found among the early Christian ascetics, whom Patricia Cox Miller has called performance artists “enacting the spiritual body in the here-and-now.”<sup>51</sup>

Mary Suydam and Joanne Ziegler have also made the link between performance and the study of medieval mysticism. In 1999, they edited

a book called *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, which includes articles about medieval people from the perspective of performance studies. In her insightful introduction to the theme, Suydam emphasizes that one part of performance is that the performer does something in the presence of and for an audience.<sup>52</sup> Another crucial aspect is the dialogue between the performer and her audience. Very often, this dialogue involves the “intense interaction and struggle between one’s own and another’s world.” Suydam describes this dialogue: “Such dialogues in their attempts to make authoritative spaces and to claim sites of authority are performative and multidimensional.” These dialogues often occurred with the performances of ecclesiastical orthodoxy.<sup>53</sup> In Birgitta’s case, the ecclesiastical partner plays an important role but her audiences include many other groups of people as well. Birgitta acted on every level of society: she was acquainted with many members of the aristocracy but she was also in contact with servants and other nonaristocratic groups.

Suydam also points out that the gender and status of the performer and audience needs to be considered.<sup>54</sup> For Birgitta, her audiences included churchmen, aristocratic men and women as well as people of lower social status; all in all, they were quite diverse. One important audience for her performances was the heavenly, transcendental audience, whose implied presence had significance for the human audiences as well. The heavenly audience gave legitimation to Birgitta by impressing the earthly counterpart with her contacts with the divine realm and convincing them of her authenticity. As a woman, Birgitta was constrained by limitations and rules, which she sought to resolve.

Suydam addresses the relation of textual and acted performance in her article “Visionaries in the Public Eye. Beguine Literature as Performance.” She concludes, “The process of producing and receiving the text interweaves textual, dramatic, ritual, and performative elements.”<sup>55</sup> She has observed that it is not possible to separate the oral performance and written composition. Consequently, performance “may refer to *both* the vision-enacted-in-the-here-and-now *and* to the performance (dictation) of a written work.”<sup>56</sup> In Birgitta’s case, her revelations contain both enacted and written performance. What I mean by this is that, as texts, they contain situations that describe events that have taken place in reality, often under dramatic circumstances.

Since I am especially interested in the practical, historical situations behind the texts, performance studies offer a useful tool for analyzing practices. Speech, framing, and space are important components of performance. They belong to the contingent and strategic use of performances of a different kind. Religious performances can be viewed as a



method of establishing identity rather than merely expressing it. This runs parallel to the idea of the living saint who, from time to time, and from place to place, had to convince his or her audience.<sup>57</sup>

In this study, the religious identity is not understood as fixed but it is continually constructed through performances. The investigation of religious performances reveals the strategies behind them and how they were interpreted. This can yield new understanding about power relations in Birgitta's world.

Finally, one significant aspect of the performances is their transformative element.<sup>58</sup> This aspect is often connected with the transformation that takes place in the audience. Even a brief glance at Birgitta's revelations shows that she aimed to achieve such a transformation in her public. But in Birgitta's case the performance might also make the visionary's own transformation visible. She could use it to help legitimize her unusual changing role in society.

In the following chapters, I will explore how Birgitta's performance of her sanctity became her means of convincing other people. The interaction between her as the performer and her audience will be the focus of my research. In the first, second, and third chapters of this study I will examine the beginning of Birgitta's career as a visionary, what factors and influences lay behind it, and what kind of roles they played in establishing her religious authority. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters I will concentrate on Birgitta's exercising of power in specific situations during her time in Sweden until she left on pilgrimage to Rome in 1349. How did she exercise power with different people? This book will offer a narrative of Birgitta's life and social interactions in Sweden as seen from the perspectives of power and authority.

### **Revelations and History**

The textual history of Birgitta's works is complex. Some of her revelations were probably compiled as books before 1349, when she left for Rome. However, the main editorial work started at the time of her death when her confessors and collaborators, Prior Peter of Alvastra, Master Peter of Skänninge, and former bishop Alfonso Pecha began to prepare her writings and *vita* for her canonization.<sup>59</sup>

Since Birgitta's closest confessors were the same men who also produced and edited the bulk of the Birgittine sources, it is appropriate to introduce them briefly. First, however, a few words about medieval women visionaries' confessors in general. If a woman claimed to have received divine messages, she was supposed to inform her priest about them through confession. The confessor then judged whether they

stemmed from a good or a bad spirit. Often, in order to be able to better assess the visions, the confessor or a scribe wrote the messages down. The confessor's role was multifaceted. For example, he could act as controller, scribe, translator, interpreter, supporter, promoter, defender, teacher, and disciple. The confessor not only learnt the secrets of the visionary's heart but also stimulated and inspired the visionary further with his questions. As a result, the confessor became the woman's most important collaborator. Most importantly, from the point of view of historical research, he gave her the "home of literacy," which resulted in the rich source material on and by female mystics. It could even be said that to convince one's confessor was the first step in a successful career as a visionary.<sup>60</sup>

Birgitta's most important confessors during her years in Sweden were Subprior (later Prior) Peter of Alvastra<sup>61</sup> (1307–1390) and Master Mathias of Linköping (1300–1350). These two men became Birgitta's most valuable collaborators during her period in Sweden. During 1346–1349 Birgitta was looking for a suitable monastic rule especially for women but was not satisfied with any of the existing rules. The problem was solved when she received her first revelations concerning the new monastic rule for the Order of the Most Holy Savior (*Ordo Sanctissimi Salvatoris*). The two confessors played important parts in Birgitta's life and their roles will be investigated more thoroughly in chapters 3 and 4. Master Peter of Skänninge (ca. 1298–1378) became Birgitta's confessor probably around the time of her journey to Rome in the fall of 1349. Master Peter helped Birgitta to write down her revelations during her time in Rome, 1349–1373. He is known especially for arranging the music to *Cantus sororum*, liturgical chants that the sisters were supposed to sing in the future monastery.<sup>62</sup> According to Birgitta's revelations, his task was to act as Birgitta's scribe and translator whenever Prior Peter had to be in Sweden.<sup>63</sup> Master Peter's influence was at its greatest during Birgitta's Roman years, therefore he does not appear in this investigation except as the second author of Birgitta's *Vita* along with Prior Peter of Alvastra.

On the other hand, Alfonso Pecha (ca. 1327–1389), former bishop of Jaén, is mentioned many times. Birgitta became acquainted with Alfonso at the end of the 1360s in Rome. Thanks to his help and connections, Birgitta and her other supporters managed to advance papal approval for the *Rule*. Before her death, Birgitta also gave Alfonso the task of editing her revelations so that they could later be translated into many languages.<sup>64</sup> Alfonso took the commission seriously and also worked eagerly toward Birgitta's canonization. With canonization in mind, he also rearranged the Birgittine revelations and documents dating to her time in Sweden. Therefore, when interpreting the sources it is important to be mindful of his influence.<sup>65</sup>

The first book of the *Revelations*, *Rev. I*, contains 60 revelations of which 10 seem to be targeted at individual people or groups of people. The rest of the revelations in *Rev. I* feature Christ or Mary talking to Birgitta. The main theme of their messages is the general decline in people's attitude toward spiritual matters. The second book, *Rev. II*, likewise stems from the 1340s. It is especially targeted at the Swedish nobles and knights. There are also messages aimed especially at Swedish priests and spiritual leaders. In this book, Birgitta sets out the characteristics of the ideal knighthood that is pleasing to God. Crusades are sometimes needed for the salvation of the people. Priests are needed on the crusades, and therefore, in *Rev. II*, Birgitta describes in detail the roles of both knights and priests on crusades.

The third, fourth, sixth, and eighth books of revelations, as well as the so-called *Extravagantes*, contain material from both the 1340s and from Birgitta's time in Rome, 1349–1373.<sup>66</sup> Apart from *Rev. VIII*, the overarching themes are not as clear as they were in the first three books, instead, the revelations touch upon many different historical subjects relating to salvation. After Birgitta's death, her Spanish friend and confessor Alfonso Pecha edited together the revelations that were especially political in content, which came to form the eighth book of revelations. These revelation books are the most important sources for this investigation. Birgitta received the first version of the rule, *Regula Salvatoris*, *RS*, in Sweden; it also contains some interesting passages relevant to my study.

In addition to these books, there are two more, *Rev. V* and *Rev. VII*. The fifth book forms an exceptionally coherent unity among the revelations. It has been called the "Book of Questions," because it contains 16 interrogations by a learned monk to the heavenly judge. There are also the responses to these questions and, moreover, 13 revelations concerning the same subjects as the questions. Overall, this book discusses theological matters from the order of creation to the order of salvation. *Rev. V* has at times been seen as a testament of Birgitta's spiritual crisis at the end of the 1340s.<sup>67</sup> Due to its theological nature, *Rev. V* does not contain much autobiographical material that would be useful for my investigation.<sup>68</sup> Also, *Rev. VII* falls outside the scope of my study, because all the revelations in *Rev. VII* are from the 1370s.

Most of Birgitta's revelations are directed toward the public at large: no specific recipient is mentioned by name. Nevertheless, a surprising number of the revelations are aimed at specific individuals. The identities of these individuals are usually blurred in the final editions of the revelations, but judging by the content it is possible to detect that the original revelation was addressed to someone Birgitta knew.<sup>69</sup> There are usually two reasons for the personal revelations: either the person in question has

asked Birgitta for help<sup>70</sup> or—as more often seems to have been the case—Birgitta has offered the revelation without being solicited for it.

Some of the revelations bear features typical of letters, but usually the later editors have erased these traits as unnecessary.<sup>71</sup> The revelations reflect Birgitta's thoughts and life in the first years of her widowhood and as a channel of God. Although in the form of revelations, they contain a surprising number of autobiographical details.

In addition to Birgitta's revelations, the canonization acts, especially the *Vita* and many testimonies, provide a great deal of biographical material.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, some documents from the *Diplomatarium suecanum* (*DS*) contain information about Birgitta and her time. Unfortunately, there are many lacunae in the *DS* in the fourteenth century and the picture they give of fourteenth-century Sweden remains very sketchy.

Birgitta's revelations are written as divine messages for other people. Her role in them is that of a mediator, a channel of God.<sup>73</sup> The canonization acts were written from the viewpoint of Birgitta's canonization and, accordingly, they emphasize her saintly qualities. Consequently, in both sets of sources the idea was not to provide a chronological account of the historical Birgitta but a testimony of her holiness. For this reason many scholars have faced the difficulty of finding Birgitta's own voice in the sources. Even the dating of the revelations can be difficult.<sup>74</sup> In many cases it is impossible to know how much editing the revelations have undergone. But as Birgit Klockars has proposed, an astonishing number of the revelations can be assigned approximate dates.<sup>75</sup> Birger Bergh has observed that even Alfonso Pecha, to whom Birgitta gave the tasks of editing and publicizing her revelations, evidently did not make notable changes to her texts. This suggests that Alfonso, as well as Birgitta's other confessors, the two Peters, appreciated her revelations as divinely inspired and were not motivated to modify them considerably.<sup>76</sup> There are, nevertheless, many additions in the revelations, the purpose of which was to explain the context and consequences of the revelation. The additions are usually flavored with a hagiographic tendency. Some of them seem more reliable than others. As a general rule, those stemming from Prior Peter are usually regarded to be the most trustworthy.<sup>77</sup>

The revelations suggest that Birgitta was convinced of her role as a channel of divine messages. She perceived that she had been given a divine mission, which she wanted to fulfill as well as she could. In this sense, her role resembles the mission of the Old Testament prophets. As many scholars have observed, the Hebrew prophets were a great source of inspiration and even role models for Birgitta.<sup>78</sup> Christ and Mary are most often among the divine interlocutors but Birgitta also has conversations with angels, saints, and deceased people.

Birgitta's visions belong to the genre of revelations. They can be categorized, for example, as dream visions, poetic, political, contemplative, theological, corporal, intellectual, mystical, prophetic, aesthetic, or teaching visions.<sup>79</sup> Birgitta's revelations cover most types of revelation. However, what is more important for my approach than typology is how the revelations were produced, used, and received. What happened when the visionary and her audiences met is also important.

While reading the revelations I have been particularly interested in what they reveal about the historical context of Birgitta and her thoughts.<sup>80</sup> She herself was convinced that she acted under divine command, as a mediator of divine truths. Nevertheless, I will try to understand the revelations as a part of Birgitta's thinking and motivation. I will read and interpret the revelations as products representing the mind of Birgitta and of her human collaborators. Although the question of whether the revelations were or were not divinely inspired is largely irrelevant for my exploration, it is necessary to keep in mind that for Birgitta and many of her supporters they were considered to come from God. This is important in my intention to better understand the people and context of the medieval world.

The historical approach does not represent or include a certain explicit method that could be adapted and applied to whatever case of study. The method of my research could be described as "close reading" or "careful reading" and it contains many layers. The research questions direct the reader's gaze to find the relevant part of the sources. The questions arise from a dialogue with the themes that can be found in the sources on the one hand, and, on the other, from a dialogue with the approaches of different scholarly fields.<sup>81</sup> Both dialogues are influenced by personal choices and questions that seem relevant to me and my own time.

In *Practicing New Historicism*, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt give a similar definition of interdisciplinary studies, and ask how it is possible to locate the appropriate archives, what the sources might be, and how to "identify, out of the vast array of textual traces in a culture, which are the significant ones, either for us or for them, the ones most worth pursuing. Again it proves impossible to provide a theoretical answer, an answer that would work reliably in advance of plunging ahead to see what resulted."<sup>82</sup> As an answer they propose a method of "Luminous Detail." This means that they try to find the significant or "interpreting detail."<sup>83</sup>

The boundary between the event and its representation is hard to maintain, which leads to the most challenging question for historians: What is real? One answer often proffered is that the research could be described as a history of possibilities. Although specialists in literary

history, Gallagher and Greenblatt acknowledge the significance of contexts. They have observed that, in their scholarship,

the relative positions of text and context often shift. . . . We are fascinated by the ways in which certain texts come to possess some limited immunity from the policing functions of their society, how they lay claim to special status, and how they contrive to move from one time period to another without losing all meaning. Accordingly, we mine what are sometimes counter histories that make apparent the slippages, cracks, fault lines, and surprising absences in the monumental structures that dominated a more traditional historicism.<sup>84</sup>

I have found these observations useful when reading the monumental corpus of Birgitta's revelations. As a historian I am interested in finding the "touch of the real."<sup>85</sup> I am aware that it is difficult to find anything about "the real" or "the truth" in visionary texts of medieval women or in hagiographic texts concerning them. Some scholars even propose that these types of texts do not say anything about the reality of the women or the ideas of the women themselves. Many German literary historians, for example, Ursula Peters and Siegfried Ringler, have emphasized this. According to them, the literary conventions and religious leaders had control over women's texts and therefore it is difficult to uncover the women's own opinions.<sup>86</sup> One consequence of this view would be that it is not possible to say anything about real life and the intentions the women had. But there are other kinds of views as well.

The aspects under Gallagher and Greenblatt's scrutiny are close to those observed by historian Gabrielle Spiegel in her writings about what she termed the "semiotic challenge of the linguistic turn."<sup>87</sup> The linguistic turn has challenged the possibility of finding "the real" in history by declaring that the world and our knowledge of it is fundamentally linguistic in character. Consequently, many basic concepts in historical research, such as causality, change, authorial intent, stability of meaning, human agency, and social determination are called into question.<sup>88</sup> Spiegel took seriously the challenge of the linguistic turn for historians, and as early as 1990 she wrote,

The ability of semiotics to sweep the theoretical field was testimony to the power of its challenge to traditional epistemologies, to the technical virtuosity of its practitioners, and to the underlying coherence of its theory, against which those advocating a return to history rather weakly invoke collective "common sense" or individual, subjective experience. But while there are good historical reasons for historians to insist on the autonomy of material reality, they are not necessarily reasons, which make

for good history, and the semiotic challenge cannot be met simply by an appeal to common or individual sense and experience.<sup>89</sup>

Spiegel has sought answers to the semiotic challenge.<sup>90</sup> She maintains that the linguistic turn has offered some important insights that should be retained, but she also argues that a “historical turn” is now taking place among historians who have pondered the meaning of the world’s linguistic character for research. Spiegel sees that the new approaches have emphasis on “the historically generated and always contingent nature of structures of culture,” and this “returns historiography to its age-old concern with processes, agents, change, and transformation, while demanding the kind of empirically grounded research into the particularities of social and cultural conditions with which historians are by training and tradition most comfortable.”<sup>91</sup> Spiegel places emphasis on the moment of inscription of the source and speaks of the “social logic” of the text.<sup>92</sup> Spiegel’s proposed contribution to the new literary theories and the study of history has been the so-called theory of the middle ground.<sup>93</sup> Spiegel concludes, “Only after the text has been returned to its social and political context can we begin to appreciate the ways in which both language and social reality shape discursive and material fields of activity and thus come to an understanding of a text’s ‘social logic’ as situated language use.”<sup>94</sup>

Concerning the historical situation of visionary experience, Barbara Newman gives valuable insights.<sup>95</sup> She has explored the influence of different contexts on how visions were produced. There were methods to encourage the visions; often the visions were preceded by spiritual disciplining.<sup>96</sup> The medieval mystical writings offered lay people an opportunity for literary innovation, as they did not have the rhetorical restrictions of the learned world.<sup>97</sup> This seems to be applicable to Birgitta’s revelations as well. The general impression after reading the revelations is that the most frequently occurring pattern is that the visions were preceded by prayer. In practice, Birgitta sought answers to questions that engaged or occupied her mind and she often received answers while or after praying. Therefore, it was characteristic of Birgitta’s utterances that visions often arose from a practical situation and offered a solution to a problem. For this reason, her visions also contain a considerable amount of information about the historical context. They seem to reveal “glimpses of reality.” In many cases, the revelations reveal that the problem was related to a real person whom Birgitta knew. This knowledge is often enough for me to analyze the text for issues of gender and authority in Birgitta’s attempts at exercising power.

It is more challenging to read Birgitta’s *Vita* from a historical point of view. The *Vita*’s purpose was to bear witness and convince the reader of

Birgitta's sanctity. Its first version was left with Bishop Galhard of Spoleto in December 1373. Birgitta's confessors, the two Peters, Prior Peter of Alvastra and Master Peter of Skänninge, were the authors. The *Vita* was thus composed by two eyewitnesses and the intended readers were eyewitnesses as well. As Aviad Kleinberg has observed, a new saint needed authentication much more than a saintly person with a long and undisputed history. The data had to be credible and the "narrative ingredients in balance."<sup>98</sup> This was the case with Birgitta as a contemporary saint. Writing up the life of a putative saint in the fourteenth century differed from older, pre-twelfth-century lives. Unlike the earlier saints, modern saints were required to exhibit, in addition to the conventional saintly features, unique elements as well. There are probably many reasons for this but part of the interest in the individual was due to the emphasis on Christ's childhood, family, and affective understanding of his passion. This made people more carefully evaluate those who tried to imitate Christ. The writer had to take into account that the audience knew quite a lot about the protagonist and the content of the *Vita* could not contradict their knowledge.<sup>99</sup> Bearing this in mind while reading Birgitta's *Vita* suggests that although hagiographically flavored, some parts of it describe historical situations in her life. It is precisely these glimpses that interest me most.

The right to canonize saints became a papal privilege in the thirteenth century. In order to secure canonization, a life (Lat. *vita*) and witnesses were needed. Pope Gregory IX (pope 1227–1241) initiated the use of *articuli interrogatorii* in the investigation. This meant that the witnesses could not say whatever they wanted about the future saint. Instead, they were asked whether certain statements about the life and miracles were valid or not.<sup>100</sup> This was done in Birgitta's case as well. The process began in Rome in March 1379 and the hearing of the witnesses lasted until March 1380. Material from Sweden was attached to the acts as well. The canonization acts sought to construct Birgitta as a saint. However, she is not a constructed saint in the sense that the image of her in the canonization acts is not real. She had to be recognizable and the witnesses credible.<sup>101</sup> When reading the canonization acts my aim is to reach beyond the constructed saint whenever possible. From the perspective of my research, the most important witnesses in the acts were Prior Peter of Alvastra, Alfonso Pecha, and Birgitta's daughter Katarina.<sup>102</sup>

Research on medieval women has multiplied over the last 30 years. Nevertheless, monographs about Birgitta are rare, even though she is the most famous Scandinavian woman from the Middle Ages. The most important works in English are the absolutely vital English biography by Bridget Morris, *St. Birgitta of Sweden*<sup>103</sup> and Claire Sahlin's *Birgitta*



of *Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*. Sahlin's work is an important contribution to Birgitta as a prophet and how her sainthood was perceived after her canonization in 1391.<sup>104</sup> The lack of monographs is possibly due to the fact that the modern editions of Birgitta's revelations had been under preparation since 1956, and by the 1990s the work was still not finished. Besides, most of the previous research on Birgitta was in Swedish, which had some implications for scholarly interest in English-speaking regions.<sup>105</sup>

Although there are few monographs, Birgitta has been included in many articles about medieval women. In addition to Bridget Morris and Claire Sahlin, scholars such as Rosalynn Voaden, Nancy Caciola, Brian McGuire, Dyan Elliott, Ulla Williams, and Werner Williams-Krapp, as well as Barbara Newman have studied Birgitta and her revelations.<sup>106</sup> Birgitta was an inspiration to many laywomen, especially after her successful canonization in 1391. The Englishwoman Margery Kempe is perhaps one of the best-known "disciples" of Birgitta. The Swedish saint was not perceived as favorably everywhere. Jean Gerson, the Chancellor of the University of Paris, for example, sought to have her canonization reversed in 1415 at the Council of Constance.<sup>107</sup> Many of the studies mentioned above concentrate on Birgitta as a role model to other saintly women or on the attacks and defenses of her sainthood after her death.<sup>108</sup>

Often, in the studies mentioned above, Birgitta and her revelations are investigated thematically without paying attention whether she experienced them in Sweden or Italy. This, in my view, often weakens the argumentation considerably. I think that defining the context is important for both the interpretation and understanding of the revelations. For this reason, my goal has been to contextualize the revelations as much as possible. In this way, I also seek to avoid teleological deductions, for example, by using the revelations from the seventh book of revelations, *Rev. VII*, which was written during the last years of Birgitta's life in the 1370s, when interpreting events and revelations from the 1340s, three decades before.<sup>109</sup> For the same reason, I avoid interpreting Birgitta and her time in the light of later events or individuals.

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