# THE BEGUINES SISTERS

**Ray M. Wakefield**

Standard reference works routinely inform us that two great socio-religious movements changed the direction and character of medieval society: the monastic reform of Cluny and the early crusades. Each movement brought large numbers of men out of their native villages; each offered men a liberation from old, imprisoning structures; and each was pursued with a fervor that eventually produced outstanding literature. Of equal importance to these two great medieval movements and largely unrecognized in the standard works is the Beguines movement of lay sisters. It also brought large numbers out of their native villages to Beguinages in the Rhineland, the Low Countries and southern France; it also offered its adherents a liberation from antiquated, stifling structures; and it also was pursued with a fervor that eventually produced literary masterpieces. The difference, of course, between the Beguines movement and the other two is that it was a movement by and for women. The fact that we today know so little about the Beguines sisters suggests that they were twice oppressed: once by the male-dominated, misogynistic, Feudal-Christian hierarchy of the Middle Ages and then a second time by the Victorian scholars who ignored their important contributions to Western civilization.

The Beguines movement must be considered one of the best-kept secrets of the medieval world, and yet, at its height in the 13th century, masses of women set out from far and wide to journey to Beguines centers in Europe. The chronology and development of the movement are still best captured by the well-known four stages of L. J. M. Philippen:[1]

Stage I *Beguinae Singulariter*
In the late 12th and early 13th centuries, many pious women seek a life dedicated to Christ outside the formal vows of the convents. These women come to be known also as ecstatic women, the earliest Beguines sisters.

Stage II Early Communes
Early Beguines sisters (beginning of the 13th century) gather in communes and submit to a disciplined Christian life under the direction of a grand mistress. The papal curia of 1216, though unenthusiastic, gives these communes legal status.

Stage III Beguinages
Gregory IX's Bull of 1233 "Gloriam Virginalem" is interpreted as favoring the continuation of organized groups of lay women dedicated to a pious life. These Beguinages are deemed especially appropriate for widows and unmarried women.

Stage IV *Beguinae Clausae*
The Beguinages become more organized in the late 13th century, each with its own set of rules governing the lives of the lay sisters. During the 14th century, the Beguinages tend to become poor houses for women of the lower classes, especially in the new urban centers.

The four stages summarized above are proposed only as tendencies to help us comprehend a very diverse historical movement, but they provide such a neat picture that one must caution against accepting these tendencies as rigid constraints.

Ernest McDonnell's weighty research indicates quite plainly that the Beguines movement never achieves the unity of a monastic order.[2] To the very end, the lay sisters are not unified under a single monastic rule nor is there any stage during which *Beguinae Singulariter,* errant ecstatic women, are not to be found. Perhaps the best description of their distinctive character, as compared to nuns, is contributed by Bishop John Malderus of Antwerp in the 17th century:

> They (the Beguines) preferred to remain chaste perpetually than to vow perpetual chastity. Likewise they were more eager to obey than to vow obedience, to cultivate poverty by frugal use of their fortunes than to abandon everything at once.... They preferred to submit daily, as it were, to obedience within the enclosure than to be confined once and for all. In constant spontaneity they found compensation for perpetual claustration.[3]

The response to this lay sisterhood in the Low Countries was phenomenal. Women came in great numbers from all over Germany, France and Flanders. Jacques de Vitry, eminent churchman and friend of the lay sisters, wrote early in the 13th century that in Liège alone so many pious women had gathered that three times as many convents as existed would be needed to accommodate them.[4] McDonnell's efforts to account for this phenomenon share with other similar attemps a striking inadequacy.[5] We are asked to believe that thousands of women took to the road in the 13th century because:

1) fewer men were available for marriage on account of the guilds' demands for unmarried apprentices,
2) the convents had few spaces and those few spaces were pledged to the daughters of wealthy patrons.

Such "explanations" simply beg the question. The logic invites us to assume that women in the Middle Ages sought nothing more than death in childbirth or perpetual claustration. Men, after all, had the *media vita,* the bachelor life.

A new approach to historical research has emerged in the past decade, new in the sense that women's concerns are not automatically subordinated to men's and new in the sense that a mass women's movement such as the Beguines is not automatically considered of secondary importance to such male endeavors as the Cluniac reform or the early crusades. Foremost is Carolly Erickson's work, *The Medieval Vision.*[6] Her research on women in the Middle Ages reveals in poignant detail the overriding misogynic orientation of the medieval church and feudal society. Following the writings of the Church Fathers, especially those of the outspoken woman-hater St. Jerome, the church increasingly introduced sex-specific penitential cautions which victimized women, for example:[7]

1) *Relating to Childbirth*
Women were forbidden entrance to the church for 33 days after the birth of a son and for 66 days after the birth of a daughter; death in childbirth or immediately after childbirth or during pregnancy could result in unconsecrated burial for the mother.

2) *Relating to Menstrual Blood*
Superstitions resulted in women being blamed for birth defects, for crop failures or for any calamity that occurred after if was imagined that a menstruating woman had entered the church.

3) *Relating to Sexual Intercourse*
Women had to bear the physical trauma of childbirth as well as the spiritual trauma of having sinned by engaging in sexual intercourse; couples were considered unclean after lovemaking and unworthy of receiving the sacrament.

Erickson points out that men traditionally had the choice of the bachelor life, the *media vita,* whereas women could select only marriage or the consecrated life. Thus, for Europe's women, the Beguines movement offered a first chance for the *media vita,* for a measure of liberation from the oppression of church and society.

It is my contention, in contrast to McDonnell, that we must understand the oppression of women in medieval society in order to comprehend the spirit of liberation which brought thousands of medieval women away from their families to join the Beguines. As evidence for this contention, I offer the case of Hadewijch, an early Beguines sister. We know as much about Hadewijch as we do about most medieval writers, very little.Her own works indicate that she was born and lived near Antwerp. She died in the first half of the 13th century, and the period of her literary activity was probably the first quarter of the 13th century. Her letters indicate that she was a Beguines sister, as was Mechthild von Magdeburg, and that she lived in a Beguines commune. Her works survive in three major parchment manuscripts from the 14th century. They include the following:

1) 14 prose visions (influenced by William of St. Thierry)
2) 31 prose letters
3) 45 strophic poems (canzonas in the provençal tradition)
4) 16 works in prose or freer poetic form

Among those scholars who know Hadewijch's work well (e.g., van Mierlo,[8] Weevers,[9] dePaepe,[10] Guest,[11] R. Meijer[12]), the phrases describing her writings are those usually reserved for literary masterpieces: remarkable versatility, formal brilliance, emotional intensity and keen intellect. All consider her the greatest writer in Middle Dutch; R. Meijer calls her work a high point in the medieval literature of Western Europe.

Though it would be possible to demonstrate a spirit of liberation in many of Hadewijch's prose works or poems, I will focus my attention in what follows upon an analysis of a Hadewijch poem entitled in most anthologies "Oerewoet" ("Primeval Rage"). Below in the original, as transcribed from Manuscript C,[13] to which I have added a very free translation, a rendition which, as you can readily ascertain, makes little attempt to capture the verbal virtuosity of the original.

1. Ic groete dat ic minne
Met miere herten bloet

Mi dorren mine sinne
Inder minnen oerwoet

2. Ay hertelike suete minne
Volwasse na dijn wesen
So moghen mine sinne
Vander doet ghenesen

3. Ay herre overkare
waerdi dat ghi sijt
In uwe natuere so ware
let mijn ghedueren tijt

4. Ay oversuete raste
Haddi al dat uwe vercreghen
So waren mine laste
Verlicht die nu so weghen

5. Ay oversuete natuere
Hoe ghedoet die herte dijn
Ic en can ghedueren ene ure
Ic moet al der minnen sijn

6. Ay hertelike ioffrouwe
Dat ic so vele te u spreke
Dat doet mi nuwe trouwe

Van dieper minnen treke

I greet you and tell you
That I love you with all my heart's blood.
My mind withers
In love's primeval rage.

Oh, dear sweet love,
May I be worthy of your being
So that my mind
Escapes extinction.

Oh, dearest master,
May you become for me
What you are in your very essence.
That would give me some peace.

Oh, peace most sweet,
If I could receive your blessing,
It would lighten the burden
Which now presses me down.

Oh, nature of love most sweet,
How can your heart behave so?
I can't endure another hour
Unless I become one with love.

Oh, dear maiden,
That I speak so much to you,
That comes from my new-found loyalty,
From my profounder experience of love.

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| 7. Ay hadden wij al dat wij hebben | Oh, if we could achieve what we desire, |
| So waren wij beide so rike | We would become so powerful together |
| So soudemen luttel venden<br>Iewerinc onse ghelike | That our equal<br>Could not be found anywhere. |
| 8. Ay ic woede in moede mit spoede<br>Na tgoede dat ic der minnen volsi | Oh, I rage in my spirit with haste.<br>I pursue the goodness of love saturation. |
| Ay in woet zijn vroet dats spoet | Oh, to be wise in a rage, that is good; |
| Ja in woet van minnen vri | Yes, it's good to be free in a rage of love. |
| 9. Ic hake ic wake ic smake | I yearn for, I watch for, I even taste |
| Die sake die mi dunct soete | The thing that seems so sweet to me. |
| Ic kinne met sinne der es inne<br>Die minne mijns evelsboete | I know in my mind that love<br>Holds a release for my torment. |
| 10. Ic doghe ic poghe omt hoghe | I am good; I strive for high things; |
| Ic soghe met minen bloede<br>Ic groete dat soete dat moete<br>Boeten mine orewoede | I such them up in my blood.<br>I greet that sweetness which might<br>Ease my primeval rage. |
| 11. Ic beve ic cleve ic geve<br>Ic leve op hoghen waen<br>Dat mine pine die fine<br>In de sine sal al ontfaen | I tremble, I cling, I give,<br>I live with the great expectation<br>That my pain, my pain so fine,<br>Will embrace all things. |
| 12. Ay lief hebbic lief een lief<br>Sidi lief mijn lief<br>Die lief gavet omme lief | Oh, beloved, I love my beloved.<br>Beloved, be for me the beloved<br>Who gave up the beloved for the lover |
| Daer lief lief mede verhief | So that the beloved could lift up the lover. |
| 13. Ay minne ware ic minne<br>Ende met minnen minne u minne | Oh, love, would I were love<br>And loved you with the love of loves. loves. |
| Ay minne om minne gevet dat minne<br>Die minne al minne volkinne | Oh, love, for love's sake grant<br>That I know love's wholeness to the fullest. |

This poem, as is the case with much of Hadewijch's works, has resisted efforts by interpreters; instead of answers, they have produced such questions as:

1) What is the source of the intense passion, ot the emotional fervor?
2) What concept of *minne* is here at the center of Hadewijch's experience?
3) Why are both males and females addressed as partners in the *minne* experience?
4) Why is Hadewijch's syntax so ambiguous that we can interpret her role in the *minne* relationship as that of either beloved or lover?

These same questions are a part of almost every discussion of Hadewijch's verse, and scholars have tended to respond with obscure and abstract explanations. Depending on whether you read van Mierlo, de Paepe or Guest, you will associate *minne* respectively with one of the Trinity, or with the love relationship itself, or with a combination of the Trinity and the love relationship. Van Mierlo admits that he does not understand why the appellations "dearest master", "nature of love" and "dear maiden" all seem to refer to one and the same *minne* partner. He surmises that Hadewijch was "confused", that the flow of her emotions clouded her thinking.

I propose another possibility. *Minne,* in this poem and in many other of Hadewijch's owrks, is the fervor of liberation experienced by the early Beguines sisters. Erickson has documented the oppressed circumstances of medieval women and the new freedom of choice offered by the Beguinages. That Hadewijch experienced both oppression and life in a Beguine commune is evidenced in her letters. We should not expect this spirit of liberation to be less fervently expressed in Hadewijch's poetry than it would be in the revolutionary work of a monastic reformer or in a crusader's

lyric.

The poem begins in an almost leisurely fashion: a greeting, a message that *minne,* whatever it might be, is experienced to the very roots of Hadewijch's existence. The form is simple, almost relaxed: quatrains with an alternating rhyme scheme. The depth of feeling slowly intensifies until, in strophe 8, the form alters in an apparent attempt to mirror the charged emotional state of the poetess. Quite abruptly at this point, the pattern of sound correspondence, i.e., of vowel assonance and consonant melody, increases in density until in the last two strophes the words *lief* and *minne* dominate. What has been announced, almost casually, in strophe 1 as an experience of primeval rage has been realized as such acoustically in the concluding torrent of syllabic repetitions.

The key to this poem is to be sought and found in its heart, in strophe 8:

> Oh, to be wise in a rage, that is good.
> Yes, it's good to be *FREE* in a rage of love.

The intensity of feeling so obvious in this poem (and in so many of Hadewijch's writings) is not primarily the result of abstract philosophical concepts. She is expressing the ecstasy of the oppressed spirit set free. To treat this poem only as the expression of abstract mystical-religious concepts is to miss the point. How would one comprehend Walther von der Vogelweide's famous "Alterselegie" without recourse to the spirit of the crusades? Kazemier[14] has noted elsewhere in Hadewijch's work the ambiguity of sex roles in the *minne* relationship. Breuer[15] has also noted elsewhere the syntactic ambiguity of nouns that can be interpreted either as subjects or objects. Both ambiguities figure heavily in this poem, and neither is the product of Hadewijch's "confusion". To the masculine and to the feminine, the poetess is both lover and beloved; she is both loving and being loved. The Beguines movement helps us understand. The spirit of liberation infusing this poem goes beyond the tepid Bride-of-Christ cliché one finds in the literary histories. It is a revolutionary poem in spirit and in form. The experience transcends the common oppositions male/female and subject/object.

As the work of Erickson and others opens our understanding of women in the Middle Ages, the contributions of the Beguines sisters will be acknowledged by many who are now unknowing of their existence. They will escape from the dungeons of 19th and 20th century scholarly neglect just as they escaped from the stifling oppression of the male-dominated, mysogynistic Middle Ages.

## NOTES

[1]L.J.M. Philippen, **De Begijnhoven, Oorsprong, geschiedenis, inrichting** (Antwerp, 1918), pp. 40-57.

[2]Ernest W. McDonnell, **The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture** (New Brunswick, 1954).

[3]McDonnell, pp. 121-22. His English paraphrase is taken from: Joseph Geldoph Ryckel, **Vita S. Beggae, ducissae Brabantiae andetennensium, Begginarum,et Beggardorum fundatricis** (Louvain, 1631), p. 731.

[4]McDonnell, p. 119.

[5]McDonnell, pp. 83-85.

[6]Carolly Erickson, **The Medieval Vision** (New York, 1976).

[7]Erickson, pp. 195-97.

[8]One could list any number of van Mierlo's numerous scholarly publications on Hadewijch. I choose to single out the anthology below because it includes an extensive theoretical discussion in addition to scholarly notes on individual writings. Hadewijch, **Een bloemlezing uit hare werken,** J. van Mierlo (Amsterdam-Brussels, 1950).

[9]Theodoor Weevers, **Poetry of the Netherlands in its European Context 1170-1930** (London, 1960).

[10]N. de Paepe, **Hadewijch: Strofische Gedichten. Grondige studien van een middelnederlandse auteur** (Gent-Leuven, 1968).

[11]Tanis M. Guest, **Some Aspects of Hadewijch's Poetic Form in the 'Strofische Gedichten'** (The Hague, 1975).

[12]R. P. Meijer, **Literature of the Low Countries** (Assen, 1971).

[13]Hadewijch's verzameld werk, Handschrift Nr. 941, Centrale Bibliotheek Rijksuniversiteit Gent.

[14]G. Kazemier, "Hadewijch en de Minne in haar strofische gedichten," **TNTL** 87 (1971): 241-59.

[15]Wilhelm Breuer, "Das mystische Präsenzerlebnis des Frommen: zu Hadewijch, strophisches Gedicht Nr. 29," Werner Besch, et. al., eds., **Studien zur deutschen Literatur und Sprache des Mittelalters: Festschrift für Hugo Moser zum 65. Geburtstag** (Berlin, 1974): 169-84.