

THE ANGEL, THE ADVERSARY, AND THE AUDIENCE:
ELISABETH OF SCHÖNAU AND THE NEGOTIATION
OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY,
1152-1165.

by

HALEY WILLIAMSON

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Student: Haley Williamson

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This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Arts in the Department of History by:

Lisa Wolverton	Chairperson
George Sheridan	Member
Lori Kruckenberg	Member

and

Scott L. Pratt	Dean of the Graduate School
----------------	-----------------------------

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Haley Williamson

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This thesis examines the visionary writings of Elisabeth of Schönau, a nun of Schönau monastery, which was a double house in the diocese of Trier between 1152 and 1165. I argue that Elisabeth's works dynamically engaged various religious audiences (monastic and clerical) in order to provide spiritual guidance to diverse types of people (monks, nuns, abbots, abbesses, and clerics). Elisabeth's writings not only represent the self-reflection of a twelfth-century woman visionary, but also demonstrate the ways in which Elisabeth forged her spiritual authority by reacting to, and at times anticipating, the reception of her visions by her community. While Elisabeth rhetorically described herself as a passive receptor of divine knowledge, she actively worked to shape the practice of worship first within her monastic community and then, once her authority grew beyond Schönau, amongst a wider audience.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Haley Williamson

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene, OR
Willamette University, Salem, OR
University of Washington, Seattle, WA
Edmonds Community College, Edmonds, WA

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Arts, History, 2017, University of Oregon
Bachelor of Arts, History, 2012, Willamette University

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Medieval Europe
Women and Gender History
Religious History

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Employee, UO Department of History, 2015-2017

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Between the years 1152 and 1165, Elisabeth of Schönau produced a series of visionary texts with the help of her biological brother, Ekbert. These texts documented Elisabeth's visions of celestial figures, such as angels, saints, and the Virgin Mary, and her conversations with these beings over the course of thirteen years. According to Ekbert, Elisabeth would "transcend her own mind and see visions of the secrets of the Lord which were hidden from the eyes of mortals" regularly on Sundays and on liturgical feast days.¹ While in a trance, Elisabeth appeared as still "as if she were dead" before uttering "certain very divine words" in Latin and in German. These utterances, which often recalled scripture or depicted the liturgy, were recorded by Ekbert and the nuns who resided alongside Elisabeth at the double monastery of Schönau in the diocese of Trier. With the prompting of Abbot Hildelin, the abbot during Elisabeth's life, Ekbert subsequently translated, compiled, and edited the texts in order to produce Elisabeth's written visionary corpus.²

The underlying assumption of scholars has been that Elisabeth's written corpus was compiled, edited, and published as one unit. Scholars such as Anne Clark, Fiona Griffiths, and John Coakley have acknowledged that the texts within it are diverse in content and tone, but no study examines the texts attributed to Elisabeth or their

¹ Anne Clark, trans., *Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 41.

² Clark, Anne. *Elisabeth of Schönau: A Twelfth-Century Visionary*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 2.

meaning.³ Although Elisabeth's visionary texts were eventually compiled by Ekbert and subsequently transmitted as a single written corpus, I will argue that Elisabeth's texts were initially constructed separately with specific messages for varying audiences. By examining the differences between *Liber Visionum Primus, Secundus, and Tertius* ("Visionary Books One, Two and Three"), a series of ten sermons on a vision titled *Liber Viarum Dei* ("The Book of the Ways of God"), and a series of visions authenticating Ursuline relics discovered in early twelfth-century Cologne called *Revelatio de Sacro Exercitu Virginum Coloniensium*, we see that Elisabeth's didactic message targeted specific monastic and clerical audiences.

I argue that Elisabeth's works dynamically engaged various religious audiences (monastic and clerical) in order to provide spiritual guidance to diverse types of people (monks, nuns, abbots, abbesses, and clerics). In creating her texts, Elisabeth and her brother were acutely aware of their audiences. Therefore, Elisabeth's writings not only represent the self-reflection of a twelfth-century woman visionary, but also demonstrate the ways in which Elisabeth forged her spiritual authority by reacting to, and at times anticipating, the reception of her visions by her community.⁴ Furthermore, while Elisabeth rhetorically described herself as a passive receptor of divine knowledge, she actively worked to shape the practice of worship first within her monastic community and then, once her authority grew beyond Schönau, amongst a wider audience. Thus, her texts

³ Anne Clark does address the entirety of Elisabeth's written corpus, but focuses on how Elisabeth navigated her patriarchal world. John Coakley emphasizes Elisabeth's later visionary texts, after Ekbert took monastic vows, to argue that Ekbert was the director behind Elisabeth's texts. Fiona Griffiths, on the other hand, studied specifically the *Revelatio* in order to make her argument about twelfth-century discourse surrounding monastic male-female siblings.

⁴ The methodology for understanding the relationship between a saintly figure, like Elisabeth, and her audience is inspired by the work of Aviad Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

provide a window into the process of a visionary nun negotiating spiritual authority with her communities in the mid-twelfth century.

This process of negotiating spiritual authority was inextricably linked to events in Elisabeth's visionary career.⁵ In her formative visionary years, Elisabeth seems to have informed only her monastic sisters, and possibly Ekbert, of her visions. Midway through 1154, however, Abbot Hildelin became aware of Elisabeth's vision, which warned of God's coming wrath, and subsequently forced Elisabeth's visions into a wider audience. This moment seems to have precipitated a dramatic transformation of Elisabeth's visions and how those visions were documented. Because of the intimate relationship between Elisabeth's visions, her biography, and the visionary texts themselves, I will briefly outline what we know about Elisabeth's life.

Our picture of Elisabeth's life is based primarily on the visionary texts themselves as well as snippets of information found in Ekbert's letters and a *vita* of Ekbert produced by the subsequent abbot of Schönau. Elisabeth was likely born in 1128 or 1129 to a minor noble family in the Rhineland. She was not the only member of her family in a religious profession; in addition to her brother Ekbert, Elisabeth mentions another brother, Ruotger, who was a prior of a Premonstratensian house, and an uncle, also named Ekbert, who was Bishop of Münster.⁶ From her descriptions in the visionary books, both Ekbert of Münster and Ekbert of Schönau seem to have been well connected to the wider ecclesiastical network. Bishop Ekbert was a well-known figure in Cologne

⁵ Elisabeth's visionary career refers to the years between 1152 and 1165 when Elisabeth received divine visions and shared them with her community.

⁶ Clark, 12.

while Ekbert of Schönau began his career as a canon in Bonn where he was active in writing sermons against and prosecuting Cathar heretics.⁷

Elisabeth entered the monastic life at the age of twelve and at twenty-three began to experience visions.⁸ Between 1152, when she experienced her first vision, and 1154, Elisabeth's visions were recorded in episodic texts, often by the nuns at Schönau and occasionally by Ekbert, that were later compiled into the complete *Liber Visionum Primus*. As depicted in this first visionary book, Elisabeth's initial visionary years were marked by torment and physical illness. She described her "long and varied illnesses" that troubled her and distressed the other nuns, and could not be treated by any "human remedies."⁹ Furthermore, Elisabeth's first visions manifested her internal crisis of faith. She described the anxiety and fear of being harassed by the devil, or her "Adversary," as she called him. With the help of her monastic community, Elisabeth eventually expelled the devil and from that point forward her visions consisted of visits from celestial beings, such as angels and saints.

In the summer of 1154, Elisabeth had a vision in which her regular celestial visitor, referred to as the angel of the Lord, showed her a warning that became known to Abbot Hildelin. In order to share the prophetic warnings with a wider community, the

⁷ Clark, 12. For more on Ekbert of Schonau's role in anti-Catharism, see Robert Harrison, "Ekbert of Schönau and Catharism: A Reevaluation," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies UCLA*, (1991): 41 - 42. For more on the Cathars, see Mark Pegg, *The Corruption of Angels: The Great Inquisition of 1245-1246*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001). Pegg argues that the "Cathars" were a construction of learned contemporaries who conflated the beliefs of the *bons omes* and *bonas femnas* with the heresies described by Augustine. Ekbert of Schonau was the first to describe the heretics of the twelfth century with the term "Cathar," likely derived from the Greek *katharos* (pure) but possibly from derivations of "cat" or Augustine's *catharistae* (a branch of Manichees from the 4th century). Pegg, 17.

⁸ Barbara Newman, "What Did it Mean to Say 'I Saw'?": The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture" *Speculum*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (Jan., 2005), pp. 1-43.

⁹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 44-45.

abbot sent letters to other religious leaders and preached publically. In doing so, Hildelin opened Elisabeth up to skepticism and criticism by a wider community, which was extremely upsetting to her. By early 1155, Elisabeth was clearly feeling distressed as news of her visions had spread well beyond Schönau with a mixed reception. It was in this moment that Elisabeth wrote to Hildegard of Bingen, a visionary woman from the neighboring monastery of Rupertsberg, and Ekbert took vows to join his sister at Schönau.

Ekbert likely joined Schönau monastery in the spring of 1155. Not much is known about Elisabeth's life after Ekbert's arrival, even though the majority of Elisabeth's visionary texts were produced after he joined her permanently. We know that Elisabeth was commissioned by Abbot Gerlach of Deutz to write a text authenticating certain relics associated with the cult of Saint Ursula in 1156.¹⁰ Around the same time, Elisabeth wrote *Liber Viarum Dei* and traveled to Rupertsberg to meet with Hildegard.¹¹ At some point after 1155 Elisabeth produced the other two visionary books, a text on the assumption of Mary, and succeeded the *magistra*, or woman in charge of the nuns, as by the end of her life the sisters asked her who should replace her as their leader.¹² It was only a few years later, in June of 1165, that Elisabeth's physical illnesses finally ended her life. Despite the popularity of her visionary texts to a medieval audience, no *vita* of Elisabeth was ever produced.¹³

¹⁰ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 214 and 237.

¹¹ Clark, 20.

¹² Clark, *Elisabeth*, 272.

¹³ Clark, 11. There are 145 extant manuscripts that include Elisabeth's works.

This biography is constructed almost entirely from how Elisabeth was presented in her visionary books. How Elisabeth was portrayed in her visionary texts, however, is central to understanding the process by which Elisabeth and Ekbert cultivated spiritual authority with her audience. As evidence of this, after Ekbert's arrival there were two important changes to Elisabeth's visionary texts. First, the autobiographical traces found in her writings all but disappeared. In the visionary texts produced after 1155, Elisabeth did not insert much of her daily life or internal conflicts into the writing of her visions. Second, the tone and subject matter of her visionary texts changed dramatically, which suggests a shift in audience. While the Elisabeth presented in the texts before 1155 was conflicted, at times tormented, and often unsure of her visionary abilities, after Ekbert took monastic vows at Schönau she was much more confident of her visions; posed intelligent, theological questions to her celestial visitors; and dispensed advice to religious leaders. This dramatic transformation in how she was portrayed in her visionary texts, I argue, demonstrates Elisabeth's new rhetorical approaches, which aimed to communicate her expanding visionary authority to a different audience. After 1155, gone was the young visionary caught between the authority of her abbot and her divine command. In her place stood a remodeled Elisabeth who regularly conversed with saints and angels.

The question of Ekbert's influence on Elisabeth's visionary texts after 1155 has been the subject of recent academic debate. John Coakley, in his work on the relationship between holy women and their male collaborators or hagiographers, argues that Ekbert, in inserting himself into the texts, should be considered the "director" of Elisabeth's

writings.¹⁴ In doing so, Coakley argues that Ekbert all but excluded Elisabeth from the authorship of her visionary works. Ekbert, as a clerical man, thus exerted his “formal power” over Elisabeth by shaping her texts at the same time that he was fascinated by the “informal” power of his holy women subjects.¹⁵ While Coakley’s study of Ekbert’s involvement in the production of Elisabeth’s visionary record provides insight into the fraught relationship between siblings, his analysis does not account fully for the texts produced before Ekbert took monastic vows at Schönau. Although Ekbert was clearly involved in editing and compiling all of the visionary texts, including the first book of visions, Coakley’s analysis does not examine Ekbert’s relative absence from the first visionary book. In Elisabeth’s first visionary book, it is not Ekbert who is visible in the text; rather, it is Elisabeth herself and her monastic community. In order to better understand the relationship between Elisabeth, the visionary, and her communities, my work will analyze the rhetoric employed by Elisabeth and Ekbert to negotiate authority with monastics in and beyond Schönau as well as male clerics.

Anne Clark’s work on Elisabeth also emphasizes her relationship with Ekbert; however Clark argues that in spite of Ekbert’s involvement in the production of her written corpus, Elisabeth should be considered the author of her texts.¹⁶ Clark bases this analysis on a detailed reading of the extant manuscripts, discrepancies between various editions of the manuscripts, and a nuanced reading of tension between Elisabeth and Ekbert evident in the written record. In providing the biographical background on

¹⁴ John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 23.

¹⁵ Coakley, 23. Coakley borrows Andre Vauchez’s terminology to distinguish between the “informal” powers, or powers that do not come from a hierarchic type of status, but rather from personal charisma, and “institutional” powers, which come from a hierarchic type of power such as that exercised by clerics.

¹⁶ Clark, 67.

Elisabeth, detangling her texts and life from previous historiography, and applying second-wave feminist scholarship, Clark's study is unparalleled. However, in focusing on presenting Elisabeth to a modern feminist audience, Clark leaves open many alternative modes of analysis for Elisabeth's visionary texts, including the role of her community in Elisabeth's writings.

Ironically, the rhetorical strategies of Elisabeth's writings to appease her skeptical audience and ecclesiastical elites are precisely what make her works unappealing to modern scholars. Clark argues that Elisabeth's concerns "do not immediately correspond to modern feminist interests," especially when Elisabeth is often compared to Hildegard, whose textual corpus is more diverse and idiosyncratic.¹⁷ However, I argue that the very rhetoric that distances Elisabeth from modern scholarly interest was a calculated strategy to make her visionary works appealing to her contemporary medieval audience. In order to present her religious ideal, Elisabeth negotiated spiritual authority with her immediate monastic community and buried her own agency and authorship beneath rhetorical humility for her clerical audience.

My work, then, will analyze the changes in Elisabeth's visionary texts not solely as a project of Ekbert, but rather an intentional rhetorical strategy to appeal to specific clerical and monastic audiences. Regardless of Ekbert's involvement in the production of the visionary texts, Elisabeth's visions offered pastoral advice to her surrounding community. Her visionary texts, therefore, provide a window into the social dynamics between a visionary nun and her community, within and outside her monastery, in the mid-twelfth century. Using her written corpus to examine the relationship between

¹⁷ Clark, 3-5.

Elisabeth and her audiences, I argue that she attempted to convince her monastic and clerical audiences of her spiritual authority in order to shape their religious practices.

Spiritual authority, in this context, refers to the power that divine intermediaries, such as Elisabeth, had to shape the actions or beliefs of their community based on the community's faith in their saintliness. Coakley, in his study, defines this same phenomenon as "informal" or "spiritual" power as a contrast to the institutional power of male clerics, who were members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹⁸ For Elisabeth, her spiritual authority was contingent on her communities' belief in her visions as messages from God. Therefore, Elisabeth's written texts reflect the process by which she sought to negotiate her spiritual authority with first her immediate monastic community and, after 1155, with a wider network of monastic and clerical religious leaders. Establishing her authority as a celestial intermediary was the preface to exercising spiritual power over her communities in the form of giving pastoral advice.

The first chapter, then, will argue that Elisabeth's texts were pastoral in nature. While Clark suggests this by arguing that Elisabeth portrayed herself as a prophet, no study to date has explicitly delineated what Elisabeth's texts were intended to impart to her medieval audience. Fiona Griffiths, working on twelfth century monastic women, notes Elisabeth's participation in a widespread culture of monastic and clerical reform.¹⁹ This chapter will bring together these assumptions about the message of Elisabeth's written visionary texts to argue that she sought to shape the practice of worship to a monastic audience and to exhort a clerical audience to provide better pastoral care.

¹⁸ Coakley, 23.

¹⁹ Griffiths argues that Elisabeth was writing within the intellectual reformist milieu of Hildegard and Herrad. Fiona Griffiths, *The Garden of Delights: Reform and Renaissance for Women in the Twelfth Century*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

With the first chapter having established that Elisabeth's texts were pastoral in nature, the second chapter examines the different visionary texts embedded in Elisabeth's written corpus in order to argue that Elisabeth's audiences were monastic and clerical. I argue that her first visionary book addressed her immediate monastic audience while texts produced after 1155 targeted a wider male-dominated religious audience. The change in audience is evident in the subject matter and rhetorical strategies are dramatically different between the visions produced between 1152-1154 and 1155-1165.

Chapter three will examine the implications of the first and second chapters in order to understand the social dynamics between a visionary woman and her audience. Why did Elisabeth and Ekbert choose to rhetorically package her visions differently for a monastic audience as opposed to a clerical one? How were they shaped by the constraints on Elisabeth, as a woman and a visionary, as she sought to establish spiritual authority? This chapter will argue that Elisabeth's visionary authority grew, erratically and sporadically, first amongst only the women monastics at Schönau monastery and later amongst a wider, male, clerical audience. Her rhetorical strategy evolved as she navigated contemporary social perceptions of the role of a woman visionary and nun in relation to the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

CHAPTER II

TEACHING MONKS, NUNS AND CLERICS

In an undated letter, the visionary nun Elisabeth of Schönau exhorted Archbishop Hillin of Trier, “extend your pastoral staff over the flocks that you have received from the Lord to govern and guard.”²⁰ Archbishop Hillin, according to Elisabeth, had not been fulfilling his clerical duties in spiritual instruction and guidance of the men and women of his diocese. She sought to compel him to provide better pastoral care by reminding the archbishop of biblical passages that charged church leaders to be diligent in leading their flocks and by referencing her own experiences of divine visions. Elisabeth’s visions provided her with celestial knowledge and inspired her critique of Hillin. This plea to Archbishop Hillin to be a better religious leader is a clear instance in which Elisabeth used her intermediary role to provide pastoral advice, in this case playing the role of spiritual leader for the archbishop.

Elisabeth’s critique of Archbishop Hillin was not an isolated incident. Throughout her letters and visionary texts she pushed clerical men to “awaken” and “gently take care of all your sheep, for you have undertaken to govern and guard them.”²¹ In attempting to encourage and instruct men of the church, Elisabeth wrote a series of letters, such as the one to Archbishop Hillin, which exhorted individual abbots, bishops, and archbishops to provide better spiritual guidance to their communities.

This desire to hold clerics accountable for ministering to their followers mirrored contemporary discourse of church reform present in the work of intellectuals and

²⁰ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 236.

²¹ *Ibid.*, in a letter to the abbot of Busendorf. Here Elisabeth draws on the biblical metaphor of religious leaders acting as shepherds to their followers, or “flock”.

religious leaders.²² In the wake of Gregorian reforms of the late eleventh century lay people became increasingly worried about the state of their souls and turned to clerics to provide solutions.²³ Male clergy monopolized the “keys to salvation” and therefore were responsible for providing baptisms, communion, ordination, penance, last rites, and confirmation for the laity and for unordained monastics.²⁴ Elisabeth and her contemporaries – Hildegard of Bingen is one example – believed that the clergy were not adequately fulfilling this role and thus sought to compel them to provide better spiritual care to the laity and monastic people.²⁵

Additionally, Elisabeth’s contemporary climate was one of dramatic transformations in monastic practice. In some instances, these changes to religious life resulted in new monastic orders.²⁶ In others, monastic practices changed within the scope of established Benedictine custom, such as with the Hirsau reformist monasteries in Germany. Schönau monastery was a dependent house of Schaffhausen abbey in Swabia, which was a center of the Hirsau movement in the generation before Elisabeth.²⁷ The

²² Fiona Griffiths’ study on Herrad, a late twelfth-century intellectual, also places Elisabeth within this context of church reform. Griffiths argues that there was a reform movement with specific goals in the twelfth century; one of those goals was the instruction and preparation of priests. For more on the larger context of reform, see Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²³ R.N. Swanson, *The Twelfth-Century Renaissance*. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 10.

²⁴ John Cotts. *Europe’s Long Twelfth Century: Order, Anxiety, and Adaptation, 1095-1229*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2013), 111. Women’s monasteries in particular had difficulties at times securing a male cleric to provide these religious services. For an example, see Griffiths on Hildegard of Bingen and Guibert of Gembloux. Griffiths, “Monks and Nuns at Rupertsberg: Guibert of Gembloux and Hildegard of Bingen.” In *Partners in Spirit: Women, Men, and Religious Life in Germany, 1100-1200*, edited by Fiona Griffiths and Julie Hotchin. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014).

²⁵ Griffiths, *The Garden of Delights*.

²⁶ New monastic orders in the twelfth century include the Cistercians (see Berman), Augustinian canons, who were monastics and clerics (for more see Griffiths, *The Garden of Delights*, 47).

²⁷ Clark, 10.

ideologies of the Hirsau movement, with its focus on the establishment of nuns' cloisters and unifying of liturgical practices, likely influenced Elisabeth's pastoral critique of monks and nuns and desire for improved liturgical practice at Schönau.²⁸ Elisabeth's first book of visions, which was intended to shape the religious practice of her monastic community, clearly articulated reformist ideas associated with improving liturgical worship and re-centering prayer as the cornerstone of the monastic profession.²⁹

Elisabeth's pastoral message, then, emphasized both clerical and monastic instruction. As Giles Constable argues in his work, the twelfth century reformation yielded varying attitudes of canons regular and monks toward pastoral work.³⁰ In the case of ordained clergy, Constable argues that "pastoral work" referred to specific liturgical rituals and rites that only male priests and clergy could perform on the behalf of monastic or secular people. In Elisabeth's case, her critique of both the secular and regular clergy partially embodied this specific sense of pastoral care but also extended to the role of clerics in providing spiritual advice to the laity. For monks and nuns, her emphasis was on liturgical prayer. For the purposes of this project, I define pastoral care as the instruction of proper practice of ecclesiastical leadership, ritual and worship. Elisabeth advised her fellow monastics in the correct practice of liturgical ritual, critiqued clerics

²⁸ Clark, 10. Also see Constant Mews, "Hildegard of Bingen and the Hirsau Reform in Germany 1080-1180." In *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, edited by Beverly Kienzle, George Ferzoco, and Debra Stoudt, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 58 and 83.

²⁹ Heloise is often cited as an indicator of changes to monasticism in her appeal to Peter Abelard for a Rule for women. Heloise, "Epistola VI" in *The Letter Collection of Peter Abelard and Heloise*, translated by David Luscombe and Betty Radice, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013), 221. Constable also cites changes to the liturgy for monastics, especially in the performance of prayers and commemoration of the dead. Constable, 199-200.

³⁰ Constable, 235. The canons regular were clerics who ministered to the laity but did live in a monastic-like community and take vows. They differed from monks in that monks were not expected to minister to lay peoples.

for not providing that instruction to their followers, and modeled clerical pastoral care by providing spiritual guidance to lay people.

This chapter will argue that Elisabeth's texts were pastoral in nature in that they provided advice to monks, nuns and clerics on improving their practice of worship and serving their communities. The first section will delineate the nature of pastoral care as it pertained to monks and nuns at Schönau monastery. In exhorting her cloistered peers to become better monks and nuns, Elisabeth emphasized the importance of prayer in the liturgy, the correct practice of religious ritual, and the role of monks and nuns in praying on behalf of souls in purgatory. The second section will address the pastoral advice Elisabeth gave to clerics. Here I will explain how her texts constituted advice for clerics as well as provided a model of how clerics might advise lay people. It was with these two audiences in mind, monastic and clerical, that Elisabeth wielded her visionary abilities to provide pastoral advice to her religious contemporaries.

Teaching Monks and Nuns:

In describing Elisabeth's ecstatic visionary episodes, Ekbert stated that "since everything that happened to her seemed relevant to the glory of God and the edification of the faithful, they were for the most part written down in this small book."³¹ The edification of the faithful, especially monastics and clerics, was a central component of Elisabeth's pastoral message throughout her written corpus. Elisabeth encouraged her monastic peers to offer more prayers during liturgical worship, pray more on the behalf of secular donors to the monastery, and to perform established rituals with precision.

³¹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 42.

These actions, focused on more intentional prayer, would allow monks and nuns to become “children of the light and like the angels of God who, in the vigor of their contemplation, do not cease to gaze at their Creator and flow back to their source.”³²

Prayer and the Liturgy:

At the beginning of her visionary career, Elisabeth described how communal prayer had tangible outcomes, which benefited the members of her community. Around the end of May in 1152, Elisabeth was deeply distressed by the enduring presence of the devil, whom she called her “Adversary.”³³ In one instance, her Adversary appeared during prayers in the midst of Elisabeth’s fellow nuns, during mass, and physically assaulted her, so that she felt her “throat [was] being drawn tight by some strong hand so that [her] breath was almost totally cut off.”³⁴ In order to alleviate this distress, Elisabeth gestured to “the sisters standing around me to bring relics and recite over me prayers and the Passion of the Lord.”³⁵ In the following seven days, “the sisters and brothers came together as they decided to pour out communal prayers ... and mortify themselves in the presence of the Lord for my sake.”³⁶ Their communal, consecutive prayers were successful. Elisabeth was freed from her struggle against the devil and “saw a great light in the heavens, and behold, a dove of great beauty ... flew to me.”³⁷ The dove, who

³² Clark, *Elisabeth*, 169. From *Liber Viarum Dei* on the path for contemplatives, where Elisabeth explicitly places monastics.

³³ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

circled around Elisabeth three times before returning toward the heavens, was a sign: communal prayers could defeat the devil.

By providing this example at the beginning of her first visionary book, Elisabeth set the precedent that monks and nuns had the ability to effect spiritual change through prayer and devotion. Thus, Elisabeth established early on that intentional prayer could impact the celestial realm. In this moment, the additional prayers, self-mortification, and extreme fasting were all modifications to the practice of worship that ultimately resulted in freeing Elisabeth from her Adversary. By describing this contest between the monastic community and her Adversary as the pivotal beginning to her visionary career, Elisabeth not only instructed her audience that prayerful acts such as fasting and self-mortification worked to influence the celestial realm, she also demonstrated the power of communal acts of worship.

The power of prayer during the liturgy was proven again by Elisabeth about a year after she was freed from the devil's influence. On June 7, 1153, Elisabeth had a vision depicting the biblical precedent for Pentecost. Before the celebration of Mass, Elisabeth saw Mary, the "mother of the savior," huddled in conversation with the apostles, while a "flame of fire appeared above each of them, descending from above with a powerful force." At that moment, they all rose "with one mind" to begin proclaiming the word of God to the people "with gladness and great confidence."³⁸ After having this vision of the apostles and Mary, mother of God, Elisabeth's vision continued

³⁸ Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau*, 76. Clearly in reference to Acts 2. For the purposes of this study, I will use biblical quotes from the Vulgate, the Latin version of the bible; the Vulgate was the text available to Elisabeth and her contemporaries. The English translations are from the Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition.

during Mass when the flame reappeared above the priests performing the service. She states,

I saw a flashing beam of light extending from heaven down to the altar. The beautiful dove that I usually saw came down the center of this beam, carrying in its mouth a certain red thing that looked like a flame of fire, but it was a little larger than usual. With wings outspread, the dove first hovered over the head of the priest and there deposited what looked like a drop from that thing which it was carrying in its mouth. The same thing was done to the ministers of the altar who were vested for reading, and after this the dove sat on the altar.³⁹

The dove transmitted drops from the flame Elisabeth saw above the Virgin Mary and the apostles to the priest and ministers conducting the Pentecostal Mass at Schönau. By describing the dove distributing the flame to her priest and ministers, Elisabeth confirmed that the ritual of Pentecostal Mass was performed appropriately. As her Pentecostal vision continued, however, it was apparent that the liturgical celebration benefited from increased prayers.

While the priests were described as properly conducting the ritual of Mass, Elisabeth sought to correct the penitential actions of the nuns. Elisabeth turned to her *magistra*, the woman responsible for the nuns at Schönau, and told her to “exhort the sisters to devotion in prayers” for the remainder of the ritual, “hoping for the same thing to happen later.”⁴⁰ They must have done as Elisabeth suggested, for upon the conclusion of Mass, just as the sisters stepped forward to receive communion, Elisabeth “slipped from the hands of the sisters,” who were supporting her weight and “fell violently into

³⁹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 77.

⁴⁰ *magistre nostre*, in the printed Latin edition by F.W.E. Roth, *Visionen der hl. Elisabeth und die Schriften der Aebte Ekbert und Emecho von Schonau* (Brunn, 1884), 26 *magistra* is the title for the woman in charge of the nuns within a double monastery.

ecstasy” for the third time that day. Elisabeth’s final Pentecostal vision gave confirmation that the sisters’ prayers had been heard. She describes how “the aforementioned dove” flew to each of the sisters and distributed “to each something from what it was carrying in its mouth” as each sister came forward to receive the Eucharist.⁴¹

By encouraging her sisters to pray more during the service, Elisabeth provided pastoral instruction on the liturgical practice of her fellow nuns. Within the Pentecostal vision, Elisabeth provided two types of instruction to her audience. First, the priests performing the Mass were acting as they should and Elisabeth therefore confirmed that the performance of appropriate ritual had divine consequences. Second, she encouraged her fellow nuns to pray more during Mass and thus shaped the practice of the nuns’ worship. Increasing the prayers during liturgical worship resulted in each of the women receiving a piece of the dove’s flame, thus confirming the correct practice of religious ritual.

Prayer for Purgatory:

In addition to providing advice on prayer during the liturgy, Elisabeth also encouraged her monastic peers to offer more prayers for the deceased souls in purgatory.⁴² In one such instance, Elisabeth seems to have been prompted into asking

⁴¹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 76-77.

⁴² Count Rupert was a donor to Schönau monastery as described by Anne Clark. The other persons mentioned here are Elisabeth’s uncles, who were both clerics and likely donated to the monastery as well, though without archival evidence we cannot be sure. Matthew Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: The Middle Rhine Valley, 400-1000*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For more on the relationship between monasteries, their patron saints, and donors, see: White, Stephen D. *Custom, Kinship, and Gifts to Saints: The Laudito Parentum in Western France, 1050-1150*. (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988). White argues that in exchange for an economic gift of land or goods, a lay donor would require reciprocation from the monks in the form of spiritual gifts. White, 33 and 156.

after the spiritual wellbeing of the deceased Count Rupert of Laurenburg by his wife.⁴³ Within the context of a vision on the feast day of Saint Michael, Elisabeth asked the angel of the Lord, a regular celestial visitor throughout her visionary texts, what she ought to report to the wife of Count Rupert, “who is very concerned about him.” Count Rupert, the angel said, endured the most intense punishments with little hope for his liberation, though he did suggest that perhaps “frequent prayer” and alms might still save the count’s soul.⁴⁴ By describing the trials of Count Rupert in the afterlife and by suggesting that additional prayers and alms might save his soul, Elisabeth suggested to her community that the monks and nuns ought to provide more prayers on behalf of those in purgatory. Even a man such as Count Rupert, who clearly sinned enough to endure the most intense punishments, could be saved through the prayers of the community. This suggestion represents a central component of Elisabeth’s pastoral message to her monastic community: in addition to praying during the liturgy, monks and nuns were responsible for praying on behalf of those in purgatory.

Elisabeth also described how additional prayers from the religious of Schönau could benefit the souls of clerics, such as Theoderic and Helid, who were Elisabeth’s own maternal and paternal uncles.⁴⁵ In the vision, Theoderic stood in the entrance of an underground cave “filled with fire and smoking horribly.” Elisabeth asked the angel of the Lord if and how her uncle Theoderic could be liberated from this hellish torment, and the angel responded that Theoderic could indeed be liberated if “thirty Masses and thirty

⁴³ Clark identifies Count Rupert of Laurenburg, who helped establish Schönau monastery. His wife, Beatrice, is mentioned in Ekbert’s account of Elisabeth’s funeral, suggesting a relationship between Count Rupert, Beatrice, and Elisabeth. Clark, 13.

⁴⁴ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 111.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

vigils are celebrated and thirty alms are given” in his memory. The other figure in her vision, Lord Helid, who was “a God-fearing person” was tormented “in the mouth” because of his “habitual undisciplined speech.” Elisabeth similarly expressed her surprise at the treatment of her uncles in the afterlife and asked, “what kind of drink do they need?” to which the angel replied they must drink “hot tears” of alms and prayer.⁴⁶

These visions about the situation of Elisabeth’s clerical family members and Count Rupert imply that the monks and nuns at Schönau ought to give more prayers and alms in order to benefit the souls of these individuals. Alms and prayers, presumably provided by Elisabeth’s audience, were needed to save the souls of Theoderic, Helid, and Count Rupert. Even though Elisabeth did not seem particularly laudatory of these men, she nonetheless exhorted her community to pray on their behalf.

This advice of praying for souls in purgatory applied not only to men. Elisabeth also described a vision where she was shown three girls “walking near a river” with no shoes and very red feet.⁴⁷ The girls told Elisabeth that they were Adelheid, Mechthild, and Libista, three nuns from Saxony who “were aided by prayers less than was necessary” after their deaths. The lack of prayers on their behalf had subjected the girls to a cruel fate: they had been detained in purgatory for thirty years when only one year of “the services owed” would have redeemed their souls.⁴⁸ The girls asked Elisabeth if she “would ask your abbot to offer the divine sacrifice to the honor of God for our liberation and that all of the faithful departed, we expect that we would very quickly be liberated

⁴⁶ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 109.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

and be able to cross over to the delights prepared for us.”⁴⁹ By providing the example of Adelheid, Mechthild, and Libista suffering in purgatory, Elisabeth showed that anyone could experience a similar fate. The girls in her vision were not clerics or secular nobility such as Theoderic and Count Rupert. Instead, these young women were nuns who were supposed to move on from purgatory quickly after their deaths until the living failed to pray on their behalf. In this way, Elisabeth advised her audience that prayers for departed souls were always necessary and did not depend upon the perceived holiness of the dead. Even Adelheid, Mechthild and Libista, who were nuns and presumably less sinful than Count Rupert, Helid, or Theoderic, still required posthumous prayers.

In the case of Adelheid, Mechthild, and Libista, Elisabeth proved to her audience that increased prayers could result in redeeming souls of the departed. Elisabeth described how she disclosed the situation of Adelheid, Mechthild and Libista to her sisters and they prayed on behalf of those women. The following day, Elisabeth had another vision wherein she saw the girls received into “the fellowship of the saints.”⁵⁰ In exchange for the prayers of the sisters at Schönau, Adelheid, Mechthild, and Libista promised Elisabeth that they would remember the nuns. In this way, Elisabeth provided advice to her audience about how to perform prayers for departed souls; provided visionary proof that the prayers were successful in relocating the girls’ souls into the celestial realm; and suggested that their prayerful actions on behalf of Adelheid, Mechthild, and Libista would have a lasting impact in that they would remember the nuns’ actions in the celestial realm.

⁴⁹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 101.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

Correcting and Confirming Religious Ritual:

In addition to demonstrating the power of prayers, Elisabeth also frequently remarked on the relationship between Mass, the performance of the liturgy, and celestial signs. In one such moment, Elisabeth described how

I saw a dove descend from heaven and come as far as the right corner of the altar and rest there. Its size was that of a turtledove, and its whiteness beyond that of snow. Among the other collects, the lord abbot said the one that is, “God, to whom every heart is open,” and had proceeded up to the part that is, “Purify the thoughts of our hearts by an infusion of the Holy Spirit.” At that point, the dove flew to him and circled his head three times and returned to the place where it had rested before. Moreover, when the Sanctus was said, it came and rested on the corporal, and looked as if something red hung from its mouth.⁵¹

By describing how the dove, which symbolically represented the Holy Spirit, circled around the abbot during Mass, Elisabeth implied that the abbot’s performance of the liturgy connected the monks and nuns to the celestial realm. Here, Elisabeth did not need to provide any advice to the abbot; rather, she demonstrated that the abbot was performing the liturgy correctly. His performance of the ritual of the Mass encouraged a visit from the Holy Spirit and thus did not need correction.

In addition to exhorting her community to participate in increased prayers during the liturgy and on behalf of souls in purgatory, Elisabeth also instructed her community on how to perform religious rites. This included continuing to practice regular religious services even when external circumstances made it difficult. In one such moment, Elisabeth described how she and her fellow sisters were unable to see the liturgical celebrations of the monks due to flooding. In order to provide this service for her fellow

⁵¹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 52.

nuns, Elisabeth had a vision of the service and narrated it to the sisters. She describes how,

I had earnestly asked our brothers to celebrate the office of Palm Sunday that day in the meadow where we could see them. They were not able to do this because the brooks had flooded; instead, they conducted the service behind the church, where we were not able to see it. And the Lord respected the desire of His handmaid, and with the eyes of my mind I saw everything that they did there.⁵²

By envisioning the service as Elisabeth did, she was able to provide a second-hand account of the Mass for the sisters. In this instance, Elisabeth suggested that monastics ought to find alternative solutions when there were barriers to participating in the regular liturgical services. Her vision of the monks conducting the service functioned to encourage the women of Schönau to continue with the liturgical rituals in spite of the flooding.

In addition to correcting liturgical practice, Elisabeth instructed the nuns on rituals associated with death. An elderly monastic sister, who had been “weak with an illness” for many weeks, dramatically worsened in her condition. Knowing that death was closing in on the sick nun, Elisabeth and the other nuns at Schönau monastery hastened to offer prayer on behalf of the elderly sister.⁵³ They scurried around her sickbed in preparatory chaos, gathering the necessary religious texts, organizing the ritual, and tending to the ill woman. Suddenly, in the midst of their commotion, Elisabeth fell to the ground. The surrounding sisters immediately dropped their busy preparations to tend to her unconscious form. After lying “as if dead” for a short while, Elisabeth arose and spoke to

⁵² Clark, *Elisabeth*, 71.

⁵³ My sense is the women were not performing official last rites, but were rather performing a different ritual that served to protect the dying sister, or performing last rites amongst themselves without the presence of men as last rites could only be performed by the male clergy.

the nuns: “Anoint her.” In tending to Elisabeth, the women had forgotten to anoint the dying sister. Elisabeth collapsed again, and the sisters left her unconscious body on the floor in order to finish tending to the ailing nun before her soul ascended.⁵⁴

This direction from Elisabeth to the nuns to anoint the ailing sister constituted pastoral advice in that she attempted to shape the practice of religious ritual, and especially a religious ritual associated with death. This ritual instruction resulted in the salvation of the elderly sister’s soul. Elisabeth described how the sisters hurried to anoint the dying nun with oil, frantically crowding around the bed in fervent prayer. Unbeknownst to the cloistered women, excepting Elisabeth, their ritual was the setting for a parallel supernatural drama: a myriad of “evil spirits” in the forms of hungry dogs were circling the oblivious nuns while still others in the guise of vultures perched on the roof. These predatory spirits were anxiously awaiting the unanointed soul of the dying sister, but they were held at bay by two shining angels standing near the bed of the sick woman.⁵⁵ The angels addressed the evil spirits, saying, “Leave this place; this sister has just received a respite.” The sister had been saved spiritually. Elisabeth’s intervention and instruction had resulted in the salvation of the nun’s soul.

By providing instantaneous feedback on the practice of rituals within the monastery, Elisabeth instructed her community on the proper performance of ritual. Her celestial connection provided Elisabeth with the tools to show her community that the Holy Spirit affirmed the abbot’s performance of Mass while the prayers of the nuns required guidance to illicit a response from the divine realm. As a visionary, Elisabeth functioned as an intermediary who communicated the need for changed behaviors of the

⁵⁴ Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau*, 83.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

nuns and confirmed when increased prayers resulted in a better performance of the liturgy.

Conclusion:

In exhorting her monastic community to participate in the liturgy by praying, giving alms and prayers on behalf of souls in purgatory, and in correcting practice of ritual, Elisabeth's visions and the texts recording them encouraged monks and nuns to be more intentional in their religious practice. She exhorted her monastic community to increased prayer during the liturgy and on behalf of souls in purgatory. By giving examples of when religious leaders were successful in performing a ritual that fulfilled the spiritual needs of the monks and nuns; in supporting her fellow nuns when they were barred from participating in regular religious practice; and by correcting the ritual actions of the nuns when tending to the dying sister, Elisabeth provided pastoral advice and demonstrated to her audience that her advice worked. Her visionary texts described the celestial outcome of increased prayers or properly performed ritual to definitively show that Elisabeth's advice improved the religious practice of her community.

Teaching Clerics:

While monks and nuns were central to Elisabeth's pastoral message, she also challenged clerics, such as Archbishop Hillin of Trier, to provide better care to their followers. Elisabeth provided pastoral advice on how they should understand certain theological concepts and modeled pastoral care to lay people. Whereas Elisabeth advised monks and nuns to promote promoted intentional prayer and ritual, she suggested that

clerics ought to serve their communities better. They could provide better pastoral care to the laity and their monks and nuns with certain theological corrections and a model of how to provide pastoral advice. In encouraging clerics to better guide the laity, Elisabeth provided a form of pastoral advice to the clergy.

Admonishing Clerics and Providing Clerical Exempla:

After 1155, Elisabeth's pastoral critique shifted to religious leaders. In letters to abbots and abbesses within the area of Trier and neighboring dioceses, the bishops of Cologne, Mainz, Metz, and Speyer, and archbishop Hillin of Trier, Elisabeth frequently admonished her correspondents to "extend your pastoral staff and strike the members of the flock of the Lord with all diligence and discretion, lest they walk haltingly in the way of His contemplation."⁵⁶ While abbatial affairs differed greatly from episcopal ones, Elisabeth's critique of secular and monastic clergy was similar in that she sought to influence religious leaders to provide better spiritual guidance to their monastery or diocese.⁵⁷ Thus, in providing this advice, Elisabeth imparted her own critique of the clergy and instructed them on how to perform pastoral services.

Elisabeth also provided *exempla* of good clerics in her text about Saint Ursula and the virgin martyrs of Cologne. In her text titled *Revelatio de Sacro Exercitu Virginum Coloniensium* (The Book of Revelations about the Sacred Company of the Virgins of Cologne), Elisabeth navigated known information about the legend of Saint Ursula and ultimately created saintly stories to accompany the unmarked saintly remains. She

⁵⁶ Clark, *Elisabeth* 238.

⁵⁷ Elisabeth's letters concerning this message were addressed to Archbishop Hillin, Abbot W. of Busendorf, Abbot Gerlach of Deutz, and the abbess of Dietkirchen. Clark, 235-254.

explained that, because “many bodies of holy bishops and other great men were also found among the graves of the virgins” in Cologne, Elisabeth had been asked by Abbot Gerlach of Deutz to authenticate and identify the unidentified relics that were sent to his monastery.⁵⁸ The abbot’s request resulted in a visionary text where Elisabeth provided additional names and *passiones* of particularly male clerics who were involved in supporting Saint Ursula and her virginal women companions. These saintly men provided *exempla* of good clerics and thus function as a type of instruction to male religious leaders. Their examples suggested that bishops, and even popes, could become equal in saintliness to the virgin martyrs by supporting the religious endeavors of women.

One such example provided by the *Revelatio* was that of Saint Cyriacus, a Roman pope, who abandoned the apostolic seat in order to join with the virgin women and “receive the palm of martyrdom.” While the cardinals and other clerics protested, Pope Cyriacus remained committed to his divine summons but did not go to his martyrdom until Anterus had replaced him as pope.⁵⁹ Saint Cyriacus was the ideal pope. He did not abandon his papal duties by delaying his martyrdom until he had found Anterus to succeed him, but he also gave up his position as pope in order to join the women in martyrdom. This example of holy behavior provided a suggestion to religious leaders on how to best perform their duties. Like Cyriacus, religious men ought to put their faith first, but also not abandon their earthly posts.

Another example of a cleric who was successful in supporting the religious endeavors of the martyred women was Archbishop James. Elisabeth described how James “diligently strove to learn the names” of the women in Saint Ursula’s company so

⁵⁸ Clark, *Elisabeth* 215.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 217. Clark states that Anterus was pope from 235-236 in note 278, pp. 295.

that he could inscribe their names onto sarcophagi after their martyrdom.⁶⁰ As a reward for his work to preserve the memory of the holy women, James became martyred himself a few days after the passion of Saint Ursula. By working to preserve the names of the holy virgins, James transformed into a saint. Saint James, as described by Elisabeth, provided clerics with a clerical *exemplum* and suggested that one path to beatitude was through actively supporting holy women.

This combination of explicitly encouraging religious leaders to provide better spiritual guidance to their followers and of depicting exemplary saintly clerics constituted pastoral advice to members of the institutional ecclesiastical hierarchy. Elisabeth implied that those who were in charge of providing institutional instruction and support to their followers, whether monks, nuns, or laity, were not fulfilling their duties. Clerics who “extended their pastoral staff” and supported the religious endeavors of their followers were to be admired and held up as saintly.

Correcting Simony and Catharism:

In addition to directly addressing clerics who were failing to provide proper pastoral care to their followers, Elisabeth also advised clerics by correcting theological teachings. Elisabeth’s later visionary texts tackle a variety of issues ranging from the investiture controversy to the contested date of Mary’s assumption. These theological issues, likely inspired by Ekbert’s arrival at Schönau and increased involvement in the production of Elisabeth’s visionary writings, served to provide answers to contested

⁶⁰ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 218.

religious topics.⁶¹ Regardless of Ekbert's influence on her visionary texts, within the post-1155 visionary texts Elisabeth provided answers to these theological questions and thereby offered another form of pastoral care to clerics by instructing clerics on contested religious teachings.

One example of Elisabeth's theological corrections was her condemnation of simony and explanation for how simoniac clerics ought to be allowed to continue in their clerical role as long as they heeded Elisabeth's caution. The problem of simony, which refers to the selling of ecclesiastical privileges, had been at the center of clerical and monastic reform movements for almost one hundred years by the mid-twelfth century.⁶² Even though simony had been repeatedly declared a sin at church councils, most recently at the 1122 Concordat of Worms, Elisabeth made a point to clarify that the church's decision was in accordance with God's will.⁶³ By using her visionary abilities to condemn simoniac clerics, Elisabeth provided a form pastoral advice in confronting this theological issue. In exhorting clerics to refrain from simony, Elisabeth cited a biblical passage that protested how "pastors are weighed down as if in a heavy sleep."⁶⁴ Her advice for simoniac clerics was that,

⁶¹ Coakley in particular argues that Ekbert was the director of Elisabeth's texts and heavily influenced the direction and content of Elisabeth's visions. Clark, in contrast, argues for Elisabeth's authorship despite Ekbert's involvement in the production of her written corpus.

⁶² Simony refers to the buying and selling of religious privileges, such as pardons, by ecclesiastical elites. The term comes from Simon Magnus, who offered Peter and John money in exchange for religious privileges. Constable, 29. The question of simony came to a head during the Investiture Contest and was a focal point for Humbert of Silva (d. 1061) and Peter Damian (d. 1072). For more, see William McCready's work *Odiosa Sanctitas: St Peter Damian, Simony, and Reform* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2011).

⁶³ McCready provides a list of synods in the mid-eleventh century all condemning simony. McCready, 76-78.

⁶⁴ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 146.

all who have received priesthood in ecclesiastical ordination [would] have the same power in consecrating the sacrament of the Lord, whether those who ordained them entered rightly or wrongly... However, even though neither those priests nor those who ordain them are ineffective in the divine sacraments, nevertheless they are blameworthy and will be overcome by greater damnation in the future.⁶⁵

Elisabeth's texts sought to provide closure to the lingering issue of simony. Her critique of simoniac clerics and the solution of allowing them to retain their institutional power constituted pastoral instruction to ecclesiastical men, who might have found themselves confronted with these issues of simony in their ecclesiastical careers.

Another theological concern that was deeply important to Ekbert and Elisabeth was the arrival of a group of heretics, called the Cathars by Ekbert, in the Rhineland in the mid-1140s, which sparked anti-Cathar sentiment amongst Elisabeth, Ekbert, and their contemporaries.⁶⁶ The anti-Cathar writings of Elisabeth served to warn clerics of the dangers of heresy as well as provide specific details on how to recognize and combat Catharism. During his time at Bonn and Schönau, Ekbert composed his own collection of *Thirteen Sermons against the Cathars*, which was based on his experience of disputing and examining confessed Cathar heretics at Bonn and Cologne.⁶⁷ In Elisabeth's texts,

⁶⁵ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 197.

⁶⁶ R.I. Moore. *The Origins of European Dissent*. (New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1977). 169.

⁶⁷ Robert Harrison, "Ekbert of Schönau and Catharism: A Reevaluation," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies UCLA*, (1991), pp. 41 and 42. For more on the Cathars, see Mark Pegg, *The Corruption of Angels: The Great Inquisition of 1245-1246*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001). Pegg argues that the "Cathars" were a construction of learned contemporaries who conflated the beliefs of the *bons omes* and *bonas femnas* with the heresies described by Augustine. Ekbert of Schönau was the first to describe the heretics of the twelfth century with the term "Cathar," likely derived from the Greek *katharos* (pure) but possibly from derivations of "cat" or Augustine's *catharistae* (a branch of Manichees from the 4th century). Pegg, 17. Additionally, see Anne Brenon, "The Voice of the Good Women: An Essay on the Pastoral and Sacerdotal Role of Women in the Cathar Church," in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Twelfth century response to catharism are discussed in Malcolm Barber, *The Cathars: Dualist Heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages*, (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 112. Furthermore, Heinrich Fichtenau argues that in the mid-

Ekbert's conclusions about the nature of Catharism underpin Elisabeth's sermon to married people, where she makes a clear distinction between Christian ideals of marriage and Cathar aversion to marriage. This text, as well as her condemnation of Catharism in letters to Hildegard, which was published in Elisabeth's third book of visions, served to instruct clerics on how to recognize and eradicate Catharism.⁶⁸

In her letter to Hildegard, Elisabeth appealed to her to "carry out the work of the Lord, just as you have done so far," as "the vineyard of the Lord does not have a cultivator; the vineyard of the Lord perishes; the head of the church languishes and its members are dead... the Lord has tested them and found them sleeping."⁶⁹ This critique of institutional ecclesiastical leaders was a common theme throughout Elisabeth's letters. In her frustration with the lack of leadership in the erasure of the heretics, Elisabeth described the heretics as "murderers, adulterers, plunderers – the unjust who have hurled their souls into death. They are also the wretched Cathars, who are more abominable than all creatures and utter their blazing words in sulfury tongues. The earth is contaminated by their abominable faith."⁷⁰ In her letter, Elisabeth described the Cathars as smoldering, sulfurous, inextinguishable beasts the religious leaders must contain. She further exhorts

twelfth century the heretics were thought to have been only distinguishable in the Rhineland on the basis of marriage alone. Heinrich Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars in the High Middle Ages 1000-1200*, trans. Denise Kaiser, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 65.

⁶⁸ Joseph Baird and Radd Ehrman trans., *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen: Volume II*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), letter 169r, pp. 125. In another 1163 letter, Hildegard wrote to the clerics of Cologne, as requested by Philip of Heinsberg, the archbishop of Cologne beginning in 1167. See letter 15r, *Volume I*, pp. 54. Elisabeth's letter was possibly written in 1164(?), the critical edition of Hildegard's letters gives the date 1157-1164(?) as possible for the letter, though in light of the shared language of "sulfur" in describing the heretics, it seems likely to me that the letter was written in 1163-4. Elisabeth died shortly after in June of 1165. See Anne Clark, *Elisabeth of Schonau: A Twelfth-Century Visionary*, 26. Joseph Baird and Radd Ehrman trans., *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 181.

⁶⁹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 142.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

secular and clerical powers alike to “use all fortitude and the catholic faith to expel and destroy all the heresies that make schisms.”⁷¹ This call to religious leaders to prevent the spread of the Cathar heresy was one example of how Elisabeth sought to instruct clerics on contemporary theological issues.⁷² Unlike the issue of Simony, which had been a previous target of religious reform, Catharism was a new concern to religious leaders – especially to clerics who were responsible for teaching correct theology to the laity.

Elisabeth’s pastoral design in encouraging clerics to provide the correct instruction to the laity was also apparent in a sermon intended to model spiritual advice to lay married people. Within this sermon, Elisabeth contrasted Cathar beliefs and orthodox teachings about marriage to model homiletics. She asked the angel of the Lord about “those who are called Cathars, who are said to completely condemn the life of married people.”⁷³ In contrast to Elisabeth’s prescriptions, which delineated the orthodox practice of marriage, Cathars “criticize the life of those who lawfully contract marriage and live together.”⁷⁴ By explaining the problems with the Cathar teachings, namely that lawful marriage is only possible between two people who “both guarded their virginity up until the time of lawful union,” Elisabeth modeled a sermon for clerics on how to distinguish Cathar beliefs.

Elisabeth’s anti-Cathar and anti-Simony teachings are but two examples of instances when she employed contemporary theological discourse to instruct clerics. This form of pastoral advice mobilized the concerns of clerics in order to educate them on

⁷¹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 145.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 147.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

better religious leadership. In articulating the differences between Cathar beliefs and orthodox teachings on marriage, Elisabeth clarified doctrinal questions for clerics so that they would be able to recognize and eliminate Catharism. Additionally, her anti-simony writings provided clerics with specific instruction on how to integrate simoniac clerics into the ecclesiastical power structure. This type of pastoral advice was practical and confirmed institutional church teachings with Elisabeth's visions, thus providing clerics with correct theological teachings and with the tools necessary to instruct the laity on religious matters.

Demonstrating Pastoral Care to the Laity:

In the visionary text *Liber Viarum Dei*, Elisabeth demonstrated to clerics how to provide pastoral advice to the laity. While the majority of Elisabeth's writings concern monastic and clerical issues, the *Liber Viarum Dei* provided sermons concerning married people, widows, and even children. Additionally, the *Revelatio* depicted two lay saints, Saint Gerasma and King Etherius, Saint Ursula's fiancée, who joined Ursula and the holy virgins in martyrdom. These saintly figures, like the figures of saintly clerics, provided *exempla* of lay people who became holy through their support of Saint Ursula and her companions. While it is possible that these texts were intended for lay readership, the more likely explanation is that these texts were intended to provide an example of pastoral care to the laity for clerical and monastic audiences.⁷⁵ In providing religious instruction to lay people, Elisabeth modeled for clerics how to provide pastoral advice to their lay constituents.

⁷⁵ Clark argues that because these sermons "retain this colloquial and circumstantial character" they were likely not intended to be a collection of exemplary sermons. However, Clark then goes on to state that Elisabeth sent copies of the book to the bishops of Trier, Cologne, and Mainz as source material. Clark, 36.

In addition to clearly articulating the difference between Cathar and orthodox views of marriage, Elisabeth provided additional advice to married people. She warned “married lay people” to “restrain yourselves from the depraved acts by which you are polluted” and exhorted them to “examine your worst iniquities” and “your path and how you walk along it.”⁷⁶ Elisabeth’s sermon to married people provided advice on how lay married people ought to navigate the fine line between the need to produce children and the sin of lust.⁷⁷ There was a middle ground, Elisabeth suggested, where married people ought to have children and also exhibit restraint in “the depraved acts.” By including a sermon that addressed the moral concerns of married lay people, Elisabeth provided a model by which clerics could instruct their lay followers.

Within the context of the sermons of *Liber Viarum Dei*, Elisabeth also addressed widows, adolescents and children in her book of sermons. She exhorted widows to “guard yourselves from the vices of this world” by not remarrying and instead turning to “the spiritual delights that God offers to you.”⁷⁸ Elisabeth similarly encouraged adolescents to be patient, offer prayer, and maintain their virginity, while young children under the age of seven were not responsible for their spiritual well-being; rather, the parents should be responsible for the instruction of young children during their lives and offer alms and prayers after they passed.⁷⁹ Similar to her advice to married people, Elisabeth’s sermons about widows and children provide an instructional tool for religious leaders responsible for serving the laity.

⁷⁶ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 177.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 204 and 206.

In addition to writing sermons addressing lay concerns, Elisabeth included saintly lay figures in her written works on authenticating and identifying Ursuline relics. Just as Elisabeth included male, clerical martyrs in the company of Saint Ursula and the holy virgins, Elisabeth also incorporated the story of Saint Gerasma, Ursula's maternal aunt. Elisabeth elaborated on Saint Gerasma as Ursula's older, wise, fellow martyr and family member.⁸⁰ Saint Gerasma, Elisabeth was told in a vision, converted her husband, King Quintianus, before becoming a mother and ultimately joining Saint Ursula's pilgrimage.⁸¹ When Ursula secretly confided her divinely-inspired plan with her father, he "had great concern about that plan and sent a letter to blessed Gerasma, telling her the will of his daughter" as Gerasma was "a woman of great wisdom."⁸² Upon receiving the letter, Saint Gerasma, along with four of her daughters, traveled to Britain in order to guide and assist Saint Ursula in preparing for the pilgrimage and ultimately suffered martyrdom alongside her niece and daughters.⁸³

The addition of this particular narrative is interesting in Elisabeth's text and diverges dramatically from the recognized hagiographic stories of virgin martyrs.⁸⁴ Saint Gerasma was not a young virgin like Ursula's companions. She was, instead, a married woman with children and a member of Ursula's family network. Saint Gerasma fit within certain hagiographical tropes, such as the queenly saint who converted her husband, yet diverged from that model of saintliness by acting as the organizer and advice-giver for

⁸⁰ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 222.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 224.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Koopmans argues that saints' stories have particular "types" that were recognized by contemporaries. For more see Rachel Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate: Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in High Medieval England* (Philadelphia and Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

Ursula and her companions. Here, Elisabeth asserted a new type of saint. Saint Gerasma dispensed advice to a king and rushed to the spiritual aid of her niece. Perhaps, Elisabeth sought to introduce a saintly figure who was intimately involved in the spiritual development of her kinsfolk and who was a giver of advice to kings.⁸⁵ The example of Saint Gerasma suggested that holiness was open to diverse types of people. Holy virgins offered one model for a religious life, but chaste young women were not the only women with access to saintliness. By including this example in her texts on the holy virgins, Elisabeth provided additional *exempla* for her clerical audience on how lay people could become holy by following Saint Gerasma's example.

Another paragon of lay sanctity in Elisabeth's version of the legend of Saint Ursula was King Etherius, Saint Ursula's fiancée. In her account, Elisabeth described how King Etherius had a divine vision that encouraged him to "leave his homeland and go to meet his fiancée, who was already returning from Rome, and that he would suffer martyrdom in the city of Cologne with her and receive an unfading crown from God."⁸⁶ Even though King Etherius had "had not yet received the Christian faith when he began to negotiate his betrothal to blessed Ursula," he had "lived as innocently and modestly in accordance with his station of life as he later did" and therefore was divinely inspired to follow Ursula in martyrdom.⁸⁷ Through the *passio* of King Etherius, Elisabeth provided yet another *exemplum* of how a lay person, even a lay person who had not been Christian

⁸⁵ Fiona Griffiths argues that the inclusion of men in Elisabeth's text reflected a defense of male-female sibling relationships amongst religious men and women. Fiona Griffiths, "Siblings and the Sexes within the medieval Religious Life." *Church History*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (Mar., 2008): 26-53.

⁸⁶ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 220.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

for the first part of his life, was able to become saintly through living “innocently and modestly” and by joining Saint Ursula in martyrdom.

Elisabeth’s advice to the laity, embedded in texts such as the *Revelatio* and the *Liber Viarum Dei*, which predominantly addressed religious leaders, functioned as a form of pastoral advice to clerics.⁸⁸ Through the examples of Saint Gerasma and King Etherius, as well as in sermons directed to lay peoples, Elisabeth provided her clerical audience with advice on how to instruct the laity. This constituted a form of pastoral edification for clerics. In contrast to her immediate monastic audience, to whom she provided guidance on the practice of religious ritual, liturgy, and prayer, Elisabeth instructed clerics on how to be better religious leaders in their community. Elisabeth thus demonstrated how clerical men within the institutional hierarchy of the church ought to support the religious endeavors of holy women, such as the Ursuline martyrs, and to provide appropriate, theologically accurate, pastoral care to the laity.

Conclusion:

Pastoral care was, implicitly and explicitly, a central focus of Elisabeth’s texts throughout her visionary career, from 1152-1165. In transcribing her visions, Elisabeth sought to influence monastic and clerical communities in their practice of worship and in providing pastoral care. For nuns, Elisabeth emphasized the practice of prayer during the liturgy, ritual, and in freeing souls from purgatory. In edifying church leaders and clerics, Elisabeth provided instructional texts that included examples of good clerics, clarified theological debates, and provided models for teaching the laity.

⁸⁸ Clark argues that the *Liber Viarum Dei* was intended for wider use than just homiletic contexts; however, I am unconvinced by her argument. Elisabeth’s rhetoric throughout her post-1155 books indicate her sensitivity to the ecclesiastical hierarchy and it seems unlikely that she would have sought to preach publically and challenge the institutional authority of the church. Clark, 36.

This chapter has presumed, to some degree, the monastic and clerical audiences of Elisabeth's written corpus. The subsequent chapter will examine the relationship between author and audience in more detail. In order to persuade her communities to follow her pastoral advice, Elisabeth sought to establish spiritual authority within her community by rhetorically shaping her texts to appeal to monastic and clerical audiences. It is to this rhetoric that we now turn.

CHAPTER III

ELISABETH'S AUDIENCES AND RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

Sometime after the celebration of Pentecost in 1155, Ekbert took monastic vows at Schönau monastery in order to live with his sister.⁸⁹ Having recently come under scrutiny by Abbot Hildelin and the wider ecclesiastical community for a seemingly failed prophecy, Elisabeth seemed to have welcomed Ekbert's permanent arrival at the monastery. In the introduction to her first book of visions, she told Ekbert, "at your arrival my soul has begun to be consoled and a great peace has been produced in me."⁹⁰ In addition to providing his sister solace, Ekbert's monastic profession at Schönau resulted in a dramatic shift in the content and rhetoric of Elisabeth's visionary texts. Whereas the visions recorded between 1152 and 1154 concerned predominantly liturgical and monastic matters, the visionary texts produced after 1155 turned to clerical critique, theological debates, and wider ecclesiastical discourse.

Scholars of medieval women have pointed to these changes in Elisabeth's visionary texts as evidence of Ekbert's hegemonic influence over the production of the visionary written corpus. This relationship between Elisabeth, the visionary, and Ekbert, the collaborator or director of her texts, has been of foremost interest to both John Coakley and Anne Clark.⁹¹ While Clark and Coakley disagree regarding Elisabeth's authorial power in the production of the visionary texts, with Clark arguing that Elisabeth

⁸⁹ The exact date is not clear, but a hagiography of Ekbert called *Vita Ekeberti* and authored by the subsequent abbot of Schönau, Emecho, states Ekbert joined Schönau monastery sometime after Pentecost, 1155.

⁹⁰ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 43.

⁹¹ Coakley uses the term "director" in relation to Ekbert's role of asking theological questions of Elisabeth. See John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*: (2011) and Anne Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: A Twelfth Century Visionary* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

was the author even though she was influenced and interpreted by Ekbert and Coakley arguing that that Ekbert's involvement in Elisabeth's texts indicates his role in authoring the visionary works at the exclusion of Elisabeth, both historians fail to analyze the interpersonal dynamics between a holy woman and her male clerical counterpart. In doing so, both Coakley and Clark address questions about the gendered power dynamics between what Coakley describes as the "informal" spiritual power of holy women and the institutional power of male clerics.⁹²

In looking beyond the interpersonal dynamics of Elisabeth and Ekbert, I will argue that the shift in content and tone of Elisabeth's post-1155 texts indicates a change in audiences. Regardless of whether or not this change came about because of Ekbert's increased involvement in Elisabeth's life, the rhetorical strategies and changed content of Elisabeth's visions and texts suggest that after Ekbert's arrival Elisabeth's visionary texts were intended for an audience beyond the walls of Schönau monastery. These rhetorical changes to Elisabeth's visionary books reveal how Elisabeth and Ekbert shaped the written texts to appeal to specific monastic and clerical networks in order to provide religious advice to those audiences.

This chapter will examine Elisabeth's visionary texts, arguing that Elisabeth's written works were rhetorically constructed for specific monastic and clerical audiences. In order to convince her audiences to follow her pastoral advice, Elisabeth and Ekbert consciously navigated audience expectations and skepticism in Elisabeth's visionary

⁹² Coakley, 23.

abilities.⁹³ For her immediate monastic community at Schönau, where nuns and monks bore witness to Elisabeth's visions, Elisabeth's visionary texts focused on her internal experiences as a means of explaining her frequent illnesses. As her audience shifted to a wider monastic and clerical audience after Ekbert's arrival, Elisabeth changed rhetorical strategies in order to convince skeptical clerics of the authenticity of her visions. For a male-dominated clerical audience, this meant emphasizing Elisabeth's humility, theological orthodoxy, and subordination to male clergy, who were members of the institutional ecclesiastical hierarchy.

After 1155, Elisabeth did not completely abandon her monastic audience; however, it expanded to include a broader monastic network, including especially those monasteries that received Ursuline relics. Therefore, this chapter will not move strictly chronologically, but rather will examine Elisabeth's different visionary texts by intended audience. The first section will address *Liber Visionum Primum* (First Book of Visions) and *Revelatio* (Revelations) as texts that were intended for monastic audiences; the first visionary book was produced for Elisabeth's immediate monastic community at Schonau between 1152-1154 while the *Revelatio* was commissioned by Abbot Gerlach of Deutz in 1156 and sought to influence a wider network of monasteries. The second section will turn to the clerical audience and analyze *Liber Visionum Secundum* and *Tertium* (Second and Third Book of Visions), and *Liber Viarum Dei* (The Book of the Ways of God). In addressing these audiences with relevant rhetoric, Elisabeth's texts reveal how Elisabeth

⁹³ The theoretical framework for the negotiating of spiritual authority comes from Aviad Kleinberg's *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

and Ekbert navigated contemporary expectations about the role of a visionary nun as they sought to convince their audiences of Elisabeth's spiritual authority.

Monks and Nuns:

In seeking to address monastic audiences, Elisabeth's visionary texts emphasized topics that were most familiar to monks and nuns. Her first visionary book *Liber Visionum Primum* contained an intimate portrayal of Elisabeth's spiritual struggles, episodes that demonstrated the importance of her monastic community in liturgical practice, and scenes from scripture. The emphasis on liturgical worship and prayer, in particular, would have been immediately familiar to the nuns who spent their days performing liturgical worship. Furthermore, by highlighting her own experience as a nun, Elisabeth sought to connect with her monastic audience by relating to monastic routines. Of course, Elisabeth's visions made her unique within her monastery; however, by focusing the content of *Liber Visionum Primum* on prayer, liturgy, the participation of her monastic community, and her own experience as a nun, Elisabeth directed her visionary text, and thus her pastoral message, to a monastic audience.

Elisabeth the Nun:

One of the most striking features of Elisabeth's early visionary texts is the deeply personal nature of Elisabeth's writings. At the age of twenty-three, Elisabeth described her introduction to her visionary abilities as a distressing crisis of faith, which culminated in a violent struggle against the devil himself. She described this struggle as "so great a weariness that there was nothing my soul did not loathe" and confessed to her brother

that “the Betrayer even made me hesitate in my faith so that I pondered our Redeemer with skepticism.”⁹⁴ Elisabeth confessed her personal spiritual struggles to her audience in order to connect with her audience on an emotional level. In detailing her crisis of faith and the resulting struggle with the devil, she addressed an audience that would identify with her circumstances. In her description of acquiring visionary abilities, Elisabeth clearly sought to relate to those who, like her, had experienced daily cycles of liturgical prayer.

In addition to describing her crisis of faith, Elisabeth also frequently referred to her physical maladies in her first book of visions. These intimate portrayals of Elisabeth’s physical suffering implicitly encouraged her audience to empathize with Elisabeth as well as alluded to her similarities to Christ.⁹⁵ On March 25, 1154, Elisabeth woke still bedridden from a bout of illness surrounded by her monastic sisters. She described how the sisters “came to my bed to say the litany over me” and “asked if I wished to take communion that day since they were about to do so themselves.” In her ill state, however, Elisabeth informed the saddened sisters that did not feel able to attend Mass. Upon their departure, Elisabeth was visited by the angel of the Lord, who “placed his hand on [her] head” and exhorted her to go and take communion. After this, her energy returned to her and Elisabeth “grabbed [her] clothes, rose from [her] bed, and with strength restored and vivid color” went to join her sisters for communion.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 45.

⁹⁵ The bodily suffering of medieval visionary women and the symbolic link to Christ’s suffering is explored most thoroughly in Carolyn Walker Bynum’s *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁹⁶ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 85.

By including descriptions of her physical suffering, Elisabeth related her visionary experience on a visceral level and aligned her own narrative with that of her community's experiences. In providing details on her interactions with the other nuns at Schönau and her physical suffering, Elisabeth emphasized her own monastic experience. Her visionary abilities were therefore believable and relatable, in part, because Elisabeth was herself describing a familiar world to her audience. In this way, Elisabeth's depictions of her monastic circumstances functioned as a rhetorical strategy to message a monastic audience.

Elisabeth's monastic community was also integrated into her written visionary texts as the immediate audience to her visionary episodes. Frequently, Elisabeth spoke aloud her revelations whilst surrounded by the nuns at Schönau. In one such moment her fellow nuns assured Elisabeth that they had already heard about her vision. She described how,

I was in a trance in my usual way, praying in spirit to the Lord and greeting my Lady, whom I could see in spirit, and pouring out fervent prayers to her. During this time, the sisters who were standing around me plainly heard the whole course of my prayers. But when I returned to myself and they told me this, I would not believe it until they repeated the order of the same words I had used in prayer.⁹⁷

Throughout the first book of visions, Elisabeth often described for her audience the experience of her fellow nuns during her visionary episodes. In doing so, Elisabeth suggested to her audience that there were other monastics who could corroborate Elisabeth's visionary experiences. The presence of eyewitnesses in her narrative is a rhetorical strategy that Elisabeth employed to negotiate spiritual authority with her

⁹⁷ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 83.

monastic audience. By inserting her monastic community into the visionary text, Elisabeth provided eyewitness testimony to her visions as well as situated her visionary moments within the mundane reality of monastic life.

The description of Elisabeth's monastic community, her physical suffering, and the intimate description of her own crisis of faith all served to connect Elisabeth's visionary experience with the experience of monks and nuns. In rhetorically communicating with nuns in this manner, Elisabeth emphasized the shared experience of communal life and corroborated her visions with eyewitnesses. These rhetorical strategies functioned on two levels. First, references to her monastic life and community made her visions accessible and relatable to other monastic people. Second, these rhetorical strategies sought to convince Elisabeth's audience of her spiritual authority by providing eyewitness testimony and by relating her experiences to the shared experiences of monastic life. By conveying her message in this way, Elisabeth sought to convince her monastic audience of her role as a divine intermediary in order to persuade her community to change their practice of worship.

Liturgy:

Another way that Elisabeth engaged her monastic audience was through focusing the content of her texts on liturgical worship. Elisabeth's visions regularly occurred during Mass or regular prayer cycles. Furthermore, in her first book of visions particularly, the visions Elisabeth described focused on saints and the connection between the celestial realm and the religious rituals of priests, monks, and nuns. The liturgical content of Elisabeth's visionary texts sent messages to an audience that experienced the

liturgy regularly. Ekbert explained how “she had been accustomed to seeing through an open door in the heavens on the greatest feast days and frequently on Sundays,” but sometime after August of 1154, these particular visions stopped and Elisabeth’s subsequent visions were different in nature.⁹⁸ Her emphasis on the liturgy in the first visionary book, however, suggests her monastic audience.

Throughout her first visionary book, Elisabeth described how she often had visions of saints on their feast days. In one such instance, she described a series of these apparitions,

On the feast of Saint Peter’s Chains, I saw Peter again in the same form in which he had appeared to me before. After this, I then saw Stephen, the first martyr, on the feast of his invention, then King Oswald, then Afra the martyr with her two servants, and then blessed Cyriacus. Then I saw blessed Lawrence on his vigil.⁹⁹

In listing the saints she saw, Elisabeth provided evidence of the regularity of her beatific visitors. The appearances of saints on their feast days functioned on two levels. First, seeing saints on their feast days placed Elisabeth’s visions within the regular liturgical cycle that would have been familiar to her monastic audience. Elisabeth’s visions were extraordinary, but by juxtaposing her celestial visions with the ordinary, daily setting of the liturgy, Elisabeth rhetorically suggested that her visions were as regular, and therefore as credible, as the daily practice of liturgical worship. Second, Elisabeth’s visions of saints confirmed the efficacy of her community’s liturgical rituals. In presenting her monastic audience with evidence of saints visiting on their liturgical feast days, Elisabeth

⁹⁸ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 98.

⁹⁹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 54. Clark provides dates for the visions of Elisabeth in note 72, page 281. Saint Peter: August 1, 1152; Saint Stephen: August 3; Saint Oswald: August 9; Afra and her servants: August 5; Cyriacus: August 8; Lawrence: August 9. According to Clark’s manuscript studies, the list of saints was in a slightly different sequence in an earlier version of the text.

confirmed that the practice of worship did result in an immediate connection between her community and the saint in question.

Witnessing saints was not the only means by which Elisabeth communicated with her monastic audience through the liturgy; she also emphasized Eucharistic worship throughout her first book of visions. In one instance, Elisabeth described seeing the transubstantiation of Christ's blood into the sacramental wine at Mass. In her vision, she saw "everything that was being done at the altar, and when the priest said the canon and raised the chalice to the sight of God, I saw the Lord Jesus as if hanging on the cross above the chalice and blood from His side and His feet seemed to flow down into it."¹⁰⁰ In another moment, she described a similar vision in which she saw a "great light coming from heaven" strike the sacramental box holding the "body of the Lord" on the altar. During communion, she witnessed a "snow-white dove ... fly through the center of that light and settle next" to the Eucharist.¹⁰¹ These visions of the body and blood of Christ during Mass indicate that Elisabeth's audience was one that experienced communion regularly. Elisabeth thus sought to communicate with her monastic audience through relating her visions to the daily experiences of monks and nuns.¹⁰²

In order to shape her community's practice of worship, Elisabeth first had to establish spiritual authority by convincing the nuns of her connection to the celestial realm. By describing her personal experiences as a nun and describing her visions within the context of the liturgy, Elisabeth sought to connect with a monastic audience. These

¹⁰⁰ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 72. Clark dates this vision to April 16, 1153. Note 117, pp. 284.

¹⁰¹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 89-90. May 23, 1154.

¹⁰² For more on the connection between medieval women and Eucharistic worship, see Carolyn Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (1987).

rhetorical strategies indicate Elisabeth's process of negotiating spiritual authority with her monastic community. For those around her, who experienced the same religious rituals and recognized her descriptions of the liturgy, validating regular liturgical rituals such as feast days and Mass allowed Elisabeth to present a pastoral message to her monastic community.

Cult of Saint Ursula:

Although Elisabeth's audience expanded after Ekbert's arrival at Schönau in the spring of 1155, she continued to address monastic communities in her writings, albeit a wider network of monasteries. Her text *Revelatio de Sacro Exercitu Virginum Coloniensium* (The Book of Revelations about the Sacred Company of the Virgins of Cologne), inspired by a letter in 1156 from Abbot Gerlach of Deutz, concerned the legend of Saint Ursula and was intended to provide additional hagiographic information as well as to authenticate and identify recently discovered relics.¹⁰³ Abbot Gerlach was not alone in his desire for confirmation of the Ursuline relics. Cologne was, famously, the site of the ostensibly mass martyrdom of eleven thousand virgins in the fourth century, and when their relics were uncovered by King Henry IV in 1106, many monasteries throughout Europe received unmarked, unidentified relics.¹⁰⁴ Elisabeth, because of her divine visions and frequent ecstatic visits with the saints, was called on by Gerlach to

¹⁰³ In Elisabeth's *Revelatio* (Clark, 214) and letters (Clark, 237). *inventio* is the Latin term used for newly-discovered relics.

¹⁰⁴ Laurence Moulinier, "Elisabeth, Ursule, et les onze mille vierges: un cas d'invention de reliques à cologne au XII^e Siècle" in *Medievals* 22-23, 1992, pp. 173-186. For mapping of the spread of relics to monasteries, see Guy de Tervarent *La Legende de Sainte Ursule: Dans la Litterature et l'Art du Moyen Age*, (Paris: Les Editions G. Van Oest, 1931).

identify and authenticate these relics. The resulting text addressed a wider network of monastics, specifically abbots and abbesses of those monasteries such as Abbot Gerlach, who desired more information on the Ursuline legend.¹⁰⁵

The request for additional information on the long-dead martyrs put Elisabeth in a difficult position – one that she was acutely aware of. On the one hand, identifying, authenticating, and telling the *passiones* of these unidentified martyrs gave Elisabeth space to provide *exempla* based upon the lives of these martyrs. On the other, Elisabeth's authentications might have been poorly received by her abbatial and monastic audiences if her *passiones* did not match previous hagiographical knowledge of the saints and if her identifications did not match the inscriptions found on sarcophagi in Cologne. In the *Revelatio*, Elisabeth navigated known information about the martyrs of Cologne and ultimately created new saintly stories to accompany the unmarked saintly remains.

Although manuscript transmission suggests that her likely audience was monastic leaders, in letters to abbots and abbesses concerning relics, Elisabeth's *passiones* were of clerical or lay men – not monks. It is possible that her text was intended for a wider audience beyond monasteries; however, the assumptions inherent in the *Revelatio* about contemporary discourse on the legend of Saint Ursula and relics of the holy virgins suggest that Elisabeth's clerical martyr figures were intended as *exempla* for religious leaders more generally and directed at religious leaders invested in authenticating Ursuline relics. In presenting these additional martyr stories, Elisabeth negotiated spiritual authority with her audience by acknowledging her skepticism at information that

¹⁰⁵ Moulinier argues that the spread of Elisabeth's text *Revelatio* corresponded almost exactly with the spread of Ursuline relics. He suggests that this indicates the popularity of Elisabeth's text was closely related to monasteries that received unidentified relics.

did not readily align with previous hagiographic knowledge, reaffirming her obedience to clerical men, and by building on the hagiographic text she had access to – the early twelfth century *Regnante Domino* – which was itself a text that fashioned martyrs for didactic purposes.

The author of the *Regnante Domino* mobilized the legend of Saint Ursula and the holy virgins to suggest that religious men and women who hesitate in their conviction were still able to become holy. While constructing her own martyr stories in the *Revelatio*, Elisabeth explicitly built upon the example of Saint Cordula in the *Regnante Domino*, using narrative flexibilities present in Cordula’s story to authenticate her own *passiones*. This rhetorical strategy linked Elisabeth’s text authenticating saints to the previous legend, which was likely known by contemporary monastic leaders.¹⁰⁶

The legend of Saint Ursula and her martyred companions had been well established by the *Regnante Domino* by the early twelfth century.¹⁰⁷ This version of the Ursuline legend was produced sometime around 1100 and recounted the hagiography of Saint Ursula, a British princess who tactfully delayed marriage to a pagan prince in order to go on pilgrimage with 10,999 other virgin women.¹⁰⁸ Through a series of visions, Ursula was informed that she and her companions would become martyrs in the city of Cologne. Upon return from Rome, Ursula and her virginal army freed the city of Cologne

¹⁰⁶ Clark argues that there are over 100 extant manuscripts of the *Regnante Domino*. Clark, 38.

¹⁰⁷ Scott Montgomery, *St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne: Relics, Reliquaries and the Visual Culture of Group Sanctity in Late Medieval Europe*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010). and Clark, over 100 manuscripts (Clark, 295 note 279), E read or knew it.

¹⁰⁸ Clark, 38. Clark cites Levison in note 36, pp. 162. Levison, Wilhelm. “Das Weden der Ursula-Legende.” *Bonner Jahrbucher* 132 (1927): 1-164.

from a siege by the Hun army and became martyrs of the faith.¹⁰⁹ The text then turns to the martyr Cordula and her later visionary authenticator, Helmdrude.¹¹⁰ Cordula was one of the virginal company who “went into hiding that same night” before offering herself “bold-heartedly ... to the death she had fled” in order to gain “equal glory in martyrdom.”¹¹¹ The author of the *Regnante Domino* assures the audience that Cordula’s martyrdom should not come as a shock; instead, her martyrdom “was delayed in order to be tested, not condemned” in a manner similar to Peter and Thomas.¹¹² Unlike Saint Ursula and the other martyrs, Cordula was hesitant and unsure at first of her conviction to martyrdom. Regardless, she was able to become a saint in “equal glory” to the virgin martyrs.

While modern scholarship has treated the *Regnante Domino* as the version of the legend that most influenced Elisabeth and her contemporaries, scholars have not adequately interrogated the *Regnante Domino* as a source.¹¹³ Instead of one text, I believe that the *Regnante Domino* was, in fact, two texts. There are two primary reasons for my two-texts theory. First, the first part of the legend ended with the mass slaughter of Saint Ursula and her companions and the miraculous defeat of the Hun army. However, the *Regnante Domino* continues from that point in the narrative, including the martyrdom of the faint-hearted Cordula and visions of a later nun authenticating Cordula’s sainthood.

¹⁰⁹ Summary found in Anne Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: A Twelfth Century Visionary*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 37.

¹¹⁰ Stouck, 523.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 530.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 531.

¹¹³ Clark, Montgomery, Guy T, and Griffiths all argue that Elisabeth either knew of the legend orally or textually on the basis of the *Regnate Domino*. Elisabeth uses Cordula and other characters named in the text and was aware of certain narrative details, which suggest her familiarity with the *Regnante Domino*.

Second, at the point when the women are martyred, the text seems to conclude with the phrase "... in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns, world without end. Amen."¹¹⁴ The differences in the texts before and after the "Amen" as well as the conclusion "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns, world without end" suggests that the second part of the *Regnante Domino* might have been a later edition or continuation of the narrative. It suggests that the text might have had two different authors, audiences, and purposes, or, at the very least, that author added on to the completed legend after the death scene. In providing the *passiones* of additional martyrs in the *Revelatio*, Elisabeth added to a legend that had already been mobilized by various authors over time for differing purposes. In this way, Elisabeth connected her martyr stories in *Revelatio* with previously known information and thus suggested that the saints introduced in *Revelatio* were as genuine as Saint Cordula.

Elisabeth also mobilized Saint Cordula from the *Regnante Domino* in order to introduce additional clerical saints such as Saint James as an *exemplum* of religious leadership. Elisabeth describes asking Saint James "about the day of his martyrdom, because it was not believable – according to this narration – that he could also have been killed on the same day on which the virgins suffered."¹¹⁵ James had been an archbishop who was called to Rome to join the virgin martyrs. He "diligently strove to learn the names" of the holy virgins before inscribing their names onto stones for their martyred bodies. By this narrative, Elisabeth was correct that Saint James had to have been martyred at a later time as he was killed while attempting to inscribe all the names of

¹¹⁴ ed. Mary-Ann Stouck, *Medieval Saints: A Reader*, (Ontario: CANCOPY, 1999), 529.

¹¹⁵ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 218.

Saint Ursula's company. In response to Elisabeth's query, Saint Verena confirmed that Saint James was killed on the third day after the passion by the same "tyrant who killed blessed Cordula."¹¹⁶ By connecting James' delayed martyrdom with the narrative of Cordula, Elisabeth explicitly linked her visionary text to the *Regnante Domino*. In doing so, she situated her own narrative of Saint James within the preexisting legend, which would have resonated with an audience that had previously knowledge the story of Saint Ursula and her companions.

The example of Cordula and her delayed martyrdom allowed Elisabeth to present new martyr figures who joined the holy virgins before, during, and after their martyrdom. In manipulating the narratives present in the *Regnante Domino*, Elisabeth built on the legend and mobilized Saint Ursula's companions, particularly her male clerical, familial, and lay companions, in order to fulfill her pastoral role to a wider monastic community.

In addition to basing her authentications and identifications of relics on the *Regnante Domino*, Elisabeth also indicated her own skepticism at information that diverged from the well-known legend. At the beginning of the *Revelatio*, Elisabeth states that she was hesitant to embark on identifying the relics for Abbot Gerlach. She states,

Although I was very resistant, certain men of good repute pressed me with their demand to investigate these things at length and they do not allow me to be silent. Indeed, I know that those people who oppose the grace of God in me will take this occasion to scourge me with their tongues. Yet I shall willingly endure it because I hope to receive a reward from these things that the Lord deems worthy to reveal through my labors.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 218.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

In this introduction to the *Revelatio*, Elisabeth rhetorically positioned herself as both hesitant and obedient to clerical men in order to convince her audience of the authenticity of her visions. By beginning her text with the claim that disbelievers “oppose the grace of God,” Elisabeth suggested that anyone who challenged her claims was wrong.

Rhetorically, her own negligible role in the creation of this visionary text and preemptive dismissal of skeptics attempted to convince a wider monastic network, possibly including monks and nuns who had no knowledge of Elisabeth’s visions. Ironically, Elisabeth’s rhetorical strategy after 1155 involved inserting herself into the text as a skeptic of the additional *passiones*. Unlike *Book One*, where Elisabeth presented herself as a nun who was relatable to the nuns at Schönau, the *Revelatio* portrayed Elisabeth as distrustful of her own visions.

Throughout her text, Elisabeth articulated her skepticism at the information presented by her beatific visitors in order to align her visionary text with existing hagiographic information. Like many monasteries in the dioceses surrounding Cologne, Schönau received unidentified Ursuline relics.¹¹⁸ Through a vision, Elisabeth identified the relics as the bones of Saint Verena, one of the martyred virgins, and her cousin, Caesarius. However, Caesarius’s martyrdom challenged the existing narrative that the holy virgins traveled to Rome and then Cologne without an escort of men. Upon hearing about the martyrdom Caesarius, Elisabeth stated that “these words threw me into grave doubt. Indeed, like others who read the history of the British virgins, I thought that that blessed society made their pilgrimage without the escort of any men. But later I learned

¹¹⁸ Tervarent and Moulinier trace the spread of relics across Europe.

something else that greatly weakened this opinion.”¹¹⁹ In presenting male martyr figures within the *Revelatio* to her wider monastic audience, Elisabeth was careful to show her own skepticism at men’s hagiographies and provide substantial visionary evidence confirming her identification of male martyrs. In doing so, Elisabeth seems to have assumed that her audience, an audience that was likely invested in the legend of the holy virgins, would resist the inclusion of male martyrs and therefore she attempted to navigate that audience’s reaction to her visionary text.

Along a similar line of inquiry, Elisabeth then asked Saint Verena about the bishops and other clerical men whose remains were found amongst the virgins. Elisabeth mobilized the saints themselves to convince herself, and thus her audience, of the veracity of male martyrs despite the absence of men in the martyrdom of the *Regnante Domino*. Upon hearing about clerical men who joined the holy virgins Elisabeth

juxtaposed what [Saint Verena] had said with what is read in the history of the virgins, namely, that when blessed Ursula and the virgins accompanying her were playing in the sea, as they often did, the ships they were steering were drawn further than usual out to sea. ... according to this, it is likely that they set out without a escort of men. To this Verena responded, “... [King Marius] carefully arranged that when his daughter, whom he loved most tenderly, set off, she would have in her retinue men whose comfort she as well as her company would need.”¹²⁰

In order to explain the presence of men accompanying Saint Ursula’s company, Elisabeth both explicitly addressed the inconsistencies between her text and *Regnante Domino* and presented those narrative discrepancies through the voice of Saint Verena.

¹¹⁹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 215.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.

Rhetorically, it was not Elisabeth who provided her audience with additional information about the legend; rather, it was the saints themselves. By voicing what appeared to be her own skepticism at information that challenged the preexisting narrative of Ursula's martyrdom and by only presenting contradictory material through the saints, Elisabeth took a passive role as the visionary even while her text was actively working to combat the doubts of her audience.¹²¹

To substantiate her visionary claims about male martyrs, Elisabeth also mobilized information about sarcophagal inscriptions found in Cologne. These were likely known to monastic communities receiving Ursuline relics, or, at the very least, to Abbot Gerlach to substantiate her visionary claims about male martyrs.¹²² Elisabeth received inscriptions recorded by Thioderic of Deutz, which recorded inscriptions found on tombs in Cologne.¹²³ In providing the inscriptions on sarcophagi as evidence for the martyred men in *Revelatio*, Elisabeth was careful to include mention the skepticism of the abbot, claiming that he was "suspicious that the discoverers of the holy bodies might have craftily had those titles inscribed for profit." It was because of Abbot Gerlach's suspicions, she explained, that Elisabeth had been asked to authenticate the relics. She affirmed,

What those inscriptions were and what was revealed to me about them I have taken care to place before the eyes of readers throughout the present book. From this it should be understood that this holy company, which the divine paternity had deigned to honor with the escort of such

¹²¹ Clark argues that the *Revelatio* exists in far more copies than Elisabeth's other visionary texts. There are over seventy medieval manuscripts today. However, the same work also garnered the most negative response from critics over the centuries. Clark, 37.

¹²² Clark, 38-39.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 38. Some of those inscriptions included male clerics, according to Clark.

elevated persons, should be very worthily attended with every honor by the faithful Christ.¹²⁴

The male martyrs, Elisabeth claimed, ought to be worshiped equally to Saint Ursula and her female companions. After presenting her own suspicions and the skepticism of Abbot Gerlach repeatedly, Elisabeth was convinced of the authenticity of the martyr stories and, thus, influenced her audience to reach the same conclusion.

The community most likely to have desired additional information on the Ursuline legend was the same network of monasteries that received relics from Cologne.¹²⁵ These abbots, abbesses, monks and nuns might have been unfamiliar with Elisabeth and her visions. She was therefore careful to present her male martyrs within rhetorical suspicion in order to preemptively counteract skepticism of her visions. In doing so, Elisabeth navigated known information about the legend of Saint Ursula in the *Regnante Domino* and sarcophagi inscriptions found in Cologne, which provided the names of some of the martyrs. By framing her *passiones* in such a way as to deter the skepticism of her audience, Elisabeth not only sought to convince monastic audiences to venerate her male martyrs, she successfully transformed the legend of Saint Ursula.¹²⁶ Her narrative, with clerical men at Saint Ursula's martyrdom, became the standard of the legend.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 215.

¹²⁵ See Tervarent.

¹²⁶ Montgomery, Tervarent, and Clark all mention that Elisabeth's text was taken seriously by her contemporaries. According to Clark, there are additional visionary texts by an anonymous author attempting to reconcile Elisabeth's dates of events with other versions of the legend.

¹²⁷ Hildegard of Bingen similarly included clerical men in her lyrical writings about Saint Ursula's martyrdom. Newman, *Sisters of Wisdom*, 308. Furthermore, the artwork described by Scott Montgomery in later centuries regularly included clerical men. Tervarent and Clark similarly believe that Elisabeth's legend became the standard; Tervarent cites the spread of relics and liturgical celebrations of the holy

In communicating with her immediate monastic audience, Elisabeth emphasized her own monastic experience and regular practice of the liturgy. For the nuns at Schönau, who were likely aware of Elisabeth's visions, liturgical practice and the relatable experience of monastic life worked rhetorically to establish Elisabeth's visionary authority. For a wider network of monasteries, where the monks and nuns were likely ignorant of Elisabeth's visions until they were publicized by Abbot Hildelin of Schönau in 1155, Elisabeth and Ekbert emphasized her suspicion of contradictions between the inscriptions of sarcophagi in Cologne and the known legend of Saint Ursula. The monasteries in the dioceses surrounding Cologne clearly sought verification about the Ursuline relics and in creating a narrative that served that purpose, Elisabeth took the opportunity to provide *exempla* of religious leaders to those communities.

Clerics:

The rhetorical strategies of the *Revelatio*, namely rhetorical humility and careful navigation of the audiences' preexisting knowledge were also evident in Elisabeth's post-1155 visionary texts. The change in visionary texts was so apparent between the first book of visions and the later works that Ekbert included explicit explanation for the changes in the introduction to Elisabeth's second book of visions. At the beginning of the second visionary book Ekbert addressed this discrepancy between the two visionary books,

Perhaps it will disturb the reader that it was written earlier that the angel said to Elisabeth, "The holy visions that you see, you will no longer see until the day of your death," and

virgins while Clark identifies later visionary works seeking to align narrative discrepancies between Elisabeth and the *Regnante Domino*.

yet after that point she still saw visions like the earlier ones. As I understand it, when he said ‘holy visions,’ he meant particularly those visions of celestial secrets that she had been accustomed to seeing through an open door in the heavens on the greatest feast days and frequently on Sundays. Indeed, from the moment he said this to her, visions of this kind stopped completely. However, at the place where the image of the door had appeared, a light of great brightness has not ceased to appear to her. This is in accordance with the message the angel had given her, saying, “Contemplate always and look to the holy light, the heavenly light. It has been given to you until the end of your life.”¹²⁸

By explicitly addressing the incompatibility between the end of the first and beginning of the second book of visions, Ekbert signaled a shift in audience. While the monastic audience of *Book One*, likely the monks and nuns at Schönau, witnessed Elisabeth’s visions and presumably believed in her spiritual gift, the audience of the second book of visions needed an explanation as to why the visions continued when the angel of the Lord said they would not.

Ekbert’s explicit acknowledgement of the inconsistencies between the first and later visionary texts sought to explain significant changes in subject matter, rhetoric, and purpose. Coakley, in particular, argues that the theological questions posed to celestial beings by Elisabeth, likely inspired by Ekbert, were a dramatic change in the later visionary texts, which indicate Ekbert’s role in directing the content of her visions.¹²⁹ Regardless of Ekbert’s role, the questions posed to Elisabeth and her celestial visitors about theological debates suggest a clerical audience. Furthermore, the tension between Elisabeth’s spiritual authority and her obedience to the institutional ecclesiastical hierarchy became a central contention. In order to convince male clerics of her pastoral

¹²⁸ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 98.

¹²⁹ Coakley, 23.

message, Elisabeth and Ekbert made explicit references to her deference to clerical men, usually Abbot Hildelin and Ekbert himself. By using saints and other intermediaries to create distance between Elisabeth and divine knowledge, emphasizing Elisabeth's subordination to clerical men, and relating Elisabeth's visionary authority on the preexisting authority of her contemporary, Hildegard of Bingen, Elisabeth and Ekbert navigated gendered constraints in their community as they sought to message a wider clerical audience.

Subordination to Institutional Power:

Just as the celestial figures in her visions created distance between Elisabeth and the divine mysteries, so too did Elisabeth consciously insert references to Ekbert's collaboration and contemporary clerics. By establishing her subordinate relationship to Ekbert and by reiterating her ties to a larger clerical community, Elisabeth put herself in a position to give pointed critiques of the church without appearing to challenge the institution itself. This supervision by Ekbert suggests that he actively tied himself to his sister for his own reasons, but in tandem with the various references to other clergy within Ekbert's network, it also suggests that Elisabeth's visionary authority grew as she tied herself more closely to the institutional hierarchy of the church. In rhetorically positioning herself this way, Elisabeth sought to influence a clerical audience that was invested in the existing ecclesiastical power structure.

In one particularly explicit passage, Ekbert inserted himself into Elisabeth's visionary text as a clerical authority. Elisabeth's regular angel visitor "turned toward me and responded with these words, 'You are not able to understand what those things

signify, but talk to the learned ones who read the scriptures; they know.’” With that exhortation from the angel of the Lord, Elisabeth directly addressed her brother, “Now, therefore, most beloved brother, I entreat you to take up this task. Examine the divine scriptures and try to discover a suitable interpretation of this vision. Indeed, perhaps the Lord has reserved this for you.”¹³⁰ In atypical *modus operandi*, Ekbert glossed the vision in the place of Elisabeth or a celestial intermediary. Unlike the other visions in Elisabeth’s corpus, where divine agents or Elisabeth herself were necessary for explaining her visions, in this instance, Ekbert’s clerical authority was sufficient. Furthermore, by deferring to Ekbert, Elisabeth clearly subordinated herself to his official institutional power.¹³¹

Subordinating herself to clerical authority within the text of her visions gave Elisabeth license to provide pointed criticisms of clergy members without challenging the church hierarchy. In a letter “To Hillin, archbishop of the city of Trier,” Elisabeth described herself as “a small worm-person” who was sent “a certain small spark sent from the seat of great majesty” in order to warn the archbishop to take more seriously his role as pastor and disciplinarian for his diocese.¹³² While providing criticism to high-ranking clergy such as the archbishop, Elisabeth was careful to include humbling adjectives such as “worm-person” in order to signify that she was simply conveying the word of God. Rhetorically, the idea is that these criticisms were not those of Elisabeth herself; rather, Elisabeth was the instrument by which God chose to send his rebuke.

¹³⁰ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 149.

¹³¹ Dyan Elliott discusses a similar relationship between beguines and their male confessors in *Proving Women: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University press, 2004).

¹³² Clark, *Elisabeth*, 237.

Elisabeth thus emphasized her own subordination to the ecclesiastical hierarchy to shape her text to appeal to a male clerical audience.

Elisabeth's explicit references to Ekbert and clerical networks functioned, therefore, to situate her authority as subordinate to that of those in the ecclesiastical hierarchy; however, Elisabeth's divine access allowed her to reconfigure her own authority in relation to clerical authority within the context of her visions. Her silences, or the silences of divine agents, in addition to her descriptions of secular and clerical men in her visions provided a means by which Elisabeth could critique certain people or behaviors. As long as her texts carefully conveyed her deference to male clerical power in the here-and-now, Elisabeth was able to express her religious experience and encourage others to follow her theological understandings.

Saints as Intermediaries:

During her visions, Elisabeth regularly conversed with angels, saints, the apostles, the Virgin Mary, and even demons. These figures created a barrier of intermediaries between Elisabeth and God and also affirmed the veracity of Elisabeth's experience. On one level, the presence of angels and saints in Elisabeth's visions indicated her holiness and proximity to God. On another, the mediation of angels and saints between Elisabeth and God further reinforced Elisabeth's *lack* of spiritual access and dependence on other hierarchical figures to interface with divine mysteries on her behalf. This strategy of rhetorical humility positioned Elisabeth as both subservient to institutional ecclesiastical power, such as clerics, and able to provide pastoral critique to clerics because of her visionary abilities.

In order to establish herself as a living person who interacted with saints and angels through ecstatic visions, Elisabeth and Ekbert created texts that navigated community and clerical expectations with her own divine experiences. She did so by describing her relationship with saints and angels, who acted as intermediaries between Elisabeth and the divine, even as Elisabeth herself functioned as an intermediary between saints and her community. One figure, whom Elisabeth called “the angel of the Lord”, appeared consistently throughout her visions, becoming her primary consultant and guide. He first appeared in her texts in a visionary episode on December 24 of 1153 when Elisabeth was fatigued by illness.¹³³ At the tearful prayers of her monastic sisters, the angel of the Lord came to Elisabeth’s aid in order to guide her to “contemplate the delights that God has prepared for those who love him.”¹³⁴ For the rest of Elisabeth’s visionary career, her angelic correspondent guided her visions, answered her questions, and explained divine secrets when other celestial figures did not. After the angel’s arrival, Elisabeth no longer had any visions that did not include a saintly, angelic, or apostolic figure explaining what it was she saw. While in the first book of visions Elisabeth witnessed celestial mysteries and relayed her experiences to her immediate community, after 1155 Elisabeth always had either a celestial being or Ekbert to gloss her visions. Unlike the nuns at Schönau, a wider ecclesiastical audience would not be as receptive to Elisabeth as a visionary without portraying her as a paradoxically passive figure. On the one hand, Elisabeth no longer came to her own conclusions about the meaning of her divine visions without the aid of celestial beings or her brother. On the other, relying on

¹³³ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 286, note 138.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

these other figures for explanations required that she was more active in interrogating her angelic visitors.

Saints and angels, as celestial beings, existed at the right hand of God and therefore had access to the divine mysteries. Elisabeth explained the relationship between the saints and God thus:

The saints' patience was found faithful in its testing and strong beyond the strength of kings and princes of the world. On account of all this, behold, they were led into the refreshment of consolation and they rest in the embrace of the right hand of God. They have been made bright in the glory of the Lamb in the sight of God and the holy angels because they bore their ignominy in the presence of those who dwell on earth.¹³⁵

Because the angels and saints had become “bright in the glory of the Lamb,” they were able to act as intermediaries between Elisabeth and God. Similarly, Elisabeth, as a living visionary woman, acted as an intermediary between her twelfth-century contemporaries and celestial beings. Thus, with one degree of separation, Elisabeth described her visionary experience as mediated by angelic and saintly figures who connected her to divine mysteries on the one hand, and separated her from direct access to God on the other. In this way, Elisabeth claimed spiritual authority by conversing with saints, angels, and the apostles, but she carefully distanced herself from claiming direct connection with God. This rhetorical strategy of emphasizing intermediaries worked to distance Elisabeth from divine knowledge while reinforcing her connection to the celestial realm, which would have potentially appealed to clerical men, who had more institutional power within the ecclesiastical hierarchy than the nun.

¹³⁵ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 175.

Resting on Existing Authority:

In addition to cementing her relationship to clerical authority, Elisabeth also explicitly tied her visions and career to that of Hildegard. Hildegard of Bingen, a visionary like Elisabeth, fell somewhere between an earthly clerical authority and a saint. She thus occupied both the role of abbess and the role of a visionary who wielded the unofficial power to advise on religious matters through her connection to God. Hildegard and Elisabeth lived in monasteries that were close geographically and interacted with the same church and lay officials.¹³⁶ In order to convince a clerical audience of the authenticity of her visions, Elisabeth explicitly linked her visionary book to that of Hildegard, implying that Elisabeth's visions and authority to provide pastoral advice was within the purview of a visionary woman.

Embedded in the beginning of her text *Liber Viarum Dei* (*The Book of the Ways of God*), Elisabeth writes,

One day in the previous year, while I was in a trance, he [the angel of the Lord] had led me as if into a meadow. A tent was pitched there, and we entered it. He showed me a great pile of books kept there and said, 'Do you see those books? All of these are still to be dictated before the judgment day.' Then, raising one from the pile, he said, 'This is *The Book of the Ways of God*, which will be revealed through you after you have visited sister Hildegard and listened to her.' And immediately after I returned from Hildegard, it did indeed begin to unfold in that way.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Felix Heinzer, "Unequal Twins: Visionary Attitude and Monastic Culture in Elisabeth of Schonau and Hildegard of Bingen," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Beverly Kienzie, George Ferzoco, and Debra Stoudt, (Lieden and Boston: Brill Publishers, 2014), 87. The Hirsau movement, inspired by the popular preacher William of Hirsau in the mid-to-late 11th century inspired a wave of reforms in German monastic communities. Heinzer argues that in addition to sharing similar Hirsau-inspired reform impulses, Hildegard and Elisabeth had fundamentally identical monastic and liturgical experiences (pp. 97). Barbara Newman cites contemporary writers who noted the similarities between Hildegard and Elisabeth. Newman, 37. Newman cites *Annales Palidenses* ad 1158, MGH.SS. 16, 90. The author might have also been Elisabeth and Ekbert's kinsman. See Clark, 5.

¹³⁷ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 165.

In explicitly mentioning her future book in conjunction with her visit to Hildegard, Elisabeth ensured that her audience would be aware of her connection to the other woman visionary. Furthermore, by claiming that the *Liber Viarum Dei* was shown to her by the angel, and that it would be created after Elisabeth received the advice of Hildegard, Elisabeth positioned her text as divinely commissioned and reliant upon the advice of her older mentor.

While information surrounding their meeting is minimal, Elisabeth likely went to visit Hildegard at Rupertsberg in 1156, shortly after Elisabeth's failed apocalyptic prophecy resulted in widespread skepticism of her visionary talents. By the late 1140s, Hildegard had established herself as an author, visionary, preacher, abbess, and theologian.¹³⁸ The tenth child of noble parents born in 1098, Hildegard was dedicated to God as a tithe until she entered a hermitage at St. Disibod monastery in 1106 at the age of eight. There, Hildegard was raised by the anchoress Jutta of Sponheim and educated by the monk Volmar, who would be Hildegard's lifelong friend, secretary, and first hagiographer.¹³⁹ When Jutta died in 1136, the nuns elected Hildegard as abbess. Between varied correspondences, including to Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugenius, Hildegard began to compose *Scivias*, a theological text of visions, which captured the interest of Pope Eugenius and prompted him to give Hildegard the special dispensation of apostolic license.¹⁴⁰ His approval of Hildegard's theology and preaching perhaps encouraged

¹³⁸ Newman, 9. Hildegard wrote to Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux in 1147 and was audited by Pope Eugenius the following year. Both men approved of Hildegard's gift and mission and Hildegard established her house at Rupertsberg shortly after (1150).

¹³⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 9.

Elisabeth to continue her work, which she made sure to align with the works of Hildegard.

Hildegard's fame and circle of correspondents grew until she decided to found a new community at Rupertsberg for herself and eighteen women followers in 1150. The next 15 years were marked by Hildegard's political struggles to secure clerical support for the nuns at Rupertsberg and her composition of a wide variety of works, musical and textual, including *Scivias*, *Physica*, *Causes and Cures*, liturgical music that was later arranged into *Symphonia of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations*, *Book of Life's Merits*, and the *Book of Divine Works*.¹⁴¹ In addition to these theological and medical texts, Hildegard also preached throughout Germany and even created her own language.¹⁴² By connecting her visions to those of Hildegard, Elisabeth consciously associated her written works with the preexisting authority of her contemporary and thus created another mediation between her visionary experience and access to divine knowledge.

Modern scholarship has repeatedly recognized the similarities and relationship between the two visionary women, their careers, and their texts. Anne Clark, Barbara Newman and Felix Heinzer all acknowledge the similarities between Elisabeth's text *Liber Viarum Dei* and Hildegard's *Scivias*. It seems obvious that *Scivias*, completed in 1151, the year before Elisabeth's visions began and about five years before Elisabeth visited Hildegard and began the construction of *Liber Viarum Dei*, was the model for Elisabeth's didactic visionary text.¹⁴³ First, the titles of the two works are remarkably

¹⁴¹ Newman, 10 and 11.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴³ Heinzer, 105.

similar. *Scivias*, Clark argues, is an abbreviation of *Scio Vias Domini*, which translates to “Know the Ways of the Lord” while *Liber Viarum Dei* translates as “The Book of the Ways of God.”¹⁴⁴ Second, both didactic texts begin with the image of a mountain, which is then glossed and described by the author. Yet, none of the scholarship has considered why Elisabeth and Ekbert would choose to construct a text so carefully modeled on Hildegard’s *Scivias*, where the texts align, and where they diverge. While Elisabeth might have modeled *Liber Viarum Dei* on *Scivias* simply because of her admiration for Hildegard, explicitly linking her didactic *Liber Viarum Dei* might have been a rhetorical strategy to connect Elisabeth’s visions, actions, and authority to Hildegard’s own spiritual authority.

Structurally, the two texts differ greatly. *Scivias* consists of a collection of three volumes of visions, which Hildegard then glossed and interpreted into didactic theological lessons. The first volume generally consists of visions depicting lessons from the Old Testament while volumes two and three deal with theological concerns in the New Testament, such as the nature of the trinity, the celestial hierarchy, and man’s relationship to the divine. *Liber Viarum Dei*, on the other hand, is a collection of sermons expounding upon one vision – that of a mountain, which is remarkably similar to the first vision described by Hildegard in *Scivias*. Unlike Hildegard, who provided a gloss on the meaning of the mountain in her vision, Elisabeth’s *Liber Viarum Dei* gave explicit sermons on how different people (clergy, children, martyrs, married folk) could ascend the mountain and therefore become closer to God. While both texts provided didactic interpretations of the vision, *Scivias* emphasized theology while *Liber Viarum Dei*

¹⁴⁴ Newman, 34.

focused on homiletics. In expounding on Hildegard's vision in this way, Elisabeth borrowed material that had been approved by worldly religious authorities. In doing so, she rhetorically suggested that her visions were not only divinely inspired, they were also corroborated by a contemporary visionary. In relating her text to that of Hildegard, Elisabeth made her pastoral sermons palatable to a male clerical audience.

Hildegard's first vision of the *Scivias* began with a description of an "iron colored" mountain with a person, bathed in bright light and with large wings extending on either side, sitting upon it. At the foot of the mountain was the image of a shape filled with eyes and a young girl clothed in a pale tunic whose face was obscured by bright light.¹⁴⁵ Hildegard glossed her vision by describing how the mountain was a metaphor for the strength and stability of God, the eye-filled figure represented the cultivation of humility and fear of God, the young girl signified the blessedness of the poor in spirit, and the stars represented that nothing was concealed from the "very profound and keen knowledge of God." Hildegard concluded her first vision by explaining that the vision's larger purpose was to admonish people who "made themselves weak and poor because they did not wish to be busy with justice and to plot out injustice... Being at leisure, they stayed away from the wondrous works of blessedness."¹⁴⁶ The mountain represented God's love, but Hildegard believed her contemporaries were not willing to practice enough humility or to fear God enough to become like the young girl in her vision. While the girl and the eye-figure were perhaps emblematic of possible paths toward living a more holy life, Hildegard instead emphasized her admonishment.

¹⁴⁵ Newman, *Hildegard*, 7.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

Like Hildegard's mountain vision, Elisabeth began *Liber Viarum Dei* by describing,

a lofty mountain illuminated at its peak by abundant light. I also saw what appeared to be three paths extending from the mountain's base to its summit. One of them, which was in the middle directly across from me, had the appearance of serene sky or blue stone; the one to my right appeared green, and the one to my left, purple. At the summit of the mountain facing the middle path was a man clothed in a remarkable blue tunic and girded at the loins with a bright white belt. His face was shining like the sun, his eyes beaming like stars, and his hair was like the brightest wool. In his mouth he had a sword sharpened on both sides. In his right hand he had a key, and in his left hand what appeared to be a royal scepter (Rv 1:13-17).¹⁴⁷

In addition to the three paths Elisabeth described at the outset of her book, she also described an additional seven paths up the mountain, one covered by thorn bushes, one narrow and hardly worn, one wide and paved with smooth red tiles, one with dense thorns on the lower half of the path but with a clear trail on the upper part of the mountain, one rough with "large clods of earth", and two that were "smooth and without obstacle" that appeared like the "well-worn earth in a public street."¹⁴⁸

In a similar interpretation as Hildegard, Elisabeth described how the mountain represented the "height of celestial beatitude" while the light at the top symbolized the brightness of eternal life.¹⁴⁹ However, after describing the image of the mountain, Elisabeth's text diverged dramatically from *Scivias* as Elisabeth explained the various paths up the mountain and to whom they pertained. There was a path designed for the

¹⁴⁷ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 161.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

contemplatives, those who lived an irreproachable active life, the martyrs, the married, the chaste, church leaders, those who were concerned with worldly affairs for part of their life before converting to the life of the chaste, hermits, and children. The figure at the top of the mountain was Christ, who carried the key, which opened the gate of life and God's mysteries, and the scepter, which indicated his power in earth and in heaven.¹⁵⁰ After affirming the authenticity of the text through a vision in which Elisabeth was shown how there were people from all those categories in heaven, *Liber Viarum Dei* then turned to a series of ten sermons intended to provide the specifics on how each path described might be navigated in the here-and-now. By expanding upon Hildegard's mountain vision, Elisabeth transformed Hildegard's warning into a didactic tool applicable to a diverse audience, particularly as a homiletic tool for clerics.

Conclusion:

In order to convince her monastic and clerical audiences to follow her pastoral advice, Elisabeth constructed visionary texts that were carefully packaged for each specific audience. In the case of *Liber Visionum Primus*, Elisabeth emphasized liturgical worship, prayer, and intimate personal experiences as a nun to communicate her advice on improving her monastic community's practice of religion. For the monastic network invested in the cult of Saint Ursula, Elisabeth was explicit in her own skepticism at additional information to the preexisting legend. Her rhetorical suspicion allowed her to integrate narrative details from the *Regnante Domino* and sarcophagal inscriptions as well as introduce male martyrs. For a male dominated clerical audience, Elisabeth emphasized her own marginality in the ecclesiastical hierarchy through rhetorical

¹⁵⁰ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 163.

humility, building on the extant authority of Hildegard, and by explicitly presenting her deference to male clerics such as Abbot Hildelin and Ekbert.

These rhetorical strategies gesture to Elisabeth's attempt to navigate contemporary understandings of the ecclesiastical hierarchy as well as social expectations about the role of a nun and the authority of a visionary woman. Regardless of the extent of Ekbert's role in authoring Elisabeth's visionary texts, Elisabeth, as the visionary, had to be presented in different, strategic ways for a male clerical audience than she was for her immediate monastic community. Over her thirteen-year visionary career, Elisabeth promoted herself as a visionary, an intermediary between the celestial realm and the here-and-now, in increasingly wider circles outside of her monastery at Schönau. The following chapter will explore the expanding of Elisabeth's reputation as a visionary, seeking to better understand how Elisabeth presented herself within her visionary texts as she navigated contemporary assumptions about the authority of a visionary nun within and without the monastery of Schönau.

CHAPTER IV

NAVIGATING SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

The events between August of 1154 and spring of 1155 dramatically shaped Elisabeth's visionary career, forcing her visions into the public domain and exposing her up to skepticism and criticism. Elisabeth seems to have been deeply affected by religious peoples' doubt in her divine connection. In a letter to Hildegard of Bingen, likely composed sometime in the early months of 1155, Elisabeth confessed, "I have recently harbored in my mind a certain cloud of anxiety on account of the many senseless, untrue words people are saying about me. Now the word of the public I could easily endure if also those who walk in the habit of religion would not also bitterly afflict my spirit."¹⁵¹ In the introduction to the first visionary book, she voiced a similar concern to Ekbart and frustration that she was compelled to reveal her visions by her celestial visitors. She admitted to him that "I acknowledge that it is dangerous for me to keep silent about the mighty works of God, and I greatly fear that it is going to be more dangerous to speak out."¹⁵² Not knowing the best course of action, Elisabeth reached out to Hildegard, who had navigated similar tensions in her own abbatial and visionary career.

Hildegard's reply to Elisabeth carried an important message: be careful how much authority you claim for yourself. She exhorted Elisabeth:

Listen again: Those who long to complete God's works must always bear in mind that they are fragile vessels,¹⁵³ for they are only human. They must always bear in mind what they are and what they will be. They must leave Him

¹⁵¹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 137.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵³ cf. II Cor 4.7

Who is of heaven the things of heaven, because they are exiles ignorant of the things of heaven. They can only sing the mysteries of God like a trumpet, which only returns a sound but does not function unassisted, for it is Another who breathes into it that it might give forth a sound. ... O my daughter, may God make you a mirror of life. I too cower in the puniness of my mind, and am greatly wearied by anxiety and fear. Yet from time to time I resound a little, like the dim sound of a trumpet from the Living Light. May God help me, therefore, to remain in His service.¹⁵⁴

Sympathetic to Elisabeth's plight, Hildegard responded in much the same way as she responded to her other correspondents, by cautioning Elisabeth to remember her subservience to God and ignorance of the divine mysteries. Even women such as themselves, who regularly had divinely inspired visions, she said, were only hollow instruments, useless without the breath of God.

Hildegard's warning suggests the tenuous position of medieval visionary women within their society. In the midst of the flowering of creative new spiritual outlets,¹⁵⁵ women such as Elisabeth of Schönau and Hildegard of Bingen experienced divine visions, which placed them close to God and thereby allowed them to circumvent, in some ways, the clerical hierarchy of the official ecclesiastical institutions.¹⁵⁶ However, as Hildegard cautioned, the acceptance of Elisabeth's religious teachings was contingent on presenting her visions in such a way that was accepted by Elisabeth's monastic and clerical audiences.

¹⁵⁴ Joseph Baird and Radd Ehrman trans., *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 181.

¹⁵⁵ Griffiths, *The Garden of Delights*. Women managed to form their own communities of Cistercians, Premonstratensians, and even Franciscans, but were actively limited in the fourth Lateran council of 1215. See also Dyan Elliott for more on restrictions on women's spirituality and John Van Engen "The Religious Women of Liege at the turn of the Thirteenth Century" *Medieval Liege at the Crossroads of Europe, Monastic Society, and Culture, 1000-1300*, ed. Steven Vanderputten Tjamke Snijders, and Jay Diehl, MCS 37 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016) for more on women's unofficial connection to Cistercian houses.

¹⁵⁶ For more on divine visions, see Barbara Newman, "What Did it Mean to Say 'I Saw'?"

Having established in the previous chapters that Elisabeth's visions were intended to be pastoral in nature and communicated with specific monastic and clerical audiences through intentional rhetorical strategies, this chapter will turn to *why* Elisabeth and Ekbert felt compelled to present the visionary texts the way they did. By reestablishing the chronological narrative of Elisabeth's visionary career, one can identify how Elisabeth sought to negotiate spiritual authority with ever-expanding audiences. As her reputation spread beyond the confines of the community of women at Schönau, Elisabeth changed the subject matter and rhetorical strategies of her visionary texts to better address a clerical audience comprised primarily of men. This chapter, then, will trace the development of Elisabeth's visionary authority over time in order to understand the tensions that her texts sought to navigate. I will argue that as her reputation spread beyond the confines of the women's community at Schönau, Elisabeth changed the subject matter and rhetorical strategies of her visionary texts to better address a clerical audience comprised primarily of men. Thus Elisabeth navigated the liminal space between the accepted authority of religious women, skepticism of her divine connection, and spiritual power derived from her visionary status in order to articulate her own views of how men and women ought to worship.

The Early Years: 1152-1154

At the beginning of Elisabeth's visionary career, knowledge of her visions seems to have remained within Schönau monastery, particularly within the community of women there. While the monks of Schönau were likely aware, to some degree, that Elisabeth was ill, it seems that only the women of Schönau, and possibly her brother

Ekbert, knew of her visionary gift until 1154.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, Elisabeth presented the growth of confidence in her own visions. In these first two years of visions, *Book One* described how Elisabeth transformed from a passive receptor of divine visions into a visionary who understood the ramifications in the celestial realm of her community's practice of worship. The tentative nature of her early visions, escalating assurance in providing pastoral advice to the nuns during religious practice, and increasing confidence in her ability to provide spiritual guidance demonstrate how Elisabeth described the growth of her spiritual authority within the female gendered space at Schönau monastery.

Elisabeth's initial visionary experiences describe her as a passive figure who was powerless against her Adversary without the support of her monastic community. In the series of incidents described concerning the spiritual struggles between Elisabeth and her Adversary, the community at Schönau played a crucial role by interceding on Elisabeth's behalf. Seeing Elisabeth struggling physically and spiritually, the monks and nuns brought relics to her and prayed over her body for a staggering seven days.¹⁵⁸ Elisabeth's crisis of faith cannot be reduced to an exclusively intrapersonal experience; the battle for her soul was enacted by her community.¹⁵⁹ Elisabeth's initial visions demonstrated her passivity as Schönau's monks and nuns prayed and fasted on her behalf, suggesting that initially Elisabeth lacked authority amongst her community. However, as Elisabeth's

¹⁵⁷ Clark, 14. Clark argues that until Abbot Hildelin took an interest in Elisabeth in 1154, Elisabeth's visions seem to have been documented by the *magistra* of the women's community, other Schönau nuns, and Ekbert when he visited her at the monastery.

¹⁵⁸ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 49.

¹⁵⁹ Clark reads Elisabeth's crisis of faith as a reflection on the revalorization of *tristitia* in monastic life, described by Urban Küsters. Clark, 14.

spiritual authority grew, first with the nuns at Schönau and later with clerical men, she came to be an active agent in men and women's spirituality.

Elisabeth, acutely aware of the institutional hierarchy at Schönau, demonstrated her own subservience to the authority of Abbot Hildelin and the *magistra*, the woman responsible for the nuns of the community. Shortly after expelling her Adversary, Elisabeth began to wonder about "the dove that she frequently saw" and asked Abbot Hildelin "whether Satan could transform himself into a dove," to which the abbot assured her that he "had never read such a thing."¹⁶⁰ In confirmation of his response, Elisabeth subsequently saw "that same dove" rest on the cross. This confirmed that the dove was, indeed, the Holy Spirit and not a satanic impostor and that her abbot's claims were correct. Despite her direct connection to the celestial realm, Elisabeth remained obedient to the ecclesiastical hierarchy as seen in her deference to abbot Hildelin.

When, however, the abbot was not present, Elisabeth was active in shaping the religious practice of her monastic sisters. On June 7, 1153, approximately one year after receiving her first visions, Elisabeth tested her spiritual authority by encouraging the nuns to provide additional prayers during the Pentecostal Mass.¹⁶¹ This moment marked another stage in Elisabeth's visionary development. By asking the *magistra* and sisters to offer more prayer during the mass, Elisabeth tested the reach of her visionary authority. Amongst the women of Schönau, Elisabeth could use her gift to interact with the divine through the participation of the sisters. While it is unclear from Elisabeth's description of the vision featuring the dove, the Pentecostal flame, and the priests at the altar, whether or not monks other than those clerics performing the service were participants in the

¹⁶⁰ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 50.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

liturgical celebration alongside the women, Elisabeth exercised her nascent visionary authority only amongst her fellow nuns. During the Mass, Elisabeth saw the priests receive a flame from the dove at the altar and leaned over to the *magistra* and asked her to encourage additional prayers from the monastic women.¹⁶² Elisabeth's intervention altered the devotional practice of her gendered community and in return, Elisabeth confirmed that the sisters' "devotion in prayers" resulted in a moment of close connection to God when the women received their own drop of flame from the dove while taking communion. The male clergy were not the only recipients of the Pentecostal flame. By praying more during the Mass, the sisters were also included in the divine rewards of worship.

While Elisabeth did advise her *magistra* to exhort additional prayers from the sisters during the Mass, and thus provided pastoral advice to the women, she did not directly address the nuns without the consent of the *magistra* and therefore did not circumvent the *magistra*'s authority. Elisabeth's visionary authority respected the institutional hierarchy. In order to shape the religious practice of the nuns at Schönau, Elisabeth appealed to the *magistra* to actually exhort changes in behavior from the sisters. At this stage in her visionary career, Elisabeth did not have the spiritual authority to directly encourage the nuns to change their behaviors. It was not until another six months of asides to the *magistra*, who then enacted Elisabeth's advice, that she had cultivated rapport with the nuns at Schönau that the women followed her advice without the approval of the *magistra*. By presenting this narrative of growing spiritual authority, Elisabeth navigated her audiences' understanding of how a visionary woman ought to

¹⁶² Clark, *Elisabeth*, 77.

function within her community. To become a spiritual authority who could provide pastoral advice to her monastic community, Elisabeth first had to gain the trust of the women of Schönau, which she did by deferring to the *magistra* and Abbot Hildelin.

In the few visions recorded between June of 1153 and February of 1154, Elisabeth continued to experience the liturgy and to interact with visions of the Saints, the Virgin Mary, and angel of the Lord. In the incident with a dying, elderly sister, Elisabeth no longer deferred to the authority of the *magistra*; rather, the women of Schönau followed her spiritual advice and thus saved the soul of the ailing nun. Unlike the Pentecostal Mass where Elisabeth's pastoral advice was enacted by the *magistra*, in this instance the nuns followed Elisabeth's advice without the *magistra*'s explicit approval.¹⁶³ Rhetorically, Elisabeth still deferred to the *magistra* by informing her of the vision after the fact, but by describing the reaction of the nuns to her command, "anoint her," Elisabeth provided evidence to her audience that the community of nuns at Schönau trusted in her spiritual authority. Elisabeth proved that she had successfully cultivated the trust of the women within her monastic community, and in return, their actions led to the salvation of their sister's soul.

At the beginning of her visionary career, Elisabeth's community implicitly authorized her potential visionary status by involving themselves in her struggle with her Adversary. This proved to be the first step in Elisabeth's claim to spiritual authority. Between 1152 and 1154, Elisabeth carefully navigated institutional power structures, resulting in gaining the confidence of the nuns at Schönau. By describing this process as subtext to her written visionary works, Elisabeth also negotiated spiritual authority with

¹⁶³ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 84.

her audience. The nuns' belief in her visionary abilities was not immediate; rather, Elisabeth described a process by which she experimented with the connection between her community's actions and the results in the celestial realm. While access to the celestial realm could, theoretically, allow Elisabeth to transcend the ecclesiastical hierarchy, in order to convince her audience of the authenticity of her visions Elisabeth had to develop rapport with her community. Once news of her visionary abilities moved outside of the community of nuns, Elisabeth had to renegotiate her authority with a wider, masculine audience.

The Moment of Crisis: 1154-1155

Unlike the *magistra* and nuns, in 1154 Abbot Hildelin and the broader, clerical community distrusted Elisabeth's visionary status, perhaps because they had not had personal experience with Elisabeth and her visions. In a letter to Hildegard, Elisabeth described the series of events leading up to Ekbert's permanent arrival at Schönau. Prior to her apocalyptic prophecy, Elisabeth's visions had remained within the community of women at Schönau; however, this particular vision was too important to keep from the abbot. Hildelin quickly reached out to neighboring religious communities and informed them of Elisabeth's prophecy. The abbot's decision to inform a wider audience placed Elisabeth in a difficult position. In 1154, her visionary authority was not established beyond Schönau's community of women. In the wake of public doubt in her visionary authority following Hildelin's promotion of Elisabeth's vision, Ekbert took permanent vows at Schönau and, together with Elisabeth, reformed her visionary texts to rhetorically

appeal to a wider clerical audience by navigating social expectations about a visionary woman's role within the ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹⁶⁴

According to her letter to Hildegard, which was published in *Book Three* of her visionary texts, the events that culminated in Elisabeth's appeal to Abbess Hildegard began early in the morning on August 8, 1154. Elisabeth woke from a recent bout of illness that had kept her in bed for six full days. Knowing from the overwhelming pain that an ecstatic episode was almost upon her, Elisabeth went "to a secret place to pray."¹⁶⁵ In the midst of her prayers, Elisabeth lifted her head to see the familiar form of the angel of the Lord, and without preamble, the angel lifted her to such a height that she could see all the corners of the earth spread out below her.¹⁶⁶ From her vantage, Elisabeth could see fiery, hooked arrows falling to the earth in a flaming blizzard that looked about to destroy the whole world. The angel reassured her: "This is not the fire you are thinking of. Rather it is the wrath of God, which is about to come upon the earth."¹⁶⁷

In the wake of her trance, Elisabeth faced the earthly consequence of her divine knowledge: the angel of the Lord had told her to share her vision with the world and thus be the mouthpiece of God. However, Elisabeth's hesitation in sharing her prophetic knowledge suggests that she was unwilling to share her vision to anyone outside the

¹⁶⁴ Coakley, 27.

¹⁶⁵ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 93.

¹⁶⁶ The angel first appears in Elisabeth's text to help the soul of one of the sisters ascend to heaven. Clark's translation does not provide a date, but it would have happened sometime between September 14, 1153 and December 24, 1153 based on the order of the visions.

¹⁶⁷ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 93. Apocalyptic discourse was very common in the twelfth century and became increasingly more widespread by the mid thirteenth century. For more, see David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century after Francis* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001) or Brett Whalen *The Dominion of God: Christendom and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

community of women at Schönau.¹⁶⁸ In an attempt to not be presumptuous about her earthly station or be accused of creating novelties, Elisabeth said nothing.¹⁶⁹ During her prayers on the following Sunday, the angel visited Elisabeth again, this time in indignation. Elisabeth had failed to obey her divine command by remaining silent about the vision that had been bestowed upon her. “Why do you hide the gold in the mud?” demanded the Lord’s angel, “This is the word of God, which was sent to earth through your mouth not so that it would be hidden, but so that it would be made manifest for the praise and glory of our Lord and for the salvation of His people.”¹⁷⁰ Having delivered his admonishment, the angel sharply struck her five times with a whip, after which Elisabeth remained bedridden for three days due to the pain.

In describing the compulsion of the angel, Elisabeth accomplished two things. First, she sought to emphasize her rhetorical humility by sharing the fact that her vision was not of her own volition. By describing the physical ramifications of remaining silent, Elisabeth emphasized her own humility and subjection to God’s will. Second, she articulated her reservation at challenging the institutional hierarchy. By demonstrating that sharing her vision, which had the potential to challenge the assumptions and teachings of clerical men, was not her decision alone, Elisabeth showed her subjection to the institutional hierarchy. Elisabeth was thus a pawn in two separate hierarchies, the celestial and the ecclesiastical, each which claimed a monopoly on her obedience. In

¹⁶⁸ Clark suggests that Ekbert knew of Elisabeth’s visions before 1154 and was one of the people involved in transcribing her visions for *Book One* along with the *magistra* and other nuns. Clark, 14.

¹⁶⁹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 138

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. Here the angel quotes directly from the bible Mt 25:25-26, Interestingly, the translator chose to divert from the Douay-Rheims translation (which is the English translation of the Latin (vulgate) bible). The Douay-Rheims is as follows: And being afraid I went and hid thy talent in the earth: behold here thou hast that which is thine. And his lord answering, said to him: Wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sow not, and gather where I have not strewed.”

order to attempt to reconcile these conflicting authorities, Elisabeth enlisted her *magistra* in telling Abbot Hildelin about her vision.¹⁷¹ However, the involvement of the abbot expanded Elisabeth's audience to include a wider community of religious men, perhaps prematurely. Once knowledge of her vision was in the hands of the abbot, Elisabeth was unable to control how her vision was communicated to a wider audience, which resulted in a temporary disaster for her visionary reputation that was only remedied when she and Ekbert revised the rhetorical strategies of her visionary texts.

In the subsequent events described in the letter to Hildegard, it was clear that Abbot Hildelin was hesitant to accept Elisabeth's spiritual authority without definitive proof that her visions were divinely inspired. While Elisabeth and the nuns of Schönau recognized the divine nature of her visions, Abbot Hildelin remained skeptical until the angel visited Elisabeth during her evening prayers a few weeks later. In another vision, the Lord's angel again exhorted Elisabeth to, "Shout strongly and cry... to all the peoples, because the whole world has been transformed into darkness."¹⁷² Duty-bound, Elisabeth repeated the angel's message to her abbot. This was the evidence the abbot needed to validate Elisabeth's experience; he quickly began sending letters warning his colleagues, mentors, and far-flung clergy of the impending wrath of God. Abbot Hildelin, by involving the wider community of male clerics, forced Elisabeth's visionary status and spiritual authority out of the shelter of Schönau and into the world of *ecclesia*. In describing the details of communicating her vision to the abbot, and his role in propagating her vision to a wider audience, Elisabeth articulated her distress at having to

¹⁷¹ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 138.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 139. From (Mt 4:17), "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say: Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Douay-Rheims.

navigate the social power constructs of her world in order to share her divinely inspired visions, which she was compelled to communicate to her contemporaries. While Abbot Hildelin seems to have believed her visions eventually, Elisabeth's lack of clerical support put her at risk once she had been exposed as a visionary outside of Schönau.

Elisabeth was right to have been concerned about how her visions would be received by a wider audience. She described in the prologue to her first book of visions how, in the following weeks, the report of Elisabeth's vision met with a variety of responses.¹⁷³ Some, like the abbot himself, stirred up by contemporary apocalyptic discourse, took the angel's words to heart with renewed penitence.¹⁷⁴ Other recipients of Hildelin's letters were described by Elisabeth as much more skeptical of the nun's vision and dismissed her message as ludicrous, even going so far as to speak perversely about the angel, saying that he was not an angel, but a mocking spirit not of divine nature.¹⁷⁵ Elisabeth's spiritual authority did not carry as much weight amongst the clerical audience as it did within her immediate community. In communicating Elisabeth's message beyond the walls of Schönau, Hildelin and Elisabeth had, it seems, not established her spiritual authority with that audience and therefore the authenticity of Elisabeth's celestial connection was called in to question.

When the angel reappeared to her in January of 1155, Elisabeth admitted her frustration at being caught between the conflicting authority of her abbot and the angel. She stated, "I thought this was presumptuous and received the order with great fear," but the abbot had "bound me through obedience" appeal to the angel and ask him if he was

¹⁷³ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 42.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

truly an angel of God and if her visions were true.¹⁷⁶ The angel indignantly affirmed that he was indeed a true angel of God and that Elisabeth's visions were indeed of divine design. He told Elisabeth, "You have acted contemptibly toward me ... by your lack of trust in me. ... From now on, know for certain that you will no longer see my face nor hear my voice unless you placate the Lord. ... Tell your abbot to celebrate devoutly the divine office in memory of me." Elisabeth begged the angel to "be merciful," since she was "bound by obedience to act and did not dare transgress the command of [her] instructor."¹⁷⁷ But the angel would not yield. Elisabeth told Abbot Hildelin what the angel had commanded, and the men and women of the monastery celebrated Mass and read psalms in honor of the holy angels while the abbot prepared to share the message of repentance to the wider clerical and monastic community.¹⁷⁸ In vividly describing her conflicting obligations to both the abbot and the angel, Elisabeth demonstrated to her audience the inherent tension between being a servant of God on the one hand and subservient to the monastic hierarchy on the other. In rhetorically depicting her attempts to be obedient to both the angel and Hildelin, Elisabeth suggested to her audience that her authority to speak out about her visions was due only to the angel's command.

In the wake of this confrontation between Elisabeth, the angel, and Hildelin, the abbot began publically to preach the angel's message of penitence. For the whole of Lent, those who had heard Elisabeth's vision zealously persevered in almsgiving, prayers, and penance out of fear of God's fury.¹⁷⁹ In the heightened anxiety about the impending

¹⁷⁶ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 139.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 139-40. December 4, 1154.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

wrath of God, the angel once again visited Elisabeth. “Do not be sad or disturbed,” he said, “if the things I predicted do not come to pass on the day I had indicated to you,” because “the Lord has been appeased by the amends made by many... and has turned the wrath of His indignation from them.” The spreading of Elisabeth’s vision had worked: God was appeased by the penitential reform of the clergy. However, Elisabeth’s visionary credibility was in danger if the vision did not progress as expected. Elisabeth asked the angel, “but then, my lord, won’t I be scorned by everyone to whom this message was revealed?” The angel responded that Elisabeth must, “endure patiently and with good will everything that will happen;” she ought to endure the mockeries just as Christ endured torment on the cross.¹⁸⁰ By describing the failure of her prophecy in her letter to Hildegard, which was included in the third book of visions, Elisabeth sought to address the skepticism of a wider audience.

When knowledge of her visions was thrust into a wider ecclesiastical community, Elisabeth’s personal authority cultivated amongst the women of Schönau was not enough to convince her new audience of the veracity of her visions. In presenting her visions to a wider clerical and monastic audience, Abbot Hildelin had exposed Elisabeth’s message without first establishing her visionary authority for this new audience and the result was disastrous. Outside of the women at Schönau, Elisabeth had no spiritual authority until Ekbert took monastic vows and collaborated with her to transform the rhetoric of her visionary texts into something palatable for a male clerical audience. First and foremost, Ekbert and Elisabeth reiterated Elisabeth’s subjection to institutional ecclesiastical hierarchy through rhetorical humility and emphasizing Elisabeth’s subordinate

¹⁸⁰ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 141. January 5, 1155.

relationship to Abbot Hildelin. In redesigning her written visionary texts produced after 1155, Elisabeth and Ekbert sought to cultivate spiritual authority with an audience that did not have personal experience with Elisabeth's visionary abilities.

The Later Years: 1155-1164

When Elisabeth sat down to write to Hildegard, her visionary gifts had been thrust into the skeptical world of ecclesiastical elites. It was within this tense circumstance that Ekbert stepped in to more actively corroborate Elisabeth's visionary texts.¹⁸¹ As has been discussed previously, Ekbert's arrival at Schönau monastery precipitated significant changes to Elisabeth's life and written corpus. The chaotic events triggered by Elisabeth's apocalyptic vision in 1154 were only the beginning of her visionary career. By her death in 1165, Elisabeth, with the help and protection of Ekbert, had produced her subsequent visionary books, provided letters of advice to monks, nuns, and clerics, and was even consulted by ecclesiastical authorities as an authenticator of the bodies of the famous virgin martyrs.¹⁸²

In the immediate aftermath of 1155, Elisabeth and Ekbert refashioned Elisabeth's visionary texts to appeal to a wider clerical audience, thus establishing her spiritual authority beyond Schönau. By explicitly inserting clerical figures into the visionary texts, such as Abbot Hildelin and Ekbert, they navigated their audiences' assumptions about the authority of a visionary woman. Elisabeth and Ekbert employed strategies of rhetorical

¹⁸¹ The exact date is not clear, but *Vita Ekeberti* states Ekbert joined Schönau monastery sometime after Pentecost, 1155. Emecho of Schönau, *Vita Ekeberti*, edited by S. Widmann, *Neues Archiv der Gesellschaft für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde* II (1886): 447-54.

¹⁸² The discovery and controversy around the bodies of martyred virgins loomed large in mid-twelfth century religious discourse. For more on Elisabeth's role in authenticating the holy remains, see Anne Clark, 20.

humility, emphasized Elisabeth's lived subordination to male clerical figures, and portrayed her spiritual authority as reliant upon preexisting biblical and contemporary authorities in order to combat the skepticism of the male clerical community. These rhetorical strategies signified a clerical audience, but more importantly they indicated that the male clerical audience encountered Elisabeth's visionary texts with certain expectations about the spiritual power and authority of a woman visionary. Therefore, in order to communicate with a wider clerical audience, Elisabeth and Ekbert assured their audience that Elisabeth was not challenging the institutional ecclesiastical hierarchy in providing her visionary advice.

Ekbert began the second book of visions, recorded between May and August of 1155, by responding to apparent criticism of Elisabeth and her visions.¹⁸³ He urged "all readers of this book" not to be "scandalized at the marvelous and unheard of divine goodness."¹⁸⁴ In order to bolster Elisabeth's reputation, Ekbert explicitly linked her to biblical, prophetic women saying,

It scandalizes them that in these days he Lord deigns to magnify His mercy in the weak sex. But why doesn't it occur to them that a similar thing happened in the days of our fathers? When men were given over to negligence, holy women were filled with the spirit of God so that they prophesied.¹⁸⁵

In connecting Elisabeth's visions to the biblical precedents of Hulda, Deborah, Judith, and Jael, Ekbert spoke to an audience of religious men who "distain[ed] whatever they regard as weaker" and sought to present Elisabeth's visions in such a way that her wider

¹⁸³ Clark, 32.

¹⁸⁴ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 97.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

clerical audience would accept her spiritual authority. Elisabeth and Ekbert's first challenge was to position Elisabeth's visions within an acceptable tradition of women prophets. Ekbert's address to clerical men at the beginning of Elisabeth's second visionary book recognized Elisabeth's marginal position within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. As a young nun, Elisabeth was not considered by clerical elites to be more than one of "the weaker sex."

In order to combat this distrust of Elisabeth and her visions, Ekbert and Elisabeth emphasized her subjection to the institutional hierarchy by inserting Abbot Hildelin and Ekbert himself into Elisabeth's visionary texts. In one such instance in June of 1155, Elisabeth described how she "began to experience greater agony than before" until the lord abbot "came and said litanies and prayers" over her. Once she had "received absolution from him," Elisabeth finally was relieved of her pain.¹⁸⁶ By describing Elisabeth's relationship to Abbot Hildelin, Ekbert and Elisabeth reaffirmed her subordination to a male clerical figure and thus did not challenge the institutional hierarchy of the church. Abbot Hildelin's confessorial role was necessary to Elisabeth's physical and spiritual well-being. Furthermore, it was Mother Mary herself who suggested that Elisabeth receive absolution from the abbot, thus confirming that even Elisabeth, who had access to divine knowledge, was dependent on the institutional power of clerical men for her own spiritual wellbeing. In verifying the authority of clerical men, Elisabeth and Ekbert assuaged their male clerical audiences, thus making Elisabeth's visionary texts much more palatable to her clerical community. Ultimately, however, these rhetorical strategies allowed Elisabeth to navigate contemporary social constraints

¹⁸⁶ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 100. Clark cites June 23, 1155 as the date of the incident in footnote 175, pp. 288.

on religious women to offer her own, poignant critique of, and advice to, male religious leaders.

In another, similar, instance, Elisabeth invoked Ekbert to gloss one of her visions. She described how,

I burned with a great desire to understand ... therefore, I very eagerly beseeched that blessed man of God to procure for me from the Lord an understanding of the vision that I desired. He turned toward me and responded with these words, "you are not able to understand what those things signify, but talk to the learned ones who read the scriptures; they know." Now, therefore, most beloved brother, I entreat you to take up this task. Examine the divine scriptures and try to discover a suitable interpretation of this vision. Indeed, perhaps the Lord has reserved this for you."¹⁸⁷

By enlisting Ekbert's help in explaining the significance of her vision, an atypical moment in her written visionary corpus, Elisabeth rhetorically distanced herself from understanding the implications of her visions. In doing so, she relied on Ekbert's clerical authority. John Coakley argues that Ekbert inserted himself into Elisabeth's visionary writings as a barrier between Elisabeth and her audience, partially as protection for Elisabeth, but also to demonstrate his own erudition.¹⁸⁸ Ekbert thus functioned to arbitrate between Elisabeth's claim to divine knowledge and her male clerical audience.

Conclusion:

Elisabeth's journey from 1152 to 1155 demonstrates how her monastic and clerical audiences received her visionary texts. Initially, Elisabeth as a visionary woman

¹⁸⁷ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 149.

¹⁸⁸ Coakley, 43.

interacted only with the nuns of Schönau monastery. Once her visionary authority was tested in mixed male-female audience outside of Schönau, Elisabeth and Ekbert repackaged her written visionary works to adjust for different audience expectations about the nature of spiritual power as opposed to institutional power. Her personal charisma was not enough in a wider, clerical sphere. In order to reach those audiences, Elisabeth and Ekbert reworked Elisabeth's written visionary texts to affirm her own subordination to the institutional hierarchy, despite her ability to communicate with the celestial realm.

Ultimately, Elisabeth's written corpus was immensely popular amongst medieval audiences.¹⁸⁹ Her texts were transmitted and translated throughout the Middle Ages, and her renown as a visionary was such that hordes of people – lay and religious alike – visited Elisabeth on her deathbed to receive her divinely-inspired advice.¹⁹⁰ Despite the public skepticism in the authenticity of her divine visions in 1155, within the span of ten years Elisabeth transformed herself into a spiritual authority who was called on by her community to act as an intermediary with God. By emphasizing her subordination to existing authorities, such as Ekbert and other male clerics, and distancing herself to direct access to God through rhetorical humility, Elisabeth successfully navigated the ecclesiastical hierarchy. These rhetorical strategies, in turn, provided the opportunity for Elisabeth to promote her own pastoral advice to monastics and clerics alike. Her rhetorical subordination to institutional powers created the space for her to exert spiritual power over the very clerics she claimed were religious authorities.

¹⁸⁹ There are 145 extant manuscripts, including translations in Norse. Clark, 49.

¹⁹⁰ From Ekbert's *De Orbitu*, a letter to his kinswomen describing Elisabeth's final days. Clark, *Elisabeth*, 255.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In 1165, Abbot Ekbert of Schönau wrote a heartbroken letter to his kinswomen Guda, Hadewig, and Regelindis recounting the last days of his sister, and their relative, Elisabeth.¹⁹¹ His letter was full of despair at his sister's death, but also relief that her years of martyr-like suffering were finally over. Elisabeth had been sick since before Ekbert joined Schönau monastery; her illness corresponded in longevity and severity with her gift of divine vision.¹⁹² Yet, at the end of her days, Ekbert described Elisabeth lying on her deathbed, the shroud nearby, welcoming in crowds of hopeful visitors asking for her blessing before her spirit left the mortal world.

Yet Elisabeth, bearing this so patiently and hiding the sharpness of her pain with the fortitude of her mind, sat in their presence and was not slow in admonishing them about their salvation according to what was appropriate for each of them. . . . She exhorted not only those present to do good, but she also sent warnings of salvation to some who were not there, and she forgave those far away for their offense of slander. She also begged everyone together to remember her with prayers and alms after her death.¹⁹³

According to Ekbert's narration, Elisabeth advised religious and secular leaders alike, exhorting them to live a virtuous life. Despite days of drawn-out illness in which she was unable to lie down fully, lacked an appetite, and knew her end was near, Elisabeth, in her final moments, was surrounded by her community. As individuals crowded around her

¹⁹¹ The date of Elisabeth's death might have been in 1164, but 1165 seems more likely. For more, see Anne Clark, 26.

¹⁹² Jonathan Coakley, "Revelation and Authority in Ekbert and Elisabeth of Schönau," in *Men, Women, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹⁹³ From Ekbert's letter, translated in Clark, *Elisabeth*, 271.

deathbed to receive her divine wisdom, one last time she offered her admonishments and advice.¹⁹⁴

Even after Elisabeth finally “gave up her spirit to the Lord,” her immediate community continued to surround her with prayers. In the midst of saying the litany over her body, the priest, “who loved her in Christ,” tearfully burst out, “Depart, holy soul, to your rest. Ascend like a column of smoke from the spices of myrrh and frankincense....Holy angel, receive the soul commissioned to you and lead it now into peace where it may rest from its labors.”¹⁹⁵ The nuns at Schönau also participated in his lament. They were permitted to follow the funeral procession and “to participate in the funeral rite at her tomb.” Led by Elisabeth’s most intimate monastic sisters and dear friend, Countess Beatrice, the women of Schönau laid her to rest “in a place near the altar dedicated to all the sacred virgins, in the church of Saint Florinus.”¹⁹⁶ For all her years advising, shaping, and confirming the religiosity of her monastic community, Elisabeth’s community ultimately reciprocated her spiritual gifts by doing everything in their power to ensure that Elisabeth’s body and soul were properly administered to in death.

This thesis has argued that in attempting to shape the spiritual practices of her community within and beyond Schönau monastery, Elisabeth’s texts portrayed a visionary woman who was able to navigate her audiences’ expectations and doubts. Her journey to become the woman Ekbert describes in 1165, surrounded by a community that knew of her holy reputation, was not without conflict. In order to convince her audience

¹⁹⁴ Clark, *Elisabeth*, 272.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 272-273.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 273.

to take seriously her visionary abilities and thus to follow her spiritual advice, Elisabeth described her own subjection to the institutional hierarchy of the church. Paradoxically, it was her visible rhetorical humility that provided Elisabeth the tools to communicate her chastisement of male clerics and monastic religious practice.

Elisabeth's message, however, was ultimately not one of individual transcendence or divine ecstasy.¹⁹⁷ Rather, her pastoral advice emphasized the correct practice of worship in the here-and-how. As a divine intermediary who communicated with celestial figures, Elisabeth provided advice on the practice of worship, confirmed the many functions of prayer in connecting with the divine realm, and exhorted ecclesiastical elites to fulfill their pastoral duties to their communities. In order to accomplish her divinely inspired mission, Elisabeth and Ekbert rhetorically shaped her visionary texts in such a way as to assure their audiences that her authority did not supersede that of clerics. Elisabeth thus walked the razor's edge between conforming to social expectations and transcending them in order to relay her divinely inspired didactic message.

The scene at Elisabeth's deathbed exemplifies her interactions with her community throughout her visionary life. She provided spiritual guidance and correction as authorized by her audiences' reception of her visionary experiences, and in return the community reciprocated by following Elisabeth's example, in this case by offering prayers and alms after Elisabeth's death and by providing a proper burial. This interaction between Elisabeth and those around her demonstrates how Elisabeth sought to shape the religious practice of her community through her visions. By reforming her community's practice of Christianity, Elisabeth transformed her world.

¹⁹⁷ The message of individual transcendence appears in some later medieval visionary works, for example in Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1282) and Marguerite Porete (d. 1310).

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