In 384, Jerome addressed a long and famous letter to Eustochium, one of his female followers. She had made of vow of perpetual virginity and would later on, together with her mother Paula, accompany Jerome from Rome to the Holy Land where she and her mother would take charge of three female monasteries in Bethlehem. In the 25th paragraph of his letter known as *De custodia virginitatis*, in which he treated the motives for and the regulation of a successful life of virginity, Jerome stipulated:

> Ever let the privacy of your chamber guard you; ever let the Bridegroom sport with you within… Go not from home nor visit the daughters of a strange land…

We would like to thank Imke de Gier for her careful correction of our English. Address of the authors: Ghent University - Department of History, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 35, 9000 Gent, Belgium.

... Dinah went out and was seduced. Do not seek the Bridegroom in the streets; do not go round the corners of the city... Let foolish virgins stray abroad, but for your part stay at home with the Bridegroom².

According to Jerome and many other Judeo-Christian authors, the dangers for a woman’s virginity and honourable conduct were closely connected with the world outside the private house. This conviction never truly changed throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period. In medieval monastic circles, the vicissitudes of Dinah (Gen. 34), referred to by Jerome, continued to be used as an argument in favour of the active claustration of women³. The association between the world outdoors and the threat to a woman’s chastity obviously also became an important topic in hagiographical texts on female saints, among whom virgins hold the first rank. Yet, as will be shown in this contribution, the discourse on female mobility in saints’ lives is much more varied and nuanced than Jerome’s guideline. Due to the specific nature of hagiographical texts, these sources offer us a large variety of views and glimpses of the mobility of women – in discourse as well as in practice – in medieval society.

The particularities of saints’ lives

Late medieval lives of saints were essentially written to promote or to launch the cult of a saint or to legitimise new religious ideals exemplified by charismatic personalities. As hagiographers often pointed out in the


prologues to their works⁴, their heroes did not necessarily have to function as models for imitation⁵. The saints and beatified described in their texts had primarily to be venerated and admired for their mediating powers and their exceptional behaviour. Hence scholars agree that saints’ lives are often better witnesses of the mindsets of hagiographers and of the ideas prevalent in their entourage, than of the lives of the saints themselves⁶. At the same time, however, hagiographical texts often also contain much information regarding the everyday life of the period in which they were composed. Hagiographers could give this information unintentionally in the course of their narratives, but they could also introduce it very consciously in order to create a realistic framework for the exceptional and often spectacular deeds and miracles of the person they wanted to sanctify. This seems to hold in particular for the lives of contemporary saints, in which, as Aviad Kleinberg puts it, the hagiographer not only had to produce «enough hagiographical commonplaces to convince the reader of his subject’s sanctity» but also «enough neutral and unconventional material to convince the reader of the writer’s sincerity»⁷.

In recent years saints’ lives have become very popular among medievalists as extremely valuable sources for women’s history⁸. The Low Countries in particular, and especially the diocese of Liège, have been well stud-

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ied in this vogue of research because of the presence in these territories, from the thirteenth century onwards, of a good number of famous mulieres religiosae connected to the growing success of the beguine movement, to female Cistercian spirituality and to the popularity of independent urban recluses\(^9\). Furthermore, in the late medieval religious movements of monastic reform and Devotio Moderna, we still encounter female saints and exemplary women testifying to a religious climate of openness to a specific and active female spirituality\(^10\). However, although it is undeniable that the number of contemporary saintly women witnessed a remarkable increase in the last three centuries of the Middle Ages, it should be noted that the Low Countries already had a long tradition of veneration of early medieval female patron saints of local or regional importance, one that continued to flourish. In some small rural communities especially, and following the example of important older monastic institutions and urban chapters of secular canons venerating an early medieval female patron saint, new cults of Christian heroines, whose lives were situated in a legendary early medieval past, were still launched\(^11\). These new cults of local patron saints were moreover accompanied by a growing popularity, both in Latin and in vernacular rewritings, of the universally acknowledged late antique martyrs and saints, amongst whom we find a minority of considerable proportions of women. This was especially due to the success of collections per circulum anni like the Legenda aurea of James of Voragine, which also circulated intensively in the Low Countries, often adapted to local preferences by the insertion of regionally important saints, or even in translation, for example from 1357 onwards in Middle Dutch\(^12\).


\(^12\) On the manuscript tradition of the Legenda aurea, see: B. Fleith, *Studien zur Über-
It is obvious that the broad range of hagiographical narratives addressed a great variety of readers and audiences, and that processes of hagiographical stylisation could vary considerably according to the kind of female saints that were described. Latin texts, for instance, were primarily aimed at a male, clerical audience, who could subsequently incorporate some storylines of these vita in their preaching for audiences who were not versed in Latin, while vernacular lives were meant more directly for religious women, novices, lay brothers, pious noblemen or even ordinary people. The use of Latin was also usually preferred to describe previously unknown figures, such as new local patronesses from an alleged distant past, or contemporary charismatic women whose sainthood still had to be negotiated. The latter’s vitae were at the same time often primarily meant to propagate new religious ideals, such as the kind of female mysticism burgeoning from the thirteenth century onwards. There were already some exceptions to this rule in the late Middle Ages, as in the case of the vita of Colette (d. 1447), which had first been written in French for a target readership of reformed Second Order sisters and which was only translated into Latin afterwards.


nacular texts, which increasingly emerged from the end of the twelfth century onwards, dealt with established and well-known saints who were less connected to a specific locality or a new religious ideal. Their often rather stereotypical passion stories or sacred lives, written down in short and sometimes even versified texts, usually presented them as personifications of timeless Christian virtues rather than as exemplifications of specific and new kinds of spirituality.\textsuperscript{16} Translating, however, often constituted a process of rewriting. Particularly in the case of vitae of relatively contemporary figures a comparison of the Latin originals with the different translations can be very revealing of interesting shifts of representation. We can think here of the lives of saints like Clare of Assisi (d. 1253) or Bridget of Sweden (d. 1373), who had entered the hallowed circle of universal saints rather quickly and whose Latin lives were translated into the vernacular.

In the following paragraphs, we will offer a basic overview of the way in which the mobility of women was represented in this varied hagiographical tradition. To this end, we will take into account a broad selection of saints’ lives written in Latin as well as in the vernacular, describing old as well as contemporary charismatic women, and universally venerated saints as well as locally beatified figures. The hagiographical framing of women’s freedom of movement will be surveyed by firstly looking at the way in which these texts confirmed the traditional normative discourse on the dangers to women of the outside world. Subsequently we will shift our focus to the fact that nevertheless several vitae are constructed around storylines in which it is precisely the female saint’s travelling that is highlighted as part of her growth towards sainthood. Finally, the scattered details about women’s mobility that one can often find in the descriptions, not only of the daily activities of the saints themselves but also of the contexts in which their lives were depicted, will allow us to complete our analysis. In the appendix to this contribution a selection of illustrative excerpts will be offered, completed with comments, from the hagiography of one of the most widely-travelled female saints of the late Middle Ages, Colette of Corbie, who died in her convent in the Flemish city of Ghent in 1447.

\textsuperscript{16} See also Kleinberg, \textit{Prophets} cit., p. 53.
Moral lessons: the ideal of claustration

When analysing the way in which the mobility of women was dealt with in this varied corpus of texts, we need to consider two important variables: on the one hand the behaviour of women wandering outdoors, in the streets, which was connoted with immorality and even prostitution; and on the other hand the actual practice of travelling, for example in the context of a pilgrimage. Throughout the Middle Ages, however, both variables continued to arouse big concerns amongst the clerical moralists in line with Jerome’s premonitions. This is shown very well by the continued and even increased popularity of some late antique female saints, both in the Latin tradition and, from the end of the twelfth century onwards, in the vernacular world. We can think, for example, of the legendary Mary Magdalene who, according to the Western Christian tradition, had led a very loose life before becoming one of Christ’s disciples, or of the repentant Mary of Egypt, the Alexandrian prostitute who had joined a group of pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land, but who had offered her body to the sailors by way of remuneration for her voyage. Both women belong, together with St Thais, to the most well-known examples of converted female sinners whose conduct before their penance became emblematic of the kind of behaviour constituting the opposite of what could be expected from virtuous Christian women. Thanks to creative compilers like James of Voragine these legends received their late medieval shape, which we can also encounter in several vernacular versions, both in Old French and Middle Dutch.

17. For the association between being in the streets, especially at night, and whoredom in medieval texts, see R. M. Karras, Common Women. Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 70–1 and 111.


19. For vitae from the Legenda aurea, we refer in this article to the edition of the Latin text, which also circulated extensively in the late medieval Low Countries. On Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt: Iacopo da Varazza, Legenda aurea, c. 102 and 54, ed. by G. P. Maggioni, Florence, SISMEL - Ed. del Galluzzo, 1998, pp. 628-42, 374-7 ( Millennio medievale, 6). A modern edition of the Middle Dutch translations and adaptations of the Legenda aurea – the so-called Passionael – is still lacking. See, however: W. Williams-Krapp, Die deutschen und
The old ecclesiastical fear of an all too independent freedom of movement for women, one which could endanger their chastity and reputation, was aggravated from the thirteenth century on with a very specific, new concern. In this period, although male clerics, especially in mendicant circles, based much of their conduct on the new spiritual ideal of an active and mobile apostolate, ecclesiastical authorities fiercely discouraged wandering about and, in particular, begging and preaching by semi-religious women such as beguines, or by women belonging to the female branches and the third orders of the mendicants\(^{20}\). At the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 it was even decreed that the mendicant lifestyle was only allowed after having obtained a license from a bishop and it is most unlikely that such a license would ever be granted to women\(^{21}\). Several vitae of contemporary saints clearly illustrate therefore that the authors particularly did not like girls and women leaving their home to wander around (\textit{discurrere, vagari}), not even for reasons inspired by piety or asceti-


cism. In his famous *vita* of Mary of Oignies (d. 1213), one of the earliest well-known representatives of the beguine movement in the Low Countries, James of Vitry relates that at a certain moment, Mary conceived such a great desire for poverty, that she wanted to start a mendicant life of begging from door to door among strangers. However, her male friends finally managed to dissuade her from that plan. She even had to be restrained from departing for the crusade against the Albigensians, a project which she only abandoned because it could scandalise her entourage. Thomas of Cantimpré, in his *vita* of the beguine Margaret of Ypres (d. 1237), tells us that her Dominican father confessor often urged her to go back home each time she had escaped from her mother and aunt’s custody to go begging alms for lepers. According to the anonymous author of the *vita* of Ida of Louvain, his heroine, daughter of a rich wine merchant in Louvain who would later become a Cistercian nun in Roosendaal, was thought to have gone mad and was put in chains by her relatives for wandering about in shabby clothes.


So while they were part of the movement for voluntary poverty, and in contrast to the male members of the mendicant orders, women sharing the same religious ideals as Mary of Oignies were clearly not encouraged to «follow the naked Christ naked» actively\(^\text{26}\). On the contrary, hagiographical texts even commended discrete public appearances and safe seclusion as the best possible lifestyles for women with religious ambitions. The hagiographers of Alice of Schaarbeek (d. 1250), Ida of Gorsleeuw and Beatrice of Nazareth (d. 1268) were unequivocal in underlining that their heroines – all women who had gained their fame as mystically gifted Cistercian nuns – had already embodied the perfect type of girl who confined herself voluntarily at home as youngsters\(^\text{27}\). And when they had to leave home, they closed off their senses from impressions of the outer world, displayed a dignified posture and kept away from men\(^\text{28}\). The \textit{vita} of Alice of Schaarbeek, for instance, makes an explicit reference to Jerome’s letter to Eustochium as it literally states that, as a young girl, the future saint, although she was very pretty, did not go into the streets like Dinah once did. She preferred to stay home following the example of Mary\(^\text{29}\).


\(^{27}\) \textit{Vita Aleidis Scharembekanae}, c. 2 and 6, ed. by G. Henschen, in \textit{AASS}, Jun. II, Antwerp, 1698, pp. 477-82, here 477-8: «Fuit igitur praedicta Domina, a primevae aetatis initio, omnium aspectui amabilis et gratiosa, tamen non more Dinae… in plateas est egres-sa, sed more Dei genetricis, intra cubiculum commorantis gratiamque nutrientis, domi semper est morata» and «non circumvaga diversa quaerens loca, dabat operam lectioni».


\(^{29}\) \textit{Vita Aleidis Scharembekanae} cit., c. 2, p. 477 (see note 27). See also, yet without an
The effective claustration of religious women also remained an important topic in late medieval hagiographical writings. This seems to have been fully in line with the papal decree *Periculoso* of 1298 issued by Boniface VIII, which imposed a strict enclosure on nuns\(^{30}\). However, in the fourteenth century, regular religious life seems to have gone through a period of slackening due to, not only general social and economic difficulties, but also a weakening of the internal organisation of the church at the time of Great Western Schism. Amongst the Clares for instance, the Second Order of St Francis, the ideal of personal poverty and the observance of claustration were often neglected\(^{31}\).

It was in the climate of reaction to this weakening, and as part of a more generalised atmosphere of efforts to restore monastic discipline, which started to take root by the end of fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, that we can situate Colette Boëllet\(^{32}\). Colette, born in Corbie, was said to have been incited by several visions to advocate a thorough reform of the Clares – a reform for which she begged the support of (Anti)pope Benedict XIII (1394–1423) in 1406 and which sought the restoration of the practice of absolute poverty. One of the important items which she included in the constitutions that she designed for her «Poor Clares», was precisely the imposition of both active and passive *clausura*. The only reasons for which sisters were allowed to leave the cloister were the foundation, reform, governance or correction of other convents\(^{33}\). These were also the motives for which Colette herself, as we will see


\(^{32}\) On this climate, which led to the influence of Franciscan observantism on convents of the Second Order, especially in the Northern Low Countries, see also B. Roest, *De Clarissen in de Noordelijke Nederlanden*, in H. Van Engen – G. Verhoeven (eds.), *Monastiek observantisme en Moderne Devotie in de Noordelijke Nederlanden*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2008, pp. 43–68.

below, had undertaken numerous journeys. In his Middle French *Vie de sainte Colette*, her first hagiographer Pierre de Vaux, who wrote her *vita* shortly after her death, did not keep silent about all these journeys. However, at the same time he repeatedly seized the opportunity to present Colette as a most remarkable example of the kind of secluded and claustral life religious women should aspire to. Already as a child, Colette was said to have looked for the solitude of a personal, isolated oratory in her parents’ house at Corbie, near Amiens. After having made her vow of virginity she chose to adopt the rule of St Francis’ Third Order and to become a recluse in a small cell built against the local church (see also Plate 1)\(^34\). According to Pierre, she kept her ideal of seclusion for the rest of her life, and even when it was necessary to leave the cloister, she tried to maintain a feeling of solitude and enclosure\(^35\). Even though, out of devotion to the Passion of Christ, she would have liked to start on a dangerous pilgrimage to the Holy Land, she did not do so because she was not granted permission\(^36\).

The Colettine reform also resulted in a hagiographical adaptation of the memory of the original founder of the Second Order, St Clare. The first translations into Middle Dutch of the thirteenth century *Legenda sanctae Clarae virginis* remained rather close to the Latin original\(^37\). However, in the late fifteenth century yet another Middle Dutch adaptation of the *Legenda* of St Clare surfaced, a text which offered a considerable expansion and narrative rearrangement of the original legend. Contrary

\(^34\). Pierre de Vaux, *Vie de sainte Colette*, c. 1/4 and 3/19, ed. by U. d’Alençon, in Id., *Les vies de Ste Colette Boylet de Corbie: réformatrice des Frères Mineurs et des Clarisses (1381-1447).* Écrites par ses contemporains Pierre de Reims dit de Vaux et Perrine de la Roche et de Baume, Paris – Couvin, Picard – Saint Roch, 1911, pp. 1-201, here 7-8, 21-2: «nantmains fust elle solitaire volumptairement et personnellement ou propre hostel de son père et de sa mere, ouquel secreteent et solitairement elle se fist enclore et refermer».

\(^35\). Ibid., c. 17/165, pp. 111-2. See also excerpt 1, added to this contribution.

\(^36\). Ibid., c. 11/98, pp. 91-2: «Et nonobstant qu’elle fust tendre et dibile et que les perilz qui sont à passer la mer sont moult grans et difficels, niantmains elle estoit tres desirant volumptaire de entreprendre le voyage…».

\(^37\). L. Jongen, «*Like a Pharmacy with Fragrant Herbs*». The *Legenda sanctae Clarae virginis* in Middle Dutch, *Collectanea franciscana*, 65 (1995) pp. 221-45, here 226-30. On Colet-
to the Latin *Legenda*, the author introduced several details and anecdotes in order to highlight the ideal of voluntary seclusion. As a child, Clare is told to have stayed away from the streets. While very young she developed a fascination for the rules of religious orders and when her family occasionally left the house to go out dancing or singing, she retired to a secret room of the house to pray. The author also comprehensively contrasts this exemplary behaviour with that of Clare’s worldly sister Agnes, who had to endure a lot of humiliations before she devoted herself entirely to God. It is precisely in this kind of emendation that the agenda of Coletine reform can clearly be recognised.

However, the ideal of claustration was not only typical of the reformed Second Order. It also quickly penetrated the late fourteenth- and fifteenth century reform movement of the Devotio Moderna, especially in women’s communities. The Devotio Moderna, which has had a major influence on religious life in the Low Countries, did not leave us many entirely new hagiographical texts. While the Modern Devout did attach much importance to collecting the life stories of their fellow brothers and sisters in their institutional historiographies or in so-called sister books, they did not really spend much energy in attempting to hagiographically propagate real saints of their own communities. However, as part of their


41. On the exemplary portraits of founding figures of the Devotio Moderna, see e.g. K. Heene, *Hagiografisch herschrijven in de vijftiende eeuw? De casus Johannes Brinckerinck*
very developed reading culture, saints’ lives did play an important role, especially in female communities. In this context, we can notice clearly how the vernacular reception of the passion stories and lives of late antique saints merged with new, contemporary religious concerns. A good example here, is the passion story of St Barbara, already known in early Old French translations and from the *Legenda aurea*\(^{42}\), which in the fifteenth century, in several Middle Dutch editions, began to gain great popularity in sister houses of Tertiaries and regular canonesses affiliated with the Devotio Moderna\(^{43}\). The virgin Barbara, who was said to have been locked up by her heathen father in a tower to keep her away from the attention of young men, and who converted to the Christian religion during her captivity, became an ideal example of holiness for sisters in their effort to cultivate their virginity and Eucharistic devotion in a context of claustration\(^{44}\).

That chastity was a central issue underlying all the concerns over the enclosure of religious women, is clearly illustrated by the life of the fifteenth century mystic Lidwina of Schiedam (d. 1434), one of the few exceptional personalities to enjoy original hagiographical attention from within the Devotio Moderna (yet without being a Modern Devout herself)\(^{45}\). Especially the second Latin *vita* of Lidwina, written by no less a figure than Thomas a Kempis in 1448, is very revealing in this respect. At the age of twelve, after a skating accident, Lidwina had fallen ill and remained so for the rest of her life. From 1398 onwards, she could not leave her sick


\(^{43}\) On this Middle Dutch tradition, with transcriptions: Van Dijk, *Een rij van spiegels* cit., pp. 180-235.


bed anymore and only survived on regularly partaking of the Eucharist. As her illness was considered a divine gift, which prevented her from getting married against her will, Thomas compared it with a seal which guarded her virginity and spiritual welfare because it kept her from roaming around with her worldly comrades. Also in this same text, we are confronted with an example of mental pilgrimage, which was seen as a divine favour. Indeed, despite being confined to her sickbed, Lidwina was able to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome and other minor holy places during ecstasies. Yet such a «virtual pilgrimage» was not entirely original. In James of Voragine’s description of the miracles attributed to the thirteenth century St Peter Martyr of Verona, there is the story of a nun from Ottenbach who wanted to visit Peter’s tomb in Milan but was unable to do so due to illness. Therefore, she undertook the journey mentally (‘ire mentaliter’) by reading a hundred paternosters for each day the trip would have taken. Moreover, after having arrived virtually at the tomb, she was eventually cured by reading the whole Psalter. Mental pilgrimages, however, were not seen as a female privilege. According to his biographer, the fourteenth century hermit Arnold of Diest, for example, also visited the tombs of the martyrs in Rome in a vision.


While many hagiographical texts continued to express the traditional concerns over the dangers of leaving the seclusion of the house or of the cloister, we can nonetheless easily find even more texts in which it is precisely the mobility and travels of the described female saints that is of prime importance for their journey to holiness. Particularly in the lives of the late antique saints, several examples occur of storylines in which the activity of «travelling» plays a central role. A first recurrent motive in collections like the Legenda aurea, and in some individual vernacular lives, is that of the escape from marriage. We can think here of St Margarita, who for her virginity’s sake, cut off all her hair during her wedding night. Dressed up as a man, she fled to a monks’ cloister where she entered under the name Pelagius. After being falsely accused of having impregnated a nun, she ended her life in an isolated cave. A similar story was told about the fifth century St Euphrosyne, who escaped from marriage by fleeing to a male monastery near Alexandria where she lived for thirty-eight years. A well-known and very influential legend dating only from the late tenth century, but also adopted in the Legenda aurea is that of the late antique British princess St Ursula, who, before marrying an English prince who had just been converted to the Christian religion, travelled to Basel and to Rome with eleven thousand virgins. On their way back, they were all killed by the Huns near Cologne, St Ursula with them because she had refused to marry their leader. From a gender perspective, it should be noted, however, that the popularity of the escape from marriage as a hagiographical motive was not only typical for saints’ lives about women. Comparable stories were also known about late antique men. The fourth century desert father Malchus, for example, whom we encounter in the early thirteenth century Old French Vies des sainz peres translated by Waucier of Denain for count Philip I of Namur, was said to have escaped
into the Syrian desert because of an arranged marriage. Also very popular in the late Middle Ages, both in Old French and Middle Dutch, was the story of St Alexis, a Roman patrician who fled from his wife during their wedding night to end up as a beggar, unrecognised by anyone of his family.

It is nonetheless very notable that this theme of the virgin escaping from an imposed marriage seems to have witnessed a renewed popularity, not only in the reception of older vitae about universal late antique saints, but also, even before the spread of the Legenda aurea, in the emergence of a number of new Latin saints’ lives connected with the development of local cults in smaller rural communities. These heroic female saints were not only situated in a somewhat distant Merovingian past, but they also had in common their hazardous undertakings. St Ragenula, whose vita must have been written already in the second half of the twelfth century in the abbey of St Laurent in Liège, was said to have lived at the time of King Dagobert I in the surroundings of Jodogne. She allegedly fled into the woods to escape from an unwanted marriage and lived there for a while as an ascetic before dying of cold and hardship.

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She was later honoured with a cult near Incourt, on the site of her refuge. The semi-orphan St Dymphna had to run away from her pagan father, an Irish king, to avoid an incestuous marriage with him. Together with a priest called Gebernus she installed herself in the village of Geel in the Kempen region where she was finally beheaded by her ferocious father\(^56\). Her story was recorded around 1240 by canon Peter of St-Aubert in Cambrai at the request of the local priest Stephen. Shortly afterwards, it was in St Oedenrode in North Brabant that the local canon Godfrey put into writing the legend of St Oda, a beautiful daughter of a Scottish king who first travelled to the tomb of St Lambert in Liège to be cured from her blindness. After her return, she fled to Rome with a few companions to escape from the marriage that her father had arranged for her. She allegedly spent the rest of her life in the surroundings of the place were her later cult would take root\(^57\). A last example is St Rolendis, whose \textit{vita} was written after the middle of the thirteenth century. She was depicted as the daughter of a Gaulish king who had tried to back out of a marriage with a Scottish prince. She wanted to flee to Cologne because of the cult over there of St Ursula and her eleven thousand virgins, but she died on her way near the village of Gerpinnes, where she was to be venerated\(^58\).

If we shift our focus to the late medieval lives of contemporary saints, we cannot definitively say that the motive of the rejection of marriage was an uncommon theme\(^59\). There was St Clare who was said to have fled to


\(^{59}\) See also Simons, \textit{Cities of Ladies} cit., pp. 68-74.
St Francis in order to escape from the wedding which her parents had prepared for her, or of the less universally known Ida of Nivelles (d. 1231) who already at the age of nine ran away from home to the local beguine community for this same reason\textsuperscript{60}. Yet apart from these rather exceptional examples, this opposition does not seem to have been an important reason for hagiographers to stress in some way the mobility of their heroines.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the most obvious religious reason for people to travel was pilgrimage. This undertaking could take on different forms. There was the lasting popularity of regional pilgrimages to local shrines that were often made to pray for intercession, help or miraculous healing. The long-distance pilgrimage to Rome, Jerusalem or Santiago, however, constituted a religious adventure which could also offer the possibility of personal religious growth and deepening of devotion throughout the long journey; it could be a way of doing thorough penance or obtaining the benefits of important indulgences. Such a pilgrimage was moreover very demanding in terms of time and money, something which enhanced its rather exclusive character\textsuperscript{61}. Despite women’s traditional confinement to domestic roles, recent research has shown that they were never absent from the history of Christian pilgrimage\textsuperscript{62}. Especially in the late medieval period we have lots of evidence of female participation in both regional and long distance pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is also said to have penetrated the ideals of sainthood of this period. While André Vauchez among others has pointed to the importance of travelling to far-flung cult places in the lives of a number of Mediterranean female saints in the late Middle Ages.

\textsuperscript{60} Die legende der glorioser maghet Sinte Clara cit., c. 7 and 11, pp. 50–52, 60–62; Gossuinus de Bossuto, \textit{Vita beatae Idae Nivellensis} cit., pp. 200–1.


Ages, others have taken the eccentric and widely-travelled mystic Margery Kempe (d. c. 1440) as an example of an exemplary English pilgrim.63

In the Low Countries too, stories about female pilgrim saints circulated widely. The *Legenda aurea* already contained examples of both regional and long-distance pilgrimage. The third-century virgin Lucia of Syracuse, for example, went on a pilgrimage with her sick mother to the tomb of St Agatha in Catania after which her mother recovered miraculously. Out of gratitude, Lucia decided to remain a virgin and to distribute her whole dowry to the poor. Her frustrated fiancé finally handed her over as a Christian to the Roman persecutors after which she was martyred.64 As for pilgrimage to far-away lands, there is the example of St Jerome’s disciples Paula and her daughter Eustochium, who, notwithstanding the warnings Jerome had addressed them concerning the dangers of wandering in the streets, voyaged to Jerusalem and Bethlehem where they chose a monastic life.65 Among the more recent female saints who were well-known for their pilgrimages, the name of the visionary St Bridget of Sweden stands out. While being married, she already travelled to Santiago with her husband. As a widow, she installed herself in Rome where, for years, she advocated the authorisation of her new double order. Yet, despite the fact that Bridgettine canonesses had to lead a strictly enclosed life, she herself still made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.66 Especially after the mid-fifteenth century, when her *vita* became well-known not only in Latin but also in several Middle Dutch manuscripts, the details of her travels became well-known in the Low Countries.67

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65. Ibid., c.29, pp. 201-8.


67. The Middle Dutch lives of St Bridget are still unedited. See, e.g., Brussels, Royal Library, ms. 3042-4 and ms. 4584 (both from Mariëntroon Dendermonde, ca 1480 and 1487) or Uden, Maria Refugie, ms. A1 (olim 88) (fifteenth century).
In the lives of late medieval contemporary saints who were directly linked to the Low Countries, however, pilgrimage does not seem to have been such an important aspect of sanctity. Only a few thirteenth century female saints are said to have undertaken regional pilgrimages, for personal devotional reasons, as well as in order to seek divine support for their religious mission. Mary of Oignies, for instance, according to James of Vitry, almost annually made a pilgrimage from Oignies to Heigne (Jumet) to receive consolation from the Holy Virgin. This information mainly served to stress the supernatural protection Mary enjoyed during these journeys of only 10 miles or so, and therefore implicitly enforced the idea that travelling was a dangerous undertaking for women. Although the road was twisting and woody, according to James, Mary never lost the way because she was guided by a light, angels held her when she returned, exhausted from fasting and vigils, and on rainy days stars stopped the floods of water and protected her\(^{68}\). In somewhat the same way, we also encounter pilgrimage in the anonymous \textit{vita} of Juliana of Mont-Cornillon (d. 1258), the Augustinian prioress of a local leper house just outside the city gate of Liège who has become famous for advocating, after several divine exhortations expressed in visionary experiences, the installation of the Feast of Corpus Christi. In her \textit{vita}, Juliana is said to have undertaken pilgrimages from Liège to Cologne, Tongeren and Maastricht, in order to ask the saints there for their divine support of her project, which until then had not yet received much approval from her contemporaries. While her hagiographer remains silent about the fact that these visits probably also offered her the opportunity to recommend the Feast to the prelates of these important religious centres\(^{69}\), he describes not only Juliana’s ecstasy in the cathedral of Cologne, but also how during the journey, she and the few fellow sisters who were travelling with her, were repeatedly tested by an evil spirit trying in vein to impede them and to sabotage their carriage\(^{70}\).

\(^{68}\). Jacobus Vitriacensis, \textit{Vita Mariae Oigniacensis} cit., Lib. I, c. 28, p. 643: «Solebat autem causa peregrinationis et orationis fere singulisannis ecclesiam B. Mariae de Heignis visitare... cumque una sola comitante ancilla viam, quae valde distorta est et nemorosa, nescirent; lumine quodam eam praecedente viamque ostendente, numquam errabat.».


\(^{70}\). \textit{Vita Julianae de Monte Corneli} ii cit., Lib. II, c. 11-2, p. 462: «Et cum iter cum suis somi-
In this way stories about travelling women saints not only offered good pretexts to illustrate the miraculous protection by Divine Providence, but also underline implicitly the dangers that women were exposed to while being on the road, whether or not in a context of pilgrimage. And just as in some *vita*e of holy men women are sometimes depicted as a threat to the chastity of male travellers\(^71\), women saints are occasionally exposed to the dangers of men. For example, in his *vita* of the mystically gifted Cistercian nun Lutgard of Tongeren (d. 1246), Thomas of Cantimpré elaborately illustrates the risk of rape for female travellers. He recounts how the adolescent Lutgard, when she was on a journey to her sister, was once attacked and nearly raped by a rejected admirer. Fortunately she escaped and, accompanied by an angel, reached the house of her former nurse. The admirer’s servants were persuaded that the rape really had taken place and spread the tidings of the assault, thus causing the alleged rapist to run away\(^72\). Thomas adds to the story that as a result the people started to treat Lutgard with suspicion, but that she was able to rid herself of the weight of shame with Christ’s help\(^73\). This last remark clearly alludes to the belief, tatibus inchoasset, videns diabolus et invidens...imo furore succensus; currum, quo Christi Virgo cum suis vehebatur, in plana via et pulchra, nequiter subvertit, sese exhibens rotam quintam; qui quoniam illarum animabus nocere non poterat, saltem corpora interimere conabatur. Verumtamen Christi famulae, cum ruente curru ecidissent, non sunt collisae: quia Dominus supposuit manum suam».

71. See e.g. the thirteenth century *vita* of the Cistercian monk Arnulf of Villers: Gossuinus de Bossuto, *Vita Arnulfi conversi Villariensis*, Lib. 1, c. 26, ed. by D. Papebroeck, in AASS, Iun. v. Antwerp, 1709, pp. 608–31, here p. 622. Arnulf, when entering a wood, meets three beautiful female demons who offer themselves to him. He scares them off by making the sign of the cross.


73. Ibidem c. 7 (p. 238): «Concursu ergo populi curiosius conglomerata, ibi immense coepti erubescentiae pondere fatigari, statimque Christum reduxit ad mentem, et fortiter
found among lay persons as well as ecclesiastics, that women were often – at least partly – responsible for being raped. Yet according to some hagiographical texts, women themselves were also aware of the fact that traveling could endanger their chastity and that it was important to have a reliable travelling companion. This seems to be suggested in an episode of the exemplary life of Gertrud ten Venne (d. 1469), sister in the Master Geert House in Deventer and subsequently mater of the Lamme of Dyese House in the same town. According to her biographer, in his description of Gertrud’s youth, Gertrud’s sister Margaret once asked her father if she was allowed to visit another of their sisters who lived in a religious community. She got his permission on the condition that Gertrud would accompany her. When two beautiful young men sitting on horses and dressed in white, probably angels, proposed to take both sisters to their destination, Gertrud is said to have answered that she had to turn down their proposition because her father would certainly not approve of them riding on horseback with men.

The most widely travelled female saint which we can connect at least in part with the late medieval history of the Low Countries, was Colette of Corbie. Her freedom of movement was also only granted after she had received a dispensation of her vows as recluse. Only from that moment on, and still under the discreet guidance of her father confessor Henry de Baume, was she able to visit Benedict XIII in his residence in Nice in order to convince him of her project to reform St Francis’ Orders. This first

animo imperans, mox velum a facie manu iniecta dimovit...in revelatione faciei eius confusa populi multitudo discessit».

74. On the impact of prejudices concerning women on the attitude of members of courts of justice in cases of rape and abduction, see W. Prevenier, La Stratégie et le discours politique des ducs de Bourgogne concernant les rapt et les enlèvements de femmes parmi les élites des Pays-Bas au XVé siècle, in J. Hirshbiegel - W. Paravicini, Das Frauenzimmer. Die Frau bei Hofe in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit, Stuttgart, Thorbecke, 2000, pp. 429-37, esp. 432-3.

75. See Vita Gertrudis ten Venne, ed. by W. J. Kühler, in Levensbeschrijvingen van devote zusters te Deventer, «Archief voor de geschiedenis van het aartsbisdom Utrecht», 36 (1910), pp. 9-33, here 12: «Pater vero eo pacto permisit, ut sororem suam Gertrudem secum asumeret ... duo speciosissimi iuvenes sedentes in equis, albissimis vestibus induti, pul-saverunt ad portam... Quibus illa respondit: “Ego et soror mea Daventriam petitire sumus, sed puto non gratum futurum patri nostro, si equitantes viris in equis asideamus”».

76. Pierre de Vaux, Vie de sainte Colette cit., c. 2/34-36, pp. 32-6. See also Lopez, Culture et sainteté cit., pp. 351-76. See also excerpt 2, added to this contribution.
journey to the southern France marked the beginning of a life full of travel and of dangers that had to be defied. As her hagiographer Pierre de Vaux emphasises, she started her career as a newly consecrated abbess without cloister or sisters, but she ended up as the spiritual leader of a network of convents situated in diverse regions «en France, en Alemaenge, en Bourgogne et en Languedoc»77. By accumulating numerous anecdotes scattered throughout her biography, Colette is represented as a most exemplary and heroic traveller. In the various places she visited, she urged the authorities to prohibit the organisation of markets and fairs on Sundays and Feast days, while she herself, wherever she was, in Roman or in German speaking lands, took care of attending as many masses as possible on these days78. Nothing could scare her off during her journeys: wars throughout France could not prevent her from travelling, she kept dangerous robbers and rapists at a distance, and protected cities against plunderers by her sole litanies79. Even at the age of seventy, when she had become very fragile, she continued to be a tireless traveller80. During her lifetime, she had already become a miracle worker for other travellers in distress (see also Plate 2)81.

Lifelike Contexts: Women on the Road

Both the moral lessons concerning the ideal of the seclusion and claus-tration of women, and the stories about travelling female saints that we have analysed hitherto, had to serve the shaping of ideals of sainthood in a very explicit manner. However, successful saints’ lives were at the same time also always embedded in descriptions of realistic contexts in order to make the exceptional character of saintliness recognisable and admirable from the perspective of the daily life of ordinary Christians. It is precisely from these lifelike contexts, in the *vitae* of both female and male saints,

78. Ibid., c. 4/26-7, pp. 26-7.
79. Ibid., c. 10/76-81, pp. 69-73.
80. Ibid., c. 19/190, pp. 162-3.
81. See e.g. Ibid., c. 10/91, pp. 82-3 or several miracles recounted in c. 20, pp. 170 ff.
that we are able to deduce that in late medieval society, women on the road were far from an uncommon phenomenon. Hagiographers’ efforts to advocate the curtailing of the freedom of movement of religious girls and women in order to protect their virginity and chastity did not prevent them from presenting in their texts numerous mobile women as well as common practicalities concerning travelling.

For instance, hagiographical evidence reveals that women of all social groups undertook pilgrimages in order to obtain miracles for themselves or their relatives, or to show their gratitude for miracles that had occurred after they had promised a pilgrimage. Caesarius of Heisterbach describes how Margaret, Countess of Gelre (d. 1231), went on a pilgrimage to Cologne to thank the celebrated murdered bishop Engelbert (d. 1225) for helping her with a difficult birth. Thomas of Villers, in the *vita* which he wrote about his recently deceased brother Godfrey (d. 1262) with whom he had entered the Cistercian abbey of Villers, relates that their mother undertook a pilgrimage from Leuven to Herent annually on feasts of the Annunciation or the Assumption to commend herself and her children to the Holy Virgin while offering money and prayers. Since the distance between these last two places was only two miles, this anecdote clearly shows that intention must have been considered at least as important as distance for pilgrims. In the fourteenth century, the wife of a Flemish worker whose hand had been crushed by a stone travelled from Beveren to the shrine of St Amalberga (d. 772) in Temse, situated some ten miles away, in order to ask for help. Many more examples of regional women pilgrims could be added to this short survey.


Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that hardly any late medieval female saint from the Low Countries seems to have travelled to the Holy Land, several vitae offer examples of the ascetic and penitential dimension of long distance pilgrimage undertaken by women. Thomas of Cantimpré, in his supplement to the vita of Mary of Oignies, written between 1227 and 1231, depicts a noble lady who, of her own free will, set off on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, walking barefoot and girded with an iron chain, in order to do penance. Thomas also reports in his vita of his former abbot John of Cantimpré, how the latter had counselled Countess Mary of Champagne (d. 1204), much against everyone’s advice, to leave her daughters behind and to travel to the Holy Land where her husband, the Flemish count Baldwin IX, Emperor of the Latin empire of Constantinople, was waiting for her. In the 1220s, Sibrand of Mariëngaarde in Frisia illustrated in his vita of abbot Fredric (d. 1175) that such a demanding pilgrimage could also be undertaken for altruistic reasons. He recounts that a certain nobleman Asego, whom Fredric had advised to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to atone for his sins, was accompanied by a religious woman called Gertrud who was his sister in law.

Travelling women also often surface in vitae to reveal the popularity of contemporary holy people during their lifetime, for hagiographers give many examples of the visits that were rendered to the latter by all kinds of important admirers. James of Vitry, for instance, tells us that Mary of Oignies was visited by a Cistercian nun. The latter was the widow of the


count of Leuven (Godfrey III, d. 1190). She had already met Mary long ago in Willebroek and, on that occasion, had expressed the wish to see her once again. This plan succeeded despite the fact that she was only able to encounter Mary’s recently deceased body just before it was going to be washed for her burial. In the thirteenth century vita of the hermit Gerlach of Houtem (d. 1165), we can read that among the many who came to see him from far away places (de remotis partibus), there was also the noblewoman Oda of Heinsberg who offered him the lands around his hermitage. The mystic Lidwina of Schiedam was said to be visited on her sickbed by Margaret of Burgundy (d. 1442), the wife of Count William VI of Holland (1404–17). Famous cases can also be found of course in Pierre de Vaux’s Vie de sainte Colette. First, there is the Baroness of Brissay who came to visit Colette in her hermitage and who, after having learned of Colette’s project of reform, encouraged her to travel to Nice to submit her plan to Benedict XIII. According to Pierre, it was this Baroness who helped Colette to receive a dispensation of her reclusion and who, with her household and her own means, accompanied her on her journey. They were also accompanied, however, by Colette’s father confessor Henry of Baume. When they approached the city of Nice, they sent ahead a notable and prudent lady (ungne notable et discrete femme) to prepare the pope for Colette’s arrival. The lady apparently became possessed by a demon when she entered the town, but she was nonetheless received by the pope and came back to her senses (see also Plate 2). Finally, some years later, when Colette undertook a journey to Besançon to reform her first convent, she was accompanied by Countess Blanche of Savoy and their retinue.

91. Vita Lidwinae prior cit., c. 11, p. 278; Tleven van Liedwy, de maghet van Sciedam, c. 6, edited, translated and commented by L. Jongen - C. Schotel, in Eid., Het leven van Liedewij, de maagd van Schiedam. De Middelnederlandse tekst naar de bewaarde bronnen uitgegeven, vertaald en van commentaar voorzien, Hilversum, Verloren, 1994, pp. 19-103.
92. Pierre de Vaux, Vie de sainte Colette cit., c. 6/34, pp. 32-4. See also excerpt 2, added to this contribution.
93. Ibid., c. 6/36, pp. 34-6.
94. Ibid., c. 7/43, pp. 42-3.
Yet it is not only lay women that are presented in hagiographical sources as respectable travellers. In many a saints’ life we encounter religious women who reveal extensive mobility in the carrying out of their duties, especially concerning organisational matters regarding the cloister. In his life of the Cistercian lay brother Arnulf of Villers (d. 1228), for instance, the thirteenth century Gossuin of Bossut mentions that on a certain day the prioress and nuns of the Cistercian cloister Epinlieu near Mons came to Villers in Brabant and that, after having settled their affairs, they spent the night there before returning home95. In addition, in his vita of the mystically gifted Ida of Nivelles, that same Gossuin situates several of the miraculous examples of Ida’s supernatural powers within situations when she is travelling around the region for business with other nuns or abbesses96. Sometimes religious women were even compelled by men to travel. The anonymous vita of abbot Sibrand of Mariëngaarde reports for example that at the beginning of the thirteenth century Sibrand asked some sisters from the nearby nunnery of Bethlehem to accompany him in order to found a nunnery into which the widowed Duchess Anastasia of Pommeren (d. c. 1240) wanted to retire97. According to his hagiographer, however, this same abbot got extremely angry when one day Anastasia, together with some sisters, took a walk in the fields without his approval98. However, even saints’ lives indicate that groups of religious women did not necessarily need the company or direction of male leaders to set out on longer journeys for the relatively independent organisation of their monastic networks. This is again very well illustrated in the Vie de sainte Colette. Particularly from the many miracle stories it contains about Colette’s journeys to and fro between the growing number of reformed and newly founded convents, it appears that she was, more often than not, travelling with fellow sisters, with men acting solely in servant’s roles. For instance, according to one such miracle story, Colette was on the

95. Gossuinus de Bossuto, Vita Arnulfic., Lib. II, c. 67, p. 631. The distance between both cloisters was some 35 miles.
98. Ibid., c. 12, pp. 378–9.
road one day with a number of sisters to bring them to a convent. Due to the negligence of their coachman they tipped into a river. Thanks to Colette, one of the sisters who nearly drowned survived (see also Plate 3).

This last story brings us to a final dimension of the richness of information to be derived from hagiographical sources. They often offer the reader a great wealth of details elucidating the practical aspects, inconveniences and (super)natural dangers which travellers could encounter. As a rule these «realistic» details confirm the picture we also get from other sources. Women as well as men usually travelled accompanied by friends, parents, spouses, fellow religious people, or, in the case of royal or noble persons, by a large escort of vassals, servants and clerics. They travelled on foot when they were poor or inspired by asceticism, on horseback or in a carriage when they were affluent or (considered to be) physically weak. They took along all kinds of necessities (food, clothing, books...), spent nights at inns, with private persons or in religious communities and travelled distances of up to forty miles a day. As pilgrims, they were provided traditional attributes – a staff, a hat and a bag. And especially in some stories from the Legenda aurea, we find indications of the advantages for women to wear men’s clothes while travelling. For women travellers had to face some extra dangers and inconveniences: the

99. See e.g. Thomas Cantipratensis, Vita Ioannis cit., Lib. ii, c. 6, pp. 281-2 for a story about a merchant killed in his guest house. For some fifteenth century examples of threats by robbers, see Pierre de Vaux, Vie de sainte Colette cit., c. 77-84, pp. 70-6.
102. For the link between physical weakness and travelling by horse or carriage, see Vita Julianae de Monte Corneli cit., Lib. ii, c. 11, p. 462: «siquidem prae nimia debilitate pedes ire non poterat»; Pierre de Vaux, Vie de sainte Colette cit., c. 6/35, p. 54 (See also excerpt 2, added to this contribution).
103. See also Ohler, The Medieval Traveller cit., pp. 82-101.
104. The vita of Ida of Nivelles offers a fine description of a pilgrimage ceremony. A deaf nun of La Ramée, the Cistercian cloister where Ida’s remains were kept, promised a wax ear to the saint in exchange for her recovery. Before visiting Ida’s tomb she asked for fun to be ceremonially recognized as a pilgrim and eventually received the traditional pilgrimage attributes. See Gossuinus de Bosuto, Vita beatae Idae Nivellensis cit, c. 35, pp. 293-4.
105. See U. Peters, Gender Trouble in der mittelalterlichen Literatur? Mediävistische Gender-
danger of rape was always present, and travelling while being pregnant was certainly not without risks.\textsuperscript{106} Even so, hagiographers remained rather sparing with misogynistic remarks and moral disapproval.

Isolated vitae of holy women can often be considered rather fragmentary and selective in their information as to the mobility of the heroines that are described. However, this contribution may have shown that the corpus of saints’ lives from the Low Countries in its entirety nevertheless offers us a kaleidoscopic image of the ecclesiastical concerns, the narrative motives and the lifelike representations that existed in late medieval society in relation to travelling women.


\textsuperscript{106} Mary Magdalene, e.g., was told to have saved a pregnant women who was wrecked. See Iacopo da Varazza, \textit{Legenda aurea}, c. 92, pp. 632-6.

**ABSTRACT**

Despite their usually andro-centric and clerical focus, hagiographical texts offer much implicit as well as explicit information on the different dimensions of female mobility. In this contribution, the hagiographical representation of female mobility in late medieval texts from the Low Countries is analysed, considering several possible variables. Are there differences between texts treating people from a distant past and those treating contemporary exemplary figures, or between Latin and vernacular texts and their respective audiences, or between the representation of female (im)mobility in texts written with a view to propagating religious ideals and those written within the realistic frame surrounding the saint’s spectacular deeds? This contribution argues that the discursive framing of female mobility in hagiographical texts is always the result of the search for a balance between at least three components: the moral teaching which has to be given, the historical core of the life of the holy person involved and the realistic background in which the hagiographical story has to be situated.
Excerpts from Pierre de Vaux’s *Vie de sainte Colette*

Nicoletta or Colette Boëllet was born in 1381 to well-to-do parents at Corbie, a village near Amiens on the river Somme. After having tried out various types of religious life, she began living as an anchoress in a cell attached to the side of the local church of St Etienne in 1402. Around that time she received several divine visions informing her that she was chosen to reform the Franciscan Orders, and especially the female branch of the Clares. In 1406, after having been relieved of her vow, Colette travelled to Nice, to Antipope Benedict XIII, accompanied by her confessor Henry of Baume and several important noble women. The pope blessed Colette, consecrated her Clare and abbess and granted her permission to carry out her project of reform. In the next four decades Colette travelled all over Europe. The first house that she reformed, in 1410, was the convent of the Clares of Besançon. In 1430 she put into writing her *Constitutions*. By the end of her life she had reformed and founded no less than sixteen houses, especially in France and Burgundy, but also in the German Empire (Heidelberg). Colette got much support, in particular from noble women, and acquired many followers during her travels. She spent the last years of her life in Ghent in the Bethlehem cloister that she had founded at the behest of Philip the Good and Isabella of Portugal. She died in 1447.

Among the many sources concerning Colette and her reform, there are also several interesting hagiographical texts. Her life was written for the first time, in French, almost immediately after her death by Pierre de Vaux who had been her confessor for 18 years. It is from this text which was clearly modelled after the lives of St Francis and St Clare, that the excerpts below are selected. One of the main manuscripts of Pierre de Vaux’s work

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107. The best comprehensive study on Colette of Corbie is certainly Lopez, *Culture et sainteté* cit.
was commissioned by Countess Margaret of York (1446–1503). It was illustrated with 29 large initial letters, 28 borders and 25 half-page miniatures and is still today kept in the convent of the Poor Clares in Ghent. A Latin translation of Pierre de Vaux’s work was made shortly afterwards in c. 1450 by the Franciscan theologian Etienne de Juilly. In 1451, Pierre de Vaux also commissioned a Middle Dutch translation, allegedly based on the Latin version and composed by the Benedictine prior Olivier de Langhe of St Bavo’s abbey in Ghent. Around 1471, sister Perinne de Baume, a niece of Henry of Baume and one of Colette’s companions dictated her personal recollections of the saint to Francis des Marez, the confessor of Hesdin, one of the cloisters Colette had founded. In many aspects, her report differed from that of Pierre de Vaux. However, both her main hagiographers picture her as a typical, humble and ascetic religious woman who experienced all kinds of mystical phenomena and displayed miraculous powers. Already during her lifetime, she was said to have performed many miracles, particularly in helping travellers in need and in offering a refuge for women in childbirth. At the end of the fifteenth century a process of beatification was initiated with the support of the citizens of Ghent. Nevertheless, Colette was only canonised in 1807.

The excerpts below offer excellent illustrations of the different ways in which the mobility of women could be represented in hagiographical writings. They add concrete examples to the three levels of analysis that we have distinguished above. The first excerpt constitutes an explicit praise of the secluded life that religious women were supposed to embrace. The second excerpt, about her very first long distance journey to Nice, relates the crucial episode in Colette’s life, which led to the beginning of her career as travelling reformer. The third excerpt, which narrates some of the difficulties Colette and her sisters had to face when


110. The autograph is kept in Ghent, Poor Clares, ms. 2 and a late fifteenth century copy in Ghent, University Library, ms. 520.

they were on the road, is a fine example of the way in which a hagiographical text could be corroborated with details derived from the day-to-day realities of travelling. All three excerpts are enhanced with suitable miniatures reproduced from the Ghent manuscript of Pierre de Vaux’s *Vie de sainte Colette*.

**Excerpt 1: the ideal of claustration**

*De la solitude qu’elle a eu.*

Peu en y a des anciens peres qui l’eust oncque tele ne samblable comme elle a eseu par l’espace de chinquante ans. Elle fut enclose et enfermée, non pas seulement dedens ung renchusaige où il y peut avoir aulcue fois lieux spacieux et solacieux, ne dedens ses couvens qui sont ampes et gracieux, mais en une petite celette située dedens les couvens qui polvoient myeulx estre ditte prison ou sepulture que aultre. Car elles estoient si petites si basses et si estroittes qu’elles ny s’i poot tournier ne drechier ne hauchier, comme il appert par sa cellette qui est située au couvent de Viviés qui n’a pas vij. piés de long ne iiij. de large. Aulcuns des enciens peres auecqque che qu’il avoient leurs celles assez ambles si pootient ilz aller aulcue fois. Et de fait les aulcuns aloient par le deseert pour eulx recreer et sola-cier apres leurs orisons el apres leurs paines et labuers. Mais la petite ancelle de notre Sei-gneur, non obstant qu’elle eust paines orribles et doloreusses, comme dist est, oncques elle n’issit hors de son horatoire pour avoier quelque recreacion. Et encore plus quant la petite cellette estoit située pres du gardin qu’il ne convenoit que mestre le pet dedens, oncques n’y veut entrer ; et quant il lui convenoit yssir hors des couvens pour visitacion ou aultrement en tous les hostelz où elle venoist elle gardoist solitute et clausere et se tenoit en unque pet-té placette qu’elle faisoit clore de draps ou de couverture et y là se tenoit comme s’elle fust immobile sans soy partir jusques à son departement.\footnote{112}

On the solitude she has known.

Among the old fathers only few have lived one comparable to the one she did during a span of fifty years. She was enclosed and locked up, not only in a hermitage where there can sometimes be spacious and sunny rooms, or inside one of these convents which are large and elegant, but in a small cell situated inside these convents. These cells are better called prison or grave than anything else because they were so small and low and narrow that it was impossible to turn around inside them, to straighten up or to stand upright, as can be noticed in her cell in the convent of Vevey which is hardly six feet long by four feet wide. Some of the old fathers, who had rather large cells, could sometimes walk around. Indeed, some

\footnote{112. Pierre de Vaux, *Vie de sainte Colette* cit., c. 17/1/65, pp. 141–2.}
of them went into the desert to relax and to repose after their prayers and after their penance and labour. But the little maiden of our Lord, notwithstanding her horrible and painful penance, did never, as was already said, leave her oratory to enjoy some recreation. What is more, though her little cell was situated so close to the garden that she only had to put her foot outside, she did not want to enter it. And when she had to leave her convent for a visitation or another reason, she kept her solitude and clausura in all the inns in which she stayed; she stayed inside a small room which she enclosed with cloths and covers and she stayed there and did not leave before her departure as if she was immobile.

PLATE 2

Excerpt 2: the travelling saint

Comment elle ala a notre st pere le pape et comment il la fist religieuse professe et abesse. VIe capte.

Quant Dieu l'eust ainssy pourveue de celluy venerable pere pour maistre à execution la ditte reformacion, elle proposa d'aler personnellement et le dist bon pere avecques elle en la presence de notre saint pere le pape. Et pour ce faire honorably et plus seurement notre Seigneur donna aulcune congnoissance d'elle et de sa saincte vie et de son saint desir à ungne noble et puissante dame chevaleresse [et baronnesse qui pour celluy temps estoit] vesve du singueur de Brysay et fust fille du S' de Roche Chouaert. Laquelle dame purement pour l'amour de Dieu et par sa grant douceur et benignité vint par devers elle en son renclusaige à Corbie et eubt moult de sainctes collacions touchant la tres parfaicte amour de Dieu et le salut de son ame avecq elle. Dont la ditte dame fust grandement ediffiée et consolee et avecque che animée à le aydier de toute sa puissance que le bon propos et saint desir que Dieu luy avoit donné peult sortir son effect, et pour ce faire print à labourer la ditte dame s'y efficacement avecque les aultres que Dieu luy avoit administrés que en petit de temps, tant par dispensacion papale comme par aultres remedes convenables, nonobstant quelconcques empeechemens que l'ennemy luy faisoit et procuroit q'elle fust hors dud. renclusaige. Et quant la ditte dame appecheu comment Dieu les avoit aydiet a la maistre hors car ad che faire y eust moult de contradiccions et de opposicions lez quelz par voye humaine ne poient pas estre annullées en sy bief tamps; niantmains par la volonté de Dieu incontinent tout empeechemens furent seclus, et mis arriere. Adonque charitablement elle se presenta personnelement et les siens et tous ses biens pour le admener jusques à la presençe du saint père. Laquelle presentacion humble et charitable congoissant l'ancelle de notre Seigneur qu'elle procedoit de la volonté de Dieu, humblement l’accepta et s’y consenti, dont la noble dame conceupt en son cuer unge grande liesse et luy fust bien advis, comme verité

113. It was in particular the abbot of the Benedictine abbey of Corbie who opposed Colette’s plans.
How sister Colette went to our Holy Father the Pope and how he made her a professed religious woman and abbess. Chapter six.

When God had thus given her this remarkable Father in order to realise this reform, she resolved to go personally with the Father in question to our Holy Father the Pope. In order to do so in an honourable and more safe way, our Lord made a noble and powerful knightly lady acquainted with her, her saintly life and desire; at the time the lady was baroness, widow of the lord of Brisay and daughter of the lord de Rochechouart. This lady came to her and to her hermitage in Corbie out of pure love of God, sweetness and benevolence; she had many saintly conversations with her concerning the very perfect love of God and the salvation of her soul. The lady was greatly edified and consoled by these conversations as well as motivated to help her with all her strength so that the good plan and saintly desire that God had given could be put into practice. To realise this, the lady in question, together with other persons that God had administered her, started to make such effective efforts that in no time, thanks to a papal dispensation and to other appropriate measures, she could leave the hermitage in question, despite some obstacles that the enemy put in her way. The lady in question

115. Henry de Baume is meant.
noticed that God had helped them to get her outside, as there was much resistance that could not have been eliminated by human forces in such a short time. Yet, by the will of the Lord all the obstacles were removed. Therefore she charitably showed up with her retinue and all her possessions to bring her in the presence of the Holy Father. The servant of the Lord who realised that this kind and charitable proposition came from the will of God, accepted it humbly and agreed with it. The noble lady experienced a great joy in her heart and understood rightly, as was the truth, that God had given them a very special grace in this matter. And due to the sovereign goodness of the Lord, she took her to our Holy Father comfortably and safely while showing her and many others much charity and humanity. During the journey, God protected them and helped them. All were feeling a great joy to be accompanied by the maiden of our Lord. She was for them the model of all sainthood. Many times, she taught them a solid and good doctrine in order to inflame in them a perfect love of God, to incite them at serving and fearing Him, at fleeing from sin and at respecting the holy commandments. And there was such a good conduct and such honest conversation amongst them, that it seemed to them that an angel was descended from heaven.

Sometimes out of pious compassion because she was young and tender, they placed her on an animal, and, as she was never lazy, she was always busy thinking of the Lord or talking with Him. As soon as she sat on the beast, she devoted her heart so greatly to thinking of God that she seemed in ecstasy and totally transfigured in Him. She did no longer know what was said or done next to her. Yet she kept so upright without staggering from one side to the other that it seemed that angels held her. Sometimes when she walked on foot and found herself on an hard and difficult road, full of stones, it often seemed that she did not touch the ground, that she flew or that she was lifted in the air. In this way, and in only a small lapse of time, she covered such a long distance that nobody, no matter how good a walker, could follow her.

PLATE 3

Excerpt 3: women on the road

Ou temps que partout le royaulme de France les gherres estoient sy cruelles et sy mortelles que peu de gens osoient yssir hors des fortresses et bonnes villes, non obstant qu’elle fust pavoruse et moult craintive comme il appertient à dame de religion, niantmains en celluy tamps elle entreprins mour l’amour de Dieu et le salut des ames à faire plusieurs voyages en divers et longtaines regions. Et pour yeulx faire seurement et sauvement son saulfonduyt estoit d’avorr tous les jours avant qu’elle partist de la maison la saincte messe des. iij. roys. Et tantost qu’elle estoit departie, elle commençoit à dire devotement les leta- nies et par le grace de Dieu et par les merites de tous les sains nommés en la ditte letanie,
tous les perils qui estoient aulcune fois si grans que pour perdre la vie elle eschieuver et eva-
doit sauvement. Desquelz perils aulcuns sont chy apres declarés et manifestés en brief.

Unghe fois que elle avecque plusieurs de ses religieusses estoient en ungrne region estrain-
ge et dont elles ignoroient la langhe, ainsy comme elles passoient par ung dangereulx pas-
seau en ung bois citués, eles furent rencontrées de gens d’armes bien montés et armés, leurs
arbalèstres tous tendues, lesquels s’estoient mis en embuche en entencion de les desrober
destrousser; car non obstant qu’elles fusent povres et vivans de mendicité, nientmains pour
la prelecxité du chemin et apreté de la voye et aussy pour la foiblèsse feminin, il les conve-
noit mener en chars qui sont de grande apparsiance et demonstrance; sur elles saudainement
et tempestueussement vindrent et comme ceulx qui avoient malvaise volenté et qui esoient
pres de mal faire, commencerent à parler rudement et espoentablement. La petite ancelle
de notre Seigneur qui devotement avoit dit la saincte letanie et qui par la grace du benoit
saint esprit comme les glorieulx appostres entendoient toutes langaiges, doulement et beni-
gneuent leur respondi. Et soudainement qu’ilz ouyrent le son de sa doule voiz leur volen-
té cruelle fust transmuée en amour et en charité, car non pas seulement ilz l’assurerent que
nul mal ilz ne leur feroient, mais se offrirent charitablement à les conduire sceurement en
quelque lieux où elles vouldroient aller. De laquelle offre charitablement et humblement les
remerchya et ainsy sans nul malfaire se despartirent116.

At the time when in the whole kingdom of France wars were so cruel and
murderous that few people dared to leave the fortresses and the good cities, and
notwithstanding that she was timid and very anxious, as is appropriate for a reli-
gious lady, she undertook several journeys to different far away regions out of
love of God and for the salvation of souls. In order to do so securely and safely,
she assured herself of a safe-conduct by celebrating each day that she left home
the sacred mass of the three Kings. As soon as she had left, she started to recite
devoutly the litanies and thanks to the grace of God and the merits of all the
saints mentioned in the litany in question, she escaped and got away from dan-
gers that were sometimes so big that they involved the risk of life. Some of these
dangers are revealed and briefly described in what follows.

Once when she was in a foreign region with several of her religious sisters
where they did not understand the language, they passed through a dangerous
place in a forest and they encountered well-armed men riding good horses and
with all their crossbows bended. These men had laid themselves in an ambush
with the intention of robbing and plundering them. For despite the fact that they
were poor and that they lived from mendicancy, they had chosen to travel around

approximately the same story and depicts herself as one of the sisters involved. See Perinne
de Baume, *Vie de sainte Colette* cit., c. 32, p. 226: «Ad cause que nous estions en charios
c’estoit grand monstre, mais la feblesse de nous et la proxilète du chemin ainsy contraignoit
se faire». 
in chariots with an impressive appearance because of the length of the road, the roughness of the journey and their feminine weakness. These men suddenly and tempestuously came forward as persons with wicked intentions and prepared to do harm and began to speak in a rude and terrifying way. Then the humble servant of Our Lord Jesus Christ who had devoutly recited holy litanies and – as was the case with the apostles – understood all languages through God’s grace, answered them kindly and benevolently. And suddenly when they heard the sound of her gentle voice, their cruel intention changed into love and charity, since not only did they assure her that they would not harm them but they also charitably offered to take them safely to whatever place they wanted to go to. For this offer she very charitably and humbly thanked them and thus they each went their own way without any harm.
par entour la dé villette Aucuns no
tables marchans aussiest propose que tout
quanquils pouvoient taquent en leuré mar
chausés es jorú des soummutez Ils don
voient enterezet pour l'amour de dieu
atiques nejaut sey consentir den Repu
Jusques à la vaillance d'uns seul denier disat
que ce n'estoit point de riuest autant
Soudain li mostra une espoéntable vision et
du consentement aps par constructe de diu elle
soma po'resonne lodre de madame sult
t Clare le 8e chapitre.

PLATE 1 – Colette as recluse in her cell, protected by an iron cage which suddenly appears while she receives a vision of hell. Illustration of Pierre de Vaux, *Vie de sainte Colette*, c. 5/29 (Ghent, Poor Clares, ms. 8 (c. 1468-77), fol. 19r).
Pieux et miséricords par deurs les poures pecheurs. La giseuse ancelle de na signé a dit maintes fois de la que offues peché ne se part de sa presence qui ne fût aussi enemiement reconforté. Quans pecheurs si a ont veut et Ramenez a dieu par ses saintes predication et belles exhortations. Et quand pison les a fait reconoiert au monde e entrer en religion. Cest une innombrable chose quavoir la parole de dieu come esmiel deit en la bouche. Plusieurs malades de divers malades en faisant le signe de la croix il gar et saulua et aulcuns demoniades sancin hors il retiet.

Plate 2 – Colette’s journey to Pope Benedict XIII. The noble lady who is sent ahead to announce Colette’s arrival gets possessed by the demon and starts to undress. After being dressed again, she is received by the Pope and cured from her sudden madness. The Pope becomes convinced of the importance of receiving Colette as well. Illustration of Pierre de Vaux, Vie de sainte Colette, c. 6/36 (Ghent, Poor Clares, ms. 8, fol. 23r).
PLATE 3 - Travellers underwent various miracles thanks to the intercession of Colette. Blanche of Savoy is rescued from drowning when she crosses a dangerous river on horseback. A travelling Burgundian nobleman falls with his horse from the edge of a river but is saved. Coleta and her companions, while travelling with their carriage to a convent, tip into a river because of the negligence of their coachman but they are miraculously saved. Illustration of Pierre de Vaux, *Vie de sainte Colette*, c. 1468-77, fol. 142r.
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Parte seconda, a cura di Clara Fossati