

BOOK REVIEWS

Olfaktorik und Entgrenzung. Die Visionen der Wienerin Agnes Blannbekin

By Julia Seeberger. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022. Pp. 364. Hardcover €50.00. ISBN: 978-3847114093.

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In this study, Julia Seeberger conducts a thorough investigation of the later medieval manuscript tradition that developed around Agnes Blannbekin, a name associated with a somewhat obscure figure in Vienna living around the turn of the fourteenth century. During her lifetime, Agnes Blannbekin experienced many mystical visions that she, in collaboration with her father confessor, endeavored to record. The stories proved fairly popular, circulating in significant numbers of (mostly Latin) manuscripts across the Holy Roman Empire and Switzerland in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Seeberger mines this collection of texts for what they might reveal about contemporaneous attitudes towards the sense of smell. To that end, she effectively applies the interpretive tools of sensory studies, teasing out the paradoxical association between olfaction and boundary demarcation. As Seeberger shows, the sense of smell was often invoked in the visions of Agnes Blannbekin to draw attention to a variety of physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual boundaries, while simultaneously intimating transgression of said boundaries.

This unique quality of the olfactory domain has been remarked upon by sociologists, anthropologists, and literary theorists since the 1980s. Historical scholarship on late medieval mysticism and women's religious experience has often been preoccupied with similar thematic issues of boundary transgression and has even drawn attention to the prominence of sensory language in the documentary record in many cases, but the connection with smell specifically has seldom been considered in detail. Seeberger is deeply conversant in both scholarly fields and structures her study to contribute to both. After an introductory chapter that carefully reviews the state of research on Agnes Blannbekin and establishes the author's main methodological and interpretive premises, derived from sensory anthropology and sensory history, Seeberger turns to the manuscripts in chapter 2. A comprehensive review of all known manuscripts allows Seeberger to identify two major groupings: the first are those complete manuscripts that present details on Blannbekin and her revelations, while the second group represent partial manuscripts that typically omit portions of the story most revealing of Blannbekin's relationship with her father confessor.

Chapter 3 works to establish the sociohistorical context from which the manuscript tradition originated. Specifically, it addresses questions relating to the identities of Agnes Blannbekin and her father confessor, as well as the nature of their relationship. Seeberger proposes a number of possibilities: Blannbekin may have been the daughter of a farmer, and her father confessor seems most likely to have been affiliated with the Franciscan mendicant order, which at the time was beginning to establish itself in Vienna. Further, through a close reading of the day-to-day activities of Blannbekin, Seeberger proposes that Blannbekin was likely influenced by popular devotional movements emergent at the time, such as the Franciscan Tertiaries and the Beguines. It appears that Blannbekin was not

cloistered but lived in a house in close proximity to the Franciscan church in Vienna. Details from her visions suggest that she may have been inspired by earlier women religious in the region, such as Agnes of Bohemia (1211-1282) and Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-1231). Seeberger is careful to stress, however, that no contemporaneous documentation outside the manuscript tradition can offer very many details on the identities of either. Indeed, the author goes so far as to point out that it is ultimately impossible to determine whether Agnes Blannbekin was an historical person or a fictional construct. On the question of the interactions between Blannbekin and her father confessor, Seeberger is able to develop a number of reasonable hypotheses through careful readings of the manuscript tradition. Because of the immediate context, in which the arrival of the Franciscans in Vienna was met with some controversy, Seeberger stresses that the writing down of Blannbekin's visions may have been a way to establish a distinctive form of moral or spiritual authority. Moreover, Seeberger interprets the content of many of Blannbekin's visions as evidence of a significant back-and-forth, editorial exchange between the visionary and her father confessor, who recorded the visions. This approach stresses Blannbekin's agency in the establishing the moral and spiritual authority of the Franciscans in Vienna at this critical, early juncture.

The fourth and final body chapter elucidates the many different ways Blannbekin's visions appealed to the olfactory domain. Smells could evoke a variety of boundaries and transitions across boundaries. With respect to the latter, olfaction was especially potent in discussions of the soul's desire for, as well as union with, the divine, whether in a more abstract, mystical sense or in more concrete ritual contexts such as Eucharistic devotions. Blannbekin also claimed that she was able to identify individuals by their smells alone, and in many cases, these smells indicated to her their internal, moral state. Pleasant fragrances were, of course, most closely associated with upright morality and most typically applied to model representatives of the Franciscan order. The bodies of those found lacking, by contrast, exuded foul or suspicious odors. Other fragrant imagery might be associated more abstractly with virtues – roses and lilies with chastity, for example – or, in other cases, the heavenly redolence of life after death.

Many of the olfactory tropes identified in the visions of Agnes Blannbekin will likely seem familiar to readers well-versed in the religious culture of the later Middle Ages. What stands out, however, is the volume of references Blannbekin made to smell. Rarely did individual authors make such extensive use of olfactory imagery. In this respect, Julia Seeberger's study will be of special interest to researchers in sensory studies. Arguments about the agency of Agnes Blannbekin in crafting these visions, however, are not entirely convincing. This is due largely to the limitations of the source material, which does not provide enough detail about the individuals involved in the production of the original visions to make any strong claims about specific intentions or problems they were attempting to solve. To be sure, a well-established literature documenting many similar cases across later medieval Europe would suggest that Seeberger's claims here are quite reasonable hypotheses. Ultimately, though, the evidence does not seem to permit definitive resolution of these questions in this particular case.

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