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Gender, Knighthood, and Spiritual Imagination in Henry Suso's *Life of the Servant*

Jacob Randolph

Department of Religion, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, United States
Email: Jacob_Randolph1@baylor.edu

Abstract

Twenty-first-century scholarship on the late medieval Dominican mystic Henry Suso has seen a marked interest in gendered explorations of his *Vita* in the realms of authorship, authority, and social and religious prescriptions. In particular, the position of the nun Elsbeth Stigel, Suso's longtime friend, mentee, and narrative subject in the *Vita*, has come to the forefront as a site of contestation. Moreover, Suso's portrayal of the monastic life as one of a knightly contest has challenged the meaning and function of his work as a didactic text for women religious, as chivalric themes typically carry certain gendered presuppositions. I argue that, contrary to the interpretation of the *Vita* as opposed to female emulation of the Servant, a close reading of the work suggests that the Servant not only allowed but encouraged Stigel and, by extension, Dominican nuns in Suso's care, to don the persona of a knight for Christ, thus broadening the spiritual imaginations of his readers beyond traditional gendered conventions.

Keywords: mysticism; chivalry; Suso; gender; *miles Christi*; spirituality

1. Introduction

The monk sat alone praying in a cold, dank room on the outskirts of the town. He had come to preach, but the people of the town parish had been more interested in hounding the friar for money than hearing a sermon. The monk had endured great hardship from the mouths of the laity and his colleagues alike, some accusing him of stealing, others accusing him of fathering illegitimate children, still others of desecrating sacred relics. He seemed beset on all sides by accusation of wrongdoing, mockery of his message, and threats against his life. The monk let out a sigh of resignation: "God must have abandoned me." As he wept and prayed, suddenly he heard a voice from within him: "What good is a knight of straw and a man made of cloth? Great daring in good times and then giving up in bad times—no one has ever won the ring you long for that way." The monk retorted, "O Lord, the tournaments that one has to endure for you are much too long and difficult!" In the silence of the empty room he waited, and he heard the answer: "But the praise, honor and ring of the knights that are honored by me are constant and last forever."¹

¹Henry Suso, *Leben*, in Karl Bihlmeyer (ed.), *Heinrich Seuse Deutsche Schriften im Auftrag der Württembergischen Kommission für Landesgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1961), 44.152; trans.

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Twentieth-century scholars have taken a renewed interest in the work of the late medieval Dominican mystic Henry Suso, especially in an exploration of gendered dynamics of his *Life of the Servant*, or *Vita*, in the areas of authorship, authority, and social and religious prescriptions. In particular, the position of the nun Elsbeth Stigel, Suso's longtime friend, mentee, religious chronicler, and supposed coauthor of the *Vita*, has come to the forefront as a site of contestation. Frank Tobin summarizes the historiography following Karl Bihlmeyer in the early twentieth century as having "either played down [Stigel's] impact on the *Vita* or questioned whether there was any real collaboration at all."² In subsequent response to the silencing of Stigel and with an eye toward recovering Suso's feminine audience, Suso's knighthood motif, which garnered a prominent position in earlier scholarship on Suso's writing, has been downplayed in favor of a refocused attention to feminine imagery in Suso. David Tinsley, while offering an alternative model for the relationship between Suso and Stigel, which centers on gender and friendship in Suso's work, chides earlier scholars who have made "the role of Suso as an idealized *miles Christi* . . . too much the focus, relegating the fate of his spiritual daughter to the margins."³ Frank Tobin, in the introduction to his translation of Suso's *Exemplar*, concurs, noting somewhat ruefully that modern scholars have overemphasized the importance of chivalric ideals in Suso's *Vita*.⁴ Given the state of scholarship at this point, the historian seems on the horns of a dilemma, either denying the feminine agency of the work's construction or minimizing the importance of the knighthood motif in the text.

In light of the renewed attention to chivalric culture in the context of masculinity studies, a number of scholars have chosen to face the dilemma head-on. Werner Williams-Krapp, for instance, posits that Suso's *Vita* was conceived in part as a rejoinder to the extreme practices taken up by Dominican women, popularized in the *Revelations* of Elsbeth of Oye, a contemporary of Suso. Williams-Krapp notes that Suso "clearly distinguishes between male and female ascetic practices; the self-mutilation practiced by Elsbeth of Oye and the Servant is characterized as distinctly male, and thus inappropriate when engaged in by the former."⁵ Meri Heinonen has taken Williams-Krapp's thesis forward, arguing specifically that the knighthood motif in the *Vita* indicates that "rather than seeing extreme manifestations of piety and intense identification with Christ as intrinsically female or feminine experiences, we need to consider the possibility that

Frank J. Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 171. All references to Suso's *Vita* and letters are taken from Karl Bihlmeyer, hereafter Bihlmeyer. The *Vita* is noted with chapter number and page (e.g., Bihlmeyer, 3.12), while Suso's letters are noted by letter number and page as they appear in Bihlmeyer. As this essay primarily examines Suso on a conceptual rather than semantic level, all English quotations are taken from Frank Tobin's excellent translation, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*. Where the German is necessary or particularly helpful, it is provided in the note.

²Frank Tobin, "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel: Was the *Leben* a Cooperative Effort?," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 121.

³David F. Tinsley, "The Spiritual Friendship of Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel," in *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Explorations of a Fundamental Ethical Discourse*, ed. Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011).

⁴Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 43.

⁵Werner Williams-Krapp, "Henry Suso's *Vita* between Mystagogy and Hagiography," in *Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe, 1200–1550*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 40–41.

the reason these activities were often deemed problematic for women is because it led them to transgress gender norms and display masculine qualities—something which they, as women, should not have been capable of achieving. The clear message which Suso's *Leben* gives to its readers is that only men could be true knights of God.⁶ Similarly, Stephanie Altrock recognizes a rigid gender binary as one possible explanation for the prominence of the knighthood motif (although her own interpretation differs), contrasting Suso's active suffering in the world—a "spezifisch männliche Form der *imitatio Christi*"—with Stigel's suffering of frailty and illness.⁷

Against the argument that Suso's knighthood motif is a deliberate attempt to provide specifically male-exclusive norms for spiritual discipline, I propose upholding the importance of the knighthood motif while simultaneously relativizing the gender dualism some scholars believe this seems to imply. I argue for a reading of the *Vita* that points to Suso's language in historical and intertextual context, revealing the ways in which the knighthood episodes in the *Vita* were meant to be internalized specifically by female religious, allowing nuns in moments of divine imagination to envision themselves as knights in spiritual combat. Beginning with a brief introduction to Suso and the *Vita*'s theme of divine knighthood, I offer a close examination of the points in contention in the "gendering" of the *Vita* to illuminate how Suso's chivalric discourse invited religious women to imaginatively don the spiritual persona of a Christian knight.

II. Suso and the *Vita*

Born at the turn of the fourteenth century, Henry Suso entered the Dominican order at a young age. Suso was educated in Cologne in order to equip him in his duties as lector in the monastery in his hometown, Constance.⁸ In Cologne, he became acquainted with the teachings of Meister Eckhart, an experience that coincided with a personal turn to stricter practices and a devotion to Eternal Wisdom.⁹ One of Suso's primary duties as a Dominican friar was the *cura monialium*, the care of nuns. In this role, Suso served as confessor and spiritual advisor for many of the sisters in his care, and he took special interest in the lives of the women at the convent in the Swiss town of Töss, across Lake Constance. It was there that he met sister Elsbeth Stigel, a well-educated and intensely pious nun. The *Vita* presents a close bond between Stigel and Suso in a spiritual daughter–father relationship. Intimate, familial, and collaborative language characterized Suso's approach to the Dominican nuns, and is reflected in Suso's claim that Stigel, in some sense, provided the source material for Suso's account of his own spiritual journey, *The Life of the Servant*. While the historicity of Stigel's coauthorship is doubtful, her presence in the text indicates Suso's goal of offering Stigel as the model disciple and interpreter of the Servant's experience.¹⁰ Frank Tobin suggests that Stigel's active role in

⁶Meri Heinonen, "Henry Suso and the Divine Knighthood," in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), 88.

⁷Stephanie Altrock, "'got wil, daz du nu riter siest.' Geistliche und weltliche Ritterschaft in Text und Bild der *Vita* Heinrich Sueses," in *Encomia-Deutsch. Sonderheft der Deutschen Sektion der ICLS* (Tübingen: Internationale Gesellschaft für höfische Literatur, 2002), 120–21.

⁸Tobin, "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel," 118.

⁹"Henry Suso, Bl," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁰Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "Medieval Self-Fashioning: Authorship, Authority, and Autobiography in Suso's Exemplar," in *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books; MIT Press, 1998), 243.

the *Vita*, not precisely as coauthor but as a live partner in its creation in the mind of Suso, is based on their true relationship. The final form of the *Vita* displays Stigel's importance, existing almost as a "memorial to his spiritual daughter."¹¹

The *Vita* offers an account of Suso's monastic journey through an idealized portrayal of Suso in the person of the Servant. The Servant is, as Tobin has suggested, a "mask" for Suso by which he can employ spiritual instruction. The *Life of the Servant* is not primarily a biographical account—it has been frequently characterized as "autohagiography."¹² Rather, this carefully curated *Vita* serves as a model for emulation. As Kate Greenspan notes, autohagiography differed from both biography and hagiography; the purpose of the text is not to convey precise detail about one's life, nor to honor the saint whose pious deeds are recorded. Autohagiography aims, among other things, to inspire "a feeling of shared human experience in [its] readers."¹³ Susanne Bernhardt refers to the Servant as the figure, or a model, of an exemplary life by which to flesh out abstract ideas about unity with God.¹⁴ In this way, Stigel too is seen as a figure. The figurative pair together narrate a text that aims not exclusively at drawing community boundaries or compliance with the rules of an order but rather at "making the transgressions and paradoxes of the divine union comprehensible to [the audience] through textual strategies."¹⁵ As Bernhardt notes, the *Vita* "aims at the activity of the recipients, not only as a compliance with a rule, but rather as an attempt to transcend the rule with the help of the rule. It is not only an incorporation into a way of life that is presented, but also its transgression."¹⁶ One way of idealizing the transgression or paradox that a life of spiritual warfare entailed was through images and motifs, like knighthood, that invited recipients to enter into moments of spiritual imagination.

The work is composed of two parts. The first details the Servant's entrance into the monastery and his early search for Wisdom through rigorous acts of austerity. Following a narration of the Servant's extreme pious devotion, the *Vita* promotes a more perfect path to Wisdom, initiated through the visitation of a divine messenger, apart from self-imposed physical asceticism. The second part of the *Vita* narrates Stigel's desire to emulate Suso in his pursuit of the divine, as well as Suso's instruction for Stigel in her journey toward God.

Suso often described the lifelong journey toward God as a romantic pursuit of Christ personified as the feminine divine, Eternal Wisdom. The Servant, in a moment of divine rapture, was told by a divine voice that he ought to take

gentle Wisdom as your dearly beloved, because she bestows on her lover youth and vitality, nobility and abundance, honor and advantage, great power and an everlasting name. She makes him handsome and teaches him courteous behavior, and how to win people's praise and fame in battle. She makes him dear to and esteemed by God and man.¹⁷

¹¹See Tobin, "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel," 134.

¹²See Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6–8.

¹³Kate Greenspan, "Autohagiography," in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret Schaus (New York: Routledge, 2006), 54.

¹⁴Susanne Bernhardt, *Figur im Vollzug. Narrative Strukturen im religiösen Selbstentwurf der Vita Heinrich Seuses* (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2016), 13–14.

¹⁵Bernhardt, *Figur im Vollzug*, 18 (my translation).

¹⁶Bernhardt, *Figur im Vollzug*, 18.

¹⁷Bihlmeyer, 3, 12; trans. Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 67–68.

To win Wisdom's hand, Servant was told, he must make himself to suffer, for "no one can be a suitor unless he is a sufferer, nor can anyone be a lover unless he is a martyr."¹⁸ The Servant at first interpreted the call to suffering as an injunction to intensify his ascetic practices. However, after an extended period of self-imposed suffering, the Servant experienced yet another divine intervention that drew him away from traditional ascetic practices and into a deeper knowledge of God. This intervention was regarded by the Servant as a call to divine knighthood.

The knighthood motif is essential for understanding Suso's self-fashioned portrayal as the Servant who suffers to win the love of another. Two instances serve as the divinely commissioned patents of nobility for Suso the knight. The first occurs early in the work, after and in juxtaposition to various extreme physical practices that had been taken up by the Servant. These included wearing a hair shirt, carving the monogram *IHS* into his breast, fashioning a wooden cross with thirty nails and strapping it to his back, sleeping on a board, sleeping upright in a chair, restricting his drinking to the point of cracking his tongue, and other intense physical modifications.¹⁹ After years of these and similar austerities, he was visited by a celestial messenger who instructed him in the better way, that of *Gelassenheit* (detachment from oneself). Eager to take up this practice, the Servant "intended to live there [in the house of detachment] and engage in much serious activity [i.e., extreme asceticism]."²⁰ However, he was restricted from doing so, and after contemplation the Servant realized that such works were, in fact, grounded in the self. To become truly detached, one must receive suffering from outside.

Some time after being released from his austerities, the Servant was meditating on the words of Job 7:1, *militia est vita hominis super terram*, when he was visited again by a celestial visitor, a "fine young man looking very virile [and] carrying two elegant knightly boots and other clothing usually worn by knights."²¹ Upon clothing the Servant, the young man enjoins him: "Be a knight! Until now you were just a squire. Now God wants you to be a knight."²² The Servant, confused because of the prior instruction to give up his physical toil, argues with the young man that he would rather earn his knighthood "in a praiseworthy manner through a contest." The young man assures him: "Don't worry. You shall have enough combat. He who endeavors to lead the life of a spiritual knight of God with valor will encounter many more dangerous battles than happened of old to the famous heroes in the bold knightly contests the world proclaims in song and tale."²³ By this, the young man means that suffering will come from outside, but will be emotional and psychological rather than physical: "I will take you away from yourself and hand you over defenseless to be dealt with at the hands of others. Then you will have to accept the public destruction of your reputation in the estimation of some blind men. . . . [Y]our earlier exercises caused you to be highly esteemed by people, but now you shall be beaten low and must be utterly ruined."²⁴

The second instance comes in the second part of the work. While traveling across Lake Constance on a preaching tour, the Servant encounters a secular knight and his

¹⁸Bihlmeyer, 3.12; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 68.

¹⁹Bihlmeyer, chs. 15–19; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 87–97.

²⁰Bihlmeyer, 19.54; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 98.

²¹Bihlmeyer, 20.56–57; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 99.

²²"bis riter! Du bist unz her gneht gesin, und got wil, daz du nu riter siest." Bihlmeyer, 55.25; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 99.

²³Bihlmeyer, 56.2–6; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 100.

²⁴Bihlmeyer, 57.3–9; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 100–101.

squire. Impressed by the knight's imposing display, the Servant enquires of the knight about his activities at court. Upon hearing about the tournament atmosphere and the reward for the winning knight, the Servant asks, "What is the reward?" The knight said, "The most beautiful lady present puts a gold ring on his hand." Then the Servant asks, "Tell me, dear sir, what does one have to do to attain the honor and the ring?" He said, "The one who suffers the most blows and sallies and does not falter but rather displays boldness and manliness, who sits firmly [in the saddle] and lets the blows rain on him—he receives the prize."²⁵ Struck by this, the Servant concedes, "[I]f the knights of this world have to take such sufferings upon themselves for so small a reward, which [is] nothing in itself, dear God, how just it then is that one must suffer many more trials for the eternal prize! O gentle Lord, if only I were worthy of becoming your spiritual knight. Beautiful, comely, eternal Wisdom. . . if only my soul could receive a ring from you!"²⁶

These two moments in the *Vita* illustrate the knighthood motif (although allusions to battle and the pursuit of Lady Wisdom are frequent), and are useful for outlining the spiritual program that the mature Suso wished to present as a pattern for imitation. By connecting progress toward God in terms of knighthood, the Servant (and thus also his audience) is led to regard the emulation of Christ's suffering not as enduring nails, sleeplessness, or thirst, but as faithfulness in the midst of suffering in the spirit and the mind. As Susanne Bernhardt notes, imagining knighthood in the context of the *Vita* was meant to evoke not particular practices, but rather a "specific attitude in suffering."²⁷ Betrayal by friends, gossip, rumor, accusation of sin and, of course, divine neglect, as well as a deep association with the spiritual resignation of Christ—"not my will, but Thine"—were, in the final estimation of Suso, what marked out a "squire" from a "knight." Endurance and patience as "blows rain on him" characterized a warrior who receives the love of the fair lady Eternal Wisdom.

III. Nuns as Knights?

As noted previously, the divine knighthood motif is essential for Suso's self-understanding, but it is not all-encompassing. One of the entrancing and complicating elements of Suso's mystical self-fashioning is the profusion of metaphors offered for the divine life. No single costume is donned by the Servant in his exploration of mystical experience, and no one vocation will suffice to illustrate what is required of the servant of Wisdom.²⁸ However, given the prominence of the knighthood motif in the work, which is directed to an audience of Dominican sisters (epitomized in the narrative presence of Stägel), it is worthwhile to question the universality of Suso's program of instruction, to probe the boundaries of gendered imagination in mystical and monastic communities, to ask the question, could nuns be spiritual knights? In an effort to provide an initial response, we might posit two realms of inquiry: the questions of (1) historical precedent and (2) the utility of the knighthood motif in the context of audience, argument, and application in Suso's writings.

²⁵Bihlmeyer, 44.149; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 170.

²⁶Bihlmeyer, 44.152; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 171.

²⁷Bernhardt, *Figur im Vollzug*, 93 (my translation).

²⁸The Servant is characterized variously as an infant in his mother's arms (Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 70), as a young girl picking roses (102), and as the husband of Wisdom (69), as well as a tattered doormat in the mouth of a dog (101).

Many scholars have noted the similarities between Suso's *Vita* and the genre of the courtly romance, a common trope in medieval literature where, as Altrock notes, sacred texts borrowed the *labor heroum* from chivalric texts to illustrate the suffering implicit in the *labor sanctorum*.²⁹ One such theory, put forward by Julius Schwietering and updated in Maria Bindschedler, argues that Suso deliberately fashioned his *Vita* in the genre of courtly romance, where the hero experiences early success but must overcome a series of trials to restore his lost honor.³⁰ Meri Heinonen has drawn the gendered implications of the courtly romance to their most fully formed conclusion, arguing that for Suso spiritual knighthood was an exclusively masculine call; Heinonen regards the second part of the *Vita*, which focuses on Stigel, as the counterpoint for Suso's masculine spirituality. Heinonen asserts,

[T]he *Leben* represented the Servant as an orthodox and ideal friar, who could become a heavenly knight by physical and mental suffering, thus presenting an ideal of holy masculinity to male readers. On the other hand the Spiritual Daughter presented a much more passive and restrained model for religious women to imitate. . . . The clear message which Suso's *Leben* gives to its readers is that only men could be true knights of God.³¹

Conversely, I suggest we may see Suso as standing in a long line of ecclesiastical authors who armed women for battle on the field of the spirit against the flesh, a metaphor well-trodden by key church authorities by the time Suso wrote his works in the late fourteenth century.³²

The call of Suso to serve as a *miles Christi*, while certainly drawing on the courtly literature and language of the Late Middle Ages, more importantly reflects a late medieval appropriation of a universal theme within Christian devotional literature: that of spiritual warfare.³³ Spiritual warfare, drawing from enculturated military imagery in any context within which the concept was evoked, almost always meant dipping into

²⁹Altrock, "got wil, daz du nu riter siest," 116–17.

³⁰Julius Schwietering, "Zur Autorschaft von Seuses 'Leben,'" *Altdeutsche und aliniederländische Mystik*, ed. Kurt Ruh (1953; reprint Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), 309–23; Maria Bindschedler, "Seuses Begriff der Ritterschaft," *Heinrich Sueses; Studien zum 600. Todestag, 1366–1966*, ed. Ephrem Filthaut (Cologne: Albertus Magnus Verlag, 1966), 233–39. See Deborah Rose-Lefmann, "Lady Love, King, Minstrel: Courtly Depictions of Jesus or God in Late-Medieval Vernacular Mystical Literature," in *Arthurian Literature and Christianity: Notes from the Twentieth Century*, ed. Peter Meister (New York: Garland, 1999), 143. See also Tobin, "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel," 129.

³¹Heinonen, "Henry Suso and the Divine Knighthood," 88.

³²Heinonen argues that in other, more mystical writings, Suso is content to allow more gender bending than in the *Vita*, which Heinonen characterizes as didactic. Heinonen, "Henry Suso and the Divine Knighthood," 88. It is granted that the *Vita* serves a largely didactic purpose, but such a sharp distinction between the didactic and mystical literature is questionable. Moreover, it is clear from Suso's letters that he sought to instill chivalric virtues in the sisters under his care through didactic language as well. See the discussion of Suso's letter to a Dominican nun, Letter 17 in *Heinrich Sueses: Deutsche Schriften*, later in the article.

³³It is not surprising that Suso applies the universal principle of spiritual warfare in terms of knighthood, since the medieval fashioning of spiritual warfare into chivalric language is driven in part by what Katherine Allen Smith identifies as a threat to the "monastic monopoly on spiritual warfare" in the wake of the rise of the Crusades. Even as knights pledged their swords to Jesus and Rome, monks insisted that theirs was the true vocation of war. See Katherine Allen Smith, *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011), 112.

a highly gendered social matrix. From ancient Rome to the Holy Roman Empire, it was taken for granted that men served as soldiers.³⁴ However, this did not hinder male and female spiritual advisors from alluding to warfare imagery in counseling their female religious. Nor did it hinder women from donning the persona of a knight in spiritual battle. Suso joined a tradition of monastic writers who utilized masculine militancy (and later chivalry) to explore the motif of spiritual warfare for women.

While a full exploration of the subject would be far too large for my current focus, a few examples of the strategic blurring of gender norms are illustrative. Jerome, for instance, was fond of using militaristic metaphors in his correspondence, with such imagery cropping up in letters to audiences as varied as soldiers, monks, and expectant mothers.³⁵ Upon one such occasion, in a letter to a female friend, Jerome enjoined his “most devout daughter in Christ” Laeta to bring up her infant daughter Paula in keeping with her preparation as a consecrated virgin. As Paula grows, Jerome advises, “[S]he ought to rise at night to recite prayers and psalms; to sing hymns in the morning; at the third, sixth, and ninth hours to *take her place in the line to do battle for Christ*; and, lastly, to kindle her lamp and to offer her evening sacrifice.”³⁶ Acts of piety and, in particular, regular prayers were tantamount to standing in the line of soldiers prepared for war.

The life of Monegund, as told by Gregory of Tours in the sixth century, reveals the permeability of gendered borders in matters of faith and spiritual tribulation. Gregory tells of Monegund in his *Liber Vitae Patrum*. Gregory introduces her life with an apology of sorts, explaining how God bestows the gift of his revelation in unexpected ways, whether it be through Abraham, the prophets, or the womb of a virgin. God has brought those in need of life into the arms of the church, and Gregory exhorts his readers to look to all the saints as examples, both men and women, since “He gives us as models not only men, but the lesser sex, who fight not feebly, but with a virile strength; He brings into His celestial kingdom not only men, who fight as they should, but also women, who exert themselves in the struggle with success. This we can now see in the blessed Monegundis.”³⁷ As a young woman, Monegund experienced a deep tragedy: the death of her two young daughters. This horror drove her to despair for a time until, drawing upon the experience of Job in scripture, she came to know peace and renewed conviction. Refraining from relations with her husband, she began living a life

³⁴This is a prescriptive statement, but clearly did not reflect reality in every case. The Crusades, in particular, saw a marked rise in women combatants, although their existence was problematic and thus relegated to the margins by medieval chroniclers. See Michael R. Evans, “Unfit to Bear Arms’: The Gendering of Arms and Armour in Accounts of Women on Crusade,” in *Gendering the Crusades*, ed. Susan Edgington and Sarah Lambert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 45–58.

³⁵Katherine Allen Smith, *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture*, 83–84.

³⁶Jerome, “Letter to Laeta,” in *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, trans. W. H. Fremantle, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1893), 190 (emphasis my own).

³⁷*Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers*, trans. Edward James, 2nd ed., (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991), 118. Lydia Coon also argues that, in addition to the characterization as a warrior, Monegund embodies another male-exclusive persona in Gregory’s *Vita*, that of a priest. In her pilgrimage to Martin, Monegund drinks from a “priestly well,” as it were, and is thereby able to “throw open the door to the grove of paradise.” *Gregory of Tours*, 118. Coon posits that by the close association of Monegund to the “stable of celestial medicine,” Gregory sees her as “a Christ-like dispenser of celestial medicine, for like a priest, she distributes grace to the Franks.” In addition to her eucharistic allusions, Monegund also blesses oil and salt, “two elements used by the male priesthood to perform exorcisms and baptisms.” Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 124.

characterized by ascetic practices, culminating in a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Martin. Upon finding the tomb, she was renewed yet again and began to work healings, gathering a group of nuns to herself as disciples. Monegund, as a saint empowered in the veneration of St. Martin of Tours (himself a former soldier), takes up the spiritual *miles*, Martin's weapons of prayer and oil for the purpose of healing.³⁸ That the characterization of Monegund as a warrior or an athlete is counterintuitive is made all the more pronounced by Gregory's own gendered perception of women as the "lesser sex," pointing to the ways in which the high demands of the Christian life explode, at least in some sense, worldly gendered categories.³⁹

Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century Benedictine abbess and mystic, offers an example of female contemplation of the *miles Christi*.⁴⁰ The *Scivias* of Hildegard is a highly stylized narrative in which she tells of the soul's journey within the "tabernacle" of the body. This tabernacle is attacked by both doubts from within and spiritual sieges from without. At one point, Hildegard envisions a barrage of arrows from her enemies' quivers, piercing the gates of the structure. Upon realizing her security within the tabernacle, she taunts her enemies, telling them that "the architect who built this tabernacle was wiser and stronger than you." She stands confident, remarking that "with great pain and labor I have waged many wars against you, and you tried to put me to death, but you could not; for I was protected by the strongest armor and [I] brandished sharp swords against you and thus vigorously defended myself from you."⁴¹ In the battle against spiritual enemies, the female body—the tabernacle, created by God to house the soul, was envisioned by Hildegard not as a vessel of weakness but as a refuge.⁴²

A final example comes from the hagiography of St. Katherine of Alexandria. The legend of Katherine, a legendary fourth-century martyr, originated as early as the seventh century, but her story gained prominence beginning in the tenth century, culminating in a codification of sorts in Jacobus Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* in the late thirteenth

³⁸Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 124, 195 n. 26.

³⁹John Kitchen, *Saints' Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 104.

⁴⁰It is questionable whether Suso, Stigel, or the Dominican sisters at Töss were familiar with Hildegard. However, the purpose here is not to trace a tight intellectual genealogy but rather to identify the presence of the female *miles Christi* in medieval literature leading up to Suso's *Vita*. Leonard Hindsley argues that Hildegard may have indeed influenced Dominican nuns through the teaching of John Tauler, the well-known preacher and contemporary of Suso. Although Hindsley finds ample evidence of Hildegard's direct influence on Tauler, how much that influence permeated the writings of the sisters under his care remains in question. See Leonard P. Hindsley, "Rhenish Confluences: Hildegard and the Fourteenth-Century Dominicans," in *Hildegard of Bingen: A Book of Essays*, ed. Maud Burnett McNerney (New York: Garland, 1998), 177–90.

⁴¹Hildegard, *Scivias*, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 112.

⁴²Jan Emerson notes that Hildegard gave special emphasis to the eschatological nature of human gendering, affirming first the soul-body reunification at the last day, and second, that the renewed bodies will retain their earthly gender. Jan S. Emerson, "A Poetry of Science: Relating Body and Soul in the *Scivias*," in *Hildegard of Bingen: A Book of Essays*, ed. Maud Burnett McNerney (New York: Garland, 1998), 77–101. Moreover, the clerical station was itself typified by battle. Knowing this, Hildegard enjoined those she counseled through letters (usually men) to arm themselves, while she too interpreted her own struggle through the monastic life in terms of a warrior-knight. See letters 262, 277, and 299 in Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, eds., *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

century.⁴³ Within a few decades after Suso's death, Voragine's text was translated into German by the Katharinenkloster in Nuremberg.⁴⁴ However, German versions of Katherine's martyrdom existed as early as 1300, and Anne Simon suggests that these prose versions would be included in mealtime readings for convents.⁴⁵ On a textual level, the portrayal of Katherine in many of these texts corresponds to symbolism found in Suso's *Vita*. Like Suso, Katherine bears a symbol of Christ on her chest; arms herself for battle as an act of service to her lover, Christ; and enters bravely into her contest, a dialogue with the pagan emperor Maxentius. Enmeshed in themes reminiscent of courtly romance, Katherine is pictured as a lover-warrior, brave and emboldened by a commission from the archangel Michael, the leader of God's heavenly armies. As Simon notes in *Der Heiligen Leben*, the debate between the pagan emperor is "cast as a battle with Katherine as soldier," as Michael tells the young woman to "be bold and unafraid for God will help you fight and win."⁴⁶ Maxentius, in an effort to best Katherine, and convert and marry her, summoned fifty philosophers to face the young virgin in a battle of wits. Katherine stands before them. Making the sign of the cross on her head, her breast, and in front of her, Katherine confounds the wisdom of the philosophers, simultaneously defeating and converting them into fellow "noble warriors" who will prove their faith through martyrdom at the hands of their former master.⁴⁷ When imprisoned by Maxentius, Katherine is visited by Christ, who affirms her in the conflict: "My dear daughter Katherine, you fight for the sake of me, your Lord and Redeemer. Be constant and have no fear for I shall never leave you and those who believe on account of you will be many and numerous."⁴⁸ What is true of the Servant (and Stigel) was also true of Katherine: to be Christ's lover was to be a warrior. Medieval depictions of Katherine across Europe, which often pictured her with a soldier's sword and shield and a spiked wheel, reveal that the story of Katherine was formative throughout Christendom, the fated female saint exemplifying two virtues of Christian devotion: knightly defense and the victory of martyrdom.

Female religious, drawing on scripture and depictions of the saints and martyrs, could employ chivalric imagery to underscore the danger and bravery involved in being a *miles Christi*. An admission of this gender contravention is significant, but it must also be noted that in the monastic context where much chivalric spiritual warfare literature appears, the rhetoric by its very nature entailed a transgression of societal boundaries. The transgression is what made the metaphor so powerful. Even as we examine the ways in which the knighthood motif creatively blurred gender boundaries, it is worth asking whether—in the highly ordered and hierarchical world of fourteenth-century Germany—the imaginative leap made by a female spiritual subject to a masculinized mystical knight is any greater than a similar imaginative leap of a tonsured, celibate monk to an armored, lovesick soldier. Put another way, the transgression of social boundaries that would provoke deeper imagination are present on a number of levels

⁴³For a summary of St. Katherine's influence in the early medieval period, see Christine Walsh, *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria in Early Medieval Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁴⁴Anne Simon, *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria in Late-Medieval Nuremberg* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 47–48.

⁴⁵Simon, *The Cult of St. Katherine*, 47.

⁴⁶Betinna Jung and Werner Williams-Krapp, eds., *Der Heiligen Leben Band II: Der Winterteil* (Tübingen: De Gruyter, 2004), 206; trans. Simon, *The Cult of St. Katherine*, 80 n. 136.

⁴⁷Simon, *The Cult of St. Katherine*, 81–82.

⁴⁸Jung and Williams-Krapp, *Der Heiligen Leben*, 208; trans. Simon, *The Cult of St. Katherine*, 94.

that are obscured when one distills the complexity of the metaphor down to a rigid gendered dichotomy.

IV. Suso and Stigel, Knights for God

Recognizing the existence of a historical precedent for female spiritual knights in monastic literature, it is important to confirm that it was in fact women whom Suso envisioned as interpreters and reenactors of his life. The text of the *Vita* confirms that Suso's ideal audience was made up of female religious novitiates seeking sanctification and curious about ascetic practices. Numerous instances of the Servant's instruction contain reference to beginning in religious life. Indeed, the first part of the *Vita* is, according to Suso, based on his answers to Stigel's questions about his early spiritual life and his progress.⁴⁹ His prologue describes the work as narrating a person beginning a spiritual life *mit bildgebender wise* (in an image-giving manner), providing easily identifiable examples for the religious novice.⁵⁰ There is scholarly consensus on the female religious audience, in part because of the *Vita's* creation in the vernacular German, but the implications for the vernacular audience remain a point of conflict.⁵¹ For some, Suso's use of the vernacular serves as an oppositional force, meant to retain authority and reinforce a gender hierarchy. Thus, Ulrike Wiethaus concludes, "Suese used the vernacular to discipline and contain women under his pastoral care and to demarcate female spirituality as inferior to his own."⁵² Conversely, Jeffrey Hamburger sees the relationship between the two and, by extension, between Suso and his broader audience of nuns, as largely positive. According to Hamburger, Suso's willing self-identification with the "feminine" spirituality of his mother, the bride of Christ, and the Virgin, leaping back and forth across gender boundaries at various points in the work, "allows his female followers to identify with him as their immediate exemplar."⁵³ Carrying forward Hamburger's assertion, I contend that Suso's leaps across gender boundaries are intended not only to offer his female disciples feminine points of contact but also to encourage the Dominican nuns to leap across the boundary with him at certain points as an imaginative costuming of their spiritual persona, the persona of "divine knight" being one of these points.

Many scholars, following R. N. Swanson, have posited the notion that clergy constituted a "third gender" in the Middle Ages, a group of people who, because of the vow of celibacy, became characterized by gendered prescriptions that differed altogether from

⁴⁹Bihlmeyer, 1.7; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 63.

⁵⁰Tobin, "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel," 122–23.

⁵¹For the widespread use of the vernacular in Dominican convents, see Marie-Luise Ehrenscheidtner, "Puellae Litteratae: The Use of the Vernacular in the Dominican Convents of Southern Germany," in *Medieval Women in Their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 49–71.

⁵²Ulrike Wiethaus, "Thieves and Carnivals: Gender in German Dominican Literature of the Fourteenth Century," in *The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature*, ed. R. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Nancy Bradley Warren, and Duncan Robertson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 226.

⁵³Hamburger, "Medieval Self-Fashioning," 245. Additionally, the primacy of Elsbeth Stigel—if not as author, then as subject—suggests that Suso expected a significant female readership. To Hamburger, Stigel's presence in the text represents not only Suso's spiritual daughter—a relationship explicit in the narration itself—but also "the exemplary imitator and interpreter of Suso's text." Hamburger, "Medieval Self-Fashioning," 243. With Stigel as both collaborator and patron, the *Vita* relativizes any hard-and-fast gender tropes by making the representative receptor feminine, while at the same time making the text immanently relatable to Suso's most immediate audience: the nuns of Töss.

lay prescriptions of masculinity and femininity.⁵⁴ Others, like Ruth Mazo Karras and Jennifer Thibbodeaux, have argued instead for a broader spectrum of variation within the two genders.⁵⁵ Many Suso scholars seem to have taken the latter option, arguing that Suso and Stigel bear traditional characteristics of masculinity and femininity. Yet this option has not opened the door to the type of variation that I propose, as many scholars deny the possibility of female knighthood in the *Vita*, opting instead for a strict duality on the basis of gender in Suso's work. To illustrate this duality, they typically point to the numerous differences between Suso and Stigel in their respective processes of spiritual growth. In particular, the marked importance of extreme austerity in the life of Suso, and its absence in the life of Stigel—primarily because of Suso's admonition to avoid such practices—illustrate, for some, the stark contrast between masculine and feminine devotional practices in the mind of Suso. Heinonen has made this argument in its most explicit form, asserting, "For Suso, to be God's knight entailed strength and masculinity, qualities that women did not have and which they could not attain" and that "[e]nduring physical and other forms of suffering was thus part of Suso's conception of the knight of God."⁵⁶ Others point to the similarity of the male–female dynamic of the Servant and the Daughter, as a script by which male and female religious should operate within their respective bounds. J. Christian Straubhaar-Jones, for instance, sees the "policing of boundaries" as important in the *Vita*, stating that "the *Life* specifies that some praiseworthy elements of its masculine identities [e.g., "intense physical ascetic practices"] are inappropriate for cross-gender emulation."⁵⁷

The admonition against physical austerity alluded to by Straubhaar-Jones occurs early in the second part of the *Vita*. As Stigel requested more information about Suso's ascetic practices, Suso shared with her his use of images; his attitude as he moved throughout the friary; and, in particular, his use of the desert fathers. Receiving the writings of the fathers from Suso and taking their example to heart, Stigel "interpreted [Suso's giving] to mean that he thought that she, too, should chastise her body in the severe manner of the desert fathers."⁵⁸ Upon hearing of this, Suso wrote to her: "Dear daughter, if you intend to order your spiritual life according to my teachings, as you requested of me, then put aside such exaggerated severity because it is out of keeping with your weakness as a woman and your physical well-being. Dear Christ did not say, 'Take up *my* cross.' He said, 'Everyone should take up *his own* cross.'"⁵⁹ Admittedly, Suso's admonition to Stigel to avoid the physical austerity that he narrates extensively points to Suso's broad acceptance of the medieval denigration of women as the weaker sex. However, this episode should be neither overemphasized nor set outside

⁵⁴See R. N. Swanson, "Angels Incarnate: Clergy and Masculinity from Gregorian Reform to Reformity," in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Dawn M. Hadley (London: Longman, 1999), 160–77.

⁵⁵See Ruth Mazo Karras, "Thomas Aquinas's Chastity Belt: Clerical Masculinity in Medieval Europe," in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, ed. Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 52–67; Jennifer D. Thibodeaux, *The Manly Priest: Clerical Celibacy, Masculinity, and Reform in England and Normandy, 1066–1300* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁵⁶Heinonen, "Henry Suso and the Divine Knighthood," 83–84.

⁵⁷J. Christian Straubhaar-Jones, "The Rivalry of the Secular and the Spiritual in the Masculine Personae of Henry Suso's *The Life of the Servant*," in *Rivalrous Masculinities: New Directions in Medieval Gender Studies*, ed. Ann Marie Rasmussen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

⁵⁸Bihlmeyer, 35.107; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 139.

⁵⁹Bihlmeyer; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 139–40 (emphasis original to Tobin).

the context of the work as a whole, in which other elements of Suso's teaching mitigate the rigidity of this one instance of gendered dualism.

Suso knew that austerity was taken up by both men and women. In fact, as Williams-Krapp asserts, it is likely that Suso sought to curb extreme physical acts among the women in his care, and the *Vita* was written in part for this very reason.⁶⁰ However, this observation coupled with the narrative arc of the *Vita* suggests that the motif of spiritual knighthood served to reenvision the hierarchy of spiritual practices, favoring an asceticism of resignation over self-chosen physical challenges. Thus, although Suso clearly regarded women as objectively weaker than men, in Stigel this supposed natural weakness had little bearing on her ability to ascend to the level of spiritual contemplation and suffering for Christ that is imagined as a form of chivalric service in the *Vita*. The Servant's purpose for instructing Stigel to refrain from extreme physical practices, then, relates to setting aside base mimicry of the Servant or the desert ascetics in favor of imagining along with the Servant in one's own context (which, to be sure, included one's gender) and of continuing, as Bernhardt suggests, to write the text in their own lives.⁶¹

This is made explicit in the narrative itself. David Tinsley points out that Stigel did not accept Suso's instruction to curb her ascetic practices without qualification, and "she asked him to tell her why he had practiced such severe austerities and yet did not want to advise them for her or others."⁶² Rather than appeal a second time to her gender as one might expect, Suso took a different tack, remarking that different saints were drawn to God through different means, including the very apostles of the church, St. Peter and St. John—the former was martyred for the faith and the latter died of old age. Yet both were drawn into the life of Christ.⁶³ Because God wishes the divine glory to be praised in manifold ways, "what is good for one person is not good for another."⁶⁴ The Servant also remarks that austerity is particularly useful for those who "arbitrarily give in to their insubordinate natures," but he praises Stigel's virtue, noting that "this does not apply to you or people like you" while warning Stigel—much like the celestial being warned the Servant—that a different, more painful cross than flagellation would come, and must be borne in patience.⁶⁵ Tinsley comments, "The didactic message here is not, as some have claimed, that women are incapable of using extreme discipline to make the spirit ascend beyond the demands of the body, but rather, as Suso illustrates through the examples of Peter and John, that God's choice is appropriate to Stigel's individual nature."⁶⁶

⁶⁰Williams-Krapp, "Henry Suso's *Vita*," 40–41.

⁶¹Bernhardt, *Figur im Vollzug*, 18.

⁶²Bihlmeyer, 35.107; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 140; Tinsley, "The Spiritual Friendship," 484.

⁶³Cf. John 21:18–23.

⁶⁴Bihlmeyer, 35.108; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 140.

⁶⁵Bihlmeyer, 35.108; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 141. This point is noted by Claire Taylor Jones: "Imprudent asceticism can only bring Elsbeth's well-ordered soul into disorder, and the Servant must direct her down a different, prudent path." Claire Taylor Jones, *Ruling the Spirit: Women, Liturgy, and Dominican Reform in Late Medieval Germany* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). See n. 35 for Suso's identification of Stigel's cross with prolonged illness.

⁶⁶David F. Tinsley, "The Spiritual Friendship," 484. See also Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "The Use of Images in the Pastoral Care of Nuns: The Case of Heinrich Suso and the Dominicans," *The Art Bulletin* 71 (1989): 22. See also Steven Rozenski, "Authority and Exemplarity in Henry Suso and Richard Rolle," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VIII : Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 2011*, ed. Edward A. Jones, Exeter Symposium 8 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013), 103–104.

Finally, it ought not be disregarded that because the harsh, self-inflicted punishment of the body was revealed to Suso as tangential in his move toward Eternal Wisdom, it is fitting that Suso would direct Stigel away from such practices as one who wishes to advance in contemplation following the Servant's pattern. Notice that the Servant enjoins Stigel to cease her attempts toward strict austerity on the basis that she is seeking to "order [her] spiritual life according to [Suso's] teachings."⁶⁷ As noted previously, the Servant was unable to become a knight until he was taught a better way by the celestial being, a way of detachment that transcended physical acts. Suso had seen through divine revelation the inferiority of physical punishment for the *miles Christi*. Therefore, assuming it is the case that Suso was earnest in his discipleship of Stigel, Suso's prohibition is expected. As Claire Taylor Jones notes in her *Ruling the Spirit*, discipleship via *Gelassenheit* "does not necessarily entail physical suffering, but rather the patient acceptance of the will of God in whatever suffering is sent."⁶⁸ Thus, Job's suffering, connected overtly to knightly service in the *Vita*, was sent by God and was incomprehensible.⁶⁹ To suffer in this way and to remain steadfast was a clear demarcation in progress. In other words, to represent Christ through submission to God's will—to be a knight for Christ—meant setting aside self-appointed and self-limited suffering, giving oneself up in holy resignation, and receiving a similar cup from the Father as Christ received—the true suffering that comes from outside one's self, whether it be sickness, shame, slander, or the like. It is this appeal that Suso offers Stigel, telling her to expect that "God will place a different kind of cross on your back that will cause you greater pain than all possible austerities. When this cross comes, accept it in patience."⁷⁰

If knighthood in the *Vita* were in fact represented by rigorous physical austerity or severe ascetic practices, as some scholars argue, then it would seem that there is indeed a proscription against women perceiving of themselves or acting as spiritual knights.⁷¹ Indeed, activity in battle and physical rigor were essential qualifiers for secular knights; a knight was, among many things, a man who could deliver a powerful and timely stroke.⁷² Richard Kaeuper asserts that physical prowess in battle, the cardinal virtue of chivalry, was idealized as delivering the death blow either in war or in a tournament; it was "the great chivalric deed."⁷³ However, Suso upends this characteristic in his ideal of knighthood, saying nothing of prowess or skill in combat, and even elevating a contrasting qualifier. A spiritual knight was one who could *absorb* powerful strokes and "sit firmly in the saddle . . . even if he is struck so that fire shoots out of his eyes and blood pours out of his mouth and nose."⁷⁴ Suso's narration of his own journey makes a clear

⁶⁷Bihlmeyer, 35.107; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 139.

⁶⁸Jones, *Ruling the Spirit*, 32.

⁶⁹Bernhardt, *Figur im Vollzug*, 93, 98. Following her examination of Job, Bernhardt argues that the suffering of both Job and the Servant (and, by extension, those who take up the Servant's mantle) are images that point to the suffering of Christ. The suffering of both is fulfilled in the Passion of Christ—Job's by means of typology looking forward, and the Servant's by means of emulating Christ looking backward.

⁷⁰Bihlmeyer, 35.108; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 141.

⁷¹See Heinonen, who argues that Suso believed that "to be God's knight entailed strength and masculinity" and that "[e]nduring physical and other forms of suffering was thus part of Suso's conception of the knight of God." In the context of her argument, Heinonen makes clear that self-inflicted suffering is an essential, if not complete, part of Suso's program of knighthood. Heinonen, "Henry Suso and the Divine Knighthood," 83–84.

⁷²Richard W. Kaeuper, *Medieval Chivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 33–35.

⁷³Kaeuper, *Medieval Chivalry*, 33.

⁷⁴Bihlmeyer, 44.149; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 171–72.

distinction between his former life of self-inflicted suffering, wherein he was a squire, and the divine commission to knighthood, a lifestyle marked by Job-like patience in tribulation that afflicts from outside one's self.

A second aspect of contestation in the gendered interpretation of the knight motif is the differing presentations of the chest monogram in the *Vita*. Building on the assumption that physical intensity demarcated masculine spirituality from the more passive feminine prescriptions in the *Vita*, Meri Heinonen examines Suso's monogram, engraved on his flesh, against Stigel's adaptation of the monogram, sewed with red silk and placed upon her chest. Heinonen sees these differences as deliberately instituted by Suso, crafting very different images of piety, "embroidering" rather than "scratching it on to [the] body, an act that was permissible only for a man."⁷⁵

The Servant's painfully crafted monogram of *IHS* on his chest was a sign of devotion both for himself and others close to him. At one point, the Servant recalls sharing an intense spiritual relationship with a friend in his youth during which, at one point, his companion asked to see the Servant's wound of love, the name of Jesus over his heart. The Servant at first demurred, but when he saw the piety of his friend, he agreed, exposing his chest, which bore the monogram. Upon seeing the symbol, his friend was overcome, "[running] his hand over it and then his face, touching it with his mouth."⁷⁶ The Servant was deeply moved by this experience, but he was also resolved not to reveal the symbol to anyone else. Yet the inclusion of this event in the *Vita* points to the fact that Suso wished, at least on some level, for a reverence for the symbol to continue, and this is in fact what Stigel did. Fashioning a monogram for herself out of silk with the intent of wearing it secretly, Stigel eventually had Suso place her monogram over his own, thereby sanctifying the silk monogram and displaying the interconnectedness of their respective forms of piety. Stigel then fashioned numerous silken monograms, giving them to the Servant for sanctification. According to the *Vita*, "[S]he would then send them all over, with a religious blessing to his spiritual children. She was informed by God: Whoever thus wore this name and recited an Our Father daily for God's honor would be treated kindly by God, and God would give him his grace on his final journey."⁷⁷

With this divinely appointed promise, the monogram took on a function similar to monograms and other textual amulets in chivalric culture. It was not uncommon for knights to apply sanctified textual items to their armor, sword, or flesh as a way of ensuring divine protection in battle. Often, these amulets were accompanied and strengthened by prayers.⁷⁸ Thus, in a remarkable turn, while the Servant's own application of the monogram on his chest remained for him a self-appointed act of devotion

⁷⁵Heinonen, "Henry Suso and the Divine Knighthood," 88. Conversely, Eric Jager argues that the monogram story plays to the feminine, not masculine, for the benefit of his audience. He "blurs the boundaries" of gender by "'feminizing' his heart under the imagery of wounding, inscription, and penetration." This blurring "reflects his frequent identification with the feminine, as well as the mystical or contemplative persona as Christ's (female) 'spouse,' qualities that would have appealed to his local audience of nuns." See Eric Jager, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 100.

⁷⁶Bihlmeyer, 42.143; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 168.

⁷⁷"wer den namen also bi im trüge un im teglich ze eren ein Pater noster sprech, dem wölte got hie güetlich tün und wölti in begnaden an siner jungsten hinvar." Bihlmeyer, 46.155; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 174.

⁷⁸Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2006), 110–11. The most well-known use of the *religious warrior* moniker is the fabric cross that was applied to crusading knights (referred to as *crucesignati*) upon taking their vows, beginning with the

(and thus was not associated with his later commission to knighthood), Stigel's version of the monogram, blessed by a priest (the Servant himself) and distributed to other devotees, served a much more active function as a protective talisman.⁷⁹

Heinonen interprets the differing presentations of the monogram as a concrete example of the differing prescriptions for religious men and women in their devotion.⁸⁰ However, in the context of mystical and ascetic practices, the concept of permissibility to which Heinonen appeals seems tenuous, as extreme austerities were highly individualistic and were often sites of conflict. Additionally, the suggestion that such extreme practices as carving a monogram into the chest would have been conceived as normative for *any* individual, man or woman, seems suspect. In the *Vita*, Stigel never seeks permission to adopt the wound of the Servant, nor is such a possibility suggested for others. In fact, it is the incredibility of the Servant's act that renders the monogram an object of devotion—not emulation—for both men and women.⁸¹ Stigel's own monogram served as an imitation of sorts, but the function of the monogram took on a decisively more chivalric and talismanic tone in the divine promise and instruction given to Stigel.⁸²

Accompanying illustrations in the early manuscripts further clarify the function of the monogram. While not expressed explicitly in the text of the *Vita*, a series of images in the earliest manuscripts of the *Exemplar*—posited by many scholars to have been devised by Suso himself as a devotional companion to the text⁸³—make clear that readers were meant to draw a close correlation between the sacred monogram *IHS* and the knighthood motif. The earliest extant manuscript of the *Vita*—housed at Strasbourg Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire, MS 2929—which is thought to reflect Suso's

First Crusade proclaimed by Urban II in 1095. Moreover, crusader identity echoes throughout this passage in the divine promise given in the spiritual pilgrimage: "God would give him grace on his final journey."

⁷⁹It is also possible that the distributed monograms may have functioned as aids in imagination. Ross Gilbert Arthur notes such a function in the visual images constructed by Nicholas of Cusa. See Ross Gilbert Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 74–76. Suso may have included the sewn monograms as an aid to his readers in their chivalric-shaped piety.

⁸⁰Heinonen, "Henry Suso and the Divine Knighthood," 87–88.

⁸¹Depictions of Suso in medieval manuscripts almost always portray the monk with his monogram, making the *IHS* (along with the crown of roses) a unique badge of identification. In most manuscripts, others who bear the monogram either hold it in their hands or carry it on parchment, but none bear the symbol on their chest as does Suso.

⁸²Functional questions are also at play in the differences between the two monograms. Given the importance of Suso's monogram as an object of devotion and the ways in which the monogram functioned (e.g., physical contact with the symbol), it is apparent that any attempt by Stigel to follow suit by physical mutilation would present serious practical challenges as a functional object of devotion. Suso's display required a level of physical exposure that would have been improper for Stigel.

⁸³Ingrid Falque argues, "The constant transmission of the visual program of the *Exemplar* during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries reveals its value and its importance in the eyes of its successive readers, while . . . [t]he large number of illustrated copies, the presence of the cycle in the oldest version, the relative stability of its transmission, the complexity of the iconography, and its close link to the textual content of the book strongly suggest that this cycle was designed by Suso himself or was at least created under his direction, although this cannot be proven with certainty. Furthermore, several passages of the text also suggest that the drawings were an integral part of Suso's original project." Ingrid Falque, "Daz Man Bild Mit Bilde Us Tribe: Imagery and Knowledge of God in Henry Suso's *Exemplar*," *Speculum* 92 (2017): 451. Falque follows Bihlmeyer, 45–46, and others in this assertion. See Falque, 451 n. 19, for a survey of scholarship on Suso's creation of the images. See also Hamburger, "The Use of Images in the Pastoral Care of Nuns," 25.

original design, depicts the Servant surrounded by angelic beings bearing the garb of a knight: shoes, a belt, surcoat, and in the center a helmet and crown combination bearing the insignia *IHS* (curiously, Suso's own self-applied monogram does not appear in the image). To the right of the Servant, mounted knights bearing shields and pennants with the same monogram look on as the Servant receives the tournament ring from Eternal Wisdom. The image offered the viewer the Servant as the subject, as should be expected, but the corresponding caption extended the application of the image into the realm of exhortation and emulation for the readers: "They who, for the love of God, are not here daunted by pain and suffering shall in eternity enjoy the trappings and the honor of knights."⁸⁴ The vernacular audience of nuns was meant to join their spiritual personae with the Servant, being encouraged and drawn into the same chivalric ceremony by interpreting their own suffering—importantly *not* qualified by monastic austerity in the text—as the tournament, and the honor given by Wisdom (i.e., Christ) as the prize for which they were to compete.

Another illustration in the same Strasbourg manuscript depicts the transmission of the monogram from the Servant to Stigel, and from her to others. The two religious figures are sheltered beneath the mantle of Wisdom. Near the center of the scene, Stigel (identified by name in the image) kneels in reverence near a throne as she is crowned by an angelic being while receiving the Servant's monogram and rose crown. Stigel and Suso, in turn, give this monogram to an eager audience including nuns and laity, both men and women. The caption reads, "I will take those under my divine protection who will bear my name *IHC* in their desire."⁸⁵ The image presented corresponds closely to the narration of the *Vita*, revealing that Stigel's appropriation of the monogram as a silken patch was not an exclusively feminine adaptation, but rather reinforces the interpretation of the monogram as a divinely commissioned protective relic; she received (in a spiritual sense) the monogram from Suso and made them for herself and for others, acting as a mediator of Suso's devotion and of God's protection for others on their spiritual journey.

In sum, reading the patriarchal language of Suso in his early interactions with Stigel *could* lead interpreters to apply rigid social gender boundaries of medieval chivalry to the *Vita* as a whole, thus closing off the possibility of Suso's vision of divine knighthood to women. However, Heinonen's examples of gendered duality—physical austerity and feminine adaptation seen in the differing monograms—are relativized both by a broader reading of the *Vita* and by a close examination of the accompanying images. Moreover, Stigel's resoluteness and initiative challenge Suso's preconceptions at various points, revealing that the prevailing language in the second half of the *Vita* is not that of prohibition based on male-female distinction, but of guided progress based on a novice-master (or squire-knight?) distinction.⁸⁶ As Suso described this distinction, it was not masculinized adjectives that shaped his instruction, but rather terms like *seasoned*,

⁸⁴Falque, "Daz Man Bild Mit Bilde Us Tribe," 470.

⁸⁵Falque notices the gendered ambiguity of the scene, commenting that the divine figure, Eternal Wisdom, is depicted as a female monarch protector, while the divine statement is pronounced by Christ, who bids people take his name. Falque, "Daz Man Bild Mit Bilde Us Tribe," 470.

⁸⁶The semantic range of the German *adel* (nobility) offers possible avenues into more subtle expressions of the knighthood motif. However, Joan Robinson warns that the ambiguity of nobility language presents a nearly insurmountable challenge for the historian, and this challenge is made all the more apparent by the malleability of social concepts in mystical language. See Joanne Maguire Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete's Mirror of Simple Souls* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 2.

mature, well-developed, and refined; these terms were applied to Stigel in time. A turning point in the narrative occurs in chapter 46 of the *Vita*. The Servant exhorts his pupil, “Dear daughter, it is now time that you lift yourself out of the nest of consoling examples suited for a beginner and proceed to something more perfect. Do as the young maturing eagle does: With your well-developed wings, that is, the higher powers of your soul, raise yourself aloft to the heights of contemplative nobility of a blessed life of perfection.” The knighthood motif served the end of *Gelassenheit*, not the other way around. Thus, insofar as chivalric language was not taken up in certain mystical teachings about the life of resignation, Suso set aside the base image in favor of more immediate didactic expression to accompany complex themes; chivalric language was one among many useful ways of communicating related spiritual concepts.

While the *Vita* provided hints and whispers beckoning female readers to envision themselves as knights, these instances in the *Vita* admittedly leave something to be desired without concrete application from Suso’s hand. This is why without a doubt the most important precedent for female spiritual knighthood in Suso appears in the guise of a letter to a Dominican nun. As a part of the larger work of the *Exemplar*, Suso included a series of “letters,” didactic treatises curated in the form of epistles. These too are models for his female audience, seemingly addressed to one but for the benefit and emulation of all.⁸⁷

Of these letters, one is of particular note: Suso writes to an immature nun who is vacillating between devotion to the ascetic life and indulgence in worldly relationships. As a means of both warning and encouragement, Suso tells the nun in this letter a story about another sister whom Suso had rescued from the grip of the devil.⁸⁸ When the sister in the story was driven into deeper devotion because of Suso, her burdens grew great under temptation, such that “a gathering of devils” swarmed the convent, raging against the nun who had turned her heart back toward God. Out of concern for his newly rescued sister, Suso wrote a letter to her, exhorting her first to “*Viriliter agite!*” (“Act manly!”)⁸⁹ Suso, likening himself to a knight, then explained that when a seasoned knight who is training a young squire leads his squire into his first tournament, the knight admonishes the squire, saying “Now, noble hero, show what you are capable of today. Be bold and defend yourself keenly. Don’t lose heart like a coward. It is better to die with honor than to live in dishonor. Once the first contest has been gotten through, it gets easier.”⁹⁰ Finally, Suso addresses the nun personally again, remarking that “this [exhortation to bravery] is what you need, my daughter.”⁹¹ Suso, in what was commonplace for the knighthood motif in spiritual warfare literature, appealed to militaristic imagery, including the spoils of war (e.g., the hand of a maiden, the honor of a king, a crown, etc.), as an imaginative means of encouragement and rejuvenation. For instance, in a profound expression of fatherly sympathy, Suso assured his addressee that he would stand in her place if he could, but this would ultimately not be for her benefit, since “then you would not receive the green palm branch that you, along with

⁸⁷Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 37–38. Tobin likens Suso’s letters to Seneca’s *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*.

⁸⁸Bihlmeyer, Letter 17, in *Heinrich Suso: Deutsche Schriften*, 457; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 342.

⁸⁹Bihlmeyer, Letter 17, 459; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 343. Frank Tobin’s translation of this exhortation as “be brave” leaves something to be desired, especially given the remarkably explicit gender transgression that occurs in this letter. In including the Latin in his vernacular letter, Suso was alluding to the Vulgate’s 1 Cor. 16:13, *vigilate state in fide viriliter agite et confortamini*.

⁹⁰Bihlmeyer, Letter 17, 459.

⁹¹Bihlmeyer, Letter 17, 459; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 343.

other special knights of God, shall wear in your eternal glory if you conquer. For every arrow shot at you there shall be a ruby in your crown.”⁹²

V. Conclusion

From this text, it becomes clear that chivalric imagery in the *Vita* could be internalized by the nuns at Töss, since this is the very thing that Suso intended to convey through the direct didactic discourse of his “letter.” The language in this letter coupled with the imagery in the *Vita* make clear the utility of chivalric discourse in the spiritual care of female religious. Moreover, the corpus of devotional writings, mystical interpretations, and personal correspondence of religious communities beyond Suso reveal that creative space could be carved out to expand hard-and-fast gendered categories, provoking imaginative spiritual exhortation and encouragement. Such encouragement worked to elevate individuals in an ennobled self-conception of their spiritual journey. This creative transgression of secular gendered barriers is strengthened upon realizing that the application of the knighthood motif to Suso’s own life was itself a creative transgression of social barriers—from monk to knight—and this creative transgression worked to simultaneously make clear the gravity of a life of spiritual struggle, as well as rejuvenate and offer hope for the weary combatant, for an armed knight was not only prepared but commissioned to fight.

Admittedly, the appearance of women-warriors in devotional and hagiographic literature does not dismiss the still highly patriarchal presuppositions of society’s religious, both men and women, but it does problematize any attempt to draw universal principles for what gendered spirituality looked like in the Middle Ages. It is true enough that many men who observed what they saw as exceptional women downplayed the perceived problem of an exceptional woman by making her an “honorary male,” and that women sometimes visualized themselves as men, as did the early Christian martyr Perpetua in her vision of the coliseum.⁹³ However, in other cases, such as those of Hildegard and Katherine of Alexandria, the assumption of battle armor did not explicitly or necessarily entail a negation of the female body. Against the expectation that the display of masculine virtues was something that women “should not have been capable of achieving,”⁹⁴ a close examination of Henry Suso’s instructions for nuns, both in his *Vita* and in his curated letter, suggests that concepts of bravery, action, defense, and resistance, which remained linked to an ideal masculinity, were not for that reason reserved only for men or exceptional religious women. Neither were they always merely observed upon such women with incredulity by their male counterparts. Rather, Suso’s *Vita* and letters illustrate that in some cases such concepts could be expected as part of a spiritual vision of the life of faith for both men and women in religious orders.

Jacob R. Randolph is a PhD candidate in the History of Christianity at Baylor University. His dissertation explores the intersection of chivalry as a cultural phenomenon and religious imagination in the Radical Reformation of the early sixteenth century. His work, which addresses themes of religious polemic, masculinity, and identity formation, has appeared in *Church History and Religious Culture* as well as *Baptist History & Heritage*.

⁹²Bihlmeyer, Letter 17, 459–460; Tobin, *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 343.

⁹³Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 50–53.

⁹⁴Heinonen, “Henry Suso and the Divine Knighthood,” 88.

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