

# GENDER AND MEDIEVALISM

## FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY AS PORNOGRAPHY: ST. ELISABETH OF THURINGIA IN NAZI GERMANY

In 1931, the 700th anniversary of the death of St. Elisabeth of Thuringia (1207–31), Elisabeth Busse-Wilson (1890–1974) published an extraordinary biography of one of the most popular female women saints in Germany. Instead of repeating the stereotypical image of St. Elisabeth as loving, gentle, and generous almsgiver, Busse-Wilson painted the portrait of a strong-willed, eccentric, and isolated young woman caught in a web of oppressive conventions and religious ideals. Immediately upon publication, her biography was criticized in strongest terms by leading German historians and members of the Catholic community; as one German scholar notes, “rarely has a book on a topic of medieval history stirred as much controversy [as Busse-Wilson’s study].”<sup>1</sup> As the title of my paper notes, her study was judged to be “pornographic,” distorting St. Elisabeth’s exemplary life as sexual pathology.<sup>2</sup> Busse-Wilson was charged with sexualizing the saint’s life inappropriately, deforming her acts of Christian piety as “perverse eroticism . . . [and] humiliating masochism” complemented by the imagined “wild sadism, . . . perverse cruelty and lust” of her confessor.<sup>3</sup> Busse-Wilson herself was judged to suffer from a “certain mental sadism.”<sup>4</sup> Other critics called her biography an “unconscientious concoction.”<sup>5</sup> The author was described as a “literary detective and criminologist intent on ripping the glory of saintliness off the head of [St. Elisabeth], motivated by scarcely hidden resentment.”<sup>6</sup> Not Elisabeth of Thuringia appears in the pages of her biography, but Busse-Wilson herself in her “full ambivalence, inner torment and bitterness.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite such criticism, the book sold well for two years. Due to the Nazis’ rise to power, its popularity declined radically after 1933. Busse-Wilson’s study fell into oblivion until fifty years later when the University of Marburg unearthed it as part of a research project that culminated in the publication of several volumes on aspects of Elisabeth’s life. In scholarly discussions recorded in the volumes, the controversy triggered by Busse-Wilson’s study has generally been explained by the problematic relationship between hagiography and medieval historiography in an academic setting strongly divided along the lines of Protestant and Catholic loyalties.<sup>8</sup>

This paper adds a feminist perspective to the controversy, trying to reconstruct the German context in which Busse-Wilson’s scholarship emerged. What were the presuppositions at work in interpreting Elisabeth of Thuringia’s life in the early twentieth century? Whose interests did they serve? Why was Busse-Wilson’s work received with such hostility and virtually silenced until the early eighties? Whence the virulent charges of “unhealthy” sexualization of a saintly

icon of purity and chastity? So far, the rhetorical strategy of sexualizing Busse-Wilson's historiographical efforts has not yet been problematized. I will use the charge of pornography—sexualizing Busse-Wilson's scholarly contribution—as an Ariadne's thread to guide us through the labyrinth of interpreting voices.

Despite the fact that Freud had published his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905, and despite the emerging science of sexology and reform movements during the Weimar Republic, sexuality was a highly charged topic in the academy. The majority of professors in pre-Nazi Germany were staunchly Christian and conservative in their political outlook.<sup>9</sup> Sexual reform movements, on the other hand, were feminist and progressive; to a great degree, the emergence of sexology in Germany was the work of German Jews. Not surprisingly, conservatives identified it with anti-Christian propaganda. The great German sexologist and activist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935), who organized the first Congress for Sex Research in Berlin in 1926 and became a president of the World League for Sexual Reform, was both Jewish and gay, and suffered from persecution by the Nazis even before the NSDAP rose to power.<sup>10</sup>

In regard to German historiography, the Middle Ages provided the historical material for a dream of a renewed German Reich to “replace the [perceived] materialism, decadence, and democracy of the Weimar Republic.”<sup>11</sup> For Catholics in particular, the spirituality of the Middle Ages was a welcome remedy for the onslaught of modernity, socialism, and feminism. Conservative politics, repressive sexual ethics, and a strict gender dualism enforced through insistence on separate economic and political spheres of influence for men and women, went hand in hand.

St. Elisabeth of Thuringia played an ambiguous role in this battle. Whereas the Baroque era neglected her, the nineteenth century turned her into a fashionable star.<sup>12</sup> Her ascent began with the neo-catholic movement in France. In 1836, the Count of Montalembert published an Elisabeth biography that was quickly translated into German. It was celebrated as a testimony of “the ways in which the revived Catholicism of the 19th century is nourished by the Catholicism of the days of hope and strength, despite all confusion and resistance.”<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth became a role model because she combined an aristocratic background—she was the daughter of the king of Hungary and was married to the sovereign of Thuringia—with acts of charity. In the social clashes between socialism and a strong worker's movement on the one hand and an embattled bourgeoisie on the other, the Catholic Church opted against the working class. Class reconciliation and paternalism was her answer to socialism: the icon of St. Elisabeth exemplified the desired social contract: with a rigid class system firmly in place—symbolized by the sumptuous clothes that the nineteenth century preferred to dress her up in—the wealthy promoted private charity over a

reformed social welfare system.<sup>14</sup> St. Elisabeth did not just symbolize class struggles, however. As art historians have pointed out, depictions of St. Elisabeth's miracle of spontaneously produced roses in the midst of winter (which is not documented in the earliest hagiographical sources) increased in popularity. The association of a beautiful young maiden adorned with an abundance of roses fit squarely into romantic notions of virginal femininity and purity. Asexual and otherworldly, this image whisked women of flesh and blood away from the centers of earthly power—programmatically.

Ironically, however, St. Elisabeth also became a unifying symbol for Catholic women that contradicted such otherworldliness, at least in one restricted sphere. In response to the feminist movement and paralleling its activism, Catholic women organized fast-growing lay women's groups dedicated to the care of the sick and poor, the so-called Elisabethvereine.<sup>15</sup> In 1913, 400 delegates from lay Elisabeth groups from all over Germany met to discuss the creation of a national headquarters. The plans faltered due to the outbreak of the First World War,<sup>16</sup> but became a reality in 1931, the 700-year anniversary of St. Elisabeth's death and the publication date of Busse-Wilson's work. In these groups, the image of Elisabeth the mother and caretaker was promoted; she was admired as active and authoritative—but only in deeply feminized spaces, the home and the hospital room.

Like their academic fellow Catholics, the lay women's groups showed little sympathy for Busse-Wilson's work. During a festive meeting of fifteen of such groups in Berlin in 1931, one of the female speakers (as the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* noted, their lectures were framed by the performance of female choirs) praised Elisabeth as "a divine miracle of love, [and] the passionate force of love which glowed within her . . . her compassion for the sick and poor." In the same breath, Busse-Wilson's book was denounced as the "false book of a rational psycho-analyst who was unable to grasp the unprecedented greatness of Elisabeth."<sup>17</sup>

The Catholic women's mythologizing of St. Elisabeth left them tragically vulnerable to the image of women propagated by the Nazis. Like the national-socialist myth of femininity, on which I will elaborate below, Catholic women's model of true womanhood—characterized by love, compassion, and piety—could only exist in strained opposition to a femininity that was skeptical of patriarchy, intellectual rather than emotional, and given to the suspect secularism of psycho-analysis. The Catholic hierarchy only heightened such vulnerability. It is well-known that many Catholic men, including Pope Pius XI who ardently supported Mussolini and praised Hitler for forbidding the Communist Party, quickly fell for the message of the Nazi Party. The Concordat, signed on July 20, 1933, sealed Hitler's success with the Catholic Church

hierarchy.<sup>18</sup> Both Catholic men and Nazi ideologists agreed on the place for women: as far away from their centers of power as possible. In 1933, one Nazi propagandist wrote, "in the ideology of National Socialism there is no room for the political woman . . . (Our) movement places woman in her natural sphere of the family and stresses her duties as wife and mother. The political woman, that post-war creature, who rarely 'cuts a good figure' in parliamentary debates represents the denigration of women. . . "<sup>19</sup>

### **Sexual Discourse and the Moral Purity Movement**

Originally, the term "pornography," coined in the nineteenth century, denoted medical descriptions of the lifestyles of prostitutes for the sake of public health. The meaning of the term has changed dramatically over time. Before the First World War, Germans used the terms *Schund- und Schmutzliteratur*, trash and smut literature. The rhetoric of the reviewers of Busse-Wilson's book harks back to the language used by the German moral purity movement, organized in so-called *Sittlichkeitsvereine* (established in Wilhelmine Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, whose goal it was to defend the Christian values of marriage and family against feminist, sexological, and socialist reform movements, all of whom were associated with the propagation of "smutty" sexual mores.<sup>20</sup> These *Sittlichkeitsvereine* were to a large degree Protestant organizations.

The agenda of the moral purity movement mixed conservative religious and political rhetoric. As John Fout has pointed out, all sexual activities that were not conducted within the confines of a monogamous marriage were judged to be "immoral, illegal, perverse, abnormal, dangerous, unhealthy, or even anti-German. It was the French or the Italians who regularly engaged in perversions or immoral vice; as one moral purity author put it . . . 'depraved nations decline . . . moral recklessness is a fundamental error of the French.'"<sup>21</sup> Hate the sin so that you may be permitted to hate the sinner: a denunciation of sexual practices served as acceptable rationale to police and disempower "unwanted" individuals and social groups.

When used as a charge against Busse-Wilson, the concept of pornography functions as a code to denote transgressions of various kinds; but first and foremost, sexuality was utilized as a symbol for relations of power organized around rigid definitions of gender. The political and cultural meaning of the charge of "pornography" against Busse-Wilson went beyond sexual issues as such; it was concerned with gender boundaries in the public arena, and sharpened by issues of anti-semitism, nationalism, secularism, and progressive social reforms. In the reviews of Wilson-Busse's study

1. "Pornography" refers to something that is "perverse," that is, in the wrong place, a mixing of categories where there should be none, a spilling over of the

profane into the sacred—hagiography must not be (Jewish, progressive, secular) sexology.

2. Busse-Wilson's contemplation of St. Elisabeth as a sexual being threatened the ideal of asexual femininity propagated by Catholic and Protestant conservatives alike.
3. "Pornography" denotes the dynamics of embodiedness in a realm—spirituality—that is imagined as fully transcendent. The "pure" precinct of Church life becomes "dirtied," material, concrete, and thus vulnerable to criticism and loss of authority.
4. The charge of "pornography" refers to a woman speaking about sex in an environment where "real" (conservatively religious) women do not speak about sex; she violates patriarchally established boundaries of public/private discourse, of Jewish "psychoanalytic"/Christian conservative relations, of the divide between the academy and leftist activism, of femininity and masculinity. Friedrich Heiler deplored explicitly that Busse-Wilson's "lack of tenderness and social grace, betrayed by her 'depth-psychological' analyses of sexuality are embarrassing when displayed by a woman." He concludes that "it is no surprise" that such a "methodology" falls short of the "disciplined attention to detail [typical] of historical research."<sup>22</sup>
5. Finally, the label of "pornography" denotes a relationship that is not just sexual, but perversely sexual. In the sexual discourse of Germany in the beginning of this century, masochism and sadism are categories reserved for the Other, prostitutes, gays, Jews, the insane; to insinuate that a medieval icon of German nationalist femininity made common cause with the "Other" is intolerably transgressive.

### **Pornography in the Academy: The Practice of Silencing Women's Voices**

The medieval sources about St. Elisabeth's life do not include any texts written by the saint herself. What has been passed on to future generations are her canonization documents, slanted toward presenting Elisabeth as worthy of papal attention and approval. She might as well have been a mute, since it was her actions during her lifetime, and her corpse after her death that "spoke" and communicated. The silencing of women's voices, both of the medieval era and in the canon of "Who's Who" in Medieval Studies, is amply documented. In his study subtitled "The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century," Norman Cantor discussed only one female medievalist, Eileen Power (1889–1940), a contemporary of Elisabeth Busse-Wilson and like her a feminist and supportive of leftist politics.<sup>23</sup> Cantor acknowledged the validity of Power's feminist research, and noted that it fell outside of the governing paradigm of Medieval Studies, which made Power a member of the

small group of "dissenters, . . . eccentrics, . . . nonconformists."<sup>24</sup> In his chapter on Nazi Germany, Cantor is perceptive and insightful in his critique of the German academy. Yet despite his sympathy for Power's cause and respect for her achievements and despite his sensitivity to anti-semitism, the plight of German women scholars and issues of feminist concern find no place at all. Norman Cantor is not alone in his fickle treatment of women's issues. In her seminal *Speculum* article on "Medievalism and Feminism" for the 1993 special edition on women, Judith Bennett has persuasively demonstrated strategies of exclusion and silencing to keep the glass ceiling intact in Medieval Studies in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

The accession of the Nazis to power had a significant impact on German women's education and their status in the academy. As elsewhere in Europe, German women benefitted greatly from the first wave of feminism, which fought strongly for improving educational opportunities for young women. In 1893, the first Gymnasium for girls opened in Karlsruhe, where young women could earn the prerequisites for attending a university. In 1898, the first German woman, Hildegard Ziegler, received a doctorate at the University of Halle.<sup>26</sup> Although more and more women enjoyed better education, their entry into higher academic ranks was consistently resisted. In 1932, women's presence in the academy peaked at 74 professors and assistant professors (*Privatdozentinnen*) vis-a-vis approximately 7,000 male professors and assistant professors nationwide.<sup>27</sup> This dismal disparity was furthered by Nazi academic politics after 1933. After Hitler became party leader in 1921, the Nazis denied women any share in party responsibilities and leadership. This practice extended to political and social organizations after 1933; arguing that German universities were overcrowded, the Nazis severely restricted student admissions and fired politically suspect professors and schoolteachers. Hardest hit were women, Jews, and the children of Social Democrats. As Norman Cantor pointed out, there was little resistance. "The German professoriat as a whole was sucked into the vortex of nazism partly for ideological reasons but mostly because its members were too unworldly, naive, timid, lazy, and selfish to resist the Nazis."<sup>28</sup> In 1933 in Hamburg alone, 103 tenured female schoolteachers and 68 female teacher interns lost their jobs.<sup>29</sup> In 1934, of the 10,000 female college graduates applying for university admission, only 1,500 were given permission to fill the 10 percent allocated to them.<sup>30</sup> The NSDAP justified this radical erasure of women's presence in the academy with their extremely dichotomized view of gender. Women were called to be mothers and wives; cultural, political, and social leadership polluted their calling and destroyed their femininity. The dissolution of distinctly male and female spheres was the enemy of Aryan identity, and feminism was yet another culture-destroying invention by the Jews.<sup>31</sup> The founder of the NSDAP, Gottfried Feder, mythologizes such syntheses of sexism

and anti-semitism. "The Jew stole our woman with the forces of sexual democracy. Our youth must rise to kill the dragon so that we regain the holiest thing in the world, the woman as virgin and servant."<sup>32</sup> Note the hagiographical and distinctively medievalist subtext in this statement. Women's expansion of roles beyond those of mother and wife, whether in the academy or in the political arena, was read in highly sexualized terms; psychologically, it was experienced as a loss blamed on a fictitious male rival, the "oversexed" and "shrewd" Jewish man. Rhetorically, women were denied their own agency in the process of emancipation, and German men could squelch any discussion of their own sexist shortcomings by triangulating their relationship to women.

Placed in this context, Busse-Wilson emerges as representative of the achievements and difficulties of the first generation of female academics. Born to an upper middle-class family in Thuringia, she entered the university in 1909, studying art history, history and ethnology in Jena, Leipzig, Bonn and Munich. She received her Ph.D. in 1914 in Leipzig and married in 1915. After the war, she began a prolific career as writer and social activist, betraying her own class by voting for the Social Democrats. Most of her publications discuss contemporary feminist and other social and political issues; her work on Elisabeth of Thuringia combines historical, sociological and psychological methodologies, but is the only Medieval Studies publication on her record. In 1933, she applied for an academic position in the History Department at the Pedagogical Academy in Dortmund, but was rejected for political reasons. Her career as a writer folded after the end of the Second World War. In a eulogy written three years after her death, the author noted that Busse-Wilson remained intellectually vibrant and interested in political and cultural issues even in her old age.<sup>33</sup> On one level, her image of Elisabeth as rebellious and marginalized thus exemplifies the tensions professional women of her age had to confront and resolve. Busse-Wilson entered the academy as an outsider, writing her dissertation only 16 years after the first woman in Germany received her Ph.D.; she worked interdisciplinarily, threatening established academic territories intellectually as well; she was known not only as a prolific writer on current political themes, including feminism, but also as a social activist and leftist. As an emancipated woman profiting from the most progressive trends in the pre-Nazi era, she chose to write about one of the most revered symbols of conservative Catholic womanhood, the medieval saint Elisabeth of Thuringia, her namesake and the guiding female icon of the region in Germany where she grew up.

It is my thesis that her biography functioned as a creative and articulate effort to deconstruct femininity as it was taught to her on a cultural and spiritual level; to deconstruct a historiography that excluded socio-political and feminist questions; to demystify a partisan cult of a female saint as an ideological maneuver that masked male privilege; and to extend the methodology of her

feminist analysis of contemporary German history to the medieval period. The German medievalists who critiqued her work clearly understood the challenge.

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1 Hans-Jürgen Scholz, "Elisabethforscher von Justi bis Busse-Wilson" in *St. Elisabeth-Kult, Kirche, Konfessionen*, ed. Brigitte Rechberg (Marburg: J. A. Koch, 1983), 39-43 and 145-56, p.40; Elisabeth Busse-Wilson, *Das Leben der Heiligen Elisabeth von Thüringen. Das Abbild einer mittelalterlichen Seele* (Munich: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1931).

2 Wilhelm Maurer, "Zum Verständnis der heiligen Elisabeth von Thüringen," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 4:65 (1953/54: 16-64), 17.

3 Friedrich Heiler, "Die heilige Elisabeth im psychoanalytischen Experiment," *Die Hochkirche* 13 (1931) 366-68.

4 Heiler, 367.

5 Alex Emmerich, "Heiligenleben und Psychoanalyse," in *St. Elisabeth. Festschrift zum 700. Todestage*, 2d edition (Paderborn, 1932), 26-28.

6 Heiler, 367.

7 Ibid.

8 Hans-Jürgen Scholz, "1931-1981: Fünfzig Jahre Elisabethforschung," in *Elisabeth, der Deutsche Orden und ihre Kirche*, ed. Udo Arnold and Heinz Liebing (Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlag, 1983), 146-62 (148).

9 Norman Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 86.

10 Erwin J. Haeberle, "Swastika, Pink Triangle, and Yellow Star: The Destruction of Sexology and the Persecution of Homosexuals in Nazi Germany," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Baum Duberman et al. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 365-83 (367).

11 Cantor, p. 112.

12 12 In German, a "*Modeheilige*." See Peter Assion, "St. Elisabeth in Legende und Graphik des 19. Jahrhunderts," in *Die heilige Elisabeth in der Kunst—Abbild, Vorbild, Wunschbild*, ed. Brigitte Rechberg (Marburg: J. A. Koch, 1983), 181-89 (182).

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Men could become members, too; a religious order, the hospital sisters of St. Elisabeth, were founded in 1622 by Apollonia Radermacher. Noted in Hans Jürgen Brandt, *Elisabeth von Thüringen. Das Antlitz einer barmherzigen Frau* (Essen: Institut für kirchengeschichtliche Forschung des Bistums Essen, 1981), 63.

16 In 1916, a Catholic clergyman published three sermons on "St. Elisabeth of Thuringia, a War Patroness of the German People." See Brandt, 66.

17 Noted in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, "Elisabeth Feier" (Berlin: October 6th, 1931, morning edition, n.p.), quoted in Scholz, "Elisabethforscher," 145.

18 Karlheinz Deschner, *Kirche und Faschismus* (Rastatt: Verlag Arthur Moewig, 1990), 60 ff.

19 Haeberle, 372.

20 John C. Fout, "Sexual Politics in Wilhelmine Germany: The Male Gender Crisis, Moral Purity, and Homophobia," in *Forbidden History. The State, Society, and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe*, ed. John C. Fout (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 259-93, 275 ff.

21 Fout, 279.

22 Heiler, 367.

23 Cantor, 381-95.

24 Cantor, 376.

25 Judith M. Bennett, "Medievalism and Feminism," in *Studying Medieval Women*, ed. Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge, Mass: The Medieval Academy of America, 1993), 7-31.

26 Antje Dertinger, *Die bessere Hälfte kämpft um ihr Recht* (Köln: Bund Verlag, 1980), 159.

27 Rita Thalmann, *Frausein im Dritten Reich* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1984), 101.

28 Cantor, 88.

29 Thalmann, 100.

30 Thalmann, 105.

31 Thalmann, 76.

32 Quoted in Thalmann, 77.

33 Franz-Josef Wehnes, "Kritische Frau in der Männerwelt. Elisabeth Busse-Wilson (1890-1974)," in *Jahrbuch des Archivs der deutschen Jugendbewegung* 9 (1977): 307-10 (310).

