

## CARNIVAL I:

### ON THE LIGHTER SIDE OF MEDIEVAL FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP

#### HOW OUR LADY RELIEVED THE GOOD SISTERS OF AUNSBY

There was once a religious establishment, a double-house of nuns and canons, where things had not been going well for some time. The foundress had intended to build a haven for holy women, and the men had come along of necessity to perform Mass and administer the sacraments. But of late, it seemed to Mother Hawise, the Prioress, the canons bothered less and less with the women and their needs, while more and more of the rich income established by the foundress flowed into the canons' coffers, and no further.

The Prioress could remember happier days, when the funds were shared fairly and the old Prior moved benevolently among the sisters, delighting in the ardor of their worship and study. The Prioress had been a young nun then, but well she remembered Father Baldwin's special devotion to Mary, and the honor he had paid to the nuns in her name. Since the old Prior had passed to his reward, and had been buried with great solemnity in the Lady Chapel, in the church's north transept, times had tightened. The Prioress of the time had been old and declining in health, while the new Prior regarded women with angry distaste—and indeed, though in his youth he had enjoyed the company of women perhaps too much, now age had brought the affliction of impotence, and with it the bitter resentment of women so well expounded by that venerable auctrix, Alison of Bath. Convinced that wealth could not be meant to fall into the polluting hands of women, Prior Hugh had slowly twisted the reins of authority until he and his canons were living in affluence while the nuns became ever more shabby, peaked, and sad. Even so, they had hardly begun to pay back the sin of their mother, Eve!

When Prioress Blanche finally died, after a lingering illness, Mother Hawise had become the leader of a declining community. Little energy or interest remained, among the disheartened nuns, for the life of work and worship that had once invigorated them. Every time the Prioress tried to remonstrate with the Prior, or to regain some control over the house's affairs, he easily stymied her. Towering above her, the tall, austere Hugh would listen to the Prioress barely a minute before interrupting with a lengthy, involved statement of affairs that left her totally bewildered. "Of course, being a woman, you will not understand this, but . . ." he would begin—and he was always right; she did not understand. "The foundress," she said, "didn't the foundress' charter state that the income from the estates was to be controlled by the Prioress, and the necessary sums passed on to the canons?" "Woman," thundered the Prior, "what do you know of such things? Where is that charter? And who would have the folly to entrust matters

of such importance to the care of ignorant women?" Just at that moment, a canon would enter with a sheaf of documents and the Prior would send her away, deploring her incessant complaints and demands.

The poor Prioress felt truly how inadequate she was to deal with the Prior and his arguments. There had been a document, at least she had thought so, in the old Prior's time, but where was it now? Her searches among the tattered books and scraps of parchment in the chest that held the nuns' library had yielded nothing. How willingly she would have handed all this responsibility over to someone else! But there was no one else, the community having dwindled and the teaching having fallen off, so that few of the younger nuns could even read, much less manage accounts. Prioress Hawise thought often and hard how she could restore the fruitful days of yore, and many nights she labored in prayer. Always in particular she spoke to the Holy Mother, entreating Our Lady's protection for those who had dedicated their lives to Her and Her son.

As if Prioress Hawise had not enough problems, she was also much concerned with the behavior of a new postulant, called Juliana. A buxom lass clearly meant for secular life, Juliana had been deposited with the sisters by her exasperated family. They had long intended her for marriage to a wealthy old fishmonger, but she had been surprised in an assignation with her fiance's young apprentice. Her husband-to-be had rejected her in disgust and jealousy, and had cast off her lover. With her reputation in shreds, no other respectable match could be obtained for her, and so Juliana's family had sent her off to moulder with the sisters of Aunsby.

Moulder was not what Juliana intended to do, however. Mother Hawise had heard of—and indeed had witnessed—innumerable agitating scenes. Juliana would gather the younger sisters to regale them with accounts of her one-time carnal experience. "How glorious it was!" she told her awe-struck audience. "Oh, when can I try it again!" The Prioress would sternly reprimand Sister Juliana, command her to scrub out the kitchens, forbid her to speak to the others—only to find her in a corner of the kitchen with another rapt auditory, preaching her gospel of bodily license. The canons, so increasingly lax in their care of the sisters, competed for the right to hear Sister Juliana's confession (for she did not cease confessing, week after week, to the same sin, and testifying to her unslaked desire). How long would it be, Prioress Hawise worried, before their house would indeed become known as an "Ordre de Bel-Eysee":

Where the brethren at their pleasure [can] visit the sisters, nor shall there be any watch-word. Their intimacy shall neither be separated by linen nor wool, or even by their very skins.<sup>1</sup>

One thought yet brought hope to the worried Prioress. Very shortly the Master of their Order, Roger de Burton, was due to visit their house. He had been long delayed overseas, in council with the Holy Father, but now that he had returned he was resuming his tours of inspection. Here was a chance for an impartial ear, for advice and indeed, authority to restrain the canons' audacity. Not even Prior Hugh could browbeat Master Roger into submission!

Yet could she convince Master Roger of the rightness of her claims? He was sure to speak first with Prior Hugh, and what might the Prior say to close Roger's ears to the nuns' just cause? Mother Hawise determined that she must invite Roger to a good dinner in the nuns' refectory, after which he would surely be more ready to hear her persuasive comments than if he was met only with hungry faces and sour laments. But to put on such a dinner, she needed money; and to get money, she had to ask Prior Hugh . . .

There is no need to relate the harrowing half-hour that followed, and the humiliation to which the Prioress submitted in the hope of obtaining a few marks. But it was in vain. "The Master will eat with his fellow priests, as is proper," said Hugh, raising an eyebrow as he looked down on Hawise. "Why should he meddle with women and their incorrigibly rebellious spirits? The reports I have heard of your nuns have troubled me sadly. Open bawdry is talked in your cloisters, I hear. I intend to suggest to His Reverence that the nuns be dispersed and their buildings made over to our holy canons. We need the space," he said, drawing in a satisfied breath, "as we are growing in number, and our cells are incommodiously cramped."

Juliana again! And what mischief she was working—or providing opportunities for others to work. Mother Hawise left the Prior's lodging in deep discouragement. As she walked slowly back to the door that connected the men's and women's compounds, she traversed the familiar path with her eyes almost closed, her spirit resting deep in prayer to the Blessed Virgin. What means could rescue her and her house from the troubles that beset them? "Oh gracious Mother," she prayed, "grant your loving daughters a sign, some help or guidance, for surely we are lost without you, and our precious community will fly apart and live in your peace no more."

At the little door in the wall, Hawise—still hardly noticing her own actions—selected the right key from the bunch that hung at her waist and turned it in the lock. She stepped through the door—and as she did was stopped by a great radiance, in the center of which she saw standing a young, sweet lady, clad in a blue robe. The Prioress stood, saying nothing, though her soul called out in glee. The Lady spoke, saying these words only: "Through she who was clothed with the sun shalt thou find what thou seekest." Then she raised her hands in blessing and vanished.

Meanwhile, Prior Hugh had bethought himself of a trifle he needed from the Prioress—inconveniently, she held the key to the cellar where the Priory's oldest, and best, wine was stored. While she was so distraught over the threat he had uttered, he thought, might be a good time to possess himself of that key for good. So he, having set out a few minutes after the Prioress left him, came up to the door just after she had stepped through it, and frowned to see it still standing open. Yet another instance of the nuns' scandalous indifference to propriety! He strode through, a remonstrance on his lips, and found the Prioress standing utterly still, her eyes open wide.

"What is happening here?" he demanded, and as if she had been waiting for the question, Hawise responded, in a thin, far-off voice, "The Holy Mother has appeared to me, and said: 'Through she who was clothed with the sun shalt thou find what thou seekest.' Oh, Blessed Mary, what did you mean by this?" And the Prioress sank to her knees, holding her hands up in prayer. "Nonsense," said the Prior. "Why would the Mother of God vouchsafe a vision to you? You had better beware, Sister Hawise, what stories you put about and what authority you take upon yourself. Know you not that only God's duly appointed priests may speak to the truth of visions? Visions! Indeed!"

Yet as the Prior fulminated, inside he was thinking, "... But I was through the door almost as soon as she was. . . . The vision must have been meant for me, surely the Holy Queen would not dignify this pallid, insignificant woman with so great an honor. . . . It is a message for me!" The Prior repeated a harsh command to the Prioress to keep her "revelation" to herself until further word from him. Then he turned back into the men's compound—carefully locking the door behind him—his mind now absorbed in deciphering the special message Mary had sent him.

Oblivious to all this, the Prioress stayed kneeling on her side of the high wall, not so much searching for a meaning as holding her heart open to await it. A little breeze brushed along her cheek, and she looked up. She saw the sun glinting through the leaves of a sapling, and a memory stirred within her. Did there not use to be, when she was a young postulant and the nuns were a strong and thriving community, a playing of the Apocalypse? In the Lady Chapel, on Assumption Day, did they not don costumes and speak the first twelve chapters of John's awful revelation, celebrating the glory of the Virgin Mother clothed with the sun? Had Mary come to tell her to revive that playing, and the Assumption observance? Why? Why? To present to Master Roger, Hawise realized. If we cannot feast him with food of the body, we will fill him with food of the soul. Surely when he sees this glorious scene enacted, she thought, Our Lady will inspire him with understanding of our plight, and he will make all well again.

Sighing a deep, contented sigh, the Prioress rose to her knees, crossed herself, and began walking peacefully back to her lodging. It did not occur to her to tell anyone of her vision—it would only agitate people, and cause a fuss, and there was work to be done. As she thought of agitation and fuss—for once with a calm and happy mind—it became clear to her that Juliana should play the Virgin. Oh, it would be another miracle! Surely, in representing that spotless holy lady, Juliana would be inspired to cleanse her own spirit and live blamelessly among them, with the Lady's grace. Hawise smiled; all this she could do, and it would be done.

Now a busy time passed, as Hawise consulted among the oldest members of her community, recreating with them the order of the playing. Costumes emerged from chests that had been stowed in empty nuns' cells and forgotten. All this had died away during the old Prioress' long decline; but when the robes and the wings were well shaken and washed, patched and mended, and smoothed again with hot irons, the excited sisters soon had fine robes for the seven angels and the dragon. The Woman's costume took the longest to find; it was in a chest to itself, hidden behind piles of old posts and implements in the gardening shed, and partly grown over with vines that had worked their way in through the building's worn slats. But out of that battered chest emerged a glorious, shining gown, with a high golden collar and wide golden sleeves. Then, at the very bottom of the chest, they discovered a mask gilded over with real gold, and a golden crown bearing twelve stars.

Hawise stood outside the shed, on that memorable day, and saw the mask and crown borne gleaming into the summer daylight, with hosannas ringing inside her. Surely Our Lady and her angels were laughing with delight, to see her beautiful Visage restored to her daughters. Juliana, standing beside Hawise, gloried in the simple thought of wearing that unbearably gorgeous costume. If only her dull old family could come see her in this splendor! The Prioress, in her good humor, placed a hand on the young woman's shoulder. "When you wear that dress, my dear," she said, "Our Lady will perform in you a great miracle. Hold yourself ready for the ecstasy of that moment, for her power is great." Juliana looked at her and laughed, in happy incomprehension.

Hawise had made sure that the Master would receive his invitation. He was to hold Mass on the feast-day, in the church shared by the canons and nuns (between them ran a high wall, with women on the south side, and men on the north). Saying nothing of her vision—and she had forgotten, or never realized, that Hugh had heard of it from her own mouth—Hawise visited the Prior again, a week before the planned visit. "Would you be so gracious, brother, as to give our Master this billet?" she said, handing a screeled to Hugh. "It is an invitation to witness our playing of the Apocalypse. We are reviving an ancient custom of our

Mother Blanche, lost in the sad days of her poor health." "Yes," said Hugh, taking the parchment. "Certainly, I see no impropriety in some limited representation of the Holy Word, with due authorization from your spiritual advisers." But Hugh's condescending words emerged almost automatically; his thoughts these days were all of the miraculous message sent to him, whose meaning he had yet to plumb, while even the preparations for Master Roger's visit failed to attract much of his interest. But as he held the invitation to the playing, his hand knew well that it would pass it on as requested, and the Prioress knew well that he would.

At last the long-awaited visit was nigh; Master Roger and his small entourage arrived, the morning of the day before the holy-day. All was ready on the nuns' side. The costumes were perfect, the players had conned their texts, and all the effects were in place. All spirits were high, and none so elevated as Juliana's. What did she care if Roger and Hugh were old men, older than her father? What joy it would be to spread her golden arms and shine in all her beauty on their dazzled eyes!

No doubt the canons' dinner went well. Mother Hawise had wisely sent over, before being asked, five casks of the deep-aged wine from the cellar opened only by the key hung at her waist. She knew there had been much purveyance going on for the week before, and loads of wood brought in from the canons'—or weren't they the nuns'—chases. So she was surprised—as she sat peaceably in her lodging with some sisters, listening to a novice reading—when a knock sounded on her door. It was Master Roger himself! "Good Sister Hawise," he said, as the women curtsied, "do please excuse me. I had such a delight to receive your invitation, and wished to hear from you some account of your revival of this felicitous custom. Well do I remember the wonder we felt in witnessing this holy playing, in the days of Mother Blanche and Father Baldwin!" The other sisters, during this speech, had excused themselves and withdrawn, leaving their superior to thank the Master.

"Dear Master," Hawise said, "do sit down, and allow me to welcome you among your loving daughters." And sit down he did, for a long, rambling talk that wandered from the Apocalypse playing, to the politics of the Holy See, to the state of the nuns' buildings and wardrobe. In due course, the bell rang for Vespers, and the two rose to go to church. "After the service is over, my dear daughter," said the Master, "will you give me the great pleasure of showing me the costumes you have recovered? And perhaps we may then visit the Lady Chapel so you can tell me how you will stage it, and I can pay my respects at the worshipful Father Baldwin's tomb." "With a full good will," answered Hawise, and so they went into the church, separating to the men's and women's sides.

After Vespers, Hawise took Roger to see the costumes, which were hung in a disused cell that had been cleaned up for the purpose (indeed, the whole enterprise had inspired the nuns to a good deal of cleaning and sorting, much of it long overdue). Master Roger examined and exclaimed—but when they reached the end of the row, Hawise was surprised to find the Woman's costume missing. "What a pity," she said. "It is quite spectacular. But one of the sisters must be making some last-minute repairs." "Never mind," said Roger. "It will be the greater surprise when I see it worn in the playing itself."

Meanwhile, Roger's talk of the playing, at dinner with the Prior, had begun to stir his host's memory. In the church was an ancient and very beautiful wooden statue of Our Lady. Given to the Priory by the foundress, it had been an object of special veneration to Father Baldwin, and stood now in a niche above his tomb. "Through she who was clothed with the sun shalt thou find what thou seekest." The carved Lady was surrounded with a great gold nimbus! In his zeal for the masculinity of Our Lord, Prior Hugh had rather discouraged the canons from visiting this statue, and clearly the Lady was pining under this neglect. Back in his lodgings after Vespers, Hugh suddenly decided he should fetch the statue there, where he could assuage her desires. In gratitude the Lady would surely reward him with the power—the potencia—the potency he craved.

But he had to act at once. Because who knew if the Prioress would also solve the puzzle, and take the statue first? Or even the Master, if the Prioress was indiscreet enough to babble her silly story to him? As for the matter of the playing, Hugh thought it a baboonerie, beneath his notice; only it annoyed him that Roger had run off to the nuns' side to discourse of it. What if he let himself be talked over by that prosing woman? Where were they now? He needed the statue—now—quick, before the playing, before Compline.

A strange urgency was filling the Prior; he walked, almost ran, to the church with the feeling he was approaching a moment of destiny. As he entered the north transept and walked quickly towards the Lady Chapel, he saw a great glow coming from it. Someone was there! By Baldwin's tomb, a living human woman—or a living vision—in billows of gold cloth, crowned, in a blaze of warm light. She turned, and he saw a golden face, the most beautiful he had ever seen. Beholding him, the vision spoke in a voice of wonder—"Man," she said, "whom seekest thou here?" "I seek you, oh My Lady," cried Hugh, sinking to his feet. "Then rise," she said, "rise and embrace me!"

Over at the south end of the church, the transept door opened. Hawise and the Master had done looking at the costumes, and had strolled back across the courtyard to visit Father Baldwin's tomb and discuss the staging of tomorrow's playing. Hawise was aware that great good things were taking place, for the Master was being so suave and kind, and between their conversation and his

sharp observation had clearly taken notice of the parlous state of affairs on the sisters' side. Perhaps the miracle of the Woman Clothed with the Sun had already transpired! Through his interest in this miming, she had captured his good will, and all might yet be well. Just a discreet word or two after the playing, asking for his good offices and reminding him of how different things had been in the heyday of her and Hugh's predecessors?

So thinking, Hawise followed the Master through the door of the south transept—to be stopped in surprise by—what was that they were hearing? “Oh, glory! Glory! Hallelujah!” in a woman's voice, and then, in a man's, “Mother of God! It's a miracle! It's a miracle!” “Oh, Holy Blessed Virgin!” exclaimed Hawise, crossing herself and falling to her knees. How weak of faith she had been, to think that a mere conversation would suffice Our Lady! Was not some great miracle happening even now, in this very church! “Oh Maria, maris stella!” she prayed. “Oh, Master Roger, some wonder has come among us!”

“Come, sister,” said the Master. “Come, we must go witness this joyful happening.” Excitedly, he pulled her to her feet and they walked quickly down the transept, up along the dividing wall, around its end, in front of the altar, and down again until they reached the north transept—the cries and hallelujahs accompanying them all the way. Turning towards the Lady Chapel, they were just in time to witness the miracle's crisis. “Oh Mother of God, oh Mother of God. Thank you!” sang out the tall, robed figure around whose waist two naked legs protruded. “Glory hallelujah!” cried out the figure behind him, who seemed to be lying across Father Baldwin's tomb. “Holy Jesus!” exclaimed Roger, and “Heavens!” said the Prioress.

At the unexpected voices, Father Hugh detached himself from the Woman Clothed with the Sun, whose clothes by now were rather rumpled. He turned and, seeing who was there, instantly ejaculated, “The woman tempted me and did call up my member.” Juliana—whose identity was no longer ambiguous, as the golden mask had fallen off in the heat of passion—had a different reaction. She sat up on the tomb, smoothed her dress, and laughed—“Oh Mother Prioress, you told me true. Truly I have experienced a great ecstasy!” In her eagerness for the next day, it was easy to perceive, Juliana had gone in costume to light the candles in the Lady Chapel and to practice parading in her finery—upon which Father Hugh had come along.

Juliana reached out both her arms to make a great blooming aureole around her loosened golden hair (she would keep growing it out, Mother Hawise thought, irrelevantly, that girl was never meant to be a nun . . .).

As the thought formed in her mind—and while Roger and Hugh began bellowing accusations and denials at one another, one of Juliana's outstretched

arms struck the statue of Mary. Out of its niche it fell, rolling past the arguing men to Hawise's feet. It lay there, in two pieces, and between them, looking down, Hawise saw a worn and folded piece of parchment. Time seemed to move very slowly as she knelt, reaching her hands towards the broken statue. There was a faint singing in her ears. But it wasn't broken; there was a small compartment, and the door that sealed it had fallen off. Cradling the Virgin's image in her left arm, the Prioress picked up the parchment with her right, and stood again. The Master seemed to have won his shouting match with Father Hugh; in the background she heard a series of orders being given and accepted. Juliana had scampered off, no doubt to relay her experiences to her corps of dedicated listeners. Only, feeling the weight of the Mother's statue in her arms, Hawise thought, perhaps not. It wouldn't be fitting.

She walked around the two priests and placed Mary's statue on Father Baldwin's tomb. The gracious golden lady smiled, none the worse for wear. Hawise opened the ancient parchment, and read: "Sciant omnibus fidelibus presentis et futuris quod ego Johanna de Hauville fundatrix . . ." Hawise raised her head. "Master Roger," she said. "Father Hugh. Excuse me." They looked at her. "I believe," she said, showing them the charter, "that I have found a valuable document relating to the foundation of this Priory...."

Well, a good deal of talking had to be done, and much organizing and reorganizing of things, but the sum total can be shortly related. The charter was undeniably legitimate—placed in the statue for safekeeping, no doubt, by Father Baldwin, and forgotten there these many years. It established clearly, beyond even Father Hugh's powers of dialectic, that the foundress intended the nuns to control the resources of the Priory. There were to be a good many nuns, and only a few canons, who would be subject to the Prioress. Prior Hugh did not really have too many opportunities for disputation, as Master Roger sent him off ere long to a remote house on the borders of Scotland, where there were no nuns to torment and life was enlivened only by the annual raids of the ever-ravaging Scots. Still, it is said that the miraculous cure worked on Father Hugh's organs of generation proved durable, and it may be he found some consolation in the heather for his loss of Aunsby Priory.

With the funds that started flowing the sisters' way, the Prioress was able to send Juliana home with a dowry generous enough to discourage inquiry and to win her the hand of her erstwhile lover, himself now a thriving fishmonger. Let us hope she found many more moments of joy in his embrace!

As for Mother Hawise herself, she had the deep delight of seeing prosperity and honest comfort re-established among her faithful community, to which many more members gathered as the Priory's reputation flourished. And always—

until she herself was laid, a much-honored and lamented corpse, in a tomb in the south transept—she kept a private, secret holiday on the 14th of August, the day on which she who was clothed with the sun had indeed granted her, and all who saw her, that which they had sought.

*Joyce Coleman*

*University of North Dakota*

1 Qe les freres à lur pleysyr / Ne pussent à lor sueres venyr, / E qu'il n'ait point de chalaunge. / Jà n'i avera ne lyn ne launge / Entre eux, e si le peil y a, / Jà pur ce ne remeindra (ll. 47–52). The translation in the text is by the editor, Thomas Wright (p. 139). The “Ordre de Bel-Eyse” is included in Wright’s collection, *The Political Songs of England, from the Reign of John to That of Edward II* (London: Camden Society, 1839).

### **MOTHER ALWAYS KNOWS BEST: A PERSONAL APPROPRIATION OF THE FICTIONAL ST. BIRGITTA’S AND MARGERY KEMPE’S IDEAS ABOUT MOTHERHOOD**

St. Birgitta is seated at one of the many celestial cafes which line the city walls of the Heavenly City (according to Tony Kushner, the place closely resembles San Francisco). She sips her vanilla cappuccino and nibbles at angel food cake (delicious but devoid of calories) as she watches the Ship of Fools make its biweekly trip up the Mother of all rivers, hoping that it will not have another collision with Mark Twain’s Mississippi steamboat. She mutters to herself, “Last week was such a mess.” Yet Birgitta is not quite at ease. She hums some bars from the “Gloria” and looks toward the entrance to the coffee shop. She is a mite irritated. Her friend Margery Kempe is late—as usual. Finally there is a disturbance at the door, and Margery, looking rather disheveled, rushes in, losing one of her clogs as she moves toward center stage. She is loaded down with bulging bags which threaten to explode their contents all over the stage. She is obviously distracted but also appears somewhat ashamed by her tardiness.

**Birgitta:** [sharply] Margery, you’re late! Where have you been?

**Margery:** [contritely] Oh, I am so sorry. It has been a simply wretched day. It seems that whenever I am just about to leave the house Gerda arrives. And as usual, she was not pleased with anything—neither the breakfast I offered her—I can’t see what she has against English breakfasts.

**Birgitta:** [muttering] I can’t blame her.

**Margery:** [oblivious to Birgitta’s comment] It isn’t as if she were French, after all, and knew something about fine cooking—She’s from Danzig for Heaven’s sake.