



Beguines, Witches, and Pious Maidens in Johannes Nider's *Formicarius*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26012/mittelalter-33575>

URL: <https://mittelalter.hypotheses.org/33575>

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Zitation: Michael D. Bailey, Beguines, Witches, and Pious Maidens in Johannes Nider's *Formicarius*, in: Von unbequemen Dominikanern, organisierten Handwerkern und gefertigten Dingen. Festschrift für Sabine von Heusinger zum 60. Geburtstag, hrsg. von Julia Bruch, Eva-Maria Cersovsky und Andreas Lehnertz (Mittelalter. Interdisziplinäre Forschung und Rezeptionsgeschichte, Beihefte 5,1), S. 1–7, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26012/mittelalter-33575>.

Zusammenfassung: *Dieser Artikel vergleicht den Dominikaner Johannes Nider als Befürworter der Beginen mit Johannes Mulberg, der sie ablehnte. Es wird argumentiert, dass Nider neben Traktaten, in denen er den Lebensstil der Beginen explizit verteidigte, in seinem allgemeineren Formicarius auch Frauen lobte, die wahrscheinlich Beginen waren, und eine solche Frau als Gegenbeispiel zu bösen Hexen vorstellte.*

Abstract: *This article compares the Dominican Johannes Nider, as a proponent of beguines, to Johannes Mulberg, who opposed them. It argues that, in addition to treatises specifically defending the beguine lifestyle, Nider praised women who were probably beguines in his more general Formicarius, and he presented one such woman as a counterexample against evil witches.*

1. Introduction

Beguines are among the most liminal figures of later medieval religious history, as difficult to categorize for modern scholars as they could be for their medieval supporters and opponents.¹ Praised by some church authorities and civic leaders as the epitome of lay piety, they were condemned by others as categorically heretical. Not only could different people come to different conclusions about women labeled as beguines, but the term itself could be applied to different groups for very different purposes. For Herbert Grundmann, beguines exemplified how difficult it was for contemporaries to differentiate between various streams of the medieval religious movement (“wie schwer die verschiedenen Strömungen der religiösen Bewegung für manche Zeitgenossen zu unterscheiden waren”).²

The Dominicans Johannes Mulberg (1350–1414) and Johannes Nider (c. 1380–1438) illustrate this dilemma perfectly. The two men knew and admired one another, but they placed beguines in very different “streams.” As Sabine von Heusinger notes in her essential study of the older of the two men, Mulberg is best known as a fanatical opponent of beguines, and most of her analysis focuses on his efforts to drive them out of the city of Basel in the early 15th century.³ Mulberg was hardly unique in opposing beguines at this time, but she concludes that he was among their most stubborn adversaries.⁴

Johannes Nider respected Mulberg tremendously as a leader of the reform movement within the Dominican Order. In his youth, he had served as the older preacher’s *socius* for a time. Even more tellingly, he related a near-hagiographic account of Mulberg’s childhood in his *Formicarius*.⁵ Nider, however, came to very different conclusions than Mulberg about beguines, both their overall status and their practice of voluntary poverty, which lay at the heart of Mulberg’s attack on them. In two specialized treatises, *De paupertate perfecta secularium* and *De*

¹ For examples, see *Labels and Libels. Naming Beguines in Northern Medieval Europe*, ed. by Letha Böhringer, Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, and Hildo van Engen, Turnhout 2014.

² Herbert Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter. Untersuchung über die geschichtlichen Zusammenhänge zwischen der Ketzerei, den Bettelorden und der religiösen Frauenbewegung im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert und über die geschichtlichen Grundlagen der deutschen Mystik*, Darmstadt 1970, p. 532.

³ Sabine von Heusinger, *Johannes Mulberg OP (†1414). Ein Leben in Spannungsfeld von Dominikanerobservanz und Beginenstreit (Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte des Dominikanerordens N.F. 9)*, Berlin 2000, pp. 1, 39–89.

⁴ Von Heusinger, *Johannes Mulberg* (as n. 3), p. 89.

⁵ Nider, *Formicarius* 2.1, ed. by G. Colvener, Douai 1602, pp. 99–100; see von Heusinger, *Johannes Mulberg* (as n. 3), pp. 5–6, on the reliability of this account. I was not able to consult the full edition of *Formicarius* in Catherine Chène, *Le Formicarius de Jean Nider O.P. († 1438): La société chrétienne au miroir de l’Observance* (2 vols., *Micrologus Library* 118), Florence 2023, in time for this article. Where possible, I cite from Chène’s earlier partial edition (as n. 15 below). Otherwise, I cite the generally reliable 1602 Douai edition.

secularium religionibus, Nider defended their choice to live in poverty, and even more generally he extolled their pursuit of a quasi-religious lifestyle that some others thought was inherently unsuitable for laypeople.⁶

While Mulberg is famous as an adversary of beguines, Nider is not so widely known for defending them. He is famous instead as a fierce opponent of supposed diabolical witches. Here too it could be said that he was mainly targeting women, for he was the first major ecclesiastical authority to develop an extended and explicitly gendered analysis explaining why witches were more often female than male. His argument, presented in his *Formicarius*, would become the basis, some fifty years later, for the much more extensive gendering of witches-as-women in the *Malleus maleficarum*.⁷

Because of its significance in witchcraft historiography, *Formicarius* remains Nider's most widely read and analyzed work among modern scholars, but the long treatise is by no means just about witchcraft. Among many other topics, Nider addressed beguines at several points, and when doing so, he often seems to have taken a more critical stance against them than in his more specialized treatises on either lay poverty or the "lay religious." I argue here, however, that Nider did indeed include many positive accounts of beguines in *Formicarius*, and I will focus on one in which he presented a woman who might well be considered a beguine as a kind of anti-witch. My argument hinges on the fact that Nider generally did not call "beguines" of whom he approved by that name.

2. Neither Beguines nor Beguinages

Scholars have long recognized that the term "beguine" was highly mutable. It could be applied in different circumstances to women of various kinds, and when it became too problematic, it could be abandoned. Especially after the papal decree *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus* appeared to condemn all beguines categorically in the early 14th century, many authorities who wanted

⁶ John Van Engen, Friar Johannes Nyder on Laypeople Living as Religious in the World, in: *Vita Religiosa im Mittelalter. Festschrift für Kaspar Elm zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. by Franz J. Felten and Nikolas Jaspert, Berlin 1999, pp. 583–615; Michael D. Bailey, *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages*, University Park, PA 2003, pp. 68–73; Michael D. Bailey, Religious Poverty, Mendicancy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages, in: *Church History* 72 (2003), pp. 457–83.

⁷ Michael D. Bailey, The Feminization of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Late Middle Ages, in: *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19 (2002), pp. 120–34.

to continue supporting devout lay women simply stopped calling them beguines.⁸ In Cologne, for example, the term “went out of fashion” in the early 14th century and was replaced by such labels as *puella* or *virgo*. In fact, virginity became increasingly central to “beguine” identity thereafter.⁹ Nider happened to study in Cologne for a few years, almost a century later. When he came to write *Formicarius*, he rarely mentioned beguines by name, but he described many pious *virgines*.

Often when mentioning admirable *virgines*, Nider gave no indication of how they lived, but he did make clear that at least some lived together communally. Ironically, his accounts in *Formicarius* that demonstrate this point most clearly often come when he was detailing some potential danger or threat of corruption affecting these female communities. It is important to note, however, that in every case he related, the threat of corruption was due to outside agents entering the community. It was not inherent to the form of life these women followed.

In one account, Nider related how a conniving “beghard or Lollard” gained entry into a “house of devout women” by posing as a “devout *fraticellus*” (*nam primum sub specie deuoti fraticelli domum aliquam deuotarum muliercularum explorat*). After insinuating himself amongst them, he preached to the women that chastity was not necessary for perfection and so lured them into sin.¹⁰ In another account, a corrupt male posed as a “very honest secular priest” in order to gain entry to what Nider specified was a “small house” (*domuncula*) of devout *virgines*. Telling them that Christ had been crucified naked, he tried to convince them to disrobe when he administered a false Eucharist to them.¹¹

Just as Nider never referred to pious women of whom he approved as beguines, neither did he refer to their communities as beguinages. This could again be due simply to his desire to avoid any negative implications that term could carry, but Nider did, in fact, use the term “beguinage” in *Formicarius*, and in a positive sense. Interestingly, however, when he mentioned beguinages with seeming approval, it was specifically to note their absence. Toward the beginning of

⁸ Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, From Case Studies to Comparative Models: Würzburg Beguines and the Vienne Decees, in: Labels and Libels. Naming Beguines in Northern Medieval Europe, ed. by Letha Böhringer, Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, and Hildo van Engen, Turnhout 2014, pp. 54–55.

⁹ Letha Böhringer, Merging into Clergy: Beguine Self-Promotion in Cologne in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries, in: Labels and Libels. Naming Beguines in Northern Medieval Europe, ed. by Letha Böhringer, Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, and Hildo van Engen, Turnhout 2014, pp. 171–72.

¹⁰ Nider, *Formicarius* 3.6, Douai (as n. 5), pp. 221–22.

¹¹ Nider, *Formicarius* 3.6, Douai (as n. 5), p. 219.

Formicarius, he lamented how there were not enough large institutions available for pious women in southern Germany. Specifically, there were not enough “monasteries or reformed religious houses or beguinages” (*nulla ibi virginum sunt monasteria nec loca religiosorum reformata, nec beginagia ibi sunt*).¹² Nider certainly approved of monasteries, especially reformed ones, and he appears to have categorized beguinages alongside them as appropriate places for devout women to reside. Later he lamented the “great number” of *virgines* in the diocese of Constance and Augsburg who could not reside in either monasteries or beguinages, “because such places are not to be found in these parts” (*sunt in magno numero hodie virgines versus montana Italiae, et in metis Constantiensis et Augustensis diocesis, non in beginagiis, nec in sanctimonialium monasteriis, quia loca talia illis in partibus inuisa sunt*).¹³

That statement is curious, since research has shown that beguine communities were actually proliferating in this period. Typically, however, individual houses were much smaller than they had been in previous centuries.¹⁴ Perhaps this is what Nider meant when, in his other account, he referred to a *domuncula* of devout women.

3. A Beguine as Anti-Witch

These observations about how Nider addressed and described pious women whom we might consider to be beguines inform my interpretation of his account of an “elderly virgin” named Ernestine (*Seriosa*) in the diocese of Constance. He refers to her in the fifth book of his *Formicarius*, “Concerning Witches and Their Deceptions” (*De maleficis et eorum deceptionibus*), and he presents her as a kind of anti-witch. But was she a beguine?

Nider called Ernestine *virgo*, which, as we have seen, he regularly used to label pious women who had dedicated themselves to a quasi-religious life, and he stated that she lived in voluntary poverty. He gave no indication that she lived communally with any other women. Instead, he described her living in a cottage or hut (*tugurio*) in a poor village, in an area rife with witchcraft (*manebat autem in tugurio villagii pauperculi ipsa voluntate pauper, in terra ubi nonnumquam*

¹² Nider, *Formicarius* 1.4, Douai (as n. 5), p. 35.

¹³ Nider, *Formicarius* 2.11, Douai (as n. 5), p. 167.

¹⁴ Andreas Wilts, *Beginen im Bodenseeraum*, Sigmaringen 1994, pp. 217–18. Tax records from Trier reveal that already in the mid-14th century most beguines lived in houses no larger than four or five women, and many lived alone or with just one companion. See Annette Winter, *Studien zur sozialen Situation der Frauen in der Stadt Trier nach der Steuerlist von 1364. Die Unterschicht*, in: *Kurtrierisches Jahrbuch* 15 (1975), pp. 20–45, at p. 35. I thank Andreas Lehnertz for this reference.

maleficia satis locum habere dinoscuntur).¹⁵ This would seem to imply an even more humble dwelling than the *domunculae* of devout women he mentioned elsewhere, and most likely she lived alone. Yet she clearly also belonged to a network of women, in which she played a leading role, for he also described her as a “mother” to all the virgins living in the area, and a model for them (*hec mater omnium in vicinia existens virginum et speculum*).¹⁶ Nider’s main intent was not to praise Ernestine’s lifestyle, however, but to hold her up as a counter-example against both witches and the sort of feckless laity who sometimes had recourse to practices that Nider considered to be dangerously akin to witchcraft.

A friend of Ernestine had suffered a serious injury to his foot, inflicted by witchcraft. He apparently tried many remedies, but to no effect. When Ernestine visited him, he asked her for a “blessing” (*benedictionem*), and she silently recited the Lord’s Prayer and Creed, while twice making the sign of the “life-giving cross” (*vivifice crucis*). The man’s injury was immediately healed. Not realizing that she had been reciting prayers, the man asked her what spell or enchantment (*carminacio*) she has used to heal him.¹⁷ This represents the kind of confusion between permissible and reprehensible rites that Nider feared would lead the laity into sin.

Ernestine left no doubt about the nature of the rite she had used to heal her friend. First, she berated him for his “wicked or weak faith,” which caused him to turn his back on the “approved practices of the church” and seek out “prohibited remedies” for his illnesses and injuries (*vos mala fide vel debili divinis et approbatis exercitiis ecclesie non inheretis et carmina ac remedia prohibita crebro vestris infirmitatibus applicatis*).¹⁸ Instead she cajoled him to use only “permissible prayers and signs,” as she had done (*sed si in oracionum et signorum licitum efficaciam speraretis, faciliter sepe curaremini*).¹⁹ “For I used nothing on you except the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed, and now you are healed,” she informed him (*nichil enim vobis applicui nisi dominicam oracionem et apostolorum simbolium et iam sanatus estis*).²⁰

¹⁵ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.4, in: *L’imaginaire du sabbat. Edition critique des textes les plus anciens (1430 c.–1440 c.)*, ed. by Martine Ostorero, Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, and Kathrin Utz Tremp, with Catherine Chêne (*Cahiers Lausannoise d’Histoire Médiévale* 26), Lausanne 1999, p. 176.

¹⁶ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.4, *Imaginaire du sabbat* (as n. 15), p. 174.

¹⁷ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.4, *Imaginaire du sabbat* (as n. 15), p. 176.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

4. Conclusion

Nider's account of Ernestine provides an important connection between his support of "beguines," that is, lay women pursuing some form of devout religious life, and his construction of and opposition to the imagined figure of the diabolical witch. Not only did he defend beguines against critics who viewed them as a corrupting force within Christian society, but he also held up one of their number, albeit without explicitly calling her a beguine, as the antithesis of harmful witches. Such a dichotomy would have been easy for Nider to accommodate, for he was not a complete misogynist, if by that we understand someone who is entirely opposed to seeing any kind of virtue in women. Instead, he embodied the sharply bifurcated view of female morality that characterized so much medieval thought.

Explaining why women were more inclined to become witches than men were, Nider wrote: "if they [women] are governed by a good spirit, they tend to become extremely good, but if by an evil spirit, then they tend to become extremely bad" (*si bono reguntur spiritu, optima, si vero malo, pessima fieri consueuerunt*).²¹ For someone with that attitude, any kind of gendered analysis would boil down to whether certain women should be placed at one end of this spectrum or the other. As much as he demonized supposed witches, Nider continued to support and valorize the many devout *virgines* whom he regarded as exemplary representatives of Christian life. Far from being a corrupting element that needed to be eradicated from Christian society, they could, he thought, even serve as a kind of bulwark against the dangerous threat that witchcraft posed.

²¹ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.8, Douai (as n. 5), p. 388.