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AUTHORS, NARRATIVES, AND AUDIENCES IN MEDIEVAL SAINTS' LIVES

Marie of Oignies, of Nivelles, or of Villers: The Multiple Textual Identities of a 13th-Century Holy Woman

Alicia Spencer-Hall

Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London, UK
a.spencer-hall@ucl.ac.uk

Nancy Bradley Warren (2005: 133) maintains that 'female spirituality and the revelations of holy women were valuable, and extremely valuable, sources of symbolic capital' in the pre-modern era. In this article, I dissect the ways in which various authors harnessed the 'symbolic capital' of the 13th-century holy woman Marie of Oignies (d. 1213). Jacques of Vitry composed Marie's *vita* in c. 1215. Most of what we know about the holy woman's life is contained in this text, which offers us the first extant account of a new form of female spirituality which blossomed in the era, the beguine lifestyle. But Jacques' account is only one of several iterations of Marie's life. Two other texts offer significantly different textual constructions of the holy woman: a 13th-century liturgical office in Marie's honour, and a chronicle of the foundation of Oignies' priory. Each text manufactures distinct versions of Marie in order to siphon off the holy woman's 'symbolic capital' to their own reserves. This entails a re-situation of Marie in each work – both literal and metaphorical – as she becomes a special patron not just of Oignies, but Nivelles, Villers Abbey, and the entire diocese of Liège. This investigation operates as a case study for the ways in which the precise contours of a saintly individual's individuality may be fashioned differently by interested parties – specifically that of a hagiographer (Jacques of Vitry), monastic institution (Villers Abbey), and spiritual community (Oignies priory) – as a means to assert their own identity. Modern actors continue to trade on Marie's reputation, as various Belgian towns seek to claim the holy woman as 'one of their own'. In my conclusion, then, I demonstrate the ways in which Marie has become a tradable asset in the cultural heritage of the Walloon region.

Introduction

Canon regular, preacher, and theologian Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240) is quite clear about the purpose of saints' biographies. Writing in the prologue to his *vita* of 13th-century holy woman Marie of Oignies (d. 1213), he declares that 'many who are not moved by commands are stirred to action by [the] examples' ('[m]ulti enim incitantur exemplis, qui non moventur preceptis') laid down in hagiographies (*VMOEng*: prol.1.41; *VMO*: prol.44.27–28).¹ As far as Jacques is concerned, texts such as his own are inherently useful documents, designed to provoke action in an audience. Nancy Bradley Warren (2005: 133) maintains that 'female spirituality and the revelations of holy women were valuable, and extremely valuable, sources of symbolic capital' in the pre-modern era.² It seems that Jacques of Vitry would concur. His insistence on the utility of *vitae* can be taken as his acknowledgment of the power of harnessing a holy individual's 'symbolic capital' – details of their life, worship forms, miracles and so forth – to bring an audience closer to God. Hagiography, then, comprises the calculated (re)telling of a holy individual's biography: one non-definitive version of historical events.

In this article, I dissect the ways in which Jacques presents Marie's life story, unravelling the way in which the cleric taps into the holy woman's 'symbolic capital' to fulfil his own agenda. But Jacques' account is only one of several extant iterations of Marie's life. Below, I interrogate two further 13th-century textual constructions of the holy woman: a liturgical office in Marie's honour, and a chronicle of the foundation of Oignies' priory. Each text carefully manufactures distinct versions of Marie in order to siphon off the holy woman's 'symbolic capital' to their own reserves.

¹ Jacques of Vitry's Latin work is found in Huygens (2012: 43–164). I refer to this work as *VMO*, with references relating to book section, chapter, page number, and line numbers respectively. The standard English translation is: Jacques of Vitry (2006). I identify this text as *VMOEng*, with references relating to book, chapter, paragraph, and page number respectively. Thomas of Cantimpré also composed a short supplement to Marie's *vita* in ca. 1231: Huygens (2012: 167–201) (Latin); Thomas of Cantimpré, 2006 (English translation). The document reveals Thomas' yearning for the return of Jacques – his beloved mentor – to return from his episcopal office in Frascati, far more than anything substantive about Marie (Roukis-Stern, 2009: 42–43).

² On this issue, and for examples that complement my analyses of Marie of Oignies, see also: Spencer-Hall (2013); Warren (2001: 111–62; 2005: passim).

As we shall see, this entails a re-situation of Marie in each work – both literal and metaphorical – as she becomes a special patron not just of Oignies, but Nivelles, Villers Abbey, and the entire diocese of Liège. Modern actors continue to trade on Marie's reputation: various Belgian towns seek to claim the holy woman as 'one of their own'. In my conclusion, then, I pinpoint the ways in which Marie has become a tradable asset in the cultural heritage of the Walloon region, the broad administrative area in which Oignies, Nivelles, and Villers are found.

Marie of Oignies was born to a noble family in Nivelles in 1177, and showed early signs of holiness. She disdained worldly goods, and longed for the religious life (*VMO*: 1.1.56–57.16–43). In dismay, her parents married her off at the age of fourteen to John, a man from Nivelles (*ibid.*: 1.2.57.44–46). Shortly after the nuptials, however, Marie managed to persuade her husband to take up a chaste union (*ibid.*: 1.3.58–59.68–74). After divine inspiration, John also agreed to the disposal of all the pair's worldly goods and they moved to the nearby Willambroux, tending the patients of a *leprosarium* and serving the poor in extreme humility (*ibid.*: 1.3.59.75–82). Due to Marie's divine knowledge and extreme holiness, she was constantly sought out to offer counsel and spiritual insight (*ibid.*: 1.9.77.486–95; 1.13.87–88.702–29; 2.6.127–28.822–25.). Such was the demand that at times she had to hide in fields and forests to obtain some peace from her followers (*ibid.*: 2.2.98–99.119–124). Ultimately, such temporary escape was not sufficient and she was forced to move to a more isolated location, Oignies, in ca. 1207 (*ibid.*: 2.9.146.1251–56). Marie spent her time in Oignies peacefully, experiencing ever more intense bouts of ecstasy until reuniting with the Lord in death in 1213. Two years later, Jacques of Vitry – who benefited directly from Marie's spiritual tutelage – composed a *vita* chronicling the holy woman's life.

Marie's biography was widely disseminated throughout the medieval period, and became one of the most widely circulated biographies of a holy laywoman from her time (More, 2008: 271). Her *vita* is hailed as the earliest extant document offering details of an innovation in female piety that emerged in the 13th century: the beguine lifestyle, in which un-enclosed women practised their religion dynamically in the world, attaining a level of holiness heretofore associated with monastics.

Hallmarks of this lifestyle include a staunch commitment to undertaking a *vita mixta*, episodes of ecstasy, intense devotional practices, adoration of the Eucharist, punishing ascetic regimes, and the reception of prophetic visions. Although beguines were found throughout Western Europe, the region of Brabant-Liège was the crucible of the new phenomenon, home to Marie herself and numerous other holy women.

Marie of Oignies is routinely described in modern scholarship as the 'prototype' or 'first' beguine, one of the religious movement's 'founding mothers' (see, for example, Andersen [2003: 7]; Elliott [2012: 181]; Hinnebusch [1972: 9 n3]; Lester [2011: 23]; Miller [2014: 100]; and Wiethaus [2006: 452]). Jacques of Vitry certainly suggests that Marie is the figurehead of the new phenomenon represented by the holy women of Liège in his prologue to her *vita* (*VMO*: prol.43–54.1–270). This phenomenon tends to be described in modern scholarship as the 'beguine' lifestyle. However, Jacques never uses the term 'beguine' to describe Marie herself, opting for the far more neutral 'mulier religiosa' ('holy woman') instead. This reflects a tendency across the Liégeoise hagiographic corpus to eschew any outright identification of the saintly protagonists as 'beguines'. This is largely due to the problematic connotations of the word 'beguine' in the era, which I discuss below. Instead, the holy women are described variously as 'religious women' ('mulieres religiosae', 'religiosae feminae'), 'sacred virgins' ('sanctae virgines'), 'sacred women' ('mulieres sanctae') and 'chaste virgins' ('virgines continentes') (Brown, 2008a: 2).

The 'primacy' of Marie's biography – the fact that it is the earliest extant witness to the beguine movement in Liège-Brabant, and that the text circulated so widely – has had a 'profound impact' on the way in which we conceptualise the totality of the beguine lifestyle (Panzer, 1994: 113). In fact, this representation of Marie of Oignies as the archetype of beguine-hood is a modern (re)construction of the holy woman's identity. As such, it works as a parallel to the various ways in which pre-modern authors manipulated Marie's textual identity to their own ends. In this article, I analyse the ways in which medieval authors posit Marie variously as 'of Oignies', 'of Villers', and 'of Nivelles'. This critique takes place against the backdrop of a decidedly more modern form of Marie's textual reorientation. 'Beguine' is often used in modern scholarship as an 'umbrella term', encompassing any woman practising an

innovative form of religion in the thirteenth century, whether or not the woman herself – or those in her community – would necessarily have used this label (Brown, 2008a: 2). Modern scholars have routinely conflated Marie with all beguines and the entire religious movement, making her ‘Marie of the Beguines’ as it were.

It is with an acknowledgement of the ambiguous landscape of beguine identity that I use the term ‘beguine’ in this article. Marie of Oignies does not represent *every* beguine, nor necessarily *most* beguines that came after her, particularly ‘institutionalised’ beguines who lived in beguinages (Galloway, 1999; Panzer, 1994: 113–15; Ziegler, 1993: 113, 118–23). This nuance, however, does not erase the fact that the 13th-century Liégeoises (the ‘Holy Women of Liège’ corpus) referred to as ‘beguines’, with more or less accuracy in contemporary scholarship, are definitively linked together by similarities in the specific tenor of their piety. What’s more, it is clear that Marie of Oignies’ spiritual praxes made a big impact, inspiring women in her homeland and beyond to take up their own form of the ‘beguinal’ lifestyle and offering enthusiastic readers a version of the new religious lifestyle for women being developed in the Low Countries. For example, Susan Folkerts (2006: 226–41) catalogues 39 extant manuscripts, which contain Marie’s *vita*, fragments or adaptations. 12 to 14 of these originate in the period between 1215 and 1300, with the majority (17 or 18) produced between 1400 and 1525. The full *vita* was also translated into Dutch, English, French, Italian, Norse, and Swedish. Manuscript possession of the Latin *vita* bears witness to the large geographical range of Marie’s text. Examples show ownership in institutions in England, Northern France, Germany, and the Northern and Southern Low Countries.

Evidently, Marie’s biography had enduring appeal. For example, Vincent of Beauvais (1624: 30.10–51.1240–1252) (d. 1264) included large extracts of Marie’s hagiography in his *Speculum historiale*, the third part of his behemoth encyclopaedia (*Speculum maius*) (Ellis, 1990: 169; Folkerts, 2006: 229; Vauchez, 1987: 104). Over 240 manuscripts of this text remain, and it was translated into Flemish by Jacob of Maerlant (d. ca. 1300) in 1280 and French in 1333 by Jean of Vignay (d. ca. 1350) (Paulmier-Foucart and Lusignan, 1990: 110–11, 121). Additionally, Dominican Thomas of Cantimpré (1628: 1.9.8.40; 2.55.54.529–32) (d. 1272) referenced Marie

in his spiritually didactic allegory based on the communal life of bees the *Bonum universale de apibus*, composed ca. 1257–1263. Thomas' apiarist work was also highly popular, with eighty-six Latin manuscripts of the whole text extant (Pyle, 2005: 477). The text's wide audience is further revealed by its rapid appearance in print in ca. 1473, the first of six Latin editions, and translations into Dutch, French, and German (Goldschmidt, 1969: 136).

Details from Marie's biography also circulated widely via inclusion in collections of *exempla* and resources for preachers. For example, episodes from her *vita* are reproduced by a variety of Dominican authors, including Arnold of Liège (d. 1345), Etienne of Bourbon, Humbert of Romans, and Jean Gobi Junior (d. 1350).³ Cistercian Caesarius of Heisterbach (1851: 8.80–164) (d. ca. 1240) had also read Marie's *vita*, and the text clearly influences his own compilation of hagiographical tales, the *Dialogus miraculorum* (completed ca. 1222) (Lauwers, 1989: 86; 1992: 46–7). All of these works were targeted at a wide audience, indicated by references in prologues (Berlioz and Beaulieu, 1995: 283–84; see, for example, Etienne of Bourbon [2002: prol.3.6, 21]). As little as 35 years after the appearance of Jacques' biography of Marie, she was deemed fit to be a model for lay piety. *Exempla*, as Jacques Berlioz and Colette Ribaucourt (1983: 96) point out, constitute 'an image, or a series of images' ('une image, ou une suite d'images'; my translation), reproducing metaphorically the Church's desired behaviour for the laity, disseminated primarily in sermons. The sermon's audience was not meant to imitate the *exemplum* exactly, but its principles. Of prime importance was that the images lodged in the congregation's minds (or hearts), and taught the laity an element of doctrine. Narratives could thus be excerpted and shaped in order to fulfil a particular ideological purpose. Marie's inclusion in *exempla* anthologies, then, does not rest upon the specificity of her situation or her subjectivity but on the general applicability of what she represents. Compilers could work with the framework of piety created by Jacques, including the key elements of Marie's fame, and manipulate events for their own purposes (Berlioz, 2009: 549–50). As I will now discuss, however, Jacques' 'original' account is certainly

³ Due to space constraints, it is impossible to list all instances here. However, this issue has been covered piecemeal in scholarship, see e.g.: Lauwers (1997: 446, 454–6); Moulinier (1997: 150–1).

not free from the taint of authorial manipulation(s). Rather, it is an explicitly ideological document.

Marie of Oignies: Anti-Cathar Emblem and the Beguine's Beguine

Marie's *vita* is, in André Vauchez's (1987: 98) words, 'an anti-heretical manifesto' ('un manifeste antihérétique'; my translation). Indeed, in the prologue, Jacques explains that Bishop Fulk of Toulouse (d.1231; otherwise known as Folquet de Marseille) requested that he undertake the composition of the biography to provide material for preachers fulminating against the Cathar orthodoxy (*VMO*: prol.52–53.223–34). The hagiographer leverages Marie's reputation for holiness to present her as a religious example fit for imitation in the diocese of Liège and far beyond. Fulk had a pressing need for persuasive narratives with which to battle the substantial Cathar threat, beginning ca. 1140–1160 in the region around Cologne and Liège. The Cathars, expanding across Southern France, had overrun his native city of Toulouse: Fulk was an exile when visiting Liège (*VMO*: prol.44.29–40). As a former troubadour and zealous preacher, the bishop surely knew what kind of content would most grasp the flock's attention and convey his desired message (Kienzle, 2001: 165–73). Fulk was drawn to Liège because of Marie's renown:

cuius fama, minor rei veritate, ad partes nostras specialiter te adduxit: cuius virtutem, in primo ingressu ad eam, in te mirabiliter expertus es [...]. (*VMO*: prol.52.217–20)

[It was her reputation less than the reality of the actual fact that especially led you to our country and in your first encounter with her you yourself had wondrous experience of her virtue. (*VMOEng*: prol.9.49)]

In other words, Fulk recognises that Marie – or rather her reputation – could be useful to him, regardless of her subjective experiences. If the holy woman's life and works were shaped to fit the Bishop's ends, and presented persuasively, they would provide powerful testimony with which to demonstrate orthodox behaviours, and holy counter-examples to nefarious Cathar practices. In this way, Marie – and her text – is sculpted to become an exemplary representative of the anti-Cathar movement.

The *vita's* anti-Cathar programme consists, in the main, of demonstrating the authenticity of doctrinal precepts rejected by Cathars. Again and again episodes in Marie's life testify as to the reality of purgatory (e.g. *VMO*: 1.9.71–72.346–67), the importance of confession (e.g. 1.6.63–64.182–96), the authenticity of the Eucharistic sacrament (e.g. 2.4.123.709–26), her triumph over demons (e.g. 2.13.161–62.1630–38), and the promotion of strict submission to clerical powers (e.g. 2.4.120.641–56). Throughout the text, Marie's unconventional spirituality – unlike that of the sinful Cathars – is framed as contiguous with her obedience to the Church and its teaching, rather than oppositional. Marie explicitly supports the Crusade against the Cathars, proclaimed by Innocent III (1198–1216; d. 1216) in 1209. She views dying as a crusader as the height of holiness, and yearns to be martyred herself (*VMO*: 2.7.134.982–88). Marie's repeated visions depicting the immediate entrance of slaughtered crusaders to heaven, bypassing purgatory, show the authenticity of the indulgence issued to crusaders (*ibid.*: 2.7.134.975–82, 2.7.135.994–1000). Jacques funnels messages of the Crusade's righteousness through divine revelation and prophecy. In his prologue, he identifies these specific attributes as targets of detractors who oppose the *vita mixta* pursued by the holy Liégeoises (*ibid.*: prol.53–54.243–52). By depicting pro-crusade prophecies and revelations, Jacques emphasises that such channels of knowledge are legitimate, and fit within pious orthodox practice. A detractor cannot reject Marie's anti-heretical message without positioning himself as a heretic, or at the very least sympathetic to the Cathars' cause.

In the biography's prologue, Jacques stresses that there are a 'great multitude of holy women' ('*tanta multitudo sanctarum mulierum*') (*VMOEng*: prol.5.44; *VMO*: prol.48.131) in the diocese of Liège, a fact supported by his short vignettes describing the extraordinarily devout worship forms – and ensuing miracles – that he sees almost everywhere around him. Against this backdrop of extraordinary female religiosity, he singles out Marie:

Sed quid opus est in diversis diversas et mirabiles gratiarum varietates enarrare, cum in una preciosa et precellente margarita omnium fere gratiarum invenerim plenitudinem, que inter alias tanquam carbunculus

inter alios lapides, tanquam sol inter stellas mirabiliter resplenduit [...].
(*VMO*: prol.52.213–17)

[But what need is there to narrate the diverse and wondrous varieties of graces in diverse peoples when I discovered the fullness of almost all the graces in one precious and surpassingly excellent pearl? She shone wondrously among the others like a jewel among other stones; she was like the sun among the stars. (*VMOEng*: prol.9.49)]

Jacques situates Marie as a proxy for the entirety of the religious movement of which she is a part, the 'beguine's beguine'. In this way, she becomes property not just of her local supporters but of a much broader audience. Of course, Jacques must stress Marie's broad, and unimpeachable, appeal to legitimise the authoring of the *vita* at all. Further, her efficacy of her anti-Cathar example rests in her perfect performance of approved doctrine, general principles which orient the lives of all Catholics, rather than local customs. It makes sense to seek out the best of the best to prove one's orthodox point. Nevertheless, Marie metaphorically adopts the moniker of Marie 'of Liège', as Jacques crafts her as a symbol of all holy women in the diocese. This procedure allows the hagiographer to advance the cause of the beguines as authentically spiritual women practising innovative – yet orthodox – worship forms.

Although Jacques details Fulk's request for the production of the *vita* in its prologue, he dedicates the text to the bishop for different reasons (*VMOEng*: prol.2.41; *VMO*: prol.44–45.40–56). Fulk, he asserts, has berated him for failing to record – and then promulgate – the extreme holiness on display in the diocese of Liège in the form of Marie and her beguine peers. Their religious praxes have transformed the whole area in an authentic alternative Holy Land. Indeed, it seemed to Fulk himself that he was in 'the promised land' ('in terra promissionis'; *VMO*: prol.44.45) when he visited the diocese. In this way, Marie's identity shifts once more: she was 'of Oignies', then 'of Liège', and finally 'of Jerusalem'. This mirrors her spiritual journey to perfection, culminating in her complete union with Christ after death, which is detailed in the *vita*. Concomitantly, all beguines are shown to be 'of Jerusalem', i.e. genuinely holy women. In this passage, Jacques conflates Fulk with the entire ecclesiastical community and

hierarchy. The hagiographer counsels his addressee to consider conscientiously Marie's example, identifying Fulk as 'holy father, bishop of Toulouse, or rather of the entire Church of Christ' ('pater sancte, pastor Tholosane, immo totius ecclesie Christi'; *VMO*: prol.44.40–41). Thus, the text is dedicated to the Church more generally, which has harboured suspicion for Marie and her unconventional spiritual sisters. As Jacques explains, the holy women were 'almost or completely humiliated and held in contempt in their own regions' ('que in partibus suis fere ab omnibus vel penitus abiciebantur vel parvipendebantur') (*VMOEng*: prol.2.41; *VMO*: prol.44.37–38). The *vita* affirms Fulk's positive reaction to the Liégeoises, recording the affirmation for all to see, and thereby promotes the women as approved by the Church.

Fulk needs a stirring anti-Cathar emblem: a holy individual that moves hearts and minds to reject the insidious heresy, and one which could especially reach those most vulnerable to its lies, women. In other words, Fulk needs Marie of Oignies, at least as Jacques of Vitry presents her. However, the Bishop cannot isolate Marie's anti-Cathar praxes from the rest of her religiosity. Along with Marie's explicitly anti-Cathar behaviours and pronouncements, Fulk – and the Church more widely – must thus accept the rest of the holy woman's religiosity, which otherwise might seem suspect. The exigencies of Fulk's situation demand that, more generally, the practices of the group of women to whom Marie belongs – her spiritual colleagues in the diocese of Liège, beguines – must be interpreted positively. Beguines were criticised for behaviour similar to that of the Cathars (Lauwers, 1989: 102–3; Simons, 2001: 16–24, 120–21, 132–35). Thus, Fulk's orthodox agenda facilitated and meshed with a defence of Marie and her spiritual colleagues. Behaviours which would exculpate the women would also serve as models for orthodoxy for others. With this in mind, Jacques' careful description of Marie's orthodoxy must be recognised as serving two intersecting purposes: anti-Cathar and pro-beguine.

Marie of Villers

In Jacques of Vitry's text, Marie is emblematic of the 'much wider phenomenon' of beguine-ism in the diocese of Liège and beyond (Wogan-Browne and Henneau, 1999: 7). Moreover, her spiritual praxes respond to events far beyond her home diocese,

radiating out in all directions of the compass in order to counter the significant Cathar threat. She becomes a pan-European lay saint. A liturgical office for the veneration of Marie also demonstrates her identity, to some, as a very 'personal' – read local – saint. In this instance, a connection is forged between Marie and the Cistercian abbey of Villers. The office is preserved in only one source, an early thirteenth-century manuscript fabricated in the abbey itself.⁴ The abbey, then, had direct control over the content of the text. The office's depiction of the holy woman plausibly reflects the ways in which the monks of Villers sought to mould Marie's identity for their own aims.

There is some debate as to the office's author, though it is generally accepted that the cantor of Villers, Goswin of Bossut, is its composer (Feiss, 2006: 177–8; Mannaerts, 2010: 249–50). Originally, the manuscript also contained the *vitae* of Marie and Arnulf Cornibout (Villers monk; d. 1228) (Goswin of Bossut, 1968: 171–2). The *vitae* were removed by archivist Adolphe Pinchart and sold ca. 1867–1870. Nevertheless, the *vitae* are indicative of the dynamic literary culture at Villers in the 13th century, which generated a suite of original hagiographies.⁵ Despite the fact that Jacques' biography of Marie's establishes her identity as the holy woman 'of Oignies' ('Oigniacensis'), Oignies is referred to only once in the office.⁶ In the opening line, Oignies is described as the location of the holy woman's death, 'OBIIT APUD OENGIS' (Goswin of Bossut, 1968: 1.181). The office's arrangement of antiphons, which follow the organisation of the second book of Marie's *vita* into the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, shows specific knowledge of and attention to Jacques of Vitry's hagiography (Feiss, 2006: 183). Silence as to Marie's staunch connection to Oignies is not the result of Goswin of Bossut's ignorance of the particularities of the holy woman's *vita*. Instead, it appears to be a conscious choice, clearing the way for Villers to appropriate the holy woman for its own ends.

⁴ The manuscript is now known as Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, MS II 1658.

⁵ On Villers' literary culture and its context in the thirteenth century, see: Falmagne (2001: 27–191, in particular 42–44 on *vitae*).

⁶ Mannaerts (2010: 250–51) notes an implicit reference to Oignies as the 12th responsory portrays Marie on her deathbed, which we know to be in Oignies.

Pragmatism may also have played a role in the suppression of Oignies from the Villers office: a desire to avoid textual duplication. Pieter Mannaerts (2010: 247) observes that Oignies certainly had its own liturgical office in honour of Marie. Unfortunately, however, that document is lost. Furthermore, it is impossible to pinpoint the date of its composition, given the earliest remarks regarding the Oignies office date to the late sixteenth century (Molanus, 1595: fol. 127r; cited in Mannaerts [2010: 247]). Nevertheless, if we speculate that the Oignies office was produced before, or contemporaneously with, the Villers office, then the possibility emerges of the two texts operating in competition, providing clashing claims to 'ownership' of Marie and her potent spiritual capacity.

In the office, Goswin emphasises Marie's utility for the Villers community as a spiritual conduit. As nominally the first – and 'best' – beguine, Marie is an exceptional intercessor with the Lord, thereby offering the monks of Villers privileged contact with the divine. This is underscored in the following apostrophe from the first nocturn:

Gaude Maria, filia Syon, gaude quae et nomini et virtutibus matris Christi familiari unitatis gratia communicasti, et in horto benignarum Domini benigni spiritus inpinguata unguine, lucerna ardens et lucens apparuisti.* Intercede pro nobis. In splendoribus sanctorum Christo nunc es unita, incuius servitio fideliter perseverasti. Intercede. (Goswin of Bossut, 1968: 23.183)

[Rejoice, Mary, daughter of Sion, rejoice you who share by an intimate grace of union both the name and the virtues of the mother of Christ and, anointed with the ointment of the loving spirit of the Lord, appeared as a burning and bright lamp in the garden of the beguines.* Intercede for us. In the splendours of the saints you are now united to Christ, in whose service you faithfully persevered. Intercede. (idem., 2006: 23.187–8)]

Goswin, then, constructs a dynamic relationship with Marie and the Villers' monks that would intone the office, the 'us' to which he urges the holy woman to respond. In this way, Marie becomes a holy woman 'of Villers' – put to the service of the

spiritual needs of the monks there. Rubrics and textual markings on the office testify that it was used for public liturgy at Villers: Marie played some role in the day-to-day worship practices of the monks (Feiss, 2006: 178).

Somewhat surprisingly, however, the office does not include any explicit mention of Villers itself. Instead, Marie's birthplace appears four times in the text, and the holy woman is explicitly identified as 'Marie of Nivelles' twice ('MARIA DE NIVELLA'; Goswin of Bossut, 1968: 1.181; phrase in lowercase at 51.187). Goswin of Bossut had intimate knowledge of Nivelles and its spiritual community, composing the *vita* of another holy woman, Ida of Nivelles, at some point shortly after her death in 1231 (see *idem.*, 1630). As such, his allusions to Nivelles, rather than Oignies, may relate to his authorial bias, at least in part. Daniel Misonne dates the office's manuscript to 1236 at the latest, based on the inclusion of historical events in the *vita* of Arnulf Cornibout (*idem.*, 1968: 176). This supports the notion of Goswin's contemporaneous preoccupation with Nivelles as he composed Marie's office.

Goswin concurs with Jacques of Vitry's proclamation of Marie's illustrious excellence as a figurehead of the innovative religious movement of women in the region. Whilst Jacques proclaimed Marie to be the 'pearl' of Liège, Goswin figures Marie as 'like a new star of the sea' ('nova maris stella') illuminating the 'paradise' ('paradysum') of the beguines (Goswin of Bossut, 2006: 17.186; *idem.*, 1968: 17.182). Nivelles is portrayed as the locus of Marie's embrace of the religious life. For example, she 'came from Nivelles, where by her parents she was joined in chaste marriage to John' ('exorta de Nivella, ibidem a parentibus casto coniugio Iohanni sociata est') (*idem.*, 2006: 11.186; *idem.*, 1968: 11.182). Further, Goswin casts Marie as the first beguine – and thus, her conversion in Nivelles marks the beginning of the glorious innovation of (predominately female) lay holiness:

Gaudeamus et exultemus et demus gloriam Deo, qui ad dedicationem novae religionis benignarum suarum, filiam suam Mariam, in Nivella, niveo vellere religiosae conversationis suae inciavit. (*idem.*, 1968: 39.185)

[Let us rejoice, exult, and give glory to God, who for the dedication of the new religious life of his kind ones (i.e. beguines), initiated his daughter,

Mary, at Nivelles, to make her choice for the snowy white (garment) of her religious way of life. (idem., 2006: 39.190)]⁷

Nivelles serves as a metonymy for the blossoming of the beguine movement across the region, and, as we shall see, ultimately as a proxy for Villers abbey itself. Villers abbey was 'the most prominent centre' of the new devotional practices in the period (Mulder-Bakker, 2011: 37). Indeed, the abbey had informal spiritual oversight over beguines in the entire Brabantine area, including women in Nivelles and Oignies (Simons, 2001: 46–7, 113, 266–7 n.21, 280 n.49, 291–2 n. 78B). However, Nivelles was much closer to home for Villers' monks than Oignies. The former was situated approximately 20 kilometres west of the abbey, whilst the latter was some 60 kilometres to the southeast. The abbey's proximity to Nivelles fostered strong reciprocally supportive relationships between the monastic community and the nearby beguines. For example, various abbots from Villers routinely visited Nivelles in order to preach to beguines there, and the Villers community typically petitioned the Nivelloise beguines to pray for the institution during the election process of a new abbot (Simons, 2001: 46).

For the monks of Villers, then, the beguines of Nivelles were *their* beguines; the monks were instrumental in the beguine's religious life, and vice versa. In this context, the office depicts Marie's immense religiosity as a product, at least in part, of Villers' spiritual activities. By underscoring the holy woman's piety – developed at Nivelles – the text implicitly witnesses both the efficacy of Villers' interventions with beguine communities, and the importance of supporting such women. If Nivelles is the crucible of the beguine phenomenon, as proffered in the office, then the monks of Villers are active agents at the epicentre of the beguinal efflorescence spreading across the region.

⁷ Although the Latin states 'benignarum' (kind ones), the translator substitutes 'beguines' here. I have amended the translation to reflect the double valency at play in Goswin's text. See Simons (2014: 40; cf. 2001: 47) for an interpretation of this sentence and phraseology to suggest the proclamation of beguine-hood as a kind of 'novo religio', 'a *new* form of monastic life in its own right, that of "God's benign", with its own rule, comparable to but distinct from the observance of Cistercian or other nuns'.

Marie is identified as 'benigna' (pleasant or kind) seven times in the liturgical office, as Goswin rather transparently replaces the term 'beguine' with a preferable affirmative placeholder (Simons, 2001: 185 n. 1).⁸ 'Beguine' was an ambiguous term at best, with various circulating theories as to its origins (Simons, 2009: 322; 2014: 14).⁹ Some considered it a derivation from the name of the apocryphal clerical founder of the movement Lambert li Bègue (d. 1177), whilst others linked it to the Latin word 'Albigensis' (Cathar heretic). Gautier of Coincy (1950: 183–4, ll. 1521–36) (d. 1236) proposed an even more disparaging history for the term. Though the women claim the term relates to the noun 'benignitas' ('goodness'), Gautier proclaims that the descriptor actually derives from the vernacular word 'begun', 'dung'. It is now generally accepted in scholarship that the authentic etymological root of 'beguine' is *begg-*, denoting the mumbling or muttering of prayer (Simons, 2014: 14–15). As Walter Simons (2009: 322) notes, this etymology brings to the fore the reputation of the beguine as a 'fake devotee, a woman who claimed to be devout but whose utterances were indistinct and therefore not to be trusted'. It is little wonder, then, that Jacques of Vitry and other hagiographers of the holy Liégeoises typically eschew the label altogether for their protagonists. Goswin's persistent usage of 'benigna' instead of 'beguine' reflects this rejection of the latter term's negative associations. Moreover, it demonstrates the author's attempt to reinstate the affirmative etymology for the descriptor that was so derided by Gautier of Coincy and others. 'Beguine' is no longer just derived from 'benignitas', the two are completely synonymous.

Marie of Clairvaux, or of Citeaux

The Villers office is not the only text to highlight the abbey's special link to Marie. The same theme is found in a concise tale that circulated in various texts. According to the version found in Thomas of Cantimpré's (1628: 1.9.40) *Bonum universale de apibus*, Conrad of Urach, ninth abbot of Villers (1204–1214), receives a vision during his nocturnal prayers at Marie's tomb.¹⁰ Passing through Brabant in 1213 or

⁸ For other instances of this usage, see: Simons (2014: 39–40).

⁹ Goswin himself espoused anti-beguine rhetoric. On this, see in particular Simons (2014: 28–31).

¹⁰ This episode is also found in Thomas of Cantimpré's supplement to Marie's *vita*, with only minor differences (Huygens, 2012: 191, ll. 674–88).

1214, he makes a special trip to the graveside, emphasising Marie's spiritual pull.¹¹ In the version of this scene contained in the *Cronica Villariensis monasterii* (1880: 199, ll. 1–5), Conrad always makes sure to visit Marie's tomb when in the area ('cum existens in partibus Brabantie'). Conrad's vision features Marie devoutly genuflecting before the Lord on the abbot's behalf. Thus, his access to God's grace is mediated by the holy woman. After her entreaties, it is she – not the Lord – who consoles Conrad. Villers' library possessed a copy of Thomas' work in the middle of the 13th century (Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, MSS 4458–4459). This story could thus easily circulate within the institution (Mannaerts, 2010: 243 n. 43). Conrad rose through the Cistercian ranks to the highest levels. Upon Honorius III's death in 1227, for example, Conrad was offered the papacy but declined out of modesty, dying the same year. Forging a connection with Conrad, an important member of the Order, shows that all Cistercians have a link with the saint, and she mediates access to God for all of them. Such positioning of Marie as central to the Cistercian Order worked well, it seems: in the 17th century, Chrysostomos Henriquez (1630: 474) includes Marie as a Cistercian nun or oblate in his canon of Cistercian saints (Folkerts, 2006: 228; Mannaerts, 2010: 248).

There is no evidence of the liturgical office's dissemination beyond Villers, and it is absent from other liturgical sources there, including a 13th-century summer antiphoner (Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, MS 6436). Thus, Mannaerts (2010: 248) hypothesises that the office was utilised for 'a kind of local celebration within the Order'. However, Folkerts (2006: 227–8) has discovered a 'remarkably high' rate of ownership of Marie's *vita* in Cistercian institutions: 11 extant manuscripts in Cistercian hands, with six of these dating to the 13th century, and another to the late 14th or early 16th century (Folkerts, 2006: 227–8). The cradle of the Cistercian Rule, Cîteaux Abbey, possessed a copy of the *vita* (now known as Dijon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 662 [401]). Moreover, two manuscripts belonged to Clairvaux Abbey,

¹¹ Timescale extrapolated from the death of Marie in June 1213 and Conrad's election as abbot of Clairvaux at the end of 1214 (Mannaerts, 2010: 243).

including the extant copy produced after the 13th century (Bibliothèque municipale, MS 1434, and MS 401, fols. 49r–73v.) This testifies to a persistent interest in Marie in supremely influential Cistercian monasteries. Though Marie's liturgical office did not travel, she was a significant figure in Cistercian circles. The Villers' office then, operates as a microcosm of a more widespread uptake of Marie as a specifically Cistercian saint. For Marie 'of Villers', we may equally read Marie 'of Clairvaux' or 'of Citeaux'. This is not necessarily surprising. As remarked in the Introduction above, Cistercian religiosity and beguine piety overlap in a variety of ways.

A relatively large number of holy Liégeoises eventually became Cistercian nuns. The choice to adopt a Cistercian monastic life was perhaps a practical one, at least partially. Ernest W. McDonnell (1954: 321) notes that entrance into the Cistercian Order allowed holy women 'protection and guidance' within an established monastic order, safeguarding them from denunciations of disobedience or outright heresy. Whilst other Orders closed ranks against women in the 13th century, the Cistercians continued to welcome new female members. Nevertheless, Cistercian and beguine spirituality meshed well. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux's commentary on the *Song of Songs* – a text that highlights intense physicalised unions with Christ – directly and radically informed Cistercian mysticism (Burton and Kerr, 2011: 127–31). As such, the graphic imagery of Liégeoises' ecstatic episodes, in which the women unite with their beloved Christ, is not particularly startling to Cistercian eyes. Rather, such experiences dovetail into the broader framework of Cistercian spirituality. Furthermore, several of the Liégeoise biographies explicitly delineate the advantages afforded by joining the Cistercian Order in particular. Ida of Nivelles, for example, applauds the Cistercian zeal for apostolic poverty, and specific elements of Cistercian worship practice (Goswin of Bossut, 1630: 2.206–07). In return for offering holy women protection from censure and access to clerical services, the graphic piety of the women invigorated the Order, showcasing its direct connection to God.

In actuality, Marie is only tenuously linked to the Cistercian Order, and she certainly never became a Cistercian nun. In the *vita*, she literally follows in the footsteps of some passing Cistercian monks, as she so esteems their way of life (*VMO*:

1.1.56–57.28–35). Though some scholars theorise that these were monks from Villers abbey, this is not made explicit in the text, and remains a supposition (Mannaerts, 2010: 242). Additionally, Marie is visited in a vision by Bernard of Clairvaux, the founder of the Cistercian Order (*VMO*: 2.8.1170–76). Her two unnamed brothers – previously enmeshed fully in the earthly world – join the Order thanks to her pious example and admonitions (*ibid.*: 2.4.117.560–64). At times, her piety is shown to be superior to that of Cistercian acquaintances. For example, her prayers save a Cistercian monk and a Cistercian nun from terrible despair (*ibid.*: 2.3.114–16.487–538; 1.9.76–79.455–527 respectively).

From such scattered breadcrumbs of explicitly Cistercian devotion in Jacques' biography, Goswin manages to compose a work of staunch Cistercian religiosity. Marie's inherent 'Cistercian-ness' comes to the fore in one instance of inter-textual dialogue between the two texts (Mannaerts, 2010: 252–3). In Marie's *vita*, Bernard of Clairvaux appears to the holy woman, mystically endowed with wings which he then wraps around her (*VMO*: 2.8.142.1170–76). The cleric explains that he absorbs divine Scripture as if an eagle flying high ('quasi alatus [...] velut aquila'). Conventionally, the eagle symbolises St John the Evangelist, due to the saint's supreme powers of sight and lofty spiritual ascent (Hamburger, 2002). For example, in holy woman Lutgard of Awyières's biography, an eagle which appears to her in a vision is explicitly glossed as John the Evangelist (Thomas of Cantimpré, 1701: 1.2.15.240). Thus, the figuration of Bernard as an eagle in Marie's biography is noteworthy. In the liturgical office, the motif of a winged embrace is repeated as Goswin relates Marie's union with God:

Datae sunt ei duae alae aquilae magnae, et volavit in amplexus sponsi sui, ubi ab immense pelago voluptatis Dei. (Goswin of Bossut, 1968: 38.185)

[There were given to her two wings of a great eagle, and she flew into the arms of her spouse, where she was absorbed into the same image by the spirit of the Lord. (*idem.*, 2006: 38.190)]

As Bernard envelops her with his wings in the *vita*, a birdlike Marie is wrapped in the Lord's embrace in the office. In this inter-textual episode, Marie becomes one

with the Lord in one text and with Bernard in the other: the three figures implicitly commingle and in this unitive embrace lies extraordinary spiritual erudition and divine experience. Cistercians following Bernard also follow Marie, and vice versa. Moreover, a vision of Bernard has particular resonance for those in Villers. He was directly involved in Villers' early days, convincing monks to remain in Villers, despite their wish to return to the comforts of Clairvaux (*Cronica Villariensis monasterii* 1880: 196, ll. 15–20). His suggestion of an improved location in the Thyle valley was taken up, and the abbey was ultimately constructed there. In this context, Goswin's near-homophonic relabelling of Marie as 'benigna' instead of a 'beguine' ensures that Villers' bride of Christ, clearly of the Cistercian persuasion, is not tainted by any association with heresy – and nor is Villers itself.

Marie of Oignies, formerly of Nivelles: Tourist Attraction Par Excellence

An anonymous short text chronicling the history of Oignies' priory, composed at some point after 1233, offers us another textual incarnation of Marie.¹² Goswin of Bossut conceives of Nivelles as integral to Marie's identity as it was the location in which she embraced fully her religious career. By contrast, the *History* manipulates the holy woman's religious origin story to emphasise Oignies' important role in the development of Marie's piety. Thus, the priory promotes – and profits from – Marie as an extraordinarily holy individual. Marie, however, is initially side-lined in the text in favour of a focus on other actors in Oignies' history (*VMOH*: 209–212.1–79; Wiethaus, 2004: 160–62).¹³ When she finally enters the scene, over two-thirds of the way into the text, it is as if the author is issuing a tourism briefing:

¹² The *History* is contained as an appendix in: Huygens (2012: 209–13). I refer to this text as *VMOH*, noting page and line numbers respectively. Huygens's edition replaces two earlier and imperfect editions of the text, prepared with variant manuscripts: *Historia* 1729 and *Historia* 1873. The English translation of the work(s), which includes discrepancies between the texts in footnotes, is: *History of the Foundation* (2006). I refer to this text as *VMOHEng*, citing paragraphs and page numbers respectively.

¹³ In fact, Jacques of Vitry features much more prominently in the *History* than Marie. For example, in *VMOH*, the description of Marie occupies ll. 76–84, whilst a much larger chunk of text (ll. 84–108) is devoted to Jacques. The details regarding Jacques are cut from the same cloth as those relating to Marie in terms of highlighting the special importance of Oignies to the cleric.

Florebat diebus illis Oigniacy preciosissima Christi margarita Maria de Nivelles, cuius vitam innumeris virtuosam miraculis, posteris mandaverunt qui suo persepe patrocinio sunt gavisi: in dei enim nomine infirmos curavit, leprosos mundavit, demones ex obsessis corporibus effugavit, cuius etiam vestis inpresentiarum reverenter apud nos custodie mancipata, mulieres a partu laborantes ipsa circumdate de mortis periculo liberantur, felici puerperio gratulantes. (*VMOH*: 2012.79–84)

[In those days there flourished at Oignies that most precious pearl of Christ, Marie of Nivelles. Those who enjoyed her patronage have transmitted to posterity the (story of) her life, which was endowed with the virtue of many miracles. In God's name she cured the sick, cleansed lepers, and drove out demons from possessed bodies (...). Her very clothing is in our reverent possession still. When women in labour are wrapped in it, they are freed from the danger of death and rejoice in a happy birth. (*VMOHEng*: 6.172)]¹⁴

Here, Marie is identified as 'of Nivelles' ('de Nivelles') rather than 'of Oignies' ('Oigniacy') as in Jacques de Vitry's *vita*. Oignies is the place in which she blossomed ('florebat') as a spiritual woman, highlighting the powers of the place for religious elevation. Though she may originally be 'of Nivelles', Marie as a holy woman is ultimately fashioned by Oignies, and her appellation in the title reflects this. Yet, Jacques' *vita* clearly shows that Marie's holiness manifested long before she ever came to Oignies. The place had little to do with developing her spirituality. In fact, Oignies is her refuge from the demands of countless individuals to see her and be near her enviable spirituality in Willambroux (*VMO*: 2.9.146.1251–56).

The author of the *History* modulates the earlier biography in order to emphasise the importance of Oignies in Marie's spiritual journey. The description of the holy

¹⁴ My parentheses. The translator includes the phrase 'and, what is more, raised the dead', which I have elided. The editor of *VMOH*, Huygens, also suppresses this phrase in its original Latin, footnoting it as an addition in manuscript B (Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belge, MS 1751–62). It is preserved as integral to the text in an earlier edition, based on this manuscript: 'nec non, quod majus est, mortuos suscitavit' (*Historia*, 1873: 105).

woman as the 'most precious pearl of Christ' ('pretiosissima Christi margarita') is highly reminiscent of Jacques' description of Marie as a 'surpassingly excellent pearl' ('preciosa et precellente margarita') (*VMOEng*: prol.9.49; *VMO*: prol.52.214–15). This suggests that the author of the historical text was familiar with Jacques' biography, and had at least read the *vita* with a somewhat attentive eye. In this context, the refashioning of the contours of Marie's religious journey appears to be a calculated undertaking in order to accentuate – fraudulently – Oignies' role in developing her piety.

The author's remarks as to the efficiency of the apparel for pregnant women authenticate the relics, and target a particular demographic of would-be visitors. Though it is possible such *peripartum* healings occurred, there are no accounts of miracles wrought through Marie's clothes during childbirth in the *vita* or its supplement, and Marie herself is childless. There is evidence, however, that Oignies possessed some of Marie's woollen clothes as relics in the thirteenth century, though they are lost to us now (Bolton, 2006: 213; Papebroeck, 1707: 2.9–12.632–33). Oignies had the supply of Marie's clothing, they just needed to stimulate enough demand. It is clear that there was at least some demand for Marie's help during childbirth. A reliquary devoted to Marie, found in Aiseau, proclaims that 'Christian mothers invoke this magnificent saint in particular to have a happy delivery' ('[l]es mères Chrétiennes invoquent spécialement cette grande sainte pour obtenir une heureuse délivrance') (my translation; original in Brown [2008b: 258]). The author carefully curates his text to show the wonders of Oignies to those who may be particularly inclined to seek out protection and healing. As Ulrike Wiethaus (2004: 163) remarks, 'Marie's miracle-working relics formed part of Oignies' cultural capital'.

It seems that the *History's* commitment to building a market for Marie, and her relics in Oignies, paid off. Marie and her relics persisted in being a powerful draw in Liège-Brabant for many years. Pilgrims flocked to venerate her tomb until the 17th century (Hucq, 1928: 231–44). On 12 October 1608, the bishop of Namur François Buisseret conducted a papally approved ceremony to open Marie's sarcophagus and exhibit her relics before transferring them to a series of reliquaries for safekeeping.

So many pilgrims arrived for the occasion that an altar had to be erected in the open air, and the relics were guarded through the night to safeguard them from the sticky fingers of zealous pilgrims.

Conclusion: Marie of Wallonia

In 1226, Jacques of Vitry ordered the exhumation of Marie's remains in order to place them in a shrine positioned close to the altar in Oignies. At the same time, he granted an indulgence to anyone who came to revere them. This equated to a 'local canonization', though Marie was never officially canonized, only beatified (Mulder-Bakker, 2006: 10). In a very literal sense, then, Marie became indissociable from Oignies, at least for a while. Her holiness afforded Oignies valuable spiritual capital, thereby increasing the locale's reputation for spiritual significance. In a feedback loop, Oignies' reputation served to underscore the exemplary piety of one of its own, Marie. Yet this loop was not unbreakable, nor unassailable. One effect of official canonization is to stabilise a saint's geographical affiliation, as the Church typically authorises and promulgates a specific, or preferred, moniker for the canonized individual. Jacques' local veneration of Marie does not afford the same concretisation. As demonstrated above, various actors laid claim to a preferential relationship with the holy woman. It is impossible to know with any certainty how precisely Marie's contemporaries would have identified her, or the extent to which a text's medieval audience would feel personally connected to her piety. However, what is clear is that appropriation of Marie, textual and otherwise, is not solely a medieval phenomenon. Her 'symbolic capital' (Warren, 2005: 133) remains an asset that various parties continue to seek to leverage.

A number of towns in modern Belgium attempt to forge a special connection to the holy woman in order to attract tourists. Nivelles promotes Marie through its tourist information board: she is amongst a (short) list of notable worthies native to the town (Office du Tourisme Nivelles [n. date]). The tourist board catalogues Marie as 'Saint Marie of Nivelles, also known as of Oignies' ('Sainte Marie de Nivelles, dite d'Oignies'), flagging the town's centrality to the holy woman's identity. Whilst Marie may be 'also known' as 'of Oignies', she is more accurately a woman 'of Nivelles'. Moreover, the three sentence biographical blurb that accompanies her listing

stresses that Marie is one of the town's own. The sketch opens with the following proclamation, localising Marie's birthplace to a specific street: '[b]orn in a maison situated on rue de Mons' ('[n]ée dans une maison sise rue de Mons'). The holy woman's later holy exploits all unspool from this house, on this street, in Nivelles. Surely, that's worth a visit? And maybe a visit to the gift shop, plus a spot of lunch?

Nivelles faces competition from other localities for 'possession' of Marie with claims of varying degrees of legitimacy. In 1980, for example, the municipal council of Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve – a town approximately 30 kilometres north-east of Nivelles and 40 kilometres north of Oignies in the Belgian province of Walloon Brabant – named a leafy residential street after Marie (Haquin, n. date). There is no evidence of a link between Marie and Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve in the *vita*, liturgical office, or *History*. Other towns have less tenuous claims to the holy woman. Aiseau-Presles, the commune in which Oignies priory is now located, boasts an orchestra known as the 'Philharmonie Royale Sainte Marie d'Oignies', alongside a women's association which bears the holy woman's name ('Amicale féminine Sainte Marie d'Oignies à Aiseau') (aiseau-presles.be [n. date 1], [n. date 2]).

In Namur, capital city of the province of the same name, we find a former church rectory known since 2014 as the 'Garden of the Cloister of Marie of Oignies' ('Jardin du cloître Marie d'Oignies') at 35 Rue de Fer (Société archéologique de Namur [n. date]). This building, the headquarters for the Namurois archaeological society, profits from a fairly long-standing association between the town and Oignies priory, Marie's home. Oignies is not located in the province of Namur, but instead the neighbouring province of Hainaut. Nevertheless, from 1818 onwards, Namur has been home to the 'Trésor d'Oignies', the resplendent collection of relics and fine artefacts – including a cup apocryphally claimed to have belonged to Marie – originally belonging to the institution.¹⁵ In 2010, the Musée provincial des Arts anciens du Namurois – one of several museums run by the Namurois archaeological

¹⁵ On this collection, see in particular: Collet (2012); Courtoy (1951–1952). On Marie's cup, see: Collet (2012: 27). Various objects with more legitimate connections to Marie were historically part of the Oignies collection, but have now been absorbed into other holdings (Courtoy, 1951–1952: 235–46). This includes Marie's thirteenth-century finger phylactery, and her seventeenth-century shrine and jaw reliquary. For an examination of such artefacts, see: De Vriendt (2013).

society – acquired the collection, heretofore under the protection of the Soeurs de Notre Dame de Namur. This museum is located just a few doors down from the ‘Garden of the Cloister of Marie of Oignies’ at 24 Rue de Fer. The society’s decision to name their new headquarters in homage to Marie underlines their relatively recent role as guardian of the Oignies treasure. In 1978, the hoard was named as one of the country’s ‘seven wonders’ by the Belgian Commissaire Général for Tourism (Collet, 2012: 37). Stewardship over the collection is a high-profile undertaking, then. The archaeological society’s reference to ‘Marie of Oignies’ paradoxically serves to flag the fact that *Namur* now has possession of the priceless and unique ‘Trésor’, a certain draw for tourists and testament to the society’s own high quality professional reputation. Claims from different towns for ‘ownership’ of Marie need not necessarily be antagonistic, however.

Since 1989, Walloon governmental agencies have organised a series of ‘journées du patrimoine’ (roughly translated as ‘regional heritage days’) to celebrate – and publicise – the area’s cultural riches. Wallonia is one of Belgium’s three regions; the larger administrative and socio-cultural unit to which all the towns which individually lay claim to Marie belong. Studying the catalogues produced annually in support of the ‘journées du patrimoine’ reveals the way in which Marie of Oignies is deployed as a cultural asset ‘belonging’ to several Walloon towns in turn, depending on the needs of the organisers on a given year to drum up touristic interest.¹⁶ Marie features in eight of the 28 catalogue volumes currently available (1989–2016) produced in support of the cultural festivities. Her affiliation shifts throughout these appearances. Most often, she is deployed as a character in the history of Oignies abbey, presented as a draw for visitors to the village of Aiseau in the commune of Aiseau-Presles (*JPW* 1992: 26, 1994: 25, 1995: 20, 2001: 36, 2002: 34, 2004: 22).¹⁷ At other times, she is referred to in support of Nivelles’ cultural heritage (2006: 15, 2012: 12). Though she is most often referred to as ‘of Oignies’, she is also identified as ‘of Nivelles’ (2001: 36; 2012: 12).

¹⁶ These are published as annual volumes of *Journées européennes du Patrimoine en Wallonie*. I refer to these as *JPW*.

¹⁷ Some refer only to the glassworks named after Marie, ‘Glaces de Sainte-Marie d’Oignies’, which took over the ruined priory after the French Revolution: 1992: 26, 1994: 25, 1995: 20.

The most telling presentation of Marie occurs in the 2012 catalogue. Here, she is presented as one of two ‘charitable heroes’ from Nivelles (‘héros caritatifs nivellois’) for her work caring for lepers in Willambroux (an area outside of Nivelles), along with the doctor and professor Louis Suetin (d. 1862), who tended the wounded in the Battle of Waterloo. The pairing of Marie and Suetin feels rather tenuous – though the pair both cared for the sick, they did so in extraordinarily different contexts – until one reads that the remains of both are housed in a former Recollect monastery in Nivelles. A tempting proposition for a historically-minded tourist: two for the price of one, or at least one visit.

The brochure refers to Marie as ‘Marie de Oignies’ in a header for the small section in which the holy woman’s vital statistics are provided. This heading suggests that the moniker ‘of Oignies’ is the name by which Marie will most likely be known by readers without much historical knowledge of the area. However, the opening sentence of the section forcefully underscores her relationship to Nivelles, including the town’s name three times: ‘Born in Nivelles in 1177, Marie of Nivelles, also known as “of Oignies”, settles at the age of 14 in the leprosarium at Nivelles’ (‘Née à Nivelles en 1177, Marie de Nivelles dite « de Oignies » s’installe, à 14 ans, dans la léproserie de Nivelles’). Yet this systematic reclamation of Marie is not stable. In a facing column of text on the same page, Marie is now referred to as ‘the Nivelloise saint Marie of Oignies’ (‘la sainte nivelloise Marie d’Oignies’). Whilst this phrasing retains the Nivellois connection, it does so with much less urgency.

The theme of events for 2012’s heritage showcase was ‘[f]amous figures in Wallonia’ (‘[g]randes figures en Wallonie’) (title page). Marie, then, is presented as one of the region’s illustrious inhabitants, a holy woman who incarnates the benevolent spirit that flows through the area more generally.¹⁸ Oignies, Nivelles, and

¹⁸ Strikingly, Marie is not included in the 2016 catalogue, which explicitly showcased Wallonia’s religious and philosophical heritage. Her religiosity is not well-known enough, it seems, to be marketable in this context, nor is there any notable contemporary devotion for her. Instead, Nivelles advertised itself with reference to its first patron and co-founder of its abbey, Gertrude of Nivelles (d. 659) (*JPW*, 2016: 27–8). Gertrude is an apposite choice: popular devotion to her remains strong. For some 700 years, and since at least 1276, residents of Nivelles have undertaken an annual procession in her honour, ‘Le Tour Sainte Gertrude’ (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles et al. [n. date]).

Villers are all located in modern-day Wallonia. The medieval prince-bishopric of Liège and roughly half of the medieval diocese of Liège also map onto the region. Marie's multifaceted identity – moulded by various invested parties – is brought together in an affiliation not limited to a specific locale, but one that encompasses the holy woman's various (manipulated) allegiances. She is, ultimately, Marie of Wallonia.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Alicia Spencer-Hall is a Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London. Her research interests focus on the potentiality of trans-historical critical engagement with medieval literature. She principally studies European literature produced from the 11th to the 15th century. Female hagiographies, particularly those from the 13th-century Low Countries, have been a particular topic of analysis in her research and publications. Her first monograph is forthcoming from Amsterdam University Press as *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience*, due to appear in autumn 2017. The book, a revision of her PhD thesis, brings theoretical perspectives from 21st-century film studies to analyse the divine visions represented in the Latin biographies of the group known as the 'Holy Women of Liège'. She argues ultimately for a spectrum of visual experience running from the medieval to the modern period, a non-hierarchical and interconnected series of possible viewing positions which inform both medieval and modern experiences. Another book, *Medieval Twitter*, is under contract with Arc-Medieval and the Medieval

Institute Press (Kalamazoo). Her current project is a comparative study of medieval and modern chronic pain in the context of theories of disability.

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