Introduction: Whose Story?

The residents of Dülmen had plenty to talk about and worry over in March of 1813. By then, the Westphalian village had seen three regime changes over the course of a decade of war. As the front line of the battle between Napoleon’s Imperial France and the other European powers had shifted, passing soldiers made camp in Dülmen’s fields and requisitioned its goods – over 15,000 of them at one point, overwhelming the community’s 2,000 inhabitants. The French Revolution had come to their doorstep: the annexed village’s Augustinian convent was secularized, its peasants emancipated. Twenty of Dülmen’s young men had just recently been conscripted into Napoleon’s Grand Armeé, joining its long march to Russia. Now the Russian campaign was over, all twenty Dülmener soldiers were dead, and not only retreating French but Prussian and Russian troops were heading Dülmen’s way.

Despite all these pressing concerns, a growing number of Dülmeners were talking in the streets and taverns about something else entirely: Anna Katharina Emmerick, the bedridden spinster forced to leave Dülmen’s convent upon its secularization. This peasant woman, rumor

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1 At the time of Emmerick’s birth, Dülmen was part of the Prince-Bishopric of Münster. The last Prince-Bishop of Münster died in exile in Vienna in 1801, and the Prince-Bishopric was formally dissolved by the Reichsdeputationshauptschluß of 25 February 1803 (for more on this document, see p. 14 below). Dülmen then fell to Duke Anna Emanuel von Croy of Regensburg. In 1806 it changed hands again, becoming part of the Duchy of Arenberg. Ludwig von Arenberg, supported by the French, would institute the Code Napoleon in 1809. When he was captured by the English, Dülmen was annexed by France directly and became part of the Lippe Departement in 1811. Following Napoleon’s defeat in Russia and subsequent retreat, Prussian troops occupied Dülmen in November 1813, becoming the effective ruling power. Dülmen would formally become part of the Prussian province of Westphalia at the Congress of Vienna in June 1815. Clemens Engling, Unbequem und ungewöhnlich: Anna Katharina Emmerick historisch und theologisch neu entdeckt (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2005), 77-79.

had it, possessed supernatural powers. Abstaining from all food, she lived solely on communion wafers and an occasional teaspoon of beef broth. Visions of angels, demons, and saints filled her sleeping and waking hours. Divine inspiration allowed her to see into men’s hearts and predict the future. Most startling of all, she bore a mysterious cross-shaped mark on her breast, as well as prick-marks around the crown of her head, and open wounds in her hands, feet, and right side: the blessed stigmata, the wounds of Christ. Even in the midst of war and privation, this marginalized woman commanded Dülmeners’ attention. Whether they ridiculed it as nonsense or affirmed it in reverence, the whole village was spreading Emmerick’s story.

This flurry of competing rumors and opinions was exactly what Dean Bernhard Rensing, Dülmen’s parish priest, had hoped to avoid. He had learned of Emmerick’s stigmata from her confessor, Father Joseph Limberg, around the start of the New Year. Taking charge of the situation, Rensing urged the handful of people privy to this information – Emmerick herself, her sister Gertrude, Fr. Limberg, and Emmerick’s closest friends, Klara Söntgen and Abbé Jean Lambert – to keep the matter quiet. In late February or early March, however, one of them apparently let the shocking secret out.³ Now it was time for him, as Dülmen’s priest and representative of the Church, to take control of the narrative.

Accordingly, Rensing paid Anna Katharina Emmerick an official visit in order – he thought – to ascertain the real story, once and for all. Highly skeptical of anything supernatural, he felt confident he knew what the story would be. Anticipating either a self-harming hysterical or a self-righteous con-woman, Rensing arranged for two local physicians, Franz Wilhelm Wesener

³ Anecdotal evidence suggests Klara Söntgen was probably the person responsible for making Emmerick’s stigmata publicly known. See for instance Franz Wilhelm Wesener, Tagebuch, 26 March 1813, in Winfried Hümpfner OSA, ed., Tagebuch des Dr. med. Franz Wilhelm Wesener über die Augustinerin Anna Katharina Emmerick unter Beifügung anderer auf sie bezüglicher Briefe und Akten (Würzburg 1926), 10.
and Peter Krauthausen, to join him on his investigation. Neither seemed likely to be misled by religious zeal or false appearances. Krauthausen had regularly attended to Emmerick during her nearly ten years in Dülmen’s Augustinian convent, and while he generally liked her, he was also familiar with both her ostentatious piety and her long medical history. Wesener, for his part, was a lapsed Catholic, and had publicly scoffed at the very idea of miraculous stigmata at a tavern the previous evening.

A formal document records March 23, 1813 as the day this trio ascended the stairs to Emmerick’s rented room, in the loft above a public inn. There they were met by Fr. Limberg and Abbé Lambert. Together, these five men crowded around her bed. They then confronted Emmerick with the question she would be continually asked for the rest of her life: where did her mysterious wounds come from? With one of the party acting as stenographer, they waited for this frail woman to tell her story.

1st Question: Explain before God our just Judge, who punishes falsehood, where the cross-shaped wound on your breast came from?
Answer: I can’t say, I myself no longer know.

2nd Question: Tell truthfully and according to your conscience, how the wounds in your hands and feet and in your right side came to be?
Answer: That I also cannot say, any more than the former.

3rd Question: Did you not feel it at all when you received these wounds in your hands and feet and side?

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Answer: Yes, I felt the pain, but I didn’t know that there were wounds.\(^7\)

Incredibly, Emmerick claimed she had no idea she had stigmata until her confessor, Fr. Limberg, saw the wounds and pointed them out to her. According to Limberg’s own notes, this occurred on December 31, 1812.\(^8\) For her part, Emmerick could only say (in response to a fourth question) that the stigmata had appeared “sometime before New Year’s.”

Such evasive and unlikely answers would seem to provide ample grounds for skepticism.

Only two more questions follow in the transcript, which elicited brief and predictable replies.

5\(^{th}\) Question: Have you prayed to our Savior for the special grace of His making you bodily more like Him, that is, through [receiving] His Five Wounds?

Answer: Yes.

6\(^{th}\) Question: Are you, in good conscience, firmly convinced that you yourself did not make the cross [wound] on your breast, the wounds in your hands and feet and side, as well as the wounds on your forehead; and that you have not, to your knowledge, received them from any other person; but rather, that you have received them through especial divine grace, and through a true miracle?

Answer: Of that I am convinced; regarding [whether it is] a miracle, I hope and believe that [it is so].\(^9\)

It was a brief, unenlightening interview, conducted by three well-educated men, of a barely-literate peasant woman. Despite this seemingly inauspicious beginning, however, the encounter produced a startling outcome. The doctors went on to examine her body, while Dean Rensing

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examined her conscience. More questions undoubtedly followed, though they are not recorded in the official report. Before the day was out all five gentlemen present signed this document, which Rensing would soon send to his ecclesiastical superior in Münster. In it they formally attested that “through the Augustinian nun Anna Katharina Emmerich [sic] . . . God our Father made us worthy to behold his wonder in an extraordinary way, to give witness to the salvation of our own souls and the salvation of our fellow men.” Emmerick, they were convinced, was a saintly woman who had miraculously received her stigmata from God.

This encounter, together with countless others over the eleven years before Emmerick’s death in 1824, raises an obvious question – one that can be posed in two different ways. One could ask: what did Anna Katharina Emmerick say and do to elicit such a response from people, including many who were predisposed to dismiss her as a hysterical or a fraud? Or alternatively: what did others, including many skeptics, see in Anna Katharina Emmerick that led them to believe she was a genuine stigmatic and visionary? In other words, did Emmerick create herself as a mystic, or did she become a mystic through the veneration and legitimization of others? Who really controlled the story that was spreading through the streets of Dülmen?

This chapter is an attempt to answer that question. Its task is complicated by the distance that separates the modern historian, temporally and mentally, from Emmerick the “authentic” individual. When looking back from a contemporary vantage point at Emmerick in 1813, the view is obstructed by two centuries of accumulated hagiography, veneration, criticism and skepticism. These layers of interpretation act as a filter that inevitably colors what can be seen. This chapter’s analysis will therefore confine itself not only to sources from Emmerick’s

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lifetime, but sources exclusively from 1813: the very beginning of her public notoriety, when the influence of her growing reputation had the least impact on individuals’ accounts.

A number of diaries, letters, and official documents concerning Emmerick survive from this period. The first body of sources comes from the aforementioned Dean Rensing, who was ordered by the Vicar General in Münster to keep a detailed diary of his interactions with Emmerick and send regular reports. Rensing also supplemented his own observations with transcribed interviews he conducted with Emmerick’s relatives, friends, and former fellow nuns. The Church in Münster also received reports from a second clergyman, Dean Bernhard Overberg, one of the Vicar General’s most trusted colleagues. Overberg made several trips to see Emmerick, taking copious notes of their conversations. A third rich source for Emmerick’s life in 1813 comes from the diary of Dr. Wesener, the Dülmen physician whose initial skepticism gave way to deep reverence for her. Finally, nobleman and Catholic convert Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg wrote and circulated an extended account of his audience with Emmerick during a visit to Dülmen in the summer of 1813.

Noticeably absent from this otherwise deep cache of sources is anything written by Emmerick herself. With only a few letters attributed to her in existence, essentially all our knowledge of her comes to us second- and third-hand. The men and women who wrote about her in diaries, letters, argumentative pamphlets and official documents brought their own beliefs and assumptions to their encounters with her; these in turn influenced the questions they asked and the conclusions they drew. Reconstructing from other accounts, so far as possible, Emmerick’s story – and determining whether it was, in fact, Emmerick’s story – is nonetheless worth attempting, because of how much it may be able to tell us. As an alleged stigmatic with a popular following who emerged in the midst of Napoleonic occupation, her story provides an entrée into
the state of German Catholicism at the moment of its transition from Enlightenment austerity to post-Revolutionary fervor. As a celebrated and much-discussed medical curiosity of her day, she reveals the complicated interplay between medicine and religiously-infused metaphysics at the turn of the nineteenth century. As a former nun at the center of ongoing, urgent discussions among village priests and diocesan officials, she can tell us something about how Germans’ lived religion was shaped through interactions between lay Catholics and the various levels of the clerical hierarchy. Furthermore, her continued cult of veneration, culminating in her beatification by Pope John Paul II in 2004, can serve as a red thread through the tapestry of German Catholic culture, a vantage point from which to consider continuity and change in this community over time.

Subsequent chapters will take up each of these various threads in turn. Here, however, the focus is on exploring the extent to which Emmerick, an individual in a position of socioeconomic inferiority, was nonetheless able to shape her own identity, tell her own story, and make her own history. The goal then will not be to capture the elusive quantity that is Emmerick the “authentic” person, but rather to excavate her own self-fashioning from underneath the layers of interpretation others placed upon her. This is a foundational task on which all subsequent analysis of Emmerick’s wounds, her visions, and her cult must be based. The reasons are twofold: first, in tracing the evolution of Emmerick’s meaning for German Catholics over time, and who participated in this process of meaning-making, it would be easy to erase her own agency, making her simply a symbol created and manipulated by others. Analysis of Emmerick’s own self-fashioned identity is a corrective against this pitfall. Second, in order to fully appreciate how and why contemporaries and succeeding generations reinvented Emmerick as symbol and
cult figure, it is necessary to uncover the “original,” self-fashioned Emmerick from which these later permutations derived.

At first, Emmerick’s role as mystic and stigmatic might seem to make the task of recovering her self-fashioned identity more difficult. The interplay of gender, identity, agency, and power is a recurring theme in scholarship on women and mysticism in the Catholic Church, but one that has yet to reach a consensus. On the one hand, scholars such as Frank Graziano and Michael Carroll have viewed women like Emmerick through the lens of institutional oppression and psychological disorders. In their analyses, “spiritual mortifications” become “masochism;” “religious fasting” becomes “anorexia;” “visions” become “hallucinations;” “auditory revelations” become “schizophrenia.” Their arguments do not simply replace one set of labels with another, however: they construct mystics as a product of their internalized, psychologically damaging discourses of human (and especially female) imperfection and inferiority. Studies of female mystics in this vein thus focus primarily on the reconstructed psyche of the individual in question, and secondarily on Christianity, monasticism, and gender as institutions and discourses of social control.¹¹ A growing body of research on the psychosomatic aspects of emotional trauma, and the potential links between conditions like anorexia and self-mutilation, bolsters this reading of mystics and stigmatics.¹² The status of these tortured women as “mystics,” therefore, is due to their disordered self-image, and to others’ interpretation of them as “mystics” rather than as masochists, anorexics, or schizophrenics.


On the other hand, Caroline Walker Bynum, Andrea Dickens, and others have interpreted Catholic female mysticism in a different light. Without wholly denying the oppressive discourses which limited women’s real and imagined possibilities, they nonetheless argue for women’s ability to manipulate these discourses and exercise some agency within them. In their view, mysticism functions as a suite of ideas and practices which can provide Catholic women an alternative means of exercising power. By making this argument, these scholars shift the point of origin for women’s mysticism from the individual psyche to the individual encounter with her historical context: her reading of theological ideas, and her response to what she perceives as her society’s greater or lesser fidelity to them. Thus, when women like Hildegard von Bingen, Theresa of Avila, or Catherine of Siena found the Church and society of their time falling short of its religious duty, claims to mystical inspiration provided them a way to make their concerns and beliefs known. Meanwhile, the physically punishing asceticism and gory wounds that characterize so many of these women become for these scholars signs to be read in the light of the mystic’s theology and cultural context, revealing meanings other than those attributed to them, perhaps anachronistically, by modern psychology.

These contrasting approaches reflect the paradoxical, uncomfortable nature of women mystics like Emmerick for modern observers: spiritually powerful and socially abased, with ecstatic minds and tortured bodies. Thus the conundrum: can taking on such a revered role be, in fact, debasing? Can inflicting such graphic self-harm be, in fact, empowering? It is in fact Emmerick’s mysticism, however, that provides the key to understanding her own sense of identity and purpose. Drawing on the insights of all these scholars, this chapter will acknowledge the disturbing nature of Emmerick’s afflictions while taking seriously her attempts to own and

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interpret them. Organized thematically, the first section will consider Emmerick’s adolescence and her life in the convent; the second will look at Emmerick’s visions, proselytizing, and spiritual pronouncements; finally, the last section will draw on the insights of the previous two in analyzing the apotheosis of Emmerick’s self-fashioning as a mystic, her exhibiting of stigmata. Thus examining Emmerick’s determined pursuit of what she saw as her spiritual vocation, her confident and distinctive voice that comes through in her visions, and her transformative embrace of her own suffering, it will argue that Emmerick’s story is one of agency without autonomy and non-conformity without disobedience. Though disadvantaged by birth, she became stigmatized by choice.

*Unconventional Nun*

Choice might seem to be an unlikely theme in the life of a nineteenth-century Westphalian nun. From birth, Emmerick’s life choices were limited by her gender, her poverty, and her social station. Later, Imperial France absorbed Dülmen and its environs and imposed the *Code Napoléon*, sweeping away estate privileges and feudal obligations. As a penniless woman, however, Emmerick was on the margins of this emancipation. In any case, in becoming a nun in 1803, she had seemingly surrendered what few choices remained open to her: where and with whom to live, how to dress, how to work, and how to pray. When the historical context and biographical details of Emmerick’s life are taken into account, however, a different picture of her story emerges: one of determined insistence on a particular calling, and a particular way of living out that calling, in the face of stiff opposition. Even as she vowed obedience to the Church, Emmerick also defied the social conventions of her class and the expressed wishes of her parents. Her zealous embrace of religious life, furthermore, went equally against the grain of her
new convent community. As Rensing, Overberg, Wesener, von Stolberg and others would discover as they delved into the details of her past, Emmerick’s confidence in her own self-fashioned identity meant that she was unafraid of being an unconventional nun.

Emmerick’s adolescence and spiritual formation played out against a backdrop of tremendous changes that would place not only her own vocational ambitions but Catholicism’s centuries-old monastic tradition itself at risk. She was born in 1774, as the Age of Enlightenment was approaching its apotheosis: the same year the First Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia, Goethe published *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, James Cook was discovering new islands in the Pacific, and Joseph Priestley discovered the element oxygen. 1774 was also the year Louis XVI ascended to the throne, amid pageantry proclaiming him king by divine right— an indication that even as philosophers, scientists, explorers, and revolutionaries pushed the boundaries of human reason and social convention, the “old regime” of monarchical Europe was prepared to push back.

The violent clash between these two worldviews for the soul of Europe took place during Emmerick’s formative years. She turned sixteen two months after rioters had stormed the Bastille in 1789; she first announced her intention to enter a convent in 1792, as another Paris mob stormed the Palace of the Tuileries. 1792 was also the year of the so-called September Massacres, a mass execution of political prisoners in Paris, including three bishops and over two hundred priests. Living in a small village in rural Westphalia, Emmerick was not a participant in these events, but the ideas of the Enlightenment and later the French Revolution would set in motion dramatic changes in institutions which shaped her daily life: the Westphalian church and state.
Many educated German Catholics, both clerical and lay, had become increasingly uncomfortable with the more supernatural aspects of Baroque Catholicism in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Attacking religious behavior and traditions they saw as superstitious, they took up the banner of Enlightenment as eagerly as Protestants. Religious orders and monasteries, bastions from the medieval past in Germany’s sacral landscape, were for these men epitomizers and perpetuators of this backward religiosity. In his much-reprinted *Allgemeine Geschichte der Jesuiten* (General History of the Jesuits), for example, Bavarian official and one-time Catholic seminarian Peter Philipp Wolf decried the infamous order for having “[driven] out the use of sound reason through their sensual religiosity, and implanted in the sensibilities of all Catholics an irresistible tendency toward enthusiasm and superstition.”

The older religious orders faced equally sharp criticism. Another official, Heinrich Wasseroth, accused monastics of “tempting the people in their area through the recounting and exhibiting of false and invented miracles, thereby bringing themselves acclaim.” One can only imagine what he would have made of the spectacle surrounding Emmerick. Wasseroth went on to decry convents in particular as “more shameful than useful to the state, and little or no use to religion.” His fellow Catholic Johann Adam Ickstatt echoed this utilitarian criticism: “how many more happy subjects would our Catholic Princes have, if the monks and nuns had not sworn off the sacrament of holy matrimony? . . . How many armies could we not form out of our monks? How many upstanding

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15 “. . . die die Mönche . . . durch Erzählung und Vorzeigung falscher und erdichteter Mirakel, das Volk in diese Oerter zu locken, und dieselbe dadurch in großen Ruf zu bringen.” Heinrich Joseph Watteroth, *Die Reformation in Deutschland zu Ende des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Vienna, 1781), 35.

housewives would our nuns not therefore supply?” 17 The reality was in fact more complicated: monasteries had long been important centers of education, with celebrated libraries and schools that had trained the sons of elites for generations. German monks, in fact, were also among those participating in the Enlightenment and its call for reform in the Church. 18 Nonetheless, many believed that monastics were the opposite of the model modern citizen: unproductive and un-Enlightened, leaches on the German economy, their monasteries clutching countless acres of land in the “dead hand of the church.” Franz Wilhelm von Spiegel zum Desenberg, a nobleman from Emmerick’s own province of Westphalia, summed up Enlightened opinion thus: monks and nuns were no more than an “ignorant class of religious vagabonds.” 19

Until recently, German-speaking lands had enjoyed what Derek Beales has described as “the most spectacular efflorescence of the monasteries, especially of the Old Orders, in the whole of Europe,” both in terms of sheer numbers and in wealth, intellectual output and architectural splendor. 20 Now, however, changing tastes in religious expression and flagging support from church and state elites eroded religious houses’ foundation in German society. Economic difficulties hastened the monasteries’ decline. Westphalian religious houses, including Dülmen’s Augustinian convent of Agnetenberg, had survived the Reformation, the Thirty Years’ War, and the Seven Years’ War in part by going into massive debt. By the end of the eighteenth century, Agnetenberg’s debt amounted to several thousands of talers. Fewer Catholics were leaving money to convents and monasteries in their wills, and fewer were pursuing a monastic vocation,

17 Christian Friedrich Menschenfreund (pseud. Johann Adam Ickstatt), Untersuchung der Frage: Warum ist der Wohlstand der protestantischen Länder so gar viel größer als der catholischen? (Salzburg and Freisingen, 1772), 85; quoted in Printy, Enlightenment and the Creation of German Catholicism, 62.
18 Printy, Enlightenment and the Creation of German Catholicism, 5.
which exacerbated the problem.\textsuperscript{21} The number of Agnetenberg’s resident nuns fell to less than ten, an all-time low. A 1799 visitation to the convent by the Vicar General of the diocese reported lax observance of the Augustinian Rule, bitter conflicts among the sisters, and systemic financial mismanagement. The Prince-Bishop of Münster seriously considered closing the nearly-350-year-old convent for good.\textsuperscript{22}

The disruption and devastation of the Napoleonic wars delivered the \textit{coup de grâce}. In the process, just how weak elite support for the monasteries was, even among German Catholics, became crystal clear. The many princes of the Holy Roman Empire failed to present a united front to Napoleon’s invading army, losing their territories in his path. For Enlightened and traditionalist, Catholic and Protestant rulers alike, the seizure of lands held by Germany’s monastic houses beckoned as a way to recoup their losses. Thus, in one of its last acts before its dissolution, the Diet of the Holy Roman Empire promulgated the \textit{Reichsdeputationshauptschluss} (Final Recess of the Reichsdeputation) on February 25, 1803. German princes who had lost lands to Napoleon received rich compensation: a sweeping mediatization dissolved around a hundred smaller territories and free imperial cities, which were then absorbed by the larger states. Rulers were granted the right to seize church lands as they saw fit.\textsuperscript{23} Secularization of religious houses across Germany followed, including Emmerick’s own convent of Agnetenberg in Dülmen on December 3, 1811.

In short, a calling to religious life was inopportune and increasingly unconventional in Westphalia at the turn of the nineteenth century. Even more obstacles in the way of the convent

\textsuperscript{22} Wilhelm Kohl, \textit{Das Bistum Münster: Die Schwesternhäuser nach der Augustinerregel} (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968), 4-33; 249-279.
emerge in Emmerick’s own account of her early years. By reading the various sources – Rensing, Overberg, Wesener, Stolberg – in tandem with each other, one fact becomes clear: having acquired an audience of interrogators and curiosity-seekers eager to hear her story, Emmerick wove her life choices into a consistent, well-constructed oral narrative, repeatedly using the same phrases and anecdotes. Together, they tell the tale of a woman who pursued, undaunted, what she believed from early childhood to be her spiritual vocation, defying social convention as well as the wishes of authority figures in her life. Once she obtained her dream of becoming a nun, furthermore, she lived out her spiritual calling in a way that went against the grain of the times, even when it made her the pariah of the convent. Thus in entering a convent she did not surrender so much as create choices for herself in an act of determined self-fashioning.

Emmerick evidently began her story each time in the same place, capturing her listeners’ attention with the same shocking declaration. Dean Bernhard Overberg recalled their conversation thus:

Question: From what age of your earthly life can you remember something?
Answer: From age three.
Question: What do you remember about yourself from that time?
Answer: That I often prayed to God that he would let me die.
Question: Oh! Why that then?
Answer: Because I had heard that when one grew up, one would often offend God with many sins.24

Emmerick would repeat this story to Overberg twice more in the coming months.25 Around the same time Rensing would record in his diary “that she remembered that already as a child of

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three she felt a particular appetite [Trieb] for God and his service,” while Stolberg wrote in July that “when she was three years old already she exhibited extraordinary piety, and bade God to take her from this world before she could besmirch herself with sin.”26 All three narratives of Emmerick’s childhood and adolescence continued from here as a catalog of superhuman, or supernatural, virtues and acts of piety.

In particular, Emmerick emphasized her childhood devotion to contemplation of Jesus’ crucifixion, a narrative move that unmistakably foreshadowed her later stigmata. She also appears to have consistently signposted the development of this devotion for her listeners.

Overberg wrote: “She told me that from the age of six on, she rejoiced in nothing so much as God,”27 while Rensing noted, “As we were speaking of her youth, she told me that already as a child of six or seven she had thought a great deal about the suffering of Jesus and, if she was alone, she sometimes carried around a piece of wood or something of that kind that she could hardly lift in place of the cross, and had also tried to follow our suffering Savior in other ways.”28 Stolberg reported that “From youth on she had often prayed to God that she be allowed to experience something of the suffering of Jesus Christ.” Overberg, the most exhaustive note-taker of the three men, provided even more detail: “she had often stung herself with nettles, and for a long time had slept on a double cross made of wood . . . She very often walked the [outdoor]
Stations of the Cross, and indeed with bare feet.” From the stinging crown of thorns to the Via Dolorosa and the heavy wooden cross, the child Emmerick eagerly sought out the physical experience of the “suffering Savior.”

As Emmerick grew older, the story went on, her piety became ever more evident, ever more uncompromising, and ever more disconcerting for many of those around her. Rensing heard from one of her childhood friends that Emmerick “often gave all [her possessions] to the needy, so that she herself was naked and bare, and that she seldom had money because she had given it all away.”

“She had from childhood on the innermost sympathy for the suffering and joys of others, and so gave all that she had to the poor,” Stolberg’s account concurred, “even though she and her parents were poor themselves.” Overberg’s notes added: “she even took the clothing from her back and gave it away... when she was still smaller, she would say when she found a hungry person, ‘Wait [here], I’ll get some bread from the house.’ Her mother sometimes

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29 The Stations of the Cross, also often referred to as the “Via Dolorosa,” is a guided meditation on the events of Good Friday, from Jesus’ trial through his crucifixion and entombment, with each event represented at a different “station.” 21st-century Catholics most often experience the Stations of the Cross within the confines of their parish church, where visual depictions of each station line the walls of the sanctuary. In previous centuries, however, the “stations” were often outdoors and some distance apart from one another, so that a person walked through the stations in imitation of Jesus’ walk to the site of his crucifixion on Mt. Calvary. In Emmerick’s birthplace, the village of Coesfeld, there was a widely celebrated and elaborate Stations of the Cross, or Kreuzweg, dating from the seventeenth century, winding for 10 kilometers. This Kreuzweg is still extant, and devotional booklets about it often play up its Emmerick connection: see for example Peter Nienhaus, Coesfelder Großer Kreuzweg mit Anna Katharina Emmerick (Dülmen: Laumann, 2005). For the history of the Stations of the Cross, see Herbert Thurston, The Stations of the Cross: An Account of their History and Devotional Purpose (London: Burns & Oates, 1906); F. E. Peters, “The Procession that Never Was: The Painful Way in Jerusalem,” The Drama Review 29, No. 3, Processional Performance (Autumn 1985), 31-41; Michael P. Carroll, Catholic Cults and Devotions: A Psychological Inquiry (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989), 41-56.

30 “Sie hatte sich oft mit Nesseln gebrannt, hätte lange auf einem doppelten Kreuze von Holz geschlafen... Wäre sehr oft den Kreuzweg gegangen, auch wohl mit bloßen Füßen.” Overberg, “Overbergs Aufzeichnungen,” Akten, 82.


32 “[sie] hatte von Kindheit an das innigste Mitgefühl für Leiden und Freuden anderer, gab daher alles, was sie hatte, an Arme, so arm sie und ihre Eltern auch selbst waren;...” Stolberg, “Tagebuch,” BAM Historische Sammlung A11 doc. 1, 2.
saw this, but said nothing particular about it.”

Stolberg also recalled that Emmerick’s mother often saw her daughter’s acts of charity “and yet acted as if she did not want to notice it.”

At this point Emmerick inserted her parents into the narrative, in which they played an ambiguous role. Overberg and Stolberg’s accounts described Emmerick’s parents in the same terms – “stern, but not hard-hearted” – and praised their piety. Yet Emmerick connected her obsessive fear of sin from infancy to a lack of parental love and praise. “Because she was sometimes scolded by her parents and never praised, as she had heard other parents praise their children, she believed that there was no child on earth as bad as she was,” Overberg wrote.

Furthermore, Emmerick’s parents were filled not with pride so much as anxiety by her preoccupation with religion. When at age seven she spoke to them about her visions of angels and encounters with the devil, her worried parents took her to a consult with a local priest. Observing her preference for prayer over play, they sent her away to live with relatives in hopes of encouraging her to mix in society. In response Emmerick’s meditative practices became more private, even secretive: “Often kneeling and with arms spread wide she carried out her meditations . . . when she was alone,” Rensing wrote.

Overberg also recounted that “She used to in the evenings, when the others had gone to sleep, secretly go out of the house and into the garden . . . to pray with outstretched arms.”

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34 “. . . die Mutter es bemerkte, und doch tat, als ob sie es nicht bemerken wollte.” Stolberg, “Tagebuch,” BAM Historische Sammlung A11 doc. 1, 2.
37 Rensing, Diary, 4 May 1813, Akten, 44.
Despite Emmerick’s professed wish to become a nun, her parents began to make wedding arrangements for their daughter.\(^{39}\) Backed by her confessor, she continued to search for a convent that would accept her. When, in 1802, Agnetenberg in Dülmen accepted her as a novice, family tensions boiled over into harsh words. Emmerick “went to her parental home to take her leave,” Overberg wrote, “and to ask her father for some money for the journey [from Coesfeld to Dülmen]. He replied: ‘If you wanted to bury yourself tomorrow, I would pay the expenses, but to enter a convent I will give you nothing.’”\(^{40}\) Other friends and relatives added their own objections, arguing that Agnetenberg had a reputation as a disharmonious convent, that it would probably soon be secularized anyway, or that becoming a nun was simply impractical. Because she was entering the convent as a charity case, with no dowry or useful skills to offer, she would undoubtedly be given the most disagreeable chores and the least appreciation (a prophesy which turned out to be true). Religious life was for daughters of nobility and the bourgeoisie, not the child of poor cottagers. Still Emmerick held firm; Overberg wrote that in response she declared, “Let it be as terrible as it may, let me have to perform the filthiest and most difficult work, and yet still I will be away from the disquiet and danger of the world.”\(^{41}\) One friend told Rensing that Emmerick declared she would still enter the convent, even if it was to be secularized a week later.\(^{42}\) In another interview, a relative recounted that “when I called on her to give up her desire to be a nun, because it would be hard on all her relations, she answered: ‘You must not say that,

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\(^{39}\) Overberg, “Overbergs Aufzeichnungen,” Akten, 97; 100.

\(^{40}\) „... zu ihrem elterlichen Hause gegangen, um Abschied zu nehmen und hätte ihren Vater um einiges Geld zur Reise begehrt. Dieser hätte geantwortet: / ,Wenn du dich morgen willst begraben lassen, so will ich die Begräbniskosten bezahlen, aber um ins Kloster zu gehen, gebe ich dir nichts.’” Overberg, “Overbergs Aufzeichnungen,” Akten, 84.

\(^{41}\) „Laß e so schlimm sein wie es will, muß ich auch die allerschmutzigste und schwerste Arbeit verrichten, so komme ich doch aus den Unruhen und Gefahren der Welt.” Overberg, “Overbergs Aufzeichnungen,” Akten, 84.

\(^{42}\) Bernhard Rensing, “Vernehmung der Fr. Gertrud Ahauß-Mört,” 8 April 1813, Akten, 211-212.
or I will not be your friend [anymore]. I want to do this, and I must do this."

Emmerick thus made clear in her account of her life that she had brooked no opposition from anyone in her pursuit of the convent, not even her paterfamilias.

This showdown with her parents and relatives introduced what would become the theme of Emmerick’s account of her convent experience: the inability of those around her to appreciate her unique spiritual gifts. All sources from 1813 stress this point, often using the same anecdotes as evidence, an indication that Emmerick placed great weight on it as well. Stolberg wrote of her fellow nuns: “. . . the others, though good girls, did not understand her, looked askance at her, and there was much gossip, as one can easily understand.” Emmerick’s difficulties with the other sisters were understandable, Stolberg explained, because they had resented what they saw as the unjust financial burden this penniless, often ill woman placed on the struggling convent. Thus prejudiced against her from the start, Emmerick’s fellow nuns were unable or unwilling to take her mystical experiences seriously. Rensing and Overberg’s accounts concur with this explanation.

As Emmerick explained to them, Agnetenberg only admitted her to the novitiate because her friend Clara Söntgen, whose organ-playing skills the convent needed, refused to enter the convent without her. In addition to being a charity case, Emmerick was also low-class. Although the family background of Agnetenberg’s nuns was less illustrious than most convents, there remained a social gulf between Emmerick, the child of a tenant farmer, and the daughters


44 Stolberg, „Tagebuch.“ BAM Historische Sammlung A11 doc. 1, 2-3.

45 Rensing, „Tagebuch.“ Akten, 50-51; Overberg, “Overbergs Aufzeichnungen,” Akten, 87-93.

46 Overberg, „Aufzeichnungen.“ Akten, 84.
of the bourgeoisie with whom she now lived. Most damning of all, she was in poor health and medical care was expensive. In Rensing’s interviews with the other former nuns of Agnetenberg, some confirmed that financial issues were one reason for Emmerick’s unpopularity. Söntgen herself stated that “she [Emmerick] was certainly not well-liked, and it seems to me that came about in part because . . . we both were so sickly and were too burdensome for the convent for that reason.” Franziska Hackebram, the former Mother Superior of the convent, said the same.

So deep was this resentment, Emmerick claimed, that the other sisters neglected her when she was ill, even when she suffered severe injuries after a heavy basket full of laundry fell on top of her. In a carefully worded statement, Mother Hackebram acknowledged she was aware of Emmerick’s complaints: “She was quite patient in her illnesses and good towards those who attended her. But she did indeed claim (not against me, but against other persons) that she was not as well cared for in sickbed as others.” Catharina Woltermann spoke for the other sisters when she admitted that Emmerick “did complain about a lack of care and food” when ill, but made clear that in her view Emmerick was overly sensitive: “In such cases, or if one said a word against her, she could be quite impatient and nasty . . . She was hardworking and good, but she

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47 Augustinian convents drew their ranks almost exclusively from the burgher class. Peasants in particular were almost entirely excluded because they rarely had the means to pay the convent the usual dowry: “Da die Aussteuer eine gewisse Wohlhabenheit erforderte – im 18. Jahrhundert lag die Mitgift im Durchschnitt bei 100 bis 300 Rtl. – blieben ganz unvermögende Familien praktisch ausgeschlossen.” Historically, Agnetenberg convent in Dülmen did have more exceptions to this rule than any of the other Augustinian houses in Westphalia, possibly due to its location. Recruitment generally was restricted to the immediate area. Kohl, Schwesternhäuser nach der Augustinerregel, 4-15.
48 “Sie war freilich im Kloster nicht recht beliebt, und das scheint mir zum Teile daher gekommen zu sein . . . daß wir beide so kränklich wären und deswegen dem Kloster zu sehr zur Last fielen.” Bernhard Rensing, „Vernehmung Clara Söntgen,” 26 April 1813, Akten, 225.
49 “. . . einige auch glaubten, sie mache durch ihre Kränklichkeit dem Kloster zu viel Last.” Bernhard Rensing, „Vernehmung Franziska Hackebram,” 26 April 1813, Akten 218.
50 See for instance Overberg, „Aufzeichnungen,” 93-94; Bernhard Rensing, addendum to „Vernehmung Dr. Krauthausens u. A. K. Emmericks,” 27 April 1813, Akten, 229-230.
51 “Sie war in ihren Krankheiten recht geduldig und gut gegen jene, welche ihr aufwarteten. Aber sie hat sich wohl (nicht gegen mich, sondern gegen andere) beschwert, daß für sie im Krankenbette nicht so gut gesorgt würde, als für andere.” Rensing „Vernehmung Franziska Hackebram,” Akten, 218.
also let her unhappiness and touchiness show when things did not go her way.”

Anna Maria Böhmer also spoke of being at the receiving end of harsh words from a sickly, cranky Emmerick:

“She was . . . often unhappy with her care, and consequently not always friendly and mild towards those who had to treat her. . . she let show through her behavior that she was embittered at heart.”

Again and again, the sisters described Emmerick as “good” and “hardworking” but also as “sensitive,” “easily upset,” and “reproachful.” The implied message was clear: if Emmerick was unpopular and shunned, she had only herself to blame.

When Rensing interviewed Dr. Peter Krauthausen, a physician who attended to Emmerick while in the convent, however, he corroborated Emmerick’s claims of neglect:

The Herr Doktor said that her treatment in sickbed was not always as it should have been and related as an example that he had once in winter found the patient in her cold room, shivering from cold, because she had not been given fresh linens after having sweat profusely; and so her bed linens soaked through and through with sweat, and also in part her shirt, had frozen stiff.

Krauthausen at first demurred when pressed for further details and said that he couldn’t say whether all of Emmerick’s claims were justified, but “finally,” Rensing wrote, “the Herr Doktor said some of the nuns had often complained about the burden which spinster Emmerick caused the convent through her frequent illness, and not only her attendants, but even the reverend Mother.”

Even if Emmerick was overly sensitive regarding her treatment, it is apparent that her

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55 “Der Herr Doktor sagte, die Behandlung derselben im Krankenbette sei nicht immer gewesen, wie sie hätte sein sollen, und erzählte zum Beweise, daß er die Kranke im Winter auf ihrem kalten Zimmer gefunden hätte, zitternd vor Kälte, weil sie nach einem starken Schweiz nicht mit frischem Leidenzeuge wäre versehen worden und die
failure to bring money into the convent, as well as her illnesses and consequent drain on the community’s resources, were recurring sources of tension.

Emmerick further fueled this fire by giving away convent goods to the poor and destitute without permission. Putting her skills as a seamstress to use, Emmerick “sometimes, when she was sacristan, made caps or other trifles for poor children out of old church vestments,” Mother Hackebram reported, “but I don’t remember her obtaining permission from me.” The former mother superior also said Emmerick gave away items to maids and workmen at the convent, frequently without permission.56 Some sisters saw this as extravagant at a time when their convent was struggling: “She was so sympathetic to the needy,” Franziska Neuhaus told Rensing, “that she often gave them more than she herself could spare.”57 Other sisters’ responses on this point also carried a whiff of snobbery, disapproving of Emmerick’s associating so intimately with working people: “she was well-behaved toward the servants, but she was too familiar with them and spoke with them too much,” Anna Maria Böhmer alleged.58

Rensing’s detective work regarding Emmerick’s time in the convent uncovered more than social differences and tension over money, however; it also revealed deep differences of opinion among Emmerick and the others about how to work and pray. Not only did this dowry-
less, sickly peasant woman practically force herself on the convent; she also had the effrontery to challenge the sisters’ more relaxed observance of its monastic rule by deliberately adopting a different lifestyle than the others. In numerous ways, Emmerick set herself apart from the women with whom she had vowed to live in community.

Mother Hackebram told Rensing that Emmerick was often absent at communal prayer, or left early, “without having had sufficient reason in my opinion.”59 When Emmerick did attend, Anna Maria Böhmer noted, her participation was “not exactly enthusiastic.”60 Emmerick for her part freely admitted preferring her own inner, spontaneous, and intimate form of meditation. As she told Rensing,

I participated in the communal prayers as was prescribed, and whatever else I had to pray aloud I did, but if I prayed for myself or for others, then I presented my request to God and told it to him from the heart as well as I could . . . I would often go so far that I more or less argued with God, which by the way I preferred to do. . . Very often I asked myself: How is it that you exist, and what are you? In this way I went ever farther, so that my meditation often lasted for long periods of time and I myself did not know how I had come from one thing to the other.61

She also told him on the same occasion that it was revealed to her in a vision that “the prayers of those who trust entirely in recited prayers and their good works, but do not observe [God’s] commandments . . . had no merit.” Rensing, somewhat taken aback, pointed out to Emmerick that such an attitude was not easily compatible with a traditional monastic lifestyle structured

around a cycle of set communal prayers. In similar comments to Dr. Wesener, there are hints that Emmerick saw the convent’s contemplative rituals as a distraction from active ministry:

“She exhorted me strongly to stand with the poor and support them, as this is a work most pleasing to God. True religion [she said] consisted not in many prayers, but in the fulfillment of one’s duty. Every person must follow the path that the Lord God lays before him.” Emmerick’s attitude in this regard was several decades ahead of her time – while there had long been both active and contemplative orders for Catholic men, female monastics had thus far been bound by strict rules of enclosure. The “monastic spring” that would see the proliferation of new, socially-minded women’s orders engaged in ministry to the poor came only in the mid-nineteenth century.

Emmerick also tried to continue her punishing ascetic practices while in the convent, despite their being far afield of the Augustinian monastic tradition. Franziska Neuhaus, who supervised Emmerick during her novitiate, told Rensing of repeatedly finding and confiscating hard wooden planks from her bed, and one occasion even a hair shirt. Much as she had as a child, Emmerick would sneak out at night to pray on her knees with arms outstretched, or face down on the ground, until Mother Hackebram put a stop to the practice “because there was

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64 For an account of the female orders of this monastic spring in Germany, see Relinde Meiwes, Arbeiterinnen des Herrn: Katholische Frauenkongregationen im 19. Jahrhundert (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2000).

65 Bernhard Rensing, „Vernehmung Franziska Neuhaus, vormalige Novizenmeisterin der Emmerick,“ Akten, 221.
murmuring about it in the convent.”66 In these and other ways, Emmerick made clear to all that in her eyes, the spiritual practices of the community were insufficient to satisfy her needs.

Not only in prayer but also in conversation, Emmerick shunned the company of the other sisters. Instead, she spent her time with the clergymen who stayed in the convent, either as guests or as pastors assigned to the community. Anna Maria Böhmer spoke for her fellow sisters, who with only one exception harped on this point, when she told Rensing: “That she was not exactly beloved in the convent seems to me to have come about because she had more friendship with Herr Lambert than with her fellow sisters, and that she thought too much of herself, that she was set apart from us.”67 Lambert, a refugee of the French Revolution who was taken in by the convent, indeed became Emmerick’s close confidante. Having obtained special permission to receive the Eucharist more often than the others, she would go alone to Lambert’s room at all hours to receive the Sacrament, sometimes even in the middle of the night. Although Emmerick allegedly went at such odd hours to avoid drawing attention to her special privilege, every nun told Rensing they were fully aware that she took the Eucharist so frequently. At a time when receiving Eucharist so regularly was rare for Catholics, Emmerick’s extraordinary devotion to the sacrament seemed ostentatious.68

In this context, Emmerick’s mysticism, her extreme asceticism and enthusiastic worship, became not a merely interior way of spiritual life, but a visible critique of her religious

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66 „Im Anfange blieb sie auch wohl des Abends nach der Complet in der Kirche sitzen, wenn die andern weggingen; aber sie tat es nicht mehr, sobald ich, weil Murren im Kloster darüber entstanden war, es ihr untersagt hatte.” Rensing, „Vernehmung Franziska Hackebram,” Akten, 217.
67 „Daß sie im Kloster nicht recht beliebt war, scheint mir daher gekommen zu sein, daß sie mit dem Herrn Lambert mehr Freundschaft hätte als mit ihren Mitschwestern, und daß sie sich zuviel dünken ließ, daß sie von uns zurückgesetzt würde.” Rensing, „Vernehmung Anna Maria Böhmer,” Akten, 227.
68 It is also worth noting that all of Emmerick’s former fellow nuns ruled out any possibility of a romantic, sexual, or otherwise inappropriate relationship between Emmerick and Lambert. Böhmer for instance, perhaps the sister least kindly disposed toward Emmerick, said Emmerick’s behavior was “immer ganz untadelhaft,” “always beyond reproach.” She went on: “Daß Herr Lambert sich zu sehr für sie interessierte, gab zu vielem Gerede im Kloster Anlaß; jedoch hat man über diese Verbindung nie einen Verdacht geäußert, der dem unbefleckten Rufe geistlicher Personen nur im geringsten nachteilig wäre.” Rensing, “Vernehmung Anna Maria Böhmer,” Akten, 227.
community. This implicit criticism often took on a more explicit form in Emmerick’s supernatural experiences, visions, and ecstasies, which often revolved around her lack of care and sympathy in the convent. That fact helped ensure that her fellow nuns dismissed Emmerick’s mysticism as the product of her overactive imagination. Mother Hackebram’s reaction was typical:

She once told me . . . that it had come to her [in a vision] that I and spinster Neuhaus, who was her mistress of novices, wanted her out of the convent. In a later illness she said that in the mornings a beautiful chambermaid dressed in white appeared by her bed and performed services for her . . . but I thought that such visions must surely be just her imagination, and would hear nothing of them. 69

Catharina Schulte similarly remarked to Rensing that Emmerick had often spoken of mystical experiences and visions, “but I never paid any attention to them, because I considered them fantasies and dreams.” 70 Anna Maria Böhmer said she had paid so little heed to Emmerick’s tales that she couldn’t remember any details. 71

Convinced of the rightness of her path, however, Emmerick transformed the hostility of her fellow nuns into a necessary aspect of her role as mystic. As she told her listeners, their unjust accusations were a God-given protection against her pride, to strengthen her humility as she progressed along the way of spiritual perfection. “I was so often annoyed and aggrieved at the behavior of my fellow sisters,” she told Rensing, “because I thought too much of how they

71 Rensing, “Vernehmung Anna Maria Böhmer,” Akten, 228.
should conduct themselves and too little of how I must behave myself. That was indeed

Ingratitude and imperfection.”  

Overberg wrote that

God had arranged that her mother superior and fellow sisters would misunderstand her. They took all that she did as hypocrisy, flattery, as arrogance and the like, and reproached her for it . . . she said nothing other than, “I will improve myself” . . . She had, despite having to put up with much from them, so much love for all her fellow sisters, that she would gladly have given her blood for any one of them.

Dr. Wesener made the point even more directly in his own notes: “She said . . . in the convent she was always treated with harshness and ridicule, but her fellow sisters could not realize that they were the instrument of God to test and practice her patience.” So masterfully did Emmerick thus reassert control over the narrative of her time in the convent that her listeners readily took her side.

This attitude and skill was in keeping with the confidence in her self-fashioned identity Emmerick had exhibited throughout her life. She had told Dr. Wesener, “Every person must follow the path that the Lord God lays before him.”

From childhood to the convent, Emmerick followed what she saw as her own destined and inevitable path – a path that no one else would see, against the tide of the times and away from what others expected and desired of her, a path that ended in mysticism and ultimately stigmata. This picture that emerges from the accounts of eyewitnesses such as Dean Rensing, Dean Overberg, Dr. Wesener and Count von Stolberg, corroborated by the testimony of family, friends, and her fellow nuns, is a constructed image that

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73 “Gott hätte es zugelassen, daß ihre Oberin und Mitschwestern sie mißkannt hätten. Diese hätten alles, was sie getan, für Heuchelei, Schmeichelei, für Hoffart und dergleichen angesehen und hätten ihr dies vorgeworfen. . . . hätte sie weiter nichts gesagt, als: ‚Ich will mich bessern‘ . . . Sie hätte auch alle ihre Mitschwestern, obwohl sie viel von ihnen habe ausstehen müssen, so lieb gehabt, daß sie gern für eine jede ihr Blut hätte vergießen wollen.” Overberg, „Aufzeichnungen,” Akten, 87-88.


75 “Jeder müsse die Bahn rechtschaffen durchlaufen, die ihm Gott, der Herr, vorgesteckt.” Wesener, Tagebuch, 7.
may not be a wholly authentic likeness. Its worth, however, lies not in its facticity but in its testimony to Emmerick’s success in discovering and articulating a self-fashioned identity. In other words, this constructed image was not simply the product of propagandists or hagiographers who saw in Emmerick and her life what they wanted to see; rather, what survives in the documents from 1813 is an image of her in whose construction Emmerick herself played a major role.

When situated in the broader context of Enlightenment, revolution and war, Emmerick’s agency becomes even clearer. At a time when western Catholic monasticism was plagued by both an ongoing popular decline and an immediate political threat, in a place where convents and their host communities alike faced economic privation, only a determined individual with a strong sense of vocation could hear and pursue a calling to religious life. Emmerick clearly had that strength, enabling her to prevail over the authority of her family and the conventions of her social class.

In and of itself, the story of Emmerick’s difficult road to the convent and her struggles with her fellow nuns has value as an example of the challenges faced by the Church in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century. It also provides crucial evidence, however, in the analysis of Emmerick’s cult of veneration, how Emmerick the symbol created meaning for German Catholics, and who was able to participate in that process. The case for Emmerick as a main author of her own story as it comes down to us in the early accounts of 1813 becomes stronger when considered in the light of this fact: before she reinvented herself as a stigmatic, she had already dared to reinvent herself as an unconventional nun.

*Untutored Visionary*
Just as analysis reveals Emmerick’s confinement in a convent to be a paradoxical case of agency without autonomy, so too does Emmerick’s role as mystic visionary prove to be one of nonconformity without disobedience. As a peasant in the early nineteenth century, becoming a nun was difficult; as a woman, becoming a Catholic preacher with legitimate authority was impossible. Interpretation of doctrine, administration of sacraments, and execution of institutional clerical power were the exclusive preserve of men. Even were it not for this rigid doctrinal barrier, Emmerick’s limited educational opportunities barred her from attaining the knowledge and skill set expected of preachers and theologians. That Emmerick was nonetheless able to impress so many of her (male) listeners with her visions and theological ideas, and even confidently instruct them on how they should follow Christ, is a testament to the charismatic power she wielded by presenting herself as a mystic. Emmerick also made her lack of formal education into an asset by presenting her ideas as the fruit of devout, even divinely inspired contemplation, in contrast with mere book-learning – a common epistemological move among mystics, but one with particular resonance in the Age of Enlightenment.

Both ancient and modern, religious and secular ideas conspired to close off access to knowledge and positions of authority for women like Emmerick. On the one hand, the exclusion of women from priestly ordination was a firmly established principle of Roman Catholic doctrine. In his foundational work *Summae Theologica*, for example, church father Thomas Aquinas had asserted that “As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active power in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness according to the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from defect in the active power.”

76 Drawing on the ideas of Plato and Aristotle as well as Scripture, Aquinas and

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subsequent generations of Europeans through the eighteenth century understood the relationship between men and women in terms of a hierarchical one-sex model, in which woman was an imperfect man: less mentally developed, less able to resist temptation, and thus man’s natural subordinate and “helpmate.” As an “incomplete man,” a woman could not represent the fullness of human nature; thus Jesus, the Incarnation of God, had to be male, and so too did his twelve disciples and their successors, the clergy. Furthermore, this natural subordination of woman to man reflected the hierarchical cosmic order which God had established. It followed from this that women were unmeant and unfit for the exercise of clerical authority or the interpretation of doctrine.

On the other hand, emerging scientific worldviews, political challenges, and social change in the eighteenth century had led to the emergence of new European gender paradigms. Belief in the body as microcosm of a hierarchically-ordered chain of being, reflecting the divine plan on which society rested, increasingly gave way among educated elites to belief in the observable, physical body and its natural behavior as the foundation for the understanding of gender. At the same time, the beginnings of an industrial free market economy forced Europeans to consider, redefine, and justify the sexual division of labor. The more tolerant openness of Enlightened society, expanding access to education, and an emerging “republic of letters” created a plethora of new social and political spaces, in which new rules had to be established concerning who could and could not participate. Finally, the Cartesian emphasis on the mind as the thinking subject, not the body, and the Lockean theory of social contract, created a problem for would-be revolutionaries: if the mind had no sex and all human beings had certain rights by virtue of their reason, it followed that women should have the same rights and responsibilities as men, something few actually wanted. Eighteenth-century men thus turned to “natural law” and
biology to establish a new justification of women’s disenfranchisement on the basis of innate and irremediable difference. Smaller, weaker, burdened with childbearing and menstruation, women had necessarily subordinated themselves to male protectors in the state of nature. A woman’s role as nurturing mother (and not as citizen) was reflected in what were considered to be observably innate female characteristics: passivity rather than aggression, sentimentality over rationality.

These coexisting and competing ideas of gender in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century had different ontological bases, but similar practical implications for women. Defined in reference to men and found wanting, saddled with attributes that were explicitly incompatible with the ability to exercise authority, they could not automatically command the same respect, and did not have the same claims to civil rights and privileges. Although some Enlightenment thinkers increasingly asserted the equality of both genders, it was an equality of different and complementary roles. They saw the division of civic life into public and private, male and female spheres as both natural and central to a healthy body politic. Similarly, while Catholic theology taught that both men and women were made in God’s image and played necessary roles in his plan of salvation, it was also divine will that these roles were manifestly different.

The combined effect of these gender paradigms and broader intellectual trends in Emmerick’s homeland is clearly visible in an area of vital interest to both church and Enlightened state: education. Driven by a growing need for educated soldiers, skilled workers, trained bureaucrats and productive farmers, state officials and interested commentators saw mass schooling as a tool for creating a more industrious citizenry – but one in which each estate

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fulfilled its appointed role in the political economy. Despite rhetoric that at times suggested otherwise, education initiatives for the various strata of society remained unequal, and deliberately so. As Prussia’s Frederick the Great, Enlightened ruler *par excellence*, wrote to one of his ministers in 1779: “In the countryside it is enough if they can learn to read and write a little; but if they know too much, then they move to the cities and want to become officials and the like.”79 While eighteenth-century Germany saw the first moves toward mass education of girls and women, this innovation was in large part a reaction to the growing importance of female labor in the economy. The instruction of peasant girls like Emmerick usually combined basic literacy and mathematics with lessons on suitably domestic work such as sewing or spinning yarn.80 While an ambitious and intelligent peasant boy could conceivably continue his education through the university level, no such distant opportunities beckoned for German girls.

The Church, meanwhile, continued to play a leading role in providing education as it had for centuries. Even secular-minded reformers usually approved of religious involvement in popular education because they saw the church as a bulwark of the established order: the classroom was an important site of moral instruction and indoctrination, and thus of social harmony and political stability. Elite German Catholics’ ideas about education of the common people, furthermore, were generally in keeping with both theological and Enlightened ideas about gender. Tracts on the philosophy of education by Catholic authors often stressed different approaches for boys and girls, and justified these differences both by asserting the innately different skills and inclinations of each gender, as well as cautioning in more traditional language against the dangers of sexual temptation. For example, Johann Michael Sailer, a Jesuit professor

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80 Kiesel and Münch, *Gesellschaft und Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert*, 76.
who would later befriend and champion Emmerick, wrote in a 1785 work that “The boy imitates the business of his father. If his father has some farmland, so will he [the son] have an appetite for horses and for farming. . . the daughter in all things imitates her mother; she wants to knit, cook, spin and do other housework like her mother does.”

It followed from this that their education and upbringing should reflect this “natural” inclination towards gender roles. Another future admirer of Emmerick, the aforementioned Dean Bernhard Overberg of Münster, had been a leading educational reformer and advocate of schooling for girls and women since the 1770s. His advice to teachers of co-educational classrooms, however, is revealing:

If you have boys and girls in your school, do not let them sit among one another, and arrange the desks, when possible, so that all children are facing toward you, but the boys and girls do not have each other in direct view. Keep children of different genders, especially when they are older, from far too close of an intimacy with one another . . .

Good order demands that each be with his own kind.

Overberg felt the importance of this to be so great that he urged schoolteachers to take no chances, even advising that boys and girls should enter and leave the schoolhouse at different times and through separate doors.

In short, Emmerick’s access to education was strictly curtailed. At the same time, both traditional and more recent schools of thought mitigated against any woman being taken

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82 “Habet ihr Buben und Mädchen in der Schule; so lasset sie nich durcheinander sitzen, und stellet die Bänke, wenn es möglich ist, so, daß alle Kinder euch das Gesicht zuwenden; Buben und Mädchen aber sich nicht gerade im Gesichte haben. / Haltet die Kinder verschieden Geschlechts, besonders, wenn sie schon mehr erwachsen sind, von einer gar zu großen Vertraulichkeit mit einander ab. . . Die gute Ordnung erfordert es, daß jedes bey seines Gleichen sey [emphasis in the original].” Bernhard Overberg, *Anweisung zum zweckmässigen Schulunterricht für die Schullehrer im Fürstenthum Münster* (Münster: Aschendorff, [1793] 1825 edition), 95-96. Perhaps ironically, Overberg’s belief in the need for strict separation of the sexes in education led him to establish training schools for some of Germany’s first lay female schoolteachers. One beneficiary of Overberg’s program was Luise Hensel, a Catholic convert and yet another close friend and subsequent public champion of Emmerick. She would go on to found a girl’s school in Aachen, and no less than three of her pupils would go on to found new Catholic women’s religious orders in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

seriously on an intellectual level. When these factors are taken into account, the astonished
reactions of more than one well-educated man to her visions and advice reveal Emmerick’s
intelligence as well as her confidence. Count von Stolberg, a poet, diplomat, and traveling
companion of Goethe who had studied at the prestigious University of Halle, wrote: “This little
nun, who had in her childhood tended cows and carried out other crude chores, spoke with a
delicate voice and expressed herself concerning religion in elevated language that she could not
have learned in the convent.”

Clemens August von Droste-Vischering, Münster’s Vicar
General and another well-traveled, university-educated man of noble background, was equally
charmed. When he had first learned about Emmerick from Dean Rensing, he responded with
extreme caution and reserve. After visiting her on a few occasions, however, he wrote to
Stolberg that while he regarded ecstatic visions in general as highly suspect (bedenklich),
Emmerick’s own mystical experiences were like a divine delicacy (Leckerbissen): “they vividly
point in my opinion to higher influence.”

Rensing himself not only rejected his former
skepticism but became amazed by Emmerick’s wisdom. After one particularly powerful
conversation with her, he wrote in his diary: “I left comforted, edified, and astounded by her, and
that a person with no other education and instruction than she received has such a pure, correct,
and superior grasp of religion and morality.”

Of these and many other accounts, perhaps the most remarkable is that of Dr. Wilhelm
Wesener. Before meeting Emmerick, Wesener was highly skeptical regarding stigmata and other
alleged supernatural phenomena. When he accompanied Rensing on his official visit of March

84 “Dieses Nönnchen, welches in der Kindheit Vieh gehütet und grobe Arbeit verrichtet hat, spricht mit zarter
Stimme, und drücket auch über die Religion in edler Sprache, die sie nicht im Kloster lernen könnte.” Stolberg,
„Tagebuch,” BAM Historische Sammlung A11 doc. 1, 2.
85 Clemens August von Droste-Vischering, „Letter to Count Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg,” 14 November 1813,
Akten, 244.
86 “Ich ging gerührt, erbaut und erstaunt von ihr, daß eine Person, die keine andere Erziehung und Bildung als sie
23, 1813, however, he had what could justifiably be called a religious experience. As Wesener wrote in his diary, he returned to Emmerick’s rented room later that same evening, compelled “to worship God’s wonder [as revealed] in this pious person.”87 From then on Wesener wrote almost daily entries about his observations and conversations with Emmerick, in which he humbly solicited her opinion on a range of subjects, from how much tithes one should give and whether the soul retained its earthly memories after death to the possibility of life on other planets.88 Again and again, solicited and unsolicited, she expounded to her visitors on theology, biblical history and human nature. Though never claiming extraordinary power or privileges in so many words, she nonetheless spoke as one with authority.

This preaching voice apparently came naturally to Emmerick. Multiple persons testified in their interviews with Father Rensing that in her youth and adolescence, she had not simply led by example, but fervently and incessantly instructed them in their faith. Her siblings may well have been her first audience. Her older brother Bernhard recalled: “She spoke very little of worldly things, and instead usually sought to instruct us regularly in articles of faith and good morals; she told us sermons [she had] heard or stories of the saints[,] and sought through her lessons to keep us good [uns zum Guten anzuhalten].”89 Maria Feldmann, who had apprenticed with Emmerick under the same seamstress when she was fourteen, told Rensing that “she always talked about church services and instructed me in the faith and in good morals,” with endless

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88 Wesener, „Tagebuch,“ Tagebuch, 9; 34; 39.
89 “Sie sprach wenig von weltlichen Geschäften[,] sondern suchte gewöhnlich uns übrige in Glaubenssachen und guten Sitten zu unterrichten; erzählte uns gehörte Predigten uler Geschichten der Heiligen und suchte uns durch ihre Lehren zum Guten anzuhalten.” Rensing, „Vernehmung Bernhard Emmerick,” 206-207.
patience for Feldmann’s “slow understanding.” Anna Schwering said much the same: “her conversation was at all times about the holy Scripture, the lives of the saints and lessons of faith.” Frau Gertrud Ahauß-Mört recalled that she had instructed her “in what the duties of a Christian were,” as well as sharing stories “of the lives of holy nuns, like Mechtildis, Katharina, Gertrudis, Clara, etc.” Perhaps the most telling anecdote of Emmerick’s zeal for instruction comes from Elisabeth Eyinck. One day, Eyinck’s mother told her that Emmerick came to speak with her about Elisabeth. She was concerned, she said, because Elisabeth had not gone to confession in ten weeks. Astonished that Emmerick knew this, and believing she could only have learned of her absence from the confessional through supernatural means, she hurried to the church. Now, she told Rensing, “I don’t go to visit her until I receive the Sacrament first.”

For Emmerick to confidently instruct her peers in how to lead a good Christian life was one thing; for her to instruct clergymen and physicians was quite another. This she frequently did, however, and with apparent ease. On one occasion, for example, Emmerick had a long conversation with Dean Rensing in which, he wrote, she “demonstratively display[ed] her pure religious sensibility, to me very edifying.” So impressed was Rensing, in fact, that he gladly took down her advice on how he should instruct his parishioners in the confessional: “Instruct those who hear confession that they [should] pray more for the souls in purgatory than to the holy ones in heaven.” Dr. Wesener also eagerly sought out Emmerick’s instruction, as recorded in his diary; her lessons on almsgiving and the afterlife have already been mentioned. In these conversations Emmerick often took on the tones of a Sunday-school teacher quizzing a pupil on

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91 “Unsere Unterredung war immer von Religion, wo sie mich in vielum unterrichtete, in dem was die Pflichten eines Christen seien, und mir gewöhnlich erzählte von dem Leben heiliger Nonnen, als der Mechtildis, Katharina, Gertrudis, Clara, etc.” Rensing, „Vernehmung Gertrud Ahaus-Mört,“ Akten, 210-211.

92 Quoted in Hümpfner, Akten, 89 footnote 1.
his catechism: “She asked me: did I indeed rightly know, then, why God created the human race? [She answered:] For his glory and our happiness. And indeed upon the fall of the legions of angels [who supported Lucifer] the Lord decided to make men in their place.”93 Nor did Emmerick hesitate to school Wesener’s brother-in-law upon their first meeting. Lying in an ecstatic state as the doctor first brought him to meet her, she apparently was able to look into the heart of this stranger. As he stood there she pronounced: “This man broods too much and muses too long over his thoughts. Also he relies too much on himself. That is not good . . . He must follow his confessor and another person that advises him well. Francis de Sales and Saint Teresa say, one must not follow one’s self, one must follow others who are righteous.”94 Wesener wrote with apparent credulity that “she told me that she could often read the hearts of the people who came to her and usually knows what people think of her.”95

All the while, Emmerick did not deny but rather openly acknowledged, even emphasized her lack of education and lowly status relative to her listeners. She made an elaborate show of her obeisance and obedience to the commands of any clergyman: even when in the deepest ecstatic trance, rigid, immovable and seemingly impervious to any disturbance, she would answer questions or instantly return to wakefulness if Dean Rensing, Dean Overberg, or any other priest commanded her to do so. Overberg’s vivid description of one instance is typical:

Now she sank completely into an ecstatic state, in which she gave hardly any signs of life. Herr Councilor von Druffel [a physician] turned her head and it remained as he had turned it. – he tried to open her eyelids but could hardly do so, they closed again immediately. – He raised her head with one arm laid behind her neck, and her body,

95 “Sie sagte auch, daß sie oft in den Herzen der Menschen, die zu ihr kämen, lese und daß sie gewöhnlich wisse, was man von ihr denke.” Wesener, „Tagebuch,” Tagebuch, 39.
without bending, raised up with it, as if it were a column. . . During this examination she
gave no signs of life at all. Then the Vicar General said: “I command you under [your v
ow of] holy obedience to answer.” Hardly were these words out of his mouth when she
turned her head, with a speed which would be difficult to imitate, towards the side where
we were, looked at us with great friendliness, and answered everything she was now
asked. 96

None of her visitors, furthermore, clerical or lay, described her as arrogant or acting above her
station, but rather as mild and humble. No doubt this was in part because Emmerick made sure to
inform them of her limited schooling. Overberg reported that “she had read little in her life,” and
not long after first attempting it gave it up for contemplation.97 She told both Stolberg and
Droste-Vischering, the Vicar General, that she had attended school for only four months. At that
point, her schoolteacher had allegedly declared in awe that “she was finished, he had nothing
more to teach that she did not [already] know.”98 Both these anecdotes suggested that
Emmerick’s wisdom came from contemplation and visionary insight. Repeatedly, she told
Rensing, Wesener, and Overberg that she had heard what she told them from an inner voice or
during a dream.

What then, to make of this untutored visionary, whose breadth of knowledge and easy
elocuence made such an impression? How to explain Emmerick’s confident voice without

96 “Hierauf sank sie öllig in die Ohnmacht (Ekstase), in welcher sie gar kein Lebenszeichen von sich gab. Herr Rat
v. Druffel drehte ihr Kopf und wie er ihn drehte, so blieb derselbe liegen. – Er suchte ihr die Augenlider
aufzuziehen, vermochte es kaum, sie fielen gleich wieder zu. – Er hob mit hinter ihren Nacken gelegtem Arme ihren
Kopf und der Körper ward ohne sich zu beugen, gehoben, als wenn er eine Bildsäule gewesen wäre. . . Während
dieser Untersuchung gab sie gar kein Lebenszeichen. Da sprach der Herr Vicarius Generalis: ‘Ich befehle Ihnen
unter dem hl. Gehorsam zu antworten.’ Kaum waren diese Worte aus seinem Munde, da warf sie ihren Kopf mit
einer Schnelligkeit, die sich schwerlich nachmachen läßt, auf die Seite, wo wir waren, sah uns mit besonderer
Freundlichkeit an, und antwortete auf alles, was sie nun gefragt wird.” Overberg, “Overbergs Aufzeichnungen,”
Akten, 71.
97 “Sie hätte in ihrem Leben wenig gelesen, wenn sie angefangen hätte, zu lesen, so hätte sie dies gleich gestört.
98 “Als sie in die Schule kam, ward sie nach vier Monaten wieder herausgenommen, weil der Schulmeister erklärte,
sie sei fertig, er habe nichts mehr zu lehren, das sie nicht wisse.” Count Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg, „Bericht des
Grafen Friedr. Leop. Stolberg über seinen Besuch in Dülmen,” 22 July 1813, Akten, 294; see also Droste-
Vischering, „Letter to Count Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg,” Akten, 245. It may also be worth noting that this
anecdote, if true, is not necessarily as impressive as it sounds. Schoolteachers in Emmerick’s day were of highly
variable quality.
recourse to divine intervention? First, it should be noted that a close reading of the sources suggests Emmerick was not as ignorant as she led others to believe. In particular, she appears to have downplayed the extent of her literacy. Her brother Bernhard reported that when Emmerick stayed up long after the rest of the household had gone to bed, she did so not only to pray but to read. Overberg also recorded that as a child, Emmerick “had often taken small candle stubs from her parents which, when the others had gone to sleep, she would light and then sit with in a corner to read or to pray.” Emmerick did not cease reading after her school-age years. On more than one occasion Dean Rensing found her with a book in her hands, or heard from her that she had read a devotional work during the long sleepless hours of the night.

More importantly, Emmerick’s linked claims of limited education and visionary inspiration are best understood as a reflection of her self-fashioned identity as a mystic. As she seems to have recognized, it was precisely her humble, untutored status which made her statements all the more impressive in her visitors’ minds. As wisdom gleaned through contemplation and (implicitly) divine inspiration, moreover, Emmerick’s words became weighted with God’s authority rather than her own. The role of the prophet or visionary as holy fool, God’s chosen instrument to speak truth to power and shame the learned, was a well-established one. Women mystics and accomplished authors such as Hildegard von Bingen or Teresa of Avila, for example, had similarly bemoaned their ignorance and simplicity as mere

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100 “Als sie in die Schule gegangen, hätte sie oft kleine Endchen Licht von ihren Eltern weggenommen, welche sie, wann die andern wären schlafen gegangen, angezündet, und sich damit in ein Eckchen gesetzt um zu lesen oder zu beten.” Overberg, “Overbergs Aufzeichnungen,” Akten, 76.
101 Rensing, “Tagebuch,” Akten, 7; 61.
women. In doing so, they derived their legitimacy as preachers from their status as visionaries, receiving messages directly from God.\(^{102}\)

Herein lay the alternative, charismatic power of women mystics in the patriarchal Catholic Church. Because of their reputed sensuality and emotional intensity, women were not only considered more prone to temptation; paradoxically, they were also more easily able to achieve ecstatic union with God than men.\(^ {103}\) In addition, precisely because they were weak, they provided God with striking opportunities to be strong in their weakness. As Rensing wrote to the Vicar General, days after meeting Emmerick: “Truly, the Lord always chooses the weak to shame the strong, and reveals mysteries to the simple and lowly that he has hidden from the great and learned.”\(^ {104}\) He even dared to hope that Emmerick’s miraculous feats would bring about “a return to a religious sensibility, and ultimately conversion to the Catholic Church” after the onslaught of Enlightenment, revolution and secularization.\(^ {105}\)

Emmerick expounded with confidence on a variety of religious topics, and was met with a positive reception by well-educated contemporaries. The presentation and reception of Emmerick’s prophetic voice reveal how the centuries-old, ever-evolving tradition of women’s mysticism played out in the specific context of early-nineteenth-century Westphalia. At a time when the Church’s ancient authority appeared under threat, and the most radical spoke of a triumph of Reason over revelation, Emmerick and the mystical tradition she represented took on new layers of meaning. The awe and devotion of Rensing, Wesener and others to follow sprang

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\(^{102}\) Andrea Janelle Dickens, *The Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009) 25-38, 179-191. It is perhaps worth noting that both Teresa of Ávila and Hildegard von Bingen have been declared “Doctors of the Church,” meaning that their writings are foundational and profound statements of Catholic doctrine worthy of comparison to the Church Fathers such as Augustine.

\(^{103}\) Dickens, 1-10; Coakley.


from their reading of Emmerick as a sign for their troubled times. Though others thereby
developed this reading of her as anti-Enlightenment symbol, Emmerick herself laid the
foundation for this idea by presenting herself as spiritually inspired. Like Hildegard von Bingen,
Teresa of Avila and other women before her, Emmerick embraced and even exaggerated her lack
of education. By thus suggesting her wisdom was the fruit of deep contemplation, perhaps even
visionary revelation, she weighted her words with the testimony of the Holy Spirit rather than her
own. This enabled her to speak her mind without disobedience to authority. When this strategy
combined with her startling wounds and her charismatic zeal, the effect was powerful – not
despite but rather because it centered on such a seemingly powerless woman, a rustic, untutored
visionary.

*Unorthodox Redeemer*

Nun, mystic, preacher, visionary – Emmerick took on all these roles, making them part of
her self-fashioned identity. She also succeeded in making others see her in this light when, in
March 1813, she became a public figure. As she told them the story of her life and shared with
them her visions, she helped shape the narrative that Rensing, Wesener, Overberg, and Stolberg
subsequently put to paper. It was not her story or her visions, however, that brought these men to
Emmerick’s bedside; it was her wounded and bleeding body. For all of her confidence and
charisma, her strong sense of vocation and her religious zeal, Emmerick’s reputation ultimately
hinged on how others saw these wounds: as miraculous stigmata, a mysterious yet natural
phenomenon, or a hoax.

At the same time, Emmerick’s own sense of self would inevitably have to grapple with
the new roles these wounds opened to her – celebrity, scandal-monger, and perhaps even saint.
“Do not imagine yourself another Saint Catherine of Siena,” Father Lambert reportedly
admonished her when he first discovered the bleeding in her hands.\textsuperscript{106} Who, then, did Emmerick imagine herself to be, and what did these wounds mean to her? How successfully did Emmerick communicate that meaning to others, and refute the interpretations others sought to impose on them? Taken together, what does all this suggest about Emmerick’s role in the construction of her public image?

When viewed in the context of her time, as well as her words and actions, Emmerick’s stigmata are revealed as of a piece with the larger spiritual mission she envisioned for herself. Neither the victim of psychology nor the pawn of fanaticism, she took on the role of stigmatic in order to experience more deeply the suffering of Jesus – and, just as importantly, to continue his ministry. Both the physical pain and public ridicule brought by her wounds were for Emmerick sacrifices that she could offer up as expiation for the sins of others, just as Jesus endured ridicule and offered up his life for the salvation of humanity. Moreover, by making her inner religious zeal outwardly visible in a dramatic way, Emmerick’s wounds allowed her mysticism to be a participatory mysticism: not a silent inward prayer but a shocking declaration of faith, even a call to action, impossible to ignore. Despite being a woman, Emmerick dared to take on Christ’s own role, offering herself to her community as its unorthodox redeemer.

In more ways than one, Emmerick found herself in a community in need of saving. The waning appeal of older forms of effusive religious devotion in Emmerick’s day has already been mentioned. In Westphalia, this spiritual impoverishment existed side by side with material poverty. Her home village of Coesfeld and the neighboring community, Dülmen, had never been particularly rich, especially after the devastations of the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648).

Westphalian peasants had feudal labor obligations to their manorial lords later than most other German lands east of the Elbe. While in other areas partible inheritance prevailed, in Westphalia farmland passed undivided to a single heir; this meant that non-inheriting children, especially daughters, faced a strong likelihood of downward social mobility. From around 1700 onward, a dramatic socio-economic shift had seen the rural substratum of smallholders or cottagers, who did not own enough land for a livelihood and thus depended on offering their labor to others, swell to the largest population group in the countryside. Emmerick’s own family fell into this lowest socioeconomic category. At the time of her birth in 1774, however, the region was in the midst of a particularly severe crisis as a result of the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763), which had seen troops tramp back and forth across the area, bringing destruction, disease, and famine in their wake. A vivid picture of this crisis can be found in an official report to the Prince-Bishop of Münster on Emmerick’s home village of Coesfeld in 1775, just after she was born. The Bishop’s ministers discovered that out of an earlier population of over 1,200, only about 425 remained; of these, 148 were barely able to meet the tax requirements for full civic participation as burghers, and 97 could not meet them at all. In total they counted 225 collapsed or deserted houses. In short, the Münsterland Emmerick knew in her formative years was one of economic despair as well as declining faith.

Emmerick responded dramatically and uncompromisingly to these challenges she perceived in her own community. As previous sections have shown, she exhorted her family and friends to remain strong in their faith. Despite being among the poorest members of her community, she gave all she owned to the destitute people she met. Her acts of charity continued in the convent, even as her unauthorized good works stretched the limits of her vow of

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obedience. As she told Dr. Wesener, in her view it was fulfilling one’s duty to the poor, not prayer, that constituted “true religion” and “work most pleasing to God.”

Proselytization and charity were not the only weapons, however, that Emmerick chose to wield in her fight. All her life, she had devoted endless hours to prayer, fasting, and self-mortification, apparently driven by a powerful mix of fear and longing: fear of punishment for her own sinfulness, of which she was constantly aware, and longing for the consolation of forgiveness that no amount of pain and punishment could provide, forgiveness that only a benevolent God could give her. These obsessive desires permeated her consciousness, haunting and enthralling her by turns, in the form of dreams and visions, voices and premonitions. Emmerick had discovered that these, too, however, could be made to serve her cause. The crucial link between Emmerick’s inner preoccupation with sin and self-punishment, on the one hand, and her outward missionary zeal on the other, was her fervent belief in a distinctly Catholic doctrine: Purgatory.

Emerging as a fully-formed concept in the twelfth century, Purgatory was the theological “solution” for the problem of reconciling divine justice with divine mercy. Drawing on a particular interpretation of Scripture and the writings of the Church Fathers, it was a place of purification where souls unworthy of heaven, yet undeserving of eternal damnation in hell, atoned for their sins before finally being allowed into God’s presence. Catholics in this world, moreover, could by their prayers and good works intercede on behalf of these poor souls as well as their own, thereby lessening their term of purification. The exact nature of this purification, however, was open to debate, giving rise to diverging ideas of Purgatory among theologians,

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mystics, and the laity alike.\textsuperscript{110} As one Protestant German author derisively commented, according to Catholics, “we should believe in Purgatory. But what is this Purgatory in which I should believe? Of this nothing is said . . . people argue about it in the Roman Church, and this article [of faith] stands on shaky ground \textit{[stehet auf Schrauben]}. One [thus] professes nothing, or professes without knowing what [he professes].”\textsuperscript{111} In reality, much was said and professed in Catholic sermons, church decorations, and didactic and popular literature about Purgatory, but little was agreed upon beyond its existence as a place of expiation and purification.

Since the Middle Ages, many theologians had argued that the “punishment” of Purgatory was existential rather than physical, consisting of the soul’s exile from God’s presence, and the mental and emotional anguish that resulted from this separation. After the French Enlightenment and around the time of Emmerick’s birth, the majority of Catholic clergy favored this more austere view, partly in response to attacks on Purgatory by polemicists as a superstitious and false doctrine, invented to raise money through the selling of indulgences.\textsuperscript{112} On the other hand, both elevated and more popular depictions of Purgatory, from church altars and translations of Dante to cheap \textit{Volkskalender}, often featured souls writhing in fire, their torments barely distinguishable from those of hell. Mystics through the centuries had also often described visions


\textsuperscript{111} "Wir sollen also ein Fegefeuer glauben. Aber was ist denn das Fegefeuer, das ich glauben soll? Hiervon ist nichts gesagt . . . man streitet noch in der römischen Kirche darüber, und es stehet dieser Artikel also auf Schrauben. Man beschwöret eigentlich nichts, oder schwöret, ohne zu wissen, was." Johann Lorenz von Mosheim and Christian Ernst von Windheim, \textit{Streittheologie der Christen}, Volume 1 (Erlangen: Wolfgang Walther, 1763), 241.

\textsuperscript{112} Pasulka, \textit{Heaven Can Wait}, 5-8. A good example of a polemical attack on Purgatory from Emmerick’s day is L. Dingen, \textit{Reise nach dem Fegefeuer} (1784).
of Purgatory as a place of fire and brimstone in which souls atoned for their sins though excruciating physical pain.\textsuperscript{113}

As for the German Catholic didactic works written for the masses in Emmerick’s day, they refused to commit to one side of the debate or the other. “In what way the souls of the departed are purified, through fire and other punishments, is not stated in Scripture,” Raymundus Bruns wrote in one catechism; “We are only obligated to believe that there is a Purgatory,” not that it operated in any particular way.\textsuperscript{114} In his \textit{Leichtfaßliche katechetische Reden eines Dorfpfarrers an die Landjugend} (\textit{Easily-Graspable Catechetical Lessons of a Village Priest for Country Youth}), Edilbert Menne also acknowledged that “we do not know what kind of punishments there are,” though he went on to say: “but you can easily imagine that they must be far greater and more painful than all the pain and agony that a person can suffer on this earth; for God has a heavy hand and his punishments go deep.”\textsuperscript{115}

Thus, while many Catholic preachers argued that Purgatory was a deeply consoling doctrine that indicated God’s infinite mercy, popular ideas about Purgatory were not always so comforting in nature. Church dogma, meanwhile, avoided pronouncement on the manner of punishment souls experienced after death, leaving the exact nature of Purgatory to believers’ imaginations. The leeway afforded by this ambiguity meant that individual Catholics, in response to the discourses and concerns of their time, came to a variety of conclusions about Purgatory.

\textsuperscript{113} An old but comprehensive review of Purgatory as described by theologians and mystics through the centuries is F. X. Schouppe, S.J., \textit{Purgatory Illustrated by the Lives and Legends of the Saints} (London: Burns & Oates, 1893).

\textsuperscript{114} “... was für eine Weise die Seelen der Abgestorbenen, durch das Feuer und andere Strafungsmittel gereinigt werden, ist in der h. Schrift nicht bestimmet. Wie sind allein schuldig zu glauben, daß es ein Fegefeuer gibt, ...” Raymundus Bruns, \textit{Erklärung des katholischen Glaubensbekännntnesses: aus der heiligen Schrift und Vernunft} (Paderborn: Junfermann and Aschendorff, 1772), 401.

and its position on a spectrum between heaven and hell. The relative “infernalization” or “celestialization” of Purgatory in a particular vision, sermon, piece of literature, or work of art can therefore reveal something about the author’s beliefs about sin, justice, and mercy. In this way, Emmerick’s conception of Purgatory provides critical clues regarding her own personal faith, and how she understood her stigmata in the context of that faith.

In Emmerick’s visions and pronouncements as recorded by Overberg, Rensing, Wesener, and others, a consistent theme emerges: the infinite mercy of God, and expiatory prayer and mortification as a way for believers to invoke this mercy for themselves and others, particularly those in Purgatory. In her very first encounter with Dean Overberg, she told him of her most recent ecstatic experience, saying it was inwardly revealed to her “the great mercy of God toward sinners, whom he tries to lead back [to him] and so lovingly takes up again [to himself] . . . [despite] the sins that wound God so terribly.” As Overberg learned over the course of his many conversations with her, leading such sinners to mercy was Emmerick’s greatest desire and constantly occupied her thoughts. Contemplating others’ damnation caused her so much anguish, in fact, that it had formerly led her to question even her most foundational beliefs:

For a long time she was in the habit of disputing with God over [the fact] that he did not convert all great sinners, and punished the unconverted forever in the next world. She said to him that she did not know how he could be this way; it seemed to be against his nature. He was after all so benevolent and it cost him nothing to convert sinners; he had all things in his hand; he should remember all that he and his beloved Son had done for sinners . . . If he himself did not keep his word [to forgive sinners], how could he then demand that men should do so[?] Herr Lambert, whom she told about her disputation [with God], had said, “Easy, easy, you are going too far!”

118 “Eine Zeitlang hatte sie die Gewohnheit gehabt mit Gott zu disputieren darüber, daß er nicht alle große Sünder bekehrte und die unbekehrten in der andern Welt ewig strafte. Sie hätte ihm gesagt, sie wüßte nicht, wie er doch so
To Rensing Emmerick said, “If I thought of just one poor sinner becoming damned, that hurt me so much that I could not get over it.”¹¹⁹ Not only, then, was Emmerick obsessed over her own sinfulness, so that even as a child she would pray God to strike her dead rather than allow her to sin; she was equally preoccupied with the sins of others. It was no wonder, then, that she had always proselytized to her neighbors and relatives with such urgency.

The apparent resolution to Emmerick’s disputation with God was supplied by Purgatory. Not only did this place of purification save countless sinners from hell; it also meant that through her prayers Emmerick could continue to work for others’ salvation even after they had passed into the next world. From earliest childhood, she began to pray almost exclusively for the deliverance of poor souls in Purgatory, and many of her visions were affirmations that God was merciful and her prayers were indeed efficacious. She told Dean Rensing one morning that in her latest vision from the previous night, “she was present as God served judgment over great sinners. ‘His justice,’” she said, “‘is great, but his mercy still greater. Only those will be damned who absolutely will not be converted[;] but those who have even a speck of good intentions will be saved . . . they indeed go to Purgatory, but they merely pass through it and do not remain there.’”¹²⁰ Rensing’s superior, Vicar General Droste-Vischering, recorded another vision of Purgatory which emphasized God’s mercy and forgiveness:

¹¹⁹ “Wenn ich sonst daran dachte, daß nur ein armer Sünder verdammt werde, das tat mir so wehe, daß ich es nicht verscherzen konnte . . .” Rensing, „Tagebuch,” Akten, 43-44.
I was in Purgatory, it was to me as if I was led into a deep chasm. There I saw a great open space that that seemed terrible but yet not terrible – I don’t know how I should say it – that seemed moving. There sat people who were so silent and sad; but there was something in their expressions, as if they still had joy in their hearts and believed in the merciful God. I saw fire (this she said smiling) not at all . . .

These visions of Purgatory were not new: they had comforted Emmerick since childhood.

Overberg, for example, wrote:

She related that from youth on she almost always prayed for others [rather than herself], and especially for the souls in Purgatory. Once an unknown person led her to a place that must have been Purgatory. There were in this place many people in great suffering who pleaded for her intercession.” From then on she offered up almost constant prayers on their behalf, and often heard in response disembodied voices who expressed their gratitude: “I thank you, I thank you.”

She also told Rensing of this vision, which she apparently had multiple times, and in which the faces of the suffering sinners took on before her eyes a look of indescribable happiness, “a sign of the near deliverance of these souls.” Emmerick’s mission to free the souls she saw trapped there was evidently a very personal one: on at least one occasion, she told Rensing that she recognized acquaintances she had known among those being tormented to purify them of their sins.

She offered as expiation for her sins and for these lost sheep of her community far more, however, than her prayers. As she explained to Rensing, “I am not praying for myself, and I am

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122 “Sie erzählte, daß sie von Jugend auf fast immer für andere, und besonders für die Seelen im Fegfeuer gebetet.

123 “Sie erzählte, daß sie von Jugend auf fast immer für andere, und besonders für die Seelen im Fegfeuer gebetet.

124 Rensing, „Tagebuch,“ Akten, 47.
never so often heard for others, and not for me, as when I pray in suffering.”

Many times, she would complain bitterly to Rensing, Overberg and whoever else would listen about her suffering – the burning pain of her wounds that kept her awake through the night, and the pain of mortifying embarrassment before the endless parade of people who came to see her: “Ach,” she cried out during one of Overberg’s visits, “how I wish to die!” Overberg asked if her pain was so unbearable that she felt she could no longer hold out, and she said it was; “and her appearance showed well enough why she wished so much to die. Of the pain of her wounds, she said: ‘These are not like other pains, these go straight to the heart.’” Yet even as she was tortured by her condition, she sought to embrace and transform it into a work of mercy. Though she said she fervently wished the visible wounds would disappear, she prayed for her physical pain to continue and even increase: “if I could wish that through my suffering something could contribute to His glory and to the conversion of sinners, then I would gladly suffer longer and still more.”

Emmerick even told Overberg that “she was most unwell when she had nothing particular to suffer; without suffering she could not be well.”

She was emboldened in her zeal by what she saw as the Church’s hour of crisis, as secularization dissolved the convents, French revolutionary troops looted churches, and clergy went into exile. To Dr. Wesener, who would update Emmerick on the latest wartime developments, she described the times as unprecedented in their lack of Christian virtue:

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125 „... denn ich bitte ja nicht für mich und ich bin schon so oft erhört worden, wenn ich für andere bat, für mich nie, als wenn ich bat um Leiden.” Rensing, „Tagebuch,” Akten, 42.


128 „Dann, sagte sie, wäre ihr am meisten unwohl, wenn sie nichts Besonderes zu leiden hätte; ohne Leiden könnte sie nicht gut sein.” Overberg, “Overbergs Aufzeichnungen,” Akten, 104.
“‘Never,’ she said, ‘was there so little love of neighbor in the world as there is now.’”

The Russians were bad enough, but at least they still had religion; the French, on the other hand, she described as godless. More than once she emphasized to Wesener that what would save the Münsterland from succumbing to this godlessness was the faith and prayer of Münsterlanders.

From this point of view, Emmerick’s own devotions became acts of public engagement on behalf of her community, in a crisis whose stakes could not be higher.

Emmerick had already at her disposal a model of radical self-mortification as expiation for others’ sins: Jesus on the cross, the “suffering Savior” she had always tried to follow. Throughout her life, she had tried to understand and accept her privations in the light of his own story. When other villagers, put off by her zeal, considered her haughty and self-righteous, she learned to rejoice in their persecution: as she told her friend “she was glad that people said this, because Christ too had suffered and was innocent.”

Faced with the same reaction from her fellow sisters in the convent, Emmerick fell back on the same thought. Having been born into poverty, she followed the example of Jesus and his disciples and gave what little she had away, making her deprivation something she chose rather than something to which she simply submitted. Apparently cursed with a weak constitution, she nonetheless punished her body – perhaps to the point of giving herself stigmata – so that her pain likewise became a cross she chose to accept. In thus transforming the circumstances of her life, she made every hardship and hindrance a sacrifice she could offer up for the expiations of sins, just as God sacrificed his Son to redeem the world.

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129 „’Nie,’ sagte sie, ‘war so wenig Liebe des Nächsten in der Welt, als gerade jetzt.’“ Wesener, „Tagebuch,“ Tagebuch, 22.
130 Wesener, „Tagebuch,“ Tagebuch, 8; 27.
131 „Und weil die Leute sagten, sie wollte aus Hoffart eine Nonne werden, so sagte sie, dieses wäre ihr lieb, daß die Leute dieses sagten, weil Christus auch unschuldig gelitten hätte.“ Rensing, „Vernhemung Gertrud Ahaus-Mört,“ Akten, 210-211.
Emmerick’s accounts of her visions as well as her physical mortifications, furthermore, suggest that she increasingly associated her own suffering with the suffering of Jesus on the cross. When praying in Coesfeld’s church late at night, she saw its crucifix fly down to meet her.\textsuperscript{132} On another occasion, she was in the chapel of her convent, praying for a better relationship with her fellow sisters, when she saw a bleeding crucifix and interpreted this as a sign that she would continue to suffer.\textsuperscript{133} As another nun, Clara Söntgen, confirmed, Emmerick had first experienced the pain of Jesus’ crown of thorns years ago while praying with her in church, though no visible wounds appeared at that time.\textsuperscript{134}

By 1813, however, Emmerick’s wounds were strikingly visible. As Rensing, Overberg, Stolberg, Wesener and others attest, these wounds were seemingly impervious to all attempts to heal them. On Fridays, according to tradition the day Jesus died on the Cross, they would bleed, sometimes copiously, sometimes stopping and starting before their eyes. Emmerick claimed, and some believed, that these wounds were made by God as a heavenly sign. Other contemporaries believed she was being manipulated by one or more of the pious clergymen around her, used as a tool to drum up the faith; given Emmerick’s independent and even willful personality, however, this seems unlikely. More recently, some authors have suggested that stigmata like Emmerick’s may be the result of a psychosomatic process. The most prosaic explanation is that Emmerick made the wounds herself, an explanation bolstered by her past history of religiously-motivated self-harm.

In any case, the distance of time and the limitations of the remaining sources do not permit any definite answers to this question. While it is impossible to know the “authentic” nature of Emmerick’s stigmata, or the “authentic” nature of Emmerick the individual, the sources

\textsuperscript{132} Overberg, „Aufzeichnungen,“ Akten, 98.
\textsuperscript{133} Overberg, „Aufzeichnungen,“ Akten, 87.
\textsuperscript{134} Rensing, „Vernehmung Clara Söntgen,“ 225-226.
do permit a recovery of the self-fashioned identity she presented to those who made the climb to her rented room above Dülmen’s public inn. Drawing on the portrait that emerges from this process, and on the nature of stigmata and women’s mysticism in the Catholic tradition, a few conclusions regarding the meaning of Emmerick’s stigmata suggest themselves.

First, if Emmerick did indeed wound herself, this cannot be chalked up to masochism pure and simple; or at least, her masochism was one of a very peculiar and paradoxical kind. Her role as unlikely nun and untutored visionary stemmed from a strong sense of self and the zeal of an expiatory mission on behalf of her community, in which she was able to embrace, transform, and transcend her disadvantages. Without demanding autonomy, she nonetheless exercised agency; without disobedience, she led a life of nonconformity. Her stigmata were no exception to this pattern. On one level, her deep awareness of her sin and her obsessive fixation on the cross were the tortuous mental elements that likely pushed her toward such graphic self-mutilation. Yet at the same time, her wounds could also serve as one more way to draw herself and her community closer to God, and one more way of commanding power through the embrace of weakness.

In taking on a ministry of expiatory suffering, she had taken on Jesus’ mission as it was understood by the church. By taking on his stigmata, she even more visibly and unmistakably took on the role of Christ, of God himself. Her subtle mixing of humility and authority suggests Emmerick was fully aware of this reading of her role. Even as she abased herself, she did so in the same way that Jesus abased himself: to reveal his superior spirituality. Her wounds were a mutilation but also an audacious elevation of the flesh when their symbolic meaning in the context of Catholic doctrine is understood.
Yet the question remains: why did Emmerick, and many before and after her, specifically manifest their devotion to Christ in their very flesh? Why did her body become her text, preaching Christ crucified? Just as Emmerick’s words and visions reveal themselves more fully when read in the light of her own circumstances as well as in the context of a centuries-old Catholic mystical tradition, so too most Emmerick’s stigmata be considered in conjunction with the longer history of stigmata as a phenomenon. As numerous scholars have noted, a clear pattern emerges in this history: though the first known and accepted stigmatic was Francis of Assisi, women were subsequently far more likely to exhibit stigmata and other forms of bodily mystical phenomena. According to the most exhaustive study, over the five and a half centuries separating Francis from Emmerick, sixty-nine individuals are known to have exhibited the “classic” five wounds of stigmata (hands, feet, and side). Only three of these stigmatics (4%) were men.135

One could easily reproduce the gender stereotypes of Emmerick’s day in attempting to explain why exhibiting stigmata has been an overwhelmingly female phenomenon, resorting to an identification of more emotive, visceral piety as somehow essentially feminine. More than a whiff of sexism lingers in older scholarship which dismisses so-called “affective,” emotionally-charged mysticism like that of Emmerick and other stigmatics as “excited emotionalism and intoxicated eroticism.”136 Similar dangers can lurk in psychologically-based explanations for stigmata, self-flagellation, prolonged fasting, and other forms of religiously-motivated self-

135 Frustratingly, the only comprehensive survey of stigmatics dates from the nineteenth-century: Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre, La stigmatisation: L’extase Divine et les Miracles de Lourdes (Paris: Bellet, 1894). Modern scholars continue to cite Imbert-Gourbeyre. I am currently developing my own list of stigmatics. In the process, I have cross-referenced all of the nearly three hundred stigmatics listed by Imbert-Gourbeyre, and subsequently winnowed down this number to individuals who displayed all five “classic” stigmata wounds (both hands, both feet, and side) and whose wounds were visible to others during their lifetime, rather than a manifestation after death. The percentage of women in this reduced cohort is analogous to the percentage in Imbert-Gourbeyre’s entire sample: over 90%.

mortification. From the moment of psychology’s emergence as a professional scientific
discipline around the turn of the nineteenth century, many of its practitioners both associated
enthusiastic religiosity with hysteria, and gendered hysteria as feminine.\textsuperscript{137} While Emmerick
became a sudden celebrity in Dülmen, elsewhere German insane asylums took in peasants,
usually women, who claimed to be gifted with supernatural powers or were prone to religious
ecstasies.\textsuperscript{138} Though Dr. Wesener would go on to publish articles in medical journals describing
Emmerick’s stigmata as inexplicable by medical science, his contemporary Johann Bährrens
would cite Emmerick as a specific example in his book on the then-fashionable theory of
“animal magnetism.”\textsuperscript{139}

That this deeply encoded assertion of power was the recourse of women like Emmerick,
far more than men, is understandable without resorting to essentialist readings of gender: what
other group has so consistently been shut out of the normal avenues of power that they would
turn to such a tortuous alternative path? What other group would be more predisposed by their
experiences to recognize and empathize with Jesus’ ennoblement of his suffering and lowliness?
What other group could employ stigmata as social and cultural critique to such shocking effect?
The carnivalesque reality of a woman as Christ, particularly a woman like Emmerick, can serve
to powerfully shame men who are failing in their Christ-like duty to shepherd their flock.

Modern psychology and psychiatry have moved away from the simplistic understanding
of gender that prevailed in the early years of the discipline. Even so, contemporary research has
sometimes failed to provide a convincing alternative explanatory framework for women mystics’

\textsuperscript{137} It is worth remembering, for instance, that the word “hysteria” shares with “hysterectomy” the same Greek word
as its root: “hystera,” meaning womb.
\textsuperscript{138} Ann Goldberg, \textit{Sex, Religion, and the Making of Modern Madness: The Eberbach Asylum and German Society,
1815-1849} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 36-70
\textsuperscript{139} J[ohann] Ch[ristian] Bährrens, \textit{Der animalische Magnetismus und die durch ihn bewirkten Kuren} (Elberfeld and
Leipzig, 1816), 138 ff.
behavior. One example is Michael Carroll’s examination of Emmerick and other women stigmatics, in which he uses an analysis of their visions to conclude that their wounds represent a conflation of the infantile desire to suckle at the breast with an Electra complex that compelled them to incorporate the “father” (in this instance God) through the mouth. Carroll seems to suggest that the psyche of women mystics is sufficient to explain their behavior, and furthermore that subconscious complexes, some of which are peculiar to women, are the driving force behind their mysticism. Similarly, Herbert Moller attributes the emergence of stigmata as well as its predominance among women to “the re-emergence of repressed wishes and fantasies, but distorted by regression . . . The mystics directed their infantilized desires for love objects at the Christian triune deity and particularly at Jesus, who became the beloved of the individual mystic.” Moller sees evidence of this “regressive” emotional desire in a wide range of stigmatics’ mystical experiences, from the 12th through the 18th centuries: “The eroticized deity could reveal himself as a loving father as well as a helpless infant in a crèche or as a radiant youth. The divine object was experienced by some as a female figure, either as Sancta Sophia or as a feminized Christ with an open wound and helpless in his humiliation. On a still more regressive level Christ appeared as a mother figure.” What this mono-causal framework excludes or ignores is the possibility of active choice as well as compulsion. When analyzed solely in this way, Emmerick comes across as a victim of her own psychoses. Basing the understanding of her stigmata on psychoanalysis of her visions, rather than a broader investigation of Emmerick’s words and actions in their historical context, cannot capture their full complexity. As Arnold Davidson among others has pointed out, psychiatric and cultural readings do not easily map onto each other: “What must be explained from a psychiatric point of

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view often turns out to be distinct from that which needs to be interpreted theologically or historically."^{142} Both approaches are needed, in other words, to uncover the whole story of Emmerick’s stigmata.

Carroll, Moller, and others rightly point out the psychological underpinnings that must contribute to women mystics’ punishing asceticism and sometimes brutal self-mutilation. The fact that stigmata or other alleged miraculous wounds are usually accompanied by a host of other phenomena – visions, hearing voices, prolonged abstinence from food, frequent illness – bolsters the supposition that mystics like Emmerick would today likely be diagnosed as having one or more psychiatric conditions, including schizophrenia, anorexia, etc. Assertions by Frank Graziano and others that, in their rush to celebrate their charismatic power, scholars have sometimes denied or obscured the tortuous reality of women mystics’ mental and physical health, have some merit.^{143}

There is no denying that Emmerick was, in the memorable phrase of one author, “a pathological museum.”^{144} Be that as it may, when her single-minded pursuit of a religious vocation and her confident, impressive voice are taken into account, it becomes hard to see Emmerick as a mere victim of debilitating mental illness. Emmerick’s own words and actions suggest that while she was indeed plagued by deep feelings of unworthiness and sinfulness, an intense obsession with suffering and an unusual fixation on religion, she also recognized and owned these parts of her personality to the best of her ability. Unable or unwilling to deny them, she instead embraced and transformed them into a powerful tool in her crusade against poverty and declining faith. In so doing, she became stigmatized – in at least one sense of that word – by

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142 Arnold I. Davidson, “Miracles of Bodily Transformation, or How St. Francis Received the Stigmata,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, No. 3 (Spring 2009), 454.
143 Graziano, *Wounds of Love*, 3-34.
choice, offering her body as well as her prayers to save her community as its unorthodox redeemer.

**Conclusion**

Anna Katharina Emmerick had a story she wanted to tell, but it was not the story that others wanted or expected to hear; a deeply-held sense of purpose, at odds with conventional expectations; a Catholic community she wished to reach, and a much larger society she was forced to confront. In a hierarchical, patriarchal society, she had little access to education, wealth, or power. All of these obstacles, however, Emmerick embraced as opportunities. In her fertile mind and fervent piety, poverty became not something she was born into but something she actively chose out of love for God and neighbor. Her meager diet of religious books became an endless feast of images and ideas for her to contemplate. The astonishment and ridicule that followed her everywhere became a God-given guard against pride, and a way of growing closer to the persecuted Christ. Her recurrent pain and illness became a penitential offering she could give on behalf of others. Unable to write or to preach, her wounded body became her text, preaching Christ crucified.

In becoming a stigmatic and visionary, Emmerick participated in a centuries-old Catholic mystical tradition. Yet even though others before her had followed similar spiritual paths, Emmerick (like mystics before her) had to find her own way as best she could, with few resources, in adverse circumstances. Thus, mysticism was not something that happened to or was handed down to Emmerick, but a calling that she defined and pursued. In pursuing it, she developed her own sense of identity – and in the face of public ridicule and humiliating church and state investigations over eleven years, she defended it, again and again.
Emmerick’s path of mysticism was not a path toward self-enfranchisement; nor was it an act of deliberate rebellion against authority. She was born into a society that was patriarchal, hierarchical, and unequal. Becoming a nun and then a stigmatic did nothing to alter Emmerick’s inferior position in this society or to challenge its institutions, and was not meant to do so. Nonetheless, a consideration of Emmerick’s monastic career and the context in which she pursued it, her open and unashamed sharing of her thoughts on theology, and her bold adoption of Jesus Christ’s own role all suggest that Emmerick found a way to make her powerlessness empowering. To interpret this as acquiescence is to mask Emmerick’s own agency. To make her a victim of pathology is to miss the deliberate theological message behind Emmerick’s actions.

It is important to recognize and recover, so far as it is possible, Emmerick’s self-fashioned identity. It provided the foundation subsequent hagiographers would build upon, and can therefore aid in understanding the process of Emmerick’s evolution as symbol – what was retained, what was altered, what was suppressed. Even more importantly, reconstructing Emmerick’s story has the potential to expand our sense of what was possible (though perhaps improbable) for peasant-class women of her time. She provides a glimpse into how Catholicism was actually lived by the faithful, who engaged with their faith in a variety of ways, and what agency in the context of the hierarchical, patriarchal Church could look like.