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# Voices from a Distant Land: Fragments of a Twelfth-Century Nuns' Letter Collection

By Alison I. Beach

Late in the nineteenth century, while working in the archives of the Benedictine monastery of Admont, the monk-librarian Jakob Wichner discovered four parchment leaves wrapped around the nuns' wine service register for the year 1431. He recognized that these fragments, though badly damaged and stained with wine, contained a collection of twelfth-century Latin letters linked in some way to Admont's female community.<sup>1</sup> He concluded that what he had discovered was probably the remains of a formulary, a collection of model letters designed for imitation, once belonging to the nuns. Wichner transcribed and printed two of the letters in the appendix to his article "Das ehemalige Nonnenkloster O.S.B. zu Admont," which appeared in 1881.<sup>2</sup>

Wichner's discovery was more important than he realized. On a recent visit to the monastery, I had the opportunity to examine the letter fragments and noticed immediately the opening lines of several letters beyond the two that he transcribed. Preserved on these unimpressive-looking parchment leaves are copies of *nineteen* complete and partial Latin letters written by Admont's nuns—an extraordinary collection that contains both routine correspondence related to patronage and remarkably powerful letters that detail the exigencies of individuals. In these fragments echo women's voices speaking of their intersecting spiritual, economic, and personal concerns, voices offering us a rare glimpse both of the lives of Admont's twelfth-century nuns and of their continuing interaction with the world outside the cloister.

I would like to thank the participants of the 1999–2000 medievalists' seminar at the Institute for Advanced Study for their comments and suggestions, particularly Drew Jones for his expert assistance with the transcription and translation, and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton for her insights and support at all points in the project. Thanks also to Joan M. Ferrante, David A. Jaeger, Constant Mews, Barbara H. Rosenwein, and John Van Engen for their careful reading and helpful suggestions, and to Andreas Fingernagle of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek for his assistance and hospitality in Vienna. Special thanks are due to Dr. Stephan Borgehammar for bringing Wichner's discovery to my attention and to the monastery of Admont and its librarian and archivist, Johann Tomaschek, for their support.

Biblical quotations and paraphrases are italicized throughout.

<sup>1</sup> The fragments are now cataloged as Admont, Stiftsarchiv Ii/1.

<sup>2</sup> Wichner, "Das ehemalige Nonnenkloster O.S.B. zu Admont," *Wissenschaftliche Studien und Mitteilungen aus dem Benediktiner-Orden* 2 (1881), 75–86 and 288–319. This article also appeared as a short monograph under the title *Das ehemalige Nonnenkloster O.S.B. zu Admont in Steiermark* (Brunn, 1881). Wichner dismissed the first line of Letter 19 as a meaningless pen trial (p. 319).

1. THE WORLD OF TWELFTH-CENTURY ADMONT:  
EDUCATION AND THE *ARS DICTAMINIS*

Admont was founded in 1074 as a monastery for men in a beautiful valley on the Enns River in the archdiocese of Salzburg.<sup>3</sup> By the middle of the twelfth century, an affiliated women's house had been added, as was common at established communities such as Admont that came under the influence of the Hirsau reform.<sup>4</sup> The newly arrived nuns were soon integrated into the spiritual and intellectual life of the monastery, although contemporary witnesses were careful to stress that monks and nuns were strictly segregated.<sup>5</sup> There was a thriving community, organized according to the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the customs of Hirsau. New female recruits, like their male counterparts, were taught to read and write, and more mature students advanced their skills in the liberal arts in an internal school directed by the nuns themselves. Young girls just beginning their education begged their teacher to write them prose and poetry,<sup>6</sup> while their elders studied the Bible with the guidance both of the church fathers, whose works were a staple of their library, and of the monks, who preached to them through the small window in their locked enclosure. Some of Admont's female scholars composed exegetical sermons, which they delivered on days when a monk-preacher was not available to do the job.<sup>7</sup> This emphasis on education created a demand for books, and teams of highly trained nun-scribes copied a wide range of biblical, liturgical, patristic, and medieval texts both for their own library and for the monks. The monastery's female copyists also helped to record and edit numerous Latin sermon-commentaries written by the monk Irimbert, who would serve as abbot from 1172 to 1176.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For a general history of Admont, see Jakob Wichner, *Geschichte des Benediktiner-Stiftes Admont*, 4 vols. (Admont, 1874), and Rudolf List, *Stift Admont, 1074–1974: Festschrift zur 900-Jahrfeier* (Reid im Innkreis, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Hirsau was a Benedictine monastery in Württemberg, founded in 830 and reformed in the eleventh century under Abbot William (d. 1091), who had been a monk at St. Emmeram in Regensburg. William's customs, the *Consuetudines Hirsaugienses*, were adopted at numerous German monasteries, including Admont, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. See Hermann Jakobs, *Die Hirsauer: Ihre Ausbreitung und Rechtsstellung im Zeitalter des Investiturstreites*, Kölner historische Abhandlungen 4 (Cologne, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> For a contemporary report claiming that the nuns were strictly enclosed, see Bernard Pez, ed., *Bibliotheca ascetica antiquo-nova, hoc est, collectio veterum quorundam et recentiorum opusculorum asceticorum, quae hucusque in variis mss., codicibus et bibliothecis delituerunt*, 8 (Regensburg, 1725), pp. 454–64.

<sup>6</sup> "Praeterea licet post completorium secundum regulam perpetuum haberet silentium, tamen cum rogaretur a parvulis, ut versus et prosas praediceret illis, sicut erat plena caritate et dilectione, accepit tabulas et scripsit eis reddendos in crastino versus et prosas" ("In addition, although after compline she kept perpetual silence according to the rule, when, nevertheless, she was asked by the girls to dictate verse and prose for them, since she was full of love and concern, she took up tablets and wrote verse and prose to be handed over to them the next day"): "Vita, ut videtur, cuiusdam magistrae monialium Admontensium in Styria saeculo XII," *Analecta Bollandiana* 12 (1893), 363–64.

<sup>7</sup> See Alison I. Beach, "Listening for the Voices of Admont's Twelfth-Century Nuns," in *Voices in Dialogue: New Problems in Reading Women's Cultural History*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> On Admont's female scribes, see Alison I. Beach, *Women as Scribes: Monastic Reform and Book Production in Twelfth-Century Bavaria* (Cambridge, Eng., forthcoming).

Admont's twelfth-century nuns came primarily from the families of wealthy nobles. We meet many of them—Liukart, Engilwich, Irmingart, Mathilt, Regilind, Dieumut, Aldheit, and Gisila, to name only a few—in necrologies, charters, and other contemporary written sources, but most are merely names without stories and without voices.<sup>9</sup> Whether they were sent to the monastery by their families, with or without a vocation, or fled to it, seeking refuge from an undesired or failed marriage, whether they were young or old, virgins or widows who could or would not remarry, we do not know. But it would be naive to imagine that once there, these women were entirely swallowed up by their new life of prayer, liturgical devotion, study, and manual labor and that their voices were henceforth absent from family and society. Strict claustration did not prevent nuns at Admont and elsewhere from continuing relationships that had, in theory, been left behind—ties with children, parents, other relatives, and friends could remain unbroken. Letters, and their attendant messengers, were a primary conduit for these human connections.

Although few artifacts have survived to document the phenomenon, Joan Ferrante has suggested that written correspondence was widespread among religious women across medieval Europe.<sup>10</sup> While much of this communication may not have reflected formal training in *dictamen*, some certainly did.<sup>11</sup> Twelfth-century nuns could be outstandingly skilled and prolific correspondents. One thinks here of major figures such as Heloise, Hildegard, and Elisabeth of Schönau.<sup>12</sup> But formal training in the *ars dictaminis* was not beyond the reach of more ordinary religious women. A letter from a nun at the Benedictine convent of Lippoldsberg to Abbot Sindold of Reinhardsbrunn, for example, contains a request for “two little books on the precepts of *dictamen*,” suggesting that interest in, and access to, such treatises was not uncommon in twelfth-century women's communities.<sup>13</sup> Letter-writing manuals were designed to teach the basics, not just to scholars in

<sup>9</sup> Admont's necrology was edited by Sigismund Herzberg-Fränkell in MGH Nehr 2:287–309. The monastery's charters were preserved in a series of sixteenth-century tradition books (*libri traditioni*), all of which had been destroyed by the end of the nineteenth century, the last in the fire that destroyed most of Admont in 1865. Fortunately, Wichner consulted the *libri* prior to their destruction, and the details of many of the charters reflecting the admission of women are noted in his article on the nuns. See Wichner, “Das ehemalige Nonnenkloster,” p. 77, n. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington, Ind., 1997), p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, eds., *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia, 1993). Cherewatuk and Wiethaus argue, “Although some women writers participated in the male-dominated world of the *ars dictaminis*, the majority of medieval women produced their letters outside it” (p. 8).

<sup>12</sup> Among the most recent studies of Heloise and her letters, including the persistent question of authenticity, are Constant J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France* (New York, 1999), and Bonnie Wheeler, ed., *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Woman* (New York, 2000). On the letters of Hildegard, see Lieven Van Acker, ed., *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, CCCM 91 and 91A (Turnhout, 1991), and Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 1 (New York, 1994). For an edition and translation of Elisabeth's letters, see Anne L. Clark, ed., *Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works* (New York, 2000), pp. 235–54.

<sup>13</sup> *Collectio Reinheresbrunnensis*, ed. Friedel Peeck, MGH EppSel 5 (Munich, 1978), pp. 80–81. Peeck suggests that the nuns had in mind the treatises of Adalbertus of Samaria and Hugh of Bologna.

the schools, but to students in a variety of less formal settings, and may thus have made training in this particular rhetorical art available to a broad population of religious women.<sup>14</sup>

Admont's nuns had access to some form of training in letter writing, for we know, even without the new evidence provided by the recovered letters, that they were active correspondents: "Sometimes in the dead of night," wrote Gertrude, a twelfth-century nun of Admont of an unnamed *magistra*, "she composed a letter and dictated it to a scribe."<sup>15</sup> "In spite of this," Gertrude continued, "she maintained the rule of silence since she never uttered any German words."<sup>16</sup> The *magistra* was, it seems, able to put her thoughts into Latin words, to organize those words into at least the rough framework of a letter, and to speak this letter aloud to a scribe who, in a strictly cloistered setting and late at night, would have been a fellow nun.

The presence at Admont of letter-writing nuns is further reflected in letters to the women that refer to now lost letters *from* them. "You inquired, O most dear ones," wrote the theologian Gerhoch of Reichersberg (d. 1169) between 1139 and 1144, "about the words of the Lord in which God is justified [Ps. 50.6]. . . ."<sup>17</sup> Between 1145 and 1169 he addressed a letter explaining the image of the centurion in Matt. 8.5–13 to "his beloved sisters in Christ," perhaps also Admont's nuns.<sup>18</sup> The survival at the monastery of two copies of a third letter, Gerhoch's response of c. 1160 to an inquiry from another group of "beloved sisters" about the meaning of the liturgical readings for the feast of the Assumption, suggests that this letter may also have been written for them.<sup>19</sup> But only Gerhoch's responses have

<sup>14</sup> See John Van Engen, "Letters, Schools, and Written Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," in *Dialektik und Rhetorik im früheren und hohen Mittelalter: Rezeption, Überlieferung und gesellschaftliche Wirkung antiker Gelehrsamkeit vornehmlich im 9. und 12. Jahrhundert*, ed. Johannes Fried, Schriften des Historischen Kollegs, Kolloquien, 27 (Munich, 1997), p. 105, where he describes manuals of *dictamen* as offering "a practical alternative to the full rhetorical training of the schools," and as "providing instruction suitable for apprentices and professional clerks in almost any setting."

<sup>15</sup> In the double monasteries of the Hirsau reform, the head of the female community was called *magistra* rather than *abbatissa*. The only surviving copy of the *Vita magistrae* is a thirteenth-century copy: Admont, Stiftsbibliothek MS 25. Scholars have debated the identity of the author, but she was certainly a nun at Admont. See Friedrich Ohly, "Ein Admonter Liebesgruß," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 87 (1956), 13–23. The author refers to Abbot Wolfhold (1115–37) as being "beatae memoriae," placing the composition of the text after his death in 1137. See Ohly, "Admonter Liebesgruß," p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> "Aliquando enim in tempesta nocte litteras composuit et scribenti praedixit, silentii tamen observantiam retinens numquam aliqua theutonica verba protulit": "Vita magistrae," p. 363.

<sup>17</sup> Gerhoch, Letter 27, PL 193:607C–D; Damien Van den Eynde, *L'œuvre littéraire de Géroch de Reichersberg*, Spicilegium Pontificii Athenaei Antoniani 11 (Rome, 1957), pp. 198–99; and Peter Classen, *Gerhoch von Reichersberg: Eine Biographie* (Wiesbaden, 1960), p. 404.

<sup>18</sup> Classen, *Gerhoch*, pp. 404–5, and Van den Eynde, *L'œuvre*, p. 288. Van den Eynde suggests Reichersberg (p. 288), while Bernard Pez suggests Admont. This question has not been resolved. See Classen, *Gerhoch*, p. 405.

<sup>19</sup> Classen, *Gerhoch*, pp. 403–4, and Van den Eynde, *L'œuvre*, pp. 245–46, who argues that the letter and accompanying sermon were addressed to nuns at Reichersberg. The survival of two copies of this letter at Admont (MS 602, fols. 15r–21r, and MS 579, fols. 3r–38r), together with the known relationship between Gerhoch and the nuns of Admont, suggests that the letter could originally have been directed to them. Van den Eynde's assertion that Gerhoch's protestation that he had no jurisdiction over what they read at the feast of the Assumption was a mere posture of humility (p. 245, n. 3)

survived, and until now we have been able to hear only half of the epistolary conversation.

## 2. THE LETTERS

The newly discovered nuns' letters are preserved on two separate folded sheets of parchment. Bifolium 1 (12.5 by 17 cm.) is the less damaged of the two. Bifolium 2 (13 by 18 cm.), which probably covered the front of the wine register, was evidently touched frequently as the book was opened, and the parchment is worn thin. I was able to read a significant amount of text using both incandescent light and color photographs, but to recover more from the most stained and damaged areas, I examined them further under ultraviolet light at the Austrian National Library in Vienna. While I was able to recover several lines of text, significant sections remain illegible.

Each of the four folios contains between twenty-seven and thirty-two lines of text written in an irregular proto-Gothic script combining elements of both book and documentary hand, distinct from the highly regular script that Admont's nun-scribes used for books in the late twelfth century. A total of five hands are identifiable (see Table 1), and with one exception (scribe B), the scribes use similar letter forms and abbreviations.

The flow of the text indicates that these two bifolia were originally part of a single gathering or booklet.<sup>20</sup> In their original configuration, the text of Letter 5 flowed from the bottom of fol. 1v (bifolium 1) to the top of 2r (bifolium 2). The final lines of Letter 9 (which begins on fol. 2v) are lacking, as are the first lines of Letter 10 (which ends on fol. 3r), suggesting that at least one inner bifolium, which would have contained the missing sections of these two letters and probably additional complete letters, has been lost. Similarly, the first ten lines of fol. 1r contain only the final lines of Letter 1, and the last four lines of fol. 4v contain the opening of Letter 19. The lost portions must have been written either on an outer bifolium or in gatherings just before and just after the surviving one. Those that remain were clearly once a part of a larger collection.

What were these letters, and why were they saved? Their obvious epistolary form leaves no doubt that they were, indeed, copies of letters, but do they reflect real letters that the nuns themselves wrote and sent (or at least planned to send), or are they fictional creations—perhaps the scribal or rhetorical exercises of students or models for their imitation?<sup>21</sup> It is easy to see why Wichner thought that he had found a formulary, since the replacement of proper names with the initial "N." in many of the letters gives them a markedly impersonal appearance. We can imagine a nun who wanted to write a letter to a patron, for example, selecting

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is not convincing. A fourth letter addressed to nuns, dated c. 1139–44 and containing another explication of Ps. 50.6, was almost certainly not addressed to Admont's exegetes. See Classen, *Gerhoch*, p. 404, and Van den Eynde, *L'œuvre*, p. 199.

<sup>20</sup> For the purpose of the present discussion, I refer to the folios of the resulting gathering as 1 recto through 4 verso.

<sup>21</sup> The most useful general introduction to the study of medieval Latin letters is still Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, *Typologie des Sources du Moyen Age Occidental* 17 (Turnhout, 1976).

a suitable model and making a copy, filling in the proper names and making other adjustments appropriate to the specific situation. But the replacement of names with initials was common in other contemporary letter collections that are clearly not formularies. In the collection maintained by Admont's monks, for example, "N." or another initial frequently stands in for a proper name.<sup>22</sup> The scribes of a twelfth-century collection from the monastery of Reinhardsbrunn likewise give only initials (often "N.") in 74 of their 102 salutations,<sup>23</sup> and copies of letters written by Elisabeth of Schönau and Hildegard of Bingen also contain numerous examples.<sup>24</sup> This was a common scribal practice, and not the hallmark of a formulary. The layout, moreover, does not lend itself to easy reference such as one might expect in a formulary. There are no titles or rubrics, and few visual cues, such as tinting or a change in letter size or style to indicate the beginning or ending of individual letters. Letter simply follows upon letter with little fanfare, often with one ending and another beginning in mid-line. On fol. 4v, for example, new letters begin on line 3, line 13, and line 26 without any special demarcation.<sup>25</sup>

There is no discernible topical organization to the collection—letters relating to the welfare of the entire community are interspersed with others that address the specific concerns of individual women. Internal clues to their dating suggest, rather, a chronological order. The author of Letter 6 describes the death of a male associate at the Scottish monastery of St. Mary in Vienna, providing a terminus post quem of c. 1158, when that community was founded.<sup>26</sup> Letters 10 and 11 appear to relate to a dispute with the monastery of Klosterneuburg, near Vienna, in which several of Admont's agents, including a wealthy patron, Gregory of Wetterfeld, were accused of illicitly diverting funds intended for Klosterneuburg to Admont between 1159 and 1164.<sup>27</sup> Letter 11 refers also to a schism threatening the church, probably the papal schism of 1158–77.<sup>28</sup> In Letter 15 a nun congrat-

<sup>22</sup> In 1162 Archbishop Englebert of Salzburg gave Abbot Godfrey (d. 1165) a collection of letters from the archdiocese of Salzburg to which the monks added copies of their own correspondence. See *Die Admonter Briefsammlung*, ed. Günther Hödl and Peter Classen, MGH Die Briefe der deutschen Kaiserzeit 6 (Munich, 1983).

<sup>23</sup> *Collectio Reinheresbrunnensis*, ed. Peeck. See especially the letters to and from nuns: p. 35 ("N. luce magis dilecte sorori S. . ."), p. 45 ("N. monachus qualiscunque N. germane sue . . ."), and p. 75 ("Dilectissimo nepoti sui H. A. humilis ancilla Christi . . .").

<sup>24</sup> A few examples from among the many will suffice: in Elisabeth's correspondence, see Letter 15, which is addressed to a kinswoman, Mistress G. (Clark, ed., *Complete Works*, pp. 247–49 and p. 297, n. 304, where Clark suggests that the addressee might have been Guda of St. Thomas of Andernach); and Letter 16, addressed to R. L. and H. (Clark, ed., *Complete Works*, pp. 249–50). Clark notes (p. 298, n. 306) that these initials are expanded in Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek MS Vindob. Pal. 488, to Rudolphus, Lu—, and Hermannus. In Hildegard's correspondence, Letter 1 (Hildegard to Bernard of Clairvaux, *Epistolarium*, p. 3) replaces Bernard with B. in line 1; Letter 48 (the monk Godfrey to Hildegard, p. 117) replaces Godfrey with G. in line 3; and Letter 223 (an anonymous provost to Hildegard, p. 489) gives N. in place of a name in line 1.

<sup>25</sup> The word "Dilecto" on line 13 was underlined (possibly by Wichner as he prepared to print the letter that followed) in what appears to be modern ink.

<sup>26</sup> See Helmut Flachenecker, *Schottenklöster: Irische Benediktinerkonvente im hochmittelalterlichen Deutschland*, Quellen und Forschungen aus dem Gebiet der Geschichte, N.F., 18 (Paderborn, 1995), pp. 214–36.

<sup>27</sup> *Admonter Briefsammlung*, pp. 74–76.

<sup>28</sup> On the course and effects of the papal schism in Bavaria, see Romuald Bauerreiss, *Kirchengeschichte Bayerns*, 3 (St. Ottilien, 1951), pp. 67–79.

TABLE 1.  
Letters Recovered from Admont, Stiftsarchiv II/1

Letter no.	Sender	Addressee	Subject	Location	Scribe	Comments
1	Female, possibly an Admont <i>magistra</i> or a female associate outside the house	Female, perhaps a woman who had been educated at Admont	Patronage?	1r, lines 1–10	A	Last 10 lines of a letter. First section lost.
2	Anonymous nun	Unfaithful kinsman who has left the monastery	Reprimands him for his lack of faith and urges repentance	1r, lines 10–21	A	Text printed in the Appendix
3	N., a nun	Kinsman	Seeks patronage (in the form of payment for a fur?)	1r, line 21–1v, line 5	A	
4	Unidentified	Secular prince	Seeks legal protection from malefactors	1v, lines 6–17	B	Extensive damage
5	Unidentified	A “prince of Christ” in the Styrian court	Issues a warning about his conduct	1v, line 17–2r, line 6	B	Extensive damage
6	Female, perhaps a <i>magistra</i> , together with her nuns	Unidentified	Describes the death of a male associate in Vienna	2r, lines 6–28	C	Refers to the Schottenkloster (St. Mary) in Vienna, founded in 1158
7	E., a <i>magistra</i> of Admont	Nuns (of Bergen)	Sister M., who has transferred to Bergen	2t, line 28–2v, line 12 or 18	C	Extensive damage to last 12 lines (2v)
8	Illegible	_____	_____	2v, lines 12 or 18–29	?	Extensive damage
9	Illegible	_____	_____	2v, line 29	?	Extensive damage, first line of a letter
10	Anonymous nuns	Unidentified, secular?	Defends Gregory of Wetterfeld, a patron	3t, lines 1–9	D	Last 9 lines of a letter.
11	Unidentified	Secular princes (dukes) of Austria and Styria	Urges peace and an end to conflict with another group of nuns (at Klosterneuberg?)	3r, lines 9–23	E	Related to Letter 11? Klosterneuberg conflict c. 1159/60–1164



TABLE 1.—Continued

Letter no.	Sender	Addressee	Subject	Location	Scribe	Comments
12	Anonymous nun	(Her) abbot	Uncertain	3r, line 23–3v, line 3	E	Text printed by Wichner (1881) and in the Appendix
13	N., a nun	A male patron	Seeks patronage, sends tournament	3v, lines 3–12	E	Archbishop Eberhard, d. 1164, or Archbishop Konrad II, d. 1168. Text printed in the Appendix.
14	Sister N.	Archbishop N. (of Salzburg)	Seeks to have her daughter, whom she had left in the care of strangers, sent to the monastery	3v, line 13–4r, line 7	E	Bishop Otto of Andechs, 1165–1169/50; Bishop Heinrich I, 1170–1173/74; or Bishop Heinrich II, 1178
15	N., a nun	Bishop of Brixen	Congratulates him on his elevation to the bishopric and urges proper attention to religion	4r, lines 8–20	A	
16	H., a nun, "sister and mother"	N., son "by adoption"	Urges him to take her son under his care	4r, line 20–4v, line 3	A	
17	N. and N., nuns	Lord N.	Seeks patronage, sends health powder	4v, lines 3–13	A	Text printed in the Appendix
18	N. and N., nuns	Provost outside Admont (possibly Gerhoch of Reichersberg)	Requests intervention in a dispute between Admont's monks and the archbishop	4v, lines 13–26	A	Text printed by Wichner (1881) and in the Appendix
19	N., a nun	Female, possibly the head of an affiliated community	Uncertain	4v, lines 26–29	A	First 4 lines of a letter

ulates the newly installed bishop of Brixen on his promotion, placing this letter after the long tenure of Bishop Hartmann (1140–64), possibly in c. 1165, when Otto of Andechs was made bishop, c. 1170, when he was succeeded by Heinrich I, or in 1178, when Heinrich II succeeded him.<sup>29</sup> These references together suggest a date in the last third of the twelfth century.

The chronological arrangement suggests that the fragments were once a part of a register or copybook. After a letter was composed and written down, either on wax tablets or parchment, the scribe made a copy to be kept at the monastery. The original was then sent out in the hands of a messenger. It may be that every letter was recorded, or perhaps only those valued for their particular content or style. Some letters, such as those seeking support and intercession (i.e., Letters 1, 3, 13, and 17), could be used as models again and again. Even those addressing specific historical situations or the personal difficulties of individual nuns could be used as models of rhetorical style or the skillful exploitation of biblical images, or simply for the pleasure of the reading.<sup>30</sup> For the nuns, the distinction between formulary and copybook may have been less distinct than modern scholars of medieval letters have imagined it.

But we must still account for the collection's unembellished layout. Why did the scribes not mark the beginning and end of individual letters more clearly? Why would they not have made it easier for later readers and scribes to copy or to read? Admont's female scribes certainly knew how to create legible, even beautiful books—they filled their library with them. The answer may be that what has survived represents an intermediate stage in the process of transmission rather than an end product. The nuns may have planned to edit this raw copybook, to polish the letters and present them in a more accessible and elegant way. In his article on the letters of Hildegard of Bingen, John Van Engen speaks of a similar process: letters recorded in copybooks preserved at Rupertsberg provided the basis for their later public transmission.<sup>31</sup> What we have at Admont, then, may be what was lost at Rupertsberg—the records that were compiled as letters went out.

The style of the letters indicates that Admont's letter-writing nuns were aware of at least the rudiments of *dictamen*, which stated that a properly composed letter should comprise five standard sections: a *salutatio*, or greeting; an *exordium*, intended to engage the recipient and put him or her in a mood favorable to hearing (or reading) what was to follow; a *narratio*, or the main narrative of the letter; a *petitio*, or request; and a *conclusio*, or closing.<sup>32</sup> The biographer Gertrude speaks

<sup>29</sup> Albert Hauck, *Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands*, 4 (Berlin, 1954), p. 965.

<sup>30</sup> I am grateful to the members of the 1999–2000 medieval seminar at the Institute for Advanced Study for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on this issue.

<sup>31</sup> John Van Engen, "Letters and the Public Persona of Hildegard," in *Hildegard von Bingen in ihrem historischen Umfeld*, ed. Alfred Haverkamp, Internationaler wissenschaftlicher Kongreß zum 900jährigen Jubiläum, 12.–19. September 1998, Bingen am Rhein (Mainz, 2000), pp. 376–77.

<sup>32</sup> Two of the better-circulated treatises in the twelfth century were Adalbertus Samaritanus's *Praecepta dictaminum*, edited by Franz-Josef Schmale in MGH Quellen zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 3 (Weimar, 1961), and Hugh of Bologna's *Rationes dictandi prosaice*, ed. Ludwig Rockinger, in *Briefsteller und Formelbücher des elften bis vierzehnten Jahrhunderts*, 1, Burt Franklin Research and Source Works Series 10 (New York, 1961), pp. 47–94. For a brief introduction to the *ars dictaminis* cast in the context of women's participation and access, see the introduction to Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, *Dear Sister*, pp. 3–6 and 8–10.

of composing (*componere*) and dictating (*dictare*) as two distinct stages in the production of a letter, an understanding of the process that was common in treatises on letter writing, especially by the end of the twelfth century.<sup>33</sup> The final letter, drawn up from the scribe's notes, would thus be the joint product of these two women, and perhaps a third person, male or female, called upon to transform the dictated words into a polished letter. We must keep this process and the possibility of two- or threefold authorship in mind when we attempt to identify the voices that we hear speaking through the letters.

Many of the newly discovered letters fit comfortably under the rubric of routine monastic correspondence, particularly those cultivating and thanking patrons, both secular and ecclesiastical, and seeing to the material well-being of the community. There is, for example, nothing about Letter 17 to identify it as anything but a kind of form letter. It contains no names, few details, and reflects what must have been a common situation: the nuns have lost contact with a patron and must now attempt to reestablish ties without physically leaving the cloister. The letter opens with two unnamed nuns offering a standard, deferential *salutatio* to an unnamed patron:

To the dearest lord N., to be loved with reverence, to be revered with love, his most devoted and faithful N. and N. [send their] due of continual prayer, their bond of fidelity, and love.

In the *exordium* that follows, they recall his earlier affection:

The lord knows that ever since we were so deserving as to make your acquaintance, the memory of your love never receded from our hearts

and lament the interruption of the relationship:

We grieve not a little, and in grieving we lament from the depths of our hearts because for a long time we have neither chanced to see you nor heard reliable information about you.

They set the scene for their *petitio* by sending their “very selves” through the messenger:

But now, by the lord's consent, we are as consoled women, because we have a faithful and trustworthy messenger through whom we greet you, and having nothing more valuable, we send our very selves to you through him.

Admont's nuns used word and image to bridge the distance between their cloister and the world beyond it. This could be a straightforward statement of transference: “Although rather far removed from you,” wrote one nun at Admont to a woman outside the community, “may I be placed in your midst.”<sup>34</sup>

The transfer of a letter writer into the presence of the recipient had a long and venerable history. Writers as early as St. Jerome (d. 420) commonly acknowledged and attempted to bridge the epistolary gap—the distance between sender and addressee. For Jerome, the letter itself could stand in for distant loved ones:

<sup>33</sup> Constable, *Letters*, p. 42.

<sup>34</sup> Admont Letter 19, lines 2–3.

Now I talk to your letter, I embrace it, it carries on a conversation with me. . . . The handwriting I know so well brings your dear faces before my eyes, and then either I am no longer here or else you are here with me. Believe love when it tells you the truth: as I write this letter I see you before me.<sup>35</sup>

The motif of transference appears also in the correspondence of St. Boniface (d. 755) several centuries later: “And though, for a while, having just gained sight of you,” wrote Abbess Eadburga of Minster-in-Thanet to Boniface, “I am deprived of your bodily presence, yet I clasp your neck in a sisterly embrace.”<sup>36</sup> Other writers closed the gap spiritually: “Let us comfort ourselves for bodily absence by spiritual conversation,” wrote Jerome to Marcella, an aristocratic Christian friend in Rome.<sup>37</sup> This theme was still popular in the twelfth century: “Although we are so widely separated from each other that we cannot enjoy mutual company,” wrote Philip, the archbishop of Cologne, to Hildegard, “still the love of Christ will keep together those joined in spirit.”<sup>38</sup>

Bridging this epistolary gap—making the nuns visible to their patron in spite of distance and cloister walls—was the most critical function of Letter 17. Their *petitio*, or request, is only that the patron receive them and remember them:

Receive [this messenger], therefore, just as a son, a brother, or your friend, and through him see fit to remember a loyalty of old, so that the compact of true loyalty, once struck between us and you, might remain unbroken to the end.

We cannot know whether the messenger delivered a more specific petition orally.<sup>39</sup> Nor do we learn the nature of the compact of loyalty that the nuns say binds them to the patron. It may be that he had promised rents, or materials, or some type of protection to the monastery.

The letter ends with notice of a gift—a certain powder intended to enhance the “perpetual health of body and spirit,” a token of their love and goodwill to be delivered by the messenger. Gift giving, which was one of the women’s strategies for encouraging and strengthening bonds with patrons, was a practice with ancient sanction. Jerome frequently noted the receipt of small gifts,<sup>40</sup> and Boniface also mentions both sending and receiving small tokens intended to signify the giver’s “affection and blessing.”<sup>41</sup> Such an exchange might create a sense of obligation in the recipient and also function as a continuing reminder of the long-distance relationship between giver and receiver. Communicating affection and concern

<sup>35</sup> F. A. Wright, ed. and trans., *Select Letters of St. Jerome* (London, 1933), p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Ephraim Emerton, ed. and trans., *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, Records of Civilization, Sources and Studies, 31 (New York, 1940), p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Wright, *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, p. 177. This letter was written in 385 C.E.

<sup>38</sup> Hildegard, Letter 16: Van Acker, p. 48; trans. Baird and Ehrman, p. 65.

<sup>39</sup> Oral delivery by messenger of the most sensitive information and requests was the norm in the Middle Ages. See Constable, *Letters*, pp. 53–55.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Jerome’s letter to Marcella (no. 44): “You send us gifts, we send you back letters of thanks” (Wright, *Select Letters of Jerome*, p. 177).

<sup>41</sup> Archdeacon Theophylactus of Rome wrote to Boniface in a letter of 746–47 that he was sending spices, cinnamon, and storax as “tokens of sincere affection and blessing.” See Emerton, *Letters of Saint Boniface*, p. 157. Similarly, in 746–47 Boniface sent a “napkin with a little incense” to Herefrid, and in 751 towels and frankincense to Cardinal Benedict; *ibid.*, pp. 131 and 167.

and simply staying visible to patrons outside the cloister seem to have motivated these small favors. Letter 13, another letter from the nuns to a male patron, refers to the nuns' gift of "two useful tourniquets for bloodletting." A tourniquet was a small offering—not much more than a simple strip of cloth—and something that a wealthy patron could certainly have procured without difficulty. Perhaps a kind of spiritual dimension pertained to such objects when given, and possibly even blessed, by the nuns.

Other letters show the nuns taking a more active role in the lives of their patrons and supporters. In Letter 18 two nuns write to the provost of a nearby monastery and ask him to intervene in a conflict—the nature of which they do not reveal—in which several of the monks "have been accused before the lord archbishop [of Salzburg] and by his will completely deprived of grace." After a standard *salutatio*, the nuns use the *exordium* to remind the recipient of his past support:

The esteem of your favor and love, whereby you have seen fit to nurture us in a special way above our other sisters, has caused us to presume to the point of daring to disturb you and to call upon you, not only for our own causes, but for the causes of our faithful.

Their assertion that he had shown them special care in the past suggests the possibility that the nuns were addressing their occasional correspondent and consultant on matters of scriptural interpretation, Gerhoch, prior of Reichersberg, though this cannot be confirmed.

One of the monks—perhaps their confessor or advocate—merits the nuns' special concern:

We suffer most especially for one among them named N., because we have found time and again that he is faithfully devoted to us, and we believe that we have in him a spokesman and an intercessor in all necessities

—especially since, as they claim, the charges against him were false:

We desire that you know and believe without doubt that he was accused more because of envy and hatred than for the sake of justice and God, and that more false things were said of him than true.

The nuns believed, or hoped, that this provost, whoever he was, had the power to intervene and to help restore this faithful monk to the archbishop's favor:

Wherefore, together with that man and on his behalf, we prostrate ourselves at your feet from afar and beseech you with all our heart that, for God's sake and for ours, you would piously and graciously procure for him the grace of the lord archbishop.

A devoted supporter could expect the assistance of Admont's nuns in times of adversity, and this could entail not just prayer within the women's enclosure but active epistolary intervention with people in a position to help.

In Letter 14, however, we encounter a situation of an entirely different nature. Here we find not routine greetings or thanks, or advocacy for patrons, but the cries of a mother as she addresses the archbishop of Salzburg about the emotional aftermath of the abandonment of her child. She opens with a standard *salutatio*, in which she makes an obligatory statement of her obedience and affection, acknowledging in the process the recipient's superior status:

To Archbishop N., worthy before the Lord, Sister N., the last of the handmaids of Christ, sends her due portion of obedience and prayer to her lord and most cherished father in a spirit of sadness.

Already amidst this opening formality she suggests that all is not well—that she is sad—but there is no indication of the anguish, and even anger, that builds in the body of the letter.

She continues to follow epistolary form with an *exordium*, which both emphasizes her humility:

Regard me, O servant of God, as an exile and the very least of the sheep in your pasture . . .

and sets the scene for the coming *narratio* and *petitio* by reminding the addressee of her spiritual motive for entering the monastery:

. . . whither I, having left all my friends and kinsmen for the love of my heavenly homeland, have taken refuge *in the shadow of your wings* [Ps. 16.8], desiring to serve God in the spiritual life.

Having chosen religion over family—or more particularly, as she soon reveals, monastery over child—she had fled into his protection. But her reference to Psalm 16, which is largely a prayer for shelter from one’s enemies, suggests that her story was more complicated. “O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at thy right hand,” the Psalmist writes, “keep me as the apple of thy eye; hide me in the shadow of thy wings.” The citation’s broader context calls into question the circumstances of her flight. Was she merely fleeing the distracting obligations of motherhood and household, or some other more serious situation, such as the birth of a child out of wedlock? Perhaps she was a young widow for whom the cloister seemed preferable to a remarriage arranged for the benefit of her wider family. The archbishop seems to have known the whole story, but we are left to speculate.

Contemporary Christian literature praised and provided a model for the abandonment of family in order to enter the religious life.<sup>42</sup> As Barbara Newman points out in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, in the discourse of medieval Christian literature, “maternal love must be crushed underfoot in the name of faith.”<sup>43</sup> She cites the example both of Perpetua and Felicity, who abandoned their newborn children and embraced martyrdom, and of Jerome, who was known for his wildly negative portrayals of motherhood and family life.<sup>44</sup> To forsake maternity was to become less of a woman and more of a man.

The monk Guibert of Nogent (d. c. 1124–25) echoes this theme as he writes of his mother’s decision, when he was a child of twelve, to leave him and his siblings and join the monastic community at the Abbey of St.-Germer de Fly:

<sup>42</sup> For a historical survey of the practice of child abandonment, see John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York, 1988).

<sup>43</sup> Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia, 1995), p. 81.

<sup>44</sup> Newman, *Virile Woman*, pp. 80–81.

She must have felt as if her own limbs were being torn from her body. She considered herself, and heard others call her a heartless, cruel woman. How could she lock such children out of her soul (they said) and leave them utterly without support? And so lovable at that! But you, O good and holy Lord, through your sweetness and love, strengthened her heart (which was, to be sure, the most compassionate in the world), so that her compassion might not work against her. For softness of heart would most certainly have been her ruin if she had put us ahead of her own salvation, if neglecting God because of us, had turned her attention to worldly things. But her love for you was “strong as death” [Song of Sol. 8.6], for the more intensely she loved you, the more firmly she broke with those things she had loved before.<sup>45</sup>

What was interpreted as cruelty by some, Guibert says, was in reality an act of great spiritual strength.

In the Admont nun’s *narratio*, however, we hear the mother’s side of a similar story:

When I therefore came to the place called Admont by your advice and assistance, pangs seized me, like those of a woman in travail, according to the word of the Lord speaking through the prophet: *Can a woman forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne* [Isa. 49.15]? I remember, and I cannot forget, my little orphaned girl, whom I carried in my womb, nursed with my very own breasts, and made to share my exile—but whom, in the simplicity of my heart, I rashly and thoughtlessly left with strangers.

Her voice is strong and unambivalent as she speaks of her transition from motherhood to religious life: she can find no peace and thinks constantly of her baby. Perhaps in answer to the dominant image of child abandonment as an act of spiritual heroism, she uses the words of Isa. 49—a biblical validation for the intensity of her feelings—to justify her strong and continued attachment to her child. How different this voice is from that of the monk or hagiographer.

She frames her lament with reminders of the archbishop’s critical role in her predicament. In the first line she repeats that it was he who guided her down the path to monastic life, and even to Admont itself. She ends with a reference to her simple piety, which she feels led her to follow his advice without sufficient forethought.

Having established the context and explained her situation, she opens the *petitio* by transferring herself rhetorically into the immediate presence of the archbishop:

Carrying her in my arms, therefore, I have recourse to you, lord father, and, throwing myself down, I place her before the feet of your lordship, and I wail and cry out in the place of and in the voice of the Canaanite woman: *Lord, have mercy on my little daughter* [Matt. 15.22–28; Mark 7.24–30].<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Paul J. Archambault, ed. and trans., *A Monk’s Confession: The Memoirs of Guibert of Nogent* (University Park, Pa., 1996), pp. 45–46. See also Newman, *Virile Woman*, pp. 84–86, where she discusses some of the possible psychological dimensions of Guibert’s account of his mother’s abandonment.

<sup>46</sup> The writer is referring here to the Syro-Phoenician woman who approaches Jesus and begs him to cast a demon out of her daughter according to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark.

She takes the standard device of epistolary transference one step further by throwing herself down at the archbishop's feet through biblical reference. This mother stands in the place of, and speaks in the voice of ("in uice et uoce"), another frantic mother—the Canaanite woman from the Gospels of Matthew and of Mark, a biblical figure certainly familiar to both parties. Perhaps it was not by chance, but through the writer's rhetorical savvy, that in casting herself in this particular scene, she placed the archbishop in the role of Christ, who went on to answer the biblical mother's plea by casting out her daughter's demon.

Our nun continues to plead her case in the voice of the Canaanite woman at Jesus' feet, seeking from the archbishop, not an exorcism, but a reunion with her daughter:

And so, unable to bear any longer maternal grief, in view of my hope and of the beneficence of your fatherly mercy, I would send and have her brought to me so that, at least, she might receive alms from my hands through the window. And if through your aid she does not merit to eat the bread of your daughters, then let her at least with the *dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table* of your poor ones [Matt. 15.27; Mark 7.28].

We cannot know exactly what arrangement the mother had in mind here, but it seems improbable that she intended literally to feed the child through the monastery window.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps she hoped that the girl could be brought to the community to be raised among the female oblates.<sup>48</sup> Here, among these girls, the mother might at least know that her child was near and well cared for.

As she continues her plea, the mother draws a parallel between the pain of the loss of her child and the pain of the Virgin Mary as she witnessed the suffering and death of her son:

Let the tearful sighs of my heart stir your innermost feelings, through the infantile bawling and crying let forth by that little Son of a Virgin, confined to a narrow crib for the sake of our salvation, or through the tears of his mother, which she shed at his suffering and death. Accept with your heart my tears, so that, according to your promise, I may receive back my daughter as quickly as possible.

She ends the letter with her strongest statement of the archbishop's responsibility for the situation, referring to Psalm 67, which offers praise to God for helping those who cannot help themselves:

I beg, lord, that your mercy not delay in consoling me, lest it perchance happen—which God forbid—that I, from an excess of sorrow, break out of the enclosure for the purpose of seeking my only daughter, with the result that I die of hunger, an exile, and that *the father of orphans and judge of widows* [Ps. 67.6] would require us of your hands.

<sup>47</sup> The window to which she refers may be the same window that Abbot Irimbert described as the nuns' only point of contact with visitors and spiritual advisers, unless their door to the enclosure, which was normally locked with three keys, was opened for the entry of a new recruit, the entrance of a priest for the administration of last rites, or the removal of a body for burial. Irimbert describes preaching to the nuns through this opening. Irimbert's account is printed in Pez, *Bibliotheca ascetica antiquo-nova* (above, n. 5), pp. 454–64.

<sup>48</sup> See "Vita magistrae," pp. 363–64, where the text signals the presence of small children at the monastery.



She boldly asserts that it is he—and not she—who will have to answer to God if she should abandon the cloister in search of her lost child, in much the same way that an abbot will answer for each of the monks in his flock.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the letter the writer speaks of herself as an exile. In the *exordium* she is an exile *within* the monastery. In the *narratio* she speaks of the exile that she shares with her baby—possibly a literal banishment from the society of family and community, or simply earthly life itself. Yet were she to leave the monastery in search of the girl, as she threatens to do in the last line of the letter, she would be an exile still. For this nun, it seems, exile was everywhere.

Exile is also on the mind of the writer of Letter 2 as she rebukes a kinsman who had abandoned their community. Like Letter 14, Letter 2 opens with an epistolary *salutatio*, but here the writer greets an equal rather than a superior:

To beloved kinsman N. his sister sends faith and love, not according to debt but according to his merit.

This is a standard epistolary greeting, but with a twist: as she soon reveals, he has behaved faithlessly, and the measure of faith and love that she sends is congruent with his lack of merit. She sends as little as he deserves. He had failed, she claims, to support her, injuring her rather than holding her up:

I know, and it grieves me to know, that I do not have a faithful kinsman in you, but rather a reedy stick, useless and worthless that if a man leans on it shall pierce his hand [Isa. 36.6].<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the two had made the decision to enter the religious life together, choosing Admont as a place that could accommodate them both. Could they have been partners in a failed marriage? Were they betrothed or married cousins—she addresses him as her kinsman—who found the arrangement unacceptable on the grounds of consanguinity? What is clear is that he has abandoned both her and the community, failing to return as promised:

For when you yourself, utterly forgetting the faith owed to me, bristled to remain in exile and hastened to return to your people, you *handed* me, stuck in a distant land, over to oblivion like a buried dead woman [Isa. 30.13], nor did you feel pity for me, whom you knew very well to have been separated from the solace of all friends.

The monastery is, for her, a distant land—a place of exile and a separation from all she knows.

Where are the *gracious and comforting words* [Zech. 1.13] with which you said goodbye to me, but took little pain to make good with deeds? But inasmuch as you have made your faith vain and you cared little to fulfill your promises, I grieve more for you than for me because you have lost the favor and love of the entire congregation, to whom you promised, as you left them, that you would return as soon as possible and remain with them.

It seems that the two had communicated with one another before his departure—perhaps at the window or via a letter. It would be interesting to know under what

<sup>49</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict* 2.6–9.

<sup>50</sup> 4 Kings 18.21 and Ezek. 29.6–7 carry this same theme.

pretext he took his leave, but he did so, clearly, with the promise that he would return. Would such a leave have been granted to the woman? Would she, too, have liked to return to her secular world? Her own feelings about the religious life at Admont may be somewhat obscured here by the rhetorical purpose of her letter, for she not only laments her abandonment but also calls to his attention the spiritual consequences of his failure to make his promised return. He has, she tells him, “lost the favor and love of the entire congregation.” We should not underestimate the impact of such a statement on a twelfth-century monk (or former monk), for whom the loss of the group’s prayers would have loomed as a very real consequence. The letter ends with a simple *petitio*. She does not ask him to return but only to examine his fickle actions, consider the consequences, and be “mindful that no unfaithful person has a place in heaven.”

The revocation of favor seems to have been a potent spiritual weapon—useful for influencing the behavior of those beyond the nuns’ physical reach—and one they brandished also in other letters. The writer of fragmentary Letter 10, for example, assures the recipient, an opponent of patron Gregory of Wetterfeld, that she is not fooled by his “flattering words and humble prayers for pardon.”<sup>51</sup> “Your great reverence,” she charges, “is displayed [more] out of fear than out of the humility of supplication.”<sup>52</sup> The nuns’ disapproval, it seems, had attracted this man’s notice, although they were evidently unimpressed by his efforts at reconciliation. The nuns also flexed their spiritual muscles at a certain “prince of Christ in the Styrian court,” in Letter 5.<sup>53</sup> They had warned him—presumably about some improper action or personal conduct—but he had not heeded. “We desire always that *no scourge come near your tent*,” they assure him, referring to the promise of God’s protection of the faithful from all harm in Ps. 90.10. “However,” they continue, “we described to you the signs of the scourging . . . which you deserved, because you refused to hear and to observe our admonitions.” The faithful could fear no danger, but this man, the nuns point out, had reason for concern.

The letters that emerge from the Admont fragments are surprising in many ways. It is remarkable that they have survived at all. The others that were once a part of the larger collection have, it seems, been destroyed, and these nineteen escaped the same fate only because someone in 1431 found that the parchment on which they were written made a useful cover for that year’s wine record. We cannot know how many others, both at Admont and elsewhere, have been lost to more destructive reuse of parchment (e.g., for binding books) or through simple neglect.

The letters are surprising also for the strength of the voices that speak through them. Intermixed with rather perfunctory messages addressed to patrons and supporters are letters that speak with unexpected force to a variety of secular and ecclesiastical figures on a wide range of issues of both corporate and individual concern. The women who emerge from these letters appear far from helpless and

<sup>51</sup> “blandinita et supplex deprecatio.”

<sup>52</sup> “Vestra maior reuerentia . . . exhibitur causa timoris quam humilitate obsecrationis.”

<sup>53</sup> The text here is unclear and the identity of the recipient uncertain. The name given appears to be Isidore, but I have been unable to locate anyone by that name in contemporary Styrian records.

certainly not dependent on the neighboring monks to mediate their relationships with people outside the community.<sup>54</sup> Despite their claustration, Admont's nuns were neither passive and powerless nor wholly absent from the secular world that surrounded them.

So surprising are these voices, in fact, that some may question their authenticity, for we do not often hear a medieval nun admonishing a prince or pleading passionately with an archbishop about the fate of her child. Are such voices just too unusual to be real? While we must not dismiss this possibility lightly, we enter a logical loop when we discount potential evidence of women daring to speak out with passion or authority simply because such evidence is rare. Heloise, Hildegard, and Elisabeth of Schönau spoke passionately in their letters, yet these cases are easily labeled as exceptional and isolated from the world of more ordinary religious women and the evidence of their more ordinary lives. New evidence must be allowed to challenge traditional assumptions about the presence or absence of female voices in medieval society.

The letters also reflect both the fact of female literacy during the twelfth century and its economic, social, political, and even personal functions at Admont. The nuns' facility with the *ars dictaminis* enabled them to establish and maintain ties with patrons whose support was essential to their material subsistence and to return that support by wielding spiritual power on their behalf in times of need. The nuns used their training in the liberal arts to project their voices into the world beyond their cloister—to extend their social and spiritual reach beyond the strictly enclosed world of their cloister and to make themselves active participants, if only by epistolary transference, in a variety of relationships.

But whose voices were these, and who heard them in the twelfth century? If the distraught nun-mother of Letter 14 was, as she claimed to be, a new member of the community, could she have attained such a high degree of literacy and epistolary skill so soon? Perhaps she had been schooled as a laywoman, or it may be that someone else—the person who took the dictation or who prepared the final version of the letter—gave her anguish its literary form.<sup>55</sup> And there is no guarantee, of course, that these assistants were women. Modern scholarship on the epistolary genre has focused on the literary character of medieval letters. And rightly so, for much of what survives seems to fit quite comfortably within the category of “self-conscious, quasi-public literary documents.”<sup>56</sup> In this intellectual context the question of whether a letter was actually sent is subordinate to that of its rhetorical function.<sup>57</sup> But as letters like those in the Admont nuns' collection

<sup>54</sup> See Bruce L. Venarde, “Praesidentes negotiis: Abbesses as Managers in Twelfth-Century France,” in *Portraits in Medieval and Renaissance Living: Essays in Memory of David Herlihy*, ed. Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., and Steven A. Epstein (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1996), pp. 204–5, for a call for greater attention to the evidence that can be provided by sources of this nature.

<sup>55</sup> See Franz H. Bäuml, “Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy,” *Speculum* 55 (1980), 246, where he refers to those who cannot themselves read or write but who have access to literacy as “quasi-literate.”

<sup>56</sup> Constable, *Letters*, p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> Constable, *Letters*, p. 13.

come to light, both the old interpretive categories and the traditional focus on the literary need reevaluation. If we read these letters, and others like them, as documents of practice that testify to the persistence of women's voices in the world beyond the cloister rather than as rhetorical exercises that echoed only within its walls, we will sharpen our understanding of the role of women in medieval society.

## APPENDIX

*Letter 2*

Dilecto cognato suo N. ipsius consanguinea B. fidem et dilectionem non secundum debitum, sed secundum meritum suum.

Scio et scire me doleo quia fidelem cognatum in te non habeo, sed *potius baculum harundineum, inutilem et uacuum, cui si homo fuerit innisus perforabit manum eius* [Isa. 36.6]. Nam fidei debite penitus oblitus in me, cum tu ipse in exilio manere horruisti et ad tuos redire properasti, me in *peregre positam obliuioni tradidisti quasi mortuam* [Ps. 30.13]. Nec misertus es mei, quam omnium amicorum solatio destitutam esse optime nosti. Vbi sunt *uerba bona, uerba consolatoria* [Zech. 1.13], quibus mihi ualedixisti sed minime factis compensare curasti? Quod autem fidem tuam irritam esse fecisti et promissiones tuas adimplere contempsisti, plus pro te doleo quam pro me quia gratiam et dilectionem totius congregationis amisisti, quibus abundo promisisti te quantotius esse reuersurum et cum ipsis permansurum.

Ergo de instabili fide tua erubescere et dignam penitentiam age, memor quia omnis infidelis non habet partem in celis.

*Letter 13*

Karissimo in christo amico domino N. humiles christi ancille deuotum orationem in perpetuam fidem et dilectionem.

Sicut sitiens aquam et sicut estuans desiderat umbram, sic nos desideramus uidere faciem uestram. Confidimus enim et sine dubio credimus, quia *pater misericordiarum et deus totius consolationis* [2 Cor. 1.3] in loco nostre peregrinationis nobis fidelem amicum preuidit et concessit in uobis.

Ipse etiam hic et in futuro uobis respondeat pro nobis, quod salutationem nostram proxime benigne suscepistis et petitionibus nostris pie et misericorditer annuistis. Salutamus per uos dominum N., uicarium uestrum, gratias agentes, quia uobis absente nuncium nostrum benigne suscepit et causa dei et uestri omnem humanitatis gratiam sibi impendere curauit. Mittimus uobis duo ligamina ad dimunitionem sanguinis apta.

Virtutum uestrarum industria uiuat et ualeat per multa annorum curricula.

*Letter 14*

Digno domino archiepiscopo N. domino et patri carissimo soror N. ultima christi ancillarum in spiritu meroris debitum obsequium obedientie et orationis.

Agnosce dei famule me exulem et exiguum inter oues paschue tue relicitis notis

omnibus et cognatis pro amore patriae celestis *sub umbram alarum uestrarum* confugi [Ps. 16.8], cupiens deo seruire in uita spiritali.

Ueniens igitur in locum admontem iuxta consilium et auxilium uestrum *angustia possedit me quasi parturientis* [Isa. 21.3] iuxta uerba domini per prophetam dicentis: *Numquid potest obliuisci mulier infanti [sic] sui ut non misereatur filio uteri sui* [Isa. 49.15]. Memor sum domine nec inmemor esse possum orphanule mee quam in uisceribus meis portauit propriis uberibus lactauit et mecum exulari feci ac in simplicitate cordis mei inconsulte et inprouide apud alienos reliqui.

Ipsam igitur in humeris meis ponens ad uos domine pater recurro et ante pedes dominationis uestrae proiciens depono eiulans et clamans in uice et uoce mulieris chanaee: *Domine miserere filiolo mee* [Matt. 15.22–28; Mark 7.24–30]. Dolorem ergo maternum diutius ferre non ualens. Ob spem et gratiam paterne miseracionis uestre mittam et adducam eam ad me ut saltem per fenestram de manibus meis accipiat elemosinam; et si per uestrum auxilium non meretur sumere *panem filiarum uestrarum tandem cum catellis edat de micis quae cadunt de mensa pauperum uestrarum* [Matt. 15.27; Mark 7.28]. Moueat ergo pietatis uestre uiscera lacrimosa cordis mei suspiria per uagitus et ploratus quas emisit paruulus uirginis filius inter arta conditus presepie nostre salutis gratia causa et per lacrimas genitricis sue quas effudit in passione ipsius morte. Lacrimas meas corde percipite ut secundum promissionem uestram quantotius recipiam filiam meam. Obsecro domine ut miseratio tua me consolari non differat ne forte quod deus uetat prae nimio dolore me de claustris erumpere contingat querendo unicam meam, ut exula fame peream, et requirat nos de manibus uestris *pater orphanorum et iudex uiduarum* [Ps. 67.6].

#### Letter 17

Reuerenter amando et amanter reuerendo domino N. karissimo ille sue deuotissime N. et N. assidue orationis obsequium et fidei et dilectionis sedis perpetuum.

Nouit scientiarum dominus quia ex quo uestri noticiam habere meruimus memoria uestre dilectionis numquam recessit a cordibus nostris. Non modicum dolemus, et dolendo medullitus gemiscimus, quia post longa tempora nec uos uidere nec aliquid certi de uobis contigit audire. Sed nunc domino annuente facte sumus sicut consolante, quia fidelem et certum nuncium habemus per quem uos salutamus et nos ipsas nichil preciosius habentes per ipsum uobis transmittimus.

Suscipite ergo illum tanquam filium et fratrem et amicum uestrum et per ipsum antique fidei memor esse dignemini quatinus uere fidei pactum inter nos et uos aliquando compactum usque in finem maneat intactum.

Mittimus uobis pulverem, optantes uobis ex eo percipere perpetuam corporis et anime sanitatem.

#### Letter 18

Dilecto domino et patri N. proposito humiles christi ancille N. et N. sorores Admontenses incluse obedientie et orationis obsequium *in domino forti in perpetuum* [Isa. 26.4].

Dignatio gratie uestre et dilectionis qua nos pre ceteris sororibus nostris specialiter dignum duxistis fouere in tantum nos fecit presumere ut non solum pro nostris causis sed et pro fidelibus nostris audeamus uos inquietare et rogare.

Audiuimus domine quosdam e monachis nostris apud dominum archiepiscopum esse accusatos ac gratia illius penitus priuatos. Inter quos pro quodam nomine N. maxime dolemus quia ipsum nobis fideliter deuotum esse sepius experte sumus et in cunctis neces-

sariis prolocutorem et intercessorem nos in ipso habere sentimus. Scire autem et indubitanter vos credere cupimus quia ipse accusatus plus propter inuidiam et inimiciam quam propter dei iusticiam et quia plus falsa dicta sunt de illo quam uera. Quapropter unam cum illo et pro illo a longe pedibus uestris prouolute rogamus quam intime ut causa dei et nostri pie et benigne pro ipso loquamini et sicut potens potestis gratiam domini archiepiscopi ei optineatis quatinus fidelis noster in causa sua sentiat quid peticio nostra apud vos optinere ualeat.