

Volume Editors' Introduction

Constance de Rabastens (active 1384–86) and Ursulina of Parma (1375–1408)

The Other Voice

It is not always possible to hear medieval women's voices directly. In many instances words and deeds were filtered through the writings of male authors. This was especially true for holy women who relied on their confessors to relay their visions and whose lives were written, sometimes posthumously, by male clerics. Such scenarios apply to the two women who take center stage in this volume, Constance de Rabastens (active 1384–86) and Ursulina of Parma (1375–1408). Although the texts we translate were written by men, they open an important window onto their protagonists' lives and works as well as the agency of women in the late Middle Ages. A large body of historical scholarship finds that European women's status, visibility, and opportunity eroded across the medieval centuries, leaving women victims of male oppression and even appropriation, to reprise the title of the series to which this book belongs, of their voices. It is difficult to arrive at coherent accounts of what Constance and Ursulina said and did, given that their actions are mediated through the genres of vision narrative and saint's life, written by Constance's confessor, Raymond de Sabanac, and by Ursulina's hagiographer, Simone Zanacchi, respectively. In that sense, learning about our two women of the Great Schism requires us to read against the grain, to try to peel away layers of editing and scripting to reveal an authentic core of female voice and experience.

However, some facts emerge that help us situate Constance and Ursulina in straightforward ways. Because of their forceful visionary and diplomatic interventions in the Great Schism, contemporaries took both women seriously enough to regard them as a threat to the political and ecclesiastical order, local and international. Constance and Ursulina managed to make their voices heard in a society that was dominated by men, and even in the extremely male-gendered spheres of secular politics and the Church hierarchy. Does that make them exceptional figures, or, as a male critic of the late-medieval author Christine de Pizan (c. 1364–c. 1430) described women who accomplished much in traditionally male-

dominated spheres, freaks? We think not. Rather, the experiences of Constance and Ursulina show that whatever the rhetoric of female weakness and insignificance in late-medieval society—a rhetoric that can be deafening in the works of many male authors—the reality was rather different. Women could, especially if they were determined and intelligent, play important roles. Simply put, they made a difference to those around them, and for that reason alone, the challenges of sorting out the nature of their experiences, of pursuing hints and asides in the texts about them, are worth the trouble.

The presentation of a collection of revelations (with some letters) and a holy biography together may assist in what is necessarily an imaginative challenge. For Constance, we have vivid visions but little in the way of biographical detail; for Ursulina, we have a narrative account of her from birth to death that seems quite intentionally to shy away from detailed description of visionary experience. But read together, both with and against each other, our texts might offer a fuller view of women's experience. We can guess at the confusion and hostility with which the visionary Constance might have been received by reading about what everyone from neighbors to popes made of Ursulina, and we might heighten our understanding of Ursulina's rich interior religious life by reading about the (sometimes literally) colorful revelations of Constance. Did Constance ever travel? Did Ursulina ever see strange, brightly hued birds? These two women doubtless shared more than we can see from the historical record, given that they were similarly situated in time, social space, and religious perspectives. Had they ever met, they would have found a great deal to talk about. We moderns can worry too much about questions of mediation or manipulation by authors—for what written text is not at one remove from reality, from literal voice? What is certain is that the voices of these two women, and perhaps of many others of whom we have no documentary record, rang out loud and clear in their time. They mattered.

The texts presented in this book are very rich and thus demand some orientation. First, we briefly present the framework into which one can place our two protagonists: women's visionary experience and writings and the aspirations to holiness with a political twist. Then, we set the historical scene against which Constance of Rabastens and Ursulina of Parma played out their remarkable parts. There follows a concise biography of each woman along with consideration of the character of the writings from which our knowledge of their lives derives. Next

comes some commentary on what may be the most surprising aspect of Constance's and Ursulina's activities: their very public and politically engaged actions. A final section considers the complex relationship of subjects and authors in these texts, the nature of which makes a true understanding of the women's stories and significance a real but—we hope—worthwhile challenge. History, spirituality, literary form, and gender are all important axes along which to ponder the experience of these two women of the Great Schism.

Constance and Ursulina's Foremothers

Throughout the Middle Ages, female visionaries could be found in many walks of life, in religious orders as well as among the laity. Many of these women lived lives of contemplation within the cloister walls or in the confines of *beguinages*, non-monastic communities of female spiritual seekers. Whatever the place, women established intimate relations with Christ or received privileged access to religious mysteries through their visions. Some of these women authored their own texts chronicling their visions and mystical experiences; others dictated them to scribes or confessors. Marie of Oignies (1177/78–1213), Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1282/87),¹ Beatrice of Nazareth (1200–1268), and Angela of Foligno (1248–1309) were women whose visionary experiences and writings centered on their interior lives.

But other women used their visions, at least in part, to try to intervene in the politico-religious conflicts of their time.² The earliest of these was the German Benedictine nun Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), who was not only aware of the political developments of her time but corresponded with rulers, such as the emperor Frederic Barbarossa, concerning the papal schism of 1159. Her younger contemporary Elisabeth of Schönau (1129–1165) also used some of her visionary experiences as a basis for various pronouncements on this schism.³ Later on, we find female visionaries engaged in a variety

1. On the complex history of Mechthild's book and for a good introduction to women's religious writing see Sara S. Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

2. See André Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practice*, trans. Margery J. Schneider (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), chs. 18–19.

3. See Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Visions and Schism Politics in the Twelfth Century: Hildegard of Bingen, John of Salisbury, and Elisabeth of Schönau," in *Saints, Scholars, and*

part of the library of a priest from nearby Padua, apparently a member of the circle of the famed poet and humanist Petrarch, others of whom were also patrons of Montello, many of them mentioned in the 1420 chronicle.³⁴ The chronicle mentions many books collected or copied by the monks of Montello, and in the very year Znacchi wrote the *vita* of Ursulina, the leadership of the Carthusian order commanded four other Italian houses to return borrowed books to Montello.³⁵ Such tradition notwithstanding, Znacchi at all appearances wrote with canonization of Ursulina in mind rather than humanist literary elegance and formal experimentation. But, like Raymond de Sabanac, he found his job of representing a holy woman more difficult than the apparent candor of the *vita* suggests. There are profound tensions in both these accounts of female holiness.

Women, Visions, and Politics

When Constance and Ursulina began their “political” careers, they inscribed themselves in a long tradition of women (and men) who had attempted to intervene in the politics of their time using their visionary authority.³⁶ From the Old Testament prophets to our fourteenth-century protagonists, visionaries throughout the centuries had relied on divine voices and revelations to guide them in their missions.³⁷ These missions often involved questioning established authority, warning rulers of the consequences of their misdeeds, or supporting one side in a political conflict over another. Visions and auditions of this sort were often quite different from the “cultivated” monastic visions typical of much of the mystical visionary culture of the later Middle Ages.³⁸ They had a direct relevance to events of the

34. Luigi Pesce, “Filippo di Mézières e la Certosa del Montello,” *Archivio veneto* ser. 5, no. 168, vol. 134 (1990), 5–44, esp. 30–33 and documents edited at 40–44; Antonio Rigon, “Amici padovani del Petrarca e il monastero di S. Maria della Riviera,” *Studi petrarcheschi* n.s. 6 (1989), 241–55 at 249–55.

35. *The Chartae of the Carthusian General Chapter: Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS Latin 10888, Part I, (ff. 1–157v)*, ed. Michael Sargent and James Hogg (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1985), 151.

36. See the section on “Foremothers” above for examples of Constance and Ursulina’s predecessors.

37. For a brief overview see Isabel Moreira, *Dreams, Visions, and Spiritual Authority in Merovingian Gaul* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), part I.

38. For a typology of visions and the conditions of their production see Barbara Newman, “What Did it Mean to Say ‘I Saw’? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval

time and often urged the visionary to some specific action. At the same time these visions often featured traditional elements centering on Christ's Passion or the Last Judgment. Constance and Ursulina both fit into these visionary patterns. Their political involvement resulted from divine commands but was complemented by visionary experiences that fit into more traditional patterns of hagiography and mystical writings.

Constance's *Revelations* move from the personal to the public rather quickly. Her first visions and auditions are concerned with her personal and spiritual life, but by 2.23 the voice begins speaking about the Count of Armagnac and his alleged treachery in seeking alliance with the English court, the enemies of France. By 2.42 the papal election of 1378 and the illegitimacy of the Avignon pope Clement VII take center stage. Constance insists repeatedly that these visions come to her unbidden but that nonetheless they must be revealed to a larger public (3.4). She is aware that these visions will cause her serious problems, especially with the clerical establishment in Toulouse. In a letter (3.3) she describes how the divine voice articulated the problems resulting from her visionary activity and her outspokenness. Constance's eventual imprisonment and disappearance eloquently testify to the risks she ran by becoming a political visionary.

Ursulina's case is quite different. Zanicchi wrote the *vita* long after her death, with a view to her canonization. Thus the first account of visions we find in the *vita* is a set piece of hagiography: her parents learn of their daughter's future birth and destiny through angels. At age nine Ursulina begins to share her visions and revelations with others. It is significant that the first vision recounted in any detail (sections 11–12) is the one in which the Lord tells her to go to Avignon and rebuke the antipope Clement VII. Thus Zanicchi explicitly links Ursulina's visionary experience to her political mission. Further commands for Ursulina's diplomatic shuttle mission between the popes of Avignon and Rome are not uttered by a divine voice but come straight from the Roman pope Boniface IX, an important contrast with Constance's long series of orders given her by the divine voice. Unlike Constance, Ursulina has no visions of popes and cardinals burning in hell nor is her own spiritual life a subject for intense visionary experiences, at least within the framework of the *vita*.

Raymond de Sabanac and Simone Zanicchi thus show us two different ways of integrating visions and politics. Raymond transcribes

Constance's visions as they happen; the text is not very tightly structured and shows his confusion and misgivings when faced with the visionary outbursts of this passionately engaged woman. Simone's carefully organized text highlights one of Ursulina's visionary experiences, the one that legitimizes her future actions. Both women were divinely inspired to work for an end of the Great Schism but neither of them succeeded: like the Old Testament prophets, who could serve as their models, they were finally no more than two of the many voices crying in the wilderness of a Church rent in two.

Because we know so much more about Ursulina's biography, though, we can speculate from Znacchi's account that the tiny saint's involvement in the high drama of pan-European ecclesiastical politics had an echo at home in Italy.³⁹ Znacchi provides a few tantalizing hints of his subject's place in local and regional politics. The overlord of Parma in Ursulina's early years was Gian Galeazzo Visconti, the duke of Milan.⁴⁰ After her second journeys to Avignon and Parma, Ursulina goes "at divine command" to meet the duke, who first scorns her but is ultimately won over; Ursulina commends him in particular to "the defense of the Catholic faith," that is, the Roman papal cause, and tells him not to interfere in matters of religious dogma (section 29). The precise nature of Ursulina's concerns, expressed before her departure for the Holy Land in 1396, is not clear, but entanglement in local politics is evident in the series of events resulting in the exile during which she died. The dominion of the Visconti over Parma was interrupted by the death of Duke Gian Galeazzo in 1402. The main factions vying for control of the city were led by Ottobono Terzi and Pietro Rossi, with Ottobono seizing control in 1404. Znacchi reports that he summoned Bertolina, Ursulina's mother, and told her to get out of town before a candle placed by the town bell burned down. The

39. See Luongo, *Saintly Politics* for a thorough discussion of the involvement of one saint, Catherine of Siena, in the complexities of Italian affairs; the remarks that follow are much indebted to Luongo's insistence on the importance of female religiosity in "the assumed male and secular cultural ground of late-medieval and Renaissance politics" (22). Alison Frazier argues that the production of a hagiographical compendium called the *Sanctuarium*, published in Milan ca. 1477, was in part politically motivated (*Possible Lives*, 101–67, *passim*).

40. On the political history of Parma in this era, see Bernini, *Storia di Parma*, 83–92; a more detailed account of the early fifteenth-century scene is Marco Gentile, *Terra e Poteri: Parma e il Parmense nel ducato visconteo all'inizio del Quattrocento* (Milan: Unicopli, 2001). We rely on both in the paragraphs that follow.

party of exiles included Abbess Maristella of San Paolo, who was at Ursulina's side when she died (sections 34–35, 37).

There was apparently more to the story than what Zanicchi describes as exile, in the company of a local abbess, at the hands of a tyrant who was annoyed at Ursulina's peaceful meditative retirement in Parma. Earlier, the prior named "the great armor-bearer and commander" Gherardo Aldighieri as one of Ursulina's scribes (section 9). Gherardo stands out from the list of scholarly and clerical scribes: he was a condottiere, a successful soldier of fortune and indeed one of Parma's most famous soldiers. He had joined the party of Pietro Rossi but was captured and killed by the forces of Ottobono in 1403. Ottobono also attacked the nunneries of San Paolo and San Quintino,⁴¹ suggesting that religion played a part in his strategy for domination. The departure of an abbess along with Ursulina and Bertolina was more than flight from aggression aimed at her house. Abbess Maristella was a member of the Aldighieri family, possibly Gherardo's sister;⁴² she had first fled Parma, along with some of her community, into the safekeeping of Rossi allies.⁴³

From these scraps of information, a few possibilities emerge. It is clear that Ursulina was involved in politics at least enough to advise the duke of Milan and suffer exile as a member of the party opposed to Ottobono. But Ursulina may have been more important than that. Zanicchi provides no details about Ursulina's activities between her return from the Holy Land and her exile from Parma, a period of eight or nine years. We might wonder if, in that period, her fame—Zanicchi's accounts of her holy work in Urbino, Venice, Bologna, and Verona suggests her company and advice were often sought out—made her a spiritual guide or protector for some of Parma's powerful families, like those in other cities perpetually feuding and fighting in a complex series of alliances. Ursulina, it would appear, was strongly linked to the Aldighieri clan and, whether previously or subsequently is impossible to guess, to Pietro Rossi. When Ottobono told Bertolina to leave Parma, he may have wanted to further the spiritual aspect of

41. Marzio Dall'Acqua, "Il Monastero di San Paolo," in *Il Monastero di San Paolo*, ed. Dall'Acqua (Parma: Franco Maria Ricci, 1990), 24 and, on San Quintino, Italo Dall'Aglio, *La Diocesi di Parma*, 2 vols. (Parma: Scuola Tipografica Benedettina, 1966), 1:180.

42. Affò, *Vita della Beata Orsolina*, 40–43 and notes, which reproduce contemporary documents referring to "domne Maristelle de Adhigheiriis abbatisse monasterii Sancti Pauli Parmensis."

43. Dall'Acqua, "Il Monastero di San Paolo," 24.

his campaign by removing a religious figure hostile to his interests—and was perhaps intimidated enough by her reputation to give the order to her mother instead of the fearless Ursulina.

Such a position of political importance also adds a new dimension to the return of Ursulina's body to Parma. If she died in 1408, as is most likely,⁴⁴ then the homecoming a year and a half later would have come on the heels of the assassination of Ottobono in 1409. The return of Ursulina was part of a normalization of affairs after the brief dominion of Ottobono (whose enemies mutilated his body). It was also an element in the revival of the monastery of San Quintino, also the target of Ottobono's wrath, its goods taken and its inhabitants expelled. Although Visconti influence over Parma was restored, the Rossi family thrived in the fifteenth century, even amid changes of overlordship.⁴⁵ In death, then, Ursulina was not only a holy visionary but also, we propose, a symbol of the restoration of political and religious order in early fifteenth-century Parma. Finally, it is even possible that Znacchi's reluctance to relate Ursulina's visions had some political motivation. Duke Galezzo Maria Sforza succeeded his father as duke of Milan in 1466, and his insouciance led to renewed struggles for influence in Parma among four families, two of whom were the Rossi, the former allies of Ursulina's scribe Gherardo Aldighieri, and the Sanvitale, of whom Znacchi's patron Abbess Magdalena of San Quintino was a member. Factional troubles were still abroad when Znacchi completed his commission in 1472; only a few years earlier a local writer had written that there was no love or charity in Parma and that cruelty reigned there.⁴⁶ Maybe Znacchi (who was from Parma, after all) thought it wiser not to give detailed accounts of heavenly revelations dictated to the one-time ally of a faction that was, as he wrote, at odds with the family of his patron abbess. Like Raymond de Sabanac, Znacchi found his job of representing a holy woman more difficult than the apparent candor of the *vita* suggests. And there are even more profound tensions in both these accounts of female holiness.

44. See above, note 29.

45. Bernini, *Storia di Parma*, 85–95, passim. Maristella's difficulties on her return to San Paolo probably explain why Ursulina's body was not taken there; another abbess had been elected in her absence and a long legal battle to regain her office ensued (Affo, *Vita della Beata Orsolina*, 41, n1).

46. Bernini, *Storia di Parma*, 92.

Part 2

1.

It all started when she was asleep in her bed one night and she had a vision of a hillside on which there was a multitude of dead people. And a voice said to her: "You should know that there will be a great mortality, but be strong and fear nothing that you may see or hear." A short time later her husband died.

2.

One night, after her husband's death, she was reflecting on her life which she thought she had spent badly as far as God was concerned; and she was thinking how she could serve God well, and how she could make up for all these past times when she fell asleep. And a voice told her: "Do not have any doubts, for you should know that you will place your children well and that you will leave the world behind."

3.

Another time she meditated on the Passion of Jesus Christ and desired to feel the pains that he had borne for us in her body and suddenly she felt a great pain in her left arm. She fell asleep and a voice told her: "Do not fear, you will be healed."

4.

Another time around midnight she meditated how at this same time of night the son of God had been bound to the pillar. Then she knelt down in prayer and felt suddenly that someone was pulling on her right arm; and she felt such great pain that she thought she could never be cured of it. And she suffered such great pain that she could not sleep or find any relief, neither during the day nor the night. But one day she fell asleep and a voice said to her: "Ask me whatever you wish." And she answered: "Some relief and the salvation of my soul." And she felt that her arm was being stretched and when she woke up she felt greatly relieved. But she had not slept longer than it takes to say three Paternosters, for her confessor, briefly absent, had had barely enough time leave the room and return quickly to her.

5.

The third night after that, she could not pray as was her custom and complained to God, saying "Oh, my Lord God, do not abandon me!"

And around [...] she fell asleep and she had a vision of a man dressed in satin who said to her: "You should know that I am the one you have in your heart [...], now you see me." And then he disappeared and she no longer saw him. He said: "Now you do not see me but you should know that I am always beside you, so do not ever again say: 'Lord, you have abandoned me.' Know that I have not left you and that I will never leave you, and that I pray to my father for you."

6.

Likewise, another night when she could not entreat God nor pray with great devotion nor even say her prayers, she complained to God. And toward dawn she fell asleep and heard a voice that said to her: "Do not fear, for your soul is in better condition than it was before, for your heart was in pain and did penance."

7.

Another time, one night after compline she was praying in her oratory and a black demon in the form of a cat appeared to her⁵; it was moving in front of her and all around her and bared its teeth as if it wanted to bite her. But in spite of all this she continued her prayer.

8.

Another night after matins when she had said her prayers she fell asleep and saw two ships. In one of them there were many people, but there was no one to guide it and it was sinking. In the other one there was just herself and two other people, and the ship was skirting danger but a voice said not to be afraid, and it arrived in the harbor and was safe.

5. Compline is one of the "Hours": they are matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, and compline, moments of the day set aside for recitation and contemplation. See John Harthan, *The Book of Hours* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1977). Starting around midnight and spaced at about three-hour intervals, the times assigned to the Hours are variable, depending on the season and other factors. These prayers were monastic in origin but by the later Middle Ages they were also often performed by pious lay people. The cat was often considered demonic and was also associated with heretics and witches who were thought to use cats in their ceremonies. For a striking image of the devil as a cat (being worshipped by heretics) see Wolfgang Behringer, "How Waldensians became Witches: Heretics and Their Journey to the Other World," in *Communicating with the Spirits*, ed. Gábor Klaniczay and Eva Pócs (Budapest and New York: CEU Press, 2005), 159.

9.

Another night after she had said her prayers she fell asleep and had a vision of a young man who showed her a coffer filled with great splendors but which was rotten, old, and worn on the outside. He said to her: "Your body is just like this; outside it is ugly and worn out from penances but on the inside it is filled with great virtues." Right away she thought this was an illusion and turned to God saying: "Dear God, by your mercy, protect me from any illusion and deception by the demon."⁶

10.

On another day she went to the Friars Minor⁷ and there was one devout friar who was afraid of her, since he had taken a vow of chastity and everything was still new to him; for which reason he told her that she had acted badly and that perhaps this time she would err but not recognize it, and he said many other things like this. Because of this she left very distressed, and the following night, after compline, she went up to her oratory and prayed to God crying copiously and asked Him to please protect her by His mercy.⁸ Then she fell asleep and in a vision she saw six paupers who said to her: "Know that we are angels and that God has sent us to comfort you; do not be afraid but be certain that you will never err." And she had endured great torments of

6. Constance's body is thus the opposite of whitewashed sepulcher of Matthew 23:27, which is beautiful on the outside but inside full of "dead men's bones and uncleanness." This scene also shows that Constance fits the criteria of the discernment of spirits that Raymond laid out in the preface. Her humility makes her doubt the vision of the young man and appeal to God for guidance.

7. The term Friars Minor designates the Franciscans, the religious order founded by Saint Francis (1182–1226).

8. Weeping copiously is a sign of piety that became particularly popular with Marie d'Oignies (1177–1213) whose life was written by James of Vitry. In the fifteenth century Margery Kempe, an English woman who tried to imitate pious models like Marie, also wept constantly. On the spiritual background of this kind of behavior see Piroška Nagy, *Le don des larmes au Moyen Âge. Un instrument spirituel en quête d'institution (Ve–XIIIe siècle)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000). See also Geneviève Hasenohr, "Lacrymae pondera vocis habent. Typologie des larmes dans la littérature de spiritualité française des XIII–XVe siècles," *Le Moyen Français* 37 (1997), 45–63. Hasenohr shows that in the later Middle Ages the initially monastic ideal of shedding devotional and contritional tears was adapted for the laity through many pious treatises in the vernacular.

sexual feelings for thirteen months, but after this moment she did not feel them any more than if she were dead.⁹

11.

Another day she heard mass from her confessor and after the Pater-noster she prayed to God saying: "Lord, give me a lesson, teach me what I should ask for." And she had a vision and a voice said to her: "Ask that wisdom may guide your words, your steps, and your glance."

12.

On another day her confessor was chanting mass and when he elevated our Lord¹⁰ she adored a little cross that was part of her rosary and some inspiration spoke to her spirit: "Kiss your hand so that you remember that you are dust and will return to dust. And henceforth wear this cross." And she did as she was told.

13.

Starting on another night when the sky was a deep red and everything seemed to be on fire, she prayed for three days and three nights while weeping copiously. And after matins when she had said her prayers she fell asleep and had a vision of a naked man who was covered only by a white cloak. His right side and arm were uncovered as was his head, and he held in his hand a large wooden cross and he was standing on a high hill. The hill and its sides as well as a great valley below were all filled with countless people. And on top of this hill there was a platform and the man stood in the middle with herself beside him and the man said: "I command that the earth open up and that those damned by my Father enter there." And then the earth trembled and all cried loudly: "Jesus Christ, have mercy on us." And no one entered [the earth]. And then the man said: "I command that the heavens open and that my Father descend with all the saints." And then everyone cried: "Lord, keep your word and descend immediately." But she saw nothing else.¹¹

9. This encounter with the frightened Franciscan seems to signal the death of Constance's sexual self.

10. I.e., the Eucharist.

11. This vision of the Last Judgment is rather inconclusive. No one seems to be condemned to hell, but Constance does not see everyone enter heaven either. In medieval paintings usually roughly equal numbers of people descend into hell and are led to heaven. See for

Life of the Blessed Ursulina of Parma

by Simone Znacchi

To the Reverend Mother in Christ Lady Magdalena Sanvitale, abbess of the Benedictine monastery of San Quintino in Parma, and to all the other nuns joyously serving their bridegroom Jesus Christ in that community, Brother Simone Znacchi of Parma, useless servant of Christ and the unworthy prior of the Carthusian house of Saints Mary and Jerome at Montello near Treviso, offers shared hope for eternal life in the precious blood of the Immaculate Lamb.

1. There comes to mind, Reverend Mother, this declaration from the Holy Scriptures: “It is good to conceal a king’s secret but honorable to reveal God’s works.”¹ Frequently reading over this idea on my heart’s desk,² I am inflamed by the ardor of your outstanding faith. For you have deigned to choose and compel me, lacking in eloquence and poor in both expression and knowledge, to produce something out of the poverty of my understanding in fulfillment of your holy desire. Therefore, I do what you have often asked: relate with my clumsy pen the life and customs of the blessed Ursulina of Parma, whatever I might discover locally in writing or hear from trustworthy people.³ I seek not to offer loveliness of language but instead to convey the truth about Ursulina’s life for you and the other nuns who live there in the monastery where her holy body rests in peace.⁴ As much as pious ardor calls me to satisfy fully your holy

1. The author quotes Tobit 12:7, from a speech in which the angel Raphael tells the virtuous Tobit and his son Tobias that they should proclaim the blessings God has granted them to reward their faithful merit. The reference anticipates three key themes of Ursulina’s life: divine direction, saintly intervention, and recompense for good works.

2. The use of various parts of the body as metaphors for objects or ideas was even more frequent in the later Middle Ages than in our own times. The heart, in particular, can be almost anything, metaphorically.

3. Znacchi, then, will rely on written documentation available in and around Parma plus oral tradition he considers reliable. He is likely to have had few if any firsthand accounts, since he wrote over sixty years after Ursulina’s death. See also section 2 and section 7.

4. The writing of a saint’s biography or *vita* (“life”) was part of the process of having a person declared a saint by the papacy in the Middle Ages. Abbess Magdalena evidently wanted to have Ursulina, whose body was buried in her convent, declared a saint. To hold the relics of a recognized saint would increase the spiritual reputation and authority of the community. It could also bring material advantage in the form of pilgrims who, attracted to worship at the tomb of a holy person, often made contributions to the institution where it lay.

desire in this undertaking, to an equal degree the assorted labors, cares, and business arising from the office of prior with which I have been honored keep me from complying as I want. For the merits of my own life are not sufficient that I am confident in my ability to grasp worthily in mind and soul the deeds and life of so outstanding a virgin. It happens that on this subject men of faithful life and outstanding knowledge and eloquence have gathered up much material for this purpose from here and there, and following on the streams of their exuberant eloquence, I would for good reason be marked by presumptuousness if I tried to introduce a few more drops except that the faithfulness of your prayers—along with your pledge that my account (which I gathered together, with great difficulty, from numerous books in Latin and vernacular tongues), howsoever it emerges, will be accepted and you will consider it as a comfort for the people of this region—incites me to this labor.⁵ But if by chance I offer anything here less carefully than I should, I pray that either you piously remove the offending matter or preserve it with the pardon of patience, seeking faith and love in my writing rather than charm.

2. Therefore, most beloved Mother in Christ, and you highly devout mothers, all together a singular exemplar of religion, inspired by your celestial prayers I will take up the task you command according to the power of my small talent. I make known, albeit in rustic style, to you, who know truth, the scattered material taken from others, seeing as they failed to set down things heard rather than experienced.⁶ I am afraid and judge myself unworthy to sound forth the life and merits of so very renowned a virgin with insipid elegance and ignorant style amidst the literary refinement of learned people, whom I beg to want the account itself more than they ponder our uncultured discourse.

5. Zanicchi, while continuing to declare that only his patrons' confidence and prayer on his behalf overcomes his sense of unworthiness to write about Ursulina, makes two additional points. First, there is much material about Ursulina already written in florid Latin and other languages. (None of these is known to have survived, although there were still some left in the late eighteenth century: see Affò, *Vita della Beata Orsolina*, 10, n. 1). Secondly, Ursulina's story is meant to console and perhaps inspire Christians in and around Parma. The extreme grammatical complexity of this sentence, in ironic counterpoint to authorial protestations of ignorance and unworthiness, is typical of hagiography. *Captatio benevolentiae*, the "reaching for kindness" addressed to readers, was also a rhetorical feature of letterwriting and works on prayer and meditation. Zanicchi continues to beg pardon for his poor style in learned and convoluted sentences in the next section, where the translation divides them for ease of comprehension.

6. Again, the author alludes to oral tradition as a source of his account.

Let them, I say, seek out my pious thoughts rather than my pen's dullness.⁷ I want them to know, too, that I, bound by your unceasing prayers, imposed on my shoulders a weight too great for them to bear. But the command was so forceful that I was unable to refuse what I did not want—and greatly feared. Moreover, although I know I am totally inadequate for and unworthy of such work owing to the paucity of my gifts, nevertheless I am equally compelled by great devotion to this same most famed virgin I know I have sustained for a long while. Putting aside fear and supported by great hope, I will make myself ready. Finally, encouraged by your prayers and the intercessions of the holy virgin Ursulina herself and protected in the highest degree by certain hope, I will fit my talent to this little work as much as I am able. If by chance I say too little or keep superfluously silent about whatever the greatness of this kindly virgin appears to demand, then please, good mothers, pardon my ignorance. I will have one concern above all: to touch on many things briefly, lest prolix detail incites boredom in readers and hearers.⁸ Trusting in the grace of the Holy Spirit, I shall begin.

3. There was a most righteous man named Pietro, who walked in all goodness before God and men. He was a native of that golden city called Parma, outstanding among other Italian towns for both nobility and antiquity. Although out of zeal for chastity Pietro had shunned marriage after his first wedding and instead committed himself (insofar as he was able) to constant prayer to the Lord,⁹ one day as he prayed to the Lord in deep concentration of heart and mind a command came from the heavens, saying, "Pietro, take Bertolina as your wife." When he had married his first wife, this Bertolina, who was afterward his second

7. The wise people from whom the author seeks pardon are female (*quas*): the compliment is to the nuns of San Quintino and other female readers.

8. Zanicchi stresses that he anticipates a wide and mixed audience for his portrait of Ursulina, one that might learn of her life by means of his account, but not necessarily through *reading* it. That is, he imagines all or part of his text might be read, after translation into everyday dialect, to the illiterate or those who cannot read Latin.

9. The phrase *ut poterat*, "insofar as he was able," suggests that the widowed Pietro was obliged to work for a living in one of the many occupations associated with late-medieval urban life. The father-to-be of Ursulina was not of extraordinary wealth or birth, or else the author, in keeping with traditions of hagiography, would say so. At the same time, Ursulina's travels suggest some measure of familial financial resources. Pietro, then, was likely of the prosperous artisanal or merchant classes, as also suggested by the end of this section, where he obtains reassurance about Bertolina's lineage before marrying her.

wife, was in her mother's womb.¹⁰ Pietro, stunned by the utterance and quite frightened, too, began to ponder anxiously concerning a command of this sort granted to him. More than a little uncertain and not knowing where to turn, especially since he had hitherto rejected such a marriage, finally he made up his mind and decided to obey divine will.¹¹ After painstaking and lengthy investigation, he found the said Bertolina, formerly unknown to him, and when he recognized her virtues and ancestry, he took her in marriage.

4. Bertolina, after many years of marriage and several daughters, was home alone one notable day, thinking with deep concentration about the vanities of this world, the briefness of human life, and also about heavenly glory and the happiness of blessed spirits. In a trance, meditating a long while on the uniqueness, sublimity, and greatness of the Trinity and compelled by the sweetness of her meditation, she burst forth in great cries, for the Holy Spirit had chosen her. That night, the same Holy Spirit informed Bertolina's husband Pietro in dreams that the most precious fruit of their marriage was to come forth from her. Two weeks later, it was revealed to Pietro as he slept that the bishop of the city told him he should stay with him. Pietro refused to do so out of consideration for his household and wife. Nevertheless, the bishop exhorted Pietro to do as he asked without misgivings. Pietro gave this reply: "I will go home and consult with my wife." Having given his promise to make a response to the bishop's plea, Pietro hastened home, and behold, he heard an angel calling him. When he told the curious angel about the bishop's request and that the bishop had accepted a respite of a month for Pietro's decision, the angel said to Pietro, "Satisfy the bishop with a reply in one year and a month." When that deadline had been agreed to by the bishop, the angel said to Pietro, "Your wife is pregnant now and will bear a daughter who will be greatly pleasing to God." "How do you know these things?" asked Pietro. "I am an angel, assigned to watch over you. Know that for five years your daughter will be incapable of any steady step, amidst great mystery, since the Lord will reveal

10. In late-medieval Italy, men tended to postpone first marriage, while women often married before age twenty: see David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 103–11, *passim*. Pietro was likely well into middle age if he had been widowed for a considerable period before marrying Bertolina. She, on the other hand, may have been in her teens.

11. Zanicchi stresses Pietro's reluctance to remarry with the verb *abiecere*, with its overtones of debasement, abandonment, and defeat.

many things to her. But in her sixth year, she will begin to walk; in her fifteenth year she will begin to talk and in her sixteenth she will walk perfectly and speak perfectly what the Lord will reveal to her.” With these words, the angel vanished.¹² Awakened from his dream, Pietro thought intently about its meaning and indeed told Bertolina about it and other things afterward in their turn. Pietro lived a year and eight months after this dream-vision.¹³

5. In due course the blessed Ursulina was born of Bertolina, on the morning of May 14, 1375. Because of her mother’s weakness, the blessed Ursulina had to feed at others’ breasts, which she did willingly, except that she not only refused to suckle but even shrunk from the touch of a woman thought to be an adulteress.¹⁴ That was a wonder, but more marvelous still was it that the other nurses who saw this were stunned and said, “Truly, if this little girl lives, she will be something great, for she already foretells things to come.” Listen, I pray you, to what followed. In her fourth month, when she had not known how to speak before and would not again for many months afterward, Ursulina burst forth in a strong voice with these words: “O God, God my Father!” Hearing this, her mother was quite surprised and kept the utterance a secret in her heart’s treasury. The baby girl had a sister, age four, who often saw two men standing by the blessed Ursulina’s cradle, one each on the right and the left, dressed in extremely bright robes. The girls’ mother tried to see if this was actually true by several tests. Rebuking her daughter, she said, “Are you asleep [when you see them]?” “No, I’m not sleeping,” came the reply, “but when they go over to her, I lift up my head completely and I watch them in bright light—it’s true what I say.” Bertolina fell silent. Much later, she asked Ursulina about the two men. Ursulina said, “One of them was the blessed apostle Peter, whom God appointed as my teacher. The other never wanted to reveal his identity.” But it can be believed in good faith that it was St. Paul or an angel sent by him. For just as in this

12. The hagiographer has shot this paragraph through with biblical echoes, the most evident being the conception of Isaac in the old age of his parents, Abraham and Sarah (Gn 17 and 21) and the Annunciation to Mary of the miraculous birth to come (Lk 1). It also recalls the story of Tobit, from whose story Zanacchi extracted a sort of epigraph for his *vita* in section 1: just as Ursulina will recover from her disabilities, Tobit is cured of blindness and experiences general good fortune in his old age.

13. See section 8, below, for an explanation of Pietro’s vision.

14. This first miracle aside, Zanacchi’s description offers another hint at the social and economic status of Ursulina’s parents: they were members of an urban middle class in which wet-nursing was a common practice.

mortal life the two were companions, so Paul would not be parted from Peter after death.¹⁵

6. At age four, the blessed Ursulina was not yet able to walk steadily, just as the angel had warned her father.¹⁶ Her mother, in church one day and seized by divine inspiration, offered Ursulina to God on the altar of the blessed Peter Martyr, in the chapel of the Dominican friars.¹⁷ As soon as she touched that altar, Ursulina gained as sure and steady a step as her age would allow. One day, while she was a girl of six, she wandered here and there on the road near her house and lo, two men of venerable appearance, unknown to bystanders, moved close to the blessed virgin Ursulina and placed their hands on her head, saying, “This girl was chosen by God and reserved for a great miracle.” From that time, the blessed virgin began to have marvelous visions. The first was on the first day of the year and concerned the end of the world and the resurrection of the dead.¹⁸ Ursulina also began to know God through her human understanding, all of which she experienced on her own and in silence. She was a stranger to all worldly desires, devoting herself mind and spirit and in all reverence to the Lord. Seeing this, her mother’s neighbors said, “Truly your daughter is too proud and restrained. She never takes part in our conversation like other people.” When her mother passed this along, Ursulina replied, “For what reason should I abandon the company of my Lord Jesus Christ and the saints on account of those women? Thus the Lord has called me, and I serve and follow Him.”

7. When Ursulina reached her ninth year, remaining humble as time and place demanded, she began, by the action of grace, to make others sharers in her visions and revelations from God. She knew this meant she would give praise in all things and glory to God

15. Ursulina’s two guardians, then, were St. Peter, the first bishop of Rome, that is, the first pope, appropriate for someone with Ursulina’s destiny, and St. Paul, the great exponent of the budding cult of Christianity in the first century, who like Ursulina traveled extensively.

16. Reference to what we now call developmental delay, along with the adult Ursulina’s tiny stature, suggest some childhood illness or disability, as foretold by the angel who visited her father. In any case, Ursulina was evidently an odd little girl.

17. St. Peter Martyr, a Dominican preacher and inquisitor, was assassinated in 1252 by heretics. His altar is a fitting place for the reception of Ursulina into God’s service, since he was a fellow Italian and enemy of heterodoxy.

18. Perhaps because Ursulina is such an unusual figure, her biographer takes pains to make her first vision utterly in keeping with orthodox Christian teaching, just as her celestial guardians in infancy were founders of the Church. Orthodoxy is equally stressed in the next section.

and that consequently the power and great goodness of God would be celebrated and benefit accrue equally to her neighbors and others. However, she always presented herself humbly when telling people about her visions, saying, for instance, “A person saw this vision; determine what it is” or “I heard from someone, try to discern if it came from the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, or an angel or saint.”¹⁹ Thenceforth God himself and our Lord Jesus Christ deemed it worthy to reveal many, many secrets and divine mysteries in succession as long as Ursulina lived, as the many volumes written about these revelations bear witness. I avow that I have seen and read them all with due reverence.²⁰ But so great was the blessed virgin Ursulina’s humility and gentleness that she tried to make known what God had revealed to her with all restraint and as time and place demanded.

8. Knowing the divine will concerning what she was to do, Ursulina refused to listen to preachers’ sacred public utterances. “I do not refuse,” she told her mother, “because I scorn the holy lessons of preachers, but because instead I obey the commands of Him whom they preach. Since God himself, the Lord Creator of all things, has decided to reveal things to the human race through me, He forbids me to go hear public preaching until whatever He has decided to reveal to me is written down, lest those men might by chance think that I learned from their sermons what God himself wanted to reveal through me.” Therefore she never wanted to put on any monastic habit, only spiritual clothing as devout and humble as she could bear. When this blessed virgin was in her fifteenth year, she had the following vision. It appeared to her as if she was in her heavenly homeland, in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that the Lord himself said to the blessed virgin’s father, standing there alongside Him, “Is this not your daughter?” Pietro replied, “You know, Lord.” And the Lord Jesus Christ spoke to him again. “Is this not your daughter?” Her father answered, “She is your daughter, Lord.” And He asked a third time, “Is this not your daughter?” and when he replied, “Lord, she is,” the Lord said, “Now tell your daughter about the vision you had about her when she was still in her mother’s womb.” Pietro did as he was

19. Here and periodically through the next several sections, Zanacchi emphasizes that from childhood, Ursulina subjected her revelations to public scrutiny, allowing evaluation of the kind discussed at the beginning of the account of Constance of Rabastens’ revelations. The sources of the visions are all, like the subject matter mentioned previously and subsequently, completely orthodox.

20. None of this material has survived.

told. Then the Lord said to him, “It was I, that bishop to whom you promised you would return, wanting to remain with me with your wife’s permission.”²¹ When all this had passed, the vision faded away.

9. The Lord himself clearly showed the blessed Ursulina visions nearly every day and disclosed very profound revelations. Then He ordered that she have written down everything He had revealed to her.²² When she was wondering to whom this duty should be entrusted, she asked, “Whom should I choose, Lord?” The Lord told her that a certain old man, a priest of proven virtue, was suitable for this task. After this old man had flatly refused three times, in the end, knowing the will of God, he did not hesitate to take on the task. At intervals over the next three years, the priest set down several volumes of writing at the blessed Ursulina’s dictation. Besides him, Ursulina had at various times and places six other transcribers of her revelations. The first was Lord Tommaso Fosio, from Parma, the aforementioned priest; the second was Master Niccolò of the order of hermits; the third Lord Anthony of Milan, an official of the antipope Clement in Avignon; the fourth Lord Jacopo Sibinago, the official in charge of legal cases in the Roman curia; the fifth Master Amico, a physician in the Roman curia; the sixth the great armor-bearer and commander Gherardo Aldighieri, from Parma; and finally, the outstanding learned man Lord Donnino Garimberti, from Parma.²³

21. See above, section 4; Pietro had been dead for many years at the time of this vision. The arithmetic is confusing, however. Perhaps the thirteen months mentioned above were to start at Ursulina’s birth, giving Pietro twenty months to live when the angel told him about his blessed daughter in the womb, or perhaps after thirteen months, Pietro agreed to join the bishop, that is to die in Christ, in another several months.

22. It is not clear that Ursulina herself could write or even read; she seems to have gained all her knowledge through revelation.

23. Ursulina’s scribes are a diverse lot reflecting her unusual career: clerics, learned men, and at least one layman, who worked in Parma, Avignon, and Rome. The priest Tommaso was of noble local family (Affò, *Vita della Beata Orsolina*, 6, n. 1). Niccolò was likely a leader of Parma’s house of the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine, formed in 1244, when Pope Innocent IV united several groups of hermits and imposed on them the Rule of St. Augustine, a short outline of communal religious life written around 400 CE by the great North African bishop and theologian Augustine of Hippo (354–430). On Anthony of Milan, see below, section 27. Jacopo and Amico are officials in the service of a Roman pope, probably Boniface IX, whom Ursulina met on two different occasions. Apparently both a lawyer and a doctor examined this young woman amidst her visions, a fact Zanacchi does not mention otherwise but in keeping with the interest in discernment of spirits in this *vita* (and in the *Revelations* of Constance of Rabastens). On Gherardo Aldighieri, see the Introduction. Donnino is the second local scribe, the third if Niccolò was indeed from Parma. The order