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### Moses Has No Tongue: or, Bumbling Truth-tellers in Places of Secret

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## Moses Has No Tongue: Or, Bumbling Truth-Tellers in Places of Secret

Although I've never felt particularly sorry for Moses — at least not as sorry as he felt for himself — I do concede that it could be handy to have someone else to act as your spokesperson, particularly if you're proclaiming something unpleasant, like “Let my people go!” It's just hard to imagine how that takes great oratory skill. But it does.

Those of us attempting to teach students rhetorical strategies sometimes forget just how difficult acquiring those skills can be. And now that I am in a position (though nothing so grand — unfortunately — as speaking for God Almighty), I too yearn for a mouthpiece — an Aaron — to speak for me. For though certainly not “slow of speech,” I appear to be unfit for the task before me: to speak the story of my doctoral thesis subject, Mother Benedicta Riepp, OSB. And not just the “story” from a historical viewpoint.

I embarked upon a thorough examination of subtextual and surrounding epistological material; I applied feminist and Bakhtinian theory where relevant, and I learned how the reconstruction of a nineteenth-century woman's life could be viably reassembled. This is what I studied with intense dedication. It was an honors dissertation, approved on the highest and most pertinent levels: its theory stamped by professorial experts, its historical accuracy by acclaimed Benedictine historians.

I actually once felt sorry for those poor English shmucks who groped for some topic on which to write an entire dissertation. (Oh God, another Eudora Welty pilgrimage?!) But while my frightened colleagues pecked in the literary earth for some kernel, I went serenely on my way, knowing that the road was prepared before me. Or so I thought. For from the very first time I had come upon the knowledge of Benedicta Riepp, I was intrigued.

As an undergraduate at Benedictine College in Atchison, KS, an English major and a life-writing aficionado, I began studying the foundress of that Benedictine women's community: Mother Evangelista Kremeter. I found nothing much unusual in my study of her journal or history, I thought, until I came upon a letter that seemed completely out of context for this mild nun. She was writing to one Abbot Boniface

Wimmer and she said:

Since we have received from Fr. Prior the various points according to which you, Father Abbot [Wimmer], want to regulate our lives, a different feeling has taken possession of me [...] it is impossible for me not to associate with Rev. Mother Superior [Benedicta Riepp] and Mother Willibalda without any reason on my part for such conduct. If [this command] must be complied with, I feel constrained to leave and seek my salvation in a stricter order. (Girgen 84)

What?! Here was a recalcitrant Moses, but in need of no Aaron. An otherwise incredibly meek individual who threatened to leave her Order — in a day in which to do would be considered the height of scandal — all for the defense of her friend? Who was this friend?

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Kansas seemed a nice safe distance from which to pursue an interest in a dead nun from Germany. It was there, from the local monastic historian, and a nun, that I was told that Mother Benedicta was “something of a troublemaker,” and Boniface Wimmer “a holy man.” At the time I never dreamed that I would live anywhere outside of Kansas, that my interest in Benedicta Riepp would go anywhere past my dissertation, or that she was still a somewhat troubling topic to the Benedictine communities of Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and even, Eichstatt, Bavaria.

But as luck would have it, and since God seems to possess at all times a rather trickster-figure sense of humor, I came to Minnesota, wandering onto the campuses of Saint John’s and Saint Ben’s, not yet having finished my doctoral work. I studied for my comprehensive exams, my doctoral defense, and jumped all the hoops put in front of me. Unfortunately, I succeeded not because I was brilliant, but rather, because I was “dogged, unstoppable, enthusiastic,” as my committee commented with wonder, though they had dutifully thrown the prerequisite boulders in my path.

I began blithely teaching for Saint Ben’s and working with a writing group to further my topic of Mother Benedicta. But unfortunately, I was also hearing about darker elements of this new community. There were rumors of money being paid out to cover scandals. A Saint John’s student disappeared without a trace. And a nun buried in the Saint Ben’s community cemetery, one Mother Benedicta Riepp, was someone not talked about per tacit agreement. Not publicly at least, and not in the company of those who might find it offensive or threatening.

In this Minnesotan and Benedictine space, it’s no secret that we have secrets. And here I am, an inept Moses with no Aaron, trying to tell a story no one wants to hear. I

am Moses without a tongue. When we begin to believe that truth has no value — that the truth of history does not “help us” — then its reiteration will find itself in identical or related forms. As we’ve learned, secrets do not remain so.

Where does a person stand who admires so many of the Benedictine principles and tenets, but also desires to speak of the incredible story of Benedicta Riepp? Perhaps I push the first Rule — “Listen” — too far.

And other institutions executed even more of what amounted to a gag order. The Liturgical Press rejected my book on the correspondence between Benedicta Riepp and Boniface Wimmer because (and I quote) “it was too hard on Wimmer,” though the words in the book were from his own unpublished letters sent by St. Vincent’s archives. So the premier Benedictine academic publishing house won’t touch a book that tells the painful truth about Riepp’s personal trail of tears and triumph. Although a grant from the Lilly Foundation and the Benedictine Heritage Committee helped to fund an original music CD about Benedicta Riepp, the play in which that music would be showcased, intended for spring ’07, was initially prohibited from the College of Saint Benedict campus until enough protesting voices brought about a reversal of that decision.

Of course no one says openly, “You are forbidden to speak of Benedicta Riepp.” Psychology 101 tells us what will occur at such an edict. And besides, I don’t believe that’s what these institutions are about. I refuse to believe that anyone wants to block a public performance of Benedicta Riepp in order to hide the truth of the past; we just don’t want to relive the pain. (Come on, who needs more pain?) Unfortunately, with the stories of too many women, the path to achievement is strewn with such thorns; this one certainly is. But if that makes Riepp’s a “negative” story, then we have not traveled all the way to her Easter. Her spring. Her time of birth. And birth — count 48 “children”: monastic houses who count her as their “mother” — is the purest of joy, no matter how agonizing the labor that brought it about.

I was told by a beloved and esteemed member of my academic institution, “This story is not helping us.” To that I would say that history does not owe *us*, as if it should *help* us. *We* owe history. *We* owe history its rightful and inclusive telling, and it pays us back when we give attention to that obligation. Are there other stories to tell? Of course there are. And there is room for all of them, but *this* story will not go away, in part because some of us so badly want it to. In part, because we recoil from telling it fully. And repeatedly. Just as we tell — again and again, and from the pulpit — those disturbing stories of Judas. Of Peter. Of the crucifixion. No matter the pain.

I would wish us able — individually and collectively — to reconcile our past with our present and future; it’s not such an awful past for all of that. But given the paucity of direct historical evidence from Benedicta’s own hand, the only way to tell Benedicta

Riepp's story is through Boniface Wimmer; conversely, I would argue that no one can tell Wimmer's full story without Riepp. It would be David with no Goliath; Lazarus with no Mary and Martha; Moses with no Aaron.

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It's been 150 years, after all. Maybe it's time to openly honor this woman. Yes, insiders know her story, but does the general population? Do our students?

Is Benedicta known and honored by the Benedicta Arts Center? Hopefully, but if you were to ask students if they know who Benedicta was, many would mumble they just thought "Benedicta" had something to do with "Benedictine" in general. Why "Benedicta" Arts Center? (I realize CSB uses many first names for their memorials.) But why not a more definitive "Riepp" Arts Center? For there is a corresponding Wimmer Hall. Where is the statue of Mother Riepp, as there is a larger-than-life statue of Abbot Wimmer in Latrobe, PA? Where is *she*?

Riepp's pictures were burned alongside her letters, but does the foundress claimed by 48 monastic houses deserve no monument that exists solely for her honor? It's not a tribute she would have asked for, but it's one that would do us well to bestow. For her place in history remains stolen, her voice usurped, her reputation compromised — primarily because her story "troubles."

Oh, many a sister and Benedictine oblate sit patiently through meetings that proclaim — and admittedly so — praises of Abbot Wimmer, though without a whisper about Mother Benedicta, his equal in fact, if not in practice. Are we educated masses really as liberated as we claim? Or do we too often still feel we must listen while condemning voices speak? Too often do our patriarchal roots surface, and we speak against each other on behalf of those voices. I cannot help but wonder if that is why the play will likely not enjoy the presence of CSB and SJU presidents, prioress and abbot, and provost.

Just as male monastics honor Boniface Wimmer in spite of his many faults, we must be no less willing to honor Benedicta Riepp in spite of her many troubles.

Jerome Oetgen, a renowned Benedictine scholar and author of the definitive biography of Abbot Boniface Wimmer, has been interested in this project from its inception in 1998 and has continually confirmed to me that it was a study that very much needed to be done. He has this to say regarding the Riepp work:

One of the key dramas of early American Benedictine history was the conflict between Prioress Benedicta Riepp, who led Benedictine women to the United States in 1852, and Abbot Boniface Wimmer, who led Benedictine men here in 1846. Because of the abbot's voluminous correspondence, the story has been most often told from Boniface

Wimmer's perspective. Thanks to Jill Zasadny, we now have it from Benedicta Riepp's. Making judicious use of the few letters of Riepp that survive, other 19<sup>th</sup>-century sources, and a methodology that effectively combines historical scholarship, dramatic characterization, and modern feminist theory, Zasadny gives us a compelling picture of Riepp herself and of her suffering, and provides us with a means to better understand her tragedy and triumph. [Signed] Jerome Oetgen.

Her "tragedy and *triumph*." Oetgen has an innate understanding of how one birthed the other in Riepp. He deeply respects not only history, but literary methods that help to excavate that history. But then, Jerome Oetgen is far away, safe, and not a Benedictine.

This heroic tale was not allowed on the women's monastic grounds in the 150<sup>th</sup> year of the monastery's founding, though it honors its foundress. Maybe it's just old news. Except that it isn't. Filtered through scholars of historical, Benedictine, feminist, Bakhtinian, and immigration literature, the script, the book, the music is more than merely academic; it is at once illuminating and somehow threatening. What, in this minefield, is the correct rhetorical strategy? If only I had an Aaron. Or a tongue. Or a listener. Or if I wasn't such a bumbling truth-teller here. Here. In this land of such secrets.

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