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The Idiot's Authority: Fifteenth-Century Hierarchies in Dialogue

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*Idiotae rapiunt caelos.*¹

The opening scene of Nicholas of Cusa's *Idiota de sapientia* begins with its hero, a poor *idiot* who walks across the Roman forum and nearly bumps into a rich lawyer, trained in the arts of Cicero. The man smiles, greets the orator, and says mildly: 'Your pride astounds me. You are exhausted from always reading so many books, yet the experience doesn't humble you. It must be because the science of this world, in which you think you're the best, is foolishness with God and puffs people up with pride. True knowledge humbles. I hope to find true knowledge, because it is a treasury of joy'.

Stunned, the orator splutters. 'How dare you, you ignorant pauper of an idiot? How can you deride letters, since no one learns without them?'

The idiot mollifies without retreat. 'Great orator, it is not presumption which makes me speak, but love. For I see that you've given yourself to the search for wisdom by hard, hollow labour. If I call you back so that you weigh your mistake, I think you'll rejoice escaping a worn trap. Authority's opinion holds you; you're like a horse free by nature but tied up by art to a fence, only able to eat what others give it. Your mind, tied to the authority of writers, feeds on strange, unnatural food'.

Despite his shock, the orator is intrigued and begins to probe. 'If the food of wisdom cannot be found in the books of the wise, where then?' And so the idiot begins to teach. He knows he is an idiot, and this true knowledge of himself makes him at once humbler and wiser than those learned in books. It is not that books contain no wisdom, but that it cannot be found there *by nature* (*naturale ibi*). Rather, wisdom cries out in the streets, and knowledge is to be found in the books of nature, those God wrote with his finger. He teaches the orator from first principles, how counting, weighing, and measuring in the streets leads to understanding of mathematics and other conceptual realities, an intellectual chain leading from nature without to nature within.²

¹ 'The unlearned grasp the heavens'. Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (ed.), *Contemplationes Idiotae. De amore divino. De Virgine Maria. De vera patientia. De continuo conflictu carnis et animae. De innocentia perdita. De morte* (Paris, Henri Estienne, 1519), fol. 96v.

² In the foregoing I have paraphrased Nicolaus Cusanus, *Idiota de sapientia*, in *Opera omnia* (Hamburg, 1940–2002), vol. 5, pp. 3–10. 'Convenit pauper quidam idiota ditissimum oratorem in foro Romano, quem facete subridens sic allocutus est: Miror de fastu tuo, quod, cum continua lectione defatigeris innumerabiles libros lectitando, nondum ad humilitatem ductus sis; hoc certe ex eo, quia "scientia" "huius mundi", in qua te ceteros praecellere putas, "stultitia" quaedam "est apud deum" et hinc "inflat". Vera autem scientia humiliat. Optarem, ut ad illam te conferres, quoniam ibi est thesaurus laetitiae. ORATOR: Quae est haec praesumptio tua, pauper idiota et penitus ignorans, ut sic parvifacias studium litterarum, sine quo nemo proficit? IDIOTA: non est, magne orator, praesumptio, quae me silere non sinit, sed caritas. Nam video te deditum ad quaerendum sapientiam multo casso labore, a quo te revocare si possem, ita ut et tu errorem perpenderes, puto contrito laqueo te evasisse gauderes. Traxit te opinio auctoritatis, ut sis quasi equus natura liber, sed arte capistro alligatus praesepi, ubi non aliud comedit nisi quod sibi ministratur. Pascitur enim intellectus tuus auctoritati scribentium constrictus pabulo alieno et non naturali. ORATOR: Si non in libris sapientum est sapientiae pabulum, ubi tunc est? IDIOTA: Non dico ibi non esse, sed dico naturale ibi non reperiri. Qui enim primo se ad scribendum de sapientia contulerunt, non de librorum pabulo, qui nondum erant, incrementa receperunt, sed naturali alimento "in virum perfectum" perducebantur. Et hi ceteros, qui ex libris se putant profecisse, longe sapientia antecedunt. ORATOR: Quamvis forte sine litterarum studio aliqua sciri possint, tamen res difficiles et grandes nequaquam, cum scientiae creverint, per additamenta. IDIOTA: Hoc est quod aiebam, scilicet te duci auctoritate et decipi. Scripsit aliquis

This passage introduces three dialogues that Nicholas of Cusa wrote in 1450 as a talented church lawyer who had been made a Cardinal in Rome barely a year earlier. Most commentators are quick to observe that it is Nicholas' own views that come from the *Idiota's* mouth, as he teaches how human ability to craft is exercised through acts of measurement: human minds project themselves onto the world, unfolding diverse approximations of nature, and through nature stretch towards the very mind that created nature, God. The *idiotia* is an artful conceit, alluding to this author's central preoccupation with 'learned ignorance', by which one can know God better by recognising how little we know of God—that truer ignorance becomes the basis for truer knowledge. Thus the mode of unlearning is itself a trope, as Cusanus puts himself in the role of Socratic questioner. Even more significantly, Nicholas of Cusa echoed St Paul, for whom Christian salvation was a kind of 'foolishness to the Greeks' (1 Cor. 1.23). Indeed, the governing metaphor of the 'book of nature', where the solid truths of *res* could be untangled from illusory *verba*, was a learned commonplace of its own.³

For the historian, the mere presence of enduring tropes about hierarchies of knowledge and knowers says little. More telling is their use at specific times and places. Cusanus, to use the name customary among specialists, is often read as a philosopher whose powerful originality authorises his standing within intellectual culture. The trope of the *idiotia*, I shall argue, in part establishes this view—the dialogue *is* a remarkable work of philosophy. But it also shows Cusanus responding to intensifying pressure from unlearned classes in upper Germany, insistent that learning was not the only way to authority. Roughly similar arguments have been made as a way to explain the irrepressible 'common man' of the later Reformation.⁴ More precisely, other scholars have probed some of the biographical links of Cusanus to late medieval religious movements with prominent lay components.⁵ My own effort will set

verbum illud, cui credis. Ego autem tibi dico, quod "sapientia foris" clamat "in plateis", et est clamor eius, quoniam ipsa habitat "in altissimis". ORATOR: Ut audio, cum sis idiota, sapere te putas. IDIOTA: Haec est fortassis inter te et me differentia: Tu te scientem putas, cum non sis, hinc superbis. Ego vero idiotam me esse cognosco, hinc humilior. In hoc forte doctior existo. ORATOR: Quomodo ductus esse potes ad scientiam ignorantiae tuae, cum sis idiota? IDIOTA: non ex tuis, sed ex dei Libris. ORATOR: Qui sunt illi? IDIOTA: Quos suo digito scripsit. ORATOR: Ubi reperiuntur? IDIOTA: Ubique.'

³ Augustine, e.g. *En. Ps.* 45.7: 'Liber tibi sit pagina divina, ut haec audias: liber tibi sit orbis terrarum, ut haec videas. In istis codicibus non ea legunt, nisi qui litteras noverunt: in toto mundo legat et idiota.' (Let the divine page be a book for you, so that you might hear these things; let the whole world be a book for you, so that you may seem them. Those who do not know how to read, do not read those books, while the unlearned read all the world.) Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1953), 319–326; Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1981). For the significance of book metaphors in relation to social standing, see Klaus Schreiner, 'Laienbildung als Herausforderung für Kirche und Gesellschaft: Religiöse Vorbehalte und soziale Widerstände gegen die Verbreitung von Wissen im späten Mittelalter und in der Reformation', *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, 11, no. 3 (1984), 257–354, at 262–263. For useful qualifications, see Lodi Nauta, 'A Weak Chapter in the Book of Nature: Hans Blumenberg on Medieval Thought', in Arjo Vanderjagt and Klaas van Berkel (eds.), *The Book of Nature in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Leuven, Peeters, 2005). Blumenberg also supplied an evocative and widely read account of Cusanus (though not linked to the book metaphor), in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Boston, MIT Press, 1983), pp. 359–360, 534.

⁴ See Peter Blickle's earlier works, summed up in *Der Bauernkrieg: Die Revolution des gemeinen Mannes* (Munich, Beck, 1998); cf. Lyndal Roper, "'The Common Man", "The Common Good", "Common Women": Gender and Meaning in the German Reformation Commune', *Social History*, 12 (1987), 1–21.

⁵ Nikolaus Staubach, 'Cusani laudes. Nikolaus von Kues und die Devotio Moderna im spätmittelalterlichen Reformdiskurs', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 34 (2000), 259–337; Nikolaus Staubach, 'Cusanus und die Devotio Moderna', in Inigo Bocken (ed.) *Conflict and Reconciliation: Perspectives on Nicholas of Cusa* (Leiden, Brill, 2004), pp. 31–51; Inigo Bocken, 'The Language of the Layman. The Meaning of the *Imitatio Christi* for a Theory of Spirituality', *Studies in Spirituality*, 15 (2005), 217–49; Inigo Bocken, 'Visions of Reform: Lay Piety as a Form of Thinking in Nicholas of Cusa', in Christopher M. Bellitto and David Zachariah Flanagan (eds.), *Reassessing Reform: A Historical Investigation into Church Renewal* (Washington DC, Catholic University of America Press, 2012), pp. 214–31.

Cusanus in relation to literature written by rather less learned contemporaries, thereby reevaluating more common scholarly narratives about the relation of intellectual elites to spiritual authority. In what follows the *idiot*a may help us see tensions distinct to fifteenth-century Europe around the authority of unlearned sorts.

Fifteenth-Century Options

Cusanus was a canny operator in the new bureaucracies that knit fifteenth-century Europe together. He ended life as an ecclesiastical prince-bishop of Brixen, who some thought might be pope—his brilliant career makes it difficult to see him as an *idiot*a in any sense. He was a cardinal well schooled in the universities, an expert collector of manuscripts, and an author of a steady flow of tracts at the highest levels of theological and philosophical abstraction. Cusanus defined the profile of the learned churchman. Yet if he was a typical churchman, he was typical also in having a life that reveals moments of instability in the hierarchy of lay and priestly, unlearned and erudite.

For his origins did not guarantee such power. Cusanus came from a merchant family, up and coming in the shipping business along the bustling Rhine river, with a local network of low-level magistrates and officials. The young Nicholas pursued ambition by way of the universities, an option chosen by a growing cadre of men from merchant families in late medieval Europe.⁶ He studied first at Heidelberg, and then at Padua, where he became a doctor of laws, a canon lawyer. In the 1420s, presumably while at Padua, Nicholas made a name in budding humanist circles. Poggio Bracciolini recognised the young man's talent, asking him to report copies of Cicero's *Republica* and Pliny in his visits to northern monasteries. Nicholas' reputation as a scholar was confirmed when he found twelve previously unknown plays of the Roman comic writer Plautus, news that Poggio swiftly transmitted to his friends. His merchant origins put Cusanus in a rising class of notaries and a bureaucratic elite that spanned merchants and clerics, from Petrarch to acquaintances such as Leon Battista Alberti. The young Rhinelander's skill with old texts stood him in good stead at the Council of Basel, which overflowed with opportunity for a talented, ambitious young lawyer like Cusanus. Whether or not his move to the papal camp was motivated by opportunism, as enemies claimed, it was certainly rewarded. The pope sent him on important missions, first to Constantinople in the entourage of Cardinal Bessarion, and then later as a papal nuncio throughout the German lands. And Cusanus did see the unified papacy as a solution to the schisms of Christendom. Much of Cusanus' manuscript hunting was for patristic and medieval sources on the unity of the church—a humanist's effort to find legal mechanisms for holding Christendom together.

We can therefore see Cusanus operating in what John van Engen has called a 'world of multiple options'.⁷ Late medieval Europe was unified through political means, which meant a daily experience of thickening Europe-wide networks.⁸ By 1400, the mendicant orders of the thirteenth century had set up administrative centres in most towns, linking local parishes one

⁶ Jacques Verger, *Men of Learning in Europe at the End of the Middle Ages*, trans. Steven Rendall (Notre Dame IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); Rita Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001); Daniel Hobbins, *Authorship and Publicity Before Print: Jean Gerson and the Transformation of Late Medieval Learning* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

⁷ John Van Engen, 'Multiple Options: The World of the Fifteenth-Century Church', *Church History*, 77 (2008), 257–284. For another portrait of fifteenth-century religion as rich in options, see Matthew Champion, *The Fullness of Time: Temporalities of the Fifteenth-Century Low Countries* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁸ On these political means, compare Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950-1350* (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1993) and R.I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1987).

to another through news and cycles of preaching and confession. Lawyers devised frameworks that compared and normalised local status and customs, applying regulation through expanding realms, offering new linkages between the local parish, its practices and preoccupations and the larger worlds of empire and the papacy. The fastest growing institution of the fifteenth century was the university, as every prince preferred to have lawyers and theologians trained in his own lands.⁹ Indeed, university men made church councils the instrument that linked the rising temperatures of Europe ever more tightly to local, regional concerns.

One should not overplay the suddenness or uniformity with which either university-educated bureaucrats or local diocesan concerns arose, yet there are clear marks of tension. The crusades against Cathars and Albigensians, recurrent peasants rebellions, Lollardy in England, Hus in Prague, and Joan of Arc in France all were flashpoints of local concern ever more acted out on the pan-European stage. Late medieval local concerns often took on the language of anticlericalism, resisting the arrogation of spiritual authority to educated men and religious orders.¹⁰ The ‘spiritually intense’ members of these communities were increasingly lay. As André Vauchez and Richard Kieckhefer have shown, saints in earlier centuries had normally been bishops, hermits, and great men. By the fifteenth century, saints were more than ever lay persons, often women, who had become the focus of local veneration—papal inquests of canonization tried not so much to stimulate local fervour as to restrain and contain popular piety.¹¹

This context made hierarchy an important but tricky topic. Cusanus remained aware of his bourgeois origins, and when he learned he had been made cardinal, he noted that ‘ut sciant cuncti sanctam Romanam ecclesiam non respicere ad locum vel genus nativitatis, sed esse largissimam remuneratricem virtutum’ (so that all may know the holy Roman church does not consider the place of birth or ancestry, but most generously rewards abilities).¹² Intellectually, he was especially attracted to a certain kind of writer who stood outside the university and legal establishments. Ramon Llull, the Catalan merchant-turned-missionary to the Muslims, believed that new intellectual tools were necessary for converting the broader Mediterranean world to Christianity. He is famous now for inventive approaches to combinatorics, along lines that would influence early modern philosophers such as Leibniz. He positioned himself, however, outside the university, an autodidact in Latin and the philosophical arts. His claim to artlessness served his message: nature offered truths immediately available to the human mind, including truths about God’s triune nature.¹³ Llull’s own dialogues, therefore, present him as an *idiot* directly reading the book of nature, inferring divine truths with a kind of natural, untutored logic. This is the feature of Llull’s thought that seems to have attracted Cusanus, possibly already in his student days at the University of Heidelberg, and certainly in 1428, when he spent time rifling through the large corpus of Lullian texts in the Sorbonne’s library.¹⁴

⁹ Jacques Verger, ‘Patterns’, in H. de Ridder-Symoens (ed.), *A History of the University in Europe, Vol. 1: Universities in the Middle Ages* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 35–74.

¹⁰ Out of many studies, see Peter A. Dykema and Heiko Augustinus Oberman (eds.), *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, Brill, 1993).

¹¹ André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (1st ed. 1981; Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997); Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984).

¹² Hermann Hallauer, Erich Meuthen (eds.), *Acta Cusana: Quellen zur Lebensgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues* (Hamburg, Meiner, 1983), vol. I.2, no. 849 (21 Oct 1449). I slightly modify the translation of Donald Duclow, ‘Life and Works’, in *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man*, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson (New York, Paulist Press, 2004), pp. 25–56, at p. 25.

¹³ Mark D. Johnston, *The Evangelical Rhetoric of Ramon Llull: Lay Learning and Piety in the Christian West Around 1300* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁴ Eusebius Colomer, ‘Heimeric van den Velde entre Ramón Llull y Nicolás de Cusa’, in Johannes Vincke (ed.), *Gesammelte Aufsätze Zur Kulturgeschichte Spaniens* (Münster, Aschendorff, 1963), pp. 216–32.

Scholars of Cusan thought agree that the *Idiota* dialogues of 1450 show him at the *apogee* of his accomplishment.¹⁵ They were written during the first year of his cardinalate. They also bear the traces of Cusanus' response to the Dominican Johann Wenck, who opposed the papal party that Cusanus had joined in the 1430s during the Council of Basel. When Cusanus wrote his long *De docta ignorantia*, Wenck found it permeated with heresy, ultimately linking him with several late medieval lay movements: Waldensians, followers of Eckhart and Wyclif, and beguines and beghards.¹⁶ All shared the same error, in Wenck's view, claiming a direct union with God that denied the Creator's distinction from the creation. Cusanus first answered with an *Apologia docta ignorantiae* in 1449, and especially the first of the *Idiota* dialogues reformulates Cusan philosophy around the refrain that true knowledge requires first-hand experience.¹⁷

Wenck was right to be worried, in a sense. In fact, Cusanus himself later became—like Jean Gerson, Johannes Nider and other churchmen—careful and wary of the excesses that could arise in popular devotion.¹⁸ Yet when Cusanus wrote the *Idiota* dialogues in 1450, the worries and compromises of real pastoral experience were still months in the future. (Moreover, until his death, Cusanus remained a supporter of the 'in between' kinds of spiritual life pursued by the *Modern Devout*, also like Gerson. In his will he left a curious charter for the *Bursa Cusana*, a school to be set up on the model of the Brothers of the Common Life at Deventer.¹⁹) As an answer to Wenck, the dialogues of 1450 take on a defiant tone, because they mirror a genre increasingly used among such late devout movements.

Naming the *Idiota*

Some readers will have already bristled at my translation of the Latin *idiota* as 'idiot'.²⁰ Modern historians take pains to use 'layman', framing the matter as one between Latinity and not.²¹ Take the Orator's outburst against the 'ignorant' (*ignorans*) pauper, which Hopkins renders in typical fashion as 'utterly unschooled', a choice of word that steers away from our associations

¹⁵ Theo van Velthoven, *Gotteschau und menschliche Kreativität* (Leiden, Brill, 1973), pp. 15–29; Kurt Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues: Geschichte einer Entwicklung* (Frankfurt a.M., Vittorio Klostermann, 1998), p. 273; David Albertson, *Mathematical Theologies: Nicholas of Cusa and the Legacy of Thierry of Chartres* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), chap. 9.

¹⁶ Johannes Wenck, *De ignota litteratura*, ed. Edmonde Vansteenbergh (Munster, Aschendorff, 1910), pp. 29–30. This debate has been studied in detail by K. M. Ziebart, *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect: A Case Study in 15th-Century Fides-Ratio Controversy* (Boston, Brill, 2013); see also Matthew T. Gaetano, 'Nicholas of Cusa and Pantheism in Early Modern Catholic Theology', in Simon J.G. Burton, Joshua Hollmann, and Eric M. Parker (eds.), *Nicholas of Cusa and the Making of the Early Modern World* (Leiden, Brill, 2019), pp. 199–227.

¹⁷ For a close reading, see Ziebart, *Cusanus on Faith and Intellect*, pp. 105–134.

¹⁸ A famous example is his reaction to the blood cult at Wilsnack; see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, Zone, 2011), pp. 15–17. See further John Van Engen, 'Friar Johannes Nyder in Laypeople Living as Religious in the World', in *Vita Religiosa Im Mittelalter: Festschrift Für Kaspar Elm Zum 70. Geburtstag* (Berlin, Dunker & Humblot, 1999), pp. 583–615; Daniel Hobbins, 'Gerson on Lay Devotion', in Brian Patrick McGuire (ed.), *A Companion to Jean Gerson* (Leiden, Brill, 2006), pp. 41–78.

¹⁹ Staubach, 'Cusani Laudes' and 'Cusanus und die Devotio Moderna'.

²⁰ Perhaps there is some comfort in the fact that I have a seventeenth-century English precedent: Nicholas de Cusa, *The Idiot in Four Books: The First and Seconde of Wisdome, the Third of the Minde, the Fourth of Statick Experiments, or Experiments of the Ballance*, trans. John Everard (London, William Leake, 1650).

²¹ The usual translations are: Nicholas de Cusa, *Idiota de Mente, The Layman: About Mind*, trans. Clyde Lee Miller (New York, Abaris, 1979); Jasper Hopkins (ed. and trans.), *Nicholas of Cusa's Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (Minneapolis MN, Arthur J Banning Press, 2001).

of ‘idiocy’ with mental disability, stupidity, irrationality and even social failure.²² The *idiota* is first a matter of education, and historians of medieval Europe make the *idiota* the obverse of ‘literate’ (‘lettered’, *litteratus*) clergy.²³

One can find in the history of the word *idiota* a reliable genealogy of these senses. The Greek ἰδιώτης primarily referred to a ‘private person’, one who does not hold public or professional office—a layperson.²⁴ Transplanted into classical Latin, the word described those lacking culture, especially the culture of Roman elite soaked up through the study of letters. This was hardly a neutral descriptor, of course. Without training, the *idiota* was cognitively handicapped. Cicero aligned the *idiota* with rude understanding, to be contrasted with the ‘ingenious (*ingeniosus*) or comprehending (*intelligens*)’ man.²⁵ In Roman culture, always cosmopolitan, the term *idiota* also carried a social judgement applied to the rustic, a figure of boorish stolidity.

Although the word retained such meanings throughout the Middle Ages, it developed new connotations too. Some were simply about language. As local vernaculars grew away from the Latin of antiquity, *idiota* gained new shades of meaning as ‘monoglot’ or specifically lacking Latin. Already in the early fifth century Augustine used the word this way in his sermons.²⁶ As the Venerable Bede explained by way of a specious etymology: ‘they call *idiotae* those naturally limited to only their own language and knowledge, who lack the knowledge of letters. These the Greeks call *proprium* or ἰδιον’.²⁷ Isidore of Seville, who mapped the world of words for medieval Europe, likewise presented the word as a matter of skill: ‘*Idiota, inperitus, Graecum est. Inperitus, sine peritia*’.²⁸

More distinctively Christian meanings accrued too. It was Christian authors who made the *idiota* stand in for the common run of humanity, the Christian masses. Tertullian had already described the ‘simple or even foolish and *idiotae*, who make up the majority of believers’.²⁹ This sense of *idiotae* as the masses merged with the notion of illiteracy in Gregory the Great’s fierce interventions on behalf of images as books for the ‘laity’—or, as he wrote ‘books for the *idiotae*’.³⁰ Regularly used in this sense, the *idiota* now also meant non-clergy—a meaning that paralleled Cicero’s rustic, but now part of the specifically Christian dyad of priest–people.

²² The *OED* offers two current definitions, a legal or technical one on disability, and a colloquial definition, what we might call a social judgement: ‘A person who speaks or acts in what the speaker considers and irrational way, or with extreme stupidity or foolishness’.

²³ Herbert Grundmann, ‘Litteratus – illiteratus: Der Wandel einer Bildungsnorm vom Altertum zum Mittelalter’, *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 40 (1958), pp. 1–65, at 2, 6. A study which applies this approach to Cusanus is Jan-Hendryk de Boer, ‘Plädoyer für den Idioten. Bild und Gegenbild des Gelehrten in den Idiota-Dialogen des Nikolaus von Kues’, *Concilium Medii Aevi*, 6 (2003), 195–237.

²⁴ Liddel and Scott.

²⁵ ‘... quae non modo istum hominem ingeniosum atque intelligentem, verum etiam quemvis nostrum, quos iste idiotas appellat, delectare possent.’ (...[statues] which not only could delight that clever and comprehending man, but even one such as us, whom he calls *idiotae*.) Cic. *Verr.* 2, 4, 2, §4.

²⁶ Above n. 3.

²⁷ ‘*Idiotae enim dicebantur qui propria tantum lingua naturalique scientia contenti litterarum studia nesciebant, siquidem Graeci proprium ἰδιον vocant*’. (Those who only knew their own language, not understanding natural knowledge or literary studies; in fact, the Greeks called their own tongue an *idiom*.) The Venerable Bede, *Expositio Actuum Apostolorum*, ed. M.L.W. Laistner, CCSL 121 (Turnhout, Brepols, 1983), p. 26, and see pp. 36–42. Cited by de Boer, ‘Plädoyer für den Idioten’, p. 208.

²⁸ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*, ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1911), vol. 2, p. 405 (X.144).

²⁹ He uses ‘*idiotae*’ for the ‘*simplices*’ or even ‘*imprudentes et idiotae, quae maior semper credentium pars est*’. Tertulliani *Opera*, Corpus christianorum series latina, 2 (Turnhout, 1954), p. 1161.

³⁰ Gregory the Great on pictures as books for the laity (*idiotae*): Registr. 9, 208, in MGH *Epistulae* 2. p. 195.21, cit. Grundmann, ‘Litteratus – illiteratus’, p. 7.

Thus European Christians applied the term with much deeper ambiguity than had the Romans. The chief reason was the Latin New Testament, which linked the *idiota* to apostolic witness in three places. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, the priests of Jerusalem marvel at Saint Peter and Saint John, both ‘sine litteris et idiotae’ (unlettered and unlearned), as they use the Jewish scripture to preach the resurrected Christ. The founding apostles of Christianity—one of them the bishop of Rome—are here simple folk, inspired to preach and teach by the gospel they witness to. The motif of inspiration returns in 1 Corinthians 14, where Saint Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit ‘who gives space to the *idiota*’, giving voice to the voiceless in prayer (v. 16).³¹ Paul also links such inspiration to madness or insanity, urging the Church not to prophesy in tongues all at once, for if ‘an unbeliever or an *idiota* enters, will they not think you mad?’ (v. 23).³² In the New Testament scriptures, the word *idiota* draws together fundamental themes of apostolic piety: Christian simplicity, the teaching of the unlearned, the outsider.

The Christian simplicity of the *idiotae* supplied the leitmotif of medieval dissent. They were fundamental to the waves of monastic reform beginning in the eleventh century with the Benedictine reformer Peter Damian. He linked the *idiota* closely to apostolic piety in his treatise on *The holy simplicity that should precede puffed up knowledge*, in which he included a section on ‘Cur deus per viros idiotas ac simplices mundum instituit’ (why God teaches the world through *idiotae* and simple folk). There he observed that God could have sent philosophers and orators, but chose to send ‘simple men and fishermen’ to sow the seeds of the faith.³³ Late medieval models of apostolic simplicity drew on this vocabulary too. Perhaps the most paradigmatic case is that of St Francis of Assisi, whose followers sweated over his letters and hagiography to divine a charter of holy vocation for the Franciscans, not least in the violent debates over poverty and learning.³⁴ In such writings, Francis protested repeatedly—in Latin—that his example was not that of the learned elite, but that his simplicity of life made him an *idiota*.³⁵

So if *idiota* does not straightforwardly translate to ‘idiot’, neither does it simply mean ‘layman’ or simply lacking Latin letters. To read ‘layman’ misses this range of tones. A good fifteenth-century example comes from a textbook by the Brothers of the Common Life, where the author distinguishes the *idiota* from the *laicus*, noting that a *laicus* certainly can be a man of letters, while a cleric can indeed be illiterate.³⁶ In other words, Cusanus had access to a perfectly good word for ‘layman’: *laicus*. In my paraphrase of Cusanus’ *Idiota*, I chose ‘idiot’ for two reasons. In part I hoped to jog us out of the familiarity that ‘layman’ offers. More importantly, however, ‘idiot’ suits the way Cusanus plays with overtones of idiocy and folly. Cusanus deploys irony deliberately, as his craftsman accuses the orator of prideful knowledge (*scientia*), which in fact is folly (*stultitia*). This passage introduces a playful series of

³¹ 1 Cor 14:16. ‘Ceterum si benedixeris spiritu, qui supplet locum idiotae, quomodo dicet: Amen, super tuam benedictionem? quoniam quid dicas, nescit’ (Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest?)

³² 1 Cor 14:23. ‘Si ergo conveniat universa ecclesia in unum, et omnes linguis loquantur, intrent autem idiotae, aut infideles: nonne dicent quod insanitis?’ (If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?)

³³ Peter Damian, *De sancta simplicitate scientiae inflanti anteponenda*, ch. 3, ed. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 145, p. 697.

³⁴ David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania State Press, 2003).

³⁵ Francis of Assisi, *Écrits. Texte latin de l'édition de K Esser* (Paris, 1981), 206, 252. See further Johannes Schneider, ‘Das Wort *idiota* im mittelalterlichen Latein’, in Elisabeth Charlotte Welskopf (ed.), *Untersuchungen ausgewählter altgriechischer sozialer Typenbegriffe und ihr Fortleben in Antike und Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1981), pp. 132–157, at 137.

³⁶ Johannes Synthen, *Dicta Sinthis super prima parte Alexandri* (Strassburg: Martin Schott, 1487), sig. a2r.

dichotomies that upturn the usual categories of learned and ignorant, books and natural world, the poor and the rich. The moral and social here cannot be unlaced from the epistemic.

Authority in Devout Dialogue

I want to recover this dappled language of moral, epistemic, and social hierarchy, because it alerts us to the cultural possibilities of Cusanus' own time. One thread of evidence is the genre of dialogue in which Cusanus wrote. The philosophical dialogue was nothing new, reaching back to Plato and Cicero, as well as Augustine.³⁷ Moreover, an enormously wide range of pedagogical texts used dialogue to transmit information—only a very small number of these exploited dialogue's polyvocal capacity to keep dissenting views in play.³⁸ Yet within the devotional literature of fifteenth century Upper Germany, one can detect a groundswell of dialogue that plays with hierarchy.

It helps to remember that Cusanus lived in a time of media change. Around 1400, new paper-making technology encouraged the outpouring of cheap, short, manuscript tracts, a revolution in media a full fifty years before the printing press, a turn Daniel Hobbins has summarised with special care.³⁹ The very cloisters that Cusanus and Poggio Bracchiolini and others scoured for ancient manuscripts were, in the eyes of most contemporaries, far more important as sites of manuscript production. This was above all true for the renewed religious orders of Germany and the Low countries, Carthusians, reformed Benedictines, Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, and Augustinian canons. In particular, Modern Devotion and groups like them produced an overflowing stream of texts and practices: before all else, written and preached sermons, but also 'collations' (vernacular addresses delivered by lay people), Lollard Bibles, books of hours and other vernacular liturgies, 'exercises', and mirrors for the discretion of souls.⁴⁰

Here we find the origins of Cusanus' *idiotia*. Inigo Bocken has argued that we find already in the celebrated *Imitatio Christi* of Thomas à Kempis a kind of lay epistemology, in which the humble farmer is presented as better suited for the spiritual life than a vain philosopher.⁴¹ But there are many further links. Late medieval devout movements along the Rhine circulated a genre of vernacular dialogues featuring a cleric learning from an *idiotia*, one

³⁷ Rudolf Hirzel, *Der Dialog: Ein literarhistorischer Versuch* (Leipzig, S. Hirzel, 1895); Vittorio Hösle, *The Philosophical Dialogue: A Poetics and a Hermeneutics*, trans. Steven Rendall (Notre Dame IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2012). Cusanus is situated in this context by Tilman Borsche, 'Der Dialog—im Gegensatz zu anderen literarischen Formen der Philosophie—bei Nikolaus von Kues', in Klaus Jacobi (ed.), *Gespräche lesen. Philosophische Dialoge im Mittelalter* (Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999), pp. 407–333.

³⁸ E.g. the bibliography in Carmen Cardelle de Hartmann, *Lateinische Dialoge, 1200-1400: Literaturhistorische Studie und Repertorium* (Leiden, Brill, 2007). For an early example of dialogue to address hierarchical dissent consider Norma N. Erickson, 'A Dispute between a Priest and a Knight', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 111, no. 5 (1967), 288–309. Although this is not the point here, university disputation can be seen as dialogic in this sense: Anita Traninger, *Disputation, Deklamation, Dialog: Medien und Gattungen europäischer Wissensverhandlungen zwischen Scholastik und Humanismus* (Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012); Alex J. Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation: Pedagogy, Practice, and Performance* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

³⁹ Hobbins, *Authorship and Publicity before Print*, 7–10, and notes.

⁴⁰ Mary A. Rouse and Richard H. Rouse, 'Backgrounds to Print: Aspects of the Manuscript Book in Northern Europe of the Fifteenth Century', in their *Authentic Witnesses: Approaches to Medieval Texts and Manuscripts* (Notre Dame IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), pp. 449–466; Koen Goudriaan, *Piety in Practice and Print: Essays on the Late Medieval Religious Landscape* (Hilversum, Verloren, 2016).

⁴¹ 'Melior est profecto humilis rusticus, qui Deo servit, quam superbus philosophus qui se neglecto cursum caeli considerat' (The humble rustic who serves God is entirely better off than the proud philosopher who neglects himself while theorising the movements of heaven). *Imitatio Christi* I.2.2, cit. Bocken, 'The Language of the Layman', p. 230.

of the ‘poor in spirit’ who often presents Eckhartian statements about radical unity with God as a source of theological knowledge.

Perhaps the most telling of such dialogues are those featuring a woman as the *idiota*. A well-known example is the *Schwester Katrei*, a tract that circulated under the name of the great German Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart. The title character is a beguine who develops a state of perfect detachment, to the point that she can teach the ‘master’, a process which takes up the largest part of the text.⁴² Another short story circulated under the title ‘Meister Eckhart’s Daughter’, with a similar device; a young girl asks for Eckhart at the dominican convent, saying she is ‘neither girl nor woman, nor husband nor wife, nor widow nor virgin, nor master nor maid nor manservant’. When she meets Eckhart, he asks for explanation of the riddle, and she tells him that to be any one of those things would distract her from God: ‘but I am none of all these things: I am just a thing like anything else and go my way’. In the dialogue, the character Eckhart reports that ‘I have just heard the purest person I have ever met’.⁴³

In fact, Eckhart never wrote these works. Nevertheless, in this textual tradition, Eckhart was thought to teach that the prevalent hierarchy of men over women did not apply; that spiritual authority instead derived from the directness of one’s relationship to God. Eckhart’s sermons circulated in Dutch translation among the Modern Devout; particularly *Beati pauperes* (sermon 87), on poverty in spirit as the posture *all* Christians must adopt for God to work in them.⁴⁴ The same mechanism takes up a much longer book found among the Modern Devout, *Meister Eckhart and the Layman*, which levels lay people using Eckhart’s steps to union with God through *Abgeschiedenheit*, or ‘detachment’.

Cusanus’ debt to Meister Eckhart was already obvious in his own time. In fact, since Eckhart was associated with the ‘Free Spirits’ and other lay heretical movements, affinities to Eckhart were Johannes Wenck’s main charge against Cusanus’ treatise *On Learned Ignorance*. But the topos of the lay person teaching the learned master went beyond these works. In ‘Die fromme Müllerin’, a miller’s wife teaches two Dominicans. They ask her the traditional questions of learned theology: what is a godly life? What is godly love? What is an angel? What is God? She answers with a question that reveals the poverty of their academic approach, cutting to the core: What must one do to be worthy of heavenly joy?⁴⁵ In similar stories, the benchmark figure of mysticism, a monk, prays that God show him whom to emulate in devotion, and God answers by showing a child; in other variants, the monk is shown a beggar or a humble nun.⁴⁶

For nineteenth-century German historians, eagerly searching for the bourgeois origins of their own national figure of the farmer, the temptation was to see these stories as an index

⁴² Kurt Ruh, ‘Eckhart-Legenden’, in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters Verfasserlexicon* (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1980), vol. 2, pp. 350–353.

⁴³ Franz-Josef Schweitzer, *Der Freiheitbegriff der deutschen Mystik* (Frankfurt a.M., Peter Lang, 1981), 322–370, translated as an appendix in Bernard McGinn, Frank Tobin, and Elvira Borgstadt, trans., *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* (New York, Paulist Press, 1986), pp. 349–384.

⁴⁴ R. A. Ubbink, *De Receptie van Meister Eckhart in de Nederlanden gedurende de middeleeuwen: een studie op basis van middelnederlandse handschriften* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1978), who deals with the sermon at pp. 62–95.

⁴⁵ Here I paraphrase one MS: ‘Die prester fassen neder und vereyningten sich mit er in gotlicher liebe und frag[ten] sie in dem ersten mall was eyn empfangen were gotlichen lebens. Sie fragten sie aber was die gotliche liebe were ... Sie fragten sie was eyn engell were ... Sie fragten sie was ist got ... [Sie fragten] Noe gebent myr auch eyn lere und sagent myr was soll eyn mensche thun das er wurdich were der clarer gotlicher freude?’ Gotha, Thür. Landesbücherei, Chart. B.237, fols. 171v–172v ([urn:nbn:de:urmel-ec8bcd2-a977-4d1c-bfc9-85764298432f5](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:urmel-ec8bcd2-a977-4d1c-bfc9-85764298432f5)). I have not been able to compare transcriptions listed in Kurt Ruh, ‘Die fromme (selige) Müllerin’, in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters Verfasserlexicon* (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1980), vol. 2, pp. 974–977.

⁴⁶ F.P. Pickering, ‘Notes on Late Medieval German Tales in Praise of Docta Ignorantia’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 24 (1940), 121–137, at 123. See also the larger literature on the ‘geistliche hausmagd’.

of the vernacular Volk. In reaction, scholars of the last century tend to explain away these stories as *topoi*, restrictive tools of an elite. Between these poles, we can take a middle path. In a tale called ‘The Young Woman of 22 Years’, we find the title character come to a theologian, a ‘maÿster der göttlichen geschriff’. She asks him what she should do, in order to approach the highest perfection and truth, to become a friend of God. The master asks about what spiritual exercises (*übungen*) she has practiced up to this point. She offers three outward exercises, as well as three inward ones. The outward *übungen* are what we might expect: (1) to reflect on the life of Jesus, (2) to consider the birth of the divine Word in Mary, and (3) to rely on Christ’s blood with full confidence. In these three exercises we can see the late medieval turn towards a Christocentric piety, strongly emphasizing both Christ’s incarnation and its attendant focus on the materiality of blood—as Caroline Walker Bynum has shown to special effect, blood cults became hugely popular in Germany at the time. For our purposes, however, the three inward exercises are more interesting. Here the young woman describes staying separated, ‘alle dage’, from all other creatures. Second, she describes keeping herself away from all unnecessary things that might come between God and her soul. Third, she tells of her habit of finding ten feet of space whenever she enters the church, and then ‘I unify myself to my God in such a way that I think no one is there but God and me alone’.⁴⁷

By now the Meister’s response is unsurprising to us: he exclaims ‘you have the right way’, and that in fifty years of wearing a religious habit he has never found anyone reach such perfection. At first glance, this appears to be the kind of egalitarianism that fascinated nineteenth-century nationalists. But this is not about *equality* of status, much less democracy. Rather, the leveling move turns on *humility*. When the *Meister* asks the young woman ‘what is your state?’ (*was ist uwer staet?*), he refers to her religious status—is she ‘secular’ and ‘in the world’ or is she under vows?⁴⁸ She answers immediately that she is ‘bound to the world’.⁴⁹ Yet what justifies her questions, at each stage, is her ‘meek’ (*oetmodenclichen, demütiglich*) manner. Hungering for immediate experience of God, the soul’s direct access to God, the mystic pursues cognitive purity not by raising themselves up, but by emptying themselves. This move has a profound social effect: the common denominator of humanity is lowered to simply being, in order to establish a common claim on divinity, to emphasise what all creation shares from God. This is vividly so for ‘Eckhart’s Daughter’, who insists not that she is equal to other people, but the opposite, that she is ‘like any other thing’. This stance, the complete separation of the soul (*Abgeschiedenheit*) is precisely what puts these texts in the Eckhartian tradition.⁵⁰

This is also what opened up these texts to critique, as we saw in Wenck’s charges against Cusanus. Yet these texts circulated widely along the Rhine, in various vernacular dialects. And Nicholas was hardly the only interested cleric. Multiple axes of hierarchy run through such examples. The most obvious is that of gender, and indeed these fit alongside a growing late medieval group of texts written by women, such as the ‘Sister-books’ circulating in Dominican women’s houses.⁵¹ These and similar ‘lives of sisters’ (*vitae sororum*) adopt

⁴⁷ I have used Version A, found in Pickering, ‘Notes’; see also the bibliography in Kurt Ruh, ‘Das Frauchen von 22 (21) Jahren’, in *Verfasserlexicon* (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1980), vol. 2, pp. 858–860.

⁴⁸ ‘Syt ir in der ee, und hait ir geut und ere dere in der werelt?’ in Pickering (ed.), ‘Notes’, p. 126.

⁴⁹ ‘Ich byn in der ee gebunden’, in Pickering (ed.), ‘Notes’, p. 126.

⁵⁰ To explore this commonplace further, see Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), chap. 6, and Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York, Crossroad, 2006), pp. 167–171.

⁵¹ For an overview, see John Van Engen, ‘Communal Life: The Sister-Books’, in A. J. Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden (eds.), *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c. 1100-c. 1500* (Turnhout, Brepols, 2010), 105–31. More closely: Gertrud Jaron Lewis, *By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany* (Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996); Rebecca L. R. Garber,

tropes of humility similar to those I have outlined above.⁵² Scholars once limited these to being exemplars of an ecstatic ‘female’ spirituality, using visionary power to dissent from the constraints of male clerical power; the feminine here is visual, vernacular, and ecstatic, to be contrasted with the male textual, latinate, and rational.⁵³ Recent studies have found this dichotomy too strong. In a closer examination of the Sister-Books, for instance, Claire Jones has shown that cloistered nuns were more responsible for bookish copying, often were responsible for the ordered lives of Latin liturgy, and earned deeper (if limited) respect for their writings from their male counterparts.⁵⁴

The overriding concern in all of this late medieval surge of devotional material is a distinctively Christian approach to the *idiotia*, as the word history of the previous section suggests. The goal is not to make nationalist revolutionaries, as nineteenth century historians would have argued. Herbert Grundmann, looking at medieval dissenting movements, argued that the evidence did not support a materialist account of revolutionary change: ‘titles of *rusticani*, *rustici*, *idiotae*, and *illiterati* tell us nothing at all about the social position of the heretics ... a weaver was not made into a heretic, but rather a heretic became a weaver.’⁵⁵ Likewise, these dialogues do not fit best with concerns about gender hierarchies, but rather concerns about Christian virtues, the standing of a human soul in God’s presence. Therefore *idiotia* dialogues constantly use the humble to critique worldly power, pride, and self-regard. The leading spiritual writers of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life wrote their own versions, often borrowing similar language, sometimes translating them into Latin. One bestseller of the period, Gerhard Zerbolt of Zutphen’s *De reformatione virium*, borrows artisanal metaphors to assemble various exercises—much like the *übungen* of the Jungfrau of twenty-two years—that are intended to transform one’s inner senses.⁵⁶ A layman in the Groenendaal community, Jan van Leeuwen, became known as the ‘good cook’, whose writings were widely read by monks and lay devout alike.⁵⁷ Cusanus’ *idiotia* emerged in a world where exemplary knowledge belonged to the humble—rich or poor, cleric or lay, male or female.

Cusanus’ Authority

Cusanus wrapped his *idiotia* in learned layers. In the *idiotia*, Christian folly converges with Socratic idiocy, much as would happen in Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*.⁵⁸ One could easily find other versions of these themes in twelfth-century Platonists, whom Cusanus read as closely as

Feminine Figurae: Representations of Gender in Religious Texts by Medieval German Women Writers 1100-1375 (New York, Routledge, 2003).

⁵² For an overview of *mulieres religiosae*, see relevant chapters of Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism: 1200-1350* (New York, Crossroad, 1998) and his *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350-1550)* (New York, Crossroad, 2012).

⁵³ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993); Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*; Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York, Zone, 1998).

⁵⁴ Claire Taylor Jones, *Ruling the Spirit: Women, Liturgy, and Dominican Reform in Late Medieval Germany* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). On literacy among women religious more generally, Rabia Gregory, ‘Authority and Authorship in Late Medieval Women’s Religious Communities: Authority and Authorship in Late Medieval Women’s Religious Communities’, *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 40 (2014), 75–100; Virginia Blanton, Veronica O’Mara, and Patricia Stoop (eds.), *Nuns’ Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Kansas City Dialogue* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015); Virginia Blanton (ed.), *Nuns’ Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Hull Dialogue* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

⁵⁵ Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, trans. Steven Rowan (1935; Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1995), pp. 14–15.

⁵⁶ Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, pp. 77–79.

⁵⁷ McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 71–76.

⁵⁸ M. A. Screech, *Ecstasy and The Praise of Folly* (1980; London, Penguin, 1988).

he read any ancient.⁵⁹ The convergence of the Socratic gadfly and Pauline folly was a learned tradition among Cusanus' favourite authors. Paul described a man 'caught [*raptus*] up to the third heaven' (2 Cor. 12.2). This image of union with Christ was often superimposed upon Plato's idea of 'divine' madness or melancholic ecstasy, as refracted through Dionysius the Areopagite's widely read treatises.⁶⁰ Alan of Lille, Thierry of Chartres, William of Conches, and similar twelfth-century voices all engaged the idea of ecstatic insight through a kind of cognitive rapture or *amentis*. Ramon Llull, another of his distinctive influences, similarly recounted his own spiritual ecstasies. The topos itself was not a denial of hierarchy, but rather encapsulated the idea that spiritual exercises could let one rise through intellectual *translatio* into higher forms of knowledge.

If it remains difficult to imagine Cusanus within the same discourse as late medieval *mulieres religiosae*, then consider his reception. Cusanus himself became an example of such hierarchical movement in the generations after his death. The circle of the French humanist Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples gathered together his works into the Paris *opera omnia* of 1514, introducing him as particularly skilled in mathematics.⁶¹ Throughout their works, though, Lefèvre and his students mentioned Cusanus as the most significant Christian philosopher since Dionysius the Areopagite himself—whom they saw as Paul's student.⁶² Although Lefèvre acknowledged Cusanus's deep learning, he did not see this as chiefly the product of an education. Rather, he presented Cusanus as a self-taught wonder to be compared to the ancients like Hermes Trismegistus, Euclid, and Aristotle, and only a few moderns such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: 'perhaps they are more truly called (if the word is clear) "disciplined" rather than "taught", these men of good nature and genius who some call *αὐτοδιδάκτους* ("self taught" as we say)'.⁶³ For all his learning, therefore, Cusanus seemed a faithful representative of ancient Christian, apostolic knowledge—and this legitimated his philosophy, rather than undermining it.

This sixteenth-century reading of a philosophically ambitious Cusanus should not be separated too sharply from the devotional context I have outlined above. Although he had been reading Cusanus since at least 1498, Lefèvre had increasingly focused on monastic reform, at the time he was assembling the *Opera omnia* of 1514.⁶⁴ At Paris, he had trained a generation of young scholars from along the Rhineland and he had developed an epistolary network with

⁵⁹ Cusanus' repeated and central re-readings of Thierry of Chartres in particular have been thoroughly explained by Albertson, *Mathematical Theologies*.

⁶⁰ E.g. *On the Divine Names* 712A. For a general exploration of the union with Christ theme in Dionysius, see Charles M. Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: 'No Longer I'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶¹ Richard J. Oosterhoff, 'Cusanus and Boethian Theology in the Early French Reform', in Burton, Hollmann, Parker (eds.), *Nicholas of Cusa and the Making of the Early Modern World*, pp. 339–366.

⁶² Oosterhoff, 'Cusanus and Boethian Theology'. On this genealogy, see Kent Emery, 'Mysticism and the Coincidence of Opposites in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France', *Journal for the History of Ideas*, 45 (1984), 3–23. More generally, see Yelena [Mazour-]Matusevich, 'Jean Gerson, Nicholas of Cusa and Lefèvre d'Étaples: The Continuity of Ideas', in *Nicholas of Cusa and His Age: Intellect and Spirituality: Essays Dedicated to the Memory of F. Edward Cranz*, ed. Thomas P. McTiche and Charles Trinkaus (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 237–263.

⁶³ Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, *Libri logicorum ad archteypos recogniti cum novis ad litteram commentariis ad felices primum Parhisorum et communiter aliorum studiorum successus in lucem prodeant ferantque litteris opem* (Paris, Wolfgang Hopyl & Henri (I) Estienne, 1503), 178v. 'Mercurium enim, Euclidem, Aristotelem, et ut ad tempora nostra descendam Cusam, Mirandulam et similes plura reperisse par est, quam que a preceptoribus et in libris monstrata perceperint, et tales verius forsitan (si verbum pateretur) disciplinati, quam docti dicerentur, quos et melioris nature et genii viros *αὐτοδιδάκτους* (quod dicimus per se doctos) nonnulli appellavere.'

⁶⁴ Jean-Marie Le Gall, 'Les moines au temps de Lefèvre d'Étaples et Guillaume Briçonnet à Saint-Germain-des-Près', in Jean-François Pernot (ed.), *Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (1450?-1536)*, Actes du colloque d'Étaples les 7 et 8 novembre 1992 (Paris, Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1995), pp. 125–40.

abbots and monks in the region. This network hunted through the libraries of monasteries from Groenendaal to Basel—yes, looking for manuscripts of Church Fathers and ancient philosophical treatises, but also searching for important classics of devotional literature to print. Lefèvre’s acknowledgements to this network for sending along transcriptions, manuscripts, and news take up a full folio page in the 1514 *Opera omnia*. The network helped Lefèvre with devotional literature too. In the years leading up to this edition, Lefèvre published several key works of medieval mysticism, by Ramon Llull, by twelfth-century Victorines, by members of the *Devotio moderna* such as Jean Mombaer and Jan Ruusbroec, and several others.⁶⁵ Elsewhere I have begun to trace through these works a fascination with untutored knowledge.⁶⁶ Here let me pick out two examples. One is the first printed editions of medieval female mystics: Hildegard of Bingen, Elizabeth of Schonau, and Mechtilde of Magdeburg (1513).⁶⁷ Another is a series of works known as the *Contemplationes idiotae* (1519). Lefèvre found the author’s anonymity appropriate to a self-effacing simplicity, observing that ‘stilus humilis est, sed purus, syncerusque, et plane Christianismum sapiens’ (the style is humble, but pure and sincere; he is plainly a wise Christian).⁶⁸

Indeed, on this reading, the *idiotae* did not need to be a man. Lefèvre’s edition of the three female mystics was balanced alongside three male mystics. He prefaced the collection with a letter to Adelheid von Ottenstein, the abbess of the Benedictine convent of Rupertsberg (the one founded by Hildegard of Bingen). He reflected on the state of virginity as a reflection of the purity belonging to the whole Church of Christ. He then concluded with a brief defence against those who dismissed women’s teaching, ‘who would take from women their trustworthiness in having revelations’.⁶⁹ One possible target here was Jean Gerson, who may have already begun to acquire a reputation for criticism of visionary women as teachers.⁷⁰ Lefèvre’s defence was that their example was ‘neither impossible nor new’; Jerome himself had presented women as teaching examples of Christian life. The modern scholarly account of Jerome’s use of women being ultimately self-serving—it was *his* vision of Christian life revealed in these women—is quite beside the point.⁷¹ Lefèvre’s view of Jerome included the spurious *Regula monacharum*, from which Lefèvre quoted Jerome’s description of himself in precisely the same terms of humility: ‘Scio (inquit) quid loquor carissimae, nam ut meam insipientiam loquar, ego homunculus sic abiectus, sic vilis, in domo domini adhuc vivens in corpore, angelorum choris saepe interfui, de corporeis per hebdomadas nichil sentiens divinae visionis intuitu’ (I know, said Jerome, of what I speak, dear ones. For I speak as of my own

⁶⁵ Eugene F. Rice, ‘Jacques Lefevre d’Étaples and the Medieval Christian Mystics’, in J. G. Rowe and W. H. Stockdale (eds.), *Florilegium Historiale: Essays Presented to Wallace K. Ferguson* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 90–124; see also entries in Eugene F. Rice (ed.), *The Prefatory Epistles of Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples and Related Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

⁶⁶ Richard J. Oosterhoff, ‘*Idiotae*, Mathematics, and Artisans: The Untutored Mind and the Discovery of Nature in the Fabrist Circle’, *Intellectual History Review*, 24 (2014), 1–19. See also Guy Bedouelle, *Lefèvre d’Étaples et l’intelligence des Écritures* (Geneva, Droz, 1976), pp. 76–77.

⁶⁷ Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, ed., *Liber trium virorum et trium spiritualium virginum. Hermae Liber unus. Uguetini Liber unus. F. Roberti Libri duo. Hildegardis Scivias libri tres. Elizabeth virginis libri sex. Mechtildis virgi. libri quinque* (Paris: Henri (I) Estienne, 1513). The author was found to be Raymund Jordanus in the seventeenth century.

⁶⁸ Lefèvre, ed., *Contemplationes Idiotae*, fol. 2r.

⁶⁹ Lefèvre, ed., *Liber trium virorum et trium spiritualium virginum*, sig. ai recto.

⁷⁰ This viewpoint stems from editors of his works; recent revision finds Gerson balanced in his critique of corrupt priests and female visionaries: Wendy Love Anderson, ‘Gerson’s Stance on Women’, in Brian Patrick McGuire (ed.), *A Companion to Jean Gerson*, pp. 293–315.

⁷¹ Jerome’s attitude to women has been very closely scrutinised, not least because his translation of Genesis 3 stressed male mastery over females. On his use of female exempla, e.g. Andrew Cain, ‘Rethinking Jerome’s Portraits of Holy Women’, in *Jerome of Stridon: His Life, Writings and Legacy*, ed. Andrew Cain and Josef Lössl (Farnham, Ashgate, 2009), pp. 47–57.

stupidity, I being a little man so abject, so mean, living then in the Lord's house often bodily present in the choir of angels, yet for weeks sensing from those bodies no intuition of divine vision).⁷² For Lefèvre, Jerome's own example legitimized the example of female eremites. Jerome, like Cusanus, exemplified apostolic simplicity as the proper root of understanding.

Conclusion

Here Cusanus has served not as a cause but a symptom of fifteenth-century efforts to hold the order of books, learning, and power to account. George Duby pointed out that medieval social commentators divided their world into three orders (those who work, fight, and pray) for their own purposes. The division was never absolute, of course. Yet it remains central to our account of Renaissance and early modern Europe that these social divisions became ever more complex from the fourteenth century on.⁷³ In the usual story, the protagonists are the Renaissance merchants from which Cusanus came. The burgeoning networks of trade and banking from the Hansa to the Medici, combined with the rising value of artisans and farmers after the Black Death, attracted a rising class of bureaucratic intellectuals, as the Medicis and other new families hired pens to justify their money and power.

I find this context is hard to explain purely as a matter of socio-economic hierarchy. One example of such an argument comes from R.I. Moore, whose 'persecuting society' of medieval Europe depended on procedures of inquest, canonization, and thickening legalese. These were the product of a social dichotomy, as 'triumphs of the expert, of the clerks over the illiterate.'⁷⁴ Thus 'the hostility of the *clericus* towards the *illiteratus, idiota, rusticus* ... the clerks constructed from the scattered fragments of reality they found to hand'.⁷⁵ But this dichotomy does little justice to the evidence I have considered in this chapter. Grundmann, finetuned more recently by Walter Simons, found that the beguines and other lay groups of the Rhineland did not represent a proto-revolutionary poor, reacting to the rich, but their wealth and class corresponded rather well to the divisions of society as a whole.⁷⁶ Likewise, Cusanus *shared* a viewpoint with the nameless women and unlearned men who dedicated themselves to lives of devotion. Rather than seeing the *idiota* as a theological veneer over ambitious ecclesiastical predation, we should see how the text responds to a groundswell of lay concern. I would argue that the theological equality of all before God becomes the mechanism that 'the hotter sort' used to make more social and cultural space for themselves. But this did not fall along simplistic class dualisms. Such theological—and literary—accounts of hierarchy critiqued socio-economic difference without being reducible to such difference.

⁷² Lefèvre, ed., *Liber trium virorum et trium spiritualium virginum*, sig. ai recto. Quoted from [Pseudo-] Jerome, *Regula monachorum*, cap. 26, in Migne, *Patrologia latina*, vol. 30, col. 414b.

⁷³ E.g. Hamish Scott, 'Introduction: Early Modern Europe and the Idea of Early Modernity', in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern History, 1350-1750. Vol. I: Peoples and Places*, ed. Hamish Scott (Oxford, 2015), pp. 1-34, at 3.

⁷⁴ R.I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 130.

⁷⁵ Moore, *Persecuting Society*, 131.

⁷⁶ In fact, Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, hypothesised that these 'radical' groups were disproportionately wealthy; Walter Simons showed that they actually mirrored wider socio-economic demographics quite closely, in his *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (University Park PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).