

Sensitive but Sane

Male Visionaries and their Emotional Display in Interwar Belgium¹

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When a wave of Marian apparitions swept over Belgium in 1932-1935 many 'visionaries' (c. 200), among them a remarkably high number of men, claimed to encounter the divine. Focusing on these male visionaries and their emotional expressivity, this article aims not only at contributing to a better understanding of Catholic constructions of masculinity, it also accords with the increased attention for the historicity of emotions and, more specifically, for men's emotional comportment. The male visionaries present a particularly interesting case since they had to live up to multiple expectations about their emotions. Whereas their visibility and trustworthiness as visionaries were founded on their capacity to display their emotions (in accordance with a tradition of emotional mysticism), these men also had to show 'masculine' rationality and coolness in order to prove that their experiences were not triggered by exaggerated piety or neurosis.

In 1937, a collaborator of the Catholic journal *De Godsdienstige week van het bisdom Gent* denounced the male characters of the film *The Sign of the Cross* as 'anything but masculine'. Commenting mockingly on their sighing and moaning, the author called for less 'pale sweetness' while he complained about the 'weltschmerzliche', 'weakened type' of men idealised in this film and in contemporaneous Catholic novels.² As such, his comments are in agreement with Ute Frevert's statement that a man who does not follow the emotional rules, 'immediately raises doubts about his whole masculinity'.³ What were these emotional rules and how rigid were they? This article addresses Belgian male visionaries who during a wave of Marian apparitions – circa 1932-1935, only a few years before the above mentioned article – displayed their emotions in a way that was similar to the tearful and ecstatic comportment of the actors. Nonetheless, their behaviour seems to have tallied with the expectations of their contemporaries for they were not depicted as out of character at the apparitional sites.

In focusing on the emotional expressivity of these men, the following paragraphs not only aim at contributing to a better understanding of Catholic constructions of masculinity, they also accord with the increased attention for the historicity of emotions and, more specifically, for men's emotional comportment. Whereas research on the (eighteenth-century) 'man of feeling' had already indicated that 'the relationship between [...] male rationalism and female emotionalism' had 'at times been more intimate and less antithetical than is generally believed'⁴, it took some time before men's emotions landed on the research agenda of historians. Nonetheless, the attention is slowly increasing and proves to be a rich field of research. Focusing on the nineteenth and twentieth century, Manuel Borutta and Nina Verheyen have pointed out that it is not only important to analyse the diachronic level, one also has to define in which 'social groups and areas of practice' men were expected to show and cultivate 'both sensibility and emotional control at the same time'.⁵ The visionary Belgians fit this profile since they seem to have been involved in a difficult balancing exercise. For all the emotional expressiveness demanded in 'modern' – that is public and serial – apparitions, they were also expected to display their ('masculine') rationality. Their non-ecstatic behaviour therefore ideally fitted the differentiation between the rational man and emotional woman that was also proliferated and supported in Catholic publications of the time. Nonetheless, even though this gender polarisation might appear all-encompassing, idealising accounts on emotionally expressive men continued to be published in the 1930s whilst (metaphorical) images also blurred the

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- 2 'Alles behalve mannelijke', 'fletse zoeterigheid', 'weltschmerzlich', 'verweekelijkt type', G.D.K., 'Mannelijke vroomheid', *Godsdienstige week van het bisdom Gent* (November 1937) 199-200 and 202-203.
- 3 'Ein Mann, der die Gefühlsregeln verletzt, weckt sofort Zweifel an seiner ganzen Männlichkeit', Ute Frevert, 'Gefühlvolle Männlichkeiten. Eine

historische Skizze', in: Manuel Borutta and Nina Verheyen (eds.), *Die Präsenz der Gefühle. Männlichkeit und Emotion in der Moderne* (Bielefeld 2010) 305-330, 313.

- 4 Dorothee Sturkenboom, 'Historicizing the Gender of Emotions: Changing Perceptions in Dutch Enlightenment Thought', *Journal of Social History* 34:1 (2000) 55-75, 70. See also G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility* (Chicago 1992) 72-77.
- 5 'In welchen sozialen Gruppen und Praxisfeldern von Männern gleichzeitig Sensibilität und Gefühlskontrolle verlangt und kultiviert wurde', Manuel Borutta and Nina Verheyen, 'Vulkaner und Choleriker? Männlichkeit und Emotion in der deutschen Geschichte 1800-2000', in: idem, *Die Präsenz der Gefühle*, 11-39, 22.

gender boundaries (e.g. military men depicted ‘as mothers’).⁶ The simultaneity of different emotional norms is also perceptible in the accounts of the Marian apparitions.

During the male visionaries’ moments of ecstasy the point of reference was a tradition of emotional mysticism. This enabled lay men to claim a certain authority – as mediators with the heavenly world – and gave them power to speak. Therefore the article also contributes to the understanding of gender in ‘the occasion, quality, and expression of religious emotion’ on which much work remains to be done.⁷ Focusing on the visionary Belgian men, their reception and testimonies, this article intends to trace the ways and means by which these men expressed their religious feelings, the acceptability of men’s emotional expressivity in the 1930s and the requirements they had to fulfil in order to be considered good Catholic ‘men’. The research is based on both published and unpublished documents. The latter stem from two different types of sources: some of the documents were created for and collected by the ecclesiastical committees, whilst other documents were intended for a lay public and circulated among the visionaries and their supporters.

The Belgian series and the male visionaries

In 1932-1935 a wave of Marian apparitions swept over Belgium. As these were years of political unrest and economic depression (since 1929), the setting of the series of Belgian visions resembles other accounts of Mary’s visitations.⁸ The various attestations and their resonance document an increasing willingness to believe in divine interventions and especially in the consolation brought by Mary when she appeared as a soothing, protecting mother or as a more militant figure.⁹ Still, this series of encounters with the divine was exceptional, not only because of the high number of locations (c. 30) and the variety of the attestations, but also because of the number of new ‘visionaries’

6 On the limits to the gender-polarisation and on emotionally expressive Christian men in the nineteenth and twentieth century, see Tine Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex: Catholic Constructions of Femininity and Masculinity in Belgium, c. 1800-1940* (Leuven 2009) 259-260.

7 Melissa Raphael, ‘Gender’, in: John Corrigan (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion* (Oxford 2008) 181-199, 181.

8 See e.g. the references to the rise of fascism and Nazism in the sources of the Belgian series. Typicality of the context: David Bromley and

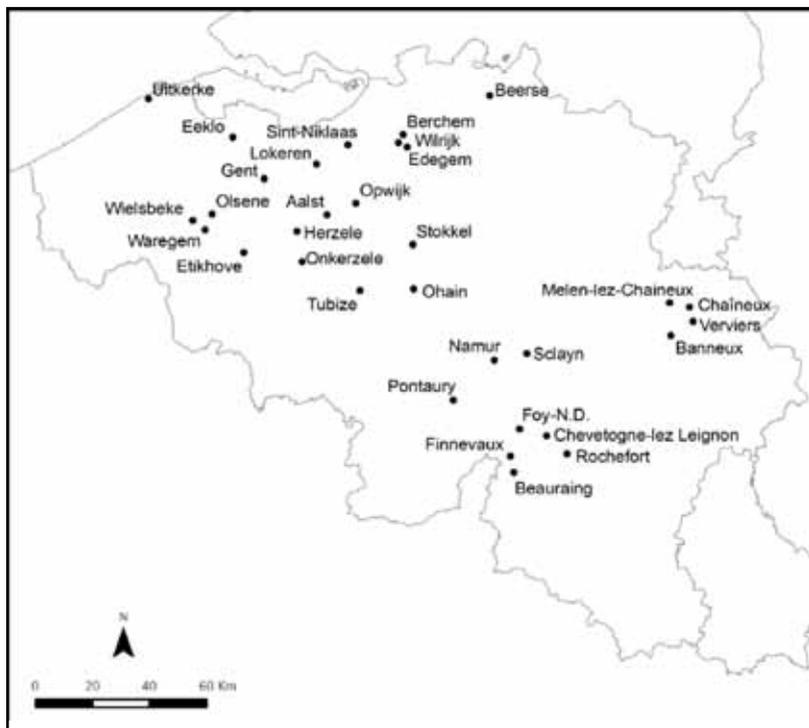
Rachel Bobbit, ‘The Organizational Development of Marian Apparitional Movements’, *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 14:3 (2011) 5-41, 8-11.

9 William Christian, ‘Afterword: Islands in the Sea: The Public and Private Distribution of Knowledge and Religious Visions’, *Visual Resources* 25 (2009) 153-165. On Mary’s image: Monique Scheer, *Rosenkranz und Kriegsvisionen. Marienerscheinungskulte im 20. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen 2006) 22.



Omer Eneman (right) and Maurice Van Rokegem (left) during their encounter with Mary, 28 October 1933. Archives of the diocese of Ghent (ADG), Onkerzele.

(c. 200), among them a remarkably high number of men.¹⁰ None of these male visionaries had a Marian encounter in the initial phase of the series, that is, when the first apparitions in Beauraing (at end of 1932–start of 1933) and Banneux (early 1933) were attested. Their experiences were part of the more turbulent and nation-wide sequel that eventually surpassed the – rather sober and Lourdes-conform – initial events in extent and diversity.¹¹



▲
Map with the sites of Marian apparitions, 1932-1935
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10 Archives of the archdiocese of Mechelen (AAM), Van Roey, Apparitions in Onkerzele and Etikhove (Apparitions), 10. List by Louis Wilmet (27 May 1935) and the list by H. Didion (25 June 1935). *Processus circa assertas apparitiones et revelationes BMV in Belgio* (Processus), BXII.6a, additions to the list of Didion (6 December 1935). The lists of H. Didion and L. Wilmet are the most complete; they catalogued 53 men/55 women, 12 boys/22 girls. These lists also include more general descriptions such as ‘de 200 à

300 personnes’ and newspaper articles hint at even more visionaries. In comparison: among the ‘habitual seers’ in Ezkioga were 21 women and eight men, according to William Christian (referred to in Marlène Albert Llorca, ‘Les femmes dans les apparitions mariales de l’époque contemporaine’, *Clio: Histoire, Femmes et Sociétés* 15 (2002) 123-134, 129).

11 For a similar sober start and more diverse sequel: see e.g. Scheer’s discussion on the Heroldsbach apparitions, *Rosenkranz*, 207-245.

These men do not fit the description of the prototypical nineteenth-century visionaries as these were predominantly women and children with a rural background.¹² The seers' important role therefore complicates the assumption that the visionaries of the modern apparitions were women – or rather girl – visionaries and the 'feminisation' of religion was also perceptible in these visionary experiences.¹³ Moreover, the Belgian male visionaries did not figure solely as confirmation of the Divine presence at apparitional sites that had already produced child and women visionaries. On the contrary, quite a few among these men claimed to see Mary at locations that could not yet boast of Mary's visitations. In this regard, the Belgian visionaries differed from their Spanish colleagues at the Ezkioga site (1931) where men did not function as 'initiators of a vision sequence'.¹⁴ Nevertheless, like their Spanish counterparts, the Belgian seers were lay men, most of them from a working-class background: of the 53 male visionaries included in the lists created by Louis Wilmet, a Catholic journalist and writer, and by H. Didion, the pastor of Bonneville, in 32 cases the profession is mentioned. In spite of notable exceptions such as 'ex-seminarian' (Gabriel Quatannens) or 'beggar' (Henri Maquet), by far the most of them belonged to the working-classes, making their living by manual labour, and introduced as such in the official documents and in the newspapers.¹⁵ Their background thus resembles that of their 'colleagues' in Spain who were, amongst others, farmers, foundry workers and chauffeurs. However, they did differ in one respect, for as William Christian has noted, during the Ezkioga-episode male factory workers were 'less likely to reveal visions'.¹⁶ In the Belgian cases, as we shall see, this factory background was built in as an *argumentum pro* in the supporting narratives.

These 'privileged' men were not perceived as an oddity by the Belgian public, neither in Wallonia (that had a more virulent anticlerical tradition), nor in more rural Flanders. As most of these seers came from the lower classes of society, their profile agreed with the recurring observation, eloquently voiced

12 David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Bismarckian Germany* (Oxford 1993) 21-24.

13 Examined primarily for the nineteenth-century attestations: Blackbourn, *Marpingen*, 21-24; Caroline Ford, 'Religion and Popular Culture in Modern Europe', *Journal of Modern History* 65 (1993) 152-173, 167. On the 'feminisation' of religion, see Tine Van Osselaer and Thomas Buerman, 'Feminization Thesis: A Survey of International Historiography and a Probing of Belgian Grounds', *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 103 (2008) 497-544.

14 William Christian, *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley 1996) 250.

15 The professional occupations were: almoner (2), beggar, bricklayer, canon, communal collector, doctor (2), editor in chief, engineer, ex-seminarian, factory chauffeur, farmer (2), housepainter, innkeeper (2), leather dyer, lumber merchant, official, shoemaker, waffle maker, weaver (2), worker (8).

16 William Christian, *Visionaries*, 254.

by De Certeau for example, that ‘the mystical favoured the illumination of the illiterate, the experience of women, the wisdom of fools, the silence of the child’.¹⁷ Whether (factory) workers or farmers, their background could be turned into an argument in favour of their credibility. Accordingly, Constant Van der Meer, an architect from Brussels, noted in a letter to the archbishop that (the ambulant visionary) Jules De Vuyst was a

[...] simple farmer, with an uncultivated intelligence, with only rudimentary instructions and education, who speaks only a vulgar Flemish dialect; and therefore he is on the level of most of the visionaries, always chosen among the most humble and insignificant, for they are not capable of deriving from themselves or prior studies, the messages that they bring.¹⁸

Although these male visionaries lacked the education and official sanction or title, they did claim a certain authority on their own account as mediators who communicated directly with the heavenly world. Furthermore, some of them such as Tilman Côme (Beauraing) and Henri Kempnaers (Onkerzele) were *miraculés* and could refer to their own miraculously healed body as evidence of the divine favours they received.¹⁹ These lay authority claims surpassed the borders of one apparitional site (or even country) as the visionaries (and/or stigmatics) from one site at times confirmed the events at other locations.²⁰ The accounts of Marian apparitions therefore not only document the networks of (changing) relationships between people and supernatural figures. As these networks were not independent of social conflicts, power relations and the attendant discrepancies in (religious) agency, they also offer an insight into claims of authority, the instrumentation of religion and the role of emotions therein.

17 De Certeau, cited in David Blackburn, ‘The Madonna of Marpingen: A Likely Story’, *Common Knowledge* 7:2 (1998) 112-126, 121.

18 ‘C’est un simple paysan, d’intelligence inculte, d’instruction et d’éducation rudimentaires, ne parlant qu’un fruste patois flamand; il est ainsi au niveau de la plupart des visionnaires, choisis presque toujours parmi les plus humbles et les plus insignifiants, parce qu’ils sont incapables de tirer d’eux-mêmes ou d’études antérieures les messages qu’ils apportent’, AAM, unapproved apparitions and revelations, letter of Constant Van der Meer (8 January 1944).

19 Even though miraculous cures have been depicted as a predominantly female privilege, they could follow in the footsteps of nineteenth-century Belgian *miraculés* such as Pieter De Rudder. Ruth Harris, ‘Les miraculées de Lourdes’, in: J. Carroy et al. (eds.), *Les femmes dans les sciences de l’homme (XIXe-XXe siècles)* (Paris 2005) 287-300.

20 E.g. Theresia Neumann confirmed the authenticity of the events in Onkerzele. AAM, Processus, BXII.2, letter of Pastor Van der Maeren to Mgr. Coppieters (23 March 1935; similarly: 29 March 1935).

Two elements are of importance here. First of all, it has been suggested for the (female) visionaries and stigmatics of the nineteenth and twentieth century that in order to be heard, they still needed the support of (socially) powerful promoters.²¹ That also seems to have been the case in the Belgian series. Prominent lay Catholics – as e.g. Jan Boon, the editor in chief of the Catholic newspaper *De Standaard* – engaged in the promotion of the Belgian visionaries.²² As for clerical support, in the autumn of 1933 the Belgian ecclesiastical hierarchy forbade the clergy to organise pilgrimages to any of the apparitional sites or to publicly express their confirmation of the supernatural character of the events.²³ Consequently there was no public pairing up of the clergy and the male visionaries. Behind the scenes however they actively engaged in promotional campaigns by writing letters to their bishops. However, since the clergy could not take a stand publicly, their (written) support most often stayed below the radar of the common laymen.²⁴ It is difficult to trace the incentives of these promoters. Most often the only thing that can be concluded from the various documents is that they believed in the truth of the events, wanted to spread Mary's message that had been communicated on these occasions and in order to do so lauded the qualities of the male seers. In this respect the Belgian case does not seem to resemble the Ezkioga visions where there were special efforts (explicitly mentioned) by the various authorities to obtain the statements of male visionaries because these were considered more trustworthy.²⁵ The Belgian documents do not hint at a similar gender imbalance in credibility that might account for the promoters' support of the causes of these male visionaries.

Secondly, the prominence these visionary men were able to obtain might also be studied from the perspective of the Church's increased attention for lay religiosity in the early-twentieth century. In their examination of the high number of girl visionaries in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth century, scholars such as Marlène Albert Llorca have emphasised that from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century the criteria adopted in the evaluation of an attestation of an apparition shifted. As women's purity (and religiosity) was increasingly exalted, this valorisation resulted in an augmented willingness

21 Marlène Albert-Llorca, 'Les apparitions et leur histoire', *Archives des sciences sociales des religions* 116 (2001) 53-66, 62; Anna Maria Zumholz, *Volksfrömmigkeit und Katholisches Milieu. Marienerscheinungen in Heede 1937-1940* (Vechta 2004) 491.

22 Tine Van Osselaer, 'Mystics of a Modern Time: Public Mystical Experiences in Belgium in the 1930s', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 88:4 (2010) 1171-1188.

23 'Bisschoppelijke onderrichting omtrent de zaak der verschijningen in ons land', *De godsdienstige week van het bisdom Gent* 48 (December 1933) 193; AAM, Van Roey, 1.37 bis, documents handwritten by Van Roey.

24 Contrary to the initial – Beauraing/Banneux – phase. E.g. Mgr. Schyrgens, 'De tegensprekers van Beauraing', in: *De verschijningen van Beauraing en Banneux* (Leuven 1933) unpaginated.

25 Christian, *Visionaries*, 243-244.

to believe the attestations made by representatives of that purity, girl visionaries. Their number was higher from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards because people were more willing to believe them and they themselves more willing to attest.²⁶ Can we adopt the same line of reasoning for the male visionaries in Belgium in the 1930s? To a certain extent the answer is affirmative: lay religiosity did experience an upgrading through movements that emphasised the apostleship of the common lay man and consequently made lay religious attestations more acceptable. This however, does not explain why this influence would have been limited to Belgium. Moreover, it has to be emphasised that the apostolic – often martial – spirituality promoted in these movements struck a different tone than the ecstatic emotionality of the visionary men. Nonetheless, the social class of the visionaries offered the opportunity to position them in the Catholic ideology of the time. These working-class men fit the ideal type of the ‘pious worker’ who enlisted in the lay apostolate of the Catholic Church and was willing to re-Christianise the world (see e.g. the idealisation of the ascetic worker Matt Talbot²⁷). Father Blondeel, for instance, emphasised how Maurice Van den Broecke’s behaviour was in accord with Pope Pius XI’s call (for lay mobilisation) as this visionary from Olsene aimed at stimulating the piety of his fellow-workers by his own words and actions (e.g. in the factory, he worked with a statue of Mary in front of him).²⁸ This link with the CA-ideology of spiritual renewal was also mentioned by lay promoters of the apparitions. More particularly, it was also referred to in (mass-distributed) booklets published prior to the bishops’ announcement (autumn 1933) that all texts had to obtain the ‘imprimatur’. Doctor Maistriaux, for instance, noted in his reports on the (first) Beauraing apparitions that it should not come as a surprise that Mary had chosen Belgium as starting point for religious renewal: the country had always been at the forefront of the *Catholic Action* movement.²⁹ Likewise, a promoter of Tilmán Côme described him as ‘a worker apostle’, a credible visionary for a Church that had attempted to introduce the feast of Jesus as a worker.³⁰ As has been concluded for the Ezkioga events, for many of the lay people who came

26 Albert Llorca, ‘Les femmes’, 132.

27 On Matt Talbot, an Irish ascetic from the working classes and a former alcoholic, see: Salvator, *Een Heilige met klak en klompen. Leven van Matt Talbot in 10 schuifkens* (Hasselt 1933).

28 Archives of the diocese of Ghent (ADG), Coppieters, 9.5. Apparitions, H. Blondeel, biographical sketch of Maurits Van den Broecke, dated 18 February 1943. See also AAM, Processus, BXII.2, letter of the uncle of Gerard Cardoen,

19 February 1935, calling him ‘a true Catholic of action’ ‘ware en hechte (sic) Katholiek van de daad’.

29 Maistriaux, *De laatste verschijningen van Beauraing* (Leuven 1933) 50. It is significant that the booklet was published by Rex, the publishing house of the CA.

30 Archives of the sanctuary of Beauraing, archives Comité Pro Maria 1932-1933, letter from Hamont, 14 July 1933.

to attend their visions the working class background of the visionaries made them recognisable as ‘one of them’.³¹

The importance of (men’s) purity in the laudatory descriptions of the male visionaries however, did not figure prominently in the narratives. It was a point of interest only in the case of the (bachelor) Maurice Van den Broeck whose eyes and language were described as ‘mirroring the immaculate purity’ of the Virgin.³² In the idealisations of other bachelor visionaries as Gerard Cardoen, Jules De Vuyst and ex-seminarian Gabriel Quatannens it was not mentioned and thus apparently not of central importance for their credibility. One might add that even though Quatannens was an ex-seminarian and – to the annoyance of the ecclesiastical hierarchy – persisted in wearing his cassock (and thus posed as a clergyman) there were no celibate clerical men among the visionaries. The Catholic prototype of male purity therefore was not represented.³³

Furthermore, the prejudices associated with the working-classes also inspired the storyline of the ‘converted’ worker. The narrative of the conversion of the impious worker – attested at other European apparitional sites too – figured as a kind of extra confirmation of the authenticity of the events. The story of the socialist, anarchist or communist worker who was unwilling to believe in divine intervention, but was brought to more pious ways after a visionary experience, was a common trope.³⁴ The Belgian socialist newspaper *Le Peuple* alluded to this typology of the converted visionary when one of its journalists disclaimed the allegedly anarchist or socialist background of Tilman Côme. The accounts in the Catholic newspaper *De Standaard* whistled another tune: while they emphasised Côme’s observance of Catholic duties before his visionary experience, Tilman’s sons were depicted explicitly as ‘irreligious’ and a little uncomfortable with their father’s attestations.³⁵ The basic idea remained the same: by situating the visionary in an environment that was more a less hostile to claims of divine intervention, his attestation gained certain credibility. Nevertheless, this was not an exclusively male narrative and in the story of Leonie Van Dijck, a visionary from Onkerzele, this unwilling role was played by her (allegedly) socialist daughter.³⁶

31 Christian, *Visionaries*, 253.

32 ADG, *Coppieters*, 9.5. Biographical sketch of Maurice Van den Broecke, 18 February 1943.

33 All men were expected to observe the Church’s directives on virginity before marriage. Purity was a combination of chastity and piety. Mary Vincent, ‘The Martyrs and the Saints: Masculinity and the Construction of the Francoist Crusade’, *History Workshop Journal* 47 (1999) 68-98, 86.

34 E.g. in the discourse on the Ezkioga-visionaries. Christian, *Visionaries*, 244.

35 L. De Hulster, ‘Une Enquête: Le mystère de Beauraing’, *Le Peuple* 26 July 1933, 2; S.n., ‘Kroniek van Beauraing. Het geval Tilman Côme’, *De Standaard* 14 June 1933, 3.

36 S.n., ‘Wat is er gaande te Onkerzele?’, *De Standaard* 4 September 1933, 3.

As for the fact that it was men who attested these encounters with Mary, gender norms and expectations were easily built into the narration of the events. While stories about rural child visionaries often started with them searching for berries or wood, those about the male working-class visionaries could start with ‘on his way to the pub’ (Omer Eeneman, Etikhove)³⁷ or ‘back from the pub’ (Maurice Van den Broecke).³⁸ These assertions would have been pernicious for the credibility of female visionaries, but they did not sound out of place in the stories about male visionaries. The latter also faced other gender-exclusive expectations. Their credibility and status seem to depend on non-religious factors as well and they were judged on their efforts to provide for their family, their behaviour on the work floor³⁹ or by their comportment during the war. Tilman Côme, for instance, was described by some as ‘the instrument of the Germans’⁴⁰ whereas others depicted him as

A good housefather, honest worker, a common but earnest Christian, a man of a sound mind and reasonable in his speech and dealings. He did not traffic with the Germans during the war and he behaved as an honest Belgian citizen.⁴¹

To sum up, the possibility of male visionaries was not under discussion. Even though none of their attestations ever gained the approval of the church, people could and were willing to believe in their testimonies.⁴² As we shall see, the assertions of the authenticity of the events were in part supported by the emotional expressivity of the visionaries during their encounters with Mary. Emotions were considered an indissoluble part of the experience, including

37 ADG, Onkerzele, testimony of Omer Eeneman (9-14 October 1933).

38 AAM, Processus, BVII.a1: letter of the pastor of Olsene (10 December 1933).

39 According to his employer, the colleagues of Maurice Van den Broecke had been among his first supporters at the site and were willing to believe him because of his behaviour and trustworthiness in the factory prior to the event. AAM, Processus, BVII.a1, letter of the pastor of Olsene (10 December 1933); BVII.a3, letter of Magain and report of Vandeweghe (12 December 1933).

40 ‘L’instrument des Allemands’, L. De Hulster, ‘Une Enquête. Le mystère de Beauraing’, *Le Peuple* 26 July 1933, 2.

41 ‘[Tilman Côme was mij bekend als] een goede huisvader, als een goed echtgenoot, als een eerlijk werkman, als een gewoon maar ernstig kristen man, als een man van goed verstand en zeer redelijk in zijn sprake en omgang. Hij heeft niet getrafikeerd met de Duitschers tijdens den oorlog en heeft zich tijdens den oorlog gedragen als een eerlijk Belgisch burger’. Joseph Lemaire, pastor of Rachecourt, cited in Jan Boon, *Getuigenis omtrent Beauraing. Ervaringen van een journalist (tot 29-11-33)*. Vol. 2. *De werkman Tilman Côme te Beauraing* (Unpublished manuscript) 81 (preserved in AAM, Beauraing and Banneux, III).

42 The Marian encounters of the child visionaries of Beauraing and Banneux were the only ones of the series that gained the Church’s approval.

those of visionary men. Accordingly, one of the questions posed to Tilman Côme after he had seen Mary was ‘Were you moved?’⁴³

‘Were you moved?’

He shows ‘signs of ecstasy [...] sighs deeply and sadly, tears fall on his clothes, his eyelids tremble immensely flutter greatly’.⁴⁴ In these words, an eyewitness described the visionary experience of Henri Kempnaers on 16 February 1934 at the Onkerzele site. As the commentator’s presence at the site and his report indicate, the Belgian series were ‘visible’ to all who wanted to attend. The bystanders could read the divine presence from the bodies of the visionaries: kneeling or going into ecstasy indicated that their visionary experience had started.⁴⁵ What is more, they could also catch the visionaries’ emotional state by reading their body language and facial expression. Consequently the accounts on the Marian apparitions also document the emotional communities of which the male visionaries were part.⁴⁶ The approving and disapproving comments registered in these accounts can help to reconstruct the emotional soundboard as they delineate the limits of men’s emotional expressiveness and document the differentiation made between the acceptable behaviour of male and female visionaries.

The impression created by these descriptions is that during their encounters with the Divine – when they were considered ‘besides themselves’ – these men (or at least most of them) went through emotions that were considered ‘exceptional’ and allowed a certain exaggeration, or rather magnification. As the literal repetition of Mary’s words by Tilman Côme and Henri Kempnaers made her messages audible for all, this ‘enlargement’ of

43 ‘Is U ontroerd geweest?’, S.n., ‘Kroniek van Beauraing. Dokumentatie. Een verhoor van Tilman Côme’ *De Standaard* 12 July 1933, 3.

44 ‘[Hij] geeft teekens van verrukking’ ‘zucht diep en treurig, tranen vallen hem op de kleeren, zijn oogschelen beven geweldig’, ADG Onkerzele, report on the events in Onkerzele on 16 February 1934.

45 Monique Scheer comments on similar phenomena in Germany and indicates that Robert Orsi calls them the ‘corporalization of the sacred’ (‘the practice of rendering the invisible visible by constituting it as an experience in a body – in one’s own body or someone else’s body – so that the experiencing body itself becomes the bearer

of presence for oneself and for others’). Monique Scheer, ‘Verspielte Frömmigkeit. Somatische Interaktionen beim Marienerscheinungskult von Heroldsbach-Thurn 1949/50’, *Historische Anthropologie* 17:3 (2009) 386–405, 399.

46 Jan Plamper, ‘The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns’, *History and Theory* 49 (2010) 237–265, 240, 242, 253; Pascal Eitler and Monique Scheer, ‘Emotionsgeschichte als Körpergeschichte. Eine heuristische Perspektive auf religiöse Konversionen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 35 (2009) 282–313, 288.

their feelings is what made them perceptible for the onlookers.⁴⁷ Moreover, not only their behaviour and verbal utterances, but also their features could reflect their emotional state. Maurice Van den Broecke, the visionary from Olsene, for instance, ‘reflected an inexpressible happiness’.⁴⁸ It was as if an ‘angelic smile’ ‘transformed his features’. ‘His smile gave him an indescribable beauty’, so a bystander remarked, ‘and I am absolutely certain that, returned to his normal state, Maurice would be incapable of reproducing such an expression’.⁴⁹ Likewise, Father Blondeel remarked how Maurice’s face had turned so pale and its bones had become more prominent because of the ‘strong emotion’ he had undergone. The surprise and shock of the apparitions had made him almost ‘unrecognisable’.⁵⁰ This idea of the divine presence as something that could be read – through their emotional expressions – from the faces and bodies of the visionaries resulted in attempts to photograph the seers during the apparitions. On 7 July 1933 a journalist of *De Standaard* happily announced that in the case of Tilman Côme ‘They have already succeeded twice in registering photographically his face and comportment during the moments of “Apparition”’.⁵¹ Furthermore, as the references to the ‘angelic smile’ and exceptional beauty suggest, visionaries were allegedly rising above their humanity – and thus masculinity – during these encounters with Mary. ‘Human’ emotional rules thus did not necessarily apply.

The emotions most often referred to seem to have been the same for both male and female visionaries and fluctuated between happiness and sadness.⁵² The latter emotion, often expressed through sobbing, is particularly

47 The pictures of Henri Kempenaers are indicative.

ADG, Onkerzele, photo-album of the visionaries of Onkerzele. For the repetition of Mary’s words, see e.g.: S.n., ‘Chronique religieuse: À Beauraing’, *La Libre Belgique* 17 August 1933, 2.

48 ‘Pendant l’extase la figure du voyant reflète un bonheur inexprimable’, AAM, Processus, BVII. a1, letter of the pastor of Olsene (10 December 1933) including a report made by Jos. Martens-Ide, Maurice’s employer.

49 ‘Un sourire angélique transforme ses traits, [...] resplendissant de bonheur’. ‘Son sourire le rend vraiment d’une beauté indescriptible et j’ai la conviction absolue qu’à l’état normal, Maurice serait incapable de reproduire une telle expression de regard’, AAM, Processus, BVII.a3, letter of Magain and report of Vandeweghe (12 December 1933).

50 ‘Verbleekt en ingetrokken’ ‘hevige aandoening’, ADG, Coppieters, 9.5. Apparitions, H. Blondeel, biographical sketch of Maurice Van den Broecke, dated 18 February 1943.

51 ‘Men is er reeds tweemaal in geslaagd zijn gelaat en houding fotografisch op te nemen in de oogenblikken der “Verschijning”’, S.n., ‘Kroniek van Beauraing. Nog meer opzienbarende genezingen? Een zevende verschijning aan Tilman Côme?’, *De Standaard* 7 July 1933, 3.

52 Jules De Vuyst, for instance, was alternately ‘sad’ and ‘smiling’ ([...] tantôt la mine triste, tantôt souriant), AAM, Processus, BII, report by Louis Wilmet about Lokeren (25 July 1934).



Henri Kempnaers during his encounter with Mary,
23 March 1934.
ADG, Onkerzele.

interesting for our study of men's emotionality (especially when we take into consideration the mocking comments on the 'anything but masculine' weeping actors that were cited at the beginning of this article). Marian apparitions often ended with tears and sadness, grief and dismay were most often mentioned when visionary men recalled their feelings during the encounter with Mary. They remembered how they had been overwhelmed by sorrow on seeing Mary weep for mankind or appear as the grieving Mother of Sorrows.⁵³ Likewise, sadness was also one of the most dominant emotions in the accounts created by the eyewitnesses to the events.⁵⁴ However, we should be wary of describing this emotional expressiveness as behaviour not befitting Catholic men. On the contrary, the weeping fits can be studied from the perspective of the perseverance of the (nineteenth-century) ultramontane tradition in which tears – not necessarily triggered by a divine intervention – figured as an expression of the soul and suited to both men and women.⁵⁵ This ultramontanism, as Margaret Anderson noted in her study of the German Catholicism, was 'less concerned with "right behaviour" than with an immediate spiritual – or, if you prefer, emotional – experience; with the believer's personal connection to the divine' not only tolerated phenomena such as stigmata and visions but also 'legitimated them, [was] expected [of] them'.⁵⁶

Moreover, the copious tears of the visionaries and the willingness to attest to them fitted what Anne Vincent-Buffault has called a Christian *dolorism*. This redemptory and expiatory suffering had been reintroduced at the start of the nineteenth century and whereby tears were depicted as the sole 'intimate truths' that prove the (inner) suffering. Tears figured as the expression of repentance and purification.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the tearful episodes also accord with the ideal of 'vicarious suffering' (expiatory suffering for the sins of others), especially when the male visionary during his visionary experiences mumbled phrases such as '[...] to the last drop' and declared that

53 AAM, Processus, BXII.2, statement of Gerard Cardoen about 2 February 1935 and ADG, Onkerzele, reports on the apparitions to Jules de Vuyst (Herzele, 22 November 1934 and St. Amandsberg 9 November 1936). The Mater dolorosa is usually depicted with seven daggers in her heart, but some reports mention only one dagger.

54 ADG, Onkerzele, report on the apparitions to Jules De Vuyst (Herzele, 30 September 1935); AAM, Processus, BIXa1, report of Sebruyens-De Smet on Kempenaers (9 March 1934).

55 Sophie Heywood, 'Les "petits garçons modèles": La masculinité catholique à travers l'œuvre de la comtesse de Ségur', in: R. Revenin (ed.), *Hommes et masculinités de 1789 à nos jours: Contribution à l'histoire du genre et de la sexualité en France* (Paris 2007) 208-219, 216.

56 Margaret Livinia Anderson, 'The Limits of Secularization: On the Problem of Catholic Revival in Nineteenth-Century Germany', *The Historical Journal* 38 (1995) 647-670, 664.

57 Anne Vincent-Buffault, *Histoire des larmes XVIIIe-XIXe siècles* (Paris 1986) 110-111, 139-141, 241.

he would be willing to sacrifice himself if that was requested of him.⁵⁸ Yet again, the Belgian visionaries seem to form an exception to the rule as the expiatory suffering, the ‘mystical substitution’⁵⁹, is mostly attested by women or girls (even though, of course, Jesus had set the example).⁶⁰ Their self-denial, according to Paula Kane, could easily be fitted into ‘a socially constructed ideal of extreme suffering as the true expression of the feminine’.⁶¹ Still, the ‘interior’ stigmata that were claimed by Henri Kempnaers and his ecstatic reliving of the passion of Christ on Christmas day 1933 clearly match the profile. An eyewitness described Kempnaers’ actions accordingly:

He sinks to his knees, stands up, eyes closed, is tired, takes a few steps; falls again to his right side and stays with his hands folded and sighs deeply. – He stands up, hands in front, looks at the church and goes on. [...] Tears glide down his cheeks on his clothes and he says: ‘Not? [...] no longer? [...] O Jesus [...] They do not have the courage [...] I must not die’. – He sinks to his knees again and says: ‘I demonstrate here Christ’s way of the Cross, especially for the faithful’ [...].⁶²

Kempnaers’ patient and tearful suffering seems to contrast with the idealisation of the (masculine) strength and valiant action lauded in Catholic movements of that period.⁶³ Nevertheless, it did fit a Catholic tradition in which physical suffering was an acknowledged means to work for the salvation of others. These visionaries gained a certain (spiritual) authority among their followers through this discourse of suffering and by situating the divine intervention in their bodies. Apart from the ultramontane tradition of affective religiosity, the acceptability of the male visionaries’ religio-emotional

58 S.n., ‘Kroniek van Beauraing. Een negende verschijning aan Tilman Côme?, *De Standaard* 10 July 1933, 3. On ‘vicarious suffering’, see Paula Kane, “‘She offered herself up’: The Victim Soul and Victim Spirituality in Catholicism”, *Church History* 71 (2002) 80-119.

59 Richard Burton, *Holy Tears, Holy Blood: Women, Catholicism, and the Culture of Suffering in France, 1840-1970* (Ithaca, London 2004) 108.

60 ‘Most of the identified victim souls have been female’. Padre Pio is a famous exception. Kane, ‘She offered’, 86, 107. Still, William Christian refers also to the embodiment of Christ’s passion by male seers in Ezkioga. Christian, *Visionaries*, 102.

61 Kane, ‘She offered’, 118.

62 ‘Hij zinkt op de knieën staat recht oogen toe, is afgemat, enkele stappen vooruit; hij valt weder op de rechter zijde en blijft met handen gevouwen hij zucht diep. [...] hij staat recht, [...] Tranen glijden van zijn wangen op zijn kleeren en hij zegt: “niet? [...] niet meer?” [...] – Hij zegt “O Jezus [...] Zij hebben den moed niet [...] ik moet niet sterven”. Hij zinkt weer op de knieën en zegt “ik toon hier den lijdensweg van Kristus, vooral om de geloovigen [...]”’, ADG, Onkerzele, report on the events of 25 December 1933 (Onkerzele).

63 See e.g. Tine Van Osselaer, ‘Christening Masculinity?: Catholic Action and Men in Interwar Belgium’, *Gender and History* 21:2 (2009) 380-401.

sensibility thus might also have been facilitated by their social (lay) status. As indicated, most of the Belgian male mystics of the 1930s were lay working-class men – befitting De Certeau’s notion of the low profile of the mystics – and as such they inversely agree with Melissa Raphael’s assertion that ‘it is usually the case’ that ‘the higher the sacral status of the male individual, the less religious emotion is displayed’.⁶⁴ In other words, the lower one stood on the scale of religious authority, the more emotional fireworks were allowed or even required.

Whereas male and female visionaries shared this enlarged emotionality, gender differentiation was not entirely absent from the accounts of their emotions. Even though the visionaries were considered ‘besides themselves’ during the apparitions, to some extent they were still expected to show gender-specific emotions and the corresponding behaviour during their encounters with Mary. This demand is particularly apparent in regard to the feelings of shame and respect that could be felt on these occasions. For instance, the inherent shame displayed by the girl visionaries of Lokeren during their re-embodiment of Christ’s passion (in spite of their skirts they always managed to fall down decently); differed substantially from Henri Kempnaers’ showing his bare chest (and wound) during his visionary experiences.⁶⁵ Likewise, the ‘more aggressive’ attitude of male visionaries such as Jules De Vuyst – including the ‘gnashing of his teeth’, ‘wide open jaws’ and ‘hands as claws’⁶⁶ when he had visions of the devil and of a ‘Usurpator’ – did not befit female visionaries. The Lokeren police for instance noted with disapproval the threatening comportment and utterances of the girl visionaries at the Lokeren site and considered it improper behaviour.⁶⁷ Whereas the supporters of female visionaries never mentioned rage in their laudatory accounts, it could be included in those on male visionaries. Vice versa, inherent shame (avoidance of immodest movements) was not referred to in the case of men. This inclusion and exclusion does not necessarily imply that the onlookers did not perceive such feelings in the visionaries. However it does indicate that in pleading in favour of the credibility of the events, they knew what should not be included.⁶⁸

64 Raphael, ‘Gender’, 190.

65 AAM, Processus, BIVb letter of Jan Boon to Mgr. Coppieters (2 August 1934); S.n., ‘Te Onkerzele’, *De Standaard* 20 November 1933, 3.

66 ‘[...] Tandengeknars, de opengespannen kaaksbeenderen, de handen als klauwen’, ADG, Onkerzele, report on Jules De Vuyst until 24 November 1935; description of a nocturnal pilgrimage on 10-11 October 1935, from Onkerzele to Herzele.

67 Archives of the city of Lokeren, XL. 1031.

Apparitions in Naastveld 1933-1934, reports of the police (24 July 1934).

68 As Ute Frevert (‘Gefühlvolle Männlichkeiten’, 305) indicates, feelings are not gender-neutral, men and women often have to answer different expectations as far as the expression/control of, for example, hate and rage are concerned. Feelings (such as shame) can be learned (312).



Group portrait of the visionaries from Onkerzele, 15 June 1934, from left to right front row: Jules de Vuyst (?), Berthonia Holtkamp, Leonie Van Dijck, second row: man with hands folded in prayer: Gabriel Quatannens, in the back: Henri Kempnaers. ADG, Onkerzele.

In spite of the emphasis on their emotional expressivity, in the accounts of male visionaries emotional control was important as well. Even though their ecstatic stance during the apparitions allowed the visionaries a certain exaltation of passionate emotions, when they 'returned to their senses' they had to display them more modestly. Therefore it was the 'tranquillity' of Tilman Côme during his non-ecstatic daily comportment, his ability to remain 'completely unmoved' in the midst of all the turbulence that was adopted as an *argumentum pro* by his supporters. In the same vein, his 'modesty', 'healthy mind' and 'calmness' were emphasised in laudatory accounts.⁶⁹ Likewise, Maurice Van den Broecke was described as 'calm, a composed spirit' and with a 'sane mind, without any exaltation'.⁷⁰ So even though they seemed to present a challenge to the polarisation between emotional women/rational men, the stories of the male visionaries in fact also confirmed the idea.

The control of their emotions in the aftermath of their experiences seems to have been as important for the male seers' image building and their credibility as the accounts of their Marian encounters were. The enlarged emotionality of the male visionaries therefore had clearly set temporal limits and the combination men/rationality/control also pervaded the descriptions of their persons. As such, they fitted the contemporaneous distinction made between the 'colder' rational men and emotional women whose imagination was hard to control and whose exaggerations could border on irrationality, uncontrolled emotionality. These texts, such as Lode Arts' 1936 article on 'Masculine Christianity', emphasised that 'The man' did not have to be 'pious as a woman; he d[id] not have to pray worse or less than her, but he ha[d] to pray differently and be pious in a different way'. Arts linked this difference to men's and women's temperament: 'rationality and will are normally the motors of his (i.e. man's, TVO) spiritual life. He will not flare up in enthusiasm so easily: he desires insight and discernment'.⁷¹ Nonetheless, Catholic men

69 'Volkomen onberoerd', S.n., 'Naar aanleiding van 5 Augustus te Beauraing. Een gewetensvol enkwest omtrent het geval Tilman Côme', *De Standaard* 3 August 1933, 1-2; 'zijn eenvoud, zijn gezond verstand, zijn kalmte', Boon, *Getuigenis*, 122.

70 'Il est calme, l'esprit posé' 'un esprit saine, sans aucune exaltation', AAM, Processus, BVII.a1. letter of the pastor of Olsene including a report by Jos. Martnes-Ide, the employer of Maurice, 10 December 1933.

71 'De man moet niet vroom zijn als de vrouw; hij moet niet slechter noch minder bidden dan zij, maar hij moet anders bidden en anders vroom zijn'. 'Zou Rede en wil zijn normaal de motoren van zijn zieleleven. Hij zal niet zoo gemakkelijk in geestdrift oplaaien: hij wil inzicht en doorzicht'. Arts, 'Mannelijk Christendom', *Bode van het Heilig Hart* (January 1936) 32-35, 33.

were not supposed to be devoid of emotionality; there were settings in which emotional expressivity was allowed or even expected (see e.g. Catholic mass meetings at the time). Still, it is interesting to note that Kempenaers in his description of how he had wept in church (while not in ecstasy), felt the need to add ‘I wept during the whole mass and I am not afraid to say so’.⁷²

Whereas the various sources dealing with the Belgian wave of apparitions do not explicitly refer to men as more rational and credible than women, the stereotype of the ‘credulous woman’ did emerge for example, in the articles on the apparition-series published in the socialist newspaper *De Vooruit*.⁷³ Likewise, comments on women’s all too susceptible imagination and taste for exaggeration in religiosity (another age-old *topos* in Catholic discourse⁷⁴) also pervaded the texts produced by the supporters of the various sites. Accordingly, there are references (in unpublished documents) to the questionable reliability of the ‘women’s talk’ of female visionaries and some mocking comments on women’s faulty interpretations of pious books that brought them to disregard all joy in life.⁷⁵ Any accusation of exaggerated piety among the male visionaries was either carefully avoided or refuted by the visionaries’ supporters. Maurice Van den Broecke’s pastor pointed out that his piety had been that of the ‘average’ working-class man. He had been a loyal church attendee, but ‘not really [an] enthusiast’: he preferred to hear mass in the church porch (the much lamented favourite spot of male parishioners).⁷⁶ Similarly, in an article on the apparitions in Etikhove a journalist of the Catholic newspaper *De Standaard* stressed that in the home of Omer Eneman there was no sanctimonious behaviour. The emphasis on the ‘moderate’ religiosity prior to the event helped to refute the suggestion that ‘exaggerated’ piety could have triggered these men’s visionary experiences.⁷⁷

However, accusations of eccentricity did not fail to materialise and when the pastor of Stokkel addressed his bishop regarding the visionary who was present in the streets of his town, he described him as follows: Jozef Cloutens was a ‘[...] decent pastry baker and pedlar’ with ‘good children’ but

72 ‘Ik heb de heel mis geweend, ik durf dat goed zeggen’. AAM, Processus, B IX.a1, report by Boon, 28 December 1933.

73 ‘Lichtgeloovige personen, vooral vrouwen’, M.D.R., ‘Etikhove is nu ook een verschijningsoord der Maagd’, *De Vooruit* 18 October 1933, 2.

74 See e.g. the directives published in clerical manuals such as Gaume, *Manuel des confesseurs* (fourth edition; Liège 1838) 310-311.

75 ‘Wijvenpraat’, ADG, Onkerzele, a letter of Vandekerckhove to Honoré Vermeire, one of the promoters of the site (16 October 1935);

‘vrouwspersonen’, AAM, Processus, BIVb, letter of Sebruyte (?) to a bishop (14 July 1934).

76 ‘Comme piété celle d’un ouvrier ordinaire, allant tous les dimanches à la messe, mais plutôt sans enthousiasme’, AAM, Processus, BVII.a1: letter of the pastor of Olsene (10 December 1933); BVIII.2, letter of the pastor of Olsene (28 June 1935): ‘aimant mieux entendre la messe dans le portail que dans l’église’.

77 S.n., ‘Onderzoek te Etikhove’, *De Standaard* 21 November 1933, 3.

somewhat ‘overstrained because of his nocturnal work’ and he had always been ‘a little original like his mother’.⁷⁸ In the description of another pastor Jules De Vuyst fared even worse:

He looks like someone who is not mentally sound. Someone who hallucinates, I do not know what else to call it. Childishness, silliness, foolishness and impossibilities on the one hand, amazing and earnest actions on the other hand. One tells me that, at least judging from his comportment, he is humble and can pray beautifully.⁷⁹

As these quotations might illustrate, the border between delusion and religious experience had an unstable reputation, also among the clergy. Their emotional expressiveness, lack of control and ‘strange behaviour’ were what made the male visionaries susceptible to accusations of hysteria and other nervous illnesses. During the Belgian series of apparitions more than one visionary was (temporarily) called insane, men not excluded. The internment of Jules De Vuyst, for instance, was a palpable threat for his supporters and almost became reality in August 1936 when he and his friend Jacques Blancquaert were arrested by the Lokeren police. Jacques was sent to an asylum, but Jules – thanks to the intervention of his father – was released after a night in prison.⁸⁰ Similarly, Tilman Côme was regularly referred to as an ‘hysteric’ and when Henri Kempenaers visited Beauraing and had a vision there a priest walked up to him and called him ‘sick’.⁸¹ Mental illness was thus a well-known accusation and therefore it was quite often explicitly refuted by the supporters of the visionaries.⁸²

The descriptions of these visionary male laics consequently also complicate the association of ‘femininity’, ‘religiosity’ and ‘hysteria’. Hysteria

78 ‘[...] een deftig pasteibakker en marskramer]. Cloetens met brave kinderen, doch overspannen door nachtwerk en altyd nogal origineel geweest hebbende zooals zijne moeder’, AAM, Processus, C3h, letter of the pastor of Stokkel (14 April 1934).

79 ‘[...] ziet er mij uiterlijk een uit, die van geesteswege niet in orde is. Een gehallucineerde of ik weet niet hoe ik het noemen zou. Kinderachtigheden, aardigheden, zottigheden onmogelijkheden van den eenen kant, verwonderachtige en ernstige handelingen van den anderen kant. Men zegt mij, nu ten minste aan zijn doening te oordelen, dat hij nederig is

en schoon bidden kan’, ADG, Onkerzele, letter of pastor Van der Maeren to Mgr. Coppieters (29 November 1936).

80 ADG, Onkerzele, report on Jules De Vuyst (s.l., s.a.); ADG, Onkerzele, short documentary note on the second internment of Jacques Blanquaert (16 August 1936).

81 ADG, Onkerzele, notes on the apparitions to H. Kempenaers (25 March 1934).

82 ‘Externally no sign of a nevropath can be discovered’, ‘Uiterlijk is er aan hem geen enkel kenteeken van een nevropathe te ontdekken’, Boon, *Getuigenis*, 76.

and neurosis were associated with ‘mysticism’ especially since the end of the nineteenth century (thanks to the work of Charcot in La Salpêtrière)⁸³ and this pathologisation had been used by the Church’s opponents to discredit religious impulses as ‘a displacement of repressed or frustrated female sexuality’.⁸⁴ The explanation of allegedly mystical experiences from a hallucinatory or psycho-pathological perspective was hotly debated in Catholic (medical) circles as well⁸⁵ and as the numerous allusions to the potential male ‘hysterics’ indicate, the ‘syndrome’ did not necessarily imply gender-exclusivity.

Conclusion

The visibility and (part of the) trustworthiness of the Belgian male visionaries of the 1930s were founded on their capacity to display their emotions. Their emotional expressivity helped to identify them as mediators with the heavenly world and therefore empowered them to speak on religious matters. However, two caveats have to be mentioned here. First of all, in order to attract sufficient attention, they still required prominent lay promoters to add weight to their (religiously and socially) frail voice. The clergy intervened as well, albeit not as openly as they might have wanted. Secondly, emotionally expressive men – especially the weeping and wailing type – could trigger comments. Although they could hardly be called a novelty – sobbing men had been noted also in nineteenth-century ultramontane texts – they were not free from accusations of hallucination, hysteria and exaggerated piety. Still, whereas the latter allegations had often been linked to women’s ‘feeble minds’, the ‘feminisation’ theme did not dominate the accounts of the Belgian wave of apparitions (not even in the socialist or liberal press). Furthermore, there was no indication – contrary to the Ezkioga case – that male visionaries were deemed more credible than female visionaries.

These men clearly met the expectations people had about visionary experiences and suited the profile of ‘emotional mysticism’ described by Lisa Bitel as befitting modern-day *female* visionaries. In her opinion, a more restrained behaviour is expected of male visionaries, including their times of ecstasy. Demonstrative weeping, falling to the knees and a special voice are characteristics that agree quite well with a ‘tradition of unruly, demonstrative female mystics’, whereas male visionaries ‘usually just prayed

83 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l’hystérie: Charcot et l’iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris 1982).

84 Burton, *Holy Tears*, 182.

85 See e.g. the work of Agnes Desmazières on Catholic psycho-analysis. Agnes Desmazières, ‘Psychology against Medicine?: Mysticism in the Light of Scientific Apologetics’, *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 88 (2010) 1192-1212.

and meditated'.⁸⁶ As illustrated, this is not confirmed in the Belgian case. The weeping and wailing male visionaries were not thereby depicted as out of character in the various sources. Their acceptance can probably be linked to the temporary character of their grand emotions. The Marian encounter was a moment during which they were in contact with the supernatural, rose above their humanity and hence also their masculinity and concomitant emotional rules. Nonetheless, as indicated, this detachment was transitory and, 'returned to their senses', they (ideally) still fitted the profile of the calm and rational man, in control of his emotions.

While their emotional expressivity made the male visionaries visible as religious mediators, the emphasis on their 'masculine' rationality and coolness also enhanced their credibility since it proved them to be uncontaminated by exaggerated piety or neurosis. Furthermore, only because they corresponded to an ideal type of Catholic masculinity (family provider, sensible and a good citizen) could their assertions be deemed worthy of attention. Failure in this respect also had its effect on their credibility during those episodes in which they were deemed beyond the (emotional) constrictions of their human and masculine condition. It was this ideal masculinity that their (more powerful) promoters could refer to and that made their claims to religious authority worthy of notice.

The stories of these male visionaries therefore illustrate not only how important emotions could be in the evaluation of new 'mystics' but also how different expectations of men and their emotions could circulate also within contemporaneous Catholic discourses. ◀

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86 Lisa Bitel, 'Looking the Wrong Way: Authenticity and Proof of Religious Vision', *Visual Resources* 25 (2009) 69-92, 82.