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Margaret Hudson

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE MYSTICAL MARRIAGE
IN THE WORK OF
MECHTHILD VON MAGDEBURG

by

Margaret Hudson

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate
Studies and Research in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts.

Department of Religion

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

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The undersigned recommend to the Faculty of Graduate
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OF MECHTHILD VON MAGDEBURG

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to examine the symbol of the mystical marriage as it is used by Mechthild von Magdeburg in her book Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit and to determine the uniqueness of her interpretation of this symbol.

Since all writers are products of their times and reflect contemporary trends and influences, an attempt is made to reconstruct the history of Mechthild's life. Because she is known to have been a member of a certain religious movement for women which was particularly active during her lifetime, the factual history of this movement is outlined. By this means it is hoped that Mechthild will appear within the framework of medieval mysticism as a whole.

The general features of her book are then examined, together with discernible influences upon Mechthild as well as any influences which she herself might have exerted upon her successors. The development of the symbol of the mystical marriage is traced solely from the text of Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit.

The final chapter is concerned with the evaluation of Mechthild's handling of the symbol and the distinctiveness which her development of a theme so often used by her predecessors, contemporaries and successors confers upon this thirteenth century mystic.

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter I The Life of Mechthild von Magdeburg	4
Chapter II The History of the Beguine Movement in Germany	29
Chapter III Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit	55
Chapter IV The Mystical Marriage	91
Chapter V Mechthild's Mysticism	125
Conclusion	152
Selected Bibliography	156

INTRODUCTION

For those interested in medieval mysticism but unable to read Middle High German, this thesis attempts to make available in English some insight into the life, background and work of Mechthild von Magdeburg. With this purpose in mind, all quotations from her text have been rendered into English, with the original in parentheses. For technical reasons, all diacritical marks have been omitted from the Middle High German quotations.

Mechthild von Magdeburg has been widely acclaimed during this present century as a writer of considerable lyrical skill, as the most important figure in medieval mysticism between Hildegard von Bingen and Meister Eckhart, and as the leading example of that manifestation of religious fervour among women of medieval times known as Frauenmystik. Like many other female mystics, she received her first intimation of God's grace in early adolescence, and thereafter had periodical visions and revelations, which she ultimately recorded in Low German. The book was later transcribed into Middle High German and known as Dás fliessende Licht der Gottheit (The flowing Light of the Godhead).

The work is divided into seven books, but the material is not generally considered by scholars to be in chronological order. Besides recounting her visions, Mechthild has given us various allegorical passages,

meditations and pronouncements upon the state of Christ's Church and its leading figures, letters answering petitions of one sort and another, as well as some of practical advice to abbesses and clerics, diatribes, often harsh in nature, directed against those who would destroy her work and put a stop to her literary endeavours, reflections of an obscure nature upon the political scene, and eloquent testimonies to the virtues of the Dominicans. But most of this material, interesting though some of it might be, is extraneous to the main motif - that of the individual and immediate experience of God. Her mysticism is intuitive in nature; from her ecstatic experiences she brings back and attempts to reproduce for her readers something of the ineffable glory of union with the Divine.

In order to do this she must have recourse to imagery to which others may relate, having some knowledge of its mundane application - namely, that of marriage. In this choice of symbol she is, of course, far from unique - it is the obvious symbol of union for any mystic to choose, being so easily understood by people everywhere.

The uniqueness of Mechthild's employment of the marriage symbol in her exposition of her spiritual experiences lies in the strongly sexual nature of her approach to it. She does not dwell upon the maternal aspect, as so many medieval nuns did in their vicarious ecstatic experiences of the role of Mary in the nativity and infancy of Christ. For Mechthild, Christ was the virile, handsome, ardent

lover and the soul was the virginal, shrinking but nonetheless eager bride. The ultimate union with the Divine, about which she must remain forever silent, is envisaged as a sexual act. In all her representations of her encounters with God may be discerned the underlying sensuality of a nature forceful enough to repress but unwilling altogether to deny the demands of her humanity in order to experience union with divinity.

Chapter I

The Life of Mechthild von Magdeburg

In the absence of historical records concerning the dates, origin and life of Mechthild von Magdeburg scholars¹ have resorted to laborious deliberation on the German and Latin texts² and to detailed comparison with Gertrude the Great's³ Legatus divinae pietatis and Mechthild von Hackeborn's⁴ Liber specialis gratiae in order to arrive at some knowledge of her earthly circumstances. Wilhelm Preger has given a convincing reconstruction⁵ of the important dates in her life, and the following outline is based upon his deductions.

In IV:2 of Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit Mechthild says: "An unworthy sinner, I was greeted in my twelfth year, when I was alone, by the blessed flowing from the Holy Spirit ... This happened for thirty-one years." (ich vnwürdige sunderin wart gegrussēt von dem heligen geiste in minem zwolften jare also vliessende sere, do ich was alleine ... Dis geschach uber ein und drissig jar. - IV:2). Therefore she must have been forty-three years old at the time of writing Book IV, Chapter 2. Further along in this same chapter she indicates that twenty years have passed, in speaking of the battle she has waged against her senses with the weapons of the soul: "These were the weapons of my soul. With these I have powerfully overcome my body, for during twenty years I was never anything but weary, sick

and weak, first of all from repentance and from sorrow ..."
(dis wāren du waffen miner sele, da ich den lip mit uberwant
also šere, da bi zwenzig iaren nie die zit wart ich were
mude, siech und krank allererst von ruwen und von leide ...

IV:2). If we assume the beginning of this twenty year
period to have coincided with her entry into a beguinage
at Magdeburg to commence the penitential life⁶, then she
would have left the parental home at the age of twenty-
three.

According to Book VI, Chapter 4, she entered the
convent at Helfta thirty years later. Her entry into this
famous house is known by evidence in the foreword to the
Latin MS, said to have been written by Brother Heinrich,
Lector of the Friars Preachers⁷, and the passage runs thus:
"At length, having suffered much and being now advanced in
years, she was admitted to the Convent at Helfta. There
she lived on for twelve years, blooming still in the
perfection of all virtues, as those⁸ testify by their
witness." The assumption that she did in fact enter Helfta
thirty years after leaving her parental home stems from
the opening lines of Book VI:4, which are as follows:
"When Sister Mechthild was older,⁹ she said, 'Ah, alas, how
wretched I am! I lament to God in heaven that I am now
worse than I was thirty years ago. For all the creatures*
that helped me to bear my homeless condition¹⁰ might not

*creature comforts?

seem so attractive if the poor body should remain strong."

(O we, ich yil arme! ich klagen gotte von himelriche, de
ich nu arger bin, dene ich was vor drissig jaren, wan die
creatiren die mir da hulpen tragen min ellende¹⁰, die
dorften nit also edel sin, sol der arme lip genesen - VI:4).

Thus we may cautiously establish her lifespan by using this
equation:¹¹

$$12 + 31 - 20 + 30 + 12 = 65 \text{ years.}$$

In establishing her birthdate with a reasonable degree
of accuracy we have some evidence from the MS. A marginal
notation to Book IV:27 in Heinrich von Nördlingen's tran-
scription of Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit gives the
date 1256. Since the same notation is given in the Latin
translation it must have been in the original MS also,
probably added by Mechthild's redactor, Heinrich von Halle.
The first sentence of this chapter tells us that "the Order
of Preachers was sorely attacked by false scholars and also
by many envious, wicked men" (der predierorden wart sere
angevohten in valschen, meistern, darzu von manigem girigen
sunder - IV:26). This is a clear reference to the bitter
diatribe mounted against the Dominicans by William de St.
Amour and other professors at the University of Paris and
published in 1255 in the tractate De periculis novissimorum
temporum. The marginal date of 1256 probably refers to
Mechthild's reporting of the event in Chapter 27, since she
indicates that the effect of the attack upon the Friars
Preachers was still an unknown factor to her by requesting

of God that He should protect His own honour in them* (Do bat ich vnsern lieben herren, do er an inen wolte behuten, sin selbes ere - IV:27). The effect was no longer unknown later in 1256, when Alexander IV issued, on October 5, the papal bull Romanus Pontifex de summi condemning the errors of William de St. Amour¹². We can certainly assume that Mechthild would be well informed concerning matters relating to the Dominicans, for whom she entertained the deepest regard¹³. If she did record this chapter earlier in 1256, the first chapters of the same book would probably have been written a year or two earlier¹⁴. Assuming the date of IV:2, then, to have been 1255, which was her forty-third year, as we have already seen, she was born around 1212 and died in 1277 at the age of 65.

Mechthild's place of birth is entirely unknown, but is assumed to have been fairly near to Magdeburg, where she spent a considerable part of her life. She evidently came of a well-to-do family, since she says to Love personified, "Lady Love, you have taken from me the world, worldly honour, and all worldly wealth." (frowe mine, ir hant mir benomen die welt, weltliche ere und allen weltlichen richtum - I:1), and much further on in the book, shortly before her death, she addresses God thus, "Lord, I thank thee that thou hast taken away from me with thy love all earthly wealth" (Herre, ich danken dir, sit du mir mit diner mine benomen hast allen

*i.e., in the Dominicans

irdenschen richtum - VII:64). The Foreword to the Latin translation also bears out the supposition that she relinquished much in the way of worldly goods in order to follow the spiritual life, for "she gave up everything which she could have had, and spent her life in a strange place and in voluntary poverty."¹⁵ She certainly enjoyed a careful, loving upbringing, as she refers to relatives and friends to whom she was most dear (bi minen frombden frunden, den ich je die lieboste we - IV:2). She stresses the fact that she was the most ingenuous of mortals, knowing nothing of the wickedness of the world or of the falsity of which so-called spiritual people are capable: "Of the wickedness of the devil I knew nothing, of the wickedness of the world I was unaware, the falseness of spiritual people was alike unknown to me" (von des tufels bosheit wiste ich nit, der welte krancheit kante ich nit, geistlicher lufe valscheit was mir och unkundig - IV:2). Her spiritual training extended no further than the tenets of the Christian faith (ich wuste von gotte nit mer denen cristanen globen alleine - IV:2), and we may safely infer from this that her background was quite worldly in nature. She gives us no further information concerning her education beyond complaining that she has had no instruction in Latin - "My German fails me, I know no Latin" (nu gebristet mir tusches, des latines kan ich nit - II:3). But her brother Baldwin, a Dominican who eventually became subprior at Halle¹⁶, is described in the Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae as having enjoyed

a good education and upbringing¹⁷, and we have no reason not to accept this as being true of his sister Mechthild also. There is too much evidence in Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit of a thorough familiarity with the courtly literature and culture of her time for us to suppose that she did not receive an education befitting her status as the daughter of loving, well-provided and providing parents. There has been considerable speculation as to the possibility that she might even have been of noble origin, but the evidence¹⁸ is somewhat tenuous, and one opposing argument¹⁹, at least, is quite persuasive - namely, that we would have had more information concerning her family name if she had come of a noble house.

After receiving the first powerful intimation of grace in her twelfth year, the young Mechthild found that she was protected from any urge to "serious daily sin" (das ich mich zu einer grossen teglichen sunde nie mohte erbielen - IV:2) by the "loving greeting" (der vil liebe grus - IV:2) which came to her every day. Eventually she was led to abandon her pleasant, sheltered life and to renounce the world for love of God - feeling, no doubt, that she would make no spiritual progress if she remained in an environment conducive only to physical well-being. We may also safely conjecture that she felt the necessity to separate herself from those with whom she had emotional ties in order to draw closer to the source of that daily outpouring of love which she had experienced since her

twelfth year. She went to Magdeburg, where she knew only one person, from whom she carefully kept herself apart so that she might pursue her determination to follow henceforth the spiritual life. If the deductions already made are correct, she would at this time be approximately twenty-three years of age, in the year 1235.

In Magdeburg, she chose the life of a beguine, according to ample evidence from the texts, although the name of the particular beguinage she joined is not known. The Latin preface to the text, probably written by Heinrich von Halle, runs thus: "In the year of Our Lord 1250 and for about fifteen years this was the book of a certain German beguine who was a holy virgin in body and inspired in spirit by the grace of God"²⁰. She addresses the Beguines specifically, telling them that they are foolish, even wicked (die vil torehligen beginen, wie sint ir also vrevele - III:15) because they accept the Host not from true inner desire but from sheer custom. She tells the story of someone who mortified the flesh to the point of death in a passage entitled Concerning the purgatory of a beguine who was so wilful that no prayers could help her (von einer beginne vegefur, die dur eigen willen kein gebet half - V:5). She gives us also the fragment of a dialogue between "a truly spiritual sister and a worldly beguine" (von einer waren geistlichen swester und von einer weltlichen beginen - III:24). Grundmann suggests that she might have been the directress of a beguinage²¹, but there

is no real support for this theory, except for the sound practical advice given by Mechthild for the management of religious establishments in VI:1. This passage could as plausibly be understood to indicate that she had become the superior of a convent, but probably indicates nothing other than her astute powers of observation and her experience of the life of an institution devoted to the religious life.

The adoption of the beguine way of life was no easy matter for Mechthild. She tells of her struggles against the promptings of the flesh in IV:2 - "When I came to the spiritual life and took my leave of the world, I considered the state of my body and how it was strongly fortified against my poor soul, mighty, powerful, perfect in strength, and I saw that it was my enemy, and saw also that if I sought to flee everlasting death, I must conquer it (i.e. the body), and must begin the struggle at once." (do ich zu geistlichen leben kam und zu der welte urlop nam, do sach ich minen lichamen an. Do war er gewaffent sere uf mine arme sele mit grosser volledi der starken maht und mit vollkomener naturen kraft. Do sach ich wol das er min viend was, und sach das och: solte ich dem ewigen totentgan, so muste ich mich darnider sclan, do muste es an ein striten gan - VI:2). In waging war upon the body throughout the entire period of her youth she brought into action all the weapons at her command - weeping, confessing, fasting, doing penance, mortifying the flesh, going without

sleep, and paying heavy penalties in the way of "many severe natural illnesses" (manig swere siechtag von nature - IV: 2). She had visions which robbed her of her senses and was so filled with wonder that she did not dare to keep silence any longer (dc ich es nit getorste verswigen - IV:2). God promised to support and comfort her - "You shall follow Me and trust Me in these things, and you shall be ill for a long time and I will care for you myself and give you all that you may need in body and in soul" (du solt mir an disen dingen volgen und getruwen und du solt och lange siech wesen und ich wil dñ selber pflegen und alles des du bedarft an lip und an sele, das wil ich dir geben - IV:2). When she revealed this to her confessor he bade her write down her visions and this she began to do, although very much against her own desires. "Then he bade me do that for which I often weep in shame, because my great unworthiness is ever before my eyes - he commanded a weak woman to write this book from God's heart and mouth" (do hies er mich das, des ich mich dikke weinende scheme: wan mine grossu vnwirdekeit vor minen ogen offen stat, das was, das er eim snoden wibe hies vs gottes herzen und munt dñs buch schriben - IV:2).

Between the years 1250 and 1256, she recorded her visions in her own mother-tongue of Low German. The isolated incidental Latin words and phrases²² which are scattered throughout the text do not indicate modesty on her part when she claims to be ignorant of Latin - they are

attributable in part to the editor of the Revelations and in part to Mechthild's knowledge of the church ritual and prayers. It seems probable that her writings, inscribed on separate sheets and subsequently collected and arranged by the Dominican Heinrich von Halle²³, must have circulated quite early in the period 1250-1265, for there is evidence in the text that Mechthild suffered considerable persecution as a result of her literary endeavours. Threats were made: "I was warned concerning this book, and was told that if I did not take care it might be burned." (Ich wart von disem buche gewarnet und wart von menschen also gesagt; wolte man es nit bewaren, da mohte ein brant ubervaren - II:26). God promised to protect the book: "No-one can burn the truth. Whoever wishes to take this book out of My hand must be stronger than I." (Die warheit mag nieman verbrenen. Der es mir vs miner hant sol nemen, der sol sterker dene ich wesen - II:26). He also assured Mechthild that her ignorance and humility were an asset rather than a liability in the undertaking of the task for which she had been chosen, reminding her that "whenever I bestowed extraordinary gifts, I always sought out the lowliest, meanest and most secret place. The highest mountains cannot receive the revelations of My grace, for the flood of My holy spirit flows by nature down to the valley." (wan ich je sunderliche gnade gap, da suchte ich je zu die nidersten, minsten, heimlichosten stat. Die hosten berge mogent nit enpfan die offenbarunge miner gnaden, wan die vlut mines

heligen geistes vlusset von nature ze tal - II:26).

In spite of this reassurance, Mechthild concludes this chapter (II:26) with an earnest prayer for the safeguarding of her book, in which she makes clear reference to her persecutors: "Ah, Lord, I beg Thee to preserve this book from the eyes of those imbued by that vigilant, deceitful spirit which was engendered in hell, not in heaven; conceived in the heart of Lucifer, born of spiritual pride, nurtured in hatred, grown so great in violent anger that it believes no virtue can reach it." (Eya, herre, ich bitte dich, dc du dis buch wellest bewaren vor den ogen der valschen vare, wan si ist von der helle vnder vns komen. Sie wart nie us dem himelriche genomen. Si ist gezuget in lucifers herze und ist geborn in geistlichem homute und ist gedruten in dem has und ist gewahsen in dem gewaltigen zorne als gros, dc si des dunket, dc kein tugent si ir genos - II:26). In the Chapter of Prayer (V:35) she makes reference to her "Christian tormentors", and prays that they may amend their ways.

Mechthild tells us of the repercussions which resulted from her persistence in continuing to write and to speak out against her opponents (with what reckless candor will be examined later in the context of her status as a beguine). Her book did not perish in the flames, but she was denied the mass. The first indication of this punishment appears in II:4, when she writes "Ah, my dear Lord, shall I be without mass this day?" (Eya, lieben herre min, sol ich hute

ane messe sin?). God compensates her for the denial of the sacrament by vouchsafing a marvellous prolonged vision of the mass of the poor maid, sung by John the Baptist. In II:24 she describes her temptation by an evil spirit during the same period: "One, (of the lords of hell) came to me, splendid as a ray of sunlight, so that I should think him an angel, and he brought a glowing book and said, 'Take this kiss of peace (pax), since you cannot take the mass.'"

"(Do einer kam zu mir, schone als ein schin von der sunen, dc ich solte wissen dc er ein engel were und brahte ein luhtendes buch und sprach: Nime doch das peize (pax) da zu der messe nit komen maht - II:24). We learn that she was admitted to the Mass again when she tells us that she said to God, "Lord, now art Thou mine, for Thou wert given to me today, according to the scripture, in which is written puer natus est nobis. Now I beg Thee, Lord, for the sake of Thy glory and not my own gain, that today Thy exalted body might be of comfort to the wretched soul. Thou art in truth mine, and therefore, Lord, Thou shalt be today a ransom for those in bondage." (Do sprach ich: herre, nu bist du min, wan du bist mir hutte gegeben, und och an der stat do man spricht: puer natus est nobis. Nu gere ich, herre, dines lobes und nit mines fromes, also dc hutte din here lichame den armen selen zu trost kome. Du bist werlich min, nu solt du, herre, hutte den gefangenen ein losepfant sin - III:15).

According to the Prologue, she continued to live the life of a beguine for forty²⁴ years, until she entered the convent at Helfta. Hans Neumann puts forward the theory that she returned to her family thirty years after her departure to Magdeburg²⁵. The reason, he says, might have been threefold - the increasing hostility of her opponents, the decision of the Magdeburg Synod of 1261 that all beguines should be subject to the spiritual direction of parish clergy²⁶ (instead of, in Mechthild's case, the Dominicans, whom she so deeply loved and respected), and the state of her personal health. In support of the third reason, Neumann points to Mechthild's frequent references in Book VI to her sufferings and the imminence of death, similar to references made some twenty years later in Book VII, recorded in Helfta during the closing years of her life. Neumann suggests²⁷ that the contents of Book VI indicate a provenance other than Magdeburg, dealing with the wider matters of universal Christianity rather than those arising in the somewhat restricted daily routine of a beguine and this would indeed appear to be the case. Chapter I consists of detailed advice on the running of a religious house, addressed to priors and prioresses, Chapter 2 outlines rules for the daily life of a Canon, Chapter 10 gives rules for prayer, Chapter 12 the rules for the general conduct of the spiritual life, Chapter 21 the problems of the priesthood. In Chapter 3 we learn the name of the person to whom Chapter 2 was addressed - Dietrich von Dobin, Deacon of Magdeburg²⁸, and one of Mechthild's champions

against her critics, identified in both the German and Latin versions in a marginal note. According to Neumann's reasoning, Dietrich must have directed his request to Mechthild in writing and received the contents of Chapter 2 as a written reply, because Mechthild was no longer living in Magdeburg²⁹. In the light of these deductions, VI:33 is then seen as a prelude to Mechthild's second withdrawal from the world, this time into the shelter of the convent at Helfta. Neumann suggests that traces may be found in VI:33 of her decision to set herself completely free of family ties and withdraw to the convent²⁹. The most important evidence from the text to support this theory runs as follows: "He* cast aside all the delights of his* relatives and friends and accepted the contempt shown to him* by his* enemies. He* cast away all love in wealth and honour in which the sinful world rejoices and lived in all possible poverty which was possible to him* under obedience." (Er warf och vs alle wollust siner magen und vrunden und saste wider in die smacheit, die im sine anvehter tun wolten. Er warf och vs alle liebin richtumes und eren, da sich die sundig welt zu vrowet, und saste wider in alles dc armute dc möglich ist ze lidene nach rate - VI:33).

Whether or not Mechthild did in fact write Book VI in some other location than Magdeburg, it seems likely that this book was intended to be the last portion of her Revelations.

*Mechthild often uses a masculine pronoun and adjective when she is really speaking of herself.

Chapter 41 begins: "You want me to write more and I cannot. The joy, honor, clarity, intimacy and truth are so far beyond me that I am speechless and may speak no further of what I know." (Ir. wellent dc ich furbas schribe und ich enmag. Die wune, die ere, die clarheit, die trutunge, die warheit, die ist ob mir also gros, dc ich stum wurde vurbas me ze sprechende das ich bekene - VI:41). The book closes with an attestation considered to have been made by Heinrich von Halle³⁰. It has an unmistakable air of finality: "The script written in this book flowed from the living Godhead into the heart of Sister Mechthild and is set down faithfully from her heart as God gave it to her, written with her own hands. Deo gratias." (Dise schrift die in disem buche stat, die ist gevlossen vs von der lebenden gotheit in Swester Mehtilden herze und ist also getruwelich hie gesetzet, also si vs von irme herzen gegeben ist von gotte und geschriben von iren henden. Deo gratias - VI:43).

According to Preger's reconstruction, she entered the convent at Helfta at the age of 53 after living for thirty years as a Beguine. Helfta was a Cistercian house, half an hour's journey east of Eisleben and one day's journey west of Halle, founded in 1229³¹ and distinguished, especially between the years 1250 and 1310, as an important centre of mystical piety³². Since the convent was known to number the daughters of the Thuringian nobility among its members³³, and was therefore probably exclusive in nature, it would appear that Mechthild was well-known by this time and that

the Abbess, Gertrude von Hackeborn, considered that Mechthild was bestowing honor upon the convent by entering it rather than that the convent was bestowing honor by receiving her. Mechthild von Hackeborn tells of the respect and reverence which the Helfta nuns had for this latest exponent of the spiritual life, and it may well have been gratitude for their attitude towards her and for the peace and safety from persecution which she now experienced which led her to continue writing. She evidently had some doubts about the advisability of this course of action, questioning God in Chapter 36 to let her know if it was His will that she should cease from this labour. His reply clearly indicated that she should continue to write with a didactic purpose, so that she "might heal the sick, add strength to the healthy, enliven the dead* and sanctify the good" (sol die siechen mit laben, die gesunden sterken, die toten weken, die guten mitte heiligen - VII:36).

She makes reference to a painful illness which she suffered soon after entering the convent (Chapter 4) and there are many hints throughout the rest of this final book that she never fully recovered and always suffered a great deal. Eventually she became blind and her writings were dictated to one of the nuns, as she records in her final prayer in Chapter 64: "Lord, I thank Thee that since Thou hast taken from me the power of my eyes Thou hast provided

*i.e. spiritually dead.

the eyes of another for my service." (Herre, ich danken dir, sit du mir benomen hast die maht miner ougen, dc du mir nu dienest mit vromden ougen - VII:64). The struggle she had to make to continue her work was aggravated by the feeling she experienced that the powers which had supported her in the past were now failing her. She laments to God: "Alas, I must complain of my old age, for it is dull and lack-lustre* and is unhappily cold and lacking in grace. It is also powerless, possessing no longer the youth it needs to endure the fiery love of God. It is also a pity that minor aches and pains, to which youth pays no attention, should bother it so much." (O we, leider min alter stat mir nu sere ze scheltende, wan es ist unnutze an schinenden werken und ist leider kalt und von gnaden. Es ist och vnmehtig, dc es der jugent nit hat, da es die vurigen gotzmine mitte tragen mag. Es ist och vnldig dc ime kleinu pine vil we tut, da du jugent nit vf enahtet - VIII:3). It was actually a relief to her when the visions died away and God revealed Himself to her no more: "Ah, my Lord, how still and silent art Thou now. I thank Thee, that Thou showest Thyself to me no more." (Eya, lieber herre, wie stille du nu swigest. Des danken ich dir jemer me, dc du mich so lange vermidest - VII:46). All these factors account for the deterioration in quality of the seventh book which, as one scholar remarks, contains much that is mere reminiscence,

*literally: devoid of all lustrous works.

part of it being merely poorly-rhymed material for convent events.³⁵

It may be assumed that Mechthild died at Helfta after her sojourn of twelve years. Visions of her reception into heaven were granted to the two nuns with whom she had the greatest rapport as fellow-visionaries, St. Gertrude and Mechthild von Hackeborn, sister of the Abbess Gertrude. The latter, in her Liber specialis gratiae, gives this account: "Here she (i.e. Mechthild von Magdeburg) received that most blissful union, and true and sweetest conjoining with God and enjoyment of Him, and the full and most abundant requital of all labours and sorrows, of which the heart of man is more able to believe than to think.*"³⁶

One of the most surprising features of the life of Mechthild von Magdeburg is the fact that she appears to have amassed such large numbers of friends and enemies alike, and must therefore have been a controversial figure in her own time. All these supporters and detractors appeared during her life as a Beguine, for she says herself that when she first went to Magdeburg she knew only one person, whom she avoided lest she might be deflected from her goal. The beguine way of life must have been generally in accordance with her spiritual aims, in spite of her criticisms of it, otherwise she would hardly have pursued it for so long. She may have come to the attention of Heinrich von Halle

*i.e. can only be grasped by faith.

through this connection - at any rate, his sister Oda knew Mechthild, and Oda was either a Beguine or a nun³⁷ - and no-one can deny that Heinrich von Halle was responsible for the preservation of her Revelations for posterity. She was frequently asked for advice and elucidation of difficulties, according to letters written as replies and embodied in the text. Much of the didactic material, especially in the last part of Das fliessende Licht, was obviously occasioned by a desire on the part of others to receive instruction from so famous an exponent of the religious life.

But there is also evidence throughout the text that she called down upon her head the hostility of some very powerful people by her persistent, fearless and sometimes rancorous criticism of their way of life. These people belonged for the most part to the secular clergy of Magdeburg, and were hardly likely to accept correction from a lay person and a woman at that.³⁸ These are some of the most outspoken of her denunciations: "God calls the Cathedral clergy goats, because their flesh reeks of impurity before the eternal truth of His Holy Trinity" (dc got die tumeherren heisset boke, dc tut er darumb, dc ir vleisch stinket von der vnkuscheit in der ewigen warheit, vor siner heligen drivaltekeit - VI:3). They may be transformed into "lambs" only by "holy penitence and faithful obedience in confession." (die helige busse und der getruwe rat in der bihte - VI:3).

"Alas for the crown of the holy priesthood, how art thou fallen! Thou hast left no more than the remnant of

thyself - namely, the power of thy office, with which thou wagest war upon God and upon His chosen friends." (O we, crone der heligen pfafheit, wie bistu verschwunden, joch hastu nicht mere dene das vnbeval din selbes, dc ist pfaffeliche gewalt, damitte vihtestu vf got und sine vserwelten vrunde - VI:21).

"Whoever does not know the way to hell, let him look at the depraved clergy, hastening straightway thither." (Swen den helleweg nit weis, der sihet an die verbosete pfafheit, wie rehte ir weg zu der helle gat - VI:21).

She mourns for the Church, whose gold is tarnished "in the filth of unchastity" (in dem pfule der vnkuscheit), whose truth is brought to nought "in the lies of this world" (in der lugine dirre welte), who has lost "the flowers of all virtues" (die blumen allertugenden - VI:21).

The question arises as to how Mechthild came by the independence of thinking which led her to such modes of expression as these and others which undoubtedly could have led to the fearsome suspicion of heresy.* The answer is to be found in her status as a Beguine. She felt entitled to go further than the average lay-person, because she did not belong, as a Beguine, to the secular world. Nor did she feel herself to be under the restrictions of those who belonged to a recognized Order. This is what Hans Urs von Balthasar says upon this subject:

*These will be examined at a later stage.

"As a Beguine, Mechthild stands between the spiritual life and the secular life. She has decided to abandon everything for God; however, she has not entered the shelter of a convent. She carries out her task unprotected, in an outwardly exposed state which corresponds to the inward one, persecuted, suspected and contradicted by a powerful clergy."³⁹

"This unique position permits her to exhibit more clearly in her person and in her work those contemporary tensions which are not to be seen in the works of others who were more narrowly constrained by the framework of their time, their culture and their perceptions of life."⁴⁰

"As a Beguine, belonging neither to the secular world nor to a recognized Order, she jealously guards her spiritual independence."⁴¹

In order to understand what was involved in living the life of a Beguine, it is necessary to examine the development of this important religious movement among women, particularly as it manifested itself in Germany.

Chapter I

Notes

¹E.g. J. Ancelot Hustache, Mechthilde de Magdebourg, 1207-1282, étude de psychologie religieuse (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1926); E. Michael, Zur Chronologie der Mystikerin Mechthild von Magdeburg (Innsbruck: Zfk. Theol., vol. 25, 1901); H. Neumann, Beiträge zur Textgeschichte des 'Fließenden Lichts der Gottheit' und zur Lebensgeschichte Mechthilds von Magdeburg, in Altdeutsche und Altniederländische Mystik, edited by Kurt Ruh (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964); W. Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik im Mittelalter, nach den Quellen untersucht und dargestellt (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1874-1893).

²Lux Divinitatis, originating in the Dominican monastery at Halle soon after Mechthild's death, consisted of Books I-IV only. It was published in 1877 in Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae II by the Benedictines of Solesmes, Paris, 1877.

³84 Nuns at the Convent of Helfta.

⁵Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik im Mittelalter, op. cit., vol. I, p. 91, footnote.

⁶This must be seen as a reasonable assumption only, not the certainty Preger takes it to be. See Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik op. cit., p. 91, "Seit sie von der Welt Urlaub nahm (als Begine nach Magdeburg ging) sind damals 20 Jahre verflossen."

⁷This heading to the Foreword is given in Mechthild von Magdeburg - Das fließende Licht der Gottheit, transcribed into Modern German by Margot Schmidt, (Einsiedeln, Zürich & Köln: Benziger Verlag, 1955), p. 48. This Brother Heinrich is identified as Heinrich von Halle, redactor and collator of Mechthild's manuscript, and possibly the one who translated it into Latin.

⁸"Those" refers to Mechthild von Hackeborn, references in Liber specialis gratiae, II:42, V:3, 6; and to Gertrude the Great, references in Legatus divinae pietatis, V:7. This material is identified on p. 422 of Margot Schmidt's transcription.

⁹The Latin version confirms this line: Cum senuisset soror M. dixit.

¹⁰The word ellende, according to H. Neumann, Altdeutsche und altniederländische Mystik, op. cit., p. 202,

was used by Mechthild in its original sense of the state of being far from home, in unfamiliar surroundings. Neumann adds: "Life at a distance from all family connections is in accordance with the old ascetic demands of the vita apostolica." (*ibid.*, p. 230).

¹¹Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

¹²H.J.D. Denzinger, Enchiridion symbolorum (Friburg Brigoviae, Herder & Co., 1960), p. 272.

¹³See V:34, V:24, and especially IV:20, IV:21, IV:22.

¹⁴For opinions of other scholars, see Neumann, Beiträge zur Textgeschichte, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

¹⁵M. Schmidt, M. v. M., Das fl. L., *op. cit.*, p. 48.

¹⁶See Neumann, Beiträge zur Textgeschichte, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

¹⁷Revelationes, p. 515, quoted by Neumann, *ibid.* See also IV:26.

¹⁸E.g. Neumann's claim that Mechthild draws upon personal experience when she says that the stern discipline imposed upon women of nobility costs them dearly (III:5).

¹⁹J. Ancelet Hustache, Mechthilde de Magdebourg, *op. cit.*, p. 52. Neumann dismisses this theory as "ein recht vages Argument!"

²⁰Translated from Latin given in Gall Morel, Offenbarungen der Schwester Mechthild von Magdeburg, oder Das fließende Licht der Gottheit (reprint Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), p. 1.

²¹H. Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter, (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1961), p. 328.

²²E.g.'s: I:46; II:4; II:7; III:15; IV:12; IV:23; V:33; V:35; VI:27; VI:36; VI:43; VII:2, 4, 10, 11, 25, 26, 35, 60.

²³Heinrich von Halle was Lector in Neuruppin, joined the Dominican monastery which was founded in Halle in 1271, and died soon after 1294. He was one of the Dominicans of the thirteenth century who established the Order's reputation for learning. Preger's supposition that he was a follower of the Joachite movement (Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik im Mittelalter, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 94) and that he passed on its doctrines to

Mechthild is unlikely in view of the Dominicans' anti-heretical stance and the fact that he himself wrote a book Wider di keczir (Against Heresy), now lost. His significance rests entirely upon his collating and editing of Das fliessende Licht. Towards the end of his life he undertook another very similar task - he read and evaluated Book I of the Insinuationes of Gertrude the Great in Helfta. He is known to have had connections with important contemporaries, well-known to many theologians of his time - to Wichmann von Arnstein, author of mystical writings, founder of Neuruppin, to many Cistercian abbots, to the Dominican Heinrich von Mulhausen, to Dietrich von Apolda, biographer of St. Dominic. The endorsement of a man of such background makes Mechthild's work of even greater historical value, especially in view of evidence that he had himself weighed and judged its worth very carefully (see Mechthild's letter to Heinrich, V:12). [This information was translated in abridged form from p. 432, Mechthild von Magdeburg transcribed into modern German by Margot Schmidt. Acknowledgement was made to R. Hünicken, Studien über Heinrich von Halle, Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kunst, 1935, pp. 102-117.]

²⁴Both the Latin and the German versions of the Prologue give this figure - Morel, Offenbarungen der Schwester Mechthild von Magdeburg, op. cit., pp. 1-2.

²⁵See Neumann, Beiträge zur Textgeschichte, op. cit., pp. 229 f.

²⁶Ibid., p. 228.

²⁷Ibid., p. 232.

²⁸Ibid., p. 233.

²⁹Ibid., p. 233.

³⁰Schmidt transcription, note on p. 419; "Dieser Abschnitt stammt sicher von Heinrich von Halle, dessen Redaktion mit dem sechsten Buch endet."

³¹See Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik, op. cit., p. 95.

³²So described by G. Lüers, Marienverehrung mittelalterlicher Nonnen (München: Verlag v. E. Reinhardt, 1923), p. 39.

³³Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik, op. cit., p. 95.

³⁴Ibid., p. 96.

³⁵Hans Urs von Balthasar, Mechthilds kirchlicher Auftrag (Margot Schmidt transcription of Das fliessende Licht, op. cit., p. 20).

³⁶"Ibi accepit illam felicissimam communionem et veram ac dulcissimam Dei associationem et fruitionem omniumque laborum et dolorum plenam et superabundantissimam remunerationem, de qua magis credere quam cogitare aliquid potest cor humanum." (Mechthild von Hackeborn, Liber specialis gratiae, V:3). See Wilhelm Oehl: Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit, im Auswahl übersetzt, (Kempten-München, 1911), Introduction, p. 16.

³⁷See Margot Schmidt, p. 432, reference to R. Hunicken, Studien über Heinrich v. Halle, op. cit.

³⁸See Wilhelm Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik, op. cit., p. 94: "die Sittenlosigkeit und Unwissenheit ertrug die Strafe aus dem Munde eines Laien, eines Weibes nicht."

³⁹Hans Urs von Balthasar, Mechthilds kirchlicher Auftrag, op. cit., p. 19.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 22.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 27.

Chapter II

The History of the Beguine Movement in Germany

Three men played important roles in the foundation of the early women's movement which was later to be known as the Beguine movement. The first of these was Lambert le Bègue, priest of Liège, who openly criticised the clergy of the period, called for a return to the vita apostolica, and translated devotional literature into the vernacular for the edification of pious lay people whom he encouraged to form communities and meet for Sunday services. He became the focal point for those among the laity who yearned to follow a life of simple piety, and especially for many mulieres sanctae, some the daughters of barons, knights and nobles, who are said to have settled in the vicinity of his church in Liège, in what was later regarded as the first beguinage¹. The name beguine has always been considered to have its etymology in Lambert's sobriquet "le Bègue", but recent research has cast some doubt upon this theory, and has offered the more sinister interpretation that beguine is actually a contraction and corruption of Albigensian and means simply "heretic"².

Lambert died around 1187, and the Hospital of St. Christopher and the beguinage attached to it were reorganized in the year 1211. The second of three men concerned with the early beguine movement took part in the reorganization.³ This was John de Nivelles, who originated from Nivelles,

the birthplace of Maria de Oignies, considered by many to have been the first famous Beguine. John was a close friend of Jacques de Vitry, Maria's biographer, and was described by the latter as "the light, teacher and father of the entire diocese."⁴ Like Lambert, he was dedicated to the ideal of the vita apostolica, and very concerned about the welfare of the mulieres religiosas at the time of the sack of Liège by Henry I of Brabant. He was a sympathetic and helpful friend to the community of women in this first beguinage of St. Christopher, and appears to have recognized that the Frauenfrage⁵ was already acute and likely to become even worse, since he is known to have promoted also the establishment of Cistercian nunneries and extraregular communities.

John de Nivelles died in 1233, but the mulieres religiosas he had sought to protect did not lack another champion. Jacques de Vitry, John's friend and admirer, took upon himself the task of defender of these women, and a powerful and persuasive intercessor upon their behalf he proved to be. He pleaded their cause in Rome, on the occasion of his consecration by Honorius III as Bishop of Acre in July, 1216⁶, requesting for all pious women in the diocese of Liège and in all France and Germany, "papal permission to live together in communal dwellings, and to strengthen each other in moral living by mutual exhortations ... that is, to form monastic communities for women without attachment to an existing order and without acceptance of

an approved Rule, together with edifying sermons, homilies, etc."⁷ His determination to secure this permission for the mulieres religiosae of Belgium, France and Germany had been strengthened by his conviction that they were "motivated by the same spirit as the Franciscans of Umbria and the Humiliati of Lombardy, whose dedication to the ideals of voluntary poverty and chastity he had observed on his journey to Rome. The knowledge which these groups gained through Jacques de Vitry of the existence of other likeminded seekers after a new piety may well have influenced the later religious development of the thirteenth century, when the northern and southern groups met and merged."⁸ His special interest in the Beguine movement comes through very strongly in his biography of Maria de Oignies,⁹ considered to have had a "beneficent practical effect in his own day and ... an excellent document of the early formative period of the new piety and of the Beguine movement."¹⁰

It is evident then, that the movement was well established by the middle of the thirteenth century, whether it actually had its beginnings in Lambert le Bègue's parish of St. Christopher, in Nivelles, or in Maria's cell at Oignies. But no commentator upon the origins of the movement ever suggests that it was a well organized, cohesive affair. At all times it remained "a poorly organized, almost amorphous movement with each community possessing its own statutes and regulations; which, although similar in aim and content, never transcended diocesan lines at best These

unorganized groups of ecstatic women who were originally called mulieres religiosae nevertheless adopted under the guidance of a priest or confessor the new type of conversio free from monastic dependence. By personal choice they conformed to evangelical precepts and carried on works of charity."¹¹

Since there was no discernible leader in the early thirteenth century, who might have acted as a focal point for women in the north who yearned after the vita apostolica, the question arises as to where these women had come from, or more precisely, where their likeminded predecessors of the previous century had followed a similar ideology which might have provided the soil which nurtured the roots of the Beguine movement. This question is dealt with by Grundmann in the fourth chapter of Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter.

The religious women's movement (religiöse Frauenbewegung) from which the Beguine movement itself probably developed had existed partly in orders and convents and partly in irregular, lay circles. Many of them had entered convents established by the Premonstratensians¹² to live under a Rule that was peculiarly suited to their desire to lead the ascetic life. From the beginning there were also Premonstratensian nuns and "for a time some of the abbeys were dual - an abbey of canons and an abbey of nuns sharing a common church."¹³ In fact, women were not simply tolerated in these establishments but were made exceedingly welcome. According to one twelfth century writer¹⁴ women of all

classes, from farmers' daughters to wealthy widows of noble estate flocked to these monasteries in such numbers that it almost appeared as if the Canons Regular were attempting single-handedly to provide a solution for the Frauenfrage.

But difficulties inevitably arose, especially with the double-cloister concept (see n. 10), and "the Premonstratensians learned that it was by no means always pure enthusiasm and devotion to the ascetic ideal that filled their cloisters with novices. Very often, unworthy elements pushed their way in, which they had trouble getting rid of"¹⁵ When successive chapter-decrees closed the doors of Premonstratensian monasteries to women, they turned to the Cistercians, so that Cistercian nunneries "multiplied like stars in the sky ... maidens flocked to them, widows hastened, and married women with the consent of their husbands, exchanging carnal marriage for spiritual."¹⁶ In Germany particularly, in the first quarter of the thirteenth century, over 150 nunneries are said to have sprung up which were either affiliated to the Cistercian Order or followed the same constitution.¹⁷

Between the years 1213 and 1228, many statutes¹⁸ were passed aimed at the prevention of the same irregularities which had resulted in the prohibition of the female presence in Premonstratensian houses, but to no apparent avail. By a decree of the general chapter of 1228, the Cistercians refused to allow the affiliation of convents to the Order¹⁹ - a terrible blow for women who were motivated by a true

desire to lead the vita apostolica, and to seek the solace, in such a life, of communion with their own kind. Thus they had recourse to communities which "did not belong to an order, did not follow any specified Rule, but were bound in all strictness, to fulfil the demands of feminine piety in chastity and poverty, prayers and fasting."²⁰ - They became Beguines.

By the middle of the thirteenth century the beguine movement had spread very rapidly: Suspicion of heresy had earlier caused the women to seek the protection of the Curia, as we have already seen, and in 1233 Pope Gregory IX took them under his protection by his proclamation Gloria virginalem - protection renewed in 1246 by Innocent IV and in 1262 by Urban IV. They were recorded as having the popular designation of "Beguines" in the archives of Köln,²¹ in which city, towards the middle of the thirteenth century, they numbered over a thousand, with as many again in the surrounding areas. Their presence was recorded in the Mainz diocese at about the same time and before long they had spread as far as the south-eastern border of German-speaking domains.²² The proliferation of beguinages, at this period was undoubtedly due in part to the influx of women who would earlier have entered Premonstratensian or Cistercian houses, but other factors must also be taken into account. Albert Hauck, historian of the German church, considered the rapid spread of the movement to have been prompted largely by a revulsion against the neglect of their

flocks by some of the clergy of the time. He admitted also that "the social conditions of this period helped to prepare the ground for the existence of communities of this kind, but surely their growth would not have expanded so rapidly if they had not met the needs of an element already predisposed to religious excitement. The religious element was, in the final analysis, the decisive one."²³

The evidence certainly points to a diversified social base for the Beguine movement. Lambert le Bègue's first community in Liège was said to be composed solely of women of gentle birth, and many thirteenth century Beguines were well-to-do, living in their own houses on their own income, charging a fee to those who joined them; in order to defray the costs of their upkeep. There were also three beguinages in Strassburg endowed by wealthy women - zum Turm, von Innenheim, and von Offenburg,²⁴ whose statutes are on record. In a report on the Beguines in Köln, Johannes Asen established that out of 1700 references to family names of women in the beguinages between 1223 and 1450, almost all the well-known patrician families in Köln were represented. The zealous pursuit of voluntary poverty by these upper-class women led to the founding of more than a hundred new beguinages in Köln between 1250 and 1350²⁵. But other Beguines were poor, living in rented houses, supporting themselves by manual work, mainly spinning and weaving, caring for the sick and preparing the dead for burial. Begging was exceptional - in fact, it was claimed by one

observer that "true beguines never begged." (gebettelt haben rechte Beginen nie)²⁶.

So rapid was the spread of the Beguine movement in Germany that their total number was estimated by Bishop Johann von Strassburg in 1318 at over 200,000²⁷. Allowing for exaggeration, there can still be no doubt that in thirteenth-century Germany there must have been many thousands of women living in voluntary poverty, forming a stratum of society which was very sensitive to religious feelings and impressions. And though the much-debated Frauenfrage may have motivated many to become Beguines, they would certainly have before them, once admitted, the examples of those who truly pursued religious ideals and could not fail to profit from the knowledge of the ideals of the community, the ordering of daily life, the rules imposed upon them, the participation in services and the contacts with monks and priests to whose direction and supervision the beguinage was assigned. For most of them such exposure would be beneficial - as Hauck comments, the majority retained their firm roots in the Church (doch blieb die grosse Menge auf dem kirchlichen Boden). For the minority there was a very real danger that the opposite effect might be produced - that participation in religious exercises which were not conducted under the constant scrutiny of the ecclesiastical authority might give rise to a self-willed piety which could thrive only outside the Church. If this did in fact happen, it is not surprising that later strands of the movement

became inextricably intertwined with those of the Brethren of the Free Spirit, and brought upon the heads of all the dark suspicion of heresy.

Reference has already been made to the loosely-organized and almost amorphous nature of the movement. They became what Grundmann calls an odd kind of intermediary order half way between the ecclesiastical orders and the laity (*Eine seltsame Zwischenform*), with their right to lead the vita religiosa recognized by papal and episcopal protection, a media via, half-religious, half-secular, having something in common with monastic orders yet remaining informal, with no irrevocable vows prescribed.²⁸ They had no mother-house and were subject to a local pastor assigned to them by magistrates or clergy, usually a Dominican or Franciscan. Obedience to house rules and to the "magistra" was mandatory, as was the observance of the four "pillars" of chastity, poverty, humility and charity. They could leave the beguinage whenever they chose, with the stipulation that they should forfeit whatever they took in if their departure took place after the expiration of the probationary period of one year.²⁹ They had some kind of habit (*habitus beginalem*)³⁰, donned after one year, and engaged upon labore manuum, always in cities and towns, for this was undoubtedly an urban movement. During the first half of the thirteenth century they were held in high esteem by such outstanding figures as Robert of the Sorbonne and Robert Grosseteste, who in a sermon praised them thus: "Begine

sunt perfectissime et sanctissime religionis, quia vivunt propriis laboribus, et non onerunt exactionibus mundum."³¹

A change in attitude towards the Beguines became evident when William St. Amour included them in his polemics against the religious poverty movements. He referred to them as "quaedam mulieres iuvenes, quas appellant Beguinas, per totum regnum iam diffusae."³² He claimed that though they were young and able-bodied, they did not work, but lived on alms, and could not be trusted to keep their vow of chastity, being moreover altogether too familiar with the Dominican priests who heard their confessions and preached to them. Other contemporary writers such as de Coincy³³ and Rutebouef³⁴ satirised the beguine way of life. In 1273 Pope Gregory X commissioned individual bishops and leaders of the great Orders to present briefs naming the problems of the Church in their districts as they saw them, and suggesting remedies and reforms. Three documents are extant, submitted by Hubert de Romans, Dominican, in southern France, Bishop Bruno von Olmutz, in eastern Germany, and Simon von Tournai, Franciscan, in Belgium.³⁵ All three complained of the activities of the mulieres religiosae pauperes, though only Simon von Tournai actually used the word "Beguines". They recommended that religious feminine movements should not be allowed unless organized by an approved Order, because these women were endangering themselves by wandering freely about, and endangering others by concerning themselves with theological questions of which

they knew nothing by expounding upon religious scripts written in the vernacular - French biblical commentaries and even Holy Writ, put out by book-dealers in Paris. This latter accusation would appear to lend credence to Grundmann's contention³⁶ that the women's movement had been confused with and possibly infiltrated by the heresy of the Brethren of the Free Spirit, condemned in Paris in 1210 but by no means eradicated. The Council of Lyons of 1274 repeated the prohibition made by the Fourth Lateran Council against the establishment of new orders which were not founded on an approved Rule, but this measure could hardly have been expected to be efficacious against the Beguines, since they had never laid claim to being a regular Order. In any case there were many much more pressing problems in the Church than the matter of differentiating between the true followers of a movement rooted in asceticism and piety and the false hangers-on and imitators. It was left to a diocesan synod held at Eichstatt in the 1280's to discuss the whole question of the Beguines and to attempt to differentiate between the true and the false. Clearly there were two groups - "one part - without a doubt the greater part - led a well-regulated life in the beguinages, often situated in the vicinity of the monasteries of the mendicant Orders, and supported themselves by manual labour, while the other part gave good cause for complaints because they did not remain in seclusion, but wandered up and down in a disorderly fashion, preferring to live off alms. This separation into two groups was to

have grave consequences for the future of the whole beguine movement. The common name of Beguine for the two manifestations, so very different in nature, and the lack of a basic, organized distinction between them, rendered ineffective all measures directed against the 'irregular', wandering Beguines. The 'regular' Beguines were later involved in the general catastrophe, through no fault of their own, and it was only after a long period of crisis that a clarification of the relationship between the two groups took place."³⁷

As a result of this general agitation against their movement, the prominent beguinages issued statutes declaring the rules laid down by their establishments. The first to do so were the three beguinages of Strassburg - zum Turm, von Innenheim, and von Offenburg, followed by beguinages at Hildesheim, Halberstadt, Worms and Wesel. All statutes stressed that begging was absolutely forbidden and that the houses were to be maintained partly from proceeds of the sisters' properties and partly from the proceeds of their own work. This prohibition served a dual purpose, preventing the Beguines from wandering abroad and thereby arousing suspicions concerning their morality, and also keeping them industriously employed in the beguinage. The very fact that all beguinages stressed this prohibition clearly indicates the conspicuous presence of female vagrants whose supplications for alms were made under the appellation of "beguine".

The beguinages were not altogether successful in their attempts at putting their houses in order, or, assuming

Grundmann's theory to be correct, in their attempts to prevent themselves from being identified with another group flourishing at the same period. And certainly there appears to have been a change in the type of women who sought to join the beguine movement, in Germany at least. Voluntary poverty, religious in its essence and aim, had lost its appeal³⁸. Many joined the beguinage from economic motives, and also as the thirteenth century progressed there became evident among their opponents an ever-increasing tendency to confuse the Beguines and Beghards with those who propounded and supported the heresy of the Free Spirit.

The heresy of the Free Spirit, which appeared in the latter part of the thirteenth century in Swabia, in cities of the Rhineland, in Switzerland, the Netherlands and Italy³⁹, was equally as diffuse and unorganized as the Beguines had always been. Wilhelm Preger compared their doctrine⁴⁰ to the Amalrican heresy,⁴¹ and came to the conclusion that they were one and the same, and that the Brethren of the Free Spirit were only too ready to accept the general appellation of Beguine or Beghard with which people were already familiar as a designation for those who wandered about begging, professing strange religious beliefs and doing whatever their natures prompted them to do. And so it came about that at the beginning of the fourteenth century the names Beguines and Beghards were used interchangeably with that of the Brethren of the Free Spirit, and drastic action taken against the latter involved persecution of those older

communities which had so far, quite deservedly, lived free from molestation and the fear of being accused of heresy.⁴²

Synodal decisions⁴³ of the early fourteenth century produced a systematic and persistent persecution which appears to have ended only with the eradication of the heresy of the Free Spirit along with the suppression of many strands of the beguine movement with which it had become so hopelessly intertwined. Some Beguines and Beghards are known to have gone to the stake as a result of proceedings taken against them between 1317 and 1319⁴⁴. Two decrees of the Council of Vienna, called the Clementine decrees, enacted 1311-1312, added the weight of papal sanction to what amounted to "a hundred years war"⁴⁵ waged by the German church against the Beguines and Beghards.

The first decree, Cum de quibusdam mulieribus, warned the Beguines to abandon their pursuit of the communal life without vows and without profession of an approved Rule. The reason given was that these women engaged upon disputation concerning the Trinity and the Divine essence and spread erroneous views regarding the articles of faith and the sacraments of the Church, deceiving many simple souls and enticing them to their ruin. They were commanded to abandon this way of life and live like other Christians, on pain of immediate excommunication if they did not obey.⁴⁶

The text of the second decree, Ad nostrum qui desiderantur, shows how deep-rooted was the confusion which existed concerning the Beguine movement and the heresy of

the Free Spirit. The reason for the enactment of this second Clementine decree was that it was considered necessary to list individual errors and prove their falsity.⁴⁷ The introduction to the decree as given by Denzinger states that "already in many preceding councils of Germany the communities of the Beguines and Beghards were suspected of heresy, being infected with a certain doctrine of the Brethren of the Free Spirit." Eight errors are listed: that man can attain perfection in this present life, that he need then no longer fast and pray, having already subjugated the senses, that he is then no longer bound by the precepts of the Church, that he has then achieved a state of blessedness, that every rational being may achieve this state, that the perfected spirit is freed from the necessity for virtuous acts, that such freedom extends also to giving way to sexual temptation, and that it is no longer obligatory to stand or show reverence at the time of the Elevation of the Host.⁴⁸

As a result of the Clementine decrees of 1311-1312, many genuine Beghards and Beguines who had attached themselves to the Third Order of the Franciscans were forced to give up the habit and return to the world. In 1320 the Bishop of Strassburg complained to Pope John XXII (1316-1324) that even some recluses of 50 years' standing were being ejected from their monastic houses and forced to return to secular life, and he asked for further clarification of the constitution of the Council of Vienne on this matter. In

his reply, probably in 1321, John XXII said that only the heretical brethren of the Free Spirit fell under the condemnation of the Clementine decrees and that others should be left unmolested⁴⁹. This was the "saving clause" which would ultimately save the Beguines from extinction.

In his bull Cum de mulieribus of 1320, Pope John XXII showed his concern for "many of these women, called Beguines, who run the gamut of virtue, live respectably, attend church frequently, obey their superiors and care naught for disputes nor fall into error. They are not deceived, nor do they deceive others, by false opinions, opposed to evangelical truth. On the contrary, they live in wholesome simplicity; some reside in their own houses, others with relatives, some rent their dwellings, others live in common with a respectable family: finally there are those who, driven by necessity and for closer observance of chastity, dwell together in the several beguinages. Heretofore they have lived and continue to live virtuously so that we have never been able and cannot now bring against them any complaint or reproach. For that reason it has been called to our attention how unjust it is to confound under the same penalty the innocent with the guilty"⁵⁰

Even this papal endorsement did not save the Beguines, so specifically named by John XXII, from the inquisitorial processes of the fourteenth century. Appeals against the indiscriminate persecution which still apparently linked them to heretical movements were made to the curia. In 1374

and 1377, Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378) issued bulls which complemented John XXII's Cum de mulieribus, though Gregory avoided the use of the word "beguines" and referred instead to "poor people of either sex" (*personae pauperes utriusque sexus*). These bulls stated that poor men and women in Germany, Brabant and Flanders who were free of the suspicion of heresy were to be protected from persecution by bishops and inquisitors, and if they had been excommunicated were to be restored to their status.⁵¹

Implementation of the papal edicts was not always forthcoming during succeeding years. Many beguines, as a result of sporadic inquisitorial attention, became Franciscan or Dominican tertiaries. Persecution did not altogether cease until the Council of Constance gave its approval for the concept of semi-religious houses.⁵²

It is sad and ironic that beguinages eventually degenerated from being primarily religious in nature, as they had been in those far-off days of the mulieres religiosas, to becoming retreats for the poor, the sick and the old, concerned not with theological questions or mystical searchings, but with socio-economic problems and the stringencies of daily life.

Chapter II

Notes

¹E.W. McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture (New Brunswick & New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1954), p. 71.

²For an interesting examination of this question see Herbert Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter, op. cit., p. 181-182.

³J.F. Hinnebusch, Historia Occidentalis of Jacques de Vitry: A Critical Edition (Fribourg: University Press, 1972), p. 268.

⁴"totius episcopatus lucerna, doctor et pater spiritualis" - quoted from Life of Maria de Oignies by E. McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 43.

⁵The term Frauenfrage is used to indicate the problem which resulted in medieval times from the preponderance of women and the question of how they were to be supported in a society which considered women's only vocation to be marriage. The knowledge that this problem did exist has undoubtedly given rise to controversy among scholars as to whether the feminine religious movement was motivated by religious and spiritual urges or by socioeconomic considerations. If the latter motives were the underlying factors, then a movement such as that of the Beguines might have appealed to women on two counts, both quite distinct from any religious overtones - namely, as a means of subsistence for women whose only "true" vocation was denied them, and as a kind of refuge among those of similar underprivileged status - what E. McDonnell calls a "body of social protest, springing from economic need on the part of the minores and directed against the maiores". (McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 81). In his excellent chapter "Social Origins: Frauenfrage", McDonnell examines the arguments of scholars on this question. In particular, he quotes from Karl Bücher, Die Frauenfrage im Mittelalter (Tübingen: Verlag der H. Lauppschen Buchhandlung, Reprint 1910), and from H. Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen, op. cit.

Karl Bücher, who according to McDonnell "brought into sharp focus the Frauenfrage of the Middle Ages on which much of German scholarship concerning the regular and extra-regular concentrated ..." (McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 83) gives various reasons for the disparity of the ratio between males and females. His figures are from the middle of the 13th century to the end of the 15th, taken from census returns for Frankfurt am Main, Nürnberg and Basel, and these figures, says Bücher, reveal

consistently such a significant surplus of adult females over males of the same age that the Frauenfrage in the last two centuries of the medieval period must indeed have been a very vexed question (Bücher, Die Frauenfrage, op. cit., p. 5). Three reasons are pin-pointed by Bücher. The first is "the numerous threats to the lives of men in medieval towns, as a result of constant feuds, civic disputes and hazardous journeys for commercial purposes"; the second is "the higher mortality rate among men during repeated epidemics of the plague."; the third is "the intemperance of males in all forms of excess" (Bücher, op. cit., p. 8). Other factors to be taken into account are the unhealthy urban conditions in which many men worked (Bücher, op. cit., p. 8), the question of celibacy, which caused quite significant numbers of men to forswear the married state in order to fulfil monastic prerequisites (Bücher, op. cit., p. 9), and guild regulations which forbade marriage to apprentices (Bücher, op. cit., p. 10).

Bücher poses the question: what became in medieval times of the numerous women, who were prevented from following their 'natural calling'? (Bücher, op. cit., p. 10). There was no shortage of jobs in trades connected with the weaving of wool and linen, the manufacture of garments of all kinds and of gold and leather objects, as well as all the traditional household-oriented work. In fact, says Bücher, "in general we may accordingly maintain that in medieval times women were not excluded from any trade which their physical strength allowed them to follow" (Bücher, op. cit., p. 19). There were no fewer than 200 different jobs open to them (Bücher, op. cit., p. 21). But the preponderance of females in the population was so marked that there were still those who, lacking the support of men, could not find means of subsistence and for these "the next refuge was the cloister, and from the second half of the 13th to the 14th century there was a striking increase in the number of urban convents for women everywhere in Germany" (Bücher, op. cit., p. 24).

Those who could not accommodate themselves to the taking of vows joined forces to conduct a common household or Sammlung, designated often as Samenung (Bücher, op. cit., p. 27). They were from the beginning in close contact with the church - like all organisations of medieval times, whatever their purpose (Bücher, op. cit., p. 27). Under the spiritual direction of the Dominicans they lived a quiet, peaceful, but also spiritually stimulating life (Bücher, op. cit., p. 29).

Bücher makes a distinction between these Sammlungen of well-to-do women and the beguinages proper, which he considered to be "charitable foundations, designed to aid the indigent and the unmarried." (McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 84). Most of them were founded between 1250 and 1350 and, continues Bücher, "it is indicative of their worldly character that they were all named after

their founders. Their number in individual towns and in the vicinity of towns was very large. In Frankfurt there were 57 known by name (about 3% of all dwellings put together), in Strassburg 60, in Basel over 30 ..." (Bücher, op. cit., p. 34). The inhabitants of these houses supported themselves by manual work and engaged upon all kinds of charitable works within the community. They did not have any special religious duties other than those of all honourable women (Bücher, op. cit., p. 40) and their chief connection with the church arose from the efforts of the church itself to bring such a widespread institution under its supervision and direction. (Bücher, op. cit., p. 40).

McDonnell does not deny that "the Frauenfrage was essentially socio-economic" (McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 84). But he maintains that it "also involved a religious question, the pastoral care of women... Competent scholarship must recognize the socio-economic factor ... but at the same time will acknowledge the potentiality of religious motivation for decision ... Genuineness and depth of this religious motivation may be measured by social caritative activity ..." (McDonnell, op. cit., pp. 84-86). McDonnell also calls upon the opinions of other scholars in support of his argument, citing Herbert Grundmann (Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter, op. cit., p. 196), as follows: "Grundmann argues the point cogently: this popular religious movement did not constitute a protest of the poor and downtrodden against economic well-being, the accumulation of wealth and luxury, or the beginnings of capitalism, for this mystical excitement was particularly strong in precisely those circles which could have benefited the most from material things. No more than Peter Waldo, the Humiliati or the Franciscans did the early beguines protest against the abundance of others; they voluntarily withdrew from their patrimony for the sake of the evangelical ideal, the renunciation of the goods of the world, and in search of voluntary poverty." (quoted by McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit.; p. 88).

McDonnell also makes reference to the well-known comment made by Albert Hauck in his assessment of the effect of social conditions upon the growth of the Beguine movement. Hauck insisted that "the religious element was, in the final analysis, the decisive one." [... Das religiöse Element war doch zuletzt das entscheidende.] (Hauck, Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1953) vol. IV, p. 931).

⁶ Philipp Funk, Jakob von Vitry, Leben und Werke (Hildesheim: Verlag Dr. H.A. Gerstenberg, 1973), p. 39.

⁷ Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen, op. cit., p. 170.

⁸ Ibid., p. 171.

⁹ Maria de Oignies, 1178-1213, the daughter of well-to-do parents, married at an early age, but very soon felt compelled to renounce all sexual desire and live a celibate life within the institution of marriage. According to Jacques de Vitry, her biographer, Maria's husband received an intimation from God that he should henceforth regard Maria as one entrusted to his care and protection, honouring her desire to preserve her chastity. (This ascetic type of marriage was apparently not at all uncommon in the Belgium of Maria's day, according to the prologue to her biography.) Maria and her husband then devoted themselves wholeheartedly to voluntary poverty and humility, applying all Maria's quite considerable fortune to the relief of the poor and the nursing of the sick at the leper-colony of Nivelles. Eventually, however, even this mode of life appeared to Maria to be tainted with traces of luxurious living, and she became obsessed by the desire to emulate the poverty of Jesus. Her proposal to wander through the countryside in rags as a beggar-woman aroused such horror and grief in the hearts of her friends and relatives that she was forced to abandon it. (Philipp Funk observes that Maria's biographer could not have had the Franciscans in mind, since he wrote Maria's biography before he became acquainted with the Franciscan ideals. The concept of absolute poverty was very much in the air at the time.)

Instead of wandering as a beggar, then, Maria did what seemed to her to be the next best thing in her pursuit of the ideals of poverty and humility - she became a Beguine. Her biography never expressly uses this appellation, but she is certainly described in the terms associated with Beguines. She supported herself by manual work, living in free association as a layperson with a few female companions, with occasional periods of seclusion. There is no doubt that her influence was great in Oignies and the surrounding district, and the entire Nivelles-Oignies area gained from her sojourn there a reputation for practical lay piety. She had a profound effect upon such men as John of Nivelles, John of Dinant, Theodore of Celles (founder of the Brethren of the Cross), and her biographer and ardent admirer, Jacques de Vitry, who describes fervently her mortifications of the flesh, intercessions for sinners, ecstatic experiences, stigmatisations, and evidence of divine protection. So convinced of her saintliness was he that he translated her bones on consecrating the new church at Oignies in 1226, granting indulgences to all who visited her tomb, and carried with him one of her fingers on his first journey to Rome, remaining convinced until his death in 1240 that this relic had saved him from shipwreck when crossing a river in Lombardy.

Although de Vitry's *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis* has all the characteristics of medieval hagiographical literature, a picture emerges from it of a very striking and impressive

figure - a visionary and a mystic, and are endowed with the same lyrical facility of expression which was later to be found in the writings of female mystics of the following centuries, particularly Gertrude and the two Mechthilds of Helfta.

[E.W. McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, (New Brunswick & New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1954), and Philipp Funk, Jakob von Vitry, Leben und Werke (Hildesheim: Verlag Dr. H.A. Gerstenberg, 1973).]

¹⁰J.F. Hinnebusch, Historia Occidentalis, op. cit., p. 11.

¹¹McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 59.

¹²The Prémonstratensian Order - Canons Regular of Prémontré - was founded by Norbert of Gennop, 1080-1134, an associate in later life of Bernard of Clairvaux. Norbert adopted the penitential life at the age of 35, upon conversion from a life of dissipation, and obtained a licence for itinerant preaching from Pope Gelasius II. He won disciples for his work of preaching in the vernacular to the laity and thus began his order of itinerant preaching ascetics. In 1119, Pope Calixtus II gave his support to Norbert's plan to start a foundation and engage in clerical reform. The first house was at Prémontré, where the canons, or parochial clergy, lived as strictly as did the monks of Cîteaux, the aim of the movement being to re-introduce into the lives of the clergy some measure of the asceticism which had always characterized monasticism, and to stress also the need for study. Numerous other houses followed, though Norbert himself became Archbishop of Magdeburg in 1126 and thereafter engaged in ecclesiastical politics in Germany in much the same way as Bernard in France. Prémonstratensian abbeys were founded in Poland and Scandinavia as well as in Germany and became seminaries for the training of parochial clergy.

The rule of the Order was Augustinian, with borrowings from the Benedictines and the Victorines, and the powers of the abbots, elected by the canons of the house, were very wide. And "from the beginning there were also Prémonstratensian nuns, and for a time some of the abbeys were dual - an abbey of canons and an abbey of nuns sharing a common church. From the beginning, too, there were lay brothers, homines illiterati, to whom was committed the exploitation of the domain and the necessary material cares of the abbey, and for whom, on that account, there was a milder rule of fast and abstinence." (abridged from Philip Hughes: A History of the Church, vol. 2, pp. 263-6, direct quotation on p. 266).

¹³Philip Hughes: History of the Church, vol. 2^d

(New York: Sheed & Ward, 1947-9), p. 266.

¹⁴Herman of Tournai, quoted by McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 103.

¹⁵Albert Hauck, Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1953), vol. IV, p. 379.

¹⁶Hinnebusch, Historia Occidentalis, op. cit., p. 117.

¹⁷Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter, op. cit., footnote, p. 182.

¹⁸Enumerated in detail by Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter, op. cit., pp. 204-205.

¹⁹They could still follow the Cistercian rule, but without supervision or spiritual direction by the Order.

²⁰Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter, op. cit., p. 176.

²¹Hauck, Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands, op. cit.; vol. IV, p. 932.

²²Ibid., p. 932.

²³Ibid., p. 931.

²⁴Idem, vol. V(1), p. 382.

²⁵McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 98.

²⁶Gerhard Uhlhorn, Die Christliche Liebesthätigkeit im Mittelalter (Stuttgart, 1884), p. 382.

²⁷Hauck, Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands, op. cit., vol. V(1), p. 426.

²⁸McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 123.

²⁹Recorded by J. Mosheim, De Beghardis et Beguinabus commentarius, quoted by Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen, op. cit., p. 345.

³⁰McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 138.

³¹Quoted by Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen, op. cit., pp. 132-133.

³²From Opera M. Guillelmi S. Amore, quoted by Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen, op. cit., p. 92.

³³Gautier de Coincy, 1177-1236, was prior of the abbey of St. Medard at Soissons, and a writer in the moral-didactic tradition. His most well-known work was Miracles de la Vierge, in which he displayed a profound veneration of the Virgin. Unlike his contemporary, Jacques de Vitry, he had neither time nor patience to try to understand lay spirituality. In his poem De seinte Leodade, he condemned the Beguines, referring to them as Papelardi, a name by which they were sometimes known, and calling in question their motives in claiming to live in poverty. See E.W. McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, (New Brunswick & New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1954), p. 463.

³⁴Rutebeuf, d. 1285; was a contemporary and strong supporter of Guillaume de Saint Amour in his campaign against the mendicant orders. It is possible that one of the "little books" in vernacular sermon and rhyme condemned by the Pope along with Saint Amour's work was written by Rutebeuf. He was a satirist and polemicist; interested mainly in contemporary issues and events. In Les Ordres de Paris and other poems, he roundly condemned the Paris Beguines. The beguinage, he said, offers an easy life for a woman. She can marry if she feels like it, never having taken perpetual vows. She can claim all kinds of divinely-inspired experiences, and no-one can deny them, since she is accountable to no-one. Affiliation with a beguinage confers the stamp of respectability, but under this cloak she may do as she pleases, even to the extent of being on a far too close footing with Dominicans, Carmelites and Barrés. Some may lead a good life, but "one must not put a glutton with fine wine, a hen with a cock, or a cat with the bacon." (Vie du Monde, vss. 154-157). See E.W. McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., pp. 465-473.

³⁵Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen, op. cit., pp. 334-340.

³⁶Ibid., p. 356.

³⁷Ibid., p. 344.

³⁸See McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 478.

³⁹Bihlmeyer and Tüchle, Kirchengeschichte, vol. II (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1962), p. 325.

⁴⁰Quoted from a document by an anonymous thirteenth-century writer and given as an appendix in Vol. I of Wilhelm

Preger's Geschichte der deutschen Mystik im Mittelalter,
op. cit.

⁴¹Amalrich de Bena, philosopher and theologian (died 1206), had come into conflict with the theological faculty in Paris because of his unorthodox views and teachings. He revived the neoplatonism of Johann Scotus Erigena and was also influenced by Aristotelian natural philosophy and its Arabic commentaries. His views are known mainly through those of his followers, particularly fourteen students of his, all clerics, condemned by the Paris Synod in 1210. According to depositions at the trial, they held the following views: salvation can only be attained by knowledge, not through faith and hope; heaven and hell are merely states of consciousness; man does not need the sacraments of the Church; man cannot sin because he partakes of the divine nature; in fact, he is God Incarnate, as Christ was. They called themselves Spirituals of the Age of the Holy Spirit, holding Joachimite views on the coming of this age and considering it their duty to preach the doctrine of the end-times and institute a religion that would embrace and change all mankind. According to a contemporary chronicle of the Cistercian monastery of Mailros, they went into the houses of widows preaching their dangerous doctrine, and it is very probable that the heresy went underground after 1210, infiltrating the religious women's movement and especially the circle of German Beguines - translated and abridged from Herbert Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter, op. cit., p. 355 foll.

The Amalrican heresy was condemned at the Fourth Lateran, 1215, but undoubtedly re-surfaced in that of the Brethren of the Free Spirit.

⁴²Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik, op. cit., vol. I, p. 216.

⁴³Detailed by Hauck, Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands, op. cit., p. 407 and McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 516.

⁴⁴R. Kieckhefer, Repression of Heresy in Medieval Germany (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), p. 23.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 27.

⁴⁶From Ewald Müller, Das Konzil von Vienne, 1311-12: seine Quelle und seine Geschichte (Münster, 1934), pp. 582-587.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 582-587.

⁴⁸Translated from H.J.D. Denzinger, Enchiridion

Symbolorum (Friburgi Brisgoviae; Herder & Co., 1960), p. 282.

49 E. Müller, Das Konzil von Vienne, op. cit., pp. 582-587.

50 McDonnell, The Beguines and Beghards, op. cit., p. 540.

51 Ibid., p. 570.

52 Ibid., p. 573.

Chapter III

Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit

In 1860, Dr. Carl Greith, later Bishop of Gallen, rescued Mechthild's book from the oblivion in which it had remained for many centuries after the end of the medieval period. His search for material previously unpublished for a book on German mysticism among medieval Dominicans brought to light MS #277 in the library at Einsiedeln in Switzerland. His book¹, published in 1861, contained a section², 55 pages in length, devoted to translated extracts from the first part of the MS³, whose author Greith wrongly designated as a Dominican sister. Recognizing its tremendous value for the history of religion as well as its literary worth, Greith urged the librarian at Einsiedeln, Professor Gall Morel, to transcribe the text from the Gothic miniscule of the early fourteenth century and publish the work in its entirety. This text⁴ appeared in 1869; it brought Mechthild's literary endeavours to the attention of scholars for the first time and still remains the definitive Middle High German version of Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit, even though many fragments and excerpts have come to light in other sources since Morel's edition appeared⁵. There is also much valuable material in his preface and introduction to the text, which has enabled subsequent scholars, beginning with Wilhelm Preger in 1869, to carry out serious research on Mechthild, and has also provided the necessary background

information for many brief outlines of the history of the text of Das fliessende Licht. This material stems from Morel's knowledge of the history of the valley of Einsiedeln in the medieval period, and from his familiarity with the MS in the Einsiedeln library.

According to Morel⁶, the high valley of Einsiedeln was the habitat in medieval times of pious women who chose to live as hermits, first in solitary style, then communally in four separate houses, under the designation of Forest Sisters (Waldschwester). The women in the house Vorder Au received this book in the fourteenth century, with a letter appended, written by one Heinrich von Rumerschein, of the church of St. Peter in Basel⁷. The letter runs thus: "To the Sisters in Vorder Au: You should know that this book, which was sent to you by the Sister of the Golden Ring, and which is called The Light of the Godhead, is to be safeguarded so that it may be of service to all the forest houses. It shall never leave the forest and shall be kept for one month in each house so that it may be passed from one to another whenever it is needed. Guard it especially carefully, because she* was especially faithful to you. Pray for me, her Father Confessor, though sadly unworthy. Sent by me, Herr Heinrich von Rumerschein, of St. Peter's in Basel." (Den swesteren in der vorderen owe: Ir sont wissen, dz das buch, dz vch wart von der zem Guldin Ringe,

*"She" evidently refers to Margaretha of the Golden Ring.

dz do heist, das liecht der Gotheit, des sont ir wol warnemen, also, das es soll dienen in alle huser des waldes und sol us dem walde niemer komen und sol ie ein monat in ein huse sin, also dz es vmb sol gan von eim in dz ander wenne man sin bedarf, vnd sont ir sin sunderlich behut sin, wand si sunderlich truwe zu vch hatte. Bitent och fur mich der ihr bichter was, leider vnwirdig. Von mir, Herr Heinrich von Rumerschein von Basel ze sant Peter - Morel, p. XX).

A similar note, also by Rumerschein, was appended to MS #268 in the Einsiedeln library, commending its contents, also of a mystical nature, to the sisters of one of the other three houses and indicating that Margaretha of the Golden Ring had sent this gift also. The donor was, according to Morel, the daughter of the visionary Nicholas von Basel, well-known in Basel as one of the Friends of God, and he gives further information from an edition of mystical writings published by Dr. Karl Schmidt in 1866, three years before Morel finished his transcription of MS #277⁸. According to this information Margaretha was a woman of good family in Basel, whose home, Zum goldenen Ring, was adjacent to a beguinage called Zum schwarzen Bären. She herself became a Beguine, probably under Dominican guidance, like Mechthild von Magdeburg, whose deep respect and reverence for that Order she evidently shared, since she bestowed her entire worldly fortune upon it⁹.

Rumerschein, then, sent this copy of Das fliessende Licht to the Forest Sisters of Vorder Au some time after the

death in 1376 of Margaretha of the Golden Ring*¹⁰. The connection between Margaretha of the Golden Ring and Margarete Ebner¹¹ is established in a letter written between 1347 and 1349, and preserved among the writings of the latter. In this letter¹² Margaretha of the Golden Ring complains to Margarete Ebner of her sorrow at the departure from Basel of their mutual friend Heinrich von Nördlingen. She misses his faithful guidance and his wise counsel and realises now that he is gone what a truly holy example he has always set before her. She says that her Father Confessor (Heinrich von Rumerschein) also feels desolate at the absence of his true friend Heinrich von Nördlingen. Their only comfort lies in the knowledge that their friend is absent from them because he is about God's business.

As a key figure in the process whereby Mechthild's manuscript was preserved for future generations, Heinrich von Nördlingen deserves more than a cursory mention¹³. His birth and death dates are alike unknown, and the information concerning his life stems from his correspondence with Margarete Ebner and her circle in the period from 1332 to 1350. He was a secular priest and the spiritual friend, advisor and director of a fairly widespread circle of pious "Friends of God", both secular and monastic. He arrived in Basel in 1339, after years of travelling to and from the papal court at Avignon, apparently in the hope of being

*Cf. "she was especially faithful to you."

permitted to carry on his spiritual duties in spite of the dispute then raging between emperor and pope. At Basel he stayed for ten years, and there he met Tauler, who had fled from Strassburg with all the members of his house. Soon Heinrich became involved with the Friends of God in Basel, and was much sought after as a preacher in all the neighbouring monasteries and convents. In 1346 and 1347 he spent some time in Köln, Aachen and Bamberg collecting relics, with the intention of submitting them to the scrutiny of Margarete Ebner, whose judgement upon their authenticity would be given under divine guidance. He visited his friends in Basel and Medingen periodically but finally left Basel for ever in 1348, to take up the life of a wandering preacher - "God's business" - as Margaretha of the Golden Ring reported to Margarete Ebner. The last report of him was made in 1351 in the diary of Christina Ebner¹⁴, a 74-year-old nun in Engelta, with whom he had corresponded for many years.*

Heinrich von Nördlingen was not distinguished by a capacity for disseminating mystical doctrines, nor did he exhibit brilliance in scholarship. He appears to have lacked power, depth and drive, being of an unusually gentle and unstable disposition. But his influence upon others should not be underestimated and because of it he is a significant figure in the history of German literature and

*Possibly his visit to her at this time was prompted by a desire to find some spiritual substitute for Margarete Ebner, who had died earlier that same year.

3

43

inward attentiveness, but before beginning to read I beg and command you, in the name of the Holy Spirit, to utter the Veni, sancte Spiritus seven times before the altar with seven genuflections, to say seven Paternosters and Ave Marias to Our Lord and His virgin mother Mary, also with seven genuflections, and yet another seven Paternosters and Ave Marias with another seven genuflections to that virgin queen of the heavenly choir* through whom God has delivered this divine song**, and to all the saints with her. And do not break the seals upon this book until you have said all these prayers ... Mark any words which you do not understand, and write them down for me, and I will put them into a simpler form of German for you. For this book was presented to us in a very strange dialect of German, so that we have had to work at it very hard for two years before we were able to put it into our own form of German, more or less. Read it three times (she says in it that you should read it nine times***). I trust

*namely, Mechthild.

**namely, Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit.

***Opening paragraph of Das fliessende Licht runs thus: This book I send as a messenger to all spiritual people, both bad and good, for when the pillars fall, the building (i.e. the church) cannot stand. It tells of me and reveals

that this book will give your souls much zeal
for grace. I wish to lend it to Engeltal also.
O Margarete my daughter, hear and see, behold
and believe how sweet is thy Beloved Christ.

In Jesus Christ, Amen.

From all this documentary evidence it is clear that the Einsiedeln MS of Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit was preserved by the efforts of the circle of the Friends of God in Basel and that it circulated among the different houses of the period. Such well-known mystics as Eckhart, Tauler, and Suso were connected with this circle, one of many societies of the fourteenth century which sought to respond to the spiritual needs of people affected by such events as the Black Death and the Interdict which resulted from the dispute between the Emperor Ludwig of Bavaria and Pope John XXII. According to a contemporary document, the Society of the Friends of God numbered "both men and women of every rank, abbots and farmers, knights and nuns, monks and artisans."¹⁹ The same writer suggests that they were held to be heretical in their views, informing his readers that "many call us sectaries, Beghards, brethren of the Free Spirit, or of the New Spirit They might call us by

my secret, to the glory of God. All who would understand this book must read it nine times.

(dis buch das sende ich nun ze botten allen geistlichen luten, beidv bosen und guten, wand wen die sule vallent, so mag das werknit gestan, und ez bezeichent alleine mich, und meldet loblich mine heimlichkeit. Alle die dis buch wellen vernemen die sollent es ze nun malen lesen - Morel, p. 3).

worse names, but we are none of these,²⁰ adding that Tauler calls them "the pillars of Christendom."²¹ To the members of such a movement the MS of Mechthild the Beguine could obviously be expected to have considerable appeal. Although it is not known when or how it came into the library at Einsiedeln, it had certainly continued to circulate long after the death of Heinrich von Nördlingen. A marginal notation in a fifteenth century hand records that it was still in the possession of the houses of the Forest Sisters - "This book belongs to the four houses in the forest" (Dis buch horet in die vier huser in dem walde - Morel: XXII). A later notation in a sixteenth century hand indicates that "it belongs to the House of God of St. Peter auf dem Bach in Switzerland." (Dem Gotshuss S. peter vff dem Bach in Schwitz gehorig - Morel: XXII).

Das fließende Licht der Gottheit is not a book in any accepted sense.- it is not an autobiography, a narrative or an orderly record of spiritual memoirs arranged in chronological order. Mechthild recorded her visions, meditations and exhortations on the impulse of the moment, and her spiritual director and redactor, Heinrich von Halle, did some reshuffling in the course of collating her sheets, as a result of which the chronological sequence was destroyed, according to Emil Michael, the first scholar to recognize this fact.²² Dr. H. Stierling later confirmed this view, adding that "the most significant result of this realisation is that we can never gain a glimpse of Mechthild's development.

The same man to whom we owe with deepest gratitude this collection of revelations has by his unfortunate scheme (of arrangement) shrouded the growth of this great soul in an almost impenetrable darkness. We do not know how Mechthild first began, what thoughts widened her horizons, nor when she first gained her wonderful power of language."²³ Mechthild was aware of the gradually growing collection, for she makes references to the "book" and to its "scribe". Book II:26 is entitled "Of this book and the writer of this book." (Von disem buche und von dem schriber dis buches - II:26). In this chapter she complains of the attacks to which she has been subjected "on account of this book" and begs God for grace "for thy scribe who has written the book according to me." (fur dinen schribere, der das buch na mire habe geschriben - II:26). The title she says she received from God: "It shall be called A flowing light of my Godhead - (flowing) into all hearts in which there is no falsehood." (Es sol heissen: ein vliessende liecht miner gotheit, in allu die herzen die da lebent ane valscheit - Intro. I). At the end of his compilation Heinrich von Halle gave this attestation: "This script which is in this book flowed from the living Godhead into the heart of Sister Mechthild and is truly set down here from her heart as she was given it by God and written by her hands." (Dise schrift die in disem buche stat, die ist gevlossen vs von der lebenden gotheit in Swester Mehtilden herze und ist also getruwelich hie gesetzt; also si vs von irme herzen gegeben

ist von gotte und geschriben von iren henden" - VI:43).

Besides visions, meditations and exhortations, the book contains much material that was written on definite occasions, addressed to specific people. "And so I am sending you this letter." (darumbe sende ich dir disen brief - VII:55); "You wish me to write further but I cannot." (Ir wellent dc ich furbas schreibe und ich enmag - VI:41); "You desire to have instruction from me...." (ir wellent lere haben von mir - VII:21). One chapter-heading runs: "This Sister Mechthild wrote on a paper to her brother B. of the Preaching Order." (Dis schreib swester Mehtild an einer cedelen irem bruder B. predier orden - VI:42). She also addresses one short chapter to Meister Heinrich, who had evidently expressed some astonishment at her vigorous and forthright style: "Meister Heinrich, you are surprised at the masculine words which are written in this book. I am surprised that you can be surprised at it." (Meister Heinrich, vch wundert sin menlicher worten, die in disem buchr geschriben sint. Mich wundert wie vch des wundern mag. - V:12).

There is also material that is written with didactic intent, such as directions for priors and prioresses (VI:1) and rules for canons (VI:2), as well as prophecies and prophetic interpretations of past and present events for the enlightenment of those endowed with understanding. The scope of individual chapters varies a good deal - some are several pages long, some only a few lines. Much of the

book is in the form of dialogue, between God and the Soul, between individual saints and the Soul, between the Senses and the Soul, between Virtues and the Soul.

Passages which are intended purely for narration and instruction are in prose²⁴, but most of the material is couched in what Wilhelm Oehl calls "a kind of rhythmical, partially metrical language accompanied by rhyming or more frequently by assonance - what might be called a poetical, rhythmical prose. There are a few - but only a few - passages which are fully rhymed and in a rhythm which accords with metrical rules, reminiscent of the contemporary stylised poetry. Rhyming, and especially assonance are more characteristic of Mechthild."²⁵ Unfortunately we cannot make any absolute judgement with regard to the power and melodious nature of the original script. But Morel's transcription of Heinrich von Nördlingen's Middle High German rendering conveys the impression that the Low German redaction of Heinrich von Halle must have been remarkably powerful and melodious. It is a well known fact that all translations and transcriptions, however faithful to the original, lack something of its essential power, and yet the Middle High German version has considerable appeal. Margot Schmidt's excellent modern version also preserves much of the rhyming and assonance. It is hardly possible however, for an English translation to do full justice to Mechthild's work.

Because of the long period during which the MS was lost to view, it is difficult to assess the influence which

Mechthild might have had upon succeeding writers. Some speculations have been made, with varying degrees of feasibility, fruitful mainly in the arguments they have engendered.

One theory, put forward by Preger*, is that Mechthild's prophecies and visions of hell influenced Dante²⁶ and that Mechthild herself was the prototype of Dante's Matelda²⁷. Morel had previously described such scenes as her lurid depictions of the torments of hell and the fierce battles among the demons for the departing soul as being wholly in the spirit of medieval art, but had also remarked upon the similarity between Mechthild and Dante and upon the fact that Mechthild could not have known Dante's work**²⁸. It does not seem to have occurred to Morel that the influence might have operated the other way around***.

Morel's comment upon Mechthild's influence upon her successors is of a negative nature - he says that "the kind of mysticism in this book is significantly different from the speculative writings of the somewhat later mystics, especially of Meister Eckhart and the so-called Friends of God ..., it is firmly grounded in the foundation of monasticism."²⁹ Her visions, adds Morel, represent the outpourings of one who was inspired by emotion and fantasy.

*and repeated by subsequent commentators.

**Dante's dates: 1265-1321.

***If this were indeed the case, he must somehow have had access to the Latin translation.

But Hans Urs von Balthasar regarded Mechthild's capacity to take traditional images such as those of the Song of Songs, and melt them down internally and reform them, as being akin to the process whereby Eckhart developed his mystical thought: "The bow is bent, as it were, and the arrow reaches as far as Eckhart and his mystical radicalism."³⁰

The writings of Heinrich Seuse³¹ certainly reveal echoes of Mechthild's predominant theme of Love as well as the type of mysticism described by Morel as being "firmly grounded in the foundation of monasticism."³² These similarities may be due to the influence of Bernard de Clairvaux upon both writers.³³ But it is also highly likely that Seuse was familiar with Mechthild's book, since he is known to have been connected with the Friends of God, knew Tauler and Heinrich von Nördlingen personally, and was probably a pupil of Eckhart's.³⁴ The influence upon him of both Bernard de Clairvaux and Mechthild is suggested by Josef Quint, who remarks that Seuse's mystical outlook is "coloured by the examples of the Christocentric mystic Bernard de Clairvaux and Bonaventura. As with the great German mystic of the thirteenth century, Mechthild von Magdeburg in her Fliessende Licht der Gottheit, the expression of Seuse's mysticism is influenced by the terminology and conceptions of the courtly-knightly minnesang."³⁵

We may safely conclude then, that Mechthild did influence the mystical development of the fourteenth century, in spite of the differences in the types of mysticism to

which Morel drew attention. She also, quite naturally, exerted considerable influence upon the nuns at Helfta where she spent the last twelve years of her life. In the introduction to the modern German transcription of Das fließende Licht der Gottheit, Margot Schmidt comments upon Mechthild's influence upon the writings of Mechthild von Haakeborn and Gertrude the Great, and expresses surprise that her book, of such greater power and significance, should not have been disseminated to the extent that theirs were³⁶. In reality it is not at all surprising - they wrote in Latin, a language of which she had no knowledge, as she herself emphatically states in II:3. And her avowed ignorance of Latin means that it is very difficult for us to determine with confidence what influences in their turn shaped the development of her mystical thought.

Grete Lüers points out that in addition to Mechthild's statement in II:3 that she knew no Latin, there is also the fact that there are almost no Latin quotations in the Middle High German text³⁷, except for "tags" from the liturgy and church ritual³⁸, or bits inserted by Heinrich von Halle, redactor of the first six books³⁹. Yet there is considerable evidence of influences which would ordinarily indicate a knowledge of Latin. Grete Lüers' summation of these influences runs as follows: "Mechthild's work clearly shows traces of scholasticism; for example, if we read page 28, line 6* of Fließende Licht, countless Thomist ideas and

*In Morel, p. 28, l. 6 - da ine han ich gesehen die unsprechliche ordenunge (in him I have seen the order which is beyond expression).

concepts appear, concealed in poetic form: The transcendent is characterized by the term "inexpressible order", which clearly corresponds to the Aquinas' representation of the order of the cosmos; Thomas speaks of the fruitio and abstentia in this fruitio and Mechthild speaks of "enjoyment and abstention from enjoyment according to the power of the senses"* The Beguine also knows of the scholastic view of the Trinity of the Soul, which corresponds to the Trinity of the triune God: "O loving Soul ... thou art threefold in thyself, thou canst well be the image of God." (Thou art a virginal man in thy striving, thou art a splendidly adorned virgin in the palace of thy Lord, thou art a voluptuous bride in thy nuptial couch.)** It is true, though - and Denifle especially draws attention to this fact - that we do not find in Mechthild von Magdeburg's work the fully matured scholastic speculation of the later mystics; it is obscured by too many layers of poetry to be considered purely as speculation. But many chapters in Fliessende Licht show that the Beguine did try to think through the most difficult theological problems.⁴⁰

*Morel, p. 28, l. 12-13 runs: "die gebruchunge mit der abebrechunge nach der maht der sinen."

**Morel, p. 38, l. 6-11: Du bist drivaltig an dir. Du maht wohl gotz bilde sin. (Du bist ein menlich man an dinem strite. Du bist ein wolgeziertt juncfrowe in dem palast vor dinem herren. Du bist ein lustlich brut in dinem minebette.) - Part in parentheses added to Grete Lüers' text in order to complete the quotation.

Lüers goes on to say that Mechthild knew the apophatic theology of Dionysius, and like him she calls God "nothing": (Thou shalt love the nothing - du solt minen das nicht - Morel, I:35)⁴¹. Lüers then attempts to trace the mode of transmission whereby Mechthild received knowledge of Areopagite theology, and concludes that it came to her by way of Victorine⁴² mysticism, which was conveyed to her orally by her Dominican spiritual directors.

The particular influence of Richard de St. Victor may be seen in the terminology Mechthild employs in her references to Love, and derives from Richard's tractate De quatuor gradibus violentae charitatis (On the Four Grades of Violent Love). The first degree is that of the love that wounds, caritas vulnerans, which may be identified in Mechthild's words "wholly wounded by true love" (von wärem mine reht wunt - Morel, II:15). The second degree is of the love that binds and unites, caritas ligans, seen in "the love bound in holy custom" (du gebunden mine von heliger gewonheit - Morel, III:13). The third degree is that of languid love, that experiences ravishment and appeasement, caritas languens, which Mechthild calls "the love penetrated by the great streaming torrent, lying quite still - all things are bitter to her save God alone" (du ingende mine von grosser vberflut, du liget alle stille und ir sint alle ding bitter sunder alleine got - Morel, III:13). The fourth degree results in a sinking or declining in strength, caritas deficiens, which is for Mechthild "the stormy love

from overpowering strength" (du windesche mine von vbermaht -

Moral, III:13)⁴³. Concerning the fourth grade Richard St.

Victor says, "Just as molten metal flows easily into any crevice it can find, so the soul in this state willingly bows with the utmost obedience, accepting in all humility the laws of divine salvation order. Whoever arrives at this stage risks his soul, for his friends ... he begins to deem himself of no esteem ... indeed, he desires to be cursed by Christ for the sake of his brethren."⁴⁴

Such influences as the foregoing in Mechthild's work may be accounted for by postulating that she gained access to them through oral transmission, either by direct instruction or by being exposed to them through sermons, and that the transmitters were her spiritual directors at different stages of her life and specifically Heinrich von Halle during the period when she recorded the first six books of Das fliessende Licht. Lüers puts forward the theory that oral transmission was not Mechthild's only means of access. She remarks upon the fact that the Flemish mystic Hadewich⁴⁵ employs the same Victorine terminology, and speculates that there might have been an intermediary literature which provided a link between French and Low German mysticism⁴⁶, perhaps actually written in Low German.⁴⁷ This would indeed appear to be a feasible supposition. Like Mechthild, her contemporary, Hadewich was a Beguine and was very much aware that the movement to which she belonged had spread from its early origins all over northern Europe (see n. 44). The

feeling of identity among all these women, of differing backgrounds, cultures and languages would surely have promoted among them the urge to disseminate works of mysticism by means of translations - a task which would not be difficult, since so many of them knew Latin, and one for which they had an early precedent in the work undertaken by Lambert le Begue in translating devotional works into the vernacular for the benefit of pious lay people. Seen in the light of this quite simple and quite reasonable explanation, Mechthild's evident familiarity with Victorine mysticism and thereby Areopagite theology no longer appears baffling.

On the prophetic and eschatological aspect of Das fliessende Licht, much has been said concerning the influence of Joachim di Fiore⁴⁷. Wilhelm Preger, first in the field of Mechthildian research, showed great enthusiasm in connecting Mechthild's prophecies with Joachite influence, devoting to it quite a large portion of his chapter on Mechthild⁴⁸. He says that Mechthild was seized by the same reforming and prophetic spirit which previously prompted Hildegard von Bingen, Elisabeth von Schönau and Joachim di Fiore to issue warnings concerning the fall of the Church⁴⁹.

There is certainly sufficient evidence of Mechthild's criticism of the Church in chapters like VI:21, in which she records the following fiery denunciation: "O alas, crown of holy Christendom, how sorely tarnished art thou! Thy jewels have fallen from thee, because of thy anger and the disgrace thou bringest upon the Christian faith" (O we,

. crone der heligen cristanheit, wie sere bist du geselwet!

Din edelsteine sint dir entvallen, wan du krenkest und schendest den heligen cristanen geloben - Morel VI:21).

She goes on to accuse the Church of having abandoned chastity, humility, truth and all the virtues, and accuses the holy priesthood of having shrunk away until it retains no more than a vestige of its authority, namely "spiritual power, (i.e. the power of its office) with which thou wagest war against God and His elect." (pfæffeliche gewalt, damitte vihtestu vf got und sine vserwehten vrunde - Morel, VI:21).

Her prophetic thrust is displayed at the end of the same chapter, when she foretells the coming of a new order, to be the successor of the Church as custodian of Christianity: "There is a need for the last brothers to come, for when the mantle grows old it gives no warmth. Therefore must I give My Bride, holy Christendom, a new mantle, and it will be that of the last brothers, as it has been written." (so ist des not, dc die jungesten bruder komen, wane swene der mantel ist alt, so ist er och kalt. So mus ich miner brut, der heligen cristanheit, einen nuwen mantel geben, die sollent die jungesten bruder wesen, als davor ist geschriben - Morel, VI:21).

This new order of the "last brothers" is described in greater detail in another prophetic chapter, IV:27, of such length that it is not feasible to quote it here in its entirety. She evidently does not intend to indicate the Dominicans as the "last brothers", because God tells her

though the Dominicans will survive Wilhelm St. Amour's attack upon them, a new order will come (IV:27). The ones she then goes on to describe are endowed with all the virtues which the contemporary clergy have forgotten or wilfully abandoned. This new order will be founded, she says, by the son of the King of Rome - an allusion which has always baffled scholars⁵⁰. There will be peace for thirty years, followed by great distress, when the Antichrist appears to tempt and seduce secular rulers, and to put Christianity to the utmost test. Enoch and Elias will return, sent by God in answer to the prayers of the new order, and they will comfort steadfast Christians and drive away the Antichrist. In another passage, Mechthild refers obscurely and incomprehensibly to "three kinds of blood", the third kind being that which will be shed at the end of the world in the end-times, the period of the Holy Spirit (V:34).

All this is well within the eschatological tendencies of Mechthild's time, and shows the influence of a very strong tradition, going right back to Gregory the Great⁵¹, as well as that of the writings of Joachim di Fiore. There can be no doubt that Mechthild knew of the "Eternal Gospel" of Joachim, but by what transmission is uncertain. Wilhelm Preger's confident assertion that "the Franciscans and Dominicans disseminated the prophecies contained in it (i.e. in the Eternal Gospel) in the interests of their Orders" is of somewhat dubious value, as is also his claim that "probably Mechthild became acquainted with these

prophecies through her friend, the Dominican Heinrich von Halle."⁵²

The likelihood that either of these statements is true depends upon the date at which the Joachite prophecies were first considered to be heretical in nature, and this date cannot be exactly determined, nor can the period during which Preger thinks Mechthild received knowledge of them. The only certain factor here is that neither the Orders nor Heinrich von Halle would have circulated material held to be heretical in nature.

One major influence upon Mechthild remains to be considered - that of the minnesang, or lyrical love poetry of the courtly tradition. The strong overtones of this influence on the metaphor of the mystical marriage are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Many scholars have made reference to Mechthild's use of motifs from the courtly-knightly minnesang and her skill in combining these with motifs from the Song of Songs. Dr. A. Oppel, writing on Mechthild on pages 24-25 in his work Das H6helied Salomanis und die deutsche religi6se Liebeslyrik*, says: "It is quite evident that motifs of the Song of Songs are combined with motifs of the knightly love-poetry, mystical longing united to the delightful, daring, vivid imagery of the minnesang."⁵³ Two outstanding examples of what he calls Mechthild's "mystical depiction

*The Song of Solomon and the German religious love-lyric.

of love" (mystische Liebesschilderung) are quoted by Oppel:

- (1) "I am a mature bride,
I will go to my bridegroom ...
God has allowed to all creatures that they should
live according to their natures.
How then should I withstand my nature?"

(Ich bin ein vollewachsen brut,
Ich wil gan nach minem trut ...
Got hat allen creaturen das gegeben,
Das si ir nature pflegen.
Wie mohte ich den miner nature widerstan?

- Morel, I:44)

- (2) "Lord, now am I a naked Soul,
And thou in thyself a richly-adorned God.
Our mutual intercourse is eternal life without
death,
And then there ensues a blessed silence
According to the desires of both.
And he gives himself to her and she to him."

(Herre, nu bin ich ein nakent sele,
Und du in dir selben ein wolgezietet got.
Unser zweiger gemeinschaft
Ist das ewige liep ane tot
So geschihet da ein selig stille
Nach ir beiden wille.
Er gibet sich ir und si git sich ime.

- Morel, I:44)

Grete Lüers upholds Oppel's view that Mechthild combines religious concepts with images drawn from secular poems of love⁵⁴. In her book on the language of medieval German mysticism in the work of Mechthild von Magdeburg (Die Sprache der deutschen Mystik des Mittelalters im Werke der Mechthild von Magdeburg) Lüers devotes a section to a discussion of the influence of the courtly minnesang on the mystical metaphor. Some of her observations are translated and interpreted in the outline which follows.

The use of metaphors, comparisons and allegories drawn from contemporary, secular life (in Mechthild's case-

the courtly-knightly cultural epoch) show that the mystic, even while he strives towards the transcendent, is till unable to cast off all the influences exerted upon him by the world and time in which he lives his earthly life. Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit shows to a noticeable degree the strong influence of the courtly minnesang. It is a characteristic feature of Mechthild's poetry, this mixture of elements from the rich, malleable imagery of the Song of Songs with those of the secular minnesang. The question arises as to whether motifs of spiritual love poetry, especially those of the Song of Songs, are actually concealed in secular disguise in the secular courtly minnesang, but Lüers does not pursue this speculation too far, observing that much research remains to be done on the influence of each type of poetry upon the other⁵⁵.

Mechthild's work, continues Lüers, is one of the leading ones among those whose basic theme is religious eroticism. Passion comes through so strongly in this book that it almost gives one the impression of being, not spiritual poetry but a secular love-lyric, - and not a lyric of the stereotyped kind of the minnesang, either, but one of a most primitive and spontaneous type⁵⁶. It is as if the most glowing sensuality of a woman's soul, long suppressed by asceticism, should find appeasement and healing by way of this transcendent love-ecstasy⁵⁷. Yet she never oversteps the bounds of propriety (as many scholars have remarked), because in the last analysis, in spite of all images and

comparisons; the unio mystica is indescribable and inconceivable.*

Some of the examples given by Lüers of metaphors from courtly influence which may be discerned in Mechthild's language are briefly summarized as follows: the bridal bed adorned with flowers; the cooling of the glow, fire, flame of love (minneglut, minnefeuer, minnebrand) by means of the union of love (minneeinung) which corresponds to the unio mystica in the spiritual sense; the plucking of flowers (akin to the Latin derivation of defloration); the coming of daybreak, as in "Arise, my Beloved, and recover from all thy torment" (Morel, VI:35); love as the slayer (cf. Mechthild's famous "I would gladly die of love" [ich stürbe gern von minne - Morel, II:2]); the clothing of the soul with the colours of God, analogous to the practice of the knight wearing the colours of his lady, ("virgins of all times are attired according to the desires of their bridegrooms" [die juncfrowen ze allen ziten sint gekleidet nach dem willen irs brutegomes - Morel, VI:65])⁵⁸.

We have now examined Lüers' exposition of the effect of the courtly minnesang upon Mechthild. Wilhelm Oehl comments further upon the influence of the general symbolism of the courtly-knightly life upon Mechthild. Her representation of the next world, he says, is imbued with

*Underlying this comment is the concept of the mystical silence - see, for example, the second quotation cited by Oppel above.

the spirit of feudal, knightly courtly culture. Christ will receive the heavenly throne after the Day of Judgment (VII: 15). Christendom is represented under the image of a crown resembling a battlemented tower, before which lies a vast host whose lord is the Devil (IV:3). As the bride of the Emperor of Heaven, the soul will have at her command all the heavenly hosts (IV:3)⁵⁹.

Hans Urs von Balthasar makes similar observations in making the point that Mechthild displays contemporary tensions which cannot be detected in the works of others more narrowly constrained by the framework of their time, culture and perceptions of life. In her, he says, we see a combination of the sacral-feudal medieval period and the courtly period. "For her, God the Father is still the Emperor in the sense of Charles the Great, the Emperor of the world. Christ is the Jungherr; imperial prince, aristocratic youth and squire. Mary is the glorious Empress. At the end of the world Christendom will be the mighty, richly embellished crown which the young conqueror receives from the Father The soul makes the 'courtly journey' to the heavenly palace (I:4), led by a train of personified Virtues, with Love in the lead, followed by a long retinue of handmaidens (I:3) and even by an extensive band of followers (I:46)"⁶⁰. As a result of this combination of the sacral-feudal and the courtly, says von Balthasar, the feudal world-order assumes more and more strongly the "modern" hue of the minnesang.⁶¹

The influence of courtly culture and the minnesang is attested by many other scholars besides Oppel, Lüers, Oehl and von Balthasar.⁶² We may assume that she absorbed the culture of her time, combined it internally with influences such as that of the Song of Songs and other writers and re-defined it, probably quite involuntarily, in the language she used to describe her mystical experiences. Among the female mystics of the medieval period - Hildegard von Bingen, Elisabeth von Schönau, Mechthild von Hackeborn, Gertrude the Great, Christine Ebner, Margarete Ebner - she is unique in her use of courtly language. This fact may stem from the circumstances of her birth and education and also from her preoccupation with the metaphor of the mystical marriage, for which this language was eminently suited.

Mechthild shows quite clearly that she possessed an eager and enquiring mind, open to many influences, both past and present, concerned with current events, theological trends, ecclesiastical problems, practical matters of life, management of religious houses, the ordering of church services. It cannot be supposed that one who so eagerly absorbed everything that came her way did not also absorb the very stuff of which the daily services were made - the liturgy and the hymns. Medieval nuns are known to have had very retentive minds - they were even able to recall and record the sermons they heard and though it is true that Mechthild was not a nun, attendance at services was equally

obligatory for Beguines. Current research shows that the Marienlieder did influence the language of medieval writers. Because Mechthild's mysticism was Christocentric in essence her references to Mary are by no means as numerous as in the works of other female mystics mentioned above, yet she praises Mary as "the cosmic essence, the female principle of the salvation-plan, just as necessary for the redemption of sinful suffering humanity as the male principle which is embodied in Christ."⁶³ The influence of the Marienlieder upon her designations of Mary is shown in her terminology, which is identical to that used in the hymns of the medieval period.⁶⁴

All the major influences thus far described affected the presentation of the various themes which Mechthild develops in Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit - themes such as the inebriation of the soul through love, the struggle of the soul against the senses, meditation upon the birth, suffering and death of Christ, the way to salvation, contemplation of the sins of mankind and the corruption of Christ's Church here on earth, the oppression of those striving towards heaven, apocalyptic prophecy, and the mystical marriage of the Soul and God. Of all these, the theme of the mystical marriage is the most strongly and painstakingly developed, throughout the whole range of Mechthild's writings - her *raison d'écrire* as well as her *raison d'être*.

Chapter III

Notes

¹Carl Greith, Die deutsche Mystik im Predigerorden, von 1250 zu 1350, nach ihren Grundlehren, Liedern und Lebensbildern, aus handschriftlichen Quellen - Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 1861.

²Geistliche Minnelieder und Sittengedichte der Schwester Mechthild Predigerordens, pp. 222-277 in above work by Carl Greith.

³Mechthild's book ends at p. 116. The remaining 55 pages contain extracts from sermons by other German mystics, especially Eckhart - Morel, p. XVIII.

⁴Offenbarungen der Schwester Mechthild von Magdeburg oder Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit, aus der einzigen Handschrift des Stiftes Einsiedeln, herausgegeben von P. Gall Morel, Regensburg, 1869.

⁵Hans Neumann, Beiträge zur Textgeschichte, op. cit., p. 175.

⁶Morel, Offenbarungen der Schwester Mechthild, op. cit., p. XX foll.

⁷Heinrich von Rumerschein was a leading figure among the mystics of Basel and a very close friend of Heinrich von Nördlingen, the secular priest who transcribed Mechthild's MS into Middle High German. Like many of his contemporaries in and around Basel, he corresponded with others in well-known centres of piety concerning mystical matters - adapted from Wilhelm Oehl, Deutsche Mystikerbriefe des Mittelalters, 1100-1550 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), p. 786, note 101.

⁸Morel, Offenbarungen der Schwester Mechthild, op. cit., p. XXI.

⁹Ibid., quoted by Morel from Schmidt's Introduction to his own work, p. 71.

¹⁰Oehl, Deutsche Mystikerbriefe, op. cit., p. 786.

¹¹Margarete Ebner, 1291-1351, born in Swabia, entered the Dominican Convent at Medingen at the age of 15, suffered a severe illness in 1312, thereafter followed the threefold way of purification, illumination and unification, the only path, according to Heinrich Seuse, leading to the highest mystical development of the soul. She was one of

the many mystics with whom Heinrich von Nördlingen, as her spiritual director, conducted a lively and continuous correspondence - 56 of his letters to her are extant, and afford an insight into what one writer (Grabmann) calls the "noble, pure, spiritual, tender and friendly relationship" between herself and her spiritual director which represents "the ideal of spiritual friendship" typical of medieval German mysticism. She wrote her Revelations at his behest, and her writings clearly show that she exhibited a maternal feeling for the Christ child far greater than that shown by other nuns in a period when ecstasies commonly sought to identify with the Virgin Mary by experiencing those maternal emotions denied to them in the worldly sense. For Margarete the highest unio mystica was to experience the birth of Christ, not, as for other mystics, His suffering - Martin Grabmann, Mittelalterliches Geistesleben, Vol. I (München; M. Hüber Verlag, 1926), p. 480 foll. Also Gräte Lüers, Mariäverehrung, mittelalterlicher Nonnen (München; Verlag Ernst Reinhardt, 1923), p. 51.

¹²Text of letter translated, paraphrased and abridged from modern German rendering given by Wilhelm Oehl, Deutsche Mystikerbriefe des Mittelalters, 1100-1550, no. 63 on p. 341.

¹³This account of the known circumstances of Heinrich von Nördlingen's life is translated and abridged from Wilhelm Oehl's excellent outline, Deutsche Mystikerbriefe, op. cit., p. 297 foll.

¹⁴Christine Ebner, no relation to Margarete Ebner, (1277-1356) entered the Dominican convent at Engeltal in 1289, dedicating herself even at this early age to a life of piety and voluntary poverty. She gained a reputation for sanctity from 1297 onwards, and many distinguished visitors including the Emperor Karl IV sought audience with her in the convent. In 1317, her fortieth year, she began to describe her inner mystical life, hitherto secret, to her Father Confessor, the Dominican Konrad von Fussen, and her experiences were recorded in her Revelations. She held different offices in the convent and even became prioress in 1345. She wrote a book, dated around 1346, entitled The Little Book of the Superabundance of Grace (Büchlein von der Gnaden Überlast), a collection of edifying stories concerning the lives of the sisters of the Engeltal convent since its foundation - Wilhelm Oehl, Deutsche Mystikerbriefe, op. cit., translated and abridged from pp. 344-345.

¹⁵The adaptation from Oehl's account of the life of Heinrich von Nördlingen ends here.

¹⁶Hans Neumann, Beiträge zur Textgeschichte, op. cit., p. 176.

¹⁷Christine Ebner received it in the summer of 1346, according to her Revelations - Oehl, Deutsche Mystikerbriefe, op. cit., p. 787. She refers to it twice - in summer 1346 and in Easter week 1348.

¹⁸Oehl, Deutsche Mystikerbriefe, op. cit., pp. 328-9 in modern German.

¹⁹Described as The Chronicle of Adolf Arnstein of Strassburg, quoted by R.A. Vaughan, Hours with the Mystics, (London: W. Parker & Son, 1856), Vol. I, p. 225.

²⁰Ibid., p. 226.

²¹Ibid.

²²E. Michael, Zur Chronologie der Mystikerin Mechthild von Magdeburg (Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie, XXV, pp. 177 foll. 1901), ref. in Wilhelm Oehl's Introduction to abridged transcription of Das fliessende Licht.

²³H. Stierling, Studien zu Mechthild von Magdeburg, (Göttingen, 1907). Ref. in Oehl's Introduction, p. 18.

²⁴E.g.: I:22; II:4, 11, 20, 24; III:4, 7, 10, 15, 21; IV:2, 12, 14, 18, 20-27; V:11, 23, 31, 34; VI:2, 15, 21, 33; VII:1, 3, 5-8, 41, 55.

²⁵Translated from Wilhelm Oehl's Introduction to abridged transcription of Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit, Deutsche Mystiker, Bd. II, pp. 27-28.

²⁶Wilhelm Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik, op. cit., p. 103.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 104-5.

²⁸Morel, Offenbarungen der Schwester Mechthild, op. cit., p. XXXII.

²⁹Ibid., p. XXVI.

³⁰Hans Urs von Balthasar, Mechthild's kirchlicher Auftrag, op. cit., p. 23 - "... der Bogen spannt sich noch weiter ... hin zu Eckhart und seinem mystischen Radikalismus."

³¹Heinrich Seuse (Suso) - 1295-1366 - born of noble father and pious, gentle mother whose family name of Suse he adopted. He became a Dominican novice at 13, and began a life of awful austerity and mystical visions at 18, probably studied under Eckhart, and defended the master's writings. He was lector and prior at Konstanz, became a

preacher and pastor, not only to Dominicans but also to beguine communities and in association with Friends of God. He corresponded with Elisabeth Stigel, a nun at the famous convent of Toss. At one period he became the target of vicious gossip, probably as a result of his visits to Beguines, was deposed as prior in 1348 and sent to Ulm, but was exonerated in 1354 and ended his life restored to favour - Adapted from R. Petry, Late Medieval Mysticism vol. XIII (London: S.C.M. Press, 1957), pp. 245-6.

³² See note no. 29.

³³ For influence of Bernard upon Seuse, see Heinrich Seuse, Deutsche mystische Schriften (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966), p. 421.

³⁴ Josef Quint, Textbuch zur Mystik des deutschen Mittelalters (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1957), p. 134.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 135 (translated quotation).

³⁶ Margot Schmidt, Das fliessende Licht, op. cit., p. 15.

³⁷ Grete Lüers, Die Sprache der deutschen Mystik im Werke der Mechthild von Magdeburg, (München: 1926. Reprint Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966), p. 34.

³⁸ For some examples see note no. 22 to Ch. I.

³⁹ Grete Lüers, Die Sprache der deutschen Mystik, op. cit., p. 34.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 35.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Abbey of St. Victor, home of Augustinian canons regular, was founded by William of Champeaux 1108-1110, chartered as a school in 1113, and became a centre for those desirous of combining total contemplation with intense intellectual exercise. The three most famous Victorines were Hugo (1096-1141), Richard (c. 1123-1173) and Adam (d. 1192) - from R. Petry, Late Medieval Mysticism, op. cit., p. 79-80. Although Mechthild resembles Hugo de St. Victor in her use of dialogue and some bridal imagery, the main Victorine influence upon her is considered to have been that of Richard.

⁴³ This attempt to find parallels for Richard St. Victor's four grades of violent love is based upon material from R. Petry, Late Medieval Mysticism, op. cit., p. 85 and G. Lüers, Die Sprache der deutschen Mystik, op. cit.,

p. 36 and p. 302. It is merely intended to be tentative, however, and should be cautiously accepted, for, as Lüers remarks, there are no direct and incontrovertible parallels to be found in Mechthild to Richard's gradations. (Lüers, p. 36). The first degree, caritas vulnerans, is obviously intended, but may well originate from the Song of Songs (IV:9). The other three are all to be found in a chapter in which Mechthild identifies sixteen kinds of love, and are not unduly stressed in comparison with the other thirteen. Therefore the comparison could be forced.

⁴⁴Margot Schmidt, Das fliessende Licht, op. cit., p. 440, quoted from Richard St. Victor's De quatuor gradibus violentiae charitatis.

⁴⁵Hadewich was born around 1180 to a noble family in Antwerp and first seized with religious fervour at age 11. She chose to join a beguinage in Nivelles, the focal point of the Beguine movement at the time. She became directress of a Beguine community and played a prominent role in the religious-ecstatic women's movement in general. In her visions she recorded lists of the vollkommenen (i.e. the "perfected ones" - distinctly evocative of the perfecti among the Cathars) - the names of Beguines in Flanders, Brabant, Seeland, Holland, Friesland, Saxony, Thuringia, Bohemia, England and Paris. In so doing she testified to the widespread nature of the Beguine movement. She died between 1260 and 1269 - From Herbert Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter, op. cit., p. 184, acknowledged source J. van Mierlo, who did very extensive research on Hadewich.

⁴⁶Lüers, Die Sprache der deutschen Mystik, op. cit., p. 36.

⁴⁷Joachim, Cistercian Abbot of Curazzo, in Calabria, later of San Giovanni in Fiore, circa 1135-1202, received permission from Pope Lucius III in 1184 to write a commentary on the Bible, which became his main occupation for the rest of his life - a document in which succeeding popes were interested. He founded a new order of solitaries at Fiore in 1191, authorised by the Pope in 1196. Despite the sensational and apocalyptic character of his writings, he was essentially a contemplative, and was regarded with veneration during his lifetime. His tractate against Peter Lombard, claiming that the latter so emphasized the una essentia of the Godhead as to make a quaternity instead of a trinity, was condemned at the Fourth Lateran in 1215, but it was expressly stated that this condemnation in no way involved his foundation at Fiore, which remained true to his memory.

The chief feature of his doctrine was that of the Third Age. The Old Testament had been the age of the Father,

the New of the Son, and in the Third Age the Spirit would rule - an age of charity, liberty, monastic orders, contemplation, superseding the second age as that had superseded the first. Thus the Church would disappear and there would be no more need for clergy. This new age would begin in 1260, heralded by persecutions, upheavals and catastrophes. Concerning his "apocalyptic fantasies", Philip Hughes says that they were "destined in later years to bring to nought the heroic lives of thousands, and seriously to weaken in its first years the greatest organized movement of popular spirituality the Church had yet known - the order of the Friars Minor", as well as playing a large part in the development of later heretical movements. - See Philip Hughes, A History of the Church, vol. II, op. cit., pp. 338-40, and M. Reeves, Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future (London: S.P.C.K., 1976).

⁴⁸Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik im Mittelalter, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 98 foll.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 98.

⁵⁰Margot Schmidt's notes call attention to the efforts of J. Ancelot-Hustache, Mechthilde de Magdebourg, op. cit., pp. 285-292 - ref. on p. 434 in Schmidt.

⁵¹See note no. 118, p. 434, Margot Schmidt's edition of Das fliessende Licht.

⁵²Preger, op. cit., p. 98 - "Die Franziskaner und Dominikaner verbreiteten die darin enthaltenen Weissagungen im Interesse ihrer Orden" and "Wahrscheinlich ist Mechthild durch ihren Vertrauten, den Dominikaner Heinrich von Halle, mit diesen Weissagungen bekannt worden."

⁵³A. Öppel, Das Hohelied Salomonis und die religiöse Liebeslyrik, (Berlin: Rothschild Verlag, 1911), p. 25 (not 75, as Lüers has it).

⁵⁴Grete Lüers, Die Sprache der deutschen Mystik, op. cit., p. 73.

⁵⁵It would appear to be almost incontrovertible that such a well-known piece of literature as the Song of Songs must have had a continuing effect upon the love-poets of succeeding ages. The effect is not even a conscious one. Its imagery is so powerful and so easily comprehended by yearning humanity that it sinks into and is absorbed by the language, so that in his efforts to express his human love, the poet unconsciously calls upon the metaphors used by the singer of that ancient song, who could express his love of the divine only by use of human imagery. The interplay between the two types of love poetry results in such

astonishing works as Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit.

⁵⁶Lüers, Die Sprache der deutschen Mystik, op. cit., "... und man vermeint, nicht geistliche Poesie, sondern weltliche Liebeslyrik, und zwar nicht solche des stereotypen Minnesangs, sondern der ursprünglichsten spontansten Gattung vor sich zu haben." (p. 74).

⁵⁷Ibid., (freely translated): "als ob die glutvollste Sinnlichkeit einer durch Askese unterdrückten Frauenseele in dieser transzendierte Minneekstatik ihren heilvollen Durchbruch fände ..."

⁵⁸Examples indicated by Lüers, ibid., pp. 74-80, and expanded from text of Das fliessende Licht.

⁵⁹Wilhelm Oehl, introduction to abridged transcription of Das fliessende Licht, op. cit., pp. 33-34.

⁶⁰Hans Urs von Balthasar, Mechthild's kirchlicher Auftrag, op. cit., pp. 22-23.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 23.

⁶²Cf. Wilhelm Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik, op. cit., and especially F.W. Wentzlaff-Eggebert, Deutsche Mystik zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1969), pp. 47-59.

⁶³Grete Lüers, Marienverehrung mittelalterlicher Nonnen (München, Verlag v. E. Reinhardt, 1923), pp. 39-40.

⁶⁴Examples of parallels between Mechthild's terminology (M) and catalogue of metaphors in A. Salzer (Die Sinnbilder und Beiworte Mariens in der deutschen Literatur und lateinischen Hymnenpoesie des Mittelalters) (S).

ame (not of Jesus only but of all mankind) - M, I:23; S, p. 97.
 ein beginne aller unser selekeit - M, VII:19; S, p. 560.
 ein blume der patriarchen - M, VII:19; S, p. 145.
 ein eisunge aller der ubelen geisten - M, VII:19; S, p. 589.
 ein ere aller heiligen dines liebenkindes - M, VII:19; S, p. 419.
 ein helferin aller wittewen
 ein menlich halverin der verzweifelten - M, VII:19; S, p. 570.
 ein hoffnung der propheten - M, VII:19; S, p. 574.
 edele Keyserin - M, VII:20;
 erlichu Keyserine - M, III:4; S, p. 456
 himelschu Keyserine - M, II:4;
 die himelsche Kunigine - M, II:4; S, p. 458.
 die wisse lylie Maria - M, II:19; S, p. 162.
 ein wysse lylie der diemutigen juncfrowen - M, VII:19; S, p. 162.
 der morgensterne ist ufgegangen, dc ist Sante Marien geburt
 und ir leben - M, VI:35; S, p. 23.
 gotz muter - M, VII:20 & II:4; S, pp. 97-109 on Mary as mother.

ein rose der marteren - M, VII:19; S, p. 69.
 ein trosterin aller heiligen cristanheit - M, VII:19; S, p. 591.
 dasselbe here trisem vas - M, II:3; S, p. 17, p. 327.
 herzeliebe vrowen min - M, VII:20; S, p. 100.
 ein lerende wisheit der apostelen - M, VII:19; S, p. 467.
 ein wune der heiligen drivalentigkeit - M, VII:19; S, p. 560.
 ein zuvluht der sundere - M, VII:19; S, p. 598.

Most of these examples, it will be noted, occur in Book VII, in Chapters 19 and 20, following a chapter of lyrical prayers for the offices of the day on the martyrdom of Our Lord. The two chapters, 19 and 20, form a litany to Our Lady. Since Chapter 7 was composed and dictated at Helfta during the final years of her life, there can be no doubt that Mechthild's language in these chapters was strongly influenced by her milieu - that of a convent in which church songs in praise of Mary were constantly heard. The Helfta convent was noted not only for its mystical piety (see Lüers, Marienverehrung mittelalterlicher Nonnen, op. cit., p. 39), but also for the role it played in the development of the veneration of Mary.

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Chapter IV

The Mystical Marriage

Mechthild's depiction of the development of the love-affair between the Soul and God begins at the highly stylized level of courtly love which was explored and extolled by German medieval poets. She uses the language of the minnesingers in describing in I:1 how Lady Love (frowe mine) first brought God to earth for the sake of the Soul, thereby robbing the Soul of all its earthly delights: (Frowe mine, ir hant mir benomen die welt, weltliche ere und allen weltlichen richtum - I:1). In exchange, Lady Love promises the Soul, who is addressed as "Queen", that she shall possess God and all His heavenly Kingdom: (Frowe kunigin, noch hant ir ze vordernde got und alle sine riche - I:1). Just as in some courtly narratives the squire brings the first intimation of love from the knight to the lady, so here Lady Love as intermediary brings the first hint of God's desire to the trembling Soul. Just as in those narratives the lady, aided by her handmaidens, begins to make half-fearful preparations which will lead step by step to her ultimate capitulation, so also does the Soul begin her timid yet joyful advance towards God. She calls upon her handmaidens, all the holy Christian virtues (alle heilige cristanliche tugende - I:3) and makes the journey to Court, urged onward by that powerful inescapable Love which "drove almighty God from heaven, and took from Him

His mortal life and gave Him back, with honour, to His heavenly Father". (han den almehtigen got von dem himelrich getriben und han ime benomen sin menschlich leben und han in mit eren sinem vatter widergegeben - I:3).

At Court the Soul is modest, withdrawn and silent, though she longs to praise God aloud. God receives the soul lovingly: "Welcome, sweet dove! Thou hast taken flight so long o'er the earth that thy wings have gained strength to carry thee to Heaven". (Siest wilkomen, liebu tube, du hast so sere geflogen in dem ertriche, das dine vedern sint gewahsen in dem himelriche - I:15).

The Soul is conscious of her unworthiness; she is "the lowly maiden" (die kleine dirne - I:4) and God "the mighty prince" (der hohe furste - I:4). But the same reciprocation of love is shown as can be seen in all encounters between the chosen lady and the knight of courtly narratives. The Soul has already admitted that she is "sick with love for Him" (minesiech nach ime - I:3) and God is said to be "sick with love for her" (minesiech nach ir - I:4). The Soul is thus emboldened to address her Lord: "Lord, Thou art my consolation, my long-sought desire, my flowing well-spring, my Sun and I Thy mirror". (herre, du bist min trost, min gerunge, min vliessender brune, min sune und ich bin din spiegel - I:4).

And God replies in most tender fashion, "Thou art My resting-place, My couch of love, My most secret repose, My deepest desire, My greatest honour. Thou art a delight

of My Godhead, a solace of My humanity, a cooling stream for My passion". (Du bist min leger kussin, min minekliches bette, min heimlichestu ruwe, min tiefeste gerunge, min hohste ere. Du bist eine lust miner gotheit, ein trost miner menscheit, ein bach miner hitze - I:19).

The Soul does not arrive at Court empty-handed, nor does God expect that she should do so, even though she has to vanquish and outstrip all the sins of the world in order to reach Him, "like a hunted deer" (als ein verjageter hirze - I:38) or "like an eagle in flight from the depths to the heights" (geswungen als ein are usser der tieffi in die hohin - I:38). He asks her what she brings to him, addressing her as "My Queen" (min Kunigine - I:39).

She answers: "Lord, I bring Thee my Jewel. It is greater than the mountains, wider than the world, deeper than the ocean, higher than the clouds, more beautiful than the sun, of greater diversity than the stars, outweighing the whole earth ... it is my heart's desire, which I have withdrawn from the world, kept to myself and denied to all created thing. Now I can bear it no longer - where, Lord, shall I lay it?" (Herre, ich bringe dir meine kleinoter. Das ist grosser dene die berge, es ist breiter dene die welt, tieffer dene das mer, hoher dene die wolken, schöner dene die sone, manigvaltiger dene die sterne; es wiget me dene alles ertrich ... es heisset mins herzen lust, den han ich der welte entzogen, mir selben erhalten und allen creaturen versaget; nu mag ich sin nut furbaß getragen.

Herre, war sol ich in legen? - I:40, I:42) And God accepts her gift, telling her that the only fit abode for her Jewel is His divine heart and His human breast, promising her that she will be comforted there in the embrace of His Spirit (da alleine wirst du getrost und mit minem geiste gekusset - I:43).

Now though the Soul does not feel herself to be worthy of the "glorious wonders of God" (dines schonen wonders bin ich gar vnwürdig - I:37), yet she is aware of her high destiny as the Bride of God, and thus can await with true delight and security the consummation of their union. For "God desired no longer to remain in Himself, alone, therefore He created the Soul, and gave Himself in great love to her alone". (do got nit me mohte in sich selben, do mahte er die selen und gab sich ir ze eigen von grosser liebi - I:22). She knows that she was created in love, and that therefore nothing can express her nobility except Love alone. (ich bin in derselben stat gemachet von der minne, darumbe mag mich enkein creature nach miner edelen nature getrosten noch entginnen dene allein die mine - I:32). God is her true Father and she is His true Bride, resembling Him in all her properties (Got ist ir rehter vatter und si sin rehtu brut, und si ist im an allen iren liden glich - I:22). The Soul is higher than the angels, as Mechthild specifically states in several places:

"For the high princes, the archangels, are greatly astonished that other princes - namely, men - should be

given pride of place over them" (wan so sere wundert den hohen fursten, die ertzengel sin des, das andere fursten der menschen uber in komen sint - II:3)

"The seraphim are God's children and yet are His servants. But the lowliest soul is daughter of the Father, sister of the Son and friend of the Holy Spirit and truly, a Bride of the Holy Trinity" (die engel von seraphin gotz kinder und doch sine knechte sint. Die minste sele ist tochter des vatters und swester des sunes und vrundine des heligen geistes und werliche ein brut der heligen drivaltigkeit - II:22).

"I gave My Holy Trinity a Bride so wondrous that the highest angels should bow before her" (ich hatte miner heligen drivaltekeit ein also lobelich brut gegeben dc die hohste engel/ir dienstman solten wesen - III:9). And by the intercession and redemption of Christ the Soul now prepares to claim her rightful place as Bride of the Holy Trinity. She treads the sevenfold way of love, passing beyond Repentance, Confession, Penitence, Worldly Love, Temptations of the Devil, Enticements of the Flesh and Self-Will, seeking the fair Youth whom she desires so much. In a setting furnished with trappings dear to the heart of the minnesingers - early morning dew, forests loud with birdsong, dancing of maidens and youths - her waiting-maids, the five Senses, urge her to dress in garments befitting such a Bride - the robes of humility, chastity and all the virtues. Thus attired, she seeks the company of the saintly

and listens to the songs which tell of union with God and of holy wisdom, and waits hopefully for her Lord. But the Youth does not come. She tries to live according to holy examples afforded by the Elect of God, adopting the faith of Abraham, the longing of the prophets, the humility and purity of the Virgin, and all the holy virtues of Christ. The Youth comes and compliments her on the way she dances in the measures first trodden by the Elect, but this fails to please her. She must dance with the Youth alone in their own unique nuptial dance. No imitation will suffice:

"I cannot dance, Lord, unless Thou lead me.
 If Thou desire that I leap for joy,
 Then must Thou Thyself first sing.
 Then I will leap for love.
 From love to knowledge.
 From knowledge to enjoyment.
 From enjoyment beyond all human senses.
 There will I remain in eternal orbit."

(Ich mag nit tanzen, herre, du enleitest mich.
 Wilt du das ich sere springe,
 So must du selber voran singen.
 So springe ich in die mine.
 Von der mine in bekantnisse,
 Von bekantnisse in gebruchunge,
 Von gebruchunge uber alle menschliche sine.
 Da wil ich bliben und will doch vurbas crisen - I:44.)

The Youth promises that it shall be as she desires. She shall have her will of the Virgin's Son. If she comes to the shaded place by the brook at noon, she shall cool her ardour in the bed of love (kument zu mittem tage zu dem brunen schatten in das bette der mine, da sont ir uch mit im erkulen - I:44).

At this point there comes a pause in Mechthild's account of the advance of the Soul towards God and the

consummation of their union. There is an argument between the Soul and the Senses, most cunningly manipulated by the author to show the attitude of the mystic. The Senses offer the Soul various ways whereby the love of God is to be sought - chastity, martyrdom, confession, the wisdom of the Apostles, the love of the angels, austerity like that of John the Baptist, contemplation of the infancy of Christ and his virgin mother. All these are admitted as being possible ways of seeking God, according to the means of grace acknowledged by the Church. But the Soul is not to be deflected from her goal. Only union with God will suffice. She is not to be inveigled into seeking a less arduous pathway than the one she has chosen to tread. Such paths are for the spiritually immature, but for her the road leads straight to the glowing heart of the Godhead. She reminds the Senses:

"I am a mature bride
I will go to my bridegroom."

(Ich bin ein vollewachsen brut,
Ich wil gan nach minem trut - I:44.)

The Senses warn her that the Godhead is too much for humanity to bear, burning so hotly that no-one could endure its proximity even for an hour. But Mechthild, in a celebrated passage, affirms the divine origin and properties of the Soul, which cannot perish in its natural element, any more than any other creature can:

"The fish cannot drown in water,
The bird cannot sink in air,
Gold cannot be destroyed in the furnace,

For it will there acquire clarity and brilliance.
 God has decreed for all created things
 That they seek their own element.
 How then could I resist my nature?
 Of all the creatures I must hence to God,
 My Father by nature,
 My Brother by His humanity,
 My Bridegroom by love,
 And I am his from eternity."

(Der visch mag in dem wasser nit ertrinken,
 Der vogel in dem lufte nit versinken.
 Das gold mag in dem fure nit verderben,
 Wan es enpfat da sin klarheit und sin luhende varwe.
 Got hat allen creature das gegeben,
 Das si ir nature pflegen.
 Wie mohte ich den minner nature widerstan?
 Ich muste von allen dingen in got gan,
 Der min vatter ist von nature.
 Min bruder von siner menscheit,
 Min brutegom von mine.
 Und ich sin ane anegenge - I:44.)

And so the Soul, still attired in bridal array, ventures into the "hidden chamber of the pure Godhead" (in die verholnen kamern der vnschuldigen gotheit, - I:44). But the Youth bids her disrobe - there must be no barriers between the Soul and God (zwischen vch und mir nihtes nit mag sin - I:44). She must lay aside "fear and shame and all external virtues" (vorhte und schame und alle uswendig tugent - I:44), and revert to her pristine state. Obediently she becomes "a naked soul" (ein nakent sele - I:44) and "there ensues a blessed silence, and as both desire, He gives Himself to her and she to Him" (so geschihet da ein selig stille, nach ir beider wille, Er gibet sich ihr, und si git sich ime - I:44). This is the way of Love, says Mechthild, at the end of I:44, which appears to have been a letter to a "friend in God" intended to describe the mystical experience - the ultimate bliss is not to be

described by human hand. (der susse herzeklang musse bliben, wan dc mag kein irdenschu hant geschriben - II:25). It must remain forever a secret, just as its pale imitation, physical love, remains a secret between two earthly lovers, says Mechthild of "the rippling torrent of love, which flows from God secretly into the soul, and back again by His power according to her capability" (die spilende minevlut, die von got heimlich in du sele vlusset und si wider mit siner kraft nach ir maht - VI:22).

Elsewhere in her book it is clear that this refusal to reveal the ultimate ecstasy stems from incapacity as well as from reluctance. She refers to the "place of purest delight which I can describe to none" (die allernotlichsten stat, dc ich nieman sagen mag - III:1) and of its radiance that "it is so splendid that I cannot write of it, nor must I" (ist so seltzen erlich, dc ich nit mus noch mag geschriben - III:1). To give the reader some idea of how infinitesimal is the information she imparts, Mechthild adds "I can only say one little word, which contains only as much as a honey-bee may carry away on its foot from a full store" (do mag ich von jegelichem ein wortelin sagen, dc ist nit mer dene also vil, als ein bini honges mag vs einem vollen stok an sinem fusse getragen - III:1). In language reminiscent of I Corinthians:13 she adds that "if I had the wisdom of all men and the tongue of all angels I could not express it" (hette ich aller menschen wisheit und aller engele stime, ich konde es nit fur bringen - III:1).

The only explanation she attempts to give for her inability to describe precisely the union between the Soul and God is contained in VI:23, the chapter entitled How God Speaks to the Soul in Three States. The first state is in the senses, and is open to God, to devils and to all creatures, who may all speak to the Soul as they please. The second state, in which God alone speaks to the Soul, is in the Soul itself. "None can enter here except God alone. But when God speaks in the Soul, there occurs without the knowledge of the senses, a great powerful, swift union of God with the Soul. The senses cannot perceive this blissful intercourse" (in die stat mag nieman komen dehe got alleine. Swene aber got in der sele sprichet, dc geschihet ane allerhande wissentheit der sinen mit grosser, crefftiger, sneller einunge gotz in der sele. So mogent die sine dc wunekliche reden nit vernemen - VI:23). The third state, in which God again speaks to the Soul, is heaven, when He draws up the Soul, entranced with joy, to delight in His wonders.

But though Mechthild does not tell of the "final ecstasy", she describes with eager wonder the natural affinity between the Soul and God, the mutuality of love between them, the burning desire of each for the other, the knowledge they share - and she constantly and artfully uses the metaphor of marriage, that state of which she had no personal experience in its earthly form yet is able to understand because of her experience on the mystical plane.

The natural affinity between the Soul and God is described by Mechthild in Chapter 31 of Book VI. It seems likely that this chapter constitutes a letter written to someone who had been puzzled by Mechthild's statement (I;44) that God is her Father by nature (from various references throughout the latter part of Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit it may safely be assumed that the earlier part of the book circulated quite widely during her lifetime).

This person evidently said (or wrote) to Mechthild that everything that God has done in us is by grace and not by nature. By way of reply Mechthild wrote the following parable, illustrating how God has formed the loving Soul after Himself and has bestowed upon her an especial enlightenment: "However good a man's eyes are, he cannot see further than a mile; however sharp his senses, he cannot grasp supernatural things except by faith, but gropes like a blind man in the darkness. The loving Soul, who loves everything that God loves and hates everything that God hates, possesses an eye which God has enlightened. With this eye she is able to see into the eternal Godhead and perceive how the Godhead has wrought with His own nature in the Soul. He has fashioned her after Himself, He has implanted her in Himself, He has united Himself with her before all creatures. He has enfolded her in Himself and has poured so much of His divine nature into her, that she cannot say other than that He is more than her Father in such union". (wie schone ogen ein mensche hat, er mag

gesehen nit uber ein mile weges; wie scharpfe sine der mensche hat, er kan vnsinelicher dinge nit begriffen dene mit dem geloben und greifft als ein blinde in der vinsternisse. Die minende sele, die alles das minet dc got minet und alles dc hasset dc got hasset, die hat ein oge, dc hat got erluhtet. Damit sihet si in die ewige gotheit, wie die gotheit gewircht hat mit ir nature in der sele. Er hat si gebildet nach im selber, er hat si gepflanzt in im selber, er hat sich allermeist mit ir vereinet vnder allen creaturen. Er hat si in sich beschlossen und hat siner gotlichen nature so vil gegossen, dc si anders nit gesprechen mag, dene dc er mit aller einunge me denē ir vatter ist - VI:31).

The Soul knows of her divine origin (I:44) and speaks of it to the senses, whom she addresses as "murderer", "prison", "fool", "enemy", because they prevent her from returning to that "pure fire" (VI:29) from whence she came. Two kinds of love there are - the "undisciplined love" which lives in the senses and is mingled with earthly things; and the "disciplined love"* which "dwells in the soul and lifts it above human senses and grants to the body none of its desires. It is moderate and still". (wonet in der sele und stiget uber menschliche sine und gestattet dem lichamen enkeines sines willen. Si ist gezogen und vil stille - II:24). It is this love which hears the

*A possible reference to Richard St. Victor's caritas ligans, one of the four stages of love.

voice of the Inexpressible and sees the light of the Incomprehensible and yearns with a burning desire to do the will of its Lord, and is prevented from aspiring to the heights for which it longs by the stirring of the senses. Yet, says Mechthild, following what she calls "a strange and lofty path" (ein selzen und ein hoher weg - I:26) the soul, endowed with sight, drags the "blind" senses along, and on this path the Soul is free and without suffering. It is the pathway to love, from which Mechthild says she can never turn back, because she is Love's prisoner. But blind though they may be, and unaware of the Soul's noble origin and high destiny, the senses still receive their due meed, for Mechthild does not uphold the pursuit of asceticism for its own sake. One of the reasons for her staunch support of the Dominican Order was Dominic's moderation in the advocacy of asceticism, in refusing to burden the brothers with too many penances. In Book VI she gives practical advice for the management of convents or monasteries, and includes among her admonitions some explicit directions concerning sufficiency of provisions. A hungry monk, she says, cannot sing sweetly nor study earnestly. The body, in Mechthild's view, is not to be altogether neglected while the Soul pursues her quest for union with her Lord. On the Day of Judgment the Soul will address the body thus:

"Arise, my Beloved, and be healed of all thy sorrows, shame, sadness, banishment, wounds and labours. The morning-star has risen, with

Mary's birth and life, the sun has added his radiance because God became man". (Stand uf, min vil lieber, und erhole dich aller diner pine, aller diner wehetagen, aller diner smacheit, aller diner trurekeit, alles dines ellendes, aller diner serekeit, aller diner arbeit. Der morgensterne ist vffgegan, dc ist Sante Marien geburt und ir leben. Die sone hat iren schin getan, dc ist dc got mensche wart - VI:35).

Just as once salvation for the soul of man lay in a body, because God was incarnate in Mary's body, so now all hope for the body lies in the soul. "Once, all my salvation lay in thee, now all thy solace rests in me" (ettewene lag alles min heil an dir, nu lit aller din trost an mir - VI:35). Thus at the end harmony and balance between body and soul will be fully restored.

Of the absolute mutuality of the love between the Soul and God there can be no doubt. There must be "a complete exchange" (ein ganzte wechselunge) with God: "If thou givest God all that is thine, inwardly and outwardly, then He will truly give thee all that is His, inwardly and outwardly" (also, dc du got gebest alles dc din ist, inwendig als vswendig, so git er dir werlich alles was sin is, inwendig und vswendig - IV:15). God and the Soul are the master and mistress of heaven and the mistress sits in her rightful place next to God whom she most resembles (und sitzt bi dem ewigen wirt, im selber allethglichest - IV:14). And thus God, the master of the house, honours the mistress (alsus eret der wirt bi siner siten die husfrowen - IV:14). As mutual love passes back and forth between them, "they gaze at each other, spirit flowing towards spirit, hand

reaching to hand, mouth speaking to mouth, heart greeting heart". (da spilet oge in oge, und da flusset geist in geiste, und da ruret hant ze hande und sprichet mund ze munde, und da grusset hertz in hertzen - IV:14). Mechthild has given us in this passage an image of a married pair, secure and confident in their mutual love, enjoying their communion without reservations and on equal terms.

This love flows first from God, who longs to share His divine life with spiritual creatures. As in marriage, however, there must always be an inner, private life which cannot be shared with a partner, so it is clear that God does not reveal the whole of His power, knowing that the effect of such a revelation, beyond all human comprehension, would be death to the creature. God answers the greetings and prayers of the Soul, who longs for Him to unite with her, by saying, "My greetings to thee in return resemble such a great flood from Heaven that if I should give Myself to thee in all My power, thou couldst not retain thy human life. Thou must understand that I must reserve My power and hide My radiance from thee, so that thou shalt remain yet longer in earthly suffering". (min widergrus ist ein so gros himelvlut, solte ich mich in dich nach miner maht geben du behieltest nit dein menschlich leben. Du sihest wol, ich mus mine maht enthalten und ubergen mine klarheit, dur dc ich dich deste langer behalte in der irdenschen jamerkeit - V:18). And so as much of His presence as He deems sufficient for the creature pours forth like "an

overflowing spring, which no-one can drain dry" (ein vsvliessende brune,* den nieman erschopfen mag - V:26), "a blessed, flowing rivulet of love" (süsse, minende brunenvlusse - VII:24), "a great fiery radiance which flows down from the Holy Trinity into the loving soul, illuminating all things" (ein grosse furin schin, der alles luhende harnider gat vs von der heligen drivaltekeit in die minende sele - V:1), "a lovely sunbeam which flowing continually from the hot sun shines down upon a newly gilded shield" (ein schoner sunenstral, der alswebende vs der heissen sunen schinet vf einen nuwen goltvarwen schilt - V:1).

The expected effect upon the Soul of this mighty outpouring is described by God Himself: "When I send forth My rays, thou must glow. When I send forth My flood, thou must surge along". (Swene ich schine, so must du luhden. Swene ich vlusse, so must du wuthen - II:6). And the creature recognizes its compulsion to respond: "Merciful Father, God of Heaven, draw Thou my Soul, which flows unceasingly (for Thee), so that I come to Thee without a backward glance". (Eya, milte vatter, got von himelrich, zuhe mine sele al vliessende; vnbekumert vm dich - V:35). The Soul longs to respond in the only way possible - by allowing the flood of grace to enter, overflow, and return to its Source: "Lord, thou shalt pour Thy grace into me, then I can overflow with Thy love". (da solt du, herre,

*In many other places in Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit God is compared to a spring.

din gnade ingiessen, so mag ich von diner mine vliessen - V:20).

Mechthild gives us a considerable insight into the experience of this irresistible torrent of Love in a long letter to a friend, contained in Book VII, Chapter 55 of Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit, and probably written towards the end of her life. Throughout the letter she uses the metaphor of a small vessel being filled to the brim and overflowing. The small vessel (the Soul) must be emptied into the larger vessel (the plenitude of grace which God receives from our good works), which in its turn must be emptied into the largest vessel of all, which is God. And in the meantime the small vessel is full again, and must be emptied on sinners, that they might repent and be forgiven. Again it is filled, and must be emptied forth over the failings of spiritual people, so that they may strive to overcome and correct their shortcomings, and when their needs are met, the continuing superabundance of love must be used to cool and comfort sufferers in Purgatory. "If we would be like Him, we must give it, back to Him", (dc selbe sollen wir im widergeben, wellen wir im glich wesen - VII: 55), declares Mechthild. God has given us much, and we must give to others "the great flood of divine love, which is never still but flows constantly and tirelessly in a blissful stream so that our little vessel is filled to the brim and overflowing - unless we choke up the channel with self-will our vessel will continue to receive the bounty of

God's gifts". (der grosse vbervlus gotlicher mine, die niemer stille stat und vlusset jemer me ane vnderlas, ane allerhande arbeit, mit also sussem vlusse jemer vnverdrossen, dc unser clein vesselin vol und vbervlussig wirt - weilen wir es nit verstopfen mit eigenem willen, so vlusset vnser vesselin jemer uber von gotz gabe - VI:55).

The interaction of the Soul with the flooding torrent of God's love is highly productive, as we have seen, in the sense that it produces an effect upon sinners, upon spiritual people who have not shed their imperfections, and upon souls in Purgatory. It is most significant in the consideration of Mechthild's development of the metaphor of the mystical marriage that she now sees herself as the "mother of souls", and these are the three children for whom she prays (i.e. sinners, imperfect spiritual people, and those in Purgatory). Of the sinners she says, "Alas! I look on this child with a bleeding heart and I caress it with tears in my eyes in my poor soul, and carry it to the feet of its Father, from whom I receive it". (O we, dis kint sihe ich mit blutigem herzen an, und ich mine es mit weinenden ogen an miner sele arme, und trage es fur die fusse sines vatters, da ich es bi gewunen habe - V:8). Of those in Purgatory she says that they cause her to suffer as a mother because of their great need and that "I must give them my heart's blood to drink". (den mus ich min herzeblut ze trinkende geben - V:8). Of the spiritual people who are still in a state of imperfection she says, "When

I look on all my children I grieve for none so much as for this one". (wene ich allu minu kint ansihe, so ist mir enkeinem also we als von disem alleine - V:8). It is only with the greatest difficulty that this sick child can recover, for those who have lapsed have deliberately turned away from God's love by yielding to the transient things which are so tempting to the outward senses. Yet Mechthild still prays far more fervently for the lapsed than for the sinners, though she considers it "a matter of grave doubt where the soul in such error will finally end". (so ist es vil sere gewaget, war die versumete sele hinwende - V:8).

Thus we can see that the effect produced upon the Soul which has been penetrated by the overpowering flood of love emanating from the Godhead is its conviction that its mission henceforth is universal and catholic. She intercedes with God and offers herself up for these her "children", even for her former enemies when they are suffering in the flames of Purgatory. God listens to her supplications and promises that "thou shalt bathe them in the tears of love which flow from thy bodily eyes". (du solt si baden in den mine trehnen, die da nu vliessent usser den ogen dines lichamen - II:8). She suffers for the sins of the whole world and repents as deeply as if she had committed them herself. In fact Mechthild takes upon herself the burden of God's concerns, and in particular the state of the Christian Church here on earth: "I pray Thee, Lord, for Thine own glory, that Thou shouldst ever give to

us Christians in the Chair in Rome a leader filled with all Christian virtues so that holy Christendom shall ever increase in love, redeemed from all sins, sanctified by all virtues". (ich bitte dich, herre, dur din selbes ere, dc du vns cristanen luten wellest geben ane vnderlas in dem stule ze Rome ein hopt vol aller cristanen tugenden, da die helige cristanheit von gebreitet musse werden in der mine und geloset von allen sunden und geheliget mit allen tugenden - VI:37). She feels empowered to make pronouncements on behalf of God, such as the Seven Demands of the Law as pre-requisites for the saints who will partake in the Judgment* with Jesus Christ** in V:22, and directions for priors, prioresses and the daily life of a Canon (VI:1, 2). She is as concerned with God's affairs as any humble little spouse is concerned with the mundane doings of her mate, and with something of the same housewifely air - she is in fact described in her old age as "a housewife of My Godhead". (ein hūsvrowe miner gotheit - VII:3).

But in all her experience of the flooding love of the Godhead and her surrender to it Mechthild never loses sight, nor wishes the reader to lose sight, of the fact that none of this would be possible without the Incarnation. She describes her visions of the flowing breasts of Mary and the

*cf. I. Cor. 6.

**Unfortunately the first paragraph of the Menzies English version of V:22 is incorrect.

flowing wounds of Christ and sees in these symbols the Godhead becoming flesh (II:3; VI:24). In one vision Christ reveals His wounds to her, telling her that "it is My heart's blood which flowed from My side with the flowing light of the Godhead. The blood came from grace like the milk which My virgin mother gave Me to drink". (do min herzeblut mit der stralen der gotheit dur mine siten vlos. Das blut kam von gnaden ze glicher wis als die milch, die ich von miner megetlichen muter sog - VI:24). And towards the end of her life she refers to reports she has heard of "a sin which is worse than all other sins" and thanks God that it has never entered her heart, for it is the uttermost depth of unbelief: "This sin did not originate with Christian people but the vile enemy has deceived simple people through it. They would fain be so holy as to draw themselves up into the eternal Godhead and pass by the eternal holy humanity of Our Lord Jesus Christ. If they are really so stricken with pride they fall into everlasting damnation". (dise sunde ist nit von cristanen luten vfkomen; der diemutige vient hat die einvaltigen lute mit betrogen. Si wellent also helig sin, dc si sich in die ewigen gotheit wellent ziehen und legen bi der ewigen heligen menscheit vnsers herren Jesu cristi. Wene sich die vindent in bobenheit so gebent si sich in den ewigen vluch - VII:47).

Her own articles of faith and means of salvation are simply set forth in a little "creed" entitled The Four Matters of Faith: "Belief in God in Christian manner, love

of God in holy manner, true recognition of Jesus Christ, faithful obedience to His teaching until one's life's end - by these four ways I believe that one can gain everlasting life". (das man cristenliche gelobet an got, und dc man got bekenliche minet und dc man Jesum Cristum werliche bekenet, dc man siner lere getruwelichen volget untz in des menschen ende, des gelob ich das man in disen vier dingen dc ewige leben vinde - VII:54).

In considering the relationship between the Soul and God it is important, as in an earthly relationship, to examine the attitude of each to the other. God's attitude can be perceived only by knowledge of the flowing richness of His love which streams forth unceasingly, surrounding and penetrating the Soul. This gushing torrent must contain and convey the urgency of the need of its Source to mingle with that towards which it flows. This urgency stems from the fact that God created the loving Soul as a Bride for the Holy Trinity, resembling Himself in all her properties, so that He may praise her as "a light of the world, a paragon among virgins (i.e. the acme of purity), a soothing balm for the weary, a symbol of fidelity for the false-hearted - a Bride of the Holy Trinity". (ein licht der welte ... ein kron der megde ... ein truwe der valschen ... ein brut der heligen drivaltekeit - II:9). In a vision of Creation, Mechthild records the conversation of the Holy Trinity, in which the Father declares His need to create a Bride out of love, so that His love might be returned and His omnipotence

acknowledged (vf das man vns wider mine und das man vnserere grossen ere ein wenig erkene ich wil mir selben machen ein brut III:9), the Spirit agrees to "consummate the marriage", (die brut wil ich dir ze bette bringen III:9), and the Son accedes to the compulsion of love by reminding the Father that He will die for it (ich sol noch sterben von minen, du weist es wol - III:9). After the Fall, the Father mourns the loss of this splendid Bride (lobelich brut) - so altogether noble that the angels should be subservient to her (die hohste engel ir dienstman solten wesen) - whereupon the Son begs to take humanity's sins upon Himself and atone for the guilt of man with His own human death. This noble Bride resembles her Creator in three ways, as Mechthild reveals in a dialogue between Understanding personified and the Soul, in which the former says: "Thy nature is three fold and thus thou art worthy to be God's image. Thou art masculine in thy striving, thou art splendid in thy virginal beauty in the palace of thy Lord, and thou art tender and submissive on thy bridal bed". (du bist drivaltig an dir, du maht wol gotz bilde sin. Du bist ein menlich man an dinem strite, du bist ein wohlgezieret juncfrowe in dem palast vor dinem herren. Du bist ein lustlichu brut in dinem minebette - II:19).

Here an interpolation must be made concerning Mechthild's understanding of the attributes of the triune God. In V:23 she stresses the qualities of omnipotence, wisdom and tenderness. In V:26 she has clearly pondered

upon the mystery of the perichoresis*, in her Song of the Holy Trinity, here translated in its entirety: - "Now hear how the Holy Trinity praises itself in its uncreated power and wisdom and eternal goodness and truth, for ever, without end. The voice of the Father utters this song of praise: "I am an overflowing spring which can never be exhausted. But if the channels of a heart are stopped up with vain thoughts, the constant, effortless flow of the Godhead cannot enter the soul". The Son adds His song: "I am a treasure that is continually renewed, which no-one can keep except by expending it, which has flowed out from all eternity from God and returns to the Son". The Holy Spirit sings in praise: "I am the invincible power of truth. I am to be found in men who await God's will and magnify Him". The whole Trinity sings this song: "I am so firm in My indivisibility that no power can separate My persons in all My eternity".

Song of the Holy Trinity

(Eya, nu höre wie die helige Drivaltekeit sich selber lobet mit ir vnbeginlicher wisheit und mit ir endelosen guti, und mit ir ewigen warheit und mit ir ganzen ewekeit Des vaters stime spricht ime lobesange: 'Ich bin ein vsvliessende brune, den nieman erschöpfen mag. Aber der mag villihte sin herze selber mit eime vnnutze gedank verstopffen, dc die vngeruwighe gotheit, die jemer mere

*perichoresis = the existence of the persons of the Trinity in one another.

arbeitet ane arbeit nit in sin sele mag vliessen.'

Dér sun singet alsus; 'Ich bin ein widerkomende richtuom, den nieman behalten mag, wan alleine die miltekeit, die je gevlossen und jemer gevliessen sol von gotte, die kunt alles wider mit sime sune.'

Der helig geist singet dis lob; 'Ich bin ein unüberwunden kraft der warheit, dc vindet man an dem menschen, der loblich mit gotte bestet swas im angat.'

Alsus singet die ganze drivaltekeit, 'Ich bin also stark an miner vngescheidenheit, dc mich gescheiden nieman mag noch zerbrechen an miner ganzen ewekeit.')

In an article entitled Die trinitarische Spekulation in deutscher Mystik und Scholasticism (Trinitarian Speculation in German Mysticism and Scholasticism), Kurt Ruh refers briefly to Mechthild's understanding of the mystery of the Three-in-One, quoting from Morell's transcription of Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit. The passages he quotes indicate that she understood the concept of one God in three Persons and recognized that the three Persons were one and indivisible, that she knew of the divine attributes of omnipotence, wisdom and tenderness (almehtikeit, wisheit and miltekeit), and saw the Soul as the imago trinitatis, being created by God in His image.

Created out of the necessity of love, then, and endowed with the properties of the Creator, the Soul must strive to realise her true nature and potential. This is what God's attitude towards His bride indicates. —She must

evinced a humility so deep that she cannot bear any creature to be lower than herself (VI:1). She must do all things for the love of God and not for earthly reward. She must put God's honour before everything (VI:1). She must remember above all else that God "was so deeply wounded by love for her that He gave up everything that was dear to Him for more than thirty years, so that He might kiss her and embrace her" (er ist also sere verwunt von irer mine; dc er aller dingen hat verzigen mere dene drissig jar die ime bekemelich waren, vf dc er si mohte durkussen und mit sineh blossen armen vmbevahen - VI:1).

Moreover, the Soul must not be dismayed even in the most wretched situation, but should rather rejoice that she is allowed to partake of suffering with Jesus Christ. For it is the lot of all God's Brides here on earth, as Mechthild learned when she complained of bodily sickness and spiritual suffering during a period in which she was denied the comfort of the Mass and the daily offices: "Thus it is always with My Brides here on earth in their bodily existence. For love of thee was I girt about with sorrows on earth ... but in all things I trusted to the endless loving-kindness of My Father" (also ist minen bruten in ertriche an irem lichamen gegeben. Ich wart in ertrich dur dini liebi mit noten bevangen ... daruber getruwete ich minem vatter vnzellige guti - III:5). And in a long chapter (III:10) Mechthild tells how the loving Soul accepts her role as participant in the Passion of Christ. Whoever is

loved by God, she says, is betrayed, sold, taken prisoner, bound, scourged, stripped naked and mocked. His eyes are bound, he must carry the cross, with the hammer of love's vows he is nailed to it, he thirsts, he goes down to hell armed with the power to comfort the suffering souls with his prayers, he is pierced by unfeeling men whose eyes are blinded to the sight of suffering Love, from his heart flow many holy teachings, he is buried in the tomb of humility, he rises on his joyous Easter Day. Every soul penetrated truly in all her doings by the flowing love of God must suffer this martyrdom (dise marter lidet ein jeglich sele die in heliger temperunge alles irs tundes ist werlich durchvlossen mit warer gotzliebi - III:10). Even hell does not daunt the loving Soul, for Mechthild demands "that He should send her to hell as a witness so that unending renown and songs of praise should rise to Him from all creatures" (ja, si wolte das er si zu der helle senden wolte, vf das er von allen creaturen uber vnmasse gelobet werde - I:5). She asks for God's blessing, and because she must partake of the sufferings of Christ it follows that the highest blessing of all can be depicted under the image of a violent curse. In I-7 God utters His curse in eight things:

"I curse thee:
 May thy body die, thy speech cease,
 Thy eyelids close, thy heart's blood be stilled.
 Then may thy soul rise while thy body remains inert.
 Then may all thy human senses pass away.
 Then may thy spirit stand before the Holy Trinity".

(ich vluche dir: din lichamen musse sterben.
 Din wort musse verderben.
 Din ogen müssen sich schliessen.
 Din herze musse vliessen.
 Din sele musse stigen.
 Din licham musse bliiben.
 Din menschliche sine mussin vergan.
 Din geist musse vor der heiligen drivaltekei/ stan -I:7).

Until such time as this "curse" is put into effect the creature must be content with the merest fleeting seconds of union with God. However much she might yearn for death, and "would indeed die a thousand deaths to see what no human eye has ever seen" (das war nie von menschen ogen gesehen, ja tusent tode weren ze lihtè - III:23), yet God must deny this on the grounds that her appointed time has not yet come and "earth cannot spare thee yet". (dis ertrich mag din noch nit enbern - III:23).

In depicting the attitude of the Soul towards God - and it is inevitable that in such a subjective work this should be Mechthild's predominant concern - she explores to the full all the nuances of the metaphor of mystical marriage, always stopping short, as we have seen, of attempting to describe the ultimate ecstasy of union. The language of the courtly minnesang suffices to describe the first stages of the love-affair between God and the Soul in terms of the courtly romance between the fair Youth and the Lady, but Mechthild leads the reader beyond romance and into the regions of yearning, burning, insistent sexual love. In these regions the Bride "yearns to love even to death, without measure and without ceasing", (und gere des, dc ich in mortlich mipe ane masse und ane underlas - I:28), and "the

high Prince and lowly Maiden embrace one another and mingle like water and wine" (der hohe furst und die kleine dirne alsust behalsent und vereinet sind als wasser und win - I:4). She begs her Bridegroom to "receive me into the arms of Thy love, and to cover me with the mantle of Thy great desire". (enpfahe mich dene an dem armen diner mine, und bedeke mich mit dem mantel diner langen gerunge - W:35*).

In Book III, Chapter I Mechthild describes how the Soul leaves the body and goes to seek God. She makes known to God her desire, and having learned that God also desires the hungry Soul above all things (die hungerige sele, der mich lustet ob allen dingen - III:1) she soars upwards, reminding two angels who are sent to meet her that the higher she climbs the more radiant she becomes, whereas they lose some of their heavenly lustre, the closer to earth they sink. In God's embrace she is snatched away in rapture into the height of heights above all the choirs of the angels, where she sees a vision of Creation. In an interpolation in this chapter she admits that she has seen "unheard-of things" (ungehortu ding - III:1), according to her father-confessor, and explains something of her unease. She fears God if she keep silent, because He bade her write of these things, and she fears ignorant men if she writes of them, but what can she do, how can she help it, if these things happen to her, as they often do? In humility,

*Omitted in Menzies translation.

simplicity, wretched poverty and shameful oppression she has been vouchsafed by God a vision of His wondrous doings, and must thereafter pine for more. She can never free herself from the bondage of love (des mag, ich nit werden von minen vri - II:25), she burns inextinguishably in the flames of God's love (ich brine vnverloschen in diner heissen mine - II:25), and expends all her powers in pursuing her beloved quarry. "O my Beloved", she cries, "do not leap away from me.* Stay a little, and rest in love, so that I may grasp Thee". (eia, lieber, nu lofe mit ir nit ze lange vor und ruwe ein wenig mineklich, auf dc ich dich begriffe - II:25). She willingly allows herself to be dragged through the fires of love to reach God's side, and in her continual thirst for Him she resembles a drunkard returning time and again to the bottle. In a remarkable extended metaphor she describes the inebriation of the Soul by love, and the consequences of casting aside all things for love of God:

"If thou wilt go with me to the wine-cellar,
it will cost thee dearly.
Even if thou hadst a thousand marks, it would
all be gone in an hour.
If thou wilt drink of the unadulterated wine,
then wilt thou for ever spend more than thou
hast, and even then the host cannot fill my goblet.
Thou wilt be poor, stripped of all things,
despised by all those who would rather wallow
in the mire than spend their substance in the
great wine-cellar."

(wilt du mit mir in die winzelle gan,
so mustu grosse kosten han. Hastu
tusend marche wert, dc hastu in einer
stunde verzert. Wilt du den win

*Cf. Song of Songs 2:8.

ungemenget trinken, so verzerest du
 jemer me als du hast, so mag dir der wirt
 nit volle schenken. So wirstu arm und nakent
 und von allen den versmehet, die lieber sich
 frowent in dem pfule, denne si iren schatz in
 der hohen winzelle vertun - III:3).

God becomes the prey of the hungry Soul. He assures her that she will find Him: "In thy secret searching thou must find me. Thy sorrowing heart may hold Me fast. Thy sweet pursuit makes Me so weary that I desire to cool Myself in thy pure soul, to which I am bound" (din heimliches suchen mus mich vinden, dines herzen jamer mag mich twingen, din susses jagen machet mich so mude, da ich begere, da ich mich kule, in der reinen sele din, da ich in gebunden bin - II:25). In her pursuit the Soul employs the power of prayer, which "draws down mighty God into the tiny heart; it drives the hungry soul up to bounteous God; it brings together the two lovers, God and the Soul, in a place of great delight, where they speak much of love" (zuhet harnider den grossen gott in ein klein herze; es tribet die hungrigen sele vf zu dem vollen gotte; es bringet zesamen du zwoi geliebe, got und die sele, in ein wunekliche stat, da reden si vil von liebe - V:13).

When the Soul is united with God as His bride, her comfort is in Him alone. She eagerly awaits the return of the Bridegroom when she awakes from sleep to find that He has left her side, and spurns all other comfort, crying that "my lover left me while I slept, as I rested in union with Him" (min lieber ist mir in minem schlafe engangen,

do ich in siner einunge ruwete - IV:12). God understands the longing of the Soul to be united with Him once more and acknowledges her need for His return. She is, He says, like a young bride whose lover has left her sleeping, and she cannot bear a moment's separation from Him, and complains bitterly when she awakes (II:25). But He tells her that she must be patient and endure the separation for a while: "I come to thee according to My desire, whenever I will. Control thyself, be still, hide thy grief as well as thou mayest ... and I will await thee in the garden of love, and pluck for thee the blossoms of sweet union and make for thee a bed of the blooms of holy understanding" (ich kum zu dir nach miner lust, wene ich wil. Siest du gezogen und still. Und verbirg dinen kumber wa du maht ... und ich warten din in dem bomgarten der mine, und briche dir die blumen der sussen einunge und machen dir da ein bette von dem lustlichen grase der heligen bekantheit - II:25). Thus the Soul is assured of the return of the Beloved, and of the renewal of their embraces, which she longs for even though she knows that at the very height of ecstasy she will begin to sink and grow cold and fall away. This is how Mechthild describes the encounter, after comparing the soul to a pilgrim who has succeeded in scaling the highest mountain and now begins timidly to descend on the further side: "So it is with the soul, who is enflamed in the heat of enduring passion and powerless in the embrace of the Holy Trinity and she begins then to sink down and to grow

cold, just as the sun goes down from its highest point and sinks into the night" (De ist, de die sele so sere durschinen ist in der hitze der langen mine, und also unmehtig worden ist in der vmbehalsunge der heligen drivaltekeit so beginet si ze sinkende und ze kulende, als die sune von der hohsten stat hernider gat und sinket untz in die naht - V:4).

Such a letdown is only to be endured in the absolute assurance that the experience will be repeated, and the Soul is confident that it will, for "God has enough of everything save of intercourse with the Soul. Of that He can never have enough" (Got hat alles dinges genug, sunder alleine der berurunge der sele wirt im niemer genug - IV:12). In her old age Mechthild almost welcomes the cessation of her visions, since she "can no longer endure the fiery love of the God of her youth" (VII:3), and accepts her role as "a housewife of My Godhead". Unlike the housewife who is a partner in an earthly marriage, she looks ahead to the continuance of the marriage of the Soul to God after the death of the body: "I beg Thee also, great and glorious Trinity, in the last hour of the painful separation of my poqr soul from my sinful body, that Thou Thyself, Lord, will bend down towards me, so that all my ~~enemies~~ depart discomfited from me. Then, Lord, I may gaze upon Thee continually and unceasingly, in accordance with Thy sweet pleasure and mine own longing, so that the eyes of my soul may delight in Thy Godhead and the rapture of Thy love will

flow from Thy divine breast through my soul" (Och bitte ich dich, hohu wunenklüche drivaltekeit, vmb die jungsten stunde der ellendigen scheidunge miner armen sele von minem sundigen libe, dc du dich dene, herre, wellist zu mir neigen, also dc alle mine viende trurig von mir scheiden, und ich, herre, danach diner sussen wollust und miner langen gerunge, dich moge ane vnderlas ansehen, also dc miner sele ogen in diner gottheit müssen spilen, und dine süssu minelust us diner gotlichen brust dur mine sele müssen sweben - V:35).

Because she is human and fearful and no more capable than any other mortal of visualizing her own death, she asks God how it will be. "I am afraid", she says, "how shall I depart from my body?" And God assures her that the way to Him will be swift and painless: "When it happens, I will draw My breath, and thou shalt follow Me, as if drawn by a magnet" (also dc sol geschehen, so wil ich minen aten ziehen, das du mir volgest als ein agestein - V:32).

Chapter V

Mechthild's Mysticism

As the preceding chapter indicated, Mechthild von Magdeburg develops in great depth and detail the metaphor of the mystical marriage in Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit. It is the theme to which she returns constantly throughout her Revelations, and she explores all possible stages of its earthly analogy, from the first glances of love between the bridal pair to the long accustomed familiarity of an aging housewife and her spouse, in order to bring to the reader some conception of the nature of the union between the soul and God. This statement must immediately be qualified, however, for the sake of clarification - it should read "all possible stages save one", for Mechthild understood as well as all other mystics the concept of the mystical silence concerning the unio mystica. This concept will be examined at a later stage in this chapter.

Mechthild's treatment of the metaphor of the mystical marriage is unique in many ways. But bridal imagery per se is not unique to Mechthild, and for a very good reason. In searching after God the true mystic recognizes that the unio mystica must be fruitful, and the first fruits of the union must be the acknowledgement to others that this union has taken place. This is why mystics have always striven, however ineptly in some cases and rather improperly in others, (for the Spirit does not automatically confer literary

ability or innate propriety) to share the delights of their ecstasies with other mortals. The problem is, how to convey to human beings the rapture of union with the Being that is beyond being, and the answer is, by using as the basis for analogy that relationship which is the closest of all among humans, the one which is most coveted and enjoyed, and the one most easily understood. No relationship of consanguinity could possibly serve the mystic's purpose, for all such relationships are produced by the propagating of others, and are not freely instigated by the volition of consenting partners, as the marital relationship is, nor are they fruitful in themselves, as the marriage relationship generally is if it is true to its nature. It is at once extraordinarily simple and extraordinarily complex - simple in that it reflects the human need for love, understanding and happiness, and complex because it contains within it the mystery of the life-impulse and of the functioning and interacting of the male and female principles. It is a fitting metaphor for the simple urge of the human spirit to reach the source of all love and for the complex riddle of how an earth-bound spirit may find and unite with the creator of all things, both physical and spiritual, active and passive.

Bridal imagery, then, has a long tradition in connection with the mystical marriage. Grete Lüers says that mysticism of all periods uses the bridal relationship to describe the union between God and the soul - "the reposit."

Yamys (sacred marriage) of the old mystery religions and the conubium spirituale (marriage spiritual) which Bernard de Clairvaux praises in the most glowing shades of spiritual eroticism are identical."¹ The Valentinians added a bridal chamber (νμφαev) to the mysteries, and the metaphor was further enriched by Origen's allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, by Bernard de Clairvaux's ~~sermons~~ sermons on the themes of the Song of Songs, and by Richard St. Victor's tractates.² Among female writers of the medieval period this imagery was especially popular. Herbert Grundmann says that "the concept of the betrothal of the soul of the pious, and the perception of God's love, often heightened to an erotic experience of union between the soul and God - these ideas pervade and dominate generally the piety of women of the thirteenth century."³ So impassioned an effect did their absorption with bridal imagery produce that it became necessary for such writers of edifying literature for women as David von Augsburg⁴ to warn women "seized by mystical excitement" against indulging their desire to experience "the kiss and the embrace."⁵

Mechthild was certainly one of these, moving beyond allegory and metaphor towards a vivid experience of religious eroticism, to such an extent that her Latin redactor found it expedient to tone down her direct, erotic experiences, and render them more recognizably spiritual - thereby weakening and taming the impact of the forceful, impetuous woman upon the sensitive reader.⁶ Dr. Carl Greith, who was responsible

for bringing to light Mechthild's MS in 1860, defended her staunchly against any censure for her use of sensuous imagery, quoting the oft-repeated expression concerning the pure and the impure⁷, to which Morel added his own defence of poetic licence. And Grete Lüers makes this forthright and justifiable admission: "Mechthild von Magdeburg loves this imagery especially; she knows how to put new life into it with an innate ability to manipulate the imagery arising from her strongly erotic spiritual stance. She is even bold enough to dare to add to the traditional representations of the conubium overtones which depict the relationship between God and the soul as a sexual act"⁸

This daring use of the bridal metaphor is evidently one of the unique features of Mechthild's mysticism - unique among her contemporaries as well as in comparison with her predecessors. Bernard de Clairvaux, first among mystical writers of the West⁹ to elaborate upon the metaphor of the spiritual marriage inherited from the Song of Songs, did so in a systematic and orderly fashion, taking phrases from the Song as the basis of this text and weaving around them the fabric of his sermons. His purpose, of course, was didactic and always kept plainly in view - the instruction of others in the development of the spiritual life by using the allegory and metaphor of the Bride and Bridegroom from the Old Testament. And he made it clear that the reader must never lose sight of the allegory: "Take heed that you bring chaste ears to this discourse of love, and when you

think of these two lovers, remember always that not a man and woman are to be thought of, but the Word of God and a soul. And if I shall speak of Christ and the church, the sense is the same, except that under the name of the Church is specified not one soul only, but the united souls of many, or rather their unanimity." (Sermon 61:2)¹⁰.

Nor did Richard St. Victor make so bold a use of the sexual metaphor as Mechthild. His work On the Four Grades of Violent Love (De quatuor gradibus violentae charitatis) may have suggested that he was preoccupied with the allegory of physical love as a means of understanding the bond between God and the soul, but he was actually concerned with his elaborate and complex analysis of the six stages of contemplation and his allegorical interpretation of Scripture in general.

In the extract from Bernard's Sermon 61 quoted above, it is apparent that the writer gives a twofold allegorical interpretation of the Bride and Bridegroom of the Song of Songs - as the soul of the individual and the Divine Word, the Logos, Second Person of the Holy Trinity, and as the Church and Jesus Christ. For Bernard, the Bride was primarily the Church, and the Bridegroom Jesus Christ, for he says in that same Sermon 61: "Though none of us would presume so far as to venture to say that his soul was the Spouse of the Lord, yet since we are members of the Church, which justly glories in that name, and in the fact which that name signifies, we may claim not unjustly a

participation in that glory." (Sermon 61, XII:11)¹¹.

But Mechthild did "presume so far as to venture to say that the soul was the Spouse of the Lord." She refused to keep silent on the matter. She was reproved by her spiritual advisor and ~~mentor~~, Heinrich von Halle, for her choice of language, but continued, quite unabashed, to write in the same vein. Her language is emotional and lyrical, the outpourings of the heart of one who had to battle constantly with the stirrings of sensuality. There can be little doubt that Mechthild's constant use of sensuous imagery is the result of her stern repression of her own nature - the sublimation and re-channeling of impulses which would have led her into marriage and family life had she not received the first intimation of God's grace at the age of twelve.

The emotional aspect is far more in evidence with Mechthild than with Bernard - and yet Bernard was considered "more discursive and emotional" than Gregory or Augustine¹². Certainly it is also much more emotional than anything to be found in the scholasticism of Richard St. Victor. The conclusion towards which these comparisons lead is that Mechthild's obsessive and daring use of sexual imagery stems not only from a strongly sensuous nature but also from the fact that she writes as a woman. For there can be no doubt whatever that the marriage symbolism is seen from a woman's viewpoint. She speaks of the bridal journey of the soul as a woman would, she gives details of raiment and

retinue, she analyses the anticipatory fears and final surrender of the Bride - all of this with an innocent air of freshness and enjoyment which removes from her work any taint of unwholesomeness. The fact that, like Hildegard von Bingen, she never overstepped the bounds of propriety has often been remarked upon, and has been generally attributed to the circumstances of her upbringing, which instilled in her the need for some restraint and decorum.

The metaphor of the mystical marriage between the Soul as Bride and God as Bridegroom becomes much more compelling and comprehensible when seen through a woman's eyes. At all times the passive female principle has represented either the soul or the Church, and surely a woman is best able to understand the underlying concept that the femaleness of the Bride represents the receptivity of the devout Soul to God.

Besides being different from that of her male predecessors in the ways mentioned above, Mechthild's work differs from that of her female contemporaries. The late medieval period was renowned for its large numbers of females writing on religious themes, and this proliferation stemmed from the interest in piety among women which had been developing, as we have seen, from the early beginnings of the Frauenbewegungen. Those who left written records of their religious experiences were usually nuns in convents noted for literacy, and an examination of some of these works shows the basic differences between Mechthild's treatment

of the theme of the spiritual marriage and theirs.

The conubium spirituale dominated the lives of women entering the cloisters. If we put aside all cynical considerations regarding socio-economic problems of the medieval period and their impact on the lives of the all too numerous women, we are left with two conspicuous motives for taking the veil - the desire to surrender their lives to God and the urge to preserve their virginity. Once within the cloister, they constantly had before them reminders of the spiritual bond which must from then on replace all earthly bonds, even to the actual enactment of the "marriage", complete with virginal robes, veil, wedding-ring and the declaration that they were hereby set aside from all others as the Brides of Christ. They found the parallel for their state of virginity in reminders of the holy example of Mary, praised in the church ritual and church songs which they heard daily. It is not difficult to understand the enthusiasm with which they entered upon the promotion of the veneration of Mary. She also had entered upon union with God, she also had preserved her virginity. And she had become the mother of Jesus Christ. In drawing close to her, might they not share spiritually in her maternal role?

Concerning this absorption of medieval nuns with the veneration of Mary, Grundmann says: "To imitate Mary, who carried the holy infant in her womb, gave birth to Him, suckled and caressed Him - this was the desire of countless

numbers of these religious women, and many actually had this experience. In dreams and visions they felt that they were mother to the Child, especially at the Christmas season. They carried Him in their arms, played with Him and there were even those whose delusions led them to evince the physical effects of the symptoms of pregnancy¹³

The appeal of this cult of Mary to women is no more difficult to comprehend than is the appeal of the marriage metaphor to the female perceptions of Mechthild von Magdeburg. But the willingness of some nuns to indulge in hysterical and pathological excesses of imagination is incomprehensible unless we take into account their often harsh asceticism, their resultant weakness and proneness to hallucinations, and their mystical yearnings for the unio mystica. For them the way to accomplish the unio mystica was "per hominem Christum ad deum Christum."¹⁴ Since they believed in the truth of per Mariam ad Jesum,¹⁵ Mary being the medium whereby the mystery of the Incarnation was accomplished,¹⁶ they devoted themselves to the imitatio Mariae. Grete Lüers sees it as a religious phenomenon among medieval nuns that "the highest fulfilment and goal of the imitatio Mariae is union, i.e. the unio mystica, the complete identification of the soul with the symbol of the One. If the goal is reached the initiatory ways of the via purgativa and the via illuminativa may be set aside and the via unitiva reached, and then the soul has attained its highest completion"¹⁷ In short, they hoped to dispense with the stages

of purification and contemplation and go straight on to unification, that ultimate goal of all mystics, by way of the birth of God in the soul.

Mechthild's predecessors, Hildegard von Bingen and Elisabeth von Schönau, both contributed to the cult of Mary. Hildegard addresses many hymns of praise to Mary, giving her such titles as "gleaming jewel", "beaming ray of the sun", "spring that flows from the heart of the Father", "sweetest root blossoming from the stem of Jesse", "glorious living light", "noble unsullied virgin", "darling of chastity", "habitation of sanctity", "mother of all joy".¹⁸ For Hildegard, Mary as the mother of God is "the teleological dimension in God's salvation-plan",¹⁹ but she represents other dimensions also - the ethical as a virtuous virgin, the emotional as mother of compassion (mater misericordiae), the doctrinal and cultic as embodiment of the Catholic faith.²⁰ In these respects Hildegard's veneration of Mary approximates to that of all the other nuns, but one dimension is missing - the motif of Mary as the mother of sorrows (mater dolorosa)²¹ (possibly the one which led others to what might be termed an excessive extension of the cult of Mary).

Elisabeth von Schönau, Hildegard's contemporary, saw Mary mainly as the mother of compassion (mater misericordiae). She was of more naive and simple nature than Hildegard, given to ecstasies and death-like trances, during which she held conversations with Mary, and with the saints. Mary

always appeared to her as the richly-adorned Queen of Heaven, surrounded by pomp and circumstance: "I saw my Lady, arising from her gorgeous heavenly throne, accompanied by a great host of angels, wearing on her head a splendid gleaming crown."²² Mary is her comforter, advocate, and mediator with Christ. Elisabeth goes to her as a woman to another woman, begging for her compassion, and Mary reveals to her the mystery of suffering. God has so ordained her life on earth that she should be purified by suffering and will suffer no more sorrow thereafter.²³ And there is a very interesting contrast between Elisabeth and Mechthild von Magdeburg in their approach to the personal question of death. Mechthild asks God how it will be and is content with the simple answer: "I will draw My breath and thou shalt follow Me, as to a magnet (V:32)". Elisabeth asks Mary for compassion in the hour of death, and receives the consolation that her departing will not be merely the departing of a true Christian, but even of a saint. The apparent conclusion to be drawn is that female devotion to the cult of Mary did not necessarily produce total humility.

The cult of Mary reached its fullest expression during the thirteenth century and the convent of Helfta, where Mechthild von Magdeburg spent the last twelve years of her life, was extremely well endowed with nuns devoted to the veneration of Our Lady. For Mechthild von Hackeborn, Mary was the mediatrix and the comforter, closer to the nun

that Christ, because she was human, as Christ from the beginning was divine. In one vision she was the mother of sorrows (mater dolorosa), holding the dead Christ in her arms, as well as the happy mother of the infant Christ, offering to the kisses of suffering humanity the healing wounds of the Saviour.²⁴

The story of the participation of the nun Gertrude the Great in the veneration of Mary is an interesting one. At the age of 26 she received her first overpowering vision of Jesus, face to face, felt the impression of His five wounds on her heart, and as a sign of the indissoluble mystical union exchanged her heart for His. Her life thereafter was increasingly mysterious, supernatural and ecstatic, with repeated visions and conversations with saints, with her heavenly Bridegroom and with the Blessed Virgin. It was she who initiated the veneration of the Sacred Heart, urged thereto by repeated ecstasies during which "the divine Bridegroom laid open to the enraptured gaze of his bride this heart, the wellspring of mercy and salvation, the glowing focus of that inexpressible Love incarnate, as if in His eternal wisdom He could not wait for that moment appointed for the revelation of this heart to her."²⁵

So Christocentric was her devotional life that she could not easily reconcile herself to acts of worship which were not directed to the Bridegroom. The manner whereby her reluctance was overcome runs thus: "When on the

Feast of the Annunciation she heard the Blessed Virgin repeatedly praised in the sermon, with no mention whatever of the work of salvation wrought by the Incarnation of the Lord, she felt very resentful. As she passed the altar of the glorious Virgin after the sermon, she felt that in genuflecting she was not completely filled by love towards the mother of all graces, but rather by glowing love and praise for Jesus, the blessed fruit of the Virgin's body. And she began to fear that she might thereby draw down upon herself the disfavor of the all-powerful Queen of Heaven. But her fear was dispersed by her kind Comforter, who said, 'Fear not, most beloved, for My dear mother is best pleased of all with greetings and praise which show thy greater longing for Me.'²⁶ Nevertheless, He commands her to praise Mary, adding, "Do it for My sake, giving up that which is dearest to you"²⁶ In this way, as Wilhelm Preger commented, she effected a compromise with the spirit of the time in which she lived.²⁷ As Grete Lüers remarked,²⁸ she showed true devotion to Mary, seeing her in visions always with the infant, whom Mary handed to her to be caressed - and in this way also Gertrude was undoubtedly effecting a compromise.

It is quite evident that all these nuns were expressing their maternal longings in identifying so strongly with Mary. Manifestations of such feelings were even more powerfully expressed at a later date by Christine Ebner and Margarete Ebner. Christine had a vision of giving Birth to Jesus,

though unlike some of her contemporaries, she understood the experience very clearly as strictly spiritual. Margarete Ebner had the same kind of visions, in even greater intensity, though she also was very careful to examine her reactions in order to ensure that she should not be misled as to their nature. While other ecstasies sought to experience the sufferings of Christ in order to reach the unio mystica, Margarete sought to experience His birth, with all the rejoicing that a woman feels on bearing a child.²⁹ The goal was identical, marked by the silence which characterizes for all mystics this stage of the mystical experience: "When she had gone through the period of silence which represents the high point of her mystical experience - for in the most exalted vision man is speechless - and when she had entered the period of speech, she revealed everything from her inner life in clear, comprehensible words and images. She knew very well what God meant when He once said to her that He did not come to deprive her of her senses but to illuminate them."³⁰

Heinrich von Nördlingen was so impressed by Margarete's visions, which he praised in the most florid and emotional language imaginable, that he called her the "spiritual mother of God."³¹ Her visions even included the suckling of the infant Christ, but this is not difficult to comprehend in mystical terms of reference. If the soul has received the inflowing of grace from God it must respond by pouring forth its essence in return - a concept which Mechthild von

Magdeburg illustrates by using the metaphor of the small vessel being filled to the brim and overflowing in Book VII, Chapter 55 of Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit.

Among medieval nuns, then, the cult of the veneration of Mary became more intensified as time went on. She had always been honoured, of course, and particularly by nuns, but not to the extent of inspiring visions of experiencing gestation and parturition. This growth of intensity from the time of Hildegard von Bingen onwards is paralleled by the growth and spread of the phenomenon of mysticism among women, which reached its peak in the early fourteenth century, at the period of the Friends of God and Heinrich von Nördlingen's correspondence with various mystics. There is an obvious link between the two. In their worship of Mary, female mystics sought to express their yearning for the unio mystica - to experience spiritually the birth of God as Mary had experienced it physically, and to become a part of God's salvation plan as Mary had been; by bringing back the fruits of their union to mankind. She was both virgin and mother; they sought to preserve their virginity and yet experience on a spiritual level the maternal role that was for ever denied to them. It is not beyond speculation that the cult of the Madonna would not have developed to such an extent if interest in the mystical life had remained largely a male prerogative.

U In the evolution of Mechthild von Magdeburg's position in German mysticism, it is of the utmost importance

to recognize the fact that she did not pursue the cult of Mary to the extent of her female fellow-mystics. She lived and wrote in the very midst of this developing religious trend and indeed spent twelve years of her life in Helfta, the very centre and hive of activity for female piety. Her views on the matter must have been close to those of her friend Gertrude the Great, and Gertrude certainly fostered in her an appreciation of the liturgy, to which she pays tribute in Chapters 19 and 20 of Book VII, which comprise a litany to Our Lady. The milieu of Helfta, in which she wrote Book VII, was also an important influence at the time, providing a background of music and liturgy in which Mary figured largely. Aside from Book I:22 and Book V:23, references to Mary are of no great length throughout the rest of Das fliessende Licht.

From I:22 and the first half of V:23 (the latter part being a discursive and somewhat tedious Gospel narrative) Mechthild's view of Mary's role may be ascertained. She sees Mary as mediatrix, as Elisabeth von Schönau did, but not in the same naïve way. Mary is not for Mechthild a mediatrix for the expiation of sins, but rather one who will lead the loving soul to union with the Father.³² Mechthild's obsession with the bridal metaphor shows up in this context also, for the emphasis is upon Mary's role as bride: "... the Father chose me as bride" (I:22); "I was alone the bride of the Holy Trinity" (I:22); "later, as the bride of God" (I:22); "the whole blessed Trinity with the power of the

Godhead, the devoted willingness of humanity and the noble tenderness of the Holy Spirit entered through the body of the pure virgin" (V:23); "almighty God with His wisdom, the eternal Son with His human truth, the Holy Spirit with His tender sweetness passed through the pure flesh of Mary's body without effort, in flowing joy". (V:23).

Mechthild does not supply any anthropomorphic features for Mary.³³ The importance of Our Lady lies in the salvation event - she was the "mother of this Wonder" (I:22), the female principle of the salvation plan, necessary for the redemption of man through the humanity of Christ. Nor does she apostrophise Mary, as Hildegard von Bingen was so fond of doing, except in the Litany in Book VII. Mechthild's mysticism is Christocentric and the marriage metaphor dominates here as elsewhere, and, unlike Gertrude the Great, she does not accommodate herself too well to the veneration of Mary except in the context of that same metaphor.

Thus the marked difference between Mechthild and her contemporaries may be traced to the dominance of the mystical marriage in her thinking, and to the fact that she led the life of a Beguine. Her independence of thought and strong self-reliance were the factors which led her to adopt this life rather than that of the convent in the first place, and she was not subjected to the enveloping influence of that self-effacing and imitatory kind of cloistral piety until the last few years of her life. It is also worthy

of note that the courtly influence which has already been examined would be totally at variance with an inclination to dwell upon maternity and infancy.

The roots of Mechthild's mysticism lie in the same soil which nourishes mystics of all races and all religions and all periods. Difficult though the word might be to define with absolute precision, it is reasonably acceptable to consider as a mystic one who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to unite with or be absorbed by the Ultimate Reality, having first been purged of all impurities and set free from all pride, so that utter abasement at the feet of God may become the first stage of union. The way is always threefold - purgative, illuminative and unitive. Bernard of Clairvaux calls these the three kisses, of the Lord's feet, hands and mouth. Kissing the feet and anointing them with the tears of penitence wash the soul clean. Kissing the hand which raises the penitent by grace glorifies God for forgiving sins and bestowing virtues. Kissing the mouth joins the soul to God so that it becomes one with Him.³⁴

Heinrich Seuse said of the threefold way that "to achieve tranquillity a man must be detached from his nature as a creature, formed again with Christ and given a super-form in the Godhead." (Unfortunately the sense is much more elusive in English than in German. He actually said, "Ein gelassener Mensch muss entbildet werden von der Kreatur, gebildet werden mit Christo und überbildet werden in der Gottheit.")³⁵

So for Mechthild also the way to God leads along the paths of purification (via purgativa) and contemplation (via illuminativa). The Soul as Bride is called to God her Bridegroom by the love which first brought God down to earth in the form of man; it is only fitting that the Soul in reciprocation should return to God who is her home. She resembles Him in all her properties and feels alien among the senses which surround and isolate her. The relationship between the soul and the body, to which Mechthild constantly refers in dialogues between soul and senses, is connected somehow to the mystery of God's Incarnation, for the Soul is indeed in-carnate, dragging along the "blind" senses and longing to escape their bondage. The way back to the Father is through this same mystery of the Incarnation, for the Divine descended into the human in order to show the human the way back to the Divine.

The Soul knows that God is her true home and that she cannot feel alien in her own element. But she must strip herself of everything that stands between her and the Bridegroom in order to be restored to God in her pristine state. She must reach the lowest depths of humility before she can hope to scale the highest peak to reach God. In reality the lowest depth is the highest peak, for she must suffer as Christ suffered in order to gain, if only for a fleeting moment, a foretaste of His blessedness. And so it comes about that those to whom God gives Himself are chastened, and God's curse (1:7) becomes His blessing.

Once the Soul is purified of all that might lead her away from God, she glorifies Him by prayers, acquisition of virtues, meditation upon His creation, and by bringing back from her encounters with the Divine the fruits of their union. The first fruits are the glorifying of God upon earth by imparting to others as much as may be told of the via unitiva. Then the offspring of the union of the soul with God is revealed in a limitless compassion that shows itself in an overflowing abundance of good works. The Soul feels herself to be the mother of all Christendom, pouring out the grace she has received from God over all mankind.

But she must remain forever silent concerning the ultimate union with God. Each loving soul must meet God alone and in silence. Words may speak of the via purgativa and the via illuminativa but cannot describe that which is beyond description. Eckhart said, "God is nameless, for no-one can speak of Him or understand Him."³⁶ This must mean that because God is utterly beyond human comprehension He is also utterly beyond human expression. For how can we express that which we have not been able to take in? Speech is used for communication among humans, silence reveals the gulf that lies between the human and the divine.

Grete Lüers examines the concept of the mystical silence in some depth, tracing it back to the mystery religions. Reference is made to it in the Mithras Liturgy, translated into German by Albrecht Dieterich. The passage

runs: "Place thy index-finger upon thy mouth and say Silence! Silence! Silence! - the sign of the living, immortal God - Protect me, Silence!"³⁷ In his exposition upon the liturgy Dieterich comments that "spoken words could not be adequate for the highest God, for only through silence may we unite with him and be like him. These concepts passed into Christianity and in some cases silence becomes the proper sacrifice of Christian asceticism."³⁸ (Is this the reason for the monastic vow of silence?)

Lüers traces the continuation of the concept of silence through Dionysius, Augustine, Bernard de Clairvaux and the Victorines to Eckhart,³⁹ and its particular manifestation in the thinking of Mechthild von Magdeburg along the way. And Mechthild thinks along the same lines as her predecessors and her illustrious successor: "God is also for Mechthild von Magdeburg, as the Mithras Liturgy sings, Silence, deep Silence, which yet speaks with the most impressive tone to the heart of man. In sharp antithetical paradoxes Mechthild calls the incomprehensible light of the Godhead the inexpressible voice - she loves antithesis, as all mystics do. Just as God is silence and stillness so is the mysterious primal base of the human soul also silence. For God and the Soul are indeed alike, related ... according to the view of the mystics."⁴⁰ Lüers adds, in general terms, that "the mystery of the Divine, the mystery of the union of God and man, is hidden to all other men, revealed in mystical fashion only to the soul which

experiences it. In the highest revelation, the visio beatifica, man is without speech."⁴¹

Mechthild says that she would not dare to name the flow of love which pours into the soul from God - she would be silent because she has never heard words for it upon earth (VI:22 and VII:45). And in the context of the bridal metaphor, to describe the moment of union, she calls it simply, a blessed silence as He gives Himself to her and she to Him (I:44). The ultimate bliss is not to be described by human hand (II:25). It is so splendid that she cannot write of it (III:1). None can enter the chamber save God alone (VI:23). Most significantly of all, the soul refuses to disclose the "inexpressible secret" which lies between her and God. Brides, she says, do not reveal everything that happens to them (II:19).

It is possible that Mechthild, with this illustration from earthly marriage, comes closer than any other mystic has ever done to describing the indescribable.

Chapter V

Notes

¹Lüers, Die Sprache der deutschen Mystik, op. cit., p. 160.

²Ibid., p. 161.

³Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen, op. cit., p. 412.

⁴David von Augsburg, Franciscan, born 1210-1220, was master of novices and professor of theology, first at Regensburg and then at Augsburg, and was very concerned throughout his life with the education and edification of the young. He wrote many tractates in Latin and German, though there has been considerable dispute as to whether the latter are genuine or not. Much of his writing was directed towards religious women and nuns. See F. Pfeiffer, Deutsche Mystiker: Meister Eckhart (Leipzig: Neudruck der Ausgabe, 1845) and Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen, op. cit.

⁵See Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen, op. cit., p. 413.

⁶Grundmann makes this comment: "Mechthild von Magdeburg's Latin redactors found it necessary to give a weaker rendering of her direct, erotic experiences, putting them on a strictly spiritual level." (Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen, op. cit., p. 412). In a footnote Grundmann calls attention to Grete Lüers' examination of discrepancies between the German and Latin versions of Mechthild's work. Some of Lüers' examples are translated below, with the English version for the Latin extracts given to facilitate comparison of the two versions. The German is cited by Lüers from Morel, Offenbarungen der Schwester Mechthild von Magdeburg, oder Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit, the Latin from Revelationes Gertrudianae et Mechthildianae, Solesmes O.S.B., Paris, 1875.

1. "in one hour with the Holy Spirit" (in einer stunde mit dem Heiligen geiste): this means a union of love in the spiritual marriage (conubium spirituale); "in one hour through My Spirit I will restore all things to thee" (in una hora per spiritum meum tibi omnia restituum). Thus the Holy Spirit becomes the means of grace, not a member of the duality of love.
2. "He (i.e. God) greets her in courtly language, which is never heard in this kitchen" (er (Gott) gruesset si mit

*by "kitchen" Mechthild means "the world".

der hovesprache, di man in dirre kuchin nit verdimet), a wonderful metaphor, transposed from an awareness of social position to the transcendental plane - a metaphor which the Latin does not reproduce at all: "speaking to her by way of greeting in a certain unfathomable manner" (quodamque modo inscrutabili eam salutando alloquens).

3. "the narrower the bed of love, the closer the embrace" (je das minebet enger wirt, je die vmbehalsunge naher gat). This bold, erotic metaphor is omitted completely by the timid, monastic translator.
4. "she (the loving soul) wants to dance" (si (die minnende Seele) wil tanzen). This metaphor of the $\chi\omega\rho\epsilon\iota\alpha$ $\tau\iota\upsilon\epsilon\sigma\mu\alpha\tau\iota\chi\acute{\eta}$ is again omitted by the translator.
5. "now I am weary of the dance for a while" (nu bin ich ein wile dez tanzens muede) has been changed by the translator to the sober "I am now wearied by the constant turning of thoughts" (cogitationum circuitu lassata nunc sum).
6. The marvellous dialogue* between the soul and the senses, with the passionate cry of the soul for the ultimate union with the divine, is given in the Latin codex in abridged form, with all passages deleted which sound altogether too erotic.
7. "The beauteous breasts are open to view" (die lustlichen bruste vnverborgen sint); in spite of the current symbolical representations of the Mother of God with flowing breasts, the translator, quite incomprehensibly replaced the phrase with "pure breasts" (ubera incorrupta).
8. "He caresses her with all His power on the bed of love" (ertrudet si mit voller maht in dem bette der mine). The Latin employs a characteristic addition, which seeks to weaken the graphic eroticism of the original depiction: "he comes to the maiden with the most delectable touch on the flower-strewn couch of chastity" (contingit virginem tactu mundissimo in florido castitatis lectulo). There is nothing in the German text which corresponds to "tactu mundissimo" and "castitatis" and indeed the German is much more primitive, impulsive, pictorial and poetical in its whole design
9. The soul cries to God, "Thou art my heart ... my body ... my breath" (du bist min herze ... min lip ... min atem), while addressing the three Persons of the Trinity.

*to be found in Bk. I:44.

The translator does not retain this inner terminology of love: "thou art the God of my heart, thou art Redeemer of my life, thou art Sanctifier of my spirit" (tu es deus cordis mei, tu es redemptor vitae meae, tu es sanctificator animae meae). What a gulf lies between the sincerity of the German and the theological reflectiveness of the Latin text!

10. The Latin codex fails to reproduce the passion of Mechthild's lyrical, ecstatic cry, "O, O, O three Persons have one Name in one undivided God" (O o o, drie personen hant ein namen in einem got vngeteilt).*

* For further examples of Lüers' comparison of the German and Latin texts, see Grete Lüers, Die Sprache der deutschen Mystik des Mittelalters im Werke der Mechthild von Magdeburg, op. cit., pp. 45-54.

⁷Quoted by Morel, Offenbarungen der Schwester Mechthild, op. cit., p. XXIX: "den Reinen alles rein, den Unreinen aber alles unrein erscheint." ("To the pure all is pure, to the impure all is impure.")

⁸Lüers, Die Sprache der deutschen Mystik, op. cit., p. 161.

⁹See Cuthbert Butler, Western Mysticism (London: Arrow Books, 1960), p. 110.

¹⁰Translation by S.J. Eales, as cited by Butler, Western Mysticism, op. cit., p. 97.

¹¹This paragraph is adapted from Butler, Western Mysticism, op. cit., p. 97 - translation by S.J. Eales.

¹²Ibid., p. 98.

¹³Translated from Herbert Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen, op. cit., p. 415. In a footnote he quotes several examples of such self-deluding women.

¹⁴Grete Lüers, Marienverehrung mittelalterlicher Nonnen, op. cit., p. 26.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 27.

*i.e. the Latin omits the threefold "O". On the other hand, as Lüers points out, the Latin version reproduces without alteration another of Mechthild's reflections on the Holy Trinity: "nothing but God, God, God, immeasurable great God" (nit me dene got, got, got, vmmesselicher grosser got).

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Translated from Lüers' selection of Hildegard's Symphonic of St. Mary in Scivias - Lüers, Marienerverehrung mittelalterlicher Nonnen, op. cit., pp. 33-34.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 33.

²⁰Ibid., p. 34; in adapted form.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 35, translated from Lüers' extract from Elisabeth's Revelations.

²³Ibid., p. 36, freely adapted.

²⁴Ibid., p. 45, freely adapted.

²⁵This information from Martin Grabmann, "Die deutsche Frauenmystik des Mittelalters. Ein Überblick." In Mittelalterliches Geistesleben; Abhandlungen zur Geschichte der Scholastik und Mystik, vol. I (Munich: M. Hueber Verlag, 1926), p. 472. Direct quotation cited by Grabmann from Maurus Wolter, Die geistlichen Übungen der heiligen Gertrud, p. 22.

²⁶Translated from Grete Lüers, Marienerverehrung mittelalterlicher Nonnen, op. cit., p. 47.

²⁷Preger, Geschichte der deutschen Mystik, vol. I, op. cit., p. 129.

²⁸Lüers, Marienerverehrung mittelalterlicher Nonnen, op. cit., p. 47.

²⁹See Lüers, ibid., p. 51.

³⁰Idem, p. 51 (translated).

³¹H. von Nördlingen's letters to Margarete Ebner, pp. 303-330, in Oehl's collection, Deutsche Mystikerbriefe, op. cit.

³²See Lüers, Marienerverehrung mittelalterlicher Nonnen, op. cit., p. 40.

³³Ibid.

³⁴On the Song of Songs I (Cistercian Fathers' Series), pp. 16-20, free interpretation of text.

³⁵Grabmann, Mittelalterliches Geistesleben, op. cit.,

vol. I, p. 480, quoted from H. Denifle's Deutsche Schriften des seligen Heinrich Seuse:

³⁶Pfeiffer, Deutsche Mystiker: Meister Eckhart II,
op. cit., p. 318.

³⁷Albrecht Dieterich, Eine Mithrasliturgie (Leipzig,
1913), p. 7.

³⁸Ibid., p. 43.

³⁹Lüers, Die Sprache der deutschen Mystik, op.
cit., pp. 204.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 5.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 7.

CONCLUSION

Since the rediscovery of the manuscript in the late 19th century, some of the individual aspects of Mechthild's many-faceted work have been examined by scholars¹. One writer², in exploring the symbolism of Mechthild's use of liquid imagery, calls attention to the manner in which Mechthild attempts to externalize her inner ecstatic experiences by drawing upon images of the natural world³. In this respect, says the same author, she resembles her illustrious predecessor Hildegard von Bingen, who is quoted as having "held the view, common among medieval Christian writers, that one purpose of the natural world about us is to illustrate the spiritual world and life to come."⁴

There is no doubt that Mechthild held this view, to a very marked degree, concerning the marriage symbol which she dwells upon so persistently. She believed that the natural world was good because it came from the hand of the Creator, as proof of the love of God towards the creature made in His image. For this creature, which embodied the pure elemental Soul fresh from the hands of its Creator and endowed with the same properties, God fashioned a gift as earnest of the delights which both He and the Soul would share when at last they were re-united. This was the union of male and female, intended to be the closest and the most blissful, superseding all other human relationships and in its truest form, rendering all others

supererogatory. In passages in which Mechthild sees the Soul as Bride of the Holy Trinity, she places little emphasis on the role of the Soul as daughter of the Father or as sister of the Holy Spirit. Her all-consuming interest lies in elaborating upon the betrothal, courtship and ultimate union of the Soul as Bride with her young, ardent, demanding Lover, Christ. And because this union is only the beginning of an indescribable eternity of mutual passion, Mechthild sustains the image and develops it as it would develop in an earthly marriage, until the fires of youth have long died down and the Bride has become an aging housewife, no less tenderly regarded by her Bridegroom than she was in those far-off, early days.

From time to time God grants to Mechthild's "loving soul" the power to experience a foretaste of eternal union with Him in the world to come. These fleeting ecstasies cannot be described, the ultimate bliss being pure silence, but as much as may be divulged is revealed to other seekers after truth. After each experience, the soul "sinks down and grows cold" and yearns for the fiery love of God to kindle her once again, and knows that this will surely happen, because God can never have enough of intercourse with the loving soul. For the duration of her time on earth, these short interludes of ecstatic union must suffice, and Mechthild makes it very clear that they are a foreshadowing of the eternal bliss that awaits the pure soul that seeks only God. In VI:22 (identical with VII:45)

Mechthild speaks of seven things for which she must glorify God. The sixth, she says, she hardly dares to name, becoming speechless because it is a thing she has never heard named on earth:

It is the rippling flood of love which flows secretly from God into the soul causing her to flow back to Him with all her power. What bliss each feels then, how they act towards each other, none can tell, but each plays a part. Whatever has been left behind here will be returned there in full. For this is the heavenly love of God which here has its beginnings in very small ways, but there never comes to an end.

(Dc ist die spilende mine vlut, die von got heimlich in du sele vlusset and si wider mit siner kraft nach ir maht. Was zwiscent in beiden dene wunen si, dc weis niemand von den andern wc si wirken vnderen ander, wan ein jegliches vindet sinen teil; was er hie hat vsgeleit, dc wirt im dort alles widergeben. Dis ist die himelsche gotz mine, die hie vil kleinliche beginet, und dort niemer ende gewinet - Morel, VI:22).

When the soul reaches her home and is united forever with God, she experiences for all eternity the bliss which has been shed upon her from time to time by the flowing light of the Godhead - "the sweet yearning, blissful, hungering and full of love, which flows evermore into the soul from the overflowing abundance of God." (die vbersusse gerunge, wunekliche hungerig, minevol, die vlusset jemer mere in die selen vberswendig von gotte - Morel, VI:22).

Conclusion

Notes

¹E.g. Hans Neumann did a study on textual evidence for biographical data (Neumann, Beiträge zur Textgeschichte, op. cit.); Margot Schmidt examined the problem of suffering in Mechthild's work M. Schmidt, Studien zum Leidproblem bei Mechthild von Magdeburg (Ph.D. dissert., Freiburg i. Br., 1952); Hans Tillman considered the numerous dialogues which are to be found in the book [H. Tillman, Studien zum Dialog bei Mechthild von Magdeburg (Ph.D. dissert., Marburg, 1933)].

²James C. Franklin, Mystical Transformations: The Imagery of Liquids in the Work of Mechthild von Magdeburg (Cranbury, New Jersey & London, Eng., Associated University Presses, Inc., 1978).

³Ibid., p. 164.

⁴Franklin here quotes Lynn Thorndike, A History of Magic as Experimental Science, The First Thirteen Centuries of Our Era, vol. II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923), p. 137. In this chapter, pp. 124-154, entitled Saint Hildegard of Bingen: 1098-1179, Thorndike examines, not altogether in a spirit of complete conviction, the prophecies and pronouncements of Hildegard vis-à-vis every aspect of the plant and animal world.

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