Mechthild of Magdeburg: Women Philosophers and the Visionary Tradition

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The current interest in the visionary tradition of medieval women thinkers appears to be but a part of the resurgent interest in women thinkers and philosophers as a whole. A good deal of what makes this comparatively new take on women intellectuals so intriguing has to do with the ways in which women have been able to express themselves as writers and scholars, and the modes of criticism that this has engendered. A growing realization that women's thought may be philosophical, even if it is not always couched in the standard philosophical language of its time, has yielded some surprising conclusions with respect to who should and should not be included in the canon.[1]

Among medieval women thinkers, two stand out as participating in the new interest in women philosophers: Hildegard of Bingen and Mechthild of Magdeburg. Hildegard's work has, according to some, been appropriated for purposes less than scholarly, and there is a concern that too much of the interest in her work has to do with contemporary "new age" thought, or popularized versions of it.[2] But the interest surrounding Mechthild comes, at least in part, from another sort of concern: contemporary notions of the authorial and postmodern conceptions of what might be considered a "text" are surprisingly applicable to Mechthild's work, since *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* is, according to Mechthild, authored by God. Thus an interest in her imagery and the uses to which it may have been put by other, later scholars is matched by twists on the notion of authorship and who it is that Mechthild is representing.[3]

Mechthild's visions contain highly erotic imagery, and this in combination with her insistence on authorship poses an unsettling group of questions. Our first concern will be with the nature of Mechthild's experience.

[1] See, for example, Catherine Villanueva Gardner, *Rediscovering Women Philosophers*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1999.

[2] Some are concerned that the most available and most widely distributed versions of Hildegard's work seem to be those published by Bear & Co. of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

[3] Extensive comment on the extent to which Mechthild's work may have been used by later thinkers (including Dante) is to be found in Frank Tobin, *Mechthild von Magdeburg: a Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes*, Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995.

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I

Frank Tobin has noted that there is an important distinction to be made between the mystical experience and that of the visionary, and the failure to make this distinction—a refusal to clarify misunderstandings that might arise from the conflation—may have something to do with the reception of Mechthild's work.[4] Mechthild, like Hildegard, had visions; this is an explicit experience, and one that does not, according to the agent, take place completely internally. Here is Tobin on how the distinction is currently being addressed in the scholarship:

> The mystical experience . . . takes place *in* the soul. . . . the visionary experience, on the other hand, is with images, able to be described, and takes place outside the soul.[5]

That Mechthild claims to have had both such experiences is beyond dispute. In fact, her claim is that her work is God's authorship flowing through her, and it is this particular aspect of her work that has caused the most comment. In fact, her Prologue, in part, reads as follows: "'O Lord, what shall this book be called for your honor alone?' 'It shall be called a light of my godhead flowing into all hearts that live without falseness.'[6] Thus Mechthild has had a vision that allows the Godhead to author through her, an experience that causes Tobin to note that the burden of the evidence suggests that Mechthild intended readers to think of her and the divinity as one, insofar as the work is concerned.

Mechthild then uses her experiences, with God in His authorial capacity moving through her, to make pronouncements about the divine nature, work that is, of course, cosmological. Whereas Hildegard's work seems to have been based more simply and strictly on visions, Mechthild's work seems to be a mix of the visual and the mystically experiential. Catherine Villanueva Gardner notes, "Once we have understood that we need not posit an individual self as its author, we shall be able to see how . . . *The Flowing Light* is a work made of love. . . . From [this work] we shall see that the supreme goal of the soul is to merge with divine love itself . . . "[7] Like other women mystics, Mechthild's ontological concerns are masked to some extent by her mode of writing. But when we consider the activities in which women of her time were allowed to engage—and when we think about the constraints under which they operated—it

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 113
[5] *Ibid., ibid.*
[6] Cited in Tobin, p. 134.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 135.

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becomes much easier to see how work that is at root philosophical begins to manifest itself in visions, ecstasies, and other religious experiences. As Mechthild herself said, the light was "flowing into all hearts that live without falseness."[8]

The tradition of mysticism of which Mechthild and others were a part also helps to remind us that questions surrounding the nature of the divinity, the ways of manifestation of God, and so forth, were important cosmological questions of the time that reaffirmed the need for explanations of Christian doctrine. Thus Mechthild's emphasis on merging is already, so to speak, a philosophical position.

The extent to which Mechthild asserts, following the language of courtly love, that the soul can merge with the divine in an ecstatic union is signaled to us in such lines as these:

> It is a rare
> And a high way,
> Which the soul follows,
> Drawing the senses after,
> Just as the person with sight leads the blind.
> In this way the soul is free
> And lives without the heart's grief
> Desiring nothing but her Lord,
> Who works all things well.[9]

Mechthild seems to feel that her soul actually becomes one with God, and that this union allows her to do the work that she does in *The Flowing Light*. As Catherine Gardner says, "She cannot say what [God's love is], she can only describe her personal experiences."[10] But she can say, to some extent, what it is: it is that melding that can only occur on the spiritual level. And she is adamant that God desires this of the individual soul, though some souls may not know it.

Mechthild's claims allow her to engage in a sort of cosmology, but still more intriguing to a variety of commentators has been the series of pronouncements and declarations that she makes about the authorship of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. Because Mechthild is so certain that God is speaking through her, she asserts, at various points, that God is the author of the work. Thus an ontological stance about the nature of God turns into another sort of stand, and this makes for an exciting philosophical foray—one from which Mechthild does not shy away.

[8] See fn. 6.
[9] Mechthild of Magdeburg, in *Beguine Spirituality*, ed. Fiona Bowie, New York: Crossroad, 1990, p. 61. (Citations from Mechthild taken from the Morel edition, and translated by Oliver Davies.)
[10] Gardner, *Rediscovering*, p. 163.

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II

The nature of God, given Mechthild's cosmology, and the nature of the soul's union with God, can be made no more apparent to a student of Mechthild than by the set of assertions that surround the physical nature of the work itself and its authorship.

It is not merely the case that Mechthild claims that God flows through her and that she and God together (or, perhaps, God alone) is the author of the work, but that God manifests Himself physically in the work's form. Although these assertions are in keeping with much of the thought of the medieval period, Mechthild pushes them further than they might have gone with a number of other thinkers. Gardner notes:

> Once we have understood that we need not posit an individual self as its author, we shall be able to see how, according to Mechthild, *The Flowing Light* is a work made of love, containing love, and written out of uncontrollable divine love. It is in this way that it is written by God and also contains God in its actual pages; but insofar as Mechthild shares in this divine love, she is also its author. . . . Yet this challenge to the notion that authorship must be tied to an individualistic concept of the self makes sense from within a worldview that does not idealize this type of individualism.[11]

An individual might be tempted to think that what Mechthild is positing is a sort of pantheism—similar to that, which in popular terms, is sometimes associated with Spinoza—but Mechthild makes it clear that there is also such a thing as a withdrawal of God or from God. A better explanation for the phenomenon of both the writing and the experiences of Mechthild's that led up to it is that one can enter into a relationship with God, just as humans enter into relationships with physical lovers. This relationship may itself form a kind of merging—and when it does, ontological status is either altered, or perhaps accurately revealed for the first time. In any case, the presence of God does cause change. Fiona Bowie, in her *Beguine Spirituality*, describes this experience as "doctrinal visions . . . set in motion a dialogue between the visionary and her confessor . . . which provide[s] visual parables for use as teaching aids in giving spiritual guidance to others."[12]

There may be something to the line of argument that the lives of the beguines themselves were such as to facilitate the type of thinking with which Mechthild was concerned. In any case, there is no question that the desire to lead a consecrated and devoted life, even if was led outside of the walls of an actual convent, might have pushed the

[11] *Ibid*., p. 152.
[12] Bowie, in *Beguine*, p. 30.

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beguine into a more direct relationship with God. Bowie emphasizes the extent to which to become a beguine was to make a statement about one's life, and that that statement was in direct opposition to the Church structure of the time. It was not the lack of an official convent that made this oppositional stance so strong; it was, rather, the typical sets of beliefs that the *beguinage* held. Bowie writes:

> Despite much popular support, the success of the beguines also earned them suspicion and hatred. There may well have been opposition from families whose daughters' choice of the beguine life of poverty, work and prayer was interpreted as an attempt to escape from lawful male authority and the duties of married life. Clerical opposition, fueled by sometimes outspoken opposition of the Church and a distrust of beguine mystical theology, resulted in accusations of immorality and heresy, particularly associated with the supposed sect of the 'Free Spirit.' It appears that there were Christians who claimed that they had attained a state of perfection, in which the moral law no longer applied to them . . .[13]

In other words, whatever Mechthild's actual associations with any heretical group, there is no question that beguinage itself bordered on heresy, and that the notion that foregoing marriage might well tie one closer to a divine marriage appears to have been part and parcel of the movement. All of this is perfectly consistent with Mechthild's lines to the effect that the soul "desires nothing but her Lord."[14]

One might be inclined to think that what Mechthild actually achieves, in a philosophical vein, is a sort of monism, and this does appear to be the case. The soul's union with God is simply another way of articulating the divine nature of all—but what Mechthild also achieves is a peculiarly powerful and beautiful way of expressing this ontological position. When the soul is cut off from the divine, it finds itself in a wilderness—when it finds the divine, the "flowing" and "fusion" begin.[15] It is Mechthild's gift that, as Bowie claims, she has "a quite exceptional degree of poetic sensibility in conjunction with a profound and mature faith."[16] This remarkable combination allows Mechthild to say the unsayable, so to speak.

III

Mechthild's overall stance receives further clarification when we think of what she has written in comparison with Hildegard's work. To be fair, Hildegard of Bingen was much more the prolific of the two authors, and there is no question that at least one of her works,

[13] *Ibid*., p. 20.
[14] See fn. 10.
[15] *Ibid*., pp. 50–51.
[16] *Ibid*., p. 50.

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Causae et Curae, was overtly philosophical in the tradition of naturalistic thinkers such as Galen. But what Mechthild and Hildegard share is a visionary and/or mystical tradition, and a desire to articulate in that tradition a personal love of God.

Each thinker to some extent addresses God personally, but Mechthild is by far and away the more personal of the two thinkers. If Hildegard's longest work, the *Scivias*, can best be thought of as a compilation of visions, it is remarkable that some of the praise-prayers of the *Symphonia* bear a resemblance to Mechthild's thought. As Ronda Chervin writes, her "key images focus on the bright light of divine truth rather than ecstatic images."[17]

Although Hildegard also writes of the soul's love for God, many of her images have a distance and detachment that Mechthild's lack. It is instructive to make a comparison, based on a selection by Chervin from Hildegard's *Symphonia*, and published in her compilation *Prayers of Women Mystics*. For example, one prayer selected by Chervin is reminiscent of Mechthild, and yet does not quite achieve the same intimacy:

> Praise to you
> Spirit of fire!
> to you who sound the timbrel
> and the lyre.
> Your music sets our minds
> ablaze! The strength of our souls
> awaits your coming
> in the tent of meeting.
> There the mounting will
> gives the soul its savor
> and desire is its lantern.[18]

The last lines here, "there the mounting will . . . and desire is its lantern," certainly remind us of Mechthild, and insofar as the use of the trope of desire or love is concerned, there is a definite resemblance. But the use of the first person plural in the preceding lines signals to us that Hildegard sees herself as simply one of many, and that those who await the Lord will receive him. Mechthild, by contrast, tells us that she has a personal relationship with God. Bowie cites the following lines from book IV, 12 (as taken from the Morel edition):

> I cannot endure a single consolation
> but my beloved.
> I love my earthly friends

[17] Ronda de Sola Chervin, *Prayers of the Women Mystics*, Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1992, p. 19.

[18] *Ibid*., p. 21. (The original is identified only by Chervin as "In Praise of God.")

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As companions in eternity
And I love my enemies
With a painful and holy longing
For their blessedness.
In all things god has a sufficiency
But in the touching of my soul.[19]

The title of this short section, according to Bowie, is "How the bride who is united with god spurns the consolation of all creatures." Mechthild may at base hold that, in principle, any devoted soul could enter into a love relationship with God. But the remarkable thing about her work is that it is not written from the standpoint of any devoted soul—it is written from her standpoint, and hers alone. Thus God is the lover, Mechthild's soul is the beloved, and the two merge in a joyful ecstasy. The literary forms of courtly love, as both Gardner and Tobin point out, serve Mechthild well.

IV

I have been arguing that retrieval of Mechthild, as a philosophical thinker of some import is part and parcel of our continuing retrieval of women philosophers, even if we still experience some difficulty in our categorizations of the mystics. It is unfair to Mechthild to try to claim that her ontology is indiscernible, or that the structure of her work makes any philosophical import incomprehensible. Mechthild's message is clear, and her work is comparatively easy to read—Hildegard's *Scivias*, for example, presents many more difficulties. But what is off-putting about Mechthild's work appears to be little more than its Sheryl personal nature: it is as if, in reading Mechthild, one had discovered a cache of love letters, and one was suddenly panic-stricken at the thought of invading someone's privacy.

Mechthild has left us her letters, and they are ours to read. In reading them, we come away with shards of the very experience that she herself had, and which she intended to share—an experience of fusion with the divine. In that sense, Mechthild's work is transparent, and it is open to all who care to look.

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[19] Bowie, in *Beguine*, p. 69.

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