

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Bride of the Holy Trinity: The Role of Mary in Mechthild of Magdeburg's Mystical Theology

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This article adds to our understanding of late medieval women's religious writing by examining the role of the Virgin Mary in Mechthild of Magdeburg's thirteenth-century mystical text *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (*Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*). The Virgin Mary was ubiquitous in late medieval religious writing, but she played different roles and modeled different ways of life, reflecting the particular aims of individual authors. In Mechthild's text, Mary is depicted as a spiritual teacher who actively draws the narrator into higher forms of the mystical life. Mechthild also portrays the Virgin in several traditional roles, adapting each of these roles to support her particular vision of the mystical life. Mary thus functions as a model for religious experience in *The Flowing Light*, while also authorizing and sanctioning Mechthild's contemplative ideals.

Keywords: contemplation; Mary; Mechthild of Magdeburg; mysticism; suffering

“For a historian of Europe Mary is a constant presence,” writes Miri Rubin in her history of the Virgin's role in Christianity.¹ In the later Middle Ages, some of the Virgin's roles are well known. She was the paradigm of virginity; the subject of theological disputes about the immaculate conception; and the object of intercessory prayer, pilgrimages, and devotions. The Virgin appeared in less expected places as well—as the subject of the Hebrew scriptures or as a model for the *trivium* or for Christian *philosophia*.² But if the Virgin Mary was everywhere, she was not everywhere the same.³

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¹Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), xxi.

²See Rachel Fulton Brown, *Mary and the Art of Prayer: The Hours of the Virgin in Medieval Christian Life and Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 161–235; Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012); and Jean Leclercq, *Études sur le vocabulaire monastique du moyen âge*, *Studia Anselmiana Philosophica Theologica* 48 (Rome: Herder, 1961), 152–154.

³Readers of the medieval historian Judith Bennett will recognize this adaptation of a line from her *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 54.

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Scholars have observed that Marian piety played a different role in women's lives than in the lives of men. In this respect, Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that the Virgin's role was a counterintuitive one in later medieval spirituality. While female saints and feminine metaphors for spirituality were on the rise in the later Middle Ages, Bynum argues that these models were not "created by or especially attractive to women."⁴ Women were not necessarily drawn to exemplars of their own sex; they more often chose to pattern their religious experience after Christ. It was men to whom the Virgin more often appeared and men who tended to recommend the Virgin as a model for women's lives.⁵ As Bynum demonstrates, while women's spirituality had its own emphases, an especial—or especially feminine—devotion to Mary, the greatest of their sex, was not one of them.⁶

Several writers have also noted that devotion to Mary does not necessarily entail the elevation of women. In the introduction to her book *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, Marina Warner remarks on the distance between the Virgin's heavenly "world of music, flowers, perfumes, and painting" and the world of the women who venerate her. Warner argues that "in the very celebration of the perfect human woman," women themselves are "subtly denigrated."⁷ Warner's observations arose from her experience as a Catholic adolescent and do not necessarily translate neatly into late medieval women's lives, but historians have also noted discrepancies between reverence for Mary and the status of women more broadly. Colin Morris has observed that "it was quite rare for writers to argue from the greatness of Mary to the dignity of women in general."⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan has noted that, while the Virgin "has been more of an inspiration to more people than any other woman who ever lived," this has not necessarily improved the status of women in traditions that venerate her.⁹

This essay proposes a striking counterexample found in Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Flowing Light of the Godhead* (*Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*), in which Mary is depicted as a model for mystical union.¹⁰ Stephen Mossman has argued that toward

⁴Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 152–153.

⁵Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 153.

⁶Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 154. Bynum argues elsewhere that Mechthild is something of an exception to the rule that women did not especially seek out female models or imagery, a conclusion borne out by this essay; see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 228–246. For another example of Mary serving as a model specifically for women, see Caroline Walker Bynum, "Crowned with Many Crowns: Nuns and Their Statues in Late Medieval Wienhausen," in *Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2020), 97–128.

⁷Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), xxi. Bynum briefly addresses Warner's book in "Why Paradox?: The Contradictions of My Life as a Scholar," *Catholic Historical Review* 98, no. 3 (July 2012): 448.

⁸Colin Morris, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050 to 1250* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 465.

⁹Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 2–3. A summary of the historiographical debates about the role of Mary in women's lives can be found in Donavin, *Scribit Mater*, 1–3; and Laura Saetveit Miles, *The Virgin Mary's Book at the Annunciation: Reading, Interpretation, and Devotion in Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020), 35–37.

¹⁰For the purposes of this article, I will rely on Bernard McGinn's definition of *mystical* as that which is concerned with "the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God." Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth*

the end of the twelfth century there arose a tradition of Mary as “a directly imitable model” of mystical contemplation.¹¹ According to Mossman, the tradition of Mary as mystical contemplative “until now has scarcely been recognized as such” and has “received almost no scholarly attention.”¹² The depiction of Mary as contemplative was one of several possible depictions, and not all late medieval writers adopted it. We will see that Mechthild’s text is part of this tradition, with Mechthild depicting Mary as a paradigmatic contemplative. In examining the contours of the *imitatio Mariae* that Mechthild offers her readers, we will also see that Mechthild portrays the Virgin in several traditional roles—as exemplary sufferer, as queen of heaven, and as mother of the church—but that these roles are adapted in order to reinforce Mechthild’s larger vision of the contemplative life. Finally, we will see that not only does the Virgin serve as a pattern for Mechthild’s religious experience as it is depicted in *The Flowing Light*, but that, rather than diminishing Mechthild by comparison, the Virgin serves as a guide and advocate who actively draws Mechthild—and the text’s readers—into higher forms of contemplation.¹³

I. Mechthild’s Life, Writings, and Authorial Persona

Very little is known for certain about Mechthild, and what has been asserted about her life has been pieced together from details found in *The Flowing Light*.¹⁴ It has been widely assumed that she was born around 1208 and that she began receiving mystical visitations (which she calls the “greeting” [*grūs*] of the Holy Spirit) at age twelve, an

Century (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), xvii. I sometimes use the closely related term *contemplation* (or *contemplative*) as well, which A. C. Spearing has succinctly defined as “the activity whose goal is the union of the soul with God in this life.” A. C. Spearing, introduction to *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* (London: Penguin, 2001), x.

¹¹Mossman, *Marquard von Lindau and the Challenges of Religious Life in Late Medieval Germany: The Passion, the Eucharist, the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 279. On the importance of models in mystical traditions, see Steven T. Katz, “The ‘Conservative’ Character of Mystical Experience,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 43–51.

¹²Mossman, *Marquard von Lindau*, 268.

¹³Several other scholars have begun to consider the role of Mary in late medieval texts by or for women, illustrating the wide range of possible attitudes toward Mary; see Sharon Elkins “Gertrude the Great and the Virgin Mary,” *Church History* 66, no. 4 (December 1997): 720–734; Rosemary Hale, “*Imitatio Mariae*: Motherhood Motifs in Devotional Memoirs,” *Mystics Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (December 1990): 192–203; Lydia Shahan “Mother of Love: The Virgin Mary in Hadewijch’s Mysticism,” *Louvain Studies* 42 (2019): 43–64; Margot Schmidt, “‘Maria, Spiegel der Schönheit’: Zum Marienbild bei Hildegard von Bingen und Mechthild von Magdeburg,” in *Maria—für alle Frauen oder über allen Frauen?*, ed. Elisabeth Gössmann and Dieter R. Bauer (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989), 86–115; and Almut Suerbaum, “Maria in der Mystik,” in *Religiöses Wissen im vormodernen Europa. Schöpfung—Mutterschaft—Passion*, ed. Renate Dürr, Annette Gerok-Reiter, Andreas Holzem, and Steffen Patzold (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019), 375–395. Although his focus is not on female authors, Stephen Mossman is attentive to the way that Mary’s role as a model for religious experience was not predetermined but rather open to choice and variety in *Marquard von Lindau*, 243–334. On the dangers of considering Mechthild’s work exclusively within gendered categories such as women’s mysticism, see Sara S. Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), xi–xv.

¹⁴Standard accounts of Mechthild’s biography can be found in Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 222–223; and Hans Neumann, “Mechthild von Magdeburg,” in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*, ed. Kurt Ruh et al., 2nd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1987), 6:260–261.

experience that continued for at least thirty-one years.¹⁵ Scholars have surmised that she became a beguine in Magdeburg around 1230, and that she may have become head of a beguine community.¹⁶ Around 1272 it seems that, because of advanced age and illness, she joined the convent at Helfta, which was itself a center of women's mystical writing.¹⁷ It is assumed that Mechthild died in the 1280s or 1290s. As for her book, the Latin prologue to *The Flowing Light* recounts that Mechthild's book was revealed beginning in the year 1250 "in German to a certain beguine" [*teutonice cuidam begine*].¹⁸ However, many of these biographical details have recently been challenged. Building on the work of Ursula Peters, Balázs Nemes has argued that the biographical details that have been assumed are drawn from Mechthild's book and have not been confirmed by extratextual sources.¹⁹ Furthermore, Nemes has shown that the establishment of Mechthild's identity as a beguine is in part due to the confessional sympathies of nineteenth-century Protestant scholars who wished to view her as a critic of the religious establishment and as a "reformer before the Reformation."²⁰ Ernst Hellgardt has likewise shown how scant the evidence for Mechthild's biographical details is, noting that even the name *Mechthild* arises not from the author's "self-naming," but from the reception of her work, and that her association with Magdeburg, although now confirmed, rested for a long time only on the inferences of her earliest modern editors.²¹ In short, as many scholars have pointed out, the confidence with which the details of Mechthild's life can be fixed depends on readers' willingness to take *The Flowing Light* as a reliable source of her biography.

¹⁵FL IV.2, 228.21–26 [Tobin, 139]. All references to *The Flowing Light* (hereafter abbreviated FL) are to Gisela Vollmann-Profe, ed., *Mechthild von Magdeburg. Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*, Bibliothek des Mittelalters 19 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2003). The English is cited in brackets, quoted from Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998). I have indicated where I have modified this translation.

¹⁶On the growth of new forms of female piety in Mechthild's lifetime, see Roger De Ganck, *Beatrice of Nazareth in Her Context*, Cistercian Studies Series 121 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1991), 2–22; Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, trans. Steven Rowan (University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); and Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200–1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

¹⁷On the distinct shape of women's religious writing at Helfta, see Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics in the Thirteenth Century: The Case of the Nuns at Helfta," in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 170–262; Ernst Hellgardt, "Latin and the Vernacular: Mechthild of Magdeburg—Mechthild of Hackeborn—Gertrude of Helfta," in *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Elizabeth Andersen, Henrike Lähnemann, and Anne Simon (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 131–155; Rosalynn Voaden, "All Girls Together: Community, Gender and Vision at Helfta," in *Medieval Women in Their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 72–91.

¹⁸FL Pro., 10.2 [Tobin, 35].

¹⁹Balázs J. Nemes, "'sancta mulier nomine Mechtildis': Mechthild (von Magdeburg) und ihre Wahrnehmung als Religiöse im Laufe der Jahrhunderte," in *Das Beginnenwesen in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. Jörg Voigt, Bernward Schmidt, and Marco A. Sorace (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2015), 342.

²⁰Nemes, "sancta mulier nomine Mechtildis," 336. See also Ernst Hellgardt, "Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit. Mechthild von Magdeburg und ihr Buch," in *Literatur in der Stadt. Magdeburg in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. Michael Schilling, Beihefte zum Euphorion 70 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012), 110–111.

²¹Hellgardt, "Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit," 103–108.

The Flowing Light is Mechthild's only known work, a "unique document with no obvious antecedents or descendants."²² The text comprises seven books, each of which is composed of smaller units of varying genres, including visions, allegories, prayers, and devotional and doctrinal meditations.²³ The only complete surviving manuscript is written in Middle High German and comes from the fourteenth century.²⁴ There exists also a Latin translation, *Lux divinitatis*, in which the chapters of the first six books of *The Flowing Light* have been rearranged thematically.²⁵ This version was also retranslated into German.²⁶ It is believed that the Middle High German version was not the original text, but rather that the original was written in Middle Low German—although this too has been challenged.²⁷ After the sixteenth century, *The Flowing Light* "more or less disappeared" until it was rediscovered in the second half of the nineteenth century.²⁸

Scholars have cautioned against reading *The Flowing Light* as Mechthild's spiritual "diary" rather than as a text with sophisticated literary elements, and also against conflating Mechthild as historical person with Mechthild as authorial persona.²⁹ Mechthild presents the work as an authoritative revelation and herself as the Lord's chosen instrument in its dissemination. In Book V, the Lord announces, "I hereby send this book as a messenger to all religious peoples, both the good and the bad."³⁰ The writing of the book is described as commanded by God against Mechthild's own inclinations,³¹ in line with the conventions of the "unwilling author" and other humility *topoi*. Mechthild depicts the book as eliciting external opposition as well, writing: "I was

²²Frank Tobin, introduction to *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), 9.

²³For a list of the genres employed, see Tobin, introduction to *Flowing Light*, 10.

²⁴Sara S. Poor, "Transmission and Impact: Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*," in *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Elizabeth Andersen, Henrike Lähnemann, and Anne Simon, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 44 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 73.

²⁵Balázs J. Nemes, Elke Senne, and Ernst Hellgardt, eds., *Lux divinitatis'—Das liecht der gottheit'. Der lateinisch-frühneuhochdeutsche Überlieferungszweig des Fließenden Lichts der Gottheit'. Synoptische Ausgabe* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2019).

²⁶Poor, "Transmission and Impact," 74. On these translations, see also Hellgardt, "Latin and the Vernacular," 133–137.

²⁷See Poor, "Transmission and Impact," 73.

²⁸Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 2.

²⁹Several recent studies have raised questions about how Mechthild's authorship and authorial persona ought to be understood. Elizabeth Andersen has argued that *The Flowing Light* is an integral literary work, the unity of which resides in Mechthild's authorial persona in *The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000). Almut Suerbaum has traced how Mechthild creates and assumes many personae across her work in "Dialogische Identitätskonzeption bei Mechthild von Magdeburg," in *Dialoge. Sprachliche Kommunikation in und zwischen Texten im deutschen Mittelalter*, ed. Nikolaus Henkel et al. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2003), 239–255. Sara Poor has argued for reading Mechthild's constructed authorial persona dialectically with other kinds of historical evidence in *Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 1–78. Balázs J. Nemes argues that Mechthild's authorship is a phenomenon not of the text but of the text's reception in *Von der Schrift zum Buch—vom Ich zum Autor. Zur Text- und Autorkonstitution in Überlieferung und Rezeption des "Fließenden Lichts der Gottheit"* Mechthilds von Magdeburg, Bibliotheca Germanica 55 (Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag, 2010), 309–380.

³⁰FL V.34, 406.10–12 [Tobin, 217]: "Dis büch sende ich nu ze botten allen geistlichen lüten, bedú den bösen und den gúten." On the "messenger" motif in Mechthild's book, see William Seaton, "Transformation of Convention in Mechthild of Magdeburg," *Mystics Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (June 1984), 66–67.

³¹FL II.26, 136.3–6; IV.2, 236.32–238.3 [Tobin, 96; 144].

warned against writing this book. People said: If one did not watch out, it could be burned.”³² This opposition from within and without is in line with Mechthild’s depiction of herself as a messenger in the line of the great biblical teachers and prophets.³³ It is clear from the work itself that Mechthild intended her book not as a private diary of her own spiritual experiences, but as a public proclamation crafted to shape the lives of its readers.

II. Mary as Mystical Exemplar

In *The Flowing Light*’s task of shaping readers’ souls, Mary’s importance is indicated by the fact that her name is mentioned more often than anyone else’s except Christ’s.³⁴ Mary is introduced as the paradigm of mystical union in Book I.22 of *The Flowing Light*. Describing the moment of the incarnation, Mechthild writes: “The sweet dew of the eternal Trinity gushed forth from the fountain of the everlasting Godhead into the flower of the chosen maid; and the fruit of this flower is an immortal God and a mortal man and a living hope of eternal life. And our Redeemer became a Bridegroom. The bride became inebriated at the sight of his noble countenance.”³⁵ Here the moment of Mary’s conception is described in Mechthild’s characteristic mystical imagery—not the image of flowing light from the book’s title but rather the related image of flowing water.³⁶ *Flowing* in Mechthild’s book often reflects God’s movement toward and gracious relationship with human beings. As Bernard McGinn has observed, for Mechthild God flows down “to create the world and to bestow his mystical greeting (*gruos*) on the soul.”³⁷ Here, Mechthild combines the language of *flowing* with the language of bridal mysticism associated with the Song of Songs,³⁸ refashioning the

³²FL II.26, 136.3–5 [Tobin, 96]: “Ich wart vor disem büche gewarnet, und wart von menschen also gesaget: Wölte man es nit bewaren, da möhte ein brant über varen.”

³³The Lord compares Mechthild to the apostles who received the Holy Spirit, to Moses when he saw “nothing but God” [*niht wan got*], and to the prophet Daniel. FL V.12, 346.10–15 [Tobin, 190–191].

³⁴Andersen, *Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 200. On the role of Mary in Mechthild’s book, see Margot Schmidt, “Maria, Spiegel der Schönheit,” 101–112; and M. Schmidt, “Mechthild v. Magdeburg,” in *Marienlexikon*, ed. Remigius Bäumer and Leo Scheffczyk (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1992), 4:378–380.

³⁵FL I.22, 38.16–22 [Tobin, 49, with modification]: “Der süsse töwe der unbegünlicher drivaltekeit hat sich gesprengt us dem brunnen der ewigen gotheit in den blümen der userwelten maget, und des blümen frucht ist ein untölich got und ein tölich mensche und ein lebende trost des ewigen libes. Und únsér löser ist brütégóm worden! Die brut ist drunken worden von der angesichte des edeln antlútes.” For the transmission and reception of this passage, see Poor, “Transmission and Impact,” 88–94.

³⁶McGinn treats the concept of “flowing” (*vliessen*) in Mechthild’s writing in *Flowering of Mysticism*, 231–234.

³⁷McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 231.

³⁸On the role of Mary in bridal mysticism, see Marzena Górecka, *Das Bild Mariens in der deutschen Mystik des Mittelalters*, Deutsche Literatur von den Anfängen bis 1700 29 (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), 342–367. On the role of the Song of Songs in Western Christian mysticism, see Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1995). For Marian interpretations of the Song, which were not necessarily mystical, see Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 42–72; Rachel Fulton Brown, “Mimetic Devotion, Marian Exegesis, and the Historical Sense of the Song of Songs,” *Viator* 27 (1996): 86–116; Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1956), 367–375; Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800–1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 244–404; Górecka, *Das Bild Mariens*, 249–281; and E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 151–177.

Annunciation scene to foreground the union between human and divine that occurs in Mary's soul. As Margot Schmidt has observed, it is typical for Mechthild to depict Mary at the Annunciation as "the archetype and model of every God-loving soul."³⁹

Mechthild depicts the union that occurs in Mary's soul as then mirrored in salvation history. The result of Mary's inner union is an external union—the incarnation, the paradigmatic union of the human and divine in the person of Christ, whom Mechthild describes as "an immortal God and a mortal man and a living hope of eternal life."⁴⁰ Furthermore, Mary is not only the exemplar of this union, she is also in some respects its origin.⁴¹ According to Mechthild, it is at the moment of conception that Christ the Redeemer became the bridegroom; only in and through Mary's own mystical experience are others able to receive the incarnate Christ as bridegroom and mystical lover. In this passage, salvation history has been renarrated through the lens of Mary's union in order to foreground what the biblical narrative has to say about the possibilities of the human soul, namely its potential for mystical union with God.

Mary, herself the channel through which the incarnation flowed, is also an entrance point for Mechthild and her readers into the final aim of salvation history: (re)union with God. It is from Mary that Mechthild's authorial persona learns of the union that the soul was originally intended to share with God, and the book's readers are meant to construct their spiritual selves in such a way as to enjoy this union once more.⁴² In Book I.22, the narrator asks Mary about the nature of the union between the human soul and God, saying: "Tell me, where did our Redeemer become the Bridegroom?" Mary answers: "In the *jubilus* of the Holy Trinity. When God could no longer contain himself, he created the soul and, in his immense love, gave himself to her as her own."⁴³ The narrator then asks when this happened to Mary, and she answers: "When our Father's *jubilus* was saddened by Adam's fall, so that he had to become angry, the Eternal Wisdom of the almighty Godhead intercepted the anger together with me. The Father chose me for his bride—that he might have something to love; for his darling bride, the noble soul, was dead. The Son chose me to be his mother, and the Holy Spirit received me as his beloved. Then I alone was the bride of the Holy Trinity."⁴⁴ In this passage, Mechthild posits the preexistence of the Virgin, a doctrine for which I have not been able to locate other explicit instances before or during Mechthild's time. Mechthild's description draws on the doctrine of the exemplary existence of souls—that is, the preexistence of the exemplar or "idea" of all

³⁹Schmidt, "Maria, Spiegel der Schönheit," 102.

⁴⁰FL I.22, 38.18–20 [Tobin, 49]: "ein untölich got und ein tötlich mensche und ein lebende trost des ewigen libes."

⁴¹On the "fusion" of mystical experience and salvation history, see Andersen, *Voices of Mechthild von Magdeburg*, 200–209.

⁴²For a consideration of the effect on Mechthild's readers, see Balázs J. Nemes, "Der involvierte Leser: Immersive Lektürepraktiken in der spätmittelalterlichen Mystikrezeption," *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 42 (2012): 38–62.

⁴³FL I.22, 40.20–23 [Tobin, 50]: "Eya, wa wart únsere loser brütgröm? In dem jubilus der heligen drivaltekeit, do got nit me mohte *sich enthalten* in sich selben, do mahte er die selen und gab sich ir ze eigen von grosser liebi."

⁴⁴FL I.22, 40.33–42.3 [Tobin, 50]: "Do únsere vatter jubilus betrúbet wart mit Adames valle, also das er müste zúrnen, do *underfieng* dú ewige wisheit der almehtigen gotheit mit mir den zorn. Do erwelte mich der vatter zú einer brut, das *er* etwas ze minnende hette, wand sin liebú brut was tot, die edel sele; und do kos mich der sun zú einer müter und do enpfing mich der helig geist ze einer trútinne. Do was ich alleine brut der heligen drivaltekeit."

creatures in the mind of God—but it is developed according to her own mystical ideals.⁴⁵ Mary’s “*éternité mystique*,” as Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache called it, functions as a kind of counterpart to human sin, in that even as Adam’s fallen, deformed nature persists across time as it is passed on to all subsequent human beings, Mary’s perfect love persists as a kind of heavenly reminder and pledge of what humanity once was and will be again.⁴⁶ Mary is introduced into the traditional typology of “Christ as second Adam”—but Mechthild does not pair Mary with Eve as other authoritative Christian texts do.⁴⁷ Rather, Mary, like Christ, is a counterpart to Adam and becomes co-redemptrix with Christ in her interception of God’s wrath.

Perhaps most remarkably, Mary is also present in the *consilium Trinitatis*, witnessing the deliberations of the Trinity concerning the redemption of the human race and taking part in those operations.⁴⁸ The Marian title “bride of the Holy Trinity” is relatively uncommon; it suggests Mary’s participation “in the formation of the will and the hidden acts of the Trinity.”⁴⁹ Mary is here depicted not only as enjoying the highest forms of contemplative union but also as being taken up into the mind of God and participating in divine activities—knowledge of which she then mediates to *The Flowing Light*’s narrator, who in turn mediates it to her readers.

This dialogue between Mechthild’s authorial persona and Mary raises the question of the imitability of Mary as mystical exemplar. Could others receive the union Mary experienced, or does the *imitatio Mariae* resist direct imitation, with Mary’s perfection elevating her union “out of reach to the ordinary contemplative”?⁵⁰ In many passages in *The Flowing Light*, Mechthild’s authorial persona and her readers are themselves drawn into a pursuit of the Virgin’s union. The description of Mary as bride in I.22 is interrupted by a song that elaborates the paradoxes of union. The voicing of the song is

⁴⁵On this appearance of the exemplary existence of the soul in thirteenth-century mysticism, see McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 214. On the tradition of exemplary existence, also called the doctrine of divine ideas, see Mark A. McIntosh, *The Divine Ideas Tradition in Christian Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1–40. For a medieval articulation of this view, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 15.

⁴⁶Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache, *Mechtilde de Magdebourg (1207–1282): Étude de psychologie religieuse* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1926), 190.

⁴⁷See Tina Beattie, “Mary in Patristic Theology,” in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (London: Continuum, 2007), 86–90; Luigi Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin in the Thought of Medieval Latin Theologians*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), 38–39, 210–212; G. Söll, “Eva–Maria–Parallel,” in *Marienlexikon*, ed. Remigius Bäumer and Leo Scheffczyk (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1989), 2:420–421.

⁴⁸Kurt Ruh has proposed that Mechthild could have learned of the *consilium Trinitatis* from William of Saint-Thierry, mediated to her by a theological advisor; see *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik. Zweiter Band. Frauenmystik und Franziskanische Mystik der Frühzeit* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1993), 280. See also Georgette Epiney-Burgard “Hadewijch d’Anvers, Mechtilde de Magdebourg: Thèmes communs,” *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 66 (1992): 74; and McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 233. Mechthild also depicts the *consilium Trinitatis* in FL III.9. On these passages in context, including other ways of connecting Mary with the *consilium Trinitatis*, see Friedrich Ohly, “Die Trinität berät über die Erschaffung des Menschen und über seine Erlösung,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 116 (1994): 242–284.

⁴⁹Schmidt, “Maria, Spiegel der Schönheit,” 106: “Maria hat so an der Willensbildung und den verborgenen Taten der Trinität aufgrund der geschaffenen und ungeschaffenen Gnade teil.” On this rarely used title, see also K. Wittkemper, “Braut. IV. Dogmatik,” in *Marienlexikon*, ed. Remigius Bäumer and Leo Scheffczyk (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1988), 1:571.

⁵⁰Mossman, *Marquard von Lindau*, 334.

unclear—is it the Virgin’s song or Mechthild’s?⁵¹ While the chapter’s title (beginning “St. Mary’s Message,” probably added by a later editor) and the narrative structure of the chapter suggest that it is Mary who is speaking, the vocabulary and imagery of the poem resemble the voice of Mechthild’s authorial persona. The paradoxes are not obviously restricted to Mary; indeed, the voicing invites the reader to conflate her own soul with Mary’s. Marzena Górecka has observed that one of the rhetorical strategies by which Mechthild’s *imitatio Mariae* is applied to readers is through the application of Marian titles and imagery to other souls.⁵² According to Górecka, Mechthild “programmatically” transfers mariological realities to her own soul in this chapter.⁵³ The chapter thus offers Mechthild’s readers a particular way of describing—and therefore of constructing—their experience of and desire for divine presence.⁵⁴ If Mary is the archetypal mystic, Mechthild’s authorial persona becomes an image of the archetype, and her readers are, in the very act of reading, given resources to do so as well.

There are also elements of Mechthild’s depiction of Mary that seem at first glance more difficult for Mechthild’s authorial persona and her readers to imitate. It would seem that other souls do not take part in the *consilium Trinitatis*, and that they belong to the fallen human race while Mary “alone was bride of the Holy Trinity.” And yet elsewhere in *The Flowing Light*, Mechthild depicts herself or other souls as entering into these privileges. The title “bride of the Holy Trinity” is transferred to the soul in Book II.9, where God praises the bridal soul with language reminiscent of the Marian language in I.22, saying, “You are a pledge among the false. You are a bride of the Holy Trinity.”⁵⁵ Here again the reader is invited to identify or conflate her own soul with Mary’s. So too with the *consilium Trinitatis*: In III.4, the narrator recounts an ecstatic experience in which she, like Mary, witnesses the Trinity’s deliberations. She says to God: “[Y]ou have drawn me out of myself into your wonder in such a way that I have heard you in your whole Trinity and have seen the exalted counsel that took place before our time when you, Lord, were enclosed within yourself alone and your indescribable bliss was shared by no one.”⁵⁶ What the narrator witnesses she then describes to the reader. Mechthild, like Mary in I.22, has become a witness to the mind of God and a teacher of the truths she sees there. Thus, although there are

⁵¹See also Waltraud Verlaguet, *L'éloignement: La théologie de Mechthild de Magdebourg (XIIIe siècle)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 150: “Encore qu’on ne sache pas toujours très bien si les métaphores paradoxales du poème inclus dans la narration s’appliquent à Marie ou à l’âme” (It is not always very clear whether the paradoxical metaphors of the poem included in the narration apply to Mary or to the soul).

⁵²Górecka, *Das Bild Mariens*, 344–346. See also Ann Astell’s related discussion of how Mary’s voice becomes “the exemplary utterance of the devout” in Marian commentaries on the Song of Songs; Astell, *Song of Songs*, 46.

⁵³Górecka, *Das Bild Mariens*, 348: “Mechthild von Magdeburg überträgt den mariologischen Sachverhalt programmatisch in Kapitel I 22 auf die eigene Seele.” See also FL II.22, in which the “least soul” [*minste sele*] is called a bride of the Holy Trinity.

⁵⁴I borrow this framework for describing the effect of devotional texts from Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 144.

⁵⁵FL II.9, 98.5–6 [Tobin, 78]: “[D]u bist ein trüwe der valschen, / du bist ein brut der heligen drivaltekeit.” See also FL I.44 and IV.12 for similar imagery.

⁵⁶FL III.9, 174.12–16 [Tobin, 114, with modification]: “da du mich mitte hast gezogen usser mir selber in din wunder also, herre, das ich in diner ganzen drivaltekeit han gehört und gesehen den hohen rat, der vor unser zit ist geschehen, do du, herre, were beslossen in dir selben alleine und din unzellichú wunne neman was gemeine.” This possibility also seems to be open to the souls of the blessed (FL VII.1).

passages in *The Flowing Light* in which Mary is depicted as an inimitable model, they are fewer than might be expected.⁵⁷

III. Mary as Sufferer

In *The Flowing Light*, Mechthild also depicts the Virgin in several other roles, refashioning these roles to support the book's mystical ideals. One such role is that of Mary as exemplary sufferer. In Mechthild's book, the soul is depicted as encountering several forms of suffering. The soul suffers most acutely when she perceives God as absent. In Book I, after an experience of union, Mechthild's authorial persona describes her "banishment" from God—that is, her return to earthly, bodily existence. When not in God's presence, Mechthild suffers like an outcast, and so extreme is her agony that she calls her own body a murderer [*morder*] for preventing her soul from sustaining lasting union with God.⁵⁸ The spiritual suffering of God's absence is a natural byproduct of intensely erotic streams of mysticism, in which a tension exists between the rapturous experiences of God's presence and the long periods of absence when God's presence is longed for but not felt. Other forms of suffering are also to be expected. Later in the same book, Mechthild describes twenty-three steps of the cross through which a bride could follow Christ. The bride could expect, among other things, to be martyred, betrayed, hunted, taken prisoner, beaten, abandoned, impoverished, and crucified through her renunciation of all things.⁵⁹ Suffering, however, was purposive: according to Mechthild, God temporarily abandons the soul "that she might feel longing" for him.⁶⁰ The steps of the cross allow one to imitate Christ in his suffering and therefore to bring one's life into union with or conformity to Christ even when mystical union proves elusive.⁶¹ At times, pain even serves as a messenger between the soul and God.⁶² In Mechthild's book, suffering is an ineluctable but spiritually generative reality.

Mary's role as a companion in suffering had long been established. Her suffering is attested in Scripture: even as Simeon prophesies in the Gospel of Luke that the Christ-child will bring resurrection, he prophesies that a sword will pierce Mary's heart (Luke 2:35), a prophecy that reaches fulfillment as Mary watches Christ's death at the foot of the cross. In Amadeus of Lausanne's twelfth-century Marian homilies, in which seven events in the Virgin's life are associated with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, Mary's presence at the cross is compared to spiritual martyrdom. She is one of the martyrs who "suffered in the spirit" rather than corporeally and "who endured in their spirits something harsher than suffering in the flesh."⁶³ Amadeus lists Abraham, Moses, and David as saints in this line, and describes Mary as suffering more than all: "She drank a cup more bitter than death itself, and what the human race

⁵⁷For a passage in which human beings are diminished by comparison with Mary, see, for example, FL VII.9.

⁵⁸FL I.2, 22.31–32 [Tobin, 41].

⁵⁹FL I.29 [Tobin, 54].

⁶⁰FL I.5, 28.12 [Tobin, 44]: "So lat er si ein kleine, das si geron möge." More causes for suffering are described in V.2 [Tobin, 181].

⁶¹FL I.29 [Tobin, 54].

⁶²FL IV.12, 264.3 [Tobin, 155].

⁶³Amadeus of Lausanne, *Huit Homélie Mariales*, ed. G. Bavaud and Jean Deshusses, trans. Antoine Dumas, Sources Chrétiennes 72 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1960), 138: "Spiritu vero sancti illi passi sunt, qui aliquid passione carnis durius in suis spiritibus pertulerunt." All quotations in this and the following paragraph are from Amadeus's fifth sermon. All translations from Latin are my own unless otherwise noted.

could not endure, she, a woman, assisted by divine favor, had strength to bear. She conquered her sex, she conquered what is human, and she suffered beyond humanity. For she was tormented more than if she were tormented in herself, since she loved that for which she grieved incomparably more than she loved herself.”⁶⁴ Amadeus understood Mary’s sorrow to be instructive: through it Christians received a model of fortitude, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit: “Therefore, beloved, let us imitate the Lord’s mother, so that in adversity we do not forget modesty and we remember constancy.”⁶⁵ Mary is not, however, a model of detached unfeelingness: according to Amadeus, “the more she loved, the more she grieved.”⁶⁶ As Rachel Fulton Brown has argued, devotion to the Virgin “schooled religiously sensitive women and men in the potentialities of emotion,”⁶⁷ offering a pattern by which suffering could be rendered intelligible and then spiritually constructive.

Like Amadeus of Lausanne, Mechthild admired the Virgin’s ability to suffer fully while also suffering well. In *The Flowing Light*, Mary is depicted as enduring her son’s death in a manner befitting a contemplative. Mechthild describes Mary’s presence at the foot of the cross thus: “Mary, his mother, was truly inwardly united to him, as she outwardly remained there standing near him.”⁶⁸ This passage is followed by one in which the narrator describes God speaking to her directly in order to clarify the purposive nature of her own suffering. Like Mary who remained united to God at the cross, the one who suffers well will find God “present with his consolation.”⁶⁹ Elsewhere in *The Flowing Light*, Mary is depicted as a model for the loving soul who also suffers, a model who experienced the same kinds of burdens. In Book III.4, Mechthild writes: “God knows, Lady, later you would turn wretchedly cold in poverty, in trials, and in heartache. In spite of this, in your heart you continued to burn brightly in good works from that fire which burns in itself unaided without a beginning.”⁷⁰ Mary’s suffering is here framed in terms suggesting an identification between the Virgin and the loving soul: the religious ideal of poverty, the trials faced by the loving soul, the heartache of longing for God’s presence. Waltraud Verlaguet has observed that assuming “la misère existentielle” to the fullest is the Virgin’s particular virtue, and insofar as the loving soul suffers to a higher degree because she feels more acutely the pain of God’s absence, Mary, who endured her son’s death at the foot of the cross without forfeiting her inner union with him, was a particularly qualified guide.⁷¹

For Mechthild, Mary’s capacity for such extraordinary suffering was a deliberate part of her nature and of her role in salvation history. In Book III, Mechthild recounts a

⁶⁴Amadeus of Lausanne, *Huit Homélie Mariales*, 148: “hausit poculum amarius ipsa morte, et quod hominum genus ferre non posset, adiuta divino munere femina valuit sustinere. Vicit sexum, vicit hominem et passa est ultra humanitatem. Torquebatur namque magis, quam si torqueretur ex se, quoniam supra se incomparabiliter diligebat id unde dolebat.”

⁶⁵Amadeus of Lausanne, *Huit Homélie Mariales*, 156: “Ergo, carissimi, imitemur matrem Domini, ut inter adversa non obliviscamur verecundiae, et memores simus constantiae.”

⁶⁶Amadeus of Lausanne, *Huit Homélie Mariales*, 152: “Quo igitur magis dilexit, plus doluit.”

⁶⁷Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, 197. See also Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 230.

⁶⁸FL V.2, 322.14–16 [Tobin, 181]: “Maria, sin müter, die im was vereinet werlich inwendig, dú gestünt alleine uswendig mit im.”

⁶⁹Mechthild FL V.2, 324.2 [Tobin, 181]: “so ist got mit sinem trost da.”

⁷⁰FL III.4, 168.3–7 [Tobin, 111]: “Weis got, fröwe, da na müstest du dich mit armüte, mit missekomen und mit manger herzenswere ellendekliche külen, iedoch belibe du im herzen an güten werken grösslich infürig von dem fure, das da brennet sunder beginne und sunder helfe in sich selben.”

⁷¹Verlaguet, *L’éloignace*, 94.

teaching about Mary that has been revealed to her by the Holy Spirit: “And the eternal wisdom of the almighty Godhead gave you, Lady, a shadow in which you kept your human life so that you could suffer pain, without sin.”⁷² It is in this foreordained shadow of suffering that the Virgin “carried Jesus in human fashion.”⁷³ That is, it is out of this shadow that Christ was born, a shadow that establishes Mary’s capacity for suffering as a bridge between herself and other human beings who do not share in her sinlessness. The mystery of salvation took shape out of this well of human nature, the capacity for suffering. In Mary’s capacity for suffering, Mechthild perceived a link between the mystery of suffering and the mystery of salvation history well before Mary stood at the foot of the cross.

IV. Mary as Queen of Heaven

Another traditional Marian role that Mechthild adapted is that of Mary as a heavenly queen. Mechthild’s relationship with earthly courts and their imagery, realities, and ideals was a complicated one. Mechthild—herself possibly, although not certainly, from an aristocratic background—was critical of many aspects of courtly culture and yet adapted its conventions, vocabulary, and ideals for her own use.⁷⁴ Mechthild also demonstrated a particular distaste for noblewomen. In her vision of hell, the worst fate short of actual damnation was reserved for those who did no penance during their earthly lives; among those having to endure the flaming breath of Lucifer outside the mouth of hell for this sin were “princesses who here love all kinds of sins just as princes do.”⁷⁵ Similarly, when Mechthild’s authorial persona questions whether it was right for St. Elizabeth to be canonized so quickly, God tells her that this honor was due to Elizabeth’s role as messenger “to wretched women living in castles who were so permeated with lust, so covered with arrogance, and so constantly engulfed in vanity that they by rights should have gone into the abyss.”⁷⁶ But in contrast to Mechthild’s distaste for earthly courtly life and its attendant vices, Mary’s station in the heavenly court played an important role in the formation of the soul.

As a title for Mary, “queen of heaven” had a long tradition before Mechthild, with roots stretching back to antiquity. The incorporation of Mary into the courtly love tradition had occurred in the twelfth century with the appearance of courtly love poetry directed toward religious subjects such as Christ or Mary.⁷⁷ There were also notable

⁷²FL III.4, 166.20–23 [Tobin, 110, with modification]: “und dú ewig wisheit der almehtigen gotheit hatte dir, fröwe, einen schatten gegeben, da du inne behieltist din menschlich leben, also das du pine mohtist liden ane sünde.”

⁷³FL III.4, 166.25 [Tobin, 110–111]: “In dem schatten trüge du Jhesum menschlich.”

⁷⁴On courtly images in Mechthild’s text, see Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1992), 93–98.

⁷⁵FL III.21, 214.30–31 [Tobin, 132, with modification]: “Ich sach da aller fröwen nit mere wan die hohen fürstinnen, die hie allerleie sünden glich mit den fürsten minnent.”

⁷⁶FL V.34, 404.2–7 [Tobin, 215]: “Elyzabeth die ist und si was ein botte, den ich gesant habe zû den unseligen vrowen, die in den bürgen sassen, mit der unkúscheit also sere durflossen und mit dem homûte also sere überzogen und mit der italkeit also stete umbevungen, das si nach rehte in das abgründe solten sin gegangen.”

⁷⁷Jennifer G. Wollock, *Rethinking Chivalry and Courtly Love* (Santa Barbara: Praeger: 2011), 44. On the question of Mechthild’s relationship to the tradition of courtly mysticism, see McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 235–239; and Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 137–167. More recently, Almut Suerbaum has questioned widely held assumptions about the relationship between Mechthild’s

theological precedents in the works of Bernard of Clairvaux.⁷⁸ In a sermon on the Annunciation, for example, Bernard imagined the precise moment between Gabriel's proclamation and Mary's assent, staging it dramatically to resemble a courtly proposal of love brought by a messenger (the angel Gabriel), with a crowd of onlookers anxiously waiting to hear the noble lady's response:

We are also waiting for this word of mercy, my lady, we who are weighed down by the sentence of damnation. . . . The whole world is on bended knee, waiting for it. And not undeservedly, since the consolation of the afflicted, the redemption of captives, the deliverance of the damned, in short the salvation of all the sons of Adam, your whole race depends on what comes forth from your mouth. Virgin, give your answer quickly. My lady, say the word for which those on earth and those below and those above are waiting. As much as the Lord and King of all desired your beauty, so also did he desire the assent of your response, by which he truly proposed to save the world.⁷⁹

There are echoes here of Psalm 45:11 (Psalm 44:12, Vulg.), which describes a king who desires (*concupiscet*) the beauty of a young woman who is acclaimed for her beauty. Bernard layers courtly images into the Annunciation scene, staging it in continuity with the future reality of Mary as heavenly queen.⁸⁰ Elsewhere, in a sermon on the Assumption, Bernard describes Mary as a queen who directed the service of her attendants: "Our queen has gone before us; she has gone before and has been caught up in such glory, so that her little servants may follow their mistress."⁸¹ In this metaphor, Christians are servants who wait on Mary, following her example and depending on her kindly care. In both cases, Mary, the humble maiden, has been transformed into a courtly figure with power and influence.

In *The Flowing Light*, Mary's role as heavenly queen is most evident in Mechthild's vision of herself as a poor maiden at a heavenly mass celebrated by John the Baptist.⁸² The vision takes place in the court of heaven amid a great crowd. The Virgin stands

text and the *Minnesang* genre; see "Mechthild und Minnesang? Neue Antworten auf eine alte Frage," in *Mechthild und das „Fließende Licht der Gottheit“ im Kontext. Eine Spurensuche in religiösen Netzwerken und literarischen Diskursen im mitteldeutschen Raum des 13.-15. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Caroline Emmelius and Balázs J. Nemes, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie 17 (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2019), 211–228.

⁷⁸For a survey of Bernard of Clairvaux's Marian theology, see Henri Barré, "Saint Bernard, Docteur Marial," *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis* 9 (1953): 92–113. On Bernard's use of Marian imagery, see Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, 303–309; and Görecka, *Das Bild Mariens*, 299–334. On Bernard compared with other twelfth-century theologians in this respect, see Mossman, *Marquard von Lindau*, 268–279.

⁷⁹Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sancti Bernardi opera* 4:53–54 (hereafter abbreviated SBOP): "Exspectamus et nos verbum miserationis, o Domina, quos miserabiliter premit sententia damnationis. . . . Hoc totus mundus, tuis genibus provolutus, exspectat: nec immerito, quando ex ore tuo pendet consolatio miserorum, redemptio captivorum, liberatio damnatorum, salus denique universorum filiorum Adam, totius generis tui. Da, Virgo, responsum festinanter. O Domina, responde verbum, quod terra, quod inferi, quod exspectant et superi. Ipse quoque omnium Rex et Dominus quantum concupivit decorem tuum, tantum desiderat et responsonis assensum, in qua nimirum proposuit salvare mundum."

⁸⁰On the development of Marian readings of the Psalms, see Brown, *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, 161–235.

⁸¹Bernard of Clairvaux, SBOP 5:229: "Praecessit nos Regina nostra, praecessit, et tam gloriose suscepta est, ut fiducialiter sequantur Dominam servuli."

⁸²FL II.4.

among saints, bishops, martyrs, angels, and virgins, but on the highest level. By contrast, Mechthild appears as a poor girl in wretched clothing. Embarrassed at how unsuited she is to such a regal gathering, Mechthild looks up at Mary and the crowd, and then is surprised to find her own clothes instantly transformed into a red mantle “woven out of love.” Mary beckons Mechthild to join her and then guides her through the mass.

Over the course of the vision, Mechthild is brought into increasing conformity with the model of Mary. Although Mary and Mechthild are initially separated by the disparity of their respective states—with Mary as queen and Mechthild as poor maiden—the references to Mary and Mechthild eventually become almost indistinguishable from one another. After Mary’s invitation to the poor young maiden, the vision continues: “As often as our Lady was mentioned, she genuflected, while the others just bowed, because God had given her the greatest honor.”⁸³ The pronouns here are not quite clear: who is genuflecting and who has been given the greatest honor? It is possible that both pronouns refer to either Mechthild or Mary, or that Mechthild is the one who genuflects to Mary, who has received the greatest honor. The last interpretation seems most plausible, but it is not at first obvious.⁸⁴ The ambiguity results from the way that Marian language has come to apply to Mechthild herself. Of all human beings, Mary possesses the greatest honor and also the greatest humility. The raising up of humility is the fundamental paradox that underlies the biblical Marian narrative, and the ambiguous pronouns in this vision draw attention to the way in which Mary as queen has guided Mechthild into a fundamentally Marian posture: in this scene, “honored humility” describes both Mary *and* Mechthild, the poor maiden turned princess.

At the climax of the mass in this vision, Mechthild is drawn into another Marian posture, this time without any ambiguity. Mechthild writes: “I no longer saw the host, but only a bleeding lamb hanging from a red cross. It looked at us with such sweet eyes that I shall never, ever forget it.”⁸⁵ Mechthild then turns to Mary, asking that the Virgin’s Son give himself to her. A beam of light shines out of the Virgin’s mouth, touching the lamb with her prayer. Christ consents, and then John the Baptist “took the white lamb with its red wounds and placed it between her [Mechthild’s] teeth in her mouth. Then the pure lamb lay down onto its own image in her stable and began to suckle from her heart with its sweet mouth.”⁸⁶ Mechthild’s narrative persona has become a second Mary, a spiritual mother of Christ, taking him into her stomach and nursing him in her heart, with Christ appearing not as an infant but as the paschal lamb. In this vision, then, the queen of the heavenly court has guided Mechthild through a Marian sequence of humility, exaltation, and finally maternal, bodily union such as Mary would have experienced while pregnant with Christ.

⁸³FL II.4, 88.11–13 [Tobin, 74]: “und als dikke únsere fröwe wart genant, so knüweti si, und die andren nigen, wan ir got die grössesten ere hat gegeben.”

⁸⁴Tobin notes the confusion in the original MHG. See Tobin, *Flowing Light*, 345n11. See also Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit: Nach der Einsiedler Handschrift in kritischem Vergleich mit der gesamten Überlieferung*, ed. Hans Neumann, supplemented by Gisela Vollmann-Profe, vol. 2 (Munich: Artemis, 1993), 31–32 (II.4). Neumann takes the one kneeling to be Mechthild.

⁸⁵FL II.4, 90.6–9 [Tobin, 75]: “ich der ovelaten nüt me sach, mere ein blütig lamp, gehangen an einem roten crúze. Mit also süssen ögen sach es úns an, das ich es niemer me vergessen kan.”

⁸⁶FL II.4, 90.16–20 [Tobin, 75]: “Do nam Sant Johannes das wisse lamp mit sinen roten wunden und leit es in den köwen irs mundes. Do leite sich das reine lamp uf sin eigen bilde in irem stal und sög ir herze mit sinem süssen munde.”

The theme of Mary's humility and exaltation was widespread in medieval writing. In his sermon on the Annunciation, mentioned previously, Bernard framed this as the Virgin's particular virtue: "It is no great thing to be humble in abjection, but honored humility is a truly great and rare virtue."⁸⁷ However, given that choice was always possible for writers who offered an *imitatio Mariae*, it is worth noting that in many texts the exaltation that the intended audience could expect would occur after death, when those who had been humble on earth would be rewarded in heaven. In Mechthild's text, however, the exaltation is not deferred but rather occurs in this life, in a vision that collapses her heavenly status and her earthly one. In Mechthild's text, Mary provides a more immediate authorization of Mechthild and of the mystical ideals laid out in her text.

V. Mary as Mother of the Church

A third traditional Marian role that Mechthild adapts is Mary's role as mother of the church. Responsibility for and authority within the ecclesial community were part of Mechthild's depiction of her vocation.⁸⁸ As Bynum observes, in *The Flowing Light* there is a "sense of responsibility for the whole church, down to the lowliest peasant."⁸⁹ Despite the opposition that Mechthild's authorial persona encounters or anticipates encountering in *The Flowing Light*,⁹⁰ Mechthild "consciously fitted herself into the ecclesial order."⁹¹ Her critiques of the church were reformist rather than iconoclastic in spirit and intersect in places with the mendicant ideals that were widespread during her life.⁹² In *The Flowing Light*, Mechthild's authority and responsibility comprise the instruction of individual souls as well as correction of and intercession for the broader church; these roles are not separate but intertwined. Just as Mary is depicted as guiding Mechthild in other aspects of her vocation, so too is Mary depicted as a model for Mechthild's ecclesial participation.

Early Christian theologians found that the association of Mary with the church yielded fruitful comparisons. Ambrose proposed Mary as a type of the church and relied on maternal language to develop this type: "Rightly is she [Mary] betrothed, yet a virgin, because she is the type of the church, which is undefiled yet married [i.e., to Christ]. The virgin [the church] conceived us by the Spirit, the virgin brings us forth without pain."⁹³ Just as Mary's virginity was preserved in childbirth, the church was understood to bring forth spiritual children while remaining pure. Augustine likewise developed the idea of the importance of Mary's spiritual motherhood: "The blessed Mary herself conceived by believing the one whom she bore by believing. . . . She con-

⁸⁷Bernard of Clairvaux, SBOp 4:55: "Non magnum esse humilem in abiectioe; magna prorsus et rara virtus, humilitas honorata."

⁸⁸See Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the 12th Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 155.

⁸⁹Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 236.

⁹⁰See, for example, FL VI.36.

⁹¹Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 178.

⁹²See Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience*, 82; and Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 142–143.

⁹³Ambrose, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, ed. M. Adriaen, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 14 (1957), 33.103–106: "Bene desponsata, sed uirgo, quia est ecclesiae typus, quae est immaculata, sed nupta. Conceptit nos uirgo de Spiritu, parit nos uirgo sine gemitu." For a broad survey of other authors who depicted Mary as mother of the church, see de Lubac, *Splendor of the Church*, 318–339.

ceived Christ in her mind before she did so in her womb.”⁹⁴ In Augustine’s treatment, Mary became the first Christian, long before the crucifixion or resurrection. All Christians were to imitate her spiritual fruitfulness.

Mechthild likewise uses the language of motherhood to describe Mary’s relation to the church. In Book I.22, Mechthild describes Mary’s maternal identity as stretching across the entirety of salvation history: “I [Mary] suckled the prophets and sages, even before I was born. Afterward, in my childhood, I suckled Jesus; later, in my youth, I suckled God’s bride, Holy Christianity, under the cross when I was so desolate and wretched, as the sword of the physical suffering of Jesus cut spiritually into my soul.”⁹⁵ Mary is a mother to the people of God as they extend forward and backward in time, even down to the last day.⁹⁶ This spiritual motherhood is predicated upon Mary’s preexistence and her eternally ordained role in salvation history. Because of this eternally ordained role, she is able to operate outside the strict bounds of chronological time, nurturing the prophets and sages of Israel even as she continues after her death to nurture the church from heaven.

While Mechthild does not portray herself as a mother of the church across all of salvation history—in this aspect, Mary remains somewhat out of reach—she depicts her ministry as converging with Mary’s with respect to their roles as intercessors. As is to be expected, Mechthild prays to the Virgin, traditionally held to be the exemplary intercessor, for her own needs: “Ah, lady, remember all my longings and all my prayers, all my torments and all my distress and all my interior suffering, my honor, my soul, and my final end, when I leave this deplorable exile.”⁹⁷ Mary is likewise intercessor over the whole church: she is “the refuge of sinners,” “the mighty helper of those in despair,” and “the consoler of all Holy Christianity.”⁹⁸ The power to intercede for the church is explicitly located in Mary’s mystical union with God: after having described Mary as the recipient of the full force of the godhead, Mechthild explains, “In this bright reflection our Lady can well make demands.”⁹⁹ Mechthild attributes to herself a similar movement from unitive presence to intercession: in Book III.15, she recounts a holy day on which, too ashamed to receive the Eucharist, she approaches God in prayer. He answers her: “Truly, if you go before me in humble sorrow and holy fear, I shall follow you as the high waters follow the deep millstream. But if you come to me with the blossoming yearning of flowing love, I must go to meet you and caress you with my divine nature as my one and only queen.”¹⁰⁰ The language here is unitive and Marian: like

⁹⁴Augustine, *Ser.* 215.4, *Patrologia Latina* 38:1074 (hereafter abbreviated PL): “Nam et ipsa beata Maria, quem credendo peperit, credendo concepit. . . . et Christum prius mente quam ventre concipiens.”

⁹⁵FL I.22, 42.7–12 [Tobin, 51]: “ich sōgete die propheten und die wissagen, e denne *ich* geborn wart. Dar nach in miner kintheit sōgete ich Jhesum; fürbas in miner jugent sōgete ich gottes brut, die heligen cristanheit, bi dem crütze, *da* ich also durre und jemerlich wart, *da* das swert der vleischlicher pine Jhesu sneit geistlich in min sele.”

⁹⁶FL I.22, 42.34–35 [Tobin, 52].

⁹⁷FL VII.20, 572.11–15 [Tobin, 292]: “Eya vrowe, *gedenke aller* miner gerunge und aller miner bette, aller miner pine und *aller* miner not und alles mins herzeleides, miner eren, miner selen und mines jungesten endes, wenne ich hinnan wende us disem jemerlichen ellende.”

⁹⁸FL VII.19, 570.31, 33, 35 [Tobin, 291]: Mary is “ein zûvlucht der sündere,” “ein menlich helferin der verzwiuelten,” and “ein trösterin aller heligen cristanheit.”

⁹⁹FL VI.39, 512.11–12 [Tobin, 265]: “In dem gegenblikke mag unser vrowe wol gebieten.”

¹⁰⁰FL III.15, 194.4–9 [Tobin, 122]: “Werlich, gast du mir vor mit demütigem jamer und mit heligen vorhten, so müs ich dir volgen als die hohe flüt der tieffen mülen. Gast du mir aber gegen mit blüender gerunge der vliessender minne, so müs ich dir gemüssen und mit miner gotlicher nature berüren als min einige küniginne.”

Mary, Mechthild's soul can become God's true lover and a heavenly queen. The vision does not culminate in erotic union, however; rather, Mechthild and the Lord go together into Purgatory, where she intercedes with him and redeems seventy thousand souls. Mechthild here acts as a queen of heaven in the Marian mold: drawing close to God, she does not forget her responsibility to others.

Mary's suckling of the prophets before her birth could not be shared by others; in this sense her role as mother of the church resisted imitation. But insofar as Mechthild's role as intercessor converges with the Marian office of nurturing the church, Mary modeled and therefore authorized Mechthild's vocation. Mary's power as intercessor in the Middle Ages is well known, but Mechthild does not simply pray *to* Mary—she also comes to pray *like* Mary. Mechthild appealed to Mary's intercessory power but also assumed it herself. As Bynum has observed, medieval women drew this authority not from an ecclesial office, as male clerics did, but from "the inspiration of a Christ who makes wise the foolish and gives the earth to the meek."¹⁰¹ In their role as intercessors, spiritual women did not oppose the established penitential system; rather, they exercised their authority through and around it. In this role, Mechthild had an unimpeachable model not only in Christ but also in Mary.

VI. Conclusion

In Mechthild's treatment of Mary, Marian doctrines, roles, and images are subsumed into Mechthild's understanding of contemplation and the life of the loving soul. As a model or archetype, the Virgin is depicted as acting on Mechthild's authorial persona and is presumably expected to act on Mechthild's readers. But it must not be forgotten that Mechthild's self-understanding seems to have shaped her portrayal of the Virgin as model as well. Mary as mother, Mary as sufferer, Mary as queen of heaven, Mary as intercessor—all of these traditional images act on Mechthild's self-understanding even as her self-understanding shapes the images in turn. This, as I have suggested, makes Mechthild a particularly rich exception among her female contemporaries, who, as Bynum has shown, tended to turn to Christ rather than Mary as a model for devotion. Mechthild turns to Christ, too, but the Virgin occupies a more prominent role in Mechthild's text than is often recognized.

To see how Mechthild's authorial choices produce a model of Mary that is particular to *The Flowing Light*, it is helpful to consider a brief comparison. The depiction of Mary as bride did not inherently lead to depictions of her that foregrounded contemplation. Alan of Lille, who lived in the century prior to Mechthild, wrote a Marian commentary on the Song of Songs, which features many of the motifs present in Mechthild's book. In fitting with the genre, the commentary depicts Mary as a bride, with Christ the bridegroom calling her "my beloved, my bride, singular and unique."¹⁰² Likewise, the

¹⁰¹Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 21. See also Barbara Newman, "Divine Power Made Perfect in Weakness: St. Hildegard on the Frail Sex," in *Medieval Religious Women: Peace Weavers*, ed. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank, *Cistercian Studies* 72 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1987), 2:103–122.

¹⁰²Alan of Lille, *Elucidatio in Cantica Cantorum*, PL 210:60A: "dilecta mea, sponsa mea, singularis et unica." For treatments of Alan's *Elucidatio*, see Max Engammare, *Qu'il me baise des baisers de sa bouche. Le Cantique des Cantiques à la Renaissance. Étude et bibliographie*, Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance 277 (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1993), 84; Matter, *Voice of My Beloved*, 163–167; Friedrich Ohly, *Hohelied-Studien. Grundzüge einer Geschichte der Hoheliedauslegung des Abendlandes bis um 1200* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1958), 99–102; and Helmut Riedlinger, *Die Makellosigkeit der Kirche in den lateinischen Hoheliedkommentaren des Mittelalters*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, 38.3 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1958), 223–226.

Annunciation is presented as a moment of union: when Mary says “be it done unto me according to your word,” Alan writes that what is meant is “May he kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.”¹⁰³ The Virgin’s suffering is mentioned in reference to Luke 2:35,¹⁰⁴ as is her role in nurturing the people of faith “just as a mother nurses a child.”¹⁰⁵ However, the emphasis of Alan’s *imitatio Mariae* takes a different shape than Mechthild’s. Alan names in the first chapter the two Marian virtues that his readers are meant to imitate: “And in the virgin are two models of how to live well—humility and chastity—which she made known to us by way of example.”¹⁰⁶ Mechthild, on the other hand, mentions the virtues of chastity and humility—so important for medieval monastic culture—in connection with Mary relatively infrequently.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, while Alan does in places associate Mary with mystical union or contemplation, it is not central as it is in *The Flowing Light*, and the extent to which Mary is a “directly imitable model” in this respect is not always clear.¹⁰⁸ In Alan’s commentary, Mary is not portrayed as engaging in dialogue with the author or actively intervening to draw the author into higher forms of contemplation, as she is in *The Flowing Light*. Thus the conventional Marian motifs present in both Alan of Lille’s Song commentary and Mechthild’s *Flowing Light* are configured differently, such that Mary is a model in both, but a model of somewhat different ways of life.

Finally, returning to Warner’s observation that the celebration of Mary as the perfect woman can subtly denigrate other women, it is worth noting that Mechthild’s understanding of Mary does not fit this pattern. It is certainly true that Mechthild often depicts Mary as having attained a more perfect union than most could hope to attain in their earthly lives, but there are also glimpses of the loving soul leaving even Mary behind.¹⁰⁹ There are occasions where the Virgin’s perfection is contrasted with human imperfection, as when Mechthild describes Mary as a goddess with whom none can be compared, and yet even the language of *goddess* is transferred to other souls as well.¹¹⁰ The vision at the heavenly mass where Mechthild enters as a poor girl in rags and Mary presides as queen of heaven likewise seems at first glance to point to the kind of denigrating comparison that Warner has so acutely observed. But while Mechthild does not lose sight of the distance between herself and the Virgin, she frequently depicts Mary in efforts to narrow or collapse the distance between them. Mary is not a distant and unattainable model; rather, Mechthild depicts her as an active presence in the spiritual progress of her authorial persona and as

¹⁰³ Alan of Lille, *Elucidatio*, PL 210:53C.

¹⁰⁴ Alan of Lille, *Elucidatio*, PL 210:57C; cf. PL 210:58C–59A.

¹⁰⁵ Alan of Lille, *Elucidatio*, PL 210:54D: “Quibus quasi quibusdam uberibus fidelem populum tanquam mater filium lactavit.”

¹⁰⁶ Alan of Lille, *Elucidatio*, PL 210:54C: “Fuerunt autem in Virgine duo exemplaria bene vivendi, castitas et humilitas, quas nobis in exemplum proposuit.”

¹⁰⁷ See mentions at FL I.44; IV.3; VI.16; VI.32; VI.39; VII.1.

¹⁰⁸ Mossman, *Marquard von Lindau*, 279. For associations of Mary with contemplation or mystical union in Alan’s commentary, see, for example, PL 210:66D (in which Mary’s contemplation is described not so much in terms of bridal love as in terms reminiscent of the apostle Paul’s rapture to the third heaven in 2 Cor. 12:2–4), 77C–78A, 77C, 85A, and 104D. On the tradition of depicting Mary as having united the active and contemplative lives, as Alan does at 81B, see Giles Constable, “The Interpretation of Mary and Martha,” in *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 8–9, 45–46.

¹⁰⁹ FL I.2, 22.8–12 [Tobin, 41].

¹¹⁰ FL III.1 (Mary); III.4 (Mary); III.9 (the soul).

someone who draws Mechthild into yet higher forms of the mystical life. Though not explicitly stated, it is Mary who seems to be orchestrating Mechthild's transformation into a princess at the mass, and it is Mary who seems to guide Mechthild into Marian postures at the end, when Mechthild takes Christ into her own body and nurses him in her heart. Furthermore, it seems difficult to argue that Mary's presence denigrates Mechthild precisely because of the way in which Mechthild has refashioned traditional images of Mary: in Mechthild's hands, the Virgin's perfection does not function as the embodiment of an unattainable standard, nor does it function to encourage readers to defer their hope of reward to the afterlife. Rather, Mary's perfection sanctions Mechthild's own mystical vocation in this life and, presumably, that of her readers.

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