

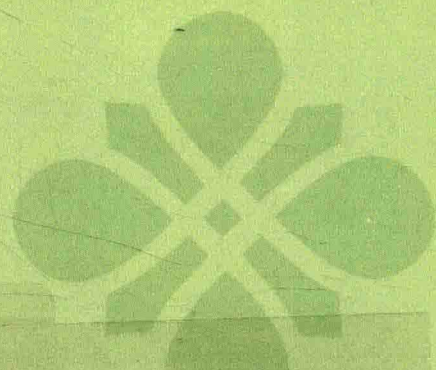


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Mechthild of Magdeburg  
Selections from  
*The Flowing Light of  
the Godhead*



ELIZABETH A. ANDERSEN

**Mechthild of Magdeburg:**  
**Selections from *The Flowing Light of the Godhead***

**Translated from the Middle High German  
with Introduction, Notes and Interpretive Essay**

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**D.S. BREWER**

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In memory of my mother

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## Introduction

Mechthild of Magdeburg's sole book, *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* [*The Flowing Light of the Godhead*],<sup>1</sup> written between c. 1250 and c. 1282, deserves to be more widely known in the English-speaking world for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it is an outstanding piece of imaginative writing in its documentation of the author's relationship with God and with her contemporaries. Secondly, within the context of German literary history the *FL* is the first text in the tradition of mystical writing that was neither a translation nor a free adaptation of a Latin text, but rather an independent composition in the vernacular. Thirdly, this text was written by a woman and thus offers insights into the cultural and social-historical context of the female religious in thirteenth century Europe.<sup>2</sup>

### Manuscript transmission, editing and translation

Mechthild's original Low German text has not survived; her writings reach the modern reader through the filter of a mid-fourteenth century translation into the Alemannic dialect of Middle High German. Heinrich of Nördlingen, a secular priest, was responsible for this transposition of Mechthild's writings into High German. He served as confessor and spiritual advisor in Cistercian and Dominican convents near Basle and was at the centre of a group of people known as 'Gottesfreunde' ['friends of God'] whom he sought to support in their striving towards greater spiritual knowledge and achievement. The Middle High German version of the *FL* is fully extant in only one manuscript, E (Ms 277), which is part of a codex held in the library of the Benedictine monastery at Einsiedeln in the canton of Schwyz in Switzerland.<sup>3</sup> First evidence of the reception of

<sup>1</sup> From here on the abbreviation *FL* is used to refer to *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*.

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller and more comprehensive account of what follows see Andersen (2000: 11–146).

<sup>3</sup> E is a 'collected manuscript' [*Sammelhandschrift*] comprising two parts. Part 1 contains the *FL* and two short pieces of mystical writing and Part 2 sermons by



Mechthild's work is to be found in the *Lux divinitatis* [The light of the divinity],<sup>4</sup> a translation into Latin of the first six of the seven books of the *FL* by Dominicans from Halle that was completed by the end of the thirteenth century. The earlier of the two extant manuscripts, Rb, is also from the mid-fourteenth century, and, again like the vernacular E, was produced in the southwest of the German-speaking world, in the vicinity of Basle. The translators generally adhered fairly closely to Mechthild's text, but there is evidence of editing in the toning down of passages where the expression is explicitly erotic and where the thought might have been construed as heretical.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the material has been radically re-ordered. In the *FL* it would seem that the passages occur, broadly speaking, in chronological sequence, whereas in the *Ld* they are grouped according to theme.

Mechthild's book was first made accessible to the modern world in 1869 in an edition produced by Pater Gall Morel, who was the librarian of the monastery at Einsiedeln. Just eight years later, an edition of the *Ld*, based on both extant manuscripts, was produced by the Benedictine monks of Solesmes in northeastern France.<sup>6</sup> Morel's somewhat flawed edition was eventually replaced in 1990 by Hans Neumann's thorough reworking of the text, followed by an accompanying volume of textual notes and studies in 1993. The benefits of Neumann's scholarship were extended to a greater German readership by Margot Schmidt's revision of her original translation of 1955 based on Morel's edition. In the English-speaking world, the translations of Lucy Menzies (1953) and Christiane Mesch-Galvani (1991), both based on Morel's edition, were superseded in 1998 by Frank Tobin's translation of Neumann's edition. This translation has the additional benefit of having been executed in dialogue with Schmidt's revised German translation.

Meister Eckhart, treatises on mystical topics attributed to him and a series of queries and sentences. For a description of E see Neumann (1993: 175ff.). There are three other manuscripts which contain significant portions of Mechthild's book: C – Colmar, from the first half of the fifteenth century, W – Würzburg, from the end of the fourteenth century and B – Budapest, from 1416. For details of these and other fragments see Vollman-Profe (in Neumann, 1990: XIff.).

<sup>4</sup> From here on the abbreviation *Ld* is used to refer to the *Lux divinitatis*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Becker (1951: 38).

<sup>6</sup> The editor, Dom Louis Paquelin, completed the thirteenth century *Ld* by rendering Book VII into Latin himself. References to the *Ld* are given according to the page and line of the Solesmes edition (1877), e.g. *Ld*: 436, 20–4.

## Biography of Mechthild

### Chronology, social background and education

We know nothing about Mechthild other than what can be gleaned from her writings and the editing of these by contemporaries. Hans Neumann's (1954/64) reconstruction of significant junctures in Mechthild's life through his painstaking analysis of her text is still generally accepted, at least in outline. According to Neumann, Mechthild was born in the vicinity of Magdeburg in *c.* 1207, left her parental home in *c.* 1230 to live as a beguine in Magdeburg, started to write down her experiences in *c.* 1250 and composed Books I–V between *c.* 1250 and *c.* 1259 and Book VI in the following decade. She entered the convent of St Mary at Helfta in Saxony in *c.* 1270, composing her seventh and final book there before her death in *c.* 1282.<sup>7</sup> However, Neumann's putative chronology has been subsequently compromised by a greater awareness of the formative influence of hagiographical literature on Mechthild's self-projection. Thus the 'autobiographical' account of her spiritual development, which Mechthild gives in IV, 2, is expressed in conventional hagiographical paradigms:<sup>8</sup> the innocence of the child, the early religious experience, the voluntary renunciation of a pleasant life in the parental home, the estrangement from family and friends, the withdrawal from the world.<sup>9</sup>

Mechthild informs her reader that she can read and, more interestingly, that she can write,<sup>10</sup> but asserts that she is unversed in Latin.<sup>11</sup> The level of her education would indicate that, at the very least, she was born into a wealthy family. Neumann suggests that Mechthild was from a 'ritterliche Burgmannenfamilie' [knightly family owing garrison duty].<sup>12</sup> The service rendered by the 'Burgmann' as vassal to

<sup>7</sup> Schmidt (1995: 397, n. 292) proposes *c.* 1294 as an alternative date for Mechthild's death. Neumann's conjecture has, however, won greater currency. Cf. Andersen (2000: 45).

<sup>8</sup> References to passages in Mechthild's text are cited according to the book in which they occur and then according to the number of the chapter in the book. Thus IV, 2 is Book IV, chapter 2. Where I wish to draw attention to particular sections in a passage that I have translated, I have included a page reference, e.g. IV, 2 [p. xx]. References to passages not translated in this selection are cited in accordance with the Neumann edition, that is with the addition of line references, e.g. IV, 2, 25–27.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Peters (1988: 55).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. II, 26 [p. 47], III, 1 [p. 56], V, 32 [p. 99]. Cf. also VI, 43, 2–5.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. II, 3, 48–50.

<sup>12</sup> Neumann (1987: 260).

his lord, the 'Burggraf', often opened the way into the ranks of the lesser nobility.<sup>13</sup> It is evident from her writings that Mechthild was well acquainted with the Bible, in particular the Psalms, the Song of Songs, the Gospels and Revelation, with methods of biblical exegesis and the liturgy. As Mechthild had not benefited from the Latin-based theological education of the convent, she would not have had immediate knowledge of theological texts in Latin. Nonetheless, the influence of the following has been detected in her writings: Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh and Richard of St. Victor, Pseudo-Dionysius and Joachim of Fiore.<sup>14</sup> These sources of influence could have been mediated to her through sermons and instruction by the Dominicans in whose pastoral care she seems to have been, as witnessed by the preface to the *FL*: '[Mechthild] followed faithfully and perfectly the light and the teaching of the Order of Preachers.'<sup>15</sup> From early in the history of Mechthild scholarship, reference has been frequently made to Mechthild's evident acquaintance with courtly culture.<sup>16</sup>

There are many echoes of secular love poetry, both in imagery and form, in Mechthild's descriptions of nuptial mysticism. However, there is no less evidence for the strong influence of native folk song.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Mechthild also drew creatively on aspects of everyday living and folk oral tradition, incorporating, for example, features from gnomic sayings and drinking songs.<sup>18</sup>

### Life as a beguine

In the Latin preface to the *FL* Mechthild is identified as a beguine<sup>19</sup> and on one occasion in her writings she specifically identifies herself as such: 'O you very foolish beguines [. . .] Now I, who am the least amongst you, [. . .]' (III, 15 [p. 61]). Beguines were women who chose to lead a life of voluntary poverty, chastity and religious devo-

<sup>13</sup> There is no fixed term in English for 'Burgmann'. 'Burggraf' is best rendered as 'castellan'.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Neumann (1987: 264), Ruh (1993: 285ff.) and Schmidt (1995: xxxviii ff.).

<sup>15</sup> There is a short preface in Latin to Mechthild's text in the Einsiedeln manuscript, which is followed by an *Index rerum*, a list of selected main themes treated in Books I–V. This Latin preface, but not the table of contents, is immediately followed by a translation of it in Middle High German.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Lüers (1926/66: 35f.).

<sup>17</sup> Mohr (1963: 394).

<sup>18</sup> Hellgardt (1996).

<sup>19</sup> 'Liber iste fuit teutonico cuidam begine . . . inspiratus' ['this book was revealed in German to a certain beguine'].

tion while remaining in the secular world. Unlike nuns, they did not take a vow of obedience, nor did they take a vow of poverty, although the ideal of apostolic poverty was evident in their lifestyle. They did, however, swear oaths of chastity.<sup>20</sup>

In the greater context of medieval religious movements the beguines take their place alongside the new monastic orders of the Augustinian Canons, Premonstratensians and Cistercians, and alongside the new mendicant orders of the Dominicans and Franciscans, as part of the popular reform movement triggered by the desire of Pope Gregory VII (reigned 1073–85) to restructure earthly society in accordance with what was understood to be a properly organised Christian world.<sup>21</sup> The Gregorian reform movement came to be interpreted as a call to emulate the example of Christ in the leading of a *vita apostolica*. In their espousal of apostolic poverty, there was a clear spiritual affinity between the beguines and the mendicant orders.

Unlike the monastic and mendicant orders, the beguines had no saintly founder. They first emerged as a number of loosely connected communities in the Low Countries, in particular in the diocese of Liège, in the late twelfth century. As the diocese of Liège belonged to the archdiocese of Cologne within the Holy Roman Empire, its bishops were often German and so it is unsurprising that the first beguine communities within the German-speaking world sprang up in the north-west of the kingdom of Germany.<sup>22</sup> In the thirteenth century, beguine communities were most numerous in towns from Osnabrück in the north, along the banks of the Rhine, to Basle in the south. However, there were also significant numbers of beguines scattered across towns in the northern and eastern German-speaking territories.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Devlin (1984: 189ff.).

<sup>21</sup> As Pope, St Gregory (c. 1021–85) worked for the reform and moral revival of the Church. He issued decrees against simony (selling or purchasing of ecclesiastical offices) and nicolaitism (clerical marriage or concubinage) in 1074. In 1075 he forbade lay investiture (the right of lay rulers to grant church officials the symbols of their authority and to receive homage from them before their consecration). This latter measure aroused great controversy, especially in Germany, France and England.

<sup>22</sup> Germany did not, of course, exist within the medieval context in the geographical and political shape that we are familiar with today. The German kingdom of the thirteenth century comprised a number of lordships that enjoyed considerable independence while sharing, to a variable extent, in common social, cultural and political traditions.

Poised between the monastic and the secular worlds, the beguinal way of life was in part characterised by its diversity. This is nowhere more evident than in the living arrangements of the beguines, who might be single, married or widowed (but who all took an oath of chastity). In the course of the thirteenth century four different patterns emerged. Some women who became beguines continued to live in their parental or their own homes, others set up house together, sometimes as an informal association and sometimes as a formally organised beguine convent. The numbers living in such a convent could vary from as few as two or three to as many as sixty or seventy women. Officially, the beguines were laywomen living in an established parish and thus in the spiritual care of the local clergy.<sup>23</sup> Where there was a particular concentration of beguines, of two to three hundred, they would form their own parishes, a walled-in 'town within a town'.<sup>24</sup> These 'beguinages' were a feature of beguinal life that was found almost exclusively in the Low Countries. Finally, some beguines adopted a life of wandering mendicancy, a pattern of life that attracted much censure in the course of the thirteenth century.

We have no documentary evidence of Mechthild's living arrangements in Magdeburg, but there is some circumstantial evidence in her writings that indicate she may have lived in a beguine convent. Thus, on one occasion Mechthild complains to God: 'In my community there is a religious person who causes me much distress because of her bad behaviour, for this person will not obey me in anything' (VI, 7 [p. 109]).<sup>25</sup> This remark further suggests that Mechthild had authority within her community, acting perhaps as the *magistra*.<sup>26</sup>

The beguines were one of the manifestations of a surge in female piety that extended from the late twelfth well into the mid-thirteenth century. Although a number of social and economic, as well as demographic factors have been suggested as causes for the exponential interest in the religious life among women,<sup>27</sup> fundamental to the

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Devlin (1984: 184).

<sup>24</sup> McDonnell (1954/69: 479).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. also VI, 37, 63–64.

<sup>26</sup> The majority of beguines who lived communally were under the jurisdiction of a *magistra*, much as a nun was subject to the authority of an abbess.

<sup>27</sup> E.g. the effects of urbanisation on employment patterns and economic wealth, the depression of the independent status of aristocratic women through primogeniture; the longevity of women, the loss of men in battle and their absence on crusade, the numbers of men entering the priesthood. Cf. Shahar (1983: 53).

phenomenon of this widespread female religiosity was the explicit desire of many women to lead an evangelical life of poverty and chastity.<sup>28</sup> This religious impulse is exemplified in the life of Marie of Oignies (1176/77–1216), the prototype of the beguine. At fourteen, Marie was married to a man of her parents' choosing. However, Marie's early interest in the concept of voluntary personal poverty and her determination to lead a religious life shaped the course of her marriage. She distributed her wealth to the poor and persuaded her husband to take a vow of chastity with her. The couple went to Willambroux, outside Nivelles, where they devoted themselves to a leper colony. After a number of years, Marie, with the consent of her husband, moved to the Augustinian priory of St. Nicholas of Oignies sur Sambre where she lived as a lay sister. Here she led an ascetic, devotional life, supporting herself by spinning. Marie became a charismatic figure for the priory and in particular for the laywomen attached to it.

Our knowledge of Marie is conditioned by the laudatory life, *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis*, written by Marie's great admirer, the Augustinian Canon Jacques of Vitry (c. 1145–1240). Jacques extolled the beguinal way of life, drawing attention not only to the chastity, poverty, asceticism and manual labour practised by these women, but also to the mystical experiences of many of them, in particular as a result of their devotion to the Eucharist.<sup>29</sup> As a keen observer of the various spiritual currents at work in the contemporary Church, he saw in the beguines a model of lay piety that could be used to counter the Albigensian heresy that was rife in the south of France.<sup>30</sup>

Caesarius of Heisterbach (c. 1180–1240), a Cistercian monk and chronicler, commented about the beguines: 'they live together with lay people in a secular manner, they are superior in religious fervour

<sup>28</sup> Cf. McDonnell (1954/69: 81ff.), Bolton (1976: 147f. and 1999).

<sup>29</sup> On the importance of eucharistic devotion amongst women mystics of the thirteenth century see Bynum (1984 and 1992). Mechthild addresses her fellow beguines on the subject of eucharistic devotion in III, 15 [p. 61f.] and the nuns in Helfta on the same subject in VII, 21 [p. 127f.].

<sup>30</sup> The Albigensians, who flourished in southern France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were a branch of the Cathars, a heretical Christian sect. The Cathars professed a neo-Manichaean dualism, that is that there are two principles or divine beings, one good and the other evil and that the material world is evil. They held that Christ did not suffer or rise again because he was an angel with a phantom body. Cathar doctrines struck at the roots of orthodox Christianity and of the political institutions of Christendom. The authorities of the Church and State united to attack them.



to many in the cloister: they are spiritual among the worldly, they are continent among those that seek the pleasure of the senses, they lead the life of a hermit in the midst of crowds'.<sup>31</sup> His laudatory remarks testify to the high regard in which beguines were held by a number of prominent churchmen in the early decades of the thirteenth century. There is evidence in Mechthild's writings that she too was esteemed in some local circles. Thus, for example, she reports how a canon who had been appointed deacon of the cathedral in Magdeburg had turned to her for advice when he felt uncertain of how to conduct himself in his new position (VI, 2 [p. 107]).

Despite the approbation the beguines enjoyed from some quarters, they were nonetheless a vulnerable group in society because of their extra-regular status. In the course of the thirteenth century, the suspicion of heresy, which had dogged them from the outset, became increasingly acute, as witnessed in one of the reports prepared for the debate on the reform of the Church at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274. In the *Collectio de scandalis ecclesiae* ['Collection of Ecclesiastical Offences'] the Franciscan Gilbert of Tournai, reporting on the state of the Church in Northern France and Belgium, expresses alarm at the way beguines met 'in conventicles, in secret corners, in public squares' to read the Holy Scriptures in the vernacular and to interpret the 'mysteries of the scriptures' without proper guidance.<sup>32</sup> One of the other reports presented at the Council of Lyons by Bruno, the Bishop of Olomouc (in the present day Czech Republic), complains that women leading a beguinal way of life were using their liberty both to escape the bonds of marriage and the obedience required of them by their parish priests. The threat of heresy is palpable in Mechthild's writings: 'I was warned about this book and people told me that if it were not protected, it would be burnt' (II, 26 [p. 47]) and 'Now I am afraid of God, if I keep quiet and yet I am afraid of ignorant people if I write' (III, 1 [p. 52]).

Although Mechthild frequently expresses her sense of vulnerability as an uneducated woman writing at the command of God,<sup>33</sup> it is clear from the prefaces to the *FL* and from the prologue to the *Ld* that she had the support of the Dominicans. The approbation of the Order that gave such central importance to study must have provided

<sup>31</sup> Translated from the Latin as quoted in McDonnell (1954/69: 224f.).

<sup>32</sup> Translated from the German translation as quoted in Grundmann (1935/77: 336f.).

<sup>33</sup> E.g. II, 26 (p. 47); III, 1 (p. 56); IV, 2 (p. 73).

Mechthild with some protection from her critics. The German preface to the *FL* tells us that 'a brother of this same Order compiled this book and copied it'. In the *Ld* this brother is identified as 'Brother Heinrich, said to be from Halle, a lector from Ruppin'.<sup>34</sup> The extent to which Heinrich of Halle might have been involved in the shaping of Mechthild's book has been a subject of some controversy. According to Neumann, whose findings underlie most of the subsequent scholarship on this issue,<sup>35</sup> Heinrich edited the first six books of the *FL*. He considers Heinrich to have been a careful and respectful editor who altered little of Mechthild's wording, his principal contribution being the division of the material into books and possibly the provision of titles for some of the chapters.<sup>36</sup>

Mechthild reciprocates the respect of the Dominicans through eulogising in her writings the Order and their founding father in particular. Thus, she declares she loves Dominic above all other saints (IV, 20 [p. 77]) and she has visions in which she sees how the Dominicans will be greatly rewarded and honoured in Heaven for their efforts on earth (III, 1 [p. 53]). Despite the vision of this heavenly reward, Mechthild is nonetheless critical of the Dominicans; she feels the Order has lost some of its initial drive and inspiration and she takes the Friars to task for their neglect of pastoral duties: 'O you preachers, how reluctantly you now set your tongue to work and how unwillingly you bend your ear to the sinner's mouth' (III, 1 [p. 54]).<sup>37</sup> These chiding remarks of Mechthild have a polemic edge, for throughout the thirteenth century the matter of priestly office and the administering of the sacraments proved to be a source of considerable tension between the secular clergy and the Dominicans. Papal rulings on this matter varied widely. In a letter dated 14 February 1221 to the prelates of the Christian world, Honorius III emphasises how the Dominicans are not only called to preach, but also to hear confessions, but, in his bull *Etsi animarum* of 21 November 1254, Innocent IV withdrew the privileges of the mendicant order with

<sup>34</sup> *Ld*: 516, 23–5.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Ruh (1993: 249ff.) and Tobin (1995a: 1ff.)

<sup>36</sup> Neumann (1954/64: 176). Peters (1988) gives a radical re-assessment of biographical information concerning Heinrich in the *FL* and the *Ld* and comes to the conclusion that any conjecture about Heinrich's association with Mechthild rests on an 'uncertain historical basis' (p. 117). Peters interprets the role of Heinrich merely in terms of his function within the conventions of the 'call to write' topos, that is that Heinrich was the confessor figure to whom the holy woman experiencing visions would turn to for advice and guidance.

<sup>37</sup> See also VI, 1, 10–12.



regard to preaching, the hearing of confession and burial rites, while Martin IV in his bull of 13 December 1281, *Ad fructus uberes*, freed the Order of Preachers from episcopal control, allowing the Friars Preachers to work in the parishes without restriction. A synod held in Magdeburg by Archbishop Rupert in 1261 gives a local context for the controversial nature of Mechthild's remarks.<sup>38</sup> This synod reminded beguines that they must obey their parish priests as other parishioners did, that is they should not evade the control and supervision of the clergy by preferring Dominicans as their confessors and spiritual advisers. Failure to follow the demands of the synod would result in excommunication.

Further evidence of the esteem in which Mechthild held the Preaching Order and her readiness to take their part in conflicts with the secular clergy is evident in her apocalyptic vision in Book IV. She opens the account of this vision by remarking: 'The Order of Preachers had come under heavy fire from false masters, and from many greedy sinners too' (IV, 27 [p. 79]). This is an allusion to the bitter attack of William of St Amour and other professors in Paris on the mendicant orders in the 1250s.<sup>39</sup> In the course of her apocalyptic vision Mechthild prophesies the advent of an order that will be modelled on the Order of Preachers, but whose members 'shall be wiser and more powerful and have fewer earthly needs and be more fired with the Holy Spirit' (IV, 27 [p. 80]) and, polemically, she reports: 'Wherever they go, the right to preach, hear confession, sing and read the Mass is not denied them' (IV, 27 [p. 82]).

### Life as a nun

What prompted Mechthild to enter the convent at Helfta during the last years of her life is unclear. Certainly, Mechthild talks increasingly in the *FL* of the hostile reception accorded to herself and her writings<sup>40</sup> and the author of the prologue to the *Ld* comments: 'Finally, in her old age, after many troubles, she entered the cloistered life at Helfta' (*Ld*: 436, 30–1). Her withdrawal from secular life may also have been in response to the wave of negative opinion on the beguinal way of life reflected in the reports of Gilbert of Tournai and Bruno, Bishop of Olomouc, at the Council of Lyons in 1274.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Grundmann (1935/77: 33, n. 24).

<sup>39</sup> Schmidt (1995: 381f., n. 174) draws attention to a marginal note in Ms B of the *Ld* which identifies the 'false masters': 'Gulielmi a Sancto Amore etc. in Universitate Parisiensi'.

<sup>40</sup> E.g. VI, 31 (p. 115); VI, 36 (p. 116f.); VI, 38 (p. 117).