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## **Women's Mysticism in the Late Middle Ages: The Influence of Affective Love and the Courtly Love Tradition**

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Allison Jaines Elledge entitled "Women's Mysticism in the Late Middle Ages: The Influence of Affective Love and the Courtly Love Tradition." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

Robert Bast, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Thomas Burman, Jeri McIntosh

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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“Women’s Mysticism in the Late Middle Ages: the Influence of Affective Love and the  
Courtly Love Tradition”

A thesis  
Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee

Allison Jaines Elledge  
December, 2008

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*Abstract*

This thesis will focus on the devotional accounts of several influential women living in European cloisters or other religious communities during the twelfth, thirteenth, and early fourteenth centuries, such as Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mary of Oignies, Gertrude of Helfta, Mechthild of Magdeburg. I will explore how the rhetoric of love, self-knowledge, intention, and the focus on Christ's humanity influenced the development of theological themes that affected their experiences and featured prominently in their writing. Finally, this thesis will examine the influence of affective mysticism and of courtly love poetry on the genre of medieval religious literature reporting mystical encounters with Christ by women in cloisters and other religious communities such as beguinages. Understanding more about what influenced these women provides insight into the expression of ecstatic religious experience during the late medieval period.

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## *Abbreviations*

- ESS* William of St. Thierry. *Exposition on the Song of Songs*. Cistercian Fathers Series. Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970.
- PL* *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series latina*. Ed. J.-P. Migne. 221 Vols. Paris: Migne, 1841-1864.
- SCC* Bernard of Clairvaux. *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. 4 Vols. Cistercian Fathers Series. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications. 1971-1980.

## *Introduction*

In the twelfth century Christianity began to emphasize love as the essential emotional focus of devotion. It did so in conjunction with a shift toward the importance of one's inner feelings of intention and contrition, especially in reference to sin and forgiveness.<sup>1</sup> One facet of this change was the turn toward self-examination and thus the focus on the individual, especially in the theology of writers such as Peter Abelard, the French Scholastic.<sup>2</sup> One's deepest feelings and intentions became a central concern of devotion. A deeply felt relationship with Christ became the primary link to personal salvation. The sentiment that forged the clearest path to this union was love.

Affective love was the expression of a relationship with Christ in which the outward form of expression was the result of the right inner feeling. The concern for inner feelings markedly altered some aspects of both the culture and the Church. This includes its penitential system because, with the turn to inner feeling and motivation, the penitent's act of contrition became less important than the deep, emotionally felt experience of regretting one's transgression.<sup>3</sup>

The twelfth century also brought changes in other facets of society, many of

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the twelfth-century emphasis on love, see Berndt Hamm, "From the Medieval 'Love of God' to the 'Faith' of Luther," in *The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Theology and Piety*, ed., Robert J. Bast (Boston: Brill, 2004), 128-152.

<sup>2</sup> Weintraub sees Abelard's *Story of My Misfortunes* as the "one medieval autobiography in which a breakthrough to a conscious recognition of individuality might have occurred most readily." See Karl Joachim Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), esp. 72-92. For a discussion of Abelard's idea of the individual as primary, especially in his *Ethics* (or *Scito te Ipsum*), see Eileen C. Sweeney, *Logic, Theology, and Poetry in Boethius, Abelard, and Alan of Lille*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 114-123.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Bernard of Clairvaux's affective mysticism, see Andrew Louth, "Bernard and affective mysticism," *Influence of Saint Bernard*, ed. Sister Benedicta Ward, (Oxford: SLG Press, 1976), 1-10. "An intellectual mysticism cannot but tend to detract from the uniqueness of the individual soul: the end is the vision of God, which is the same for all. And anyway, my knowledge is not mine but simply universal knowledge which I have apprehended. But my feelings are my own; and it is indeed with reference to the affective depths of the soul that Bernard explains the uniqueness of each soul's union with God." 5.

which affected the thirteenth-century Church and beyond. For example, writers of this period began expressing feelings of love, friendship, and self-reflection in their treatises and poetry—feelings that were being reintroduced to the culture after an absence of several centuries—and that formed the background for accounts of mystical experiences recurring through the early fifteenth century.

The emphasis on love that enveloped the twelfth-century Church was accompanied by a turn toward intellectual curiosity, which also flourished in the secular community.<sup>4</sup> These two values marked a cultural and theological shift away from the previous six centuries, during which the Church reflected and to some extent created a culture that had become more primitive, more agrarian, less intellectual, and less likely to value the refined feelings of antiquity than was true during the first several centuries of Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the sixth century, western Europe had embraced many of the values of Greek and Roman civilization, especially those related to friendship, honor, reason, and love. Augustine, in the fifth century, had been the last influential voice in the Church to speak of love as the path to salvation: “Nothing conquers except truth and the victory of truth is love.”<sup>6</sup>

During the period between Augustine and Bernard, the theological focus was on various versions of neo-platonism and unwavering faith; intellectual reasoning was largely valued only to explain revelation. In part, this resulted from Augustine’s assertion

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<sup>4</sup> For more on cultural developments that contributed to the context for the rise of affective mysticism, see Le Goff, ed. *Medieval Callings*. Trans. Lydia G. Cochrane. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 181-209. Also, R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 208. Also, Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, 74. See Rodney Stark for his discussion of Marxist aspects in Grundmann’s thesis, “Upper Class Asceticism: Social Origins of Ascetic Movements and Medieval Saints” *Review of Religious Research* 45, no. 1, (2003), 6f.

<sup>5</sup> Hamm, 128-129.

<sup>6</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 358, 1, “Victoria veritatis est caritas.” In *The Works of Saint Augustine: a Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Trans., Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1990), pt. 3, vol. 11.

that everything begins with faith; the value of rational inquiry is to illuminate faith; reason can lead to understanding the Gospels' supernatural revelation but it cannot contradict it. He held that the Church had authority to decide how reason would be used in matters of faith, and many in the Church hierarchy seems to have readily assented. In the ninth-century, John Scotus Eriugena, an Irish-born Greek scholar living in France, sought to convince his contemporaries of the value of logical inquiry in theological matters, but he had little effect other than to further Augustine's neo-platonism and to nudge the Church toward scholasticism. It was the eleventh-century Italian-born theologian and philosopher Anselm of Canterbury who began to alter the Christendom's position by arguing that both faith and reason are equally required to find the truth of God and redemption, although his position was not that different from Augustine's in that reason is mostly useful for understanding faith. When Aristotle's works became more widely available in the twelfth century, the focus shifted even further with the insistence by Abelard and other scholastics that intellectual understanding was necessary to finding union with God. This created a milieu in which Bernard's theology of affective love could work congruously with Abelard's theology of intellectual understanding; knowing and loving were equally important.<sup>7</sup>

During the twelfth century, men and women in cloisters and in religious communities such as beguinages began to express their spiritual experience in ways that were very different than previously had been the norm.<sup>8</sup> For some, such as Abelard, Guibert of Nogent, and Otloh of Saint Emmeram, the expression took an

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<sup>7</sup> See Hamm, 132-133.

<sup>8</sup> It also produced what some refer to as a women's movement in the Church during the High Middle Ages, resulting in part from the writings of women mystics and the enhanced status that brought them in the Church. See Flowering, 153ff.

autobiographical, self-reflective form not seen since Augustine.<sup>9</sup> Others, such as Mechthild of Hackeborn (f. ca. 1250), Hadewijch of Antwerp (f. ca. 1250), Gertrude the Great of Helfta (f. ca. 1289), and Mechthild of Magdeburg (f. ca. 1270), gave accounts of emotionally charged mystical experiences in which they describe intensely personal encounters with Jesus. A third form of religious literary expression explains with markedly sensual language the way Christians, by earnestly examining their interior feelings and motivations, can find salvation by first entering into a loving relationship with the human Christ and ascending from that to union with God. Bernard of Clairvaux, an example of this third form, wrote in his sermons on the *Song of Songs* of the individual soul as the bride and Christ as the bridegroom in a passionate marriage whose purpose is to reach salvation by way of a mutually ardent love. “Know thyself,” Bernard said, and the reward of knowing Christ becomes possible.<sup>10</sup> Peter Abelard, with whom Bernard quarreled over Abelard’s use of reason in matters of faith, argued similarly, titling his treatise on ethics “Know Thyself.” Female spirituality during this period combined some or all of these forms.

Underlying much of the language for women’s devotional experience is the focus on seeking a loving relationship with the human Christ as the first step toward the highest spiritual union with God. The sensuously carnal metaphors that generate such images as Hadewijch’s telling of the night that Jesus “took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him” are the result of this period’s emphasis on love, Jesus’s humanity, and the desire

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<sup>9</sup> Colin Morris, *Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 79ff.

<sup>10</sup> Bernard's *De diversis*, sermon 40:3, ed. Jean Leclercq, 6.1.236. For a discussion of Bernard in relationship to self-examination and individuality, see John F. Benton, “Consciousness of Self and Perceptions of Individuality” in Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable, ed., *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 263-295.

for union with God.<sup>11</sup>

Both men and women during this period shifted gender imagery in reference to themselves and others. They adopted male and female personas, shifting from one to another depending on context.<sup>12</sup> The soul as Christ's bride was a common metaphor by many late medieval writers, largely drawn from the bridal imagery utilized by Bernard and other Cistercian monks. This was not the only feminine symbolism they used when referring to themselves. Bernard sometimes compared the monks in his care to maidens in the *Song of Songs*, sometimes to the bride seeking to be held in the arms of Christ. He also spoke of himself as mother to the monks. Jesus was often described with feminine imagery, sometimes as a lactating maternal figure providing the milk of redemption flowing from the wounds in his side.<sup>13</sup> Shifting gender allowed men to become the bride embraced by Christ.<sup>14</sup>

These intensely emotional accounts of spiritual experience drew from many influences, four of which—each related to the other—will be considered here. One was the emergence early in the twelfth century of love, including the desire to reciprocate divine love, as a central experience in the spiritual lives of individuals.<sup>15</sup> Another, also

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<sup>11</sup> Mother Columba Hart, ed., *Hadewijch, The Complete Works*, 1980, Vision 7, (New York: Paulist Press), 281.

<sup>12</sup> See Ulrike Wiethaus, who argues that Hadewijch intersects sexual and spiritual desire with fluid gender identities. In "Female Homoerotic Discourse and Religion in Medieval Germanic Culture," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braunj Pasternack, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 288-321.

<sup>13</sup> See Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 113-125. See also David Damrosch, "Non alias ed aliter: the Hermeneutics of Gender in Bernard of Clairvaux," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Tímea Klára Szell, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 181-195.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of Cistercians and gender roles in the late twelfth century, see Martha G. Newman, "Crucified by the Virtues: Monks, Lay Brothers and Women in Thirteenth-Century Cistercian Saints' Lives," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braunj Pasternack, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 182-209.

<sup>15</sup> Hamm, 128ff.

from the early twelfth century, was the new importance placed on the inner experience of feeling and motivation, a consequence of which was a shift in religious obligation from mere outward expressions of duty, such as fulfilling the requirements of confession and fasting, to an affective religious experience of repentance for sin and love of God, one in which the penitential act fully reflects inner feeling.<sup>16</sup> The third influence, related to the first two, was the development of the courtly love tradition, which had sufficient effect on the culture that aspects of it appear in the accounts of some religious writers when they describe feelings of an intimate love for and visions of union with Christ.<sup>17</sup> By combining the sensual language of courtly love with the emphasis on divine love and the Eucharist, many women wrote of experiences with Christ's humanity that link the visceral and the spiritual.<sup>18</sup> Hadewijch of Antwerp, who alludes to the romances of chivalry throughout her religious writing, used her knowledge of French courtly love lyric to transform it into a new genre of "mystical love lyric."<sup>19</sup> Further, the relationship between courtly literature and mystical writers was symbiotic: just as religious writers used the language of courtly love, the authors of the courtly literature drew from religious symbolism and experience,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> See Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)*. Vol. III of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 30ff., 166ff.

<sup>18</sup> See Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). She discusses Beatrijs of Nazareth and Hadewijch of Antwerp, among others, as examples of women who represent the complexity of using language that is both sensually erotic and religious. She discusses this as a prominent theme in high and late medieval women's spirituality. Carolyn Walker Bynum warns against using modern understandings of sensual imagery as having erotic connotation. However, she also asserts that some religious women seem to have fused the sensual, spiritual, and erotic, noting that differentiating one from another in their writings is difficult. See "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 3. (Autumn, 1986), 399-439.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Mommaers and Elisabeth M. Dutton, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, (Dudley, Mass.: Peeters Publishers, 1989), 1.

including the veneration of the Virgin Mary.<sup>20</sup>

Fourth, the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, especially his sermons on *The Song of Songs*, created a template for bridal, or affective, mysticism,<sup>21</sup> which featured a heartfelt devotion to Christ both as divinity and as man.<sup>22</sup> Many women followed his model because its emphasis on bridal and sensual imagery to describe the path to loving union with God resonated with them. For example, Bernard's sermons were a common source for the thirteenth-century women mystics in northern Europe who explored the theme of *Minne/fin' amour*, a genre combining elements of courtly literature with the desire to have a deeply felt, loving relationship with Christ. Beatrice of Nazareth's (f. ca. 1260) *The Seven Manners of Loving* is an example of combining elements of Bernard's sermons with the language of courtly literature.<sup>23</sup>

Chapter one of this thesis will discuss three elements—the inward turn, the focus on the individual, and the emphasis on love as the path to union with God—as the context within which women mystics began writing accounts of their experiences emphasizing sensual feelings and ecstatic encounters with Christ. Chapters two and three will consider two direct sources for the way they describe their experiences. One is the genre of religious writing exemplified by Bernard of Clairvaux, but with important contributions by others, including William of Saint Thierry, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Gueric of Igny. The second is the poetry of courtly love. Each of these contributed vocabulary for this genre of women's spirituality, which began in the twelfth century, flourished through the

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<sup>20</sup> Raymond Gay-Crosier, *Religious Elements in the Secular Lyrics of the Troubadours*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 38, 88-97.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Newman, "La mystique courtoise: Thirteenth-Century Beguines and the Art of Love," in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 138.

<sup>22</sup> See Herbert Moller, "The Social Causation of Affective Mysticism," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 4, No. 4. (Summer, 1971), 306.

<sup>23</sup> See McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 168ff.



thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, then waned during the fifteenth century when support for female mysticism became the subject of ecclesiastical debate.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of John Gerson's pivotal role in ending the Church's sanction of female mysticism, see Dyan Elliott, "Seeing Double: John Gerson, the Discernment of Spirits, and Joan of Arc," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 107, no. 1, (February 2002) See also Elliot's chapter 7 in *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Late Middle Ages*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 264-296. Also See Jo Ann McNamara, "The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy," in *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*. Ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 24–27.

## *Chapter One: Know Thyself – Love, Friendship, and Self-Reflection*

### Emphasis on introspection and intention

The monastic system was fertile ground for this period's new emphasis on the individual, especially her inner character and personal piety. It provided the opportunity to withdraw from secular society to a place without the demands and distractions that limit the ability to develop the requisite devotional life. In the cloister, women had the time to follow Bernard's instruction to "know thyself" and the opportunity to open themselves to knowing and loving Christ.<sup>25</sup> By knowing more about Christ, his humanity, and his suffering, a stronger emotional connection could be made between one's feelings of love and the object of that love, Christ. For the religious women discussed here, the ideal was an affective love for Jesus that combined the excitement of ecstatic experience with intense spiritual union.

While the idea of the individual can be found in the twelfth century, it was not until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that the concept was widely disseminated, partly as a result of expanded educational and social opportunities.<sup>26</sup> The rise of cities ensured the spread of schools, which in turn produced more educated citizens who as a result had more choices in what they would do with their lives, and hence more sense of themselves as individuals. Because both Christian and classical texts were central to

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<sup>25</sup> See Morris, 7ff.

<sup>26</sup> Moller says the rise of affective mysticism followed other cultural changes as well, including in the emotional and intellectual climate: "The ideal of withdrawal from reality and of detachment from oneself gave way to a greater intensity of feeling, thinking and observing. Instead of the old demand of outright suppression of emotion and desires the most outstanding theologians and moralists advocated a strong but controlled sensibility. One aspect of this change was a new image of Christ and a heartfelt interest in his humanity, in his suffering, and in the emotional meaning the individual believer could find in them," "Affective Mysticism," 306.

education during this period, the focus of learning inevitably was on the individual self whose goal was to develop a virtuous character and to strive for self knowledge—inevitable because these were emphasized by Christian theology and classical ideas.<sup>27</sup>

There is no reason to believe that any of this substantively affected opportunities for women or generally altered their status. What little effect it had was likely confined to the nobility. In cloisters and other religious communities, women—like men—were encouraged to look inward to examine their motivations and beliefs as part of the endeavor to seek redemption.<sup>28</sup> As such, some of these women may have benefited indirectly from this turn toward self-examination and individualism because this was one of the developments that led women to openly discuss their ecstatic experiences. Their status was often improved by the privileges they received because important Church authorities valued their reports of visions and prophecies, but these were isolated cases and had no discernible effect on other women.<sup>29</sup> Besides, whatever privileges accrued to them began to wane in the early fifteenth century when John Gerson and others denounced women's mysticism.<sup>30</sup> The rise of individualism during this period would have

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<sup>27</sup> See Mariateresa F.B. Brocchieri, "The Intellectual" in *Medieval Callings*, 181-209.

<sup>28</sup> Morris warns against supposing that the status of women was rising in the twelfth century and that even the cult of courtly love had no real effect on changing the role of women or allowing them more opportunities. See *Discovery of the Individual*, 44ff.

<sup>29</sup> Ulrike Wiethaus points out that "The new forms of mysticism channeled women's effort to overcome the prohibition of being more than passive participants in the liturgy; they validated their religious claims psychosomatically in manifestations such as extreme fasting and Eucharistic ecstasies. Nonetheless, all these mystical phenomena, precisely because of their extraordinary character, still underscored women's exclusion from liturgical participation. "The Death Song of Marrie D'Oignies," in *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries*, ed. Ellen E. Kittell and Mary A. Suydam, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 155.

<sup>30</sup> See Elliott, "Seeing Double . . ." She says that Gerson's treatises portray women as "dangerously inclined to confuse carnal and spiritual love" and cautions against women who have visions and miracles. In *On the Proving of Spirits*, written to object to canonizing Bridget of Sweden, he says women's fervor leads them astray and they develop inappropriate relations with their confessors under the pretext of frequent confession. They also are prone to too much curiosity, "which leads to gazing about and talking (not to mention touching)" 6. Also quoted in *Proving Woman*, 268, 269.

affected women's perceptions of themselves just as it did men's, which perhaps led to more awareness of their lives in relationship to their environs, and thus to the beginning of the very long process that many centuries later would lead to developments that did indeed alter the status of women.

The Cistercians generally and Bernard in particular taught that diligent inquiry into one's feelings, beliefs, and motivations was the beginning of the path to knowing and being in union with Christ.<sup>31</sup> In his sermons on the *Song of Songs*, Bernard says that two things are required of those who seek salvation, or union with Christ. The first is knowledge of God. The second is knowledge of self, because it is the guard against pride: "Nothing is more efficacious for acquiring humility than knowledge of ourselves as we really are."<sup>32</sup>

The clergy during this period began discussing the importance of the individual's experiences. Bernard and Guibert of Nogent, for example, spoke in their sermons of their own desires, their inner motives, and their feelings of repentance for transgressions. Guibert said "No preaching seems to me more profitable than that which reveals a man to himself, and replaces in his inner self, that is in his mind, what has been projected outside . . ." <sup>33</sup>

They, like the Cluniac Peter Abelard, asserted that external forms of repentance such as fasting were without value unless the external reflected the deeply felt motives of

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<sup>31</sup> Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Sermon 36:5, in M. Corneille Halfants, introduction to *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Song of Songs*, trans. Kilian Walsh, Cistercian Fathers Series 4, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1971) vol. 1, Sermon 57:4, 11, xi.

<sup>33</sup> *Commentary on Genesis*, prologue (Migne, PL 156, col. 27B), Morris, 67.

one who seriously repented wrongdoing.<sup>34</sup> External penance does not necessarily assure internal repentance. The former is necessary but not sufficient; both are required and the intention felt in one's innermost self was most important. This is related to Abelard's forceful stand demanding that knowledge and understanding—of God, of oneself, and of existence—take precedence in seeking salvation; just as penance alone is not sufficient, neither is faith alone sufficient.<sup>35</sup> He insisted that love is the most important aspect of redemption, and that Christ's incarnation and suffering resulted from God's love for humanity. Nevertheless, knowledge of the grounds for love—of its logic—is a prerequisite for redemption just as inner contrition is a prerequisite for forgiveness. Thus Bernard's focus on reciprocating God's love with an affective devotion is the counterpart to Abelard's requirement that one apply intellectual rigor both to understanding one's inner self and to understand the meaning and purpose of a loving union with God.<sup>36</sup>

The twelfth century was a transitional period, not just for theological changes but also in related areas of law. Where during the previous six centuries the theological emphasis was on the external act of penance, the legal emphasis was on the external act of the deed. Just as one's confessor was concerned primarily about whether one had sinned, the magistrate was concerned about whether a crime had been committed. One's intention was of little concern. Whether the person intended to kill another did not matter.

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<sup>34</sup> Morris, 73.

<sup>35</sup> Hamm says the intellectual awakening represented in the twelfth century by Abelard should not be viewed as a "diametrically opposed counterpart to the emotional outburst of love." Instead, he says the desire for understanding is complementary to love because knowledge looks behind the "façade of what exists to the dimension of motives and reasons," 132-133. He says that twelfth century theologians in western Europe benefited from Abelard's intellectualism and Bernard's affective devotion by learning the grounds for faith and a "new emotional interiority of love including its penitential emotions of humility and hope," 161.

<sup>36</sup> See Hamm, 133-134 for an analysis of Abelard and Bernard. Also, for a wider discussion of intellectualism and theology during the twelfth century, see Mariateresa Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri, "The Intellectual," in *Medieval Callings*, 181-210.

Neither did remorse. In the twelfth century, the combination of intellectual awakening and a more ethically refined culture created a milieu in which theologians and magistrates alike began considering more nuanced notions of guilt, sin, and compensation.<sup>37</sup>

One result of this focus on examining intentions was the Fourth Lateran Council's imposition early in the thirteenth century of required annual confession for all Christian believers. Individual confession was an important form of affective devotion, laying bare before a priest the inner feelings of sorrow for one's sin. It was also the opportunity to gain self-knowledge by way of examining one's actions, intentions, and motivations. The penitents' focus changed from the penance required for absolution to the penitent's remorse for transgressing. This is not to say that penance was no longer required; rather, penance alone was insufficient. Hence Bernard of Clairvaux says that penance is the first impulse God gives to a sinner seeking salvation; it is the "kiss of the feet" of the sinful woman mentioned in Sermon 3 on the *Song of Songs*.<sup>38</sup> But for Bernard, penance must arise from the compunction that comes from sadness over sinning as well as the joy of having received divine mercy.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the motivation for transgression was viewed as more telling than the transgression itself. Abelard and Guibert of Nogent, drawing upon Aristotle's *Ethics*, argued forcefully for the importance of inner motives.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Bernard said one's intention is the way to union with God: "O holy and chaste love, O sweet and gentle affection, O pure and undefiled intention of the will . . . To be thus

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<sup>37</sup> See Hamm's discussion of these transitional changes, pp. 128-130. He says the "relationship of external and internal, of doing and feeling, was reversed . . . in an almost breathtaking way," p. 130.

<sup>38</sup> Sermon 3:2, in Halflants, introduction to Bernard's *Sermon on the Song of Songs*, cited above, n. 30.

<sup>39</sup> See Halflants for a discussion of Bernard's conjoining of penance and compunction, p. xv.

<sup>40</sup> See Abelard's 1135 publication of *Ethics: or, Know Yourself*.

disposed is to be united with God.”<sup>41</sup> The purpose, throughout, was to understand oneself as the key to knowing God. Confession and penitence were becoming common practice during the eleventh century and they were officially required in 1215, in part because many in the church sought to counter Peter Abelard’s “contritionist” position. Abelard, who articulated the position in the early twelfth century, prefigured sixteenth century Protestant reformers by maintaining that inward remorse is sufficient for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>42</sup>

Because self-examination came to be valued in ways not seen since Augustine’s fifth-century *Confessions*, more religious writers discussed how they felt about their lives, their motivations, their desires, as well as their perceptions of their own failures and accomplishments.<sup>43</sup> When Guibert of Nogent, a Benedictine, wrote an autobiography, his contemporaries compared him to Augustine because he wrote in the confessional tradition.<sup>44</sup> Most writers, however, including Bernard and Peter the Venerable, used the classical epistolary genre, writing letters to friends about their self-reflections. Central to all of their accounts was recognition of the necessity to regret transgressions, rather than merely acknowledge them and accept penance. For example, in a treatise on penance in the *Concordance of Discordant Canons*, Gratian says that, “it appears clearer than light that sins are remitted not by oral confession but by inner contrition.” The requirement of confession and the duty of penance were still required, but they were secondary to the

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<sup>41</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*. Trans. Jean Leclercq and Henri Rochais. Cistercian Fathers Series 13B, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1973), 1:1 X. 28.

<sup>42</sup> See Elliot, *Proving Woman*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> See Benton “Consciousness of Self and Perceptions of Individuality,” in *Renaissance and Renewal*, 263ff.

<sup>44</sup> Morris, 84. Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk’s Confession: The Memoirs of Guibert of Nogent*. Trans. Paul J. Archimbault (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

sinner's motive and feelings.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Margaret Porette says in the prologue to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*:

Here Love Speaks: I pray you, both actives and contemplatives, and those who may be brought to nothing by true Love, who will hear some of the powers of that pure love, that noble love, that exalted love of the Soul set free, and of how the Holy Spirit has set sail in her as if she were his ship—for love, I pray, says Love, that you listen with great attention of the subtle understanding within you, for otherwise all those who hear it will misunderstand it, if they are not so themselves.<sup>46</sup>

As introspection became the key element in both secular and religious literary genres during the “long twelfth century,” the various literary forms—epistolary, biographical, autobiographical, poetic—proliferated with writing that described how and why to move from self-examination to union with God. For example, Peter Abelard wrote his autobiography, *Historia suarum calamitatem*, in the epistolary form, addressed to an unknown friend.<sup>47</sup> It is a self-portrait of his life as a monk, the difficulties surrounding his relationship with Heloise, and his intellectual life in Paris.

Many of the period's religious works contained the word “mirror,” suggesting self-examination and perhaps referring back to Augustine's use of the metaphor in his commentary on Psalm 103 in the *Soliloquies*. Earlier, Saint Ambrose referred to the “mirror of the mind” in his *De Officiis Ministrorum (On the Duties of the Clergy)*, a theme to which Saint Bonaventure returned in the mid-thirteenth century in his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum (Journey of the Mind to God)*.<sup>48</sup> Other writers who employed

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<sup>45</sup> Benton, “Consciousness of Self and Perceptions of Individuality,” in *Renaissance and Renewal*, 273.

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Porette, Prologue to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. Trans., J.C. Marler and Judith Grant. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>47</sup> Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual*, 97-98, and Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 257-58.

<sup>48</sup> Ritamary Bradley, “Backgrounds of the Title *Speculum* in Medieval Literature” *Speculum* 29, no. 1, 108. (Jan. 1954), 100-115.



mirror imagery included William of Saint Thierry in *The Mirror of Faith*, Aelred of Rievaulx in *The Mirror of Charity*, and Margaret Porette's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. The twelfth-century English satire, *Speculum Stultorum (A Mirror for Fools)* was the Benedictine monk Nigel Longchamp's examination of his efforts to love God and his advice to fellow monks that self-reflection would allow them to see the foolishness of their behavior.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Arnulf of Bohéries wrote the *Mirror for Monks* (ca. 1200) as a guide to the moral edification and daily rituals of new monks.<sup>50</sup>

When Aelred, the English abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Rievaulx, wrote "How much does a man know, if he does not know himself?"<sup>51</sup> he was expressing one of the dominant themes of this period. It was a sentiment that had not been heard much for several centuries, perhaps since Augustine's explanation about the soul needing to understand itself in the search for God:

For now, while [the soul] is still in the body, it is said to her, "Where is your God?" But her God is within, He is spiritually within and spiritually beyond: . . . the soul cannot succeed in finding Him, except by passing through herself.<sup>52</sup>

Religious mystics, especially women in northern Europe, would use this theme along with the other dominant theme of the period—the importance of loving others as a part of

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<sup>49</sup> Nigel Longchamp, *A Mirror for Fools: The Book of Burnell the Ass*. Trans. J.H. Mozley, Indiana: Notre Dame, 1961; also Nigel Whitacre, as discussed in Karl Pomeroy Harrington, Joseph Michael Pucci, and Alison Goddard Elliott, *Medieval Latin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 614-620, and Nigellus Wireker, *A Mirror for Fools: Or, The Book of Burnell the Ass*. Ed. John Henry Mozley. (B.H. Blackwell, 1961). There are various spellings for Nigel's last name, based on different editions of the primary text.

<sup>50</sup> Carolyn Walker Bynum, "The Cistercian Concept of Community: An Aspect of Twelfth-Century Spirituality" *The Harvard Theological Review* 68, no. 3/4 (Jul.-Oct, 1975), 276-77, n. 12. See also Giles Constable, "Twelfth-Century Spirituality and the Late Middle Ages" *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. Proceedings of the Southeastern Institute of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Summer 1969. Ed. O.B. Hardison, Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 31.

<sup>51</sup> Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*, 66; Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Charity*, Trans., Elizabeth Connor (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 1.5.

<sup>52</sup> Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*, 66.

loving God—and write about their feelings in ways that expressed an intense form of religious experience. Their accounts would affect some women’s status in their religious communities, partly because it established them for the first time as having voices that mattered.

### Love as the pathway to God

Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux differed about many issues, most importantly that of Abelard’s use of rational, philosophical inquiry to acquire knowledge of God. On the necessity of love and self-reflection as the key to union with God, however, there was no disagreement.<sup>53</sup> Both believed, and others in the Church concurred, that God gives his love freely to humanity and that his love inspires men and women to love him in return.<sup>54</sup> Bernard is said to have moved Church doctrine toward this focus on love, partly by the force of his argument in *On Loving God*.<sup>55</sup> He opens the treatise with “You wish me to tell you why and how God should be loved. My answer is that God himself is the reason why he is to be loved.”<sup>56</sup> Likewise, William of Saint Thierry said, “Love is given by God alone, and it endures in him, for it is due to no one else but him and for his sake.”<sup>57</sup> This view became widespread in European Christianity during the twelfth century and there is abundant evidence that women in cloisters read Bernard, William of St. Thierry, and Abelard. Their work is less evident in religious communities such as beguinages, but some beguines, including Hadewijch of Antwerp

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<sup>53</sup> See Abelard’s *Ethica*, chs. 17-25, Migne *PL* 178, 660-673; and David E. Luscombe, ed., *Peter Abelard’s Ethics* (Oxford, 1971) 76-111. From Hamm, 133, n. 24.

<sup>54</sup> Hamm, 133. Also see Abelard’s Commentary on Romans: Migne *PL* 178,836B.

<sup>55</sup> Hamm, 132.

<sup>56</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, 1:1

<sup>57</sup> William of Saint Thierry, *The Nature and Dignity of Love*, trans. Thomas X. Davis. Cistercian Fathers Series 30. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 1.3.

and the nuns at Helfta, are known to have read them. Juliana of Mont-Cornillon (f. ca. 1240), for example, is said by her biographer to read St. Augustine with great sympathy, “yet the writings of the most blessed Bernard seemed to her ablaze with fire and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb, so she read and embraced them with the most fervent devotion . . . she yielded her mind to his eloquence and learned by heart more than twenty sermons from the last part of his work on the Song of Songs . . .”<sup>58</sup>

The monastery of St. Mary at Helfta in northern Saxony provided an environment where Gertrude the Great, Mechtild of Hackeborn, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and more than a hundred other women could study and learn from each other without the oppressiveness that women experienced in other places.<sup>59</sup> It was a renowned place of literary, artistic, and theological culture that was first nurtured by the Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn and then by her successor, Gertrude the Great. They obtained books for their library and encouraged all of the nuns at the monastery to study. The intellectual development of all the nuns there seems to have been influenced in part by the friars at the Dominican convents of Halle and Magdeburg because they were the women’s spiritual directors. Some think that the connection was important to the rise of mysticism in Germany because the friars introduced the women to important interpretations of scriptures by influential clergymen.<sup>60</sup> The monastery school at Helfta , where pupils and parents came to learn from these women, served another purpose as well. It was regularly visited by people who traveled to Helfta because they knew about the monastery’s regard

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<sup>58</sup> *The Life of Blessed Juliana of Mont-Cornillon*. Trans. Barbara Newman. (Toronto: Peregrina Publications, 1991), 1:6. The biographer of Juliana is unknown, but Newman states that it is from a canon of St. Martin, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Mary Jeremy Finnegan says that at Helfta “there is no hint of intellectual inferiority or subordinate status” for women. *The Women of Helfta, Scholars and Mystics*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1991), x.

<sup>60</sup> Finnegan, 7.

for theological learning, and as such it provided a way for their ideas to be disseminated. The education Gertrude and the others received is thought to have been comparable if not better than that of men in the Church and so they had influence outside the monastery because of the girls they taught.<sup>61</sup>

In addition, for both Abelard and Bernard, love was the central aspect of penitence, of one's duty to humanity, of one's role as a friend, and of one's salvation. It was the penitence of loving remorse that absolved sin. Absolution by the priest in confession became, during this period, merely an acknowledgment of the loving recognition of having sinned and the deeply felt repentance for the transgression. Penitential acts still required absolution, but they were not sufficient. Part of the justification for the shift toward loving repentance relied upon Luke 7.47: "Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven, for she has shown great love."<sup>62</sup>

The genre known as "love mysticism," which was primarily developed by women, probably began in what is now Belgium during the last half of the twelfth century. Hadewijch, a thirteenth-century beguine, was perhaps the most poetically talented of the women "love mystics" and is said to be the "primary exponent" of the genre. By employing elements of Bernard, William of Saint Thierry, and Richard of Saint Victor, she synergistically wrote about the essential themes of the genre: first, union with God can be achieved in this life because God lets himself be experienced as Love (*Minne*) by one who openly and deeply loves him; second, the experience is strongly

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<sup>61</sup> Finnegan, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Hamm, 135.

emotional and ecstatic.<sup>63</sup>

The theme commonly employed to explain how one's soul could move farther along the path to union with God was that the soul progressed by way of various stages of love. Bernard used this theme as did William of Saint Thierry and Aelred of Rievaulx.<sup>64</sup> The stages were explained using several kinds of imagery, but typically one began with self-reflection and loving remorse for sins, and then moved to love of others, especially in friendship, to love of Christ and finally to union with God. Bernard used the metaphor of three kisses for three stages of love. Bernard's Christology describes this three-part process as one in which man can unite with God by progressing through stages along the pathway. In *Sermons* three and four, Bernard says that to know God, to receive the "kiss," one must begin with the feet of Christ. The first kiss "is a genuine conversion of life, the second is accorded to those making progress, the third is the experience of only a few of the more perfect."<sup>65</sup> One moves from carnal love of Christ to a spiritual love of God. The path to mystical union with God thus begins with self-knowledge, passes through love and compassion for other people, and ends at the pure love of God. For Bernard, loving of friends and neighbors is neither a distraction nor an impediment, but a necessary stage that leads to the deepest levels of feeling and engagement. So, for Bernard, knowledge is never enough; it is only by way of a deeply felt love that one can be with God: "Neither fear nor the hope of reward can convert the soul; they may change

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<sup>63</sup> Paul Mommaers, preface to *Hadewijch, The Complete Works*. Mommaers says that for Hadewijch, the union is experienced mystically because "The touch of Love also throws the minds and senses of these persons into commotion, so violent indeed that all sorts of psychosomatic phenomena arise from it. And it seems that the experience of oneness and Love must go hand in hand with a psychological withdrawal from self that usually finds its reaction in visions," xiii.

<sup>64</sup> William of Saint Thierry, *The Mirror of Faith*. Trans. Thomas X. Davis. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1979), 2:4, 9:13, 9:16. Indeed, the entire work is written as a guide to reach union with God. See also William's *On the Nature and Dignity of Love*, 1.3 and 2.7-9.

<sup>65</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. 4:1.

one's manner, or even one's behaviour, but they can never touch one's feeling . . . Love however converts souls by making them willing.<sup>66</sup>

William's path has four stages: will (youth), love (young adult), charity (adult), and wisdom (old age). In Aelred of Rievaulx's *Mirror of Charity*, one grows toward love of God through love of neighbor, meaning identification with your neighbor's emotions and suffering.<sup>67</sup> The stages are always tied to the inward turn, as with Bernard, who says one must know his own heart before he can empathize with another's misery on the path to knowing God.<sup>68</sup> In the treatise, *Seven Manners of Holy Love*, the beguine Beatrice of Nazareth lists the seven ways to achieve union with God.<sup>69</sup> Margaret Porette describes both how Love (personified) speaks of the seven states of the Soul, and how she herself describes the seven states of the soul, or being. These stages are the pathway to union with God.<sup>70</sup>

The loving path one must follow led to the development in the twelfth century of renewed interest in serving humanity, of an obligation to both love and serve other people. This resulted in the founding of new hospitals and the proliferation of wandering evangelical preachers, phenomena that were first seen in the fourth century but that waned until a resurgence in the twelfth century.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, when Bernard and others

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<sup>66</sup> *De Diligendo Deo* 12.34; from Louth, "Bernard and Affective Mysticism," in *Influence of Saint Bernard*, Leclercq's translation is slightly different: "Neither fear nor love of self can change the soul. At times they change one's appearance or deeds, they can never alter one's character," 7.

<sup>67</sup> Bynum, "Cistercian Conception" 278.

<sup>68</sup> Bynum, "Cistercian Conception," 277.

<sup>69</sup> Amy Hollywood, "Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographer," *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*. Ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 85-86.

<sup>70</sup> Margaret Porette, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, p. 82-83 and 140-46.

<sup>71</sup> Bynum, "Cistercian Conception" 280. The first hospitals in Christendom were established in the fourth century, including one at the monastery led by Saint Basil of Caesarea. The impetus for the hospitals was the First Council of Nicaea, which in 325 said the Church should care for the poor and the sick and then ordered that all cathedral cities should construct a hospital.

wrote about love, they focused on how the act of loving as well as the emotion of loving would affect and benefit the person experiencing it. There is little evidence in their writing of real concern for others, including neighbors, other than love of others being a requirement in furthering the journey to love of and union with God.<sup>72</sup> This is likely the result of increasing concern for the individual during this period. The spiritual advice given by Bernard and others is directed to the individual monk seeking salvation, not on obligations to one another in the monastery or in the larger order. The Cistercian writers, such as Bernard, William, Aelred of Rievaulx, Adam of Perseigne, and Stephen of Salley consider brotherly love a virtue and advocate loving friendship as a necessary step in their spiritual progress, but they clearly assert that the individual is responsible for his own salvation. This is both a reflection of the concern for individual autonomy as well as the focus on self-reflection: salvation must be achieved by the loving intentions of the individual; another cannot provide it.<sup>73</sup> Gueric of Igny expressed what was important in the loving of other men and women: “The most important thing of all to be sought therefore is the love of God which is the beginning and end of all things. As a reward for this we may become worthy to be loved also by men; and by striving to grow in the love of God we may learn how to make use of the love of men.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Bynum, “Cistercian Conception,” 282.

<sup>73</sup> Bynum, “Cistercian Conception,” 275.

<sup>74</sup> Gueric of Igny, *Liturgical Sermons* 2. Trans., Monks of Mount Saint Bernard Abbey (Spenser: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 24:4.

## Friendship as a form of love

The focus on one's own striving for salvation does not imply an absence of genuine feelings of friendship. The twelfth-century turn to a focus on deeply felt emotions and intentions resulted in discussion of intimate friendship in letters, biographies, and poetry.<sup>75</sup> Juliana of Mont-Cornillon, for example, maintained a long friendship with Eve, described in Juliana's biography as a recluse at St. Martin-on-the-Mount in Liege whom she visited regularly:

They were in fact very close friends, being mutually bound by an unbreakable chain of charity. In the bloom of youth this Eve had been touched by Christ's inspiration with the love of the hermitage. Juliana banished vain fear from her heart with powerful words, and by her exhortation succeeded in giving her courage to fulfill her purpose. Thus began their mutual love in Christ, which increased continually thereafter as their relationship grew . . . She entered [the hermitage], I say, on the condition that her dear encouraging friend must visit her at least once a year.<sup>76</sup>

Another of Juliana's close friends was Isabella of Huy (f. ca. 1240), about whom the biographers says, "From then on, Juliana and Isabella talked frequently and intimately, in honeyed speech . . ."<sup>77</sup> The friendship of the Dominican nun Diana of Bologna and her spiritual guide, friar Jordan of Saxony, was said to be "not an icy Platonic love but really human, a union of hearts that beat as one."<sup>78</sup>

Accounts by men and women about their friendships were different than those of

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<sup>75</sup> See the discussion of friendship between men and women in Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience, 350-1250*, Cistercian Studies Series, 95 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1988). 202-3, 209, 332-33, 389-90, 396-97, 401, 411-12, 423.

<sup>76</sup> *The Life of Juliana* of Mont-Cornillon, 1:5, par. 22.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 2:2, par. 8.

<sup>78</sup> Norbert Georges, *Blessed Diana and Blessed Jordan of the Order of Preachers: The Story of a Holy Friendship and a Successful Spiritual Direction*, (Somerset, Ohio: The Rosary Press, 1933), xv. The author is aware of untoward interpretations of the relationship, but discounts them. She says the letters from Jordan to Diana manifest such a love and affection that "some might take alarm. Some may fear that this example will serve as a pretext to excuse dangerous, natural friendships that may, and sometimes do, lurk under the cover of spiritual direction." Theirs, Georges says, was a "true spiritual friendship," p. 52.



the several centuries preceding the twelfth, in part because it seems to have allowed intimate friendships between men and women.<sup>79</sup> The model of friendship in the ninth and tenth centuries was similar to the Roman form of friendship during antiquity; the requirements were formal and established by the conventions of that period. People understood the advantages of friendship, but the written accounts do not suggest the emotionally intimate component that appears in the writing of the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries.<sup>80</sup>

By the early twelfth century, however, religious writers throughout Europe, and especially those writing in monasteries, began speaking earnestly about the love they felt for their friends, sometimes employing language that can be read as having an erotic connotation. Aelred of Rievaulx wrote openly about his youthful sexuality and his struggle to accept the vows of celibacy: “While I was still a schoolboy, the charm of my friends greatly captivated me . . . my mind surrendered itself completely to emotion and devoted itself to love. Nothing seemed sweeter or nicer or more worthwhile than to love and be loved.”<sup>81</sup> He refers to this period when “a cloud of desire arose from the lower drives of the flesh and the gushing spring of adolescence,” and “the sweetness of love and the impurity of lust combined to take advantage of the inexperience of my youth.”<sup>82</sup> His struggles to accept the celibacy of monastic life are also described in his personal writings, where he says that his eventual decision to live by the vows was made difficult

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<sup>79</sup> McGuire says this became possible because the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries were a time that afforded “an opening to women” and allowed the “full flowering” of friendships between men and women such as Jordan of Saxony and Diana of Andalo, pp. 388-394.

<sup>80</sup> Mary Eugenia Laker, ed. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*. (Washington D.C.: Cistercian Publications, 1974), 36-37.

<sup>81</sup> James Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 222.

<sup>82</sup> Boswell, *Christianity*, 222.

by his attachments to the world—“most of all, the knot of one particular friendship, sweeter to me than all the sweet things of my life.”<sup>83</sup>

Margaret Ebner (f. ca. 1325), a Dominican mystic, spoke of her devotion to another woman, saying “only one sister knew about my desire; otherwise no one else” and “She trusted me completely . . . Whenever I left the table, I had the custom of bringing her whatever I saw that would please her. I always went to her as if she were God Himself.”<sup>84</sup> A friendship? More? Sexual relationships did occur in the cloister, but that is a somewhat different matter than the issue related to the use of sensually intimate language in correspondence between friends during the period from the twelfth through fourteenth centuries. Many scholars, although not all, assert that the use of endearments in these epistles do not necessarily evidence an erotic relationship.<sup>85</sup> Because they were bound to a celibate ideal, the focus of friendship could not explicitly be sexual love. Friendship’s value in the view many theologians during this period was in the way friends could participate in the love of God, thereby progressing on a path to union with God. Bernard’s three “kisses” in his sermons on the *Song of Songs* is a primer on how to

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<sup>83</sup> Boswell, *Christianity*, 223. For an argument against homoeroticism in these relationships, see Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience*, 244-48.

<sup>84</sup> Wiethaus, 298.

<sup>85</sup> See Morris, 96. Also, at 105, Morris says of Aelred’s writing: “Our modern reaction to such language is to suppose that the sexuality which was not obtaining its normal outlet is overflowing here into the idea of friendship. It is hard to doubt that this was happening, but we must also remember that these images performed another function,” i.e., *The Song of Songs* in monastic tradition expressed the ascent of the soul to God, and its sexual symbolism was used in that context. Also see James Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, who examines friendship in erotic and non-erotic relationships in monasteries as well as friendship’s role in the Bernardian sense of it being a step in the path toward loving union with Christ. See his discussion of Saint Aelred of Rievaulx, 221ff. and of Saint Anselm, 218ff. He focuses primarily on the existence of and attitudes toward male homosexuality in Christian theology and practice. Also see Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, (New York: Villard Books, 1994), esp. 240ff.

climb from the love of friendship to love of God.<sup>86</sup> The expression of strong feelings of love and care for friends was directly related to the focus on self-awareness and motivation associated with the requirements of salvation. Just as it was necessary to honestly examine one's remorse for transgression and the motivation for action in reference to seeking salvation, it also became important for people to examine their feelings and motivations in personal relationships such as friendship. The necessity to be open and honest in the relationship was another way to gain understanding of the self.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, once union with God is achieved, the soul longs to share it with friends, which Bernard says in his sermons on the *Song of Songs* is a part of the progression toward spiritual marriage with God.<sup>88</sup>

When Bernard writes to his friend Peter the Venerable, the abbot of Cluny, in 1150/51 the tone is intimate, but measured; it expresses affection and the desire to be together, but there is no conclusive evidence of anything more. The letter is an example of the writer examining his feelings and considering the quality of his motivation.

Even now I would call myself happy, but by your favour not by my own deserts. Happy to be loved by you and happy in loving you. Although I do not think that even that tid-bit, sweet as it is, can be swallowed whole or even, as they say, admitted to the teeth. Do you wonder why? It is because I can find nothing in myself to deserve such affection, especially from such a man as you. I know that a just man will never wish to be loved more than he deserves. Would that I could imitate as well as I can admire such humility. Would that I could enjoy your company, I do not say always, nor even often, but just once or twice in a year!<sup>89</sup>

Bernard's correspondence with Count Theobald in 1147 speaks of the purpose of

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<sup>86</sup> See Aelred's discussion of Bernard's three kisses: *On Spiritual Friendship*, Book 2:21-27. See also Morris, 106 ff.

<sup>87</sup> See Morris, 96.

<sup>88</sup> *SCC*, 27:2, 10:2.

<sup>89</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Letters of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Bruno Scott James, trans. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1999), letter 306, p. 377.

friendship, saying that it occurs for the sake of God.

You know that I care for you, but how much I do so God knows better than you. I am quite sure that you too are fond of me, but for the sake of God. Therefore if I should offend God, you would have no reason for your affection since then God would not be with me. Why should a great prince like you care for an insignificant creature like me, unless you believed that God were with me? So perhaps it would not be to your advantage for me to offend God.<sup>90</sup>

For Bernard, fraternal love and charity, combined with humility and the pursuit of peace, are necessary virtues for those seeking union because they are aspects of the “incomparable grace,” which is the love of man for God: “Woe to the man who disturbs the bond of unity . . . Nothing can trouble or deject you so long as peace and fraternal charity reign in your midst.”<sup>91</sup>

Aelred of Rievaulx entered the Cistercian monastery in 1134 after giving up a career at the royal court in Scotland. Two themes are striking in his treatises *Spiritual Friendship* and *Mirror of Charity*: a deep concern for friendship and a desire for self-awareness, both of which he connects to his desire for union with God.<sup>92</sup> Heavily influenced by Cicero’s *De Amicitia*, his work is indicative of the twelfth-century interest in regaining some of the values of antiquity, including that of friendship. In antiquity, the values tended to focus on having a good reputation and being known for showing hospitality, especially to one’s friends. Aelred’s interest is in applying those standards to Christianity by asserting that one’s reputation in God’s eyes is dependent upon one’s

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<sup>90</sup> *Letters of Bernard of Clairvaux*, letter 341, p. 419-20.

<sup>91</sup> *SCC* 29:3. See Halfants, p. xv, on Bernard’s discussion of friendship in the sermons.

<sup>92</sup> For a discussion of Aelred, friendship, and homosexuality, see Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. For historiographical discussion and assertions of Aelred’s sexuality, see the Appendix in Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, 91-103, esp. 92-93. See also Frederick S. Roden, *Same Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 22ff. See also, Stephen D. Moore who states that the language used in Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Sermons* is clearly not a discussion of his spiritual love of God; rather he was literally queering the *Song of Songs*. Stephen D. Moore, “The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality.” *Church History*, Vol. 69, no. 2 (June, 2000), 329-330.

willingness to examine intentions and express love. He does this in a guide for his fellow monks explaining the importance of love and friendship, arguing that only Christians can attain the kind of friendship expected by God.<sup>93</sup> Aelred tries to reconcile Christian scripture with Cicero's understanding of friendship and love that is described in *De Amicitia*. He divides his text into three parts: "What is Friendship?," "The Advantages of Friendship," and "The Requirements for Unbroken Friendship." Writing to his friend Ivo, Aelred says that,

The word "friend" [*amicus*] is derived from "love" [*amor*], as it seems to me; and "friendship" [*amicitia*] is derived from "friend." However, love is an affection of the rational mind through which the mind seeks something for itself with desire and strives to enjoy that object of its desire. Love also enables the mind to enjoy the object of its desire with a certain internal pleasure, and once it has attained the object of its desire it embraces it and preserves it. I have already explained the passionate and emotional nature of love as well as I can in my essay *The Mirror of Charity*, with which I believe you are already familiar.<sup>94</sup>

Aelred claimed that love of one's fellow Christians was modeled after the love of God, but this ideal is not reflected in his writing. There, his interest in helping others is primarily important in that it furthers his progress toward union with God, and the distraction of having to concern himself with others is a painful exercise that takes away from being with Christ.<sup>95</sup> He says in *The Mirror of Charity*, "So also, in loving his neighbor, whom one ought to love as oneself, let him be careful not to exceed the measure of the love he ought to save for himself."<sup>96</sup> He adds, making it clear that friendship and love for others is merely a tool to be used to gain the only love that matters, "[Christ] alone in all, he alone above all, both captures our attachment and

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<sup>93</sup> Mark F. Williams, trans. Introduction to Aelred of Rivaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, 16-17.

<sup>94</sup> Aelred of Rivaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, (1994), 1:19.

<sup>95</sup> Bynum, "Cistercian Conception," 278.

<sup>96</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Charity*, 37:98.

demands our love [*dilectio*]. He claims for himself a place in the abode of our heart; not only the most important place but the highest; not only the highest but also the innermost.”<sup>97</sup>

Women, such as Beatrice of Nazareth, also used the symbolism of friendship, intimacy, and openness in describing their mystical encounters with Christ and their path to salvation. Yet it is unclear whether their interest in these qualities is primarily to deepen their friendships. Beatrice’s biographer wrote a short treatise, *The Love of Neighbor*, which describes her life as exemplified by charity and love toward others. But again, those qualities appear to be devices necessary for salvation rather than having value in themselves.<sup>98</sup>

Because some writers seem to qualify the value of loving friendship and kindness, does not imply that this was a universal sentiment. Bernard’s writing suggests that he regards deeply felt love of all kinds as a part of his desire to be loving toward God. He says in *On Loving God*, “I give the name of loving-kindness, because the elements that go to its making are the needs of the poor, the anxieties of the oppressed, the worries of those who are sad, the sins of wrong-doers, and finally, the manifold misfortunes of people of all classes who endure the affliction, even if they are our enemies.”<sup>99</sup>

Nevertheless, the context for Bernard is always clear, that all love originates in love of God first: “. . . in order to love one's neighbor with perfect justice, one must have regard to God. In other words, how can one love one's neighbor with purity, if one does not love him in God? . . . It is necessary therefore, to love God first; then one can love one's

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<sup>97</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Mirror of Charity*, 38:106.

<sup>98</sup> Unknown, *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, trans. Roger de Ganck, trans. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 333-339.

<sup>99</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, 12:1.

neighbor in God.”<sup>100</sup> Margaret of Ypres (f. ca. 1230) makes a similar point when she expresses concern that her love of her spiritual adviser might be seen as diminishing her love of God: “She loved [her spiritual father, Zegher] more than anybody or anything she had in the world. From her simplicity of heart, however, she began to be afraid lest she was acting against the Lord in any way, and she said to the Lord in prayer: “Most merciful Lord Jesus Christ, I love You—as You know—above all things and, because of You, I love that man who made me recognise you and taught me to love You.”<sup>101</sup>

The twelfth-century focus on love, friendship, self-examination, and right intention as the path to union with God was an important aspect of the context within which women mystics began writing accounts of their experiences emphasizing sensual feelings and ecstatic encounters with Christ. The following section will consider some of the direct sources for the language and imagery they used to describe their experiences.

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<sup>100</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, 8:25.

<sup>101</sup> Thomás de Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, Margot H. King, trans. (Toronto; Peregrina Publishing, 1990), Ch. 26, p. 60

## *Chapter Two—Women’s Devotional Accounts and Affective Mysticism*

The previous chapter discussed the inward turn of the twelfth century, the focus on the individual, and the emphasis on love as the path to union with God. These were aspects of the context within which many women mystics wrote accounts of their experiences emphasizing sensual feelings and ecstatic encounters with Christ. This chapter will consider some of the sources that informed their use of sensual language and carnal imagery. Among them was the genre of affective mysticism focused on the humanity of Christ exemplified by Bernard of Clairvaux, Rupert of Deutz, and others.

### Affective Mysticism

The theme of an emotionally loving relationship with Christ, sometimes described in the sensual language of the body, is a central element of affective mysticism—the experience of an ecstatic union of love with God as man.<sup>102</sup> This is not intellectual or contemplative mysticism; it is a visceral experience, deeply and ecstatically felt in ways that at its most intense can excite all of the senses and emotions. The union is often described using carnal references of sensuality because the most compelling way to depict the experience is often with language that fuses emotion and physicality.<sup>103</sup> Because of this it is possible to read the writings of many mystics as sexually erotic

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<sup>102</sup> Moller discusses this as “Bernardine mysticism,” noting that it mostly occurs in Western religious thought, whereas other forms of mysticism (transcendent speculations, prophetic and millenary movements) are found throughout the world, “The Social Causes of Affective Mysticism,” 305ff.

<sup>103</sup> For a simplistic discussion of eroticism in Christianity, see Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter O’Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1992), esp. 83ff.



longings—a result of the cloister’s required abstinence and repressed sexuality.<sup>104</sup>

Conversely, it is also possible to argue that repressed sexual desire has nothing to do with their writing; rather, the sensual imagery of taste, touch, and smell is merely the device that is best suited to expressing the intensity of emotional feeling that results from seeking union with Christ.<sup>105</sup> Often, that may be the case; but it requires a good bit of suspended disbelief not to read eroticism into some women’s reports of mystical pregnancies, of longing to be entwined with Christ in their marital bed.<sup>106</sup> It does not follow that because abstinence was proscribed in the cloister or in religious communities such as the beguines, erotic content was thereby absent from the imaginations of those living there.

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<sup>104</sup> Karma Lochrie says that during the late Middle Ages women’s spirituality is notable for its “erotic, nuptial, and maternal themes, along with an increased attention to Christ’s humanity.” She says this spirituality is positioned “in a patrilineage extending back to the language of the biblical *Song of Songs* and its commentaries, the secular tradition of courtly love, and Cistercian and Franciscan influences on late medieval piety. What emerges from most accounts of women’s spirituality of the late Middle Ages is a highly romanticized or, alternatively, allegorized vision of their practices of mystical sex and a rigidly heterosexualized version of their sexuality.” See “Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies” in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 180-200. <http://college.holycross.edu/faculty/ssstanbur/Lochrie.htm>. Also see James Boswell, who focuses primarily on the existence of and attitudes toward male homosexuality in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*.

<sup>105</sup> Bynum, in *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* and Gordon Rudy, in *Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2002), discuss this issue. See note 226 on Rudy’s skepticism of applying erotic connotation to the imagery in medieval women’s writing.

<sup>106</sup> Kari Elisabeth Berresen says that “phenomena of spiritual pregnancy and giving birth are rather common among medieval women mystics, displaying their intimate union with Christ.” *Women’s Studies of the Christian and Islamic Traditions: Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance Foremothers*, (New York: Springer Publishing, 1993), 283. Andrew Keitt says that “mystical pregnancy was a familiar trope in the writings of women visionaries” but that their “swellings and contortions” resulted from their intense identification with the Virgin Mary, not from union with Christ. Andrew W. Keitt, *Inventing the Sacred: Imposture, Inquisition, and the Boundaries of the Supernatural in Golden Age Spain*, (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 173. Also see Claire L. Sahlin, “‘A Marvelous and Great Exultation of the Heart’: Mystical Pregnancy and Marian Devotion in Bridget of Sweden’s *Revelations*.” In *Studies in Saint Birgitta and the Brigittine Order*, edited by James Hogg, vol. 1, pp. 108-28. *Analecta Cartusiana* 35:19, *Spiritualität Heute und Gestern* 19, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik. (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993). For more on Saint Bridget and mystical pregnancy, see Kimberley M. Benedict, *Empowering Collaborations: Writing Partnerships between Religious Women and Scribes in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18ff. Also, Bynum in “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century,” says that fourteenth-century Dorothy of Montau (f. ca. 1370) was “almost required by her confessor to exhibit mystical pregnancy as part of her preparation for communion” 168. Also quoted in Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 257.

Further, numerous accounts attest to the problems the Church had in maintaining celibacy among its clergy. In the mid-eleventh century, for example, St. Peter Damian wrote in his eleventh-century treatise, *The Book of Gomorrah*, about the evil of homosexuality among the clergy. He both condemned erotic relations between clergymen and noted that it was a common occurrence. Pope Leo IX, responding to Damian's allegations, said that he agrees with him and that the assertions are "like water thrown on the fires of hell." The Pope adds, "Therefore, lest the unpunished license of filthy desire should spread, it is essential to combat [it] with appropriate measures of apostolic severity and moreover to give some evidence of strictness."<sup>107</sup> There is little evidence, however, that the Pope acted on his vow to prevent the spread of this impurity. The twelfth-century *Livre des manieres* by Etienne de Fougères is a vicious attack on sexual relationships among women and, while not specifically about women in cloisters, it suggests that female homoeroticism was common.<sup>108</sup> Given the presence of erotic relationships, it would be disingenuous to deny the likelihood that the emotionally charged stories of women such as Hadewijch and Mechthild were at least tinged with sexual connotation.

Nevertheless, from the fifth century until at least the beginning of the eleventh century, sexual love was almost never discussed in religious literature, and the Church

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<sup>107</sup> Boswell, *Christianity*, 366.

<sup>108</sup> Robert L. A. Clark, "Jousting without a lance: The condemnation of female homoeroticism in the *Livre des manieres*," *Same Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Francesca Canade Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 143-178. A compelling article by Susan Schibanoff discusses the possible homoerotic relationship between Hildegard of Bingen and her "favorite nun" Richardis of Stade. However, her evidence is weak and suggests that if there was sexual feelings between the women, it was likely one-sided, that is, from Hildegard towards Richardis. There is no surviving evidence to suggest a relationship other than close friendship. "Hildegard of Bingen and Richardis of Stade: The Discourse of Desire," *Same Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages*, 49-83.

viewed with suspicion anything that smacked of eroticism.<sup>109</sup> The reports of mystical encounters with the physical Christ in a marriage bed thus marked a significant change in the norm of religious literature. It is hard to say whether the acceptance of the mystics' language was the result of larger cultural changes accompanying the twelfth-century renaissance or of the awareness that the mystics' special relationship with the divine allowed unusual liberties.

For purposes of this essay, it does not matter which is the more accurate reading of these mystical accounts; the likelihood is that each woman's report of ecstatic union was the result of various factors and that no single overarching explanation is applicable to all. Nevertheless, common influences do emerge in the affective mysticism practiced by women such as Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hildegard, Hadewijch, Gertrude the Great of Helfta, and others.

For example, the formula with which they sought union with God was modeled in part on Bernard of Clairvaux's insistence that neither the knowledge gained from intellectual understanding nor the hope of everlasting reward is sufficient. He says the goal of divine union is attainable only by way of one's deepest feelings of love: "Neither fear nor the hope of reward can convert the soul; they may change one's manner, or even one's behaviour, but they can never touch one's feeling. . . . Love however converts souls by making them willing."<sup>110</sup> He says that intellectual understanding must be accompanied by feelings of fear and love that "penetrate our souls and shake us to the very depths

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<sup>109</sup> Boswell discusses the shift to demonizing eroticism after ascetic leaders gained ascendancy in Christendom early in the fifth century. He says that the monastic communities were somewhat more able to achieve the new ideal of celibacy, but large numbers of the clergy were not. Sexual love was absent from the literature, he says, but not always from the lives of those in monasteries. James Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, 108ff.

<sup>110</sup> *De Diligendo Deo* 12:34; III, 148, 20-149, 4 and 149, 11f., from Louth.

because we are moved by them.”<sup>111</sup>

That this lesson resonated with many religious women from the late-twelfth through at least the early-fourteenth centuries is apparent in their impassioned references to smelling, touching, seeing, hearing, and tasting when they describe the rapture of intensely loving spiritual experiences.<sup>112</sup> They especially draw upon the senses to declare the depth of emotion they feel when, in receiving the Eucharist, they have visions of Christ coming to them. They write of a lust for his tears, blood, and flesh, as well as milk from his breasts.<sup>113</sup> He is sometimes experienced as an infant or child, sometimes as father or nursing mother. Mechthild of Hackeborn, for example, claimed that the baby Jesus had sucked the breasts of all the nuns in her monastery. More often Jesus is the adored lover and husband. The Austrian beguine Agnes Blannbekin spoke lovingly and longingly about swallowing Christ’s foreskin.<sup>114</sup> Always, he is the focus of their love and the one from whom they crave love. The impassioned descriptions of longing and of waiting with open hearts and open arms are the voices of women using the only vocabulary they have that is capable of expressing the love that Bernard said is the

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<sup>111</sup> SCC 31:2. See Halflants, xxii.

<sup>112</sup> For example, see Gertrude the Great of Helfta’s *Spiritual Exercises*, esp. “Mystical Union.” Trans. Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis. Cistercian Fathers Series 49 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1989), 73-92. For a larger discussion of the senses in mystical writing, see Gordon Rudy, *Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>113</sup> Mary of Oignies’ many tears flow straight from the Lord according to her biographer, James of Vitry. James of Vitry, *Life of Mary of Oignies* in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*, Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, ed. (Brepols, 2006), I.18, p. 58. On blood, see Catherine of Siena, *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Vol. I. Trans. Suzanne Noffke (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1988), throughout, but Letters 6, 7, 17, 18, 23, 31, 38, 59, and 84 offer some stark examples. Lutgard of Aywières was offered Christ’s breast and side-wound as comfort after she became scared. Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*. Trans. Margot H. King (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1991), Book 1:2, p. 23.

<sup>114</sup> Wiethaus, 296. Catherine of Siena wrote in several letters that she wed Christ and that the wedding ring was not of gold or silver, but Christ’s foreskin. Bynum says that while some “scholars have sometimes seen the spirituality of all late medieval women as “erotic” or “nuptial,” Catherine’s sense of the flesh as extremely unerotic,” 178, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*. For the letters that mention the wedding ring of foreskin, see Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, 376-77, fn. 135.

prerequisite for salvation.

The spread of affective mysticism among women occurred in the context of the rising influence of visionary prophecy that began in Italy, Germany, and Flanders during the late twelfth century and the thirteenth century and became widespread throughout much of Christendom during the fourteenth century.<sup>115</sup> During this time, the status of some women in the Church was enhanced, largely because they were viewed as having a privileged relationship with God by dint of their mystical experiences.<sup>116</sup> Women who had mystical visitations were seen as exemplars of orthodoxy and deep spirituality, and especially of devotion to the sacraments.<sup>117</sup> As exemplars, they were valuable to some in the Church hierarchy, which used them to support anti-heretical campaigns such as its rebuttal of the Cathars' rejection of transubstantiation; if women had miraculous visions related to the Eucharist, it was *prima facie* evidence of the doctrine's validity.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Andre Vauchez discusses this, pointing out that "new forms of sanctity" began developing because the Church was "less and less capable of responding to the religious aspirations of the faithful." "The Saint," in *Medieval Callings*, 328.

<sup>116</sup> An indicator of increased status is the number of women canonized. Andre Vauchez reports that between 1198 and 1431, 18 percent of canonization processes were for women and that 15 percent of all saints canonized during this period were women. Women accounted for 21.4 percent of all saints from the mendicant orders. Of all lay saints by the late middle ages, three-quarters were women. "Between Virginité and Spiritual Espousals: Models of Feminine Sainthood in the Christian West in the Middle Ages" *The Medieval History Journal* 2 (1999), 350.

<sup>117</sup> Bynum says that women "sometimes bypassed the clergy, sometimes exposed their failures, and sometimes frankly usurped their authority . . ." They did this not by taking the office of priest, but rather by allowing Christ to speak through them. In this way they "manipulated religious authorities by looking at Eucharistic miracles, especially those miracles told almost exclusively of women, in which unconsecrated hosts or unchaste celebrants were identified." Thus when a holy woman vomited out a host, "suspicion immediately turned on the priest who had offered it" because it was assumed that he was in some way—usually as a result of sexual immorality—unqualified to consecrate the host. In this way, "Women's eucharistic visions . . . were a kind of litmus test for clerical immorality or negligence." Over time, the clergy viewed these holy women as a "standard of piety and a window open to the divine." Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 227-229.

<sup>118</sup> Carol Neel and others argue that the Church used women's celebrity to provide support for their theological positions. Neel says that one of James of Vitry's motives in working on behalf of the mystic beguine Mary of Oignies was to establish her as "the paradigm of a newly vigorous lay spirituality," someone who could be used against other new movements, especially heretical movements such as the Cathars. Carol Neel, "The Origins of the Beguines," *Signs*, 14, no. 2, (Winter, 1989), 326. Also, see Elliot, *Proving Woman*, 11.

Further, because election to the clergy was proscribed, thereby denying them access to that power, women occasionally gained authority by way of the celebrity they achieved for being selected by God.<sup>119</sup> For example, Saint Bridget of Sweden (d. 1373) and Saint Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) accrued some sway in the politics of the Church because they claimed to have received divine revelations urging that the papacy be returned to Rome, that the Church reform itself, and that it pursue conversions of the infidel. Catherine was instrumental in returning the papacy from Avignon to Rome, partly as a result of her meetings with the pope to argue for his return. Her political involvement suggests a status that women previously had not experienced.<sup>120</sup> Hildegard of Bingen became influential in the twelfth century partly by dint of the power of her writing, but also by her willingness to fearlessly correspond with three popes, five monarchs, various members of the nobility, and many Church leaders.

Other women gained privilege by dint of their public performances of ecstatic experience. Elisabeth of Spalbeek's (f. ca. 1300) performances of ecstatic trance-dances were widely observed and regularly scheduled, making her one of the most renowned "holy women" in the Low Countries.<sup>121</sup> Bridget of Sweden (f. 1340) did not herself speak in public but she did enlist clerical authorities to publicly use her revelations to exorcise

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<sup>119</sup> Vauchez cites as an example of this that "Although they placed themselves under the direction of male confessors or directions of conscience, these women often did not take long to reverse authority roles and turn their confessors into secretaries and spokesmen," "The Saint," 328.

<sup>120</sup> See Ann Matter, "The Undebated Debate: Gender and the Image of God in Medieval Theology" in *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*. Ed. Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees. (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 47.

<sup>121</sup> Joanna E. Ziegler, "Elisabeth of Spalbeek's Ecstasy," in *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries*, pp. 181ff. Also see Clair L. Sahlin, "Preaching and Prophesying: The Public Proclamation of Birgitta of Sweden's Revelations," in *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 79.

demons.<sup>122</sup> Others performed either by having mystical experiences in the company of others in the cloister or, in the case of beguines, in public spectacles. Because they were not in cloisters, the beguines were involved in communal life and so those who claimed mystical experiences would often perform in public places.<sup>123</sup> Later, Margery Kempe (f. ca. 1410) became adept at public performing during her tours of Europe, giving audiences regular glimpses of her divine visitations, trance-induced dancing, and occasional divine healing.<sup>124</sup>

Increasingly, the view emerged that women had some special connection to mystical experience and that as they took on prophetic and visionary roles they accrued new authority in some circles of the church. For example, women's ecstatic experiences related to the Eucharistic were thought to be a way for Christ to speak through them, thereby assuming a clerical role. Thus, when a holy woman vomited out a host it brought suspicion on the priest who had offered it, the assumption being that he was in some way—usually as a result of sexual immorality—unqualified to consecrate the host. In this way, women were able to test the sanctity of priests, a talent that inevitably would cause the Church hierarchy to turn on them.<sup>125</sup>

In north-central Germany, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* by Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1285) is one of the more notable examples of fully developed affective

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<sup>122</sup> Claire L. Sahlin, "Preaching and Prophesying" 70.

<sup>123</sup> Mary Suydam, "Beguine Textuality: Sacred Performances," in Suydam and Ziegler, 169ff.

<sup>124</sup> Nanda Hopenwasser, "A Performance Artist and her Performance Text: Margery Kempe on Tour," in Suydam and Ziegler, 97ff. Also, Mary A. Suydam, "Visionaries in the Public Eye," in *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries*, ed. Ellen E. Kittell and Mary A. Suydam, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 131ff. Woman claiming mystical experience were not always viewed favorably. In the beguine movement, for example, they were sometimes viewed as disruptive and were discouraged because it was feared they could not be controlled. On this, see Joanna E. Ziegler, "Elisabeth of Spalbeek's Ecstasy," p. 183.

<sup>125</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 227-229.

mysticism. She says that describing her experiences made her feel with her entire body and all of her senses the intensity of her soul being in loving union with God. Her imagery draws strongly from sensory expression, describing the longing for Jesus with language that became common, especially among female mystics, by the late thirteenth century:

My body is in prolonged torment, my soul is in elated bliss, for she has both seen and embraced her Lover fully. He is the cause of her torment, poor wretch. Whenever He draws her up to Him, then she flows; she cannot stop until He has brought her into Himself. Then she would like to speak but cannot; through sublime union she is completely caught up in the wonders of the Trinity. Then He withdraws a little so that she might feel desire. Then she longs for His praise that she cannot find just when she wants it. She even wishes that He might send her to Hell, so that He would be praised beyond measure by all creatures. Then she looks at Him and says to Him: 'Lord, give me Your blessing.' Then He looks at her and draws her to Him again and the greeting He gives her is beyond what the Body can express. Then the Body says to the Soul: 'Where have you been? I can't take anymore.' Then the Soul says: 'Shut up, you're a fool. I want to be with my love even if that were to mean the end of you. I am His delight, He is my torment.' This is her torment; may she never recover from it! May you be overcome by this torment and never escape it.<sup>126</sup>

Church officials and abbots who believed that the women's visions lent support to their theology gave credence to their reports by validating mystical claims of divine visitation. Hugh of St. Victor, for example, reassured mystics that their encounters with Jesus were real, not imagined:

Truly it is your beloved that visits you. He comes to touch you . . . not to fulfill your desire but to draw your love. He offers you some first-fruits of his love; he does not tender you the fullness of completed satisfaction. . . . He, who one day will give himself to you to be seen and possessed for ever, now sometimes gives you a taste of himself, that you may know how sweet he

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<sup>126</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Mechthild of Magdeburg: Selections from The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, Elizabeth Anderson, ed., (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 1.5.



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The affirmation by the clergy encouraged women to publicly report the intimate details of their ecstatic visions. At times, the intensity blurs the line between the spiritual and the physical, between the metaphorical and the carnal. Some, such as Gertrude the Great of Helfta, write as if they stand at the cusp between prayerful devotion and physical longing. Speaking metaphorically of her soul's longing for union with the divine, she asks Christ to open the "private bedchamber" of his love because her soul "thirsts for the embrace of intimate union with you."<sup>128</sup> For others, the metaphorical ambiguity of combining the physical and the spiritual is more explicitly carnal. Mechthild of Magdeburg pleads, "Ah Lord, love me deeply and love me often and love me long!"<sup>129</sup> and asserts that, "Where two hot desires come together, there love is consummated."<sup>130</sup> For Mechthild, loving union with Christ is experienced in a very different way than it was by the religious writers who were her mentors, including Bernard and William of Saint Thierry. Speaking of her encounter with Christ, she says, "The more His desire grows, the greater their wedding becomes. The narrower the bed becomes, the closer the embrace. The sweeter the kisses taste on the lips, the more lovingly they look at one another."<sup>131</sup> Mechthild's thirteenth-century contemporary, the Dutch mystic Hadewijch, tells of visions that combine the literary devices of courtly love poetry with the sensual imagery she uses to describe Eucharistic rites:

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<sup>127</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor, *The Soul's Betrothal-Gift*, trans. of *De Arrha Animae* by F. Sherwood Taylor (Westminster, England, 1945), 38-39. From Moller, "The Social Causation of Affective Mysticism," p. 307.

<sup>128</sup> Gertrude the Great of Helfta, "Mystical Union" in *Spiritual Exercises*, 77.

<sup>129</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Revelations*, 1: 23.

<sup>130</sup> Newman, *Virile Woman*, 150. Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Revelations*, 7:16. Newman's translation differs slightly from that of Menzies's, which states, "When two burning desires come together then love is perfected."

<sup>131</sup> See above, n. 76, for a caveat about reading sexual content into medieval religious writing.

He came in the form and clothing of a Man, as he was on the day when he gave his Body for the first time . . . he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament, in its outward form . . . and then he gave me to drink from the chalice . . . After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity [*na miere herten begherten. na miere menscheit*]. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported.<sup>132</sup>

Hadewijch's descriptions, like that of many others, are not always of a joyfully felicitous union.<sup>133</sup> Often, they focused on the torment of unrequited love: "As Hell turns everything to ruin, In Love nothing else is acquired but disgust and torture without pity; forever to be in unrest, forever assault and new persecution . . ." <sup>134</sup> Similarly, Angela of Foligno (f. ca. 1290) says that the feeling of being filled with Christ was tormenting:

And then at once she was filled with love and inestimable satiety, which, although it satiated, generated at the same time inestimable hunger, so that all her members were unstrung and her soul languished and desired to fly away. And she wished neither to see nor to feel any creature. And she did not speak and did not know whether she could speak, but within she spoke, clamoring that God not let her languish in such a death, for she thought life to be death.<sup>135</sup>

The theology, vocabulary, and imagery used here is similar to the darker, haunted aspect of Bernard's writing. The love one should have for Jesus should be without limit and is sometimes both violent and narcissistic. One is expected to submit entirely with no reservations about the misery that will result from the longing for Christ's presence.<sup>136</sup>

These themes recur in the writing of both Angela of Foligno and Hadewijch. When

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<sup>132</sup> Hadewijch of Brabant, *Hadewijch, The Complete Works*, ed., Mother Columba Hart. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), Vision 7:64, p. 281.

<sup>133</sup> See Elizabeth Petroff for a discussion of Hadewijch and the theme of *minne*, Love, and the use of erotic language in "Gender, Power and Knowledge in The *Strophische Gedichten* of Hadewijch," Paper first presented at the 25th International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 10, 1990, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo MI. <http://monasticmatrix.usc.edu/MatrixTextLibrary/mm-S11575-petroffe/genderpowe.html?PHPSESSID=26bf670a04023bffe13b7d56528f82e9>. Also Paul Mommaers and Elisabeth Dutton, *Hadewijch: writer, Beguine, love mystic*; (Louvain: Peeters, 2004.)

<sup>134</sup> Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, Poem 16, p. 356.

<sup>135</sup> In Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 248. Also: <http://college.holycross.edu/faculty/sstanbur/Lochrie.htm>, n. 14.

<sup>136</sup> For discussion of this, see Julia Kristeva, "Ego Affectus Est: Bernard of Clairvaux; Affect, Desire, and Love" *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 139ff.

receiving the Eucharist, Angela responds sensually and often painfully, sometimes feeling the taste of eating his flesh and sometimes feeling his embrace. In one vision, Angela is in Christ's tomb being embraced by him and feeling the wounds of his body in hers.<sup>137</sup> Richard of St. Victor also examines the themes of misery, isolation, and fear in his treatise, *The Four Degrees of Violent Charity*. The four, which are violent but necessary steps preceding union with Christ, are love-wounding, binding, languishing, and disintegration of mind and soul. He likens each of the degrees of spiritual love to its counterpart in sexual love.<sup>138</sup>

The affective mysticism practiced by these women had origins in Bernard's assertion that salvation requires more than intellectual knowledge and fear of perdition. It also resulted from the twelfth-century interest in the human aspect of Christ. Bernard says that love for the incarnate God is a step in the direction of the higher spiritual union with the entirety of God. Rupert of Deutz (d. 1129), a Benedictine in northwest Germany, was also among the first to write about being in union with Christ as an existing human person.<sup>139</sup> For him, affective religious practice may be related to the belief in impanation—the doctrine that the body and blood of Christ exist in the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist, rather than result from intinction and transubstantiation.<sup>140</sup> The

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<sup>137</sup> Paul Lachance, trans., *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, 182. For a discussion of Angela's visions as an acting out of the Paschal mystery, see Molly Morrison, "A Mystic's Drama: The Paschal Mystery in the Visions of Angela da Foligno," *Italica*, vol. 78, no. 1 (Spring, 2001), pp. 36-52.

<sup>138</sup> See Gervais Durneige, ed., *Les quatre degres de la violente charite*, Textes philosophiques du moyen age, 3 (Paris: J. Vrin, 1955), pp. 127-29. In Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," n. 18.

<sup>139</sup> See Abigail Ann Young, *The Fourth Gospel in the Twelfth Century: Rupert of Deutz On The Gospel Of John*, 1998, unpublished, based on her 1983 University of Toronto doctoral thesis, "The Commentaria in Iohannis Euangelium of Rupert of Deutz: A Methodological Analysis in the Field of Twelfth Century Exegesis." (<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~young/text.html#part1>). Also see John H. Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1983. Van Engen explains that Rupert understood Christ to be of two natures, divine and human. 105-118.

<sup>140</sup> For a full discussion of Rupert's views on the Eucharist and impanation, see John H. Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz*, 136ff. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07694a.htm>) points out that

body of Christ on the sacramental altar is the incarnate Christ.<sup>141</sup>

For Rupert, to have knowledge of and union with Christ is to be in relationship with God as an existing person.<sup>142</sup> In his commentary on John, Rupert asserts that his encounters with Jesus are with the human, physical Jesus. In *Glory and Honour*, he speaks of having eight visions, some of which are suggestive of visions described later by women mystics. In them, Rupert sees Christ in human form. When Rupert can no longer see him he spends the nights waiting for his return, embracing and kissing his image on a crucifix. In his seventh vision, Christ comes to life from the crucifix, embraces Rupert, and kisses him.<sup>143</sup> Recalling the visceral sweetness of feeling Jesus, Rupert remembers, “O taste and see that the Lord is good.”<sup>144</sup> His reports are intimations of later accounts by women who speak of tasting, smelling, and touching the human Christ during their rapturous unions.<sup>145</sup> Juliana of Mont-Cornillon, for example, is said, beginning when she was five, to have experienced the taste of sweetness in taking the Eucharist:

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there is some dispute about whether the heretical doctrine should be attributed to Rupert, noting that the language he used when writing about the issue is ambiguous. John of Paris is more justifiably considered the champion of the doctrine, the Encyclopedia asserts. Similarly, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Albert Hauck, Samuel Macauley Jackson; Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1908) says that while Rupert “would have inclined toward the doctrine of impanation,” there is no substantive proof that he “taught not only consubstantial impanation, but also hypostatic impanation . . .”

[http://books.google.com/books?id=wvYtAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA114&lpg=PA114&dq=Rupert+of+Deutz&source=web&ots=XouCD84ZX&sig=3LDPziBWAf\\_GY8wOy7HmX8i7ko8&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=10&ct=result#PPA115.M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=wvYtAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA114&lpg=PA114&dq=Rupert+of+Deutz&source=web&ots=XouCD84ZX&sig=3LDPziBWAf_GY8wOy7HmX8i7ko8&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=10&ct=result#PPA115.M1)), 115.

<sup>141</sup> Van Engen, 139.

<sup>142</sup> See Young, *The Fourth Gospel in the Twelfth Century: Rupert of Deutz On The Gospel Of John*. Section 1.

<sup>143</sup> Young, from Rupert, *Glory and Honour*, CCM 29, pp 382-3.

<sup>144</sup> Young, *The Fourth Gospel in the Twelfth Century: Rupert of Deutz On The Gospel Of John*. Section 1.

<sup>145</sup> Like some of the commentary about other religious writers, Rupert’s accounts have been thought by some to contain elements of homoeroticism (see especially Barbara Newman’s “Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation,” *Church History* 54, no. 2 (1985), 163-75). However, Young says that, “Since the object of the vision and its retelling seems to be the arousing not of desire but devotion, it is hard to see how it can have been in any real sense erotic or homoerotic. A vivid physicality is characteristic of Christian mystical writing and its biblical foundation and to see it as erotic in the modern literary sense is, I think, to miss the point altogether, i.e., that the immediacy and power of the mystic’s contact with the living God is such that it can only be expressed in physical terms.”

From childhood, in fact, she began to conceive for this marvellous sacrament an affection that was far from childish. At first she felt a wonderful inner sweetness infused by the Holy Spirit at the hour of sacrifice, as if her heart were overflowing with water; and she prayed in the sight of the Most High that she might more fully experience the grace of the sweetness she had tasted. Day by day, she was rendered more capable by her vehement desire of receiving what she longed for, so that the fervour of her devotion increased until, when she was praying at the hour of the Sacrament, she could scarcely be torn away from the torrent of her pleasure. There was nothing in which she could take more delight than if she were permitted to prolong that time of prayer and sweet savour. But her foster mother and sisters, prudently deferring to her tender years, if not to her devotion, drew her away from prayer and compelled her to interrupt the taste of spiritual delights—a thing she found irksome.<sup>146</sup>

The Eucharist provided religious women such as Juliana with a practice by which they could encounter Christ's physicality in an emotionally intoxicating experience.

Eating Christ's body became more than a sacrament; it escalated in their minds to a physical union, a marriage, a suckling at the breasts. The imagery they portray in describing ecstatic encounters by way of the sacrament are sensuous and rapturous.

Hadewijch describes the feeling of being with Christ after coming to her during the sacrament:

Then it was to me as if we were one without difference. It was thus: outwardly, to see, to taste, and feel, as one can outwardly see, taste, and feel in the reception of the outward Sacrament. So can the Beloved, with the loved one, each wholly receive the other in all full satisfaction of the sight, hearing, and the passing away of one in the other.<sup>147</sup>

The Eucharistic visions of being with Christ make her possessive of him, jealous of other brides who may have a higher place in Christ's heart than she: "Yet, I have never been able, dear child, to bear the thought that anyone prior to me should have loved him more

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<sup>146</sup> *The Life of Blessed Juliana of Mont-Cornillon*, 1:2.

<sup>147</sup> Hadewijch of Brabant, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*. Trans. Mother Columba Hart. Series of The Classics of Western Spirituality, (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 281-82.

than I. I do believe, however, that there were many who loved him as much and as ardently, and yet I cannot endure it that anyone should know or love him so intensely as I have done."<sup>148</sup>

Affective devotion continued to develop throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Various forms flourished in northern France, Belgium, and parts of northern Germany, in part because interest in an emotionally felt spiritual life was strong among women who belonged to the Orders of Premontre, Citeaux, and St. Dominic, as well as among the beguines in Orleans, Tours, and across northern France. It also occurred in Italy, especially with Catherine of Siena, whose writings focus on the maternity of Christ with imagery that combines the erotic with the nurturing:

With that, he tenderly placed his right hand on her neck, and drew her towards the wound in his side. "Drink, daughter, from my side," he said, "and by that draught your soul shall become enraptured with such delight that your very body, which for my sake you have denied, shall be inundated with its overflowing goodness." Drawn close in this way to the outlet of the Fountain of Life, she fastened her lips upon that sacred wound, and still more eagerly the mouth of her soul, and there she slaked her thirst.<sup>149</sup>

The language and imagery of affective love are employed to speak of an emotionally loving relationship with the physical Christ. The sensual references to physicality are compelling devices to articulate this theme. The Eucharist in particular is a central focus for affective love because it provides the opportunity for devotees to declare the depth of emotion they experience when they most intimately feel themselves take Christ into them.<sup>150</sup> Rupert of Deutz, Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Saint Thierry, and others established the precedent for affective devotion, but women such as

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<sup>148</sup> Hadewijch, 69.

<sup>149</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Conleth Kearns (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1980), 156. Also quoted in Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 172.

<sup>150</sup> For a discussion of this, see Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, throughout.

Hadewijch, Hildegard, Mechthild, and others constructed a more ecstatic, more visceral experience than did the men. They described experiencing the human Christ by following the model of an emotional, sensually responsive relationship with any human being. They used as sources the vocabulary provided by Bernard and others, as well as the poetry of courtly love. Their writing created a genre that is not substantively different than that of men who reported visions or miracles, but there are qualitative differences in imagery and vocabulary that would not have taken the form it did without the influences of Bernard and courtly love. These will be discussed in the following two sections.

### Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard of Clairvaux had a significant influence on the language, theology, and imagery found in the writing of women such as Hildegard, Gertrude of Helfta, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mechthild of Hackeborn, and her sister Gertrude of Hackeborn.<sup>151</sup> Others also had influence—Hugh of Saint Victor, Rupert of Deutz, and William of Saint Thierry, for example—but because Bernard was so widely read, his was a template for expressing the primacy of love as the path to God.<sup>152</sup> Bernardian mysticism and affective mysticism are viewed by some as synonymous.<sup>153</sup> Juliana of Mont-Cornillon was like many women, as well as men, who were moved by reading his sermons on *The Song of Songs*.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Bynum says the nuns of Helfta, in particular, “appear to have felt a special reverence for the great twelfth-century Cistercian, Bernard,” *Jesus as Mother*, 175.

<sup>152</sup> About 111 twelfth- and early thirteenth-century manuscripts of Bernard’s sermons on the *Song of Songs* are known to exist. For this many to have survived, manuscripts of his sermons must have been widespread, which is an indicator of his popularity. See From: *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, Vol. I. Sermones Super Cantica Cantorum 1-35. Ed. Jean Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, and H. M. Rochais. (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957), xxiii. For more on Bernard’s influence, see Mark Atherton’s introduction to *Hildegard of Bingen, Selected Writings*, London: Penguin, 2001), xvi.

<sup>153</sup> See Moller, “Social Causes,” 305.

<sup>154</sup> *The Life of Blessed Juliana of Mont-Cornillon*, 1:1

His writing, however, usually has a different sound than that of the women considered in this essay. For one thing, Bernard, in contrast to the women considered here, does not claim to have visions; he claims only to have experiences of rapturous love such that the soul conforms to God's love in a spiritual marriage: "Such conformity unites the soul to the Word. Already resembling him by nature, it begins to do so also by will. It loves as it is loved. If it loves God perfectly, then it is wed to him."<sup>155</sup>

Another difference is that Bernard's discussion of union with Christ, especially in his sermons on *The Song of Songs*, was stylistically moderate in its use of sensuous language—moderate, that is, compared to Hadewijch and others. Using metaphor and allegory, Bernard describes what the body feels: the touch of the lips with "the kiss of the kiss of his mouth," described in the first line in the *Canticles*,<sup>156</sup> the smell of the Bride's ointment,<sup>157</sup> the taste of Christ's "fullness,"<sup>158</sup> the sound of the Bridegroom's words.<sup>159</sup> His vocabulary is meant to get across the feeling of closeness and intensity that one should bring to loving Jesus and his sermons follow the monastic tradition of employing the sexual imagery of the *Song of Songs* to depict the ascent of the soul to God.<sup>160</sup>

However, when Hildegard and others wrote about their mystical experiences with Christ, the imagery may have been drawn from Bernard—especially in describing sensuous physicality—but they intensified it to reflect the ecstatic, rapturous nature of their visions. Their imagery focuses on the physicality of both Christ's body and their own, which follows from Bernard's instruction to begin the journey to God by connecting

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<sup>155</sup> Sermon 83:3. See Halflants, xxiv, for a discussion of Bernard's spiritual marriage with God.

<sup>156</sup> Song, 1:1. SCC, 3:4.

<sup>157</sup> SCC, 10:6.

<sup>158</sup> SCC, 2:3.

<sup>159</sup> SCC, 9:7.

<sup>160</sup> See Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*, 105.



with the humanity of Christ. He says that the “invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with men as a man” because he desired “to recapture the affections of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love.”<sup>161</sup>

Gertrude of the Great of Helfta expresses this view when she says, “Oh, if what I’m yearning for happened to me here and I were granted my dear wish and, in truth, you turned to me and refreshed me with the very pleasant kiss of your favor! . . . I might seize you in my innermost [self] and kiss you so warmly that, truly united with you, I might cling inseparably to you.”<sup>162</sup>

Others write about a more intensely sensual experience of God’s humanity, including Hadewijch’s fervid recollection:

My heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire and, as often occurred with me, such madness and fear beset my mind that it seemed to me that if I did not content my Beloved, and my Beloved did not fulfil my desire, dying I must go mad, and going mad I must die. On that day my mind was beset so fearfully and so painfully by desirous love that all my separate limbs threatened to break . . . he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported.<sup>163</sup>

Angela of Foligno’s visions are especially vivid in her use of sensual imagery to describe her encounters with the physical Christ. Relating the twenty steps of her spiritual journey, she reports standing in front of a crucifix, stripping herself naked, and offering her body to Christ, who shows her “his afflictions from head to toe.” She says that whenever she goes to the cross, “I would need to strip myself in order to be lighter and go naked to it,”

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<sup>161</sup> *SCC*, 20:6.

<sup>162</sup> Gertrude the Great, *Spiritual Exercises*, 80.

<sup>163</sup> Mother Columba Hart, ed., *Hadewijch, The Complete Works*, 1980, Vision 7, 280-281.

thereby making herself like the naked, suffering Christ.<sup>164</sup> In another of her visions, Christ is on the cross asking her to drink from the bleeding gashes in his side. She “saw and drank the blood, which was freshly flowing from his side.”<sup>165</sup> Throughout her visions, Angela does not differentiate between the Eucharistic wafer and Christ’s actual flesh: “this beauty which I see makes me conclude with the utmost certainty and without a shadow of a doubt that I am seeing God.”<sup>166</sup> When she takes the host into her mouth, she says she would like to hold it there for a “great while” and that “when it descends into my body it produces in me a most pleasant sensation, and this can be detected outwardly because it makes me shake so violently that I must make a great effort to take the chalice.” She says “it does not have the taste of any known bread or meat. It has most certainly a meat taste, but one very different and most savory.”<sup>167</sup> In another vision, Angela is in Christ’s tomb being embraced by him and feeling the wounds of his body in hers. Her confessor, the Franciscan Arnaldo recounts what she told him:

She said she had first of all kissed Christ’s breast—and saw that he lay dead, with his eyes closed—then she kissed his mouth, from which . . . a delightful fragrance emanated . . . she placed her cheek on Christ’s own and he . . . placed his hand on her cheek, pressing her closely to him.<sup>168</sup>

These reports by women of rapturous meetings with Jesus in their marriage bed and elsewhere persisted in the literature. Margery Kempe, for example, wrote in the early fifteenth century of Christ telling her to use the intimate “thy” so that “you may boldly when you are in your bed take me to you as thy wedded husband and your dear worthy

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<sup>164</sup> Paul Lachance, trans., *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, 126.

<sup>165</sup> Lachance 128.

<sup>166</sup> Lachance 146.

<sup>167</sup> Lachance 186.

<sup>168</sup> Lachance, 182.

darling and you may boldly kiss my mouth.”<sup>169</sup>

Bernard taught that one must begin the journey to salvation with carnal love because it is man’s most basic understanding of Christ. Carnal love is perfected when it becomes spiritual, but that can be attained only with the help of the Spirit.<sup>170</sup> Carnal love is not spiritual love, however, and female mystics influenced by Bernard sometimes fused the two together, whereas Bernard kept them distinct.

The contrast between the moderation of Bernard and the sensuous intensity of women such as Hadewijch and Angela is also apparent in comparing William of Saint Thierry to these women mystics. Like Bernard, William uses the sensual language of the body to describe the love story between Christ and his bride, representing either the Church or the soul. The men are similar too in their use of metaphor that does not veer toward the erotic. William writes, “With the full embrace of charity, she draws him into her heart. Presenting her lips, as it were, for his kiss, she cries: “You whom my soul loves!”<sup>171</sup> Speaking to Christ, William says, “she has known the hour when the face of your beauty shone upon her, since she loves you thus; she has felt the breath of your mouth, since she sighs for you thus; she has experienced the sweetness of your embraces, since she abandons herself so intimately in you.”<sup>172</sup> The metaphorical nature of his use of language is especially apparent in his discussion of Christ’s breasts:

[The Bride] must recollect her entire being in understanding and nourish her soul at leisure with the fruit of spiritual knowledge, she must return to the memory of the storerooms and the breasts of the Bridegroom. That is, as has been said, she

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<sup>169</sup> Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Trans. Lynn Staley (New York: Norton, 1991), Ch. 36, p. 67.

<sup>170</sup> *SCC*, 20:9.

<sup>171</sup> William of St. Thierry, *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, in *The Works of William of St. Thierry* Vol. II. Trans. Mother Columba Hart. Cistercian Fathers Series 6. (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970), 1:53. Hereafter, *ESS*.

<sup>172</sup> *ESS*, 1:55.

must take refuge in the comfort of the Scriptures. The two Testaments are for her the two breasts of the Bridegroom. From them is to be sucked the milk of all the mysteries accomplished in time for our eternal salvation, in order to attain to the food which is the Word of God, God with God. For Christ, in his humility, is our milk; God, equal with God, he is our food. Milk nourished, and food brings about growth. But it is in the storerooms that these breasts are given in suck, because these mysteries are understood in the Scriptures. The Bride sucked at the breasts when she first understood; she remembers the breasts when she meditates in what she has understood. Here she finds exultation for her body and joy for her soul; for after corruption her body is promised incorruption, and her soul is promised the vision of God; and in the love of God, her uprightness is duly ordered.<sup>173</sup>

William and Bernard differed somewhat in that William placed more emphasis on scriptural meditation than on Christ's humanity. But by the mid-thirteenth century, Bernard's model was dominant, having become the center of religious women's spirituality. The women's focus is on the need for a loving relationship with the human Christ as the first step toward union with God. They also used some of the literary devices Bernard employed to poetically describe that relationship, transforming Bernard's metaphorical descriptions into ecstatic, sometimes erotic, imagery. The fourteenth-century German recluse Dorothea of Montau combined various of these elements in describing her experience as the bride of Jesus when Christ and Mary

began to push the spears by their shafts deeper into the heart of the bride, to press them stronger into her and stick them so deep into her, as if they wanted to push out her heart through her back. (God says to her:) "I have now stuck two hard, dark and giant spears into your heart, in order that you and your friends really know and can openly admit that you have an enormously potent bridegroom."<sup>174</sup>

Similarly Gertrude of the Great Helfta wrote: "All words that she [Gertrude] sang appeared like a pointed lance, that went from her heart to the heart of Jesus, excited it in the innermost chamber, penetrated it in the innermost chamber and excited infinite joy . . .

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<sup>173</sup> *ESS*, 1:46.

<sup>174</sup> In Ralph Frenken, "Childhood and Fantasies of Medieval Mystics," *The Journal of Psychohistory*, 28, no. 2 (Fall 2000), 150-272, (<http://www.primal-page.com/frenken.htm> ).

. At the barb of the lance, drops appeared in vast quantity. . .”<sup>175</sup>

Several influences contributed to this transformation. Among them is that men and women feel and think about their experiences in different ways. Speculating about that difference, however, is outside the scope of this project. Instead, this discussion will briefly consider how Bernard and others used the language and emotion of affective love and will provide examples of women who were influenced by his sermons and other writing.

Bernard’s contemporary, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), for example, wrote to him about her divine revelations. By seeking his approval and beseeching him to listen to her stories of divine visitation, Hildegard implies that she knows about his work and expects him to be sympathetic.<sup>176</sup> We know that Bernard was important to her because he recommended her writings to Pope Eugenius III, who then gave approval for publication. When she wrote to Bernard in 1147 that she has secrets and mystical truths to reveal, the implication is that she had reason to believe her revelations were of a kind Bernard would embrace. When she tells him, “I have from earliest childhood seen great marvels which my tongue has no power to express,” she referred in part to the kind of imagery Bernard used in his own discussion of union with Christ.<sup>177</sup> Just as Bernard sometimes feminized

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<sup>175</sup> Gertrude the Great of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, trans. and ed. Margaret Winkworth. (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 35. Winkworth does not include all chapters in her edition, and the quote is from the introduction rather than from within the text itself. Also quoted in Frenken.

<sup>176</sup> For example, Mark Atherton says that Bernard “was an obvious person for Hildegard to appeal to” because he was a “widely known author and by then a venerable figure.” Bernard, he says, was “the great churchman of her day” whose writings “were extremely influential in the period.” Atherton also compares the two styles, finding them similar in their freedom of expression. *Selected Writings: Hildegard of Bingen*, Penguin, ix, xvi, xvii, 3. Similarly, Baird states in *The Personal Correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen: Selected Letters* Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), that Hildegard had “open admiration” for Bernard, p. 16. Even Dante knew about and admired Bernard, placing him among the highest of the souls in heaven (*Paradiso*, Canto XXXI). Cynthia Stewart says he was “perhaps the most powerful man of his time.” *The Catholic Church: A Brief Popular History*, 201.

<sup>177</sup> Hildegard’s letter to Bernard, 1147. *Personal Correspondence*, Letter 1, p. 17.

God by applying maternal characteristics, Hildegard characterized a divine presence in the world as feminine.<sup>178</sup> She said “man signifies the divinity of the Son of God, woman His humanity.”<sup>179</sup>

Hildegard was influenced by others as well, especially Rupert of Deutz, for whom she wrote a series of devotional songs.<sup>180</sup> The cross-pollination of ideas, imagery, and theology among the genre’s writers is apparent in their references to each other.

Hildegard, for example, wrote to Odo of Soissons, Saint Disibod, Hartwig of Bremen, Saint Ursula, Elisabeth of Schonau (f. ca. 1155) , Gertrude of Stahleck (f. ca. 1160), and others. Each had their own voice, but each also combined aspects drawn from others.

Among the commonalities was the influence of Bernard. The genre of affective love literature that developed during the next hundred years began with references that are implicitly Bernardian and then combined these with other influences, thereby

transforming them into their own voice. This is true of the ascetic Jutta of Spanheim (f. ca. 1125) , Elizabeth of Schonau and her brother, Egbert of Schonau, as well as the beguine Christine of Stommeln (f. ca. 1270).<sup>181</sup>

It is not that Bernard and his sermons were the only or even the primary

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<sup>178</sup> She may be referring to something like the Judaic concept of Shekhinah, often described as the feminine presence of God. See Exodus 14:20; 40:34-38; Leviticus 9:23, 24; Numbers 14:10; 16:19, 42. It also appears in Christian writings, sometimes as the Holy Spirit. For an informative article on the subject and especially a twelfth-century Cistercian connection, see Arthur Green, “Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in its Historical Context.” *AJS Review* 26, no. 1 (Apr. 2002), 1-52.

<sup>179</sup> See Cynthia Steward, *The Catholic Church: A Brief Popular History*, Winona, Minnesota: St. Mary’s Press, 2008, p. 203, fn. 3.

<sup>180</sup> See especially “Appendix: The *Symphonia* and the ‘Epilogue to the Life of St. Rupert’” in Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia*. A Critical Edition of the *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* [Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Trans. and ed. Barbara Newman. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 68-73.

<sup>181</sup> Elisabeth of Schönau: 1129-1165, Mechthild of Magdeburg: 1207-1282, Christine of Stommeln: 1242-1312, Jutta of Spanheim: d. 1136 (She was the abbess when Hildegard joined the nunnery.) Hildegard is considered the “first” female visionary and contemporary of Bernard., Egbert of Schönau: brother of Elisabeth, became a monk in 1155.

influences for all mystical accounts of this period. Other twelfth-century writers offered their own version of the bride/bridegroom motif, sometimes using the *Song of Songs*, sometimes not. Rupert of Deutz, for example, saw the *Song's* kiss as the incarnate Christ offering the union that could be consummated only by the Holy Spirit.<sup>182</sup> In a hymn written for Heloise, Peter Abelard said the Holy Spirit provides consummation as the conjugal “Lord and Giver of Life,” able to nurture and impregnate.<sup>183</sup> William of Saint Thierry wrote similarly about the “bridegroom and bride” in the conjugal bed to explain the soul’s relationship to God.<sup>184</sup> Gueric of Igny (d. 1157), ambiguously, used bridal and maternal imagery in saying that just as Christ grew in Mary, Christ grows in those who seek union with him.<sup>185</sup>

For Christian religious writers ranging from Augustine and Ambrose to Bernard and his contemporaries, as well as those who followed him in the late twelfth through fourteenth centuries, the blending of the carnal and the spiritual is one aspect of the journey described in allegories of the Church or the soul as bride and Christ as groom.<sup>186</sup> However, in the accounts of many women, it is their soul, their self, who is the bride, not

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<sup>182</sup> Wanda Zemier-Cizewski says that Rupert believes “The impudent bride who demands a kiss is sexually immature, like so many of the little aristocratic child-brides of Rupert's day. The kiss is the incarnation, and as her bridegroom decorously kisses her through the lattice of her window, but does not fully embrace her, so also the words of Christ before his resurrection and ascension are addressed to an immature band of followers, not yet capable of bringing forth offspring to his name. For, as Rupert remarks, nobody ever made anyone pregnant with a kiss. When, at last, the Spirit is sent forth on the day of Pentecost, it is as if the marriage is consummated, because the Holy Spirit has the power to penetrate the souls of the Apostles so as to make them pregnant by the Word.” “The Lord, the Giver of Life: A Reflection on the Theology of the Holy Spirit in the Twelfth Century”, *Anglican Theological Review*, (Summer 2001).

<http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy.lib.utk.edu:90/ehost/detail?vid=5&hid=6&sid=0400e441-1d1f-4ea7-8591-929e4aeb44ee%40sessionmgr2&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtOGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=5283761>.

<sup>183</sup> Zemier-Cizewski.

<sup>184</sup> Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 119.

<sup>185</sup> Gueric of Igny, *Sermons*, 52:1.

<sup>186</sup> The primary Biblical source for this is Ephesians 5:22-33 (“For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church . . .”). Also see Revelation 22:17, Matthew 22:1-14 and 9:14-15, Mark 2:18-20, Luke 5:33-35.

the Church, and the experience described is far more sensual and far more deeply felt, both emotionally and physically. While theirs seems a more visceral experience of union than is found in Bernard and other early religious writing, their words and imagery are clearly drawn from the genre of affective love on which Bernard, especially his sermons on *The Song of Songs*, had perhaps the most influence.

Still, when Bernard says that he asks of the Lord “that he kiss me with the kiss of his mouth,” he is clearly not presuming “that it is with his mouth I shall be kissed.” Rather, it is the kiss that marks “the uniting of God with man.”<sup>187</sup> This is the doctrine that shaped his affective devotion—the mystical embrace of Christ in a reciprocal relationship of devoted love that can, with grace, be experienced by anyone: “. . . every soul, if it is vigilant and careful in the practice of all the virtues, can arrive at this holy repose and enjoy the embraces of the Bridegroom.”<sup>188</sup> It is first necessary, however, to understand that the erotically carnal, or “natural,” passions must be under control: “The soul must be in control of its passions if it is to become the dwelling place of God . . . this soul is worthy of the caresses of the Bridegroom”<sup>189</sup> The natural passions can be set aside if one has sufficient affection for Jesus, which “should be both tender and intimate, to oppose the sweet enticements of sensual life. Sweetness conquers sweetness as one nail drives out another.”<sup>190</sup>

Bernard’s theological basis for the sermons can be divided into three categories: anthropology, which works out the relationship between the soul and the body, that is the

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<sup>187</sup> SCC, 2:1-3.

<sup>188</sup> M. Corneille Halfants, introduction to Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Sermon 57:4, 11,

p. x.

<sup>189</sup> SCC 69:1. See Halfants, xvii.

<sup>190</sup> SCC 20:4. See Halfants, xx.



human interaction with the divine that can lead to union; Christology, which describes union with Christ; and Ecclesiology, which is a treatise on the Church as Christ's bride.<sup>191</sup> Like his contemporary, Rupert, Bernard disavowed intellectual mysticism as insufficient, saying that the path to God is found in the unique way each person arrives at a heartfelt love for the divine, not in gaining knowledge by way of contemplation. The person seeking God, he says, should feel the love between himself and the divine, and the feeling of that relationship will be different for each person: "Now it is necessary that the relish of the divine presence should vary on account of the varying desires of the soul, and that the taste of heavenly sweetness should be felt on the soul's palate differently for each soul."<sup>192</sup> The love that results from this experience is consuming, leaving no place for cognitive understanding: "When love comes, it draws everything else into itself and makes all feeling captive to itself."<sup>193</sup>

Much of Bernard's anthropology is based on the assertion in Genesis that the soul is created in the image and likeness (*imago et similitudo*) of God, and thus is a part of God. Since the Fall, man's soul, or bride, desires to reunite with God.<sup>194</sup> The physical person housing the soul knows best his physical body, and thus can best experience Christ as a physical person. For this reason, Bernard uses the sensual imagery of the body as a pedagogical tool. He says that the "invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with men as a man" because he desired "to recapture the affections of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love

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<sup>191</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 168ff.

<sup>192</sup> SCC 31: 3.7 Also quoted in Andrew Louth, "Bernard and affective mysticism," *Influence of Saint Bernard*, 5.

<sup>193</sup> SCC 83: 1.3 Louth, 5.

<sup>194</sup> SCC, 24:5.

of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love.”<sup>195</sup>

By beginning with the love of Jesus incarnate, men proceed toward the higher love of the spirit. Following Bernard, when women describe their experiences of union with Christ, they center their accounts on the physicality of both Christ’s body and their own because they could feel their body in ways that made the emotional love visceral. Gertrude the Great, for example says, “Oh, if what I’m yearning for happened to me here and I were granted my dear wish and, in truth, you turned to me and refreshed me with the very pleasant kiss of your favor! . . . I might seize you in my innermost [self] and kiss you so warmly that, truly united with you, I might cling inseparably to you.”<sup>196</sup> By beginning with a kiss from the mouth of Christ, Gertrude says she could move toward the higher union referred to by Bernard.

In Bernard’s Ecclesiology, the Church is described as the Bride of Christ,<sup>197</sup> the highest form of the soul,<sup>198</sup> and the body of Christ.<sup>199</sup> He says the *Song of Songs* is “the love song of Christ and the church.”<sup>200</sup> It is also the text that more than any other was allegorically interpreted for its mystical possibilities, beginning with Origen’s commentaries.<sup>201</sup> For Origen, the beloved can be thought of as the soul of the bridegroom made in the image of the word of God or the beloved can be the Church, which are the

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<sup>195</sup> SCC, 20:6.

<sup>196</sup> Gertrude the Great, *Spiritual Exercises*, 80. Also see McGinn, *Flowering*, who says that for Bernard, God became incarnate because “Jesus, the God-man, is lovable on the most basic level of human attraction, that of the flesh,” 174.

<sup>197</sup> SCC, 12:10, 21:1ff.

<sup>198</sup> SCC, 27:10-11

<sup>199</sup> SCC, 12:7.

<sup>200</sup> McGinn, *Flowering*, 177. Origen, (d. ca. 254), Ambrose (d. 397) and Gregory of Nyssa (d. ca. 395) are just three early examples of the marital language used to describe Christ and the Church.

<sup>201</sup> For a discussion of the impact on the mystical tradition in Christianity, see F. B. A. Asiedu, *The Song of Songs and the Ascent of the Soul: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Language of Mysticism, Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (2001), pp. 299-317. For Origen, see *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies*, Ancient Christian Writers No. 26, New York: Newman Press, 1956.

interpretations Bernard and other commentators use.<sup>202</sup> When Ambrose of Milan wrote about the text, his discussion uses the *Song*'s erotic imagery to describe the soul's yearning to unite with God, whereas Augustine's writing on the topic either downplays or omits the use of erotic imagery, especially that of the kiss.<sup>203</sup>

Bernard draws upon Ambrose, not Augustine, for his sermons on *The Song of Songs*. The language used by Bernard as well as Hadewijch and other women mystics is reminiscent of Ambrose. He speaks, for example, of Christ mounting the soul at the culmination of the nuptials, when seeds are implanted in the spiritual womb.<sup>204</sup> However, unlike the imagery drawn by many women, Ambrose did not depict the soul embracing Jesus as a man. Instead, using the analogy of conjugal love, Ambrose speaks of the kiss as the beginning of a "ladder of ascent" toward union with God or the Word or Christ, but not with the physical Jesus:

For it is with the kiss that lovers cleave to each other and gain possession of the sweetness of grace that is within, so to speak. Through such a kiss the soul cleaves to God the Word, and through the kiss the spirit of him who kisses is poured into the soul, just as those who kiss are not satisfied to touch lightly with their lips but appear to be pouring their spirit into each other.<sup>205</sup>

For Bernard, the goal is to unite the earthly church with the heavenly church of Jerusalem, "the bride,"<sup>206</sup> which he says is analogous to the union of Christ and the Bride: 'I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.'<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> See Asiedu, 300.

<sup>203</sup> Asiedu thinks Augustine thought the use of erotic imagery was inappropriate. See p. 300.

<sup>204</sup> See Asiedu, 306, 311.

<sup>205</sup> *De Isaac uel anima*, in *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works*, trans. Micheal P. McHugh, Father of the Church, vol. 65, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1972, 65, 16. From Asiedu, 304.

<sup>206</sup> *SCC*, 24:7.

<sup>207</sup> *SCC*, 27:6; *Rev*, 21:2.

Bernard's Christology, especially as he describes it in the sermons on the *Song of Songs*, is a three-stage process by which man can unite with God. One moves from carnal love of Christ to a spiritual love of God. In Bernard's Christology, the steps of the "kiss" are aids to be used for spiritual growth.<sup>208</sup>

The template for women's descriptions of their mystical visions incorporated this bridal imagery, but drew even more from Bernard's advice that, when praying, one should keep in mind the "sacred image of the God-man, in his birth or infancy or as he was teaching, or dying, or rising, or ascending."<sup>209</sup> The focus, always, must be on Christ as human.<sup>210</sup> When women or men speak of their desire for the infant, suckling Christ or the dying, suffering Christ, they were following Bernard's instruction. Margaret of Oignt, for example, describes herself as a mother cradling the infant Christ in her arms.<sup>211</sup> Gertrude had visions of holding the infant Jesus so that "not even a thin napkin should separate me from You, whose embracing and kisses surpass the sweetness of honey."<sup>212</sup> The fourteenth-century German mystic, Henry Suso, a Dominican, has visions of himself as a mother wanting to suckle God.<sup>213</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx differs from all of them in that he meditated on the infant Jesus in addition to describing Jesus as a

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<sup>208</sup> *SCC*, 3:2.

<sup>209</sup> *SCC*, 20:6.

<sup>210</sup> McGinn explains this part of Bernard's Christology as God providing us "with the necessary starting point, the carnal love of the flesh of the God-man. We begin to love the spirit, though still in a carnal way, when we are struck with sorrow at the remembrance of his death for us. This can lead us on to the third stage, loving the flesh in a spiritual way when we recognize that our redemption takes place through this saving death of Christ's flesh. Finally, we love the spirit of Christ spiritually when we become one with him in his Resurrection and Ascension into heaven, the events through which his flesh become glorified and fully spiritual." McGinn, *Flowering*, 176.

<sup>211</sup> Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 149, n. 134. Also, Bridget of Sweden reported visions of the infant Jesus, but not of herself suckling him.

<sup>212</sup> Gertrude the Great of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 2.16, p. 117.

<sup>213</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, 103, 288.

nursing mother.<sup>214</sup> The early fourteenth century mystic Margaret Ebner feels Jesus thrusting himself into her heart and then feels her body swelling, as if pregnant.<sup>215</sup> In another vision, Margaret nurses the infant Christ after he begs her to suckle him:

I have a statue of our Lord as a child in the manger. I was powerfully attracted to it by my Lord with delight and desire and by His gracious request. This was spoken to me by my Lord: "If you do not suckle me, then I will draw away from you and you will take no delight in me." So I took the image out of the crib and placed it against my naked heart with great delight and sweetness. . . . I am set afire by the ardent love coming from Him and am filled up by His presence and by His sweet grace so that I am drawn into the true enjoyment of His divine essence.<sup>216</sup>

Julian of Norwich, referring to Jesus as "our tender mother," says she was led into his "blessed breast through his sweet open side, therein showing in part the Godhead and the joys of heaven."<sup>217</sup> In a different vision, Julian meets the dying, suffering Christ: "Blodeleshede and peyne dryden within and blowyng of wynde and cold commyng fro withouten metten togeder in the swete body of Criste."<sup>218</sup> Hadewijch's devotion to the God-man sometimes takes convoluted turns; at times she speaks of herself as female in relationship to Christ, at other times as male. She also sometimes takes the male role during erotic unions with the female allegory of divine love, Lady *Minne*, which Hadewijch conflates with Christ, referring to him as "her": ". . . Love blinds me to such a

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<sup>214</sup> Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 119.

<sup>215</sup> Visions of pregnancy occur somewhat frequently among women visionaries, often related to thinking about the Eucharist as becoming pregnant with Christ. However, most examples are ambiguous at best and in some cases the reference may be to being pregnant by Christ rather than being pregnant with Christ. Bynum in *Holy Feast* notes that Ida of Louvain swelled as if pregnant with Christ (203). In the fourteenth century Christina Ebner (1277-1355) also dreamed of being pregnant with Jesus and Dorothy of Montau reported a mystical pregnancy as part of her preparation for communion (136, 257).

<sup>216</sup> Leonard P. Hindsley, ed., trans., *Margaret Ebner, Major Works*, New York: Paulist Press, 1993, p. 132.

<sup>217</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love, Translated From British Library Additional MS 37790 : The Motherhood of God : an Excerpt, Translated From British Library MS Sloane 2477*. Library of Medieval Women, 1369-9652 Ed. Francis Beer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), ch. LX, p. 66. Ebook.

<sup>218</sup> Julian of Norwich, *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*. Ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton. Originally Published in *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*. TEAMS Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994). <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/julianfr.htm>.

degree that when I can taste and feel her it is enough for me. . . .”<sup>219</sup> More often, she takes the female role, calling herself the “Love/ress of Love,” saying to *Minne/Christ*, “The young maidens are melted away in you, and love with violent longing” and, describing another encounter, “. . . in the sweetness of clasping, in the fond embrace, in the sweet kiss, and in the heartfelt experience when *Minne* actually speaks, ‘I am the one who holds you in my embrace!’”<sup>220</sup>

Just as these writers drew from the theology, vocabulary, and imagery of Bernard’s bride/groom motif, so some drew from the darker, haunted aspect of his writing. The love one should have for Jesus should be without limit; sometimes it is both violent and narcissistic. One is expected to submit entirely, with no reservations about the misery that will result from the longing for Christ’s presence.<sup>221</sup> These themes recur in the writing of both Angela and Hadewijch. Richard of Saint Victor examines it as well in his treatise, *The Four Degrees of Violent Charity*. The four, which are violent but necessary steps preceding union with Christ, are love-wounding, binding, languishing, and disintegration of mind and soul. He likens each of the degrees of spiritual love to its counterpart in sexual love.<sup>222</sup>

When Bernard tells a new monk that if he feels “the stings of temptation . . . suck not so much the wounds as the breasts of the Crucified. . . . He will be your mother, and you will be his son,”<sup>223</sup> he was describing a theology of affective love that resonated with

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<sup>219</sup> Hadewijch, 69.

<sup>220</sup> Wiethaus, 291, 302, 304.

<sup>221</sup> For discussion of this, see Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 166.

<sup>222</sup> See Gervais Durneige, ed., *Les quatre degres de la violente charite*, Textes philosophiques du moyen age, 3 (Paris: J. Vrin, 1955), pp. 127-29. In Karma Lochrie, “Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies,” n. 18.

<sup>223</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, Letter 322, PL 182: col. 527, in Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 117. Also Letter 378 in *Letters of St Bernard of Clairvaux*, 449. First published as the same, by Burns and Oates, (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1953).

women, conjuring images of Jesus as female, as a mother suckling her children.<sup>224</sup>

Combining this with the sexual and conjugal depiction of Christ as a lover and bridegroom provided women a powerful way to express their spirituality. It helped to create a new genre of religious writing, one that employed women's feelings of love, maternal care, physicality, marital connection, and sexual union. This is a more visceral depiction of divine union than that which occurs in the writing of most men, including Bernard.

Even after many in the clergy withdrew their support from women claiming to have visionary or prophetic visitations, the genre persisted. Well into the sixteenth century, for example, Margaret de Navarre writes in the Bernardine tradition about her penitential role as both God's child and God's mother.<sup>225</sup> Its resilience is due largely to the reasons already discussed.

Mechtild's thirteenth-century contemporary, the Dutch mystic Hadewijch, tells of visions that combine the literary devices of courtly love poetry with sensual imagery conjured from the Eucharist:

He came in the form and clothing of a Man, as he was on the day when he gave his Body for the first time . . . he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament, in its outward form . . . and then he gave me to drink from the chalice . . . After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity [*na miere herten begherten. na miere menscheit*]. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> See Bynum, "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality," in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 48.

<sup>225</sup> See Susan Snyder, "Guilty Sisters: Margaret de Navarre, Elizabeth of England, and the Miroir de l'ame Pecheresse," *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Summer, 1997), 445.

<sup>226</sup> Mother Columba Hart, ed., *Hadewijch, The Complete Works*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), Vision 7:64, p. 281.

By appropriating the language and imagery of courtly love, of the Eucharist, as well as of Bernard and others, many religious women write of a more visceral experience of union than was typically found in the earlier writing of Bernard, Rupert, William, and others.



### Chapter Three—Courtly Love

When the French beguine Margaret Porete wrote *The Mirror of Simple Souls* very late in the thirteenth century, she analogized love between a man and a woman to love between the soul and God. In it, she claims that because human love is related to divine love, people can experience union with God in this life without a clerical or other intermediary.<sup>227</sup> Employing the allegorical figures of Reason, Love, and Soul, she co-opts French courtly language, imagery, and concepts—normally used in literature and music to describe the love between a man and a woman—to describe the love between the soul and God. This section will examine the influence of courtly love as one aspect of the cultural milieu in which three women wrote about their experiences on the pathway to uniting their soul with God—Margaret, Hadewijch, and Mechthild of Magdeburg.<sup>228</sup> These women had in common the use of courtly language, but they differed significantly in how they used it. For example, Hadewijch and Mechthild relied heavily on sensory imagery, whereas Margaret used very little of that.

The genre, whose central theme is love (*minne*), evolved during the second half of the twelfth century. A commonality among those using the form is that one can achieve a loving union with God on earth rather than waiting for the afterlife. The language employed is often sensual, relying especially on touch and taste, which prior to the twelfth century had been considered inappropriate in references to God. Different interpretations are drawn about the

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<sup>227</sup> For a discussion of this, see Ellen Louise Babinsky, “The Use of Courtly Language in *le Mirouer des simples ames anienties*,” *Essays in Medieval Studies: Proceedings of the Illinois Medieval Association* 4, (Chicago: Illinois Medieval Association, 1997), 91ff.

<http://www.luc.edu/publications/medieval/vol4/babinsky.html>.

<sup>228</sup> J. Raynaert discusses the influence of courtly love literature in “Hadewijch: mystic poetry and courtly love” in *Medieval Dutch Literature in its European Context*, (New York: Cambridge Press, 1994), 209. Barbara Newman also includes Hadewijch, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Margaret Porete in her study of mystics writing in the genre *La mystique courtoise*, in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 137-167.

issue of whether women such as Hadewijch wrote about their own embodied experience.<sup>229</sup>

The genre's expression tends to take ecstatic or rapturous directions marked by visions and other mystical experience. For example, Hadewijch recalls that:

On a certain Pentecost Sunday I had a vision at dawn. Matins were being sung in the church, and I was present. My heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire and, as often occurred with me, such madness and fear beset my mind that it seemed to me that if I did not content my Beloved, and my Beloved did not fulfil my desire, dying I must go mad, and going mad I must die. On that day my mind was beset so fearfully and so painfully by desirous love that all my separate limbs threatened to break, and all my separate veins were in travail.<sup>230</sup>

The use of sensual language influenced by the courtly love tradition was an aspect of the theological claim that union with God can be attained in this life while still in one's body. Both Bernard of Clairvaux and Mechthild subscribed to this, believing that because God took human physical form as Jesus, it follows that the body can be used to know and achieve union with God because the body has a divine aspect that is perfectible.<sup>231</sup>

Not all women mystics used the language of courtly love to the extent found in

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<sup>229</sup> For a discussion of this, see Gordon Rudy, *Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages*, 4. Among other things, Rudy points out that the surviving accounts of medieval women were frequently written by men and that men are more likely to "celebrate those women's strongly somatic and highly visible piety, but those penned by holy women themselves emphasize theological concepts about the will, the nature of God, the structure of the Trinity, and other topics that pertain to their inner lives and ideas," 74. He faults Bynum and others for failing to recognize this and argues that Mechthild and Margaret reject the somatic, or bodily, piety attributed to women. He asserts that Hadewijch's sensual imagery is not a record of her sensory experiences; rather, it is a device used to discuss spiritual, not carnal, senses: "I argue that Hadewijch, in general, writes in a genre and a style that suggests a physical protagonist actively sensing God with her bodily senses and, in particular, uses language of taste and touch to explain and promote her theological ideas about the structure of the human person and the Trinity and the profound ontological unity between them," 73ff. Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and John Giles Milhaven, *Hadewijch and Her Sisters*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), however, argue that medieval women, including Hadewijch, did write about their embodied experiences. Jantzen, for example, says that Hadewijch "treats the erotic . . . as an actual, though visionary, encounter," 135. Milhaven says that "Hadewijch experienced herself as physically embracing her Beloved," 15, and Marguerite d'Oingt ". . . experienced the experience as of a bodily kind," 103. Rudy's thesis provides useful context for this project, which does not claim that she was recording her sensory experiences; instead I claim here that she was in a lineage of medieval writers who employed the language and sensibility of courtly love to illumine her theological ideas.

<sup>230</sup> *Hadewijch: Complete Works*, Vision 7, p. 280.

<sup>231</sup> See Rudy, 5ff.

the accounts of Margaret, Hadewijch, and Mechthild. However, because they were well known and had a public life, it is likely that they represent a common phenomenon among women mystics in Europe during this period.<sup>232</sup> In addition, mystics and troubadours had an occasionally synergistic effect on each other in that there is evidence of both mystical influence on secular poetry and courtly influence on mystical imagery.<sup>233</sup>

### Margaret Porette

In the prologue to Margaret's *Mirror*, the theme of *l'amour du monde*, or courtly, worldly love, is explicit.

*Here Love speaks:* [ . . . ] Now listen humbly to a brief story of worldly love, and understand that it applies also to divine love.

*The Story:* Once there was a damsel, a king's daughter, great-hearted and noble and worthy of heart; and she lived in a distant land. It happened that this damsel heard tell of all the graciousness and nobility of King Alexander, and at once she wanted to love him for the great fame of his gentle breeding. But this damsel was so far off from this great lord, on whom of her own will she had set her love, that she could neither see him nor possess him; and because of this she was often sad at heart, for no other love than this sufficed her. And when she saw that this far-off love, which within her was so near to her, was without her so far away, she thought to herself that she would comfort her sorrowful heart by making some imagined likeness of her loved one, for love of whom her heart was many a time sorely wounded. So she had a picture painted to represent the likeness of the king whom she loved, as near as she could to the appearance under which she loved him, by the affection of the love and of her other rites of love she could imagine that the king himself was present.

*The Soul:* Truly, says the Soul who had this book made, I speak to you of matters similar to this. I heard tell of a most mighty king, who through his graciousness and his most gracious nobility and generosity was a noble Alexander; but he was so far away from me and I from him that I could find no comfort for myself; and

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<sup>232</sup> McGinn *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 168-170 says, "From the twelfth century on mystics had made use of courtly themes." Cf, 404, n. 69.

<sup>233</sup> See Rudy, 67-100. Also see Raymond Gay-Crosier, *Religious Elements in the Secular Lyrics of the Troubadours*, University of North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures 111, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 88.

to remind me of him, he gave me this book, which in some rites represents the love of him. But even though I have his picture, still I am in a distant land, and far from the palace where the most noble loved ones of this lord dwell, they who are all pure and made perfect and free by the gifts of this king with whom they dwell.<sup>234</sup>

Margaret's writing is an example of this genre as a fully developed literary form, but its roots are in the twelfth century, related in part to the bride/bridegroom allegory of Bernard's sermons on the *Song of Songs* as well as to the theological milieu in which affective love was prominent. Throughout the *Mirror*, Margaret develops courtly imagery by use of concepts such as *courtoisie*, *largesse*, a distant love, the nobility, the monarchy, the gifts of the beloved, and the ecstasy of loving union. This genre flourished among religious women throughout the thirteenth century, most vividly in the writing of the Dutch mystic Hadewijch,<sup>235</sup> whose tales of visionary encounters with Christ often combine the literary devices of courtly love poetry with sensual imagery drawn from her ecstatic experiences of the Eucharist:

He came in the form and clothing of a Man, as he was on the day when he gave his Body for the first time . . . he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament, in its outward form . . . and then he gave me to drink from the chalice . . . After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported.<sup>236</sup>

By appropriating the language and imagery of courtly love, as well as that of the

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<sup>234</sup> Margaret Porette, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Edmund Colledge, J. C. Marler, and Judith Grant, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>235</sup> Paul Mommearns says that Hadewijch was "familiar with French courtly love lyric in a unique way. She mastered the technique of the troubadours to perfection; she played with the love-themes of the southern singers – but she did not simply imitate their profane art. She succeeded in transforming the thematic conventions of this genre to serve her own purpose. She created a new genre – Hadewijch is the first in western European literature to write mystical love lyric." *Hadewijch: writer, Beguine, love mystic*, (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1989), 1. Originally published in Dutch by the same in 1989 as *Hadewijch—Schrijfster, begijn, mystica*.

<sup>236</sup> *Hadewijch, The Complete Works*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), Vision 7:64, p. 281.

Eucharist and of Bernard, these women tell of a more visceral experience of union than was typically found in the earlier writing of Bernard, Rupert, William, and others. Men also wrote of love with the sensuous imagery love and physicality, but their descriptions tend to have a metaphorical, less visceral ring to them; their writing does not portray the rapturous intensity that Hadewijch does when she speaks of her body being held and pressed into Christ. Similarly, when Margaret uses the imagery of courtly love alone, the physicality of Hadewijch is absent, replaced by Platonically idealized concepts. It is the soul that is “consumed in an ecstasy of love” and which is carried higher and closer to being with the beloved. There are no nuptial beds, no thrustings, no arms and legs pressed into Christ’s body.

Margaret’s use of courtly language is most apparent in her description of the fourth, fifth, and sixth stages of the soul seeking union with God. After her soul beats and bruises herself, annihilating her will so that there is a large enough place for love, the fourth stage is an ecstatic experience of love that begins to transcend herself. But in this fourth stage, she still desires. It is in the fifth stage that she understands that apart from God she is nothing and in the sixth the soul is in an abyss of humility in which she cannot see God but God sees himself in her. The *Mirror* focuses on the relationships among these stages, beginning with the attempt to destroy her will so that her soul can please the beloved.

At first she is paralyzed, realizing that she loves herself as well as her beloved. Then she realizes that she could will her soul to “depart from its love by which it has lived, if it thought that by so doing it could live longer.” But this too fails because “it would thus be that it could will this only by willing its own will.” Finally, she transitions

toward the sixth stage by allowing the beloved to raise all the torturous questions that test the limits of her soul's love, then letting go of her will and dissolving into God:

What I would will for the sake of your love. . . . you would will these three things which have been so grievous for me to bear and swear. And I know without doubt that your will would will it without diminishing your divine goodness, and I would will this without willing, anything further. And thus, Lord, my will is killed in saying this. And thus my will is martyred, and my love is martyred: you have guided these to martyrdom . . .<sup>237</sup>

The difficulty she experiences in understanding her love, testing her love, and the eventual finding of the best path to her beloved are the traditional elements of the courtly motif. When Margaret recognizes that loving solely for the sake of loving, rather than loving so that one can be with the beloved, is the way to union, she is following the primary theme of *l'amour du monde*: realization that the highest love is the love that exists only to love, without any consideration of benefit, even the benefit of pleasing the beloved. The soul that is without will and desire can be filled in union with God and after seeing this, the soul is content to reside in Margaret's fifth stage, filled with the contentment of loving. Her conclusion employs all the vocabulary of courtly stories:

For God's sake, why is anyone astounded who has discernment within him, if I say great things and new things, and if I have through All, by All, in All my full sufficiency? My lover is great who gives me a great gift, and so He is all new and gives me a new gift. And so He is fertile and full of abundance of all the blessings of Himself. And I am pregnant and full and abundantly full of the abundances of delights from the flowing goodness of His divine goodness, without seeking it through pain nor through the peddling of pain's remedies, which this book describes.<sup>238</sup>

As she holds her lover, her soul, pregnant with His abundance, says, "I hold Him, for He is mine. I will never let Him go. He is in my will. Come what may, He is with me. It

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<sup>237</sup> Babinsky, 97.

<sup>238</sup> Babinsky, 99-100.

would be a lack in me if I should be astounded.”<sup>239</sup> In her embrace, *Courtoisie*, which is the way in which God’s love is in relationship to the soul’s love, has made it possible for her soul to relinquish its will and replace it with a love that exists only to love.<sup>240</sup>

Hadewijch reaches this same conclusion, using slightly different vocabulary but reflecting the same courtly sources:

The cross which we must bear with the Son of the living God is that sweet exile, that we bear for the sake of veritable Love, during which we must await with longing confidence the festival when Love shall manifest herself and reveal her noble power and rich omnipotence on earth and in heaven. In this she shows herself so unreservedly to him who loves that she makes him beside himself; she robs him of heart and mind, and causes him to die to himself and live in devotion to veritable love.

In Germany, the tradition of writing poetry and lyrics using, in part, imagery from the courtly love tradition was known as *Minnesang*.<sup>241</sup> The genre flourished from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries and is evident in the accounts of Mechthild and Hadewijch.<sup>242</sup> Elements of *Minne* poetry are related to the twelfth-century focus of Bernard and Abelard to look inward, to understand one’s inner life and motives, in that the poets topic is concerned with the self.<sup>243</sup> It is also about the absolute devotion to and

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<sup>239</sup> Babinsky, 100.

<sup>240</sup> Babinsky says that Margaret Porete uses courtly language to express Neoplatonic notions of the human-divine relationship: “She presses and stretches the concepts of the courtly genre to analyze how the soul might be intimately related to and experience union with the divine . . .,” 101.

<sup>241</sup> In *Outlines of the History of German Literature*, ed. John George Robertson (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1911, Waltherr von der Vogelweide, says in chapter 5, “Minnesang and Didactic Poetry” that the word *minne*, or love, had a spiritual and mystic meaning as well as the personal and concrete “amour” of the French troubadours, 47.

<sup>242</sup> Mother Columbia Hart’s study of Hadewijch asserts that she was influenced by both Bernard of Clairvaux and the courtly tradition. Hadewijch, who Hart says was familiar with Latin and proficient in French, also makes reference to William of St. Thierry and Gueric of Igny in her writings. *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 5-6, 19-22. Carolyn Walker Bynum says Mechthild was “obviously influenced by vernacular love poetry as well as some earlier mystical writings. Mechthild produced lyrical love poems to God, filled with erotic and nuptial imagery,” *Jesus as Mother*, 229.

<sup>243</sup> Wolfgang Beutin, et al, *A History of the German Literature: From the Beginnings to the Present Day*. Trans., Claire Krojzl. (Routledge, 1993), says it is “personal lyric poetry, concerned with pursuit of the experience of the self,” 43.

praise of the Lady as the archetype of virtue, whose love may never be realized; the devotee must love entirely for the sake of loving. This form typically uses symbolism comparing religious figures with courtly life. In Mechthild, for example, God is the emperor of heaven, the Lady is the Virgin Mary, the imperial prince is Christ, and angels are knights and feudal vassals.<sup>244</sup>

By using courtly imagery, women were able to depict themselves variously as the intimate friend, the aggressively courting lover, the nurturing mother, the child.<sup>245</sup> The form allowed women to experiment with gender roles by combining the ideals of romance and religion. They depicted themselves as intimate friend, pleading lover, pregnant wife, nurturing mother, and nursing child.<sup>246</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, alternates her imagery between nurturing mother and sexual bride: “Where two hot desires come together, there love is consummated.”<sup>247</sup> Some medieval women who use bride/lover imagery were influenced by the *Song of Songs*, but Hadewijch does not seem to rely on it as a source; instead, her imagery is derived largely from the conventions of courtly love.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> *Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, xxix.

<sup>245</sup> Bernard McGinn says courtly love imagery was important in the thinking of Mechthild, Hadewijch, and Margaret: They “adapted prose or poetic versions of courtly personification dialogues . . . (which) grew in significance in vernacular theology” and that their credibility was enhanced to the extent they stressed their visionary experience by way of the vocabulary of “erotic love-language.” *Flowering of Mysticism*, 20, 2.

<sup>246</sup> For discussion of this, see Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman*, 138ff. Newman describes the courtly love tradition as it was adopted by religious women as a “new movement both religious and literary . . . in which the monastic discourse on love converged with the courtly.” “*La Mystique Courtoise*,” says Newman, was a “distinctive creation” of thirteenth century beguine women. She says that religious women’s eroticized vocabulary did not result merely from Bernard’s reading of the *Song of Songs*. It was a new literary form that also drew from courtly lyric to describe “the turbulent experience of loving God.”

<sup>247</sup> Newman, *Virile Woman*, 150.

<sup>248</sup> Newman makes this argument in *Virile Woman*, as does Rudy, 72.



## Hadewijch and the Malleability of Gender Imagery

Hadewijch portrays herself sometimes as the suffering lover, sometimes the exalted bride, and sometimes the strongest of all warriors.<sup>249</sup> She alters gender back and forth, sometimes viewing herself as female in relationship to Christ, sometimes as male. One of the characteristics of the writing by both men and women during this period is malleability of gender imagery, which may have been one of the factors contributing to the rise of affective mysticism among women. Both men and women adopted male and female personas, shifting from one to another depending on context.<sup>250</sup> The metaphor of the soul as Christ's bride was used in reference to both genders. However, the use of bridal imagery by Bernard and by Cistercian monks generally, which they derived largely from their reading of the *Song of Songs*, was not the only feminine symbolism they used to describe themselves. Bernard sometimes compared the monks in his care to maidens in the *Song*, sometimes to the bride seeking to be held in the arms of Christ. He also spoke of himself as mother to the monks and said other abbots should also think of themselves as nurturing mothers. Conversely, Jesus was often seen as feminine, primarily as a maternal, nurturing figure providing the milk of redemption flowing from the wounds in his side.<sup>251</sup> Transposing their gender to think of themselves as female allowed these men to more easily imagine being the bride spoken of in the *Song* who is embraced by Christ.

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<sup>249</sup> Newman, *Virile Woman*, 147. Newman says the form allowed these women to play "an erotic game with a bewildering variety of moves: one could become the bride of a God or the lover of a Goddess, or merge utterly with the Beloved and become oneself divine . . ." 166.

<sup>250</sup> See Ulrike Wiethaus, who argues that Hadewijch intersects sexual and spiritual desire with fluid gender identities. In "Female Homoerotic Discourse and Religion in Medieval Germanic Culture," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braunj Pasternack, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 288-321.

<sup>251</sup> See Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 113-125. See also David Damrosch, "Non alias ed aliter: the Hermeneutics of Gender in Bernard of Clairvaux," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Klara Szell, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 181-195.

For the Cistercians, as for others, religious women were associated with the body, whereas men were thought of in terms of rationality and spirit.<sup>252</sup> This dichotomy persisted as a holdover from Greek thought, especially Aristotelian categories, and may be one of the reasons women's spirituality was so widely expressed in the language of the body and its senses: the psychological shift required of the monks to adopt the imagery and emotion of feminine sensuality was not necessary for women.

At times, Hadewijch also places herself in the male role during erotic unions with the female allegory of divine love, Lady *Minne*. More often, she takes the female role, calling herself the "Love/ress of Love," saying to *Minne*, "The young maidens are melted away in you, and love with violent longing" and, describing another encounter, ". . . in the sweetness of clasping, in the fond embrace, in the sweet kiss, and in the heartfelt experience when *Minne* actually speaks, 'I am the one who holds you in my embrace!'"<sup>253</sup> In another example from Hadewijch, the Lady becomes Love, whom she both celebrates and by whom she is pained. Love is personified as the voice that comes forth from the face of the Holy Spirit.

Now great lamentation  
Replaces my new songs,  
Which I have sung so long,  
Poeticizing Love so beautifully.  
Although I have striven too little,  
It causes me woe and pain  
That I am not in possession  
Of Love's unconquered power

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<sup>252</sup> For a discussion of Cistercians and gender roles in the late twelfth century, see Martha G. Newman, "Crucified by the Virtues: Monks, Lay Brothers and Women in Thirteenth-Century Cistercian Saints' Lives," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braunj Pasternack, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 182-209.

<sup>253</sup> See Ulrike Wiethaus, who argues that Hadewijch intersects sexual and spiritual desire with fluid gender identities in "Female Homoerotic Discourse and Religion in Medieval Germanic Culture," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braunj Pasternack, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 288-321.

In the fruition where I become controlled by Love.<sup>254</sup>

Here as elsewhere, Hadewijch uses courtly imagery to depict a state of frustration with her lack of being in union with divinity. Her personification of love is of one longing for fulfillment by way of immersion in God and of jealousy for want of being the closest and most loved by Christ, of feeling wounded by his absence—all of which is the theme of courtly poetry. In poem 3, for example, Hadewijch as lover has a shield that “has warded off so many stabs/there is no room left on it for a new gash.” When love is not wounding, it gives “consolations, then again wounds.” Hadewijch endures this because “her pleasure gives/The sweet kisses of her mouth.” In poem 4, Hadewijch takes the persona of a male lover, “always new and afire with longing.” By poem 7, she begins the process of dissolving her will by trying to end desiring and retain only the abyss of pure love:

My soul melts away  
in the madness of Love;  
The abyss into which she hurls me  
is deeper than the sea;  
For Love's new deep abyss  
Renews my wound:  
I look for no more health,  
Until I experience Love as all new to me.<sup>255</sup>

By poem 12, however, she again feels the frustration of longing for her lover by describing the pain of being penetrated by love:

As Love's arrows strike it [the soul],  
It shudders that it lives . . .  
At all times when the arrow strikes,  
It increases the wound and brings torment . . .  
Longing keeps the wounds  
open and undressed.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> *Hadewijch: Complete Works*, poem 2.6.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, poem 7.4.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.2, 14.3; 12.3

In the same poem, she writes about the experience of union that causes a drunken madness:

With Love they shall cleave in oneness  
to Love,  
And with love  
they shall contemplate all Love -  
Drawing, through her secret veins,  
On the channel where Love gives all love,  
And inebriates all her drunken friends  
with love  
In amazement before her violence.<sup>257</sup>

Hadewijch's poems, even more than her prose accounts of mystical experience, typically speak of herself as a lover with a beloved who is both powerful and very far from her. The courtly tradition typically employs role or gender reversal by making the male poet powerless or less powerful, unable to win the lady's love unless she freely gives it. This theme recurs throughout Hadewijch's poems; she pursues Christ by way of *Minne*, but she is at love's mercy. The poems depict *Minne*, or Lady Love, not as the personification of an idea and not as God, but as the experience of love and as a real being who is the object of desire.<sup>258</sup> Love can be the source both of confinement and grief, as well as joy:

What joy can surround  
Him whom Love has thrown into close confinement  
When he wishes to journey through Love's immensity  
And enjoy it as a free man in all security?<sup>259</sup>

The loss of one's self, or will, that is necessary for union with God is worth what others

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 2.6.

<sup>258</sup> For a discussion of Hadewijch's *Poems in Stanzas*, see Elizabeth Petroff, "Gender, Power and Knowledge in The *Strophische Gedichten* of Hadewijch," a paper first presented at the 25th International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 10, 1990, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo MI. ([http://monasticmatrix.usc.edu/MatrixTextLibrary/mm-S11575-petroffe-genderpove.html?PHPSESSID=26bf670a04023bffe13b7d56528f82e9#footnote\\_anchor-1](http://monasticmatrix.usc.edu/MatrixTextLibrary/mm-S11575-petroffe-genderpove.html?PHPSESSID=26bf670a04023bffe13b7d56528f82e9#footnote_anchor-1).)

<sup>259</sup> *Hadewijch: Complete Works*, 17.2.

see as sacrifice:

Nothing of myself remains to me . . .  
I have given up honour and repose.  
Because I wish to live  
Free, and receive in love  
Great riches and knowledge . . .  
I cannot do without this gift.  
I have nothing else:  
I must live on Love.<sup>260</sup>

Hadewijch's later poems in this group are increasingly heartfelt in her grief and frustration at being separated from Love. As she becomes more inconsolable, her experience of love and union are cast in more sensually carnal language, as in poem 25:

Love's soft stillness is unheard of,  
However loud the noise she makes,  
Except by him who has experienced it,  
And whom she has wholly allured to herself,  
And has so stirred with her deep touch  
That he feels himself wholly in Love.  
When she also fills him  
with the wondrous taste of Love,  
The great noise ceases for a time;  
Alas! Soon awakens Desire, who wakes  
With heavy storm  
the mind that has turned inward.<sup>261</sup>

In poem 40, Hadewijch combines the imagery of war and conquest with images of a lover drinking from the beloved's body, content to love for love's own sake:

Love conquers him so that he may conquer her . . .  
When he experiences this sweet Love,  
He is wounded with her wounds;  
... He imbibes eagerly from Love's deep veins,  
With continual thirst for a new beginning,  
Until he enjoys sweet Love.  
So for the soul things go marvellously;  
While desire pours out and pleasure drinks,

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 24.5.8; 24.6.4-6, 9-10. Petroff points out that Hadewijch's version of *Minne* is best understood through paradox, "for she is beyond all systems of binary opposition and contains all opposites. The language of paradox forces the poet to abandon ordinary truth, to move mentally into a new space where real truth dwells."

<sup>261</sup> *Hadewijch: Complete Works*, 25.4.

The soul consumes what belongs to it in love  
And sinks with frenzy in Love's fruition ...  
Thus is the loving soul well fed by Love alone.<sup>262</sup>

### Mechthild of Magdeburg

Mechthild was influenced in her writing by Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh and Richard of St. Victor, as well as others. Commentators routinely note her evident awareness of the courtly love tradition, especially in her lyrical love poems.<sup>263</sup> Like many other medieval women during this period, Mechthild wrote in the form of affective mysticism; it is by way of love that she seeks union with divinity. Her writing is in part an examination of her experience during three periods of her life, which she describes by way of something God said to her in a vision: "Your childhood was a companion to my Holy Spirit, your youth was a bride to my Humanity, your old age is now a wife to my Godhead."<sup>264</sup>

The connection in Mechthild to courtly love lyrics is apparent from the beginning of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* when she describes a conversation between the soul as Queen and Lady Love (*minne*).

The Soul came to Love and greeted her with great respect and said: 'May God greet you, Lady Love. . . . you are truly perfect. . . . Lady Love, you struggled for many years before you brought the exalted Trinity to pour itself into Mary's humble virginity.' 'Majesty, that is to your honour and greater good.' 'Lady Love, now you have come to me and stripped me of everything that I ever acquired on Earth.' 'Majesty, you have made a blessed exchange.'<sup>265</sup>

Like Hadewijch, Mechthild describes a process of being emptied and desolated, which allows her to shed the desire for reward and all that is valued on earth in exchange for the

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<sup>262</sup> *Hadewijch: Complete Works*, 40. 5.1,3-4 and 6.1-4,7

<sup>263</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, ed., *Mechthild of Magdeburg: Selections from The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), introduction, p. 4.

<sup>264</sup> *Mechthild: Selections*, p. 16 and Book VII, 3, p. 124.

<sup>265</sup> *Mechthild: Selections*, Book I, 1, pp. 26-27.

courtly ideal of being able to love only for the sake of loving. The condition of love-sickness and becoming nothing, as well as the symbolism of a burning heart, desire, and embraces—all common motifs in courtly poetry—recur throughout Mechthild’s writing. She mentions all of these in speaking of a vision in which her soul travels to court, which is an allegory for being in the presence of the godhead.

Whenever the poor Soul comes to court, she is discerning and refined. Then she looks joyfully on her God. Ah, how lovingly she is received there! She then falls silent and longs intensely for His praise. Then He, with great desire, shows her His divine heart. It is like red gold burning in a great coal-fire. Then He puts her into His glowing heart. When the great Lord and the little maid thus embrace and are mingled as water and wine, then she becomes nothing and is enraptured. When she can cope no longer, then He is lovesick for her, as He always was, for He neither waxes nor wanes. Then she says: ‘Lord, You are my loved one, my desire, my flowing fountain, my sun and I am Your mirror.’<sup>266</sup>

When Mechthild uses bridal imagery, the larger influence is the *Song of Songs*, but she weaves into the narrative many of these same symbols from the courtly vocabulary, including flowing fountains of dew falling into the flower of a maiden intoxicated by her nuptial experience. The language creates a richly drawn description of spiritual union.

The sweet dew of the uncreated Trinity has fallen from the fountain of the eternal 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 has become Bridegroom. The Bride has become intoxicated in the contemplation of the noble countenance: . . . The less she becomes, the more flows to her. . . . The more deeply she lives (in God), the more outspread she is. . . . The more His desire grows, the greater their wedding becomes. The narrower the bed<sup>267</sup> becomes, the closer the embrace. The sweeter the kisses taste on the lips, the more lovingly they look at one another. . . . The more she burns, the brighter she glows.<sup>268</sup>

At times, Mechthild rejects motifs used by other medieval women writers, as when

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<sup>266</sup> *Mechthild: Selections*, Book I, 4, p. 29. Also, a rich tradition of using mirror imagery in mystical writing is in Margot Schmidt, trans., *Mechthild von Magdeburg. Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt:frommann-holzboog, 1995), 349, n. 19.

<sup>267</sup> The “bed” and the “bed of love” are recurrent images: Cf. I, 22 (p. 31); I, 44 (p. 35); II, 2 (p. 38); III, 9 (p. 60); V, 34 (p. 101); VII, 21 (p. 128).

<sup>268</sup> *Mechthild: Selections*, I, 22, pp. 30-31.

she scorns an invitation to “see and taste how the joy of the angels sucked the supernatural milk from the eternal Maid,” asserting that “I am a fully grown bride, I want to go to my Love.”<sup>269</sup> Instead, she returns to her central themes of courtly wooing, true love, young men, and a sweet dew entering the Soul. Seeking to erase her “accursed self-will, that acts as such a drag on many a soul that they never reach true love,” she is defeated and becomes so tired that her desire returns:

“Handsome Young Man, I desire You, where shall I find You?” . . . In the sweet dew of the morning, that is, the restrained fervour that enters the Soul first, her chamberlains, the five Senses, say: ‘Lady, you should dress yourself.’<sup>270</sup>

When the young man arrives, they dance to his singing, which she says will cause her to “spring into love and move “from love into knowledge, from knowledge into pleasure, from pleasure into what is beyond all human senses.”<sup>271</sup> When they weary of dancing, the young man says: ‘Young Lady, you have performed this dance of praise well, you shall have your way with the Virgin’s son, for now you are tired through love. Come at midday to the shadow of the fountain, to the bed of love, there you shall refresh yourself with Him.’<sup>272</sup>

At the end of Mechthild’s path of love, she arrives at the nuptial bed where she and Christ, with “the room of love made ready,” consummate their union.

‘What is Your command, Lord?’ ‘You should undress yourself!’ ‘Lord, what will happen to me then?’ ‘Lady Soul, you have so much of my nature that between you and me there can be nothing. Never was an angel so honoured that he was granted for one hour what is given to you eternally. Thus, you should strip yourself of both fear and shame and all external virtues . . . ‘Lord, now I am a naked soul and You in Yourself a richly adorned God. Our communion together is eternal life without death.’ Then a blessed stillness follows that they both desire. He gives Himself to her and she herself to Him.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> *Mechthild: Selections*, I, 44, p. 35.

<sup>270</sup> *Mechthild: Selections*, I, 44, p. 34.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid*, I, 44, p. 34.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid*, I, 44, p. 35.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid*, I, 44, p. 36.



Throughout *The Flowing Light*, Mechthild's references to the courtly tradition are reminiscent of Hadewijch and Margaret. In her songs of love, she sees herself as a "noble young lady" wearing a cloak adorned with gold and inscribed with the words, "I would gladly die of love." She vows: "I would gladly die of love/If I could;/ I have seen/With my bright eyes/Him whom I love/Standing in my soul./The bride who has taken her Love in/Does not need to go far."<sup>274</sup> Mechthild's sensory experiences of mystical encounters are very different than what was reported by her predecessor of a century earlier, Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard said of her visions: "But I hear them not with my physical ears, nor with my heart's thoughts, nor do I perceive them by bringing any of my five senses to bear—but only in my soul."<sup>275</sup> By contrast, Mechthild was a product of the lineage that began in the twelfth century when mystics began to claim direct somatic experience of God. These were revelations sometimes experienced alone, sometimes in public, all claiming divine privilege. Mechthild, like the others, combines a variety of forms and motifs. At times, she employs the motif of Eucharistic rites in conjunction with allusions to sexual consummation: "I . . . Take Him in my hand,/Eat Him and drink Him/And do with Him what I will!"<sup>276</sup> Elsewhere, she relies almost entirely on the language of the troubadours, referring to courtly scenes with queens, princes, and maidens. In these sequences Mechthild speaks of love that is "greater than the mountains, wider than the world, deeper than the sea." She speaks of the treasures to be had by

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid, II, 4, p. 40.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 151, translation from Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (? 203) to Marguerite Porette (? 1310)*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 252.

<sup>276</sup> Lucy Menzies, *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1953), II, 22, p. 48.

loving for the sake of love, of her “heart’s desire” to be embraced by the godhead, and of the “intimate rapture” she feels when the dew penetrates her soul.<sup>277</sup> For each of these women—Mechthild, Hadewijch, and Margaret—mystic love is described with the vocabulary of courtly love. They follow in the tradition of Beatrice of Nazareth, whose *The Seven Manners of Loving* centers on *minne* as the pathway to God. They build upon Beatrice—who claims neither visions nor any other mystical experience—by adding a courtly vocabulary and ecstatic encounters with the physical, human Christ.<sup>278</sup> This tradition uses the motifs of love from afar, longing for the beloved, occasional union, and the devastation caused by love’s madness. This also occurs in Beatrice’s discussion of *minne*, but when Hadewijch and Mechthild explore the theme of *minne* through the prism of courtly motifs, their accounts tend to the sensually ecstatic. As lover, for example, Mechthild has a threefold nature, the third of which she preferred: “You are a virile man in your battle; you are a well-dressed maiden in the palace before your Lord; you are an eager bride in your and God’s love-bed.”<sup>279</sup> This description represents the devices common to Mechthild, Hadewijch, and Mechthild: a fusing of various religious and secular elements, including the language of courtly love, the nuptial motif of bride and groom, and affective love.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Mechthild, *Revelations*, I, 39-43, p. 20.

<sup>278</sup> For a discussion of Beatrice in relationship to the three women discussed here, see Bernard McGinn, *Flowering*, pp. 166ff. Also see Barbara Newman’s discussion of *la mystique courtoise* as a term employed to describe the phenomenon combining courtly love and mystic aspects of the *Song of Songs*.

<sup>279</sup> *Flowing Light*, 2.19 (49.5-8).

<sup>280</sup> For a discussion of mysticism and love poetry, see Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of the European Love Lyric*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1:57-70. For a discussion of the term *fin’amour*, see Edmund Reiss, “Fin’ Amors: Its History and meaning in Medieval Literature,” *Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 8 (1979): 74-99.



## *Conclusion*

The written accounts of mystical experiences reported by the women discussed here are indicative of a form commonly used during the late medieval period. While each has a unique way of utilizing vocabulary, theme, and imagery, together they share several commonalities. These shared characteristics suggest that their devotional accounts were informed by common influences. Understanding more about those influences and the form these well-known religious women employed provides insight into what has often been referred to as the emergence of a “women’s movement” in the Church during the late twelfth century.<sup>281</sup> It is also important to examine the way women gave voice to their spiritual and theological thinking during this period. Various influences—cultural and religious—converged in their lives to create the remarkably rich and complex literature discussed here.

To the extent there was such a women’s movement, it gathered momentum in the twelfth century and flourished in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. While there is no reason to believe that this resulted in any general change in women’s status or opportunities, it did seem to increase both status and opportunity for specific women whose visionary claims were viewed as an indication of divine favor. In part, this was because some in the clergy used women’s claims of miracles and other mystical events in their efforts to discredit various heresies, including that of the Cathars.<sup>282</sup> Neither is there reason to believe that the accounts of women mystics differed in substance from those of men who reported visions or miracles. However, a qualitative difference is apparent in

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<sup>281</sup> On the “women’s movement,” see McGinn, “*Mulieres Religiosae: Experiments in Female Mysticism*,” in *Flowering*, 153ff.

<sup>282</sup> McGinn, 154.

women such as Hadewijch and Margaret in that they speak about their experiences with more physical and sensual intensity than occurs in reports from men.

Underlying much of the language found in their reports is the focus on affective love, that is, on seeking a loving relationship with the human Christ as the first step toward spiritual union with God. This was the result of various factors, but the most central was that in the twelfth century Christianity began to emphasize love as the essential emotional focus of devotion. It did so in conjunction with a shift toward the importance of one's inner feelings of intention and contrition, especially in reference to sin and forgiveness. One facet of this change was the turn toward self-examination and, consequently, a focus on the individual. In addition, the twelfth century was marked by an emphasis on intellectual curiosity as an important value in secular and theological inquiry.

The twelfth-century Church established as a central tenet the assertion that the one sentiment necessary to forging a clear path to union with God was love, and a deeply felt loving relationship with the human Christ thus became the primary link and the beginning of the pathway to personal salvation. Mystical experiences reported by Hadewijch, Margaret, and others shared that one central tenet. Rupert and Bernard of Clairvaux described the process by saying that one's soul could move farther along the path to union with God, progressing by way of various stages of love. The stages typically began with self-reflection and loving remorse for sins, and then moved to love of others, especially in friendship, to love of Christ, and finally to union with God. These stages are described in Bernard's explication on the *Song of Songs*, which articulated the centrality of affective love, and which profoundly affected the way women, as well as

men, would describe their mystical experiences. The bridal motif in his sermons might not have been universal in women's stories, but it was nearly so.

In addition, Bernard's affective love worked congruously with the necessity of intellectual understanding that was championed in the Church by Peter Abelard and other Scholastics. Just as intellectual understanding of revelation became important, so was the effort to know one's inner feelings, motivations, and transgressions. It was by way of self-knowledge that one could fully enter a loving relationship with Christ; knowing and loving were equally necessary. Knowledge of the grounds for love—of its logic—was said to be a prerequisite for redemption just as inner contrition is a prerequisite for forgiveness.

The sensuous metaphors utilized by Hadewijch, Margaret, and Mechthild are partly the result of this period's emphasis on love, Jesus's humanity, and the desire for union with God. Another influence was the courtly love tradition and its imagery of longing for the intimacy of union with a distant beloved. By combining the sensual language of courtly love with the Church's emphasis on divine love, many women wrote of experiences with Christ's humanity that link the visceral and the spiritual. Throughout her writing, for example, Hadewijch intersperses allusions to the romances of chivalry and in doing so contributes to a new genre of "mystical love lyric." Margaret utilizes courtly language, imagery, and concepts—normally used to describe the erotic love of men and women—to describe the love between the soul and God. Describing her devotional experiences, she uses the ideas of *courtoisie*, *largesse*, a distant love, the nobility, the monarchy, the gifts of the beloved, and the ecstasy of loving union.

The use of sensual language influenced by the courtly love tradition created a

powerful literary device that supported the theological claim that union with God can be attained in this life while still in one's body. This position was enhanced by Bernard of Clairvaux's assertion that because God became incarnate, the body is perfectible. Not all women mystics used the language of courtly love to the extent found in the accounts of Margaret, Hadewijch, and Mechthild. Nevertheless, because they had such a public life, their devotional accounts suggest that the thinking that went into them represents a common phenomenon in Europe during this period.

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