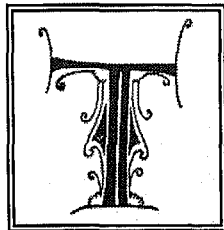


INFANCY AND EDUCATION  
IN THE WRITINGS OF  
GERTRUD THE GREAT OF HELFTA

*Alexandra Barratt  
University of Waikato  
Hamilton, New Zealand*



The German Benedictine nun Gertrud the Great of Helfta (c.1256-1302) was one of the most highly educated of medieval women mystics. Unlike most religious women of the Middle Ages, she not only read Latin but also wrote it fluently and prolifically. Latin is the language of almost all her surviving writings: *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness*, *The Spiritual Exercises* and (probably also written by her) *The Book of Special Grace*. *The Herald* consists of five books, although only Book 2 comes, quite literally, from the pen of Gertrud herself. The opening describes how she

snatched up the writing tablet at her side and wrote the first section under divine inspiration (II, Prologue<sup>1</sup>).

Book 1 is a biographical sketch of the saint, written by another Helfta nun, while Books 3, 4 and 5 were compiled either by that same nun or another, using material provided by Gertrud, and as far as possible authorized by her. In compiling *The Book of Special Grace*, Gertrud almost certainly performed a similar service for her own mentor and novice-mistress, Mechthild of Hackeborn. In addition, according to the biographer of Book 1, Gertrud wrote much more in Latin and the vernacular, including prayers and devotions, and commentary on and paraphrases of scripture (I.1,2), but none of this has survived.

There are many references in Gertrud's writings to childhood and education, particularly in the lively *similitudines* (extended similes or analogies) which often illustrate particular points in her dialogues with the Lord. It must be said that most of these are put into His mouth, so their status in providing information about Gertrud's own intellectual formation is problematic, but they can probably tell something about her mental, if not real, world. While they may well be influenced by literary sources, they must to a certain extent reflect the experiences of herself and of

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<sup>1</sup>Gertrud the Great, *Gertrud the Great: Books One & Two*, tr. Alexandra Barratt (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991). All quotations from Gertrud the Great are from this translation and from *Gertrud the Great: Book Three*. Passages are identified by book, chapter and section numbers: these correspond to those of the Latin text, ed. Doyère, *Gertrude d'Helfta: Oeuvres Spirituelles Tomes II & III* (Paris: Sources Chrétiennes, 1968) from which the English translations were made.

her sisters in religion, and they mainly describe what sounds like the typical medieval education of aristocratic children (boys as much as girls): informal, private, and secular.

While Gertrud herself presumably came from the aristocracy, her own education must have been somewhat different. She entered the monastery at the age of four as a child oblate, that is, her parents handed her over to Helfta to be brought up to be a nun. Child oblation was an ancient practice for which Chapter 59 of the *Rule of St. Benedict* made specific provision. It had in the earlier Middle Ages been the standard method of entrance into the religious life and adult entrants or *conversi* the exception. However, the practice fell out of favor in the twelfth century, (the last recorded cases in an English Benedictine house took place in the mid-twelfth century) and the new Cistercian order made a point of eliminating it. It was discouraged by the Lateran Council of 1215, which declared it unlawful, but nonetheless it continued sporadically.<sup>2</sup> Houses where it did continue had ideally to provide a full range of education, from the most elementary training in literacy to the study of the trivium (grammar, rhetoric and dialectic) which formed the substance of the university arts degree.

For thirteenth-century monks the educational minimum was “to read, sing and perform the liturgy correctly,” but “by the middle of the thirteenth century the first attempts were being made . . . to improve the facilities

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<sup>2</sup>Nicholas Orme, *English Schools in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1973) 225.

for study in their orders. In 1245 the general chapter of the Cistercian order . . . urged that every abbey should have facilities for study if possible”<sup>3</sup> while “in 1331 the [Cistercian] general order had commanded that communities of forty monks or more should maintain a lecturer to instruct the younger brethren in grammar and logic.”<sup>4</sup>

As is so often the case, however, very little, if anything, is known about what happened in women’s houses. The anonymous Irish Poor Clare who was Gertrud’s nineteenth-century translator states that the saint grew up “under the careful training of the Benedictine Dames,— who then, as now, devoted themselves with unwearied solicitude, and more than ordinary intellectual abilities, to the education of those confided to their charge,”<sup>5</sup> but this is more pious optimism than hard historical fact.

What can the writings of Gertrud tell one that might fill this lacuna? First, although she was separated from her natural family at what seems today to be a barbarically early age, her writings are full of references to mothers, fathers and families, and it is of course in the context of the family that socialization and training first begin, parents acting as

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>5</sup>A Poor Clare, *The Life and Revelations of St. Gertrude* (London: Burns, 1965) 3.

first teachers. In the relevant *similitudines* in Books 2 and 3 of *The Herald*, it is first of all striking that the Lord presents himself as both father and mother. Moreover, there are only four comparisons of himself to an earthly father while there are eight to a mother.

There are naturally many more literal references, outside the *similitudines*, to God as Father. Gertrud, or occasionally any devout soul, is troped as both son and daughter. The surprise here is that against two examples of her as a daughter we can set four as a son, and a further six where the gender is not specified, the nature of Latin grammar being such that these imply masculinity. So Gertrud's writings in this respect show a pronounced tendency to be gender-neutral or even transgressive.

The attributes of God as mother are clearly distinguished from those of God as father and here Gertrud complies with medieval (and modern) stereotypes. The father adopts a robust role. He is the kindly *paterfamilias* when Gertrud compares his affection for her to "that of the father of a family, who takes a real joy in the graceful poise of his numerous children, on whom a vast crowd of relatives and neighbors congratulate him. Among them he has a little child who has not yet achieved the poise of the rest, but in his fatherly love he feels sorry for it, clasps it to his bosom more often, and spoils it more than the others with kind words and little presents"(II.18,1).

As their father, God provides for his children, even though they may be feckless and irresponsible. On one occasion Gertrud exclaims, "How skillfully and thoughtfully your fatherly nature knows how to make provision for your children who have degenerated into a

state of worthlessness! After they have squandered the capital of innocency, including the capital of that devotion you would find welcome, you condescend to accept this miserable return, that is, the recognition of the unworthiness of my merits”(II.20,15). He also plans their financial future by putting money aside for them. Gertrud recounts how, when she reproached the Lord for not hearing her prayers on behalf of the community, he replied, “It would not be astonishing that a father allowed his son to ask him for a penny, if each time he had a hundred marks set aside for his son. Thus do not be astonished that I put off hearing you all in this matter, for each time you pray for it, even with the least words or thoughts, I put aside for you far more than a hundred marks from the treasures of heaven!”(III.31,2).

In sterner mode he disciplines his children: “She asked the Lord why he allowed her to be troubled at that time by certain people. She received this reply from him: ‘When the father's hand wants to correct his son, the rod cannot resist him. So I would like my chosen never to blame the people by whom they are purified, but always regard my fatherly love’” (II.30,22). God also maintains order when sibling rivalry gets out of hand:

She was praying for two people who were arguing with each other. . . . The Lord replied: “When a kindly father sees his children playing in his presence and fighting each other for fun, he sometimes turns a blind eye and smiles. But if he sees one set upon the other more

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violently, he quickly gets up and rather sharply corrects the delinquent. Similarly I, the Father of mercies, turn a blind eye while I see them having slight differences of opinion while their intention is good . . . But if one of them should act more harshly towards the other, she would certainly not be able to escape the correcting rod of my fatherly justice.”  
(III.78,2)

The mother, on the other hand, is loving, gentle, protective, even overprotective in a way that readers might find selfish. She kisses away her child’s troubles: “Then the Lord caught her up like a delicate child into his bosom . . . He said: ‘Just as a kindly mother is accustomed to kiss fondly anything that troubles her delicate child, so I desire to soothe away by the blandishments of loving whispers all your troubles and contrarities’”(III.63,2).

She protects the child from the fire while warming it. When praying for someone who was depressed she was told, “Just as a mother, when she wants to warm her child at the fire, always holds her hand between the fire and the child, so I who know what is suitable to purge my chosen through tribulation, do not do this to burn them up but rather to test them and save them”(III.83,1). She makes sure her child is appropriately dressed:

The Lord replied, “In this as in all things I show towards you the delicate care of most tender love. Just as a mother who

loves her little child would gladly adorn him with gold and silver, but knows he cannot bear the weight of the ornament and adorns him with more fragile flowers that pour out splendor but do not weigh him down, so I too moderate your troubles, lest you should give way under their weight, and nonetheless you do not lose the merit of patience." (III.63,2)

She comforts the child, plays with it and acts as intermediary with the outside world:

The Lord replied, "Just as a mother comforts her sons, so shall I comfort you." . . . the Lord reminded her that about six months before she had seen a mother caressing her little boy. He particularly impressed upon her three things which she had not noticed at the time she saw them. First, the mother often asked the little boy for a kiss, at which the little boy tried to stand up in spite of the feebleness of his limbs . . . Second, the mother tested the little boy's will, saying "Is this what you want? and is that what you want?" but doing neither! So God tests a person, sometimes allowing him to anticipate troubles that never actually happen. . . . Third, of all those present no one understood the babbling of the boy,



who could not yet form words, except for the mother. So God alone understands a person's intention. (III.30,38)

The mother keeps the child with her, even resorting to ruses. The Lord compares himself to

. . . a mother who has a little boy whom she loves so dearly that she wants him to be with her all the time; when the boy wants to run off to his friends because of a secret game, she sometimes puts scarecrows or something terrifying in certain areas so that the frightened boy runs back to her bosom. So I, wishing you never to be absent from my side, allow your friends to thwart you in something (III.63,1).

The mother is also presented as training her daughters, though the few incidental references suggest nothing more formal than their learning traditionally female skills through close and constant association with their mother. For instance, on one occasion the Lord remarks to Gertrud:

When a mother wants something embroidered to be worked in silk or pearls, sometimes she sets her little child in a higher place to hold her thread or her pearls for her, or to give her some sort of help. In the same

way I have set you in a higher place to make you take part in this Mass (III. 6,1).

On another occasion when Gertrud was praying for two of her sisters, the Lord states:

I have drawn them closer to me; hence it is very necessary that they should be purified by troubles, like a favorite daughter who, because of her tender love for her mother, wants to sit on a seat as high as her mother but must sit less comfortably than the other daughters, who choose their own seats near their mother (III.71,2).

The mother also socializes the daughter into her female role, even at the cost of some conflict. Thus the Lord observes:

It is a noble and beautiful honor for a maiden to have various fur linings under her cloak; but if she turns them inside out, what had earlier been a source of honor and beauty becomes quite the opposite, a source of disgrace and embarrassment. And so if there is no other way the girl's mother, not allowing her daughter to become a laughing-stock, will at least cover her with another garment lest she be thought crazy. In the same way I, too, tenderly loving this daughter of mine,

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cover her failing with various burdens  
that I quite often allow to fall to her lot,  
for the same reason, through no fault of  
her own (III.89,1).

Mother-daughter conflict over clothing is also evident in another similitude which is particularly interesting as for once the Lord is troped as the daughter, and the imperfect soul as a rather self-centered, vain and foolish mother. Gertrud has asked the Lord how he feels about the affection demonstrated by some for the crucifix. He replies:

I welcome it with pleasure; but as for those who love my image but do not follow my Passion through imitation, I look on this just as a young girl can welcome from her mother the fact that she dresses her up in various ways to satisfy her own tastes and prestige. She does not do it because the daughter particularly wants it; on the contrary, [the daughter] sometimes strenuously objects. In so far as the mother ignores her wishes, the daughter welcomes the other things lavished on her the less. For she thinks that her mother puts the other ornaments on her to enhance her own prestige and not out of tender affection. Similarly, all the affection and honor and reverence shown to my cross can never seem

completely good to me as long as a person does not take pains to imitate the example of my Passion (III.42,2).

Either the mother or another great lady, as the head of a household, further educates the growing girl along with others. In a miniature allegory, Gertrud praises the Blessed Virgin as the ideal figure in this role:

more than all human beings, she had ruled her household of affections, moral dispositions, senses and all other impulses with such great care that she rendered most fitting service to the Lord who was lodging in her, so much so that she never did anything unfitting in thought, word, or deed. She prayed that she too might win the same for herself. At this the Virgin Mother seemed to dispatch her affections in the guise of tender young girls, as if she were instructing them that they should all join themselves with all the affections of the woman who was praying and should exert themselves to serve the Lord with them (III.19,2).

Nevertheless, the only skills mentioned that such a young woman might acquire in these various ways are not what would be considered academic. Here it is useful to bear in mind the distinction between training and education neatly encapsulated by Katherine J. Lewis:

“‘Training’ is used here to refer to various sorts of education that a girl . . . would receive within the household. This encompasses a learning programme that was above all concerned with the acquisition of social and religious mores and cultural accomplishments . . . . More strictly ‘educational’ attainments such as literacy did play a role in this but were not necessarily seen as essential for young women per se.”<sup>6</sup> It may however be suggested, as will later be illustrated here, that the dividing line between education and training might well be drawn differently in the context of a religious community.

The young girl has already been seen helping her mother with her embroidery. She may also, surprisingly, learn to make jewelry and thus apparently enhance her family’s reputation. On one occasion when the Lord is explaining how special spiritual favors shown to one soul can be shared with others and even, to a lesser degree, with the Church as a whole, he says:

when a noble maiden knows how to  
skillfully construct varied jewels from pearls  
and precious stones, with which she adorns  
both herself and her sister, she acquires  
renown and respect for her father and  
mother and all the household. Nonetheless  
she who adorns herself with necklaces and

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<sup>6</sup> Katherine Lewis, “Model Girls? Virgin-Martyrs and the Training of Young Women in Late Medieval England” in *Young Medieval Women*, ed. K. J. Lewis, N.J. Menuge and K.M. Phillips (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) 39, n. 3.

bracelets that she has made for herself, wins very great mass favor and praise, and consequently her beloved sister too, whom she has made lovely with jewels like her own . . . has greater renown than her other sisters, who are not adorned in the same way (III.75,1).

This interesting passage is also somewhat puzzling. John Cherry has observed that up to the early thirteenth century some goldsmiths, of which essentially jewelers along with burnishers and spanglers, were a subset, were monks (and therefore possibly nuns?). In the late Middle Ages, however, “nearly all goldsmiths were men, and women played only a very subsidiary part in the trade” although he immediately goes on to say, “Burnishing appears to have been a specialty of women.”<sup>7</sup> Marian Campbell, however, notes “Alice la Jueler listed in the 1319 subsidy roll” as one of the earliest occurrences of the word.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the involvement of lay women, no one has ever suggested that aristocratic maidens might be apprenticed to such a trade. Gertrud’s analogy however does not seem to concern a professional activity but possibly a skill more like embroidery, which did involve

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<sup>7</sup> John Cherry, *Medieval Craftsmen: Goldsmiths* (London: British Museum Press, 1992) 60.

<sup>8</sup>Marian Campbell, “Gold, Silver and Precious Stones,” in *English Medieval Industries*, ed. John Blair and Nigel Ramsay (London: Hambledon Press, 1991) 151, n. 220.

precious stones as well as gold and silver thread and wire. Campbell further comments that “although jewellers sometimes describe themselves also as goldsmiths . . . they were as or more often drapers . . . -- a reminder of the intimate link between clothing and jewellery.”<sup>9</sup>

Of the education of boys there is only a glimpse. An anecdote about an over-severe priest who deterred those in his charge from receiving communion allows Gertrud briefly to introduce a king’s son and his interfering tutor, whose role seems more that of a chaperone than of a teacher. The Lord compares the priest to:

. . . an over-severe tutor who restrains the king's son too harshly or drags him away from the companionship and games of those his own age who are rather low-born or poor, but whose company the king's son enjoys very much, simply because he [the tutor] thinks it more suitable for the young man to enjoy the honor due to royalty than to play in the streets with a stick or such like. Then she said: “Lord, if that man made up his mind to avoid that in future, surely you would pardon him for anything he has done wrong hitherto?” The Lord replied: “Not only would I forgive him but I would also find it as welcome as the king's son would find it if his tutor cheerfully took him back

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 151.

to play with his beloved contemporaries whom a little earlier he had driven off with dire severity” (III.77,1).

There are also several references to boys, presumably of noble birth, who are being prepared for future greatness. Once when Gertrud has been praying for a friend, the Lord replies:

Ask her which she judges is more useful for her little brother . . . to whom she would very much like the benefit of some church to be given: should the church be granted him, or should the value of the church be presented to the boy all at once, while he is still at school, and it left to the boy's own judgment what he should do with the money? . . . it would be more useful for the boy to be granted the benefit of the church that can enrich him with many good things, when he comes to years of discretion, than the value that he would waste, as children do, and afterwards be as wretched and needy as before; therefore let her have faith in my divine loving-kindness and wisdom, that I who am her father, brother and lover, pursue and ordain the profit of her soul and body much more carefully and conscientiously than she does the interests of any relative (III.79,1).



Incidentally this similitude emphasizes that Gertrud's imagery is inherently culture-bound: there is no suggestion that conferring a church benefice on a child too young to be ordained or to carry out its duties might in any way be considered an abuse! On another occasion when she questions the apparent futility of so many of her prayers for her friends, the Lord tells her:

When a little child is brought back from the emperor endowed with vast estates, which of the onlookers immediately sees any fruit of that endowment in the boy's appearance? None the less it is no secret to the witnesses what sort of person, and how great, he will be from the riches granted him (III. 20,24).

Elsewhere another analogy is made with "earthly possessions (which are sometimes granted to a little child who does not know how to expect to use them, so that later on as an adult he may have an abundance of goods)" (III.30,32).

What evidence may be found in these images for anything more formal and less secular? There is very little, and yet Gertrud must have received an extensive and thorough education. It is known that Helfta possessed places designated as classrooms, for in one passage where Christ's body is allegorized as the monastery buildings, one reads that "at the Lord's command she chose the Lord's feet for a periphery or ambulatory; for the workshop the Lord's hands; the Lord's mouth for parlor or chapter-house; the

Lord's eyes for the classrooms where one reads; the Lord's ears for the place of confession" (III. 28,1).

What activities took place in these classrooms "where one reads"? Clearly, the child oblates had to learn to read and write and that would first entail learning the alphabet. Orme states that in English schools the alphabet was either written up in black on the classroom walls, or put on a small portable board like the later horn-books, or in a small book.<sup>10</sup> One of Gertrud's two references to the alphabet suggests a very informal and affectionate learning situation:

Asking the Lord what he would like her to concentrate on at that moment, the Lord replied, "I want you to learn patience." For she was strongly disturbed for a particular reason. At this she said, "How or by what means could I learn it?" Then the Lord, taking her up to himself like a kindly teacher holding a little pupil in his lap, put before her, as if in the form of three letters, three things that ought to stimulate her to patience." (III.30,40).

The other reference shows that Gertrud was well aware of the full span of medieval education. She hopes that "some people who read this account . . . may achieve personal experience in their inmost being of ampler graces,

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<sup>10</sup>Orme, 61.

just as students sometimes come to the study of logic by way of the alphabet!" (II.24,1). Logic, of course, was part of the trivium, and usually studied at undergraduate level as part of the arts degree. It presupposed a thorough grounding in elementary Latin grammar.

There is one more reference to a formal teaching situation, which sounds surprisingly like a university lecture. Gertrud asks why the revelations that she receives are often disconcertingly different from those received by others. The Lord replies:

If some teacher were questioned by large numbers of people speaking different languages and were to reply to them all in one language only, it would not be useful nor accepted by everyone. But if he answered everyone according to the interpretation of their own language, speaking to a Latin-speaker in Latin, a Greek-speaker in Greek, the more he answered each one appropriately in his own language, the more discriminating his wisdom would prove to be. In the same way the more differently I communicate my gifts to anyone, the more brightly shines the unsearchable depth of my wisdom by which I answer everyone in a way appropriate to their understanding. (III.48,2)

While this passage clearly owes a debt to the account in Acts of the first Pentecost, it is hard to think of

any situation in the Middle Ages where a teacher would be faced with a large class of multilingual students other than at a university or *studium generale*. But university education was conducted entirely in Latin, which would completely subvert the point that the Lord (or Gertrud) wants to make here — the need to meet students on their own ground and, literally, to speak their own language. Finally, not only is the Lord imaged as a teacher in some of these analogies, but educational terms are used elsewhere to describe Christ, as *magistrorum benignissime* (“kindest of teachers”) (III.37,1) and as *tutor* (III.65,3).

It is intriguing to juxtapose these scattered references to social and educational formation with what can be gathered of Gertrud’s own training. Not only must she have been extensively educated in Latin, the liturgy and the Church fathers but in her *Spiritual Exercises* she makes use of the Greek alphabet, the only Western medieval woman, to this author’s knowledge, to do this.<sup>11</sup> There is clear evidence that Gertrud had a classical education in the sense that she learned to read Latin. Her prose is shot through with reminiscences of the Vulgate bible and the Latin liturgy, while she quotes both the *Confessions* of Augustine of Hippo (III.41) and Bernard of Clairvaux (III.73,2). She could also write Latin prose (even though her extravagantly exuberant style, once unkindly described as “elephantine,” would have made Cicero turn in his

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<sup>11</sup>Gertrud of Helfta, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Gertrude Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis, (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1989) 84-5.

grave) and she does write some rather free rhapsodic verse, accentual rather than quantitative in the medieval fashion.

She also had some knowledge of classical, or at least Roman, culture and literature. At one point the Lord offers to sing her a song of sacred love poetry “in place of Fescennine verses”(III. 45,2). “Fescennine verses” were songs of ribald abuse traditional at a Roman wedding,<sup>12</sup> so the use of the term may indicate some acquaintance with Roman customs. She had however most likely come across the term in reading Claudian, a poet much admired in the Middle Ages, who wrote four *fescennini* for the marriage of the Emperor Honorius. They are apparently very decorous, so she may not have known that more authentic examples were bawdy.

On an earlier occasion, when Gertrud was questioning the Lord about the advantages that priests have over nuns such as herself, because they can celebrate mass and therefore receive communion much more frequently, the Lord in his answer refers to their shared knowledge that it was “a custom among the ancients” that he who had received the consulship more than once received greater honor than he who had received it once only (III.36,1). The consulship was indeed a very great honor, indeed the highest office of state in the Roman republic, but the source for this piece of information is unknown. One suspects some sort of epitome or encyclopedic text, such as the summary of Roman history written by Sextus Pompeius

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<sup>12</sup>Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966) s. v. “Fescennini (versus).”

Festus and epitomized by Paul the Deacon in the eighth century but the reference certainly indicates some knowledge of Roman history and politics.

Gertrud's nineteenth century translator's summary of her educational achievements is essentially the same as that presented here, if with a slightly different emphasis:

At an early age she was sufficiently conversant with the Latin tongue to read and converse in that language; her reading was extensive for an age in which literature was confined to parchment manuscripts and oral instructions. Indeed, her devotion to literary pursuits -- though these were of the best and purest kind . . . seemed at first likely to prove a hindrance to her spiritual advancement.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly Gertrud did see her earlier preoccupation with secular letters as essentially sinful and indeed it is the only real form of dissipation of which she can accuse herself. In Book 2 she tells how at the time of her conversion, the Lord tried "to pull down the tower of vanity and worldliness into which my pride had grown, even though I bore -- an empty boast -- the name and habit of the religious life" (II.1,1). These somewhat cryptic remarks should be read in the light of her biographer, who explains that:

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<sup>13</sup>*Life and Revelations*, 4.

while clinging too closely to the liberal arts, she had until that moment failed to adjust the eye of her mind to the light of spiritual understanding. By attaching herself too eagerly to the pleasure of human wisdom, she had deprived herself of the most delightful taste of true Wisdom. (I.1,2).

One would dearly like to know in what secular literature she had been over-indulging: Virgil, Cicero and Seneca perhaps?

All this education, whose results are obvious, is largely silent about itself. Susan Kelly's comparison of the search for Anglo-Saxon lay literacy springs to mind as an analogy to our search for detailed information about the education available to Gertrud. She compares it to "the hunt for a certain elusive type of sub-atomic particle: the direct evidence for its existence is negligible but the fact that it did exist can be inferred from its perceived effect upon its environment."<sup>14</sup> This ignorance is the more frustrating as Helfta's success in producing at least three generations of educated nuns (those of Mechthild, Gertrud herself, and her biographer) is somewhat surprising in Germany at the time. The second half of the thirteenth century, the age of Dante, was a time of great political instability and conflict in the Holy Roman Empire. Moreover, Germany was

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<sup>14</sup>Susan Kelly, "Anglo-Saxon Lay Society and the Written Word" in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 36.

educationally backward, at least compared with France, Italy and even England, with no university until the University of Prague was founded in 1346. According to a standard history of Western education, "By 1300 there were about fifty bishoprics in the country, and hundreds of monasteries, but only a few of those were important centres of learning."<sup>15</sup> The exceptions included Cologne, not too far from Helfta.

Helfta itself, although a Benedictine foundation, followed the customs of Cîteaux and was under the spiritual direction of the Dominicans. It is Dominican friars who write the letters attesting to the authenticity and orthodoxy of Gertrud's writings that precede Book I of *The Herald*. Although the Order of Preachers had originally discouraged the study of the arts, by 1259 their attitude had changed and the general chapter had decreed that each province should have a center for their study.<sup>16</sup> Possibly it is this order rather than the Benedictines or the Cistercians (who officially did not admit women's houses, the spiritual direction of nuns not being considered part of the monks' duties) who should take the credit for the education of the women of Helfta.

Finally, perhaps there is need also to recognize culture-bound assumptions and reassess the utility of the practice of child oblation. While it seems nearly

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<sup>15</sup>James Bowen, *A History of Western Education* (London: Methuen, 1975) 269.

<sup>16</sup>Orme, 229.



incomprehensible to the modern mind, it clearly offered potential educational advantages, for girls in particular. Is it possible, for instance, that one of the reasons for the lower educational level of post-Conquest women's religious houses compared with those of Anglo-Saxon England might be the decline of the practice? After all, child oblation brought together a larger, more viable group of young girls who needed education than one would find in the average noble household.

There would be enough of them to make it worthwhile to have a teacher, and not so many that they received no personal attention. Education in the reading and writing of Latin could start at an early age, when it is relatively painless and easily assimilated. Moreover, these would be pupils growing up in an environment that would impress on them every minute of their waking (and working) day the relevance of their studies for their future lives. In other words, the distinction between "training" and "education" noted earlier would fade away. Although the children were probably kept separate from the adult community, they must have heard the Office recited or chanted in Latin. They also would have known that Latin devotional texts were read at every meal in the refectory and chapters from the Latin *Rule of St Benedict* were read daily in the chapter house. Instead of thinking of the child oblates at Helfta as pupils at a girls' single-sex high school, perhaps they should be seen much more as students at a ballet school attached to a famous dance company, or at a school for precocious young musicians. A common purpose unites children and adults, their lives smoothly

blending the academic and, in all senses of the word, the vocational.