

Mechthild of Magdeburg: Selections from The Flowing Light of the Godhead. Translated from the Middle High German with Introduction, Notes and Interpretive Essay by Elizabeth A. Andersen. (Library of Medieval Women.) D.S. Brewer, 2003. pp. 154.

In this latest contribution to the Library of Medieval Women series, Elizabeth A. Andersen, presents a well-chosen selection from Mechthild of Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. While many of the works published by the Library of Medieval Women series bring to light the literary productions of lesser-known women, Mechthild of Magdeburg's reputation as a leading exemplar of thirteenth-century *Frauenmystik*, or women's mysticism, has long been established. Andersen's translation is thus not the first to appear in English, nor the most comprehensive, but her selection is eminently suited for a classroom setting. A general introduction, which places Mechthild within the historical contexts of visionary and mystical literature, female monasticism, and the beguine lifestyle, provides useful

background information for understanding Mechthild's life and work, despite the omission of recent works on beguines and their spirituality by such historians as Walter Simons and Mary Suydam.

Whereas previous anthologies have focused on the lyrical passages of mystical union in Mechthild's writing or extracted passages from their original context in order to arrange them categorically, Andersen has chosen to respect the original integrity and order of individual chapters in order to reflect the heterogeneity of Mechthild's work (p. 16). By maintaining the integrity of the original work, Andersen reveals the idiosyncratic and diverse nature of Mechthild's writing to readers, enabling them to hear the changes in Mechthild's tone and style. Andersen has nevertheless chosen her selection to reflect the development of

certain dominant themes in Mechthild's writing, such as the union of the Soul with God, visionary accounts of Heaven, Paradise, Purgatory, and Hell, Mechthild's relationship with her contemporaries, her self-projection as both author and narrator, and issues surrounding visionary authority. Most useful are Andersen's brief introductions to each of the books of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, which highlight the appearance of these various themes and point to the changes in Mechthild's style and tone.

By way of conclusion, Andersen provides an interpretive essay that focuses on the issues of authorial voice and spiritual authority in Mechthild's writing. Andersen notes how Mechthild's persona as narrator oscillates between fragmentation and integration by shifting from narration in the third person to the first person within individual chapters and by employing such rhetorical devices as personification (pp. 141-146). The remainder of the essay focuses more specifically on Mechthild's use of the "eyes of the soul" topos to assert

her authority as visionary, mystic, and author (pp. 146-154). Andersen's discussion of this aspect of Mechthild's writing is appropriate, given the importance of such issues as authorship and authority to medieval feminist scholarship. Indeed, her introductions to the individual books of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* emphasize Mechthild's use of the *sancta simplicitas* or "holy fool" and divine "call to write" topos as means of asserting her spiritual authority. Andersen's discussion of the "eyes of the soul" topos thus provides an in-depth analysis of one of the rhetorical means by which Mechthild asserted her status as visionary and author.

Although her essay addresses the broader issues of authority and authorship, Andersen avoids engaging in recent debates concerning the interaction between medieval female visionaries/mystics/authors and their male advisors/admirers/compilers. This is rather unfortunate, since consideration of such issues as reception, redaction, and co-authorship could have enriched this

concluding essay. As Andersen notes in her introduction, Mechthild's original Low German text is no longer extant. Her work is only available through its mid-14th century translation into Middle High German by the male priest, confessor, and spiritual advisor, Heinrich of Nördlingen. In addition, only one manuscript preserves her writings in their complete form (p. 1). In regard to Heinrich of Nördlingen's role as translator and promoter of Mechthild's work, Andersen merely repeats Hans Neumann's view that Heinrich was "a careful and respectful editor who altered little of Mechthild's wording" (9). Yet, Andersen also states that while other translators generally adhered fairly closely to Mechthild's text, "there is evidence of editing in the toning down of passages where the expression is explicitly erotic and where the thought might have been construed as heretical" (2). Given the reception of Mechthild's work in the surviving manuscript tradition, it would seem appropriate to remark on the possibility that Mechthild's mystical writing,

as it has been preserved for the modern reader, speaks not only through the various authorial voices of Mechthild's narrative personae, but also through the double voice of Mechthild and those who sanctioned her work by translating and copying it. Indeed, at one point Mechthild herself played with the idea of an alternative, male voice as author of her experiences, exclaiming: "Ah Lord, if I were an educated, religious man and You had worked this singular, great wonder in him, then You would have had eternal honour from that" (48). Andersen's discussion of the "eyes of the soul" topos and Mechthild's assertion of visionary authority could have been enhanced by also drawing the reader's attention to the other "eyes" that read and copied her text, that is those religious who worked to preserve and promote, and perhaps in the process modify, Mechthild's memory and writing. The interpretative essay might then have stimulated further questions about medieval authorship, reception, and use of mystical and visionary texts, as well as the assertion,

creation, or preservation of spiritual authority.

Although Andersen's interpretive essay avoids these issues, her edition of Mechthild's *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* contributes greatly to the continuing endeavor within medieval studies and feminist scholarship to recover the literary works, voices, and experiences of medieval women. More importantly, her presentation of Mechthild's work will help both students and instructors understand the influence of women in shaping the religious culture of medieval Europe and the devotions of their contemporaries.

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"When Adam dug and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?"

□ John Ball,
revolutionary leader