LOVE AND BEAUTY IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD: PATHWAYS THROUGH BEGUINE AND TANTRIC MYSTICISMS

Paul Martin
University of South Australia
Adelaide, Australia

In this essay I shall consider the special mystical experiences of two Beguines, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Antwerp, who variously used erotic and gendered imagery to convey their yearning for union with God. The kind of feminine–masculine symbolism exhibited by them can also be found in the spirituality of the Indian Tantras, which is a religious system that focuses on the concept of sakti as the emblem of power in the universe; this force is conceived as feminine, and personified as the divine consort of the god Śiva. Although there are substantial theological differences between these two traditions, there appear to be correlations at the level of image-making. I hope to show here that they both extol the quality of Love, but from different angles. I shall contend that, so far as textual evidence is concerned, the Beguines express a “love of love,” while Tantric practitioners (who are predominantly men) express a “love of beauty.” In what follows I shall firstly frame these kinds of mysticism, Beguine and Tantric, then examine instances of their applications, and finally analyze their correspondences.

Beguine Mysticism

A compelling motif of medieval mystical feeling, first made explicit by the Cistercian monk, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), was the sense of God as being the essence of love. Using the platform of exegesis of the Song of Songs, Bernard sought to integrate both carnal and spiritual experiences, and recognized that bodily love was at least a form of spiritual love. However, the highest, purest love, because selfless, is exemplified in the urgent desire of the bride for her bridegroom; and Bernard translated that spiritually, by representing the soul as the bride and Christ (the incarnation of the Word) as bridegroom. “Such love,” he thought, “is completely mutual, and it is perfectly satisfying in the sense that it is the highest form of vision or contemplation of God and the most exalted type of union.”1 Bernard’s perspective of eroticism, besides that of other male writers of the period, was, however, just a “spiritual” one, and not one that included actual bodiliness and sexuality. Indeed, according to Grace Jantzen, “[a]lthough [Bernard’s sermons] are explicitly based on one of the most erotic love poems in the literature of the world, they manage to reduce eroticism to a sustained allegory, intellectually intricate, but hardly passionate.”2 In effect, she argues, this de-eroticized vocabulary of passionate spirituality acted as a substitute for actual physical bodily love.

Bernard McGinn locates the place of women mystics in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in the tradition of Mary Magdalene’s penitential weeping and espousal of love for Christ.3 He argues that the unique efforts of the Beguines in realizing a sense of union with the divine constituted a new mode of mystical endeavor. Moreover,

3 See his examination of this period in chaps. 4 and 5 of The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200–1350 (New York: Crossroad, 1998).
the foremost problem for women mystics of the time was the issue of authority; and so, lacking the necessary theological background, they tended to support their claims to authority by appealing to visionary revelation. Augustine had divided the showings produced by special divine action into three ascending forms based on their relation to materiality: corporeal visions; spiritual visions; and intellectual visions. He privileged the last kind over the others, as it refers to an idealized realm of objective reality, in which God is sharply illuminated. The cognitive dimension of intellectual visions is understood as being superior to that of imagistic spiritual visions, or sense-directed corporeal visions.  

Male mystics, such as Meister Eckhart, likewise preferred intellectual visions. The medieval female mystics, however, tended to “collapse the Augustinian hierarchy” by merging and melding the three kinds into “direct forms of ‘total’ conscious experience of God realized as much in and through the body as in a purely spiritual way.” Working with the theme of sweet love, these women described their encounters with God in markedly sensual terms. Often indeed, many of them used sexualized images and language to describe their ecstatic experiences. In short, the earlier monastic efforts at transforming and allegorizing scriptural language now became, in the hands of the *mulieres religosae*, a vehicle for openly expressing erotic conjunction with God.

The movement of the Beguines was shortlived, flourishing only from about 1220 to 1318. These innovative women mystics recorded their own intense experiences, or communicated them to others; in many cases, their experiences were subsequently redacted and embellished by hagiographers. Principal among these mystics were Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Antwerp. Both wrote encomia to the God who stood not at a distance but nearby; and he was realized through mediate, and immediate, experiences of his compassing being. For these women love is a striking and powerful force, which is also personified as Lady Love, or Frau Minne. “She appears in various contexts as a double for the mystic herself, her ‘transcendent I’; as a double for Christ, the Beloved; and as ultimate being, the Absolute, in which Lover and Beloved are one.”  

Barbara Newman observes that Minne is, simply speaking, just the alter ego and projection of the ideal to which the soul aspires. This “specular Minne” is an irresistible force for Hadewijch, and for Mechthild is the object of intense desire as embodied in the bridegroom, who is Christ. Moreover, *minne* and the bridegroom reverse conventional gender roles: “[t]he opposite of the gentle adolescent Christ, [Lady Minne] seems a Western manifestation of the Hindu goddess Kali insofar as she is a divine force, fierce, unrelenting and merciful….Lady Minne, as image within an image, appears to reflect back to the mystical onlooker a notion of femininity that is strong-willed, single-minded, fiery.”

Mechthild, it is generally believed, was born into a noble family in Lower Saxony in about 1208. A the age of twelve she was “greeted” by the Holy Spirit, and these ecstatic experiences continued for the next thirty-one years; she later recalled them in a seven-part book, *Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, or The Flowing Light of the Godhead (FL). Originally written in a Low German dialect, it was also translated into High German.

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and Latin, which are now the only extant manuscripts. Few details are known about the Flemish mystic Hadewijch, except that she lived in the first half of the thirteenth century. Her familiarity with French courtly poetry suggests a noble breeding; and equally her familiarity with the writing of male theologians and mystics suggests some learning. She employed a variety of genres in articulating a coherent love mysticism; these comprise Poems in Stanzas (PS), a series of Visions (V), and Poems in Couplets (PC).

**Tantric Mysticism**

Tantra (“loom,” “warp”) is a diverse body of beliefs that has existed in South and East Asia since the middle of the first millennium. At one time or another there has been a Tantric component to the major religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and even Islam. Given this diversity, general definitions are problematic; but David White fairly offers the following:

Tantra is that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.

The chief centers were originally in Kashmir and Nepal, but by the tenth or eleventh centuries Tantric schools and practices could be found all over India. Within Buddhism there are Tantras that belong to the “northern” or Mahayana strand, and these find sophisticated development in Tibetan lineages, especially the Vajrayāna (“Diamond Vehicle”). Although the origin of Hindu and Buddhist Tantras is still uncertain, it is admitted that there has historically been little communication between the advocates of these philosophies; and clearly there are differences in ideology. Broadly, Hindu Tantrism is a system or rule which refers to a gamut of practices – ritual, magic and yogic – indulged in by practitioners belonging to one of three divisions: the Vaiṣṇavite, Saivite, or Śākta; in these, emphasis is placed respectively on the worship of the gods Viṣṇu or Śiva, or the goddess Devī in her various guises. The numerous schools and sects within these divisions utilize a vast number of obscurely written revelatory texts, many of which still remain to be critically edited from their manuscript forms, much less to be translated into English. It is likely much more has been lost over time. The Tantras are generally cast in the form of a dialogue between Viṣṇu or Śiva and his consort, with the goddess asking questions of the god; sometimes these roles

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are reversed in Śākta Tantras. The contents are deliberately designed to be secretive and ambiguous; and, as “encrypted” teachings, the key to unlocking their secrets can only be supplied by a guru, who may or may not be actually present in physical form. So, for a Westerner unfamiliar with the concepts and terminology a commentary is a prerequisite, and indeed indispensable. Although the popular image of Tantrism in the West is one of rampant sexuality, this is a skewed view; in fact, the texts are doctrinal expositions on the way to the godhead, and sexual intercourse is just one component of a whole scheme.

A common theological basis in Hindu Tantrism is the idea of a unified Absolute (Brahman), which becomes through reflection a binary godhead composed of masculine and feminine complements; from their union is created a universe composed of triadic forms. More precisely, the Absolute, as self-illuminating consciousness, expands and projects a mirrored version of itself; hence, the universe is considered to be identical to and different from the Absolute.\(^{14}\) Brahman is known as the transcendent that appears in universally immanent form through bifurcatory (and triadic) modes. Essentially, then, the universe is a continuum of divine and mundane realms: spirit (energy) is thought of as just unstructured matter, and matter, just structured energy (spirit). There is a correspondence to the Einsteinian formulation of mass-energy equivalence, in which mass is viewed as concentrated energy, and energy as deconcentrated mass. Importantly, the material universe is believed not to be an illusion, but real enough, remaining so upon spiritual realization; it is only the perception of duality that disappears.\(^{15}\) It might be said that the human mind of the ordinary, enclosed individual self (jīva), acts as a polarizing lens, and spiritual liberation (mukti) has the effect of removing the lens, allowing the unpolarized sunlight to be seen. Furthermore, since heaven is implanted in the world, “liberation-in-the-body” (jīvanmukti) is stressed; for it is condign to enjoy the bliss of divinity in the body. It is possible then, in this theology (what might be called the “doctrine of continuity”), to feminize all of creation, up to and beyond the godhead, as Śāktism is somewhat inclined to do; in this view, Śiva recedes firmly into the background.

The divine godhead of Śiva and Śakti is thus originally polarized, and represented as principled opposites in the work of creation. Śiva is the ground of inert consciousness, while Śakti is the activator of evolving consciousness. This cosmic duo of Śiva and Śakti is mirrored in the worldly duo of man and woman, who are also polarized opposites. The male is taken to be the subject, and to express wisdom, but is yet passive; while the female is taken to be the object, to connote power, and to be in the active mode.\(^{16}\) However, pursuing the idea of the universe as a vast energy field, it is possible to neutralize this loaded dichotomy by referring to Śiva (male) as potential energy, and

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\(^{15}\) This is subtly unlike the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta propounded by Śaṅkarācarya (ca. 788–820), in which there is a “provisional realism.” The world is real enough in its subject/object distinctions for at least as long as one remains in a state of ignorance (avidyā). In other words, the world of appearances is only an illusion factored by māyā (sakti), and can be surmounted by realizing one’s whole identity with non-dual Brahman. (See Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* [Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1969]). A metaphor for this condition, or state of mind, is that of someone who normally approaches a pit of quicksand and fails to notice a warning sign. The Vedantically realized state is just that as one notices the sign, one acts to stop; but, whereas the Advaitin sees danger ahead, the Tantric happens to notice the sign, yet walks on regardless: she or he does not fear sinking into the quicksand (being immersed in the world).

\(^{16}\) Buddhist Tantras reverse these attributions, so that the male becomes active compassion, and the female, passive wisdom. (See Bharati, *Tantric Traditions*, p. 208.) To be fair, the assignation of these types is based on different premises.
Śakti (female) as kinetic energy. If Śiva and Śakti are “identically different,” so must be man and woman; and it is useful to think of these two kinds as respectively the gems sapphire and ruby. Both are forms of corundum, which is a crystallization of the aluminum oxide alumina, and which in its pure state is colorless; it is only a chromium impurity that gives it the red color of ruby, and iron and titanium impurities that give it the blue color of sapphire.¹⁷

The “external” reflection that is the godhead of Śiva and Śakti appearing as man and woman is paralleled by an “internal” reflection, in that each human being is understood as being composed of those same male and female principles, or energies (potential and kinetic). Salvation is achieved by conjoining the two principles, either externally through ritualized sexual contact (the “left-hand way”), or internally through visualization (the “right-hand way”); or, most commonly, through a combination of both methods. Whatever means is employed, the process involves initiating the force of kuṇḍalinī, who is but Śakti in her microcosmic aspect, and who is envisaged as a snake-form that lies coiled at the base of the spine in the yogic, “subtle,” body (in Western esoteric terms, the “matrix” of the body). Upon activation, or ignition, the kuṇḍalinī-śakti moves up the suṣūmnā canal (the subtle analogue of the spinal canal) intersecting, or piercing, a series of five energy vortices called cakras (“disks,” “wheels”), progressively located in the region of the genitals, navel, heart, throat, and between the eyebrows (the “third eye”), until she joins with Śiva who resides in the head cakra. At this point God-consciousness ensues.¹⁸

The cakras are also often depicted as lotus petals on which are inscribed Sanskrit letters. In effect, each lotus has a particular soundscape, and illustrates the expression of a mantra, which can be used for invoking the divinity of the cakra.¹⁹ They are normally shown as drooping, but will blossom upon passage of kuṇḍalinī. Another central element in the Tantras is the concept of the yantra, which functions in a similar way to the Buddhist maṇḍala.²⁰ A yantra then is a geometrical configuration that is said to house one’s chosen deity, and as such is an iconographic rather than anthropomorphic representation; it serves to operate as a focus for ritual worship. Furthermore, as an architectural representation of the unfolding forces that manifest the universe, it becomes a map by which to navigate back to the source of creation. This journey requires specialized instruction in ritual worship, which is given through initiation. A most famous example of a yantra is the sricakra, which is composed of a central dot and nine interlacing triangles, surrounded by two sets of stylized lotus petals alternating with three circles, all of which is enclosed within a square gateway structure.²¹ From the outer edge to the inner dot comprises nine circuits or sub-cakras exemplifying various attributes and deities. The human body itself can be thought of as a yantra, since it encapsulates Śiva and Śakti.

The multifarious texts of Śākta Tantrism can be characterized as belonging to the Śrīkula or Kālikula. The first focuses on the Goddess in her beneficent, benign and


¹⁹ The Kashmirian tradition emphasizes more the idea of cakras as spinning wheels, which, by their different modes of vibration generate the particular sound frequencies that make up the Word of Brahman (sabdabraham).

²⁰ An accessible introduction is Madhu Khanna, *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981; repr. 1997), from which the following discussion is taken.

motherly form, while the second focuses on her terrifying forms.\footnote{Brooks, *Auspicious Wisdom*, p. 17.} In the conservative School of Śrīvidyā, Devī is worshipped under the rubric of Lalitā Tripurasundārī (“Beautiful One of the Three Cities”), and is portrayed as being auspicious, queenly and powerful. Graphically, she is shown as single-faced and four-armed, carrying a noose, an elephant-goad, a bow of sugarcane, and five arrows (the arrows of the Love God, Kāma). She features in the texts Lalitāsahasranāma (LSN) and Saundaryalahārī (SL), which were supposedly written by the Vedaṅga philosopher Śaṅkarācārya.\footnote{The editions used here are Lalitā-sahasranāman, with Bhāskararāya’s Commentary, translated by R. Ananthakrishna Sastry (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1951; fourth repr. 1970); and the Saundaryalahārī or Flood of Beauty: Traditionally Ascribed to Śaṅkarācārya, edited, translated, and presented in photographs by W. Norman Brown (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958). Śaṅkara’s authorship is questioned on the basis of his abstract non-dualism standing in contradiction to the concept of a personalized godhead, which these texts depict so assiduously.}

The LSN is a compilation of one thousand appellations honoring the Goddess. The SL is composed of one hundred stanzas in metrical form, which can be considered in three parts. The first part comprises stanzas one to forty-one, and is an explication of the power and position of Saktī and Śiva; it is separately known as the Anandalahārī, or “Flood of Bliss.” The second part comprises stanzas forty-two to ninety-one and is a eulogy on the beauty of Devī (Saktī); it is for this reason often called the Saundaryalahārī, or “Flood of Beauty.” The third part comprises stanzas ninety-two to ninety-nine and is a prayerful invocation. In stanza one hundred the poet acknowledges Devī as his inspired source for the writing. Basically, the SL is a devotional hymn of praise (*stotra*), which is acknowledged as a preeminent poem, and given a distinguished place in mystical Hindu literature. However, as read on its own, it cannot be regarded as a Tantric text; rather, it is only the elaboration by numerous commentators of the underlying philosophical ideas that give it that status.\footnote{Rajmani Tigunait, *Sakti: The Power in Tantra, A Scholarly Approach* (Honesdale, Pennsylvania: The Himalayan Institute Press, 1998), pp. 58–62.}

**Spiritual Marriage**

Mechthild sets the scene for her marvelous experiences in chapter 2 of book 1:

> God’s true greeting, coming from the heavenly flood out of the spring of the flowing Trinity, has such force that it takes away all the body’s strength and reveals the soul to herself, so that she sees herself resembling the saints, and she takes on a divine radiance.

Her use of imagery is particularly strong in the first five books. She articulates God in his complete flowingness: in his airy (light), fiery, and watery nature. In sum, in his triune self, God is a boundless flowing movement of love (5.26), in whom Mechthild reciprocally moves and has her being (5.20, 5.35, 7.45). As light, God dazzles Mechthild in his brilliance (1.22, 2.7, 5.1). He is an eternal fire, who lights up his kingdom (6.29). His flowing capacity naturally lends itself to watery allusions: Mechthild depicts God as a cleansing mountain stream that flows into the lake of humanity (4.12, 6.2); and her soul will swim in his flowingness, like a fish (3.1). For Hadewijch, God is a whole of love, who is wholly to be loved, and who lives in all things (PS 34; V. 3; PC 3). She strives to measure the love of God through fidelity and virtuousness, and finally experience “fruition” of him (PS 4, 8; V. 7). The name of Love is likened to oil poured out, “since it overflows with a flood of wonder” (PS 42.25–34). She is ever moving:
So strongly active is Love’s nature
That she cannot rest one instant
Without involving her loved one in sweet love,
Or in a storm of the understanding. (PC 12.15–18)

Hadewijch envisions God’s “hiddenness embracing and flowing through all things” (V. 6); and so, union with Divinity means “to have been flowed through by the whole Godhead, and to have become totally one, flowing back through the Godhead itself” (V. 14).

For Mechthild, God is acoustically powerful in his flowing love (5.18), and she extols him endlessly (5.30). In loving God, the soul acquires power to overcome adversity. The power of Love is explicitly conveyed by Hadewijch, as she says that Love stands supreme over the sun, moon, and stars (PS 12.69–70). Love’s nature is “powerful in its activity,” and is fearful of nothing, ever valiant; and, “in it is all the power of God” (PC 10.57–59). Only by being conquered by love can one hope to conquer love (PS 14.19–22). She says:

O powerful, wonderful Love,
You who can conquer all with wonder!
Conquer me, so that I may conquer you,
In your unconquered Power. (PS 19.50–53)

The way to do this is through the interactive force of longing, which indeed is terrific in its ardor (PS 7.54–60, 38.49–60). Certainly, one must fight Love with passion, “to the death, or nearly” (PS 40.23). Love is demanding, and requires total love in commitment, which invariably entails suffering and misery for the lover (PC 4.86–94, 5.17–20, 7.45–49, 9.13–19). She advises this course notwithstanding:

He who wishes to conquer Love
Must not neglect
To give himself continually to Love.
And he must suffer
Incessantly
For what his heart has chosen,
And surrender himself in pain or in defamation,
In sorrow or in joy, in Love’s chains;
Thus shall he come to know
The noblest Being in the depths of Love. (PS 24.81–90)

Love is also vehement, and relentless. Mechthild’s soul complains to her chambermaid, who is Love, that she has “…hunted me, trapped me, bound me, and wounded me so deeply that I shall never be healthy again. You have meted out to me many a cudgel blow” (1.3). Yet, that God should be away from the loving soul is, for Mechthild, “anguish beyond human dying” (2.2). God gives too much:

“O Lord, you pamper to excess my dank prison,
In which I drink the water of the world and eat in great misery
The ash cake of my frailty,
And am wounded to the death
By the beam of your fiery love.
Now you leave me, Lord, lying in my misery,  
My wounds untended, in great torment.” (2.25)

But the pain of love cuts both ways. God the Father desires to create human souls so as to be able to share his love: “I shall make a bride for myself who shall greet me with her mouth and wound me with her beauty. Only then does love really begin” (3.9). For Hadewijch, desire is tempestuous in its pursuit of Love, who is elusive, not allowing the soul any repose (PS 6.49–60, 20.35–36; PC 10.103–114). She finds love a stormy madness, which fetters her soul (PS 24, 28, 31.9–16, 32.5–8, 39.19–27; PC 10.35–38). So powerful is it that she can be flung into the abyss:

Alas, where is new Love now  
With her new good things?  
For my distress brings me  
Into many a new woe;  
My soul melts away  
In the madness of Love;  
The abyss into which she hurls me  
Is deeper than the sea;  
For Love’s now deep abyss  
Renews my wound:  
I look for no more health  
Until I experience Love as all new to me. (PS 7.37–48).

Love possesses, devours and burns with her fury (PS 36.106–110, 38.33–38; V. 11). In the School of Love, the highest gift is to be blessed with Love’s wounds, and the longing desire for knowing her vastness keeps those wounds open (PS 14.65–72). Hadewijch suffers repeated blows for love’s sake (PS 13.5–8, 16.80–90, 39). In styling the aspiration to Love as a knight, she can demonstrate the attacking qualities that are required to achieve the goal of union (PS 9, 10). For the soul must suffer heavy blows in its cause:

People afraid of any pains in love  
Certainly cannot understand  
What can be won by souls  
Who are always submissive to Love,  
Who receive from her hand heavy blows  
Of which they remain wholly unhealed,  
And who mount on high and are knocked down again  
Before they please Love. (PS 32.57–64)

And, Love is cunning: “She can, according to her pleasure, / Adroitly fence under the shield, / Inflicting wounds from which no one can recover” (PS 39.52–54).

It is clear that for these Beguines the quality of love is promoted above all else, and represents a sure way to union with God. The sense of Mechthild’s desire for this union borders on assimilation, which is tantamount to identification. God speaks:

When I shine, you shall glow.  
When I flow, you shall become wet.  
When you sigh, you draw my divine heart into you.  
When you weep in longing for me, I take you in my arms.
But when you love, we two become one being.  
And when we two are one being,  
Then we can never be parted.  
Rather, a blissful abiding  
Prevails between us. (2.6):

In an echo of the earthly court, Mechthild writes of the soul’s journey to the Court of God, where the Sovereign reveals his divine heart, which resembles “red gold burning in a great fire of coals” (1.4). After placing her soul in there she exalts; and being so embraced, she achieves a union which is like that of water mixing with wine. In an extended metaphor describing the approach to God as a mystical dance, Mechthild’s dialogic senses urge her not to go to the Godhead, as it is “so blazing hot.” The soul retorts in part by saying that “[g]old in fire does not perish” (1.44). Elsewhere, she refers to God’s light as shining into her soul “[l]ike the sun against gold” (2.5). Mechthild thus equates the soul with gold. For Hadewijch, the goal is to “have fruition of Love’s nature” (PS 15.24), and to experience the mutual embrace (PS 34.49–54). She will conform wholly to Love’s nature:

O sublime nature, true Love,  
When will you make my nature so fair  
That it will be wholly conformed to your nature?  
For I wish to be wholly conformed.  
If all that is other in me were yours,  
Everything that is yours would be altogether mine:  
I should burn to ashes in your fire! (PS 43.43–49)

God is “particularly Love,” and mandates, as according to Hadewijch’s wishes, that Love draw the loving soul to herself in the closest possible union (PS 20.25–30). In Vision 7, Hadewijch experienced the full union of her self with the “manly beauty” of Christ, and it seemed that they “were one without difference.” As she goes on to say: “After that I remained in a passing away in my Beloved, so that I wholly melted away in him and nothing any longer remained to me of myself; and I was changed and taken up in the spirit, and there it was shown me concerning such hours.” She also uses a liquid metaphor to convey the sense of union, of swimming in beauty:

Love’s being is in her commandments;  
Where love is with Love in love,  
The abyss is unfathomable;  
There all those who let themselves sink in her  
Must be drowned in her.... (PC 10.60–64)

Divine Engagement  
The Goddess is worshipped in a threefold manner: in her gross, or physical form, as Lalitā Tripurasundarī; in her subtle, or mantric form, as Śrīvidyā; and in her transcendent, or yantric form, as Śrīcakra.

In the Lalitāshahasranāma (“Thousand Names of Lalitā”) she is symbolized as royal and auspicious, as all-powerful, the great Queen and Mother, who is supreme ruler of the universe (2, 294, 295, 306, 396, 457, 758, 934). She is illimitable majesty (429), omniscient (196) and omnipresent (256, 400, 702); she delights in dominion (686), and confers prosperity and happiness on her devotees (117, 502, 953, 967, 968). She creates
the universe in her golden womb (637, 638, 783, 823, 826), and then supports it (659, 759, 985). She wears a beautiful crescent moon (243), and shines like the ruby (248); she is radiantly luminous (393, 394, 414, 465), and of rosy effulgence (12, 922). She is the goddess of the Earth (935, 955), who is of exquisite and enchanting beauty (241, 562); her lovely appearance is detailed in names 13 to 51. She is worshipped by the God of desire, Kāma (375), and filled with the essence of love (376), shining with rapturousness (431, 432, 433), exuding compassion (687, 992), and endowed with the divine perfume (631). She is Kuṇḍalini (110), who is the fountain of ambrosia (106, 717, 879). She has seven qualities: contentment, nourishment, wisdom, might, tranquility, benevolence, and beauty (443–49); and she dwells in justice (608).

Śiva is subject to her power (54), and he worships her (406); but her nature is also the equal essence of Śiva and Śakti (999). Though she is without cause herself (152), she is the origin of all else (397, 615), and is reality itself (907). She has no superior (155, 809); as ātman, the supreme and absolute (617, 618, 623), she transcends the universe (334). She is indestructible and eternal (136, 143). She is the very essence of all mantras (204), the soul of all yantras (205), the spirit of all Tantras (206), who is to be attained by knowledge (980), and through constant devotion (990). She is called Tripurā, city of the three, because she is “the measurer, the measuring and the thing measured” (234). Furthermore, she is said to be the bestower of knowledge (643), and to embody knowledge itself (644), but also to transcend the knowable (652). She encompasses multiple trinities in manifestation (626, 628). She is the ruler of the beautiful city, that supreme city of Śrīvidyā which stands at the centre of the Śrīcakra (56, 996). Her residence is in the center of the ocean of nectar (61), and she is to be contemplated in the ether of the heart (595, 609, 855). At the end, she is the Mother Lalitā (1000): “Thou art rightly called Lalitā for thou hast nine divine attendants [in the Śrīcakra] and your bow is made of sugar-cane, your arrows are flowers, and everything connected with you is lovely (lalitā).”

In the Saundaryalaharī Lalitā’s image is invoked in verse 7:

Banded with a tinkling girdle, heavy with breasts like the frontal lobes of elephants,
slender of waist, with face like the full moon of autumn,
bearing on the palms of her hands bow, arrows, noose, and goad,
let there be seated before us the pride of him who shook the cities.

She inspires the god of Love, Kāma, to his conquering:

His bow is made of flowers, the bowstring of bees, five are his arrows,
Vasanta (Spring) is his adjutant, the Malaya breeze his war chariot,
and yet, by himself, O daughter of the snow mountain,
when but a bit of compassion
he has got from a side glance of yours, the Bodiless one (Kāma) conquers this world entire. (v. 6)

The beauty of the Goddess is incomparable, and even master poets “can scarcely succeed” in describing it (v. 12); but by drinking from the “ocean of the milk of poesy,” which flowed from her breasts, Śaṅkara was able to do so (v. 75). He acknowledges Devī as the mother of speech, who revealed to him the words that he used to compose his hymn of praise (v. 100).
There is an exoteric and esoteric meaning to the SL, as with all Tantric poetry and verse. It can be appreciated merely at a literary level; or it can be seen as a catalyst for perceiving the infinite beauty and love of totalizing being (parabrahman), which is just Sakti:

In the midst of the Ocean of Nectar, [where] covered with groves of heavenly wishing trees [is] the Isle of Gems, in the mansion of wishing jewels with its grove of nīpa trees, on a couch composed of [the four gods] Śiva [and the others], your seat a mattress which is Paramaśiva – some few lucky ones worship you, a flood of consciousness (cit) and bliss (ānanda). (v. 8)

The SL is inconsistent in its presentation of the status of Sakti. She is supreme in verse 1:

If Śiva is united with Sakti, he is able to exert his powers as lord; if not, the god is not able to stir. Hence to you, who must be propitiated by Hari, Hara, Virañci, and the other [gods], how can one who has not acquired merit be fit to offer reverence and praise?

and verse 35, where Devī’s body is said to encompass the entire universe:

You are mind, you are space, you are wind, you are the one (fire) for whom the wind is charioteer, you are the cosmic waters, you are the earth; when you are evolved [into these forms] there is nothing more. You only, to effect evolution of yourself in the form of the universe, O young bride of Śiva, though your very nature bear the form of consciousness and bliss.

But she is in parity with Śiva in verse 34 (my interpolations):

You are the body of Śambhu [Śiva] with the sun and moon as your pair of breasts, your self I take to be the flawless self of Bhava [Śiva], O blessed lady; hence, as you reciprocally realize each other as complement and essence, this union exists of you two experiencing supreme bliss with equal savor.

The text of Ānandalahārī (vv. 1–41) is basically a celebration of the joy entailed by the cosmic union of Śiva and Sakti. This union is able to be experienced reflexively by the devotee (yogin, m. or yoginī, f.) through the microcosmic activation of the power of Sakti, which is called kuṇḍalini. As previously noted, kuṇḍalini is depicted as a sleeping serpent at the base of the spine, and this condition represents the present unawareness of one’s identity with Brahman. Upon awakening, she ascends through the central channel (suśuṃnā) of the vertical axis of the body, piercing the cakras, and
erupting through the “aperture of Brahmā” (brahmarandhra) into the cranial vault, before coming to rest in a union with Śiva in the sahasrā ra cakra (“thousand-petalled lotus”), located just above the head. At this stage, the devotee experiences blissful consciousness. As kundalini separates and descends into her quiescent state at the base of the spine, the devotee returns to normal consciousness; this pattern is indicated in verses 9 and 10. In verses 36 to 41 the cosmic kundalini is pictured as the creative, evolutionary force in the universe, which is contained in the body of Devī.

In her subtle, or mantric form, the Goddess is the śrīvidyā, and her word of invocation is fifteen syllabled (v. 32), or eighteen syllabled (v. 33). In her transcendent aspect, she is adored in the yantra (mystic diagram) of śricakra (v. 11), which is the focal point for realizing the identity of the self, or ātman, with the Goddess. According to verse 96:

> With the rays Animā and the others that spring from your own body [surrounding you] on all sides,
> O you who are eternally to be worshipped, whoever thus constantly meditates upon you with the thought “It is I” –
> what wonder is it that before him, who counts as grass the riches of the three-eyed one (Śiva),
> the fire of the universal dissolution performs the evening light-waving ceremony?

The identity is to be found through beauteous admiration, expressed meticulously in verses 42 to 91 of SL. Here, the features of the Goddess are described in detail: her diadem (42); the locks of her hair (43); the parting line of her hair (44); her smiling lotus-like face (45); her brilliantly shining forehead (46); her eye-brows (47); her eyes, which, as they open and close, create and dissolve the universe (48, 49, 51–57); her ears (50); her eyebrows (58); her ear-rings, which reflect in her cheeks (59); her response to the songs of Sarasvatī (60); her nose, which holds pearls created by her cool mouth (61); her red lips (62); her sweet smile in her moon-like face (63); her China rose tongue, on which the ruby-like goddess of speech sits (64); the cooling flakes of betel and camphor that drop from her mouth (65); the sweet tones of her applause before music (66); her matchless chin (67); her neck, which has the beauty of a stalk (68), and whose three creases define the limits of the three musical scales (69); her four arms (70); her lovely hands (71); her prominent breasts, like ruby jars of nectar, from which her sons suck (72, 73, 74); her deep navel (76); the line of abdominal hair (77, 78); her slender waist, burdened by overhanging breasts (79, 80); her wide hips and buttocks (81); her thighs like elephant ears (82); her shanks (83); her feet (84–90); and finally her elegant gait (91).

**Essential Differences**

In this section I hope to show that the way to God and Brahman by the Beguines and Tantrics is essentially the same, only expressed differently. This way is regulated by the desire for unification with a projected otherness, who is the apotheosis of love and beauty. It might be said, anecdotally, that for Beguines love is an “emotive” power, or a love of love, while for Tantrics love is an “appreciative” power, or a love of beauty. Putting it more mystically, Beguines express a “gold” love, as they image the union of their soul with the God who is splendid in his fiery countenance; while Tantrics express a “diamond” love, as they image the engagement of their divine self (ātman) with the Goddess who is admired in her sparkling beauty.
For the Beguines spiritual union connotes the joining of two separate wills, as in marriage here on earth. As Mechthild says:

“You are the feelings of love in my desire.
You are a sweet cooling for my breast.
You are a passionate kiss for my mouth.
You are a blissful joy of my discovery.
I am in you
And you are in me.
We could not be closer,
For we two have flowed into one
And have been poured into one mold.
Thus shall we remain forever content.” (3.5)

However, since the connubial relationship is provoked by love, and since God is quintessentially love, union with Love becomes almost an end in itself (FL 5.4). Hadewijch speaks eloquently of the spiritualized bridal relationship in her Visions; while in her Poems in Stanzas, and Poems in Couplets, she dwells on Love as the avenue to union. It is true that Tantrics seek unification; but this is achieved through engaging with the concept of beauty as presented by the Goddess. The goal of identification is indicated by SL in verse 22:

“Do you, O Lady (bhavāni), extend to me, your slave, a compassionate glance!” –
when one desires to praise you utters the words “you, O lady” (which also mean, “May I be you”),
at that moment you grant him a state of identity with you,
with your feet illuminated [as in the evening waving of lights before a god’s image] by the crests of Mukunda (Viṣṇu), Brahmā, and Indra.

Much attention is paid to the perception of the beauty of the Goddess, as verses 42 to 91 of SL shows. However, the Beguines also appreciate the value of beauty. Hadewijch writes that those who catch sight of the beauty of Love can become acquainted with her joy, and take delight in it (PS 9.91–98). The power of God’s loveliness is a recurring theme in Hadewijch’s writings. In one vision, she tells of ascending to the summit of a great mountain, where she came see God’s “ineffably beautiful Countenance, which was in appearance like a great fiery flood, wider and deeper than the sea” (V. 8).

A correspondence may be alleged between minne and śakti, and their personifications. Love, as Frau Minne, or Lady Love, is portrayed as forceful and unrelenting, mediating the desire of the soul and God for conjunction. For example, Mechthild speaks of “the violent force of love, which pressed me so intensely with these marvels that I did not dare remain silent about it” (4.2). For Hadewijch, it is enough to conquer, or be conquered by Love, in a stormy, maddening endeavor. Though yet wounded in heart and mind, the valiant soul must cross the rampart to confront Love (PS 21, 41.57–64). She writes of “the violence of Love,” and that only Sweetness can alleviate the “madness of Love” (PC 15.32, 15.39–40). Śakti too can be forceful and unrelenting. As her kinetic manifestation, kuṇḍalini, is actuated and moves up the body, she works to clear a dimensional pathway through the obstacle of ignorance, burning up the egoic accretions in her pursuit of union with Śiva. In this motion, kuṇḍalini can be
imagined as a bird. Compare Mechthild, who writes that Love, as she passes through the soul,

...rises up and begins to fly with the wings of a dove, which are all the virtues, and [when she] begins to desire with the longing of the eagle, she follows the heat up to heaven, for she finds everything transitory to be cold and tasteless (5.31).

Elsewhere, Mechthild refers to the experience of the soul’s union with God as being like the passion of Christ in its severity (3.10). She is consumed in the fire of God’s love; absorbed in his humility; and annihilated in all things (6.25). Hadewijch spoke clearly of the overthrow of her limiting self through the agency of Love. She envisions the countenance of Love as expressive of power: “From Love’s eyes proceeded swords full of fiery flames. From her mouth proceeded lightning and thunder” (V. 13). A fine, and startling example of the action of *kundalini* rendered in Christian terms can be found in Vision 12. Here, Hadewijch beholds a vision of the bride, who wears a robe adorned with the twelve virtues, “and each virtue had its symbol on the robe and its name written, that it might be known”; she goes to meet with her bridegroom above the abyss, who is sitting on a disk “set with all kinds of precious stones and in the color of pure gold.” Correspondingly, the gateway to realization of *samādhī* (ecstatic integration) is entered by meditating on the heart *cakra*, whose lotus is composed of twelve inscribed petals, and upon which Śiva and Śakti move together:

Subsisting only on honey from wisdom as though it were an opening lotus [the Anāhata],

that pair of haṁsas (Śiva and Devī) I worship, as they glide over the minds of the great ones [as though over Lake Mānasa];

from their ululations evolve the eighteen sciences;

they separate all the valuable from the worthless as [haṁsas drink apart] milk from water. (*SL*, v. 38)

Haṁsa is translated as “swan,” “goose,” or “migratory bird,” and is used in discussing the movements of the vital breath, *prāṇa*. Hence, in her aspirational role *kundalini-saktī* appears as the vital breath *prāṇa-kundalini*, which is called haṁsa (*swan*). The union is finally effected in the thousand-petalled lotus (*sahasradalapadma*), where Śakti greets with joy the seated Śiva.

*Kundalini* as the breath of Śakti has a pervasive presence within the body, apparent through the system of *nādis* (fiber optic nerves) and *cakras*; in her active state she thus positively suffuses the whole body and mind. Mechthild’s soul is held tightly in the embrace of God’s ambassador, Love, and permeated “utterly” by her at the time of death (1.3). At the end of her life, she can say that she is flooded with the love of the Holy Spirit’s “sweet loving spring waters” (7.24). For Hadewijch too, the quality of love is pervasive in her being:

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25 It can be argued that a gnostic interpretation of Christ’s Passion would admit it as being akin to a *kundalini* experience.
O Love, were I but love,
And could I but love you, Love, with love!
O Love, for love’s sake, grant that I,
Having become love, may know Love wholly as Love! (PC 15.49–52)

In the literature of Tantrism and *kundalini* yoga the process of liberation is accompanied by sensations of bliss, which are likened to the sweetness of honey (nectar). At the moment of the conjoining of Śakti with Śiva there is an outpouring of ambrosial streams of delight:

Slender as a streak of lightning, composed of the essence of sun, moon, and fire,
situated above the six lotuses (cakras), the manifestation of you
in the forest of great lotuses, those with mind free of stain and illusion
who view it, mighty ones, experience a flood of supreme joy. (*SL* v. 21)

In a similar way, Mechthild refers to God as being “so nicely honeycombed” (1.14). In the second heaven “she tastes an indescribable sweetness / That permeates all her members” (2.19); she delights in the sweetness of the Holy Spirit (4.2; 4.12). She prays that God will open his “drink of honey” for her and others to enjoy (7.42). Hadewijch typically writes of the sweetness of love; notably in PS 40.33–40:

Love conquers him so that he may conquer her;
To anyone who succeeds in this, her sweet nature
becomes known.
When he experiences this sweet Love,
He is wounded with her wounds;
When in amazement he beholds her wonders,
He imbibes eagerly from Love’s deep veins,
With continual thirst for a new beginning,
Until he enjoys sweet Love.

Elsewhere, she envisions the countenance of God as being of “unspeakable great beauty and the sweetest sweetness” (V. 1). In vision 4, she sees the kingdom of God, as she is touched and encompassed by “sweet” and “perfect” fidelity, which “was full of knowledge with the taste of veritable Love.” In vision 6, she recognizes her “awe-inspiring…unspeakably sweet Beloved.” So here we have Christ, realized in his suffering might, taking on the role of Śiva for the beguine-śaktis.

It seems these kind of mellifluous experiences were more generally encountered. In *The Life of Marie d’Oignies*, written in 1215, Jacques of Vitry summarized the intense mystical experiences of the Beguines (*mulieres sanctae*):

You saw some of these women dissolved with such a particular and marvellous love toward God that they languished with desire, and for years had rarely been able to rise from their cots. They had no other infirmity, save that their souls were melted with desire for Him, and, sweetly resting with the Lord, as they were comforted in spirit they weakened in body…The cheeks of one were seen to waste away, while her soul was melted with the greatness of her love. Many had the taste of honey on their tongues when their hearts experienced the sweetness of
meditation...Another’s flow of tears had made visible furrows down her face...I saw another who sometimes was seized with ecstasy five-and-twenty times a day, in which state she was motionless, and on returning to herself was so enraptured that she could not keep from displaying her inner joy with movements of the body, like David leaping before the Ark. Some in receiving the bread of Him who came down from heaven, obtained not only refreshments in their hearts, but a sensation in their mouths sweeter than honey and the honey-comb...So eagerly did they hasten after the fragrance of the sacrament that they were unable to go without it long: they found neither consolation nor rest, but languished unless their souls were frequently refreshed by the sweetness of this food....

Both Mechthild (7.65) and Hadewijch (V. 7, and 10) suffered physical effects from their ecstatic experiences. These parallel the effects of *kuṇḍalini*, which at various stages may include tingling sensations all over the body, heaviness in the head or sometimes giddiness, tremors, automatic and involuntary laughing or crying, visions and voices, inner lights or sounds, pain at the base of the spine, sensations of heat, etc. The tingling sensation is said to be akin to the “touch” of divine energy, or “the very touch of grace.”

Just as Lalitā is the arbiter of knowledge, who instructs in the way of liberation (cf. *LSN*, name 603), so Mechthild allegorizes the wisdom that Jesus imparts as a beautiful virgin (4.3). She writes of this figure: her feet are adorned with jasper, which stone is Christian faith; she carries in her right hand a chalice filled with red wine, which is the blood of the eternal Son; in her left hand she wields a fiery sword that is full of golden cymbals hanging from it, which sound so sweet; unction flows from her throat, representing mercy; her mouth is full of golden teeth with which to chew the celestial junipers, or the sayings of the prophets; her tongue drips honey that the bustling bees – the apostles – have sucked from the sweetest wild flowers; she wears on her mouth blossoming roses, and her nose is adorned with sweet violets; she wears on her brow verdant white lilies, signifying that she is a mother to widows, a dear friend to married people, and a glory to all virgins; her eyes, threefold yet one, sparkle with delight; she wears on her head a crown that is wrought from red gold, that is, lofty counsel and holy action which one has from holy teachers. And for Hadewijch, to attain to the kingdom wherein Love reigns it is requisite to attend the School of Love (PS 14). In Vision 9, she personifies reason as a queen, who is “clad in a gold dress,” and spotted with a thousand eyes. One of her retinue is Wisdom, through whom Hadewijch gained to knowledge of power and virtue in God. Compare *LSN*, name 283, where the Goddess is said to be “thousand eyed.”

Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that in the medieval affective tradition men strongly demarcated gender notions. Women, on the other hand, rather than uncritically accepting the notion that opposed attributes constitute male and female, tended to view them as overlapping. It was not a fixed paradigm of opposition, but a fluid understanding of complementarity which informed their conceptions. At any rate, the socially defined

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30 Silburn, *Kundalini*, p. 139.
parameters relating to biological distinctiveness did not necessarily extend to the spiritual realm. Women also emphasized the sensual nature and physicality of spiritual union. Within the present context, it can be seen that Mechthild visualized her feminized soul against a masculinized Godhead, with personified intermediaries as feminine. Hadewijch did likewise, but also employed the idea of the soul as a knight pursuing Lady Love. In the Tantras, the soul of the individual (jīva) is ungendered; this is because it is understood as collapsible within the body structure; in other words, the human self is a composite embodiment, and the soul is perforce of the same gender as the body. The notion of genderization arises in the projection of the “other” self. Since it is the case that the Sākta texts are written from a male point of view, this “other” is routinely feminine; as a consequence, projection is, externally, onto women, and internally, onto the “feminine” component in the self. From a feminist point of view this imagining has certain implications and ramifications.

There are two points that can be made here. Firstly, the polarized nature of the two principles embodied by Śiva and Śakti is generally understood as dichotomizing; and this is carried over into the mundane realm of man and woman, at least by male writers. However, the opposition should be understood as referring to the “structural” conditions, not the “gendered” attributions. That is to say, the energy matrix of the human body is structurally differentiated, and is the basis for biological distinction; while the traits ascribed to the ensouling body are culturally specified. Secondly, the object of Tantric meditation is to identify the individuated self (jīva) with the undivided Self (ātman, Spirit), which is the Absolute, and which in the Sākta tradition is the supreme Goddess; accordingly, the mantra is invoked, aham devī na cānyosmi, “I am the Goddess, none else.” However, whereas male Śakti Tantrics establish a polarity between their selves and the female goddess, there is no need for a female Tantric to do so. She represents a continuum from the physical to the divine, and so may be said to represent the full expression of humanity, rather than a segmented version. Although women are granted a position of power in Sākta Tantra, in that they embody the saktī, it does not always follow that they are accorded equality or respect in social settings, outside of Tantric ritual. The view of sex by male Tantrics is one of functionality, and women are instrumental objects rather than subjective agents.

The Tantric view has some affinity with Platonic notions, as evidenced in The Symposium by Plato, especially in the dialogic account of the Mantinea priestess Diotima and Socrates. She argues that Eros, or Love (erōs, desire) is a spirit, or daimon, who is a being halfway between mortal and immortal, and a mediator between gods and humans. As the son of Resource and Poverty, he schemes to get hold of beautiful and good things; he also desires knowledge, which foreshadows wisdom. Since wisdom is one of the most beautiful things, and Love is just love of beauty, Love must be a lover of wisdom. However, Diotima perorates that it is a mistake to identify Love with the beloved object instead of with what feels love; therefore, she goes on to say, beauty is

32 Bharati, Tantric Traditions, p. 112.
34 Plato, The Symposium, with an introduction and notes by Christopher Gill (London: Penguin, 1999). Diotima is generally understood to be fictitious in this setting. The French feminist Luce Irigaray examines this dialogue in the light of her ethic of the “sensible transcendent”; see Luce Irigaray, Ethics of Sexual Difference, trans. by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), pp. 20–33.
36 Symp., 203d–204b.
actually embodied in the desire for what is immortal and what is good. This urge is normally satisfied through having children; and the enthusiasm for this sense of immortality is what love is. Poets and philosophers wish to express this desire creatively in the soul; and so they would rather conceive wisdom and virtue spiritually than procreate physically. For the aspiring philosopher, it is necessary to go from loving the beauty of one person’s body to appreciating the beauty of all (male) bodies. Later still, he must reckon that the beauty of soul is more valuable than beauty of body; and beyond even moral beauty and the beauty of knowledge, there is the supreme knowledge that is absolute beauty; this is what the philosopher must finally contemplate. If one could but “see beauty itself, absolute, pure, unmixed, not cluttered up with human flesh and colors and a great mass of mortal rubbish,” then one could see divine beauty. This form that is Beauty must be the true object of desire and apprehension; love in this scenario is just the interlocutor. For the Tantric, the transcendent Goddess ensouls the idea of the beautiful, and represents the object of his desire; as far as he immanently projects that image onto a woman, he loves her in a speculative way. For the Beguines, the transcendent God embodies the beautiful, and the spirit of love (erōs) is made immanent in the eternal longing for union with that which is holy.

**Conclusion**

In this essay I argued that the element of love, or lilac divinity, exists in both mystical traditions, Beguine and Tantra, although it is differently anchored. For the Beguines God is quintessentially of love, whereas for male Tantrics Brahman is reflectively of beauty. The aspiration for the divine becomes, in the affective tradition, a “love of love,” where love itself is adored in embodied form, which is God in Christ, or as a reified synopsis, which is God in Eucharistic form. Mystically, I called this a “gold love,” since gold melts and flows in the divine crucible, but solidifies upon cooling; it therefore aptly signifies the separation of God and his soulful creation. In the Tantric tradition, the aspiration for the divine becomes a “love of beauty,” where beauty itself is adored in projected form, which is Goddess Lalitā, or as a beauty in design, which is Lalitā in geometric form (ṣrīcakra). I called this a “diamond love,” since diamond burns off to carbon dioxide under the application of intense heat; it therefore aptly signifies the identity of Sakti and the divine self (ātman). Can it be said that these two types are gendered? Is gold love a feminine kind and diamond love a masculine kind? Is the admiration of beauty just the “male gaze”? The issue may not be so black and white. There are Platonizing tendencies in the imagining of Beguines, and tempestuous tendencies in the imagining of Tantrics. Still, if Beguines express a desire for love, it is just a filamenting beauty; and if Tantrics express a desire for beauty, it is just a spangling love. The two kinds of mystical endeavor are then essentially the same; for what is love, if not a conflagration of beauty?

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37 *Symp.*, 204e–208b.
38 *Symp.*, 209a–211d.
39 *Symp.*, 211e.