"In *Thousands and Thousands of Lovers*, Anna Harrison hones in on the most engaging aspect of Helfta's spirituality: the nuns' powerful sense of community. In a period of just fifteen years, these nuns produced a treasure trove of Latin mystical literature, creating a utopian vision of their monastic life as an icon of the kingdom of heaven. Exploring the sisters' loving relationships with one another, with clergy and laity, with the dead in purgatory and the saints in heaven, Harrison shows that mysticism is not just a pursuit for the lonely soul in its solitude. It can be—and at Helfta it is—the most profoundly social of all human activities."

— Barbara Newman, Northwestern University

"In *Thousands and Thousands of Lovers*, Anna Harrison offers a rich and engaging account of women's religious community during the thirteenth century, focusing on the German monastery at Helfta—the period's most important and prolific center of women's religious writing. Considering the Helfta women as part of a community animated by a daily sense of Christ's presence and by the rhythm of the liturgy, but also by quotidian preoccupations—the presence of illness and death, friendships with each other, and relations beyond the cloister—Professor Harrison places the women's writings alongside their shared monastic and spiritual experience, bringing vividly to life their communal commitments, concerns, and sometimes annoyances. Brimming with fascinating observations about life at Helfta—from the nun who was excessively pleased with her golden bedspread, to the Christ-given power of Gertrude to hear confession, absolve, and assign penance—*Thousands and Thousands of Lovers* is a learned and delightful book that will be warmly welcomed by scholars and students concerned with questions relating to monastic community, spirituality, authorship, and gender."

— Fiona Griffiths, Stanford University

"This book offers an astonishingly rich reconstruction of the visionary, communal, personal, and literary lives of the nuns of Helfta. It rests on a rich knowledge of their teachings and writings but understands these as born as much from communal experience and insight as the visions or writings of unusually graced individuals. Amidst a larger interpretive literature, much of it not in English, this book follows upon Caroline Walker Bynum's pioneering introduction of these materials to English-speaking readers a generation ago. It is an attractive and compelling general reflection on the lives and writings of these women, yet thoughtfully focused. Readers will find themselves immersed in its narrative flow as well as its host of illuming and learned notes."

— John H. Van Engen, Andrew V. Tackes Professor of Medieval History, Emeritus, University of Notre Dame

"The nuns of medieval Helfta occupy a special place in the history of spirituality, both as individuals and as members of their community. Anna Harrison has given us a much-needed book on the writings associated with Mechtild of Hackeborn and Gertrude the Great. She shows how these nuns flourished in their monastic community. Her work is deeply grounded in scholarship, thoughtful, gracefully formulated, and accessible. It will be read for many years to come as a landmark in the study of spirituality."

— Richard Kieckhefer, Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies and History, Northwestern University

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Sense of Community among the Nuns of Helfta

Anna Harrison

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A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l *velle*,
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.
Dante, *Paradiso*

For
Hilary Cousins,
Eve Harrison,
Barbara Grizzuti Harrison,
and Caroline Walker Bynum

Contents

PART TWO

Within and Beyond the Cloister

PART THREE

The Living and the Dead

Abbreviations

ABR	American Benedictine Review
Analecta	*Analecta Cisterciensia*
CF	Cistercian Fathers series
Cîteaux	*Cîteaux: commentarii cistercienses*
Collectanea	*Collectanea Cisterciensia*
CS	Cistercian Studies series
CSQ	*Cistercian Studies Quarterly*
DSAM	*Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*. Ed. M. Viller, et al. Paris: G. Beauchesne et ses fils, 1980.
New Catholic	*The New Catholic Encyclopedia*. 2nd ed. Ed. Berard L. Marthaler, et al. Detroit: Gale, 2003.
RB	*The Rule of St. Benedict*. Trans. Carolinne White. London: Penguin Books, 2008.
SBOp	Sancti Bernardi opera. Ed. Jean Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, and H. M. Rochais. 8 vols. in 9. Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–1977.
SCh	Sources Chrétiennes. Paris: Les Éditions de Cerf.
Tjurunga	*Tjurunga: Australasian Benedictine Review*

The Works of Gertrude of Helfta and Mechtild of Hackeborn

CF 35	Gertrud of Helfta. *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness, Books One and Two*. Trans. Alexandra Barratt. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991.

CF 49 Gertrud the Great of Helfta. *Spiritual Exercises*. Trans. Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1989.

CF 63 Gertrud the Great of Helfta. *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness, Book Three*. Trans. Alexandra Barratt. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1999.

CF 85 Gertrud the Great of Helfta. *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness, Book Four*. Trans. Alexandra Barratt. Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2018.

Legatus Gertrude of Helfta. *Sanctae Gertrudis Magnae virginis ordinis sancti Benedicti: Legatus divinae pietatis accedunt ejusdem Exercitia spiritualia*. Vol. 1 of *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae*. Ed. the monks of Solesmes [Louis Paquelin]. Paris: H. Oudin, 1875.

Liber Mechtild of Hackeborn. *Liber specialis gratiae*. In *Sanctae Mechtildis virginis ordinis sancti Benedicti: Liber specialis gratiae accedit sororis Mechtildis ejusdem ordinis Lux divinitatis*, edited by the monks of Solesmes [Louis Paquelin]. Vol. 2 of *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae*. Paris: H. Oudin, 1877.

SCh 127 Gertrude of Helfta. *Oeuvres spirituelles I: Les Exercices*. Trans. Jacques Hourlier and Albert Schmitt. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1967.

SCh 139 Gertrude of Helfta. *Oeuvres spirituelles II: Le Héraut, Livres I et II*. Trans. Pierre Doyère. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1968.

SCh 143 Gertrude of Helfta. *Oeuvres spirituelles III: Le Héraut, Livre III*. Trans. Pierre Doyère. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1968.

SCh 255 Gertrude of Helfta. *Oeuvres spirituelles IV: Le Héraut, Livre IV*. Trans. Jean-Marie Clément, the nuns of Wisques, and Bernard de Vregille. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1978.

SCh 331 Gertrude of Helfta. *Oeuvres spirituelles V: Le Héraut, Livre V*. Trans. Jean-Marie Clément, the nuns of Wisques, and Bernard de Vregille. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1986.

I have benefited from English and French translations of the Helfta books by Alexandra Barratt; Pierre Doyère, Jean-Marie Clément, the nuns of Wisques, and Bernard de Vregille; Jacques Hourlier and Albert Schmitt; Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis; Barbara Newman; the nuns of Dordogne; and Margaret Winkworth. All these works are cited in the bibliography.

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reverberates throughout these pages and includes Donna Alfonso Bussell, Leah DeVun, Mary Doyno, Anna Trumbore Jones, and Nicole Randolph Rice.

The last half century has seen a surge of scholarship in the religiosity of the women of the Latin Christian Middle Ages, invigorated by 1970s feminism and the increased attention to the history of women; like so many others, I owe an enormous debt to the women's movement of the previous century and particularly to one of its more contrarian contributors, Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, my mother, who took up the presumptuous proposition that a single mother of two, high school graduate, and first-generation Italian American had something of value to offer the literary world. I offer this book to her. I thank my husband and my daughter for everything.

Preface

Suffused with communitarian and corporate imagery, laced with other-directed prayers as well as instructions for the strengthening of conventual ties, and crowded with visions asserting solidarity between the living and the dead, the writings of the thirteenth-century Cistercian nuns of Helfta attest to their wholehearted investment in the topic of community. They shine a spotlight on an intricate web of thought concerning social commitments and relationships both within the monastery and beyond its walls. This is a complex account. Bursting with emphatic optimism about what community offers for individual and group spiritual progress,[1] the Helfta literature also exposes tensions in the nuns' notions of the reach of the community—and of the women's associated obligations. Buoyed by a vibrant and growing body of scholarship on Helfta, in this book I examine the nuns' sense of community more deliberately than have previous studies.

Among a wealth of compositions that thirteenth-century women wrote, three surviving works produced at Helfta and associated with Mechtild of Hackeborn (1241–ca. 1298/99) and Gertrude of Helfta (1256–ca. 1301/2) stand out as exceptional in several ways. Gertrude's *Spiritual Exercises* is a series of loosely organized prayers, chants, and litanies based chiefly

[1] For the optimism of the Helfta literature, see for example Philibert Schmitz, *Les Moniales, Histoire de l'Ordre de Saint-Benoît*, vol. 7 (Liège: Les Éditions de Maredsous, 1956), 299; and Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics in the Thirteenth Century: The Case of the Nuns of Helfta," in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), esp. 193–94.

on the liturgy. The *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* are composite, hybrid creations, weaving together accounts of revelations and ecstasies, spiritual teachings, prayers, and a variety of testimonies to the exemplary devotion of Gertrude and Mechtild as well as that of Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn (1223–1292)—and to the piety of the monastery's female inhabitants considered collectively. Together, these texts run close to 1,250 printed pages, making this the century's largest body of religious writing by women. The monastery's concern with the community—unyielding, nuanced, wide-ranging—is evident in virtually every nook and cranny of this literature. Its centrality to the women's religiosity is exemplified in the multi-decade enterprise that gave birth to the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace*, a collaborative process that called on the varied contributions of an indeterminate number of nuns, with almost no discernible male involvement.[2] These all-female compositions offer insight into the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of a remarkable monastic family, a group of highly educated, theologically sophisticated, and self-consciously literary women, and they are among our richest resources for understanding the spiritual significance of community to late medieval people.

Scholars have long identified the thirteenth century as central in the elaboration of western European notions of community. There has been a tendency, however, to see late medieval religiosity as centering on individual, inner experience rather than on group practice or on communal response, even when the context is religious or monastic community. And though the view is now much contested, some scholars

[2] See especially Kurt Ruh, "Gertrud von Helfta: Ein neues Gertrud-Bild," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 121 (1992): 1–20; Margarete Hubrath, *Schreiben und Erinnern: Zur "memoria" im* Liber specialis gratiae *Mechthilds von Hakeborn* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996), 37, 51; Laura M. Grimes, "Writing as Birth: The Composition of Gertrud of Helfta's *Herald of God's Loving-Kindness*," CSQ 42, no. 3 (2007): 329–45.

have argued that the surge during the late Middle Ages in subjective spirituality—characterized, in part, by a deliberate curling inward of attention to the self in relation to God—drained enthusiasm for the common life. In spite of a sustained interest in female spirituality and collective institutions, medievalists have paid little attention to women's voices in fashioning this account. Focusing on writing from Helfta—a woefully underused resource for major areas of medieval religious thought—this book explores a more subtle interplay between communal practice and private piety, other-directed focus and inward-religious impulse, than is often allowed.

I cast a wide net in this book, following the nuns' lead as they wrote about a broad spectrum of matters related to community that captured their imagination and pulled on their conscience. It is arranged in three parts. The first part concentrates on the nuns' sense of community among themselves. In chapter one, I examine the collaborative process of the composition of the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace*, asking what this process tells about writing as a sustained spiritual practice that depended upon and contributed to building a sense of community among the sisters. In chapter two, I explore friendship and spiritual guidance at Helfta, and I consider the meaning of the nuns' relationships with one another for their sense of community. In chapter three, I take a close look at attitudes toward relationality that come to the fore in the nuns' experiences of illness, dying, and bereavement, to which the literature devotes considerable attention. The Helfta writings contain numerous reports of revelations that came to the sisters in Office and in Mass. In chapter four, I study these for the women's sense of relatedness to and responsibility for one another during public communal worship—as well as their sense of separateness from one another.

In the book's second part, I widen the scope of my investigation. In chapter five, I consider the place of clergy in the women's perceptions of community, including those priests who tended to their pastoral needs (or neglected to do so), and

to whom the nuns sometimes served as confidants and counselors. In chapter six, I examine the nuns' sense of community with members of their household who are neither nuns nor clergy, such as *conversi* and convent administrators. I consider in addition how the nuns related to the laity who attended the monastery's chapel as well as to armed aggressors who periodically threatened the monastery's integrity. In the book's final part, I turn to visions of departed souls for what they convey about the ties that bound the sisters to the population of purgatory, the subject of chapter seven, and the inhabitants of heaven, the focus of chapter eight.

I intend this book as a history of the Helfta nuns' thoughts about and attitudes toward community. The considerations of community that the women offered were never fully free from the scrim their interpretative gaze created, a gaze harnessed to a desire to shape what they saw.[3] They thus portrayed their monastic household both as it was and as they wished it to be, braiding an idealized version of the common life with frank accounts of what was, here and there conceding that the community they conjured through literary creativity was openly different from and sometimes at odds with the reality they knew themselves to live. Because the boundary between the sisters' sense of community and their experience of community was not absolute, the reader may notice a degree of slippage between the two in my own writing.

The convent's compositions—joyous, solemn, and ribboned with praise for God—are a synesthetic explosion of images for the edification and entertainment of the reader. Liquid and light, feasting and dancing, ornate vestments and brilliant

[3] Barbara Newman has characterized the *Book of Special Grace* as a type of "utopian genre," offering its readers an ideal community "in action" (introduction to *Mechthild of Hackeborn and the Nuns of Helfta: The Book of Special Grace*, trans. Barbara Newman [New York: Paulist Press, 2017], 8).

jewels, foliage and flowers adorn pages drenched in a kaleidoscope of colors and punctuated with sighs, whispers, and song, offering sometimes chummy, sometimes erotic, now regal, now homey delights. Their extravagantly cataphatic quality, long regarded by scholars as second rate in comparison to a more sober, speculative (often presumed to be mostly male) apophatic mystical orientation,[4] complements a celebration of the loyal love relationship between Christ and the visionary nuns, Gertrude and Mechtild, as well as their sisters. These qualities have not failed to elicit the squeamishness of some modern readers, including William James, who dismissed the whole of the *Herald* as the musings of a personality so absorbed in love of God and so narrowly fixed on securing demonstrations of his love for her as to push from her purview "all human loves" and all "practical human interests."[5] In fact, the Helfta authors join sumptuous descriptions of mystical flight and evocations of affective response with delicate meditations and razor-sharp insights that betray seasoned sensitivity to questions of community; their intellectual acuity is less obvious, perhaps, to the reader unaccustomed to their peculiarly poetic (to some, fussy and ponderous) literary leanings, including, especially, their heavy borrowings from the language of the liturgy.

These writings signal a surge of female confidence in a century that saw the growing clericalization of the church and the rise of the university as a center of theological reflection, a world in which almost all the writers the nuns knew were male—with the exception of their late-in-life cloister companion, the literary giant and Beguine Mechtild of Magdeburg (1207–1282), and, probably, the Benedictine Elisabeth of Schönau (1129–1164), whose liturgically inflected visionary

[4] On the relation of gender to the categories of cataphatic and apophatic, see Barbara Newman, "Gender," in *The Blackwell Companion to Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 41–55, esp. 53.

[5] William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; repr. New York: Image Books, 1978), 335–36.

compositions may have been influential at Helfta.[6] Giving virtually no thought to their femaleness, the nuns launched themselves into a larger elite Latin textual culture, filled with trust in the worth for themselves of their bookish endeavors and sure that the fruit of their labors would be meaningful to audiences stretching out into the far future.

I take as my central concern what the women of Helfta themselves wished to communicate. Thus, when I write, for example, that this or that sister heard a heavenly harmony accompany the nuns in communal song, felt God's grace coursing like liquid through her body, or witnessed Christ comfort a dying sister with a kiss, I do so because this is what the authors tell us, and I try to understand what they seem to want to say. I deliberately do not adduce whether events such as these "really happened." Never casting doubt on the divine origin of the visions, auditions, and ecstasies they record, the Helfta compositions themselves suggest that such sleuthing misses a larger point. About the visions the *Book of Special Grace* attributes to Mechtild, we read that she received them not only for herself but for *us*,[7] an interpretive framework instructing the reader to appropriate what these revelations convey. We also learn that when Christ flooded Gertrude with his grace, he sometimes did so by means of images that would make his presence to her comprehensible to others.[8]

Threaded through the phenomena the *Herald* and *Book of Special Grace* chronicle, therefore, is a candid missionary impulse, molding (so we read) what the visionary undergoes so as to make the experience of one (often but not always Mechtild

[6] Newman, introduction to *Mechthild of Hackborn*, 8, 10.

[7] *Liber specialis gratiae*, in *Sanctae Mechtildis, virginis ordinis sancti Benedicti: Liber specialis gratiae accedit sororis Mechtildis ejusdem ordinis Lux divinitatis*, ed. the monks of Solesmes [Louis Paquelin] (Paris: H. Oudin, 1877), 5:30, 363; hereafter *Liber*.

[8] *Le Héraut*, ed. and trans. Pierre Doyère, et al., *Gertrude d'Helfta: Oeuvres spirituelles*, 4 vols., SCh 139, 143, 255, 331 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968–86); 1 Prol. 6 (SCh 139:114); hereafter *Le Héraut*.

or Gertrude) accessible to another (the sisters themselves as well as the texts' broader audience). Thus the nuns crafted into a stylized whole an abundance of discrete experiences and insights that they attributed to a number of women, putting into play the gospel's command: "what you hear whispered, proclaim from the rooftops" (Matt 10:27).[9] Keeping motive in mind and convinced of the value of attunement to the nuns' thought, I attempt a way of reading that Caroline Walker Bynum has modeled in her many works: I believe that a careful study of particular images in the context of other images, of theological teachings as well as of religious practices and social behavior, can yield insights into the assumptions of medieval people and thus offer entry into their experience.

I hope my work will contribute to the history of ideas about the function of the collective in forming the self, to the study of female authorship and intellectual achievement, and to investigations into monastic spirituality of the later Middle Ages. I write for medievalists as well as for readers with general interest in the history of women and in the history of Christianity. Although the book's chapters build sequentially, each can stand independently of the others. Those interested in delving into an expression of the medieval experience of liturgy can jump directly to chapter four, for instance, while readers whose curiosity lodges in the role of the saints in the lives of the faithful can skip over the others to the book's last chapter.

The *Book of Special Grace* circulated widely in the late Middle Ages, in both lay and monastic circles.[10] Over a hundred manuscripts in Latin contain either the bulk or portions of the book.

[9] *Liber* 7.7 (399).

[10] For the manuscript history of the *Book of Special Grace* and patterns of circulation, see Louis Paquelin, Praefatio to *Liber*; Margot Schmidt, "Mechtilde de Hackeborn," DSAM 10:873–77; Ernst Hellgardt, "Latin and the Vernacular: Mechthild of Magdeburg—Mechthild of Hackeborn—Gertrude of Helfta,"

One manuscript, the second oldest, written in 1370, contains the entirety of the *Book of Special Grace's* seven parts. It is probably a reliable descendant of an original Helfta composition. The *Herald* achieved a far smaller circulation in any form in the first several centuries after its creation. There are seven known manuscripts, two of which contain incomplete versions of the text as it survives in the other five.[11] There are no known manuscripts of the *Spiritual Exercises*.[12] In spite of the absence of a manuscript, and of a manuscript tradition, scholars who have closely studied the *Exercises* have for the most part not raised concerns about its authenticity or authorship.[13] Scholars have been divided as to the language in which the *Book of Special Grace* was first written, with the majority considering the original a Latin composition; both the *Herald* and the *Exercises* were probably composed in Latin.[14]

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in *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Elizabeth Andersen, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

[11] For the *Herald's* manuscript tradition, see *Le Héraut*, Appendix (SCh 143:345–50); Balázs J. Nemes, "Text Production and Authorship: Gertrude of Helfta's *Legatus Divinae Pietatis*," in Andersen, et al., *Companion to Mysticism and Devotion*, 103–30.

[12] John Lansberg, the text's first editor, neither mentions any manuscript nor reviews the process by which he prepared his edition, a surprising omission since he does indicate his source for the *Herald* in a preface to that work (*Les Exercices*, ed. and trans. Jacques Hourlier and Albert Schmitt, in *Gertrude d'Helfta*, SCh 127 [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1967)], 40–43; Balázs J. Nemes, "Die 'Geistlichen Übungen' Gertruds von Helfta: Ein vergessenes Zeugnis mittelaltlicher Mystik," review of *Gertrud von Helfta: Exercitia spiritualia. Geistliche Übungen. Lateinisch und deutsch*, ed. Siegfried Ringler [Elberfeld: Humberg, 2001]; Marie-Hélène Deloffre, "Les Exercices sont-ils l'oeuvre de Sainte Gertrude d'Helfta? Approche Stylistique," *Cîteaux* 68, nos. 1–4 [2017]: 121–91).

[13] Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis (introduction to *Spiritual Exercises*, ed. and intro. Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis, CF 49 [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1989], 2); and Kurt Ruh (*Frauenmystik and Franziskanische Mystik der Früheit* [Munich: C. H. Beck, 1993], 318; Ruh, "Gertrud von Helfta"), believe Gertrude wrote this work. Nemes does not regard as credible Lansberg's ascription of the *Exercises* to Gertrude (Nemes, "Die 'Geistlichen Übungen'"; Nemes, "Text Production and Authorship," 105).

[14] Ruh, *Frauenmystik*, 301–2, reviews scholarly opinions with regard to the original language of the *Book of Special Grace*. For a discussion of the language

It was not until the 1536 edition of John Lansberg (1490–1539) of the Charterhouse of Saint Barbara in Cologne that the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Herald* began to achieve the renown that had long belonged to the *Book of Special Grace*, in fact coming to overshadow it in popularity. The first printing of the *Book of Special Grace* seems to have been the 1503 German-language edition of Paul Weida, who translated a Latin manuscript,[15] and in 1536, Lansberg edited what has come to be regarded as the complete version of the Latin text. Numerous printings of the three works followed,[16] a rush of sixteenth-century editions and translations augmenting readership for versions of the Helfta writings, many with content at a distance from the medieval texts themselves.[17] There is no critical edition of the *Book of Special Grace*. Modern studies that rely on the Latin transmission depend on the late-nineteenth-century edition based exclusively on the 1370 manuscript, which the monks of Solesmes prepared under the direction of Louis Paquelin. Pierre Doyère, Jean-Marie Clément, and Bernard Vregille prepared the definitive critical Latin edition of the *Herald*.[18]

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in which the *Herald* was composed, see Doyère, introduction to *Le Héraut*, 25; Hourlier and Schmitt, introduction to *Gertrude d'Helfta,* 42–44; Siegfried Ringler, "Die Rezeption Gertruds von Helfta im Bereich süddeutschen Frauenklöster," in *"Vor dir steht die leere Schale meiner Sehnsucht": Die Mystik der Frauen von Helfta*, ed. Michael Bangert and Hildegund Keul (Leipzig: St. Benno Buch- und Zeitschriftenverlagsgesellschaft, 1998), 136–37.

[15] Paquelin, Praefatio to *Liber*, xi; Paquelin, Praefatio to *Sanctae Gertrudis Magnae, virginis ordinis sancti Benedicti: Legatus divinae pietatis, accedunt ejusdem Exercitia spiritualia*, ed. the monks of Solesmes [Louis Paquelin] (Paris: H. Oudin, 1875), iii and xlvi (hereafter *Legatus*); Hourlier and Schmitt, introduction to *Gertrude d'Helfta*, 42.

[16] Ursmer D. Berlière, "Sainte Mech[t]ilde et sainte Gertrude la grande, furent-elles Bénédictines?" *Revue Bénédictine* 6 (1899): 42–52; Paquelin, Praefatio to *Liber,* x–xiii; Wilhelm Preger, *Geschichte der deutschen Mystik bis zum Tode Meister Eckharts* (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1874), 79–82; Ruh, *Frauenmystik*, 296–97.

[17] Hellgardt, "Latin," 144.

[18] For the edition's preparation, see Doyère, introduction to *Le Héraut*, 63–64, 77–83.

In comparison with other medieval women who composed religious literature, the Helfta nuns have sparked relatively little modern scholarly interest. There are multiple reasons for this neglect, including a reluctance among American medievalists to grapple with German religious culture and the relative lack of interest among Germanists in studying works that have been transmitted largely in Latin.[19] Anglophone scholars' concentration on the new (formal and informal) religious roles for women that emerged during the later Middle Ages may have contributed to dulling interest in a spirituality anchored firmly in the cloister, the Helfta literature's rootedness in liturgical practices and texts probably being alienating to some tastes. The fact that neither Gertrude nor Mechtild was a reformer or sharp critic of the church has perhaps rendered their contributions less relevant to a contingent of readers. The virtual absence of male involvement in the creation of the Helfta writings may have made them less compelling to those whose interest fixes on the interaction between women and men, and since Bynum's groundbreaking 1982 article on Helfta, relatively few historians of gender have looked to this literature.[20] There are signs that the pull of the Helfta nuns has, however, begun to increase. We have seen, for example, the first translation into English in over five hundred years of the Latin-language version of the *Book of Special Grace*,[21] renewed engagement with the works' liturgical significance[22] and mysticism,[23] and an

[19] For the reception of the *Book of Special Grace*, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, Einführung to *Das Buch vom strömenden Lob*, ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1955), 7–8.

[20] Bynum, "Women Mystics."

[21] Barbara Newman, trans., *Mechthild of Hackeborn and the Nuns of Helfta: The Book of Special Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 2017).

[22] See, for example, Helga Unger, "Interaktion von Gott und Mensch im *Legatus divinae pietatis* (Buch II) Gertruds der Großen von Helfta. Liturgie—mystische Erfahrung—Seelsorge," in *Liturgie und Literatur: Historische Fallstudien*, ed. Cornelia Herberichs, et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 133–65.

[23] See for example Beate Korntner, *Mystikerinnen im Mittelalter: die drei Frauen von Helfta und Marguerite Porete—zwischen Anerkennung und Verfolgung* (Munich: Akademische Verlagsgemeinschaft München, 2012).

invigorated exploration of the nuns' writings for what they might contribute to modern Christian worship.[24] All these areas of inquiry—and others still—are likely to gain momentum as word spreads of efforts currently afoot to proclaim Gertrude a Doctor of the Church.[25]

Over seven hundred years separate us from the golden age of Helfta; aspects of the nuns' notions of community will probably appear to many of us as frankly odd. Yet their preoccupation remains familiar. If in 1988 medieval historian Miri Rubin could remark that the word *community* was so much in vogue that any category of people could be called a "community,"[26] its application is even more promiscuous today, sometimes employed to summon up what it describes, promoting a sense of affinity, solidity, and homogeneity that may mask unspoken complexity or whispered antipathies, or live side by side with them. It is certain that attitudes about community continue to be of utmost relevance to the ways in which we experience and organize our world, think about self in relation to others, and make decisions about affairs clearly political, patently personal, and obviously religious. Our modern sensibilities are informed by a long history of notions about community. It seems worthwhile to consider what the Helfta nuns expressed about a subject of singular meaningfulness to them that still stirs our imagination.

[24] See for example Michael Anthony Abril, "Gertrude of Helfta's Liturgical-Mystical Union," CSQ 43, no. 1 (2008): 77.

[25] Ana Laura Forastieri, "Saint Gertrude's Postulation for Doctor of the Church," *Magistra* 24, no. 2 (Winter 2018): 42–45.

[26] Miri Rubin, "Small Groups: Identity and Solidarity in the Late Middle Ages," in *Enterprise and Individuals in Fifteenth-Century England* (Stroud, UK: Alan Sutton Publishers, 1991), 133.

PART ONE

The Nuns

Chapter 1

"Oh! What Treasure Is in this Book?"

Writing, Reading, and Community

Whoever reads or listens to this, all these consolations that God made to people through his lover, [Mechtild,] I counsel you to make them your own as well.[1]

The Literature of Helfta

The last decades of the thirteenth century through the first years of the fourteenth century were busy with literary activity at the monastery of Helfta, and the monastery's writings attest to numerous individuals who participated in this burst of creativity. We can identify only a few of these people by name. The celebrated and persecuted Beguine Mechtild of Magdeburg sought refuge at Helfta sometime around 1270. She remained at the monastery for perhaps twelve years, until her death, and it is likely that she there composed and dictated to the nuns the final portion of her vernacular mystical masterpiece, *Flowing Light of the Divinity*,[2] a work containing poems, instructions,

[1] *Liber* 4.38 (297). See the list of abbreviations (pp. ix–x) for editions of the Helfta works and for their translation into English and French.

[2] Frank Tobin reviews what most scholars continue to accept as the skeletal outlines of Mechtild's life; Frank Tobin, *Mechthild von Magdeburg: A Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 128–31.

admonitions, and revelations. It was probably in the 1280s and 1290s that Gertrude of Helfta wrote the *Spiritual Exercises* and book two of what would become the five books (or sections) of the *Herald*.[3] She also produced other original writings, including an uncertain number of prayers and letters as well as a song commemorating Christ's passion, and she may have written a collection of daily meditations meant to help readers prepare for death.[4] Gertrude also tended to an array of editorial tasks: she compiled a book of sayings of the saints, elucidated them, and drew on them to produce songs in praise of God. We also know that she cast portions of the Bible into simpler language, abridged lengthy scriptural passages, and explained difficult ones.[5] With the exception of the *Exercises* and the *Herald*, none of these writings survives as a discrete work. Some of the prayers became part of the *Herald*, and there may be other portions of that work that originated as independent pieces of writing.

According to her sisters, Mechtild of Hackeborn wrote so many prayers that if they were gathered together, there would be more than all the psalms. No individual prayer exists independently of the *Book of Special Grace*,[6] and it is possible that portions of Mechtild's prayers were woven into this work. Book five of the *Book of Special Grace* contains epistolary extracts written by Mechtild and addressed to a laywoman.[7] Both the

[3] For a chronology of events in Gertrude's life, see Herman Grössler, "Die Blützeit des Klosters Helfta bei Eisleben," *Jahres-Bericht über das königliche Gymnasium zu Eisleben* (Easter 1886–Easter 1887), 30; Doyère, introduction to *Le Héraut,* SCh 139:22; Kurt Ruh, *Frauenmystik und Franziskanische Mystik der Frühzeit* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1993), 317.

[4] See *Le Héraut* 3.54.2; 2.23 (SCh 143:234; SCh 331:210–22, n. 1); and Columba Hart, introduction to *The Exercises of Saint Gertrude*, trans. a Benedictine nun of Regina Laudis [Columba Hart] (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1956), xvi. Letter writing was a means by which Gertrude helped to soothe the distress of others at a distance from herself (*Le Héraut* 1.8 [SCh 139:158]).

[5] *Le Héraut* 1.1; 3.54 (SCh 139:120–22; 143:234).

[6] *Liber* 5.30 (365).

[7] *Liber* 5.30; 4.59 (365, 310–15). For Mechtild's letters, see Lucie Félix-Faure Goyau, *Christianisme et culture féminine* (Paris: Librairie Académique, 1914),

Herald and the *Book of Special Grace* are a jumble of genres, containing treatises on Mary and John the Evangelist, accounts of visions and ecstasies, discourses on the religious life and related instructions, liturgical commentary, spiritual confessions, deathbed narratives, prayers, and hagiographical accounts of contemporary nuns.

Working with Gertrude, one or several unknown nuns were principally responsible for writing portions of the *Herald* and fixing it in its final form.[8] When this work was completed we do not know, although it probably took place after Gertrude's death in 1301 or 1302.[9] Nuns whose names are lost to us were also responsible for the *Book of Special Grace*, work on which may have begun in 1291 (or perhaps the later years of the 1280s) and seems to have continued throughout the decade.[10] We do not know whether the same persons participated in developing each of the several sections that make up the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace*, or whether the sisters who worked

193; and Margot King, "Letters from Mechthild of Hackeborn to a Friend, A Laywoman in the World, Taken from the *Book of Special Grace*, Book IV, Chapter 59," Vox mystica: *Essays on Medieval Mysticism in Honor of Professor Valerie M. Lagorio*, ed. Anne Clark Bartlett, et al. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 173.

[8] See, for example, *Le Héraut* (SCh 139:25); Ruh, *Frauenmystik*, 301–2.

[9] Most scholars concur with Grössler's assessment ("Die Blützeit," 30) that books 3–5 were completed during Gertrude's lifetime. The majority think that the addition of book 1 to the corpus took place after Gertrude's death. See Wilhelm Preger, *Geschichte der deutschen Mystik bis zum Tode Meister Eckharts* (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1874), 78; Kurt Ruh, "Gertrud von Helfta: Ein neues Gertrud-Bild," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 121 (1992): 3.

[10] *Liber* 1, *caput praevium*; 2.26 (6; 169). The majority of scholars assume that the women who wrote the *Book of Special Grace* worked on it through Mechtild's death and beyond. See Preger, *Geschichte*, 117; Paquelin, Praefatio to *Legatus*, iii; Theresa A. Halligan, introduction to *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn*, trans. Theresa A. Halligan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1979), 7; Susanne Köbele, *Bilder der Unbegriffenen Wahrheit: Zur Struktur mystischer Rede im Spannungsfeld von Latein und Volkssprache* (Tübingen: Francke, 1993), 105; Margarete Hubrath, *Schreiben und Erinnern: Zur "memoria" im* Liber specialis gratiae *Mechtilds von Hakeborn* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996), 37, 51.

on one book also fashioned the other. While scholars have long pointed to a range of similarities in the content, language, and imagery of the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* as indications that Gertrude had a hand in composing the latter, the case for her as one of its unnamed authors is less secure than has usually been supposed.[11] While it appears that at some point a two-woman team took the lead in its writing, inconsistencies in the text's own communications about its authorship suggest that this was not always so. Although there is strong evidence to suggest that a single *compilatrix*—together with Gertrude—was primarily responsible for the *Herald*, this work is also not consistent about the number of its principal authors.[12] For both, I therefore generally use the plural *authors*. Some sisters also seem to have assisted Mechtild of Magdeburg in completing the *Flowing Light of the Divinity*, perhaps taking dictation when old age weakened her eyesight and limited her use of her hands.[13]

The creation of the Helfta literature was an all-female endeavor. The absence of the participation of a male confessor or other male superior as overseer, advisor, or redactor of the

[11] Ursula Peters, *Religiöse Erfahrung als literarisches Faktum* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1988), 53–67, 116–29, esp. 126. Ruh has concluded that parallels in the substance of the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* derive from Mechtild's spirituality ("Gertrud von Helfta," 317–20). Among those who have argued for Gertrude's authorship of the *Book of Special Grace* are Paquelin, Praefatio to *Legatus*, ii–iii; Hans Urs von Balthasar, Einführung to *Das Buch vom strömenden Lob*, ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1955), esp. 12 and 17; and Pierre Doyère, introduction to *Le Héraut,* SCh 139:21.

[12] See, for example, *Liber* 2.43; 5.24; 5.31 (356–57, 370); *Le Héraut* 3 Prol. 1.8–9; 5.1; 16.8–13; 5.34.1; 5.35.1 (SCh 139:108–17; SCh 143:3, 12; SCh 331:36, 266, 268–72). Among the most important considerations of the *Herald's* authorship is Laura Grimes, *Wisdom's Friends: Gertrude of Helfta's Conversational Theology* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009), esp. 23–43; she argues convincingly for the centrality of communal authorship to the text's preoccupation with community.

[13] *Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 7.64, 334.

works is conspicuous. Moreover, there is no formidable presence of a confessor or other priest who might have assumed a consequential role in the intellectual life of the sisters and in this way influenced the books' composition.[14] No male patron is associated with their production. Freedom from male participation in the monastery's literary projects may have embedded these works, and their authors, more firmly in their community. Neither Gertrude nor Mechtild nor the anonymous women who joined in this work were burdened with worries about writing because of their gender.[15] They demonstrate an unflagging sureness in the value of their endeavor.

Writing in Need of Community

A sense of God's condescension toward her fuels Gertrude's writing and drives her participation in the whole of the *Herald*.[16] Not only has Christ, by his death, freely paid Gertrude's debt,

[14] This is especially noteworthy in light of the probable presence at Helfta of the Dominican Henry of Halle, Mechtild of Magdeburg's confessor and spiritual advisor, whose involvement in crafting Mechtild's *Flowing Light of the Divinity* would have provided precedent for clerical involvement in women's writing at the monastery (Tobin, introduction to *Flowing Light*, 6–7).

[15] Gertrud Lewis and Jack Lewis, introduction to *Spiritual Exercises*, CF 49:5–7; Anna Harrison and Caroline Walker Bynum, "Gertrude, Gender, and the Composition of the *Herald of Divine Love*," in *Freiheit des Herzens: Mystik bei Gertrud von He[l]fta,* ed. Michael Bangert (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 60–66.

[16] A variety of motives appear to have propelled Gertrude to participate in the *Herald*. Her superiors insisted that Gertrude write what is now its second book. We read, furthermore, of the impulse that overcame her when, moved by the Holy Spirit, she snatched up the writing tablet at her side and began to write: *Le Héraut* 1 Prol. 4 (SCh 139:112); and see *Le Héraut* 1.15.2 (SCh 139:206). Elsewhere, Gertrude confesses to a pressing need to write, although she sometimes tries to dodge the prodding of her conscience to do so: *Le Héraut* 2.10.1; 2.22.1; 2.21.2 (SCh 139:272, 328, 322–24). She wishes to counter the frailty of memory in order to be able at some future time to recall the gifts God has poured into her and in this way to secure her own continuous praise of God: *Le Héraut* 2.21.2 (SCh 139:322–24). All of these concerns pale as motivating forces before a divine command to write, which finds a receptive response in Gertrude.

but he continues ceaselessly to make up for her ever-renewed deficiencies,[17] and he offers tender intimacy, indulgent correction, and inclusion in the circle of his friends, the saints and angels.[18] Although Christ's mercy is unmerited—a gift no human being can ever repay—he does demand something in return. For Gertrude's redeemer, having assumed Gertrude's debt (as he has that of the whole human race), takes delight in each pittance he can extract from her:

> Just as an avaricious usurer would not willingly neglect to earn even a single penny, in this way, I, who have decided to have my pleasure in you, would much more unwillingly permit a single thought or movement of your little finger, done on my account, to come to nothing, because I did not turn it to the advantage of my great praise and your eternal salvation.[19]

Christ yearns for Gertrude's glory, but justice does not permit mercy to overlook her faults. For Gertrude (as for everyone) redemption is a matter of sharing in Christ's perfect satisfaction by attaching herself to good works and uniting these to her Savior.[20] As Gertrude understands it, she is unworthy of the gifts God has given her, so he cannot have intended them exclusively for her.[21] Caught between Christ's

[17] *Le Héraut* 2.19.1 (SCh 139:302–4). The theology of the atonement is the implicit context for Gertrude's formulation of her relationship with God and the background against which her involvement in the *Herald* gains coherence.

[18] See *Le Héraut* 2.21.4; 2.23.9; 4.4.10 (SCh 139:326, 338; SCh 255:76–78).

[19] *Le Héraut* 3.54.2 (SCh 143:234).

[20] See *Le Héraut* 4.21.2 (SCh 255:202).

[21] *Le Héraut* 2.21.2 (SCh 139:322–24). For Gertrude's sense of herself as a vile woman, grateful for God's condescension, see *Les Exercices* 3.52–56 (SCh 127:96). For Gertrude's humility, see *Le Héraut* 3.88 (SCh 143:98); for Gertrude as unworthy servant, see *Le Héraut* 3.308–9 (SCh 143:116). This theme has been pointed out: Doyère, introduction to *Le Héraut,* 17–18; Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics* (1962; repr., with additions from author, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991), esp. 96; Jane Klimisch, "Gertrude of Helfta: Woman God-Filled and Free," in *Medieval Women Monastics: Wisdom's Wellsprings*, ed. Miriam Schmitt and Linda Kulzer

justice and his mercy, Gertrude is at an impasse that (she understands from Christ) only her participation in the spiritual gains of others can break: "In your merciful love, you do not want me to perish, and yet, in your excellent justice you could not allow me to be saved with so many imperfections. At least you have provided for me that, from the participation of many, the gain of each might increase."[22] When Gertrude reveals God's nearness and accessibility to others, as well as her own devotion to him, she assists them in achieving spiritual gains and thereby has a share in them.

When Gertrude resisted putting into writing the story of the graces she received[23]—sure that she had paid restitution to God by communicating them verbally to her neighbors—Christ was unwavering in his demand that she write. "Know

(Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 250; Lillian Thomas Shank, "The God of My Life: St. Gertrude, A Monastic Woman," in *Medieval Religious Women: Peaceweavers*, ed. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank, CS 72 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), esp. 243. It was often the case that when Gertrude enjoyed an experience of God too wondrous for her to recount, she was nonetheless moved to speak and to write and thus composed new devotions on such occasions. She did so, we read, as payment for debt acquired for saying the hours tepidly, including the hours of the Virgin, Vigils for the dead, and other offices, and in reparation for not having sufficiently loved her God and her neighbor: *Le Héraut* 5.30.5 (SCh 331:244).

[22] *Le Héraut* 2.20.6 (SCh 139:314).

[23] Gertrude expresses various reservations about writing: she thinks readers will derive no profit from her work, she worries that her writings may give others license to claim God's authority for the introduction of false teachings, and she is concerned that the dissemination of her writings may prompt some to slander her: *Le Héraut* 1.15.1; 2.10.2 (SCh 139:204, 274). Both the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* employ the humility topos so common in monastic circles; see Harrison and Bynum, "Gertrude, Gender," esp. 61–62, 72–76. And in a topos equally familiar in the mystical tradition, Gertrude insists on the irreducibility of her divine experiences to words (see *Le Héraut* 2.8.5; 2.21.4; 2.10.2 [SCh 139:266, 324, 274]). On the ineffability topos, see Michael Bangert, *Demut in Freiheit* (Würzburg: Echter, 1997), 252, for the *Herald*; and for the *Book of Special Grace*, see Hubrath, *Schreiben*, 50–51; Alois Maria Haas, "Die Problematik von Sprache und Erfahrung in der Deutschen Mystik," in *Grundfragen der Mystik*, ed. Werner Beierwaltes (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1974), 73–104; Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1973), 159–62.

for sure: you will never leave the prison of your flesh until you have paid that coin that you are still holding back," Christ insisted to her.[24] Referring to the most holy of books, he illustrated for her the peculiar capacity of the written word to stretch out into the future and affect lives to which the spoken word has no access: "If the Lord had only spoken his teaching for those who were [then] living, his words would not have been written. But now they have been written for the salvation of many."[25]

The parable of the talents, a biblical lesson from Matt 25:14-30 to which the above quotation alludes, tells of a nobleman who, before setting out on a journey, deposits coins with each of his servants. Upon his master's return, the servant to whom the master had given two coins, and who had invested them, extended him four, while the five coins the nobleman had given another servant doubled in number, extracting praise from the master and a promise of future reward. A third servant, however, hoarded the talent that his lord entrusted to him and received his master's condemnation. Gertrude and the authors of the *Herald* take up this parable to elaborate on the reason that Gertrude must write. As the *Herald* makes clear, this book is the last coin to be paid before release. Gertrude owes God everything. Writing is a means by which Gertrude returns to God some of what she owes him: "Behold, most loving Lord, the talent of your most condescending familiarity with me . . .; and it is for love of your love and for the increase of your praise that I disclose this in this writing and in those that follow."[26]

Christ's gifts to Gertrude are his investment, whose multiplication she brings about by sharing them with others.[27] In

[24] *Le Héraut* 2.10.1 (SCh 139:272).

[25] *Le Héraut* 2.10.1 (SCh 139:272–74).

[26] *Le Héraut* 2.24.1 (SC 139:350).

[27] *Le Héraut* 1.15.2 (SCh 139:206). See also *Le Héraut* 5.36 (SCh 331:268–72). For a fuller discussion of the role of the nuns' notion of gift-giving in creating

Matthew's version of the parable, the anxious servant dug into the earth and hid his master's coin there. When Gertrude divulged her experience to others, it was as if she lifted a gem out of the dung, out of the slime of her heart, and encased it in gold.[28] Gertrude is bound to others by a common need: she requires a portion of the spoils of their victory, while they will emerge triumphant in part through Gertrude's travail, which includes her written self-disclosures. This logic links self and other in a reciprocal movement toward redemption.[29]

While the *Herald* pictures Gertrude as enjoying an enviable closeness with God, such familiarity does not replace Gertrude's reliance on others. On the contrary, because they augment her indebtedness to Christ beyond the common debt of all, she is constrained to share her gifts with others. Thus Gertrude's acknowledgment of her unworthiness before God's never-ending flow of grace is fundamental to the mutuality she enjoys with God, which in turn drives her writing. This is the larger context within which Gertrude and her anonymous co-authors situate her written self-disclosures, and it is in this context that we should understand Gertrude's eagerness to confide in someone about those graces she did not reveal in her own writings.[30]

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community, see chap. 8 below. Clark emphasizes gift-giving in all directions in the *Herald*; see Anne L. Clark, "An Uneasy Triangle: Jesus, Mary, and Gertrude of Helfta," *Maria: A Journal of Marian Studies* 1 (August 2000): 51; see also Hugues Minguet, "Théologie spirituelle de sainte Gertrude: le Livre II du *Le Héraut* (III)," *Collectanea* 51 (1989): 317–28.

[28] *Le Héraut* 2.5.5 (SCh 139:252).

[29] On the theology of co-redemption, see Barbara Newman, "On the Threshold of the Dead: Purgatory, Hell, and Religious Women," in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), esp. 119–22; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

[30] *Le Héraut* 1.11.1; 3.1.2 (SCh 139:170–72; SCh 143:14–16). See also *Le Héraut* 4.2.3 (SCh 255:24–26).

Writing in Community

When the reference to the parable of the talents surfaces in the *Book of Special Grace*, it commands none of the sustained reflection it receives in the *Herald*; it calls attention to community in a different way:

> "Who would like honey from the heavenly Jerusalem?" Then when all the sisters who were in the choir were approaching her, she brought to each honey from the vial of honey. This person, however, who saw these things in sight, approached, and she gave to her a piece of bread infused with this honey; when she held this in her hands, the piece of bread together with the honey began to grow in a wondrous way, so that the piece grew into a whole bread, soft and warm, and the honey, penetrating the bread inside and out, dripped so copiously that it rained like oil through her outstretched hands, flowing onto her clothes and then onto the floor.[31]

Although Mechtild herself distributes the honey that is the *Book of Special Grace* to her sisters, the honey increases in the hands of the writer. This reference to the parable occurs, furthermore, in a dream vision that comes not to Mechtild but to one of the unknown authors of this work, who, through the vision, was plucked out of the solitude of sleep and landed in the midst of the chapel. In this account, the parable evokes a running theme in the *Book of Special Grace*: the importance of both specific sisters and the wider cloistered community to the work's genesis and advancement.[32]

[31] *Liber* 5:24 (356–57).

[32] As Rosalynn Voaden has noticed, the *Book of Special Grace* contains neither a divine command directed to Mechtild nor an expression of Mechtild's conviction that she ought to write. The text instead highlights the role of her sisters in spearheading and superintending the book's creation (Rosalynn Voaden, "Mechtild of Hackeborn," in *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c. 1100–c. 1500*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden [Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2010], 435).

In the winter of 1290–1291, severely ill and bedridden for a prolonged period, the fifty-year-old Mechtild began to divulge the contents of her revelations and to channel to others her access to God in a manner that the authors of the *Book of Special Grace* mark as a departure in conduct for her:

> During this time, the merciful Lord revealed to her the wonder of his secrets, and she rejoiced in the sweetness of his presence to such an extent that, as if she were drunk, she could not contain herself and poured out to guests and to strangers that interior grace that she had hidden for so many years. In consequence, many people communicated their affairs through her to God, to each of whom, as God deigned to show her, she made known the desires of their hearts, and they, extraordinarily joyful on this account, returned thanks to God.[33]

The writers of the *Book of Special Grace* may have been among those drawn to Mechtild, and they may have begun composition of the book at the beginning of the last decade of the thirteenth century. Mechtild, however, may not have known about her sisters' decision to record her utterances until the writers were about six or seven years into the process.[34]

[33] *Liber* 2.26 (169).

[34] *Liber* 2.31 (176). Its authors do not explicitly connect Mechtild's "drunken speech" with the period at which they began to write the *Book of Special Grace*, although the evidence for this chronology is suggestive; see *Liber* 1, *caput praevium*; 2.26 (6, 169). Whether the words Mechtild uttered in this state continued to cascade unreservedly, whether she from this point forward took sober determination to communicate to others the workings of her spiritual life, or whether she at some subsequent moment descended anew into a semblance of silence is also not evident, although we are told that her sisters continued surreptitiously to record parts of their conversations with her for more than half a dozen years. On these and related matters, see: Doyère, introduction to *Le Héraut*, 21; *Liber* 177, n. 1; Preger, *Geschichte*, 117; Von Balthasar, Einführung to *Das Buch*, 12; Halligan, trans., *The Booke*, 37; Margot Schmidt, "Mechtilde de Hackeborn," DSAM 10:874; Köbele, *Bilder*, 105.

What Mechtild seems to have lamented especially about her illness was that it rendered her unable to serve the household's members, and she confessed to feeling useless.[35] Although her ecstatic loquacity may have been a means of service during her sickness, and although, in common with Gertrude, Mechtild is perplexed that God chose to offer her a profusion of gifts, her notion of herself as undeserving does not appear to find resolution in confiding to others about God's gifts to her. The authors make little immediate use of their assertion that Mechtild received her revelations "not for herself but for us and for those in the future."[36] We may suppose, nonetheless, that Mechtild or the anonymous writers understood that benefits would accrue to Mechtild in consequence of the dissemination of the *Book of Special Grace*. Although the writers report Mechtild's sadness and worry upon learning of their work,[37] when God explained to Mechtild that she was discomfited because she lacked gratitude for the gifts he had given her, she expressed the hope that gratitude to God might be awakened in those who read the *Book of Special Grace* and that the audience would in this way supplement her meager thankfulness.[38] By setting side by side passages that appear here and there in the *Book of Special Grace*, we may surmise that the women expected that readers' gratitude would compensate for Mechtild's lack. Such expectation brings to mind a notion that we find throughout the *Herald* and elaborated explicitly there: that one person can make up for the deficiencies of another.

The *Herald* underscores Gertrude's need for others to make right her relationship with God; the *Book of Special Grace* implies this fact about Mechtild but does not emphasize it or work it

[35] *Liber* 2.36 (183). Mechtild's infirmity kept her from regular participation in choir, the communal hub of the cloister day.

[36] *Liber* 5.30 (363).

[37] *Liber* 5.31; 2.42 (370 and 191).

[38] *Liber* 5.22 (354–55). The authors of the *Herald* also identify Gertrude as ungrateful for the favors she has received (*Le Héraut* 13 Prol. 12 [SCh 139:312]).

out in detail. In the *Herald*, the gifts God gives Gertrude (which she is obliged to distribute to others) assume prominence. The language of gift-giving, although present in the *Book of Special Grace*—God tells Mechtild that he wants a little house with one window through which he can distribute gifts; this window is Mechtild's mouth[39]—is not developed in connection with the book's creation. It is Mechtild's and the audience's attitudes (her sense of uselessness and ingratitude, their thankfulness) toward these gifts that come to the fore, not the gifts per se or the mutuality of the exchange.[40] Mechtild's role in securing the compensation the audience provides is muted in comparison with Gertrude's. The *Herald* highlights the reciprocity that inheres in Gertrude's relationship with the reading audience and accentuates her function in forging that relationship.

Accounting for Differences

Mechtild seems to have been pulled between a yearning to closet herself in seclusion with Christ and the desire to communicate to others her encounters with her Lord, his holy and angelic friends, and the needy dead. Passages scattered throughout the *Book of Special Grace* indicate that she harbored misgivings about speaking about her visions and insights—and that she held them back even before she knew that others were recording her words.[41] Fear that her visions might have a demonic source hovered in her consciousness, a concern that they might be riddled with error clouded her conscience, and she was troubled that the words she thought came from Christ

[39] *Liber* 2.33 (178).

[40] The gifts God has lavished on her are, he explains, for Mechtild. If he had not attracted her to himself, she would have sought consolation in things terrestrial (*Liber* 5.22 [354]).

[41] For Mechtild's doubts about sharing her revelations, see Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics in the Thirteenth Century: The Case of the Nuns of Helfta," in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 223–24.

might be instead of her own making.[42] Mechtild sometimes perceived God to be abetting her longing to keep her thoughts to herself. Yet her sisters are said to have flocked to her side as if to a preacher to hear her proclaim God's word, and Mechtild offered them her teachings and consolation.[43] Moreover, in the face of clerical objection, she strove to give voice to a cluster of visions that granted her knowledge of certain souls in purgatory.[44] Mechtild's general disposition with regard to speaking about her revelations, ecstasies, and perceptions is elusive.[45]

Gertrude seems more confident than Mechtild in the divine source of her visions and less anxious about determining their origins when they are not immediately apparent to her, her assurance perhaps fueled by the presence in the house of older visionary women, including Mechtild herself.[46] Gertrude's relative ease with her revelations probably contributed to her apparently lesser hesitation about sharing her experiences and teachings with others. Both aware of the problems that might

[42] *Liber* 1.9; 2.12; 1.23 (29, 146, 82). See also *Liber* 5.22 (54). On Mechtild's concern for the truth and on Christ's keeping the *Book of Special Grace* from error, see *Liber* 5.31; 5.22 (370, 354). For Mechtild's fear of the devil's deceptions and desire to receive God's confirmation of the divine origins of her visions, see Rosalynn Jean Voaden, "Women's Words, Men's Language: *Discretio Spirituum* as Discourse in the Writing of Medieval Women Visionaries," in *Proceedings of the International Conference of Conques, 26–29 July 1993*, ed. Roger Ellis and René Tixier (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), 77.

[43] *Liber* 5.30 (365).

[44] *Liber* 5.18 (347).

[45] It is not possible, for instance, to discern whether Mechtild may have shaken off, once and for all, a hesitancy to give voice to her inner life or whether she may have ricocheted between the impulse to shroud herself in silence and the desire to speak. I agree with Bynum, "Women Mystics," 223, that Mechtild had more ambivalence than Gertrude about confiding in her sisters. Laurie Finke, *Women's Writing in English: Medieval England* (London: Longman, 1999), 127, contends that Mechtild was not hesitant about speaking of her visionary life but that the recording of her visions, a fear of losing control over the text, was what perturbed her.

[46] *Le Héraut* 2.4.2 (SCh 139:244).

develop and certain of the gains that would be reaped with the dissemination of the *Herald*, Gertrude was more attuned than Mechtild to the possible ramifications of this public work.[47] This awareness may be related to the recognition of Gertrude's literary aptitude by others (which seems to have preceded her writing book two of the *Herald*) as well as to her history of using her scholarly pursuits to improve the spiritual well-being of others[48]—and to further her own devotion. Mechtild's writings were less extensive than Gertrude's: Mechtild was chantress, in which capacity she directed the sisters in song and taught the novices, and she may have been especially disposed to verbal expression,[49] more a preacher than a writer.[50] Her participation in the *Book of Special Grace* was primarily oral. Furthermore, because Mechtild may not have known about the book until the last year of her life, she did not have the same opportunity as Gertrude to reflect on

[47] See *Le Héraut* 1 Prol. 1.12 (SCh 143:3). For the variety of apprehensions women express about exercising visionary authority, see Sara S. Poor, "Cloaking the Body in Text: The Question of Female Authorship in the Writings of Mechthild von Magdeburg," *Exemplaria* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 419; Sara Beckwith, "Problems with Authority in Late Medieval English Mysticism: Language, Agency, and Authority in the *Book* of Margery Kempe," *Exemplaria* 4, no. 1 (1992): 171–99; Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 34–41; Bynum, "Women Mystics."

[48] On the acclaim Gertrude received for her written work, see *Le Héraut* 1.1.1–2 (SCh 139:118–22). On her zeal for the salvation of souls finding expression in her literary activities, see *Le Héraut* 1.4.2; 1.6.1; 1.7.1–2 (SCh 139:142–44, 150, 152–54).

[49] *Liber 1, caput praevium* 6; and see 6, n. 1. In this role, Mechtild would also have been charged with oversight of the library and scriptorium (Newman, introduction to *Mechthild of Hackeborn and the Nuns of Helfta: The Book of Special Grace*, trans. Barbara Newman [New York: Paulist Press, 2017], 4). For vocal leadership in women's houses and Mechtild as chantress, see Anne Bagnall Yardley, *Performing Piety: Musical Culture in Medieval English Nunneries* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 64–66.

[50] *Liber* 5.30 (365).

the meaning for herself and her audience of its dissemination.[51] It thus makes sense that she did not invest the written expression of her words with the same force that Gertrude attributed to her own. This possibility seems to be why the parable of the talents, as the *Book of Special Grace* employs it, does not depict the written disclosure to others of the gifts Mechtild has received as being crucial to Mechtild's relationship with God. For the women involved in this book's composition, the parable instead draws attention to the collaborative aspect of the compositional undertaking and to the larger community within which this took place.[52]

Visionary Writers: Authors and Subjects

From certain perspectives, neither the *Herald* nor the *Book of Special Grace* is obviously concerned with the communal aspect of its production. Neither offers explicit, extended discussion of collaborative authorship. Throughout both works, the writers, following monastic convention, remain anonymous.[53] Furthermore, the exact nature of their authors' varying

[51] Because of the absence of coherent chronology, it is not possible to gauge precisely Mechtild's attitude toward the *Book of Special Grace*.

[52] Gertrude, like Mechtild, relied on others to help broadcast her ecstasies and devotion. She, however, elaborates on the parable of the talents even in her own book two, where she accomplishes by herself that for which Mechtild requires the mediation of another.

[53] Placed in a larger context, these omissions are less exceptional. The *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* refer to a few of the women who pass through their pages by the title of the office they hold. They sometimes characterize a woman as an older sister or novice or laywoman, and sometimes they attach a nun to her initial; only rarely do they provide anyone—including Mechtild or Gertrude—with a name: *Le Héraut* 5.6.1; 5.7.1; 5.15.1 (SCh 331:116, 122, 166); *Liber* 5.5; 5.4 (322, 321). Only once does the *Herald* refer to Gertrude by name: *Le Héraut* 4.17 (SCh 331:184). Usually the women are simply "sisters": *Le Héraut* 3.81.1; 5.4.11 (SCh 143:332; SCh 331:78); *Liber* 4.14; 65.1, 6, 9 (270–71, 335, 389). Ruh, "Gertrud von Helfta," accounts for the authors' absence of self-identification as an instance of the monastic custom to wrap oneself in anonymity. The Sister Books, collective accounts of religious life

contributions to the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* is far from obvious. The anonymous writers acknowledge having exercised a degree of editorial control.[54] They sifted through visions, electing to record only those they deemed useful for the reader.[55] They have sometimes lifted a broadly applicable instruction out of an incident or series of events in which the visionaries figure.[56] Although occasionally remarks break through as unambiguously their own, the instances in which the writers lay claim to a particular comment do not elucidate the full extent of their involvement in either book.[57]

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associated with fourteenth- and fifteenth-century German women's houses, provide examples of the author's personality coming to the fore while she continues to maintain her anonymity (Gertrud Jaron Lewis, *By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany* [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996], 33).

[54] *Liber* Prol. 2; 2.31 (2, 177). Laura Grimes calls the anonymous contributors to the *Herald* "active authors"; they are not "simply taking her [Gertrude's] dictation" (*Wisdom's Friends,* 36). The authors of the *Book of Special Grace* admit of a distance between that book and what Mechtild sought to express: the words she spoke to them were sometimes so obscure that they could not understand her and so abstained from writing them down (*Liber* 2.31 [177]). The claim of Mechtild's incomprehensibility may be indicative of actual circumstances, or it may be a literary convention; it may be both. It is possible that the language in which the visionaries spoke and that in which the authors composed were not the same, which would mean that the works were at a farther remove from their central subjects than has been thought. For the distance between the vision and the writing of the Helfta literature, see Finke, *Women's Writing*, 127–28.

[55] This is a criterion Gertrude herself employs in book two, but which the nameless nuns nowhere claim to have exercised in consultation with either her or Mechtild. For example, *Liber* Prol.; 2.31; 2.43 (2, 177, 192–93); *Le Héraut,* between chaps. 65 and 66 of book three: 1.4.2; 3.40 (SCh 139:170; SCh 143:142–44; SCh 143:186–88). See also *Le Héraut* 2.10.1; 1.15 (SCh 139:272, 204). For the emphasis on the works' utility, see Alois Maria Haas, "Mechthild von Hackeborn: Eine Form zisterziensischer Frauenfrömmigkeit," in *Geistliches Mittelalter* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1984), 222; Hubrath, *Schreiben*.

[56] For example, *Le Héraut* 3.41 (SCh 143:190); *Liber* 5:22 (355).

[57] For example, a *compilatrix* instructs her readers in the disposition required of them to profit from the *Herald*, expresses hope for their well-being, and beseeches God on their behalf; the authors of the *Book of Special Grace* also

Images of the collaborative pursuit pepper both books, and the anonymous writers cast themselves as prominent players in the experiences they relate, lavishing attention on several facets of their work's conception and unfolding. Their authors disavow responsibility for initiating the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald*: the women heeded their superiors' call to obedience, and God compelled them to write.[58] They took to their task with industrious zeal, regarding it as privileged participation in a divinely ordained enterprise, and from time to time their voices sweep in to accentuate and celebrate their part in these literary creations. "Me," exclaims one of the *Herald's* unnamed writers: God has chosen "to make me the minister of the disposition of these most holy revelations."[59]

The authors express admiration for their subjects, counting themselves among the beneficiaries of their sisters' exemplary piety.[60] Enthusiasm for their mandate infuses the nuns' writings, which are redolent with their own sense of mission. The authors proclaim their determination to write for the profit of

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pray for their readers; a narrator tells the reader how she should respond to a particular vision about which she has just read and instructs the reader on how to greet the day, offer her heart to God, make the sign of the cross, and so on; *Le Héraut* 3.18; 5.35 (SCh 143:88; SCh 331:268–72); *Liber* Prol. (3). Hubrath, *Schreiben*, 48–52, discusses the relationship the anonymous authors establish with the readers.

[58] *Liber* 5:31 (369); *Le Héraut* 1 Prol. 1–8 (SCh 139:110–16).

[59] *Le Héraut* 5.35.2 (SCh 331:272). The participation of women other than Mechtild and Gertrude in composing the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* is almost always remarked upon in studies of these works. Their all-female authorship has occasioned some celebratory cries: see Rosalynn Jean Voaden, "All Girls Together: Community, Gender, and Vision at Helfta," in *Medieval Women in Their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1997), esp. 80; Hubrath's *Schreiben* is the most thorough consideration of the circumstances of the *Book of Special Grace*, but Hubrath does not closely consider the authors' descriptions of the importance of their work for themselves. Grimes's *Wisdom's Friends* notes the significance to one of the anonymous authors of the *Herald* of her literary labor (36–37).

[60] See *Liber* 5:30 (363); *Le Héraut* 5.33–36 (SCh 331:264–74). See Grimes, *Wisdom's Friends*, 30.

their neighbors and confess that their efforts are laden with consequences for their own salvation.[61] Their labor moves them even now. The very physical presence of the *Book of Special Grace* floods its authors with wonder: "One feast day, when one of them [the writers], wishing to read it, opened the book, the other one said to her fervently, 'Oh! What treasure is in this book? As soon as I saw it, my heart was filled with wonder and strong emotion ran through my whole body.' "[62]

The authors of neither work vanish for long from the readers' purview; indeed, it is sometimes Gertrude and Mechtild who fade from sight.[63] Thus, for example, the commendation of the *Herald* refers to the *compilatrix*, God, and the reader, but is empty of reference to the visionary woman who occasions the work.[64] As the anonymous authors tell it, they proceed under the cloak of God's pleasure in their labors. Christ recognizes the good will animating one of these women, which is to him as a delicious scent that appears on each page of the book: it is as if she traced each letter with perfume.[65] He proclaims that he has nourished the anonymous author with the same love with which he fed Gertrude and shepherded all her endeavors.[66] In dulcet expressions that here and there reiterate Christ's satisfaction with the anonymous nuns and their work, the nameless writers draw attention to their own roles in the creation of the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald*, and the familiarity with God that their work opens up for them.

[61] *Le Héraut* 5.27; 5.35 (SCh 331:210, 268–72); *Liber* 2:31; 5.22; 5.30 (176–77, 353–55, 363–69).

[62] *Liber* 5:24 (357). Mary Carruthers remarks on the "intensely emotional" response that the physical presence of a book sometimes occasioned ("Reading with Attitude, Remembering the Book," in *The Book and the Body*, ed. Dolores Warwick Frese and Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe [South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997], 37).

[63] Hubrath, *Schreiben*, 37, makes this point.

[64] *Le Héraut* 5.35 (SCh 331:268–72). And see *Liber* 5:31 (369).

[65] *Le Héraut* 5.33 (SCh 331:265).

[66] *Le Héraut* 5.33 (SCh 331:266).

The anonymous nuns find themselves a topic of discussion between their esteemed sisters and Christ. Speaking with Gertrude, Christ declares the delight he takes in the *Herald*'s second part (which Gertrude did not compose by herself) and announces to her the merit its writer will receive.[67] The *Book of Special Grace* records a vision in which, at some late stage in the process of composition, God urged Mechtild to cooperate with the authors.[68] Mechtild sees "three rays reaching from the heart of God into the hearts of the two people who wrote this book, by which she understood that these women accomplished this work with divine inspiration and with grace strengthening them."[69] As God's instructions to Mechtild and Gertrude about the anonymous authors find a place in the very work about which Mechtild and Gertrude speak with God, the anonymous authors write about themselves. Moreover, the authors of the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* claim to have received revelations that center on their literary pursuits, and in the visions to which they are privy, they encounter God and their subjects, Mechtild and Gertrude. Thus the anonymous nuns and their sister subjects become the stuff of each other's visions, the boundary between subject and recorder blurs, and hard edges distinguishing holy women from their scribe confidantes dissolve.[70]

In visions that come to them and in those that come to the writers, Christ encourages Gertrude and Mechtild to work with the nameless nuns. Championing the collaborative venture and insisting that the women write at his bidding, he advocates for them and assures Mechtild and Gertrude that he sustains the works in progress. Soothing the anxious chant-

[67] *Le Héraut* 5.33 (SCh 331:266). And see *Liber* 5:42 (190).

[68] *Liber* 5:22 (355).

[69] *Liber* 5:22 (355).

[70] For example, *Le Héraut* 5.24 (SCh 331:357–58). Barbara Newman, review of Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics*, in *Speculum* 63 (1993): 506, observed the "extraordinary fluidity surrounding the roles of . . . author and subject" in the literature associated with Mechtild and Gertrude.

rix, Christ corrals her into cooperation with a writer of the *Book of Special Grace*: "Allow her to do what she does," he appeals, coaxing Mechtild into speech.[71] The resulting works incorporate revelations in which Christ's command that the sisters work collaboratively is effectively realized. The vision of the overflowing honey, for instance, does more than make plain a collaborative process at work; it decrees the fruitfulness of the cooperation that Christ superintends. In the *Book of Special Grace*, the talent is the honey, and the honey, as the narrator explains, prefigures the book.[72] Honey is, in addition, Christ's love: in heaven, he touches his heart to the heart of his elect, flooding it with this sweet substance, liquefying it and joining a soul to himself.[73] In the hands of the anonymous writer, the honey increases and causes Christ's incorporative love to flow in abundance far beyond either the original woman who received the gift of honey, Mechtild, or its immediate beneficiary, the writer sister herself. Working together, she and Mechtild each play a part in making available to others a foretaste of heaven on earth.

The cooperative nature of the creation of the *Book of Special Grace* is further emphasized when focus shifts to the supreme artist at its center. Both speaker and writer come before God as his attendants, and he enables the work that follows. As Christ explains to Mechtild,

> I am . . . in the mouth of those speaking; I am in the hand of those writing; in all these matters, I am a cooperator for those people and an assistant; and thus, everything they speak and write is true because [they speak and write] in me and through me. And just like an artist who has many assistants helping him in his work, who (although they cannot bring the work to perfection) each help him in accordance with his ability, in such a way that all actually cooperate to produce the work, in this way, although those women who

[71] *Liber* 2.24 (191).
[72] *Liber* 5.24 (357–58).
[73] *Liber* 1.1 (8–9). And see *Le Héraut Missa* 3, 11–15 (SCh 331:288).

> write these things do not communicate as elegantly as I communicated to you, with my grace cooperating and assisting, the work is approved and confirmed in my truth.[74]

Thus the making of the *Herald*, and even more obviously the *Book of Special Grace*, was infused with a sense of the affinity between writers and speakers as well as between God and his creatures. Nevertheless, the *Book of Special Grace* insists that Mechtild and the visionary writers alike are *Christ's* assistants, and Christ likewise takes credit for the *Herald*. Coming before the *compilatrix* after the *Herald* was completed, Christ said to her, "With the sweetness of my divine love, I shall penetrate, and by penetrating I shall make fecund all the words of this, my book . . ., [which words] were truly written by the impulse of my spirit."[75] The *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* are God's books. He maintains a continual engagement with his participating co-workers: soothing, explaining, cajoling, praising. In both books, the difference between Creator and creature overwhelms the distinction between Mechtild and Gertrude, on the one hand, and, on the other, the anonymous writers.[76] The writers do not therefore present the multiplication and confusion of the works' main human subjects and authors as a matter for untangling: each cooperates with God, through whose grace each speaks and writes his words, not her own. From this perspective, attempting to attribute authorship to any particular person or to separate out strands of writing specific to any one woman—in the manner of some recent scholarship[77]—is beside the point. At least this is the story the

[74] *Liber* 5.22 (354–55). See also *Liber* 5.22; 2.42 (354; 191). See Rosalynn Voaden, "Mechtild of Hackeborn," 435, for God's authorization of the *Book of Special Grace*.

[75] *Le Héraut* 5.34 (SCh 331:268).

[76] God expresses a blanket enthusiasm for the joint accomplishments. For example, *Le Héraut* 5.33.1 (SCh 331:264, 266); *Liber* 2:43; 5.31 (193, 369).

[77] In a careful and provocative analysis, Ruh has argued that a contemporary nun, whom he names "Sister N.," played a prominent role in the com-

writers of the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* present. Or rather, it is part of the tale they tell.

It seems evident that however serenely collegial the effort to record aspects of Gertrude's and especially Mechtild's life and teachings, the process also involved jostling over competing wishes and whispers of secrecy. The *Herald* reports,

> When the *compilatrix* of this book was going to communicate, this [book] was hidden in her tunic under her stole. She proffered the offering to the Lord in eternal praise, without anyone knowing, and according to custom, she inclined deeply on bended knee toward the body of the Lord, [and] the Lord, as if incontinent with a profuse love, was seen by another person . . . to have, on bended knee, embraced her.[78]

The Herald does not say why the *compilatrix* tried to hide the *Herald*—whether her concern with concealment focused on the book per se, or whether she anticipated her meeting with Christ and strained to secure a moment of privacy in which to enjoy it. Her description arouses curiosity, in part, precisely because she does not explain her secretiveness.

Secrecy was central to the composition of the *Book of Special Grace*. Mechtild's editorial participation only occurred during the space of one year. Before this time, a woman to whom the visionary was accustomed to reveal her secrets cultivated Mechtild's intimacy and disclosures, colluding with her fellow writers to keep from Mechtild the end toward which their talk tended. Thus trafficking clandestinely in Mechtild's revelations

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position of the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace*, both impressing these works with her own literary style and in large part determining their content. Ruh has asserted, furthermore, that Sister N.'s own religiosity may have had fundamentally different emphases from Gertrude's (Ruh, "Gertrud von Helfta," 3, 8; Ruh, *Frauenmystik*, esp. 317–20).

[78] *Le Héraut* 5.34 (SCh 331:266–68). Doyère thinks the *compilatrix* made this offering after Gertrude's death, but he provides no evidence for this chronology (*Le Héraut* SCh 331:267, n. 2).

with the aim of bringing them into public light, the writers nursed the desire to keep Mechtild ignorant of their activities, continuing to do so even after she learned about the existence of their work, through some circumstance the *Book of Special Grace* does not disclose.[79] Refusing to speak with her about the book, the visionary writers dismissed the questions Mechtild put to them with the blunt instruction to take her inquiry before God.[80] There seems to be more at work here than a topos of secrecy.[81]

Mechtild is depicted as having been perturbed when she found out about the existence of the *Book of Special Grace* exactly because she was afraid that she might be thought of as its initiator. When she seeks refuge in God after finding out about the book, the comfort he offers her is that the book was composed without her knowledge; he, not she, is responsible for it.[82] This exchange fits snugly within generic conventions of humility. It would not be surprising if Mechtild strove to mold her behavior and attitude in a way she considered compatible with the virtue of humility, so highly prized and regularly cultivated in monastic life. It may be that in this instance, literary convention and assumptions governing attitude and action overlapped. Finally, the authors of the *Book of Special Grace* may have had an additional motive for making much of Mechtild's humility, and, however inadvertently, benefited from interpreting her lack of confidence about the gifts God bestowed on her as an expression of ingratitude. Accentuating Mechtild's humility and ingratitude encourages the reader to meditate on Mechtild's pious but flawed self, and this buffers the authors from accusations of proceeding against Mechtild's will.

[79] *Liber* 2:42–43; 5.24; 5.31 (190–93; 356–58; 370).

[80] *Liber* 2:42 (190).

[81] Siegfried Ringler, *Viten- und Offenbarungsliteratur in Frauenklöster des Mittelalters: Quellen und Studien* (Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1980), 173. On the secrecy topos in the *Book of Special Grace*, see also Haas, "Mechthild," 222; Peters, *Religiöse Erfahrung*, 126; Hubrath, *Schreiben*, 37–38.

[82] *Liber* 2.43 (193).

Collaboration

There is, in any case, reason to suppose that Mechtild and Gertrude shared control over what the literature conveyed about them with the visionary authors. The *Herald* makes evident Gertrude's preoccupation with the work as a whole and her continual involvement with it. She made public the misgivings she had about the *Herald*, alongside her motivations for disclosing her experiences for another (or others) to record. Furthermore, work on the book's second part was a subject that entered repeatedly into her conversations with God, and the prologue implicates her in sewing together the work's two sections. In colloquy with Christ, Gertrude ascertained the titles for each of the *Herald*'s two parts, and at her prompting, God disclosed to her the name the book would carry in its fused form, *The Herald: A Memorial of Abundance of the Divine Loving-Kindness*; they also spoke together about the title's significance. Gertrude also secured Christ's assurance that he had preserved the book from all error.[83] At some point after Mechtild's discovery of their activities, the visionary authors (as they insist) showed Mechtild the *Book of Special Grace* whenever she wished, and Mechtild assumed something akin to editorial oversight over the work, scrutinizing and evaluating its content, instigating revisions, and otherwise guiding it toward completion.[84] Moreover, neither the *Herald* nor the *Book of Special Grace* records Mechtild or Gertrude reproaching their interpreters for inaccuracy in their accounts or otherwise decrying their content.[85]

[83] *Le Héraut* 1 Prol. 2–5; 5.33 (SCh 139:108–15; SCh 331:264–66).

[84] *Liber* 5.31 (370). See also *Liber* 5.31; 5.22 (369, 354), as well as Hubrath, *Schreiben*, 37.

[85] It is not anachronistic to expect that such complaints, had they been expressed, might have been recorded; see Catherine M. Mooney, "The Authorial Role of Brother A in the Composition of Angela of Foligno's Revelations," *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance*, ed. E. Ann Matter and John Coakley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), esp. 51; and Anne L. Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau:*

Nowhere in the *Herald* or the *Book of Special Grace* do we find the suggestion that the anonymous nuns who worked on these books themselves held positions of authority in the monastery, or that they served as proxies for monastery officials and were thus able to rely on authority to encourage or oblige Mechtild and Gertrude to participate in preparing these testimonies.[86] The authors of the *Book of Special Grace* did work at the behest of Helfta's third abbess, Sophie of Querfort, and with the consent of a man identified as Mechtild's prelate [*praelatus*], perhaps a confessor, provost, or bishop.[87] An anonymous author of the *Herald* acknowledges writing under obedience, and it was in obedience to superiors that Gertrude joined in producing the *Herald*'s second part.[88] It is not clear to whose order Mechtild submitted. It may be that the injunction Abbess Sophia issued to the anonymous authors of the *Book of Special Grace* also compelled Mechtild to cooperate with the writers, but we cannot be certain. When we read in the 1289 approbation in which theologians and friars endorsed the *Herald* that superiors of the monastery examined this work, we cannot discount the possibility that the abbess may have been among those who took on that task and that perhaps other women, such as the prioress, may have done so as well.[89] The directives concerning the creation of the Helfta literature appear to have

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A Twelfth-Century Visionary (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), esp. 53–54.

[86] If deference was due to any among the principal participants, it was probably most fittingly due Mechtild, who was not only Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn's sister but also aided the abbess with the monastery's management; see Bynum, "Women Mystics," 220. She was also lead singer in choir (*Le Héraut* 1.11.9 [SCh 139:178]). Moreover, her family were significant benefactors of the monastery.

[87] *Liber* 5:31 (369).

[88] *Le Héraut* 1.4.1–5; 1 Prol. 5–9 (SCh 139:112; SCh 139:12).

[89] *Le Héraut "Approbationes des docteurs"* 1–5 (SCh 139:104). See Ruh, *Frauenmystik*, 6. I know of no literature that addresses the question of why the *Herald* but not the *Book of Special Grace* is accompanied by an approbation. According to book one of the *Herald*, Gertrude's other writings were unanimously approved by theologians. These men remain unidentified. See *Le*

fallen on all parties alike and seem to have been issued by persons whose authority all acknowledged.

The cooperative aspect of the enterprise to create the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* does not mean that the anonymous writers did not recast Mechtild's and Gertrude's words into patterns of meaning they found more to their liking.[90] We should be judicious about tagging this or that devotion, teaching, or revelation to Mechtild's person or to Gertrude's. Those who record have the power to shape, and the visionary writers were impassioned recorders. They exhibit a relentless fascination with their subjects' ecstasies and devotions, they lay bare their own eager attempts to pry into their subjects' lives, and they express the conviction that their literary activities are caught up in a divine plan.[91] They also broadcast their own visions, betraying a heady confidence in their direct relationship with the divine.[92] The visionary writers were far from

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Héraut "La notice des approbations" (SCh 139:349–50). For the approbation, see chap. 5.

[90] Furthermore, the authors of the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* may have been responsible for several redactions of the writings. Over fifty years ago, Hans Urs von Balthasar (Einführung to *Das Buch*, 17), suggested that a redactor, or redactors, not contemporary with Mechtild were responsible for the book's introductory material and conclusion as well as for some of its biblical references, and Schmidt ("Mechtilde de Hackeborn," DSAM 10:874) has admitted to differences between Mechtild's account of her experiences and what her sisters recorded.

[91] Described this way, the writers bring to mind their male counterparts, who likewise labored in the company of holy women to record aspects of the women's religious lives. A male scribe's enthusiasm for his subject, and his conviction that he worked with her on a common mission, is frequently found in texts that also indicate that the scribe's own interests came to exert a controlling influence over the woman whose experiences he purported to document and thus to compromise her "independence of perspective" (Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau*, 50–67). And see also Mooney, "Authorial Role," esp. 51–52.

[92] The anonymous authors give voice to none of the deprivation and need that scholarship has found men sometimes expressing in writings they compose with women and in men's hagiographical writings about women. Women's male writing partners often believed that women ought to serve

impartial transcribers. Mechtild and Gertrude, for their part, contributed to the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* far more than raw accounts of their experience. It seems clear that the creative work of all parties overlapped. These works resound with the voices of Gertrude, Mechtild, and the anonymous visionary authors—and of still others.

A Chorus of Voices: Communal Composition

In a variety of ways, the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* bear the imprint of the whole community of religious in whose monastery they took shape. Both books are suffused with representations of the achievements, trials, desires, and devotions of an indeterminate number of nuns—considered both as individuals and as a collective. Often these are tucked into or seem to trigger the visions that come to Gertrude and Mechtild. Sometimes visions attest to Christ's concern for others, as when, for example, Mechtild one day in choir spied Christ in the form of a young man and heard him say to one of her sisters, "I shall follow you wherever you go," holding open for her the book from which she was reading.[93] Visions prompted by those soliciting Gertrude's or Mechtild's mediation periodically break open others' preoccupations. For instance, a woman confided in Gertrude her puzzlement that she received no fruit from the prayers offered on her behalf. Subsequently, God relayed a series of questions to Gertrude, with instructions to put them to her inquiring sister; reflection

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as conduits of grace to the men in their orbit. Such perceptions gave male confidants the impetus to supplant a woman's own interpretation of her experiences with his own, which included frequently highlighting his importance in her life. See Catherine M. Mooney, *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), and John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

[93] *Liber* 4.44 (301).

on them, he said, would illuminate the way of prayer for the nun.[94] Thus edged aside by an emphasis on the content of her revelation or by the person or circumstances that occasioned it, the visionary herself now and then plays a subordinate role in the accounts in which her visions figure.

Furthermore, Mechtild's and Gertrude's revelations frequently concern the larger life of the monastery, as when Gertrude sees Mary sweeping the convent's sins into a corner, tucking them out of sight of her Son's watching, or when Mechtild beholds souls of the monastery's sisters dancing around Abbess Gertrude, who had recently joined them in Paradise.[95] Many of the visions that come to Gertrude and Mechtild, moreover, show their sisters as equal beneficiaries of God's presence. Mechtild beholds Christ in the middle of the choir as the congregation is communicating; rays of light from his face illuminate the faces of her sisters, and Christ's love for them causes the women's hearts to liquefy.[96] In these visions the visionary herself frequently does not act as mediator for the divinity, and Christ's (or his saints' and angels') attentiveness to the nuns often has nothing to do with her solicitude for her sisters. The vision she sees is often prompted (or propelled forward) by the devotions of the sisters who appear in her vision.[97] Moreover, the texts identify nuns in addition to Gertrude, Mechtild, and the anonymous writers as recipients of revelations. Gertrude and Mechtild were not alone in projecting the force of their visionary life onto the household: on one occasion, another woman's revelation resulted in a particular prayer being enjoined on the entire community.[98]

[94] *Le Héraut* 3.79.1 (SCh 143:328–30).

[95] *Le Héraut* 4.48.4 (SCh 255:360–62); *Liber* 6.9 (389).

[96] *Liber* 1.4 (13). See also 1.5 (SCh 139:13, 17); *Le Héraut* 3.17.1; 4.48.4 (SCh 143:72–74; SCh 255:360–62).

[97] See *Le Héraut* 4.2.9–14 (SCh 255:36–44).

[98] *Le Héraut* 1.11.7; 1.16.3; 1.16.5–6 (SCh 139:176–79, 212–14, 216–17).

PART TWO

Within and Beyond the Cloister

Chapter 5

"A Husband Enjoys His Wife More Freely in Private"

The Nuns and the Clergy

> *While Mass . . . was celebrated and the priest was reading the Gospel, she saw the Lord standing facing the priest, and all the words that the Lord had spoken in the Gospel were like rays of light that passed through the priest himself. And the Lord said, "All the words that I spoke on earth are as efficacious and have the same power as they had when they came from my mouth originally, whoever recites them with devotion."*[1]

Helfta was in the diocese of Halberstadt and would have been under the authority of its bishop.[2] We have minimal documentation about bishops' relationships with the monastery. Nor do its writings reveal what sort of administrative, financial, or other contribution clergy may have given the nuns—or the drain they may have placed on the women's economic resources, as was sometimes the case with a male clerical presence in female houses.[3] The women would have needed a

[1] *Liber* 5.11 (337).

[2] See introduction.

[3] See Ursula Peters, *Religiöse Erfahrung als literarisches Faktum: Zur Vorgeschichte und Genese frauenmystischer Texte des 13. und 14. Jahrhunderts*, *Gedruckt*

priest for the celebration of daily Mass and for the proliferating Masses offered for the dead, as well as for the ceremonies of Holy Week. Priestly services were essential for confession and absolution, as well as for the performance of deathbed rites.[4] A priest would have preached at the monastery and provided spiritual direction. One person or several might have fulfilled these responsibilities; neither the charters, the chronicles, nor the visionary literature states explicitly who provided the women's pastoral care. It is likely that Dominicans assumed this role, and Franciscans may have also participated.

While no one section of the Helfta writings is dedicated to a consideration of priests or to the priesthood, remarks about individual men figure throughout, suggesting that clergy who tended to the nuns were not far from their thoughts and at least occasionally became objects of curiosity. Friars, confessors, celebrants, canons, and even a bishop figure here and there in the literature. We learn that sisters hungered to confess—and that they dodged their confessors.[5] We read of priests' reciting litanies over the dying and administering holy unction;[6] they celebrated funeral Masses, Masses for feast days, and other daily Masses. Theologians and friars expressed rapt interest in the nuns' revelations, pronounced their fierce admiration for the visionaries, and attested to the transformation they themselves had undergone because of the women's intervention. Friars cried out from purgatory, pulling on the

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mit Unterstützung der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinshaft (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1988), esp. 127.

[4] The priest was a usual presence at the deathbed. See, for example, *Liber* 5.6 (326). And see Peter Bowe, "Die Sterbekommunion im Altertum und Mittelalter," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 60 (1936): 1–54. For women's dependence on the priest for confession, see Penelope Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France*, Women in Culture and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 260. Female houses also labored under the financial obligation to pay for priests to say Masses for the living and the dead; Johnson, *Equal*, 111 and 260.

[5] *Liber* 2.14 (147); and *Le Héraut* 5.9.1 (SCh 331:134).

[6] *Liber* 5.6 (326).

women's pity and pleading for their intercession. Canons issued an interdict prohibiting the nuns from receiving the Eucharist.[7] And some effort was expended to check the flow of news to the outside world about the nuns' revelations and other extraordinary experiences: one priest tried to halt the spread of Mechtild's visions.[8]

The nuns were alert to the disposition of clergy with whom they came into contact, adducing whether a priest served Mass devoutly or otherwise, for example.[9] Some passages convey the high estimation in which the nuns held priests who faithfully discharged their responsibilities.[10] In one revelation Mechtild received, the words the priest intoned at Mass traveled through him like rays,[11] and now and then she saw Christ in the place of the priest consecrating the Eucharist.[12] Provosts

[7] On the interdict, see for example *Liber* 1.27 (95); *Le Héraut* 3.16.1; 3.17.1 (SCh 143:66, 74).

[8] *Liber* 5.18 (347). On this and related points, see Peters, *Religiöse Erfahrung*, 125–29; Margarete Hubrath, *Schreiben und Erinnern: Zur "memoria" im* Liber specialis gratiae *Mechtilds von Hakeborn* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996), 6; Kurt Ruh, *Frauenmystik and Franziskanische Mystik der Frühzeit* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1993), 298–99; "Gertrud von Helfta: Ein neues Gertrud-Bild," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 121 (1992): 302–3. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics in the Thirteenth Century: The Case of the Nuns of Helfta," in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 176, supposes that the man may have felt threatened by Mechtild's visionary authority. For suspicion and doubt that late medieval priests sometimes expressed about women's spiritual powers, see John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 211–13. For the broader ambivalence and anxiety in the late Middle Ages about claims associated with the authenticity of experience of those who were championed as holy, see André Vauchez, *Saints, prophètes et visionnaires: le pouvoir surnaturel au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 208–19.

[9] *Liber* 5.5 (322–24).

[10] *Liber* 1.30 (103); *Le Héraut* 5.3.6 (SCh 331:74).

[11] *Liber* 5.11 (337).

[12] *Liber* 1.4; 1.30; 5.6 (14, 104, 327). See *Liber* 5.6 (326) for Christ taking the priest's place at the bedside of a dying nun; Christ also took the place of the abbess at chapter: *Liber* 1.5 (15), and *Le Héraut* 4.2.8 (SCh 255:34–36).

and other priests were among the souls adorning the celestial kingdom who danced through the spheres with deceased sisters.[13]

Nuns as Admired Counselors and Mediators to Clergy

The approbation that accompanies the *Herald* tells us that in 1289, distinguished theologians and friars of the Order of Preachers and of the Order of Minors enthusiastically endorsed the whole of this composite work.[14] We do not learn whether one or more of the men who signed the approbation served the nuns as confessor, confidant, celebrant, or preacher, or had some other particular commitment to the house, although its existence supports the likelihood that the monastery was largely served by friars. The approbation enumerates the scholarly acumen of some of its signatories and the praiseworthy spiritual qualities of a few. One is "filled with the Holy Spirit," and another is renowned both for his "literary achievements and for his special gift of spiritual balm."[15]

We learn here of the effect that contact with Gertrude had on a number of the men who approved the *Herald*. On hearing her words, the Dominican Brother Herman of Loweia and "many others . . . witnessed for her on God's behalf."[16] Gertrude's words—whether he heard them, read them, or both—

[13] Provosts were sometimes clerics, and in such cases were responsible for participating in financial as well as pastoral oversight. On sisters and brothers dancing in heaven, see, for example, *Liber* 6.9 (389).

[14] *Le Héraut*, "*Approbationes des docteurs*" (SCh 139:104–6). The approbation purports to be contemporary with the *Herald*, although Kurt Ruh has raised questions about its authenticity (Ruh, *Frauenmystik*, 317; Ruh, "Gertrud von Helfta," 6). On the purpose of the approbation, see Doyère, who discusses its place in the manuscript tradition ("La notice des approbation," in *Le Héraut*, SCh 143:349–50).

[15] *Le Héraut*, "*Approbationes des docteurs*" (SCh 139:104).

[16] *Le Héraut*, "*Approbationes des docteurs*" (SCh 139:106). For clergy as friends, students, and followers of twelfth- and thirteenth-century women whom they perceived as especially holy and possessing spiritual gifts lacking in themselves, see Coakley, *Women, Men*, 2.

so fired up a certain Dom Gotfried Fex that "from then on, he spent his life in wonderful devotion and desire for God."[17] At least one brother, the Dominican Theodore of Apolda (1220/30–1302/3), spoke with Gertrude frequently. The brief approbation (consisting of fewer than two printed pages) closes with fiercely protective words, a stern rebuke to anyone who would challenge the *Herald*, from an anonymous signatory to the document, game to fight to the death with anyone who questions these writings: "I confess in the very truth of the divine light that no one, truly having the holy spirit of God, would rebel with audacious temerity against these writings in any way. In fact, fortified by the spirit of the only lover of humankind, I bind myself to these writings and to fight to the death against any opponent."[18]

Thus a number of clergy, whose high intellectual and spiritual standing the approbation's signatories are themselves keen to credit, regarded Gertrude as source of divine knowledge and recipient of revelations. Expressing no reservations about the authority, power, insights, and teachings the *Herald* attributed to her, they proclaimed the book's orthodoxy. Although only one of these men, Dom Gotfried, testified to Gertrude's having invigorated his own devotional life, she may have offered spiritual and more obviously theological sustenance to someone such as Theodore, about whom we learn only that he spoke with her often. The approbation is evidence that more than half a dozen clergy, at least some of whom knew Gertrude personally, endorsed the entirety of the *Herald*'s content with gusto, brandishing threats, testimony, and their own learning in unequivocal support.

The men associated with the *Herald*'s approbation were not the only clergy who looked to some among the Helfta nuns as especially disposed to receive divine favors and to pass them along to others, including themselves. Gertrude sometimes assumed responsibilities for male superiors who, by behaving

[17] *Le Héraut*, "*Approbationes des docteurs*" (SCh 139:106).
[18] *Le Héraut*, "*Approbationes des docteurs*" (SCh 139:106).

badly, became the object of her good works, seeking correction of their faults by commending them to God.[19] A number of clergy had recourse to Mechtild's gift of visions and sought her guidance and succor. The whiff of sanctity seeped out of the convent, attracting laity and religious alike. Thus we read in the *Herald* of a man who consulted with Mechtild about his salvation and who returned the favor by providing her with financial support through a period during which she was ill.[20] Additional economic benefits may have redounded to individual nuns, and perhaps to the monastery as a whole, from people pleased to have access to the sisters' advice and prayer.[21]

A number of male religious also appealed to Gertrude for aid, and she shared with them the blessings she received from God, praying for them, offering divine communications, and otherwise mediating between them and God.[22] She was at ease dispensing advice, sure of the benefit to many men of the guidance solicited by a few.[23] Through Gertrude, Christ beckoned one religious to union with him in love-language such as that associated with Gertrude's and Mechtild's relationship with Christ, and the counsel Gertrude offered the anonymous petitioner is like that which she gave her sisters: the man was to recollect his unworthiness, ponder Christ's mercy, and with wings of desire soar toward his King and into the ecstasy of heavenly joy.[24] About another supplicant we learn that after

[19] *Le Héraut* 3.82.1 (SCh 143:334).

[20] *Le Héraut* 3.75.2 (SCh 143:320–22).

[21] For financial reward associated with women's prayers within the monastery, see Penelope Johnson, *Equal*, 233–34; Jo Ann Kay McNamara, who has written about women's prayers for those in purgatory as a source of economic support for women's houses (*Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996], 277, 285, 287, and "The Need to Give: Suffering and Female Sanctity in the Middle Ages," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991], 212–21 and 218–19).

[22] See, for example, *Le Héraut* 3.73 (SCh 143:294–308).

[23] *Le Héraut* 3.73.12 (SCh 143:308).

[24] *Le Héraut* 3.73.1 (SCh 143:294–96).

God's grace poured out to him through Gertrude, Christ approached the man and, extending his hand to him, interlaced their fingers, their hands fitting together beautifully.[25] Gertrude directed the men who sought her counsel to find refuge in prayer,[26] balance contemplation and good works,[27] practice self-scrutiny and cultivate contrition,[28] and share God's love with their neighbors.[29]

Both religious and secular clergy associated with the monastery and those who came from a distance to consult with Mechtild attested that she delivered them from their suffering, providing them with consolation they had received from no one else.[30] The matters these men brought before her ranged from queries about the eternal fate of religious and political figures from the distant past to affairs immediately gnawing on their conscience. One brother requested Mechtild to ask the Lord about the state of the souls of Solomon, Samson, Origen, and Trajan.[31] Another brother visited the monastery on at least two occasions and confided in Mechtild that he had hunted for relief from temptations among his fellow friars but with no success; when Mechtild prayed for him, his temptation disappeared.[32] About a certain priest for whom Mechtild prayed, Christ promised, "his soul will adhere to my divine heart."[33]

It may have been a regular occurrence that Mechtild received revelations in response to prayers she offered for particular men and through such visions provided counsel. Christ advised Mechtild about a man overwhelmed with sorrow that

[25] *Le Héraut* 3.73.4 (SCh 143:298).
[26] *Le Héraut* 3.73.7 (SCh 143:302–4).
[27] *Le Héraut* 3.73.9 (SCh 143:304–6).
[28] *Le Héraut* 3.73.11 (SCh 143:306–8).
[29] *Le Héraut* 3.73.5 (SCh 143:298–300).
[30] *Liber* 5.30 (365).
[31] *Liber* 5.16 (344).
[32] *Liber* 4.39 (298).
[33] *Liber* 4.42 (300).

if anyone is so depressed that he would rather die than endure his suffering, he should lay his burden on the Lord.[34] Mechtild expressed a sustained interest in the spiritual state of a number of individual priests and seems routinely to have talked with Christ about them. She was sympathetic:[35] once, inquiring into the state of a priest spiritually spent in God's service, she asked God why he had consumed the man's strength like a bee sucking a flower dry.[36] When she prayed for yet another friar beset by temptations, Christ explained that although he could wave away the man's worries, it was to the brother's benefit that he struggle against the minor temptations that troubled him, so as to become stronger in his ability to direct others facing graver onslaughts.[37]

Mechtild launched into prayer on another occasion for this friar, perhaps, although not necessarily, indicating a long-term commitment to his welfare. Christ subsequently communicated through her a message promising always to protect the man, to guide him, to govern all his works, and to console him. Mechtild's instructions continued, now targeted toward the brother's fellow friars, as she relayed from Christ a series of warnings centering on this command: the friar should not cease to remind his brothers that they should withdraw from earthly goods and honors.[38] If Mechtild's words stuck, she would have served as more than a gentle counselor of this one man; she would have animated him to be a reformer within his household, stirring up his fellow friars to a more perfect life and teaching them to withstand the trials that assaulted them. These accounts show Mechtild assuming responsibility for these men, one that she shouldered with assurance, aware that she was in a position to help them in their own relationship with God and that they, in turn, were responsible for their

[34] *Liber* 4.52 (305).
[35] *Liber* 4.41–43 (299–300), for example.
[36] *Liber* 4.43 (300).
[37] *Liber* 4.40 (298–99).
[38] *Liber* 4.40 (298–99).

brothers' spiritual betterment and (drawing on Christ's aid) would execute their charge. Thus Mechtild's role in the lives of the individual men who sought her out had ramifications for men's religious communities. The *Book of Special Grace* in this way pictures Mechtild introducing herself into a male clerical household—via the disclosure of revelation to individual members—in order to affect that community for the better, an intriguing counterpart to the routine intrusion of male spiritual directors into female households.

The space the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* allot to the piety of individual men and to Mechtild's and Gertrude's prayers and recommendations for the men who sought them out is relatively minimal, however, occupying only several printed pages. And there is little additional evidence suggesting that Mechtild, Gertrude, or any other sisters took on as central to their obligations the role of spiritual muse that is so prominently assigned to holy women in contemporary and near-contemporary writings about women (and sometimes by them), including religious and quasi-religious women.[39] The

[39] For the nuns' relationship as advisors to friars, see Bynum, "Women Mystics," 211. Perceptions about women common among late medieval clerics influenced the content of the hagiographical material about women for which these men were responsible. Late medieval clerics seem to have perceived women as generally more receptive to divine grace than men and to have juxtaposed the power that accrued to the priest through his office with the personal visionary authority associated with holy women. They often shared the attendant belief that women ought to serve as conduits of grace to the men in their orbit, including husbands, confessors, and scribes. Such perceptions gave male confidants the impetus to supplant a woman's own interpretation of her experiences with his, which frequently included highlighting his importance in her life, especially her visionary life, that area that most intrigued and eluded him. See especially Dyan Elliott, "Authorizing a Life: The Collaboration of Dorothea of Montau and John Marienwerder," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Catherine M. Mooney, "The Authorial Role of Brother A. in the Composition of Angela of Foligno's Revelations," in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance*, ed. Ann Matter and John Coakley (Philadelphia:

conspicuous place of male need and the control male confidants often exercised in lives of some twelfth- and thirteenth-century holy women—such as Elisabeth of Schönau (ca. 1129–1164) and Angela of Foligno (1248–1309)—are virtually absent from the Helfta compositions.[40] The concern of the sisters for and with their fellow nuns dwarfed their interest in needy men, however much the nuns may have served as the men's spiritual superintendents. It is evident, nonetheless, that when the occasion arose the women were sure in their ability to guide individual religious men and that they regarded their counsel to be suitable for a larger male audience. Christ made clear to Gertrude the fittingness of the instructions she received for anyone in any religious order.[41]

Indifference to Priests

We learn much less about the role priests occupied in the women's lives as mediators, confidants, or companions in the religious life than we do about the role the women understood themselves to play in the lives of these men. The literature in fact does very little to illuminate the contours of priestly guidance at Helfta. It allots scant space to describing the spiritual or intellectual pull that clerics might have exerted on the nuns.

University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); John Coakley, "Gender and the Authority of the Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and Dominicans," *Church History* vol. 60, no. 4 (1991): 445–60; Karen Glente, "Mystikerinnenviten aus männlicher und weiblicher Sicht: Ein Vergleich zwischen Thomas von Cantimpré und Katerina von Unterlinden," in *Religiöse Frauenbewegung und mystische Frömmigkeit im Mittelalter*, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher and Dieter R. Bauer (Cologne: Böhlau, 1988), esp. 252–53. For a study of the role certain twelfth- and thirteenth-century holy women played in the lives of their male clerical confidants, see Coakley, *Women, Men*.

[40] This pervasive sense of men's presence comes through both in women's own writing and the writings of men, as in the *Life of Marie of Oignes* that Thomas of Cantimpré (1201–72) composed.

[41] *Le Héraut* 3.73.12 (SCh 143:308).

There is certainly no indication that the women's religiosity was molded by priestly supervision,[42] and the women expressed virtually no concern for the counsel living priests might have for them. As mediators and advice-givers, and as women wise in matters theological and spiritual, Gertrude's and Mechtild's relationship with the priests they knew personally was unequal and not based on a sense of reciprocal need or like ability to shepherd spiritually.[43] Although they do not emphasize it, the women provide illustrations of the men's sometime dependence on them but do not acknowledge a like reliance on their prelates or any other men with whom they may have been in contact.[44]

Thus, for example, when we read about Mechtild in relationship to her two confessors, it is in a passage testifying to her holiness, which tells us nothing about these men's roles in her life.[45] Book one of the *Herald* offers the witness of certain unidentified men, including a religious, who received messages from God about Gertrude's sanctity, but again we do not learn about their relationship to her.[46] We also read in the *Herald* that

[42] Bynum, "Women Mystics," esp. 255–59.

[43] Bynum, "Women Mystics," esp. 255–59. Ella L. Johnson underscores the nuns' sense of equality with men: "Metaphors for Metamorphosis: Mary Daly Meets Gertrud the Great of Helfta," *Magistra* 15, no. 1 (Summer 2009), 30.

[44] Nor do we find in the Helfta writings traces of the sort of relationships between the nuns and their priests that flowered in the free exchange of friendship between men and women in the thirteenth-century Low Countries and that the Cistercian monk Goswin of Villers portrayed in the thirteenth-century *Life of Ida*. Here we find the nun Ida and a clerical friend intimately bound to one another through an experience of ecstasy that she enjoys and that triggers a vision in him that seems to envelop both simultaneously and join them in one spirit, an experience so powerful that it then pulls into their orbit a third woman, Ida's abbess, who witnesses the priest's rapture (Barbara Newman, "Preface: Goswin of Villers," in *Send me God: The Lives of Ida the Compassionate of Nivelles, Nun of La Ramée, Arnulf, Lay Brother of Villers, and Abundus, Monk of Villers,* trans. Martinus Cawley [Turnhout: Brepols, 2003], xxxiv–xxxix).

[45] *Liber* 5.30 (363–64).

[46] *Le Héraut* 1.11.4, 7 (SCh 139:174, 176–78).

Gertrude consulted a trusted elder, presumably a priest, but the point of the account is the man's declaration of her godliness, one among dozens of such attestations threaded throughout the *Herald*, not her reliance on his advice.[47] A reference to the man's wisdom reinforces his pronouncement on Gertrude, and a conversation between holy women occasions it, but neither the man's sagacity nor the content of their talk is the subject of the passage. Although the approbation to the *Herald* similarly discloses that the Dominican friar Theodore of Apolda and Gertrude had frequent exchanges, the substance of their talks remain out of view in this rather perfunctory remark.

Perhaps they spoke about Dominic of Guzman (1170–1221), whose *Life* Theodore composed, or about Elisabeth of Hungary (1207–1231), the royal wonder-worker, of whose *Life* Theodore was also the author.[48] As Willibrord Lampen has shown, language culled from the office of Saint Elisabeth is interwoven with the *Herald*'s long account of the death of Mechtild.[49] Elisabeth is, furthermore, among the identified saints who appear to Gertrude, while most remain anonymous. The vision in which Elisabeth comes to her is also assigned a discrete chapter, a privilege accorded only a minority of the holy dead in Gertrude's revelations, or in Mechtild's.[50]

But if Theodore was a source for Helfta's devotion to Elisabeth, none of the writings acknowledges this, and it may well

[47] *Le Héraut* 1.9.2 (SCh 139:162).

[48] Renate Kroos, "Zu frühen Schrift- und Bildzeugnissen über die heilige Elisabeth als Quellen zur Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte," in *Sankt Elisabeth: Fürstin Dienerin Heilige*, Philipps-Universität Marburg in Verbindung mit dem Hessischen Landesamt für Geschichtliche Landeskunde (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1982), 215–16; Marie-Hubert Vicaire, *St. Dominic and His Times*, trans. Kathleen Pond (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), vii, 19; M. Werner, "D. v. Apolda," in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, ed. Robert Auty, et al. (Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1977–1998), 1032–33.

[49] Willibrord Lampen, "De spiritu S. Francisci in operibus S. Gertrudis Magnae," *Archivum franciscanum historicum* 19 (1926): 736–38.

[50] *Le Héraut* 4.56 (SCh 255:462).

have been the enthusiasm of the convent's founding patron, Elizabeth Mansfeld that drew the nuns to this popular saint.[51] There is no suggestion in the approbation or elsewhere that Gertrude and Theodore spoke to one another as fellow writers.[52] And although Gertrude conversed with dead male authors on the topic of writing and had a keen appreciation for the works men such as Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Bernard of Clairvaux composed, the *Herald* does not recognize the literary achievement of Theodore or of any living man.

Here again, the literature's silences are far more revealing than what it does say. The nuns provide no indication of having benefited in any substantial way from, or having recoiled under the force of, confessors' or other male confidants' guidance. There is no mention of Gertrude, Mechtild, or any of their sisters seeking help from a male spiritual director in interpreting visions, and no evidence that the nuns wanted the guiding presence of a priest in their spiritual lives. We do read that Gertrude at least once confided in an older man about her relationship with God, but when she wondered about the meaning of certain experiences, she seems to have tended to turn to her sisters with her questions.[53] When Mechtild feared her visions might not be divinely inspired, there is no record of her direct appeal to male authority.

A vision of a certain Brother N. of the Order of Preachers is provocative on this account. In life affiliated with the monastery, the dead brother came to Mechtild in a revelation, and she conveyed to him her fear that the vision in which he came to her was a trick of the enemy. In response, he counseled her to wrap herself in the armor of faith and believe that the revelation was a gift from God, an intriguing account in part because there is no analogous instance of the visionaries turning

[51] See introduction.

[52] Joseph Gottschalk calls Theodore Gertrude's friend but does not elaborate ("Kloster Helfta und Schlesien," *Archiv für schlesische Kirchengeschichte* 13 [1955]: 66).

[53] *Le Héraut* 1.9.2 (SCh 139:162).

to a living priest in confidence and receiving like direction. This vision may provide insight into the sort of conversations Mechtild had with a male confidant, just as it underscores the absence of recorded conversations between the nuns and the living men who may have counseled them.

It seems likely that this lack of discernible interest was the case at least in part because priests' guidance was negligible in the nuns' view of things and did not for the most part compel their attention or inform their actions: as Rosalynn Voaden has observed, the priest who directed Mechtild to keep quiet about her revelations seems to have been markedly ineffective.[54] The *Book of Special Grace* follows the account of the priest's instruction several chapters later with the statement that the *Book of Special Grace* was composed with the encouragement of Abbess Sophia and the consent of an (anonymous) prelate.[55] The matter, furthermore, finds no support elsewhere in the text and is eclipsed by reports of her sisters' coaxing Mechtild into speech and of the efficacy of her words for them and others, including clergy. According to Voaden, the *Book of Special Grace*'s lack of acknowledgment of a male confidant is explained by the fact that for contemporary readers, a cleric's spiritual direction would have been assumed. That readers would have made such an assumption is indeed likely. The lack of acknowledgment probably has more to do with another factor, however: the women writers were not interested in exploring one-on-one relationships with a confessor or spiritual director because the men in these roles exerted little influence on their lives that registered as noteworthy.

[54] Rosalynn Jean Voaden, "Women's Words, Men's Language: *Discretio Spirituum* as Discourse in the Writing of Medieval Women Visionaries," in *Proceedings of the International Conference of Conques, 26–29 July 1993*, vol. 5 of *The Medieval Translator*, ed. Roger Ellis and René Tixier (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), 77.

[55] *Liber* 5.31 (369). Paquelin suggests that the anonymous priest may have been Helfta's provost or the bishop of Halberstadt (*Liber* 5.31 [369, n. 1]). I have found no evidence in the text for either conjecture.

The writings emphasize instead the variety of ways sisters filled for one another the role of spiritual guide. Gertrude even assumed the role of at least a sometime confessor to her sisters. Accounts of Christ's patient and thorough training of this or that nun—as when he coached Mechtild on the meaning of the *Miserere*—and his exquisite counsel, directed now to the visionaries, now to their sisters, may have meant that when it came to understanding the routines and rituals that comprised everyday life and were necessary to their salvation, the women could largely do without recourse to the living men whose job it was to counsel them.[56] This does not, however, mean that the presence of priests at Helfta was an indifferent matter to the nuns.

The Power of Priesthood

The nuns might have had little interest in individual men as confessors and guides, but their recorded revelations proclaim the priest's awesome power as God's instrument in transforming the bread and wine into the Lord's body and blood, making Christ present in the chapel and thus facilitating union with him.[57] During one Mass, Mechtild beheld Mary descending a golden ladder and setting on the altar the Christ Child she had carried in her arms from heaven. When the priest elevated the host, he raised high the baby, whom he offered to the congregation.[58] On another occasion, Mechtild saw that at the moment the priest placed the Host in a sister's mouth, Christ offered his rosy lips to the woman to kiss.[59] Emphasizing the chronological coincidence of Christ's celebration of the Mass in heaven and the priest's celebration in

[56] For Christ's assumption of the role of spiritual father to the nuns, see Christian Gregory Savage, "Music and the Writings of the Helfta Mystics," M.A. thesis, Florida State University, 2012, 42.

[57] *Liber* 4.46 (302).

[58] *Liber* 1.9 (31).

[59] *Liber* 4.46 (302).

the chapel, a vision attributed to Gertrude illustrated the intimacy between the priest's confection of the Eucharist and Christ's self-offering to the Father:

> Truly, in that very same hour in which the Son of God offered his divine heart to God the Father, the bell rang in the church at the elevation of the Host. And thus it happened that at one and the same moment, the Lord in this way performed in heaven what was done on earth through the ministry of the priest.[60]

The connection between Christ and the priest in his sacramental role at the altar, their status as co-workers, was explicit in many visions Mechtild received. On a number of occasions, as the community approached to receive communion, Mechtild saw Christ in the form of a king standing in the place of the priest, indicating, if not an affirmation of any single contemporary theology of the priesthood, that it is Christ who acts in the priest when he serves at the altar.[61] "I do everything the priest does, both with and in him," Christ once declared to Mechtild as he stood by the altar.[62] During a Mass celebrated for the dead, Mechtild saw Christ at the altar clothed in a cloak adorned with grasses, human hair, and animal fur, and shining with the souls of all human beings. A gloss to the vision says that Christ came to Mechtild in this way because these most humble elements of creation burn brightly in the Trinity through the humanity of Christ, because Christ assumed his humanity from this same earth from which these elements come.[63] Endowing the Mass with cosmic significance that highlighted God's embrace of even the most minor details of his creation—fur, hairs, grass—and celebrating the beauty of all

[60] *Le Héraut Missa* 12.1–5 (SCh 331:300–2). For chronological synchronicity between Masses celebrated in heaven and at the chapel at Helfta, see also *Liber* 2.20 (157–58).

[61] *Liber* (14).

[62] *Liber* 2.10 (144).

[63] *Liber* 4.3 (260).

souls, Mechtild beheld Christ cover the priest with this cloak, and when the priest consecrated the Host, Christ assumed the Host into his heart, and it was changed into him.[64] Through the celebrating priest's words, the bread at the altar became Christ, who in his humanity is really in some sense the whole of creation, and who is responsible for the transformation of the bread into himself at the moment of consecration. This is an extraordinary declaration of priests' power, at the same time that it stresses that the true source of this power lies outside the men themselves.

Moreover, the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* call attention to the Mass as the occasion for the liberation of souls from purgatory and the increase of the joy of the saints, sometimes spotlighting the priest as precipitating these feats. Mechtild heard Christ say during Mass to a certain priest, "Your will is my will," and at the *Agnus Dei*, the deceased soul whom the priest wished to deliver from purgatory approached the altar, where Christ kissed her (the soul) sweetly and drew her into heaven.[65] When the priest offered Mass for the deceased Lord C., a priest of Osterhausen, it seemed to Mechtild that the celebrant made offerings of a series of gold chalices, and she understood from this act that he was congratulating the Lord C. on his happiness and praising God for it. Then Mechtild saw Christ open his heart, which exhaled a marvelous perfume, procuring a new ravishment for the soul of Lord C.[66] Here the happiness of one priest (Lord C.) precipitated the praise of another, increasing the heavenly happiness that prompted the

[64] *Liber* 3.4 (260). Mechtild folds the priest into her cosmic vision when she sees that the priest at the altar is clothed in leaves from a tree that grows in the middle of the church, a tree so large that it fills the earth, under which sit sinners and good people, and on whose branches perch souls like birds, and the tree's fragrance refreshes inhabitants of purgatory, while puffs of smoke from heaven chase away demons (*Liber* 1.17 [50–51]). See for example *Liber* 1.16 (49), in which Christ reminds Mechtild that he contains the whole of creation.

[65] *Liber* 5.5 (322–24).

[66] *Liber* 5.10 (334–36).

praise. On another occasion, the role of the priest was highlighted in response to Mechtild's own post-mortem vulnerability. A close friend of hers was concerned that sin might have stained the soul of the recently deceased visionary and saw no better way to ensure compensation for any negligence on Mechtild's part than to have priests celebrate on her behalf as many Masses as years Mechtild was alive.[67]

Priests and Sisters

Similarities between priest and visionary are apparent. Both mediated the divinity to the congregation; both had the power to move souls on earth and in purgatory toward salvation as well as to augment the joy of the saints (a topic I take up in the final chapter of this book); Christ recognizes the alignment to his will of both, and both are the instruments by which he reaches out to others. Insofar as the Helfta literature encourages the nuns to take Gertrude and Mechtild as models for imitation, a consideration of the fundamental parallels between the roles that they enjoyed, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, that which the literature attributes to the priest means that before God, differences among priest, visionary, and anonymous sisters do not collapse, but become far less pronounced than one might suppose.[68]

There are parallels between priest and sisters in addition to those I note above and to which the visionaries bring attention. Evidence scattered throughout the Helfta writings indicates that Mechtild and Gertrude regarded themselves as privy to the inner experience of the priest, just as they understood themselves as seeing into their sisters' souls. The visionaries now and again attributed to a priest the reception of certain

[67] *Liber* 5:25 (358–59).

[68] On the priesthood's belonging to all the faithful, see Gertrud Jaron Lewis, "God and the Human Being in the Writings of Gertrude of Helfta," *Vox benedictina* 8, no. 2 (1991): 309.

gifts—gifts of which the priests, like the anonymous nuns about whom we read, appeared to be largely unaware. As the Helfta literature portrays them, the priests with whom the nuns worshiped in Mass sometimes seemed otherwise to resemble the cloistered women whom they served. Brief shining accounts in the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* attest to the women's confidence that the men in their midst, as individuals and as a group, were worthy of divine communications, could be strengthened and buoyed through the visionaries' prayers and revelations, were in need of Christ's correction, and could have such a forceful desire for God that Christ was compelled to pull them out of life and into death.[69]

In these accounts the clergy recall to us the nuns, who appeared likewise in need of and deserving of Christ's gifts, gifts that sustain and fortify them, and that they sometimes received through the mediation of their visionary sisters, who were also in need of amendment and whose powerful ardor for Christ stimulated his desire for them. The repertoire of images on which the nuns drew in writing about these aspects of the priests' experience is indistinguishable from that they used to communicate the visionaries' exercise of analogous powers. And the kinds of gifts friars and other clergy received are largely impossible to distinguish from the gifts the visionaries perceived their sisters and themselves to receive—although the nuns did receive many more and far more splendid gifts.

Once, for example, Mechtild saw John Evangelist holding open a book for the priest at the altar.[70] On another occasion, the words in the Gospel that Christ spoke and that the priest read flowed through his mouth like rays of light.[71] These gifts and others are strikingly similar to those the women receive. Thus the Evangelist, as we have seen, was a frequent presence in the monastery; we find him sitting at the bedside of and

[69] *Liber* 5.8 (331).
[70] *Liber* 1.6 (24).
[71] *Liber* 1.6 (24).

gazing at an unnamed sleeping nun, talking with Gertrude about his gospel, or relating to Mechtild his familiar relationship to Mary. The words that travel through the priest recall the claim these fiercely bookish nuns made about the words of their own *Book of Special Grace* (the very book in which we read this account): Christ explained to Mechtild that the whole of the *Book of Special Grace* contained his own words—not hers.

In the short narratives of a priest's current or future intimacy with Christ (for example, when Christ shared with Mechtild about a friar that "his soul will adhere to my divine heart") we might be reading of one or another anonymous nun, or perhaps the visionaries themselves, whom Christ offered pledges of his love and glowing attestations of their future with him. Thus, for example, Mechtild gazed favorably at a certain Friar H. of Plauen, whose celestial rewards included a crown with carvings representing Christ's passion, a sign of the friar's devotion. By word and example, the friar's teaching had profited the world so much that Mechtild was moved to ask Christ why he had taken the brother to himself, and she revealed a high estimation of Friar H. when she related Christ's response. "His violent desire constrained me," Christ answered, and then described the brother as having weaned himself from his mother's breast and attached himself to Christ.[72]

Friar H. was in possession of that desire that the *Book of Special Grace* hoped to instill in readers, and he enjoyed the intimacy with Christ associated with Mechtild and other spiritually advanced women in the monastery. And when Christ asserted to the celebrating priest that the man's will was in alignment with Christ's will, we might be reading about Gertrude's or about Mechtild's conformity with Christ, which allowed them to issue judgments and provide guidance to their sisters and others. A number of passages betray the women's admiration for individual clergymen and convey the value of

[72] *Liber* 5.8 (331–32).

the priest's personal religiosity to influence for the better the spirituality of others; in this way, too, they recall powers ascribed to numerous—usually anonymous—nuns in the household in addition to the two principal visionaries. Certain friars, in consequence of their encounters with Mechtild, became reformers in their own community, assuming a role as champions of spiritual integrity and renewal akin to that which Mechtild and Gertrude took up in their monastery.

On one occasion, Mechtild related to a friar these encouraging words from Christ, affirming Christ's support of the man's preaching and teaching, and thus their value: "When he preaches, he can have my heart for a trumpet; when he teaches, he can have my heart for a book."[73] Christ's heart was available to the friar, just as it had become a place of intimacy and a source of sustenance for Gertrude and Mechtild, on account of which they were sometimes said to make the divinity available to others, living and dead. Moreover, it seems as if the friar's powers to teach and preach depended on the sort of personal (we might almost say "mystical") association with Christ that the literature claims as the basis for Mechtild's and Gertrude's quasi-clerical power and authority. Elsewhere Mechtild, dispensing promises from Christ to another brother that resembled those that he made to Mechtild herself and to Gertrude, mediated between Christ and the brother, offering the brother a power of mediation: if it was contrary to the brother's will, Christ would not punish a sinner, and he would pour out his grace on those for whom the friar prayed.[74]

Once again, Mechtild's one-on-one engagement with the priest who sought her counsel primed him to occupy a special place in his own household, authorized by Christ and starkly evocative of Christ's authorization of Mechtild's and Gertrude's interventions in the life of their immediate community. It is unclear whether the anonymous friar whom Christ,

[73] *Liber* 4.40 (299).
[74] *Liber* 4.41 (299).

through Mechtild, authorized to offer God's grace and to stay God's punishment was a priest. If the friar was not a priest, then the conferral speaks to the Helfta nuns' conviction that both they and some of the men in their circle might be counted recipients of divine authorization to take up priestly tasks, bypassing the official priesthood. If he was a priest, Christ's conferral of authority would already have been his by virtue of his office; in this case, the vision may ultimately suggest a similar message, that even when harnessing the power of his office, the priest lacked something the visionary possessed and that God might bestow on him through Mechtild's mediating presence.

When the women's gaze turned heavenward, the saints they beheld seemed further to diminish the difference between nuns and the clergy. The nuns knew that Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Bernard of Clairvaux were priests. As the authors of the *Book of Special Grace* depict Bernard, however, his priesthood is a matter of irrelevance; he is plainly evocative of the holy women at the center of the Helfta writings. Like them, he too was divinely inspired, and everything he knew, he knew through the Holy Spirit.[75] What was important to Christ about the pious priest was not at all different from what was important to Christ about the nuns.

Although the women provide little indication of having turned to priests directly in attitudes of supplication, surrender, or wonder, here and there they made plain their understanding that the priestly office did offer advantages to its occupant. Depictions of such advantages recall experiences attributed to Mechtild and to Gertrude as well as to their sisters. When nuns probed Christ about the benefits that redounded to the priest in consequence of those aspects of his office that most interested them—celebration of Mass and daily

[75] *Liber* 1.28 (98). Barbara Newman has noticed this parallel: introduction to *Mechthild of Hackeborn and the Nuns of Helfta: The Book of Special Grace*, trans. Barbara Newman (New York: Paulist Press, 2017), 260, n. 72.

reception—what came to the fore was both the merit a priest gained in association with his execution of liturgical responsibilities and its increase if the priest distributed the sacrament with devotion and joy.[76]

The priest's liturgical role in Mass was itself meritorious. Christ's response to Gertrude when she asked about the profit to priests of daily communion appears calculated simultaneously to bolster respect for the office of the priest and to temper her envy of the person of the priest for his frequent reception.[77] Christ instructed Gertrude on the great value of frequent communion for furthering union with him, something she knew from her own experience.[78] He cautioned her, nevertheless, not to confuse internal joy with external glory, underlining the difference between the glory the Mass brings to God and the pleasure it may offer to the celebrant.[79] Thus shifting the focus of his conversation with Gertrude from the privilege of the priest's daily reception to the worth of the communicant, Christ redirected Gertrude's attention back to herself, and thus to her sisters: the *Herald* leaves the reader little room to doubt that Gertrude received communion with as much love as any woman or man (we can say the same for Mechtild), and Gertrude's attitude and behavior in reference to reception is presented as a wholly attainable model for her sisters. Moreover, the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace*, while alerting the

[76] *Liber* 5.2 (319).

[77] For this observation, see Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 120. On the nuns' sense of the dignity of the office of the priest, see for example *Liber* 4.15; 5.2; 5.10 (273, 319, 334–36).

[78] *Le Héraut* 5.38.2 (SCh 331:230).

[79] *Le Héraut* 3.36.1 (SCh 143:176). We read elsewhere that Gertrude asks the soul of a sister with whom she speaks if it is more advantageous than anything to have Mass celebrated for the dead, and the sister responds that it is more fruitful if love animates the priest to help souls rather than simply celebrating another Mass to fulfill his sacerdotal responsibilities. Here it appears that the quality of the priest's heart as he celebrates is relevant for the efficacy for the dead in need of the Mass! (*Le Héraut* 5.3.6 [SCh 331:74]).

reader to individual nuns and groups of sisters who were on occasion wanting in their eucharistic devotion, repeatedly and enthusiastically broadcast approval of the convent's eucharistic piety more generally.

The Helfta writings seem further to undermine differences between sister and priest in that in the nuns' portrayal, the priest was not the only ecclesiastical office-holder whose office Christ animated. Christ appeared to Mechtild to take the place of the Abbess Gertrude during chapter ("*Dominus autem loco Abbatissae in throno eburneo residebat*"),[80] just as Gertrude saw Christ take the place of the priest at the altar. The Rule prescribes that the abbess, like the abbot, is vicar of Christ, his representative.[81] And this notion may hover in the background here. The positions of priest and abbess in the piety of the nuns differ, however, in ways that sometimes underscored the value of the abbess's person by contrast. The Helfta writings laud Abbess Gertrude for fostering the intellectual household that fed the convent's vibrant religiosity, praise her virtues as Christ's own,[82] devote several chapters to a hagiographical account of her death, and identify her as laboring for the good of her daughters (she treats them just as Christ treated his disciples)[83] and all the faithful. "Nowhere is there a place, except the sacrament of the altar, where you will find me more truly and certainly than in her and with her," Christ declares.[84] (He says the same about Gertrude of Helfta.)[85] No priest receives the attention, the affection, or the esteem the nuns heap upon this abbess. Abbess Sophia is credited with initiating work on the *Book of Special Grace*, under obedience to whom

[80] *Liber* 1.5 (15).
[81] RB 2.13.
[82] *Liber* 6.2 (378).
[83] *Liber* 6.2 (378).
[84] *Liber* 6.2 (378).
[85] *Le Héraut* 1.3.3 (SCh 139:136–38).

the work was completed; no priest is centrally important to this or any other of the Helfta writing projects.[86]

The nuns thus attributed to themselves and to the clergy with whom they had contact a range of substantive similarities, at virtually every turn diminishing difference between themselves and their priests, and without hinting at the need to reconcile the priest's institutional role with their own.[87] They did so exactly during a period in Western European history when clerics routinely asserted and roundly accentuated differences between their own caste and all other Christians. As elaborated in twelfth- and thirteenth-century canon law and theology, the role of the priest was associated with teaching, preaching, administering the sacrament of penance, offering counsel, and consecrating the Eucharist, practices increasingly shut off to women, including women religious. Caroline Walker Bynum was right when over thirty years ago she described Gertrude and Mechtild as projecting themselves onto the ecclesiastical structures in their assumption of the mediating role associated with the priesthood, in response to the late medieval clerical insistence on an essential and hard divide between priests, on the one hand, and laity and women religious, on the other.[88] The nuns did not perceive themselves

[86] *Liber* 5.31 (369).

[87] Clerics associated with late medieval holy women seem often to have felt the need to think through the relationship between the two sorts of power and authority. Broadly speaking, and in contrast to the nuns of Helfta, they arrived at the conclusion that each was discrete in its source and without overlap in role. The clerics who wrote about themselves in relation to these women underscored the special access to God the women enjoyed and proclaimed them more virtuous than the men, and these differences (as the men saw it) formed the basis of the partnership the men assumed with the women, a partnership that men cast as basic to the women's holiness (Coakley, *Women, Men*, 212–14, 221). The women of Helfta, on the other hand, do not attend much, explicitly or otherwise, to difference per se, and they do not conceive of their relationship with the men as a partnership.

[88] Bynum, "Women Mystics," 227, 258–59. Bynum argues that the exaltation of the clerical status in the thirteenth century corresponded with a clear defi-

as doing so, however, and there is no indication that they considered their own gifts as in any way mimicking those of the priest. Why would they? Their theological and canonical separation from the priest, joined to their sense of spiritual integrity—insofar as they were for the most part unencumbered by their male confessors, confidants, or spiritual guides—may have helped them sharpen their concentration on themselves and abetted a sense of their own centrality as conduits of the divine. Although from the distance of many hundreds of years, we can, with Bynum, understand aspects of the nuns' experience about which they were themselves unaware, it is striking that the whole of the Helfta literature reads as though the priests were assimilated to Gertrude and Mechtild, rather than the other way around. It is hard not to notice that the nuns fashioned the priest in their own image.

Doing without Priests

Perhaps because of the nuns' sense of the similarities between themselves and the clergy, coupled with their sense of the visionaries' fiercely intimate relationship with Christ, the women of Helfta seem to have been adept at doing without priests when they perceived that it was necessary. When the

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nition of women's incapacity for that role, generating in women a stronger need for substituting for that role than in the earlier Middle Ages. Raised in an all-female environment with the privileges associated with nobility, the nuns of Helfta were able to elaborate positive roles for themselves, assuming to themselves clerical prerogatives. For the rise of the clerical caste and the setting apart of clergy from the non-clerical population, see R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe 950–1250* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); Gary Macy, "The Invention of the Clergy and Laity in the Twelfth Century," in *A Sacramental Life: A Festschrift for Bernard Cooke*, ed. M. H. Barnes and W. P. Roberts (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003), 117–35; Robert N. Swanson, "Apostolic Successors: Priests and Priesthood, Bishops, and Episcopacy in Medieval Western Europe," in *A Companion to Priesthood and Holy Orders in the Middle Ages*, ed. Greg Peters and C. Colt Anderson (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

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