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# TRANSFORMATION VIA MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE IN THE 13TH CENTURY

Hadewijch, Marguerite d'Oingt,  
and Mechthild of Hackeborn

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The phrase ‘transformative experience’ seems almost tailor-made for discussions of religion and mysticism: most (if not all) world religions include reports of people receiving divine revelations via mystical experiences that radically transform both them and their communities. Thus, Moses is given the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai; Paul is struck to the ground by a blinding flash of light and hears Christ’s voice on the road to Damascus; Muhammad receives the first verses of the Qur’an from Jibril in the Night of Power on Mount Hira. These experiences mark turning points that transform not only the lives of the individuals involved but also constitute vital points of connection between God and entire communities.

Dramatic and definitive as they are, however, I believe that these sorts of mystical experiences are not best understood as themselves *transformations-full-stop*, but are instead better understood as ‘break-through’ experiences in longer, more mundane *processes of transformation* in the lives of people already engaged in contemplative practices and who model a certain sort of ‘active receptivity’ to the divine. The larger context of the pivotal moments mentioned above bear this out: Moses’s development into the leader of his people neither begins nor ends on Mt. Sinai; Paul is already deeply embedded in a religious life as a Pharisee when he hears Christ’s voice, and his subsequent epistles to various communities detail his continuing spiritual growth; Muhammad is on Mount Hira for a meditative retreat, and his receiving of the Qur’an continues to unfold over the next 23 years. In short, although individual mystical experiences can be (and often are) life-altering, the deepest sort of transformation takes place not at a moment but over an extended amount of time, usually a period of years. Furthermore, ‘break-through’ mystical experiences typically occur within the lives of people already dedicated to contemplative disciplines such as meditation and prayer, disciplines that are meant to prepare their practitioner for deeper levels of engagement with the divine. Finally, both individual mystical experiences and the larger transformative processes in which those experiences occur – which I will refer to as *mystical transformations* – often possess a communal function. Reports of mystical experiences typically appear within narratives of spiritual transformation and are presented as important to both individual and common life: the mystical transformations of individuals provide the communities

in which they live insight into God's nature and desires for them, and they offer moral/spiritual exemplars meant to inspire and encourage others.

What follows is a focused case study of this relation of mystical experiences to mystical transformations in three of the most influential Christian contemplatives in later 13th-century Europe. The figures on whom I focus – Hadewijch, Marguerite d'Oingt, and Mechthild of Hackeborn – present autobiographical accounts of their mystical experiences that demonstrate gradual revolutions in thinking, living, and loving that are carefully framed to highlight the ways in which they serve as lessons or exemplars ('mirrors', in medieval parlance) for their audiences. These authors also all exert a significant influence on that religious tradition, both in their own time and in later centuries. And, as we'll see, these figures' visionary literature offers 'inside-out' perspectives on mystical transformation that demonstrate how individual mystical experiences can 1) fit into a longer process of transformation, 2) presuppose an 'active receptivity' developed by spiritual practices, and 3) possess communal as well as individual significance.

### **8.1 Common Context**

By the mid-to-late 13th century, often referred to as the Later Middle Ages, the 'Latin West' (which roughly corresponds to modern-day Western Europe) was in a period of turmoil. The Roman Catholic Christian tradition dominated social, political, and religious realms, but papal schism was looming; the university system had become firmly entrenched in religious as well as intellectual life, but struggles over whether and how Aristotelian metaphysics were compatible with Christian doctrine (and the Platonism it had been imbued with by Augustine, Boethius, and others) polarized intellectual communities and led to the infamous condemnations of 1277. The trade routes that made Aristotle's full corpus and the wealth of Islamic commentary and independent philosophical treatises available to the Latin West toward the end of the 12th century continued to develop and expand, leading to an exchange of intellectual and cultural as well as physical goods across Europe, Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.<sup>1</sup> The plague had not yet arrived, and the popularity of pilgrimages (particularly to Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela, and Rome) meant that large numbers of people were journeying thousands of miles each year: even those without the means to travel the longer and more expensive routes would try to make pilgrimages to closer shrines and cathedrals (such as those at Canterbury and Chartres). At the same time, the mendicant orders founded in the early 13th century had spread across the Latin-speaking world, and their emphasis on humility and love resonated strongly with laypeople who felt increasingly disenfranchised both by the spiritual power given to the clergy after the Gregorian reforms of the 11th century and by the intellectual elitism of those in the university system.<sup>2</sup> Lay religious movements sprang up throughout Europe in this period, inspired by the 'vita apostolica' (life of Christ's apostles) and spearheaded by women as well as men. Chief among these was the massive movement in the 13th–15th centuries of laywomen, called beguines, who lived alone or in communities of like-minded women (called beguinages), and who devoted their lives to prayer, teaching, penance, contemplation, and service.<sup>3</sup>

All these factors contributed to a virtual explosion of mystical and contemplative literature in the late 13th century, and it is in this complicated and changing world that Hadewijch, Marguerite, and Mechthild lived, wrote, and underwent their mystical transformations. I have chosen this particular grouping to represent different spiritual traditions (Augustinian, Carthusian, and Benedictine/Dominican, respectively), geographic regions (the Lowlands, France, and Germany), and relation to official church orders (Hadewijch is beguine – a laywoman dedicated to a religious life, while Marguerite and Mechthild are nuns). These women also bear importantly

different relations to their texts: Hadewijch and Marguerite wrote their own works, while Mechthild's book is compiled from verbal reports and dictation.<sup>4</sup> The similarities we find in these descriptions of mystical transformation, then, are not merely tropes of particular religious orders or regional styles of piety – they underlie these differences. And, as we'll see, the autobiographical descriptions of these three figures' mystical experiences present a gradual transformation of their intellectual, emotional, and spiritual lives, shared as a guide for others.

## 8.2 Hadewijch<sup>5</sup>

Almost nothing is known about Hadewijch's life apart from what we can glean from her texts, which indicate that she was a beguine active in the mid-13th century in the Flemish lowlands. (She addresses many of her letters and even one vision to her 'sisters', but she does not appear to have been a nun.) Her familiarity with a variety of literary genres and languages and her poetic skill, however, suggest that she came from a noble family and had an extensive literary education. Her extant work includes letters, poetry, and visions written in Middle Dutch, replete with scriptural and theological allusions and quotations from Latin texts (particularly the Vulgate and Augustine), and she draws extensively on French verse to model the soul's relationship with God in the trope of *fin amor*. For our purposes here, her visionary literature is the most relevant, being carefully constructed to highlight her gradual spiritual transformation. Over the course of 14 visions, Hadewijch develops from what she describes as a child-like state in her first mystical experience to someone capable of "being God with God". As we'll see, this process requires practicing a variety of virtues and is described in a way meant to instruct others interested in following suit.

### 8.2.1 *Mystical Experiences as Part of a Larger Process of Transformation*

That moral and spiritual transformation requires long and arduous work is a central theme in Hadewijch's work. Picking up on a Pauline metaphor made popular by Augustine and others, Hadewijch frequently identifies the end goal of faith with being 'grown up' and becoming relevantly like God: "For that is the most perfect satisfaction – to grow up in order to be God with God" (280). Nowhere is this theme more visible than in the progression of her 14 recounted mystical experiences. Following the conventions of medieval visionary literature, Hadewijch opens with a description of her prior state: setting as a constant her love for God and strong desire "to be one with God in fruition," Hadewijch explains that she was at this point "too childish and too little grown up" to attain this goal, both because she has "not as yet sufficiently suffered for it" and because she lacks "the number of years requisite for such exceptional worthiness" (263). The first mystical experience she goes on to share involves an angel (a mediating figure, since she is unready for direct contact with God) showing her a number of trees, which represent different aspects of the human self and its potential relation(s) to God.<sup>6</sup> The subsequent 13 visions she relates detail Hadewijch's growing understanding over the years of both herself and God (particularly the mystery of the Trinity). This understanding parallels the development of her will's conformity to God's will and corresponds to ever-deeper levels of union with God. Her visionary literature also demonstrates a continued interest in embodied experience, particularly as it relates to Christ's humanity.<sup>7</sup>

One of the key motivators throughout the process of Hadewijch's mystical transformation is her love for the Second Person of the Trinity, Christ. Consistently described in the visions as 'the Beloved', Christ becomes Hadewijch's bridegroom in Visions Ten and Twelve – a sign

of growing spiritual maturity. Christ's doctrinal status as fully human and fully divine also presents Hadewijch with a perfect model for unity with God, for (in her words) the "perfect pride of love" is "to know how we shall love the Humanity in order to come to the Divinity" (292).<sup>8</sup> Christ's mother, Mary, features prominently in several visions as well, providing another exemplar for Hadewijch's spiritual development. In Vision Six, when Hadewijch asks how she can become "full-grown like him [Christ] and like her [Mary], so as to content both of them according to their dignity?" (275), the answer is that she must actively prepare herself to receive God in whatever manner God sees fit, continuing to cultivate the virtues. In Vision Thirteen, Mary appears and tells Hadewijch that those preparations have succeeded, and her humility, prudence, and faith have won her Love's prize: "You cherished Love with humility; you adorned and tasted Love with loyal reason; and, with this lofty fidelity and this entire power, you vanquished Love and made Love one" (301). Love's prize is that the now-mature Hadewijch is able to be 'one with Love'.<sup>9</sup>

In her final vision, Hadewijch elaborates on what it means to have reached full maturity. In line with medieval theological depictions of the ultimate goal of human life, she sees God face to face – and the description of what is required for this makes clear what Hadewijch's process of mystical transformation has involved. As she writes: "The Countenance, which God had at that moment, was invisible and inaccessible to the sight for all creatures who never lived human and divine love in one single Being, and who could not grasp or cherish the notion of attaining union with the Divinity, so as to have been flowed through by the whole Godhead, and to have become totally one, flowing back through the Godhead itself" (303). The final image she leaves us with in Vision Fourteen is of Hadewijch herself serving as the throne of God: "He who sat on the new throne, **which was I myself**, had the imposing appearance of the fearful, wonderful Countenance" (305). Hadewijch has been transformed from the spiritual child of Vision One into someone who has reached 'fruition' and can be God with God – someone who can "taste Man and God in one knowledge, what no one could do unless they were as God" (305).

### 8.2.2 *Active Receptivity via Spiritual Practices*

The spiritual progression glimpsed via these 14 visions provides an excellent illustration of how individual mystical experiences can function in a larger process of mystical transformation. Although Hadewijch does not delineate distinct stages on the mystical journey in the way many other contemplatives do, she stresses the importance of spiritual disciplines such as prayer and the cultivation of virtue as a crucial part of developing the sort of active receptivity the Virgin Mary recommends to her in Vision Six.

Hadewijch also carefully links her visions to particular moments both in the ecclesiastical calendar (e.g., Christmas, Epiphany, and Pentecost) and in daily liturgy (e.g., the elevation of the host in celebration of the Eucharist). 'Tagging' her visions in this way would have provided her original audience with rich context for the experiences she goes on to report. It also would have served as food for thought and a potential model for her readers when reaching the same moment in such services themselves. (This feature of keying mystical experiences to particular Scriptural passage and moments in the liturgy is common to the visionary literature of Marguerite and Mechthild as well.)

In general, Hadewijch portrays the process of contemplative transformation as becoming the sort of person disposed to receive mystical experiences and to learn from them. Developing both these states requires certain virtues. Humility, faith, and the use of 'enlightened reason' play especially prominent roles in this respect, but Hadewijch stresses a number of virtues that make

one ready to receive more of God. In Vision Twelve, for instance, she sees a host of virtues “conducting a bride to her Beloved” (294). As the vision continues, Hadewijch herself becomes the bride, being attended by 12 virtues who have “served her nobly and looked after her so proudly that they could present her as worthy to be received by the mighty great God” (294). Significantly, the virtues listed are not just the standard theological and cardinal virtues (faith, hope, and love/charity,<sup>10</sup> and wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, respectively) or the fruits of the spirit listed in Galatians 5 in the Vulgate (charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, forbearance, gentleness, faith, modesty, self-control, and chastity).<sup>11</sup> Instead, the list consists of a more idiosyncratic group that Hadewijch identifies as particularly important to her spiritual development: Faith, Hope, Fidelity, Charity, Desire, Humility, Discernment, good Works, Reason, Wisdom, Peacefulness, and Patience. Each of these virtues receives its own description of what it is and how it has helped Hadewijch progress. Wisdom, for instance, “showed her to be familiar with all the power of every perfect virtue that must be encountered in order to content the Beloved perfectly,” as well as demonstrating “that she also had profound knowledge of each Person of the Trinity” (295).

### **8.2.3 The Communal Significance of Individual Mystical Transformation**

The end goal of delineating these virtues and their role in Hadewijch’s life is to serve as a testament and a model for others who also long to be fully grown and experience ‘being God with God’. In Vision Thirteen, when she is given full knowledge of Love, Hadewijch is told by Mary that the fullest fruition of knowledge requires abandoning her earthly body – something that she herself is ready for, but that she will put off “for the sake of those whom you have chosen to become full-grown with you in this, but who are not yet full-grown, and above all for the sake of those whom you love most” (301). In short, growth happens on a group as well as individual level. Hadewijch is part of a spiritual community committed to a mutual goal; even now that she is full-grown, she will continue to share her mystical experiences and process of transformation as long as God wills, for the advancement of the other people in that community.

The communal aspect of Hadewijch’s work is evident in her poetry and letters as well as her visionary literature. Her poems, for instance, contain masterful re-framings of popular troubadour tropes and thus presuppose an audience. They frequently recount deeply personal experiences that contain an outward-facing moral: “So must you, if you wish to gain love....” Her letters share insights about the nature of God and virtue and contain extensive advice about how to make moral progress; they are addressed more personally to members of her spiritual community, whom she calls her ‘sisters’ (some of whom are called by name). Those same sisters appear to be the intended audience for her visionary literature. Although most of her visions are written in first-person narrative voice, detailing what Hadewijch was doing at the moment the mystical experience began and then the nature of the experience, in her final recorded vision Hadewijch breaks from this narration in order to address her reader directly. “I am continuing this too long,” she writes, “Because you are glad to hear in what that happiness consisted which was so beautiful, or so beyond human nature, and so conformed to the Humanity of God.” She goes on to mention other visions “about which I have written you recently” and to apologize for not being able to record all her experiences despite the fact that she has been asked to do so: “Since you wish to know everything that concerns me, I am very sorry that you do not know everything you wish to know” (304). This explicit mention of her readers in her final vision underscores the communal purpose of her visionary literature. In contrast to the contemporary stereotype of the mystic as an isolated individual caught up in personal rapture, Hadewijch writes not as an

‘Other’ addressing disciples but as one member of a community sharing details of the process of her mystical transformation with her fellow members for their mutual enlightenment.

### 8.3 Marguerite d’Oingt<sup>12</sup>

Our second case study features someone from a strikingly different spiritual tradition and relation to ecclesiastical hierarchy. Unlike Hadewijch, who appears to have been a laywoman devoted to the religious life, Marguerite d’Oingt (c.1240–1310) was a nun in the Carthusian order – a contemplative order that emphasized solitude, humility, and transcribing Scripture and other authoritative texts, and whose members took strict vows of silence. Marguerite came from a noble family and was well educated (as evidenced by the fact that she writes her *Meditations* in Latin, while her later works are in Franco-Provençal).<sup>13</sup> She spends her entire life as a nun in the charterhouse of Poleteins, where she eventually became prioress; her writings – which consist of a *Page of Meditations*, a *Mirror*, a history of a fellow nun, and a collection of letters that contain practical as well as visionary insight into her life – were quite popular in her own time and subsequent centuries. (This popularity is why Marguerite’s works remain extant; today, her writings are some of the only texts we know were authored by a female Carthusian in the Middle Ages; they thus provide important insight into Carthusian spirituality as it was experienced and lived in convents.) Not surprisingly, Marguerite’s visionary literature stresses different themes than Hadewijch’s: Christ’s life versus the abyss of God’s wisdom, for instance. Yet we find in her writing the same general features of mystical transformation – namely, portraying individual mystical experiences as 1) part of a continuing process of transformation, 2) requiring preparation via spiritual exercises such as prayer and meditation, and 3) being received, recorded, and shared for communal as well as personal edification and improvement.

#### 8.3.1 *Mystical Experiences as Part of a Larger Process of Transformation*

All of these features are on display in Marguerite’s brief *Mirror*, which chronicles her spiritual growth. The medieval literary genre of a ‘mirror’ serves as a guide for a particular quality or social role by describing a model or ideal of its subject; what Marguerite does, then, by presenting her own development (modestly written in the third-person) is to offer her practices of prayer, meditation, and introspection – and subsequent illuminative mystical experiences – as a model for others. The distinct mystical experiences that she relates over the course of *Mirror*’s three chapters demonstrate her ongoing transformation, as she moves from being able to see only the outside of a book held by Christ, to being able to see heaven in the wonderful interior of the book, to seeing Christ ‘face to face’.

Marguerite opens her *Mirror* by explaining that she has spent much time meditating on the nature and life of Christ, to the point where she has “put sweet Jesus Christ so firmly into her heart that it sometimes seemed to her that He was present and that He held a closed book in His hand in order to teach from it” (41–42). At this point, she closely observes the outside of the book, which she describes as “completely covered in white, black, and red letters” and bound by clasps that “had golden letters on them” (42). As she meditates on the significance of those colors and those letters, she understands that they all symbolize things that have been written about Christ. (The black letters, for instance, recount the evil things done to Christ, while the gold letters recount Christ’s heavenly status post-resurrection.) When she progresses to this point of understanding, the first chapter ends, and the second chapter begins with Marguerite seeing the book finally open. Rather than being filled with more letters, the inside of the book is like ‘a beautiful mirror’

which gives her a glimpse of heaven and the Trinity. As she goes on to write: “In this book appeared a delightful place, so large that the entire world seems small by comparison. In this place appeared a glorious light which divided itself into three parts, like three persons, but there is no human mouth that could speak of it. From this place came all possible good things” (44).

In the third and final chapter, after more prayer and meditation on her previous experiences, Marguerite returns to this ‘delightful place’ and sees Christ seated on the throne of God, “so glorious that no human heart could conceive of it” (45). The remainder of the chapter expands on this vision and the insight it gives her into God and the rest of creation – particularly the nature of human beings. Writing now directly to her audience, Marguerite explains what this means for them: “Now you can imagine the great goodness that is in Him who has thus given everything He has to His friends...He made them so beautiful and so glorious that each of them sees the Trinity in himself, as one sees in a beautiful mirror that which is in front of it” (46). Not only are human beings capable of being friends of God, but we are ourselves a model of the Trinity, mirroring the three-fold nature of God to each other and to the rest of creation. Marguerite then closes the *Mirror* with a call from the Beatitudes to purify and polish our inner mirrors, for “the pure of heart will see God face to face in His great beauty” (47). Although the number of visions and the details of those visions differ from Hadewijch’s, Marguerite’s mystical experiences similarly change and deepen over the course of her spiritual development, and in conjunction with continued spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation; her ability to experience God is directly correlated to her growth in virtue, love, and understanding.

### **8.3.2 Active Receptivity via Spiritual Practices**

Marguerite is emphatic that she receives these mystical experiences from God purely by grace rather than by any effort on her own part.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, she consistently ‘shows’ rather than merely ‘tells’ how regular practice of the four central spiritual disciplines of the Carthusian order – *lectio divina* (close, careful reading of important religious texts, particularly the gospel accounts of the life of Christ), *meditatio* (reflection on and imaginative engagement with those texts), *oratio* (prayer for further illumination and understanding), and *contemplatio* (contemplating God, particularly ‘face to face’ via mystical union)<sup>15</sup> – plays a vital role in preparing her to receive (and understand) those experiences. Again, a careful reading of her *Mirror* is instructive in this respect: it repeatedly presents her reading the word of God, meditating on the life of Christ, praying for illumination, reaching a contemplative height in a vision, and then returning again to reading, meditation, and prayer. In demonstrating how regular practice of the first three disciplines leads to contemplating God ‘face to face’, Marguerite is following the advice of a fellow Carthusian, Guigo II, who identifies these four disciplines as particularly important in his late 12th-century *Ladder for Monks*; in recording her experiences in her local vernacular rather than Latin, Marguerite is helping normalize and popularize these practices beyond the Carthusian charterhouse.

At the end of the first chapter of her *Mirror*, for instance, Marguerite – who has already emphasized how often she reads about and meditates on the life of Christ – is inspired by her vision of the colored letters on the book’s cover to think about “how the blessed Son of God is sitting on the right side of His glorious father.” Yet she finds that her eyes are “still so darkened” that she is unable to “contemplate our Lord in heaven” (43). That is, she can still gain access to God only via textual revelation, not personal experience. Marguerite concludes the first chapter by explaining that her response to this is to return again, as always, “to the beginning of the life that our Lord Jesus Christ led on earth,” and she ends the chapter in meditation. (“In this way, she meditated for a long time” (43).)

The second chapter opens with Marguerite engaged in the practice of praying, during which “she began to look at her book, as was her habit.” (The book to which she refers is the ‘imaginary’ book discussed in the first chapter; regardless, the fact that she is looking at a book during prayer wouldn’t indicate impiety or distraction, as praying in the 13th and 14th centuries was not associated with closing one’s eyes.) As she prays, and “when she was not expecting it” (a detail that highlights God’s activity and her receptivity), she finally sees the book open: “until then, she had only seen it from the outside” (43). Careful study of the life of Christ, meditation, and prayer is what allows her to look inside that book and see the light of the Trinity. The transition between the second and third chapters is similar, but this time as she is praying and thinking again about Christ being seated at the right hand of the Father, she experiences a vision not merely of a book about God, but of Christ himself: “her heart was so ravished that she thought she was in a place much larger than the entire world, and more brilliant all over than the sun...[and] she seemed to see Jesus Christ, so glorious that no human heart could conceive of it” (45). In short, her final experience of contemplative union with God in the *Mirror* is the culmination of what her previous practices have specifically aimed at.

### 8.3.3 Communal Significance of the Mystical Transformation

The Carthusian emphasis on silence and solitude might make it seem less likely that Marguerite would see her mystical experiences and process of transformation as more individual than communal. Yet Marguerite consistently frames her experiences in terms of how they can inspire and enlighten her larger community. As she writes toward the end of her *Mirror*: “I truly believe that there is not a heart in this world so cold that it would not be set on fire with love, if it could imagine and know the very great beauty of Our Lord” (47). Since she has literally just shared her experience of seeing Christ face-to-face, it is clear that one of the goals of the treatise is to help her readers’ heart burn with greater love.

Marguerite’s use of the mirror genre itself shows that she sees her mystical experiences as having practical benefits, since the entire purpose of a literary mirror is to reflect an image for its readers to emulate. She makes this even more explicit when she writes: “It seems to me that you have heard it said that, when you listen to someone tell of some grace given by our Lord to some of his friends, you are the better for it for a long time.” It’s a common assumption in her community that hearing about someone’s experience of God’s grace is beneficial; Marguerite presents this as the motivation for sharing both her own experiences and her personal understanding of the reason she has received them: “And because I desire your salvation as my own, I will tell you, as briefly as possible, of a great favor done not long ago to a person of my acquaintance. And so that you will profit from this as much as possible, I will tell you the reason why God, in my opinion, did this favor for her” (41). This outward-looking perspective appears throughout Marguerite’s work, establishing that she sees her process of mystical transformation as a journey of communal as well as individual significance.

Like Hadewijch, Marguerite frequently ‘keys’ her visions to particular dates in the church calendar – an action that both contextualizes what she experiences and provides a link between that experience and those of her readers as they participate in the same liturgy themselves. She frames her *Meditations*, for instance, by noting that it was the Septuagesima (the Sunday 70 days before Easter), that she was at mass, and that the verse “The sighs of death will surround me” was being sung. This framing sets an appropriate context before Marguerite goes on to detail her meditations on Christ’s life and passion.

Although much of what Marguerite reports resonates with other medieval visionary literature from this period, there is one respect in which her experiences are quite unusual: they contain



no voices. Marguerite does not receive verbal instructions from either God or angels; her visions contain no unseen voice telling her what she is seeing and what it means, and she herself does not speak, either to God or to anyone else. Because the Carthusians took strict vows of silence, communicating primarily through physical signs and written words, it is only appropriate that the spoken word doesn't play a role in Marguerite's mystical transformation. Instead, she discerns God's will through reading Scripture, meditating, praying for illumination, and contemplating both the visions God gives her and the meaning of those visions. In all these ways, she quietly models Carthusian spirituality to her readers.

#### **8.4 Mechthild of Hackeborn<sup>16</sup>**

Like Marguerite d'Oingt (and unlike Hadewijch), Mechthild of Hackeborn (c.1240–1298) was a nun. Yet, Mechthild's convent at Helfta – a lively intellectual community in which Mechthild served as choirmaster – presents a sharp contrast to the silent Carthusian chapterhouse in which Marguerite spent her life.<sup>17</sup> Founded by the Benedictines but overseen by Dominican spiritual directors by the mid-to-late 13th century, the community of Helfta produced a number of influential writers and thinkers in the later 13th and early 14th centuries. In just Mechthild of Hackeborn's own time, for instance, the convent housed Gertrude the Great (author of the *Herald of Divine Grace* and *Spiritual Exercises*) and Mechthild of Magdeburg (a former beguine who took refuge at the convent as an older woman, where she completed her *Flowing Light of the Godhead*). Although little known today, Mechthild's own *Book of Special Grace* was quite popular in the 14th and 15th centuries. As Rosalynn Voaden notes, "Mechthild of Hackeborn was one of the best known and most widely read visionaries in late medieval and early modern Europe. Hundreds of copies of her book of revelations, the *Liber specialis gratiae*, were in circulation in both complete and excerpted forms, in Latin, and translations into at least five different vernaculars" (431).<sup>18</sup> Mechthild's book, a pastiche of spiritual advice, reported visions, and musings on the religious life and the cultivation of virtue, is self-described as a collective effort produced by some of her closest sisters. Despite differences in production, emphasis, and sensibility from the visionary literature of Hadewijch and Marguerite, however, we find the same pattern of mystical experiences being portrayed as moments along a longer process of transformation, supported by regular spiritual exercises, and with a communal function.

##### **8.4.1 Mystical Experiences as Part of a Larger Process of Transformation**

Mechthild is not a subject of interest for the scribes of the *Book of Special Grace* as a model of spiritual growth per se; the sisters recording her mystical experiences and spiritual advice are more concerned to present her as a model of spiritual maturity and insight. Nevertheless, the mystical experiences described in the book involve a gradual transformation, particularly with respect to Mechthild's attitude toward the book's creation. Mechthild is described as initially unaware that the visions and revelations she regularly shares with her community are being recorded, and as horrified when she finds out that her sisters have been working on the *Book of Special Grace*. In addition to worries about how this is setting her up as better than her sisters, she worries about whether what's being recorded about her experiences is accurate. "How can I know if everything they write about these things is true, when I have neither read nor approved it?" she asks.

In response, God assures her that the real author of book is neither Mechthild nor the women recording her words. Rather, the author of the book is God, "Truth itself." Echoing Augustine's theory of divine illumination (particularly as laid out in *De Magistro/The Teacher*), God explains

to Mechthild that what knowledge human beings acquire comes straight from this divine Truth. On their own, human beings can understand nothing – they need God to illuminate their intellects and their hearts so that they can grasp truth, and all truths they access have their ground in God as Truth. Thus, Mechthild’s worries are ill-founded, because God ensures that her words will convey truth; in fact, God is integrally involved in all aspects of the book’s creation and reception. In a memorable passage, God explains:

I am in the hearts of those who desire to listen to you, stirring up that desire in them. I am the understanding in the ears of those who hear you; it is through me that they understand what they hear. I am also in the mouths of those who speak of these things. And I am in the hands of the writers as their helper and collaborator in every way. Thus, all that they compose and write in and through me is true, for I am Truth itself. Just as a builder has many assistants who help him with his work, although they do not all complete the work as the master does, still each of them works in his own measure, and the project is completed by the master craftsman along with his assistants. It is the same with those who write these things.”

(5.22, pp. 242–3)

In short, God is the architect of Mechthild’s book. Because fallible human beings are helping construct it, the book is subject to minor imperfections of various kinds, but since these scribes are being assisted by the Master Craftsperson, the end result will be what God wants it to be.<sup>19</sup> (It’s worth noting that the way the book’s authors employ the Augustinian trope of God as the only true teacher here gives what’s written in this book the stamp not just of divine approval but also of divine authority.)

After being assured that the book will share God’s Truth with others, Mechthild accepts its creation. As its writers report, “Thus the Lord took away all of her sorrow. So from that day forward, they showed her the book whenever she wished, reading it in her presence in its entirety (except for the prologue and the conclusion).” In fact, Mechthild develops into an active participant and spiritual ‘fact-checker’ for the book, consulting directly with God about anything that seems uncertain: “Whatever they discovered in it whose truth was suspect, she at once sought [clarity] from God as soon as she could.” (245–246). In this way, Mechthild grows in confidence, and her relationship with her mystical experiences becomes more active – a sign of spiritual maturity.

#### **8.4.2 Active Receptivity via Spiritual Practices**

Like Hadewijch and Marguerite d’Oingt, Mechthild emphasizes the need to prepare oneself for the process of mystical transformation by cultivating virtue and practicing spiritual disciplines. The particular virtues and spiritual exercises on which she focuses, however, underscore how the general practice of cultivating active receptivity toward divine illumination and mystical experiences can take different forms depending on context. Toward the outset of the first book (1.2), for instance, Mechthild emphasizes the importance of nine qualities that are ‘supremely useful’ to those who wish to develop their relation to God, and which are foregrounded in the rest of the book: purity (here identified with virginity), humility, desire for God, love for God and neighbor, loyalty, patience, faithfulness, prayerfulness, and dedication to contemplation. Communal virtues are stressed here (more than in Hadewijch’s or Marguerite’s texts), as are qualities specifically associated with living a cloistered religious life. Indeed, the majority of books three and

four are devoted to instructions on the religious life, sharing advice based on what Mechthild has learned in her own journey, both via her life in the convent and via her mystical experiences. At the same time, we see a common emphasis on humility, love, patience, as well as the disciplines of close reading of Scripture, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.<sup>20</sup>

Also like Hadewijch and Marguerite, Mechthild's mystical experiences are carefully keyed to particular events in the church calendar, so that her readers have vital context for them and can reflect on them when participating in the same events. As Barbara Newman notes, "Mechthild's scribes arranged the revelations in book 1 according to the liturgical year, which begins on the first Sunday of Advent," so that they form a sort of calendar of insights. In addition, "Visions are frequently introduced with the opening words of the Mass (Introit) for the day" (Mechthild 2017, 37). Mechthild's reports of mystical experiences are seamlessly worked through with Scripture passages. Again and again, her recalling a passage of Scripture, puzzling about its meaning, and then asking for illumination via prayer lead to her being given an answer in a 'face-to-face' encounter with God. In this movement between close study of the Word of God (*lectio divina*), thoughtful imaginative engagement with its content (*meditatio*), requests for illumination (*oratio*), and responses via mystical experiences (*contemplatio*), we see how the four-fold sequence of spiritual disciplines delineated by Guigo II in his *Ladder for Monks* has spread beyond the Carthusian community to set the standard for spiritual devotion, providing a common structure to personal devotion that remains popular in the Rome-based Christian tradition through the 16th century. Unmeditated experience of God is 'the' central goal of contemplative literature in this period; Mechthild shows by example how we can make ourselves actively receptive to such experiences.

#### **8.4.3 Communal Significance of the Mystical Transformation**

The communal significance of Mechthild's visions and mystical transformation is at the forefront of the *Book of Special Grace*. The whole reason her sisters begin transcribing her visions in the first place is to have a record of them for future reflection (and to be able to share them with others), and Mechthild herself expresses concern for how best to express her experiences so that they can benefit her community. In 5.22, for instance, Mechthild reports that she feels "divinity streaming into her with a mighty rush like a river," but then worries that she won't be able to express enough of the experience to benefit her sisters, for "whatever I can explain of that knowledge to others, is scarcely so much as an ant can carry away from the largest mountain" (242). Partly in response, Mechthild is then given a vision of "three rays of light extending from the heart of God into the hearts of the two scribes who write this book" (243), which reminds her that the task is not hers alone (as well as emphasizing the Trinitarian nature of God and God's powers of illumination).

The importance of sharing mystical experiences for the good of others is one of the central themes of the book, stressed by both Mechthild and the sisters who are recording and arranging her words. After receiving the vision described above, for instance, Mechthild concludes: "It will comfort me if this book inspires praise for [God] and spiritual progress in its readers" (243). As one of her scribes observes, "I dare say truthfully that often much more was revealed to her than she had any wish to tell. But for the glory of God, she revealed those things that she believed would be useful and instructive" (241). In other words, Mechthild shares her visions and mystical experiences not as one idly recounts an interesting dream the next morning, but because she believes she has received those contemplative experiences in part for the illumination of her spiritual community. And, although she thought of her community primarily as the convent in which she spent her life, the Dominican emphasis on preaching and teaching leads the spiritual

advisors of the convent at Helfta to disseminate Mechthild's book widely; her sharing of her personal experiences thus impact a large number of people.

### 8.5 Mystical Experiences and Mystical Transformations

The main goal of this chapter is quite straightforward – it is to observe that although individual mystical experiences can deeply impact their subjects and serve as turning points in their lives, the deepest sort of mystical transformation occurs not via an isolated experience but over an extended period of time and in conjunction with disciplines meant to prepare their practitioner for deeper levels of engagement with the divine. The significance of this observation is the way it draws attention to the socially embedded and deeply communal aspects of mystical experiences, which today are often studied outside those contexts and thus often misrepresented and misunderstood.<sup>21</sup> The fact that mystical experiences typically occur within the lives of people already dedicated to contemplative disciplines such as meditation and prayer, for instance, is crucial to understanding the role those experiences play in moral and spiritual transformation. So also is the role of community, as the case studies of Hadewijch, Marguerite, and Mechthild indicate, for both individual mystical experiences and the larger mystical transformations of these figures are explicitly offered to their communities as models and encouragement for others, in addition to providing insight into God's nature and desires.

In this respect, the differences between Hadewijch, Marguerite, and Mechthild are as illuminative as their similarities. The three figures represent a wide range of spiritual traditions, geographic regions, languages, and relationship to their texts, and their visionary literature reflects these differences, demonstrating how particular styles of piety can impact both the reception of mystical experiences and their recounting. Hadewijch's and Mechthild's list of virtues most important to the spiritual life are both different from each other and idiosyncratic in the larger Christian tradition, for instance; a closer examination of those virtues and their role in preparing for/attaining union with God would shed light on their broader theological and philosophical commitments. So would a comparison with Hadewijch's understanding of the spiritual disciplines that undergird mystical transformation with those of Marguerite and Mechthild, both of whom are working within the four-fold model of *lectio divina*/meditation/prayer/contemplation. Hadewijch also differs from the other two in frequently referencing the groundless abyss of God, which features prominently in the works of later Flemish and Rhineland mystics (such as Jan Van Ruusboec, Meister Eckhart, and Johannes Tauler), while the strict vows of silence Marguerite took as part of the Carthusian order is mirrored in her (silent) interactions with God and models "the Carthusian plan" of moving from study of the written word to self-interrogation (Gilbert 2014, 372). Meanwhile, Mechthild's mystical experiences are full of sounds as well as sights and smells, as seems appropriate for a much-loved convent choirmaster.

Yet despite these differences, all three figures provide autobiographical descriptions of mystical experiences that gradually transform their intellectual, emotional, and spiritual lives, and they share those experiences in ways designed to guide others working toward mystical transformation. In so doing, they demonstrate an understanding of mystical transformation as a long and gradual process not *constituted* by individual mystical experiences, but rather shaped by those experiences and guided by an 'active receptivity' for such transformation that is developed by spiritual practices. Finally, in stark contrast to contemporary conceptions, these individual mystical experiences function not to set their subjects apart from the 'regular' members of their communities but instead as contributing to communal as well as individual transformation.

## Notes

- 1 For more information on the often-overlooked importance of the African trade routes for medieval Europe, see Berzock (2018).
- 2 We can see this frustration with the intellectual elite, for instance, at the outset of Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*, as well as Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Flowing Light of the Godhead*.
- 3 The classic work on this movement remains Grundmann (1935). For origins of the beguines, see Neel (1989).
- 4 The fact that Mechthild of Hackeborn reported her mystical experiences to others (rather than recording them herself) raises worries in the modern readers about authenticity and veracity: how might her experiences have been filtered, changed, and framed for the purposes of her scribes? This is indeed a thorny issue, and the subject of much scholarly debate. Medieval and contemporary sensibilities about historical accuracy differ, with medieval authors keenly aware of their roles as producers of texts available to various interpretations – records of visions often include in the text the rules for how to read them. The vitae of female saints are especially subject to this sort of worry, as close comparison between their experiences as recorded by themselves and as described by their male confessors and hagiographers demonstrate sometimes quite significant differences. (See, for instance, the set of essays in Mooney (1999).) This is why I've chosen a figure who was directly involved in editing and producing the resulting manuscript.
- 5 All quotes from Hadewijch come from Hadewijch (1980). For more about Hadewijch's life, works (letters, poetry, and visions), and influence, see Hampton (2020), McGinn (1994), Murk-Jansen (2010), Suydam (1996).
- 6 For more on the importance of trees as symbols of the self in medieval contemplative literature, see Van Dyke (2022, Chapter 2).
- 7 Contemplative authors from this period emphasize the fact that Christ remains fully human even after his ascension into heaven. See Van Dyke (2019).
- 8 See also Vision Seven, where she writes: "I desired that his Humanity should to the fullest extent be one in fruition with my humanity, and that mine then should hold its stand and be strong enough to enter into perfection until I content him, who is perfection itself" (280).
- 9 A medieval contemplative who takes this unity with Love to its furthest extreme is Marguerite Porete, who was burnt at the stake in Paris in 1310 for refusing to recant her position in the *Mirror of Simple Souls* on the radical unity of the 'annihilated soul' with God. For more on Porete and the theme of losing oneself in love, see Van Dyke (2022, Chapter 4).
- 10 I list both love and charity here because the interplay between love as 'amor' or erotic longing for one's Beloved and 'caritas' as the love one has for God and one's neighbor becomes run together in interesting ways in the 13th and subsequent centuries. For more on the relation between caritas and amor in this period, see Newman (2003, Chapter 4).
- 11 This list differs from the one in modern translations of Galatians 5, which just consists of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
- 12 All quotes are from Marguerite d'Oingt (1990). For more on Marguerite's life, thought, and imagery, see Marguerite d'Oingt (1990), Fibla (2017), Paulsell (1991).
- 13 Marguerite's earliest surviving work is the *Page of Meditations*, which she writes in Latin and sends to a spiritual advisor (her prior, Huges of Amplepuis) for approval. After the Chapter General gives her *Meditations*, its imprimatur, Marguerite has license to write more freely, which she chooses to do primarily in her vernacular – thus making it more widely accessible to her immediate community, who were much less likely to be schooled in ecclesiastical Latin. For more on her choices of language, see Marguerite d'Oingt (1990: 15).
- 14 See, for instance, the opening of the first chapter of the *Mirror*, where Marguerite writes of her experiences as "a great favor" which God has granted to her, as a grace that God shares with God's friends (41).
- 15 See Hollywood and Beckman (2012) for chapters corresponding to each of these disciplines.
- 16 All quotes are from Mechthild of Hackeborn (2017). For a biography and overview of her work, see Voaden (2010).
- 17 Bynum (1984) remains an invaluable source for information about the community at Helfta.
- 18 Voaden (2010).
- 19 This is a recurring theme. See, for instance, 5.31 where God assures Mechthild: "Just as truly as you received it from my Spirit, so truly my Spirit compelled them to write it down and elaborate it" (245).

- 20 For more on the dual nature of contemplation as activity and receptivity, see Van Dyke (2022, Chapter 4).
- 21 To read medieval visionary literature with an eye toward diagnosing the underlying medical condition of the person reporting their experience or determining how to replicate such an experience in a laboratory, for instance, is to miss the careful way in which reports of these experiences are constructed to be intelligible and meaningful to their original audiences.

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