

“Lewd, Feeble, and Frail”

Humility Formulae, Medieval Women, and Authority

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The humility topos—in its most basic form, a rhetorical strategy used to position a speaker and their project respectfully in relation to their audience—appears in a wide variety of philosophical literature. Socrates, for instance, begins the *Apology* by claiming that he needs to defend himself in his usual “rough” manner because he is ignorant of the polished rhetoric of the law court, while the dedicatory letter of Descartes’s *Meditations* contrasts the Sorbonne’s position (“no institution carries more weight than yours in matters of faith; while as regards human philosophy, you are thought of as second to none”) with Descartes’s own: “when I remember not only that I am a human being, but above all that I am an ignorant one, I cannot claim that [this work] is free of mistakes” (CSM II:5). The use of humility topoi is particularly common in contemplative philosophy, with its emphasis on self-examination and moral and spiritual development. As Julian of Norwich writes in her *Revelations*: “God forbid that you should say or take it so that I am a teacher, for I don’t mean that nor have I never meant that; for I am a woman, lewd [uneducated], feeble, and frail.”¹ Yet while philosophers typically read Socrates’s claim as ironic and Descartes’s as disingenuous flattery, even scholars of medieval

¹ Short Text, section 6, my rendering into modern English from the text in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, ed. N. Watson and J. Jenkins (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 75.

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philosophy tend to accept claims like Julian’s—that is, claims by medieval women—at face value. When Hildegard of Bingen writes in her *Scivias*, for instance, that she is “timid in speaking, and simple in expounding, and untaught in writing,” we take this as a sad testament to medieval women’s relative lack of education and scholarly acumen. We ignore (or are ignorant of) the fact that the “timid in speaking” Hildegard conducted no fewer than four major preaching tours throughout Germany, that the woman who claims to be “simple in expounding” wrote an extensive discussion on the prologue to the book of John (in the *Liber Divinorum Operum*), and that the “untaught in writing” Hildegard composed three major works in philosophical theology and two medical textbooks, in addition to her numerous choral works (many of which are still performed today).²

The primary goal of this paper is very simple. It is to provide “one weird trick” for reading medieval Christian women’s use of humility topoi, so that contemporary scholars of medieval philosophy can appreciate how these women use them not to express lack of education, self-loathing, and/or internalized misogyny but rather to establish themselves as authorities within existing discourses. In so doing, I hope to remove one of the main obstacles that continues to block the integration of women’s works into discussions of medieval philosophy: the impression that these self-professed “unlettered” women lacked intellectual sophistication and did not consciously engage the philosophical and theological debates of their day.

To that end, the rest of this paper proceeds as follows. First, I explain how humility topoi generally function in the Middle Ages, showing that their use was ubiquitous in contemplative literature by both male and

² Hildegard’s downplaying of her education has other functions as well. In “Hildegard and Her Hagiographers: The Remaking of Female Sainthood” (in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. C. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999)), Barbara Newman suggests that another reason Hildegard does this is “in order to authenticate her prophetic call.” Newman immediately goes on, however, to observe: “[Yet] a recently discovered vita of her teacher Jutta of Sponheim (d. 1136), commissioned by Hildegard and possibly written by Volmar [the monk who was meant to write Hildegard’s own vita until she outlived him], describes the aristocratic recluse as literate, intelligent, and a skillful teacher; it characterizes her repeatedly as a *magistra*, her nuns as *discipulae*, and their monastery as a *schola*” (197, fn. 18). In other words, Hildegard did, in fact, receive a formal education on the model of the *schola*.

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female authors, and that such statements often include (1) an explanation of the text’s larger purpose and (2) a defense of the author’s claim to write it. Second, I address the centrality of humility as a virtue in the Latin Christian contemplative tradition, for in order to understand how humility formulae would have been read in this period, we need to appreciate how humility is held up as not just *an* ideal but *the* moral ideal for layfolk as well as members of religious orders. Finally, I address medieval women’s particular use of humility topoi in light of this broader context, which allows us to see how women writers in this period often use these formulae to “front” objections to their right to write on these subjects, and then to explicitly address those objections in the voice of the only universally recognized medieval authority: God.

1. Medieval Humility Topoi as Rhetorical Trope

“Can anything be reclaimed from the self-denigrating rhetoric of medieval women in the Christian tradition?” asks Michelle Voss Roberts.³ Although she goes on to answer in a qualified affirmative, Voss Roberts is hardly alone in characterizing the medieval use of self-descriptors like “ignorant” and “filthy puddle” as a particularly feminine problem;⁴ she goes on to state that, “Due to the frequency of such statements in medieval European women’s writing, scholars have bestowed upon them the status of a trope, the humility topos.”⁵ Yet the use of the humility topos is hardly unique to medieval women—it appears throughout contemplative and devotional literature in the medieval Latin Christian tradition, crossing geographic regions, religious orders, and gender. When Clare of Assisi calls herself a “useless and unworthy servant” in a letter to Agnes of Prague, for instance, she is directly

³ “Retrieving Humility: Rhetoric, Authority, and Divinization in Mechthild of Magdeburg,” *Feminist Theology* 18 (2009), 50–73, at 50.

⁴ See also Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); and Logan Dale Greene, *The Discourse of Hysteria: The Topoi of Humility, Physicality, and Authority in Women’s Rhetoric* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009).

⁵ “Retrieving Humility,” 51.

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quoting the founder of her order, Francis of Assisi, who refers to himself as “a useless man and unworthy creature” in a letter written to his entire order.⁶

There are at least three reasons why humility formulae become especially common in the Latin Christian West. First, once pride is labeled the “deadliest” of the “deadly sins” identified by Gregory the Great in the sixth century (and popularly portrayed as the root of the other vices in morality plays, literature, and art), pride’s converse, humility, is in turn upheld as not just *a* but rather *the* moral ideal from which spiritual progress begins and in which it culminates, and represented as the mother or root of the virtues.⁷ Second, because medieval contemplative literature has as its primary goal moral and spiritual development in the form of increased devotion and closeness to God, the authors of such literature remain formally conscious of their status as creatures in relation to Creator regardless of whether they are addressing God (as in Anselm’s *Proslogion* and Catherine of Siena’s *Dialogue*) or fellow creatures (as in Marguerite d’Oingt’s *Mirror* and the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*).⁸ Finally, language describing human beings as servants of God permeates Scripture and forms one of the central models for relating to God in the Middle Ages; David’s and Paul’s confessions of weakness and humble servanthood in the Psalms and epistles are often cited in medieval texts alongside Mary’s description of herself as the handmaid of God in the Magnificat as examples of this model.⁹

Medieval humility formulae typically include professions of unworthiness, low value relative to others as well as God, and an inability to express properly what should be said due to lack of knowledge and/or education. They also often contain pleas for illumination and/or note

⁶ *Complete Works*, tr. R. J. Armstrong and I. Brady (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), 195 (Clare) and 60 (Francis). It is worth noting that the editors of this volume miss this, attributing Clare’s phrasing here to Mary’s Magnificat rather than seeing that reference as mediated through Francis.

⁷ Catherine of Siena uses the metaphor of a tree to explain the importance and effects of humility and the deadly effects of pride and sin in her *Dialogue*. See, e.g., chapter 10, pp. 32–33.

⁸ As Julius Schwietering writes, “the humility formula is a gesture toward God even when it is the audience that is addressed,” in “The Origins of the Medieval Humility Formula,” *PMLA* 69 (1954), 1279–91, at 1283.

⁹ See, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermon 30 in *Sermones in Cantica Canticatorum*, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, vol. 183, ed. J. P. Migne (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969).

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that anything of value in the following work should be attributed entirely to God's grace. Although expressions of humility on the part of the author can appear anywhere in contemplative literature, humility *topoi* themselves typically appear toward the very beginning (or, in the case of letters, sometimes the very end) of the work, and they serve the important function of setting out the text's motivation and larger purpose, as well as providing a justification for why the project is being tackled by this particular author.

To see how this trope works, I want now to present how it appears in texts composed by figures for whom lack of earthly authority was not an issue: Anselm and Bonaventure. Anselm, for instance, writes the following toward the opening of his *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit*, composed while he was serving as archbishop of Canterbury (that is, the head of the Roman Catholic Church in England):

There are, to be sure, many who could accomplish this better than I can; but many people have laid this burden upon me, and because of what I owe to the love of truth, and for the sake of their charity and devout will, I dare not refuse their request. I therefore call upon the Holy Spirit himself to be gracious in directing me to this end. And so, having this hope, on account of the lowliness of my knowledge I leave higher things to those who know more than I do, and I shall attempt what they are asking me to do: employing the faith of the Greeks, and the things they unwaveringly believe and profess, to prove by utterly solid arguments what they do not believe [viz. that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as from the Father].¹⁰

Here we find all the hallmarks of the medieval humility *topos*: confession of unworthiness, lack of relative value in comparison to others who could undertake the task, disavowal of knowledge, and an appeal to God for grace and illumination. We also find the reason Anselm is writing the treatise and a description of the project Anselm is undertaking—namely, to present a rational argument that employs points of doctrine to which

¹⁰ All Anselm quotations are from *The Complete Treatises*, translated by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2022).

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the Greek Christians are committed to prove that they are wrong about the nature of the Trinity.

In part *because* they hit all the marks that characterize humility formulae, we don't read these words as Anselm's expressing actual self-doubt or genuine lack of knowledge. Rather, we take it as his paying his dues to the conventions of the genre (and doing so with enough flair to make one doubt his sincerity—it's a bit rich, after all, to claim not to have knowledge of "higher things" right before tackling the mystery of the relation between the persons of the Trinity). He makes the same moves in the first chapter of *On the Incarnation of the Word* (where he calls himself "a trivial and inconsiderable fellow"), in his commendation of *Cur Deus Homo* to Pope Urban II (in which he writes "Although I am a man of very little knowledge, these considerations give me such great strength that I will endeavor to raise myself up just a little . . . so far as heavenly grace sees fit to grant it to me"), and in the preface of the *Monologion* (which he describes himself as unwilling to write "because of the difficulty of the task and the weakness of my own talent"). That Anselm does not mean such statements to be taken literally is further supported by his behavior: when sending the *Monologion* to Lanfranc, for instance, Anselm writes that if Lanfranc does not approve of it, "then let the copy that I am sending to you not be returned to me or to the aforementioned brother; rather, let it be banished by one of the elements: buried, sunk, burned up, or scattered." Lanfranc does not approve of the work, but Anselm publishes it anyway.

Bonaventure, who presided over the Franciscan order as Minister General for almost two decades, uses similar formulae in his contemplative (as opposed to scholastic) works as well.¹¹ Take, for example, the beginning of his vita of Francis of Assisi, in which Bonaventure writes:

¹¹ Humility formulae are not commonly found in the scholastic genre of disputed questions, most likely because disputed questions developed from a teaching context, in which different groups of students were assigned to present arguments either "for" or "against" a particular proposition in a question, which the master in charge of the class then "settled." In this setting, the purpose of the discourse is clear, and what is most relevant is the master's authority (and the authorities on which the master draws—Augustine, Avicenna, etc.), as opposed to his humility. That this, rather than any underlying difference in attitude towards humility, is what influences the use of humility formulae is clear from a look at scholastic figures who also wrote contemplative works, such as Bonaventure and Meister Eckhart.

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I feel that I am unworthy and unequal to the task of writing the life of a man so venerable and worthy of imitation. I would never have attempted it if the fervent desire of the friars had not aroused me, the unanimous urging of the General Chapter had not induced me, and the devotion which I am obliged to have toward our holy father had not compelled me. For when I was a boy, as I still vividly recall, I was snatched from the jaws of death by his invocation and his merits. So if I remained silent and did not sing his praises, I fear that I would rightly be accused of the crime of ingratitude. I recognize that God saved my life through him, and I realize that I have experienced his power in my very person. This, then, is my principal reason for undertaking this task, that I may gather together the accounts of his virtue, his actions, and his words—like so many fragments, partly forgotten and partly scattered—although I cannot accomplish this fully, so that they may not be lost when those who lived with this servant of God die.¹²

Here again we see all the hallmarks of the humility topos, including the reason why Bonaventure in particular is writing this text and the purpose for his undertaking this task (namely, so that Francis's virtue, actions, and words can continue to inspire future generations). Like Anselm, Bonaventure is firmly established at the top of his institutional hierarchy; his protestations of ignorance or lack of worth cannot be taken, then, as due to internalized norms of subordination—other than the prevailing norm of subordination to God, which everyone in the Latin Christian tradition acknowledged. (Even the most worldly of popes in this period refer to themselves as the “humble servants” of God in letters and other documents.)

The final example of the general use of humility formulae I want to consider comes from the *Meditaciones vite Christi*, a late thirteenth-century set of spiritual exercises that became one of the most widely read pieces of literature in the later Middle Ages, particularly among women. In its prologue, the anonymous author states:

¹² Translation by Ewert Cousins, 182–83. Bonaventure also goes on to say in this same passage that “I decided that I should avoid a cultivated literary style, since the reader's devotion profits more from simple rather than ornate expression.”

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I did wish you would receive this introduction from someone more experienced and learned, because I am quite inadequate for such things. Nevertheless, judging that it would be better to say something suitable rather than remain silent entirely, I shall put my inexperience to the test and speak on familiar terms with you, in a rough and unrefined manner of speaking: on the one hand so that you are able to understand better what is said, and on the other, that you can strive thereby to refresh not your ear but your mind. . . . I hope also that my lack of expertise might supply something to your lack of erudition; but in this endeavor I am even more hopeful that, provided you wish to exert yourself by assiduous meditation, you will have as virtual teacher the same Lord Jesus of whom we speak. (3–4)

Here we see another classic use of the humility topos in a widely circulated and read text. This statement appears immediately following an explanation of how the meditations recommended in this work will prepare their practitioner for contemplation of God in its highest form; it includes the standard disavowals of worth, knowledge, and literary expertise, and an appeal to illumination from God.

This appeal, moreover, invokes the popular Augustinian trope of God as the only true teacher—a move that levels the intellectual playing field as well as acknowledges God as the ultimate source of truth. Insofar as God alone is responsible for granting human beings understanding and wisdom, the Franciscan nun to whom the *Meditations* was written is in as good a position for receiving illumination as cardinals and university masters. In fact, the importance of humility as a virtue in the later Middle Ages entails that God is seen as perhaps *more* likely to illuminate the “least of these.” To further illuminate the use of humility formulae in this period, then, I turn now to a discussion of humility as moral ideal, modeled by Christ himself.

2. Humility as Contemplative Virtue

As mentioned in section 1, after Gregory the Great’s delineation of the “deadly sins” in the sixth century, the virtue of humility gains

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special emphasis in monastic communities as the converse of pride. Post-Gregorian reforms of the eleventh century and the rise of the university system in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, growing frustration with both rigid ecclesiastical hierarchies and intellectual elitism contributes to a widespread cultural emphasis on the importance of humility. In the mendicant orders and in the lay devotional movements that spread like wildfire in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, humility is upheld as a virtue central not just to moral and religious life, but to intellectual life as well: true wisdom is a gift from God, and contemplation of the divine is inherently humbling. Furthermore, the prime exemplar of humility throughout the Middle Ages was taken to be Christ himself. Although the Second Person of the Trinity, Christ “emptied himself and took on the form of a servant” via the Incarnation, presenting a model of humility with universal applicability—if God can be humble, then everyone should be humble: pope or peasant, bishop or beguine. This conception of humility as moral ideal forms the background against which medieval expressions of unworthiness and ignorance were uttered and interpreted. Such pronouncements represent *comparative* rather than absolute assessments of worth, where the ultimate object of any comparison is always God. Because fallen human nature tends toward pride and an inflated sense of self-worth, the function of this comparison is to remind both author and reader that any human accomplishment pales to insignificance next to God’s infinite actuality.

The poem with which Marguerite of Porete opens her *Mirror of Simple Souls* neatly captures how humility was portrayed as an ideal—and a caution against pride—in the early fourteenth century. Introducing her treatise to its readers, she writes:

Humility, who is keeper of the treasury of Knowledge
And the mother of the other Virtues
Must overtake you.
[...]
Theologians and other clerks,
You will not have the intellect for it,
No matter how brilliant your abilities,
If you do not proceed humbly.

(79)

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Here Marguerite draws on humility's status as both the source of the other virtues and a precondition for wisdom. The explicit mention of the need for humility in theologians and clerks (who represented the pinnacle of the hierarchy of intelligentsia, and who would burn Marguerite at the stake as a heretic in 1310) underscores the idea that intellectual pride is an obstacle to illumination.

I have written in more detail elsewhere about the vital role humility plays in the medieval Christian contemplative tradition;¹³ for the purposes of this paper, what proves most important is its status as a moral, epistemic, and spiritual ideal, and Christ's modeling of that ideal. A central theme of the medieval meditation genre, for instance, is that the Incarnation has created an unbreakable link between humanity and divinity.¹⁴ As the English hermit Richard Rolle writes in one of his widely read fourteenth-century meditations on the life of Christ:

Lord who came down from heaven to earth for love of the human race, from so high to so low, from such dominion to such low poverty, from such high splendor to such low misery, from such high magnificence to such low sorrow, from such a pleasurable life to such a painful death, now, Lord for all that love which you revealed to mankind in your incarnation and in your passion, I implore you for mercy and help.¹⁵

One reason Christ's example of humility proves so informative for our purposes is that it represents a *perfect* model of humility: humility in its purest form, devoid of pretense or sin. Paradoxically—but crucially—Christ's model teaches that humility is intrinsically linked with dignity and sublimity. Indeed, a common Scriptural trope throughout both the

¹³ See, for instance, “‘Many Know Much, but Do Not Know Themselves’: Self-Knowledge, Humility, and Perfection in the Medieval Affective Contemplative Tradition,” in G. Klima and A. Hall (eds.), *Consciousness and Self-Knowledge in Medieval Philosophy* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 89–106.

¹⁴ For more on the medieval meditative tradition, and particularly its relation to the activity of contemplation, see Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), and my “From Meditation to Contemplation: Broadening the Borders of Philosophy in the 13th–15th Centuries,” in A. Griffioen and M. Backmann (eds.), *Pluralizing Philosophy's Past: New Reflections in the History of Philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

¹⁵ *The English Writings*, ed. and tr. R. Allen (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 107.

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Old and New Testament is the high being brought low and the low being raised up; the Passion and Resurrection present the ultimate example both of how the high should humble themselves and also of how the humble will be lifted high. Any number of medieval authors highlight Christ's example as both an imitable model of humility and an assurance that such humility will result in a closer union with God. When meditating on Christ's presence in the Eucharist, for instance, Francis of Assisi writes:

O sublime humility!

O humble sublimity!

...

Look, brothers, at the humility of God

And pour out your hearts before him!

Humble yourselves, as well,

That you may be exalted by Him.¹⁶

The medieval call to humility is always balanced with this assurance (sometimes implicit; often explicit) that God will exalt those who answer this call.

Finally, professions of insignificance and lowliness in this period must also be read in light of the fact that according to this tradition, union with God is understood to be the final end of human nature—that is, human beings are meant to aim all their actions ultimately at becoming one with the perfect source of all goodness.¹⁷ Obviously, the contrast between that perfect source and fallen human nature is extreme. Regardless, human beings were understood to be created in God's image by their possession of intellect and will, and were encouraged to develop those capacities in order to grow closer to God. Medieval acknowledgements of the extent to which human beings fall short of this goal don't indicate a static sense of worthlessness; rather, they acknowledge the importance of humility as a

¹⁶ "A Letter to the Entire Order," in *The Complete Works*, 55.

¹⁷ For more on differing conceptions of what, exactly, that final end might look like, see my "The Phenomenology of Immortality (1200–1400)," in M. Cameron (ed.), *The History of the Philosophy of Mind*, vol. 2: *Philosophy of Mind in the Early and High Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2019), 219–39.

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dynamic component of moral and spiritual growth—the ground in which other virtues root themselves and begin to bear fruit.

3. Re-reading Medieval Women's Use of Humility Formulae

It is against *this* background that we need to read medieval women's use of humility formulae: first, the careful use of humility formulae throughout this period as a way of introducing the text's content and explaining/defending the claim of this particular author to write it; second, the centrality of humility as moral, intellectual, and spiritual ideal, taken to apply equally to all, and intrinsically linked with dignity and divinity. Understanding this broader context allows us to appreciate how many medieval women use these formulae not only to situate themselves as authorities but also to explicitly respond to the objection that women have no business speaking on theological and philosophical topics.

We find an early use of this trope in Hrotsvit of Gandersheim's letter to the patrons of her dramas. As she writes in verse:

I do not deny that by the gift of the Creator's grace I am able to
grasp certain concepts the arts concerning
because I am a creature capable of learning,
but I also know that through my own powers, I know nothing.
[...]

Therefore, in order to prevent God's gift in me from dying by
my neglect, I have tried whenever I could probe,
to rip small patches from Philosophy's robe
and weave them into this little work of mine,
so that the worthlessness of my own ignorance may be ennobled
by their interweaving of this nobler material's shine,
and that, thus, the Giver of my talent all the more justly be
praised through me,
the more limited the female intellect is believed to be.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Florilegium of Her Works*, ed. and tr. K. Wilson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), 44.

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Here, the late tenth-century Benedictine nun includes all the classic features of the medieval humility formula, including a nod toward the overtly Boethian content of her dramas (particularly the *Sapientia*); the reference to ripping pieces from Philosophy's robe is a direct reference to the opening book of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, and it implies that Hrotsvit sees herself as a philosopher.¹⁹ We also see here the main modification to the general humility topos that characterizes its use by female authors—namely, (1) explicit mention of the sex of the writer, (2) reference to common beliefs about female weakness (in intellectual, physical, moral, and spiritual form), and (3) an assurance that these perceived limitations pose no barrier to the text's ability to convey divine Truth (and may, in fact, enhance its ability to do so).²⁰

I have already referenced Hildegard of Bingen's twelfth-century use of the humility formula in the introduction; with the virtual explosion of contemplative literature in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, there are any number of later examples to choose from. To highlight the breadth of this trope, then, let us consider its use by Mechthild of Magdeburg (a German beguine who writes in Middle Low German), Marguerite d'Oingt (a French Carthusian nun who writes in both Latin and Franco-Provençal), Mechthild of Hackeborn (a nun at Helfta whose book is composed in Latin), and Julian of Norwich (an English anchorite who writes in Middle English). As we will see, despite differences in style and emphasis, the general form and function of their humility topoi remain remarkably similar.

Little is known of Mechthild of Magdeburg's early life or education; what we do know is that she was a beguine—that is, a laywoman who dedicated herself to a life of religious devotion and service without entering a convent—and that she composes the majority of her book, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, before taking refuge at the nunnery at

¹⁹ This is further supported by Hrotsvit's subsequent claim that "I do not boast to possess knowledge nor do I pretend not to be ignorant; but, as far as I am concerned, the only thing I know is that I know naught" (44)—a direct echo of Socrates's contention in the *Apology* that the only thing he knows is that he knows nothing, and this alone is the respect in which he should be considered wisest.

²⁰ Hrotsvit regularly mentions her sex and its perceived limitations in her author's prologues or dedicatory letters, often in a manner obviously meant to be ironic, as when she uses complex meter to express the difficulty of writing in verse for "the fragile female sex" (19).

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Helfta (famous for its intellectual community) later in life. Much has been made in recent discussions about how Mechthild’s expressions of humility and anxiety concerning how her book will be read and received should be understood;²¹ Michelle Voss Roberts, for instance, claims that Mechthild’s worries play an “authorizing function” by dint of providing “constant iterations of lowliness that subtly persuaded her male supporters” that she poses no threat to established authority.²² In light of the evidence I have presented in the previous two sections of this paper, however, I believe that these expressions are actually meant to establish the authority of their texts in a much more straightforward way—namely, to explicitly address the question of their status as women writing about theological and philosophical matters and to establish their right to speak authoritatively about God and God’s will for their fellow human beings.

Take for instance, this memorable passage at the outset of Book II, in which Mechthild refers to herself as “filthy ooze” in sharing with God the worry that her book will not be read or properly appreciated:

Ah, Lord, if I were a learned religious man,
And if you had performed this unique great miracle using him,
You would receive everlasting honor for it.
But how is one supposed to believe
That you have built a golden house on filthy ooze
And really live in it with your mother, with all creatures, and
with your heavenly court?
Lord, earthly wisdom will not being able to find you there.

Here Mechthild purposefully contrasts her status and knowledge as a laywoman with that of a university-educated man. At the same time, she refers to her book as not just a “unique great miracle” but also a “golden house” inhabited not just by Christ but also by Mary and the heavenly

²¹ See, e.g., Sara Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) and Voss Roberts, “Retrieving Humility.”

²² “Retrieving Humility,” 68.

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hosts. Now look at the response she receives from no lesser an authority than God:

Daughter, many a wise man, because of negligence
On a big highway, has lost his precious gold
With which he was hoping to go to a famous school.
Someone is going to find it.
By nature I have acted accordingly many a day.
Whenever I bestowed special favors,
I always sought out the lowest, most insignificant, and most
unknown place for them.
The highest mountains on earth cannot receive the revelations
of my favors
Because the course of the Holy Spirit flows by nature downhill.
One finds many a professor learned in scripture who is
actually a fool in my eyes.
And I'll tell you something else:
It is a great honor for me with regard to them, and it very
much strengthens Holy Christianity
That the unlearned mouth, aided by my Holy Spirit, teaches
the learned tongue.

(II.26)

This assurance that Mechthild's text is inspired by the Holy Spirit, that earthly wisdom is often foolishness, and that what she has to say will actually benefit those learned men is further supported by her appeal to the medieval ideal of humility discussed in section 2. It is the "least of these" who are open to God's teaching, and whose work "strengthens Holy Christianity."

We find another example of this sort of use of the humility topos in the work of Marguerite d'Oingt, a Carthusian nun whose works (although little known today) were widely read and well respected in both her own time and in following centuries. Toward the outset of her *Page of Meditations*, a late thirteenth-century set of meditations on the life of Christ, Marguerite offers what at first looks like a flurry of justifications and self-effacing anxiety:

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I began to think about and to contemplate the sweetness and goodness which is in Him, and the great good He had done me and all of humanity [via his Incarnation]. I was so full of these thoughts that I lost my appetite and my sleep. [...] I thought that the hearts of men and women are so flighty that they can hardly ever remain in one place, and because of that I fixed in writing the thoughts that God had ordered into my heart so that I would not lose them when I removed them from my heart, and so that I could think over them little by little whenever God would give me His grace. And for that reason I ask all those who read this text not to think badly [of me] because I had the presumption to write this, since you must believe that I have no sense or learning with which I would know how to take these things from my heart, nor could I write this down without any other model than the grace of God which is working within me.²³

If we look at this passage again, however, in light of the general use of humility formulae (notice, for instance, how Marguerite immediately makes it clear that the content of the work will be thoughts on the life of Christ), and humility as moral ideal, we can read it more as it would have originally been meant and understood. First Marguerite, who is proficient in several languages, obviously does not lack either “sense or learning”; in fact, she writes these words in Latin—the language of scholarship and the Church. Second, the Carthusian order, which took strict vows of silence and solitude, used the act of writing and transcribing as a spiritual discipline and had as one of their central spiritual metaphors the image of God inscribing words directly into their hearts.²⁴ Thus, Marguerite’s claim that God ordered these thoughts “into her heart” and that she is in turn transcribing those thoughts directly from her heart is extremely significant. Third, Marguerite attributes her ability to compose this text to nothing less than the model of God’s own grace moving within her, giving both the origin and the

²³ *The Writings of Margaret of Oingt, Medieval Prioress and Mystic (d. 1310)*, tr. R. Blumenfeld-Kosinski (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), 26.

²⁴ As Bennett Gilbert writes, “Transcription, filling the monk’s mind with truthful words, was the first step in a [Carthusian’s] spiritual reflection,” in “Early Carthusian Script and Silence,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 49 (2014), 367–97, at 372.

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means of her writing a divine source. Finally, note that although she initially frames the composition of this text in terms of an aid to her own future meditation, she assumes a wider readership in asking for kindness from “all those who read this text.” Taken as a whole, this statement actually positions what Marguerite is about to say as an important contribution to the teachings of her religious order.

Another medieval contemplative who was influential in her own time but remains little known today is Mechthild of Hackeborn, described by Rosalynn Voaden as “one of the best known and most widely read visionaries in late medieval and early modern Europe.”²⁵ The composition of Mechthild’s *Book of Special Grace* was a collective effort; although Mechthild apparently regularly shared her visions and revelations with her fellow nuns at Helfta, she is described as initially unaware and then horrified to discover that these experiences were being written down and collected by some of her sisters (including Gertrude the Great—an equally notable contemplative and author). When she goes to God with her worries, however, God explains to her that “Truth itself” is speaking through her:

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. (5.22, pp. 242–3)

After being assured that God was in favor of the book’s composition, Mechthild is reported as participating enthusiastically in its production. Again, we see here how a profession of humility (in the form of Mechthild’s stated alarm at learning her visions are being preserved for

²⁵ As Voaden goes on to write: “Hundreds of copies of [Mechthild’s] 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” (“Mechthild of Hackeborn,” in A. Minnis and R. Voaden (eds.), *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c. 1100–c. 1500* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 431–51, at 431).

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dissemination) is met by God's explicit endorsement of the text's project. As with the prologue to the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, the appeal to the Augustinian trope of God as the only true teacher gives what follows the stamp not just of divine approval but also of divine authority.²⁶

Let me close this section with a passage from the Short Text of Julian of Norwich's *Revelations* (written toward the end of the fourteenth century). Julian begins with a classic use of the humility formula, going on to address objections to a woman's writing on theological matters:

God forbid that you should say or take it so that I am a teacher, for I don't mean that nor have I never meant that. For I am a woman, lewd [uneducated], feeble, and frail. But I know well that what I say I have received from the showing of him who is sovereign teacher. Indeed, charity stirs me to tell you it. For I wish that God were known and my fellow Christians helped, as I wish to be myself, to the greater hatred of sin and loving of God. But because I am a woman, should I therefore believe that I should not tell you the goodness of God, since I saw in that same time [that is, during her visions] that it is his will that it be known? And that you shall well see in what follows, if it be well and truly understood. Then shall you soon forget me who is a wretch, and do so that I not interfere with your learning, and behold Jesus who is the teacher of all.²⁷

Here Julian combines the common tropes of humility formulae (disavowal of knowledge and worth) with the tropes more specific to

²⁶ 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). We find a similar emphasis on humility's connection with God's grace in Mechthild's scribe and sister nun, Gertrude the Great: "Now Gertrude was led by her very humility to consider herself so unworthy of God's gifts that she could not be induced to believe that they were given her for her own advantage. She saw herself as a channel through which, by some mysterious disposition of God, his grace flowed to his elect, since she herself was so unworthy and received all God's gifts, small or great (so she thought), in the most inadequate and unfruitful fashion, save only that she took the trouble to distribute them to others in speech or writing" (*The Herald of Divine Love*, ed. and tr. M. Winkworth (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993)).

²⁷ Short Text, section 6, my rendering into modern English from the text in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Watson and Jenkins, 75.

women (frailty and weakness) into one pithy sentence. She appeals to divine love and God's will (also the main subject matter of her *Showings*) to explain why she writes, and also to explicitly address her status as a woman. Her comment about being a wretch functions in this context primarily to draw attention to how all are wretches in comparison to God. Finally, the Augustinian-influenced anchorite reminds her readers that the only real teacher is God, from whom all authority comes.

4. Conclusion

Although even the most brilliant women in this period faced significant obstacles to being heard—particularly insofar as they were barred from holding prominent positions in ecclesiastical and university hierarchies—this does not mean that their self-descriptions as uneducated and ignorant should be taken at face value. As we saw in section 2, *anyone* in this period who claimed authority on their own merit would be dismissed out of hand; in this context, women's stressing their greater claim to humility via their "naturally" subordinated position functioned simultaneously to emphasize their claim to a closer connection to the divine.

Furthermore, the women who wrote the passages discussed in section 3 were familiar not only with the general form and function of medieval humility formulae but also with many of the actual texts in which they were found. Rather than being forbidden, the activities of reading and writing were widely portrayed as signs of holiness and religious devotion for women in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries.²⁸ In addition to the "sister-books" and convent chronicles generated by and shared between

²⁸ As Richard Kieckhefer notes, "We know that certain women saints were enthusiastic readers, and we know that devotional reading figured prominently in the urban religious culture of the era. . . . This is not to suggest that pious women read more than men did, or that the content of the books was less important for men than for women. Rather, it may be that the *activity* of reading was in closer accord with the central themes of women's piety than with those of men's" ("Holiness and the Culture of Devotion," in R. Blumenfeld-Kosinski and T. Szell (eds.), *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 302).

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communities of religious women (e.g., nuns, beguines, and tertiaries), the high demand for pocket Bibles, Books of Hours, and meditative literature for personal devotional use speaks to the assumption that the wealthy laywomen who commissioned these works both could and would read them; in stained glass windows, sculptures, altarpieces, and paintings from this period throughout Europe, women are frequently depicted holding and reading books.²⁹ The influence of contemplative works written by women throughout this period on ecclesiastical as well as lay communities demonstrates that women were seen as potentially valuable sources of insights into divine wisdom (that is, the only “true” source of knowledge and truth) throughout this period.

Indeed, the simple fact that so many of these women’s texts survive today means that they *were*, in fact, taken seriously as authoritative sources on moral and theological matters. Viewing medieval women’s use of humility formulae through the lens laid out in this paper allows us to appreciate the skill with which those women “flip” their inferior social status to position their works as important contributions to existing debates, and to appreciate that many medieval women were, in fact, both more aware of and engaged in the theological and philosophical debates of their day than contemporary scholars of medieval philosophy tend to realize. Women’s contributions to these debates were not ignored in their own time; it would be a shame if scholars of medieval philosophy continued to ignore them now.³⁰

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²⁹ For more on this topic, see Gertrud Jaron Lewis, *By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996), as well as any and all of volumes three through five of Bernard McGinn’s compendious *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991–2016).

³⁰ Thanks to Andrew Arlig and Christia Mercer for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of this paper, as well as to the audiences of the Arché Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory Seminar at the University of St. Andrews, a workshop for the New Narratives in Philosophy Center at Columbia University called *Seeking Authority: Women, Genre, and Philosophical Reflection in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, the Goliardic Society at Western Michigan University, and feedback from Juliana Oaxley on a much shorter and more informal version of this project, which was published as an APA blog post at <https://blog.apaonline.org/2021/05/19/lewd-feeble-and-frail-subverting-sexist-tropes-to-gain-authority>.

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