



Hollywood, Amy. *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995. x + 331 pp.

This book is a productive and provocative exploration of the relationship between three thirteenth- and fourteenth-century mystics, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart. Picking up where historian Herbert Grundmann left off [*Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter: Untersuchungen über die geschichtlichen Zusammenhänge zwischen Ketzerei, den Bettelorden und der religiösen Frauenbewegung im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert* (1935)], Hollywood takes his challenge of the traditional historical narrative in which Eckhart represents the intellectual and philosophical synthesis of what the women mystics came to know through intuition and experience, and both substantiates and complicates it (5). As such, her study not only adds to our understanding of medieval culture, but also brings an historical depth and complexity to current debates on the constellation of gender, authorship and the imagination.

In the first chapter, Hollywood introduces the main issues in the work of each mystic and the philosophical and theoretical concepts she will use in discussing the relationships between them. In Mechthild of Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light of the Divinity*, the primary concern, according to Hollywood, is the suffering experienced by the soul once the *unio mystica* is ended. Lamenting to God about this suffering, Mechthild receives the command to write down what she has experienced. In so doing, she is led back to the divine source, for in obeying the command, she suppresses her *eigenwille* (one's own will or willfulness) and this in turn leaves her soul open to God's return. Though Mechthild renounces willfulness, she later distinguishes it from good will or good intentions which God tells her can indeed function as good works. While Mechthild's theology redeems the body's role in suffering by understanding it within the frame of the divine incarnation in Christ, Marguerite Porete wishes to transcend human suffering altogether. For her, the complete annihilation of the will results not only in union with God, but also in the transcendence of her createdness. Indeed, Marguerite's free soul escapes the body by becoming divine. Meister Eckhart's thought develops aspects of both women's writings. Like Marguerite, Eckhart advocates complete annihilation of the will and detachment from self, and like Mechthild, he is concerned with the notion of performing good works in the world. By uniting contemplation and action, Eckhart bypasses the role of experience and instead calls for a change in consciousness, "a new way of viewing the relationship between the self and God in which the self is emptied

so that it might become the place in which God works" (10). Good works, then, or action, paradoxically arise out of a complete inaction, the lack of intention inherent in the soul emptying itself of its createdness or creatureliness. It is hard not to see in this comparison the reinstatement of the master narrative in which Eckhart is the "winner" of the historian's contest between the three bodies of work. However, Hollywood is fully aware of this danger, and thus constantly directs our attention away from the temptation to draw these conclusions, stressing instead the more interesting complexities of the relationships as they are located in their historical contexts. For example, Hollywood suggests that in situating himself in relation to his two predecessors as he did, Eckhart perhaps came up with a theology that was accessible to both women and men. Yet, it is difficult to see him as a winner in this when we remember that he was tried and condemned for heresy in 1329 (though not condemned to die for his writings), just 19 years after Marguerite was condemned and burned at the stake. It is precisely this kind of analysis that reminds us as readers and scholars of the kinds of assumptions and models we bring to medieval texts, assumptions and models which, as Hollywood demonstrates, these texts teach us to resist.

Chapter Two, by investigating the relationship between male-authored hagiographies and female-authored mystical autobiographies or treatises, offers the scholarly community a huge service in clarifying the distinction that needs to be made between constructions of the feminine, the female body and female experience on the one hand and women writers' engagement with these constructions in language on the other. To show how male hagiographers portray women as body in order to redeem both women (as the men see and construct them) as well as men around them, Hollywood compares the Latin *Life of Beatrice of Nazareth* (1200-1268) with the vernacular treatise, *On the Seven Manners of Loving*, written by Beatrice herself. Beatrice describes her mystical experiences happening to her soul and to various internal bodily systems (her heart, her bone marrow, her lungs), but for the writer of the *Life*, it is the external markers of these experiences which count as evidence of sanctity. So, for example, when Beatrice writes that to her soul, her veins feel like they are bursting, for the writer of the *Life*, "the blood diffused through her bodily members boiled over through her open veins" (33, quoting *Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, trans. by R. Deganck (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991) 308-311). When Beatrice describes the fever of love, the hagiographer claims her body is made perceptibly hot by her love. As Hollywood eloquently concludes:

Beatrice's hagiographer, then, transposes her accounts of internal experience into descriptions of the body in its externality. The visionary woman becomes a vision, a divinely marked body, a spectacle for the viewing pleasure of contemporaries (35).

This attention to and analysis of the differences between male-authored hagiographies and female-authored mystical treatises also leads Hollywood to point out how the latter texts question dualisms used in forming categories of analysis in much modern criticism: not only are the female-authored texts she deals with not focused on the body, as hagiographies tend to be, but they are not antisomatic either. This is due to the apophatic strategies of the writers concerned. While they perhaps use bodily images and metaphors to describe their visions, they also subvert these images by negating them. As such they resist the categories of our thinking in approaching the texts.

The thesis presented in Chapter One is then fleshed out with separate close analyses of the work of each mystic. Chapter Three reads Mechthild's book like Augustine's *Confessions*, as a lifelong theological reflection on the experiences of a Christian soul. After a concise analysis of the structural principles at work in Mechthild's book, Hollywood offers an exposition on the central role of love in the text, on the nature of union for Mechthild, on the role of the body versus the will in her thought, and on the way the work of the soul mediates between differing conceptions of human sinfulness and suffering. Chapter Four offers a reading of Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls* in terms of the allegorical writing and reading practices which inform it. Whereas the general tendency is to posit the author's voice in that of the soul, Hollywood points out that Porete expressly distances herself from the book generally, thereby enabling herself to pervade all the voices in the text and to shift among them. The chapter then demonstrates how "[t]he many ambiguities that still remain are a direct result of the disjunction between Porete's view of the final state of the simple soul and the needs and demands of a changing and ever-fluctuating world" (96). Chapters Five and Six focus on Eckhart's mystical theology, as laid out in his Latin and German works respectively. Hollywood carefully explains how Eckhart's concepts of ontology and of *unio mystica*, previously held to have privileged the intellectual (contemplation) over action (good works), serve as a unification of contemplation and action, taking us a step closer to her main thesis that Eckhart is a "reconciliation" of certain of the main theological issues emerging from Mechthild and Porete's work. By elaborating and modifying what he means by the soul's embrace of a complete will-lessness, he takes up strains of Porete's theology; by explaining how through this embrace, the soul becomes the place where the Son is continually reborn, transcending the dualisms of soul and body, contemplation and action, Eckhart speaks to concerns found in Mechthild's theology.

In the final chapter, Hollywood discusses the three writers in terms of their ideas on the transformation of suffering. Placing the mystics in the context of the "multiple views and valuations of the human body in the later Middle Ages," she offers further explanation as to why their texts moved away from the stress

in late medieval culture on the ties between women, embodiment and the visionary imagination (180). This discussion extends her critique of attempts to distinguish between male- and female-authored texts by highlighting the greater somatic, emotional and spontaneous nature of the latter. In the end, the visionary mode itself becomes crucial for this critique. While throughout Mechthild's writing a variety of contrasting rhetorical sources and styles can be found, her authority comes down to the prophetic visions in which God chooses her as the vessel for his teachings. Porete takes an alternative route, however: her choice of allegory to convey her teachings distances herself from explicit authorship of her book, placing that authorship in the voice of divine Love and rejecting the other bodily marks of divine authorization. And Eckhart, finally, describes a process in which the visionary experience is no longer needed, for the divine is present in the transfigured soul. Rather than see Porete and Eckhart as exceptions to a rule in which female-authored writings based on some kind of extraordinary visionary experience tell us about the nature of women, Hollywood suggests that all these texts reveal something about the "power structures in which [the women] found themselves and in which they attempted to find a voice" (203). Both Porete and Eckhart fail to demonstrate to the ecclesiastical authorities the divine authorization through visions or bodily evidence of sanctity that the latter had come to expect. Eckhart, however, had the authority of his position to protect his own body while his writings were condemned. Porete, on the other hand, had no such institutional authority to fall back on and as such, not only was her work condemned, but she herself was executed. This, then, is how the factor of gender becomes significant: the increasingly somatic quality of women's religious practices in the aftermath of Porete's death and Eckhart's condemnation attest not to a particular feminine nature or aesthetic, but rather to a complex political and social reality in which the only alternative for women was silence.

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Holman, Sheri. *A Stolen Tongue*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997. ISBN 0-87113-669-4 (hardcover).

True to its kind, this historical novel is a hybrid creature. Part mystery, part historiography, *A Stolen Tongue* is an imaginative reconstruction of a pilgrimage undertaken in 1483 by a German monk, Friar Felix Fabri of Ulm. The historical Felix left behind him the *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae Arabiae et Egypti*