As is the case with the lives of many medieval writers, there are more questions than answers regarding the life of Mechthild of Magdeburg and her status as author. The circumstances regarding the early life of this thirteenth-century German mystic—that she had begun experiencing visions since age twelve and that she had been a beguine prior to entering a Cistercian convent at Helfta—can only be conjectured from her own writing, namely Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit (The Flowing Light of the Godhead), the only record of her experiences and visions and the first set of mystical writings composed in the German vernacular. Having entered the convent at Helfta in order to avoid religious persecution, Mechthild began to write down her visions in Middle Low German, the dialect spoken in that region. However, her book survives only in Middle High German and Latin translations. In part as a result of the somewhat sketchy historical transmission of her text, and in part because Mechthild seems to be effaced throughout the latter part of her book, anxieties arise during her own lifetime and well after regarding Mechthild’s credibility and agency as author of her text, anxieties that are also tied to notions of gender. These issues are central to Poor’s choice of The Flowing Light of the Godhead as a site in which to consider the relationship between gender and medieval textual authority. Poor states that within this study she “seeks to elucidate not only how Mechthild as a female author shaped her book but also how the transmission of the text does or does not constitute Mechthild the author as a function or an effect of the medieval book or the textual tradition it constructs” (10).

In the wake of 1970s feminism, scholars grew interested in “recovering” texts written by women. As a result of feminist challenges to literary canons, the works of rediscovered transmission of her text, and in part because Mechthild seems to be effaced throughout the latter part of her book, anxieties arise during her own lifetime and well after regarding Mechthild’s credibility and agency as author of her text, anxieties that are also tied to notions of gender. These issues are central to Poor’s choice of The Flowing Light of the Godhead as a site in which to consider the relationship between gender and medieval textual authority. Poor states that within this study she “seeks to elucidate not only how Mechthild as a female author shaped her book but also how the transmission of the text does or does not constitute Mechthild the author as a function or an effect of the medieval book or the textual tradition it constructs” (10).

In the wake of 1970s feminism, scholars grew interested in “recovering” texts written by women. As a result of feminist challenges to literary canons, the works of rediscovered
medieval women authors—in particular mystical writings—entered the canons of medieval and national literatures. While their subsequent inclusion in the numerous studies and anthologies produced in the last few decades have made the writings of these medieval women accessible to a wider readership, the organization of many of these anthologies around the category of “woman” raises for Poor the question of how to avoid further marginalizing these authors, since: “an anthology of writers who have little else in common except their gender tends to construct a tradition that invites its readers to reduce the complexities of those writings to unified female experience, which is then devalued” (xiii).

Poor seeks to circumvent the pitfalls of essentialist categories such as “women’s mysticism” or “medieval women writers” by devoting this project to the study of a sole author and then tracing “the changing degrees of authority accorded to Mechthild’s book and her name” across the German canons of the past (xv). This monograph seeks to not only further our understanding of Mechthild’s status as (a woman) author and producer of a religious work, but also how the history of her book can more generally exemplify “how vital the study of the medieval period can be for contemporary literary, theoretical, and historical concerns” (xv).

Poor begins her study by introducing us to the problem of Mechthild’s role as author of The Flowing Light, a problem not just for her contemporary readers, translators, and editors, but also a problem for literary scholars, feminists, and other readers studying her text now. Within the first few lines of her book, Mechthild herself declaims God as the true author; she is merely the messenger. The further one reads into the book, the less visible is Mechthild’s presence as author. According to Poor, this is a mark of Mechthild’s success as a producer of this new kind of theological writing in the vernacular, one that emphasizes the relationship with God yet minimizes the role as transmitter of God’s words. In Chapter One, Poor argues that Mechthild’s use the vernacular was in fact a deliberate choice
and thus an act of her authorial agency, rather than just the language used as a result of not being versed in Latin. In fact, Poor asserts that Mechthild’s use of the vernacular strategically furthers the mission of the mendicant orders with which Mechthild associated to disseminate religious information in a way that can be understood by all, not just the elite. Furthermore, Mechthild’s poetics are enhanced by her use of the vernacular, and according to Poor, serve to underscore Mechthild’s attitude of dissent towards the secular clergy, for example by teaming a critique with a novel rhyme scheme. One of Mechthild’s most interesting and poetic passages—the Mass conducted by John the Baptist for the poor girl—is the central site for Poor’s analysis of the means by which Mechthild exerts her authority as a mystic and as a female author whilst grappling with cultural implications of female corporeality.

While the first part of her monograph focuses on Mechthild’s authorship and authority, the latter part shifts to a consideration of the historical transmission of The Flowing Light and Mechthild’s eventual fall into obscurity. In Chapter Three, Poor examines the five primary manuscripts of Mechthild’s work. According to Poor, the manuscript evidence demonstrates that “the ‘loss’ of Mechthild’s book was the consequence of [. . .] efforts to preserve her writings either in spite of or disregarding the woman who wrote them and the book from which they came” (83). As a result of the tradition that privileges the role of God as author over that of the human, Mechthild’s work continued to known, even if her name was not. None of the eleven fifteenth-century manuscripts that Poor discusses in Chapter Four (Poor herself discovered several of these) name Mechthild as an author, though they do each anthologize a portion of her book. In this chapter Poor concerns herself with the broader topic of female readers as producers and consumers of anthologies containing Mechthild’s work and the implications thereof. Just as production becomes as important as
content in the analysis of films, Poor demonstrates how production may be as vital to the understanding of texts as is content. The final chapter of this monograph discusses how the Dominican priest Carl Greith discovers the Middle High German translation of Mechthild’s book in the mid-nineteenth century and probably more interested in her nationality and religious affiliation than in her gender, he uses it in the interest of proving a Dominican tradition in the history of German literature. Poor ends her study of Mechthild’s book by coming full circle to discuss the emergence of interest during the late twentieth-century in the work of women mystics. She concludes that it is not enough for feminists to insist that the canons include women authors: we must also consider why they have or ought to be included.

Poor’s astute examination of Mechthild’s authorship and the historical transmission of her text contributes significantly not only to the fields of feminist and medieval scholarship, but also demonstrates how a medieval text can more broadly engage in the construction of religious, philosophical, and literary traditions across time.

Alissandra Paschkowiak
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

*Editor’s Note: Congratulations to Sally Poor for winning the 2005 SMFS Book Prize for this work!*

religious, philosophical, and literary traditions across time.

*Editor’s Note: Congratulations to Sally Poor for winning the 2005 SMFS Book Prize for this work!*