



Eroticism and Pain in Mechthild of Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light*

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Abstract

This article presents an introduction to the rhetoric of eroticism and pain in the theology of medieval mystic, Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1208-c. 1282/94), author of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. A survey of select texts from *TFL* is presented, with a focused analysis of Book IV, Chapter 12, where pain is cast in the role of a courtly intermediary between Christ and the soul. It is argued that a deeper consideration of this chapter provides significant insight into Mechthild's overall conception of pain in relation to the divine. Moreover, she writes with a coherent mystical theology of pain situated firmly within the Christian liturgy and narrative tradition.

Keywords

Mechthild, Pain, Suffering, Erotic, Mysticism

Mechthild of Magdeburg: Medieval Mystic of Eroticism and Pain

An important figure in medieval women's mysticism, Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1208-c. 1282/94) has been a subject of research among scholars of women's religious history and spirituality for some time. Information about Mechthild's life is scant, coming only from the autobiographical passages of her book, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, its various introductions in German and Latin translations, and brief references to her in the writings of others.¹ According to her testimony, Mechthild was born in 1208 and began to receive divine "greetings" and visions from the age of twelve (FL IV.2). Around 1230, she left home and took up residence in a house of beguines in Magdeburg.² Mechthild came into close contact with

¹ Frank Tobin, *Mechthild von Magdeburg: A Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 1.

² *Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (The Classics of Western Spirituality; New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 139. Beguines were

a neighboring Dominican order, with which the beguines shared a similar mode of life. It was her Dominican confessor, Heinrich of Halle, who encouraged her to heed God's command and compose her book.³

Mechthild began writing *The Flowing Light* around 1250, penning it in Middle Low German, the vernacular dialect of northern Germany. Scholarly consensus is that the first five books were finished around 1260, with a sixth book added over the next decade.⁴ Heinrich provided some assistance with the editing process, but most contemporary scholars conclude that he was a careful editor who worked with deep respect for Mechthild and her text, changing very little.⁵ Around 1272, after an aging Mechthild joined a community of Cistercian nuns at Helfta, she composed a seventh book. The last chapters of *The Flowing Light* were dictated due to Mechthild's failing eyesight and she died around 1282.

In recent decades, scholars have been particularly interested in Mechthild's employment of erotic language and imagery to describe her relationship to the divine, a characteristic that she shares with other medieval women mystics.⁶ Most have come to conclude that the overtly sexual language in medieval women's mysticism is more than simple allegory, but an intrinsic aspect of their thought. In this way, Mechthild's eroticism is best understood as an inherently positive and straightforward category, an intentional union of the spiritual and sexual to express, in the words of Caroline Bynum, the way in which "a male Christ [is] handled and loved."⁷ Moreover, it is acknowledged the consistent use of erotic language is evidence of Mechthild's ambivalent relationship to the body, in general. Even as physicality is seen as a spiritual hindrance throughout *The Flowing Light*, Mechthild's erotic rhetoric reveals that she also understands

women who adopted lives of celibacy, voluntary poverty, and religious devotion without joining an approved religious order. This means that they had no common order of life and did not fall under direct ecclesiastical authority. Frequently, this made the beguines subjects of suspicion, with some even being accused of heresy, which is reflected by Mechthild's references to her detractors and enemies in her text. During Mechthild's lifetime, beguines typically shared a common house and supported themselves through donations and cottage industries, such as weaving and spinning (Tobin, *Mechthild von Magdeburg*, 2).

³ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism—1200–1350* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 223.

⁴ McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 223; Tobin, *Mechthild von Magdeburg*, 3–4.

⁵ Tobin, *Mechthild von Magdeburg*, 3–4.

⁶ See, for example, Elizabeth Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Caroline Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Rochester, NY: Boydell, 1992); and Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁷ Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 248.

the realm of the sensual to be an appropriate place from which to articulate her relationship to God.⁸

In addition to the erotic, Mechthild and other medieval women mystics employ the language of suffering and pain to describe both their practical piety and mystical experience. Of course, an emphasis on pain and suffering is not unique to women or mystics, for it is a defining characteristic of Western Christian spirituality.⁹ Still, for reasons that are not altogether clear, many women religious in the medieval period emphasized the imitation of Christ's bodily suffering as the prime focus of their holy work.¹⁰ In this way, their pain became redemptive and an essential means of union with the divine. Although Mechthild's use of such rhetoric is not nearly as prolific as other women mystics of her day, she does utilize the language of pain, alongside that of eroticism, to speak of her intimate relationship to God.

Thus far, scholars have approached Mechthild's combined rhetoric of eroticism and pain in a number of ways. Most advance the issue within a larger discussion of Mechthild's view of the body. In these studies, the focus has been upon the subversion of medieval discourses on the female body as a means of authorial and prophetic empowerment.¹¹ Although by no means ignored, pain is largely incidental to the larger discussion in these works, treated as a feature of the "physical and spiritual disjointedness," of human existence,¹² or the manifestation of the female mystic's commitment to bodily *imitatio Christi*.¹³ Furthermore, these studies tend to include Mechthild within a survey of women medieval mystics generally, with

⁸ David O. Neville, "The Bodies of the Bride: The Language of Incarnation, Transcendence, and Time in the Poetic Theology of Mechthild of Magdeburg," *Mystics Quarterly* Vol. 34, Nos. 1–2 (Jan–Apr 2008): 1–34. See also, Paul Martin, "The Body in the Realm of Desire: Gendered Images on the Horizon of the Divine," *Mystics Quarterly* Vol. 30, Nos. 3–4 (Sept–Dec 2004): 96–121.

⁹ Indeed, one scholar sums it up well: "Perhaps no other major world religion endows pain with greater spiritual significance than Christianity" (Maureen Flynn, "The Spiritual Uses of Pain in Spanish Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 2 [Summer, 1996]: 257). See also the important study by Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁰ Caroline Bynum has done the most exhaustive work on this topic. See *Fragmentation and Redemption and Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

¹¹ See, for example, Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Sara S. Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*.

¹² Neville, "The Bodies of the Bride," 14. See also Neville's unpublished dissertation, "The Chalice of the Flesh: The Soteriology of the Body in Mechthild von Magdeburg's 'Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit'," (Washington University, 2002).

¹³ Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

little regard to possible differences among them, particularly between Mechthild's characterization of pain and that of her contemporaries.¹⁴

Other scholars have offered more provocative perspectives on Mechthild's erotic and painful rhetoric. Some have chosen not to read medieval women mystics on their own terms, opting for a psychoanalytic approach that finds within their texts either sublimated masochism before the dominant male (i.e., Christ) or a form of female narcissism.¹⁵ One recent feminist scholar has taken a more nuanced approach, choosing not to psychoanalyze Mechthild's text, but still seeking to problematize the wedding of pain and eroticism in her spirituality. In this way, she uses Mechthild as a means to argue that the "eroticized violence" of medieval women mystics advanced and sustained the patriarchal ideology that women take pleasure in physical and spiritual violence done to them in the name of love.¹⁶ Still, not only do these studies tend not to read the women on their own terms, but also they assume, perhaps prematurely, a significant degree of conceptual continuity among multiple mystics, across multiple centuries.

While affirming the merit of these recent studies, I contend that a need remains for a comprehensive consideration of the rhetoric of eroticism and pain within *The Flowing Light*, on its own terms. It is quite possible, even probable, that by subsuming the study of Mechthild's mystical spirituality within a larger project devoted to medieval women mystics in general, we lose sight of those features that make Mechthild's perspective unique. What exactly does Mechthild do with the language of eroticism and pain in the *The Flowing Light*? Does she simply borrow from the medieval asceticism of her contemporary women mystics, or does Mechthild have a coherent mystical theology of pain all her own?

To address these questions fully is impossible at this point, but I intend to take one step in that direction in what follows. I will begin by presenting a survey of select texts from *The Flowing Light* that use a combination of erotic and painful language to speak of the soul's union with the divine. This cannot be comprehensive, of course, but it will provide a suitable introduction to the rhetoric of eroticism and pain in the volume. Then, I will present a focused analysis of Book IV, Chapter 12, a conceptually dense passage, where

¹⁴ A possible exception to this is David Neville's unpublished dissertation, "The Chalice of the Flesh," but as of this paper's completion, I have not had access to this work.

¹⁵ Perhaps most notable for this viewpoint is Luce Irigaray, "La Mystérique," in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985): 191–202.

¹⁶ Julie B. Miller, "Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women's Mystical Literature: A Call for Feminist Critique," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 1999): 25–49. Whether a link exists between medieval women's mysticism and misogynist ideology is an important question, but I think it is necessary to seriously examine the rhetoric of pain and eroticism in medieval texts prior to making such a case.

pain is characterized as a courtly intermediary between Christ and the soul. My contention is that a deeper consideration of this chapter, its theological perspective, and its context in the Christian narrative provides significant insight into Mechthild's overall conception of pain in relation to the divine. I hope to show that closer scrutiny of *The Flowing Light* reveals that Mechthild does indeed have a coherent mystical theology of pain, one to be distinguished from her fellow medieval women mystics and situated firmly within the Christian narrative and liturgy.

Mechthild's Strange Bedfellows: Pain and Eroticism in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*

As stated above, despite the dominant erotic themes, the rhetoric of suffering and pain is prevalent throughout *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. The book, unique in its great variety of literary forms, includes discussions of pain and suffering within Mechthild's apocalyptic visions, poetry, dialogue, autobiographical remarks, spiritual instruction, and more. Rather than try to deal with all the variety of forms in which the rhetoric of pain appears, in what follows I will provide a survey of four key poetic texts. In each of these texts, Mechthild combines the language of eroticism with that of pain and violence in reference to the soul's union with God. Of course, this brief review is not intended to be comprehensive, but merely to provide a rhetorical and conceptual overview and to bring to light some of the difficulties inherent in Mechthild's mystical language.

In Book I, Chapter 22, Mechthild describes the origin of the soul in the Trinity and the experience of the soul as the Bride of Jesus Christ. She depicts the human soul as created out of the abundance of God's love and, for this reason, "no creature is able to give comfort" or to "open it up except love alone." In this way, the soul, the Bride, can only be made complete through union with Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom. Mechthild describes this union through a poetic listing of a number of mystical paradoxes, in the midst of which, the imagery of pain comes to the fore:

The longer she is dead, the more blissfully she lives.
 The more blissfully she lives, the more she experiences. . .
 The deeper she dwells, the more she expands. . .
The deeper her wounds become, the more violently she struggles.
 The more loving God is to her, the higher she soars (FL I.22).

The language of romance and eroticism becomes more explicit and intense following this expression of pain:

The more his desire grows, the more extravagant their wedding celebration becomes.

The narrower the bed of love becomes, the more intense are the embraces.

The sweeter the kisses on the mouth become, the more lovingly they gaze at each other. . .

The more ardent she remains, the sooner she bursts into flames.

The more she burns, the more beautifully she glows.

The more God's praise is spread abroad, the greater her desire becomes (FL I.22).

What is particularly striking about this poetic description of the soul's union with God is that the "deeper" the soul dwells in the Godhead, the "deeper her wounds become." This entails a direct connection between union with God and wounding. And, as the soul's wounds become deeper, the "more violently she struggles"—presumably against God, her intimate partner. Even so, the soul eventually surrenders to the "desire" of the Bridegroom and is swept up in the intensity of their "wedding celebration." Indeed, by the time their passionate consummation is complete, "she bursts into flames."

A critical reading of this passage recognizes within it features that, on the surface, make up a troubling romantic plot. What do we do with the fact that Mechthild's description of the soul's union with the Bridegroom involves wounding and apparent coercion?¹⁷ One important feature of Mechthild's poetic account is that the soul is a mutual participant in the pleasure of the encounter. In the end, she bursts into flames, not out of pain, but out of passion for the Bridegroom. It is also important to recognize that, as she portrays it, the soul in Mechthild's drama is not a victim of God's assault. The soul is an active subject participating in a welcomed romantic rendezvous. Although wounding is experienced, according to Mechthild, the union of the soul with God is what brings the soul completion—ultimate comfort and joy. While modern sensibilities understand pain and pleasure to be mutually exclusive bodily experiences, clearly Mechthild's poetry represents a vastly different point of view, with which would-be interpreters must reckon.¹⁸

In Book II, Chapter 23, Mechthild reproaches the "foolish Soul" for neglecting her Bridegroom through excessive concern with bodily matters. When the foolish souls asks to know where the dwelling of the Lord is, Mechthild answers:

¹⁷ I use the term "coercion" advisedly due to the impression given by Mechthild's poetry that even as the soul struggles violently, she is wooed into submission by God's advances.

¹⁸ Bynum explains it this way: "We cannot understand medieval religiosity until we realize how different such . . . embracing of body as pain-pleasure is from most modern notions of body, in which pleasure and pain are seen as opposites and the cultivation of pain is rejected as pathological. In understanding this difference it is helpful to remember how little medieval people could do to mitigate discomfort of any kind. Thus medieval metaphors and symbols express the experiencing of body more than controlling it" (*Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 245).

He lives in the peace of holy affection and whispers to his beloved in the narrow confines of the soul. He also embraces her in the noble comfort of his love. . . He kisses her passionately with his divine mouth. You are happy, more than happy in this most glorious hour. He caresses her, as well as he can, on the bed of love. *Then she rises to the heights of bliss and to the most exquisite pain when she becomes truly intimate with him. Ah, dear Soul, let yourself be loved and don't fiercely fend it off* (FL II.23).

Here, in a more straightforward, but no less erotic, description of the Lord's intimacy with the human soul, similar elements present themselves as in the previous passage: embrace, kisses, a bed of love, and pain. Moreover, even though a violent struggle against God's loving advance is not explicitly described, Mechthild's admonition implies that the soul has a tendency to "fiercely fend it off." Again we find a narrative of sacred romance, in which the soul struggles against but eventual submits to divine persuasion. What is distinctive about this passage, however, is that the "foolish Soul" asks Mechthild for clarification: "Who are those who defend themselves fiercely?" And, she replies:

Those who pester others and themselves with their own spitefulness. Now I shall tell you who he is. He is the loftiest of all pinnacles, and this same loftiest of all pinnacles bent down into the deepest of all valleys, and this deepest of all valleys ascended onto the highest of all pinnacles. O dull Soul, look all around you and open your blind eyes (FL II.23).

This response helps to shed some light on the theme of struggle from the first text we considered. It seems that in Mechthild's imagination, the soul in violent struggle against God corresponds to those whose "spitefulness" afflicts others and themselves. Furthermore, those who possess this character miss the grandeur of the Bridegroom entirely, blinded as they are by their sin. In this way, the rhetoric of the soul's struggle with God refers to a resistance to the soul's own tendency to dullness and blindness. It seems that Mechthild does not envision a soul singularly focused on fending off the romantic advances of the Godhead, but a soul divided in its loyalty, at once desirous of divine union and working against these desires at the same time.

Even so, we should note that a fuller explanation of the soul's struggle against God does not resolve why, in the first place, God's erotic advances are experienced as deep "wounding" and "exquisite pain." In both passages, pain is understood as an inherent part of encountering the Godhead. As stated above, this conception of divine union is counterintuitive for contemporary interpreters, for whom loving fulfillment and deep pain are mutually exclusive experiences. Even while acknowledging and respecting the hermeneutical gap that

separates us from Mechthild's medieval context, it still seems reasonable to wonder why union with the Godhead, the only One who is able to comfort and complete the soul, produces wounding and pain. Hopefully, we can approach an explanation of this difficulty as we delve deeper into *The Flowing Light*.

The next passage to consider, found in Book II, Chapter 25, is an extended romantic poem depicting an intensely erotic conversation between the soul and God. The heart of their exchange is the conflict between the soul's unending desire for God and God's apparent inconstancy to the soul. Throughout the passage, the soul desires complete satisfaction and constant union, while God assures her of the need for his periodic departure. The soul expresses the "inhuman anguish" she feels in "great longing" and "burning love" for God. God replies with the words of a lover, affirming that he hears her "secret sighs" and "heart's anguish," and that he yearns for her as well.

In the midst of this erotic exchange, God acknowledges the reality of pain in their intimate union:

No matter how softly I caress you,
I inflict immense pain on your poor body.
 If I were to surrender myself to you continuously, as you desire,
 I would lose my delightful dwelling place on earth within you,
 For a thousand bodies cannot fully satisfy the longings of a soul in
 love (FL II.25).

Here, even more than the previous passages, it is clearly stated that God inflicts "immense pain" upon the body of his beloved. Furthermore, if we understand God's "delightful dwelling place on earth" to be the body of the soul in love, then it seems that God acknowledges that if he gave himself totally to his lover, she would be consumed. In this way, divine intimacy entails severe pain and even the possibility of annihilation.¹⁹ For her part, the soul responds in the following way:

O Lord, you pamper to excess my dank prison,
 In which I drink the water of the world and eat in great misery
 The ash cake of my frailty,
And am wounded to the death
By the beam of your fiery love.
 Now you leave me, Lord, lying in my misery,
My wounds untended, in great torment (FL II.25).

¹⁹ We should note, however, that Mechthild gives very little attention to the soul's annihilation in the *The Flowing Light* and in this passage it remains simply an alluded-to possibility. Compared to the theme's prevalence in the writings of her contemporaries, it is almost nonexistent. The beguine mystic most known for this emphasis is Marguerite Porete, whose book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, was condemned as a heretical document prior to her execution by burning in 1310. For more information, see McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 244–265.

In her reply, we see the soul acknowledging that her experience of intimacy with God is deeply painful. She depicts her body as a dank prison, where she is forced to experience worldly frailty, and God as a lover who indulges her body nonetheless. Still, in the midst of this pampering, the soul is “wounded to the death” by the “beam” of God’s “fiery love.” Moreover, when God takes leave of the soul again, she is left alone in misery with fresh wounds, “in great torment.” Here again, along with the language of romance and desire, union with God leads to wounding and pain. And, an explanation as to why this is the case remains elusive.

The final passage we will consider is found in Book III, Chapter 10. This extended poem takes the rhetoric of romance and pain to another level, depicting the erotic union of the “loving soul” with God through the language of Christ’s Passion. More than any other in *The Flowing Light*, this text combines overtly violent language with the language of loving divine union. At first, Mechthild speaks of the soul’s romantic infatuation with God, using verbs from the narrative of Christ’s arrest:

She is captured in the first experience
When God kisses her in sweet union.
She is assailed with many a holy thought
That she not waiver when she mortifies the flesh.
She is bound by the power of the Holy Spirit,
And her bliss is indeed manifold (FL III.10).

As Christ was captured, assailed, and bound, so also is the soul in love with God. Notice the way in which Mechthild weds romantic language to the language of assault, even as it produces “bliss” in the soul. She goes on to describe the soul experiencing most of the other elements in the Passion of Christ, as well, including being “slapped” and “beaten,” being “stripped of all things,” “ridiculed” and “imprisoned.” And, all of these experiences of suffering and pain have some correlation to an experience of God’s favor and love. Then, in what appears to be the climax of the poem, the loving soul is crucified:

She carries her cross on a sweet path
When she truly surrenders herself to God in all sufferings. . .
With the hammer of the chase of love she is nailed so fast to the cross
That all creatures are not able to call her back again. . .
Her body is killed in living love
When her spirit is raised aloft above all earthly senses (FL III.10).

The soul goes on to offer her spirit to God in death, descend into hell, be raised from the dead, offer consolation to her disciples, and ascend into heaven. In all these ways, the loving union of the soul with God is depicted in the language of Christ’s own experience in the New Testament Passion narratives. Mechthild

concludes this extensive poem with a simple explanation: "This passion is suffered by every soul that in holy moderation of all her activity is truly permeated by genuine love of God." This indicates that a soul's intimacy with God is vitally connected to suffering and pain, so much so that her experience becomes analogous to the Passion of Christ himself. Once again, we see that in Mechthild's poetic mysticism, the painful and the erotic make for strange, yet inseparable, bedfellows.

Lady Pain, Messenger of the Soul: Theological Insights from Book IV, Chapter 12

Book IV, Chapter 12 of the *The Flowing Light* is notoriously dense, containing a combination of dialogue, poetry, and narrative description. In what follows, I will provide an overview of the entire chapter, highlighting the links Mechthild makes between divine intimacy, physical pain, and estrangement. I will show that a fuller understanding of this passage provides significant theological insight into her overall understanding of pain in relation to divine union.

In the beginning dialogue, Mechthild draws on the courtly tradition of the "dawn song" to describe the sadness of the soul, the bride of the Trinity, at the departure of her Beloved after a night spent in his embrace.²⁰ She refuses to be comforted by the created world or any creature. Then, in poetic form, the bride proclaims the "nobility" of her status in God, that is, "her pre-creational status in God."²¹ Because she has been made to love God alone, only being drawn into the Trinity can bring her satisfaction. And, in her description of God's usual "consolation," he is a lover who "cannot get enough" of "caressing souls."

Then, the reader is told that eight years pass before the narrative resumes again. Mechthild says that at this time, God desired to console her "way beyond what was due to [her] soul's nobility"—that is, beyond what she deserves. Rather than be elevated, therefore, the soul asks God to allow her to remain in the "lowest part" for his sake. What follows is a description of the soul's "sinking" into the depths of estrangement from God, first into purgatory and hell, then into complete darkness and lack of knowledge, completely void of divine intimacy. Curiously, the soul welcomes this estrangement and she beseeches God to allow her to "sink further" for his honor.

In this midst of this trial, the soul struggles with trust and faithfulness and she converses alternately with "Lady Trust" and "Lady

²⁰ For more on "dawn songs," in medieval love poetry, see A. T. Hatto, *Eos: An Enquiry into the Theme of Lovers' Meetings and Partings at Dawn* (London: Mouton, 1965).

²¹ McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 240.

Constancy” in pursuit of both. The Trinity speaks encouragement to the soul, as well, with each person bidding her to recall his prior works:

Then the Father of heaven said to the soul: “Remember what you experienced and what you saw while there was nothing between me and you.”

And the Son said: “Remember what your body suffered from my pain.”

This is what the Holy Spirit said: “Remember what you wrote” (FL IV.12).

It is important for our discussion to note that in this dialogue the pain experienced by the soul in the Son’s Passion is to be viewed as proof of God’s favor and presence. Indeed, the memory of suffering and pain, along with the intimacy of the Father and inspiration of the Spirit, provides such assurance to the soul that she responds with “the constancy of true faith,” saying: “As I have believed, loved, enjoyed, and known, so shall I go forth from here unshaken.”

After this declaration of faith, “constant estrangement” descends, a “chambermaid” now fully welcomed by the soul, bringing her joy, marvels, and delight. The soul proclaims that the experience of complete estrangement from God is now more welcomed than God himself, for she is certain, in paradoxical fashion, that even in “great estrangement” he will console her.

At this point, the narrative takes a strange turn, so that that pain and suffering become the central focus for the rest of the chapter. First, the Lord makes a request of the soul: “Grant me this: that I might cool the heat of my Godhead, the longing of my humanity, and the pleasure of my Holy Spirit in you.” The soul assents, but only on the condition that it is “good for you and not for me”—that is, the soul that has embraced estrangement no longer desires pleasure from encounter with the divine. Then, comes the following description as the soul is introduced to her final courtly companion—“Lady Pain”:

After this the bride entered such a great darkness that her body sweated and writhed in painful cramping. The pain was asked by someone to be a messenger to God for her. She said: “Lady Pain, this I bid you: that you release me now, for you are now the most important thing about me” (FL IV.12).

Lady Pain obliges the soul and ascends to the door of the kingdom of heaven to speak with God. The Lord greets her as a dearly loved friend, “the garment” he wore next to his skin while on earth; but he does not allow her to enter the kingdom. Instead, Lady Pain is permitted to be the messenger between himself and the “virgin,” the means by which he will “embrace” the soul and unite himself her.

Even so, the final dialogue between the Lord and Lady Pain complicates the narrative further, by revealing the diabolical character of suffering:

Then pain said this: "Lord, I make many blessed and yet am not blessed myself, and I consume many a holy body and yet myself am evil, and I lead many to heaven and yet do not enter it myself."

To this our Lord responded: "Pain, you were not born from the kingdom of heaven; therefore, you may not enter it. Rather, you were born from Lucifer's heart; there you shall return and shall dwell with him eternally" (FL IV.12).

Mechthild closes the chapter with further declaration of her devotion to the Lord and the way of estrangement. She asserts that her will is strengthened through pain and the closer she draws to "Blessed Estrangement," the more intensely God falls over her. Her final words are a poetic couplet: "But the deeper I sink, The sweeter I drink."

There is much within this passage upon which we could dwell, I would like to focus on the person of "Lady Pain." Mechthild's depiction of pain as "messenger" (*bote*) is an adaptation of a device common in medieval German *Minnesang* (sung love poetry from the 12th and 13th centuries). In these songs, a courtly lady-in-waiting often serves as a messenger between absent lovers, someone who negotiates the distance and unfulfilled love between them.²² Eventually, the messenger comes to represent the presence of the other to both lovers. The way Mechthild employs the messenger role in the above chapter suggests that in the mystical relationship between the Godhead and the soul, the physical pain of bodiliness is a vital intermediary between the earthly and the divine. That is to say, Mechthild understands that fallen humanity is brought into intimate union with God through the mediating work of physical pain.²³

The casting of pain in the role of divine-human messenger is not an arbitrary literary device, nor can it, in my opinion, simply be dismissed as a romanticized manifestation of female misogyny. Mechthild's view of pain (and bodiliness, in general) must be understood in light of the Christian narrative of salvation, in which the crucifixion of the Son of God is the means by which the Godhead is reconciled with the world.²⁴ In the framework

²² Neville, "The Bodies of the Bride," 2. Neville depends upon the work of Hugo Moser and Helmut Tervooren, Eds., *Des Minnesangs Frühling* (Stuttgart: Hirzel Verlag, 1988), 345–347.

²³ Neville, "The Bodies of the Bride," 2.

²⁴ In a parallel vein, Bynum concludes of medieval women's ascetic practices: "[L]ate medieval asceticism was not, at its most basic level, dualistic, nor was internalized misogyny the dominant element in women's conception of their religious role... [Ascetic

of the Incarnation, pain is, literally, the *crux* of the matter—the center of God's identification with humankind. This helps us understand why the loving soul comes to embrace estrangement ("sinking") as the most welcomed form of intimacy with God, for it was Christ's own estrangement that brought about redemption. One scholar applies this to Mechthild's mysticism in the following way:

Since a lover can take no joy except in her Beloved, the supreme sacrifice must lie in the willed choice of absence over presence. . . . God's very absence, once bitterly lamented, now becomes a sign of union with the abandoned Christ. . . . She welcomes new handmaids, Blessed Estrangement and Lady Pain, and she puts on her wedding garments of sickness, temptation, and heartache. . . . For Mechthild, the abjectly loving soul no longer seeks her Beloved because she is identified with him, imitating Christ's passion so perfectly that she becomes herself a womanChrist.²⁵

Understood in this way, the literary role Mechthild gives to Lady Pain in her narrative invests the physical reality of pain with deep theological meaning. Despite her ambivalent relationship to the body elsewhere in *The Flowing Light*, Mechthild clearly understands the conjunctive relationship between body and soul as the place in which her relationship to God is negotiated and expressed.²⁶ In this sense, it seems right to conclude that physical pain serves as a sensory bridge between herself and her Beloved. Since "Lady Pain" was Christ's closest companion while on earth, she is the most suitable messenger to negotiate the distance and desire between Mechthild and the Godhead.²⁷ The presence of pain, therefore, assures Mechthild of the presence of her Beloved and the reality of her union with the divine, even in the midst of "sinking" estrangement.

It is not enough, however, to understand that Mechthild views pain as a corporeal mediator between the soul and the divine. We

practices that involved self-denial and pain] did not, to medieval people, mean self-torture; rather, they were ways of fusing with a Christ whose suffering saves the world" (*Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 217–218).

²⁵ Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 162. The use of "womanChrist" language may seem a bit exaggerated. But, we should recall the extended poem that closed our survey of erotic and painful language in the previous section (*The Flowing Light*, Book III, Chapter 10). There, the soul's love for Christ allows her to become identified with him in such a way that their union is experienced as an analogue to Christ's Passion. In this sense, I think we can safely say that loving and painful union with Christ makes Mechthild into a "womanChrist."

²⁶ Martin, "The Body in the Realm of Desire," 114.

²⁷ Although her conclusions apply mainly to the writings of Spanish mystics, Maureen Flynn's discussion of the medieval notions of pain as proof of God's presence and purification have been helpful in my reflections on Mechthild's perspective. See Maureen Flynn, "The Spiritual Uses of Pain in Spanish Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Summer, 1996): 257–278.

must clarify this with Mechthild's expressed understanding of pain as originally diabolical and ultimately unsuitable for the kingdom of heaven. We should recall the words of the Lord to Lady Pain in Book II, Chapter 12: "Pain, you were not born from the kingdom of heaven; therefore, you may not enter it. Rather, you were born from Lucifer's heart; there you shall return and shall dwell with him eternally." This statement provides corrective to contemporary misunderstandings arising from modern notions of the body, in which "the cultivation of pain is rejected as pathological."²⁸ Clearly, Mechthild does not embrace pain because it is inherently good or even eternally oriented. Although she understands pain (closely tied to bodiliness) as the necessary and appropriate mediator for human-divine encounters in the present life, the time will come when pain ceases to play this role. Once again, this nuanced viewpoint arises from the Christian narrative of salvation, in which the crucified Christ is also the glorified Christ, who ascends into heaven to receive his reward from the Father. When Mechthild's soul is resurrected and joined with her glorified body in heaven, Lady Pain will not be needed, for the distance between the soul and the Godhead will be bridged and eternal ecstasy will be her reward.²⁹

A final layer to the theological context surrounding Mechthild's characterization of Lady Pain is the centrality of the Eucharist and Eucharistic devotion in mystical spiritual practice. Although space does not allow an exploration of this issue in any significant depth, it is important to note that recent scholarship on medieval women mystics has shown a vital connection between their understanding of bodiliness and pain and the importance of the Eucharist in their religious life.³⁰ To partake of the Eucharist was to partake of the human body of Christ, which suffered for the salvation of the world. In this way, "God is food, which is flesh, which is suffering, which is salvation."³¹ The emphasis on the fact that Christ's presence in the Eucharist is literally flesh and blood led to an increasingly literal understanding of what the *imitatio Christi* entailed.³² For medieval women mystics, the pursuit and embrace of physical pain became a focal point of their ascetic religious devotion and the primary means by which they experienced union with God.

This context provides further depth to Mechthild's characterization of pain as a human-divine lady-in-waiting. For Mechthild, the

²⁸ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 245.

²⁹ For a discussion of Mechthild's ambivalent attitude toward the body and what appears to be an eventual acceptance of the body as "hylomorphically necessary for heavenly deliverance," see Paul Martin, "The Body in the Realm of Desire."

³⁰ Most notable is the work of Caroline Bynum in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* and *Fragmentation and Redemption*.

³¹ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 250.

³² *Ibid.*, 255.

suffering of Christ physically present in the Eucharist is a material mediator between God and her soul. Likewise, the suffering of her physical body in spiritual devotion is a corporeal mediator between her soul and God. Moreover, the practice of Eucharistic devotion begins to explain why pain and suffering could be so closely linked to pleasure in Mechthild's mystical theology. When the consumption of Christ's body in the Mass brings literal nourishment from, and intimacy with the divine, then it is appropriate to understand that the experience of pain in imitation of Christ brings pleasure and intimacy, as well.

Toward a Conclusion

There is no doubt that the study presented above is more of a first word than a last word. While space constraints have prevented the presentation of a complete argument for the notion that Mechthild imparts a coherent mystical theology of pain, I think sufficient ground has been covered to suggest strongly the possibility. If nothing else, it is clear that Mechthild's poetic texts reveal a depth of theological insight that situates her firmly within the Christian narrative and liturgical tradition. More work remains to be done in order to develop whether the view presented above is consistently reflected throughout *The Flowing Light*, in the various literary forms Mechthild employs. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether the characterization of pain as courtly mediator is something unique to Mechthild or if it is reflected in the works of other medieval mystics, male or female.

Whatever the focus of future studies, it is certain that Mechthild's unabashed combination of erotic and painful rhetoric to speak of her union with God will remain a topic of great interest to scholars of women's religious history and mysticism. Indeed, even after the above presentation, some would say that the most important question of all remains unanswered: For Mechthild, why does union with the Godhead, the only One who is able to comfort and complete the soul, produce wounding and pain? Certainly, room must be made for the emphasis of medieval scholasticism upon God as Wholly Other and the Aristotelian notion of pain as the aspect of bodily existence that is most intimately human.³³ But, for many, especially feminist scholars concerned about the glorification of suffering and violence against women, such suggestions fall short of providing a satisfactory explanation.

Pursuing an answer to this question would take us beyond the bounds of this paper, but my preliminary thoughts are these. Although deeply sympathetic with the concern to disassociate divine love and

³³ Flynn, "The Spiritual Uses of Pain in Spanish Mysticism," 272.

human pain, I think documents produced by the Western Christian tradition cannot be made to do so. Since the penning of the New Testament, Christians have taught that in the Passion of Christ, divine love and human suffering met for the redemption of the world. It is clear, therefore, that when Mechthild's mystical theology pairs "the heights of bliss" with "the most exquisite pain," it does so as a faithful recipient of this tradition, in which love and pain occupy the center of God's relationship to humankind. Ultimately, those who are scandalized by Mechthild's wedding of erotic and painful rhetoric will be scandalized by what has become the heart of the Christian tradition, as well.

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