

<sup>9</sup> See Pamela Sheingorn, "Medieval Drama Studies and the New Art History," *Medievalia: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 18, 143-162 for a recent analysis of the New Art History.



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Wiethaus, Ulrike, *Ecstatic Transformation: Transpersonal Psychology in the Work of Mechthild of Magdeburg*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996.

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Ulrike Wiethaus' ambitious goal is to make medieval mysticism intellectually accessible to a modern western audience (2). To do this, she draws analogies between modern psychologies open to the existence and significance of "altered states of consciousness" and the accounts of ecstasies and visions within Mechthild of Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. The study is divided into two parts, the first focusing on ecstasy and the second on visions. After an introduction in which Wiethaus outlines her method and makes some preliminary claims about the context for Mechthild's book, Chapter 2 describes Mechthild's understanding of ecstasy, particularly as found in Book 1 of *The Flowing Light*. This is followed by two chapters describing contemporary psychological accounts of ecstasy, in particular the work of humanistic psychologists Abraham Maslow and Roberto Assagioli and the psychotherapeutic approaches of Arthur Deikman and Claudio Naranjo. Wiethaus suggests both the explanatory power of these models for understanding and making accessible Mechthild's work and subjects the contemporary psychologies to critique from the perspective of Mechthild's work. Chapter 5 again returns to Mechthild, describing the visions found in Book 2 of *The Flowing Light*. Wiethaus closes her book by arguing that contemporary psychophysiological approaches to visionary phenomena offer fruitful—although crucially limited—modes of access to medieval experience.

This brief synopsis merely suggests the wide array of topics on which Wiethaus touches in her brief book. She clearly knows *The Flowing Light* well, and offers insightful readings of important aspects of the text. Any of a number of mystical texts would have served for Wiethaus' project, yet I find her most compelling when she focuses on the particularities of Mechthild's book. Although on first reading I was troubled by Wiethaus' assertion that "self-actualization" and "altered states of consciousness" could be taken as "approximate twentieth-century equivalents" for medieval conceptions of *deificatio*, *visio*, *alienatio mentis/fruities/raptus*, she is careful throughout her study to note both points of analogy and *disanalogy*, reiterating the divide between Mechthild's text and twentieth-century assumptions. Most crucially, Wiethaus keeps firmly in

sight the divergence between Mechthild's belief in a deity that transcends humanity and the human-centered work of contemporary psychologists.

What these contemporary psychologists offer, according to Wiethaus, is a way for contemporary audiences to begin to understand the power, authority, fruitfulness, and self-fulfillment Mechthild attained through her ecstasies and visions. Yet understanding occurs through a thorough acquaintance with the language and context of the text. For this reason, and despite my lack of competence to judge the plausibility of the psychological theories Wiethaus discusses, I remain unconvinced that she needs them to make her argument about Mechthild's book or that contemporary explanatory theories can ever help us understand medieval texts more fully. Modern psychology may offer causal explanations of aspects of the text, but as Wayne Proudfoot shows in *Religious Experience*, this is another project. Wiethaus is not always clear whether her comparison of medieval and contemporary views is meant only to serve as an illuminating analogy, or whether she understands modern psychological views as explaining the medieval text in this more precise sense. As I will mention again below, she suggests in places that modern views explain the physical phenomena, while the understanding and significance of these phenomena change in diverse historical and cultural contexts.

Some readers working on medieval mysticism may also question Wiethaus's sharp distinction between ecstasies and visions. She recognizes that for many medieval women the visionary imagination and ecstatic union merge, yet insists that the enormous number of visions and auditions that occur in *The Flowing Light* without mention of ecstatic transformation demands a differentiation between the two phenomena (122-23). The point is well taken, yet the reader still wonders about the relationship between the two.

This issue is raised again by Wiethaus's approach to *The Flowing Light* as a whole. In her discussion of the text's ecstatic elements, particularly as found in Book 1, Wiethaus usefully argues that readers might best approach the book as "a manual of ecstatic transformation" (33). Even more strongly, Wiethaus argues that Mechthild "intended her writings as instructions for others rather than objective descriptions of experiences" (81). In her reading of the visions of Book 2, however, Wiethaus gives a slightly different account of the text's genre and intent; "Mechthild's ecstasies . . . were intended to be reexperienced by her audience, but visions were her exclusive and unique property" and merely provided the reader with information (123). The claim that the visions are intended to give practical moral and religious advice to a readership not graced with such extraordinary experiences seems at odds with an account of the book as a whole as "a manual for ecstatic transformation." Marianne Heimbach argues for a tighter relationship between the ecstatic and the visionary within *The Flowing Light*, both for the speaking "I" of the text and for the reader, in that the

visionary material gives the cosmological, theological, and practical elaboration of and context out of which the ecstatic emerges and reemerges. Although Heimbach may assert greater coherence to Mechthild's text than it possesses, as one who knows the book well Wiethaus might usefully return to this question. She suggests something like this relation, when she writes that "Mechthild interpreted ecstasies as existentially and intellectually transformative events . . . Visions, on the other hand, are the medium in which the relationship between a human being and the divine is translated back into the fabric of 'ordinary' life" (121). Unlike Heimbach, however, Wiethaus denies the transformative quality of visionary experience.

Wiethaus presents her work as preliminary and, like *The Flowing Light* itself, open-ended. In that same spirit I would like to raise an issue broached in the final pages of Wiethaus' study—one which I think warrants further reflection from those interested in bringing together contemporary explanatory frameworks with medieval texts. Throughout her study, Wiethaus assumes that some account of experience—whether ecstatic or visionary—can be unproblematically deduced from the text. With regard to ecstasies Wiethaus reads Mechthild as guide and theoretician, whereas the visionary accounts are taken as simply descriptive. Yet in both instances, that which lies behind or beyond the text is deemed accessible to the modern reader. Despite her attempt carefully to note analogies and disanalogies between Mechthild's experience and that described in contemporary psychologies, moreover, she does assert a common core of shared experience untouched by the interpretative overlay of differing cultural contexts. In a move markedly divergent from most of the perennialist philosophies with which she shares this opinion, for example, Wiethaus equates the unchanging aspect of visionary phenomena with the body and its significance with the influence of religious and secular teachings and traditions (149).

In the final pages of her book Wiethaus briefly touches on the debates surrounding the relationship between experience and interpretation recently reopened by the work of philosopher of religion Steven Katz. She sides with Peter Moore and Philip Almond, who argue, according to Wiethaus, that "religious experience is crucially, but not necessarily, dependent on a belief system" (613). I am not sure what the distinction is between "crucially" and "necessarily," nor, more importantly, how religious experience can be identified as such without some reference to systems of belief and practice. Moreover, both Moore and Almond operate with a distinction between experience and interpretation that has been subject to continued attack by philosophers of religion interested in mysticism and religious experience. Given the intensity of the debate and its extreme relevance to the questions Wiethaus raises, simply asserting her agreement with Moore and Almond seems inadequate.

As Frank Tobin has recently demonstrated in *Mechthild of Magdeburg: A Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes*, a related debate runs through the work medievalists have done on mystical and visionary literature. Here the argument is between historians, who—to put the matter far more simply than do any of the scholars in question—assert that we can talk about the mystical and visionary experience of medieval men and women on the basis of textual accounts (Peter Dinzelbacher and Caroline Walker Bynum) and literary historians who insist on the fictionality and artfulness of medieval visionary, mystical, and hagiographical literature, thereby calling into question the extent to which we can claim an historical referent for the experiences recounted within them (Siegfried Ringler and Ursula Peters). Wiethaus begins with a very perceptive account of the genre of Mechthild's text, yet goes on to infer the nature of her experience without adequate attention to the ways in which that experience has been textually shaped. Or perhaps more aptly, Wiethaus sometimes reads Mechthild as a theoretician of her own experience parallel to modern psychologists and sometimes suggests that the textual shaping is the interpretative overlay beneath which some "raw experience" can be discerned. Yet within the wealth of material Wiethaus presents, I am not sure that she offers a theoretical account of how this can be done. Perhaps before a fully compelling understanding of Mechthild of Magdeburg's experience (and that described by contemporary psychologists) can be attained, we need some theoretically plausible account of the literary nature of her text, the degree to which it allows us to talk about her experience, and the manner in which this process of recovery is to take place. Such an exploration might also untangle the relationship between analogy, understanding, and explanation in Wiethaus' thought-provoking work.

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