Performing Mystical Union in Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*
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At the core of medieval Christian mysticism lies a seemingly insurmountable conundrum. On one hand, the tradition of mystical writing is predicated upon *unio mystica*, or mystical union, defined as the “notion that a human being can become one with God.”¹ It is the assertion of this unique experience that distinguishes mystical from other theological texts. On the other hand, we find, even within mystical texts themselves, an enduring theological insistence on God’s ineffability: the belief that God “cannot be described or expressed, or is free of all names, or cannot be thought or perceived, or cannot be known.”² Given these opposing ideas, the mystic faces the singularly difficult task of conveying that which seems to defy language, knowledge, and worldly reference. It is of little surprise, then, that mystical writings exist in a wide variety of textual styles. Through sermons, memoir-like descriptions, philosophical speculations, and visual depictions with exegesis, mystics have run the gamut of genre in an attempt to convey the unconveyable.

Thirteenth-century mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1208-ca. 1282/94) is no exception. Born to a family from the lower nobility around 1208, Mechthild began experiencing what she in her writing

calls mystical “greetings” from the age of twelve. When she was in her early twenties, she left her courtly home to join a house of beguines in Magdeburg. The mystical experiences continued throughout her life—daily, she writes, for three decades—and at the request of her confessor, she began composing her book Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit (The Flowing Light of the Godhead) around 1250. Divided into seven books, the work as a whole consists of 267 chapters, ranging in length from a few lines to several pages.

Like other mystics, Mechthild wrote in order to share her experiences with a non-mystic audience, seeking a way to translate these personal, spiritual encounters into language. Mechthild’s idiosyncratic designation of her revelations not as visions but as greetings, however, points towards one of the most distinguishing characteristics of her mysticism.

3. Mechthild’s biography has been derived primarily from the autobiographical statements in her writings as well as information mentioned in the forewords to her book’s translations. See Sara S. Poor, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Frank J. Tobin, introduction to Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of the Godhead (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 1–27. More recent scholarship, particularly Balázs Nemes’s 2010 tome on Mechthild’s transmission history, problematizes many of these assumptions, arguing that the authorial voice of the text came to be understood as the author “Sister Mechthild” through the book’s various transmissions. While Nemes is undoubtedly correct to point out the unacknowledged assumptions that underlie much scholarship on Mechthild (most of which he traces back to the first critical edition of FL by Hans Neumann in 1990), I am rather inclined to think with Sara Poor, who asks “Would it not make more sense to think about a more broadly conceived idea of authorship, one that includes a number of different processes and scenarios of writing, so that the literary activity and accomplishments of women who wrote could be recognized alongside those of their male counterparts?” See Sara S. Poor, “Ich Schreyberin’: Rethinking Female Authorship with Anna Eybin’s Table of Contents,” Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures 42, no. 2 (2016): 201–23, 203; Balázs J. Nemes, Von der Schrift zum Buch—vom Ich zum Autor: Zur Text- und Autorkonstitution in Überlieferung und Rezeption des “Fließenden Lichts der Gottheit” Mechthilds von Magdeburg (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2010).

4. There is evidence that Books 1.1 through 2.2, 1 through 4.4, and 1.1 through 5.5 all circulated as individual units at certain points. For a detailed account of transmission, see Poor, Mechthild and Her Book, 79–80.

5. The Flowing Light of the Godhead is often classified as a Visionsbuch (book of
A greeting (grūs) in Mechthild’s usage encompasses gestures, verbal exchanges, and experiences perceived through multiple senses. In other words, Mechthild’s union with the divine is often less a vision witnessed than a scenario experienced, the embodied nature of which cannot be fully captured or contained by text. If, as Claire Taylor Jones has argued, “no texts exist, or ever existed, that record mystical experience as such,” then Mechthild’s challenge is not unique, but her strategy for addressing it is. As I will argue, it is precisely the experiential excess of God’s “greeting” that leads Mechthild to draw on a repertoire of performance practices.

This paper sets out to identify the multiple traces of performance that can be found throughout The Flowing Light of the Godhead—that is, textual prompts inextricable from their (explicit or implied, real or imagined) completion in physical and vocal acts. My approach to Mechthild’s text takes its cue from Diana Taylor’s influential work of performance historiography The Archive and the Repertoire, in which she argues for a shift in focus “from written to embodied culture, from the discursive to the performatic” in order to access knowledge that defies logocentric epistemologies. Taylor proposes the term “performatic,” derived from the Spanish performático, as the “adjectival form of the nondiscursive realm of performance,” in contrast to the more strictly discursive connotations of “performative.” She argues that such distinctions are vital if we wish to recognize “the performatic, digital, and visual fields as separate from, though always embroiled with, the discursive one so privileged by Western logocentricism.” Taylor suggests that rather than “focussing on patterns of cultural expression in terms of texts and narratives, we might think about them as scenarios that do (visions) despite the fact that, as Tobin points out, the term would formally exclude much of the book’s content. I would add, moreover, that such classifications overemphasize the opticality of a mysticism that draws on a full range of sensuous perception.

8. Taylor, 6.
not reduce gestures and embodied practices to narrative description.”

This paper takes up Taylor’s proposal in order to examine the significance of Mechthild’s penchant for performance and to explore what using performance as a hermeneutic device might reveal about Mechthild’s mystical “greetings.”

In the following, I examine how The Flowing Light of the Godhead depends on what we could think of as performance prompts: textual elements that can (and, I argue, ought to) be read as traces of performance scenarios. The three parts of this essay correspond to three particular types of prompts: three different ways Mechthild’s text relates to performance. First, I explore how Mechthild draws on literary genres and conventions that are connected to what I demonstrate are fundamentally performatic aesthetic and cultural practices, such as dramatic dialogue, personification allegory, courtly love poetry, and Minnedienst (courtly love service). This first section thus examines how the text prompts the reader to imagine mystical union as a scenario between live bodies and to flesh that scenario out with sensory detail. Secondly, I move from how Mechthild cites bodies engaged in performance towards how the text itself might perform on bodies. I ask: how does erotic language and imagery performatively link text with physical sensation, drawing attention to Mechthild’s own corporeal experience while simultaneously seeking to affect the reader on a sensual level? Finally, turning to the lists that constitute multiple chapters of her book, I consider how Mechthild’s text, if taken as a script for recitation, might prompt the reader into a performance of their own. Taken together, this paper argues that The Flowing Light of the Godhead is less a description of mystical “visions” than an attempt to stage, in three quite different ways, the embodied experience of “greeting” God.

**Disavowing the Body?**

Of course, arguing that Mechthild conveys her mystical experience in a particularly embodied way risks running up against a substantial scholarly history of resisting the carnal implications of such embodiment.

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10. Taylor, 16.
And indeed, Mechthild’s own writing gives good cause to think twice about foregrounding the flesh. At multiple points in her writing, she explicitly disavows and disparages her own worldly body, calling it “murderer” and “enemy” (1.2, 41) (morder and veint; 22), and reminding herself to be on guard against all carnal temptations.11 Not only is her body posited at times as an obstacle in her journey towards God, but the mystical experience itself seems predicated on the separation of her body and soul.

Der ware gottes grūs, der da kumet von der himelschen flūt us dem brunnen der fliessenden drivaltekeit, der hat so grosse kraft, das er dem lichamen benimet alle sin maht und machet die sele ir selben offenbar. . . . So scheidet dú sele von dem lichamen mit aller ir maht, wisheite, liebin und gerunge, sunder das minste teil irs lebendes belibet mit dem lichamen als in eime süßen schlaffe. (1.2, 20)

God’s true greeting, coming from the heavenly flood out of the spring of the flowing Trinity, has such force that it takes away all the body’s strength and reveals the soul to herself. . . . the soul leaves the body, taking all her power, wisdom, love and longing. Just the tiniest bit of her life force remains with the body as in a sweet sleep. (40)

This passage articulates the physical conditions of mystical experience, where Mechthild’s soul encounters her heavenly bridegroom while her body remains on Earth in a sort of trance, deprived of sensation for the duration of the mystical encounter. If Mechthild experiences the divine only by escaping her body for a time, then why does she draw on the

11. In-line citations of Mechthild’s Flowing Light (FL) state book and chapter, as well as page number from the respective edition. Middle High German citations are from Gisela Vollmann-Profe, ed., Mechthild von Magdeburg, Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit, Bibliothek des Mittelalters 19 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2003). English citations are from Frank Tobin’s translation, Mechthild of Magdeburg, The Flowing Light of the Godhead.
repertoire of performance, of embodied practice, to convey an experience that is apparently disembodied?

One answer that finds strong precedent would be that Mechthild’s usage of explicitly corporeal imagery ought to be taken as strictly metaphorical. Since at least Bernard of Clairvaux, there has been an enduring tendency to understand biblical passages that evoke erotic corporeal sensation (such as the Song of Songs) as allegories for hidden spiritual meanings that transcend earthly experience. Even Caroline Walker Bynum emphasizes the metaphoric nature of affective language during the period, warning “We must be careful not to overemphasize the affective aspects of later medieval piety. Even in writers . . . who give the images very concrete development, the notion of Christ as mother, like that of Christ as bridegroom, remains allegorical.”12 Here Bynum’s sense of allegory is firmly tied to abstraction; corporeal aspects are subsumed into the realm of metaphor, whereby their material qualities are downplayed. In such readings, the sensuous is only a means of describing what a spiritual experience is like: no more than an aid to disembodied, intellectual understanding.

If, as I will argue, Mechthild’s deployment of performance practices constitutes a unique strategy for conveying her mystical experience, one which depends on bodily actions and sensations, then understanding these aspects in either purely physical or purely metaphorical terms ultimately replicates a too simplistic (and deeply gendered) binary between the material, corporeal world and that of the spirit or soul.13 As Amy

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12. Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 134. While the allegorical dimension of the Christ-as-Bridegroom metaphor is undeniable, Dyan Elliott presents compelling evidence that mystical marriage was the kind of “restless image that seemingly refused to be restricted to the Christian equivalent of the platonic realm of ideas, instead constantly seeking embodiment.” As she observes, the initially capacious spiritual ideal of the “Bride of Christ” became increasingly tied to living, female virgins throughout the Middle Ages. Dyan Elliott, The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200–1500 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 2, 4.

13. Recent scholarship has questioned the presumed stability of this distinction between the corporeal and spiritual by emphasizing the shifting role of sensuous perception in medieval paradigms of knowledge formation. For scholars like
Hollywood explains, “Modern scholars . . . tend to divide mysticism into two general types: the feminine—affective, emotional, visionary, and often erotic; and the masculine—speculative, intellectual, and often explicitly antivisionary.”

Using initially as a phallogocentric distinction between the “higher” intellectual activities of male mystics and the “baser” experiential mysticism by women, this hierarchical dichotomy was flipped by feminists in the 1980s to praise a distinctly “feminine” form of mysticism that reveled in an essentialist understanding of the female body. The most recent scholarship on mysticism, however, tends to critique this binary as inaccurate and even harmful, pointing to the ways in which this reversal enacts an essentialization that limits interpretive possibilities. As Jones explains, “One of the most pernicious themes in mysticism scholarship has been the division between a mysticism of thought and a mysticism of body, a mysticism of language and a mysticism of asceticism.”

Thus rather than perpetuating this binary, in which “the body” and the sensuous serve purely as metaphors for the intellectual experience of the “soul,” we might turn towards a more historically specific conception of the soul and the body that offers an escape from this either/or logic.

In *Promised Bodies: Time, Language and Corporeality in Medieval Women’s Mystical Texts*, Patricia Dailey argues that scholarship on mystical writing tends to treat concepts like “embodiment” and “the body” as though they were ahistorical and transcendental. Both, however, are historically specific and culturally contingent. During the thirteenth century, when Mechthild was writing, theological discourse was heavily

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Martina Bagnoli, sensuous perception is not a metaphor, but an episteme in its own right. She argues that the Late Middle Ages saw the development of a “new bodily geography of knowledge that pertained to both the practical and the spiritual, and which allowed frequent border crossings between the two realms.” Martina Bagnoli, “The Materiality of Sensation in the Art of the Late Middle Ages,” in *Knowing Bodies, Passionate Souls: Sense Perceptions in Byzantium*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and Margaret Mullett (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2017), 31-63, 40.


influenced by Pauline and Augustinian doctrines, both of which understand “the body” as a “twofold entity partaking of two anthropological registers—the inner and outer persons—that promises to find its true materiality in a time to come.”

Thus while the concept of soul/body duality was as pervasive in medieval as it is in modern times, modern conceptions of this duality tend to insist on an absolute difference in the material status of each side of the binary.

Augustinian theology, however, allocates many corporeal qualities to the soul itself. It has its “own temporal age and members”; it also has access to sensory experience, as William of Saint Thierry writes, “the soul has her five senses.” Thus when Mechthild deploys the language of touch, scent, sight, sound, and even taste to describe the sensuous scenarios in which her soul is engaged, we need not automatically assume these somatic references to be strictly metaphorical. In a chapter titled “Die schrift dis bůches ist gesehen, gehöret unde bevunden an allen lidern” (The Text of This Book Is Seen, Heard, and Felt in All Members), Mechthild writes: “Ich enkan noch mag nit schriben, ich sehe es mit den ögen miner sele und höre es mit den oren mines ewigen geistes und bevinde in allen liden mines lichamen die kraft des heiligen gesites” (4.13, 266) (I do not know how to write, nor can I, unless I see with the eyes of my soul and hear with the ears of my eternal spirit and feel in all the parts of my body the power of the Holy Spirit; 156). For Mechthild, the soul itself has eyes and ears—a material form open to sensory experience. Equating the sensuous, affective language of mysticism with corporeality in opposition to spirituality is to impose an ahistorical notion of embodiment. With the “two persons” theological schema in mind, we might instead consider the ways the spiritual self can be embodied—and the role of language in that embodiment.

17. Dailey, 16.
Performance Repertoires

The seemingly ontological incongruence between written word and embodied experience might be one reason Mechthild’s writing about God’s “greetings” defies generic classifications; it is as if the experience she sought to convey refused to be limited by literary conventions. In addition to the instructional aspects highlighted in its transmission through devotional anthologies, chapters of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* move between direct and indirect speech, poetry and prose, with the identity of the speaker shifting suddenly and repeatedly: from God, to Mechthild the author, to various “characters”—religious, allegorical, and historical. Ingrid Kasten suggests that this fluidity of narrative form mimics the liminal position of the mystic herself, and reading the text in terms of narrative structure does indeed offer a compelling metaphor for *unio mystica* as a transitional experience.

Likewise, much research has focused on textual evidence of Mechthild’s remarkable fluency with a variety of canonical texts and their competing interpretations, especially the Song of Songs, which plays a central role in Mechthild’s vocabulary of imagery. Sarah Poor, for instance, has convincingly argued that Mechthild’s manipulation of these literary traditions is tantamount to a textual negotiation of authorial and spiritual agency.

Similarly, Elizabeth Andersen argues that Mechthild uses the Psalter and the Song of Songs as “paradigmatic literary models,” which not only structure the seemingly heterogeneous parts of *The

19. While scholars often refer to a “rediscovery” of Mechthild that occurred in the nineteenth century amid a new interest in *Frauenmystik*, her text had by no means disappeared between its writing in the thirteenth century and this resurgent interest. Segments of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* had circulated in the form of late medieval devotional anthologies, veritable “how to” books, the popularity of which coincided with the reformations initiated by the mendicant orders emerging in the twelfth century.


Flowing Light of the Godhead into an integral literary work, but also allow Mechthild to position herself as prophet and mystic. While this scholarship has offered a solid foundation for appreciating the intertextuality of Mechthild’s book, especially as it relates to questions of gender and authority, considering these formal elements only in terms of borrowing literary traditions misses a host of references to aesthetic and cultural performance traditions popular in the High Middle Ages.

The first chapter of Book 1 offers a clear example of the most ubiquitous performance genre found in The Flowing Light of the Godhead. The chapter begins:

I. Wie dú minne und dú kúneginne zesamene sprachen
Die sele kam zů der minne und grůste si mit tieffen sinnen und sprach:
“Got grüsse úch, vro minne.”
“Got lone úch, liebú vro kúneginne.”
“Vro minne, ir sint sere vollekommen.”
“Vro kúneginne, des bin ich allen dingen oben.” (1.1, 18)

1. How Love and the Queen Spoke to Each Other
The soul came to Love, greeted her with great deference, and said:
“God greet you, Lady Love.”
“May God reward you, Mistress and Queen.”
“Lady Love, you are indeed perfect.”
“Mistress and Queen, that is why I am above all things.” (39)

In this first chapter, the authorial voice that introduces the scene is quickly superseded by the voices of two characters, the Soul (or “the Queen”) and Love, whose dialogue constitutes the remainder of the chapter. Dialogues like this appear throughout Mechthild’s book, and although they are often embedded within third person narrative passages (not unlike direct speech embedded in a novel), in multiple chapters such as the example above, the narrative framing recedes to foreground

22. Elizabeth Andersen, The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), 18, 147–81.
a conversation between two or more entities. In these passages, it is the characters’ speech, not the narrator’s description, that carries the story forward. In the example above, the chapter is less a narrative than a scenario in which the Soul and Lady Love interact as personas with distinct voices and subjectivities. This shift from epic to dramatic implies a shift from a disembodied voice narrating a past event towards a present-time staging of bodies interacting—even if only in the reader’s mind’s eye.

To suggest that Mechthild’s dramatic dialogue implies performance, however, demands some context, especially given the fact that theatre history discourses often gloss the Middle Ages as a period in which theatre as an institution stagnated. While it is true that relatively few examples of secular European drama can be traced to this period, many scholars have challenged the narrative of dramatic disappearance by pointing out how liturgy itself was teeming with theatricality.²³ Amalarius, Bishop of Metz, is credited with introducing a repertoire of theatrical practices into devotional service in the early ninth century, including dialogue, gesture, props, and movement between symbolic locations. Although dramatic liturgy often involved some role-playing on the part of the priest, most of the dramatic dialogue initially took the form of ritualized call and response practices, without assigned characters. These characteristics paved the way for the development of liturgical drama throughout the High Middle Ages, as responsories and antiphons were converted into dialogue between fixed characters.²⁴ By the time of Mechthild’s writing, dramatic dialogue enacted in live “performance” was a staple of devotional practice. Thus Mechthild’s use of dramatic dialogue can be understood as drawing on this explicitly embodied and theatrical practice rather than a borrowing of a strictly literary genre. Even if not meant to be staged as a theatrical production per se (as it almost certainly was not), the form itself implies the interactions of people in real time.

Given that liturgical drama and dramatic liturgy tended to assign


²⁴. See Bevington, Medieval Drama, 7–12.
dialogue to individuals drawn from divine history or singers and cho-
ruses without specified characters, respectively, Mechthild’s dialogues
present a significant variation; in the example above, she assigns speech
not to an historical or biblical character, but to a personification popular
in lyrical poetry in this period: Lady Love. In fact, many of the dramatic
scenes in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* depend heavily on personi-
fications: concepts such as knowledge, humility, and contemplation are
anthropomorphized as the soul’s bridesmaids or chamberlains. These
figures prepare the soul for her loving union with Christ (1.46), offer
council and instruction (2.19), and chide the souls (of clergy) who fail
to recognize the significance of love in their devotion (2.23).

The personifications of abstract concepts are often referred to as
“allegorical figures,” although personification—etymologically “to make
something into a *personne*” (body or person)—need not necessarily be
allegorical. “Allegory” refers to a range of practices, both composi-
tional and interpretive, all of which proceed on the assumption that
behind what is given in concrete terms hides a higher, usually spiritual
or moral, meaning. Personifications, although distinct from allegory,
were nevertheless a staple of allegorical tales throughout the Middle
Ages and are now commonly associated with the morality plays of the
fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. According to Rita Copeland and Peter
Struck, Prudentius’s early fifth-century narrative, the *Psychomachia*, is
the “archetype of personification allegory [which] can be read most
simply as an allegory of virtues and vices, depicting a battle (machê) in
cosmic, eternal terms for the human soul (psychê).”25 Given the popu-
larity of this text throughout the Middle Ages and the many imitations
it inspired, Mechthild would have likely been familiar with at least this
device of personification allegory, if not Prudentius’s text itself.

In some respects, Mechthild’s dramatic chapters bear a strong resem-
blance to the *Psychomachia*. She and Prudentius both personify abstract
concepts like virtues as material entities, bestowing them with sub-
jectivity, voice, and agency, and allowing them to interact with other
personified concepts. However, where Prudentius’s personifications are

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25. Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion
to Allegory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-11, 6.
embedded in an epic narrative form, Mechthild sets these figures in an explicitly dramatic form—it is through dialogue, not narration, that action unfolds. By borrowing the dramatic form present in liturgy and uniting it with personifications like those in the *Psychomachia*, Mechthild essentially anticipated the formal devices of the morality play a century before it gained widespread popularity.

Although Mechthild’s personifications resemble those found in the *Psychomachia* and later morality plays, the extent to which the text ought to be seen as allegorical remains a question. As Copeland and Struck explain, “To compose allegorically is usually understood as writing with a double meaning: what appears on the surface and another meaning to which the apparent sense points.” Consequently, allegorical composition calls for allegorical interpretation, and Prudentius calls the reader’s attention to this necessary decoding. At both the beginning and end of the *Psychomachia*, the narrator points explicitly to the moral lesson the epic poem aims to provide. Addressing God, the final passage states:

> Thou didst wish us to learn the dangers that lurk unseen within the body, and the vicissitudes of our soul’s struggle. We know that in the darkness of our heart conflicting affections fight hard in successive combats . . . man’s two-sided nature is in an uproar of rebellion; . . . Light and darkness with their opposing spirits are at war, and our two-fold being inspires powers at variance with each other.

With such statements, Prudentius makes clear that his text as a whole is meant to function as an allegory, an “extended metaphor” from which a moral lesson ought to be abstracted. The most well-known morality play, *Everyman*, functions in a similar manner, with the personifications allegorizing the inner battle for a virtuous life. In these examples, the value of allegory purportedly lies in the act of translating the concrete into a spiritual message, as if to take these personifications literally would be to miss the moral point.

Mechthild’s dramatic scenes, on the other hand, arguably complicate


this notion of allegorical abstraction. The scene between the Soul and Lady Love can certainly be read allegorically as an imperative for the individual to lead a loving life. However, Mechthild’s writing also places particular emphasis on the corporeal nature of this encounter. Her personifications are not simply subjects capable of speech, but definitively *material* entities, possessing bodies, senses, and desires. Even the authorial voice, which might, like Prudentius, reference the moral lesson, introduces the personifications as physical beings that move, gesture, and speak: “The soul *came* to Love, *greeted* [grůste] her with great deference, and *said*” (my emphasis). As the interaction continues, the soul speaks of all that Lady Love has done for and, more significantly, *to* her:

“Frő minne, ir hant mir benomen alles, das ich in ertrich ie gewan.”
“Frőwe kúnegin, ir hant einen seligen wehsel getan.” . . .
“Frőwe minne, ir hant mich also sere betwungen, das min licham ist komen in sunderlich krankheit.”
“Frőwe kúnegin, da wider han ich úch gegeben manig hohe bekantheit.”
“Frőwe minne, ir hant verzert min fleisch und min blůt.” (1.1, 18-20)

“Lady Love, you have now come here to me and have taken from me everything I ever gained on earth.”
“Mistress and Queen, you have made a happy exchange.” . . .
“Lady Love you have brought me to such a pass that my body is racked by a strange weakness.”
“Mistress and Queen, in exchange I have given you much sublime knowledge.”
“Lady Love, you have devoured my flesh and my blood.” (139-40)

This soul, with her saporous flesh and blood, and Lady Love, with her carnal appetite, play out the scene of a flirtatious encounter. As the soul demands recompense for Lady Love’s feast, the dialogue comes to a climactic close:

“Frőwe minne, ir sint ein rőberinne, dennoch sont ir mir gelten.”
“Frőwe kúnegin, so nement reht mich selben.”
“Frōwe minne, nu hant ir mir vergolten hundertvalt in ertriche.”
“Frō kūnegin, noch hant ir ze vordernde got und alles sin riche.”
(1.1, 20)

“Lady Love, you are a robber; for this as well shall you make reparation.”
“Mistress and Queen, then take me.”
“Lady Love, now you have recompensed me a hundredfold on earth.”
“Mistress and Queen, in addition you may demand God and all his kingdom.” (40)

A strictly allegorical reading might simply dismiss this physicality, flying over the concrete in search of a higher meaning. Following Diana Taylor’s proposal, however, we might instead think about Mechthild’s dramatic dialogues “as scenarios that do not reduce gestures and embodied practices to narrative description.”28 Taking these scenes as materializations per se, rather than only as material from which to abstract a moral lesson, offers the script for a staging of a mystical encounter. In other words, when understood as a scenario animated by desires and played out between bodies, mystical union becomes something not described but rather prompted by the text. Like any script, this chapter demands the imaginative contribution of its reader to fill in gaps—what tone, what expression, what touch might accompany these words? What is the nature of Lady Love’s recompense, occurring, as it does, between the lines? By writing a scene rather than a narrative description, Mechthild prompts her reader to imagine those ephemeral aspects of the encounter that resist textual transmission. While each reader will fill those gaps in their own way, it is this implied repertoire beyond the textual trace that posits mystical union in its embodied fullness.29

29. My suggestion that the text calls to be read on multiple levels, rather than solely allegorically, also echoes the Latin prologue of The Lowing Light of the Godhead, which states the book’s “manner of proceeding is both historical and mystical” (FL, 32). Tobin takes this as an instruction to read the book both literally and more-than-literally (allegorically, analogically, and mystically); see Tobin’s note (FL, 337n4). At the same time, however, the Latin translator betrays some anxiety about
The performatic quality of mystical union is further developed through Mechthild’s use of courtly love poetry, or Minnesang. The use of this genre might seem surprising given Mechthild’s status as a beguine. However, general consensus is that, before entering the communal beguine house in Magdeburg and taking voluntary vows of poverty, chastity, and religious devotion, she likely spent the first part of her life in a courtly setting. As such, she would have been familiar with the literary form of love poetry, which was central to courtly culture at the time.

The influence of Minnesang is most apparent in the abundance of lyrical passages throughout The Flowing Light of the Godhead that express longing for an absent lover, frequently in rhyming verse, such as in “The Lament of the Loving Soul” in Book 2:

Wie we mir dennne na dir si, How painfully I long for you
als du wilt schonen min, When you want to spare me;
das möhten dir alle creaturen This all creatures would not be able
nit vollesagen, to express to you fully
ob sie müssen für mich clagen, If they were to lament on my behalf;
wan ich lide unmenschliche not; For I suffer inhuman anguish.
mir tete vil sanfter ein Human death I would find more
menschlich tot. pleasant.

(2.25, 126)

Characteristic of Minnesang, love in Mechthild’s verses is not purely a matter of pleasure but always also a source of torment.

Later in the same chapter, Mechthild turns to the Tagelied, or Dawn

the potential carnal implications of a literal reading: “This writing must be read in a pious spirit, however. It must be understood, as is the case with other holy writings, in a wholesome manner and in good faith. In this way the reader will find nothing scandalous or offensive in it” (FL, 32). I take this (over)insistence on the impossibility of scandalous affect as tacit support of the erotic potentials I theorize here.

30. “Beguine” refers to women who voluntarily practiced chastity, poverty, and religious devotion, usually in a communal house, but who did not join an ecclesiastically approved religious order.

Song, a subgenre of Minnesang in which lovers depart from one another with the break of day. As the soul continues her lament, God responds: “Dir ist als einer núwen brut, / der sclafende ist engangen ir einig trut” (“You are like a new bride / Whose one and only lover has slipped away as she slept”). He goes on to describe the site of their next encounter: “ich warten din in dem bǒngarten der minne / und briche dir die blůmen der süssen einunge” (2.25, 132) (“I shall be waiting for you in the orchard of love / And shall pluck for you the flowers of sweet union”; 95). Just as in the lyrics by Minnesänger like Albrecht von Johansdorf, Heinrich von Morungen, and Walther von der Vogelweide, Mechthild’s pastoral setting functions as the clandestine meeting place of lovers seeking privacy from the court’s prying eyes, if only briefly: “Nu dis mag nit lange stan; wa zwöi geliebe verholen zesamen koment, si müssent dike ungescheiden von einander gan” (1.44, 64) (Now, this cannot last long. Where two lovers secretly meet, they must always part again without separating; my translation).

These affinities have been noted by several scholars, all of whom treat Mechthild’s use of Minnesang as the borrowing of a literary genre. Minnesang, however, was not strictly—or even primarily—a textual form, as the term itself suggests; Minnesang translates literally to song of courtly love, signaling that vocal performance was a constitutive element of the poetry. The role of recitation was so fundamental to the genre that Hugo Kuhn has even argued that Minnesang ought to be understood primarily as a performance form that finds its complete meaning only through a public enactment combining voice, text and


33. See Günther Schweikle, Minnesang, 2., korrigierte Auflage (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), 143.


35. Minnesang is often used as a blanket term for lyric poetry written between 1150 and 1400 in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, not all of which focused on minne (courtly love).
music. By attending to the performatic aspects of Minnesang—that is, the embodied aesthetic and cultural practices associated with the poetry—we can see how Mechthild deploys Minnesang as a model for conveying the experience of mystical union.

The suggestion of love poetry’s vocal performance is found not only formally in the “sing-song” quality of Mechthild’s rhyming verses, but also thematically: the work as a whole abounds with references to the sounds of words in mouths. In one passage God speaks in the first person to the “writer” (schriber) of the book, stating: “Dú wort bezeichent mine wunderliche gotheit; dú vliessent von stunden ze stunde in dine sele us von minem götlichen munde. Dú stimme der worten bezeichenet minen lebendigen geist und vollebringet mit im selben die rehten wahrheit” (2.26, 136) (“The words symbolize my marvelous Godhead. / It flows continuously / Into your soul from my divine mouth. / The sound of the words is a sign of my living spirit / And through it achieves genuine truth”; 97). It is not the words themselves, then, but the vocalization of those words that conveys truth. In other passages, the lyrical conversation between the soul and God is not merely spoken, but explicitly sung. For instance, at God’s request, “Liebú, nu sing an und la hören, wie du es kanst” (“Beloved, begin the song and let me hear how well you sing”), Mechthild responds: “Owe min vil lieber, ich bin heiser in der kelen miner kúscheit; / mere das zuker diner süssen miltekeit / hat min kelen erschellet, das ich nu singen mag alsust” (2.25, 134) (“Alas, my dear Lover, I am hoarse in the throat of my chastity, / But the sugar of your sweet kindness / Has let my voice resound, so that I can now sing thus”; 96). In the passage that follows, Mechthild provides the words of what her bridegroom calls “megde sang” (the song of the virgins):

36. Hugo Kuhn, “Minnesang als Aufführungsform,” in Festschrift für Klaus Ziegler, ed. Eckehard Catholy and Winfried Hellmann (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1968), 1-12,
37. Poor, “Medieval Incarnations of Self,” 16.

MFF, PIGGOTT
http://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol55/iss2/
Herre, din blůt und min ist ein, unbewollen—
din minne und minú ist ein, ungeteilt—
din kleit und min ist ein, unbevleket—
din munt und min ist ein, ungekust—(2.25, 134)

Lord, your blood and mine are one, untainted.
Your love and mine are one, inseparable.
Your garment and mine are one, immaculate.
Your mouth and mine are one, unkissed. (96)

As if to stress how crucial the musical element is to this performance of love, Mechthild concludes the chapter with a note to the reader: “Dis sint dú wort des sanges. / Der minne stimme und der süsse herzeklang müsse bliben, / wan das mag kein irdenschú hant geschriben!” (2.25, 134) (These are the words of the song. / The voice of love and the melody of the heart must be left unrendered, / For they can be captured by no merely human hand!; 96). Once again, the text here functions as the trace of a larger performance practice. While the formal devices of Minnesang constitute only a limited portion of The Flowing Light of the Godhead, the book as a whole takes up this courtly performance tradition to convey mystical union as an encounter seen, felt, and heard.

The aesthetic performance of Minnesang is also intimately linked to a broader set of cultural performances taking shape in this period. Minnesang sprang from an emerging courtly culture in which various aspects of everyday activity became codified performances, from gendered norms of public conduct to a new interest in clothing and adornment. Minne (courtly love) itself emerged as a concept at this historical moment, recasting feudal oaths of fealty between men as codified modes of love service (Minnedienst), performed by a man for a woman. In this new paradigm, a knight or lord performed Minnedienst for the love of a lady of high esteem, including singing her praises publicly and pursuing acclaim on her behalf. Within this context, codified performances of love served as a vehicle for the performer’s own ennoblement.

Mechthild evokes this host of cultural performances, which include but are not limited to Minnesang, by setting the encounter of her soul with Christ the Bridegroom as occurring “at court.” In the second
chapter of Book 1, she writes: “So grüisset er si mit der hovesprache, die man in dirre kuchin nút vernimet, und kleidet sü mi den kleidern, die man ze dem palaste tragen sol, und git sich in ir gewalt” (1.2, 22) (He greets her in courtly language that one does not hear in this kitchen, clothes her in the garments that one fittingly wears in a palace, and surrenders himself into her power; 40). In this first narrative passage of Book 1, Mechthild references the language, clothing, and architectural setting of courtly romance, as well as the trope of love service. In effect, this chapter rescripts *unio mystica* as a courtly encounter, of which *Minnesang* would be an expected part.

The interpenetration of courtly and religious practices was not uncommon in this period; indeed, the figure of an unattainable lady to be adored and praised from afar mapped exceedingly well onto the Virgin Mary, as is evident in the Marian poetry tradition that had been popular through much of the Crusades.\(^\text{38}\) Mechthild, however, tailors the codified roles of love service—both as a lyrical theme and as part of courtly culture broadly understood—towards her own ends of conveying her mystical experience.\(^\text{39}\) For instance, in several passages, Mechthild appropriates the Marian tradition in order to sing the praises of Christ the Bridegroom from the position of a mere mortal awed by heavenly glory. And, like the beloved lady we find in secular *Minnesang*, God responds with reciprocal affection and (small) rewards: “So sprichet er: ‘Eya du liebú tube, din stimme ist ein seitenspl minen oren, dinú wort sint wurtzen minem munde, dine gerunge sint die miltekeit miner gabe’” (1.2, 22) (And he says: “Oh, dear dove, Your voice is string music to my ears. Your words are spices for my mouth. Your longings are the lavishness of my gift”; 41). Having usurped the typically male behavior of love service, the soul receives God’s praise and the “gift” of longing—a gift that God, like the lady of courtly romance, bestows for the wooer’s own ennoblement.\(^\text{40}\)

\(^\text{38}\) For numerous examples of “divine Minnesang,” see A. E. Kroeger, *Minnesinger of Germany* (New York, 1873), 75–126.

\(^\text{39}\) See Poor, “Medieval Incarnations of Self,” 9.

At other points, however, this relationship between the soul and God as wooer and wooed is reversed, so that she becomes the beloved while God sings his adoration of her: “Du smekast als ein wintrúbel, / du rúchest als ein balsam, / du lúhtest als dú sunne, / du bist ein zúnemunge miner höhsten minne” (1.16, 36) (“You taste like a grape / Your fragrance is like balsam. / Your radiance is like the sun. / You are an enhancement of my most sublime love”; 47). Although I do not wish to overemphasize Mechthild’s radicalness, this reversal of the Marian tradition carries certain implications that speak to Mechthild’s ingenuity—especially when this literary device is considered within its broader cultural performance context. Since the performance of Minnesang suggests a hierarchical relationship in which the singer serves the lady being praised, Mechthild’s casting of Christ as the singer simultaneously casts him in the soul’s own service, as she suggests in that first narrative passage of Book 1: “er . . . git sich in ir gewalt” (1.2, 22) (surrenders himself into her power; 40).

Just as Minnedienst provided a new romantic model for older feudal relationships, so too does it allow Mechthild to transform established devotional relationships (such as between earthly petitioner and heavenly deity) into romantic interactions. For instance, in Book 3 the soul takes on the role of beloved lady and directs her lover to perform the service she desires: “Do sprach ich: ’Herre, nu bistu min. . . . Nu gere ich, herre, dines lobes und nit mines fromes, also das hútte din here lichamme den armen selen ze trost komme. Du bist werlich min; nu solt du, herre, hütte den gevangenen ein lösepfant sin.’” (3.15, 194) (Then I said: “Lord, now you are mine. . . . I desire your praise and not my advantage, that today your glorious body might come as consolation to the poor souls. You are truly mine. Now, Lord, you shall be today a ransom for those imprisoned”; 122.) At this point, the soul and God descend to hell and look upon the suffering souls. After discussing the nature of their punishment, the soul “gerte kreteklich arbeiten minnenklich und sprach: ‘Vil lieber, du weist wol, was ich gere’” (3.15, 196) (yearned powerfully and toiled lovingly and said: “Very dear One, you know full well what I desire”; 123). At this request, the Lord releases the tortured souls and grants them heavenly access, stating “Du hast mich mit rehte har braht” (3.15, 196) (“It was right for you to bring me here”; 123). Although the devotional practice of petitioning God on behalf of the deceased was
already a well-established tradition, in this chapter Mechthild borrows the script of courtly love to cast this petitioning as the catalyst for Minnedienst, in which the male lover serves the desires of his lady.41

The theological implications of this last point relate to a shift in religious practice, beginning roughly with the Cistercians in the twelfth century. Caroline Walker Bynum refers to this shift as the emergence of a “new affectivity” in devotional writing, in which relationships like friendship, family, and marriage come to supplement older feudal images of rulers and followers in order to advance “a view of authority that balances discipline with love.”42 With a new focus on Christ’s humanity, affective devotional language gained popularity in the twelfth century, so Mechthild’s affective relationship to God ought not to be perceived as extreme or radical on its own. Her work clearly participates in this “new affectivity”; however, her book also pushes this turn to its extremes by first borrowing the cultural performances associated with the literary genre of Minnesang, and secondly, by casting God in her (soul’s) own service. While the concept of an approachable, loving God was well established at the time, the secular practice of Minnedienst provides a script that allowed Mechthild to develop her intimacy with Christ in a highly inventive way.

**Erotic Poetry / Embodied Piety**

The performance repertoires of Minnesang allow Mechthild to express the intimacy of her union with the divine, but it is her use of erotics that most clearly manifests a performative strategy for linking this experience to living bodies—both hers and her readers’. The Flowing Light of the Godhead floods the reader with tempting, teasing, and titillating language, leaving little doubt as to the romantic and sexual nature of the soul’s union with God. For instance, in a chapter that combines narrative elements with dramatic dialogue in lyrical verse, the soul is

41. As Poor observes, although Mechthild’s appropriation of the Minnedienst tradition has God “playing the humble lover,” he, like the Minnesänger who discursively controls the woman for whom he supposedly performs, remains “the man in charge.” “Medieval Incarnations of Self,” 32–33.

42. Bynum, Jesus as Mother, 8.
first encouraged by the personified Senses to embrace a maternal love of God: “Frőwe, went ir úch minnekliche külen, so neigent úch in der jungfrőwen schos zů dem kleinen kint und sehent und smekent, wie der engel frőde von der ewigen maget die unnatúrlichen milch sog” (1.44, 62) (“Lady, if you want to refresh yourself in love, bow down to the small Child in the lap of the eternal virgin; and taste and see how the Joy of the angels sucked the unnatural milk”; 61). The soul, however, makes the erotic sense of her love for God clear, responding: “Das ist ein kintlich liebi, das man kint söge und wiege. Ich bin ein vollewahsen brut, ich will gan nach minem trut” (1.44, 62) (“That is child’s love, that one suckle and rock a baby. I am a full-grown bride. I want to go to my Lover”; 61). Despite the warning of the Senses that they will be overcome with the light and heat of the “fúrig” (blazing) Godhead, the soul persists, and finally joins her Bridegroom in a “verholnen kammeren” (secret chamber) where she finds “der minne bette und minnen gelas von gotte unmenschliche bereit” (1.44, 64) (the bed and the abode of love prepared by God; 62). When she encounters her lover in this private locale, she asks: “Was gebútest du, herre?” (“What do you bid me, Lord?”). Lest we be tempted to take the scene in a strictly metaphorical sense, God’s response rings of directness and practicality: “Ir sönt úch usziehen!” (1.44, 64) (“Take off your clothes”; 62). In the lyrical passage that follows, God and the soul share an intimate dialogue that climaxes in the statement

So geschihet da ein selig stilli nach ir beider willen. Er gibet sich ir und si git sich ime. Was ir nu geschehe, das weis si, und des getröste ich mich. (1.44, 64)

Then a blessed stillness
That both desire comes over them.
He surrenders himself to her,
And she surrenders herself to him.
What happens to her then—she knows—
And that is fine with me. (62)
In this passage, we see two erotic tropes common to the *Tagelied*: a secret meeting to make love, and an innuendo of the sexual act.\(^43\)

While such tropes are certainly more commonplace in secular literature, they also have precedent in religious writings, particularly in the Song of Songs and the psalms. Indeed, this biblical precedence would lead generations of scholars to insist on a strictly metaphoric understanding of such seemingly carnal imagery. Suspending for a moment the tendency to insist on allegory, however, I would like to consider Mechthild’s erotic language as a performative strategy for affecting her readers on a sensual level, thereby conveying mystical union as an experience that stirs the senses.

In her study of erotic discourse in medieval writing, Lara Farina offers an expansive definition of erotics that includes the “visual, tactile, and kinesthetic pleasures that accompany a consciousness of the body in space.”\(^44\) Significantly for Farina, however, this pleasure is not simply a matter of representing erotic content, but far more about the ways in which texts establish affective relationships with their readers: such texts must “possess a certain efficacy, must be actualized in readers’ imaginative and somatic responses.”\(^45\) In Mechthild’s writing, we can see the author strive towards such efficacy. Her passages move from innuendos and the understated to the explicit and excessive. She teases her readers with urgent anticipations—“Ich rüffe dir mit grosser gere . . . ich mag nit růwen, ich brinne / unverlöschen in diner heissen minne” (2.25, 128) (I cry out to you in great longing, . . . I cannot rest, I am on fire, / Unquenchable in your burning love; 93)—before succumbing to candid details of love-making: “Gedenke, wie du trúten kanst die reine sele in dinem schos und vollebringe es, herre, an mir alzehant” (5.17, \(^\)43. The final stanza of Walther von der Vogelweide’s “Under der linden” offers a striking parallel to Mechthild’s verse: “wes er mit mir pflege, niemer niemen bevinde daz, wan er und ich und ein kleinez vogellin, tandaradei, daz mac wol getriuwe sin” (What he did with me there may no one ever discover, only he and I and a little birdie, tandaradei, that is sure to be true [i.e., stay quiet], my translation). Ingrid Kasten and Margherita Kuhn, eds., *Deutsche Lyrik des frühen und hohen Mittelalters* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1995), 398.


45. Farina, 2.
352) (Remember how well you can caress / The pure soul on your lap / And do it, Lord, to me now; 193). At points, Mechthild goes to great lengths to emphasize the sexual nature of her relationship with Christ:

So zühet er si fúrbas an ein heimliche stat. Da můs si für nieman bitten noch fragen, wan er will alleine mit ir spilen ein spil, das der lichame nút weis noch die dörper bi dem phlüge noch die ritter in dem turnei noch sin minnenklichú můter Maria—des mag si nút gepflegen da. So swebent si fúrbas an ein wunnenriche stat, da ich nút vil von sprechen mag noch will. Es ist ze notlich, ich engetar, wan ich bin ein vil súndig mönsche. (1.2, 22)

Then he draws her further to a secret place. There she is not permitted to beg on anyone's behalf or ask, because all alone with her he wants to play a game that the body does not know, nor the peasants at their plows, nor the knights at their tournaments, nor his lovely mother, Mary—not even she may play it there. Then she soars further to a blissful place of which I neither will nor can speak. It is too difficult; I do not dare, for I am a very sinful person. (41)

The passage refrains from providing the details of that “blissful place,” instead assuring the reader that to speak of it directly flirts with impropriety, if not outright sin. What we read here, then, is not a description of the encounter, but rather a pointed suggestion of its erotic nature accompanied by a thinly veiled warning of its potentially arousing effects on a witness. Although what precisely constitutes pleasure for the reader certainly resists generalization, I would argue that *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*’s evocation of exquisite “visual, tactile, and kinesthetic pleasures" manifest, at the very least, a discernible effort to arouse.

While it might seem counterintuitive, this performative investment in affecting the reader signals a parallel between erotic and religious modes of writing. As Farina explains, “Devotional literature, like the erotic, has a functional teleology. . . . Such literature strives to effect belief as erotic works strive to effect arousal; indeed, medieval religious writings
that incorporate the erotic collapse these two responses.”

Mechthild’s writing manifests precisely such a collapse. In one passage, Mechthild switches to a third person narrative form to describe a mystical encounter between her soul and God in a pleasurable fusion of sexual satisfaction and spiritual knowledge:

so beginnet si ze smekende sine süssekeit. Und so beginnet er si ze grüssende mit siner gotheit, das die kraft der heligen drival-tekeit ir sele und iren lip alles durgat, und da enpfat si die waren wishiet. Und so beginnet er si ze trútende, das si krank wirt, so beginnet si ze sugende, das er minnesiech wirt. . . . So beginnet si ze gerende grosser trúwe im ze leistende, und so beginnet er ir die volle bekantnisse ze gebende. Und so beginnet si denne vröliche ze smekende an irme vleisch dur sine liebi. (6.1, 428)

Then she begins to taste his sweetness and he begins so to greet her with his Godhead, that the power of the Holy Trinity penetrates fully her soul and her body; and she receives true wisdom. And then he begins so to caress her that she becomes weak. She so begins to drink it all in that he becomes lovesick. . . . And then she begins longing to show him great faithfulness. And then he begins to give her full knowledge. And then she begins to taste with delight his love on her flesh. (227)

In this passage, the erotically charged body becomes an “episteme, fundamental for acquiring knowledge of God.” For Mechthild, the act of acquiring divine wisdom is inseparable from the sweetness in her mouth and caresses on her flesh. And if the purpose of her book is to impart to the reader the divine knowledge she has gained through such sensuous—and sensual—experience, then employing an erotic mode of writing offers one strategy of doing so. The text’s power to arouse the reader is part of its power to inform.

Affective, sensual language, as Bynum points out, generally functioned

46. Farina, 6.
47. Farina, 3.
during this period as a supplement to older God-fearing imagery, but Mechthild’s text does more.\textsuperscript{48} It posits sensuality not just as a way of illustrating her relationship to God, but as a way of knowing God in its own right—what Bernard McGinn refers to as an attempt to “fuse feeling and knowing.”\textsuperscript{49} For instance, in a chapter entitled “Wie ein geistlich mensch sol clagen und beknnen got sin sünde alle tage” (How a Person in Religious Life Should Daily Lament and Confess His Sins to God), Mechthild provides a prayer of repentance that culminates in the statement: “Jhesus, vil liber bůle min, la mich in warer rúwe und in herzelicher liebi zů dir und la mich niemer erkůlen, also das ich diner herzeklicher minne in minem herzen und in miner sele und in minne fúnf sinnen und in allen minen geliden ane underlas enpfinde!” (7.38, 606, my emphasis) (“Jesus, dearest Lover of mine, let me approach you in true sorrow and with deep love for you in my heart, and never let me grow cold, so that I constantly feel your intense love in my heart and in my soul and in my five senses and in all my members”; 309). This passage illustrates how Mechthild knows God in and through her own flesh, thereby offering a corporeal epistemology crucial to conveying her experience.

This epistemology of the flesh is assisted, too, by Mechthild’s use of vernacular language, which enabled her to perform new linguistic feats and produce erotically charged poetry that moves beyond the more conventional Latin of the Bible.\textsuperscript{50} Heinrich von Nördlingen, who

\textsuperscript{48.} Bynum, Jesus as Mother, 8.


\textsuperscript{50.} The Flowing Light of the Godhead is believed to be the first set of mystical writings composed in the German vernacular, likely Middle Low or Central German. Although this original is lost, Neumann argues that the “translation” into Middle High German commissioned by Heinrich von Nördlingen is better understood as an \textit{Umsetzung} (transferring) than as an \textit{Übersetzung} (translation), given that Middle Low and Middle High German were different dialects of a common language, and that Mechthild relied extensively on courtly idiom that would have transcended regional differences. Hans Neumann, “Problemata Mechtildiana,” \textit{Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur} 82, no. 1–2 (1948): 143–72, 172. More recently, Nemes has questioned the authenticity Neumann attributes to the Middle High German translation, in part by providing evidence of a more complicated transmission
commissioned a translation of her book into Middle High German, commented on the novelty and beauty of Mechthild’s vernacular poetic form, stating that she writes “das lustigistz tützsch . . . und das innerlichst rürend minenschosz, das ich in tützscher sprach ie gelas” (the most pleasing German . . . and the most inwardly touching sudden love I have ever read in the German language). Mechthild’s use of the vernacular also expanded the performative potential of her text to those outside the clergy—including a newly emerging female readership within beguine communities. As Katherine Zieman has argued, the kind of “liturgical literacy” possessed by most women in convents prioritized memorization and accurate performance over nuanced comprehension of the Latin texts that largely structured devotional practices throughout the Middle Ages. By composing in the vernacular, Mechthild would have allowed a large portion of her readership to shift from indirect comprehension, mediated by translation, to a more directly accessible reading experience. Indeed, as Jones points out, vernacularity has often been associated with the embodiment and ecstatic experience characteristic of female piety. And while these links have, at times, been posited too easily as part of a conceptual chain that links vernacularity to the material, corporeal world in opposition to spirituality, the more direct comprehension offered by Mechthild’s vernacular text has significant implications for the third and final type of spiritual performance prompt we find in her text.

history prior to Heinrich von Nördlingen’s commission, thereby undermining the notion of a singular “original.” Nemes, Von der Schrift zum Buch, 382–83.


52. This is not to imply that her work was only intended for a female readership. See Poor’s excellent chapter “Transmission Lessons: Gender, Audience, and the Mystical Handbook,” Mechthild and Her Book, 79–131.

53. Katherine Zieman, “Reading, Singing, and Understanding: Constructions of the Literacy of Women Religious in Late Medieval England,” in Learning and Literacy in Medieval England and Abroad, ed. Sarah Rees Jones, Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy; 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 97–120. The degree of Latin fluency possessed by women in convents throughout the Middle Ages has been a question of some debate. For an succinct summary, see Jones, Ruling the Spirit, 5–8.

Performing Seduction

Having considered Mechthild’s references to embodied performance practices as well as the affective potential of her erotic imagery to arouse, in this final section I turn to a third aspect of performance to explore how *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* might prompt the reader herself to perform. Recalling Dailey’s discussion of how the “inner person” of Pauline and Augustinian theology possesses a material form capable of sensory (if not sensual) stimulation, I now move on to consider the unique relationship of this spiritual embodiment to language. Dailey writes: “The inner person and inner body are understood as potential manifestations of Christ, the Word made flesh, and thus the inner person is linked to the Word, and eventually to textuality.”55 For Dailey, spiritual embodiment is not something outside the text, nor something captured by the text, but actually “a form of textuality.”56 If we accept this theological connection between spirituality and textuality, then we might begin to uncover the ways in which *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* is invested in prompting the soul to perform.

While Dailey’s argument posits a theological model of textuality qua spiritual embodiment, medieval reading practices offer evidence of a further (if more commonplace) relationship between textuality and embodiment as well: “in a medieval text, ‘written’ or even bookish as it may come down to us, its voice, the sense that it is or could be vocalized, is never far below the surface.”57 In other words, textuality not only bears a relationship to spiritual embodiment (in Dailey’s sense) but also to the “outer” body, in the sense of physical vocalization. Numerous scholars have noted the oralized reading practices that were commonplace until at least the sixteenth century, suggesting that texts were composed with at least as much attention to the ear as to the eye, and that readers were

56. Dailey, 7.
well attuned to the “voice” of any given text.\(^5\) Taken together, this might suggest that voiced textuality—recitation—could function as a mode of embodiment for both the inner and outer person.

Recitation has remained a central feature of Christian liturgy, as vocal performances carried out in the sight (and earshot) of God, and this was equally true for beguines like Mechthild under Dominican guidance. As Jones points out, “contrary to received opinion that the Dominicans were not particularly interested in the liturgy, the friars placed the Divine Office at the center of Dominican women’s spiritual lives.”\(^5\) Likewise, as Annie Sutherland observes, the Latin psalter was a cornerstone of medi-

eval devotional practice, not least because of the way in which the psalms, as a series of first person utterances, offer themselves up “for appropriation by the individual (or community) who prays using them.”\(^6\) “The psalms,” she writes, “are insistent in drawing attention to themselves as personal utterances, as performances before the divine.”\(^6\) Once again, such practices draw a connection between the inner person and textuality—this time, textuality in spoken form. Sutherland continues: “these texts require us to perform them, not simply in the sense of voicing their words, but also in the sense of completing them, of executing their imperatives.”\(^6\) In this sense, the words possess what linguistic philoso-

pher J. L. Austin terms “illocutionary force”: words that, when uttered, do what they say in the saying.\(^6\) The vocal performances referenced by

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58. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier insist that in “the ancient world, in the Middle Ages, and as late as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the sort of reading implicit in many texts was oralized (as was their actual reading). The ‘readers’ of those texts were listeners attentive to a reading voice. The text, addressed to the ear as much as to the eye, played on forms and formulas that adapted writing to the demands of oral performance.” Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, introduction to *A History of Reading in the West* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 4.


60. Annie Sutherland, “Performing the Penitential Psalms in the Middle Ages,” in Gragnolati and Suerbaum, *Aspects of the Performative*, 15–37, 18.

61. Sutherland, 18.

62. Sutherland, 35–36.

63. Austin distinguishes between illocutionary speech acts (utterances that do what they say in the saying) and perlocutionary speech acts (which, as a consequence
Sutherland possess illocutionary force in so far as the saying of them with the proper penitential engagement performs the act of penance. Speaking the text—that is, turning written words into performative utterances—is part of what allows them to mean fully.

 Returning to Mechthild, we can find traces of emphasized orality throughout The Flowing Light of the Godhead. As discussed in the previous sections, the loving exchanges between God and the soul often center on the aural quality of their dialogue. When God praises the “minnende sele” (loving soul), he states: “Du bist ein lieht vor minen ögen,/ du bist ein lire vor minen oren, / du bist ein stimme miner worten” (3.2, 160) (“You are a light to my eyes / You are a lyre to my ears; / You are a voice for my words”; 107). Clearly, speech and song are central to Mechthild’s experience of mystical union—from this passage, one could even argue that Mechthild’s voicing of God’s words is a basic condition of their union. At the same time, the use here of the term “loving soul,” as opposed to a personal pronoun, might suggest that such a union is available to any “loving soul” who speaks the words of God. Could this be a covert stage direction to Mechthild’s reader?

 If so, this might offer a clue to understanding one of the most unusual genres she uses. Amid first and third person narratives, love lyrics, and dramatic scenes, Mechthild inserts in each book a series of chapters, which, for lack of a better word, might simply be termed “lists.” For instance, in Book 1, after Mechthild has described the soul’s journey to the court of heaven and her ecstatic encounter with Christ the bridegroom, chapter 6 suddenly shifts in form:

 Nu höre, liebú, höre mit geistlichen oren! Sust singent die núñ köre:
“Wir loben dich, herre, das du úns hast gesúchet mit diner demütekeite.”
“Wir loben dich, herre, das du úns hast behalten mit diner barmeyerzekeite.”
“Wir loben dich, herre, das du úns hast geheret mit diner smahheit.” (1.6, 30)

Now hear, my Beloved; listen with spiritual ears. Thus do nine choirs sing:
We praise you, Lord, that you sought us in your humility.
We praise you, Lord, that you have kept us in your mercy
We praise you, Lord, that you have glorified us in your humiliation.

In this and all but one of the following six chapters, and then again in chapters 16 through 20, Mechthild offers the reader a series of lists that repeat a certain grammatical structure. In this first example, “We praise you, Lord, that” is repeated nine times. While this first example offers the song of the nine choirs of angels as they praise the Lord, the other lists alternate between God’s praising of the soul, and the soul’s praising of God.

The lists proceed without any regularity in number or length, but the sheer repetitiveness of list upon list is striking. The frequency of end rhymes preserved in the Middle High German translation emphasizes the repetition all the more. Considering the repetitive nature of these series of lists, their aural quality, which is tied to an historical understanding of reading as a voiced practice, and the prefatory direction included to the reader that the book ought to be read nine times, these lists begin to take on the contours of chants or incantations. Like texts for liturgical performances, they offer a repetitive, formalized script available for appropriation by the reader. Furthermore, given the erotic qualities of Mechthild’s writing, which have (at the very least) the potential to arouse the reader, we might perhaps understand these lists as an attempt to seduce the reader into participating in the act of recitation.

In her study of mysticism and communal song, Jones suggests that in the context of medieval Christianity, “ritual is a practice of the body performed with the intent to shape the attitude of the soul, an external

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64. Instructions to read the book nine times occur in both the Latin foreword to the Middle High German translation and in the preface of Book 1, although both are likely additions made by a fourteenth-century editor. Hans Neumann, Beiträge zur Textgeschichte des “Fließenden Lichts der Gottheit” und zur Lebensgeschichte Mechthilds von Magdeburg (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), 182–83.
technique for the creation of an inner disposition.” Bringing in Dai-
ley’s observation that the inner person or soul is uniquely connected
to textuality, chanting, as a doubly embodied performance, might also
be uniquely poised to effect a transformation of the soul. If liturgical
chanting is a ritual that realigns the soul for the purpose of establishing
a community of worshippers, and the recitation of psalms constitutes a
ritual performance of penance, then perhaps Mechthild’s extensive lists
might best be understood as the script for a ritual performance as well.
The question, then, would be: what act is being performed when one
recites Mechthild’s lists? What is the illocutionary force of such utter-
ances? In other words: what ritual, exactly, is taking place?

By way of answer, I ask the reader to indulge me (and Mechthild) by
reading the following list from chapter 8, entitled “Der minste lobet got
an zehen dingen” (The Most Lowly Praises God in Ten Things), aloud.

O du brennender berg,
o du userwelte sunne,
o du voller mane,
o du grundeloser brunne,
o du unreichaftú höhi,
o du klarheit ane masse,
o wisheit ane grunt
o barmherzekeit ane hinderunge,
o sterki ane widersatzunge,
o crone aller eren! (1.8, 32)

The use of emphatic aposiopesis—a rhetorical device in which the
speaker breaks off before the completion of a statement in order to
express the magnitude of an idea that exceeds language—creates a sense
of words reaching their communicative limit over and over again. The
repetition of the emphatic “o,” combined with the paratactical nature
of the sequence, in which no syntactical connection between lines is
provided, leaves the reciting reader uttering what might be the ecstatic
cries of an erotic encounter: breathy, broken and building to a crescendo.

If Mechthild’s text is taken as a prompt for recitation, then these lists might allow the reader to reenact the aural environment of mystical union, like a sonograph rendered in textual form. Or, perhaps, this uttered text is not only a record of Mechthild’s experience but an enactment in its own right.66 Mechthild’s lists, with their emphatic, ecstatic, and aural qualities, might signal a shift away from conveying mystical experience through the language of performance towards a performative language that offers itself up to the reader as a means of inducing mystical experience—of producing that erotically charged spiritual union via a practice of embodying language. Helena Stadler argues that such stylistic features allow Mechthild’s lists to affirm the ineffability of God while simultaneously dramatizing the moment of union as the “sublation of the self in the Other.”67 But if we consider Mechthild’s language as a series of speech acts—as a prompt for performance per se rather than a textual dramatization—then these lists, through their utterance, might be understood as constituting the mutual seduction between the soul and God. They invite the reader to perform the erotics of unio mystica, and thereby transform what might otherwise be taken as an account of one individual’s mystical experience into a prompt for communal piety.68

Conclusion
Performance takes on multiple functions in The Flowing Light of the Godhead. Mechthild’s use of performance repertoires serves as a means of communicating a past event as an embodied experience; her erotic language manifests a performative investment in affecting a pious arousal in the present of the reader’s encounter; and finally, the text offers a

66. Jones reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that texts aimed at recitation “served not as records of speech, but as models for it. These devotional texts did not describe the mystical experience of a particular person. Rather they were held to induce mystical experience in those engaging fully in their text.” “Communal Song,” 7.


68. As Jones has argued in her most recent work, the “primary purpose” of mystical texts “is not to relate a past experience but to teach others how to achieve spiritual fulfillment.” Ruling the Spirit, 3.
ritual script for future performances of *unio mystica*. Moreover, Mechthild provided this script in the vernacular, which not only widened her potential readership, but also would have bolstered the illocutionary force of this ritual performance. If, as Sutherland has argued, devotional texts meant for recitation before the divine require the proper inner disposition or engagement, “without which they would not mean as they should,” Mechthild’s use of the vernacular narrows any gap of comprehension between text and its intended effect.

Of course, as a kind of performative utterance, Mechthild’s chants are not guaranteed to produce the illocutionary effect of inducing mystical experiences in her readers. This union remains a promise—one that will not necessarily be kept. By definition, performative statements contain the potential for misfire; they are always only a promise. Returning to Dailey, we might bring this observation into dialogue with what she calls the “promised body.” According to Pauline and Augustinian theology, the promised body is a “truer . . . ‘immortal’ body,” the unified body par excellence that manifests the merging of not only the inner and outer persons in the afterlife, but also the merging of the soul with God—the very experience that constitutes mystical union. Moreover, this promised body “is closer to being-as-Word, paralleling Christ’s being as Word-made-flesh.” The chants Mechthild composed might manifest precisely such an attempt to perform “being-as-Word,” might be the very act of promising this future state. If Mechthild’s promise is felicitous—that is, if her promise is kept—then the reader turned performer might experience *unio mystica* as a fleeting moment in which the “promised body” is realized in the flesh of the here and now.

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69. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for pointing out the temporal triptych of this analysis.
70. Sutherland, “Performing the Penitential Psalms in the Middle Ages,” 35.