



# Medieval Feminist Forum

A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

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*This Is My Body: Eucharistic Theology and Anthropology in the Writings of Gertrude the Great of Helfta*, by Ella Johnson. Cistercian Studies 280. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2020. Pp. xxii + 246. ISBN: 978-0-87907-280-3.

In *This Is My Body*, Ella Johnson makes a compelling case for the importance of treating medieval women's devotional writings as theology. Countering the scholarly tendency to draw a strong distinction between these writings—which often feature visionary narratives, devotional meditations, and life writing—and the theology produced by university-trained scholars and clerics, Johnson's study explores how Gertrude's writing (much of which was collaboratively authored with her fellow nuns) articulates a eucharistic theology that draws upon but differs in important ways from those developed by her scholastic predecessors, especially in its valorization of the body and its conviction that *unio divina* is open to anyone, male or female, clerical or lay. Gertrude the Great (1256–1301 or 1302), a nun living and writing in the highly learned convent of Saint Maria at Helfta, is considered to be the author of two Latin works: the five-volume *Herald of God's Loving Kindness* and the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Johnson's discussion is admirably clear, and her chapters proceed in a logical order that makes her rich, complex argument easy to follow. After a preface that argues for the importance of reading Gertrude's writings as theology, chapter 1 introduces Gertrude and her work, and chapter 2 explores the monastic context of the Helfta convent, a site widely known for the excellent education that its nuns received, particularly under the abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn (1232–1292). This overview makes the book accessible to scholars who are not already specialists in the Helfta corpus.

Chapter 3 is likewise contextual, but here Johnson turns her attention to medieval eucharistic theology, so that—in the core of her argument, chapters 4–6—Gertrude's innovations are clear. This chapter lays out the positions on the physical and spiritual senses espoused by Origen, Augustine, and Bernard. Origen adopted a strongly dualistic view that valued spiritual sight over its physical analogue, a view that accords with his position that “the body [has] no real or meaningful

role in the way humans know and return to God” (67). The body, for Origen, is functional—we need it to navigate the material world—but it has no part in the knowledge of God (66). Augustine’s view softens this position, as he argues that the corporeal senses are useful for knowing the divine. Yet, while Augustine sees more value in the body, there is a hierarchy between body and soul, and he privileges sight over the other senses—especially over taste and touch, the most corporeal of the senses (78). Finally, Bernard goes one step further than Augustine in his view of the value of corporeality, arguing that “the human body is the vehicle for salvation, not the obstacle to it” (87). Body and soul work together for their mutual benefit and salvation, and the physical senses provide analogues for how one can know God. Yet they remain only analogues, and sight remains at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of the senses.

This overview provides an excellent foundation for understanding the key argument of chapter 4. Replete with phrases such as “goes beyond,” “transcends,” and “exceeds,” this chapter demonstrates how Gertrude diverges from her predecessors’ positions, developing a theology in which the physical experience of the Eucharist is an instrument of divine union. Unlike Origen, Augustine, and Bernard, Gertrude sees the senses of “taste and touch as the highest modes of knowing God” (99), precisely *because* of—not despite—their physical immediacy. In the Eucharist, the communicant tastes and touches the humanity of Christ, and this becomes the basis for union. Gertrude’s view also articulates a new understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and the corporeal senses. Whereas, for her predecessors, the corporeal senses are inferior to the spiritual and may provide knowledge by serving as analogues to the spiritual senses, Gertrude sees the spiritual and corporeal senses as working in tandem. By physically tasting Christ’s humanity through the Eucharist, then, it is possible to spiritually “taste”—in the sense of *sapere*, the root of *sapientia*, or wisdom—Christ’s divinity.

In chapter 5, Johnson considers Gertrude’s temporal and spatial language, showing how the ritual of the Eucharist draws together “here” and “there” as well as “then” and “now,” enabling a sort of “remembering of the future” of salvation (140–44). Again, the focus is on

the direct experience with Christ that occurs in the moment of eucharistic communion, an experience that transcends temporal and spatial distinctions. The chapter also argues that Gertrude presents her own writing as having a similar effect. Reading her words in the proper spirit creates an opportunity for a direct encounter with Christ in both his humanity and his divinity: Gertrude “suggests that Jesus Christ will be united to her readers, in both his humanity and his divinity, by the very act of reading her books” (157–58).

Chapter 6 takes gender as its explicit concern and is thus of particular interest to feminist scholars of the Middle Ages. Here, Johnson analyzes how Gertrude subverts gendered binaries in her writings and, in doing so, challenges some of the generalizations that have accrued to medieval women’s mystical and religious writings since the 1980s. Gertrude stresses that the body—so strongly associated with women in the medieval period—is in itself a means of knowing the divine. She does not denigrate the body; at the same time, she neither employs the tropes of self-effacement that are common in medieval women’s mysticism nor exploits the connection between woman and body to empathize with Christ. Instead, Gertrude frequently presents herself in a priestly role, assuming duties normally reserved for men. At the same time, she uses a feminine persona throughout the *Spiritual Exercises* (with a few interesting lapses, that Johnson explores), emphasizing the accessibility of divine knowledge to men and women, alike.

Chapter 7 looks at Gertrude within the larger context of medieval women’s devotional writings but narrows the focus to her contemporary Helfta writers—Mechthild of Hackeborn, a fellow nun whose eucharistic theology is similar to Gertrude’s, and Mechthild of Magdeburg, a beguine who spent her last years at Helfta. The latter Mechthild’s *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, most of which she wrote prior to coming to Helfta, reveals many of the gendered tropes more common at the time in women’s writings than in men’s, such as anxieties about persecution and claiming authority as a woman, and an identification with Christ in his sufferings. As Johnson speculates, it is likely that the sheltered environment of Helfta gave Gertrude (and Mechthild of Hackeborn) the freedom to confidently explore their spiritual insights in a way that was closed to Mechthild of Magdeburg and other women

who lived more fully within the misogynistic world of thirteenth-century Europe.

This book is essential for Helfta scholars, since it makes a major contribution to our understanding of Gertrude's theology. It also adds important nuance to the study of the body and the senses in the Middle Ages. More broadly, scholars of medieval women's religious and devotional writings will find this work useful, as it complicates existing narratives about medieval women's spirituality. Johnson compellingly makes the case for expanding what kinds of writings "count" as theology and adds new dimensions to our understanding of medieval eucharistic theology. Johnson's concluding comments offer far-reaching reflections on how both Gertrude's theology *and understanding her as a theologian* challenge fixed dichotomies, that, she notes, tend "to harden ... into hierarchical dichotom[ies]" (193): body/soul, woman/man, professed/lay, mysticism/theology. Disrupting these hierarchies liberates us to read more richly and fully. As we continue to build upon the foundational work of early feminist scholars of medieval women mystics, this refreshed vision of the field offers significant new insights.

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*Margery Kempe's Spiritual Medicine: Suffering, Transformation and the Life-Course*, by Laura Kalas. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020. Pp. xiv + 252. ISBN: 9781843845546.

This book will doubtless be of interest to both literary scholars and scholars of the medical humanities, and will hopefully encourage more dialogue between these fields. Kalas's work also suggests that current models of medical history—which have largely rejected the retrospective diagnosis so popular in studies of Margery Kempe and her *Book*—might offer further insights into this much-studied text.