Women Writers in the Medieval Church: Context, Hierarchy, and Reception

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Women Writers in the Medieval Church: Context, Hierarchy, and Reception

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted to the College of Arts and Sciences
for the Completion of College Honors

by

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Introduction

Women in the Middle Ages did not have great freedom, particularly in regard to the Church. Men dominated clerical offices and the study of theology, so they were in a position to vocalize their ideas. Women who wanted to write had few ways to make their voices heard. One method was to claim visionary authority. Hildegard of Bingen, Elisabeth of Schönau, and Mechthild of Magdeburg were three of these women. As visionaries or mystics, each of these women possessed a personal connection with God by which she received special knowledge. Hildegard, Elisabeth, and Mechthild chose to record their experiences through writing. However, they could not accomplish this alone. Despite the authority they held as visionaries, these women were dependent on men in order to validate their teachings. The extent to which this was true varied from woman to woman. One of the reasons for this variation is the status that each woman held. This study will explore their lives and relationships, paying close attention to the context in which they lived and the context in which their texts were created. A crucial consideration is the balance of informal and institutional, or formal, authority held by each woman, and also the nature of the relationship between each woman and her male collaborators. By analyzing these factors, it will be possible to discern how they played a role in the creation of these texts and in the way the texts and the women themselves were perceived.

Scholars have been examining the interplay between male authority figures and women writers for the past few decades. In 1991, John Coakley published two articles, “Gender and the Authority of Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and
Dominicans”\(^1\) and “Friars as Confidants of Holy Women in Medieval Dominican Hagiography,”\(^2\) which dealt with the question of how medieval holy women and men interacted. His focus on the mendicant orders came about because Franciscans and Dominicans had a great deal of interaction with women due to the nature of their mission; mendicant preachers spoke publicly, and women were often in their audiences and among their followers. This led to spiritual relationships, which in turn could lead to working relationships in which men assisted visionary women with their writing. Coakley’s concern falls with the men, summing it up succinctly, “These voices speak of the men’s perception of the women, their interactions with them, and the significance of women as an aspect of their religious experience as men.”\(^3\) Rather than exploring the experience of medieval holy women, Coakley looks primarily at how these women were regarded by the men closest to them, and how that perception affects hagiography about these women. He touches upon the disparity of perception of gender differences between the genders. Men, he says, had a stronger sense of difference from women, whereas women, while acknowledging gender differences, did not necessarily define themselves according to these differences. Therefore, when men wrote about role reversal among the sexes, it was a strong statement. The danger of such reversals was real; men held authority to which women were not privy in their formal ecclesiastical power. However, holy women also held authority to which male clerics did not have access in the form of their direct connection with God. Ideally, and often, holy women and the men who wrote about them achieved a balanced relationship in which women were admired yet submissive; they provided the men with access to their mystical


\(^3\) Coakley, “Friars as Confidants,” 223.
experiences, but never challenged the men’s ecclesiastical and theological authority, resulting in a mutually beneficial relationship.

The 1999 compilation of essays *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, edited by Catherine Mooney,⁴ sharpens the focus on medieval holy women themselves. In the foreword, Caroline Walker Bynum sums up the questions the essays attempt to address: “How do we discern individual voices? how are these voices gendered? how much of what survives is determined by genre, by social or religious stereotypes, by individual experience?”⁵ There are several parts to this. First is the discernment of different voices. Nearly all the surviving writings about medieval holy women were authored in full or in part by men. Even those works written by women were very often edited or at least scribed by men. Inevitably, the men’s voices creep in and impart their biases on the works. Mooney’s compilation of essays asks how much it is possible to discern between the man’s voice and the woman’s voice in a given work about a medieval holy woman. In doing so, it also attempts to examine the ways in which female self-representation differed from male representation of women. A major concern is what men chose to include and what they left out, and how this affects perceptions of these women.

Kimberley Benedict’s *Empowering Collaborations: Writing Partnerships Between Religious Women and Scribes in the Middle Ages*⁶ from 2004 looks at medieval authorship as a communal activity. In doing so, she expands upon the idea of a mutually beneficial relationship between a male cleric and a holy woman. Benedict argues that authorship in the Middle Ages was a collaborative effort. Religious women, both laywomen and nuns, worked with male

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⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, “Foreword,” in *Gendered Voices*: ix-xi, at x.
scribes, usually monks or priests, in order to record their visions and messages. There were two major reasons for this collaboration. First, it was often necessary for practical reasons. Few women were literate; poor women rarely had the opportunity to become educated, and while wealthy laywomen might have the opportunity to learn to read and write, even then it was typically in their vernacular language, not the more official language of Latin. Nuns living in religious communities might have a greater familiarity with Latin, but often lacked the necessary amount of grammatical instruction to be able to produce new texts on their own. Male clerical figures would have this ability, so they were a logical choice for women who needed help getting their ideas written down. Even those women who were literate in Latin, however, often turned to male clerics instead of writing for themselves. Holy women who wrote their experiences, which often included new theological ideas, were in danger of being viewed as heretical or overstepping their bounds into the realm of ecclesiastical authority. For this reason, collaborating with male clergy was a safer option. The men not only provided clear language and prose, but they also lent credibility and authority to the texts. The assumption was that in scribing for a holy woman, the man would also evaluate her claims to make sure they kept within the orthodox doctrine and, in some cases, edit more controversial passages. Power dynamics unavoidably entered into these collaborations. Benedict’s aim is to understand how these collaborations functioned.

Coakley’s 2006 book, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators*, expands on his earlier focus on men’s perspectives. His concern lies not with the “lived” sanctity of medieval holy women, but rather the “imagined” sanctity. By this, he means that his focus lies with how the women were perceived, recorded, and remembered, rather than

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on what actually occurred during their lives. In other words, he is not necessarily concerned with
the “truth” concerning their lives, but the way in which male perceptions and biases influenced
both contemporary and modern perceptions. For this reason, he chooses to focus on men who
wrote about women in such a way that their relationship is evident. In doing so, he expands upon
Mooney’s concept of “voices.” He examines texts which include male self-examination in
regards to the women they write about. He also expands upon the idea that holy women were
admired but submissive, saying there are two aspects to these male/female relationships:
authority and control on the one hand, in which the cleric maintains and exercises ecclesiastical
authority, and fascination and subservience on the other hand, in which the cleric respects and,
sometimes, even reveres the holy woman. This distinction between “informal” powers and
“institutional” powers is an important consideration. Visionary women hold informal power in
their ability to access information that others cannot reach. They lack the type of institutional
power that their male collaborators possess. The comparison of the value of each type of
authority is not always a simple, hierarchical one.

Thus far, scholars have primarily explored the nature of these male-female working
relationships. Coakley has been a leader in understanding the male perspective on these
relationships, looking at how holy women were experienced by men. Others, as shown strongly
in Mooney’s book, have explored the idea of “voices,” or the nature of the relationships. This
concept examines the differences in how women presented themselves and how they were
presented by men. Still further, scholars like Benedict have looked at the reasons for
collaboration, the benefits for both parties involved, and the power dynamics associated with
these collaborations. What remains to be explored in greater depth is an expansion on this last

point. The relationships themselves have been explored, but, as is true in any situation, the context in which these relationships existed is as important as the relationships themselves. This includes factors such as the status of both the woman and the man or men involved; their relationship, either professional or personal; the time and place; and cultural perceptions of the individuals, their work, and their relationships. Whereas Coakley focuses on the dichotomy between women’s spiritual authority and men’s institutional authority, this study will consider also women’s institutional authority. As members of Church orders, women in abbeys held varying levels of institutional power correlated to their respective positions, which women outside that structure lacked. This is an important consideration. Examination of this context will form the foundation for this thesis.

The three women I have selected, Hildegard of Bingen, Elisabeth of Schönau, and Mechthild of Magdeburg, share many similarities. Living between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, all hail from the German territories. All three women can be considered mystics; they experienced visions and some form of a personal connection with God. Importantly, these three women were all believed to be true visionaries and were revered. Thus, though their paths may have differed, their outcomes are similar. Only Hildegard has been formally canonized, but not until 2012, after centuries of being considered what I will call a *de facto* saint. Similarly, Elisabeth and Mechthild have often been referred to as saints despite not having been canonized. What differs among these women most of all is the question of context. Due to their similarities, it is possible to examine the differences in a semi-controlled setting. Hildegard lived

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9 There is some scholarly debate concerning the use of the term ‘mystic’ for all three of these women, but for the purposes of this thesis this simple definition will be used and applied to all three.


11 Though in Mechthild’s case this is partially due to confusion between her and Mechthild of Hackeborn, who was formally canonized.
almost her entire life within a religious setting; enclosed with an anchoress at a young age, she lived in a cell with only other women, became their *magistra*, or prioress, and eventually became an abbess at the monastery she herself founded. Her relationships with the men who contributed to her works and works about her varied. Her *magister*, Volmar, was a man she selected who provided her with guidance concerning her writings. His place was eventually taken over by the monk Godfrey. Guibert was a monk who sought her out because of her reputation; he asked her to work with him, not the other way around. Theodoric, who compiled the *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* after her death, was a man she never knew. Elisabeth of Schönau also lived a religious life. Becoming a nun at age twelve, she began writing first with her fellow nuns at Schönau and then with her brother, Ekbert. Later in life she became the *magistra* of the nuns at Schönau, but never acted as the abbess. Mechthild of Magdeburg lived a semi-religious life; as a beguine she was both subject to and separate from the hierarchical order of the Church. Perhaps due to this, Mechthild lacked such close relationships with men, preferring to write with other women, nuns at Helfta, where she lived at the end of her life, though she had the support of her male confessor and editor, Heinrich of Halle. It can be plainly seen that, despite their similarities, these three women lived different experiences.

This thesis asks these questions: how did visionary women who held different formal positions within or outside of the Church hierarchy legitimize their written work? Does her position correlate with the level of protection each woman deemed necessary for herself? How did each woman’s relationship with men affect this question? I will argue, based on case studies of these three women, Hildegard, Elisabeth, and Mechthild, that status does seem to be important in two main ways. First, position within the Church structure is important in determining the level of risk for women to write, and it therefore has influence on the justification they provided.
Second, it is a factor in both contemporary perceptions and remembrance of visionary women after their deaths. For the first of these considerations, there seems to be an inverse correlation with the level of authority a woman possesses. The greater the authority she holds, the lower the risk. For the second consideration there is a positive correlation. The greater status a woman has, the more likely she is to be remembered, specifically for her visionary power. However, position and relationships with men are not necessarily indicators of the means by which women provide legitimacy in the way one might expect. Hildegard, who held the greatest institutional authority of the three, placed herself in a dominant position in terms of her assertions of authority and her relationships with men. Elisabeth, who was in a more subordinate position within the Church structure, was similarly subordinate to men in supplying her legitimacy as a visionary. Mechthild, who had the least formal authority, actually presents herself as less subordinate than Elisabeth and possibly even Hildegard, either in spite of or perhaps due to her position.
Hildegard of Bingen

So the pure Virgin brought forth her Only-Begotten in sweet chastity, not because of a man but because she was overshadowed by the power of the Most High and imbued by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.12

Hildegard of Bingen pushed the limits on female activity in writing and theology. Hildegard was born in 1098 to a wealthy family as the youngest of ten children. At the age of eight, Hildegard was placed under the guidance of an anchoress, Jutta. She lived enclosed in a cell connected to the monastery at Disibodenberg with Jutta, who became her teacher and mentor. Other women joined them, so that they lived as a small nunnery, of which Hildegard was elected abbess upon Jutta’s death in 1136. From this community of women she eventually founded the convent at Rupertsberg. It was several years after this that Hildegard made her visions known publicly.13 She began writing theological texts, including her first, *Scivias*, and her last, *Book of Divine Works*. Alongside her prophetic writings, which stemmed from the divine inspiration she received, she also wrote music and texts on medicine and the natural world, though always, as Barbara Newman points out, keeping her theological texts with divine inspiration separate from those written by Hildegard alone (without divine intervention).14 In addition to all her written work, Hildegard was also responsible during this entire time for the nuns at Rupertsberg and the convent she later founded at Eibingen.15 Hildegard collaborated with several men (and women) throughout her lifetime. The monk Volmar was her original confidant. She had chosen him as her *magister* and confided in him about her visions. It was Volmar who

brought her visions to the attention of the archbishop and later Pope Eugene III, who granted Hildegard the authorization to write and publish her visions.\footnote{Newman, “Introduction,” in \textit{Scivias}, 11.} Volmar stayed with her, later becoming the editor of \textit{Scivias}, along with the nun Richardis. Volmar died in 1173, well before Hildegard’s career was over. Godfrey, another monk at Disibodenberg, was sent to Hildegard’s convent as a supervisor and took Volmar’s place as her collaborator. He helped Hildegard to continue working on the \textit{Book of Divine Works} and also began writing the \textit{Vita Sanctae Hildegardis}, the hagiography of Hildegard’s life.\footnote{Anna Silvas, “The Life of Hildegard, Introduction,” in \textit{Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources} (Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 122.} Godfrey died in 1176, yet again creating an opening for the position of Hildegard’s editor. Guibert filled this position. He was a monk at Gembloux who began a correspondence with Hildegard in 1175 and moved to Hildegard’s monastery in 1177 to work with her.\footnote{Coakley, \textit{Women, Men, and Spiritual Power}, 50.} He left after her death in 1179, leaving Theodoric of Echternach to complete her \textit{Vita}, though Guibert later edited the work. Theodoric was commissioned by the Abbots of Echternach and St. Eucharius to write Hildegard’s life, even though he had never met her and apparently knew little about her.\footnote{Silvas, “The Life of Hildegard, Introduction,” in \textit{Jutta and Hildegard}, 121.} Thus, Hildegard had widely varied relationships with the men who worked with her and those who wrote about her life and works. In \textit{Scivias} and \textit{Book of Divine Works}, Hildegard’s strong voice and self-confidence are evident. In the \textit{Vita}, contemporary perceptions of Hildegard can be examined. Due to her position of authority and the structures of support that surrounded her, Hildegard came to be highly regarded and has remained so through the centuries. These same factors played a role in determining Hildegard’s method of presenting justification for her work. Hildegard uses rhetoric that presents her as a meek woman, but she also displays a tremendous amount of confidence in
her power and knowledge, and she dominates her relationships as an active player, not a passive recipient of authority from men.

*Hildegard’s Theological Texts*

*Scivias*, or *Know the Ways*, was the first theological text Hildegard wrote after receiving the command to write from God. Working with Volmar and Richardis, a nun with whom Hildegard was close, it took Hildegard ten years to complete *Scivias.* As her first visionary text, *Scivias* in a sense tested the waters for Hildegard. Having already received approval from the pope, Hildegard knew she had the official authority to record her visions, but actually doing so was still risky. *Scivias* presents a balance between saying what Hildegard wanted to say and portraying herself as small, timid, and humble. It is, overall, Hildegard’s own voice (though of course she writes primarily in the Heavenly Voice that speaks to her).

Consisting of three books with several distinct visions in each, *Scivias* follows a consistent format throughout. Each section begins with the vision described in Hildegard’s voice, saying what she saw and experienced. This is followed by an explanation from the Heavenly Voice, which goes through each aspect of the vision and provides an explanation. It is very thorough. Often, the explanations are dotted with quotes from Old and New Testament figures, which are then interpreted and paraphrased by the Heavenly Voice. *Scivias* has a wide range; it covers all of time from the fall of Lucifer through the end of time, with plenty in between. It addresses large theological questions, such as the nature of the Trinity, along with contemporary, more commonplace concerns, like the dangers of fornication or the importance of baptism. Frequently, the vision itself serves as a sort of jumping off point, with the Voice going on to discuss matters that are not directly part of what Hildegard sees in the vision itself but are related

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20 Newman, “Introduction” in *Scivias*, 12
to that subject matter. For example, a vision concerning the casting out of Adam and Eve goes on to include issues such as why a woman should not enter a church after childbirth.\textsuperscript{21} Throughout the work, Hildegard’s goal of providing a teaching text is evident. Phrases such as “What does this mean?” and “Why did this happen?” along with analogies that further explore points appear frequently and are included in nearly every section at least once. This focus on teaching is established in the Declaration, the preface to \textit{Scivias}, in which Hildegard explains her connection with God, her reasons for writing, and her aims.

By placing the Declaration at the beginning of the text, Hildegard presents justification for her writings immediately. It serves to eliminate any doubts about Hildegard’s legitimacy. She records what the Heavenly Voice said to her:

\begin{quote}
O fragile human, ashes of ashes, and filth of filth! Say and write what you see and hear. But since you are timid in speaking, and simple in expounding, and untaught in writing, speak and write these things not by a human mouth, and not by the understanding of human invention, and not by the requirements of human composition, but as you see and hear them on high in the heavenly places in the wonders of God. Explain these things in such a way that the hearer, receiving the words of his instructor, may expound them in those words, according to that will, vision and instruction. Thus therefore, O human, speak these things that you see and hear. And write them not by yourself or any other human being, but by the will of Him Who knows, sees and disposes all things in the secrets of His mysteries.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Hildegard uses this passage as a rhetorical device in order to demonstrate much of what she wanted to convey about the nature of her divine knowledge and inspiration. First, it heavily emphasizes that everything she writes comes not from herself nor any other human (woman or man), but from God. This is important because it provides Hildegard with some protection against criticism. She claims that she writes only because God commanded her to do so. This stresses her humility and understanding of her subordinate standing as a human and as a woman.

\textsuperscript{21} Hildegard of Bingen, \textit{Scivias}, 83.
\textsuperscript{22} Hildegard of Bingen, \textit{Scivias}, 59.
By beginning her work with this assertion of divine inspiration, Hildegard puts herself in a position to write without being condemned as too bold or over-assertive. As Sabina Flanagan notes, “…her humility, though real enough, was of the paradoxical kinds which gives authority and assurance.” By this, Flanagan means that Hildegard uses rhetoric of humility in order to validate herself as a female writer. Similarly, Hildegard emphasizes her lack of education for the same purpose: “…a lack of formal education could be turned into an advantage (and even the extent of one’s informal education might be somewhat played down), since this showed that what Hildegard had to impart … must have come directly from God.” Because of the prohibition on women’s teaching, it was necessary for Hildegard to assert divine inspiration for her works. In this way, she could avoid the criticism of being too presumptuous as a woman. This passage also sets up Hildegard’s goal in writing this work: teaching. The Heavenly Voice commands Hildegard to write in order that others may be able to hear His word through her, establishing the idea that God speaks not to Hildegard, but through her. The whole Declaration reads similarly to what one would expect a man to include in the work. It very well may have been Hildegard’s idea to begin with this section, but it seems as though any male editor (in this case, Volmar) would have been eager to include this type of disclaimer in order to ease the skepticism a woman like Hildegard would have faced. This passage is more similar to the Vita Sanctae Hildegardis than any other passage in Scivias; in fact, two of the “autobiographical” passages in Vita (which will be discussed below) come from this passage in Scivias.

Hildegard demonstrates her awareness of the fears regarding women in power not only in her Declaration but also in a reference to Eve leading Adam astray: “Thus woman very quickly

22 Flanagan, Hildegard of Bingen, 55-56.
23 1 Timothy 2:11-12, in which Paul says, “Let woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.”
overthrones man, if he does not hate her and easily accepts her words.”26 This is precisely the fear contemporary men would have harbored about women like Hildegard, that they were capable of repeating Eve’s sins and leading men astray. This can explain why men were typically so careful to determine a woman’s legitimacy before taking her word as truth. Despite her position as abbess and founder of a convent, as a woman Hildegard was at risk of being viewed unfavorably by male superiors. The predominant fear would be that a woman who claimed divine authority was being deluded by the devil, which would therefore lead good Christians astray. By including this particular quote, Hildegard demonstrates her acknowledgement and understanding of this fear, though not giving in to it.

In Scivias, Hildegard provides material that makes it possible to look at her views on men and women. The rhetoric used provides indications of contemporary views of women and how Hildegard fit into them. It is clear to the reader that gender matters to Hildegard. A subtle but real indication of this comes when Hildegard writes of figures she sees, “I could not quite tell whether their faces were masculine or feminine.”27 It perhaps does not appear to the modern reader to matter for the vision whether the figures are masculine or feminine. Hildegard goes on to describe them using feminine pronouns. There is more than one explanation for why Hildegard may have included this ambiguity. It could be that sex does matter to Hildegard for the vision, so that it would make a difference in the interpretation whether the figures were male or female. In this case, the statement would accentuate equality between the sexes. On the other hand, however, it could be that Hildegard is highlighting the idea that the sex of the figures does not matter, for the figures are capable of speaking articulately and teaching Hildegard and, through her, the public about theology and virtues.

26 Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias, 77.
27 Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias, 453.
Hildegard strikes a balance between elevating women and acknowledging their “lesser” place in society, particularly using rhetoric to assert her own humility while also maintaining her spiritual authority. This is demonstrated with a quote about the Virgin Mary: “So the pure Virgin brought forth her Only-Begotten in sweet chastity, not because of a man but because she was overshadowed by the power of the Most High and imbued by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.”

Variations on this statement appear throughout the work. This can be viewed as a metaphor for Hildegard herself, though whether or not she intended it that way is left to speculation. Hildegard receives her understanding of the Word (as she commonly refers to the Son) not through a man, meaning a priest or other Church official, but through the Father and the Holy Spirit, just as the Virgin received the Son not through man but through God. As Anne Clark notes, Mary’s role is superior to the role of any ordained priest. Therefore, if this is taken as a comparison of Hildegard to Mary, it asserts her authority as a visionary to be equal to that of clergymen who hold authority due to their position within the Church hierarchy. In this same vein, Hildegard provides a misquote from the gospels. “‘As woman is of the man, so is the man for the woman; but all are from God’ … Which is to say: Woman was created for the sake of man, and man for the sake of woman.”

As Newman points out, this is incorrect. The quote actually reads, “For the man is not of the woman, but the woman for the man. Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man.” Here, Hildegard asserts the equality of the sexes, defying the established idea that women were weaker in body, mind, and spirit, and therefore must be dominated.

30 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 78.
32 1 Corinthians 11:8-9.
Overall, *Scivias* seems to be mainly in Hildegard’s voice with only a minor amount of editing by men. However, there is one moment that stands out as the work of an editor. Hildegard writes quite a bit about male anatomy and physiology, particularly pertaining to fornication and sexuality. As Hildegard was a woman who was enclosed with only other women at the age of eight, stayed there until she was forty-three years old, lived only in monasteries, and claimed virginity, it is unsurprising that a reader may become suspicious of how she is so informed about this topic. Following a section on fornication and lust, there is a disclaimer from the Heavenly Voice that leaps off the page as an insertion by an editor: “I am explaining this by this person [Hildegard], to whom this human operation is unknown; she is receiving this explanation not from human knowledge, but from God. What next?”33 This statement is unlike any other passage in *Scivias* in that it comes across as extremely defensive. Though there are certainly other instances when Hildegard asserts her own humility and divine inspiration, there are no other examples of this type of defensiveness. Here, the directness of the assertion makes it very emphatic. It is not hard to imagine this statement being added to the text by an editor who had received feedback or could anticipate feedback questioning the provenance of Hildegard’s knowledge about the subject. To add to this, the “What next?” makes the narrator sound very eager to move on to the next topic quickly in order for the reader to not dwell for too long on this matter. Despite the sense that this was an addition by an editor, putting it into the words of the Heavenly Voice maintains Hildegard’s divinely given basis for justification.

The *Liber Divinorum Operum*, or *Book of Divine Works*, was Hildegard’s last theological text. Completed just a few years before her death, it is a demonstration of Hildegard’s increased confidence in her work. The English edition of the *Book of Divine Works*, translated by Robert

33 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 82.
Cunningham and edited by Matthew Fox, is far from perfect. Beyond simply the factual inaccuracies and a clearly biased standpoint, the formatting of the translation itself is ambiguous to the point of error.\textsuperscript{34} Chief among these complaints is the failure to properly distinguish between Hildegard’s voice and the Heavenly Voice. Despite Cunningham’s note that italics were added to the sections in which the Voice is speaking in order to “improve the readability” of the translation,\textsuperscript{35} the italics are extremely inconsistent and misused. As Newman points out, “the entire text of the Book of Divine Works purports to be celestial dictation, except for the short descriptions at the beginning of each vision. But [in Fox’s edition] only a fraction is italicized, and the statements identifying speakers are often omitted. This carelessness obscures the nature of Hildegard’s claims and the literary integrity of her book.”\textsuperscript{36} However, this misstep on the part of the editors does allow for the examination of a crucial consideration: how much of herself does Hildegard put into her work? Though consistency connects the Book of Divine Works with Hildegard’s earlier Scivias, there is an important difference in the content. While Scivias focuses almost exclusively on theological matters and matters that pertain directly to the contemporary Church, Book of Divine Works branches out in terms of subject matter. As noted above, Newman mentions that Hildegard keeps discrete her visionary texts and her other texts, meaning that in her theological texts like Scivias and Book of Divine Works she claims divine inspiration but she makes no such claim concerning her non-theological works.\textsuperscript{37} However, Book of Divine Works challenges Hildegard’s policy of discreteness. Here, though she claims divine inspiration and claims to record the words of the Heavenly Voice, she also discusses medical matters. In

\textsuperscript{35} Robert Cunningham, Book of Divine Works, with Letters and Songs, edited by Matthew Fox, translated by Robert Cunningham (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1987), unnumbered page.
particular, Vision Three, “On Human Nature,” focuses on the humors that make up the human body and the various ways in which interactions between or deficiencies of humors can affect the human body. This is written in the same format as the visions that focus on strictly theological concerns, though the prose does seem to address Hildegard herself with first-person pronouns more in this section than in others, with phrases such as “we human beings.” This appears to indicate a higher level of confidence than seen previously in Scivias. Having already written successfully and having her works been well-received, it seems as though Hildegard felt she had the ability to overtly put more of her own thinking into her primarily divinely-inspired text. Through this, Hildegard’s personal development in terms of confidence and boldness in “pushing the limits” can be seen.

Overall consistency is a key theme linking the Book of Divine Works to Scivias. The format is more or less the same, with each vision beginning with a visual description from Hildegard followed by an explanation from the Heavenly Voice. Much of the content is the same, though the Book of Divine Works has a narrower scope than Scivias, which spans all of time. Even the forewords of the two works are incredibly similar, to the point that at first glance the reader might think she describes the same event in both, though she does not. The foreword or Declaration of Scivias describes a vision she had at age forty-two while the foreword of Book of Divine Works describes a similar occurrence at age fifty-five. In both, though, a divine force commands Hildegard to write; thus, the forewords serve the same function as justification and explanation for her writing. The re-occurrence of such an event described in Book of Divine Works perhaps makes her point even more strongly; by adding this disclaimer, Hildegard makes

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38 Hildegard of Bingen, Book of Divine Works, 58; keeping in mind, though, that this may simply be due to the editing style discussed above.
39 Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias, 59; Book of Divine Works, 5.
it difficult for anyone to accuse her of overstepping her bounds while also asserting her humility. She does not claim that she continued to write because she felt she, as a woman, had so much to say, but rather because the Heavenly Voice continued to encourage her to do so. Furthermore, Hildegard remains consistent by building upon her own work. In Vision Two, Hildegard describes her vision of “a wheel of marvelous appearance”: “On the wheel there were symbols that made it look like the image I had seen twenty-eight years ago – then it took the form of an egg, as described in the third vision of my book Scivias.”\(^{40}\) In her reference to her own prior visions and writing, Hildegard demonstrates her consistency. Her story never changes; she does not contradict herself. This is extremely important when considering the potential dangers of asserting oneself so much as a woman. In directly referring to her own work, Hildegard calls attention to her own consistency, which strengthens her claim of legitimacy.

*Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*

*Vita Sanctae Hildegardis,* or *The Life of Holy Hildegard,* is a composition of texts by several authors. Godfrey of Disibodenberg began but did not finish writing a life of Hildegard after her death. Theodoric, a monk at Echternach, was commissioned to complete the *Vita.* Beginning with Godfrey’s work, which made up much of Book One of the *Vita,* Theodoric also drew upon other sources left to him by Guibert. These included letters, miracle reports, and the ‘autobiographical’ sources by Hildegard herself.\(^{41}\) From these, Theodoric completed the work, which was necessary because he had never actually met Hildegard. Finally, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* was edited by Guibert. So, the work has many authors: Theodoric, Godfrey, Guibert, and Hildegard herself.

\(^{40}\) Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works,* 22.

\(^{41}\) Silvas, “The Life of Hildegard, Introduction,” in *Jutta and Hildegard:* 118-134, at 122-123.
*Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* reads very similarly to any other hagiography of a female mystic, written for the purpose of bringing about the canonization of its subject. Broken down into three parts, the first and second books describe Hildegard’s early life and her visions, while the third book focuses on miracles that occurred both during Hildegard’s life and after her death. In the first book, it is described how Hildegard had visions from an early age, but was afraid to reveal them. It is only when she fell ill, the *Vita* claims, that Hildegard revealed her inner life to her *magister*, who revealed such things to the Abbot of Disibodenberg. It was this abbot who ordered her to write her visions in order to make them public. Her writings moved through the Church hierarchy and eventually reached Pope Eugene III at Trier. Eugene III investigated her writings and, according to the *Vita*, “gave orders that the blessed Hildegard’s writings be presented publicly” and he himself “read them out to the Archbishop, the Cardinals and all of the clergy present.”  

42 This section on Hildegard’s writings moving up through the hierarchy and gaining the pope’s approval takes prominence in the beginning section of the first book. It appears as though the authors, primarily Theodoric who, though he may have drawn from Godfrey’s writings for this section, actually structured the *Vita*, were eager to provide the legitimizing factor straightaway. Thus, it leaves no doubt in the readers’ minds that Hildegard was not in any way transgressing the limits on women’s teaching. It also sets up the next section of Book One, which describes Hildegard’s drive to found an abbey at Rupertsberg. In this matter, Hildegard is very willful, but the papal approval she had already received set her up so that she remained in a flattering light. Additionally, it was not only her will but also God’s will that she move to Rupertsberg from Disibodenberg. When the abbot and monks denied her requests to move, Hildegard fell ill and was only cured when they conceded to her wishes, symbolizing the

42 *The Life of Holy Hildegard*, in *Jutta and Hildegard*: 135-210, at 143.
divine will acting through her. Thus, Hildegard does not appear to step outside her bounds. Indeed, she uses this to her advantage. Beverlee Sian Rapp argues that, “While it is clear from her writings that her illnesses were genuine, that is, not contrived to make her point, they seem to have occurred only when all other avenues of appeal have been exhausted.” As a woman, Hildegard was unable in this matter to convince her superiors by argument. Thus, she resorted to using her spiritual authority, the authority she derived from God, in order to accomplish her mission of founding Rupertsberg.

Book Three, the final section of *Vita*, is devoted to recording the miracles Hildegard performed during her lifetime and those which occurred after her death. It is very typical of any hagiography and Hildegard is described in very typical ways. More interestingly, Theodoric mentions Hildegard’s other texts in this third book. He had, of course, mentioned already that she wrote; he claims to have taken the autobiographical passages from her works. He had not, however, discussed her works at all beyond mentioning the name of *Scivias* in introducing one of those autobiographical sections. In the third book, there is very slightly more mention of her works. In one of the passages containing Hildegard’s own words, she mentions her *Book of Divine Works* but only in passing. Just after this, Theodoric writes that, “The holy virgin composed many other written works and remarkable proofs of her prophetic charism.” However, he goes on to explain that, “In [Hildegard’s works] we have discovered sure signs of the learning her soul acquired from the Holy Spirit, wholly given over as it was to divine instructions.”

Here, Theodoric ignores the distinction Hildegard herself had made between her visionary and

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44 *The Life of Holy Hildegard*, in *Jutta and Hildegard*, 139.
45 *The Life of Holy Hildegard*, in *Jutta and Hildegard*, 207.
46 *The Life of Holy Hildegard*, in *Jutta and Hildegard*, 207-208.
non-visionary texts and contends that all of Hildegard’s knowledge and written works came from her visionary gift.

**Perception and Self-Perception**

The first and second books of *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* heavily feature Hildegard’s visions in the form of autobiographical sections. These are arguably the most intriguing aspect of the work. First, because they are unusual – it is uncommon to have any sort of autohagiography. Second, because they must be taken with a grain of salt. Though they are supposedly in Hildegard’s own words, there is every chance that they have been edited by others before reaching Theodoric, even if Theodoric himself left them the way he found them (which is not entirely certain either). The best evidence that Theodoric’s insertions of Hildegard’s voice may not be exactly Hildegard’s voice is Guibert’s revisions of *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, which focused primarily on the autobiographical passages. The passages are not very different in Guibert’s version as compared to Theodoric’s, but there are minor changes, all the while purporting to be Hildegard’s own words. Thus, if Guibert felt comfortable editing her words, it is impossible to tell who else may have done so as well and to what extent. Unfortunately, though we know Theodoric had access to these passages through Guibert, it is unclear from which sources they come. As Newman writes, “The original context of her ‘autobiographical’ writings proves impossible to recover.”47 However, with direction from *Vita* translator Anna Silvas’ footnotes, it has been possible to locate passages and related themes from some of Hildegard’s own works, including *Scivias* and *Book of Divine Works* as well as letters of correspondence, which correlate with the passages in *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*. This makes it possible, to an extent, to compare Hildegard’s own words with those both Theodoric and Guibert claim. It is

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important to remember, however, that even though Hildegard’s *Scivias*, Book of Divine Works, and letters are supposedly from her herself, it is entirely possible that they had been scribed or edited by a number of clerics or nuns.

The *Vita* includes a passage from a letter from Hildegard to Guibert that contains a similar message. In this section, Hildegard writes to Guibert at his request, describing the nature of her vision. She asserts that God speaks through her for His own glory, not for hers, and that she is “always in trembling fear” because she perceives her own lack of special ability. She then goes on to write that she has had the vision for her entire life and she sees in her soul, not with her eyes, staying conscious the whole time. The passage in the *Vita* corresponds almost exactly with the original letter. The letter is longer and contains more material, but the two-paragraph passage taken from it in the *Vita* is nearly word for word. A small difference is that the *Vita* leaves out the first sentence of the first paragraph and the last two sentences of the last paragraph. The first reads, “And how could God work through me if I were not aware that I am but a poor little creature?” and the last reads, “Yet my body suffers ceaselessly, and I am racked by such terrible pains that I am brought almost to the point of death. So far, however, God has sustained me.” With the rest of the passage being the same, this is a subtle difference. However, it does have significance. The first sentence emphasizes Hildegard’s self-proclaimed humility. She says often that she is aware of her own humanity and does not claim any special knowledge or status. Here, she goes just a bit further and asserts that it is her humility which makes her a candidate for the vision she possess. If she believed she held a special status, she would necessarily be disqualified from holding that status. By excluding this in the *Vita*, this

48 *The Life of Holy Hildegard*, in *Jutta and Hildegard*, 150.
point is not quite made. The last two sentences reaffirm Hildegard’s idea that she herself is not special and, importantly, that she did not ask for the power of vision. Instead of making her special, she says, having that ability actually hurts her physically and it is only because it is God’s will that she is able to endure it. Again, by excluding this from the *Vita*, there is less of an emphasis placed on Hildegard’s humility.

Hildegard acknowledges her own shortcomings in a letter to Pope Anastasius, a passage from which was included in the *Vita*, though not without some modification. The *Vita* incorrectly labels the passage as a letter to Anastasius’ successor, Pope Adrian. In the original letter, Hildegard records what the Heavenly Voice said to her: “You have given these things in a language given to you from above, rather than in ordinary human speech, since it was not revealed to you in that form, but let him who has the pumice stone not fail to polish it and make it intelligible to mankind.”50 In the *Vita*, it reads: “Whenever something is shown to you from on high in familiar human form, you shall not publish it in the Latin language yourself, for this familiarity is not given to you. Rather, let him who has a file not neglect to finish it off in a form pleasing to the human ear.”51 Clearly, there is little difference between the text of these two passages. What is different, however, is the context. The *Vita* introduces the passage by stating that Hildegard wrote to the pope “concerning this matter,”52 the matter being how she sometimes dictated to a scribe who put her words into correct grammar. However, this is misleading. In the actual letter, Hildegard’s focus was not on this at all; rather, the letter is a rebuke of the pope. The passage quoted in the *Vita* is added more or less as an aside with the purpose of providing Hildegard with validation for her writings; it both indicates her uniqueness in that she has

51 *The Life of Holy Hildegard*, in *Jutta and Hildegard*, 156.  
52 *The Life of Holy Hildegard*, in *Jutta and Hildegard*, 156.
visions, and highlights her lower status and thus humility by acknowledging her lack of education. By confusing the context of the passage, Theodoric emphasizes only these two parts and ignores the fact that Hildegard has taken it upon herself to chastise the pope, which could easily be seen as claiming too much authority. Also, as Silvas points out, Theodoric adds “in the Latin language” to the passage. Silvas notes that in doing so he “‘clarified’ the passage.”53 One has to wonder if in doing so he actually confused Hildegard’s meaning. It appears as though Hildegard intended to stress the fact that her visions come to her in a heavenly, not worldly, form, and thus she must use the “language given to [her] from above” to communicate, with help from a scribe. By adding “in the Latin language,” Theodoric seems to stress instead the fact that Hildegard is unlearned. Indeed, this is something she herself is eager to underline (see the Declaration of *Scivias*), but by changing her words Theodoric also changes her meaning and denies her emphasis on her unique connection with the divine.

A large distinction between Hildegard’s own writings and the autobiographical passages selected for the *Vita* is the amount Hildegard writes about herself in each. In *Scivias* and *Book of Divine Works*, Hildegard rarely writes directly about herself. Both works have introductions in which Hildegard writes in the first person describing her experiences, but other than those her writings are actually fairly impersonal. She uses the first person voice to describe what she sees in each vision but quickly turns to a transcription of what the Heavenly Voice said to her in His (or Her, sometimes the Voice is a female personification) own words, not Hildegard’s own. The Voice rarely speaks directly about Hildegard, but when it does it is more often than not referring to Hildegard in the third person voice, not the second person. Though the Voice speaks for Hildegard to hear, it rarely speaks directly to Hildegard. However, one would not realize this

53 Silvas, footnote 88 in *The Life of Holy Hildegard*, in *Jutta and Hildegard*, 156.
only reading the *Vita*. Every autobiographical passage included in the work, without exception, is either Hildegard talking about herself or the Voice talking to her in the second person. Of the nineteen autobiographical passages, only four actually describe what Hildegard saw and heard in any detail, whereas in each of her own works this accounts for nearly the entire text. This demonstrates a difference in perception; what Hildegard believed mattered the most about her works was not necessarily the same as what others, including Theodoric, paid the most attention to. It skews readers’ perceptions as well. Rather than viewing Hildegard as a theologian, a reader of the *Vita* would see her more as a true mystic.

What is left out of the *Vita* is as interesting as what is included. Reading the *Vita*, one would not get the sense of exceptionality that Hildegard deserves. According to the *Vita*, Hildegard was a pious woman who was headstrong insofar as it would help her achieve what the Heavenly Voice asked of her, but who was otherwise a fairly typical abbess. In reality, there was so much more to Hildegard. Her theological texts in themselves are extraordinary. This is not completely reflected in the *Vita*, but that is understandable. The *Vita* is not necessarily the place to reflect on Hildegard’s teachings. It is the place to reflect on what she did with her life. It is in this aspect that the *Vita* fails to do Hildegard’s activities justice. Hildegard did more than simply have visions and write them down. She also preached and wrote non-visionary texts, including medical works and songs. He mentions her songs and language briefly but in very little detail, and he glosses over the rest.

Differences in self-perception and male perception of Hildegard can thus be discerned in *Scivias, Book of Divine Works*, and *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*. Gender absolutely plays a role. This can be clearly seen in a comparison of Hildegard’s self-comparisons and Theodoric’s

comparisons of her to Old and New Testament figures. This can be seen in the *Vita* alone. There are numerous references both in Theodoric’s writing and in the autobiographical sections to Old and New Testament figures. There is a disparity in the figures to whom Hildegard compares herself and to whom she is compared by Theodoric. Theodoric’s comparisons are fairly equal, with Hildegard being compared to three women and three men. Hildegard herself, however, only compares herself to a woman once and five times to male figures. In addition to this, Hildegard rarely refers to herself as the bride or handmaid of Christ, but Theodoric does so at least five times throughout the *Vita*, not including his countless references to her as a holy virgin, a term almost exclusively used to describe women, not also chaste men. This appears to support Coakley’s claim that gender was a more important distinction for men than it was for women. Furthermore, this evidence contained in *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* leads me to agree with Newman when she argues that Theodoric “was more concerned to represent Hildegard as a certain kind of saint, a ‘bridal mystic,’ than he was with the content of her message.”

Hildegard does not fit herself into the bridal mystic mold, but Theodoric very much does so. As he did not know Hildegard, his style focuses on stereotypical elements of a “good” woman that would be most effective in gaining the canonization of Hildegard, but is not necessarily reflective of Hildegard the person.

Reception

Hildegard demonstrates a remarkable level of confidence in herself. Peter Dronke has made this assessment: “Her approach to every problem … was her own. She took nothing ready-made. Her conviction that she saw the answers to the problems in her waking vision meant that

she did not have to defer to established answers. Often we see she does not give a damn about these, however powerful their proponents. …when it comes to asserting what she believes to be right, she will do it bravely, out-facing all opposition.”

How was Hildegard able to have the self-assurance to act so willfully, and how did she avoid antagonism from others for doing so? First, I argue against Flanagan’s suggestion that Hildegard had “internalized … the prevailing view of women’s capacities.” Instead, her early experiences encouraged her to believe in her intellectual abilities. Having been enclosed in a very small community from childhood, with only women who trusted and believed in her (as demonstrated by her unanimous election as abbess after Jutta’s death), Hildegard rarely experienced pushback. She was, so to speak, a big fish in a very small pond. She did not experience any competition: “Although Hildegard devoted boundless energy to the nurture of her spiritual daughters, she dominated Rupertsberg absolutely. No other nun there received visions, wrote books, composed music, or competed with the towering figure of the foundress in any way.”

Due to this environment, Hildegard grew to be very sure of herself. However, Hildegard still needed to convince people outside her small community of her abilities as well. To accomplish this, Hildegard appealed to her spiritual authority. As seen above, Hildegard’s works emphasize her visionary authority, stressing the nature of her visions. Newman argues that, “Were it not for the visions, she would never have preached or written at all.” Hildegard may have had faith in her intellectual abilities, but she could not expect that others, particularly clergymen and male theologians, would perceive her in

57 Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 55.
the same way. By using claims of authority derived directly from God, Hildegard bypasses the idea that a woman alone would not have the intellectual capacity to create works such as hers.

Trust in her abilities from her male counterparts was critical. Indeed, “Hildegard’s belief that she possessed such privileged knowledge would not have been enough to ensure her success, if her superiors had not seen it in the same way.”60 Luckily for her, they did. In this, the importance of the papal approval Hildegard received cannot be overstressed. By gaining the official approval of the pope, Hildegard was able to avoid being questioned. Dronke has addressed this concern, citing examples of men who wrote similar theological texts who were actually persecuted for their works.61 If these prominent men were called into question, a woman like Hildegard certainly would be at risk.

Despite the potential risks, Hildegard found herself received positively by her contemporaries. Evidence for this is the series of preaching tours Hildegard took and the solicitations of advice from her. Despite the explicit ban on women’s public preaching, Hildegard embarked on four separate preaching tours between 1158 and 1170, on which she preached both at monasteries and convents as well as to the public at large.62 The fact that she was able to do so without backlash speaks to the reputation she acquired during her lifetime. Additionally, she had correspondence with people from all ranks of society, many of who solicited advice, whether it was general requests for her prayers or requests for her answers to specific questions. These correspondents included popes and emperors, as well as those from humbler ranks.63 Clearly, Hildegard enjoyed high regard from her contemporaries. Hildegard has maintained that high regard beyond her own day and into the present. Though Hildegard was not

60 Flanagan, Hildegard of Bingen, 14.
61 Dronke, Women Writers, 148.
63 Flanagan, Hildegard of Bingen, 159.
technically canonized until 2012, she has been referred to as a saint for centuries.\textsuperscript{64} Additionally, her works have come down to the modern day; she was not forgotten, but rather has been remembered and revered. As Kerby-Fulton notes, however, she was remembered by medieval men primarily as an apocalyptic prophet, particularly in her chastisement of corrupt clergy.\textsuperscript{65} Interestingly, her theological ideas and her criticisms had the most lasting impression. This makes some sense, as Hildegard herself focused so heavily on her visionary authority, thus it is her visionary work that was remembered. It also indicates her success in asserting her authority, as the end of time is an extremely important consideration to leave in the hands of a woman, and her criticisms of clergymen had the potential to be very problematic for her. By asserting her humility and divine inspiration strategically and surrounding herself with support from those holding high positions within the Church hierarchy, Hildegard was able to promote her intellectual capabilities. Though she was portrayed with a greater eye towards stereotypical female traits in her \textit{Vita}, Hildegard ultimately has been remembered for her intellectual works rather than the picture of her as a typical, submissive woman.

Hildegard exemplifies the balance a strong woman like herself might strike between confidence and humility. She strategically maneuvers in the space granted to a woman of her status, subtly pushing on the boundary lines. Her authority based on her position in the Church hierarchy and her spiritual authority play upon each other in a circular fashion. While her status granted her the resources she needed to validate her work, such as access to authority figures who could bring her to the pope’s attention, her visionary authority also helped to increase her institutional authority – a reciprocity seen in her ability to found Rupertsberg based on her divine

authority. Ultimately, Hildegard presents justification from God as a way to bypass the limits on women and circumvent the need for male support. She relies heavily on rhetoric of humility and divine inspiration, but actually displays her self-awareness concerning the risks she faced as well as her self-confidence in defiance against anyone who might doubt her.
Elisabeth of Schönau

Some perhaps would say I am holy and attribute the grace of God to my own merits, judging that I am something when I am nothing. And indeed, others would think about it, saying to themselves, “If she were a servant of God, she would certainly keep silent” … And, of course, there would be those who say that all the things they have heard from me are womanish fictions, or perhaps they would decide that I am deceived by Satan. In these and other such ways, dearest one, I will be tossed about in the mouths of the people.66

Elisabeth of Schönau was born in 1129 to a family that was well connected with ecclesiastic life, and died in 1165. From the age of twelve she lived in a Benedictine double monastery, meaning there were communities of both monks and nuns. She began her visions at age twenty-three and in 1155 her brother, Ekbert, a canon at Bonn, gave up his theological career and moved to Schönau to collaborate with Elisabeth.67 This collaboration resulted in a number of works, including the First, Second, and Third Book of Visions (which make up the “visionary diary”68), The Book of the Ways of God, The Resurrection of the Blessed Virgin, and The Book of Revelations about the Sacred Company of the Virgins of Cologne, which have been compiled and translated by Anne L. Clark in Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works. Throughout these works, Elisabeth demonstrates many of the familiar qualities and techniques one might expect in a work from a medieval woman. Her justification for writing lies firmly with the authority granted to her by Ekbert, other male authorities, and God. However, Elisabeth is not simply this typical, submissive female mystic. There is much more to her. Elisabeth takes

ownership of her work, asserting her spiritual authority and maintaining control over her message. Her work contains Ekbert’s and others’ voices, but Elisabeth’s shines through.

**Elisabeth’s Voice**

Elisabeth presents an image of female submission and humility. She speaks not because of hubris but because, “I am entirely ready to satisfy your [Ekbert’s] desire in all things and my soul has long wished for this very thing: that I may be given the opportunity to confer with you about all these things and to hear your judgment on them.”69 Similarly, she did not want to reveal her visions for fear of arrogance, but was forced to do so by God: “When I had firmly fixed it in my heart that I would reveal them to no one, I was seized by a very harsh torment in my heart in such a way that I thought I was about to die. And so the sisters earnestly entreated and urged me to reveal to them what I had seen. When they had forced it out of me, I immediately recovered from my suffering.”70 This rhetoric is typical of women mystics and similar to the language used in Hildegard’s justification, with a focus on visionary authority. Unlike Hildegard, however, Elisabeth presents greater emphasis on male authority figures, particularly Ekbert. She establishes justification for writing by saying she is reporting her visions because Ekbert wants her to and by asserting that she is compelled by God, not her own hubris. Her quotation about pleasing Ekbert establishes her female deference to male authority; though she is the one having the visions, she turns them over to Ekbert for evaluation and validation. She continues this assertion of submission by displaying trust in the male church authorities concerning her visions: “At one point when the dove, about which I have already spoken, had been frequently appearing to me, I began to wonder about it. I inquired of the lord abbot whether Satan could transform

69 “First Book of Visions,” in Clark, trans., Complete Works, 42.
70 “First Book of Visions,” in Clark, trans., Complete Works, 57.
himself into a dove.”  

Similarly, Elisabeth writes sermons but stops short of violating restrictions on women preaching by sending these sermons to the archbishops of Trier, Cologne, and Mainz instead of giving them herself, as Hildegard did on her preaching tours. She wrote to these men, “It has been announced to you by the Lord God, great and dreadful, and by the angel of the testament of this book that these words which you find in the present book are to be announced by you to the Roman church and to all the people and all the church of God.” In addition to the deference to male authority and respect for ecclesiastical rules Elisabeth displays, she also presents herself as a typical female mystic through her rhetoric which makes her the “handmaid” of God and her descriptions of the physical torment she undergoes. Furthermore, consistency is key; Elisabeth demonstrates her consistency through her strict adherence to the liturgical calendar, which is noted at the outset of almost every description of each vision, as well as through the reoccurrence of the same visions several times.

Elisabeth also takes ownership of her work in a remarkable fashion. Though each of the above examples is a valid portrayal of Elisabeth’s work, additional information about each demonstrates that this is not the full picture. Elisabeth is so much more than that stereotype of a submissive woman. When Elisabeth says, “I am entirely ready to satisfy your [Ekbert’s] desire in all things and my soul has long wished for this very thing: that I may be given the opportunity to confer with you about all these things and to hear your judgment on them,” the first and last clauses stand out as demonstrative of Elisabeth’s female obedience. However, the section in the middle, “my soul has long wished for this very thing: that I may be given the opportunity to confer with you,” is equally important. Not only is Elisabeth speaking out about her visions in 

73 “First Book of Visions,” in Clark, trans., Complete Works, 42.
order to please the men who tell her to do so, but this statement indicates that she also truly believes she has something important to discuss. In another example noted above, Elisabeth asserts that she submitted her concerns about the validity of her visions to men within the church hierarchy for confirmation, asking her abbot whether the vision of a dove could be Satan. However, Elisabeth trusts her own visions more than she trusts the abbot’s judgment: “Although he affirmed that he had never read such a thing, I remained dubious. One day, I looked at the cross that I usually saw, and that same dove came from the other direction and rested on it. Therefore I was assured that this was not Satan, because Satan is the enemy of the cross.”74 Here, Elisabeth demonstrates that the authority she receives from God in her mystical visions, her “informal authority,” is worth more than the authority of the abbot granted by the institution of the Church. She reaffirms this idea when she sends her sermons to the archbishops. Though she flatters them, saying “I speak to you by names because in this region you are renowned for piety,”75 she also uses her authority as a mystic to chastise them for improper behavior. “Correct yourselves and turn from your errors. Do not receive the sacred and divine warnings unworthily, because they were not invented by human beings.”76 Furthermore, Elisabeth sends her sermons to the archbishops in order to avoid violating the prohibition on women preaching, but this is unmistakably a way for her to get her message out, urging them to take her seriously: “Do not judge that they are the figments of women, because they are not. Rather, they are from God the omnipotent Father, who is the fount and source of all goodness. And what I say to you, I say to all others.”77

Elisabeth demonstrates an outstanding retention of control over her work. Unlike Hildegard, Elisabeth writes using first person narration. This makes Elisabeth a central figure in her works. Even in Ekbert’s third person disclaimer, Elisabeth is the focus: “For it had been given to her to transcend her own mind and see visions of the secrets of the Lord which were hidden from the eyes of mortals.” Though of course Ekbert implies that Elisabeth receives this gift from God, Elisabeth remains the subject and the emphasis lies with her. This is present also in *The Book of Revelations;* Elisabeth, having been chosen to provide truth about the Band of Eleven Thousand Virgins, is told by one of them, Verena, that “Long ago God predestined you for this, that these things which up until now were unknown about us would be made manifest through you. … In this way, you may one day deserve to be joined to our company.” This serves to validate Elisabeth as the right person for this task and reaffirms Elisabeth as a central figure; she is more than just a passive mouthpiece. She is an active, worthy participant who has long been destined for the role.

Additionally, Elisabeth is highly present in her visions. Whereas according to Hildegard’s rhetoric she existed in her visions as solely an observer, Elisabeth presents herself as an active participant and the visions are specifically centered on her. This is exposed when the Virgin appears to Elisabeth as her “Comforter.” “I understood that she was calling me by my name, Elisabeth, and then she said no more. Taking this as consolation, I thanked her and she withdrew from me.” The presence of her name and the fact that the Virgin appears for the sole purpose of comforting Elisabeth and not to show her a vision concerning theological knowledge makes Elisabeth the primary focus of her own mysticism. Elisabeth is also in full control of her visions.

They are not random occurrences, but she receives answers when she seeks them, as shown when she says, “I invoked her in my usual way.” Beyond this, Elisabeth can shape the direction of the visions by becoming an active participant. Whereas Hildegard receives whatever she receives, Elisabeth makes herself heard and actively asks questions. She is not afraid to request information from the figures who appear to her. There are quite a few examples of this. When John and Paul appear with their backs to her, “I very diligently entreated them to deign to turn their faces to me. And they did turn to me.” When she wants to have a mystic experience, she asks for it. “I prayed to the Lord to open my eyes in the accustomed way … I saw a beam of copious light descending from heaven to that church … I also saw a multitude of angels descending on that beam.” Elisabeth experiences these things because she asks for them, making her more than a passive mouthpiece. She also asks questions when she wants to gain a fuller understanding, asking, “My lord, who are they?” and “My lord, show me, I implore you, what these things mean.” When she asks, she receives answers. She also makes requests: “I said to him, ‘My lord, let’s rest a little in this place,’” and he consents to her request. She has a remarkable level of control.

Elisabeth also retains ownership of her work even in the face of Ekkert’s editing. She reveals to Ekkert only some of her visions, meaning she maintains control over what is publicized. This may be due to her early experiences, in which the Abbot of Schönau, Hildelin, publicized Elisabeth’s visions without her consent, as this prompted skepticism of her validity, thus encouraging Elisabeth to keep her visions to herself. The reader can see that Elisabeth is

84 “First Book of Visions,” in Clark, trans., Complete Works, 81-82.
giving Ekbert only some of her information. Elisabeth says to Ekbert, “But lest I weary you any longer, let me turn now to those issues about which you chiefly inquire.”87 This is evidence that Elisabeth tells Ekbert only that which she feels is important to him specifically, or at least this is all he records. This idea is reinforced when she said, “Brother, I also do not want you to be in the dark about one of our friends whom we loved as a father.”88 Her style is very personal and familial. This demonstrates that Elisabeth tailors what she reports specifically to Ekbert. This tone is seen yet again, “I also have something to tell you about the recent consecration of the church at Bonn.”89 This language illustrates the point that what Ekbert records is not the entirety of Elisabeth’s experiences. By fitting what she reports to the specific person to whom she is reporting, she demonstrates that there is more to it and thus she retains control over what is published.

_Ekbert’s Voice_

Far more than for Hildegard, other voices are highly visible in Elisabeth’s works. This does not, however, detract from her ownership of her work because they are involved on her terms. Ekbert’s is the most obvious outside voice. He is visible of course in his own commentary and headings, but also in the way Elisabeth tailors both what she asks and what she discloses to fit what Ekbert wants from her. As the male authority figure who had taken responsibility for Elisabeth’s visions by recording them, Ekbert needed to provide justification. As a former canon with a promising theological career and the future Abbot of Schönau, Ekbert was clearly in a respected position with a relatively high level of institutional authority.90 However, it was also necessary for him to give explicit reasons why Elisabeth should be believed. As in Elisabeth’s

87 “First Book of Visions,” in Clark, trans., Complete Works, 44.
88 “First Book of Visions,” in Clark, trans., Complete Works, 64.
90 Clark, Elisabeth of Schönau, 2.
own justifications for her writing, Ekbert both asserts that Elisabeth’s visions were truly from God and protects Elisabeth’s humility by saying that she did not share her visions publicly of her own volition, but rather was compelled to do so by those with greater authority. All this can be seen in Ekbert’s opening to the First Book of Visions:

[Elisabeth’s visions] did not occur without a visible miracle. Frequently … a certain affliction of the heart came over her and she was violently disturbed. Finally, she became as still as if she were dead. Sometimes this happened in such a way that no breath or vital movement could be detected in her. But then, after a long trance, when her spirit had been gradually restored, she would suddenly utter in Latin certain very divine words that she had never learned from anyone else and that she could not have made up herself since she was unlearned and had little or no skill in speaking Latin. … Although in fact she hid many things from inquirers because she was very God-fearing and most humble in spirit, she was compelled by familial love and by order of the abbot to explain in intimate detail the whole thinking to this cleric who was diligently investigating everything and desirous of handing it down to posterity.⁹¹

After explaining the manner in which Elisabeth’s visions occur, Ekbert claims that Elisabeth, though unlearned, spoke in Latin. His claim that she was unlearned in Latin, though perhaps technically true, lacks total credibility. Though she may have lacked formal training, as a nun “she spen[t] virtually all of her waking hours reading, reciting, singing, and listening to Latin, and by the time her visions begin she ha[d] been doing this for over a decade.”⁹² As with Hildegard, an emphasis on a lack of education lends credence to her visionary authority. Thus, this functions more as a rhetorical device designed to emphasize the “miraculous nature” of her experiences.⁹³ The above statement also serves to emphasize the fact that Ekbert has personally witnessed this occur on many occasions and has determined it to be truly coming from God. This validates Elisabeth’s visions as well as Ekbert’s decision to record them. He also protects her

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⁹³ Clark, Elisabeth of Schönau, 30.
image of humbleness by stating that she only agreed to reveal her visions out of love for him and by the order of the abbot. This takes responsibility off Elisabeth and places it onto the male authority figures, making it so that Elisabeth could not be criticized for overstepping her authority or for lack of womanly humility.

Ekbert’s justification of Elisabeth is visible throughout the works. Just as the above passage opened the *First Book of Visions*, the *Second Book of Visions* begins with an “exhortation to all readers of this book urging them not to be scandalized at the marvelous and unheard of divine goodness.”

In this, Ekbert turns the fear that Elisabeth is overstepping her bounds as a woman on its head, arguing instead that she holds this authority precisely because men were failing in theirs: “When men were given over to negligence, holy women were filled with the spirit of God so that they prophesied, vigorously ruled the people of God, or even triumphed gloriously over the enemies of Israel, like Hulda, Deborah, Judith, Jael, and others of this sort.”

By providing Old Testament women as precedents, Ekbert places Elisabeth within a well-established tradition. On a related note, there is a marked difference between the gendered language Ekbert uses and that which Elisabeth uses. “For him, Elisabeth’s activity is best understood in light of the roles of other women, and women could play these roles when the historical circumstances were appropriate. But Elisabeth herself does not cite or evoke any biblical model of a woman inspired to do the work of God. In fact, she uses prophetic language that is specifically gendered as male.”

An example of Elisabeth’s use of gendered language comes when she is told to “Act manfully.” As Clark explains,

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…her sense of self as a *filius homini* reveals a self-consciousness about doing something (preaching the word of God), that is traditionally the exclusive vocation of men. But her recognition of “doing something male” does not mean that Elisabeth sees herself as male … Rather, her use of the phrase seems to indicate her extreme fidelity to biblical prophetic tradition as a way of understanding, communicating, and protecting her own preaching activity.  

Thus, while Ekbert justifies Elisabeth’s work by invoking female precedents, Elisabeth instead takes a more gender-neutral approach. This allows the reader to more clearly see a delineation between Ekbert’s voice and Elisabeth’s.

Ekbert’s voice can be heard even in Elisabeth’s first-person narration:

>I also have something to tell you about the recent consecration of the church at Bonn. Just as you had suggested to me in a letter, I prayed to the Lord to open my eyes in the accustomed way … Among other things shown to me, I saw a beam of copious light descending from heaven to that church and the whole thing was illuminated by an immense brightness. … Moreover, among other things going on there, I saw you, brother, standing at the pulpit at Matins and reading one of the lessons.

Ekbert’s influence is apparent in several ways in this passage. First, as noted above, Ekbert being her scribe affects what Elisabeth reveals. The statement, “I also have something to tell you about the recent consecration of the church at Bonn,” sets up the passage as something Elisabeth believed would have been of interest to Ekbert. This is affirmed when Ekbert is seen in the vision. It is also affirmed by Elisabeth’s use of “among other things” twice in the passage. This is evidence that Elisabeth saw many things that were not revealed or recorded, seeming to indicate that the visions that were made public were those that Ekbert found important or that Elisabeth believed were important specifically to Ekbert. Furthermore, “Just as you had suggested to me in a letter” reveals that Ekbert’s direction influenced Elisabeth’s visions. This is seen again: “My brother asked me to question the angel as to why, at the beginning of this sermon, the term

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98 Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau*, 92.
‘fornication’ was added to the other sins when fornication does not seem to apply to married people, which is what he had been discussing.”¹⁰⁰ Not only does this quotation reaffirm the idea that Elisabeth took Ekbert’s advice about what to ask of her angel, it also exposes his editing of her words. Throughout the work, Ekbert’s voice can be heard directly or indirectly as he seeks to “clarify” aspects of Elisabeth’s visions that could be seen as controversial. In this instance, Elisabeth had previously announced that fornication was among the sins of married people, when according to traditional doctrine this was not the case. Instead of claiming this was a mistake on the part of Elisabeth or her angel or simply quietly omitting it from the written work, Ekbert instructed Elisabeth to ask why this was the case. This serves to preserve Elisabeth’s reputation and the validity of her visions, even when she was “wrong” about certain things. In addition to this method, Ekbert also places his own words into the narrative in order to make similar clarifications. Typically Ekbert’s writing is in the third-person voice, but occasionally he uses the first-person in order to make these sorts of points. In one instance, Ekbert explains what seems to be a contradiction:

Perhaps it will disturb the reader that it was written earlier that the angel said to Elisabeth, “The holy visions that you see, you will no longer see until the day of your death,” and yet after that point she still saw visions like the earlier ones. As I understand it, when he said, “holy visions,” he meant particularly those visions of celestial secrets that she had been accustomed to seeing through an open door in the heavens on the greatest feast days and frequently on Sundays. Indeed, from the moment he said this to her, visions of this kind stopped completely.¹⁰¹

Unexplained, this contradiction could be seen as evidence that Elisabeth was being deceived or being deceptive and that her visions were not truly from God. Ekbert avoids this accusation by adding this explanation. Through his authority, he is able to explain away the inconsistencies and maintain authority for Elisabeth. Additionally, Elisabeth seeks Ekbert’s expertise in

understanding that which she cannot. When her angel says, “You are not able to understand what those things signify, but talk to the learned ones who read the scriptures; they know,” Elisabeth asks of Ekbert, “Now, therefore, most beloved brother, I entreat you to take up this task. Examine the divine scriptures and try to discover a suitable interpretation of this vision. Indeed, perhaps the Lord has reserved this for you.” Ekbert goes on to provide his interpretation, which fills the next several pages. Thus, not only does Ekbert influence Elisabeth’s visions and interpretations, he also inserts his own voice directly. This is accomplished through the angel’s instruction to Elisabeth to consult those more learned, those with the institutional authority of the Church behind them, and through Elisabeth’s own assertion that “the Lord has reserved this for you.” Through this statement, Elisabeth allows Ekbert to combine his institutional authority with Elisabeth’s mystical authority in order to provide his own understanding.

The Community at Schönau

Elisabeth speaks not only for Ekbert but for her entire community at Schönau. Elisabeth was deeply connected to her community. As Newman states, “She confronts us as a mystic of supreme objectivity, one who spoke in and for her community, and through whom her community spoke. Few seers have been so profoundly ecclesial as Elisabeth. She was a window through which the community of nuns and monks at Schönau, and later the church at large, could gaze on the mysteries it proclaimed and adored.” Elisabeth focused her works on teaching a correct way of living. Her use of Latin as opposed to the vernacular indicates a concentration on members of the Church as her audience. Thus she placed emphasis on teaching, but she did not shy away from criticism, particularly of clergy members. In her criticism can be seen her stress on the welfare of individuals as opposed to the dignity of the hierarchical structure of the

Church; as Clark explains, “Rarely does she appear to be interested in the degeneracy of the clergy for its own sake – there is no particular interest in the purity of the church per se. Always the criticism of avarice, worldliness, or corruption is related to the impact that this corruption has on the members of the church.”\textsuperscript{104} Thus, in her criticism her love for the members of her community and her concern for their welfare can be seen. Elisabeth did not outright defy the Church structure, but it played second fiddle to her preoccupation with her community.

Her reputation among her peers was of a person who benefitted the entire community with her gift. Ekbert’s tribute to her in \textit{The Death of Elisabeth} provides evidence of this: “Through you heaven was opened to earth and secrets of God hidden from the world flowed to us through the instrument of your voice … Through you the angels conversed intimately with us and with you mediating, the highest princes of heaven were friendly to us.”\textsuperscript{105} Just as Ekbert proposed questions for Elisabeth to ask of her angel, other members of the community did the same and Elisabeth dutifully obeyed. This can be seen at several points throughout the works. “A certain brother proposed a question to me that had this form. … I presented this question to my lord when he appeared to me.”\textsuperscript{106} Similarly, she presents a theological question to her angel, prefacing it with, “Just as I had been advised beforehand by a more learned one…”\textsuperscript{107} Again, like Ekbert, other monks questioned contradictions in Elisabeth’s work without questioning Elisabeth herself: “Just as I had been advised by a teacher, I said, ‘Lord, it is written that the will is to be judged as the deed. Doesn’t this contradict the sermon that you just delivered?’”\textsuperscript{108} Elisabeth serves her community by putting forth their questions to her angel, using her mystic authority to benefit those around her. These men also serve her by providing legitimacy due to their

\textsuperscript{104} Clark, \textit{Elisabeth of Schönau}, 120.
institutional authority. By introducing her more theology-based questions as those put forth by “more learned one[s],” Elisabeth can avoid potential criticism for going beyond her authority and pushing into territory held by male members within the formal hierarchy of the Church. Thus, through their trust in her, these men serve as protection for Elisabeth.

Reception

Despite the confidence in her work that Elisabeth displays, she was not unaware of the fears she could rouse in others. Through her own words and, undoubtedly, with edits from Ekbert, Elisabeth demonstrates her understanding of those fears and eloquently addresses them. She presents justification but is not apologetic.

If that message, which you have already heard, were made public … what do you think people would say about me? Some perhaps would say I am holy and attribute the grace of God to my own merits, judging that I am something when I am nothing. And indeed, others would think about it, saying to themselves, “If she were a servant of God, she would certainly keep silent and not allow her own name to be magnified upon the earth.” They would say this, not knowing the goads by which I am constantly urged to speak out! And, of course, there would be those who say that all the things they have heard from me are womanish fictions, or perhaps they would decide that I am deceived by Satan. In these and other ways … I will be tossed about in the mouths of the people. … But certain wise people say to me that the Lord has done these things to me not for my sake alone. Rather, they say that He also has provided for the edification of others through these works because these deeds to some extent concern the confirmation of the faith and the consolation of those who are troubled in heart for the sake of the Lord. … But I admit that I am not as yet totally sure what is best for me to do. For I acknowledge that it is dangerous for me to keep silent about the mighty works of God, and I greatly fear that it is going to be more dangerous to speak out. ¹⁰⁹

There are several elements that can be teased out of this passage. First, Elisabeth shows that she understands exactly what the criticisms (or even praises) of her could be. She is fully aware of the risks she faces. Second, she provides justification for speaking out. Her words come not from

her but directly from God. In this way, she uses her visionary power to provide justification much in the same way as Hildegard. Lastly, she is candid about her lack of certainty about whether or not she should speak. She is not, however, uncertain about her own validity and, though she acknowledges suspicions, she does not give indication that she herself is suspicious, at least in this passage. She does discuss her fear of being deceived by Satan at other points. An example of this comes when she asks her angel, “My lord, can we confidently confirm that all those words came from you?” and he answers her, “Believe with your whole heart that these words that have been transcribed come from my mouth. Blessed is the one who reads or hears the words of this book because they are true and I have never diverged from the truth.”

This is not a contradiction of her earlier assertion; rather, it strengthens her validity. Elisabeth also shows concern for the limits of female authority. As seen above, she sends her sermons to archbishops instead of giving them herself. In the same vein, she repeats several times throughout the works that the words “suddenly … fell into my mouth” and she “burst[s] into speech.” By using this language, Elisabeth stresses that the words she speaks come from God and are not her own, nor does she give them any forethought, which serves to enhance her claim to the right to publicize her work.

Elisabeth’s validity was not just taken for granted. She wrote to Hildegard about her concerns following the exposition of her visions by her abbot, Hildelin. In 1155, Hildelin “learned about Elisabeth’s visions and began to preach publicly about her most lurid, apocalyptic warning of imminent punishment upon sinful Christendom.” This was the first time Elisabeth’s visions were publicized, and they proved to be controversial, particularly when

\[111\] “First Book of Visions,” in Clark, trans., Complete Works, 57, 60.
someone preached from a false letter written in Hildelin’s name.\textsuperscript{113} Elisabeth wrote to Hildegard about the “many senseless, untrue words people are saying about me,” lamenting the fact that many did not believe her.\textsuperscript{114} She was made to undergo tests to prove herself and, though she did succeed, she grew much more cautious from the experience; she and Ekbert agreed not to publish their works until after Elisabeth’s death.\textsuperscript{115} This episode is demonstrative of the risks associated with women’s visionary experiences. Elisabeth held her own position within the Church as a nun and had the support of a powerful Church official, the Abbot of Schönau, and yet she was still subject to ridicule and disbelief.

Overall, however, the reception of Elisabeth’s visions was overwhelmingly positive. As shown above, members of the community went to her for advice, demonstrating their trust in her. Ekbert was a clear believer. As Clark wrote, “The fact that Ekbert took Elisabeth’s experiences seriously is demonstrated by his repeated recourse to her as a source of truth. …he believed that she had access to knowledge beyond that which he had gained in studies at Paris. … And not only could she offer him details that were otherwise out of his reach, but the proclamation of her visions made the details more persuasive to the faithful than any details he could quote from a book.”\textsuperscript{116} This is the interplay between institutional and informal authority. Ekbert, an educated theologian, possessed an authority that Elisabeth could not have. However, the reverse was also true. Elisabeth held a spiritual authority that Ekbert could not access. His connection to the information it provided was solely available through her, giving her a power beyond that of any clergyman. Ekbert’s full trust in Elisabeth was also shown in his allowance of more controversial assertions in her work. Though he undoubtedly censored her work, he “did not suppress what he

\textsuperscript{113} Clark, \textit{Elisabeth of Schönau}, 15.
\textsuperscript{114} “Third Book of Visions,” in Clark, trans., \textit{Complete Works}, 137.
\textsuperscript{115} Clark, \textit{Elisabeth of Schönau}, 14.
\textsuperscript{116} Clark, \textit{Elisabeth of Schönau}, 18-19.
felt uncomfortable with,” even if he did question and attempt to explain less-than-orthodox visions.\(^{117}\)

It was not only Ekbert who held this faith in Elisabeth’s validity. Others, too, demonstrated belief in her visions; her selection as the *magistra* of her community at Schönau provides evidence for their trust in her abilities. Most notably, Abbot Gerlach of Deutz placed trust in Elisabeth in her role concerning the relics of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins. The remains of St. Ursula and her band of virgins of Cologne were discovered in 1106. Gerlach, in charge of determining the authenticity of the relics, selected Elisabeth to provide proof using her visionary abilities.\(^{118}\) This occurred when Elisabeth was 27 years old, only four years older than when her visions began. Clearly, her reputation had grown immensely in this short period, so much so that she was trusted with this important task.

Elisabeth’s role in the authentication of the Ursuline relics is important in several ways. Not only does it demonstrate a positive reception of her work by her contemporaries, but it also provides examples of the way in which she utilized her gift, using critical thinking, and reveals the enormous influence she was able to have. Mary Marshall Campbell compares this process to contemporary legal practices, arguing that Elisabeth acted in the role of judge. This, she says, served to authenticate Elisabeth’s abilities even further. In a circular fashion, Elisabeth is selected to authenticate the relics because of her reputation; likewise, Elisabeth’s success in authenticating the relics has the effect of validating Elisabeth’s visionary power.\(^{119}\) The authentication of the relics was particularly important because the physical discovery presented evidence contradictory to what was written in the histories: there were male remains found

\(^{117}\) Clark, “Elisabeth of Schönau,” in *Medieval Holy Women*, 375.
\(^{119}\) Campbell, “Sanctity and Identity,” 182.
among the female remains, while the stories taught that there had been only women. Elisabeth navigates this situation in a very careful manner. “Indeed, like others who read the history of the British virgins, I thought that that blessed society made their pilgrimage without the escort of any men. But later I learned something else that greatly weakened this opinion.”¹²⁰ This serves more than one purpose. First, it establishes that Elisabeth is indeed familiar with the orthodox story. It also provides her with greater believability. Had Elisabeth simply contradicted the canon without asserting that she, like everyone else, had previously believed that version of the story she would have opened herself to criticism on the basis that she was making things up. By making it clear that Elisabeth did not contradict the canon without very good reason, this risk is avoided. Elisabeth’s *Book of Revelations* also provides a clear picture of Elisabeth’s methods. She receives answers from the martyrs themselves, particularly one named Verena, but she also employs her own critical thinking and investigation skills. For example, “I juxtaposed what [Verena] had said with what is read in the history of the virgins.”¹²¹ Similarly, “After this, when I had examined the catalogue of Roman pontiffs and nowhere found the name of Saint Cyriacus, I again inquired of blessed Verena. One day when she presented herself to me, I asked her why he was not inscribed among the other Roman prelates.”¹²² Both of these statements provide evidence for Elisabeth’s method. Though she possesses visionary abilities and is able to converse with the virgins themselves, she is not entirely reliant on them for her information. She can be seen taking her responsibility very seriously. She compares that which she is told in visions with the written histories, questioning her informants when the two do not match. Elisabeth employs information available to any learned person, using her status as a learned nun and consulting the

accepted information from the Church histories, and also information available to her through her visionary experiences. In this way, the information Elisabeth presents should be seen not only as the result of her spiritual authority but as the result of her combining her spiritual authority with institutional authority.

As a result of the reputation for validity Elisabeth developed throughout this process she was able to alter orthodoxy. Elisabeth introduced into the story of the virgins Pope Cyriacus, who had not been present in earlier versions. Her adjustments to the story had a lasting impression, as Clark explains: “Elisabeth’s revision of the Ursuline legend made its impression on artists – very few medieval paintings of the Cologne martyrdom omit the scene of Cyriacus’s resignation in Rome – as well as on chroniclers. For example, Alberic of Trois Fontaines, writing in 1242, incorporated all this new and surprising data into his historical record and flatly stated that all historians and chronographers up to the time of Elisabeth were in error about the events of the Cologne martyrdom.”

Elisabeth’s work, *The Resurrection of the Blessed Virgin*, also had the effect of altering orthodoxy. In this work, Elisabeth took on the question of the Virgin Mary’s bodily resurrection, which was ambiguous in the literature. Through her visionary conversations with Mary, Elisabeth “confirmed her bodily resurrection and even revised the liturgical calendar for celebrating it,” with the effect that “Not only was the text itself popular but the celebration of 23 September as the feast of Mary’s bodily assumption spread beyond the walls of Schönau and seems to have become established as part of the cult of the Virgin in some German areas, remaining in effect into the fifteenth century.”

Elisabeth’s spiritual authority was compelling enough to actually produce changes to accepted Church canon.

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125 Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau*, 379, 382.
Elisabeth was respected not only by her contemporaries but also beyond her own day. Her works were widely read; there are 145 known medieval manuscripts, and they were translated from Latin into Provençal, German, Icelandic, French, and Anglo-Norman.\textsuperscript{126} Additionally, though she was never the subject of hagiography and has never been formally canonized, Elisabeth has been considered \textit{a de facto} saint. However, she was perhaps remembered in a different manner from how she thought of herself. According to Clark, Elisabeth was mentioned in the 1584 \textit{Martyrologium Romanum}, but “only for her exemplary monastic life; her visions remain unmentioned.”\textsuperscript{127} This goes against Elisabeth’s self-conception; her visions were more important to her than her monastic life: “Her selection as \textit{magistra} of the Schönau nuns, of which no details are given, seems to pale in significance beside the events more directly related to her experience of revelation.”\textsuperscript{128} For Elisabeth, her spiritual authority held more weight than her institutional authority. For the scribes who noted her centuries after her death, however, the reverse held true.

Elisabeth presents an interesting mix of confidence and meekness. She is a good example of the way female visionaries and male scribes mixed their respective informal authority and institutional authority. Elisabeth held little formal authority, and thus she defers to Ekbert and other clergymen for validation, using their institutional authority to validate her writing. In contrast with Hildegard, her justification is much more heavily based on male authority than her own spiritual authority, though she certainly incorporates this as well. Her confidence is of a different sort from Hildegard’s. While Hildegard is more overtly confident, Elisabeth wraps her confidence in a layer of rhetoric that promotes male authority above her own. Hildegard presents

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\textsuperscript{127} Clark, \textit{Elisabeth of Schönau}, 27.
\textsuperscript{128} Clark, \textit{Elisabeth of Schönau}, 20.
\end{flushright}
her visionary authority as more equal to male institutional authority. This difference between Hildegard and Elisabeth could be due to their respective positions within the hierarchical structure. Elisabeth, though certainly highly-respected, did not hold the same amount of authority within her community that Hildegard held. Her relationship with Ekbert was very different from Hildegard’s various relationships with her male scribes and editors. Whereas Hildegard was the dominant partner in nearly all of her relationships, Ekbert and Elisabeth’s was more balanced. At first glance it may seem as though Ekbert was the dominant partner, but due to Elisabeth’s respected visionary authority it was actually quite balanced. In this way, their relationship embodies Coakley’s idea that men “perceived the women as having a privileged contact with the divine which they themselves desired yet which was beyond their power to possess,” while “the women apparently submitted themselves to the authority that the [men] did possess.”

129 Coakley, “Gender and the Authority of Friars,” 459.
Mechthild of Magdeburg

Ah Lord, if I were a learned religious man
And if you had performed this unique miracle using him,
You would receive everlasting honor for it.
But how is one supposed to believe
That you have built a golden house on filthy ooze.\textsuperscript{130}

Born in 1208, Mechthild of Magdeburg joined the beguine movement in 1230, just as it was beginning to flourish in the German territories. Beguines were women who chose to live a religious life but were not cloistered as nuns nor bound by vows. Therefore, they belonged to no official Church order, though they tended to be closely associated with the mendicant orders. “Strictly speaking, the beguines were no more than pious laywomen.”\textsuperscript{131} They could live either in communal houses with other women or on their own. Thus beguines lacked the protection of a monastic structure as well as the protection of a marital structure. Particularly at Mechthild’s time, at the beginning of the movement, beguines had a fairly loose status. This led to suspicion. There was distrust of these women from early on: the term ‘beguine’ “was first used pejoratively.”\textsuperscript{132} Though they gained some acceptance, the suspicion persisted; Pope Clement V ordered the investigation of the beguine movement in 1312 at the Council of Vienne.\textsuperscript{133} This did not entirely end the movement, but it did change it, and it became more organized.\textsuperscript{134} Mechthild of Magdeburg’s status as a beguine is crucial in the understanding of her work and of its reception. Mechthild was in a riskier position than either Hildegard or Elisabeth. She lacked the support of a theological education and a formal position within the Church structure. Toward the

\textsuperscript{131} Elizabeth A. Andersen, The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), 61.
\textsuperscript{132} Andersen, The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg, 62.
\textsuperscript{134} Andersen, The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg, 69.
end of her life Mechthild moved to the convent at Helfta, where she received support from the community of nuns.

Mechthild claimed to have been first visited by the Holy Spirit at age twelve, but did not reveal her revelations until 1250, when she spoke about them to her confessor, the Dominican Heinrich of Halle. He encouraged her to write and with his help she produced Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit, or Lux divinitatis in Latin and The Flowing Light of the Godhead in English. Untrained in Latin, Mechthild wrote in the vernacular of her time and place, Middle Low German. She clearly had some familiarity with courtly literature, demonstrated by her poetic style, which typically leads scholars to believe Mechthild came from a wealthy, possibly noble family and was therefore educated (though, of course, not in Latin). The Flowing Light of the Godhead consists of seven books; the first five were written between 1250, when she first divulged her visions to Heinrich, and 1260, the sixth was written over the following ten years, and the seventh and final book was written between 1270 and Mechthild’s death (a contested date, likely either around 1282 or 1294) while she lived in the monastery of Helfta. This last book was written after Heinrich’s death and thus was not transcribed or edited by him. The general scholarly consensus is that, though Heinrich played an active role in encouraging Mechthild to write, he probably did little editing of her work and she herself may have also participating in editing. The original Middle Low German text does not survive, but has come down in two forms. The first six books were translated into Latin by Dominican brothers at Halle just after Mechthild’s death. The full text including the seventh book was translated into the vernacular Middle High German by a secular priest, Heinrich of Nördlingen, who disseminated the text among other women’s communities. In the process of being translated, the text received

135 Andersen, The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg, 53.
changes to structure and, to some extent, content. The Latin translation included chapter headings, changed the arrangement of the text, and added explanations to more confusing aspects. Additionally, the Latin translators participated in “the softening of outright critiques of the clergy, and the rephrasing of the erotic imagery” by replacing some of Mechthild’s language with “the Latin vocabulary of the biblical text or, alternatively, … that of the Psalms.” Similarly, the German version includes a preface and a foreword to the work.

This chapter will examine Mechthild’s writings from Frank Tobin’s translation and attempt to show how her status as a beguine influenced her work and its reception, both immediate and subsequent. Lacking a formal education, institutional authority, and a strong connection with a man who could provide her with that authority, Mechthild had to be particularly careful not to offend in her writings. Despite this, Mechthild also displays a confidence that allows her to teach and promote her ideas. She uses the same rhetoric of divine authority and humility which Hildegard and Elisabeth use to justify their writings, but Mechthild is actually less overt about her divine authorization and that which she received from men. This self-assurance is reflected in the reception of her work, as she gained a high reputation. However, her status as a beguine is evident in comparison to her nun counterparts in terms of the level of reverence each received.

Mechthild’s Voice

As with the works from Hildegard and Elisabeth, Mechthild’s work demonstrates her concern with legitimacy. After providing a description of her visions and doubts, Mechthild says that she deferred to male authority in figuring out how to handle her gift:

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138 Andersen, *The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 58.
Then, a wretch trembling in humble confusion, I went to my confessor, told him the whole story, and begged for his advice. He said I should boldly go forward with a light heart; God, who had been leading me, would certainly preserve me. Then he gave me a command that often makes me ashamed and causes me to weep because my utter unworthiness is obvious to my eyes; that is, he commanded me, a frail woman, to write this book out of God’s heart and mouth. And so this book has come lovingly from God and does not have its origins in human thought.¹³⁹

This passage accomplishes what seem to be the criteria for a woman defending herself for writing. As both Hildegard and Elisabeth had done, she asserts her humility throughout, calling herself a “wretch” and “frail” and also acknowledging her unworthiness for this honor bestowed upon her. She also claims that she only writes because her confessor, an established male authority, not only granted her the privilege but actually commanded her against her will to do so. Finally, she places emphasis on the idea that the words of the book came from God, not from her or any other human. Mechthild’s version of this disclaimer is slightly unusual in one way; instead of placing it at the beginning of her work like Hildegard and Elisabeth, she put it right in the middle, in the fourth book. The first book of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* does open with a short dialogue in which God states that the book comes from Him and gives it its title, but the more involved and defensive explanation does not come until the reader is already well into the book. From this, it can be surmised that providing justification for her writing, while important to Mechthild, is certainly not a top priority. The text itself, what it is that Mechthild wants to transmit, seems to be more important. If this is the case, it can be assumed that Mechthild did not feel herself to be in much danger for writing, and that she was received with a relatively high reputation. Mechthild does demonstrate that she understands the risks of writing, but for her either the risks do not include harm to herself or she is simply not concerned with being a victim of potential harm. Instead, Mechthild’s concern lies with the text: “I was warned

against writing this book, People said: If one did not watch out, It could be burned.” Though this carries the implication that Mechthild could be at risk of perceived heresy, which would be perilous to both her body and the salvation of her soul, greater prominence is placed on her concern for the safety of the book and the transmission of “the truth,” as she puts it.

Mechthild provides an explanation of the nature of her visitations: “Then for the first time my spirit was brought up through prayer between heaven and the air. I saw with the eyes of my soul in heavenly bliss the beautiful humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ, the eternity of the Father, the suffering of the Son, the sweetness of the Holy Spirit. Then I saw an angel, to whom I was entrusted through baptism, and my devil.” From this description of her first vision, it seems Mechthild’s visions are similar in nature to other mystics’, who see God and commune both with Him and with a personal angel. Mechthild’s writing, however, does not consistently reflect this formulaic notion of visions. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* is not simply a transcription of what Mechthild saw or heard; as Tobin explains, “Most visionary writers of her time and in the generations after her seem to be passive in formulating their experiences. They wish simply and unadornedly to report what they have seen and heard … Mechthild, on the contrary, seems to consider the experience as raw material that needs to be reflected upon, formed, and fashioned before it can become part of her book.” The language Mechthild uses proves this point. For example, Mechthild’s soul asks a question of God, “Lord, how do you like this prison?” and God replies, “I am held captive in it.” From these short six words, Mechthild says, “I understood the meaning of all the following words,” and she goes on to provide a passage of further description.

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that is twenty lines long.\textsuperscript{143} This is similar to Hildegard’s treatment of her own visions. Clearly, Mechthild feels no qualms about providing her own commentary, even if it means going far beyond the actual words she heard from God. In this way she goes beyond her professed visionary authority and asserts authority based on her opinion of her own intellectual capacity, demonstrating a remarkable level of confidence.

Mechthild writes in her vernacular language because she is untrained in Latin. She acknowledges this as a shortcoming: “Now my German fails me; I do not know Latin.”\textsuperscript{144} This proclamation seems to stand somewhat on its own; there is no explanation, so it is impossible to know what Mechthild wanted to say that she felt she could not accomplish in German. It does seem to indicate that she believed she would be able to say more if she were learned in Latin. Interestingly, she follows this statement with “If there is something of merit here, it is not my doing; for there never was a dog so nasty that it would not come if its master coaxed it with a white breakfast roll.”\textsuperscript{145} She claims inspiration from God, yet God has not provided her with the Latin language needed to fully express the ideas. However, it is unlikely, given her status, that Mechthild knew no Latin at all.\textsuperscript{146} Sara Poor makes the argument that Mechthild’s use of the vernacular contained elements of choice and was not purely dictated by her educational limitations. Having not been educated in a convent from childhood, as was the case for Hildegard and Elisabeth, Mechthild “would not have had access to the kind of education or secretarial support available to the nuns of Rupertsberg, Schönau, or Helfta.” However, she completed her compilation of the text while she was living at Helfta, where she would have had the support had she chosen to dictate and have her text translated into Latin for her. “Yet, even

\textsuperscript{143} Mechthild of Magdeburg, \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead}, 321, 322.
\textsuperscript{144} Mechthild of Magdeburg, \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead}, 72.
\textsuperscript{145} Mechthild of Magdeburg, \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead}, 72.
\textsuperscript{146} Poor, \textit{Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book}, 28.
when she had the resources available … she continued in the vernacular.”

Therefore, Poor has concluded that Mechthild’s decision to use the vernacular is representative of her challenge to authority in which she “circumvent[s] the ban on lay and women’s teaching and … address[es] a universal audience with a local language,” a decision brought on by Mechthild’s status as a beguine and her affiliation with the Order of Preachers. Using the vernacular also allowed for a wider readership. Mechthild’s style addresses both the clergy and laypeople in instruction on how to live a good life. Her goal of providing spiritual education to many was apparently realized, as Heinrich of Nördlingen sent her text to many different people and so “men and women from varying classes and religious lifestyles read Mechthild’s work.”

Mechthild switches between the first and third person voice when describing her experiences. Typically, this is to differentiate between Mechthild the human being and the Soul who converses with God. The use of first person to represent herself and, at times, the second person to address the reader demonstrates that Mechthild, like Elisabeth, was quite forthcoming about her own role. She frequently inserts disclaimers saying everything came from God, not herself, but she is not particularly consistent with this, as she also inserts phrases such as, “Dear friend of God, I have written for you this path of love. May God infuse it into your heart!” Through this, Mechthild gives the impression that, though of course everything she writes comes from God, without Mechthild no one would have access to this information, revealing Mechthild’s confidence in her rightness. Furthermore, this sets up the text as a teaching tool. Her intention to teach is obvious in the above statement. Her use of the third person for the character of the Soul is also important for this end. The Soul is given female pronouns because of the

147 Poor, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book, 24.
148 Poor, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book, 37-38.
characterization of the Soul as the Bride of Christ, as Tobin explains. However, the use of the third person voice for the Soul makes it a universal figure. Mechthild could have easily written “my soul” or even simply “I” – after all, it is her soul that converses with God – but she instead portrays it as a universal, or potentially universal, experience for all humans. Anyone’s soul could be the Bride of Christ, male or female, if that person follows Mechthild’s “instructions.” She provides paths and advice for her readers to follow. Interestingly, these are aimed both at religious and lay people. Though Mechthild does not officially belong to an order, she does not fear giving those who do instruction in how to act: “‘Lord, what should I be doing here in this convent?’ ‘You should illumine and teach them and should remain with them in great honor.’” Despite her rhetoric of unworthiness, here Mechthild is able to transcend her status as a beguine and provide instruction for those who held greater institutional authority.

Mechthild also offers criticism of members of the Church. She skillfully allows God to provide justification for this action in the same manner as both Hildegard and Elisabeth: “One finds many a professor learned in scripture who actually is a fool in my eyes. And I’ll tell you something else: It is a great honor for me with regard to them, and it very much strengthens Holy Christianity that the unlearned mouth, aided by my Holy Spirit, teaches the learned tongue.” Mechthild does precisely that. In the sixth book, she provides instruction for members of the clergy, particularly those who hold positions of authority. She cautions them to always treat their subordinates with humility, advising them to speak thus: “Alas, my dear fellow, I, though unworthy of anything good, am your servant in all the ways I can be and not your master. Unfortunately, however, I have authority over you and send you forth with the heartfelt love of

152 Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 283; written while Mechthild was living at Helfta.
Not only should superiors lament their status, they should not use it in any way that opposes the will of their subordinates: “You should be very careful not to use your authority contrary to the will of the brethren or the community, for that is the source of much dissension.” Mechthild also goes beyond just offering advice. She explains why they might need it. She clearly has respect for the Order of Preachers, as she praises St. Dominic several times. However, “Alas, how much of what they faithfully practiced has been lost! The more that is lost, the weaker the order becomes.” Even more strongly,

Woe, Crown of the holy priesthood, how utterly have you disappeared. You have nothing left but your trappings; that is, ecclesiastical authority with which you war against God and his chosen intimates. For this God shall humiliate you before you know it, and our Lord speaks thus: “I shall touch the pope in Rome in his heart with great misery, and in this misery I shall tell him reproachfully that my shepherds of Jerusalem have become murderers and wolves. Before my very eyes they murder the white lambs, and the old sheep are all sick in the head because they cannot eat from the healthy pasture that grows in the high mountains, which is divine love and holy teaching. He who does not know the path to hell, let him look at the corrupt clergy, how their lives go straight to hell with women, children, and other public sins.

This is a classic way to justify women’s writing. If churchmen are failing in their duties and becoming corrupt, it is perfectly acceptable for a woman to provide both criticism and advice. However, it is not just those within the church who are victim to Mechthild’s disapproval. She also has critical words for her own: “O you terribly foolish beguines, how can you be so insolent that you do not tremble before our almighty Judge, since you so frequently receive the Body of God out of blind habit. Though I am the least among you, I must feel shame, blush, and tremble.” Mechthild asserts her humility, but here it is not convincing as she harshly chastises

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other beguines whom she believes are not as pious as they ought to be, receiving the Eucharist out of habit rather than devotion.

Mechthild is not only critical. She has plenty of room for praise of the church hierarchy. This is apparent in the metaphors Mechthild uses that include members of the hierarchical structure playing roles to assist the Soul. First, Mechthild provides imagery of the Soul as the Bride of Christ. The Bride is accompanied by virtues, personified as churchmen. “She has a chaplain; this is fear … The chaplain is clothed with the blood of the lamb and is crowned with honor. … She has a bishop, which is faith. He brings the bride before the bridegroom. The bishop is clothed in precious stones and is crowned with the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵⁹ This indicates that Mechthild believes churchmen do have a role to play, primarily one of assisting the Soul in achieving its place as the Bride, or helping people to become the best Christians they can be. She later uses a similar metaphor that includes female members of the church:

After this I saw a spiritual convent that was constructed of virtues. The abbess is sincere love who has much holy understanding with which she diligently preserves the community in body and soul, all for the glory of God. She gives them many a holy teaching – whatever God’s will is. Thereby she frees her own soul. The lady chaplain of love is divine humility. She is always subordinate to love. … The prioress is the holy peace of God. To her good will is given patience to instruct the community in divine wisdom. … The subprioress is amiability. She it is who gathers up faults and disposes of them with kindness. … The provost is divine obedience, not sinful obedience. To him all virtues are subordinate.¹⁶⁰

Mechthild’s use of the church structure to explain necessary virtues and their functions demonstrates that Mechthild has respect for the structure itself. Rather than rejecting the structure of authority outright, Mechthild shows esteem for the hierarchy, focusing her criticism specifically on corrupt clergy members. It is also interesting to think whom in particular

Mechthild may have had in mind while writing about the spiritual convent, as she was living at Helfta at the time.

Thus Mechthild displays both respect and condemnation for the church hierarchy. There is evidence that Mechthild made little differentiation between those who had taken vows of an order and those who had not. In her visions, Mechthild has experiences with people in purgatory. First she meets a “religious man” of whom she had had a high opinion during his life. He did not go immediately to heaven because, “In [his] life on earth [he] was too fond of ideas, words, and deeds … [and] wanted to live according to his own will rather than according to the determinations of his superiors.” However, “because of the dignity of [his] order no devil was ever able to touch” him.\textsuperscript{161} He asks her for prayers to help end his torment. In this, Mechthild reinforces the idea that one should respect the authority of his or her superiors. Later, Mechthild meets a beguine. She had a “faithful love in her pure heart,” and yet, “She was surrounded by darkness and urgently desired to reach eternal light. Whenever she was ascending, dark night always blocked her. This was her selfish will refusing counsel that so utterly held this person back.” As she explains, “While on earth I never wanted to follow anyone’s advice given according to Christian custom.”\textsuperscript{162} In this anecdote as in the above Mechthild emphasizes the importance of listening to others. Here, it could be indicative both of Mechthild herself, how she must and does listen to her superiors, and it could also be a reminder to others that they ought to listen to her advice. Finally, Mechthild meets a “lay brother of the Order of Preachers … He was fair in celestial bliss and in no way suffering. His soul gave the reasons why this was the case: ‘I was always humble in my heart, cautious in my thinking, and well-intentioned in my actions,’” but he had not yet reached heaven because “I had to receive divine knowledge and love here

\textsuperscript{161} Mechthild of Magdeburg, \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead}, 125.
\textsuperscript{162} Mechthild of Magdeburg, \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead}, 184-185.
first.” He was not suffering, but only had “a small blemish on [his] face” because “I used to frown at those who didn’t do what I wanted. I never did penance for this.” The blemish was quickly removed once the man was given a sigh.\textsuperscript{163} As a lay brother, this man embodied the spiritual and monastic aspects of the Order of Preachers but not the clerical.\textsuperscript{164} Thus, he was within an order, with authority higher than that of a beguine, but not perhaps with the same authority of a priest. And yet, he was the best Christian of the three souls. The experiences of the first two souls, the religious man and the beguine, were very similar to one another. Mechthild does mention the “dignity” of the man’s order, but in terms of how his soul was treated it did not seem to matter much if one held the institutional authority of a clergyman or not.

\textit{Other Voices}

There are other voices present in \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead} besides Mechthild’s. The one a reader might expect to be obvious is Heinrich of Halle, who collaborated with Mechthild to produce the work. It is perhaps not so obvious, however, because much of the work seems to feature Mechthild’s voice so strongly above others. Nevertheless, there are moments when the reader is reminded of Heinrich’s role. Mechthild directly addresses him in her writing: “Master Heinrich, you are surprised at some of the words that are written in this book. I am surprised that you can be surprised at this.”\textsuperscript{165} This is an unusual passage. Mechthild at times addresses the reader, but this is the only example of her addressing her collaborator directly, though she mentions him in the third person voice several times. Here more than at any other spot \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead} feels like a collaboration between the two; the picture the reader sees so clearly in Elisabeth’s works with her describing her visions to Ekbert while he

\textsuperscript{163} Mechthild of Magdeburg, \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead}, 319.
\textsuperscript{165} Mechthild of Magdeburg, \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead}, 190.
transcribes can here be seen with Mechthild and Heinrich. The most interesting part about this passage is what Mechthild is actually saying to Heinrich. He is surprised at her words, seeming to indicate that Heinrich does not necessarily take responsibility for everything Mechthild says. Clearly he believes her, otherwise he would not risk collaboration, but this line provides proof that Heinrich does not alter (at least, not too much) the bits of Mechthild’s work that are less than orthodox. It also seems to indicate that, though he obviously is providing her with some level of protection, he may not be prepared to vouch for everything she says. This could be indicative of Heinrich’s trust that Mechthild cannot say anything heretical, or it could imply that Heinrich does not want to risk his own neck by giving Mechthild a blanket statement of acceptance.

Other collaborators are perhaps a bit more cautious. Later contributors insert their voices more obviously in an attempt to ‘clean up’ Mechthild’s work. First, there is a prologue to the work written by “Brother Heinrich,” who cannot be Heinrich of Halle because, as noted above, his death preceded Mechthild’s and this prologue was written after her death. It provides some of the components typical in a female written work. As Hildegard and Elisabeth before her, Mechthild is compared to Old Testament women prophets, Deborah and Huldah. Foreshadowing Mechthild’s own assertions, the prologue gives reason as to why a reader should not be surprised that God’s words come from a woman, as had happened to women of old before her: “Quite often, in fact, almighty God has chosen what is weak in the world to confound what is stronger for its good.”¹⁶⁶ This accomplishes more than one goal. It provides legitimacy for Mechthild by giving well-established precedent. It also both reaffirms Mechthild’s own weakness as a woman as well as confirms the book’s audience as male. It seems clear that Mechthild did not necessarily intend her book to be solely for a male audience, even in her criticism of church

members as she addresses both male and female members, but this prologue avoids the conflict of a woman teaching by declaring that she has done so only by the will of God and only in order to correct male behavior for their own good. The prologue also gives evidence as to whom the intended audience was. It is given in both Latin and German. The editor, whoever he was, made the choice to provide the reader with both languages. This could indicate that the audience is both clergy and lay. This is further indicated by Mechthild herself, as her instruction is directed at both populations. As noted above, Mechthild specifically directs attention to members of the clergy, telling them how they ought to act, but she also provides more general instruction for the population at large.

In addition to this prologue, there is also a foreword. In this, the reader is told in order to understand, “You should read it through nine times in faith, humility, and devotion.”167 This is actually repeated right at the opening of the first book: “All who wish to understand this book should read it nine times.”168 This was added later and was not Mechthild’s own words.169 As opposed to the defensive nature of the above additions, this seems to be an acknowledgement of the complexity and seriousness of Mechthild’s work. Not just anyone would be able to understand the work because she writes with such depth. It is imperative for the reader to gain a full understanding because of the importance of the topics Mechthild addresses. To this end, the Latin editors also provided explanations or interpretations of more confusing passages.170 This can be seen as a precautionary measure designed to make Mechthild’s work more acceptable, but it can also be seen as an attempt to follow Mechthild’s own desire to make the work accessible to the public. Furthermore, another addition by an editor provides the defensive justification of the

167 “Latin Foreword with Table of Contents and Middle High German Translation,” in The Flowing Light of the Godhead, 36.
prologue mentioned above along with an emphasis on Mechthild: “The writing in this book flowed out of the living Godhead into Sister Mechthild’s heart and has been faithfully set down here as it was given by God, out of her heart and written by her hand.”\textsuperscript{171} The editor who added this passage clearly was concerned with providing extra justification for Mechthild’s work, as s/he emphasizes that it was given by God. However, there is just as strong an emphasis on Mechthild’s own role.

Despite the editors’ obvious praise for Mechthild, parts of her work have been seen as controversial. In particular, Mechthild uses certain gendered and sexual language that might be read as improper. As the theme of the Soul as the Bride of Christ permeates the entirety of The Flowing Light of the Godhead, the sexual imagery that goes along with this is also continuously present. God bids the Soul to “Take off your clothes … you are so utterly formed to my nature that not the slightest thing can be between you and me. … your noble longing and your boundless desire. These I shall fulfill forever with my limitless lavishness.”\textsuperscript{172} Not only does the Soul desire God, but God also desires and praises the Soul as heavily as she him: “You are my softest pillow, my most lovely bed, my most intimate repose, my deepest longing, my most sublime glory. You are an allurement to my Godhead, a thirst for my humanity, a stream for my burning.”\textsuperscript{173} In this, Mechthild even feels comfortable reversing the language of gender roles in marriage. Rather than the Soul giving herself to her Bridegroom (though she does), God “in his immense love, gave himself to her as her own.”\textsuperscript{174} Though of course “Mechthild is far from confusing or commingling spiritual love with physical love,”\textsuperscript{175} the later Latin translators “have

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\textsuperscript{171} Mechthild of Magdeburg, The Flowing Light of the Godhead, 267. \\
\textsuperscript{172} Mechthild of Magdeburg, The Flowing Light of the Godhead, 62. \\
\textsuperscript{173} Mechthild of Magdeburg, The Flowing Light of the Godhead, 48. \\
\textsuperscript{174} Mechthild of Magdeburg, The Flowing Light of the Godhead, 50. \\
\textsuperscript{175} Tobin, “Introduction,” in The Flowing Light of the Godhead, 16. 
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toned down Mechthild’s … erotic imagery.”\textsuperscript{176} This is indicative of a fear of Mechthild’s work crossing over a line into unacceptable language. It seems obvious that these editors were more concerned with presenting Mechthild in an acceptable, humble, submissive manner than Mechthild herself was.

Reception

Overall, the reception of Mechthild’s work seems to have been overwhelmingly positive. She apparently gained a favorable reputation during her lifetime, as evidenced by those who sought her advice. Her advice was not unsolicited: “I prayed to the Child for those who had commended themselves to me.”\textsuperscript{177} Clearly, her contemporaries placed trust in her authenticity. This is particularly significant because of her status as a beguine. Mechthild’s work was produced around the same time when other beguines were beginning to write “vernacular theology,” a term coined by Nicholas Watson.\textsuperscript{178} This was a risky endeavor. Some, like Mechthild, were received well. Others, however, were not. Marguerite Porete was a French beguine who lived in roughly the same time period as Mechthild. Her work, \textit{The Mirror of Simple Souls}, shared many similarities with \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead}. Both were written in the vernacular and both consisted of dialogues of the Soul based on courtly literature.\textsuperscript{179} However, while Mechthild’s work was praised and respected, Marguerite’s was deemed heretical and she was burned at the stake in 1310.\textsuperscript{180} This difference in treatment of beguines for similar works seems to be largely dependent on their respective support structures.

\textsuperscript{177} Mechthild of Magdeburg, \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead}, 328-329.
\textsuperscript{178} Nicholas Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409,” \textit{Speculum} 70, no.4 (October 1995), 822-864, 823.
\textsuperscript{179} Poor, \textit{Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book}, 26.
\textsuperscript{180} Sean L. Field, \textit{The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor: The Trials of Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart} (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 2.
Though there is not a great deal of evidence surrounding Mechthild’s contacts with male authorities, her collaboration with Heinrich of Halle and the later translation of her work by Dominicans and Heinrich of Nördlingen indicates that her work was highly respected and protected. For Marguerite, on the other hand, the only support she received from a man (or at all) during her heresy trial was from Guiard of Cressonessart, who himself was deemed a heretic.\(^1\)

The protection of a respectable man or men who held positions of authority was absolutely crucial for legitimizing beguine mystics.

Despite her status as a beguine, Mechthild rarely wavers in her self-confidence. She claims unworthiness, particularly in the face of the nuns at Helfta who had greater formal education and authority, protesting their requests of her: “You want to have instruction from me, but I myself am uneducated. What you are searching for you can find a thousand times better in your books.”\(^2\)

However, her protestations are not entirely convincing when one looks at her work as a whole. Rather, they appear to be used as a rhetorical device, much like in Hildegard’s works. As noted above, she inserts into her book her command from God that she ought to be teaching the nuns at Helfta. This functions as justification for an “unworthy” beguine teaching nuns, but it also demonstrates Mechthild’s confidence in her correctness. She is “secure in her role as Christ’s mouthpiece.”\(^3\)

She may worry that she steps beyond her limits by teaching, but she never worries that her visions are not legitimate in the way Elisabeth of Schönau does when she questions if she is being deluded by demons. Instead, Mechthild asserts her correctness throughout, with statements such as: “A sincere woman and a good man who after my death

\(^1\) Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 1.


would have like to talk with me but cannot should read this little book.”\footnote{Mechthild of Magdeburg, \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead}, 228.} Evidently, Mechthild believes her words are important enough to be remembered after her death and she has enough confidence in a positive reception of her work that she believes people will want to talk with her even after she is gone. Similarly, even when people disagree with her work, she maintains belief in her correctness: “I said in one passage in this book that the Godhead is my father by nature. You do not understand this, and say: ‘Everything that God has done with us is a matter of grace and not of nature.’ You are right, but I am right, too.”\footnote{Mechthild of Magdeburg, \textit{The Flowing Light of the Godhead}, 256.} Rather than questioning her own words and beliefs, Mechthild asserts that anyone who contradicts her simply does not understand.

\textit{The Nuns at Helfta}

Mechthild was an influential force during her time at the abbey at Helfta. Not only did she provide spiritual teachings for the nuns, her activities fostered an environment of encouragement for nuns to record their mystical experiences. The convent at Helfta, founded in 1229, became known for its proliferation of mystical texts: “their reports of visions and inner experiences or meditations form the largest single body of women’s mystical writing in the period.”\footnote{Bynum, \textit{Jesus as Mother}, 174.} The two most notable mystics from Helfta are Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude the Great. Mechthild of Magdeburg, present at Helfta right at the beginning of this movement and overlapping with Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude, played a large role in influencing them and their works. Mechthild of Hackeborn joined the convent at Helfta at age seven in 1248. It was not until 1291 (several years after or just before Mechthild of Magdeburg’s death) when Mechthild of Hackeborn was seriously ill that she revealed her visions, which were transcribed
by two other nuns.\textsuperscript{187} Gertrude the Great was a generation younger but wrote earlier, composing an account of her spiritual life in 1289.\textsuperscript{188} Thus, both women were at Helfta as young to middle-aged nuns at the time Mechthild of Magdeburg lived there. Therefore, both were quite familiar with her work. Indeed, Gertrude was even present at Mechthild of Magdeburg’s deathbed – apparently they had some sort of relationship.\textsuperscript{189} The works of these two nuns differs from Mechthild’s in that they were composed in Latin; as they had both been cloistered from childhood, they would have received an education in Latin. Perhaps due to this, their writings demonstrate greater confidence. Whereas Gertrude, “Qualified by neither her gender nor by any official position in the monastery … nevertheless felt almost no hesitation about her teaching and advising,”\textsuperscript{190} Mechthild of Magdeburg was “intensely aware of lacking priestly status and learning. When ‘many’ warned her that her book was dangerous and should be burned, she addressed God, never doubting his inspiration but slightly irritated at the lack of protection she experienced.”\textsuperscript{191} This contrast, in which the nuns of Helfta felt greater confidence in their security and Mechthild of Magdeburg was aware of her lack of protection, demonstrates the difference a formal position within the Church hierarchy and a formal education can make. Despite this, however, Mechthild of Magdeburg does not appear to have censored herself much or felt a great lack of confidence. She also served as an inspiration to Mechthild of Hackeborn, Gertrude the Great, and other nuns at Helfta, demonstrating that she was highly respected even without an authoritative position.

\textsuperscript{187} Bynum, \textit{Jesus as Mother}, 210.
\textsuperscript{188} Bynum, \textit{Jesus as Mother}, 178.
\textsuperscript{190} Bynum, \textit{Jesus as Mother}, 187.
\textsuperscript{191} Bynum, \textit{Jesus as Mother}, 240.
Where her lower status as a beguine lacking formal education and formal authority within the Church can be clearly seen is in a comparison of the remembrance of her work in comparison with the remembrance of Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude the Great. Though Mechthild has come back into scholarship, her work “appears to have received little attention from the fifteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century.”192 Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude the Great, however, were not forgotten. In fact, both have been recognized as saints.193 As such, their works were widely disseminated. Mechthild of Hackeborn’s Liber specialis gratiae circulated not only in Latin; extant manuscripts also reveal that it was translated into Middle High German, Dutch, English, Swedish, Italian, and French; “If only one Mechthild were to be remembered, it was more likely to be Mechthild of Hackeborn.”194 With their status as saints, Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude the Great have enjoyed much greater remembrance than Mechthild of Magdeburg. If she was so influential in their writing, which she was, why is it that they have been remembered while Mechthild sat quietly by for so many centuries? One explanation is that Mechthild of Magdeburg, while influential for these nuns, was a less credible source due to her status as a beguine. Her lack of a theological education and use of the vernacular seem to be the largest differentiating factors between her and the nuns of Helfta. Despite the sizeable role she played in the encouragement of women to write their mystical experiences, Mechthild herself was not considered important enough to be remembered or canonized.

Mechthild’s work thus seems contradictory to her status. Though she uses the same rhetoric of humility that Hildegard and Elisabeth use, it seems to be less important to her. Her justification for writing is based on the same visionary authority as the two earlier women,

192 Andersen, The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg, 93.
193 Benedictine Monks of St. Augustine’s Abbey, Ramsgate, The Book of Saints, 124, 191.
194 Poor, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book, 182-183.
particularly Hildegard, but she places less emphasis on it. Perhaps there is more to Mechthild’s story and her relationships that is no longer known, and for some lost reason she felt secure in her writing. It is also possible that this difference is simply due to personality. However, another possibility is that it is because of her position outside of the Church structure that Mechthild had the confidence to go boldly forth with *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. As an outsider to the hierarchical structure, Mechthild was not subject to the same pressures as Hildegard and Elisabeth and potentially even, due to a greater distance between herself and male Church authorities, subject to less intense scrutiny than her ecclesial counterparts.


**Conclusion**

Sabina Flanagan has argued that ecclesial or lay status affected medieval women’s self-image in terms of their own authority:

Some evidence suggests that certain noble and royal women, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine or Matilda of Tuscany, exercised a good deal of real power and need not have felt their world to be excessively circumscribed. At the other end of the scale some peasant women have been seen (if possibly through feminist glasses) as holding an honoured and honourable place within the domestic economy. It is quite likely, indeed, that misogynist attitudes weighed most heavily on women in religion, who were exposed to them more constantly, and where a set of special prohibitions – from assuming priestly office or from approaching the altar – were in force.  

This thesis has not examined the lives of medieval laywomen. Flanagan’s point about women in religious lives, however, is extremely pertinent to the question this thesis addresses. How did their respective positions as abbess, nun, and beguine affect Hildegard’s, Elisabeth’s, and Mechthild’s visionary works? Hildegard and Elisabeth were more similar in terms of status, education, and structured support, and yet Mechthild appears to exemplify confidence similar to that of Hildegard. These are only three women, but it is possible to speculate that they are indicative of a broader trend in the relationship between status and the way medieval women wrote. This would suggest that there is indeed a correlation between status and how women wrote and justified their work, but not in the way one might expect. To expand on Flanagan’s idea, Mechthild of Magdeburg’s case suggests that women who were not under the direct authority of male members of the Church could actually exhibit more confidence in their work, as they were not subject to the same pressures and restrictions that women within the ecclesial structure bore. This is also related to relationships with men. Hildegard, due to her position,
acted as the dominant partner in her relationships with various male collaborators. This both influenced and was a result of the visionary authority she claimed in her writings. In this way, she placed herself outside the authority of men using her informal power, and also was able to establish herself as such a powerful figure because she did not use the same rhetoric of dependency on men that other women did. Elisabeth was one of those women. She also had access to the benefits of a religious life that Hildegard enjoyed, including education and a formal structure of support in the form of the Church hierarchy that surrounded her. Elisabeth, however, had a much closer relationship with her collaborator than Hildegard had. She, too, used her visionary power as a means of justification, but it came more strongly in the form of her deference of Ekbert and other men in positions of authority. This is not to say Elisabeth was not a strong player in her own writing – she certainly was – but her relationship with Ekbert along with her position as a nun as opposed to the leader of the community led Elisabeth to focus less on her visionary authority and more on her immediate relationships. Mechthild, as a beguine, might be expected to portray herself even more humbly and focus even more on her relationships with men to provide justification than Elisabeth. This, however, is not the case. Mechthild does, of course, use rhetoric of humility, but her justification is much more subtle. The justification she does provide stems from her visionary authority, like Hildegard, but she does not make providing such justification a priority. Additionally, while she held the support of a male authority figure in Heinrich of Halle, her focus in writing is rarely on him. Thus, there does indeed appear to be a relationship between position and authorial authority for medieval women. Within the Church structure, there seems to be a descending order in which women who held greater institutional authority also held greater visionary authority. Outside of that structure, however, women who were not under the direct control of a religious institution perhaps harbored less fear of direct
hostility or contention of their authority, despite the fact that, due to their lack of institutional protection, the risks of claiming visionary authority seem to have been higher for these women. Where the expected relationship between status and authority can be seen is in perceptions of women after their lives had ended. Hildegard was regarded most highly of the three after her death, being canonized and remembered for her visionary power. Elisabeth was also remembered well, but perhaps the focus was more on her life as a nun than on her informal authority. Mechthild lacked this same type of remembrance. Though she was remembered well, she was not as important as similar women who held formal positions within the Church. An examination of the similarities and differences between Hildegard, Elisabeth, and Mechthild can provide a closer look at this relationship between position and authority.

As Flanagan notes, men, too, often provided a formulaic justification for their written work.\textsuperscript{196} The women’s justifications, however, contain components distinct from those of men and are potentially more important. There seems to be more riding on a woman’s justification as there is higher risk involved. Hildegard, Elisabeth, and Mechthild all provide typical elements of visionary justification, but they also exhibit marked differences. Each woman uses rhetoric of humility, asserting herself as lowly and subordinate. They also all allude to the Biblical teaching that “God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.”\textsuperscript{197} In this way, they are able to criticize clergy members and the Church without facing retribution. Their justifications differed, however, in several ways. Hildegard and Elisabeth both emphasize their informal authority derived directly from God. Both of these religious women claim that they had fallen ill and only recovered when the will of God had been performed. Elisabeth also, of course, focuses

\textsuperscript{196} Flanagan, \textit{Hildegard of Bingen}, 50.
\textsuperscript{197} I Corinthians 1:27.
heavily on male authority that fortified her position. Mechthild also asserts that her words come from God, as Hildegard and Elisabeth had done, but her justification is less overt than theirs in general. The clerics who translated her work after her death included disclaimers in the prologue, but Mechthild herself does not strongly assert her reasons for legitimacy until the middle of the book. This is in contrast with both Hildegard and Elisabeth who provide their respective claims of legitimacy right at the beginning of their works, and continue to do so throughout. It is possible to suggest that this difference came about due to status. Mechthild, as a beguine, was not under the direct authority of the hierarchical structure of the Church. She was, of course, subject to her confessor, Heinrich, but this relationship did not have the same type of power dynamic that a woman in a convent would have had with her male superiors. Therefore, Mechthild did not need to prove herself in the same manner as Hildegard and Elisabeth, and thus she focuses less on justification and more on her theological content.

The differences between each woman are evident in their respective styles of writing as well. Hildegard concerns herself with grand theological themes and writes in a relatively detached, impersonal way. Mechthild does much the same, focusing on a universal experience for all souls. Elisabeth, however, writes in a very personal fashion. She writes specifically about herself and those close to her. This seems to be related to each woman’s relationship with men. Hildegard was separate from any one man. Though she undoubtedly developed friendships, Hildegard was not dependent on one collaborator. Mechthild had one male collaborator in Heinrich, but there is so little concerning Heinrich directly in Mechthild’s writing that it is difficult to determine the nature of their relationship. Additionally, Mechthild worked not only with Heinrich but also with the nuns at Helfta. Elisabeth had a very close relationship with her
collaborator. Due to their familial relationship, she and Ekbert collaborated more closely and perceptibly than either Hildegard or Mechthild did with their editors.

In their differing styles, each woman presents her work as intended for a different audience. Hildegard, with her use of Latin and focus on theology, clearly intends her work to be read by members of the clergy. Elisabeth’s works are also in Latin, indicating a learned audience, but her personal style also gives the impression that her work is for herself, Ekbert, and her immediate community. Other readers, while welcome, are not the focus, except in the cases of her works on Mary and the Ursuline relics. Mechthild, using the vernacular and the Soul as a universal figure, directs her work toward an audience comprised of both the clergy and laypeople. Status can be discerned not only in style but also in content. For example, Hildegard and Elisabeth both shy away from sexual language, even condemning sexual notions. As women of a religious life, Hildegard and Elisabeth both had reason to proclaim and protect their image of virginity. Mechthild, however, not only does not shy away from it but actively uses sexual language to make her point. This may seem counterintuitive; as a woman outside the Church but also unmarried, Mechthild also should have been concerned with her image of chastity, perhaps even more so than the cloistered women. However, Mechthild also uses the idea that her soul is the Bride of Christ much more than either Hildegard or Elisabeth. This, in a sense, ‘balances out’ her sexual language because, as the Bride, the Soul is chaste and pure, despite the imagery Mechthild uses.

Position is extremely important when considering the institutional support each woman held. In contrast to Mechthild, Hildegard and Elisabeth enjoyed a great amount of support due to the structure to which they belonged. As Clark notes: “As Benedictine nuns, [Hildegard and Elisabeth] were nourished by the rich liturgical experience of monastic life, were exposed to
educational opportunities not available to most lay women, and had structured communities to support them materially and emotionally as they articulated their interpretations of what they considered divine revelation.”

These communities provided them with significant advantages over a laywoman or beguine such as Mechthild. Due to their structural support, Hildegard and Elisabeth had a leg up, so to speak, in terms of claims to authority. As Poor articulates, “Authority derives after all not merely from a claim or an assertion of authority, but also from an external acknowledgement of that claim. We can assert authority ad infinitum, but we cannot have it until someone believes that we do, whether because of how we act, because of who supports us, or because of a position held within a social or institutional hierarchy.”

Because Hildegard and Elisabeth possessed a certain level of support before even revealing their visions, they could expect to be taken more seriously than Mechthild might have. However, there were also important differences between Hildegard and Elisabeth based on position. While Hildegard had “support from a powerful circle of friends, relatives, and churchmen … Elisabeth had only her devoted brother.”

While I would argue that Elisabeth had support beyond Ekbert alone – after all she was part of a well-connected ecclesiastic family and developed relationships in the convent for eleven years before revealing her visions – the point stands that Hildegard, due to her strong position as abbess and founder of Rupertsberg and as a highly renowned individual both within and outside of her own community, enjoyed a greater sense of institutional security than Elisabeth. Mechthild, considering that it is not even certain whether or not she lived in a beguine community and certainly was not part of an order, had even less. With this in mind, it may seem contradictory that Mechthild comes across in The Flowing Light of the Godhead with such

199 Poor, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book, 79.
200 Newman, Sister of Wisdom, 38.
confidence. It is possible, of course, that Mechthild was simply an anomaly, a woman without formal support who, for some reason, was able to promote her message using only some rhetoric of humility. However, a potential explanation, as noted above, could be that her status actually allowed Mechthild to write in the way she did. Mechthild may have lacked the support that the formal monastic structure could provide, but it also meant that she was free from the strict regulations imposed on women in a religious life. She therefore may have felt less subordinate to male authorities in the Church hierarchy and greater freedom to pursue her visionary message without as explicit justification or direct authority from those men.

Thus, the works of these three extraordinary women were shaped by the context in which they were created. The contexts of Hildegard, Elisabeth, and Mechthild’s lives were similar – all lived between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries in the German territories, all shared a devotion to and mystic connection with God, and all developed positive reputations for their visionary power. And yet, their writings were not the same. For all their similarities, each of these women’s works presents a unique perspective and spin. In this way, Hildegard, Elisabeth, and Mechthild provide a view into the relationship between institutional position and authority.
Primary Sources:

Secondary Sources:


