THE MEDIEVAL FEMALE MYSTICS’ RESPONSES TO THE VIRGIN MARY

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Devotion to Mary, Christ’s mother, was prevalent in medieval culture both in the ecclesiastical community and with the laity. The medieval Church and its male theologians regarded the Virgin Mary as Queen of Heaven, the embodiment of the Church and the intercessor of Christ. The medieval period also fostered female writers, often identified as mystics, who were concerned in their writings with the role of the Virgin. This thesis examines the responses to Mary in the medieval female mystics’ reflections and how their responses differ from traditional church teachings, early Christian writers and medieval male theologians. In particular, this project focuses primarily on the Mariology of four prominent female German mystics: Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Elisabeth of Schönau (c.1129-65), Mechtild of Hackeborn (1240-98) and Gertrude the Great (1256-1302). To reach conclusions on the Mariology of these women, early Christian and medieval primary sources were interpreted. Also, it was important to examine medieval female mystics’ writings and review the scholarship on these women. This research found that the female mystics upheld many of the traditional tenets of medieval Marian devotion but still developed their own personal Mariology. The mystics attempted to reconcile the inherited traditional church teachings with their own personal experiences regarding the Virgin. The female mystics also complicated these traditional
teachings by offering divergent views among themselves. The contemporaries Hildegard of Bingen and Elisabeth of Schönau shared many traditional views of medieval Marian devotion. Hildegard did not envision communication between herself and Mary and she struggled reconciling the accepted female roles of her era with her exaltation of the Virgin. Elisabeth’s more interactive relationship with the Virgin resulted in visions of Mary as priest. This priestly Mary assured Elisabeth her spiritual gifts were legitimate. In the later medieval era, Gertrude the Great and Mechtilde of Hackeborn also accepted the traditional tenets of medieval Marian devotion and experienced visions of the Virgin communicating with them. These women lived in a community that allowed them freedoms that their predecessors did not enjoy and this environment fostered a bold personal spirituality that brought them directly to Christ. Gertrude did not wish to exaggerate Mary’s position in the celestial hierarchy; Christ was Gertrude’s primary focus in her own personal spirituality. Her fellow nun, Mechtilde felt that she was closer to Christ through his mother. These four women each had a complex relationship with the Virgin. Their responses to Mary were unique to their own personal spirituality. Ultimately, the contributions these women made to Marian devotion helped to define them as mystics; their connection with Mary enriched their relationship with the Divine.
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INTRODUCTION

Devotion to Mary, Christ’s mother, was prevalent in medieval culture both in the ecclesiastical community and with the laity. The medieval Church and its male theologians regarded the Virgin Mary as Queen of Heaven, the embodiment of the Church and the intercessor of Christ. Medieval writers continued the dialogue of their predecessors regarding her elevated position within Catholic teaching and piety. Identification of Mary’s highly revered status exists in the many male-produced religious texts, as well as depictions in art and statuary of the era. However, the medieval period also fostered female writers, often identified as mystics, who were concerned in their writings with the role of the Virgin. This thesis will examine the responses to Mary in the medieval female mystics’ reflections and how their responses both contribute to and differ from traditional church teachings, including writings by the male medieval mystics.

The thesis focuses primarily on the Mariology of four prominent female German mystics: Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Elisabeth of Schönau (c.1129-65), Mechtilde of Hackeborn (1240-98) and Gertrude the Great (1256-1302). They are not the only female mystics to contemplate the Virgin in their religious writings. However, this group does offer a rich representation of the complex and diverse responses female mystics had to Mary. In order to investigate how medieval female mystics had different responses to Mary from their male-counterparts it is imperative to interpret an early and appropriate selection of Christian and medieval primary sources, examine the Mariology of medieval female mystics and a review of the scholarship on female mystics and their writings. This research found that the female mystics upheld many of the traditional tenets of medieval
Marian devotion; yet they nonetheless developed their own personal Mariology. The mystics attempted to reconcile the inherited traditional church teachings with their own personal experience regarding the Virgin. These women also complicated these traditional teachings by offering divergent views among themselves. This thesis will explore the Mariology of each of these four female mystics and explain how and why their views of the Virgin were unique.
CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS OF MEDIEVAL MARIAN DEVOTION

Two fundamental sources for the medieval intellectual tradition are the Bible and the writings of the early Church’s fathers. It is essential to examine early Christian texts and teachings on the Virgin in order to grasp how Marian devotion became an integral part of medieval culture. The mention of Mary in the New Testament is sparse but important; these biblical accounts and related exegesis are vital to understanding Mary’s role in the New Testament.

In 1978, Catholic and Protestant scholars produced an important study on Mary in the New Testament; the study focuses on Mary’s role within the biblical texts. The study discusses Luke’s use of the infancy narrative to exalt Mary and highlights places in the biblical texts that mention the Virgin and emphasize Mary’s humility, motherhood and acceptance of God’s will. Perhaps no other passage in the Bible speaks more to what would become medieval Marian devotion than the Magnificat. Mary responds to Elizabeth with the following verse:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.
for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud in the imagination
of their hearts,

the qualities that Mary discusses in the Magnificat will be reflected in later medieval Marian devotion: humility (“low estate of his handmaiden”), venerated (“generations will call me blessed,”) and mercy (“And his mercy is on those who fear him”). The study suggests that: “Her faith does not include clear understanding of all these events, yet because she is the believing handmaiden of the Lord, she seeks to penetrate their meaning.” This is an important point made by the authors; however, there is more recent scholarship that questions this theory. In his essay: “Mary in the New Testament and Apocrypha,” Chris Maunder states that this assertion: Leads to a minimalization of the importance of Mary in the New Testament…she became a disciple at a late point in the ministry, so the portrait of her as the believing “handmaiden of the Lord” is derived from a later memory…other disciples understood the mission of Jesus before she did.\(^4\)
Maunder also states that the study is more in line with Vatican II interpretations of the Virgin. The emphasis is on the Virgin as a disciple of Christ rather than her role as the Mother of God:

Mary’s New Testament role derives more specifically from her status as disciple rather than Jesus’ mother—is consonant with post Vatican II understanding of Mary. In this she is situated more in a theology of Church, as a prototype of all believers, and less as an exalted partner of Christ in the work of redemption, where her position as his mother is at the heart of her privileges.\(^5\)

Interestingly, the early church fathers and the medieval thinkers would focus on both roles of Mary. In particular, the female mystics would often exalt Mary as the partner of Christ and have visions of her crowned and seated next to him. Both male and female mystics honored the Virgin for her intercessory powers as well as promoting her virtues as an example for all. The patristic fathers and medieval mystics also interpreted Mary as “a prototype of believers” and even extended this belief to associate Mary as Church. In his book, *Gateway to Heaven: Marian Doctrine and Devotion*, Brian Reynolds states:

“Although the Evangelists clearly call Mary the Mother of Jesus, they were not particularly concerned with defining the nature of that motherhood.”\(^6\) Reynolds further explains that this question, for the early church fathers: “became the most burning doctrinal issue in the Church in the first centuries...because it had a direct bearing on the Christological controversies concerning the human and divine nature of Jesus….”\(^7\) It will


\(^7\) Ibid., 10.
be evident in the following sections of this thesis how important establishing Mary’s place and purity was to the patristic fathers and medieval theologians. They would interpret the biblical texts in ways that celebrated the Virgin as Mother of God, Queen of Heaven and other roles that established her prominent status as a key aspect of medieval theology and devotion.

Maunder suggests that Mary’s role in the New Testament was ultimately Christocentric; however, her presence and dedication to God’s will is upheld as a standard for the masses:

Overall, we can say that these and other readings of the Gospel texts do confirm the Christocentric nature of Mary's presence in them; she is there to tell us something about the Christian faith in the risen Jesus and his incarnation. However, she also acts as a strong role model of faith and reflection.  

Mary became the first Christian not only because she was Christ’s mother but because she was prepared to accept and carry out the will of God.

Western medieval religious thought was also inspired by the writings of the patristic fathers. These men began to formally establish Mary’s place in Western Christianity. In this section of the thesis I shall examine the Mariology of two significant fathers, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine. The Mariology of these early writers had significant influence in later medieval Marian devotion and doctrine in Western Europe. A concrete understanding of medieval Mariology is, therefore, necessary for later interpretations of the female mystics’ response to Mary in their writings. St. Ambrose and St. Augustine explored complex issues related to Mary as a person and as the Mother of

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God. Marian themes that would reappear in medieval discourse included discussions on her virginity, intercessory qualities, and virtues such as humility and obedience to God’s will. Also, they would question how a woman born by human reproduction—and thus tainted by original sin—would be able to bear the Son of God. The patristic fathers attempted to reconcile how Mary could be exempt from exposure to original sin. This dialogue would continue with the medieval male-theologians and beyond. However, it would not be a significant point of contention with the medieval female mystics.

St. Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) was a significant fourth-century figure in the early Christian church. In his work, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, Luigi Gambero suggests that St. Ambrose offered the “first important Marian doctrine within Western Christianity, in terms not only of quantity but also of quality,” and Gambero states that it is: “indisputable that he excluded from Mary any stain of sin whatsoever.” St. Ambrose placed a high value on the virtue of virginity, especially as it applied to Mary. In his writings he attributed to Mary many virtues including humility, prudence, diligence in labor, charity, temperance, modesty and reserve. However, it was Mary’s virginity that he exalted and professed should be an example for all:

Now who could be nobler than the Mother of God? Who more splendid than she, whom Splendor chose? Who more chaste than she, who gave birth to a body without bodily contact? What should I say, then, about all her other virtues? She

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10 Ibid., 198.

11 Ibid., 191.
was a virgin, not only in body but in her mind as well, and never mixed the sincerity of her affections with duplicity.\textsuperscript{12}

In fact, it is in his praise of virginity that St. Ambrose touches upon an idea that will be of great significance in medieval religious thought and a common theme in the writings of the female mystics: Mary as intercessor. St. Ambrose discusses how Mary presents a group of virgins before God. He reinforces his emphasis on the preferred state of virginity and the rewards of being the bearer of such a virtue: “Oh, how many virgins will she meet! How many will she embrace and bring to the Lord, saying: ‘By her chastity, she has kept unstained the bridal chamber of my Son!’”\textsuperscript{13} The virgins are before God due to the “embrace” and intercession of Mary. It is through her that the virgins are able to interact with the Divine. The implications of her intercessory powers are subtle but important; medieval writers will fully embrace this role of Mary, and it will become a significant aspect of the era’s piety.

Another important aspect of St. Ambrose’s Mariology is his discussion of Mary as mother. Her motherhood of Christ would lead to his association with Mary as Church. In his book, \textit{Mary Through the Centuries}, Jaroslav Pelikan states that Ambrose took the role of Mary deeper with his meditations on the “Virgin within the house” and the “Mother at the temple.”\textsuperscript{14} Pelikan asserts that these roles he ascribed to Mary spoke to her “historic mission as the Mother of Christ.”\textsuperscript{15} He states: “For ‘the Virgin within the house’ was also

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 199.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 191.

\textsuperscript{14} Jaroslav Pelikan, \textit{Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 120-121.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 121.
‘the Mother at the temple,’ and because she was not only Virgin but Mother, she could be ‘the companion for the ministry of Christ.’ Mary’s ‘historic mission’ would begin before Christ’s birth at the Annunciation when she accepted that she would hold a pivotal role in transforming the Word to Flesh. When she agrees to house the Son of God within her body she becomes an analogy for the Church, because Christ rests within her as the faithful come and stay within the Church. As cited in Emmanuel Lanne’s article, “Marian Doctrine and Piety up to the Council of Chalcedon: the Fathers and the Liturgy,” St. Ambrose states: “Well [does the Gospel say]: married but a virgin; because she is the type of the Church, which is almost married but remains immaculate. The Virgin [Church] conceived us by the Holy Spirit and, as a virgin, gave birth to us without pain.” The comparison of the Virgin and the Church would continue in the writings of St. Augustine and later medieval theologians.

St. Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) is the most important theologian in the early western Christianity. He introduced teachings on Mary that are still influential in current Catholic debate:

In his Marian doctrine, which anticipates the perspectives of Vatican II by centuries, Augustine examines the Blessed Virgin in relation to the mystery of her Son and to the Church; this allows him to give the proper place to her person and mission within salvation history.

16 Ibid.


18 Gambero, Mary and the Fathers of the Church, 217.
Emmanuel Lanne observes that St. Augustine did not dedicate a unique treatise to Mary, perhaps because the North African church had no specific “Marian commemoration.” Nonetheless, Augustine wishes to reconcile the same issues with Mary’s person that his predecessors focused on; this includes Mary’s exposure to original sin. There is controversy among scholars whether St. Augustine believed Mary was free from original sin. As cited by Jarsolav Pelikan, much of the controversy surrounding Augustine’s view comes from a passage in a treatise his called “On Nature and Grace.” Augustine states:

> We must make an exception of the holy Virgin Mary, concerning whom I wish raise no question when it touches on the subject of sins out of honor to the Lord. For from him we know what abundance of grace for overcoming sin in every particular was conferred upon her who had the merit to conceive and bear him who undoubtedly had no sin.  

This passage certainly seems to exempt Mary from the sin that Catholic doctrine associates with every person due to the disobedience of Adam and Eve. However, Augustine does not explain why Mary is free from original sin and here lies the point of contention. Some medieval theologians would go to great length to explain Mary’s exemption from the taint of original sin. Jarsolav Pelikan refers to the larger theological discourse on Mary as the “Great Exception.” Pelikan believes that St. Augustine exempted Mary from the company of other Old and New Testament saints whom the Bishop of Hippo felt were tainted by original sin. He argues that St. Augustine found

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19 Emmanuel Lanne, “Marian Doctrine and Piety up to the Council of Chalcedon,” 52.


21 Ibid.
Mary to be free from sin as evidenced from his work: “On Nature and Grace.” The scholars Emmanuel Lanne and Rozanne Elder seem to agree with Pelikan’s assertion; however, Lanne will only go as far as to say that it was “unlikely” that St. Augustine did not exempt Mary from the taint of sin. Lanne acknowledges the controversy surrounding St. Augustine’s view on Mary and original sin and both he and Elder discuss St Augustine’s understanding of original sin as a byproduct of human reproduction. The scholars highlight the influence of Palagius’ theory that Mary was sinless due to her “own volition.” Elder argues that St. Augustine reworked his theory to accommodate Mary’s actions of charity and humility as well as the circumstances of her birth. However, she does not argue that St. Augustine exempted the Virgin completely. St. Augustine’s Mariology reached beyond the debate of Mary’s exposure to original sin. His views and writings of Christ’s mother for example, would influence medieval Marian piety.

St. Augustine’s Marian devotion was similar to St. Ambrose in that he accepted Mary’s virginity before and after she gave birth to Christ and acknowledged her virginity was an example to all. Also like Ambrose, he asserted that there was an allegorical

22 Ibid.

23 Lanne, “Marian Doctrine and Piety up to the Council of Chalcedon,” 52.

24 Ibid.


26 Ibid.

27 Emmanuel Lanne, “Marian Doctrine and Piety up to the Council of Chalcedon,” 52.
relationship between Eve and Mary and Mary and the Church. As we have seen with Ambrose, Mary’s decision to carry Christ inspired these early church fathers to compare her to the Church itself. Elder focuses on Augustine’s frequent referral to Mary as the “Lord’s Mother” and Luigi Gambero takes Mary’s motherhood of Christ a step further, asserting that Augustine viewed Mary as Church: “Nevertheless it is true, the Church is the mother of Christ: Mary preceded the Church as its type.” In his seminal work, *City of God*, St. Augustine praises Mary as “Mother Sion” and acknowledges that it was in Mary that Christ was made man. He states:

> For thence came the Virgin Mary, in whom Christ assumed flesh that He might be man. Of which city another psalm says: “Mother Sion, shall a man say, and the man is made in her, and the Highest Himself hath founded her.” Who is this Highest, save God? And thus Christ, who is God, before He became man through Mary in that city; Himself founded it by the patriarchs and prophets. As therefore was said by prophecy so long before to this queen, the city of God, what we already can see fulfilled: “Instead of thy fathers, sons are born to thee; though shall make them prices all over the earth; so her out of her sons truly are set up even her fathers [princes] through all the earth; when the people, coming together to her, confess to her with the confession of eternal praise forever and ever.”

This rich and powerful passage demonstrates St. Augustine’s deep devotion and commitment to Mary’s place within Christianity. The views of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine are based on their exegesis of the biblical texts. While Mary’s literal presence in the New Testament is not expansive, the patristic fathers offered significant

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28 Rozanne Elder, “Mary in the Common Latin Tradition: Agreements, Disagreements and Divergence,” 76.

29 Ibid.


commentary to highlight the Virgin’s role in salvation history. Typological interpretation of Mary, such as New Eve and Church were key allegorical treatments of the Virgin.

In her essay: “Mary in the Common Latin Tradition: Agreements, Disagreements and Divergence,” Rozanne Elder states of St. Augustine: “His interest in Mary was Christological and ascetic: she is vital to understanding Christ’s full humanity and full divinity, and is the prototype of obedience and virginity.” 32 This Christological view can be seen in St. Augustine’s focus on the feast of Nativity as a time to celebrate Christ and Mary’s role in the birth of Christ.33 One interesting aspect of Augustine’s Mariology is that he did not often write about Mary’s role as intercessor.34 He would not be alone in de-emphasizing this aspect of Marian devotion; Hildegard of Bingen would also focus on other roles assigned to the Virgin. However, Hildegard would echo a key aspect of St. Augustine’s Mariology, the importance he placed on the Incarnation. While his Mariology may be primarily Christological in intent, Augustine clearly believed Mary deserved an elevated status in Christian religious doctrine. Luigi Gambero beautifully sums up St. Augustine’s Marian piety:

Augustine praises the free and informed fiat by which Mary became Mother of the incarnate Word and offered her moral cooperation in the work of salvation; he explains that all the faithful can share the spiritual motherhood of the Church by giving themselves over to the will of God.35

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32 Rozanne Elder, “Mary in the Common Latin Tradition: Agreements, Disagreements and Divergence,” 76.

33 Lanne, “Marian Doctrine and Piety up to the Council of Chalcedon,” 52.

34 Ibid.

35 Gambero, Mary and the Fathers of the Church, 225.
CHAPTER TWO
WESTERN MEDIEVAL MARIAN DEVOTION

Western Medieval writers continued the dialogue of their predecessors regarding the Virgin’s elevated position within Christian teaching and piety. In the introduction to *Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary* by Bernard de Clairvaux, M. Chrisysogonus Waddell states: “Three points of Marian teaching which were being developed...[in the] twelfth century: the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, her bodily (and not just spiritual) assumption and her spiritual maternity.”¹ Devotion to Mary, Christ’s mother, was prevalent in medieval culture both in the ecclesiastical community and with the laity. In her book, *The Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages*, Andrea Janelle Dickens discusses the key elements in eleventh and twelfth-century Marian devotion. She states that such devotion “incorporated intercessory prayer with healing,”² and Mary’s role as mother of Christ “emphasized her role bringing humans to God, thus undergirding Christ’s role as mediator.”³ This was a powerful position for a woman to be in, especially in the medieval era, and Dickens argues that Marian devotion “presented a strong female figure alongside Christ, integral to the saving work of the Incarnation.”⁴ In Dickens’ study she further examines the role that the medieval Latin

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³ Dickens, *The Female Mystic*, 17.
⁴ Ibid.
Church prescribed for Mary and suggests that they “emphasized three unique roles of Mary: Mary as intercessor alongside the role of Christ as judge of souls, miracle-worker and one that brought heavenly visions or apparitions to humans.”

In *Mary Through the Centuries*, Pelikan states that twelfth-century “tradition and innovation was nowhere more dramatically in evidence than its portrayal of Mary as the Mater Dolorosa, Mother of Sorrows and is correlative doctrine of Mary as the Mediatrix.” Mary served as an example for piety, obedience, virginity and humility in medieval spirituality. The medieval era saw the great production of poetry, prose and visual imagery dedicated to Mary. This project will explore in particular how the verse and prose were used by the female mystics to explore their Marian spirituality.

To further interpret medieval Marian devotion and to provide a comparison to the female mystics, it is essential to investigate the Mariology of three significant medieval theologians. The Marian piety of theologians from the monastic orders of the Cistercians, Dominicans and Franciscans will be explored. Medieval male mystics and theologians continued to be concerned with establishing authenticity of Mary’s role and revered status within the Church. A key theme among the male theologians to be discussed in this project continues to be their discourse surrounding Mary’s birth and original sin. Pelikan states that medieval thinkers who did not believe in the Immaculate Conception outnumbered those who did. All three male monastics to be discussed in this thesis are

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5 Ibid.

6 Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 125.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 195.
concerned with Mary’s exposure to original sin. Scholars seem to agree that both Bernard de Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas did not exempt the Virgin from original sin. Through complicated arguments they found a way around Christ’s mother being tainted by the stain of sin. However, there is some controversy among scholars whether St. Bonaventure exempted Mary from what Pelikan refers to as: “The Great Exception.”

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was a Cistercian monk famous for his devotion to Mary. His piety to the Virgin inspired many examples of devotional writings on her behalf. He states: “Before the birth of Mary, a constant flow of grace was lacking, because this aqueduct did not exist.”

Though his works significantly feature Mary, his Mariology is not usually unique. Speaking of Bernard’s Marian devotion, Waddell suggests that Bernard was not an innovator to Marian devotion but a “witness to tradition.”

Though he seemed to follow a traditional discourse when it came to Mary, he did not include all elements of medieval Marian piety is his works. He draws attention to Mary’s Assumption and there is controversy whether or not his spirituality focused on the Virgin’s role of mother to the masses: “it was enough for Bernard to be Mary’s faithful servant and knight errant, without also being her son.” Even with his strong devotion to Mary, Bernard also argued against the Virgin being completely free from sin. The scholars Waddell and Pelikan refer to his Letter 174 to the Canons of Lyon (1138-1139) for a decisive answer against Mary’s freedom from original sin. Bernard states:

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10 M. Chrysogonus Waddell, introduction to *Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, xviii.

11 Ibid., xvii.
The royal Virgin has in more than abundant measure true titles to honor, true marks of dignity. What need, then for false claims? Honor her for the integrity of her flesh, the holiness of her life. Marvel at her virginal fecundity, venerate her divine Son. Extol her freedom from concupiscence in conceiving, and from all pain in bringing forth. Proclaim her reverenced by angels, desired by nations, foretold by patriarchs and prophets, chosen from among all, preferred to all. Magnify her for having found grace, for being mediatrix of salvation and reparatrix of the ages. Exalt her, finally as one exalted to the heavenly kingdom above the choirs of the angels. All this the Church sings to me about her, and teaches me to sing in turn. What I have received from the Church, I firmly hold and pass on to others. Aught else, however, I would scruple to admit.\textsuperscript{12}

In this passage, Bernard argues that Mary should be honored for who she is and the taint of original sin does not diminish her exalted status. He strives to remind his readers that she “found grace” and was the “mediatrix of salvation;” she led a holy life and that is why she is in the “heavenly kingdom above the choirs of angels.” Pelikan offers a separate passage as evidence of Bernard’s view on the matter. This particular passage is important in that it states specifically that he believes Mary was born in a different way from Christ, but he also takes it a step further. He asks: “what would the prerogative of the Mother of God” be if she was free from original sin:

If it is appropriate to say what the church believes and if what she believes is true, then I saw that the glorious [Virgin] conceived by the Holy Spirit but was not also her conceived in this way. I saw that she gave birth as a virgin, but not that she was born of a virgin. For otherwise, what would the prerogative of the Mother of God?\textsuperscript{13}

It is intriguing how Bernard makes the argument that if Mary was born without original sin, it would almost diminish her role as the Mother of God. She would not be a mere human girl who agreed to be part of God’s plan; it would change the significance behind

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} Pelikan, Mary Through the Centuries, 192.
her story completely. If she did not bear the taint of original sin, she would be dangerously close to being divine herself. Interestingly, Thomas Aquinas argued for Mary’s exposure to sin in a similar manner. He asserted that Mary needed the taint of original sin to validate Christ. Bernard would also continue the analogy of the patristic fathers that compared Mary to Eve. He discusses Mary and Eve’s role as intercessors, the medieval quality associated with the Virgin. However, in the case of Eve, she is the intercessor of the devil while Mary is the intercessor of Christ: “Mary plays a part in this great work of reconciliation. As Eve was the mediatrix between Adam and the devil, the blessed Virgin is the mediatrix between sinful man and Christ.”

Bernard’s devotional writings to Mary are known for their beauty. His Homilies on Mary are reflections on the Annunciation for his personal devotion and were the first written production of Bernard’s concerning Mary.” It must be remembered that for Bernard, Mary is always seen in relation to Christ: “he is constitutionally incapable of isolating her from her Son or (by extension) from the Church.” This Christological view of the Virgin will also be apparent in the writings of some of the female mystics, particularly Hildegard of Bingen and Gertrude the Great. Bernard’s exaltations of Mary are traditional aspects of medieval devotion to the Virgin; he focuses on the virtues of humility and virginity. However, he is extremely creative in how he describes her uniqueness within the spheres of these virtues. When speaking of the Virgin’s celestial

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16 Ibid., xx.
nobility and earthly humility, he refers to the Annunciation. He describes Mary as: “noble enough to be greeted by an angel and yet humble enough to be the fiancé of a workman.” The image portrayed by this one sentence is poignant and speaks to the dichotomy of how the medieval era viewed Mary. She was Queen of Heaven yet equally revered for her humble earthly status. Like his patristic predecessors, Bernard of Clairvaux also focuses on Mary’s virginity, although for him the virtue of humility was still the most important. It was these virtues that Bernard argued should be emulated by all. If virginity and humility could not be both achieved, than one must strive for a humble existence:

How gracious is this union of virginity and humility! A soul in whom humility embellishes virginity and virginity ennobles humility finds no little favor with God. Imagine then how much more worthy of reverence must she have been whose humility was raised by motherhood and whose virginity consecrated by her childbearing. You are told that she is a virgin. You are told that she is humble. If you are not able to imitate virginity of this humble maid, then imitate the humility of the virgin maid. Virginity is a praiseworthy virtue, but humility is by far the more necessary. 

The Dominican, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) would also join the discourse surrounding the Mother of God. In his seminal work, Summa Theologica, he explored Mary’s exposure to original sin and argued for a compromise on the question of Mary and original sin: Mary was freed from the taint of original sin before her birth and after she received her soul. It is this teaching that allows Aquinas to accept that a woman exposed

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18 Ibid.

to original sin could also bear the Son of God. Interestingly, Thomas asserts that Mary needed the taint of original sin to validate Christ:

Moreover, since a conceived child is not liable to fault before reception of that soul, if she had been sanctified before that moment, she would never have incurred the blemish of inherited sin, and would not have needed the ransom and salvation of Christ. If Mary’s soul was never infected with inherited sin that would prejudice the dignity of Christ as the savior of all mankind; but her purity was the greatest after Christ, who as universal savior did not himself need salvation.²⁰

Aquinas argues that if she did not have the “blemish of inherited sin” she would not need Christ’s salvation as she was already free from sin. This would have diminished Christ because her sinless nature would have equaled his. Aquinas notes that after Christ it is Mary who is most pure.

While in the *Summa*, Aquinas focuses primarily on the Virgin’s exposure to original sin; he also discusses Mary in other contexts. On the extent of Mary’s graces, Aquinas argues that her graces came after death. She could not perform miracles until after her earthly mission was completed. Aquinas is very concerned with defining the differences between Mary and Christ even when discussing the celestial powers that she would possess:

There is no doubt that the Blessed Virgin received in a high degree both the gift of wisdom and the grace of miracles and even of prophecy, just as Christ had them. But she did not so receive them, as to put them and such like graces to every use, as did Christ: but accordingly as it befitted her condition of life. The use of miracles did not become her while she lived: because at that time the Teaching of Christ was to be confirmed by miracles, and therefore it was befitting that Christ

²⁰Ibid.
alone, and His disciples who were the bearers of His doctrine, should work miracles.21

Aquinas is also specific about the nature of devotion to the Virgin Mary. She is not divine and should not be worshiped as God is worshiped. She has her own place within the heavenly court and she should be honored for the proper reasons. One aspect of her person that Aquinas chooses to examine is her motherhood. Since she is the Mother of God, she has a right to be honored:

The Blessed Virgin is a thinking creature who can be honoured with our service but not ‘divinely worshipped’ though as mother of God she is given higher honour and service than any other creature. Such honour of the mother honours her son, because she, unlike images, has a claim to be honoured herself.22

While Aquinas is less lyrical about the Virgin in his writings than Bernard of Clairvaux in his homilies or Bonaventure in his Psalter of Our Lady, this does not indicate that he gives Mary any less reverence than the other two medieval theologians. The Summa is a doctrinal work whose lack of poetry is not unique. The doctrinal work of Hildegard of Bingen entitled Scivias is of a similar tone.

Like Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas and their predecessors, St. Bonaventure (c.1221-1274) of the Franciscan order was concerned with Mary’s exposure to original sin and Bonaventure cites Bernard of Clairvaux in his own works. There are conflicting arguments on whether Bonaventure thought Mary was tainted by original sin. The scholar Rozanne Elder argues that he would not have extended exemption to Mary:

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21 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, III, Q. 27, Art. 5.

22 Aquinas, Summa Theologie: A Concise Translation, 509.
“Like Bernard, he exempted only Christ from the taint of Adam’s fall and taught that ‘no one was immune from the guilt of original sin, save on the Son of the Virgin.’”

However, in his book, *Bonaventure*, Christopher Cullen argues Bonaventure did indeed exempt the Virgin from the taint of original sin:

No human being is exempt from this struggle save the Virgin Mary whom Bonaventure singles out as one who receives ‘an extraordinary grace’ by which concupiscence is extinguished, for it is fitting that she be pure to bear the Word of God. ‘She received a privilege that radically frees her from concupiscence, so that her conception of the Son of God would be all-pure and perfect.’

Brian Reynolds agrees with Cullen’s assertion and quotes a passage from Bonaveture’s *Breviloquium*:

Since humankind fell by diabolical suggestion, by the consent of a deceived woman, and by the libidinous generation which transmits original sin to offspring, it was opportune that, on the contrary, there would be here a good angel inciting to good, and the love of the Holy Spirit sanctifying and fecunding her for an immaculate Offspring.…

Bonaventure also continued the patristic tradition of comparing Mary with Church. To that end he constructed an allegorical understanding of Ecclesiaticus 24:12: “He who has created me has rest in my tent,” as cited by Cullen:

According to the literal understanding, it applies to the Virgin Mary, in whose tabernacle the Lord rested bodily. According to the allegorical, it applies to the Church Militant, in whose tabernacle the Lord rests sacramentally. According to the moral, it applies to the faithful soul, in whose tabernacle the Lord rests

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spiritually. According to the anagogic understanding, it applies to the heavenly court, in whose tabernacle he rests eternally.26

The language describing Mary as tabernacle is similar to the language used by the mystics Hildegard of Bingen and Gertrude the Great; as we shall see, this imagery was a key aspect of their Mariology.

Bonaventure’s Marian devotion follows the path of traditional medieval Mariology. Intercession and mercy on the part of Mary are consistent themes in his writings. In his interesting project, the “Psalter of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” he makes clear that Mary forgives and eases pain, “By her grace sins are forgiven: and by her mercy maladies are healed.”27 In the prologue of his treatise: “A Soul’s Journey Into God,” he speaks to Mary’s motherhood and intercessory role in his opening prayer: “I call upon the Eternal Father through his Son, or Lord Jesus Christ, that through the intercession of the most holy Virgin Mary, the mother of the same God and Lord Jesus Christ…”28 In the beginning of Chapter III of Bonaventure’s: “The Life of St. Francis,” he discusses how Francis appealed to Mary for her intercession and mercy:

While her servant Francis was living in the church of the Virgin Mary Mother of God, he prayed to her who had conceive the Word full of grace and truth, imploring her with continuous sighs to become his advocate. Through the merits of the Mother of Mercy, he conceived and brought to birth the spirit of truth of the Gospel.29

26 Cullen, Bonaventure, 116.


29 Ibid., 199.
There are also copious examples of his views on Mary, and he exalts her in many ways. Also, he often uses the common medieval title bestowed upon the Virgin and refers to her as “Queen.”

Bonaventure’s “Psalter of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” contains psalms that Bonaventure altered so they serve to praise the Virgin Mary. The themes presented in these psalms range from her motherhood, mercy, intercession, and virginity—all very important and common virtues ascribed to the Virgin in late medieval Marian devotion.

In the following sections of this thesis we will explore how the Mariology of the early Christian fathers and the male medieval thinkers influenced medieval female mystics. It is also important to note that the women did not echo their male-counterparts’ emphasis on Mary’s exposure to original sin. The male theologians’ project of validating Mary’s position within salvation history (even if she was tainted by original sin) did not seem to concern the female mystics. Nonetheless, these women did reflect the traditional Marian piety of the patristic fathers and medieval male theologians in their focus and devotion to Mary’s ascribed virtues and roles. We have seen that St. Augustine reworked his theory of Mary and original sin to accommodate her actions of charity and humility as well as the circumstances of her birth. The female mystics focused on the Virgin’s actions and the Marian virtues that were also highlighted by the early fathers and medieval male thinkers. Mary was an example for all peoples due to her humility, mercy, virginity, intercessory powers and her roles as Queen of Heaven and Mother of God. The women were more concerned with these qualities as contributing to Mary’s sinless and elevated

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30 Ibid., 240.
32 See page 11.
celestial position. We will also see that while the female mystics did reflect the established Marian piety of their era they also departed from traditional teachings to create their own personal and complex Mariology.

Richeldis de Faverches was an eleventh-century noblewoman of Little Walsingham, England.\textsuperscript{33} In 1061 she had a vision of Mary in which the Virgin asked Richeldis to build a replica of Mary’s home in Nazareth, giving exact dimensions.\textsuperscript{34} This would be the place of the Annunciation, where Mary said “yes” to Gabriel. Unlike the other mystics who will be explored in this project, Richeldis did not leave written documentation behind. Her story is told by the \textit{Pynson Ballad} written around 1460, centuries after her death.\textsuperscript{35} A discussion of Andrea Janelle Dicken’s scholarship on this ballad serves as a helpful link between the early Christian writings and the medieval devotional texts of later female mystics. This ballad examines the events that led Richeldis to build a shrine to the Virgin Mary.\textsuperscript{36}

Dickens remarks that even though the ballad was written centuries after Richeldis’ life, the visions it describes: “Bear a number of similarities with the growing spiritualities of the twelfth century, and serves to orient the reader with twelfth-century Incarnational and Marian devotions and pilgrimage in the high middle ages.”\textsuperscript{37} The patristic fathers and

\footnote{33} Judith Dupré, \textit{Full of Grace: Encountering Mary in Faith, Life and Art} (New York: Random House, 2010), 240.

\footnote{34} Ibid.

\footnote{35} Dickens, \textit{The Female Mystic}, 12.

\footnote{36} In her book, \textit{The Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middles Ages}, Dickens discusses Richeldis and the \textit{Pynson Ballad}.

\footnote{37} Ibid., 12.
medieval theologians exalted Mary’s virtues and how those virtues made her an example to all: “The legends about Richeldis focus not on her but on the shrine she founded; in this portrayal, they see Richeldis’ behavior as an example for others: a woman of her time following the example of Mary’s fiat (‘let it be so’) in response to the Annunciation.”

This is extremely similar to the medieval theologians and in particular the Mariology of St. Augustine as described by Gambero; the focus is on Mary’s agreement to God’s plan.

As Dickens explains, the ballad exemplifies medieval Marian virtues: obedience, humility, and piety. There is also a great deal of emphasis placed on Mary’s intercessory powers when Richeldis needs assistance in building the shrine. The ballad discusses the Virgin showing Richeldis the house in Nazareth and explaining that the house in Walsingham should be built in its likeness; it will be a shrine to Mary. Richeldis is assisted by the intercession of angels and Mary herself; she shows great obedience in agreeing to Mary’s task (as Mary agreed to God’s request at the Annunciation):

In spyryte Our Lady to Nazareth hir led
And shewed hir the place where Gabryel hir grette:
"Lo doughter, consyder" to hir Oure Lady sayde,
Of thys place take thou suerly the mette,
Another lyke thys at Walsyngham thou sette
Unto my laude and synguler honoure;
All that me seke there shall fynde socoure,
Where shall be hadde in a memoryall
The great joy of my salutacyon.39

This part of the Richeldis legend is extremely similar to the Genesis story of

38 Ibid., 11.

Jacob:

Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. And the Lord was standing beside him and He said: “I am the Lord, the God of your….the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring…. Shaken, he said….This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven….” And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God’s abode….⁴⁰

In this biblical passage Jacob experiences a dream vision of God who tells him that his location is: “assigned to you and your offspring.” When Jacob awakens he infers this to mean that the stone placed under his head is in the “abode of God.” He will use the stone to “set up as pillar,” to honor the Lord. Many themes of this biblical story can be seen in the Pynson Ballad. After a dream of the Virgin, Richeldis will build a shrine to honor Mary. Through the Virgin’s intercession, a physical place of worship is established to bring people closer to God. The poem also continues the theme of the Marian role as Church. Mary shows Richeldis the location of the Annunciation and Incarnation; a structure is built to honor Mary serving as a tabernacle to Christ.

The story of Richeldis echoes the Old Testament story on many levels: dreams and visions, obedience and intercession, and a physical place to celebrate God and Mary. Another interesting analysis could suggest a connection with Mary as Church. Mary is asking Richeldis to build the home that literally housed her at the Annunciation; the moment she became the vessel for Christ.

⁴⁰ Genesis 28:10-22.
In the following chapters, I will examine four female mystics in an attempt to ascertain their particular responses to the Virgin Mary. A review of the scholarship of these women and analysis of their writings will be used to discover how their responses were similar to or different from the Mariology of the patristic fathers and medieval theologians. Did their experiences with Mary follow the path of traditional Church teachings of Mary? Did the female mystics exalt the Virgin for her obedience, virginity, motherhood and humility? Did they use biblical typology in any way? How did their experiences of Mary differ from their male contemporaries and how did this influence their responses? Did the female medieval mystics have a different Mariology than their male-counterparts? Answering these questions will shed light on an important aspect of medieval Marian devotion.
CHAPTER THREE

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

Scholars are limited in what conclusions they can make about historical persons such as Richeldis de Faverches who leave no written record of their experience or situation. In the case of Richeldis, only a poem written four hundred years after her death can be used to assess her experience. However, medieval female mystics of the late medieval era did leave behind writings detailing their mystical lives. One of these women, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), is arguably one of the most famous of the medieval female mystics. Hildegard, a Benedictine nun, whose visions began at the age of three, became a significant spiritual force during the twelfth century. She began to write about her visions and experiences relatively late in life and became a public figure at the age of 43. As is the case with many female medieval mystics, she was susceptible to illness and suffering. For many—including Hildegard—the trigger to their visions was physical pain and strife. In her book, Holy Feast Holy Fast, Caroline Walker Bynum asserts that this was a common phenomenon among female mystics because, “suffering of disease or injury was a major way of gaining sanctity for females, but not for males.”

Hildegard was also unique in the status she enjoyed while still alive. She corresponded with kings and bishops and held the respect of important ecclesiastics such as Bernard of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[2] Ibid., 3.
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Clairvaux. In her lifetime she produced an unusually large corpus for a woman, including three major visionary works: *Scivias*, *Book of Life’s Merits* and *Book of Divine Works*. Her written works were not limited to prose; she wrote both music and poetry, including her well known poem, *Symphonia*.

Her writings are very different from the other women to be discussed in this thesis. For example, the written accounts of Elisabeth of Schönau read as a cathartic and personal journey. The tone of Hildegard’s writing is more distant and her approach pedagogical. Caroline Walker Bynum remarks that Hildegard was technically not a mystic because she was: “a visionary who took her revelations as a text for exegesis, not an experience for re-living….she wrote not about union but about doctrine.”\(^4\) Bynum’s perspective is interesting but, as we shall see, Hildegard’s visionary writings are strongly influenced by mystical texts such as the narrative of Jacob’s ladder and her poems highlight more of a connection with the Virgin. Hildegard is seeking union when she meditates on the Incarnation in *Scivias* and when she asks for her intercession in the *Symphonia*. This writing style, as well as her experiences and validation from powerful people outside her monastic walls, set her apart from other mystics. For the most part, her Mariology would also follow a more traditional path, one already walked by the patristic fathers and the male theologians of her era. She maintained an understanding of the Bible and the corresponding exegesis of those that came before as well as her contemporaries. Her comprehension of important theological texts can be seen in her own writings. However, she ignored certain Marian debates and differed from her fellow female mystics in her

personal relationship with Mary. Unlike her fellow female mystics, Hildegard did not converse with the Virgin or seek her out for solace or intercession. The dialogues that Elisabeth of Schönau had with Mary are not seen in the writings of Hildegard. She maintained a boundary between herself and the Virgin that was often crossed by her female contemporaries. Barbara Newman states:

> She saw no visions of Mary, recounted no miracles of the Virgin, and ignored apocryphal legends of her birth and childhood. Nor did she have any affective devotion to the maiden suckling her child or the mater dolorosa weeping by the cross. Doctrinally, she ignored current debates over the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Mary in her roles as bride of God, mother of Christians, and queen of heaven seldom appears in Hildegard's writings.5

This is not to say that Hildegard viewed Mary with a lesser degree of importance than other female mystics; quite the opposite is true. It is also important to note that Hildegard would struggle to reconcile personal experiences and loyalty to established doctrine and the Marian devotion in her writings. These struggles would at times result in seemingly contradictory statements.

Hildegard confirms the importance of Mary’s place within the medieval church by exalting the virtues Mary possesses that should be emulated by others. Like the patristic fathers and the medieval male theologians, Hildegard is concerned with authenticating the Virgin’s purity and emphasizes that through her virginity she is an example to all. Her vision, “The Church, Bride of Christ and Mother of the Faithful,” in Scivias, explores the virginity of Mary. Hildegard remarks on the importance of Mary’s virginity in a manner reminiscent of St. Ambrose’s philosophy:

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And on her breast shines a red glow like the dawn; for the virginity of the Most Blessed Virgin when she brought for the Son of God glows with the most ardent devotion in the hearts of the faithful. And you hear a sound of all kinds of music singing about her: “Like the dawn, greatly sparkling;” for, as you are now given to understand, all believers should join with their whole wills in celebrating the virginity of that spotless Virgin in the Church.6

Hildegard states that Mary “brought” her virginity for the Son of God. This implies that Hildegard views Mary’s virginity as a gift for God, essential for His will to be done. Her virginity is more subtle but no less powerful, than her consent: “I am the handmaiden of the Lord.”7

Mary’s virginity is not the only virtue extolled by Hildegard. She describes humility and charity, characteristics long-associated with the Virgin, as being “above all other virtues.”8 So high does she hold the virtue of humility, she gives it credit for being the virtue that was responsible for Mary birthing Christ:

For humility caused the Son of God to be born of the Virgin, in whom as found humility, not eager embraces or beauty of flesh or earthly riches or gold ornaments or earthly honors. But the Son of God lay in a manger, because his Mother was a poor maiden.9

In the third book of Scivias, Hildegard’s vision: “The Pillar of the Humanity of the Savior,” there is an important example of how Hildegard’s knowledge of biblical texts influenced her mystical writings. Newman describes this vision as: “[depicting] the Incarnation as the primary locus of the Virtues, that is, the context in which humanity is

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6 Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 172.
8 Bingen, Scivias, 89.
9 Ibid.
enabled to collaborate with God…The pillar closely resembles Jacob’s ladder.”\(^{10}\) The Incarnation is a significant part of Hildegard’s Mariology. She would further explore this topic in her poetical work *Symphonia*, and she uses it often in her allegorical discussions of Mary. Her description of humility is significant since the language is intertwined with earlier descriptions of Mary. If this vision is read out of context, it could very well be mistaken for a discussion of the Virgin. Hildegard states that humility is “crowned with the gold crown of the precious and resplendent Incarnation of our Savior. For He adorned her head with this mystery when He became Incarnate.”\(^{11}\) The image of humility wearing a crown is reminiscent of the popular iconographic tradition in medieval Marian devotion. In both patristic and medieval religious thought, Mary’s “yes,” allowed for the Word to be made Flesh. For her faith in the Word of God, she is crowned Queen of Heaven. The virtue of humility is also crowned for its role in the Incarnation. An interesting feature of this particular vision is Hildegard’s physical description of humility; it is almost identical to that of Mary: “And on her [humble] breast she has a shining mirror, in which appears with wondrous brightness the image of the incarnate Song of God.”\(^{12}\) Her exalting of Mary’s virginity in an earlier vision includes the passage: “And on her breast shines a red glow like the dawn.”\(^{13}\) Hildegard further links this virtue to Mary by giving humility maternal characteristics:

\(^{10}\) Barbara Newman, introduction to *Scivias* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 39.

\(^{11}\) Bingen, *Scivias*, 442.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 172.
And so the noblest impulses of the hearts of the faithful elect are sealed by this figure, who sets up her tribunal in them and rules and directs all of their actions. For she is the solid foundation of all good deeds, as she shows in the maternal admonition already quoted.¹⁴

Female medieval mystics famously struggled with the fact that they were women in a world that placed ecclesiastical power solely with men. Much has been written about how these women attempted to carve out a modicum of authority and stature in an era that would have easily dismissed their visions and written products. Hildegard was no exception and wrote about her concerns in a letter to Bernard of Clairvaux:

I am very concerned about this vision which opens before me in spirit as a mystery. I have never seen it with the outer eyes of the flesh. I am wretched and more than wretched in my existence as woman. And yet, already as a child I saw great things of wonder which my tongue could never have given expression to, if God’s spirit hadn’t taught me to believe.¹⁵

The text of this letter and the problem as she describes it seem very Marian in tone. This passage from a much longer letter is reminiscent of the Annunciation. She is filled with humility and experiences doubt and would not have been able to understand the circumstances that she finds herself in if not for the grace of God. However: “God’s spirit” has “taught [her] to believe,” and she wants to answer “yes” and continue in her writings. It is difficult to know if Hildegard’s intention was to evoke a scene full of Marian imagery. However, she did know the works of Bernard of Clairvaux, and it is likely that she was familiar with his significant devotion to the Virgin as they were

¹⁴ Ibid., 442.

contemporaries and shared correspondence. In addition, the letter was extremely
significant for Hildegard; it was this letter that moved Bernard to write on her behalf to
Pope Eugene III, who in turn “gave papal approval to the visions of Scivias (which was
half written)….”\(^{16}\)

Hildegard’s self-professed wretchedness did not stop her from embarking on
preaching tours or from establishing her own convent by overcoming opposition from an
abbot who held power over her community.\(^{17}\) Her activities were certainly outside the
usual purview of women of her era. Her actions as the leader of her religious community
are important in relation to her response to Mary. Of particular note is a passage in
Scivias in which Hildegard makes the case that priesthood should only be available to
men:

> Those of the female sex should not approach the office of My altar, for they are an
> infirm and weak habitation, appointed to bear children and diligently nurture
> them. A woman conceives a child not by herself but through a man, as the ground
> is ploughed not by itself but by a farmer. Therefore, just as the earth cannot
> plough itself, a woman must not be a priest and do the work of consecrating the
> body and blood of My Son; though she can sing the praise of her Creator, as the
> earth can receive rain to water its fruits.\(^{18}\)

In this passage, God is speaking directly to Hildegard. This is intriguing since
Hildegard—a woman—does not need priestly intervention to interact with God. Yet, in
her vision God makes the unequivocal assertion that priesthood was only for men. This is

\(^{16}\) Dickens, *The Female Mystic*, 27.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 28.

\(^{18}\) Bingen, *Scivias*, 278.
significant not only in relation to Hildegard’s personal actions but also in relation to her Mariology.

In her article: “The Priesthood of the Virgin Mary,” Anne Clark, investigates the interesting dichotomy between Hildegard’s Mariology and her writings barring females from priestly office. Clark argues that Hildegard’s view was in direct conflict with some of her writings on Mary. She offers a few examples; the most relevant to this project is Hildegard’s analogies dealing with the Incarnation. Clark states that in her argument against women as priests, Hildegard compares the Eucharist with the male reproductive role of: “sowing the seed,” and thus this priestly duty is designated to men.\textsuperscript{19} However, Clark finds a conflict since Hildegard also compares: “Eucharistic body of Christ to the creation of the body of Christ in the womb of the Virgin Mary.”\textsuperscript{20} It is important that Hildegard decides to exclude women from priestly office while offering imagery that seemingly places the Virgin in that role. Clark offers an opinion of what Hildegard was struggling with doctrinally:

Hildegard seems to distinguish between the social position and the concomitant priesthood. Just as virginity offers women the possibility of a life at least in some ways outside the social subordination to men, so the priesthood offered by virginity also functions outside the social order and is thus not linked with office.\textsuperscript{21}


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 17.
An important part of Hidegard’s writings is her continuation of the tradition of comparing Mary to Ecclesia in her works. St. Bonaventure’s analogy of Mary as “tabernacle, where the Lord rested bodily” is almost identical to an analogy of Hildegard’s in her visionary work, The Book of the Rewards of Life. In attempt to explain Psalm 19:5-7, Hildegard states:

This means that the Son of God with the brightness of his divinity took on the flesh from the Virgin who existed like a tabernacle for another life for the salvation of the human race. For God is called the burning sun that illuminated everything at the time of creation; from the heat of the sun, the flesh of the Virgin, like a tabernacle, grew warm so that a man with a brighter faith and with a more burning charity came from it in the same way that God joined Eve to Adam before the fall.22

In this particular text, Hildegard does not take the analogy a step further to equate Mary as Church. However, other writings suggest that was her intent.

In the introduction to Hildegard’s Scivias, Barbara Newman describes a vision of Hildegard’s detailing the emergence of the Church during Christ’s crucifixion. In medieval imagery that originated in patristic thought, Ecclesia is female and is joined with Christ as his bride23:

The crucifixion is represented as the wedding of Christ and the church: As Christ hangs on the cross his predestined bride, Ecclesia, descends from heaven and is united with him, receiving his body and blood as her dowry. Whenever Mass is celebrated, Ecclesia, as heavenly archetype of the celebrant, devoutly offers this dowry to the Father and renews her marriage union with the Son.24


23 Newman, introduction to Scivias, 33.

24 Ibid.
This imagery is important for this project’s discussion of Mary since the comparison can be made with the Virgin. Hildegard’s *Ecclesia* is described by God as the: “Bride for restoration of My people; may she be a mother to them, regenerating souls through the salvation of the Spirit and water.”

It is this vision that Anne Clark suggests evokes the image of Mary at the foot of the cross. Hildegard’s analogy of *Ecclesia* as Mary is not unique but it is important. To further cement this point, Barbara Newman, in her book, *Sister of Wisdom*, confirms “Mary is the type or prefiguration of Ecclesia” and points to a passage in *Scivias*, as an example of Hildegard equating the Church with Mary and specifically refers to the act of baptism:

> And thus the Church is the virginal mother of all Christians, since by the mystery of the Holy Spirit she conceives and bears them, offering them to God so that they are called the children of God. And as the Holy Spirit overshadowed the Blessed Mother, so that she miraculously conceived and painlessly bore the Son of God and yet remained a virgin, so does the Holy Spirit illumine the Church, happy mother of believers…

Mary, mother of God, the predecessor to Church as the “happy mother of believers,” is poignant and powerful language. There is often a dearth of such poetic language in Hildegard’s visionary writings. However, this is not the case with her poem, *Symphonia*. Hildegard’s descriptions of the Virgin in her more doctrinal texts are much different from the lyrical devotional poetry she wrote in reverence of Mary. Her poetical

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28 Ibid., 189-190.
work, *Symphonia* contains some of the most beautiful language devoted to the Virgin and focuses on exalting her many virtues. Within these lines of verse she makes many comparisons between Mary and Eve and focuses on Mary being the healer of wounds wrought by Eve’s actions. Andrea Dickens states: “Hildegard’s use of feminine imagery arguably is at its best in her writings about the figures of Eve and Mary and the ways in which she molds them within God’s provident care of creation and plans for redemption.”

In the poems that focus on Mary and Eve, Mary is portrayed as heroine, even a destroyer of sin. She obliterates the serpent that Eve was so taken with by bearing Christ:

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Hail Mary,
O author of life,
Rebuilding salvation,
You who confounded death
And crushed the serpent
Toward who Eve stretched forth
Her neck outstretched…
You trampled on him
When you bore the Son of God from heaven…
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The tone of this poem is very similar to Bonaventure’s Psalm 24 in *The Psalter of Our Lady*. He also writes of Mary as a heroine and destroyer of those that wish to harm him: “Let not my adversaries make game of me…Let not the snares of death prevail against me: and the camps of the malignant not hinder my step. Crush their violence in thy might.”

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29 Dickens, *The Female Mystic*, 36.

30 Bingen, *Symphonia*, 111.

In such poems we see Hildegard reflecting on the roles of Mary that she does not address as much in her visionary works. Though these poems are not referred to as visionary writings, it is my view that Hildegard would have described them as such. She speaks of Mary as mother, healer, and intercessor:

O most radiant mother
Of scared healing,
You pour ointments
Through your holy Son
On the sobbing wounds of death
That Eve built
Into the torments for the souls.
You destroyed death
Building life.
Pray for us
To your child,
Mary,
Star of the sea.\(^{32}\)

Hildegard’s poems are also intriguing in comparison to the patristic and medieval thinkers’ emphasis on original sin. A selection of her prose highlights Mary as New Eve, saving all from the disgrace of the actions of Adam and Eve. Her language is powerful and Mary is an active participant in the salvation of all peoples:

Therefore because a woman constructed death
A bright virgin has demolished it,
And so the supreme blessing is
In feminine form
Beyond all creation,
Because God became man
In the most sweet and blessed Virgin.\(^{33}\)

\(^{32}\) Bingen, *Symphonia*, 113.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 117.
In another poem dedicated to Mary, Hildegard credits Mary with saving humanity from the fate of Adam and Eve:

While the unhappy ones were blushing
As their own offspring
Walking in the exile of the fall,
Then you cry out with a clear
voice,
In this way lifting humanity
From this wicked
Fall.34

This is an interesting theme of Hildegard’s poetry. She does not explicitly exempt Mary from original sin, but holds her responsible for helping lift others out of sin and away from the Fall. As we have seen in Hildegard’s prose, “the Virgin who existed like a tabernacle for another life for the salvation of the human race,”35 the Virgin as a participant in the salvation of humanity is a key aspect of her Mariology.

It is in her poetry where Hildegard’s Marian devotion shines. It is also in these verses that her traditional Mariology is displayed. There is no doubt that Hildegard struggled in her work, Scivias, to align her Marian piety with those of her peers and Church. While these poems can be interpreted as verses that follow the path set before her by the Church, nevertheless, the poems also highlight her unique devotion to the Virgin that is not diminished by the fact her Mariology followed a more traditional image of the Mother of God.

34 Ibid., 119.
35 See page 27.
CHAPTER FOUR
ELISABETH OF SCHÖNAU

In her book, *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*, Elisabeth Petroff offers a general account of female mystics’ interaction with Mary:

The initial stages in the visionary’s exploration of human and divine are generally mediated by Mary, and vision of the Virgin create a profound bond between the apprentice mystic and her Lady. Often this bond is visualized as a type of feudal ceremony in which the devotee takes Mary as her feudal Lord and is received into her protection as a vassal. It is Mary who, as wise guardian and affectionate mother, brings together the saint and her son.¹

This is certainly not the case with Hildegard of Bingen; her Mariology is much more in line with the patristic fathers and her contemporary medieval male theologians. However, the following female mystics and their responses to Mary are significantly more personal. The following mystics interact with the Virgin and converse with her in their visions. Elisabeth of Schönau (c.1129-1165), a contemporary and correspondent of Hildegard, has a very different experience of the Virgin. Unlike Hildegard, she has visions of Mary visiting her and bestowing wisdom and consolation. Petroff’s assertion may not apply to Hildegard’s understanding of Mary; but, her generalizations may indeed describe integral parts of other female mystics’ relationships with the Virgin.

Elisabeth of Schönau was a Benedictine nun in the mid-twelfth century. She did not produce as many writings as Hildegard; nor did she possess the authority of her contemporary; but she was prolific for her time: “Though she did not travel and preach as Hildegard did, her works were widely distributed and well known, and she clearly had

extraordinary gifts as a visionary.”² Elisabeth’s writings were recorded by the nuns of her convent and by her brother, Ekbert, a priest.³ It was not unusual for the writings of medieval mystics to be recorded by others, but there is interest among scholars on how much influence Ekbert had upon his sister and her written products, particularly when he decided to join her in Schönau.⁴ This is of interest for this project since many of Elisabeth’s Marian visions occur in her first book of visions. In her biography *Elisabeth of Schönau: A Twelfth Century Mystic*, Anne Clark states that Ekbert’s arrival at his sister’s convent corresponds with the recordings of her last two books of visions.⁵ We note as well that Elisabeth would invoke the Virgin on behalf of her brother and before he joined her in Schönau.⁶ In her first book of visions, Elisabeth describes how she prayed to Mary to assist her in convincing her brother Ekbert to pursue a higher level of religious life: “I had frequently extorted him not to delay rising to the sacred order of the priesthood… [Mary] responded to me: “Tell my servant, ‘Do not fear; do what you are going to do and calculate the service you owe me and have not done.”⁷

Like Hildegard and many other female mystics, Elisabeth suffered from acute illness and pain which could trigger or seem to trigger visionary situations. In Barbara

⁵ Ibid., 141.

⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 17.


¹¹ Ibid., 81.
Newman’s preface to *Elisabeth of Schônau: The Complete Works*, she discusses the pain, illness and “demonic apparitions”\(^8\) that Elisabeth suffered. Her relief came from: “the prayers of her brothers and sisters, but also by consoling visions of the Virgin.”\(^9\) Newman argues that it is through these bouts of illness and despair that Elisabeth’s visions would appear, “We see what would become the overarching themes of her visions: the saints of earth and heaven form but one company, separated by the thinnest of veils, which divine grace allowed her to pierce almost at will.”\(^10\)

Elisabeth had many visions of Mary, and her response to the Virgin’s visitations is always enthusiastic and met with joy and consolation. At one vision of Mary she states:

> I sank into ecstasy and my heart was opened...I saw the likeness of a regal woman in the whitest garments and wrapped in a purple mantle. I immediately understood that this woman was the exhaled Queen of Heaven, mother of our Savior, whom I had long desired to see.\(^11\)

Mary’s responses vary, but she is often consolatory towards Elisabeth. At a time when Elisabeth is extremely disturbed by certain visions, she prays that Mary will comfort her in her need. Her prayers are answered:

> At that time I most fervently asked my Lady to deign to offer me some consolation...And behold, suddenly that celestial light flashed and my Comforter came forth from it...Looking at her, I carefully watched the movement of her lips, and I understood that she was calling me by my name, Elisabeth, and then she


\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) Ibid.

said no more. Taking this as consolation, I thanked her and she withdrew from me.\textsuperscript{12}

Elisabeth’s use of the term “Comforter” is not surprising, but it is very personal. It is indicative of the type of relationship she had with the Virgin. However, this was not the only term or title Elisabeth used to describe Mary. Like many before her, Elisabeth used the common and traditional title bestowed upon the Virgin, Mary as Queen of Heaven, throughout her visions. Interestingly, in one particular vision she evokes a term more uncommon among female medieval mystics of Western Europe. She refers to Mary as “Theotokos,” which means Christ bearer, while envisioning her holding Christ in her lap:

“I saw a woman sitting, gloriously crowned like a queen of great majesty, and she held a very beautiful and lovable young child in her lap. It was made known to me that this was our blessed Lady, the Virgin Theotokos.”\textsuperscript{13}

Not all of Elisabeth’s experiences of the Virgin are positive. During a particular vision Mary turns her face from Elisabeth, and the Virgin ultimately expresses frustration due to a perceived lack of devotion to her.\textsuperscript{14} Elisabeth attempts to right any observed wrong against Mary by asking how she as offended her:

And I added: “Most holy Lady, most merciful Lady, Queen of Heaven, may you deign to show me, a sinner, how I have offended your grace. Behold I am very willingly prepared to correct it and to please your mercy with every satisfaction.” She responded, saying: “You have too greatly neglected me in your heart and you do not strive to serve me with the devotion that you owe me.”\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{12}] Ibid., 50.
\item[\textsuperscript{13}] Ibid., 125.
\item[\textsuperscript{14}] Ibid., 104.
\item[\textsuperscript{15}] Ibid., 105.
\end{itemize}
The exchange between Elisabeth and Mary continues until the Virgin decides that priests serving Mass have honored her to a proper degree during the service. Gertrude the Great will also experience a less than affirmative visitation of Mary. However, the Virgin’s favor is never withheld from the female mystic for very long.

One of the most striking visions of Mary that Elisabeth experiences is in her first book of visions. After expressing her joy at receiving a vision of a woman “[she] had long desired to see,” she witnesses Mary’s reverence of God:

While I looked at her with longing, she prostrated herself three times, worshipping in the presence of the divine light before her. Then, when she had lowered herself for the fourth time, she seemed to lie there for a long time.  

Mary’s physical act of prostrating herself in front of God is an example of the Marian virtue of humility. While “in the presence of the divine light” she physically displays her humbleness towards God. Elisabeth’s “longing” and wish to see the Virgin are answered with a display that is almost ritualistic. The ritualistic character of Mary’s visitation becomes actual ceremony when Mary “Marked me with the sign of the cross and implanted—I don’t know how—these words in my mind, ‘Do not fear, because these things will not harm you at all.’” When Mary marks Elisabeth she is flanked by “two glorious companions,” Elisabeth describes one to be a significant monastic and Ecclesiastical authority, St. Benedict.

16 Ibid., 47.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
Mary’s authority in this particular vision is not only substantiated by her saintly companion but also by the gesture of marking Elisabeth with the sign of the cross. Clark notes that this is: “a gesture that recalls the activity of a bishop in the sacrament of confirmation.”\textsuperscript{20} Mary’s actions in this vision are intriguing in that she is given the ecclesiastical authority of a bishop, a role reserved for men. Hildegard wrote Bernard of Clairvaux for authenticity of her writings. In Elisabeth’s visions, Mary herself is bestowing authenticity upon Elisabeth. However, the most remarkable vision of Mary’s elevated authority comes in the vision immediately following this episode. Elisabeth sees the Virgin in front of an altar in priestly garments:

Then I asked the priest to invoke the name of the Lord over me. When he began the litany, I again went into ecstasy. Again I saw my Lady, this time standing at the altar in a vestment like a priestly chasuble, and she had on her head a glorious crown decorated with four precious gems, and the angelic salutation: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you,” was inscribed all around.\textsuperscript{21}

Clark notes that the crown described in this vision can be interpreted as: “part of the standard iconography of Mary as Queen of Heaven, its place here on the head of one standing by the altar, robed in priestly vestments, may also evoke clerical tonsure.”\textsuperscript{22} It is difficult to argue that these particular visions show Mary in any other role besides that of a member of clergy: “These visions of Mary blessing Elisabeth with the sign of the

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 280.

\textsuperscript{21} Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works, 47.

\textsuperscript{22} Clark, “The Priesthood of the Virgin Mary,” 18.
cross and then standing by the altar in sacerdotal vestments suggest that, for Elisabeth, there was a very strong association between Mary and priesthood.”

The Church’s Marian doctrine allowed for and in fact encouraged the reverence and elevation of the Virgin. However, Mary’s association with the earthly male role of priest is still unusual. Unlike, Hildegard, Elisabeth does not seem to struggle by trying to reconcile her visions of Mary as priest with the accepted and traditional church roles and hierarchy. Interestingly, like Hildegard, Elisabeth did struggle with her role as a visionary and had concerns about her authority and place within the ecclesiastical community. Hildegard confessed her concerns to Bernard of Clairvaux and Elisabeth did so to Hildegard. In her letter to Hildegard, Elisabeth is concerned about the response to some of her writings, specifically her apocalyptic writings. She wants to assure Hildegard that she was not prophesizing about Judgment Day. The most significant passages are when she explains to Hildegard how she understands her role as a visionary:

I languished and went into a trance. And behold, the angel of the Lord stood in my sight and I said to him: “My Lord, remember what you said to me as your handmaid, that the word of God was send to earth through my mouth not so that it could be hidden but so that it would be made known for the glory of God and for the salvation of his people.

Elisabeth is using extremely powerful Marian imagery to explain her experience with the Divine. She experiences a visitation from an “angel of the Lord” and uses terms such as “handmaid.” Also, she states that the word of God was sent to earth and through her for

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23 Ibid.


25 Ibid., 140.
the “salvation of his people.” Nowhere in the several letters that Elisabeth writes to Hildegard does she question her visions that associate Mary with the priesthood. In fact, she associates herself with Mary. This particular passage of Elisabeth’s letter mirrors Hildegard’s letter to Bernard of Clairvaux. It is through the imagery of Mary that these women try to establish some type of authority or to explain why their visionary lives should be accepted.

Many scholars have remarked on female mystics’ visions as being a vehicle to attain authority in a culture that relegated its women to second class status, and Petroff remarks that Elisabeth associated her illnesses and visions with martyrdom. This particular martyrdom gives her a kind of agency and validity not often bestowed upon women of her day:

[It] allows her—in her visions—to bypass the limitations on women’s roles in the institutional church. No priestly mediation is necessary for her communion with the divine, for just as the experience of martyrdom gave women in the early church a status like that of priests, the visionary martyrdom gives her a priestly kind of authority.\textsuperscript{26}

Elisabeth’s relationship with the Virgin was deeply personal and an integral part of her spirituality. Hildegard’s Mariology is more traditional in nature; she does not question the place of the Virgin within the current Church hierarchy. Elisabeth also applies many of the common medieval Marian roles in her piety towards the Virgin. However, both these women have a complex relationship with Mary. Hildegard struggles with reconciling the accepted female roles of her era with her exaltation of the Virgin. Elisabeth has detailed visions of Mary as priest, and she professes to have the power to

\textsuperscript{26} Petroff, \textit{Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature}, 141.
invoke the Virgin for intercessory needs. Elisabeth experiences Mary marking her with the sign of the cross, signifying the Virgin’s confidence in her as a mystic. This thesis will continue its analysis of medieval female mystics’ response to Mary by focusing next on two thirteenth-century women of Helfa. The nuns of Helfa, in particular Gertrude the Great and Mechtilde of Hackeborn, will offer an important comparison to Hildegard and Elisabeth. Gertrude and Mechtilde were contemporaries and inhabited a place known for fostering women writers and mystics. These women lived later in the medieval era and in a different environment from Hildegard and Elisabeth.
CHAPTER FIVE
GERTRUDE THE GREAT

In 1229, a German noble family established a Cistercian monastery that would eventually—after several moves—find its way to Helfa.\(^1\) The monastery of St. Mary of Helfa, located in northern Saxony, was originally founded as a Cistercian institution; however, it followed “the Rule of St. Benedict” and was “heavily influenced by Cistercian customs.”\(^2\) In her book, *The Women of Helfa: Scholars and Mystics*, Mary Jeremy Finnegan states that elements of the Dominican tradition were also present in the monastery which, “must have been essentially autonomous.”\(^3\) This monastery housed some of the most prolific female visionaries of the thirteenth-century and fostered the writings of two Benedictine nuns, Gertrude the Great and Mechtild of Hackeborn.

In *Jesus As Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Caroline Walker Bynum explores Christian spirituality of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Of particular note to this project is her essay, “Women Mystics of the Thirteenth Century: The Case of the Nuns of Helfa.” Her conclusions are important due to the attention she pays to Gertrude the Great and Mechtild of Hackeborn; but, she also offers an intriguing argument related to the origins of thirteenth-century female mysticism:

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The mysticism of thirteenth-century women is therefore an alternative to the authority of office. It is an alternative that fostered by the presence of institutions within which a female religious culture can develop. It is fostered also by a theology that emphasizes God as accessible and intimate…Moreover the mystical alternative flourished as a complement to, not a contradiction of, the clerical role….

In the writings of Gertrude and Mechtilde, they describe a relationship with God that exists without the intercession of clergy. God is available to them as a counselor and confidante; this is also the case with Mary—particularly in the writings of Mechtilde. We see this type of relationship between the mystic and the divine being developed in both Hildegard and Elisabeth, but the women of Helfa express a more bold and confident tone in their writings. Whereas Hildegard sought authentication from Bernard of Clairvaux, Gertrude receives her validation directly from God. Both Elisabeth and Mechtilde envision Mary as priest. However, we will see that Mechtilde seems to extend Mary’s priestly position to herself and advocates on behalf of her fellow sisters as if Mechtilde herself held clerical authority.

The following chapters explore the Marian spiritualities of Gertrude and Mechtilde and how they compare to medieval male theologians their female predecessors, Hildegard of Bingen and Elisabeth of Schönau. There are similarities and also striking differences between the women. For one thing, the women of Helfa experienced a stronger sense of spiritual authority than their predecessors:

Ambivalence about wealth and authority, which lies at the heart of Christianity, also helps to explain why the mystical authorization that, for women substitutes for clerical status is never seen as second best, why the sense of self of the nuns

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of Helfa is, if anything, stronger than that of the great male and female mystics of the previous century.®

Does this “sense of self” that Bynum attributes the Helfa nuns influence the Mariology of Mechtilde and Gertrude? If so, did a “theology that emphasizes God as accessible and intimate” alter their understanding of Mary? Did this cause these two women of Helfa to have different views of the Virgin from Hildegard or Elisabeth, or the male theologians?

Gertrude the Great’s (1256-1302) importance in the historical discourse surrounding Helfa is undisputed. Gertrude and Mechtilde were contemporaries and confidantes.® Scholars even attribute a portion of Mechtilde’s written work to Gertrude, “It is almost certain…that Gertrude was the author of a part of the revelations of Mechtilde of Hackeborn, the Book of Special Grace.”® Gertrude’s own seminal work is the book, The Herald of Divine Love. The book’s prologue, “contains revelations which are not found in the book but which are truly from Gertrude’s lips,”® and offers insight into Gertrude’s frame of mind as she wrote about her visions. In some ways, Gertrude suffered from a similar crisis of confidence as her predecessors. She also questioned if she possessed the authority to write about her spiritual experiences. However, instead of looking to fellow mystics or to Mary, Gertrude reached out directly to God for assurance:

Another time as she was striving in prayer to persuade the Lord to give her permission for this book not be written (since at the time obedience to her superiors did not compel her to write as pressingly as it had previously done), the

® Ibid., 261.
® Marnau, introduction to The Herald of Divine Love, 6.
® Ibid., 11.
Lord in his kindness replied to her: “Don’t you know that whatever my will commands will be placed above every obedience?”

With this divine assurance in hand, Gertrude continued and produced a significant example of medieval mystical writing. In the Herald, Gertrude experiences and interacts with Mary. Her visions are a unique addition to a discussion of female medieval mystics’ response to the Virgin.

Though this thesis focuses on female mystics’ response to Mary, it is important—particularly in the case of Gertrude—to explore her relationship with God as they are integral to understanding her relationship with the Virgin. Of particular note are situations in The Herald of Divine Love that Gertrude counseled individuals on taking holy communion and experiences explicit visions of the Lord encouraging her to act in what can be construed as a confessor, a clerical role, “If, therefore, I send some weary and afflicted soul to you to be comforted, say to whomever it may be to come with confidence to receive me.”

In an even more powerful passage, God states that his words flow through Gertrude’s mouth, “He touched her tongue, saying ‘Behold, I have given my words in thy mouth. And in truth I confirm all the words which, inspired by my Spirit, you shall speak for me.’” Caroline Walker Bynum discusses this situation and states,
“both Gertrude and those who record her visions clearly see her powers as analogous to those of the priest and make no apology for the similarity.”\textsuperscript{12}

Scholars disagree on if and how this type of spiritual authority on the part of Gertrude could be deemed heretical by medieval standards. Bynum states that Gertrude was aware of her subordinate position as a woman and nun but, “unlike many female mystics (for example Elisabeth of Schönau in the twelfth century and Julian of Norwich in the fourteenth) who mention female incapacity, although they dismiss it as unimportant, Gertrude never raises the issue of her own gender.”\textsuperscript{13} In her article, “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision,” Laurie Finke finds issue with Bynum’s analysis that Gertrude’s professed spiritual authority was not heretical, she states, “However orthodox and conservative her religious vision, Gertrude’s daring claim to speak for God challenged the hierarchies of a male-dominated clergy…”\textsuperscript{14} Regardless of whether Gertrude’s claims could be labeled heretical or not, her relationship with Christ was a significant part of her spirituality. This chapter will investigate how her relationship to Christ affected her response to the Virgin.

Christ validating Gertrude’s decisions and actions will continue throughout \textit{The Herald of Divine Love}. What is unique about Gertrude in comparison to her predecessors is that she explicitly prefers Christ’s validation over Mary’s. It is through Christ that she reconciles her personal actions that were beyond a nun’s or woman’s purview. Elisabeth

\textsuperscript{12} Bynum, \textit{Jesus as Mother}, 206-207.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 208.

of Schönau and Mechtilde of Hackeborn professed to have mystical powers. They experienced Mary as priest, and Mechtilde also envisioned herself as “a kind of deacon.”\textsuperscript{15} However, both these women developed a Mariology that validated their visions and actions; this was not the case with Gertrude. Her spiritual path included the Virgin but emphasized the divine. Gertrude’s emphasis on Christ would result in conflict between Gertrude and the Virgin.

In some ways Gertrude’s visions of the Virgin in \textit{The Herald of Divine Love} echo medieval Marian devotion and the sentiments of her fellow male and female mystics. However, there is a noticeable difference in her attitude towards Mary as she attempts to reconcile her desire to become closer to Christ while honoring his mother.\textsuperscript{16} In her article, \textit{Gertrude the Great and the Virgin Mary}, Sharon Elkins remarks on Gertrude’s feelings towards Mary. Elkins states that Gertrude “did not question whether the Virgin Mother was a beneficial model for women who could not biologically imitate her virginal maternity …but Gertrude did have considerable ambivalence about this virgin mother.”\textsuperscript{17} Similar to her predecessor Elisabeth of Schönau, who used the term, “Comforter,” for the Virgin, Gertrude refers to Mary as the “Consoler” and recognizes her as the intercessor of Christ for the masses. Throughout the \textit{Herald}, Mary is referred to as, “Queen of Heaven” and her role of intercessor is highlighted as she is called a “Gracious Mediatrix.” Mary’s virginity is emphasized as well as her merciful nature; Mary is called “Mother of

\textsuperscript{15} Bynum, \textit{Jesus as Mother}, 224.


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 722-723.
mercies.” Very late in Book III of the *Herald*, Gertrude overtly prays to the Virgin and comments on the importance of Marian prayer:

Then she praised the blessed Virgin, saying: “I praise and salute you, Mother of all blessedness, most worthy tabernacle of the Holy Spirit, through the sweetest heart of Jesus, God the Father’s most loving son and yours, praying that you may help us in our necessities and at the hour of death. Amen.” And she understood that if anyone praises the Lord as has just been described, and at the same time praises the blessed Virgin by adding the verse “I praise and salute you Mother…” as above, each time, they would, so to speak, offer to the virgin Mother a drink from the sweetest heart of Jesus Christ, her most loving Son. The royal Virgin will gladly accept this offering and will kindly deign to reward it with the liberality of her maternal affection.\(^\text{18}\)

Gertrude’s Marian prayer almost seems to suggest that Gertrude is offering Christ to the Virgin instead of Mary offering Christ to Gertrude. This role reversal will be seen again in Gertrude’s visions dealing with the intercessory powers of the Virgin. This quotation also emphasizes a theme that is always present in Gertrude’s visions and spirituality; she acknowledges Marian qualities and virtues, yet it is very apparent that it is Christ for whom she truly wishes to interact and with whom she has a strong and important connection.

This phenomenon is apparent in an episode in which Gertrude envisions herself delivering the infant Christ: “I received you from the womb of your virginal mother as a most tender and delicate newborn Babe, and held you for a moment clasped to my breast.”\(^\text{19}\) This invokes imagery of Gertrude as mother to Christ and the act of clasping him to her breast is not entirely uncommon in medieval mysticism.\(^\text{20}\) A theme earlier


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 115.

explored in Elisabeth of Schönau’s experience of Mary also appears during this particular vision. Gertrude earns the displeasure of the Virgin Mary due to her negligence while interacting with Christ, “But I must confess, alas, that I cared for this gift with less than due fervor and devotion.”\textsuperscript{21} Mary’s anger towards Gertrude culminates in her requesting that Gertrude hand over Christ:

\begin{quote}
Your virginal mother asked me to give you back to her, you, the lovely little child of her womb. Her face wore a severe expression, and though she were not pleased with the way I was look after you, the pride and joy of her immaculate virginity.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Though this passage is reminiscent of Elisabeth of Schönau’s experience; it is unique for two reasons. First, Gertrude refers to Mary’s immaculate virginity. Margaret Winkworth suggests that this refers to the “perpetual virginity” of Christ and Mary.\textsuperscript{23} Gertrude could be making a doctrinal reference that Mary maintained her virginity throughout her entire life, before and after the birth of Christ.\textsuperscript{24} It seems important to Gertrude to include such traditional doctrine in her experience of the Virgin.

Also, Gertrude’s response to Mary is quite different from Elisabeth’s appeasement. Though it is clear that Gertrude wishes to placate the Virgin, she does so by reminding Mary of where her blessings originate—with Christ. Through the entire vision, Gertrude

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Gertrude the Great, \textit{The Herald of Divine Love}, 115.
\item Ibid., 116.
\item Winkworth, notes to \textit{The Herald of Divine Love}, 149.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
is speaking to Christ about her experiences, as a mother explains to her children the circumstances of their birth. When his mother expresses her frustration, Gertrude states:

Remembering that is was because of the grace she found with you that she was given for the reconciliation of sinners and to be the hope of the hopeless, I exclaimed these words: “O Mother of Love, was it not for this that the Source of Mercy was given to you as your son, so that through you all the needy might obtain grace, and that you might cover with your copious charity the multitude of our sins and defects?”

Like her male and female predecessors, Gertrude exalts the Virgin for her virtues of love, mercy, charity and the rehabilitation of sinners. However, she is reminding the Virgin of these virtues and that it is because of Christ that Mary holds an elevated spiritual position with graces to bestow upon the all peoples. Gertrude says to Christ, “because of the grace she found with you” and “the Source of Mercy was given to you as your son.” Her tone is unlike the pleading of her predecessor, Elisabeth, because Christ is so intertwined with Gertrude’s Mariology. She wants to right whatever wrong she has caused the Virgin, but only in a way in which she is truly apologizing to Christ. What is similar to Elisabeth’s experience is that the Virgin’s favor is returned to Gertrude, who in turn confirms to Christ his mother’s appeasement:

At that her face assumed an expression of serene benignity. She seemed to be appeased, showing me that although I had deserved her apparent sternness because of my wickedness, she was in reality entirely filled with loving kindness, being penetrated to very marrow with the sweetness of divine charity. Her face soon lighted up at my poor words, which had dispelled all appearance of severity and brought back the serene sweetness which was inherent in her nature. May your Mother with her unfailing love, be my gracious advocate with you for all my defects.


26 Ibid., 116-117.
Even at this moment, when she acknowledges a key theme in medieval Marian devotion, the intercessory powers of the Virgin, Gertrude only wants Mary’s advocacy if it is in partnership with Christ, “May your mother with unfailing love, be my gracious advocate with you for all my defects.”

Mary is seen as an advocate for Christians; however, the Virgin’s intercession for Gertrude is at the request of Christ and is often not enough in the eyes of the mystic. This phenomenon, "introduces a surprising reversal of the typical medieval pattern in which Mary petitions her son on behalf of one of her devotees.”

In Book III of the *Herald* Gertrude anticipates difficulty, and Christ goes before his mother on behalf of Gertrude:

> The good Lord, taking pity on her timidity, himself charged his merciful mother, the august empress of heaven, to be a gracious mediatrix for her, so that whenever the weight of this adversity became more than she could bear, she could always have recourse to the Mother of mercies who, she knew, would come to her aid.

Christ asking Mary for intercession on behalf of another is an unusual theme. Gertrude’s Christocentric spirituality is further demonstrated when after Christ’s actions Mary, “the Consoler” responds to Gertrude’s concerns with a Christ-focused response, “Give away all that you have, for my son is more than rich enough to repay you for all you expend for his glory.” It is unlikely that Gertrude would disagree with Mary’s comments, but the

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27 Ibid., 117.


30 Ibid., 157.

31 Ibid.
Virgin’s intercession is not enough for Gertrude. Unlike Elisabeth of Schönau, Mary’s comfort does not end Gertrude’s pain and she needs divine intervention to solve her problem:

But as she had wrapped her secret round with so many concealments of her own invention, she could not easily disclose it; in this situation she flung herself down at the Lord’s feet, imploring him to give her some indication of what would be most pleasing to him and to grant her the grace to accomplish that will of his. Then she obtained of the divine goodness this reassuring reply….”  

Even though Christ himself assigned his mother as her “gracious mediatrix” and Gertrude called Mary, “Consoler,” there was no consolation from the Virgin. Only Christ could give Gertrude peace of mind and offer the reconciliation she seeks. Further complicating her relationship with the Virgin is Christ’s interactions with his mother in her visions.

In a chapter of the Herald entitled, “How to Pray to the Mother of God,” Gertrude is told by Christ to “Keep close my mother, who is seated at my side, and strive to please her.” Gertrude begins her praise of the Virgin with language that echoes her male and female predecessors’ comparison of Mary as Church. Gertrude begins:

Praising her for having been the most pleasant abode which God’s inscrutable wisdom, to whom all creatures are known, chose as his dwelling from among all the delectable pleasures of his Father. She prayed that she might obtain for her own heart such attractive and varied virtues that God might be pleased to dwell there also.

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 184.
34 Ibid., 184-185.
Gertrude does not praise the Virgin for accepting God’s will. She praises Christ for his choice of Mary. It could be argued that this moment is Mary’s finest—the moment she agrees to take part in the Word becoming Flesh—she states, “I am the handmaiden of the Lord.”\(^{35}\) However, even at this significant Marian episode, Gertrude is still focused on Christ. Gertrude would refer to the Virgin as a “tabernacle”\(^ {36}\) later in the *Herald*, echoing the term used by her predecessors to describe Mary’s particular role in the establishment of the Church. However, similar to this vision, her thoughts would soon return to Christ and how best to honor him.

During the same vision, Gertrude is concerned that she has offended the Virgin and she asks Christ to speak to Mary on her behalf, “Since you were made man to make up for all human defects, now deign to make up to your blessed Mother for what may have been lacking in my praise of her.”\(^ {37}\) It is surprising that Gertrude seems to instruct Christ to mend her relationship with the Virgin. This particular request and tone is unique in comparison to her previous questioning of herself to Christ and his continued validation of her mystical abilities. Bynum comments on Gertrude’s spiritual authority, “The kind of authority her compilers attribute to her—an authority she accepts herself with ease and confidence—is analogous to the kind of authority her theology ascribes to God.”\(^ {38}\) This is an important point in relation to Gertrude’s response to the Virgin. Clearly her spirituality is Christocentric, but if she ascribes to an authority equal with Christ, what spiritual needs

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\(^{35}\) Luke 1:38.


\(^{37}\) Ibid., 185.

\(^{38}\) Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 208.
can his mother fulfill for her personally? That said, Christ himself emphasizes the importance of exalting his mother and solidifies her celestial position by stating that Mary is “seated at my side.” Gertrude’s complex response to the Virgin is highlighted by Christ’s interactions with the Virgin; these interactions are instigated by the Son of God for Gertrude.

After Gertrude asks Christ to intercede with Mary on her behalf, Christ approaches his mother in an uncommon and almost deferential way:

> When he heard these words, the Son of God arose and most reverently went to kneel before his Mother; bowing his head, he saluted her most courteously and affectionately, so that she could not but be pleased with the homage of one whose imperfections were so abundantly made up for by her most beloved Son.  

Here Christ kneels, and bows before his mother, while asking her to forgive Gertrude’s negligence. When discussing the phenomenon of Christ as intercessor to Mary in Gertrude’s visions, Sharon Elkins states:

> Gertrude’s visions never caused her to challenge the official belief that Mary ranked below Christ, but in the world of Gertrude’s visions, Mary’s subordinate position had little impact. Christ ranked higher in the heavenly hierarchy, yet he placated her.  

Christ’s divinity did not give him permission to neglect his mother. In Gertrude’s writing, he places his mother at his side and approaches her with respect and affection. According to Gertrude, Christ recognizes the important spiritual role his mother holds even though Gertrude’s personal spirituality focuses more on Christ than Mary. It is not

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40 Elkins, “Gertrude the Great and the Virgin Mary,” 725.
my view that Gertrude denies the Virgin the reverence the Church and even Christ believe
should be extended to Mary; however, she is clear that Christ should be the primary focus
for Christians. This is never more apparent in an episode when Gertrude is in front of
altar devoted to the Virgin but finds her thoughts pondering Christ instead:

And so on the feast of the Annunciation of the Lord, when the blessed Virgin was
so often extolled by the preacher and no mention was made of the Lord’s
Incarnation, which brought about the salvation, she was grieved and, after the
sermon, as she was passing in front of the altar of the glorious Virgin, in saluting
her she did not feel moved exclusively by sweet affection toward the mother of
every grace, but instead every time that she saluted and praised her, her loving
thoughts always went out towards Jesus, the blessed fruit of her womb.  

In this vision, Gertrude acknowledges the emphasis placed upon Mary in medieval piety;
even so, she is disconcerted and feels the need to redirect attention towards Christ: “No
mention was made of the Lord’s Incarnation.” Ultimately, through her actions, Gertrude
highlights a very important role of the Virgin, bringing Christ to all peoples and
highlighting his divinity. Nonetheless, she again feels concern that she will anger Mary,
and Christ again assures her that she honors Mary by honoring him, “It is this kind of
salutation or praise of my beloved mother, directed more to me than to herself which is the
most agreeable to her.”

Gertrude’s relationship with Mary was undoubtedly complex. Like her fellow
female and male mystics she agreed with and honored the traditional medieval Marian
virtues. She did not question Mary’s place in the celestial hierarchy or in earthly prayer
and piety. She also upheld and praised the Virgin for her important role as the

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42 Ibid.
“tabernacle” for Christ. However, her personal relationship with the Virgin was not the center of her spirituality; but could be for others, “she saw Mary as a powerful mother and protector of the others [nuns of Helfa].”43 Her elder and confidante, Mechtilde of Hackeborn, experienced powerful and positive visions of the Virgin, and Gertrude assisted her sister in writing those visions in Mechtilde’s Booke of Gostlye Grace. Gertrude would never find validation from a fellow male mystic like Hildegard did in Bernard of Clairvaux. She would never be assured by Mary marking her with the sign of the cross, like Elisabeth of Schönau. Gertrude’s comfort and authority came directly from Christ and she strived to balance the medieval emphasis on the Virgin with her own Christocentric spirituality. Gertrude wish to redirect spiritual attention to Christ, however, is very Marian in quality. At times Gertrude describes a tense relationship between herself and Mary, emphasizing her focus on Christ. Nonetheless, Gertrude’s attempt to be closer to Christ is also one of the most important roles of Mary’s in salvation history; bringing people closer to Christ. Gertrude’s relationship with the Virgin does not diminish her acknowledgment of Mary and her belief that the Mother of God should be honored. However, her visions give readers an understanding that female mystics did not necessarily claim the Virgin as their own spiritual touchstone because she was a woman or because medieval piety dictated her importance. For Gertrude and perhaps others, it was Christ who took priority in ultimately fulfilling her spiritual aspirations.

43 Elkins, “Gertrude the Great and the Virgin Mary,” 731.
CHAPTER SIX
MECHTILDE OF HACKEBORN¹

Before Gertrude the Great arrived at Helfa, it was home to Mechtilde of Hackeborn (1240-98). Mechtilde followed her abbess sister, Gertrude of Hackeborn, into cloistered life of Helfa. Mechtilde also contributed to the visionary literature of the Helfa with her work, the Booke of Gostlye Grace.² Her experience as a mystic was unique, but also shared similar traits of her fellow nun, Gertrude, and their predecessors Hildegard and Elisabeth. In the introduction to her translation of the Booke³ Theresa Halligan discusses Mechtilde’s concern when she learned her fellow nuns were recording her visions: “The Booke relates that in her distress she complained to Christ who reassured her that the written record was part of his providential plan…moreover he gave the work it’s title.”⁴ This episode is reminiscent of Gertrude the Great’s crisis of confidence in The Herald of Divine Love. Gertrude wonders if she has the authority to write the Herald, and God must reassure her that her actions are in line with his will and even entitles the collection of Gertrude’s visions.

¹ There is not a consensus among scholars of the correct spelling of Mechtilde’s name. For the purposes of this thesis, it will be spelled Mechtilde, unless quoting another author’s work.

² Mechtilde’s book is also referred to by scholars as The Book of Special Grace. This thesis uses a translation of her writing entitled, The Booke of Gostlye Grace. For purposes associated with this thesis, Mechtilde’s book will be referred to as, The Booke of Gostlye Grace, unless quoting another author’s work.

³ It should be noted that Halligan’s edition of the Booke is in Middle English. I have referenced the glossary in Halligan’s text as well as A Concise Dictionary of Middle English: From AD 1150 to 1580 by Rev, A. L. Mayhew.

It is not surprising that two contemporaries who live in the same spiritual environment would have similar themes in their visions. Mechtilde’s closeness to Gertrude the Great is well documented and “the consensus is that St. Gertrude was undoubtedly the principal compiler [of Mechtilde’s visions], and because of her ill health, was assisted by another nun.”5 These two women shared a friendship, a home and their visions; however, there are differences between their spiritual experiences. However, as scholars have previously remarked, each woman wrote about their own unique spirituality that at times differed significantly. One way to observe the differences in Mechtildes and Gertrude’s visionary writings is to focus on their relationship with Mary. Mechtildes’s relationship with the Virgin is very different from her fellow sister. Mary features more prominently in Mechtildes’s visions and in comparison, some of Mechtildes’s visions resemble Elisabeth of Schönau’s Marian experiences rather than echoing Gertrudes. However, Mechtildes’s visions of the Virgin do include traditional medieval Marian elements also shared by Gertrude and their male and female predecessors.

The role of Mary as intercessor is significant in Mechtildes’s visions and unlike Gertrude, she seems to endorse the intervention of Christ’s mother. Mechtildes trusts that the Virgin’s intercession will bring her the company and blessings of God: “Ande lakke de te presens of God ande his gracyouse conforth which schee was wonte to have, sche prayed to our ladye, mediatrice betwyxte God and mane, that sche wolde gete here the presence of here dere beluffede sonne.”6 In one particular vision, Mechtildes

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5 Ibid., 37.

emphasizes the role of Mary as mediatrix as well as listing other important Marian qualities. In prayer at Mass, Mechtilde asks Mary to intercede on her behalf with God because she had been sinful:

This maydene mayde reuerente salutacion to oure ladye ande askede of here that sche wolde gette of our lorde forgyness of here synys…sche saw oure ladye stande before oure lordys feete, ande toke the hemme of his clothes whiche lay on the erth ande with his cloythes sche wypede h[er]e face.  

This imagery of Mary going before Christ to speak for another more common than what we find in Gertrude, with Christ kneeling in front of his mother. In Mechtilde’s vision, Mary shows great reverence and humility in front of her son. In this same vision, Mechtilde notices many virgins surrounding Mary. When asked who these virgins are, Mary describes the seven virtues she possesses and that these virgins represent holynesse, prudence, chastity, mekenes, charite, studiosyte (close attention) and pacience. As described by Mary, it is these virtues that allowed her to achieve the celestial position she holds. It is implied that all people should ascribe to these qualities, and Mechtilde asks the Virgin to pray that she receive such virtues.

lacking the presence of God and his gracious comfort, which she wanted to have, she prayed to Our Lady, mediatrix between God and man, that she would get her the presence of her dear beloved Son.”

7 Ibid., 299. Modern English translation: “This maiden [Mechtilde] made reverent salutation to Our Lady [Mary] and asked of her that she would get the Our Lord to forgive her sins. She saw Our Lady stand before Our Lord’s feet and took the hem of his clothes which lay upon the Earth and with his clothes she wiped her face.”

8 Ibid., 299-300. Modern English translation: “holiness, prudence, chastity, meekness, charity, close attention and patience.”

9 Ibid., 300.
One instance of intercession in the *Booke* is reminiscent of both Elisabeth of Schönau and Gertrude’s interactions with the Virgin. However, there are significant differences unique to Mechtilde’s own experience. Like her fellow mystics she also envisions a situation in which she had been negligent in honoring Mary and not prompt in her prayers. Unlike Elisabeth and Gertrude, she was not reprimanded by the Virgin but instead sought out Mary to explain her concerns:

> Sche sawe oure ladye stondynge before here, and to here semyne our ladye drowe her to her ande beclyppede here. Ande this maydene anone mayde here complaynte of here neclygence ande askede of oure layde whedere sche hadde sayde here complyne ouere euen or nowst sayde itt.¹⁰

Mary embraces (beclyppede) Mechtilde, listens as the mystic acknowledges her negligence, and asks if her prayers have been heard at the highest level (ouere euen). Mary reminds Mechtilde that no matter how successful she is in her prayers, Christ is aware of her actions and they are “before my sone.”¹¹ This interaction with the Virgin motivates Mechtilde to exalt Mary to her son and admit her guilt:

> Howe this maydene [rendered] here gylyte in [the] sight of God [that] sche cowth neuere luffe so perfytelye his blessede modere as sche schulde haffe luffede. Ande oure lorde [taught] here whate satisfaccioun sche schulde do for neclygencies in her seryuse.”¹²

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¹⁰ Ibid., 314. Modern English translation: “She saw Our Lady standing before her and it seemed to her that Our Lady drew her to her and embraced her. And this maiden again made complaint of her negligence and asked Our Lady if her prayers and been heard at the highest levels [by Christ].”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. Modern English translation: “How this maiden rendered her guilt in the sight of God that she could never love so perfectly his blessed mother as she should have loved her. And Our Lord taught her what satisfaction (prayers) to right her negligence.”
God responds with instructions on how to remedy her negligence and according to Christ, Mechtilde must worship and praise Mary, focusing on the deeds the Virgin has performed as the mother of God. In particular, Christ emphasizes Mary’s role as intercessor. His description of Mary as mediatrix is a detailed narrative about how Mary’s intercession saves the souls of men:

Sche is moste trewe to me to brynge to me synfulle men, ande besyes here with here prayers [that] they be tornede fro [their] synne. Ande sche helpsawlys whiche passed fro the bodeye [that they] mowe be deleyuerede oute of peynes, for be here merytes many synners innumerabele be convuerte, ande manye sawllys ordeynede to euerelastynge peyns be my ryghtfulle doome be clepede agayne [through] here mercy, and deleyuerede fro the fyre of purgatorye.¹³

Christ’s description of Mary’s role as intercessor is powerful. The Virgin is able to save souls that have already been ordered to everlasting pain (euerelastynge peyns). By her merciful embrace (clepede) she is able to save these people from the fires of purgatory (fyre of purgatorye).

We recall that this emphasis on Mary’s intercession was not part of Gertrude’s quest to be closer to Christ. Even with his assurance that she would receive mercy by honoring Mary, she was not satisfied with the Virgin’s ability to intercede on her behalf. This is not the case for Mechtilde; she is confident in the Virgin’s intercession. Mechtilde differs from her fellow nun by asking Christ for further instruction in how to please his

¹³ Ibid., 315. Modern English translation: “She is most true to me to bring me sinful men and beside her with her prayers that they be torn from their sin. And she helps souls, which passed from the body to be delivered out of pain. Due to her promptness, innumerable sinners and many souls ordered to everlasting pain by my rightful doom, are embraced again through her mercy and delivered from the fires of purgatory.”
mother: “In a masse tyme of oure ladye sche askede of oure lorde how sche shulde worschepe oure ladye with alle [the] orders of aungellys, ande with patriarches, ande prophetez, with apostlys, martyrs, confessours, ande virgyns.”

As well as the Virgin, it is important to Mechtilde that she honors the worthy such as the angels, prophets and apostles.

Mechtilde’s spirituality differs from Gertrude in that she finds herself closer to Christ by praying and honoring Mary and other worthy individuals. In her book, The Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages, Andrea Janelle Dickens refers to a quotation from the Booke and comments on how it highlights Mechtilde’s personal view on how one becomes closer to Christ through Mary: “Ande when sche beheld hym furste in his humanyte ande hadde fulle knawyng that he was verrey God, ande for [that] ioye to gette here [that] sche [must] haffe a verrey ande a soythfaste knawyng.”

Mary was what Christ is, Mary has certain “knowledge” about Christ that should be honored. Dickens agrees the first to hold Christ and understand his humanity and his divinity. As the first human to truly understand: “Since this knowledge is what binds Mary so closely to God, knowledge of Christ by other humans is another way of helping to ensure their union with Christ.” This is a significant difference between the Mariology of Mechtilde and Gertrude. Gertrude understood and respected Mary’s role—in particular for others—

14 Ibid. Modern English translation: “In a Mass dedicated to Our Lady, she [Mechtilde] asked of Our Lord how she should worship [pray to, honor] Our Lady with all the orders of angels, and with the patriarchs and prophets, with the apostles, martyrs, confessors and virgins.”

15 Ibid., 313. Modern English translation: “And when she beheld him first in his humanity and had full knowledge that he was truly God, and for that joy to be with her first, she must have a very true knowledge.”

16 Dickens, The Female Mystic, 97.
but her own personal spirituality focused on her direct communication with Christ.

Mechtilde actively prayed to the Virgin to become closer to Christ—a not uncommon goal in medieval Marian devotion.

Mechtilde’s Mary is charitable, patient, and holy. She is acts as intercessor of Christ and is comforter to the masses by her embrace. All of these virtues of the Virgin are common in medieval Marian piety. Mechtilde’s Mary also echoes the more complex Christian doctrine of the patristic fathers and her fellow male and female mystics. In a particularly striking vision during mass, Mechtilde is mediating upon the “temple of Cryste the saueour,”17 and calls that the Virgin hears her prayers. When she has the ear of Mary, she states: “Ande sade to here [that] sche was the moste gloryouse…[the] moste delycious temple of God.”18 The imagery of Mary housing Christ, the Virgin as the tabernacle and church, is not an uncommon theme as we have seen in this thesis. However, what is interesting is the response of Mary to Mechtilde’s exaltation. The Virgin leads her to a house, and this structure and Mary’s actions are described by Mechtilde in detail:

[Then] oure ladye toke here handed and ledde here to a fulle fayre howse, which was mayde fulle hye with squarestonys ande hadde none wyndowe, ande [it] was fulle lyght withyn…In the hight ande the length sche vnderstode [that] oure ladye was moste hye in contemplacion ande moste [enlightened] with knawyng. Be the dore was schewede here mercye which es euere open to alle [that] comes to here…Aftere this vysioun oure ladye sade to this maydenne, “[If thou] desire to be suche a Goddys howse, stodye to haffe excercyse in [these] vertues.”19

18 Ibid., 304. Modern English translation: “And said to her that she was the most glorious…the most delightful temple of God.”
19 Ibid., 304-305. Modern English translation: “The Our Lady to her hand and lead her to a fair house, which was made high by square stones and had no windows and was full of light within.
After Mechtilde refers to Mary as the “temple of God,” Mary brings her to a structure “fulle lyght withyn,” that seems to represent the Church. It is through Mary that Mechtilde finds herself within the Church, and once in its walls she acknowledges Mary’s spiritual knowledge and elevated position within Christianity: “sche vnderstode [that] oure lady was moste hye in contemplacion ande moste [enlightened] with knawynge.” Mechtilde is shown the door of the structure and she is told that it is open to all through the Virgin’s mercy.20 Mary informs Mechtilde that in order for one to be in “Goddys house,” one must work to lead a virtuous life; the implication being to emulate the Virgin.21 This vision is also reminiscent of the previously discussed biblical story of Jacob and the Pynson Ballad. It is impossible to know if Mechtilde was inspired by either story; however, it is clear that fundamental elements of Marian piety that had developed over the centuries were important to Mechtilde. Her personal spirituality was highly influenced by the presence of Mary.

Mary held a significant place is Mechtilde’s spirituality; that said; did her presence within the walls of Helfa influence how she responded to the Virgin? We have discussed Bynum’s theory that thirteenth-century mystics and in particular the nuns of Helfa enjoyed a type of “alternate authority” that fostered an intimate relationship with God and allowed

While within the height and the length [of the house] she understood that Our Lady was in deep contemplation and most enlightened with knowledge. By the door she showed her mercy by being open to all that come to her…after this vision Our Lady said to this maiden, ‘If you desire to be in God’s house, study exercises in these virtues.’

20 Ibid., 305.

21 Ibid.
them to explore their spirituality on a higher level than those women not within the
convent’s walls. Gertrude professed that God places his Word upon her tongue and his
Word flows through her lips. A similar occurrence can also be seen in Mechtilde’s
visions; however, it is through Mary that God’s will is done. As cited in Andrea Janelle
Dickens’ book, *The Female Mystic*, Mary professes that: “The worshipful Trinity
delighted and had joy in me because He would make such an image wherein the gracious
working of all His mighty wisdom and all His goodness should passingly and curiously
appear.”22

We have seen in medieval Marian devotion that Mary is held up as an example to
all peoples. However, Dickens’ believes this statement of the Virgin is more significant
and argues that the statement: “…goes beyond saying that Mary is merely an example and
makes her a conduit of the divine wisdom itself.”23 At first glance this could be
interpreted as moving beyond common medieval Marian devotion. Mary was the
tabernacle in which the Word was made Flesh, but once Christ had lived and died, could
Mary speak the Word for him? This imagery that Mechtilde evokes seems to indicate that
Mary was a fountain of God’s wisdom, similar to how Gertrude considered herself a
mouthpiece of the divine. Interestingly, Mechtilde’s vision of Mary may not be as
surprising when compared to a statement of Bernard of Clairvaux: “Before the birth of
Mary, a constant flow of grace was lacking, because this aqueduct did not exist.”24

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22 Dickens, *The Female Mystic*, 96.

23 Ibid.

similarity in the language is striking and Mechtilde certainly knew of Bernard as he appears in her visions. Much of Mechtilde’s Marian devotion was consistent with the traditional Marian piety of her era. However, this is not always be the case and Mechtilde’s visions would echo her predecessor, Elisabeth of Schönau, as she would see Mary at the altar performing duties not generally attributed to the Virgin.

In Gertrude’s *Herald of Divine Love* Gertrude performs actions reserved for priests. Mechtilde also saw herself in a priestly type role and unlike her predecessor Hildegard or Elisabeth, does not seem to view her femaleness as a prohibitive to spiritual authority. Also, unlike Gertrude, Mechtilde’s view of herself also extended to Mary. There are two visions of the Virgin at an altar in the *Booke*. The first vision is of St. John the Evangelist celebrating Mass: “and all the wordys of the gosepelle come from the mowth of Saynt Iohan as bright bemys of the sunne.”

Mechtilde also witnessed Mary at the altar: “Sche sawe also ate the same masse tyme oure ladye stondynge atte the [other] syde of the awtere ande a sunnebeeme of a wonderfulle schyngynge stretch furth rechynge into oure ladyes face.” When Mechtilde asks St. John the meaning of Mary’s shining presence, he states: “Whyles I lewydde in erth ande was conuersaunt with erthly folk I hadde my lordys modere in so grete reuerence ande worschepe that I durste neuere looke in here blessede vysage.” St. John seems to imply that while he was alive and concerned


26 Ibid. Modern English translation: “She also saw at the same Mass, Our Lady standing at the other side of the altar and a wonderfully shining sunbeam stretched forth into Our Lady’s face.”

27 Ibid. Modern English translation: “While I was of the Earth and concerned with earthly folk, I held my Lord’s mother in so great reverence and worship that I never looked in her blessed face.”
with earthly matters, he revered and worshiped Mary but never dared looked upon her “blessed vysage.” St. John’s comment is somewhat confusing; however, the significance of this vision is that Mary is by his side at the altar during Mass. Her presence at the altar is seemingly approved by God as her face is alighted with sunbeams and this divine approval is of upmost importance to Mechtilde and very significant in the following vision of the Virgin celebrating mass.

Mechtilde describes a situation in which her religious community was:

“suspendede…fro duyne seruyce in [that] holy feste.”

Dickens further clarifies the problem stating that the convent was under interdict and those within its walls were not allowed to receive the sacraments. Mechtilde is extremely bereft at the thought of not being able to receive communion. Her prayers are answered and God comes to the rescue of her and her community. Christ consoles Mechtilde and he begins to celebrate Mass with St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. The mystic sees a crowned Virgin at the altar:

Ande our ladye stode atte [the] right syde of [the] awtere cloythede in clothythnge as bright as [the] light of [the] sunne. Sche hadde on here hede a corowne arayede with rychesse whiche in comparision passed alle kynddeys of preciouse stoneyes.

28 Ibid., 251. Modern English translation: “suspended from doing service in that holy feast.”

29 Dickens, The Female Mystic, 96.

30 Hackeborn, The Booke of Gostlye Grace, 253. Modern English translation: “And Our Lady stood at the right of the altar, clothed in clothing as bright as the sun’s light. She had on her head a crown arrayed with riches which in comparison surpassed all kinds of precious stones.”
This imagery is reminiscent of Mechtilde’s predecessor, Elisabeth of Schönau. In Elisabeth’s visions, Mary acted as priest to her and provided a type of personal validation to Elisabeth. Mechtilde’s vision is a little more complex because Mary is celebrating the mass with her son at her side in front of an entire congregation: “Atte [the] table oure lorde sette hym downe and his blessfulle modere satte besyde hym.”\(^{31}\) Even more striking is that Mary assists in the priestly act of providing the Eucharist to the entire community: “Anone alle the congregacion come furth to [that] table ande eche of [them] knelede undere [the] arm of oure ladye to receyue Goddys bodye of oure lords handee.”\(^{32}\) The Virgin also holds a chalice to her son’s side to collect his blood for the members of the convent to receive the blood of Christ: “Ande owre ladye held a chaleys of golde…ande helde hitt to oure lords syde….”\(^{33}\) This vision shows Mary assisting in the role of priest and with the blessing of Christ. The imagery is not traditional; however, Mary is performing her duties in one of the most traditional ways, she is obeying God. Dickens states of Mary’s priestly function: “Mary oversteps the authority of Rome…Her ability to step outside the constructed roles for women intends to embolden the rest of the community, if they act on behalf of the will of God.”\(^{34}\) There is significance in Mechtilde’s vision of Mary as priest. Not only is Mary performing and assisting in duties reserved for

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 254-255. Modern English translation: “At the table, Our Lord set himself down and his blessed mother sat beside him.”

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 255. Modern English translation: “And then, the entire congregation came forth to that table and each of the knelt under the arm of Our Lady to receive God’s body of our Lord’s hand.”

\(^{33}\) Ibid. Modern English translation: “And Our Lady held a chalice of gold and held it to Our Lord’s side.”

\(^{34}\) Dickens, *The Female Mystic*, 96.
men, but she is providing Eucharist—with the approval of Christ—to individuals who are prohibited by the Church hierarchy from receiving the body and blood of Christ. The Marian intercession of Mechtildes’s vision does not just apply to the mystic but to her entire community. Her writing advocates for following the will of God over the earthly rules of the Church.

To act “on behalf of the will of God” is the unifying factor between Gertrude and Mechtildes. The spiritual activities of their community allowed them freedoms that their predecessors did not enjoy and this environment fostered a bold personal spirituality that brought them directly to Christ. Gertrude honored traditional Marian teachings but her writings reflect a wish not to exaggerate Mary’s position in the celestial hierarchy. Christ was Gertrude’s primary focus in her own personal spirituality. Her fellow nun, Mechtildes, felt that she was closer to Christ through his mother. The Mariology of each woman was unique while maintaining key elements of traditional Marian piety, their relationships with the Virgin were just as complex as their female predecessors.
CONCLUSION

Mary’s role in salvation history was a significant focus of medieval Christian theology and devotion. This thesis examines four female medieval mystics’ responses to Mary, drawing upon biblical accounts, writings of the patristic fathers, and male medieval theologians. A review of key early Christian responses to Mary, as well as foundational scholarship provide essential historical context for the later female writers.

While passages devoted exclusively to Mary in the New Testament are relatively few, she appears at key moments in the account of Christ’s life, his mission, and the early life of the Church. The writers examined in this thesis emphasize that Mary is the first Christian, not only because she is Christ’s mother, but also because she was prepared to accept and carry out the will of God. This thesis also shows how important establishing Mary’s role in salvation history was to the patristic fathers and male medieval theologians. Understanding Mary’s exposure to original sin was a key concern of these writers. They would also interpret the biblical texts in ways that celebrated the Virgin as Mother of God, Queen of Heaven and other roles that established her prominent status as a key aspect of medieval theology and devotion.

This thesis found that an important selection of medieval female mystics upheld many of the traditional tenets of Marian devotion, but they also went further to develop their own personal Mariology. One main theme of divergence was the dialogue surrounding original sin. The female mystics were not as concerned with original sin and Mary’s status as part of those teachings. However, the women strongly echoed their predecessors’ focus on Mary’s virtues such as virginity and humility, as well as her status
as Queen of Heaven and Mother of God. They attempted to reconcile the inherited traditional church teachings with their own personal experiences regarding the Virgin. These women also complicated these traditional teachings by offering different views among themselves.

The contemporaries Hildegard of Bingen and Elisabeth of Schönau shared many traditional views of medieval Marian devotion. Hildegard did not envision communication between herself and Mary, and she struggled to reconcile accepted female roles of her era with her exaltation of the Virgin. In Hildegard’s poetic work, *Symphonia*, we see her make many comparisons between Mary and Eve, and she focuses on Mary being the healer of wounds wrought by Eve’s actions. Hildegard even portrays Mary as a heroine and destroyer of sin. Elisabeth has a more direct and interactive relationship with the Virgin, calling her “Comforter” and invoking Mary for intercessory needs. Elisabeth also experienced visions of Mary as priest. In this priestly role, Mary marks Elisabeth with the sign of the cross, bestowing authenticity upon Elisabeth and her spiritual gifts.

In the later medieval era, Gertrude the Great and Mechtilde of Hackeborn also accepted traditional tenets of medieval Marian devotion and experienced visions of the Virgin in direct communication with them. These women lived in a community that allowed them freedoms that their predecessors did not enjoy, and this environment fostered a bold personal spirituality that allowed a more intimate relationship with Christ. Like her fellow mystics, Gertrude exalted the Virgin for her mercy, charity, intercessory skills and ability to rehabilitate sinners. Also, in her visions Christ himself emphasizes the importance of exalting his mother and solidifies her celestial position by stating that Mary is “seated at my side.” However, it is clear that Gertrude did not wish to exaggerate
Mary’s position in the celestial hierarchy; Christ was Gertrude’s primary focus in her own personal spirituality. Her fellow nun, Mechtilde, shared a more intimate relationship with Mary. Mechtilde focused on the Virgin’s intercessory powers and would often seek to please Mary in her prayers. Mechtilde also envisioned Mary as priest and serving Mass by Christ’s side. These particular visions highlighted the mystic’s emphasis on Mary’s role to follow the will of God. Ultimately, Mechtilde felt that she was closer to Christ through his mother. These four women each had a complex relationship with the Virgin. Their responses to Mary were unique to their own personal spirituality.

The research shows that there is not a specific Marian devotion apart from traditional teachings that is common to all the female mystics discussed in this thesis. While the early Christian writers and male medieval theologians often focused on Mary’s exposure to original sin, the female mystics did not. It is unclear why the women did not feel the need to contribute to the larger theological debate surrounding Mary and original sin; however, what is clear is that these women decided to focus on the earthly virtues and celestial powers the Mother of God possessed. The female mystics’ Marian devotion demonstrated a more interactive relationship with the Virgin in comparison to their male predecessors. Visions and conversations with Mary are prevalent among the women. Hildegard is the one exception; she does not speak of personal communication with the Virgin. That said, her poetic works show she did feel an intimate and powerful connection to Mary. It is my view that the contributions these women made to Marian devotion helped to define them as mystics; their connection with Mary enriched their relationship with the Divine. Through their interactions with the Virgin, these women found themselves closer to Christ: Hildegard’s poetry emphasized Mary’s role as an active
participant in the salvation of all peoples; Elisabeth’s visions of Mary as priest
authenticated the mystic’s spiritual gifts which allowed her direct access to God;
Gertrude’s Christocentric spirituality still saw Christ highlighting the Virgin’s place at his
side; and Mechtilde’s priestly visions of Mary showed the Virgin’s importance as an
intercessor and focused on how by honoring Mary, she is honoring Christ and thus
following the will of God.

This thesis offers conclusions based on an important selection of medieval female
mystics. Nonetheless, further research on the Mariology of other female mystics from
different geographic areas and time periods could only assist in developing a better
understanding of the medieval female mystics’ responses to the Virgin. An even more
comprehensive review of medieval female mystics could help answer questions raised by
this thesis’ conclusions. Do all female mystical writings focus on the themes of Marian
virtues such as virginity, charity, humility, mercy and intercession? How does Eastern
Mariology compare to the Western examples examined in this project? Can further
research conclusively answer why the female mystics did not focus on Mary’s exposure to
original sin? Many more avenues of research can be explored on the topic of medieval
female mystics’ responses to Mary. What is clear with this project is that these women
viewed the Virgin through the lens of traditional medieval piety but they also adjusted
their Mariology to comport with their own personal spirituality.


