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# The Wedded Soul:

## *Mystical Marriage in Late Medieval Female Mysticism*

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of Master of Arts in History at Massey University

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## Introduction

From its first days in the early Church onwards, mystical marriage between the soul and God was powerful, pervasive and malleable, both as a concept and as a lifestyle and belief system, and was increasingly used and developed by late medieval female mystics as their chosen form of exclusive holy life and individual expression of their own spirituality. At the root of its power and potential in the spiritual life of the mystic was the deep, intimate, unmediated and heightened relationship with God which mystical union encapsulated. This mystical relationship was considered the apex of holy and mystical life and brought with it all the attached privileges of a personal connection to God, mystical experiences and spiritual gifts and power.

Mystical marriage or union came under the category of bridal mysticism, the mystical system which took its form and expression from the spiritualised concept of marriage. The range of experiences and nuances available through the metaphor of marriage made bridal mysticism a strongly expressive and sensory based alternative to the intellectual mysticism of the medieval Church, which female mystics were virtually cut off from. The expressive and mystical potential of bridal mysticism, and thus mystical marriage, was recognised by late medieval female mystics and brought union with God to the centre of female mysticism, at the same time as female mysticism and religious devotion itself was growing and flourishing (1), and holy life was becoming more publicly practiced and more popular with the laity (2).

These changes were well covered by Bernard McGinn in his book *The Flowering of Mysticism*, and his article, 'The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism' (3), and more particularly Grace M. Jantzen in *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (4) and Frances Beer in *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (5), which both look specifically at the female experience of medieval mysticism and holy life, and introduce pertinent points on how and why female mystics were regulated by the Church. The theological building blocks on which the late medieval female mystic and Bride of Christ built her holy life are examined in Peter Brown's work, *The Body and Society* (6), as he discusses the role of the body and sexual renunciation in holy life as well as the views of early Church theologians and Church Fathers. David G. Hunter contributes a good discussion on early views of the Bride of Christ in his article 'The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church' (7), and Nelson Pike details the intricate theology involved in the concept and experience of mysticism itself in his book, *Mystic Union: An Essay on the Phenomenology of Mysticism*, which includes a lucid and useful section on the individual views of major theologians on visions, rapture, ecstasy and union without distinction (8). On the very influential mystical theology of Bernard of Clairvaux - and some other theologians along the way - Etienne Gilson is very informative, providing an accurate and sensitive synthesis of Bernard's mystical doctrine in *The*



*Mystical Theology of St. Bernard* (9).

On the female mystics themselves there are some very useful works. Mechthild of Magdeburg is well covered in *The Soul as Virgin Wife* by Amy Hollywood (10), *The Symbolism of Mystical Marriage in the Work of Mechthild of Magdeburg* by Margaret Hudson (11) and, to a lesser extent, Frank Tobin in his article 'Mechthild of Magdeburg and Meister Eckhart: Points of Coincidence' (12). Secondary sources on Catherine of Siena include Sarah Cedar's MA Thesis entitled *The Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine* (13), and Giuliana Cavallini's book *Catherine of Siena*, which gives good background information and details on Catherine's mystical and political activity (14). Leonard Hindsley discusses the very active female mystics at Engelthal, a centre of medieval German mysticism, in *The Mystics of Engelthal: Writings from a Medieval Monastery* (15), and the book which Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi co-edited, *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, had useful information on the public life of female mystics and holy women and how they gained and used spiritual authority (16). In addition to this, Mary Suydam offers an innovative new view on the role of beguine mystical experience in the life of the beguine and her audience in her article 'Beguine Textuality: Sacred Performances' (17).

However, the most illuminating source of information on mystical marriage are the writings of and about the Brides themselves. Mechthild of Magdeburg's account of her mystical career is called *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, dictated to two different clerics, and is a beautifully lyrical work (18). Raymond of Capua's *vita* of Catherine of Siena, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, is invaluable in exploring Catherine's rich spirituality and strong personality (19). This thesis has drawn on five *vitae* of St. Katherine of Alexandria, two in Middle English (*Legendys of Hooly Wummen* by Osbern Bokenham (20) and John Capgrave's *The Life of St. Katharine of Alexandria* (21)) and three translated *vitae* found in three collections of primary documents (*Anchoritic Spirituality*, translated by Anne Savage (22), *Virgin Lives and Holy Deaths*, translated and introduced by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Glyn S. Burgess (23), and *Chaste Passions: Medieval English Virgin Martyr Legends*, edited and translated by Karen A. Winstead (24)). These five *vitae* reflect all the incidental parts which were added to the legends of Katherine of Alexandria, and give a good range of interpretation and modification by the different authors. Similarly, the bulk of Bernard of Clairvaux's mystical theology can be found in his *On the Song of Songs*, of which Volume I and II are used in this thesis (25). These sermons exemplify the emotional and relational language borrowed from the Song of Songs by affective mystics in order to describe holy life and mystical experience in vivid, sensory terms. These named sources are the richest sources for examining how mystical marriage was viewed, how it was approached, lived out, expressed and what types of experiences were associated with it, all in the words of the mystic, theologian or hagiographer.

Drawing on these primary and secondary resources, this thesis will explore and examine mystical marriage by looking at four main concepts connected with mystical union: theology, mentalite (a belief system) and metaphor, experience, and power, each of which will correspond to one chapter. Chapter One is dedicated to explaining the theology and traditional foundation of the

concept of the Bride of Christ and mystical marriage, how it was used and developed from the early Church to the medieval period, what was considered necessary for the Bride, which methods the Bride used to pursue and maintain the bridal relationship and where the bridal relationship fitted into late medieval female mysticism. Chapter Two examines the mentalite and metaphor of marriage to God and highlights the non-secular outlook and mentalite adopted by the Bride in her efforts to live out the bridal metaphor. This is demonstrated by an exemplar, St. Katherine of Alexandria, who was constructed to be the ideal model for an aspiring Bride of Christ. Chapter Three deals with the aspect of spiritual and mystical experience as the result of God's love and favour and the ability of mystical experience to develop, maintain, and facilitate the relationship between the Bride and God and to empower her to serve in the world. This is followed by an examination of the expression of such mystical experiences and the implications of different types of language and expression. The last chapter, Chapter Four, focuses on the issue of the spiritual power and authority gained by the Bride, how she gained it and how she used it, as well as how the laity and Church reacted to the Bride's spiritual power. Together these four aspects of mystical marriage give a rounded view of the lifestyle, experience, belief system, practices and realities of a woman living as a Bride of Christ in the late medieval period and explore the possibilities, limitations, joys and problems of a female mystic having a bridal relationship with God.

## Chapter One: Mystical Marriage as Theology

### *The Role of the Image of the Bride of Christ*

The Biblical image of the Bride of Christ has been discussed, developed and applied since the time of the early Church. In the hands of the Fathers of the Church and other prominent theologians it has been interpreted and re-interpreted. With the writing of this thesis, some of these interpretations will be re-examined in search of the development and growing significance of the image of the Bride of Christ in the eighth to fifteenth century Church.

The image itself was one that could serve as both a broad, all-encompassing symbol or a highly specific symbol, so it had great potential for theological development. The implications of the term Bride and its description of a certain type of life and experience could also be referred to generally or in a more intimately detailed way. And one must not forget the eschatological role that the Bride of Christ plays. Something else that could be explored through the term Bride was an on-going relationship with Christ that granted a soul access to all the experiences and benefits that a permanent connection with God could offer. This is where the image of the Bride of Christ becomes a concept - the concept of marriage to the Godhead, or mystical marriage.

It was through this process that the concept of mystical marriage was born in the Christian Church, achieved through internalising the image of the Bride of Christ and transforming it into a principle which could be taught and lived. Marriage to the Godhead then retained all the rich depth and potential of the image of the Bride of Christ, but could be expanded to be taken in on a much more personal level than a religious image. An image may be seen, but it is through the image being identified with and entered into personally that the image is able to inspire or humble or encourage. Thus, through providing principles and concepts that people could adopt and with which they could interact, the image of the Bride of Christ could call the faithful to wish to be a Bride of Christ or to be more righteous. It was now a concept applicable in the life of the Christian. Such was the potential of the term Bride, that a whole series of interacting principles for the lifestyle of the soul wedded to Christ was able to be constructed, principles that reflected the soul's lifelong walk with God as Bridegroom, over and above the experience of an ordinary human soul. This was the basis of the very personal relationship with God which mystics had.

At this level, the experiences of a bride and her more personal and intimate contact with her husband could be spiritualised and added to the analogy of life with God. These spiritualised experiences could be used to express the closer relationship that those called Brides of Christ

strove for and were thought to have. It is not too hard to see that the state of the Bride could be viewed as an elevation above other Christian souls, a more personal, intimate and deeper joining to God than other souls would experience - and more to be desired because of the added intimacy and blessings that a Bride may obtain. The desirability of the union helped to make marriage to the Godhead a central image in the description of female monastic or ascetic life in the medieval Church, and as a rich source of images and concepts, it is not surprising that the Bride of Christ would prove to be a powerful, pervasive and deeply plumbed image in the early to late medieval Church.

### ***The Traditional and Theological Basis of Mystical Marriage***

As with any image, its meaning can be altered as radically or as subtly as desired through modifying the context that surrounds the image. This makes the image of the Bride of Christ and the ensuing concept of mystical marriage a malleable source of allegory and meaning, a fact that was well understood in the medieval Church. Consequently, the motifs and images of mystical marriage were used in many ways for as many different purposes as there were commentators. Some commentators used the image of the Bride of Christ as the symbol of the Church as a whole, or for the city of Jerusalem (as in the Book of Revelations), while others saw the Bride as an especially holy person in a heightened relationship with God. Such was the easy transference of the image that some commentators would use both interpretations in different circumstances (1).

The main passages on which the commentators based their interpretations were the Song of Solomon (also called the Song of Songs or the Canticle of Canticles), Revelations Chapters 19 and 21, and Psalm 45. All of these passages show the Bride as an especially honoured member of God's entourage and a partner who is desired by God or Christ. The Song of Solomon is a canonical love poem which is laced with erotic themes and expresses the mutual love between the Lover and the Beloved. The traditional interpretation was that this poem was intended to express the love between God and the Church.

The passages in Revelations refer to eschatological events in which the Bride is preparing to wed the Bridegroom, who is Christ. In Chapter 21 the Bride is identified as Jerusalem, and the traditional interpretation of the Bride in Chapter 19 is the Church as a whole, so the Bible itself could be seen as issuing permission to adapt the meaning of the image of the Bride to various circumstances.

Psalm 45 describes a mighty king, traditionally equated with God as the Bridegroom, and speaks of the bride of the king, his daughters and the friends of the bride, who are her attendants. It is this Psalm which yielded the mandate for the monastic vocation: 'Forget your own people and your father's family' (2).

These passages spawned the view of the privileged relationship that the Bride had with her Bridegroom and provided a ready core of images and vocabulary with which to express that relationship. Commentators could then choose whatever themes and images they wished to use, embellishing the themes within accepted doctrinal boundaries, and expanding the image into larger and more pervasive metaphors. Considering this flexibility, the concept of a soul wedded to God or to His Son was a concept that was quite easily absorbed into medieval Christian theology, and into the more idiosyncratic views of each commentator. The concept of mystical marriage was capable of taking a vital place in the world view of a theologian or any Christian, since it could act as both a goal and a journey with principles that could be applied to all stages of a relationship with God. Later theologians were also able to develop it into a kind of yardstick and path of spiritual progress, so it proved to be an enduring and useful concept to have in one's world view and one's theology.

#### Early Commentators

Some of the early theologians to treat the subject of the Bride of Christ and mystical marriage were Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome. These giants of theology helped to build the theological foundations of marriage to the Godhead, and each contributed his own layer. Ambrose, a Christian Bishop of Milan who grew up in the AD 350-60's (3), had a special motivation for refining and expressing his ideas about the image of the Bride of Christ. In his era and social milieu it was women who more readily displayed their religious zeal after conversion, having less to hold them back than men of that time (men would have been expected to give up worldly ambition and political activity as a sign of their conversion to Christ (4)). So female converts were more eager to pursue a holier lifestyle and had fewer worldly obstructions to pursuing that life. Ambrose then felt few qualms about exhorting unmarried women to renounce marriage and remain pure in a holy state, as expressed in his treatises *De virginibus* and *De virginitate*, composed between AD 377 - 395 (5). Ambrose encouraged such women with the idea that they would be virgins consecrated to Christ, and as such Brides of Christ (6). Having Christ as a Spouse was to be desired above an earthly spouse, Ambrose asserted, since a heavenly spouse is more beautiful (e.g., spiritually and morally) and has more importance than any man on earth (7). Christ was a noble, loving and superior husband.

Ambrose's emphasis, then, was on the virgin consecrated to Christ, and not so much the other celibate women, like ascetic widows and partners in chaste marriages (8). It was the virgin whom he saw as the bride of Christ, the women who lived as *virgo velata* (9), yet he also saw the *sponsum* (spouse) of Christ as the Church itself. Ambrose described the Church as a virgin bride, consecrated to God, holy and uncorrupted. Yet, as a bride, the Church could be spiritually fertile, and be fruitful in producing spiritual offspring which the Church nurtured, taught and cared for as part of the duties and joys of motherhood (10). In this way the bride of Christ could still perform



the duties of a wife and mother, but on a more divine and cosmic scale.

Augustine, too, focussed on this more cosmic level in his treatment of the image of the Bride of Christ. He saw the Bride as the whole Church, thus all the believers in one body. He saw the position as too great and lofty that one individual could fulfill it or do justice to it. No 'mere human' but only a 'queen' could fill the part of the spouse of the king of Psalm 45 (11). The coming of the Church was to him the fulfillment of a prophecy that a pure virgin would arise (12) and he placed all celibate women and ascetics on the same level as consecrated virgins, for Augustine denied the 'elitism' of ascetic hierarchy. He identified all believers as the Bride by being part of the Body of Christ (13) and thought that all could aspire to some form of purity or holiness. From the Song of Solomon, Augustine drew that the Bride must be beautiful in God's eyes, thus pure, uncorrupted, and, as a body of people, both universal and united (14). However, Augustine did not believe that complete purity or perfection was possible in a fallen world or, by inference, a fallen Church, so he looked forward to the eschatological purity of the Body of Christ and did not look for perfection in his own age (15). He was more compassionate and realistic than some other commentators.

His study of Psalm 45 yielded more treatment of the image of the Bride of Christ. In verse 10, the bride is told to leave her father's house and turn her back on her family. Augustine took this to be God's command to the Church to turn from her sinful origins and habits (symbolised by the city of Babylon infamous for its evil deeds and idolatry), and take up a new life after the Church's baptism and rebirth as consecrated to God (16). This may be the source of beauty that the Bride gains and which attracts the admiration of the king.

Although he named the Queen or Bride in this Psalm as the Church as a whole, Augustine did have room for some hierarchy. The daughters of the king he saw as the individual believers whom God had won to his side. Such individuals were indeed attendants and companions of the Church (17).

Jerome's thoughts on Psalm 45 were very similar to Augustine's treatment, although his angle of approach was different. The Church claimed the position of the Queen, and the daughters of the king were named as believers or a choir of virgins (18). However in treating the Song of Solomon, Jerome found more scope in which to apply his ascetic approach. He took self-denial as a yardstick of holiness and saw the hierarchy of the bride, the queens, the concubines and the maidens in the Song of Solomon, as one of ascetism. He saw the Bride as the highest and most holy, echoing the praise of the queens and concubines. For Jerome the Bride was both the Church and the individual holy soul, at different times, but his emphasis was more on the Church in his works (19). The sixty queens of the Song of Solomon he identified as consecrated virgins to God, while the eighty concubines, lower than the queens, were the other celibate ascetics who had renounced sexual activity after a period of marriage, such as widows or the chaste married. The remainder of believers were included under the the auspices of the numberless maidens, and occupied the bottom rung of the ladder. The whole hierarchy was based on the extent of sexual renunciation which each group had shown (20).

### The State of the Bride

The concept of the Bride of Christ, whether it was the Church or the individual, was not left only as a superimposed metaphor, but was used as a mandate for an ascetic and non-worldly lifestyle by those who aspired to become especially holy or to become Brides of Christ themselves. The term itself was shrouded with an intangible and mystical aura that suggested the title was exclusive and hard to attain, lofty and ultra-spiritual. As a result of this lofty aura and the principles that were gathered to ensure that Brides of Christ could be more spiritually advanced than other believers, the life of the Bride attracted those people who wished to live in a heightened, holy state, excluding the world. One term for such people could be the 'professional holy', those who made a life out of pursuing unalloyed and complete righteousness, and were willing, even eager, to embrace asceticism, to reject the world and its trappings and focus only on God. It was these types of people who willingly undertook the sacrifices that were dictated by the model lifestyle of the Bride of Christ.

To the mind of medieval Christian theologians the needs of the body and the temptations of the flesh needed to be resisted and eradicated for the soul to ascend to God in purity and freedom. This dictated that anyone who wished to be especially holy or aspired to mystical union with God had to retreat from the world and its distractions, pitfalls and temptations, and focus completely on God. It was thought necessary to renounce the influence of the world and its pleasure, such as bodily comfort and health, marriage and sensuality, luxurious food and clothing, powerful positions and money, so as to singlemindedly pursue the perfection and will of God free from these distractions and impure influences. However, this retreat from the world was not only to flee evil influences and distractions, but also to show the willingness to sacrifice the comforts of ordinary life for God. It was a simpler life where warm clothing, health and adequate food could not be taken for granted and the rewards of marriage and family were forsaken. Such contemporary attitudes formed the basis of the ascetic exercises and attitudes considered to be an aid in the pursuit of holiness and spiritual perfection in a human soul. The Bride fled all that could corrupt him or her and set out on a life of refining and purifying the soul, sacrificing a more comfortable life to focus on God.

The state of the Bride was, thus, one that was a recognised and defined lifestyle, not just a metaphor, and was a state of both physical and spiritual purity. The bride had to maintain that purity jealously and pursue it proactively. The instruments and methods used in this process will be addressed more fully in 'The Methods of Medieval Female Mysticism' later on in Chapter 1.

Physical and spiritual purity was required from the bride because they aspired to be united to God in body and spirit. Their bodies became a 'sacred vessel dedicated to the Lord' (21), and they served their spouse with their bodies as well as striving for spiritual union with God, so they had to be pure. Women as far back as the age of Augustine became brides of Christ through ceremonies in which they were literally married to God and were consecrated to their husband by the Holy

Spirit (22). Such women remained virgins so they could be pure brides to God and they were protected from earthly marriage by having a heavenly Spouse (23).

Physical celibacy and virginity, though, had a somewhat deeper importance for some theologians, and many theologians considered it essential for the mystical union to occur. For instance, Athanasius equated virginity to 'the holiness of the angels' and called all those who pursued it 'brides of Christ' (24). There was an ongoing debate in the fourth century over whether the virginity of the bride had to be literal, or whether a pledge of celibacy from widows was considered as an equivalent (25). There were some theologians who held up physical virgins to be more holy and worthy than other celibate ascetics, such as Jerome (26), while others made no distinction, like Augustine (27). The requirement of virginity could cause problems for unmarried girls who wanted to become consecrated virgins, as the loss of a marriageable daughter could be great for a family, and the family had to give her permission. Most girls in the early church had to struggle for the right to become a bride of Christ, and sometimes were not consecrated until the age of 16 or 17, when they could be more secure of a celibate life (28).

Yet, once a bride of Christ, the ascetic had secured most of the circumstances thought necessary to pursue as close a union with God as possible. Christ became not only a spiritual spouse but He might also unite physically with His. The Bride could strive to present a pure and beautiful soul before her spouse through a life of discipline, devotion, service and affection. This was not just a way of life but was a real relationship between the soul and God, reflected in the range of experiences open to the bride. The bride was thought to live in the company of Christ and His angels and to be able to experience the affection and touch of Christ, which the imagery of the Song of Solomon explored (29). Another theologian called Evagrius expressed the loving and mutual relationship in this way: '[The brides] will see the Lord, their ears will hear His words, their mouth will kiss their Bridegroom, and their nose will take in His sweet perfume. Virgins' hands will touch the Lord, and the purity of their flesh will give Him joy' (30). The bride could thus have sensory experience of the Bridegroom and could enjoy a mutual love relationship.

As a spiritual bride, the soul could also experience the spiritual equivalent of many of the physical bride's rewards: joining the husband's household, knowing his affection, support and love, sharing in his prosperity, bearing and raising children, growing old together and weathering hard times, having physical and emotional security, sharing good time and developing a deep, mutual intimacy. This was the reward for all the sacrifices and effort the bride had made to attain her role and was the circumstance that made the soul's struggles and difficulties worthwhile, and even sweet.

### *The Body and the Will*

Only three things stood in the way of the soul attaining the desired perfection of God and the closeness to God that it wished for, namely, the evil influences of the world, the needs of the body, and the temptation of the flesh. Through these three aspects of life sin was seen to enter the life of



the soul and pollute the purity which God desired. So, it seemed imperative to early and medieval Christian theologians that these aspects of life be resisted and brought under control in some way. The most obvious thing was to retreat from the world, if the influences of the world were causing sin, and to tame the flesh if the flesh was tempting one to sin. This principle of withdrawing from the world and totally resisting any source of potential impurity or sin became the cornerstone of the lifestyle that was prescribed for those who wanted to be united with God in a heightened way. The goal was to rid such causes of sin of their power to tempt the soul and thus gain more holiness and merit before God. Then God would recognise this with the establishment of a special, closer relationship with Him that other less holy believers enjoyed.

However, this hard line was not taken by all theologians; for some the body was not the evil villain in the story of salvation, but could even play a positive role in the life of the bride through physical service and charity and the spiritual discipline and development that the active resistance of physical sins could provide.

## Medieval Augmentation of Mystical Theology

In the medieval period the image of the Bride of Christ and the concept of the mystical marriage went from convenient descriptions of the holy life in the eighth century to the central image of medieval mysticism. This was achieved under the guidance of new generations of theologians and the rising tide of affective piety and mysticism. Since the *anima* or soul was feminine in gender, both men and women could internalise the concepts and principles of marriage to the Godhead in their own spiritual lives. Throughout the medieval period, this image of the Bride was adopted as an essential part of an ascetic's self-image - not just as an optional metaphor - and the principles and exercises attached to the image were made traditional and essential - and increasingly mystical in tone.

This coincided with the swift rise of female mysticism in the twelfth century and its blossoming in the thirteenth century. The images and vocabulary connected with mystical marriage were now taken up by women, who took as a basis of their mystical lives the same vocabulary and images provided by male theologians who had previously addressed mystical marriage. Female mystics of the medieval period took up these building blocks and created their own mystical language and expression, using the inherited images and concepts to convey their own rich and intense mystical lives.

That is not to say that male ascetics did not use or develop the concept of the mystical marriage. The *anima* of a man was just as able to ascend to spiritual union as a woman's, even more so in the minds of medieval theologians. Nor was the emotional side of the bridal relationship ignored by male ascetics, who expressed great desire and longing for spiritual union with God, and great love for Christ and devotion to Him. In the medieval period, there were some theologians and writers who expressed their love for God through writing works on the processes and nature of mystical marriage and spiritual union. These men built inside the boundaries of the mystical theology handed down to them, and started to flesh out the bones of body of knowledge which men like Origen and Augustine had bequeathed to them. Such men included Bernard of Clairvaux and his contemporaries William of St. Thierry, as well as John Ruusbroec and Saint Bonaventure. Each had their own views and approaches, but they helped to consolidate and develop the role of spiritual union in the ascetic or holy life and its nature in the life of the ascetic. These views became more affective in tone and started to incorporate sensory based mystical experience. One of the most influential writers on mystical marriage of the medieval period was Bernard of Clairvaux, an abbot and later a saint. He was a rarity, a male affective mystic, and used his sermons on the Song of Solomon to elucidate his view of mystical union with God. Through its figurative language he wrote of the experiences, delights and rewards of the bride, portraying his view of the nature of spiritual union and the holy life. It was Bernard's 'mystical handbook' which

became the greatest influence on late medieval female mystics, both because of his affective spirituality and his choice of the Song of Solomon as the conceptual medium of his mystical theology.

### Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard entered the Cistercian monastery at Cîteaux in 1112 with four brothers and twenty-five friends, starting the career in which he played such a significant part in the Renaissance of the twelfth century (31). Even when he was still a novice, Bernard's friend, Geoffrey of Auxerre, said that Bernard compared himself to the bride and studied the Song of Solomon (32). It may be supposed that spiritual union was on Bernard's mind for decades before he put any of his thoughts down on paper, for *On the Song of Songs* were not started until 1135. Even then, they were not finished until 1153, with eighty-six sermons in all (33). The result is a well-developed and unique treatment of mystical union and holy life that is balanced yet ardent, calling for intense devotion and spiritual discipline. He rejected both the absolute intellectualisation of the speculative tradition, and the emotional excesses that affective mysticism could reach, presenting instead a simple and practical lifestyle that embraced both earthly works of charity and teaching and pursuing the embraces of Christ with passion and intensity.

The basis on which this lifestyle stood was love. The idea of love was at the heart of Bernard's vision of spiritual union and was, in many ways, both a foundation and ideal expression of union with God. Without love a man is nothing (34), and love is the primary measure of how beautiful and vast the soul is; a soul that learns to love neighbour and stranger alike without hope of reward, and even to love their enemy is a soul that equals the breadth and beauty of heaven (35). Love is the thing that underpins all other virtues and keeps the momentum of the spiritual life going:

'Christian, learn from Christ how you ought to love Christ. Learn a love that is tender, wise, strong... Let love enkindle your zeal, let knowledge inform it, let constancy strengthen it. Keep it fervent, discreet, courageous. See that it is not tepid, or temerarious, or timid... So love the Lord your God with the full and deep affection of your heart, love him with your mind wholly awake and discreet, love him with all your strength so that you would not fear to die for love of him... Let your love be strong and constant, neither yielding to fear nor cowering at hard work. Let us love affectionately, discreetly, intensely' (36).

Thus a pure, selfless, strong and tender love for God was, for Bernard, the trait that bound together all the aspects of the holy life and the pursuit of mystical experience.

This was to be paired with humility, though, so that the mystic would know their own condition and unworthiness as well as love with full devotion. Love was the best motivation for pursuing the holy life and humility provided the appropriate attitude for that pursuit. Humility was fed and motivated by love (37), and love was increased by acknowledgement of the human condition and

dependance on God. Bernard stated that God was 'habitually' pleased with humility, and smiled on it (38), and that God rewarded cheerful and patient humility with grace (39). Bernard stated even more strongly that 'unless there is a durable foundation of humility the spiritual edifice has no hope of standing' (40). Humility led to righteousness through the patient bearing of adversity and humiliation (41), and prevented knowledge from producing self-importance (42). Bernard called humility 'the soul's loveliness' (43), and said that the bride could not be praised if she did not possess humility (44). Bernard explained further how humility was a necessary trait for those wishing to ascend to the heights of mysticism:

'Anyone who strives forward towards the spiritual heights must have a lowly opinion of himself; because when he is raised above himself he may lose grip on himself, unless through true humility he has a firm hold on himself. It is only when humility warrants it that great graces can be obtained, hence the one to be enriched by them is first humbled by correction that by his humility he may merit them' (45).

The contrast of the soul's lowliness and the exaltation of gifts of grace work to check the extreme tendencies of each and produce discretion and encouragement in times of adversity (46).

All the steps in the pursuit of mystical graces were built on the two traits of love and humility, adding to them little by little to construct the 'spiritual edifice' and develop the soul to a point where God could offer mystical union and experience. The journey to righteousness started with the acknowledgement of the human condition, or self-knowledge as Bernard called it, and a subsequent call to holy life. Humility and submission in the face of God's correction and discipline came next, as the process of the soul's purification and refinement was started. Concurrent with this or soon following was the showing of charity and love towards others, which, together with an increasing purity, brought the soul into a sufficiently close state of conforming to the will of God that union was possible. The aim was to eradicate self-will and self so that the soul could return to the divine likeness. This reflection of God in the soul was the consummation of spiritual union with God - the mystical marriage of the soul and God. In this process, the Holy Spirit was all important, as the human soul could not ascend without its help. The Holy Spirit set the pace of the progression, sometimes present, sometimes absent (47). It acts as the go-between for the lover and the Beloved, bearing messages to each from the other (48), and prepares the soul for greater visions and experiences than previously granted by speaking to her heart, granting spiritual enlightenment and contemplation and a heightened ability to gaze on God. 'You will be led from brightness to brightness', Bernard promised (49).

On a more human level, the mystic themselves needed to engage in a campaign to control the senses and purify his or her soul. The help for this process came in two ways: correction which curbed arrogance, produced humility and discretion and fear of God, as well as consolation, which inspired trust, strengthened the weak, made one devout, and balanced the fear of God with the hope of salvation (50). Physical penance such as fasting and prayer (51), labours and vigils (52)

was also suggested. Sanctification could also be obtained, thus controlling the sense, through service to the righteous and working for the salvation of others (53).

Serving others was the heart of Bernard's other strategy to gain righteousness, namely acts of charity and love. Charity was important to Bernard, as he characterised the heart of God as Charity (54). Bernard expected the ascetic not just to say the right things, but for their deeds to authenticate his or her words (55). The primary way for an ascetic to show their love and holiness was to perform acts of charity, the signs of a person void of self-will. Works of charity and penance, in Bernard's view, were to be concurrent, mutually supported by the other (56). Through these two means the soul was refined and transformed to the point of being conformed enough to God's will and image to be shown special graces and given union with God.

To experience gifts of grace from God, such as visions and revelation, the soul had to be effectively ridded of self-will. The soul needed to be obedient to God to receive visions (57), a soul which seeks Him with 'all its desire and love' and has felt the force of holy desire that consumes bad habits (58). Bernard stated that receiving visions was rare (59), and that they were communicated through an 'infusion of grace', a purely spiritual communication (60). Bernard encouraged his audience with this description of experiencing God:

'At such a hour he will find himself locked in the arms of Wisdom; he will experience how sweet divine love is as it flows into his heart' (61).

As the Bride became more conformed to the divine likeness, she displayed the following qualities, Bernard said: faith and beauty (62), knowledge and chastity (63), intense devotion, affection and desire (64), love justice, patience, voluntary poverty, humility, holy fear, prudence, temperance, virtues and fortitude (65). The Bride lived as an angel in a human body, loving only God, chaste and seeking only heavenly things (66). She had progressed through the chamber mentioned in the Song of Solomon to the bedchamber, becoming a Bride because she had hungered for God and worked for righteousness (67). The bedchamber was her goal because it was the source of her blessings and delights (68). There she enjoyed

'the sweet interflow of affection between the Word and the soul...Between these all things are equally shared, there are no selfish reservations, nothing that causes division. They share the same inheritance, the same table, the same house, the same marriage bed, they are flesh of each other's flesh...the bride for her part is bidden to "forget her nation and her ancestral home", so that the bridegroom may fall in love with her beauty' (69).

The bedchamber was the place of rest and peace, free from the world of the senses, where the Bride and Bridegroom could enjoy mutual embraces (70).

When the Bride was not in the bedchamber, the soul swooned and burned with desire for God's presence, impatient with delays or rebuffs, longing for His countenance (71). The Bride had an

uncontrollable ardour for God, and invited the bridegroom to spend the night with her (72). Bernard commented that the bride 'must have glimpsed something of the beauty of his higher nature, something that wholly transcends our vision, that eludes our experience' (73).

Yet, God called her from her contemplation into service in the world, to teach and raise up spiritual offspring for God, in spite of her longing for God (74). The bride had to 'feed the needy with the milk of doctrine' (75), and was never to forget her obligation to comfort and nurture those she had raised to God (76). However, in her renouncing her own will in this and other ways, the soul could enter the bedchamber (77), and enjoy the love and embrace of her bridegroom:

'Winged words honey-sweet fly to and fro between them and their eyes like heralds of holy love, betray to each other their fullness of delight. He calls her his dearest one, proclaims her beauty, repeats that proclamation, only to win a like response from her' (78).



### ***The Place of Mystical Marriage in Late Medieval Mysticism***

By the late medieval period Christian mysticism had taken on unique and definite proportions, and had had a whole cultural system built around it. Through the lasting influence of Ambrose, Augustine and Origen the foundation had been laid and theologians like William of St. Thierry, John Ruusbroec and Bernard of Clairvaux had developed a form of mysticism with shape and substance. There were now traditional ways to achieve the mystic's ultimate aim of complete union with God, although there was sufficient room for divergence of method or thought within doctrinal boundaries. Such leeway had to be given if the unmediated and mysterious nature of mystical union was to be preserved, giving the mystic the ability to enjoy their own personal connection with God and the right to express the results in a manner they considered appropriate and representative. The diversity of thought and experience expressed by medieval mystics does not then show a chaotic tangle of ideas. It emphasises that within that diversity there were some basic aims and concepts which all the mystics shared, no matter how they were expressed and interpreted. These were, the aim of total spiritual union with God; that the more effort one put into purity, the more merit before God was gained; that an unmediated connection with God is better than a mediated connection (e.g., through a priest); and that spiritual perfection equals total union with God.

The aim of all mystics was to gain access to an intense, intimate and unmediated relationship with God which resulted in the union of the human soul to God. This was more than just a wish to be holy or to live in service to God, it was an entirely spiritual aim that was seen as sublime, profound and transcending all physical or mental experience. The unmediated nature of the connection made a purely spiritual exchange possible and the result was experienced by the 'spiritual senses' rather than the other senses and was often said to be inexpressible in words (79). These experiences were described as mystical experiences, mysterious, powerful and ineffable encounters with God. They sometimes involved the bodily senses but were rooted in the 'spiritual senses' and were intended for the furthering of the spiritual life of the soul. They were telegrams from God to the soul, in the soul's own language (80).

How to gain such mystical experiences now was the problem of one who wished to be a mystic. Luckily there was a long tradition for the new mystical convert to follow. Merit before God was to be won by proactively pursuing a holy and pure life, being dedicated to becoming righteous before God. This was achieved through self-sacrifice, discipline of the sinful body and the errant mind, penitence, devotion to God and humble service to others. For greater levels of holiness, greater self-sacrifice was required, greater devotion and greater bodily and mental discipline. We have already seen that the exclusively holy, such as monks and nuns, felt that chastity was necessary as a bodily discipline. Important also was renouncing of the world, which the holy of

the medieval period achieved through poverty and enclosure in convents. Some female mystics in the late medieval period were beguines or tertiaries (e.g., Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch of Brabant and Catherine of Siena), who still lived in holy communities, but avoided enclosure within the walls of a closed communities. There were also countless mystics, like Hildegard of Bingen, who followed the mystical path within the walls of convents with few obstacles to her mystical career. The process of self-sacrifice, asceticism and service refined and purified the soul, and the greater effort put into the process, the greater the rewards were thought to be. The cumulative effect was that of increasing holiness and devotion and increasing favour with God. With gritty persistence and God's grace an apprentice mystic could pass from a priest-mediated relationship with God to the mystic's world of a close, personal connection to God Himself. As the refinement process continued, mystics could receive such marks of favour as visions, sweet smells and sounds, revelations, special abilities or gifts, and their world contracted a little more as the will of the soul grew more into conformity with God's will. These were the expected marks of the progressing mystic, the badges of honour that proved favour before God and confirmed his or her status as an elite follower of God. A mystic was known by his or her extraordinary spiritual knowledge or experiences, the signs of intimacy with God.

#### Late Medieval Female Mysticism

The path to mysticism was the same for male and female mystics - the same kinds of activities and challenges - but in practice there were some great differences in the way that male and female mystics approached their life's work. These were prompted by the different cultural and religious ideas about the nature and potential of men and women held by society and the Church. The central struggle of the mystical life, that of fighting sin and developing holiness, was seen as harder for women than for men. The woman's extra dose of inherent sinfulness impeded her spiritual development and made the world more dangerous and tempting, and herself a source of extra temptation.

The world of the late medieval mystic was full of dangers and pitfalls. Ambrose called the material world *lubricum* (treacherous and slippery), ready to swallow up the unwary traveller (81). If the mystic was to maintain his or her progress towards a truly holy state one did not only have to be cautious and watchful, but also proactive in achieving this holiness. In this struggle the female had more to overcome than men in the eyes of the Church - she had not only to continually purge the impurities in her life, but also to combat the concentration of bodiliness and sin which was seen as stronger in women than in men (82). As more inherently impure and sinful, the female ascetic had more to resist and more to overcome than a male ascetic.

This difference in perception of initial purity affected female mysticism in deep and significant ways and led to a unique opportunity for female mystics. It prompted female mystics to punish and discipline the body more determinedly, striving harder for the purity and spiritual detachment they were told was easier for men. At the same time they might, paradoxically, revel in the



sensual, emotional nature that was ascribed to women, bringing sensory language and experience and deep emotional expression into medieval female mysticism. This was eagerly embraced by female mystics, who felt more free to enter into union with God than men not just in their souls, but with their bodies as well. The intimate and personal relationship of the Bride to the Bridegroom lent itself to affective, or emotional, mysticism, which became the dominant strain of female mysticism in the late medieval period, expressing a woman's characteristically emotional perspective on relationships. Although it had been male theologians who had first popularised and developed the concept of mystical union, the concept was quickly taken up by female mystics because it lent itself particularly well to a woman's life and perspective and was very easy for women to adopt as the fundamental structure of their lives as holy women and mystics. Female mystics of the time thus took union with God from the abstract to the experienced, creating their own mode of expression along the way. This created a gendered mysticism that both acknowledged the doctrinal boundaries of the Church and made use of the emotionally based perspective of a woman. Since men were seen as the seat of the logic and reason needed for speculative mysticism and the highest spiritual insights (83), women, as the seat of sensuality, found that the area of sensory spiritual experience was a useful direction for expansion by female mystics. By this strategy, unique female insights and experiences found a new source of expression which could prove to be a way to subvert the jealously guarded compound of spiritual authority. Thus, some medieval female mystics found an outlet for their highly charged emotional and sensual encounters with God, allowing other female mystics to carve out a place for themselves by following in the footsteps of others (84).

There were a few male mystics in the medieval period who recorded visions and sensory experiences of God which were expressed in emotional language as women did, for example St. John of the Cross, Richard Rolle and Bernard of Clairvaux - however, these men were a minority. Most male mystics belonged under the banner of speculative mysticism, which was a purely intellectual progress of gradually detaching the soul from the body through asceticism, prayer and service. The journey from self-knowledge (knowledge of Man's sinful state and need of God) and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (letting the Holy Spirit work, thus producing good works and holiness), to the loftiest spiritual heights of illumination from God (gifts of divine knowledge) and finally perfect contemplation of God (a state of freedom from the body, true union with God), were all achieved in the mind and soul. Additionally, it was a process that the body was considered to have hindered more than it helped. Under this tradition visionary and sensory experiences were distracting, if not suspect. Even a male mystic as affective as Bernard of Clairvaux emphasised that visions or sensory experiences by themselves were not indicative of spiritual progress unless examined by others and accompanied by progress in the interior life. Such experiences were not seen as sufficient by male theologians, even by an affective male mystic, but had to be backed up by evidence of interior holiness and virtue. This gave female mystics more to prove and made it more important to show their holiness in tangible ways. This, too, would have an effect on female mysticism when it came to asceticism.

If visions and sensory experience itself could be a false indicator of spiritual purity, it is possible to understand male ecclesiastical skepticism of female visionary or sensory experience. Such visionary women could be dangerous religious role models if they did not prove to have a truly holy lifestyle which was worthy of veneration and emulation. The chance of this danger increased as female mystics started to grow in number, visibility and level of education. Certainly if a woman's lifestyle was unorthodox or advocating a disruptive idea, her holiness, and by extension, her methods and ideas could be questioned. It would have been the job of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to guard the public against such women, though whether the clergy's authority was always used for the public weal and never to expel inconvenient ideas or criticism, or to cement their control over the doctrine of the church is another question.

However, female mystics were becoming more and more numerous in the late medieval period, some from beguine communities where there was not such a strong male ecclesiastical influence as in convents, and many of these women were ascetics and visionaries. Women in convents sometimes had access to devotional books or the writings of other mystics, as well as more access to education and literacy than their female ancestors. Convents like Helfta were famous for the well-educated, visionary nuns who lived there (85), and even women like Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe could gain access to mystical works and treatises. Julian learned enough from such texts to weave together an alternative view on sin, the body and spiritual progress that was well-integrated and theologically very sound. Dramatic visions authenticated by holy, ascetic living, paired with female mystics with the ability to argue their view as well as any educated male cleric - one can forgive the male ecclesiastical hierarchy for having had the urge to suppress such unpredictable and troublingly holy female mystics.

This is exactly what happened as the thirteenth century wore on. Monks' and priests' worries that prolonged contact with women, even holy women, would eventually undermine their monastic vow of chastity combined with a knee-jerk reaction against the swift and potent rise of female mysticism and visionary experience. This resulted in the gradual but determined stamping out of the newfound independence that nursed female mysticism (86). The Council of Lyon in 1274 repeated a ruling that all women's houses had to be attached to an approved order (87), - thus ruling out beguinages - and as the ratio of nuns to monks increased, the willingness of male clerics to serve women's house dwindled (88). Although female mysticism was still present, the flourishing of the thirteenth century was past, and convent walls swallowed up many of the writings of female mystics and visionaries.

### *The Methods of Medieval Female Mysticism*

Medieval mystics followed the example of the desert fathers in the ways of taming the flesh as well as in their emphasis on asceticism. The same principle was internalised - that the flesh had to be overcome for the spirit to grow - so mystics fasted, denied themselves sleep, shunned bodily comforts and even competed in their feats of asceticism as the desert fathers had done (89). Sexual

renunciation was also required because sexuality, too, was seen as hindering the life of the spirit (90). The whole point of these exercises of self-denial was to build the groundwork for the liberation of the soul or spirit from the body, which necessitated rebuking the flesh and empowering the soul to defeat the flesh. In this battle the weapons of self-denial and proactive punishment of the body were the most commonly used.

Renouncing worldly influences, comforts and securities was the first step, but withdrawing from the world, living a simple, chaste and humble life in poverty and service was not enough to reach the heights of mysticism. Medieval female mystics were characterised by their extreme devotion to Christ, their determined pursuit of holiness and, in most cases, their overactive asceticism. It was, in fact, the level of asceticism that often confirmed the exalted status of the mystic. As far back as the twelfth century the ability to endure harsh ascetic practises was seen as an endorsement of the mystic's virtues and merits from God Himself; e.g., a woman in a Cistercian order called Alpais claimed to be able to do without food altogether as a gift from the Virgin Mary, a fact which prompted the writer of her *vita* to take this as a sign from God acknowledging Alpais' merit (91). It was clearly a case of 'you-get-what-you-earn' for the late medieval mystic.

Medieval mystics 'earned' their heightened status before God with various types of deprivations and exercises. Deprivation of sleep, of food, and of comforts were practised side-by-side with physical acts of penance and devotions. Whipping or hitting oneself with a chain or rope (flagellation) (92), wearing a hairshirt or other garment which constantly irritated the skin, praying in a kneeling or prostrate position for long periods, physical and menial work and enduring illness were all possibilities for physical penance. However they were often concurrent with acts of devotion and service, which balanced out the equation. Service to the poor, sick and needy was a standard sign of holiness, since most mystics felt that helping those in need was actually another way of helping God and emulating Christ in his charity. Prayer and meditation on Christ, or another image, was another way to further devotion and gave mystics a forum for two-way communication with God and mystical experiences. It also allowed them to pray for the souls of others, one of the perceived devotions and special duties of monastic religious especially. Attending or chanting the holy offices was another form of devotion and worship that a nun or ascetic could practise.

Such practises accompanied and augmented the ascetic practises most medieval mystics undertook, and, indeed, some practises could have elements of both asceticism and devotion. Praying for long periods involved not only physical discomfort but praying for others and deepening the connection with God. Similarly, serving the sick or poor was doing charitable work and showing love, but it also involved hard physical work and dirty or unhealthy conditions that could cause sickness or discomfort. The concurrence, and sometimes combination, of both penance and devotion were the twin pillars of the mystic's struggle for perfection. It was not enough to tame the flesh to liberate the soul, the soul had to be equipped to defeat the flesh and rise above its physical limitations. It was a symbiotic relationship, penance feeding devotion and devotion motivating penance.

Another aspect of asceticism bears the same dualist purpose, that of fasting. This form of ascetic practise was especially well-used by female mystics from the twelfth century to the fifteenth, and became one of the most visible authenticating marks of holiness for holy women of the period (93). From the early days of Christianity, fasting was considered an effective method of reducing sexual desire in both men and women, and a good way of ensuring that one had food to give to the poor (94). It could also be a way of rejecting the comforts of wealth and status through refusing plentiful food and bodily comfort (95). The way that it effected the body itself could also be a motivation for extensive fasting; if a woman fasted enough the normal processes of her female body, like menstruation, would cease and the female flesh could be conquered, becoming more divine and Christ-like (96). This process could also let the woman avoid marriage (and thus sexuality), and provided an effective way of controlling and rebuking the wicked female body (97). Since defeating the flesh was so important to the dedicated holy woman, this chance was a gift, which explains the extensive use of fasting in female mystics of the period, and the sometimes extreme forms of fasting that developed, especially in Italy.

Yet, fasting was not just a form of penance or control over the flesh. It had devotional possibilities that would prove useful to devotion to the Humanity of Christ, one of the most popular forms of devotions amongst late medieval female mystics. The linking of the female to the body was fortuitous in that the body was linked with suffering, and, more importantly, to the suffering of Christ - the means of human salvation (98). This allowed the bodily suffering of penance, especially for women, to be seen as an identification with Christ's suffering and the subsequent salvation (99). Penitential suffering could thus be an emulation of Christ and a show of solidarity and belief. The cleansing effects of fasting on the body and its reminder of the suffering of Christ was a good preparation for receiving the Eucharist with all proper devotion. Having no food at all but the Eucharist, which was the claim of some female mystics (100), would have been the highest form of devotion to the suffering Christ, being sustained by the bread and wine alone. It is no coincidence that devotion to the Eucharist was at its highest point when fasting was being widely used as an ascetic practise and form of devotion. Nor it is strange to find that the visions and mystical experiences of some female mystics were sometimes triggered by receiving the Eucharist (101). Although fasting was very damaging to the body and moderation was often urged by the Church and confessors, its practical and devotional implications show how it came to be considered almost essential for the spiritual life of the mystic (102).

### *The Goal and Apex of Medieval Mysticism*

It was through these twin pursuit of taming the flesh and strengthening the soul's link to God that the mystic believed she could achieve the ultimate goal of medieval mysticism - total spiritual union with God. By breaking the shackles of the flesh and equipping the soul to ascend up to God unfettered, that soul could connect with God in the purest form that a human soul could. This union was entirely spiritual, so only the soul was united with God. The prerequisite for such a



union was a will totally conformed to the image of God and His wishes. This was necessarily the work of a lifetime of dedication to God and required the persistent development of both discipline of the mind and body and devotion to God. Medieval mystics sped up this process by becoming exclusively holy and focussing all their energy and determination on that goal. A simple and infinitely descriptive metaphor was used to conceptualise this ongoing and developing relationship - that of marriage. This seemed to encapsulate the love, the loyalty, the companionship and intimacy, and the mutual commitment of the mystic's pursuit of holiness perfectly, so the process was traditionally known as mystical marriage or marriage to the Godhead. The love relationship of a bride and bridegroom was reinterpreted in this spiritual context, to good effect.

In practise, it was recognised that complete conformity to God was not really possible in a fallen world or in a sinful body, so mystical marriage came to be applied as both the journey and the destination. The mystic tried to get as close as possible to complete union, and this, in itself, was seen as mystical union also in the sense of an ongoing and developing love relationship with God rather than a single moment of union. The mystic's progress was judged by the Church by his or her virtue and interior life and by the resulting signs of God's favour - special abilities, insights and signs. Typical of mystics who were most visited with signs of God's favour were periods of ecstasy, visions, sweet smells and sounds, revelations and messages from God, the ability to do something that is otherwise physically impossible, e.g., going without food, and moments of ecstatic union with God. Although sometimes mediated through the bodily senses, these were spiritual gifts for a spiritual purpose that proclaimed the special quality of a certain mystic's spirituality. At the top rungs of mystical union the currency was the frequent recurrence of extraordinary mystical phenomena, used as evidence of an intense and advanced direct relationship with God. Such phenomena could be likened to the anniversary gifts that a married couple exchanges no matter how long they have been married: the longer the marriage, the more valuable and significant the anniversary gift, and the longer the couple have shared the love relationship. The mystic showing extraordinary signs of God's love may be presumed to be a well-loved spouse of God, with all the intimacy and honour that that entailed.

## Chapter Two: Mystical Marriage as Metaphor and Mentalite

The search for self-definition and cultural identity is at the heart of the story of the bride of Christ. Aspiring to become the spouse of God meant adopting both a restraining and liberating new definition and cultural identity. By pursuing the status of a Bride of Christ, the bride took on a physically and spiritually arduous task, but it gave the bride access to a new spiritual world unavailable to those who pursued nothing except ordinary piety. For the sake of this new spiritual liberty, brides of Christ took on a new identity, a new life, and a new way of thinking. The bride of Christ had to start with the metaphor of marriage to Christ: she had to re-define herself as an advanced devotee of God to attain the mystical life and the freedom to follow it. With this came the joys and responsibilities of the wife, and the unique aspects of being wed to God. Her new role made her a sacred vessel, her whole being a holy space set apart for God, and a new member of God's household. This was not just a metaphor used for her own purposes, but was an image, a new identity, one that others also needed to recognise and respect. In the late medieval period, the cultural identity of the bride of Christ was well established and highly visible, making the bride's new identity not just a matter of her own self-image, but also the public's image of the bride.

However, the most vital aspects of the life of the bride were those connected to her interior life, or the life of the soul. Changes were wrought in the interior life that could transform not only the identity of the bride, but also her whole outlook on life. Through the filter of the religious principles on which her new life was built and the attitudes these inspired, the bride of Christ could re-examine her life and come up with very different conclusions from those of a non-religious person. Through using a new set of concepts and attitudes provided by the Church, she could re-examine the events of her life and learn to see and interpret her world through God's eyes. The work of conforming the will of the soul to God was started in re-interpreting earthly existence and bringing that interpretation into line with God's view of earthly existence. Brides of Christ were given new eyes and a new form of vision that allowed them to see more clearly the path they had chosen to follow, or were chosen for by God. As the earthly medieval bride would be obliged to submit to the judgement of her husband, so the spiritual bride came to her marriage ready to be guided by her heavenly husband. Thus she would please her husband and win favour in His eyes.

Yet, to win the ultimate rewards of favour, the bride had to step beyond seeing herself as the bride of Christ to acting like the bride of Christ. The bride gained a new vision of God and the world and could start to learn and act on a new belief system or mentalite. This belief system

(explained in Chapter One) was based on her new way of seeing things, but spread out into the practice of life, laying down roots in everyday experience. Here was the source of the transformative process of perfecting the soul. The conversion of the mystic to a dedicated religious life gave her the new type of vision and the new set of beliefs; with these she could continue on the path of the holy life. She was given the metaphor of holy life and the principles with which to practice it, the tools needed to develop the mentalite, or belief system, that would produce spiritual perfection.

The spouse of God was set apart for her husband as any wife at the time was - her chastity was assumed and her loyalty and fidelity were expected. She was the possession of God, meant for service and spiritual procreation. Like some secular medieval brides, the bride of Christ could add the aspect of an intimate love relationship to this list of expectations and assumptions. So the bride of Christ's service, her fidelity and loyalty were as motivated by love as by duty, which was not always true for earthly medieval brides. The emphasis shifts from duty to gratitude and love, from obligation to admiration and respect. The spouse of God was a privileged bride indeed because her Husband would not act in cruelty or pride, as earthly husbands might, but would show care and consideration. This gave her more motivation for gratitude and devoted service than an earthly bride could boast of. So with confidence in her new identity and role, the bride united to God could express her gratitude and love by adopting the name and practices of one joined to God. She could claim the intimacy of a wife and begin the process of transforming her life and soul into a vessel of service and love for God's use. The process of re-definition ushered in the transformative potential of the new mentalite, and worked together to mould the soul of the beloved into a closer conformity to the image of God. This was the very point of both the metaphor and the mentalite - to align her nature with God's.

### **Metaphor and Mentalite in Practice: An Example**

One excellent example of this new approach to the spiritual life and its experiences is the virgin martyr, (St.) Katherine of Alexandria. She was both conventional and unique, and her *vitae* and legends are a good indication of the spiritual trends and emphases of the late medieval period as well as the types of expression and language used. Works about her reflect the spiritual and mystical principles prevalent at the time and the attitudes towards some popular practices and the nature of mysticism. Katherine of Alexandria is a versatile and rewarding study because she was a holy virgin dedicated to God, trained as a scholar and especially blessed by God with a sharp intellect and superior logical and debating skills. She was a fiery defender of the Christian faith, a bride of Christ in metaphor and practice, and, at last, a martyr for God, ending her young life by

being beheaded by the pagan emperor Maxentius. This gives her *vitae* and legends a wide range of experiences and reflection on the mystical life.

This alone would make Katherine of Alexandria's *vitae* and legends a valuable and rich resource for looking at late medieval female mystics, but another aspect of the works about her adds to this - although this may not appear to be true immediately. The historical existence of Katherine of Alexandria cannot be established with any security; her *vitae* claim that she lived in Alexandria, a princess, in the second century A.D., in the reign of Maxentius, but this has no independent evidence. Her first *vita* was not written until the ninth century and it may be that her person was based on another holy or wise woman of that time (1). Most of the other *vitae* and legends about Katherine dated from the mid to late medieval period, at least two centuries after the original *vita*, and it is in these *vitae* and legends that the virgin martyr saint gained the attributes which made her so famous and in which the essential elements of her spirituality were added. Her royal blood, her scholarship and debating skill, her marriage to Christ, her miracles and confrontations with the fifty scholars or philosophers were all added on during the medieval period. It was in this period when stories of her holy childhood were told and her conversion experience detailed (2). The historical Katherine of Alexandria, if there was one, probably did not survive this process complete, and the saint that was so popular in the medieval period was almost completely a cumulative creation of that time. This gives her numerous *vitae* and legends the special attribute of being uniquely indicative of the spiritual principles, trends and attitudes of the medieval period. These *vitae* and legends provide a clearer and more representative portrait of the spiritual and mystical landscape of this period than the *vitae* and legends of other popular saints of the time.

Another advantage to this aspect of Katherine's *vitae* and legends is that a timeline of religious trends can be established by looking at the works about her in chronological order. The various versions of her life and legends shifted to reflect what the authors wished to communicate and advocate, and trends of their times. In the thirteenth century, when the laity was searching for a more 'active' piety and *vitae* were becoming more popular and accessible to an increasingly literate laity, Katherine was used as an example of holy living and religious practices and attitudes - even religious activism (3). Yet, by the fifteenth century, her calm defiance of society and secular authority became less palatable, and she was represented as more co-operative, courteous, eloquent and gracious, not compromising her secular responsibilities for her religious studies and devotions (4). The holy example of Katherine portrayed in the *vitae* and legends was made more powerful and effective by the portrayal of her as a bride of Christ, so beloved of God that He performed miracles for her. Katherine's being a spouse of God gave her added influence, and the extra malleability of her ultimately constructed life was a bonus for hagiographers. They could use her influence on behalf of the Church and to promote their preferred devotional forms and practices through her. Although some core features remained constant in all *vitae* and legends - her powerful intellect and defense of the faith, her martyrdom and evangelical activities - she was to all intents and purposes a creation of the medieval period. She was shaped and moulded by her



various hagiographers, reflecting their emphases and priorities.

Despite, or perhaps because of her changing cultural and mystical construction, Katherine of Alexandria was one of the most popular and recognised virgin martyrs and saints in medieval Europe, abundantly depicted in art and literature of the time (5). She was adopted as the patron saint of nuns and young unmarried women, theologians and philosophers, clerks, school children and students. Because her legends included a deadly wheel, she was claimed as the patron saint of millers, carters, wheelwrights and potters, and the miracle of her blood turning into milk upon her death made her the patron of wet-nurses. On a more general level, her promise to plead for those who called on her name caused her to be looked to for good luck and protection from pestilence and diseases of the tongue, (6). Because Katherine was so thoroughly claimed by her audience, and her legends and *vitae* so sensitive to the religious climate of the time, some of her reported behaviour and attitudes can give a good idea of what was expected from a bride of Christ in the late medieval period and how their lives were viewed and expressed. As a 'perennially reinvented' saint and bride of Christ, she can surely serve as a cultural and religious barometer (7). This makes her a special figure in medieval hagiography - a template or blueprint of the ideal medieval female saint that changed to reflect closely her culture and society.

Since Katherine was so heavily constructed in the medieval period, the way that the *vitae* of Katherine re-interpret her life and experiences shows the central tenets of bridal mysticism. Anyone reading or hearing works about her would absorb the main tenets of the mystical life and would be presented with a worthy religious role model and some ideas about how to develop holiness in a practical way in their own lives. They could emulate the way in which the constructed Katherine changed her behaviour and attitudes, and in so doing gain a more holy life and the potential for a heightened relationship with God. The types of behaviour demonstrated by Katherine in the *vitae* and legends provide the point of such a *vita*, and the construction of Katherine as a holy woman, a saint and a bride of Christ. She was an exemplar for the orthodox mentalite or belief system of the religious and the advanced mentalite of a mystic and bride of Christ.

Katherine's mentalite, which utterly rejected the world and its values, was the foundation of the hagiographers' claim that Katherine was a bride of Christ. In another way, it also was her mystical marriage - as seen in Chapter One, mystical marriage was both her love relationship with Christ and the fulfillment of that relationship. So the author of a *vita* or legend was demonstrating mystical marriage by presenting the relationship between Katherine and Christ, and Katherine's preparations for the consummation of that relationship in Heaven. The mentalite demonstrated by Katherine in the works about her, then, was a vital part of the representation of her mystical marriage, which was in the end not just a means to an end, but a journey in itself.

The *vitae* of Katherine portrayed her as turning away from worldly attitudes so completely that she sees her life and the world in almost the opposite way to the pagan view of life. All the things which others would enjoy or value, she held as nothing, and she challenged pagan society at its very foundation. In the *vitae* of Katherine of Alexandria a re-interpretation of the female life-cycle

can be seen, a radical new approach to life - from birth to death, there is a new hope and symbolism and altered values. Spiritual birth was added to her perception of the world, and physical death was no longer to be feared, since it led to eternity in Heaven as a Bride of Christ. Similarly, Katherine was portrayed as seeing past the world to important spiritual truths. She no longer valued things the world valued, and put immense value on intangible spiritual concepts. For instance, although the *vitae* claimed that Katherine was born royal, the only daughter and heir of King Cost, which would have made her seem more worthy and important than others in society in the eyes of the world, she only mentioned her royal birth because Maxentius asked a direct question about her lineage, (8). Instead, she was reported to have taken more pride in knowing spiritual truths than being a wealthy princess.

The *vitae* also reflected the high level of learning and skill Katherine gained through the standard curriculum of the classical era. One *vita* claimed that Katherine learned so much and was so skilled and intelligent that her distinguished teachers (the best in the world) were 'ful glad to become hir disciples and to lerne of hir' (9). No scholar, however clever or crafty, could defeat her in debate - 'they all knew themselves defeated and overcome, and conceded the victory and honor to her utterly' (10). Other young women would have seen this as a great source of prestige, something to show off, but Katherine had learned to see it another way. When she was questioned by Maxentius she dismissed worldly wisdom and philosophy as useless for eternal purposes. In the *vita*, she commented:

'Until now I have had very great teachers. But because the learning they taught me encourages idle boasting, is aimed at profit and worldly honor, and in no way help one attain eternal life, in no way do I boast of it. But as soon as I saw the light of the true teaching that leads to eternal life I completely abandoned the other' (11).

This demonstrated that worldly wisdom was considered a stumbling block in Katherine's mentalite, and the Gospel story the most fundamental truth, giving illumination in this world and the next.

This reliance on the ordinances and teachings of God carried through to her portrayed lifestyle, which rejected much of the cultural norms around her. The *vitae* claimed that Katherine was born rich, with a palace and servants to attend her, yet she denied herself the comforts she could have had. From the large estate inherited from her father, she took a share for herself and her household and used the rest to help the poor, the sick and the needy (12). After her conversion she established the household in a Christian manner (13) and shunned the frivolous activities of the world, avoiding plays, games and foolish songs or love stories. She studied the Scriptures instead (14), and lived quietly, practicing charity, 'full of alle vertues and graces, as the ryght dere and singlere spouse of almyghty God' (15).

As one *vita* said, 'her heart was set on higher things' (16). Katherine was determined to keep her chastity and virtue and her soul from corruption, however in one *vita* she was asked by her 'parlement' to take a husband who could rule the kingdom for her (17). She resisted this idea, but

eventually found a husband to fit her impossible standards - Christ. In him Katherine found an 'immortal lover whose love is chaste and pure and everlasting in its delight' (18). So Katherine gave herself over to God and gained a heavenly spouse far superior in her view to any mortal spouse. All she had done before was in preparation for that event, the *vitae* imply - Christ would not have desired her for a bride otherwise.

As the spouse of an immortal being, she was to give life, not to earthly children, but spiritual children, as the *vitae* detailed. As a bride of Christ, it was her duty and joy to bear and nourish spiritual children for her Bridegroom. The *vitae* portrayed Katherine as winning these through her debating and evangelical. Her first converts were the fifty philosophers she debated with, who confessed that she spoke with such a 'heavenly spirit' and her logic was so airtight that they could not find fault with her - 'Nothing human speaks in her', one *vita* reported they said (19).

Through Katherine's other efforts and opportunities, the *vitae* and legends claimed that other important people were converted, such as the Queen and a high ranking official Porphyrius (20). It was Katherine's ability to survive horrible odds and deprivations, the miracles that she received, and her knowledge and teaching (all practices and privileges of a bride) that convinced them (21), as with other onlookers later. So, Christ's words to Katherine were destined to be fulfilled - 'through you, many will yet turn to me' (22). By harnessing the power of Katherine's example, the hagiographer could inspire others to take up these attitudes and thus a more holy life.

In the *vitae*, physical death was not something Katherine was afraid of, but something she could look forward to - this too was a rejection of worldly values and a call by the authors to adopt a new mentalite. Just before her own death, Katherine reproached people for weeping and mourning at her imminent death; she assured them that her Spouse and Lord would be waiting for her and there she would enjoy eternal rest and the rewards for her earthly efforts (23). When a voice from Heaven called, urging her to come, Katherine was suddenly impatient. She pleaded with the executioner to be quick, since her Lord was calling her to him (24).

The portrayal of Katherine's death in the *vitae* made it the ultimate act of a woman who inverted and re-interpreted basic events of earthly life to reflect a heavenly perspective. She was eager to suffer for Christ and impatient to die, yet was reluctant to give herself the earthly comforts and joys she could have had in abundance. She set herself against the standards and values of the world, seeing eternal consequences for the manner in which the earthly life was lived. In essence, earthly life was, for her, an exile in a place which separated the godly from the ungodly, and tested the faith and worthiness of the believer. This was the standard that late medieval holy women and mystics had - they echoed her beliefs and attitudes. They followed the same devotional practices. Some considered themselves brides of Christ also. Like Katherine in her *vitae* and legends, medieval holy women would have had to fight spiritual battles everyday against spiritual pride, rivalry, physical exhaustion and practice becoming habit or ritual. This was the everyday reality of pursuing and maintaining a bridal relationship with God.

Katherine of Alexandria served as a good composite of the nature of mystical and holy life, and the belief system (or mentalite) that spawned and supported it. Being a symbol or an object lesson

did not diminish Katherine's significance or purpose - in fact it probably enhanced both. As an exemplar of religious mentalite and mystical life and practice, Katherine, as she was seen in works about her, was complete: she lived a simple, holy life, taking up heavenly principles, delighting in trials which would embitter others, practicing charity, studying and avoiding frivolity. She prayed, and performed devotions, keeping herself chaste. And it was these attitudes and holy practices which allowed the hagiographers to claim she was holy enough to receive the gift of mystical marriage:

'[Christ] has married my maidenhood with the ring of true faith and I have committed myself to him truly. We are so fastened and tied as one, and the knot so knotted between us two, that no desire, or mere strength either, of any living man, will loosen or undo it' (25).

The devotional characteristics displayed by Katherine of Alexandria in the *vitae* and legends show that the mentalite behind the mystical path was indeed the mystical path, and also led to mystical events. The belief behind the action was just as important as the action itself, and caused the action to have spiritual and mystical ramifications.

### **Mentalite in Late Medieval Female Mysticism**

The same underlying beliefs which were found in works on Katherine of Alexandria were universally followed and acted upon by late medieval female mystics, providing them with an basic pattern of life which formed and developed their relationship with God. By the late medieval period the religious and more advanced mystical mentalite was well defined and found in a neat orthodox package. From this orthodoxy came the public and clerical expectations of the bride's principles and behaviour; for example, giving help or food to the poor was an expected activity of the bride, as it was prescribed by the required mentalite of the bride of Christ. Yet each woman had her own way of fulfilling these expectations and often emphasised a certain practice or attitude above the others in her own spirituality. This made the nature of that spirituality and expression of it distinctive from other brides of Christ and gave her her own voice. They were able to practice a unique form of devotion and service by maintaining and practicing the core principles and attitudes of the mystical life, but customising how and when they went about this. This process of customisation reflected the subtle differences between the Bride's own vision of her life and relationship with her Spouse and other such visions of other Brides, leading to many slightly different nuances and approaches, as well as different emphases and priorities for different brides.

These differences of practice and principle found in the lives of some women mystics could be



imagined as a large stained glass window - each bride's individual mystical spirituality and mentalite was a piece of coloured glass with a unique size, shape and colour. These pieces of glass (the individual mystics) were held together by mutual vocation and spiritual principles and purpose, as the strips of lead held all the pieces in place to construct the pattern. Together they made a vivid and glorious image of the glory and work of God, while still maintaining the individual nature of each woman's relationship with God. However, if the individual mystic's unique mentalite was the coloured glass of the window, and the communally held orthodoxy was the lead strips, it was God who provided the light which brought the picture to life and revealed the full glory of the window as a whole, as well as the small idiosyncracies of each of the mystics' relationship with God. Through this divine illumination the shades of the relationship were seen, and the brilliance of each relationship was made possible. The individual quirks of a single mystic's relationship with her Bridegroom were thus reflected in any individualised aspect of the bride's mystical mentalite. These idiosyncracies brought life, dimension and richness to the late medieval mystical tradition and provide fascinating glimpses of the great range of deep and personalised ways in which mystics connected with and served their Heavenly Spouse.

In examining this range of relationships there are two useful perspectives from which to view each mystic; firstly how each woman envisioned the stages of the mystical path and what these involved, and secondly the role of service and charity in the mystical life and mentalite of the bride. These reveal the priorities and goals of each bride within her own mystical path. How she approached both showed much about her style and the nature and dynamics of her relationship with her Bridegroom. It shows which beliefs or practices were foremost in her spirituality and the individual nuances of those beliefs or practices.

The bridal relationship was all important in mystical marriage, as the mystic looked to this mechanism to pursue and maintain the divine connection she longed for. For Mechthild, the first important part of her bridal relationship was the growth process from a child-bride to a full-grown bride. This was where the soul learned to clothe herself in holiness and purity in readiness to encounter the Bridegroom. Mechthild allegorised this process by describing how a soul prepared to meet her Lover and be united with him. The soul who wished to start on God's path must first pass through repentance, confession, penance, and must reject the love of the world, the temptations of the devil, the influence of the flesh and the self-will. In Mechthild's allegory the fair youth (God as her Lover) had 'courted' the soul throughout this process and now heard the soul's call. He hurried to meet the soul and dance with her. In preparation the soul put on the garments of humility, chastity, good reputation and virtue, then, when the young man not yet arrived, the soul sent for faith, the humility of Mary and the excellence of God's chosen. The youth arrived and urged the soul to join in the dance of praise, but the soul expressed her dependance on her lover - 'I cannot dance, Lord, unless you lead me', she said. Her wish to have deeper enjoyment and experience met with the praise from the youth. He promised to unite her with her Lover soon - she humbly voiced her unworthiness for this experience. Her senses came to her again, and offered earthly forms of spiritual refreshment (e.g., the blood of the martyrs, angel's bliss, the Christ

Child), but the soul had already had her fill of these. She had the wisdom of the apostles already, and had progressed beyond the others which were offered; she was impatient to meet her Lover. The senses replied that they could not accompany her, and they feared for her in going to her Lover, but Mechthild was confident that she would literally be in her element. Her preparations had demolished any obstacles to union with her Lover and she was able to appear before Him a naked soul. Their union could only be achieved under these circumstances, and their mutual surrender to each other effected the union (26).

In the process described the soul went from shutting out the evil influences of the world and selfish nature to gaining internal virtues and devotion. The change from the external to the internal focus was significant for Mechthild, whose relationship with Christ was conducted internally in the privacy of her soul or in the state of ecstasy. This process produced a less outwardly dramatic, but very intimate expression of growing union than other mystics, and was a special characteristic of her spirituality.

In contrast, the manifestation of Catherine of Siena's union with Christ was more outwardly visible. Her bond with Him was deep and familiar, but of a more dramatic and intellectual tenor than Mechthild's bond with her Lover. Catherine of Siena's experience and expression of her love and devotion was more focussed, more controlled and driven, and manifested itself in frequent bouts of ecstasy (27). An advanced state of mental intimacy existed between the bride and Bridegroom that was rather distinctive amongst female mystics - this facilitated the extensive personal divine teaching that her Bridegroom gave her. Although her body was in the world, Catherine's soul was continually in the company of her Bridegroom (28), and she took the Eucharist frequently to join with him in body as well as in soul (29). Her devotion and love was wholehearted and exclusive. Catherine delighted in contemplating God, praying and being in constant union with God at least in mind, and these factors tended to dominate her relationship with Christ. It was a full and exclusive union, which nurtured Catherine's sharp and focussed mind and engaged her deep and almost myopic devotion to God. Yet, other people did not seem to have a significant part in her mystical life, and she was reluctant to bring them in.

The dynamics of the bridal relationship were open to the influence of personal emphases and needs, as we have just seen, the expression of love through service or charity took on more predictable forms. It is not the forms of charity that reveal the differences between mystics so much as the role and significance of such acts in the life of the bride of Christ. Acts of service were an expected part of holy life in the eyes of the Church and the public, and were especially expected from a bride of Christ. As Raymond of Capua, Catherine of Siena's confessor and hagiographer, commented, sanctity was judged on the degree of the holy person's charity (30). The potential acts of religious service and charity were fairly well defined by the late medieval period, and could be done almost anywhere. They included tending to the sick, giving clothes or food to the poor or needy, helping and encouraging others, especially fellow sisters or Christians, praying for the souls of others (the living or the dead), counselling a sister or fellow Christian, or communicating visions or knowledge gained from encounters with God. In less Christian areas,

telling the truth of God to non-believers was also an act of service, but was not always necessary in predominantly Christian areas. These could be done inside a closed community as well as in a beguinage or from the home of a tertiary. An anchorite would not be able to move from her rooms, thus cutting out some of the bodily acts of charity, but she could still work at weaving or copying manuscripts to earn money to feed the poor and give spiritual advice and encouragement to others through her little window - and she could always pray for others. Holy people could choose from this list and what significance these acts had to the religious life of a holy woman help to outline the dynamics and details of that bride's spirituality.

The *vitae* and legends portrayed Katherine of Alexandria's earthly service as part and parcel of her holy lifestyle and a response to the apostolic directive to live in poverty, as well as the commandment to love your neighbour. She gave a portion of her income to the needs of the poor and sick, thus helping to satisfy the need to help and love others. Her main area of service was in the dangerous and ultimately fatal role of challenger of the pagan religion of her home city. Through this aspect of service she was able to use her quick and logical mind, and was able to impart knowledge and comfort to those who listened to her. Her education had primed her for the successful debate with Maxentius and the fifty philosophers, and this provided her greatest opportunity of service. Furthermore, it reflected the confident faith and the deep personal bond with God that characterised the spirituality constructed in works about her, and the emphasis on serving and trusting God that was in works about Katherine.

Mechthild of Magdeburg too had a strong urge to guide and encourage others. She was not afraid to give advice or share any knowledge she had gained through the years. Her work does not mention many specific instances of giving to the poor or tending the sick, as she focusses more on the acts of charity applicable to the interior life - praying for others, counselling and encouraging the sisters and sharing knowledge gained from God. The directive to help others in their faith and religious life was the best expression of her close and intimate relationship with her Lover and her perceptive and expressive mind. She saw it as her duty to console and help her followers and sisters, (31). Even if she saw herself as perhaps unworthy of being in a teaching role, she was eager to share her own heart and what she had learned, so others would be helped, (32). This urge to share her knowledge and help others progress was an expression of the way she approached her own close relationship with God and her own wish to share her joy and experiences. So the major forms of service in her work were that of praying for others and counselling them as they walked their own religious path, although we may never know to what extent she practised other forms of service, since no others are recorded in her work.

Catherine of Siena was not so eager to teach and practice charity in her world, however. She much preferred dwelling with God in contemplation and ecstasy than trying to deal with the world and other people. Yet, Raymond of Capua cited some instances of the more conventional types of charity that Catherine practiced: e.g., doing menial work in her family home to show her humility (33), and giving clothes to a poor couple, as well as helping a leper woman (34). In fact, Raymond reported that Catherine grew in acts of love and charity as she grew in virtue and holiness (35).

Yet Catherine was a little reluctant in this, sometimes resisting the call to love her neighbour in preference for communing with Christ. After her marriage to Christ, Catherine had to be told to go back into the world and help others. She was afraid that her connection with God would be broken or diluted by this, but God reassured her that it would not and explained that showing love to her neighbours would bring her closer to Him, not force them apart. To express her love for Him, Catherine had to express her love for others - this was almost grudgingly enacted by Catherine, who would rather have been praying (36). These acts of service attracted God to Catherine - so Raymond claimed - and provided a training ground for further spiritual growth (37). Catherine must have resigned herself to service in the world, however, because at one point she begged permission to go and talk with people who supported the Great Schism (these people were considered heretics). She argued strongly against the refusal she received from the Pope on account of fears for her purity, and expressed the idea that it was a duty worth what small risk there could have been (38).

Yet, being on earth was always irritating for Catherine of Siena. A few times Raymond recorded that Catherine prayed to be taken to her Bridegroom soon: 'In this wretched life I find nothing that attracts me', Catherine was reported to have said (39). Still, Catherine served others as part of her expression of love for God, despite her strong focus on constant union with God and her interior life. Her reluctance to enter the world shows that Catherine's primary focus was almost obsessively on God, and that she was willing to let everything else fall by the wayside in deference to this priority. However, her wish to obey God's edicts caused her to fulfil God's command that she enter into the world and care for her neighbour, thereby expressing her deep love and loyalty towards her Bridegroom.

These three female mystics and brides, one constructed and two more tangibly real, were expressions of the mystical ideal, carrying on the accepted western Christian mystical tradition exemplified by the *vitae* and legends of Katherine of Alexandria. Acting as the 'housewife of God', they pursued busy and purposeful lives, caring for the mystical household, striving to please and honour their Bridegroom in all things, bearing and nurturing spiritual offspring, sharing the bounty of their individual households by showing hospitality and charity to others, and playing an active and positive part in their community. These three Brides were able to mould this lifestyle so as to let their own individual spirituality shine through. The differences between the individual mystics were found partly in their individual religious and mystical mentalities, which each produced a bride with slightly different practices, emphases and strengths than any other bride. The other area where the differences were seen was in the actual recorded or reported experiences of each bride or mystic, these experiences being an expression of each bride's relationship with God and her own personal spirituality, and just as individual as her mystical mentality.



## Chapter Three: Mystical Marriage as Experience

If the mentalite of the mystical life lent context and structure to the Bride's relationship with her Bridegroom, the specific experiences of mystical life were the points of direct, soul-to-soul contact with God which solidified and developed the relationship beyond a metaphorical existence. These mystical experiences or phenomena ranged from visions and revelations, sweet sounds and smells, special abilities, and mystical lactation (1), to more dramatic experiences such as Eucharistic joining and levitation (2), to more personal experiences like spiritual stigmata (3), enduring lovesickness (4), having Christ's name written on the mystic's heart (5), and periods of ecstasy. These events could be sensory in nature, or sometimes purely spiritual. All of these mystical phenomena provided direct and immediate contact with God, but there was a core of three types of mystical experiences which were widely utilised or undergone by late medieval brides of Christ; visions, ecstasy and a union or marriage experience. Each of these core mystical events will be explored separately in the next sections. Such experiences, although shared by many other mystics, were the vehicles of personal definition and expression and played significant roles in the process and reality of life for a late medieval Bride of Christ. By such mystical events was her soul called, prepared, clarified, glorified, loved, defined and elevated. By such events was mystical union achieved and celebrated.

A mystic gained many advantages from the experience of mystical phenomena. Not only were mystical events an indication of God's favour towards an individual soul, they were a means of teaching, encouraging and guiding the soul and developing the mystical relationship through graduated steps of spiritual growth. The visibility of some mystical phenomena marked the Bride as spiritually growing and steadily advancing down the mystical path. The presence of mystical experiences, thus, proclaimed the holiness and spiritual progress of an individual soul, validating and empowering the mystic on her chosen path, and served to express, facilitate, advance and verify the state of union or impending union between the soul and God. With such advantages, it is easy to see why mystical experience was vitally important for late medieval mystics.

### ***Visions***

The most common and basic mystical experiences of the medieval bride of Christ were periods of ecstasy, visions and marriage and union experiences. These were interrelated and

interdependant, feeding each other in vital ways, and pointing the way to the next experience. The most straightforward of these three experiences were visions, a familiar, if discounted, concept today. In the time of Catherine of Siena and Mechthild of Magdeburg, however, visions were an accepted and expected part of mystical life, and even holy life in general. Visions were seen by the physical eyes sometimes, but mostly by the 'spiritual eye', which perceived spiritual communications. These required only a basic state of holiness to receive, and sometimes not even that - the person did not have to be very holy to be a visionary. For instance Mechthild having received a special touch of the Holy Spirit at age twelve, was holy enough to receive periodic visions and revelations from that time on, even before she entered the beguinage (6) - in this sense visions could be seen as a sign of a certain person's call to holiness. They were an effective conduit for personal messages to the soul, and could provide much needed instruction or signal an answer to prayer for the soul. Catherine of Siena prayed repeatedly to be able to join the Dominican Order, thus gaining a holy vocation, and was answered via a vision of Dominic holding the habit of the Sisters of Penance, signalling that her wish would be granted (7). Visions could also impart instruction or information, such as Mechthild's vision of Hell (8), or her visionary insight into the heart of a woman she knew (9). Or they could encourage through praise or devotional images, or teach. God taught Catherine of Siena the importance of suffering for Him through a vision of Christ on the Cross (10), and showed this intimacy with Catherine through a vision in which He took away her heart and exchanged it with his own - an act which increased her divine gifts and visions, and made her feel like a completely different person (11).

A vision was an experience directly inspired by God, and was, in every sense of the word, an event uncontrollable by the holy women themselves. So it was a mark of divine favour that could be worked towards, earned or sought after through holy life, but was only given at the pleasure of God. Repeated visions and revelations, as Raymond of Capua claimed for Catherine of Siena (12), would, thus, be a sign of constant and deep favour from God, and a good stepping stone to deeper and more purely spiritual mystical experiences.

### *Ecstasy*

Although visions may seem otherworldly enough, the state of ecstasy was another rung higher on the mystical ladder. Ecstasy gave access to even more emotionally and spiritually charged exchanges with God and sidestepped the body to make a direct connection between the soul and God, excluding the distractions from the body or physical senses. Frank Tobin summarises the influential Augustinian concept of ecstasy: 'In the state of ecstasy the attention of the spirit/soul (*intentio animae*), is altogether turned away and cut off from the senses and its gaze utterly directed either to images (*visio spiritualis*) or to things so immaterial that they cannot be rendered in images (*visio intellectualis*). In ecstasy one is completely oblivious to one's physical

surroundings. Here the soul is more separated from the body than while dreaming, but less so than in death' (13). This account is consistent with the descriptions given in mystical works by women of this time; for instance, Raymond of Capua describes Catherine's bouts of ecstasy, which were triggered by thinking of her Heavenly Bridegroom. In this state 'she lost the use of her bodily senses, and her extremities, that is to say her hands and feet, became quite paralysed' (14). This took her into a 'region beyond sense' where she was 'absorbed in the Creator' (15), and where she lost the ability to hear, smell or taste, yet was able to explain what was happening to her so it could be recorded (16).

Yet Augustine's description was almost too clinical to account for the deep emotional and spiritual implications of such an exchange. For female mystics especially, the medieval period was conducive to a more affective spirituality and the expression of the inexpressible feelings that were stirred up by periods of ecstasy. A worthy spokeswoman for this new cause was Mechthild of Magdeburg, whose descriptions of ecstasy were more organic, lyrical and natural. One description from Book I of her work, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, included an allegorical encounter: '[God] places her into his glowing heart. When the exalted Sovereign and the little waif thus embrace and are united as water and wine, she burns to nothing and is transported out of herself' (17). Although essentially the same experience as Augustines's ecstasy, it was imbued with more emotion in Mechthild's description.

The above passage plainly described a more personal, more intimate and more significant event than a vision or revelation, which involved the soul but not the body. The contact with God was on a purely spiritual level, and thus had less physical ties and more spiritual significance for the soul. Mechthild indicated the lack of physical involvement when she described preparing to be united with Jesus, her Lover: the Senses warn her that they cannot follow her into ecstasy and union, and advise her against going. But Mechthild expresses the naturalness of ecstasy and union even while acknowledging that the soul will need the Senses again once out of the state of ecstasy (18). This direct contact with God could not exist with the body blocking the way to ecstasy, and the transcendence of physical processes made such a state next to impossible to describe in words. How would you describe the immaterial, the infinite with words designed to describe material objects and concepts in a finite world? (The mystics' attempts at expressing such experiences will be explored in the last section of this chapter, The Expression of Mystical Experience).

Alongside the purely spiritual and indescribable nature of ecstasy was the acknowledgement that the state of ecstasy was, like visions, triggered not by the mystics themselves, but by God. Mechthild reflected such a belief when she declared, 'I cannot dance, Lord, unless you lead me. / If you want me to leap with abandon, / You must intone the song. / Then I shall leap into love, / From love into knowledge, / From knowledge into enjoyment, / And from enjoyment beyond all human sensations' (19). The bride might respond to the opportunities given by her Bridegroom, for instance, to 'leap with abandon', but the pace was set by the Bridegroom. That God was in complete control of this process supports Leonard Hindsley's comment that the bouts of ecstasy of the late medieval nun, Adelheid Langmann were a sort of measuring device for spiritual progress,

or a way of ascertaining the closeness of the relationship of the soul to God (20). The Bridegroom could lead the soul through increasingly significant experiences starting small and gradually demanding and giving more. Through such a graduation of mystical gifts, the ascent of the soul to God could be controlled and individually tailored to the spiritual and instructional needs of the soul and to how God wished to employ the soul in the world.

The spiritual ramifications of ecstasy were one of the main reasons why ecstasy was a major vehicle of mystical experience and progress. Like visions, the state of ecstasy could communicate instruction, encouragement, devotional images, and requested experiences. However, ecstasy could give a depth and intensity that a visionary experience could not, since ecstasy was purely spiritual. It achieved a more direct and complete revelation from God, and was thus a more treasured and significant mystical experience. The state of ecstasy could facilitate a deeper communion with God, so it was able to serve as the basis of the mystical progression to union with God, supporting the experiences and intimacy that brought the soul closer to God. The fact that the state of ecstasy became a staple of mystical life for female mystics in the late medieval period marks the emphasis of affective mystics on experienced love and relational communication with God, rather than the male emphasis on intellectual contemplation. As a purely spiritual forum, ecstasy could provide a relatively barrier free context for mystical communication than the more controlled and restrictive spiritual experiences which were available to late medieval mystics, like visions, stigmata, or sweet smells, in which the mystic could only receive and not give. The most emotional and affective female mystics of this period, such as Catherine of Siena and Mechthild of Magdeburg, showed a special appreciation or propensity for periods of ecstasy, signalling the more emotional, relational and interactive character of their mysticism. These women made passionate, mutual union with God a centrepiece of their mysticism, the goal of their mystical journey.

### ***Marriage and Union Experience***

Marriage and union experiences were, for many female affective mystics and Brides of Christ, the goal of the mystical life. They practised self-denial, humility, physical discipline, charity, poverty and other virtues like patience and faithfulness, in order to attain the holy state needed to be granted the status of a Bride of Christ. Earlier in this chapter, it has been shown how Mechthild acknowledged that her Lover had to lead her soul through a number of steps in order to reach a place 'beyond human sensation'. Leonard Hindsley sees a similar pattern in the writings of the female mystics of the convent of Engelthal, i.e., the building up of mystical experiences and their intensity to a climax of flashes of union with Christ through ecstasy (21). These kinds of descriptions lead the reader to believe that mystical union was more intense, more personal and perhaps more direct than other forms of ecstasy or visions. It seemed to be a reward for the bride



who remained obedient and loving, and strived to be holy. When Catherine of Siena was granted her marriage experience, God cited her holy lifestyle and devotion as the trigger, saying, 'Since for love of me you have forsaken vanities and despised the pleasure of the flesh and fastened all the delights of your heart on me...I have determined to celebrate the wedding feast of your soul and to espouse you to me in faith as I promised' (22). Likewise, in Mechthild's experience of union with her Lover, the union could only take place because there was no barrier between the soul and God, i.e., no sin or impurity (23). The soul had to be in conformity with God in nature and will. The exclusivity of this union and the prerequisites put on its attainment were practical ways to sort the pretenders from the truly devoted brides, and secured mystical union the place of the ultimate sign of God's favour and the appropriate honour attached to being chosen as a bride by God Himself.

The actual experiences of the bride were often as individual as the brides were. Each woman had her own style of spirituality and expression, each receiving experiences tailored to her spiritual needs and desires. These experiences, even union experiences, could occur within ecstasy or outside of it, e.g., through visions or dreams. The intensely focussed and dramatic spirituality of Catherine of Siena was reflected in her simple but dramatic marriage experience, through a vision rather than ecstasy; Lady Mary mediates to bring about the quiet and dignified joining of her Son to Catherine, with Catherine being given a ring (invisible to all but Catherine herself) in the simple ceremony, with an illustrious list of guests that include St. Dominic (the founder of the order in which Catherine was a tertiary), St. Paul, St. John the Baptist and David (who provides sweet spiritual music for the ceremony). Catherine is given instructions by her Bridegroom and is promised the status of a bride in heaven if she obeys the instructions. Christ is gracious, courteous, encouraging, but not loving or passionate (24).

Such a solemn ceremony was not the style for Mechthild, though. Mechthild's Lover spoke of fulfilling the soul's desire lavishly and expressed a passionate urgency and desire to meet His Bride (25). Mechthild's Lover sought to establish a seamless fluidity between Himself and the soul (26), and called the soul lovingly to union, despite her soul's own sense of unworthiness (27). The union scene was one of intimacy, physical and spiritual, in which the union was achieved by mutual surrender and characterised by mutual desire: 'Then a blessed stillness / That both desire comes over them. / He surrenders himself to her, / And she surrenders herself to him ' (28). A similar vein was found in Adelheid Langmann's union experience: 'The Lord now approached the bed. In all his joyous beauty he knelt down before the bed and his face was turned toward mine. I looked up and gazed at Him. He was so beautiful that I could not bear it and it seemed to me that my soul would dissolve from true love. He said, 'My Beloved!'. With the same word that so sweetly came out of his mouth he drew my poor, sinful soul into His Godhead' (29). Adelheid's union experience communicated the loving nature of the event, the same sense of joining, and communicated well the intensely personal contact of mystical union; she literally looked into God's face and was absorbed into God's being.

Through looking at all these women's writings we can see the basic properties of mystical



union; a representation of union (i.e., a ceremony or an expression of the merging of the soul and God), the sense of the soul's intense, intimate or direct contact with God and the sense of love, happiness or passion that accompanied the union. Another pattern suggests itself also, that marriage and union experiences which occurred within visions often lacked the emotional expression or depth of those occurring in the state of ecstasy. This can be put down partly to the greater potential of ecstasy to deliver a more intensely emotional experience than a vision, and also to the individual treatment each bride gave the union experience according to her own personal spirituality and spiritual needs.

### ***The Purpose of Mystical Experience***

Mystical experiences, such as visions, mystical lactation, bouts of ecstasy or sweet sounds, served a vital purpose for late medieval female mystics and brides of Christ. Four crucial spiritual and mystical needs were fulfilled by mystical phenomena, namely facilitating mystical union, developing the union, making the bride useful to others and confirming and marking the status of the bride and her intimacy with God. The most basic role of mystical experience was to give mystical union the opportunity to occur by providing multiple forums for communication with God. As already discussed earlier in this chapter, visions and periods of ecstasy allowed for individualised spiritual instruction, encouragement, warnings, messages and devotional meditation. These were the raw materials needed for the spiritual development of the Bride and her increasing physical and emotional attachment to God. As the relationship grew, such types of communication grew in importance and played an important part in developing the union.

Once the communication pathways were open, mystical experiences allowed more personal communication and attention from God. The gifting of such experiences was a sign of love and favour, something which was sure to increase the value of the impending union in the eyes of the bride, and was sure to increase the desire for God and assist in her pursuit of holiness. As a sign of favour, mystical experiences encouraged the Bride in her devotional practises and spiritual disciplines, showing her that she was on the right track. As an answer to a particular prayer or a deeply felt spiritual desire, a mystical experience could give needed guidance or help in a spiritual battle, or fulfill a deep longing which the Bride had. The repeated experience of mystical phenomena could increase the soul's dependance on God. All of these beneficial aspects of mystical experience were invaluable to the development of the Bride's spiritual life and advanced the intimacy of the soul with God, and also her love for God and others. Although mystical phenomena were not the only ways to encourage and nurture the Bride in her mystical life, they were perceived to be the most powerful methods at God's disposal and were used to good effect in

the mystical relationship.

The Bride who was advancing steadily towards total union with God probably had had some mystical experiences along the way and these could be useful, not only to herself, but to others as well. Mechthild of Magdeburg acknowledged that the first fruit of *unio mystica* (mystical union) must be telling others of the union that has taken place, thus sharing her experiences (30). The female mystics of Engelthal also shared this urge to distribute their experiences, which they meant as 'documents of faith' for the encouragement of those at Engelthal or other German-speaking people. Hearing of such mystical experiences was useful to others because the intensity of the experiences recommended a more holy life to the listener or reader (31). Through seeing what God did for some, it could encourage others to follow a holier example and to want such mystical experiences themselves. This sharing of powerful personal testimony of the divine also made the bride a dispenser of spiritual truth and knowledge, and theoretically made her able to advise and counsel people about spiritual matters because of her close and sustained contact with God (In Chapter Four this aspect of mystical marriage will be discussed more fully). With the increase of knowledge and experience of God, both mystical and otherwise, the bride became an increasingly good source of encouragement and advice, an example of holy living, and was a person who became a more valuable resource the more knowledge and spiritual experience she was granted.

The reason behind this attitude was that mystical experiences were considered to be a seal of approval or a legitimizing stamp on the life and spiritual experiences of the bride. They served as signposts to divine power and favour which others could access through the mystics or brides themselves. If these women had divine approval, their methods must be sound enough to emulate, and their practises could be beneficial to others as well (See Chapter Four for development of these points). In fact, divine favour, manifested in mystical experience for instance, was a very definite endorsement of the bride's methods, practises and spirituality, and when compared with the experiences of other mystics and brides, could show a comparatively higher or lower level of divine favour. A less advanced bride might have the occasional vision of a devotional image, like the infant Jesus, while a more mature and advanced bride may have a few mystical manifestations, such as sounds, visions and ecstasies as well as being granted a union experience - Adelheid Langmann seems to have been an example of a mature bride (32). In this way, mystical phenomena could be signposts for other people, pointing them to a person or practises that could benefit them spiritually, or to the spiritual progress of the particular bride, as she pursued holiness.

### ***The Expression of Mystical Experiences and Events***

Mystical experience or phenomena were an intrinsic part of the mystical life and calling, but it was the least easily communicated aspect of mysticism. The otherworldliness of ecstasy or a union experience made such mystical events hard to describe in words, and Mechthild even commented

that there were certain things which brides did not share about such events: 'Brides may not tell everything they experience. / Holy contemplation and precious enjoyment / You shall learn about from me. / My privileged experience of God must always be hidden / From you and from all creatures except for myself' (33). Yet despite this, Mechthild and other brides of Christ were often very forthcoming about trying to express, when allowed to, any direct contact they had had with God. The problem then was how to write about or describe these 'contacts' which were 'beyond human sensation' using a language that only dealt with human sensations. Although the words used may be descriptive of earthly events, they were always unable to present properly the foreign nuances of mystical experience, so the words would never be as good or as expressive as they needed to be. However, this difficulty with expressing mystical phenomena has one advantage which contributes to our understanding of mysticism today - the highly individualised descriptions of mystical events of women which emerged in the late medieval period. These help us to enter into the experience just as individually as the women themselves did and allows these women their own voices and personalities. It was these voices and personalities which gave life to the unique descriptions of the personal mystical experiences which each bride had. These will be examined in three sections, the language of intimacy, the language of love, and the language of relationship.

### ***The Language of Intimacy***

Perhaps the most influential framework for describing the ineffable mysteries of mystical phenomena was the canonical love poem, the Song of Solomon. This was a strong and almost unconscious influence in the late medieval period, when its vocabulary, concepts and metaphorical framework were widely used as ways of conveying the emotions and sensations of mystical phenomena. Its terms were easily comprehensible and easily transferable to the spiritual meaning intended by late medieval mystics, (34). The language of the Song of Solomon communicated strong relational concepts like loyalty, protection, intimacy (35), physical and spiritual closeness, mutual love and desire, and tenderness. These were the building blocks of the intimate mystical relationship and were easily linked with *Brautmystik*, or bridal mysticism. Late medieval female mystics realised, as others had before them, that the bridal relationship was the closest metaphor they could get to describing the lived experience of mystical phenomena. Bridal imagery had rich theological history, and included the types of terms that could portray a highly individualised and unmediated experience of God (36). The erotic terms that were also included in metaphorical descriptions drawn from the Song of Solomon had most of their sensual stigma removed by being part of a spiritualised metaphor or allegory (37). Despite the incongruity of mystics and brides of Christ using erotic terms, the metaphor of marriage was rendered effective by its being easy to relate to, easy to understand, yet complex enough to convey the intricacies of relationships: 'It is at once extraordinarily simple and extraordinarily complex - simple in that it reflects the human need for love, understanding and happiness, and complex because it contains

within it the mystery of the life-impulse and of the functioning and interaction of the male and female principles' (38). With such a rich and relevant source of imagery and vocabulary it is not surprising that the Song of Solomon and the connected bridal imagery was claimed by female mystics in the medieval period as their own, particularly relevant, form of expression.

The language of the Song of Solomon is fragrant with meaning. It speaks of the Lover (God) and the Beloved (the soul), their mutual passion and longing, the delight of kisses and touches, the intoxication of wine, the garden where the lovers meet and the meadows where the Beloved searches for her Lover. Terms of description and comparison include lilies, grapes, milk and honey. The Beloved waits and longs for the Lover, and the Lover praises the Beloved, even stating that there is no flaw in her. Such terms and description were easily transferable to the more common metaphor of marriage. The love relationship in the Song of Solomon could represent the ideal marriage, and gave that relationship new expression in the mystical context. For instance, Christina Ebner, one of the female mystics at Engelthal, appropriated the vocabulary and concepts contained in the Song of Solomon and used them to describe her own love story with Christ (39). By using terms of description and expression from the Song of Solomon, the bride was tapping into a deep well of affective expression which resonated with the love and passion of the Lover and Beloved. In her writings, Adelheid addressed Christ as her beloved, used the image of the enclosed garden, and the motif of lovesickness, and was compared to beautiful things and called as sweet as honey (40).

This type of expression opened the door to more erotic terms connected with marriage. Because of the mutual passion of the Lover and Beloved, the expression of desire and sensual experience could be used by mystics if spiritualised. This gave birth to erotic mysticism, a form of expression which was especially appropriated by affective female mystics in the late medieval period because of its depth and passion, and also its relevance to the bridal state and women's lives. Margaret Hudson comments in her thesis that Mechthild probably found a welcome release from her repressed sensuality through the love language she used (41), which may have been a factor in the use of bridal imagery as well. Yet the experiences of the women were so intense that sensual terms, Grace Jantzen comments, were the only adequate expression of the experience, with all its attendant intimacy (42). It could be seen as appropriating their own type of sexual act, one which did not involve the body at all, so as to make it spiritual lovemaking (43). Such expressions as the marriage bed, the 'abode of love' (44), the embraces of the Bridegroom, the kiss of the mouth, were thus considered an eminently practical and descriptive framework for expressing the intense and intimate experiences of the mystical bride in the late medieval period. The sense of commitment, love, loyalty, joy, relational communication, companionship and physical enjoyment could be portrayed through this metaphor, and a theological education was not necessary to engage in that lifestyle. Such descriptions only required an internalisation of the terms and expressions of the Song of Solomon and the concept of marriage and physical intimacy (45).

In practise such terms and descriptions were used to portray the intimacy, love and directness of the experiences. Mechthild recorded God's communications with her in which God used the



Lover's praises of the Beloved from the Song of Solomon; God says to Mechthild, 'O you beautiful rose among the thorns! /...O you unblemished dove in your being! / O you beautiful sun in your radiance! / ...I cannot turn away from you' (46). Similarly, God invoked more intimate metaphors: 'You are my softest pillow, / My most lovely bed, / My most intimate repose, / My deepest longing' (47). The impression of fluid and loving union of the soul to God is given in another passage, where God says; 'When you sigh, you draw my divine heart into you, / When you weep in longing for me, I take you in my arms. / But when you love, we two become one being. / And when we two are one being / Then we can never be parted. / Rather a blissful abiding / Prevails between us' (48). This impression of loving intimacy and exchange is achieved by the emotive language and the use of images associated with physical intimacy. Mechthild's Lover was ardent and equaled her own professions of love and desire with his own (see the section called *The Language of Love* in this chapter). Mechthild used the same loving terms as she described the loving soul: 'The loving soul betrays her true love in sighing for God. / She is sold in holy grief for his love. / She is sought with the heart of many tears for her dear Lord, / Whom she likes so well. / She is captured in the first experience / When God kisses her in sweet union' (49). The intoxication of love and union was portrayed by the intimate implications of kisses, and the impassioned longing for her Lover which Mechthild betrayed.

This language has a heavy sensory base, expressing mystical phenomena in terms of feeling and sensation. Emotions were the common denominator between the mystic and the reader or audience, and it was emotions which were used to build up the impression of the experience. Mechthild used emotive language in a more extreme way than other mystics, her emphasis being on Love itself and the sublime, often ecstatic love relationship between her soul and God. However, emotive language was used by other mystics as well. Raymond of Capua referred repeatedly to Catherine of Siena being in the embrace of her Bridegroom (50). He wrote of her 'flowery bed', where Christ embraced her (51), and of Christ being attracted to Catherine by her acts of charity and mercy (52). In highly affective language Raymond claimed 'as soon as [Catherine] had found [her Bridegroom] [she] would sweetly embrace Him, eagerly hold Him, and adore Him in ineffable devotion' (53). This did not reach the ecstatic heights of near hyperbole found in Mechthild's work, but expressed the same types of feelings in the calmer, more orderly, tender way more suitable to Catherine's less emotional spirituality. Catherine of Siena's Bridegroom was just as ardent as Mechthild's passionate Lover, and both brides' attachments to their Spouse were just as strong, but language was used in different ways to reflect their different approaches and personalities.

Part of this process was choosing the language appropriate for the emotion or tone wanted and tailoring it to the mystical experience. As well as language from the Song of Solomon, which meshed well with bridal imagery, there was another tradition of expression which lent itself to affective mysticism - the courtly love tradition.

### ***The Language of Love***



If a mystic wished to express the sensations of rapturous and transcendent love, the vocabulary and concepts found in the Song of Solomon were very useful and laden with the right connotations, but the late medieval bride of Christ also had another tradition she could draw on - the courtly love tradition. This was a thoroughly secular tradition, used to describe and explore earthly love relationships and flirtations, but the common denominator of focus on relationship made it an attractive source for use by women in the religious life. It was appropriated by some affective mystics because it had the ability to blend well with love language with the added advantage of providing metaphors not just of the sensations of love but also its processes and little joys. The courtly love tradition provided another emotionally based framework which expressed love and intimacy as the love language of the previous section did, as well as a set of patterns and situations that were useful settings for love encounters with God, such as lovers meeting, wooing, and the anguish caused by the absence of the lover. These specific situations utilised the affective language favoured by female mystics of the period and gave them more descriptive situations to draw on in their works. Because of this extra depth, the courtly love tradition was a valuable addition to the Bride's collection of concepts and vocabulary. Using the patterns and motifs of the courtly love tradition provided more structure and richness for the Bride's description of the mystical experience. The most valuable of these patterns and motifs for mystics were the lover as the inflicter of wounds of love (54), the motif of mutual longing and anguished fidelity, and the ongoing pattern of being united then separated from the lover, which resulted in the first two items on the list. Courtly love also allowed women to gain more power and control in relationship, an equalising factor allowing the passion to be mutual strong and mutually expressed (55).

The concept of the exclusive, passionately felt love relationship contained in the courtly love language was used especially by Mechthild of Magdeburg, who fused the bridal imagery of the Song of Solomon and the secular love song or poem, *minnesang* (56). A good example of these points is Chapter 24 of Book II of *The Flowing Light of Godhead*, which is a dialogue between the soul and God. The soul longs for her lover, saying: 'I cry out to you in great longing, / A lonely voice; / I hope for your coming with heavy heart, / I cannot rest, I am on fire, / Unquenchable in your burning love. / ... Please, my Love, run not so far ahead of me / And tarry a while in love, / So that I can catch you' (57). God replies with equal ardour, 'Your secret sighs shall reach me, / ... Your sweet pursuit shall so exhaust me / That I shall yearn to cool myself / In your limpid soul' (58). This does not satisfy the soul, who complains, 'Now you leave me, Lord, lying in my misery, / My wounds [of love] untended, in great torment' (59), to which the answer is 'When I wound you most deeply, / I immediately apply salve most tenderly. / The abundance of my riches is yours alone, / And even over me shall you hold sway. / You are very dear to my heart' (60). God goes on to describe the soul as a lonely bride who has just awakened to find her lover gone. She is so enamoured of him that she cannot even be apart from him for an hour, yet he must often be apart from her. She laments because all that she has of him now is memories - until he returns again, when he will be waiting for her in 'the orchard of love' (61). Yet while her lover is gone, the bride

is unable to be consoled, and she sees nothing that does not remind her of her lonely state (62).

Out of the above passage comes some of the most common courtly images used by Mechthild and other medieval brides of Christ. The soul and the lover both long for each other, only finding rest in each other. There is the fire of divine love (a way of describing consuming, passionate love), the idea of tender and exclusive love, and the wound of love, all of which are mentioned in the passage. They are interrelated images and ideas, but each represents a separate and valuable aspect of the love relationship. The wound of love sees the Lover or Christ, or in Mechthild's case Love itself on Christ's behalf, inflicting a wound that will not heal or diminish, making love an incurable source of torment and sweetness. This wound spurs the bride on to loving God and others more and dooms her to a life of lovesickness for her lover. In Chapter 5 of Book I of Mechthild's work, Mechthild complained to Love about the rough treatment that has trapped, bound and wounded her in such a way that she will never recover. Love seems happy in the situation and asserts, 'When I wounded you, you were joined to me' (63). So to be wounded with love was to be infused with desire to love God and others irresistibly, thus being joined to Love. This state caused the desire and longing for God's presence that was incurable and alleviated only by a visit from the Lover, or a sign of love from Him: 'Whoever at some point / Is seriously wounded by true love / Will never become healthy again / Unless he kisses that same mouth / By which his soul was wounded' (64). So it is the Lover Himself who wounds the soul, or Love itself as God's agent, and only with His love or presence can the pain of separation from the loved object be lifted. This marks the Lover as just as lovesick as the soul, willing and eager to alleviate the suffering of the lovesick soul (65).

The female mystics of Engelthal went further, though, characterising Christ as a prisoner of love, under the soul's control because He was drunk on his love for the soul (66). Their love and holiness made some of the nuns so attractive to Christ that he is almost irresistibly compelled to be near them and to grant them what they wish. Christ gained rest in the garden of Adelheid's heart, and was captivated by her beauty (67). Christ was eager to love and satisfy Margaret Ebner, also of Engelthal: 'Your fiery love keeps me near... I want to give you the kiss of love', Christ said (68). This eagerness even extended to playing a game of love, or *minnespil*, with the beloved soul, an expression that was used by other Engelthal Brides as well (69). Similar words were used by Mechthild when she called God her 'Playmate', and spoke of playing 'intimately' with her Lover (70). Such language can be traced back to the secular terms and concepts used in the courtly love tradition, and portrays the playful, almost flirtatious part of love that wishes to create desire and longing through absence, play lover's games and satisfy each other's desires. Courtly language also portrays the deep and passionate bond of the love relationship and the whole range of emotions within its compass. The Lover is as enamoured as the soul, and expresses His desires and love as freely as the soul. The inequality of the union is forgotten as God becomes the passionate lover who frolics with the beloved soul and increases her love through His alternate presence and absence. These are the sweet events and processes of love, more than just the representation of the ardour and intensity of the bridal relationship.

### *The Language of Relationship*

The relationship of the soul with God, like union, was both the basis and goal of the mystical life. However it was not always expressed in bridal imagery or love language, but could be portrayed through the more routine and ordinary experiences of the divine relationship. Like any human spousal relationship, physical intimacy and love were only the pinnacles of the relationship; just as important were basic experiences of the relationship which occurred every day and marked the nature of the relationship. First there had to be a recognition both from the couple and from others of the bridal relationship, and a commitment to that relationship. Then there had to be special marks of affection and care, as well as communication and contact. These were the base experiences of a personal and direct relationship, the experiences that are repeated every day between the Bride and Bridegroom. These form the base of a comfortable, practical and fully functioning spousal relationship.

Recognition of the soul's union with God need not be strictly from any mystical experience granted, but can also be seen in the declaration of that relationship by one party. In one *vita*, Katherine of Alexandria's marriage to God was declared publicly, making her love and commitment clear: 'Jesus Christ, my bridegroom, so desires my love that the two of us have already made a covenant that I am his beloved and he is my lover. He is my renown and my honour; ...He is my pleasure and my comfort, my sweetness and my delight. I love him so much that I cannot be parted from him; for I love him alone, and him alone do I desire. I am fully aware that he loves me in return and I for my part love him with such faith that I shall never abandon him' (71). This disclosure was the hagiographer's means of portraying her commitment so that the marriage would be recognised by others, and she would be held to that promise. It also ensured that any divine favour would be seen as the affection and care of her Lover. This set the context for the reported events which happened after the declaration and gave those around the bride, laity or clergy, a frame of reference in which to view the bride herself. This view was ongoing, as marriage to God was a life-long commitment, a state which Mechthild described as being the 'housewife' of God, a permanent co-habitation with God, with implications of progressively deepening intimacy and comfort in her role (72). This was an expression of the destiny of the mature or long-time bride of Christ and an acknowledgement of the long-term nature of the union.

Part of the bridal relationship was a commitment to caring for the spouse physically and emotionally. This was a special expression of love, as spouses care for one another not out of duty, but out of love. It was the lover's instinct to care for and protect the beloved, and a sign of that love. This expression of the bridal relationship between a human soul and God was shown in the *vitae* of Katherine of Alexandria. Through her many reported trials, the writers of the *vitae* represented her as especially favoured by God and cared for and protected by His own hand. In these *vitae*, God's partiality was clear. When Katherine was sitting in her cell after a savage beating, left without food and help, one *vita* related that witnesses 'saw how the angels anointed

her wounds with aromatic ointments, and so tended the gashes in her body, all broken from the beating' (73). Another *vita* detailed how a white dove came down from heaven with 'celestial food, which sustained her very well' (74). Similarly, in the legends of Katherine's life and passion, Christ was said to have sent angels down to destroy the machine built to kill Katherine, in answer to her prayer (75). Thus Christ was shown to have cared for her, physically providing her urgent needs despite human resistance. This expressed the care and concern that a loving Bridegroom would have for his bride.

The *vita* latterly mentioned also included an episode of direct, personal contact with the Bridegroom in the form of conversation. This was another demonstration of the bridal relationship and expressed the emotional connection of the lover and beloved - the couple communicated and listened to each other. One *vita* of Katherine reported that Christ acknowledged Katherine's last prayer before her death, granting her request out of love (76). In the same *vita* Christ was also represented as visiting Katherine personally, accompanied by virgins and angels to encourage and comfort His Bride (77). The theme of communication was an essential one for a functioning bridal relationship, and so also appeared in Catherine of Siena's *vita*, where Raymond of Capua wrote that Catherine was constantly conversing with her Bridegroom, enjoying his company and receiving his instruction (78). Such close communication and contact was part of the close-knit relationship of the bridal soul to God, using everyday experiences to express a familiar and loving relationship.

In the hands of the brides of Christ, especially affective female brides from the medieval period, the everyday and intimate experiences of the secular bride were transformed into the expression of the equally close, but less tangible bridal relationship of the soul to God. The sense of intimacy, the use of erotic terms and love language expressed the pinnacle of mystical phenomena, which could be balanced by the more down-to-earth but no less significant realities of everyday life with the Bridegroom. As mystical manifestations were shaped by the language and nuances used to express them, so too the Brides' experience of union, love, intimacy and the mystical relationship shaped their mystical lives in many ways. This allowed the individual stories of each Bride to burst forth in glorious colour and let them explore the dynamics and workings of their mystical lives.



## Chapter Four: Mystical Marriage as Power

The inevitable result of a Bride's progress through conversion to the holy life, repentance, spiritual transformation and refining, to mystical experience and union was the gradual and often dramatic acquisition of spiritual power and authority. As the relationship between the soul and God expanded, deepened and became more intimate, the holiness of the soul grew and spiritual manifestations of God's work in the soul appeared, e.g., through visions, ecstasy and revelations. These manifestations were the evidence for others and the female mystic herself that God favoured and loved her and took especial notice of what she said and did, honouring her for her spiritual beauty and purity. God had specially gifted her with spiritual and mystical gifts as a sign of love. He had listened to her prayers and spoke directly to her. Thus the mystic became a link between Heaven and Earth, embodying and carrying the power of God on behalf of God Himself. The power and authority an advanced and spiritually gifted female mystic had was not really her own, but was borrowed from God so she could use it in the world to help, teach, encourage and even correct those around her. The mystic had spiritual power not just as a sign of favour and love from God, but also as an instrument with which to bless others on God's behalf.

For a female mystic, the acquisition of spiritual power and authority was a threefold process and was not complete until she was recognised as spiritually powerful by God and man. She had first to gain spiritual power from God by being holy, then to demonstrate that power to others so she would be acknowledged by the laity and the clergy. When the mystic had gained the recognition of the world, she was free to exercise her spiritual power and authority for the good of others within the regulations and boundaries set by the Church to guard against the perceived female tendency to spiritual error. These regulations and boundaries were a reflection of the deep tensions which the rapid rise of late medieval female mysticism stirred up in the Church, and could be severe and restricting. Female mystics were not always free to follow all their wishes, but there were a good number of clerics who were genuinely supportive of female mysticism and spirituality if the women were willing to be guided as thought necessary.

In the light of the tensions surrounding late medieval female mystics who claimed and exercised spiritual power and authority, how these women used their power was important. The uses of spiritual power by female mystics is divided into two parts in this thesis, first, earthly service, which was enhanced by the possibilities of spiritual power, and second, leading and teaching others, which could be controversial for female mystics. Both types of uses were taken up eagerly by the new breed of late medieval female mystics who both continued a long tradition of female spirituality and pushed the boundaries to form a new, broader religious world which they could



explore.

In the late medieval period, female mystics were sometimes outstripping the holiness and mystical activity of male clerics and religious. At the same time, female mystics became more visible, and thus female spirituality appeared more visibly holy than the clergy. In this period, the female holy life was being increasingly lived out in the secular world. There was an increasing number of women who were leading semi-holy or exclusively holy lives, and the women often chose a more public forum for this, such as a beguinage or living a holy life at home (1).

Traditionally, holy women had been encouraged to retreat from the secular world in order to pursue an exclusively holy life, but there were now female ascetics and mystics in the public eye, tending to the sick or poor, running hospitals, praying for the dead, sometimes acting as spiritual guides to others or performing miracles in public. Leading a holy life was, also, no longer considered completely incompatible with having a family or even a husband (2). Mystical experiences like stigmata and ecstasy became public, sacred performances, able to be witnessed by the laity first hand (3). The heavy emphasis on purity and apostolic poverty and service which female ascetics and mystics of this time demonstrated quickly spread to the laity, as such women were often quite accessible to the laity. The mystical heights which some of these women reached showed the laity a close-up view of the mystical life and how to go about it. The realm of holiness and mysticism was then close enough to touch but still retained the sense of the unattainable. It is reasonable to say that the prolonged exposure to the holy and mystical life which the late medieval laity had through the work of beguines, tertiaries, nuns and holy women in the public arena made at least a semi-holy life more attractive and achievable, and perhaps raised the standard of the holy behaviour and piety which the laity thought should have been practiced by the clergy and the Church as a whole.

Even if the laity did not pick up this change immediately, the ascetics and mystics were sure to remind the laity and the clergy of how the latter fell short of God's glory. St. Catherine of Siena was a perfect example of the higher spiritual standards achieved by female ascetics and mystics of the late medieval period, and the campaign to raise the spiritual standards of others, especially clergy. Catherine of Siena had great zeal for reforming the Church, and one of the instances of her attempting to hasten this very event was her sharp reproof of three cardinals who supported the Schism and did not wish to be pressed into reforming their own lives; Catherine highlighted their hypocrisy and pride and their preference for earthly things over spiritual things, an attitude which was not acceptable for clergy (4). So, female ascetics and mystics joined the push for Church and papal reform which had been started by male clerics from within the Church, the women lending their increasingly powerful voices and holy example to the reform cause. For those who, like the cardinals just mentioned, had no wish to bring their lives in line with the spiritual standards of the Church, the purity and spiritual activity of the lives of the female ascetics and mystics could be supposed to be damning, and even embarrassing. Yet, for those clergy who were calling for Church reform and a more purely apostolic life for clergy, such holy women were sisters-in-Christ, and the bringers of spiritual blessings to all they encountered.

## ***The Acquisition of Spiritual Power for Female Mystics***

Although the primary reason for mystics to pursue holy lives was to grow closer to God, not to gain spiritual power or authority, the latter was a natural result of the former and proved useful for the female ascetic or mystic in mystical life in many ways. There were three distinct stages needed to acquire spiritual power, which could be concurrent: gaining spiritual power in the eyes of God, showing evidence of it, and having it recognised by others. This process also revealed deep tensions within the Church when it was faced with female mystics gaining spiritual power and using it.

### ***Spiritual Power in the Eyes of God***

Spiritual power in the eyes of God was not based on union with God, but on the fact that the mystic or Bride had won God's favour by living a holy and pure life based on love and humility. Her spiritual exercises and disciplines, her virtues and her good works, and her heightened relationship with God had earned her God's special attention, the reward of God's favour being the privilege of becoming a conduit of God's power for those on earth. A woman did not have to be a Bride of Christ to gain the privilege, however, since the concept at the base of the medieval 'salvation economy' was applicable - the holier a mystic was, the more spiritual power and authority she gained. According to this formula, the more effort and sacrifice went into becoming like and more conformed to God's will, the more spiritual blessings given to the mystic and through the mystic to other people. The more spiritual blessings given to the mystic, the more he or she grew in holiness and conformity to God's will, and the closer the mystic got to total union with God, the more spiritual blessings were given to the mystic and through the mystic. If mystical union was the ultimate sign and reward of holiness, it can be assumed that a Bride of Christ was considered the repository of more spiritual blessings and power than a less advanced mystic.

Yet, the blessings of spiritual power were not for the mystic alone, but were intended also to be used to help, serve, encourage, teach and even correct God's flock, and those who were holy became God's agents appointed to distribute His blessings and power. With this revelation comes another part of the picture - the role which other people, both laity and clergy, played in the process of acquiring spiritual authority in the world.

### ***Confirmation of Spiritual Power***

Any claim to holiness in the late medieval period had to be backed up with proof of sanctity, such as virtues, charity, chastity or a holy lifestyle (5), and anyone who claimed spiritual power

had to have that power confirmed by the evidence of marked spiritual or mystical gifts (6). These gifts had to be visibly and publically manifested and clearly supernatural abilities which could only be given by God such as visions, periods of ecstasy, spiritual insight, divinely given knowledge, the ability to physically heal others, cast out demons or even a visible 'glow' of holiness. All these required God's special touch, and were considered proof of spiritual power if the gifts were judged to be genuine and divinely inspired. *Vitae* and legends were written in order to use such manifestations of holiness and spiritual gifts to confirm the sanctity and favour before God the subject of the *vita* had (7). Some female mystics, however, had no one to write their *vitae*, so these women had to confirm their place in God's favour themselves, by exercising the spiritual gifts given to them as rewards and for serving others. More than this, since women did not have the theological education to claim spiritual knowledge, they had to renew and constantly prove their spiritual power through using their spiritual and mystical gifts publically (8).

The process of confirmation was essential, as male clerics and the Church in general took great care in ascertaining the genuineness and quality of a female mystic's practices and spirituality, especially in the late medieval period when Church authorities were becoming increasingly wary of female mysticism. One of the main measuring tools, apart from the level of sanctity of the woman, was whether there was genuine evidence that God had confirmed her sanctity through giftings of spiritual abilities and power. Her spirituality and gifts had to be judged genuine and inspired by God to be accepted by the clergy. And yet the official approval of the Church was not the only confirmation needed, the laity also needed to be won over in order for the mystic to be completely accepted as a holy woman or a mystic (9). This could be significantly easier than winning over the clergy, because the laity were more easily impressed by any proof of sanctity. Convincing the ordinary people also became easier in this period because holy women were practising their vocation in more public places, in towns and cities, so more people were exposed to mystical practices and spirituality. In this situation it was easier to attract fame for holiness or spiritual power, and thus easier to build up the reputation for holiness which would gain the mystic the reverence of the community and the notice of the Church.

### *Spiritual Power in the Eyes of Man*

Spiritual power and authority was gifted to a holy woman for the use of serving and blessing others around her, so it was important to be recognised by others as holy and spiritually gifted. This recognition was needed in order to work amongst others effectively. Spiritual advice was taken much more seriously if the one advising you was recognised as being on a higher level of spiritual achievement, so they know things which you did not. From this conclusion came the importance of a holy reputation amongst the laity and the official sanction of the Church. As seen in the previous section, a holy reputation was gained by people noticing the mystical and spiritual gifts of the mystic in question and telling others (10). The reverence and awe a holy woman or mystic inspired gained her the spiritual influence to work effectively in the community as an

instrument of God (11). If a holy woman or mystic was seen to have, for instance, special spiritual insight into people's hearts, a particular talent for exhortation, or seemed in touch with another, more spiritual realm, this would gain her the attention of others quite quickly and add to her holy reputation (12). More dramatically, a holy woman or mystic could have her spiritual authority confirmed by casting out demons or overcoming evil influences (13). Or it could be as simple as looking at a mystic to see her sanctity and power. Jacques de Vitry asserted that Mary D'Oignies' miracles and tangible 'glow' of sanctity caused many who came to see her to be spiritually nourished and that her holy 'glow' even moved people to tears and devotion: 'Reading the unction of the Holy Spirit in her face, as if in a book, they recognised that power came forth from her' (14). In this process of gaining a holy reputation any means of publicising or writing down accounts of the mystic's sanctity and spiritual power were important. *Vitae*, legends and popular preaching were valuable sources of exposure and helped to popularise an individual and make a permanent record of her practices and spirituality (15).

The sustained confirmation of a holy woman or mystic's spiritual power inevitably attracted not just reverence and spiritual authority in the community, but often devoted followers or disciples. Followers like these stayed close to their chosen holy woman or mystic, emulating the practices, doctrine, and lifestyle of their mentor. Having followers guaranteed a mystic a lasting reputation and gave her the opportunity to pass on to others the spiritual blessings which she had. Having followers also gave the mystic the spiritual influence she needed to contribute greatly to the spiritual nourishment of other souls. These souls were the 'spiritual offspring' which the Bride raised up for her Spouse and nurtured like a mother. Mechthild of Magdeburg had highranking admirers in the home of her last days, Helfta, including the abbess (16). Catherine of Siena had many followers, formal or otherwise, including her own spiritual director, confessor and hagiographer, Raymond of Capua. Catherine even had followers after her death (17). Similarly, Jacques de Vitry was so impressed with Mary D'Oignies that he became devoted to her, placed himself in her spiritual care and gave her the credit for his exceptional preaching career (18). Some male clerics did not mind seeking spiritual advice from reputable holy women; for instance, Ubertino of Casale, a thirteenth to mid fourteenth century Franciscan, credited his new-found spiritual zeal to Cecilia of Florence and the Bride and mystic, Angela of Foligno (19). The only addition needed to the situation of being a recognised holy woman or mystic, or even a Bride of Christ, and having a group of disciples, was having official sanction or blessing from the Church. If a holy woman or mystic had this, she was secure of using and maintaining her spiritual power and authority, and was able to use the spiritual gifts given to her without impediment.

Yet until a mystic gained the positive recognition of the lay and clerical community she was vulnerable and greatly exposed, as her situation revealed underlying tensions in the power structure of the Church. There were some questions in the minds of the clergy as to whether it was appropriate for women to have spiritual power or authority. The Church held that women were more inherently sinful than men, and had to be controlled by men to avert danger. Yet, the spiritual and mystical activity of holy women and female mystics were attracting admirers and



followers to certain female mystics, who were becoming more and more recognised as having indisputable spiritual power directly from God. Because of this apparent clash of views on female religious, female mystical activity and spiritual giftings were, alternately, a friend and a problem for the medieval Church. Women who exhibited spiritual and mystical gifts were often a source of inspiration, holiness, blessings and spiritual training for those around them, even for famous male preachers like Jacques de Vitry. These holy women gave ordinary people a glimpse into the divine life, a rare and exalted world which the people might experience in Heaven, as well as giving hope to the laity and illumination to the clergy. Yet female mystics could also attack the very doctrines which the Church was built on, challenge the ultimate authority of Church leaders and undermine the general stability and power structure of the Church. It is at this point where the tensions were exposed, putting the Church in the position of having to balance two responsibilities; accepting and encouraging these holy women and female mystics, and regulating their power to avoid any harmful effects which the doctrine, methods or practices of female mystics might have had on others. Female mystics could both challenge the Church or reinforce the authority and doctrine of the Church. When a holy woman or female mystic strayed into challenging the authority or character of the Church, she was considered dangerous and the clergy moved to contain her.

On a more secular level, also, male clergy and Church leaders had no wish to compete with holy women, of any spiritual or mystical level, for ultimate spiritual authority in the Church, and the new breed of late medieval female mystics appeared to be in a good position to be dangerous rivals. This new groups of female mystics were bold in proclaiming their new spiritual power and quick in using it to lead, teach and help others. The advantage which these female mystics had was a direct mandate for their activities from God Himself through direct experience of the Godhead. A direct mandate from God was officially approved by the Church as the highest authority, rivalling the authority of the Church (20). If God revealed Himself directly only to those who pleased Him most, it was disturbing for the Church that female mystics were sometimes more favoured than the ordinary male cleric, and that the women religious seemed to closer to God's will. This was something which could have undermined male clerical authority if not counteracted. The question of whether female mystics should be allowed to circumvent the authority of the Church by gaining spiritual power directly from God was a very topical one in this period.

There was a general distrust of women in the medieval period, especially when it came to religion and spirituality. Women were thought to be more susceptible to spiritual deception and diabolical illusion and influences than men (21), which cast doubt on the validity of the staples of late medieval female mysticism - visions, revelation or prophecies and periods of ecstasy. There was a general caution expressed when male clerics were dealing with female charismatic spiritual or mystical activity, due to the idea that the activity might not be godly in origin (22). Clerics could have easily concluded that a female mystic's 'gift' was from the Devil, and she might possibly have had to refute accusations of witchcraft (23). Clerical opposition towards female mystics became worse when faced with a female mystic who was publicly teaching or speaking against the Church in some way. The Church had too many doubts about the spiritual fitness of



women to teach to let such activity go unchallenged (24). The problem of whether women could preach or teach publicly became even more of a sticking point as the late medieval period saw a new and growing emphasis on preaching to achieve church reform and higher personal spiritual standards amongst the faithful (25). But whether women should preach or not was only one of the issues which the Church was concerned about when deciding how to handle highly ascetic women and advanced female mystics, some who claimed to be Brides of Christ.

However, the clergy tried to reconcile the growing spiritual authority of female mystics and ascetics with their responsibility to protect the Church from spiritual harm and lead the faithful in correct doctrine. There were regulatory processes put into place to guide female religious, and especially female mystics, aimed at combatting any errors which these women could fall into. Clerics tried to put themselves into a position where they would be able to guide, refine and shape the practices, beliefs and spirituality of female ascetics and mystics, especially those women who lived very public holy lives. Very few female religious were taught enough to study the great theological works of the time, so what Jantzen call the 'theologies of language' shut women out from the study and discussion of the Scriptures (26). This only left women the chance of gaining authority through vernacular theology (27). Female mystics and some ascetics were assigned male spiritual directors who would supervise the women and counteract any unorthodox tendency. These spiritual directors often served as the mystics' confessors as well, so the spiritual directors were in an excellent position to be familiar with all of the mystics' spirituality. Male clerics also controlled the strict criteria which the female mystics and ascetics had to live up to, thus setting the standards and, with the other regulatory provisions, enforcing the standards and maintaining order within the Church (28). As Bernard McGinn asserts, female religious needed male clerical co-operation and approval to live the *vita apostolica* with the required freedom, and to find new, more individual expressions of that life (29).

The fact that female ascetics and mystics needed the goodwill of male clerics came forcibly home when the clergy squashed those who did not keep within the boundaries set by the Church. In 1235, a beguine (or *bizzoche*) community at Spoleto was suppressed because its members would not submit to Church authority and had already tried to evade the control of the papal curia (30). Mystics judged to be false (men and women alike) were thought to be sufficiently threatening to the Church and society in general to be executed. As clerical controls on female mystics tightened, the number of women condemned as false mystics, supposedly inspired by diabolical forces, increased (31). The world of the late medieval female mystic proved to be a dangerous one if she did not follow the rules - it was just as well for female mystics of the time that there were many male clerics who were in fact willing, if not eager, to support and promote the growth of female mysticism, despite the doubts which were present in the minds of the clergy.

### ***The Use of Spiritual Power by Female Mystics***

After a female mystic's spiritual power or authority was confirmed and recognised in the eyes of God and Man, she was able to use it in the world according to the regulations set by the Church and God's purposes for her spiritual and mystical gifts. She could have been more effective in her role as Bride of Christ, and she often had a wider and more attentive audience than before her authority was recognised by others. A classic, if extraordinary example of this liberation was the career of St. Catherine of Siena. Catherine's rapid rise to official sanction and recognition of her authoritative spirituality showed what a female mystic and Bride could do with spiritual power and authority. Her holy, apostolic lifestyle and mystical vocation formed the the foundation for her subsequent forays into preaching, pushing to reform the Church, her role as peacemaker between states and individuals, and her religious and political influence in Europe (32). If anyone challenged her right to push for Church reform or write to a French monarch, Catherine had only to remind them that her mission and authority came from no lesser an authority than God Himself. Some female mystics did not push so far as Catherine of Siena, but they still regularly exercised their spiritual prerogative to use their spiritual and mystical gifts for God's flock, and often pressed forward with God's view of human behaviour, even against opposition. Their God-given mission impelled such enduring women to act for God on earth, and with official and popular sanction, female mystics could live out the fullest expression of God's power.

There were two main ways of using spiritual power and authority amongst the people of the world. Earthly service was similar to the practice of charity, and relatively uncontroversial, and the other way, leading and teaching others, intruded more on the established authority and interests of the Church, and was sometimes challenged by the Church.

### *Earthly Service*

Acts of earthly service could be as simple as giving food to the poor or praying for the dead, but the added spiritual power of an advanced female mystic, who was perhaps a Bride of Christ as well, added new dimensions to simple acts of service. Giving food to the poor could be the result of having more food to spare because Christ was sustaining the Bride on the Eucharist alone. Praying for the dead could mean that her spiritual power took more years off the dead soul's stay in Purgatory than another person's prayers. Nursing a sick person could end in the patient being miraculously healed through the spiritual power of the Bride. Intervention in a spiritual situation could be more effective if done by a mystic with advanced spiritual power. Such a woman's mode of worship, prayers or ascetics methods would be a more potent religious example, and her words and doctrine more compelling. So, the Bride's duty of nurturing spiritual offspring would be fulfilled more effectively and more fully the more spiritual power the Bride had.

Being directly connected to and inspired by God made a Bride a more valuable, compelling and

powerful spiritual role model than other less advanced female mystics. Her intimacy with God ensured that her gender could not be held against her too much, and the direct line of communication she had with her Spouse often made her the receiver of divine knowledge, teaching and wisdom straight from God (33). The divine knowledge and teaching the Bride received from visions, dreams or periods of ecstasy made her a spiritually wise mentor and her experience of mystical phenomena made her a useful and practical advisor on the mystical life. All of these factors ensured that a Bride or a spiritually advanced female mystic could prove to be a valuable, powerful and iconic religious role model for others.

### *Leading and Teaching Others*

It was when female mystics tried to move into this use of spiritual authority to lead and teach others that some mystics could run into clerical opposition. Claiming to be able to lead and teach others was on the verge of the territory clearly claimed by the clergy. However, the deep and intimate bond of the female mystic or Bride to God provided her with the tools to make the transition. She had a direct mandate from God to go out and teach, encourage, guide and even rebuke others in the interests of the Church. She had the divine knowledge she needed straight from God's mouth, and she had the spiritual and mystical experience to be of great use to other believers.

Many late medieval Brides of Christ felt strongly led by God to teach and foster other people. Orthodox theology allowed for women to teach others *ex beneficio*, or from the grace and knowledge given to them, but there was no official or institutional way for women to teach or preach (34) - official Church preaching was the sole right of the male clergy (35). Yet women could preach by example, especially if someone was devoted enough to the mystic to write a *vita* about her (36), and by being a role model, the mystic could be both a teacher and a spiritual mother who delivered Christ's message to others (37). The quiet authority with which Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote her spiritual advice seemed to indicate that she was accustomed to giving godly advice and sharing divine knowledge with others, either in the beguinage or in Helfta or in both places. In her work *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, she gave advice on issues ranging from how to examine the heart (38), which bad habits to avoid (39), how to keep on the holy path (40), how to enhance virginity (41), and the religious life (42). A good example of one of her short teachings was Book VII, Chapter 29 (43). All of these teachings had practical applications for holy women and would have enhanced Mechthild's worth as a spiritual mentor and teacher.

The positive side of female mystics' leading and teaching others was not so much of a problem for the Church as the negative side - correcting and rebuking others. There was sometimes official resentment aimed at female mystics who took it upon themselves to exercise the other half of teaching, admonishing the laity, and even male clerics, who were disobeying God. Considering the inferior state of women in the medieval Church, even mystics and Brides of Christ walked a

fine line when they used their spiritual authority to correct other, especially the clergy. For this task, female mystics had to be brave or beloved by God and others in order to withstand any opposition or persecution resulting from their actions. Yet many Brides and female mystics nonetheless felt driven to express God's disapproval of the state of the Church and clergy, the need for reform and even for change in a particular individual's life. Mechthild of Magdeburg felt strongly impelled to correct others and expose spiritual corruption, hypocrisy, vanity, greed, self-indulgence and lack of spiritual zeal where she saw it (44). She was threatened and persecuted because she publicly remarked on these inconsistencies in the Church and included them in her work, but Mechthild endured this persecution because God had ordered her to write her spiritual and mystical experiences down (45). In similar fashion two Italian female mystics, Osanna and Arcangela Panigarola, both denounced the state of the Church and the corruption of the clergy - some holy women even went directly to the Pope with their concerns, but failed to get the results they wanted (46). Catherine of Siena was a great advocate for church reform, using all of her influence to try to convince clergy and laity to change their ways. Catherine frankly rebuked an important churchman for expecting others to repent and not having repented himself, and urged high ranking prelates not to turn a blind eye to the many misdemeanours of the clergy, so the resulting damage to the Church could be halted (47). Asserting this kind of spiritual authority, admonishing those above her in the Church hierarchy, signalled that Catherine, like Mechthild, Hadewijch of Brabant and Marguerite Porete, was claiming that her words, teachings and written works were quasi-scriptural, derived from the same Source of Divine Truth Himself, as the Bible was (48). This was a bold claim, but was borne out by the very foundation of female sanctity and mysticism - a direct, unmediated and loving relationship with God.

In a twist which seemed to be uniquely Italian, some female Italian mystics and Brides took the absolute spiritual authority they believed was theirs and waded into the chaotic politics of late medieval Italy. Margaret of Cortona, a Franciscan who founded a hospital and combined ascetic and mystical life, intervened in local faction wars with the aim of achieving peace (49). In a similar fashion, Catherine of Siena helped to settle the rivalry of two branches of the Salimber family in 1377 (50) and in the two years after that tried her best to stir up support for Urban's papal court to stop the Schism (51). For these women, peace and unity was as important as proper doctrine and mystical life, and they willingly used their spiritual influence and authority to combat what they saw as unnecessary conflicts. Their aim was to use the spiritual authority they had gained during their mystical careers to try and do God's work on earth, as many male clerics were also trying to do.

The dramatic and insistent rise of a new breed of female mystics in the late medieval period must have caught the Church a little by surprise, and it was not long before these female mystics began citing their direct and unmediated connection to God to claim the subsequent spiritual power and authority granted to those who were intimate with God. As a new, uniquely female and strongly affective mysticism arose, the same female mystics increasingly based their claims to spiritual power on their mystical experiences, such as visions, periods of ecstasy and revelations or

prophecies. This emphasis on direct contact with God effectively circumvented the mediation and authority of the medieval Church and brought to the fore all the doubts the clergy had about women and whether women should have spiritual power. But despite the regulations and boundaries set up by the clerics to control female mystics, the said mystics claimed and used their spiritual power and authority with more frequency and visibility than the female religious before them. Late medieval female mystics aspired to tasks which were increasingly seen as encroaching on clerical authority. Female mystics teaching, acting as spiritual mentors and religious role models, even publicly preaching in some instances (52), might have been a new sight, but female mystics and Brides dispensing and discussing doctrine, rebuking and admonishing others - even clergy - and intervening in Church affairs, as Catherine of Siena did, must have been revolutionary. Female acetics and mystics and Brides had a broader world and sphere of influence to explore, and female mystics like Catherine of Siena showed how high women could climb.



## Conclusion

Through examining four central aspects of mystical marriage and the lifestyle which it implied, this thesis has explored the theology which provided for mystical union, the mystical experiences which developed and authenticated mystical union, and the spiritual power which accompanied and enhanced life as a mystical Bride. The common thread through each of these seemingly disparate aspects of mystical marriage was the relationship of the soul to God. This relationship was the basic connection which lived out the theology of mystical union, made the new mentalite and metaphor attractive to the Bride, made mystical experience the private treasure and public declaration of each Bride, and justified the spiritual power which the Bride gained throughout her mystical life with her Bridegroom.

That mystical marriage was rooted in the deep and intimate connection of the holy human soul to God also made the language and concepts of bridal mysticism and the Song of Songs a particularly eloquent source of expression of female mystics and Brides, and allowed the reader of mystical works and audiences of mystical activity to better imitate Brides and mystics in their own lives through developing relationships with God.

This fundamental relationship also provided very specific advantages to the female mystic or Bride herself. Since full mystical union with God could not actually happen until the soul reached Heaven, earthly mystical marriage proved to be the training ground for Brides, preparing and refining their souls for full bridal union in Heaven. And yet, many late medieval Brides of Christ had their status confirmed on earth, enjoying the benefits of the Bridegroom's love and favour before entering Heaven. As both the journey and the destination for medieval Brides, mystical marriage gave a taste of the total union with God through mystical experiences, as well as preparing the soul for an eternity as a Bride of Christ.

Because mystical union could be tasted on earth, mystical marriage, and the mystical experiences which accompanied and confirmed it, were considered the apex of mystical and spiritual life. Mystical union provided the closest possible human-divine relationship on earth, the medieval Church believed, as confirmed by the plethora of supernatural experiences which were embraced by Brides of Christ and those advanced on the mystical path. Being a Bride of Christ gave a female mystic the highest status she could have on earth and in the eyes of God.

Yet, the granting of this status of Bride of Christ was often dependant on the presence of mystical experiences and phenomena, at least in the eyes of the clergy, who asserted considerable control over the earthly processes of becoming a Bride of Christ. These mystical experiences were as individual as the female mystics themselves, differing according to the individual devotional

and ascetic emphases of the Bride and her personal spirituality and spiritual gifts. Her expression of these personalised mystical experiences was also individual, the Bride choosing the language and concepts which best served to express the tone, nuances, and sensations of her experiences. The result was a much varied picture of mystical experience from the different perspectives of many Brides, but it was a picture of the same types of experiences and the same type of relationship with God as all the other Brides.

All these Brides also had the same aim in their spiritual and mystical lives as well - to develop and nurture the mystical relationship between the soul and God, to use the fruits of that mystical relationship to help and serve others and God, and to gain the ultimate reward for holiness on earth, the status of the Bride of Christ, the Beloved of God, honoured above others and able to gaze without obstacle on the face of their Divine Lover.

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- 42) Jantzen, p. 137.
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