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The Wedded Soul:

Mystical Marriage in Late Medieval Female Mysticism

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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.