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Certainty in Mechthild von Magdeburg (1207–1282)

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Mechthild of Magdeburg is perhaps best-known for her contention that the authorial content of her *Flowing Light of the Godhead* came directly from the divinity. Because of that it is necessary to assert that the concept of certainty in her work, as she herself tried to indicate, is directly tied to this notion of authorship. Although many women medieval thinkers claimed to have had a variety of experiences that might be thought to be either mystical or visionary, or both, Bowie, Chervin and others are careful to point out that Mechthild's claims with respect to her experiences are, in general, different. Tobin notes that "the mystical experience [...] takes place in the soul..." but in Mechthild's case it is as if something were pouring into her soul—and this, of course, allows her to posit a concept of certainty as to the content of what God "pours" into her soul. She also compares the experiences that she has had to claiming that "[T]he person with sight leads the blind." Indeed, on at least some readings, God manifests Himself in the actual physical form of the *Flowing Light*, and it is that manifestation that provides certainty of the work's content. Despite the hostility regularly shown to the beguine communities, as Bowie's commentary indicates, Mechthild was able to move beyond this level of suspicion and *Flowing Light* is an example of what we might deem to be the product of such a move. That she was able to do so is remarkable, for as Bowie also notes, beguine communities were regarded as an "attempt to escape from lawful male authority."

Primary Source:

Mechthild von Magdeburg 1998. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. Tobin, Frank (trans.). New York: Paulist Press.

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