The book bearing the title *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* ("The Flowing Light of the Godhead") survives in its complete form in one 14th-century manuscript.¹ In this manuscript (ms. E), the writing is attributed to a “certain beguine”, who is said to have begun writing in 1250, and who is referred to later in the book as *Sister Mechthild.*² Scholars refer to her as Mechthild of Magdeburg because of references to that city in the text. From a letter written in 1345 by Heinrich of Nördlingen, enclosing *Das fließende Licht* to a nun he was counselling, scholars have inferred that this manuscript transmits a copy of a translation or transposition of *Das fließende Licht* from a Middle Low or Central German dialect (a dialect of German found in the central German-speaking regions of Thuringia and Saxony in the 13th century) into Alemannic (spoken in southwestern German-speaking regions and one of the dialects that usually falls under the rubric of Middle High German).³ A version of Mechthild’s book in

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² Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Das fließende Licht*, vol. I, Book V, Chapter 35: lines 1–2, p. 194; Book VI, Chapters 42 and 43, p. 251. Hereafter citations to Mechthild’s text will be in the following form: Book, chapter: line number (if relevant), page number; followed by the page number from Frank Tobin’s English translation.
³ The reference to Mechthild’s text in Heinrich’s letter can be found in Strauch, *Margaretha Ebner und Heinrich von Nördlingen: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Mystik* (1882), 246–247. It should be noted that the notion of a “pure” Low German original is no longer accepted without question. For the most recent discussion of the language in which Mechthild probably wrote, based on newly discovered fragments of the text, see Squires, “Mechthild von Magdeburg: Ein handschriftlicher Neufund aus dem elbstäfälischen Sprachraum” (2010); and Nemes, “Mechthild im mitteldeutschen Raum: Die Moskauer Fragmente und andere Handschriftenfunde zur Rezeption des Fließenden Lichts der Gottheit und seiner lateinischen Übersetzung” (2013), both of whom argue for a specification of the dialect as an Eastphalian central German. I am grateful to Balázs J. Nemes for sharing this essay with me in advance of its publication.
German was also translated into Latin (completed before 1298).\textsuperscript{4} This Latin version was later translated back into German, a copy of which survives in a manuscript dating from 1517 (\text基础设施).\textsuperscript{5}

As is the case for most medieval authors, nothing is known of Mechthild beyond what can be gleaned from the book and the prologues attached to it. From these sources, scholars have surmised that Mechthild was born around 1210. When she was a young woman in her twenties, she left her home and family to pursue a devout religious life in a place where she knew only one person. This place is thought to have been the city of Magdeburg. From passages in the book that address other beguines, scholars speculate that Mechthild was at some point a member of a beguine community. In other passages, God compels her to write, and her Dominican confessor encourages her to follow God’s will (\text基础设施 Suerbaum). One of the prologues states that Mechthild began to write about her mystical experiences of divine union in 1250 and continued writing until her death, which is thought to have been somewhere around 1282. The last decade or so of her life she spent at the convent of Helfta (near Eisleben).

The writings, as they have come down to us in the one surviving complete manuscript, are divided into seven large books that consist of narratives of visions; dialogues between the soul and God as well as personified faculties, like Lady Love, the senses, and Conscience; instructions to other religious; and critiques of corrupt clergy. The writing can be characterized as highly poetic, with most of the prose displaying internal rhyme (assonance), with some passages written in rhyming couplets, and with much of the poetic language showing influences from contemporary courtly lyric (\text基础设施 Fraeters). It is the first such collection of revelations to be written down in a German vernacular.

Although some of the chapters have an autobiographical quality, \textit{Das fließende Licht} should not be read as a private journal that was later made public. Indeed, the book was meant from the start for the edification of others. A detailed table of contents for each Book in the surviving complete German manuscript allows for the reading of (or listening to) isolated chapters. The chapters often offer specific instructions about devotional practices, and when they contain narratives of visions or dialogues, they are meant as examples or as material for meditation. A short prefatory


\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., and also Senne, \textit{Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit Mechthilds von Magdeburg. Die Fassung der sogenannten Wolhusener Handschrift} (2002).