CHAPTER SIX

LATIN AND THE VERNACULAR: MECHTHILD OF MAGDEBURG—MECHTHILD OF HACKEBORN—GERTRUDE OF HELFTA

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The relationship between Latin and the vernacular has been particularly significant for the development of European mysticism, especially women’s mysticism since the 13th century. In southern Germany, religious texts—in women’s convents or addressed to lay people—were increasingly written in the vernacular rather than in Latin. By contrast, in northern Germany the majority of religious texts, both transmitted and authored, remained in Latin, even in women’s communities. The corpus of mystical literature displays a wide range of competence in this language, as is clearly demonstrated by texts drawn from the writings of the three visionary women of Helfta. Hence the Latin-German origins and transmission of the writings by Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude of Helfta form the focus of this chapter (→ Nemes). The works by Gertrude of Helfta and Mechthild of Hackeborn were translated from Latin into the vernacular; in the case of Mechthild of Magdeburg this process was initially reversed; later her work was also translated from the Latin back into German. These women lived together for a while in the Benedictine-Cistercian convent of Helfta near Eisleben in Thuringia, knew one another, and communicated with one another about their spiritual experiences within the framework of a devotional culture imbued with mysticism. This formed the basis for the transmission of their works beyond northern Germany to the Netherlands. Hence, their writings form a self-contained, unified complex, even if those by Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude of Helfta are closer to each other in style and content than to Mechthild of Magdeburg’s work. Nonetheless, all three belonged to the spiritual milieu of Helfta in the second half of the 13th century.

Mechthild of Magdeburg, the oldest of the three, did not enter the Helfta community until late in life. She spent the last twelve years of her life there, having previously lived for a long time as a beguine, possibly
in Magdeburg. Mechthild of Hackeborn (1241–98) had been admitted into the community at the age of seven (Liber I, 1, 5) and raised there under the supervision of her older sister, Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn. She became choir mistress and was probably a teacher, particularly of the young Gertrude of Helfta. Gertrude of Helfta (1256–1301/1302) was the youngest of the three, entering Helfta in 1261 at the age of five (Legatus I, § 1, l. 10). There are clear intertextual and literary cross connections between Das fließende Licht der Gottheit, the Liber specialis gratiae and the Legatus divinae pietatis, mainly in the use of hagiographical and literary topoi. Their writings allow us insight into both the homogeneity and the heterogeneity of the spiritual milieu in the Helfta convent at that time. This is illustrated by the reflection within their works on the very nature of the works themselves, expressed using the same literary motifs (→ Nemes). With very similar formulations, all three authors lay claim to divine authorization, approbation and defence of their writings (→ Poor).

For example, the actual material form of all three works—their binding, parchment and script—is imagined as an actual “book” in the hands of God. Moreover, each woman expresses anxiety about the continued transmission of the book to, and its salvific effect on, its readers, as well as concern for, and intercession on behalf of, the copyist(s). The works also discuss whether, or to what extent, the visionary wrote her book with her own hand. A key motif is the statement that the visionaries all received the titles of their respective works from the mouth of God Himself: Das fließende Licht der Gottheit is named in Chapter II, 26 as the “Light of the Godhead which always flows into the hearts of truth” (Licht der gotheit das do alwegen flüst in die hertzen der warheit, cf. also Legatus V, § 7). Of the Liber specialis gratiae Chapter II, 43 says that it is called “the book of special grace” (‘liber specialis gratiae’ vocabitur). Two titles are given in the Legatus divinae pietatis: the prologue to Book 1, § 2, ll. 7–8 states that “the Lord wanted to put on this book the following name: ‘Document of the Abundance of God’s Loving-Kindness’” (Dominum velle imponi libello illi tale nomen: scilicet ‘Memoriale abundantiae dininae suavitatis’). Chapter II,
