Mechthild of Magdeburg's Mysticism:

The Body, Divine Eroticism, and Suffering in the *Flowing Light of the Godhead*

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Abstract

This thesis examines Mechthild of Magdeburg's The *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, analyzing themes of the body and sexual desire for the divine using various conceptions of the erotic and physicality. It also confronts Mechthild's usage of pain in relation to pleasure and the extent to which this may be problematic with a queer approach and BDSM analysis. The paper briefly overviews the phenomenon of Christian mysticism in the medieval period, along with looking at how gender may have functioned differently in this time that resulted in the prevalence of female mystics. Before analyzing Mechthild's texts, the paper looks at previous scholarly approaches that have sought to minimize the presence of sexuality in her work and posit her painful experiences as violence enacted against women. The analysis of Mechthild's texts concludes that both the body and sexuality are essential to her religiosity and proposes the idea of accepting pain and pleasure as not mutually exclusive.

Contents

Introduction	1
Historical Context	2
Gender and the History of Beguine Mystics	6
Background and Scholarly Treatment of Mechthild	10
Textual Analysis: The Body and Eroticism	15
"Eroticized Violence"	20
BDSM Perspective	26
Conclusion	32
Bibliography	34

Introduction

In a collection of texts from the thirteenth century, Mechthild of Magdeburg writes of the relationship between a loving couple, stating that "the more his desire grows, the more extravagant their wedding celebration becomes. The narrower the bed of love becomes, the more intense are the embraces. The sweeter the kisses on the mouth become, the more lovingly they gaze at each other".[1] For the modern reader, it may be surprising to learn that the partner Mechthild speaks of, a man that desires, embraces, and kisses the soul, is God. In medieval Christianity, the act of sharing a bed with, embracing, and kissing God was not uncommon. In fact, Mechthild was only one of many individuals throughout medieval Europe who developed intimate relationships with God and Jesus to further their spiritual growth.

Mysticism, or the acts and experiences of an individual directly communicating with God in order to attain greater spiritual truth or knowledge, was an extremely popular phenomenon in medieval Christianity. This new monastic movement in Europe led to an increasing number of female mystics who sought to express their religion and develop love relationships through connecting with Jesus spiritually and physically. The prevalence of Christian mystics in medieval Europe points to an intriguing connection between religion and experience in which Christian practices were deeply embodied. Additionally, the popularity of mystic women in the Middle Ages highlights a period when women were becoming more centrally involved with Christianity, they increasingly contributed to theological discourse, yet could not fit into existing structures of the organized church.[2] Mysticism appeared to take a strong hold of the lives of these women in a manner that led to an increasing importance of the body to their religious and spiritual expression. This paper will very briefly overview Christian mysticism in medieval Europe, its

[1] Mechthild of Magdeburg. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. (~1250-1270). Translated by Frank Tobin. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press. 1998, Kindle. (I.22).
[2] Woodhead, Linda. 2004. *An Introduction to Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, 146-48.

connections to gender and authority, and analyze themes of corporeality, eroticism, and suffering in Mechthild's texts. In this thesis, I demonstrate the essentiality of Mechthild's body and eroticism to her religiosity, along with how both enabled her to advance her relationship with God. In addition, I seek to problematize the idea that Mechthild was a victim in her experiences that involved pain and explore the possibilities of how pain and pleasure may function together.

Historical Context

Scholars of religion and medievalists note various transitions and structural changes that impacted the involvement of women in Christendom throughout the Middle Ages. Both the Gregorian reforms and the shift from an aristocratic society to one that was more urbanized and money-based diminished the power of women, especially within the public sphere.[3] Towards the end of the eleventh century, there was a revival in monasticism that inspired women as much as men. Between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, the number of women who were canonized increased significantly, yet the institution of the new Cisterian order had no intention of including women in monasteries.[4] Interestingly, this lack of attention to women in both the formal structure of the order and in official legislation resulted in the ability for women to have greater autonomy in developing their monasticism. Despite the fact that the Cisterian order later tried to curb the power of these women, it failed, and at the end of the thirteenth century Cisterian nunneries outnumbered Cisterian monks.[5] The prevalence of these nunneries in the Middle Ages resulted in the ability to finally hear women's voices in Christian history, such as that of Mechthild. In fact, the German convent of Helfta, which Mechthild was a part of, was

[3] Woodhead, *Introduction to Christianity*, 145.
[4] Ibid, 146.
[5] Ibid, 146.

especially notable in its allowance for women "to attain a level of literacy that enabled them to contribute directly to Christian literature and theology for the first time".[6]

In the later Middle Ages when monastic authorities finally began to exert control over these religious orders to curb their power, a new movement had already arisen that included less formal women who embraced poverty, as well as the continued participation of aristocratic women.[7] Due to increasing control over the church, as well as who could be involved with or representative of it, the new movement of monasticism "represented a reaction against the elaborate structures of government that had come to characterise much monastic and clerical life".[8] This was an expression of power from below, because rather than stemming from overarching or existing structures, "this feminised form of piety took its rise from the actions and desires of individuals… and it took the form of loose alliance of like-minded women united by common devotion".[9] Further, this new form of monasticism was largely focused on the relationship of the individual soul to God and placed a new emphasis on devotion to Christ.

Mechthild was part of this larger movement of monasticism in western Europe that consisted of women seeking out new ways to live in connection with Christianity, which was that of the beguines.[10] For the beguines, apostolic Christianity was emphasized and Christians focused on the humanity of Christ, seeking to live how he lived.[11] According to Petroff, this new spirituality and the beguines "wanted a daily religious practice, the education to pursue that practice intelligently, and the opportunity to discuss spiritual ideas among themselves".[12] The

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[6] Ibid, 147.
[7] Ibid, 147.
[8] Ibid, 149.
[9] Ibid, 148.
[10] Petroff, Elizabeth A. *Body and Soul : Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism*. Oxford University Press, 1994.
[11] Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 52.
[12] Ibid, 52.

first beguine that can be tracked was born in 1177 and the movement lasted in northern Europe until the French Revolution.[13]

Originally, the beguine movement was more spontaneous and led by individual or small groups of women that were not affiliated with the church, who then began organizing themselves into congregations at the beginning of the thirteenth century until the church intervened.[14] To allow for these women to continue practicing their religion with minimal threat to the structure of Christianity, many of them were assigned various spokesmen and the women received papal consent to regulate their own communities.[15] As these communities grew, they gradually became more enclosed until forming into a parish. By limiting the public appearance and influence of these women, the Church was able to retain control over certain fears they had regarding hierarchical positions and the bodies of women.[16]

The lives of beguine women were highly varied and many pursued different paths to achieve spiritual enlightenment. The beguine movement produced many different writings that allow us an inside view of how these women experienced and understood divine love, many of whom seemed to do so through erotic encounters with God and intense suffering. The stark eroticism within texts such as Mechthild's is especially intriguing, as it occurred in a period that largely viewed sex as shameful, except in the context of marriage. Yet, it is important to note that there was a gap between the sexual ideals that the church promoted and the lived realities of medieval people.[17] Another important aspect to note in relation to Mechthild and the beguines is

[13] Ibid, 52-3.
[14] Ibid, 54.
[15] Ibid, 54.
[16] Ibid, 54.
[17] Slipp, Nicole. "Kinky Reading: Power, Pleasure, and Performance in Middle English Texts". PhD diss., Queen's University, Ontario. 2017, 13.

their desire to relate to and mimic Jesus physically in the suffering he endured on the cross, which I will later discuss.

Along with the beguines, Mechthild additionally reflects the prominence of bridal mysticism, another movement in the late medieval and early modern periods that stemmed from the monastic revival. Bridal mysticism drew its primary inspiration from the Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible, which portrays the erotic and spiritual relationship between two young lovers. A common interpretation of the Song is to view it as a metaphor for the love between Christ and the church, which cemented the notion of love relationships between members of the church and Jesus within Christian history.[18] Bridal mystics, therefore, sought to develop marriage relationships with Jesus through mystical union. As opposed to beguines, bridal mystics did not need to be part of a religious community or order, they could be married, and bridal mysticism was common among both men and women. Mechthild's writing displays similarities to poetry in the Song of Songs and is reflective of bridal mysticism. While Mechthild was formally a beguine and belonged to a convent, she also exemplifies bridal mysticism, which was more so tied to the popular culture of medieval and modern Christianity in Europe.

The writings and spiritual practices of beguines, as well as the prevalence of bridal mysticism, can help inform us of how medieval women like Mechthild thought about and utilized their bodies. While not every beguine text can be read as coming directly from these women themselves, numerous texts that were produced were done so primarily by the women, with minimal interference or regulation.[19] Mechthild is one of these beguines who received a notable amount of autonomy as she wrote her book, which allows us to read a medieval text that

[18] Fox, Michael V. "Song of Solomon". In *HarperCollins Study Bible NRSV*, edited by Harold W. Attridge, 903-911. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006.
[19] Woodhead, *Introduction to Christianity*, 147.

comes more directly from a woman in history.[20] I hope to analyze Mechthild's writings in this paper as they invoke eroticism and pain, as well as briefly overview the previous scholarship and controversies that have existed about medieval mystics as a whole that are often applied to Mechthild.

Gender and the History of Beguine Mystics

Before diving into Mechthild's texts, I would like to briefly overview how gender functioned for women in the medieval era, which allowed Mechthild to author seven books and become a notable religious figure in a time when theological instruction was reserved primarily for men. In order for medieval women to secure the spiritual practice and development that they desired, they utilized alternative pathways from what was considered traditional. As opposed to what was seen as normal for men, who frequently entered spiritual life through studying texts and seeking the mystical meaning of scripture, the source of these women's "spirituality was experiential more than intellectual, in a stronger sense than was true for most male mystics".[21] The basis for this movement of monastic women, therefore, was firmly grounded in their experiences, which were enabled by their bodies. It also marked them as different from the theologians and male mystics that were prevalent in this time. While experience did serve as the basis for these womens' authority, men were increasingly threatened by these visionary experiences and sought to disqualify them as sources of religious authority. This made the relationship of women to the mystical tradition extremely ambiguous, as we see with Mechthild. On the one hand, they were within the church and saw it as an important basis for their salvation.

[20] Tobin, Frank. "Introduction" in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998. Kindle.
[21] Jantzen, Grace. *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 195.

At the same time, these women pushed the boundaries in place that sought to diminish their presence and experience because they wanted to be heard and inform others of what they knew.[22]

While medieval mysticism occurred over multiple centuries in numerous different countries, with texts written or dictated in various languages, there are still some similarities between the beguines as a whole, which are important to note in order to contextualize Mechthild. The texts of beguines tell us "that the body is deeply implicated in their epistemology: knowing is performed not by the soul alone, but by the whole person - body, soul, and heart".[23] Additionally, gender imagery was much more fluid and less literal in the medieval period. There is less adherence to the categories of the masculine and feminine, and instead, bodies could be characterized by both traits and it was common for the body of Christ to be portrayed as both male and female, sometimes interchanging.[24] Beguine texts reveal that medieval women saw their bodies as less bound by categories of gender or needing to conform to binaries, but instead they regarded the body as something that could transform and serve as a site for interactions with the divine. While gender may have been conceived of as more fluid in the medieval period, it is important to note that the church did not subscribe to these conceptions in its structure, which was hierarchical and particularly exclusionary of women. Rather, ideas derived from bridal mysticism could be seen throughout society and individuals may have interacted with them at various levels.

Rabia Gregory, a scholar on medieval Christianity, notes how the unique environment of medieval Christianity allowed for new pathways for women to gain and exercise spiritual authority. Gregory's argument centers on medieval conceptions of gender and the body, which

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[22] Jantzen, *Power*, *Gender*, 158.
[23] Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 61
[24] Bynum, Caroline W. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York: Zone Books, 1991.

she states "sometimes operated as a medium for religious practice in ways which cut through the rigid hierarchies of class and consecration and defied gendered constructions of sanctity".[25] It is especially important to note how medieval ideas may differ from our modern ones, because the way that people see their bodies in particular cultures or societies are highly dependent on factors such as laws, customs, institutions, wealth distribution, food availability, and religious ideas and practices.[26] Gregory shows how medieval gender conceptions allowed for women to prioritize proper piety over the pressure to conform to gender norms given that "the practice of learning to become a bride of Christ in particular work[ed] outside of this institutional hierarchy".[27]

Wiethaus additionally carefully analyzes the topic of gender and the body among medieval women, stating that mystical experiences granted women an alternate means of authority that allowed for them to discuss gender from a female perspective.[28] Wiethaus makes a strong argument for how the experience of mysticism functioned for medieval women in their social context, stating that "bridal mysticism allows for the discovery that limits as limits can be destroyed, that femininity can be constructed as a symbol of power, authority, boldness, mental and spiritual well-being and freedom".[29] In these mystical writings, the "Christ figure dissolves any alliance with the fixed images of patriarchal and priestly masculinity except his divine salvific agency" and ultimately "this Christ figure is a composite of both masculine and feminine gender".[30] Gregory states that "these shifts from male to female represented a drawing together of human and divine until the one so closely resembled the other that they were

[25] Gregory, Rabia. *Marrying Jesus in Medieval and Early Modern Northern Europe: Popular Culture and Religious Reform*. Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2016, Kindle, 17.
[26] Miles, Margaret R. *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350-1750*. University of California Press, 2008, 21.
[27] Gregory, *Marrying Jesus*, 15.
[28] Wiethaus, Ulrike. “Sexuality, Gender, and the Body in Late Medieval Women’s Spirituality: Cases from Germany and the Netherlands.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7, no. 1 (1991): 35–52. EBSCOhost, 40.
[29] Wiethaus, "Sexuality, Gender, and the Body", 50.
[30] Ibid, 44-45.

indistinguishable".[31] So in their pursuit for connection with God, female and male bridal mystics appeared less focused on gendered divisions as they prioritized the spiritual development and transformation that was made possible through the convergence of bodies and souls. At the same time, this was not a sense of religious authority in any way that would allow it to be translated to the hierarchy of the church. Rather, Mechthild's engagement with ideas of bridal mysticism, her own experiences with the divine, and her being situated within a community of beguines allowed her greater exploration and experimentation in this area.

As mentioned previously, one main influence for the increasing popularity of bridal mystics and writings that explored love relationships with Jesus is the biblical book, Song of Songs. As Gregory tracks the emergence of the bride of Christ figure in the medieval world, she notes how courtly and allegorical commentaries on the Song of Songs "firmly established the feminized human soul as an erotic bride of Christ" by the twelfth century.[32] Given this common notion of the ability to gain a closer relationship with Jesus, there was an increasing desire and community that sought this experience for themselves, as well as for others. Additionally, it provided a textual basis and reference within the Bible from which the movement of bridal mysticism gained some authority and importance. Given that there are two primary allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs, either as God's love for Israel or as Christ's love for the church, the Song was able to become canonized and thus cemented in Christian history.[33] Additionally, the Song is a poem about two lovers that display sexuality and the union of bodies and souls. Given that the Song is in some ways an earlier example of what later mystical writings

[31] Gregory, *Marrying Jesus*, 17.
[32] Gregory, *Marrying Jesus*, 340.
[33] Fox, *HarperCollins Study Bible*, 903.

would detail, it is helpful to contextualize its place within bridal mysticism when considering the theme of eroticism and the extent to which it is metaphorical.

Background and Scholarly Treatment of Mechthild

The beguine I will be focusing on in this paper, Mechthild of Magdeburg, was a prominent German mystic of the thirteenth century. Born in 1208, Mechthild had her first encounter with the divine at twelve years old, which happened again everyday for more than thirty years.[34] When Mechthild was twenty-two, she went to Magdeburg to become a beguine and devote her life to God. She left the beguines to join the Cistercian convent at Helfta around 1270, where a number of other prominent mystical authors lived around the same time.[35]

Mechthild has one key text, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, that consists of seven books. As Frank Tobin introduces Mechthild's text, he provides an overview of her process: she wrote the first five books of the work in between 1250 and 1260, the sixth book during 1260-1270, and then the seventh book later on. Mechthild wrote in a low-German dialect, while sometimes quoting Psalms in Latin. Her Dominican confessor, Heinrich of Halle, assisted Mechthild by urging her to write the text and compiled her writings into the first six books, while the nuns at Helfta collected the writings for the last book. Most of our knowledge about Mechthild's life comes from the Flowing Light; the fact that she was able to write and utilize poetry reflective of courtly love patterns indicates that her family was likely of noble or knightly standing. Additionally, the fact that she wrote in both poetry and prose implies a higher level of education and knowledge of literature than was common for women at the time. She was also familiar with the Bible and had an awareness of the theological debates taking place around her,

[34] Tobin, "Introduction".
[35] Ibid.

given that she sometimes quoted the text and was able to criticize elements of the church and other theologians.[36]

The Flowing Light of the Godhead consists of seven books of poetry and prose that were written "out of God's heart and mouth" and therefore, did "not have its origins in human thought".[37] As Mechthild notes, it was her God-given duty to record and share what God communicated with her, which granted her the spiritual and textual authority to undergo the project. Deciding to write the Flowing Light was a crucial moment for Mechthild, as in 1260, there was a diocesan synod in Magdeburg that criticized beguines and debated female spiritual authority. The interesting timing of this synod shows how "Mechthild's engagement was a political act and the fruit of her mysticism at the same time".[38] While Mechthild had an intense individual relationship with God and composed this text, it was not removed from the social context of her time, which did not favor women taking on a project such as the Flowing Light, and Mechthild did receive significant criticism for it. This demonstrates the tensions between the fluid notions of gender that existed in medieval Europe and the church's effort to contain and restrict the influence of beguine women.

Before looking at Mechthild's text on my own, I would like to focus on the previous scholarship that considers the erotic elements of the Flowing Light and debate over their meaning as symbolic or literal. In a paper that explores the similarities between eroticism and mysticism through looking at both the Flowing Light and a portion of the Song of Songs, Rita Perintfalvi highlights the connection they share in transgressing boundaries. Perintfalvi states that both of these texts "represent a call for transgressions, since without these the experience of

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[36] Ibid.
[37] Mechthild, FL (IV.2).
[38] Perintfalvi, Rita. “Eroticism and Mysticism as a Transgression of Boundaries: The Song of Songs 5:2-8 and the Mystical Texts of Mechthild of Magdeburg.” *Feminist Theology* 22, no. 3 (2014): 229-40. doi:10.1177/0966735014527197, 230.

God is not possible".[39] While recognizing how stark the erotic language used by Mechthild is, it is interesting that Perintfalvi's response is that the eroticism is "still explainable on logical grounds", which seems to imply something inherently illogical about the relationship between sex and spirituality.[40] At the same time, Perintfalvi cites Keul in stating that "mysticism then discloses an inherent connection between religion and eroticism" .[41] It seems that to Perintfalvi, the connection can only be made logical through a set of transfers, where the language of eroticism is placed upon and utilized to represent a religious experience. It is important to note that Perintfalvi does not deny the sacredness of eroticism or discount these types of experiences, but to her they seem to function primarily as a portal or means to access the divine.

Similarly, Simone Kügeler-Race states that in mystical literature such as that of Mechthild, the "highly eroticised imagery functions as a complex metaphor to express the experience of the divine which ultimately supersedes all human senses".[42] To many scholars, it seems the experience with the divine is interpreted and portrayed as something too powerful for humans to understand or describe, except for through the utilization of erotic language and imagery. Kügeler-Race says that "in Mechthild's text, the language of sexual desires celebrates the divine union, which words fail to express".[43] This perspective communicates the idea that sex only has a place within Mechthild's work as a filler or because nothing else is available, when this is the language and manner in which Mechthild experienced and portrayed her encounters with God.

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[39] Perintfalvi, "Eroticism and Mysticism", 231.
[40] Ibid, 231.
[41] Ibid, 231.
[42] Kügeler-Race, Simone. "Carnal Manifestations of Divine Love in the Mystical Writings of Elsbeth of Oye, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Margery Kempe." *Neophilologus* 102, no. 1 (2018): 39-58. EBSCOhost, 53.
[43] Kügeler-Race, "Carnal Manifestations", 57.

These perspectives from Perintfalvi, Kügeler-Race, and others are especially interesting considering that an article by the theologian Emily Hunter McGowin said how most scholars came "to conclude that the overtly sexual language in medieval women's mysticism is more than simple allegory, but an intrinsic aspect of their thought".[44] The medievalist historian Nancy Partner takes a strong stance against the tendency of scholars to reconfigure and improperly attend to the explicitness of mystical language and literature. She states how the language is coded and read as "a scheme of linked metaphor whose ultimate referent is outside the range of human perception and understanding, and thus can be approached only through figuration, paraphrase, comparison, and displacement".[45] Partner expresses frustration with how sex is often glossed over, instead saying that "medieval mysticism wants to tell us about the heavy weight of sexual restriction, sexual guilt, and conformity to difficult rules of self-constraint carried by monks and nuns, and by all women, but especially those whose religious conpunctions were sensitive and genuine".[46]

Another perspective that reaffirms the erotic in Christianity comes from the feminist theologian Sarah Coakley, who presents an argument that indicates the presence of strong sexual desires and conflicts that the fathers of patristic trinitarianism were also grappling with, specifically Augustine of Hippo and Gregory of Nyssa. Her essay outlines how both fathers in the East and West carried a sexual subtext and struggled with the "messy entanglement" of sexual desire and desire for God.[47] Coakley's paper suggests several ideas, the first being that

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[44] McGowin, Emily Hunter. “Eroticism and Pain in Mechthild of Magdeburg’s ‘The Flowing Light.’” *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1041 (2011): 607–22. EBSCOhost. 608.
[45] Partner, Nancy F. "Did Mystics Have Sex?" In Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West, ed. Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenbichler, 296-311. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996, 302
[46] Partner, "Did Mystics Have Sex", 307.
[47] Coakley, Sarah. “Batter My Heart: On Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity.” *Graven Images: A Journal of Culture, Law, and the Sacred* 2 (1995): 74–83. EBSCOhost. 76.

already in the fourth and fifth centuries, Christian theologians were familiar with and troubled by the intersection of sexual desire and God. The recurrence of a theme such as this one indicates that to become a part of Christian tradition, sexual desire for God may have some "kernel of truth" that cannot be disregarded.[48] Second, the theme of how sexuality relates to the divine is present among both women and men. This makes sense, considering that our modern norms about gender and sexuality did not apply back then, which makes desire for God or interactions with the divine not solely a feminine experience or practice limited to women. Another point that Coakley provides is that not only was this theme seen and questioned in early Christianity, but it was done so by the founding fathers of trinitarianism, which makes the intersection between sexual desire and desire for God relate specifically to conceptions of the trinity and thus to Christianity.[49]

Coakley also wants to present a way in which Christian feminists may be able to retain parts of Augustine or Gregory of Nyssa's theologies for what they do offer in regards to reconciling sexual desire and desire for God. Through her analysis, she argues that Augustine's continuous outpouring of desire at the divine level and Gregory of Nyssa's apophatic turn into darkness both "might hint at an alignment of sexual desire and desire for God, rather than demanding a disjunctive choice between them".[50] If such notable figures in the history of Christianity, as early as the fourth and fifth centuries, were seeking to reconcile these desires in their theologies, Mechthild should be able to contemplate similar issues and desires without being categorized as metaphor before more serious consideration. Further, Coakley argues for the feminist restoration of the "late Augustinian view of human cooperative delight in response to

[48] Moore, Kai. "Kinky Hermeneutics: Resisting Homonormativity in Queer Theology." *Feminist Theology* 26, no. 3 (2018): 241-254.
[49] Coakley, "Batter My Heart", 83.
[50] Ibid, 82.

the Spirit's inflaming of us with the divine".[51] Mechthild herself exemplifies this delightful response of receiving the divine's outpouring through her relationship with God that entails longing for and active non-resistance to this inflammation.

Textual Analysis: The Body and Eroticism

Now I would like to focus on examples in Mechthild's text that depict the erotic dimension of her religiosity. As she begins her sixth book, Mechthild details an intense experience with God that is characterized by touch, love, and knowledge:

> The soul loses all her guilt and all her sorrow, and he begins to teach her his complete will. Then she begins to taste his sweetness and he begins so to greet her with his Godhead, that the power of the Holy Trinity penetrates fully her soul and her body; and she receives true wisdom. And then he begins so to caress her that she becomes weak. She so begins to drink it all in that she becomes lovesick. Then he begins to limit the intensity, because he knows better her limits than she herself does. And then she begins longing to show him great faithfulness. And then he begins to give her full knowledge. And then she begins to taste with delight his love on her flesh. And then he begins to strengthen with holy feeling in her soul all his gifts.[52]

This interaction is one that could not take place without a body and is clearly felt. Mechthild and the soul are "penetrated", "caressed". Love is something that is tasted and additionally, she tastes it on her flesh, making her body the medium and therefore means through which Mechthild was given the possibility to interact with God. As opposed to a "complex metaphor", Mechthild's writing seems to be a recollection of a felt experience, one where spiritual growth and sexuality occurred simultaneously.

The utilization of the flesh in this union of the soul with God illustrates Jean-Luc Marion's philosophy of embodied love, which is discussed in Beáta Tóth's paper, "Love Between

[51] Ibid, 83.
[52] Mechthild, FL (VI.1).

Embodiment and Spirituality: Jean- Luc Marion and John Paul II on Erotic Love". From Marion's perspective, "the radical immanence of the flesh is shown here to reveal an unexpected transcendence" and thus when two bodies encounter one another, "the erotic crossing of the fleshes becomes the site par excellence of the disclosure of one's most intimate spirituality".[53] By keeping Marion in mind as we read Mechthild's experience with God, we see there is value in the flesh and erotic interactions themselves, as opposed to viewing them as symbolic representations of ideas that are inaccessible to the human realm. As Tóth states, "love follows its own logic", which reveals the mistake of scholars as they attempt to explain Mechthild's eroticism on "logical grounds". It is a mistake "to try and make a body 'mean' something, singularly and/or transparently" because then we may "miss the nature of the body itself".[54]

In another passage from book six, Mechthild elaborates on the nature of the body and its relationship to God, stating that:

> The body receives its value from its relationship as brother of the Son of the heavenly Father and from the reward of his toils. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, performed his work with heartfelt love, by suffering poverty, pain, toil, humiliation -- even unto his holy death. The Holy Spirit also performed his works, as you say, with his grace and has produced all the gifts that we ever received. These are three different kinds of works, and yet one undivided God performed them in us.[55]

Here, Mechthild directly connects the importance of the human body to the physicality of Jesus and the suffering that he endured through his body. This presents a means through which Christians can experience a connection with the divine through the materiality and sensations of their own bodies. For Jesus, his most notable physical experience was primarily one of suffering, which explains why for Mechthild, suffering is a voluntary action and something that she

[53] Tóth, Beáta. "Love Between Embodiment and Spirituality: Jean- Luc Marion and John Paul II on Erotic Love." *Modern Theology* 29, no. 1 (2013): 18–47. doi:10.1111/moth.12003, 25.
[54] Moore, Kai Daniel. "Bodies Now and Otherwise: Theology of the Cross and Trans Experience." *Currents in Theology & Mission* 48, no. 3 (2021): 8–12. EBSCOhost, 11.
[55] Mechthild, FL (VI.31).

deliberately seeks out. Similarly to the experience of Christian martyrs, the passivity of enduring physical suffering for Mechthild is an act of triumph and form of agency for Christians.[56]

Mechthilds relationship to her body and the materiality of the body itself, therefore, appears to hold significance on its own because of the connection to Christ it presents. The passage in book six shows that physical sensations of the body, such as being touched gently or harshly, are important to Mechthild's experience with the divine in more than a symbolic manner. Mechthild demonstrates how, as opposed to a metaphor, "it is precisely through actual eroticism that lessons of God are to be learned".[57] As opposed to other theologians before or during Mechthild's time who were often eager to transcend the actual experience of the body and move on to what it symbolized, Mechthild refused to minimize "the reality of the bodily experience that gave the symbol its power" in the first place.[58]

Another manner in which Mechthild connects her body to that of Christ is through eucharistic devotion, which serves as an important practice that helps Mechthild understand the body and pain.[59] For medieval Christian mystics, partaking in the eucharist and recognizing that this also meant partaking in Christ's human body, his literal flesh and blood, resulted in increasingly literal understandings of what it meant to imitate Christ. Mechthild's desire to connect with the divine, therefore, became focused on seeking out and experiencing the physical pain that Christ himself suffered. We see Mechthild make this connection between the suffering of Jesus's body and her efforts to join with him this way:

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[56] deMayo, Thomas Benjamin. “Mechthild of Magdeburg’s Mystical Eschatology.” *Journal of Medieval History* 25, no. 2 (1999): 87–95. doi:10.1016/S0304-4181(98)00027-X.
Asad, Talal. “Agency and Pain: An Exploration.” *Culture and Religion* 1, no.1 (2000): 29–60. EBSCOhost, 46.
[57] Jantzen, *Power, Gender*, 134.
[58] Miles, *A Complex Delight*, preface.
[59] McGowin, "Eroticism and Pain", 620.

> I ask you, Lord Jesus Christ, by your holy death and by the pitiful suffering your holy body suffered on the holy cross… Give me then, Lord, your very own body, that I might receive you, Lord, with true Christian faith, with genuine love, so that your holy body might be and remain the last food of my body and the eternal bread of my poor soul.[60]

Mechthild seeks to receive Christ through the eucharist and is thus also receiving God. The eucharist serves as a means for Mechthild to make the divine part of her; it acts as a bridge between each of their bodies and so it is Mechthild's corporeality that allows for this connection with God. Additionally, if it were not for Jesus's physical suffering on the cross, Mechthild or other Christians could not relate to or connect with him in this way.

Caroline Walker Bynum expands on the importance of the eucharist in the medieval period, especially for women, in her book *Fragmentation and Redemption*. She states that to an extent, receiving Christ's body and blood could serve as a substitute for ecstasy, as it was a union that anyone could achieve. Through the eucharist, Christ was made available to both beginners and those that were more spiritually advanced. Beyond ecstasy, the eucharist allowed for Christians to encounter the humanity of Christ and for thirteenth-century women, Christ's humanity was seen in his "physicality, his corporality, his being-in-the-body-ness; Christ's humanity was Christ's body and blood".[61]

Mechthild demonstrates the importance of the eucharist to her practice, as well as its availability to all Christians and the connection it gives her to God. The soul reflects that even with her lowly status, she is able to receive God: "take in my arms, eat him and drink him, and have my way with him… No matter how high he dwells above me, his Godhead shall never be so distant that I cannot constantly entwine my limbs with him".[62] While God may feel very

[60] Mechthild, FL (VI.37).
[61] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 129.
[62] Mechthild, FL (II.22).

distant and removed, taking the eucharist allows for Mechthild to always have the ability of connection through each of their bodies. Physically, Mechthild utilizes her arms and body to take in God, which blurs the boundaries between them and grants the entwining of limbs that Mechthild speaks of. The taking of the eucharist also seems to present a shifting power dynamic between Mechthild and God. While God almost always holds the power in their relationship, the eucharist makes God consistently available to Mechthild and in this encounter, she is the one deciding to touch and handle him. Further, she is the one in control, as she states that she can have her way with him. While this may not necessarily be a loss of God's power, the blurring of boundaries and bodies that occurs in eucharistic devotion offers Mechthild a different experience in that it allows her to feel Godly.

Additionally, the eucharist held erotic connections as it cemented the physical relationship that Christians can achieve with God through their bodies. Kai Moore argues for the importance of paying attention to the erotic dimensions of desire for God and states that we see these dimensions in medieval mystics that show us "there are virtually no limits to what can potentially be a source for the erotic".[63] Moore states that the invitation to eat Jesus through communion was powerful because physical intimacy was involved, "but *also* because of the implications of cannibalism and the bloody, physical submission of the divine body and blurring of bodily boundaries it implies".[64] By increasingly eating primarily the eucharist, while fasting from other food, one's body was able to move beyond a human body and become divine because of the source of the food.[65] These erotic connections and implications of the eucharist show how the body and eroticism were necessary components for mystics such as Mechthild in their

[63] Moore, "Kinky Hermeneutics", 252.
[64] Ibid, 253.
[65] Jantzen, *Power, Gender*, 209.

religious experiences and relationships with God. Additionally, they hint at the existence of a truth or intrinsic aspect of bodily desire for God in Christianity, demonstrating that simply glossing over the intense physical experiences of people and labeling them as symbolic is both a disservice to the tradition and inaccurate.

"Eroticized Violence"

Given the invocation of body imagery and physicality within many medieval mystic texts, one concern that has emerged among scholars is the combined discourses of pain and love, which build upon one another, as opposed to being understood as mutually exclusive. Various scholars and feminist critiques have identified issues within the texts themselves, as well as problematizing the previous scholarly treatment of suffering and love being portrayed together. One prominent critique comes from Julie B. Miller, who calls for a reexamination of the literature and scholarly treatment of the literature, which she argues has furthered the discourse of women enjoying or seeking harm when it is accompanied by love. Miller cites some passages from Mechthild in her paper, where she identifies the issue that the presentation of violence "is often enwrapped in the rhetoric of romance and sexual passion, in the discourse of pleasure and delight".[66] In regards to how previous scholars have dealt with the literature, Miller states there have been two primary methods, which are either "a reluctant acknowledgement of it followed by a quick dismissal of the need for any rigorous critique" or a celebration that upholds violent sexual themes "as reflective of a peculiarly 'feminine' experience".[67]

Given Miller's critique and her utilization of Mechthild as an example, I wanted to attend to some of the passages in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* that depict what Miller terms

[66] Miller, Julie B. “Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women’s Mystical Literature: A Call for a Feminist Critique.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15 no. 2 (1999): 25–49. EBSOhost, 30.
[67] Miller, "Eroticized Violence", 27.

"eroticized violence" and consider various ways that these could be read. To contemplate the extent to which Mechthild's eroticized violence may be problematic, I utilized various concepts of passivity, pain, and agency from Jean-Luc Marion and Talal Asad, as well as a BDSM framework and ideas about the erotic from various queer theologians. In book III chapter ten, Mechthild details an intense interaction between the soul and God:

> Her eyes are bound with her body's baseness
> Because she is so utterly imprisoned in its darkness.
> She carries her cross on a sweet path
> When she truly surrenders herself to God in all sufferings.
> Her head is struck with a reed
> When one compares her great holiness to a fool.
> With the hammer of the chase of love she is nailed so fast to the cross
> That all creatures are not able to call her back again.
> She suffers terrible thrust on the cross of love as well.
> For she would like to drink the pure wine of all God's children.
> But they all come thronging and offer her gall.
> Her body is killed in living love.

In this passage, violent imagery and language are utilized to describe the intense process of forming a union with God and experiencing divine love. Along with being bound, imprisoned, struck, and nailed, the body is also killed in securing this love. Mechthild's usage of the cross in this scene is especially powerful for the case of imitating Jesus's suffering to recall his humanity. When Mechthild points out this particular moment in time when Jesus suffered, she blurs the boundaries between the human body and that of the divine: one's body is opened up to the various possibilities and feelings that are made available through this Godly experience. Mechthild's suffering followed by her body's death, both granting her new insight, bridge a gap between her and Jesus, who "likewise, suffered agonizing torture and death, and in these same moments revealed the glory of the living God".[68]

[68] Moore, "Bodies Now and Otherwise", 12.

Mechthild's presentation of this interaction in book III posits the soul and female as a passive receptor through her language; her head is being struck and she is nailed to the cross, an experience that is likely not seen as desirable or pleasurable for the majority of readers or individuals. Yet, before these lines in the text, Mechthild "truly surrenders herself to God in all sufferings". This is an active choice of Mechthild's, after recognizing the imprisonment of her body and the dark forces that the soul is already subject to in everyday life, she decides to seek further union to direct her soul's progress. Mechthild's power in surrendering depicts "an inner reserve of strength and calm that is not predicated on taking power away from anyone else".[69] Additionally, it is important to note that our reaction to being nailed to the cross is formulated by the environment we are in, because in the medieval period the desire to be crucified "was neither bizarre nor uncommon".[70]

In the decision for Mechthild to subject herself to suffering, it is helpful to apply Marion's reconsidered concept of passivity, which will allow us a new perspective that recognizes Mechthild as an agent, as opposed to a victim. Using the Stoic idea of pre-emotion, which says that the soul's involuntary motions are not emotions until the individual ratifies it, Marion insists that when flesh is involved, "the passivity of the lover develops in conjunction with her activity and is no longer opposed to activity".[71] In this framework, we can think about passivity as a form of active non-resistance to the touch of another, which posits Mechthild as a participant and autonomous individual in her interaction with God.

[69] Moore, "Kinky Hermeneutics", 249.
[70] Gregory, Rabia. "Marrying Jesus: Brides and the Bridegroom In Medieval Women's Religious Literature." PhD diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2007. https://doi.org/10.17615/2j0f-z006, 183.
[71] Tóth, Beáta. “Love Between Embodiment and Spirituality", 24.

Further, the erotic, which can include acts of submission and the acceptance of degradation and pain, can be thought of as a source of power itself, as Audre Lorde suggests.[72] By broadening our definition of eros and what constitutes the erotic, we can interpret the erotic as granting an individual their own personal power through having "the strength to claim one's own selfhood, needs, and desires, both physical and emotional".[73] By thinking about Mechthild's invocation of the erotic in this manner, we see a woman who constructed her own power through her most intense embodied experiences and needs. Even if parts of Mechthild's writing may be "embarassing to our progressive or feminist sensibilities", the continued emergence of these themes over time suggests an aspect of truth that makes erasing them dishonest and difficult.[74] The desire for a sexual connection to God or Jesus and connection between the erotic and the divine is recurrent in Christian theology. Additionally, it is a recurring theme that is always connected to the body which demonstrates why it cannot be ignored.

To further analyze Mechthild's role in her suffering and how this violence could be problematic or not, anthropologist Talal Asad provides helpful observations in his essay *Agency and Pain: An Exploration*. Asad notes that even in cases where the intention is to punish someone with pain, it "can be eagerly embraced by those on whom it is inflicted and transformed into something other than was intended".[75] While Asad points out that pain is not solely negative and that the body is often utilized to cultivate agency through practices involving pain, this is not his primary focus. Instead, Asad is interested in thinking about how pain can function as "an essential element in a distinctive social act" that impacts others and thus is an "activity that

[72] Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sexuality and the Sacred*. (1994): 75-79. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 75.
[73] Moore, "Kinky Hermeneutics", 248.
[74] Ibid, 251.
[75] Asad, “Agency and Pain", 45.

reproduces and sustains human relationships".[76] In Mechthild's case and that of other mystical women experiencing suffering, is it possible to think about their endurance of pain both as a martyr-like act of self-empowerment and as having an agentive function that impacts social spaces?

Bynum and other scholars certainly posit mystics similar to Mechthild as active pursuants of a union with God, even when this involves pain. Bynum warns against falling into the modern notion of a bride as inherently passive, instead stating that from the women's perspective, "the image was deeply active and fully sensual" and in seeking suffering "it was a fully active fusing with the death agonies of Christ".[77] Further, it was common for both medieval women and men to manipulate their own bodies with a religious goal in mind. While we may see these actions as "self-torture", they were more likely to be described as a means to unite with the body of Jesus. Bynum pushes against the tendency to view these women as lacking self-worth or feeling distant from Jesus or God because of gender difference. Actually, Bynum says, their physicality granted them a means to imitate Christ as they were; there was no need to find an alternative role or separate themselves from their gender or their femininity.[78]

To return to Asad's larger goal of highlighting pain as a social instrument that sustains human relations, his example of Christian martyrs in late antiquity is helpful to understand the differentiation being made. Apparently, the Christian embrace of suffering that was depicted in martyrdom resulted in a greater concern for the poor or sick members of society, which created both a new meaning of pain and another economy of action. When Christian martyrs inflicted pain on themselves, it was

[76] Ibid, 48-9.
[77] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 48.
[78] Ibid, 49.

> a form of agency not because of their active intention, nor primarily because of the symbolic significance of suffering. It was a form of agency because, as part of an emerging tradition, their public suffering made a difference not only to themselves as members of a new Faith but also to the world in which they lived: it engaged with one's own pain and the suffering of others differently.[79]

Did the suffering of Mechthild and other medieval mystics make a difference to those surrounding them and how they interacted with others? Based on the popularity of mystical literature and experiences in this period, it is hard to imagine that these experiences of pain did not alter or shape the world that mystics lived in. For example, Gregory highlights this social function as she states that choosing to marry Christ was not simply a replacement for worldly marriage or a symbol of chastity, but these communities functioned to challenge "each bride to make herself worthy of her spiritual groom so that communities of sisters could all enter heaven together".[80] The women of these monastic communities sought to undergo their own spiritual transformations, as well as secure a model that would allow others this opportunity, which created environments with shared goals, beliefs, and practices that reinforced their approach to life. The formation of the concept of the individual bride of Christ within the medieval period happened in conjunction with the shifts of the surrounding environment. As Gregory states, it "required the collaboration of generations of Christian teachers, patrons, and artisans", which reflects how thoroughly individual experiences of pain or suffering altered and shaped the world around these women, such as Mechthild.[81]

Further, the desire of medieval mystics to imitate and identify with Christ in his pain impacted society as well as women such as Mechthild, because by merging with Christ's flesh they achieved "salvation not only for themselves but for the world. The bodily suffering of their

[79] Asad, "Agency and Pain", 47.
[80] Gregory, *Marrying Jesus*, 182.
[81] Ibid, 215.

fasting, frequently accompanied by other self-inflicted pain such as flagellation, can be seen as a positive identification with the agony of Jesus in his bodiliness. They thereby gave themselves, with him, for the redemption of the world".[82]

Additionally, pain that is seen as welcomed or desired by those who are inflicted with it should be able to be seen in a different light than when an individual is simply a passive recipient of an undesirable experience. While the eroticization of violence may be an issue, how do we attend to or think about those who may find pleasure with pain or experience acts of violence in a pleasurable manner? According to Augustine, the delightful reception by humans of the divine is the act of contemplation itself and allows for the boundaries of human and divine to be blurred as God can be part of an individual, as they are part of God.[83] To push back on the scholarly interpretations that often characterize erotic relationships with God as abusive and too problematic for retrieval, Coakley, based on her analysis, posits this act of contemplation as a "willed delight" and possibly the ultimate goal for which humans were created. This further helps to portray Mechthild as an autonomous woman who actively sought the highest level of spiritual development and union with God, even when faced with the complexities of pain and suffering, which should be considered as not mutually exclusive with pleasure itself and thus the pleasurable aspects of the experience.

BDSM Perspective

Another helpful framework to consider when grappling with the connection of eroticism and pain in Mechthild's writing is offered by queer theologians such as Kai Moore and Robert Shore-Goss, which is the invocation of a BDSM framework to approach theology. Moore presents their "Kinky Hermeneutics" as an approach for queer theology, in which they build on

[82] Ibid, 215.
[83] Coakley, "Batter My Heart", 82.

Marcella Althaus-Reid's framework of indecency to illustrate that there are many different pathways and insights to the divine that can be explored if we challenge our values or initial hesitations and start attending to bodies and their desires. To illustrate what BDSM can offer to theological reflection, Moore discusses the act of intentional submission, which is both an unconventional mode of power and a transformative force. Bottoms, or those that do not hold positions of dominant power, conjure up their own internal strength and power "in the face of what looks (or sometimes feels) like victimization".[84] While Mechthild was not familiar with BDSM or kink, she is also not removed from the possibility of seeking intentional submission or pain in her relationship with God to produce liberative and spiritual moments or revelations through her sense of inner power. If our modern sensibilities hold us to think "that submission is anti-feminist"[85], we are ignoring the diverse desires and realities that exist in subjectivities vastly different from our own.

Shore-Goss also presents the idea of individuals seeking voluntary pain as a means of transcendence, stating that we no longer see voluntary pain as a religious value. In opposition to voluntary pain, in our present day we actually seek to avoid it through medication or other treatments. This was not always the case, however, considering that voluntary pain has been utilized by numerous religious traditions over time to achieve a sense of transcendence or enlightenment.[86] Asad also reaffirms the importance of the body, specifically regarding its ability to feel pain as he states that the materiality of the body has been an essential medium for various traditions, as those partaking in the traditions utilize the body to cultivate agency. Historically, "the role of fear and hope, of felicity and pain, is central to such practices"[87], yet we understand

[84] Moore, "Kinky Hermeneutics", 249.
[85] Ibid, 252.
[86] Shore-Goss, Robert. "Queer incarnational bedfellows: Christian theology and BDSM practices." in *Contemporary Theological Approaches to Sexuality*. 2017.
[87] Asad, "Agency and Pain", 49.

them differently now, which can make the experience of reading certain female mystics such as Mechthild especially jarring for the contemporary reader.

Through a BDSM framework, we can consider Mechthild as the equivalent of a bottom or the partner with a more passive role in an interaction she details between the soul and God, where the soul says:

> O Lord, you pamper to excess my dank prison,
> In which I drink the water of the world and eat in great misery
> The ash cake of my frailty,
> And am wounded to the death
> By the beam of your fiery love.
> Now you leave me, Lord, lying in my misery,
> My wounds untended, in great torment. [88]

In this passage, Mechthild characterizes her body as the dank prison from within which God wounds the soul. Not only is the soul wounded, but it is wounded to the extent of death, left untended, and in torment. While the experience that Mechthild writes of may seem difficult to recover, even in relation to a BDSM framework, God demonstrates the overall awareness he maintains of Mechthild's suffering when he replies, stating that:

> "When I wound you most deeply,
> I immediately apply salve most tenderly".[89]

God's response resembles the idea and importance of aftercare in BDSM, which can involve a variety of care-taking behaviors, both emotional and physical, after what may be an especially painful or uncomfortable experience for the submissive. Aftercare can be stated at its most basic level "as the willingness to provide support and attention to your partner after a play session to facilitate the return to an everyday state of mind".[90] In this scene, God is the inflictor of pain, as

[88] Mechthild, FL (II.25).
[89] Ibid, (II.25).
[90] Pullen, A. "BDSM Aftercare" Hell's Couture. https://hellsc.com.au/bdsm-aftercare/. 2019.

well as the healer of the wounds afterwards. Similarly to BDSM, this highlights how God as the dominant holds the overall power throughout the scene, which allows for Mechthild to forgo her sense of control to ensure a transcendent experience, which is only possible if God takes on this role.

Nicole Slipp is another scholar that utilizes a BDSM framework to gain insight on different historical periods, whose dissertation is a kinky reading of three medieval texts in order to understand the power dynamics of the medieval period via queer theory.[91] Her dissertation is helpful to better understand the basic components of a BDSM framework and the normative views on sexuality during the medieval period. For Slipp, the elements of fantasy, power exchange, and pain are critical for BDSM. Interestingly, these elements also seem to be notable in medieval literature and all three are utilized by Mechthild in her books. Another basic element of a BDSM framework is that power exchange is always acknowledged and made more noticeable, as the power differences are part of the sexual appeal and get exaggerated for erotic effect.[92] Further, it is common for kink scenes to "involve the conscious and performative resistance to or manipulation of existing power dynamics between practitioners", which again speaks to ideas of active resistance and passivity that we considered earlier.[93] One last defining element of BDSM is consent; boundaries, comfort, limits, and forms of communication are all established prior to the activity to ensure everyone's comfort and safety. Consent is always essential and important, and it is especially so when sexual encounters may involve pain.

In the medieval period, as we have seen, the act of experiencing pain was eroticized and at times it can become extremely difficult to differentiate pain from pleasure when this happens.

[91] Slipp, "Kinky Reading", 74.
[92] Ibid, 37, 74.
[93] Ibid, 17.

Suffering to achieve sexual pleasure and suffering for salvation therefore possess similarities, even if the experiences are different. At the same time, even if the experiences are different, it is intriguing to note the similarities between religious and sexual ecstatic experiences, as both can be characterized by bodiliness, intensity, and excess.[94] Pain is utilized in both the Christian tradition and BDSM practices to elevate power distinctions in relationships and transcend the self, a process that is voluntary and offers distinct potentials for emotional freedom.[95]

Because of the difficulty in distinguishing between the erotic and divine or suffering and pleasure, intent and subjectivity are especially important when discussing pain. Again, a BDSM perspective highlights how the key for these experiences that cause suffering are the desire for the end result, the subject's intention to achieve this result, and of course, the unique perspective of who the subject is themselves. If we return to Mechthild, knowledge of BDSM helps to understand her intense experience of erotic suffering and consider the extent to which it may be an internalized desire for violence against women, an agentive decision made by Mechthild, or possibly a combination of both that may problematize how or if we can accept each of these themes together. Again, God enacts harsh punishment against Mechthild in her spiritual quest:

> She is slapped with the great powerlessness
> Of not being able to enjoy without interruption eternal light.
> She is brought to judgment trembling with shame
> Because God so often avoids her
> Because of the stains of her sins.
> She responds to all things in a holy manner
> And cannot bear to treat anyone shamefully.
> She is beaten at her trial
> When the devils try her spiritually.[96]

[94] Hollywood, Amy. "Sexual Desire, Divine Desire; Or, Queering the Beguines". *Toward A Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*. (2009): 119-133. Fordham University Press, 133.
[95] Shore-Goss, "Queer Incarnational Bedfellows".
[96] Mechthild, FL (III.10).

Mechthild is taken on quite the physical, emotional, and spiritual journey, but is it one in which she is a victim?

With the help of queer theology, I propose that it is through her pleasurable experiences of pain that Mechthild in fact frees herself from the boundaries of medieval society to instead achieve union with the divine. It has been noted that "pain and self-construction are intimately interrelated through human neuro-dynamics", which allows us to recognize how "sacred pain often released the mystic from corporal constructions of ego into a transformational experience of connecting with the divine".[97] According to Shore-Goss, this is precisely what some BDSM practitioners achieve through their practice of erotic submission with a dominant partner. These individuals actually find freedom from receiving pain as a submissive and further, many "shared an ever-deepening sense of service to humanity and to God, starting with their particular master and widening their service to the greater community".[98] Further, the social element that Shore-Goss highlights within various queer individuals brings us back to Asad and how pain likely had a greater agentive function for medieval mystics such as Mechthild, by producing and sustaining relationships between different people.

By approaching the erotic from multiple perspectives, it is possible to recover Mechthild from perceptions that see her as furthering ideas that cause violence to women. Yet, at the same time, I would like to consider the possibility that Mecthild does not need to be recovered or situated within a different framework, even if she may seek pain in her path to enlightenment. While Miller calls for a reexamination because the treatment of literature such as Mechthild's may further the idea that women seek or enjoy violence or pain in the name of love, I would like to pose the question of what if some individuals *do* desire pain when it is accompanied by love?

[97] Shore-Goss, "Queer Incarnational Bedfellows".
[98] Ibid.

If they are women, does this make them proponents of gendered violence or have they internalized a misogynistic society? Through this thesis, I think it is clear that some people do actively seek out pain and we should allow for a distinction between them and those who are victims of harm. While the preferences of some should definitely not be applicable to all and anyone's desire for pain should never be presupposed, it is still important to take various, different, and irregular subjectivities into mind.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have established the centrality of Mechthild's body in her religious practice and further, argued that her simultaneous utilization of eroticism and pain in her mystical experiences should be read as an active choice that cannot be simplified into a dualistic framework, as we tend to do contemporarily. Mechthild exemplifies the monastic revival within the Middle Ages and the unique opportunities this presented to medieval women. On the one hand, the movement of bridal mysticism allowed for a more fluid concept of gender in which both men and women aspired to marry Jesus, therefore allowing women to experiment more with religious authority through their own relationships and experiences with God. On the other hand, the church felt threatened by the increasing participation of women within Christianity on their own terms and therefore, sought to confine them into communities and place them under church control. Mechthild, as a beguine who lived within a monastic community and reflected bridal mysticism, offers a unique glimpse into the religious practice of a devout Christian woman in the medieval era.

Mechthild privileged the erotic aspect of her relationship with God and was only able to follow this intensive religious path because of her body. The scholarly tendency to deemphasize Mechthild's sexuality reflects the increasing lack of attention given to the body in modern

conceptions of religion as largely or solely belief. Additionally, positing Mechthild's experiences of pain as a violence she was forced to suffer through immediately reinforces a conception of pain that is negative and thus something to be avoided, despite Mechthild telling us that "if the body can still flap its wings, the soul can never reach the heights that are attainable for human beings".[99] These tendencies that posit religion as completely separate from the erotic and the erotic as incompatible with pain are a disservice to Mechthild and her readers considering the profound revelations she shares throughout *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. By too quickly dismissing what makes us uncomfortable, we deny ourselves of recognizing the possibilities that discomfort or pain may provide in shaping and transforming ourselves and the world around us.

[99] Mechthild, FL (II.24).

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