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## The Written Word Bound by Devotion Unseen: Female Monasticism and Religiosity in the Visions of Gertrud the Great of Helfta

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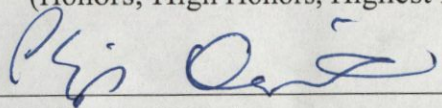
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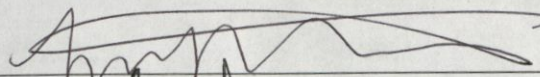
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
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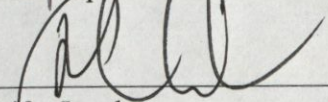
by

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Accepted for High Honors  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

  
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## Introduction

The mystical literature of Gertrud the Great of Helfta expresses above all else a love for the Divine and for Christ as the Bridegroom, unmatched in its sensual language and surreal, ethereal imagery. Gertrud herself is a well-known figure, a nun who lived and wrote at the monastery of St. Mary in Germany in the late thirteenth century and the only woman ever to be given the title of "The Great" in monasticism. The scholarship discussing specifically what her visions express and the shape of life at Helfta focuses mainly on those concrete, obvious details. It examines the vibrant culture that characterized Helfta, the meaning behind Gertrud's sumptuous imagery and bridal mysticism, and the relationships between her work and the writings of her predecessors. Such study has its place and in fact was extremely useful and necessary for my own research. However, this Honors Thesis is less enamored of those concrete details of Helfta's life and intentions, and far more interested in the emotions and motivations expressed through the shape of Gertrud's visions. As a result, the least-studied book of *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness*, the fourth book, written not directly by Gertrud but rather transcribed by an anonymous nun, has become the focus of my research. In its collection of visions centered around the connecting literary structure of liturgical celebration, the fourth book expresses Gertrud's surreal visions and as well indirectly contains the Sacred Heart of Helfta itself. Appearing as a tapestry, each of the book's individual threads record the experience of a different nun. When examining this grand, intricate cloth in detail, a scholar may see the edges of each and every seam, wound together to express both the singular experience of the visionary whose religiosity facilitated such a text as well as those of the community that raised, changed, and grew up alongside her. Thus, while Gertrud remains the focus of this study, serving as the

underscoring cloth connecting each and every idea together, she also allows for a scholar to understand the character of Helfta as a whole. With this purpose in mind, I have approached my thesis not looking to unpack the theological ideas of a singular figure (which Caroline Walker Bynum, Jeffrey Hamburger, and Ella Johnson among others have already accomplished) but instead to understand how these ideas express the religiosity and experiences of the women who created them.

This Honors Thesis consists of two sections, one in which I outline historical context and one in which I approach and analyze the text itself. Within the first section, I review the life of Gertrud of Helfta, contextualizing her work within the framework of the complicated history of monasticism and her own experiences. The influences upon Gertrud's work, such as her mentor, companions, and the literature accessible to her as a member of Helfta will be discussed alongside the less-concrete details that underscored her text. In addition, the presence of her unique, difficultly defined "female experience" in her work and the manners in which it appears, such as in her erotic depictions of the Sacred Heart of Christ as vaginal in shape, will also be presented. As well as these aspects specific to Gertrud, the first section will discuss the significant role that the community of Helfta played in the genesis of the *Herald* and its fourth book, laying out each concept necessary for understanding the second part. During this second section I will present a notable list of Gertrud's visions, describing them in detail, and discussing them in reference to theology, culture, and the community at Helfta. Studying the veneration of Christ as a bridegroom and religious-romantic target, I will discuss a main idea of reciprocal, divine love to which Gertrud's visions pointed, no matter what subject or contemporary issue they were meant to comment upon. I will break this section into five parts analyzing different aspects of Gertrud's religiosity. Framed by introductory and concluding subsections, there will

also be sections focusing on the Liturgy, the Eucharist, Wealth and Materiality, and Female Spirituality and Intimacy. Within the context of these ideas, the threads of the lived experiences of the greater tapestry of the women of Helfta will be examined.

The study of female monasticism and mysticism in medieval Germany is one that simultaneously is still emerging and yet already has years of background. Both the establishing works of Caroline Walker Bynum, whose *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* introduced the complex ways in which gender often functioned in mystical literature, and Rosalynn Voaden's research on how gender informed the works of Gertrud of Helfta and its community as a whole influenced my thesis. However, I wanted to take the perspectives expressed within a step further. Ella Johnson's *This is My Body: Eucharistic Theology and Anthropology in the Writings of Gertrude the Great of Helfta* was integral in this respect, a new piece of scholarship in comparison to much of my material that added the final piece in the puzzle of understanding Helfta's religiosity: the Eucharist. Its introduction into even the most spiritual of visions lends itself to the expression of a physicality that cannot be ignored through the direct consumption of Christ's flesh and blood, and participation in the liturgy. Expanding on these works and the many others that I read, I hope to have pushed the boundaries of scholarship on Helfta. While they acted as a background, enabling me to understand the visions on display and make connections between them and the complex, mystical theology of the High Middle Ages, the primary source itself nonetheless remained the most interesting one. It is very likely that in all of my analysis I barely scratched the surface of what was within; indeed a wide array of visions remain undiscussed in this text, although each of the ones that I selected reveals some interesting aspect of the piety and love expressed by Gertrud within the *Herald*.

My study of the *Herald* and of Gertrud of Helfta herself took me across a wide array of scholarly texts, both ones focusing on the broader historical context of the liturgy and of female monasticism, and ones focused instead on the mysticism that Helfta's main body of work expressed so beautifully. These secondary sources offered me context and a variety of lenses through which to view and recontextualize the *Herald*. My understanding of its content, once a superficial entrancement, instead became deeper as I came to know the wider reasoning for and meaning behind Gertrud's imagery. Thereafter I could simply make connections between this context and the text itself. While I initially intended to consider more of the material, lived reality, each of Gertrud's visions were deep with a spiritual meaning that lent itself to a far more ethereal study focused less on physical existence and more on the motivating emotions of the women of Helfta. As a result, when I examined each vision on its own, considering possible metaphors, the eucharistic tilt of Gertrud's approach to monasticism, and the vaginal, venerated status of the Sacred Heart of the romantic Christ, what emerged was not an expression of any one piety, but a culmination of the experiences of Helfta as a whole. This study contains within it a focus first and foremost on the expressions of love present at Helfta: love for Christ, for the Divine in general, and for and from the community itself. Perhaps this focus is not so groundbreaking; however, I found it important to say, especially when so much popular discussion of female monasticism seems obsessed with understanding it as an escape from the misery of the male oppression of the Middle Ages, rather than on its own terms. Such an understanding of the time feels unfair, both to the Middle Ages themselves, and to the many women who chose the convent not out of fear but out of love, whatever that love was for them.

To conclude this brief introduction, this Honors Thesis, envisioned at first as a path to studying the daily lives of the women of Helfta, came to help me understand their emotions and

beliefs instead. In the next two sections, my hope is that I will be able to illuminate an under-discussed aspect of the nuns of Helfta and of Gertrud herself– pushing the focus past their piety and their misery to instead examine their love and humanity. They were devoted, both to each other, and to the romantic figure of Christ. Gertrud, whose visions elevate and illuminate their own perspectives, described her visions of the Divine with all of their sensual, beautiful imagery, from a place of love. Perhaps this sensuality was merely an expression of a greater sentiment spreading throughout the religiosity of the Middle Ages at the time, and yet through Helfta's massive tapestry of visionary literature it can be found. With it, so, too, can be understood its function within the community of Helfta.

### Section One: Historical Context

The works of Gertrud the Great of Helfta emerged from a wider monastic, mystic tradition as an influential body of visionary literature in thirteenth-century Germany. Primarily responsible for the authorship of texts such as the *Exercises* and *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness*, Gertrud became the preeminent mystic of her community at the monastery of St. Mary by encasing complex theologies within sensual visions of the Divine. Devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ, Gertrud dictates many visions, such as those detailed in the fourth book of the *Herald*, presenting complex theological ideas through a legitimizing piety based on her visionary experience. However, the history behind these visions contains far more complexities than one might realize. Their language, contents, and concepts stem from both Gertrud herself and the community at Helfta that influenced and was a massive part of the genesis of her work. The lived experience itself of monasticism affected the character and contents of the visions that she recorded. As well, the cloister's physical reality defined the boundaries in which Gertrud existed, simultaneously offering sanctuary and a sense of group identity while also cutting off many influences of the wider world. The resulting literature expresses a confidence that underscores the nearly entirely female community that birthed it, as it reflects the experience of gender endemic to female monasticism and mirrors it upon the Divine. Alongside the lives of the entire community, Gertrud's writing also includes the experiences of Gertrude of Hackeborn, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Mechthild of Hackeborn, three members of Helfta's monastery who each influenced her writing, helping it to grow into a lyrical and sensory style focused on the visual, tactile experiences of the Divine. Gertrud's eloquent mystical writing presents a visionary canon indicative of the lives and lived experiences of its inhabitants. In focusing on Divine love, Gertrud offered a personal and yet simultaneously



communal version of religiosity, as it was intimacy with, rather than separation from God that she espoused.

However, before the examination of Gertrud herself as well as the monastery of St. Mary at Helfta, a wider historical context is necessary. The course of monastic history as a whole has been one of branching growth and development from its earliest participants, with successive movements building off of and reacting to the ideas and practices of previous orders. Earlier within the history of medieval monasticism, St. Benedict composed his aptly-named and influential *Rule of St. Benedict* during the sixth century.<sup>1</sup> The Benedictine Order that would eventually emerge from this text offered the basis for the majority of European monastic traditions. Its multitudes of followers lived a disciplined and ascetic lifestyle of regimented prayer, work, and study as they devoted themselves to God and attempted to live virtuously.<sup>2</sup> Over time, the various Benedictine monasteries scattered across central Europe became the subjects of lay patronage and accumulated a vast amount of wealth. Eventually, they would participate significantly in the landscape of medieval Europe's social infrastructure. This growth owes its existence to the common practice of elite patronage of religious devotees in the twelfth century.<sup>3</sup> The system enabled the continued existence and accumulation of wealth of monasteries and was a method through which wealthy lay people were able to participate in religious life. Notably, many monastic institutions, including nunneries, were founded by the wealthy and powerful for the purpose of gaining prestige.<sup>4</sup> The cultivation and management of surrounding properties became a significant portion of the duties of the convent, as they came to function as dedicated religious institutions and larger administrative systems in their own right. In the case

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<sup>1</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, Fourth Edition, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce L. Vernerde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890-1215*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 131.

<sup>4</sup> Vernerde, 128.

of female monasticism, abbesses and their deputies were involved in and even in charge of the business of the abbey, including the exchanges of its properties and the gathering of wealth.<sup>5</sup> Thus, these particular institutions were unique in terms of their hierarchical structures, as they would have been primarily administered and cared for by women. In addition to the direct participants in the daily life of the abbey, wealthy women often patronized female monastic institutions.<sup>6</sup> That medieval women were able to wield such power is notable, as their doing so marks the significance of female experience and participation in the overall development of monastic communities. The accumulation of wealth and prestige that would come to characterize the Benedictine Order would also lead to the establishment of the Cistercian Order (significantly, a movement with which the abbey at Helfta engaged) as part of successive responses to the preceding institutions.

The Cistercian Order, founded in reaction to the perceived overwhelming wealth taken by the Benedictine Order, laid out specific goals of its own in response. Vowing to return to what they thought to be the original Rule of St. Benedict, the Cistercians focused on living in poverty and simplicity, dressing themselves in undyed cloth and refusing to opulently decorate their religious spaces and objects.<sup>7</sup> That the one existed in reaction to the other connects the two, and indeed it is between these two conflicting observations of the Rule that Gertrud may finally be placed. Much of the earlier scholarship disagrees on her alignment between the two monastic orders, as she is difficult to contextualize in either tradition. This ambiguity accurately describes the overarching situation at the monastery of St. Mary at Helfta, to which Gertrud belonged. Scholars have struggled to categorize it and ultimately the convent has been described as

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce L. Vernerde, *Women's Monasticism*, 123.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*, (Zone Books: New York, 1998), 58.

<sup>7</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 3-4.

Benedictine, Cistercian, or both by one scholar or another. This confusion comes as a result of the monastery's complicated history. A Cistercian prohibition passed in 1228 and reaffirmed in 1235 banned both the incorporation of nunneries into the Order and new affiliations of existing abbeys.<sup>8</sup> As a solution, scholarly consensus holds that the institution was formally Benedictine despite the undeniable Cistercian leanings of its literature.<sup>9</sup> However, while Helfta may not be formally designated as Cistercian, there is no denying that the movement's influence penetrated deeply into all of its works. In lieu of joining or creating Cistercian monasteries, Benedictine nuns simply had to adapt their Rule for themselves. This solution was the case at Helfta; indeed its charter refers to the monastery as Cistercian, even if without the approval of the Cistercian Order.<sup>10</sup>

The use of this more covert designation led to a loophole within the laws of the greater Cistercian governing body, as it would allow the residents of Helfta the space to write and create unique art without an overarching hierarchy to stop them. Abbots of the Cistercian General Chapter exercised a significant amount of control and supervision over the many Cistercian convents that had already emerged in the century before Gertrud's time, and were able to impose strict limits on population size, visitors, and confessors.<sup>11</sup> That the Monastery of St. Mary remained officially Benedictine despite the obviously Cistercian leanings of its inhabitants would have allowed them the space to experiment with new ideas and to better self-govern. The autonomous nature of Helfta enabled its inhabitants to adopt many Cistercian customs and ideas without reproach.<sup>12</sup> The lack of easy categorization of the monastery at Helfta cements it as a

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<sup>8</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body: Eucharistic Theology and Anthropology in the Writings of Gertrud the Great of Helfta*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2020), 32.

<sup>9</sup> Alexandra Barratt, "Introduction," in *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness: Book 4* by Gertrud the Great of Helfta, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2018), XI.

<sup>10</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 32-33.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce L. Vernarde, *Women's Monasticism*, 161.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics*, (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1999), 6.

liminal institution in which Benedictine and Cistercian experience both informed a religious expression of female monasticism unique to Helfta and any other uncategorized nunneries. Without the shackle of an official religious Order or governing entity weighing around their necks, the nuns of Helfta would have been free to look in a variety of directions for theological and literary influence. Based on their mystical writings, they most certainly did.

In any case, despite these problematized yet fascinating attempts to place Gertrud within a greater religious tradition, what is for certain is that her ideas did not exist in a vacuum no matter to which of the Orders influencing her they tended to lean. Her religious writing, just like her monastery itself, is certainly difficult to categorize. Working off of the influence of her fellow nuns and contemporaries within her liminal monastic house, Gertrud's writing resembles the overall trend of successive movements that characterized medieval monasticism. Like every other piece before them, texts such as *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness* emerged as an amalgamation of synthesis and genesis, responding to and working off of earlier religious works with new concepts and interpretations. Gertrud herself took a significant amount of religious inspiration in the form of many influential male writers, to whose work she would have had access. In particular, the shadows of Bernard of Clairvaux and Augustine of Hippo may be seen with the illumination and examination of her writing.<sup>13</sup> *The Herald* draws upon the ideas of these writers alongside Origen, Gregory the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, and the Victorines.<sup>14</sup> That Gertrud's finger was on the beating pulse of medieval Christian literature is exemplified by her display of literary skill and knowledge. Her litany of sources offered her the ability to express a variety of complex religious concepts through her more ethereal prose.

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<sup>13</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 60.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, 25.

Much of Gertrud's research was facilitated by Helfta's abbess, Gertrude of Hackeborn, who was well known for procuring as much theological literature as she possibly could, either by transaction or by transcription, in order to teach her flock.<sup>15</sup> During the preceding century, the significance of written sources for documentative, historical, and narrative purposes had grown, and as a result so, too, had the practice of keeping archives.<sup>16</sup> Gertrude of Hackeborn was therefore on the cutting edge of these monastic developments. Her drive to collect literature pushed Helfta's community in new and interesting directions, cultivating a more studied monastic community. She was known during her abbacy for simultaneously being kind and welcoming while also intensely encouraging the pursuit of education among her charges.<sup>17</sup> Given Gertrude of Hackeborn's frenzy for education, the atmosphere of the monastery itself would have considerably promoted reading and writing, creating a culture that would have engaged the community as a whole, and as a participant in which Gertrud the Great would have developed into the visionary writer as she is known today.

As well as this encouraging source of literature and learning of all kinds, the younger Gertrud the Great would also have had access to the preaching and spiritual guidance of nearby Dominican friars, whose close proximity to Helfta would have made such collaboration likely.<sup>18</sup> The interaction of these friars with Helfta's community would diversify Gertrud's sources and influences in order to deepen the flowing channel of her writing. Gertrud's work therefore should not be analyzed as a singular cog in the machine of any particular monastic tradition, but rather, despite its mostly Cistercian ideas, as a product of a great litany of medieval visionary literature. Her work incorporates greater mystic traditions while simultaneously treading its own path.

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<sup>15</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Martha G. Newman, "Stories and Community: Seeing, Hearing, Writing" in *Cistercian Stories for Nuns and Monks: The Sacramental Imagination of Engelhard of Langheim*, (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2020), 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 34-35.

However, when analyzing Gertrud's writing, it is important to take care not to leave out the rest of the community at Helfta. Their presence would come to influence Gertrud's own in a multitude of manners as the majority of her works were written in conversation with the community. In particular among Helfta's residents, Mechthild of Magdeburg, the Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn, and her sister Mechthild of Hackeborn portrayed visions that they had experienced in language that drew from both their personal experiences of the body and communal experiences of female monastic life in the cloister.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the rest of Helfta's less-known inhabitants would have participated in the conception, writing, and discussion of her work in one way or another. Gertrud's visionary literature thus exemplifies a multiplicity of experiences and ideas, as she synthesized her disparate sources into a unique whole.

In her writing, Gertrud expresses both the influence of the outer world of Germany and the inner world of the cloister. Despite the superficial perception of a simple, pastoral, perhaps utopian life, communities such as the one inhabiting the monastery of St. Mary at Helfta lead quite complex existences. There was no singular, quintessential monastic experience for men or women, as regionality and specificity would exist despite the standardization of monastic orders. In the case of convents, the communities present were diverse, boasting virgins, widows and wives of all ages.<sup>20</sup> Helfta would have been no exception to this general population makeup. This lack of standardization adds an interesting question into the reading of the *Herald*: whose experience would it most manifest? Would this person be Gertrud, whose point of view features so consistently? On the other hand, much of the writing at Helfta resulted not from Gertrud's sole authorship but rather as the result of collaborative, communal visionary writing.<sup>21</sup> Helfta's

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<sup>19</sup> Rosalynn Voaden, "All Girls Together: Community, Gender and Vision at Helfta," in *Medieval Women in their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 86.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce L. Vernerde, *Women's Monasticism*, 97.

<sup>21</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 48.

broader community played a crucial role in the writing and transcription of many of Gertrud's texts, either describing her life biographically or transcribing her dictations of her mystical visions.<sup>22</sup> In this case, the task of untethering the perspective of the one from the perspective of the many is nearly impossible; as well, it would significantly degrade the meaning of the text as a whole. The *Herald* was not written alone; to analyze it as though it was filtered merely through a single, genius mind is to miss its meaning entirely. There is a reason that the community of the monastery of St. Mary features heavily in the *Herald*. For one, their presence functions as a connective device. Throughout the successive series of revelations described in the text, Gertrud outlines the shape of her visions atop the daily religious activities of her monastic sisters as she illustrates her many points about theology, piety, and the liturgy. Gertrud thus creates meaning in part through their described actions and behavior.

As the plot of the *Herald* itself is so communal, it both mirrors overall trends in Cistercian thought at the time and recalls of the way in which the Abbess Gertrude attempted to engage with and teach her monastery. Particularly, the collecting, composing, and sharing of stories had become an important Cistercian tradition by the end of the twelfth century.<sup>23</sup> That the entirety of the community adopted this particular practice into their repertoire highlights the significance of communal writing when it came to the composition of the *Herald*. Notably, the collection of sacred, visionary texts that emerged from Helfta is one of the largest collections of female-written revelations to come out of the thirteenth century.<sup>24</sup> This enormous selection betrays the hand that the community had in its creation. The existence of these texts may be considered a physical manifestation of the intellectual, spiritual atmosphere of community

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<sup>22</sup> Alexandra Barratt, "Introduction," in *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness* by Gertrud the Great of Helfta, (Collegeville: Cistercian Publications, 2018), XV.

<sup>23</sup> Martha G. Newman, *Cistercian Stories*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 25.

cultivated by the nuns who inhabited Helfta. This specific brand of female spirituality evolved in response to the exclusion of women from larger monastic institutions, encouraging exploration.<sup>25</sup> Such exclusion simultaneously forced women to deal with this reality and allowed them the space to explore and create unique art and literature, as they would have had to come up with their own, individual ways of establishing spiritual authority. Their visionary work therefore expresses these unique circumstances, exhibiting a religiosity all their own.

The spiritual atmosphere of Helfta was influenced by the physical space of the cloister itself. The reality of monastic life would affect the events and ethereality of female visionary literature. The influence of physical space onto visionary expression would come as a result of cloistered life and the sensory experiences that it offered. The physical reality that Gertrud inhabited thus filters her perspective. While dismissing the convent simply as the place in which Gertrud and the nuns lived is easy, it should be noted that she spent nearly her entire life within this space, having been sent to Helfta at age five and educated there all her days.<sup>26</sup> The life offered to Gertrud by the convent would have simultaneously been one of seclusion from and communication with the outside world, as purely cutting the convent off from all exterior contact was an impossible task. This challenge led to the construction of the convent as a religious space that would have facilitated both inclusion and exclusion, as many convents were built with specific plans that controlled both entrance and exit, often utilizing complex gateways and paths, while simultaneously crafting discrete sacramental spaces for women to participate in the liturgy.<sup>27</sup> The strict control offered by these design choices would create a sense of ritual tied to the experience of crossing boundaries and traversing the cloister, as repeated traversal through

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<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Alexandra Barratt, "Introduction," in *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness* by Gertrud the Great of Helfta, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2018), XII.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*, 48.



the convent itself in order to view the sacrament or to simply exist as a member of the community would legitimize this recurrent motion as a religious experience. Unfortunately, as very little of Helfta survives to the modern day, Gertrud's exact physical experience of worship and daily life cannot be gleaned. However, the general shape of existence within the cloister and the experience that such a life would have evoked is not unknowable. Special precedence would be afforded to the ideas of outside and inside themselves, as they would become specific spaces that offered unique experiences of reality. As well, despite their seclusion from the outside world, nuns nonetheless kept some ties to it and its images.<sup>28</sup> Thus, despite any intended isolation from it, the realm outside of the cloister nonetheless seeped in through the cracks in the monastery to influence the tiny society within. As a result, the nuns of Helfta's monastic community existed in a sort of liminal space, with a physical reality influenced by the very walls in which they lived, yet still writing with sources from beyond the limits of the convent in order to craft an expression of religiosity that was unique to them.

Like the wider physicality of monastic buildings, the experiential aspects of the body itself also affected female religious life and writing. As was standard for the version of bridal mysticism exemplified by Gertrud and the nuns of Helfta, the flesh, at least in a spiritual sense, granted an avenue through which the Divine could be reached. While such physicality was not meant to be literal, the imagery apparent nevertheless embodies the experience of what was considered the female body. This focus on personal, female bodily experience is present even and especially in depictions of Christ. For example, imagery and discussion of the Sacred Heart of Christ in spiritual literature tends to focus on Christ's wounded side. Having developed from earlier veneration of the Five Wounds of Christ, the Wounded Side was seen as the entrance to

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*, 51.

the Sacred Heart and subsequently as the source of the sacraments.<sup>29</sup> Gertrud's depictions of his wound often tilted towards imagery of feminine bodily experience. She was not alone: medieval illustrations of the Sacred Heart as seen through Christ's wounded side tended to resemble a vagina, as the wound was represented as "a slit between two gaping edges," in which "sometimes, but not always, drops of blood were shown emerging."<sup>30</sup> Many interpretations are possible for an observation like this one; however, the most useful for the contextualization of Gertrud's writing is the way it indicates the lasting influence of personal, bodily experience on her spirituality. Specifically, an individual's sensations would have been given precedence in a type of literature so focused on intimate connection with the Divine. This touching of the Divine was one indicative of the experiences of Helfta, as rather than dismissing themselves for any perceived unworthiness, they reached outwards toward it to find their own identities within. Notably, the visionaries of Helfta inscribed the female on the Divine, employing these images of blood flowing, opening, and enclosure when discussing the Sacred Heart.<sup>31</sup> A focus on the physical experience of Helfta's inhabitants themselves makes perfect sense. Gertrud's tactile, sensory perspective would filter her experiences of both the body of the cloister and her own body, affecting the visions communicated in the *Herald*. That spiritual union with God was expressed with such intimate, and in the case of Christ's wound and Sacred Heart, homoerotic imagery and language, echoes the cloistered nature of the lives of those who lived and wrote at Helfta.

This focus on the female extends beyond simply perceiving it to be in Christ, as the nuns of Helfta both envisioned themselves embracing the Lord and saw Christ embracing them back. The relationship depicted was one of mutual love and physical affection as a means through

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<sup>29</sup> Rosalynn Voaden, "All Girls Together," 72.

<sup>30</sup> Rosalynn Voaden, "All Girls Together," 74.

<sup>31</sup> Voaden, 74.

which to depict mystical experience, as contact with Christ's body became the impetus of spiritual revelation. Many of the visions of female mystics, often facilitated in the literature by descriptions of visual works of art, tended to include depictions of nuns embracing Christ, kissing his wounds, and receiving the stigmata, a culture of religious imagery that was particularly distinctive to female mystic spirituality.<sup>32</sup> This veneration of Christ's wounds reads as an expression of adoration and love from the devotee to the subject of her devotion. In the example of Helfta specifically, Gertrud's visions would often feature "the union of her heart with Christ's within their bodies," which tended to be "accompanied by an exchange of fluid," of which the liquid given the greatest precedence was blood.<sup>33</sup> Gertrud's focus on bodily fluid implicates the significance of sensual experience to the writing generated by Helfta. The tangible sensation of Christ's wounds as a means to connect with him becomes exemplified in the ritualized exchange of liquid between Divine and devotee. The inscribing of vaginal imagery onto Christ's wounds illuminates this type of experience, as mystical depictions of the wounds dripping with blood would represent the outflowing of Divine love from the source of his Sacred Heart.

That blood was given such focus is unsurprising, but nonetheless indicates an ease with a specifically feminine, personal experience of the body interacting with a higher, spiritual experience. This blood parallels the flow of menstrual blood, which would even have mirrored the cleansing and healing blood flowing from the sacred heart.<sup>34</sup> The confluence between menstrual blood and the blood of the Sacred Heart in the literary tradition parallels and evokes those aforementioned vaginal-like illustrations of the Sacred Heart, as both images champion tangible, sensory experience as a path to the Divine. That many visions of female mysticism

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<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*, 80.

<sup>33</sup> Rosalynn Voaden, "All Girls Together," 85.

<sup>34</sup> Voaden, 85.

overall included physically interacting with these wounds implies at the very least a more intimate relationship with Christ founded on personal, physical connection as a means to communicate spiritual union. However, these depictions underscore the significance placed on female experience in female visionary literature, and particularly in the literature of Helfta. Rather than depicting the Divine as unreachable, illustrations such as these ones extend a personal understanding of the body to the Divine itself. The nuns of Helfta looked into the heavens and, instead of perceiving themselves to be unworthy of it, they saw the familiar within. Thus, despite the intangible, ethereal nature of many of the nuns' visions, the physical space of the body with all of its features and fluids communicates intimacy with the Divine.

The centrality of female experience to the writings of Helfta comes as no surprise, given its existence as an institution populated by and run entirely for women. As a female monastic community it had a learned and spiritual atmosphere that was conducive to the creation of art. Helfta's population actively encouraged the creation of and did indeed produce illuminated manuscripts, embroidery, and music.<sup>35</sup> This art, funded by female patrons and crafted by nuns, served as an indirect means of participating in religious discourse.<sup>36</sup> Texts would often inspire images, which would then inspire texts in a cycle of artistic creation.<sup>37</sup> Gertrud even admits in her work that religious images shaped her visions.<sup>38</sup> Thus, while the revelations and visions depicted in the *Herald* were written by many hands from throughout the abbey, certain influences emerged to the forefront and directed the imagery of the texts. In addition to Gertrud's visions, many of the works compiled at Helfta were the products of particular mystics and scholars, women whose writing influenced her own. Of this literary community, two figures

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<sup>35</sup> Rosalynn Voaden, "All Girls Together," 76.

<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*, 67.

<sup>37</sup> Hamburger, 79.

<sup>38</sup> Hamburger, 127.

emerge as part of the specific brand of bridal mysticism so prevalent in Gertrud's visions. These were her contemporaries and fellow Helfta inhabitants: the Beguine guest of the abbey, Mechthild of Magdeburg, as well as Gertrud's close friend and mentor Mechthild of Hackeborn. A short discussion of their lives, beliefs, and works will supplement the overall discussion of Gertrud's *Herald*. Many similarities can be found between their visionary texts and the works that were envisioned by Gertrud's own will.

First, the much-older Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*.<sup>39</sup> Transcribed in a vernacular Middle Low German rather than in the more-accepted Latin of most religious texts, the *Flowing Light* was composed by Mechthild over the course of decades, both preceding and concurrent with her stay at Helfta.<sup>40</sup> Before moving to the monastery, Mechthild lived as a Beguine in the city of Magdeburg for forty years. This female-led religious path was highly spiritual but was not cloistered in the way of monasticism.<sup>41</sup> The alternative perspective that Mechthild gained as a Beguine ultimately influenced Gertrud's own uncategorizable spirituality, adding an element of sensual mysticism to her more classical education. In addition, through the *Flowing Light*, Mechthild communicated various mystical and visionary experiences, writing of the divine Heart of God and the wisdom and ecstasy of love.<sup>42</sup> These images resonate again and again in the work of Gertrud as she expresses her own experience of the Divine. In particular, Mechthild's conception of divine love would come to be one of the most influential aspects of her work, making its mark upon Gertrud and the other nuns of Helfta when they wrote literature of their own. Moreover, much of the religious imagery with which Mechthild attempts to communicate this concept within the *Flowing Light* focuses on the

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<sup>39</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 25.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Finnegan, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Finnegan, 18-19.

employment of the symbolism of various liquids. Water, wine, blood, and honey all illustrate and communicate the matter and movements of divine love and grace, as reflected in the text's very name.<sup>43</sup> The experiential nature of such imagery would come to be a cornerstone of Gertrud's writing; the articulation of divine love through ethereal yet sensual symbolism underscores the entire *Herald*. Thus, Mechthild's mystical, representational imagery found purchase within Helfta's vast literary tradition, as the visual and sensorial decadence of her writing made its way into Gertrud's own.

This relationship between Gertrud and the writing of Mechthild of Magdeburg finds its twin in Gertrud's relationship with her mentor and close friend Mechthild of Hackeborn. Sister to Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn, the second Mechthild was a contemporary of Gertrud with mystical visions of her own to share. *Domina Cantrix* of the monastery at Helfta, Mechthild served as chantress, directed the choir, and was called "the Nightingale of Christ" by Gertrud in the literature due to the beauty of her voice.<sup>44</sup> Her role as a primary and visible figure within Helfta's community underlines her significance to the *Herald*, as the sensory and musical imagery through which Gertrud describes many of her visions finds inspiration within her experiences of the real world. However, Mechthild herself offered a source of visions and inspiration to Gertrud. While she did not write any of them herself, the visions of Mechthild of Hackeborn were nonetheless recorded by Gertrud and another nun in *The Book of Special Grace*.<sup>45</sup> Much in the style of the *Herald*, the book recounted Mechthild's visions over many years of her life and was also written collaboratively as part of the greater collection of Helfta's spiritual and mystical literature.<sup>46</sup> Through this communal process, Helfta's literature recorded a

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<sup>43</sup> Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta*, 21.

<sup>44</sup> Finnegan, 27.

<sup>45</sup> Finnegan, 28.

<sup>46</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 25.

scant hint of the close relationship between Mechthild and Gertrud. Their work together thus underscores the shape of the *Herald* and its contents, which expresses, as its title suggests, a significant amount of love for the Divine and for the community itself. Mechthild and Gertrud enjoyed an intimate friendship blossoming from their shared, mystical religiosity and love of music.<sup>47</sup> Their work together on *The Book of Special Grace* expresses this friendship. The closeness of their shared writing exemplifies the ways in which the community at Helfta so heavily influenced Gertrud's work on the *Herald*. This influence appears stylistically and in terms of religious thought. Through her vibrant imagery Mechthild communicated her ideas of divine love and the union of Christ with humanity.<sup>48</sup> The echoes between Mechthild's thesis and the themes present in the *Herald* cannot be overstated. Thus, Mechthild's close relationship to Gertrud intertwines their works together. The attachment that binds them is integral throughout the *Herald*; more than simply contemporaries, as friends and writing partners they influenced each other.

With this relevant history and scholarship in mind, one may return to Gertrud's own writing and particular brand of bridal mysticism. Like Mechthild and Mechthild before her, Gertrud's many works tend to focus on the sacred heart of Jesus Christ and express a deep, sensory relationship with the Divine. As the celestial cast of biblical figures cycles through her visions, Gertrud communicates their presence with a sensory imagery influenced by her predecessors and filtered through her own perspective, expressive of her deep scholarship and personal, visionary experience. In the case of her writing itself, Gertrud's style of written Latin was musical and bold.<sup>49</sup> That she would write with such lyricity comes as no surprise. Indeed,

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<sup>47</sup> Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta*, 110.

<sup>48</sup> Finnegan, 46, 50.

<sup>49</sup> Finnegan, 82.

music itself was significant to monastic life at Helfta.<sup>50</sup> Given Gertrud's fondness for it and its centrality within the liturgy, it is no wonder that music wormed its way into the essence of her writing. The central position of music within the *Herald* as lyrical influence and the actual setting of her visions marks it as a significant influence upon Gertrud's work and life. In addition to its auditory aspects, a large portion of her imagery in these visions illumined divinity and virtue through descriptions of riches.<sup>51</sup> The communication of the will of the Divine in the *Herald* utilizes the effigies of jewelry, cloth, and precious metals, symbolizing ethereal rewards through the visages of tantalizing, tactile riches. The near-constant employment of this imagery throughout the fourth book of the *Herald* marks it as integral to the experience of the text, contributing to the many depictions of intimacy with the Divine. Gertrud's works were intensely spiritual and deeply explorative of this mystical idea of divine love in all of its iterations.

Gertrud's expression of religiosity is almost radical as she describes the spiritual through the tangible, centering her body and its connection to the Divine in her visions. Her writing followed a wide array of influences, as her not-quite Benedictine and not-quite Cistercian upbringing meshed with the influences of her Dominican friars, Beguines such as Mechthild of Magdeburg, and naturally her own monastic community, including the Abbess Gertrude and Gertrud the Great's companion, Mechthild of Hackeborn. The significance of Helfta's community to her writing cannot be overstated. Her fellow nuns recorded her well-crafted visions and participated in the spiritual life of the community. Works such as *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness* exemplify the influence of the community of Helfta, as the many inhabitants of the monastery made up its population and participated in its daily life. As well, Gertrud's writing was influenced by the physical constraints in which she lived. The cloister and the art available

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<sup>50</sup> Finnegan, 7.

<sup>51</sup> Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta*, 83.



to her facilitated her writing, both affecting her experience of the world and the types of visions she would have been able to have. Ultimately, her visions communicated a positive and intimate depiction of spiritual union with the Divine, one inspired by Gertrud's monastic experience.

## Section Two: The Herald of God's Loving Kindness

### Introduction

Medieval, mystical literature illuminates a window into the inner pages of its composers, crystalizing their religiosity and lived experiences into ink and text. In the case of Gertrud the Great of Helfta, known for her vibrant, visionary experiences, mystical literature offered an avenue through which she expressed her own religiosity and lived experiences, as well as those of the rest of her monastery's inhabitants. Gertrud's *Herald of Divine Loving-Kindness* is a book not entirely crafted of her own hands, and yet one that nevertheless reflects the intimacy and passion with which she characterized all of her visionary interactions with the Divine. Gertrud constructed a text that expressed a love for Christ centered around the unfolding of the liturgy, in which the entire community of Helfta took part. This liturgical structure shifts a significant portion of the *Herald's* focus, particularly in its fourth book, to center around the Eucharist. In doing so, Gertrud's relationship to and conception of the Eucharist are carved in the context of her interactions with Christ in her visions. As well, Gertrud's version of the Eucharist is accessible to everyone, including her own, often-featured monastic community. This communal centrality spreads the affection of Christ and the rest of the heavenly host across a pious humanity. It unites the members of Helfta themselves, as their common appearance in her visions marks the community as a vibrant, close, and loving one.

In addition, Gertrud's visions display the medieval, religious, visual culture that emphasized displays of wealth as a way to showcase piety. This culture both inspired her visions and served as a motif through which she could portray the divine rewards themselves. Within Gertrud's visions, this visual wealth was grafted upon the bodies of the heavenly figures, simultaneously beautifying, othering, and venerating them. Gertrud's writing connects the

experience of the Divine to the experience of the body, emphasizing the senses, in particular the sense of taste, as a legitimate method of interaction with Christ through the Eucharist. In her meetings with Christ, Gertrud characterizes their relationship through the lens of a bridal mysticism reflected in the piety of her contemporaries. She therefore portrays their subsequent intimacy as a mutual expression of love between Divine and devotee. This mystical devotion draws upon the language of romance and the body in order to mirror personal experience in the form of the Divine, as the brides of Christ saw themselves simultaneously as with him and a likeness of themselves within him. As a result of such piety, the face of the Divine carries the lived experiences of those who envisioned it. They saw their perfect worlds hidden within the very face of love. Thus, Gertrud depicts a version of the Divine that loves a pious humanity, one expressing a version of Christianity that is warm and loving above all else. As a result, the *Herald* portrays an atmosphere at Helfta and an experience of the divine based around love in an otherwise chaotic world.

Daily life at Helfta would have had a significant effect on the shape and scope of Gertrud's visionary experience, as it defined the limits of her existence. For Gertrud, life would have been characterized by the daily tasks of the monastery, including the liturgical calendar. As a result, the fourth book of the *Herald* centers entirely around the yearly celebration of the liturgy; liturgical experiences tend to trigger Gertrud's visions. Repeated ritual practice thus intertwines with Gertrud's writing, which expresses the liturgy through community participation as a means of experiencing the Divine. This relationship between the Eucharist, communion, and the Liturgy was knotted together by a sense of passionate union with Christ. Gertrud expressed her love of Christ and offered spiritual advice to her sisters through this daily life. Notably, in the fourth book of the *Herald*, Gertrud's own interpretations of theology, heaven, and the Divine, are

lain out without any anxiety about her own authenticity as a heavenly mouthpiece. Rather, she speaks from a place of power, as indeed time is spent in the *Herald* establishing Gertrud's legitimacy as a religious figure with authority.<sup>52</sup> In doing so, the text dives right into the meat of Gertrud's assertions without any need for her to be constantly undermining herself. Her visions thus become a legitimizing tool in and of themselves, allowing Gertrud the precedence to say whatever she wishes on the nature of Christ and any other subject that her visions covered. This function of the visionary medium materializes in the vibrant environment at Helfta, which itself was supportive and harmonious, allowing its inhabitants a greater sense of spiritual authority.<sup>53</sup> Thus, Gertrud's authoritative account imbues her visions with a sense of confidence. This self-assurance is notable, paralleling how Gertrud establishes herself as a visionary authority by joining herself to Christ's humanity through eucharistic communion, rather than the more common trope of gendered weakness and suffering.<sup>54</sup> That Gertrud sets herself apart from her female predecessors and contemporaries speaks to an alternative line of thought running through the *Herald*, one reflective of the unique community at Helfta. Although Gertrud's apparent confidence as she approaches her own visions in her dictations to the third sister that make up the *Herald's* fourth book seems like a small change in mindset in comparison to her contemporaries, it nonetheless is significant as it alters the narrative throughline of the entire piece to emphasize Gertrud's significance as a visionary mouthpiece of the heavens. Any analysis of the text itself thus needs to account for the self confidence that characterized her interactions with the Divine.

### The Liturgy

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<sup>52</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body: Eucharistic Theology and Anthropology in the Writings of Gertrud the Great of Helfta*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2020), 16.

<sup>53</sup> Rosalynn Voaden, "All Girls Together: Community, Gender and Vision at Helfta," in *Medieval Women in their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 81, 86.

<sup>54</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 20.

The liturgical structure of Gertrud's work indicates both the life she spent growing up at the monastery of St. Mary and also the communal culture of Helfta itself. The aforementioned confidence embodies Gertrud's mindset when approaching her writing, characterizing her relationship to the other sisters as mentor-like. However, their participation in Gertrud's visions extends far beyond the realm of the *Herald's* background, as they often directly interact with the narrative. Even the never-named sister to whom Gertrud dictates the many visions of book four of the *Herald* has a distinct presence as part of the narrative, as it is through her perspective that Gertrud's own visions are filtered. As such, rather than being a singular, solitary figure with some essential greatness setting her apart from the rest of her community, Gertrud instead characterizes herself as one small woman experiencing visions within the larger, communal machine of Helfta. While Gertrud remains the main focus and recipient of these visions in the case of the *Herald*, Helfta's inhabitants appear often. For example, Gertrud's interactions with the community of Helfta that come hand in hand with the liturgy trigger many of her visions and in fact function as the devices through which they are facilitated. The participation of the community in the visions of Gertrud is fully apparent when discussing a chapter of the *Herald* in which the Virgin Mary appears before the community with the infant Christ, meaning to contact all of them. That Mary does not simply find Gertrud alone but instead desires to lavish her presence upon the entire community legitimizes them as recipients of her divine power. In one vision triggered by the liturgy, as Gertrud dictates, "at the phrase '<full of grace> and truth,' the Virgin Mary... came to the senior sister of the right-hand choir," she prioritizes the participation of her sisters in the vision.<sup>55</sup> Notably, a section of the liturgy itself triggers this vision. However, rather than directly approaching Gertrud alone, even while still in the presence of the rest of the community, the

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<sup>55</sup> Gertrud the Great of Helfta, *The Herald of God's Loving Kindness: Book Four*; trans. Alexandra Barratt, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2018), 24.

Virgin chooses instead to personally visit every individual sister participating in the liturgy. That she does so emphasizes the significance of religious service, as the sisters' act of devotion is met with a heavenly reward and with love in return. In addition, Gertrud's own role as a passive observer of the Virgin Mary emphasizes her more priestly position, a motif common throughout the *Herald*. While she is a part of the community, Gertrud is still in some ways apart from it, although this partition does not undermine the significance of Helfta's wider community to the text.

The sisters of Helfta are essential to the text, as their participation in the vision nonetheless emphasizes the significance placed on the activities of monastic communities themselves. As the vision continues, Gertrud specifies the ways in which the Divine interacts with its devotees, dictating that "putting her [Mary's] right arm around her [the senior sister's] shoulder and squeezing her, she pressed her noble Child, *beautiful above the children of men*, to her soul."<sup>56</sup> With the addition of the infant Christ into the plot, the participation of Gertrud's sisters in the Vision legitimates them as well as recipients of the Eucharist, emphasizing the direct, heavenly reward available to those who participate in the ritual. As well, the meeting between the Virgin Mary, the infant Christ, and Gertrud's sister through direct physical contact exemplifies an intimacy between their physical and divine bodies. Nonetheless, this intimacy reveals a level of fondness on the part of heaven for its followers, one reflective of and rewarding of the devotion of Helfta to God. However, far more apparent and relevant for the current discussion is the way in which the pressing of Christ to the sister's soul visually represents the effects of taking the Eucharist, just as the physical embracing of Christ simultaneously, spiritually represents its taking. Thus, direct consumption of and interaction with the Eucharist, naturally, remains a central idea of this scene. The direct, physical embrace between the sister

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<sup>56</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 24.

and Christ is also reminiscent of Gertrud's imagery of the Sacred Heart. The gesture that the Virgin Mary makes, pulling her devotees against her side, suggests an embrace, one that extends to Christ himself between them. This particular language of sides invokes the imagery of Christ's wounded side, through which communion with the Sacred Heart is reached. As the infant Christ is pressed against this woman's chest, he therefore meets the font of her soul as well. Thus, that Christ interacts with this woman by being physically placed against her very being reflects the wire-crossed relationship between the physical and the spiritual senses, legitimizing physicality as a method of coming into spiritual contact with the Divine.

In addition, this physicality and intimacy is extended outside of one-on-one, personal contact and ultimately to the community of Helfta as a whole. As the vision continues, Gertrud describes the Virgin Mary "proceeding through the whole choir to the community" before "she pressed her lovable and delicate Son in a similar way to the souls of every single woman in a gentle embrace."<sup>57</sup> The procession of the Virgin across the entire community rewards them for their participation in the liturgy, a significant aspect of their daily lives. That each and every member of the community receives the same divine reward and union with Christ together emphasizes the fact that while Gertrud may be the only one privy to such a vision, she is not alone in her intimacy with Christ nor in their Eucharistic relationship. She simply experiences the revelation of its existence for Helfta's nuns. Despite her visions, Gertrud sees herself in the *Herald* as a servant of her monastic community, as a counselor, and as a servant of the Divine as a visionary.<sup>58</sup> Although the *Herald* catalogs her visions, it makes no attempt to elevate her, just as it makes no attempt to diminish her either. By emphasizing her role as a servant of the Divine and the community at Helfta, Gertrud twists the connotations of her visionary status away from

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<sup>57</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1982), 196.

exaltation so that the focus may remain on the actions of the Divine. Her ability to directly communicate with Christ simply allows her the pleasure of helping to guide the entire community with what he himself has told her. Otherwise, she is simply a small part of a wider organism that moves in tandem. Within the beliefs asserted in the *Herald*, the nuns of Helfta, as a devoted community, are all equally able to share in the intimacy of a relationship with the bridegroom Christ. Thus, in taking the Eucharist physically, any devotee may be subject to the same intimacy with Christ and the rest of the heavenly host that Gertrud herself experiences.

The Virgin Mary's own body language extends the sensory metaphor of Gertrud's relationship to Christ and to the Divine as a whole, as communion with Christ is facilitated once more through an embrace. To embrace Mary when celebrating her in the liturgy therefore also allows one to meet with Christ. The inclusion of the Virgin in this relationship underlines the significance of physical contact to Gertrud's many visions, both in how it allows one to reach Christ as well as the entirety of the heavenly host, who are just as able to bring Divine rewards onto a devotee with participation in the liturgy. This scene therefore accentuates the multitude of nuanced relationships and interactions with Christ that make up the text of the *Herald*. Rather than direct, romantic contact, the scene instead establishes a motherly relationship between the Virgin and her followers. In pressing the infant Christ to the sides of these nuns, the Virgin Mary also allows them to share in the imagery and sensory experience of motherhood despite their virginal status. As the sisters share in this moment of motherhood with the Virgin Mary, they come to resemble mothers themselves, evoking the imagery of breastfeeding as they press Christ to their souls.

While the infant Christ is still central in the relationship between the women, the vision nonetheless creates a direct moment of contact between the Virgin Mary and the nuns of Helfta,



one reflective of the same divine intimacy established in bridal mysticism with Christ. While worshipping the Virgin Mary indirectly facilitates connection with Christ, it also leads directly to physical contact with the Virgin. In devoting their lives to the Virgin Mary, the nuns of Helfta are thus made to be like her and to receive her and Christ's love. The nuns' repetition of and participation in the liturgy as a community allows them to have an even deeper relationship with Christ and come to better understand him through their contact with his mother. In addition, that this maternal image is repeated over and over again with every member of the community simultaneously implies an endless and bountiful love on the part of heaven for its devotees and emphasizes the significance of the female relationships crafted in the monastic community. As an all-female community, the relationships at Helfta would have been almost entirely homosocial. As such, while participation in the Virgin Mary's feast day allows the women of Helfta to connect with her as a whole, their doing so as a community binds all of them in complex ties of love and piety.

#### The Eucharist

The theme of physical communion with the Divine, especially Christ, evident in the vision is apparent in Gertrud's treatment of the Eucharist, which the *Herald* emphasizes in contrast to wider Christian ideas at the time as a method of direct, physical and spiritual contact with the heavens. Particularly, Gertrud emphasizes the significance of legitimate participation in and physical interaction with the Eucharist as a means of connecting with Christ on a deeper level. This opinion, indicative of the unique circumstances of her childhood growing up in Helfta indicates the significance of ritual practice to Gertrud's daily life. This importance becomes especially apparent when discussing medieval popular piety, in which it was understood that to

simply see the Host was to experience it with all of the senses.<sup>59</sup> As a result, encountering the Eucharist through any, more tactile method, was not necessary in order to fully consume it. That the simple act of looking held so much power in comparison to the rest of the senses betrays a religious culture that was not particularly invested in the full array of the sensory experiences of the body. If this simple asceticism would do, then there would not have been any reason to focus on it. The physicality of Gertrud's visions, then, with their focus on tactile, divine sensation, contrasts heavily with this general, visual trend. To make matters even more complex, the common, popular notion at the time of Gertrud's writing was that the average person was impure and therefore unworthy of receiving the Eucharist physically.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the environment in which Gertrud and the rest of the sisters of Helfta were working was one in which religious participation in the liturgy was dampened due to these feelings of unworthiness. Gertrud's visions therefore take on what could tentatively be called a counter-cultural edge as rather than agreeing with popular sentiment, Gertrud instead focused on the significance of consuming it directly with the mouth. That she did so was not to delegitimize the act of partaking in visual communion but rather to emphasize the importance of actual consumption of the Eucharist in comparison.

Working off of the influence of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Gertrud reads the Eucharist as though it were a text.<sup>61</sup> Her understanding of the Eucharist, while grounded in mystical, personal experience, is nonetheless also rooted in her interactions with religious scholarship. Therefore, Gertrud's ideas reflect the genuine effort that went into thought and discussion, as her portrayal of the Eucharist emerged from her time at Helfta. In addition, this simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the ideas of contemporaries betrays the existence of an element of individuality

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<sup>59</sup> Ann W. Astell, *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006) 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 39-40.

<sup>61</sup> Ann W. Astell, *Eating Beauty*, 67.

present in Helfta's body of work. While these ideas were based in the interactions of and discussions by the entire community, working off of other mystical literature from a variety of influences, they also exemplify where Gertrud's visionary work diverges significantly from previous conventions. This divergence from popular thought both exhibits the free atmosphere at Helfta that was less affected by outside trends and also Gertrud's own, personal relationship to the Eucharist and the liturgy. Her visions directly connect participation in these ritual aspects of monastic life to the achievement of a close, personal relationship with Christ. Thus, the key to gaining such a reciprocal relationship with the Divine is to participate in the Eucharist through the sense of taste, rather than sight. The act of direct consumption therefore is portrayed as an act of love and devotion. In the conception of Gertrud and the rest of the community at Helfta, to isolate oneself from the rituals of religious life is to isolate oneself from the Divine.

These assertions about the nature of the Eucharist culminate in Gertrud's discussion of Christ's humanity and the image of the Sacred Heart. It is important to note here that Gertrud's devotion to Christ's Sacred Heart is also eucharistic in nature, as her visions are centered around the mass.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, her assertion that the Divine is reachable through participation in the Eucharist also applies to her experience of bridal mysticism and personal relationship with Christ. As Gertrud describes the relationship between communion with Christ, the liturgy, and the Eucharist, she outlines a version of the Divine whose humanity and love is accessible to anyone through ritual practice, prayer, and genuine devotion. This emphasis upon sincerity over perfect execution of the liturgy characterizes the heavens as forgiving and caring. Gertrud also asserts the reception of the Host as a means to make physical contact with Christ's humanity, and therefore also simultaneously make spiritual contact with his divinity.<sup>63</sup> The duality of these

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<sup>62</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 193.

<sup>63</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 104.

tactile and spiritual sensory experiences underscores many of Gertrud's visions, such as one in which during the singing of a psalm, the narrator of the *Herald* describes that "during the fifth verse" Gertrud approached "the sacred wound of the side of her sweetest lover, which *abounds and more than abounds with all good things*."<sup>64</sup> Preceding this event, Gertrud venerates one of Christ's stigmata with every verse of the psalm.<sup>65</sup> Her contact with Christ is facilitated through the recitation of the psalms, intrinsically connecting participation in the liturgy to this visualization of her act of sincere devotion. In addition, the positioning of the Sacred Heart as a wound on Christ's side, although an element ground in biblical imagery, emphasizes the physicality of the intimacy of Gertrud's approach. She is not simply envisioning the Sacred Heart on its own, but rather seeing it in the context of Christ's human body. This intention on Christ's humanity incites the pious intimacy that characterizes Gertrud's visions.

The closeness between Gertrud and Christ underscores the entirety of the text, with their religious and romantic relationship serving as a narrative throughline, paralleling the function of the liturgy. One prominent example of their intimacy occurs in a vision in which "kissing it [the wounded side] devoutly, she [Gertrud] was purified from all stains in that rosy water that the soldier's spear drew from thence."<sup>66</sup> This section's focus on an act of genuine, romantic and yet religious intimacy between devotee and Divine sets the tender tone of the *Herald's* fourth book very early in its narrative. Its events define the relationship between Gertrud and Christ with physical, tactile language, an understanding of the Divine that accentuates every single scene between the two of them with the suggestion of intimacy. This physicality extends back around to intertwine with the eucharistic undertones of the *Herald*, as Gertrud's physical contact with Christ in the vision resembles the act of taking the Eucharist during the liturgy. Christ's flesh and

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<sup>64</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 12-13.

<sup>65</sup> Gertrud, 12-13.

<sup>66</sup> Gertrud, 12-13.

blood in the vision naturally acts as the bread and wine of the Eucharist. As Gertrud's method of taking this spiritual Eucharist is through a kiss to the Sacred Heart, the erotic connotations first arise. After all, Christ's Sacred Heart was envisioned as vaginal in shape, a motif made all the more clear by the drawing of "rosy water," that is, blood, from Christ's wound. This imagery adds a significant edge to Gertrud's interactions with Christ, enforcing the sense of love between them.

In this particular scene of intimate devotion, however, the parallels to the consumption of the Eucharist stand out starkly. Gertrud's physical communion with Christ affects her in the same way that taking the Eucharist in an actual service would. Through intimate contact with Christ's flesh and blood, Gertrud is "made whiter than snow, made beautiful in every kind of virtue by the most precious blood, and drawn to the very fount of all good by the aromatic steam that came from it."<sup>67</sup> As drinking from the Sacred Heart purifies and beautifies Gertrud, it cements the *Herald's* understanding of the purpose of connecting with Christ so intimately through the Eucharist as one based in the idea of elevation, both through veneration of the Divine and through the subsequent self-betterment of the devotee. The physical and spiritual communion that occurs in the *Herald* due to Gertrud's participation in the liturgy therefore leads directly to her enrichment as a person. As Gertrud is made "beautiful in every kind of virtue by the most precious blood," the *Herald* emphasizes the nearly transactional and reciprocal nature of participation in the Eucharist, directly connecting the idea of the consumption of Christ's blood to the enhancement of one's virtue. As Christ's blood makes Gertrud more beautiful, the text also returns to the sense of romance that accompanies the religious discourse of the fourth book of the *Herald*. It is interesting as well to note the work of St. Bernard with this relationship in mind, as he and his contemporaries believed that as the devotee consumed Christ in the Eucharist, she is

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<sup>67</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 12-13.

also consumed by Christ and incorporated into Him.<sup>68</sup> Gertrud's visions thus wholeheartedly incorporate the ideas of her influence into her romantic sense of the taking of the Host.

Romance holds a major significance to Gertrud's understanding of the Divine and is encoded into every utterance of her devotion. This aspect of Gertrud's prayer appears in the vision with the specific, physical action of a kiss against Christ's side, placing her in a more active position. Her purification is not the result of passive prayer but of a direct act of supplication and intimacy. In reaching for the Divine, Gertrud reaps its rewards. While the kiss functions as a conduit for Gertrud to orally receive the blood of Christ the way she might with the actual Eucharist in physical space, it also functions as a devotional gift. As Gertrud receives the communion she gives devotion in return, expressing her taking of it in a romantic act. In particular, Gertrud saw the senses, particularly those of taste and touch as integral to accessing the Divine. This necessity is of course due to the role they play in eucharistic communion as a means of experiencing both Christ's humanity and divinity.<sup>69</sup> These two versions of Eucharistic communion– the oral Eucharist and the spiritual vision of it– do not conflict with each other and in fact happen simultaneously. In fact, Gertrud believed that eucharistic union with Christ suspended the boundaries between space and time and humanity and divinity, and so the physical and spiritual senses function concurrently in her conception.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the distinction between the literal and the spiritual is not a meaningful one to make when attempting to understand the *Herald*. Gertrud's spiritual consumption of the Eucharist encircles her physical consumption of it. In some ways, there is no meaningful difference between the two at all. The action of a kiss therefore mirrors the act of chewing, as both involve the pressing of Gertrud's lips to Christ in some form. The actuality of taking the Eucharist would express love and devotion for Christ on

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<sup>68</sup> Ann W. Astell, *Eating Beauty*, 75-76.

<sup>69</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 99-100.

<sup>70</sup> Johnson, 123.

the part of Gertrud and the other members of Helfta. Thus, the intimacy apparent in Gertrud's mystical experience of piety grounds itself entirely the actuality of her experience of the Eucharist. In addition, her forwardness with Christ sets the goal of eucharistic devotion as a reciprocal union, emphasizing its rewards to those willing to believe they are worthy enough to consume it with their mouths, rather than with their eyes. However, even as Gertrud emphasizes the experience of taste and participation in the Eucharist to reach the Divine, she also pushes the significance of sight and the other senses. Much of this detailing results from the essence of Gertrud's visionary experience, as its nature ties it to the realm of perception and sensation. This simultaneous focus on the body and what it perceives reflects the relationship between spirituality and physicality within the *Herald*, as Gertrud's visions are stated as the utilization of sensible things to express the inexpressible.<sup>71</sup> They were not simply dictated to and then transcribed by a nun, but rather communicated Gertrud and the rest of Helfta's own religious experiences, both internally and externally.

This interaction between interior and exterior arises in Gertrud's descriptions of aspects of her visions unrelated to direct contact with the Divine, such as the scenery, clothing, and precious objects present within them. This focus is especially apparent when considering that the Eucharist and visual artwork plays a significant role in triggering many of Gertrud's visions.<sup>72</sup> In fact, Gertrud and her sisters argued that physical and material images were significant tools for spiritual writing due to the prescience of sensory experience over the gaining of divine knowledge.<sup>73</sup> Thus, the material aspects of worship such as gestures, books, and chants enabled intimacy with Christ.<sup>74</sup> This materiality of Gertrud's visionary experience sheds light on the

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<sup>71</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 200.

<sup>72</sup> Ann W. Astell, *Eating Beauty*, 96.

<sup>73</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 99.

<sup>74</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 27.

nature of her relationship with the Divine, as her visions portray the heavens and the physical environment of Helfta. The atmosphere of learning present there thus extended both to her conversations with her fellow nuns and to Gertrud's experience of inhabiting the monastery. The cloistered nature of her existence places the setting of her visions at Helfta. Thus, as Gertrud approaches Christ's body, he himself exists within and mirrors the bones of the larger body of the monastery of St. Mary. This connection between the physicality of the Divine and visual, sensory experience underscores the *Herald* as a tool of Gertrud's visions, revealing the world she inhabited as one in which all of these different experiences met.

#### Wealth and Materiality

The connection between piety, body, and visual metaphor belongs to Gertrud's conception of Christ and logically underpins the entirety of the text, characterizing many members of the heavenly host. The distinctive imagery that these visions evoke presents the Divine with surreality, portraying it as living outside the boundaries of human physicality and experience, yet still intimately connected to humanity. The result of this merging is a style of imagery within Gertrud's visions that ornaments and transmutes the relic that is the Divine body into the precious materials that would have decorated it. For example, as she describes an encounter with the Virgin Mary, Gertrud writes that "the spotless womb of the glorious Virgin also appeared, transparent like a most pure crystal; through it all her inner organs shone forth, shot through and filled with his divine nature, just as gold wrapped in parti-colored silk is accustomed to shine through crystal."<sup>75</sup> Here, the act of seeing allows Gertrud to perceive what she might consider to be one of the most human aspects of Mary's body, her womb, which gave birth to Christ's human form, with the language of the Divine. Christ's long-ago presence within this "spotless womb" has illuminated it beyond the bounds of regular human experience. Notably, it has been argued in

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<sup>75</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 23.



Jeffrey Hamburger's seminal work on the relationship between visual and visionary experience that this vision was inspired by a specific representation of the *Maria gravida* that itself had a crystal inlaid in its torso.<sup>76</sup> Whether or not he is correct in his assertion, the enumeration and veneration of Mary's crystalline organs "shot through and filled with his divine nature" connects wealth, beautiful objects, the body, and the Divine, into a delicately tangled web. The crystalline nature of the Virgin's womb allows a divine-inspired look into her very human organs.

This connection between ethereality and physicality is exemplified by Gertrud's elaborate description of the Virgin Mary's inner organs. As they are "shot through" with Christ's divine nature, they are themselves described to be of crystal rather than of human flesh, an analogy emphasized in the image of "gold wrapped in parti-colored silk" that is shining "through crystal." Gertrud describes the Virgin Mary's womb, that specific part of her body in which Christ was held, as filled with his divine nature as well, ascribing a significance to physicality, touch, and sight. The inclusion of the detail of light that has "shone forth" from the Virgin Mary's inner organs elevates the innards of the womb itself, indicating the presence of divine love just as the Sacred Heart might. Christ's presence has left behind some power within her, transmuting her human womb into an object of devotion, lovingly crafted with a wealth of shimmering materials, simultaneously indicative of the presence of the Divine and of the influence of human craftsmanship and touch. That the Virgin Mary's body becomes an art piece through which to venerate her reconnects Gertrud's visionary experience to her physical one, inscribing human sensation upon the Divine even as the Divine is grafted onto human sensation. As well, this depiction intrinsically connects Gertrud's conception of art and precious objects to the experience of the body itself. That the precious image of the Virgin Mary's womb is made alive through

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<sup>76</sup> Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*, (Zone Books: New York, 1998), 118.

Gertrud's sensory experience simultaneously elevates it and makes it accessible by human devotion, as Gertrud's sensible experience expresses a conception of the Divine that is otherwise impossible to articulate in human terms. Thus, Gertrud's imagery fuses ideas of the body with conceptions of wealth and piety, crafting the sense of a Divine that is both other from humanity and yet simultaneously distinctly connected to it.

As well, Gertrud uses these precious objects and depictions of wealth in order to communicate her more complex conceptions of piety, as when not explicitly connected to the body, these elaborate displays instead become tools through which to represent divine rewards. For example, in one vision, "the gracious Virgin appeared to her [Gertrud] wrapped in a shining green cloak, scattered all over with golden flowers like trefoils. She said, 'Look! Each of the women on whose behalf you are offering to me has placed on me as many flowers to embellish it as words uttered in prayer.'"<sup>77</sup> This vision in particular explicitly connects elaborate visual metaphor and divine reward, as the Virgin herself simply states so outright. The direct connection between Gertrud's offerings of prayers and the golden flowers explicitly illustrates the effects of individual acts of piety on the Divine, as each individual moment is visually represented upon the beautiful garment that adorns the Virgin Mary. As the Virgin elaborates that "each of the flowers blossoms more or less, depending on how strongly she was intent on her prayer. And I reflect the splendor of those flowers onto the souls of each and every person who rendered them to me, so that they could please my Son and the host of heaven," she outlines the nature of prayer as the *Herald* depicts it.<sup>78</sup> The Virgin Mary presents the reciprocal nature of prayer through floral imagery, interlinking the power of supplication with ideas of nature. At the same time, however, the fact that these flowers are made not of plant matter but of gold once

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<sup>77</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 213.

<sup>78</sup> Gertrud, 213.

again fuses the visual experience of precious materials with the sensory experience of life. This miraculous, visual representation of devotion thus emphasizes the connection between the Divine and the human, as it coalesces the overall relationships of the text into a smaller microcosm. The extent of the flowers' blossoming is contingent on the strength of the intention of the devotee, emphasizing the significance that Gertrud places on genuine love and devotion for the Divine. This visual metaphor of piety connects ethereality to lived reality, as Gertrud's visions continue to filter her lived experiences through a heightened version of her existence. The reflection of these flowers back onto the devotee illuminates this sense of mirroring. As the Virgin returns the splendor of these blooming prayers to their offerers, she emphasizes the effect that strength of intention and piety has not only on the Divine but also on the devotee and her relationship to Heaven.

This excerpt also displays a cyclical, exponential nature to piety, as the prayer bounced back upon the suppliants makes them more pleasing to Christ. This pleasure expresses the nature of Gertrud's own contact with Christ's Sacred Heart, as the reception of Divine love betters the devotee. Thus through this visual metaphor, Gertrud establishes a direct relationship between intention and reward. Piety, not perfection, draws one closer to heaven. This focus on the pleasure of Christ directly relates back to the visual pleasure derived from Gertrud's visionary experience. The interwoven connection between wealth, beauty, piety, and indeed the body, communicates Gertrud's conceptualization of piety and helps her to elevate the Divine. The Virgin Mary's green cloak and her crystalline womb reveal her Divinity as the Mother of Christ. As she is ornamented with decadent wealth, she is both separated from the experience of living humans and yet simultaneously is able and happy to be reached by them.

The sense of visual imagery extends to the community as a whole, communicating the relationships between the religious behavior of the nuns of Helfta and the subsequent divine rewards offered to them. In one mystical experience, Gertrud envisions Christ dressing the devotees who fully participated in the liturgy, both receiving communion and confessing, in a "dazzling white garment... adorned all over with precious jewels with the appearance and the scent of violets" as well as "a pink garment covered with gold flowers which symbolized the Lord's passion in perfect love, through which anyone obtains worthy reward."<sup>79</sup> As she describes the garments that Christ offers to the nuns of Helfta, Gertrud conveys the tangible, spiritual reward that will result from the completion of both Communion and Confession. As Christ crafts the garments from his innocence and passion, he associates the behavior he is rewarding with specific virtues and attributes of himself, passing them onto the nuns in exchange for their veneration. The dazzling nature of the white garment with its precious jewels and the gold of the flowers bring to mind the imagery of light dancing across a shimmering surface. As well, the jewels with their violet scent and appearance and the gold flowers evoke images of nature. This connection between physical wealth and the imagery of the natural world presses the garments closer to the Divine. Simultaneously, these objects appear as from nature but are made of otherworldly materials, signifying their heavenly origin. This syncretism between nature and object, animate and inanimate, makes use of the ethereal space of Gertrud's visions to offer a Divine reward outside of the bounds of physical experience.

In addition, this sequence crafts a hierarchical relationship between intention and action, alongside a web of relationships between symbolism, visual splendor and spectacle, the liturgy, and naturally Communion. Gertrud elaborates that "those who received communion even though they had not been confessed... trusting on their own account in the goodness of God...were

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<sup>79</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 51.

given only the pink garment covered with gold flowers" and that "those women who with humility and lamentation did not receive communion seemed to be standing before the table and taking great pleasure in its abundant delicacies."<sup>80</sup> While the sisters who did not confess are unable to receive Christ's innocence in this particular vision, they nonetheless attain the garment constructed of Christ's passion and therefore still remain in his affections. However, the women who acted with humility, despite their refusal to receive communion, are still allowed a place at the table and a chance at its delicacies. While the rewards that all three groups receive are directly proportional to their participation in the liturgy, all of them nonetheless receive a pleasurable place in Gertrud's vision. Their pious motivations lead them in three different directions that offer different rewards. The hierarchical nature of these rewards does not reflect a lack of devotion on the part of those sisters who abstained from the Eucharist, but rather stresses the role that physically taking Communion has in gaining proximity to Christ. However, even with these grandiose, divine rewards for those with higher participation, Gertrud still emphasizes that as long as you are earnest in your piety, the Divine will always be in reach.

#### Female Spirituality and Intimacy

The idea of touching the Divine with human hands within the context of spiritual, sensory experience is one of the most present aspects of Gertrud's visions, as through her participation in bridal mysticism she envisions a loving Divine. However, Gertrud was not the sole genitor nor sole recipient of this bridal mysticism; her visionary work was heavily influenced particularly by Mechthild of Magdeburg and Mechthild of Hackeborn. These women lived at Helfta's monastery and their fingerprints remain on the text even as the visions recorded are of Gertrud. The acknowledgement of these two figures alone fails to consider the rest of Helfta's inhabitants, who would also influence the direction of Gertrud's discussions. The *Herald* is not the product of

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<sup>80</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 51.

Gertrud's sole authorship but is a communal, collaborative work birthed from monastic discussions of revelations.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the text presents a conception of physical relationships specific to and indicative of the experiences of the inhabitants of Helfta. This female physicality as expressed by the nuns came to characterize their interactions with the Divine, as they naturally understood existence through the filters of their senses and bodies. One filter in particular is significant to the creation of the fourth book of the *Herald*: the third nun, who wrote down Gertrud's visions in a biographical, third-person form.<sup>82</sup> This compiler worked from Gertrud's own writing and discussion, as well as others who were close to her.<sup>83</sup> As such, while the work is not entirely Gertrud's own and may be applied to the whole of Helfta, it nonetheless also emerged from her personal experiences of the Divine, and therefore can still be considered reflective of her ideas. While the fact that the *Herald* exists in a liminal space between Gertrud's personal experience and those of the whole of Helfta may complicate analysis of its many ideas, it nonetheless widens the brackets of Gertrud's visionary experience to be contain the community as a whole. By its nature the *Herald* in fact represents a litany of medieval female monastic existences that emerged in the thirteenth century, as it expresses the relationship to sensation and piety relevant to Helfta. Medieval women who wrote about God often established authority through grounding their writings in experiential accounts.<sup>84</sup> This practice can be easily extrapolated to Helfta, given its vast propensity for visionary literature. That all of these minor details are being discussed at all is for the purpose of understanding the intricate role that bridal mysticism plays in Gertrud and Helfta's expression of the Divine and specifically of Jesus Christ,

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<sup>81</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 25.

<sup>82</sup> Rosalynn Voaden, "All Girls Together," 77.

<sup>83</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 179.

<sup>84</sup> Gordon Rudy, *The Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages*, vol. 14 of *Medieval History and Culture*, ed. Francis G. Gentry (Oxfordshire and New York: Routledge, 2002), 11.

as it contains a multiplicity of ideas and experiences that cannot simply be summarized in one woman's mystical, visionary romance with Christ.

This discussion of relationships and the body will commence not directly with the bridal mysticism that characterizes the majority of the *Herald* but instead with a small, quiet moment of intimacy between two heavenly figures, St. John the Evangelist and naturally, Christ. This vision embodies the tender relationships that Gertrud established between the inhabitants of heaven. For example, Gertrud experiences a vision in which St. John sits beside Christ while writing. The anonymous nun writes that "as blessed John sat writing.... sometimes he seemed to dip his pen into the loving wound of Jesus' side, which was laid open before him, and from this he formed rose-red letters"<sup>85</sup> As John dips his pen into the font of Jesus' wound, he evokes the same imagery of contact with the Sacred Heart as Gertrud's own vision of kissing it. This moment of contact marks a spark of intimacy between these two biblical figures, mirroring the bridal mysticism with which Gertrud identifies. While touching the Sacred Heart of Christ and the "rosy" liquid within appears prior to this scene, St. John deviates from earlier scenes by writing *with* it at the behest of Christ rather than taking it for himself.<sup>86</sup> John's use of Christ's goodness as ink indicates his own holy status, as he is able to better himself with Christ's Sacred Heart in order to serve the whole of creation. As well, that Christ's blood functions as ink elevates the act of writing, characterizing it as a gesture of devotion. In addition, the special status afforded John, that is, the ability to contact the Sacred Heart and subsequently write with the very blood of Christ, makes sense, as St. John the Evangelist was seen in the thirteenth century as a special lover of Jesus.<sup>87</sup> The intimacy between the two of them apparent in this vision is therefore

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<sup>85</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 94.

<sup>86</sup> Gertrud, 94.

<sup>87</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 188.

grounded in popular ideas about their closeness, once more reflecting the intimacy that Gertrud herself shares with Christ.

The intimacy between Christ and St. John is ultimately extended to Gertrud, tangling the three of them in an intricate web of religiosity and love. In a vision, St. John visits Gertrud to teach her about Christ, saying to her "'let us rest together on the Lord's breast, flowing with sweetness, in which lie hidden treasures of perfect blessedness.' And... he took her with him to the presence, flowing with honey, of the Lord the Savior and put her on the right, and he himself turned aside to the left, to rest."<sup>88</sup> As St. John acts as a guide to Gertrud, he cements within himself that same knowledge that she will one day understand as a bride of Christ. Their discussion of the exuding of sweetness and honey from Christ's breast simultaneously mirrors other mystical depictions of Christ's wound as a devotional and erotic object, and also centers Christ in veneration as the fount of goodness. Even more interesting is the way in which St. John positions the two supplicants on either side of Christ's breast. As they are placed across from each other, their body languages mirror each other, with both of them taking an intimate position against Christ's side. This duplicate intimacy extends the role of companion of Christ from St. John to Gertrud. Simultaneously, it places St. John in a similar position to that of a bride of Christ. He himself explains his choice of positioning as one in which Gertrud, needing more assistance than he, is placed closer to the heart by necessity.<sup>89</sup> This logic presents the religious and romantic position at Christ's side so often taken by Gertrud as available to St. John as well. These parallels reinforce the sense of symmetry between the two of them, laying their mystical experiences upon each other. St. John's close relationship to and intimacy with Christ therefore relates him to the feminine experience of Helfta.

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<sup>88</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 29.

<sup>89</sup> Gertrud, 30.



This holy intimacy centralizes the Sacred Heart in Helfta's conception of divine union. The vision continues, centering upon the Sacred Heart when the anonymous nun writes that "when both were leaning on the bosom of the Lord Jesus, St. John, touching the Lord's breast with his forefinger with most reverent gentleness, said, 'Look, this is the Holy of Holies, drawing itself to all goodness of heaven and earth.'"<sup>90</sup> As the two of them together come in proximity to the Sacred Heart of Christ, they continue their romantic parallel. Although the vision itself serves an instructional purpose for Gertrud, it nonetheless also centers Christ's Sacred Heart in theology above all else. St. John describes Christ's breast, that is, his Sacred Heart, as the "Holy of Holies" and emphasizes its magnetic relationship with the goodness of heaven and earth, centuring it within the cosmos. At the very least, the Sacred Heart is the center of Gertrud's universe, and the centerpiece of Helfta's devotion. This tender interaction between Gertrud and St. John over the Sacred Heart of Christ exudes a gentle intimacy, with John's direct, physical contact with Christ's heart serving as a focal point in the narrative. Subsequently, the experience of physical touch plays a large role in St. John's explanation of how the world works. Even as Christ's Sacred Heart is related in terms of the very heaven and earth, it nonetheless is accessed directly through John's contact. The tenderness with which he touches it expresses an intimate relationship between St. John and Christ, as all of their interactions are underscored with a sense of love. This centrality to gentle, physical contact with Christ's Sacred Heart reinforces the significance of love to Gertrud's understanding of the liturgy. It is not simply veneration, but intimate interaction with the Divine through which you may reach it.

Gertrud's vision of kissing Christ's Sacred Heart embodies the motif of direct, physical contact with his wounded side. Outside of its relationship to Eucharist, this vision reflects a variety of themes common to the bridal mysticism of the thirteenth century. In particular, the

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<sup>90</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 29.

vision expresses an accessible and loving version of Christ by contextualizing him within traditionally feminine imagery and emphasizing the significance of physical contact between the devotee as the bride and Christ as the bridegroom. To review the vision, Gertrud is first described as "kissing it [the wounded side] devoutly," before "she was purified from all stains in that rosy water that the soldier's spear drew from thence" and ultimately "made whiter than snow, made beautiful in every kind of virtue by the most precious blood, and drawn to the very fount of all good by the aromatic steam that came from it."<sup>91</sup> Within the context of bridal mysticism, the act of kissing carries significant weight. To elaborate, Gertrud saw the mouth as the most important part of the body, as it was the organ that directly received the Eucharist.<sup>92</sup> The presence of direct, romantic-coded, physical contact to Christ's body offers an interesting angle through which to examine the Eucharistic scene. This moment of contact is an expression of both divine love and of love for the Divine. The two feelings mirror each other as a two-way expression of affection, one accessed through the Eucharist, but embodying deeper feelings on both ends. As for why this mutual love exists, the answer is simple. Gertrud saw the process of eating the Eucharist as mutual between devotee and Christ, fully accepting the physical experiences of the body as a method through which to know the Divine.<sup>93</sup> These aspects of Gertrud's mysticism underline the loving nature of the physical connection between Gertrud and Christ. Namely, the fact that Christ is not a passive recipient of Gertrud's devotion but fully aware and reciprocal in his feelings.

As Gertrud grounds her approach of the wounded side in the context of eucharistic communion, she emphasizes the act of exchange between Divine and devotee specifically as intimacy through the lips and physical touch. That Gertrud focuses on the significance of touch to communion should at this point come as no surprise; Gertrud described her own physical

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<sup>91</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 12-13.

<sup>92</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 126.

<sup>93</sup> Johnson, 128.

union with God and the Eucharist in terms of mutual intimacy and exchange, and focused as well on the language of sweetness and caressing.<sup>94</sup> The mutual nature of Gertrud's contact with Christ constructs a symmetry between Divine and devotee, similar to the one crafted between Gertrud and St. John. This sense of likeness emphasizes the humanity of Christ and heightens the sense of connection between him and Gertrud. As their bodies connect within the spiritual, sensory space of Gertrud's visions, the participants become more like each other. While Christ takes Gertrud's humanity and devotion, Gertrud takes Christ's virtue and becomes more pleasing to him as a person. This mutual exchange underscores the occasions of Gertrud's visions with a sense of a heaven that truly adores its creation. With Gertrud herself being delighted to learn from and commune with Christ, the *Herald's* depiction of the relationship between the Divine and the devotee is one that is rewarding for both participants, born from a place of genuine affection.

The sense of symmetry apparent in Gertrud's erotic contact with Christ makes the Divine into a more familiar entity. Just as the taking of the Eucharist inside oneself leads to oneself being taken into Christ, so too does the feminine imagery with which he was described. Thus, the fact that Christ's wound is often described as something at the time considered entirely female allows his female devotees to see something of themselves and their own identity in his venerated figure. Through contact with female devotees, Christ therefore as a result of the mutual exchange of the Eucharist grows more feminine and familiar. Indeed, Rosalynn Voaden has noted that this affect was Gertrud of Helfta's way of grafting the feminine onto the Divine.<sup>95</sup> The veneration not just of Christ but particularly of his familiarized body in respect to the Eucharist allowed an avenue through which Gertrud and the nuns of Helfta could express their religiosity

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<sup>94</sup> Ella Johnson, *This is My Body*, 129.

<sup>95</sup> Rosalyn Voaden, "All Girls Together," 86.

and devotion. This adoration follows an earlier trend, as female mystics were responsible for propagating devotion to the human Christ and to the eucharist, focusing on the wounds, blood, body, and Heart of Christ.<sup>96</sup> That the Sacred Heart may have been contextualized in their own, personal experiences as individuals illuminates the outline of their lived experiences in the shadow of Christ. Gertrud, with her sensual imagery, played a significant role in this process. Sensory language was significant to mystical writing as it helped to communicate experience and served as a vessel through which theological ideas could be articulated.<sup>97</sup> The shape of these ideas as they appear in the *Herald* is a complex one, suggesting a variety of beliefs, theological conceptions, and mystical sensory experiences. The *Herald* belongs in the intersection between visionary experience and theological writing. Therefore, Gertrud's visions were not recorded passively, but rather these artistic transcriptions of her experiences with the Divine articulate far more than the literal events of the vision, laying out complex conceptions of theology, monasticism, and Christ.

For example, this particular instance of visionary contact between Christ and Gertrud against his wounded side carries a distinct eroticism, accompanied by homoerotic undertones, through its extreme employment of intimate language and veneration of the physical experience of Christ's body. This sense appears specifically alongside the act of Gertrud pressing her lips to Christ's wound. While a seemingly simple gesture, the Eucharistic undertones exist as only one simple thread in a web of the connotations suggested by Gertrud's act of piety. As Gertrud kisses Christ, the physical intimacy apparent often in the text turns more explicitly romantic, as Gertrud makes physical contact with the very source of love. In addition to the action of a kiss, the specific description of the Sacred Heart adds these far more erotic undertones to the *Herald*.

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<sup>96</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 172.

<sup>97</sup> Gordon Rudy, *Mystical Language*, 13.

Namely, that the Sacred Heart of Christ was often described in female mystical literature as resembling a vagina. While not a motif necessarily unique to Gertrud, it was one that was definitely apparent in the *Herald*. Therefore, this erotic sense emerges from prior precedent and is woven into the narrative itself. In fact, Gertrud depicts the Sacred Heart as resembling a vagina in some of her other works, describing in her *Exercises* Christ "opening with both hands" the wound of his heart before "contracting the aperture of the wound in which [her] hand was enclosed." In doing so, she utilizes the biological characteristics of the medieval, female experience personal to her rather than any culturally determined ones.<sup>98</sup> The fact that the wound of Christ also allows entrance into the body is another avenue through which it resembled a vagina.<sup>99</sup> While this vision originates from another piece of Helfta's main body of work, it nonetheless reveals the physical landscape of Christ's Sacred Heart as Gertrud and her contemporaries understood it. The women of Helfta are not envisioning the actual organ of a beating heart, but rather a wound that mirrors the sensory experience of the vagina. The selection of such a motif comes as no surprise given Gertrud's focus on the experiences of the body in her visionary work.

Gertrud's employment of this imagery also marks the peculiarities of her education at Helfta, as aside from its Dominican friars the all-female community was not often visited by men, leaving Gertrud and many other members of Helfta without the same, more gendered socialization of those who grew up outside of the monastery. As well, this imagery responds to the direction of medieval mystical literature as a whole, as the popularity of female erotic and sexual experience to describe the soul's union with Christ increased from the twelfth century onwards.<sup>100</sup> In addition, the holy person in medieval literature was often someone for whom the

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<sup>98</sup> Rosalynn Voaden, "All Girls Together," 74.

<sup>99</sup> Voaden, 85.

<sup>100</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 138.

boundaries of binary gender were erased.<sup>101</sup> The illustration of Christ with such vaginal, feminine imagery would therefore not have been particularly seen as an imposition, nor would it have necessarily felt particularly subversive to depict him in such a way. Christ was therefore able to take on whatever form the nuns needed him. Gertrud and other female mystics simply continue the sense of exchange and reflection apparent in the eucharistic aspects of their theology by mirroring that female experience onto Christ himself. However, to stop at this sentiment would be to do a great disservice to the inhabitants of Helfta. Within the context of Gertrud's eucharistic, intimate theology, the vaginal shape of Christ's wound carries multitudes of meanings. Rather than attributing this vaginal imagery entirely to either the desire to see femininity in the Divine (to which one might ask why the Virgin Mary was not the focus instead if gender was the sole motivation), or an expression of an all-female community's idea of the Divine, or even an expression of female desire for women within the boundaries of a heterosexual, chaste model of pious love for Christ, it instead served as a method through which to express any combination of these elements. After all, while these visions belonged to Gertrud, they were also the result of the work and life of the community. It would be foolhardy to distill the entire medieval, female monastic experience into a singular expression of piety. Rather, this imagery would have meant something entirely different to each nun who encountered or it, including to Gertrud, for whom this imagery does take on a particularly romantic nature alongside its more eucharistic function. The connotations of Gertrud drinking the "rosy water" within Christ's Sacred Heart are thus entirely intentional, as Gertrud's eucharistic contact with Christ's wound was depicted with the language of romantic and sexual contact.

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<sup>101</sup> Jacqueline Murray, "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?" in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, ed. Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 48.

## Conclusion

The influence of these multiple experiences on the text ultimately plays into one of its defining sentiments. While the physical intimacy with all of its erotic undertones expresses the feminine on the Divine and a tool with which to illustrate the rewards awaiting those who are devoted, it is significant to understand that this divine love reciprocates genuine, religious devotion. While Gertrud's representation of such a relationship with Christ is undeniably erotic, it plays into a greater theme of devotion that is inherently connected to ideas of heavenly reward and participation in the Eucharist. Christ himself outlines this theme, announcing in a vision that "if anyone has worked hard for my love in the ways just described... I shall undoubtedly reward them courteously with full divine pleasure, my royal glory, and loving faithfulness, as it befits my incomprehensible omnipotence and unsearchable wisdom and sweetest good will generously to fulfill this at any time."<sup>102</sup> This sentence crystalizes a defining theme of the *Herald*: those who are legitimately devoted and try their best will receive virtue, love, and warmth in kind from the heavens. In the *Herald*, Gertrud often describes piety with physical language as an exchange between devotee and the heavens. As she envisions it, the heavens love their creation and cycle all of the love returned to them back upon the devotee. Christ's intention on love and pleasure in his dialogue also suggests religious intimacy. While pleasure itself is a vague term, evoking both physical and metaphorical interpretations, when taking into account the inclusion of love, this transactional relationship is coded as romantic. In addition, the adjective of sweet, used very often in the *Herald*, characterizes this exchange with the physical sensation of taste.<sup>103</sup> Even this transactional relationship, correlating directly with the actions of the devotee, reflects both the personal love that Gertrud bears for Christ and the sensation most important to taking the

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<sup>102</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 104.

<sup>103</sup> Alexandra Barratt, "Introduction," in *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness* by Gertrud the Great of Helfta, (Collegeville: Cistercian Publications, 2018), XXIX.

Eucharist. To return to the words of St. John, still resting upon the breast of Christ: "the bubbling force of divine love generously pours out unceasingly to all those who desire it"<sup>104</sup> Those who genuinely express love for the Divine, in whatever form they ultimately choose to do so, will find reciprocation in the Sacred Heart of Christ. The entire community participates together in the liturgy, and therefore as a result Christ has enough love for everyone who partakes. They love him, after all, and he will return their love in kind.

This love, and exchange of love, underscores the entirety of the *Herald*. Gertrud herself crafts an intimate relationship between herself, the Divine, and the vibrant community at Helfta, one expressed not by the image of prayer but by the language of the senses. Articulating the inexpressible through fantastical, erotic language, Gertrud elevates the relationship between Christ and the members of Helfta's monastic community. Thus, as the fourth book of the *Herald* records her visions, it frames the image of a spirited, thoughtful sisterhood that contains multitudes. Gertrud may have been the most prominent voice in the community, but she was also the community's mouthpiece. The culture of Helfta is characterized with its own visual and sensory vocabulary and conception of the wider world, both in the heavens and on earth. As Gertrud's visions are discussed, a warm and loving version of heaven is envisioned, one in which acts of genuine devotion, often facilitated by participation in the liturgy, are rewarded with devotion and heavenly virtue in return. The grounding of Gertrud's visions in the taking of the Eucharist and subsequent greater rewards, specifically, pushes forward the importance of participating in it physically. For many of Helfta's inhabitants, the Eucharist was the premier way to know Christ on a physical and spiritual level, with taste serving as the gateway to divine communion, even as some of its members may have related to the Eucharist differently. Finally, the Sacred Heart holds a venerated position in the text. As Gertrud and the nuns of Helfta

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<sup>104</sup> Gertrud the Great, *The Herald*, 30.



described its shape and form with feminine imagery relevant to their own bodily experiences, they expressed themselves and their love in the Divine. They were not simply adding the familiar to Christ in order to make him more knowable to a female audience, but rather were seeing the Divine through the lens of their desires and needs. The fourth book of Gertrud's *Herald of God's Loving-Kindness* exemplifies above all else the many ways in which female monastics found kindness in the face of the Divine, expressing a love that was significant to them. The vaginal image of the Sacred Heart allowed an assortment of devoted nuns with a variety of lived experiences of female monasticism to express themselves. These differences, illuminated often through the choices emphasized by Gertrud, meant that Christ's Sacred Heart served as a point upon which to lavish affection and devotion, as well as as a physical representation of the very center of love. That this origin point resembles a part of their own bodies only heightens the significance of their own, individual experiences as they become as one. As these experiences come together in Gertrud's visionary work, they express a conception of the world around them defined by love— both a love of God, and a love for the other members of the community, as they lived their lives as best they could.

## Conclusion

The women at Helfta formed a community, one devoted to the Rule. However, from the earliest days of study of Helfta's monastery, scholars have tended to view it as a peculiar, vibrant, unique, nearly utopian community of women, spearheaded by its best and brightest nun. Simultaneously, scholars have contextualized it within the boundaries of its contemporaries and earlier scholarship, discussing the influence of figures such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux, as is done in *Eating Beauty*, or within the context of mysticism's ambiguous relationship to gender, as Caroline Walker Bynum accomplished in her influential *Jesus as Mother*. Jeffrey Hamburger added material culture to its study, while Mary Jeremy Finnegan herself wrote an entire volume of analysis of Helfta's community. All of these scholars had something interesting to say, and I would like to add to them with my own ideas. Namely, I suggest a shifting of focus. We know much about Gertrud and her theology. The fourth book of the *Herald* is the most recent to have been translated and, due to its relative distance from Gertrud, has been discussed the least in favor of the *Exercises* and the *Herald's* other books. This neglect is a missed opportunity. The editorial, anonymous nun, whose presence within the text is often shadowed by Gertrud's, is worthy of study, even if that study by necessity must focus on Gertrud everthemore. The anonymous nun's editorial function makes her in some ways the mouthpiece of Helfta for the *Herald's* fourth book. She stands in for every unnamed nun who participated (or did not participate) in the Eucharist, for the complex discussions that must have been constantly happening at Helfta, and for the perspective of the community watching one of their own out of a few meet with the Divine. There are so many potential perspectives available from Helfta, and all of them are unique. While most are obscured within the greater character of the community that appears in the *Herald*, nonetheless we see much of their unique perspectives and

participation. We see their love and their presence, an aspect of the *Herald* that scholars tend to ignore in favor of Gertrud's theology. While Gertrud is, again, still the most obvious character in the *Herald*, the other nuns are also present. Thus, even as it focuses on Gertrud's perspective, my Honors Thesis is attempting to find them.

I simply would like to argue that as scholars we should pay attention to the little, unarticulated aspects of the old texts. Helfta's body of visionary literature expresses the perspective and visions of Gertrud, yes, but it also carries forward a monastic experience of the body and of love relevant to the entire community. It is this expression of love and subsequently of humanity, from a community so focused on a world after earth, that enamors me as a scholar. What experiences must they have had at that monastery, facilitated by the repetition of the liturgy, by participation (or a lack thereof) in and discussion of the Eucharist, and by the simple, daily reality of cloistered life, that led to the genesis of such a text? The prose within the *Herald* is sumptuous. All of its figures, be they Christ, Mary, or any other members of the heavenly host, are gentle, kind, and loving. The sense of an unworthy humanity that so characterized much of religious piety is absent, replaced instead with the desire to reach. In her visions, Gertrud does not simply see the Divine, nor does she only hear it; she tastes it. She touches it with all of her human and spiritual senses, and in doing so comes to know it and love it, to see herself and her own needs within it. Christ's wound resembles a vagina, so that he may resemble her, or so that he may be an object of devotion of a religious, erotic, and homoerotic nature. In Gertrud's visions, Christ rewards her piety with love and devotion in return. The culmination of this study of the *Herald* is therefore an understanding of the intersection between the text's complex ideas. Gertrud of Helfta, as she records her visions, constructs a version of the Divine that is accessible to her and to all of the sisters of Helfta.

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