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Communicative Strategies by Medieval Mystics: The Cases of Mechthild of Magdeburg, Angela of Foligno, and Margery Kempe

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ABSTRACT

The literary discourse has always served as a medium to explore the various venues for human communication. Most of the people do not face any significant problems with communication in their ordinary, daily lives, but many human conflicts are, after all, the result of miscommunication. Those problems are commonly discussed in fictional narratives, which thus emerge as critically important media for theoretical reflections on human communication, depending on the specific contexts. Most difficult proves to be the communication with the divine, the Godhead, spirits, or other non-material entities. To explore this issue, this paper turns to the genuinely challenging literary discourse, mysticism, generally dominated by female voices from the late Middle Ages and, in some cases, the early modern age. Examining late medieval women's narratives about their visions and revelations, we are empowered to recognize not only female modes of communication but also women's special abilities to reach out to the other dimension or respond to Godhead's calls to engage with Him/It/Her.

Keywords: *Communication; mysticism; women's linguistic abilities; revelations; divine language*.

Introduction

Literary texts seem useless and irrelevant at first sight when we try to come to terms with the practical side of human existence (economics, politics, medicine, environment, resources, etc.). Humans need, so it appears, specific, concrete education, advice, recommendations, and instructions for their professional careers. There are countless examples of individuals who found their way into life through pragmatic education, a fundamental aspect of our existence here. However, the opposite can also be the case. Literature is, of course, not a direct tool in that regard, but it has always served exceedingly well as a theoretical platform for human experiences of a different kind. If we want to study heroism, the intricacies of courtly love, the ineffable experience of mysticism, or the cultural conflicts between religions, races, age

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groups, and gender, then the literary evidence serves very well for that purpose, whether deliberately so or not. All those issues are critically important for society at large because they deeply impact the individual and his/her relationship with the broader community.

The practical demands in life have seemingly little to do with fictional narratives. And yet, people have always relied on the narrative medium to reflect on their personal conditions, their desire to gain a social reputation, and to establish religious authority, for instance. For that reason, even though Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, for instance, are determined by many different characteristics, yet they are all embedded in a narrative context, that is, their scriptures through which a textual bridge is established between the material and mundane on the one hand and the esoteric, spiritual, and religious on the other.

Studying written documents, religious or secular, sheds light on the authors and their audiences, so we gain deep insights into a culture, past or present. This then paves the way for us to move forward as people who have to deal with universal challenges all the time, ethical, moral, and religious in nature. Reading texts constitutes a strategy to reflect on ourselves because we find ourselves mirrored there, even if refracted and distorted, magnified and amplified, reduced in size or transformed. Nevertheless, the narrative constitutes a sort of laboratory where life itself is experimented with, offering constantly changing perspectives, experiences, ideals, or concepts about potential approaches to problems and conflicts in our existence. We study ourselves best in a fictional laboratory because it allows us to vicariously examine specific situations, problems, tensions, concerns, and issues (cf. Classen 2020b).

One of those would certainly be communication, one of the central tools we have as people to build community and to survive in our world because we must rely on collaboration and cooperation, compromise, compassion, and care, all made possible through the use of language, however, we might define it. We communicate with our family members, with friends, neighbors, teachers, students, customers, workers, bureaucrats, politicians, bankers, lawyers, and physicians. Many times, however, communication is fraught with problems because we tend not to learn its essentials or do not accept the foundations that make constructive communication possible in the first place, such as mutual respect, tolerance, team spirit, and commitment to the ideals of humanity.

In addition, communication requires, of course, the physical ability to speak, write, gesture, or express oneself in the first place. Further, we always need a shared linguistic code to facilitate

communication. Undoubtedly, there are gestures, there is mimicry, and there are objects we can use as gifts or signals for that purpose, but many times, individuals utilize specific codes representative of their social status, which can easily build barriers against functioning communication. As we know only too well, jargons, dialects, accents, group codes (youth language, highbrow language, technical vocabulary, etc.), and secret languages constitute serious challenges, as linguists have discussed already for a very long time (e.g., Glück, ed., 1993; Aronoff and Rees-Miller, ed., 2001; Dancygier, ed., 2017). However, we need language to understand our world, both in social and physical form; without language, that world does not really exist since there is no communication at play. And without special language, we might never perceive the spiritual aspects.

However, as this article will examine at length, there are countless dimensions, areas, experiences, notions, and sensations that refuse to grant easy access or remain incomprehensible, such as visions, revelations, miracles, the encounter with the divine, with demonic forces, or the devil himself (see, for instance, Roos 1972; Rudwin 1973; or now the contributions to Eming and Fuhrmann, ed., 2021). Of course, all of world literature is filled with miracle accounts, naive attempts at best to come to terms with the phenomena the authors try to address (Caciola 2006; Ruys 2017; Harte 2024). Those are naive because the human language is mostly incompetent in dealing with the divine or the demonic and can approach them only in ordinary terms, circumscribing and describing them by means of analogy. In other words, our human communication suddenly reaches its own limits and can only fall back to what it knows and can handle.

Of course, since ancient times, prophets, poets, and priests have made valiant efforts to put into writing what they had witnessed, which resulted in the creation of the various scriptures both in East and West. In the Middle Ages, a new, or rather very old, phenomenon emerged: personal encounters of privileged individuals, mystics, with an otherworldly entity, the Godhead, a saint, or angels, if not demons. Mysticism has consequently witnessed extensive studies (cf. the handbook by Dinzelbacher 1989 and numerous other subsequent studies by him, such as Dinzelbacher 2012; Magee, ed., 2016; the most seminal studies in English have been published by McGinn 1988–1998). It might remain impossible ever to comprehend in rational terms what mystical visions might have been, but the mystical texts have always endeavored to come to terms with something ineffable or apophatic by means of writing, overcoming the universal divide between the inner and the outer dimension of human existence (Dailey 2013, 63–66).

This brings us directly back to the fundamental concern literature by itself pursues, developing a sense of good and functioning communication for the well-being of society, as I have argued before in light of a variety of medieval texts (Classen 2002; see also my summary article, Classen 2010a; and Classen 2022). We all would probably agree that intra-human communication constitutes a great difficulty that can be handled only through constant practice, a willingness to learn, a readiness to adjust and correct one's behavior and expectations, and by the great ability of listening closely and attentively. Once the linguistic hurdle (the foreign language, accent, or dialect) might have been overcome, the cultural barriers must be considered (cf. the contributions to Sell, ed., 2013, and to Rings and Rasinger, ed., 2023). Misunderstandings and conflicts regularly appear, even under the best possible circumstances, and this across genders, generations, races, and cultures.

However, in what ways would a mystic communicate with the Godhead? The vast body of relevant texts, written by and for Hildegard of Bingen, Elisabeth of Schönau, Catharine of Siena, Bridgit of Sweden, Julian Norwich, Margery Kempe, or Theresa of Avila strongly suggests that communication between the soul and the divine voice was not regarded as a problem. Yet, how did the mystics then transmit their experiences to non-mystical readers? Since this topic has not yet fully attracted scholarly attention, I will investigate it here in light of the texts by three mystical authors, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Angela of Foligno, and Margery Kempe (cf. Ruh 1993; and see the contributions to Fanous and Gillespie, ed., 2011).

Mysticism and Communication

Mechthild of Magdeburg

Already the title of Mechthild of Magdeburg's mystical account, Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit, or The Flowing Light of the Godhead, suggests a highly dynamic rapproachment to the divine as it had imposed itself in her life (Mechthild 1998; for the critical edition, see Vollmann-Profe, ed. 1990 and 1993). This northern German beguine turned mystic has already been discussed from many perspectives (for a solid summary, see Tobin 1995), especially regarding her connection with Meister Eckhart and the various voices that come forward in her text (Andersen 2000; McGinn, ed., 1994). The remarkable reception history of her text, which ultimately survived only as an anonymous work, which repressed her gender, was the topic of Sara Poor's detailed study (Poor 2004).

Mysticism, however defined, profoundly deals with the direct exchange between a visionary soul and a divine voice. Hence, there is a form of communication occurring that the author must try to translate into ordinary language. In Mechthild's case, that was Middle Low German, the version of which has been lost, only a Middle High German translation has been preserved. While she lived as a beguine or even anchorite near Magdeburg for much of her life, in her old age she joined the women's Cistercian monastery of Helfta near Eisleben at around 1270 (Classen 2020a).

Right from the start, the poet formulates what she intends to do with her narrative, sending it out "to all religious people, both the bad and the good" (39). She knows fully well that the statements and observations contained in it would remain mostly inexplicable to most, so she urges her readers to study the book at least nine times. However, she immediately changes her perspective and engages in a conversation with the Godhead about who might have created this book. The latter confirms His authorship because of His overflowing love for all people. But Mechthild quickly shifts the perspective again and shares a conversation she had with the Godhead predicated on the trope of courtly love in its usual erotic dimension. The intensive exchange between both voices offers a most dramatic perspective underscoring the intensity of the mystical experience, as the soul states, for instance, "Lady Love, you have brought me to such a pass that my body is racked by a strange weakness" (40).

In the second chapter, we are abruptly transported to a narrative introspective describing the outcome of the mystical transformation: "Then the soul leaves the body, taking all hr power, wisdom, love, and longing. Just the tiniest bit of her life force remains with the body as ina sweet sleep" (40). However, the narrator does not disappear as such; instead, she next returns and comments: "Then she soars further to a blissful place of which I neither will nor can speak. It is too difficult; I do not dare, for I am a very sinful person" (41).

The narrative gaze wanders from the inside to the outside and back again, or, more precisely, from the world above her and the world below, in and with her body to which the soul has to return against its own wishes (41). We are thus made to intimate witnesses of various communicative scenarios in which the soul once speaks with the Godhead and then with the body again. To make the spiritual experience somewhat understandable, Mechthild resorts to the term 'Love' which calls upon the soul and is the irresistible force that pulls her out of her body. As we learn from love: "The medicine that God has often given you / is nothing other

than a brief return to human life. / But when your Easter Day comes / And your body receives the death blow, / Then I'll embrace you tightly / And permeate you utterly, / And I'll steal you from your body / And give you to your Lover" (42–43).

The author thus sets up small dialogue frameworks in which the mystical unio can take place. The soul alerts love that she is ready for the Lover, has prepared their bed and "weak with longing for him" (43). Subsequently, the observant speaker takes over again and describes the events as they evolved in front of the mystic. Once the soul and her beloved, the Godhead, meet, a deep and powerful love embraces them, leading to complete harmony and integration: "She remains silent, longing boundlessly for his praise. With great longing, he reveals his divine heart to her. It resembles red gold burning in a great fire of coals. He places her into his glowing heart" (43). In fact, there are no words exchanged, but the inner peace and embrace prove to be perfect and intense, as Mechthild's soul then reveals: "Lord, you are my lover, / My desire, / My flowing fount, / My sun; / And I am your reflection" (44), which might have been modeled on the famous twelfth-century poem in Middle High German, "Du bist mîn, ich bin dîn" (You are mine, I am yours; Moser and Tervooren, ed., 1988, no. VIII, p. 21; there are many online copies and translations; see, e.g., https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=36779).

Afterward, the mystic turns to herself and examines the effects of this love on her, lamenting about the torment and feelings of longing. Right away, the Lord appears and welcomes her lovingly: "He looks at her, draws her up again, and gives her a greeting that the body cannot express" (44). This then transitions to a yet another intimate dialogue, and that one is followed by a song performed by the nine choirs (45). In other words, we are constantly taken into new narrative contexts or genres, allowing the reader/listener to respond variably just as the situation might have suggested. Indirectly, hence, Mechthild communicates with her audience intricately, taking them along on her astounding journey through a world transformed by mystical experiences. There are, for example, instructive poems regarding those who manage to triumph over evil through divine love.

The most beautiful line in the entire work might be the comment by the Godhead: "I come to my beloved as the dew upon the flower" (47), which underscores, once again, the erotic community between both and outlines to the audience that a perfect union or community can be achieved if love and the soul merge with each other. The following poems intensify the

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interaction, so when God receives the soul: “Welcome, my precious dove. / You have flown so keenly over the earth / That your feathers reach to heaven” (47). In fact, the deeper we enter into Mechthild’s narrative, the more we realize how much she had drawn from traditional courtly love poetry (Minnesang, courtly romances) and utilized it for her projection of a new community of lovers, i.e., the Godhead and the soul. Mysticism thus emerges as an expression of a divine and an erotic form of communication in which both partners respect and embrace each other, forming thereupon a new union determined by compassion and commitment, so when God compares the soul with five things: “O you beautiful rose among the thorns! / O you fluttering bee in the honey! / O you unblemished dove in your being . . .” (48). Both explicitly express their partnership and love and thus practice the perfection of communication, so when the soul speaks to the Godhead: “You are my resplendent mountain, / a feast for my eyes, / A loss of myself, / A tempest in my heart, / A defeat and retreat of my power, / My surest protection” (48). Mechthild speaks a fairly simple language, but in closer analysis, the poem challenges us considerably more than we might have assumed, considering the expression: “A loss of myself.” Both partners are in love with each other, and they dissolve in the unio mystica, which finds its vivid expression in dialectics such as “The longer she is dead, the more blissfully she lives. / The more blissfully she lives, the more she experiences. / The less she becomes, the more flows to her. / The more she fears, . . . / The richer she becomes, the poorer she is” (49) (for further reflections on these aspects, see Hollywood 1995; Wiethaus 1996).

Of course, Mechthild, as a mystic and an author, does not examine communication as much as a modern scientist/linguist might do. Instead, she practices it to the full extent possible and presents ever new speech-acts and exchanges between the soul and the Godhead as illustrations of the ultimate form of communication where complete love and understanding dominates. This is stunningly formulated in a passage of highest erotic atmosphere: “The more his desire grows, the more extravagant their wedding celebration becomes. / The narrower the bed of love becomes, the more intense are the embraces. / The sweeter the kisses on the mouth become, the more lovingly they gaze at each other” (50). There are images of breast-feeding (51), poems filled with pleading for love (52), and instructional comments like a manual for how to establish a new divine community: “Three things make a person worthy of this path – that one recognize it and enter upon it: first, that one submit to God relinquishing all human control, and that one piously hold on to God’s grace and willingly keep it by being forgiving in all things as far as is possible for a human will” (53). The soul and the Godhead communicate with each other in

an undulating manner, changing from one narrative genre to another, but whatever format there is used, the inner harmony is consistently preserved.

One of the most amazing passages confirming the intriguing experimentation with narrative voices to add ever-new facets of the communicative toolbox might be section 35 in Book I: "You should love nothingness. / You should flee somethingness. / You should stand alone / And should go to no one. / You should not be excessively busy / And be free of all things" (55–56). The dialectic method applied here highlights the author's effort to resort to come to terms with the apophatic which refuses to submit under the laws of rationality and logic by means of poetic language: "You should drink the water of suffering / And ignite the fire of love with the kindling of virtue: / Then you are living in the true desert" (56).

The mystical voice also addresses the Godhead and inquires about the right strategies to come to terms with her emotions and senses, such as pertaining to her "Heart's Delight": "But now I can carry it no further. / Lord, where shall I put it?" (57). As a confirmation of the communicative community, the Godhead then responds and explains, also in spiritual terms, what Mechthild is supposed to do: "The delight of your heart / You shall put nowhere else but into my divine heart / And onto my human breast" (58). The soul herself turns to the senses, or the audience, and offers relevant explanations about the natural course of things, including her love for the Godhead: "A fish in water does not drown. / A bird in the air does not plummet. / God in fire does not perish. / . . . / How, then, am I to resist my nature? / I must go from all things to God, / Who is my Father by nature, / My Brother by his humanity / My Bridegroom by love, / And I his bride from all eternity" (61).

The highly varied discourse on spiritual love by this mystic makes it possible for her to outline surprising, unexpected, even shocking and dialectic images of the need to transform herself and join the Godhead as the ultimate goal of everything, which is made possible here through the use of many different voices in ever-changing contexts, all determined by the sense of community and communication (see, for some correlated studies, Spitz 1997).

Angela of Foligno

A Highly Learned Mystic Communicates with Us

The Italian Tertiary Angela da Foligno (ca. 1248–1309) earned so much respect for her intellectual discourse on mystical experiences that she was identified as "Theologorum Magistra" (Teacher of Theologians). She and her fellow sisters refused to become an enclosed monastic order because their main task was to take care of the sick and ailing whom they tended to in their own houses. She was declared a saint by the Catholic Church as late as in 2013. After her entire family's death around 1291, she had visions and joined the Third Order of St. Francis. Angela dictated the account of her vision to a virtually unknown cleric who recorded them in the Il Libro della Beata Angela da Foligno since 1292; it was completed around 1300 (Lachance, trans., 1993).

The book begins with strong confirmations provided by numerous authority figures as to the veracity of the visions presented here. Angela also reaches out to her audience with the intent of revealing what she had experienced spiritually: "God himself enables his faithful ones to fully verify this experience and the teaching about such an experience" (123; for a variety of new research approaches to Angela, see Menestò, ed., 2009; Hahn and Acosta-García, ed., forthcoming). Although at first it seems difficult to distinguish clearly between the mystic's voice and that of her scribe, the narrative soon opens up a direct stream of instructions and illuminations on how she had received her revelations and what she learned to do about them, changing her life completely. She offers a list of twenty steps explaining in detail what a good Christian is supposed to do to reach out to God, react to his words, and establish a mystical community with Him. However, she laments that it takes so much time to achieve the goal of salvation and to reach out to God: "It takes such tiny steps at a time. As for myself, I lingered and wept at each step. My only consolation was being able to weep, but it was a bitter consolation" (125).

Both her husband and her mother seem to have been severely opposed to her religious efforts to transform herself from the previously sinful life, but then both passed away, along with her three sons, which opened her way toward a new religious community where she could communicate freely with the Godhead: "I thought that since God had conceded me this aforesaid favor, my heart would always be within God's heart, and God's heart always within mine" (126). Through this newly-found community, she managed to create a unique communication with her Savior who appeared to her numerous times while she was awake and could see her vision most clearly: "He spoke to me just as he had while I was sleeping, showing me his afflictions from head to toe. . . . And he said: 'I have endured all these things for you'"

(127). The visions helped her to pursue her goal of voluntary poverty and to dismiss people's criticism against her 'shameful' behavior, including begging although she was still relatively young and healthy (128).

Although Angela presents primarily a report about her spiritual experiences, she reveals nevertheless clear information about the new mystical union with God and her communication with Him through these visions: "Immediately I understood what it is to experience the riches of God and derived such delight from it that I not only forgot the world but even myself" (130). Of course, the vision itself comes upon her while she is all alone in her cell, but by sharing the vision, Angela managed to reach out to her companions to follow her and thus to join the community of tertiary Franciscan mystics. The call by God stays clearly in the room, inviting her to engage in a close conversation: "At that moment, God promised me much more. He also drew me out of all tribulation and departed from e very tenderly. From then on I eagerly awaited for the fulfillment of what he had promised" (132). Thus, The mystical union became the central point of her communicative community, which the scribe could barely handle, so he abandoned his report of the twentieth step even though he had been allowed to witness it through Angela's own words (132–33). This aspect then leads to more extensive comments from his pen on how the work was recorded and what role he played in its creation, which sheds important light on the community of the faithful ones in Angela's circle. In particular, this lay brother, her blood relative and confessor, felt deeply ashamed of her behavior she had demonstrated one day in Assisi, but when he interviewed her and jotted down what she said, he could barely understand anything of the essence, identifying himself as nothing but a "sifter which does not retain the precious and refined flour but only the most coarse" (137). However, as it then turned out, his written words, read back to her, made little sense to Angela and failed to render appropriately what she had told him about her visions (137–38).

As it is then revealed, the Holy Spirit had come to her and had confirmed with her that her prayers had been listened to: "I will accompany you and be within you until you reach Saint Francis's church, and no one will notice it. I wish to speak with you on this path and there will be no end to my speaking. You will not be able to do otherwise than listen because I have bound you fast" (139). Despite the violent language, the essence here consists of a deep bonding of love between both: "I will never leave you if you love me" (138). This love for Angela is driven by Saint Francis's love for the Holy Spirit, which in turn had shed its love on her (139). Her shouting and screaming at the entrance of the church had been the result of the

Holy Spirit having withdrawn from her, so the community with the Godhead had been interrupted. However, the voice returned, and so the felt presence of the Holy Spirit who assured here that it was the Godhead itself, as confirmed by feeling “the cross and the love of God within” her (142). So, despite the short interval, God’s commitment to her continued, which made her feel the great desire to die, i.e., to leave her body, “because I wanted to attain the source of this experience and not lost it. . . . The thought of continuing to live was a greater burden for me to bear than the pain and sorrow I had felt over the death of my mother and my sons, and beyond any pain that I could imagine” (143). Despite the disappearance of God’s presence, she was told of their firm bonding to each other, like in a worldly marriage. However, as Angela underscored repeatedly, she could not find the right words to express her feelings because the communication with the Holy Spirit made it impossible: “I can say something about them, but my words are inadequate to transmit the sweetness and the delight I experienced” (143).

Significantly, the communication with Brother A, her scribe, makes possible the translation of the spiritual messages into human terms, but many times, Angela can only comment on her vision as an most extraordinary experience for which there were no words: “I do not know how to compare the clarity and brightness of that vision with anything or any color in the world except, perhaps, the clarity and brightness of Christ’s body, which I sometimes see at the elevation of the host” (146). But the Brother stayed alert, continued to question her about her visions and thus contributed meaningfully to the translation of the visions into the narrative. Most importantly, so it seems, for Angela the vision itself dominated almost everything because in the light and the image she found the Godhead and felt completely attracted to it: “The vision was a source of such joy for me that I do not believe I will ever lose the joy of it. I was also so sure of it that I do not doubt a single detail of it” (147).

As much as Angela voiced deep worries about her own sinfulness, making her unworthy as a vessel for God’s manifestation, she also was illuminated about the divine presence in all and everything here on earth (149). Nevertheless, as she then also realized, there was no possibility for her as a human being ever to understand the divine fully. Asking for a certain sign of His presence in her, she was comforted and rebuffed at the same time because irrespective of what God would grant her in response, she would never lose her doubts. This then led her to the realization that their conversation was not really translatable into any human language: “everything he said was so much more delightful, affectionate, and full of meaning that what

we are saying about it now seems like absolutely nothing at all" (150). The mystic thus signals to her audience that she enjoyed a unique communicative code with the Godhead which she could only describe in tentative terms without ever being able to render the content fully.

God assures Angela that He would deposit a clear sign in her confirming the truth of His presence, but it would not be a material object. Instead, He planted love for Him in her so deeply that her soul "will be continually burning for me. So ardent will be this love that if anyone should speak to you offensively, you will take it as a grace and cry out that you are unworthy of such a grace" (150). The further details about his gift to her do not need to be detailed, but we can be certain that Angela thereby approximately outlined the unique conversation she enjoyed with God, a conversation no one on the outside could even faintly comprehend. As the Godhead Himself then confirms: "the aforesaid words which you have heard from me are so sublime that it does not displease me that you entertain some doubts about them, for if not, your joy would be too great for you to bear" (151). In other words, mystical experiences serve the individual primarily and cannot be shared with the public, except through some crude public signs and narratives. That means, Angela reveals that her communication with God was a unique privilege, and she continued to doubt the veracity of the words she heard from Him. Even upon the scribe's inquiry, Angela could not answer explicitly and indicated only: "I saw a fullness, a brightness with which I felt myself so filled that words fail me, nor can I find anything to compare it with. I cannot tell you that I saw something with a bodily form, but he was as he is in heaven, namely, of such an indescribable beauty that I do not know how to describe it to you except as the Beauty and the All Good" (151–52). The mystical discourse then transcends into a discourse of love, which many, if not all, mystics reported about ever since (Classen 2010b). Denying Angela the fulfillment of her wish to receive His full love, the divine voice alerted her that this could never be possible "for in this life, I want you to hunger for me, desire me, and languish for me" (153).

Altogether, as we can thus conclude, Angela recognized the mystical experience as an expression of divine love: "God does not require anything from the soul save that it loves him in return! . . . Who could hold anything back for oneself if one loves?" (153). The entire conversation is thus pivoted on the experience of love, and communication is hence defined as the verbal exchange of love, as many other mystics then also expressed. This also extended to the written words that mirror the Godhead's love for all and everything (154). Their exchange was perfect and full, determined by complete comprehension, including all human suffering,

as it applied to Angela's own life after she had lost her entire family (159). It is her soul that receives the divine messages, which then makes it possible to convey them in human terms both orally and in writing (160) (cf., for instance, Andreoli 2008; Benedetti 2009; Zangari 2019).

Margery Kempe

As puzzling as the book by the English mystic Margery Kempe (ca. 1373–after 1438) might be for modern readers, in which she presents herself as the most tearful mystic throughout history, Kempe deserves our full recognition as the first English autobiographer and as one of the most powerful English mystical authors, next to Julian of Norwich (ca. 1343–after 1416). Numerous scholars have examined her narrative from different perspectives, focusing especially on her personal experiences, her political conflicts, her enormous travel experiences, her rhetorical skills, and her religious visions. She was not a member of the clergy, she did not belong to the aristocracy, she was married and had fourteen children; she created many enemies through her loud public crying and even screaming; and she amazed many people because she as an ordinary middle-class person was apparently graced by God to receive revelations from Him (cf. the contributions to Arnold and Lewis, ed., 2004; and to Kalas and Varnam, ed., 2021; here I draw from the trans. by Windeatt 1985; for the Middle English original, as edited by Staley 2006, see https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/staley-book-of-margery-kempe-book-i-part-i).

Here again, the focus will not rest on the spiritual dimension, the mystical experience, or the biographical aspects. Instead, the emphasis will be placed on how the author relates her communication with God and how she understand her role as a communication partner with Him. Kempe's book is filled with additional comments about her constant exchanges with people in her world, whether she could understand them in concrete terms or not, such as in the case of the German priest from Constance (ch. 33, 118–20; ch. 40, 133–34). While many other mystics were nuns, beguines, or belonged to the aristocracy, having enjoyed a high level of education, with Margery we encounter a rather unlearned, urban woman. Yet, she demonstrated from early on her empowerment through the Godhead and her privilege of divine, mystical communication. In Chapter 3, for instance, she relates her spiritual experience while sleeping in bed next to her husband: "she heard a melodious sound so sweet and delectable that she thought she had been in paradise" (46). Kempe was drawn to God and could not help but

respond to her visions through her ways, crying, praying, sobbing, and talking to others. She was personally graced by the Godhead who talked to her and brought her into conversation with Him: "Daughter, why are you weeping so sorely? I have come to you, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross suffering bitter pains and passion for you. I, the same God, forgive you your sins to the uttermost point" (51).

He urged her to disregard people who would only hurt and slander her and to pay attention only to their mutual love through which He would strengthen her sufficiently to survive in this world: "I shall give you grace enough to answer every cleric in the love of God. I swear to you by my majesty that I shall never forsake you whether in happiness or in sorrow" (51). The Godhead insists on their shared time together after a specific time: "I shall give you high meditation and true contemplation" (52). Some people in her social environment respected Kempe for her visions, others, especially clerics, vilified her. But most crucially, she only listened to the mystical voice and gained all her strength from it. When she did not hear the Godhead speak to her, she turned to crying, and felt the desire to die, just as Angela formulated it. But Christ then came back to her and instructed her: "For I have ordained you to kneel before the Trinity to pray for the whole world, for many hundred thousand souls shall be saved by your prayers" (54).

When she tried to protect herself from her husband's advances who was desirous of sexual intercourse with her, she only needed to appeal to God and was saved (56). In cases of danger from other people, she received Christ's succor and knew that she would be alright (57). Through her mystical enlightenment, she could talk to God Himself and receive concrete council as to what to do with her husband, which then pleased both (60). Her entire life is determined by the intimate conversation with the Godhead who speaks to her directly, directs her, informs her, encourages her, and guides her in countless ways; for instance: "I thank you, daughter, that you would be willing to suffer death for my love, for as often as you think so, you shall have the same reward in heaven as if you had suffered that same death" (65). Another great example proves to be the following statement by God: "Daughter, there was never child so meek to its father as I shall be to you, to help you and look after you. With my grace I sometimes behave towards you as I do with the sun" (66).

Kempe also enjoyed powerful conversations with like-minded people, whether a bishop or a priest, whereas she encountered much hostility by fellow pilgrims, neighbors, and clerks who

could not understand her at all. The entire book, however, is deeply determined by the communicative community with the Godhead, and even the learned doctors in Lincoln, for example, have to acknowledge her spiritual superiority which she received, according to her words, from the Holy Spirit (174). In fact, Kempe regarded herself as the Godhead's direct mouthpiece and served humbly in that function, as we read in chapter 56: "Daughter, I will not have my grace hidden that I give you, for the busier people are to hinder it and preven it, the more I shall spread it abroad and make it known to all the world" (177) (cf. Amsler 2021).

Conclusion

As much as historical linguists and literary scholars focusing on the Middle Ages have already examined communicative challenges and strategies (von Moos, ed., 2008), the evidence of the mystical discourse has not yet been adequately addressed. I have drawn here from the 'literary' works from three of the most respected female mystics, Mechthild of Magdeburg (German), Angela of Foligno (Italian), and Margery Kempe and identified and isolated specific strategies to channel and direct the conversation with the Godhead who created, through His intervention, a new communicative community shared only by the mystic and Him. As we observed, the mystical experience led to a very intensive and intimate verbal exchange, but it was one of greatest significance for the human recipient.

As all three authors indicated, communication consists of many levels, depending on the participants. In the case of Mechthild, the conversation was mostly between her soul and love; in the case of Angela, while she reflected many times directly what the Holy Spirit had told her, her text is strongly structured and determined by the role of her scribe. He added a particular communicative layer, if not filter, because he often could not understand her words, could not record her testimony accurately, and failed her in rendering the truth of her vision, as he admits himself repeatedly. But this very difficulty and diffusion intensified Angela's messages about the ineffable communication she enjoyed with the Godhead.

And Margery emerges as an intriguingly self-conscious yet humble female who desires the community with the Godhead and her own spiritual uplifting with all her heart. But she also mirrors all the external distractions, challenges, and even outright threats against her because

many people questioned her religious visions or could not tolerate the modality with which she conveyed them, such as her excessive crying.

By turning to the testimony of these three female mystics, we are empowered to recognize the ultimate spiritual dimension of true communication because these authors address or reflect what could not be verified and were revealed to them only within their own soul. We are thus in the unique position of recognizing yet another essential function of the literary discourse through which the world of the ineffable, the apophatic, and hence the spiritual could be made accessible and comprehensible.

Reading these mystical texts constitutes a considerable epistemological challenge for modern readers. But the medieval contemporaries were equally stunned, perturbed, upset, confused, if not angry, and feeling hostility toward those exceptional women. Neither secular literature nor mystical texts intend to make us feel content, satisfied, calm, and in harmony with the world. Instead, all these works provoke us to the extreme because they indicate the presence of another world of the divine and refuse to let us indirectly. The Godhead speaks with and through the mystics, and we can only listen in and try to partake vicariously. But that is the same process when reading love narratives or heroic epics. As I indicated in the introduction, the literary discourse presents life in a laboratory setting, and there, we are invited to study extreme cases in human existence. Those cases, whether with eroticism or heroism, spiritual quests, or world explorations, allow us to examine the extraordinary and apply the insights to our ordinary existence. The medieval mystics, at least, reflected intensively on the operations of a spiritual, divine form of communication, very similar to the prophetic accounts in Scriptures worldwide.

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