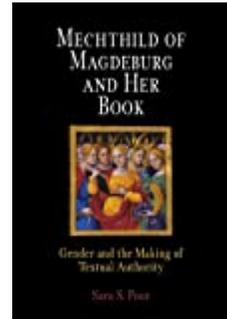




Sara S. Poor. *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 333 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3802-0.



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Advancing the Place and Legitimacy of a Medieval Author

In *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority*, Sara S. Poor attempts to reinsert texts authored by medieval women into the mainstream by arguing that contemporary techniques of literary analysis allow us to recover the ways women exercised power in a male-dominated world. Poor asserts that one can discern through the analysis of the textual traditions a pattern of the universalization of Mechthild by men, because they believed the work came from God through Mechthild. Through the example of Mechthild, Poor aims to explore the fall of female authors into obscurity and, then, the process of their return to our “collective literary and historical consciousness” (p. xi). This is an attempt to take scholarship about female-authored texts a step closer to the mainstream canon without marginalizing the writers as women, which previous scholarship and recent anthologies have tended to do. Poor argues that feminist scholars cannot simply advocate the inclusion of female authors into the literary canon. They must also analyze how and why authors are included (or excluded).

Mechthild of Magdeburg is known from her work *Das*

Fliessende Licht der Gottheit written from the 1250s to the 1270s. Mechthild’s work includes her own visionary experiences, advice, criticism, prayers and allegories found in prose, dialogue, and verse. Mechthild wrote in a northern German dialect, but the only complete text is a translation made into a southern German dialect sixty years after her death. Poor traces Mechthild’s own view of female authorship, her choice of vernacular dialect, and the presence of her writing in periods since the thirteenth century. She analyzes Mechthild’s shifting role in different periods and traditions, and considers the language choice of vernacular and Latin manuscripts containing Mechthild’s writing. The appendices provide additional information on the manuscripts. The notes are very extensive and demonstrate the level of research and exhaustive scholarship that went into this work, as does the bibliography.

Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority takes a historical approach to the complex theoretical issues regarding authority and authorship through medieval manuscript traditions, women’s writing (including autonomy and agency) and

canon formation. As Poor states in the preface, her two conceptual categories are women and the past. With regard to Mechthild, Poor wants to consider the importance of authorship, how conflicts of authorship and authority, particularly with the church, develop at different times and in differently conceived traditions for various ideological reasons. Her work charges modern scholars to be clear on the argument of authority or canonicity of an author and to be clear on the stakes of this argument. Poor is not just concerned with one female author's changing textual authority but also with the challenges of textual authority of the past and how it is important for German studies today. Poor raises in her preface the question of how scholars can bring the place and legitimacy of the female author forward in academic canons and not essentialize and therefore marginalize these authors as women. While she acknowledges great strides made in reforming the literary canon, she emphasizes the fact that there is still "a stigmatization of women" in contrast to the "(male) universal" (p. xiii). This ongoing marginalization as an "essentialized, ahistorical category" shows that the effort to reintegrate the texts of women has been only partially effective (p. xiii), but this marginalization makes the process of reintegration or recovery of these texts difficult to abandon. Poor says this is why she focuses on one author instead of a group and addresses Mechthild's "presence (not absence)" in earlier literary canons from the thirteenth century onward (p. xiv). Poor's book also addresses the ongoing scholarship concerning medieval texts. She briefly considers the current state of German studies in general in the United States and Germany, and states that a "universal present" has the same effect on the past as the male universal had on women writers. Poor sees her book in part as a response to this issue. Through this approach, she demonstrates how vital medieval studies are to these contemporary literary, theoretical and historical questions as well as the humanizing element. She provides a history of authorship—through gender, canon, and tradition. Poor wants her book to clearly show and encourage the study of medieval and ancient texts with regards to other periods.

This is a carefully and thoughtfully structured analysis, and it is very accessible. The introduction addresses the process of forming traditions and how to reform the literary scholarly canon with regards to traditions defined by the category of women. In the first chapter, "Choosing the Vernacular: The Politics of Language and the Art of Devotion," Poor considers the historical context of Mechthild based on evidence of vernacular language use. She also looks at the authority of the au-

thor as a woman in relation to the church and asserts the originality of Mechthild's work. The second chapter, "Visions of Authorship: Cloaking the Body in Text," shows the challenges of textual authority of a female author and the various struggles that Mechthild goes through in dealing with these challenges. Poor also demonstrates how Mechthild challenges existing authority and asserts her own authority and authorship. In the third chapter, "Transmission Lessons: Gender, Audience, and the Mystical Handbook," Poor demonstrates how she makes an otherwise complex topic clearer by reconsidering her ongoing arguments as well as providing various ways of understanding her arguments regarding how Mechthild asserts her authority and authorship (p. 81).

Poor's work does not only analyze *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit* during Mechthild's lifetime, but also considers the reception of Mechthild's writing as well as the reception of the genre of medieval religious literature after Mechthild's death up to the present day. She considers Mechthild's role in this tradition which gave her authority and yet also allowed her authority to dwindle over time. Poor evaluates the composition and transmission of various manuscript traditions. She argues that Mechthild's name fell into obscurity due to the success of her work in claiming a divine authority that overshadowed her own. The second half of chapter 3 is much more difficult to follow and needed to be made clearer. Information on manuscripts and the market for these types of texts becomes less accessible. This difficulty is partly due to the complexity of the argument and volume of material that Poor must use in order to set the historical stage in which to conduct her analysis of the authorship of Mechthild. The fourth chapter, "Productive Consumption: Women Readers and the Production of Late Medieval Devotional Anthologies," importantly raises the issue of the variety of consumers of texts from the medieval period onward where other texts on this period have considered consumers a more homogeneous group. I feel, however, that a stronger economic analysis would have added greatly to this chapter.

The final chapter, "Historicizing Canonicity: Tradition and the Invisible Talent of Mechthild of Magdeburg" (pp. 173-203), addresses a wide range of scholarship. According to Poor, the specific problem with focusing on women authors is that the importance of locations, history, and transmission of the female author may be lost and then these writings become essentialized as only female experience. Even while she notes that progress has been made in the publishing of new anthologies of medieval female authors, she still feels that the view of

Mechthild (and others) remains skewed. The issues surrounding the category of women remain problematized by Poor and are deftly developed to provoke further discussion on this topic. She argues that new strategies for dealing with these issues must be developed. By addressing the changes in the reception of Mechthild over the centuries, Poor takes a critical look at this author not from the perspective of the category of women alone, but in the categories of authorship and tradition that scholarship continues to use and construct.

This work is not strictly focused on gender. While it demonstrates gender is a major factor that needs to be considered, it also shows that a variety of other factors are relevant. Therefore, this work advances many prior debates on the exclusion of female authorship and the

attempts to reintroduce these texts to the mainstream. I perhaps would have liked to see the work go even farther to suggest a complete rethinking of what we accept as the literary canon. *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* breaks down the complexity of a modern theoretical approach and offers a wonderful introduction to any student or scholar wishing to explore issues of female authorship, vernacular and Latin textual traditions, geography in relation to literature, and Mechthild herself. The book will be useful to experts in feminist scholarship, paleography, and medieval religious literature. It also will be relevant to conversations going on in theoretical circles and discussions of autonomy, authority, and agency. Finally, this work will likely become the seminal work on Mechthild and a must for studies on *Frauenmystik*.

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