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CHAPTER 16

Brides of the Celestial Bedchamber

Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1212–ca. 1282)
 Beatrijs of Nazareth (1200–1268)

From the early thirteenth century, German and Dutch mysticism flowered among women visionaries who expressed their piety in the erotic imagery of divine love and marriage. Notable among these ecstatic authors are Mechthild, a native of Lower Saxony, and Beatrijs, a woman who spent her life in the duchy of Brabant.

Glimpses of Mechthild's life may be had from the autobiographical segments of her writing as well as the recollections of her younger companions, the nuns of Helfta. She was born in the diocese of Magdeburg, in a family that was apparently noble and well-to-do. She received her first "greeting"—the courtly *gruss* of an amorous glance—from the Holy Spirit when she was twelve. At twenty-three Mechthild left her family to be nearer to God, and took up a life of relative obscurity as a beguine in Magdeburg.

The urban sisterhood of the beguines that spread throughout France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and to some extent Italy took no religious vows, embraced no order or specific rule, and initially sought no authority from the church. Jacques de Vitry, Bishop of Acre (d. 1240), designates the beguines as the religious women of Flanders and Brabant. He wrote of them: "They melted altogether in wondrous love for God until it seemed that they bowed under the burden of desire and for many years they did not leave their beds except on rare occasions. . . . Resting in tranquility and with the Lord, they

became deformed in body but comforted and made strong in spirit."¹

Their name presumably derives from their patroness St. Begga, the older sister of Gertrude of Nivelles; both were women of the Carolingian dynasty. The mother of Pepin the Short, the widowed Begga founded an abbey at Andennes near Namur in Belgium, where her remains are laid.²

This movement of religious women (*mulieres sanctae*) received papal protection and recognition in 1216 and again in 1233. Beguines did not precisely renounce the world. They did not always live in groups, though some resided in houses in small walled communities. They might keep their own homes and carry on trades. They were pious women who dedicated their energies to prayer and charitable works at a time when there were no institutionalized hospitals or homes for the elderly. The *mulieres sanctae*—comprising nuns, recluses, virgins, and beguines—were active from about 1180 to 1270. However, their conspicuousness and their lack of formal affiliation were to make them vulnerable to accusations of mendicancy and vagabondage, even heresy. In 1273 Gilbert Bishop of Tournai sent a report to Pope Gregory X:

There were among us women called beguines, some of whom blossom forth in subtleties and rejoice in novelties. They have interpreted in vernacular French idiom the mysteries of Scripture which are scarcely accessible to experts in divine writings. They read aloud in common irreverently and boldly, in conventicles, convents and public squares.³

The women certainly attracted disagreeable attention. The thirteenth-century French satirist Rutebeuf writes on a surly note in his *Dit des Béguines* that one couldn't trust a beguine: "If she sleeps, she's ravished away; if she dreams she's having a vision." The eventual condemnation of the beguines led to their being lumped together with so-called undesirables, as a sixteenth-century English source does: "young wanton wenches, and beguines, nuns and naughty packs." Actually they were women who chose a contemplative life in modest poverty and self-support through labor, following an apostolic ideal. Roger De Ganck

has singled out three main principles by which they abided: frugality, virginity, and self-knowledge.⁴

Whether Mechthild lived independently or in a community is not known. She did, however, attract hostile attention by her outspoken warnings and denunciations of the clergy as "goats" and "wolves." In danger of persecution, she took refuge twelve years before her death with the nuns of Helfta monastery, near Eisleben in Saxony. Helfta was an outstanding center of female piety and learning. The best known of the Helfta women were Gertrude of Hackeborn, Mechthild of Hackeborn, and Gertrude the Great of Helfta, of whom the last two also left a significant corpus of mystical writing. Never formally Cistercian, since they were kept from being part of the order, the gray-clad nuns however followed the rule laid down in eleventh-century Cîteaux. The rule stressed work, prayer, study, and a balance between an individual inner life and the group's well-being.

Beatrijs van Tienen is better known as Beatrijs of Nazareth for the religious house where she spent the last half of her life and served as abbess, the Cistercian abbey of Our Lady of Nazareth. The convent was near Lierre, just south of Antwerp.

The chief facts of Beatrijs's life can be assembled from her mystical treatise *The Seven Manners of Minne*, from recollections of nuns with whom she lived, and from the *Vita Beatricis*, which her Latin biographer based on her own vernacular diary. This personal diary has since disappeared.⁵ Born in Tienen in about 1200, Beatrijs was the youngest of six children. At age five she could recite the psalter by memory. Her mother, who was her first teacher, died when Beatrijs was seven. Her father, Bartholomew, sent her to a house of beguines at Zoutleeuw, or Léau, to be educated in the virtues, but she continued her liberal arts education at a school for girls and boys in the town. Eventually Bartholomew sent her to Bloemendaal (or Florival), a Cistercian abbey for which he acted as a manager, perhaps as a collector of revenues.

Beatrijs made her profession when she was about sixteen, and was sent by her abbess to La Ramée (Rameya), a Cistercian house where she was trained to write manuscripts, especially liturgical choir books. At La Ramée she formed a friendship with Ida of Nivelles, who was close to her age and who had been

trained in the mystical life with the beguines of Nivelles. Beatrijs's own spirituality developed.

The rest of her family meanwhile followed the religious life. Her father and her brother Wikbert became lay brothers at Bloemendaal, and her sisters Christine and Sybille also entered that community. Eventually all of the family were sent to Maagdendaal, a foundation created by Bloemendaal near Beatrijs's birthplace of Tienen, a town not far from Leuven. It was at Maagdendaal that Beatrijs, at the age of twenty-five, received her consecration as a virgin. While Maagdendaal was setting up another foundation at Nazareth, Beatrijs had the task of copying the choir books for the new community's use. Beatrijs, Christine, and Sybille moved to Nazareth in May 1236. Beatrijs's early assignment was to care for the novices. The following year she became prioress, an office she held until her death in August 1268 after a severe illness of eight or nine months. Her *Seven Manners of Minne* was composed late in her life. In it "she gathered everything under one dynamic concept: *Minne*."⁶

The writings of both Mechthild and Beatrijs creatively synthesize two major traditions of amatory literature. These are the imagery of holy nuptials from the *Song of Songs*, and the secular *Minnesang*, or *Minnelied*, the body of courtly love lyric that thrived for 300 years in Germany. A brief look at both these traditions will illuminate the borrowings and the individual departures of Beatrijs and Mechthild.

The Old Testament *Song of Songs* (also called the *Song of Solomon*, or the *Canticles*) is an epithalamium, a marriage song, made up of lyric, dramatic, and narrative elements. The text, with its voluptuous imagery, gave rise to an extensive Christian exegesis. In the third century, the Alexandrian churchman Origen composed a commentary which proved influential thereafter. The *Song of Songs*, he wrote, is sung "after the fashion of a bride to her bridegroom, who is the word of God, burning with celestial love. Indeed, he loves her deeply, whether she is the soul, made in his own image, or the Church."⁷

Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry further developed the allegorical reading of this rich and sensual text. Eventually, the Bridegroom (*Sponsus*) was both Christ and God

the Father; the figure of the Bride (*Sponsa*) might signify the Self, the Soul, the Church, the Virgin Mary, the nurturing Mother, or Woman as prophet.⁸

Along with this current in theological writing, the secular and courtly literature of *Minnesang* flourished. The literary conceit of "courtly love" migrated from the troubadours in the south of France to Germany in the twelfth century, to give shape to *Minne*. Sometimes the concept is personified as Lady Minne (Frau Minne), a powerful feminine figure as coercive and adamant a force as the goddess Venus. Lady Minne demands compliance, service, and feudal allegiance. She plants her triumphant banners in the human heart, and there she reigns, causing much suffering and elation.

The word *Minne* is thought to have arisen from Latin *mens* (mind) or the Greek *memini* (remember). The Middle English word *minnen* meant to ponder or to remember. In present-day Oslo the "memorial park" preserving the ruins of a medieval church and monastery is called the *Minne-park* in Norwegian.

As lover-protagonist, the poet is devoted to the praise of a lady. In the development of the love lyric, the man entreats a lady, pledging her his love service (*Frauendienst*, "the service of women"). She may seem remote, but possession is part of the courtly bargain: solace in return for service. The reward of mercy the lover hopes for in his lyric stance is sexual union and rapture. Often the language of religion is adopted to express erotic longing: the lover's agony is that of a "martyr," his beloved is an "angel," she is "heaven." Winning her sexual favor leads her lover to "redemption"; their union is described in terms of a divine ascent.

Even while he loves her, the poet is intent on recording his deep absorption in the yearning, sorrowing mental states that *Minne* goads him into. The contemplation of *Minne* leads to an intensely interior concentration on desire; a private, intimate exaltation; a spiritual and physical soaring. Built into the lyrics of love are concepts of grief and inadequacy, the lover's fear that his efforts may prove insufficient, and his anxiety over abandonment.

Minnesang embodied an elaborate system of wildly oscillating contraries of mood, but the object was the fulfillment of

desire through union with the beloved. The persona of the sorrowing Minne servant presents himself as agonized and submissive, ravished, wounded, mournful, groveling, and grateful for the slightest favor. He languishes in pain for love that either is or is not granted. The lady is both kind and cruel, she is despotic and adorable, she kills and gives life. Parting from her is a form of exile, reaching her is a quest or pilgrimage. The poet swings between abject misery and sheer bliss. He begs for mercy and favor; the joy he strives for is *høher muot*—the pure joy, the exaltation, the “high mood” that comes with mutuality and union. The poet-lover claims he is steadfast and faithful.

Theorizing about “what is Minne” arose in the romances, such as Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan* and Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* and *Titurel*, and from the lyrics themselves. At the height of the tradition, a well-known poet opens his lyric with these words: “Saget mir ieman, waz ist minne?” (“Let anybody tell me—what is Minne?”) The question is playful, since hundreds of poems already dealt with the question. This thirteenth-century poet, Walther von der Vogelweide, gives a simple answer of “joy shared by two hearts,” in his disarmingly simple lyric, knowing that other, fiercely complicated definitions might also be advanced. It is a question that lies seriously at the core of mystical writing as well. Hadewijch of Brabant, a thirteenth-century beguine, writes in her book of visions (vision 3): “What and who is Minne?” a query that is answered rather solemnly by God, who declares his identity.

The German mystic Mechthild and the Dutch mystic Beatrijs adopt the language and imagery of Minnesang to sing of the soul’s ecstatic and erotic pleading with God. Interestingly, among male theologians, the concept of the love between God and the soul was worded as *amor*, *dilectio*, and *caritas*, sometimes interchangeably and sometimes with specific shades of meaning.⁹ By using the vernacular, however, and depending on the popular noun *minne* and the verb *minnen*, women mystics unlettered in Latin gain access to a whole system of immediate meanings and images in the erotic vocabulary. Nor do they appropriate only the most polished Minnesang conventions. Their lyric stance also harks back to the genre of the earliest women’s songs. The lonely woman plays the actively petitioning role and begs

her lover to come to her. The genre was often called *trätliet* (“sweetheart song”) from *mîn trüt* (“my dear”).¹⁰ As we have seen, the songs of barbarian women (chapter 7) and of the more sophisticated *trobairitz* (chapter 11) belong to this type. Women’s songs were often anonymous, but men liked to write them in a female voice. “The man from Kurenberg” (Der von Kurenberg) adopts a female persona in his “Falcon Song”: a woman trains a falcon and tries to secure it to her with gold fetters, but it takes flight. The lyric is a succinct statement about the restless male who is hard to subdue to love.

In the writings of the beguines and other consecrated women, the conventions of the *Song of Songs* and Minnesang appear side by side, often entwined. The fusion is perfectly exemplified by Mechthild’s “For I am sick with love for him!” The line is translated from the *Song of Songs* (2:5), in which the loving soul portrays herself as “minne-sick” (“und das ich minnesiech nach ime bin”).¹¹ Both Mechthild and Beatrijs borrow freely from the erotic conventions and vocabulary of Minnesang and the *Song of Songs*. There is a wonderful boldness, an unleashed vigor in their demands for joyous union with their heavenly beloved.

Mechthild began *The Flowing Light of Godhead* when she was forty-three. Its seven books represent stages of her experience. She had written the first six parts of her visions, meditations, dialogues, lyrics, and allegories outside the cloister; these were gathered and rearranged by the Dominican Heinrich of Halle, who may have been her confessor. At Helfta, elderly, sick, and blind, she dictated the seventh part to her companion nuns.

Claiming to know no Latin (book II.iii), Mechthild used the Low German vernacular. Heinrich of Halle later made a “smoother” Latin version of the first six books. In the fourteenth century Heinrich of Nördlingen turned the work into High German verse, helping to spread Mechthild’s cult among the mystics who were his followers in Basel. The Latin and High German versions are extant, but Mechthild’s original is lost.

In addition to the poetic imagery of the celestial erotic embrace, Mechthild draws upon medieval cosmic elements. Air, fire, and water inform her visions of divinity, as in the merging of the soul’s breath with heaven’s purifying fire, or in “flowing light.” Liquidity especially becomes a godlike quality, with the

parched soul's thirsting for the Spouse's divine moisture—dew, rain, blood, honey, milk, and wine.

Chief among the personages in Mechthild's dramatic dialogues are God, his messenger Love (the courtly Minne), and Mechthild's own Soul. The Soul is feminine, a poor and lonely courting maiden, not passive but brazen in her frank desire. Through Soul, the mystic's rapture burdened with spiritual torment finds voice in the language of Minne's dialectic—love's sweetness shot through with anguish—which began with the lyrics of the troubadours. God's messenger can be Frau Minne, a noble lady ranking high in heaven's court who is empowered to woo the Soul as a queenly bride for the Lord. At another time Minne appears as a beautiful young man in a garden or orchard, a jousting knight, a dancer, or a drinking companion.

In the first selection, after an exchange of greetings and bargainings, Lady Minne woos the Soul for God, not gently but fiercely, stalking her prey as would a huntress. In this guise Minne also appears in secular lyrics and romances. A daring set of erotic figures is drawn from the love chase, in which her soul joins in an ecstatic union with divine Minne. Liberated from actual sexual love, the poet can use the body's terminology, openly uttering a transcendent joy in being clubbed into submission. The hunt of love, an image from Greek and Latin antiquity, was fully developed in Ovid's *Art of Love* and enjoyed a long and rich tradition in medieval literature. Mechthild's secular German contemporaries, Burkart von Hohenvels, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Gottfried von Strassburg, and others wrote of the *Minnejagd*, the "hunt of Minne."¹²

For Mechthild nothing less than the capture, clubbing, binding, and slaying of herself as quarry will ensure her union with the heavenly Bridegroom on an Easter day of joyous resurrection. The dialogue varies the hunt imagery with that of the letter and seal, images of enfeoffment seen in the troubadour lyric.

The second selection tells of the Soul's arrival at court and the trade of amorous conversation between her and God. The third selection, in the tradition of the *Song of Songs*, describes Mary's spousal reception of God's love, the Soul's preparation as a bride, and her divine wedding dance of love.

In the fourth selection Minne is a seductive young man inflamed with longing for Mechthild's soul. The poet boasts of her thirst for divinity in the heavenly wine cellar. As the dialogue opens, Mechthild's Soul is already drunk with God. The wine cellar of celestial love became a commonplace of mystical writing, following the more restrained notions of Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux of "sober inebriation" (which Bernard says is *not* like a wine-induced madness). Of Ida of Nivelles, who was Beatrijs of Nazareth's young teacher, her biographer wrote: "She was frequently brought by the Beloved into the wine cellar. There she received the goblet filled with the seasoned wine of his divine love. She became inebriated and carried away."¹³

The metaphor of an alcoholic carouse in the heavenly tavern anticipates by six centuries Emily Dickinson's paradisaical drunkenness on the bounties of summer ("I taste a liquor never brewed/From tankards scooped in pearl") that ends with seraphs and saints staring in amazement from heaven's windows "to see the little tippler/Leaning against the sun!"

Mechthild's erotically oriented imagery, however, features a male companion, Minne, who invites the Soul to drink further and who reveals his own desire for her. The besotted feminine Soul, eager and unrepentant, acknowledges her degraded condition. Minne's delicious promises must be paid for. The dramatic situation of the tavern prodigals gives way to that of the *Song of Songs*, in which the inebriated Bride first enjoys the Bridegroom's caresses but later wanders destitute and scorned through the streets looking for him. Lost though she may be, she continues to hear the Bridegroom's whispers of solace to her.

The imagery of deep drinking occurs in Beatrijs of Nazareth as well, though with a slightly different emphasis. Beatrijs's Christmas meditation in her *Vita*, as Caroline Bynum has pointed out, employs the metaphor of "drinking Christ, as rivulets, as streams, or as a mighty river."¹⁴

Beatrijs writes:

She looked and behold, the all-powerful and eternal Father was emitting from himself a great river from which many brooks and brooklets here and there branched off and offered a drink of water springing up to eternal life to those who willed to approach them. Some drank from the

river, some drank from the brooks, and some drank from the brooklets. Beatrice, to whom it was granted to see these things, was allowed to drink from all of them.¹⁵

In her Sixth Minne, Beatrijs expresses a joy that is orgasmic, like a vessel filled to overflowing that spills at a touch.

The concept of *minne dienst*, service to Minne, pervades Beatrijs's writing. The *Seven Manners of Minne*—its title nicely assonanced and alliterating—builds a stepwise ascent to bliss in clearly defined stages: (1) the beginning of desire and the ridding of wayward impulses; (2) the image of the soul as a young serving girl who waits on her lord, not for wages, but because she adores him; (3) the feeling of anxious despair that the soul's efforts may be fruitless; (4) a first sense of ecstasy, of sinking and melting, when the soul is like a vessel filled to the brim and in danger of overflowing; (5) the vehemence of heat and fever mounting so strongly that the overwrought body sickens and the mind is driven to lunacy; (6) the attainment of clear joyful serenity, in which the soul orders herself like a prudent housewife, swims deeply like a fish in the flood, and soars like a bird; (7) the sweet immersion in Minne, a holy force that toys with the soul, both pleasurably and cruelly, while the soul—exiled in this world—thirsts for the celestial marriage with her Bridegroom.

Mechthild of Magdeburg: *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*

1. *Minne's Greeting to the Queen, Mechthild's Soul, and the Hunt of Love*

How Minne and the Soul spoke together:

Mechthild's Soul came to Minne and greeted her with deep meaning, saying, "God greet you Lady Minne."

Minne: God reward you, dear lady Queen.

Soul: Lady Minne, you are very welcome to me.

Minne: Lady Queen, I'm honored by your greeting.

Soul: Lady Minne, you struggled a long time with the high holy ghost, and you conquered him so that he gushed all at once into Mary's humble maidenhead.

Minne: Lady Queen, it was for your honor and delight.

Soul: Lady Minne, you have taken from me everything I ever won on earth.

Minne: Lady Queen, you've made a blissful exchange.

Soul: Lady Minne, you've taken my childhood from me.

Minne: Lady Queen, I've given you heavenly freedom for it.

Soul: Lady Minne, you've taken my whole youth.

Minne: Lady Queen, I've given you many holy virtues for it.

Soul: Lady Minne, you've taken my friends and kin.

Minne: Ah, Lady Queen, that's a worthless lament!

Soul: Lady Minne, you've taken the world from me, worldly honor, and all worldly riches.

Minne: Lady Queen, in an hour I'll recompense you on earth with all you desire of the Holy Ghost.

Soul: Lady Minne, you have so harassed me that my body is seized by sundry ills.

Minne: Lady Queen, I've given you much high wisdom.

Soul: Lady Minne, you have squandered my flesh and my blood.

Minne: Lady Queen, by that you've been enlightened and raised up with God.

Soul: Lady Minne, you are a robber woman. Pay me back for that!

Minne: Lady Queen, then take my very self!

Soul: Lady Minne, now you have repaid me a hundredfold here on earth.

Minne: Lady Queen, now have you claimed God and his whole kingdom! (Book I.i)

The Soul's handmaids and Minne's beatings:

The holy Christian virtues are the Soul's handmaids. The Soul in sweet sorrow cries out her anguish to Minne.

Mechthild's Soul speaks:

Ah, dearest Lady,

you've been my lady-in-waiting, lurking so long,
now tell me what's to become of me?

You have hunted, seized, and tied me so fast
and wounded me so deeply
that I shall never be healed.
You have beaten me with a club.
Tell me whether I shall ever finally recover!
Shall I not be slain by your hand?
It would have been better for me if I had never
known you.

Lady Minne's reply:

I hunted you for my delight;
I seized you for my desire;
I bound you tightly for my joy;
When I wounded you, you became one with me.
When I beat you with a club, I became your strong
ravisher.
It was I who drove out the Almighty from
heaven's kingdom
and deprived him of his human life,
then gave him gloriously back to his father.
How could you, vile worm, think you could
recover from me?

Mechthild's Soul:

Tell me, my Queen, I thought a small medicine
from heaven
that God had often given me
might help me to escape you.

Lady Minne:

If a captive wants to escape death,
let her reach for water and bread.
The medicines that God has given you
are nothing more than days of grace in this life.
But when your Easter Day dawns
and your body then meets its death blow,
I shall be there, encircling you, piercing you,
and I shall steal your body
and give it to Love.

Mechthild's Soul:

Ah, Lady Minne,
I have written this letter dictated from your lips.
Now give me your great seal to affix to it.

Lady Minne:

She whom God has captured for himself
knows where the seal must be pressed.
It lies between the two of us.

Mechthild's Soul:

Be quiet, Minne, give me no more advice; I and all
earthly creatures bow to you.
Oh my dearest lady,
tell my friend his couch is ready,
and I am lovesick for him.
If this letter is too long, I have plucked a few
blossoms from its meadow.
This is its sweet lament:
Whoever dies of love shall be entombed in God.
(Book I.iii)

2. The Soul Comes to Court

The courtly journey of the Soul to whom God shows himself:

When the poor soul comes to court, she is prudent and well-behaved. She joyfully gazes at her God. Ah, how lovingly she is welcomed there! She keeps quiet, but is extravagantly eager for his praise. And he shows her with great yearning his sacred heart. It is like red gold burning in a great coal fire. And God lays her in his glowing heart so that the high prince and the little maidservant embrace and are made one like water and wine. Then she is annihilated and takes leave of her senses so that she can do no more, and he is sick with love for her as he always was, for he neither grows nor diminishes. She says, "Lord, you are my solace, my desire, my flowing stream, my sun, and I am your mirror!" This is the journey to court for the enamored Soul, who cannot live without God. (Book I.iv)

How God comes to the Soul:

I come to my love
as a dew upon the blossom. (Book I.xiii)

How the Soul welcomes and praises God:

Ah joyful sight! Ah loving greeting! Ah minne-like embrace! Lord, the wonder of you has wounded me! Your favor has quelled me! O you lofty rock, you are so nobly cleft; none may nest in you but your dove and nightingale. (Book I.xiv)

How God receives the Soul:

Be welcome, darling dove; you have flown so fervently over earth's kingdom that your feathers rise strong to the kingdom of heaven. (Book I.xv)

How God compares the Soul to four things:

You taste of the grape, you smell of balsam, you glitter like the sun, you are the increase of my highest love. (Book I.xvi)

The soul praises God in five things:

O you God, gushing forth with your gifts!
O you God, flowing in your love!
O you burning God in your desire!
O you melting God in the union of your love!
O you God resting on my breast, I cannot be without you! (Book I.xvii)

God compares the soul to five things:

O you fair rose in the thornbriar!
O you fluttering bee in the honey!
O you pure dove in your being!
O you lovely sun in your shining!
O you full moon in your sphere!
I can never turn away from you. (Book I.xviii)

God caresses the soul in six things:

You are my pillow, my minne-bed, my secret resting place, my deepest desire, my highest honor. You are a delight of my godhood, a solace of my manhood, a brook for my burning heat. (Book I.xix)

The Soul responds to God in six things:

You are my mirror—mountain peak of perfection—a feast for my eyes, a losing of myself, a storm of my heart, a ruin and scattering of my forces, and my highest safety! (Book I.xx)

3. *The Celestial Wedding of Mary and of the Soul*

The tidings to Mary; how the virtues follow one another and how the soul is a jubilus—a shout of joy—in the Trinity:

The sweet dew of the Trinity that has no beginning sprang from the eternal Godhead in the flower of the chosen Virgin, and the fruit of the flower is an immortal god, a mortal man and a living consolation of everlasting love.

Our Redeemer has become our Bridegroom! The Bride has become drunk with the sight of his noble face. In her greatest strength she takes leave of her senses; in her greatest blindness she sees most clearly; in her greatest clarity she is both dead and living. The longer she is dead, the more joyously she lives. The more joyously she lives, the more she journeys. The more she tastes Minne, the more she is flowing. The richer she grows, the poorer she becomes. The deeper she dwells, the wider she ranges. The more she offers herself, the deeper are her wounds. The more she storms, the more minne-like is God toward her. The higher she floats, the more beautifully she shines from the glance of the Godhead as she comes nearer to him. The more she labors, the more softly she rests. The more she grasps, the more quietly she falls silent. The more loudly she cries out, the greater wonder she works with his power and her might. The more her desire grows, the greater the wedding feast, the more enclosed the minne-bed. The tighter the embrace, the sweeter the kisses of their mouths. The more lovingly they gaze at each other, the

harder it is to part. The more he gives her, the more she squanders, the more she has. The more humbly she takes her leave, the sooner she comes back. The more ardent she is, the more she glows again. The more she burns, the more gloriously she shines. The more enveloping God's praise of her, the more avid is her longing for him.

This is how our sweet Bridegroom went in the shout of joy of the holy Trinity. Since God wished to be alone no longer, he made the soul and gave his own great love to her.

Therefore, O Soul, what are you made of that you soar so high above other creatures and, though you mingle with the Holy Trinity, yet you remain yourself?

Soul: You spoke about my origins, and now I will tell you the truth—I was created in the same state of Minne, and so nothing can solace or arise from my nobility except Minne alone. (Book I.xxii)

The Bridegroom's beauty, and how the Bride shall follow him:

Vide, mea sponsa! See, my Bride! How beautiful my eyes are, how fair is my mouth, how fiery is my heart, how gentle are my hands, how swift my feet—and follow me!

You shall be martyred with me, betrayed through envy, tracked to an ambush, seized in hatred, bound through hearsay, your eyes bandaged so that you won't recognize truth, beaten by the world's rage, dragged to judgment through confession, beaten with sticks, sent to Herod with mockery, stripped with banishment, scourged with poverty, crowned with temptation, spat upon with abuse. You shall carry your cross in the hatred of sin, be crucified in the denial of all things by your own will, nailed on the cross with the holy virtues, wounded with minne, die on the cross in holy steadfastness, your heart pierced with indwelling oneness, released from the cross in true victory over all your enemies, buried in paltriness, raised up from death to a blessed end, carried to heaven on a draught of God's breath. (Book I.xxix)

Brides of the Celestial Bedchamber

You shall be a lamb in your pain, a turtledove, a bride:

You are my lamb in your pain—
You are my turtledove in your moaning—
You are my bride in your abiding. (Book I.xxxiv)

God asks the Soul what she brings:

You hunt sorely for your love.
Tell me—what do you bring me, my Queen? (Book I.xxxix)

The Soul answers that it is better than four things:

Lord, I bring you my treasure:
It is greater than the mountains,
Wider than the world,
Deeper than the sea, higher than the sky,
More beautiful than the sun, more manifold than
the stars,
And more weighty than earth's whole kingdom.
(Book I.xl)

The seven ways to Minne, the bride's three gowns, and the dance:

God speaks: Ah, Soul filled with minne, do you wish to know where your path lies?

The Soul: Yes, dear Holy Ghost, teach it to me.

[*God Speaks:*] You must overcome the sorrow of contrition, the pain of confession, and the labor of repentance, the love of the world, the temptation of the Devil, the luxuriance of the flesh, the destruction of your own will which so fiercely drags down many souls that they never can come back to true love. Then when you have beaten down most of your enemies, you are so tired that you cry out, "Beautiful youth, I'm longing for you—where shall I find you?" The young man will say:

"I hear a voice
that speaks a little of minne.
I have courted her many days

but her voice has never come to me.
 Now I am stirred,
 I must go to her.
 She is the one who bears pain and minne together.
 In the morning, in the dew, there is the sheltered
 rapture that first enters the soul."

Her chambermaids, the five senses, speak: Lady, you must gown
 yourself in many colors.

Soul: Love, where shall I go?

The senses:

We have heard it rumored
 that the Prince is coming to you
 in the dew and in the lovely song of birds.
 Ah, lady, do not delay!

So the Soul dresses herself in a shift of gentle humility, so
 lowly that she can endure nothing under it. Over it goes a white
 gown of clear chastity, so pure that she can endure neither
 thoughts nor words nor sentiments that might sully it. Then she
 covers it with a mantel of holy reputation, which she has gilded
 with all the virtues.

Then she goes into the wood, which is the company of
 blessed folk. There the sweetest nightingales sing in harmonious
 union with God, both day and night, and she hears many sweet
 voices there of the birds of holy understanding. But the young
 man still does not come. He sends her messengers, for she wants
 to dance. He sends her Abraham's faith, the Prophets' yearnings,
 and the chaste humility of our lady St. Mary, all the holy virtues
 of Jesus Christ, and all the goodness of his chosen ones.

And so a lovely dance of praise will take place. Now the
 young man comes and speaks to her:

"Maiden, as gallantly as you follow the dance, now, my
 chosen partner, you will lead the dance!" But she says:

I cannot dance, lord, unless you lead me.
 If you want me to leap ardently,
 you must yourself first dance and sing.
 Then I will leap into minne,
 from minne into understanding,
 from understanding to enjoyment,

from enjoyment to far beyond all human sense.
 There shall I stay and whirl still dancing in a ring.
 (Book I.xliv)

4. *The Heavenly Wine Cellar*

Minne speaks:

If you'll come with me to the wine cellar
 it will cost you a great deal.
 Even if you buy a thousand marks worth of wine,
 your money will be squandered in an hour.

If you want to drink wine straight, without water, you'll
 keep spending more than you have, and the tavernkeeper won't
 pour you the full amount. You'll be poor and naked, despised by
 all those people who'd rather seek pleasure in a pool of muddy
 water than waste their wealth in the lofty wine cellar.

You'll also have to suffer
 when those people who go with you to the wine
 cellar envy you.
 How scornful they'll be of you
 because they dare not risk the huge expense,
 preferring to drink their wine diluted with water!
 Darling lady bride, I'll go to the tavern,
 and eagerly spend all that I have,
 and let myself be dragged through hot coals of
 love,
 and submit to being beaten with the fiery brands
 of love's slanderers,
 so that I can go often to that blessed wine cellar!

Mechthild's Soul answers:

I choose eagerly to go there, since I can't do without
 Minne. While he torments and insults me—this one who pours
 out the tavernkeeper's wine for me—still, he has been drinking it
 too.

I've become so drunk with wine
 that I am truly thrall to all creatures,

and it seems to me in my human disgrace
and my newfound wantonness
that no man ever treated me so badly before—
he can do any kind of sin with me, unblessed
woman that I am.

And so I would not take vengeance on my enemies for my
sorrow, even though I know they might break God's law.

Minne comforts the Soul:

Dearest playmate, when it happens that the wine cellar is
locked, you must take to the street, hungry, poor and stripped
bare, and so despised that nothing is left for you of the banquet
of Christian living except your own faith; then you can still have
Minne, for that is never spoiled.

Lady Bride, I have such hunger for the heavenly
father
that I forget all sorrow.
And I have such thirst for his son
that it takes all earthly yearning from me.
And I have for both of them such a ghostly need
that it goes higher than all I can grasp
of the father's wisdom.
But I can endure all the work of the son,
and all the solace of the Holy Ghost
that befalls me.

Whoever is seized by this torment must always—however
unworthy—hold fast to God's holiness. (Book III.iii)

*Beatrice of Nazareth: The Seven Manners
of Holy Minne*

Seven manners of loving come down from the highest place, and
work their way back again to the uppermost place.

The Soul's First Yearning

First is the yearning that comes and arises out of Minne. It
must reign a long time in the heart before it can drive out its
adversary, and work its might and understanding and valiantly
grow in us. This manner is a desire that surely comes out of
Minne. The good soul truly wants to serve and to follow Minne.
(from "The First Minne")

The Soul Is Like a Young Girl Eager to Serve for Nothing

Sometimes the soul has another way of loving. She under-
takes to give her Minne-service freely out of love alone, without
any reason and without any reward of grace or glory. The soul is
like a young girl who serves her lord only because she loves him
greatly, and not for any wages. She is content to be able to serve
him and content that he lets her serve him lovingly. So the soul
yearns to perform her Minne-service—above measure and be-
yond measure and beyond human sense and reason—fulfilling
all her service with constancy.

When the soul has reached here, she is so burning with
desire, so ready with her service, so lighthearted in her labors, so
sage in the face of sorrow, so blithe despite annoyance! With all
that she is and has, she desires so much to love and serve him
that it is enough for her to act and endure for the sake of honor
and Minne-service. ("The Second Minne")

The Soul Suffers Many Grievs

Another Minne has many griefs locked into it. This is
when the soul yearns to fulfill Minne and yield to it in all obedi-
ence and honor and service. Once in a while this yearning will so
shake the soul that she strives with strong desire to try every-
thing, to pursue every virtue, to suffer and undergo everything,
to accomplish all the works of Minne, to hold nothing back, to
spare nothing. In this condition she is ready to fulfill every ser-
vice and is eager to toil and suffer.