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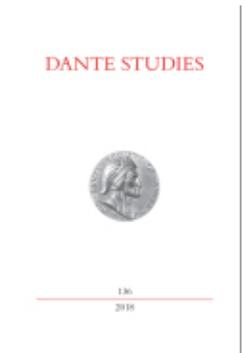
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The Seven-Storey Mountain: Mechthild of Hackeborn and Dante's Matelda

BARBARA NEWMAN

In *Purgatorio* 28, after Dante has climbed the seven-storey mountain and expiated a sin on every terrace, he attains the summit.¹ There he finds the Earthly Paradise, and in it a lady all alone, singing and gathering flowers. Radiant in her innocence, she tells him about the paradisaical forest, especially its twin streams of Lethe and Eunoë. Both spring from the same fountain: one to erase the memory of sin, the other to restore that of every good deed (*Purg.* 28.121–33). Still nameless, she leads Dante to the pageant of the Church Triumphant and the longed-for Beatrice, who gives him a tongue-lashing. But after the chastened poet has confessed, the lady of paradise fulfills her ministry by baptizing him, first in Lethe, then in Eunoë. Momentarily stunned by these events, Dante asks Beatrice something he should have already known, and she responds, “Priega / Matelda che 'l ti dica” (*Purg.* 33.118–19). Thus, in passing, we learn the lady's name.

The Mystery of Matelda

The identity of this mysterious Matelda has long puzzled *dantisti*. If she is like his other characters (angels and demons excepted), she presumably fuses a historical person with a figural or exemplary sense. Numerous allegorical meanings have been proposed, centering on her role as a new or unfallen Eve. Critics have taken her to represent original innocence,

the active life, the virtuous human will, temporal felicity, ordered charity, divine wisdom, the ministry of the Church, pastoral beauty, lyric love, art, philosophy, unfallen intellect, and sanctifying grace.² These interpretations may not be as diverse as they seem. In fact, many derive from the same passage at the end of *Monarchia*, where Dante spells out what the Earthly Paradise signifies. It is a place where humankind enjoys original justice and complete earthly happiness—a condition to be attained only through philosophy and the perfection of the active life, with exercise of all the moral and intellectual virtues.³ To grasp the full meaning of this paradise (and its lady) in *Purgatorio*, we must integrate this cluster of ideas with the canto's idyllic, lyrical tone, which evokes overwhelming natural beauty and unfallen sensuality.

A number of influential readings converge to see Matelda as an apotheosis of the *donna gentile*, who consoles Dante in *Vita Nuova* 35–38 and reappears as Filosofia in the *Convivio*—with additional traits adapted from the figure of Lady Wisdom in the Old Testament.⁴ Admittedly, the *donna gentile* led Dante astray after Beatrice's death, whether through her physical attractions, his misguided philosophical studies, or both. That is the burden of Beatrice's reproach in *Purgatorio* 30 and the poet's confession in Canto 31. In this reading, therefore, Matelda is made to atone: if she once seduced Dante away from Beatrice and the love of God (through his own fault, not hers), she now leads him back.⁵ The problem with this attractive interpretation is that the *donna gentile* has no name. It is hard to explain why Dante should have withheld it in the *Vita Nuova* and *Convivio*, yet bestowed an inexplicable name in the *Commedia*. Hence a number of scholars argue that Matelda was never meant to be an identifiable person. For Peter Dronke, she incarnates earthly beatitude in its pagan as well as Christian figurations. Matelda is another Persephone, another Eve, “a woman of spellbinding physical seductiveness . . . But whatever real experience may have lain behind this meeting, Dante was determined to keep that private.”⁶ Albert Ascoli believes Matelda remains mysterious because “Dante does not wish to historicize or motivate her presence.”⁷ To heighten his self-presentation as a New Adam in the Earthly Paradise, she must be a New Eve, a role that is easier to grant if she is not complicated by a fixed historical identity. Francesco Santi too maintains that Dante, contrary to his usual custom, has introduced an ahistorical figure whose name is “a mere *senhal*, a pure symbol” of innocent desire, like the troubadours' ladies.⁸

Her ordinary Italian name, casually dropped after six cantos, is thus no more than a means of teasing the reader.

But if we grant this view, Matelda would be a unique exception to Dante's normal practice. That exception would stand out all the more because Virgil and Beatrice, as well as Cato and St. Bernard, his other guides at the poem's liminal moments, have such clear and distinct identities. Hence the majority of critics, even if they are concerned primarily with Matelda's symbolic meanings, continue to believe that Dante also intended her to have a historical identity. Virtually all the medieval commentators and many modern ones, following in their wake, have favored Matilda of Canossa (1046–1115)—the celebrated warrior countess and champion of Gregory VII. She appeals especially to those who pursue political readings of *Purgatorio*, such as Joan Ferrante, John Scott, and Lino Pertile.⁹ But this identification is commended chiefly by its antiquity. Even many of those who accept it *faute de mieux* acknowledge its difficulties.¹⁰ Nothing about the battle-hardened, twice-married virago suggests Edenic innocence or explains why she, of all people, should be the sole inhabitant of the Earthly Paradise, whose function is to initiate the blessed into their beatitude. Moreover, her staunchly defended views on the sovereignty of pope over emperor cannot be reconciled with Dante's position in the *Monarchia*.¹¹

In a very learned article, Jo Ann Hoepfner Moran Cruz has recently supported a less familiar candidate—the sainted Queen Matilda of Saxony (895–968).¹² St. Matilda, an ancestor of the Capetian and Ottonian dynasties, was undoubtedly an important monarch who has the advantage of being pro- rather than anti-imperial. Moran Cruz associates her with a nexus of maternal and political themes central to Dante's thoughts about justice. Yet, despite the broader significance of those themes, Matilda of Saxony shares the aesthetic drawbacks of the Tuscan countess. A powerful matriarch rather than an innocent virgin, she does not obviously fit the lyrical mood of the Earthly Paradise. Further, it is hard to prove that Dante knew of this rather distant figure, whose *vitae* date from the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. In short, although Matilda of Saxony can be made to stand for ideas endorsed by the poet, neither of the two rulers seems well suited to the language and texture of Matelda's canto.

Several scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century believed that Dante had modelled his Matelda on one of two German

mystics, either Mechthild of Hackeborn (as I will argue) or the slightly older beguine, Mechthild of Magdeburg, who entered the convent of Helfta in her old age.¹³ But the beguine is not plausible because her book of revelations, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, was composed in German.¹⁴ Although it was eventually translated into Latin, that version did not circulate beyond the Germanic world,¹⁵ nor did anyone write her *vita*. So it is unlikely that Dante had ever heard of her. In any case, the Latin text of *The Flowing Light* suppresses Mechthild's name in order to claim divine authorship, so its readers would have known nothing of a Lady Matelda.¹⁶

This essay aims to save the appearances by remaining close to the *bella donna*'s literal acts and functions, while revisiting the question of her historical identity. To that end, I revive and strengthen an older view that links Matelda with Mechthild of Hackeborn (1241–1298). A mystically gifted nun of Helfta, in Saxony, Mechthild was Dante's older contemporary. Regarded as a saint in her lifetime, she was celebrated for her sweet, joyful demeanor and amorous devotion to Christ, as well as exquisite singing and heavenly visions. All these traits make her a better match than any other candidate. A book of her revelations, the *Liber specialis gratiae* (*Book of Special Grace*), was compiled by her sister nuns and completed within a year of her death.¹⁷ Diffused by Dominican friars, who served as confessors at Helfta, the *Liber* was rapidly copied and widely circulated. Significantly, there is reason to believe that one of Mechthild's visions inspired the whole scheme of *Purgatorio*, that is, a mountain climbed by penitent souls, its seven terraces each dedicated to the cleansing of a particular vice and acquisition of the corresponding virtue, with the Earthly Paradise at its summit. This scheme is unprecedented in earlier otherworld visions that depict Purgatory as a fiery pit, haunted by demons and barely distinct from hell. If Dante owed a debt to Mechthild for his radical alternative vision, he gracefully acknowledged it by placing her in paradise, under her Italian name of Matelda.

Among the proponents of this view have been Antonio Lubin in 1860, Mechthild's editor Louis Paquelin in 1877, Francesco D'Ovidio in 1906, Edmund Gardner in 1913, and Dante's translator John Sinclair in 1939.¹⁸ A century ago, the nun's advocates traded polemics with defenders of the countess,¹⁹ while her more recent champions include Paolo Pecoraro and Omerita Ranalli.²⁰ But for the most part, the case for Mechthild has faded away, neither proven nor refuted, out of frustration

with what has long seemed an insoluble enigma. A more salient reason is that very few scholars in the last century have read her to assess its merits. For reasons that have nothing to do with Dante, Mechthild's revelations—ubiquitous in the late Middle Ages—have in modern times, until quite recently, been as rare as the Grail. In this essay I will revive her claim by taking a fresh look at the evidence for Dante's knowledge of her—and indeed, his debt to her—as well as her compatibility with the role and character of Matelda.

I will further show that, however much or little the poet knew of the historical Mechthild, the role he gave his fictional Matelda provides an exceptional key to *The Book of Special Grace*. In other words, not only does a knowledge of Mechthild and her visions illumine the lady of the Earthly Paradise, but a knowledge of Dante helps us glimpse the heart of Mechthild's mystical spirituality. My argument, therefore, is a two-way street. I mean to elucidate the crux of Matelda, but equally to refresh our knowledge of an important, yet all but forgotten female mystic. Hence I will cast Dante in the unexpected role of guide to the work of a holy woman who enjoyed considerable fame in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, if not today.

***Who Was Mechthild of Hackeborn,
and How Could Dante Have Known of Her?***

Mechthild's life and work are little known to Dante scholars, so an overview is in order.²¹ A daughter of the powerful baron of Hackeborn-Wippra, Mechthild was kin to the Hohenstaufen. At the age of seven she entered the Saxon convent of Rodarsdorf, where her sister Gertrude was abbess. After that community moved to Helfta (near Eisleben) in 1258, it became famous as a center of female holiness and learning. The independent abbey straddled several religious orders; while officially Benedictine, the nuns followed Cistercian customs and wore the grey habit, though their confessors were Dominican. Abbess Gertrude's insistence on education assured that these highborn sisters retained their Latinity at a time when most European nuns could read and write only in the vernacular. In the late thirteenth century the convent's reputation was bolstered by another Mechthild—the beguine, already mentioned, who entered late in her life. Mechthild of Magdeburg completed her *Flowing*

Light of the Godhead at Helfta where, because of encroaching blindness, she had to dictate the last portion to the nuns. It was probably her charismatic presence that galvanized them into further literary activity.

The younger Mechthild—Mechthild of Hackeborn—served as chantress of the monastery throughout her career.²² Not only was “Christ’s nightingale” famed for her musical voice, as befits her role of leading and teaching the chant, but she must also have been highly literate, for a chantress was responsible for maintaining the abbey’s library and scriptorium. During her sister’s long abbacy Mechthild seems to have been, at least unofficially, the community’s novice mistress and second-in-command. But in 1291, around the time of Abbess Gertrude’s death, she became seriously ill. Bedridden for most of the seven years remaining to her, she began to speak of her hitherto private visionary experiences with two confidantes, St. Gertrude the Great (not to be confused with Abbess Gertrude) and a second, anonymous sister. Initially without her knowledge, these nuns recorded and elaborated Mechthild’s revelations throughout the 1290s to produce the popular *Liber specialis gratiae*.

The book is a hybrid of visions, hagiography, liturgical commentary, and practical religious advice, but in modern terms it could be called a utopian fiction. The nuns aim to depict an ideal community in action, or rather two of them. Life at Helfta, as a kind of earthly paradise, is so idealized that it presents a microcosm of the true utopia, the kingdom of heaven. The sisters at worship mingle freely with Christ and Mary, the nine orders of angels, and the saints in their serried ranks. All form a single fellowship for the praise of God and the salvation of souls, with little distance between the righteous on earth and the blessed in paradise. In fact, no other vision-text is so intensely focused on heaven.²³ Many include visions that survey all three realms of the afterlife, but the 420-page *Liber* barely mentions hell, while heaven is featured on almost every page. The Soul enters celestial spaces through the heart of Christ, holds daily converse with saints and angels, and earns heavenly rewards for everything from reciting Our Fathers to patiently enduring illness. These rewards—literalized in an endless parade of crowns, gems, and dazzling brocades—figure in the ceremonial gift exchange that the saints conduct with God, one another, and their worshippers on earth.

There is evidence that the *Liber specialis gratiae* began to circulate soon after its completion. Of nearly one hundred extant Latin manuscripts, nine (Group A) transmit most or all of the enormous work,

while forty (Group B) contain a still-ample condensed version. Another forty-three (Group C) are devotional anthologies with extracts. The popular Group B recension must have been disseminated shortly after Mechthild's death in 1298, but before the death of her protégée and favorite student, St. Gertrude, in 1301 or 1302. We know this because St. Gertrude wrote a hagiographic account of her death that must have been added as an appendix after the Group B recension was already in circulation, since the B manuscripts do not include it.²⁴ The complicated transmission of the *Liber* is still poorly understood, but it seems likely that Helfta's Dominican confessors used the networks of their order to produce the earliest copies.²⁵ The book retained its popularity through the sixteenth century and was eventually translated into six vernaculars. The earliest, a Middle Dutch version (ca. 1420) popular with the Devotio Moderna movement, survives in 144 copies, and there are 47 in Middle High German. Thanks to the Carthusians and Brigittines, we have two complete exemplars of the Middle English *Booke of Gostlye Grace*, plus several fragments,²⁶ and two of a Middle Swedish version made by Jöns Budde in 1469.²⁷

Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples printed an early Latin edition in 1513; his *Liber trium virorum et trium spiritualium virginum* includes the *Liber spiritualis gratiae* (under its usual corrupt title) along with Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias* and the revelations of Elisabeth of Schönau.²⁸ But the sole modern edition of the *Liber* is rare. Louis Paquelin's best-manuscript version, produced at Solesmes in 1877, is easy to find in Dutch, Swiss, and German academic libraries, but almost nowhere else. A thorough search on WorldCat turns up only four copies in France, four in Britain, one in Sweden, six in the United States—and none in Italy.²⁹ As a late medieval best-seller, Mechthild's book is a perfect example of Murray's Law: "the more widely copied a work was in the late Middle Ages the less likely it is to enjoy a modern critical edition," and thus to be read by medievalists.³⁰

Unfortunately, little evidence bears on the question that interests us most—the work's early circulation in Italy. The *Liber specialis gratiae* was printed at Venice in 1520, 1522, and 1558, and an Italian translation was published there in 1590.³¹ An earlier translation has surfaced in a fifteenth-century manuscript in Gubbio.³² But this is still far from Dante's lifetime. For many years it was thought that the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, an early fourteenth-century Franciscan text long ascribed

to Bonaventure, alluded to Mechthild of Hackeborn.³³ If this were the case, it would prove that her book was available in Tuscany while Dante was writing the *Commedia*. In one chapter of the *Meditations*, the Virgin Mary weeps to see her Son's beard pulled out and his head shaved during his Passion—details that Christ is supposed to have revealed to “a certain devout woman” (*cuidam deuote sue*).³⁴ Edmund Colledge in 1976 identified this *deuota* as Mechthild, leading many scholars to accept the date of her death in 1298 as a *terminus post quem* for the *Meditations*.³⁵ But Sarah McNamer has recently shown that the *deuota* was almost certainly Angela of Foligno, an approved Franciscan author, whose text is much closer to the passage cited by pseudo-Bonaventure.³⁶ So the *Meditations* can no longer be taken as evidence that the *Liber* had reached Italy by Dante's lifetime.

Our earliest evidence of Mechthild in Tuscany therefore comes from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1353), which suggests that by that time one of her prayers was in use in Florentine worship. In the first tale of Day Seven, a rich but simple-minded weaver is elected head of his confraternity because of the lavish feasts he provides. As captain of the laud-singers (*laudesi*) at Santa Maria Novella, he learns quite a few prayers, which Boccaccio obligingly if cynically lists: “the *Paternoster* in the vernacular, as well as the song of Saint Alexis, the lament of Saint Bernard, the laud of Lady Matelda, and other such nonsense, all of which he valued very highly and used most diligently for the salvation of his soul.”³⁷ The *laudesi* at Santa Maria Novella, a Dominican church where Dante had personal connections,³⁸ were among the oldest, wealthiest laud-singers, though there were more than a dozen such companies in late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Florence.³⁹ Dominicans, as noted, were instrumental in diffusing Mechthild's revelations and probably brought the knowledge of her to Italy, though we cannot say when.

Boccaccio's “Lady Matelda” was almost certainly Mechthild of Hackeborn, whose Latin name often takes the form Matilda.⁴⁰ Admittedly, McNamer is skeptical of this identification as well. She points out “that Boccaccio's story is fiction; that the mention of the ‘laud’ is immediately paired with the phrase ‘and other such nonsense’ . . . [and] that the Matelda named in the laud is named as a lady, not a saint (enhancing the possibility that the allusion may be a joke).”⁴¹ But these objections can easily be answered. Mechthild would not have been called “saint” because she was never canonized. Rather, as a baron's

daughter she was styled *domina* (lady), a very common title in aristocratic German nunneries.⁴² Boccaccio's story is indeed fiction, but the *Decameron* is filled with realistic details. Santa Maria Novella did have a company of *laudesi*, and there is nothing ludicrous about the repertoire ascribed to them. The vernacular Lord's Prayer would have been a staple of laud-singers; St. Alexis enjoyed a popular cult and figured in hagiographic romances;⁴³ and the prayers ascribed to Bernard of Clairvaux, authentic or not, were among the most beloved of all. Although the narrator takes a cynical tone, hardly rare in Boccaccio, there is no reason to think he was mocking *donna Matelda* any more than he intended to mock the *Paternoster* or St. Bernard.

Moreover, Mechthild was famous as a composer of prayers, which circulated both within and apart from the *Liber*. According to her *vita*, "she composed and taught so many prayers that, if they were all written down, they would make a book longer than the Psalter."⁴⁴ In fact, late medieval anthologies ascribe numerous prayers to her, not all of them included in the *Liber*. *La lauda di donna Matelda*, according to Paquelin, could have been Mechthild's prayer on the five joys of the risen Christ in *Liber* 1.19.⁴⁵ More likely, however, the Florentine *lauda* was one of many compositions that circulated orally or independently. Antonio Lubin believed that the *lauda* sung at Santa Maria Novella was an *oratio beatae Methildis* printed at the end of the 1522 Venetian edition of her book. It begins, "Benedicam Dominum Patrem omnipotentem in omni tempore / Semper laus eius in ore meo."⁴⁶ Modeled on the Song of the Three Holy Children in Daniel 3, the prayer is divided into half-lines for antiphonal chant. For performance by the *laudesi*, it could have been translated into Italian and set to music. Whatever this *lauda* may have been, if it was an independent composition it could have been diffused well before Mechthild died in 1298, and thus before Dante was exiled from Florence in 1302. The Florentine practice of laud-singing was already flourishing in the 1280s.

Boccaccio's reference, assuming that it denotes an actual laud ascribed to Mechthild, establishes that she was known as a sacred author in Florence by 1353. This of course is too late to confirm Dante's familiarity. Whatever the date of the *lauda*, the *Liber* could have reached Italy at any time in the fourteenth century, but we cannot be more precise. For the poet to have based the structure of his *Purgatorio* on Mechthild's vision, he would have needed to know about it no later than 1309 or 1310,

when he was beginning work on the second canticle. This would allow slightly more than a decade after her death for her fame to reach Italy. But we need not imagine Dante reading her entire book. He would need only to have sampled its first part, for as I will show, the most convincing evidence of his acquaintance with her comes from *Liber* 1.13, near the beginning.

It is possible, and indeed likely, that Dante first heard of Mechthild through personal contacts. Friars were constantly on the road, so he could easily have met Dominicans in Florence or elsewhere who had actually known the mystic. One possibility is Rome: the Jubilee of 1300 brought enormous numbers of foreign pilgrims to Italy.⁴⁷ Dante himself visited Rome for the occasion, to judge from his eyewitness description of crowd control there (*Inf.* 18.28–33).⁴⁸ All those pilgrims seeking plenary indulgences would have needed confessors, so friars speaking multiple languages must have been well represented in the throngs. Some of them surely came bearing books. Rome was the obvious place to promote an incipient saint cult, and the *vita* that concludes some manuscripts of the *Liber* seems to have been written with that purpose. Some of Mechthild's visions would also have made ideal preaching material; friars did not hesitate to cite the revelations of holy women if they had exemplary value. So it is not impossible that Dante first heard about the seven-storey mountain in a sermon and later sought out a copy of the text. Ultimately, however, we must rely on compelling internal evidence, for this particular vision provides an embryonic version of the whole scheme of *Purgatorio*.

Internal Evidence for Mechthild's Influence

The first book of the *Liber specialis gratiae* arranges Mechthild's visions to correspond with the liturgical year, and her allegory of the mountain is the sole vision pertaining to Lent—the penitential or “purgatorial” season preceding Easter. On Quinquagesima Sunday, just before Lent begins, Jesus shows the seer a mountain and asks if she wants to stay there with him for forty days and forty nights. This mountain is “of great size, reaching from the east to the west. It had seven stairs by which it could be climbed, and seven springs.”⁴⁹ Each stair and its spring are named for virtues: humility, patience, charity, holiness (or obedience),

generosity, purity, and joy. Bathing in each one, the Soul is successively purged of sins committed in pride, anger, hatred, disobedience, avarice, carnal desire, and acedia (sadness). Mechthild's text describes these faults interchangeably as vices (*vitiis*), stains (*maculis*), and sins (*peccatis*); at other points she says only that the soul is "purified of all that avarice [or some other vice] had committed." On the third stair, that of charity, the Soul prostrates herself at the feet of Jesus, who sings, "Arise, my love, show me your face" (Cant. 2:13–14). On the seventh stair, a "spring of heavenly joy washed the Soul from all the sins of acedia." As soon as she reaches the summit, Jesus leads her into paradise, where she sees streams of living water flowing from the throne of the Trinity.

Though the mountain is not called purgatory and has no punishments, it bears more than a slight resemblance to Dante's purgatorial mountain. Climbing it is a penitential exercise that cleanses sins, beginning with pride as in Dante, and following a similar scheme of virtue-vice pairs.⁵⁰ Breaking the vision into its component parts, we find the idea of a vast mountain with seven levels or terraces; a stairway leading to the top; the association of each level with a virtue; the ascent of a penitent soul who is cleansed of a corresponding vice on each stage; the companionship of angels; a digression halfway up the mountain relating to divine love; and a paradise on the summit, where the soul discovers the wellspring of joy. Each of these elements recurs in *Purgatorio*. The "digression" on the nun's third terrace corresponds structurally to *Purgatorio* 17, halfway up the mountain, where Virgil delivers his famous discourse on love to explain Dante's scheme of the sins. No previous text combines all these elements, and where Dante diverges most sharply from earlier otherworld visions, he comes closest to Mechthild.

To be clear, the poet did not need the nun to supply him with a scheme of virtues and vices. Such schemes were ubiquitous, and it is agreed that Dante relied on the *Summa de virtutibus et vitiis* of the Dominican Peraldus, or William Perault (d. 1271).⁵¹ Rather, his debt to Mechthild concerns two atypical features of the *Purgatorio*: its topography and its overall mood or tone. Part of the poet's genius lay in fusing an older idea of Purgatory as a place of torments with the penitential, almost tender concept he could have found in Mechthild. In otherworld visions before Dante, Purgatory is scarcely distinguished from hell; it often lies in another part of the same infernal pit. This is the case, for example, in the well-known *St. Patrick's Purgatory* and *The*

*Vision of Tnugdál.*⁵² Purgatorial pains differ from those of hell chiefly in being finite; souls there suffer as the damned do, tortured by demons. But the seven-storey mountain is new and distinctive. While the *Purgatorio* punishes, it also purifies. Its denizens actively long for God and embrace their suffering to fulfill his justice. Far from being tormented by demons, they are assisted by angels—a refinement first introduced in Mechthild's brief account of Purgatory.⁵³ For all its torments, the overall mood of *Purgatorio* is one of penance, serene love, and fervent hope, just as in Mechthild's allegory. Dorothy Sayers is eloquent on this point: "There is no difference [between Purgatory and Hell] in the justice; the only difference is in the repudiation or acceptance of judgment. . . . The contrast between Hell and Purgatory is therefore, in its essentials, a contrast of spiritual mood—a contrast, one may say, of atmosphere. . . . The whole landscape is washed in with a sweet and delicate austerity."⁵⁴

As for topography, Dante stands alone in imagining that Mount Purgatory was created by the mass displaced when Satan fell to the center of the earth, hollowing out the infernal realm. Against the lofty mountain, still uninhabited, Ulysses's ship had come to grief in *Inferno* 26; Purgatory was established there only after the death of Christ. The terraced mountain leads souls to Paradise not merely in the course of time, as sinners complete their sentence, but also in space, as they finish their ascent. Here Dante's modest debt to an older tradition clarifies his sharp divergence from it. Most patristic and medieval authors held that the Earthly Paradise forfeited by Adam and Eve still existed, its beauties undiminished by their sin. Many writers, including Ephraim of Syria, Lactantius, John of Damascus, Bede, and Peter Lombard, located the Garden of Eden on a mountain so high that the waters of the Flood never reached it.⁵⁵ But the purpose of that mountain was to make Paradise inaccessible; it had no paths and no one, living or dead, could climb it. Some writers even surrounded Paradise with a wall of fire, suggested by the biblical cherubim with the flaming sword (Gen. 3:24). Dante knew that tradition, for all his penitent souls must pass through a wall of fire on the seventh terrace (*Purg.* 27.10–57). Yet no one before him, other than Mechthild, had made the mountain a mode of *access*, rather than a barrier to the Earthly Paradise—symbolizing the soul's ascent, through penitence, from its sinful dispositions to original innocence. Just as Mechthild's soul is bathed in the seven springs, each denoting

the purgation of a sin, Dante's forehead is cleansed by an angel on each terrace of one of the seven P's (for *peccatum*) that he receives on arrival. Unlike the nun, Dante makes his Earthly Paradise a point of departure for the heavens. But he never follows any source slavishly, not even the Bible; Genesis mentions four rivers in paradise (Gen. 2:10–14), while Dante names only two. Here again he may have been influenced by Mechthild, who sees just two streams flowing from the throne of Christ. One denotes the forgiveness of sins, the other spiritual consolation, much like the poet's Lethe and Eunoë.⁵⁶

When we turn to the cantos in which Matelda appears, two further lines of evidence point to Mechthild's probable influence. One is the character of Dante's *bella donna*, who resembles the joyful mystic; the other is her role as psychopomp, the agent who initiates the blessed into their beatitude. Let us first compare Matelda's character with the nun of Helfta. A brief *vita* of Mechthild, probably written by St. Gertrude, appears as chapter 5.30 in Group A manuscripts of the *Liber*. But in the condensed B version, which circulated more widely, that chapter is recast as a prologue, so a reader who had time only to dip into the volume could not miss it.⁵⁷ Here Dante could have read that Mechthild was "a wonderfully sweet-tempered person" of remarkable innocence: "her two confessors swore they had never met anyone so innocent and pure of heart."⁵⁸ In a *vita* one expects all possible virtues to be ascribed to the saint, but the notes that stand out in Mechthild's are tenderness, joy, and a unique gift for comforting others. We are told that "both religious and laypeople came to her from far away, saying they had never found so much consolation from anyone else."⁵⁹ In endlessly varied forms, her visions convey one intense but simple message: that she is deeply, tenderly, intimately, ardently loved by God. So are her sisters, so is everyone she prays for; so is the reader. The same joy, sweetness, and innocence radiate from the figure of Matelda.

Mechthild of course was a nun and thus, by definition, a contemplative. Here we confront a potential problem because critics all but unanimously read Matelda as a type of the active life. Insofar as the Earthly Paradise represents temporal felicity, the goal of the *vita activa*, its guardian must represent the perfection of that life. When Dante first sees Matelda, she is gathering flowers, just as Leah does in the pilgrim's earlier dream. There Leah explicitly signifies the active life (*Purg.* 27.97–108), as she normally does in the exegetical tradition, while her

sister Rachel (Beatrice) typifies contemplation. But this allegory needs to be nuanced, for Matelda's version of the active life does not consist in lay activity, such as mustering armies or governing lands (as Matilda of Tuscany did). In religious life, the *vita activa* had a more specialized sense: it denoted virtuous works such as teaching the ignorant, consoling the troubled, tending the sick, and even chanting the liturgy (all of which Mechthild of Hackeborn did). For a nun, she was *attivissima*—as noted already by D'Ovidio, who knew her book well.⁶⁰ Thomas Aquinas explains that the active life poses no obstacle to contemplation: "active life may be considered as quieting and directing the internal passions of the soul; and from this point of view the active life is a help to the contemplative."⁶¹ Some in fact see Matelda as embodying a union of the two lives, for if she gathers flowers like Leah, she also has beautiful eyes like Rachel (Gen. 29:17)—or for that matter, Venus (*Purg.* 28.64–66).⁶² Nor should we forget the exegesis of Richard of St. Victor, which accounts for Matelda and Beatrice at least as well as the traditional reading. For the Victorine mystic, "Leah is affection inflamed by divine inspiration; Rachel is reason illumined by divine revelation."⁶³ Matelda is without doubt an affective figure, an emblem of ardent but innocent eros; that is why the enchanted pilgrim is both right and wrong when his mind turns to Proserpina, Hero, and even Venus. Dante certainly knew the work of Richard, whom he singles out in the Heaven of the Sun as *più che viro* in contemplation (*Par.* 10.132).

When Matelda appears to the pilgrim, we learn three things about her. She is alone, she is singing, and she is collecting flowers (*Purg.* 28.40–41). All three traits in themselves evoke the contemplative life—or rather, what Thomas called the highest part of the active life, which prepares a soul for contemplation. First, solitude is a typical pursuit of monks and nuns, not of laity following a path of active virtue. Second, Matelda is singing, like the chantress Mechthild—and what does she sing? Dante does not reveal this at once, saying only that as she drew nearer, he understood her song and its meaning (*Purg.* 28.59–60). A few verses later she tells us herself: "il salmo *Delectasti*" can disperse any clouds from the poet's mind (*Purg.* 28.80–81). She refers to Vulgate Psalm 91:5, *Delectasti me, Domine, in factura tua* (You have made me glad, O Lord, in your handiwork). In his commentary on that psalm, Augustine explains that those who sing psalms (*psallunt*) denote people who perform their good works cheerfully (*cum hilaritate*)—thus establishing

links between psalmody, the active life in its religious sense, and the joy of the Earthly Paradise.⁶⁴ A few critics have been puzzled because *Delectasti* is not the first word of the psalm, and even verse 91:5 begins with a *Quia* not cited by Dante.⁶⁵ The small mystery can be solved, however, with a glance at the liturgy. “Delectasti me, Domine, in factura tua” is a brief responsory used in the Friday office throughout the year, followed by the second half of the psalm verse: *Et in operibus manuum tuarum exultabo* (And I will exult in the works of your hands).⁶⁶ The chant perfectly suits the occasion. Matelda sings with delight at the beauty of the Earthly Paradise, a work of primal nature direct from God’s hand, as she is about to explain.⁶⁷ The liturgical form is also suggestive: in a responsory the chantress would intone the first verse, leaving the choir—in this case, Dante, Virgil, and Statius—to respond with the rest. The three poets do not actually sing, but they do share Matelda’s delight, smiling when she recalls the poetry of the Golden Age (*Purg.* 28.146–47) in which they evoked this very place.

At the beginning of the next canto she sings again *come donna innamorata*. As often noted, that verse recalls a *pastorella* by Guido Cavalcanti.⁶⁸ Yet we must attend once more to what she sings, which is not erotic at all: Psalm 31:1, *Beati quorum tecta sunt peccata* (*Purg.* 29.1–3). Indeed, “blessed are they whose sins are covered,” the souls who have found forgiveness with God. Dante has learned by now that if the *bella donna* is in love, as he thought at first, it is not with him but with Christ. Throughout *The Book of Special Grace*, Mechthild too is portrayed as a woman in love, passionately enamored of her Lord. Like the psalms sung by Matelda, her revelations place uncommon stress on divine gladness and the forgiveness of sins. In fact, their consistently joyful tone sets them apart from the majority of vision-texts, in which divine praise is counterbalanced by threats of judgment. Mechthild’s deeply monastic book is steeped in the psalms, for praise of God through the Psalter was the *raison d’être* of the Divine Office. Not only do psalms evoke many of her visions and exegetical flights, but she is often portrayed in the act of chanting: “she customarily sang to God with all her might, with such fervent love that as it often seemed to her, even if she should breathe her last she would not stop singing.” As in the Earthly Paradise, her song enfolds not just the worshipping community, but even voiceless creatures in God’s praise. Christ tells Mechthild in the same passage that, when certain hymns are sung, “inviting the creation to divine

praise, all creatures spiritually join in my praise as if they were persons standing in my presence.”⁶⁹

In the third place, Matelda is gathering flowers. This is a traditional emblem of leisure rather than labor; it is what aristocratic maidens do in romances. In monastic life, however, it is a time-honored symbol of meditation. As a bee gathers nectar from many flowers to make honey, a monk or nun culls choice passages from Scripture and sacred texts to produce devotion—hence the terms *florilegium* and *anthology*, which both mean “gathering of flowers.” The *Liber* is itself such a gathering. In its original prologue, where no reader could miss it, Mechthild’s scribe exults that “God showered her abundantly with his grace in every way. He freely gave her not only spiritual and gratuitous grace, but also natural gifts such as knowledge, understanding, literary skill, and a very musical voice.”⁷⁰ This union of “spiritual and gratuitous grace” with natural grace freely given sums up the meanings *dantisti* have assigned to Matelda. She seems to be a kind of unfallen Eve, yet also possesses the grace of redeemed humankind.

Matelda’s primary role is to prepare souls for beatitude by baptizing them in Lethe (*Purg.* 31.91–102), then Eunoë (*Purg.* 33.127–45). During his passage through Lethe, Dante hears a voice singing *Asperges me* (Psalm 50:9): “you will sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be clean.” The penitential psalm may seem like an obvious musical choice for this moment—yet there is no river in that psalm, only sprinkling. In *Liber* 2.2, however, as Mechthild sings the same verse in choir, *Asperges me*, she asks Christ how he intends to wash her heart. At this he invites her to enter his own heart, where “she saw a river of living water flowing from east to west. Around the river were twelve trees bearing twelve kinds of fruit,” as in the new paradise unveiled at the end of the Bible (Rev. 22:1–2). The Soul then bathes in this stream, where she is “cleansed of all stains.”⁷¹ Here again, Mechthild’s vision anticipates Dante’s. Matelda’s second sacramental act, baptizing the poet in the *santissima onda* of Eunoë (*Purg.* 33.142), is the last action in the canticle. From these waters he emerges “Puro e disposto a salire a le stelle” (*Purg.* 33.145). In short, the kind of pure activity represented by Matelda has prepared his soul for the pure contemplative life of heaven.

Once again it is worth dwelling on the originality of Dante’s idea of Purgatory. Far more than previous otherworld visions, *Purgatorio* emphasizes the arduous preparation required by even a relatively pure

soul before it can enjoy the presence of God. The redeemed must not only endure the punishments of the seven terraces. Even after completing their ascent and passing through the wall of fire, they must undergo the double purgation of memory in the two streams. The idea of a river that divides this life from the next is archetypal, but in myth Lethe flows through Hades, not Paradise. And in heavenly visions such as the Middle English *Pearl*, when a stream separates a seer from paradise, it is usually an emblem of death. For Dante, however, the two streams have a more pointed meaning: there can be no full beatitude while the least tainted memory remains or the smallest good is forgotten. This insight, I believe, was shared by Mechthild. One of the overarching themes of the *Liber* is precisely the preparation of the blessed for their beatitude. So at this point, I will turn from my argument for Mechthild's influence on Dante to her historical ministry at Helfta, using the role of Matelda as a guide to some key dynamics in her *Liber*.

Liminal Ladies at Heaven's Portal

While theologians speculated at length on the nature of heaven—the beatific vision, the primacy of intellect or of will, the dowries of the resurrected body—few tried to imagine the social life of the blessed. Fewer still did so in narrative form, and among those, Dante is chief. There are dozens of terrifying visions of hell, but *Paradiso* stands alone. Nevertheless, without making inflated claims, we can observe that the poet and the visionary nun share an unusual distinction. For the *Commedia* is not just a monument awaiting exegesis, to be read in light of its sources. Like any masterpiece, it sheds its own light on texts in its penumbra, and one of those is the *Liber specialis gratiae*.⁷² If we read the nuns' book in the light of *Paradiso*, we see that the women of Helfta were engaged in the same project as Dante in his third canticle—imagining the spirit of joyful, courteous exchange that animates the blessed, in relation with one another and with those on earth.⁷³ One famous Dantean example is the Heaven of the Sun, where Thomas Aquinas sings the praise of St. Francis while Bonaventure, in return, dwells on the gifts of St. Dominic (*Par.* 11–12). The same spirit of exchange governs the celestial prologue that sets the whole poem in motion. The Virgin Mary summons Lucia, who appeals to Beatrice, who “visit[s] the threshold

of the dead” to plead with Virgil (*Purg.* 30.139), who comes to deliver Dante (*Inf.* 2.52–126). These interactions are social, depicting the whole City of God in action on behalf of one of its (potential) citizens.

That Mechthild’s imagination was not the equal of Dante’s goes without saying. But in their sustained and full-blooded imagining of heaven, the two were kindred spirits. If the poet knew the *Liber*, as I believe he did, he would have prized its high courtesies. Consider Mechthild’s vision of St. Agnes, which has the rubric, “How the saints can give all their goods to their devotees as if they were their own.” As the choir chants a responsory for the virgin martyr, Mechthild sees Christ embracing Agnes and regrets that she herself, though consecrated from childhood, had not loved Christ as much as the saint did. “Then the Lord said to St. Agnes, ‘Give her all that is yours!’ From this saying the Soul understood the privilege that God has conferred on his saints. All that he has accomplished in them, and all that they have suffered for Christ, they can give as gifts to their lovers and devotees—those who praise and thank God for their sake or love God’s gifts in them.”⁷⁴ Such generosity becomes possible—or at any rate, visible—because spiritual merits possess tangible glory. Christ and the Virgin donate their virtues and merits in the form of treasure chests, golden rings, or sparkling lilies. Any defect in the faithful can be readily compensated by this means. The nuns’ prayers participate in this spiritual economy by directing and speeding the circulation of such goods to those who need them most. One of Mechthild’s ministries lay in making this system of exchange transparent to her sisters through visions, thus initiating souls into the divine fellowship.

Three themes in particular link Mechthild’s role with Matelda’s: the function of *initiatrice*; *transitus* tales, or stories of a soul’s joyful entrance into heaven; and tales of unexpected salvation. Mechthild ministered at Helfta in many ways—as chantress, teacher, novice mistress, and practical administrator. But she fully comes into her own as a kind of psychopomp. Being still on earth, she cannot directly guide the souls of the dead as Matelda does. In her visions, however, she gains privileged access to the spiritual experience of the dying, then observes their ceremonial entrance into heaven. By recounting these rites of passage in intimate detail, she reassures her sisters that all is well with the deceased—and lets them know what to hope for in their own passing.⁷⁵ Among the souls she ushers into heaven this way are Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1282) and

her own sister, Abbess Gertrude (d. 1291).⁷⁶ With her deathbed narratives and celestial welcomes, Mechthild pioneered a role and an affiliated literary genre that became specialties of Helfta. Ever the teacher (like Matelda), she initiated her sisters into her deathbed practice through the collective process of composing the *Liber*. The younger St. Gertrude became a skilled practitioner. Surviving Mechthild by about four years, she narrated her teacher's *transitus* in a lengthy, loving account.⁷⁷ Paolo Pecoraro even suggests, ingeniously, that Mechthild stands in the same relation to St. Gertrude as Matelda to Beatrice and Leah to Rachel. Just as action prepares the soul for contemplation, the chantress and teacher Mechthild yields to her protégée Gertrude, a pure contemplative, who held no religious office.⁷⁸ Gertrude's own death and transfiguration (d. 1301 or 1302) are chronicled at the end of another visionary recital from Helfta, the *Legatus divinae pietatis* or *Herald of God's Loving-Kindness* (ca. 1298–1302).⁷⁹ Whatever their basis in inner experience, these narratives are rhetorically crafted to a fine polish, as poetic in their way as Matelda's actions in the Earthly Paradise.

As a reporter on the state of souls, Mechthild builds on a long-standing tradition whereby the deceased would return, often on the thirtieth day or first anniversary, to reveal their posthumous state. This tradition was so well established that both monastics and laity entered into pacts, promising friends that the first one to die would return in a postmortem visit. Many otherworld narratives are based on the tales of such revenants.⁸⁰ But Mechthild's reports differ in significant ways. In the first place, the souls she accompanies are always saved, often entering heaven in a flash of glory and rising straight to the seraphic thrones. Never do they come with horrifying tales of damnation. Second, even the experience of the dying is anchored in the vivid awareness of community so central to the nuns' piety. When a soul departs, it is like the Joyous Entry of a monarch in reverse: the king and queen of heaven, with all their courtiers, throng the gates to welcome a humble soul into their realm. Book 5 of the *Liber* is devoted to such "joyous entries," including Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas.

One startling feature of the *Purgatorio* is Dante's boldness in including souls that none of his contemporaries thought could be saved. Cato in *Purgatorio* 1 is the chief case in point: the very guardian of Purgatory is a pagan, a suicide, and an opponent of Caesar, whose assassins the reader had encountered in the previous canto in the deepest circle of hell. One

of the first souls we meet in *Purgatorio* is Manfred (*Purg.* 3), who died excommunicate and was popularly blamed for several murders. Statius, another pagan, is ushered into Paradise by Matelda at the end of the canticle—even though Virgil, whose *Fourth Eclogue* supposedly led him to faith, is himself lost. In short, Dante evinces the kind of spiritual optimism that Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, in a different context, characterized as “radical salvational generosity.”⁸¹ This brand of optimism was not typical of the age, yet it is prominent in the spirituality of Helfta. I will present two cases from the *Liber specialis gratiae*.

A lengthy chapter deals with Count Burkhard, a descendant of the founder, who died a sudden, ill-prepared death at the age of nineteen.⁸² Mechthild hints that, if not for a deathbed repentance that only she knows about, he would have perished in mortal sin. So even she cannot grant him immediate entry into heaven, although (much like Dante) she claims privileged knowledge of the state of souls. She spares the count any purgatorial torments by making a gift of “all the loving, innocent tears that she herself had ever shed on earth as a remedy and compensation for his soul.” It is a baptism in Lethe, so to speak, and once God has accepted her offering, “that soul rejoiced greatly.” Next Mechthild wonders how the count’s heartbroken mourners can possibly atone for his sins by “extol[ling] his goodness, his virtues, and the charm of his manners.” Christ assures her that such eulogies do profit the soul: “Whenever people on earth extol his distinguished virtues and his innocent life, all the saints offer me singular praise for the natural virtues I lavished on that soul. Moreover, his soul itself happily praises me, even though he is not yet in heaven, whenever people on earth say good things about him.” Even in *Inferno*, as we recall, the damned take pleasure in the knowledge that Dante will revive their fame or clear their reputations on earth. On the thirtieth day after the count’s death, Mechthild sees his soul at his commemorative mass, and the two enter into a long colloquy. Though not yet in paradise, the soul is already singing God’s praise and assures her that he suffers no punishment at all, “except that I do not yet see my loving God. I yearn to behold him with a desire so great that, if all the desire that anyone ever felt for God on earth could be transfused into a single man, it would be nothing compared with my desire.” Because the young count had so many strikes against him, his painless salvation is a signal proof of the theology taught on every page of the *Liber*: it is loving community that saves.

Mechthild's gift of tears, the nuns' prayers, his mother's alms, a priest's memorial masses, and even the mourners' eulogies speed his passage into heaven. His condition recalls that of Manfred and other negligent souls in the antepurgatory, waiting for the prayers of the living to speed them on their way (*Purg.* 3.140–45, 4.133–34).

Another vision hedges its bets, while nonetheless giving broad hints about the correct reading. Theologians sometimes asked holy women to solve their conundrums, trusting in the women's direct access to God in prayer. So it happened that a friar asked Mechthild about four hard cases in salvation theology, perhaps to test her:

At the request of a certain friar, she asked the Lord where the souls of Samson, Solomon, Origen, and Trajan were now. He replied, "I do not want people to know what my mercy has done with Solomon's soul, so they will be more careful to avoid carnal sins. I wish what my goodness has done with Samson's soul to remain unknown, so people will be terrified to take vengeance on their enemies. What my kindness has done with Origen's soul should be hidden, so no one who trusts in his own knowledge will dare to exalt himself. Finally, I want no one to know what my generosity has decreed about Trajan's soul, so the Catholic faith will be more highly valued. For, even though he excelled in every virtue, he lacked Christian faith and baptism."⁸³

All four men were test cases for the limits of God's mercy. Samson committed suicide as well as vengeance (*Judg.* 16:28–30), while Solomon apostasized at the end of his life and worshipped idols at the behest of his foreign wives (*3 Kings* 11:1–10). Dante alludes to widespread curiosity about the fate of his soul, which he presents as unambiguously saved (*Par.* 10.109–14). Origen, a third-century theologian, was posthumously charged with heresy for his teaching on universal salvation, and the emperor Trajan posed the question of whether righteous pagans could be saved. In a well-known miracle story, he was resurrected by the prayers of Gregory the Great, on account of his virtuous deeds, just long enough to be catechized and baptized in the pope's tears. Dante admitted his soul to paradise, devoting parts of two widely separated cantos to his fate (*Purg.* 10.73–93, *Par.* 20.43–48 and 100–17). In taking on such questions, Mechthild had reason to be cautious, for overtly proclaiming the salvation of these figures could jeopardize her orthodoxy. Nevertheless, the *Liber* uses nouns suggesting that all four were saved (*miser cordia, pietas, benignitas, liberalitas*), while maintaining that it

is pastorally useful to leave their fates in doubt.⁸⁴ Dante, less cautious, saves not only Solomon and Trajan, but also the pagans Cato (*Purg.* 1), Statius (*Purg.* 21–33), and Ripheus (*Par.* 20.118–29). While the poet did not hesitate to pronounce sentences of damnation, he shares Mechthild's salvational generosity. For his own mysterious reasons, Dante's God suspends the ordinary rules of play whenever he sees fit.

As I have argued, heaven is the destination toward which Mechthild's thought, her visions, and her *Liber* constantly tend. Her book strives with all its rhetorical might to kindle desire and awaken hope, preparing readers for the joys that the nun, on behalf of Christ, never ceases to promise them. There is thus a striking resemblance between the role Dante assigns to his Matelda and the ministry Mechthild of Hackeborn fulfilled at Helfta as a portress at heaven's gate. Her theology balances a robust doctrine of salvation by grace with a typically monastic emphasis on virtues, merits, and rewards.⁸⁵ In this respect she is close to *Paradiso*. Dante's Eunoë crystallizes an insight at the core of Mechthild's revelations: there can be no perfect bliss without *memoria . . . d'ogne ben fatto* (*Purg.* 28.128–29). Constantly recalling the good works of Christ and Mary, the saints, beloved friends, and even one's own, augments that torrent of divine pleasure that the *Liber* so often invokes (Psalm 35:9).

I have dwelt on Mechthild's ministry, especially her concerns with the nature of heaven, the death of the righteous, unexpected salvation, and the ritual sharing of good deeds, because these aspects of her life and teaching make her a singularly apt candidate for the role of Matelda. Mechthild is still routinely invoked, only to be dismissed, in discussions of this long-standing enigma. Yet few Dante specialists since Edmund Gardner in 1913 have actually read her book to assess her plausibility, even though our historical knowledge of her has advanced greatly since her name was first proposed in the nineteenth century. A historical link between Matelda and Mechthild of Hackeborn would support the most convincing symbolic accounts of her role: Mechthild would have been an excellent choice if Dante wanted his Matelda to be a figure of divine wisdom, an exemplar of innocence restored, or a model of charity in action. In fact, it is not impossible that the poet on some level identified with her. If his life of exile seems a far cry from her cloistered world, we must recall that Dante no less than Mechthild portrayed himself as a visionary prophet, publishing revelations vouchsafed him for the common good. Cacciaguida's charge to reveal the whole vision, come

what may (*Par.* 17.128–29), echoes the divine commands received by a legion of holy women.

Conclusion

The mystery of Matelda will never be definitively solved. Yet, unless we believe that she is unique among Dante's characters in being completely ahistorical, she has to be modelled on *someone*, and the credible alternatives are few. Matilda of Tuscany, I have argued, is a poor match on both poetic and political grounds, and other historical candidates are no less open to challenge. To be sure, some have proposed a figure from Dante's private life, a personal friend of Beatrice—one of the several ladies who surround her in the *Vita Nuova*.⁸⁶ If she is not the *donna gentile*, she could be the close friend who predeceased Beatrice (*VN* 8)⁸⁷ or even the lady "Primavera," who preceded her as John the Baptist preceded Christ (*VN* 24). These suggestions explain the intimacy of the two ladies and preserve the vernal, virginal aura of the Earthly Paradise. Yet they cannot account for Matelda's name, and if she was a young woman he had known on earth, it is odd that the poet does not recognize her when they meet again.

At the end of *Purgatorio*, Beatrice asks Matelda to bring Dante and Statius to Eunoë and there revive the power (*virtù*) of their souls, *come tu se' usa* (*Purg.* 33.128–29). As often noted, this verse implies that Matelda is not newly appointed, but has exercised her task for some time.⁸⁸ Moreover, the phrase implies that unlike Beatrice, she performs her ministry not for Dante alone, but for all the blessed, like Cato at the entrance to Purgatory. In that case, she should be a figure of greater historical significance than a forgotten Florentine beauty.⁸⁹ Yet Cato conveniently left this world not long before the death of Christ created Purgatory, so it is plausible to imagine him filling his place from the Passion until the Last Day. Mechthild, on the other hand, died long after the Earthly Paradise was opened, so if she is Matelda, another (or several others) must have filled her role for the first thirteen centuries. This objection, however, applies to all candidates, whether famous historical figures or obscure friends of Beatrice. If Dante had wanted his *bella donna* to hold a place parallel to Cato's, fulfilling her ministry from the Redemption until the end of time, he would not have called her Matelda—for

that name, of Germanic origin, is first attested (as Mechthild) in the seventh century. In principle, the poet could have given the role to a New Testament saint, such as Elizabeth or Mary Magdalene; instead, he chose Matelda. As he does from time to time, Dante leaves us with a conundrum. But the fact that Matelda has already served for some time in the Earthly Paradise does not imply that she has always been there, nor that she will remain as long as Purgatory lasts. It is quite possible to imagine that when Mechthild of Hackeborn died, as a pure soul who had already completed her purgation on earth, she succeeded someone else at heaven's gate, and will in turn be replaced when she passes on to the celestial Paradise. *Come tu se' usa* suggests that her role is habitual; it need not be perpetual.

A similar objection concerns Mechthild's age at the time of death. If Matelda must be a woman who died in the full bloom of her beauty, like Beatrice, then not only Mechthild of Hackeborn, but also Countess Matilda and in fact, all historical candidates would be out of the running. That cavil seems woodenly literal: could the lady of paradise be *other* than a youthful beauty? But in Mechthild's case, a better response is at hand. E. G. Parodi asked long ago, "What affinity can there be between the lady who typifies the Earthly Paradise, who until the end is always called *la bella donna*, and the poor little nun, confined in a cloister and estranged by strict duty from all human vanity?"⁹⁰ Mechthild was indeed cloistered and estranged from "human vanity." Yet, precisely through her pursuit of spiritual purity, she attained that state of glorious innocence symbolized by Matelda's beauty. The protagonist of visions in her *Liber* is not the empirical Mechthild, as we might call her—a veiled nun who was, in her last years, an invalid. It is rather her Soul (Anima), always envisioned as a nubile, amorous virgin like the Bride in the Song of Songs. Further, as I have argued, Mechthild's ministry at Helfta answers an objection to any candidate whose lifespan falls too close to Dante's. Even though the nun had died recently, she had in effect been practicing that ministry on earth throughout her life—reviving the memory of every good deed, revitalizing souls, and preparing them for ultimate joy. What she does in the Earthly Paradise is a continuation of what she had long done in her life on earth.

"Dante's description of an activist Matelda," Moran Cruz argues, in accord with a long line of commentators, must exclude a contemplative figure like Mechthild of Hackeborn.⁹¹ But this perceived "activism" feels

more like the artifact of centuries of scholarship than of fresh, attentive reading. The lady of paradise is not maternal, but virginal (*Purg.* 28.56–57), reminding Dante of Proserpina (28.49–51) or a lady dancing (28.52–54). She is a solitary woman in love, not a ruler, and the literal acts she performs—chanting psalms, explaining the topography of Paradise, and baptizing souls before they enter heaven—are eminently suited to Mechthild. Further, as I have shown, the *vita activa* did not necessarily denote a lay or secular life. As Thomas Aquinas maintained, it could equally denote works of active virtue performed in the religious life to prepare the soul for contemplation. Mechthild of Hackeborn, first proposed by Antonio Lubin more than 150 years ago, has long languished in the absence of an accessible text. Yet she fits the character and role of Matelda far better than the few, unsatisfying alternatives. She certainly deserves a fresh look from *dantisti*.

I am under no illusion that I have proven my case; if that were possible, it would have been done long ago. But I hope this inquiry has been more than another salvo in a never-ending debate. I have tried to show that, whether or not we accept the argument for direct influence, Mechthild and Dante were engaged in the same theological project—reimagining the communion of saints. The *Commedia* folds the Church Militant, the Church Suffering, and the Church Triumphant firmly into a single community, from which the damned have tragically cut themselves off. With its new Mechthildan vision of Purgatory, Dante's second canticle removes the penitent souls once and for all from their traditional place beside the damned. Tortured they may be, still tainted by sins they have now fully repented, yet they are ascending toward justice—and joy—with newly pure intentions. Dante ascends with them, a living man among the shades, a Christian in the company of righteous pagans, up to the summit. There a shining Matelda embodies both the justice and the joy. Mechthild, in her Mateldan innocence, had no interest in hell or unrepentant sin. But, like Dante, she too ascended this mountain, rising from the active religious life of her youth to the pure contemplation of her last years when, from a bed of sickness, she recounted the visions that somehow touched the poet.

In addition, Dante's creation sheds a tantalizing light on *The Book of Special Grace*. Like Matelda in her poetic paradise, Mechthild in her utopian vision of monastic life devoted herself to grooming souls for celestial bliss. She taught them to climb the seven-storey mountain,

quicken their faith with promises of joy to come, alerted them to the companionship of saints, accompanied them through the transit of death, and finally, regaled those left behind with tales of their entry into heaven. So if the nun gives us a clue to the identity of Matelda, the lady sketched in Dante's masterful strokes also reveals a truth about Mechthild. These two figures are hardly "the same," yet they are versions of one another: liminal ladies on the threshold of heaven, joyfully chanting psalms on the mountaintop as they wait to usher purified souls into beatitude.

Notes

I would like to thank John Bugbee, Christian Moevs, and Paola Nasti for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1. I take my title from Thomas Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), which pays elegant homage to the *Purgatorio*.

2. Fiorenzo Forti, "Matelda," *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, ed. Umberto Bosco et al., 6 vols. (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970–78), vol. 3:854–60; Caron Cioffi, "Matelda," in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing (New York: Garland, 2000), 599–602.

3. Dante, *Monarchia* III.xvi, ed. and trans. Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 144–47.

4. Giulio Natali, "Il Paradiso Terrestre e la sua custode," *Studi in onore di Salvatore Santangelo*, 2 vols. (Catania: Università di Catania, 1955), vol. 1:197–210; Concetto S. Del Popolo, "Matelda," *Lecture Classensi* 8 (1979): 121–34; Peter Armour, "Matelda in Eden: The Teacher and the Apple," *Italian Studies* 34 (1979): 2–27.

5. Del Popolo, "Matelda," 131.

6. Peter Dronke, "Dante's Earthly Paradise: Towards an Interpretation of *Purgatorio* XXVIII," *Romanische Forschungen* 82 (1970): 467–87, at 481.

7. Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 404n154.

8. Francesco Santi, "La natura dal punto di vista di Matelda (*Purg.* XXVIII)," in *La poesia della natura della Divina Commedia*, ed. Giuseppe Ledda (Ravenna: Centro Dantesco del Frati Minori Conventuali, 2009), 137–55, at 142.

9. Joan M. Ferrante, *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 245–48; John A. Scott, *Dante's Political Purgatory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 182–84; Lino Pertile, *La puttana e il gigante: Dal "Cantico dei Cantici" al Paradiso Terrestre di Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 1998), 79–84.

10. Ovidio Capitani, "La Matelda di Dante e Matilde di Canossa: un problema aperto," in *Matilde di Canossa nelle culture europee del secondo millennio*, ed. Paolo Golinelli (Bologna: Pàtron, 1999), 19–27; and see the commentary in *Purgatorio: A Verse Translation*, ed. and trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (New York: Random House, 2003), 632–33.

11. Bruno Nardi points out that Dante might have lacked accurate knowledge of Matilda's political leanings: "Chi e cosa è Matelda," *Nel mondo di Dante* (Rome: Edizioni di "Storia e Letteratura," 1944), 275–84. But it seems unlikely that he would have chosen her for such a key role on the basis of ignorance.

12. Jo Ann Hoepfner Moran Cruz, "Dante's Matelda: Queen, Saint, and Mother of Emperors," *Viator* 47.3 (2016): 209–42, reviving a suggestion of Michelangelo Caetani, *Matelda nella*

divina foresta della Commedia di Dante Alighieri (Rome: Salviucci, 1857), and M. F. M. Meiklejohn, "The Identity of Dante's Matelda," *Collected Essays on Italian Language and Literature Presented to Kathleen Speight*, ed. Giovanni Aquilecchia et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), 23–27. Jerome Mazzaro supports the Saxon Matilda on the ground that her feast day, March 14, would in Dante's time have fallen on the vernal equinox: "The Vernal Paradox: Dante's Matelda," *Dante Studies* 110 (1992): 107–20. But hers was a regional cult, observed only in Saxony and Bavaria.

13. Wilhelm Preger, *Dante's Matelda: Ein akademischer Vortrag* (Munich: Verlag der Königlichen Akademie, 1873); Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache, *Mechthilde de Magdebourg, 1207–1282: étude de psychologie religieuse* (Paris: Champion, 1926), 358–70. Edward Boehmer thought Dante might have conflated the two Mechthilds: "Matelda," *Jahrbuch der deutschen Dante-Gesellschaft* 3 (1871): 101–78, at 177. Edmund G. Gardner agreed, though he "slightly incline[d]" toward Mechthild of Magdeburg: *Dante and the Mystics* (London: J. M. Dent, 1913), 296–97.

14. Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*, ed. Gisela Vollmann-Profe (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2003); *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist, 1998).

15. Sara S. Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 205; Eadem, "Transmission and Impact: Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit*," in *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Elizabeth Andersen, Henrike Lähnemann, and Anne Simon (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 73–101. Earlier claims for the wide diffusion of the Latin text, *Lux divinitatis*, have proven to be unfounded.

16. Prologue to *Lux divinitatis*, in Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light*, trans. Tobin, 32.

17. *Sanctae Mechthildis Liber Specialis Gratiae, in Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechthildianae*, vol. 2, ed. monks of Solesmes, dir. Louis Paquelin (Poitiers and Paris: Oudin, 1877), 1–421; Mechthild of Hackeborn and the nuns of Helfta, *The Book of Special Grace*, trans. Barbara Newman (New York: Paulist, 2017).

18. Antonio Lubin, *La Matelda di Dante Alighieri* (Graz: Kienreich, 1860); Louis Paquelin, "Zur Matelda-Frage," *Jahrbuch der deutschen Dante-Gesellschaft* 4 (1877): 405–10; Francesco D'Ovidio, *Nuovi studii danteschi. Il Purgatorio e il suo preludio* (Milan: Hoepli, 1906), 582–93; Gardner, *Dante and the Mystics*, 265–97; *Dante's Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford, 1939), 374. See also Paquelin, *Liber Specialis Gratiae*, vi–vii and footnotes, passim; Augusto Mancini, "Matelda, S. Mectilde e S. Ildegarde," *Atti della R. Accademia lucchese* 31 (1901): 3–12; and Gertrude Casanova, "St. Mechthilde," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1911), retrieved 26 October 2018 from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10105b.htm>.

19. Forti, "Matelda," 855.

20. Paolo Pecoraro, "L'ora di Citea (Una interpretazione della Matelda dantesca)," *Critica letteraria* 40 (1983): 419–44; Omerita Ranalli, "Il Purgatorio nella tradizione medievale e nella *Commedia* di Dante: Matelda e le Matildi," *Bollettino di italianistica* 4 (2007): 9–31. Wolfgang Beutin is sympathetic but inconclusive: "Säkularisierungs- und Spiritualisierungstendenzen in der Dichtung und im mystischen Schrifttum des späten Mittelalters, mit einem Exkurs: Dantes Matelda und deutsche Frauenmystik," *Jahrbuch der Oswald von Wolkenstein-Gesellschaft* 9 (1997): 361–72.

21. This account is based on Newman, Introduction to *The Book of Special Grace*, 1–34.

22. For Mechthild as chantress and her beautiful voice, see *The Book of Special Grace*, chaps. 1.0, 3.7, 5.30, and 7.11 (pp. 151, 217, 222, 234). In the last passage she is called Christ's nightingale.

23. Newman, Introduction to *Book of Special Grace*, 16; Voaden, "Mechthild of Hackeborn," 436; Barbara Kline, "The Discourse of Heaven in Mechthild of Hackeborn's *Book of Costly Grace*," in *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Jan Swango Emerson and Hugh Feiss (New York: Garland, 2000), 83–99.

24. Newman, Introduction to *Book of Special Grace*, 28.

25. R. L. J. Bromberg, O.P., ed., *Het Boek der bijzondere Genade van Mechthild van Hackeborn* (Zwolle: Tjeenk Willink, 1965), 105–27; Margot Schmidt, “Mechthild von Hackeborn,” *Verfasserlexikon*, 2nd ed., vol. 6 (1985): 253–60; Rosalynn Voaden, “Mechthild of Hackeborn,” in *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c. 1100–c. 1500*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 431–51; Ernst Hellgardt, “Latin and the Vernacular: Mechthild of Magdeburg—Mechthild of Hackeborn—Gertrude of Helfta,” in *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Andersen et al., 131–45.
26. *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechthild of Hackeborn*, ed. Theresa A. Halligan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1979).
27. *Hel. Mechthilds uppenbarelser (Liber spiritualis gratiae) öfversatta från latinet år 1469 af Jöns Budde*, ed. Robert Geete (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1899).
28. *Liber trium virorum et trium spiritualium virginum*, ed. Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples (Paris: Stephanus, 1513). The widespread title *Liber spiritualis gratiae* is based on an erroneous expansion of the abbreviation *sp’alis*. Most translations derive their titles from this reading.
29. Italian libraries are poorly represented on WorldCat, so this search is not definitive.
30. Alexander Murray, “Should the Middle Ages Be Abolished?” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 21 (2004): 1–22, at 14. Available online through Project MUSE.
31. Schmidt, “Mechthild von Hackeborn.”
32. Patrizia Bertini Malgarini and Ugo Vignuzzi, “Matilde a Helfta, Melchiade in Umbria (e oltre): Un antico volgarizzamento umbro del ‘Liber specialis gratiae,’” in *Dire l’Ineffabile. Caterina da Siena e il linguaggio della mistica*, ed. Lino Leonardi and Pietro Trifone (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2006), 291–307.
33. *Iohannis de Caulibus Meditationes vite Christi*, ed. M. Stallings-Taney, CCCM 153 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997); *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, trans. Francis X. Taney, Anne Miller, and C. Mary Stallings-Taney (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 2000). Stallings-Taney attributes the work to Johannes de Caulibus, but this is contested and lacks a firm grounding. Sarah McNamer ascribes the original core of the text to a Poor Clare nun of Pisa: *Meditations on the Life of Christ: The Short Italian Text* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018).
34. *Meditationes vite Christi*, c. 80, ed. Stallings-Taney, 281.
35. Edmund Colledge, “‘Dominus cuidam devotae suae’: A Source for Pseudo-Bonaventure,” *Franciscan Studies* 36 (1976): 105–7.
36. McNamer, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, cxx–cxxx.
37. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron* VII.1, trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: Penguin, 1982), 418.
38. Alessandro Vettori, “Dominicans,” *Dante Encyclopedia*, 313.
39. Blake Wilson, *Music and Merchants: The Laudesi Companies of Republican Florence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 109; Ronald F. E. Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 43–46.
40. Many scribes were puzzled by her Germanic name. In England she becomes St. Maude, Moll, Molte, or Molde, and in one Italian and Spanish recension she is Melchiade.
41. McNamer, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, cxxiii, n. 10.
42. *Book of Special Grace* 7.7, p. 229; *Legatus divinae pietatis* 5.4, in Gertrude d’Helfta, *Oeuvres spirituelles* V, ed. Jean-Marie Clément et al. (Paris: Cerf, 1986), 78. The *Legatus*, written at Helfta a few years after the *Liber*, clearly distinguishes between “Sister Mechthild” (of Magdeburg) and “Lady Mechthild the chantress” (Mechthild of Hackeborn).
43. Duncan Robertson, *The Medieval Saints’ Lives: Spiritual Renewal and Old French Literature* (Lexington, KY: French Forum Publishers, 1995), 200–52.
44. *Liber* 5.30, p. 365; *Book of Special Grace*, 221.
45. *Liber* 1.19, p. 65n; *Book of Special Grace*, 80–81.
46. I will bless the Lord, the Father almighty, at all times; his praise will always be in my mouth. “Oratio Beatae Methildis,” in *Commedia di Dante Allighieri . . . esposta e commentata da Antonio Lubin* (Padua: Penada, 1881), 351–52.

47. Giovanni Villani estimated the crowds at 200,000. Cesare Baronio, *Annales ecclesiastici* ad 1300, tom. 23, ed. Augustin Theiner (Bar-le-Duc: Guérin, 1871), 264; Debra J. Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome in the Middle Ages: Continuity and Change* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), 199–201.
48. Stephen Bemrose, *A New Life of Dante* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 47. See also *Par.* 31.103–4, where Dante refers to a pilgrim in Rome viewing *la Veronica nostra*.
49. *Liber* 1.13, p. 40; *Book of Special Grace*, 61.
50. The *Liber* names hatred rather than envy as the opposite of charity, and it substitutes disobedience and holiness for the more familiar gluttony and temperance. Dante arranges the seven vices according to an original scheme; in ascending order, they are sins of love perverted (pride, envy, anger), love defective (sloth), and love excessive (avarice, gluttony, lust). In the *Purgatorio* lust is therefore the last vice to be purged, while in the *Liber* it is acedia or sadness.
51. Carlo Delcorno, “Dante e Peraldo,” in *Exemplum e letteratura: tra Medioevo e Rinascimento* (Bologna: Mulino, 1989), 195–257. For a broad survey of Dante’s ethical sources see Patrick Boyde, *Human Vices and Human Worth in Dante’s Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
52. Eileen Gardiner, ed. and trans., *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante* (New York: Italica, 1989), 135–96; Jean Delumeau, *History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition*, trans. Matthew O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1995), 36–37.
53. *Liber* 5.21, p. 352; *Book of Special Grace*, 198; Gardner, *Dante and the Mystics*, 295.
54. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, II: Purgatory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), 16–17.
55. Delumeau, *History of Paradise*, 50.
56. *Liber* 2.21, p. 159.
57. This recension of the text is edited in Bromberg, *Het Boek der bijzondere Genade*, alongside the Dutch translation based on it.
58. *Liber* 1.0, p. 6, and 5.30, pp. 363–64; *Book of Special Grace*, 217, 220. Cf. D’Ovidio, *Nuovi studii danteschi*, 588.
59. *Liber* 5.30, p. 365; *Book of Special Grace*, 221.
60. D’Ovidio, *Nuovi studii danteschi*, 588.
61. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II.2, q. 182, art. 3, trans. English Dominicans, 2nd rev. ed. (1920); online edition by Kevin Knight, 2017, at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3182.htm>.
62. Charles S. Singleton, *Dante Studies 2: Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 205; Forti, “Matelda,” 858.
63. “Nam Lia . . . affectio est diuina inspiratione inflammata, Rachel est ratio diuina reuelatione illuminata.” Richard of Saint-Victor, *Les douze patriarches ou Benjamin minor*, cap. 4, ed. and trans. Jean Châtillon and Monique Duchet-Suchaux, *Sources chrétiennes* 419 (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 100.
64. “Qui sunt qui psallunt? Qui cum hilaritate faciunt bene. In psallendo enim hilaritas est.” Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Ps. 91, par. 5, v. 4 (PL 36.1174); Chiara Cappuccio, “Matelda e Beatrice tra salmodie ed echi profani: dicotomie e complanarità,” *Italian Quarterly* 48 (2014): 5–31, at 13–14.
65. Vincent Truijen, “Delectasti,” *Enciclopedia Dantesca* vol. 2:346. It is unlikely that Dante was referring to Psalm 29:2b, which uses the same verb in the negative: *Nec delectasti*.
66. CANTUS Online Catalogue for Mass and Office Chants, at <http://cantusindex.org/id/a01408>.
67. Peter Hawkins, “Watching Matelda,” in *The Poetry of Allusion: Virgil and Ovid in Dante’s Commedia*, ed. Rachel Jacoff and Jeffrey T. Schnapp (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 181–201.
68. Singleton, *Dante Studies* 2, 214–16; Hawkins, “Watching Matelda,” 184.
69. *Liber* 3.7, pp. 205–6; *Book of Special Grace*, 151.
70. *Liber* 1.0, p. 6; *Book of Special Grace*, 217.
71. *Liber* 2.2, p. 137; *Book of Special Grace*, 121.

72. For a similar approach to Dante see Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 291–308.

73. On courtesy and exchange as central themes, see Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943).

74. *Liber* 1.11, pp. 34–35; *Book of Special Grace*, 56–57.

75. Wolfgang Beutin, “‘Ego semper vivere vellem in his poenis . . .’: Der Tod der Mystikerin,” in *Europäische Mystik vom Hochmittelalter zum Barock*, ed. Wolfgang Beutin and Thomas Bütow (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998), 189–219.

76. For Mechthild of Magdeburg see *Liber* 5.3, 5.6 (*Book of Special Grace*, 188–91); for Abbess Gertrude, *Liber* 6.1–9 (*Book of Special Grace*, 203–15).

77. Parallel versions appear in *Legatus* 5.4 and the belatedly added Book 7 of the *Liber* (*Book of Special Grace*, 224–38). See Beutin, “Ego semper vivere vellem,” 205–10.

78. Pecoraro, “L’ora di Citerea,” 430–31. To be aware of this, however, Dante would have required an implausibly deep knowledge of Helfta.

79. Gertrude d’Helfta, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, ed. Pierre Doyère, Jean-Marie Clément, B. de Vregille, and the nuns of Wisques, in *Oeuvres spirituelles, Sources chrétiennes*, vols. 139, 143, 255, and 331 (Paris: Cerf, 1967–86); *The Herald of God’s Loving-Kindness*, trans. Alexandra Barratt, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991–2018).

80. Catherine Rider, “Agreements to Return from the Afterlife in Late Medieval *Exempla*,” in *The Church, the Afterlife, and the Fate of the Soul*, ed. Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), 174–83. For examples see Peter of Cornwall, *Book of Revelations*, ed. and trans. Robert Easting and Richard Sharpe (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2013), 238–39; Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor* III.103, ed. and trans. S. E. Banks and J. W. Binns (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 758–81; and *A Revelation of Purgatory by an Unknown, Fifteenth-Century Woman Visionary*, ed. and trans. Marta Powell Harley (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1985).

81. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 233.

82. *Liber* 5.11, pp. 336–39; *Book of Special Grace*, 192–95.

83. “Rogata a quodam Fratre, Dominum requisivit ubinam essent animae videlicet Samsonis, Salomonis, Origenis et Trajani. Ad quod Dominus respondit: ‘Quid misericordia mea cum anima Salomonis fecerit volo homines latere, quatenus carnalia peccata magis ab hominibus devitentur. Quid etiam pietas mea cum anima Samsonis egerit volo esse ignotum, ut homines se de inimicis ulcisci amplius pertimescant. Quid vero benignitas mea cum anima Origenis effecerit volo esse absconditum, ut nullus in scientia sua confidens audeat elevari. Quid insuper de anima Trajani liberalitas mea jusserit, volo hominem ignorare, quatenus fides catholica ex hoc magis extollatur; quia hic licet omnibus polleret virtutibus, christiana tamen fide atque baptismo carebat.’” *Liber* 5.16, p. 344; *Book of Special Grace*, 195–96. One manuscript adds a similar comment about Aristotle in the margin.

84. For a range of patristic opinions on these figures, see Mary Jeremy Finnegan, O.P., *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 40–41.

85. Bromberg notes that Mechthild is sometimes falsely hailed as a precursor of Protestantism because she teaches justification by grace, yet she just as strongly teaches that good works merit heavenly rewards: *Het Boek*, 464.

86. Natali, “Il Paradiso Terrestre”; Del Popolo, “Matelda”; Armour, “Matelda in Eden”; Sayers, *Purgatory*, 347–48; C. H. Grandgent, *La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri*, rev. ed. (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1933), 582; Gianfranco Contini, “Alcuni appunti su *Purgatorio* XXVII,” *Studi in onore di Angelo Monteverdi*, ed. Giuseppina Gerardi Marcuzzo, 2 vols. (Modena: Società tipografica editrice modenese, 1959), vol. 1:142–57, at 144.

87. Ignazio Baldelli, “Matelda e la ‘donna giovane e di gentile aspetto molto’ (*Vita Nuova*, VIII),” in *Miscellanea di Studi Danteschi in memoria di Silvio Pasquazi*, ed. Alfonso Paoletta et al., 2 vols. (Naples: Federico & Ardia, 1993), vol. 1:45–52.

88. On this problem see Armour, “Matelda in Eden,” 3–4 and 21.

89. Forti, "Matelda," 856.
90. "Quale affinità vi può essere tra la donna tipica del Paradiso terrestre, che fino all'ultimo è sempre chiamata la *bella donna* e la povera monacella, confinata in un chiostro e aliena per stretto dovere da ogni vanità umana?" E. G. Parodi (1898–99), cited in Forti, "Matelda," 859.
91. Moran Cruz, "Dante's Matelda," 225.