

Richard III's Books: I. *The Booke of Gostlye Grace* of Mechtild of Hackeborn.

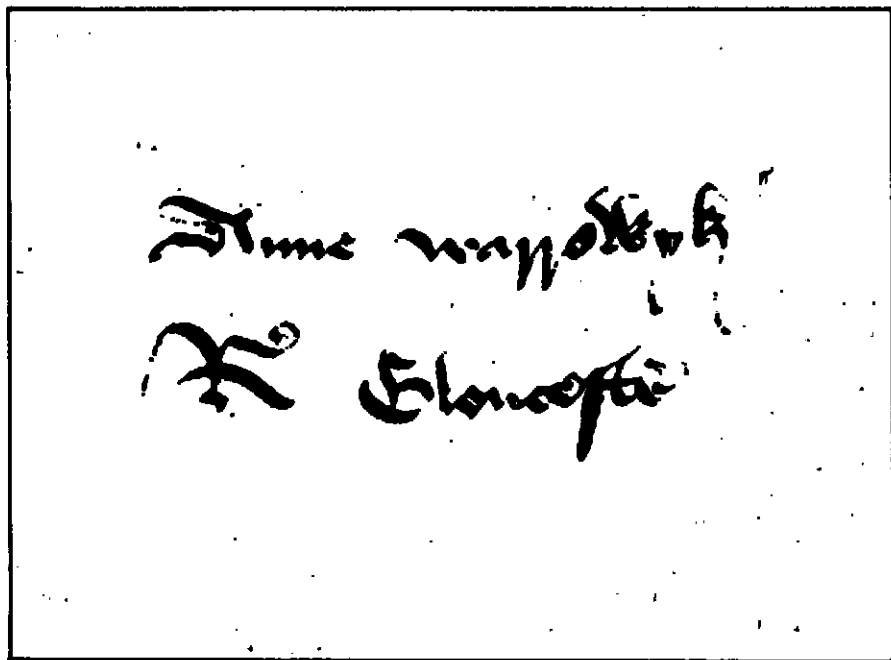
ANNE F. SUTTON AND LIVIA VISSER-FUCHS

Mechtild and Her Book.¹ Mechtild was the daughter of the Baron von Hackeborn and younger sister of Gertrude, Abbess of a Cistercian community of women, established originally at Mansfeld in Saxony and moved by Gertrude to Helfta. The community was known for both its piety and learning, and, from 1261, was the home of St. Gertrude the Great, an editor and translator of religious manuscripts, and, from about 1270, of Mechtild of Magdeburg, a beguine and the author of mystical lyrics and *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, a book of her mystical experiences. At the age of seven Mechtild of Hackeborn entered the house at her own request. She became the assistant of her sister, the Abbess, training the choir and novices and teaching in the convent school. She acquired a reputation for learning, devotion, amiability and compassion, besides fame as an accomplished singer and a pious teacher, although always in the shadow of her greater contemporaries, St. Gertrude, her pupil, and Mechtild of Magdeburg. She died in her late fifties, 1298-9 after a long and painful illness during which she began to recount her visions in confidence. On her dismayed discovery that her confidence had been broken and that her words were being written down, she was only persuaded that the recording of her experiences was part of a divine plan by another vision in which Christ gave her a title for the book. It is generally considered that St. Gertrude the Great was the principal compiler of the book, with some assistance because of her own ill-health. St. Gertrude was also the author of her own revelations in which she made frequent references to Mechtild.

Mechtild's book was designed to give advice to men and women on preserving the health of their souls and on how they might please God by prayer and self-discipline. It described the special graces of Mechtild and visions of dead persons in order to show its readers how the dead depend on the living for good works and prayers. The text has been described as dramatic and lively. It was in the Bernardine tradition of piety and the enthusiastic cults of the Virgin and the humanity of Christ. Mechtild's book developed the cult of the Five

Wounds, in particular the wound in the side, part of the history of the Sacred Heart. By the mid-fourteenth century condensed versions were circulating on the continent in Latin and the vernacular languages. Several English copies were made of the Latin version, often at Carthusian inspiration, and an English translation.

The Text owned by Anne Neville and Richard of Gloucester. One of the two surviving copies of the English translation is now British Library Egerton MS. 2006 (the other is Bodley MS. 220). It is written in a plain, large mid-fifteenth century hand of about 1450. The decoration is very simple consisting of alternate red or blue initial letters for the entries in the table of chapters, red or blue letters marking the descriptive title of each chapter, and larger blue capitals at the beginning of each chapter with small prolongations. It is an attractive, plain book in its original leather binding with fragments of three clasps remaining. The leather is now rough with no sign of any tooling. The overall size is approximately 10¼ by 7 inches, with 212 folios. Scattered through the text in the margin are roughly written comments, of no particular importance, drawing the reader's attention to certain passages: 'Nota bene'; 'Nota the praysynges off sayntes'; etc.



The names of Anne Warrewyk and R Gloucester' on the flyleaf of Egerton MS. 2006. By courtesy of the British Library (enlarged).

On the pasted down front fly-leaf occurs: 'Anne Warrewyk' with 'R Gloucestr' beneath. 'R Gloucestr' also occurs on the pasted down fly-leaf at the back as well as a crude 'R Glo'. The modern editor of this manuscript, Dr. Theresa Halligan, is positive that the hand is not that of Richard or of Anne but says nothing of any attempt to compare the writing with examples known to belong to these persons. Her statement appears to be based on the brief statement to the same effect in the *British Museum Library Catalogue of Additional Manuscripts* covering the year 1866, the year in which the Library added the book to its Egerton Collection. The present authors are inclined to think that the signature is Richard's after comparing it letter by letter with Richard's other known signatures and upon consideration of the repeats of his name or part of it as scribbles at the back of the book. Who else would have repeated this signature but its owner?

It is not particularly surprising that either Anne or Richard should have possessed this book. Mechtilde was extremely popular with the pious laity and both of them came from families that had produced persons noted for their piety. In the context of this book the most important is Cecily Neville, the mother of Richard and the great aunt of Anne. Cecily had books of piety read to her each day in her widow's retreat, including that of Mechtilde, and in 1495 she bequeathed 'a boke of Saint Matilde' to her grand-daughter Brigit, daughter of Edward IV and a Brigittine nun at Dartford.¹ One may speculate whether Cecily's copy was that previously owned by Richard and Anne. If the book had been primarily the possession of Anne it could well have passed to Cecily on Anne's death on 16 March 1485 by the gift of Anne or Richard.

The language of this particular manuscript has been identified by Dr. Halligan as north and north-east midlands, possibly Lincolnshire, and she points to the Carthusian house of Axholme in Lincolnshire, on the Yorkshire border, as the possible source of the manuscript. The house was founded by Thomas Mowbray, the Earl Marshal, in 1396, on a site in Epworth, the manor of which he owned. It was in a flourishing state by the mid-fifteenth century but few details are known about it, not even a list of its priors.² The manor of Epworth was briefly in royal hands in the reign of Richard III and finally passed to Lord Berkeley on the division of the Mowbray inheritance. He sold it to Lord Stanley.³ A number of connections between the area and the Nevilles and Richard Duke of Gloucester could be postulated but none with any precise association that might explain the migration of the book. The only other fifteenth century signature in the book (f.127b) is that of a Marget Thorpe to whose identity no clues have presented themselves. (This signature is suspiciously like a child's doodle and there are other scrawls on this page that encourage this idea.) She could have been the original owner or she could have owned it after the Neville/Gloucester ownership.⁴ The book never passed into the Royal Collection after 1485 and, apart from a few seventeenth century owners who wrote their names in it, its whereabouts is not recorded until it was bought on 10 February 1866 from Thomas Frame for the British Museum Egerton Collection (details from a British Library note in the *Booke*).

The manuscript of the *Booke* used by Anne Neville and Richard of

Gloucester is described by its modern editor as a copy of the autograph English translation, done probably before 1438, of its Latin source *Liber Specialis Gratiae*, (in a corrupt version. It should also be noted that the title of Mechtild's work was also corrupted to *Liber Spiritualis Gratiae* at an early date).⁶ It was chosen to be the English version edited by Dr. Halligan because it is the 'more accurate' of the two existing manuscripts. She finds the translator faithful in 'emotional colour' and 'didactic content' but states that he added to the confusion of his corrupt original: his text is prolix, his English constructions are loose and his insertions often unnecessary. He was undoubtedly sincere, however, in trying to encourage the reader towards an 'encres of devocion or of other gostelye grace'.

The two extracts that follow have been chosen to illustrate Mechtild's message and to give some idea of how her tender preaching of love appealed to lay persons such as Anne Neville and Richard of Gloucester. They both use the bodily symbol of Christ's hand, the first very simply, and the second in an elaborately constructed and powerful image. The first is a translation of the most reliable Latin text of *Liber Specialis Gratiae* which must be understood to be a factual description of one of her visions. The second is from the book owned by the Gloucesters, its long-winded, clumsy text, a product of the English translator's earnest desire to record 'playnlye withoute curiose terms' a mystic's interpretation of her vision to the ordinary person, who wished to share, in some small measure, that closeness to Christ which was her 'special grace'.

Liber Specialis Gratiae

Book 1, chapter 15. The Five Ways to Praise God.⁸

One night when she could not sleep for sadness, she heard the choirs of Angels singing: Cast thy burden upon the Lord and He shall sustain thee.⁹ And she saw the Lord standing by her, clad in a green vestment. She said to Him: Dearly beloved Lord, as this is the time of the Passion, why are You dressed in green? And the Lord answered: It is written: For if they do these things in a green tree what shall be done in the dry?¹⁰ And by these words she understood that if the green freshness of all virtues, that is, Jesus, was punished in so many ways, what would be inflicted on those who resemble the dry wood and are devoid of all goodness; if not eternal torment? Then she prayed the Lord that He would teach her how she should praise Him in this time of the Passion. And He showed her the five fingers of His hand, by which she learned that she should praise Him in five ways.

First she should praise His inconceivable omnipotence, by which the very powerful Lord of Angels and men was rendered powerless for the sake of man.

Second His inscrutable wisdom, by which He was thought to be, as it were, foolish.

Third His immeasurable love, by which He was hated without reason for our salvation.¹²

Fourth His very benign pity, but which He was condemned to such a cruel death for the sake of man.

Fifth His gentle sweetness, by which He suffered bitterly through a very bitter death for the sake of man.

The Book of Gostlye Grace (BL. Egerton MS. 2006).

[f.185b] *What lettere sche sente to a gostlye dowgttere whome sche luffede ententyflye and purposede to comforth here with goode wordes of exhortacion, ande speciallye howe sche schulde ioyn here fyngres to owre Lordys fyngres.*

My dere dowgttere in Cryste: The luffere of thyne sawlle holde thyne hande in his ryghthande and towche eche of thyne fyngers with his fyngeres, for he walde thare by schewe to the howe he worcheth in thyne sawlle. Ande thowe schalte folowe hym and his ensamples.

The laste fyngere whiche es the laste of his fyngers betokene hys meke conversacion whare with he come in to the erth, nowgt to be servede botte to serve to othere, ande to schewe subieccion to eche creature. To that fyngere putte thyne fyngere, that es to saye, when thowe erte styrrdede or temptede with prude, bethenke the on the mekenesse ande on the subieccion of thyne God, and praye hym that be hys mekenes thowe may overcome alle pride ande thyne propyre wille, whiche comys of a pryvete luffe whare with a man luffes hym selfe.

Be the fyngere that es usede to rynges es betokenede the trowth of the herte, with [f.186] the whyche trewth he es besye als a fulle trewe modere and berys owre chaarge and putteys awaye owre chaarges and grevaunces with unestymable faythfulnesse of his herte and defendys us fro alle evylles. To this fyngere also ioyn thy fynggere ande knoweleche howe moche untrowth yowe haffes schewede to thyne luffere moste trewe and moste fulle of swetnesse, and howe thowe haffes drawene longe awaye thy sowlle fro hym, which sawlle he mayde of nowgt in to his lovyngte worscheppe and luffe to that entente for that sawlle schulde be with hym and haffe hym oonlye in evere lastyngte delycis. And knowlyche also howe seyldome and howe unlustye thowe haddeste thy mynde on hym which schewede the so mekylle luffe.

His myddelle longe fyngere betokede his hye everelastyngte devyne luffe whiche luffe bowes hym downe so marvelouslye and so spedefullye to a sowlle, and itt suffreys nowgt his herte to be in reste tylle he putte hym yn alle hole to the sowlle, als a watere that rennyys owte fro a place with a grete feyrnesse and sekys where yn he maye fully abyde. To that fyngere putte thyne fyngere, that es to saye thyne wille, as thus yiffe thowe may nowgt luffe hym als thowe wolde in eche tyme and owre, gyffe than thy wille for thy dede, so that yif thowe mygt haffe the luffe that all Seyntys and alle creatures evere hadde, thowe woldeste yelde ande sette itt in to hym oonlye.

The grete fyngere nexte the myddelle betokene the marvelous ordynaunce of devyne provydence he sawe before mercyfullye alle thynges that schulde falle [f.186b] to a man. Ande when a man erres, with his wysdome ande gladde wille he clepes hym agayne, some tyme with prosperite and some tyme with adversite. To this fyngere putte gladlye thy fyngere, that es to saye that thowe utterlye beleve hym ande trowe¹³ hym that alle thynges that falleyys to the, whethere thay be comfortable or sorowfulle, that thay come of so moche luffe of hym and to so grete profytte to the, that thowe wolde none othere thyngte fell to the and none othere wyse. And therefore for all his gyftes syngulerlye yelde hym thankkynges and worsheppes.

His thombe betokenes the myghtfulnes of God whiche es alle myghttye, and the myghtye proteccion of his faderelye benignyte, with the whiche

proteccion he withstandys ande thyrstes downe alle aduersyteez that comes to a feythfulle and a trewe sawlle, savyng that that owre Lorde suffrys falle ande come to that a sawlle for his meryte and satisfaccion ande to excercyse of vertues. To this fyngerre also ioynе thy fyngerre, that es to say, that thowe bestronge in excercyse of vertues ande that thowe withstande alle vycys manlye and myghtlye, and that thowe mystryste nowgt of the mercye of God, thowg he suffre the be troblede in anye thyngе or thowg he with drawe fro the anye relevyngе or conforth of his grace.

[All capitals and punctuation have been modernised. Modern usage of u and v has been adopted. The Anglo-Saxon letter of thorn has been rendered as th and that of yogh as g or y. Otiose abbreviations have been ignored. This transcript appears by courtesy of the British Library Manuscripts Department.]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The main source for the details about Mechtild and her book (unless otherwise referenced) is Theresa A. Halligan (editor), *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn*, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto 1979, of which the edition of the text of the *Booke* itself is on microfiche. There is an extensive bibliography provided by Dr. Halligan.
2. C. A. J. Armstrong, The Piety of Cecily, Duchess of York, in *England, France and Burgundy in the Fifteenth Century*, London 1983, pp.142, 148.
3. *Victoria County History: Lincolnshire*, vol. 2, pp.158-160.
4. R. Horrox and P. W. Hammond, *British Library Harleian MS. 433*, Upminster & London 1979-83, vol. 1, pp.109, 131, 163, and W. B. Stonehouse, *History and Topography of the Island of Axholme*, London 1889, p.147.
5. We are indebted to the advice of Mr. W. E. Hampton on the identity of Marget Thorpe.
6. N. F. Blake, *Revelations of Matilda, Notes and Queries*. September 1973, p.324, n.3.
7. Halligan, p.28.
8. This quotation was translated from the Latin of *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae*, ed. by the Benedictines of Solesmes (Dom L. Paquelin), (2 vols., Poitiers/Paris 1875-7), vol. 2 *Liber Specialis Gratiae and Lux Divinitatis*, pp.47-8. The text of this edition is based chiefly on a manuscript in Wolfenbüttel, supposed to be the earliest and the most accurate available and dating from 1370. A literal French translation of a very similar Latin text may be found in *Les Révélations de Sainte Mechtilde ou Le Livre de Grace Spirituelle, traduit par le traducteur des oeuvres de Catherine d'Emmerich*, Paris/Leipzig/Tournai 1863.
9. Psalm 55, 22.
10. St. Luke 23, 31.
11. St. Mark 3, 21.
12. St. John 15, 18.
13. = believe