# INTRODUCTION

Visionary writing was popular with both women and men in the Middle Ages,[1] and it has never ceased to attract the interest of scholars and believers alike. The German mystic Gertrude the Great of Helfta (ca. 1256–1301) is, to this day, globally venerated in the Catholic Church as a saint central to the Sacred Heart devotion. The earliest account of her life, the *Legatus divinae pietatis* (*Legatus* for short), partly written by herself, deals primarily with her revelations, prayers, and teachings; it is one of several mystical and hagiographic texts originating from the Saxon convent of Helfta. Written around 1300, it gives an account of a visionary culture practised by liturgically orientated and exegetically sophisticated religious women living in monastic communities.[2] The history of its reception serves as a mirror – in the medieval sense of an 'example' – to the development of devotional culture. This study looks at the emergence and reception of the German redactions of the *Legatus,* illuminating the text material from a variety of angles, including historical, codicological, and literary aspects. The chronological focus of this book is the late thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, a period marked by a revival of mystical devotion, monastic reform, and – significantly, for the purpose of this study – an intense increase in pious book production. With this study, I hope to raise awareness of the late medieval resonances the *Legatus* had in vernacular contexts and to show its broader implications for our understanding of late medieval rewritings of Latin material more generally. My driving questions, from which a number of other questions follows, are: how was the *Legatus* read

in late medieval vernacular contexts, and what do these readings tell us about how collaborative aspects of medieval text production as processes of translation, abbreviation, and redaction emerged from within a culture of hagiographic and mystical rewriting?

## GERTRUDE'S VOICE IN THE LATIN *LEGATUS*

Knowledge of the Latin source – on which the German redactions are based – is essential when answering questions about the German reception of the *Legatus* and its paradigmatic significance for medieval writing culture. Gertrude's voice in the *Legatus* can be characterised as self-reflective, loving, and rooted in a specific time, place, and community. Gertrude also expresses the ineffable, using images and figurative speech; this aspect of her voice is exceptionally important for the German reception of the *Legatus*.

Gertrude's voice is expressed in the first-person account of the second book of the *Legatus*:

> When I called to mind the freely-given blessings your loving mercy gave me, unworthy though I am, I decided that it would be quite wrong if I were to pass over in this account, as if through ungrateful forgetfulness, the gift which the wonderful generosity of your most amiable loving-kindness gave me one Lent.[3]

The opening of this chapter on 'the accomplishment of the beatific vision' (*de effectu visionis divinae*) presents the reader with a soliloquy, spoken to the divine 'thou'. Different time levels are unfolded: an instant at which the 'loving-kindness' (*amicissima pietatis*) was received, a time of reflection about the necessity of reporting this (marked by the past tense of the intent), and the very moment (*in hoc*) in which the account is written. As a preamble, this opening is rhetorically clever; the speaker, identifiable as Gertrude from the context, justifies her account while creating the impression of an intimate conversation with God. The self-reflection about what should rightfully be done – that is to pass on what was generously granted to her – prepares the way for the narration proper:

> On the second Sunday in Lent, while they were singing at mass before the procession the responsory beginning 'I have seen the Lord face to face', my soul was illuminated by a miraculous and priceless flash. In the light of divine revelation I saw what seemed to be a face, right up against my own, as described by Bernard: 'Not the recipient but the giver of form, not affecting the eyes of the body but rejoicing the face of the heart, pleasing not by its outward appearance but by its gift of love'. In this vision, flowing with honey, I saw your eyes which are like suns directly opposite my own and I saw how you, my sweet darling, were then acting not on my soul alone but also on my heart and all the parts of

> my body, as you alone know how. As long as I live I shall render you humble service for this.[4]

The tone is loving when describing Gertrude's face-to-face experiences with God. To be faced by God, to face God, is known as the beatific vision. According to medieval theology, it is the state in which saved souls will dwell in eternity, a state which on earth can be achieved temporarily through the mystical union of soul and God. Gertrude describes this union in a seemingly paradoxical way: on the one hand, the inwardness of the vision is underscored by referring to Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* in which he urges his readers to aim for a union in the spirit, detached from the body;[5] on the other hand, she repeatedly stresses the act of seeing and the effects on her heart and limbs (*cor meum cum omnibus membris*). She recalls the encounter in affectionate words, still addressed to God, her 'sweet darling' (*dulcedo mea*), creating a dialogical space in which the reflection of the lovers' encounter can evolve.

Gertrude's vision is anchored in a particular moment of time and space; she remembers it to have taken place in a collective setting in the past, during mass. Because of the liturgical frame, the demarcation of 'we' and 'they' is one that allows the 'we' – Gertrude and her 'darling' God – to be folded into the 'they' – the community of worshippers. The intertextual intensity reinforces a sense of participation despite the personalised narrative: the mentioned responsory 'I have seen the Lord face to face' (*Vidi Dominum facie ad faciem*), based on Genesis 32:30, comes from the gospel reading for the second Sunday of Lent. The fact that the same passage is read on the Feast of the Transfiguration is somewhat reflected in Gertrude's subsequent words 'my soul was illuminated by a miraculous and priceless flash' (*mirabili quodam et inaestimabili coruscamine illustrata anima*).[6] Readings of the Scriptures and the study of patristic and theological literature were communal activities, so Gertrude's words must have evoked a sense of shared experience in her readers' minds.

Gertrude explicitly engenders a community when she goes on to mention her readers and her account's spiritual effect on them:

> Although in springtime the rose is far more delightful when, fresh and blooming, it gives off a sweet scent than it is in winter when, long since withered, people say that it did once smell sweet, nonetheless recalling the past does seem to kindle some small pleasure. For this reason I too long to offer a description, with what imagery I can muster, of what my littleness perceived in that most delightful vision, with your praise in mind. Then if some of my readers have perhaps received similar or greater favors, my account may stimulate them to give thanks. May I myself, by frequently recalling it, keep in check a little, through thanksgiving, the dark cloud of my negligence by this reflecting mirror which glitters with the sun.[7]

The relationship built between Gertrude and 'those who read' (*quis legentium*) is established through spiritual experiences which in remembrance can still incite praise and thanksgiving.[8]

Images – such as the rose in this passage – play a central role in the account of devotional acts in the *Legatus*: they are not only discussed but brought forward themselves by the use of other images. The recollection of sensorial experiences – here scent and vision – is used to negotiate memory and aspects of temporality. Allegory and sensorium are involved but the rose in Gertrude's account is neither simply a symbol nor a visual mirage; rather, the image serves to illustrate a figurative mode of speculative perception.[9] Figuration creates a virtual space for sensory effects which allows the divine to be perceivable in aesthetic experiences. Speculation, in thirteenth-century philosophy, is not restricted to spiritual introspection; it encompasses all phenomena, 'those of nature and those of grace' meaning all things worldly ('visible') and sacred ('invisible').[10] Both Hugh and Richard of St Victor highlight the role of images in the contemplative practice of figurative speculation.[11] Gertrude's reflections and rhetorical techniques engage with these contemporaneous ideas on contemplation when she explains and illustrates how reading her account may create new opportunities for the encounter with the divine, using images to do so.

Images are also used to describe the experience of union with God, when Gertrude plunges back into the description of the beatific vision, which is presented as a light entering her body through her eyes, 'a light which came from your deifying eyes, a light beyond price, bringer of sweetness, which penetrated all my inner being and seemed to produce an extraordinarily supernatural effect in all my limbs'.[12] The union of soul and God is played out in bodily terms, applying hypothetical proximations – for example, 'it seemed to empty my bones of their marrow' (*quidem quasi evacuans omnes medullas ossium meorum*) – as well as corporeal sensations – 'then, too, the bones themselves and my flesh melted away into nothingness' (*hinc etiam ipsa ossa simul cum carne annihilans*).

Figurative speech is another way for Gertrude to express the ineffable. Gertrude asks: 'What more am I to say of that sweetest of visions, as I must call it?'[13] Experiencing and then recalling the experience is a way to overcome the insufficiency of language to describe the mystical union:

> For to tell the truth as I see it, the combined eloquence of all tongues throughout my entire lifetime would never have persuaded me of the existence of this dazzling mode of seeing you, even in the glory of heaven, had not your generosity, my God, the one and only salvation of my soul, introduced me to it through personal experience.[14]

The beatific vision, so personal and 'experienced again and again' (*saepius experta sum*), is – despite its supposed ineffability – still communicated. The

exclusiveness is shared as a 'sweetness' – a form of embodied understanding – which 'one person instills into another'.[15] Gertrude's self-reflected account aims to function as a trigger for her readers to gain new experiences with the divine.

The *Legatus,* which deals with the spiritual life of Gertrude as a model for Christ's mystical bride, also contains Gertrude's instructions for the spiritual and educational care of her fellow nuns and the readers at large; artistic reflections on objects from Gertrude's world; creative commentaries on the Scriptures, the patristic writings, and the liturgy; and numerous instances of direct communication with God. The intensity of Gertrude's words, the complexity of her thought-building, and her inexhaustible capacity for drawing images of the imageless have attracted countless readers to her writings. This study looks at their late medieval reception, that is when the translated and redacted books of the Latin *Legatus* found a vernacular readership that, dealing with Gertrude's legacy creatively, reshaped and revisited the transmitted material to match its devotional needs.

## VERNACULAR REWRITINGS

There are very few medieval saints who – like Gertrude – are only known through their writings.[16] We know a little more about Gertrude's contemporaries Mechthild of Hackeborn and Mechthild of Magdeburg, the two other mystics connected to the convent of Helfta, than we do about Gertrude herself.[17] While Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote in her mother tongue, a Northern-German dialect, Gertrude of Helfta, Mechthild of Hackeborn, and unnamed fellow writers opted for Latin as their written language. Much ink has been spilled about the community of Helfta, and scholarship has begun to address the nuns' Latin compositions as transmitted in late medieval manuscripts.[18] Their earliest vernacular reception, however, has received only a little attention – despite a burgeoning body of research into the reform movement (in which the *Legatus* was read and copied), and the role of vernacular theology in the late Middle Ages – and it deserves more.[19]

Gertrude's spirituality, which testifies to her robust knowledge of the Scriptures, the patristic tradition, and contemporaneous scholasticism, has rightly been described as theology.[20] This attribution has more gravity than it may seem at first glance; religious women active in writing are more often described as visionaries and/or mystics. Vernacular rewritings in this regard seem then even further removed from what is conventionally considered to count as original theology. The translation of Gertrude's ideas and visions into the vernacular faces some of the problems with which medieval religious texts are often confronted.[21] What is at stake becomes evident when we flip the coin and consider, for a moment, the attention translated texts receive

whenever a supposed original is lost: we may think of Greek material that has come down to us solely through Latin, Arabic, Syriac, or Persian transmission. We may likewise think of Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, of which Middle Low German fragments were discovered only very recently.[22] All of these texts are greatly valued despite their status as translations. Often the loss or non-existence of originals is bemoaned but the independent value of a text is still underscored. This does not quite hold true for vernacular translations of texts that continued to circulate in Latin; in this discrepancy of judgment (translation is the only transmission versus original is still extant) lies the real bias against vernacular rewritings from the Middle Ages.

Indeed, late medieval Germany has an embarrassment of riches when it comes to vernacular writings, which remain under-explored. 'The German-speaking regions can boast, perhaps more than any other modern region, of a long history of book production and preservation', one which allows exploration of 'the work that nuns were doing from the eighth through the sixteenth centuries'.[23] Reasons for the neglect of vernacular (re-)writings have often been implicit; as outlined above, translations of Latin texts are seldom studied because of underlying assumptions about 'originality'. In addition, in scholarship on the late medieval reform movement, vernacular texts have mostly only been considered whenever reformers or other male theologians authored them as programmatic writings for communities undergoing observant changes,[24] whereas vernacular redactions have been regarded as mere translations serving a technical end (such as a copying practice) rather than conveying creative devotional significance. This problem (translation versus original) occurs notably with religious textuality where poetological aspects are often deemed secondary to theological content.[25] In research on courtly literature, for example, the same problem does not arise; German epics based on French romances are never termed translations, and instead, their independent literary composition is highlighted.[26] Yet, many religious texts in the late Middle Ages, based on prior Latin texts, also developed independent lines of transmission and ought to receive the same critical attention.[27]

In the middle of the fourteenth century, courtly literary production in Germany decreased drastically, in contrast to mystical texts being continuously produced and copied in predominantly Dominican female communities.[28] Vernacular religious texts are currently being revaluated, using concepts such as vernacular theology and mystical lives,[29] in studies that prove a prevailing Latin literacy among scribes and readers who were, in fact, bilingual.[30] Writing in the vernacular language was more of a choice than a necessity – a condition which results in a 'self-reflectiveness' of vernacular religious texts.[31] This 'self-reflectiveness' needs to be explored in detailed analyses in order to understand vernacular writing and reception in the late Middle Ages, but research into concrete cases has been slow to catch on.

The current study fills this vacuum by exploring the vernacular reception of one of the most successful female-authored religious texts, the *Legatus divinae pietatis*. In subsequent chapters, I consider the German reworkings of the *Legatus* from both manuscript and cultural standpoints, tracing the production and reception contexts of the vernacular redactions. What interests me most is not *what* had changed in the redactions – that is to say, the editorial details in each extant manuscript – but rather *how* the *Legatus* was reshaped for different purposes, *how* the hagiographic material was revisited for new audiences who would be invited to reimagine Gertrude's life and visions. This shift in analytical approach moves away from the notion of 'author' to explain collaborative authorship with women's attempts to generate authority pushing instead towards the more accurate concept of 'redactors'. The German continuation of the *Legatus* tradition does not represent discontinuous productions but a continuation of collective redactorial processes. More broadly seen, the reception and transmission of Latin visionary writing in predominantly fifteenth-century vernacular literary culture was a creative playground for adopting and adapting devotional tropes of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

Studies on vernacular theology have been able to lift some of the often stigmatic judgment attached to non-Latin religious texts, emphasising the innovativeness of late medieval religious culture which included processes of translating and compiling.[32] Yet, regarding the situation on the European continent, much work remains to be done as assumptions about the supposed lack of 'original text production' prevail. In this book I contend that this assumption is misplaced and is aggravated if terms such as 'originality' and 'authorship' are overused for analysing translations which emerge in the context of a dynamic manuscript culture that evades the stable notion of a 'single author-work production'. What makes this argument distinctive is that it focuses not on the act of translating itself, but on the effects of redacted texts as embedded in a culture of devotion: hagiographic and mystical writings were constantly reshaped and revised according to the spiritual needs of their readers. By emphasising a body of writing which, as a result of our unexamined assumptions about the nature of religious text production, is still relatively unknown to the modern reader, I hope to illuminate the intricate situation of vernacular writing.

As the *Legatus* was adapted and translated into early modern European languages – for example, a French version (*L'image de noblesse*) printed in Paris in 1612, and an Italian life (*La vita della b. vergine Gertruda*) printed first in Venice in 1562 – the Latin version continued to be distributed and read, mostly in shorter redactions and excerpts.[33] The story of the rewriting of the *Legatus* in other languages begins, however, in the fourteenth century in Germany, with the text known as *ein botte der götlichen miltekeit* (the *botte* for short). Examination of this earliest vernacular redaction of the *Legatus* allows us

to study its reception in late medieval contexts in which monasticism, under the influence of flourishing lay religious communities, underwent important reforms that affected the devotional culture of the time.

The *botte* and its further redaction, the *Trutta*-legend, are not simply abridged translations; they are rewritings and at the same time text creations, worthy of being considered distinctly and in their own right, just as they were received autonomously in their historical contexts. Studying these vernacular texts allows us to trace various reception histories which consider redactions of texts and challenge modern understandings of medieval processes of translation.[34] The vernacular redactions of the *Legatus* teach us how medieval readers generated devotional meaning in new contexts. These new contexts were influenced by fourteenth-century German mystics such as Henry Suso, who wrote long after Gertrude of Helfta had died and whose notions on meditation via images came to impact the way Gertrude's visions were read.[35] Central to these new readings is the concept of 'corporeal image', which in the *Legatus* and the *botte* ties back to material culture, allowing us to speak of imaginary material objects in Gertrude's visions.[36] That in such 'corporeal images' materialities are represented rather than presented does not alter the fact that the reader is invited to imagine them in a sensorial way, just as material objects can be seen, touched, and smelled.[37] The inner sensorium, according to medieval philosophy, mirrors the outer sensorium; so through the process of reimagining, Gertrude's 'corporeal images' gain quasi-material qualities.[38]

Combined with the *Legatus*' inherent programme of 'corporeal images',[39] late medieval devotional culture enhanced the understanding of the *botte* as a dynamic text susceptible to processes of rewriting and reimagining. This dynamic quality continued with manuscript copies of the *botte* being produced up to the seventeenth century, but print versions in the early sixteenth century changed the patterns of dissemination as reception in wider circles became possible. The following analysis focuses on the German manuscript transmission because the *botte* itself emphasises a dynamic book culture where the process of copying is analogous to the transformation of the soul into the bride of Christ. The *botte* demonstrates a dynamic manuscript culture in multiple ways – which are explored in the next six chapters – as it forms part of an increase in production of vernacular texts in the late Middle Ages.

A significant challenge in studying the German reception is how little we know about the historical contexts for some of the manuscripts. My examination of the vernacular transmission thus involves two parallel and complementary aims: first, to broaden the scope of study regarding medieval visionary culture to include translations (treating them as creative rewritings in another language) by introducing the German redactions of the *Legatus*; and second, to explore new ways of understanding this repertoire from different interpretative angles, focussing less on individual text witnesses in various manuscripts than

on a set of images that they hold in common. Exploring central images which evoke manuscript culture (the book), the human body (the heart), and textile culture (festive garments) – motifs that are linked to the liturgy, illuminations and miniatures, objects, sermons, scholastic works, and mystical texts – allows for a more complete sense of how Gertrude's visions activated meaning for generations of pious readers, and it reveals the contours of late medieval devotional practices in which reading and writing were understood as holy services and salvific acts. My aim is to show that vernacular redactions, no less than their Latin models, deserve our attention.

My intervention in scholarship on vernacular writing culture via the reception of Gertrude of Helfta's visions in medieval Germany comes in three parts. First, I offer critical and historical contextualisation of the writing culture and book history of the *Legatus*: I delve into previously unstudied archival material for both the German *botte* (Chapter 3) and its Latin sources (Chapter 1). As I explain in Chapter 1, the writing culture and the religious life at Helfta form together an important background for the understanding of the reception of the *Legatus*. Two further chapters investigate the topic of the status of the *botte* from two distinct perspectives: after discussing the concept of redaction with historical examples (Chapter 2), I turn to literary constructions in the *botte* and the implication for its textual status, for which book metaphors and writing imagery are central (Chapter 4). Finally, I trace the revisited understandings of Gertrude's visionary images in the vernacular reception, focussing in particular on images relating to the heart (Chapter 5) and textiles (Chapter 6) as I study their literary, liturgical, and artistic contexts.

## STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The first chapter ('The Helfta Scriptorium') investigates Helfta's intellectual and scribal culture, and intervenes in current debates on gendered authorship by suggesting collective writing scenarios that evade notions of authorial originality. New insights into how the scriptorium at Helfta was managed, with the names of the sisters writing and illuminating manuscripts, suggest a nuanced image of the convent's book culture. Consideration of a recently discovered alternative version of the *Legatus*, now the oldest known text witness (Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Ms 827), brings to light a dynamic manuscript culture in which parallel versions of 'one text' coexist. In Chapter 1 I argue that the scriptorium at Helfta was characterised by collaborative processes of writing, rather than the site of three individual authors, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mechthild of Hackeborn, and Gertrude of Helfta.

The second chapter ('Redactions within a Dynamic Textuality') examines questions about vernacular redactions and updates previous research on the *botte* as I suggest that the *Legatus* was redacted into the *botte* by Carthusians and

that the *Trutta*-legend emerged first in the Dominican nunnery of St Katharina in Nuremberg. This chapter takes the *botte* as a paradigmatic example of late medieval cocreative writing processes which were fuelled by a self-reflective vernacularity. I propose using the term 'redactor' to capture the specific textuality engendered by the Helfta mystics. By defining the concept of redaction – with reference to Bonaventure and others – I argue that the translation of the *Legatus* is another – a redacted – version of it. Inspired by approaches developed under the flag of Material Philology, Chapter 2 moves away from rigid binaries between author and scribe, or original and translation, demonstrating instead that production of writing is a multifaceted process, in which there can be a spectrum of approaches to writing, adapting, and copying.

In the third chapter ('Manuscript Transmission History') I address the vernacular reception history – 'Überlieferungsgeschichte' – of the *Legatus*, which demonstrates 'textual flexibility', seen in both the *botte*'s rearrangement and its manuscript transmission. Drawing on the methods of Material Philology, I introduce each of the manuscripts rather than attempting to establish stemmatological dependencies.[40] The *botte* circulated in hagiographic, visionary, and mystical miscellanies. Comprehensive text witnesses, excerpts (often consisting of prayers), as well as the *Trutta*-legend were read, reshaped, and copied, mostly by nuns, but also by lay communities and individual devotees. The manuscript transmission history discusses newly unearthed manuscripts and exposes intricate networks within the reform movement and beyond it.

Chapter 4 ('The Book's Self-Reflectivity') offers an innovative way of contextualising the codicological findings of the preceding chapters within a discussion on affective literacies. The examination of book and writing metaphors in the *botte* reveals an attentiveness to how the *botte* comes into being through processes of reading, rearranging, and copying. Reading and imagining with the help of 'corporeal images' – a term asserted in the *Legatus* – become holy acts and means to embody the bride of Christ. Such ontological effects are partly embedded in the *Legatus* but they become programmatic in the vernacular redaction, which draws authoritative assertion from salvific mechanisms associated with scribal activity. I put forward that the reworking of the *Legatus* in the vernacular positions itself, and thus the activity of the redactor, alongside that of the original as a holy book, placing greater emphasis on the processes of reading and copying, rather than on production and authorship.

The sacred heart, which has always been seen as the hallmark and innovation of Gertrude's spirituality, is the focus of the fifth chapter ('The Scriptorial Heart'). Instances of the sacred heart need to be seen in a wider context of writings which, inspired by Richard of St Victor's concept of *amor vulnerans*, consider processes of wounding and their affinity with writing. Heart imagery takes us back to Helfta's writing culture, where the cross-pollination of ideas