

A History of
Women's Writing
in Germany, Austria
and Switzerland

Edited by
JO CATLING



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 2000

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface TEFFLexicon 9/13 pt *System* QuarkXPress® [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 44482 9 hardback

ISBN 0 521 65628 1 paperback

Contents

List of contributors ix
Acknowledgements xiv

Introduction 1
JO CATLING

Part I **Beginnings to 1700**

- 1 The Middle Ages 13
MARGARET IVES *and* ALMUT SUERBAUM
- 2 Women's writing in the early modern period 27
HELEN WATANABE-O'KELLY

Part II **The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries**

- 3 The Enlightenment 47
LESLEY SHARPE
- 4 Revolution, Romanticism, Restoration (1789–1830) 68
JUDITH PURVER
- 5 Women's writing 1830–1890 88
PATRICIA HOWE
- 6 Political writing and women's journals: the 1848 revolutions 104
PETRA BODEN

Part III **'Coming of age' – 1890–1945**

- 7 The struggle for emancipation: German women writers of the *Jahrhundertwende* 111
CHRIS WEEDON

- 8 Trends in writing by women, 1910–1933 128
SABINE WERNER-BIRKENBACH
- 9 Women's writing under National Socialism 146
AGNÈS CARDINAL
- 10 Writing in exile 157
SONJA HILZINGER

Part IV **Post-war, East and West**

- 11 Restoration and resistance: women's writing 1945–1970 169
MARGARET LITTLER
- 12 GDR women writers: ways of writing for, within and against
Socialism 190
RICARDA SCHMIDT
- 13 Post-1945 women's poetry from East and West 200
KAREN LEEDER
- 14 Feminism, *Frauenliteratur*, and women's writing of
the 1970s and 1980s 216
ANGELIKA BAMMER
- 15 Women's writing in Germany since 1989: new concepts of national
identity 233
ANNA K. KUHN
- 16 Writing about women writing in German: postscript
and perspectives 254
ELIZABETH BOA

Bibliography

- Select bibliography by subject 265
General bibliography by chapter 268
Bibliographical guide to women writers and their work 285

Index 382

The Middle Ages

According to Katharina M. Wilson in her excellent anthology *Medieval Women Writers*, for both men and women in the Middle Ages several conditions had to be fulfilled before literary productivity could take place. These included at least a certain level of education, leisure, access to the materials necessary for writing, patronage or other means of financial independence, and – true for writers in every century – something to communicate. ‘For women writers’, continues Wilson, ‘an added pre-requisite often entails the freedom from childbearing and repeated pregnancies’ (Wilson, p. ix). It is not therefore surprising that many of the earliest achievements by women of letters in German-speaking countries, whether in Latin or the vernacular, should spring from the ambience of the cloister. In the convents of the religious orders girls were taught to read the Psalter and to copy passages from the Bible, both of which presupposed instruction in Latin. In the seclusion of her cell or during the silences of the daily office a nun would have ample time to reflect on her own life and the mysteries of religion and, with a little encouragement, might indeed begin to write.

In some cases, the convents produced highly trained female scribes, some of whom emerge as rather striking personalities. One of the earliest known female scribes who copied a book of Latin sermons in the second half of the twelfth century, known as the *Guda-Homiliar* (now held in Frankfurt) identifies herself in a rubric: ‘Guda, peccatrix mulier, scripsit et pinxit hunc librum’ (Guda, a sinful woman, wrote and illuminated this book). Despite the self-deprecating humility, this is a confident statement at a time when most scribes, whether women or men, remained anonymous; Guda is clearly aware of the importance and value of her work, and adds a picture of herself in the illuminated initial D – one of the earliest self-portraits of an artist.

A similar tribute to such an achievement, this time by a contemporary, is paid to Gisela von Kerksenbrock, a Cistercian nun from Rulle in Northern Germany, who must have spent years of her life producing a lavishly illustrated gradual, now commonly known as *Codex Gisle* in recognition of her achievement. On the first folio, one of her contemporaries noted shortly after her death:

Istud egregium librum scripsit, illuminavit,
notavit, impaginavit, aureis litteris et
pulchris imaginibus decoravit venerabilis
ac devota virgo Gysela de Kerzenbroeck in sui memoriam
Anno Mccc cuius anima requiescat in sancta pace.
Amen.

The venerable and pious Gisela of Kerksenbrock wrote, illuminated, annotated, paginated this excellent book and decorated it with gold letters and beautiful pictures, so that she might be remembered. AD 1300. May her soul rest in holy peace. Amen.

Not only this note but also the illuminations testify to the self-confidence of the nun who trusted she would be remembered by her own work: on the pages for Christmas and Easter, the two most important feast days and therefore the most lavishly decorated, she inserts the figures of kneeling nuns, one of whom is clearly identified in a rubric as 'Gisle'.

Gisela of Kerksenbrock and Guda are thus examples of women with sufficient education to be able to produce Latin liturgical manuscripts, but despite the high degree of literacy shown here, women did not normally have access to Latin learned traditions, which were the prerogative of the monasteries and hence equally inaccessible to most lay men. Nevertheless, there are female writers who defy the general trend.

The significance of Latin and a knowledge of the classical canon can be seen in the work of Hrotsvit (also known as Roswitha) von Gandersheim, who has the distinction of being the first known Christian dramatist. Probably born in the fourth decade of the tenth century, she was a Saxon of noble lineage who entered the religious life at an early age and became a canoness of the abbey of Gandersheim in the Harz mountains. Here she also became acquainted with the works of Horace, Ovid, Statius, Lucan, Boethius, Terence and Virgil as well as with the early Christian Fathers and the Vulgate. Then – following, as she tells us, an inner compulsion which she perceived to be a gift of God – she too sought to express herself

in Latin, the language of liturgy, learning and culture, and wrote some eight legends, six plays, two epics and a short poem, all of them inspired by her Christian faith and sense of mission. Her two epics depict Otto the Great (912–73) as an exemplary Christian ruler and his queens Edith and Adelheid as embodiments of Christian virtue. Although she describes herself as a weak woman of little scholarship, she is in all probability adopting here again the traditional medieval modesty topos in such utterances, since her material is wide-ranging and possesses a self-confident authority.

The entry for Hrotsvit in the *Oxford Companion to German Literature* (p. 732, under the alternative version of her name, Roswitha) lists her as the author of six Latin plays ‘intended as a Christian substitute for the comedies of Terence’. This statement needs elucidation. In one very important aspect these plays – *Gallicanus*, *Dulcitus*, *Callimachus*, *Abraham*, *Pafnutius* and *Sapientia* – can all be regarded as anti-Terentian tirades, not so much in style and structure as in content and message. Hrotsvit was incensed by the portrayal of women by the Latin dramatist as lewd, lascivious creatures forever seeking the attention of men and certainly no strangers to seduction. Her aim, as she tells us in a preface, is to establish a counter-model, that of the chaste Christian virgin, who can withstand all temptation, preferring martyrdom to the sacrifice of her integrity. Thus, in *Dulcitus*, three Christian maidens – Agape, Chionia, and Irene – refuse to honour pagan gods at the request of the Emperor Diocletian and foil the advances of their torturer, Dulcitus, who consequently has them put to death. In *Callimachus*, Drusiana, a respectable married lady, prays for death when confronted by the lustful Callimachus, and her wish is immediately granted. In *Abraham* and *Pafnutius* the theme is varied slightly. Abraham here is not the Biblical patriarch, but a hermit who has brought up a niece, Maria, in the silence and solitude of the desert. Nevertheless, when temptation comes her way, she is deceived and dishonoured and becomes a prostitute. Having tracked her down to a brothel, Abraham dons a disguise and seeks to win her back, asserting that God’s grace and mercy are open to all who genuinely repent. In *Pafnutius* two harlots are similarly reclaimed for God by two saintly male anchorites. Christian women, then, should aspire to be pure vessels for the reception of the Holy Spirit after the example of the Blessed Virgin, but – failing that – can draw solace from the story of Mary Magdalene, do penance and find salvation.

It must be emphasized that, for Hrotsvit, the figures of Mary and the

reformed Mary Magdalene genuinely represented a higher concept of womanhood. This in itself was not so startlingly original, since Jerome (342–420) had influenced much medieval thinking with his well-known condemnation of women as daughters of Eve, and his famous dictum ‘mors per Evam, vita per Mariam’ was understood, when applied to women, to mean that through vows of chastity and abstinence they could indeed redeem their fallen nature. What is particularly striking about Hrotsvit’s work is the assurance with which she proclaims that women have undeservedly been cast in the role of sinners, their natural inclination being to value integrity in both the physical and moral sense. Although in *Abraham* and *Pafnutius* it is acknowledged that men, too, can be chaste, in other plays the male characters are depicted as being at the mercy of their carnal appetites. Dulcitus is so ablaze with passion that, attempting to enter the prison of the virtuous Christian sisters after nightfall, he mistakenly embraces pots, pans and culinary utensils and becomes covered in dirt and grime. Even worse, Callimachus plans to violate the tomb of Drusiana, although – of course – he is prevented from doing so. Elsewhere in Hrotsvit’s dramas it is the women who transform their would-be seducers and convert them into true Christians. A good example is *Gallicanus*, where the eponymous pagan general is inspired by Constantia, daughter of the Emperor Constantine, to give up his hopes of marrying her and, like her, adopt a vow of chastity. All this may not appeal greatly to modern tastes, but it has to be seen in the context of its time as a powerful campaign for the enhancement of the status of women.

Such a campaign was not without its dangers. Hrotsvit tells us that she sometimes had to blush with shame because, in the course of her dramatic dialogues, she occasionally had to depict the distasteful passions of forbidden love and reproduce unseemly conversations. The hint of necrophilia in *Callimachus* is a case in point; there are also lines in *Abraham* that speak of the desire of an old man for a young woman, while in *Dulcitus* there are vivid descriptions of the hapless man’s encounter with the kettle!

From an inserted introductory letter to her benefactors it is evident that Hrotsvit only completed this collection of plays after she had gained the express approval of her mentors, who praised and encouraged her. Since there was no established theatre in the tenth century, her plays were probably not performed. That even these moves towards Christian drama were, however, highly controversial is highlighted by remarks included in the *Hortus deliciarum* (Garden of delights) by Herrad of Hohenburg in

the late twelfth century. A compendium of reading matter for the education of nuns, compiled by the abbess of a convent in Alsace and famous for the way in which it integrates text, illustration and musical notation into an overall programme of the essentials of Christian doctrine as well as for the many minute details of everyday life contained within its structure, it voices strong reservations against the introduction of religious drama on the grounds that there is potential here for liturgical seriousness to degenerate into frivolous play.

Nevertheless, Hrotsvit may justifiably be seen as a pioneer of German drama. Her works were rediscovered in 1501 by the humanist Conrad Celtis, and it is interesting that her two major themes – the woman who cannot be forced to surrender her integrity, and the penitent who finds salvation – foreshadow well-known classical works, such as Lessing's 'domestic tragedy' *Emilia Galotti* (1772) and the 'Gretchen tragedy' of Goethe's *Faust*. Her own memory lives on in contemporary drama in Peter Hacks's re-interpretation of her comedies, *Rosie träumt* (1975). She went on to compose a short history of the convent of Gandersheim, where she had spent most of her life, and a life of Emperor Otto I. This piece of commissioned official biography shows most clearly the esteem in which she must by then have been held, and in dealing with contemporary matters, Hrotsvit had to rely on her own individuality as a writer – an existence which, despite all acknowledged difficulties, she clearly enjoyed.

The distinction of being the first woman to write in German whose name has come down to us belongs to 'Frau Ava'; in an epilogue to her writings, she reveals that she is the mother of two sons, one of whom had predeceased her. She may be identical with the highly respected anchoress Ava whose death in 1127 is recorded in the annals of the monastery at Melk. If so, this is another example of a woman for whom the seclusion of the religious life offered the freedom to write, although the epilogue also stresses the encouragement and advice received from her sons. Her oeuvre, written for a lay audience interested in devotional reading, but unable to do so in Latin, consists of a group of five narrative poems which together form a history of human salvation through time. She begins with the life of St John the Baptist, the precursor of Christ, moves on to a vividly narrated life of Christ, and concludes – in short poems on the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Anti-Christ and the Last Judgement – with a vista of the end of the world and the possibility of salvation. The centrepiece, the life of Christ, is based mainly on the accounts of the Gospels as they would have been read out in church during the year, but Ava's

narrative has certain distinctive characteristics; she focuses, with obvious interest, on the female figures, selecting the Biblical stories of Christ's encounters with women in preference to other episodes. Her narrative style is vivid, especially when she describes gestures and settings, giving us the first German account of the ox and ass surrounding the manger in the Nativity scene. At times, the way in which she evokes images appears reminiscent of religious drama.

In an Age of Faith such as the Middle Ages, the claim that one had a God-given talent to depict the lives of the saints and martyrs or to proclaim the Gospel had to be respected. Similarly, a woman who claimed to be inspired by the Holy Spirit could not be dismissed out of hand, even if her revelations challenged traditional notions. An outstanding example of such inspiration is Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), sometimes known as the 'Sibyl of the Rhine'. Of noble birth, she reports in an autobiographical fragment that she experienced her first visions at the age of three and, clearly a gifted child, she was placed by her parents at the age of eight in a convent of the Benedictine order where she received her education. In 1136 she was unanimously chosen as Mother Superior and some five years later, in 1141, took the decisive step of revealing her prophetic insights to the world. A voice told her to write down what she had seen in her visions: she was reluctant at first to do so, but then fell into a debilitating illness, from which she only recovered when she resolved to follow her inner compulsion. Employing a scholarly monk to help her with Latin grammar, she began work on her first book *Scivias* (Know the ways), and during a visit of Pope Eugene to Trier sent him some extracts from the manuscript, which obtained his blessing. Armed with this authority, she completed *Scivias*, which she divided into three parts, the first containing visions of God the Father as creator of the universe, the second concentrating on Christ and His message of salvation, and the third – on the analogy of the Trinity – focusing on the power of the Holy Spirit to shape and transform our lives. After this Hildegard went from strength to strength. Her second great religious work, the *Liber vitae meritorum* (Book of life's merits), was finished between 1158 and 1163 and is a treatise on the Christian virtues in contrast to worldly sins and vices. The *Liber divinorum operum* (Book of divine works), compiled between 1163 and 1173, is, on the other hand, a mystic insight into the nature of the Universe, in which the fully harmonious human being, the crown of God's creation, draws strength from the natural world which, in turn, is spiritualized and lifted back to God. Her interest in plants and animals, coupled with her keen

powers of observation, also enabled her to produce two scientific manuals, the first, *Physica* (Physics), being a handbook on nature, while the second and better-known *Causae et Curae* (Causes and cures), a textbook on medicine, contributed to her reputation as a physician and healer. Recognized in her own lifetime as a person of great spirituality and wisdom, she did not hesitate to comment on contemporary events or to rebuke kings and princes. According to Hozeski, in the preface to his English translation of *Scivias*, Hildegard foresaw ‘that the abuse of political power and the corrupt government of the episcopal electors and princely abbots was exasperating the Germans and that the volatile situation would eventually burst into flames such as the Reformation or the Thirty Years War’ (Hozeski, p. xxx). Hozeski also quotes the opinion of the Dominican theologian Matthew Fox that, had she been a man, Hildegard would have been one of the most famous people in the history of humanity.

Be that as it may, *Scivias* certainly has the authoritative tone of a new Revelation. The visions are followed by detailed commentaries: the finale is apocalyptic in its prophecy. At the end of the world, according to Hildegard, the elements will be destroyed: ‘fire will burst forth, the air will be dissolved, water will pour forth, the land will shake, flashes of lightning will seethe, claps of thunder will clash loudly, mountains will be torn asunder, forests will fall down, and whatever is mortal in the air or in the water or on the land will give back its life’ (Hozeski, p. 367). For all their force and power, however, Hildegard maintains that she received her messages not in a state of ecstasy, but from a deep source within her soul. As she writes in a famous letter, ‘I do not hear these things with my external ears; nor do I perceive them by the thoughts of my heart, nor by any combination of my five senses – but rather in my soul, with my external eyes open, so that I have never suffered the weakness of ecstasy in them, but alertly see them by day and by night’ (Wilson, p. 123). In this she differed from other religious women who, particularly in the following century, experienced in dreams or trance-like states what they describe as a rapturous union with Divine Love.

Foremost among these ecstatic visionaries writing in Germany is Mechthild von Magdeburg, who was probably born sometime between 1207 and 1212 and who died at Helfta in 1282. Unlike Hildegard, she was not formally professed as a member of a religious order, but settled in Magdeburg as a beguine, and wrote not in Latin, but in the vernacular. Her sole work, *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* (*Flowing Light of the Divinity*), is an extraordinary collection of poems, prayers, aphorisms and dialogues

between the soul and her Divine Lover. Mechthild, too, writes out of a profound conviction that God Himself had chosen her as a new apostle. In answer to a monk who expressed astonishment at her audacity, she asked him if he could explain 'how it came about that the apostles themselves, who were at first so timid and afraid, grew to be so bold after they had received the Holy Spirit'. Like Hildegard, she claims that she was commanded to write her book. It is not, however, an easy book to follow. It has, she says, to be read at least nine times, and always with due reverence and humility. Its central message is that it is natural for the soul to crave God, but God Himself also craves the human soul, and in the highest states of ecstasy a mystic union becomes possible. In such states, she writes, 'eye shines to eye, spirit flows to spirit, hand seeks hand, mouth seeks mouth, and one heart greets another'. God's love for the soul is indeed overwhelming, and Mechthild struggles to find adequate images. Thus, as her title suggests, God is an ever-flowing radiance, an ever-buoyant flood-tide, the Divine illuminates the soul as sunlight shining upon gold or water, the Divine music is a music to which all hearts must dance. This is, even for its time, bold and unconventional language, and it offended a good many people. Mechthild's passionate evocation of the Divine courtship led to accusations of obscenity, and towards the end of her life she was obliged to seek refuge in the Cistercian convent at Helfta, where she found other mystics of a similar persuasion. Her work, originally written in Low German, was later translated into Middle High German by Heinrich von Nördlingen and in this form was undoubtedly known to both Margarete and Christine Ebner (see p. 23 below).

Different though these two remarkable women were, Hildegard and Mechthild do share certain features. Like Hrotsvit, both denigrate their authorship. Hildegard tells us that she is 'a poor little female' and Mechthild often describes herself as 'a sinful woman' who is ashamed that she cannot find better words to express heavenly splendours. There may, however, be subtle irony at work here. By conceding their weakness, both women acknowledge the structure of the patriarchal society in which they lived, while at the same time evoking scriptural sanction for their activities. It is precisely because, as women, they are of low degree and thus more humble and obedient that the Holy Spirit has deigned to reveal to them new ways of truth and love. Both could cite here the words of the Magnificat (Luke 1: 46–55), and as Barbara Newman has pointed out in her excellent study on Hildegard, *Sister of Wisdom* (1987), Mary the Mother of God occupies a central place in Hildegard's theology. Versed as she was

in liturgy and Church tradition, Hildegard seems to have seen some of the topoi of theological debate not as abstract concepts, but as larger-than-life allegorical figures, many of them female. Sapientia (Wisdom), Caritas (Divine Love) and Ecclesia (the Church) are all personified in her writings, and all are grouped round the pivotal figure of Mary, by whom 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth' (John 1: 14). It is through the purity, humility and obedience of Mary that the Incarnation, and hence the Redemption, is possible. Following on from this it is only through a feminine response to the Divine Nature that Creation itself comes into being. Hence Sapientia is identified with the great creative force flowing throughout the universe which gives birth to all things; Caritas is depicted as a female figure responsive to God and, like Ecclesia, often pregnant with generations to come; and all three, together with Mary, can be taken as what Newman calls 'cosmic theophanies of the feminine; and the purpose of the feminine is to manifest God in the world' (Newman, p. 160).

If Hildegard thus draws the attention of her contemporaries to the feminine principle inherent in the Divine mystery, Mechthild von Magdeburg personalizes it in the account of her own relationship with God. Her God is no stern authoritarian, sitting in judgement. He is, rather, an ardent wooer of the human soul, delighted if the latter reciprocates his feelings. As one of Mechthild's poems expresses it, 'You (i.e. the soul) are a light before my eyes, a harp to my ears.' Or again, the soul is said by God to 'taste like the grape, to have the fragrance of balm, to shine like the sun' and to be 'the rose on the thornbush'. Yet not all human souls surrender to these endearments. Indeed, only the truly humble can be truly receptive, and these are much more likely to be women rather than men. Mechthild is often quite emphatic that it is difficult for men *per se* to find God. 'Alas!' she laments in one of her frequent outbursts 'here is one thing that many a man of excellent education and clever natural talent finds impossible, and that is to dare to surrender himself to the power of naked Divine Love...'

Although subsequently canonized by the Church, it is easy to see why Hildegard, Mechthild and other women mystics provoked so much controversy. Both Hildegard and Mechthild speak out very strongly against the male-dominated Church establishment of their day, which they condemn as corrupt and anti-Christian. One of Hildegard's most terrifying visions concerns 'a woman of such exquisite sweetness and of such rare and delightful beauty that the human mind could by no means comprehend it'.

This is Ecclesia, who is dressed ‘in a shining robe of white silk and wrapped in a mantle trimmed with the most precious gems – emerald, sapphire and pearls . . . Yet her face was spattered with dust and her robe torn . . . her mantle had lost its elegance, and her shoes were blackened with mud.’ In her anguish and distress Ecclesia complains that she has been betrayed by ‘my foster-fathers – the priests! – they who should have made me beautiful in every part have despoiled me in all!’ (Newman, p. 241). Mechthild is no less extreme. ‘Alas! Crown of Holy Church, how tarnished you have become! Your precious stones have fallen from you because you are weak and you disgrace the holy Christian faith. Your gold is sullied in the filth of unchastity, for you have become destitute and do not know true love . . . Whoever does not know the way to hell, let him behold the depraved priesthood, how its path goes straight to hell with women and children and other public sins’ (Wilson, p. 170).

Another vivid source of controversy is the explicit sexual language. It may well be that medieval times were not as prudish or as squeamish as our own. Hildegard, in her medical treatises, writes quite openly about menstruation and other gynaecological topics, although admittedly in Latin. Yet her vision of Ecclesia assaulted by Antichrist, again in Latin, verges on the pornographic. ‘That feminine figure which I had formerly seen before the altar in the sight of God now appeared to me again, so that this time I could see her below the navel as well. For from her navel down to the place where a woman’s sex is recognized, she had variegated scaly patches, and in place of her privy parts there appeared a monstrous black head with fiery eyes, asses’ ears, and the nose and mouth of a lion gaping wide, horribly gnashing and sharpening its terrible iron teeth’ (Newman, p. 245). Nevertheless, given the traditions of medieval iconography, this is probably less difficult to take than Mechthild’s erotic descriptions of divine love-play. ‘For He then steals away with her to a secret place . . . for He wishes to play games with her, games that the body does not understand, nor the peasant at his plough, nor the knight at his tournament, nor even his loving mother Mary. And after this ecstasy the soul sighs with all her might, so that the whole body is shaken.’

Neither Hildegard nor Mechthild is an isolated example. A book of visions by Hildegard’s contemporary and fellow Benedictine Elisabeth von Schönau extols Mary as a paradigm for all Christians, even portraying her at one point as a priest at the altar. Elisabeth also wrote a life of St Ursula which contributed to the widespread veneration of that saint in the Cologne area. In the convent of Helfta, as already mentioned, Gertrud

von Helfta, Gertrud von Hackeborn, and Mechthild von Hackeborn all wrote treatises on the religious life, stressing in particular the virtues of obedience and humility and initiating the adoration of the Sacred Heart as a special form of Christian devotion. All these works are in Latin. A little later, at Engelthal, the Dominican nun Christine Ebner recorded the lives and mystical visions of her sister nuns in a German work, *Von der Gnaden Überlast* (On the over-abundance of grace), while at the abbey of Medingen, near Donauwörth, Margarete Ebner – no relation of the former – corresponded with the priest Heinrich von Nördlingen on spiritual matters, and, through him, became very influential among the *Gottesfreunde* (friends of God), a religious community with adherents in Strasbourg and Basel. From all this it can be seen that women made a very substantial contribution to religious thought and practice during the medieval period and in doing so explored many forms of literary expression. History, biography, theology and medicine are among the scholarly topics covered by their works, while the prophetic visions and rhapsodic flights of the soul towards Heaven, whatever their cause or origin, resulted in devotional poetry and meditation of outstanding beauty and eloquence. Yet, as the Age of Faith receded, much was overlooked or forgotten. Even today, their views are not always regarded as acceptable. The attempt, from Hildegard onwards, to work out a theology of the feminine which sees certain aspects of the great drama of Creator and Creation as essentially female is still regarded in some circles as verging on heresy or even blasphemy. Nevertheless, its presence as an underground current in German mysticism, literature and thought cannot be questioned. When, at the end of *Faust II*, Goethe evokes ‘das Ewig-Weibliche’ (the Eternal Feminine) he is again acknowledging that receptivity to the divine Creator expressed in humility, reverence, loving-kindness and service – that is to say, those values which are held to be female prerogatives – is the only sure way of achieving spiritual significance. (It is of course ironic that Faust, in his very masculine goal-orientated striving, fails to understand this as he rushes headlong through life.) When, in the early twentieth century, Rilke speaks of ‘the eternal torrent’ (Leishman’s translation of ‘die ewige Strömung’) in the *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino Elegies*; 1923), or uses the metaphor of the dance in some of the *Sonette an Orpheus* (*Sonnets to Orpheus*), this may be seen as a continuation of a long line of contemplatives and charismatics, linking back to Mechthild von Magdeburg’s unequivocal assurance of God as the fountain-head of all being and inexhaustible source of joy. ‘I will dance if you will lead’ she exclaims. ‘I leap

up into the Divine.’ It is a supreme expression of that superbly confident religious faith which must constantly find new outlets for itself in language and music.

Apart from the religious houses, the secular courts are the other important sphere in which German literature developed, and again, women play their part, even if not in quite the same way as in France. From Carolingian times onwards, women exerted their influence as patrons of literature, and in the period of Hrotsvit’s life, we can see a whole group of important female patrons: Adelheid, the second wife of Otto I, supported Ekkehard IV of St Gall, while her daughter Mathilde, as abbess of Quedlinburg, commissioned important manuscripts and a chronicle of the Saxons, dedicated to her; Gerberga, the niece of Otto I, was not only Hrotsvit’s abbess, but also acted as her friend and adviser. In the twelfth century, with the rise of secular literature as courtly entertainment in France, it is again female patrons – often French-born wives of German noblemen – who are influential in introducing these new developments into Germany, but whereas in France, noblewomen are writers as well as patrons, there is no evidence for women taking such an active role as writers in Germany.

Around 1170, the cleric Konrad was commissioned by Mathilde, wife of Henry of Brunswick (= Heinrich der Löwe) and daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, to translate the *Chanson de Roland* into German. This is more than the desire of an educated noblewoman for appropriate reading matter, since the genre of the *chanson de geste* had been used in France as a literary means to justify political power of the ruling family; through her mother, Mathilde was almost certainly aware of the way in which literary patronage could be used thus to enhance the importance of the secular courts.

In the development of French courtly literature, the central concept is that of *amour courtois* (courtly love). The love-relationship is expressed in images and metaphors drawn from the contemporary social structures of feudal service, so that the lady assumes the part of the liege-lord in whose power it lies to grant favours and acknowledge the service of the vassal. Although the theme itself is quickly taken up in German literature, it is adapted only in forms which suppress the potential tension between such an elevated image of the all-powerful feudal lady, and the actual political and social reality of male domination over women. Whereas in France women could occasionally wield considerable political power in their own right, and were also able, as writers and poets (for

example Marie de France or the *trobadora* Beatriz de Diaz), to comment on the problems of women, or, as rulers and patrons, to feature as the supreme judge in cases of fictional amorous disputes, there is no evidence for parallel developments in Germany. On the whole, women appear to have been restricted to a more passive role until much later, so that the first woman to achieve similar independence within a courtly setting is Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken. After the death of her husband in 1429, she governed the duchy of Saarbrücken until 1438, when her son was old enough to take over. During the same period, she also engaged in literary activity and translated four French *chansons de geste* into German prose. Again, family connections provided the source and perhaps the inspiration, because the French versions of these *chansons* had been copied for Elisabeth's mother, Margarethe of Vaudémont and Joinville, in 1405, and Elisabeth later revised and corrected her translation checking it against another French copy procured by her son in Paris. In literary terms, Elisabeth's four epics are not much more than faithful renditions which follow her French – verse – sources closely in most details, even where references to rhyme and verse no longer make sense in German prose. While her prime interest was clearly to introduce these stories – about the knight *Herpin* and his sons, the two brothers *Loher und Maller*, *Hug Schapel*, the fictitious heir to the Carolingian throne, and *Sibille*, the innocent wife of Charlemagne maliciously persecuted by her husband – to the court at Saarbrücken, in so doing, she laid the foundations of a new genre which had already enjoyed a head start in France, that of the prose romance.

These beginnings were developed further by Eleonore of Austria (also known as Eleonore of Scotland, since she is the daughter of James I of Scotland). Her translation of the French *Pontus et Sidonie* was undertaken 'to please her husband Sigismund', and to assist him in his attempt to emulate the example of the Italian courts by attracting humanist scholars and writers. Her achievements were acknowledged by Andreas Silvius Piccolomini, one of the most important German humanists at the time. *Pontus und Sidonia*, the love-story of the prince of Galicia and his future bride, quickly achieved widespread literary success, and its special appeal lies not so much in the adventures of the chivalrous hero as in the extended and often vivid depictions of courtly ceremony and everyday life. Pontus is well-bred, courteous and possesses exquisite table manners, and he marks the shift towards a truly modern novel which features an early aristocrat instead of the traditional knight.

Compared to their French counterparts, German women took much longer to assert their creative influence, but when Elisabeth of Nassau-Saarbrücken and Eleonore of Austria began their work, they helped to introduce to German literature the genre of the prose romance, precursor of the novel which was to prove so overwhelmingly successful in centuries to come.