Abstract:

From Author to Textual Construct: Changing Approaches to Female Mystics in the European Tradition

This paper will focus on the changing motivations, desires, and theoretical stakes of scholarship on medieval women mystics from the late 1980s to the present, with some attention given as well to the nineteenth and early twentieth-century scholars to whom we owe the so-called “rediscovery” of many of these texts. Using Mechthild von Magdeburg (ca. 1210-1282) as my larger case study, but with reference to other European women mystics, I will trace the change in approach from an intense focus on biography to the complete rejection of that approach in more recent decades in favor of a “purely” literary (constructed) idea of authorship devoid of agency. Along the way, I will describe how my own work has evolved both in the context of and as a response to this trajectory.