

Marguerite Porete in the Context of Female Religiosity and the Heresy of the Free Spirit



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On April 11, 1310, twenty-one theologians from the University of Paris met to condemn the work of a solitary beguine, known in the trial record known only as Marguerite Porete.¹ Such a gathering of scholars was unprecedented for an inquisitorial proceeding at that time especially for proceedings against a laywoman. The trial gathered the attention of several chroniclers who “recorded Marguerite’s death... as among the most noteworthy events of 1310.”² The beguine was accused of a litany of heresies of which only three survive including the accusations antinomianism and self-deification.³ Still more surprising, it was revealed in the trial that three clerical authorities had already verified Marguerite Porete’s questionable work, The Mirror of Simple Souls, as orthodox.⁴ Among them was Godfrey of Fountains, described by Robert E. Lerner, in his book The Heresy of the Free Spirit as “one of the most important scholastic philosophers at the University of Paris from 1285-1306.”⁵ Nonetheless, after the confusion of the trial, Mirror of Simple Souls was declared “heretical and erroneous and containing heresy and errors.”⁶ By May 1310 Marguerite Porete had been sentenced to be burned at the stake.⁷

Still, The Mirror of Simple Souls managed to survive the condemnation, and continued to be copied and preserved throughout the Middle Ages, with four copies surviving into the modern period.⁸ Marguerite Porete herself also managed to escape anonymity: since her authorship of The Mirror of Simple Souls was established in the 1940’s there has been considerable scholarly work about her life, and the context of her

1 Sean L. Field The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press 2012) pg. 125

2 *ibid* pg. 2

3 *ibid* pg. 129

4 Robert E. Lerner The Heresy of the Free Spirit (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1972) pg. 72

5 *ibid* pg. 72

6 Sean L. Field The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor pg. 129

7 *ibid* pg. 1

8 Robert E. Lerner The Heresy of the Free Spirit pg. 200

book. These factors allow for a reanalysis of The Mirror of Simple Souls and its author. The Mirror of Simple Souls by itself should be regarded in the context of female mysticism and the Heresy of the Free Spirit, two of the most influential religious traditions present in the book. At the same time it's author, Marguerite Porete, must be considered as a member of the beguine movement, and a representative of female religiosity in general. She reflects the social conditions that promoted female religiosity in her period, while her own creative contributions to mysticism present a startling and compelling portrait of religious devotion in a period many regard as heavily controlled by the Church. Ultimately, Marguerite Porete's book, her influence on contemporaries, and what is known of her way of life bring together three strains of popular Christian devotion in a way that illuminate otherwise underrepresented avenues of religious expression. She was identified with both the beguine movement and the Heresy of the Free Spirit, both of which were forms of worship that were frequently poorly understood or greatly distorted by contemporaries. In her own right she was a female mystic who aggressively asserted a theology where women could transcend male clerical authority. As Robert E. Lerner states somewhat prosaically in the preface to the Ellen Babinsky English translation of The Mirror of Simple Souls, "Marguerite Porete refused to apologize for being a woman."⁹

There is very little definitive evidence about the life of Marguerite Porete beyond her encounters with the inquisition, and what little can be extrapolated from her book. It is likely that she was a beguine from the diocese of Cambrai,¹⁰ on the border between modern day France and Belgium. Sean L. Field suggests that she probably lived in or

9 Robert E. Lerner The Mirror of Simple Souls pg. 3

10 Sean L. Field The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor pg. 27

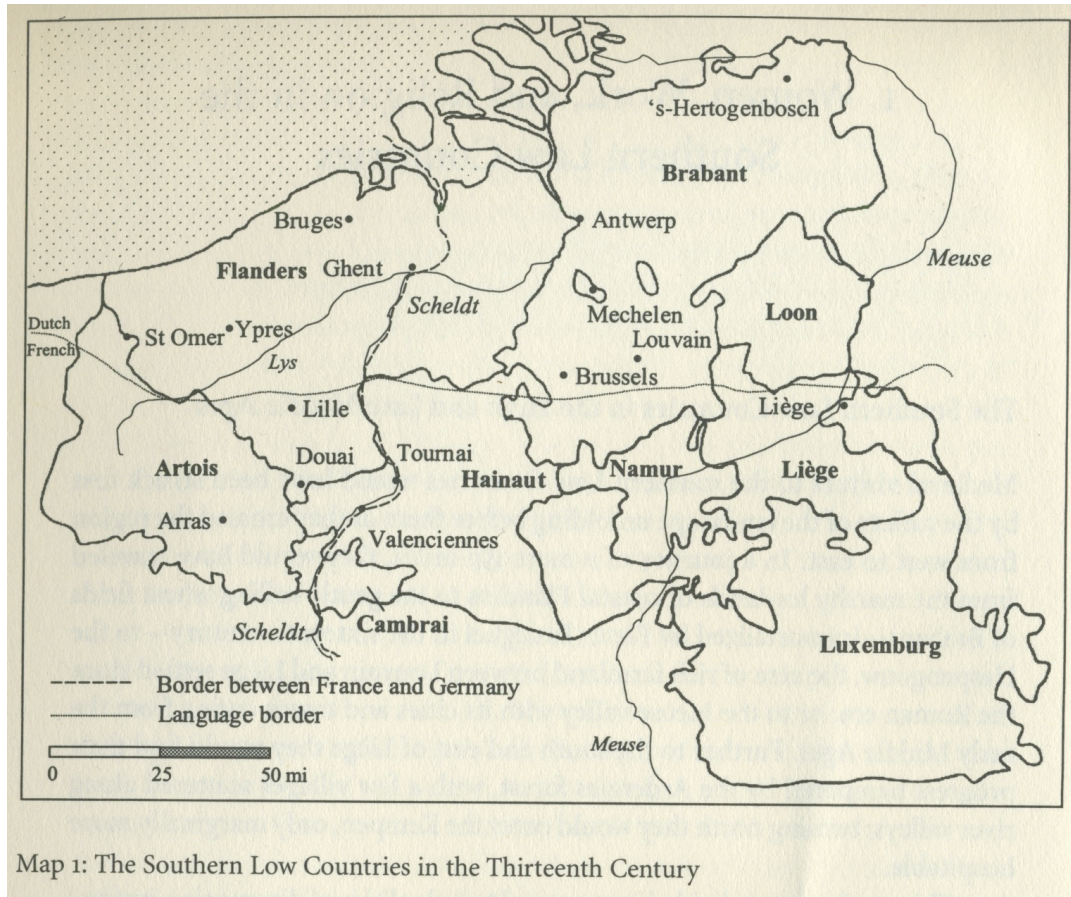
very near to the town of Valenciennes.¹¹ He notes the Bishop of Cambrai chose Valenciennes, rather than Cambrai itself, as the site for burning her book, despite its smaller size and relatively more remote location. This would suggest the local population had “particular knowledge” of her work, which is indicative that she lived in that area.¹² Linguistic evidence confirms this claim. Marguerite Porete wrote exclusively in Old French¹³, as opposed to Flemish, even though she is sometimes called Marguerite of Hainaut¹⁴, a Flemish speaking city. Simons, in his book Cities of Ladies, includes a map of the linguistic and political divisions of what is now Belgium and Northern France.

11 *ibid* pg. 27

12 Ellen Babinsky, introduction to The Mirror of Simple Souls (New York: Paulist Press 1993) pg. 5

13 *ibid* pg. 5

14 Sean L. Field The Beguine, the Inquisitor, and the Angel pg. 27



Map 1: The Southern Low Countries in the Thirteenth Century

Figure 1: Language and Political Borders in the Lowlands. Reproduced from Walter Simons *Cities of Ladies* pg. 2

Marguerite would have had to live closer to Hainaut than to another major city, but within the diocese of Cambrai. The overlap of French speaking areas, close to Hainaut, and within Cambrai is essentially confined to the northeastern corner of the diocese in the area around Valenciennes.

There is a similar degree of uncertainty about the exact year of her birth. Again Sean L. Field presents an answer, putting her birthday around the year 1260.¹⁵ He observes that Marguerite reflects on several stages of her spiritual development in a way

¹⁵ *ibid* pg. 27

that indicates she felt a sense of “spiritual maturity,”¹⁶ which suggests she felt she had reached middle age. The Mirror of Simple Souls was written sometime between 1296 and 1306, so a birth date close to 1260 would make Marguerite between 36-46 at the time of writing. However, Field’s analysis is not conclusive. It is important to note that many beguines entered the religious life as early as seven years old, and could become ‘mature’ religious thinkers by their twenties.¹⁷ Nevertheless, in spite of the lack of precise figures, it seems safe to conclude that Marguerite Porete was born in the northern part of Cambrai during the final third of the 13th century. Therefore the social conditions, in particular those surround religious women, within Cambrai in this period likely had a significant impact on Marguerite Porete’s development as a religious thinker.

In Cambrai, the lives of religious women (*mulieres religiosae*¹⁸) were unusually free, and remarkably public. The most visible manifestation of this was the beguine movement. Beguines, in some Flemish cities represented as much as 4.4% of the medieval Flemish population during Marguerite’s life.¹⁹ The Flemish beguine movement had begun to take a recognizable shape in the early part of the 13th century, almost 100 years before Marguerite wrote.²⁰ Originally, these beguines were unordered groups of holy women, who lived together in communities but accepted no monastic rule.²¹ These women lived a combination of the active and contemplative life, preaching in the world, while living in semi-cloistered conditions. Simons suggests that beguines arose in part from a desire among women to recreate the ‘apostolic lifestyle’ male groups like the Franciscans

16 *ibid* pg. 27

17 Walter Simons, Cities of Women, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2001) pgs. 68-70 excerpts from the *vitas* of Ida of Nivelles, Mary of Oignies, and Odilia of Liege

18 *ibid* pg. 36

19 *ibid* pg.60

20 *ibid* pgs. 31 and pg. 35

21 Ernest W. McDonnell Beguine and Beghards in Medieval Society: With a Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene (New York: Octagon Books 1969) pg. 63

emulated.²² She argues that the encounters with urban poverty, wealth disparity, and the conflict between Catholic morality, and the increasingly lucrative mercantile businesses that accompanied urbanization promoted a strong apostolic movement in medieval urban centers.²³ Accordingly these women wished to withdraw from the world, but still hoped to have an ameliorative impact on their wider community. In the Flemish territories the comparatively high status women enjoyed made these organizations possible. Like the Mediterranean, the Lowlands were dominated by urban centers like Bruges, Lieges, Hainaut, and Brussels.²⁴ These urban centers created a large mercantile elite that was clearly distinct from the feudal nobility and even more than in Italy, this urban population was interested in literacy and education, especially for women, further elevating their status.²⁵

There is no conclusive evidence about how this affected Marguerite's life, as her contemporaries are silent about her class and education. However, as Robert E. Lerner points out, there are clues in her writing. Marguerite refers to judging the Soul according to its nobility²⁶, and Virtues, in the presence of an 'annihilated Soul' are, "like a peasant who would be kept from the court of a gentlemen in the judgment of his peers."²⁷ This would suggest that Marguerite was of upper class origins.

There is also some circumstantial evidence to suggest this is the case. McDonnell argues that early beguines in general came primarily from the upper classes.²⁸ Entrance

22 *ibid* pg. 66

23 *ibid* pg. 64

24 Walter Simons *Cities of Ladies* pg. 65

25 *ibid* pg. 4-5

26 Robert E. Lerner *The Heresy of the Free Spirit* pg. 202

27 Marguerite Porete *The Mirror of Simple Souls* pg. 140 Robert E. Lerner draws attention to this same point in his book *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, he uses his own translation so the relevant quote is not identical but it is very similar.

28 Ernest W. McDonnell *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Society* pg. 63

into a beguinage was a way to avoid marriage or a fall in status for women, and, since beguines continued to own property and were responsible in some cases for their own room and board some means were required.²⁹ Finally, the level of education, and familiarity with court culture that Marguerite displays bolsters the claim that she was a member of the upper class.³⁰

Admittedly this is not the only plausible explanation. The issue of education in particular is complicated by the nature of beguinages. Education was one of the primary missions of many beguines, and they endeavored to educate a relatively wide swath of the upper middle classes in the southern Low Countries.³¹ According to Simons the nature and scope of this education varied widely, from what would now be considered an etiquette school to attempts “to bring beguine teaching up to par with that of schools that trained boys for an ecclesiastical career.”³² It is therefore not inconceivable that Marguerite could have gained such a comprehensive education without belonging to the highest merchant class, or the lower nobility as most scholars have suggested is the case. Nevertheless most of the evidence does weigh on the side of Marguerite having at least lower aristocratic origins.

However, whether or not the beguine movement was unified by social factors, it is clear that it was decentralized as a religious institution. According to both Simons and McDonnell, the beguine movement was not the result of cohesive action, but rather sprung up out of numerous unconnected holy women who eventually attracted followers

29 *ibid* pg. 63

30 Robert E. Lerner *The Heresy of the Free Spirit* pg. 201

31 Walter Simons *Cities of Ladies* pg. 81

32 *ibid* pg. 83

and organizations around them.³³ These early movements lacked hierarchical structure or a formalized system of organization, which was both their attraction and their weakness. The unordered nature of beguinages allowed women who were unable or unwilling to take vows to live a religious life, while at the same time it set the beguines in constant conflict with the various clerical and monastic orders who feared their lack of structure.

Unsurprisingly, this meant the beguines had a number of detractors. The word beguine itself was pejorative term for the mulieres religiosoae who formed the earliest lay religious communities³⁴. It implied a connection to heresy and a defiance of established hierarchy. By Marguerite's lifetime the work of a few prominent male defenders of these 'holy virgins' had helped to legitimize the movement, albeit in a more restricted form.³⁵ Nonetheless "the term beguine never fully lost its pejorative connotations"³⁶ because of the connections with female preaching and a religiously active life. St. Thomas Aquinas' derisive characterization of the speech of women is indicative of the orthodox view on the topic of preaching. Thomas writes, "Speech can be used in two ways. In one way privately, to a few, in familiar conversation. In this way the grace of speech becomes a woman. The other way is publicly, addressing oneself to the whole Church. This is not conceded to women."³⁷

As a result, by the second half of the 13th century beguines were becoming increasingly restricted. In order to accommodate the pressure to cloister beguine members, formal beguinages took on two general institutional forms. The first is the

33 Simons *Cities of Ladies* pg. 36

34 *ibid* pg. 36

35 Ernest W. McDonnell *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture* pgs. 40-58

36 *ibid* pg. 36

37 Thomas Aquinas excerpt from Rosalynn Voaden *Gods Words Women's Voices* (York: York Medieval Press 1999) pg. 8

convent beguinage. According to Simons, “beguines who lived in a convent agreed to obey certain regulations for the duration of their stay and contributed to the common fund of the convent.”³⁸ These convent beguinages were usually relatively small buildings, where the beguines live together “in close proximity to one another.”³⁹ The second type was the court beguinage. These were “larger than convents, as well as more complex and more diverse.”⁴⁰ They lived more independently in detached privately owned housing, and had a more varied organizational structure. The degree to which a beguinage was beholden to the local bishop depended in large part on the type of organization. Convent beguinages were generally subordinate to a parish priest.⁴¹ On the other hand, court beguinages generally contained their own chapel and retained a male cleric to administer rites and were thus exempted from the ecclesiastical control of their bishop or priest.⁴² By contrast, solitary or itinerant beguines were the least sheltered from clerical persecution, as they relied on popular acceptance of their position in order to retain their religious privileges.

Although they still had a good deal of freedom over their life, certain offenses resulted in dismissal from an official beguinage, and an accompanying loss of property.⁴³ Most importantly, beguines who were dismissed lost the protection and legitimization that belonging to an accepted community afforded them. This is not to say that beguinages ceased to function as havens for women. Simons notes that beguinages could be incredibly lenient about social transgressions, at least before the 14th century. For

38 Walter Simons *Cities of Ladies* pg. 50

39 *ibid* pg. 50

40 *ibid* pg. 51

41 *ibid* pg. 50

42 *ibid* pg. 51

43 *ibid* pg. 16

example, in the beguinage of St. Catherine's at Mechelen the regulations dated between 1286 and 1300 state "the beguine who has the misfortune to become pregnant shall be removed from the Beguinage for a year as soon as her condition becomes obvious; afterwards, if she demonstrates good behavior attested by good witnesses, she will be re-accepted into the community."⁴⁴

It is likely Marguerite associated herself with this type of orthodox, semi-cloistered beguine before she began to preach her own heretical doctrine. She refers to herself in places as "formerly a mendicant creature."⁴⁵ Field has even suggested that her epigraph, Porete, may be a reference to this stage in her life. Poret is the Old French word for leek, as well as a slang term meaning 'of little value'.⁴⁶ The idea of a 'mendicant creature' subsisting either from the fruits of hard labor, or through begging is typical of the accepted beguine movement.⁴⁷ In fact the commitment to mendicancy was used as a defense for beguines in general against allegations of heresy and disobedience to hierarchy. McDonnell notes it was the "vita primitive ecclesiae, which Jacques de Vitry [a major defender of the early movement], among others, advocated."⁴⁸

Assuming Marguerite was involved with one of these conventional beguinages in the early stages of her religious development she would have spent most of this period of her life studying, praying, and working or begging. However, unlike a nun, Marguerite would have had the opportunity to preach and to travel relatively widely outside of her

44 Walter Simons *Cities of Ladies* pg. 73

45 Robert E. Lerner *The Heresy of the Free Spirit* pg. 71

46 Sean L. Field *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor* pg. 28

47 Simons *Cities of Ladies* pg. 66, excerpt from the vitae of Mary of Oignes

48 Ernest W. McDonnell *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture* pg. 56

There is considerably more information on the relationship between Jacques de Vitry, alongside other prominent male defenders of the beguine movement pgs. 40-58

commune.⁴⁹ Even though the liberties of beguines were already being curtailed, in the Lowlands they retained a fluid relationship with the clergy and were sometimes able to subsume roles that were otherwise denied to women. They tended to claim religious authority that was, in places, on par with the local clergy. Part of this involved the beguines' 'spiritual capital'. Beguines were frequently enlisted to pray for the sick or the recently deceased.⁵⁰ It is also clear that many beguines preached, or taught religious texts on their own, in an informal capacity.⁵¹ Nor would entrance into a Beguinage of this type have precluded mystical or visionary episodes. Mary of Oignes and Ida of Louvain were both early beguines who experienced direct interaction with Christ.⁵² It was typical of these women not only to receive visions, but also to interpret and preach about them.⁵³ According to Simons, "some beguines were esteemed as teachers for more than their formal instruction in letters or proper behavior... girls and women sought their guidance on a wide range of moral and ethical issues."⁵⁴

Marguerite Porete's own spiritual revelations, however, placed her beyond the protection of the formal beguine movement. Sometime between 1296 and 1306, Marguerite gained mystical access to Divine Love, advancing, in her own theology, to the 6th level of spiritual development.⁵⁵ She eventually became the earthly mouthpiece for Divine Love and wrote The Mirror of Simple Souls. By this time, she had very likely already broken away from the orthodox beguine movement to become a solitary beguine.

In the second part of The Mirror of Simple Souls, she provides three "considerations,

49 Ellen L. Babinsky Introduction to The Mirror of Simple Souls, pg. 15

50 Walter Simons Cities of ladies pg. 77

51 *ibid* pg. 83

52 *ibid* pg. 63 and pg. 38

53 *ibid* pg. 83

54 *ibid* pg. 83

55 Direct mystical communication with the Divine is what Babinsky and others label the 6th level of Spiritual development See Ellen L. Babinsky The Mirror of Simple Souls pg. 42

which indeed helped me at the time when I was one of the sad ones, when I lived from milk and pabulum, and when I was still ignorant.”⁵⁶ Her repeated references to a stage of ignorance, mendicancy and complacency, followed by a period of internal spiritual revelation makes the break between Marguerite and the orthodox beguine community very likely. In addition, it is clear from her work that her beliefs had become far more radical than the mainstream beguine movement: She begins The Mirror of Simple Souls with a warning in verse to “Theologians and other clerks” to,

“Humble then, your wisdom
Which is based on Reason
And place all your fidelity
In those things which are given
By Love illuminated through Faith
And thus you will understand this book
Which makes the Soul live by Love.”⁵⁷

What follows is an in depth explication of how one might undertake a seven stage ascent to spiritual perfection and union with God. Each of the levels, except the 7th, which can be experienced only after death, is explained at length. Ellen Babinsky calls the Mirror of Simple Souls a “spiritual handbook,”⁵⁸ guiding a receptive soul to perfection and union with God.

Divine Love, as both a cognitive faculty and the personified aspect of God, is the facilitator of Marguerite’s book, as well as the faculty responsible for the soul’s spiritual ascent. The audience is restricted to those that are capable of undertaking this

56 Marguerite Porete The Mirror of Simple Souls trans. Ellen L. Babinsky pg. 202

57 *ibid* pg. 79

58 *ibid* pg. 27

transformation, who Marguerite calls “The Sad Ones.”⁵⁹ While the reasons behind this particular name are mysterious, the definition of a ‘sad one’ is clear. Ellen Babinsky suggests, “the sad soul, for Marguerite, is one in whom understanding comes from both intellect and ability.”⁶⁰ There are no further explicit limitations as to who Marguerite believes can achieve perfection other than that the soul must begin in a state of grace.⁶¹ Eventually for Marguerite, however, all Virtues are reducible to obedience to Divine Love. Even grace means obedience to the commandments of the Holy Church, which is really obedience to the Virtue Charity.⁶² Love then establishes that “the noble Virtue of Charity... obeys none other than Love.”⁶³

Having established her credibility as the facilitator of spiritual perfection, in the subsequent sections Love discusses the “life, which is called the peace of charity in the annihilated life.”⁶⁴ In other words, the annihilated, or free soul. She goes on to provide the criteria for what one would find in such a being:

- “1. A Soul
2. Who is saved by faith without works
3. Who is only in love
4. Who does nothing for God
5. Who leaves nothing to do for God
6. To whom nothing can be taught
7. From whom nothing can be taken
8. Nor given
9. And who possesses no will.”⁶⁵

From this point on the first section of the book is concerned with explicating the meaning of each of these nine points, and demonstrating how they apply to the ‘annihilated life’.

In some places this section is clearly instructional. In others it is intentionally misleading.

59 *ibid* pg. 75

60 Ellen L. Babinsky introduction to *Mirror of Simple Souls* pg. 35

61 Marguerite Porete *The Mirror of Simple Souls* pg. 82

62 *ibid* pg. 82

63 *ibid* pg. 82

64 *ibid* pg. 82

65 *ibid* pg. 82-83

For instance, points four and five in the above list appear to be a contradiction requiring the soul to simultaneously do nothing and do everything. That passage is not unique in this respect. Marguerite repeatedly employs this rhetorical tactic in which Love makes an apparently irreconcilable comparison, which is challenged by Reason, and then resolved in a way that satisfies and sometimes astounds her challenger.⁶⁶ Love provides these rebuttals with a combination of pseudo-syllogistic proofs and the testimony of various sources, including the Virtues and the annihilated soul. However, both of these are often presented in a way that is jarring and sometimes fails to address the original paradox. For example, Reason recoils at the above contradiction between points four and five exclaiming, rather dramatically, “For God’s sake! What can that mean?”⁶⁷ Love replies,

“This means, that such an Annihilated Soul possesses so great understanding within her by the virtue of faith, that she is so occupied within herself with the sustenance which Faith administers to her of the power of the Father, of the wisdom of the Son, and of the goodness of the Holy Spirit, that a created thing, which passes briefly cannot dwell in her memory.... This Soul does not know how to work... she is thus excused and exonerated without works.”⁶⁸

The above reply does not seem to answer the fundamental contradiction between being unable to do work, and yet doing all works for God. Instead it establishes why an ‘annihilated soul’ shouldn’t have to do works. Nevertheless Reason is satisfied by this response. It is unlikely that Marguerite was unaware that these replies did not directly address her contradictions. The use of this tactic is repeated throughout *The Mirror*, and

⁶⁶ See *The Mirror of Simple Souls* Chapter 86 : *How Reason is Astounded by what is Said of this Soul*

⁶⁷ Marguerite Porete *The Mirror of Simple Souls* pg. 89 I have deleted ‘says Reason’ from the middle of the quote

⁶⁸ *ibid* pg. 89

Marguerite goes out of her way to create suitable contradictions to be resolved by Love. This tendency even makes its way into Marguerite's mystical vocabulary. In chapter 58 Marguerite describes the relationship between the annihilated Soul that fluctuates between the fifth and sixth levels of spiritual development, and God as Farnessness.⁶⁹ Rather than reflecting a rhetorical flaw in Marguerite's writing, it is in keeping with a dialog between Love and Reason that her proofs and her logic should be irrational. In fact Lerner notes The Mirror of Simple Souls "was meant for an esoteric audience of those who had 'understanding'. This did not mean education or reason; indeed, quite the opposite."⁷⁰

However, such paradoxes are not meant to undermine the educational component of The Mirror of Simple Souls. Marguerite Porete takes a painstaking interest in ensuring that her book is as accessible and convincing as possible to her imagined audiences. The structure, which Lerner castigates as "poorly organized and repetitive"⁷¹ is in part a reflection of Marguerite's belief that different segments of society require completely different arguments in order to establish the same point. This is demonstrated most clearly in Chapters 10: *How Love names the Soul by twelve names for the Actives at the request of Reason*, 11: *How, at the request of Reason, Love gives understanding of this Soul to the true Contemplatives* and Chapter 13: *How Reason is content with the explanation of the things said above for the Contemplatives and the Actives, but she asks again for the sake of the common folk*. The titles of the chapters themselves sufficiently illustrate this belief, although the content of each is also significant. First, they demonstrate that Lerner's condemnation is somewhat overreaching. Each section

69 *ibid* pg. 135

70 Robert E. Lerner The Heresy of the Free Spirit pg. 206

71 Robert E. Lerner The Heresy of the Free Spirit pg. 202

introduces new information that Marguerite believes is relevant to that group alone. For the Actives, listing her names for the soul, along with the testimony of Pure Courtesy, is sufficient to convince them. For the contemplatives Reason must be convinced, and for the Common Folk, the Virtues must affirm Love's conclusions.⁷²

There is a definitive break with this style of writing approximately half way through The Mirror of Simple Souls. The second half of the book establishes the exaltation of the annihilated soul and provides practical examples, drawn from biblical text, for "those who are in the stage of the sad ones and who ask the way to the land of Freeness."⁷³ For example, Marguerite proclaims, "I will help those who will hear this book to grasp that it is necessary for us to retreat within ourselves... which Jesus Christ did and which He preached to us."⁷⁴

By uniting these two sections the conclusions of Marguerite's work are clear. She argues that, through the guidance of Divine Love, the soul can transcend the need for the virtues and the Church. This soul becomes perfected, losing all will except the will of God, and ultimately enters into a total union with the Divine.⁷⁵ Further, she argues that it is Divine Love, both as a faculty of human cognition and as an aspect of the Divine that exists within the soul that allows this perfection to occur.⁷⁶

Because her work is motivated by a kind of Divine Revelation, and because Marguerite sees Divine Love as a means of spiritual access available to all sufficiently contemplative souls, she should be placed in the wider tradition of female religious devotion outside of the beguine movement, and in particular the tradition of female

72 Marguerite Porete The Mirror of Simple Souls pgs. 87-96

73 *ibid* pg. 202

74 *ibid* pg. 184

75 *ibid* pg. 81

76 *ibid* pg. 128

mystic writing. Although it was not an official source of condemnation Marguerite's view of women is far more radical in the context of late 13th, early 14th century French society than the technicalities of her 'errors and heresies'. Lerner writes, "Marguerite was probably a heretic, but had she been submissive and content to enter a cloister like Mechthild of Magdeburg, with whom she is compared, she probably would have attracted little notice."⁷⁷

Marguerite would have known about a variety of female saints and holy women, who formed a major part of the popular religious landscape. Like the beguine movement, this strand of female religiosity clearly heavily influenced Marguerite Porete's own religious development. Part of this can be explained by the common social factors that promoted such an abundance of female religious figures despite prohibitions on women's participation in formal active religious life. In some ways the relative frequency of female mystical experience and the more intense religiosity of women in this period may be explained by a similar set of conditions as those that generated the beguine movement. Caroline Bynum suggests four "basic themes of women's religiosity in its orthodox forms: a concern for affective religious response, an extreme form of penitential asceticism, an emphasis both on Christ's humanity and on the inspiration of the Spirit, and a bypassing of clerical authority."⁷⁸ However, the most tangible attraction of extreme religiosity was the escape from family life. Childbearing and marriage were both a source of oppression for women and responsible for high rates of mortality, constant pregnancy and illness. Again, in many ways this parallels the same conditions that led women to join beguinages and nunneries.

⁷⁷ Robert E. Lerner *The Heresy of the Free Spirit* pg. 208

⁷⁸ Caroline Bynum *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1987) pg. 17

Paradoxically, for others it was, as Caroline Bynum puts it, “the presence not the absence, of a prospective bridegroom that activated the desire for perpetual chastity.”⁷⁹ Bynum continues: “female erotic experience, childbirth and marriage became major metaphors for spiritual advance.”⁸⁰ Marguerite Porete also briefly indulges in religious romance. The Prologue of the Mirror of Simple Souls is a story of a princess, in love with a faraway Great King, with whom she cannot communicate or see but with whom she is deeply in love. Unlike other mystics who focus on this relationship however, this physically erotic section is only two pages in the The Mirror of Simple Souls, though the emotional relationship with God is ubiquitous in Marguerite’s writing.

Nonetheless, one can clearly see that Marguerite is tapping into a convention that pre-existed and outlasted her own life. This aspect of female religiosity remained part of the Flemish religious experience into the 16th century. The Dutch writer known as sister Bertken maintains a dialog between the Loving Soul and The Inhabitants of the Highest City in her *Pious Colloquy*, similar in that respect to the dialog in the Mirror of Simple Souls. Throughout the *Pious Colloquy* The Loving Soul pleads, “bring word to him [Jesus] that I languish from Love.”⁸¹ Unsatisfied with the response she receives, The Loving Soul asks, “Do you not know that I am searching for my beloved, that I desire only him?”⁸² Her demands build up in a crescendo, until finally The Bridegroom Jesus finally intercedes, assuring the Loving Soul, “because you recognize your weakness, and

79 *ibid* pg. 20

80 *ibid* pg. 152

81 Sister Bertken *Pious Colloquy* in Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Robert Faesen (New York: Paulist Press 2008) pg. 205

82 *ibid* pg. 205

desire help and comfort from me and you rely on me alone, I will put my hand under you.”⁸³

Visionary and mystical experiences were also one of the few ways that women could establish religious credibility. Although Thomas Aquinas maintained, “[a woman] cannot receive the sacrament of Order,”⁸⁴ he conceded, “in the reality of the soul there is no distinction between man and woman, and sometimes a woman is better in her soul than a man.”⁸⁵ The fact that women could be internally equal but were denied the same hierarchical access to the church as men furthered the division in male and female religiosity. According to Caroline Bynum, in the 13th century “male and female styles of sanctity diverged sharply. Those men canonized or venerated were almost exclusively clerics.... [But] the reputations of holy women were based, far more often than men's, on charismatic authority, especially visions.”⁸⁶ Holy women could use their visionary access to supplement, and at times eclipse, the spiritual access possessed by clergy. The hagiographer⁸⁷ of Christina the Astonishing asserts “she grew sick in body by virtue of the exercise of inward contemplation and she died.... Finally, returning home with her sisters, she was reinvigorated by food. Her spiritual friends then hastened to her and asked what she had seen.”⁸⁸ This account demonstrates a source for Christina’s authority outside the clerical domain, namely direct knowledge of the afterlife. Similarly, the holy woman Umiltà displays her holiness by predicting the hour of one of her sisters' death,

83 *ibid* pg. 208

84 Rosalynn Voaden *Gods words Women's Voices* pg. 37

85 *ibid* pg. 37

86 Caroline Bynum *Fragmentation and Redemption* pg. 60

87 This same hagiographer wrote the vitae of Mary of Oignes, and was one of the proponents of the 'new spirituality' epitomized by the beguine movement. See ...

88 Mary-Ann Stouck *Medieval Saints: A reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2008) pg. 438

another power not granted to the clergy.⁸⁹ For others, visionary episodes were proof of their devotion, especially among suspect groups. According to her vitae, Marguerite Porete's beguine predecessor Mary of Oignies, “in a frenzied vision of the crucifix, cut off pieces of her own flesh and buried them in the ground to keep the secret of what she had done.”⁹⁰ As part of a vitae of an early, suspect, beguine such stories of extreme devotion to Christ were essential to establish legitimacy.

Implicit in the establishment of their own ethos was a female critique of the clerical monopoly on spiritual access. First, these women were claiming a spiritual prerogative far greater than any cleric. Mystics “from Mary of Oignes to Catherine of Siena and Joan of Arc, holy women saw themselves as acting -not merely suffering- in imitatio Christi.”⁹¹ Secondly, female forms of religious expression were often more theatrical, and thus more persuasive and noticeable to the lay observer. Caroline Bynum asserts the experience of “conversion phenomena’ in women's piety”⁹² is well established. Accordingly, women were more likely than men to experience visions, levitations, or other dramatic forms of religious experience. Finally, “the piety of medieval women expressed itself in no characteristic institutional form.”⁹³ Unlike male religious organizations, female groups resisted the interjection of hierarchy into their religious groups. This left them outside the clerical control to a greater degree than men, and allowed greater freedom in their modes of religious expression that could be challenging or threatening to Catholic hierarchy.

89 *ibid* pg. 460

90 Caroline Bynum *Fragmentation and Redemption* pg. 131

91 *ibid* pg. 54

92 *ibid*. pg. 55

93 *ibid*. pg. 63

Marguerite Porete, however, has a more explicit renunciation of clerical command. In Chapter 3: *Here Love speaks of the commandments of the Holy Church*; a variation of the ‘Golden Rule’ is essentially the only commandment she acknowledges. In her justification she writes “we accomplish all our works purely for Him.... Nobody can have grace with a lesser way.”⁹⁴ Although Love claims that in this chapter she is beginning with “the commandments of the Holy Church,” the ‘Golden Rule’ certainly does not exhaust the examples of Catholic proscriptions in her time. In one sense, it reads more like a critique of Church legislation *beyond* that point, than an honest description of the requirements to follow church authority.

Marguerite is also guilty of usurping clerical authority by virtue of her position in the mystical tradition. The challenge to clerical authority is an implicit part of mysticism in general. The individual mystic is necessarily removed from clerical authority since mysticism implies a direct union and communication with God, which renders the clerical intermediary unnecessary. At the same time mystics usurped some of the spiritual capital clerics held with the wider population. The direct and visionary contact with the divine had an imaginative and oratory pull that was difficult for the clergy to compete with. Mystics, who were extreme in their piety, and unique in their life experiences and devotion, were exempt from the criticisms of corruption and excess that was building around the established Church.

This is not to say that mysticism as a whole was suspect in the eyes of the Church. In some ways Marguerite’s connection with mysticism helps to explain what was omitted from the heresy proceedings against her. Most prominently, the use of the feminine pronoun and female personifications is impossible to miss in the Mirror of Simple Souls.

94 Marguerite Porete The Mirror of Simple Souls pg. 81

In Chapter 119 Marguerite, or at least her soul, addresses the reader directly as “Ladies in no way known, says the Soul who causes this book to be written, you who are in being and established.”⁹⁵ Some scholars have interpreted this and similar quotes to mean that Marguerite intended her work to be circulated only among women. However, this view is rejected by modern historians, and is unlikely as Marguerite sent copies of her work to numerous male readers.⁹⁶ In addition her most fervent defender, Guiard of Cressonart, the self-appointed incarnation of the Angel Philadelphia, was male.⁹⁷ Instead, this quote seems to suggest something about how Marguerite saw the world in general. Marguerite sees souls as female so in addressing her readership as Ladies, she identifies them only as spiritual beings, not as biologically female.

Even more surprisingly, Marguerite suggests that Divine Love, Reason, and the Virtues are all part of God as a substance, which she characterizes as exclusively female. One might expect that, more than relying on somewhat more abstract allegations like antinomianism. Marguerite Porete's prosecutors might have exploited this seemingly obvious feminization of God the Father. In fact accusations like this were probably excluded because this kind of gender inversion of all aspects of the Trinity were characteristic of the wider mystical tradition. Caroline Bynum writes, “Christ’s love for the soul was seen as the unquestioning pity and tenderness of a mother for her child.”⁹⁸ Even among male mystics “mothering meant not only nurturing but also an affectivity that was needed to complement authority.”⁹⁹

95 *ibid* pg. 194

96 Sean L. Field *The Beguine, The Angel, and the Inquispaor* pg. 85

97 *ibid* pg. 108

98 Caroline Bynum *Fragmentation and Redemption* pg. 158

99 *ibid* pg. 158

But the ways in which Marguerite breaks from the mystical tradition equally illuminate her thought. The most notable divergence is the near complete absence of bodies in her work. The Prologue to the *Mirror of Simple Souls* provides some parallel to the erotic relationship with God, and in particular Christ, that typified female mystical writing of this period, but the way Marguerite intends this story to be understood is very vague. The “Great King”¹⁰⁰ could be God the Father or Jesus Christ. Finally, in total the *Explicit* comprises just two pages of Marguerite's work. From that point on, she becomes concerned almost exclusively with a dialog between Souls, and the personifications of the faculties of cognition, along with a whole host of immaterial characters. For instance, Chapter 13 of *The Mirror of Simple Souls: How Reason is Content with the Explanation of the Things Said Above for the Contemplatives and the Actives, but she {Divine Love} Says it Again for the Sake of the Common Folk*,¹⁰¹ provides an opportunity to relate to the material concerns of the ‘common folk’. Instead Marguerite’s only mention of the body in this chapter is to say, “I have already said above that such Souls possess as equally dear all adversities –for the body and for the soul- as prosperity and prosperity as adversity,”¹⁰² which is simply an endorsement of asceticism.

This point is particularly relevant considering the medieval view where, as Bynum argues, “male and female were contrasted and asymmetrically valued as intellect/body, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion”¹⁰³ Marguerite Porete clearly rejects or reverses each of these dichotomies. For Marguerite, the Soul, and thus the intellectual part of human beings, is personified as female. Reason remains the

100 Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* pg. 79

101 Marguerite Porete *The Mirror of Simple Souls* pg. vii

102 *ibid* pg. 95

103 Caroline Bynum *Fragmentation and Redemption* pg. 151

domain of the Holy Church the little, and thus of male clerical authority; but Reason is repeatedly forced to accept the superiority of Divine Love, a decidedly female cognitive and spiritual faculty. The basic inability of Reason to comprehend the arguments of Divine Love becomes a theme throughout The Mirror of Simple Souls. At one point, the Soul, responding to Reason's skepticism towards the argument's of Divine Love, chides Reason, “ Ah, Intellect of Reason, says the Annihilated Soul, how you are so discerning. You take the shell and leave the kernel, for your intellect is too low, hence you cannot perceive so loftily as is necessary for the one who wishes to perceive the being of which we speak.”¹⁰⁴ Similarly, in the annihilation of the Will, passivity transcends activity. Marguerite argues, “The Annihilated Soul neither possesses will, nor is able to possess it.”¹⁰⁵ However the contradiction is that the soul, in lacking a will possesses, “This divine will, which God makes her will.”¹⁰⁶ Finally, the entire book is an asymmetrical dialog between the emotion Divine Love, and Reason. Like the dichotomy between rationality and irrationality, it is the socially inferior, and stereotypically feminine characteristic that maintains the upper hand.

Referring to similar inversions, like the portrayal of “God as mother” in her book Holy Feast and Holy Fast, Bynum writes, “anthropologists have tended to see such symbolic reversals as providing a 'liminality' – a moment of escape from role and status, a crossing of boundaries or margins into an opposite role or perhaps into rolelessness,”¹⁰⁷ although Bynum argues that such reversals ultimately strengthen the societal norm they

104 Marguerite Porete The Mirror of Simple Souls pg. 93

105 *ibid* pg. 92

106 *ibid* pg. 93

107 Caroline Bynum Holy Feast and Holy Fast pg. 280

are upending.¹⁰⁸ Whether or not the second part is true, they certainly reflect an attempt on the part of the author to invert, and escape her own social proscription, which provides insight into Marguerite's motives for writing The Mirror of Simple Souls.

Another major difference between Marguerite Porete and the broader female mystical tradition is the mode of her mystical experience. Marguerite provides no evidence that she received any visions, or communicated in a linear way with Divine Love. For one thing Marguerite's knowledge is limited by what we may assume her own soul has been allowed to experience in life. She remains wholly ignorant of the 7th stage of spiritual development, implying her source is experience not omnipotent revelation. Conveniently, an alternative mechanism for Divine revelation is included in Marguerite's explanation of the 5th and 6th stages of spiritual development. In these stages the will of the Soul is annihilated and replaced with the Divine Will. Thus a Soul at this level of spiritual perfection may act on its own accord, but at the same time by acting as it would choose to act, it is acting as God directs it to act. As Marguerite put it, "If this Annihilated Soul wills the will of God –and the more she wills it, the more she would will to will it – she cannot possess this through the smallness of creaturehood because God retains the grandeur of His divine righteousness."¹⁰⁹ Further, Divine Love is part of Marguerite Porete's 'faculty psychology'¹¹⁰ as a higher form of intellect than Reason.¹¹¹ Thus, Divine Love can be "the Mistress of this book", in the sense that someone under

108 *ibid* pg. 280

109 Marguerite Porete The Mirror of Simple Souls pg. 93

110 Ellen L. Babinsky the introduction to The Mirror of Simple Souls pg. 31

111 Marguerite Porete The Mirror of Simple Souls pg. 81

the influence of Reason might write a book about what Marguerite refers to as “Holy Church the little.”¹¹²

But Marguerite’s most damning break with the mystical tradition was that she believed that union with God was possible. This was one of the charges brought against her at her trial,¹¹³ and it is not at all typical of mystical writers who generally saw the afterlife as a physical relocation of the soul.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, Marguerite’s view was not entirely unheard of among orthodox writers. Another Flemish mystic, Henrik Herp, writing in the 15th century uses similar language, although there is no evidence that he was influenced by or had knowledge of Marguerite Porete's work. He writes, “[The preparation for superessential life] is founded on the most perfect and noble mortification of our nature. This means that the loving soul will renounce everything unlike God and enter into a perfect likeness with God.”¹¹⁵

Because of these divergences Marguerite Porete's place in the female mystic tradition is anything but simple. On the one hand she epitomizes many of the spiritual conditions and religious thought of the mystic tradition. On the other hand, she is systematic in her approach, and theological and idealist in her thought, which distances her from the mystical tradition and ultimately pushed her past the fold of orthodox mysticism.

Theologically her belief system came to resemble yet another ad hoc assembly of religious thinkers, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit*.¹¹⁶ It is important to note that *The Heresy*

112 *ibid* pg. 122

113 Robert E. Lerner *The Heresy of the Free Spirit* pg. 1

114 See for example the discussion in Caroline Bynum’s *Fragmentation and Redemption* pgs. 228-230

115 Hendrik Herp from *Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries* pg. 146

116 Robert E. Lerner *The Heresy of the Free Spirit* pg. 200

of the Free Spirit does not reflect a unified system of belief.¹¹⁷ But, like Marguerite Porete, “these individuals carried personal mystical experience to the point of antinomianism and self-deification.”¹¹⁸ The specific dogma varies widely between proponents and frequently they were the result of coincidental similarity in thinking, rather than direct communication between thinkers.¹¹⁹ As Bynum suggests, “the contemporary [to the 13th century] notion that they were a formal movement, a kind of conspiracy, may have been in large part a fantasy generated by orthodox fear of the implications of mysticism.”¹²⁰ Nonetheless Marguerite’s Mirror of Simple Souls is considered one of the heresy’s broadest systematic explications. In fact, Lerner argues that The Mirror of Simple Souls was one of the primary sources for the wider condemnation of the Heresy of the Free Spirit at the 1312 Council of Vienne.¹²¹ Defining the precise nature of the Heresy of the Free Spirit as a whole is difficult to do because of the tendency towards hyperbole and sometimes sheer fiction in contemporary accounts. Lerner retells the account of one chronicler who claimed that these heretics “maintained that if a man and a woman had sexual intercourse on an altar at the same time as the consecration of the host both acts would have the same worth.”¹²² He mentions another chronicler who announced that the German Free Spirit Aedigius “went around completely naked carrying a plate of meat on his head [which he gave] to a pauper.”¹²³ These accounts are of dubious credibility.

117 *ibid* pg. 229

118 Caroline Bynum Holy Feast and Holy Fast pg. 17

119 Robert E. Lerner The Heresy of the Free Spirit pg. 229

120 Caroline Bynum Holy Feast and Holy Fast pg. 17

121 Robert E. Lerner The Heresy of the Free Spirit pg. 83

122 *ibid* pg. 11

123 *ibid* pg. 159

Nevertheless, Robert E. Lerner, in his book The Heresy of the Free Spirit, has successfully constructed a fairly complete view of the beliefs that can be considered foundational to the Heresy of the Free Spirit. In general the Heresy may be characterized by three primary tenets. Most generally, in Lerner's words, the “Free Spirits were interested in a program of mystical perfection of the individual.”¹²⁴ Clearly, this is in keeping with Marguerite’s own mission in writing The Mirror of Simple Souls. Most of the Free Spirit sects put forth, in very limited forms, similar sort of proposals for their readers to achieve the same kind of perfection the author had achieved.

The second tenet was that union with God was possible. In general, those included in the Heresy of the Free Spirit were more radical than Marguerite Porete on this point. Some held that union with the divine was possible before death; others held a kind of pantheistic viewpoint where God literally was the world. More often this took the form of a ‘deification’ of the spiritually receptive believer. Hostile sources portray one sect as believing “the deified man could not sin: for him sin was not sin and he could commit a mortal sin without sinning.”¹²⁵ By comparison Marguerite's view that the Soul was subsumed into the Divine being after death and able to act perfectly in accordance with Divine will before death is relatively mild.¹²⁶

The third tenet, which can also be seen in the above quote, is antinomianism.¹²⁷ In fact many of the accusations of grotesque immorality seem to be what the inquisitors feared might follow the liberating immorality of antinomian teachings. According to

124 *ibid* pg. 127

125 *ibid* pg. 17

126 This is one of the defenses apologists for Marguerite Porete's orthodoxy have put forward into the modern era. Interestingly, the modern Catholic Church still maintains that Marguerite Porete is a heretic, but on the grounds that other authors posthumously added passages that limit union with God until after death, which avoids the issue as to whether Marguerite's theology, as it appears in the text, would still be considered heretical. See *The Theology of Renewal Volume I*.

127 Robert E. Lerner The Heresy of the Free Spirit pg. 62

Lerner the papal bulls and condemnations of the Heresy of the Free Spirit “reveals the sort of practices that the orthodoxy most feared,”¹²⁸ rather than accurately reflecting a particular set of practices. Typically, however, these tirades of grotesque crimes were generally preceded with a more plausible set of theological transgressions that highlight the feared descent from antinomianism to immorality. As Lerner relays, the inquisition in Strassburg in 1317 found a group calling itself the Free Spirits who believed man can be in a state “in which he cannot sin,¹²⁹” going so far as to claim “that a perfect man should be free from all acts of virtue and should not meditate on Christ's passion or on God.” The same kind of belief system was uncovered by inquisitions in Eastern Europe. They record the lives of John and Albert of Brúnn. Lerner claims, John “became one of the 'perfect' for eight more years. In this state he was entirely freed, according to his account, from the moral law.”¹³⁰ Such beliefs obviously concerned orthodox leaders for several reasons. Foremost, the idea that morality was possible if one did not fear the consequences of one actions in the afterlife was, for the most part, outside the Catholic consciousness for some time. Even the most imaginative pre-reformation Catholic literature cannot imagine human beings who do not accept an immortal soul that receives judgment. Thomas More, discussing fictional and exotic non-christian peoples in Utopia writes, “[The King] earnestly and straightly charged them that no man should conceive so vile and base an opinion of the dignity of man's nature as to think that the souls do die

128 *ibid* pg. 79

129 *ibid* pg. 86

130 *ibid* pg. 109

and perish with the body.... An therefore they believe that after this life vices be extremely punished and virtues bountifully rewarded.”¹³¹

Marguerite Porete's repeated claim that the annihilated soul ‘takes leave’ of the Virtues reflects this antinomian sentiment. However, just as she does with her beliefs on unification with God, Marguerite does qualify this assertion considerably more than it seems other Free Spirit thinkers may have done. She stresses that, although such a Soul is no longer beholden to the virtues, it would never act in a way that was not in concordance with them, and could never act against God's will, which is inherently moral.¹³²

The final commonality between proponents of the Free Spirit was a certain similarity in their lifestyle. The John mentioned above underwent “20 years of abnegation,” and like many Christian holy people, orthodox or otherwise, asceticism was generally considered to be a quintessential aspect of the road to perfection. Of three major case studies in Lerner's book, The Heresy of the Free Spirit, every one of them explicitly mention a period of asceticism.¹³³ Marguerite ignores the physical world to such a degree that it is difficult to discern how she may have felt about ascetic practices. However, she does believe that a Soul must first live by Grace, subordinate to the Virtues before she might ‘take her leave of them’.¹³⁴ Living by the Virtues would require a certain amount of self-discipline and deprivation, especially when living as a ‘mendicant creature’. Adherents to variations of the Heresy of the Free Spirit were also linked by class. Lerner argues that the Heresy of the Free Spirit was “a near monopoly of the well-

131 Thomas More Utopia ed. William Dallam Armes (New York: The Macmillan Company 1912) pg. 192-193

132 Marguerite Porete The Mirror of Simple Souls pg. 82

133 Robert E Lerner The Heresy of the Free Spirit pgs. 106-112, 157-164, 182-186

134 Marguerite Porete The Mirror of Simple Souls pg. 85

off.¹³⁵” Proponents were nearly always educated and comparatively wealthy. Part of this is because the Heresy of the Free Spirit is essentially a written phenomenon, so the evidence is skewed towards the rich, but this is likely still indicative of an actual social characteristic of these movements.¹³⁶

Nevertheless, these similarities between the Heresy of the Free Spirit and Marguerite Porete do not mean they exerted the same kind of formative impact that the beguine movement and female mysticism did on Marguerite’s thought. There is no evidence that Marguerite had the kind of interaction with other members of the heresy as she undoubtedly did with other beguines, and as she would have, through writing, and through cultural tradition, with the female mystic movement. Beyond that, for many of the heresy's most prominent figures it was not a self-conscious movement but an external categorization of their thought. The heresy survived for as long as it did primarily because it was reinvented and reinterpreted repeatedly by religious thinkers who would have vehemently denied (as Marguerite did) accusations of heresy, and would have had only limited awareness of likeminded thinkers. This confusion and lack of unity within the movement has lead to Marguerite Porete’s characterization by different scholars as “the first apostle in France of the German sect of the Brethren of the Free Spirit,”¹³⁷ a founding member of the movement by another.

The value of Marguerite’s association with this movement then, is in the further explication of the social factors that Marguerite wrote in reaction to. These social factors also help to explain why Marguerite was tried so aggressively as a heretic. Taken out of

135 Robert E Lerner, reproduced in the introduction by Ellen Babinsky to The Mirror of Simple Souls pg. 12

136 Robert E. Lerner suggests this was the case...

137 From Lea II reproduced in Robert E Lerner The Heresy of the Free Spirit pg. 1

context, Marguerite Porete's writings have entered and left the fringes of orthodoxy depending on their interpreter and the time period. After her death, The Mirror of Simple Souls circulated for some time without an attributed author, and "was... copied not clandestinely, but in orthodox monasteries and nunneries."¹³⁸ Also significant is that during the period The Mirror of Simple Souls was most widely accepted as orthodox or near orthodox it was attributed to a male author.¹³⁹ It would be an oversimplification to suggest that Marguerite was burned simply because she was a woman. Nevertheless, while there was nothing inherently anathematic to the Church in the idea of the exaltation of a female soul, there was a general hostility toward devout women who were not cloistered or did not accept any formal order. This hostility was enflamed by the growing popularity of the beguine movement and fears about 'Libertine heresies' like The Heresy of the Free Spirit.

All of these factors, the fear of beguines, the skepticism towards female mystics, and the association with the semi-fictional Heresy of the Free Spirit ultimately contributed to Marguerite's condemnation. However, Marguerite should not be viewed simply as a radical aberration in the development of Christian theological thinking. In part her work is a product of the same social conditions that inspired the flowering of female religious devotion in this period. She reflected the consternation with the development of unchristian forms of commerce, the desire to withdraw from the world, and the disenfranchisement with the broader Church authority. Personally, she reflects a deep desire, especially among the educated classes, to explain the nature of their religion and their world in greater detail. Marguerite's connection with the Heresy of the Free

138 Robert E Lerner The Heresy of the Free Spirit pg. 200

139 *ibid* pg. 200

Spirit shows a subsection of medieval society seeking to push the boundaries of ecclesiastical learning. This is a desire that may have extended to a wider swath of the population than is reflected in inquisitorial records. The effort expended in convicting Marguerite, and the inquisition's inability to eradicate her work is indicative that her work had wider appeal than is acknowledged in contemporary accounts. Finally, as an author, Marguerite Porete created a compelling and persuasive piece of literature. At times The Mirror of Simple Souls is lyrical, at times it can be technical, and at times it is fantastical and dramatic. Few other pieces of medieval literature can claim to rival it in the grandiosity of its aim, and few other medieval writers been so imaginative, systematic, and insightful in their writing.

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