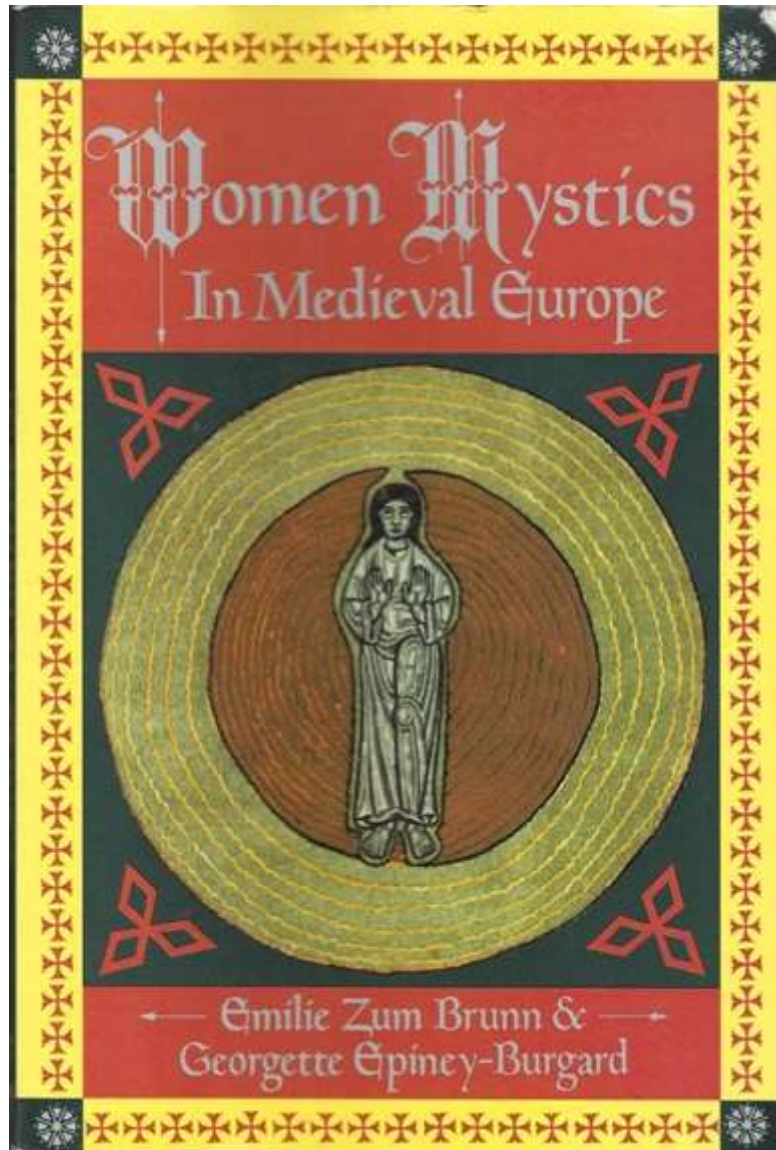


Introduction

Excerpt from *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*

in Part V: Marguerite Porete



Marguerite and the Inquisition

We have no source of knowledge concerning Marguerite Porret, Poiret, or Porete (also known as Marguerite of Hainaut), apart from her famous *Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls*, the records of her trials, and, in contrast to the condemnations contained therein, a few favorable yet wary judgments pronounced by theologians and spiritual men of those times. Moreover, the link between the *Mirror* and the Beguine Marguerite, victim of the Inquisition under Philip the Fair, was brought to light only in 1946, and this was thanks to the perspicacity of Romana Guarnieri. This text had been discovered in 1867 by Francesco Töldi, who did not hesitate to attribute it to Blessed Marguerite of Hungary, doubtless because some of the manuscripts were known to be in Vienna.¹ However, the little we know of Marguerite is the essential. She taught pure love and persevered in this teaching, such as it appears in her book, even if, already before 1306, it had been condemned by Guy II, Bishop of Cambrai, burned on the public square at Valenciennes and its use prohibited under pain of excommunication. Subsequently she was pursued by Philip of Marigny, Guy II's successor, and then accused by a higher authority, the Provincial Inquisitor of Haute Lorraine. Later on, during her eighteen months' imprisonment in Paris for having repeatedly refused to appear before an ecclesiastical court, to swear to tell the Inquisitor "the truth," and finally to

retract when threatened with death, she was declared to be a relapsed heretic and on May 31, 1310, the Inquisition handed her over to the secular authorities.

The following day, June the first, she was burned at the stake on the Place de Grève—now Place de l'Hôtel de Ville—in the presence of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities and of an enormous crowd who were converted to her favor on witnessing her attitude to death.²

This final trial was instituted by the Inquisitor General of the Kingdom of France, the Dominican, Master William of Paris, who was King Philip's confessor and who, from 1307, in a notoriously sinister manner, had presided over the trial of the Templars. About this latter trial, it has been said that never in the Middle Ages did Inquisition and Crown collaborate so closely, and it seems that there were political reasons—apart from the strongly emphasized ecclesiastical or doctrinal ones—for Marguerite's condemnation. It has been suggested that this decision of the Inquisition was a compensation offered to the Pope and the Church after the ticklish question of the Templars. However that may be, those who love her are convinced that, if we seek a deeper explanation, it was "on account of her just love," as, according to Hadewijch, another Beguine, doubtlessly Aleydis, had been put to death a long time before by the first Inquisitor General of France, Robert le Bougre.³

In defense of the clergy who condemned Marguerite, it has been asserted that, on the basis of the documents presented to them, they could not have pronounced a different judgment. It was, in fact, common practice in the Middle Ages, as it still is in our own times, to allow polemics and persecutions to be nourished by quotations that have been either mutilated or severed from their context, and the duty to seek more complete information does not seem to have been the chief concern of the ecclesiastical courts. Perhaps this fact—which we cannot verify—helps to explain at least partially the obvious contradiction between the judgment pronounced by these theologians representing Paris University and the favorable opinions of the three

equally competent exponents of the clergy who had "heard" her book, as Marguerite puts it. These three clerics were a Friar Minor named John (de Querayn according to the English version), a Cistercian called Frank of the Abbey of Villiers in Brabant, and lastly the famous theologian Godfrey of Fontaines who came from Flanders and was ex-regent of Paris University. "The selection could not have been more judicious or more complete: a representative of the most advanced and modern movements, a representative of the monastic tradition, and lastly an exponent of the scholastics and the secular clergy. The three attestations they wrote have an authentic and sincere tone and are important testimony in favor of Marguerite. At the same time, they throw light on the divisions existing in mysticism."⁴ In fact, while the Cistercian's approval is without reserve, both Godfrey and the Franciscan, although expressing their deep admiration, consider that the book should be shown only to very few persons, for it might be a source of dangerous illusions to those who do not possess an adequate spiritual preparation.

These brief indications can help us to form a certain idea of the contacts and influence Marguerite had during her lifetime. We might also mention an episode—not bereft of a romantic touch—concerning a cleric who took her part in these vicissitudes. We refer to the Beghard Guiard de Cressonessart, arrested in Paris towards the end of 1308 by order of the Inquisitor William for having "aided and defended" Marguerite. When he gave witness before the Inquisition, Guiard admitted "that he had exposed himself on her behalf" in Paris. It seems that, by defending Marguerite, then strongly suspected of heresy, he had become as much distrusted as she was. Like her, for eighteen months (a lapse of time legally granted to the accused for reflection), he refused to appear before the Inquisition Court. At last, in March 1310, William convoked an assembly of theologians and canonists of Paris University to reach a decision on the two cases. On April 3 judgment was pronounced and it was declared that, unless they retracted, the two accused would

be considered guilty of heresy and would be handed over to the secular authorities. This decision was meant to be a final threat. Guiard then retracted and was consequently condemned to life imprisonment instead of death. Marguerite, however, did not allow herself to be intimidated: she followed literally—a fact rare enough to be signaled—what she had written about the liberated soul: “This Soul replies to nobody, unless she wishes to, if he is not of her lineage; for a gentleman would not deign to answer a churl, if he called him, or challenged him. This is why whoever calls this Soul does not find her, and so her enemies have no reply from her.”⁵

So all that was left for William to do was to gather in solemn assembly in the Church of Saint-Mathurin, the most renowned theologians of Paris University, twenty-one in number, among whom were John of Gent and Nicholas of Lyre, who unanimously condemned the *Mirror* and its author.

It is difficult to establish precisely the links which existed between Marguerite's doctrine and that of Guiard de Cressonessart, the latter having left nothing in written form, but it is known that he had Millenarian views, similar to those of Abbot Joachim of Fiore and St. Bonaventura. It results from his testimony before the Inquisitional Court that he believed he had been called to be the apostle of a new dispensation of the Faith. That is why he had his disciples call him the “Angel of Philadelphia,” referring to a passage in Revelation (3:7) which attributes to the Angel of this church “the key of David.” Guiard, in fact, was convinced that he had been given a prophetic power of the keys, higher than the merely ministerial power which he recognized in the Pope. Naturally this became the chief charge brought against him and led to his subsequent condemnation.

Although this perspective on the history of salvation does not at first glance strike the unprepared reader of the *Mirror*, it nevertheless seems to be reflected in the remarks concerning “Holy Church the Less,” that is to say the official Church, distinguished from “Holy Church the Greater,” composed of those souls who have been really freed, those who sustain

and teach the whole of Holy Church. Marguerite says that “Holy Church the Less” is really less, for she will reach her end and she will rejoice at this.⁶ This theme, which echoes the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore, frequently reappears in the *Mirror*.

Far from ceasing with Marguerite's death, the persecutions by the Inquisition continued and may be said to bear witness to the success of the *Mirror* in Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It overcame linguistic barriers as did no other contemporary mystical writing in the vernacular. Proof of this fact is furnished by the six versions which have been preserved, in Old French, Old Italian, Middle English and in Latin. (The German version, if it ever existed, has not been brought to light.) At present they are accessible in about fifteen manuscripts, while others have been reported to exist in various places but have then mysteriously disappeared.⁷

“But the history of the *Mirror* does not stop with its author's story. Its theological dossier is then transferred to Vienne, in Dauphiné, where, in 1311–1312, will be held the famous Council that will condemn northern mysticism in general, and more particularly Meister Eckhart's and that contained in the *Mirror*, confused, in its entirety, with the deviations of the Free Spirit sects. What remains of the documents of the various trials, as well as the articles of the Vienne Council, show how great the misinterpretation was. . . . With the condemnation of Vienne, the *Mirror* is henceforth labeled as a heretical work and was regularly confiscated by the Inquisitional authorities of the whole of Europe until the Renaissance, an eloquent proof of its success and diffusion. . . . The reputation for heresy and the limited number of manuscripts which survived the confiscations have certainly caused the importance of the *Mirror* to be underestimated in modern research.

“The fact that it met with great success during and after its author's life is amply testified by the impressive *mise en scène* of the various trials—all the authorities of the Sorbonne participating—by the efforts of the Inquisition to put a stop

to its circulation, but above all by the traces it left in future spiritual literature, both orthodox and heretical. . . ."⁸

The first English version of the *Mirror*, dated fourteenth century, is in all probability the work of Michael of Northbrook, Bishop of London and co-founder of the London Charterhouse. As this text became an object of criticism, many years later he rewrote his translation, adding to it orthodox glosses. In the following century, the Carthusian, Richard Methley, produced a Latin version of this translation, insisting strongly in his preface that this book could be put into the hands of only a very restricted number of persons. (This Latin manuscript also contains a translation by Methley of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, the work of an anonymous English author on the mysticism of self-abandonment, of similar inspiration to that of the *Mirror*.) Recalling the extraordinary influence Marguerite's book had in England during the second half of the fifteenth and the first decades of the sixteenth century, Romana Guarnieri is led to the conclusion that its popularity had gone beyond the walls of the Charterhouses and, together with the doctrines of the Free Spirit, was having its effect on the mystical illuminism of the Quakers.

It was in the North of Italy, where it circulated in both Latin and Italian, (the earliest translations date from the end of the fourteenth century) particularly in the first half of the fifteenth century, that the *Mirror* seems to have provoked the most commotion. St. Bernadino of Siena, in the sermons he preached between 1417 and 1437, attacked it strongly and repeatedly; at Padua, in 1433, the Benedictines forbade it in their congregations; the Jesuates of Venice, accused of having made it their bedside book and of sympathizing with the Free Spirit heresy, were declared innocent by two inquirers named in 1437 by Pope Eugene IV, while the Inquisition continued to follow its course at Padua. The Venetian question came up again and finally the Pope himself was accused (after his deposition) of being favorable to the *Mirror*. This charge was made by a certain Mastro Giacomo, probably the Paduan Inquisitor who had written about this

book "numerous execrations or reprobations." On the same occasion, in 1439, Mastro Giacomo reminded the Council of Bâle of the thirty articles of the *Mirror* judged as heretical by the Fathers of the Council and demanded that the thirty-six copies kept, according to him, by the Commission which had examined Marguerite's book, should be burned. We lose track of these vicissitudes after the Bâle Council. Nevertheless, in 1473, the error of the adherents of the simple soul (*lo errore di quelli de l'anima semplice*) is again denounced, this time by the Franciscan Pacificus of Novara who complains of the conduct of heretical groups. Finally, in a sixteenth century manuscript in the library of the Benedictine Monastery of Monte Cassino mention is found of a book entitled *De anima annihilata*, "in which are written the most secret of God's secrets, and all the secrets of the servants of love are contained in it." This certainly refers to a manuscript of the *Mirror* entitled *Speculum animarum simplicium alias Anima annihilata*. This manuscript is now in the Vatican. It was finished being copied in 1521 at the Subiaco Benedictine Monastery where Rhenish mysticism was greatly appreciated. The Monte Cassino manuscript is impregnated with the spirit of the *Mirror*, and it seems that a group of mystics attached to St. Catherine of Genoa made use of it as a spiritual guide. Its publication had been planned, but a marginal note added later shows the disapproval of the censors and so the idea had to be abandoned.

In France, Jean Gerson, Chancellor of Paris University from 1395 to 1425, chanced to read a book on the love of God written by a certain Marie de Valenciennes. The mention of Valenciennes, Marguerite's town, where her book was burned for the first time, as well as Gerson's description of the book he had read, have induced the most serious critics to admit that it must have been the *Mirror of Simple Souls*—the first name, Marie, being simply due to an error on the part of the copyist. While recognizing that it was a work of "unbelievable subtlety," Gerson puts the reader on his guard against it.⁹ But a century later the *Mirror* would find a supporter no less famous than this censor, in the person of

Marguerite of Navarre, Francis the First's beloved only sister. This Marguerite was on friendly terms with the nuns of the Madeleine Convent at Orleans from which comes the only accessible copy of the original version of the *Mirror*, in Old French, and now preserved at Chantilly. In the fifteenth century, when this copy was made, the Madeleine Convent played an important role in the reform of the famous Abbey of Fontevrault, where the queen poetess found one of the deepest inspirations of her mysticism. It is she who furnishes us with the most beautiful introduction to Marguerite Porete's book.¹⁰

The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls

In her *Prisons*, written in the last years of her life, Marguerite of Navarre mentions the *Mirror of Simple Souls* among the books "which follow unconditionally the intention of the Sacred Bible":

But among all books I saw one by a woman,
Written a hundred years ago, filled with the flame
Of Charity, so very ardently
That love and love alone was its concern,
The beginning and end of all she said.

.....
Oh, how attentive this woman was
To receive that love which burned
Her own heart and those to which she spoke!
Well she knew by her subtle spirit
The true friend whom she named Noble.

.....
And her Far-Nigh, oh, how well-named He is
He Who must be loved above all!

.....
He is noble and through His nobleness
He makes her noble too;

He ennobles the soul with His bounty,
So she, from a churl, becomes a lady.¹¹

We notice that it was the author's subtlety of mind that struck both Queen Marguerite and Chancellor Gerson. They did not dream of reproaching her, as worthy critics have later done, for not having obeyed a rational principle of composition when writing her book. Marguerite Porete's intention is to show, as in a mirror, the spiritual truth that she wishes to teach, a supra-rational truth which, if perceived, will, by itself, render the soul simple. By illuminating in turn the various facets of this truth, the author attempts to make the reader or listener progress in his or her understanding of the central theme: the liberation of the soul which one attains by annihilating oneself in God through love, thus being transformed into Him.

"The word (mirror) involves a very strong visual connotation and contains . . . an invitation to look at ourselves in order to draw closer to a reality we admire; here we have the Platonic, but more especially Christian, conception of knowledge. It is contemplation and not action that transforms us and makes us resemble what we contemplate: 'It is because we shall see God that we shall resemble Him,' St. John says, to explain the bliss of the elect. So the *Mirror of Simple Souls* is also a mirror which renders the soul simple."¹²

The theme of liberation is expressed, as with our other Beguines, in the courtly language, in the literary and social schemas which allowed the author to be understood by the readers, or rather listeners, of those days: In fact, the text is presented in the form of a play, with allegorical characters, the chief ones being Soul and Lady Love. But there are also others, such as Courtesy, Understanding of Love, confronted with Reason, Understanding of Reason, and the Virtues. *Fine Amour*, the idealized love of the troubadours, leads us, when spiritually transposed, to Lady Love who represents an aspect of God, or rather, God Himself in His Essence.

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