"She Swims and Floats in Joy"

Marguerite Porete, an "Heretical" Mystic of the

by Kathleen Garay

Cet article se penche sur le travail de l'écrivaine mystique française, Marguerite Porêtre. Elle a été brûlée vivante en 1310 à cause de la parution de son livre Le miroir des simples d'esprit *qui était considéré comme un ouvrage hérétique.*

In the record of her condemnation, she is referred to as a pseudo mulier, a "fake woman"; no woman who recorded the nature of the mystical experience has written in the manner of Marguerite.

This Soul, says Love,

> swims in a sea of joy, that is, in the sea of delights, flowing and running out of the Divinity. And so she feels no joy, for she is joy itself. She swims and floats in joy, without feeling any joy, for she dwells in Joy and Joy dwells in her. (Porete Chapter 28, page 109)

The book from which these words are taken, written in the closing years of the thirteenth century by Marguerite Porete, is *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls and Those Who Only Remain in Will and Desire of Love.* All that we know about Marguerite Porete is drawn either from this one surviving book or from the account of her trial. She probably came from Valenciennes in Hainault, northwestern France, for the court records tell us that her book was burned in the public square there sometime before 1306. She was a beguine, a member of a loosely structured order of pious lay women which allowed both enclosed and wandering lifestyles. She may, at one time, have been cloistered, but she seems to have spent most of her life out in the world. On June 1, 1310, Marguerite was burned as a relapsed heretic, for having refused to withdraw her book or to answer to the authorities regarding its contents.

Among the first converts to Christianity, devout women, just as devout men, dedicated their lives to God throughout the Middle Ages. While they usually did not preach in the way that holy men did, many women joined convents and led strictly regulated lives of devotion. Out of this empowering environment came the writings of the great German female mystics, those who sought to obtain union with or absorbtion into the Deity by means of contemplation and self-surrender. The genre seems to have been given its momentum by the works of Hildegarde of Bingen (1098–1179). Of noble birth, a woman with powerful connections and indomitable will, Hildegarde gave uncompromising voice to her visions and had them "authenticated" by the church authorities as the revealed words of God.

Perhaps partly as a result of Hildegarde's success, mystical works proliferated throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Most of these works combine the relaying of revealed spiritual truths with a description of the steps by which unity with God might possibly, eventually, be achieved. Clustered at first in southern German monasteries, then extending into the Low Countries, educated, well-born nuns wrote with voices which were increasingly, more intensely personal than the writings of Hildegarde.

Outside Germany surviving mystical writings by women are rare before the fourteenth century. St. Francis of Assisi seems to have inspired a flowering of Italian mystical activity, but, although the lives of many Italian women mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth century are recorded, the writers of their biographies were usually men, and the descriptions of their mystical experiences were transmitted, albeit sympathetically and sensitively, by male voices in conformity with male models of female spirituality.

In late medieval France the female mystic voice is even more muffled, so that Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* may well be claimed as only the second surviving French work of autobiographical female mysticism. Curiously, it was probably written within a year or two of another French *Mirror*, by Marguerite d'Oingt, a nun whose writings approached spirituality quite differently.

Marguerite Porete, however, was not a nun, and she was not cloistered or attached to a particular house. Further, Marguerite wrote in her own voice—and what a voice it was! Both in what she wrote and in the manner in which she delivered her message, she stood apart from the conventional; her work, like her life, is wandering, uncontrolled, and always supremely confident. In the record of her condemnation, she is referred to as a *pseudo mulier*, a "fake woman"; no woman who recorded the nature of the mystical experience has written in the manner of Marguerite.

Just as she had physically positioned herself outside the context of formal religious life, so Marguerite's book presents a brilliantly original notion of authority, both spiritual and secular.

The context of the *Mirror* is the world of courtly love. God is depicted as a great and powerful lord, and the Soul is the besotted lover, desperately seeking a union so perfect as to lead to self-annihilation in the love object. Romantic imagery permeates the text: the Soul is "inebriated by the understanding from Love," and she is "so enflamed in the

furnace of the fire of Love that she has become properly fire, which is why she feels no fire ..." (Chap. 25, pg. 107).

Images of intoxication and fire are familiar devices in the erotically spiritual writings of the earlier German mystics, and they recur in many later mystical writers, but none of them possesses greater evocative power than

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Marguerite's account of the Soul in joy (see above).

But this work is no mere retreat into metaphors. From the opening, after warning the reader about the difficulty of her text, Marguerite begins a process of "othering" authority with the tale of a maiden in love with a distant king. The woman has an image made of the king of "great gentle courtesy and nobility," by means of which she dreamed of him. Marguerite herself has done more than dream; the Soul, "who had this book written," then tells a parallel tale of a powerful king. With this highly important opening chapter Marguerite as author introduces a new construction of authority, within which she specifically locates herself (Chapter 1, page 80–81).

Marguerite's *Mirror*, reflecting the object of her soul's love, will produce not only dreams but an account of the steps to perfect union with God. As such, it fits the conventional model of such works. Also, by using the courtly frame, her work appears within the context of the most refined earthly ideals of authority. And yet it becomes apparent that the landscape of authority in Marguerite's text is a boldly unfamiliar one. In order to demonstrate the primacy of faith over the senses, for example, she has the personified Light of Faith instruct the Soul to take "this Sacrament, place it in a mortar with other things, and grind this Sacrament until you can no longer see nor feel the Person which you have placed there" (Chapter 15, page 97). Two chapters later, equally problematically, Love announces that the Soul gives to Nature whatever she asks, but specifies that, "one dare not speak overtly about it. And no doubt on account of the simple intellects of other creatures, lest they misapprehend to their damage" (Chapter 17, page 100). Phrases such as these have made it easy for some historians, and no doubt many of her contemporaries, to link Marguerite with the sexually libertine dogmas of certain heretical groups. However, as quickly as she departs from the supporting frame of authority, so she reinvokes its physical strength to support her spiritual journey: "the Soul is strong against her enemies, like a castle on a hill in the midst of the sea, which one cannot penetrate" (Chapter 23, page 105).

But in Marguerite's theocentric landscape, the traditional "markers" of spirituality no longer have relevance; while the highest forms of medieval devotion customarily included the doing of good works and often extreme self-mortification, this Soul "so annihilates her within herself" that she "no longer does any works, neither for God's sake nor for her own" (Chapter 41, page 120).

In an age where scholastic learning was pre-eminent and reason and religion were inextricably intertwined, Marguerite's rejection of reason also implied a rejection of the powerful intellectual element of the thirteenth-century church. The Soul, confronting the intellectuals directly, tells Reason that those who live by its counsel

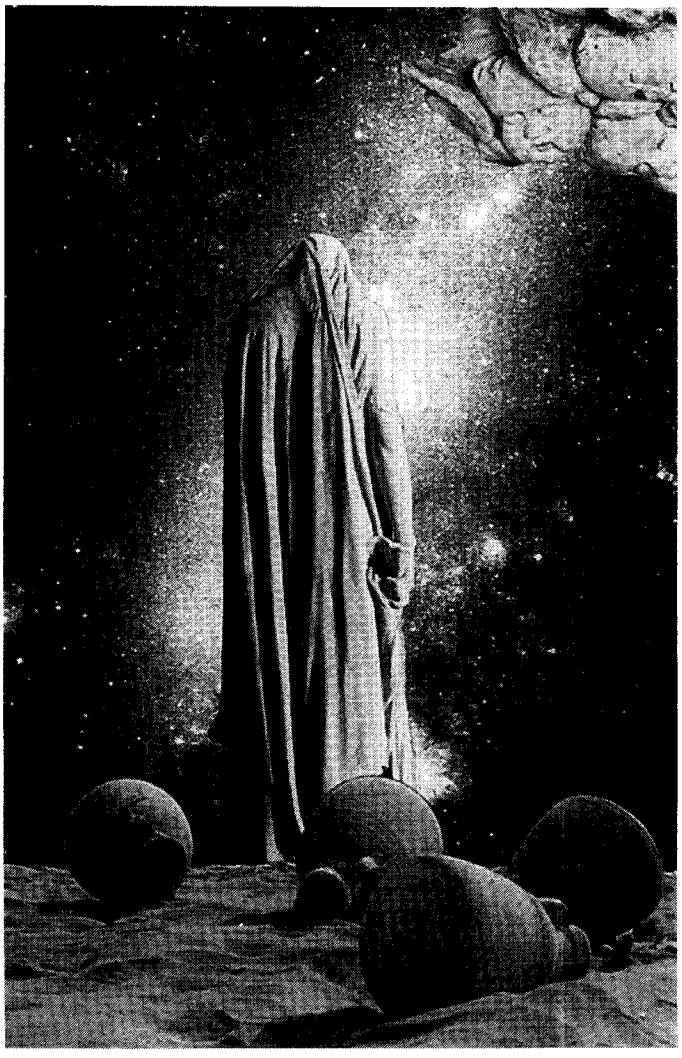
> are such beasts and donkeys that on account of their rudeness I must hide from them and not speak my language to those who prefer death to the being of life where I am in peace without moving myself. (Chapter 68, page 143)

Marguerite's work, like her life, rendered existing institutions irrelevant. Her work of theocratic reconstruction, transposing the manner, conventions, and practices of the medieval French court into the spiritual realm, rendered obsolete all other attempts to manipulate power, whether spiritual or temporal. Appropriating the language and metaphors of a monarchy which was one of the most powerful in Europe, along with the familiar conceits of courtly love, Marguerite created nothing less than an alternative hierarchy.

We can probably never fully know what the political motivations for her condemnation were: to what extent Marguerite's trial was the means selected by an increasingly embattled Church to take a stand against the "free enterprise" spirituality that all mystics, and particularly the itinerant beguines, represented. But whatever the ulterior motives, Marguerite's book contained controversial and difficult material. Even those who read her manuscript and found nothing heretical in it cautioned that it was not for general circulation. That the author of this subversively anti-conventional work was a woman must have made her text seem even more challenging to the male high officials of church and state. However, Marguerite, the "fake woman," makes no stereotypical apology for trespassing into the privileged territory of

erudite males. The tone of the *Mirror* is consistently confident and even combative, simultaneously depending on and transforming established notions of gender to reinforce its vision.

The book itself has been called a "happening"; though composed in conventional dialogue form, the *Mirror* is written in poetic prose and often in full poetic stanzas. Structurally, it relates to the recently identified genre of "life writing," a particularly female mode of expression which rejects the "phallocentric" values of logic and order and incorporates the plural and the multiple (Verduyn 13–14), "a genre of documents or fragments of documents written out of a life, or unabashedly out of a personal experience of the writer (Kadar qtd. in Verduyn 13–14, 23). Yet while her nonlinear style may be quintessentially female, Marguerite's representation of self does not accord with the medieval expectation of female self-abasement and humility.



Kass Elan Morgain, "There Are No Maps For This Journey," collage, 18.5" x 14", 1995. Photo: Robert Hawkins.

A few examples of many possible ones must suffice. The door to the text is latched with a warning in the opening stanza; the reader—"You who would read this book"—is counselled to be humble:

> Think about what you say,
> For it is very difficult to comprehend.
> ...
> And may Love and Faith, together,
> Cause you to rise about Reason,
> [Since] they are the ladies of the house. (79)

Not only does the Soul, aided by Love, subdue Reason, but she confounds Holy Church as well: "Holy Church asks 'And what is such a Soul?' ... Most sweet Holy Spirit, teach it to us, for this word surpasses our Scripture, and so we cannot grasp by Reason what Love says" (Chapter 41, page 121). The Soul is a wax impression of God and has no need of mediation: "in the manner that wax takes the form of the seal, so has this Soul taken the imprint of this true exemplar" (Chapter 50, page 128).

While most of the dialogue of the *Mirror* is with and about the Soul—Marguerite as author disappears after the opening chapter—she employs clear strategies to keep herself inside the text. Just after God the Father has called the Soul "my first-born daughter" (Chapter 50, page 128) and Holy Church the Little "our very sweet Lady and Mistress" (Chapter 51, page 129) we find: "O very high-born one, says Love to this precious pearl, it is well that you have entered the only noble manor, where no one enters if he is not of your lineage" (Chapter 52, page 129)—the use of the "pearl" being a clear pun on the French meaning of Marguerite.

In chapter 96, she appears without linguistic disguise in the book's only segment of autobiography:

> Once upon a time there was a mendicant creature, who for a long time sought God in creatureliness, in order to see if she would find Him thus as she will Him, and as He Himself would be, if the creature allowed him to work His divine works in her, without impediment from her.... And when she saw that she found nothing, she pondered. And her thought about Him told her to seek Him, as she asked, at the depth of the core of the intellect of the purity of her sublime thought. And there this mendicant creature went to seek Him, and so she thought that she would describe God such as she desired to find him in his creatures. And so this mendicant creature wrote what you hear. (Chapter 96, page 170)

With its emphasis on the "mendicant creature (she saw ... she pondered ... she thought ... she desired ... she willed)" (Chapter 96, page 170–171), this account is far removed from conventional descriptions of authenticating visionary experience. In the next chapter, Marguerite

the writer becomes the Soul once again, concluding the section in luminous poetry:

> Yet even so, says that Soul who wrote this book, I was so foolish at the time when I wrote it; but Love did it for my sake and at my request, that I might undertake something which one could neither do, nor think, nor say, any more than someone could desire to enclose the sea in his eye, or carry the world at the end of a reed, or illumine the sun with a lantern or torch.... (Chapter 97, page 171)
> ...
> But since I took my course
> in order to come to my help
> to my final crown
> of the being of which we speak
> which is in perfection. (Chapter 97, page 172)

Heightened by the admission of her earlier foolishness, Marguerite's is a tone of such confidence that it approaches arrogance. She concludes one passage with the observation: "These examples are sufficient for those who have intellect to grasp what remains to be said. This book is not written for others" (Chapter 76, page 150). The authoritative, non-apologetic tone of her rhetoric is an exact mirror of the transcendent, restructured authority which is her subject matter, and life and artifice converge in the Soul's observation: "She responds to no one if she does not wish to, if he is not of her lineage.... Her enemies have no longer any response from her" (Chapter 85, page 160). Marguerite herself refused to respond to any of the heresy charges against her during the 18-month long imprisonment which preceded her execution.

While she makes the customary protestations about the impossibility of describing the state of divine union in merely linguistic terms, for the "language of such a life of divine life is a hidden silence of divine love" (Chapter 94, page 169), and she informs the reader that the final, seventh stage of mystical progression "love keeps within herself" (Chapter 118, page 194) Marguerite feels impelled by the divine will to speak:

> O Lover of gentle nature,
> You are much to be praised ...
> And thus I must not hold silence
> About your beauty and goodness.
> Powerful you are for my sake, and wise;
> Such I cannot hide.
> (Chapter 122, page 199)

While the medium of language may be inadequate, Marguerite's voice is not. Rather, located within the framework of divine inspiration, it is awesome in its certainty. By the end of her book, Marguerite/the Soul explicitly and fearlessly reasserts her sex and the fruitfulness of her inspiration:

> He is fullness,
> And by this I am impregnated.
> This is the divine seed and Loyal Love.
> (Chapter 122, page 201)

The Soul is at once annihilated and yet fecund and life-affirming.

Marguerite Porete used the conventions of courtly love and, more significantly, of courtly authority to construct a theocratic universe which was the antithesis of the society which she saw around her. The voice in which she wrote was confident and authoritative, and yet it was also unmistakably and determinedly, the voice of a woman. It is the combination of these two elements in *The Mirror of Simple Souls* which made Marguerite's work fatally dangerous and which has rendered it timeless.

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