

“The World on the End of a Reed”:
Marguerite Porete and the annihilation of an
identity in medieval and modern
representations – a reassessment.

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Abstract

This thesis presents a new assessment of the identity and historical significance of Marguerite Porete, burned for heresy in Paris in 1310, and reconnects her to a vigorous, lay, discourse community that threatened the authority of the later medieval church. The thesis argues that a bilateral annihilation of Porete as an historical subject has been brought about by medieval and modern representations, and that this has served to obscure the presence of a subaltern religious discourse in the period. The historiography of Porete has followed distinctive stages of development that reflect, and are affected by, concurrent advances in the study of medieval female religious participation. This interplay has led to the development of a particularly influential hermeneutics that serves to exclude Porete from her contemporaries. Analysis of documentation issuing from Porete's condemnation has similarly been influenced by hermeneutic issues that manipulate the ways in which Porete is perceived as an identity. This thesis challenges dominant representations of Porete in the scholarship and argues that Porete's identity and discourse reflect a particularly vigorous, fluid and cross-discoursed lay engagement with religiosity that has roots in the precocious socio-religious environment of the Southern Low Countries.

Central to the aims of this thesis is the question "how did Porete 'fit' the religious landscape of her period?" A seeming obstacle to this pursuit are claims from within the scholarship that Porete did not 'fit' at all, but was, rather, as an aberration amidst other female mystics of the period. Clear links, however, have suggested a wider discourse community and some have identified her, in conjunction with those that condemned her in Paris, as a beguine. Yet this affiliation is refuted by Porete within her book and the term, as an indicator of identity, is highly problematic. This thesis explores the historiographical issues that cloud Porete's case and offers a reassessment of the possibilities her reconnection to the major religious currents of her day presents. It will be argued that her condemnation represents a major historical development wherein the boundaries of institutionally accepted discourse were hardened at the very moment when the possibilities for religious discourse were at their peak. Porete will thus be reassessed as a major figure in an alternative religious discourse that represents the excluded voice of lay engagement in the later Middle Ages.

This is to certify that this thesis comprises only my original work, except where due acknowledgement is made. The thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, inclusive of appendix and bibliography.

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This thesis was born from the excitement of undergraduate classes taught by Dr. John O Ward at the University Sydney in the 1990s. Under the tutelage of Dr. Ward, a highly influential and gifted teacher, I formed part of a dedicated group of devotees who spurned other areas of study (despite the impracticality of this) and pursued topics as heady as ‘witchcraft’, ‘heresy’ and ‘magic’ within the medieval period. I was fortunate to find Dr. Ward amenable to supervising this thesis and even more fortunate to have him continue to supervise after retirement from Sydney University’s History Department. I thank him for his inspiration, advice, assistance and criticism in the development of this thesis. I hope the completion of this work will give him more time to pretend to be retired.

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Around the feast of Pentecost it happened in Paris that a certain pseudo-woman of Hainaut, named Marguerite, called Porrette [*Poirette, Poreite*], had published a certain book in which, by the judgment of all the theologians who had diligently examined it, were contained many errors and heresies, and among those that the soul annihilated in love can for love of the creator, behave without reprehension of conscience or remorse and concede to nature whatever it demands and desires, which smacks manifestly of heresy. While she did not wish to abjure this little book or the errors contained therein, as a consequence of which [*quinimo*] she lay under sentence of excommunication by the inquisitor for heretical depravity since she had not wished to appear before him although sufficiently warned, for a year or more she remained of pertinacious mind, finally hardened in her wickedness, at last in public in the Place de Grève, before the clergy and people specially called for this, on the advice of learned men she was exposed and handed over to the secular court. The provost of Paris accepting her at once into his power, the next day she was extinguished in the fire.

Guillaume de Nangis, *The Grand Chronicles of France*¹

I was so foolish ...[to]... 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 on the end of a reed, or illumine the sun with a lantern or a torch. I was more foolish than the one who would want to do the other, when I undertook a thing which one cannot say, when I encumbered myself with the writing of these words.

Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls*²

On May 31st 1310 a crowd gathered at the common field of La Grève, on the then outskirts of Paris, drawn by a procession of ecclesiastics exiting the city³ and witnessed the condemnation of a woman named Marguerite Porete, whose book, trial and death have subsequently become one of the most celebrated cases in the history of late medieval women's religiosity. Porete was burned at the stake on June 1st 1310 the day after her

¹ Cited in Paul Verdeyen, "Le Procès d'inquisition contre Marguerite Porete et Guiard de Cressonessart (1309-1310)", *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique*, 81, (1986), pp.47-94. English translations of the Latin from J.O.Ward, "Heresy and Inquisition: heresy and witchcraft, inquisition and crusade, reform and social change in Europe 1000-1325 AD", *Sourcebook*, School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry, Department of History, University of Sydney, HSTY 2015, Semester 2, 2003, hitherto referred to as Ward, *SBK*. The associated Verdeyen reference will accompany each citation. This reference: Ward, *SBK*, p.462; Verdeyen, 'Le Procès', p.90.

² There are a number of complete English translations available: *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Clare Kirchberger,(trans.), (London: Orchard Books, 1927); *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Ellen. L. Babinsky (trans.), (Paulist Press: New York, 1993); *The Mirror of Simple Souls by Marguerite Porete, ca. 1250-1310*, Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., J. C. Marler, and Judith Grant (trans.), Notre Dame Texts in Medieval Culture, vol 6, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999). With one or two exceptions, the English translation of *The Mirror of Simple Souls* used in this thesis will be Babinsky's, hitherto referred to in the text as *The Mirror*. This Reference, *The Mirror*, pp. 171-172.

³ "... in the Place de la Grève, Paris, in solemn congregation, with present in that place the reverend father in Christ the lord bishop of Paris; master John of Fregeris, official of Paris; William of Chenac; John of Lord Martin; Xavier of Charmoia; Stephen of Bertoudicuria; brothers Martin of Abbatisvilla, bachelor in theology, and Nicholas of Annesiaco, of the Order of Preachers; John Ploiebauch, Provost of Paris; William of Choques and many others specially called to this, in the presence also of many prominent people of the town of Paris and a great number of the populace and of me, the under-written public notary." Ward, *SBK*, p.459; Verdeyen, 'Le Procès', p.81.

condemnation at La Grève,⁴ for writing a book containing ‘many errors and heresies’ and for refusing to desist in disseminating the ideas in that book to both the ‘learned’ and the ‘simple’ after its initial condemnation (in 1306). Officially, this refusal to cease and desist classified her as a relapsed heretic, a transgression that was magnified by her ‘contumacious’ silence in the face of her inquisitors. These crimes – crimes that began with what was written and ended with what was not said – have given Porete the dubious distinction of being the first medieval woman writer burned for heresy.⁵

As if such a distinction were not enough, Porete’s case has been linked to such sensational events as the burning of fifty-four Templars on May 12th 1310 in Paris, a conflagration occurring just over two weeks prior to her execution, as well as to the condemnation of Meister Eckhart, a revered Dominican preacher and teacher, who was accused in 1326 of heretical and suspect notions reminiscent of those found in Porete’s work. Further spice can be found in the associated condemnation of a man called Guiard de Cressonessart (self-titled the heady ‘Angel of Philadelphia’), who set himself up as a defender of Porete but blanched at the prospect of immolation and recanted at the eleventh hour. Guiard’s alleged association with the more unorthodox forms of apocalypticism, coupled with the suggestion that Porete was an adherent of the mysterious Heresy of the Free Spirit (the existence of which remains in doubt), has, in confluence with the politics swirling around the Templar and Eckhart cases, resulted in an historical event worthy of a mystery novel of the highest order.

⁴ Judith Grant, Edmund Colledge and J.C. Marler report that the Place La Grève is where the Hôtel de Ville now stands, “Introductory Interpretative Essay”, *The Mirror of Simple Souls by Marguerite Porete, ca. 1250-1310*, Notre Dame texts in medieval culture, vol 6, (University of Notre Dame Press: 1999), pp. xxxv-lxxxvii., p.xxviii.

⁵Nicholas Watson, “Melting into God the English Way: Deification in the Middle English Version of Marguerite Porete’s *Mirouer des simples ames anienties*”, in *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England*, Rosalynn Voaden, (D S Brewer: Cambridge, 1996), pp.20-49, p.20.

To add to the intrigue, those involved in investigating Porete's case are continually challenged by an extreme paucity of sources that include only the documents relating to her death, a smattering of historical anecdote and a book that was ostensibly the reason behind her demise. The book, (never named in the trial documents so it seems important to name it in full now - *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls Who Are Annihilated and Remain Only in Will and Desire of Love*),⁶ which is essentially Porete's 'voice' and the only sympathetic indication we have of her life and ideas, has itself been no stranger to intrigue. For some six hundred years *The Mirror* was divorced from its real author and attributed by turns to a royal nun, a venerated theologian⁷ and an anonymous man. In 1946 however, it was reunited with Porete by Romana Guarnieri,⁸ a revelation that caused a minor scholarly sensation and brought about a series of cloak and dagger manoeuvres involving missing manuscripts and confidence men attempting to pass off secret and probably non-existent German manuscripts.⁹

The resultant renewed interest in Porete engendered a flurry of scholarly activity in which divisions remain regarding her position within the tradition of late medieval female religiosity. Some have seen her as a deliberate heretic, representative of a wider heretical movement and have pointed to such evidence as the 1311-12 Council of Vienne's *Ad nostrum* decretal,¹⁰ in which three articles reminiscent of the ideas in Porete's book were used

⁶ The original French title is *Le Mirouer des Simples ames anienties et qui seulement demourent en vouloir et desir d'Amour*. I will attend to the history of the text and its numerous translations (from both the old French and the Latin) in some detail in chapter two.

⁷ Queen Margaret of Hungary and Jan Van Ruusbroec.

⁸ *Osservatore Romano*, (June 16, 1946).

⁹ See also pp.20-27 of Nicholas Watson's, "Melting into God the English Way", pp.19-49.

¹⁰ Those decretals being "2: That after he has reached this grade of perfection, a man does not need to fast or pray; for the sensuality is then so perfectly subject to the reason, that a man can freely grant to the body whatever it pleases; 6: That to practice acts of virtue is proper to an imperfect man, and the perfect soul may take leave of the virtues; 8: That they need not rise at the elevation of the body of Christ, nor show reverence to it, for it would be an imperfection in them, if they descended from the purity and height of their contemplation

as examples of beguine/beghard error.¹¹ Others have seen her as not perniciously heretical, but misguided in her adherence to a specifically female, beguine inspired, religiosity. More recently she has been seen as both an example of ‘authentic female mysticism’¹² and as a representative of a wider theological movement (a new mysticism)¹³ that was not perniciously heretical, but had its roots in the melding of the vernacular mystical movement,¹⁴ with the formal traditions of neoplatonism and scholasticism.¹⁵ Others still have given *The Mirror* a role in precipitating “a heated Continental discussion of the whole relationship between God and the soul as it is experienced in this life: a discussion which, after 1300, at once popularised and threatened to hereticate much of the radical strain of Christian neoplatonism derived from pseudo-Dionysius”.¹⁶ Accordingly, whilst some sixty years have elapsed since scholars began investigating the woman and her book together, there is still a lack of clarity about Porete as an historical figure.

Indeed, there are many questions about Porete that continue to vex despite the sustained interest in her case that the last sixty years have brought. In particular, the question of Porete’s identity remains unresolved. How did she ‘fit’ in the religious landscape of the

to meditate upon the mystery or the sacrament of the Eucharist or anything concerning the Passion of the humanity of Christ”, cited in Michael Sargent, “The Annihilation of Marguerite Porete”, *Viator*, 28: 1997, pp.253-279, p.257.

¹¹ Beguines and beghards are understood here to have been single individuals who, without taking formal vows, undertook a life of contemplation and religious discourse whilst simultaneously working in the ‘world’ – predominantly as labourers and teachers. Beghards did not achieve the same popularity as beguines and did not form distinct communities, such as beguinages which were developed by beguines in the second quarter of the thirteenth century.

¹² Melissa Brown, “Marie d’Oignes, Marguerite Porete and ‘Authentic’ Female Mystic Piety in the Middle Ages”, in *Worshipping Women: Misogyny and Mysticism in the Middle Ages*, J.O.Ward & F.C.Bussey [eds.], (Sydney Studies in History No. 7, Dept. of History, University of Sydney, 1997), pp. 187-235.

¹³ Enrica de Dominguez, “Judgement and Gender: the Trial and Textual Reception of Marguerite Porete and *Le Mirouer des simples ames anienties*”, 1997 dissertation, (York, 1997), as yet unpublished.

¹⁴ Bernard McGinn, *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, (Continuum: New York, 1994).

¹⁵ “The Pseudo-Woman and the Meister: Unsayings and Essentialism” in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, pp. 114-146, p.146.

¹⁶ Watson, “Melting into God”, p. 43.

period? What was her social status? Was she a wandering widow, a single woman of means, or a semi-religious receiving financial patronage of some kind? How did she receive the learning that evidently contributed to the composition of her book? Did she teach her views to others and, if so, what, where and to whom did she teach? Was she affiliated with any group and if so which group? Further, what exactly was her relationship to other extra-regular religious individuals of the period and what was her approach to ecclesiastical authority? These questions remain, to my mind, inadequately answered in the scholarship, a state of affairs that seems to me to be highly unsatisfactory, because without an understanding of *who* Porete most likely was, we are less than likely to begin to understand the late medieval religious landscape in its entirety.

The lack of clarity about Porete as an historical subject has arisen not only because we do not have much source material to work with, but also because the nature of the source material we do possess is highly challenging. We have documents relating to her condemnation, the *Nangis* chronicles (composed by an anonymous monk of the notoriously conservative Royal Abbey of St Denis), the *Frachet* chronicles (which are shorter yet say nothing different to the former), the *Grand Chronicles of France*, a brief snippet in Jean d'Outremeuse's c.1400 *Ly Meur des Histoires*¹⁷ (which adds little to the former sources) and *The Mirror* itself which is generally described as challenging. In other words, we have

¹⁷ All the documents relating to Porete's condemnation (including the *Nangis* and *Frachet* chronicles, the *Grand Chronicles of France* and *Ly Meur des Histoires*) are held in the *Archives Nationales*, Paris, layette J428. In 1986 they were published with an exegesis by Paul Verdeyen in "Le Procès d'inquisition contre Marguerite Porete et Guiard de Cressonessart (1309-1310)". Henry Charles Lea also translated many of the documents in his *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, III vols. (London: Sampson / Rivington, 1887, 1988), Vol. II, pp.575-78. Lea's offerings were reprinted in 1889 by Paul Frédéricq in *Corpus documentorum inquisitionis hareticae pravitatis Neerlandicae* (Gand, 1889) Vol I, pp. 155-60. Popular English translations of the Latin documents are frequently sourced from Lea's and Frédéricq's efforts (for example Richard Barton, "The Trial of Marguerite Porete (1310)", <<http://www.uncg.edu/~rebarton/margporete.htm>>, accessed April 2007). English translations used in this thesis, unless otherwise stated, Ward, *SBK*. The associated Verdeyen reference will accompany each citation. For a summary of the contents of the documents of condemnation, see the Appendix to this thesis.

predominantly hostile documentation regarding her trial and death, and a book that even its author describes as “difficult to comprehend”.¹⁸ As a result, historians have been forced to apply large doses of what R.W. Southern would classify as intuitive conjecture:¹⁹ the fleshing out and re-envisaging of the past and its inhabitants by linking and assessing the evidence of sources related to the subject, with a creative recognition of difference and personalities.²⁰ This is, of course, recognised as a necessity for historians and is a particularly important requirement for medievalists. For Porete scholarship, however, the pursuit is doubly fraught, not only because, as Watson points out, research “progresses in three disciplines (theology, philology and history), in five languages (French, Italian, German, Dutch and English), and often in rare publications”²¹ but also because, as he further explains, this ‘tortuous’ path is beset by misconceptions, ideological barriers and textual issues that continue to plague.²²

These issues make the study of Porete notoriously difficult, as many scholars have discovered. Edmund Colledge, for example, whose contributions to Porete scholarship are vast if not entirely charitable, complains with Judith Grant and J.C.Marler of “the false starts, disappointments, and frustrations which have been the lot in modern times of all who have been so engaged... Margaret Porette [sic] always was and still remains another ‘daughter of debate’”²³ Whilst Colledge’s complaint refers primarily to issues of methodology, and whilst I would agree that she is a difficult subject, I would also argue that the source of many of the

¹⁸ *The Mirror*, p.79.

¹⁹ For a good sample of Southern’s views on history see section II of *History and Historians: Selected Papers of R.W.Southern*, R.J.Bartlett [ed.], (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004). In particular see chapter seven of the same edition, “The Truth about the Past”, pp. 120-134, especially pp. 132-134.

²⁰ Southern, “The Truth About the Past”, p. 133.

²¹ “Melting into God”, p. 23.

²² “Melting into God”, p. 23.

²³ “Introductory Interpretative Essay”, p. lxxxi. Alternative spelling of ‘Porete’ here is Grant’s, Marler’s and Colledge’s.

debates about Porete stems from hermeneutic issues that continue to inform our reading of the key documents.

For it seems to me that the study of Porete has been made problematic by interpretative frameworks that influence the ways scholars read firstly, her book, secondly, her trial and thirdly, the religious discourse of her milieu. Broadly, these interpretative frameworks can be broken into two groups. The first can be called a hermeneutics of exclusion and concerns the overall conceptualising of medieval women's religiosity, a pursuit that over the last century has resulted in the imposition of a unitary framework on medieval women's religious history that, in turn, posits Porete on the margins of a religious discourse. The second concerns the barriers to historical apprehension that the construction of Porete as a heretic within the sources has created. One might characterise this as a hermeneutics of hostility. I will now preview the significance of each framework.

The interpretative framework that has resulted in excluding Porete from the discourse of her contemporaries is largely the result of influential scholarship that, whilst contributing much to the subject, has also contributed to the current problematic nature of Porete's case in the scholarship. Herbert Grundmann, for example, argued that medieval religious women were representative of a 'movement' that was coherent and unified, a notion that has had a profound effect on the ways in which women in the period are viewed. Whilst his analysis of the development of female heresy, which viewed women such as Porete as 'imperilled' through a combination of shared religious impulses and bad influence, was abandoned in the subsequent debates about her status as a heretic, his 'women's movement' thesis was to be

developed and extended by numerous scholars.²⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, for instance, reinforced the coherence of Grundmann's specifically feminine religiosity whilst at the same time extending it to analyse the discourse of gender. Bynum argued that medieval religious women were empowered by a discourse that used the very tropes of misogynist discourse that had at first glance appeared to be so *dis*-empowering. This paradigm was picked up by a generation of scholars who claimed that this discourse (somatic in character) was *the* dominant mode of female religiosity in the period. This approach has proven highly beneficial for medieval women's history and has spawned some lively and challenging scholarship. However, for Porete scholarship, the results have proven less beneficial as the problems surrounding her case, which were initially grounded in 'was she a heretic or wasn't she?', became 'if we concur that she wasn't a heretic (as most, if not all, currently do),²⁵ how do we account for her marked difference from the apparently dominant somatic discourse of women religious in the period?'

Because of this disjunction, scholars have developed a number of representations of Porete which generally posit her as an enigmatic and solitary figure on the periphery of a broader women's movement, a "fascinating exception"²⁶ and "an anomaly"²⁷ representing an unusual discourse that was singular in its intellectualism and elitism. On a broader thematic

²⁴ For example, Robert Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972; R.I. Moore, *Origins of European Dissent*, (London: Allen Lane, 1977); Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, (St Albans: Paladin, 1976).

²⁵ An exception is Colledge who retains a particularly paternalistic view of Porete. This remains evident in the recent commentary attached to the translation of the New Latin *Mirror*, "Introductory Interpretative Essay". I will discuss this in more detail in chapter two.

²⁶ "With the predictable and fascinating exception of 'heretic' Marguerite Porete, all thirteenth century women who wrote at length on spiritual matters emphasize the eucharist"; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p.124.

²⁷ "Porete was an anomaly in her time and remains an anomaly today"; Joanne Maguire Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete's "Mirror of Simple Souls"*, (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2001), p. xiv.

level, however, recent scholarship has re-examined the texts of significant female religious writers, and found considerable intrusion by amanuenses – predominantly male.²⁸ This serves as a significant challenge to the Bynum-inspired paradigm, because many of the texts that have hitherto been used to define and frame a dominant somatic discourse were read as authentic indicators of medieval women's *actual* experiences. However, it transpires that these texts were mediated, translated and sometimes distorted by those other than the supposed 'author'. This is important, because much has been decided about the religiosity of the period, and particularly women's religiosity, based on a reading of these texts as autobiographical. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that the composition of these texts was derived from the demands of genre and as such represents, at some level, an imposed discourse, rather than a 'true' experience of religiosity. This is fine in terms of what it tells us about genre and ecclesiastical motivations, but it is less revealing in terms of what it tells us of individual religious experiences outside of the dominant representation.

Porete, however, is one of the few women whose words *do* survive without the interference of an amanuensis.²⁹ Accordingly, she represents an important opportunity to explore the experience of female religiosity in terms of a *first person* representation of religiosity. This is important in itself. However, equally important is that the dominance of

²⁸ See Amy Hollywood, "Suffering Transformed: Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and the Problem of Women's Spirituality", *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, B. McGinn (ed.), (New York: Continuum, 1994), pp.87-113, and "Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographer", *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, Catherine. M. Mooney (ed.), (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp.79-98; Ritmary Bradley, "Beatrice of Nazareth (c.1200-1268): A Search for her True Spirituality" *Vox Mystica: Essays on Medieval Mysticism in Honor of Professor Valerie M. Lagorio*, Anne Clark Bartlett ed., (Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 1995), pp.57-74; Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, "The In-carnation of Beatrice of Nazareth's Theology", *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality, The Holy Women of Liège and Their Impact*, Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne [eds.], *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts Series*, Vol. 2, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), pp. 78-98.; Kate Greenspan, "Autohagiography and Medieval Women's Autobiography", *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, Jane Chance [ed.], (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996) pp. 216-36.

²⁹ Certainly, her book has been subject to translation and glosses. However, the essence of her discourse appears relatively intact.

somatic discourse, which is accepted as a given in much scholarship, may well not always have been as central to women's experiences as we have thought. This would suggest that the disjunction between Porete and her milieu may not have been as extreme as hitherto considered and that Porete may, as a result, offer a unique insight into a veiled world of religiosity. Porete's *Mirror* was not written in a vacuum;³⁰ rather, there are demonstrable links with other thinkers and writers of the period that suggest that Porete spoke from a shared background. This has hitherto been difficult to reconcile with the uniform pattern of female religious expression applied to female religiosity in the period. However, these categories are increasingly being recognised as problematic, serving at times to conceal, more than they reveal, the nuances of an age.

The second major barrier to an understanding of Porete's place in the medieval religious milieu, the hermeneutics of hostility, springs from the documents that recorded her sentencing that summer day in 1310. The trial documents and the recollections of chroniclers have been mined for decades by scholars attempting to understand Porete and the world she inhabited and a variety of conceptions regarding her status and significance within that society have been decided on the basis of what those sources say. These documents are accordingly an important part of the historical portrait scholars have drawn of Porete. Indeed, without them, *The Mirror* would have remained as anonymous as the *Cloud of Unknowing*³¹ with no means of ascertaining its authorship and no history apart from what can be pieced

³⁰ Prior to Bynum's work attempts to situate Porete's religiosity within the medieval religious landscape focussed on demonstrating Porete's heretical status. Here, the hidden religiosity that Porete may represent was identified as part of a pernicious heretical sect that was widespread throughout Western Europe – the now discredited 'Free Spirit' movement. Born from an acceptance of trial documents as accurate recordings of real heresies, this connection collapsed under the weight of scholarship that saw Porete as wrongly accused. Accordingly, the idea that Porete's discourse was part of a shared religiosity was thrown aside, with recent work only beginning to identify broader currents.

³¹ See *The Cloud Of Unknowing: a book of contemplation the which is called the cloud of unknowing, in which a soul is oned with God*, Evelyn Underhill [ed.], 2nd edition, (London: J.M.Watkins, 1922); see also, Clifton Wolters, [trans. intro.] , *The Cloud of Unknowing, and Other Works*, (New York: Penguin, 1978).

together from the references Porete makes within the work. Essentially, therefore, the trial documents have given historians aim by providing external material with which to build an understanding of Porete's history in conjunction with her book. However, the fact is that these documents were recorded by individuals with clearly hostile opinions about Porete and nowhere is there any evidence of Porete's voice, because, we are told, she did not want to respond to questions or swear the standard inquisitorial oath. What is more, the documents are highly unusual, as we shall see; they cannot be considered part of the inquisitorial register, lacking as they are in a confessing subject, and they do not conform to any modern sense of due process, no matter how much their 'authors' appear to protest this.

This poses a very great problem for Porete scholarship, because this absence of a right of reply, this apparent manipulation of the case and this hostility mean that the veracity of the documents is constantly under threat. Primarily, this is because the one thing that the documents do tell us with utter certainty is that the individuals who composed them were not only opposed to Porete, but were highly antagonistic towards her. In the trial documents and in the anecdotal offerings, she is, above and beyond all, a pertinacious and contumacious *pseudomulier*,³² a fraud who was burned not only for what she wrote, but also for how she behaved. Thus, her construction as a heretic is linked to her deconstruction as a woman, an extremely vitriolic assault that cannot be underestimated. This hostility flavours very strongly the inquisitorial records (and the chroniclers' renditions thereof), and we should not forget this, for it makes the source itself an extremely suspect and volatile vehicle for apprehension. Yet, scholarship has been forced to rely on the work to piece together what Porete may have

³² Medieval writers used the term 'pseudo' to indicate one who claims to be something they are not. I will explore the significance of this term in chapters three and four. For now, it is enough to understand the term as a derogatory accusation that attempts to subvert Porete's gender and her mystical authority. It is synonymous with liar. See Domniguez, "Judgment and Gender", pp. 43-48.

been before she was arrested and this is troublesome, because we have been required through this reading to draw breath and ‘take their word for it’, thereby accepting a version of Porete’s history that tells us more about inquisitorial responses to the historical woman than it does about the woman herself.

I am not, however, proposing here that we should therefore abandon the trial documents as a source of information about Porete. Nor am I suggesting that historians have failed to recognise the implicit hostility within the sources, or that scholars have not maintained a reflective scepticism about their veracity. Suspicion, of the best sort, has at least in the last few decades *almost* rescued Porete from the charge of antinomianism.³³ What I am suggesting, however, is that some ongoing significant misconceptions about Porete spring from an acceptance in the scholarship of the fact that the relevant inquisitorial documents are accurate recordings of Porete’s deviancy. This is so despite developing academic sensitivity to the complexities of source materials.³⁴ Regardless of this sensitivity, for example, most scholars consider Porete to have been a beguine,³⁵ despite only anecdotal evidence of this

³³ Antinomianism is the idea that one can achieve spiritual perfection in life and as a result owe no obedience to the laws of the institutional church. It was frequently associated with immorality. The *Nangis* chronicler ‘reports’ that Porete’s beliefs included “many errors and heresies, and among those that the soul annihilated in love can for the love of the creator, behave without reprehension of conscience or remorse and concede to nature whatever it demands or desires, which smack manifestly of heresy”, Ward *SBK*, p.462; Verdeyen, p.99. This charge against Porete is presumably based on chapter 17 of *The Mirror* wherein Porete’s character Love states: “This Soul gives to Nature whatever she asks. And it is true, says Love, that this Soul has neither care nor love for temporal things which she would know how to gain in refusing Nature her demand; but a guilty conscience would cause to be taken from her what is her own”, *The Mirror*, pp.99-100. Porete was not explicitly accused of immorality, however, and the passage, taken in context, can be seen as a critique of the intense asceticism popular in her period. Robert Lerner points out that the anonymous chronicler tries to portray Porete as an antinomian, which to Lerner is unsurprising as the monk “habitually expressed the crown’s point of view and must have been well informed since a certain Peter from the same Abbey had been on the examining commission”; *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 75.

³⁴ Contemporary scholarship, for instance, recognises that accusations of heresy do not heresy make and is sensitive to the undercurrents of misogyny and gender relationships in texts.

³⁵ Exceptions to this include de Dominguez, *Judgment and Gender*, and Keiko Raya Nowacka, *Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women: Heloise, Marie d’Oignes and Marguerite Porete in Medieval and Modern Discourses*, History IV Thesis, University of Sydney, 2000.

affiliation, despite cognisance of the fluid and derogatory meaning of the term and despite evidence from within *The Mirror* that she did not consider herself to be of this group. This is significant, because if Porete was not a beguine, at least at the time of her initial condemnation, and if she distanced herself explicitly from beguines, as she does in *The Mirror*, then she may be suggestive of a socio-religious development that has not thus far been fully apprehended.

Thus, on a heuristic level the trial documents represent an interpretative barrier that is in danger of viewing Porete not as the author of an important medieval text, but as the burned/suspect author of a burned/suspect medieval text. This brings us to the crux of the matter: when we seek information about Porete in documents relating to her trial, we are consulting records that are related to the processes of inquisition; that is, they are part of the processes of power that maintained the authority of the church in this period. Thus, we are forced to engage with a discourse in which power relations are pre-eminent. We do this out of necessity in Porete's case (we have so little to go on) and we do it in the hope of unveiling the subject. We want to glimpse her reality within the register and we desire to rescue her from the silence of her testimony. Intriguingly, however, Porete does not engage with that dialogue in the documents; she does not speak, we are told, and thus she does not take part in the verbal pattern of question and answer as the standard inquisitorial formula required.

It is this, perhaps, that makes Porete all the more compelling a subject – because in a formulaic process that demanded dialogue, there is none. Or, rather, there is a dialogue with silence. When we read the documents of Porete's condemnation, therefore, what do we listen for? How do we hear the dialogue between accusation and silence? How is Porete made

visible through the documents? It seems to me that it is only possible to see Porete through these documents if we look for the collision of communities and identities that lie subsumed behind Porete's silent deposition and the contours of her text. Only in this way can we begin to draw out the patterns of power that speech and silence in the documents provide and thus, ultimately, we may begin to see the shadow of our subject outside the constraints of inquisitorial constructions. If we do not do this, if we allow the documents to define Porete (as beguine, as heretic, as pseudo-woman), we stand, ultimately, with her adversaries.

The history of Porete, unlike the history of contemporaries such as Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Beatrice of Nazareth, remains continually reconstructed through the shadow of a trial that was recorded carefully to sustain and proclaim Porete's heresy, but does not carry with it the echo of her voice. This is important because we perceive her through the lens of either heretic or victim and neither category assists in an apprehension of her contribution and significance to the religiosity of the period. In contrast, however, when we view Porete in her *Mirror*, the only sympathetic indicator of her life and ideas, we do at least come close to achieving a sense of the discourse in which she wrote and taught and delivered to an audience. For, despite the possibility of the textual interpolations of translators, and despite an artificiality associated with the text as a construct, *The Mirror* appears fundamentally coherent and true to its author's religiosity and therefore tells us far more than the trial documents do of her role in the religiosity of the period.

The hermeneutic issues we have here briefly previewed have resulted in flawed reconstructions of Porete as an historical subject. This makes highly problematic any attempt to discern what seems to me to be a very important historical question: who was Porete and

what company did she keep? My aim, therefore, is to assess the scholarship and, in discerning productive and unproductive elements of the various reconstructions of Porete, offer an alternative means of apprehending her identity. This is not to deride or abandon the bulk of Porete scholarship, but to add to it and to sift through it in order to gain a better understanding of the subject. This is important because an analysis of the hermeneutic issues outlined above suggests that exclusion and hostility have coloured many of the various scholarly reconstructions of Porete, to the detriment of medieval religious studies and to the detriment of Porete's history.

Broadly, historical reconstructions of Porete that are to varying degrees affected by the hermeneutic frameworks of exclusion and hostility, can be broken into a number of groupings, with three dominant characterisations pre-eminent: 1) Porete as a heretic beguine, justly burned and representative of a broader heretical trend; 2) Porete as an anomalous beguine mystic, highly unusual in her rejection of a somatic discourse; and 3) Porete as a beguine evangelist who finds limited company in a handful of other female authors. These representations, however, are all problematic in certain ways. It is now generally agreed, for example, that Porete did not espouse a deliberate heresy, and all but a few recognise that her propositions were taken out of context and that her *Mirror* does not represent heresy *per se*. Similarly, her link with the Free Spirit heresy has been discredited because it has been shown that such a sect, or an organised one at any rate, did not exist except perhaps in the minds of inquisitors.

These prior conclusions are now well known in the scholarship. Thus, option one seems an unlikely identity, leaving us to choose between options two and three. Recently,

however, the dominance of a somatic discourse has been questioned by scholars who have identified issues of genre and gender at work in religious ‘publications’ of the period and, accordingly, the characterisation of Porete as an anomaly within the religiosity of the period is now open to revision. This leaves us with the characterisation of Porete as an evangelist beguine (option three). However, whilst this identification would seem convincing and illuminating of a broader discourse, Porete was not a beguine at the time of her trial. This is important because if she wasn’t a beguine, then what exactly was she, where did she come from and who was listening to her and in what context?

Porete as a suspect and excluded beguine, whilst dominant in the scholarship, is accordingly problematic and confluent with the hermeneutic issues we have briefly canvassed. There is, however, a fourth option for Porete that does seem to offer a fruitful and fresh means of envisaging Porete. This option envisages Porete as a religious commentator who aimed to transform the individual, not the institution, and who represents the excluded ‘voice’ of lay engagement with religiosity in the period. This is intriguing, because, taken in hand with scholarship that has been exploring the beguine phenomenon and women and men’s lay engagement with religiosity in the period, it offers the opportunity not only of understanding Porete as an historical subject with greater clarity, but also of better understanding the complexities of the religious milieu from which she emerged. Certainly, it demands significant doses of Southern’s ‘intuitive conjecture’. However, given the issues with the documents relating to Porete’s condemnation, this is perhaps a necessity. Moreover, what is perhaps most compelling about this fourth option is that it avoids many of the problems associated with other reconstructions; in particular, it bypasses the hermeneutic issues that have served to complicate Porete’s case.

This thesis argues that the historiography of Porete has not as yet adequately answered the question fundamental to our enquiry: who was Porete and how did she ‘fit’ the religious landscape of the later Middle Ages? The thesis builds on emerging research in the area of lay religiosity in the Southern Low Countries and posits an alternative picture of Porete: that of a grass roots religious reformer whose trial represents a moment when an excluded discourse was briefly identifiable above the clamour of institutional anxiety over text and word. Thus, this thesis rejects the commonly held notion that Porete stands as an anomaly amidst her peers, that she was a challenging and fascinating exception to the rule and that her discourse stands in stark contrast to all but a few of her contemporaries. Further, it questions the notion that Porete’s identity can be classified as beguine. In contrast, I argue that Porete was a productive participator in religious reform, whose impulse was to transform the individual, not the institution, and who articulated this by means of a discourse that moved across communities and the boundaries of gender and genre, but nevertheless, held firm to the tradition of a shared community of religious expression. In exploring this notion, I offer an alternative view of Porete as an historical subject and attempt to answer the question of her identity and the possibilities that her discourse represents.

I believe that Porete was very much the product of her times and that her discourse and behaviour reflect the intense vigour and intellectual engagement with alternative modes of religious discourse that were very much part of the tradition of religious engagement in the Southern Low Countries by the late thirteenth century. Thus, as much as Porete is the most challenging representative of the female medieval religious, she is also potentially the most revealing of the religious currents of her day. In life, in her *Mirror*, she reveals herself to be representative of the unmediated religious woman availing herself of the vigorous diversity

of discourse characteristic of her times. In death, she reveals the intense institutional anxiety regarding vernacular ideologies (textual and verbal) that culminated in her burning. Taken together, therefore, the history of Porete may well reveal the history of an hitherto underestimated point of climax for lay pedagogy and movements away from the institutionalised church, in so far as the latter seemed by 1310.

It is this history that this thesis anticipates. However, this cannot be achieved without a thorough analysis of the historiographical and interpretative barriers that complicate her case. Accordingly, my primary task will be an analysis of the hermeneutic and historiographical issues that impede progress on this front. This will allow me to identify which approaches work when applied to Porete and which approaches do not. It will also offer me the opportunity of presenting an alternative view of the historical subject. My aim is not to resolve all of the issues surrounding Porete's case, nor to provide a new textual appreciation of *The Mirror*, but rather to explore the ideas that a) Porete was not the oddity she has predominantly been classified as, but was, on the contrary, conversant with the multitudinal modes of discourse of her extra-religious milieu and b) that her death therefore stands as a defining moment in the institutional repression of a movement towards vernacular and textual discussions regarding the relationship of the soul to God.

Chapter one will focus on the issues associated with the hermeneutics of exclusion. This will entail a broad sweep of the phenomenon of female religiosity in the period and will centre on historiographical and hermeneutic issues that impose uniformity upon medieval women's religiosity and, in so doing, exclude alternative discourses such as that offered by Porete. Chapter two will address historical reconstructions of Porete that take in options one

through to three, as outlined above. The focus of this chapter will lie with scholarly interpretations of Porete's *Mirror* that act as a conduit to understanding her identity in the period. Dominant scholarship (rather than an exhaustive review) will be canvassed chronologically. Chapter three will discuss Porete's case and its background, and will explore the hermeneutics of hostility associated with reading inquisitorial records. The chapter will address the curious nature of the trial documentation and will present an alternative theoretical reading that aims to re-think the significance of the sources and contextualise them within inquisitorial culture. Chapter four will attempt a new interpretation of Porete and a reconsideration of her significance within the later medieval religious landscape. This will involve consideration of the significance of the Southern Low Countries and will explore features of this environment that may help to explain Porete's role in the religiosity of the period. The chapter will argue for option four as the most convincing portrait of Porete as an historical identity and will stress the ways in which she can be seen as representative of an excluded lay discourse that saw individual transformation, critique and bold engagement with religious notions, as an essential aspect of transformative Christianity.

HMQ: Could I ask you a question, Sir Anthony? Have I many forgeries? What about these?

BLUNT: Paintings of this date are seldom forgeries, Ma'am. They are sometimes not what we think they are, but that's different. The question doesn't pose itself in the form, "Is this a fake?" so much as "Who painted this picture and why"? ... Paintings make no claims, Ma'am. They do not purport to be anything other than paintings. It is we, the beholders, who make claims for them, attribute a picture to this artist or that... What has exposed them as forgeries, Ma'am, is not any improvement in perception, but time. Though a forger reproduce in the most exact fashion the style and detail of his subject, as a painter he is nevertheless of his own time and however slavishly he imitates, he does it in the fashion of his time, in a way that is contemporary, and with the passage of years it is this element that dates, begins to seem old-fashioned, and which eventually unmasks him.

HMQ: Interesting. I suppose too the context of the painting matters. Its history and provenance (is that the word?) confer on it a certain respectability. This can't be a forgery, it's in such and such a collection, its background and pedigree are impeccable - besides, it has been vetted by the experts ... Isn't that how the argument goes? So if one comes across a painting with the right background and pedigree, Sir Anthony, then it must be hard, I imagine - even inconceivable - to think that it is not what it claims to be. And even supposing someone in such circumstances did have suspicions, they would be chary about voicing them. Easier to leave things as they are in every department. Stick to the official attribution rather than let the cat out of the bag and say, here we have a fake.

(There is a strained pause.)

BLUNT: I still think the word 'fake' is inappropriate, Ma'am.

HMQ: If something is not what it is claimed to be, what is it?

BLUNT: An enigma?

HMQ: That is, I think, the sophisticated answer.

Alan Bennett: *A Question of Attribution*³⁶

The exclusion of Porete from her contemporaries is founded in an historiographical development that can best be charted by assessing the ways in which the study of women's involvement in medieval religiosity has progressed over the last five decades. Because medieval female religiosity has enjoyed something of a renaissance in academia, there is no lack of informed works that deal with the subject. However, rather as in a well-trodden, sandy path, there remains such an abundance of footprints that it is difficult at times to distinguish the subject from the pursuant. This is the nature of history (building on research

³⁶Alan Bennett's screenplay concerns two paintings by Titian: *Allegory of Prudence* and *Triple Portrait*. The story involves a (fictional) series of events surrounding the (real) discovery of the incorrect attribution of *Triple Portrait* to Titian. Three figures were discovered beneath the paint of *Triple Portrait* and from this evidence, it was determined that Titian had not painted the work. Rather, his son, or someone of the same school, is understood to have been the work's 'author'. The play also concerns Anthony Blunt, an art historian "in charge of the Queen's pictures" and an 'ex-spy' under immunity. The conversation cited is between Anthony Blunt and Queen Elizabeth II, occurring after the Queen discovers Blunt (whose immunity is rapidly dissolving because he refuses to identify those 'behind him') removing the *Triple Portrait* from her walls in order to investigate his suspicions regarding 'authorship'. *A Question of Attribution*, therefore, concerns issues pertaining to both art and government (and perhaps more besides); "A Question of Attribution: An Inquiry in Which the Circumstances are Imaginary but the Pictures are Real", *Single Spies: Two Plays About Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt & Talking Heads: Six Monologues*, (London: Summit Books, 1989), pp.41-76, p.57.

and notions that have gone before), yet it carries significant implications for writing the history of Porete. Primarily, this is because fundamental notions about the broader historical framework have impinged upon interpretation. Deeply embedded in the pursuit of our subject, for example, are a number of notions that have informed the various ways in which the history of medieval religious women has been understood. In turn, these notions, these deep tracks in the sandy path, have had a lasting effect on the way in which Porete has been assessed as an historical subject.

This chapter argues that Porete's history has been distorted by a highly influential historical framework that developed in two stages. The first stage introduced the notion of a coherent and connected women's movement to medieval religious studies. The second stage argued that this movement possessed a specific and dominant mode of discourse. The influence of this double-pronged hermeneutics is that Porete has been cast as something of an anomaly amidst her peers. However, recent trends in scholarly analysis have called into question the ways in which scholars have 'read' the history of medieval women religious. Not only is this misreading a problem because it does not present the diversity of female religious expression of the period, but also because it does not acknowledge the possibilities of a *different* religious milieu from which Porete may have emerged. This seems unfortunate because the history of Porete may very well reveal the existence of ideological and religious currents that have hitherto remained hidden by the structures of institutional power. Indeed, it is an irony to consider that the partial success of the institutional church in excluding Porete from religious discourse (and from life) has found echoes in the exclusion of Porete from her discourse community in the scholarship. It is this irony that the following chapter seeks to redress by tracing the hermeneutics of exclusion as observable in scholarship that deals with the phenomenon of female mysticism in the later Middle Ages.

The flowering of female religiosity in the medieval west is currently generating more debate and opening up more questions than ever before.³⁷ In part, this growth in interest and debate has come about because medievalists have had to come to terms with both postmodernism and feminism. The postmodern challenge to traditional historical interpretations has proved particularly influential. With the rise in academia of a theory that attempts to introduce a new way of thinking about the past and its representation, preoccupied with issues of power and knowledge, of subject and object, signified and signifier and bound by an inherent denial of “final understanding”,³⁸ historians have risen valiantly to the challenge of re-addressing history in terms of what is ‘already lost’. The ‘illusion’ of history, pursued by Michel Foucault in terms of rupture and discontinuity, the ‘mirage’ of the text³⁹ introduced by Jacques Derrida and his ‘undoing’ or deconstruction of language, and the focus on *mentalité* brought in by the Annaliste school, have thus become the standard and beguiling soak into which academia (for the most part) has settled. Accordingly, many historians have turned to fresh subjects and fresh means of interpreting those subjects. The result has seen a move away from the macro (great: men/events) to the micro (marginal: women/incidents). The master ‘narrative’ has been replaced by the ‘Foucauldian fracture’; the ‘marginal’ have been identified as telling indicators of the social, the cultural and the political; concepts and terms have been ‘deconstructed’ so as to better unravel the complexity of power relations; the ‘text’ has become an arena of intense cross-disciplinary analysis and the search for ‘self’ has become a major preoccupation of much

³⁷ For a sample of the evidence of this ‘growth area’, see *The Medieval Feminist Index* which catalogued in early 2007, some 986 relevant studies, <<http://www.haverford.edu/library/reference/mschaus/mfi/mfi.html>>, last visited June 2007.

³⁸ Paul Strohm, “Cultural Frictions: Conference Commentary” paper delivered at *Cultural Frictions: Medieval Cultural Studies in Post-Modern Contexts*, (1995), <http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/conf/cs95/papers/strohm.htm>, >, accessed May 2004. This commentary was later revised into the book chapter “Postmodernism and History” in Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 149–62. This citation from the original version.

³⁹ “The archive as fetish is a literal substitute for the ‘reality’ of the past which is ‘always already’ lost for the historian. When it is fetishized, the archive is more than repository of traces of the past which may be used in its inferential reconstruction. It is a stand in for the past that brings the mystified experience of the things itself - an experience that is always open to question when one deals with writing and other inscriptions”, Joan W Scott, “The Evidence of Experience”, *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (Summer 1991), pp.774-97, p.92.

scholarship.

For the medievalist, the task has proved particularly rich, if testing. Indeed, as Paul Freedman and Gabrielle Spiegel point out in addressing the early reluctance of medievalists to take up the ‘challenge of postmodernism’:

the amount of medieval material that probes the boundaries of the magical, that combines rational analysis with strange questions, and that assembles a *bricolage* of ancient authorities, ideally placed [medieval studies] to exploit the historicist strain in postmodern thought, since it had always insisted on difference (‘alterity’) as the privileged category defining the relationship of the Middle Ages to the modern world of scholarship.⁴⁰

The compatibility of the medievalists’ reliance on philology with Derrida’s ‘writing difference’ and the very marginality of medieval studies in academia, they argue, should have been enough to compel and incite medieval scholars to embrace the rupture in scholarship that postmodernism represented. It was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, that medieval scholars ‘came to the party’, a transformation they argue, brought about largely by the rise of feminism and gender studies in academia.⁴¹

In confluence with postmodern epistemologies, the feminist restoration of medieval women to history, pursued in terms of the way in which gender *differences* – experiences and representations – are revealed, has succeeded in “creating new interpretative agendas, independent of the traditional problems and discussion[s]”,⁴² rendering medieval religious women ‘visible’ and dissecting the ‘codes’ of gender within their society. Largely a reactive⁴³ process involving the rescue, revision and reinterpretation of texts, images and scholarship pertaining to medieval women, feminist analysis of the ‘cultural construction’ of women and men in the medieval period (of the ‘gendering’ of society and history) has

⁴⁰ Paul Freedman and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies” *American Historical Review* 103: 3 (June 1998) pp.677-704, p.694.

⁴¹ “Medievalisms Old and New”, p.695.

⁴² Judith M Bennett, “Medievalism and Feminism” *Speculum* 68 (1993) pp.309-331, p.327.

⁴³ “Feminist reinterpretation of medieval studies is quite properly reactive, seeking to revise or reinterpret traditional questions and texts”, “Medievalism and Feminism” p.327.

laboured to examine the links between “knowledge-power technologies”⁴⁴ and the marginalisation of women in both history and historical scholarship. In particular, the notion of the ‘alterity’ of the medieval period,⁴⁵ in which “the state is more predatory, piety is more intense, and mentalities more foreign than had been portrayed”,⁴⁶ has established a move towards viewing the period as a contrasting image of modernity. This by-product of feminist and postmodernism ideas of the ‘other’ has in turn, “given medievalists their sense of professional legitimacy, since the very strangeness and ‘difference’ signified by the distant past suggests a special virtue required for its study”.⁴⁷

Rejecting the notion of the Middle Ages as “progressive, pluralist, rational and self aware”,⁴⁸ and utilising and expanding the theoretical framework used by postmodernism to address historical issues, feminists have turned to an investigation of textual remains, emphasising that “all acts of language are grounded in [a] dense network of partial positions (e.g. sexual, class, racial)”.⁴⁹ Consequently, texts written by women (and also by men *about* women) have attained primacy in the attempt to uncover constructions and representations of the ‘authentic’ female voice. Nowhere is such an approach richer with documentation and contentious issues than in the textual evidence pertaining to female religiosity in the later medieval period.

⁴⁴Kathleen Biddick, “Genders, Bodies, Borders: Technologies of the Visible” *Speculum* 68 (1993), pp.389-418, p.389.

⁴⁵ A by-product of feminist and postmodern ideas of the ‘Other’ that is “darkly familiar, the analogue of a negatively construed modern West”, “Genders, Bodies, Borders”, p.702.

⁴⁶ “Genders, Bodies, Borders”, p.702.

⁴⁷ “Genders, Bodies, Borders”, p.679.

⁴⁸ “Medievalisms Old and New”, p.702.

⁴⁹ Robert Stein, “Medieval, Modern, post-Modern: Medieval Studies in a post Modern Perspective”, Conference paper delivered at *Cultural Frictions: Medieval Cultural Studies in post Modern Contexts*, Georgetown University, 1995, <<http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/conf/cs95/>> last visited June 2004.

Whose women's movement and which?

When McNamara writes of the “happy thought”⁵⁰ that first characterised ‘a women’s movement’ in the later Middle Ages, she is referring primarily to the work of Herbert Grundmann and his highly influential *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*.⁵¹ Enquiry into late medieval female piety pre-Grundmann had for the most part ignored the role of women in the religious traditions of the medieval west.⁵² When addressed, the presence of women was passed off as insignificant due to an absence of source material.⁵³ Most analyses focused on individual men or the male tradition,⁵⁴ the exception being that of research into heretical movements and the ‘beguine phenomena’ carried out by such scholars as Jan van Mierlo, and L.J.M. Philippen.⁵⁵ However, in 1935 Grundmann published *Religious*

⁵⁰ Jo Ann McNamara, ‘De Quibusdam Mulieribus: Reading Women’s History from Hostile Sources’, *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*, Joel T Rosenthal [ed.], (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), pp.237-258, footnote 1, p.252. It is noted, however, that McNamara seems to see Grundmann’s term as pertaining only to beguines; “a group with sufficient cohesion and prestige to merit being called ‘a woman’s movement’ by modern historians”, p.237, see also footnote 1. I see this as only partially correct.

⁵¹ Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: the historical links between heresy, the mendicant orders, and the women’s religious movement in the twelfth and thirteenth century, with the historical foundations of German mysticism*, (1935), 4th ed., Steven Rowan [trans.], (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). Lerner cites Grundmann as the discoverer of the high medieval ‘women’s religious movement’, pointing out that whilst other scholars had written on nuns and beguines before Grundmann “he was the first to employ the term”. “Introduction to the Translation”, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, ix-xxix, xx.

⁵²For example H.O.Taylor, who in 1911 included two chapters on medieval women; “Mystic visions of ascetic women” and “The Heart of Heloise”, *The Medieval Mind: a history of the development of thought and emotion in the middle ages* (1911), 4th.ed, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), (Ch. XX and XXVI respectively).

⁵³One example being David Knowles’ comments in his *The Religious Orders in England, 2: The End of the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge:1955), that “In truth, intimate or detailed records of the nunneries are almost entirely wanting over the whole period between c. 1200 and the Dissolution ... The religious historian of medieval England cannot help remarking, in every century after the eleventh, upon the absence from the scene of any saintly or commanding figure of a woman”. Cited in Judith M Bennett, “Medievalism and Feminism”, *Speculum*, 68 (1993), pp.309-331, p.325.

⁵⁴For example: Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: The Teachings of Saints Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life*, 3rd ed. (London: Constable, 1967), (London, 1919); W.R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, the Brampton lectures for 1899, [6th ed.], (London: Methuen, 1925); C.M. Edsman “Mysticism, Historical and Contemporary”, in *Mysticism: Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Mysticism Held at Abo on the 7th-9th September 1968*, (Stockholm: Hartman. S.S., & Edsman. C.M., Almqvist and Wiksell, 1970).

⁵⁵ German scholarship is a significant exception. For example: Jan van Mierlo, “Hadewijch en Eckhart.” *Dietsche Warande en Belfort* 23, (1923), 1138-55; “Was Hadewijch de Gelukzalige?” *Dietsche Warande en Belfort* (1924), pp.106-115; “Hadewijch den gelukzalige Bloemardinne?” *Dietsche Warande Belfort* 2 5:3, (1925), pp.28-49; “Beata Hadewigis de Antverpia.” *Dietsche Warande en Belfort*, (1927), pp.787-98, pp.833-43, a condensed list of a prolific output, particularly as concerns Hadewijch of Antwerp. L. J. M Phillipen’s *De Begijnhoven, Oorsprong, Geschiedenis, Inrichting*, (Antwerp: 1918); “Les Béguines et l’hérésie albigoise”,

Movements in the Middle Ages, more than half of which was devoted to “a hitherto greatly neglected aspect of thirteenth century religious history: the ‘religious women’s movement’”.⁵⁶ The impact of this book, though late in coming, can be seen in the post-war demand for numerous reprints and translations⁵⁷ and the work continues to act as a foundational “historical study of medieval religious life”.⁵⁸

Essentially a synthesised cultural history that acknowledges the role of political, religious, literary, economic, artistic and social activities and presents them in a sweeping drama, Grundmann’s book carefully plotted the significance of ‘religious movements’ that developed in the wake of the Gregorian reform. Partly in response to what he saw as a materialist turn in medieval religious history that “not only contradicts all the sources, but utterly misunderstands them and their sense of religiosity”,⁵⁹ Grundmann emphasised the significance of reform tendencies in the extra-ecclesiastical activities of the period. Accordingly, he gave special attention to the practice of poverty and itinerant preaching and identified the *via media* and apostolic poverty as the catalyst for emerging ‘sects’. In so doing, he charted the history of a religious ‘revival’ in which *mulieres religiosae* and beguines played a significant part.⁶⁰ Grundmann followed the development of beguines from that of pious revivalists championed by the likes of Jaques de Vitry to ‘suspect heretics’ associated with (and, for Grundmann most likely members of), the (now largely discredited) heresy of the Free Spirit.

Annales de l’Academie royale d’Archéologie de Belgique, 73, (1925); H. Nimal “Les Beguinages” *Annales de la Société Archéologique de l’Arrondissement de Nivelles*, 9, pp.1-126, (1908); J. Greven *Die Anfrange über Beginin: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Volksfrommigkeit und des Ordenswesens im Hochmittelalter*, Münster: (Westphalia, 1912); J Greven *Die Anfrange über Beginin: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Volksfrommigkeit und des Ordenswesens im Hochmittelalter*, (Münster in Westphalia, 1912).

⁵⁶*Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, xx.

⁵⁷ Initial reprint 1961, Italian in 1974, and the 1995 English translation.

⁵⁸John Van Engen, “The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem”, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No 3, (Jun 1987), pp.519-552, p.523.

⁵⁹*Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, xx.

⁶⁰ Grundmann defines beguine status as “a strange transitional form between the ecclesiastical orders of the day, never belonging to the monastic community of *religiosi*, since it was not an approved order ... [nor to] ... the lay world of *sæculares*, since beguines had left the *sæculum*, sworn chastity and led a *vita religiosa*”, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, p.140

Grundmann's unprecedented elevation of women's role in the cultural history of the West was achieved through firstly, a recognition that historical research in the area had overlooked the role of women (particularly in the thirteenth century)⁶¹, and secondly through an analysis of sources relating to late medieval women's religious activity. The result of this new and exciting revision was, amongst other things,⁶² the coining of the term "the women's religious movement".⁶³ This movement, Grundmann claims, was first recognised by Jacques de Vitry whom, he further asserts, considered it to be a widespread and complex phenomenon, in possession of "a *common nature* and unitary importance".⁶⁴ Medievalists owe a large debt to Grundmann's masterwork,⁶⁵ particularly in that it addressed a hitherto greatly neglected area in medieval studies – "the crucial role of women's participation in religious life and the production of vernacular literature".⁶⁶ These two ideas linked women, as never before, to the production and development of religiosity in both textual and social terms, a cultural promotion that has enriched the study of history in general and medieval religiosity in particular. However, whilst Grundmann's work is to be much valued for this, it will be argued here that it has also served to cloud the waters of our topic by introducing a notion that implicitly suggests a coherent, uniform pattern of female religiosity – A women's religious movement.

The commonality that Grundmann claims for the women's movement has become one of the significant givens in pertinent scholarship, partly because of the "unprecedented

⁶¹ *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, p.5.

⁶² A strong motive for Grundmann's work was the rejection of the notion that economics was primarily the impulse behind women's participation in religiosity in the period. See in particular *Religious Movements*, pp.82 – 88.

⁶³ *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, p.5.

⁶⁴ *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, p.76, italics mine.

⁶⁵ So coined by Robert E Lerner, "Introduction to the Translation", *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, pp. ix-xxix, ix.

⁶⁶ Jocelyn Wogan Browne and Marie-Elisabeth Henneau, "Introduction", *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and Their Impact*, Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne [eds.], Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts Series, Vol. 2, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), pp.1-22, p.2.

authority and scope”⁶⁷ with which he argued his case, but also because, as subsequent scholars have demonstrated, the textual evidence is so compelling and the material so rich. This has allowed for a vigorous and very fruitful exploration of women religious in the period, with *the* women’s movement functioning as a paradigm that has, for the most part, been embraced by scholars across a variety of historical approaches. Indeed, the synthesised narrative of Grundmann’s contention has proved a powerful and persuasive means of connecting a variety of communal and individual cultural expressions. Henneau and Wogan-Browne, for example, point out that:

the last few decades’ research in medieval women, heresies, literacies, and vernacular literatures – research which is aware of the interconnections of these areas and of the value of the political, social, and cultural location of the ideas and texts in which it deals – still in many ways refers back to the framework laid down by Grundmann.⁶⁸

As a conceptual agenda therefore, the notion of medieval women united by a commonality of purpose and expression has proved particularly useful for a variety of approaches, none the least of which has been gender studies.

For example, Caroline Walker Bynum’s highly influential *Holy Feast* (itself a foundational work),⁶⁹ whilst challenging Grundmann’s interpretation of women’s expressions⁷⁰ and stressing their agency, embraces his thesis that women were attracted to religious movements, both orthodox and heterodox, because of shared spiritual impulses. This commonality, Bynum claims, was centred in “a concern for affective religious response, an extreme form of penitential asceticism, an emphasis on both Christ’s humanity

⁶⁷ *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality*, p.1.

⁶⁸ *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality*, p. 3.

⁶⁹ *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women.*, 2nd. ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

⁷⁰ Bynum turns Grundmann’s notion that bridal mysticism (erotic mysticism) was ‘crass’ (*Religious Movements*, p.175) on its head, and refutes cogently the implication that women were led astray through a lack of guidance and control (enclosure, for example).

and on the inspiration of the spirit, and a bypassing of clerical authority”,⁷¹ themes that Grundmann also articulates as a catch-all of religiosity that was born from a distinctive and common origin.⁷²

This notion of a common ‘spiritual impulse’ was picked up by scholars excited by Bynum’s work and has significantly informed scholarship on the topic. The result has been a proliferation of scholarship on medieval women religious that can only be regarded as a boon for the subject – albeit a boon that is accompanied by problems and issues only now coming to light. Henneau and Wogan-Browne, for example, ask whether the notion of a women’s movement is useful at all.⁷³ Similarly, Simons is critical of tendencies towards viewing his subject (the beguines) without acknowledging the “inherent diversity of their status, organization and function”⁷⁴ – a charge in accordance with the implicit idea of Grundmann’s unified women’s movement and with his localised focus for beguines. Clark too, is critical of scholarship that searches for origins (for a golden era before it all went horribly wrong),⁷⁵ and Joanna Ziegler bemoans the suppression of “local variations” and an overweening “intellectual interest in the ‘big picture’”;⁷⁶ both of which are charges conversant with *Religious Movements*’ syncretic approach.

It is not only these ‘big picture’ issues that detract from the veracity of the women’s movement thesis. Rather, some of Grundmann’s conclusions are developed from definitions that do not bear up under scrutiny. Somewhat amorphously, for example, Grundmann

⁷¹ *Holy Feast*, p.17.

⁷² For an outline of his view on this see *Religious Movements*, pp. 82 ff.

⁷³ “Introduction: Liège, the Medieval ‘Woman Question’, and the Question of Medieval Women”, *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality*, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Walter Simons’ “The Beguine Movement in the Southern Low Countries: a Reassessment”, *Bulletin de l’Institut Historique Belge de Rome*, 59, (1989), pp.63-105, pp.63-64.

⁷⁵ Elizabeth A Clark, “Women, Gender, and the Study of Christian History”, *Church History*, 70, no. 3, (Sept. 2001), pp.395-426, pp.404-405.

⁷⁶ “The Curtis Beguinages in the Southern Low Countries and Art Patronage: interpretation and historiography”, *Bulletin de l’Institut Historique Belge de Rome*, LVII, 1987, pp.31-70, p.48.

loosely defines beguines as “never representing a planned form of religious life; rather they were the *result* of the women’s religious movement insofar as it did not find reception into new orders”.⁷⁷ This is problematic, firstly because it implies that the overflow of women were enough to warrant widespread and uniform classification (as beguines) and secondly, because it represents a catch-all definition that has more in common with contemporaneous stereotypes than with the evidence. Moreover, while Grundmann’s use of the distinction may be excused as the conceptual canvas he used to explore his thesis (and thus must be regarded as highly generalist), it does represent a major flaw in his re-envisioning: because he does not acknowledge diversity on a *conceptual* level and he does not read the sources with an eye to possible hostility.

This is clear even when Grundmann does define beguines in more detail. For example, in discussing the reasons beguines fell foul of the institutional church Grundmann claims that:

...beguines constituted a strange transitional form between the ecclesiastical orders of the day, never belonging to the monastic community of *religiosi*, since it was not an approved order ... [nor to] ... the lay world of *sæculares*, since beguines had left the *sæculum*, sworn chastity and led a *vita religiosa* ... this position athwart the ecclesiastical categories became a problem for beguines. It caused contemporary opinion to turn against a phenomenon which found no niche in the system of ecclesiastical estates; it also brought on decline for beguines as a group, beset by moral scandal and heretical tendencies⁷⁸

In this rather curious fashion, Grundmann acknowledges the disparate nature of beguines but still classifies them in the singular ‘phenomenon’. He fails to provide any firm explanation as to why contemporary opinion would have turned against such a ‘transitional form’. Moreover, the passage evinces a lack of differentiation between accusations of ‘moral scandal’ and a lack of morality *per se* and just what is meant by ‘heretical tendencies’ remains unclear.

⁷⁷ *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, p.139, my italics.

⁷⁸ *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, p.140.

Thus has Grundmann's work resulted in associating women and religion in the later Middle Ages with a paradigmatic notion that claims a unitary pattern of expression – *The women's religious movement*. Grundmann does not, however, as John Van Engen points out, define exactly what he means by a 'religious movement',⁷⁹ which is odd considering Grundmann begins his work by pointing out that "The Middle Ages themselves knew no such concept as 'religious movement'".⁸⁰ Nor does he really subject his thesis to the test that this would provide. This is predominantly because Grundmann's argument is predicated on the idea that history can be recovered and received as 'truth' and that this 'truth' can be constructed to provide "a unified, continuous and coherent picture, complete within itself".⁸¹ The result of this approach however, is a disjunction between pluriformity and uniformity in which difference is reduced to sameness and commonalities are sought at the expense of recognised diversity. This is a casualty of the traditionalist views of history perhaps, but it is one that has extended into present day scholarship with deleterious results.

Inspiring scholars of heresy such as Ernest McDonnell, Robert Lerner, R.I. Moore and Norman Cohn and acting as an invaluable source and impetus for the next few decades of research in the area of medieval religious women, the focus that Grundmann gave to the influence of the *vita apostolica* in late medieval religiosity and the assertion of a coexistent 'religious women's movement' identifiable by a particular adherence to *imitatio christi* accordingly posited the idea of a gender divided piety surfacing in the *frisson* of late medieval spirituality. This underlying *motif* given to the phenomenon as a whole was to profoundly influence the work of later scholarship and by the late 1970s was understood

⁷⁹ "The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem", *The American Historical Review*, 91, no. 3, (June 1986), pp.519-552, p.524.

⁸⁰ *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, p. 1.

⁸¹ Nicola Jayne Watkinson, "Medieval Textual Production and the Politics of Women's Writing: case studies of two medieval women writers and their critical reception", Masters Thesis, Department of English, University of Melbourne, (1991), p.8.

predominantly as representative of a distinct pattern of ‘female expression’.⁸² The shift in methods demanded by feminism, however (whilst in general adhering to the idea of a late medieval ‘women’s movement’), required a more radical revision that constituted itself in a desire to “render medieval women visible”⁸³ – a pursuit that built on and extended the idea that there existed a discrete religiosity in the period that was specifically female (a ‘women’s movement’).

Rendering Women Visible

Eileen Power’s work in the first half of the twentieth century (and in particular her 1920s work on nunneries as centres of piety and patronage) had already begun the task of ‘rescuing’ medieval women’s history,⁸⁴ a history of oppression.⁸⁵ Bynum’s groundbreaking work in the early seventies,⁸⁶ pursued the medieval women’s movement in terms of conceptions of self and how gender relates to conceptions of self.⁸⁷ This cemented into scholarship the feminist notion that “a woman’s spiritual journey may look different because we are different”⁸⁸ and made it clear that a closer ‘reading’ of the history of medieval women was required. Suzanne Wemple, Jo Ann McNamara, Shulamith Shahar and Judith Bennett

⁸²Challenges to Grundmann’s analysis can be found in Ziegler’s “The *Curtis* Beguinages in the Southern Low Countries” (esp. pp.47ff.) and in Walter Simons’ “The Beguine Movement in the Southern Low Countries”.

⁸³Kathleen Biddick, “Genders, Bodies, Borders: Technologies of the Visible”, *Speculum*, 68 (1993), pp.389-418, p.389.

⁸⁴See for example *Medieval English Nunneries, c1275-1535*, (Cambridge, 1922); and *Medieval Women*, M. M. Postan [ed.], (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

⁸⁵Allen Frantzen, paraphrasing Peggy McIntosh, calls this ‘phase’ in the academy ‘women in’ and notes attempts to unearth women in textual sources and to examine “political and social contexts in which women had previously and uncritically been either lumped together with men or left out because there was little evidence of their activities”, “When Women Aren’t Enough”, *Speculum*, 68 (1993), pp.445 - 471, p.447.

⁸⁶Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: studies in the spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1982).

⁸⁷“*From the Medieval to the Modern: a conversation with Caroline Walker Bynum*”, interview conducted by William R. Ferris, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, *Humanities*, March/April 1999, 20, No. 2, this citation electronic resource, <<http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities /1999-03/bynum.html> > accessed June 2007.

⁸⁸Kimberly Winston citing Amy Hertz (senior editor at Riverhead Publishing), in her article concerning the popularity of women’s spirituality in the ‘bookstores’, “Women warriors Lead the Charge” *Publishers Weekly*, (April 13, 1998).

(to name but a few), accordingly headed the surge to demonstrate the ways in which medieval women had been occluded by historical scholarship, actively promoting the notion of what has been termed ‘herstory’.⁸⁹

The strategies of ‘normalising’ women in medieval history, soon led to an increasing demand for more detailed and critical studies. Anthologies of translated texts written by and about medieval women (what Miri Rubin has termed ‘canon building’⁹⁰) were consequently put together and included numerous ‘mystical’ tracts and *vitae* of saints,⁹¹ (an ongoing popularisation that continues to be added to by numerous monographs that translate into English the work of individual medieval women).⁹² Concurrently, the move towards cross disciplinary analyses and the influences of Foucault, Hélène Cixous, Simone de Beauvoir,

⁸⁹A suggested list: Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, Susan Stuard, [eds.], *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 2nd ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987); Julius Kirshner and Suzanne F Wemple [eds.] *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honour of John H. Mundy*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985); Suzanne F. Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500-900*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); Barbara J Harris and Jo Ann McNamara, [eds.], *Women and the Structure of Society: Selected Research from the Fifth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women*, (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1984); Brenda M. Bolton. [et.al.], *Women in Medieval Society*, edited with an introduction by Susan Mosher Stuard, (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976); Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: a history of women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai, (London, New York: Methuen, 1983); Judith M. Bennett [ed.], *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Derek Baker [ed.], *Medieval Women: dedicated and presented to Professor Rosalind M.T. Hill, on the occasion of her seventieth birthday*, (Oxford: Basil and Blackwell, 1978); Frances and Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1980).

⁹⁰“A Decade of Studying Medieval Women, 1987-1997” *History Workshop Journal*, 46, (1998), pp.213-239, p.217.

⁹¹A suggested list: Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, [ed.], *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); John F Plummer, [ed.] *Vox Feminae: Studies in Medieval Women’s Songs*, (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1981); Marcelle Thiebaut [ed.], *The Writings of Medieval Women*, (New York: Garland, 1987); Katharina M. Wilson [ed.], *Medieval Women Writers*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1984); Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Rochester, NY, USA: Boydell Press, 1992).

⁹² For example: Thomas de Cantimpre, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, Margot. H. King, (trans. & intro.), (Saskatoon: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1987); *The Life of Christina of St. Trond*, Margot King, [trans.], (Saskatoon: Peregrina Publishing, 1988); Jacques de Vitry, *The Life of Marie d’Oignies*, Margot. H. King (trans. & intro.), (Saskatoon: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1986); Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, Mother Columba Hart, O.S.B. [trans.], (London: SPCK, 1980); *Angela of Foligno’s Memorial*, Christina Mazzoni and John Cirignano [trans.], Library of Medieval Women, (Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 1999); Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, Frank Tobin (trans. & intro.), (New York: Paulist Press, 1998); *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, 1200-1268*, Roger De Ganck [trans.], (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1991).

Luce Irigaray⁹³ and Julia Kristeva, prompted a re-evaluation of the significance of ‘the body’ - social and physical - and of ritual, as the theories of structural anthropology came to the fore (a pursuit already begun by Bynum). This re-evaluation of ‘the evidence’, occurring in the last decades of the twentieth century, demonstrated a discernible shift in the underlying episteme of pertinent scholarship from one of unearthing and inclusion, to one in which the hidden *voice* of the ‘other’ (women) is sought within the models of the social ‘other’ (the Middle Ages).

Accordingly, the ‘new canon’ of texts pertaining to medieval women religious that has emerged in the last few decades has resulted in a “theoretically informed and confident engagement with issues of voice, authenticity and male mediation operating in women’s texts”,⁹⁴ which, in turn, has added much valuable insight. As is the nature of scholarship however, the current view is far from unitary. Indeed, the battle to redefine the question/s of discourse applied to pertinent documents has raised a whole new series of issues that continue to excite and provoke.⁹⁵ Distinctive camps can now be recognised as scholars search for the ‘authentic voice’ of medieval women within the corpus of documents available. Interpretative dilemmas informed by ontological schisms and the ongoing battle to view the period through postmodern and feminist eyes, along with a more detailed recourse to the construction of the texts themselves, have surfaced with some rapidity. As a result, ‘solutions’ to the ‘problem’ of medieval women’s religiosity continue to result in new characterisations of medieval women mystics: as somatic adventurers (‘tragic’ and ‘empowered’), as proto-feminists, as deliverers from suffering, as performance artists and, most recently, as mystics falsely transcribed.

⁹³ For a thorough analysis of the significance of ‘embodiment’ in analyses of ‘female mystics’ as offered by Beauvoir and Irigaray, see Amy M. Hollywood, “Beauvoir, Irigaray, and the Mystical” *Hypatia*, 4, (Fall, 1994), pp.158-185.

⁹⁴ Miri Rubin, “A Decade of Studying Medieval Women”, p.221.

⁹⁵ “Feminists ... are revising the field of medieval studies from three directions: adding new information, answering old questions in new ways, and creating entirely new research agendas”, “A Decade of Studying Medieval Women”, p.327.

Largely, the cacophony of characterisations that presents as the foundation for academic wrangling over the ‘authentic’ image of medieval women religious can be seen in the paradigmatic view that a reading of the relevant textual documents offers. The large corpus of medieval hagiographical texts available (which have received the lion’s share of scholarly attention) offers a very particular and sensational portrait of medieval religious women: Christina Mirabilis (1150-1254) hunched in a tree, suckling from her own virginal breasts;⁹⁶ Marie d’Oignes (1177-1213) slicing off portions of her body and burying them;⁹⁷ Angela of Foligno (1248-1309) drinking leper water, gagging on a scab and claiming it sweet as communion⁹⁸ (to mention but a few). In comparison, the few apparently self-authored texts available, present quite a different portrait of medieval women’s religiosity: Hadewijch of Antwerp (mid thirteenth century),⁹⁹ expressing the most evocative of ‘mystical’ poetry and allegorical visions that do not evince a preoccupation with bodily showings; Mechthild of Magdeburg (1209-1282), echoing Hadewijch’s themes of self-abnegation through language rather than primarily through the body; Beatrice of Nazareth, whose surviving words stand in stark contrast to her biographer’s retelling of her mystical ideology, the latter subsuming Beatrice’s more apophatic and speculative concepts within a primarily physical declaration of divine knowledge; and of course Porete, whose *Mirror* barely touched upon the physical, but used rather the themes of an apophatic discourse to

⁹⁶ “the dry paps of her virginal breasts were dripping sweet milk against the very law of nature. Wondrous thing! ... she was nourished for nine weeks with the milk from her fruitful but virginal breasts”, Thomas de Cantimpre, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, p.7.

⁹⁷ “she cut out a large piece of her flesh with a knife ... She buried it in the earth” *The Life of Marie d’Oignes*, p.23.

⁹⁸ “a scab from the leper sore’s had become lodged in my throat ... just as if I had received Holy Communion”, *Angela of Foligno’s Memorial*, p.53.

⁹⁹ For her poetry see *Hadewijch: The Complete Works* but for a more complete picture that includes poems 17 ff. see Mary Suydam, “The Politics of Authorship: Hadewijch of Antwerp and the Mengeldichten”, *Mystics Quarterly*, 22 no.1, (March 1996), pp.2-20 (which deals also with the controversy regarding the attribution of these poems to Hadewijch) and Emile Zum Brunn & Georgette Epiney-Burgard, “Hadewijch of Antwerp (13th century)”, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*, Sheila Hughes [trans.], (New York: Paragon House, 1989), pp.97-138, poems on pp.132-137.

describe the journey of the soul to God.¹⁰⁰ From within each area of textual analysis different and particular conclusions have been reached. However, attempts to evaluate and analyse their significance have, for the most part, sought to either isolate, subsume or occlude the differences apparent in the various expressions and competing camps have begun to clamour for a re-evaluation of the ‘authentic female voice’.

This chapter therefore, begins with a ‘question of attribution’, using both Grundmann’s identification of a unified women’s movement and the current debate surrounding the legitimacy of ascertaining women’s experiences and/or ideas through the quills of scribes as a springboard for an investigation into the hermeneutics of exclusion that is characteristic of Porete scholarship. The following section will outline the nub of the debate and will pose a number of questions and problems that are evident for both sides. This is done so that the idea of a unitary phenomenon can be challenged – a challenge, I believe, that is necessary in order that Porete be understood within her milieu. For I will suggest in this chapter that the diffusion of ‘voices’ in the late medieval west, which is made apparent by the debate we will now turn to, indicates that Porete may not have been the ‘fascinating exception’ to her religious contemporaries that she has predominantly been characterised as. Rather, I argue that Porete is anomalous only because she does not fit our

¹⁰⁰ Scholarship addressing these particular texts has a long and distinguished tradition, a list too long to include in its entirety. What follows is a small selection: E. Colledge with J.C. Marler, “Poverty of the Will: Ruusbroec, Eckhart and *The Mirror of Simple Souls*” in *Jan Van Ruusbroec: the sources, content and sequels of his mysticism*, P. Mommaers and N De Paepe, (Leuven University Press, 1984), pp.14-47; Frances Gooday, “Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Antwerp: A Comparison”, in *ONS Geestelijk Erf*, 48, (1974), pp.305-62; Evelyn Underhill ‘The Mirror of Simple Souls’, in *Fortnightly Review*, XCV, (1911), pp.345-54; Clare Kirchberger’s, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*; E. Colledge and Romana Guarnieri, “The Glosses by ‘M.N.’ and Richard Methley to ‘The Mirror of Simple Souls’” in *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà*, 5, (1968), pp.357-382; Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A critical Study of texts from Perpetua (-203) to Marguerite Porete (1310)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Maria Lichtman, “Negative Theology in Marguerite Porete and Jacques Derrida”, in *Christianity and Literature*, 47, No. 2, (Winter 1998); Maria Lichtman, “Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart : The Mirror of Simple Souls Mirrored’ in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, (New York: Continuum, 1994); Maria Lichtman, “Marguerite Porete’s Mirror for Simple Souls: inverted reflection of self, society and God”, in *Studia Mystica*, 16, no.1, (1995), pp.4-29; Bernard McGinn, *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*; Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); Nicholas Watson, “Melting into God the English Way; Rebecca Stephens, “Eckhart and Sister Catherine: The Mirror’s Image?”, in *Eckhart Review*, (Spring 1997), pp.26-39.

historiographically imposed conception of what the medieval female religious was supposed to be.

The Authenticity Debate: Geneses

The origins of the current debate can be seen to stem from the highly influential and brilliantly conceived work of Bynum. In a remarkable career that saw her address and utilise the cultural significance of symbolism and metaphorical allusions long before the work of Derrida and Clifford Geertz had become *de rigueur* in academia,¹⁰¹ Bynum meticulously detailed an abundance of textual and visual references that demonstrated the significance of cultural metaphors to medieval society – food, the body and the inversion of gender roles in the religious milieu. Following the innovative *Jesus as Mother*, which analysed classical texts pertaining to spirituality (visionary literature, spiritual treatise and hagiography), *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* further drew on the insights afforded by the “methodological tools of cultural anthropology and the phenomenological study of religion”.¹⁰² Outlining the development of medieval women’s ambiguous relationship to the church in what she saw as an emerging and new religiosity that developed from the twelfth century, and acknowledging the ‘difference[s]’ expressed therein,¹⁰³ Bynum argued that late medieval women’s mystical expressions reveal an ingenious utilisation of the patriarchy’s theological, devotional and cultural metaphors that managed to successfully invert, subvert and accordingly include ‘the feminine’ in the religious revival of the later middle ages. This was achieved in terms of a reaction on the part of medieval women that took a distinctly physical shape, in which

¹⁰¹“I do, as de-construction urges, read for the silences and slippages in texts. But the funny thing is that I was reading that way before anyone in America had heard of Derrida. Just as I think I understood symbols as both reflecting and shaping experience before I read Clifford Geertz”, Roger Adelson, “Interview with Caroline Walker Bynum”, *The Historian*, 59, no.1, (Fall 1996), pp. 1-17, p. 14.

¹⁰² Jennifer Carpenter, “Review of *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*” in, *Scintilla: a Student Journal for Medievalists*, 5, (1988), pp.81-83.

¹⁰³ *Fragmentation*, p.194.

“Women were more apt to somatize religious history and to write in intense bodily metaphors”.¹⁰⁴

Inverting the premise that extreme ascetic practices arising from *imitatio christi* represented for medieval women a means of enacting psychological ‘dis-ease’, Bynum turned to the symbolic meaning that somatic references indicate, utilising anthropological and sociological studies regarding ritual and practice, drawing on multi-layered meaning within textual formations and subsuming this within a specific idea about what the medieval period represents. The significance of the *imitatio Christi* and the human-ness of Christ, was thus for Bynum the central act of piety for medieval women: “No religious woman failed to experience Christ as wounded, bleeding and dying. Women’s efforts to imitate this Christ involved *becoming* the crucified, not just patterning themselves after or expanding their compassion toward, but *fusing with*, the body on the cross”.¹⁰⁵ The Incarnation likewise offered a symbolic fusing of the stereotype of women as body and man as soul, the person of Christ representing polarised humanity in a united and divine form, which reinforced in women their own physicality as redeemed and transformed, their ‘selves’ seen in terms of matter, not gender.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, transubstantiation came to stand for a realignment of divinity with constructed ‘femininity’; “in eating a God whose body was meat and drink, women both transfigured and became more fully the flesh and the food that their own bodies were”.¹⁰⁷ Accordingly:

Medieval women are not best understood as creatures constrained and impelled by society’s notions of the female as inferior. Women’s piety was not, fundamentally, internalised dualism or misogyny ... In their symbols women expanded the suffering, giving self they were ascribed by their culture, becoming ever more wonderfully and horribly the body on the cross. They became that body not as a flight from but as a continuation of the self. And ... that body was also God.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ *Fragmentation*, p.194.

¹⁰⁵ *Fragmentation*, p.131.

¹⁰⁶ *Fragmentation*, p.149.

¹⁰⁷ *Holy Feast*, p.275.

¹⁰⁸ *Fragmentation*, p.295.

The kernel of Bynum's thesis, therefore, which was reiterated more forcefully (and with far more recourse to, and dialogue with, social theorists) in her follow-up series of essays *Fragmentation and Redemption*, was that the late medieval holy woman's body was constructed as a symbolic site of holiness that functioned as a metaphorical elevation of 'the feminine' within a patriarchal theology. The extreme asceticism of medieval women was accordingly deemed to be not so much representative of an internalisation of misogynist 'flesh-hatred', nor of 'hysteria', or a 'world rejecting' anorexia, but of a positivist recourse to the masculinist tropes of 'mysticism' and religiosity. Accordingly, the tradition of 'suffering' in the women's religious movement – fasting, self-mutilation, leper licking, virginal lactation etc. – functioned as a kind of somatic subversion that repositioned the role of women within the religious milieu and transcended the constraints of gender. The possibilities for criticism, therefore, for by-passing or challenging the clergy, became for Bynum an issue deriving from women's "privileged association with the eucharist".¹⁰⁹ Therefore, as Coakley points out:

Bynum does not construe female roles as primarily challenging male ones in the sense of seeking to supplant them, but rather as coexisting with them in a complimentary and interconnected way, within the rather complex system of meanings that the culture attached to gender. In this sense then, Bynum hears the women's voices more as expressions of those principles and assumptions that ordered their culture, than as protests against them.¹¹⁰

In opposition to the analysis that Rudolph Bell had offered in his *Holy Anorexia*¹¹¹ (written contemporaneously with *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*), Bynum thus distanced herself from the notion that texts could be discursively investigated by means of twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory. For Bell, the extreme fasting of medieval women was essentially a

¹⁰⁹John Coakley, "Introduction", *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance*, E. Ann. Matter & John Coakley [eds.], (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp.1-15, p.6.

¹¹⁰ *Creative Women*, p.6.

¹¹¹ Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

strategy of autonomy by which women could gain control over themselves (their bodies) and their own salvation. By denying the body, medieval women mystics thus embraced what Bell saw as the “implicitly dualist notions in the Christian ascetic tradition”,¹¹² understood in terms of the “destruction of the body – for the flesh cannot be tamed and therefore must be obliterated”.¹¹³ Analysing the physical symptoms of modern day anorexia and its effect on the body and the psyche, Bell found in the history of medieval female saints a direct avenue between starvation and the identification of holiness: “Certain holy women set upon a path of rigorous austerity... Once they did, starvation steadily amplified symptoms which these anorexics and their confessors, friends, families, and followers came to understand as heavenly favor”.¹¹⁴

By torturing themselves internally and externally the ‘holy anorexic’ attained a “freedom from the patriarchy” within which she was “trapped”.¹¹⁵ By rebelling against “passive, vicarious, dependent Christianity”,¹¹⁶ therefore, the emaciated holy woman gained a very public and visible religious authority and thus a form of ‘empowerment’ attained through her (negatively construed) search for autonomy. For Bell, however, the story is essentially a tragic one, for whilst his ‘anorexics’ did succeed in breaking away from the constraints of gender divided piety – thus ushering in “newer and wider avenues for religious expression by women more generally”¹¹⁷ - their triumph was short lived; for, quite apart from the personal toll starvation took, “even male authority [ultimately] conceded that illness was not saintly, and so holy anorexia disappeared as an inspired mode of religious self assertion”.¹¹⁸

¹¹² *Creative Women* p.4.

¹¹³ *Holy Anorexia*, p.115.

¹¹⁴ *Holy Anorexia*, p.14.

¹¹⁵ *Holy Anorexia*, p.xii.

¹¹⁶ *Holy Anorexia*, p.116.

¹¹⁷ *Holy Anorexia*, p.117.

¹¹⁸ *Holy Anorexia*, p.179.

Bell's psychoanalysis identifies ascetic female 'holy striving' as a further example of women constrained on all sides by gender. Bynum, however, investigating many of the same figures as Bell, rather than proposing a "set of dramas moved along by psychological factors ...illuminates the women's behaviour by presenting a web of assumptions and convictions that were part of the fabric of the culture in which the women lived".¹¹⁹ Accordingly, Bynum draws from the same subjects a more 'positive possibility' evoked by extreme asceticism. This innovative shift in conclusions regarding medieval women's religiosity saw Bynum drawing on a particularly refined approach to medieval women's religiosity. This approach was undertaken in conversation with late twentieth century feminist theory and literary studies, structural anthropology and a particular adherence to the notion of what Jennifer Carpenter identifies as a primary orientation drawn from structuralist and synchronic approaches aligned with both social history and cultural anthropology.¹²⁰

For Carpenter, Bynum's orientation is thus drawn from the notion that "human beings are deeply, fundamentally, cultural and that making and being made by culture constitute the ultimate and elemental framework of human activity" coupled with an "emphasis on viewing society as a functioning whole, a working, interrelated system".¹²¹ Her move away from the constrictive and individualised aspects of Bell's attempt at psychohistory, demonstrated a commitment to the idea that humans are experiential in their cultural surrounds, and that the significance of symbols must be related to that culture rather than any kind of collective unconscious which, for Bynum, is reductive in terms of an individuated and biological referent. Accordingly, her reading of the texts attempts to draw broad, interrelated themes from cultural symbols that operate on a level informed by the medieval society in which they emerged, as well as being informed by the essential

¹¹⁹ *Creative Women*, p.5.

¹²⁰ Carpenter, "Review", p.511.

¹²¹ Carpenter, "Review", p.509.

difference/s imposed by gender. Consequently, the synchronic attempt to locate cultural themes informed by the symbolism of metaphor involves a “de-emphasis on...origins, change and progression”,¹²² a particularly strong characteristic in Bynum’s scholarship.

The ‘long shadow’ of Grundmann has thus been added to by the highly influential impact of a culturally embedded reading of symbolic metaphor that involves a very particular ontology about what medieval culture was and what historical relevance can be drawn from culturally imbued expressions. Bynum’s situational introduction to *Holy Feast* is instructive here:

I propose a complex refutation of the standard interpretation of asceticism as world-rejection or as practical dualism and of the standard picture of medieval women as constrained on every side by a misogyny they internalized as self-hatred or masochism. Rather, I argue that medieval efforts to discipline and manipulate the body should be interpreted more as elaborate changes rung upon the *possibilities provided by fleshliness* than as flights from physicality ...I intend to reveal the past in its strangeness as well as its familiarity. My point is to argue that women’s behaviour and women’s writing must be understood in the context of social, economic, and ecclesiastical structures, theological and devotional traditions, *very different from our own*.¹²³

As an indication of method then, Bynum’s statement expresses the defining characteristic of much of the scholarship that was to follow. Firstly, the situating of the Middle Ages as ‘strange’ and ‘familiar’ firmly announced the arrival of ‘alterity’ within the study of medieval female religious whilst concurrently redressing the attempt to find patterns of origins in the medieval experience (the origins of anorexia for example). Secondly, the claim that the voices of medieval women mystics were discernible within symbolic and metaphorical tropes became an exciting and valuable method of research. Accordingly, it became commonplace for women’s religious expressions and iconography to be analysed within the cross-referent of structural anthropology and literary theory, acknowledging symbol and sign as the inscription of voice and model, and using this as a means of

¹²² Carpenter, “Review”, p.511.

¹²³ *Holy Feast*, pp.8-9, my italics.

‘decoding’ and ‘revealing’ the hidden and mysterious past. Thirdly, the significance of the constrained and gendered body, rather than representing internalised misogyny, became seen as a vehicle for subverting (or utilising) oppression. Thus, echoing Irigaray’s theoretical situating of medieval women mystics as “gloriously irrational”¹²⁴ and imbued with a sense of multiplicity of ‘self’ evident in the symbolic language of medieval texts,¹²⁵ the model of research that Bynum utilised in the early stages of her career led to the underlying assertion of medieval women mystics as inherently indicative of a kind of thematically unitary ‘voice’ – as somatic adventurers.

The detailed and persuasive account that Bynum has given us in her particularised, yet also oddly synthesised, studies of the phenomenon¹²⁶ has dominated scholarship (though not, as we shall see, without challenges) and can be seen as representative of “the common themes of scholarly writings on the subject”.¹²⁷ However, Bynum’s insistence on the interconnectedness of male and female religious themes, and her denial of their use as protest *per se*, has often been submerged beneath the notion of physicality as a means of ‘empowerment’ and thus as a form of resistance to patriarchy. Rising in confluence with the flourishing of literary theory that examines the notion of ‘writing the body’ – a means by which a writer allows what is repressed to surface through the text (as explored by Foucault, Irigaray, Cixous etc.) – the result has been an abiding conviction that the expressions of medieval women were somatic and inherently subversive.

¹²⁴ Melissa Brown, “Marie d’Oignes, Marguerite Porete and ‘Authentic’ Female Mystic Piety”, *Worshipping Women*, p.227.

¹²⁵ “When Our Lips Speak Together”, in Hoy et. al., *Women’s Voices: Visions and Perspectives*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1990), p. 499.

¹²⁶ Much of Bynum’s work (and particularly *Holy Feast*) uses small incidents to draw big pictures. This is part of the allure of her work and indeed the charm of her attitude to historical scholarship: “I first learned [from Peter Brown] that it was alright to generalize, to try out sweeping interpretations, to make mistakes - even big mistakes - as long as one was part of a conversation with other people and was willing to change one’s mind... So the writing of history is, at its best, always -so to speak - from a perspective, and to be corrected. I think that’s the clue. Historians don’t have to avoid asking big questions if they regard their work as part of a conversation ... So we can still attempt our own syntheses if we admit they’re ‘ours’ and if we stay in conversation with other historians”, “Interview with Caroline Walker Bynum”, p.2.

¹²⁷ Mary A Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler [eds.], *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999), p.xvi.

Jennifer Ash, for example, whilst working more in line with Bell's thesis in *Holy Anorexia*, adopting a "combination of semiotic theory, French feminist theorising, and Lacanian psychoanalysis"¹²⁸ (which she notes might be deemed anachronistic by many scholars),¹²⁹ carefully analysed the body as a means of discursively reconstructing historical and gender issues. Arguing that the mysticism of late medieval women was a "discourse obsessed with fleshliness and actuality, the substantiality of bodily being, a discourse which focused on the bleeding, dying body of the God-man",¹³⁰ Ash claimed, in opposition to Bynum, that the somatic discourse did not indicate an ingenious and empowering inversion of patriarchal themes but rather, an expression of 'hysteria' (albeit an 'empowering' hysteria), a felt and expressed "social and psychic dis-ease",¹³¹ which, as a stratagem "constitutes a woman's psychical resistance, her unvoiced rebellion against patriarchy, against the functioning of Symbolic Law and Order".¹³² The challenge to Bynum's thesis whilst great in terms of what somatic expressions *meant* for medieval women, nevertheless maintained the emphasis on the somatic characterisation of medieval women mystics. Moreover, the idea of resistance to the patriarchy implicit in Ash's version of these somatic expressions concurs with the notion in Bynum's thesis that these expressions were essentially a subversion (if not a supplanting) of commonly held assumptions regarding gender and the construction of medieval culture.

¹²⁸ Jennifer Ash, "The Discursive Construction of Christ's Body in the Later Middle Ages: Resistance and Autonomy" *Feminine, Masculine and Representation*, Terry Threadgold & Anne Cranny-Francis [eds.], (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), pp.75-105, p.75.

¹²⁹ To which she responds "For the semiotician, objections such as these are irrelevant ... when in the twentieth century we are confronted with a medieval text, we must be aware of and respect its difference, its cultural specificity. Yet we will never be able to read that text from a position within the culture which produced it. My reading of medieval texts and textuality will necessarily be constrained by the discourses which inform my own position within late-twentieth-century capitalism, those discourses which have constructed me as a thinking, speaking subject", "The Discursive Construction of Christ's Body", pp.75/76.

¹³⁰ "The Discursive Construction of Christ's Body", p.91.

¹³¹ "The Discursive Construction of Christ's Body", p.95.

¹³² "The Discursive Construction of Christ's Body", p.93.

Literary theories of the body in history have generally sided with Bynum in the assertion of somatic expressions as essentially positive and empowering. Margaret Miles,¹³³ Karma Lochrie,¹³⁴ Jane E Burns,¹³⁵ Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury,¹³⁶ are but some of the contributors who have heightened our awareness of the body as a significant cultural metaphor for medieval female mystics, one that was neither peculiar nor pathological. The body and the implicit resistance that somatic references indicate have accordingly remained firmly tied to our interpretation of the phenomenon. The 1993 collection of essays *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*,¹³⁷ for example, hinges on the assumption that “medieval women were not passive foils on which men projected their images of womanhood, but active shapers of their lives who refused such stereotypes or succumbed to them not without resistance” and that their ‘female flesh’ was the “*prima materia* out of which they fashioned many of their devotional symbols and theological and artistic creations”.¹³⁸ Emotional and physical suffering are, for Ellen Ross, the primary aspects of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe’s “deepening love of God and neighbour”¹³⁹ and the historical continuum of the *imitatio Christi* is, for E. Ann Matter, the key to understanding Maria Domitilla’s ‘interior map’.¹⁴⁰ When Laura Finke speaks about the ‘female mystics of the Middle Ages’ she claims that their discourse “was constructed out of disciplines designed to regulate the female body, and it is, paradoxically, through these

¹³³ Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

¹³⁴ Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

¹³⁵ Jane E Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1993).

¹³⁶ Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury [eds.], *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1993).

¹³⁷ Ulrike Wiethaus [ed.], *Maps of Flesh and Light: the Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993).

¹³⁸ Ulrike Wiethaus, “Introduction”, *Maps of Flesh and Light*, pp.1-8, p.1.

¹³⁹ “‘She Wept And Cried Right Loud For Sorrow And For Pain’: Suffering, the Spiritual Journey, and Women’s Experience in Late Medieval Mysticism”, *Maps of Flesh and Light*, pp.45-59, p.59.

¹⁴⁰ “Interior Maps of an Eternal External: The Spiritual Rhetoric of Maria Domitilla Galluzzi d’Acqui”, *Maps of Flesh and Light*, pp.60-73.

disciplines that the mystic consolidated her power”,¹⁴¹ adding that their “words, and even their bodies when necessary, became the sites of a struggle to redefine the meaning of female silence and powerlessness”.¹⁴²

The resistance of female mystics for Finke thus becomes fundamentally equated with their embodied mystical expressions, a notion that Elizabeth Petroff concurs with in the attempt to demonstrate “that women’s bodies were involved in a struggle to redefine God and the experience of God”.¹⁴³ This redefinition becomes for Petroff a means with which women mystics were able to transcend both temporally and spiritually, to break free of the constraints of gender: “writing the body is representing the self as subject and as other, both infinite”.¹⁴⁴ A repositioning of the self in relation to, and by ingenious use of, the monolith of misogyny accordingly functions for Petroff as a means of ‘unsaying’ the oppression of women in cultural and spiritual terms. More than this, however, the visible declaration that somatic mysticism represented functioned as both the facilitator of a spiritual ‘self-salvation’ and the declaration of the self as a kind of target for accusations of heterodoxy. Thus, the writings of ‘beguine associated’ authors are seen by Petroff as works in which “the body [is] deeply implicated in their epistemology”,¹⁴⁵ orthodox in its transmission, yet in its very visual and public act, essentially transgressive.¹⁴⁶

The transgressions of medieval women mystics have accordingly become an exciting avenue of scholarship within studies of the phenomenon, one that has demanded a thorough going over of long held assumptions, particularly as concerns the continuum of concepts.

¹⁴¹ “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision”, *Maps of Flesh and Light*, pp.28-44, p.29.

¹⁴² “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision”, p.44.

¹⁴³ Elizabeth Alvida Petroff *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.217.

¹⁴⁴ *Body and Soul*, p.219.

¹⁴⁵ *Body and Soul*, p.61.

¹⁴⁶ *Body and Soul*, p.165.

Grace Jantzen,¹⁴⁷ for example, analyses the shifts in meaning that the term ‘mysticism’ itself represents, pointing out the inclusive and exclusive components of its application and concluding that ‘mysticism’ as an essentialised concept does not exist:

...there is no such thing as an abstract ‘essence’ of mysticism Rather, what counts as mysticism will reflect (and also help constitute) the institutions of power in which it occurs. Put starkly, the church (and nowadays the university) will exert its power to determine who counts as a mystic, excluding from that category any who are threatening to its authority.¹⁴⁸

‘Mysticism’ as a culturally constructed phenomenon is traced by Jantzen in terms of a genealogy that seeks to demonstrate the ways in which it “has been constructed in different ways at different times”.¹⁴⁹ Accordingly, Jantzen examines the intricate connections between mystical ‘knowledge’ and authority, criticising the essentialist notion of mysticism as passive and internal and pointing to the connections of power and gender “at work in its various constructions”.¹⁵⁰

This is an interesting work that enunciates what feminist medievalists have been discussing for some time now (although the author fails to acknowledge it) and Jantzen’s thesis serves as a welcome addition to pertinent scholarship, particularly in terms of the ‘genealogy’ of mysticism and religiosity that she presents. However, it is also clear that the work stands as an indication of the problems that are tacitly entwined with the debate as a whole. In her examination of medieval women mystics, for example, whilst pointing out the *variety* of mystical ‘discourses’,¹⁵¹ she associates the extreme ‘bodiliness’ of their expressions as a *fundamental* characteristic of feminine piety. The mysticism of women in the medieval period is for Jantzen rooted in experience,¹⁵² the utilisation of visions acting as a conduit to divinity, a means of attaining an authority that Jantzen claims was limited by

¹⁴⁷ Grace Jantzen *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion 8, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁴⁸ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.14.

¹⁴⁹ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.12.

¹⁵⁰ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.339.

¹⁵¹ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, pp.331 ff.

¹⁵² *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.159.

their exclusion from higher education.¹⁵³ “Women, on the whole, did not have the education necessary to study the [*Bible* and its glosses] ...and even in exceptional cases where they did have the requisite education and access to manuscripts, they were not considered suitable to teach or to have authority”.¹⁵⁴ Thus visions, erotic metaphor, extreme asceticism and identification with the sacraments of the Church mean for Jantzen that medieval women were ‘forced’ to “do special things with their bodies”¹⁵⁵ in order to become accepted as ‘true’ rather than ‘false’ mystics¹⁵⁶: “If the Word became flesh, then the flesh cannot be negatively valued”.¹⁵⁷

For Jantzen, therefore, somatic mysticism (experiential, erotic, ascetic mysticism) becomes the primary aspect of the medieval woman mystics ‘voice’ that became challenged by the patriarchy even as it gained ascendance. The transgressions of female mystics, their attempts at entrance to the privileged male world of spirituality, were not only evident in their utilisation of strong ‘gender bending’ somatic imagery “gestating and giving birth to God”,¹⁵⁸ but also in the conceptual and political framework that constituted (in both medieval and modern discourses) ‘who counts’ as a mystic and who does not.¹⁵⁹

Thus, whilst demanding that we acknowledge the variety of female mystical expressions, Jantzen falls back on the dominant interpretation of the primacy of somatic mysticism, occluding the intellectual and philosophical components of many of the mystics she addresses and focusing on the public arena of experiential religiosity. The notion of empowerment, consonant with the theme of resistance or struggle, leads Jantzen into the

¹⁵³ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.159.

¹⁵⁴ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.324.

¹⁵⁵ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.196.

¹⁵⁶ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.326.

¹⁵⁷ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.224.

¹⁵⁸ Grace Jantzen, “Disrupting the Sacred: Religion and Gender in the City” *Bodies, Lives, Voices: Gender in Theology* Kathleen O’Grady, Ann L Gilroy & Janette Gray [eds.], Sheffield: Sheffield Academic press, 1998, pp.72-92, p.79.

¹⁵⁹ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.14.

suggestion of an odd kind of spiritually experienced ‘truth’ allied with political motivation: “whereas a large measure of women accepted male-defined controls both of their writing and of their bodies, and indeed accepted and internalised their inferior and subordinate status, they also consciously and unconsciously pushed back the boundaries of male-defined spirituality”.¹⁶⁰ In pursuit of her theme of the very public nature of mystical expression, therefore, Jantzen sets up her female subjects as primarily actors in a public sphere, and thus, as Elizabeth Dreyer points out,¹⁶¹ she “projects postmodern consciousness onto medieval women mystics and finds them either wanting or heroic – the very thing for which she criticises her colleagues”.¹⁶² Indeed, whilst Jantzen claims that we must not attempt to treat medieval women mystics “as though they were late-twentieth-century feminists, or write them off if they ‘failed’ to be”,¹⁶³ she nevertheless categorises Hildegard as more “a prototype token woman than ...a twelfth-century feminist”¹⁶⁴ and claims that Julian of Norwich “cannot be taken without reservation as a fourteenth-century feminist”.¹⁶⁵

The implicit notion of transgression, resistance, empowerment and struggle suggestive in the ‘somatic woman mystic’ characterisation has succeeded in subtly evoking the notion of medieval women mystics as ‘proto-feminist’, a notion that has led many medievalists to reach quite particular conclusions. Jo Ann McNamara’s huge study on the history of Catholic nuns, for example, which offers a full and much needed historical picture of the development of women in the cloister, remains reliant on the ‘liberating’ qualities religious physicality entailed: “By turning their bodies into objects of self mortification

¹⁶⁰ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.160

¹⁶¹ “Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism- book review” *Theological Studies* 57, no. 4 (1996), pp.751 ff.

¹⁶² “Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism- book review”, 751. Another example of Jantzen’s tendency of projection can be found in *Disrupting the Sacred: Religion and Gender in the City*, wherein she concludes in reference to Porete’s case (with little reference to the vast scholarship surrounding it) that it is disturbing that her mystical writing is not viewed as political and “that a woman concerned with religion could not possibly be politically involved”, p.91. An idea (as J.O.Ward has pointed out in a private conversation) no less disturbing than that *The Mirror of Simple Souls* was politically motivated.

¹⁶³ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.23.

¹⁶⁴ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.121.

¹⁶⁵ *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.180.

[medieval nuns] unquestionably sought to liberate their spirits and render them eligible for the true imitation of Christ in his complete humanity”.¹⁶⁶ For McNamara, cloistered women “created the image and reality of the autonomous woman”.¹⁶⁷ Similarly, Petroff, and Finke as we have seen, build into their analyses an interpretation that characterises medieval women religious as united in a physicality of expression that is used (consciously or not) as a socio-political tool for empowerment. Wiethaus claims that “women’s writings emerge as texts of resistance that counter an ever-present misogyny”¹⁶⁸ and as such they are representative of “spiritual foremothers and foresisters”,¹⁶⁹ and Joan Ferrante characterises ‘certain’ medieval women as “feminists by virtue of the life they led or the works they produced, though they are not necessarily feminist in all their opinions”.¹⁷⁰

The problem with this kind of approach is that it sets in place a kind of ‘religious women versus the misogynist Church’ paradigm, the notion of the woman mystic using a particularly feminine somatic metaphor to battle the “obnoxious screen-saver”¹⁷¹ of misogyny (which is in itself often constituted by feminists as “a continuum of patriarchy”),¹⁷² thereby simplifying the phenomenon itself, as well as medieval society in general. Indeed, the ‘strange familiarity’ of the somatic mystic, and the image of the proto-feminist that has surfaced from it, can, I believe, be seen to arise less from any kind of historical reality than from what Judith Butler and Diane Watt identify as a feminist predisposition to situate ‘woman’ as a “transhistorical, transcultural category”:¹⁷³

¹⁶⁶ *Sisters in Arms: catholic nuns through two millennia*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p.259.

¹⁶⁷ *Sisters in Arms*, p.6.

¹⁶⁸ Ulrike Wiethaus, *Maps of Flesh and Light*, p.4.

¹⁶⁹ Ulrike Wiethaus, “On Violations and Fragmentation: Feminist Scholarship and Late Medieval Women’s Ecstatic Spirituality” *Women and Language* XVI: 1 (Spring 1993), pp.7-13, p.7.

¹⁷⁰ Joan M. Ferrante *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997, p.9.

¹⁷¹ Barbara Newman, “The Case for Women in Medieval Culture (Review)” *Modern Philology*, 97, no.2, (Nov. 1999), pp. 241-45, p.241.

¹⁷² “On Violations and Fragmentation”, p.7.

¹⁷³ *Medieval Women in their Communities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 1997, p.5.

If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalias of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.¹⁷⁴

The post-Bynum identification of the empowered woman mystic is thus in danger of claiming for the phenomenon "a region of the 'specifically feminine', one that is both differentiated from the masculine as such and is recognisable in its difference by an unmarked, and hence presumed universality of, 'women'".¹⁷⁵ This presents a methodological problem that Watt and Teresa Brennan see as a fundamental issue in gender studies, whereby difference is pursued fundamentally in terms of the mirror image and analysis inherently reduces "all difference to sameness".¹⁷⁶

The result of this kind of approach¹⁷⁷ is an occlusion of change over time, of differences between women in differing geographical, socio-cultural locations (and centuries), and of intellectual and cultural interaction with (as well as against) the apparatus of male involvement in spirituality.¹⁷⁸ In sum, the imposition of the proto-feminist characterisation involves an enforced universality of religious understanding that does not necessarily correspond to the history itself. This is not to deny the very real evidence of hostility towards women most evident in the late medieval period. Yet, to associate medieval

¹⁷⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.3.

¹⁷⁵ *Gender Trouble*, p.4.

¹⁷⁶ David Aers citing Teresa Brennan in his "Preface", *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 26:2, (Spring 1996), pp.199-208, p.204. See also Watt's introduction to *Medieval Women in Their Communities*, pp.5-9.

¹⁷⁷ Lillian Thomas Shank sees the history of medieval religious women as an example of a timeless community: "Together we form an interconnected arc as we identify with [medieval women's religious] aspirations and are inspired by the example of their lives"; "Introduction" to *Peace Weavers: Medieval Religious Women, Vol. II.*, John A. Nichols and Lillian Shank [eds.], Cistercian Studies Series: Number Seventy Two, (Michigan: Cistercian publications, 1987), p.2; Jean Leclercq claims that "Each human being is like a mirror of every other ... Thus there exists an ontological solidarity between all human beings, because solidarity, before belonging to a psychological or spiritual order, is an ontological reality... [this] must be consciously taken up into psychological awareness and spiritual experience - otherwise we fail to understand that what happened to dear little Eve in the garden is of any consequence for us. And we fail also to grasp that what happened on the cross is of benefit to us", "Solitude and Solidarity: Medieval Women Recluses", in *Peace Weavers*, p.81.

¹⁷⁸ A problem pursued by Alcuin Blamires, *The Case For Women in Medieval Culture*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), in which the 'defense of women' in formal and quasi-judicial terms is acknowledged as a literary genre, including, apart from Christine de Pizan, Peter Abelard.

women mystics so emphatically with the somatic and subversive fails to recognise difference between women ‘then’ and ‘now’. It obscures the ebb and flow of ideas amongst medieval individuals (both male and female) in and between their ‘communities’,¹⁷⁹ and it elides the historical development of diverse ideas pertaining to spirituality as well as the diverse utilisation of spiritually pertinent cultural metaphor. Moreover, it tends towards the kind of assumption that signifying metaphors are directly aligned with our own modern interpretations, and thus statically located within the unconscious.¹⁸⁰

All this of course begs the questions: do feminist appraisals of history impinge upon, or at least exaggerate, motivations of people of the past, or is this just another means of passing off the veracity of feminist-led women’s studies? For it is clear that feminist analysis is always political, deeply committed to “*praxis*, a transformatory social process in which theory and reflective action become powerfully entwined”¹⁸¹ and is, “as the department chairmen and the deans of liberal arts suspect, political”.¹⁸² However, so too “is the history of white men, as told by themselves, political, having to do with the retention of power”.¹⁸³ As such, it seems that the problem of interpretation is not confined to feminism. Moreover, it is not one that has been ignored by feminists (as Butler’s analysis demonstrates). Bennet, for example, identifies the interpretative dilemma thus:

As a feminist medievalist, I respect the possibilities and limitations of my sources; I approach the dead and different people of the Middle Ages with ... ‘epistemic humility’; and I would never manipulate my research findings to suit present-minded concerns. Yet I am more than an antiquarian; I am also an historian, an interpreter of the facts as I find them. In its interpretative aspects, my work necessarily reflects my

¹⁷⁹ It is important to note here, as Dianne Watt points out, that the idea of ‘community’ in medieval terms does not necessarily correlate with our modern understanding, “Introduction: Medieval Women in their Communities”, *Medieval Women in their Communities*, pp.1-19, p.5-9. I use the term here to indicate collections of individuals residing together and having significant socio-cultural interaction.

¹⁸⁰ An example of which is Rosalyn Voaden’s analysis of the sacred heart symbolism in the Helfta community in which she associates the image of the sacred heart as “nothing so much as a vagina”, “All Girls Together: Community, Gender and Vision at Helfta”, *Medieval Women in their Communities*, pp.72-91, p.74. It can be argued, however, that a circle could also represent a vagina. As could the letter V or Y.

¹⁸¹ “On Violations and Fragmentation”, p.7.

¹⁸² Adrienne Rich, as cited in “Medievalism and Feminism”, p.322.

¹⁸³ Adrienne Rich, as cited in “Medievalism and Feminism”, p.322.

feminist politics, just as the interpretations of all historians reflect their political views¹⁸⁴.

The acknowledgement of interpretation, therefore, as that which “rejects ‘objectivity’ as a patriarchal construct”¹⁸⁵ and which celebrates subjectivity, is a frank admission of the nature of feminist methodology, one which is commendable in its honesty and its critically aware approach to historical issues.

However, as Barbara Newman points out, the balance between the feminist imperative of a “hermeneutics of empathy”¹⁸⁶ and a “hermeneutics of suspicion”¹⁸⁷ is fine, and the temptations are many, particularly the temptations to idealise, blame and pity.¹⁸⁸ To idealise medieval women as our ‘autonomous foremothers’ thus constitutes an entrapment in the interstices of ‘empathy’ and ‘suspicion’, resulting in the separation of medieval women from their historical ‘place’ and occluding the complexity of their very ‘selves’ or ‘voices’. In this way, the approaches that seek and find feminist sensibilities in medieval women are clear examples of what Newman calls “an excess of empathy, an exaggerated notion of the solidarity of women ... [in which]... otherness and diversity”¹⁸⁹ are denied. This is particularly clear in the constructed image of the empowered somatic mystic, in which the image of the proto-feminist mystic and her society is pursued in terms of paradigmatic continua that ultimately serve to veil more than illumine the complexities of political, cultural and religious interconnectedness.

¹⁸⁴Judith Bennet situating herself in “Medievalism and Feminism”, p.322.

¹⁸⁵Barbara Newman, “On the Ethics of Feminist Historiography”, paper given at “A Symposium on Women, History, and Literature: Theory and Methodology”, *Exemplaria*, Centre for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 2, no.2, (Oct., 1990), pp.702-706, p.702.

¹⁸⁶ A principle which Newman identifies as one “grounded in our search for a common, usable past which affirms the presence and contributions of women”, “On the Ethics of Feminist Historiography”, p.702.

¹⁸⁷ The converse principle in which we can recognise “that our experience has been severely constrained under patriarchy, and our history and literature unjustly suppressed”, “On the Ethics of Feminist Historiography”, p.702.

¹⁸⁸ “On the Ethics of Feminist Historiography”, p.703.

¹⁸⁹ “On the Ethics of Feminist Historiography”, p.705.

Whilst it is certainly not my intention here to accuse Bynum of constructing the medieval religious proto-feminist,¹⁹⁰ it is clear that her early identification of the somatic quality of medieval women's mysticism has been adapted by some scholars as the backdrop to a self-referential version of the history of medieval women's 'voices'. A continuing 'history' of the body as a site of cultural metaphor, for example, constitutes a 'strange and familiar' reflection of the modern. Thus, it "should not be hard to understand why Bynum's claims are persuasive. The women mystics ... were suddenly seen as women with whom we could identify. Although often repulsive, their behaviour is familiar to us nonetheless".¹⁹¹ Utilising Nancy Partner's own thesis¹⁹² against her in this context (in her argument that medievalists do not treat their 'subjects' as 'human'),¹⁹³ it is fairly evident that the identification of medieval women mystics as proto-feminists entails a desire to attach to medieval women's mysticism a "'something' that accords with modernity", a latent meaning in what is otherwise an unintelligible framework (mysticism itself), but which, with the 'right' analysis, "turns out to be excitingly intelligible, recognizable, almost familiar, almost ... ourselves!".¹⁹⁴

This is not to say that all scholarship focussing on the extreme physicality of female mysticism has been completely lost in the discursive tangle. Indeed, the movement towards a better understanding of the function or meaning of the metaphorical and linguistic tropes utilised by medieval women religious has resulted in many fine analyses that have contributed significantly to scholarship on the topic. Yet the influence of Grundmann and

¹⁹⁰ Indeed, Bynum's approach to history is witness to her commendable dedication to an ongoing 'conversation' between both the historian's versions of events, and the complexities of the people and issues she studies.

¹⁹¹ Joanna Ziegler, "Introduction", *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler [eds.], (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), p.xvii.

¹⁹² A thesis that begins with an amusing demand for a reclassification of the Middle Ages to "The Really Early Modern Period"; "Did Mystics Have Sex?", *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), pp.296-311, p.298.

¹⁹³ "Did Mystics Have Sex?", "The overwhelming impression given by ... medievalist scholars, is of a world of past persons we really cannot recognize: we can describe their institutions and learn their semantic codes, but they are not human to us", p.300.

¹⁹⁴ "Did Mystics Have Sex?", p.298.

Bynum has been such that the idea of a ‘women’s religious movement’ (which is in itself suggestive of solidarity of women) and the notion of an ‘empowering physicality’ continues to present the somatic as a uniting discourse for medieval women. Thus, the continuing scholarly focus on somatic piety remains a dominant interpretational model through which the history of medieval women’s religiosity is viewed, a focus which, in its dominance, creates the impression that the ‘voices’ of late medieval feminine piety are indicative of a particularly feminine and dominant physical discourse.

For example, Jennifer Carpenter’s thesis, that vicarious suffering was as an indication of the economy of salvation (in which women religious functioned as a kind of service industry) offers a fascinating and informative twist on the function of bodily asceticism.¹⁹⁵ Carpenter too, however, acknowledges and gives implicit credence to the idea that the documentation we retain is an indication of an *authentic*¹⁹⁶ somatic female ‘voice’:

As dedicated exponents of vicarious suffering, the *mulieres religiosae* of Liège acted on the supremely confident conviction that their own penance, in the form of physical or emotional suffering, would be of specific and objective spiritual benefit to others because they could bestow their own meritorious suffering on their neighbors, especially, though not exclusively, those who were in purgatory.¹⁹⁷

For Carpenter, therefore, the medieval proto-feminist characterisation remains absent. However, the image of the ‘community minded mystic’ is presented in the context of physical privation and emotional suffering that served a specific purpose. In her attention to the historical schema in which the traditions of hagiography and spiritual expression surfaced,¹⁹⁸ Carpenter identifies the development of a new meaning attached to the tradition

¹⁹⁵ Jennifer Carpenter, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Vitae of the Mulieres Religiosae of Liège*, thesis submitted for the Doctor of Philosophy, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, 1997, see especially the chapter entitled “Spiritual Charity and Vicarious Suffering in the Vitae of the *Mulieres Religiosae* of Liège”, pp.218-295.

¹⁹⁶ In my use of this term I am indebted to Melissa Brown’s application of same in her “Marie d’Oignes, Marguerite Porete and ‘Authentic’ Female Mystics Piety in the Middle Ages”, in *Worshipping Women*: pp. 187-235.

¹⁹⁷ *A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Vitae of the Mulieres Religiosae of Liège*, p.2.

¹⁹⁸ Consonant to which is the commendable acknowledgement of the role of male / female relationships.

of suffering¹⁹⁹ which surfaced alongside the growing institution of the *mulieres religiosae* as a socio/religious element. Essential to Carpenter's thesis, and indeed to the previous analyses cited, is the notion that the biographies of *mulieres religiosae* "gave women a new way in which to value their own lives, and a new avenue of self expression".²⁰⁰ The implicit acknowledgement is thus that biographies are indicative of the 'real' or 'authentic' voices of women in the later medieval religious milieu.

The Challenge

As with Grundmann's characterisation of a 'women's movement', therefore, Bynum's classification of the 'physicality' of women religious in the later Middle Ages has become the backdrop for a great deal of recent scholarship, to the extent that Kate Greenspan in an analysis of the *Cloud of Unknowing* claims that "anyone familiar with Western mysticism is aware of the intense physicality that characterizes the *writings and experience* of medieval women mystics".²⁰¹ Our collage of impressions has thereby intensified historical understanding, not only of the phenomenon and the western religious tradition, but also of medieval society in general. The somatic characterisation, however, does not always provide a complete picture of the phenomenon. Most significantly, the continuum of 'voice' in the search for reflection has confined, until recently, the phenomenon to a unitary discourse in which alternative examples, such as that of Porete's mysticism, are passed off as 'fascinating exceptions'.²⁰² Moreover, the evidence of sophisticated theological notions that are evident in the writings of Hadewijch and Mechthild of Magdeburg (and perhaps also in the mystical understanding of Beatrice of Nazareth and Angela of Foligno), have either been completely

¹⁹⁹ *A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Vitae of the Mulieres Religiosae of Liège*, p.269.

²⁰⁰ *A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Vitae of the Mulieres Religiosae of Liège*, p.3.

²⁰¹ Kate Greenspan "Stripped for Contemplation" *Studia Mystica* XVI: 1 (1995), pp.72-81, p.72.

²⁰² *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p.124.

occluded by, studied separately to, or submerged within²⁰³ a perceived somatic discourse. The question remains, how do we account for such differences?

At first this problem was addressed by analysing the divergent mystical expressions (and fates) of certain medieval women mystics: for example, Marie d'Oignes compared with Porete. Melissa Brown, however, rallying against what she saw as an overweening scholarly interest in the 'ecstatic' or 'paramystical' elements of medieval women's mysticism (one that identified the somatic as *the* 'authentic' female voice) argued against the misplaced assumption that we can "speak of an 'essentially feminine religiosity'" and addressed the very great problem that "the vast majority of the ecstatic women mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are known to us through the voice of their ecclesiastical male sponsors".²⁰⁴ For Brown, therefore, the mediated piety of Marie d'Oignes stands in stark contrast to the self-authored text of Porete, the former representing an example of a "mysticism presented to us in an orthodox ...form" and the latter, bereft of amanuensis, indicating a prime example of "medieval female mysticism in the most 'authentic' form possible in its day".²⁰⁵ Pointing out the sharp contrast between Marie's ecstatic (read somatic) piety and Porete's "Eckhardtian 'poverty of the soul'" mysticism, Brown argued that the constructed orthodoxy of Marie's translated mysticism was pre-eminent in the Church's advocacy of "ecstatic mysticism ...as a replacement for the more threatening mystic spirituality practised by the mendicant beguines",²⁰⁶ of whom Porete is, for Brown, if

²⁰³ To return to Bynum again, it is noted with some interest the footnote wherein she claims "that these women, like the twentieth century mystic and anorectic Simone Weil, often developed moving and sophisticated theories ... Mary of Oignes, Lutgard of Aywières, Hadewijch, Beatrice of Nazareth, Angela of Foligno, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Catherine of Siena and Catherine of Genoa seem to have *elaborated* out of their own self-doubt and hunger both a complex theology of substitution in which their sufferings redeemed the evil of the world for which they felt responsible and a *mystical doctrine of annihilation of self in the blinding love of God*", *Holy Feast*, footnote 60, p.389, my italics.

²⁰⁴ "Marie d'Oignes, Marguerite Porete and 'Authentic' Female Mystical Piety", p.187.

²⁰⁵ "Authentic Mystic piety", p.188.

²⁰⁶ "Authentic Mystic piety", p.232.

not a definite example, at least suggestive of one.²⁰⁷ Brown's 1994 undergraduate thesis, quite remarkable in its originality and precognition of scholarly themes, thus identified a major scholarly theme that was only beginning to affect scholarship of the phenomenon.

Recent philological studies embarking upon enquiries into medieval textual construction have pointed to the significance of genre and male mediation evident in the 'textual remains' of medieval holy women and historians have unearthed some significant findings that put into question the very validity of an *authentically generated* female voice of mystic piety. One key to this is the identification of a glaring disparity between Beatrice of Nazareth's (1200-1268) self-authored *Seven Manieren van Minne* (*Seven Manners of Loving*)²⁰⁸ and the Latin life written some five to ten years after her death by an anonymous male monk²⁰⁹ (which was commissioned by either the abbess of the monastery at Nazareth or some other close confidant).²¹⁰ The *Seven Manieren* is the only fragment surviving of Beatrice's own work. The biographer claims to have merely translated Beatrice's text into Latin, "Of my own I have added or changed little; rather I have only given a latin coloring to the vernacular words as they were given to me in diary notes".²¹¹ However, as Ritmary Bradley,²¹² Amy Hollywood²¹³ and Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen²¹⁴ have shown, when one compares the vernacular rendition of the *Seven Manieren* (a "substantial text which

²⁰⁷ "Authentic Mystic Piety", pp.192 ff.

²⁰⁸ The first critical edition of which is found in Leonce Reypens and Joseph Van Mierlo, *Beatrijs van Nazareth, Seven Manieren van Minne*, critisch uitgegeven, (Leuven, 1926). For the *vita* in English and Latin, and the Latin version of the *Seven Manieren* see *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, 1200-1268*, Roger De Ganck [trans.], Vol.1., (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991). For the Dutch treatise see L. Reypens and J. Van Mierlo [eds.], *Seven Manieren van Minne*, (Louvain: S. V. de Vlaamsche Boekenhalle, 1926).

²⁰⁹ For a comprehensive comparison in English see DeGank's *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, 1200-1268*, pp.289-331.

²¹⁰ "Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographer", *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, Catherine. M. Mooney [ed.], (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp.79-98. p.80.

²¹¹ *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, p.5.

²¹² Ritmary Bradley, "Beatrice of Nazareth (c.1200-1268): A Search for her True Spirituality".

²¹³ See both Amy Hollywood's, "Suffering Transformed: Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and the Problem of Women's Spirituality", *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics* and also her "Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographer".

²¹⁴ "The In-carnation of Beatrice of Nazareth's Theology", *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality*, pp. 78-98.

[Beatrice] herself composed”),²¹⁵ with that section of the *vita* which the biographer apparently translated with only ‘a little Latin coloring’, it becomes abundantly clear that what we have in the biography is a somewhat distorted reflection of the mystical experience that Beatrice herself described. This is made quite clear by Hollywood in the following comparative:

Treatise in English: When the soul feels itself to be thus filled full of riches and in such fullness of heart, the spirit sinks away down into love, the body passes away, the heart melts, every faculty fails; the soul is so utterly conquered by love that often it cannot support itself, often the limbs and the sense lose their powers. And just as a vessel filled up to the brim will run over and spill if it is touched, so at times the soul is so touched and overpowered by this great fullness of the heart that in spite of itself it spills and overflows²¹⁶

Vita in English: In this stage the holy woman’s affection was so tender that she was often soaked with the *flood of tears* from her melted heart, and sometimes because of the excessive abundance of spiritual delight ... she lay *languishing and sick* in bed, deprived of all her strength ... Just as a vessel filled with liquid spills what it contains when it is only slightly pushed, so it happened frequently that Beatrice, pushed as it were, would let spill out by many *signs* of holy love what she felt inside; or else she would undergo a kind of *paralyzed trembling*, or would be burdened with some other *discomfort of languor* [illness]²¹⁷

²¹⁵ “A Search for her True Spirituality”, 59.

²¹⁶ Cited in “Inside Out”, p.88. Hollywood’s translation of the *Seven Manieren* is taken from the Dutch which reads: “Also aldus har seluen geuelt in die oueruloedicheit van waelheit ende in die grote volheit van herten, soe wert hare geest altermale in minnen versinkende ende hore lichame hare ontsinkende hare herte versmeltende, ende hare macht verderuende. Ende <so> seere wert si verwonnen met minnen, datsi cumelike hare seluen can gedragen ende datsi dicwile ongeweldich wert haerre lede ende al hare sinne. Ende also gelijck also .i. vat. dat vol es. alsment ruret, haesteleke oueruloyt ende vut-welt also wert hi haestelec sere gerenen, ende al verwonnen // van der groter uolheit hars herten, so datsi dicwile hars ondanx moet breken”, “Inside Out”, footnote 49, p.224. Hollywood notes that her translation is slightly modified. DeGank’s translation is from the Latin and is slightly different from Hollywood’s and reads: “When the soul feels itself in the superabundance of delights and in this great fullness of heart, its mind is wholly immersed in love and its body is withdrawn from itself; the heart melts away and all its power is consumed. So conquered is it by love that it can scarcely sustain itself, and loses its power over its members and sense. And just as a full vessel overflows and spills when it is suddenly moved, so at times the soul is very quickly moved and totally overcome by the great fullness of heart so that in spite of itself it must often spill over” (the Latin is usefully positioned on the left hand pages, the English translation on the right), *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, pp. 305-307, p.304. The Latin treatise reads: “Quando sic se sentit in hac superabundantia deliciarum et in hac magna plenitudine cordis, mens eius liquescit et tota potentia eius absumitur, et in tantum amore vincitur, vt vix sustentare se possit et saepe mambis et sensibus iam non potitur. Et sicut vas plenum cum movetur subito effluit et exundat, sic valde cito, ex magna plenitudine cordis movetur et tota devincitur, ita ut saepe invita erumpat necesse sit”, *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, pp.305-307, p.304 .

²¹⁷ *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, 305-307, my italics. The *vita* in Latin reads: “Fuit etiam in hoc statu tam deilicatus sancte mulieris affectus; vt, liquefacto corde, frequentissime lacrimarum imbre madeseeret, et, pre nimia spiritualis copia delectationis ... interdum, virium deficiente presidio, languens et egrotans in lectulo decuberet ...frequenter accidit vt, ad vasis similitudinem quod, cum plenum liquoris fuerit., impulsus vel modice, mox quod continet eiciendo refundit; et ipsa, per plurima sancti amoris indicia, quod sentiebat intrinsecus, velut impulsa, refunderet;; aut certe paraliticum quodammodo tremorem incurreret, aut alia queque languoris incommoda sustineret.”, *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, p.304 & p.306.

For Hollywood, this divergence of meaning between biography and treatise points to the biographer's constant externalisation of interior themes in which the biographer seems unable to "adequately express the nature of her interiority without reference to her body"²¹⁸ and Bradley concludes of a very similar comparison²¹⁹ that "Beatrice's highly-condensed text ...differs radically from the more diffuse *Vita*. Her imagery is not specifically feminine, as this term is defined in the stereotypes of women mystics".²²⁰ For, whilst Beatrice utilises metaphors of the body to describe the soul utterly conquered by love, which "consumes everything"²²¹ within, the "spirit sink[ing] away down into love", and is thus completely absorbed by and within divinity²²², the biographer repeatedly focuses on the physical 'symptoms' of ecstasy. For the biographer, Beatrice is "soaked with the flood of tears ... paralyzed trembling ... the very fervour of her holy longing blaz[ing] up as a fire in all her bodily members, making her perceptibly hot in a wondrous way".²²³ In other words, her body is constituted as a kind of vellum upon which the audience could 'read' her divine association. Yet a reading of Beatrice's own words, whilst indicative of the body as an expressive metaphor, suggests a far more evocative and rich depiction of the interior workings of the soul. Thus, Hollywood declares that "the hagiographer's summary ...is filled with bodily illness, paramystical phenomena, and ecstatic experience, [whereas] the *Seven Manners of Loving God* is intent on the mad love of the soul and her ecstatic union with love, who is God".²²⁴

This biographical use of overt physical signals of divinity is significant not only because it demonstrates a measure of misinformation, or perhaps more aptly 'somatic

²¹⁸ "Inside Out", p.84.

²¹⁹ "A Search for her True Spirituality", pp.62-66.

²²⁰ "A Search for her True Spirituality", p.66.

²²¹ DeGanck's translation of the *Seven Manners*, in *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, p.311.

²²² *Seven Manners*, in *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, p.323.

²²³ *Seven Manners*, in *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, p.311.

²²⁴ "Inside Out", p.81.

favouritism', but also because it evinces an occlusion of themes, something the biographer actually admits to in the concluding passages of the *Vita* wherein he states that:

...in many places I have omitted no small part of those things which might have evaded the reader's understanding by their excessive depth. Even if they were intelligible to the more perfect, they would have been more tedious than edifying, would have done more harm than good to those with minds less practiced in these matters...²²⁵

Accordingly, it would seem that the metaphysical components of Beatrice's religiosity were deemed by her biographer as deep, tedious and dangerous. However, this does not cancel out the significance of the utilisation of somatic imagery that Beatrice clearly avails herself of, nor does it indicate a pernicious attempt on behalf of the biographer to conceal the 'truth'. Rather, the comparison of the *vita* with the *Seven Manieren*, coupled with the biographer's admission of an incomplete rendering, indicates that significant themes within Beatrice's mysticism were swept under the hagiographical rug. As Bradley puts it:

...the *Vita* author overlay[s] the life of Beatrice with stereotypes of the woman: unable to exert self-control, centered in her emotions rather than in her deeds, beset by illness and physical weakness, primarily either exerting herself immoderately in ascetical practices, or passively receiving the actions of God. Her self-image and the restrained account of her actual experience is quite different from the hagiographers portrait, which may have been shaped to teach ascetical practices and humility to an audience of nuns who did not know Beatrice herself.²²⁶

The impact of the findings relating to Beatrice is intensified when we consider that Beatrice was not alone in having her mysticism distorted by her biographer. Angela of Foligno's biography was composed by a scribe known as Brother A or Brother Arnaldo. A probable relative of Angela, he is very evident within her *Memorial*,²²⁷ mainly due to the striking inclusion of his own role in authoring her 'divine secrets' and his own acknowledgement of his discrepancies in translating them. Announcing to the reader that he

²²⁵ *Seven Manners*, in *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, p.343.

²²⁶ "A Search for her True Spirituality", p.66.

²²⁷ For the text see *Il libro della Beata Angela da Foligno (Edizione critica)* (2nd ed.), Ludger Thier and Abele Calufetti, (Grottaferrata [Rome]: Collegii S. Bonaventurae and Claras Aquas, 1985); for an English translation of the *Memorial* see Cristina Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno's Memorial: Translated from the Latin with introduction, Notes and Interpretive Essay*, John Cirignano [trans.], (Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 1999) and Romana Guarnieri, *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, Paul Lachance [trans.], (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

experienced “a special grace from God, which I had never known before, that enabled me to write very reverently and to fear adding any statement of my own, but only to write what I could grasp while she was speaking: I was unwilling to write anything after we parted company”,²²⁸ Arnaldo very clearly positions his own role as (divinely aided) author, in direct (face to face) communication with the mystical secrets of Angela.

A fascinating device, which is expertly addressed by Mooney,²²⁹ Arnaldo accords his own writing as divinely sanctioned and truthful, yet identifies omissions and incomprehension, along with a certain amount of distraction owing to ‘gossiping brothers’ present at his discussions with Angela, that resulted in a less than perfect rendering. As Angela’s *Memorial* was written by Arnaldo mainly in the first person it has been generally seen as an authentic indication of a medieval woman mystic’s voice, one that Bynum refers to often as an indication of an impassioned physicality. However, as Mooney is at pains to point out, the confessions of Angela’s scribe indicate a much misunderstood experience of divinity:

In truth, *I could grasp so little which I could then write* regarding [Angela’s divine secrets] that I considered and perceived myself to be like a *sieve or sifter which does not retain the fine and precious flour, but only the most coarse ...* And this will show the extent to which I was incapable of grasping her divine words except in the roughest manner: once, when I was writing the words just as I understood them straight from her own mouth, and I was reading back to her the words I had written so that she could continue her dictation, *she told me in amazement that she did not recognise them.* And another time when I was reading back to her so that she could see if I had written correctly, she replied that my expression was dry and insipid; it astonished her. Another time she put it this way: “*Your words remind me of what I said to you, but the writing is quite obscure because the words you read to me do not convey the intended meaning; for that reason your writing is obscure.*” Similarly, another time she said: “*What is inconsequential and meaningless you have written, while concerning the precious experience of my soul, you have written nothing*”²³⁰

²²⁸ *Angela of Foligno’s Memorial*, p.38.

²²⁹ Unusual in its candour, which prompts numerous questions that are addressed by Mooney in her “The Authorial Role of Brother A. in the Composition of Angela of Foligno’s revelations”, *Creative Women*, pp.34-63.

²³⁰ Cited in “The Authorial Role of Brother A.”, pp.40-41.

Arnaldo's translation, therefore, must be viewed in light of his admission that Angela regarded his rendering with amazement, reminiscent of her words, but so lacking in conveying their meaning that they became for her unrecognisable.

The acknowledgement of the expressions of these women as mediated or 'translated' (and seemingly much distorted) is exceedingly significant for students of the phenomenon, not only because we are reminded that *biography* must be distanced from *subject*, but also because the authenticity of *other* male mediated mystical texts, which have been mined for decades as indicators of medieval women's 'authentic mystical voice', become questionable repositories. As Hollywood reminds us: "Medieval writers of saints lives ...were not striving to be faithful to historical fact but were trying to create a narrative which would lead readers to admire and imitate the holy person ... The *Vita* ...is in many respects such a piece of hagiography".²³¹ Thus, whilst the acceptance of somatic metaphor as the uniting discourse in medieval women's mystic piety has remained dominant in historical reconstruction's of the phenomenon, the veracity of this claim has been threatened by the acknowledgement of male mediation in "texts in which women and men collaborate, texts in which men use or misuse women's texts or experiences, texts in which women themselves write or dictate, sometimes appropriating, sometimes rebelling against or ignoring religious stereotypes and expectations".²³²

Indeed, as Keiko Nowacka²³³ has pointed out, the importance of acknowledging the significance of the mediated mystic lies in the recognition of the function of translated mysticism in the period, a genre in which the didactic and the social functions of *vitae* became compressed within an orthodox construction of feminine piety, led by figures that

²³¹ "A Search for her True Spirituality", p.63.

²³² Caroline Walker Bynum, "Foreword", *Gendered Voices*, pp.viii - xi, p.x.

²³³ Keiko Raya Nowacka, *Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women*.

had a very particular agenda in mind. In her analysis of a ‘trinity’ of women (Heloïse (†1163/4), Porete and Marie d’Oignes, each of whom she argues are “emblematic of some of the profound changes that occurred in late medieval religion”,²³⁴ Nowacka queries the validity of the “currently dominant view that female somatic piety was empowering for women”.²³⁵ Nowacka argues that such an interpretational model (which excludes “the non-somatic female voice in favour of clerically-constructed images such as Marie”)²³⁶ rather than serving to reveal the real ‘voices’ of medieval women religious, ultimately results in a reconstruction of “the history of medieval female piety as it was seen by ecclesiastical observers”.²³⁷ Nowacka accordingly questions the very possibility of extracting an authentic female ‘voice’ from hagiographical works – her analysis of the multiple agendas of de Vitry and the progression that is charted through de Cantimpre, thereby pointing to a Marie who appears more as a literary figure (an *exemplum*) than a ‘real’ woman.²³⁸

For Nowacka, therefore, the importance of acknowledging the voices of unedited mystics such as Heloïse and Porete, of ‘including and listening’ to their unmediated voices, redresses the imbalance of an overweening scholarly preoccupation with the body in mystical expressions. The ‘voices’ of *unedited* women mystics “present historians with an important opportunity to retrace and reconstruct the history of medieval female piety as it was seen through the eyes of the women themselves”,²³⁹ thereby “opening a gateway into examining the realities of female religious experiences that lie beyond the clerical voices and the textual female body”.²⁴⁰

²³⁴ *Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women*, p.3.

²³⁵ *Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women*, p.2. I would like to thank Keiko here for the fruitful and invigorating discussions we have had on this subject.

²³⁶ *Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women*, p.9.

²³⁷ *Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women*, p.9.

²³⁸ *Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women*, pp.52-77.

²³⁹ *Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women*, p.104.

²⁴⁰ *Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women*, p.10.

In light of these recent advances in addressing the significance of genre and male mediation, we must ask whether the documents that portray women religious accurately reflect their experiences, or are they rather more indicative of religious ideals of female sanctity that were consonant with the didactic function of the written record of the saints, propagated by predominantly male clerics?²⁴¹ Moreover, what of those texts that were not mediated by amanuenses? What of Mechthild's and Hadewijch's works? And, most pertinently for our purposes, what of Porete's *Mirror*? Are these works not more likely to offer us a true record of medieval women's experiences and religious understanding than those of their mediated contemporaries? Should they not then, function as the primary means with which the historian can glean the 'real story' behind the functions and motives of the institution?

Delete the Subject?

In assessing the various constructions scholars have offered of medieval women since the late seventies, therefore, it is tempting to suggest that the claims of the Bynum school must be, if not wiped out, at least cautiously reappraised due to the attribution of the 'inauthentic' mystical voice. For in light of the evidence offered above, the leper water drinking Angela of Bynum fame (whom Bynum seems to consider the author of her work, perhaps because of Brother A's frequent claim²⁴² 'she also wrote...') who found a leper's scab in her throat as "sweet as communion"²⁴³ becomes the misunderstood or co-opted mystic who was evidently attempting to share a far more erudite and seemingly complex experience - an intellectual or metaphysical mysticism - than her (beleaguered) biographer

²⁴¹ Mooney accordingly articulates the necessity to a) distinguish the 'voices' or points of view of the subject from their interpreters (both medieval and modern it would seem), b) to "address whether or not the voices one hears are gendered" and c) to query the extent with which the construction of holiness was informed by genre (hagiographical *vitae*). "Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Sanctity", *Gendered Voices*, pp.1-15, p.1-2.

²⁴² *Holy Feast*, p.144.

²⁴³ *Holy Feast*, p.145.

was content to offer. And Beatrice's *vita*, which Bynum considered to be "florid and essentially truthful"²⁴⁴ and which drew her as one intent on "flagellating herself, sleeping on stones, walking on ice, binding thorns between her breasts and around her loins"²⁴⁵ and exhorting an extreme (Bynum says 'frenzied'²⁴⁶) devotion to the Eucharist, seems rather to have been a distorted reflection of a more interior path to God. Therefore, when Bynum claimed that she analysed the "words that women themselves wrote or spoke"²⁴⁷ it is a fair claim now to query the validity of her findings. But to what extent?

Indeed, given that so "many of [medieval religious] women's writings reach us only indirectly through the pens of scribes, confessors and editors whose interpretative ears may, wittingly or not, change or even skew a woman's own thoughts and deeds",²⁴⁸ does this mean we have been collectively 'barking up the wrong tree' for the last few decades? Are hagiographical texts *only* able to inform as to the notions of female piety conferred upon medieval women by their male interpreters?²⁴⁹ I do not believe this to be the case. Rather, we must consider the *agency* of these women in both their desire to impart their own perceptions of a privileged divine understanding and in their utilisation, or alignment with, the ambiguous medieval perception of the matter/spirit dichotomy and the standards of ascetical practice. Whilst the significance of male mediation clearly demands a revision of historical interpretation, it would seem as though the 'editing' of women's mysticism had varying levels of intrusion, clear agendas of construction, differences in co-operative authorship and developments of genre related to instances, time-frame and individual relationships.

²⁴⁴ *Holy Feast*, p.161.

²⁴⁵ *Holy Feast*, p.161.

²⁴⁶ *Holy Feast*, p.161.

²⁴⁷ *Holy Feast*, p.152.

²⁴⁸ *Creative Women*, p.34.

²⁴⁹ A notion that Jacques Dalarun seems to support in referring to Angela of Foligno's *vita* as a 'mystic tale'. Cited in Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)*, Vol III of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1998), p.143.

For example, Anne Clark, drawing on Peter Dinzelbacher²⁵⁰ points to the “appearance of new styles of religious literature in the thirteenth century”²⁵¹ in which the merging of distinct traditions that include an emphasis on interiority and biographical information can be seen in the various representations of Elisabeth of Schönau (1129-1164). Identifying Elisabeth and her brother Ekbert’s textual collaboration in the expression of Elisabeth’s visionary experiences as “one of the earliest examples of this new style of literature”,²⁵² Clark demonstrates the particular role that Ekbert played in his capacity as biographer: “Diligently investigating all the marvels which our Lord worked with [Elisabeth], he put into writing those things that he saw to be appropriate for the use of the faithful, but those things that he knew would not profit the readers, he totally concealed”.²⁵³ At first glance this would seem just another example of intrusive editing. However, the ‘real’ Elisabeth does not necessarily completely disappear. Indeed, detailing the developing representations that are apparent throughout the corpus of available documents, Clark argues for the clear *agency* of Elisabeth within the text, in terms of both her self-representation and her influence over Ekbert. For Clark, therefore, the “reshaping of conventional genres²⁵⁴” apparent in the Ekbert and Elisabeth collaboration are as much testimony to the role of women as agents of expression as they are evident of a spiritual ‘high-jack’; they are not “simply about Elisabeth”.²⁵⁵ Rather, they demonstrate “that interplay between Ekbert’s authoritative voice introducing the messages vouchsafed to an unworthy vessel and Elisabeth’s passionate insistence on the relevance of her own experience as a religious woman”.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁰ Peter Dinzelbacher, “Die ‘Vita et Revelationes’ der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin (†1315) im Rahmen der Viten- und Offenbarungsliteratur ihere Zeit”, *Frauenmystik im Mittelalter*, Dinzelbacher and Dieter R Bauer [eds.], (Stuttgart: Schwabenverlag AG, 1985), pp.152-78.

²⁵¹ “Holy Woman or Unworthy Vessel?: The Representations of Elisabeth of Schönau”, *Gendered Voices*, pp.35-51, p.51.

²⁵² “Holy Woman or Unworthy Vessel?”, p.51.

²⁵³ Ekbert’s biographer on Ekbert’s policy of translation. Clark notes “Ekbert’s suppression of potentially controversial material can be seen in comparing the various redactions of the visionary collection that he produced”, “Holy Woman or Unworthy Vessel?”, p.37.

²⁵⁴ “Holy Woman or Unworthy Vessel?”, p.51.

²⁵⁵ “Holy Woman or Unworthy Vessel?”, p.51.

²⁵⁶ “Holy Woman or Unworthy Vessel?”, p.51.

Similarly, the intention of Arnaldo's confession within the pages of Angela's *Memorial* indicates his eagerness to display his inadequacies in order to both shield himself and Angela from approbation and to give recognition to the work as a collaborative effort. Indeed, his attempt to draw subject and object together under the shield of divine favour is most pertinently clear in the concluding phrases of the work, and, if one takes Arnaldo at his word, is also indicative of Angela's acquiescence (and indeed collusion):

I, brother scribe, after I had written almost all that this little book contains, asked Christ's faithful one to ask and request of God that, if I had written anything false or superfluous here, God would in his mercy reveal it ... [to which Angela responds]... "I have already asked God many times to let me know whether I have spoken or you have written a superfluous or false word ... [note the echoing of phrasing]... God's response to me was that everything that I said and everything that you wrote was entirely true ... God said : "I will seal this work... I will put my signature on this."²⁵⁷

The collaborative effort is thereby accorded divine authorship and God duly announces: "Make sure, at the conclusion of the words you [plural] speak, that the following is written, namely, that thanks be rendered to God for all the things which you [plural] have written"²⁵⁸. Saint and scribe, therefore, are offered to the audience as cooperative subjects for perusal and, whether or not we choose to believe Arnaldo, this can be seen as an indication of the particularities of the hagiographical genre.

Questions of the synergetic aspects of 'saint making' (or authorising) stand as an indication of the spiritual (and personal) relationships involved in hagiographical development, as well as being indicative of part of the genre's historical progression and its, by turns, obfuscatory and revelatory techniques.²⁵⁹ For whilst the function of a hagiography

²⁵⁷ *Angela of Foligno's Memorial*, p.78.

²⁵⁸ "The Authorial Role of Brother A.", p.58.

²⁵⁹ See for example André Vauchez, *Les laïcs au moyen âge: Pratiques et expériences religieuses*, (Paris: 1987) as well as "Saints admirables et saints imitables: Les fonctions de l'hagiographie ont-elles changé aux derniers siècles du moyen âge?", *Les fonctions des saints dans le monde occidental (III-XIII siècle)*, (Geneva:1982), pp.161-72.. Bynum notes regarding Vauchez' assertion that medieval saints' lives "shifted around 1150 from an emphasis on miracles and charismatic gifts ...to an emphasis on the virtues" that he has since modified his argument claiming that "both threads are present generally in medieval hagiography", Caroline Walker Bynum, "Wonder", Presidential Address, *American Historical Review*, (Feb. 1997), pp.1-26, p.10, footnote 39.

was to provide a particularly didactic *exemplum* of religious *personae* to both the secular and religious worlds (as Cazelles points out),²⁶⁰ it is also clear that the literary construction of the subject does not, *ipso facto*, have to mean complete occlusion of that subject. Indeed, to assume a wholesale passivity on the part of the subjects of hagiography is to ignore the active role that many of these women may well have had in the construction of their own claims to ‘sainthood’.

Barbara Newman, for example, in her analysis of the various hagiographical constructions of Hildegard of Bingen,²⁶¹ has demonstrated the “tangle of collective authorship”²⁶² involved in the “process of saint making”²⁶³ in which Hildegard acts as the pervasively supervising subject. In the extraordinary evidence of Hildegard’s construction as holy, we are offered *four* authors (Volmar, Gottfried, Guibert of Gembloux and Theoderic), who fashioned the *vita* over a number of years (Hildegard outlived the first two). Hildegard had apparently fashioned a first person memoir, which was to act as the core of the “autohagiography”.²⁶⁴ This, and the dossier of writings inherited by Theoderic, charted a progression that Newman sees as indicative of a paradigm shift within the genre – the literary Hildegard moving from the “authorized prophet, ‘sibyl of the Rhine’, whose books were said to have been canonized by a pope ...[to the]... prototypical ‘feminine mystic’, remembered and praised not so much for her outspoken public message as for her ineffable private raptures”²⁶⁵.

Thus, the interaction of biographers with their subjects (though differing from case to case), along with the ‘evidence’ they claim to use in the construction of their *vitae* cannot be

²⁶⁰ B. Cazelles, “Introduction”, *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, (R. Blumenfeld-Kosinski & T. Szell [eds.]), Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, p.1.

²⁶¹“Hildegard and Her Hagiographers: the Remaking of Female Sainthood”, *Gendered Voices*, pp.16-34, p.16.

²⁶²“Hildegard and Her Hagiographers”, p.16.

²⁶³“Hildegard and Her Hagiographers”, p.16.

²⁶⁴“Hildegard and Her Hagiographers”, p.16.

²⁶⁵“Hildegard and Her Hagiographers”, p.16.

ignored, as much as it cannot be assumed to be a fully accurate depiction of the mystical expressions of their subjects. An example of evidence cited in the construction of a subject can be found in Arnaldo's reference to Beatrice's sister Christine:

...In a few words I now add how she left this life and flew off to the heavenly fatherland through the longed-for-passage of death. I have learned this not from the book of her own life but from what reliable people told me, especially her venerable sister Christine, who succeeded her as prioress²⁶⁶

Clearly, the layers of interpretation were many and were developed around complex relationships that had a distinct bearing on the biographer's depiction. These layers included male and female relationships that were not necessarily antithetical, but could be mutually beneficial (particularly in spiritual terms). Elisabeth Bos has charted the spiritual relationships between men and women in the twelfth century and argues that these relationships were more equitable than has been believed. Further, she discerns a particularly strong interchange of spiritual *conversatio* between men and women within the epistolary genre, itself indicative of a more fluid interaction between religious men and women.²⁶⁷ Thus, the personal and formal interrelations of genre and subject combine in the construction of sainthood in a peculiarly diffuse way that cannot be viewed by means of a blanket view of expression.

Moreover, somatic spirituality is not entirely absent in the unmediated expressions of women religious. The sample of the *Seven Manieren* above indicates the use Beatrice made of the body as a metaphor, as do the writings of other apparently 'unedited' mystics. Hadewijch, for example, whose letters, poems and visions do not evince the preoccupation with physical showings characteristic of the mediated women mystic, nevertheless betrays a

²⁶⁶ *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, p.339 and p.338 respectively. See also "Inside Out", p.80, although it is noted that Hollywood incorrectly calls Beatrice's sister Catherine.

²⁶⁷ Elisabeth Kendall Bos, *Gender and Religious Guidance in the Twelfth Century*, thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of Cambridge, Newnham College, Cambridge, March, 1999. Now published as "The Literature of Spiritual Formation for Women in France and England, 1080-1220", in Constant Mews [ed.], *Listen Daughter: the "Speculum Virginum" and the Formation of Religious Women in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp.201-220.

reliance on the body as an indication that she was about to receive divine knowledge and she constantly stresses the significance of the humanity of Christ. This is clearly evident in a vision entitled *Oneness in the Eucharist* (which bears a striking resemblance to Beatrice's description of interior states):

On a certain Pentecost Sunday I had a vision at dawn. Matins were being sung in the church, and I was present. *My heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire ... On that day my mind was beset so fearfully and so painfully by desirous love that all my separate limbs threatened to break, and all my separate veins were in travail...* I desired that *his Humanity* should to the fullest extent *be one in fruition with my humanity*²⁶⁸

Thus, the humanity of Christ, the significance of transubstantiation and the metaphor of the body, become the entrance points by which Hadewijch is enabled an allegorical reading of divine truth (visions in which, it should be pointed out, the body does not figure). Indeed, bar two unspecified examples,²⁶⁹ each of her visions, wherein she is 'taken up in the spirit', coincides with consumption of the host, or is received on a significant religious feast day.²⁷⁰ This would suggest a strong coincidence of her visions with sacramental rituals, most of which emphasise the body, the humanity, of Christ. Thus, Hadewijch's visions most likely concurred with recent consumption of the Eucharist, a significant factor that stresses the potency of the notion of 'God made man' (a physical unification of humanity with divinity) in Hadewijch's mystical understanding.

Furthermore, Mechthild relies on the physical body as a *descriptive* tool, the high point of her unification with divinity expressed in terms of an erotic encounter:

²⁶⁸ *Complete Works*, Vision 7, p.280, my italics. This is followed by an allegorical vision.

²⁶⁹ Visions 8 and 14, *Complete Works*.

²⁷⁰ Vision 1: host brought "secretly" to her on the Octave of the Pentecost, Vision 2: receives the 'Holy Spirit' on Pentecost Sunday; Vision 3: 'gone to God' one Easter Sunday; Vision 4: 'sense drawn inwards' during the Epistle (Wisd. 5:1-5); Vision 5: "taken up for a short while in the spirit" on the day of the Assumption; Vision 6: "taken up in the spirit" on "a certain feast day of the Epiphany; Vision 7: (quoted below) a vision during Matins on Pentecost Sunday; Vision 9: "something wonderful ...shown in the spirit" at Matins on the feast *In nativitate beatae Mariae*; Vision 10: "taken up in the spirit on the feast of Saint John the Evangelist in the Christmas Octave"; Vision 11: "taken up in the spirit" one Christmas night; Vision 12: "on Epiphany, during Mass, I was taken up out of myself in the spirit", Vision 13: is "raised up in the spirit" on the Sunday before Pentecost, *Complete Works*.

Then the bride of all delights goes to the Fairest of lovers in the secret chamber of the invisible Godhead. There she finds the bed and the abode of love prepared by God in a manner beyond what is human. Our Lord speaks: “Stay, Lady Soul.”/ “What do you bid me, Lord?” / “Take off your clothes.”/ “Lord, what will happen to me then?”/ “Lady Soul. You are so utterly formed to my nature / That not the slightest thing can be between you and me .../ Lord, now I am a naked soul / And you in yourself are a well adorned God.../ Then a blessed stillness / That both desire comes over them./ He surrenders himself to her, / And she surrenders herself to him.²⁷¹

Mechthild, however, is conscious to differentiate between the highs and the lows of religious experience and she concludes her work with a reflective emphasis on the ‘workaday’ necessity of physical piety:

Whenever virgins in all ages are clothed according to the will of their Bridegroom, they need nothing more than their wedding dresses. This means being *racked with pain in sickness, in days of suffering*, in temptation, and in much anguish of heart.... These are the wedding dresses of loving souls. But the everyday work clothes are *fasting*, keeping vigils, *scourging oneself*, going to confession, *sighing*, *weeping*, praying, fearing sin, *severely curbing the senses and the body* in God for love of God.²⁷²

Suffering (emotional and physical) are thus for Mechthild an integral aspect of her relationship with God and the ‘Virtues’ become the ‘Handmaids of the Soul’ in the soul’s desire for unification: “Lord, you have raised me up so high here that I shall not be able to praise you in any fitting degree when in my body. Rather, I shall suffer as an outcast and shall struggle against my body”.²⁷³ Accordingly, we do not see in Mechthild’s work the same sensational use of physical signals of divinity that fill to overflowing the biographers’ descriptions of their subjects. Indeed, Mechthild is chary about giving asceticism too great a role: “they make great fools of themselves who imagine they are scaling the heights with loathsome, inhuman toils ... False holiness likes to hide where self-will holds sway in a heart”.²⁷⁴ Despite this, however, somatic reference points remain an important *aspect* of her piety and mystical understanding.

²⁷¹ *The Flowing Light*, Book I:4, p.62.

²⁷² *The Flowing Light*, Book VII:65, p.335, my italics.

²⁷³ *The Flowing Light*, Book I:2, p.41.

²⁷⁴ *The Flowing Light*, Book 2:1, p.69.

Moreover, even Porete, who is celebrated as the most removed from the flesh carving, leper licking holy women of hagiographical works, accorded the ‘virtues’ a *role* (albeit a minor one) in the mystical progression. The virtues, she says, pertain to those souls who either “completely mortify the body in doing works of charity”²⁷⁵ or remain languishing in the absence of God.²⁷⁶ The souls who *pursue* the virtues are, Porete contends, “lost in their works ...called kings ...in a country where everyone is one-eyed. But without fail, those who have two eyes consider them to be servants”.²⁷⁷ Porete consequently demands that they (the virtues) be cast aside (a point which her detractors belaboured). Accordingly, it may seem that Porete saw nothing to be gained in the traditions of asceticism.²⁷⁸ However, when we focus on the stages of progression she charts at the outset of her work, it is apparent that she accords those virtues (and thus in part physical piety) a *role* in the ascension toward (or for Porete descent into or with) God. She says, for example, in retaliation to Reason’s lament that ‘in taking leave of the virtues’ “none can be saved nor come to perfection”²⁷⁹ that:

*...such Souls possess better the Virtues than any other creatures, but they do not possess any longer the practice of them, for these Souls no longer belong to the Virtues as they used to ...they have been servants long enough to become free from now on ...when they lived in the love of obedience of you, and also of the other Virtues. And having lived there, they have become free ...[for] when Love dwells in them ...the Virtues serve them [annihilated, perfect souls] without any contradiction.*²⁸⁰

Thus, for Porete the virtues are only a hindrance when they become the major or sole focus of the searching soul. Yet, they are *an integral aspect* in the freedom of that Soul and thus form a part of the early stages of a movement towards divinity.

While the spiritual expressions of Porete, Mechthild, Hadewijch and Beatrice are indicative of a greater recourse to spiritual, cultural and intellectual traditions than that which

²⁷⁵ *The Mirror*, p.132.

²⁷⁶ *The Mirror*, p.135.

²⁷⁷ *The Mirror*, p.132.

²⁷⁸ Pace Nowacka, who comes to the conclusion that “Marguerite ...did not see any spiritual worth in somatic piety”, *Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women*, p.99.

²⁷⁹ *The Mirror*, p.85.

²⁸⁰ *The Mirror*, p.86, my italics.

is found in the biographies of other medieval women religious, it is clear that they also (to varying degrees) utilised, or at least acknowledged, the ascetic tradition and found ‘the body’ as a useful metaphor for describing interior states. Thus, their inclusion of asceticism as a *tool* for spiritual growth and the body as a descriptive device indicates that the significance of somaticism retains a *measure* of importance in historical reconstructions of medieval women’s spirituality. Furthermore, it is not clear exactly how much redaction was involved in the transmission of these self-authored texts. Mechthild’s writings were “compiled [*conscriptus*] by a brother... of the Order of Preachers”,²⁸¹ and Hadewijch’s corpus comprises of a number of texts that were found in various forms in Brussels and Louvain (in 1838 and the seventeenth-century respectively), the work in Brussels surfacing in the form of medieval Dutch copied in a fourteenth-century hand.²⁸² Similarly, the original text of Marguerite’s *Mirror* does not survive. Rather, we are reliant on the Old French and Latin, with Middle English notes,²⁸³ themselves replete with the intrusions of the redactor’s hand.²⁸⁴ If we are to query the ‘authentic’ depictions of medieval women’s spirituality in biographies, therefore, must we not also address similar concerns to treatises that have, over the centuries, been redacted again and again?

²⁸¹ The “Latin Foreword” of *The Flowing Light* p.35, written apparently in 1270. It should be noted here too that the German translation according to Frank Tobin reads as “a brother of the same order [of Preachers] gathered together and wrote this book”, p.36.

²⁸² “Introduction” to *Complete Works*, pp.1-41, p.1. The controversy over the authorship of those works attributed to Hadewijch continues to be ground for scholarly debate. Of her surviving writings, 31 letters, 14 visions and two collections of poetry survive. The examples of her poetry, however, divide scholars, one school of thought being that the poems 17-29 are not indicative of affective mysticism, but rather suggest a more speculative spirituality. Thus, Hadewijch has been fragmented by many scholars into Hadewijch I and Hadewijch II, or the ‘pseudo-Hadewijch’. However, Mary Suydam argues that this is a fallacy resulting from a dichotomous approach to medieval mysticism that separates expressions of spirituality into hard and fast binaries (affective vs. speculative, positive vs. negative, interior vs. exterior, for example). For Suydam, therefore, this binary approach is an example of what she calls the ‘politics of authorship’ and reflects “the shortcomings of the affective - speculative dichotomy and a gendered approach to works about mysticism”. Thus, she sees no reason (and I concur) to consider that Hadewijch was not the author of poems 17-29. Mary A Suydam, “The Politics of Authorship: Hadewijch of Antwerp and the *Mengeldichten*”, *Mystics Quarterly*, 22:1, (March 1996), 2-19. See also Baumer-Despeigne, Odette, Hadewijch of Antwerp and Hadewijch II: Mysticism of being in the thirteenth century in Brabant, *Studia Mystica*, 14, No.4, pp. 16-37.

²⁸³ Romana Guarnieri established Marguerite as the author of *The Mirror*, which was previously thought to be the work of either Jan Van Ruusbroec or Margaret of Hungary. To be discussed in greater detail in the chapter two.

²⁸⁴ For an effective summary of the rather extraordinary history of the *Mirror*, see Nicholas Watson, “Melting into God the English Way”, pp.20-27.

Certainly, translations of self-authored works require cautious appraisals. However, they still, I believe, are more likely to indicate a more accurate reflection of a personal sense of religiosity than ‘auto-hagiographies’²⁸⁵ *because they are self-authored*. That is, they are not one- step-removed from personal immersion in religiosity, rather, they reflect the belief system, the ‘experience of spirituality’ and the thought processes of the author, even if they were not considered to function as ‘autobiographies’ in the sense we understand today. Further, redactions are not always despoilers of a manuscript’s message. The *Mirror*, for example, despite numerous redactions, appears to have survived substantially intact and as true to its author as far as is possible for us to discern. The intrusions of the biographers are clearly visible in the margins and there are very few discrepancies between each translation. Indeed, as Colledge has argued convincingly, the only major discrepancy between the texts appears to have been an addition composed by Porete herself *after* the text was burned at Valenciennes.²⁸⁶ Nevertheless, as Mary Suydam and Joanna Ziegler have pointed out, there is much in works such as the *Mirror* that requires further exploration, particularly in terms of what these texts say about the multiple ways in which their authors crossed genres and appealed to an audience in which the visible ‘happening’ of divine relationships served a specific purpose in terms of ‘performance’.²⁸⁷

Once more, therefore, the issue returns to genre and to the historian’s use of works of literature in the reconstruction of the past.²⁸⁸ For if a biography of a saint was intended to teach by example (to inspire, reinforce, authorise and befit the agendas of scribe and subject)

²⁸⁵ For further discussion of this genre see Kate Greenspan, “The Autohagiography and Medieval Women’s Spiritual Autobiography”, *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, pp.216-36.

²⁸⁶ Introductory Interpretative Essay”, pp.xli-xlii.

²⁸⁷ Joanna E. Ziegler, “Introduction” to, *Performance and Transformation*, p.xiv.

²⁸⁸ Penelope Johnson warns that we ignore this at our peril: “Historians may fail to recognize literary topoi or the form in which a work was presented to its audience [likewise] unwary scholars trained in literature may assume that historical sources, unlike literary texts, reveal the real world”, “False Dichotomies”, *Exemplaria*, Centre for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 2, no.2, (Oct. 1990), pp.689 - 692, p.691.

then a treatise was intended to theorise (to describe, declare, also teach and also, perhaps, to authorise).²⁸⁹ Each had a specific purpose or meaning that could function in a myriad of ways. Thus, whilst it is clear that the auto-hagiographical function has clear implications for the occlusion of their subject's religious understanding (ones that far outweigh that of apparently self-authored works), to separate the two, or present them as opposing or dichotomous representations of the 'inauthentic' or the 'authentic', involves a danger of imposing a binary conception upon the medieval world, one that Johnson points out is "the most dangerous, since it can slip into binary exclusivity: if X then not Y, leaving us with – as Elizabeth Janeway puts it – that meanest of choices, an either/or choice".²⁹⁰ The possibilities for historical reconstruction from both types of text constitute the more generous option and indeed, I believe, ultimately the more accurate.

Further, our imposition of a framework that constitutes male intrusion of ideals of sanctity *upon* women as subjects is not always clear-cut. This is evident when we consider that the little studied *vita* written by Margaret of Oignt about Beatrice of Ornacieux²⁹¹ betrays the same kind of preoccupation with bodily mortification as that found in similar male-authored hagiographical works. Beatrice, according to Margaret (in an introductory chapter that prefaces her visions) "inflicted on herself fasts and abstinences which were as severe as her feeble constitution could bear"²⁹² and which, when the devil allegedly began to torment her, became immoderate (an extravagance, the editors note, that was missing from Beatrice's own account of her spiritual life).²⁹³ At pains (pun intended) to chase away the devil, Margaret says that Beatrice:

²⁸⁹ One thinks here of the frequent claims for speaking *for* and *from* God and not *for* and *of* self, particularly evident in Mechthild's work.

²⁹⁰ "False Dichotomies", p.690.

²⁹¹ "The Life of the Virgin Saint Beatrice of Ornacieux", *The Writings of Margaret of Oignt Medieval Prioress and Mystic (d.1310)*, (Focus library of Medieval Women), Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski [trans.], (Newburyport: Focus Information Group, 1990), pp.47-62.

²⁹² "The Life of the Virgin Saint Beatrice of Ornacieux", p.48.

²⁹³ "The Life of the Virgin Saint Beatrice of Ornacieux, footnote 1, p.49. See on this also my review of "The Writings of Margaret of Oignt" (Review Article), *Pareregon*, 14, no.1, (1996), pp.299-300.

moved her face so close to the heat [whilst cooking] that it seemed to her that her brain was on fire and that her eyes came out of her head, and often she expected to see them falling on the floor ... She always carried live coals in her naked hands so that her skin burned completely, including her palms ... She punished herself so severely that blood was running down her body on all sides ... She evoked the Passion of our Lord so strongly that she pierced her hands with blunt nails until it came out the back of her hand. And every time she did this, clear water without any blood in it gushed out ... When she could not do anything else, [the mind boggles at what else she could have come up with!], she walked through the snow and ice without shoes.²⁹⁴

Thus, whilst Beatrice was certainly working from within the hagiographical tradition (and many of her male counterparts were also),²⁹⁵ she nevertheless adheres to the notion of the *exemplary* status of asceticism.

To view males as the only representatives of the promulgation of somatic piety, therefore, is perhaps too simplistic, conforming more to our hermeneutics of suspicion than to the utilisation of genre in the construction of sanctity. As Newman points out, the “tendency to reduce every text to its potential for re-inscribing or subverting categories based on gender, class and power ...[assumes]... that male-authored texts always re-inscribe these categories these hierarchies, while female-authored texts subvert them, is in itself, a regrettable instance of gender stereotyping”.²⁹⁶ Indeed, in an interesting correlation to the rules of hagiography used by Beatrice of Nazareth’s biographer, Hollywood notes that the stereotypical *modus operandi* that the biographer uses regarding the external penitential practices that he claims for Beatrice, is almost identical to that found in the life of a male Cistercian called Arnulph (1180-1228).²⁹⁷ DeGanck concurs with this evidence,²⁹⁸ adding that

²⁹⁴ “The Life of the Virgin Saint Beatrice of Ornacieux”, p.49.

²⁹⁵ Although to what degree deVitry and Cantimpre were is questionable.

²⁹⁶ “On the Ethics of Feminist Historiography”, p.705.

²⁹⁷ “Inside Out”, p.82. See also Martinus Cawley OSCO [trans.], *Send me God: the Lives of Ida the Compassionate of Nivelles, Nun of La Ramée, Arnulf, lay brother of Villers, and Abundus, Monk of Villers, by Goswin of Bossut*, (Belgium: Brepols, 2003), pp.12-17 (commentary) and pp.125-208.

²⁹⁸ Although he asserts “That Beatrice did some of the self - castigations mentioned in Chapters Four to Seven in the first book of her biography is not in doubt”, an assertion that does not quite concur with the textual evidence, *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, p.x.

Arnulph was “notorious for his extraordinary self torture”.²⁹⁹ Moreover, Arnulph does not present as a solitary male example of extreme asceticism. John of Alverna’s (1259-1322) *vita* describes him experiencing raptures in which he cries out from excessive periods of “fervour and sweetness”³⁰⁰ and his contemporary Roger of Provence (d.1287) is described as confessing up to twenty times a day, at one time experiencing rapture one hundred times during Matins.³⁰¹ To these examples of extreme male asceticism one can add Edmund of Eynsham (circa 1190s), whose *vita*³⁰² was written by his brother Adam, the contents of which betray an acute asceticism:

A young monk ...lapsed into a coma for nearly two days, and when he awoke, invigorated and mysteriously restored to health, he intimated that his soul had visited places not of this world ... The visionary named Edmund, had suffered from anorexia, acute revulsion from food and a painful ulceration on his leg that would not heal, until he awoke [from his coma] when it healed spontaneously. The period just preceding his ecstatic trance state was reported by him to have included midnight sessions of corporal discipline from older monks, which filled him with such pleasure, such ‘unbearably sweet sorrow’ with each stroke, that he wanted many more, and when he next discovered a bleeding crucifix in the church, he acted on another overwhelming desire and ate the blood.³⁰³

Thus, not only did at least one woman write a somatic biography, but at least four men were written about as somatically inclined.

I would argue, then, that somatic piety must be considered as an important *aspect* of medieval women’s religiosity and the scholarly analyses of somatic piety remain highly useful.³⁰⁴ For, as McGinn points out “[w]ithout some kind of claim to an underlying experience these textual expressions would probably not have come into existence; but to

²⁹⁹ *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, p.x.

³⁰⁰ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)*, Vol III of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1998), p.132.

³⁰¹ *The Flowering of Mysticism*, p.132.

³⁰² “The Vision of the Monk of Eynsham”, in *Eynsham Cartulary*, H E Salter [ed.], (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp.255-371, with introduction and notes.

³⁰³ Cited in “Did Mystics Have Sex?”, p.305.

³⁰⁴ In this I am in agreement with Katrien Vander Straeten, who argues that the challenge to Bynum’s thesis is not a dismissal, but a qualification. I do not concur, however, that women who did not fall into the somatic category were thus, ‘exceptions’. See “The ‘Bynum Thesis’, about the suffering of the female body in religious/mystical practice, and its reception: criticism, qualification, substantiation”, term paper, (Spring 2001), <<http://www.cns.bu.edu/~satra/kaatvds/bynumpaper.htm>>, last visited June 2007.

say that every expression of such a claim was intended as a more or less literal account of a divinely given vision is neither provable nor required...”.³⁰⁵ Indeed, Greenspan, responding to the debate here charted, has argued that the focus on ‘in-authenticity’ has submerged the importance of religious modelling and given perhaps too much importance to the textual mode in which it was presented, without recognising its relationship with medieval society.³⁰⁶ Nevertheless, it is also quite apparent that somatic piety cannot be seen as the dominant nor unifying mode that characterises the religious experiences of medieval religious women. Thus, the debate regarding authenticity has served – in refuting the primacy of the somatic voice – to usher in a new chapter of investigation that both identifies mediation as a significant problem in extracting an authentic female voice, as well as laying bare the problems involved in demanding a unitary voice of a seemingly far more diffuse religious experience. The challenge is to recognise not only the diffusion of ‘voices’ but the diffusion of religious themes that surface from a more cautious appraisal of ‘voice’ and ‘self’ in the reading of medieval women’s religiosity.

A Mystical Amalgam

In our attempts to rescue the voices of women from the medieval past I believe that we are now obligated to pursue the revelations provided by analyses of textual construction *without* casting aside the inroads provided by scholars who focus on the somatic. Only in this way, I argue, is it possible to reconstruct a historical portrait of medieval women religious without dissembling into a cacophony of competing representations. Indeed, to ignore the significance of somatic piety would be, to my mind, just as inaccurate as conferring a proto-feminist tag upon selected medieval women. Rather, if we are ever to come to any accurate

³⁰⁵ *The Flowering of Mysticism*, p.29.

³⁰⁶ Kate Greenspan, “The Autohagiography and Medieval Women’s Spiritual Autobiography”, p.218.

kind of understanding about the complexities of female religiosity in the later Middle Ages, we must pursue the multitudinal modes of discourse that medieval women (and men) utilised in their attempts to enter into spiritual discourse. As Newman points out:

These voices should not be flattened into unison No univocal discourse, no programmatic *écriture féminine* can encompass the commanding speech of Brigitta and Catherine of Siena, the subtle tones of Hadewijch and Julian, the impassioned cries of Angela and Mechthild, the fiery tongue of Na Prou Boneta. But each voice, whether strident or meek, struggled mightily to rise above the background noise of the fathers clamouring for silence.³⁰⁷

It is not possible, therefore, to assume that the ‘voices’ we hear in the *vitae* of medieval women are *entirely* indicative of their actual religious experiences. Rather, the varying levels of intrusion, occlusion and collusion, of revelation and obfuscation, point to a veiled and ‘sifted’ (to use Arnaldo’s term) account of a diverse and multifaceted religiosity that, whilst not perhaps without pattern, nevertheless cannot be understood in terms of a unified and all embracing discourse that presents all ‘voices’ as one. Suydam’s conclusion regarding the contribution of Hadewijch to the history of Christian mysticism, therefore, is especially pertinent to this study. For:

As long as one clings to a dichotomized schema of medieval mysticism (contemplation = soul = higher = male vs. sensory = bodily = lower = female), it is difficult to imagine Hadewijch as a visionary celebrator of an embodied relationship between God, humans, and, at the same time, as a woman who saw herself as ‘engulfed’ in the bottomless abyss of God. It is time to put aside the ‘politics of authorship’ which have sundered Hadewijch from Poems 17-29, and to articulate Hadewijch’s rightful place in the history of Christian mysticism. In doing so, we open up the possibility for better understanding of the dimensions of mysticism in the thirteenth century, and for fruitful investigation of the degree Hadewijch’s and of other Beguines’ influence upon the Rhineland mysticism of the 14th century and beyond.³⁰⁸

As Gail Ashton citing Irigaray asks “Why only one song, one speech, one text at a time?”³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 245.

³⁰⁸ “The Politics of Authorship”, p.12.

³⁰⁹ Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint*, Routledge Research in Medieval Studies 1, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.2.

It is also clear, however, that the significance of the mediated woman mystic demonstrates the importance of interior themes that *did not rely* on the body as a vehicle for expression – themes that were seemingly far more important to some medieval women religious than has often been conceded. Porete is an illuminating indication of this, as her work indicates the existence of a discourse that was neither reliant on somatic themes nor alarmed by notions that gave the soul pre-eminence in the human/divine relationship. Further, it seems unlikely that this discourse could have emerged without a community that was happy to receive such notions and was conversant, at least to some degree, with the interior themes she expressed. However, it remains clear that the institution of the Church regarded this discourse as alarming and requiring suppression. This is evident in Porete’s arrest and execution. However, it is also discernible in the ways in which amanuenses declared the religiosity of their subjects – a declaration accompanied frequently by indications of concealment and subterfuge.

Indeed, the recognition that biographical works about medieval holy women were involved in concealing certain aspects of their religiosity remains more than passing strange. Clark, for example, notes that Ekbert’s “suppression of potentially controversial material can be seen in comparing the various redactions of the visionary collection that he produced in his continuing preoccupation with enlarging and refining the collection”.³¹⁰ Beatrice’s biographer as we have seen abridged aspects of her mysticism lest it do “more harm than good”.³¹¹ Arnaldo, ingenuous to the last in grasping “so little which [he] could then write” considered himself to be “like a sieve or sifter which does not retain the fine and precious flour, but only the most coarse”.³¹² So, we must ask, what was it that these biographers were concealing or not comprehending? Moreover, if they were concealing something, why?

³¹⁰ “Holy Woman or Unworthy Vessel?”, p.37.

³¹¹ *Seven Manners*, in *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, p.343.

³¹² “The Authorial Role of Brother A.”, pp.40-41.

A tentative answer to this question is that this suppression bears witness to a subaltern discourse that was current outside the traditional boundaries of the Church. This would make sense of the disjunctions between scribe and subject and would also make sense of the instances of collusion, with the *vitae* functioning as a tool for presenting the most marketable and palatable portrait of the holy woman to the institutional church. One can go further than this, however, and suggest that if the former is the case, then the religiosity of *unmediated* women writers may tell us a great deal about that subaltern discourse. Furthermore, if this too is the case, then Porete stands as an important means of reaching into some aspects of that hidden discourse and thus warrants special attention as one of the most important voices of the marginalised in the period. For, despite the numerous redactions of the *Mirror*, the work appears to have survived substantially intact and as true to its author as far as is possible for us to discern. There are very few discrepancies between redactions and early substantial changes to the text appear to have been the work of Porete herself, rather than a third party.³¹³

It has not been my intention in this chapter to rewrite the history of medieval women's participation in religiosity nor to provide conclusive answers to many of the questions I have raised. Rather, my intention has been to open up the debate in order that Porete may be viewed more clearly alongside her contemporaries. As such, I have tried here to demonstrate the ways in which scholarship has created a broad framework to understand a phenomenon, but in so doing has succeeded in marginalising those individuals who do not 'fit' the overall schemata. This hermeneutics of exclusion has made the apprehension of Porete as an historical subject exceedingly difficult and as a result of this Porete has been excluded from her discourse community/s. It would seem worthwhile, therefore, in order to

³¹³ Judith Grant, Edmund Colledge, J.C.Marler, "Introductory Interpretative Essay", pp. xli-xlii.

further explore the ramifications of this notion, to now address the thorn in the side of scholarship that Marguerite Porete and her *Mirror* represent before turning to the particulars of the institutional church's case against her.

The glory of the One Who moves all things/ penetrates all the universe, reflecting / in one part more and in another less. / I have been in His brightest shining heaven / and seen such things that no man, once returned / from there, has wit or skill to tell about;

for when our intellect draws near its goal / and fathoms to the depths of its desire, the memory is powerless to follow; / but still, as much of Heaven's holy realm / as I could store and treasure in my mind/ shall now become the subject of my song

Dante Alighieri, *Paradise*³¹⁴

Here the Soul begins her song: ... [Soul]: And when Love saw me think about her, on account of the Virtues, she did not refuse me, but instead she freed me from their petty service and guided me to the divine school. There she retained me without my performing any service, there I was filled and satisfied by her.

Thought is not longer of worth to me, / Nor work, nor speech. / Love draws me so high / (Thought is no longer of worth to me) / With her divine gaze, / That I have no intent./ Thought is no longer of worth to me, Nor work, nor speech.

Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*³¹⁵

Called 'a happening'³¹⁶ by Lerner and 'a wonder and an inspiration'³¹⁷ by Peter Dronke, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* is one of the most important vernacular religious works of the period. Written contemporaneously with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, *The Mirror* describes seven stages of individual transformation in which Porete's central protagonist, Soul, embarks upon a journey fraught with dispute (between Love and Reason, for example), with despair brought by self-knowledge and with the agony of attempting to express the inexpressible. The interior suffering of the protagonist is validated only by a growing recognition of an inner relationship between humanity and God that culminates in Soul ascending from the 'abyss' of despair and self-knowledge (in the fifth stage) to utter freedom and absorption in God (in the sixth). As with Dante, however, this divine knowledge is achieved only momentarily; what glimpses of divinity have been achieved can never be sustained until the moment of death. Despite this disappointment, the soul has

³¹⁴ *The Divine Comedy: Volume III*, Mark Musa (trans. and commentary), 2nd ed. (1984), (New York: Penguin, 1986), Canto I, p. 1.

³¹⁵ *The Mirror*, p. 200.

³¹⁶ "Preface", *The Mirror*, p.1.

³¹⁷ Cited by Lerner in his "Preface" to *The Mirror*, p.1.

experienced divinity at close hand and is transformed: Porete's protagonist has merged with God and Dante's has witnessed Heaven; the temporal and the spiritual have met and so humanity has been shown to have the facility to experience God in this life. Accordingly, *The Mirror* stands as an important textual example of what Southern has identified as that aspect of medieval humanism defined by the belief that humans could go a long way on this earth towards union with God.³¹⁸

Porete achieves this textual conflation of the temporal and the supernatural by employing an extraordinary mixture of literary styles accompanied by a sophisticated use of theological devices. Switching between dialogue, monologue and verse, *The Mirror* reads at times like a play, at others like a treatise and in others still like an evocative poem that articulates a divine love affair of metaphysical proportions. Part handbook, part exposition on the 'unsayable' (God), the text consists of a Boethian style conversation between allegorical female subjects (Reason, Love and the Soul)³¹⁹ with the dominating theme of this conversation focused on the idea that there is a state of perfection in this life, wherein the soul "sees not herself, through the abyss of her humility, nor God, through the height of his goodness; but God sees himself in her by divine majesty".³²⁰ This notion of 'becoming God's mirror'³²¹ is achieved by the Soul's recognition of the supreme ineffability of God, a denial of language and 'creatureliness' (the central praxis of Porete's

³¹⁸ "At the end of all, the union of natural and supernatural was the culmination of medieval humanism", *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), see esp. Chapter 4, "Medieval humanism", pp.30-60.

³¹⁹ For a good basic introduction to the theological and literary structure of the book see Babinsky's "Introduction", the *Mirror*, esp. pp 27-48.

³²⁰ I have used here Watson's translation for its brevity and clarity, "Melting into God", p.27. The Babinsky translation reads as follows: "...the Soul does not see herself on account of such an abyss of humility ... Nor does she see God on account of [his] highest goodness ... But God sees Himself in her by his divine majesty ... so that she sees only that there is nothing except God Himself Who is, from whom all things are. And he who is, is God himself. And thus she does not see according to herself for whoever sees the one who is does not see except God himself, who sees Himself in this same Soul by his divine majesty", *The Mirror*, Babinsky, p.193.

³²¹"Melting into God" p.27.

apophatic mysticism, drawn from negative theology) in which the procession into the abyss of humility (the annihilation of the self) results in a soul who no longer wills, regrets or loves, and is simply returned to and in and of the God from whence she came. Thus, the reflection principle in *The Mirror* “means that it can only be said of the soul that she experiences God at all because God is all that exists for and in her – so that the ‘she’ who experiences is nothing but God experiencing himself in her”.³²² Accordingly, Porete’s utilisation of the fundamental praxis of negative theology (the ineffability of God) results in an extreme expression of self-denial and reunion with God that sits uncomfortably between the need to express the inexpressible, to ‘encumber oneself with words’, and the futility and entrapment that such a textual pursuit entails.³²³

Esoteric and allegorical in nature, *The Mirror* is thus substantially different to hagiography, auto-hagiography and vision literature and is marked by intriguing language turns (such as the frequent use of the genitive case) which, along with a cryptic ‘unsaying’, makes it an extremely challenging text. This is not to say, however, that *The Mirror* must therefore have had a limited audience (on account of its impenetrability). Rather, quite apart from indications that Porete was likely to have had something of a following (as we shall see), the posthumous reception of the work demonstrates a significant and ongoing interest that outlasted its condemnation in 1306 and again in 1310. For, despite the best efforts of the inquisitor of Paris to expunge the work from the world, *The Mirror*, never named as we have said in the trial documents, continued to be translated into Italian and

³²²“Melting into God” p.27.

³²³ For analyses of the utilisation of negative theology in *The Mirror* see, in conjunction with Watson, “Melting into God”: Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, Chicago University Press: Chicago, (1994) and his “The Pseudo-Woman and the Meister: Unsaying and Essentialism” in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, pp. 114-146; Maria Lichtmann, “Negative Theology in Marguerite Porete and Jacques Derrida”, in *Christianity and Literature*, 47, No. 2, (Winter 1998) and her “Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart : The Mirror of Simple Souls Mirrored” in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, 65-86; “Negative Theology in Marguerite Porete and Jacques Derrida”; Michael. G. Sargent, “The Annihilation of Marguerite Porete”, *Viator*, 28: 1997, pp. 253-279.

Latin (twice each) and into Middle English (once). The text was posthumously attributed by turns to: a female saint (the Dominican nun Queen Margaret of Hungary) in three manuscripts drawn from a single Italian translation dating from the mid to fourteenth century;³²⁴ an anonymous male author in three mid to late fifteenth century Middle English translations of the French text;³²⁵ and a revered male theologian (Jan Van Ruusbroec) in a Latinised translation of the Middle English text in the sixteenth century.³²⁶

That a book once so violently condemned could achieve orthodoxy, firstly in the hands of an enclosed female Eucharistic ecstatic who practised extreme ascetic self-starvation and physical mortification³²⁷ and lastly in the hands of a venerated theologian (a credentialed scholastic male), is more than passing strange. For it would suggest that it was only the posthumous linkage of an orthodox affiliation, complete with stereotypical manifestations of piety (Margaret) and the requirement of masculine gender (Ruusbroec and the anonymous male), that enabled an orthodox reading of *The Mirror*. This is important because whilst these incorrect attributions generally include a warning as to the subtlety of the notions within, the book was not burned again and nor was it removed from circulation. This despite the fact that John Gerson classified *The Mirror* as ‘false mysticism’ of an incredibly subtle kind in 1401³²⁸ and that in 1439 the Basel condemnation, in order to pursue Pope Eugenius IV who had supported the work, produced no less than thirty errors within *The Mirror*. Nevertheless, it remained in circulation.

³²⁴ The three manuscripts are held at Naples, Vienna and Budapest.

³²⁵ Dominguez, “Judgement and Gender”, p.60.

³²⁶ A mis-attribution made by the gloriously named Darker of Sheen, which stands beside another mis-attribution: the mistaken identification by English Carthusians of Ruusbroec as Prior of the Paris Charterhouse. For further discussion on this, and references, see Dominguez, “Judgement and Gender”, pp.60/61; Watson, “Melting into God”; Sargent, “Annihilation”.

³²⁷ Dominguez, “Judgement and Gender”, p.59.

³²⁸ Gerson cited Maria of Valenciennes as author, *De distinctione verarum revelationum a falsis*, cited in Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.165.

In modern scholarship, the reception of *The Mirror* has been similarly divided. Initially it was considered sophisticated “of an advanced kind”³²⁹ and theologically daring but, nevertheless, essentially orthodox.³³⁰ Since Guarnieri’s discovery of its real author in 1946, however (twenty years after its modern publication), the work has attracted both favourable and unfavourable readings. These readings were initially grounded in controversy over the institutional censure of the work, with some scholars labelling *The Mirror* as ‘perniciously obfuscating’ and heretical, and others arguing for its essential orthodoxy. Distinct from these divisions, however, was a growing recognition of the importance of the work in historical, theological and literary terms and in recent years scholars have returned to the text and acknowledged it as one of the great works of religious literature in the period. The sophisticated analyses that have accompanied this pursuit have done much to inform our understanding of Porete and offer considerable insights into the textual significance of *The Mirror*.

But who was the woman who wrote such an extraordinary text? What company did she keep and where did her ideas come from? It is often pointed out in work that assesses Porete and her *Mirror* that we know very little about Porete as an historical identity. This is primarily due to a paucity of documents, as we have already said; we have her *Mirror*, some ‘historical’ anecdote, we have the documents of condemnation and we are unlikely to uncover any further documentation. Desiring to rehabilitate Porete from this paucity, some have attempted to read *The Mirror* as autobiographical.³³¹ This has proven problematic, however, because Porete does not situate herself within the text. Rather it is the Soul, not

³²⁹Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A study in the nature and development of man’s spiritual consciousness*, 2nd ed., (New York: Dutton, 1961), p.462.

³³⁰ The most significant studies being Evelyn Underhill ‘The Mirror of Simple Souls’, *Fortnightly Review*, XCV, 1911, pp.345-54, and Clare Kirchberger, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*.

³³¹ To begin to appreciate the difficulties associated with using literature as autobiography, one need only consider how difficult it would be (and how far off the mark) to construct Dante’s life through a reading of the *Divine Comedy*.

the 'I' who leads the way.³³² This has meant that any reading of the work demands the selection and ordering of available information in order to constitute Porete as an historical figure. This pursuit has relied on comparisons and contrasts with associated information and also the insights of prior scholarship.

The result of this process is that a series of identities have been given to Porete. She has been described variously as a leader of a heretical sect, as a woman condemned by her gender and as one whose thought reflected the mystical striving of a handful of semi-regular writers. Sometimes heretical and sometimes orthodox, occasionally pernicious and frequently misunderstood, the Porete drawn in much dominant scholarship suffers from a profound identity crisis that remains unresolved. Naturally, these classifications have shifted over the years to accommodate new insights and methodologies. Currently, however, there exist in the scholarship competing claims that demonstrate an ongoing lack of consensus. On the one hand, Porete is situated firmly within the beguine milieu and is given the identity of an 'independent beguine'. On the other, she is described as anomalous and unique, her thought issuing from a highly individualised recourse to medieval theology and literary technique. The question remains, which classification is an accurate reflection of the woman who wrote *The Mirror of Simple Souls*?

This thesis contends that neither classification is satisfactory. Rather, I argue that the ways in which women's religiosity has been framed historiographically have contributed to a binary contradistinction currently obscuring Porete's identity. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to explore the ways in which the identity options for Porete have

³³² For an analysis of the problems with this pursuit see Robin Anne O'Sullivan, *Model, Mirror and Memorial: Imitation of the Passion and the annihilation of the imagination in Angela da Foligno's Liber and Marguerite Porete's Mirouer des Simples Âmes*, unpublished PhD dissertation, Faculty of the Divinity School, University of Chicago, Illinois, (2002), pp.225-226.

been developed in the scholarship with an emphasis on the hermeneutic problems that have contributed to current conceptions. It is not my intention here to discredit scholarship that has interested itself in Porete. Rather, my aim is to extricate ongoing issues surrounding Porete, to point to associated problems, to canvass important developments and thus to point the way beyond current analyses and surveys. What is presented here, therefore, is not an exhaustive list of *all* scholarship relating to Porete, but rather it is intended to indicate *dominant* representations.

This chapter then, begins the task of exploring dominant historical reconstructions of Porete starting not with Guarnieri but with significant scholarship that preceded and informed her conclusions (and the conclusions of subsequent scholars). This is done in order that Porete's status as the oddity of the women's religious movement be challenged and also to draw attention to the issues associated with identifying Porete as a beguine. To do so, I will pursue chronologically the scholarship pertaining to Porete's role within the medieval religious tradition. This will be developed in accordance with the dominant options for Porete's identity (as outlined in the introduction to this thesis). Option one will discuss scholarship that responded and developed Porete as a heretic beguine. Option two will canvass representations of Porete as an anomaly. Option three will discuss more recent scholarship that has identified Porete as an evangelist beguine. In many ways, however, these options overlap, particularly options two and three. Accordingly, I will conclude this chapter with some reflection on the ways in which this interrelationship both hinders and deepens our understanding of Porete as an historical identity. In doing so, the trial documents as sources of information about Porete's identity will be discussed. However, a full exploration of the significance of these sources will not be attended to until chapter three.

Option one: The heretic beguine

Had he been given the opportunity to peruse her book in full rather than relying on a handful of lines taken from hostile sources, Grundmann may well have been more charitable to Porete than some later scholars have been. Only, however, in that he would have identified the genesis of her alleged heterodoxy as deriving from the ‘excesses’ of the women’s movement and would perhaps have thus seen in her and her book (in his time still estranged from its author) a more gentle and less pernicious passage towards heresy. For unlike many subsequent scholars who have struggled to explain how Porete ‘fits’ into her milieu, Grundmann claims for her a foundational alliance with her contemporaries in his ‘women’s movement’. Her distance from her female contemporaries is explained not so much in terms of differences, as in differences arising because of similarities. Thus, Porete appears in *Religious Movements* as firmly connected to her female contemporaries, doomed certainly, yet led only into ‘temptation and peril’ by a misguided and ‘contumacious’ *esprit de corps*.

This is particularly intriguing both because the current perception of Porete as an anomaly in part stems from Grundmann’s theory of *the* women’s movement and because it demonstrates the difficulty of negotiating diversity within an imposed and uniform framework. Indeed, there are moments in *Religious Movements* where Grundmann seems to be struggling with this tension, particularly when he addresses the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in which the rise of independent and speculative religiosity appears to begin.

Tellingly, this tension is most evident in those chapters that deal with Porete.³³³ Whilst exploring geographic and notional heretical relationships in *Religious Movements*, for example, Grundmann attempts to account for the development of elements of both speculative and bridal mysticism evident in female religious expressions of the period. In doing so, he posits Porete as influenced by speculative theology, particularly as emanating from the Ries heresy.³³⁴ Whilst we know now that no hard evidence exists of any sect espousing Ries heresy,³³⁵ Grundmann, writing before this was brought to light, is clearly convinced of a connection: all varieties of female religious expression are related to a commonality born of the women's movement, and any heretical tendencies can be sourced to specific influences (such as the aforementioned Ries heretics³³⁶ for example).³³⁷

Now it may well be that Grundmann was on the right track in identifying numerous means by which ideas (religious or otherwise) circulated in the period. However, his concern in identifying multiple origins and transferences obscures the revelations that this train of thought may have delivered. For he is mainly interested in these currents in so much as they conform to, or can be used to confirm, his thesis: the commonality of female piety. This is particularly evident when he contrasts Mechthild of Magdeburg with the heretics of the Ries (who he believes influenced Porete):³³⁸

³³³ Particularly in chapter seven "The Heresy of the 'Free Spirit' in the Religious Movements of the Thirteenth Century". pp.153 – 186.

³³⁴ *Religious Movements*, p. 183. Much of what we know about the Ries heresy, or heresy of the Swabian Ries, comes from a document believed to represent the findings of Albertus Magnus regarding heretical errors circulating in the Swabian Ries around 1260. Of those errors (97 in the Magnus document) foremost was the idea that it is possible for humans to become one with God. See Lerner's *Heresy of the Free Spirit* pp. 13 ff. and *Religious Movements*, pp. 170 ff.

³³⁵ Lambert refutes both contentions, *Medieval Heresy*, p. 183 and p. 186.

³³⁶ "...the theological system and speculative doctrines of German mystics were not the foundation, the starting point, or the source, but rather they are the intellectual justification and efforts at the theoretically ordering and theoretically digesting of the religious women's movement. For precisely that reason ... the statements of the Ries heretics are so important ... since they already display the primary themes of mystical speculation without ... a scholastic didactic structure ... [and are]... remarkably confirmed by the condemnation of Marguerite Porete", *Religious Movements*, p. 183.

³³⁷ Other examples include the Amaurians and *virii religiosi*. According to Grundmann, *virii religiosi* in the Ries were unaffiliated mendicants who favoured red cloaks, *Religious Movements*, pp. 173 ff.

³³⁸ *Religious Movements*, p. 183.

The deep difference between the Magdeburg beguine and the heretics of the Ries laynot in... foundational experiences, *which were common to the entire women's religious movement*, but in the intellectual expression of their experiences in regard to the doctrine of the Church. Mechthild had consciously fitted herself into the ecclesiastical order, entrusting herself to the spiritual guidance of her Dominican friends, and later she entered a convent. The heretics of the Ries, in contrast, distrusted and rejected the spiritual guidance of theologically trained leaders ... They disdained the cloistered life³³⁹

In this way, Grundmann posits women such as Porete as examples of the tendency to heresy that unconstrained intellectualism, mendicancy and independence bring. However, it is vital to note that Grundmann also unites Porete and Mechthild in what he calls the 'foundational experience' consistent with the women's religious movement. Grundmann thus develops a distinction within female piety that does two things: firstly, it distinguishes between expressions that conform and those that do not; and secondly, it unites the two strands within a foundational premise (*the women's movement*) whilst simultaneously dividing the two along intellectual and behavioural lines. Accordingly, he indicates difference *and* similarity as developing from a) a shared foundational impulse, b) engagement with doctrine and c) behaviour.

This characterisation of women religious, which simultaneously grounds them in a foundational basis whilst pointing out their marked differences, is a good example of what Anke Passenier identifies as the *typicum* of the stereotypical medieval woman religious, both in the sources and in historiography: "the medieval sources often seek to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' beguines. What seems to have happened is that these discriminations have found their way into modern historiography."³⁴⁰ Passenier claims that Grundmann is complicit in this and she argues that *Religious Movements* propagates the

³³⁹ *Religious Movements*, p. 178, my italics.

³⁴⁰ "Women on the Loose: Stereotypes of Women in the Story of the Medieval Beguines", *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, Ria Kloppenborg and Wouter J Hanegraff [eds.], (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1995), pp. 61-88, p. 64.

stereotype of the bad beguine – the ‘woman on the loose’ and the ‘seducible woman’ – with Porete standing for Grundmann as a prime example of a woman whose brazen intellectualism and mobility stood as an *exemplum* of what women were not supposed to be.³⁴¹

Thus, for Passenier, Porete occupies the heterodox realm so easily within accounts such as Grundmann’s primarily because she conformed to stereotypical views both about beguines in particular and women in general. This is evident in Grundmann’s account of Porete because, for him, women are endangered always by the threat of ideas from external sources: thus Porete is more at risk than risky (a notion that McDonnell, as we shall see, inverted). In other words, women are easily led and without proper supervision remain in constant threat of lapsing into heresy. They are also, however, always united by a shared religious excitement and by gender. Accordingly, Grundmann surfaces as sympathetic to the women he studies, albeit in such a paternalistic manner that it is hard not to see him in company with Albertus Magnus, whom he quotes as seeing the tendency to heresy in women of the period as one that was “not a heresy which could be refuted, but silliness which deserved a good whipping”.³⁴²

Quite apart from the issues of gender that Grundmann, in keeping with his times, elided, his emphasis on foundations in discussing complex differences, and what Passenier calls ‘pluriformity’, remains highly problematic. Grundmann’s analysis fails to fully acknowledge the multifaceted nature of humanity and human expression even as it describes and comments on it. I think Grundmann recognises this at times and in holding

³⁴¹ “Women on the Loose: Stereotypes of Women in the Story of the Medieval Beguines”, *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, Ria Kloppenborg and Wouter J Hanegraff (eds.), (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1995), pp. 61-88, pp. 65 – 70 and explicitly on Porete p. 75.

³⁴² *Religious Movements*, p.176.

onto his thesis is careful to negotiate links backward (to Liège) and forward (to the great German mystics) in order to maintain order in an (always) disordered history. He lays out his patterns carefully and with great sophistication, but he assumes an order that cannot be confirmed. Accordingly, his is an ultimately flawed approach that fails to acknowledge the nuances of an age.

However, whilst Grundmann's insistence on foundations as connective and unifying media in thirteenth century women's religiosity is problematic, not least because of issues pertaining to gender, the measures Grundmann is forced to take to sustain this theory and make sense of women's religiosity in the period *are* illuminating, particularly for the study of Porete. This is because in distinguishing between impulses, doctrine and behaviour, Grundmann simultaneously positions Porete alongside her female contemporaries in the women's movement and emphasises a wider *conversatio*. He also acknowledges an element of unease with the veracity of inquisitorial documents and, for that matter, chronicles. For this reason it is worth quoting Grundmann's assessment of Porete in full:

We only know two sentences from the book of this beguine [Porete], but they are conclusive enough. They speak of the 'annihilated soul' (*anima annihilata*), which is no longer subject to the law of virtues ...[and]... does not concern ...[itself]... with divine gifts and consolations ... These propositions, *probably taken verbatim from her book*, come very close to the statements of the heretics of the Ries ... on the other hand the two propositions, which – to rely on the theological evaluation – were the basis for condemning the beguine Margarete, could just as well have come from Meister Eckhart.... A contemporary chronicler reproduces the condemned doctrine in different wording, perhaps to make them clearer to his readers, and only then does he demonstrate the close alliance with love-mysticism on the one hand, and with ... antinomianism ... on the other. *When chroniclers or inquisitorial protocols attempt to describe the propositions of heretics, this mystical doctrine is always distorted and confused*, as if it sought to break down all barriers against compulsion and vice. When we have even a few words from the mouth of a 'heretic' such as Margarete Porete, it is mystical earnestness and religious purity which speak from them.³⁴³

³⁴³ Alternative spelling of 'Porete' are Grundmann's, *Religious Movements*, p.184.

Porete's ideas are thus depicted in company – with Eckhart, with her Love mysticism contemporaries and with those ideas associated with miscellaneous heresies – and she is, like many of her female contemporaries, imperilled by temptations delivered from afar. The representations of her ideas are also flagged as difficult to discern, given the documentation we possess. Accordingly, her status as 'heretic' is treated with an element of scepticism – because it is derived from both the motives of chroniclers, inquisitors and her own 'earnestness' (the latter a by-product of her association with the women's movement).

In this way, Grundmann both underlines the diversity of expressions and activities in the period whilst simultaneously emphasising a widespread dialogue perhaps buried within the relevant documentation. This *conversatio* is also apparent when Grundmann discusses those who are nameless. We have already mentioned his comparison of Mechthild with Porete, yet he also discusses (in the context of exploring speculative discourse of the period) others whose stories are less familiar. In a chapter dealing with the Free Spirit and Porete, for example, he notes that:

... any intermingling of philosophic and theological training of Neo-Platonic origins with the women's religious movement *would always produce particular spiritual tendencies with an unmistakable relation to the Paris heretics* [the Amaurians], even when a direct relationship cannot be demonstrated³⁴⁴

This passage admittedly demonstrates a certain element of haziness on Grundmann's part (for would this *always* produce particular spiritual tendencies and just what relationship *can* be demonstrated?). However, it also indicates an awareness of a discourse that had some currency – and it situates, by association, Porete within that discourse. Further, it positions Porete firmly within Grundmann's grander thesis: the search for a common source that both created heresy, new orders and "the profundities of German mysticism".³⁴⁵

³⁴⁴ *Religious Movements*, p.156, my italics.

³⁴⁵ *Religious Movements*, p.186.

This is where Grundmann provides us with his most adventurous flourish – he situates Porete within a shared female discourse and he accords that discourse a significant role in the history of intellectual developments:

...the theological system and speculative doctrines of German mystics [such as Eckhart] were not the foundation, the starting point, or the source, but rather they are intellectual justification and efforts at the theoretically ordering and theoretically digesting of the religious experiences *which first arose from the mystical activities of the women's movement.*³⁴⁶

Porete is thus included in the development of elite theological mysticism at the height of the later middle ages. Of course, that recognition is marred substantially by the implication that male successors (such as Eckhart) were required to develop the profundities adequately. However, the recognition is evident and it situates Porete, as never before or after, firmly within a milieu.

Grundmann would, nevertheless, be the last scholar for many years to accord Porete such a resonance with her contemporaries. He would also be the last for a long time to view her sympathetically and to give her work a positive role in the intellectual history of the age. Rather, Grundmann's work became the impetus for studies that transformed Porete into a pernicious and obfuscating heretic, a 'bad apple' that discredited her extra-regular contemporaries, ruined the reputations of beguines and cast a long shadow over the reception of female religious in the medieval west. From this point forward, the process of excluding Porete from the discourse of an orthodox milieu began in earnest. Heretic, rogue leader of a heretical sect, nemesis of the good beguine, all these categories have served to reinforce Porete's status on the fringes of the religiosity of the period.

³⁴⁶ *Religious Movements*, p.183, my emphasis.

Into temptation and peril: from misguided heretic to pernicious heresiarch

Important in assigning Porete a role as the arch-heresiarch of the later Middle Ages is Ernest W. McDonnell, whose institutional history *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, with special emphasis on the Belgian Scene*³⁴⁷ claimed an invaluable debt to (amongst others)³⁴⁸ Grundmann's "penetrating insight".³⁴⁹ McDonnell's mammoth tracing of the 'beguine-beghard' movement, used as its springboard the "continuous waves of religious excitement"³⁵⁰ that followed the Gregorian Reform. Identifying the *vita apostolica* as the locus of a bifurcated movement that either 'revolted' or 'submitted' to the ecclesiastical hierarchy (and thus 'earned' its 'heretical' or 'non-heretical' categories of classification),³⁵¹ McDonnell's analysis is remarkable in its meticulous attention to detailed records. Representative of an archival history of the Middle Ages, the purpose of the work is, McDonnell claims, to present a "synthetic" treatment of the beguine-beghard movement, "broadly conceived as a cultural force".³⁵² The means of doing this are a detailing of documents³⁵³ that continue to provide historians with an invaluable warehouse of otherwise scattered sources that are remarkably extensive and informative. As a result, "Most scholars agree that McDonnell's work is definitive. There is no historian working today in northern urban church history ...who would not consult McDonnell first almost as a matter of

³⁴⁷ E.W.McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture with Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (1954), (New York: Octagon Books, 1969).

³⁴⁸ The author also acknowledges Alcantra Mens, L.J.M Philippen, R. Hanon de Louvet and Simone Roisin.

³⁴⁹ *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p. viii.

³⁵⁰ *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p. vii.

³⁵¹ Accordingly, as with Grundmann, McDonnell does not address the interests of patriarchal power relations, nor does he question the construction of heresy within that power relationship. Thus, the persecution of beguines for McDonnell was largely due to individual 'rogue beguines' *singulariter*, who gave the others a bad name because of their "mendicancy, vagabondage, doctrinal errors, and moral aberrations", *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p. 6.

³⁵² *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p.viii.

³⁵³ Listed by McDonnell as "1) hagiographical and literary references; 2) the Roman Bullarium, conciliar legislation, and chronicles; and 3) testaments, property deeds, and town ordinances", *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p.viii.

course”.³⁵⁴

McDonnell’s indebtedness to Grundmann is particularly evident in his acceptance of the idea that the beguine and beghard movement sprang from a shared dedication to the *vita apostolica*. Unlike Grundmann, however, McDonnell qualifies this foundational cohesion by claiming that beguines and beghards *earned* their heretical or non-heretical categories by either revolting from, or submitting to, the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This is an important distinction, quite different to Grundmann’s ‘women at risk’ principle, in that it places the burden of guilt baldly upon the accused. Not that McDonnell was alone in this conclusion; Grundmann had already pointed the way and Henry Charles Lea had concluded that Porete was “the first apostle in France of the German sect of the Brethren of the Free Spirit”.³⁵⁵ It was McDonnell, however, who began the post-medieval trial in earnest.

McDonnell’s explanation of the heated institutional attack on beguines in the later middle ages is that persecution was largely due to individual ‘rogue beguines’ who gave the others a bad name. He draws a distinction between these ‘rogues’ (*beguine singulariter in saeculo degentes*) and ‘enclosed beguines’ (*beguine clausae*), with the former firmly classified as troublemakers: “it is they above all who by their mendicancy, vagabondage, doctrinal errors, and moral aberrations caused the most trouble for the *beguine clausae*, at times discrediting the whole movement”.³⁵⁶ Gone therefore, is the suggestion found within Grundmann’s work that these *singulariter* were lambs to the wolves, easy prey for *virii religiosi* and for the spread of ideas that resonated with their ‘innate’ religious excitement. Rather, McDonnell positions them as actively pursuing a deviant lifestyle with dire consequences for their obedient, enclosed contemporaries.

³⁵⁴ “The Curtis Beguinages”, p.47.

³⁵⁵ Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages*, pp.122-23

³⁵⁶ *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p.6.

For McDonnell, a prime example of this deviancy is Porete, the penultimate rogue and propagandist³⁵⁷ whom he claims “must have been an unattached beguine, with no fixed residence, regarding mendicancy as a means of livelihood, pursuing a life of moral laxity, and refusing to submit to authority”.³⁵⁸ Following this characteristic series of assumptions, accompanied as they are by an utter elision of the nature of his source material, McDonnell gives Porete the dubious distinction of being responsible not only for much of the abuse afforded beguines and women religious but also for the persecution of extra-regular associations in general:³⁵⁹ “heresiarchs such as Margaret Porete ... who went under the name of beguine, had the immediate consequence not only of casting discredit upon the feminine movement but of sharpening the antagonism of ecclesiastical and secular authorities to extraregular associations generally”.³⁶⁰ As with the inquisitors, so with McDonnell – Porete remains unquestionably guilty and is condemned as a clear representative of pernicious and obdurate ecclesiastic criminality.³⁶¹

The inquisitorial nature of McDonnell’s interpretation appears to be primarily informed by issues that early scholarship had accepted *prime facie* in Porete’s case – the accuracy and validity of the sources. Thus, Porete’s trial documents are seen fundamentally as an accurate recording of her deviancy, one that demonstrates a responsive and rightly repressive condemnation. This is important for Porete studies because this phase of the scholarship is one in which, as Watson suggests, “the present repeats the past by working with the same categories as caused the condemnation of Porete’s thought in the first place.... [thus]...the demonisation of Porete by a few scholars ...[is informed by an]...assumption that her condemnation was the result of valid ecclesiastical process, and

³⁵⁷ *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p.491.

³⁵⁸ *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p.376.

³⁵⁹ *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p.490.

³⁶⁰ *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p.490.

³⁶¹ McDonnell makes similar assumptions regarding Bloemardinne of Brussels, *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p.492-496.

so must perforce be justified”.³⁶²

McDonnell’s views have cast something of an enduring shadow across later reconstructions of Porete and represent a view of history that Nicola Watkinson might identify as ‘old history’ – an approach in which the past is seen as “a monolithic edifice”³⁶³ that can be reconstructed cohesively and in its entirety from its original fixed state. The assumption here is that the historian is able to stand outside the monolith and objectively sort the sources out to reveal the truth that the past has hidden from us. Sifting through the detritus, the jigsaw can be put together and the ‘real’ picture unveiled. McDonnell was clearly this kind of historian. Primarily, the remains of history are the sources and thus for McDonnell, archivist extraordinaire, Porete is pernicious, obstinate and morally corrupt, *because the sources tell him that this is so*. She is also a beguine because the sources tell him so, although he consistently points out elsewhere in his work that the term was used fluidly in the period, predominantly as an offensive term, linked to the term heretic.³⁶⁴

Despite these troubling aspects, McDonnell withholds suspicion of his sources and takes them at face value; each source represents part of an ordered past that, though missing the odd portion, nevertheless represents a re-constructible image of the past. As Joel Rosenthal points out, however, “Winners write history. They also determine the creation, the content, and the scope of the sources”.³⁶⁵ Of course it is commonplace to assert this now, as it is also commonplace to remind readers that the writers of history in this period were predominantly men, for the most part paternalistic at best and misogynist at worst. However, for the study of Porete, this acceptance of the source material has carried

³⁶² *Melting into God*, p.22.

³⁶³ Nicola Watkinson, *Medieval Textual Production and the Politics of Women’s Writing*, p.8.

³⁶⁴ *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p.429.

³⁶⁵ “Introduction” to *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*, Joel. T Rosenthal [ed.], (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), pp.vii – xvii, p.vii.

significant weight, as we shall see in the following chapter. Primarily this is because we have so little of it and must extrapolate from limited material. What we make of her life, her trial and her death and how we understand her contribution to the cultural world of the later middle ages, all of this is informed directly *by five sources only*,³⁶⁶ one of which is a book that McDonnell, to give him his due, was completely unaware of.

Reflected Glory: sensations, scandals and *psuedomulieres*

In 1946 Romana Guarnieri announced in the obscure Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore romano*³⁶⁷ that she had located the 'certain book' referred to in the trial of Porete. Recognising a correlation between three articles justifying Porete's condemnation³⁶⁸ and passages in Clare Kirchberger's Middle English translation of *The Mirror*,³⁶⁹ Guarnieri was led to the Chantilly Condé catalogue's description of a manuscript that was most likely the original of the Middle English translation (from which Kirchberger's translation was drawn).³⁷⁰ The source was a French text *Le Mirrouer des simples âmes anienties et qui seulement demourent en vouloir et désire d'amour*³⁷¹ of previously unknown authorship, but thought to be the work of either Jan Van Ruusbroec or Margaret of Hungary. Guarnieri's attribution remains unchallenged.

This news caused barely a ripple in academia initially, mainly because of the

³⁶⁶ 1) the *Nangis Chronicles*, 2) the *Frachet Chronicles*, 3) Jean d'Outremeuse's *Ly Meur des Histors*, 4) the documents of condemnation (see Appendix A) and 5) *The Mirror*. Sargent adds a brief snippet which I note here as an addendum: the writings of English theologian John Baconthorpe, a student in Paris at the time, who commented on "a certain beguine who published a book against the clergy". See "Annihilation", p.257.

³⁶⁷ "Lo 'Specchio della anime Semplici' e Margherita Poirette", p.3. The article was reprinted in *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà*, Vol. 4, 1965, pp.513-635 and pp.661-663.

³⁶⁸ The articles were drawn from Porete's trial documents and the *Grandes chroniques de Fance*. Considerable detail regarding Guarnieri's discovery is provided in Judith Grant, Edmund Colledge, J.C.Marler, "Introductory Interpretative Essay", pp. xxxv-lxxxvii. An account that does not praise Guarnieri's work quite so effusively can be found in Sargent's *Annihilation*.

³⁶⁹ Clare Kirchberger, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, (London: Orchard Books, 1927).

³⁷⁰ With annotations by the still unaccounted for M.N. See, "Introductory Interpretative Essay", p.lxxx

³⁷¹ Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS F XIV 26.

obscurity of the journal. However, this inertia was short-lived and gradually scholars became aware of a kind of sensational proportions. Indeed, for historians interested in medieval women's religious participation, and particularly for students of heresy, the news once it did break was received with much excitement. As much as a paucity of source material is always an issue for medieval historians in general, it is particularly so for those who study medieval heresy. This is considered to be because the inquisitors made every effort to rid the world of any remains of the works of alleged heretics.³⁷² Cases of heresy were recorded, certainly, but increasingly these records were being recognised as skewed documents replete with stereotypical images of the heretic and composed with a copyist's reliance on heresy handbooks. Little is to be found that offers a first-hand account of the accused' 'voice' without being marred by the editing and paraphrasing of unsympathetic notaries. Guarnieri's find, therefore, represented a coup of the highest order because it meant that both hostile sources *and* those composed by the subject of that hostility were now available for perusal.

The flurry of scholarly activity that followed cognisance of *The Mirror's* author was shadowed, as we have already pointed out, by events worthy of a best-selling Umberto Eco novel.³⁷³ In 1957, M. De Corberon, perhaps anticipating that he had 'out-scooped' Guarnieri, announced the discovery of a German *and* a French manuscript with the latter understood to be held by a religious community³⁷⁴ who did not wish to relinquish the manuscript. De Corberon, however, appears to have been duped by an "academic confidence man"³⁷⁵ and both manuscripts are now generally considered to be hoaxes;³⁷⁶ a

³⁷² "Introductory Interpretative Essay", pp.xliii – xliv .

³⁷³ See Kurt Ruh, "Le Miroir de Simples Ames de Marguerite Porete", *Verbum et Signum*, 2 (1975), pp.365-387.

³⁷⁴ French speaking, but geographically outside France.

³⁷⁵ "Melting into God", p 21 and note 7.

³⁷⁶ See Watson, "Melting into God", p.21, n. 7 and Sargent "Annihilation", p.260. Colledge, Marler and Grant point out that one manuscript "formerly in a French provincial library is now considered lost; and the report of a third by Corberon is now considered a hoax", "Introductory Interpretative Essay", p. xliv: note 32.

disappointment that was to be compounded by his incomplete translation of a genuine redaction of *The Mirror*. Then, in 1961, a seventeenth century manuscript of *The Mirror* was lost in transit between Bourges municipal bibliothèque and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.³⁷⁷ This loss was followed by further misfortune in 1968; Colledge and James Walsh's "*The Cloud of Unknowing and The Mirror of Simple Souls in the Latin Glossed Translations by Richard Methley of Mount Grace Charterhouse*" was at press with the *Archivio* when the journal folded. The submission has never been re-issued, except informally.

Despite these setbacks and multiple intrigues, or perhaps because of them, work continued apace on Porete and that phase of scholarship which is now generally understood to be the battle over her orthodoxy or otherwise began. This is odd, because one would have thought that the discovery that a condemned heretic was the author of a book published by the Downside Benedictines as a 'mystical classic'³⁷⁸ would have given pause to Porete's demonisation. Guarnieri's scoop, however, sidestepped this orthodox acknowledgement and focussed on the links between Porete, her *Mirror* and the *Free Spirit* heresy; an avenue of enquiry that had always shadowed Porete in the scholarship, but was forcefully emphasised by Guarnieri's findings (thereby radicalising Porete in the scholarship). Guarnieri published the first critical edition of the text in 1965 as part of a larger treatise on the *Free Spirit* heresy.³⁷⁹

The 1965 *Archivio* publication includes the original article that reunited *The Mirror* and author in an appendix, but it goes much further than just attribution; it ties Porete

³⁷⁷ Although some report it has gone missing within the bowels of the Bibliothèque Nationale.

³⁷⁸ Accompanied by the formal Church approvals of *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, p. 118.

³⁷⁹ "Le Miroir des simples âmes, in *Il Movimento del Libero Spirito. Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà*, 4, (Rome: Edizione di storia e letteratura, 1965), 351-708. The complete edition was published in conjunction with Paul Verdeyen in *Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Medievals*, 69, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1986).

explicitly to the spread of a *Free Spirit* heresy, presenting her as the grand matriarch of a flourishing heresy that required widespread suppression. Using a chronological and geographical approach, Guarnieri canvasses 181 *Free Spirit* heresy cases, charting what is for her evidence of *The Mirror's* central role in the dissemination of the *Free Spirit* heresy in Europe. In this staggering cavalcade of cases we are presented with a series of antinomian and pantheist doctrines purported to belong to a wildly proliferating sect who used *The Mirror* as a guide to doctrine. The result, Sargent points out, is the impression of a fundamentally orthodox Europe beset by *Free Spirit* heretics wielding *The Mirror* as their bible.³⁸⁰

Guarnieri's harnessing of Porete to the heresy of the *Free Spirit* was brought about because she recognised links between propositions in *The Mirror* and the terminology of accusations of heresy. This link was further strengthened by Guarnieri's argument that the condemnation of *The Mirror* was responsible in part, for the Clementine bull *Ad Nostrum*,³⁸¹ which Lerner has famously observed "is the birth certificate of the heresy of the Free Spirit ...without it being fully clear whether there was any child".³⁸² Derived, it is thought, from the Council of Vienne's *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*,³⁸³ the propositions can be found in *The Mirror* in various forms and also echo the condemnations cited in the *Chronicles of Nangis*.³⁸⁴ The significance of this has proved profound with much being

³⁸⁰ "Annihilation", p. 255, note 6.

³⁸¹ The condemned propositions from *Ad nostrum* that parallel those used to condemn Porete are: "Proposition 2: that after he has reached this grade of perfection, a man does not need to fast or pray; for the sensuality is then so perfectly subject to the reason, that a man can freely grant to the body whatever it pleases. Proposition 6: that to practice acts of virtue is proper to an imperfect man, and the perfect soul may take leave of the virtues. Proposition 8: that they need not rise at the elevation of the Body of Christ, nor show reverence to it, for it would be an imperfection in them, if they descended from the purity and height of their contemplation to mediate upon the mystery or the sacrament of the Eucharist or anything concerning the Passion of the humanity of Christ", cited in, "Annihilation", p. 257. The eighth proposition is described by Sargent as arguable.

³⁸² Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p. 83.

³⁸³ "Annihilation", p.257.

³⁸⁴ For an extended analysis of the *ad nostrum* link and for the Latin propositions, see Roman Guarineri and Edmund Colledge "The Glosses by M.N. and Richard Methley to The Mirror of Simple Souls'.

made of the links between the condemned propositions and the book and even more being made of the flurry of accusations of antinomianism and pantheism that followed in the wake.³⁸⁵

Guarnieri's discovery of *The Mirror's* author has been characterised as "one of the most exciting ... discoveries made in the field of mediaeval history"³⁸⁶ and her attribution, as we have said, remains unquestioned. However, the ways in which she extended her find in *Il Movimento* has brought criticism regarding form, methodology and the implications of the work's focus.³⁸⁷ Lerner, for example, expresses dissatisfaction with the form and detail of the work, adding that Guarnieri fails to attend to the 'business of history' and make meaning from sources and events. He complains of vast lists of cases that are impenetrable, repetitive and not always accurate.³⁸⁸ Sargent is similarly concerned with repetitiveness and inaccuracies. He points out that many of the 181- strong list of instances of *Free Spirit* heresy, "are repetitious, and many refer to persons and events not directly tied to this, or any other, heresy".³⁸⁹ Thus, Guarnieri's presentation of Porete's ideology as the heretical benchmark of a significant religious movement is built upon erroneous attributions that do not stand up to scrutiny.

Of course, that there exist accusations that are not repeats, or red herrings, does seem to indicate that there was, in some form, a religiosity that endorsed an alternative path to that of affective religiosity. However, as Sargent again points out, to apportion the

³⁸⁵ See for example, Raoul Vaneigem, *The Movement of the Free Spirit*, (New York: Zone Books, 1994), esp. pp. 128-143.

³⁸⁶ *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.73, note 32. Grant, Colledge and Marler incorrectly omit the ellipsis ..., not a huge crime but for one as demanding on other scholars as Colledge, worth pointing out; Judith Grant, Edmund Colledge, J.C. Marler, "Introductory Interpretative Essay", *The Mirror of Simple Souls by Marguerite Porete, ca. 1250-1310*, lxxxi.

³⁸⁷ See for example Lerner's comments in *Heresy of the free Spirit*, p. 7 and Watson, *Melting into God*, particularly p. 22 and Sargent, *Annihilation*, p. 255, note 6.

³⁸⁸ Lerner cites here also the complaints of Grundmann, who points out that Guarnieri leaves out significant cases in her listing of heresy trials using *Ad Nostrum*. Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.7.

³⁸⁹ "Annihilation", p. 255.

transmission of these ideas to Porete is to draw a long bow. This is so because:

...by using the *Mirouer* as the litmus-text for the Free Spirit heresy Guarnieri has given it [*The Mirror*] an apparent prominence that it may not have had in actual fact. People accused of holding the same beliefs as those condemned in the *Mirouer*, or beliefs similar to them, appear to have been readers of Marguerite Porete's book because their condemnation is referred to it [sic] – either by contemporary inquisitors, or by the modern historian. In neither case does this constitute a demonstration that the persons in question actually read the *Mirouer*, but rather that they might have agreed with it if they had.³⁹⁰

Therefore, Sargent concludes, whilst it is remarkable that *The Mirror*, as one of the first vernacular mystical texts, survives in so many translations, we should not assume that this is testament to its popularity or influence.

Guarnieri's representation of Porete as the grand heresiarch of the *Free Spirit* movement has been formed by a reading of Porete's trial documents and subsequent inquisitorial registers without a full consideration of the power relations that shaped them. Guarnieri does not consider the context in which the proceedings were composed, nor does she account for the significance of the development of knowledge that the documents represent. Thus, as with McDonnell, *accusations* of heretical doctrines are *proof* of a heretical movement. Now it may well be that the accounts of inquisitorial documents and Porete's trial records attest to some measure of a doctrinal similarity; however, this does not necessarily indicate that Porete led the way. Nor does it indicate that these accounts are accurate recordings of a widespread 'movement' constituted in deviancy. Rather, it can be argued that the accusations of heresies similar to Porete's were founded in the process of utilising knowledge of heresies – as promulgated by *Ad nostrum* and *Cum de quibusdam* – and that the responses of deponents, either confessional or represented by the notaries, are a form of self-fulfilling prophesy in which 'leading questions' governed the outcome of the interview.

³⁹⁰ "Annihilation", p.255, note 6.

Guarnieri's assessment of Porete and her discovery of the real author of *The Mirror* prompted considerable debate regarding the validity of the ecclesiastical condemnation. Whilst contributors such as Marilyn Doiron³⁹¹ and Jean Orcibal³⁹² maintained a positive view of the work, others were less than convinced by *The Mirror's* posthumous reception, seeing the subtlety of the work (along with Porete's contemporaneous supporters) as one that continued to lead those not well versed in theology into error. In particular, Edmund Colledge³⁹³ stands as the most dogged in his insistence that *The Mirror* and Porete were undoubtedly heretical. Colledge worked with Guarnieri on the "The Glosses by 'M.N.' and Richard Methley to 'The Mirror of Simple Souls'" and found in agreement with Porete's inquisitors that "the *Mirror* is a work of heresy, written by a teacher of false doctrine skilled in concealing her unorthodoxy behind ambiguity and imprecision".³⁹⁴ Not only this, but, as his work on the subject developed, he added that she lacked control of her subject and suggested that *The Mirror* was deficient in sophistication³⁹⁵ and without deep comprehension of the Dionysian themes she articulated.³⁹⁶ This view has remained unchanged in Colledge's most recent work on the subject, *The New Latin Mirror of Simple Souls*,³⁹⁷ which reinforces his contention of *The Mirror* as heterodox and Porete as a deliberate heretic.

³⁹¹ Sister Marilyn Doiron, "The Middle English Translation of *Le mirouer des simples ames*", in A. Albertus [ed.], *Dr L. Reypens-Album: Opstellen aangeboden aan Prof. Dr L. Reypens s. j. ter gelegenheid van zijn tachtigste verjaardag op 26 Februari* (Antwerp, 1964), pp. 131-52.

³⁹² "'Le Miroir des simples ames' et la 'secte' du Libre Esprit", *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 175 (1969), pp.35-60.

³⁹³ Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., was priest of St Monica's, London, and a member of the Austin Friars in England. Professor Emeritus of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto, his final publication, a new translation of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, was completed whilst he was on his deathbed and published posthumously; *The Mirror of Simple Souls by Marguerite Porete, ca. 1250-1310*.

³⁹⁴ "The Glosses by M.N.", pp.381-382.

³⁹⁵ In comparison to Eckhart's work, "Poverty of the Will", p.28.

³⁹⁶ "Poverty of the Will", p.31.

³⁹⁷ This translation compares the sole surviving French manuscript with M.N.'s Middle English translation and Richard Methley's Latin version. M.N.'s prologue and glosses are translated in appendices. Notes to the translation discuss divergences between the versions and explain allusions. Translations of the marginal comments of the French scribe are also provided.

It is not only Porete's orthodoxy, however, that is at stake in Colledge's work on the subject. Rather, in an interpretative introduction to the former translation, Colledge, with collaborators Grant and Marler, not only consistently deride Porete's *Mirror*, but also her character, her behaviour and the genuine nature of her claims for spiritual knowledge. Porete's persistent advocacy of her work, for example, is constituted as a testament to her extreme arrogance and obstinacy, rather than as an indication of her desire for acceptance within the Church hierarchy. Thus, Porete is accused of arrogance where other scholars may see perseverance and confidence in her philosophy:

She vaunts her own spiritual isolation, she treats scholarly opposition with scorn, and we can see, in her disregard of the warnings she had received from Guy, and in William's story of his failure to make her give some account of herself, a stubborn persistence in her opinions, even when she knew that this could cost her a cruel death.³⁹⁸

The resemblance to sentiments expressed by Porete's inquisitors is here particularly evident. However, in the accompanying assessment of contemporaneous support for Porete, the suggestion of her deceit, manipulation and false mystical piety outstrip even those of her inquisitors.

In discussing the approvals that are described by Porete in *The Mirror*, for example, Colledge and his collaborators cast doubt on Porete's claims to have received any ecclesiastical support. We have "only her word for it"³⁹⁹ the authors assert, the implication being that Porete was deceitful and more, that she was manipulative of measures that would vouchsafe her work which Colledge believes she *knew* to be heretical.⁴⁰⁰ Moreover, in an accusation reminiscent of the charge of *pseudomulier*, Porete is also constituted as a

³⁹⁸ "Introductory Interpretative Essay", p.lxxvi.

³⁹⁹ "Introductory Interpretative Essay", p.xl.

⁴⁰⁰ "In fine, Margaret foresaw that she would incur the Church's hostility for the book ... She was no friend of 'Holy Church the less', or of the Church's institutions ... She took pride in the singularity of her doctrine and found pleasure in knowing how few there were who would understand and accept it", "Introductory Interpretative Essay", pp. Lix-lx.

fraudulent mystic in possession of a “spirituality [that] is purely intellectual, with no indications that she had received any of the private revelations of the secrets of divine nature which are the distinguishing marks of genuine mysticism”.⁴⁰¹ Exactly how one might measure the veracity of ‘private revelations’ and the ‘secrets of divine nature’ Colledge et.al. do not divulge. Nor do they explain why ‘intellectual’ spirituality is inferior to what one can only imagine is ‘experiential’ spirituality. Nevertheless, these claims represent an extremely significant blow to the reception of Porete’s work, because they suggest that she lacked any true motivation to disseminate her ideas (in the traditional Christian sense) and make a lie of her claim to be “a creature by whose mediation the Creator made this book of Himself”.⁴⁰²

Porete’s identity as a mystic is, in Colledge’s reading, thereby denied. This is an important distinction not only because it strips Porete of validity as a religious writer but also because it opens up the issue of authority in textual transmission. Porete’s ‘knowledge’ was not received through divine intervention, but rather through her own devices – by means of a ‘purely intellectual spirituality’. This makes her suspect, a *pseudo mystic* who did not occupy the elite role of credentialed male theologian and, as such, was unable to ‘control her subject’. Again, we can argue that this is reflective of inquisitorial aims; Porete is cast as an invader of the textual territory of credentialed males, her small acknowledgement of the traditional rationale for female religious writing written off as a lie. This is interesting because in terms of Porete’s identity, the term ‘mystic’ becomes unstable, a contested category that is ineffective as an identity category (and we might remember Jantzen here).⁴⁰³ This is made clear in Colledge’s objections to Porete’s status as

⁴⁰¹ “Introductory Interpretative Essay”, p.lxxiii.

⁴⁰² *The Mirror*, p.221.

⁴⁰³ Jantzen’s argument, we will remember, denied an essentialised concept of mysticism and argued that as an abstract term, it does not exist. *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p.14.

mystic whereby what ‘counts’ as mysticism for him is inherently related to the construction of an identity based on ideological objectives; Porete cannot be a mystic because he asserts her heterodoxy and she cannot be both in his ontology. This is problematic because it imposes a binary classification on Porete that serves to occlude her identity as a productive participant in her milieu.

The inquisitorial nature of Colledge’s work is unfortunate because it detracts from his significant contribution to the topic, a contribution that, though to my mind overweeningly antagonistic,⁴⁰⁴ nevertheless offers some important insights. Indeed, quite apart from the considerable input that Colledge makes in presenting another English translation of *The Mirror*,⁴⁰⁵ the assertion that Porete was not a beguine has considerable merit. For, whilst there is a continuing perception in the scholarship that Porete was a beguine, Colledge is at pains to point out that this is not an accurate attribution. Rather, he affords William’s classification as indicative of “no more than casual denigration”⁴⁰⁶ and he finds it difficult to “accept without qualification the statement that Margaret was in any strict sense a Beguine”.⁴⁰⁷ Admittedly, this seems to be because he finds her work devoid of any of the ‘admirable’ motives he sees as evident in the ‘minor literature’ associated with the beguine movement:

...we cannot see, in her book, any of [beguine literature’s] salient characteristics: assertion of the validity of the Beguines’ untutored, unlettered piety, fervid expressions of the commonest manifestations of the people’s devotions, deep feeling for the unhappy lot of the poor, certainty that in alleviating their want Beguines were performing works very dear to Christ and to his mother.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁴ A feature of Colledge’s work is an absence of engagement with alternative interpretations that have been offered over the last few decades. This is particularly evident in his final offering on the subject, *The Mirror of Simple Souls by Marguerite Porete, ca. 1250-1310*, which contains no relevant references after 1986.

⁴⁰⁵ *The Mirror of Simple Souls by Marguerite Porete, ca. 1250-1310* includes extensive footnotes and appendices that explore variants and annotations from the early Latin and Middle English translations.

⁴⁰⁶ “The Latin Mirror of Simple Souls”, p.179.

⁴⁰⁷ “Introductory Interpretative Essay”, p.xlviii.

⁴⁰⁸ “Introductory Interpretative Essay”, p.xlviii.

However, despite this further swipe at the spirituality of Porete, and despite a motive stemming it would seem from a desire to continue to single Porete out as a radical and purposeful heretic, Colledge's misgivings regarding Porete's beguine status are, I believe, valid. This is so because they stem from recognition both of the instability of the term 'beguine' in the period and from Porete's self-professed disassociation. As I have already argued, and will continue to argue in subsequent chapters, these two factors cannot be ignored in the historical apprehension of Porete.

The above dominant historical re-envisagings in this early phase of scholarship devoted to Porete have done much to improve our understanding of the period and of Porete as a historical subject. However, the methodological and ideological problems inherent in these offerings have also served, as Watson points out, to repeat the past "by working within the same categories [that] caused the condemnation of Porete's thought in the first place".⁴⁰⁹ In particular, the notion of Porete as heresiarch has reinforced the inquisitorial take on her alleged offences and this has resulted in much debate regarding the validity of ecclesiastical process. Consequently, much time has been devoted to debating the issue of Porete's 'guilt' or 'innocence'. This is not, however, the most useful means of approaching her case, because, as we explore pursue in the next chapter, definitions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are inherently constituted in the power relations from which they emerge as *categories*. Heresy is, in the strictest sense of the word, a divergence of doctrinal opinion as declared so by ecclesiastical authorities. However, heresy is also more than this, as is made clear by the posthumous reception of *The Mirror* and by the divergent pronouncements of Porete's contemporaries; it is a category defined into deviance by ecclesiastical censure. When that censure is not clearly visible (as it was not for Godfrey, Richard Methley and other supporters of *The Mirror*) then the heresy is absent; conversely,

⁴⁰⁹ "Melting into God", p.22.

when it is expedient to perceive censure, (as it was for those present at the Basel condemnation and also for John Wenck),⁴¹⁰ then the heresy resurfaces. Therefore, whilst it is important to account for Porete's alleged heresy in any attempt to re-envisage her as a historical subject, the accusation of 'heresy' says more about institutional responses from within the Church than it does of Porete's identity as a religious figure in the period.

Option two: The anomalous beguine mystic

Classifications of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are important in historical analyses. However, equally important is cognisance of the circumstances in which those classifications arose. This is particularly so when we attempt to reconstruct an identity for individuals discussed in official Church documents and illumined by self-authored textual offerings. This requires a careful consideration of competing motivations and of inferences drawn from relevant events and socio-cultural structures. For Porete, however, with one or two exceptions⁴¹¹ that identity remained settled in the category of 'heretic beguine' until the late 1970s, a classification that, as we have seen, is problematic in a number of ways. However, with increasing interest in heresy as a concept and with a new approach to women's religiosity of the period, doubts regarding that classification grew. In particular, attempts to rescue the 'voices' of those who are excluded from the written record, to distinguish between what was written and what can be cross-referenced from the sources, enabled a whole new reading of Porete's history. Accordingly, the term 'heretic beguine' was soon to be replaced with that of 'beguine mystic'.

⁴¹⁰ Who Lerner indicates linked the Basel articles with beghards, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.170.

⁴¹¹ For example Orcibal, Doiron and Evelyn Underhill.

Leaning towards rehabilitation: the much-maligned mystic

Acknowledging the problems associated with extracting the ‘voice’ of historical subjects from inquisitorial documents, has, as we have already pointed out, long been recognised by historians. Yet, for Porete, this realisation was somewhat tardy in impacting on the scholarship. In 1972, however, Robert Lerner released *The Heresy of the Free Spirit*, an important work that attempted to extricate historical ‘truth’ from the inquisitorial register by recognising the *topoi* of the inquisitor (context, methods and language) and comparing it with the textual remains of those that were accused of the so-called *Free Spirit* heresy. In doing so, Lerner exploded the notion that the *Free Spirit* was a discrete sect and argued, conversely, that it constituted an inquisitorial fiction. Rather than consisting of ‘an elite of amoral supermen’, as Norman Cohn put it,⁴¹² Lerner demonstrated that the *Free Spirits* found within the register were regularly the result of a particularly strong form of lay piety desirous of achieving the highest form of apostolic perfection. Thus, for Lerner, the line between orthodox mystical piety and heresy is very fine, a point he reiterates by refusing to engage in hard and fast theological assessments of the texts he analyses.

Recognising Porete as an important feature in scholarly readings on the subject, Lerner has provided one of the more important scholarly assessments of Porete to date. Assessing both her trial and her book, Lerner’s stands as one of the few works that seek to assess, in some detail, the controversies surrounding both a reading of her work and a reading of the documents that relate to her condemnation. In this, Lerner achieves a more sympathetic drawing of Porete than that which had previously been offered, arguing that

⁴¹² Title of chapter eight of Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary millenarians and mystical anarchists of the Middle Ages*, 3rd ed., (1957, 1961), (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 148.

whilst Porete's *Mirror* went "beyond orthodoxy"⁴¹³ hers was, nevertheless, a 'mysticism' that avoided "antinomian or libertine conclusions traditionally associated with the heresy of the Free Spirit".⁴¹⁴ His work on the subject thus positioned her as part of the inquisitorial response to a burgeoning lay desire towards perfecting the apostolic life and achieving union with God.⁴¹⁵ As for Porete's condemnation, Lerner found that her fate was brought about due to multiple factors including her decision to remain an active and unaffiliated voice of religiosity:

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. Her active life, her pertinacity, and the political situation surrounding her arrest certainly contributed to her death.⁴¹⁶

This contention, in contrast to Eleanor McLaughlin, who saw *The Mirror* as orthodox and Porete as a *Free Spirit*,⁴¹⁷ has left a lasting impression of Porete as a debateable heretic, condemned by her mendicancy and unusual in her religious expression.

Lerner's exploration of Porete's case has become an important first call for scholars interested in her case. The brevity and clarity with which he discusses her case is admirable and his apprehension of the difficulties within her source material is clearly articulated. For this reason it is worth quoting his assessment in detail:

Historians appropriate ...[inquisitorial documents]... with alacrity because of their apparently 'objective' nature, but, despite their value, the appearance is deceiving. The distorting influence of torture [and the stake] is obvious and ... [t]o make matters even more complicated, medieval protocols were nothing like modern trial records. Most were not taken verbatim but reproduced only the points the scribe or inquisitor thought most important. Furthermore, they were recorded in Latin, even when, as most often, the interrogations were conducted in the vernacular...[and]...

⁴¹³ *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.204.

⁴¹⁴ *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.208. Cohn makes this point too, though in less detail and still identifying Porete with the Free Spirit heresy.

⁴¹⁵ *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.232.

⁴¹⁶ *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.208.

⁴¹⁷ "The Heresy of the free Spirit and Late Medieval Mysticism", *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 4 (1972), pp.37-54.

procedures were of such a nature that they often produced stereotyped testimony.⁴¹⁸ Implicitly, therefore, Lerner recognises that the source material must be seen as a component within power relations in the period and accordingly he contends “for these reasons the study of protocols must be scrupulous and closely related to texts written by the presumed heretics themselves”.⁴¹⁹

This approach can only be seen as an advance in the ways in which historians apprehend the use of inquisitorial documents. Despite this, however, Lerner’s application of his ‘source critical’ approach is not always satisfactory. This is particularly so in his assessment of Porete whose identity, as articulated by Lerner, at times reinforces the classifications of the inquisitors. For example, notwithstanding his intention to scrupulously cross-reference the texts of alleged heretics with the inquisitorial record, Lerner discounts Porete’s own textual distancing from beguines,⁴²⁰ conflates the term ‘mendicancy’ with beguine,⁴²¹ and argues that Porete “was called a beguine by so many independent sources that the designation may be taken as certain”.⁴²² This last point is worth special mention because one can only presume that the sources Lerner is referring to here are both the trial documents and the chronicles. For him to reach this conclusion based not only on the records of her trial but on popular sources is unfortunate, not only because of his acknowledgement of the unstable nature of inquisitorial records, but also because of his own *caveat*, cited from Horace Walpole, that “[a]n historian who shall consult the Gazettes of the times will write as fabulous a romance as Gargantua”.⁴²³

⁴¹⁸ *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.5.

⁴¹⁹ *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.6.

⁴²⁰ “...the fact that beguines were included [in the list of opponents] is probably to be explained by the predominance of orthodox beguinal communities in the areas where Marguerite was active”, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.207.

⁴²¹ “Marguerite was a woman from Hainault who referred to herself as ‘a mendicant creature’ and who was called a beguine...” *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.71.

⁴²² *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.71.

⁴²³ Cited in Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.4.

Lerner's work gave a renewed vigour to Porete scholarship and succeeded in extinguishing, for the most part, the *Free Spirit* association that had shadowed her.⁴²⁴ In particular, Lerner's articulation of the fine line between speculative mysticism and heresy became a motif that continues to intrigue scholars of the period and raised concerns regarding the validity of enquiring into Porete's case with black and white conceptions of heresy and orthodoxy in place. This has proved highly influential in scholarship that attempts to 'render visible' the experiences of medieval religious women. Accordingly, Lerner's work stands as an important bridge between the historical characterisations of Porete as a heretic and Porete as a much-maligned beguine mystic.

The lost milieu

The notion of Porete as an anomalous beguine has its roots in the influential work of Bynum, which I explored in some detail in chapter one. To save us from traversing old ground, we will remember that Bynum characterises Porete as a 'fascinating exception'⁴²⁵ and that she contrasts her work, in its denial of somatic themes and advocacy of speculative approaches to God, with the ecstatic and somatic religious expressions of women that she sees as characteristic of the period. We will also remember that authors such as Hollywood have argued for a greater appreciation of the diversity of women religious' voices in religious literature. Prior to this challenge being voiced the import of the distinction between Porete's work and that of other female contemporaries (written about by men) was vigorously explored. This represented an important move away from earlier scholarship as Porete became viewed in light of this distinction and in light of a more favourable pursuit

⁴²⁴ An exception to this is Raoul Vaneigem whom, in 1994, claimed her as an important representative of an underground 'Free Spirit' movement, *The Movement of the Free Spirit*, (New York: Zone Books, 1994), esp. pp.128-143.

⁴²⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p.124.

dedicated to perceiving the hidden voices of women within historical records.

Predominantly, this shift in conceptualising Porete has been the result of feminist readings coupled with the popular study of female ecstatic mystics. Often occurring in sweeping extracts and commentaries on medieval women writers and mystics,⁴²⁶ these explorations served to bring Porete and *The Mirror* to the attention of a wide range of budding and established scholars.⁴²⁷ The release in 1986 of Paul Verdeyen's compilation of the documents and contemporary chronicles relating to the trial of Porete and Guiard de Cressonessart⁴²⁸ has contributed further to a broader understanding of the case. As a result, the curious case of Porete and the curious nature of her book has increasingly come to the fore with feminist scholars, in particular, bringing to the topic a much needed and fresh exploration. The case of text and author has been explored in terms of Porete's position as a woman, the violating nature of her 'mystic' claims and the political and social events that surrounded both the composition of *The Mirror* and her condemnation as a heretic.

Returning to the text and trial of Porete, scholarship influenced by feminist ideology and methodology saw in Porete's condemnation a visible moment in which the power structures of a highly patriarchal institution repressed and persecuted a woman who transgressed on a number of levels. For many, these transgressions appeared fundamentally related to gender issues. In particular, Porete's activities and social status received considerable attention. Porete was an unenclosed female who did not confer with the

⁴²⁶ For example: Emile Zum Brunn and Epiney Burgard, *Women Mystics*, op.cit., 143-74. Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary literature*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp.294-98; Katharina Wilson, [ed.], Gwendolyn Bryant, [trans.], *Medieval Women Writers*, (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1984), pp.204-26; Peter Dronke *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: a critical Study of texts from Perpetua (-203) to Marguerite Porete (1310)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁴²⁷ Of which an interesting example would be *Worshipping Women*, a collection of honours theses edited by Dr. Ward and myself for the Sydney University History Department.

⁴²⁸ "Le Proces d'Inquisition contre Marguerite Porete et Guiard de Cressonessart (1309-1310)".

manifestations of piety expected of medieval women religious, who was probably itinerant, certainly learned to a degree and who actively disseminated her teachings in the vernacular in order to reach those outside of the Latinised scholastic world. These factors became seen, in confluence with the flourishing of female religiosity and the concurrent intolerance of the institutional Church, to have significantly contributed to the violent suppression of Porete and her book.

Along with the visible moment of suppression scholars also saw Porete's visibility itself as an important impetus for the inquisitorial response. For example, Petroff sees Porete's 'crime' as one that consisted of "speaking publicly, teaching her ideas publicly ... and in her own voice".⁴²⁹ Further, in attempting to address the apparent disjunctions between the fates of women writers similar to Porete, she argues that:

She may have been heretical in her views – although the very evolved spirituality she is presenting seems no more or less dangerous than the spiritual teachings of Beatrijs or Hadewijch – but she was much more visible than they were, for she refused to hide behind God's voice or to submit to the church.⁴³⁰

Thus, as with Lerner, Porete becomes a 'probable heretic', not because her work was inherently unorthodox but because the authorities were aware of it circulating in the public sphere. Other scholars, however, whilst concurring with the public and gendered transgression Porete engaged in, found her work to be fundamentally orthodox. Catharine Randall, for example, sees Porete's 'heresy' as not so much due to her expressed doctrine, but because of her "prolonged and thoughtful dialogue with church doctrine ...[thus].... [h]er 'heresy' does not consist in unorthodoxy. Instead, that which is judged heretical is due

⁴²⁹ *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, p.282.

⁴³⁰ *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, p.282.

to the unaccustomed admixture of religious discussion with literary technique and focus”⁴³¹.

As with the past history of *Mirror* analysis, therefore, questions regarding the orthodoxy of Porete’s major work remained an important focus for scholarly attention. However, with the benefit of Guarnieri’s attribution and with fresh interpretations founded in literary and feminist theory, her book, the measure of her outspokenness, began to attract more thorough analyses. The description of the ‘annihilated’ soul who did not need, in the end, ‘creaturely’ mediation with God, in particular, began to be seen as an important factor in her condemnation. This liberating quality, implicit in the end result of most mysticism but so explicitly stated in *The Mirror* that its challenge to ecclesiastical authority is difficult to ignore, indicated to scholars such as Emile Zum Brun and Georgette Epiney-Burgard that “the ecclesiastical institutions felt threatened, ...[by]... the essential freedom of the soul”⁴³² as expressed in Porete’s work. This threat was emphasised by Porete’s refusal to fashion her book into any kind of format that might have possibly have afforded her the mantle of *virago* – honorary male. Rather, scholars pointed out that Porete had penned a sophisticated vernacular interpretation of a hitherto male theology (apophatic mysticism) in the vocabulary of a particularly feminine spirituality, using a structure of playful dialogue and *disputatio* to describe the journeying souls’ annihilating return to God. Thus, for scholars such as Lichtmann, Porete represents a radical Dionysian beguine who invaded the textual territory of credentialed male theologians.

The transgression of gender and textual participation that Porete and her authorship of *The Mirror* represented thus became seen as crucial components in her condemnation

⁴³¹ “Person, Place, Perception: A Proposal for the Reading of Porete's *Miroir des ames simples et aneanties*”, *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 25, (1995), pp. 229-44, p.230.

⁴³² *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*, p.158.

and consequent execution; Porete's contravention was brought about not only by both writing and teaching, but also by exploring theological and literary ideas that were considered the sole province of male elites. Her 'heresy', therefore, became seen as not so much an objection based on theological grounds, but as one grounded in the challenge to intellectual and theological authority. More than this, some scholars began to see Porete as moving beyond the intellectual developments of her age and saw in her *Mirror* a challenge to "the dominant monastic and scholastic paradigms in the West".⁴³³ In this way, Porete's 'heresy' became disassociated from the simplistic notion that the church was responding to a purely doctrinal aberration that represented a threat to the 'community of the faithful'.

The notion of Porete as a radical was further reinforced by analyses of the antinomian accusations implicit in the selected articles recorded in the register. This selection became seen as a means by which Porete's inquisitors were able to condemn her on theological grounds whilst 'really' condemning her for a series of gendered transgressions. As evidence for this, scholars consistently reiterated that Porete's work was "read disruptively"⁴³⁴ and that *The Mirror* was decontextualised and fractured in order to proclaim it, and Porete, heretical. Some scholars thought that this was because of 'bafflement' on the part of the inquisitors⁴³⁵ whilst others considered more sinister motives were at work.⁴³⁶ As scholarly attention became more and more interested in her text, however, these motives became associated with Porete's subversion of the social order. On this, Robert Cotrell writes:

⁴³³ Joanne Maguire, "The Paradox of Unlikeness in Acard of St. Victor and Marguerite Porete", *Magistra: a journal of women's spirituality in history*, Vol 4, No 1, 1998, pp. 79-105, p. 82.

⁴³⁴ Catharine Randall, "Person, Place, Perception", p.229.

⁴³⁵ "Porete's judges were baffled by what we might call Porete's dynamic, illustrative theology", Catharine Randall, "Person, Place, Perception, p.230.

⁴³⁶ Jantzen claims that "A careful look at [Porete's] book, and indeed a look at the whole manner of the inquisitorial procedure in relation to Marguerite shows that the so-called heretical articles can only have been a pretext". Jantzen doesn't elaborate in the detail one would expect on this point. Rather, she goes on to pursue the notion of Porete as politically minded and politically threatening, "Disrupting the Sacred", p. 77ff.

Now patriarchal discourse is the linguistic representation of a social order that guarantees masculine supremacy and dominance ... The male clerics, guardians of patriarchal discourse, who judged and condemned Porete saw heresy in her text. They were surely right... but not in the sense that her text cannot be reconciled with doctrine; Methley's reading suggests it can. Right, however, in the sense that by usurping the prerogatives of patriarchal discourse, by deviating from the model, Porete in fact subverts the social order of which that discourse is a sign.⁴³⁷

Accordingly, for this phase of scholarship, Porete was constituted as a radical 'not heretic', in the sense that she did not *deliberately* refute the doctrine of the established church; *pace* Colledge. Rather, the nature of her text became seen as cause for a condemnation that was, as Johnston pointed out, "regrettable, but not surprising".⁴³⁸

The rehabilitation of Porete at this stage in the scholarship represented quite an advance and stands as a defining moment wherein Porete's 'voice' began to be distinguished from that of her inquisitors. As radical and subversive mystic, however, this characterisation developed, for some, into a rather concerning and anachronistic tendency to view her as a proto-feminist, as vanguard of a female precocity that achieved 'empowerment' by subverting and appropriating religious and cultural ideologies. I have already discussed the dangerous balance that the feminist imperative of a "hermeneutics of empathy"⁴³⁹ and a "hermeneutics of suspicion"⁴⁴⁰ can bring to the subject of medieval women religious. Porete has not been lost in this, despite the overweening attention given to somatic religious of the period. Finke, for example, points to 'mystics' such as Porete as indicative of a move towards a female rejection of allotted traditional religious roles.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁷ Robert Cotrell, "Marguerite Porete's Heretical Discourse; or, deviating from the Model", *Modern Language Studies*, Vol.21, No. 1, (Winter 1991), pp.16-21, p.20.

⁴³⁸ "Marguerite Porete: A post mortem", *Worshipping Women*, p.125.

⁴³⁹ A principle which Newman identifies as one "grounded in our search for a common, usable past which affirms the presence and contributions of women", "On the Ethics of Feminist Historiography", p.702.

⁴⁴⁰ The converse principle in which we can recognise "that our experience has been severely constrained under patriarchy, and our history and literature unjustly suppressed", "On the Ethics of Feminist Historiography", p.702.

⁴⁴¹ "Surely these are not ... women who accepted the traditional religious roles allotted to women", Laurie A Finke, "Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision", *Maps of Flesh and Light*, p.41.

Whilst pointing out that she does not imply that this was ‘intentional’, she nevertheless concludes that texts such as *The Mirror* “became the sites of a struggle to redefine the meaning of female silence and powerlessness”.⁴⁴² In this way, the authorship of religious texts becomes seen as profoundly political and, by implication, *actively* so.

This notion has prompted at least one commentator to posit Porete as a revolutionary ‘gender-bender’ leading the charge against the oppressor – a medieval Emmeline Pankhurst of the most heroic sort.⁴⁴³ This is a frustrating assessment of Porete, not the least because it is overwhelmingly anachronistic, but also because it simplifies Porete and her milieu. Whilst Porete may well have been providing a critique on the religious institutions of her day, she was also writing about a sincerely perceived individual relationship with God. Certainly, this meant, in the medieval period, that she was engaging in a discourse of power and this can be understood as a political act. However, there seems no reason to suppose that she wrote *The Mirror* in order to make some kind of political statement.

Women’s involvement in religiosity of the period, however, is frequently referred to in this stage of the scholarship as an act of resistance and subversion. This is chiefly evident in studies that align Porete with the beguines and then proceed to associate Porete with “strong independent women” who banded together as a result of, and in rebuke to, the oppressive regime of the medieval church and thus represented a “multi-layered threat to the powerful in society”.⁴⁴⁴ Quite apart from the question mark over Porete’s alleged beguine status, this utterly elides the complex ways in which humans navigate choices

⁴⁴² “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision”, p.44.

⁴⁴³ Jantzen’s interpretation of Porete seems to me to be very much in this vein. This is particularly evident in her “Disrupting the Sacred” but can also be seen in her analysis of Porete in *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, see especially pp.259-264.

⁴⁴⁴ Jantzen, “Disrupting the Sacred”, p.79.

about social affiliations, ignores what can only be seen as a general spiritual impetus and imposes unverifiable characterisations (such as ‘strong women’) upon a very diverse group of women.

Porete’s alleged beguine status has become an important aspect in historical reconstructions and this association has been, at times, replete with the suggestion that beguines represented a unified female front with inherent subversive qualities. Lichtmann, for example, in discussing the use of the vernacular in beguine literature (and Porete is included here amongst beguines) argues for the “implicit statement of freedom from the language”⁴⁴⁵ that texts such as *The Mirror* represented. This freedom is represented as an active mode of subversion (“with that implicit freedom goes explicit freedom”)⁴⁴⁶ and also of apprehension of subversion by those in power. Thus, Porete is imbued with the qualities of a freedom fighter, characterised as one who engaged in “head-to-head combat ...[with]... male scholastic theologians”⁴⁴⁷ and whose religious sensibilities and affiliations resulted in combat between repressive authorities and subversive marginals.

This is problematic, however, not because the idea of resistance must be ruled out, but because, as I have already discussed in chapter one, to draw Porete as prefiguring feminist concerns simplifies, idealises and ultimately, does not provide a verifiable portrait of the subject. It is not ‘good history’ and this is so in Porete’s case for a number of reasons: firstly, it ignores the fact that Porete attempted to gain male support from *within* the church hierarchy, which suggests she was desirous of ecclesiastic approval; secondly, it elides the importance of religious reform that by the 1300s was almost a tradition within the church; thirdly, it assumes for beguines a coherence that they did not, in fact, possess;

⁴⁴⁵ “Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror for Simple Souls*: inverted reflection of self, society and God”, p.6.

⁴⁴⁶ “Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror for Simple Souls*: inverted reflection of self, society and God”, p.6.

⁴⁴⁷ “Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror for Simple Souls*: inverted reflection of self, society and God”, p.6.

fourthly, it discounts the possibility of a wider religious discourse *between* men and women that was not necessarily antagonistic; and finally, it classifies Porete as a beguine, despite evidence to the contrary. As a result, the portrait drawn of Porete as champion of resistance is not, for me, satisfactory. As tempting as it is to see in her work litmus for female religious independence, this does not acknowledge the complexities of the world within which her work was composed and received. It is, ultimately, a flawed portrait of deceiving simplicity.⁴⁴⁸

The insights offered in this phase of scholarship have done much to broaden our understanding of Porete and provide convincing arguments regarding her condemnation and her significance to medieval religiosity. Yet it is the company that Porete kept, her discourse community, that seems to me most important in any historical reconstruction and this has remained a hazy conception in the scholarship. In the above literature, Porete is identified loosely as a beguine mystic and, when scholars are forced to make a judgment call, the term heretic is downplayed and replaced by the contention that she was a misinterpreted and misunderstood radical. Above all, however, what seems to me to unite these readings is the impression that Porete was an individual who is *exceptional* in her religious expression and whose work, even when associated loosely with other female authors, represents an *anomalous* voice on the periphery of the female tradition. Losing the company of the *Free Spirits*, therefore, Porete also lost a definitive milieu and became excluded from her contemporaries. Her association with beguines, however, offered her a shadowy community that, in the next phase of scholarship, was to prove most fruitful.

⁴⁴⁸ McGinn discusses the problems associated with reading the sources in this way and argues “that the best model for approaching the issue of the relation between men and women in late medieval mysticism is that of an overheard conversation, rather than that of argument or confrontation”, *Flowering*, p.17.

Option three: The beguine evangelist

Because of the somatic and eucharistic dearth within her *Mirror*, Porete was initially perceived by scholars as an exception to the rule. This was so even when the divergent and frequently speculative expressions of other women mystics were considered. Bynum, for example, in acknowledging divergent expressions, elides similarities in favour of a difference founded in eucharistic devotion:

Not all women writers, of course, made food so central an image as did Hadewijch, Beatrice, and the two Catherines. To the German mystics Hildegard of Bingen, Elizabeth of Schönau, Gertrude the Great, and Mechthild of Hackeborn it was a useful metaphor but not a central one; nor was food a crucial image to Julian of Norwich or Margaret of Oingt. And Marguerite Porete ... rejected the whole tradition of affective spirituality with an attack on works (such as fasting and communion) that went far beyond Tauler's or Eckhart's. But, to all these writers (except Marguerite Porete), the humanity of Christ, understood as physicality, was crucial; and eucharistic devotion was important to them all.⁴⁴⁹

The result of this comparative is that all writers bar Porete are represented as possessing a commonality of purpose. Excluded from the mainstay of female religious writings, Porete is thus singled out as highly unusual and atypical. This notion was pursued by scholars perhaps excited by Bynum's claims and certainly curious about the *Mirror's* complex and highly speculative religious expression. Kathleen Garay, for example, contends that "no woman who recorded the nature of the mystical experience has written in the manner of Marguerite"⁴⁵⁰ and Emma Johnston, in arguing for the 'one-off' nature of Porete's trial, concludes that Porete was more ambiguous than other writers of the period and that she "went beyond the carefully defined area of spirituality allotted to women".⁴⁵¹

With textual analyses of the writings of late medieval women religious

⁴⁴⁹ *Holy Feast*, pp.185-186.

⁴⁵⁰ "'She swims and floats in joy': Marguerite Porete, an 'heretical' mystic of the later Middle Ages" *Canadian Woman Studies* 17.1 (Dec-Feb 1996): pp.18-21.

⁴⁵¹ "Marguerite Porete: A Post Mortem", *Worshipping Women*, p.125.

proliferating, however, the shared moments of discourse in speculative women-authored texts of the period became difficult to ignore. As explanation for this, scholarship began to return to the idea that Porete's work must be positioned within the beguine tradition of spirituality (as Ruh had suggested). This move in the scholarship represents a distinct *point du depart* from Bynum's influential somatic emphasis, with scholars such as Dominguez arguing that Porete "is the 'fascinating exception' to the intensely physical and erotic eucharistic and passion piety expressed by thirteenth century religious women, *but no exception* to that other strand of speculative, experimental mysticism, erotic and courtly, of which they also speak".⁴⁵² The acknowledgement of a broader canvas for religious expression represented an important development in Porete scholarship, one that posited *The Mirror* as a far from solitary, theological development.

Of this, Bernard McGinn remains convinced as do the contributors to his *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*.⁴⁵³ Placing Porete within the context of a vigorous and radical new religious assertion on behalf of the marginalised, McGinn sees *The Mirror* as an example of what he terms 'vernacular', as opposed to scholastic or monastic, theology.⁴⁵⁴ His claims for the significance of the vernacular on mysticism are broad. Arguing the hermeneutic perspective that language affects the development of ideas, he sees the use of the vernacular in the dissemination of religious notions (in the sermons of itinerant preachers and in such works as Bernard of Clairvaux's *Song of Songs*, which was translated into Old French in the thirteenth century) as having a profound impact on: a) gender roles; b) 'conversation'⁴⁵⁵ between men and women; c) the widening and diffusion

⁴⁵² "Judgement and Gender", p.42, first emphasis Dominguez', second emphasis mine.

⁴⁵³ *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*.

⁴⁵⁴ *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*., 6 ff.

⁴⁵⁵ He understands the word conversation here "in its Latin sense as *conversatio*, that is, a living with, a familiarity that includes but is not limited to verbal discussion", between men and women on theological grounds, *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, p.8.

of a previously scholarly and monastic audience; and d) the organising and presentation of teaching. For McGinn, the ‘union without difference’ posited by Eckhart and Porete is part of a vernacular theology that has its roots in the works of Mechthild and Hadewijch.

The rather substantial claims regarding Eckhart and Porete remain unresolved,⁴⁵⁶ particularly as concerns the possibility of definite contact. In response to McGinn and contributors, for example, Stephens argued against a direct correlation between the work of Eckhart and Porete: “it does not follow that because Eckhart may have been aware of the *Mirror*, this then becomes the hypothesis from which to explain any textual similarities between the two authors”.⁴⁵⁷ Stephens’ thesis thus denies the theory of a direct textual progression that culminates in the thought of Eckhart. Rather, in a statement that both supports McGinn’s classification of vernacular theology (while questioning the linear progress that he claims makes Eckhart indebted to a lineage of ‘beguines’), she argues that:

There is no reason why the parallels in the writings of Porete and Eckhart cannot be explained in terms of the collective pool of ideas common to beguine and scholarly circles. There is nothing in Porete’s *Mirror* that is so unique - interesting as it may be! - that Eckhart could only have got from this text ... It is not necessary to document direct links, but rather to demonstrate the existence of an intellectual climate, within which beguines and those who, like Eckhart, moved in beguine circles could circulate ideas and enter into debate.⁴⁵⁸

This is a significant point, and worth returning to Stephens’ argument for, because it indicates cognisance of a broader engagement with scholastic, theological and literary themes.

⁴⁵⁶ We shall pursue this debate in the following chapter. However, an example of differing opinion can be found in Catharine Randall (Coats) analysis of the “Mirror in Changing Places: Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart and the Question of Perspective”, in *Romanic Review*, 85:3, May 1994, pp.341-360, wherein she offers a theological and literary analysis that sees the work as conventional, drawing on Augustinian and orthodox traditions, and constituting a “ ‘heresy [that] does not consist in her lack of doctrinal adherence, but rather in the technique of conjoining artistic production with theological mediation”, pp. 342-3.

⁴⁵⁷ “Eckhart and the Sister Catherine: The Mirror’s Image?”, p.27.

⁴⁵⁸ “Eckhart and the Sister Catherine: The Mirror’s Image?”, p.29.

This is certainly the opinion of Barbara Newman, who has argued convincingly for the appearance in the thirteenth century of a mystical form called *la mystique courtoise*, “a new movement both religious and literary ... in which the monastic discourse on love converged with the courtly”.⁴⁵⁹ For Newman, this new model was:

...an art of consummate subtlety, a play of imagination ...[and]... an erotic game with a bewildering variety of moves: one could become the bride of a God or the lover of a Goddess, or merge utterly with the Beloved and become oneself divine – but only at the price of being no longer ‘oneself’.⁴⁶⁰

Quite different from *Brautmystik* (the *Song of Songs* discourse made famous by Bernard of Clairvaux) and *Fin Amour* (the *Art of Courtly Love*), *la mystique courtoise* represented an artful appropriation of both discourses and was to result in expressions so subtle and compelling that “mysticism would never be quite the same”.⁴⁶¹ *La mystique courtoise* thus represents a highly sophisticated mystical genre that caused unease amongst many contemporaries (especially male ecclesiastics) because it turned women from their ‘natural’ state of simplicity and desire into “dangerously subtle creatures, *beguines clergesses*”.⁴⁶²

It will come as no surprise, then, to find Porete (classified by contemporaneous historians as a *beguine clergesse*) amongst those engaged in this discourse. Concurring with this identification, Newman situates Porete (alongside Hadewijch and Mechthild) as one of the “three great literary *beguines*” who would develop *la mystique courtoise* “to its highest and subtlest pitch”.⁴⁶³ Characterised as “a distinctive creation of *beguines*”,⁴⁶⁴ *la mystique courtoise* is identified as defying “the mainstream view of medieval theorists (and

⁴⁵⁹ Barbara Newman, “La Mystique Courtoise”, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 137-167, p. 138.

⁴⁶⁰ “La Mystique Courtoise”, p.167.

⁴⁶¹ “La Mystique Courtoise”, p.137.

⁴⁶² “La Mystique Courtoise”, p.137.

⁴⁶³ Newman says that this is “beyond doubt”, “La Mystique Courtoise”, p.139.

⁴⁶⁴ “La Mystique Courtoise”, p.137.

medievalists)”,⁴⁶⁵ and is confluent with the mystical ‘love affair’ pertinent to beguine dynamism. Newman is quick to point out, however, that it would be a mistake to impose “too strict a correlation between this new form of mystical discourse and beguine status”.⁴⁶⁶ Rather, she uses this framework as an analytical model with which to explore the texts of a number of medieval women writers, including the Cistercian Beatrice of Nazareth, Hadewijch II⁴⁶⁷ and the anonymous author of the *Schwester Katrei*.⁴⁶⁸ In doing so, she finds correlations that indicate the presence of a “unique and specialized literary culture”⁴⁶⁹ that was highly threatening to ecclesiastics and unique to women who occupied marginal positions within medieval religious culture.

The theme of marginality governs much of Newman’s conclusions regarding Porete, a marginality that, coupled with her special spin on *la mystique courtoise*, constituted Porete as heretic for her inquisitors. As a beguine development, ambiguity of social strata (neither religious nor secular, learned or lay) is seen by Newman as a contributing factor in both the development of this theology and in the condemnation of women such as Porete who failed to recede from the public sphere.⁴⁷⁰ For Newman, Porete’s arch nobility, which is a function of the *mystique courtoise* model taken to its zenith in *The Mirror*, contrasted starkly with the traditional imperative of ‘humble Christian love’ and made Porete an easy target of ecclesiastic hostility.⁴⁷¹ However, Porete goes further than this, Newman contends, and radically extends the principles of her theology to

⁴⁶⁵ “La Mystique Courtoise”, p.138.

⁴⁶⁶ “La Mystique Courtoise”, p.139.

⁴⁶⁷ See chapter one of this thesis for a brief synopsis of the Hadewijch II controversy.

⁴⁶⁸ For the text, translated by Elvira Borgstädt, See Bernard McGinn, [ed.], *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) pp. 10-14, 32-33, 349-387. For discussion see: Robert Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1972); Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Womanchrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Pennsylvania, 1995) pp. 172-181; Franz-Josef Schweitzer, “Schwester Katrei” in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters Verfasserlexikon*, (1992).

⁴⁶⁹ “La Mystique Courtoise”, p.143.

⁴⁷⁰ “Introduction” to *Virile Woman*, pp.1-18, p.12.

⁴⁷¹ “Introduction” to *Virile Woman*, p.12.

reach beyond suffering and humility and achieve a permanent union with God. Further, she utterly annihilates herself in her apophatic theology to the extent that she claims the role of co-redeemer “not because she is overflowing with charity, like other mystics, but because she is *not*. Marguerite’s inquisitors may have accepted her claim to be ‘the sum of all evils’ and hence worthy to be killed”.⁴⁷² In this, Porete stands in contrast to Hadewijch and Mechthild whom Newman believes would have counselled her “to grow up by following Christ in his life of humility, obedience, and pain”.⁴⁷³

With McGinn’s ‘vernacular theology’ acting as a dramatic backdrop to Newman’s new classification, the idea that Porete may have been speaking from a shared background became an increasing focus of scholarly attention. Hollywood, as we will explore in the next chapter, sees Porete’s thought as linked with that of Eckhart and, in a further exploration of this notion, adds to her cast list Mechthild of Magdeburg. In doing so, she argues not only that Eckhart was influenced by both writers (she classifies each as beguines), but also that that all three, “work to subvert medieval discourses on, and practices concerned with, gender and subjectivity”.⁴⁷⁴ This acknowledgment of a broad sphere of influence and transmission challenged earlier conceptions of Porete as anomalous and proved fruitful in historical reconstructions. Brown, for example, argues that Porete was not “an historical aberration, unique in her religiosity. Marguerite’s mystic ideas were instead consonant with those of a large number of female mystics living in her time”.⁴⁷⁵ Thus, as with Newman who saw Porete as achieving “complete authenticity”⁴⁷⁶ in her mysticism, Brown sees Porete as not only ‘more’ authentic than somatic mystics like Marie

⁴⁷² “On the Threshold of the Dead: Purgatory, Hell, and Religious Women”, in *Virile Woman*, pp.108-136, p.129. Newman’s emphasis.

⁴⁷³ “La Mystique Courtoise”, p.152.

⁴⁷⁴ *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, p.5.

⁴⁷⁵ “Authentic Mystic Piety”, p.235.

⁴⁷⁶ “Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise”, p.74.

d'Oignes but also indicative of a wider discourse than had been acknowledged. In this notion Brown was followed by Nowacka, who concludes that whilst Porete "is a thorn in the side of modern historiography" she is also revealing of "a strata of religiosity, otherwise obscured by ecclesiastical discourses".⁴⁷⁷

Nowacka's comparison of Porete, Heloise and d'Oignes demonstrates a keen eye for the historiographical problems associated with both medieval and modern 'readings' of medieval religious women. With Dominguez, Nowacka argues that Porete cannot be identified as a beguine but was, rather, condemned as such due to her "superficial resemblance to the 'heretic beguines' known of in the Rhineland".⁴⁷⁸ This conclusion is reinforced by evidence from within *The Mirror*. In the opening *Explicit*, Porete asks: "O my Lover, what will beguines say, when they hear the excellence of your divine song? Beguines say I err, priests, clerics, and Preachers, Augustinians, Carmelites, and the Friars Minor. Because I wrote about the being of one purified by Love".⁴⁷⁹ Thus, beguines are included with other members of Holy Church the Lesser and are not given the kind of eminence one would expect of a woman strongly affiliated with that grouping. This represented yet another important *point du depart* from scholarship that situated Porete firmly within the beguine milieu. It remains, however, a nascent idea in the scholarship with important works on Porete continuing to propagate her beguine status.

In particular, McGinn's ongoing exploration of mysticism has served to harness Porete to the beguine milieu more firmly than ever before. Volume three of his *Presence of God* series, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, charts the development of what McGinn calls 'The New Mysticism' covering two broad strands of the mystical tradition: the Franciscan movement and the *mulieres religiosae*. Summarising the basics of this development,

⁴⁷⁷ *Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women*, p.103.

⁴⁷⁸ *Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women*, p.92.

⁴⁷⁹ *The Mirror*, p.200.

McGinn identifies three crucial components that set it apart from earlier movements: “(1) new attitudes toward the relation between world and cloister; (2) a new relationship between men and women in the mystical path; and, finally, (3) new forms of language and modes of representation of mystical consciousness”.⁴⁸⁰ Porete is situated within these innovations as one of McGinn’s ‘four female evangelists’ along with Angela of Foligno, Hadewijch and Mechthild, all of whom are associated with the rise of vernacular theology.

McGinn uses the term ‘evangelist’, he explains, not only to indicate that they are “the most important mystics of the thirteenth century, but also to emphasise the bold, quasi-scriptural claims they made for their writings”.⁴⁸¹ This is a strong claim to make of Porete; where accusations of arrogance had gone before, here they are replaced by a perceived ‘boldness’ undercut with the suggestion that Porete intended her work to be read as gospel. McGinn associates the authority of *The Mirror* as grounded in a novel representation of the books co-authorship with God, a point that he also associates with other women writers of the genre, yet one he sees as developing very differently in Porete’s expression.⁴⁸² This difference is grounded in ambiguity and annihilation and thus, McGinn argues, Porete’s “gospel is one that continually strives to negate itself – a vanishing gospel written for secret free souls who really do not need it”.⁴⁸³ Accordingly, McGinn contends “If Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls* can be considered a new ‘gospel’ of some sort, it is clear that it is more like the *Gnostic Gospels* of the second century than the traditional four Gospels of the *New Testament*”.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸⁰ *Flowering of Mysticism*, p.12.

⁴⁸¹ *Flowering of Mysticism*, p.142.

⁴⁸² *Flowering of Mysticism*, p.247.

⁴⁸³ *Flowering of Mysticism*, p.249.

⁴⁸⁴ *Flowering of Mysticism*, p.253.

A short step sideways from Guarnieri's assessment of *The Mirror* as the bible of the *Free Spirit* heretics, the term 'evangelist' as applied to Porete is problematic,⁴⁸⁵ because McGinn claims that Porete and her evangelical companions "sought to give their writings status comparable to that of the bible itself".⁴⁸⁶ This seems to me, despite the perceived 'arrogance' within Porete's work, to be drawing a rather long bow. Can we say with veracity that Porete (and Mechthild and Hadewijch for that matter) would have considered their writings equal to that of the Bible? Is this not in danger of expressing a perception more in keeping with those who condemned Porete's work than with an accurate historical reading? Mystical tracts were frequently predicated on the notion that God was speaking through the subject and allowing 'secret' knowledge of divinity to be disseminated. This does not necessarily mean, however, that those doing the writing considered their co-authored expressions confluent with the salvific nature of the Bible. If McGinn means in more general terms that 'gospel' relates to interpreting the Christian message or that which is presented as infallible truth, then that would make more sense. However, he suggests that Porete elevated her work to biblical status, a notion that requires considerable support before *it* can be treated as 'gospel'.

Another problem with McGinn's assessment is the ongoing classification of Porete as a beguine. Whilst Angela is treated to her own section within the Franciscan tradition, Porete is discussed in a chapter entitled "The Three Great Beguine Mystics". As an 'independent beguine' Porete is posited among the most original mystics of her period (Hadewijch and Mechthild) and is given a significant role in the development of McGinn's new mysticism. However, the classification of her as a beguine remains unquestioned and

⁴⁸⁵ Geneviève Souillac sees Porete in a similar way, as a prophet *par excellence*, "Charisme et Prophétisme Féminins: Marguerite Porete et le *Miroir des simples âmes*", *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 35, No.3, (1998), pp.261-278.

⁴⁸⁶ *Flowering of Mysticism*, p.199.

seems to work more as commonality for the women he discusses than as a significant discourse community. This is curious because the problems associated with ‘beguine’ as a category of classification have long been recognised, with important works on the issue published prior to *Flowering*. Perhaps the omission of consideration of these issues, which is referred to only fleetingly,⁴⁸⁷ is because his study is predicated on the notion of the texts as a conduit for understanding the progression of Christian thought. Thus, the identities of his subjects are less important than what the text says itself about their theological engagement. However, by occluding the possibilities of identity for Porete we are not only in danger of conforming to the inquisitorial classification of her, but we also miss out on the opportunity to explore alternative classifications.

The dominance of McGinn’s and Newman’s classification of Porete as a beguine has strengthened the ongoing misconception that we can classify her in this way. O’Sullivan, for example, answers her own question “So was Marguerite a beguine?” with the simple and unqualified response “I think so, yes”⁴⁸⁸ and a brief internet search will reveal numerous pages identifying her in this way.⁴⁸⁹ Joanne Maguire Robinson, however, in her important new monograph dedicated completely to Porete and her *Mirror* asserts that “One cannot definitively classify Porete as a beguine in part because the label itself refers to a shifting set of doctrines and lifestyles” and she further explains that the “general

⁴⁸⁷ For example, in his discussion of Na Prou Boneta, whom he classifies as a beguin (different to beguines, he says, and related to the Spiritual Franciscans), he points to the many terms utilised to classify independent female religious, *Flowering of Mysticism*, p.183.

⁴⁸⁸ *Model, Mirror and Memorial*, p.52.

⁴⁸⁹ A notable exception being the ‘Other Women’s Voices’ website: “Nothing is known about the life of Marguerite Porete except from the records of the heresy trial that resulted in her death. Her accusers labelled [sic] her a beguine, but they meant it as an insult; we simply don’t know whether she considered herself a beguine (one passage in her book places beguines among her critics)”, <<http://home.infionline.net/~ddisse/porete.html>>, maintained by Dorothy Disse, last visited October 2006. Compare this with the mystifying account in a web site dedicated to *Saint Marguerite Porete*: “Marguerite of Hainault, called *la Porète*, were in her early thirties when she suffered the rather controversial trial in Paris which ended with her being burnt alive... Marguerite Porète was a wandering Beguine”, *InTerjeCted*, <<http://weblog.bergersen.net/terje/archives/000879.html>>, accessed December 2006.

definition masks the tremendous complexities in the spiritual paths of growing numbers of *mulieres religiosae* from the beginning of the thirteenth through the middle of the fourteenth century”.⁴⁹⁰ Despite this caution, however, Robinson frequently refers to Porete as a beguine, a troubling habit that demonstrates the adhesive quality of identity categories and detracts from her analysis. This is evident particularly when Robinson begins to discuss the issues surrounding Porete’s condemnation. In a passage discussing Porete’s textual transgressions as a rationale for her condemnation, for example, the following contention lends Porete a beguine affiliation that Robinson had earlier denied: “It is indeed difficult to avoid the conclusion that the awkward boundary status of many beguines made them appear suspect to the (male) church hierarchy and (male) secular authorities”.⁴⁹¹ This is problematic on both associative and methodological fronts. For, even if the beguine category reflects the institutional *perception* of Porete as a beguine, which seems to be Robinson’s suggestion, the acknowledgement of the term as unstable demands a more careful reading that resists such hard and fast classifications.

It is unfortunate that Robinson does not take further her misgivings about the category ‘beguine’ because her work does much to reinforce the significance and importance of Porete’s thought. In part, this gap in analysis is because *The Mirror* is approached as a textual indicator of the motif of ‘nobility’ in the literary traditions of the later medieval west. Retreating from a gender analysis of the work, Robinson accordingly attempts to understand the development of Porete’s thought without attending to the controversies surrounding her condemnation. The result is a sound introduction to *The Mirror* that does much to elevate it as a work that demands to share the stage with other important texts of the period. Yet it is difficult to appreciate Porete’s thought without

⁴⁹⁰ Joanne Maguire Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete’s “Mirror of Simple Souls”*, (Albany: University of New York Press, 2001), p. 29.

⁴⁹¹ *Nobility and Annihilation*, p.106.

attending to her condemnation, which, as we shall see in the next chapter, stands as one of the more thorny of our period.

An important contradistinction between Robinson's work and that of McGinn and Newman is that where the latter scholars situate Porete firmly within a discourse community (beguines), Robinson, in retreating somewhat from this classification, returns Porete to the status of exception: "Porete was an anomaly in her time and remains an anomaly today".⁴⁹² Thus, we are presented with an 'either or' situation. Either she was a beguine, which would go some way towards explaining the development of her theology, or she wasn't a beguine and must therefore be considered anomalous. The question remains, which option is most 'true' to Porete's historical reality?

The case for a reassessment

The most recent scholarship addressing Porete has tended to concern itself fundamentally with the study of *The Mirror* as a text. Therefore, questions regarding Porete's identity and the circumstances behind her condemnation do not receive the lion's share of attention. This has been the emphasis of most Porete-based scholarship over the last few decades. Prior to this, the emphasis was on her condemnation (was it deserved or not?) and on attempting to understand her expression in comparison with hagiographical female contemporaries. This was viewed through a framework of understanding medieval

⁴⁹² *Nobility and Annihilation*, p.xiv.

women's religiosity that ultimately excluded the discourse of those writers who did not conform to the model; accordingly, Porete became cast as an anomaly. However, as we have seen, the options for Porete's identity now stand at a crossroads that spans both re-envisagings; on the one hand, she is associated with beguines and is given a hazy beguine identity and on the other she is cast as a unique and radical voice for change. This seems to me to be a poor choice because there are problems with both classifications.

The beguine category is problematic on three fronts: firstly, Porete refutes the affiliation in her book; secondly, as we see in the next chapter, it was an identity given Porete by hostile sources, without qualification and burdened with the hermeneutics of hostility; and thirdly, the term itself has been shown to be a diffuse and problematic category as we shall see in our penultimate chapter. That scholars persist in the classification is, I believe, primarily because recent historical analyses have been overwhelmingly textual. That is, *The Mirror* has been explored as a pre-eminent example of religious literature of the period evidencing similarities between various self-authored works. This has been most fruitful in better understanding the work's difficult theology but has been less so in extricating an identity for Porete. For, the analysis of texts relates to genres – speculative, affective, apophatic, vernacular, *mystique courtoise* and so forth – and this is not necessarily confluent with social affiliation. Indeed, as McGinn is at pains to point out, these were works written in the vernacular and available to those who could read and access the works. As access cannot be ruled out for authors such as Porete (itinerant 'wandering creature'), there is no reason to confine influence to instances of shared spaces (beguinages, for example). Moreover, the ideas contained within the works were not necessarily restricted to the written page; it is just as likely that they were present in verbal dialogue: in *conversatio* with religious representatives; in educational settings; and in

public “in groups, in gangs, in the squares”.⁴⁹³ Whilst Porete’s *Mirror* may demonstrate affinities with the genre of beguine literature this does not mean that she must perforce have been a beguine.

The anomalous tag is problematic also, however, because at a thematic level the classification reflects the hermeneutics of exclusion that was predicated on the dominance and authenticity of a coherence of female somatic expression; because Porete departed from this mode her *Mirror* was seen as reflecting a unique and radical voice. Accordingly, Porete is characterised as an extraordinary example of a woman ‘ahead of her time’, her radical mysticism developed as a challenge to the church and formulated within a highly specific and individualised, mode of discourse (for example, ‘nobility’). It is possible, of course, that Porete *did* develop her theology in isolation from any kind of dialogue (written or verbal). However, this seems to me to be more unlikely than the alternative: that her theology was predicated on engagement with written and verbal discourses consonant with a vibrant and challenging discourse community. To characterise Porete as anomalous, therefore, annihilates her significance in the medieval religious landscape. Porete may, of course, have appreciated that annihilation wryly. However, to accept this would be to the detriment of our understanding of religiosity in the period.

The predicament presented by current dominant scholarship, therefore, shows that whilst we have progressed on many fronts, important issues remain unresolved, particularly as concerns an identity for Porete. This seems to me to underline the importance of apprehending just what kind of discourse community or communities Porete was involved

⁴⁹³ Ward, *SBK*, p.465; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, p.91.

in. Because, without this, without some sense of where or how Porete's ideas were nourished, shared and developed, we are left with the poorest of options, an 'either or' situation that does not do justice to the subject. Who was Porete? What was her ontology? Who were her audience? In other words, a subaltern aim of this thesis is to consider the proposition 'how to write a life of Marguerite Porete?' Accordingly, it seems important before exploring a fourth option for Porete's identity, to now turn to the specifics of her condemnation, not only because it is the documents relating to her condemnation that represent a key starting point in re-envisaging a life for Porete, but also because modern readings of these documents have helped to contribute to the present identity crisis from which Porete suffers.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Since we, brother William of Paris, of the Order of Preachers, deputed by apostolic authority inquisitor of heretical depravity in the kingdom of France, determine and establish from clear arguments that you, Marguerite of Hannonia, called Porete, are vehemently suspected of the stain of heretical depravity, we had you cited on account of this, so that you should appear in judgement before us, in which being personally indicted by us several times canonically and legitimately, so that before us you should swear concerning the telling of the full, pure and entire truth concerning yourself and others about these things which are known to pertain to the commission of our inquisitorial office. This you disdained to do, though you were requested by us many times and in many places concerning this, remaining contumacious and rebellious in these things. For which evident contumacious rebellions and notorious acts demanding redress, on the advice of many learned men, we delivered against you, rebellious and contumacious as you were, and in writing, a sentence of greater excommunication, which, though it was notified to you, after the aforesaid notification you bore for a year and more at the expense of your salvation and with a pertinacious mind, although many times we offered you the benefit of our absolution according to ecclesiastical form, if you should humbly request this, which until now you have disdained to seek, nor so far have you wished to swear nor to reply to us about the aforesaid.

William of Paris, 1310⁴⁹⁴

Truth, in matters of religion, is simply the opinion that has survived
Oscar Wilde⁴⁹⁵

The hermeneutics of exclusion that has hampered historical reconstructions of Porete is, at base, one that reads her ‘voice’ as anomalous alongside those of her contemporaries. In conjunction with this reading, however, lies another that attempts to discern her history through information presented by those that condemned her. Because we have so little source material to work with, this information is crucial in any attempt to reconstruct Porete’s life – to glimpse who she might have been, what company she may have kept and why she may have died. Yet it is also problematic because the same information is drawn from papers that, despite being termed ‘trial documents’ are far removed from the notions of ‘due process’ and ‘justice’ that are connected in modern sensibilities with a legal trial. There is neither stenographer, nor court reporter and the voice of the deponent is completely absent. The folio of papers consists of seven documents, three officially recorded by notaries and the remainder officiated only by the seals of the participants. There is no jury, nor witnesses to support Porete aside from Guiard. The documents relating to Porete’s ‘trial’, therefore, are

⁴⁹⁴ “The Sentence of the Inquisitor”, Ward, *SBK*, pp.459/460; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, pp.81/82.

⁴⁹⁵ Cited in Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (London: Bantam Press, 2006), p.191.

not accurate recordings of Porete's alleged deviancy. They are official recordings of proceedings instigated and implemented by institutional representatives in order to document the classification and condemnation of a woman accused of being a heretic; that is, they do not record a 'trial' in the sense we understand it today, rather, they document inquisitorial representations of identities, events and transgressions in which contested notions of 'heresy', 'identity' and 'authority' are articulated. The official records of Porete's condemnation can thus be seen as an ecclesiastical 'separating out' of notions and individuals associated with those notions from spiritual authority.

This is not to say that historians have failed to recognise power relations within the documents of condemnation. However, attempts to rehabilitate Porete from this nexus of contested authority have failed to resolve many of the issues that complicate her case and, for some, preconceptions remain based on a reading of those sources. In particular, the notion of Porete as a beguine has been frequently accepted in the scholarship without critical consideration of the significance of the term. Yet beguine affiliation prior to the mid-thirteenth century is difficult to discern, both because it was an informal status and because the term was used fluidly to indicate both holy and suspect female religious engagement. The development of beguinages in the second quarter of the thirteenth century gave the term a more formal self-designation based on residence with others of the same religious impulse. Whilst it seems likely that there remained women outside of the beguineage that considered themselves beguines (the so-called 'independent beguines') such a designation should not be assumed. This is so primarily because of the issues surrounding the use of the word by ecclesiastics, which (as we shall see) could be both derisive and favorable.

So, why do scholars continue to identify Porete as a beguine? There is no brief answer to this question. Partly, this misreading has come about because of recognition of stylistic links in *The Mirror*, as we have seen in the preceding chapter. Yet it has also come about, I argue, because the documents of Porete's condemnation have not attracted strong methodological analyses. This is unfortunate, because there is much to be gained from approaching Porete's case from a broader theoretical perspective. Foucauldian analyses, for example, employed most recently by Inquisition historian John Arnold,⁴⁹⁶ stress that any assessment of information received through inquisitorial documentation needs to consider not only what the documents *say*, but also what they *do* – what functions they served, what effects they generated, how they ordered social reality and legitimised inquisitorial and (by extension) institutional authority, and how they reflected and contributed to the historical situation being analysed. In other words, inquisitorial documents must be seen as a productive component relative to power relations – in the sense that power is not only about repression, but is also about the construction of knowledge, discourse/s and mutual benefits.⁴⁹⁷ This represents an important perspective for Porete studies, because in assessing the function of her trial records as productive of deviance, of otherness, of community and of identity, we can better glimpse the process of power in the medieval religious landscape.

Whilst much innovative work has been done to assess the significance of documents issuing from the inquisitorial register,⁴⁹⁸ Porete's case has not attracted similar analyses. Why should this be so? Partly this may be because the documents do not seem to 'fit' easily within the inquisitorial model; whilst Porete's condemnation was formalised in Paris under

⁴⁹⁶ *Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the confessing subject in medieval Languedoc*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

⁴⁹⁷ As an introduction see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*, Allan Sheridan [trans.], 2nd Vintage ed. (1997), (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

⁴⁹⁸ For example, Mark Pegg, *The Corruption of Angels: the great Inquisition of 1245-1246*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001); James B. Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society: power, discipline, and resistance in Languedoc*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).

the auspices of the Chief Inquisitor, William of Paris, far from the usual inquisitorial documentation was produced. Inquisitorial records generally document the process of investigating an accusation of heresy, in the main by means of an interrogation process that claimed for the subject autonomous confession. In Porete's trial records, however, the deponent does not speak; *Porete refuses to swear oath and she refuses to respond to questioning*. Instead of a standard inquisitorial dialogue we find in Porete's trial records a series of carefully recorded responses by clerics and theologians to a series of requests by the inquisitor into 'heretical depravity' at Paris. We thus read little of what Porete may have had to say, but we read a great deal of William's interpretation of events, as presented to ecclesiastics for their consideration and advice.

Moreover, whilst inquisitorial registers were intended to circulate amongst other inquisitors and institutional authorities (an example of which is Jacques Fournier's register),⁴⁹⁹ the documents of Porete's condemnation were not found amongst the papers of the inquisitor who led the condemnation, but amongst the documents of senior Parisian jurists (Guillaume de Nogaret and Guillaume de Plaisians), who were not, on record at least, involved in Porete's condemnation. Whilst Porete's documents are thus not part of the inquisitorial register *per se*, they do, nevertheless, bear a relationship to that register – not only because they were intended to proclaim and sustain Porete's heresy and document the validity of that classification by means of carefully recorded 'proofs', but also because they were presided over by the head inquisitor in Paris (a fact that is repeated frequently in the documents). What is more, there is good reason to believe that they were also used to substantiate future classifications of heretical behaviours and ideas, as the Clementine decrees *Ad nostrum* and *Cum de quisbusdam* attest. This is important because it means that Porete's trial did two things: first, it documented an institutional response to an individual

⁴⁹⁹ Translated selections, mainly relating to female deponents, can be found at <http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/english/Fournier/jfournhm.htm>, *Labyrinth*, last visited May 2007.

accused of heresy and second, it produced precedence for future accusations. This is very much in line with inquisitorial process, even though the documents themselves diverge from the standard formula.

Regardless of whether the documents of Porete's condemnation conformed to the standard formula the record of her trial does fit within the inquisitorial framework: Porete was identified as a relapsed heretic by the chief inquisitor of Paris; her heresy was recorded and expunged; she was given a year to consider and repent (as per inquisitorial procedure); she was executed and her book was burned in order to cease dissemination 'in word or deed'. Potential contamination of 'the faithful' was thereby addressed at the same time as the hegemony of the ecclesiastic hierarchy was reinforced. Whilst we should not ignore the disparity between Porete's documents and standard inquisitorial records, recognising the relationship between the function of documented inquisition and Porete's condemnation offers a broader perspective that is better placed to glimpse the nexus of power relations hidden in the documentation.

This chapter argues that attempts to construct an identity for Porete through the documents of condemnation have been corrupted by what I call here a hermeneutics of hostility. What I mean by this is that Porete, as an historical subject, has been bound by a discourse that was not in the least interested in representing an historically valid report of her identity and religious beliefs, but was, rather, determined to harden the boundaries between religious discourses that competed for space within the religious landscape. While the documents of Porete's condemnation offer important indications of events leading up to her death, therefore, they cannot be considered accurate recordings of Porete's identity. Rather, they represent hostile ecclesiastical markers of identity and confraternity that were intended,

I argue, to confirm institutional authority and exclude alternative religious discourse. As a result, the opportunities for considering an identity for Porete have been clouded by an official discourse that is, by far, a better indication of the motivations of her inquisitors than it is of their target.

Accordingly, it seems useful to consider an alternative approach to the documents of condemnation, one that engages with a methodological reading that, it is hoped, can better consider the ways in which competing discourses were negotiated within the religious landscape of the period. This chapter seeks to assess the implications of reading Porete's case through the documents of condemnation and to engage with the issues that such a reading represents using an emphasis on the productive elements of power inherent in the discourse of the inquisition. Part of this pursuit will implicitly critique the ways in which scholars have understood Porete as an identity, based on a reading of her 'trial' documents. However, part will also provide suggestions about how an alternative engagement with the sources can offer different options for apprehending Porete through the sources. Whilst this thesis does not aim to resolve all the issues pertaining to Porete's trial it is important that we understand both the events and circumstances surrounding her execution and the problems for scholarship that her case has represented. I will now sketch the background to her trial and the details of her case. This will be followed by a discussion of the major issues surrounding her case, the unusual nature of the trial documentation and an analysis of the problems that a reading of the documents of condemnation represents. The chapter will conclude with an exploration of some of the opportunities that alternative methodologies can offer.

An execution in context

The historical setting of Porete's case has been characterised as a "maelstrom of political and ecclesiastical tensions and conflicts".⁵⁰⁰ The groundswell of religious revival, which began in the eleventh century and intensified in the twelfth and early thirteenth, saw increasing numbers of men and women disillusioned with the exclusivity of the church and attracted by alternative religious ideas (generally presented in the vernacular).⁵⁰¹ This retreat from the traditional church culminated in events after 1250 that saw an increasing attempt by the ecclesiastical hierarchy at widespread suppression.⁵⁰² Heretical groups, such as the Cathars, were suppressed viciously by the crusaders in Languedoc and hounded pretty much out of existence by persistent persecution. The Albigensians were 'clearly doomed' and the Waldenses survived extinction not so much through lack of inquisitorial attention, as through anonymity and quiet perseverance.⁵⁰³ The mendicant orders had obtained public favour, preaching in open arenas and in familiar tongues, only to be forced to deal with controversy from both within the orders themselves and in the form of criticism from the church. Similarly, semi-regular associations of men and women became linked with the spread of heresy and drew increasing disfavour and suspicion from the church.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰⁰ Babinsky, "Introduction", *The Mirror*, p.26.

⁵⁰¹ The history of ecclesiastical intolerance of female religious participation has been well documented and space does not permit a full exploration of its complexities here. Apart from those works cited in Chapter One of this thesis, see for a survey: John Coakley, "Gender and the authority of the friars: the significance of holy women for thirteenth-century Franciscans and Dominicans", *Church History*, 60 (1991), pp. 445-60; Dyan Elliott, *Proving woman: female spirituality and inquisitorial culture in the later middle ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Jo Ann McNamara, 'Rhetoric of orthodoxy: clerical authority and female innovation in the struggle with heresy', *Maps of Flesh and Light*, pp.9-27.

⁵⁰² Walter L Wakefield and Austin P Evans, "Historical Sketch", *Heresies of the High Middle Ages: Selected sources translated and annotated*, [2nd. ed.], (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp.1-55, p.41.

⁵⁰³ *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, "Historical Sketch", pp.50 ff.

⁵⁰⁴ Emma Johnston notes that "Jean de Meun in the Roman de la Rose ...described the character of False Abstinence as a beguine, a 'lustful bitch', her face 'tinged with pale hypocrisy ... Seemed proof she her condition rued'. Men and women practising the *vita apostolica* had the distressing tendency to live together, a habit also associated with heretics", "Marguerite Porete: A Post Mortem", in *Worshipping Women*, p.115.

Concurrently, mystical religiosity, and in particular women's expressions of this, became regarded as suspect by the authorities. This suspicion arose in confluence with unprecedented numbers of women who articulated, in whatever form, a claim to a 'special' relationship with God. This, Vauchez claims, coincided with the emergence of a highly visible female presence in the religious milieu: "50 percent of the laity canonized in the thirteenth century, and 71.4 percent of those canonized after 1305, were female".⁵⁰⁵ Issuing from a desire to imitate the life of Christ, the *apostolic* fervour that was prevalent in the twelfth century gave rise to women who gave of their wealth to the poor and sought religious piety in terms of an individual commitment to the passion of Christ, to chastity and to the life of the apostles. The humanity of Christ thus became an increasingly prevalent aspect of piety - surfacing for example in the practice of *imitatio christi* made famous by Francis of Assisi, in the growing depictions of the suffering of the crucified Christ and in the development of the Cult of the Virgin. Each of these aspects of mainstream piety drew on the significance of the Incarnation - Christ's humanity evident in his asceticisms, his sufferings and his birth to a woman. As such, each was grounded in the imagery of the human body as an example of the tangible link between God and humanity. Thus, emerging concurrently with the developing emphasis on the humanity of Christ in mainstream piety of the twelfth century, we find increasingly religious expressions that posit the body as the touchstone of mystical experience. The significance of this somatic mysticism, as we have seen, has attracted an ongoing scholarly dialogue.⁵⁰⁶

What measure of tolerance that had been achieved by women who expressed, or were presented as expressing, this kind of body centred mysticism, however, was tempered by a developing mistrust of an increasingly independent and flourishing female spirituality.

⁵⁰⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum (citing Vauchez), *Holy Feast*, p.21.

⁵⁰⁶ Innumerable references relate to this somatic dialogue. Refer to chapter one of this thesis for a sample.

Partially the result of a growing suspicion that heretical tendencies were entwined with mendicancy and vernacular preaching, concerns arose surrounding the propensity of teaching, reading, preaching and discussion that occurred without supervision and without the exclusive use of Latin. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) cast anathema on anyone who attempted to preach without the authority of the church, a concern consistently reiterated by a variety of synods and councils.⁵⁰⁷ Gregory IX (1234) withheld the privilege of preaching from abbesses. Johannes Teutonicas' *Decreta* proclaimed that women could neither preach nor exercise any public functions.⁵⁰⁸ Alan of Lille asserted in his attack on heresies (composed between 1179-1202) that, "If it is a dangerous thing for wise and holy men to preach, it is most dangerous for the uneducated who do not know what should be preached".⁵⁰⁹ Accordingly, for women (who were for the most part excluded from the medieval academy), Lille cites scripture, saying "Let women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted them to speak ... If they would learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home' [first epistle to the Corinthians] ... 'I suffer not a woman to teach nor to use authority over the man'" [first epistle to Timothy].⁵¹⁰

With escalating accusations and suppressions of 'heresies', with distrust of semi-regular associations and of the spread of religious ideologies in the vernacular, women who dared preach, express mystical knowledge, or who were perceived as following an itinerant or unenclosed religious life, increasingly attracted institutional suspicion. In particular, beguines, or those associated with the beguine movement, became in our time frame associated with developing the extracurricular notions conversant with what the Church saw

⁵⁰⁷ Trier 1277 and Eichstatt 1284, for example.

⁵⁰⁸ Melissa Brown, "Marie d'Oignes, Marguerite Porete and 'Authentic' Female Mystics Piety in the Middle Ages", in *Worshipping Women*, pp. 187-235, p.201.

⁵⁰⁹ In "Alan of Lille: A Scholars attack on heretics", in Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, p.219.

⁵¹⁰ "Alan of Lille: A Scholars' attack on heretics", in Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, p.219.

as heterodoxy. In 1307, for example, Henry of Virnebourg issued a proclamation condemning beghards and *Apostolici* of both sexes (called *idiotae* in recognition of their lay status), citing both their violation of the Fourth Lateran Council's decree concerning the institution of new orders and their insistence on conducting their own sermons to the detriment of the preaching orders.⁵¹¹ This significant event inaugurated, as Mc Donnell points out, the "earnest systematic episcopal persecution which, guided by papal directives, would continue ...to the beginning of the following century"⁵¹² culminating in the Council of Vienne of 1311-12, a little over a year after Porete's death.

Instituted by Clement V in an attempt to "address the scope and exercise of church jurisdiction and co-operate in punishing violators",⁵¹³ the decrees issuing from the Council of Vienne stand at the culmination of half a century of institutional attempts to "curb ...the baneful influence of semireligious societies",⁵¹⁴ of which Henry's condemnation had been a recent and forceful reminder. Canon five, *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*, the first of two decrees issuing from the council directed explicitly at the beguine community, was a significant indication of the extent to which the church viewed the existence of extra-regular women as a threat to their monopoly:

There are certain women, commonly called beguines who, although they promise no one obedience and neither renounce property nor live in accordance with an approved rule, and consequently can in no wise be considered regulars, nevertheless wear a so called beguine habit, and cling to certain religious to whom they are drawn by special preference. It has been repeatedly and reliably reported to us that some of them, as *if possessed with madness, dispute and preach about the Highest Trinity and divine essence and in respect to the articles of faith and the sacraments of the Church spread opinions that are contradictory to the Catholic faith*. They deceive many simple persons in these things and lead them into various errors; they also do and commit under the veil of Holiness much else which endangers their souls. Therefore, after hearing frequently from these and others about their perverted principles on

⁵¹¹ McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, pp.517-17.

⁵¹² McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p.516.

⁵¹³ Sophia Menache, *Clement V*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought: Fourth Series, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.285/6.

⁵¹⁴ *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p.521.

account of which suspicion has rightfully fallen on them, we believe that we must, with the approval of the holy council, prohibit forever their status and abolish them completely from the church of God.⁵¹⁵

With the focus turned firmly on extra-religious women immediately following Porete's case the background to her trial must be seen in correlation with growing ecclesiastical disfavour of lay women's participation in vernacular, unsupervised and evangelical dissemination of religious ideas.

From imprisonment to immolation: the narrative of the trial

Whilst we have no documentation, apart from *The Mirror*, that tells us anything about how Porete may have navigated this maelstrom, it is possible to piece together the sequence of events that saw her burned at La Grève on the 1st June 1310.⁵¹⁶ In 1306 Porete was brought before Guy of Colmieu, bishop of Cambrai, who accused her of writing an heretical book and demanded that she cease disseminating her ideas any further ("in word or in writing").⁵¹⁷ Her book was "publicly and openly burnt in [her] presence"⁵¹⁸ in Valenciennes. Porete did not, however, obey the bishop's orders and sent copies of her book "to many other simple persons, beghards and others, as though it were ...good"⁵¹⁹ including at least three authorities: John of Querayn, a Franciscan from the Hainault region; Franco of Viliers, a Brabantine Cistercian; and Godefroid de Fontaines, a canon of Liège and Tournai and doctor of the University of Paris.⁵²⁰ Textual interpolations suggest that after receiving

⁵¹⁵ Cited in *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p. 524, my italics.

⁵¹⁶ This is done primarily through the documents of condemnation. See the Appendix of this thesis for a summary of contents.

⁵¹⁷ Ward, *SBK*, 458: Verdeyen, "Le Procès", pp.78-79.

⁵¹⁸ Ward, *SBK*, 460: Verdeyen, "Le Procès", p. 82.

⁵¹⁹ Ward, *SBK*, 458: Verdeyen, "Le Procès", p. 79.

⁵²⁰ Porete's inclusion of her supporters appears in the *Approbatio* of *The Mirror*, Chapter 140, pp.221-222. See also Dominguez, *Judgement and Gender*, p.6, and her analysis of the significance of Porete's supporters, pp 10-11. See also Colledge et.al., "Introductory Interpretative Essay", pp.xl-xlii.

support from these quarters, Porete added to her *Mirror* both the *Approbatio* and chapters 123-129,⁵²¹ and then appealed to the bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne with the revised version⁵²² in the hope of greater support. John of Châlons, however, disappointed her in this and handed her over to the inquisitor of Haute-Lorraine, where she was sent to face Philippe de Marigny and thence to his collaborator William Humbert of Paris and imprisonment in 1308.

In Paris, William (inquisitor into heretical depravity, confessor and advisor to the King of France, Phillip the Fair), took several articles from *The Mirror*⁵²³ and in March 1309 presented them, probably out of context, to twenty one theologians of the University of Paris.⁵²⁴ Meanwhile, the cleric Guiard de Cressonessart of Beauvais was arrested and

⁵²¹ The *Mirror* contains two Explicits, one at the end of Chapter 122 (p.201) and one at the end of Chapter 139 (p.221), the latter just prior to the *Approbatio*. Colledge et.al., conjecture that “the book, as burned at Valenciennes, contained nothing beyond Chapter 122, and that Margaret thereafter was prompted to add Chapters 123-139, by no means as retraction but rather as reaffirmation”. The authors go on to assert that Porete tried to ‘fix’ her book after feedback from her selected authorities, so as to gain ecclesial approval “Introductory Interpretative Essay”, pp.xli-xlii. Watson, has a different interpretation, believing that “although we could explain this as Porete’s response to her worsening situation, I prefer another explanation: that only as the book neared its end did she fully understand herself what it was saying”, “Melting into God”, p.29. Colledge’s conclusions are predictably less charitable than Watson’s. In this case, I find myself siding with Colledge, though for slightly different reasons. I think Porete was desirous for approval from within the Church (chapter four will explore this further). I also think she did understand what she was saying but identified that there were ecclesiastics who may require confirmation of her grounding in the traditions of the Church (thus, the chapters after 122 are grounded in christological exegesis).

⁵²² “By which bishop it was expressly forbidden to you under pain of excommunication lest you should further ... compose or have such a book or use it or any like it, the said bishop adding and expressly asserting in a certain letter sealed with his seal, that if you should further use the aforesaid book or those things contained in it, or should further attempt to do so by word or writing, he would condemn you as a heretic and would release you to be justiced at the hands of secular justice. But after all these things you used the said book many times against the said prohibition, as is obvious from your court appearances, made not only before the inquisitor of Lorraine, but also before the reverend father and Lord John ...then bishop of Cambrai, now archbishop of Sens. Indeed after the aforesaid condemnation and burning you communicated the said book as good and licit to the reverend father lord John, bishop of Chalons, and to other people, as is clear from the evident testimonies of many sworn witnesses worthy of faith before us concerning these things”, Ward, *SBK*, 460: Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, p. 82.

⁵²³ Only two of the selected articles are mentioned in the documents (see below).

⁵²⁴ Simon the deacon, Thomas of Bailly, William of Alexander and John of Ghent (all four canons of Paris), Peter of Saint Denis, Gerard of Saint Victor, Jacob abbot of Caroliloci, Gerard the Carmelite, John of Polliaco, Laurence, Alexander, Henry the German and Gregory of Lucca (of the order of the hermits of Saint Augustine), John of the Holy Mountain of the Elect, Radulph of Hoitot, Berengar of the Order of Preachers, John of Claromarisco, Nicholas of Lyre and Jacob of Esquillo of the Order of the Minors, Jacob the Cistercian and Roger of Roseto, (masters of theology). See Ward, *SBK*, p.445; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, p.50.

imprisoned also, accused of having demonstrated (*exposuit*) support for Porete.⁵²⁵ On the 11th April 1309, the articles extracted from Porete's book were declared by the twenty-one theologians to be heretical. As inquisitorial procedure granted the accused a year after their first condemnation in which to reflect and repent. It was not until March 1310 that William resumed the prosecution. During this time, Porete is said to have refused to answer any questions or to swear the standard oath required of inquisitorial procedure. Nor did she acknowledge Guiard as a disciple. As a result, there is no evidence that Guiard was in any way more than a self-professed defender of Porete, perhaps showing his allegiance on the streets, as Colledge believes,⁵²⁶ but never gaining sanction from Porete herself. His documents of condemnation, however, were stored with Porete's amongst the collected papers of Guillaume de Nogaret and Guillaume de Plaisians, jurists, advisors to Phillip the Fair and, like William, heavily involved in the Templar affair.

On the 3rd of April 1310, William summoned eleven of the twenty-one theologians involved in Porete's case and five professors of law to give counsel regarding both Porete and Guiard. It was decided (ostensibly because Guiard had espoused no doctrine⁵²⁷ and because Porete's doctrine had already been declared heretical by Bishop Guy), that the case would, henceforth, be in the charge of the lawyers. The canonists officially condemned Porete and Guiard on the same day and sentenced them to death with an escape clause of confession and perpetual imprisonment attached. The condemnation of each is almost identical in wording, and is quoted now with pronouns conflated: "unless immediately before sentence or after [they] should repent returning voluntarily to the unity of the Catholic faith

⁵²⁵ "Introductory Interpretative Essay", p.xlii.

⁵²⁶ "Introductory Interpretative Essay", p.xlii.

⁵²⁷ See Ward, *SBK*, pp.457-8.

and consenting publicly to abjure [their] errors”.⁵²⁸ On the 9th of April Guiard recanted, responded to William’s questioning and submitted to confession. He was imprisoned for life and his clerical status was revoked.⁵²⁹

On the 31st of May, William declared Porete a relapsed heretic and she was led to the field of La Grève, accompanied by a crowd, and was formally relaxed to the secular arm. She was burned at La Grève the following day, where it was recorded that “she showed many signs of penance both noble and devout, by which the hearts of many were moved to compassion for her piety and their watching eyes to tears”.⁵³⁰

The trouble with the trial

Thus far we have charted the narrative of Porete’s trial and explored briefly how issues of ecclesiastic authority and power were both challenged and consolidated in the period. We have discussed the ways in which women were both a visible presence in the religious landscape and a focus for institutional disfavour. Accordingly, when we consider why Porete was brought before the Chief Inquisitor of Paris it seems on first appraisal simple, if dreadful: Porete was a woman who did not submit to Church authority and who wrote and actively distributed an allegedly heretical treatise (whether deliberate or otherwise being moot) in the vernacular (and thus for a lay audience). She was a woman who was unaffiliated and unenclosed; she had considerable levels of learning; perhaps she preached

⁵²⁸ It must be stressed here, however, that the two documents are *separate condemnations*, presented by the same notaries. They are presented together here for both ease of communication and to underline the fact that the condemnations are virtually identical in wording.

⁵²⁹ For more on Guiard see Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, p.65 ff., Colledge et.al., “Introductory Interpretative Essay”, p.xliii and Robert Lerner, “An ‘Angel of Philadelphia’ in the Reign of Philip the Fair: The Case of Guiard de Cressonessart”, in W.C.Jordan, B.McNab, and T.F.Ruiz., *Order and Innovation in the Middle Ages*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 1976), pp.343-358.

⁵³⁰ *The Nangis Chronicles*, Ward, *SBK*, p.463; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, pp.89-90.

and her ideas were certainly intended for an audience. In addition to this, Porete did not conform to the traditions of female *exegesis* and auto-hagiography current and popular at the time; she did not declare her authority through visions or physical manifestations of divine knowledge, as many of her female counterparts were described as doing; and she did not offer traditional co-redemptive suffering for the living and the dead. What is more, she was silent *and* outspoken in all the wrong places and at all the wrong times. Therefore, it would seem inevitable that Porete's articulated religiosity, in tandem with her social role, brought her to the attention of notoriously misogynistic authorities and resulted in her execution: simple.

As with most history, however, there is little that is simple in the case of Porete. For example, if her book was so fundamentally heretical, why did it continue to circulate under mistaken authorship as a text of great, if esoteric, mysticism? What was it explicitly about her and her work that demanded an investigation by twenty-one theologians – a remarkable number for a solitary nuisance? Why was Guiard's case attached to hers considering he was but a self-professed defender and did not follow her to the flames? Further, of what significance is it that the Templar executions, the attacks on Eckhart and the institutional campaign against beguines and beguards occurred in such a conflated period of time?

In attempting to answer these questions, scholars have considered Porete's documents of condemnation and *The Mirror* and come up with a variety of responses. On the issue of orthodoxy, the general consensus has now returned to the original claims, pre-Guarnieri (and indeed those prior to its modern translations),⁵³¹ that *The Mirror* is essentially

⁵³¹ Godfrey of Fontaines "said nothing unfavourable about the book ...[but]... did indeed counsel that not many see it" (*The Mirror*, Chapter 140, p.222) lest they be led into error. Similarly the Middle English translator M.N. added glosses to rectify what were apparently criticisms of the text but maintained that it was written of "high divine maters and of highe goostli felynges and kerningli and ful mystili it is spoken" (cited in Malcolm

orthodox, if radical. Of the case against Porete, it is believed that Porete's accusers took sections of the work out of context to fashion a claim of antinomianism and that Porete was executed because she was a woman invading the textual territory of men without adherence to either the dominant feminine mystical traditions or the demands of 'Holy Church the Lesser', her death being an example to the increasingly persecuted beguine movement. There are problems with these responses not least of which is the question mark hanging over Porete's association with the beguine movement. To my mind, however, the most important issue that continues to remain unresolved is why Porete – a writer with apparently anomalous opinions that were ambiguous enough to receive a measure of ecclesiastical support, and who is not charged outright with a significant following – should have engendered such a sustained institutional campaign?

Unfortunately there are not really any clues within the documents themselves to answer this question. Rather, a close reading reveals only further thorny issues. The official documents reporting on Porete's condemnation contain six charters comprising seven official documents. Only three of the documents are notarised and all seven were found amidst the documents of jurists who had nothing to do with Porete's trial. The cases of Porete and Guiard are treated in parallel in all but the first two relevant documents. With the exception of the final notarised condemnation of Porete and Guiard, all the documents are statements by theologians and canon lawyers ('regent masters') in response to requests by William for advice. The majority of the documents thus consist of matters attested to by the convoked regent masters who appear to repeat what, in turn, the Inquisitor has told *them*.⁵³²

Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: popular movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation*, (2nd ed.) (1997), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.184). Watson adds that Methley, whilst directing the reader to *Ad nostrum*, is happy to attribute the work to Ruusbroec claiming him as a Carthusian prior. Watson concludes that Methley, "like M.N... Seems fascinated but wholly unalarmed by the text", "Melting into God", p.49.

⁵³² See Appendix.

What William appears to have told them was this: that Porete had failed to comply with the Bishop of Cambrai and destroy her work; that instead she sent it out to other people, clerical and lay; that she refused to submit to the authority of both his person and inquisition by a) refusing to appear before him voluntarily and b) refusing to swear oath and respond to questioning; and that she persisted in this rebelliousness for a significant period of time. Thus, the documented charges against Porete appear to condemn her behaviour as much (if not more) than they condemn the religious ideas that apparently instigated the entire process. Indeed, the apparent cause of her initial heresy, *The Mirror*, is not given a title in the documents, but is referred to only as ‘a certain book’. More, the charges against the work are delivered in a notarised document separate to the ‘trial’ of Porete, with no mention made of its author.

What looms large in the documents, therefore, is Porete’s ‘contumacious’ and ‘pertinacious’ refusal to comply with William’s authority and the office of the inquisitor. Her alleged heretical notions are addressed in an almost cursory fashion in documents relating to her person, and the condemnation of her book is similarly lacking in detail, with only two of the fifteen articles William selected to show the theologians recorded and no mention made of a prior condemnation. Despite this, it remains a testament to the significance of *The Mirror* (and perhaps also its author), not only that William clearly did not want the two officially associated, but also that he seemed to find it important to select a very large panel of distinguished theologians to condemn it.

This selection continues to puzzle scholars interested in her case. Verdeyen expresses surprise, for example, at the extent of the representatives, but considers that the primary reason for this number was the weight of the *Approbatio* of the book by Godfrey of

Fontaines who was an eminent member of the university and well respected. Despite the fact that Godfrey died somewhere between 1306 and 1309, Verdeyen considers that the twenty one theologians were required to counterbalance the significance of his support.⁵³³ Dominguez goes further than this, however, arguing “that something of a vendetta may be discernible behind the choice of so large a theological commission”.⁵³⁴ She points out that Godfrey had disputed propositions of Aquinas in 1277 and had publicly opposed mendicant privileges in 1283 and this, she believes, in combination with *The Mirror’s* assault on Holy Church the Lesser, added fuel to Porete’s smouldering condemnation. Whether William would have called on such a phalanx just because he knew the theologians would enjoy the sport, however, or indeed whether Godfrey’s attacks on the mendicants would have still been fresh after twenty-seven years, remains unclear. Moreover, it would seem odd that this phalanx would choose the case of one undistinguished woman to make a somewhat belaboured point.

Nevertheless, the intense, almost bureaucratic attention to validation of Porete’s alleged heresy is suggestive of a need to substantiate the due process of the trial. Not only this, but, as we have already pointed out, it is highly suspicious that the ‘evidence’ of Porete’s misdemeanours appears to have been primarily William’s rendition of events and that he seems to have told the ecclesiastics involved what he wanted them to repeat. This is suggestive of a certain amount of manipulation and the frequency of consultation with canonists and lawyers suggests that William was probably nervous about the validity of the condemnation and was eager to substantiate his assertions. Not all of the documents are notarised,⁵³⁵ however, which is unusual, given that, as James Brundage explains, “A genuine

⁵³³ Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, p.54.

⁵³⁴ “Judgment and Gender”, p.11.

⁵³⁵ A notary’s job was to draft and record legal instruments. L. Neville Brown notes that “The development of this office is an interesting result of the contact of two distinct systems of law, common and civil. In the Middle

notarial document constituted *prima facie* evidence of the transaction that it described. All canonical judges were (and still are) supposed to employ notaries to set down the official record of proceedings in their courts, since notarial enrollment [sic] gave this record its character as a trustworthy public document”.⁵³⁶ Why would William fail to notarise all of the documents relating to Porete’s trial? Because, as it stands, the four un-notarised documents appear more as administrative minutes than as sanctioned records; without the official seal of a notary they do not induce public ‘trust’. Could it be that William was chary of publically demonstrating the ‘evidence’ held within the un-notarised documents? Or was it considered unnecessary at the time and only deemed later to be important and thus kept with the other notarised documents?

There may be something in this, because in the same year that Porete’s trial took place, the final stages of the Templar trial also occurred, culminating in the burning of fifty four of its members on the twelfth of May just twenty days prior to Porete’s own execution. The significance of this coincidence is noteworthy not only because of the conflation of dates and venue, but also because many of the principal protagonists in Porete’s case are associated with the Templar trial. It will be remembered, for example, that William was deeply involved in negotiating the difficult process against the Templars instigated in October 1307.⁵³⁷ However, the coincidence goes further than this: Philip de Marigny, the inquisitor of Haute-Lorraine who handed Porete over to William was brother to Enguerrand de Marigny, royal chamberlain and important minister to Philip. Furthermore, Jacob of

Ages this contact was closest in the ecclesiastical sphere, for the Western Church was a powerful international organization”, “The Office of the Notary in France”, *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 2, No. 1. (Jan., 1953), pp. 60-71, p.70.

⁵³⁶ James A. Brundage “The notary specialized in drafting and recording legal instruments- contracts, mortgages, bills of sale, charters, conveyances, dowry agreements, testaments, and anything else that his clients might require”, “The Medieval Advocate’s Profession”, *Law and History Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2. (Autumn, 1988), pp. 439-464, p.443.

⁵³⁷ For details of the Templar case, along with a chronology of events, see Malcolm Barber, *The Trial of the Templars*, (1978), (Cambridge: University Press Cambridge, 2000). See also, J.O. Ward, “The Fall of the Templars”, Review Article, *Journal of Religious History*, 13, no.1., (June, 1984), pp.92-113.

Virtute and Evenus Phili, who notarised some of Porete's trial documents, were both involved in the condemnation of the Templars.⁵³⁸ In addition to this number, however, we must also add the coincidence that Porete's trial documents were found among the papers of Guillaume de Nogaret and Guillaume de Plaisians who were ministers of Philip the Fair and were two of the lawyers responsible for the prosecution of the Templars.⁵³⁹ Their names, as I have said, are not mentioned in the proceedings against Porete. Why then would the records of Porete's case have been stored by those who had nothing to do with her trial? Did they have an interest in her case that we know nothing about?

This seems to me to be likely and it is possible to conjecture that the decision may have been made to store *all* the documents recording Porete's condemnation (both notarised and not) in order to both substantiate the due process of trial proceedings at Paris in that year and to demonstrate the role of ecclesiastics in prosecuting heresy cases. Verdeyen believes this may have been so and he argues that Porete's trial may well have been considered an exemplary case,⁵⁴⁰ a notion that Colledge, who remarks on the precision and extent of the trial documentation also, concurs with.⁵⁴¹ This conclusion is further reinforced when we consider the background to the selection of the theologians, nine of whom had been summoned only a year earlier to respond to queries by Philip the Fair regarding the jurisdiction of civil authorities in heresy cases (specifically the Templar case). The theologians had responded "that civil judges could not advise in a trial against persons accused of heresy"⁵⁴² and thus Verdeyen argues that Porete's case was intended to reinforce the agreements between Philip and the papacy regarding the correct procedure for

⁵³⁸ Ward points out that "Jacob and Evenus were titular notaries of the inquisition. In this capacity they ... often recorded together the interrogations of the Templars", *SBK*, p.449.

⁵³⁹ Charles.V. Langlois, "Les papiers de Guillaume de Nogaret et de Guillaume de Plaisians au Trésor de Chartes", *Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, 1909, XXXIX, pp.215-241.

⁵⁴⁰ Ward, *SBK*, p.449.

⁵⁴¹ "Introductory Interpretative Essay", p.xxxv.

⁵⁴² Ward, *SBK*, p.10.

prosecution of heretics; that the Church, not the state, was required to initiate a heresy trial before delivering the accused for civil prosecution.⁵⁴³

Thus, the Templar and Porete trials, though different in form and betraying significantly disparate accusations, nevertheless have in common at least fourteen individuals. The significance of this must also have been noteworthy to Porete's contemporaries, particularly as each trial ended in a very public execution attended by large crowds. Certainly, Porete's association with the Templar trial was evident to the *Nangis* chronicler, who positioned the entry on Porete in the *Grande Chroniques* within a chapter entitled "*de la condamnacion des Templiers*".⁵⁴⁴ Scholars have posited a variety of reasons for this merger of the two cases. Lerner and Johnston, for example, argue that links between the two cases are the result, not of some sinister connection, but of Philip's acute interest in demonstrating his role as champion of Christianity. Johnston cites the extensive trial activity that accompanied Philip's reign, including the trials of those accused of witchcraft that began to escalate in France from this period, and sees, with Lerner, this proliferation as indicative of Philip's resolve to champion the Christian faith.⁵⁴⁵ This, in conjunction with Philip's desire to avoid accusations of financial motivations,⁵⁴⁶ is strong evidence that Porete's trial represented a canny move on the part of Philip's court both to evade accusations of self-

⁵⁴³ This would also help to explain not only the number of theologians consulted in Porete's case, but also the calibre of masters selected and the success of their careers. For as Ward notes: "Many of these men already occupied or subsequently rose to important positions within the Church: Gerard of Bologna had been Prior General of the Carmelites since 1289; in 1310 Jacob of Ascoli was made provincial of the Franciscans for Germania Superior; in 1312 Alexander of Saint Elpidio became Prior-General of the Augustinians and died as bishop of Amalfi; Henri of Germany, also known as Henry of Friemar, was for a long time provincial of the Augustinians of Germany; Gregory of Lucca became bishop of Sorra in Sardinia and, afterwards, of Belluno-Feltre; Berengar of Landore was chosen Master-General of the Dominicans in 1312 and named archbishop of Compostella in 1317; Nicolas of Lyre wrote the *Postilla litteralis*, for centuries the basic manual for all biblical exegesis", *SBK*, p.449.

⁵⁴⁴ "Marguerite Porete: A Post Mortem", *Worshipping Women*, pp. 63-125, p.120.

⁵⁴⁵ Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, pp.76-77; Johnston, "Marguerite Porete: A Post Mortem", *Worshipping Women*, 119-124.

⁵⁴⁶ Philip, for example, received substantial compensation from the Hospitaliers, recipients of the Templars wealth, after their suppression as an order. Accordingly, Barber sees the Templar trial as, in part, explicable by Phillip's financial needs, *The Trial of the Templars*, p.3 and p.247.

advantage⁵⁴⁷ and to promote Philip's role as a *Bellator Rex*, Defender of the Faith.

The motivation of the French court in pursuing Porete has, however, had other explanations proffered. Jantzen,⁵⁴⁸ for example, railing against Lerner's dismissal of the significance of possible political swipes within *The Mirror*, argues that Porete's references to "one-eyed servants who thought they were kings, and ... self important owls" are direct references to the political situation within Philip's court. Thus, Porete's trial is indicative, for Jantzen, of political suppression and she points out that it cannot be "sheer coincidence that [Porete] wrote about one-eyed servants who thought they were kings, and about self-important owls, just when the king's one-eyed minister was arresting a bishop who compared the king to a self important but ineffectual owl".⁵⁴⁹ Certainly, if Porete's references to internal matters at the French court were intentional this would appear significant, as it would indicate knowledge of the internal workings of Philip's court.

Yet even if it were the motives of the French court that account for the various coincidences that accompany Porete's case, this does not explain why Porete's trial documents include the case against Guiard, which, given the careful attention to detail and legitimacy, cannot be seen as a haphazard amalgamation of documentation. Verdeyen explains that "the tribunal of inquisitorial proceedings were against two persons and were in accordance with a parallel scheme",⁵⁵⁰ a point with which Dominguez concurs, explaining that the cases closed "with sentence passed at the same session and notarised in a single

⁵⁴⁷ Johnston, "Marguerite Porete: A Post Mortem", p.124.

⁵⁴⁸ Grace Jantzen, "Disrupting the Sacred: Religion and Gender in the City", *Bodies, Lives, Voices: Gender in Theology*, Kathleen O'Grady, Ann L Gilroy & Janette Gray [eds.], (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp.72-92.

⁵⁴⁹ "Disrupting the Sacred", p.87.

⁵⁵⁰ Verdeyen, "Le Procès", p.48. Colledge et.al. agree that William intended to pursue the cases as one and suggests this was to emphasise their similar approaches towards the temporal church, "Introductory Interpretative Essay", pp.xlii-xliii.

document”.⁵⁵¹ This is significant because despite the fact that Guiard’s deposition is fundamentally apocalyptic⁵⁵² and Porete’s *Mirror* is not, the cases *are presented as one* and this means that Porete and Guiard were seen as complicit in some way. Yet we know that this was not the case and the deposition of Guiard proves this to be so; for Guiard is above and beyond all the *Angel of Philadelphia*, a functional role that required his defence of both his followers and those who “adhered to the Lord in the Church of God”.⁵⁵³ Further, the record of his ‘confession’ indicates a very strong apocalyptic belief system carrying with it echoes of the *heresiarch* Fra Dolcino, who called himself the *Angel of Thyatira* and was burnt, together with his spiritual sister (interestingly enough, named Marguerite), at Vercelli in 1307. It may well be, as Johnston argues, that just by professing support, Guiard had given William an apocalyptic stick to wield against Porete.⁵⁵⁴ However, there seems to be more to it than this, because Porete is not accused of apocalyptic notions, she does not acknowledge Guiard and Guiard does not claim to be anything other than a defender.

The rationale for Guiard’s alleged heresy, according to the canonists consulted, was that “he had introduced division into the Church and refused to admit the absolute supremacy of the pope”.⁵⁵⁵ In an un-notarised record of Guiard’s trial⁵⁵⁶ (which preceded his ‘confession’ and condemnation), we see echoes of the phrases used to accuse Porete (‘contumacious’, ‘rebellious’ and ‘pertinacious’) and the umbrage taken at Guiard’s parallel

⁵⁵¹ “Judgement and Gender”, p.9.

⁵⁵² For details of Guiard’s deposition see Robert Lerner, “An ‘Angel of Philadelphia’ in the Reign of Philip the Fair” and Ward, *SBK*, pp.10-20.

⁵⁵³ Johnston, “Marguerite Porete: A Post Mortem”, p.108.

⁵⁵⁴ “Marguerite Porete: A Post Mortem”, pp.102-114, see especially p.114.

⁵⁵⁵ The findings read: “from his speech and deposed confessions it is clearly manifest that he places a division in the church militant, nay indeed he rather posits two churches militant, his own wielding the excellent keys of the one, and the pope holding fast the keys of the ministry of the other, and that the pope himself should not at all be the head of the church militant, nor be able to direct it at all through himself and his ministers and the holy canons and his statutes, all of which is heretical”, Ward, *SBK*, p.457; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, p.67.

⁵⁵⁶ Ward, *SBK*, pp. 453-54; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, pp. 60-1.

refusal to swear oath is clear.⁵⁵⁷ This would suggest strong parallels with Porete's defiance of Church authority, the division between Holy Church the Greater and Lesser⁵⁵⁸ being the most obvious example of this, yet even these things taken together do not necessarily demand a conflated case. Perhaps then, the link between the two cases was an emphasis intended to underline Porete's broad and 'pernicious' influence⁵⁵⁹ (it will be remembered that Porete was condemned for sending her book "to many other simple persons, beghards and others, as though it were ...good....").⁵⁶⁰ Indeed, the documents make reference to Guiard's *demonstrated* support – his *public* defence (*exposuit*), as we have already pointed out. This is significant because whilst it is not clear what shape Guiard's initial support of Porete took, the inference is that it may well have been vocal and at street level, a contention strengthened by Guiard's history of involvement in public demonstrations.⁵⁶¹ Can it be, therefore, that it was not only Guiard's self-professed support of Porete but also his 'demonstrated' *public* support that gave William a means of demonstrating in the documents that Porete was a danger to the public?

This seems a feasible conjecture, because whilst the canon lawyers do not mention Guiard's support of Porete in the un-notarised documents recording his confession, William refers to it at length in the notarised sentence at La Grève.⁵⁶² This would suggest that William was keen to emphasise that Porete had supporters in the public arena. In turn, this would have successfully capitalised on a fear of 'contamination', in which the 'heretic' is cast as a polluting creature carrying the threat of contagion amongst the faithful. R.I.Moore

⁵⁵⁷ Ward points out that The Council of Beziers (1246) had made the oath mandatory for all persons appearing before the Inquisition, as follows: 'From those who, thus cited, have appeared before you within the assigned time, you will receive the oath of saying fully and completely the truth which they know concerning the fact of the crime of heresy both for themselves and for others alive or dead"', *SBK*, p.453.

⁵⁵⁸ See for example, chapter 43 of *The Mirror*.

⁵⁵⁹ Dominguez believes this to be the case, see "Judgement and Gender", p.10.

⁵⁶⁰ Ward, *SBK*, p.458; Verdeyen, "Le Procès", p. 79.

⁵⁶¹ Guiard had taken part in demonstrations in Reims against Dominican friars "Introductory Interpretative Essay", p.xlii.

⁵⁶² Ward, *SBK*, p.458; Verdeyen, "Le Procès", pp.78-9.

has shown that this was a predominant motif in heresy accusations characteristic of the period⁵⁶³ and appears to have been a fear that was capitalised on readily by Philip's court (particularly when we consider the Templar case, with sexual deviance at the high end of the scale of contamination).⁵⁶⁴ For Porete, however, to whom no sexual immorality charges were applied (although it is noted that the inference of antinomianism suggested 'moral laxity'), the contagion appears to have been reinforced by the presentation of Guiard as a disciple and conduit for her thought, an individual whose public support on the street represented the threat of heretical pollutants.

The conflation of the two trials is suggestive, therefore, not only of an anxiety that Porete *had* followers but also that her case required significant strengthening. For, the charges against Porete were directed at a silent deponent whose ideas had to be de-contextualised and assessed by twenty-one masters of theology in order to sustain the charge of heresy. This betrays a canny manipulation of material that underscores the hostility with which William pursued his subject. However, if the evidence found in the trial documents is suggestive of a carefully structured and reinforced assault, it is nothing compared to that which can be discerned in the vitriol Porete herself received in the documentation. For, whilst Porete came before her inquisitors accused of authoring and disseminating heretical ideas, she was accused in *The Chronicles of Nangis* of being guilty of much more: of not only being a relapsed heretic but of being a fraud - a *pseudomulier*.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶³ The signifiers of contagion were presented in multiple forms. Sexual immorality (as with the Templars) was a common theme but signifiers were not confined to this, as Moore explains: "The threat ... omnipresent and so highly contagious as to be virtually irresistible ... is contained especially in sexual menace and represented most vividly by it ... but no less significant is the habitual description of those who carry the threat as wandering and rootless people confined by no boundaries, subject to no restraint of custom or kin, without visible means of support or a settled place in society", *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: power and deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, (1987), 5th ed., (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) p. See also chapter 3 "Purity and Danger", pp.100-123.

⁵⁶⁴ See Barber, *The Trial of the Templars*, particularly his Appendix A, "The Articles of Accusation 12 August 1308", pp.248-252.

⁵⁶⁵ On the significance of this appellation (and others), see Dominguez, *Judgement and Gender*, pp.37-50.

The Chronicles, we will remember, were composed by an anonymous monk of the notoriously conservative Royal Abbey of St Denis, who “habitually expressed the crown’s point of view” and was very possibly informed by a member of Porete’s examining commission (Peter of St Denis).⁵⁶⁶ Thus, it is possible that they are documents in accordance with the sentiments evident within the trial documents: sentiments that are fundamentally antagonistic towards Porete. Indeed, the trial documents are replete with what Dominguez has termed ‘name calling’. In both the notarised and un-notarised documents, Porete is consistently referred to as ‘obstinate’, ‘contumacious’ and ‘disobedient’, possessing a ‘pertinacious soul’ and displaying “evident contumacious rebellions and notorious acts demanding redress”.⁵⁶⁷ When William of Nangis identified her as *pseudomulier* in his chronicle, therefore, he expressed a sentiment confluent with the inquisitor’s sense of Porete’s transgressions; she was a ‘traitor to her sex’, not male, not female but somehow ‘unnatural’, anathema to both genders, a figure that in one word described everything a woman should not be.

The significance of this undoing of gender, the denial of Porete’s very existence as a gendered human (oddly reflective of her mystical desire for annihilation), is implicitly entwined with both her silence *and* her outspokenness, each of which reflected the Church’s concern with, and suspicion of, the flourishing of female religiosity. It will be remembered, for example, that *Cum de quisbusdam mulieribus* was explicitly directed at beguines who “as if possessed with madness, dispute and preach about the Highest Trinity and divine essence and in respect to the articles of faith and the sacraments of the Church spread opinions that are contradictory to the Catholic faith”.⁵⁶⁸ Further, it has been argued across the scholarship

⁵⁶⁶ See Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.75.

⁵⁶⁷ Ward, *SBK*, p.460; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, p.82.

⁵⁶⁸ Cited in *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, p.524.

that the decree issuing from the same sitting of Council, *Ad nostrum qui*, is directly related to the condemned articles lifted from Porete's *Mirror* and to the *Nangis* chronicler's rendition of Porete's crime.⁵⁶⁹ It will also be remembered that the Council of Vienne began its sittings only a year after Porete's death. Indeed, in yet another conflation of coincidences, several of the delegates at the Council of Vienne were associated with Porete's case; six of the theologians that condemned extracts from *The Mirror* were present along with the Marigny brothers (Philip and Enguerrand) and others associated with the court of Philip IV.⁵⁷⁰ *Ad nostrum* has been called 'the birth certificate of the heresy of the Free Spirit' and Porete has been called "the first apostle in France of the German sect of the Brethren of the Free Spirit",⁵⁷¹ though it remains unclear, as Lerner and others have pointed out, whether any such sect existed.⁵⁷² It is highly likely, therefore, that the anti-beguine Clementine decrees represent a direct conduit between ecclesiastical distrust of vernacular and extra-regular activity (such as beguines) and Porete's alleged transgressions.

Fundamentally linked with the accusation of gender fraud in Porete's trial documents, is Porete's alleged beguine status. Now this is a curious appellation because there is evidence in her book to suggest that she saw beguines as opponents of her philosophy: "O my lover, *what will beguines say*" Soul asks "and religious types, /When they hear the excellence of your divine song?! *Beguines say I err,/ priests, clerics, and Preachers,/ Augustinians, Carmelites,/ and the Friars Minor*".⁵⁷³ Why call Porete a beguine, therefore, when she clearly disassociates herself from this group? Some scholars have responded to this by

⁵⁶⁹ See Roman Guarineri and Edmund Colledge, "The Glosses by M.N. and Richard Methley"; Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit*, pp.81-84; Michael Sargent, "Annihilation", p.256ff, , Edmund Colledge, et.al, "Introductory Interpretative Essay", pp.xxxv-lxxxvii.

⁵⁷⁰ For more detail see Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.80.

⁵⁷¹ Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages*, pp.122-23

⁵⁷² *The Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.83.

⁵⁷³ *Mirror*, p.200, my italics. Clearly, Porete is distancing herself here from both the regular and sub-regular. For analyses that demonstrate (unequivocally, I believe) that Porete was not a beguine, see Dominguez "Judgement and Gender", p.37 ff and Nowacka "Editing and Excluding Medieval Religious Women", pp.85-92.

pointing to the label as one given by the inquisitorial records⁵⁷⁴ and by contemporary historians. Yet, Porete is labelled beguine on three occasions only in the trial documents and *William himself never once calls Porete a beguine* (nor Guiard a beghard for that matter). Rather, it is the regent masters who report on this status.⁵⁷⁵ Certainly, this identification may well have come from William himself, as much of the other information about Porete appears to have done; however, it is interesting to note that when the term is applied, it is on the same day and by the same people.⁵⁷⁶ Can it be, therefore, that the topic of beguines and beghards occupied a special significance on that day and that the regent masters were identifying a category much in their minds and in the public eye? Were they unsure how to categorise Porete and thus resorted to a stereotype that was not only hazy enough to be used as a catch-all for unaffiliated, religiously inclined women, but was also helpful in reinforcing the heretical nature of their subject? Further, could William have recognised the political significance of the term and the potential for its controversial application in a heresy trial, and thus ensured the affiliation was notarised,⁵⁷⁷ but not as uttered by him – thus ensuring a record of the status and simultaneously distancing himself from the accusation?

These conjectures may not be too far off the mark, particularly when we consider that the label ‘beguine’ is such a problematic vehicle for historical apprehension. Tanya Stabler Miller, for example, in assessing a variety of clerical sources delivered to audiences in Paris from the mid-thirteenth century, argues that the label ‘beguine’ was highly contested in the years prior to Porete’s condemnation and “called to the clerical mind a wide range of ideas

⁵⁷⁴ For example, O’Sullivan builds up the case of her beguine status by layering inquisitorial records with contemporaneous chorinciles and later references (for example, Gerson’s association of Porete with Marie of Valenciennes), *Model, Mirror, Memorial*, p.48.

⁵⁷⁵ The documents that do so are all dated April 3, 1310: “Proceedings against Marguerite and Guiard: first consultation of the canonists”, Ward, *SBK*, pp. 450-52; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, pp. 56-58; “Condemnation of Marguerite”, Ward, *SBK*, pp. 453-54; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, pp. 60-1; “Condemnation of Guiard”, Ward, *SBK*, pp. 454-55; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, pp. 62-3. See the Appendix of this thesis for further detail.

⁵⁷⁶ Ward, *SBK*, pp. 450-52; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, pp.56-68.

⁵⁷⁷ One of the three instances in which Porete is labeled beguine is in a notarised document.

and qualities, both positive and negative, that preachers shaped and re-shaped in their sermons to Parisian beguines, fellow scholars, and other urban audiences”.⁵⁷⁸ Used in a highly arbitrary fashion the notion of ‘beguine’ appeared to be a means with which clerics could consider both their own religiosity and the social implications of unclear distinctions between lay and official religious participation:

Preachers made use of several different images of the beguine mystic, ascetic, social critic, and outcast in the sermons and *exempla* reflecting upon their experiences as university scholars. Drawing upon, and thus reinforcing, negative imagery of the beguines, some clerics expressed a desire to become like the beguine who remained steadfast in the face of criticism. Others expressed admiration for the beguines’ intense, solitary spiritual experiences, as well as their active involvement in their communities, claiming that the beguines were closer to God than the Parisian theologians who spent their time in study and disputation. Still others expressed concern that the beguines had interiorised these positive images of themselves, causing several to speculate that these women arrogantly thought of themselves as worthy alternatives clerical authority.⁵⁷⁹

Clerical uncertainty regarding the appropriateness of lay religious participation is here quite evident, as is a tangible anxiety about authority; for if beguines could be admired and emulated, they could also be a threat and a caution. What is more, clerical perceptions of beguines suggest unease that religious individuals were not readily identifiable as a discrete sector of the community.

Thus, Miller’s research reveals a very evident ecclesiastical anxiety about the benefits of unofficial religiosity. This is particularly clear in sermons that express an element of rivalry regarding the authority of religious knowledge. For example, clerical perceptions of beguines were caught between acceptance of beguine piety and suspicion of fraud; people could either benefit from the example of beguines or could be led into error by beguines

⁵⁷⁸ Tanya Stabler Miller “What’s in a name?: Clerical representations of Parisian beguines (1200-1328)”, *Journal of Medieval History*, 33, (2007), pp.60-86, p.64.

⁵⁷⁹ Tanya Stabler Miller “What’s in a name?”, p.64.

masquerading as pious representatives.⁵⁸⁰ Suspicion became particularly sharp when arrogance was perceived to be in evidence,⁵⁸¹ a charge frequently associated with intellectual and text-based approaches to religiosity. This appears to have been an anxiety emphasised not only by the blurred nature of beguine status, but also by recognition of a profound female engagement with religiosity that remained unenclosed. For as Miller further explains, “Parisian clerics often preached to the beguines about the importance of remaining within the beguinage, warning that leaving the institution constituted an abandonment of their vows, and that, in order to be considered ‘religious,’ one had to remain enclosed”.⁵⁸² Porete, however, was not enclosed, was deeply engaged with religiosity and did utilise a text-based approach to that engagement. This may help to explain why she is given a beguine identity by her accusers and why her behavior (particularly her perceived arrogance) is emphasised in the documents. It may also, however, indicate a stereotype less conversant with reality than with perceptions of *a* reality that shifted between ‘person, place and perception’.⁵⁸³

Clerical unease about beguines suggests both a desire to classify and contain female religiosity within spatial constraints, as well as a desire to restrict religious knowledge within readily recognised boundaries. However, it also makes problematic application of the term in discussing extra-regular activity. The significance of this has, however, not always achieved the prominence it deserves, and it has only been in recent years that scholarship has begun to reassess the beguine movement as a whole and thus to investigate the linguistic implications of the term itself.⁵⁸⁴ Walter Simons, for example, whose *Cities of Ladies*⁵⁸⁵ is possibly the

⁵⁸⁰ Tanya Stabler Miller “What’s in a name?”, pp.70-73.

⁵⁸¹ Tanya Stabler Miller “What’s in a name?”, pp. 80ff.

⁵⁸² Tanya Stabler Miller “What’s in a name?”, p.69.

⁵⁸³ To borrow from Randall’s title, “Person, Place, Perception”.

⁵⁸⁴ For a review of scholarship that is critical of dominant historical understandings of beguines, see Ziegler, *Curtis Beguinages* and Walter Simons’ “The Beguine Movement in the Southern Low Countries: a Reassessment”.

⁵⁸⁵ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.36.

most important work on the subject of beguines to be released since McDonnell's, has demonstrated that despite the term's proliferation in spoken and written discourse, and despite occasions where it seems to have been used charitably, the word 'beguine' never quite lost its pejorative connotation. This underlines the problems historians face when attempting to distinguish between institutional descriptions of social status and institutional descriptions of deviancy. Indeed, as we shall see in the following chapter, it is very likely that Porete's designation reflected an official response to ecclesiastical ambiguity regarding beguines, one that both consolidated adverse sentiments regarding their status and linked that status to opinions that could be seen as antagonistic to ecclesiastic hegemony.

The trouble with the trial records

The issues associated with an academic propensity for reading the term 'beguine' as a description, rather than as a value-laden term, are entwined with the problems associated with reading Porete's history through an inquisitorial account of events, identities, relationships and transgressions. This constitutes what I call here a hermeneutics of hostility, in which the use of key documents issuing from the ecclesiastical hegemony has made problematic the academic apprehension of Porete as a historical subject. The trial documents have been instrumental in academic interest in Porete and frequently function as the backdrop to how she is understood as an identity in the period. This is challenging, because whilst the documents seem at first glance to be objective representations of a legal case, they are only deceptively so, as we have said. Indeed, as we have just discussed, there is much within the trial documents to suggest that they reflect more accurately the motivations and prejudices of their 'authors' than the identity of Porete.

The cognisance of inquisitorial documents as a problematic pathway to historical reconstruction has a long tradition.⁵⁸⁶ Indeed, even very early in Porete scholarship an element of unease with the veracity of inquisitorial records was recognised. Grundmann, for example, points to the distortion that inquisitorial records engaged in when presenting the doctrines of the accused⁵⁸⁷ and McDonnell acknowledges, albeit briefly, the multiple ways in which some terminology was used in the sources.⁵⁸⁸ Despite this unease, the trial records have been read by some as accurate descriptions of Porete's case. As scholarship developed, however, a more 'source critical' approach was embraced that acknowledged inquisitorial documents as moderately suspect, with the threat of torture, the stake, and other aspects of the methodology of the inquisitors seen as complicating the process of finding 'truth' in inquisitorial records.⁵⁸⁹ Lerner, for example, whilst imposing a problematic distinction between hostile sources and inquisitorial records,⁵⁹⁰ nevertheless makes reference to these coercive aspects and points to the deceptive objectivity they represent. We are thus advised to treat with care the information they proffer. This *caveat* for scholarship dealing with inquisitorial records has functioned as an underscore to relevant studies, one that reinforces a developing historiographical awareness of the centrality of power implicit in heresy accusations.

Moore has written of the shift from dissent into heresy as an outcome of the reforming Church, in which innovations of faith and practice applied coherence to heresy as

⁵⁸⁶ Effectively mapped by Arnold, *Inquisition and Power*, see especially pp.5-7.

⁵⁸⁷ Grundmann, for example, who at times expresses unease at the use of 'beguine' as a term, without actually following this up, comments that: "When chroniclers or inquisitorial protocols attempt to describe the propositions of heretics, this mystical doctrine is always distorted and confused, as if it sought to break down all barriers against compulsion and vice. When we have even a few words from the mouth of a 'heretic' such as Maragrete Porete, it is mystical earnestness and religious purity which speak from them", *Religious Movements*, alternate spelling of Porete's name, his, p.184.

⁵⁸⁸ For example, when discussing the use of the word 'beguine', he notes that "the term may not always have had a derogatory connotation ... But this does not invalidate the conclusion ... that originally the word *beguine* connoted heretic", *Beguines and Beghards*, p.429.

⁵⁸⁹ Lerner, *The Heresy of The Free Spirit*, p.4-7

⁵⁹⁰ *The Heresy of The Free Spirit*, p.5.

a recognised state.⁵⁹¹ For Moore, the heretic, defined canonically as “one whose views were ‘chosen by human perception, contrary to holy scripture, publicly avowed and obstinately defended’”,⁵⁹² became, from the twelfth century, classified according to the strictures of authority:

a person became heretic only by refusing to accept a bishop’s pronouncement that his [sic] expressed views were heretical ... From the point of view of the faithful, therefore, the heretic is self-defined ... as the person who by his [sic] own deliberate choice denies the authority of the Church. But by the same token to put it in that way is to be reminded that heresy exists only in so far as authority chooses to declare its existence ... Heresy ... can only arise in the context of the assertion of authority, which the heretic resists, and is therefore by definition a political matter.⁵⁹³

This constitutes for Moore the development of a ‘coherence of heresy’ which in turn reflects the development of the Church’s increasingly institutional response to varied expressions of faith, belief and practice, particularly within the laity. Accordingly, inquisitorial documents, which reflect the institutional response, must be seen as an element of the power relations that classified and determined the heretic in order to suppress and, for Moore, contribute to the formation of a persecuting society.

Moore’s influence has proved ontologically profound with the “tremendous extension of the power and influence of the literate”⁵⁹⁴ becoming an important part of research into heresy and inquisition. Accordingly, suppression and persecution function as important motifs in the relevant scholarship with an underlying, if not always expressly defined, recognition of the nature of the source material. For specialists of inquisition, however, the source material holds particular significance. James Given, for example, concludes of his research into the ‘confessions’ of Cathars at Languedoc that the records evince a particular power strategy that “ruled through the systematic creation of social marginality” and he

⁵⁹¹ *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, see for a précis, pp.68-72.

⁵⁹² From Gratian’s *Decretum II*, cited in Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, p.68.

⁵⁹³ *Inquisition and Power*, p.68.

⁵⁹⁴ *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, p.153.

points out that “[s]uch creation or maintenance of socio-cultural marginality seems to have been an essential aspect of the strategy of power generally in the Middle Ages”.⁵⁹⁵ This might suggest that inquisitorial documents have little value in terms of historical apprehension. Grado Merlo, however, argues that despite inquisitorial documents functioning as secret documents of propaganda, which compromise any ‘trust’ historians may place in them, they nevertheless provide a filter through which to view the deponents’ lives.⁵⁹⁶

In this, McNamara is in agreement. Rejecting Lerner’s distinction between hostile sources and inquisitorial records, McNamara writes that the history of medieval women is “fractured by hostile sources”, amongst which she includes inquisitorial records, and she adds that medieval women’s history is thus “a history in confrontation with our sources rather than in conformity with them”.⁵⁹⁷ Despite this difficulty, McNamara goes on to attempt a rehabilitation of two women whose lives and beliefs, she argues, were obscured by the source material that names them but can nevertheless be unveiled by means of “a cross-textual comparison aimed at dissolving the structural patterns that separated them”.⁵⁹⁸ This cross-textual analysis includes the use of inquisitorial records. A characteristic of studies that attempt to rescue the ‘voices’ of medieval women from what McGinn has called “the monologic triumph of the authoritative male voice of ecclesiastical authority”,⁵⁹⁹ inquisitorial documents are thus frequently looked to for moments when the ‘real voices’ of the deponents ‘break through’ and make themselves heard.⁶⁰⁰ Thus, the issue of ‘trust’ in the veracity of inquisitorial sources has taken a larger role in the historical imperative, as has the

⁵⁹⁵ *Inquisition and Medieval Society*, p. 217.

⁵⁹⁶ Grado Merlo, *Eretici e inquisitori nella società piemontese del Trecento*, (Turin: Claudiana, 1977), cited and critiqued by Arnold, *Inquisition and Power*, p.6.

⁵⁹⁷ Jo Ann McNamara, “De Quibusdam Mulieribus”, p.239.

⁵⁹⁸ “De Quibusdam Mulieribus”, p.240.

⁵⁹⁹ *The Flowering of Mysticism*, p.17.

⁶⁰⁰ A methodology Arnold discusses in more detail, *Inquisition and Power*, p.7.

notion that the documents represent a ‘veil’ over the truth that can, nevertheless, be peered through.⁶⁰¹

However, Porete’s trial documents frustrate this pursuit because they diverge from the standard inquisitorial register: Porete does not speak; the documents do not proceed in the same way as other inquisitorial documents; and they were not compiled and archived to represent a detailed account of her heresy. Indeed, as we have seen, the details of that heresy are represented rather loosely and it is not always clear whether Porete’s heresy was behavioural or doctrinal, or both (although the ‘twin pillars’ of the anti-beguine Clementine decrees would indicate both). This may suggest that Porete’s trial documents cannot be studied in the same way that cases drawn from the inquisitorial register can. However, it is clear that William considered her case as one of inquisition and trial,⁶⁰² despite being frustrated by her refusal to comply with the rules of such a pursuit, and he (and those from whom he sought advice) consistently refer to his role in her case as that of “inquisitor of heretical depravity in the kingdom of France”.⁶⁰³ I would argue that Porete’s trial documents do thereby exist within the framework of the inquisitorial endeavour and that her condemnation is clearly situated within a broader construction that presented alternative religious discourse as not just competition, but as a covert attempt at evangelical heresy.

For when we consider the inquisitorial documents relating to Porete, we see, firstly and foremostly, an official demonstration of the responsibilities of the Inquisitor General of Paris in protecting the people from the ‘harm’ of heresy. This, after all, was the primary objective of inquisition. Part of that objective, however, was also to discern heresy, to

⁶⁰¹ *Inquisition and Power*, p.7.

⁶⁰² “Further while you, Marguerite, remain obstinate in those rebellions, we, led by conscience and wishing to exercise the debt of our commissioned office, have made inquisition and trial against you about the aforesaid as the order of law requires”, Ward, *SBK*, p.460; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, p.82.

⁶⁰³ Ward, *SBK*, p.460; Verdeyen, “Le Procès”, p.82

enlarge knowledge of the heretic and thus to find the ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’ hidden amidst the laity. This was seen as necessary because, as Arnold reminds us, the Church in this period was engaged in a struggle over “ownership of signs of piety”, an ownership that was contested in the public sphere and interpreted by a laity who were “too easily deceived by exterior appearances”.⁶⁰⁴ Thus, the Church retained and proclaimed authority and power, using the function of the inquisitor to reveal what the laity was unable to see, with the mantle of ‘care’ discreetly covering the frequently violent process of consolidation.

This does not mean that the inquisitorial process was solely concerned with responding to heresy as it arose. Rather, in our period, it also constituted “a process of gathering, interrogating, noting, collating and naming”.⁶⁰⁵ This process entailed both information gathering and the communication of that information to those invested with maintaining and proclaiming Church authority. It also involved correction, imposing penance on individuals who were classified as transgressors and monitoring their rehabilitation. This was considered a serious and significant task requiring strict protocols and attention to the archiving of materials that could be used to cross-reference both individual cases and generic precedence of transgression. Taken together, these components of inquisitorial process are important because they show that the inquisitors were fully aware of the power of information and its role in the communication and maintenance of authority.

Indeed, as Arnold further points out, compiling methods of inquisition and maintaining detailed records allowed the meaning of transgression to be controlled, ordered and communicated⁶⁰⁶ and perhaps, we might add, manipulated. To communicate what was transgressive (and conversely, what was not), inquisitors engaged in a process designed to

⁶⁰⁴ *Inquisition and Power*, p.65.

⁶⁰⁵ *Inquisition and Power*, p.56.

⁶⁰⁶ *Inquisition and Power*, p.56.

develop the identity of the heretic using an authoritative discourse that reinforced inquisitorial processes and authority in respect of enacted piety. This involved the frequent utilisation of stock phrases, which ranged from the ubiquitous ‘returning like a dog to its vomit’, for *relapsi*, through to the identification of the inquisitors as ‘obedient sons and zealots of the catholic faith’,⁶⁰⁷ which served to reinforce what the deponent was not. The process, however, also included the naming and description of the accused, along with their heresy. Thus, deponents in inquisitorial cases are given an identity that confers with behaviours recognisable as transgressive. Sometimes this is associated with their alleged adherence to particular sects (such as the Cathars) and sometimes it is associated with behaviour that contravenes the authority of the Church.

Trial documents are, therefore, textual sites of contested power in which the deponent is constituted as ‘other’ in contradistinction to the inquisitor and to the faithful. They are thus *part of*, rather than only the *result of*, power relations. Indeed, as all trials are about power, about the ways in which society controls and attends to perceived deviance, and as our period can be characterised as one in which the language and protocols of power within the institution of the Church were still being established, it seems important to consider the *productive* components of power in trial documents. For Arnold, this means:

... firstly that the effects of their Latinity and their ‘writtenness’ must be examined; and secondly that they must be understood not as passive reflectors of events occurring ‘elsewhere’, but as sites of discourse that are inextricably part of the performance of power and authority. As texts, they must be analysed not only in terms of what they say, but also of what they do, their functions their effects, their textuality.⁶⁰⁸

Inquisitorial documents, for Arnold, are accordingly texts that do not just record information

⁶⁰⁷ A recurring linguistic motif in Porete’s trial.

⁶⁰⁸ *Inquisition and Power*, p.79.

‘for us’ as historians, but also produce things within the historical setting.⁶⁰⁹ These productive components are constituted by Arnold as “the formation of heresy, transgression, and identities; the repetition of a particular of [sic] authoritative language that constitutes the inquisitor as an inquisitor; and the construction of a confessing subject...”.⁶¹⁰ Thus, it is not only repression, or contested power, but also the production of categories of repression and contested power that characterise inquisitorial documents.

This seems to me to be a particularly useful way of addressing some of the issues of Porete’s case. Indeed, considering the trial documents as sites of power that *produce* rather than just *repress* allows us an alternative avenue of enquiry that may better comprehend what can be ‘heard’ through the clamour of the inquisitorial voice that so plagues Porete’s case. Because, as the preceding discussion of issues surrounding her trial indicates, questions of events, identities, relationships and transgressions are not readily discernible when approached using current approaches to the documents of condemnation. This is primarily because Porete’s case is generally viewed as a *responsive suppression* of an individual, with the documents considered hostile but essentially indicative of the inquisitors’ requirement of suppression. This is problematic because it ignores the agency of the inquisitors in the development of power and authority that maintained the religious hegemony.

Using a methodology of constructive power, however, repression becomes *only part* of the function of inquisition and this is important because it opens up possibilities for historical interpretations that do not rest solely on the notion of the register as primarily a *responsive* tool to an individual. Moreover, focussing only on repression infers that Porete’s

⁶⁰⁹ Foucault saw power as constitutive of reality – as creative. It orders reality and meaning around categories that define centre and periphery – that give ‘pleasure’ when compared with silence (make invisible when the repressed voice is beyond the meaningful) when dissenting.

⁶¹⁰ *Inquisition and Power*, p.11.

demise was the result of a process in which the authorities responded to a particular set of criteria that demanded an outcome. However, the manipulation of material, in confluence with the construction of a transgressive identity for Porete, evidences a motivation that was more than just responsive; it was also constructive of an institutionally created ‘other’ that would have implications that went beyond the case of Porete.⁶¹¹ Indeed, if we view repression as the primary objective of the documents, and if we ignore the agency of the inquisitors, we neglect the *construction* of an identity for Porete, an identity replete with transgressive qualities and behaviours that in their elucidation helped to identify heretical qualities and in so doing reinforce the consolidation of power within the Church.

In this sense then, Porete evades repression by refusing to swear oath or speak, she dissents and rebels and thus fractures the boundaries of the institution by refusing to ‘play’. This is why Porete’s trial documents jar in comparison to others of their ilk; they appear to be nothing more than an administrative record of a defined and confirmed heretic. This is deceptive, however, because they result in the same production of deviance as others that include dialogue. Yet they do so with a fluidity of characterisation of deviance that marks the fluidity of discourse that they attempted to repress and record. Thus, they *produce* the machinery for a fluid suppression that can encompass divergence within the community. Moreover, when we compare the way in which trial documents relating to Guiard proceed after his confession, parallels with other inquisitorial documents begin to emerge. Initially, Guiard’s documents look very much like Porete’s, as I have already noted. However, when Guiard *does* confess, the documents begin to look very much like other standard inquisitorial documentation: the repetition of phrases such as “he also said” and “likewise asked”

⁶¹¹ Indeed, McGinn has pointed out that Porete’s condemnation “provided critical ammunition for an ongoing struggle between the mystical and institutional elements of Christianity that has continued almost down to the present day”, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, pp.244-245.

following the familiar pattern of question and response.⁶¹² As such, I would suggest that whilst Porete's documents do diverge from what we are used to in inquisitorial documentation, they do so predominantly because *she* diverged from pattern by refusing to swear oath – a response to inquisition that the inquisitors had not expected.⁶¹³

Porete's book brought her to trial, but it was her behavioural transgressions that, in the trial documents, are represented as a significant part of her identity and a significant part of her heresy. Only two condemned articles extracted from her book are identified,⁶¹⁴ but much space is dedicated to listing Porete's alleged character flaws. Accordingly, when Porete is relinquished to the secular arm, the trial documents declare that Porete's:

...notable suspicion of heresy has passed first from vehement then into violent presumption, the aforesaid unhappy woman, *by the weight of her contumacies, rebellions and adjudged pertinacities* and in accordance with the demands and requirements of the law, must be held as a heretic and definitively condemned as a heretic, and relinquished to the secular court, to pay the due penalty according to the nature of her crime, *unless immediately before sentence or after she should repent, returning voluntarily to the unity of the catholic faith and consenting publicly to abjure her errors at the judgement of the same inquisitor.*⁶¹⁵

Thus, Porete is consistently classified as pertinacious, contumacious, rebellious and disobedient, appellations that Guiard is also subject to prior to his confession. In both cases, the repetitious accusations of disobedience are contrasted with the obedience of the

⁶¹² See the sentence of the inquisitor of Na Prous Boneta, H.C. Lea *History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, III, pp.653-54; online version is "La Prous Bonet (Boneta)", *Medieval Sourcebook*, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/naprous.html>> David Burr, [trans.], last visited June 2007.

⁶¹³ It is interesting to compare Porete and Joan of Arc here – both were accused of 'gender fraud' and both resisted swearing oath. Moreover, betraying a further similarity to Porete, Joan refused to answer many of her inquisitor's questions. Ansgar Kelly's comments about the reasons for this could provide the basis for an interesting future comparative: "[Joan] was motivated by the need to protect personal loyalties and obligations. That is, she was not worried so much about self-incrimination as self-betrayal in the sight of God and the saints. Nevertheless, her legal rights were violated, and the self-testimony that was extorted from her in spite of her heroic efforts constituted a judicial rape that resulted in her death". See "The Right to Remain Silent: before and after Joan of Arc", *Speculum*, vol. No. 4. (Oct., 1993), pp. 992-1026.

⁶¹⁴ "The first of which articles is thus: "That the annihilated soul gives freedom from the virtues nor is it [any] further in the service of them since it has no longer any use for them, but [rather], the virtues obey its command". The fifteenth article is: "That such a soul has no care for the consolations of God nor his gifts, nor ought to care nor can, since all its intention is around God and thus its intention is caught up in God.", Ward *SBK*, p.446; Verdeyen, "Le Procès", p.51.

⁶¹⁵ Ward *SBK*, p.453; Verdeyen, "Le Procès", p.61, my italics.

inquisitors. This disobedience (Porete's and Guiard's) and, conversely, obedience (the inquisitors) function as a predominant motif in the trial documents, a discourse that communicates the declared importance of the shared community of faithful whilst simultaneously declaring the inquisitors as subjects of trust and authority.

In inquisitorial protocol complying with the authority of the inquisitor began with the taking of the oath,⁶¹⁶ a declaration of faithful obedience closely associated with the sacrament of confession which, as Arnold points out, was “theologically ... a necessary preparation for receiving the Eucharist”.⁶¹⁷ The returning motif in the documents of Porete's refusal to swear oath and thus confess, therefore, has connotations that her inquisitors would certainly have been aware of – that this refusal to swear represented a conscious rejection not only of salvation and the ‘community of the faithful’, but also of the Eucharist. Thus, Porete's trial can be seen as a means by which Porete's inquisitors were given opportunity to declare what was transgressive, to communicate and authenticate the ‘stain of heretical depravity’ in the person of Porete. And this stain related not only to her authorship of a book but also to her refusal to submit to the pact between representatives of the Church and the people. Accordingly, Porete's transgressions are *represented* as disobedience and a *voluntary self-excision* from the ‘faithful’.

The representation of Porete as a beguine, however, is more than the standard inquisitorial practice of separating out the transgressor from the faithful; it is a particularly hostile means of representing an identity. Indeed, as we have discussed above, there were divergent opinions within the Church hierarchy regarding the validity of beguines as a semi-

⁶¹⁶ This was a precondition of the process of inquisition, wherein confession was looked for as the most desirable indication of guilt, more so after *The Directory of Beziers* in 1246 reduced ‘clear and frank proof of guilt’, to second place *after* confession. On confession and power, see *Inquisition and Power*, p.90.

⁶¹⁷ *Inquisition and Power*, p.91.

regular association and the result was a variety of connotation attached to the term, predominantly derogatory. To call Porete a beguine therefore, when there is good cause to believe that she was not at the time of writing *The Mirror*, can be seen as another instance of ‘name-calling’ within the register. However, when we consider that both Porete and Guiard were called beguine and beghard, and when we think of the documents as productive litmus for transgression, something even more interesting begins to emerge.

We have already pointed out that the parallel case against Guiard was probably intended to reinforce the notion of a following for Porete. The regent masters term Guiard a beghard; however, Guiard does not confess to a beghard status. Therefore, we are presented with a number of possibilities: either the inquisitors called Porete and Guiard beguine and beghard out of hostile intent and conversant with the conflation of the terms with ‘suspect heretic’, or Porete and Guiard were represented as of that status because by their unaffiliated standing the inquisitors considered them to be so, or the inquisitors were intent on constructing a group identification for Guiard and Porete in order to both pursue beguines and beghards who had already drawn ecclesiastical disfavour. Of course it may also be that all of these possibilities count for something in the inquisitors’ use of the terminology. However, when we consider that the terms were considered official classifications of individuals and that these were publicly declared and archived for possible further inquisitorial procedure, the last option appears more convincing. If this is so, it is highly significant because it suggests that Porete was constructed as a representative of a fluid discourse community (beguines) whose behaviours could be identified as telling indicators of a lurking transgression, a threat to the authority of the Church and thus to the flock.

The notion that Porete’s trial was aimed at beguines is not new in the scholarship. It

has long been argued that Porete's case was a warning to beguines and beghards, with the Council of Vienne the final blow and the decrees *Ad nostrum* and *Cum de quisbusdam* an echo of Porete's condemnation.⁶¹⁸ However, what is different in this analysis is that if we see trial documents as *constructive*, it becomes possible to note more far-reaching implications. Because, if Inquisition was based on the assumption that there were dark forces hidden amidst the laity and if, as a result, inquisitorial documents were part of the process of classifying and identifying hidden evil and, moreover, if that classification included claims of superior knowledge, then it is possible that the inquisitors had in mind a form of precedence with multiple deponents in mind. For, after Porete's trial, *any* woman (or man for that matter) evincing the same, or similar, behaviour to Porete, or engaging in a discourse that echoed those identified as suspect within *The Mirror*, could be classified as heretical. Can it be, therefore, that the inquisitors were intentionally labelling Porete as beguine, knowing that there were diverging opinions within the Church about beguines and that, as a result, the term could be interpreted fluidly, and knowing that there were both 'actual' beguines and those who could, lacking any other affiliation, be classified as such? If this is the case, then Porete's constructed identity can be seen as playing a productive part in the process of classification that was to culminate in official and widespread condemnation at Vienne, a little over a year after her death.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁸ Initiated by Guarineri and Colledge "The Glosses by M.N. and Richard Methley to The Mirror of Simple Souls". For an excellent assessment of (amongst many other things) Guarnieri's legacy and methodology and the links between *The Mirror* and *Ad Nostrum*, see Sargent, "Annihilation", esp. pp.259 ff.

⁶¹⁹ A future topic for investigation might be the significance of this in light of Bernard of Gui's classification of 'beguins', a group distinct from beguines in the south of France. In the *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis* (written between 1323 and 1324), Gui complained of those who: "read or listen to the reading in the vernacular from ... *pamphlets or tracts*, out of which they imbibe poison, although certain other things are also read ... the commandments, the articles of faith, legends of the saints, and a *summa* on vices and virtues. Thus the school of the devil, with its appearance of good, seems in monkey fashion to imitate the school of Christ in some ways. But in Holy Church the commandments of God and the articles of faith must be preached and expounded publicly, and not secretly, by rectors and pastors of the Church - *not by simple laymen, but by doctors and preachers of the word of God*", (Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, p.414, my italics). Gui speaks of the beguins' refusal to swear oath and points to their links with the apocalyptic teachings of Peter John Olivi, who some beguins characterised as the Angel of Philadelphia (see Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: the relation of heterodoxy to dissent, c.1250-c.1450*, Vol I, (New York: Manchester University Press,

Rather than a reflection of identity being seen in the documents, we can identify a breadcrumb trail of classification that runs a line between the increasing suspicion levelled at beguines, witnessed by early polemics, through to the decrees issuing from the Council of Vienne. However, it was also more than this, because Porete was above all a producer of texts and a producer of ideas. Thus, Porete's trial must be seen as part of a process of institutional response *and* consolidation that was levelled *in general* at the production of texts, ideas and the practice of faith amidst the laity.

The production of a widespread transgression

So, how do Porete's trial documents assist us in constructing an identity for her? Certainly, it is likely that we will never be able to adequately respond to all of the issues surrounding her trial, nor attain a definitive construction of her identity as an historical subject. However, that so many questions surround Porete, particularly questions that issue from the information gleaned from the trial documents, seems to me to demand a reconsideration of the documents themselves: how did they function in the medieval landscape and what can this tell us about Porete's case? For the canny manipulation of material, the coincidences with the Templar case, the conflation with Guiard's condemnation, the heretical book and its posthumous orthodoxy, the decrees issuing from the Council of Vienne and Eckhart's condemnation, all of these issues (which remain troublesome in the scholarship) suggest that something more was going on than has hitherto been apprehended.

1967), p.196 ff. This suggests an interesting avenue for exploration, given both the coincidences with Guiard, Porete's refusal to swear oath and the links with the propositions from the Council of Vienne.

Porete's book was condemned in a document dated the 11th of April 1309. It had, of course, already been declared erroneous and burned some years earlier. Porete's name, as we have said, is, however, not mentioned and nor is the title of her 'erroneous book'. Yet people were clearly aware that Porete *had* written a book. Local historians, for example, such as the *Nangis* chronicler, were cognisant of a book's existence and of the inquisitors' version of the alleged heresies within it. This emphasises not only the anxiety that William and the theologians held with regard to the book, but also the inquisitorial requirement of maintaining the authority of their information. Thus, the absent title stands not only as an indication of an inquisitorial censure but also as a convenient means with which to check any resistance to the theologians' interpretation of the work. For without the original in evidence, who would be able to question the interpretation?

Indeed, as scholars have noted, the doctrines understood by the chroniclers and, one would imagine by those present at the Council of Vienne, were distilled, de-contextualised, and lacking the true spirit of Porete's book taken as a whole. This is not to say that a heresy was invented for Porete. Rather, Porete's heresy was already in play, instituted by William's colleague, the Bishop of Cambrai, and extended with her ongoing dissemination of *The Mirror*, thus giving her the status of relapsed heretic. However, William's motivation for removing the title of the book and for selecting certain articles is suggestive of a conscious attempt to remove the book from circulation and skew the contents so as to represent a specific doctrine that could be seen as heretical. However, *The Mirror* is, in essence, an exegesis on the individual's capacity for attaining spiritual wholeness beyond that which had been advanced within either the reformist or traditional Church. It is not antinomian, although it is possible to see, as many others have noted, how select articles could be interpreted as such. Rather, *The Mirror* advocates penance, asceticism and adherence to

‘Holy Church the Lesser’ as the *initial* pathway to God. Thereafter, the individual whose ‘nobility of soul’ was equal to the task was seen as capable of reaching a ‘flash point’ union with God. This, as scholars have pointed out, can only have appeared alarming to members of the Church invested with the task of mediating that pathway. As an advocate of spiritual individuality, therefore, Porete’s work has been seen as a radical mysticism that was heretical in that it denied the authority of the Church. However, as we have already pointed out, some members of the Church saw *The Mirror* as orthodox, though requiring a sophisticated audience, and its posthumous reception underlines this.

So where was the great concern for William and for the Bishop of Cambrai? For if this was a highly sophisticated work, suitable for only the very few, how can it be seen as an indication of threat to the faithful? Part of the answer to this may be seen in the very support the work was given by members of the church hierarchy. We have already noted that the selection of twenty-one eminent theologians suggests that the support of those such as Godfrey and others required a phalanx of response. However, we should also remember that some seventeen years later (1326), a work of similar doctrinal views was brought to the attention of Pope John XXII by the now familiar Henry of Virneburg as an indication of the heresy of Eckhart, renowned Dominican teacher and preacher and minister to the *cura monialum*.

Recent scholarship, as we have seen, has raised the possibility that *The Mirror* may have influenced Eckhart,⁶²⁰ who was accused of heresy in 1326 after a distinguished career

⁶²⁰ See: Herbert Grundmann, “Ketzerverhöre des Spätmittelalters als quellenkritisches Problem”, *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters*, 21 (1965), pp.519-575; Colledge and Marler, “Poverty of the Will”; Colledge and Guarnieri, “The Glosses by ‘M.N.’ and Richard Methley to ‘The Mirror of Simple Souls’”; Maria Lichtmann, “Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart: The Mirror of Simple Souls Mirrored”; Rebecca Stephens, “Eckhart and the Sister Catherine: The Mirror’s Image?”; Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*; Michael

and died with the charges still standing.⁶²¹ Eckhart's sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu* has been seen as an explicit example of a coincidence between the Meister and Porete's thinking, with scholars pointing out the significance of parallel phrases (such as 'without a why') and the notions of detachment and annihilation echoed in each of the works.⁶²² Accordingly, much has been made of the significance of Eckhart's residence for two years in the same Dominican community as William of Paris, wherein it is possible that he encountered *The Mirror*. Additional support for the view that he did know the book can be found in his acquaintance with Godefroid de Fontaines and the strong possibility that he was acquainted with Porete's trial and the suspect propositions cited in the documentation.⁶²³ To add to the intrigue, the *Schwester Katrei*, which traces the inversion of a teacher and pupil relationship (which has been substantively linked to Eckhart), has been shown to have parallels of thought and language with both *The Mirror* and Eckhart's *Beati pauperes*, and it is tempting to posit Porete as the pupil turned teacher in the relationship.

Despite these alluring parallels scholars remain divided. Grundmann and Josef Koch, (the latter a renowned Eckhart specialist), remain convinced that Eckhart encountered *The Mirror* and was directly influenced by it. Koch was so certain of this that he declared to Guarnieri (then editor of the *Archivio*) that he had proof of incontestable links, which he proposed to publish.⁶²⁴ Unfortunately, he died before he was able to do so, adding yet another instance of mystery to Porete's case. Colledge and Marler claim that a subsequent examination of Koch's papers fails to provide any evidence of exactly what that proof might

Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Chicago University Press: Chicago, (1994) and his "The Pseudo-Woman and the Meister".

⁶²¹ 17 articles were proclaimed heretical and another ten, suspect. Eckhart argued that two articles were not his and the charge was reduced to 15, "Meister Eckhart: An Introduction" in Paul Szarmach, *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

⁶²² The most thorough of which is Michael Sells, "Apophysis of Desire and the Burning of Marguerite Porete" and "Porete and Eckhart: the apophysis of gender", in *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp.116- 145 and pp.180-205 respectively.

⁶²³ Rebecca Stephens, "Eckhart and the Sister Catherine", p.27.

⁶²⁴ "Poverty of the Will", p.16.

have been⁶²⁵ and they remain unconvinced by the significance of the parallels, claiming that *The Mirror* is deficient in sophistication⁶²⁶ and without deep comprehension of the Dionysian themes Porete articulated.⁶²⁷ In like fashion, though with a more charitable approach to Porete, Stephens, as we have seen, argues that the evidence of links between Eckhart and *The Mirror* has more to do with historical parallels than a direct intellectual influence.⁶²⁸ Distancing herself from scholarship that has extended Koch's and Grundmann's hunches,⁶²⁹ Stephens calls for the recognition of a 'family group', one immersed in "the collective pool of ideas common to beguine and scholarly circles".⁶³⁰ In this, Sells is in agreement, neither discounting the direct link theory, nor seeing it as important to the case, but rather emphasising the dialogue between each thinker.

This is not the place for a discussion of Eckhart's thought which has been well documented elsewhere.⁶³¹ However, the above does put a question mark over the relationship between Porete's work and the Meister's *Beati pauperes spiritu*. It is possible, therefore, to

⁶²⁵ "Poverty of the Will", p.16.

⁶²⁶ In comparison to Eckhart's work, "Poverty of the Will", p.28. Colledge has never been one to favour Porete with sophisticated notions, however, and his highly conservative attitude to Porete has been remarked on freely in the scholarship. Watson, for example, comments that "Colledge has done more than most for the study of medieval mysticism, and our debt to him is profound, But I think it must be said that his work has always had an inquisitorial quality to it, and that his desire to expose her as a pernicious influence has been a hinderance to impartial discussion of the subject", "Melting into God", p.24. Further, Colledge's work on Eckhart, whom he is anxious to exonerate from charges of heresy, means that any lick of a connection between the two would invalidate his rehabilitation.

⁶²⁷ "Melting into God", p.31.

⁶²⁸ Rebecca Stephens, "Eckhart and the Sister Catherine", p.27.

⁶²⁹ Stephens points to those studies published in Bernard McGinn's [ed.] *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*. These studies are: Maria Lichtmann, "Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart: The Mirror of simple Souls Mirrored", pp.65-86; Amy Hollywood "Suffering Transformed: Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and the Problem of Women's Spirituality", pp.87-113; and Michael Sells "The Pseudo-Woman and the Meister: 'Unsayings' and Essentialism", pp.114-146. Stephens rails against these studies: "Several recent articles ... posit the likelihood that Porete had a direct influence on the ontology of Eckhart", "Eckhart and Sister Catherine", p.26. In Sells' defence, it should be noted that he does not argue for a direct textual transmission, although he does not discount it, rather he points out that "We may never know whether Porete and Eckhart ever met one another, conversed in person, or read firsthand one another's works. In many ways, it really doesn't matter. For it is clear that what occurs between the works of Eckhart and those of Porete is a sustained and intricate conservation", "The Pseudo-Woman and the Meister", p.146, a sentiment he also echoes in *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*.

⁶³⁰ Rebecca Stephens, "Eckhart and the Sister Catherine: The Mirror's Image?", *Eckhart Review*, Spring, 1997, pp.26-39, p.9.

⁶³¹ For a survey, see note 625 of this chapter.

conclude that Porete was instrumental in instigating a doctrine that was compelling enough to draw numerous followers into error, including one of the most revered theologians and Dominicans of the period. However, if we look at it another way, if we see the processes of inquisition and the agency of the inquisitors as part of the procedural constitution of power and authority in the period, then we can also conjecture that the links here represent an indication of a wider doctrinal conversation that William and his fellow inquisitors were well aware of, as Stephens suggested. This is particularly evident if we consider what local historians were saying regarding Porete.

The *Nangis* and *Frachet* chronicles, for example, both say that Porete's book contained "many errors and heresies, and among those that the soul annihilated in love can for love of the creator, behave without reprehension of conscience or remorse and concede to nature whatever it demands and desires, which smacks manifestly of heresy".⁶³² The author of the *Great Chronicles of France*, however, goes further than this and calls Porete a learned beguine (*beguine clergesse*), claiming that she had "gone beyond divine scripture and had erred in articles of faith, and had said contrary and prejudicial words about the sacrament on the altar. And for this the masters expert in theology had condemned her".⁶³³ Similarly, Jean d'Outremeuse's account stresses Porete's 'learned beguine' status and accuses her of translating "divine Scripture, in which translation she erred much in articles of the faith; and of the sacrament of the altar she said some prejudicial words against Holy Scripture, for which some masters very expert in theology condemned her and she was burnt", adding that "God in his great mercy kept her so that she died in the true Catholic faith".⁶³⁴ Thus, Porete begins as one accused of antinomian statements and ends as one who interpreted scripture and abused the sanctity of the sacrament.

⁶³² Ward, *SBK*, p.463; Verdeyen, "Le Procès", p.90.

⁶³³ Ward, *SBK*, p.464; Verdeyen, "Le Procès", p.91.

⁶³⁴ Ward, *SBK*, p.464; Verdeyen, "Le Procès", p.91.

All this might have accounted for the corruption of information over time if it were not that similar complaints had been levied against beguines *prior* to Porete's condemnation. For example, in 1274 Guibert of Tournai wrote, in a polemic similar to that of the sentiments expressed in the official *Cum de quisbusdam*, that:

There are among us women who are called beguines and certain of them strive in subtlety and rejoice in novelty. They have interpreted the mysteries of the scriptures and publicly in the French idiom, which yet men expert in Holy Scripture can scarce penetrate. They read them together, irreverently, boldly, in groups, in gangs, in the squares. I myself have seen, read and have a French bible, an example of which is placed publicly at the stationers in Paris for copying. The heresies and errors, the dubious and absurd interpretations, which are contained in these, the smallness of this paper cannot cover, rather the large capacity of the ears scarce hears these filthy things with sobriety. If the disease takes hold, as many scandals will arise as there are listeners, as many blasphemies as there are streets.⁶³⁵

Clearly, therefore, there is cause to conjecture that the transgressions the inquisitors represented as instrumental in the condemnation of Porete – disobedient beguine, writer and disseminator of heresies – were founded in a cognisance of a larger development that circumvented the authority of the Church as conduits for 'the faithful' and as interpreters of 'the word'.

Throwing their net wide, the instigators of Porete's condemnation can thus be seen as producing documents that could be used to reinforce suspicion of beguines and beghards, whilst at the same time attaching transgressive qualities to those of the laity who were public actors in the medieval landscape. This is not to accuse William and his fellow inquisitors of inventing Bishop Guy's initial condemnation of *The Mirror*. Rather, it is to acknowledge the discourse of power and the agency of the powerful in the construction of identity within Porete's trial documents. For, in representing the identity of Porete as a beguine with

⁶³⁵Ward, *SBK*, p.464: Verdeyen, "Le Procès", p.91.

particular transgressive qualities, and in selectively portraying the alleged heresies within her work, Porete's inquisitors were able to articulate their own anxieties about the participation of the laity in the production of religiosity whilst at the same time contributing to the power relations that sought to classify, order and communicate heresy for protection of the 'faithful'. If, in addition, this resulted in reinforcing the authority of the Church and refuting what limited support existed within the hierarchy, then so much the better.

This chapter has attempted to chart not only the trial of Porete and the issues for scholarship that it represents, but also to explore how the hermeneutics of hostility inherent within the documents of condemnation have influenced scholarship interested in her case. It is my contention here that the necessity of reading Porete's trial documents in order to reconstruct her history has resulted in a two-tier hermeneutic construction that has particular implications for historical apprehension. The first, working backwards here, is the historical reconstruction of Porete by historians through documentation that is slippery at best and obfuscating at worst. The second tier of construction is found in the trial documents themselves, which constitute, for me, an exceedingly complicated power discourse that has particular implications for the way in which Porete's history is read by historians. The first tier attempts to find out about Porete's identity, actions and social affiliations. To do so, it looks for her reflection in *The Mirror* yes, but it also looks for her reflection in the documents that relate to her condemnation. It is seeking, in essence, a piece of the jigsaw that will reveal the true identity of the subject. However, the documents of condemnation, our second tier, betray concerns very far removed from providing a true portrait of their subject.

Accordingly, the hermeneutics of hostility inherent in the documents of

condemnation have infected the ways in which scholarship has interpreted Porete as an identity in the medieval landscape. This, in conjunction with the hermeneutics of exclusion discussed in chapter one, has served to construct a history of Porete that appears to me to be, ultimately, unsatisfactory. This is not to say, however, that the considerable work achieved in understanding Porete does not go a long way towards revealing her import as a contributor to the religiosity of the period. On the contrary, the contributions that scholars have made are replete with insights that function as invaluable components in any historical rehabilitation of Porete. However, dominant in these historical reconstructions of Porete are a number of identity options that seem to me to be exclusory and burdened with issues that can be contested as valid, given our prior discussions. Indeed, emerging scholarship is indicating that the options for Porete are far from exhausted, despite the fact that no new documentation has come to light, or likely will.

The later Middle Ages was a period of possibility in which multiple voices emerged in contradistinction to church authority. Porete's condemnation represents a moment in which those multiple possibilities were relegated to the flames. Foucault would call this a *heterotopic* moment in which possibility erupted and disturbed the trajectory of social life: his point being that the present is just one possible arrangement that results from the victory of a discourse over others – such victories are inevitably violent and inevitably ephemeral or unstable.⁶³⁶ The condemnation of Porete and the posthumous battles over the orthodoxy of her work are indicative of the ways in which the strategies of those with power have obscured the past and made unstable the very censure they employed to maintain and proclaim that power. In part, this has made the study of Porete so notoriously difficult. Yet it is also the striving of modern discourses to both penetrate the rigid boundaries of these

⁶³⁶ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, (Spring 1986), pp.22-27, see esp. pp.24 ff.

strategies and to comprehend Porete's history through specific and selective medieval discourses that has contributed to the predicament here charted.

This thesis seeks to extricate the intrusion of discourses, both medieval and modern, from the history of Porete. In doing so I am in danger of adding my own discourse to the cacophony. However, this is a risk worth taking because, as we have seen, there is still a lack of consensus regarding Porete as an historical figure and the preceding review of the more dominant scholarship indicates some substantial problems that stand in the way of achieving this. True, Porete scholarship has become more sophisticated and informed, particularly in the last few decades. However, it has also returned us to a stalemate of sorts wherein the choices for apprehending Porete's identity have narrowed and yet the options for entering her history have broadened. Recent works in associated areas of study, however, suggest options for a further possibility for Porete, one that bypasses many of the hermeneutic issues we have here discussed and complements ideas about Porete that are nascent in the scholarship. The next chapter will address these new developments within a framework that seeks to discern an alternative portrait of identity and community. This will constitute our fourth option for Porete: a religious reformer of the individual who represents the excluded 'voice' of lay engagement with religiosity in the period.

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space, that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enable me to see myself there where I am absent. That is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back towards myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through the virtual point which is over there.

Michel Foucault⁶³⁷

‘Knowledge’ has in our days sprung up among women in Bavaria. Lord God, what knowledge is this that an old woman understands better than a learned man?

Lamprecht of Regensburg 1250⁶³⁸

Searching for the identity of a historical subject is fraught with the imperative of imaginative conjecture. This is so because we are bound by texts and interpretations of those texts and in the last few decades this has been recognised as a particular challenge for the discipline of history. All writers, it is argued, are “bound by pre-existing language codes rather than by social processes to which they give voice ... [which are] ... themselves understood as linguistically constituted”.⁶³⁹ The text as an historical document (as ‘truth’) is thus subject to the multiple intrusions of an (always) artificial language, made more complex still by the ontology and motivations of both scribe and historian.⁶⁴⁰ Source materials have thus become seen as unreliable, providing only a dissonant view of historical events, personalities and relationships, and competing theoretical viewpoints challenge interpretation at every turn. As a result, the written word has become the focus of disquiet, rather than of illumination. Partly this is because the historian prefers a story to silence – the word

⁶³⁷ “Other Spaces”, p.24.

⁶³⁸ Lamprecht of Regensburg, German poet writing c.1250 of *kunst*, or women’s knowledge. Cited in Newman, *Virile Woman*, p.137.

⁶³⁹ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages”, *Speculum*, 65, No.1, (Jan. 1990), pp.59-86, p.62.

⁶⁴⁰ “...events, structures and processes of the past are indistinguishable from the forms of documentary representation, the conceptual and political appropriations, and the historical discourses that construct them”, Patrick Joyce and Catriona Kelly, “History and Post-Modernism”, *Past and Present*, 133, (Nov. 1991), pp.204-213, p.208.

overrides everything else despite the fact that most of life is lived not told. However, our “valuable deposit of the past”⁶⁴¹ is ephemeral and open to multiple interpretations, subject to an imagined division between the real and the constituted. Thus, as many would have it, “history is a disciplined form of fiction”.⁶⁴²

Rather than abandoning history as a valuable means of assessing and interpreting the past, the challenges ushered in by a more theoretical turn have resulted in a vigorous reassessment of methods and the acrimony of past debate has settled the ‘new history’ into a mature form. The ‘linguistic turn’ is now a dominant theory in medieval studies, cross-disciplinary analysis has become commonplace in academic pursuits and interpretative theoretical elements are now the hallmarks of contemporary historicism. Accordingly, Partner is happy to conclude that:

Sources will never settle back into seeming transparent passive containers of good and dubious facts; medieval people will always now decline to be obedient idiographs of a didactic cultural ideal; sex has won its right to have a history and gender – feminine or masculine, will never again appear as a specific character type inevitably attached to a sexed body.⁶⁴³

This triumph, however, does not sidestep the complexity of the historian’s ambition, articulated by Southern, of studying “the thoughts and visions, moods and emotions and devotions of articulate people”,⁶⁴⁴ and no more so than when we attempt to extract identity and community from the past.

⁶⁴¹ Richard Southern, “The Shape and Substance of Academic History”, *History and Historians: selected papers of R.W.Southern*, Bartlett, Robert [ed.], (Malden. MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp.87-103, p.100.

⁶⁴² Stefan Berger, “Editor’s Preface”, *Writing Medieval History*, Nancy Partner [ed.], (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), pp.ix-x, ix.

⁶⁴³ Nancy Partner, “The post-traditional Middle Ages: the distant past through contemporary eyes”, *Writing Medieval History*, pp.xi-xvi, p.xvi.

⁶⁴⁴ Richard Southern, “The Shape and Substance of Academic History”, p.100.

Identity can be seen as a dialogue – textual, verbal and physical – between and within multiple communities. However, these communities are constituted in different social frameworks dependent on a variety of factors, particularly in terms of the ways in which power relationships are negotiated. Conflict, concord and the normative of accepted conventions all contribute to the ways in which the individual both constructs and is constructed in a community. This is particularly so in textual indicators of identity, as the very act of writing constrains identity within textual artificiality. More, the communities involved in the construction of such texts are themselves engaged in multiple and shifting dialogues (negotiated both within a community and between competing or co-existing communities). It is this that makes it so difficult to apprehend medieval people, because texts function as the bedrock of traditionalist history and that bedrock is sometimes a mirage, sometimes a red herring and sometimes a seismic collision between competing communities. In the pursuit of an individual and a community, therefore, we engage with a past world holding within it multiple worlds of social and individual divergences that intersect and alter and do not always hold true to an immediately identifiable narrative of identity and community.

Shaw argues that the “great unfinished business of social history”⁶⁴⁵ is the exploration of social selves – of identity and community. The people of the past, rather than only the effects of those people (events, texts etc), require attention in order to flesh out the “meanings that guided people that lived in and altered their worlds”.⁶⁴⁶ Thus, medieval people, Shaw believes, *must* be sought within their communities not only in terms of texts, but in terms of what we can glean of the community itself. To complicate matters, however,

⁶⁴⁵ David Gary Shaw, “Social selves in medieval England: the worshipful Ferroure and Kempe”, *Writing Medieval History*, pp.3-21, p.3.

⁶⁴⁶ David Gary Shaw, “Social selves in medieval England”, p.3.

the social world will generally allow a multiplicity of community. Nominal transgressions and a fluidity of authority are commonplace in social spheres wherein power relationships are not rigid nor administered through institutional scrutiny. Because these social selves are fluid, and in a sense made artificial through the text, they are consistently negotiated and re-negotiated within the community and the readers of that community (including the historian). In communities where those power relations are rigid, however, and where the boundaries of relationships are scrutinised in order to defend and extend classifications of status, transgressions will surface in sharper relief. Sometimes, these multiple communities will collide and the nominal transgressions accepted in one, will be sharpened and defined into deviance in the other.

It is not only the text, therefore, that informs us as to the identity and identities of an individual, but the social world/s, the community/s, within which individuals' acted. Identity, therefore, is not only found within a text or texts, but can also be perceived in assessing the social fabric of multiple communities. On the macro level these may be: educational opportunities, gender and family constructs, traditions of reform or conformity, engagement with ideas (or disengagement) or economic stability or instability. On the micro level these may be: the origins of the community, ontological first principles, cognisance of future directions or links with parallel communities (past, present and future). These are some of the factors that can help us develop an informed conjecture about the social selves of medieval people, about their communities and the interplay of competing communities.

In conjunction with an analysis of the multiple and intersecting community/s of medieval people, it is also vital to engage with the work of other historians engaged in understanding these communities. These works are, of course, texts. This intersection means

that the historian utilises past frameworks and then is required to compete, contest and cajole in order to provoke or promote further interpretations. The result is an ever-evolving and, once again, ephemeral possibility. The historian, therefore, is in constant play with Foucault's third principle of heterotopia: the juxtaposition "of several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible",⁶⁴⁷ simultaneously held in place and made ephemeral by the real space of the historical 'word'.⁶⁴⁸ History, therefore, is texts written through the reflection of other texts. Thus, the historical word can be seen as a Foucauldian mirror, a heterotopic space that reflects the real even as it is constituted as not real (and *vice versa*). To reiterate the opening heading of this chapter: "The mirror functions as a heterotopia ... at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through the virtual point which is over there".⁶⁴⁹ The historical interpretation is, accordingly, both real and unreal and the intersection of that space is where the fun begins.

I have chosen to begin this chapter with Foucault's heterotopic principle both because it addresses the coming concerns of this chapter – the re-envisaging of Porete as an historical subject, as an identity with a social self – and because the analogy of Foucault's mirror ironically reflects Porete's major work. Furthermore, I believe that Porete's identity, community/s and condemnation can be seen as a crisis point in the medieval period that further reflects a heterotopic moment, a rupture in the continuum of the social world in which the collision of identities and communities converged in crisis to create a

⁶⁴⁷ "Of Other Spaces", p.25.

⁶⁴⁸ Foucault argues that heterotopias "are something like counter sites, a kind of effective enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them ... heterotopias. ...between utopias and these...heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror", "Other Spaces", p.24.

⁶⁴⁹ Foucault, "Other Spaces", p.24.

compensatory moment that enforced control and generated deviance. As I have already suggested, Porete's condemnation was a moment of possibility in which the trajectory of the social order was disturbed. A victorious discourse emerged in the documentation of that crisis, but the submerged discourse remains vital to a fuller apprehension of the medieval religious and social landscape. Porete's condemnation, therefore, reflected in the documents that 'record' her condemnation, is a mirror of the conflict of competing communities. However, Porete's *Mirror* is also the reflection of a discourse submerged beneath competing textual constructions of the written word. I am interested here in that submerged discourse, in the sense that I am interested in the community or communities that nurtured that discourse, or at least saw it as 'fitting' in the socio-religious context.

In Porete's case, that community has not been satisfactorily explored. Partly, this is because the focus has been on her text and her condemnation. Porete produced a book, she sent this book out into a world and she was burned for doing so. These three elements of Porete's case represent the matrix of scholastic pursuit and have resulted in many valuable contributions. As a result, we have a better understanding of the nature of her theology. We know who her enemies were and we have evidence of a handful of supporters. What we are unsure of, however, is what company she kept. Who were her friends and lay supporters? With whom did she discuss her ideas? Where did the knowledge evident in her *Mirror* come from?

These are questions that are important to pursue, I believe, because they offer an opportunity of better understanding the religious landscape of the period. Of course, such a pursuit is risky. This is so for a number of reasons, as we have already indicated, but particularly because we have such limited source material to draw on. Porete's name is not

encountered in any of the standard sources of civic life (for example marriage documents or property registrations). We have no record of her aside from her book and the texts that relate to her condemnation and death, and we are unlikely to recover any further evidence of her life aside from these sources. Moreover, we have already indicated the difficulties in each of the remaining documents: the one ‘difficult to comprehend’ the other burdened with the weight of inquisitorial power. Thus, Porete’s voice is at once strident in her self-authored work and silent in the administrative records of her condemnation. This dissonance means that the ‘valuable deposit’ of Porete’s history is both overwhelming and meagre.

However, a reconsideration of the social spheres (the communities of thought and of action) in which Porete was most likely active provides opportunities for an alternative conjecture of her identity. It is important to pursue this because it seems to me highly unlikely that Porete was writing purely for her own benefit or that she composed the intricacies of her work in a vacuum. Indeed, when we attempt to place Porete’s work and her condemnation *in situ*, we can begin to apprehend an identity that actively participated in a community with a vigorous tradition of religious reform. *The Mirror*, I argue, both reflects and produces that reform tradition, a tradition founded in the didactic and transformative possibilities of religiosity on an individual basis sought eagerly within the public sphere. My argument, therefore, implicitly rests on the notion that Porete was not reclusive and that she intended her work to function as a productive contribution (as both critique and advocate) to the religiosity of the period. This means that Porete was an actor within a community or communities of shared discourse. For those that believe that Porete was an anomaly, this argument fails. For those that believe Porete was a beguine, that community becomes restricted. I have demonstrated, however, that there are profound problems with these notions on hermeneutic levels and through the evidence of Porete’s *Mirror*.

This chapter, then, is an attempt to reconstruct an identity and a community for Porete that steps outside of restrictions that I believe have been imposed on her history by the scholarship (the heterotopic intersection of the historical source and the historical interpretation). I seek to explore Porete's identity and community, not by attempting a genealogical analysis (although the initial references to Foucault may suggest this), but by using as a springboard the notion of identity and community as contested and as extant in multiple spaces (the real and the not real, the parallel and the coerced). This, I believe, is an area open to exploration and historical enquiry. In other words, this chapter seeks to *imagine* Porete's identity in the spaces between a paucity of source material and a *conversatio* between communities, at once parallel and in competition with each other. The chapter will thus also explore the idea that it was the collision of this identity, forged as it was in a community that did not guard its boundaries so rigidly, with a community that was dedicated to 'defence of the citadel', that resulted in her violent condemnation.

Behind *The Mirror*: Porete *in situ*

Whilst we know next to nothing about Porete prior to her trial, it is possible to piece together some information regarding her origins, although these are far from concrete. It is generally accepted that whilst Porete was based in Valenciennes, she was probably active in the wider Hainault region (at the very least).⁶⁵⁰ This geographic location is significant, because, as recent scholarship has demonstrated, the urban environments of the region in this period possessed a rich socio-cultural tradition that may help to explain Porete's religiosity

⁶⁵⁰ For arguments that Porete's *Mirror* was not burned in Cambrai, but in her native town of Valenciennes, see Guarnieri, *Il Movimento*, pp.408-409. For a discussion on post-mortem identifications of Porete as from Hainault, see Colledge et.al. "Introductory Interpretative Essay". p.xxxviii.

and her behaviour towards ecclesiastical authority.⁶⁵¹ In the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, thriving urban environments in the Southern Low Countries spawned a new sub-class that possessed wealth and unprecedented levels of literacy (both in the vernacular languages and in rudimentary Latin). This emerged concurrently with what Chenu has called an “evangelical awakening”⁶⁵² that rested on a return to the significance of the Gospels and the importance of apostolic poverty. In particular, the tradition of the *vita apostolica* gained ascendancy, an old theme altered, as O’Sullivan explains, by four key differences to the tradition. These can be characterised as: 1) lay initiation; 2) embracement of a poverty principle that entailed renunciation of worldly goods; 3) evangelical activity (including preaching) grounded in the urban environments of cities and 4) “a critical stance towards the older forms of monastic life and the clergy”.⁶⁵³ Women were not excluded from this tradition. Indeed, as we have already remarked, women constituted an important nexus of this ‘new religiosity’.

Along with this increased engagement with religiosity came an increased engagement with urban life, which rested, in part, on the ways in which families were organised. Martha Howell has demonstrated that the roles women embraced in the period were extremely diverse and dependent on “the function of the family production unit during the development of the market economy”.⁶⁵⁴ In the urban environments of the Low Countries, families as production units afforded unsurpassed opportunities for women.⁶⁵⁵ Women were intensely involved in the production and distribution of goods and services and family clusters were

⁶⁵¹ See *Cities of Ladies* along with Ellen.E. Kittell and Mary A. Suydam [eds.] *The Texture of Society: Medieval women in the Southern Low Countries*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2004.

⁶⁵² M.D.Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p.203.

⁶⁵³ Robin Anne O’Sullivan, *Model, Mirror and Memorial*, p.21.

⁶⁵⁴ Martha C Howell, *Women, Production and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p.43.

⁶⁵⁵ Walter Simons provides a concise introduction to the unique socio-cultural tradition of the area, *Cities of Ladies*, pp.1-34.

small. The average age of marriage in the Low Countries in the thirteenth century was twenty-seven for both men and women, and the family structure tended to consist of the married couple and two or three children.⁶⁵⁶ In southern Europe, however, men also married in their late twenties, but to women some ten or more years younger. Family groups were generally extended, comprising both single males, couples with children and were usually multi-generational.⁶⁵⁷

The latter description has become the popular understanding of marriage and household in the Middle Ages, as has the notion of highly restricted educational and vocational opportunities for women. However, it is clear that this was not the kind of environment Porete operated within and this is extremely interesting. For, within a smaller domestic unit, such as those that were predominant in the Low Countries, the opportunities for independence and divergent cultural expression can be argued to have been greater, and, importantly, the financial burdens lesser. This is so because with multiple family dependencies under the one roof come multiple financial and domestic burdens. For women, this would have implications for leisure, hierarchy within the family structure (power) and access to the wider urban environment. The family as a small unit of production demanded shared engagement with customers, suppliers, traders and the ability to contribute to the economy of the family. Women were not confined to duties conversant with a large household but could be ‘stakeholders’ in the urban environment at both an economic and social level; this held profound implications for literacy and access to knowledge.

⁶⁵⁶ This is what Howell classifies as “The dominant family type among most social classes in England, in France north of the Loire, in Scandinavia, in the Low Countries, and in most of Germany until about 1700”, *Women, Production and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities*, p.12. Simons makes the contrast between northern Italy and the Southern states more strongly, *Cities of Ladies*, p.8.

⁶⁵⁷ *Cities of Ladies*, p.8.

In the geographic area Porete was active in, educational innovations and opportunities were available in community settings that held socio-economic conditions conversant with the requirement of female education (albeit at a restricted level of credentialed attainment). Simons points out that starting in the twelfth century, wealthy merchants of the Low Countries made a successful challenge to the Church monopoly of education and introduced secular schools. The result was the provision of literacy for boys and girls across the classes and “it was not uncommon for the city to provide [education] for free to those ... who were unable otherwise to afford it”.⁶⁵⁸ Education was, therefore, at the elementary level, co-educational and afforded girls the opportunity of, at least, a good grounding in fundamental education⁶⁵⁹ (including reading and writing in both basic Latin and the vernaculars, which generally in this region encompassed two dialects – nascent Dutch and French).⁶⁶⁰

Writing, therefore, appears to have been considered an extremely important skill for women, featuring in the curricula of merchant-established educational environments.⁶⁶¹ This was perhaps because the role of women in the period demanded an engagement with the written word for business purposes. Higher levels of learning (credentialed learning) for women in this region were, however, rarer, though not non-existent, and this meant that women well versed in writing Latin were few.⁶⁶² Despite this discrepancy, it is clear that in the urban centres of the Low Countries women married later, held potentially greater independence, learned more and participated in the production of goods and services. As

⁶⁵⁸ “Introduction” to *Texture and Society*, pp.xi-xxiv, p.xii.

⁶⁵⁹ *Cities of Ladies*, p.6.

⁶⁶⁰ *Cities of Ladies*, p.3.

⁶⁶¹ *Cities of Ladies*, p.3.

⁶⁶² Simons notes that “The real gender gap became apparent at the higher educational level. Although there are notable cases of ‘higher schools’ that girls could attend or that were specifically intended for them .. and a certain number of women in wealthy families received further training at home or in a convent, far fewer girls than boys, in fact, enjoyed advanced schooling. Fluency in Latin and familiarity with the learned culture preserved only in that language must thus have remained rare among women. Nevertheless, the very existence of a few such ‘higher’ schools for girls proves that there was a certain demand for them”, *Cities of Ladies*, p.7.

Ellen Kittell and Mary Suydam point out, the commonly understood notion that medieval society was structured around a public/private dichotomy in which women were relegated to the private sphere is thus not a useful method for assessing all areas of medieval society.⁶⁶³ This can be seen to be particularly apt for the Low Countries, in which women were integrated “at almost all levels”.⁶⁶⁴

In addition to this, an “intense traffic of people, goods and ideas”⁶⁶⁵ made the Low Countries incredibly energetic urban environments⁶⁶⁶ in which extra-regular religious activity and high levels of public interest in religious notions were strongly in evidence. Travellers to the area noted in the mid-sixteenth century that “everyone could read and write”⁶⁶⁷ and some were alarmed that there were women in the area who were “able to discuss intellectual subtleties ‘like wise doctors’”.⁶⁶⁸ This heterogeneous environment meant that norms governing “distinctions between male and female, religious and lay, did not so much define as describe”.⁶⁶⁹ Public and private were fluidly engaged with and the public realm became the centre in which both the business of living and the business of religious engagement were played out. This entails a further heterogeneity between literacy and orality,⁶⁷⁰ a blurring of boundaries that marks the region as specifically precocious. Clearly, this energetic engagement with an educated religiosity was also evident in Paris in the late

⁶⁶³ “Introduction” to *Texture and Society*, pp.xi-xxiv, p. xix.

⁶⁶⁴ “Women ruled Flanders as Countesses for most of the thirteenth century and as duchesses of Brabant in the fourteenth. They were regents for the Hapsburgs in the sixteenth. They could be found in the count’s administration, bargaining in the markets of the major towns, baking bread, tanning, retailing, growing wheat, butchering meat, selling cloth, and warping loom threads”, “Introduction” to *Texture and Society*, p.xiii.

⁶⁶⁵ *Cities of Ladies*, p.4.

⁶⁶⁶ “Introduction” to *Texture and Society*, p.xii.

⁶⁶⁷ *Cities of Ladies*, p.7.

⁶⁶⁸ *Cities of Ladies*, p.7.

⁶⁶⁹ “Introduction” to *Texture and Society*, p.xii.

⁶⁷⁰ “Introduction” to *Texture and Society*, p.xiii.

thirteenth century,⁶⁷¹ as testified by Guibert of Tournai's list of morally questionable issues across the social stations: "I have myself seen and read and held in my hands a Bible in French, whose exemplar is *available to everyone at Parisian writing-shops* so that heretical and erroneous, dubious, or stupid interpretations might be copied".⁶⁷² However, the Low Countries exhibited early and profound indications of a dedication to *unsupervised* and productive religiosity, characterised by a reformist and evangelical zeal, expressed communally and in the vernacular.

In part, this may be understood to have been brought about both by economic precocity and weak feudal and episcopal government. The textile industry, for example, was extremely prosperous and produced highly sought after material exported as far afield as Russia.⁶⁷³ The Peruzzi and the Bardi, major Italian banking houses, held branches in Bruges, and Ypres and Ghent were renowned as major centres of trade and commerce.⁶⁷⁴ This helps to explain the high level of traffic in the region, with trade and tourism representing important features of the social strata. In addition to this, the divisions of principalities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries meant that allegiances were theoretically neither French nor German, and this created both contest from external powers and moves towards independence from cities.⁶⁷⁵ Further, Simons has shown that episcopal governance in the area was fractured by a lack of supervision brought about by geographic dislocation,⁶⁷⁶ and this was furthered by shifting feudal allegiances which resisted elements of religious

⁶⁷¹ Semi-regular religiosity akin to that of the Southern Low Countries was to come to Southern Europe later, and generally with an inclination towards a cloistered and institutional orbit – predominantly, the Franciscan order, *Model, Mirror and Memorial*, O'Sullivan, p.58.

⁶⁷² Cited in Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.125, my italics.

⁶⁷³ "Introduction" to *Texture and Society*, p.xii.

⁶⁷⁴ "Introduction" to *Texture and Society*, p.xii.

⁶⁷⁵ "Introduction" to *Texture and Society*, p.xii.

⁶⁷⁶ Diocesan sees were situated at the periphery of areas they were required to supervise, *Cities of Ladies*, p.12.

reform.⁶⁷⁷ Kittell and Suydam believe that this combination of features affected community norms to the extent that “neither gender nor religious affiliation strictly limited anyone to a particular sphere of action”.⁶⁷⁸ In particular, for our purposes, it created an environment in which people were able to experiment with religious ideas and were likely to bring those ideas into the public realm.⁶⁷⁹

The case of Lambert La Begue (1120/1135-1177), for example, is evidence of the early and intense interest lay men and women had in the *Scriptures* and the *Acts of the Apostles*. Lambert was active in Liège and was imprisoned in approximately 1175 under suspicion of heresy.⁶⁸⁰ He escaped prison after numerous written appeals to anti-Pope Calixtus III and applied in person to Calixtus’ court. The *defence* he mounted there is detailed and reveals much about his followers, whom Lambert describes as an ordered and devoted phalanx who spend the Holy days “reflecting upon what they heard in church and urging one another to practice it”.⁶⁸¹ Lambert’s detailed responses to his accusers function, Simons argues, as proof of the reformist precocity of the Low Countries, demonstrating a tradition of interest and engagement in religious matters that was intensely social.⁶⁸² Moreover, Lambert’s activity in translating texts into the vernacular “proves that about 1177, lay men and women of Liège formed communities of readers who ... acquired instruments to re-evaluate the basis of Christian religion, and to practice [sic] it without much regard for current ecclesiastical legislation”.⁶⁸³

⁶⁷⁷ Kittell and Suydam point out that many diocese owed allegiance to the German emperor and thus resisted religious reforms conversant with the rest of Europe, “Introduction” to *Texture and Society*, p.xii.

⁶⁷⁸ “Introduction” to *Texture and Society*, p.xii.

⁶⁷⁹ Kittell and Suyda claim of the Low Countries that “[d]aily life was played out in an oral-aural space, routinely accessible to the community at large. By the thirteenth century, custom had come to enshrine a clear distrust of anything smacking of the hidden”, “Introduction” to *Texture and Society*, p.xiii.

⁶⁸⁰ See Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.25.

⁶⁸¹ Lambert, cited in Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.28.

⁶⁸² Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.30.

⁶⁸³ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.30.

The social aspect of religious literacy in the Low Countries is here clearly identifiable and early tensions between ecclesiastical rule and social reform are evident in Lambert's imprisonment. This is a good indication of the religious precocity of the area and of an emerging recognition of its reformist tendencies. This precocity was to develop further as subsequent centuries ensued and by Porete's period had become a defining aspect of the region. Porete, accordingly, was active in communities that possessed a long tradition of engagement with religious themes that went beyond acceptance of clerical governance and saw reform, critique and challenge as accepted modes of religious activity. However, the time for reflection, for reading and discussing ideas, required the leisure to disengage, to a certain extent, from labour. Thus, for women such as Porete, the production of written work required financial support.

Both the economic and religious precocity of the Southern Low Countries appeared to allow for this. Indeed, property relations within the small familial units characteristic of the region (which reflected the economic demands of the new urban sub-class), meant that women had a greater recourse to finance and with this, independence. As Howell explains:

Husbands and wives belonging to northern European family economies pooled their property, and in northern European cities frequently did so following some version of community property law. Accordingly, assets acquired after the marriage were treated as the joint property of both spouses; the survivor of the marriage inherited at least half of the property, and could use it as he or she wished, and often had lifetime rights to the usufruct of any communal property they did not inherit.⁶⁸⁴

For women interested in pursuing religious activities, and recording and transmitting religious ideas, the possibilities suggestive in an accepted level of financial equity within the family unit can only be seen as significant.⁶⁸⁵ Moreover, the status of widowhood is

⁶⁸⁴ *Women, Production and Patriarchy*, p.14.

⁶⁸⁵ For a comparison between Ghent and Venice and the significance of women's social and legal conditions in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, see Linda Guzzetti, "Women's Inheritance and Testamentary

intriguing because with inherited financial means comes the ability to afford not only the *time* to create, reflect and write but also the *means* required to produce written work .

Whilst I think it unlikely that Porete was married at the time of writing her *Mirror*, it is possible to conjecture that her status may have been that of a widow who had at her avail resources to allow engagement in religious activity, reflection and written expression. This would make sense of her ability to produce *at least* four copies of her work to send to hoped for supporters (and we will remember that she was reprimanded for retaining not only copies of *The Mirror* but also other texts).⁶⁸⁶ The status of widowhood was often represented as an important *point du depart* for medieval women who, released from the domestic intrusions and sexual expectations of marriage, were able to fully embrace the principles of chastity and abandonment in God conversant with the apostolic life. Guibert of Nogent, for example, writes of his mother turning to religious pursuits after the death of her husband,⁶⁸⁷ and the *vitae* of numerous religious women record the death of a husband as a moment of freedom wherein they could finally pursue their religious leanings without hindrance. Was this Porete's experience? Had she wrangled, much as Margery Kempe had,⁶⁸⁸ with the demands of a husband whilst desirous of a fuller engagement with the religiosity she saw flourishing all around her? Once released from the marital bond, was Porete able to finance her religious reflection and expression through inherited wealth?

Practices in Late Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth-Century Venice and Ghent", in *Texture and Society*, pp.79-108.

⁶⁸⁶ "Also the same inquisitor found that she had [been] recognized in court at one time before the inquisitor of Lotharingia and once before the reverend father lord Philip, then bishop of Cambrai, to have the said book and others with her after the aforesaid condemnation", Ward *SBK*, p.458; Verdeyen p.78.

⁶⁸⁷ Anneke Mulder-Bakker, "The Metamorphosis of Woman: transmission of knowledge and the problems of gender", *Gender and History*, 12, no.3, pp.642-664, pp.642-646.

⁶⁸⁸ As an introduction see Sarah Beckwith, "A Very Material mysticism: the Medieval mysticism of Margery Kempe", *Gender and Text*, pp.195-215.

It is difficult to confirm these conjectures both because we have no record of a union and because Porete's *Mirror* classifies her as a 'mendicant creature' – which literally means begging and the renunciation of property and wealth. Accordingly, it may seem inconsistent with Porete's text and the available evidence to suggest she was a widow with the financial means to pursue her religiosity. However, by Porete's period the term 'mendicant' had taken on a somewhat different meaning for women of semi-regular persuasion. The Fourth Lateran Council forbade begging for alms unless supported by a local bishop or the Holy See. Beguineages commonly relied on labour, income and property for financial maintenance and beguines were understood as those who engaged in 'honest labour'. Accordingly, mendicancy for lay people came to be seen as a characteristic of one who is abstemious and mindful of the excesses of wealth and its distance from the *via apostolica*. They were also understood to infer itinerancy and Katrien Heene has shown that the mobility of women in the region, despite the reactive measures of male polemicists, was evident both in the social sphere and in terms of physical space.⁶⁸⁹ These understandings of the term mendicancy are thus conversant with what we can imagine for Porete, though such conjecture can never be concrete.

This does not, however, help us answer the origins of Porete's views regarding the nature of the divine-human relationship as expressed within *The Mirror*. For, whilst we can know nothing for sure about her background (family status, education, life experience), her book does seem to suggest that she had achieved a significant level of learning and was more than familiar with a variety of elite traditions (from the literature of courtly love, through the works of the church Fathers and aspects of negative theology). She also knew her bible well and she wrote well, significantly in the vernacular, and this would indicate that she had been

⁶⁸⁹ "Gender and Mobility in the Low Countries: Travelling Women in Thirteenth-century Exempla and Saints' Lives", *Texture of Society*, pp.31-49, p.31.

educated although there is no indication that she was credentialed. This all suggests that she was of a wealthy background; however, to what degree of class she may have hailed from is unverifiable. This begs the questions: where did the style of religious expression evident within her work come from? Were the courtly themes evident within her work residue of an association with nobility – of noble birth (as with Hadewijch) or through marriage? Or had Porete ‘learned’ these tropes through engagement with the literature of courtly love in religious frameworks? In short, how did Porete produce such a remarkable text? How did she come to ‘know’, to write, to reflect and to use the sophisticated theological and metaphysical themes evident in her work? It seems important, therefore, in imagining Porete’s identity, to now pursue both possibilities: firstly, her education and secondly, the themes articulated within her work.

The education of an annihilated Soul

Whilst it is generally accepted by the uninitiated that educational opportunities for women in the Middle Ages were woefully lacking, scholarship is increasingly demonstrating that this was not unequivocally the case. Rather, the medieval period evinces a wide divergence of accepted and encouraged education for women that was both formal and informal. This recognition has taken time to emerge because whilst we have a plethora of texts that inform us as to the institutional education of men, of instructional manuals for cloistered women and behavioural instruction for elite women, informal education has left little textual residue. Moreover, scholars have tended to rely on the notion that education, and consequent learned facility, can only be apprehended in terms of credentialed outcomes,

chiefly achieved in an institutional setting. However, as Anneke Mulder-Bakker⁶⁹⁰ and O'Sullivan⁶⁹¹ have pointed out, this definition does not account for the many *informal* ways in which women acquired knowledge in the later Middle Ages. Mulder-Bakker points to the importance of spiritual guidance grounded in a form of female 'mentorship', developed through access and transmission of texts, and she explores the importance of anchoresses and nuns to the spiritual education of women in the period. Similarly, O'Sullivan argues that educational opportunities for women were "typically gained in informal settings under the tutelage of someone more experienced"⁶⁹² and she underlines that these 'settings' were frequently the domain of beguine communities.

Once again, therefore, we find the Southern Low Countries at the centre of our scrutiny. Because, in conjunction with the vigorous lay engagement indicated by Lambert's case, we must also add the tradition of semi-regular women 'commonly called beguines', who appear to have originated in the Low Countries from around 1200 and who constituted a prominent female presence in the religious landscape. Whilst exact origins, development and initial motivations of beguines remain a subject for debate,⁶⁹³ what is clear is that the visibility of women who chose, or had no option but, to pursue a religious vocation outside of the cloister developed concurrently with the intense religious discussions fuelled by the vernacular material that Lambert's *defense* attests to. Initially an informal movement, Simons explains that in the second quarter of the thirteenth century "beguine groups began to acquire property, adopted sets of regulations to govern life as a community, and presented

⁶⁹⁰ For a good analysis of the variety of educational opportunities for women across western medieval Europe, see Anneke Mulder-Bakker, "The metamorphosis of woman".

⁶⁹¹ Robin Anne O'Sullivan, "The school of love: Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*", *Journal of Medieval History*, 32, Issue 2, (June 2006), pp.143-162, p.4.

⁶⁹² Robin Anne O'Sullivan, "The school of love: Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*", p. 4.

⁶⁹³ For example, Lambert Le Begue is often cited as the founder of the beguine movement, but this has been rejected convincingly. See Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, pp. 24-34. Seminal works on the beguine movement include: Simons, *Cities of Ladies*; McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*; L.J.M Philippen, *De Beginjhoven, Oorsprongm Geschiednis, Inrchting*.

themselves to the outside world as religious institutions”.⁶⁹⁴ This did not mean that beguine communities possessed any centralised ‘rule’; however, a number of basic principles can be seen to define them as a group: withdrawal from the world, which was balanced with charity work (in the world) and manual work (predominantly, but not only, in the textile industry); rejection of material goods and also of marriage; prayer, contemplation and study which also included teaching. Accordingly, the role of beguines in the period appears to have been, amongst other things, educational: related to spiritual benefit and including tutelage in “basic literacy for reading the psalter and other devotional books; the ‘virtues’; meditation; penitential practices; and handicrafts necessary for economic survival”.⁶⁹⁵

Thus, informal educational access and the transmission of knowledge cannot be seen as necessarily peripheral to the accepted norm of education for women, and beguine communities appear to have played an important part in that transmission. Considered important for the education of young girls, and often sought out for those infused with religious enthusiasm, was training in *sapientia*, or wisdom, transmitted to women and girls through the guidance of ‘spiritual superiors’ or *magistrae*.⁶⁹⁶ This appears to have been the principle familial motivation for sending young girls to ‘study’ with beguines and/or anchoresses (although some *vitae* tell of the impetus deriving from the girls themselves).⁶⁹⁷ Beatrice of Nazareth, for example, was sent by her father at the age of seven to a *beghinarum collegio* (a group of beguines) in Zoutleeuw to be instructed in ‘virtue’. Similarly, Ida of

⁶⁹⁴ *Cities of Ladies*, p.36. Simons rejects Phillipen’s four stages of beguine development (from lone beguines living with family members, through to cloistered beguinages). See *Cities of Ladies*, p.169, n.7.

⁶⁹⁵ Robin Anne O’Sullivan “The school of love”, p.4.

⁶⁹⁶ Anneke Mulder-Bakker, ‘The metamorphosis of woman. Transmission of knowledge and the problems of gender’, *Gender and History*, 12, no.3, (2000), pp.642-664, p. 650.

⁶⁹⁷ Rejection of marriage and sex is an important motif in the ‘adventures’ recounted by numerous *vitae*. For example, Ida of Nivelles ran away from home to escape an enforced marriage and Odilia of Liège married but refused intercourse.

Gorsleeuw (1203-1260), Beatrice's mentor,⁶⁹⁸ whom her biographer claimed 'thirsted for knowledge from an early age', regularly visited beguine communities for guidance.⁶⁹⁹ Thus, beguinages were frequently sought after by girls and their families as a means to acquire mentorship for young girls across the classes. For many, beguines became substitute families, as with Beatrice who developed a very great affection for her beguine associates.⁷⁰⁰ This transmission of knowledge, however, was not confined to moral instruction in its purest sense (although it was clearly highly valued), but could also "include not only instruction in foreign language but also in music, Latin and, at least in a few cases, Bible study, contemporary spirituality, and possibly even theology".⁷⁰¹

Thus, it was not only 'virtue' that beguines appeared to provide, but rather a communal interaction based on the readings and interpretations of religious tracts either related by the *magistra* or engaged with textually at age-appropriate levels. Beguinages, therefore, functioned as an interesting adjunct to Brian Stock's 'textual communities' – "micro-societies organized around the common understanding of a text".⁷⁰² Whilst Stock refers here to largely illiterate followers of a literate person, beguine environments appear to have revolved around a discourse community characterised by *group* literacy and *group* engagement with texts. Instruction based on interpretation and, at times, a written record of both that instruction and the individual expression of an alternative version of religiosity, appears to have been an important part of the religious activities of beguines. This further reinforces Stock's claims that "what was essential to a textual community was not a written version of a text, although that was sometimes present, but an individual who, having

⁶⁹⁸ For more on Beatrice's relationship with Ida, see De Ganck's *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, Vol. 1, pp.xvi ff.

⁶⁹⁹ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.43.

⁷⁰⁰ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.84.

⁷⁰¹ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.82.

⁷⁰² Brian Stock, "History, Literature, and Medieval Textuality" *Yale French Studies*, 70, (1986), pp.7-17, p.12.

mastered it, then utilised it for *reforming* a group's thought and action'.⁷⁰³ Stock's use of the term 'reforming' is significant here in that it indicates both transmission of knowledge and change, or alteration of, a previously held idea or ideas. This is usually understood to be predominantly the province of males. However, verbal engagement with religious ideas appears to have been an important part of beguine communities achieved through discussion and, at some level, reading and perhaps translation of biblical and theological texts. Moreover, in beguine communities, that reforming tendency appears to have emerged through the engagement of multiple individuals. The robustness of that engagement, as we shall see, indicates a strong tendency to question and debate religious ideologies.

However, there is no reason to assume that the robustness of debate issuing from these textual communities was necessarily confined to 'beguine on beguine' relationships. For example, much like the *cura monialium* (the pastoral care of nuns), some designated beguine communities were assigned male advisors to assist in spiritual guidance, either on an informal or formal basis. The Dominicans were pivotal in this requirement and this guidance was not necessarily received passively. For example, the following extract describes an exchange between a superior of a beguinage and a visiting preacher:

When one of [the preachers] formulated [a] proposition that the man whose charity goes straight cannot but act in a way above reproach, the mistress of the beguines asked him: 'Where in holy scripture, master, have you seen that charity is lame? If it limps and no longer follows a straight course, it is no longer charity.' The speaker was confused.⁷⁰⁴

Reminiscent of the *Schwester Katrei*, the challenge to the preacher's authority in the beguine's homily is remarkable in its confidence and emphasises the extent to which some

⁷⁰³ "History, Literature, and Medieval Textuality", p.12, my emphasis.

⁷⁰⁴ McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, p.344.

women in the period engaged boldly and with intellectual vigour with religious ideologies presented by clerical representatives.

This is not to say that religious interactions between men and women were necessarily conducted within designated spaces, in terms of a formal ‘pulpit and pew’ exchange. Rather, a broad level of dialogue across communities and between men and women is indicative of ‘cross-community’ challenge to clerical (male) monopoly of religiosity. The following text, for example, was composed between 1270 and 1297 by a Dominican active in Northern France and articulates a dialogue between a beguine and a Parisian master of theology. Simons explains that what follows is the beguine’s response to an accusation of “irreverent and presumptuous attitude”:⁷⁰⁵

You talk, we act.
 You learn, we seize.
 You inspect, we choose.
 You chew, we swallow.
 You bargain, we buy.
 You glow, we take fire.
 You assume, we know.
 You ask, we take.
 You search, we find.
 You love, we languish.
 You languish, we die.
 You sow, we reap.
 You work, we rest.
 You grow thin, we grow fat.
 You ring, we sing.
 You sing, we dance.
 You dance, we jump.
 You blossom, we bear fruit.
 You taste, we savour.⁷⁰⁶

This text, which survives in various translations,⁷⁰⁷ indicates a new language of religious debate that was ushered in by women’s verbal and textual involvement in religiosity. It is a

⁷⁰⁵ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.131.

⁷⁰⁶ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.131.

playful dialogue that engages with a very serious debate over ownership of divine knowledge and is a good example of what has been called the beguine formula of stressing intuitive learning over reason. Apparently, this challenge could be light-hearted, but, as we saw with the preceding debate between a preacher and a beguine mistress, it is frequently marked by a bold intellectual engagement associated with critique.

However, it should not be assumed that the exchanges between religious men and women were always adversarial.⁷⁰⁷ The *Schwester Katrei* is a good example of the ways in which knowledge transmission could shift, challenge and move across community (and gender) boundaries. Whilst a fictional account, it shows that spiritual knowledge was understood in the period to have the potential to develop and inform both teacher *and* pupil. The *magister* (the ‘maybe’ Eckhart) as confessor is sought out by a ‘daughter’ (frequently considered to be beguine and sometimes Porete) to be taught the fastest way to salvation. The daughter, however, finds his teaching lacking and after retreating to ‘foreign lands’ in order to learn, returns transformed and, for her confessor, indistinguishable from an angel. The treatise concludes with the teacher spiritually transformed and desirous of her instruction. The teacher-pupil inversion is complete. Whilst the *Schwester Katrei* is most likely a fictional account of a teacher-pupil relationship inversion, it nevertheless demonstrates that women were understood to have the capacity to engage informally and verbally with male teachers on an advanced theological and spiritual level. More, it shows that knowledge was understood to be a dialogue, achieved through a variety of means, and that affective and speculative knowledge were understood, on a fictional level at least, as acceptable bedfellows.

⁷⁰⁷ Simons notes that a 1300 translation of the text concluded with an ending that supplies a warning *touché*. In French, this text concludes with “You debauch, we dispute”, a play on the French for prostitute, *pute*, *Cities of Ladies*, p.132.

⁷⁰⁸ On the relationships between religious men and women, see Elisabeth Bos, “The Literature of Spiritual Formation in France and England, 1080-1190”.

This dialogue becomes more intriguing when we consider that Charlotte Radler has argued that Eckhart's writings demonstrate his "ability to harmonize the speculative and affective"⁷⁰⁹ and that the *Schwester Katrei* "restores a fractured anthropology and theology caused by the rupture between speculative and affective forms of mysticism".⁷¹⁰ In other words, both Eckhart's writings and the *Schwester Katrei* demonstrate a particular religiosity that fused speculative and affective themes. This is significant because Porete has been linked to both the *Schwester Katrei* and to Eckhart, primarily, but not only, because of the ways in which *The Mirror* demonstrates a similar approach to divine-human relationships. In particular, the shared 'without a why' of Eckhart and the *Schwester Katrei*, and the 'annihilation' of Porete's noble Soul indicates a shared discourse that utilises the tenets of negative theology, a philosophy that, at least until the twelfth century in the medieval west, had been the domain of elite male theologians. This is important, because it suggests that at some stage in the high Middle Ages, a transference of an elite male discourse to the marginalised (semi-regular women) occurred; the historical implications of this are profound.

Whilst we cannot claim that the *Schwester Katrei* is hard evidence of this transmission, we can consider it to be so in Porete's works. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Porete has been considered such an 'exceptional' case. Yet Porete was not the only woman writer to use negative theology. The works of Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch and Beatrice of Nazareth, for example, demonstrate a familiarity with this form of mystical approach. All three utilise the apophatic discourse of the abyss, similar in its

⁷⁰⁹ "For The Beloved: mystical marriage in Meister Eckhart and Sister Catherine", (Department of Theological Studies, Loyola Marymount University, 2005), <<http://www.aarmysticism.org/documents/Radler>>, last visited March, 2007.

⁷¹⁰ "For The Beloved", p.12.

intent to Porete's annihilated soul, to describe the soul's journey to God. All three meld in different ways the traditions of *Fin Amour* and the *mystique courtoise* with a poetic and interior utilisation of the dominant themes of negative theology (annihilation, non-willing, and apophasis).⁷¹¹ Whilst not as extreme as Porete's adaptation, it is nevertheless significant that what is presented in these *self-authored* works is an inner path to divine knowledge that stands in contrast to the overweening somatic spirituality that is usually characterised as the defining aspect of female mysticism of the period and in contrast to ecclesiastical, mediated approaches. In terms of transmission, it is also important that the women that used this form of metaphysical mysticism were all associated *in some way*, with the beguine milieu.

These examples of evidence of a more significant presence for negative theology in beguine associated female religiosity of the period are further enhanced by the findings of Miriam Marsolais who has convincingly argued for the influence of Richard of St Victor (d.1173) (successor of Hugh of St Victor (d.1142), champion of negative theology) on Jacques de Vitry, Marie d'Oignes's amanuensis.⁷¹² Outlining the parallels between Hugh's *The Twelve Patriarchs* and *The Mystical Ark* and Jacques construction of Marie's *Vita*, Marsolais argues that Jacques made Mary an *exemplum* of Richard's ideas (another example of a constructed identity). Stressing the particular didactic agenda Jacques had in mind, Marsolais has succeeded in adding a new slant to the history of women's involvement in

⁷¹¹ Negative theology in the later Middle Ages is a vast subject. As a survey, see: Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*; Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: negativity in Christian mysticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and his "The Art of Unknowing: Negative Theology in late medieval Mysticism", *Modern Theology*, 14, no.4, (Oct. 1998), pp.473-488; Dale Coulter, "Pseudo-Dionysius in the Twelfth Century Latin West", <<http://www.theorb.net/encyclop/culture/philos/coulter.html>> last visited June, 2007; Albrecht Classen, "The Literary treatment of the Ineffable: Mechthild von Magdeburg, Margaret Ebner, Agnes Blannbekin", *Studies in Spirituality*, 8, (1998), pp.162-187; Thomas A. Carlson, "The Poverty and Poetry of Indiscretion: Negative Theology and Negative Anthropology in contemporary and historical perspective", *Christianity and Literature*, 47, no.2, (Winter 1998), pp.167-193; John Aberth, "Pseudo-Dionysius as Liberator: the influence of the negative tradition on late medieval female mystics", *Downside Review*, 114, (April 1996), pp.96-115; Bernard McGinn, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Early Cistercians" in *One Yet Two: Monastic Tradition, East and West*, B.Pennington [ed.], (Kalamazoo: Cisterican Publications, 1976), pp. 200-204; Maria Lichtmann, "Negative Theology in Marguerite Porete and Jacques Derrida".

⁷¹² "Jacques de Vitry and the Canons of St Victor", in *Two Lives of Marie d'Oignes*, (Toronto: Peregrina, 1998), pp.13-36.

religiosity. For Richard's work, following on from Hugh's, was dedicated to the further realignment of the Christian tradition with negative theology. His renown for such an adaptation is indicated by Bonaventure, who tells us that "Richard aims at Dionysius in contemplation".⁷¹³

Works such as *The Mystical Ark* were intended to outline the contemplative ascent and its accompanying stages in order that the goal of 'alienation of mind' followed by 'ecstasy of mind' be achieved through a careful system of contemplative measures. Richard's expressed desire, "to be led above ourselves ... with so much alienation of soul that for a while our mind might know nothing of itself",⁷¹⁴ demonstrates at once the subtle manner with which Richard utilised Hugh's use of Dionysian categories and prefigures the emphasis on ecstatic vision through contemplation that so characterises later ecclesiastical constructions of those who were termed beguines. What this signifies, then, is that even at the outset of the 'flowering of female mysticism' negative theology had a place within female religiosity – ironically enough apparently instigated by two churchmen, each in different ways acutely aware of its propensity for unorthodoxy. This is important because it indicates a transmission of knowledge over time in which the religious dialogue between men and semi-religious women escaped the boundaries of the initial instigators.

Significantly, this dialogue was centred on women and women's communities (frequently beguinages) and we have seen that there is evidence that this guidance was not a passively received offering. Indeed, as Fiona Griffiths has pointed out in her discussion of Abelard and Heloise's negotiation of the *cura monialium*, "traditional interpretations ... have tended to force a dichotomy between men's support for the care of women, as at Fontevrault,

⁷¹³ Dale Coulter, "Pseudo-Dionysius in the Twelfth Century Latin West".

⁷¹⁴ Dale Coulter, citing *De Arca Mystica* 4:16, *Patrologica Latina* 196, pp.143-44, in "Pseudo-Dionysius in the Twelfth Century Latin West".

and opposition, which is generally, although not exclusively, associated with Cîteaux, meanwhile condemning women as passive characters to the periphery of the debate”.⁷¹⁵ Griffiths concludes that such a dichotomy is not satisfactory and that women, such as Heloise, negotiated within the framework of accepted guidance. Whilst I am not arguing here for a direct relationship between Eckhart and Porete (as per Abelard and Heloise), what I am suggesting is that the relationships between men and women interested and engaged in religious thinking were not necessarily antithetical.⁷¹⁶ Rather, we can conjecture that the tradition put in place by Jacques was fostered and negotiated over time by both men *and* women, resulting in permutations and developments that were exceptional but not, perforce, unexpected or, it transpires, exceptional.

Beguine-educated or mendicant magpie?

So was it within this kind of textual community, a beguinage, that Porete achieved or ‘put to use’ the learning that contributed to the composition of her *Mirror*? Did she visit one of the small ‘convent style’ beguinages for instruction? Or live within one of the court beguinages?⁷¹⁷ Are the conventions of critique, disregard for ‘reason’ and a poetic performance style of writing indications that her book was formed within a beguine milieu? Does Porete’s utilisation of negative theology demand an encounter within beguine relationships? These are not easy questions to answer because we do not have any records that would assist us in piecing together Porete’s movements and activities prior to her condemnation at Valenciennes.

⁷¹⁵ “‘Men’s Duty to Provide for Women’s Needs’: Abelard, Heloise, and their Negotiation of the *Cura monialium*”, *Journal of Medieval History*, 30, Issue 1, (March 2004), pp.1-24, p.13.

⁷¹⁶ This is Bos’ argument, “The Literature of Spiritual Formation for Women”.

⁷¹⁷ For details of these communities see Simons, “The Formation of Beguinages”, *Cities of Ladies*, pp.35-60.

We do know, however, that at the time of writing *The Mirror* Porete was not ‘enclosed’, although she may have been at some stage. Evidence for this is based on the line “I used to be enclosed”⁷¹⁸ and is frequently quoted by scholars as evidence of Porete’s cloistered past. However, the verse following this statement suggests this could also be an allegorical indication of Porete’s servitude to the Virtues. The verse reads: “I used to be enclosed/ in the servitude of captivity, / When desire imprisoned me/ in the will of affection/ ... Now has Divine Light/ delivered me from captivity,/ and joined me by gentility/ to the divine will of Love”.⁷¹⁹ Of course, the lines could mean both things, that she was cloistered and, whilst so, was slave to the Virtues. Troublingly, however, as we have already noted in chapter two, it is not certain that these passages are autobiographical. These particular lines occur in that section entitled ‘Here the Soul begins her song’ and it is not clear if Porete is offering a self-designation or is engaging in a creative interplay with the Soul as principle protagonist.

This interplay can also be seen as problematic in the lines that indicate Porete’s divergence from both the regular and sub-regular religious classes. It has been repeated frequently throughout this thesis, for example, that Porete’s status as a beguine has been questioned because of her self-disassociation within the text of *The Mirror*. We will remember that the specific lines indicating this are: “O my lover, *what will beguines say/ and religious types, /When they hear the excellence of your divine song?! Beguines say I err,/ priests, clerics, and Preachers,/ Augustinians, Carmelites,/ and the Friars Minor*”.⁷²⁰ This passage directly follows those that we have just discussed. Accordingly, it may be concluded that the contention that Porete was not a beguine is weakened by a debatable

⁷¹⁸ *The Mirror*, chapter 122, p.200.

⁷¹⁹ This directly precedes the verse indicating Porete’s non-beguine status at the time of writing; “O my Lover, what will beguines say ...”, *The Mirror*, p.200.

⁷²⁰ *Mirror*, p.200, my italics.

autobiographical basis. However, it can also be argued that the point expressed here refers to the *ideas* Porete expressed, distributed and claimed as her own. The Soul tells us that these ideas are seen as error. Beguines, the Soul says, *say* (past tense) that the ideas are in error and the Soul expresses concern regarding what they *will* say when they hear the work in its entirety (thereby encompassing past, present and future). Thus, it does not really matter whether it is Porete or her protagonist Soul that speaks. Because what is at stake is not the autobiographical 'I' but the ideas expressed in the work *produced by Porete*. Porete's ideas are excluded from beguine support because beguines *have* regarded her ideas as erroneous and *they will* again regard it as so when expressed by Soul in Porete's *Mirror*.

It may be, therefore, that Porete had been in contact with beguine communities, but to affirm her status as beguine as certain, to give her a firm beguine *identity*, as many scholars do, is counter-intuitive to the meaning of Porete's disengagement evident within the text. More, it assumes that to articulate themes reminiscent of an identified beguine corpus is evidence of a beguine identity which, in turn, assumes linear and mono-situational learning opportunities. This fails to acknowledge the variety of options available for the transmission of knowledge in the period. For example, in chapter ninety-six the Soul speaks to the Trinity, saying: "Once upon a time, there was a mendicant creature ...[who]... wrote what you hear. And she desired that her neighbours might find God in her, through writings and words".⁷²¹ Porete's journey of religious discovery appears in this way to be narrated, although artificially, through the register of the Soul as 'I' and not 'I'. This is the Soul telling us a story suggestive of an identity for Porete: as mendicant creature and as an author desirous of the instruction of others – her neighbours. Accordingly, as many scholars have concluded, it does appear plausible to conjecture that Porete was unaffiliated and itinerant at the time of

⁷²¹ *The Mirror*, p.170.

writing her *Mirror* and that she saw her role as a didactic, evangelical one.⁷²² However, itinerancy and didactic activity do not require the ‘mendicant creature’ to be a beguine, in the sense that this term relates to a fixed identity of confraternity and a unified discourse governed by specific ideas about religiosity.

As such, it is possible to further conjecture that Porete encountered a *variety* of educational opportunities in multiple communities and was not restricted to a singular textual community. Nor was this, it seems, unusual. For example, we have already mentioned that Beatrice is said to have received instruction from beguines at an early age. However, she was previously instructed in basic Latin grammar by her mother so as to read her Latin primer and at the same time as she was being instructed by the beguines she attended a co-educational school to complete her training in reading and writing. She received this training before attending the school maintained by the Cistercian abbey of Florival, where she was finally to become formally ‘enclosed’. Similarly, Ida attended a co-educational school and at thirteen began lessons within the school at the Cistercian abbey of La Ramée, prior to her enclosure some years later. Thus, for these women at least, these avenues of opportunity were clearly sought through a number of channels: through secular (public) schools, beguine communities and anchoresses and male spiritual advisors. The result, which should not be surprising considering Lambert’s early claims for an extensive lay reading public, were high levels of female literacy and a precocious commitment to knowledge achieved across the social strata.

One thinks here of Christine de Pizan born almost fifty years after Porete’s death, who, desirous of acquiring learning considered unsuitable for a girl, filched “scraps and

⁷²² On the didactic nature of Porete’s *Mirror*, see O’Sullivan, “The School of Love”.

flakes, small coins and bits of change, that have fallen from the great wealth my father had".⁷²³ Was this what Porete was doing? Did she sit at a father and/or mother's table, eagerly absorbing knowledge and ideas? Did she then continue to gather scraps and flakes as she went along in life in order to develop herself as a writer and thinker? Was she, therefore, as so many other women of the period appeared to be, a magpie for knowledge pursuing wherever she could the opportunity to fulfil her spiritual and intellectual requirements? This seems to me to be a highly feasible conjecture, both for Porete and for other women of the period, particularly when we consider that some of the 'unsifted' writings of her associates betrayed a particular style of religious metaphysical thought that point to a melding of traditions unique to the religious literature of the period.⁷²⁴

I believe that is clear from the connections articulated by Newman, McGinn and others that Porete was well acquainted with the traditions of spirituality articulated in terms of *mystique courtoise* and *Fin Amour*. Further, the reformist tradition and the accompanying evangelical impulses related to what O'Sullivan has termed "the distinctive educational needs and spiritual ideals of semi-religious women's communities"⁷²⁵ are clear indications of a discourse shared within the textual communities of women committed to pursuing and reforming their dedication to *via apostolica*. However, unlike these authors I do not believe that it is useful to provide Porete with a beguine identity because with this comes the inference of a restricted discourse community and this does not do justice to the development of Porete's theology nor does it acknowledge her own disassociation.

⁷²³ The result of which, after her widowhood at twenty five, was the development of one of the most revered professional women writers of the period. Cited in Mulder-Bakker, "Metamorphosis of Woman", p.654.

⁷²⁴ This merging of traditions underlines Souillac's claims for Christianity's existence within multiple modes of cultural, social and intellectual signification, "Charisme et Prophétisme Féminins", p.262.

⁷²⁵ O'Sullivan, "Model, Mirror and Memorial", p.12.

Indeed, as attested to in the parallels between Porete and Eckhart's work, and as fictionally indicated in the *Schwester Katrei*, it would seem that religious debate, knowledge and modes of transmission were achieved through numerous channels and were shared as well as debated within and across communities not necessarily confined to a beguine milieu. This is made apparent when we consider some other female self-authored writings that have striking parallels to Porete's discourse. For example, in Book One of her *Flowing Light* Mechthild writes:

The sweet dew of the eternal trinity gushed forth from the fountain of the everlasting Godhead into the flower of the chosen maid ... under this immense force *she loses herself.*/ In this most dazzling light she *becomes blind in herself.*/ And in this utter blindness she sees most clearly... "What are you made of, Soul, that you ascend so high above all creatures, mingle with the Holy Trinity, and yet remain whole in yourself?"/ "You have brought up the question of my origin. I shall tell you honestly: I was made by love in that very place. For that reason *no creature is able to give comfort to my noble nature or to open it up except love alone*"⁷²⁶

Here, the stylistic and thematic links with what has been called 'beguine traditions' remain strongly in evidence; we have the shifts between monologue, poetry and dialogue, yet we also have themes of self-annihilation, immersion in God and a claim for the inadequacy of 'creatureliness' in soothing the Soul. This is reminiscent of Porete's *Mirror* not only in its use of the tenets of *via negativa* but also in the use of similar stylistic links, albeit with a tendency to reduce the role of the affective route.

Similarly, Beatrice's self-authored fragment evinces strong correlations with both the 'beguine traditions' of affective religiosity and the speculative vernacular theology so reminiscent of Porete's work. For example, as Porete would do in her *Mirror* some years after Beatrice's death, Beatrice outlined a seven stage procession of a soul's union with

⁷²⁶ *Flowing Light*, pp.49-50, my italics.

God.⁷²⁷ Like Porete's sixth stage,⁷²⁸ the seventh stage constitutes the ultimate moment of achieving union, in which the Soul:

...gives no little labour within, namely when it is drawn into love *beyond what is human, beyond human sense and reason, and beyond all the works of our heart*. It is drawn through eternal Love alone into the eternity of Love, and into the incomprehensibility and vastness and inaccessible sublimity and deep *abyss of the Godhead*, which is totally present in all things and remains incomprehensibly beyond all things...[there]... The soul seeks its beloved in his Majesty; it pursues him there, and gazes upon him with heart and mind. *The soul knows him, loves him, and desires him so much that it cannot pay attention to saints or men or angels or creatures.*⁷²⁹

Here we find strong echoes of Porete's sixth stage descent into the 'abyss of humility':

[wherein]... God sees himself in her by His divine majesty, who clarifies this Soul with Himself, so that she sees only that there is nothing except God Himself Who is, from whom all things are ... And so the soul is at the sixth stage, freed, and pure and clarified from all things – but not at all glorified. For the glorification is at the seventh stage, which we will have in glory, of which none know how to speak. But this Soul, thus pure and clarified, sees neither God nor herself ... God shows to her that that there is nothing except Him. And thus this Soul understands nothing except Him, and so loves nothing except Him, praises nothing except Him, for there is nothing except Him.⁷³⁰

Accordingly, whilst Porete is one step ahead of Beatrice in achieving a spiritual union prior to 'glorification', we find shared notions of the abyss, of total immersion in the 'Godhead', of blindness to creaturely recognitions and indeed to anything apart from the object of the pursuit (God).

In Hadewijch we also find indications of a shared discourse that included notions prescient of the full blown apophatic discourse evident in Porete's work. Hadewijch's works consist of letters, poems (some contested, as we have said) and visions. Many betray forays

⁷²⁷ For Beatrice's version see de Ganck's *Beatrice of Nazareth*, pp.289-331, usefully set out in two columns alongside the biographer's version, with the Latin on the facing page.

⁷²⁸ For Porete's description of the seven stages see *The Mirror*, chapter 118, pp.189-194.

⁷²⁹ Selections from de Ganck's *Beatrice of Nazareth*, pp.320-323, my italics.

⁷³⁰ *The Mirror*, chapter 118, p 193.

into a creative form of speculative theology yet subdued within a strong dedication to *Fin Amour*. For example, in Vision twelve ‘The Perfect Bride’ Hadewijch declares:

And when she was led thus to the high seat ... the eagle... said: “Now see through the Countenance, and become the veritable bride of the great Bridegroom, and behold yourself in this state!” *And in that very instance I saw myself received in union by the One who sat there in the abyss upon the circling disc, and there I became one with him in the certainty of unity.* Then the eagle said, when I was received: “Now behold, all-powerful one, whom I previously called the loved one, that you did not know all you should become, and what your highest ways was, and what the great kingdom was that you as bride should receive from your Bridegroom. When previously you fell down before the Countenance, you, like an ordinary soul, confessed it as frightening. When you stood up and contemplated it, *you saw yourself perfect, together with us, a veritable bride, sealed with love*” ... *In that abyss I saw myself swallowed up.* Then I received the certainty of being received, in this form, *in my Beloved, and my Beloved also in me.*⁷³¹

As with Mechthild and Beatrice we have the themes of the abyss, total union with God, and references to those “... who love no longer hav[ing] virtues to do anything/ but wander in the storms of Love”.⁷³² Labour (subjection to the Virtues) is far behind the Soul and union is achieved within the abyss and the self is lost within God and, at the same time, reflected and seen more perfectly in God.

What we have here is evidence of a shared discourse. This appears to me to be undeniable, but how was that discourse transmitted? How did these women come to share the ideas and the stylistic modes they utilised? Where was it encountered? Many scholars, such as McGinn and Newman, consider these similarities to be the result of beguine communities in the transmission of a specific discourse. I believe this was probably so. Yet we must be careful not to assume a beguine identity for women who betray familiarity with ideas nurtured within beguine communities. Because, as I have repeatedly emphasised throughout this thesis, the issues with using the term ‘beguine’ as a definition of identity are

⁷³¹ *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, p.296, my italics.

⁷³² *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, p.358

highly problematic. For both medieval clerics and modern historians, the term has become a catch-all for *all* semi-religious women. Yet not all women who engaged in religious discourse were beguines. This is not to say that beguines were fictitious – made up by malevolent clerics. On the contrary, the prevalence of beguinages throughout Europe rules this out.⁷³³ However, to classify all single, uncloistered, religiously active women as beguines (particularly when, as with Porete, we are told that beguines were adversaries) is to stand alongside male medieval clerics, rather than with the women religious we wish to study.

Moreover, the fluidity of education opportunities and religious influences that we have here charted indicates that a beguine identity was not a pre-requisite for expressing beguine-associated ideas. For example, Beatrice was not considered to be beguine at the time of writing the *Seven Manners*, although she did, as we have seen, receive some beguine tuition at an early age.⁷³⁴ Similarly, there is no hard evidence that Mechthild was, definitively, a beguine. McGinn cites Book 4:2 as an indication of this status but all that is suggestive of this is Mechthild's statement that she "moved to a town where no one was my friend except for one person".⁷³⁵ This does not seem to me to be hard evidence and Frank Tobin concedes that Mechthild's status as a beguine and as mistress of a beguine community can only be assumed.⁷³⁶ Thirdly, Hadewijch, our only uncontested beguine (and eventually *magistra*)⁷³⁷ was eventually exiled from her community⁷³⁸ with some associated scandal⁷³⁹

⁷³³ See Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, pp.56-60, for data on the prevalence of beguinages and beguines in the Low Countries.

⁷³⁴ Beatrice became an oblate of Bloemendaal and thence a prioress of Nazareth near Cambrai.

⁷³⁵ *Flowing Light*, 4:2, p.140.

⁷³⁶ Frank Tobin, "Introduction" to *Flowing Light*, p.5.

⁷³⁷ Hadewijch was a *magistra* of a beguine community for a time. Her list of 'recommended readings' included some of the great church writers – Origen, Hilary of Poitiers, Augustine, Gregory the Great and Isidore of Seville. Her work has been shown to be indebted to Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St Thierry and, significantly, the Victorines. Clearly, therefore, she was conversant in Latin, was well grounded in theological speculation and was recommending these authors to others as worthy of spiritual and theological guidance.

and it has been conjectured that some of the statements in her Letters, *taken out of context*, Tobin remarks, may have provoked this.⁷⁴⁰ These statements are held to be suggestive of quietism and it here, again, that we find reflections in Porete's *Mirror*.

Have we, therefore, more magpies here? Women whose access to both formal and informal education allowed them to develop a distinct stylistic theology achieved through recourse to multiple modes of ideological, spiritual and theological interchange. Indeed, does this shared discourse indicate an alternative and hitherto veiled discourse that, born from a diffusion of discourse communities, competed vigorously for space within the religious landscape? For what unites these authors, apart from aspects of the content of their works, is that the vernacular expressions of *all* these women were regarded with disquiet. We have already seen, for example, how Beatrice's words were distorted by her biographer to present an orthodox and genre-specific representation of the 'Holy Woman'. Mechthild retreated to the Helfta community because of the criticisms of her detractors and Hadewijch was forced to flee her beguine community. Therefore, it seems that it was not affiliation as much as the content of vernacular expressions that caused problems for religious women writers of the period; many 'real' beguines were clearly not easy with this kind of affective and speculative fusion. Nor, it seems, without good reason, as Hadewijch herself would have been aware; her 'List of the Perfect' included reference to a beguine executed by Robert le Bourgre, a one-time heretic-come papal inquisitor whose headquarters were in Cambrai, the same diocese

⁷³⁸ In her but last recorded Letter Hadewich consoles her reader, asking her not to grieve over her 'disgrace' for "What happens to me, whether I am wandering in the country or put in prison – however it turns out, it is the will of Love", Letters, p.114. Post exile, Hadewijch is believed to have spent the remainder of her life in a leprosarium, tending to the afflicted.

⁷³⁹ See Mother Columba Hart's "Introduction" to *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, pp.1-42, p.4.

⁷⁴⁰ This is Columba Hart's contention, who claims that issues with quietism may have been involved. *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 1-42, p.4. Certainly, her notion of 'the perfect soul' and the possibility of perfection can be seen to reflect Porete's notion. It is also interesting to note that contextualisation is, as for Porete, seen to be important in interpreting Hadewijch's works.

governing Nazareth and, we note, the bishopric of Guy II, the instigator of Porete's condemnation.⁷⁴¹

In whose company: an audience for *The Mirror*.

Textual communities are generally held to be those that revolve around a literate individual who, through both oral and literate engagement with ideas, seeks to reform and contribute to knowledge regarding a specific ideology (frequently, in our period, religious). Stock uses as an example the Waldenses and argues for the oral and eventual literate translation of reformist principles within this distinct group.⁷⁴² The beguineage in these terms can be seen to be an important indicator of a textual community (though different to that discussed by Stock). However, if we consider the ways in which knowledge (of texts, ideas and reformist principles) appear to have been transmitted amongst semi-religious women of the period and region it is possible to conjecture that this knowledge, this exchange of ideas, was not restricted to situated communities governed by principles of engagement (however loose). Rather, the interchange between oral and written ideas evinced in the textual production of the handful of texts we have here cursorily explored points to a more fluid exchange that crossed boundaries of identity formations. This means two things (two possibilities): firstly, that Porete had the opportunity to engage in religious ideas by various means; secondly, that as a producer of knowledge (both textual and, one can only assume, oral) she had the opportunity to transmit those ideas by various means and she was eager to do so.

⁷⁴¹ See Helen Rolfsen, "List of the Perfect by Hadewijch of Antwerp", *Vox Benedictina: A Journal of Translations from Monastic Sources* (Saskatoon: Peregrina Publishers, 1984), 5, no.4 (1988), pp.277-87, accessed here at *Cartularium*, <<http://monasticmatrix.usc.edu/cartularium/article.php?textId=2475&PHPSESSID=32f>>, last visited June, 2007.

⁷⁴² In addition to Stock's important *The Implications of Literacy: written language and models of interpretation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries*, (Princeton University Press, 1983) is "History, Literature and Medieval Textuality", esp. pp.10 ff.

It is clear that Porete was keen to send her work out ‘into the world’ (either verbally or textually). This can be seen in her identification of opposition to her ideas – from beguines, priests, clerics, Preachers, Augustinians, Carmelites and Friars Minor – which shows that she was actively seeking approval from her religious peers. This is an important point because only by transmitting, in some form, the content of her theology would she have been able to make this claim (*pace* Colledge’s claims that her contentions are untrustworthy). That her theology was ill-received may or may not have disappointed Porete.⁷⁴³ However, she did not give up seeking approval; the cautious affirmations of Godfrey of Fontaines, John of Querayn and Franco of Viliers bear this out. So too, do the comments of regent masters and William in her trial documents.⁷⁴⁴ This too is important, because it shows that the boundaries of accepted modes of religious engagement were still soft and that Porete felt confident to pursue and challenge them. If this were not the case, then Porete would have kept her ideas to herself and a handful of followers, and would not have attempted to garner approval. The assumption that Porete was some kind of spiritual maverick, therefore, arrogant and pernicious in her heresy, does not make sense when we consider that she was desirous of approval from her peers and actively sought to attain it.

However, this active desire for approval does not discount the possibility that Porete had support from areas *outside* recognised religious communities and individuals. We have seen how the Low Countries exhibited a precocious engagement with religious ideas and held high levels of literacy. This suggests a vibrant community that was further engaged by

⁷⁴³ Robinson argues that *The Mirror* intentionally sets itself up as an elite work, whose notions will not be comprehensible to any but those who have achieved a measure of ‘nobility of soul’, *Nobility and Annihilation*.

⁷⁴⁴ “The inquisitor also found that after the condemnation of the book the said Marguerite had nevertheless communicated the said book, containing the same errors or exactly similar ones, to the reverend father lord John, by the grace of God bishop of Chalons, and to many other simple persons, beghards and others, as though it were [a] good [book]”, Ward *SBK* p.458: Verdeyen, pp.156-71.

the frequent comings and goings of travellers. It seems feasible, therefore, to conjecture that Porete could have been sharing her ideas in the public realm. Indeed, Porete's distancing from both beguines and other dominant religious groups indicates that she was very likely to have an alternative community, a diffuse community, with which to share and engage in religious ideas. Interestingly, however, she is not accused explicitly of preaching (as Guiard was), but rather of communicating 'in word and deed' the contents of her book. How did she do this? Were there physical spaces for an engaged lay public? Or did Porete perhaps receive patronage from the educated and religiously engaged new urban classes? Were 'dinner parties' conducted wherein she could communicate her ideas, either verbally or by delivery of her text? We cannot prove these conjectures. However, there does seem good evidence to suggest that public venues were increasingly spaces of lay engagement with religious ideas.

Suydam, for example, building on her earlier work with Joanna Ziegler,⁷⁴⁵ argues for the intense performative aspects of beguine literature, and, much as I do here, points to the possibility of a very different textual community to that envisaged by Stock and others.⁷⁴⁶ For Suydam, the textual residue of beguine literature indicates a highly public spirituality that was intended to be demonstrated (and one cannot help but think of Guiard here) in the public eye *as performance*. This is confirmed for Suydam, by the layout of beguinages, as described by Wogan-Browne and Henneau,⁷⁴⁷ featuring a strong architectural indication of an intensely civic and communally structured mini-urban society. Her focus here is on beguines, but she points to the ways in which religious women, such as Beatrice, brought to their new religious communities the public, oral and spiritual interests and norms learned in the beguinages. However, this does not mean that this oral and performative feature was

⁷⁴⁵ Joanna E Ziegler's introduction to *Performance and Transformation*, announces the intention to turn the 'inherited "discourse on the body...towards a more performance-sensitive perspective" p. xiv.

⁷⁴⁶ "Visionaries in the Public Eye: Beguine literature as performance", in *Texture and Society*, pp.131-152.

⁷⁴⁷ See both Suydam's "Visionaries in the Public Eye", p.132 and *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality*, pp.14-15.

restricted to beguine communities. Rather, as we have already pointed out, religiosity, literacy and orality was frequently fused in the Low Countries urban environments; a situation that suggests a broader, and perhaps reflective, public religiosity than the confines of a beguinage.

A collision of communities

Porete's contribution to the religiosity of the period, along with her arrest and subsequent execution, must, therefore, be seen in light of both her commonality with a diffuse lay religious movement of the period and the ecclesiastic reaction to that movement and its discourse that resulted in her burning at La Grève. As a heterotopic moment, therefore, the condemnation of Porete can be seen as representing the point at which the contest resulted in a collision of identities and communities. This collision can be seen as something of a retrospective crisis in religious ideology, in which the dominant community produced a compensatory framework designed to enforce control and generate deviance. Why this moment, however, and why this woman? Indeed, if Porete was so undistinguished, if her work was, as was repeatedly pointed out by her 'reviewers', only suitable for the elite, why bother to burn it and her? Largely, this would seem to be because Porete's ideas and status were contested within the Church. This contest has a long history and may go some way towards helping us understand Porete's condemnation. Let us now look then at the contested support semi-religious women received in the period leading up to Porete's death before turning our attention to the metaphysical and theological background to the ideas expressed within *The Mirror*.

We have already seen the pivotal role Jacques de Vitry held in gaining papal approval for semi-religious women and their role in disseminating religious discourse (and his role in introducing aspects of the *via negativa* to *mulieres religiosae*). However, Jacques' teacher Peter the Chanter (d. 1197), had already paved the way for the advocacy of female lay evangelism by vigorously defended lay preaching:

Where did [St.] Paul get his preaching certificate? He started to preach right after his conversions. That convinces me that each Christian can preach if he sees his brother in error. Not in the church, unless the local bishop or the local priest has granted him permission. But otherwise it is enough to be guided by the Holy Spirit, even if one is not licensed by a human or by any ecclesiastical authority. It has been said that no one should preach without being ordered to do so by man. But should I not give alms to a poor person even if I am not commissioned to do so by the Church? Preaching is very similar: it is a work of charity, and thus the Gospel itself was preached to many without commission.⁷⁴⁸

Peter's views did not gain the full support of the church. However, his views profoundly influenced clerics who were significant in advocating semi-religious women. John of Nivelles and John of Liroux, for example, were amongst Peter's disciples and, along with Jacques, became ardent and active supporters of the early *mulieres religiosae* of Liège.

Support for these women was not isolated to Peter the Chanter's disciples. Caesarius of Heisterbach writing between 1225 and 1228, for example, affirmed *mulieres religiosae*'s contribution to piety whilst simultaneously indicating an awareness of unease regarding their unmarked attire and lay residence:

Although those [holy] women, whom we know to be very numerous in the diocese of Liège, live among the people wearing lay clothes, they still surpass many of the cloister in the love of God. They live the eremitical life among the crowds, spiritual among the worldly and virginal among those who seek pleasure. As their battle is greater, so is their grace, and a greater crown will await them.⁷⁴⁹

⁷⁴⁸ Cited in *Cities of Ladies*, p.126.

⁷⁴⁹ Cited in Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.35.

Similarly, Humbert of Romans noted in 1270 “that there are good women who with the grace of God imitate good things and by the fear of the Lord have adopted a salutary spirit and live a most holy life in the midst of a perverse community: they are called beguines”,⁷⁵⁰ thereby both giving credence to a term initially arising from derision⁷⁵¹ and, like Caesarius, indicating a concern with contamination of uncloistered women. This underlines the ecclesiastical reluctance to accept the purity of a religious movement that rubbed shoulders with a lay population seen as ‘perverse’ and with the potential for contamination of even the best of intentions.

Despite these measures of ecclesiastical support, we have seen that anxiety regarding the influence of unrestrained religiosity grew apace, accompanied by a building tension in which the ownership of textual and verbal exegesis was battled for. This became concrete in the institutional move to seek out heretics amidst the laity, as Arnold has pointed out. Simons believes that this contest was not because clerics saw semi-religious women as competitors, but rather because the issue was still open within the Church as to who had rights to circulate the ‘word of God’.⁷⁵² This is evident in the very nature of the ways in which the terms used to classify *mulieres religiosas* were used in medieval discourse – both complimentary⁷⁵³ and otherwise.⁷⁵⁴ One supposes that it may have been more than this, however, and that a discernible unease can be identified in the very public ways in which these texts, and in particular the *ideas* associated with these texts, were being distributed, considered and discussed. Which begs the questions – what was it explicitly about those ideas that crystallised that unease into inquisitorial condemnation? Why was it that some ideas

⁷⁵⁰ Cited in Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.168, note 2.

⁷⁵¹ Even as far afield as England, Robert Grosseteste (d.1253) positioned the beguines above the Franciscans because of their obliging lack of demands on the coffers of the world: “because they earn their living with their own hands and do not make burdensome demands on the world”, cited in Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.35.

⁷⁵² *Cities of Ladies*, p.126.

⁷⁵³ For example *mulieres religiosas*, *virgines continentis* and *religiosae feminae*.

⁷⁵⁴ For example, *paperlades* and, tellingly, *beguines*.

expressed by women were ‘tolerated’ and others not? In particular, how did Porete’s religiosity differ from her female contemporaries, particularly those most close to her in terms of religious expression?

McGinn and Newman have been instrumental in analysing the themes and theology behind Porete’s *Mirror* and it is not the purpose of this thesis to rework their endeavours. We will remember, however, that Porete’s work represents a fusion of influences that drew on the themes of *mystique courtoise* and an associated stylistic means of imparting those themes in the vernacular. Her work is united with McGinn’s *Four Evangelists* in this way and yet she is different in her sublimation of the more affective themes of Eucharistic devotion so prevalent in Mechthild and Hadewijch’s works and overweening in the *vitae* and auto-hagiographies of Porete’s female contemporaries. Her representation of the Soul as a ‘creature’ capable of achieving a ‘flash’ of unity with the Beloved (God), goes beyond even those works that betray an affinity with what Sells has termed ‘apophatic mysticism’. This is what makes her *Mirror* such a significant text; it represents the most mature and didactic representative available to us of that strand of religious expression that, with its roots in the theological utilisation of the pseudo-Dionysius, had developed in lay interpretations as a distinct type of apophatic expression.

Accordingly, *The Mirror* has been assessed as radical and an exception to the religiosity of the period by many. However, as we have seen, the currency of this theology can be glimpsed in the interstices of lay religiosity and institutional guidance and in the ways in which other contemporaneous writers harnessed, in different ways, the same themes. These evidences, I argue, further underline the existence of a more diffuse discourse that had inherited from Eriugena’s translation of the pseudo-Dionysius specific doctrinal and

metaphysical concepts regarding the human/divine relationship; concepts that had hitherto been solely the preserve of male elites within the ecclesial hierarchy. This discourse, I believe, was an important part of the oral and written expressions of individuals associated with semi-religious communities. Accordingly, given the intense engagement with religiosity in Porete's period and region, given the avenues by which women were able to engage with religious ideas and given the evidences of elements of a shared discourse, the presence of *The Mirror* in the medieval landscape is not as surprising (or such an exception) as some scholars have thought.

Conjectures on Porete: collisions and collusions

I argue that Porete saw *The Mirror* as a significant contribution to religious discourse, subtle and challenging, but not so radical as to require concealment. This contention is based, as I have said, on the significance of Porete's ongoing dissemination of her work to those within the Orthodox Church. However, it is also apparent that she recognised her work as a departure from the dominant forms of religious expression of the period. This is evident in her complaint that so many saw her work as in error. Further, her work is subtle, she agrees, intended for the elite, the 'noble in spirit':

You who would read this book,
 If you indeed wish to grasp it,
 Think about what you say,
 For it is very difficult to comprehend;
 Humility, who is keeper of the treasury of
 Knowledge
 And the mother of other Virtues,
 Must overtake you.
 Theologians and other clerks,
 You will not have the intellect for it,
 No matter how brilliant your abilities,
 If you do not proceed humbly.⁷⁵⁵

⁷⁵⁵ *The Mirror*, p.79.

This is interesting because clearly Porete *does* differentiate herself from the tolerated forms of religious expression, not only from beguines but also from the scholastic influences that mark her work. She does this by pursuing a more firm adherence to self-annihilation and by critiquing the affective components particular to dominant female religiosity. ‘Slavery to the Virtues’, the dominant mode of affective religiosity, is seen by Porete as only the *initial* step to a full realisation of accord with God. ‘Reason’, the hallmark of scholastic theology, is presented as an adversary to challenge at every turn and ultimately discard.

The virtues *do* have a role, however, and reason (in terms of the logical pursuit of negative theology) leads Porete to self-will and annihilation. In this way, Porete’s religiosity runs both parallel to, and away from, the influences that mark out her work as so significant. However, she appears to see this divergence as an accepted mode of discourse, one that logically follows from the inherited discourse she articulates. Moreover, if we continue with her *Explicit*, and if we note her reference to the concession by which others could come to comprehend it, by proceeding *humbly*, we see that she does consider a suitable audience for her *Mirror*:

Humble, then, your wisdom
Which is based on reason,
And place 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.⁷⁵⁶

Therefore, whilst Porete sees her divergent religiosity as something that ‘was difficult to comprehend’, she appears dedicated to pursue approbation – less perhaps because of an

⁷⁵⁶ *The Mirror*, p.79.

arrogant perversity and more because she saw her work as an important extension of the theological religiosity relevant to the period.

Indeed, Porete is steadfast in relating the difficult but transformative revelation she believes can allow humanity union with divinity, however brief that may be:

Love has made me find by nobility
 These verses of a song.
 And it is [of] the Deity pure,
 About whom Reason knows not how to speak ...

...And thus I must not hold silence
 About your beauty and goodness.
 Powerful you are for my sake, and wise;
 Such I cannot hide.
 Ah, but to whom will I say it?
 Saraphim know not how to speak of it.

Compelled to impart her knowledge of divinity, despite the evident anxiety she sees in doing so, Porete, like Dante, acknowledges both the profound difficulties associated with expressing 'special knowledge' and the importance of imparting this knowledge to an audience. In the final canto of *Paradise*, for example, Dante elucidates the issue of ineffability and the transformative power of divine Love:

O Light Supreme, so far beyond the reach
 of mortal understanding, to my mind
 relend no some small part of Your own self,

and give to my tongue eloquence enough
 to capture just one spark of all Your glory
 that I may leave for future generations

... So did I strive with this new mystery ...

But my own wings could not take me so high –
 Then a great flash of understanding struck
 My mind, and suddenly its wish was granted ...

By the Love that moves the sun and other stars.⁷⁵⁷

⁷⁵⁷ *Paradise*, Musa, [trans], Canto xxxiii, pp.392.

In this way, *The Mirror* can be seen, in company with *The Divine Comedy*, as representative of the apotheosis of lay theology, one that crystallised critique of the Orthodox Church whilst simultaneously seeking to transform the individual.

Porete's construction of her religious understanding, therefore, which also acts as an indication of her identity, suggests that she considered herself functioning within a religious community that was still open to critique and reform. This has been seen as indicative of a direct assault on the authority of the Church. For example, Porete speaks of 'Holy Church the Lesser' in contrast to 'Holy Church the Greater',⁷⁵⁸ and many have seen this as an indication of a hierarchy that discredits the activities of the Church as temporal representatives. However, this hierarchical differentiation does not necessarily run in opposition to medieval conceptions of the separation between the temporal and the spiritual. One need only think here of Dante's summit in *Paradise* where we find the hierarchy of divinity arranged according to the celestial rose.⁷⁵⁹ Consider also the numerous artworks of the period that depict a triumvirate of celestial hierarchy; heaven, earth and hell.⁷⁶⁰ This suggests that the notion of a linguistic division, of greater and lesser, whilst read through modern eyes as a direct reduction of the temporal church's role, reflects the basic understanding of medieval people about spiritual and temporal separation. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, it is difficult to conclude that Porete saw nothing of merit in 'Holy Church the Lesser' if she repeatedly sought approbation from ecclesial representatives.

⁷⁵⁸ See pp.122-123, *The Mirror*.

⁷⁵⁹ See Canto XXXII of Dante's *Paradise*. Also see Mark Musa's visual depiction of "The Celestial Rose", *Paradise*, notes p.382.

⁷⁶⁰ One of the many examples of which would be the Spanish Chapel frescoes in the *Basilica di Santa Maria Novella*, Florence.

Despite this, her work is a form of critique, yet it is not necessarily a blanket condemnation of existent structures of salvation or an attempt to reform the institution. Rather, *The Mirror* and Porete's dissemination of the work suggest that she was dedicated in her desire to transform the individual by advocating an interior path to God. Porete's protagonist (Soul) claims that 'she who wrote this book' "...desired that her neighbours might find God in her, through writings and words".⁷⁶¹ There is no indication in *The Mirror* that I can see of Porete presenting herself as an alternative to the temporal Church, nor does she appear to have presented herself as a leader of an alternative sect, despite Guarnieri's claims and Guiard's efforts to present himself as such. Porete's *Mirror* therefore, need not necessarily be seen as 'an alternative bible' or a brazen assault on the authority of the Church any more than any other mystical treatise of the period. Rather, I argue that *The Mirror* was intended as a *contribution* to an ongoing dialogue that Porete did not seem to see as antithetical to religious concerns of the period. She was thus responding to the greatly broadened parameters of lay religious life and the growing criticism of the institutions of the established Church. It is possible to conjecture, therefore, that Porete produced a work not intended to 'demolish the citadel', but to enhance individual salvation.

In this sense, therefore, Porete's theology can be seen as an intended addition to a corpus of knowledge that developed alongside and, at times, in concert with, multiple communities. For clearly, Porete did receive support; we have evidence of this in terms of the ecclesiastic advocacy she includes within her work. However, there is no reason to conclude that this was her only avenue of support. Guiard can be seen as a rather odd example of this, yet the religiously engaged lay and semi-religious communities she was most likely associated with are very likely to have been, at the very least, interested in what

⁷⁶¹ *The Mirror*, p.170.

she had to say and, at most, supportive of her efforts. Clearly, there were those that regarded her ideas with a measure of alarm prior to its condemnation in 1308 and this may have been because she suggested the reform of the individual at a level beyond that which had thus far been expressed. It may also have been because of recognition by established religious communities (such as the *beguinage* at Valenciennes) that ecclesiastic authorities were hardening their boundaries. However, for those more removed from the interstices of power, that apprehension may have been less visible and Porete's reformist principles may well have 'fit' more readily within a strong tradition of religious reform.

This is not to suggest that Porete was so foolish as to fail to recognise that her work was dangerous, although it is possible that there existed areas within the Low Countries where the danger was not as evident. Indeed, while the following may be taken to indicate her struggle to encapsulate apophatic theology in a text, it can also be seen as indicative of recognition that her work, in its very subtlety, was a bold and perilous attempt:

I was so foolish ...[to]... 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 on the end of a reed, or illumine the sun with a lantern or a torch. I was more foolish than the one who would want to do the other, when I undertook a thing which one cannot say, when I encumbered myself with the writing of these words.⁷⁶²

However, we have seen that this reformist tradition was not universally condemned by ecclesiastics and nor was the harnessing of negative theology uniformly considered anathema; both *mulieres religiosae* and *via negativa* had their supporters. However, this support seems to have become increasingly difficult to maintain when the two traditions merged. Indeed, as Porete's and Eckhart's utilisation of the transcendent possibilities of negative theology indicates, the junction was so subtle in its application that for both

⁷⁶² *The Mirror*, pp.171-172.

medieval and modern readers alike the line between institutional challenge and individual transformation is frequently difficult to discern. As Sells points out:

At its most intense, apophatic language has as a subject neither divine nor human, neither self nor other. It can be read as a relentless critique of religious traditions or as a realisation of the deeper wisdom within such traditions. It can be read as grounded in the intimate specificities of particular traditions or as opening into intercultural and inter-religious conversation. These properties may not be mutually exclusive.⁷⁶³

When combined with the vernacular traditions of *mystique courtoise*, this interplay appears to have created a whole new means of considering the relationship of the soul with God and, until Porete's period, the debate over that relationship had yet to be decided.

Was Porete, however, aware that her work represented such a defining moment? She certainly appears to have been confident that someone with ecclesiastical authority would support her work, hence her ongoing dissemination and claims for such within her work. This indicates that she saw her work as a reasonable contribution to religious thought and practice, as I have said. However, if Porete did consider her contribution reasonable, why then did she not attempt to defend herself when she was brought before William in Paris? If she found her contribution in keeping with the traditions of religiosity she was familiar with, why did she suddenly become silent after such persistent vocality?

In answer to the question of Porete's silence, one can conjecture that she simply refused to be tried in the 'court of Reason', thus remaining steadfast to the contents of her *Mirror* (which some, as we have seen, cite as evidence for her arrogance and pertinacity).⁷⁶⁴ There may be something in this, for Porete clearly has little patience for clerics and those ensconced in Reason, "who are such beasts and donkeys that on account of their rudeness I

⁷⁶³ Michael A Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, pp.12/13.

⁷⁶⁴ For example, Edmund Colledge.

must... be silent and hide my language”.⁷⁶⁵ Clerics and theologians “will not have the intellect”⁷⁶⁶ for her theology and will be left at the gates of Paradise. Accordingly, Porete’s silence seems prefigured in her text. Yet, this does not explain why she persistently sought favour from the very representatives of Reason she seemingly derides within her book: theologians from within the Church. A fact that suggests she considered there to be representatives sympathetic to her religiosity. Thus, we need also to consider the series of events that saw Porete forcibly brought before William in Paris in 1308.

Prior to her arrest, Porete had been brought before Bishop Guy (in 1306), most probably in Valenciennes. Perhaps there, in her likely natal city, she had defended herself, though no record of this exists. Certainly, she continued to circulate her work after this point, with the rejection of John of Châlons resulting in her delivery to Philippe de Marigny. Perhaps in Philippe’s company she may have attempted to press her point and argue for the merit of her work – this, to the brother of Enguerrand de Marigny, Phillip the Fair’s chamberlain who had secured Philippe’s bishopric at Cambrai. Was it by this stage that Porete recognised the hardening of attitudes towards extra-regular engagement with theology? Was it in engaging with Phillippe and with the added disappointment of rejection from John of Châlons that she began to see her situation as hopeless? For it is doubtful that Philippe would have wished to jeopardise his position with his brother by in any way supporting a woman whose social position and religious vocality had already incurred disfavour. When Porete was brought before William, therefore, did she find *herself* hardened in reaction to the collision of communities and, rather than rejecting her clearly passionate notions regarding spiritual transformation, subverted the process of inquisition by remaining mute? Was it in Paris, where the political situation escalated the growing institutionalisation

⁷⁶⁵ *The Mirror*, p.143.

⁷⁶⁶ *The Mirror*, p.79.

and compartmentalisation of knowledge that Porete recognised that the possibilities for open religious discourse were swiftly closing down? Moreover, was it there that she saw that the hostile reaction to her words, and indeed her very being, could result in nothing less than temporal, as opposed to spiritual, annihilation? Did Porete thus choose Susanna⁷⁶⁷ as her model, and, with St. Ambrose as her guide, decide on a divine, rather than temporal justice?

For there is also an active silence, such as Susanna's was, who did more by keeping silence than if she had spoken. For in keeping silence before men she spoke to God, and found no greater proof of her chastity than silence. Her conscience spoke where no word was heard, and she sought no judgment for herself at the hands of men, for she had the witness of the Lord. She therefore desired to be acquitted by Him, Who she knew could not be deceived in any way.⁷⁶⁸

This seems plausible to me, given a lack of any other evidence. More, it underlines that Porete was most likely made aware in Paris of the dim view some religious males took towards active female religious participation.

Certainly, the classification of Porete as a *beguine clergesse* and a *pseudomulier* indicates a particularly vitriolic view of women engaged in religiosity. This abuse speaks cogently of the diffuse and, as yet, unordered manner with which William and many others within (and without) the church saw female religious participation. On the one hand, in the *Chronicles* she is a *beguine clergesse* – a learned woman of uncertain religious and social affiliation. On the other, in the trial documents, she is a *pseudomulier*: not a woman, but a

⁷⁶⁷ The Book of Daniel's story of Susanna and the Elders was used by church fathers to exemplify the chastity and modesty of those wrongly accused. Kathryn A. Smith explains that the motif of female silence in the face of false witness held a particular significance in the Christian tradition. She points out that: "Ambrose considered silence to be the sign of modesty, which in turn must guide chastity. Susanna was the perfect paradigm of pious modesty, since she was willing to die with both her chastity intact and her modesty untarnished by a public protest of innocence: 'To God alone she spoke.' Susanna 'avoided looking on the face of men. For there is also modesty in the glance of the eye, which makes a woman unwilling to look upon men, or to be seen by them'". Smith adds that "in several works Ambrose emphasized the virtue of Susanna's silence in the face of her accusers, and compared and contrasted her accusation and trial with Christ's", "Inventing Marital Chastity: The Iconography of Susanna and the Elders in Early Christian Art" *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1. (1993), pp. 3-24, p.15. and n.70, p. 23, respectively.

⁷⁶⁸ St. Ambrose, *On the Duties of the Clergy*, Book One, chapter three, <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/34011.htm>>, New Advent, *Fathers of the Church*, maintained by Kevin Knight, last updated 2007, last visited May 2007.

fraud, a pretender to the role. What does this mean? How could she be both? I believe Porete could be both things for her adversaries because she represented a) everything threatening about women's engagement in the religious and social sphere (visible, literate, productive, clever and persistent) and b) the embodiment of an ideological contest recognised as issuing from within ecclesia, and thus from men. Accordingly, Porete could be both the 'other' and the infiltrator: a *typicum* of the 'trouble with women' when left unchecked and unsupervised, a fraud in her use of an elite theology; in short, a transvestite, dressing in the 'clothes' of a man (the ideas of a man), but dressing so well as to subvert the gender and declare the lie.

Accordingly, the records relating to Porete's condemnation stand as an important marker in the ways in which the ecclesiastical institution was gradually developing (producing) knowledge that would serve to classify the 'other' within the community and within the institution. This involved a contest and Porete represented both an internal and an external embodiment of that contest. Porete's trial, therefore, reveals the ways in which the boundaries of religiosity had not as yet been clearly identified across the community. Further, her mute vocality before her inquisitors indicates her possible cognisance of this development. Silence as recognition, resistance and resilience demonstrates the ways in which Porete acknowledged that dissonance and also acknowledged the message within her book.

It is possible to conjecture, therefore, that the institutional response to Porete's work was a point at which the diffusion of religiosity expressed across, between and within religiously-engaged communities (women and men) represented a pinnacle of possibility; on the one hand seen as reasonable by Porete in the context of her experience of a number of discourse communities and on the other hand seen as a contest between it and an

increasingly hard line of institutional defence. This is clear when we consider what was happening before 1308 and when we consider what happened after Porete's death in 1310 – specifically in terms of Eckhart's condemnation but also in terms of the increased persecution of those labelled beguines and beghards. For, as Watson has argued, Porete's *Mirror* and its condemnation can be seen as constituting a defining point in religious history that “helped to precipitate a heated Continental discussion of the whole relationship between God and the soul as it is experienced in this life: a discussion which, after 1300, at once popularised and threatened to hereticate much of the radical strain of Christian neoplatonism derived from pseudo-Dionysius”.⁷⁶⁹ The production of deviance inherent in Porete's trial records, therefore, constituted not only the production of a recorded deviance amidst a religiously engaged public, but the production of deviancy within the Church itself.

Porete's identity, however, seen within the matrix of this production, does not so much reveal a repository of classification as a submerged community. Porete, I believe, was a member of a community whose religious, social, financial and gendered freedoms (though undeniably qualified) resulted in the evolution of a remarkable spiritual development of which *The Mirror* stands as definitive marker. Porete was not alone in fashioning this development. She moved between and across discourse communities, both oral and literate. She participated and she produced religious knowledge. She did this fluidly and with antecedents. Moreover, she did this in accordance with the traditions of her period and environment.

⁷⁶⁹ Watson, “Melting into God”, p.43.

‘It seems very pretty,’ she said when she had finished it, ‘but it’s *rather* hard to understand!’...
‘Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don’t exactly know what they are! However,
somebody killed *something*: that’s clear, at any rate’

Lewis Carrol, *Through the Looking-Glass*.⁷⁷⁰

...appearance is not truth, truth is, and not some other thing.
Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*.⁷⁷¹

It has become commonplace to discuss Porete in terms of her *Mirror’s* distinctive theology, its difference to somatic mystical expressions and how this contributed to her condemnation. Much work has been devoted to exploring this and yet, as an historical subject, Porete has remained enigmatic. This thesis has posed the following broad questions regarding an identity for Porete: Who was she? Who were her audience? Why did she write the book she wrote and in the way she wrote it? Why did she behave the way she did? I argue that scholarship has not been successful in answering these questions. Where an identity and community has been considered for Porete, this is usually cast as beguinal or anomalous. Yet she was not a beguine and nor can she be considered a medieval anomaly. The old chestnut of her heresy or orthodoxy continues to attract attention (though considerably less so than in the last century). Yet this is a less important pursuit, to my mind, than attempting to understand her role within the religious culture of her period. Fundamentally, therefore, Porete as an actor within the medieval religious landscape has not been fully accounted for in the scholarship. Why should this be so?

Partly, this is because scholarship is chary of drawing conclusions based on insufficient ‘hard evidence’. This is indeed an issue for Porete studies – to hold in your hand

⁷⁷⁰ *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, (London: The Folio Society, 1962), pp.16-17.

⁷⁷¹ *The Mirror*, pp. 171.

all the relevant documents apart from her *Mirror* is to hold a small sheaf indeed. Yet it is precisely this that I consider to warrant a bold aspiration: to attempt to build a life from difficult sources that seeks annihilation at every turn. *The Mirror* is a tale of spiritual annihilation based on transformative ambition. The documents of condemnation (inclusive of which are associated historical ‘reportage’) are a reflection of the institutional annihilation of a woman and her book and, I have argued, an associated discourse of an excluded lay theology. Ironically enough, for a time the ambition of each pillar of textual evidence succeeded in totally annihilating Porete from her *Mirror*. No record remained of the author of such an extraordinary book. When scholarship redressed the injury and reunited author and book, the restoration of an identity was made possible. Sadly, however, that identity was fractured by a) an acceptance that the documents of condemnation are accurate records of deviancy, and b) that the discourse within *The Mirror* can only be seen as anomalous to the phenomenon of female religious experience in the later Middle Ages.

Hermeneutics of hostility and exclusion have, as a result, reinforced the annihilating ambition of Porete’s detractors; she is considered either a beguine or an aberration and these identities fail to fully appreciate Porete’s contribution to medieval religiosity. Not only this, but these misapprehensions also subsume the significance of lay theology as a powerful socio-religious phenomenon. Like Dante, Porete critiqued the Church and wrote in the vernacular of unification with divinity that could occur in life rather than in death. Unlike Dante, however, she sought approval from within the very institution she critiqued. Yes, she sent her work out only after its initial condemnation, but that very condemnation indicates that she held an audience interested in religious transformation. Her genre was thereby

understood by her contemporaries and, I argue, by Porete as one of significant religious contribution.

Porete's *Mirror* marks the moment when lay religious mysticism, born in the twelfth century within the aegis of monasteries, sought full public equality and status with, but difference from, the male ecclesiastical doctrinal system. No previous female religious thinker had sought this. The genesis of this lies partly in the socio-religious culture of the geographic area within which Porete was active. The Southern Low Countries appear to have fostered not only vigorous lay religious debate, but also a discourse that allowed for inter-gender vocality. This is another way in which Porete's work is distinct from Dante's: her search for inclusion within the framework of the mainstream Church reflected a tradition of female lay religious engagement that had its roots deep in the cross-gendered religious literacy that Lambert Le Begue bore witness to in 1177. By 1310, however, whatever tolerance such an extra-regular engagement had attracted received a resounding blow in the execution of Porete.

The 'trial' of Porete thus represents a moment when alternative religious discourse was formally rejected by the church, having been in various ways tolerated previously. This rejection speaks at a variety of levels of the multiple ecclesiastical anxieties that accompanied lay engagement with religiosity: the invasion of textual authority; the displacement of gender boundaries; the blurring of spatial indicators of religious affiliation; and the harnessing of a discourse (negative theology) that had hitherto been the province of male, scholastic elites. Porete's condemnation is thus an important indicator of the hardening of boundaries that

accompanied ecclesiastical consolidation in the period leading up to the Clementine decrees of 1311-1312. That Porete was a woman, unaffiliated, outspoken (at all the wrong times) and with an audience reinforced ecclesiastical censure, but it was because she was a representative of a flourishing extra-regular religious discourse that explains the particularly vitriolic and annihilating assault she received. Thus, I have argued here that the documents of Porete's condemnation, despite their odd divergence from inquisitorial records, are evidence of not only the peculiar political climate of Philip the Fair's court, but of the production of knowledge necessary for the continuing consolidation of ecclesiastical authority.

A topic for further examination would thus be to pursue this contention in light of the following process of consolidation that saw beguines, beghards and those accused of propagating 'Free Spirit' doctrine accused of subverting the Christian faith. For despite issues with Guarnieri's analysis of a link between Porete and Free Spirits, and *pace* Lerner, the academic disengagement of Porete's discourse from what Watson has termed a 'wider conversation' occludes any perception that Porete's ideas were linked to shared notions, thereby perpetuating the view that her ideas were anomalous. This is unfortunate because, whilst we should treat with care the information proffered in the documents of condemnation, the following actions levelled against beguines and beghards (for example at Strassbourg), or those the inquisition or the modern historian cited as such,⁷⁷² indicates a recognition of doctrinal views amidst the laity that were similar to Porete's and, after her, Eckhart's.⁷⁷³ The

⁷⁷² Lerner discusses the inquisitorial proceedings against the *relapsi* Metza of Westhoven at Strasbourg and notes that the Church historian Mosheim categorised her a beguine. However, when the relevant manuscript was discovered, no such classification was found to be in evidence, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p.96.

⁷⁷³ Beguines and beghards were persecuted wholesale after the dissemination of *Ad nostrum* and *Cum de quibusdam* and, it appears, somewhat indiscriminately. In response to an excessive spate of accusations, John XXII's *Ratio Recta* in 1318 qualified the former decrees by admonishing bishops to return beguines who did not

possibility that victims of inquisition recognised statements of ‘annihilation with and within God’ needs to be accounted for.

This thesis has attempted to move beyond classifications of prior scholarship and to reassess the evidences relating to Porete, with attention paid to the socio-religious environment in which she most likely lived. I have thus sought to suggest an identity for Porete that, whilst far from definitive, nevertheless points to her as an important representative of a discourse that has hitherto been insufficiently accounted for. Porete was, I believe, a reformer of the individual who represents the apotheosis of lay religiosity in the later Middle Ages. Her *Mirror* reflected an intense desire amidst portions of the laity to experience divinity in life, to bypass the sole mediation of the established church, and to witness the glory that ‘salvation’ was purported to bring. This can only be seen to have been an attractive proposition to a society drenched in the fear and proposed glory of an afterlife. Porete’s book and her death are thus indicators of the collision of multiple communities: the one, a testament to an unprecedented lay-investment in the opportunities of religious transformation; the other, a marker for the hardening of boundaries that separated out the possibilities of lay religious discourse from the authority of ecclesiastical mediation.

express controversial ideas to their communities. It is noted, however, that John also added that the Holy See retained its general disapproval of beguines as a religious order. Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.133.

The official documents pertaining to Porete's condemnation (layette J 428) contain six charters comprising seven official documents (some conflated) which are not presented in chronological order and can be confusing to consult.⁷⁷⁴ Verdeyen explains that the notarised documents were held within one charter as were documents relating to the first and third consultation of the canonists. What follows is the document chronology, accompanied by an indication of contents:

A: 11th April 1309: "Condemnation of the Book of Marguerite Porete"⁷⁷⁵

Notarised by Eveno Phil and Jacob of Virtute. This document reports that twenty-one theologians were convoked by William in his capacity as Inquisitor and asked to advise on several articles extracted from 'a certain book' (*The Mirror*). No mention is made of prior condemnations. After some deliberation the articles are declared heretical and erroneous. Porete's name is not given, nor is the title of her book.

B: October 1309: "Proceedings against Marguerite and Guiard: first consultation of the canonists"⁷⁷⁶

Notarised by Eveno Phil and Jacob of Virtute. This document is the official report of a series of consultations. It begins with a retrospective account, dated March 1310, stating that sixteen theologians (sixteen of the twenty-one formerly convoked) were requested to advise William about how to proceed against Porete's self-professed supporter, Guiard. The theologians advise William to consult the lawyers. The document then proceeds to report that on the 3rd of April 1310 five canonists were consulted and found that William had proceeded legally against Guiard and that Guiard was, indeed, heretical in his support of Porete. The document is notarised in the presence of four other theologians. From this point onwards, the cases of Porete and Guiard are considered synonymous and treated in parallel. The document was drawn up on the 3rd April and authenticated on the 3rd of October 1310.

C: 3rd April 1310: "Condemnation of Marguerite"⁷⁷⁷

⁷⁷⁴ The documents are presented in Verdeyen thus: 15a = pp.50-51; 15b = pp.81-83; 16 = pp.56-58; 17 = pp.62-63; 18 = pp.65-67; 19 = pp.60-61; 19bis = pp.78-79.

⁷⁷⁵ Ward, *SBK*, pp.445-47; Verdeyen pp. 50-51, Arch.Nat.layette j428, 15a.

⁷⁷⁶ Ward, *SBK*, pp.450-52; Verdeyen pp. 56-58, Arch.Nat.layette j428, 16.

⁷⁷⁷ Ward, *SBK*, pp. 453-54; Verdeyen pp. 60-1, Arch.Nat.layette j428, 19.

Not notarised. This is the first explicit report of the condemnation of Porete (as distinct from Guiard). It records the condemnation of five ‘regent masters’ who were convoked to give William counsel regarding Porete and ‘what further may be done in law on this matter’. The regent masters say briefly that William had sought counsel about what to do with ‘a beguine’ called Porete who was suspected of heresy. They then proceed to relate further detail regarding that which William has told about Porete’s case. They relate the following: that Porete refused to appear before William and that he was forced to bring her to him; that, once summoned, she refused to swear the oath required by inquisitorial procedure (and due to the Inquisitor); that she was thus excommunicated and remained so for a year and a half without repenting (repenting allowed for absolution accompanied by life imprisonment). The regent masters conclude by declaring that Porete is indeed heretical (‘has passed from vehement and into violent presumption’) and counsel is given William that, unless she recants and accepts perpetual imprisonment, he must proceed with the matter and relinquish Porete to the secular arm. Officiated by the seals of the participants.

D: 3rd April 1310: “Condemnation of Guiard de Cressonessart”⁷⁷⁸

Not notarised. The official documentation of Guiard’s condemnation. This is almost an exact copy of document C. Guiard’s name and the associated charges against him constitute the main differences (charges that are repeated verbatim from document B). Officiated by the seals of the participants.

E: 9th April 1310: “Confession of Guiard”⁷⁷⁹

Not notarised. This document sees William once again seeking advice from the regent masters. The document is an account, verified by five canonists (as above), of Guiard’s confession to William as retold by William. Guiard is said to have sworn oath (to have been ‘legally bound’) and to have answered a series of questions. Advice from the canonists is that Guiard is a heretic because of his professed support for ‘two churches militant’. His original ‘heresy’ (support of Porete) is not mentioned here. Because of his cleric status and his confession, the advice of the masters is not to relinquish him to the secular arm (and thus he escapes execution). Officiated by the seals of the participants.

⁷⁷⁸ Ward, *SBK*, pp. 454-55; Verdeyen pp. 62-3; Arch.Nat.layette j428, 17.

⁷⁷⁹ Ward, *SBK*, pp. 455-57; Verdeyen pp. 65-7; Arch.Nat.layette j428, 18.

F: 9th May: “The Trial of Marguerite”⁷⁸⁰

Not notarised. The same five regent masters (as above) declare the document to be ‘a recount concerning the trial which follows’. The document introduces detail regarding the initial condemnation of Porete by the bishop of Cambrai and detail regarding her failure to cease disseminating her work. The regent masters confirm that Porete be classified as relapsed. The document was instigated yet again by a request by William for counsel as to whether or not Porete can be classified as a relapsed heretic. As with documents C, D and E, it is based on William’s account. Officiated by the seals of the participants in front of the ‘Latin Gate’.

G: 31st May: “The Sentence of the Inquisitor”⁷⁸¹

Notarised by Jacob of Virtute. This document is William’s sentence of Porete and Guiard at the Place de La Grève delivered, the notary writes, before ten officials, ‘prominent people’ and ‘a great number of the populace’. The notary records William’s written version of his sentencing. The details of William’s sentence are thus: first, William outlines Porete’s resistance to his powers as Chief Inquisitor which culminated in the instigation of inquisition and trial (‘wishing to exercise the debt of our commissioned office, [we] have made inquisition and trial against you [Porete]’). Second, William outlines the findings of his inquisition: that Porete’s book had been condemned by the bishop of Cambrai; that Porete, regardless of this, had continued to ‘use’ her book (evidenced by ‘court appearances’ witnessed by senior church officials) and had sent the book out ‘as though it were good and licit’ to those who subsequently bore witness to this dissemination; third, that having considered his findings and consulted lawyers and theologians along with the Bishop of Paris (William of Baufet), William had found that Porete was a relapsed heretic and would be handed over to the secular arm (and executed); and finally, that Porete’s ‘said book’ was heretical, by virtue of judgment of theologians (not by prior judgment of Guy of Colmieu) and that all copies were to be delivered to the Preaching Brothers and burned. The second part of William’s sentence concerns Guiard

⁷⁸⁰ Ward, *SBK*, pp. 458-59; Verdeyen pp. 78-9; Arch.Nat.layette j428, 19 *bis*. See also Richard Barton, “The Trial of Marguerite Porete (1310)”, <<http://www.uncg.edu/~rebarton/margporete.htm>>, accessed April 2007). This is drawn from Lea’s *History of the Inquisition*, pp. 577-578. The date given by Lea and Barton (May 30th 1310) does not correspond with Verdeyen.

⁷⁸¹ Ward, *SBK*, 459; Verdeyen, pp.81-83; Arch.Nat.layette j428, 15b.

and follows a similar form to that of Porete's: William outlines firstly Guiard's disobedience, his refusal to swear oath and refrain from supporting Porete; secondly, the sentence of excommunication passed in accordance with counsel; thirdly, the confession delivered after a year and a half of imprisonment; fourthly, the details of that confession; and finally, the sentence of perpetual imprisonment passed. It is important to note that William does not call Porete a beguine, or refer to Guiard as a beghard. He refers to Porete as 'lady Marguerite' in sentence passed against Guiard.

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