

Marguerite Porete, a heretic to be sanctified

Sources on Marguerite

We know very little about her life from the sources. She did not have a *Vita* written by an admiring biographer. We do learn about her from the records of the trial that decreed her death. According to them, on June 1st, 1310, in the Place de Grève in Paris (now Place de l'Hôtel de Ville), a woman, declared relapsed heretic*, was burned at the stake, along with her book, stained with heresies and errors. The records do not mention the woman's name or the title of the book. From the chroniclers, however, we learn that she was a beguine named Marguerite, known as Porete, from the county of Hainaut, known as a cultured, educated figure and a fine theologian; according to one chronicler, she even translated the some Bible excerpts into the vernacular.

Fortunately, we also have the book, burned at the stake with her in 1310, whose title, given by the author herself, is “*Mirouer des simples âmes anéanties et qui seulement demeurent en vouloir et en désir d'amour*” (Mirror of simple and annihilated souls who dwell only in the will and desire for love).

We no longer possess the original Picard French text from the late 13th century, unfortunately lost, but a unique French version in the Île de France vernacular dating from the early 15th century, which also served for subsequent translations into English, Italian and Latin.

This mystical masterpiece, having gracefully escaped annihilation, was rediscovered in 1867 by the Hungarian scholar Francesco Töldi, in a 14th-century Italian manuscript preserved in the National Library of Vienna, but it was only identified in 1946 by the scholar Romana Guarnieri as a work by Marguerite Porete.

* relapsed means to return to or fall back into heretical beliefs or practices after having previously renounced or confessed them

Marguerite Porete, who is she really?

Marguerite was born in the north of France, in the province of Hainaut, around 1255. What is striking about her is her impressive intellectual education: she demonstrates a remarkable culture, **both lay:** she knows Latin, the rules of metric and rhetoric, **then theological:** she knows the Bible, she even partly translated in the vernacular language, and the Desert Fathers. From her education we can deduce she came maybe

from the aristocracy or at least from the city patricians or in any case from the dominant classes by wealth and power.

In an era in which devotion was often imbued with superstition, the pregnant force of her mystical thought leaves no space neither for the amorous transports that are so much discussed by psychoanalysts nor for any form of miracle-working that makes many scientists smile slyly. In this sense she is fully modern.

We know that she was a beguine, one of those *mulieres religiosae* whom Dieudonné Dufrasne qualifies with the apt synthesis of “*Modern Women of the Middle Ages*” (Donne moderne del Medioevo), in his book published in Italian by Jaca Books in 2007.

But what does "beguine" mean?

From the very beginning, the term has had a rather pejorative meaning. Viewed with suspicion by the ecclesiastical hierarchies but also by civil society, these women marked, starting from the end of the 12th century, a fundamental stage in the path of female emancipation, to the point that some observers describe the Beguinal movement as the first "feminist" manifestation on a European level.

Because of their innovative autonomy, they were regarded with suspicion: through them, **for the first time in Western history**, a status of women's autonomy emerged in relation to male authority, whether of a familial nature (neither daughters nor wives subordinate to the father or husband) or clerical nature (nor nuns subordinate to their confessors and superiors).

Added to this, we have to mention their reading of sacred texts in the vernacular and even their preaching in homes and also in the streets and squares, a practice adopted by the beguines at least before Gregory IX banned it in 1228. And then they adopted a "strange" semi religious status that integrated **lay elements**: autonomy, well expressed by their individual homes within the beguinages, paid work which proceeds they kept, institutional independence and **religious elements**: the promises (not as definitive as vows) of obedience and chastity; the community life (especially in the beguinages from the second half of the 13th century) in obedience to the Rule (freely elaborated and specific to each community) and to the Grande Dame, the superior, of the beguinage in which they were living; the assistance to the needy (the first infirmaries and food give boxes) and an intense life of prayer, both individual and collective, with mystical research and also forms of asceticism.

The Beguine movement initially spread widely in several European countries of different denominations depending on the place of residence (Belgium, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Switzerland, Spain, England, Hungary, Poland).

Opposition to it quickly came into being and then condemned as a heretical movement by the Council of Vienne (1311-12, in Dauphiné, France), it subsequently survived only where papal bulls of protection ensured its safety, specifically in Holland and Belgium.

The last Beguine, Marcella Pattyn, died in Belgium in April 2013. The movement lasted more than 800 years. The smaller male branch of the Beguinal movement, the Beghards (or Beguini), was even more radically repressed and disappeared with the end of Middle Ages.

The beguine Marguerite most likely lived in the beguinage of Valenciennes, whose community took care of the hospital of Saint Elizabeth. Beguine yes, but conscious of its atypicality. In the trial documents she is called as a *pseudomulier*, an irregular beguine, and she herself in her “*Mirror*” expresses the doubt that many Beguines will not understand how much is expressed within:

*“Friend, what will the beguines and religious people say
when they hear the excellence of our divine song?
The beguines say I am wrong, and priests, clerics and preachers,
Augustinians, Carmelites, and the Friars Minor
for what I write about is the state of ennobled Love”*
(chap.122, 88-89, personal translation)

Even the doctoral thesis of LU Hanan, about the beguinage of Valenciennes, gives us very few information about Marguerite. I read its 426 pages having of course as a catalyst the traces of the presence of Marguerite Porete within this beguinal community, a presence that the thesis fully confirms, although probably it was not a long stay. Only the inquisitorial investigation speaks of her under the name of “*Marghoneta*”. Would this unsettling silence be a “*damnatio memoriae*” towards this “heretic” who had shaken the reassuring life of the community?

The beguinage of Valenciennes, one of the first in France, dates from the year 1239 and became an independent parish from 1250. Initially the beguinal community was grafted onto the hospital of Saint Elizabeth, then, in 1265, it became a well distinct enclosure. The beguinage lives and prospers without disturbances until the ecclesiastical inquiry of August 4, 1323. After the Council of Vienne (1311-12) each bishop became effectively in charge of the investigation about the orthodoxy of the beguines within his diocese. Despite the infamy caused by the condemnation of Marguerite Porete, the St. Elizabeth beguinage quickly overcame the investigation against heresy and continued to attract many single women from all walks of life. Few traces of this beguinage remain today because the church and the buildings were demolished during the French Revolution.

Having said that, Marguerite most probably lived a solitary mystical existence. It is very likely, given the insistence on obedience to the virtues even at the cost of one’s life, she was also a committed ascetic.

Marguerite Porete, a “heretic” at the stake?

She was burned at the stake for her book. Today it seems difficult to conceive of this. She says that her book was directly inspired to her by the Creator (chap. 140,1). *The Mirror* was burned for the first time before 1306 in Valenciennes, where she probably lived. She was first opposed by Guy de Colmieu, bishop of Cambrai, and then by Philippe de Marigny, his successor, who made her life even more difficult: he brought a second case against her and then reported her before the Inquisition.

Despite the condemnation, between 1306 and 1308 the *Mirror* was translated into Latin and obtained at least three important institutional approvals: the Minor Friar Jean of Querayn, the Cistercian monk Dom Franco of the Abbey of Villers and the master of theology Geoffrey de Fontaines (*Mirror*, chap.140).

In 1308 Marguerite appeared under arrest before the Grand Inquisitor where in good faith she tried to explain her reasoning. But she was judged a heretic and excommunicated. In January 1309, the book was examined by some consultants who extracted 15 “incriminating” statements.

Of these 15 “*male sonantes*” propositions, the trial documents report only two: the first and the fifteenth.

According to **the first thesis**, the annihilated soul, the soul totally in love with God, can take leave of the virtues after having been under their dominion for a long time.

It states verbatim:

"The soul lost in love takes leave of the virtues.

And she is no longer at their service;

she has no longer to exercise the virtues,

but the virtues themselves are at this service”

(Chap. 6, 10-25)

According to the **fifteenth thesis**, also reported in the trial documents, such a soul does not care about God's consolations and gifts for it, so as not to prevent its total attention to God himself from waning: such a soul no longer cares about God's consolations or his gifts; it no longer has and can no longer care about them because all its attention is turned towards God himself.

We then learn of **a third proposition** from an external source, from William of Nangis, a Benedictine who was deeply impressed by the proposition according to which the soul annihilated in divine Love loses all remorse of conscience for its sins, granting nature what it desires. Obviously, this proposition, which changes meaning when removed from its context, must have seemed to our Benedictine a sort of premise for absolute libertinism in moral matters.

Reconvened on 11 April 1309 by the ecclesiastical tribunal composed of 21 theologians and by the inquisitor William of Paris to swear an "oath of truth",

Marguerite refused to go because she did not recognize the authority of that “Little” church. She spent one year in prison, a year granted by the regulation to the accused to repent. On the 31st May, Pentecost Sunday, a commission of canons judged the Author “relapsed” and abandoned her to the secular authorities who the next day had her burnt to death along with her book.

Marguerite's Mystical Path

Marguerite's journey is all condensed in the *Mirror of Simple Souls*, the first mystical work written in vernacular French. The title and construction recall a form of medieval genre: the Mirror, which means both treatise and reflection of a questioning. Marguerite's work is a tense dialogue between several main characters: soul, love, reason, virtue, and other minors (e.g. courtesy). It is composed of 122 chapters, 17 more were added later, thus reaching 139. The 140 collects the three “approvals” drawn up by institutionally authoritative people above mentioned: the Minor Friar Jean of Querayn, the Cistercian monk Dom Franco of the Abbey of Villers and the master of theology Geoffrey de Fontaines but unfortunately they were not sufficient to counterbalance the verdict of the Inquisition tribunal.

Marco Vannini, a great scholar and admirer of Marguerite, defines the Mirror as “*a book of life and battle...with a universal teaching and message, valid for every time and every place...a classic of Christian thought, an itinerary to remove every otherness, every ideology that acts as an obstacle to love...and achieve a life and a state of consciousness that no longer depend on the conditions of life*” thus reaching that state in which “*All is joy for the right person, there is neither evil nor pain for who dwells in the One*” as Master Eckhart summed it up. He was most likely familiar with Marguerite's story and the text of The Mirror, since he was also in Paris at that time.

Marco Vannini highlights some ruptures in Marguerite's spirituality compared to the mainstream of her time. Here are the main ones:

freedom of the spirit as the overcoming of virtues and freedom of will which is nothing other than the will of God. The spiritual is not an opposition to the senses, these have to be part of a rich spirituality but is a non-appropriative, and therefore non-oppositional modality with respect to things;

rejection of ecclesiastic mediation (that Marguerite qualifies as “Little Church”) and **the centrality of one's own experience and conscience** in relation to the Scriptures were another stumbling block, after that one of the overcoming of virtues.

It is the entire experience of *unitas spiritus* towards all religions, with every creature of every time and place, where we find that region which “*has only love and light as*

its boundary” (Dante, Paradise, XXVIII, 54), but whose obstacles can not be traced back to the sole question of power affiliations;

concentration on the essence and the rejection of sentimentalism, including in its erotic and/or ascetic side because these traits are a strengthening of the psychological ego and a response to our emotional, psychological and even spiritual needs.

In the same way as a Christology built on the humanity of Christ, Marguerite moves towards a format Christology in which Christ becomes Logos, the Word, the Word that gives meaning and truth to all other words, without identifying itself with any of them. The denial of the self (ego) occurs only by bringing the psychological self to completion. “*Discover that everything is still too little for you*” and Marguerite invites us not to waste time: “*You have no reason to delay in abandoning yourselves, because no one can rest in the highest restful rest, if she/he has not abandoned her/himself: of this I am certain*” (chap. 94, 7-9)

Romana Guarnieri adds that Marguerite, woman of high culture and lofty thought, is perhaps the only female voice in the field of theological thought who, under the guise of a literary text, dared to stand up in an unequal but tenaciously fought battle over the years, against the rationalist intellectualism that towards the end of the 13th century had taken hold irresistibly, especially at the Sorbonne, cornering the previous Augustinianism and sending to hell the Neoplatonic school nurtured by the Eastern Fathers, still very present at the beginning of the century with Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Saint-Thierry and the canons of Saint Victor. (Romana Guarnieri, *Amiche mie, beghine*, in *Ruah*, Piccola biblioteca mille lire, 1997, pp.43-44).

Marguerite however, faithful to the apostolic and evangelising tradition of the Beguinal movement, also offers us a “pedagogy” for overcoming the ego, and therefore duality.

This is achieved by passing through **the three deaths**, each one of them opens to a higher life. We pass from the **first death of sin**, which leads to the life of grace, to **the second death of nature**, which leads to the life of spirit, to **the third death** of the spirit (or of the soul) which leads to the divine life (chap.59).

The souls who have passed through the first two deaths still have access to Reason and its nourishment; the souls who have achieved the third death, however are incomprehensible to Reason; no living being can understand them except those who are like them.

Even the Franciscan Jean de Quevryn, writes in his *aprobatione* that the saying of the Mirror “*was so high that not even he could understand it*” (chap.140, 19-20).

These three deaths-rebirths are proposed to us by Marguerite in the *Mirror* through a journey of seven stages. Seven is a symbolic number also used by Béatrice de Nazareth in *The Seven Steps of the Love of God* and by Saint Teresa of Avila in the seven rooms of the *Interior Castle*.

Death to sin, **the first mystical death**, allows the soul to live according to nature, according to reason, observing divine commandments. But at this level, it is a psychic state guided by utility and self-preservation, typical of merchants seeking profit.

The second mystical death is death of one's own nature, through the imitation of Christ and the following of his precepts, oriented toward the desire for God and the observance of the evangelical counsels. It is a life more spiritual than psychic, but despite its higher quality, it is still conditioned by a personal will.

Then, the soul follows a great involvement in the works of perfection: meditation and contemplation. But up to this point, we are still "slaves and merchants," because by maintaining a relationship with our ego, with our own will, God remains "other".

Marguerite calls as "lost" people at this level, because they have lost their own being, without a solid ground in this search for something truer and deeper than what they miss. But this meditation makes the Soul discover its irremediable corruptibility as a creature and its ontological nothingness with respect to the whole of God and leads it to surrender its will to the will of God.

The radical transition occurs in **the third mystical death**, the *nient vouloir*, the nothing wanting, that one in which ends our individual will, even the spiritual one. By losing one's identity, there is no longer any difference between the soul and the Divinity. Thus "annihilated," we find ourselves free, simple, united with divine life, in a union of love in which God is no longer "other." In this soul "devoid of itself," there is no longer any form of appropriation and therefore of objectification. Reason no longer guides the Soul, which resides in infinite joy and peace, in perfect charity, without room for remorse, sign of an imperfect love.

In this state of grace, the soul experiences pure divine light, absorbed and annihilated in the divine abyss. Love ends because all duality ends. The soul regains its original condition, which it had in God before creation. The return is complete.

The Soul no longer loves itself in God nor God in itself, but loves God in God. "*...of the state which we call perfection, when the Soul dwells in pure nothingness, without thought; and not before then*" (chap. 97, 43-45).

The bliss of paradise, almost an addition to reach the perfect number, is the post-mortem condition, anticipated by the glimpses that the soul already enjoys in the 6th state.

Conclusion

One could never stop asking forgiveness to all the Beguines who were hunted, repressed, and even burned at the stake. Among them was Marguerite, condemned by the Inquisition as a heretic, even though her dizzying intuitions, guided by Love, later informed Rhenish theology and its most brilliant representatives, such as Master Eckhart, who, during the 10 years he was vicar general of the Dominican order in Strasbourg, protected and intervened especially for the Beguines, and was later a regular visitor to the Beguinage in Cologne. Master Eckhart later learned about Marguerite's story while he was in Paris in those same years.

The history of spirituality, but not that of the “little Church”, rehabilitated Marguerite. More than seven hundred years after her ignoble death, we gather together the spiritual legacy of Marguerite Porete, which the centuries have not faded, but rather made even more brilliant and fruitful.

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