

BOOK REVIEWS



The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor: The Trials of Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart, by Sean L. Field. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. Pp. 424. ISBN: 9780268028923; E-ISBN: 9780268079734.

Marguerite Porete, the beguine mystic who authored the extraordinary treatise *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (as it is known to Anglophone scholars), is without doubt one of the most fascinating figures in medieval history. Steadfastly refusing to cease disseminating her ideas, even in the face of ecclesiastical censure, Marguerite was tried and burned as a heretic in 1310. In her treatise, scholars have a rare opportunity to read the writings of a deeply learned laywoman. Her trial, moreover, offers intriguing details about her character and the circumstances leading to her death. Her story is of broad significance. Not only was Marguerite the first medieval author (male or female) to be executed for her writings, her trial is linked to that of the Knights Templar by virtue of its shared prosecutor, the Dominican inquisitor and royal confessor William of Paris. Moreover, only a year after Marguerite's execution ecclesiastical authorities gathered at the Council of Vienne, where her ideas—misinterpreted as antisacerdotal and antinomian—were attributed to all beguines, ushering in a period of uncertainty and persecution for communities of lay religious women all over northern Europe.

For historians of women, gender, heresy, and lay religion, Marguerite's trial and execution are indeed watershed moments. Yet until now, historians have remained content to relate only the bare outline of the story, which is admittedly difficult to discern given the nature of the sources. *The Mirror*, rediscovered in the twentieth century and reconnected with its author thanks to the work of Romana Guarnieri, is frustratingly stingy with biographical details about its earthly creator and has invited mostly literary and theological analysis over the last several decades. The seven documents preserved from her trial, moreover, are incomplete and reflect the choices, omissions, and perspectives of Marguerite's prosecutors. As a result, Marguerite herself has remained an enigmatic figure,

with scholars of medieval women noting mainly the ways in which Marguerite did *not* fit the profile—famously described by Caroline Bynum—of female sanctity. That no scholar to date has been able to link Marguerite to a known beguine community or a male confessor has led many to view Marguerite as a deliberately solitary and defiant figure.

Despite enduring scholarly interest in various aspects of this story, Sean Field's book is the first historical monograph to reconstruct Marguerite's trial. Pulling together threads that have heretofore received attention separately, Field has written an extraordinarily gripping, meticulously researched account of an event in which collided late-Capetian concerns over heresy and political authority, an inquisitor's personal and professional interests, an "Angel's" divine mission, and a beguine's unwavering belief in the rectitude of her ideas. Although Marguerite Porete is the book's central figure, Field wisely widened the scope of his study, treating the beguine's remarkable defender—the Joachite-inspired and self-proclaimed "Angel of Philadelphia" Guiard of Cressonessart—and her prosecutor, the Dominican inquisitor William of Paris. Even more of a boon to future scholarship, Field presents important details on the bishops involved in the condemnation of Marguerite's book as well as those clerics who expressed their approval, including the well-known secular cleric and theologian Godfrey of Fontaines. One of the many achievements of this book is that it sets the historical record straight on the basic facts surrounding Marguerite Porete and her trial. Returning to carton J428 in the Archives nationales de France (where the trial records are located), Field identifies numerous factual errors propagated in many of the best known accounts of Marguerite's trial, errors that have led to erroneous claims about Marguerite's actions, motives, and options, as well as those of her inquisitor. In his careful reconstruction of the basic timeline of Marguerite's activities from her first known efforts to circulate her book to her eventual execution, Field has done Porete scholars a tremendous service in that we can now better survey her circumstances within the wider context of political and ecclesiastical shifts in Marguerite's base of operations (the Low Countries) as well as the political climate in the neighboring kingdom of France. Field's impressive assemblage of details from previously published studies, combined with his careful translations of the trial records (helpfully presented in the appendices), shed much needed light on the ways in which the legal, political, and spiritual context shaped and constrained the choices of this beguine, her angelic defender, and her clerical supporters and inquisitors alike. Detailing the mutually reinforcing Capetian platform of piety and political power fostered in particular by Philip IV (the Fair), Field analyzes Marguerite's case against the

backdrop of an astounding number of trials in which perceived enemies of the Crown were cast as heretics, a strategy that emphasized the king's self-assigned role as defender of the Faith. As Field argues, royal concerns and papal pressures dictated William of Paris's handling of the trial. Caught between king and pope, and implicated in the attack on the Templars, William needed to conduct the case as carefully as possible. As for Marguerite and Guiard, Field argues that each came before the inquisition because of their ideas and actions, but met their end—death for the former and life imprisonment for the latter—as a result of Philip IV's "political machine where all stories and all fights were ultimately about royal power" (26).

Skillfully mining Marguerite's book for potential clues about the personality and motives of its author, Field's study joins a growing body of scholarship on the *Mirror* that seeks to uncover details about Marguerite and her context. In a careful reconstruction of Marguerite's activities and encounters with churchmen prior to 1308 (when she was taken into custody and brought to Paris), Field sketches a convincing picture of a woman determined to share her ideas and who rationally weighed her options at every turn. Rather than the disdainful, even defiant, beguine who declined to say a word in her own defense, we find a woman who relentlessly sought ecclesiastical approval of her work. In opposition to the prevailing view of Marguerite as an isolated, elitist figure, Field shows that she was more likely at the center of a circle of beguines, beghards, clerics, and laypeople. Although Field is not the first to claim that Marguerite sought to teach her ideas to others (Robin O'Sullivan, Zan Kocher, and John Van Engen have made similar points), his careful reconstruction and analysis of the evidence provides important examples of contact and discourse between learned clerics and lay religious women. Laying out the evidence for Godfrey of Fontaine's approbation of the *Mirror*, Field compellingly illustrates the ways in which learned theologians engaged with—and sometimes supported—the ideas and writings of lay religious women. In fact, Godfrey's approbation was an important factor in William of Paris's handling of the trial, leading him to take the unusual step of consulting twenty-one theologians from the University of Paris on the question of the *Mirror's* orthodoxy.

Field's book has the added merit of being an engaging read. While accessible to non-specialists, it is a useful resource for scholars of medieval spirituality, lay religious women, canon law, inquisitorial process, and royal politics. Moreover, it has done much to nuance—and in some cases correct and clarify—widely held views on the life and death of an extraordinary woman.

Tanya Stabler Miller
Purdue University, Calumet