

**MEDIEVAL WOMEN: ACCESSING POWER  
USING THE RHETORIC OF  
POWERLESSNESS**

**THESIS**

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*For my mother,  
who did not live to  
see me become the woman  
who wrote this.*

## *Introduction*

Power is the ability to take one's place  
in whatever discourse is essential to action  
and the right to have one's part matter.

Carolyn Heilbrun

I came to this work as a result of my stubbornness; I was simply unwilling to accept the idea put forward by some scholars that *all* medieval women internalized social and clerical judgments of their inferiority. There is, after all, a great deal of difference between acknowledging the realities of one's social milieu and accepting or internalizing those societal judgments as characteristic of oneself. Fighting the battle between being drawn to medieval studies and being repelled by some of the language used by medieval women to describe themselves required an adjustment on my part, as a feminist, as well as a great deal of investigation into the context of these medieval women writers.

Although I have not used their works directly in this study, the work of scholars such as Carolyn Walker Bynum, Rosemary Reuther, Ann Clark Bartlett, and Carole Lee Flinders has been invaluable in giving me a background in the field. (I am particularly indebted to Carole Lee Flinders for helping me overcome my resistance to Christian spiritual writing.) The work of Peter Dronke and Elizabeth Alvida Petroff in their edited editions of women's writings were instrumental for my knowledge of the subject.

If, as suggested in the quote from Carolyn Heilbrun above, "Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential", then the rhetorical strategies that make that entrance possible are of vital importance. What I propose in this study is not startling, or even new; critics have been suggesting, but not naming it for years. Where my argument differs is that I suggest that we look past the face value of protestations of inferiority, to their instrumentality for access to the power of discourse.

Recent moves in rhetorical studies, particularly those made by rhetoricians such as Cheryl Glenn and Andrea Lunsford, from the classic to the margins have provided the opportunity to examine women's writing in a different light. Once excluded from the rhetorical tradition, women are finally making their way into the discussion.

Reading Christine de Pizan's Book of the City of Ladies gave me the first glimmerings of what I call the rhetoric of powerlessness. The biography of Christine by Charity Cannon Willard provided insights and understanding as to Christine's position at court, and in society; my discussion of Christine would have been incomplete without it. Alcuin Blamires and Howard Bloch's investigations into classical and medieval misogyny were key to my discussion of Christine's struggle to defend women from misogynist writers.

Christine refers to herself in self-deprecating terms, but then proceeds to mount a staunch defense of women

against misogynist literature. She accomplishes several things with her reference to her social inferiority :

1. she acknowledges the 'powers-that be'
2. she 'claims' her gender
3. she uses this submissive posture to present herself as unthreatening to the social and literary 'establishment.'

I had noticed this same submissive posture in The Book of Margery Kempe, and since there is no evidence that Margery was familiar with Christine de Pizan, I had to look farther to determine if this really was a pattern in women's writing. Margery Kempe's text is unusual in that Margery claims to be illiterate, and therefore incapable of reading on her own. In fact, Margery's text borrows heavily from the form and style of texts that she claims clerics have read to her. That she adopted the language and rhetorical strategy of familiar hagiographies and visionary texts suggests that this rhetoric had been developing for some time.

Sarah Beckwith and Sidonie Smith each provided compelling arguments surrounding textual authority and its relation to social identities and power that were indispensable. Karma Lochrie's examination of Margery's use of Latin text while claiming to be illiterate, along with Cheryl Glenn's examination of the narrative and rhetorical strategies employed by Margery; these two theories, combined with Lynn Staley Johnson's "trope of the scribe" may urge us to re-examine our "proof" of Margery's illiteracy.

What exactly is the rhetoric of powerlessness? Put simply, this is a particular mode of self-reference employed by women to acknowledge, and, as I will argue, to challenge the inferior position of women in medieval society. Rather than a single class of classical rhetoric, this mode of speech combines the *humility topos*, the Christian principle of *mundus inversus*, and the prevailing social and clerical judgments of women. While the first two *topoi* are also used by men, the addition by women writers of locating the site of their humility and unworthiness in their gender is unique.

I do not mean to suggest that the women being discussed were what we would consider to be "feminists"; often they distance themselves from their gender and from other women. Rather than be judgmental about their "failure" to stand up for women, it is more productive to look at their writings in light of traditional and accepted views of the capabilities of women and how they challenge these views.

If the constant insistence on their frailty, unlearnedness, and unworthiness as women grates a bit on the nerves of the modern feminist, it is useful to see how these protestations of inferiority can be used to access the very kind of authority that they are acknowledging that they do not possess. By using a rhetoric of powerlessness exclusive to women, they at once acknowledge and call attention to their inferior position in society, and in the Church; by

appealing to male authority to "authorize" their writing, these women secure a space in which to express themselves.

Many women writers in this period describe themselves as unlearned (Hildegarde), or illiterate (Margery), and by male standards of education, they were in many ways 'illiterati.' While scholars may agree that Margery Kempe is illiterate in a modern sense, Hildegarde of Bingen most assuredly was not. Claims of 'illiteracy' do not necessarily mean that they could not read at all, rather this often meant that they did not read Latin or have a formal university education. The rise of vernacular language in literature and in the functions of everyday culture opened the field somewhat for women to participate in a meaningful way in their culture. But this increasing use of the vernacular also carried a very real danger, that of heresy.

The idea that the Bible and other scriptural writings could be translated into the vernacular and therefore be accessible to any person with the ability to read or listen to the vernacular and understand would seem to be a good thing; however, in the eyes of an institutionalized Church dependent on their role as intermediaries for the 'common folk', this could spell disaster. After all, if everyone has the ability to read and interpret scripture on his or her own, what purpose does the Church serve? This may be one reason why women were especially careful in their writing to acknowledge their inferior position and to insist on the orthodoxy of their views. Quite often, religious

women will include a history of the authorization of their work by male authorities to dispel any suspicion that they are acting outside the realm of acceptable doctrine.

Mystics, who claim to have their knowledge as a direct revelation from God are in a precarious position. Time after time, we read in mystic texts of the reluctance to tell anyone about the visionary experience, and the need felt by the mystic to have her experience authorized by a member of the clergy. Although the visionary experience itself is not mediated, women mystics often mention the "approval" of their visions by their confessor early in the narrative of the experience.

There is one glaring exception to this appeal to authority: Margeurite Porete. By including her in this study, I hope to show the consequences attendant on ignoring or foregoing the appeal to authority. Marguerite Porete is thought to have been a Beguine at one time, placing her in a liminal position in her society. Beguines were often enclosed in communities much like convents, but this does not seem to be the case with Marguerite Porete. There is very little information about her available, but it seems that she traveled and preached rather than remain in an enclosed community, neither of these activities being strictly approved by clerical authorities. Her book The Mirror of Simple Souls was condemned and burned once in 1306, when she was cautioned to stop preaching and distributing the book. Since Marguerite was arrested,

condemned as a lapsed heretic and burned at the stake in 1310, we can assume that she ignored the directive of 1306. What is important for the purposes of this study is the difference between Marguerite's text and that of the other women in the study; she does not refer to herself in any way as a female body, she does not appeal to any authority for validation of her work, and she denies the authority of "Holy Church the Little."

My choice for the women to be included in this study may at first seem strange; they are not all mystics, saints, or even virgins. Since the goal of my research was to determine whether the rhetoric of powerlessness was used by women in general, it made the most sense to look at the writing of women from very different backgrounds to determine the pervasiveness of the speech.

I begin the study with Hildegarde of Bingen, the ultimate "insider." Hildegarde was part of a religious community of women from the time she was eight years old, and eventually became one of the more powerful women in western Europe. While Hildegarde does claim to be unlearned, she did have access to whatever education was available within her convent and did know, and write in, Latin. This education enabled her to correspond with popes and emperors, as well as write several books. Hildegarde's life as part of an established religious community may account for her doctrinal orthodoxy, but her criticism of the clergy dispels

any notion we might have that she accepted all policies of the Church unquestioningly.

Bruce Holsinger's reading of homoerotic images in Hildegarde's music encouraged me to do a (rather) 'queer' reading of one of Hildegarde's images from the Scivias, and to use that queer reading to make a suggestion about Hildegarde's eroticism in her creative endeavors. John Boswell provided the background information on homosexuality in the Middle Ages that put Holsinger's work into context. (Karma Lochrie's work in this area has also been influential, although not cited.)

Complex and ambiguous, Hildegarde stands on the cusp of the emergence of widespread female variations of orthodox Christianity. Her visions and her life opened the minds of high-placed male clergy to the potentialities of female spirituality and may possibly have made it easier for female mystics of subsequent generations to be accepted as genuine.

Using a chronological organization, the next woman to be considered is Marguerite Porete, who is discussed at some length above. There could probably not be a greater contrast than that of Marguerite and Hildegarde; the two women come from different countries, different experiences of spirituality, and different places in their societies. Hildegarde works from within her cloistered community, and Marguerite is an itinerant preacher. In addition, Marguerite does not use the rhetoric of powerlessness in order to be accepted by male clergy; in fact, Marguerite's text is

nearly devoid of gender identifications, and those that do appear are references to God as male and the Soul as female, a fairly standard practice. What Marguerite does is take the idea of powerlessness to its ultimate conclusion- that the soul who surrenders all is in fact unified with God, therefore ultimately powerful by nature of being in this union. This places the "free soul" outside any temporal authority being based as it is on the experience of the soul alone.

This emphasis on individual experience becomes an increasingly important component in women's writing during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Christine de Pizan will argue that the tales told about women in literature are in direct contradiction with her experience of real women. As I said above, Christine was my inspiration for the idea of the rhetoric of powerlessness, perhaps because she is writing as a secular woman. It was easier to recognize the rhetoric of powerlessness in her secular prose than in many mystic texts, where the humility of the human in the presence of the divine is sometimes intertwined with the rhetoric of powerlessness used by the mystic.

For Christine, her inferiority lies in her societal position as a woman rather than in her nature as a woman. She wrote some "safe" pieces-courtly poetry, the biography of Charles V and a treatise on chivalry, but she also wrote two books defending the honor and integrity of women.

Perhaps her most impressive feat is her entry into the "Roman de la Rose" debate. This places her in an unique position; she has entered into the public arena of literary criticism as a woman who, although educated, does not have the formal education of the men she is criticizing. In her arguments she steadfastly objects to misogynist constructions of female identity and argues for the dignity and virtue of real women. Christine de Pizan is the closest we come to a "feminist" writer in this study although contemporary feminists often have difficulty with her conservatism.

Our last subject, Margery Kempe, also provides modern feminists and students in general with certain problems of understanding. To begin, Margery is difficult to categorize; she is married and the mother of fourteen, she is neither a nun nor a Beguine, so her position in the community of religious women is marginal at best, and she claims to be completely illiterate. Recent criticism by Cheryl Glenn, Lynn Staley Johnson, and Karma Lochrie opens up the possibility of construing this 'illiteracy' in a rather different way. Although Margery adopts narrative styles from the hagiographies and tales of visionary experience to which she has been exposed, her book seems to be terribly self-interested. I contend that Margery's "project" is one of self-definition and autobiography. Margery uses her experiences as a pilgrim and as a religious speaker as the basis for her narrative; visions are

included, but often for the purposes of validation of Margery's acts.

It is this emphasis on experience as authorization that we see in women's writing that often negates, or at least compromises, their gestures of submission to the temporal authorities of their societies. Given that most of the women in this era were operating from a position of educational, social, economic, and clerical inferiority, it is both fortuitous and amazing that they dared to write at all. That they refused to be silenced, no matter how conservative the message, is a testament to the strength and perseverance of women who believed in themselves, hardly an internalization of their inferiority.

## *Chapter One*

### *Hildegarde of Bingen*

As the first woman in our study, Hildegarde of Bingen is also the most conservative. This may be in great part due to her upbringing; as the tenth of her parents' children, Hildegarde was "tithed" to the Church at the age of eight. Her first years in the Church were spent enclosed with the anchoress Jutta. Her upbringing in the convent gave her access to an education not possible for most women of her time. She is the only woman represented in this study who wrote her works in Latin, although she apologizes for her ignorance of "the division of the syllables or the knowledge of cases or tenses" (Hildegarde 59). In fact, part of Hildegarde's use of the rhetoric of powerlessness consists, as in so many cases, of protestations of her inferior education. Elizabeth Petroff interprets Hildegarde's "remarks as a realistic disclaimer about not having received the equivalent of a university education" (Petroff 27). While her Latin may be irregular and unpolished<sup>1</sup> in comparison to the 'Learned Latin' used by her male contemporaries who had access to university educations, Hildegarde can hardly be called 'unlettered'. Medieval women were certainly familiar with "ecclesiastical Latin, the Latin of the liturgy, the

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<sup>1</sup>The term "unpolished" is one Hildegarde uses in reference to herself in a letter to Guibert of Gembloux explaining her visionary experience (Dronke 168).

Psalter, and the daily canonical hours" that they used on a daily basis in their worship (Petroff 30).

Not only did Hildegarde have access to the texts and teachings available in her monastery, she also had access to some of the most powerful men in Europe. Frederick Barbarossa was her sponsor, and her early writings were endorsed by Pope Eugenius III. As Barbara Newman points out in her introduction to the *Scivias*, "[t]he importance of this papal seal of approval cannot be overestimated. Not only did it increase Hildegarde's confidence and security in the face of continuing self-doubt, but it also *authenticated her publicly and protected her from the censure she was bound to attract for violating the deuterio-Pauline strictures on female silence and submission*" (Hildegarde 13, italics mine). We would expect that after this highest of endorsements, Hildegarde would feel freer to express herself without having to be overly self-deprecating.

That this is not in fact the case says something significant about the attitudes of female writers about themselves *as writers* that we do not find when reading male spiritual writers of the period. If we look carefully at the introductions of their writings, there is a discernible difference in the way that the male writers express themselves as compared to Hildegarde. Bernard of Clairvaux was not only Hildegarde's contemporary, but was also instrumental in putting her work before Eugenius. Bernard's

form of modesty can be seen in this excerpt from one of his sermons on the *Song of Songs*:

Who is there wise enough not only to understand these things but to distinguish between them and define each one, and then render them comprehensible to others? If you are looking to me for this, I personally would rather listen to an expert, versed and practiced in such matters. But since persons prefer to modestly shroud in silence what they have learned in silence, and judge it safer to keep their secret to themselves, I, who am obliged by my office to speak and have not the refuge of silence, will relate whatever I have learned directly or from others, keeping to what most of us can hope to experience and leaving higher things to those able to grasp them (Bernard 73).

Bernard does not call himself weak or unworthy, merely demurs that he is not "an expert." He appeals to the demand being made on him by others to write and/or preach on these subjects, something we also see in the writing of Anselm of Canterbury. Although it is unlikely that Hildegarde knew Anselm, he was prominent in the Church during her childhood, and so is nearly contemporary with her. What follows is an excerpt from the prologue to Anselm's *Monlogion*:

Some of my brethren have often and earnestly

asked me to write down, as a kind of model meditation, some of the things I have said, in everyday language, on the subject of meditating upon the essence of the divine; and on some other subjects bound up with meditation. They specified (on the basis more of their wishes than of the task's feasibility or my capacity) the following form. ...For a long time I declined even to try. I considered how I measured up to what it involved, and I tried to excuse myself. ...And so, although I took it up against my will (in view of the difficulty involved and the feebleness of my talents), I completed it (in view of their love) willingly, to the best of my ability, and in accordance with their specifications. ... Now, I was induced to do this in the expectation that whatever I produced would be read only by those who had asked for it. I expected that they would soon scornfully and disdainfully consign it to oblivion as something without value. ...But--and I do not know how it has happened -- despite that expectation, not only the aforementioned brethren, but many others as well, each making a copy of this writing for himself, have made it their business

to preserve this treatise for posterity.

(Anselm 5-6)

We see here the same doubt of talent and value of the work that we saw in Bernard; what then does Hildegarde say about herself in her work? The prologue (or Declaration) to the Scivias begins:

These Are True Visions Flowing from God  
 And behold! In the forty-third year of my  
 earthly course, as I was gazing with  
 great fear and trembling at a heavenly  
 vision, I saw a great splendor in which  
 resounded a voice from Heaven, saying to me,  
 "O fragile human, ashes of ashes, and filth  
 of filth! Say and write what you see and  
 hear. But since you are timid in speaking,  
 and simple in expounding, and untaught in  
 writing, speak and write these things not  
 by a human mouth, and not by the understanding  
 of human invention, and not by the requirements  
 of human composition, but as you see and hear  
 them on high in the heavenly places in the  
 wonder of God" (Hildegarde 59).

Hildegarde's motivation for writing is therefore not the urging of other mortals to share her insights, but a direct command from God. In Hildegarde's case, her speaking and writing are simultaneous acts, a reversal of the model we

saw in Anselm and Bernard, who only write to preserve their spoken words.

Hildegarde, like Anselm, delays writing and is finally compelled, by a bout of sickness and the support of her favorite nun Richardis (whom we will discuss again later) and her secretary Volmar, to record her visions and their exposition. What we see consistently in her Declaration is the prompting of the divine as her motivation. This becomes fairly standard in the writing of spiritual women, along with the appeal to male clerical authority for validation of both the visionary experience and the writing involved in it. At the end of the Declaration, Hildegarde situates herself both socially and historically by listing the men in power in both the Church and the secular arenas at the time that the Scivias was written. Following this list, Hildegarde issues one more disclaimer about speaking from her own authority:

And I spoke and wrote these things not by the invention of my heart or that of any other person, but as by the secret mysteries of God I heard and received them in the heavenly places. And again I heard a voice from Heaven saying to me, "Cry out therefore, and write thus!" (Hildegarde 60-1).

Elizabeth Petroff, in the Introduction to Medieval Women's Visionary Literature discusses the insecurity many women felt about writing and points out that this insecurity indicates "that writing was a gender-determined activity,

that writing could be considered as a usurpation of a male prerogative, and that the writing voice had to be assimilated to the male voice of God if it was to be heard" (Petroff 27). Hildegarde's writing reflects this in that it is almost always the voice of the divine which is heard in her visions rather than her own.

Hildegarde does not contradict orthodoxy often, but she is not above arguing for what she believes. She openly criticized anyone who she felt was working to the detriment of the Church, emperors and clergy alike. Gillian Ahlgren, in her analysis of Hildegarde's letters, points out the use of different rhetorical strategies in the letters. The strategy most prevalent in letters to men is what Ahlgren terms the "instrumental". This strategy stresses Hildegarde's role as God's instrument and is usually expressed in her reference to herself as only a "poor woman". This formulation of her inferiority emphasizes the inspired nature of her message, and at the same time reassures her readers as to her obedience and allegiance to the hierarchical church (Ahlgren 52).

Another of Hildegarde's epistolary strategies involves invoking the "virtues" to instill her perception of heavenly order. By using these traditional figures of authority which are female, Hildegarde reinforces her authority as a female teacher. In one of her letters, Hildegarde remarks that hers are "feminine times" when women have to take the responsibility for reforming the church, since men have

proven themselves to be incapable trustees (Ahlgren 53). Her comment on the 'effeminacy' of the times and the clergy are interesting; we can interpret this comment several ways:

1. it seems to be used pejoratively- this could indicate that she is adopting contemporary attitudes about male and female attributes and accepts the inferior value attached to women
2. challenges the inferior valuation of women by positing herself (a woman) as a model for proper behavior
3. distances herself from other women by pleading her singularity
4. realigns herself with women by her self-references to her gendered "frailty"

Given her gifts and her impressive works, we can hardly fault her for recognizing her own uniqueness, and this distancing from "common" women is a strategy that will be employed by other powerful women in the course of history. As for the suggestion that Hildegarde is using the feminine designation as an inferior one, this suggestion has been made in reference to Hildegarde by many scholars, and is one that I believe is not completely valid. While it is true that Hildegarde often refers to women using the standard hierarchical and scriptural language contemporary to her, it would be naive to suggest that she did not understand the underlying power structures of the Church. She would have to have been painfully aware of the "party line" on women in

the Bible and the patristic writings; having spent her entire adult life living and working within the institutional religious culture, it simply would not have made sense to Hildegarde to challenge this outright.

Further, if we keep in mind her claim that a woman is the one who has to 'set things right' in the absence of any action being taken by men, then this is not demeaning to women, but rather to the men who have failed to perform up to the standards of a woman. While Hildegarde conforms to many of her culture's beliefs and valuations about the sexes, this should not be taken as proof that she considered women to be inferior. When participating in the textual tradition usually reserved for male clerical authority, Hildegarde does stay very close to the form and rhetoric employed by male authors. Hildegarde is definitely not the Gloria Steinem of the twelfth century, nor should we expect her to be; rather she is a woman who is quite clear about what the possibilities and limitations of her society are, and works within those limitations. We will see, in the next chapter, an illustration of the consequences of ignoring society's limitations, in the case of Marguerite Porete.

Before we dismiss Hildegarde as merely conforming to the male clerical establishment, it is important to remember that she does chastise them, stand up to them, and quite often wins her point, but we must also remember that she did not have any contemporary female model to follow. Her desire to start a convent at the Rupertsberg was initially met with

resistance, but she eventually triumphed, as she did near the end of her life in the controversy over the "excommunicate" buried in the convent graveyard. The argument that she did not win was the one over Richardis von Stade.

**\*\*What I am about to suggest may be offensive to some, but I believe we have come to the point where we can discuss sexuality without apology.\*\***

As calm and collected as Hildegarde is in her writing and her pursuit of her convent's goals, she is equally, if not more, emotional in the argument over Richardis. Hildegarde mentions her in the Declaration to the Scivias and elsewhere, and appeals to Richardis' mother and the archbishop of Mainz to disallow Richardis' nomination as abbess. It is telling that there was another young woman, Adelheid, who was nominated at the same time, but whose nomination is not of primary concern. In the course of her opposition to Richardis' leaving her Hildegarde blames everyone from the archbishop, the family, even the abbot of the Disibodenberg. The intensity of her language and the depth of her distress come out in her letters, even blaming Richardis herself for seeking preferment. After having accused the archbishop of Mainz of being a simoniac, Hildegarde writes to Richardis' brother:

Dear friend, I greatly cherish your soul, more than your family. Now hear me, prostrate in tears and misfortune before your feet, for

my soul is deeply sad, because a horrible man (horribilis homo) has overthrown my advice and will. ... If one of restless mind seeks preferment, longing to be master, striving lustfully for power rather than looking to the will of God, such a one is a marauding wolf in person (Dronke 155).

Hildegarde is at once sad and accusing, hardly the cool expositor of visions that we see in the Scivias. She goes on to beg that Richardis be sent back to her "so that [she] may be consoled through her, and she through me" (Dronke 155). And when finally faced with the fact that Richardis will not return, she writes to her:

**2** I fell short of this, because of the love for a noble person. Now I tell you, whenever I have sinned in this way, God has made that sin clear to me in some experience of anguish or of pain--and this has now happened on account of you, as you yourself know.

**3** Now, again, I say: Woe is me, your mother, woe is me, daughter--why have you abandoned me like an orphan? I loved the nobility of your conduct, your wisdom and chastity, your soul and the whole of your life, so much that many said: What are you doing?

(Dronke 156-7).

Favorite nun or not, there is an intimacy and anguished emotion in this letter that suggests to my mind that there was a love relationship between these two women. If the relationship were truly that of abbess and nun, or mother and daughter (as the language of the letter suggests), it seems uncharacteristic that Hildegarde would have been this opposed to one of her 'daughters' being promoted to a higher position in the Church. Since Hildegarde seems to drop the question of Adelheid's promotion fairly quickly, we have to ask why it was so particular with Richardis.

I don't want to appear to be one of those prurient people who like to imagine debauchery behind the convent walls, but it would be unusual if women in cloistered environments did *not* occasionally form strong emotional and perhaps even erotic, attachments to one another. Bruce Holsinger has traced homoerotic imagery in Hildegarde's music, particularly in her songs to the Virgin Mary. He suggests that the singing of these hymns allow "women to voice their fleshly and spiritual desires for the female body in a way that transgresses-- textually and musically-- the careful devotional boundaries established by the medieval Church" (Holsinger 108). Unlike many medieval mystics, Hildegarde does not employ nuptial imagery, or the language of heterosexual intercourse in her writing of her experiences of communion with the divine (Holsinger 109). As

Holsinger remarks, many scholars attribute<sup>2</sup> this lack of heteroerotic imagery to being "asexual, divorced from her naturalistic appreciation of the female body and erotic desire" (Holsinger 119). Hildegarde's medical treatises should be sufficient proof that she was quite familiar with the anatomy and physiology of women, and of sexual activity in general. As a woman who lived nearly her entire life in a community of women, it is not surprising that Hildegarde should find beauty and inspiration in the female form and spirit.

This awe and respect of the feminine is seen in Hildegarde's art as well as her music; one of Hildegarde's illustrations is very similar to that seen in medieval depictions of Christ's wounds, although it may also evoke for modern readers the *yoni* shape seen in Hindu drawings and mandalas. This is the "cosmic egg" illustration of Vision Three, Book One of the Scivias. The descriptions (that follow the illustration) of the actions of the various components of the "instrument" read like a description of the physiology of female arousal and orgasm. I found it especially intriguing that the "globe of sparkling flame" which roughly corresponds with the position of the clitoris

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<sup>2</sup>This attribution (of asexuality) is probably more symptomatic of the tendency of people in the twentieth century to equate eroticism with heterosexual genital contact than with any failing of comprehension on the part of the critics.

is associated with virginity and that the "watery air with a white zone beneath it" (vagina) "imparted moisture to the whole instrument". Nestled inside the "watery air" is a "sandy globe" (uterus) which is associated in the descriptions with creation (Hildegarde 95-7). The "winds" which Hildegarde describe as blowing about in the "instrument" are also mentioned in her *Causa et curae* where she says that "women's bodies are 'open like a wooden frame [lignum] in which strings have been fastened for strumming [ad citharizandum]'" (Holsinger 98). The blowing of winds or breezes are representations of female desire; within the body, they are the source of erotic desire. In *O viridissima virga*, many of the verses explore the ways in which the womb is "a source of life, heat, scent, and the joy of devotion", with the "greenest branch" having sprung forth in the "airy breezes of the prayers of the saints" (Holsinger 117). For Hildegarde it seems that physical and spiritual eroticism are very closely intertwined.

It is not Hildegarde's knowledge of the female anatomy that is surprising, since she wrote detailed medical treatises which addressed sexuality, it is the lyricism of the language describing the female body that catch the interest. Rather than denying her identity as a woman, this would tend to suggest a celebration of womanhood as a glorious thing. In the following excerpt from *Ave generosa*, one of her hymns to the Virgin Mary, "the language evokes

the power she sees as inherent in the nature of the female body":

Hail, noble, glorious, and virgin girl;  
 You, the pupil of chastity, you  
 mother of holiness who was pleasing  
 to God!

For it happened in you by the  
 supernal one, that the supernal  
 was cloaked in flesh.

You, white lily, whom God viewed  
 before all other creatures.

...

For your womb held joy, just as grass  
 on which dew falls when greenness  
 floods into it; thus did it happen in  
 you, o mother of all joy.

Now let all Ecclesia blush in joy and  
 sound in symphonia for the sweetest  
 virgin and praiseworthy Mary,  
 mother of God. Amen (Holsinger 100-1).

If Hildegarde was careful in her writing to 'stay within the lines' of accepted doctrines and attitudes, how much more careful would she have been to conceal any sexual feeling she may have had? She reflects or reiterates the standard admonition of homosexuality in Book Two, Vision Six, but her admonition against woman-woman sex is a mere

two sentences in the context of an entire page (and more) of admonitions against other sexual transgressions:

And a woman who takes up devilish ways and *plays a male role* in coupling with another woman is most vile in My[God's]sight, and so is she who subjects herself to such a one in this evil deed (Hildegarde 279, italics mine).

This particular vision is one which covers fifty-two pages and also deals with issues such as married clergy, election of priests, the iniquity of priests, and crossdressing. Taken in its context, the section condemning homosexuality is relatively short, and that condemning "lesbianism" is even shorter. We must also take notice that it is the usurpation and confusion of *sexual roles* that Hildegarde explicitly condemns.

It is important to note that social tolerance of homosexuality in general was on the decline at this point, but this can be seen as part of the larger push towards regulating marriage and sexuality in general. John Boswell suggests that the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries were periods of relative openness, while the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were bent on achieving uniformity and order (Boswell 269-70). In the two hundred year period between 1150 and 1350, the public perception of homosexuality changed from being a matter of personal preference to being an antisocial and severely sinful aberration (Boswell 295). It is in this climate of growing

intolerance that Hildegarde lives and writes, so it should hardly be surprising that she reflects the orthodox church doctrine on homosexuality in her visionary experience.

Do I mean to suggest that Hildegarde was a lesbian? If we remove the twentieth century notion of lesbianism as being *primarily* about genital sex, yes, I do. We know, and it would be naive to assume that medieval people did not, that the spectrum of human sexuality is far broader than the heterosexual coitus model that we are trained to assume is the 'default setting'. If we adopt the idea of intimate friendship as lesbianism, the relationship between Hildegarde and Richardis would certainly qualify. It is possible, even probable considering the above quote, that there was no genital component to her relationship with Richardis, but the intensity of emotion at her departure, and her bitterness when Richardis did not return, do indicate that there was, at the very least, a strong love between the two women.

How then do we reconcile the different images we get of Hildegarde? She is a powerful and influential woman whose claim to authority is that she has received visions directly from God but who denies her own ability to understand and interpret them for herself without divine guidance. She denies that women should have the right to preach, but she herself goes on officially authorized preaching tours. She is an able administrator who becomes alternately despondent and hysterical when one of her nuns leaves to become an

abbess in her own right. She "oscillates between rapturous praise of womankind-'o feminea forma, quam gloriosa es!'- and a despairing sense of woman's weakness" (Dronke 201). As the 'foremother' of the rhetoric of powerlessness, Hildegarde uses claims of her own inferiority or weakness time and again to accomplish the goals she has set for herself and her 'daughters', creating a space in which she exercises power and influence within the Church, and in the world. The space created also allows Hildegarde a place to express, if only symbolically, her reverence for the female body.

Since Hildegarde is one of the earliest woman writers in the Church, it is not surprising that she uses the language and the structure of that Church in her own spirituality. As time goes on, women writers will continue to use the rhetoric of powerlessness, but will come to challenge that rhetoric more openly and more often.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Marguerite Porete*

Unlike Hildegarde of Bingen, very little is known about Marguerite Porete. We have evidence mainly of her brushes with authority; her book was condemned and burned in 1306, and again in 1310. This latter condemnation proved to be fatal for Marguerite, if not for her book. The Mirror of Simple Souls survived and was circulated long after the author was forgotten. Written in the vernacular, this work represents what Bernard McGinn has characterized as "vernacular theology", an emerging strand of theology and one in which women played "an important, perhaps even a preponderant role" (McGinn 6). The rise of vernacular expressions of spirituality was particularly important to women, who had little or no access to formal instruction in Latin, and therefore the Bible itself. Teaching for women before this rise of vernacular theology was limited to those who, like Hildegarde, were members of established religious orders attached to monasteries.

Marguerite Porete was not only not a nun, as a Beguine she does not seem to have lived in an enclosed community. From what we can gather about her movements, she traveled and taught in the Hainaut area and the first burning of her book took place in Valenciennes. (Dronke 217) The final condemnation in Paris was that Marguerite was a relapsed heretic, which assumes that she had recanted her beliefs at

earlier arrests. Altogether she spent a year and a half in prison in Paris, where she refused to give any testimony on her own behalf. What she did do was send her book (*in toto*) to three noted scholars who all approved of it (Petroff 280-1).

The question then becomes one of judgment; the Inquisitorial judges were presented with only extracts of the book, while the independent scholars received the whole text. In addition, there were other women associated with the Beguines who had written texts that could be seen as equally controversial in content; so why was Marguerite condemned as a heretic? The mystic Marguerite is often compared to is Mechtild of Magdeburg and their writings do bear a resemblance to one another. The most obvious difference between the two women is Mechtild's willingness to accept entrance into a cloistered religious community. It is her lack of submissiveness to recognized clerical authority that ultimately causes Marguerite's downfall.

If Marguerite does not assume a submissive posture in relation to clerical authority, how does the rhetoric of powerlessness work in her case? Where other women authors like Hildegard referred to themselves as being merely the vessel or transmitter of God's message, ***Marguerite speaks in her own voice***. This does not mean that her work is heavily inflected with personal anecdotes as we will see later in The Book of Margery Kempe, rather we have to wait until chapter 96 to get even a hint of the woman behind the

voice (if not for the use of feminine pronouns, the reader would be at a loss as to identify the gender of the speaker), and her "Approval" by clerical authorities doesn't appear until the final paragraph of her book. Even here she refers to herself merely as a "creature" and places no importance whatsoever on her gender:

I[am] a creature from the creator by whose mediation the Creator made this book of Himself for those whom I do not know nor do I desire to know, because I ought not to desire this (Porete 221).

This failure to "gender" herself may, in itself, be seen as a contributing factor in her problems with the Church; by refusing to conform to the "standard text" of female affective piety, she suggests that she is above, or for Marguerite, below, all that.

Inversion of values is one of the basic tenets of Christianity, as the Beatitudes suggest. Marguerite takes this inversion of values to its extreme; rather than elevating the soul through virtue and good works to reach God as most traditions urge, Marguerite suggests that the way to achieve union with God is to descend to the depths and relinquish all will and desire. This relinquishment also includes transcending "the virtues" and all good works, which are not necessary for the annihilated soul. This comes dangerously close to antinomianism (the idea that one is only responsible to God and needn't obey temporal authority), and

was certainly of great concern to the Inquisitors at her trial. And this is of course the key to Marguerite's rhetoric of powerlessness; that only by becoming completely powerless can one achieve even temporary union with God, who is all powerful.

Marguerite's description of the "peace of charity in the annihilated life" does lend itself to interpretations that it is heretical. "Love" says that in this life one could find :

- 1.A Soul
- 2.who is saved by faith without works
- 3.who is only in love
- 4.who does nothing for God
- 5.who leaves nothing to do for God
- 6.to whom nothing can be taught
- 7.from whom nothing can be taken
- 8.nor given
- 9.and who possesses no will (Porete 82-3).

Merely the suggestion that salvation is possible without works causes enormous problems for an institutional church that requires such works for salvation to be possible. The suggestion that the annihilated soul cannot be taught would seem to indicate that there is no possibility to show this soul her "error" with any hope of its being corrected. The unimportance of property and the surrendering of her will would be ideas very familiar to medieval women since few of them owned property or were able to exercise their wills in

any but the most mundane areas of their lives. What Marguerite offers in her theology is the surrender of the will and property in exchange for the ultimate 'power base'-union with God. This could be very attractive to women who were already familiar in their daily lives with the language and realities of sacrifice and self-abnegation.

It has been suggested by several scholars that Marguerite wrote primarily for a female audience. Maria Lichtman points to the nearly exclusive use of female characters in her book as proof of her intended audience and further contends that for Marguerite gender "was not a matter of traits of social roles, but of the prophetic possibility of dissent from and subversion of the predominant patriarchal order" (Lichtman 73-4). It is certainly true that the theology that Marguerite proposes transcends the limitations attendant on being female in the Middle Ages since the emphasis is on the soul's relationship with God rather than the study of biblical and patristic texts. She even offers this warning to her potential readers:

You who would read this book,  
 If you 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 the 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.  
 And may Love and Faith, together,  
 Cause you to rise above Reason,  
 [Since] they are the ladies of the house.

(Porete 79)

It seems that Marguerite was aware of the startling nature of her work, and if any anxiety is present, it is that people will "read poorly" what she was trying to teach. Even the clerics who approved her work were concerned that its readers should be limited to those who were prepared for such extremely radical theology.

What makes Marguerite's theology so controversial is the concept that once a soul has reached a certain stage of spiritual development, she no longer needs to conform to the outward manifestations of orthodox piety. She rarely comments directly on scripture, preferring to describe to her listeners the state of the annihilated soul. In Marguerite's view, the annihilated soul has reached a stage in which her will is in essence inseparable from the will of God. This relationship removes the need for mediaries,

sacraments, and even bodily manifestations of visionary or affective piety.

This is not to suggest that Marguerite disparages the body as more dualistically inclined mystics might; rather Marguerite recognizes the holistic nature of the human condition, in which the soul and the body must be integrated rather than separated. In fact, one of the major criticisms of Marguerite's thought is the idea of giving "to Nature all that is necessary" (Porete 87). Although she goes on to say that a soul who has reached this stage of development will have a Nature that is so well ordered that it will not demand anything which is prohibited. This would suggest that there is no need (at this stage) for severe asceticism or mortification, and no need to worry about sin. Although it was the latter proposition that was most threatening to the clergy, those who practiced asceticism might have been offended by her suggestion that it is not necessary for the truly free soul.

If we do not see Marguerite recommending asceticism and mortification of the body, neither do we see the bodily, erotic expressions of piety like a Catherine of Siena or an Angela of Foligno in Marguerite's spirituality. Where the expressions of piety and visionary experience of many female mystics reside in the lyrical and emotional realm of language, Marguerite's is more of a "speculative" mysticism that has teaching as its goal (Lichtman 74). Marguerite

herself describes her goal as the enlightenment or "freeing" of other souls:

And so this mendicant creature wrote what you hear. And she desired that her neighbors might find God in her, through writings and words; that is to say and mean, that she wished that her neighbors become the perfect ones she described (at least all those to whom she desired to say this). And in doing this, and in saying this, and in willing this she remained, as you know, a beggar and encumbered with herself. And thus she would beg, because she willed to do this (Porete 170-1).

Far from being a description of an individual visionary experience, The Mirror of Simple Souls offers the reader the possibility of achieving a relationship of perfect intimacy and union with God *without the need for the institution of the Church*. Worse yet, in the eyes of the Church, she proposes that this union is available for all who can achieve the total surrender of the will to God.

This would be a very attractive option for women whose needs were not being met by the institutional Church, which excluded women from the clergy, and with very few exceptions, from teaching in public. One move outward from the Church was that of the Beguine movement with which Marguerite has been associated. As the spiritual life became more attractive to women and the convents more populated,

there was simply not room enough for all women who sought the contemplative life in the established convents. Other women did not wish to confine themselves to contemplation, but wished to work and be self-sufficient without compromising their life of evangelical poverty (Petroff 171). Some of these women entered beguinages, where they lived and worked in a community of women who had common spiritual goals. It is perhaps the ultimate mark of Marguerite's radical nature that even the beguinage did not "capture" her. It may be as Robert Lerner suggests, that "Marguerite was probably a heretic, but had she been submissive and content to enter a cloister, like Mechtild of Magdeburg, with whom she is compared, she probably would have attracted little notice" (Lerner 208). Even if Marguerite was at one time attached to a beguinage, near the end of her book she despairs of even her sister beguines understanding her message:

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,  
 Because I wrote about the being  
 of the one purified by Love.

I do not make Reason safe for them,  
who makes them say this to me.

(Porete 200)

We have to wonder if this merely more concern for people reading her text poorly, or if members of the congregations mentioned had actually been critical of her teaching. This distancing from established and accepted religious orders moves Marguerite even farther out on the fringes of her society.

Where Hildegarde could be seen as the ultimate "insider", it could be said that Marguerite Porete is the ultimate "outsider" in terms of religious community. And this is her greatest value to this study, that she *did not* employ the rhetoric of powerlessness to gain access to the rather narrow world of religious service open to women. Rather, she *embodied* powerlessness to gain her own space of supreme power in her union with God. The move past asceticism to obeying Nature's demands on the body retrieves the body from the denial, and often disgust, that those focusing on the spiritual often adopt. By separating herself from the institutions that could protect her and support her, Marguerite surrenders any personal power or responsibility for the care and upkeep of her body to the will of God and the kindness of strangers.

The object lesson to be taken from Marguerite's experience (in terms of the uses of rhetoric of powerlessness) is that Marguerite never appeals to any

authority, or speaks in any voice, that is not thoroughly her own.

This speaking in her own voice is quite a departure from mystics such as Hildegarde who are transmitting their visions, and are admittedly reluctant to do so. It is of great importance to note that Marguerite's description of the writing of her book does not appear until very near the end, and does not include the usual disclaimer of writing only at the request of others. She decides that she has something valuable to offer her neighbors, and she decides which of them are ready to hear her message. This is either a radical statement of autonomy by a woman, or an incredible *faux pas* by someone who was obviously familiar with both religious writing and clerical attitudes towards women preaching.

Marguerite's determination to reach people with her message in spite of opposition is admirable; it is only by the greatest of luck that her determination and subsequent condemnation did not erase her entirely from the face of theology. The fact that her text was preserved by the Downside Benedictines and others as an orthodox text might make us suspect that the heresy was not in the doctrine itself, but in the agent. Meister Eckhart who, as has been suggested by Bernard McGinn, was influenced by, and adopted some of Marguerite's teaching was himself condemned for unorthodox teaching by a papal Bull in 1329, but not burnt (McGinn 11). Eckhart was in Paris shortly after

Marguerite's imprisonment and trial and that he may have had access to a copy of The Mirror of Simple Souls.

At the same time that Marguerite was being examined by the Inquisition, the Knights Templar were being investigated by the same man (Philip of Cambrai, later Sens) who had sent Marguerite to Paris in the first place (Lerner 76-7). Given Marguerite's complete lack of defense, and the relative power of the Templars, it is not surprising that Marguerite's case was chosen to act as a demonstration of Philip the Fair's unwavering orthodoxy.

It is obviously much easier to convict a poor woman with no institutional or legal support than it would be to convict members of the powerful (male) organization of the Knights Templar. At the time of Marguerite's trial, the case against the Templars was presenting difficulties, and doubts about it had arisen (Lerner 77). With the case against these powerful men foundering, Marguerite's case provided an opportunity for Philip to demonstrate his orthodoxy and his preservation of the faith from dangerous heretics.

It did not help Marguerite's cause that she refused to testify on her own behalf during the year and a half that she spent in custody. There are many ways in which this silence can be interpreted; Marguerite may sincerely have felt that she was above temporal considerations such as trials, or she may have known that, short of recanting her entire theology, she would not escape no matter what she said in her defense. Perhaps it was both; her description of

the reaction of beguines and others to her writing indicates that she knew how difficult it was to understand, and prior experience must have taught her the dangers of challenging the clergy. In any case, she remained aloof from her own trial and went to the stake without compromising her beliefs or her integrity.

Does this mean that Marguerite is somehow more noble or enlightened than the women in this study who chose to employ the rhetoric of powerlessness? Certainly not; I use the example of Marguerite to point out the very real dangers that confronted women who chose to speak in their own voices without the validation of accepted clerical authority. Marguerite cleared a space for herself in which to speak, but the scope of her space was not the cloister, the beguinage, or the home; Marguerite's space was the infinite. Her work lived on, even through the (approximately) 650 years between her execution and Romana Guarnieri's (re)discovery of her manuscript in 1965, and this longevity may ironically be due to the fact that her identity remained hidden for so long.

Even if Marguerite's theology did not dwell on gender, her critics had certain expectations of women's styles of spiritual writing, and hers did not conform to those expectations. Her use of allegorical dialogue and the absence of physical descriptions of an ecstatic state set her apart from many of her female contemporaries. Since clerics had certain expectations of women's writing, it

should not surprise us that Marguerite's text may have been mistaken for that of a male author.

Now that her text has been "returned" to her, and to us, we can look to Marguerite as a woman who was steadfast and true to her beliefs until the end. While she may not have been typical of, or a "good role model" for, her contemporaries, we are living in a far less restricted society. Even if her theology sounds strange and unsettling to us, her message of independence from all but the divine resonates.

### *Chapter Three*

#### *Christine de Pizan*

As the inspiration for this entire line of inquiry on my part, Christine de Pizan is also the woman who uses her rhetoric of powerlessness in the most aggressive way. Where Hildegarde operated within the institution of the church, Christine was most familiar with life at the French court. The difference in their social milieu, and their historical contexts would suggest that there would be little in common in their writing. Where the two women do share a commonality is in their references to themselves as poorly educated or ignorant. As with Hildegarde, this was in some ways less true of Christine herself than most of her female contemporaries. This lack of equal education for women, on a practical, if not a scholastic level, is a recurring theme in Christine's work.

The question has been raised in recent years as to whether we can consider Christine de Pizan a "real feminist". To late twentieth century feminists, Christine may appear to be disturbingly conservative in her advice to women. After all, Christine does not propose a radical restructuring of society, she simply attempts to redefine the *cultural* profile of women (Blamires, 278 italics mine). However, if we consider the glib, albeit true, definition of feminism as the radical notion that women are people, this is exactly what Christine is suggesting. More disturbing

than Christine's failure to advocate female uprisings in protest of unfair treatment is the fact that after six hundred years, we are still fighting the same ideological battle with misogyny that she began.

As Alcuin Blamires notes in his introduction to Christine's work in his book Woman Defamed and Woman Defended, her attempt to 'clear the names' of women entailed no less a challenge than undermining the authority of prestigious literary figures the such as Ovid, Augustine, and Jerome, while at the same time establishing herself as an *author-ity* in her own right (Blamires 278). Although Ovid is one of the more well-documented sources for misogynist texts, the authoritative source for other misogynist literature is difficult to pinpoint at its source.

Howard Bloch uses the example of Theophrastus, who is quoted early and often by misogynist authors of the Middle Ages, but whose own works appear to be non-existent. Using what Bloch calls an "absent *locus classicus*" as a source, generations of writers reiterated "Theophrastus'" misogynist judgments of women in their own writing, perpetuating misogyny through shoddy scholarship (Bloch 2). For Christine, the stories she heard told about women simply didn't agree with her own experience of women's behavior. We will see this defense of women on the basis of personal experience again in the next chapter when Margery Kempe appeals to her own experience as the source of her authority. As Mary Anne Case points out "the 'inside story'

from a member of the [oppressed]group can thus be a powerful corrective to the authority of the[se] experts" (Case 71). By invoking her experience as a woman as *the* source of her authority, she has a seemingly irrefutable argument; after all, how are male critics to argue that they know what it is like to *be* a woman?

The first instance of Christine's defense of women in a public forum is her entry into the first literary debate in France over Jean de Meun's portion of *The Romance of the Rose*. While it has been suggested that Christine began the argument with her *Letter of the God of Love*, in the actual debate over the *Romance* she was only responding to what she felt was overabundant praise of the poem by Jean de Montreuil. In her opening, Christine uses the protestation of poor education and female weakness that form the first components of the rhetoric of powerlessness:

Reverence, honor, and all commendation to you,  
 lord provost of Lille, most precious lord and  
 scholar, sage in conduct, lover of knowledge,  
 soundly erudite, well versed in rhetoric, your  
 humble Christine de Pizan, an unlearned woman of  
 small understanding and penetration, with hopes  
 that your wisdom will not despise my arguments  
 withal but make due allowances in consideration of  
 female weakness (Writings 151).

She then goes on to elaborate the faults she finds with the *Romance*, allowing that there are "many things well said",

and ending with what could be considered her battle cry and is the component of the rhetoric of powerlessness that points to the refusal to internalize societal judgments of women's inferiority:

Let this then suffice. And may it not be laid to folly, arrogance, or presumption that I, a woman, do upbraid and refute so difficult an author, diminishing the good fame of his work, when he, a sole and solitary man, dared take it upon himself to defame and condemn without exception and entire sex(Writings 158-9).

This initial volley by Christine was answered not only by Jean de Montreuil, but by both Pierre and Gontier Col as well. The Col brothers, and Gontier in particular, adopted a patronizing tone in their responses to Christine, and it must have been unsettling for them when Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, entered the fray on Christine's side. Pierre Col begins a third round of "the quarrel" with a letter criticizing and offending both Christine and Gerson, but being particularly condescending to Christine:

O most foolish presumption! O word too soon issued and lightly spoken from the mouth of a woman to condemn a man of such high understanding [and] profound study who, after such great labor and mature deliberation, has written such a noble book as *The Romance of the Rose*, which surpasses all

others ever written in the language in which he wrote his book....

And Col concludes sarcastically with:

So I beg of you, woman of great ingenuity, that you preserve the honor you have acquired for the extent of your understanding and your well-chosen language, and that if you have been praised because you have shot a bullet over the towers of Notre Dame, don't try to hit the moon for that reason with an oversized arrow; take care not to resemble the crow who, when his singing was praised, began to sing louder than usual and let the morsel he was holding fall from his mouth

(Willard 84-5).

It is at this point that Christine becomes exasperated with the whole argument and asks just exactly how women, who are purported to be deceitful, can actually deceive men if the men don't allow themselves to be deceived. She points out the relative positions of power of women and men and asks the very pertinent question of how women, who have little or no social or legal power, can possibly take advantage of men.

In addition to its historical value as the first literary debate in France, the *Romance of the Rose* quarrel was most likely the impetus for Christine's writing one of her best known works, The Book of the City of Ladies (hereafter referred to as *City*). Her major influence for

*City* was probably Boccaccio, although the title was almost certainly meant to echo Augustine's City of God. The *City* represents Christine's first use of the dream vision in her writing, which had to this point consisted primarily of poetry and "published" letters. Christine herself comments on the evolution in her own writing:

I began by forging pretty things, rather light at first, but like the craftsman who progressively acquires greater skill through experimentation with various materials, my sense became imbued with novelties, directing my style toward more subtlety and more lofty inspirations, from 1399 until this year of 1405, when I have not yet ceased my efforts..." (Willard 91).

As she moved from "pretty" poetry into allegory, Christine felt that she was moving toward "a more worthy form of writing than the society verse she had composed earlier" (Willard 91). Unlike many allegorical dream visions of her time, Christine's has a decidedly secular flavor. While Langland and Dante have religious salvific purposes in composing their allegories and dream visions, Christine's salvific purpose is the reclamation of women's honor.

Christine's Virtue figures are not the standard theological models of Faith, Hope and Charity; they are Reason, Rectitude, and Justice who represent very different values than those of the theological models. Christine is a devout woman, but she appreciates that the problems that

most women have in the world do not fall within the province of faith, hope, or charity. The women she is addressing live in the world, and her concern is that they be treated fairly. To this end, Christine appropriates virtues which are more traditionally associated with aspects of public(hence, male) lives. Reason, although generally portrayed as a woman, is an attribute that women are seldom given credit for possessing in equal degree with their male counterparts, and Justice is associated with Law and authority, something that Christine knew about from her own experience. By appropriating these virtues for her ladies, Christine has already begun alter the balance, placing attributes that generally work in favor of men into her service to help build and defend her city of ladies.

Christine begins the *City* by situating herself in her study, surrounded by books; from the very outset, she establishes herself as a studious woman, one who could argue authoritatively about texts. But first she must answer her mother's call to dinner. Maureen Quilligan suggests that this scene "posits the central problem of Christine's book as *the problematic relationship between the scene of reading and the woman's traditional role of mothering and nurturance*" (Quilligan 49-50). Christine must leave her study filled with textual authority to obey the domestic, experiential authority of her mother.

The first chapter of the *City* functions as a proem of sorts to the text, explaining how she came to write the book

in response to reading a misogynist text (Maltheous) that makes her despise herself because of her sex. She then appeals to God to help her understand:

"Yet look at all these accusations which have been judged, decided, and concluded against women. I do not know how to understand this repugnance. If it is so, fair Lord God, that in fact so many abominations abound in the female sex, for You Yourself say that the testimony of two or three witnesses lends credence, why shall I not doubt that this is true? Alas, God, why did You not let me be born in the world as a man, so that all my inclinations would be to serve You better, and so that I would not stray in anything and would be as perfect as a man is said to be? But since Your kindness has not been extended to me, then forgive my negligence in Your service, most fair Lord God, and may it not displease You, for the servant who receives fewer gifts from his lord is less obliged in his service." I spoke these words to God in my lament and a great deal more for a very long time in sad reflection, and in my folly I considered myself most unfortunate because God had made me inhabit a female body in this world (Writings 172-3).

While some critics have pointed to this as proof of women's internalization of their own inferiority, if examined

closely, it can be seen in exactly the opposite light. While there is a sadness to (the character) Christine's lament, there is also anger just beneath the surface. How else are we to read her chastising of God for allowing the defamation of women, and her statement that she owes God less diligent service because he seems to have been lax in his, if not as an expression of anger? Anger is that province of human emotion which has historically been denied expression by women. Although expressed in the form of a lament, the anger Christine feels on the behalf of all women is very real.

Christine most assuredly acknowledges the position of women in society, but she steadfastly objects to its being either romanticized or reinforced in literature. Her objection to the *Romance of the Rose* was, after all, that it portrayed and characterized women according to unconscious and derived beliefs about women rather than the practices of actual women (Semple 179). Christine herself does some creative revising in building her *City of Ladies*, rewriting the stories of Dido and Semiramis to accentuate their positive accomplishments. Semiramis, who is traditionally condemned for mother/son incest is excused by Christine on the grounds of her historical context.

In Boccaccio's version of Semiramis' story, she passes a law which permits complete liberty (in the worst sense of the word) in sexual matters, clearing the way for her to take her son as a lover in addition to the many she already entertained. Christine argues that Semiramis' story took

place before their were written laws dealing with these matters, and that Semiramis *married* her young son because there was no one else who was her equal. While the act of incest remains the same, there is a great deal of difference between marrying to preserve a dynasty, and adding the son to a veritable stable of lovers.

By making Semiramis an autonomous queen, operating in the absence of any *written law*, Christine places her outside the scope of monolithic legal structures, relying, not on laws and authorities, but on her own skills, talent, and judgment. Christine rather selectively omits the fact that Semiramis was killed by her son, practicing "structural amnesia" in her text, "silently sloughing off the irrelevantly tragic end to Semiramis' story" (Quilligan 79-80). As the first builder in the *City*, we see a Semiramis who is not completely exonerated, but is also not entirely condemned.

Another city-founding woman, Dido, is cited by Christine in the first section of the book. Traditionally, Dido is criticized for dishonoring her husband Sichaeus' ashes by having an affair with Aeneas. Christine redeems Dido by pointing out her constancy and generosity in love, compared to Aeneas' ingratitude:

[H]e left after she had restored and enriched him with property and ease, his ships refreshed, repaired, and placed in order, filled with treasure and wealth, like a woman who had

spared no expenses where her heart was involved. He departed at night, secretly and treacherously, without farewells, and without her knowledge

(Quilligan, 173).

The fact that Christine began her *City* with pagan women might be seen as unusual, but one of the most liberating aspects of Christine's work is that she does strive to address every woman in some way. That she does not make a distinction, or value judgment between pagan and Christian women in history is not surprising, given the sources that she used. Her egalitarian nature only extends so far, though. She does present the martyrs and saints of the final section of the *City* as the height of perfection, and therefore the pinnacle of womanhood. This should be seen as a privileging of Christian virtue rather than an indictment of pagan women.

For Christine, the only boundary markers between women are those of virtue and authority. Her support of social hierarchy has been criticized, but given her own circumstances and the increasingly turbulent state of affairs in France, stability and order would have seemed very attractive.

As remarked earlier, Christine is primarily a secular writer; it is therefore interesting that she ends the *City* with tales of saints and martyrs, but should not be considered unusual. In fact, a greater number of women were

being canonized during this period than ever before, and religious texts by women were, for women's writing, the norm rather than the exception. Many writers' careers were authorized by the use of religious subject matter<sup>1</sup>(Quilligan 203). The use of martyrology therefore gives Christine an additional source of authority that she would not otherwise possess.

In her subsequent, and perhaps companion, book A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor (*Mirror* hereafter) Christine offers women of various social classes advice and guidelines on how to conduct themselves in a number of situations. There are several things that make this *Mirror* different from other conduct books of the period; hers is the first conduct book written by a woman for women, and is probably the only conduct book anywhere that addresses itself (albeit briefly) to prostitutes. This in itself can be seen as a reversal of her judgment in the *City* that only the "worthy" ladies will be allowed to live in the city. Her softening on this score should not be taken as inconsistency, however. The prostitute has to change her ways if she is to live in the city, but Christine at least allows for the possibility of rehabilitation and seems sincere in her pity for the situation in which "women of light morals" find themselves:

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<sup>1</sup>This use of religious texts as basis of authority is explored in greater detail in the next chapter on Margery Kempe.

Just as the sun shines forth on both the good and the wicked, let us extend our doctrine even to the frivolous, light-moraled, and dissolute. ...For Heaven's sake, you who bear the name of Christians and convert it to such baseness, get up and leave the dreadful muck(Mirror 214-5).

Her advice may seem harsh, but it is no gentler for the noble lady who succumbs to Pride:

Miserable, weak, blind woman! Your overweening pride seduces you to forget God's punishments. Though for a long time He may watch you plunged in your vices without giving you what you deserve, remember: The longer God's punishment tarries, the more perilous it is when it comes...

(Mirror 76).

It has been pointed out that over half the length of the book is concerned with the conduct of princesses and other noble ladies, but if we consider who might constitute not only an audience, but also patronage for her book, this is not terribly surprising. As Christine herself knew all too well, education was a difficult thing for women to obtain and noble women were the most likely to be literate. It should not be overlooked then that she devotes the other half of the book to women who would never be in a position to extend patronage, or might not even be able to read the book for themselves. It is her hope that noblewomen will

disseminate the advice in the book to their less fortunate sisters (Willard 147).

The style of the *Mirror* is noticeably different from that of the *City* in that Christine uses a simpler style with fewer classical allusions, and less use of allegory. Although Maureen Quilligan describes Christine's voice in the *Mirror* as more "submerged" than the voice in the *City*, there are several possible explanations for this (Quilligan 257). One explanation may be that Christine felt that she had established her "voice" sufficiently in the *City* and wished to use a plain style that would be accessible to more women, women from a variety of social and educational backgrounds:

Inevitably, the women, as well as the men, whom God establishes in the high seats of power and domination must be better educated than others. . . . They are the mirror and example of virtue for their subjects and companions. The first lesson, therefore, will be directed at them--the queens, princesses, and other great ladies. Then, step by step, we will begin to explicate our doctrine for women of the lower degrees, so that the discipline of our College may be useful to all (Mirror 70).

In addition to the noble ladies and the prostitutes, Christine addresses wives of merchants, artisans, and

"humbler folk", suiting her advice to their station and their needs.<sup>2</sup> Even the desperately poor receive Christine's attention, and if her advice to them to concentrate on their rewards in Heaven seems like a medieval version of "get over it", it should be remembered that there was little social mobility for the very poor in Christine's time. Rather than dismiss them, or omit mentioning them altogether, Christine reminds them that their patience in the absence of worldly comfort will be rewarded exponentially in Heaven.

Having addressed all levels of her society, Christine ends the *Mirror* with her ambitions for it as a text:

Afterward, having summarized, reviewed, and revised it, I think it is better than ever now, and extremely useful for the improvement of virtuous habits intended to increase the honor of ladies and all women now living and to be born. This advice will endure wherever this work may

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<sup>2</sup>It is perhaps difficult to understand in our ostensibly classless society that this is not meant to be patronizing on Christine's part. But the fifteenth century was not the twentieth, and a social hierarchy that seems oppressive to us now should not be judged by twentieth (or twenty-first) century standards.

circulate and be read. ... Therefore, I thought I would multiply this work throughout the world in various copies, whatever the cost might be, and present it in particular places to queens, princesses, and noble ladies. Through their efforts, it will be the more honored and praised, as is fitting, and better circulated among other women. I have already started this process; so that this book will be examined, read, and published in all countries, although it is written in the French language (Writings 224).

Not only does Christine have global ambitions for her work, but she makes an interesting comment in her emphasis on using the vernacular. She claims in the next paragraph that "French is a more common and universal language than any other", reflecting the shift from a predominantly Latin culture to one of vernacular language. Growing up in the court of Charles V, Christine was aware of, and likely participated in the translation of texts from Latin into French. Charles was committed to promoting French as a national language, and as a source of pride for scholarly writing in the French vernacular (Fenster 93-4). By now we are familiar with the Latin=male, vernacular=female division of language, and much speculation has been entertained as to whether or not Christine "knew" Latin. As Thelma Fenster points out Christine herself actually translated paragraphs from Thomas Aquinas's *Commentary on Aristotle's*

*Metaphysics* (Fenster 94). This obviously demonstrates that Christine could read Latin well enough to translate texts. Why then, did she enter into the *Roman de la Rose* debate with Latin humanists using French? It could be attributed to an ability to read, but not write Latin, but a more intriguing idea is one put forth by Fenster, that Christine, by using French forced her opponents in the debate to fight on her terms, and in her language. If Christine's use of vernacular language to engage in scholarly debate marked a moment in history, then "Christine's coming to learned writing as a woman was an act without a history, just as prose writing itself arose 'untainted' by any oral history" (Fenster 104). The nice thing about being first is that there are no expectations of what can be accomplished yet.

Christine was free to mark out her own ground as a writer unencumbered by any preconceived notions about what a secular woman writer could (or should) do and establish her authority on her own terms. If those terms included soothing male egos with protestations of her relative ignorance, so be it. The soothing tone was the velvet glove on Christine's iron-hard determination to defend the honor and dignity of all women, everywhere.

## *Chapter Four*

### *Margery Kempe*

Margery Kempe differs from the other women presented in many ways; as a bourgeois laywoman, she does not have the institutional support systems that the other women enjoyed, being neither an acknowledged religious such as Hildegarde of Bingen nor a well-educated woman familiar with courtly life like Christine de Pizan. Margery's societal position as a wife and mother offers her little scope for participating in her culture in a publicly significant way. Since Margery does not "meet the traditional requirements of mysticism" she must create an alternate identity for herself, but still uses mysticism to "provid[e] her with the means of composing her life" (Glenn 114). The liminal identity she creates for herself most resembles that of the position occupied by the beguines on the Continent.

It is from this marginal position that Margery pursues her quest for access to one of the few powerful roles available to medieval women: that of the mystic. Margery's use of the rhetoric of powerlessness consists in her insistence on her role as both persecuted mystic and as illiterate author. I would also argue that Margery's illiteracy is in some ways essential to her presentation of her *author-ity*.

I suggest that what Margery does is use her position of powerlessness/illiteracy in an increasingly literate culture

to secure herself a safe "space" to exercise her authority to speak of her direct revelations from God and to create an alternative identity for herself. Having experienced the life of a married woman, Margery struggles to live what she perceives to be the life of the mystic. By insisting on her powerlessness to control the physical and behavioral manifestations of her visionary experience, Margery in fact accesses the power available through the role of the mystic whose experiences of God may be challenged, but are more difficult to disprove. As Sidonie Smith points out, "[S]he came to her narrative influenced by prevailing and cherished 'fictions' about woman's mystical life. ...Kempe could look to a pantheon of famous women mystics and saints whose lives would have provided plentiful opportunities for identification, appropriation, revision" (Smith 66-7). In fact, it is only by reading the life of Marie d' Oignies that Margery's scribe is convinced of the sincerity and uncontrollability of Margery's experience.

Accounts of mystical experience often provided a privileged site for testing social identities, particularly for women. The social identity of the mystic depended on the acceptance, usually by a male clerical authority, of the revelation as an authenticated direct communication from God. Once the authenticity of the experience was 'proven,' no further justification should be needed to support the mystic's role as teacher. In Margery's case however, it requires multiple endorsements, and ongoing testing, and

never are we presented with a picture of Margery as a fully accepted member of the religious community. While we may be as reluctant as some of her questioners to see Margery's activities as 'teaching,' her endorsement by clerical authority does gain her access to public speech.

The mystic who could either write her own life experiences or gain the support of others to write a hagiographic text was appropriating powers of literacy usually reserved for male clerics or women within established religious institutions. In Margery's time this appropriation could be quite dangerous, as charges of Lollardy against her demonstrate. For the Lollards, "access to the written word was crucial" since the actual preachers of Lollardy were persecuted and often on the run or in hiding; "a book is more easily hidden than a man; the text is constant, if not permanent, where the spoken word is fleeting" (Hudson 231). Margery must therefore insist on her inability to read in order to circumvent suspicion of heresy.

Margery's descriptions of the problems she had in finding a scribe to write her experiences down for her parallel the problems she encounters in her quest to be accepted as a mystic. While Margery's self-asserted illiteracy makes the use of a scribe necessary, it also provides her with the mediation and validation of another (male) authority. Crucial to Margery's presentation of herself as illiterate is the story of the book's composition

given in the proem. This frame of scribal inadequacy and miraculous intervention not only demonstrates Margery's inability to write her own text, but gives Margery protection from charges of heresy or preaching that might be associated with a laywoman writing a book in order to instruct others. As we saw in the example of Marguerite Porete, this could be a deadly proposition. If Margery's illiteracy is in fact a posture she assumes, then her 'scribe' can be seen even more strongly as a strategy to increase her *author-ity*.

Lynn Staley Johnson calls attention to "The trope of the scribe" used by other authors besides Margery Kempe. She finds that both Margery and Julian of Norwich "seem especially aware of the ways in which the deployment of a scribe could be used strategically, as a means of maintaining control over texts they profess neither to control nor aspire to control" (Johnson 820). Both Margery and Julian "deployed scribes in ways that illuminate their senses of themselves as authors" (Johnson 827). Because Margery does not enjoy even the small authority that Julian does as a recognized anchoress and member of the official culture, it is even more necessary for Margery to establish her textual authority through the use of a scribe. She even uses Julian herself as a source of validation by describing her visit to Julian to ask about the nature of her "feelings".

By 'proving' the validity of her visionary experience through the use of a male amanuensis and the testimonials of Julian and various clerical authorities, Margery self-consciously locates herself within the particular discourse of Franciscan affective piety that would have been familiar to her from stories of saints' lives and the writing of mystics that were read to her. By choosing this mode of presentation, Margery seeks to establish her authority, both as a mystic and as an author. Her insistence on her illiteracy is similar to the self-reference of "the uneducated woman" that we saw in both Hildegarde and Christine.

In an increasingly literate society, Margery would have been well aware of the benefits, and the dangers, of literacy. John Wyclif emerged in the late fourteenth century as both a critic of the institutional church and a proponent of the idea that "priesthood inhered in all true believers" (Russell 84). Of key importance to this notion of true believers as the "real" clergy is the ability of those believers to have access to the scriptures. Vernacular translations of the Bible provided the layperson with this access, something that was very disturbing to clerical authorities who had reserved the privilege and authority of interpreting scripture for themselves. Wyclif's followers, who came to be known as Lollards, placed their main emphasis on preaching from the Bible, often excluding patristic or scholastic commentaries (Russel 86). At the time that most

of the events in Margery's book take place (ca. 1415-20), Lollardy was still very present in the minds of the clergy, and some heretics were still being burnt at the stake. A civil statute of 1401 ordered that convicted Lollards were to be executed. The rebellion of Sir John Oldcastle finally died out in 1414, when Margery would have been about forty-one years old. Reading and interpretation of scriptures in the vernacular were seen as suspect, and it is only by virtue of her illiteracy that Margery avoids this particular charge.

The more Margery's discourse reflects its resonance with Lollardy, the more she becomes dependent on the protection of male mediators to save her from the stake. Just as her life remains in the hands of male authorities, so too does her book remain in the hands of her scribe. "Without the two men, but particularly without the second, her life will be condemned to silence," (Smith 79). If we consider the radical suggestion that Margery was not, in fact, illiterate, but used the "trope of the scribe" to protect herself from persecution, the importance of the scribe is revealed in a completely different light. For a literate Margery, the "scribe" would serve the same function in the fifteenth century that a male pen name would in the nineteenth; the interdiction of a male name or voice gives legitimacy to a text in a culture in which female *author-ity* is seen as suspect.

The circularity of authority in The Book of Margery Kempe can be problematic; Margery must write her experiences to gain authority as a mystic, while at the same time insisting on her illiteracy and powerlessness to tell her own story. Given her stated illiteracy and its concomitant inability to use traditional methods of citing other authors and texts to support her claims to authority, Margery must look for authorization elsewhere. In Chapter 58 of Margery's book, she explains in detail how she has come to be familiar with so many texts:

[A priest visiting Lynn] read to her many a good book of high contemplation, and other books, such as the Bible with doctors' commentaries on it, St Bride's book, Hilton's book, Bonaventura's *Stimulus Amoris*, *Incendium Amoris*, and others similar.

And then she knew it was a spirit sent from God which said to her these words, as is written a little before, when she complained of a lack of reading...(Kempe 182).

Interestingly, Margery uses this list of texts and her experience with them in two ways; she insists on her illiteracy by emphasizing that the texts are read to her, while at the same time citing textual authorities.

Karma Lochrie presents an intriguing suggestion that Margery's piety, and her text, are more influenced by Latin sources than would appear to be consistent with her avowed

illiteracy. Lochrie cites an incident in which the steward of Leicester is questioning Margery; Margery asks him to use English because she cannot understand Latin, but later responds to a question in Latin without difficulty (*Translations* 114). This one example of inconsistency in Margery's reporting of her abilities is hardly sufficient to demonstrate that she was literate in either English or Latin, but it does introduce a seed of doubt as to how literally we should read Margery's protestations of her own ignorance. Given the very real dangers that Margery would have faced in presenting herself as a woman who taught, not only by virtue of her experience, but with the authority of one who could read, study, and interpret scripture, it should not be surprising that she would insist on her own inability to engage in activities reserved for the clergy.

This is where the circularity of authority becomes rather dizzying; Margery's experience authorizes her to be the author of her own experience. It is important to understand that the rhetoric of affective piety depended on this experiential form as opposed to the more learned and theological form most often exercised by more educated male clerics. By insisting on experience and divine revelation as the source of authority, women, and Margery in particular, could sidestep charges of "glossing" scripture and spreading heresy.

Given all the dangers inherent in Margery's outspokenness, why is it so important for her to write her

*Book?* I believe an argument can be made for Margery's desire to (re)claim a voice and a recognition that were denied her in her early, and more worldly, life. The over-hasty reproof of her confessor on the first page of the book is of key importance to understanding Margery's need to be heard:

Therefore, after her child was born, and not believing she would live, she sent for her confessor, as said before, fully wishing to be shriven of her whole lifetime, as near as she could. And when she came to the point of saying that thing which she had so long concealed, her confessor was a little too hasty and began sharply to reprove her before she had fully said what she meant, and so she would say no more in spite of anything he might do. And soon after, because of the dread she had of damnation on the one hand, and his sharp reproving of her on the other, this creature went out of her mind... (Kempe 41).

The tension between her need to confess and the priest's impatience with her sets the tone for the rest of the book. Margery herself attributes her madness to the disrupted confession, and her subsequent ventures into affective piety should be looked at through the lens of this failure on the part of institutional clergy to meet her need for comfort in her time of trouble. What we see is a Margery constantly striving to be heard, and understood, by her fellow

Christians. Margery presents her "homely" relationship with Jesus to common folk in "conversation and good words" (Kempe 164). That they reject her just as stridently as ever inspires Margery to gather authorizations from priests, confessors, and other "holy persons" that her "feelings" are divinely inspired.

Lacking the support of a recognized religious institution, Margery must in fact provide her own validation. Margery's moments of public speech allow her to "*presen[t] herself* as a prominent voice in her culture" (Smith 76). Her public position invites censure, even charges of heresy, which requires further appeals to authority to justify her words and behavior. This is not an easy task as Margery's life has not been one of quiet, virginal meditation, but rather of an extremely busy, noisy journey.

Even validation of her visions as genuine does not guarantee that Margery will be allowed to pursue her vocation in her own style. Margery visits the Bishop of Lincoln to request that she be allowed to wear "the mantle and the ring" and is initially refused. The bishop suggests that she wait to adopt such "singular clothing" until she returns from Jerusalem and has proven herself (Kempe 70). Even the priest/scribe who writes her book tests her, asking her to consult the Lord on "things that were to come and whose outcome were uncertain" (Kempe 90). This constant insistence that Margery prove herself gives her the

opportunity to illustrate narratively the persecution she must undergo for the sake of her religious belief, therefore aligning herself with martyrs, and with Christ himself.

Perhaps the most memorable, and most important, testing that Margery undergoes is conducted by the Archbishop of York. Many components of her unorthodox behavior are questioned in her meetings with the Archbishop, from her wearing of white clothes, to the charge that she is preaching and leading people astray, particularly women (Kempe 162-3).<sup>1</sup> Her deft response to the quoting of Paul is "I do not preach, sir; I do not go into any pulpit I use only conversation and good words, and that I will do while I live" (Kempe 164). While this may seem to be mere semantic quibbling, or more dangerously, a Lollard argument, on Margery's part, she does make an important distinction between the two activities that the Lollards did not make (Lochrie 111). By insisting that preaching only takes place in institutional settings and at prescribed times, Margery separates her "conversation" from the preaching activities that would result in censure by the institutional church.

This creative subversion of Paul's admonition against women speaking is a bold and dangerous move on her part, one

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<sup>1</sup>Margery is accused on at least two separate occasions of leading women astray, or encouraging them to leave their husbands. This does much to emphasize the very liminality of Margery's position in her society, in which women had very definite roles and places.

that is sure to antagonize, but also one that expresses perfectly Margery's frustration with the constant admonition against women's speech. It is her refusal to be silenced that is ultimately the point *and* the justification for the writing of the book. In fact, Margery uses her rejections and reproofs as another mode of authorization for her authorship. This, like her 'glossing' of Pauline doctrine, can be dangerous. Margery reports that God assures her repeatedly that all the slander and scorn she suffers only act as proof of her own sanctity and the relative blindness of her neighbors. This places Margery in a liminal position, "able to remain outside a society which denies her legitimacy without herself becoming spiritually or intellectually dispossessed by that society" (Lochrie 38). Margery's demonstrations of her affective piety gain her access to the tradition of female mystics, while her temporal reality of wife-and motherhood, and her seeming disinterest in entering a cloistered community (or a structured religious community of any sort) deny her access to the institutional protections enjoyed by women in religious orders.

It is this very liminality of position that separates Margery Kempe from other writers of spiritual autobiography or mysticism. Many of the women mystics whose stories Margery knew, and perhaps imitated, were recognized religious figures such as saints, martyrs, and anchoresses like her "neighbor" Julian of Norwich. As such, these women

were members of an approved religious community and therefore more likely to be at least nominally educated, and therefore to be taken more seriously than Margery herself. While nearly all mystics give examples of the experiences that induce them to write, and their doubt of their ability, those who are secure members of established communities do not spend nearly as much time chronicling the process of arguing their qualifications to write as Margery does. In some ways, her struggle to write her story *is* her story.

Another important factor in the relative "ease" of mind of the cloistered women is the very fact of their virginity, as opposed to Margery's ever-present physicality. We see no involved, abstract meditations in The Book of Margery Kempe; rather we see her "feelings" and conversations with Jesus as being very involved with Margery herself. Even her meditations on the birth and passion of Jesus involve her being 'physically' involved in some way, either presiding at the birth in the role of midwife, or comforting Mary after the crucifixion. Having been both a wife and a mother, Margery's "spiritual renewal must come through the medium of her female body rather than through its renunciation. Thus Margery's text lacks the disembodied quality characteristic of much medieval religious writing" (Harding 180). If we compare Margery's book to that of Julian of Norwich, we find that Julian's book contains very few references to her material existence aside from the descriptions of her illness that prompts the visions. Harding suggests that

"[I]n moving the narrative focus from the woman's body to the body of Christ, from the present to infinity, Julian's text is legitimized in a way that Margery's is not" (Harding 180). Julian legitimizes God's body, while Margery legitimizes her own.

For Julian, then "her life was not the text that authorized her written text" (Johnson 831). In fact, what little autobiographical information there is in the long version of Revelations of Divine Love is contained in about three pages. By omitting the references to her gender included in the short version, Julian is projecting a different type of persona, one that emphasized her authority as a theological writer rather than an experiential one (Johnson 831). It has been speculated that the fifteen years that Julian spent on her revisions of the short text may have included mastering the conventions of classical rhetoric, making the long version "at once less individualistic and more authoritative" (Johnson 832). The changes in voice between the two texts are accomplished in part by replacing the singular pronouns in the short text with the plural pronouns of the long one. By making only this minor change, "the unlearned and feeble woman has become a voice aligned with the community of the church and speaking with the authority of the seer and the teacher" (Johnson 832). This creates a tone of distance and objectivity that Margery Kempe only approaches with her use of the third-person narrator.

Mary Mason considers this strategy of third-person narration to be a minor stroke of genius, suggesting that the 'quasi-objectivity' of this stance "confers some sense of objective reality on scenes that might otherwise have little enough of the realistic about them" (Mason 219). Here we see the authorship of the book acting as authorization of the life once again. Margery was certainly familiar with stories of the saints' lives, even if she could not read them for herself. Some of the 'events' in Margery's tale bear a striking resemblance to conventional patterns of the conversion story- a first conversion after sickness, a period of penance and temptation ending in a second conversion or illumination, a five-year period of initiation culminating in a mystical marriage in Rome; its originality comes from the essence of Margery's individual personality that both fascinates and repels both her contemporaries and modern critics.

This abundance of individual personality present in The Book of Margery Kempe is of great importance to the argument for the book as autobiography. When Margery reports Christ telling her 'I take no hede what a man hath ben, but I take hede what he wyl ben' she takes this as an opportunity to refashion her present and hence her self (Beckwith 175).

While many mystics use introductory passages to present their experiences leading up to the writing of their books, Margery's book constantly shifts between narratives of her

life and descriptions of her "ghostly feelings." Rather than use her experiences simply as justification for her "feelings," often Margery's conversations with Jesus serve to validate her speech or behavior. In the end, what separates The Book of Margery Kempe from other mystical texts is that we learn more about Margery in her book than we do about God.

The question of Margery's intent to project so much of her own personality into her book brings us back to the question of the purpose and point of the book itself. It most certainly does not conform to a model of spiritual revelation as presented by other writers such as Hildegarde of Bingen, Margeurite Porete, or Julian of Norwich. Considering the resemblances to conventional stories of saints' lives that Margery was surely familiar with, it might best be described as a self-inscribed hagiography. Margery had a story she wanted to tell - her own. Finally then, Margery used the one model of female authorship that she was familiar with to tell her own story. This model was probably seen by Margery as the only one likely to be accepted as legitimate by both textual and clerical authorities. The emphasis that Margery places on her own powerlessness in the story is subversive in that it is her very lack of power, over text or even over her own behavior, that ultimately forms the basis for her authority.

## *Conclusion*

While this study does not pretend to be either exhaustive or definitive, the hope is that it has at least offered a slightly different way of looking at women's "speech" about themselves. The three women presented who use the rhetoric of powerlessness each use it in a manner unique to themselves.

Hildegarde of Bingen uses primarily cool, rational language in her instructional works, but employs a more lyrical, passionate language in her musical and artistic endeavors. Hildegarde appears to be quite conservative, and certainly reflects both her education and life within the institutional Church. If however, we "read her queerly," I believe an argument can be made for Hildegarde being quite "woman-centered" in her thinking. As part of the institutional Church, and its first great abbess, Hildegarde must maintain a balance between what is possible for her realistically, and what she would prefer. As foremother of female mystics yet to come, Hildegarde did her part to gain access for women to the religious discourse traditionally monopolized by male clerics. This small, but radical step opened the door for future women to stride through more boldly.

Where Hildegarde's celebration of, and arguments for, women were in some ways secondary to her religious life,

Christine de Pizan made the defense of women her life's work. Although considered conservative by twentieth century standards of feminism, Christine presents her contemporaries with the first feminist revisionist history in her Book of the City of Ladies. Her "conduct book", A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor, gives medieval women of all classes a navigational tool for operating within a patriarchal society. If we wish that women had been able to assert themselves more strongly, we should keep in mind the example of Marguerite Porete.

Marguerite Porete's case is admittedly an extreme example, but it does demonstrate what the very real dangers of autonomous female speech could be. What Marguerite proposes as her steps to "free the soul" are not any more radical than the teachings of other mystics of her time. Her refusal to be enclosed, or to be silenced, earned her a horrific death and the dubious distinction of being the first person burned by the Inquisition since the mid-thirteenth century.

The final woman in the study, Margery Kempe, is another bold speaker, but one who employs the rhetoric of powerlessness through her insistence on her illiteracy. Margery was certainly aware of the consequences of heterodox speech, and would have had enough examples from the Lollard trials in her own part of the country to illustrate the need for a strategy of presentation. Her illiteracy gives her

that strategy by removing the possibility that she is indulging in unmediated interpretation.

Since their works have (miraculously) survived to the present day in some form or other, all of the women represented were successful in getting their message heard. If the consequences for their own lives were negative, as in the case of Marguerite Porete, we can at least be thankful that the message these women strove to express has not utterly perished.

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