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### Mirrors of Heresy and Visions of Holiness: Using the Works of Marguerite Porete and Angela of Foligno to Examine Heresy and Holiness in Medieval Mysticism

Simone Prince-Eichner  
*Pomona College*

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2014  
Claremont Colleges Library  
Undergraduate Research Award

Sophomore Award Winner

**Simone Prince-Eichner**  
**Pomona College**

Reflective Essay

## Reflective Essay

When I stumbled upon the story of Marguerite Porete, a thirteenth century female mystic who wrote and disseminated her own theological treatise, was accused of heresy, refused to cooperate with Church authorities, and was burned at the stake as a heretic, I knew immediately that I wanted to explore the experiences of Medieval female mystics in the research paper phase of Professor Ken Wolf's "Heresy and Church" history research seminar. While Marguerite Porete's story was compelling on its own, I realized that a comparison between Marguerite Porete and another female mystic of the same era would make for a more nuanced analysis. At the suggestion of Professor Wolf, I began investigating the story of another thirteenth century mystic, Angela of Foligno. Initially, I expected to argue that what turned the Church against Marguerite was her unconventional status as a lay female offering religious commentary; however, the fact that the Orthodoxy embraced Angela—also an outspoken lay female who authored a theological text—suggested that my initial assumption was misguided. Furthermore, Angela's and Marguerite's texts center around remarkably similar theological ideologies. Why, then, did Marguerite meet an untimely demise in the flames of the Inquisition while Angela died a heroine of the faith in the arms of her Franciscan followers? The pursuit of the answer to this question motivated and guided my research and writing.

My research process began with a class workshop led by librarian Adam Rosenkranz of the Claremont University Consortium Library. Mr. Rosenkranz introduced us to the CUC Library's Research Guides, which I had not previously explored. The Medieval and Renaissance research guide proved immensely helpful, because it allowed me to limit my searches to journals and periodicals that deal exclusively with Medieval history scholarship. I also benefited from Mr. Rosenkranz's discussion about searching for sources effectively and efficiently using pertinent keywords and filters. Working through the CUC library portal, of course, also conferred the valuable benefit of *free* access to a tremendous volume of sources.

Because the texts that Marguerite and Angela produced are still available today (and have been translated into English), I was able to ground my research in three rich primary sources: Marguerite's *A Mirror for Simple Souls*, Angela's *The Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, and a series of Inquisitorial records and fourteenth century chronicles that describe Marguerite's trial,

conviction, and death. After searching the Blais library catalogue, I was able to obtain the *Mirror* and Angela's *Book* from the Claremont School of Theology Library. The trial records were available in translation in the appendix of a book titled *The Beguine, The Angel, and the Inquisitor*, available at the Honnold-Mudd Library. My research approach, as encouraged by Professor Wolf, involved prioritizing the primary sources, "mining" them for "data," and developing my own impression of the topic *before* reading secondary sources and considering the arguments advanced by other scholars. I actually wrote the bulk of my paper based exclusively on my analysis of Marguerite's and Angela's texts (and a general understanding of the historical context of the era from readings and discussions in the first half of the class). This was the first time I had approached a research topic in this manner, and although I was slightly worried about spontaneously generating a thesis identical to that of another scholar, I ultimately found the primary-source based research process liberating, as it ensured that my own independent take on the subject drove my understanding and analysis of the sources.

Following the primary-source phase of my project, I explored secondary sources, in order to address the historical context in which Marguerite and Angela lived and to assess the historiography of the topic. In addition to the Link-Plus service, the electronic delivery service of the interlibrary loan system, and Professor Wolf's own collection of Medieval history books, the Medieval and Renaissance Research Guide was particularly useful at this stage of my research (especially the "Iter" and the "International Medieval Bibliography" databases). Perplexed by the fact that I was not finding other scholarly works offering a compare/contrast analysis of Marguerite Porete and Angela of Foligno, I sought out the help of a librarian at the Services Desk to verify that I wasn't simply overlooking an entire genre of Medieval scholarship. This interaction proved a fruitful and reassuring experience. Using the Sherlock database, we found only two sources dealing simultaneously with Marguerite and Angela, both doctoral dissertations that approached the subject differently than my paper does. They were, however, extremely helpful reference points for situating my work within the historiography of scholarship on medieval female mystics. Had I more time at my disposal, I would have preferred to further develop my review of secondary sources to gain an even deeper understanding of the scholarly conversation surrounding my topic.

The separation between primary and secondary source analysis in my research process allowed me to view my topic with fresh eyes and offered me the freedom to develop my own distinct interpretations of Marguerite's and Angela's relationships to Orthodox authority. At the same time, what made the paper come alive was the integration of primary source data and an analytical framework inspired by secondary source research—in particular, the notable Medieval historian Herbert Grundmann's notion of the "single religious movement" that split off into the Orthodox and the heretical branches based not on ideology but on institutional authority. Such a framework, as my paper demonstrates, provides the key to explaining the paradoxical fact that striking ideological similarities are evident in a comparison of *A Mirror for Simple Souls* and *The Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, while the lives and fates of Marguerite Porete and Angela of Foligno diverge dramatically. Each step of the way, the CUC Library offered a wellspring of resources for my research, from instructive human-to-human interactions, to online databases, to the physical books that I adorned lavishly with multi-colored sticky notes.

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Research Project

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**MIRRORS OF HERESY AND VISIONS OF HOLINESS:  
USING THE WORKS OF MARGUERITE PORETE AND ANGELA OF FOLIGNO  
TO EXAMINE HERESY AND HOLINESS IN MEDIEVAL MYSTICISM**

*Simone Prince-Eichner*  
*Heresy and Church - Professor Wolf*  
*December 8, 2013*

## INTRODUCTION

Both Marguerite Porete and Angela of Foligno produced theological texts depicting the cultivation of a deep personal relationship with God and the attainment of spiritual perfection—a state of enlightenment characterized by the union of God and the soul through love. The two mystics would seem to occupy similar roles in the context of Medieval European religiosity; yet, while Marguerite was burned at the stake for heresy in 1310, Angela died a natural death in 1309, surrounded by a community of Franciscan followers, and she is now a canonized saint. The dramatically different circumstances surrounding Marguerite's and Angela's deaths elicit questions about the ways in which their lives diverged. Comparing and contrasting the lives and ideologies of these two female mystics through an analysis of their theological texts, this paper explores the Catholic Orthodoxy's reactions to late thirteenth century female mystics who pushed the boundaries of conventional Orthodox structures and seeks to understand what distinguished Marguerite's "heresy" from Angela's "holiness."

Although Marguerite and Angela acted within the same historical context, drew inspiration from a common religious movement, and exhibited comparable spiritual impulses, the contrasting ways in which the two women articulated their spiritual ideologies in relation to the established authority of the institutional Church led Orthodox authorities to condemn Marguerite a heretic while celebrating Angela as a model of holiness. While Angela carved out a niche for herself within the Franciscan order and manifested the conventional attributes of the unlettered, "simple," and intuitive female mystic who obediently reflected God's goodness, Marguerite kept herself detached from existing Orthodox structures, wrote and published her own text, and took ownership over her ideology. An examination of Marguerite's and Angela's ideologies and experiences suggests that the thin line between heresy and holiness in Medieval religiosity depended less on the particular spiritual substance of the ideology than on its capacity to disrupt the authority and hierarchy of the institutional Church.

Marguerite's and Angela's experiences, ideologies, and textual works are rooted in the particular historical context of the thirteenth century women's religious movement—which is itself a product of the apostolic poverty movement of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The apostolic poverty movement challenged the opulence of the Church, spawned the proliferation of unauthorized sects, and led the Orthodoxy to integrate potential dissenters into the Orthodox hierarchy (as epitomized by the creation of the Franciscan order).<sup>1</sup> As a result, the thirteenth century religious establishment came to reflect a Franciscan model of spirituality that emphasized the veneration of poverty, performance of penance, and a more intuitive spiritual experience. At the same time, social, economic, and political changes associated with the process of urbanization and the establishment of secular universities in Paris and Bologna resulted in a growing population of educated lay men and women.<sup>2</sup> Historian Paul Lachance explains that in the second half of the thirteenth century, "churchmen and clerical schoolmen seemed unable to understand the profound changes taking place within medieval society and unable to

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Lachance, "Introduction." In *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 25.



deal effectively with an emerging educated laity.”<sup>3</sup> The growing population of educated lay men and women, filled with the anxiety about an impending apocalypse and uncertainty about the ability of the institutional Church to satisfy their spiritual consciences, sought to actively engage with the religious structures of Medieval Europe. Women, excluded from the transitory vocation of preaching, frequently formed informal religious communities in order to pursue a life of spiritual enlightenment. In the Low Countries, these women were known as *Beguines*, and the communities they formed (called *Beguinaiges*) were “more or less organized communal arrangements that allowed for a non-cloistered combination of prayer and work—a new form of religious life that repudiated traditional ones they considered deficient and outdated.”<sup>4</sup> In Italy, the growing push for lay spirituality achieved realization in offshoots of Orthodox orders—such as the Franciscan Third Order of Penance, an order comprised of women and men who pursued a “‘middle way of life’ between the laity and clergy.”<sup>5</sup> With regard to the women’s religious movement, Marguerite’s France and Angela’s Italy underwent comparable transformations in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Born around the year 1260 in northern France, Marguerite Porete witnessed, engaged in, and shaped the women’s religious movement that unfolded in the Low Countries of northwestern Europe during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Angela of Foligno, born in 1248 in the Umbrian province of central Italy, was similarly positioned to participate in the parallel women’s religious movement that coursed through Italy during the late thirteenth century.<sup>6</sup> What makes the comparison between Marguerite and Angela so relevant, however, is not only the fact that both women acted on the same historical stage, but that both produced theological texts. Published in the 1290s, Marguerite’s *A Mirror for Simple Souls* is a theological treatise that describes the process by which the human soul may achieve unity with God—a transcendental state that Marguerite refers to as “divine love.”<sup>7</sup> *The Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno* is based on Angela’s dictation and was recorded by the Franciscan friar, Brother Arnaldo of Foligno. The first section of the book, completed in 1298 and titled “The Memorial,” depicts Angela’s transition from sin to spiritual enlightenment and describes her pursuit of an intimate connection to God. The second section of the book, completed between 1296 and 1309, is titled “The Instructions.” This section conveys the pillars of Angela’s spiritual philosophy and details the key elements of her teachings.<sup>8</sup>

Individually, Marguerite Porete and Angela of Foligno have attracted significant scholarly attention, though few historians have specifically compared the lives and texts of the two figures. Marguerite, on her own, has been the subject of more than one hundred scholarly analyses in the last quarter century.<sup>9</sup> Angela has received less attention than Marguerite. The first English translation of her text, for instance, was not completed

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<sup>3</sup> Lachance, “Introduction,” 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 141.

<sup>6</sup> Sean L. Field, *The Beguine, The Angel, and The Inquisitor: The Trials of Marguerite Porete and Guirard of Cressonssart*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 27; Lachance, “Introduction,” 16-23.

<sup>7</sup> Marguerite Porete, *A Mirror For Simple Souls*, trans. Charles Crawford. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Brother Arnaldo, “The Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno,” in *The Complete Works of Angela of Foligno*. trans. Paul Lachance. (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Robert E. Lerner, “New Light on The Mirror of Simple Souls,” *Speculum* 85 (2010), 91.

until 1993.<sup>10</sup> Even so, historians have produced a considerable body of work on Angela's life, text, and spiritual ideology.<sup>11</sup> Many comprehensive discussions of the women's religious movement include references to Angela of Foligno and Marguerite Porete, among other thirteenth century figures, but do not engage in an integrated discussion of the lives and texts of both Angela and Marguerite.<sup>12</sup> Among recent publications in the field of medieval history, only two studies focus simultaneously on Marguerite's and Angela's texts, and both are recent doctoral dissertations. Only one of the two—Anne O'Sullivan's "Model, Mirror and Memorial: Imitation of the Passion and the Annihilation of the Imagination in Angela da Foligno's 'Liber' and Marguerite Porete's 'Mirouer des Simples Ames'" —engages in an integrated comparison of Marguerite's and Angela's spirituality.<sup>13</sup> O'Sullivan's article fills a much needed void, drawing attention to the relevance of a comparison between Marguerite and Angela and emphasizing that the works produced by female mystics should be viewed not in a purely autobiographical context but rather within the "context of thirteenth century religiosity" in which "women's mysticism functioned as an intellectual, social, and religious phenomenon."<sup>14</sup> O'Sullivan further posits that a recognition of the "common cultural backgrounds" that informed Marguerite's and Angela's spiritual identities is "key to understanding the theological similarities" between the *Mirror* and the *Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*.<sup>15</sup>

Building on O'Sullivan's analysis, this work also seeks to shed light on the shared premise (the common ground of the thirteenth century religious environment) that gave rise to both Marguerite's and Angela's philosophies. However, while O'Sullivan focuses on ways in which this shared context produces similarities between the two texts, this exploration takes her conclusion one step further in another direction. The present study seeks to establish the nature of the common cultural background in order to tease out the process by which Marguerite and Angela acted on a shared religious impulse but found themselves on opposite sides of the thin line between heresy and holiness. This construction of both similarity and difference evokes the observations of historian Herbert Grundmann, who suggested that the historian of Medieval history must fulfill a "double-duty." According to Grundmann, the Medieval historian must not only demonstrate that religious developments of the Medieval era shared a "common heritage,

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<sup>10</sup> Lachance, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>11</sup> Lachance, "Introduction;" Dino S Cervigni, "Angela da Foligno's *Memoriale*: The Male scribe, the Female Voice, and the Other," *Journal of the American Association of Teachers of Italian* 82, nos. 3-4 (2005), 339-355; Ruth Smith, "The Mystical Self in the Book of Divine Consolation of the Blessed Angela of Foligno," *Mystics Quarterly*, 24 (1998), 8-22.

<sup>12</sup> Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); Caroline Walker Bynum, "Religious Women in the Later Middle Ages," in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Rait. (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 128-129. See Robin Anne O'Sullivan, "Model, Mirror and Memorial: Imitation of the Passion and the Annihilation of the Imagination in Angela da Foligno's 'Liber' and Marguerite Porete's 'Mirouer des Simples Ames,'" Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Chicago (2002), 7-8 for a discussion of the ways in which traditional narratives about the female religious movement have positioned the two women at opposite ends of the "heresy to holiness" spectrum—where Marguerite is the quintessential rebellious Beguine heretic and Angela is the model of Orthodox devotion.

<sup>13</sup> O'Sullivan, "Model, Mirror and Memorial;" Emily Holmes, "Writing the Body of Christ: Hadewijch of Brabant, Angela of Foligno, and Marguerite Porete," Ph.D. Dissertation, Emory University, (2008). Holmes focuses on both Marguerite and Angela (as well as Hadewijch of Brabant), but keeps the discussion of each figure separate from the others.

<sup>14</sup> O'Sullivan, "Model, Mirror and Memorial," 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

[and emerged] from a single religious movement” but also recognize the “factors which determined the articulation of the religious movement into...[holy] orders and [heretical] sects.”<sup>16</sup>

#### MARGUERITE PORETE’S *MIRROR FOR SIMPLE SOULS*

Marguerite Porete’s reasons for writing *A Mirror for Simple Souls* are simultaneously personal and pedagogical: on the one hand, Marguerite indicates that the *Mirror* is a divinely-inspired expression of her love for God; yet, at the same time, she presents her book as an instructional resource for those seeking to fully immerse themselves in the love of God. (Marguerite is adamant, however, that the *Mirror* is suitable only for those few individuals capable of understanding her sophisticated ideas). In describing to her readers how the book is to be understood, Marguerite explains that her yearnings for God’s presence led her to receive divine inspiration to write a book about her spiritual experiences and insights. God, she writes, “is so far from me and I am so far from him, that I am in distress. So he inspired me to write this book, which gives some inkling of the practice of his love.”<sup>17</sup> Marguerite then proceeds to establish the instructional value of the book by explaining that the *Mirror* describes the ways in which the soul can prepare itself to receive God’s love and to experience the “perfect freedom” of unity with God. The purpose of the *Mirror*, Marguerite writes, is to “show the way love works...[to] those who seek the perfection necessary for salvation.”<sup>18</sup> While Marguerite’s first comment indicates that the book emerged from her personal quest for God’s love, the second comment reveals that Marguerite saw her book not as a personal account but as a roadmap to enlightenment for those seeking a life of spiritual perfection.

Although Marguerite expresses her desire to educate others about the power of God’s love, she specifically warns her readers that her book expresses sophisticated ideas about spiritual matters that cannot be universally comprehended. In fact, she cites the cautionary words of the theological scholars who endorsed her book. She quotes, for example, the Franciscan friar Brother John of Querayn, who notes that her book is the work of the Holy Spirit, and therefore can only be understood “due to the working of that Spirit, not due to the learning of the readers.”<sup>19</sup> As a result, he suggests, “its inspiration is not for all; those incapable of understanding it should have it kept from them.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the theologian Godfrey of Fountaines recommended that the number of readers be kept to a minimum in order to ensure that the book would not incite those who had found their own spiritual path to “forsake ways that suited them better than the way put forward in these pages, which might not be apt for them.”<sup>21</sup> He further observes that the “words [of the *Mirror*] cut deep, and can only be appreciated by the few who have advanced beyond the early stages of the way of perfection.”<sup>22</sup> Marguerite’s inclusion of these cautionary statements suggests that she saw her book not as a “popular” text for

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, trans. Steven Rowan. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 24. Marguerite promises that, for those select few prepared to properly understand her philosophy, the *Mirror* will bear “good fruit” in the soul of the reader.

general consumption or as an “advertisement” for her ideology, but as a tool for spiritual advancement appropriate only for those individuals with a pre-existing proclivity for her spiritual ideology.

An examination of the major themes and ideas explored in *A Mirror for Simple Souls* reveals that the notion of “divine love” is the fundamental philosophic idea that guides the text and comprises the core of Marguerite’s philosophy. Divine love, according to Marguerite, is the “brightest, noble, and highest love that is found in the souls of those set free.”<sup>23</sup> By specifying that divine love resides only in the souls of those who have been set free, Marguerite contends that divine love is not a sensation that an individual can *seek* to attain, but an experience of joy and freedom that the soul *receives* from God. Marguerite suggests that the soul experiences divine love when it reaches a state of complete, self-consuming immersion in God’s love. Speaking through the character of the “Soul,” Marguerite writes, “Oh, the sweetness and truth and purity of this divine love! The joy of this union, in which I have become what I love more than myself!...Love has taken over my whole being, and I have become Love, my only love.”<sup>24</sup> The divine love that overtakes the being of the soul thus represents the integration of divinity and humanity—God’s love articulated through the enlightened human soul.

To receive divine love, Marguerite explains, the soul must replace its independent human will with God’s will, achieve a state of nothingness, and recognize its inherent wickedness. Marguerite refers to this process of spiritual advancement as the “ladder of perfection,” and she devotes the majority of her book to describing in detail the six stages through which the soul must pass before arriving at the final seventh stage in which it is absorbed in a “union of love” with God. Marguerite is adamant that the experience of divine love through the liberation of the soul requires not only through the abnegation of bodily sin and human nature, but also the death of the soul’s self-conscious will.<sup>25</sup> The ultimate goal of this self-abnegation is to reach a state of “nothingness” where the soul asks and desires nothing “except to give [itself] in perfect love.”<sup>26</sup> Marguerite refers to this state of nothingness as the “dark night,” and she explains that those who enter this space lose ordinary knowledge and consciousness; blinded to the rest of the world by the “light of divine knowledge,” the soul views “everything through God’s sight.”<sup>27</sup>

#### *THE BOOK OF THE BLESSED ANGELA OF FOLIGNO*

The impetus behind the creation of *The Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno* did not originate with Angela herself, but with a Franciscan friar by the name of Brother Arnaldo, who wrote the book using the notes he took during his conversations with Angela.<sup>28</sup> Brother Arnaldo explains it was Angela’s dramatic behavior at the Church of St. Francis of Assisi—where she arrived in a state of frenzied screaming and shouting—

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 67-68.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>28</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 136. For the sake of brevity, when referring to ideas, actions, and statements that Brother Arnaldo attributes to Angela of Foligno, I will refer to them as her ideas. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the Angela we see in the *Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno* is filtered through the “penmanship” of Brother Arnaldo.

that first inspired him to discover “the cause of her shouts.”<sup>29</sup> Arnaldo explains, “I wished to write absolutely everything so that I could consult with some wise and spiritual man...I wished to do this so that she could be in no way deceived by an evil spirit.”<sup>30</sup> This comment indicates that Brother Arnaldo’s initial reason for recording Angela’s words stemmed from his concerns about her spiritual wellbeing. When it later became apparent to Brother Arnaldo that he was witnessing the power of divine grace articulated through Angela’s being, he was filled with a “great reverence and fear” and felt compelled by God to record her experiences and teachings.<sup>31</sup> In this way, Brother Arnaldo suggests that the text is a divinely inspired work: not only was he compelled by God to write, but “the faithful servant of Christ [Angela] was likewise altogether compelled by God to speak.”<sup>32</sup>

The fact that the *Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno* is the two-layered product of Angela’s dictation and Brother Arnaldo’s transcription makes it difficult to determine whether the text reflects Angela’s authentic experiences. On the one hand, Arnaldo asserts that he added nothing of his own. He explains, “I did not want to write anything after I had left her...unless it was exactly as I could grasp it just out of her mouth as she related it.”<sup>33</sup> At the same time, however, he also indicates that he made decisions about the content and structure of the book based on his own discretion: “My guiding principle was to divide the subject matter according to the state of grace I perceived Christ’s faithful one to be in, or according to what I perceived and learned of her spiritual progress; and also according to what seemed to me most fitting and appropriate.”<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, Arnaldo explains that any doubts about the veracity of the text were definitively resolved by none other than God himself, who offered Angela “a wonderful revelation...that what we had written was completely true and without falsehood.”<sup>35</sup> Even this divine imprimatur, however, cannot address the larger issue of the “ineffability” of God’s grace. Throughout the book, Angela insists that it is impossible to explain the vividness and transcendent nature of her experiences; she even goes so far as to suggest that her attempts to explain her experiences are so weak that they ought to be rejected as blasphemy.<sup>36</sup>

The central motif of Angela’s mysticism, as portrayed in the *Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, is the intimacy of her relationship with God. As noted by historian Paul Lachance, Angela’s “passionate love affair with ‘the suffering God-man,’ the crucified Christ, is the central and organizing principle of her journey.”<sup>37</sup> Throughout the text, Angela’s experiences of God’s love are given to her in visions and revelations, and it is in moments of divine illumination that Angela gains spiritual wisdom and is divinely guided to the next stage of her journey.<sup>38</sup> For example, Angela describes an encounter with God in which he assures her, “as soon as you have finished what you have set out to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 137, 124.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 211, 138, 143, 212, 213.

<sup>37</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 85.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 182, 128, 132, 173, 158, 189, 215.

do the whole trinity will come into you.”<sup>39</sup> She goes on to recall, “God drew me out of all tribulation and departed from me very tenderly. From then on, I eagerly awaited the fulfillment of what he had promised.”<sup>40</sup> In response to this transformative experience, Angela sells all of her possessions and dedicates herself to completing the final seven steps on the path to spiritual perfection. In her revelations, Angela experiences not only the abstract power of God’s love, but also the physical presence of God. Frequently, Angela describes her experience of God in relation to her own physical perceptions of Christ’s crucified body and her determination to internalize his suffering. She writes, for instance, “Christ on the cross appeared...[and] he gave me an even greater awareness of himself than before...it seemed to me that I saw and drank the blood, which was freshly flowing from his side. His intention was to make me understand that by his blood he would cleanse me.”<sup>41</sup>

Identifying heavily with the suffering of Christ, and inspired by God’s divine revelations, Angela concludes that the key to spiritual perfection is the attempt to imitate the life of Christ. She writes, in fact, “the imitation of the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary is the foundation of all virtues as well as the light for the knowledge of God and self.”<sup>42</sup> Her spiritual teachings highlight the necessity of forgetting worldly matters, embracing poverty, constraining the will, and enduring tribulation. In order to “seek the way of the cross,” Angela explains, “I would need to go naked to it...forgiving all who had offended me, stripping myself of everything worldly, of all attachments to [people] and, likewise of my possessions and even my very self. Then I would be free to give my heart to Christ...and to walk along the thorny path...of tribulations.”<sup>43</sup>

## COMPARING AND CONTRASTING MARGUERITE’S AND ANGELA’S TEXTS

### *Motivations for Writing*

That the Orthodoxy condemned Marguerite as a heretic while embracing Angela as a model of holiness begs questions about the intentions with which the two women approached the writing of their texts. At first glance, one might ascribe motives to the authors that account for their dramatically different encounters with the Orthodoxy. Because Marguerite makes certain radical statements that seem to threaten Orthodox doctrines, the *Mirror* could be seen as a subversive text designed to challenge the Orthodox status quo. It is likewise tempting to suggest that Angela dutifully reinforces Orthodox authority by identifying with the established Franciscan order and reinforcing the familiar practice of the *imitatio Christi*. Yet, to assert that Marguerite was motivated by a desire to dissent and to assume that Angela saw herself as a conservative model of Orthodox piety would be to ignore Marguerite’s deliberate efforts to establish the legitimacy of her text and to deny Angela’s personal agency.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 251.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 126.

In the first paragraph of the *Mirror*, Marguerite announces that the text “has already been read and approved by three men of learning and holiness.”<sup>44</sup> She goes on to establish the qualifications of the three men who read the *Mirror*—Brother John of Querayn, a Franciscan friar; Dom Frank, a Cisterican monk; and Godfrey of Fountaines, a renowned theologian. John of Querayn called the book “the work of the Holy Spirit,” Dom Frank considered the *Mirror* to be “in full accord with the Scriptures,” and Godfrey of Fountaines “found no fault in it.”<sup>45</sup> Both John of Querayn and Dom Frank belonged to established orders, and Godfrey of Fountaines, though not a clergyman, was a highly respected secular scholar who operated within the sphere of the Orthodoxy.<sup>46</sup> By emphasizing the “credentials” of those who approved the text, Marguerite establishes that the *Mirror* received the sanction of Orthodox authority. That she sought out the judgment of Orthodox authorities and reported their favorable reviews in her book suggests that Marguerite was interested in following the appropriate procedure for publishing a theological text and that she had reasonable grounds to expect that her book would continue to attract favorable reviews by Church authorities.<sup>47</sup>

Like the *Mirror*, the *Memorial* begins with a section proclaiming the approval of the text by Orthodoxy authorities. Significantly, however, this approbation does not reflect the degree to which Angela was concerned about the legitimacy of her spirituality, but rather the extent to which Brother Arnaldo was concerned about the legitimacy of the text.<sup>48</sup> It is important to recall that the *Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno* is the reconstructed product of Arnaldo’s queries into Angela’s personal experiences. Angela herself does not exhibit a desire to actively cultivate an image of “orthodoxy.” On the contrary, she demonstrates a commitment to prioritizing her personal pursuit of spiritual perfection. In fact, Angela’s role as a “spiritual teacher” is subordinate to her primary identity—that of a penitent seeking to attain spiritual perfection. At times, Angela’s immersion in her personal spiritual quest leads her to celebrate her personal experiences even when they diverge from Orthodox conventions. For example, she describes one particularly enlightening revelation, in which she “was filled with such certainty, such light, and such ardent love of God” that she came to understand, “with the utmost certainty, that nothing of these delights of God is being preached. Preachers cannot preach it; they do not understand what they preach.”<sup>49</sup> Her willingness to call out the shortcomings of preachers indicates that Angela was not particularly concerned about the judgments others might make about her spiritual ideology, suggesting that Angela saw herself not as a model of Orthodox piety but as an independent mystic.

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<sup>44</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 23.

<sup>45</sup> Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 49.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 49. Field suggests, “The praise of Godfrey of Fountaines must have been the glittering jewel in Marguerite’s array, for Godfrey was among the best-known theologians of his age. If a master theologian could praise the *Mirror* then Marguerite might reasonably have hoped that Bishop of Guido’s condemnation was simply wrong.”

<sup>48</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 123. Arnaldo reports that the Cardinal-Deacon James of Colonna, as well as eleven other Franciscans—including two inquisitors and three friars “known for their modesty and spiritual life”—placed their stamps of approval on the text. None of the readers, Arnaldo continues, “saw any traces of false teachings in this book—on the contrary, they treat it with a humble reverence, and cherish it most dearly, like a holy book.”

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 131. For other examples of instances in which Angela expresses similarly “radical” views, see pages 184, 188, 192, and 207.

### *The Ideological Substance of the Texts*

Marguerite and Angela share considerable ideological common ground, as evidenced by the fact that both express similar ideas about the nature of spiritual perfection, seek personal relationships with God, extoll the superiority of love and intuition over reason, and highlight the importance of self-abnegation and the subjugation of worldly desires. Although Marguerite's and Angela's conceptions of spirituality are very similar on an abstract theoretical level, the two women do not share the same ideas about the *process* by which spiritual perfection can be attained, nor do they use the same language and imagery to frame their observations. While Angela embeds her philosophy within existing Orthodox structures, integrating the unconventional aspects of her philosophy with familiar narratives, Marguerite draws attention to the places where her ideology contradicts established norms by insisting that conflicting Orthodox doctrines are not merely *incompatible* but also *inferior*.

Both Marguerite and Angela express a desire to experience a direct, personal relationship with God. Early in the text, Marguerite explains that spirituality should not be pursued through a "go-between" that dilutes the power of God's love. The soul, writes Marguerite, "like the seraphim...wants nothing that comes through a go-between. It is the nature of the seraphim to have no intermediary between their love and God's love, and to know everything directly...[there is a] great a difference...between the love that comes through a go-between and the love that comes direct from the beloved."<sup>50</sup> Like Marguerite, Angela also celebrates the fact that there is no intermediary between herself and God.<sup>51</sup> She recounts a vision in which she is told, "God almighty has deposited much love in you, more than in any woman of this city...he stands continually over you even if you do not always feel his presence in the same way as you do now. At this moment, his eyes are turned toward you."<sup>52</sup>

While Angela's commentary about her personal relationship with God is limited to her descriptions of the delight she experiences in God's loving presence, implicit in Marguerite's commentary about her personal interactions with God is a dismissive attitude toward the authority of the Church. According to Marguerite's conception of divine love, the soul must pursue an unmediated, personal relationship with God. She claims that the soul immersed in God has no interest in the Church: "the Church cannot recognize them without entering into their souls, and there is no room in their souls for anything made, but only for God, who made them."<sup>53</sup> By suggesting that the enlightened soul does not have room for the Church, Marguerite lays the foundation for a spiritual ideology that operates independently of Orthodox structures.

The idea that the intuitive force of love is more powerful than "dry reason" permeates the text of the *Mirror* and the *Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*. The *Mirror*, for example, is structured as a "dialogue" between the characters of the Soul, Love, and Reason.<sup>54</sup> Marguerite characterizes Reason as an unsophisticated fool whose ignorance and dimwittedness prevents her from recognizing the wisdom and superiority of Love, who is constantly trying to earn the allegiance of the soul and demonstrate the inferiority

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<sup>50</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 33.

<sup>51</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 205, 126, 215.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 148-149.

<sup>53</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 58, 47, 51, 71.

<sup>54</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 84-86.



of reason. In a discussion about the true nature of spiritual perfection, Reason remarks with characteristic ineptitude, “I teach people to seek disgrace and poverty and other mortifications, to go to mass, listen to sermons, fast and say their prayers, to be on their guard against nature...to long above all things for heaven, and to be afraid of going to hell...This is the best advice I can give to those who try to live by my precepts, so how can they understand this book if they follow those?”<sup>55</sup> Like Marguerite, Angela asserts that love is preferable to reason. In fact, Angela reports that God himself specifically asked her to avoid emulating “those who preach only with words of learning and dryly report the deeds of saints,” encouraging her instead to “speak...with the same divine savor as those who performed these deeds.”<sup>56</sup> Angela further suggests that those who attempt to spread God’s love through “force of reason” are engaging in “imperfect and suspect love toward God.”<sup>57</sup>

By drawing a connection between reason and the Church, however, Marguerite delivers a potent—though indirect—criticism of the Orthodox establishment. Throughout the text, the character of Reason echoes the voice of the Church. She goes on to explain that the church ruled by reason is the “lesser church,” in comparison to the “greater church” ruled by love.<sup>58</sup> The mere idea that love could be more powerful than reason was not inherently a radical concept. Angela, for example, invokes the superiority of love without demonizing reason or associating her preference for the force of love to a criticism of the Church. Further, the debate over the relative merits and pitfalls of love and reason was a familiar topic among Orthodox theologians.<sup>59</sup> What *is* radical about Marguerite’s criticism of reason is her willingness to associate the folly of the character of Reason with the firmly entrenched rituals of Orthodox religiosity—mass, prayer, sermons, and fear of hell.<sup>60</sup> Compounding the potentially inflammatory content of Marguerite’s argument is the derisive tone with which the character of Love expresses her contempt for those Reason and her “insect-brained” companions, those “small minded, coarse people who follow the asinine course of Reason!”<sup>61</sup>

Marguerite and Angela both insist that spiritual perfection requires the recognition of one’s unworthiness and wickedness, the mortification of worldly desires, and the abnegation of the independent will. In fact, both suggest that it is only through the recognition of the soul’s utter unworthiness that the profound goodness of God’s love reveals itself. Angela writes, for instance, “While I was praying the Our Father I received deep in my heart a very clear awareness of the divine goodness and my own

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>56</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 262.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 225, 221-223.

<sup>58</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 57, 58.

<sup>59</sup> Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1938), 54-56, 70, 77. See pages 54-55 for Gilson’s discussion of the ways in which thirteenth century Church authorities struggled to reconcile the tension between theology (which assumed that truth was that which had been divinely revealed by God) and philosophy (the doctrine of Aristotelian rationalism brought to Roman Catholic Europe by twelfth century Arab philosopher Ibn Rashd). Gilson writes, for example, “On the one side, they were good Christians and sincere believers. To them, it was beyond a doubt that the Christian Revelation was, not only the truth, but the ultimate, supreme, and absolute truth...On the other side, and this time as philosophers, this group failed to see how any one of Averroes’ philosophical doctrines could be refuted. What were they to do in the many instances where their faith and their reason were at odds?”

<sup>60</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 36-37, 41, 54, 57, 90, 81, 83. Marguerite’s allusion to the existence of two churches of unequal levels of holiness could have reinforced the idea that Marguerite’s ideology represented a threat to orthodox hegemony.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 92, 106.

unworthiness...I was so aware of my own sins and my unworthiness, still, on the other hand, I felt a great consolation and I began to taste something of the divine sweetness.”<sup>62</sup> Marguerite also suggests that it is only through the recognition of the depth of one’s wickedness that the soul can see the heights of God’s goodness. She writes, for instance, “the more [the soul] sees of herself the more realizes that she cannot see the true extent of her wickedness...this is the lowest point she can reach, and from this point she is able to look up and clearly see the sun of God’s goodness.”<sup>63</sup> Angela and Marguerite also emphasize the necessity of indifference to worldly concerns. When the soul “sees the One who is,” Angela explains, it comes to realize that “death, infirmity, honor, [and] dishonor” are all equally insignificant. In Marguerite’s text, Love states that it is only when souls “forsake all their outer desires and turn to the inner life of the spirit” that they can achieve divine love.<sup>64</sup> Further, both texts invoke the abnegation of the soul and the human will, suggesting that the attainment of unity with God requires the death of the soul. “True annihilation,” Angela notes, “consists of becoming aware that we are not the authors of any good.”<sup>65</sup> She proceeds to explain that the soul must achieve this annihilation in order for it to realize how much it is loved and to experience God’s grace.<sup>66</sup> Marguerite offers a similar depiction of the process by which the death of soul fuels the fire of divine love: souls that live in a “state of death according to the divine will,” she writes, “are so consumed in the fire of love that they cannot feel the flames, being fire themselves, aflame with pure love.”<sup>67</sup>

#### DIVERGING APPROACHES TO ACHIEVING SPIRITUAL PERFECTION

Although Angela and Marguerite both see the death of the soul and the abnegation of the will as an essential element of spiritual perfection, the two individuals build upon the narrative of abnegation to construct two very different methods for achieving spiritual perfection. On the one hand, Angela constructs a mechanism for achieving spiritual perfection that finds its inspiration in the emulation of the penitential practices of St. Francis, the performance of charitable works, and devotion to “the rules of the Church.”<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, Marguerite’s conception of the doctrine of abnegation leads her to transcend the institutionalized mechanisms of piety that the Church provides; the self-sufficient nature of Marguerite’s philosophy thus threatens the procedural authority of the Church.

##### *Angela’s Approach*

The attainment of God’s divine love, according to Angela’s spiritual ideology, hinges on the performance of bodily penance. She declares that “true love is at work” only when the soul “takes up its cross” and performs “penance as long as one lives, penance as great

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<sup>62</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 129.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>64</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 126.

<sup>65</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 229.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>67</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 65.

<sup>68</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 151.

and harsh as possible.”<sup>69</sup> Angela sees penance as an opportunity to cleanse the soul of “malice, iniquity and sin” and as an opportunity to share the suffering of Christ.<sup>70</sup> She asserts, in fact, that penance is the rightful heritage of God’s children: “the father handed down the heritage of the cross and penance to his only Son...it is fitting that all the sons of God, the more they reach perfection, assume this heritage and adhere to its implications all their life.”<sup>71</sup> Angela notes that the “entire life of the suffering God-man was filled with the most bitter effects of the cross and penance.”<sup>72</sup> Angela thus constructs a framework in which her potentially radical conception of bodily penance is expressed in terms of established Orthodox tradition—the imitation of Christ. Not only does Angela express a desire to perform penance, but she identifies heavily with the idea of martyrdom—in fact, she laments that she cannot “imagine a vile enough death to match [her] desire.”<sup>73</sup> Because martyrdom is deeply entrenched in the identity of the Church, Angela’s desire to perform the ultimate act of penance—“to be killed on account of [her] faith and love of God”—further establishes her legitimacy as a voice of Orthodox spirituality.<sup>74</sup>

Angela’s ideology, particularly her emphasis on voluntary poverty, penance, and self-mortification, reflects her desire to emulate St. Francis. By identifying with St. Francis, Angela carved out a niche for herself within the Orthodox hierarchy, presenting herself not an independent newcomer proffering a non-traditional spiritual doctrine, but as a devotee of a popular Orthodox figure. Angela’s first forays into mystical experiences (which manifested themselves as inordinately passionate outbursts of shouting and screaming) were legitimized by her participation in the mainstream activity of making a pilgrimage to the church of a popular saint.<sup>75</sup> That Angela integrated herself into the Franciscan order was particularly strategic. From its inception, the Order of the Friars Minor acted as a “buffer zone” between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, a mechanism for incorporating potential agitators into the fold of the Orthodox hierarchy.<sup>76</sup>

Angela suggests that spiritual perfection requires adherence to the virtues of humility and charity, leading her to extoll the value of the “other-centered” life of charity and service. True devotion to charity, she suggests, facilitates the soul’s ascent into the divine joy of God’s love. Angela reports that God instructed her to be “useful” and “of service” to anyone she might encounter.<sup>77</sup> In an effort to fulfill this duty, Angela describes a visit to a hospital in which she and her companion not only “washed the feet of the women and the hands of the men, and especially those of one of the lepers which were festering and in an advanced stage of decomposition” but also “drank the very water with which we had washed him.”<sup>78</sup> Angela explains that her intention was to “find Christ there among the poor, the suffering, and the afflicted,” and she notes that the water with which she had washed the body of the leper “was so sweet that, all the way home, we tasted its

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<sup>69</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 229.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 219, 224.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 224.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 224, 303.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 128, 150, 174.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 141-143.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 29-33; see also: Andre Vauchez, *Sainthood on the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 205-207.

<sup>77</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 168.

<sup>78</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 163.

sweetness and it was as if we had received Holy Communion.” As this dramatic anecdote suggests, Angela links the performance of charity and service to the pursuit of spiritual perfection.<sup>79</sup>

### *Marguerite’s Approach*

Focusing exclusively on the love between the soul and God, Marguerite dismisses the idea that the soul ought to love “the Church” or “the faith,” thereby distancing herself from the institutional authority of the Church. Marguerite does not exhort her readers to strengthen their allegiance to the “mother church” nor does she emphasize the importance of striving to advance the “the faith.” Instead, she explicitly describes the inability of the Church to truly recognize and convey God’s greatness, writing, “God’s goodness is worth more than anyone can do in a hundred thousand years or anything the Church can do in history.”<sup>80</sup> The Church, she goes on to explain, promotes a relationship with God based not on love but on fear. Marguerite believes that acting out of reason and fear can only lead the soul into slavery, “whereas real freedom can only come from doing things out of faith and love.”<sup>81</sup> According to Marguerite, the pursuit of divine love through the development of a personal relationship with God is the only true path to freedom. The Church, Marguerite complains, is a fear-based institution that enslaves the soul and is incapable of truly conveying God’s greatness. By associating “reason” and “fear” of the Church with “slavery” while equating her own conception of divine love with “real freedom,” Marguerite introduces a sense of polarity between the spirituality of the Church and the ideology she espouses in the *Mirror*.

The distance between Marguerite’s mysticism and the conventional doctrine of the Church is further demonstrated by Marguerite’s assertion that religious activity stemming from fear of damnation and the desire to achieve individual salvation can never lead the soul to divine love. To intentionally seek salvation, Marguerite argues, is to cater to a human will that exists independently of God’s will. Because true love requires the complete abnegation of the will, a soul that indulges its desires—even when its desires consist merely of pleasing God—falls short of love.<sup>82</sup> To illustrate this point, Marguerite explains that a “free” soul (one that has reached a high level of spiritual perfection) is indifferent to its fate in the afterlife: “If anyone were to ask these [free] souls whether they would like to be in purgatory, they would answer ‘No,’ if they would like to be certain of salvation while still in this world, again ‘No;’ if they would rather be in Paradise, ‘No!’”<sup>83</sup> A free soul does not seek to avoid the torments of hell nor does it strive to secure the rewards of paradise; Marguerite indicates that this indifference stems from the fact that the wills of enlightened souls are “possessed by Him who is; he knows what is good for them, and they are content with this, without any further knowledge, let alone certainty.”<sup>84</sup>

Marguerite saw fear of damnation and the desire for salvation as a bane to spiritual perfection. The narrative of salvation, however, constitutes the very essence of the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 178, 214.

<sup>80</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 152.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

<sup>84</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 38-39.

identity of the Orthodox Church. Through her insistence on the inappropriateness of seeking personal salvation, Marguerite dismisses the Orthodox conception of religious activity as a preventative, incentive-based mechanism for avoiding damnation. She asserts, “the Church [is] here being understood as mainly to do with those who live in fear of the Lord...but this fear of the Lord can be a disturbing influence in the life of complete freedom.”<sup>85</sup> Marguerite’s comments about the ways in which the Church exerts a “disturbing influence” on spiritual freedom is indicative of the broader incompatibility between her ideology and prevailing Orthodox doctrine.

By arguing against the necessity of performing “virtuous” activities designed to guide the soul to salvation, Marguerite dismisses Orthodox conceptions of piety. An individual who obeys the “virtues,” according to Marguerite, is one who obeys the rules and formalities of the Church—subduing bodily desires through the mortification of the flesh, praying consistently, fasting, and performing acts of charity. To engage in these actions, Marguerite contends, is to mold the soul to externally imposed definitions of piety. Those who “practice the virtues,” Marguerite writes, “mortify their bodies through continual good works...[and] bolster themselves up with a continual barrage of prayers and good intentions. But because they cannot see the better way, they are blind and perish for lack of spirit.”<sup>86</sup> Again, Marguerite denounces action that stems from “good intentions” and the desire to achieve virtuousness, because such intentionality—however “holy” it may be—presupposes the existence of an independent will, which Marguerite considers the ultimate impediment to divine love. She does not reject the virtues unconditionally, however. According to Marguerite, only the soul “at the highest state of perfection” is “beyond the works of virtue.”<sup>87</sup> Additionally, she notes that the “perfected” soul has not actually *abandoned* the virtues, but rather, “has assimilated them to the point where they are a part of her and obey her intrinsically.”<sup>88</sup> Despite these explanatory remarks, Marguerite’s comments about the limitations of the virtues challenge the procedural authority of the Church. She suggests, for example, that the perfected soul is “beyond noticing the rules of the Church,” that those who “see God as bound by his sacraments and works...are silent and miserable for not finding him,” and that the soul whose will is “fixed in the trinity” does not need to perform the “mundane tasks” of the virtues.<sup>89</sup>

#### THE ORTHODOXY’S RESPONSES TO THE *MIRROR* AND THE *BOOK OF THE BLESSED ANGELA OF FOLIGNO*

The Inquisitorial records of the legal proceedings against Marguerite, as well as the fourteenth century chronicles that mention her trial and death, offer insight into the Orthodoxy’s reasons for condemning Marguerite as a heretic. An examination of the legal documents and chronicle entries indicates that Marguerite’s status as a heretic had its origins in the Orthodoxy’s perceptions about the heretical nature of the *Mirror*. For instance, William of Paris (the head inquisitor of France) explained his decision to excommunicate and remand Marguerite to secular justice by noting that she had

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 151, 110, 125.

“composed a certain pestiferous book containing heresy and error.”<sup>90</sup> Fourteenth century chroniclers, who recorded the news of Marguerite’s execution, also linked her heresy to the publication of a heretical book. William of Nangis’s *Chronicon* reads, “Marguerite, called ‘Porete’ had published a certain book, in which, according to the judgments of all the theologians who diligently examined it, many errors and heresies were contained...”<sup>91</sup> The significance of the book itself as a source of heretical ideology is further demonstrated by the fact that William of Paris not only condemned Marguerite as a heretic and relinquished her to the fate of execution at the hands of secular authority, but he also condemned her book itself as “heretical and erroneous,” specifying that it must be “exterminated and burned” and insisting that “every and each person having the said book, under pain of excommunication, is required to turn it over without fraud to us.”<sup>92</sup>

At the request of William of Paris, twenty-one masters of theology gathered in Paris in April of 1310 to analyze passages extracted from Marguerite’s *Mirror for Simple Souls*.<sup>93</sup> What is remarkable about the document the theologians drafted is the narrow scope of their critique of the *Mirror*. The canon masters note that William of Paris identified “several articles” for their review, and the memorandum conveying their conclusions refers to only two passages.<sup>94</sup> Significantly, both selected passages reflect the more “concrete” aspects of Marguerite’s philosophy. The canon masters do not target the fact that Marguerite—as a lay woman—interpreted Scripture, nor do they take issue with the abstract idea of pursuing a personal relationship with God; rather, their criticism hinges on the “policy” aspects of Marguerite’s text, the places where she offers the soul a map to the attainment of spiritual perfection that does not engage with—but rather detours around—the institutional Church.

The canon masters were less disturbed by the abstract conceptual framework of Marguerite’s philosophy than by her ideas about its implementation. According to Marguerite, the enlightened soul no longer needs to manifest its piety by performing virtuous deeds because it has fully internalized the essence of virtue.<sup>95</sup> In order to establish the heretical nature of Marguerite’s text, the canon masters point to the notion that “the annihilated soul gives license to the virtues and is no longer in servitude to them because it does not have use for them; but rather the virtues obey [its] command.”<sup>96</sup> This idea has its roots in Marguerite’s conception of self-abnegation: a soul that renders itself “nothing” has no life in which to practice the “virtues,” because such a soul has died for God’s love—the ultimate demonstration of holiness.<sup>97</sup> This philosophical premise inspires Marguerite’s most radical statements, such as her assertion that (for the

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<sup>90</sup> Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 228.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 234, 235, 238. The heretical nature of Marguerite’s book is mentioned in three of the five contemporary chronicles included in the appendix to Field’s book,

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 222.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 224. The memorandum only refers to two passages, but it states that William of Paris “showed them...several articles.” The document also refers to the passages as the “first” and the “fifteenth” articles: stating, “the first of these articles is this...likewise the fifteenth article is this...” These references indicate that William of Paris may have identified and asked the theologians to review at least fifteen passages.

<sup>95</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 61.

<sup>96</sup> Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 224. This passage seems to reflect the canon masters’ interpretation of Marguerite’s writing, because the exact phrase written in the memorandum does not appear in the text of the *Mirror*. The closest parallel is her comment that “the soul has moved beyond the virtues as far as trying to practice them is concerned.”

<sup>97</sup> Porete, *Mirror*, 90. See also 34, 41, 62, 81, 91, 95-96, 105, 110, 125, 126, 151.

enlightened soul) the “way to God is no longer through penances, nor the sacraments of the Church, nor thoughts nor words nor deeds. She is not helped on her way by creatures of this earth nor by those of heaven. She is beyond justice, mercy, glory, the knowledge and love of God, beyond praising his name.”<sup>98</sup> Marguerite’s bold assertion that the soul ought to avoid Church formalities likely rankled the panel of theologians who made it their business to ensure that the Church held a monopoly over the road to salvation.

While the *Mirror* reflects Marguerite’s critical views of the institution of the Church and rejection of the traditional instruments of Orthodox religiosity, Angela of Foligno embeds her personal conception of spirituality within the existing system of Orthodox religiosity. Marguerite Porete goes so far as to state that the necessity of prayer does not apply to those who have achieved spiritual perfection; Angela of Foligno, on the other hand, insists on the necessity of prayer, noting the soul should never abandon the routine, mundane exercise of prayer (what Angela calls “bodily prayer”) even when it is capable of entering into transcendental states of spiritual union with God (what she refers to as “supernatural prayer”).<sup>99</sup> While Marguerite encourages her readers to pursue a path to spiritual enlightenment that bypasses conventional Orthodox structures, the *Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno* specifically exhorts its readers to defer to authority, conform to established laws, engage in consistent prayer, and take the sacraments. Arnaldo reports that Angela specifically emphasized the importance of obedience to the *imitatio Christi*: “Christ was also a son of obedience, and this led him to leave the bosom of his Father, and to obey him unto death. In this we should imitate him, and be obedient not only to divine precepts and to religious superiors.”<sup>100</sup>

#### CONCLUDING ANALYSIS

A thorough examination of the *Mirror* and the *Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno* reveals that Marguerite’s and Angela’s ideologies revolved around the same essential premise—the desire to attain unity with God through divine love. The idea of a shared mystical literary movement echoes the observations of historian Herbert Grundmann, who argues that the emergence of heretical sects and new Orthodox orders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries represented two different branches of the same religious movement. Grundmann describes the existence of a “single religious movement in which religious forces and ideas originally operated in a similar manner, before forming into various orders and sects.”<sup>101</sup> When viewed in relation to the comparison between Marguerite and Angela, Grundmann’s interpretations suggest that the two women acted on a shared impulse that was later articulated into heretical and holy branches. Both Marguerite and Angela lived in an era when female mysticism was at its height, both as a way of life and as a literary genre. As historian Sean Field points out, the thirteenth century gave rise to a “flowering of a new kind of text—religious literature written in vernacular languages by... women, sometimes nuns, but frequently those at the edges of organized religious communities.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>99</sup> Lachance, 287. On page 90, Marguerite’s writes, “knowing my nothingness I have everything and there is no room for prayer, so I no longer pray.”

<sup>100</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 289.

<sup>101</sup> Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 6-7.

The shared religious movement that comprises the backdrop for Marguerite's and Angela's experiences has its origins in the apostolic poverty movement of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. This movement reflected the rising popularity of emulating the life of Christ and the apostles through the renunciation of worldly wealth and devotion to the pure teachings of the gospel.<sup>103</sup> In response to the growing popularity of the apostolic poverty movement, rising dissatisfaction with the wealth and privilege of the Orthodoxy, and the dangerous ability of heretical sects such as the Waldensians, the Cathars, and Humiltati to brand themselves as the "true" followers of Christ, the Orthodoxy strove to absorb and rearticulate apostolic heresies into legitimate extensions of Orthodox structures.<sup>104</sup> In the early thirteenth century, Pope Innocent III's integration of heretical sects into the fabric of the Orthodoxy spawned new orders that synthesized apostolic "heresy" and Orthodox doctrine. As Herbert Grundmann notes, Innocent III granted "apostolic preachers and devotees of evangelical poverty... a place within the Church itself, so long as orthodox doctrine and hierarchical authority continued to be recognized in principle."<sup>105</sup> The Pope tried to curb the spread of heresy by incorporating, appropriating, and neutralizing new factions whenever possible—a process epitomized by the encounter between the Orthodoxy and Francis of Assisi. As historian Paul Lachance notes, "the rise and acceptance of the mendicants provided a bridge between the hierarchy and the representatives of the profound aspirations that were animating the Christian community, and that until then had tended to be isolated in powerful heretical movements."<sup>106</sup>

The bridging capacity of the mendicant orders did not prevent the emergence of new religious impulses, however. The late thirteenth century saw the emergence of "an increasingly educated, vocal, and emancipated laity."<sup>107</sup> Many of these lay men and women wished to immerse themselves in religious life without committing themselves to the monastery or the cloister. The desire to form informal religious communities permeated Medieval Europe, manifesting itself throughout the Low Countries in the form of the lay religious movement—a campaign that sought to expand the role of the laity in thirteenth century religiosity. For women—who could not pursue the life of itinerant preaching practiced by their male counterparts—the desire to create alternative outlets for religious expression was particularly compelling.<sup>108</sup> In Angela's Italy, these lay female spiritualists often found their niche by affiliating themselves with the mendicant orders of the Franciscans and the Dominicans, forming communities such as the Franciscan Third Order of Penance. In Marguerite's France, women who sought to synthesize the active life and the contemplative life formed informal religious communities of like-minded women. These religious women came to be known as Beguines.<sup>109</sup> Third Order Franciscans and Beguines resembled one another closely, as demonstrated by the shared themes evident in Angela's and Marguerite's texts. Members of the two communities attracted similar adherents, encouraged comparable lifestyles, and employed parallel

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<sup>103</sup> Grundmann, 7-21.

<sup>104</sup> Grundmann, 31.

<sup>105</sup> Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 30.

<sup>106</sup> Lachance, "Introduction," 25-26.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 33-34.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>109</sup> Simons, 30-60.



motifs. Beguine spirituality, explains Lachance, “had a strong resemblance to Franciscan spirituality, which it preceded and, in many instances, blended with.”<sup>110</sup>

Although both the Beguines and the Third Order Franciscans hovered on the edges of Orthodoxy, the Beguines were further removed from Orthodox authority. Field observes that the Orthodoxy “portrayed Beguines in a variety of ways, from models of humility, piety, and visionary mysticism to charlatans and arrogant spiritual rebels.”<sup>111</sup> Likewise, the spiritually inclined laity of the Italian Penitential communities were also known for espousing radical ideas that verged on heresy. As a result, the Franciscans and Dominicans were initially “reticent toward the penitents and...[hesitated] before taking them under their wing.”<sup>112</sup> Unlike the Third Order Franciscans, whose communities included both men and women and who existed within close physical and ideological proximity to established male mendicant orders, the Beguines founded the “only movement in medieval monastic history that was created by women and for women—and not affiliated with, or supervised by, a male order.”<sup>113</sup>

The fundamental difference between the Beguines and the Third Order Franciscans was the degree to which each community existed independently of established Orthodox hierarchy. From their inception, the Beguines transgressed the dichotomy between the active and the contemplative life, obscuring the boundary between clergy and laity. In 1274, for example, one Franciscan master of theology by the name of Guibert of Tournai expressed concern over the fact that lay women were interpreting Scripture. He writes, “Women called the Beguines...have interpreted the mysteries of Scripture and translated them into the common vernacular, although the best experts in Scripture can hardly comprehend them. They read these texts in common, without due respect...even in public places.”<sup>114</sup> The Third Order Franciscans also occupied this liminal space between the secular and religious sphere. However, the Orthodoxy had already vetted the Franciscan order, imbuing the associated Third Order Penitents with a sense of “orthodoxy by association.” It thus becomes apparent that it was not merely the liminal position the Beguines occupied but the fact that they lacked Orthodox sanction for their activity that cast them in a suspicious light.

Understanding the historical differences between the Beguines and the Third Order Franciscans helps shed light on the differences between Marguerite’s and Angela’s relationships to authority. For example, Angela began her spiritual career by seeking permission—of both divine and earthly authority—to pursue a life of apostolic poverty and spiritual perfection. Angela’s ardent desire to live a life of evangelical poverty initially provoked concern among her spiritual counselors. Rather than abandoning her pursuit or striking out alone in defiance of her superiors, Angela “decided to go to Rome to beseech the apostle Peter to obtain for her the grace of becoming truly poor.”<sup>115</sup> She adopted St. Francis as her model and asked the Third Order Franciscans in Foligno to allow her to join their community. She further ensured the appropriateness of her actions by making a pilgrimage to the Church of St. Francis in Assisi, where she prayed to St. Francis, requesting the grace to “feel Christ’s presence in her soul, to observe well the

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<sup>110</sup> Lachance, “Introduction,” 37.

<sup>111</sup> Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 31.

<sup>112</sup> Lachance, “Introduction,” 35.

<sup>113</sup> Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 143; Lachance, “Introduction,” 35.

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 125.

<sup>115</sup> Lachance, “Introduction,” 18.

Franciscan Third Order Rule she had recently professed, and above all to make her become, and remain to the end, truly poor.”<sup>116</sup> Marguerite, on the other hand, did not belong to an established Orthodox order. It has frequently been suggested that Marguerite was a Beguine (though the degree to which she was associated with a particular Beguinage is a matter of scholarly debate).<sup>117</sup> Nonetheless, the suspicious informality of the Beguine community would have done little to provide her actions with Orthodox sanction. As Walter Simons observes, the Orthodoxy viewed the Beguines with suspicion due to their “informality, irregularity, lack of solemn vows, mystical experiences, in other words, their strangeness.”<sup>118</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Both Marguerite Porete and Angela of Foligno developed spiritual ideologies designed to facilitate the attainment of spiritual perfection, which both define as a liberating state of “oneness” between God and the soul achieved through the total immersion of the soul in God’s divine love. Despite these parallels, the Orthodoxy condemned Marguerite as a heretic while embracing Angela as a model of Orthodox piety—an incongruity that illuminates the differences between the two figures. It is tempting to suggest that Marguerite was motivated by a desire to dissent while Angela consciously strove to embody Orthodox piety. Close examination of *The Mirror for Simple Souls* and the *Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, however, highlights Marguerite’s deliberate efforts to establish the legitimacy of her text and Angela’s willingness to promote her personal vision of holiness, even when doing so brought her to the verge of heterodoxy, thus refuting the notion that Marguerite was a self-identified heretic and Angela a self-identified model of holiness. Thorough analysis of the two texts reveals that Marguerite and Angela espoused similar ideas about spiritual perfection, intimacy with God, the superiority of love and intuition over reason, and the importance of abnegating the independent will. These core similarities between Marguerite’s and Angela’s ideologies are indicative of the theological common ground the two mystics shared. Invoking Grundmann’s observations about the emergence of heretical sects and Orthodox orders from a common religious movement suggests that both Marguerite’s and Angela’s ideologies are inextricably linked to the broader thirteenth century lay religious movement that blurred the lines between the secular and religious spheres. Given this common ground, the fact that the Church condemned Marguerite Porete while embracing Angela of Foligno indicates that the boundary between heresy and holiness depended not only on *what* each woman believed but also on *how* she sought to implement her beliefs and the degree to which her spiritual impulses aligned with the authority of the institutional Church.

Although it is beyond the scope of this study, an exploration of Angela’s and Marguerite’s divergent representations of femininity would offer a more nuanced depiction of the encounter between the female religious movement and the male-dominated Orthodox hierarchy. Angela’s spirituality, for example, as depicted in the

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>117</sup> Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 27-33. See these pages for Field’s analysis of whether Marguerite was a “real” Beguine.

<sup>118</sup> Simons, *Cities of Ladies* 140, 140-143.

*Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, is filtered through the voice of the male scribe, Brother Arnaldo. Placing himself between Angela and the reader, Arnaldo casts Angela as a passive conduit for conveying the Holy Spirit rather than an independent agent of her own spirituality.<sup>119</sup> Marguerite, on the other hand, presents her philosophy as the product of her own inspiration, and she bypasses the conventions of the female mystic's genre, thereby dissociating herself from the conventional narrative of Orthodox femininity.<sup>120</sup> Despite the fact that both were female, Angela and Marguerite embodied their femininity quite differently, and further examination of this difference would illuminate another facet of the fine line between Marguerite's heresy and Angela's holiness.

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<sup>119</sup> Arnaldo, *The Book of Blessed Angela*, 317. Arnaldo suggests that Angela's feminine simplicity endowed her with a special capacity for absorbing God's grace. He writes, for example: "You, eternal God, through Angela, have raised up against men, a woman; against the proud, someone humble; against the clever, someone simple; against the lettered someone unschooled... Thus a strong woman brought to light what was buried by blind men and their worldly speculations." He goes on to imply that Angela is not graced with the potential to *create* but to restore, to "bring to light" to what has already been created—she does not hold the power to actively shape spiritual discourse, but rather the passive ability to reflect God's light: "she is truly a shining light of God, a mirror without blemish of God's majesty, and an image of his goodness" (318).

<sup>120</sup> Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 7-8. Literate and educated, Marguerite wrote the *Mirror* herself, and although the text received the approval of several Orthodox scholars, it is Marguerite's unmediated ideology that fills the pages of her text. Even among other female mystics who authored their own texts, Marguerite's limited use of the first-person voice and the nuptial narrative deemphasizes her femininity. The absence of visionary imagery in the *Mirror* further emphasizes Marguerite's distance from traditional displays of feminine mysticism. As Field explains, "Marguerite did not base her message on visionary authority... [or] claim that God spoke through her or that what she knew came from a mystical access to the divine that others lacked. In fact, she did not deign to explain how she knew what she knew at all" (7-8).

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