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Marguerite Porete: Love, Mystical Marriage, and Beyond

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VI. ST. MONICA

The cult of St. Monica began to appear in the Middle Ages and is still with us. Her name adorns churches, parochial schools, health-care providers, women's shelters, and a city in California with which she has little in common beside the name.

In the early church, noteworthy women—that is, women who were to be emulated—were predominantly martyrs, virgins, or extreme ascetics. Monica was none of those things. She was a wife and mother who died of natural causes, and appears to have been a person of moderation rather than self-imposed extreme deprivation.

Contemporary readers of the *Confessions* are likely to be either suspicious of or repelled by Augustine's stress on her submissiveness to her husband. Submissive she may have been, but she was not without a spine. Augustine says almost nothing about how she managed the family's affairs after Patricius' death, or found the means to follow her son's path to Milan. But she obviously did find them. Augustine remarks that she was both mother and daughter to the little community that formed around him.

Monica's sanctity was not the sanctity of submission. It was much more the sanctity of tenacity. She took the welfare of her children, both temporal and eternal, as her business, and kept at it until her death. Further, she did this in ways that were utterly ordinary. The combination of presence, prayer, and sheer nagging is one that is familiar to most parents, particularly parents of headstrong and precocious children.

The two climactic events of Augustine's conversion—the voice in the garden and the vision at Ostia—may have had a supernatural or miraculous tinge to them, but they did not come out of the blue. They were preceded by years of searching on Augustine's part, and years of concern and prayer on Monica's.

There is no doubt that Augustine in retrospect saw God working in and through her, as he saw God working in and through almost every circumstance of his life. She was not only a symbol of the persistent love of God; she was almost a sacrament of it. When Augustine felt far from God he knew he was not far from her, even when he wanted to be. For that, ultimately, he gave thanks.

We know of Monica only because we know of Augustine. Her eminence is in some respects a reflection of his. Had there been no Augustine, she would have been one of the millions of people whose influence extended only as far as their immediate circle. But this does not diminish her importance as a symbol and sacrament of something infinitely precious. If we see in her the sanctity of tenacity, we also see the sanctity of the ordinary—the extraordinarily important ordinary. We all are the instruments of each other's salvation. Whether as parents and children, teachers and students, healers and patients, pastors and lay people, or simply one and other, the God who is love uses love in all its forms to shower grace upon the world. Grace does not necessarily require martyrs, virgins, or ascetics to do its work, but it does require love. That is what we see in Monica, Augustine, and their tenacious God. ❧

MARGUERITE PORETE: LOVE, MYSTICAL MARRIAGE, AND BEYOND

WENDY FARLEY

For many Protestants, faith consists primarily in belief and a commitment to the justice and compassion available to us through divine grace. But Christianity also offers a vision of lives transformed to their roots by and for love. Christian contemplatives in particular dedicate themselves to this desire for deeper relationship with the divine love. A group of women in the Middle Ages called the Beguines created a particularly beautiful and profound literature expressing this intoxicating desire for God, expressed in union and in love for humanity.¹ One of the most brilliant of these women is Marguerite Porete, whose writings are readily available for the first time in centuries in part because of Ellen Babinsky's wonderful translation of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. In this essay I would like to reflect on Porete's work and consider ways in which her description of non-dual union with the divine extends beyond the images of mystical marriage that are characteristic of many other Beguines.

Mystical marriage is an enduring metaphor for contemplation; it is rooted in the Song of Solomon, a text used to describe longing for God by Origen in the third century and Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century. It was a favorite image for many Beguines. Romantic love captures so viscerally certain features of human longing. The joy of love comes from two-ness, yet lovers long to bridge the gap between them. The Good Lord in His Mercy provided a method for this. In the moment of the most intimate em-

1. There are many introductions to the Beguine movement, for example the work of Amy Hollywood, including *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). The introductions to *Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, Frank Tobin, translator (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1998) and Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Ellen L. Babinsky, translator (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993) are also very helpful.



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brace, separation is fleetingly abolished. Romantic love requires two, but the temporary dissolution of duality is blissful. This very human experience is used by lovers of God to describe the strange mix of two-ness and oneness at the heart of divine desire.

The medieval Beguines were particularly good at plumbing erotic metaphors, drawing from them profound theological insight. They wrote of the anguish they experienced in the play of love which vacillated between heights of joy and anguished longing. This imagery also allowed Beguines to re-conceive the nature of divine power. Rather than the sovereignty of an all-mighty king, Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote of divine power perfected in love. Divine Love is a Lord who “surrenders himself to her.”² When she demanded that her Lover free souls from purgatory, He submits, saying “when two wrestle with each other the weaker must lose. I shall willingly be the weaker, though I am almighty.”³ For Mechthild, God becomes truly divine and truly a redeemer when He renounces omnipotence and is ruled by Lady Love, a theological insight that she uses to criticize church politics. She envisions God castigating a power hungry Pope: “You have nothing left but your trappings; that is, ecclesiastical authority with which you war against God and his chosen intimates.”⁴ Mechthild’s erotic metaphors express aspects of contemplative experience but they also challenge ideas about divine and ecclesial power.

Marguerite Porete was a Beguine and harbored criticisms of church theology and politics. But she was also critical of Beguine piety. She was suspicious of the vacillation between bliss and longing and critical of severe ascetic practices. Contemplative women often tended toward almost violent self-abnegation and penitential practices. Porete described a path emphasizing interior peace and an appropriate self-respect. She offered a sublime vision of the capacity of the human spirit as it rested in the mystery of divine grace. Her vision seems also to evince compassion for her sisters whose wings were cut by conventions of feminine piety. As Amy Hollywood puts it: “in their rejection of bodily asceticism, paramystical phenomena, and, most importantly, special visionary and unitive experiences, Porete and Eckhart are attempting to allay women’s pain.”⁵

In a period when it was dangerous for women to write theology, some carved out space by accepting the conventions which permitted them a voice. Porete defied those conventions. She did not describe amazing, exotic visions. She did not talk about how she was just a stupid and worthless woman. When her book was condemned and burned she sought three clergy-theologians who would attest to her orthodoxy; she appended their comments in a new conclusion to her book. She asked the bishop if she could circulate the book with these modifications. He responded by handing her over to William of Paris, Philip the Fair’s chief Inquisitor. The Inquisition condemned her, mocking her as a “false woman” as they took her to the stake on June 1, 1310. It is a testimony to the equanimity she describes in her writings that witnesses describe a crowd moved to tears by the nobility with which she met her fate.

In thinking about the distinctiveness of Porete’s theology I have been drawn to the

2 Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* Book 1.44.

3. Mechthild of Magdeburg, 6.10.

4. Mechthild of Magdeburg, 6.21.

5. Amy Hollywood, “Suffering Transformed: Marguerite Porete, Mesiter Eckhart, and the Problem of Women’s Spirituality,” in Bernard McGinn, editor, *Meister Eckhart and Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete*, 110.

witness of her actions as well as in her writings. She described a soul set on a throne of peace unmoved by threats or blandishments, a soul that can be seduced or threatened by nothing in the world. She lived this out in her encounter with the Inquisition. Some scholars, more appalled by a stubborn woman than by the church’s savage methods of control, wonder why she did not cooperate with her jailers. Her writing foreshadowed her fate: “I must hide from them and not speak my language to those who prefer death to the life where I am in peace without moving myself. I must be silent and hide my language which I learned in the secret court of the sweet country in which courtesy is law, and Love moderates, and Goodness is the nourishment. The sweetness draws me, the beauty pleases me, the goodness fills me. What therefore can I do, since I live in peace?”⁶ I believe her text provides clues to why she thought it so important to stand by her theology of divine love, even at the cost of her life.

Her tenacious defense of her writing makes sense if we consider that she belonged to a community for whom her ideas were important. She wrote a book for “sad souls,” that is, those who do everything contemplatives are supposed to do: fast, keep vigils, discipline their bodies, discipline their emotions, pray, do good works, delight in intimacy with God, and yet remain unfulfilled. In the opening pages of her book, *Divine Love* speaks to her readers: “I have made this book for you so that you might hear in order to be more worthy of the perfection of life and the being of peace to which the creature is able to arrive through the virtue of perfect charity, the gift given by the whole Trinity.”⁷ Love insists that the foundation of this path is love of God and neighbor: “These commands are of necessity for salvation for all: nobody can have grace in a lesser way.”⁸ Porete explains herself at the beginning: this is a book to those who might otherwise never find this path of peace, the foundation and the fruit of which is love. She witnesses to these lovers of God a theology and practice of divine love that breaks free from the cycle of pain and pleasure, of ecstasy and abasement. Spiritual ecstasy and attestations of unworthiness are still preoccupied with the ego and its experience. She describes instead a self-forgetfulness in which “there is no one except Him, no one loves except Him, for no one is except Him, and thus He alone loves completely, sees Himself completely alone.”⁹

In contrast to Mechthild, Porete does not describe moments of bliss when everything dissolves into a kind of orgasmic but excruciatingly brief union. Her book tries to lead her readers to a state in which the soul recovers its divine nature and dwells in the divine presence all the time, whatever is going on around them. This is state of “non-duality” in which the spiritual essence of the human being, the divine image, is not separate from the mysterious depth of the divine life even though it remains enmeshed with all of the ordinary experiences of this world. For Porete, Lady Love and non-dual awareness represent simultaneous aspects of life. Love is the foundation and fruit of grace but it opens up a place beyond words. Porete writes within the paradoxical situation of all negative theologians: she must express the inconceivable depths of divinity

6. Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Chapter 68.

7. Marguerite Porete, Chapter 3.

8. Marguerite Porete, Chapter 3.

9. Marguerite Porete, Chapter 91.

within the dualistic structure of language. Both ultimate reality and the soul are irreducible to conceptual thought. About God she writes: “everything one can say or write about God, or think about him, God who is greater than what is ever said, everything is thus more like lying than speaking the truth.”¹⁰ She says of the Soul: “And when nothingness is, then God sees Himself in such a creature, without any hindrance from his creature.”¹¹ Porete expresses the paradox of writing about something beyond speech: it is something that “one can neither do, nor think, nor say any more than someone could desire to enclose the sea in his eye or carry the world on the end of a reed.”¹² She insists that the true writing is on the parchment of the soul and it is the Holy Spirit who writes there: “the divine school is held with the mouth closed, which the human mind cannot express in words.”¹³ She dwells beyond words and yet writes them to inspire others on this path.

Annihilation is her characteristic metaphor for the clearing away of egocentric attachments. It is not that one ceases to exist but that the ego is displaced so one can say with Paul, “it is no longer me but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). The soul no longer works “since He Himself works in me.”¹⁴ Such a soul neither knows nor works. And yet she writes and acts. Porete wrote her book for other contemplatives whose attachment to spiritual practice became an obstacle to life in God. Attachment, even to God’s will, remains a mark of duality. In a mirror, a wrinkle or mark will distort, however subtly, the image. A simple soul is pure luminosity, nothingness, neither light nor darkness, but absorbed in divine love.

When we read Mechthild of Magdeburg or Teresa of Avila, we remain more or less in a world that makes sense to us; for all of their theological wisdom, they do not dismantle a world which is more or less familiar. A marriage, even a mystical one, has a familiar outline to it. Porete takes us to an arena of mind that requires more of us. We have to enter, if only imaginatively, the mind’s capacity for non-dual awareness. Everything but simple awareness is dualistic. Consciousness occurs in language, desire, and thought, and these are essentially structured by duality—by the difference between the self and another. In her writings we inhabit an irretrievably paradoxical space of awareness where the mind points to a capacity in which mind moves into the abyss of divinity beyond concept and experience. For Porete, the point is not to cultivate exotic experiences; it is to integrate non-dual awareness more stably into everyday life. Doing the ordinary things we do or suffering extraordinary hardship, we remain in the immediacy of the divine life. On this throne of peace nothing can disturb her.

Porete insists that it is natural and proper to the human mind to enter a mode of reality that is not structured by duality. There is sometimes a concern to consider whether or in what sense we can be the “same” as God. But Porete presses us to recognize that it is only entities that can be the same as or different from one another. Though we use personal metaphors for God, God is not a being among other beings. The “annihila-

tion” of the will does not mean the soul is the “same” as God but that distinctions like same and different, mutuality and dissolution, are simply inadequate. Bridal mysticism expresses the truth of non-duality in a limited sense: the bride returns from the bed chamber, longing for her lover. For Porete, this fluctuation between bliss and longing can be displaced by a peaceful stability no longer buffeted by attraction and aversion. In theology, we know that our words are inadequate to God and so we are pressed to accept a state beyond naming and negation. In this state the opposition between time and timelessness, between longing and fulfillment, between duality and unity is overcome and awareness rests in “unknowing.”¹⁵

In the dialogue of her book, Porete tries to communicate to Reason the path of annihilation, knowing that Reason is in principle not capable of comprehending her. At one point in the narrative Reason dies of shock, only to reappear again and resume the conversation. This is a rather lovely dramatization of her point. Reason can be led to a place where it expires and yet mind continues to function in this world, to talk, write, revise. Reason returns but has become more flexible, less domineering. Reason becomes Love’s servant rather than Her master. The will is also led to its own death. Through the disciplines of medieval asceticism, the will is remorselessly trained to renounce its attachment. But as Porete points out, the will survives these techniques fairly well. It might desire more sublime pleasures and accept the physical discomfort of cold, hunger, fatigue, pain, as well as a tortured abdication of self-worth. But the dualistic and egocentric structures of mind remain intact. Just as the truth about divinity is not apprehended by a more accurate concept, the release of will into divinity is not accomplished by more fitting joys and sorrows. These may be useful at the beginning but they remain in thrall to pain and pleasure, and to the theology that stands behind it—pleasing or offending a deity fundamentally separate from them.

Porete ended her original manuscript with a song of the soul in which she sings of mystical marriage: “Divine Love tells me that she has entered within me, and so she can do whatever she wills, Such strength she has given me, from One Lover whom I possess in love, to whom I am betrothed, who wills what he loves and for this I love Him.” But then she unsays her song: “I have said that I will love Him. I lie, for I am not. It is He alone who loves me: He is, and I am not ... by this am I impregnated. This is the divine seed and Loyal Love.”¹⁶ Love is our last word before we become speechless, but in this speechless wonder we are impregnated with the living reality of Love. We say and unsay the truth of divinity, but we dwell ever more stably in the divine depths. Porete concluded her book with a song to love and she ended her life in flame. Perhaps she thought that a community that deserved a witness to the limits of penitential theology and bridal mysticism also deserved a witness to the limits of terror. Inquisitors could not force into her mouth a lie about the unspeakable goodness of non-dual love.

I feel that the tragedy of Porete is less hers than ours. Terror relegated the wisdom of non-duality and the witness of great contemplatives to the far margins of our tradi-

10. Marguerite Porete, Chapter 119.

11. Marguerite Porete, Chapter 92.

12. Marguerite Porete, Chapter 97.

13. Marguerite Porete, Chapter 66.

14. Marguerite Porete, Chapter 84.

15. Various Christian authors use this metaphor of unknowing to describe an awareness that is not simply cognitive, including for example Pseudo-Dionysius and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

16. Marguerite Porete, Chapter 122.

tion, an anonymous underground railroad that appears and disappears throughout our history. I am grateful to scholars like Ellen Babinsky. In recovering voices such as Porete's we recover treasures of our tradition and expand our imagination of what Christian devotion has been and can be. ❧

Coming in the Fall 2011 issue:

**Professor Kristin Saldine
on Preaching Out of Place**

SEMINARY MEMORIES

CHARLES M. CARY

I recall Ellen Babinsky as a fellow student at McCormick in the early '70s. Chicago was still adjusting to the police riot and rancor of the 1968 convention of the Democratic Party, and student activism was fervent and sometimes zany. The seminary itself was awash in multiple agendas, and the administration endeavored to steer us in a direction that was faithful and sincere. The late Jack Stotts was a mentor unparalleled to so many, but to Ellen in particular.

Ellen was a pioneer in that she was one of the first women to enter seminary as a single parent. Her two daughters were very young at the time, and the realities of childcare, financial burdens, and managing time and energy so as to meet the rigors of her course of study were ever before her. She slept very little in those days, managing nonetheless to excel at these and other challenges. I was impressed that she was forever comfortable with herself as one who engaged the religious questions before us. Seminary was never foreign to her, more a natural environment in which to apply the wisdom of the faith to the pressing matters of society.

Ellen also showed sensitivity to those on the periphery of our community and other communities. Her classroom questions would often stop any mad rush toward conformity and invite us to reconsider the status quo. She accomplished this consciousness-raising without jeopardizing trust. Many of us wondered after hearing her analysis of a position why we had not thought of the matter ourselves. Critical inquiry was and remains one of Ellen's gifts.

Another memory: Ellen was almost possessed by her sense of humor. I am not talking about giddy, sentimental laughter of the kind popularized by late night comedy. Hers was more akin to the laughter of Sarah upon hearing that she would bear a child in her old age. Good satire, dripping irony, and inexplicable grace would set Ellen laughing beyond limit. Why? I believe that she had what Robert McAfee Brown called the first cousin of faith: A divine sense of humor which punctured our pretense, and pointed to

Continued on page 34



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