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**The Saint, the Béguine and the Heretic:
Laywomen and Authority in the
Late Medieval Church,
c.1200-1400**

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Abstract:

Authority in the late medieval Church was usually vested in clerical men, but it could also be acquired by women, even laywomen. This thesis considers the contrasting experiences of three laywomen who attempted to gain authority: Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1207-c.1282), Marguerite Porete (c.1250-1310), and Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). One was ostracised, one burnt at the stake, and one was canonised. This thesis examines the factors that explain these divergent fates in order to offer more general insights into the problems associated with female authority. Scholarship on women and authority currently focuses predominantly on the nobility and religious, yet these case studies reveal how non-noble laywomen could utilise certain tools to legitimise themselves and achieve recognition that their words were God's own. This thesis shifts away from the tendency of current historiography to generalise women's experiences as universal, as a result of their common gender, and focuses instead on the individuality of their experiences. It therefore considers the impact of different political and geographical contexts on their lives, the importance to them of male support, but also the agency each woman had in utilising clerical authority and hagiographical topoi to prove their authority to late medieval audiences.

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Chapter One: An Introduction and Literature Review

[G]ender has proven a particularly illuminating axis of analysis in the study of Medieval religious history and much work remains to be done. For example, whereas medieval scholarship of the past century first drew attention to the outpouring of religious enthusiasm among women and posited a particular affinity between women and heresy, recent research has challenged that assumption and offered nuanced new approaches to the workings of sex and gender in medieval religion.¹

Gender and the medieval Church has formed an exciting part of medieval historiography. The relationship between gender and authority has been explored by historians, revealing crucial insight into our understanding of how differently men and women interacted with the institutional Church. Yet, as will be seen below, conversations on laywomen and their engagement with the concept of authority need further exploration. This thesis addresses the issue by examining three case studies of laywomen, Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1207-c.1282), Marguerite Porete (c.1250-1310), and Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), all of whom were mystics, authors and activists and who sought to influence the Church hierarchy. How they attempted to gain authority is the main focus of this thesis.

‘Authority’ in this context takes its cue from the Latin *auctōritās*, meaning authority, influence, prestige, rather than the executive or instrumental form of power associated with *potestas*. It is defined by Marie A. Kelleher as the ability to

¹ Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2011), 19.

influence people and achieve goals using strategies to negotiate accepted concepts and practices of society.² While studies on queens, countesses, and abbesses have been fundamental in our initial understanding of medieval women and authority, limiting authority in historiography to formal institutional structures excludes the large majority of women.³ Women's association with the private sphere did not automatically mean a lack of authority. Kelleher argues that women engaged in the exercise of authority if they set out with the intention of affecting others.⁴ By writing, these case studies were targeting a public audience in a realm usually reserved for men. The routes to Christian authorship for women were narrow and closely watched. One had to follow the accepted paths of *revelatio* (mystical revelation) and *prophetia* (prophecy). The topos of humility was also used as a defence screen in acknowledging this crossing of societal norms. However, if women stayed within these parameters of knowledge attainment and gained clerical approval, they could possess spiritual authority.⁵ As we shall see, these aspects were key in the experiences of the case studies.

Gender differences in relation to authority are quite apparent in medieval Europe. Kim M. Phillips argues that while 'manhood' was demonstrated with positive traits such as authority, responsibility, and control of self and others, 'womanhood' required conquering the frailties of femininity and perfecting the virtues of maternity, humility and piety.⁶ The simplest way for a woman to be seen as having conquered her vices was by embracing cloistered life.⁷ However, courage and assertiveness could be positive traits in women if used in the face of significant threats to their chastity or 'national' security.⁸ Social classes and positions (such as

² Marie A. Kelleher, "What Do We Mean by 'Women and Power'?", *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 51, no. 2 (2016): 104.

³ For an example of such studies, see Lois L. Huneycutt, "Power: Medieval Women's Power through Authority, Autonomy, and Influence," in *A Cultural History of Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Kim M. Phillips (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 153-78.

⁴ Kelleher, "What Do We Mean by 'Women and Power'?", 111.

⁵ Kim M. Phillips, "Gender and Sexuality," in *The Routledge History of Medieval Christianity, 1050-1500*, ed. R. N. Swanson (London: Routledge, 2015), 314.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 310-11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁸ Kim M. Phillips, "Introduction: Medieval Meanings of Women," in *A Cultural History of Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Kim M. Phillips (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 10.

wife, mother, sister) were too diverse to permit unitary treatment of women in historiography, although Phillips argues that medieval people clearly identified a category of 'woman' and associated certain traits with her.⁹ Yet when one delves deeper, general statements are much more difficult to assert. Social status, geographical location, age, marital status, and religious vocation must be taken into account. These case studies are in one sense studies of individual laywomen, but their experiences are framed in terms of questions of laywomen and authority more generally. Their similarities and contrasts paint a more nuanced picture of women's experiences with authority.

For a woman to have the authority to write in the thirteenth century, she needed to emphasise the prophetic nature of her visions; this was closely linked to the contemporary debate surrounding women preaching and teaching in the medieval Church. Female mystics had to deal with authority for writing in ways men did not. For men, legitimacy came from theological education and clerical status - both paths unavailable to women. The roles of authority for women were carefully circumscribed, and it was only possible for women to be presented as models of sanctity if they adhered to strict traditions. While this tradition had previously not included the role of teacher, this began to change with the new mysticism of the thirteenth century. Both Clare of Assisi (d.1253) and Angela Foligno (d.1309) were examples of mystical teaching models. However, to assert their teaching authority they had to construct new models for acceptable female holiness.¹⁰ Thirteenth-century hagiographical tradition credited Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Alexandria with evangelising roles, which gave legitimacy to this new teaching tradition. Mary Magdalene was reported to have preached to defend the faith. This legend began circulating in the twelfth century when Mary's cult was vigorously promoted.¹¹ Similarly, the medieval Life of Saint Catherine of Alexandria claims she out-argued fifty pagan philosophers who were trying to dispute Christianity.¹²

⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism - 1200-1350*, ed. Bernard McGinn, vol. III, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 145.

¹¹ Alcuin Blamires, "Women and Preaching in Medieval Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Saints' Lives," *Viator* 26 (1995): 143-4.

¹² Ibid., 144.

However, examples like Mary and Catherine were to be revered, not imitated. Thomas Aquinas argued that because of the Fall, women were submissive to men and therefore lacked authority over Christian souls to preach. Gifts of the spirit had to be used for the common benefit, but sex governed how one employed a teaching gift. Prophecy transcended gender because it explained any revelations as miraculous. Therefore, biblical prophetesses, Aquinas argued, were not precedents for female preaching.¹³ Yet some women were qualified as having the gift of prophecy to legitimise their preaching in the medieval period, such as Hildegard of Bingen (d.1179), Rose of Viterbo (d.1252) and Umiltà of Faenza (d.1310). As will be seen, the case studies in this thesis also used their gifts of prophecy to legitimise their call to write.

Hagiographical tradition also highlighted the holiness of physical asceticism. The medieval identification of women with the sinful body meant that their sanctification had to occur in and through that body. Outward signs were necessary to prove the validity of visionary experiences to gain authority, because the body was the site of both sinfulness and holiness.¹⁴ Thus, while there was the potential to redeem oneself, it was more difficult yet more rewarding for women. Accounts of intense ascetic activities in women's mystical texts before the fourteenth century, though, are extremely rare. Bodily asceticism appears more frequently in the fourteenth century when béguines and other women religious were becoming increasingly persecuted and viewed with suspicion. Expectations for extreme asceticism are found in accounts of early béguines and trial records after the Council of Vienne (1311-1312). As will be seen, the increase in popularity of physical asceticism in the fourteenth century amongst female mystics is evident in how strongly it is represented in Catherine's writings compared to its relative dismissal in the earlier texts of Mechthild and Marguerite.

Ultimately, though, these women strove to achieve authority through recognition that their words were God's own. This was by no means a straightforward process, as will be seen; and in their pursuit of recognition and

¹³ Ibid., 146.

¹⁴ Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, & Meister Eckhart* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 182.

authority these three women experienced drastically different fates. One was canonised, one ostracised, and another burned for heresy. These differences throw up further questions to do with gender and agency. The historiography of women naturally tends to emphasise their experiences as female, but in the cases examined here, a common gender was clearly not the only determinant of their fates. Although their situations were all gendered in different ways, the economic, social, and political context of each woman must have played a part in their fate. By comparing three women who came from different parts of Europe – Germany, France and Italy – the importance of context can perhaps be more fully assessed. Discussion of context also involves considering the receptiveness of churchmen to women who claimed authority. Recent historiography has explored male and clerical agendas to explain the reception of such women. Yet this may underplay the agency that the women themselves had in gaining authority. This thesis will also consider the activism of these three mystics in this process.

Early Historiography

Over the past two centuries, there has been a multitude of historical scholarship on medieval Christianity, and to a lesser extent the role that women played in it. John H. Arnold's survey of medieval Christianity in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historiography reveals a strong nationalist focus which has shaped the way women's participation has been viewed across Europe.¹⁵ Historians shifted focus to 'lived religion' in the twentieth century, and how religion flourished as part of the world and how it was shaped by economic, social and cultural factors. The *Annales* in France, founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, turned attention in French historiography to the relationship between religion and politics, with a strongly socialist bent, and pushed for an interdisciplinary approach. Religion was considered the *mentalité* of a past age and was accorded considerable power as a context for social and political action. Alongside this approach, Gabriel Le Bras investigated canon law as part of *la religion vécue*. To Le Bras, the law was not only a product of

¹⁵ John H. Arnold, "Histories and Historiographies of Medieval Christianity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity*, ed. John H. Arnold (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 28-9.

authority but also a reflection of societal expectations.¹⁶ The next generation of the *Annales* historians continued this approach but fiercely contested interpretation of the experiences of the laity, and how well the Church as an institution transmitted its ideas and programme of faith to the laity as passive subjects. Jacques Le Goff wrote of Christianity as a powerful ideology that structured the *mentalité* of society and determined the lives of ordinary people.¹⁷

It was not until the late twentieth century that early modernists such as Natalie Zemon Davis highlighted the need for the laity to be understood as active participants in their own faith. Instead of focusing on the top-down religion imposed by the institutional Church, scholarship began considering the folkloric or unorthodox beliefs of the laity and how they shaped lived religion from the bottom-up. Notable studies were Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1975) and Jean-Claude Schmitt's *The Holy Greyhound* (1979). Women especially were linked to these movements as active participants. However, the focus on the margins of society (witches, heretics, the superstitious) tended to posit a cultural gulf between clergy and laity, and ignored the agency of laypeople in organised orthodox religion.¹⁸ This realisation triggered studies on béguines, the Bianchi movement, and parochial religion, among many others. By the end of the twentieth century, discussion on medieval religion held society and culture at the heart of the understanding of the medieval Church. Studies on the institutional Church also evolved to include a more socially informed notion of what an 'institution' might be. Social issues of gender, the body, sexuality and social status were also explored as integral to an understanding of medieval religion.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid., 31.

¹⁷ Ibid., 33.

¹⁸ Ibid., 34-5; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, C.1400-C.1580*, 2 ed. (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, "'...And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writings of the Later Middle Ages," in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 257-88.

Current Trends in Medieval Scholarship

Twenty-first-century medieval scholarship has produced discussions on a wide range of new topics, such as groups claiming affinity with the apostolic tradition of poverty and preaching, or on urban public rituals, domestic meditative practices, and late medieval mystics.²⁰ However, there is still comparative work to be done in traditional periods of study. Robert Brentano looked in detail at the institutional and social structures of the Church in thirteenth-century England and Italy, but this is a rare comparative study.²¹ The comparison in this thesis between Germany, France and Italy suggests the need for more comparative scholarship across geographical boundaries. The thesis also follows the current historiographical trend of focusing on the nature of medieval piety and the experience of faith. Many studies in this area though have gone back to focusing on the social or spiritual elite, including the focus on nobility for medieval mystics. The three non-noble laywomen explored here will return to the experiences of the laity from a wider social background. There has also been a tendency to isolate the 'religious man' from the 'political man' or 'economic man', as though aspirations were largely spiritual.²² The three case studies all demonstrated their agency in wider society. This study will contribute to the exploration of religion 'lived' within different geographical locations.

Twentieth-century Academic Feminism

Twentieth-century academic feminism provided the foundation for further scholarship on women's experiences in the Church throughout history, including the medieval period. Historians such as E. Jane Burns, Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple have written on social mobility, the formation of collective identity, and empowerment for women in the medieval Church based on evidence for well-

²⁰ See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (London: University of California Press, 1982); Bynum, "'...And Woman His Humanity'."; Claire M Waters, *Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance, and Gender in the Later Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Carolyn Muessig, "Prophecy and Song: Teaching and Preaching by Medieval Women," in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle & Pamela J. Walker (California: University of California Press, 1998), 146-58; John H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

²¹ Robert Brentano, *Two Churches: England and Italy in the Thirteenth Century*, 2 ed. (California: University of California Press, 1988).

²² Arnold, "Histories and Historiographies of Medieval Christianity," 39.

educated elite women living in religious communities.²³ Late twentieth-century studies of women's writings have focused on legitimisation and authorisation.²⁴ Analyses argue women's practices and rhetorics (their prophecies, visions, and mystical experiences) were their agency. However, the focus on religious women in these studies excludes most women in medieval Europe who could not access the sanctioned power that came with being an abbess, proto-saint, or spiritual advisor. In response, scholarship is starting to focus more on the vibrant spiritual experiences of noble laywomen. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker focuses on those who served their community circles, lived independently, and took part in civic and religious politics.²⁵ Her research identifies the *domus animarum* 'house of souls' lifestyle, under the same umbrella as béguines, and highlights its popularity in Germanic countries during the later medieval period. While Mulder-Bakker's study furthers historiography around laywomen's spirituality in late medieval Europe, it is still limited to a minority of the population by focusing on the nobility. As will be seen with the three case studies in this thesis, there are underutilised sources on non-noble laywomen which can provide a better understanding of how a wider group of women could attain spiritual authority.

Mysticism is arguably the most researched aspect of 'extraordinary' women in the medieval Church. Between 1180 and 1230 new forms of religious life were developed in response to restrictions on women's increasing membership in heretical cults. Movements which emphasised mysticism, such as the béguines in the Low Countries, filled the needs of laywomen wanting to live pious lives without joining a convent.²⁶ Divine visions gave well-known medieval female saints authority in the

²³ E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Medieval French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); Jo Ann McNamara, & Suzanne Wemple, "Sanctity and Power: The Dual Pursuit of Medieval Women," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal & Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 90-118.

²⁴ See Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1997).

²⁵ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *The Dedicated Spiritual Life of Upper Rhine Noble Women: A Study and Translation of a Fourteenth-Century Spiritual Biography of Gertrude Rickeldey of Ortenberg and Heilke of Staufenberg* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2017).

²⁶ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Béguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

Church's eyes to preach (Mechthild of Hackeborn), form orders (Birgitta of Sweden), and write rules (Clare of Assisi). While a saint's privileged experience of the divine became increasingly more important than their deeds during the late medieval period, laywomen also heard from God but were not always sanctioned by the Church, even becoming targets of heretical trials. Elizabeth Alvida Petroff's works on mysticism and the mystic's reception in society provide a framework for analysing the three case studies' mystical writings.²⁷ Petroff argues that visions are inseparable from a mystic's autobiography and agrees with Caroline Walker Bynum's theory that the internal study of 'self' in the medieval period was a search for the soul, the part of oneself made in the image of God. The purpose of self-discovery was to get closer to God.²⁸ This is why bridal imagery and its use of intimate marital connotations is so common in their writings. Mystics' recordings of visions have two voices – that of the mystic and that of God – which have been united by the union of the mystic's soul to God. The female voice expresses doubt in its authority to speak, and the male voice (God) gives authority, approval and encouragement.²⁹ As will be seen, this sentiment is evident in the mystical writings of the case studies.

John W. Coakley has identified three main categories of women's revelations. The first are revelations of the state of souls, which reinforced the priest's power by directing people to confession and mass. This was the most common revelation women had. The second were revelations on matters of ecclesiastical, geopolitical, or broadly historical importance, implying a public audience beyond a woman's immediate context. The Great Schism (1378-1417) allowed women's prophecies greater opportunity for legitimisation than a secure ecclesiastical establishment would have allowed. These first two revelation types are characteristic of Catherine's visions. Thirdly were revelations on matters of Christian doctrine, Scripture or obscurities of God's dispensations. These were more common in the twelfth century with mystics; however, both Mechthild and Marguerite shared

²⁷ *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Alvida Petroff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Petroff, *Body and Soul*.

²⁸ *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, ed. Petroff, 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

revelations of this nature.³⁰ The difference in revelation types experienced by the three women examined here in part explains their reception by a society with set expectations of what divine messages women could share.

The idea of saintliness has also been well explored in scholarship and is useful in considering social expectations and the relative fates of these three mystics. Canonisations were four times less numerous during the Avignon papacy than the century prior.³¹ However, they rose after the Great Schism as both Roman and Avignon popes elected saints who were close to their cause or their political allies. The number of canonisations during this period is a direct reflection of the weakened authority of the Church and its need for support.³² Local archbishops and bishops also promoted cults of 'saints' and the most successful of these lay saints were women, including Catherine. Whether or not local or episcopal support translated into official canonisation depended on the popularity of the cult and its perceived political benefits. But whether successful or not, candidates for sainthood needed to conform to various criteria of sanctity that would prove their saintly credentials. It was through stereotypes of holiness that women could achieve authority. André Vauchez describes the epitome of the medieval female saint as a girl of modest origin who had lost her father, abandoned active life in adolescence to avoid male attention and was set on keeping her virginity. To escape marriage, she ran away to a tertiary community linked to a mendicant order, spending her days in prayer and meditation, living an exclusively religious life, and experiencing mystical states regarding Christ's passion. She chose extreme asceticism and identified with Christ's suffering. Her states of ecstasy aroused local interest, and her death would be greeted by a surge of popular enthusiasm, with prodigies and miracles.³³ Some of these women believed they were charged by God to deliver prophetic warnings to the Church and the world and became ideal mouthpieces for reform movements. While all three women in this study felt called to impart God's words regarding

³⁰ John W. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 13-6.

³¹ André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 61-2.

³² *Ibid.*, 274.

³³ *Ibid.*, 210-1.

reform in the Church, only Catherine accessed the full authority that came with adhering to saintly ideals. Her biography highlighted all the desired stereotypes for holy women, and in response she garnered a large cult following who promoted her legitimacy. The nature and significance of these stereotypes in allowing laywomen access to authority needs to be considered further.

While men were overall more likely to be canonised in the medieval period, in the thirteenth century fifty percent of canonisation processes were for women, and seventy-one percent in the fourteenth century, though this figure slipped back thereafter, and the balance returned in favour of male saints after the Schism.³⁴ Theoretically, therefore, the three women in this study lived during a period when their chances of canonisation were greater than they would have been earlier or later. Moreover, the chances were also greater for laywomen: women in conventual life were the minority compared to the vast numbers of faithful women following mendicant orders while in a lay state. But the opportunities for women to become saints were not the same in all regions of Europe. Lay sanctity was most strongly represented in France, Italy and Germany. The influence mendicants had in part explains the regional differences in the number of canonisations; where mendicant movements were strongest, as in Italy, there were more lay saints. The strong hold of feudal and monarchical power in northern Europe, and the continuing power of bishops, explains some of the attachment to traditional forms of sainthood in these areas.³⁵ It is therefore unsurprising that while Catherine was canonised, Mechthild and Marguerite were less likely to be officially recognised in this way. The creative fervour for new saints present in Italy and France was less so in Germany where traditional cults were preferred; this is interesting considering the flourishing mystical movement throughout the Low Countries. Thus, sainthood had differing levels of popularity across the three geographical locations of our case studies. The reception among their peers and by the Church of each of the three women in this study was partly determined by the patterns of sainthood and female holiness that were dominant in the regions in which they lived.

³⁴ Ibid., 269.

³⁵ Ibid.

As mentioned, there is currently limited literature comparing the spiritual authority of laywomen. Yet study of this can illuminate what set women apart from their peers, and what might lead them to be revered or reviled. Although the late medieval period saw a greater variety of religious roles and backgrounds for saints, as well as more opportunities for women to progress to sainthood, there were dangers too.³⁶ Changing attitudes from the twelfth century onwards, related to an increasing fear of heresy and the rise of inquisitorial procedures, increased the risk for women who attempted to express their faith more publicly of attracting persecutory attention. While Catherine was accepted as a papal and political advisor, Marguerite was condemned for spreading her theology. More and more women were deemed heretics for actively expressing their faith: establishing proof of holiness and divine legitimacy became increasingly vital for women attempting to gain spiritual influence.³⁷ This concept of proof will be particularly useful when considering the different strategies used by the women studied here to validate themselves.

Dyan Elliott analyses how the Fourth Lateran Council's (1215) introduction of auricular confession through male clergy was a reaction against growing fears of heresy and a means of tightening control over believers. Raymond of Peñafort, a thirteenth-century canonist, pushed for confidentiality in confession to be subordinate to the welfare of the Church: confessions of heresy or unorthodox behaviour could become ammunition in heretical persecutions.³⁸ The role of the confessor, then, was significant in the safety of a mystic, something clearly observed with the women studied here. The increasing fear of heresy and stricter definitions of orthodoxy in the Middle Ages weakened women's (and laymen's) ability to publicly express their spirituality or challenge religious leaders. Yet many spiritual women were outwardly focused, concerned for reform and ecclesio-political activism.³⁹ Hence, we still have much to learn about the active women who launched initiatives to change the world around them, both successful women such as Catherine, as well

³⁶ Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*, 8.

³⁷ Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitorial Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁹ Paul Rorem, "The Company of Medieval Women Theologians," *Theology Today* 60, no. 1 (2003): 85.

as those who were ostracised for their efforts such as Mechthild and Marguerite. Analysis of the spiritual experiences described in their texts will highlight the gender expectations present in the late medieval Church, and how these impacted upon women's experiences across different European societies.

While twentieth-century academic feminism introduced women's experiences into scholarship, a negative aspect of this is its usage of modern concepts when analysing medieval sources. These tend to obstruct an understanding of the way women viewed their own experiences in the Middle Ages. Amy Hollywood argues that religious experience is, by definition, inadequately explained, and a subject's own explanation is not considered true by social scientific researchers. Ideally, social history should be free from modern categories of analysis, as these shape the way we read the past – yet modern understanding and explanation is what makes the past comprehensible to us.⁴⁰ Feminist scholarship tends to read into medieval women's writings agency and conspired authority that was not necessarily expressed by those women themselves. It often valorises women as passive or victims, and not fully responsible agents of violence, evil or oppression. There are significantly different life views regarding temporality between "medieval supernatural agents" and post-Enlightenment secularists.⁴¹ As a historian, it is necessary to recognise the power of a subject's beliefs and their absolute truth in the mind of the believer. Modern secular cynicism regarding divine authority needs to be set aside when examining the spiritual writings of medieval women who fully believed the words they spoke were of God. Female mystics in particular saw authority as a necessity to share what God had spoken to them, not as an end goal in and of itself.

Gender

The issue of gender in medieval literature has been well analysed in scholarship. Bynum has done extensive analysis on gender categories in late medieval religious writings. She explains her approach as one that focuses first on the texts without an

⁴⁰ Amy Hollywood, "Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography," *The Journal of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2004): 514-28.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 522.

agenda of modern subjects such as politics or oppression in mind. She also cites the importance of exploring the context of the texts in relation to other texts they were grouped with when read and preserved at the time of writing.⁴² Ann-Marie Rasmussen argues that to further understand the debate surrounding gender in secular literature the social and geographical context must influence analysis.⁴³ Rasmussen proposes three categories of gender analysis evident in Germanic literature: gender as theme, as variation, and as compilation.⁴⁴ This would have influenced Mechthild's writing. Rasmussen and Bynum's theory of contextualising the texts in their original published form will not only aid in understanding how the women themselves viewed the debate between gender and authority, but how receptive their audiences were to them.

Moreover, scholarship has considered the issue of gender in medieval women's own writings. Bynum outlines four main principles with which women's writing aligned. Firstly, 'masculine' and 'feminine' were relatively fluid categories. Secondly, 'female' was almost a genderless self – a vessel. Women did not attempt to create a distinct 'female' outside of men's construction. Thirdly, femininity was associated with the patriarchal characteristics of physicality, not mind or spirit. Their physical form enabled women to connect to the Eucharist and incarnational Christology. Fourthly, women avoided confrontational structures in gender symbols. They emphasised the continuity of the earthly and divine realms.⁴⁵ It would be useful to consider whether these categories are evident in women's religious writings in both monastic communities and in secular society. Mechthild's works did not have the same societal bias as those of her peers at Helfta. Writings of béguines such as Mechthild are of great significance precisely because they were theological and pedagogical texts aimed at a mixed lay audience. Ulrike Wiethaus claims this means they mirrored the hopes, desires, and fears of their audience, giving the historian a

⁴² Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 22-3.

⁴³ Ann Marie Rasmussen, "Thinking through Gender in Late Medieval German Literature," in *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster, and Clare A. Lees (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 106.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁵ Bynum, "'...And Woman His Humanity'."

glimpse into contemporary social circumstance.⁴⁶ This connection between author and audience can also provide an insight into how the writers were perceived by their contemporaries. Wiethaus uses Mechthild as an example of a *béguine* who utilised bridal mysticism to construct the female as a symbol of power, authority, and spiritual well-being and freedom. Catherine and Marguerite also employed this technique. This “proto feminist vision”, Wiethaus argues, was a direct challenge to the common medieval association of the female as weak.⁴⁷ However, it is noteworthy that female weakness could be seen as a virtue in regards to the humanity and suffering of Christ.⁴⁸ Social acceptance or rejection of such controversial and strong imagery would explain the treatment of the authors.

There is a distinct focus in medieval gender studies on analysing women’s status and authority in comparison to their male peers. Coakley surveys how religious women’s authority enhanced their male spiritual director’s power.⁴⁹ He contrasts the different types of authority each gender had to demonstrate their stronger agency when united. Catherine proves an exciting subject in this area because we not only have her writings but those of her spiritual director and biographer Raymond of Capua. While Catherine compares herself to the apostles of the Bible, Raymond portrays her as Christ’s bride. Whereas Catherine describes her marriage to Christ in her letters as occurring through the giving of his foreskin to Catherine, Raymond relates the marriage as the giving of a gold ring with pearls and diamonds. The question arises: did Raymond alter Catherine’s powerful spiritual experiences to make them less controversial to her contemporaries so that she would gain legitimacy? This raises the issue of the significance of male clerical support in promoting the authority of women in the medieval Church. Mechthild and Marguerite had limited male clerical support; the impact of this on their much less successful claims to authority will need to be considered.

Scholarship has also debated the idea of gender equality in the medieval Church. Bynum supports the feminist theory that all human beings are gendered and

⁴⁶ Ulrike Wiethaus, "Sexuality, Gender, and the Body in Late Medieval Women's Spirituality: Cases from Germany and the Netherlands," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7, no. 1 (1991): 43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁸ Phillips, "Introduction: Medieval Meanings of Women," 12.

⁴⁹ Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*.

argues that religious experience is not the same for a man as for a woman.⁵⁰ Thus, the comparison of male and female religious authority has been well worth the extended scholarship. Religious authority, she argues, comes to women from charismatic and prophetic gifts, but to men from ecclesiastical office.⁵¹ Coakley's scholarship agrees with this argument, contrasting for example the commonality among women of extreme asceticism and identification with Christ's passion, resulting in physical stigmata, with the more limited appearance of these phenomena among men.⁵² Compellingly, E. Ann Matter argues that Saint Augustine of Hippo's proposition - that men and women were created equally in the image of God according to humanity - dominated medieval theology and was not debated during the medieval period. Some women even circumvented their exclusion from clerical office by positioning themselves as living in and performing the image of God. They challenged the accepted dogma in "positive and hard to argue ways."⁵³ While twentieth-century feminist biblical criticism uses Genesis 1:27 (the co-creation of man and woman) as a basis for gender equality, Matter argues that medieval women themselves did not contend for their physical equality with men, but for their spiritual equality. She claims Augustine's argument that women were intellectually inferior to men was not debated either. 'Woman' was the manifestation of the active mind (*scientia*), whereas the masculine part of the mind was for the meditative wisdom of God (*sapientia*).⁵⁴ Aquinas' influential discussion of the human body reflecting God was based on Augustinian principles.⁵⁵

This theory of women's spiritual equality has been strongly argued by historians. Patricia Ranft questions the assumption that medieval Christianity was dominated by misogyny, and claims that female spirituality was viewed as a separate issue from women's physical and social status. However, she acknowledges that she

⁵⁰ Bynum, "Introduction: The Complexity of Symbols," 2.

⁵¹ Bynum, "'...And Woman His Humanity'."

⁵² Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*, 10.

⁵³ E. Ann Matter, "The Undebated Debate: Gender and the Image of God in Medieval Theology," in *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster, and Clare A. Lees (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 42.

⁵⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 147.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

only focuses on the canonical and orthodox holy women: the borderline beliefs of women such as Marguerite are not considered. Ranft's argument for female spiritual equality rests partly on the quantity and popularity of sainted women in written texts and popular art forms. For example, she claims communal support for anchorites is evidence of reverence for holy women. The greater number of female over male anchorites, Ranft argues, is evidence of society acknowledging women's "superior spiritual status within the community."⁵⁶ Ranft disagrees with the idea of a universality of symbols and gender. Yet, she argues that the centrality of Mary in medieval culture is proof all women were spirituality esteemed across class, gender, and geography.⁵⁷ She also claims that the 'New Spirituality' was a major shift in religious focus from knowledge to emotion, which enabled the foundation of mysticism and the spiritual equality of men and women, placing women firmly in the midst of medieval spiritual tradition. Women's inclusion in mysticism on an equal footing with men is proof of society's deep-seated deference and esteem for holy women.

While there may be ample theological support in theory for female spiritual equality, this was not as clearly realised in late medieval society as Ranft's study insinuates. Matter, on the other hand, holds that gender distinctions did lead to the subordination of medieval women, but that there was a distinction between 'women' – actual female humans – and 'woman' – an abstract subject.⁵⁸ Further consideration is needed as to why some women did not have access to the spiritual equality supported by Church theology. By ignoring those women on the border of orthodox approval, as Ranft has done, the positive relationship between the Church and female spirituality can be exaggerated. Women's social status, geographical context, and level of influence need to be compared to gain a fuller understanding of the complexity of the Church's relationship with female spirituality. An approach that emphasises the different experiences between laywomen will bring further insight into women's spiritual authority.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 140.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 163-6.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 43.

While studies analysing men's role in promoting the authority of women have been significant, comparisons between women of similar status and differing levels of social and spiritual authority have been few. Twentieth-century feminism turned the spotlight on women's experiences in history, although its usage of modern themes and concepts can be anachronistic. The feminist focus on women's collectivity defines women in terms of sexual sameness and in relation to their difference to men.⁵⁹ Judith Butler argues that one should not generalise experiences based on gender alone:

if one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive... because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.⁶⁰

Women did not all have the same experience simply because of their gender, which is why the analysis of the social and political contexts of each case study in this thesis will be so fundamental to understanding their different outcomes. This comparison will allow for a more in-depth understanding of how women attained and asserted their authority. While the clerical perspective on gender roles in the Church, influenced by Aquinas' teachings, helps explain the varying reception these women experienced from the Church, this alone is a partial explanation. Ultimately this thesis is interested in how the women themselves perceived and utilised their authority.

The Case Studies

A brief introduction to the case studies is necessary here to begin the process of comparison between different experiences of authority. Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1210-c.1282) was a béguine from the Low Countries and wrote her mystical text

⁵⁹ Diane Watt, "Introduction: Medieval Women in Their Communities," in *Medieval Women in Their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 5.

⁶⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 3.

The Flowing Light of the Godhead over thirty years based on visions she received from God. She had limited access to authority within her lay community, and it was not until she sought refuge in the convent at Helfta that her spiritual authority was more recognised, although largely among women religious. Her criticisms of religious laxity in the Church led her to be isolated and rejected by society. Currently, scholarship on Mechthild has looked at the relationship between the female body and spirituality, although Sara Poor has expanded the literature to explore the role gender played in Mechthild's authorship and textual authority.⁶¹ This approach can be extended to include Mechthild's agency in utilising key hagiographical strategies to access spiritual authority.

Marguerite Porete (c.1250-1310), too, recorded her divine revelations in vivid imagery so common in late medieval mysticism. However, without clerical connections, her published text *The Mirror of Simple Souls* was used as ammunition against her at her heresy trial. From Valenciennes, she was unable to capitalise on the political tensions between the King of France and the papacy. Instead, they played into her downfall. The number of academics and lawyers consulted as to her theological orthodoxy was unprecedented and she was later burned at the stake along with her writings. Yet the same texts, without attribution, were widely circulated after her death and were much better received; *The Mirror of Simple Souls* was even translated into many languages to reach a wider audience.⁶² Modern scholarship focuses largely on the issue of heresy when considering Marguerite and the unfortunate political circumstances which impacted her execution. However, she carried a similar message to Catherine and Mechthild, yet Marguerite lacked the authority to save her own life. As will be seen, her dismissal of key hagiographical authorising strategies left her without legitimacy amongst her peers.

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), on the other hand, attained such authority in the eyes of her peers that she was canonised and made a Doctor of the Church. *The*

⁶¹ Sara S Poor, "Cloaking the Body in Text: The Question of Female Authorship in the Writings of Mechthild Von Magdeburg," *Exemplaria* 12, no. 2 (2000): 417-53; Sara S Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Sara S Poor, "Mechthild Von Magdeburg, Gender, and the 'Unlearned Tongue'," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 2 (2001): 213-50.

⁶² Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete*; Zan Kocher, "The Apothecary's Mirror of Simple Souls: Circulation and Reception of Marguerite Porete's Book in Fifteenth-Century France," *Modern Philology* 111, no. 1 (2013): 23-47.

Dialogue is her recording of key visions from God, while the hundreds of preserved letters she wrote reveal the conviction with which she spread God's words.

Catherine's radicalism in politics has featured in literature on her life, yet why she was able to achieve such authority when women such as Mechthild and Marguerite were not needs further investigation.⁶³ Catherine's experiences have also been investigated as feminist spiritual practice by historians.⁶⁴ To understand her ability to gain such influence in society, scholarship needs to go beyond analysing her authority simply in relation to that of successful contemporary men, and consider it in comparison to women who had similar messages but were muted by their societies' disapproval. Comparisons between these three women and the differing paths their lives took will help uncover what it was that impacted on a medieval woman's ability to hold influence in her society based on her spirituality.

Therefore, there is more to be said on why some medieval laywomen gained authority within their communities while others were ostracised or sentenced to death. The relationship between the institutional Church and women who wanted to participate actively in their faith was more complex and not as consistent across Europe as has previously been assumed. Even in feminist historiography, generalisations have tended to be made on women as one homogenous group. Literature on medieval women's authority has largely focused on comparisons between them and men, rather than their female contemporaries, particularly when it comes to spiritual influence. Their spiritual equality has been competently argued, both in contemporary and modern scholarship, and yet while women's different fates have been acknowledged more broadly, not enough consideration has been given to why women's experiences contrasted so drastically in western Christian Europe. Catherine held an influential role in politics and the Church, Mechthild was isolated by society and Marguerite was burned at the stake as a heretic. How did some laywomen gain religious and secular authority over their contemporaries in late medieval society when others were unsuccessful? An answer to this question cannot just lie in the fact that these women had gender in common. A new analysis of

⁶³ Cheryl Forbes, "The Radical Rhetoric of Caterina Da Siena," *Rhetoric Review* 23, no. 2 (2004): 121-40; Joan Isobel Friedman, *Politics and the Rhetoric of Reform in the Letters of Saints Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena* (Brepols Publishers, 2007).

⁶⁴ Janet L Larson, "Josephine Butler's Catharine of Siena: Writing (Auto) Biography as a Feminist Spiritual Practice," *Christianity & Literature* 48, no. 4 (1999): 445-71.

medieval female writings focusing on uncovering the social reactions to women's beliefs will enable understanding of why some laywomen were able to exert powerful secular and ecclesiastical influence while others were condemned as heretics.

Chapter Two: Mechthild of Magdeburg

And now I fear God if I keep silent,
but I fear uncomprehending people if I write.⁶⁵

Called to share God's words in a culture where women were encouraged to have private faith, Mechthild of Magdeburg left her mark in history by writing the first mystical text in the German vernacular. Yet she was forgotten a couple of centuries after her death and was only rediscovered in 1861.⁶⁶ Mechthild's writing flourished alongside the growing mendicant orders and béguine movement in the Low Countries as thirteenth-century pastoral efforts focused more on an interiority and reflective faith for laypeople that was midway between the contemplative and active life. The doctrine in her book *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* in places was questionable, although she strove to remain orthodox and her loyalty to the overall authority of the Church saved her from being deemed heretical. Her main support came from other religious and semi-religious women, although she was fairly popular amongst local Dominicans as well. To counter attacks on her orthodoxy, Mechthild utilised key hagiographical topoi to gain authority amongst her peers and within the Church. Her emphasis on divine favour, prophecy, humility and asceticism gave her access to sanctity that legitimised her book.

⁶⁵ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1998), III:1, 102.

⁶⁶ Frances Beer, *Women and the Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1992), 5; Frank Tobin, *Mechthild Von Magdeburg: A Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes* (Columbia, South Carolina: Camden House Inc., 1995), 21.

Mechthild of Magdeburg

Little of Mechthild's life is known aside from the few autobiographical sections included in her book *The Flowing Light*. Scholarship suggests she was born in Magdeburg around 1207 into a family of retainers in service. Mechthild had a basic education and could read and write in the vernacular. Her adroit use of language is clever and suggests that she created her own education.⁶⁷ Mechthild's writing was inspired and influenced by her life as a béguine. Although she did not know Latin, she understood and used phrases she had learnt from the liturgy, sermons, and conversations with her confessor.⁶⁸ After being "greeted by the Holy Spirit in my twelfth year" (as she was every day for the next thirty-one years), she left home around 1230 to join a house of béguines in Magdeburg, and may have eventually become the head of this community.⁶⁹ Mechthild began writing around 1250 at the command of God and her Dominican confessor, Heinrich von Halle. She entered Helfta, a Cistercian convent in 1270 when her orthodoxy came under attack. Despite Helfta's reputation for strong female writers, Mechthild did not feel at home in this environment. Venerated by the community of nuns, they looked to her for spiritual instruction and were inspired to produce their own important spiritual writings.⁷⁰ Elizabeth Andersen holds the uncommon assertion that Mechthild took Orders at Helfta.⁷¹ However, her justification for this stance is unclear and the general consensus is that Mechthild remained a laywoman. Mechthild completed *The Flowing Light* while at Helfta, and died around 1282.

While there is significant scholarship on Mechthild, it generally has a narrow focus. Mechthild's cosmic dimension of supernatural geography distinguishes her from other women visionaries who confine themselves to visions of a personal and

⁶⁷ Poor, "The 'Unlearned Tongue'," 221.

⁶⁸ Tobin, *A Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes*, 43.

⁶⁹ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, IV:2, 139-40.

⁷⁰ Tobin, *A Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes*, 2-3.

⁷¹ Elizabeth A. Andersen, *The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, European Academic Publishers, 2000), 78.

private world.⁷² Yet early twentieth-century studies on Mechthild often limited her importance to being an early example of the language of German mysticism. These studies were highly influenced by the overemphasis on speculative mysticism in Meister Eckhart scholarship. The focus of mid-twentieth-century scholarship on Mechthild was also limited to three main areas: spirituality, influences and comparisons, and language and literary qualities.⁷³ By the late twentieth century, there was an increased interest in Mechthild, but scholarship largely remains in German. Feminist scholarship has also addressed Mechthild, but such literature ignored the importance religion played in Mechthild's life and forced modern ideas into a medieval context.⁷⁴ Thus, there are aspects of Mechthild's contemporary authority that still need to be addressed in scholarship.

Historical Context

As discussed earlier, scholarship has tended to generalise women mystics as having one experience based on a shared gender identity, which does not allow for differences in social situations that influenced their access to authority. Hence, it is important to analyse the environment in which Mechthild lived. From the twelfth century, aristocratic familial power was diminishing and bureaucratic and institutional power was rising. Authorities also restricted noble women's public authority as landholders and abbesses of double monasteries.⁷⁵ There were baronial wars in the Low Countries, and Helfta's wealth made it vulnerable to looters.⁷⁶ Magdeburg in the thirteenth century was an established archbishopric on the banks of the Elbe, and Slavs and Germans had heavily contested the surrounding area since the eighth century. During Mechthild's lifetime, Magdeburg was one of several important launching points for the '*Ostkolonisation*' of Slavic regions. Contact in

⁷² Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 11.

⁷³ Tobin, *A Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes*, 60.

⁷⁴ Key scholars on Mechthild in the twentieth century include Evelyn Underhill, Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache, Bernard McGinn, Peter Dronke, Frank Tobin, Elizabeth Petroff, and Ulrike Wiethaus. For Feminist literature on Mechthild, see Caroline Walker Bynum, and Susan Clark.

⁷⁵ *Béguine Spirituality: Mystical Writings of Mechthild of Magdeburg, Beatrice of Nazareth & Hadewijch of Brabant*, trans. Oliver Davies (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), 5.

⁷⁶ Andersen, *The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 84.

Magdeburg with non-Christian cultures led to tenuous clerical authority. This unsettled atmosphere was matched by a change in the religious scene as well. The thirteenth century witnessed a widespread religious movement in central Europe which focused on individual salvation, with Christianity centred on Christ's humanity and his evangelism. The ideal life was an imitation of Christ and the apostles through repentance, poverty and preaching. The mendicant orders established numerous houses in Magdeburg and focused on preaching in the vernacular to reform the laity.⁷⁷ However, their presence is indicative of conflicting approaches to monastic life, contributing to the atmosphere of fractured religious authority.

Significantly, this new wave of active Christianity enabled laypeople to participate more fully in their salvation. Out of this environment, béguines emerged. Richard W. Southern summarises the béguine movement as:

a women's movement, not simply a feminine appendix to a movement which owed its impetus, direction and main support to men. It had no definite Rule of life; it claimed the authority of no saintly founder; it sought no authorisation from the Holy See; it had no organisation or constitution; it promised no benefits and sought no patrons; its vows were a statement of intention, not an irreversible commitment to a discipline enforced by authority; and its adherents could continue their ordinary work in the world.⁷⁸

Walter Simon's research on the béguine movement across the Low Countries show that the lifestyle presented in several forms. Some women lived as recluses, others worked in hospitals or their local communities. It was sometimes a transitory station leading to traditional monastic life, although increasingly over time women remained with the movement until their death.⁷⁹ Béguines thrived in towns across Germany such as Magdeburg where there was a high degree of urbanisation. Early thirteenth-century béguines were held in high regard by the Church, with Pope Honorius III recognising the movement in 1216.⁸⁰ Béguines, strictly speaking, were no more than pious laywomen, but they came to occupy a position between the monastic and

⁷⁷ Poor, "The 'Unlearned Tongue'," 223.

⁷⁸ Richard W. Southern, *The Penguin History of the Church: Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 321.

⁷⁹ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 36.

⁸⁰ Blamires, "Women and Preaching in Medieval Orthodoxy," 138; *Béguine Spirituality*, 17.

secular worlds.⁸¹ They were placed under the spiritual instruction of local mendicant orders who fostered the mysticism of the béguines and introduced them to mystic theological tradition.⁸² Personal visionary experiences were recorded to benefit the spiritual growth of others, and it is from this perspective that Mechthild's book has previously been studied. Yet historians have emphasized the text's role in self-improvement of individuals, when mystical texts in fact had a wider impact on society.

Because béguines were not under direct ecclesiastical control, they were increasingly viewed with suspicion. Female mystical authorship threatened clerical jurisdiction because it promoted direct access to God without mediation by the Church. In 1261, the Dominican synod in Magdeburg issued decrees criticising béguines and ordered them to obey their local parish priest. Furthermore, the Second Council of Lyons in 1274 named béguines as suspicious in behaviour and lacking official guidance. Complaints that béguines used their liberty to escape familial ties or obedience to clergy circulated around the Council.⁸³ The condemnation and execution of Marguerite Porete in 1310, discussed in a later chapter, is the first example of systematic action against béguines.⁸⁴ The Council of Vienne (1311-1312) officially condemned béguines, accusing them of hypocrisy, laziness, and false piety cloaking lives of gross sensuality. The Dominican orders who had fostered the spirituality of these groups were suddenly threatened by their experiential mysticism. Béguine communities were forbidden, and many embraced the rule of established orders to continue.⁸⁵ Such an atmosphere explains Mechthild's sensitivity to orthodoxy, her sharp reaction to accusations of heresy, and the frequent mentions of her detractors. However, Mechthild was never officially charged with heretical beliefs. The mix of Christian and non-Christian cultures in Magdeburg weakened clerical authority there, and the presence of a charismatic holy woman who supported the local mendicant orders and the Church would have been useful. Yet while mendicants may have wanted to enlist Mechthild for their own

⁸¹ Andersen, *The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 61.

⁸² Tobin, *A Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes*, 52.

⁸³ Andersen, *The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 79.

⁸⁴ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 132.

⁸⁵ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 3.

ends, her ability to capitalise on the circumstances which may have developed her own authority was undermined by suspicions regarding her theology.

The Flowing Light of the Godhead

The Flowing Light of the Godhead is an important historical text because it was the first mystical text in the German vernacular not translated from a Latin source. Recording visions in the vernacular in the thirteenth century was a break with custom. Mechthild's non-religious status in producing such a text was also unique at that time. Unfortunately, the original manuscript in the vernacular of *The Flowing Light* did not survive. Thus, for modern scholars our access to Mechthild is filtered through translators, and even the oldest translation is still one-step away from Mechthild's original words and meanings. The differences between the surviving Middle High German and Latin translations point to the book being copied frequently.⁸⁶ *The Flowing Light* is made up of 267 chapters across seven books. There are also two medieval prologues from the Middle High German and Latin translations. Mechthild's first collection of mystical revelations (Books I-VI) were written in the vernacular by Mechthild's own hand. The final book was dictated to the nuns at Helfta when Mechthild was blind and unable to write. Mechthild undertook some of the editorial work alongside her confessor Heinrich of Halle for the first six books. Scholars previously argued that Heinrich significantly altered Mechthild's work in content, style and order. While it is plausible that Heinrich divided the chapters and occasionally influenced the wording of sections dealing with difficult theological matters to ensure orthodoxy, it is now commonly agreed that Heinrich let Mechthild's original text speak for itself.⁸⁷ The nuns at Helfta compiled the final book. Writing in Middle Low German is a sign of Mechthild's authorial agency as far as it represented a choice to reach a different audience. Mechthild also always intended for *The Flowing Light* to be translated to reach a

⁸⁶ Tobin, *A Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes*, 10.

⁸⁷ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 6-7.

wider audience - she asked God to reward future scribes handsomely.⁸⁸ The translation of her writing into Latin began during her lifetime.

The Flowing Light's Latin translation is an early example of important vernacular mystical texts being incorporated into the sacred language of the Church. The translator's editing voice is clearly heard in the tempering of erotic language and criticism of religious contemporaries. This diminished the innovativeness of Mechthild's writing to place it more securely within the sphere of orthodoxy.⁸⁹ The Latin Index Rerum highlights key themes for educated monks and nuns, and specific extracts to be read aloud to groups of nuns or béguines for devotional practices.⁹⁰ Mechthild planned for her book to be published and so utilised literature forms which facilitated the book being read aloud to large audiences.⁹¹ *The Flowing Light* eludes classification within one specific genre; it contains visions, dialogues, prayers, hymns, letters, allegories, parables, and narratives covering theological insights on Church reform and prophetic critique.⁹² The text being in dialogic form would have been key to its reception.⁹³ The prefaces reinforce the idea that the text was meant to be shared. The Middle High German prologue advised that the book must be understood in good faith, "as is the case with other holy writings." Thus, the reader would find "nothing scandalous or offensive in it, and the writing itself will not be subjected to any perverse claim of falsehood."⁹⁴ This suggests that friars accepted the religious significance of *The Flowing Light* as a sacred text enough to encourage a wide readership.

Mechthild's perception of *The Flowing Light* as a public document shaped it. Most other divine texts written by women at the time focused on intimate experiences of divine favour which were later published. Some scholars read the text

⁸⁸ Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book*, 232.

⁸⁹ Andersen, *The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 92.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹¹ Frank Tobin, "Audience, Authorship and Authority in Mechthild Von Magdeburg's Flowing Light of the Godhead," *Mystics Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (1997): 8.

⁹² Rorem, "The Company of Medieval Women Theologians," 88.

⁹³ Andersen, *The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 90; Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book*, 113.

⁹⁴ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 32.

as a diary of Mechthild's inner life. However, this perpetuates the idea that medieval women were silent on theological discourse, and that was not the case. Mechthild's work is not a pure and unsophisticated expression of her experiences, but a carefully constructed reflection given theological shape and significance. The work should be approached as a theological reflection on experiences of a Christian soul.⁹⁵ While her writing is more a theology of experience than scholastic theology, it provides a distinctive teaching about God, Creation, the Fall, salvation, and relationship with the divine.⁹⁶ Mechthild's distinct ambiguity as narrator reflects her lack of cultural authority as a woman. This changes during the course of her writing as her confidence grows and her authority is established by the circulation of the first six books throughout her lifetime. Textual evidence in *The Flowing Light* suggests it was circulated in a variety of forms over the long period during which she wrote it (c.1250-c.1280). The books were circulated in various sets (books I & II; books I-IV; books I-VI). By the time she entered Helfta, many editions of her work were circulating, to then be combined as a collected works and translated into Latin by the Dominicans at Halle.

Doctrine

During a time of increased scrutiny of béguines, Mechthild wrote *The Flowing Light* as a public document which justifies and legitimises her experiences from charges of heresy.⁹⁷ Extracts of *The Flowing Light* were included anonymously in collections for theological teaching, suggesting that her theological arguments were appreciated widely when female authorship was undocumented. However, there were aspects of Mechthild's theology that caused controversy. According to Mechthild, the soul shares everything in common with the Trinity except her uncreatedness. Mechthild views humans as a trinity as well - the soul bound to God, the body to Jesus, and the senses to the Holy Spirit.⁹⁸ In Book II, Chapter 19, Lady Knowledge tells the soul

⁹⁵ Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 57.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 66.

⁹⁷ Leona M. English, "An Analysis of Power in the Writing of Mechthild of Magdeburg," *Feminist Theology* 14, no. 2 (2006): 199.

⁹⁸ Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 78.

“you are of threefold nature in yourself in order to be indeed God’s image. You are a virile man in your battle; you are a well-dressed maiden in the palace before your Lord; you are an eager bride in your and God’s love-bed.” Mechthild also argues that humanity has two natures, a sinful and sinless one. She claimed that humans can be held so tightly by God that they do not sin.⁹⁹ Her stance on humanity’s eternal existence in and of the Trinity was challenged by critics, particularly when God says, “you are now so ennatured in me that the least thing cannot be between you and me.”¹⁰⁰ Challengers claimed Mechthild was denying the necessity of grace. However, Mechthild argued that humans are both God’s children by grace and by nature, as they are created in His image. Despite the Fall, the soul is one with the Father by nature, and the recognition of that lineage makes special gifts or experiences of the Godhead unnecessary.¹⁰¹ Interestingly, it was these special experiences which legitimised her right to speak in the eyes of her contemporaries, as is discussed further below. Mechthild was accused of aligning with the Free Spirit movement by rejecting spiritual guidance of the Church on the basis of radical unity with God by those who misconstrued her visions. She claims such ideas of entering the eternal Godhead never entered her heart.¹⁰²

Furthermore, Mechthild’s most controversial vision is the mass of John the Baptist in Book II, Chapter Four. Having a layman perform the mass was a threat to priestly authority, particularly as Saint Peter is standing idly by. Mechthild describes John as “the same priest, who had been ordained by the Holy Spirit in his mother’s womb.”¹⁰³ Not only did John take mass, but he also heard Mechthild’s confession and gave her communion. The extent of the controversy around this vision was enough to warrant a defence from Mechthild. In Book VI, she wrote that:

one cannot grasp divine gifts with merely human understanding... That John the Baptist sang mass for the poor girl who was not of the flesh; it was so spiritual that only the soul saw it, understood it, and enjoyed it... My Pharisee remarked in response to this description that John the Baptist was a layman.

⁹⁹ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 233-4.

¹⁰⁰ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, I:44.

¹⁰¹ Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 72.

¹⁰² Michelle Voss Roberts, "Retrieving Humility: Rhetoric, Authority, and Divinization in Mechthild of Magdeburg," *Feminist Theology* 18, no. 1 (2009): 60.

¹⁰³ Based on Luke 1:41; Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, II:4, 75.

The Most Holy Sacrament in the mass is God's body. John the Baptist touched this same Son of God in humble trembling fear while leading a holy life of such dignity that he heard the voice of the heavenly Father and caught his words and saw the Holy Spirit and recognised the Son in them both.¹⁰⁴ John the Baptist also preached the holy Christian faith openly to all the people and pointed out for the people with his finger the true Son of God who was there present: 'Behold the Lamb of God.' Neither pope nor bishop nor priest can ever speak so perfectly the word of God as did John the Baptist, except through our Christian faith which is above human understanding. Was this man really a layman? Prove me wrong, you who are blind!¹⁰⁵

Controversially, Mechthild here argued that the ordination of any person - John the Baptist, the pope, even herself - is effective exclusively through the power of Christian faith. God's supernatural power does not lie with the Church's institutional hierarchy, but the Church is empowered by the faith of its members. The text addresses members directly and activates their power.¹⁰⁶ Such a blatant threat to the institutional hierarchy, and then passionate defence of her stance, suggests an inherent authority felt by Mechthild that grew over the period of writing her book. Moreover, the fact that she was not brought to trial for contradicting a central part of the ecclesiastical institution is evidence of her theology being largely orthodox. This gave her a level of authority that excused such a controversial belief.

Additionally, Mechthild argued that one attained divinity by following Christ in his humanity. Mechthild disagrees that it is human to sin, pointing to Christ as the ultimate example. She argues that it is the will that sins, and good will makes up for weakness of the body.¹⁰⁷ In Mechthild's prelapsarian Eden, there was no genitalia, i.e. no definitive separation between Adam and Eve. It was the original sin that brought gender differences and subjugated women under men.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, humans in their perfect state are equal. Disciplining the flesh restores the semblance of prelapsarian perfection, participating in the divine flow of love and light given in mystical union. Mechthild focuses on the will as central to sin. She believes in union

¹⁰⁴ John 1:29-34

¹⁰⁵ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, VI:36, 261-2.

¹⁰⁶ Poor, "The 'Unlearned Tongue'," 227.

¹⁰⁷ Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 75.

¹⁰⁸ David Neville, "The Bodies of the Bride: The Language of Incarnation, Transcendence, and Time in the Poetic Theology of Mechthild of Magdeburg," *Mystics Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2008): 12.

without distinction with the divine but presents it in traditional formulas.¹⁰⁹ In her vision of the mass, Mechthild distinguishes between willfulness and action.

Willfulness is the cause of sin, not the body – therefore, a woman's body does not equal sin. The maid receives a vision as a reward for good will despite being ill.¹¹⁰

Christiane Nisters observes that Mechthild's authorial identity is characterised by a dualistic split between spirit and flesh.¹¹¹ The dualism of Mechthild's writing is a feature of religious vitae of the thirteenth century and performs as a function of text to authenticate the holiness of the author and legitimise truthfulness of the writings. Mechthild acknowledges and uses this expectation on female sanctity to legitimise herself in *The Flowing Light*.

Reception Among Peers

When assessing Mechthild's authority, it is necessary to recognise that it derives not only from an assertion but also from an external acknowledgement of that claim. By the time Mechthild entered Helfta, many editions of her work in various forms were circulating. Notably, the vernacular manuscript of Mechthild's visions was deemed most suitable for other semi-religious women of the same social status as Mechthild. There was no need to justify the authorship in the prologue of this version as it avoided the public-teaching ban. It was sent throughout southern Germany and Switzerland to other béguinages as guidance for contemplative practices. Heinrich von Nördlingen, a priest and spiritual adviser to mystic Margaret Ebner, translated the original into Middle High German and sent the manuscript along with a letter to Margaret at the convent of Maria Medingen in Southern Germany in 1345. Heinrich felt compelled to send the manuscript because of the "treasure that God is in himself and has shown in this book... I also want you to lend it to Engeltal."¹¹² This shows an educated clergyman found enough value in *The Flowing Light* not only to recommend the text and ask it to be shared, but also to translate the entire book. The

¹⁰⁹ Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 177.

¹¹⁰ Poor, "Cloaking the Body in Text," 427.

¹¹¹ Qtd. in Neville, "The Bodies of the Bride," 5.

¹¹² Patricia Zimmerman Beckman, "The Power of Books and the Practice of Mysticism in the Fourteenth Century: Heinrich of Nördlingen and Margaret Ebner on Mechthild's 'Flowing Light of the Godhead'," *Church History* 76, no. 1 (2007): 62-3.

nuns were ordered by Heinrich to treat *The Flowing Light* as a sacred spiritual document, with parallel instructions for treatment with other sacramental objects.¹¹³

Mechthild's influence amongst her peers is closely related to the role medieval women's texts played in literary and ritual exchange. Mystical books were a living conduit for divine power, which accounted for their rhetorical power but also at times their perceived danger.¹¹⁴ With great power in the written word came the threat of heretical charges, as the act of mystical writing and distribution of texts was not inherently authoritative. Medieval audiences assessed mystical authority based on a text's ability to produce the experience in themselves. Therefore, *The Flowing Light*'s instructions for a mystical encounter which enabled Mechthild's audience to commune directly with God themselves were significant. If a text could stir up mystical life in its audience, it had a productive power for connecting divine and human. At a time when the Church was concerned about official mediation this could be inherently threatening to the ecclesiastical hierarchy and explains why *The Flowing Light* was recommended mostly to other religious. Yet, legitimacy was given to the text when Heinrich von Nördlingen suggested the book be placed on the altar and prescribed ritualistic prayers before reading.¹¹⁵ This reinforces that Mechthild's text was accepted as a vessel of divine grace, and that she gained legitimacy by Heinrich's recommendation.

There is certainly evidence that Mechthild held a certain level of authority at least amongst religious women, even though it was strongly questioned by some. 'Sister M' is referred to fondly in writings by women at Helfta.¹¹⁶ However, Mechthild was not without struggles with other béguines. She writes that in her community, "there is a religious person who causes me much distress because of her contrary disposition. This person is not willing to obey me in regard to anything."¹¹⁷ This suggests that Mechthild was the head of a béguine house, and that not everyone under her authority respected it. Mechthild was then told by God that the woman

¹¹³ Ibid., 64.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 66.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 67.

¹¹⁶ Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book*, 80.

¹¹⁷ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, VI:7, 233-4.

would be struck dumb, blind and paralysed; “fourteen days later this actually happened.”¹¹⁸ This reinforced Mechthild’s divine authority and prophetic abilities, gaining her more legitimacy amongst her peers. She criticised “worldly béguines”, too, writing that “the spiritual sister speaks from the true light of the Holy Spirit, free from interior suffering; but the worldly béguine speaks from her flesh in Lucifer’s spirit with dreadful effort.”¹¹⁹ The tense relationship with some of her béguine peers reflected in Mechthild’s criticism of them suggests that not all reception of Mechthild by her contemporaries was positive.

Mechthild entered Helfta, a Cistercian convent, circa 1270. This move both protected her from attacks on her orthodoxy and gave her access to better education in theology. However, while Mechthild’s greatest support came from religious and semi-religious women, her writings from this period have an overwhelming sense of solitariness. Throughout her life there were no disciples to bolster her claims or promote her potential canonisation. She asked God what she should do in the convent where she felt she did not belong. In response, He told her she “should illumine and teach them.”¹²⁰ But when the younger nuns ask her to teach them, she responds that they “want to have instruction from me, but I myself am uneducated. What you are searching for you can find a thousand times better in your books.”¹²¹ Mechthild was fiercely independent with a strong personality and sense of dignity. She felt alienated from her peers at Helfta who viewed her as a living relic.¹²² Mechthild’s key literary contemporaries at Helfta were Gertrude the Great and Mechthild of Hackeborn who both became prolific writers and visionaries. Their works spread throughout Europe. While Helfta was a strategic place for Mechthild of Magdeburg to go because female literacy was strongly encouraged, it may have come too late to be of real benefit for her. Translated copies of *The Flowing Light*

¹¹⁸ Ibid., VI:7, 234.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., III:24, 133-5.

¹²⁰ Ibid., VII:8, 283.

¹²¹ Ibid., VII:21, 292.

¹²² Frank Tobin, "Mechthild of Magdeburg and Meister Eckhart: Points of Coincidence," in *Meister Eckhart and the Béguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 1994), 60.

reached Switzerland and other parts of Germany, but no further.¹²³ Without the official endorsement of convent life, or a strong following including key male clerical figures, Mechthild's influence was much more limited than her contemporaries.

Relationship with the Dominicans

Key to Mechthild's support network and access to authority was her relationship with the Dominicans in Magdeburg. Heinrich von Halle, a very learned and highly respected *lectio* and therefore key member of the existing hierarchy, acted as her confessor and commanded her to write. By aligning herself with Heinrich, Mechthild avoided claims of heresy by being obedient to her spiritual director. Heinrich is described in *The Flowing Light* as a "learned and good man" who assisted in the compiling of the text. It continues: "Sister Mechthild, who survived him, saw his soul in the sight of the Lord in heaven holding this book in his hand and rejoicing with his face radiant. For through the writing down of this book he attained for himself many rewards."¹²⁴ Heinrich is granted entrance to Heaven based on his contribution to *The Flowing Light*. In this one vision, God vindicates Mechthild from unorthodox claims against her, and reinforces that *The Flowing Light* has the ability to save souls, including those of the mendicant orders. Mechthild's brother Baldewinus was accepted into the Order of Preachers on the strength of Mechthild's merits, which displays the high esteem in which the Dominicans held her. He became a well-respected member and subprior of the Dominican priory of Halle, and his connection to Mechthild would have been mutually beneficial.¹²⁵

While her book was well-distributed amongst women, there were a number of extracts included in religious and theological manuscripts largely aimed at a male readership. The fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts in which excerpts from *The Flowing Light* exist are mostly collections of sermon outlines, Latin grammatical texts, devotional compilations, and meditation guides for mendicant

¹²³ Poor, "The 'Unlearned Tongue'," 238.

¹²⁴ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, notes to V:12, 358.

¹²⁵ Andersen, *The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 49.

orders.¹²⁶ This implies that key ideas from the text were heard by a much wider audience. The compiler of the Colmar codex asserted Mechthild's sainthood and surrounded her work with that of other holy men, including Bernard Clairvaux and Johannes Tauler, to legitimise her with the audience of friars.¹²⁷ While in most of these manuscripts authorship is not attributed to Mechthild, it is necessary to understand that before the issue of copyright emerged, speeches and books were assigned real authors only when the author's discourse was considered transgressive.¹²⁸ It was Mechthild's desire to have contemporaries accept the work as written by God, and thus the removal of her name was inconsequential. Therefore, the lack of official authorial acknowledgement does not suggest a significant lack of authority. Yet, the presence of a charismatic holy woman would have been very politically useful for the Dominicans in Magdeburg who were missionising to the east and north. They were focused on winning over erring Christians, and Mechthild's book fits into this mission. Through inclusion in manuscripts read and shared by the Dominicans, and the respect they held for her, Mechthild's mission to correct the laity through her teachings was carried out.

Moreover, Dominicans in the thirteenth century were part of a struggle for power themselves; Mechthild claimed "the Order of Preachers was under severe attack from false teachers and, in addition, from many greedy sinners."¹²⁹ Preaching privileges of the Dominican Order were being contested by the clergy whose roles were being encroached upon. In 1254, Pope Innocent IV withdrew the Order's privileges, although they were restored again in 1281 by Pope Martin IV. Local decisions were made to strengthen the authority of secular clergy in response, particularly by trying to force béguines to obey parish priests rather than friars. The Synod of Magdeburg in 1261 dealt with this very issue, and Mechthild would have been aware of the power struggle surrounding the Order.¹³⁰ The Dominican order was known for its emphasis on theological study - an inherent respectability that

¹²⁶ Poor, "The 'Unlearned Tongue'," 235-6.

¹²⁷ Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book*, 130.

¹²⁸ Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 124.

¹²⁹ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, IV:27, 170.

¹³⁰ Andersen, *The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 137.

Mechthild could borrow by her association with the movement. She, in return for their support, praises the Order whom she claims occupies a privileged place in heaven.¹³¹ Mechthild details the “sixteen reasons why the Order of Preachers is dear to God” in Book IV, Chapter 21, with God telling her that He loves “two things in the Order of Preachers so much that my divine heart unceasingly smiles upon it. The first is the holiness of their life; the second is their great value for the church.”¹³² As well as praising their activities on earth, Mechthild prophesied “the reward of preachers as it will come about” in heaven where they would gain the highest honour.¹³³ Such incredibly high endorsement relayed through Mechthild from God would have been crucial at a time when the Order’s own authority was being questioned by the Church.

Relationship with Clergy

Mechthild’s relationship with the wider Church was less positive. Her decision to write in the vernacular was bold, as it meant transmitting divine truths unmediated by the clergy. Her agency as a writer of God’s words contrasts the social expectations of women practicing private piety. Mostly, Mechthild’s writing reinforces the overall authority of the Church, despite criticising the morality of many of its members. There is solid evidence for clerics who highly valued her writings and respected her authority as mediator between God and people.¹³⁴ Mechthild was sought for advice by the deacon of the cathedral at Magdeburg who did not know how to conduct himself in his new position. While God told Mechthild to encourage the deacon to keep his position, she did not hold back from criticising his immoral behaviour.¹³⁵ She claims he abused his office by his extravagance, and that “God calls the cathedral canons billy goats because their flesh stinks of lust in

¹³¹ Tobin, “Mechthild of Magdeburg and Meister Eckhart,” 46; Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, III:1, 101-06.

¹³² Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, IV:21, 165.

¹³³ Ibid., III:1, 104.

¹³⁴ Tobin, *A Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes*, 124.

¹³⁵ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, VI:2, 228.

eternal truth before his Holy Trinity.”¹³⁶ Frances Beer claims this criticism led to the canon at Magdeburg calling for her book to be burned. Mechthild’s harsh words potentially also suggest he gave her trouble when she was a béguine in Magdeburg.¹³⁷

Mechthild is certainly adroit at grasping the inherent power imbalance in the religious leadership around her. Both God and Mechthild held the pope responsible for priestly corruption. She sees the pope in prayer as God scolds him for “violating the holy Christian faith”. God continues, “he who does not know the path to hell, let him look at the corrupt clergy, how their lives go straight to hell with women, children, and other public sins... The reason [the pope’s] predecessors did not live long is that they did not bring about the hidden intentions of my will.”¹³⁸ Such blatant criticism of the pope would have been controversial. Yet Mechthild emphasises that they were not her words, but God’s. Mechthild feels most distress over the imperfect in religious life, because their souls have “utterly lost” their “sweet intimacy with God.”¹³⁹ In Book II, Chapter 23, the “Dull Soul” claims that they do not need to love God with everything because they are “a member of a religious order. I fast, keep vigils, am free of serious sin, I am bound enough.” Mechthild criticises them for being “more concerned about that mongrel body of yours than about Jesus... You should be ashamed of yourself today in God’s sight, that you call yourself a religious and yet busy yourself the whole time with your body... Rather, it is the simple and pure who seek God alone in all their actions to whom God, given his nature, must favourably incline.”¹⁴⁰ This false holiness of religious was frustrating to Mechthild and threatened the very foundations of the Church. Mechthild promoted a higher Christianity than this. She sees the results of corrupt religious lives in purgatory and warns those left on earth. False religious will be clawed apart by devils, boiled alive and eaten in a repeated cycle throughout their

¹³⁶ Ibid., VI:3, 230.

¹³⁷ Beer, *Women and the Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*, 83; English, "An Analysis of Power," 197.

¹³⁸ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, VI:21, 249-50.

¹³⁹ Ibid., V:8, 187.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., II:23, 87-8.

days in purgatory.¹⁴¹ Despite these threats, focusing on the greed and lust of churchmen was conventional of criticism at the time. Mechthild had an active engagement with the power struggles connected to religious reform going on around her.¹⁴²

Despite her criticism of religious immorality, Mechthild still argued that disobedience to the ecclesiastical hierarchy was the ultimate sin. Obedience was the reason she dared to write.¹⁴³ Mechthild did not question clerical authority but the morality of the corrupt who had authority. She claims that, “no person in any situation can humble himself to better advantage than by following Christian counsel with an obedient heart.” She warns of a béguine who had refused counsel and is now in purgatory and cannot receive the aid of prayers.¹⁴⁴ Mechthild distancing herself from authorship in the text could also be a sign of her tension with clerical authority as a female writer. She does not assert herself as a female claiming authority against the failure of male authority. Her ‘dissent’ was conventional rather than radical. Her critique of corrupt priests and praise of the mendicant orders shows how dissent and orthodoxy sometimes go hand in hand. She never questions the overall authority of the Church. Mechthild’s engagement with competing religious issues reveals her agency by her negotiation of contemporary debates. Nevertheless, her criticisms brought her unwanted attention from the Church. The clergy was increasingly counter-attacking such vocal, independent béguines. She was warned by God that this would happen, being told “more than six years ago that religious people would hold me in great contempt.”¹⁴⁵ The devil says he is glad to find “so many who look like angels and are happy to torment you for me.... I am the chamberlain of religious persons.”¹⁴⁶ He is able to separate religious from God due to their secret impurities and hidden hatred. Yet, in trying to bring her down through their attacks on her honour, they in fact bring her sanctity through suffering. For suffering inflicted upon the self for love of God was noble but suffering inflicted by God through enemies or

¹⁴¹ Ibid., V:14, 191.

¹⁴² Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book*, 42.

¹⁴³ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, VII:8, 283.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., V:5, 184-5.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., III:16, 124.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., IV:2, 142.

friends was much nobler.¹⁴⁷ In Book VI, Chapter 38 we see that her own community had abandoned her.

Hagiographical Topoi: Divine favour

As well as being actively involved in contemporary debates on religious morality, another example of Mechthild's agency is her employment of thirteenth-century hagiographical topoi in her writing to gain authority. In particular, she emphasised divine favour. She declares herself a passive vessel, and the visions and revelations an unrequested gift from God.¹⁴⁸ In the medieval period, both men and women emphasised the divine origins of their revelations to legitimise their writings. However, it became more prevalent in women's writings from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries as they were otherwise being denied positions of sanctioned authority in the Church.¹⁴⁹ Bernard McGinn argues that no medieval male mystics made quite the same claims of divine authorisation women did in the thirteenth century because men did not need divine authorisation for public teaching.¹⁵⁰ Mechthild as well as the prologue authors utilised this method of authorisation. The Middle High German prologue claims that *The Flowing Light*'s author "is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."¹⁵¹ The translator, too, adopts Mechthild's stance that the true author is the Holy Trinity, legitimising the authenticity of Mechthild's writing and editing her work to look more like other holy texts.¹⁵² Mechthild herself records God confirming his authorship of *The Flowing Light*. When the book is threatened to be burned, God responds to Mechthild, holding the book in his right hand:

My Dear One, do not be overly troubled.
No one can burn the truth.
For someone to take this book out of my hand,
He must be mightier than I.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., V:2, 180.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., IV:2, 139.

¹⁴⁹ Andersen, *The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 23.

¹⁵⁰ McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, III, 225-6.

¹⁵¹ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 32.

¹⁵² Poor, "The 'Unlearned Tongue'," 232.

...Now, examine all these words –
How admirably do they proclaim my personal secrets!¹⁵³

No higher authority could be given than God's himself, and Mechthild repeatedly accesses this path to legitimacy. Divine favour was also reinforced by her peers. Gertrude the Great describes a vision of God holding Mechthild's book and explaining he is using it to convert people. This vision confirms God's authorship of *The Flowing Light* and Mechthild's legitimacy.¹⁵⁴ The reinforcing of the divine author highlights Mechthild's special relationship with God and the favour He has bestowed on her.

Furthermore, the mystical experience of which Mechthild wrote cannot be gained by effort alone. God must bestow on the mystic a special grace to receive an ecstatic experience.¹⁵⁵ Hollywood argues that there is little proof that thirteenth-century women experienced ascetic and paramystical experiences in their own writing. Most of it comes from male-authored hagiographical texts. It only starts to appear in women's writing from the fourteenth century.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, Mechthild's exploration of her visions and her overall mystical experience is uncommon in this period, and suggests she was aligning herself with the male-dictated hagiographical tradition that would lend her more authority. While unity with God was more important to Mechthild, visions were important for authority with her contemporaries. A state of ecstasy is necessary for a mystical union. Mechthild describes the experience of mystical ecstasy as "the brightest of lights opened up to the eyes of my soul... bliss with interruption in proportion to the capacities of the faculties."¹⁵⁷ While her body seems to be in a "sweet sleep... she would like to speak but cannot, so utterly has she been enmeshed in sublime union with the awe-inspiring Trinity."¹⁵⁸ Her descriptions attempt to legitimise what could be potentially transgressive visions by utilising the language of the hagiographical tradition to

¹⁵³ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, II:26, 96-8.

¹⁵⁴ Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book*, 80.

¹⁵⁵ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, IV:2, 139-44.

¹⁵⁶ Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 28.

¹⁵⁷ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, II:3, 70-1.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, I:2, 40; *ibid.*, I:5, 44.

emphasise the ecstatic nature of the experiences. It is Mechthild's conviction that she is favoured in God's presence which permeates the book and authorises her. Without it, she could not write, have authority, or advise on spiritual matters. She explains that she does not "know how to write, nor can I, unless I see with the eyes of my soul and hear with the ears of my eternal spirit and feel in all the parts of my body the power of the Holy Spirit."¹⁵⁹ Thus, Mechthild reinforces that it is not her initiative which is propelling her to write, but the command of God through the divine mystical experiences she has been given.

As previously discussed, biblical and early Christian precedents of female prophetesses were used by female mystics to validate their call to write and teach. Mechthild positions herself amongst key female saints in her recorded visions. In the Mass of John the Baptist vision, the maid finds herself in the company of two great female saints renowned for their influence through words - Catherine and Cecilia. The maid is raised and glorified alongside the heavenly courtiers because of her writing; she is dressed in a robe covered in the words of *The Flowing Light*.¹⁶⁰ The prologue of *The Flowing Light* also calls on the biblical tradition of holy prophetesses and argues that Mechthild is a continuation of this tradition. The author of the Middle High German prologue tells of how, "raised up above all things by contemplation and made a sharer of divine illuminations and revelations, [Mechthild] was worthy to perceive from the Lord through her prophetic spirit numerous intimate divine mysteries concerning things past, present, and to come."¹⁶¹ In one of her visions, a dead religious told her a person would die in fourteen days, and so they did.¹⁶² Mechthild is compared directly to these holy women of biblical tradition, and the divine and prophetic origin of the words she has written is highlighted, lending her legitimacy for her text through this hagiographical topos.

Discernment of the visions was also necessary for all people claiming to hear from God, but particularly women, who were deemed more susceptible to being deceived by the devil. Women were expected to submit to a confessor who could

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., IV:13, 156.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., II:4, 72-6.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁶² Ibid., IV:22, 166.

determine the origin of the visions; however, Mechthild asked God to teach her how to tell the difference between a visit from Him and one from the devil. He explained that after a visit from Him, “the beloved is so content that she considers everything good that estranged souls feel as pain. If you are then cross, you might well fear that the devil has anointed you.”¹⁶³ Thus, not only does Mechthild claim a special relationship with God, she also demonstrates that God has given her the ability to discern the truth without clerical mediation. Mechthild separates herself from her writing more than the other two case studies. The words are God’s alone, he interprets them, and she is a passive instrument in relaying the messages.

Hagiographical Topoi: Humility

Another key hagiographical topos Mechthild uses to claim authority is humility. Michelle Roberts describes this hagiographical humility as “a theological view of the self that is neither overly inflated nor excessively abject. The genuinely humble view their relationship to God and others in proper proportion. They recognize their limitations and their creaturely status.”¹⁶⁴ Mechthild acknowledges that she is an unlikely candidate for receiving God’s prophecies. She writes that “some people might be surprised how I, a sinful person, can undertake to write such a description... because of the obvious lowliness I reflect – which is so clearly manifest to my soul – and the nobility of favours that are contained in God’s true gift.”¹⁶⁵ She believes she is “the most worthless person [God] ever created.”¹⁶⁶ When she revealed her visions to her confessor and asked for his advice, “he gave me a command that often makes me ashamed and causes me to weep because my utter unworthiness is obvious to my eyes; that is, he commanded me, a frail woman, to write this book out of God’s heart and mouth.”¹⁶⁷ Through voicing her unworthiness, she creates room for divine authorisation. Her emphasis on the command to write reinforces that it is not her choice and shows humility in her role as messenger.

¹⁶³ Ibid., IV:15, 158.

¹⁶⁴ Roberts, “Retrieving Humility,” 71.

¹⁶⁵ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, III:1, 107.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., III:12, 119.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., IV:2, 43-4.

Mechthild uses the topos of humble reversal to explain why an unlearned woman was given this role. God declared to Mechthild that many wise male theologians are fools in his eyes, and Christianity is strengthened when “the unlearned mouth, aided by my Holy Spirit, teaches the learned tongue.”¹⁶⁸ The prologue in *The Flowing Light* also reinforces this idea of the humble teaching the proud, claiming that “quite often, in fact, almighty God has chosen what is weak in the world to confound what is stronger for its good... [The God of Moses and Israel] now reveals his mysteries to the fragile sex.”¹⁶⁹ Both the author of the prologue and Mechthild emphasise her ignorance and weakness to generate a congenial environment. She pre-empts the criticism by acknowledging her lower gender, education and social status. By highlighting her lowliness, she emphasises God’s majesty and the magnitude of God’s favours to her, and positions the audience more favourably towards her. The self-deprecating rhetoric Mechthild uses aligns with the complexities of medieval emphasis on sin and a healthy recognition of human limitations. Compared to her cloistered contemporaries at Helfta, whose writing did not emphasise women’s lower status, Mechthild’s writing shows evidence of the internalised patriarchal values of her society. Such expressions of contextual attitudes towards women defuse a female speaker’s implicit threat by mimicking its devaluation of women, gaining her authorisation amongst contemporaries.¹⁷⁰ Importantly, Mechthild’s humility is in stark contrast to her absolute belief in her salvation. Mechthild understood and used the political landscape, showing an active agency in her search for legitimacy. In identifying herself as worthless, she aligns herself with saintliness.

Supporters of Mechthild reinforced her holiness. They describe her life with saintly motifs, including the innocence of childhood, an early religious experience, voluntary renunciation of worldly life and pleasantries, estrangement, and withdrawal from the world with a deep sense of humility. The prologue author writes:

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., II:26, 96-8.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁷⁰ Roberts, "Retrieving Humility," 58.

from early childhood she led a pure and innocent life. In her youth, at the urging of the Lord, she left everything she stood to gain and became an exile in a foreign land, leading a life of voluntary poverty. Finally, after many tribulations and at an advanced age... [she joined the sisters at Helfta. For the 12 years she was there,] she flourished in the perfection of all virtues. She especially practised charity, humility, long-suffering, and meekness.¹⁷¹

Similar claims are repeated in the Latin prologue, claiming that she “was a holy virgin in body and spirit” who “served the Lord with great devotion for more than forty years, following perfectly the footsteps of the brothers of the Order of Preachers.”¹⁷² Moreover, scholarship argues that she models aspects of her life on Jesus’ own as an attempt to gain legitimacy. She uses numerical symbolism in the hagiographical account of her life: twelve years old was the age of Jesus when he entered the temple and is the age she received her first vision; thirty-one years of greetings from the Holy Spirit reflects the thirty-one years of Jesus’ life.¹⁷³ The exaggerated topos is evident here. It was necessary to convince the reader of the saintly virtue of a female author who dared to record special revelations from God, and humility was a key aspect of this. The suppression of visionary experience followed by a divine call to write was a characteristic feature of women’s visionary writing. It underlines the divine grace shown to women and pre-empts criticism based on gender.¹⁷⁴ Mechthild places herself in the recognised hagiographical tradition of ‘*docta ignorantia*’ (learned ignorance) and ‘*sancta simplicitas*’ (holy simplicity). This authenticates her experiences and disarms her opponents.¹⁷⁵ The holiness of Mechthild is described in the prologue as proof that the marvels made public are what “the divine Spirit had wrought in her and with her.”¹⁷⁶ Thus while Mechthild utilises humility in her writing, her supporters promote it as evidence of her holiness.

¹⁷¹ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 32.

¹⁷² Ibid., 35.

¹⁷³ Andersen, *The Voices of Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 48.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 113.

¹⁷⁶ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 33.

Hagiographical Topoi: Asceticism of the Body

As discussed earlier, hagiographical tradition highlighted the holiness of physical asceticism, a topos that increased in popularity amongst female mystics as béguines and other female religious were becoming increasingly viewed with suspicion. Mechthild was critical of the physical asceticism associated with traditional cloistered monastic life. She felt there was too much emphasis on suppression of the body rather than on Jesus, which she believed prevented the transfiguration of mystical union. She was against the self-satisfaction of ascetic life that sometimes occurred.¹⁷⁷ Yet for Mechthild, Christ was the example of righteous suffering humans must experience to be one with the Trinity. Physical pain acts metaphorically as a mediator between the celestial and terrestrial, bringing the soul and divine closer.¹⁷⁸

Although Mechthild did not promote inflicting pain on oneself, she did believe in the sanctification of the body through enduring suffering. She recorded how her visionary experiences affected her physically, and she delighted in her “enemy”, her body, being wounded.¹⁷⁹ Throughout her youth she endured suffering that “so completely conquered the body that in twenty years the time never came that I was not weary, weak and sick – mostly from repentance and suffering, but also from holy longing and spiritual toil.”¹⁸⁰ Her visions, too, left her physically ailing. After one vision of hell, she “was so wretchedly in pain from the stink and the unearthly heat that I could neither sit up nor walk and was without the use of my five senses for three days, like someone struck by thunder.”¹⁸¹ In agreement with contemporary expectations, Mechthild gladly suffered bodily pain as she believed that it purified her; she specifically recounted these sufferings in *The Flowing Light* to ensure her sanctification was accepted by her audience.¹⁸² She also had a desire to

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., II:23, 87-9.

¹⁷⁸ Neville, "The Bodies of the Bride," 2.

¹⁷⁹ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, I:2, 41.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., IV:2, 143.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., III:21, 130.

¹⁸² Ibid., V:2, 181.

be martyred like the saints, “that I might shed my sinful blood in true Christian faith for the sake of Jesus whom I love.”¹⁸³ Mechthild framed persecution from enemies and physical ailments as martyring her “beyond all adversity.”¹⁸⁴ Mechthild believed it was to the extent that she willingly suffered poverty, humiliation, rejection and pain that made her like the true Son of God and aligned her with the martyred Christ and saints.¹⁸⁵

Consequently, Mechthild’s wrestle with the issue of authority is evident throughout her text *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. The concurrent growth of the mendicant orders and the béguine movement provided Mechthild with a fertile audience for her mystical literature. Her innate confidence in her work’s divine authorship and God’s favour, the prophetic nature of her visions, her humility and adherence to physical asceticism were key hagiographical topoi Mechthild built her authority on. The other case studies’ comparative observance of these hagiographical topoi will provide insight into how topoi influenced the perception of spiritual authority in laywomen. For Mechthild, this was somewhat successful amongst her peers, particularly the local Dominicans and other semi-religious women. However, her criticism of the morality of the Church did cost her significant official support, despite the close relationship with the Dominican order. The suspicion of her doctrine as unorthodox hindered Mechthild’s ability to go even further in her claims to authority. As will be seen with the other case studies, adherence to orthodoxy was critical in legitimising female mystics. While she gained some fame for her writings, this renown was largely limited to her geographical location and she did not have as wide-ranging an impact as she had hoped. Yet her unique experience as a woman in the medieval Church who wrote the first vernacular mystical text in Germany is significant, and warrants comparison to other medieval women who also wrestled with authority in their writings.

¹⁸³ Ibid., VI:26, 252-3.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., II:24, 91.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., VI:32, 258.

Chapter Three: Marguerite Porete

And she desired that her neighbours might find God in her,
through writings and words.¹⁸⁶

In the previous chapter we encountered a woman who strove to establish her authority through hagiographical topoi in the flourishing mysticism of the Low Countries. In this chapter, we find one whose disregard for these topoi during a time of intense political upheaval in France led to her very public downfall. A béguine with no authority to her name, Marguerite wrote *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, a mystical text which spread throughout Europe and brought her to the attention of the inquisitor in Paris. Her questionable theology and overt challenges to the hierarchy of the Church won her few supporters amongst the clergy. She rejected many of the expected hagiographical topoi for female mystics and instead relied on the authenticity of her divine favour and superiority of the Annihilated Soul as validation of her message. Ultimately, her criticism of the Church and lack of authority in the eyes of her inquisitors led to her condemnation as a heretic and subsequent burning at the stake. Yet her agency in claiming authority while deviating from the accepted path for holy women reveals just how constricting gender norms were for medieval mystics.

¹⁸⁶ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen L. Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 170.

Marguerite Porete

Despite being the first heretic burnt at the stake during the inquisitions in Paris, Marguerite Porete is less well-known than her extraordinary biography warrants. Little is known about Marguerite's life until she first ran afoul of ecclesiastical authorities in the 1290s, and what is known of her is taken from *The Mirror*, records of her trial by royal ministers, and brief reports on the trial in chronicles such as that of William of Nangis. References to Marguerite in older documents can be difficult to identify as her name was disassociated from her work for seven centuries after her death.¹⁸⁷ Even so, contemporary documents describe Marguerite as a preacher, author and theologian. Marguerite was probably born circa 1260 in or near Valenciennes, where she was first brought to the attention of authorities.¹⁸⁸ Trial documents' lack of information on her background and status suggests she was neither noble-born nor a nun. Marguerite was likely from the urban patriciate, given the access she apparently enjoyed to resources for copying and circulating *The Mirror* in multiple languages. Although her kinship ties are difficult to detect, it is worth noting that other recorded Poretas in the area were of modest social status.¹⁸⁹ She had at least a superficial level of Latin literacy, and comprehensive vernacular literacy. The inquisition records note Marguerite as reading her book aloud, as well as owning other books. Her knowledge of the Bible and important mystical texts of the twelfth century reinforce evidence that she was well-educated.¹⁹⁰ Records reveal no family relationships, nor spiritual director, and limited contemporary support.

Many contemporary texts describe Marguerite as a "béguine, very sufficient in learning".¹⁹¹ When trial documents labelled her a '*beguina*', they were describing Marguerite as a laywoman who offered a "manifest self-projection of uncommon

¹⁸⁷ Suzanne Kocher, *Allegories of Love in Marguerite Porete's 'Mirror of Simple Souls'* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2008), 4.

¹⁸⁸ Sean L. Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor: The Trials of Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 27.

¹⁸⁹ Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 26.

¹⁹⁰ Michael Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics: Five Centuries of Religious Dissent* (New York: BlueBridge, 2008), 136.

¹⁹¹ Ly Myreur des Histors of John of Outremeuse (d.1400), qtd. in Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 237.

religious devotion while insinuating a special knowledge of God.”¹⁹² She may or may not have had a specific link to a béguine community. ‘Béguine’ in this period was a sweeping term covering a range of spiritual paths which constituted an “extra-cloistral form of feminine religiosity.”¹⁹³ As we have seen in the previous chapter, béguinages allowed some support for female authority – however, by Marguerite’s lifetime béguines were viewed with suspicion and increasingly being condemned. While Marguerite has been described as a mendicant béguine by some historians, references in inquisitorial records to Marguerite’s many books contradict the idea of her being itinerant: her books would have been too unwieldy to travel with. Her metaphors thus suggest spiritual mendicancy. Despite her connections to béguines, Marguerite’s was a “mysticism of the margins.”¹⁹⁴ The antinomian and pantheistic qualities of her teachings led H.C. Lea in the nineteenth century to claim Marguerite was, if not the founder of the Free Spirit movement, at least the first member to arrive in France.¹⁹⁵

Marguerite wrote *The Mirror* in Old French by her own hand sometime between 1296 and 1306. She disseminated the book and its teachings while living as a béguine, suggesting she felt an inherent level of authority to do so. This is what brought her to the attention of Gui de Collemedio, the bishop of Cambrai. At a meeting in Valenciennes he publicly condemned her teachings, threw her book into the flames, and ordered her to stop spreading her teachings and writings. She ignored Gui’s demands and continued spreading her ideas. Due to her obstinacy and sharing her ideas with ‘simple folk’, she was arrested in 1308 by William of Paris – the Dominican inquisitor and former confessor to King Philip IV the Fair.¹⁹⁶ From 1308 – 1310, Marguerite was confined in William’s prison. Marguerite refused to

¹⁹² Ibid., 32.

¹⁹³ Joanne Maguire Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete's 'Mirror of Simple Souls'* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 29.

¹⁹⁴ Maria Lichtmann, "Marguerite and Meister Eckhart: 'The Mirror of Simple Souls' Mirrored," in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2001), 69.

¹⁹⁵ Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics*, 136. Certainly her book was drawn on by the Council of Vienne (1311-2) when drafting the decree ‘*Ad Nostrum*’ which sparked decades of inquisitions and persecutions of béguines accused of the Free Spirit Heresy. This “movement”, though, seems to be invented by those attempting to condemn and crush it at the Council of Vienne.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 139-40.

cooperate with the inquisition, and a group of theologians and lawyers from the University of Paris condemned her and her text. Marguerite's theology was deemed antinomian and heretical for rejecting the Church and traditional morality.¹⁹⁷ She was sentenced to death by burning at the stake on 1 June 1310 at Place de Grève in Paris. Bystanders were moved to tears by her calm and pious demeanour as she faced her death.¹⁹⁸ Incredibly, her book survived the order for all copies to be burned along with her and continued to be circulated. Because of the impact she managed to have in her short life, Marguerite has been called one of the four female Evangelists of the late Middle Ages alongside Angela of Foligno, Hadewijch of Brabant, and Mechthild of Magdeburg.¹⁹⁹ Scholarship has either focused on Marguerite's theological contribution and its significance, or the role politics in the French court played in her execution. Key scholars on Marguerite include Robert Lerner and Paul Verdeyen, while Amy Hollywood and Maria Lichtmann have produced significant feminist scholarship on Marguerite.

The Mirror of Simple Souls

Written in the late thirteenth century, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* is a mystical treatise exploring the relationship of human and divine love and union with God. It is the only surviving medieval text by a female writer executed as a heretic. Southwestern Hainaut was bilingual in its written culture (French and Latin) in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Old French was the language of 'modern' literature, most used by thirteenth-century mystical writers and for passionately expressing both secular and religious ideas. The choice of Old French by Marguerite reflected her lack of authority within the Church to write in Latin, her agency in controlling what was recorded by doing it in her own hand, and her desired target audience. The thirteenth century saw a movement of the avant-garde Christian writings shifting into the vernacular.²⁰⁰ This choice was key to the work being read

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 140-1.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 136; for a summary of common errors made by historians regarding Marguerite's trial, see Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 4-6.

¹⁹⁹ Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete's 'Mirror of Simple Souls'*, 28.

²⁰⁰ Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 70.

aloud to an audience of laypeople, or as the inquisition alleged, “many other simple people, beggars, and others.”²⁰¹ Marguerite sought literate and non-literate, male and female, lay and clerical audiences. The sixteen manuscripts which survive are in four different languages, and at least the French and Latin copies were circulating during Marguerite’s lifetime and were likely authorised by her.²⁰² Due to its numerous translations, *The Mirror* overcame more linguistic barriers than any contemporary vernacular mystical writing.²⁰³ Thirty-six copies circulated Italy in the fifteenth century. An Old French translation was made for the nuns of Madeleine Convent at Orléans. It was found in England circa 1327, translated into Middle English in the fifteenth century and then translated back from Middle English to Latin by the Carthusian monk Richard Methley in 1491. This was one of a vast number of copies made by monks, suggesting there was nothing overtly heretical in the text despite its condemnation in the fourteenth century.²⁰⁴ *The Mirror* was rediscovered in 1867 and attributed to a male author, until Italian historian Romana Guarnieri attributed it to Marguerite in 1946. It was published as an orthodox text in the twentieth century.

The Mirror, despite what some scholars have argued, is not an autobiography. Marguerite creates a distance between herself and the text.²⁰⁵ The book is a dialogue between Love and Reason, but it does not have a uniform structure. Prose, poetry and exempla are used by Marguerite in adapting chivalric and courtly ideals for her purpose. Marguerite structured *The Mirror* as a sermon with oral presentation in mind, not as a sermon guide but to be presented verbatim. Structured thematically, *The Mirror* guides the listener on their journey to God in seven stages. While the entire book would take roughly seven hours to read aloud, it is written in such a way that a listener would hear most of its central ideas in virtually any thirty-minute period. Suzanne Kocher claims these “brief idea-cycles” make the treatise more accessible to the ear.²⁰⁶ There is extensive mystical

²⁰¹ Ibid., 49.

²⁰² Ibid., 32.

²⁰³ Ibid., 46.

²⁰⁴ Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics*, 143.

²⁰⁵ Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 95.

²⁰⁶ Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 54.

vocabulary and Marguerite follows mystical tradition by referring frequently to the Psalms, Songs of Solomon and the Gospels, showing Marguerite knew the scriptures well.²⁰⁷ Due to women not being permitted to study theology, this divine knowledge of the scriptures is what Marguerite based much of her authority on, as we shall see later in the chapter. The text's focus on the annihilation of the soul was unusual, but not unprecedented. Marguerite built on the mystical ideas of previous authors, including Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Cistercians Gérard of Liège (*Quinque incitamenta ad deum amandum ardentem*) and Beatrice of Nazareth (*Seven Manieren van Minne*).²⁰⁸ This shows Marguerite's work was connected to its literary and theological context, in a tradition well-established by the close of the thirteenth century. Marguerite spends a lot of *The Mirror* explaining the usefulness of her new theology in an attempt to validate herself to her readers.²⁰⁹ The book is still hailed as one of the most profound yet controversial works of speculative mysticism in Christian tradition.²¹⁰ Significantly, it had a profound effect on Dominican Master of Theology Meister Eckhart. Marguerite thus varies the level of religious difficulty in her lessons to accommodate readers of varying degrees of literacy, and draws them together into a new spiritual elite.²¹¹

Historical Context

Marguerite's life and death were so intertwined with broader contemporary historical movements that her story can only be understood in the religious and political context of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The period from 1280–1320 saw relatively few heresy persecutions and even fewer executions in Paris. The inquisition against the Cathars had ended and the witch trials were yet to begin.

²⁰⁷ Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics*, 144; Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 78.

²⁰⁸ See discussion in Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 79.

²⁰⁹ Rina Lahar, "Marguerite Porete and the Predicament of Her Preaching in Fourteenth-Century France," in *Gender, Catholicism and Spirituality: Women and the Roman Catholic Church in Britain and Europe, 1200-1900*, ed. Laurence Lux-Sterritt and Carmen M. Mangion (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 43.

²¹⁰ Bernard McGinn, "Introduction: Meister Eckhart and the Béguines in the Context of Vernacular Theology," in *Meister Eckhart and the Béguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2001), 2.

²¹¹ Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 53.

However, it was a period when ecclesiastical authorities were reinventing what it meant to be a heretic.²¹² Despite the béguine movement beginning as a pious option for women without the means or desire to become nuns, the term ‘béguine’ became synonymous with ‘heretic’ during Marguerite’s lifetime. As seen in the previous chapter, by the turn of the fourteenth century rumours of sexual immorality within the movement had surfaced. A béguine unattached to a community, as Marguerite apparently was, following her own interpretations of Scripture and unregulated by clerical supervision, represented a particular threat to society and the Church.²¹³ Marguerite’s encouragement for souls to develop their spirituality independent of clerical supervision challenged the unitary authority of the Church in an environment where schism was already feared.²¹⁴

Arrests, excommunications, fines and imprisonments were not uncommon in the area during Marguerite’s lifetime. The bishop of Cambrai arrested nuns at the Convent of St Lazarus in Cambrai, banished the béguine Marie du Fait, and excommunicated some inhabitants of the city of Cambrai.²¹⁵ The treatment of Marguerite by the bishop was comparatively mild. Châlons-sur-Marne was undergoing social and political upheaval at the time with tax riots against the bishop in 1307.²¹⁶ Marguerite’s conviction was the first public ceremony of multiple heretics in Paris that included sentencing and relaxation to secular authorities. The execution was designed to be a public spectacle and warning to others.²¹⁷ A substantial number of men with direct knowledge of Marguerite’s trial, including at least six of the twenty-one Masters of Theology who condemned her writing, were part of the Council of Vienne (1311-1312). The Council condemned béguines and Free Spirits. Both sects were said to believe they could attain perfection on this earth and that it would be impossible to sin, meaning, they were not subject to the laws of

²¹² Ibid., 28.

²¹³ Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics*, 138.

²¹⁴ Patrick Wright, "Marguerite Porete's 'Mirror of Simple Souls' and the Subject of Annihilation," *Mystics Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2009): 68.

²¹⁵ Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 30.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 31.

²¹⁷ Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 154.

Church or state.²¹⁸ The Council passed the *Ad nostrum* canon against béguines due to these rumours, and many of these errors can be traced back to the articles in *The Mirror* that had been inspected at Marguerite's trial.²¹⁹ Significantly, this shows that Marguerite's work had been condemned for 'errors' that had not officially been outlawed by the Church until after her death. The Council of Vienne's decrees launched interrogations into béguine life across Europe, including Marguerite's home diocese of Cambrai.

The same combination of gender, social marginality, and religious idiosyncrasy had not threatened the lives of earlier béguines like Mechthild of Magdeburg. Evidence suggests it was the addition of the unfavourable political climate in Marguerite's context that impacted her situation negatively. Valenciennes straddled the Escaut River, with the right bank part of the county of Hainaut and under the bishop of Cambrai (an imperial region of the empire) and the left bank part of Flanders overseen by the bishop of Arras (within the French kingdom). This made Valenciennes a prime location for political and religious troubles to be fought. It was a city on which King Philip IV wished to impose his authority during his long wars with Flanders in the early fourteenth century.²²⁰ Philip saw himself as God's anointed on earth, the defender of the church in France, and responsible for dispensing divine justice. This caused tension with the pope, who disagreed with Philip taxing the French clergy, the heresy trials for bishops, and thus his undermining the idea of universal papal sovereignty. Philip's advisor, William of Nogaret, painted Boniface as a false pope, charging him with corruption, sodomy, atheism, and with hating the French and their king, among other things. Boniface moved to excommunicate the king, so William broke into the papal palace in Anagni and attempted to arrest the elderly pope. Boniface died shortly after, and the more compliant French Pope Clement V was elected.

Thus, Philip and his advisors perfected techniques to defame the crown's enemies: paint the accused as a heretic and a threat to French Christians, convoke public assemblies in favour of the accusations, and pressure Church and lay

²¹⁸ Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics*, 139.

²¹⁹ Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 197-8.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

assemblies to formally support the king.²²¹ In July 1306, Philip's men arrested all Jews in the kingdom, confiscated their goods and claimed the right to collect all debts owing to them. By October, only Jews who had converted to Christianity remained in France, making it a theoretically 'pure' Christian land.²²² It is noteworthy that Marguerite was executed alongside a relapsed Jew in 1310. This cycle was repeated with the Knights Templar. Philip needed funds, and the wealth of an international order with little reason to submit to French royal sovereignty was appealing. He accused the Order of including in their initiation rites kissing other members on the base of the spine, navel and mouth, and urinating on the crucifix, and members were accused of heresy and homosexuality.²²³ The entire order was deemed an anti-Christian "bastion of blasphemy and unbelief." In 1307 all Templars in France were arrested, kept in jail, and some confessed under torture. The Order was suppressed alongside béguines at the Council of Vienne.²²⁴

The significance of the Templar case becomes apparent when one considers that William of Paris, who oversaw Marguerite's case, was Philip's confessor and directed Philip's campaign against the Templars. By creating enemies he then defeated, William assisted Philip in presenting himself as a most Christian king, sanctifying royal control over his kingdom. Diversity of opinion was forcefully suppressed.²²⁵ Philip used William's role of papal inquisitor as a cover for his arrest of the Templars, yet it became apparent that William was willing to treat inquisitions as tools of royal policy. All French inquisitors' rights in the Templar case were revoked by the pope in February 1308, and William was named specifically in the humiliating letter which rescinded their rights.²²⁶ In the meantime, Philip of Marigny, who had handed Marguerite over to William of Paris, had been made archbishop of Sens, and was to oversee the Templar trial. Against papal advice he burned at the stake fifty-four knights of the Templar who were key witnesses in the

²²¹ Ibid., 13-4.

²²² Ibid., 15.

²²³ Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics*, 148.

²²⁴ Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 16.

²²⁵ Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics*, 149.

²²⁶ Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 78.

defence of the Order at the papal commission.²²⁷ Philip and William effectively switched trials – William initiated the Templar trials which Philip concluded; Philip brought Marguerite to Paris and handed her over to William for her inquisition. Both the Templars (11 May) and Marguerite (9 May) were judged relapsed within two days of each other. Both William and Philip were working under royal orders against the papal commission. For William, the trial of Marguerite was used to restore his reputation. When twists in the papal commission of the Templars cast him again in a negative light, a development in Marguerite's case displayed his competence as an inquisitor.²²⁸ William was careful to follow inquisition protocol in Marguerite's case, and to use key people to restore his and King Philip's reputations. The Masters of the University of Paris did not support Philip's arrest and torture of the knights. Nor did they support his struggle for autonomy with Pope Clement V, who attempted to intervene on the Templars' behalf.²²⁹ Yet, William used twenty-one Masters in Marguerite's trial compared to the fourteen that were consulted for the Templars.²³⁰ The trial sided the French government with the mendicant orders who had been against the Templars' case, and were becoming anti-béguines as well.²³¹ The political violence of Marguerite's era was not just a repressive force, but the crises of clerical and secular authority under the regime of Philip enabled Marguerite to come to prominence in a way she would not have otherwise. Yet without significant clerical support or even strong support amongst her peers, Marguerite lacked the social authority to capitalise on this visibility.

Views on the Nature of the Church

Key to a holy woman's access to authority was a positive relationship with the Church. Marguerite's new theology was provocative and questioned the

²²⁷ Ibid., 150.

²²⁸ Ibid., 152-3.

²²⁹ Paul F. Crawford, "The Involvement of the University of Paris in the Trials of Marguerite Porete and of the Templars, 1308-10," in *The Debate of the Trial of the Templars (1307-1314)*, ed. Paul F. Crawford Jochen Burgtorf, and Helen J. Nicholson (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2010), 130.

²³⁰ Ibid., Appendix 9, 143.

²³¹ Ibid., 136.

ecclesiastical institution which in turn viewed her as a fomenter of religious schism. Her promotion of an individual and private relationship with God was a clear critique of political and religious power. Moreover, Marguerite's status as a béguine left her vulnerable, without the protection of an established religious order, confessor or other institutional sanction. Marguerite challenged the boundaries of the male and female spheres with *The Mirror*. She presented an image of a non-gendered preacher who was a pure conduit of God's voice. This aroused the Church's fears of women preaching by not conforming to its rules of interpretation of sanctioned public teaching.²³² All the major characters in *The Mirror*, except for Loingprès, are female gendered. Gender for Marguerite was not so much a matter of traits or social roles, but of the prophetic possibility for dissent from the predominant patriarchal order.²³³ Marguerite envisaged an inverted hierarchy between the Little Church (earthly institution) and the Great Church, consisting of the Annihilated Souls. The Souls "sustain and teach and feed the whole Holy Church."²³⁴ She used dialogues between Love and Reason to battle the prevailing patriarchal rationality of the Church and show why Love superseded it. The character of Reason represents the concerns of the Church and gives Marguerite the opportunity to counter its criticisms and explain her theories in more depth. In her new order of the Church, the Holy Church claims to be so amazed by the Annihilated Soul, "that we dare not oppose her," and Reason realises that it "cannot have greater joy nor greater honour than to be the servant of such a lady."²³⁵ Thus, in Marguerite's vision of the Annihilated Soul, Reason and the Church submit to the new order.

However, Marguerite was not naive enough to expect that this submission would occur in reality. She pondered:

Oh my Lover, what will béguines say,
and religious types,
When they hear the excellence
of your divine song?
Béguines say I err,
priests, clerics, and Preachers,

²³² Lahar, "Marguerite Porete and the Predicament of Her Preaching," 47.

²³³ Lichtmann, "Marguerite and Meister Eckhart," 74.

²³⁴ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 122.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 119-21.

Augustinians, Carmelites,
and the Friars Minor,
Because I wrote about the being
of the one purified by Love.²³⁶

Her writing shows awareness of the reception of *The Mirror* and the negative feedback expected from the Church. She calls all those who live by Reason's counsel "such beasts and donkeys that on account of their rudeness I must hide from them and not speak my language to those who prefer death."²³⁷ The struggle of being misunderstood by the Church was not unexpected. Marguerite realised that the book:

is very difficult to comprehend...
Theologians and other clerks,
You will not have the intellect for it,
No matter how brilliant your abilities,
If you do not proceed humbly.²³⁸

Without humility, the ecclesiastical elite were assumed by Marguerite to be incapable of understanding the text. None of the masters of Scripture, she explains, nor those who remain in obedience to the Virtues, can perceive the intentions behind *The Mirror*. Understanding of the book is a gift from God, only given to the Annihilated Souls written about in the text.²³⁹ This deliberate undermining of the Church's traditional role as intermediary, not only of Scripture and texts, but of any communication with God, was a direct threat to the institutional power of the Church. Marguerite confirms that "there is no mediary between these souls and the Deity, and they desire no mediary" because "how great a difference there is between a gift from a lover to a beloved through a mediary, and a gift that is between lovers without a mediary."²⁴⁰ Marguerite's rejection of mediation could be interpreted as a reaction to and compensation for her lack of institutional power that would have come from belonging to an order. Her views of the Church likely created fraught

²³⁶ Ibid., 200-1.

²³⁷ Ibid., 143.

²³⁸ Ibid., 79.

²³⁹ Ibid., 87.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 141 & 83.

relationships with members of the Church hierarchy, and thus these relationships were not a source of authority but of tension for Marguerite.

Relationship with Male Religious

After the first burning of *The Mirror*, Marguerite strategically sought approval from key religious figures whose legitimacy she could use to bolster her own. She placed copies of her work into the hands of religious men of varying orders and political opinions with positions of influence to enable her manuscript to survive.²⁴¹

Marguerite had no known confessor to give herself credibility with authorities. Such confessors played key roles in presenting mystics as orthodox.²⁴² Certainly, as we will see in the next chapter, Raymond of Capua was significant in Catherine of Siena's success with the pope and her subsequent canonisation. Included at the end of *The Mirror* as it now survives, are the approbations of three scholars whose reputations Marguerite used to establish her claims to orthodoxy. Franciscan John of Quaregnon was known for his holiness, and Marguerite reports that he believed *The Mirror* "was truly made by the Holy Spirit, and that if all the clergy of the world heard only what they understood [of it], they would not know how to contradict it in any way."²⁴³ As Marguerite gained confidence in the truth of her book, she sought approval from men of higher status. The Cistercian Dom Franco of Villiers was an exemplary monk of sound theological knowledge from an abbey well known for its association with holy béguines. He claimed that he had "proved through Scripture that truth is what this book speaks."²⁴⁴ Finally, Godfrey of Fontaines, the greatest master of theology of his generation at the University of Paris who also opposed mendicant orders, professed that *The Mirror* "is made from a spirit so strong and ardent that few or none are found to be like it... the soul is not able to arrive at divine life or divine practice until she arrives at the practice which this book

²⁴¹ Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 33.

²⁴² For an in depth discussion on the influence male confessors had on their mystic's success, see Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*.

²⁴³ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 221.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

describes. All other practices are inferior to this.”²⁴⁵ Marguerite deliberately sought the approbation of men from different sectors of the Church and in different geographical locations to give *The Mirror* as much credibility as possible. This clearly shows Marguerite’s agency in accessing authority.

With these three key men’s approval, Marguerite could hope that the original condemnation of *The Mirror* was wrong.²⁴⁶ The approvals were recorded “for the sake of the peace of the hearers,” but also likely in defence against future condemnations of the text.²⁴⁷ However, the approbations included warnings about not circulating the text indiscriminately, and highlighted why some readers condemned the text - because they did not understand it. Yet it reinforced the idea that if read in a sympathetic light and trusting that Marguerite had good faith, *The Mirror* was not universally deemed a heretical text by significant male religious contemporaries. It was her agency in seeking validation for her beliefs from these key men that brought her back to the attention of inquisitors.

There are few records of any peer support for Marguerite, despite the numerous translations of her work circulating during her lifetime. The evidence of so many translations and editions of *The Mirror* in the fourteenth century suggests many did not see the work as suspicious or dissimilar to other mystical writings. Robert Lerner claims that had Marguerite entered a traditional religious community she would have attracted little attention, because her writing was similar to Hildegard of Bingen and Mechthild of Magdeburg.²⁴⁸ The one contemporary supporter that is noted is Guiard of Cressonessart, who discovered Marguerite’s plight in Paris and became a public and vocal promoter of her. However, this visibility in her defence swiftly led to his own arrest and imprisonment, where his unorthodox theology condemned him as a heretic as well. Scholarship suggests that Guiard was not an intellectual disciple of Marguerite, and unlike Marguerite he cooperated with authorities shortly after being arrested.²⁴⁹ It is unclear whether he

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 222.

²⁴⁶ Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 50.

²⁴⁷ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 222.

²⁴⁸ Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics*, 147.

²⁴⁹ Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 89.

had read *The Mirror* or knew Marguerite's theology. There are no other records of disciples or promoters of Marguerite, and as will be seen in the following chapter, access to substantial peer support had the ability to raise a holy woman to saintly status.

The Trial

Yet Marguerite, like the Annihilated Soul, paid "no attention to her enemies", no matter how fatal the consequences.²⁵⁰ Her belief in the legitimacy of her book thanks to the borrowed credibility from key scholars gave her confidence. There is no record of what exactly it was in the text that made the bishop of Cambrai find it theologically objectionable. At the first burning of the book, only the text was labelled heretical, not Marguerite. This suggests that Marguerite must have shown some level of cooperation, contrition and willingness to obey. It did not last long. Her subsequent behaviour more than her writing determined her fate. The final seventeen chapters of *The Mirror* were added after the first burning of her book, and show Marguerite clarifying and restating her ideas in a more authoritative manner for the benefit of those who had previously misunderstood the text. The chapters are written in an undisguised first-person voice, and Marguerite and God speak directly to each other.²⁵¹ Buoyed by the support she had garnered for the book amongst the religious men mentioned above, Marguerite sent *The Mirror* to John of Châteauvillain, bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne in the hopes he would also lend the book a sympathetic eye. John, however, was a staunch Capetian supporter, and Marguerite was imprisoned. She was handed to the new bishop of Cambrai, Philip of Marigny, after she had given her testimony.²⁵² She was sent to Paris shortly after and was incarcerated by William of Paris.

Evidence suggests that to an extent Marguerite communicated with those who arrested her the second time. At the very least, trial records show that she recognised William of Paris as an inquisitor performing his official duties. William

²⁵⁰ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 105.

²⁵¹ Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 47.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 56.

tried to have Marguerite take the required oath, promising her absolution. Her refusal led to her excommunication, which did not deliver the expected repentance in Marguerite. Recalcitrance was a tactical form of resistance that forced William to either break legal protocol and proceed without Marguerite's participation, or play the waiting game. Marguerite may have hoped that by waiting, more support would emerge for her case, which would have been rational given the praise of key religious men and the widespread popularity of the book. Whatever her reasoning, William followed inquisition procedure strictly, and torture was not resorted to. Recalcitrance was deemed a sign of guilt, and alongside her disobedience to the bishop of Cambrai and the continuation of teaching her questionable doctrine, William and the Masters of Canon Law judged her a relapsed heretic. These canonists were not advised of her previous brushes with ecclesiastical authorities. William wanted to ensure that he publicly had the university's support and did not repeat the position he got himself into with the Templars. She was subsequently handed over to secular authorities for punishment, with the conviction requesting "that short of death and mutilation of the body it act mercifully with you, as far as canonical sanctions permit."²⁵³ Marguerite's public burning could be interpreted as a symbolic warning against antinomian views which were becoming widespread. Marguerite was executed because she was perceived to be a threat to the established order which was intimately connected to royal power.²⁵⁴ This was why so many highly connected men were involved with her condemnation, and why the authority lent her by the support of men such as Godfrey of Fontaines did not suffice.

Significantly, *The Mirror* was treated separately to Marguerite in the trial. William did not advise the Masters of Theology that the text they examined was authored by a woman already imprisoned as a rebel, or that it had previously been condemned.²⁵⁵ This information was deliberately withheld by William to ensure that the text was not condemned by anything other than its own words. The inquisitional method of removing extracts for examination, whilst common amongst scholastics, would have been foreign to Marguerite who envisaged the text as a whole. The

²⁵³ Qtd. in *ibid.*, 157.

²⁵⁴ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 25-6.

²⁵⁵ Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 127.

extracts were in Latin, not the original French, and they were taken out of the original dialogue format, with explanations removed. The only extracts present in trial records were from the first twenty-six chapters, suggesting William never read the entire text, and particularly not the final chapters where Marguerite attempted to clarify her ideas. The extracts without explanation were clearly chosen to secure a heretical condemnation. The decision was unanimous: the book was “so heretical and erroneous and containing such heresy and error as to be eliminated.”²⁵⁶ It was unprecedented for an inquisitor to bring together almost the entire faculty of theology from the University of Paris to ask for a judgement on a laywoman’s writings. However, because Godfrey of Fontaines saw spiritual value in *The Mirror*, William needed to provide overwhelming evidence of its heretical nature – hence the need for the unanimous verdict from the twenty-one strategically chosen theologians.²⁵⁷ It was only after the execution, when the trial documents were being copied, that the condemnation of *The Mirror* and Marguerite were put together on the same page. Marguerite is not even mentioned as the author in the judgement on the text. This placement on the trial records reinforced her guilt as a heretic. The decision of the Masters of Theology thus legitimised the entire proceeding.

Accessing Authority

Although Marguerite was ultimately executed as a heretic, her agency throughout her life in claiming authority was significant. Instead of relying on hagiographical topoi, which was expected of holy women, Marguerite argued her case for authority by utilising scriptural and theological analysis – a genre reserved for men. *The Mirror* demonstrates how ‘heretical’ texts often claim a fuller, more perfect understanding of Scripture. Marguerite used Scripture to fit her alternative theology which threatened the unity of the Church in the eyes of ecclesiastical authorities. She used the common subject of Martha and Mary to compare the difference between those living under Reason (the Church), and those souls who have been liberated. Mary is loved and praised over her sister, who represents the Church and

²⁵⁶ Qtd. in Lichtmann, "Marguerite and Meister Eckhart," 67.

²⁵⁷ Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 133; For biases of four of the Masters of Theology who judged the text, see *ibid.*, 135-42.

dependence on good works for salvation.²⁵⁸ In Chapter 49, Holy Church the Small is indignant at Love's controversial remark that the Annihilated Soul cares only for God's will to be done. All traditional Christian ideals of holiness, even martyrdom, are eclipsed by the soul that does not will. Marguerite also uses the Old Testament example of Rachel and Benjamin to symbolise the old and new relationships with God. Rachel is the old way of seeking God through mediation from the Church. Rachel must pass away before the 'new' and 'better' way can come alive – Benjamin, i.e. the unmediated mystical union with God. In Psalm 67:28 Benjamin is described as in "*mentis excess*" (in a transport of mind). The same phrase was used by medieval hagiographers to describe mystical experiences. Marguerite references Paul's vision of the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12 which is a common biblical reference of an ecstatic experience utilised by medieval mystics. However, Marguerite uses it to highlight the limitations of the traditional mediated Christian practices, and that the heights of the Annihilated Soul are greater than Paul's rapture to the third heaven – greater than those promoted by the Church and Scripture.²⁵⁹ Marguerite's use of this typology shows her well-executed and strategic ability to show canonical precedent for her theology of the Liberated Soul and its lofty status.²⁶⁰ Marguerite's theology of the old ways of the Church passing away to a new Christianity threatened the desired unity of the Church at a time when political tensions between France and the pope were at an all-time high. It also placed her on a level of authority which superseded the Church.

Moreover, in *The Mirror* Marguerite performs a complex analysis of the nature of the soul in seven stages. This was not an original concept in medieval theology amongst male scholars. Alan of Lille in the twelfth century wrote of reaching God in seven stages like climbing Jacob's ladder. The seventh stage brought the ability to preach. However, only the first three stages were between man and God. The next three were about mastering Scripture – that was how one attained perfection, but it was a skill unattainable for women who were not allowed formal

²⁵⁸ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 162.

²⁵⁹ Jonathan Julifs, "Reading the Bible Differently: Appropriations of Biblical Authority in an Heretical Mystical Text, Marguerite Porete's 'the Mirror of Simple Souls'," *Religion and Literature* 42, no. 1 (2010): 82.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 83-4, based on Porete ch. 69 and Genesis 35:16-20.

education in the Scriptures.²⁶¹ Hence to analyse the nature of the soul was thought too theological a topic for a woman to be dealing with. In *The Mirror*, the soul ascends to God through seven stages, through which it gains ultimate union with God, annihilation of the soul in God, and total identification with God. The first four states are in line with traditional orthodox mysticism and mark the growth of the soul towards God while depending on Reason to teach the steps of evangelical perfection. Without this guidance, the soul would not progress any further.²⁶² These steps include keeping the commandments, asceticism, martyrdom of the spirit, and contemplation. This orthodox foundation of stages of the soul would have given Marguerite initial legitimacy with her contemporaries.

However, Marguerite pushes further to argue that one must move through these stages to attain a higher level of annihilation of the will. Too often, the Annihilated Soul laments, religious men and women believe the contemplative and ascetic practices of the first four stages are the highest level of perfection possible. The fifth and sixth states are the most daring and depart from traditional mysticism. In the fifth state, the soul is thrown into the abyss of nothingness and loses its desire to will. It relinquishes its free will for the will of God. Marguerite explains: “in which Trinity this soul plants her will so nakedly that she cannot sin if she doesn’t uproot herself. She has nothing to sin with, for without a will no one can sin.”²⁶³ Thus, the “unencumbered [souls] do everything that pleases them if they wish not to lose peace” because they do not will anything that God does not will.²⁶⁴ In the sixth state, the soul is completely liberated and purified and sees only God, completely united with Him. This Annihilated Soul is no longer bound by the laws of religion and society, having transcended them through divine union. Sacraments, penance and works are no longer used to seek God, and the soul only desires what God desires. It is in this stage that the soul enjoys in this world what most mystics reserved for the next. According to Marguerite, this sixth stage is the highest attainable on earth. The seventh state, reached only after death, is the Beatific Vision

²⁶¹ Lahar, "Marguerite Porete and the Predicament of Her Preaching," 42.

²⁶² Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 34.

²⁶³ Ibid., 165.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 166.

in line with traditional Church and mystical teachings.²⁶⁵ Despite it not being acceptable for a woman to engage in scholarly debate, Marguerite actively participated in contemporary arguments to prove the legitimacy of her theology.

Marguerite's stages of the soul challenged thirteenth-century scholastic theory which argued that virtues enabled a clear moral taxonomy and combatted vices to keep sin at bay. Augustine's writings described will as the seedbed of virtue and the principle by which we act. When the will has a greater desire for vice over virtue, a person sins.²⁶⁶ The primary biblical example of this used in the medieval period was the original fall in the Garden of Eden. By criticising sins and promoting the guilt of all humans in relation to Adam, the Church was promoting the inherent sin of humanity and the need for moral reform. Marguerite's optimistic view of human nature contradicted the Church's stance; her view on vices as beneficial and not harmful promised the ability to aspire to a good life.²⁶⁷ Marguerite distinguishes the just man's fall from the act of sin. Sin only occurs if the will consents to evil inclinations. This notion prepares the way for Marguerite's idea of the virtuous fall. The fall promotes moral improvement by reorienting oneself to God. The just man is still fallible due to his imperfect body and the world. However, without premeditation or consent of the will, sin is not permanently damaging, and in fact rewards the person with a reminder of their divine origin and potential to move closer to God. Thus, the virtuous fall leads to God and is therefore positive. This belief contrasted heavily with the prevalent view of the fall in medieval culture, that sin must be avoided and feared at all costs. Marguerite recognises failure as beneficial to moral life and spiritual formation. It spurs one on to improvement, and therefore externally imposed penance is not essential in spiritual formation.²⁶⁸ Marguerite instead encourages the faithful to look at their internal will, not external rules. In her opinion, fear does not foster genuine spiritual transformation. When the will no longer consents to vice, it is evidence of an Annihilated Soul.

²⁶⁵ Frassetto, *The Great Medieval Heretics*, 146.

²⁶⁶ Danielle C. Dubois, "The Virtuous Fall: Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and the Medieval Ethics of Sin," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 43, no. 3 (2015): 439.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 442.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 434.

Marguerite was not the first to claim that one can aspire to good despite human weakness. Peter Abelard's treatise on ethics in the twelfth century, *Scito te ipsum* (Know Thyself), provided a solid argument for viewing vice as an opportunity. Though man is marked by original sin, he is not culpable for acts he never intended because sin is when vice is consented to. Fighting against vice leads to the crown of salvation.²⁶⁹ Hence Marguerite's stance on the virtues was not unprecedented. Yet despite this, her statement "Virtues, I take my leave of you forever", was used as key evidence for her heretical charges due to their supposed antinomian leanings.²⁷⁰ The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 had made vices and virtues one of the key topics preached to the laity. By being written in the vernacular, *The Mirror* was a direct threat to the themes the clergy had been encouraging the laity to recognise, venerate and emulate.²⁷¹ Virtues were not only representative of the good of the person, but also the common good of the polis. While Aquinas debated the need for good works to attain salvation, he concluded that though it is possible to achieve salvation without good works, it would seem undeserved and violate the good order.²⁷² Marguerite instead rejects the socially defined construct of achieving salvation through good works while not completely rejecting virtues altogether. The virtues still play a key role in the spiritual development of the first four states of the soul.²⁷³ Yet the Annihilated Soul "is so well ordered through the transformation by unity of Love... that Nature demands nothing which is prohibited."²⁷⁴ Hence, despite taking leave of the virtues, the Annihilated Soul does not sin because it cannot will anything that is not the will of God.²⁷⁵ Thus, Marguerite skilfully interacted with contemporary scholarship to actively build her own case for authority in her theology.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 443.

²⁷⁰ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 84; David Kangas, "Dangerous Joy: Marguerite Porete's Goodbye to the Virtues," *Journal of Religion* 1, no. 93 (2011): 301.

²⁷¹ Jennifer Schuberth, "'Holy Church Is Not Able to Recognise Her': The Virtues and Interpretation in Marguerite Porete's Mirror," *History of Religions* 52, no. 3 (2013): 205.

²⁷² Ibid., 306.

²⁷³ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 103.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 87.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 90.

Hagiographical Topoi: Divine Favour

While Marguerite primarily claimed authority through scriptural analysis as we have seen, she did also engage to a degree with some hagiographical topoi expected in holy women. Although emphasising divine favour was key in Marguerite's authorising tactics in *The Mirror*, she dismissed the importance of the traditional visionary experience in legitimising her teachings. Rejecting such a key authorising topos for women led to Marguerite being labelled a *pseudo-mulier* (fake woman) and alienated her from other béguines.²⁷⁶ *The Mirror* is not a visionary work; it contains none of the usual prophecies or paranormal experiences that make up Mechthild's and Catherine's writings. Instead, Marguerite utilises an imaginative theology which to some extent qualifies as bridal mysticism, although it focuses more on the relationship between soul and God than soul and Christ.²⁷⁷ Love authorises Marguerite's role as vessel of divine truth without relying on visions or apologising for her lowly status. Her nobility as an Annihilated Soul gives her access to the divine court. It is in this divine court where Marguerite gains a "high understanding which the soul receives from the pure Deity."²⁷⁸ No longer does she learn about God through the lessons of Reason; instead, she surpasses this learning with that of the Holy Spirit, "who writes this lesson in a marvellous way, and the soul is like precious parchment."²⁷⁹ The Trinity teaches her directly, and gives her the words to write *The Mirror*. According to Marguerite, "the Creator made this book of Himself."²⁸⁰ While the early chapters of the book reveal God's role in the creation of the text – namely, that He gave an internal image to the soul that is externalised in the form of the book – Marguerite identifies herself as co-author. Her referral to a pearl in Chapter 129 is a nod to her authorship through clever wordplay in the

²⁷⁶ Wright, "Marguerite Porete's 'Mirror of Simple Souls' and the Subject of Annihilation," 67; Lichtmann, "Marguerite and Meister Eckhart," 72.

²⁷⁷ Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 16.

²⁷⁸ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 105.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.

original French – one of the meanings of Porete is pearl.²⁸¹ Thus, like other mystical texts, the book is a collaboration between Marguerite, the soul and the Trinity.

However, mystical texts generally put into words a real or perceived encounter with the divine. If a confusing passage is seen as a direct expression of an experience, barriers to interpretation are understood as being due to the impossibility of expressing certain experiences in language. Thus, to be a mystical text is to resist interpretation. *The Mirror*, however, is not just responding to general inadequacies of language or the inability to convey a visual experience, but to specific thirteenth-century methods of interpretation.²⁸² As seen above, Marguerite was attempting to show in her biblical commentary that she understood the relationship between the saints and Scriptures expected in a devout woman. She was attempting to make her credentials as textual scholar and mystic clear, while transgressing into the male-dominated genre of scriptural interpretation. Marguerite's understanding of the transfiguration of Jesus is one such example of her theological interpretation which reinforced her position of divine favour. According to Marguerite, Jesus was transfigured before only three disciples "so that you might know that few folk will see the brightness of His transfiguration, and that He shows this only to His special friends."²⁸³ Here Marguerite is emphasising the rarity of God's self-manifestation to humans and the exclusivity of those to whom he reveals himself. God has shared the "secrets of the Son through the Love from the Holy Spirit" with the Annihilated Soul, and the "treasure of the Trinity [is] hidden and enclosed within her."²⁸⁴ Marguerite furthers her claims to divine favour by explaining that souls who are not annihilated "are kept outside the court of your secrets, much like a peasant would be kept from the court of a gentleman in the judgement of his peers, where no one can be a part of the court if he is not of correct lineage."²⁸⁵ This reinforces the exceptional intimacy with God necessary for divine revelations while at the same time it explains why others cannot understand the picture of the Annihilated Soul she has painted in *The Mirror*. Therefore, instead of analysing visions as her claim to

²⁸¹ Wright, "Marguerite Porete's 'Mirror of Simple Souls' and the Subject of Annihilation," 82.

²⁸² Schuberth, "'Holy Church Is Not Able to Recognise Her'," 200-1.

²⁸³ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 149.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 122 & 28.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 140.

legitimacy, Marguerite skilfully analysed scripture to bolster her claims to authority, emphasising the hagiographical topos of divine favour. This would not have been as well received by her contemporaries.

Hagiographical Topoi: Humility

Marguerite also ascribes to the hagiographical topos of humility to a degree. She argues that the most genuinely virtuous person is the one who cannot recognise their own virtue. In the medieval period, names could be given to someone based on location, family relationships, occupation, or appearance. Marguerite could have been given the name 'Porete' as an adult by someone familiar with her theology – the feminine noun porete in Old French, as well as meaning pearl, meant “a worthless thing”. It is a fitting name for someone who saw herself as valueless apart from God. Humility is the core virtue that Marguerite believes in, and only once it is attained can the rest be left behind.²⁸⁶ Her version of perfect love is not a meditative longing for the crucified Jesus, but the self-destroying descent into the abyss of humility where no self remains.²⁸⁷ The Annihilated Soul describes herself as “I who am nothing” because God “is all.”²⁸⁸ Not only does the Soul see itself as nothing, she “believes and maintains that there never was, nor is there, nor will there ever be anything worse than she.”²⁸⁹ It is this total humility which qualifies her to receive divine secrets and unity with the Trinity. It is also a common hagiographical topos used by female mystics to reinforce their unworthiness at being chosen by God to be His messenger. It would have been familiar to Marguerite's readers and gained her some legitimacy. Furthermore, not only does Marguerite see the Annihilated Soul as humble, without this humility not even the most learned scholars are able to understand *The Mirror*. The opening poem in the book reinforces that everyone who wishes to understand the text must put their brilliance and intellect aside and proceed

²⁸⁶ Kangas, "Dangerous Joy," 308.

²⁸⁷ Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 8.

²⁸⁸ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 111.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

humbly, depending not on Reason but Love to understand what is written through Faith.²⁹⁰ Hence humility was key for Marguerite and to the text.

However, there were parts in *The Mirror* where Marguerite seemed to contradict the idea of humility. Some surviving manuscripts have a lacuna where potentially dangerous material was in the original. Marguerite believed that the Annihilated Soul is an exemplar of salvation. She is the height of all evil, but her wretchedness is replaced by His divine goodness: “therefore I say that I am the salvation of every creature and the glory of God. As Christ by His death is the redemption of the people and the praise of God the Father, so I am by reason of my wretchedness the salvation of the human race and the glory of God the Father.”²⁹¹ The book continues, describing how humanity comes to understand God’s goodness by means of it being poured out on the Soul despite her wretchedness: “thus it appears clearly that I am the eternal praise of God and the salvation of every creature is nothing other than the understanding of the goodness of God”, and all will gain this understanding through the Annihilated Soul.²⁹² Significantly, this passage is omitted from the old French manuscript but is in the Latin. Such a controversial statement about this Soul being salvation could have been confusing and misleading to people outside the Latin-literate ecclesiastical community and so was removed. However, Field argues that writing a book in France with daring theological ideas was not enough to put a woman in prison or justify her execution by secular authorities.²⁹³ The issue was that Marguerite was teaching her suspect doctrines to ‘uneducated folks’; if she had only spread them amongst educated clergymen the outcome may have been different. Her contradictory use of humility as an authorising topos meant it did not strengthen her legitimacy as much as it did for the other case studies.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 79.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 187.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor*, 6.

Hagiographical Topoi: Physical Asceticism

Physical asceticism, a key hagiographical trait expected of female mystics, was rejected by Marguerite, and this impacted her validity in the eyes of her contemporaries. The dilemma of *The Mirror*, which had already been posed by Mechthild, was how much virtue, how many good works, and how pure an imitation of Christ is necessary to attain salvation in light of the state of perfection preached by thirteenth-century religious movements, particularly when visionary experiences and signs of physical asceticism were understood as marks of sanctity. For Mechthild and Catherine, in the absence of such experiences the soul is desolate. For Marguerite, the soul must push past such feelings to attain a higher state of unity with the divine. Marguerite subscribed to *wesenmystik*, a radically introverted mysticism of being. This suggests a resistance to the traditional identity of religious women. Her goal of total fusion with God is more extreme than béguines who strove for *imitatio Christi* and identified with Christ's humanity.²⁹⁴ Such women were increasingly being recognised as exemplars in the thirteenth century. Their cultural association with the body required that their exemplarity become manifest through physical suffering. If a woman drew attention to the inferiority of their religious concerns, the Church interpreted them as external suffering. No matter how nuanced a female author's representation of spiritual life was, it had to be reinterpreted through the body.²⁹⁵ *The Mirror* challenges that rhetoric.

Marguerite does not fully discount suffering, though. The Annihilated Soul in *The Mirror* explains that if it would bring God pleasure to bring torments to Marguerite to avenge Himself, it would also please her.²⁹⁶ Moreover, she claims that her "will is martyred, and my love is martyred."²⁹⁷ Thus, she subscribes in some form to the idea of physical asceticism. Indeed, the soul "is delighted many times... by the sufferings of her neighbours, for she discerns... that this is the way by which they will arrive at the gate of their salvation."²⁹⁸ However, Marguerite warns of those

²⁹⁴ Wright, "Marguerite Porete's 'Mirror of Simple Souls' and the Subject of Annihilation," 68.

²⁹⁵ Schuberth, "'Holy Church Is Not Able to Recognise Her'," 207.

²⁹⁶ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 212.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

who focus on mortifying the body by doing works of charity. They “possess such great pleasure in their works that they have no understanding that there might be any better being than the being of the works of the virtues and death by martyrdom.”²⁹⁹ They become lost in their works, and do not realise that ultimately this stage must be surpassed to a higher level of unity with God. Marguerite explains that when the soul and its will are too attached to good works and imitating Christ, it must be martyred.

In *The Mirror*, the idea of *imitatio Christi* as embodied by Franciscan exemplars is a lesser form of existence than that of the Annihilated Soul. The text reinterprets Christ’s death at the cross. Instead of focusing on the suffering of Christ, Marguerite emphasises that His only concern was the will of the Father. Christ’s exemplarity is thus viewed as will, not good works. The Annihilated Soul and Jesus are both sons of God, in so far as they share the same will, but there are no external marks of this transformation, i.e. stigmata, that was so highly regarded in saints in late medieval culture.³⁰⁰ By renouncing the will and its works, the soul’s true nature is restored. Marguerite argues that the human Christ and his sacraments are stages in the progress of the soul that must be surpassed. Marguerite insists that the free soul is no longer dependent on fasting, prayer, masses or sermons. They are signs of slavery and bind God to works and sacraments. Within the context of the entire text, this statement dismantles the hierarchy of soul and body prevalent in Christian Platonism tradition.³⁰¹ Out of context, as the inquisitors read it, it was deemed heretical and contradicted expectations of asceticism in holy women. By dismissing this hagiographical topos, Marguerite not only lost a key legitimising tool, but opened herself up to intense criticism by rejecting a key facet of medieval Christianity.

Consequently, the life of Marguerite Porete provides important insight into the complexities of the relationship female mystics had with authority. Political and social tensions played a significant role in Marguerite coming to the attention of her peers and fed into the fear of heresy and schism that permeated the atmosphere at the

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 132.

³⁰⁰ Schubert, "Holy Church Is Not Able to Recognise Her'," 210.

³⁰¹ Lichtmann, "Marguerite and Meister Eckhart," 79.

turn of the fourteenth century. Her persistence in teaching her new theology and refusal to comply with Church orders made her a threat to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Her lack of consistent male support also significantly hindered her ability to win approval from authorities. However, Marguerite was not passive in her quest for authority. While her theology challenged the status quo, very few if any of the ideas were unprecedented as Marguerite built on the theology of many mystics and scholars before her, including Mechthild. Her claim as an Annihilated Soul to a higher authority which superseded the Church was ultimately unrecognised by those she claimed to out-rank. Her rejection of many key hagiographical topoi left her vulnerable in a society where as a non-religious woman she was expected to adhere to stereotypes for holy women. She exhibited a persistent complicity in her own demise that suggests she was not merely a victim of an intolerant misogynist age. Yet Marguerite's agency in actively engaging in the issue of authority shows her awareness of the cultural climate, and an inherent belief in her own authority.

Chapter Four: Catherine of Siena

[God's] outpouring of grace... is conferred in special measures on women, 'the weaker sex'. Is not this fact meant to humble the pride of the men... swollen with self-conceit, arrogating to themselves knowledge when they know nothing, and wisdom when they are not wise to savour the things of God?³⁰²

Laywomen who asserted a special relationship with God, challenging the Church's claim to be the principal intermediary of divine grace on earth, were likely to face scrutiny or even persecution. Yet unlike Mechthild of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete, Catherine of Siena managed to rise above persecutory threats to become a highly influential papal and political advisor in fourteenth-century Italy. For her confessor, Raymond of Capua, Catherine was an example for future holy women, yet Catherine saw herself as inspiring popes, her confessor, and any individual regardless of gender to seek Church reform and unity.³⁰³ While Catherine rarely addressed them, Raymond was aware that a woman who took up such a public role presented a problem for the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Despite the resistance of many ecclesiastics, the support she gained from some, the pope especially, propelled Catherine onto a public platform that she could not have reached alone. In a deeply fractured society, she played a significant and, for a woman, unprecedented role in the relationship between the papacy and Italian city-states. To legitimise herself and her public role, Catherine and her confessor utilised various hagiographical topoi.

³⁰² Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Conleth Kearns (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1980), 3.

³⁰³ Heather Webb, "Catherine of Siena's Heart," *Speculum* 80, no. 3 (2005): 812.

Her life and canonisation provide an excellent example of how laywomen could assert their authority to attain public roles in ways that confounded gender expectations.

Catherine of Siena

Knowledge of Catherine's life comes largely from texts generated by the process of her canonisation; although constructed to reveal her sanctity, they provide a level of detail unavailable for most other medieval laywomen. Born into a merchant family in 1347, the year before the Black Death struck, Catherine was one of twenty-five children, her twin dying in infancy.³⁰⁴ Plague struck again in 1361 when Catherine was a teenager, and in 1374 when she devoted herself to caring for plague victims. Catherine was writing during another plague outbreak in the 1370s, at a time of crisis in morale within the Church. These circumstances prompted her to offer spiritual guidance for overcoming the terror of death and Hell, and provided fertile grounds for her reported miracle healings.³⁰⁵ Living close to the powerful church of San Domenico brought a strong Dominican spiritual influence over Catherine's life.³⁰⁶ In the late fourteenth century, holy women in Italy had relative freedom of choice to live active or contemplative lives in either secular or religious communities. At a young age Catherine joined the Sisters of Penance, lay tertiaries of the Dominican order, and for most of her life served her local community in Siena. Dominican tertiaries were expected to spend most of their time in prayer and needed special permission to leave the city. Yet in the final six years of her life Catherine travelled around Italy and southern France as a female apostle, preaching peace and salvation with the pope's blessing. She was even a lay consultant to ecclesiastics, including two popes, and campaigned for crusades, an end to the war with Italian states, and reform in the Church.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ Mary Catherine Hilker, *Speaking with Authority: Catherine of Siena and the Voices of Women Today* (Paulist Press, 2008), 9-15.

³⁰⁵ Renee Neu Watkins, "Two Women Visionaries and Death: Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich," *Numen* 30, no. Fasc. 2 (1983): 176-7.

³⁰⁶ Hilker, *Speaking with Authority*, 14.

³⁰⁷ Karen Scott, "Urban Spaces, Women's Networks, and the Lay Apostolate in the Siena of Catherine Benincasa," in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic*

Catherine was in Florence during the summer of 1374 when there was a general chapter of the Dominican order. She may have been summoned by the master general due to her increasing celebrity, and to negative reports surrounding her behaviour. If she was investigated, she was vindicated: Raymond of Capua was then appointed as her confessor. She also began meeting with and advising Pope Gregory XI, and later Urban VI. She was sent on papal duties and permitted to start her own convent. Noffke credits Raymond with the expansion of Catherine's ministry outside Siena.³⁰⁸ Catherine was interrogated by three French cardinals when she visited the pope in 1376 immediately preceding the Great Schism (discussed below). Francesco di Bartolomeo de Casini (the pope's physician) recalls that "if they had not found this virgin Catherine solidly grounded, she would never had made a more unfortunate journey!"³⁰⁹ Catherine was found to be orthodox; and she continued to be a vocal supporter of the papacy at a time when the Church feared disunity. Catherine attempted to bring a contingent of holy men to Rome for Urban, exhorted the Roman Cardinals to support him, and tried to gain Queen Giovanna's support. She sent over sixty letters to the Schism's protagonists. Catherine died in 1380 before the Schism ended.³¹⁰

Despite being an uneducated *popolana*, by 1379 Catherine had become Italy's most famous holy woman, known for her fasts, visions, and desire for reform. She was one of the first Italian laywomen to transmit to posterity her ideas on spiritual issues in the vernacular, defining herself as a female apostle. She is an outstanding example of a laywoman gaining authority and influencing secular and ecclesiastical politics, in contrast to most of her female contemporaries.³¹¹ Catherine's reputation for involvement in major events was formed largely by nineteenth-century scholars who emphasised the papal support for her special

Renaissance, ed. John Coakley and E. Ann Matter (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1994), 105.

³⁰⁸ Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanna Noffke, vol. 1 (Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 47.

³⁰⁹ Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanna Noffke, vol. 3 (Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007), 32.

³¹⁰ Karen Scott, "» Io Catarina «: Ecclesiastical Politics and Oral Culture in the Letters of Catherine of Siena," in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 87.

³¹¹ Karen Scott, "St. Catherine of Siena, 'Apostola'," *Church History* 61, no. 01 (1992): 46.

dedication to the Church.³¹² Recent scholarship on Catherine has focused on hagiographical texts and on her role as activist or mystic. However, this presents several issues. Firstly, by focusing on hagiographical sources written by those wanting to promote her holiness, scholarship has neglected Catherine's own understanding of her role in life. Secondly, the two main views of Catherine as either an activist or a mystic are incomplete, as they do not address her varied and complex life. Thirdly, the later image of Catherine as a role model for enclosed nuns contrasts with the public life that Catherine actually lived.³¹³ By focusing on the image of Catherine from Raymond's *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, historians such as Coakley and Bynum perpetuate an image of Catherine that is very different from the one witnessed in either political histories or Catherine's own letters.³¹⁴ While Raymond's *Life* provides significant information on Catherine, Catherine's own writing in her book *The Dialogue* and her letters need to be prioritised to gain a more balanced understanding of Catherine's own perception of her authority.

Historical Context

As with the other case studies, Catherine's role must be placed in context. In late medieval Italy, it was assumed that women could not preserve their virtue unless isolated in their homes or monasteries. The Council of Trent (1545) was to reemphasise the need to enclose religious women; later depictions of Catherine were shaped to focus on the ascetic and mystical elements of her life that were deemed appropriate.³¹⁵ Catherine's unusual freedom of movement and wide social network did indeed threaten her reputation.³¹⁶ Her preaching ministry was not unprecedented, but comparable women, such as Hildegard of Bingen, had taught mostly in religious communities and to other women. Catherine's teaching included men and women, lay and religious. No religious institutions existed for laywomen who wanted to be apostles; nor did theological justifications exist for Catherine's role in the Church.

³¹² Ibid., 34.

³¹³ Scott, "Urban Spaces," 36.

³¹⁴ Scott, "'Apostola'," 35.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 36.

³¹⁶ Scott, "Urban Spaces," 108.

However, there were potential role models: Saint Birgitta of Sweden (1303-1373) had made an impact, even performing the role of papal advisor.³¹⁷ Vocal religious women in the Church were not unprecedented, yet it was unique for a laywoman to proselytise among men and women.

Catherine lived at a time of extreme social and spiritual turmoil. Tuscany was in an economic depression and banks were bankrupted. The Italian city-states were at war with each other and the papacy, with Florence leading the anti-papalist movement. The perceived corruption of the clergy had discredited the Church in the eyes of many. When Florence and Siena were put under interdict in 1376, great pressure was put on spiritual and economic life: prohibiting trade caused hardship for many.³¹⁸ Unlike most of her female mystic predecessors, Catherine was not from the nobility. Her family home was sold at this time to repay debt.³¹⁹ Siena's political franchise had broadened in the 1360s through to the mid-1380s, its government becoming the most open in Italy to popular male (though not female) participation.³²⁰ But strife in local politics, like that between Guelfs and Ghibellines (in which Catherine became involved), often drove citizens to give extraordinary powers temporarily to a local magnate who then plotted to make his power permanent and hereditary. By purchasing the title of vicar from popes, such a magnate might gain authority to act in the pope's name.³²¹ Although the Italian city-states were technically under papal lordship, the absence of popes from Rome from 1309 onwards eased the creation of powerful *signorie* in city-states like Florence and Siena.³²² During the Great Schism from 1378, Christendom was split between two popes both claiming legitimacy, which gravely affected papal and ecclesiastical authority. It was in this volatile environment that Catherine became increasingly active.

³¹⁷ Scott, "'Apostola'," 44.

³¹⁸ Hilkert, *Speaking with Authority*, 15.

³¹⁹ Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 1, 31.

³²⁰ Charles F. Briggs, *The Body Broken - Medieval Europe 1300-1520*, ed. Malcom Barber, Routledge History of the Middle Ages (Oxon, Great Britain: Routledge, 2011), 127; Scott, "Urban Spaces," 116.

³²¹ Briggs, *The Body Broken*, 128.

³²² *Ibid.*, 147.

The Dialogue, Letters, and Life

Three main primary texts may be used to analyse how Catherine understood her authority and role within society. The first is Raymond of Capua's biography, *The Life of Saint Catherine of Siena*. This is by definition a *legenda*, the Life of a saint, adapted to be read aloud.³²³ It has formed the basis for the saintly Catherine depicted in present scholarship. Both Catherine and Raymond would have been aware of Dominican expectations for holy women. Raymond had written Agnes of Montepulciano's biography, which contributed to these expectations.³²⁴ However, Catherine's non-noble origins and political activity did not conform to the private piety required of the stereotype. Hence, Raymond's *Life* focuses more on aspects of a saintly life, Catherine's fasting and visionary prayer life, that did correspond to recognised models. Tomasso di Antonio Caffarini, one of Catherine's most devoted followers, wrote the *Libellus de supplemento legende prolixie virginis Beate Catherine de Senis* as a supplement to Raymond's *Life*. He included forty-two drawings in the margins depicting Catherine with various saints and receiving her stigmata, in support of her sanctity and canonisation.³²⁵ Raymond repeatedly makes apology for Catherine's gender, describing the difficulties Catherine faced in carrying out God's work as threefold: the "weakness of her sex as a woman, the unusual nature of the work itself, and the greater wickedness of the world at present day."³²⁶ There is an agenda behind this work which may well detract from its accuracy; but it provides biographical information that is unrecorded in Catherine's own writings.

The second text is Catherine's sole book, *The Dialogue*. Like Marguerite and Mechthild, Catherine wrote in the vernacular for a lay audience. *The Dialogue* is a conversation between a soul and God, broken into four main parts regarding the reformation of the Church, salvation of the world, a request for Raymond, and a

³²³ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, xcii.

³²⁴ Webb, "Catherine of Siena's Heart," 802.

³²⁵ Emily A. Moerer, "The Visual Hagiography of a Stigmatic Saint: Drawings of Catherine of Siena in the 'Libellus De Supplemento'," *Gesta* 44, no. 2 (2005): 89.

³²⁶ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, 108.

section on herself. The book's format appears to be based on Letter 272 to Raymond which describes a vision experienced by Catherine at Rocca d'Orcia in October 1377. She is said to have miraculously learnt to write to allow her to complete her book.³²⁷ Catherine's central motifs are truth, love and charity. The voices and images Catherine presents are somewhat androgynous: the soul is feminine, God masculine, and the body of Christ neither masculine nor feminine.³²⁸ Noffke claims that Catherine was more a mystic activist than a social mystic, and there was nothing theologically new in Catherine's writings. Catherine conformed to orthodox teachings, despite her lack of theological education. Scriptural references are peppered throughout the work. Raymond's guidance no doubt enhanced its orthodoxy, although Catherine claimed never to alter the original wording of God in her retellings.³²⁹ Before her death, Catherine asked Raymond and other disciples to gather her writings: "take care of the book [*The Dialogue*] and any other writing of mine you may find... do with them whatever you see would be most to God's honour."³³⁰ Catherine intended her written words to reach a far wider audience than she could in person. As we shall see, Catherine situated herself as a connective agent between Christ and humanity, both spiritually and politically. As God's agent, she had the authority to save souls in the public sphere, which she entered in part through her writing.³³¹ *The Dialogue* was first published in the fifteenth century, and rapidly spread through Christendom. This second text is crucial in analysing the mystic side of Catherine's life.

Catherine's letters form the third key primary text. More than 380 of them from the last ten years of her life have been translated. The recipients include her mother and her disciples, the pope, royalty and political figures. Their dating is problematic: Noffke's estimates are used here.³³² Scribal interference in them is

³²⁷ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanna Noffke (London: SPCK, 1980), 12 & 15.

³²⁸ Watkins, "Two Women Visionaries and Death," 188.

³²⁹ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 9-11.

³³⁰ Letter T373 to Raymond, 15 Feb 1380. Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanna Noffke, vol. 4 (Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 369.

³³¹ Webb, "Catherine of Siena's Heart," 811-2.

³³² Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 1, xlvii.

possible, but Noffke argues for the scribes' faithfulness to Catherine and her meaning.³³³ The letters show that she was remarkably well connected and knowledgeable of current events; that she formed her own opinions and advised high-ranking Church leaders on how to bring about reform and peace. Women were forbidden official channels of communications, but they could send personal messages. Thus, Catherine's letters enabled her to influence recipients but were not legally binding nor as threatening as official Latin epistles.³³⁴ Her writings are distinguished by careful reasoning and self-explanation. Catherine never presents an image without explaining each point in non-metaphorical terms, perhaps because she was aware of the potential imputation of heresy.³³⁵ Thus, the letters are important for analysing Catherine's public persona and social influence.

In contrast to *The Dialogue* and Raymond's *Life*, Catherine's letters do not have the tone of mystical texts. To Karen Scott, this signifies that they were an extension of her active vocation stemming from oral speech.³³⁶ Scholarship has previously focused too much on her ascetic and mystical life based on her hagiography, and not enough on her practical influence over the Church and political landscape that is evidenced in her letters.³³⁷ Moreover, most studies have treated her letters as early examples of Italian literature or mysticism – at the expense of considering the oral culture in which Catherine lived. Early editors of Catherine's letters cut out many of her political or ecclesiastical requests for action; yet these appeals allowed her to gain political influence.³³⁸ We need to consider how Catherine developed her own voice through her letters despite her status as an uneducated woman from a merchant background. Historians have tended to focus exclusively either on Catherine's public activities or on her mystical reputation. Considering together the *Life*, *The Dialogue*, and *Letters* will offer a more balanced view of her public and spiritual authority in late medieval Italian society.

³³³ Ibid., xxiii.

³³⁴ Scott, "» Io Catarina «," 106-7.

³³⁵ Watkins, "Two Women Visionaries and Death," 190.

³³⁶ Scott, "» Io Catarina «," 96.

³³⁷ Ibid., 91.

³³⁸ Ibid., 119.

Relationship with Peers

The wide range of recipients to her *Letters* shows that Catherine established a remarkable social network that transcended class and gender. This enabled her to influence a large cross-section of society. Neighbourhood networks gave her entrance into a wider political world. Catherine mediated with Florence and other cities to bring peace between them and the papacy. Her engagement with noble families gained her a reputation as a counsellor and promoter of peace.³³⁹ Bernabò Visconti, the Duke of Milan, requested Catherine's aid in ending the papal war against his territory in 1372.³⁴⁰ From 1375 to early 1376, Catherine spent time in Pisa and Lucca to dissuade them from joining the anti-papal league. She begged Pope Gregory XI to communicate with them "since they aren't getting any encouragement from you, and are being constantly goaded and threatened by the other side."³⁴¹ This appears to be Catherine's first extant letter to Gregory: this suggests Catherine had already acquired the authority to negotiate with the city-states on her own initiative or at their request.

Indeed, the Florentines, under the threat of interdict in 1376, had heard of Catherine's favour with the pope and sought her mediation.³⁴² Astutely, Catherine does not refer to her papal sanctions when dealing with the city-states because she realised clerical permissions would not have been influential on authorities at a time when they were at war with the papacy.³⁴³ Catherine's reputation alone was evidently enough to recommend her to political authorities. Her loyalty to the papacy meant that she fought for reconciliation. She wrote to the Signori of Florence in April 1376, arguing for submission to the Church out of obedience to God.³⁴⁴ Gregory then sent her to Florence on his behalf in 1378. But papal validation did not

³³⁹ Mary Jeremy Finnegan, "Catherine of Siena: The Two Hungers," *Mystics Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1991): 174.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁴¹ Letter T185 to Pope Gregory XI, in Avignon, January 1376. Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 1, 249.

³⁴² Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanna Noffke, vol. 2 (Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), 1-2.

³⁴³ Scott, "'Apostola,'" 45.

³⁴⁴ Letter T207 to the Signori of Florence, April 1376. Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 2, 142.

significantly alter her own claims to authority. Her letter to the municipal government of Rome in 1379 is similar to her earlier political letters. She qualifies herself as a servant of God, writes a religious lesson regarding their ingratitude, and requests that the government take on the moral principles outlined in government of the city.³⁴⁵ In the Italian political arena, Catherine had a level of influence independent of any papal authority bestowed on her.

Catherine's mediation, however, was sometimes unwelcome. Marchione di Coppo Stefani recorded that:

there came to Florence a woman named Caterina, daughter of Giacomo di Benincasa. She was reputed to be very holy, pure, good and honourable, and she began to cast blame on those who were struggling against the Church. Those who managed the [Guelf] Party were glad to see her... She was, either by her own will or maliciously by their instigation, often brought to the Party to say that it was good to "admonish" [that is, to bring to civil justice those of the opposition] so that the Party might be enabled to stop the war [against the papacy]. Because of this, she was considered by the Guelfs to be something of a prophet, while the others considered her a hypocrite and an evil woman. People said all sorts of things about her - some out of treachery, and others simply because they thought they were doing well to speak ill of her.³⁴⁶

While the Guelf Party was pleased to exploit her, the Eight of War were uninterested in Catherine's mediation. Catherine rebuked them in June 1376 for spurning the papacy and taxing the clergy. She claimed that the pope had been "ready to receive you as his children and to do about the matter whatever seemed best to me."³⁴⁷ The authority invested in her by Pope Gregory was meaningless to those at war with the papacy. Indeed, her very favour with the pope harmed her attempts to influence the government of Florence, who identified her as an enemy. The Eight of War incited riots that led to an attempt on Catherine's life.³⁴⁸ The Florentine government used Cardinal Iacopo Orsini, the official Protector of Siena at the Papal Court, to turn Gregory against Catherine. Catherine had in any case written to Orsini multiple

³⁴⁵ Letter on May 6 1379 to the government of Rome, qtd in Scott, "» Io Catarina «," 97-99.

³⁴⁶ Qtd. in Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 3, 35.

³⁴⁷ Letter T230 to the Eight of War in Florence, 28 June 1376, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 2, 197.

³⁴⁸ Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 3, 36.

times condemning him for his personal life.³⁴⁹ Moreover, Dupré Theseider speculated that the pope asked Catherine not to come see him again, to avoid irritating those who opposed his return to Rome.³⁵⁰ Catherine's influence over the pope was significant enough for her to be viewed as a threat to those who disagreed with her political stance.

During the Schism, Catherine endeavoured to persuade key figures to support Urban VI as the true pope. She wrote many times to Giovanna d'Angiò, the Queen of Naples. Before becoming aware of the queen's allegiance, Catherine warned her that not supporting Urban "will show that you are a woman, with little stability."³⁵¹ Giovanna originally sided with Clement VII, which led Catherine to tell her that "your sin makes me depart from respect and address you disrespectfully."³⁵² Despite temporarily switching allegiance to Urban, Giovanna reverted to supporting Clement. Catherine then became involved in persuading King Louis I of Hungary to dethrone Giovanna for her failure to support Urban. Historians claim that Catherine did not know the lengths to which Louis would go to do so, and that she was merely Urban's tool.³⁵³ However, Catherine's willingness to interfere in the affairs of another state shows how committed she was to her public political role. Her inability to persuade Giovanna suggests again that Catherine's authority was more readily recognised by those who supported the same causes she did. Her legitimation from the papacy in some ways hindered her ability to play the public role to which she felt called.

Outside of the political sphere, Catherine had many supporters whom she called her *famiglia*. She was compared to the Virgin Mary by contemporaries, who named her "the blessed virgin, mother of thousands and thousands of souls."³⁵⁴ When using these terms, her disciples were referring to Catherine's power as a spiritual mother to bring them salvation. Even at the age of twenty-five, she

³⁴⁹ For example, Let. T101 to Cardinal Iacopo Orsini, March 1376, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 2, 65.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

³⁵¹ Letter T312 to Giovanna d'Angiò, Queen of Naples, 7 Oct 1378, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 3, 290-1.

³⁵² Letter T317 to Giovanna d'Angiò, Queen of Naples. Dec 1378, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 4, 11.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 236.

³⁵⁴ Watkins, "Two Women Visionaries and Death," 179.

acknowledged one follower's request "to receive you as my son."³⁵⁵ She was adored by many of her disciples, who became dependent on her teachings and comfort. In a letter to Stefano di Corrado Maconi, her 'son' in Christ, Catherine writes that she intends "more than ever to give you what you need spiritually, by way of teaching as well as with the desire God pours into my soul."³⁵⁶ She saw her role to her *famiglia* as mother: her teaching could therefore be classified as a mother's of a child, as deemed appropriate by Aquinas. She refers in her letters to people of all social groups, including the clergy, as her sons and daughters. By presenting herself as a mother, she cut a less threatening figure in the eyes of patriarchal churchmen. Although she broke with some social conventions by speaking publicly, she did align herself with others to shore up her religious authority.

Scott suggests that Catherine's social spirituality, based on the small neighbourhood, conformed to female patterns in parts of Siena. Catherine's devotees built a comfortable niche in Sienese society, and most of Raymond's stories of Catherine took place within a two-minute walk of her father's house in Camollia, one of the city's poorest areas. Catherine was able to access the citywide networks made by Giovanni Colombini who supported spiritual women earlier in the century.³⁵⁷ The people who became Catherine's *famiglia* in Siena were almost all neighbours or friends of friends, who had been sent to Catherine for their spiritual needs.³⁵⁸ Catherine made connections with other strong women in the neighbourhood who then witnessed her mystical states and served as her scribes. She also made followers of significant men. Nanni di Ser Vanni, once converted, gave Catherine his fortress of Belcaro to establish her convent.³⁵⁹ Catherine's convent was to be for "ladies of the upper classes", among whom Catherine had many disciples.³⁶⁰ Catherine's religious focus did not change her interactions with society,

³⁵⁵ Letter T99 to Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi, Feb/March 1372, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 1, 15.

³⁵⁶ Letter T369 to Stefano di Corrado Maconi, December 1379, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 4, 338.

³⁵⁷ Giovanni Colombini converted to his cause many wealthy and politically prominent men in Siena earlier in the century, and his disciples had a great respect for spiritual women. Catherine and Giovanni shared a common group of friends, giving Catherine access to key men who would support her cause. Scott, "Urban Spaces," 113-4.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁵⁹ Finnegan, "The Two Hungers," 174.

³⁶⁰ Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 2, 333.

aside from the early years spent confined to her cell, but focused on a pious version of urban life. However, her public visibility as an ascetic and unenclosed visionary increased criticism that she was seeking personal renown.³⁶¹ When Urban sent for Catherine in 1378, people in Siena were suspicious of her for travelling so much, so she told Urban she would only go if he sent a written summons. This was then issued.³⁶² Raymond argues through the *Life* that a holy woman could live in urban society without it diminishing her relationship with God. He also credits her visions, miracles, humility and good will with converting her detractors.³⁶³ However, this is a highly hagiographical view of Catherine's social reputation.

Although she had many staunch supporters in her network, at times Catherine faced criticism from her own *famiglia*. God warned Catherine that because of the gifts He gave her, "even your friends will come to doubt you."³⁶⁴ Indeed, Catherine wrote to her disciples in 1377 while in the Val D'Orcia to address rumours:

I mean that those who call themselves [my] children have taken scandal because of the tricks of the devils who were lurking within them to steal the seed the Holy Spirit had sown in them... they have sown in others the same scandal they were feeling, and I'm telling you emphatically: it is God's will that I stay here. All the rumours and suspicions heaped on both me and my father Frate Raimondo had made me fear I was offending God by my staying [in Val D'Orcia]. But to satisfy my tremendous desire, that Truth who cannot lie clarified the matter for the same servant of his. 'Continue to eat at the table I have given you'.³⁶⁵

Catherine was not immune to criticism from even her closest friends. Women were not allowed to preach publicly, but God told Catherine that:

your heart will now be so filled with burning zeal for the salvation of souls that you will lay aside the conventional constraints imposed upon women, and will mingle freely in the company of men as well as of women... Indeed,

³⁶¹ Scott, "Urban Spaces," 107.

³⁶² Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 7.

³⁶³ Scott, "Urban Spaces," 110.

³⁶⁴ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, 158.

³⁶⁵ Letter T122 to Salvi di Messer Pietro, Siena (disciple) Aug/Sept 1377, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 2, 395.

you are now to plunge boldly into public activity of every kind... Great numbers of those you meet in this way will take scandal at it.³⁶⁶

Catherine's conviction in her divine calling encouraged her to break social protocol despite condemnation from some of her peers. As we will see, this contributed to the hagiographical topos capitalised on by Catherine that has would-be saints suffering the torments of this world.

Relationship with the Church

Catherine wrote during a period when Church-state relations in Italy were being severely tested by city-states that taxed the clergy. Catherine had been mediating with Florence and other cities to reconcile them to the papacy. God told her that it would be "with your prayers and sweat and tears [that] I will wash the face of my bride, holy Church."³⁶⁷ Hence, Catherine believed she had a role to play in Church reform, inspiring her to write to ecclesiastical authorities and encourage them to mend their ways. God told Catherine that clergy "will never correct persons of any importance, even though they may be guilty of greater sin than more lowly people, for fear that these might retaliate by standing in their way or deprive them of their rank and their way of living."³⁶⁸ Catherine addressed herself to high-ranking clerics and challenged them on their sin. Earthly rank did not deter Catherine from following God's will. She was not afraid to lose her position, or even her life, for God's work.³⁶⁹ However, simply by writing, Catherine was intruding on a male domain, and by presuming to write on religious matters, she needed clerical allies to authenticate her visions and protect her from criticism. To fulfil the critical role she saw herself playing in the Church, Catherine had to build strong relationships with key ecclesiastical figures.

Catherine won favour partly by emphasising obedience to ecclesiastical hierarchy. At no time did Catherine promote a new Church or claim, as Marguerite

³⁶⁶ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, 159.

³⁶⁷ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 159-60.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

did, that there was no need for its mediation with the divine. Her resolute belief that its members were God's chosen people made her less threatening to clerical leaders. Catherine vowed obedience to religious authorities from a young age. Her obedience to Raymond made for a mutually beneficial relationship: a mystic's confessor often sensed he could access God more directly through the mystic, whereas the female mystic needed the legitimacy of the confessor and his ability to decipher and transcribe visions.³⁷⁰ The confessor was often able to create partnerships between the mystic and ecclesiastical authorities, as Raymond did with Catherine. This relationship gave Catherine a significant advantage over Mechthild and Marguerite in accessing authority. Even if the clergy were corrupt, Catherine still believed "the virtuous must not lessen their reverence."³⁷¹ Disrespecting ministers is disrespecting God; reverence is the same.³⁷² Catherine also wrote to many people commanding "that even if the pastors and Christ on earth were devils incarnate (rather than good kind fathers), we must be submissive and obedient to them – not for what they are in themselves but out of obedience to God, because they take the place of Christ, who wants us to obey them."³⁷³ Thus, Catherine supported the ecclesiastical hierarchy even while campaigning for its reform. Obedience "kills the selfish will, [and] frees us from sin by killing the thing that commits sin."³⁷⁴ It brought one closer to God and was therefore hugely important to Catherine.

Catherine was sought out by several popes to provide guidance and mediation in both ecclesiastical and political arenas. Papal support expanded her influence in society. After Birgitta of Sweden died, Gregory sent her confessor to Catherine "to say that I should offer special prayer for him and for the holy Church."³⁷⁵ Noffke considers this the first indication that Gregory was looking to Catherine as a source of wisdom to replace Birgitta. In her first letter to Gregory,

³⁷⁰ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, 74; Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Constance De Rabastens: Politics and Visionary Experience in the Time of the Great Schism," *Mystics Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1999): 159.

³⁷¹ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 229.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 215.

³⁷³ Letter T207 to the Signori of Florence, April 1376, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 2, 141.

³⁷⁴ Letter T201 to Giovanni, a Carthusian monk, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 3, 254.

³⁷⁵ Letter T127, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 1, 40.

Catherine claims that his troubles with rebellion resulted from the failure of authorities to discipline sinners, for fear of making enemies. She encourages him to rid the Church of corrupt clergy and appoint good pastors who will attend to spiritual affairs.³⁷⁶ Gregory sent for Catherine to come to Avignon and forwarded her a letter warning him not to return to Rome because of plots against his life. Gregory wanted Catherine's assessment on the letter's veracity and advice on what he should do.³⁷⁷ After meeting with Catherine, Gregory paid for her trip back to Italy, and after her repeated appeals for his return to Rome, he re-entered the city in 1377.³⁷⁸ Such close ties with the pope enabled Catherine to pursue her mission as an apostle. Gregory gave Catherine permission to preach in Siena, which was unique for a woman of that era.³⁷⁹ This was more than 'teaching': in principle, Catherine had the right to preach across Italy.³⁸⁰ Gregory also gave her permission to found a convent in 1376.³⁸¹ Catherine believed both she and the pope had been chosen by God, "placed on the battlefield, like knights, to fight for his spouse."³⁸² Catherine was leading the fight, exhorting the pope to follow her example. Precedent for a pope receiving guidance from a woman had already been established with Birgitta.³⁸³ Catherine capitalised on this precedent: her authority as God's messenger was accepted by the Church hierarchy.

This positive relationship with the papacy continued under Urban before and during the Great Schism. Female visionaries gained a level of authority when they backed the cause that was dominant in the areas from which they came.³⁸⁴ Thus, Catherine, an Italian, was successful as an Urbanist. Not all Italian states, however,

³⁷⁶ Letter T185 to Pope Gregory XI, in Avignon, January 1376, *ibid.*, 245-9.

³⁷⁷ Letter T239, *ibid.*, 243.

³⁷⁸ Scott, "'Apostola,'" 34.

³⁷⁹ Scott, "» Io Catarina «," 88.

³⁸⁰ As has been discussed, modern scholarship's reluctance to call public teaching by women preaching has de-emphasised the experiences of women such as Catherine who were officially sanctioned to preach.

³⁸¹ Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 1, 272.

³⁸² Letter 371 *qtd.* in Webb, "Catherine of Siena's Heart," 813.

³⁸³ Watkins, "Two Women Visionaries and Death," 195.

³⁸⁴ Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Constance De Rabastens: Politics and Visionary Experience in the Time of the Great Schism," 154.

supported Urban's appointment as pope; and Catherine's support was beneficial to Urban at this fraught time for the Church, as a proven intermediary between God and the Church, and staunch supporter of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In return, Catherine maintained the authority she had gained and continued to influence issues in the Church. She also received indulgences from Urban for seventy-seven of her disciples.³⁸⁵ Urban called Catherine to Rome in 1378 to help him reunite the Church. Her letters regarding the Schism are self-assured and strongly worded. She tells Urban and his followers what to do and tells his opponents exactly why they are wrong. She rebuked three Italian cardinals, after Clement VII's election on 21 September 1378, for their betrayal:

through it all, you know and recognise the truth that Pope Urban VI is truly pope... Now you want to prostitute this truth and get us to see it differently by saying that you elected Pope Urban out of fear. This isn't true!... You could say to me 'Why don't you believe us? We who elected him know the truth better than you.' And I answer you that you yourselves have shown me in many ways that you've departed from the truth and that I shouldn't believe you [when you say] that Pope Urban is not the true Pope. If I look at what rules your lives, I don't know you to have led such good holy lives that your conscience would keep you from lying... The reverence you paid him shows us that the solemnity was genuine as do the favours you asked of him and have made use of.³⁸⁶

Catherine's absolute belief in respect for the Church hierarchy did not prevent her passionately reprimanding those leaders whom she believed were defying God's will. Her belief that Urban was the true pope served him well during the Great Schism.

Hagiographical Topoi: Divine Favour

Arguably, Catherine viewed her strongest source of legitimation, as mystics often did, as the authority given to her by God. Her letters and *The Dialogue* portray an intimate relationship between herself and God. Like many female mystics, Catherine refers to her espousal to Christ through faith in a vision, calling Christ her

³⁸⁵ Letter T57 to Matteo di Fazzio Cenni, Rector of the Casa della Misericordia in Siena, 8 May 1379, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 4, 181.

³⁸⁶ Letter T310 to three Italian Cardinals, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 3, 219-21.

Bridegroom and using bridal imagery to convey the intimacy with which she was bonded to the divine.³⁸⁷ In her *Life*, Raymond follows the late medieval convention for a mystical marriage, describing Catherine's marriage to God as an exchange of a gold ring with a diamond and four pearls, placed on her right hand and visible only to her. The four pearls, Raymond claims, were symbols of the fourfold purity in Catherine's heart.³⁸⁸ Her intimate relationship with God conferred on her the power of prophecy. In a letter to Raymond in February 1376, Catherine describes a vision she received where God "spoke of future things... I seemed to sense the elevation of our archbishop. Later, when I learned from your letter what had happened, I was overcome with joy."³⁸⁹ Catherine may be referring to the appointment of Iacopo da Itrio to Patriarch of Constantinople.

References to intimate conversations with the divine are not rare in Catherine's writing. Similar conversations occur in *The Dialogue*, where God tells the soul that "there you find my heart's secret and it shows you, more than any finite suffering could, how I love you. And I show you this without limit."³⁹⁰ Divine secrets are continually revealed to Catherine. In Letter T219, again to Raymond, in April 1376, Catherine writes that when praying for the Pope's return to Rome, and for Church reform and unity:

God disclosed his secrets more than usual... He told and explained bit by bit the mystery of the persecution holy Church is now enduring, and of the renewal and exaltation to come. He said that what is happening now is being permitted to restore her to her original condition... It was as if he were saying, 'I am permitting this time of persecution in order to uproot the thorns from my bride, for she is all hedged with thorns... I tell you, I've made a whip now of certain people, and with that whip I am driving out the filthy, greedy, avaricious dealers bloated with pride, who are selling and buying the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit.'³⁹¹

³⁸⁷ Letter T371 to Raymond, 15 Feb 1380, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 4, 362.

³⁸⁸ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, 107.

³⁸⁹ Letter T226 to Raymond, February 1376, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 2, 10.

³⁹⁰ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 139.

³⁹¹ Letter T219 to Raymond and others in his company, April 1376, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 2, 91-2.

God reveals the reasons behind the unrest in the Christian community prior to the Great Schism. Catherine's privileged knowledge bestowed by divine vision put her in the position to counsel highly-ranked ecclesiastics on the best way forward in troubled times.

In *The Dialogue*, Catherine's relationship with God is explored not just as a spouse, but as a reflection of God himself. She writes how "when I considered myself in you, I saw that I am your image. You have gifted me with power from yourself, eternal Father, and my understanding with your wisdom... What more could you have given me than the gift of your very self?"³⁹² God also tells her that those who love with the perfect love like Catherine "are another me; for they have lost and drowned their own will and have clothed themselves and united themselves and conformed themselves with mine."³⁹³ Through the conversations between the soul and God, Catherine explores the legitimacy of her role as God's representative on Earth. Her intimate relationship with God and His confirmation of her as another image of Him gives her an authority surpassing any that could be imparted by human agency.

Furthermore, Catherine believed resolutely that God had bestowed on her a mission to speak and have a public role. She describes how God in a vision "placed the cross on my shoulder and put the olive branch in my hand, as if he wanted me (and so he told me) to carry it to the Christians and unbelievers alike. And he said to me: 'Tell them, 'I am bringing you news of great joy'.'" ³⁹⁴ The cross symbolised sharing Christ's mission of bringing salvation to the world, while the olive branch was a sign that she must preach peace to Christendom. She is told to carry these things to the people, like the angel who announced the "great joy" of Jesus' birth;³⁹⁵ in other words, to spread this message, God is telling her she must travel, and thus to break with social conventions. As Scott writes: "God, the ultimate source of all legitimacy, can allow people like Catherine to do things which no one else, not even

³⁹² Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 365.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁹⁴ Letter T219 to Raymond and others in his company, April 1376, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 2, 92.

³⁹⁵ Luke 2:8-14.

the church and the pope, considers appropriate.”³⁹⁶ In *The Dialogue*, God reveals to the soul how it knows it has attained perfect love for Him:

the sign is the same as that given to the holy disciples after they had received the Holy Spirit. They left the house and fearlessly preached my message by proclaiming the teaching of the Word, my only-begotten Son. They had no fear of suffering. No, they even glorified in suffering. It did not worry them to go before the tyrants of the world to proclaim the truth to them for the glory and praise of my name.³⁹⁷

Catherine’s public role is justified and demanded by God as evidence of her perfect love for him. Thus, it is through divine favour that Catherine derived the authority to carry out her mission as apostle, over and above that conferred by the papal bull permitting her to preach publicly.

Catherine also compared herself with other holy women who had received divine favour. Mary Magdalene could be used as an example of a woman seeking God in unconventional ways without concern for criticism. Thus, Catherine refers to Mary Magdalene as “so much in love with Christ that she forgot about social conventions, and did not care about the gossip caused by her presence alone and her freedom of movement in a man’s world.”³⁹⁸ But Catherine did not particularly explore issues raised by gender in her writings. She did emphasise the feminine side of Jesus, but the gender stereotypes she most used were ones depicting the desirability of masculine traits such as strength and courage; and she described herself with imagery usually reserved for male preachers – a sower of grain, a guild member, and an artisan. This legitimised her peace-making campaign by aligning herself with acceptable male standards, separating herself from the accusations that her mission was inappropriate for a woman, and thus shoring up her claim to divine favour.

³⁹⁶ Scott, "'Apostola'," 40. Although, it should be noted that Catherine received papal support from two popes for her actions, as discussed above.

³⁹⁷ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 136-7.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

Hagiographical Topos: Physical Asceticism

Besides reference to divine favour, Catherine also utilised the topos of physical asceticism to prove her holiness. Medieval holy women were expected to experience and fixate on pain to identify with Christ's Passion and demonstrate their renunciation of earthly pleasure. To a greater extent than men, women rejected their bodies, earthly desires, and intellection as proof of their sanctity. By the thirteenth century, women were more likely than men to be recognised for their mystical experiences. Catherine believed in this topos significantly more than Mechthild or Marguerite. Her portrayal of physical asceticism has been the focus of most scholarship on Catherine, yet it is worth revisiting as a path to authority. Catherine regularly refers to her weakness and suffering in her letters, especially during visions or after receiving the Eucharist. After one such occasion, she wrote of how "the pain in my heart was such that my tunic was torn apart wherever I could get hold of it, while I reeled about the chapel as if I were in convulsions... Just a little while later the devils' terrors began in such a way as to throw me into complete confusion."³⁹⁹ Catherine's suffering was held up as holiness by some, but criticised by others. She was frequently denied communion by priests due to the "tumultuous groaning of her heart" and the intense ecstatic state into which she would enter after receiving the Eucharist. She was ordered to leave the church immediately afterwards, which she was physically unable to do while in that state. She was often thrown out of churches, kicked and scorned by passers-by. These experiences of persecution were later used as evidence of her sanctity.

Due to this backlash, Catherine received papal permission to receive communion as often as she liked, and in later years she claimed the Eucharist so completely nourished her that she no longer needed to eat normal food. This behaviour has been post-diagnosed as anorexia, yet miraculous fasting was a sign of sanctity in the late medieval period.⁴⁰⁰ Some claimed that she had gone beyond Christ's counsel, others that she was deluded by Satan, and some accused her of secretly eating to keep up her reputation. Catherine addressed such claims in a letter to a religious person in Florence, explaining that:

³⁹⁹ Letter T373 to Raymond, 15 Feb 1380, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 4, 365.

⁴⁰⁰ See Mario Reda, & Giuseppe Sacco "Anorexia and the Holiness of Saint Catherine of Siena," *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 8, no. 1 (2001): 37-47.

you wrote suggesting especially that I ask God for the ability to eat... Over and over I have prayed and do pray and continue to pray God for the grace to live as other people do in this matter of eating - if it is his will, for it is certainly mine... I realise that he has given me a very special grace to overcome the vice of gluttony.⁴⁰¹

Persecution followed Catherine. Raymond claims she “could hardly practice a single act of devotion in public but she became the butt of calumny, obstruction and persecution. These things she suffered more especially from the very people who should, by rights, have given her encouragement, and actively seconded her efforts in this direction.”⁴⁰² Raymond argues it was the self-love of ecclesiastics which led them to persecute Catherine:

when it was a question of such actions of Catherine as bore the stamp of high perfection and cried it aloud, since they could not deny the reality of what was plain to everyone, they [the Sisters of Penance of Saint Dominic] imitated the Pharisees and Scribes, and said that she worked these signs ‘by Beelzebub the Prince of Devils’. Furthermore, these women, true daughters of Eve, infected Adam also, and drew him after them into their own error. That ‘Adam’ was certain Superiors and Fathers of the Order of Preachers, who at various times refused to associate with Catherine, or deprived her of Holy Communion, and even of confession or a confessor.⁴⁰³

Here Raymond compares Catherine’s plight to the persecution Jesus suffered at the hands of the Pharisees. God also warned Catherine that those who were in positions of religious authority not only violate the holy rules He commands, “they act like ravenous wolves toward the lambs they see observing the rule, taunting and jeering at them. And they believe, these wretches, that by hounding and taunting and jeering at those good religious who keep the rule, they will cover over their own sins; but they expose themselves all the more.”⁴⁰⁴ Catherine thus justifies her fasting and explains how her critics in the Church are in fact going against God’s will. In turn, she reinforces her own holiness by highlighting her obedience to God in her extreme fasting.

⁴⁰¹ Letter T92 to a religious person in Florence, July 1375-1376, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 1, 160-1.

⁴⁰² Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, 370.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 370-1.

⁴⁰⁴ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 242-3.

Furthermore, Catherine modelled her behaviour, as did Raymond, on biblical depictions of Christ and his martyrdom. As recorded in the *Life*, while in Florence in 1378 mediating between the city-state and pope in hopes of ending the interdict, a riot broke out which quickly turned into an attack on Catherine's life. Catherine stayed at the house she was occupying, anticipating and hoping for martyrdom. She went into the garden to pray with her disciples, imitating Jesus in Gethsemane.⁴⁰⁵ In a letter to Ristoro di Piero Canigiani, a Florentine whose house was burnt in the riot, Catherine describes how people should embrace suffering and persecution, like Jesus: "he didn't run away from this but went to meet the Jews when they wanted to arrest him, saying, 'Who do you want?' They responded, 'Jesus the Nazarean.' 'And if you're looking for me,' said the gentle loving Word, 'I am he. Take me and let them (that is, his disciples) be.'"⁴⁰⁶ Catherine, too, addressed the attackers calmly: "I am she; take me and let this family be."⁴⁰⁷ Much to Catherine's regret, the rioters left quickly without harming her. She bemoaned to Raymond in a letter:

I want to begin all over again so that my sins may not hold me back from such a good as giving my life for Christ crucified. For I see that in the past I've been deprived of that because of my sinfulness. I had really longed... to suffer innocently for God's honour, for the salvation of souls, and for the reform and welfare of holy Church - so much so that my heart was being squeezed out drop by drop in my love and desire to lay down my life... [But God] did not fulfil my desire to give my life for Christ's dear bride. My eternal Bridegroom played a great joke on me.⁴⁰⁸

There was a desperation in Catherine to be a martyr, because dying for God would be the ultimate symbol of her love for Him.

Approaching death, Catherine framed her visions as violent ecstatic experiences. Raymond used them as examples of her living martyrdom: the repeated momentary deaths where her spirit leaves her body during her visions gives her the status of martyr. As Catherine's soul left her body during a vision, she appeared to be dead to her disciples, remaining that way "for such a very long time that the

⁴⁰⁵ John 18:7-8.

⁴⁰⁶ Letter T160 to Ristoro di Piero Canigiani of Florence, July 1378, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 3, 164.

⁴⁰⁷ Letter T295 to Raymond, July 1378, *ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 148-9.

family was mourning me as dead.”⁴⁰⁹ When her soul returned to her body, “the room seemed full of devils. They began to do battle with me again - the worst I have ever experienced... These storms went on for two days and two nights.”⁴¹⁰ Catherine was grief stricken to return to her body and be separated from God, but she sensed that death was near: “it seems that at this time I should consume my body in a new martyrdom within my soul’s sweetness, holy Church... He will put an end, finally, to my miseries and to the anguished longing.”⁴¹¹ Here she directly links her suffering and persecution in her life to a martyrdom for Christ. Suffering on earth meant less time in purgatory, and Catherine felt that to go to heaven without suffering was disloyal to Christ.⁴¹² Bodily suffering was a key sign of sanctity in late medieval saints. In fact, Raymond writes that Catherine “was not only scourged and beaten by [demons] time after time, but in the end suffered the loss of her life itself as a result of these torments”, further justifying the idea that Catherine was a martyr.⁴¹³ The fact that Catherine still managed to attend Mass at the feast of Mary’s purification during this ordeal would have suggested to contemporaries a supernatural holiness. Through detailing such torment in her letters and Raymond’s confirmation of them, Catherine aligns herself strongly with the model of Christ and holy martyrs.

While Catherine modelled herself on Christ, it is noteworthy that her writings do not include a significant event in her life, that of receiving the stigmata. Instead, the account comes from Raymond second-hand. Catherine described to him the experience:

then I saw, springing from the marks of [Christ’s] most sacred wounds, five blood-red rays coming down upon me, directed towards my hands and feet and heart. Realising the meaning of this mystery, I promptly cried out: ‘Ah, Lord, my God, I implore you not to let the marks show outwardly on my body’. Whilst these words were still on my lips, before the rays had reached me, their blood-red colour changed to radiant brightness, and it was in the

⁴⁰⁹ Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 4, 366.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 366-7.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 368.

⁴¹² Watkins, "Two Women Visionaries and Death," 184.

⁴¹³ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, 380.

form of clearest light that they fell upon the five parts of my body - hands, feet, and heart.⁴¹⁴

Accounts of physical marks of the divine on the body increased significantly in hagiographical texts in the late Middle Ages. According to Raymond, Catherine received the stigmata after praying to a crucifix at the Church of Santa Cristina in Pisa, in 1375. While her followers claimed this to be the climax of her spiritual life, many notable members of the Franciscan order doubted its authenticity, believing the miracle to be unique to Saint Francis. Catherine's experience of the stigmata was different to Francis' because at her request her wounds were invisible to all but her. It is unclear why Catherine would not mention such a significant experience in her letters – perhaps this was part of her adherence to the topos of humility, as will be explored below. The miracle of the stigmata played a significant role in Catherine's canonisation; although controversial, it was therefore important in Catherine gaining authority during life.

Hagiographical Topoi: Humility

Humility was often a trait of the would-be saint. Without the willingness to be a passive vessel one could not be used by God, and to be a passive vessel one had to be aware of one's own unworthiness. It was the pride of many ecclesiastics that had brought their downfall, according to Catherine.⁴¹⁵ She saw herself as “a scandal to the whole world, ignorant and filled with faults.”⁴¹⁶ She wrote to one admirer advising that “of myself there is nothing to see or tell except utter poverty; I am ignorant and quite dull-witted. Everything else is from supreme eternal Truth, so give the credit to him, not to me.”⁴¹⁷ She positions herself as a humble vessel of God. Catherine does not detail the stories of miraculous healings, her mystical marriage, or her great virtues in her letters as they are recorded in Raymond's *Life*; nor does she see herself as anything but a sinful human. She believed she was guided in her speaking by God. Such belief was characteristic of holy women, particularly

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 186.

⁴¹⁵ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 35.

⁴¹⁶ Letter T328 to Frate Antonio da Nizza, January 1379, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 4, 81.

⁴¹⁷ Letter T2, to Andrea de'Vitroni, priest, Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 3, 280.

mystics. The passive vessel filled with God and used to perform God's will conformed to a stereotype of holy femininity that might allow women to break social norms and hold some authority above men. Catherine is harshly critical of her own sinfulness, writing of her visions and dialogues with Christ to pass on the lessons that Christ has taught her. She includes herself in the religious lessons she writes to others, using the inclusive pronoun 'we' until confronting the specific sin of the recipient. Catherine's primary aim was to save those she corrected; her humble passivity in accepting the role of God's vessel helped deflect potential criticism of her public role.

Watkins argues that the only way women could circumvent the prohibition on women publicly teaching was to be visionaries and ascetics. They had to be passive vehicles of supernatural spirits, not women. Catherine did have to present her visions with more rational argument and theological caution than her male counterparts, yet there is little recognition in her letters that a woman advising important people on spiritual, ecclesiastical and political matters was abnormal.⁴¹⁸ Her humility as an "unworthy servant" stems from her view of herself as a sinful human being, not from a perception of her weakness as a woman. She neither argues herself to be a weak female vessel nor an equal with all people before God.⁴¹⁹ Catherine did not discuss her gender in the same way as Raymond did or modern historians have done since; she seems unaware of the contemporary anti-feminist literary culture explored by writers such as Christine de Pizan. Raymond, on the other hand, directly addresses the issue of gender and the divine mission bestowed on Catherine because he was intensely aware of the potential controversy. Aquinas argued that women were given the gift of charism of speech to teach as a mother educates a child; Raymond attributes this divine gift to Catherine. She thus appears as a mother figure teaching her *famiglia*, an image that conformed to the humility required of women, but also legitimised a more vocal role in society.

⁴¹⁸ Watkins, "Two Women Visionaries and Death," 174-5.

⁴¹⁹ Scott, "'Apostola,'" 45.

In conclusion, Catherine of Siena played influential roles not only in the Church but also in wider Italian society. Despite meeting opposition, her success in these roles is remarkable, particularly in light of the experiences of Mechthild and Marguerite. Catherine engaged with the same hagiographical topoi as they did – those of divine sanction, physical asceticism and humility – to legitimise her authority; yet unlike them she succeeded in adopting a public role. Her positive relationship with the Church and papacy is one explanation for this, although this relationship did hinder her influence with those who were at war with the papacy. Despite some persecution for her extreme lifestyle, Catherine established a strong network of supporters who promoted her cause and eventually her canonisation. The role of her confessor, Raymond of Capua, who had some standing within the Church, was also important in her achievement. His passionate support bolstered her legitimacy. Catherine's life proves that in propitious circumstances, laywomen could achieve authority and play significant public roles despite the restrictive norms of medieval society and the Church.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Modern scholarship has tended to make generalisations about women mystics as though they shared a common experience based on a common gender identity. Holy women and the nobility have been used as representatives for the experiences of all medieval women. Laywomen are most often considered for their participation in heretical sects. Hence there has been a gap in scholarship which addresses laywomen's relationship with authority in the late medieval Church. *Auctōritās*, defined for the purposes of this thesis as authority or influence, was accessed and engaged with differently by each laywoman. Ultimately, they wanted to achieve recognition that their words were God's own. Medieval ideas of saintliness created exemplars of holiness for women to model their lives on, but also narrowed their religious expression to conform to societal expectations of orthodoxy. The three case studies have shown that laywomen mystics' experiences, and the reception accorded them by churchmen and peers, were shaped by differing social and historical situations. The women themselves, too, were active agents in accessing the routes available to them including seeking male endorsement and utilising hagiographical topoi. Thus, clearly generalisations about the experiences of laywomen and authority cannot be made with reference purely to their gender. Factors including geographical location, political, ecclesiastical and social conditions played significant roles in women's experiences in gaining authority.

Historical Context

This thesis began with Mechthild, whose life spanned the thirteenth century. Mechthild's influence has been limited in scholarship to her literary contribution to

early mystical texts. Yet her struggle with the concept of authority and her desire to be heard has needed further exploration. Compared to the other case studies, the lack of significant political and religious upheavals during Mechthild's lifetime meant she had less opportunity to capitalise on disunity in the Church in her quest for authority. The spread of the mendicant orders was part of a wider movement of reform that promoted more active and more personal forms of devotion; and the mendicants played a key role in the support or otherwise of female mystics. As Walter Simons has shown, this new wave of Christianity paved the way for women to participate more fully in their salvation and birthed the *béguine* movement that both Mechthild and Marguerite were part of to varying degrees. The *béguine* movement rose to prominence during the first half of Mechthild's lifetime, but by the later thirteenth century was beginning to be viewed with the suspicion that would lead to its condemnation at the Council of Vienne. *Béguines'* mysticism was fostered by mendicants who witnessed their special relationship with God as a tool to bring personalised Christianity to secular society. Magdeburg's contact with non-Christian cultures weakened centralised clerical authority, and the presence of a charismatic holy woman who supported local mendicant orders would have been useful for encouraging Christianity. Enter Mechthild - a *béguine* promoting a unified Church and a personal faith with God. She did not present radically new theology and retreated into the safety of a convent later in life when her orthodoxy came under threat. Her work was most circulated and appreciated amongst religious women. The localised tension in Magdeburg and Mechthild's lack of travel meant that her impact and readership was more restricted than Catherine and Marguerite.

At the other extreme, Catherine's environment was politically and religiously volatile, her life encompassing wars between the Italian states and the papacy, as well as the Great Schism that divided the medieval Church. Previous analyses have focused solely on Catherine's mystical or public life but have not considered how both aspects together contributed to the influence she established amongst churchmen. Her role as a papal advisor, though not unprecedented for a woman, became a much more significant role when the pope was struggling to verify his own authority. Catherine capitalised on the division in the Church, endorsing one Church under Pope Urban VI. Her inferiority as a woman was overridden by the Church's need for support. She was able to borrow papal authority via his approval, although this authority held less weight with his opponents. Catherine was able to counsel,

instruct, and admonish those in the highest positions of the Church and local political circles. Her intimate connections with those at the top of the religious and social hierarchy gave her significantly more influence and authority than Mechthild or Marguerite were ever able to attain. This was paramount to her success.

While Catherine used the volatile political environment to advantage, Marguerite did not find conditions in her lifetime so favourable. The uncertain political climate and increase in fear of heresy hindered her ability to gain authority. Valenciennes' geographical location, split between the jurisdiction of the Empire and the French kingdom, created a contentious atmosphere. As Marguerite did not voice strong support for either King Philip IV or the pope, and as she challenged the orthodoxy of the Church with her radical Christianity, she was not a candidate for promoting the agenda of one or the other, as Catherine had been for Urban. Perhaps Marguerite's lack of political awareness meant she did not capitalise on this atmosphere of political turmoil. Unlike Mechthild and Catherine, Marguerite did not promote unity in the Church, and in fact endorsed a new Church that would supersede the current one. Her status as a *béguine* in the later thirteenth century also aroused suspicion in authorities. Hence, she was used as a pawn in the competition between Philip and the papacy to promote Philip's ability to protect France from suspected heresy. During the controversy of the trial of the Knights Templar, Marguerite's condemnation did a lot to restore the reputation of the king's advisors and promote a united and Christian France. Scholarship has focused on this heretical condemnation, emphasising Marguerite's radical theology and the role the French court played in her execution. Michael Frassetto's inclusion of Marguerite as one of the great medieval heretics is characteristic of her representation in historiography. Yet her agency in getting her divine message to the public and the issues she had doing so have been missing from discussions of her life.

Thus, fractured environments in which Church authority was weaker could open more space for toleration of charismatic holy women (as happened for Mechthild and Catherine), but they could also generate intolerance, especially towards a female mystic (such as Marguerite) who directly questioned Church supremacy. This needs to be addressed for medieval laywomen in scholarship because, as we have seen, it helps to illuminate why women had such varying experiences in their attempts to achieve authority. The geographical impact of the political and religious tensions

each woman lived in also had a significant effect on the level of authority these women were able to garner, as well as their ability to utilise the tensions to their advantage. The strategies each woman employed in these differing circumstances were key to their levels of influence.

Seeking Male Endorsement

One such strategy was seeking male endorsement of their texts. As we have seen, Catherine thrived in a contentious atmosphere by connecting with significant religious men, and Mechthild was well regarded by many mendicants, while Marguerite floundered without the backing of her peers or the Church. Even in favourable circumstances, male support was needed to advance the authority of the female mystic. Seeking this out was crucial for laywomen's success.

There is no doubt that Catherine's endorsement by the pope was paramount to her gaining authority in her peers' eyes. She is a prime example of how women mystics had more success when they sought and achieved the support of powerful clergymen whose credibility they could borrow. For Catherine, this was achieved through a wide circle of men. Raymond of Capua, in particular, was central to the advancement of Catherine's cause and later canonisation. As discussed in chapter 4, the relationship of a mystic and her confessor created a powerful dynamic that enabled the confessor to gain direct access to the divine and the mystic to confirm her orthodoxy which, when exploited, won her authority within the Church.⁴²⁰ Raymond's connections in the Church furthered Catherine's cause, and his biography of her life is filled with proof of her holiness. Certainly, after her death *The Life of Catherine of Siena* had a great influence on her cult following. Moreover, the esteem in which key political figures in Italy held Catherine held great sway over the way she was received by the wider population. Unlike Mechthild and Marguerite, Catherine was invited into contentious political situations between warring states and asked for her counsel to end feuds. Undoubtedly, the passionate support of her male *famiglia* also played a part in her position of authority amongst

⁴²⁰ This has been examined in-depth in Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*.

her peers. Such a large, influential following was missing for Mechthild and Marguerite, with deleterious consequences for their levels of authority.

While Mechthild had an approved male confessor and other male supporters, her support came mainly from religious women such as at Helfta. Had Mechthild's confessor written as glowing a biography as Catherine's, perhaps her writings would have spread further than Germany and Switzerland, and perhaps she would not have had to withdraw to the convent to protect herself in later years. The Latin prologue of *The Flowing Light* emphasised Mechthild's hagiographical qualities as a holy virgin who was called by God to write of the visionary experiences He gifted her. This gift was also emphasised by Mechthild herself, but the endorsement by the male prologue writer would have held more weight amongst readers. Evidence also suggests that the translators of *The Flowing Light* tempered Mechthild's more controversial erotic language and criticism of religious contemporaries to make her work more orthodox. The question arises that if this was done in translations to make *The Flowing Light* more acceptable, why was Marguerite's *The Mirror* not also tempered by translators? It could be because Marguerite had more control over her translations, or because her translators were less likely than Mechthild's followers to be members of the tertiaries. Yet Mechthild lacked the official papal permission to write and teach like Catherine, and her blatant criticism of the Pope would have been controversial as she did not have the level of intimacy with him which authorised Catherine to speak so boldly. Thus, her book was largely only promoted amongst female religious as that was deemed the appropriate audience for a female mystic without significant male connections. Patricia Zimmerman Beckman's exploration of Mechthild's influence in this sphere reinforces the idea that female support of a mystic was not enough for validation: it was her success in courting male endorsement that enabled a female mystic to gain authority.

Yet Marguerite was at even more of a disadvantage than the other case studies: without a known confessor, and lacking residence in a religious house. She had no recorded ongoing relationship with a respected male confessor in the Church to vouch for her orthodoxy or to guide her writing as both Catherine and Mechthild did; nor did she have connections to the papacy as Catherine had. Had Marguerite joined a religious house like Mechthild, Robert Lerner argued, she would likely have circumvented the controversy around her writing; certainly, the number of

translations of *The Mirror* circulating at the time suggests that many people found nothing significantly contentious in it. After the first condemnation of *The Mirror*, Marguerite sought the approval of significant male religious, including John of Quaregnon, Dom Franco and Godfrey of Fontaines. She gained varying degrees of support from these men, which was meant to give her authority amongst her readers. However, sending *The Mirror* to Jean I de Châteauvillain, bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne, led to her arrest and conviction as a heretic. The agency seen in Marguerite pursuing official male approval trapped her in a heretical trial that would end her life. In the process of being condemned in Paris, Guiard of Cressonessart's sudden defence of Marguerite was unexpected and largely insignificant. Being in such a negative relationship with the Church himself, Guiard was unable to bolster Marguerite's claims to authority. The short period of his support did not seem to affect Marguerite's case in either a positive or negative way. Ultimately, Marguerite's lack of significant long-term male support appears to have notably disadvantaged her claims to authority and her influence amongst her peers.

Hence, relationships with key male religious figures were important in determining how far laywomen acquired authority. The active steps that Catherine took from an early age to develop them is reflected in the significant authority she gained by her death at age thirty-three. On the other hand, Marguerite's indifference to male endorsement until after her initial condemnation meant that she was already disadvantaged by the time she realised the importance of this path to authority, and her realisation came too late. Mechthild always submitted herself to male supervision, and was recommended throughout local clerical circles, yet her passivity in taking support given to her and not actively seeking it herself meant that she did not capitalise on her potential for influence. Male support therefore was important for laywomen seeking spiritual authority, but those women who took the earliest and most active steps to gain it were most likely to succeed.

Utilising Hagiographical Topoi: Divine Favour and Visions

Female mystics needed clerical support to authorise their writings, but they also needed to prove their access to the divine through exploitation of hagiographical topoi. The ideals of saintliness outlined by André Vauchez as mentioned earlier reveal how crucial these hagiographical topoi were to laywomen positioning

themselves as holy in order to gain authority. One of the key topoi in all three case studies' texts is that of divine favour.

Divine favour is central to Catherine's authorising tactics. Her fervent belief in her role as a passive vessel and the physical evidence left by her visionary experiences carried a lot of weight amongst her contemporaries. More so than the other women, Catherine's representation of her relationship with God as passive receiver of visions was orthodox and familiar amongst contemporary saints. Her more radical views were accepted due to the accuracy of her prophecies. Catherine's lack of formal education (though her relationships with religious men would have compensated) was also in her favour: her scriptural knowledge was attributed to her relationship with the divine and miraculous comprehension; the divine origin of the secrets bestowed on Catherine through her visions gave her credibility; her ability to write was deemed a miraculous gift from God. However, while visions, passively received, played a significant role in legitimising her authority in her book, Catherine's letters speak of her own agency and self-confidence.

Like Catherine, Mechthild was not formally educated, but credits all her knowledge to the Trinity. Mechthild, though, was able to write the first six books by her own hand in the vernacular, so her level of literacy suggests some level of education. She also relied on her visions as evidence of being chosen as a divine vessel. Of the three case studies, Mechthild removes herself and her authorship the most from her book, relying heavily on the divine source. These experiences, Mechthild emphasised, could not be gained by effort alone; God had to bestow a special grace. Mechthild was one of the earlier mystics to explore her own visions and mystical experience: previously such exploration had been the preserve largely of male-authored hagiographical texts. However, without formal education on the Scriptures, the only theological analysis Mechthild could undertake was on her own divine experiences. Like Catherine, Mechthild was modelling her experiences on those of the saints to claim orthodoxy and authority. Bridal mysticism, too, is strong in *The Flowing Light*, and the language is much more erotic than the language used by the other two women. This intimacy is what qualifies Mechthild to hear the secrets of the divine. Moreover, both Catherine and Mechthild were taught by God how to discern what were authentic visions from Him, rather than having to go

through a male intermediary. Direct access to God was key in Mechthild's claims to legitimacy.

Unlike Catherine and Mechthild, Marguerite did not overtly credit her divine knowledge to visions, and *The Mirror* lacks the expected prophecies and paranormal experiences of other female mystics' writings. By not highlighting her knowledge as divine experiences, Marguerite lacked a key symbol of authority. Yet, Marguerite does use bridal mysticism and positions herself as a divine vessel for God's secrets. As with Catherine and Mechthild, Marguerite was not formally educated in the Scriptures. Marguerite credits her theological knowledge as coming from the Trinity directly. However, her ability to write the text herself suggests a level of education at least on par with Mechthild if not higher. Marguerite emphasises that she has moved on from Reason's teaching, i.e. the mediation of the Church, and has an intimate relationship with the divine through which God gives her the words to write her book. Without the expected topos of visions, however, Marguerite's role as a vessel was doubted by contemporaries, and her words lacked the same authority attributed to those of Mechthild and Catherine. Moreover, the lack of submission to a confessor to verify her writing also left Marguerite vulnerable to accusations of heresy. While God is credited as the author of *The Mirror*, Marguerite manipulates the vocabulary to provide subtle nuances of her own role in creating the text. Marguerite was not able to legitimise her own text as divinely authored, and support from religious men came too late. Consequently, only public recognition of divine favour enabled these women to gain authority with their writing.

Utilising Hagiographical Topoi: Physical Asceticism

Physical asceticism was another key hagiographical topos through which late-medieval female mystics could gain legitimacy. Of the three case studies, Catherine was the most extreme in adhering to this topos. In her weakest physical states she received the greatest visions from God. She starved herself regularly of food, to the point where she was unable to stomach anything other than the Eucharist. There remains scholarly argument over the exploitation of this gendered bodied access to divine authority, as explored by historians such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Patricia Ranft. However, fasting was perceived by those around Catherine as a sign of saintliness, and she received special permission from the pope to take communion

regularly. Catherine used starvation, as well as physical beatings of her body, to overcome the weakness that was particularly associated with the female body. Her body, too, was marked by signs of divine approval. Her reception of the stigmata, uniquely like St Francis (a sign though that she requested to be made invisible), was a key tool in gaining authority. While controversial, amongst promoters of Catherine it solidified her authenticity and advanced her later cause for canonisation. For both the Franciscans and Catherine, the stigmata were a claim to divine favour superior to all contemporaries, as well as a holy sign of physical suffering. Catherine is a prime example of how extreme physical asceticism could be perceived as a mark of holiness, and how it might offer a path to authority.

While not as overtly ascetic as Catherine, Mechthild also recognised asceticism as a sign of holiness. She wrote of conquering her body with fasting and weeping but did not follow the hagiographical tradition of inflicting suffering on herself. Instead, she willingly accepted sickness and pain delivered her by God. Her visions affected her physically and left her weak and ill. She writes in *The Flowing Light* of being constantly sick from the spiritual toil of her life, but this physical frailty purified her. Mechthild's physical asceticism was less gendered than Catherine's and aligned with the ideals of suffering held by many male, rather than female, saints. Nevertheless, her physical suffering as a result of her visions validated her experiences amongst those who witnessed them. Her suffering of the torments of hell in her visions sanctified her. Mechthild's repeated desire to be martyred with physical suffering, like Catherine, drew from the saintly ideals of the thirteenth century. Both women actively engaged with this key hagiographical topos to gain authority.

To her detriment, Marguerite rejected physical asceticism as an authorising tool. Bynum has shown how contemporaries expected women to overcome the shortcomings of their gender through physical suffering in order to prove their holiness. Instead, Marguerite pushed for a higher state of unity with the divine that superseded asceticism and good works. While Mechthild and Catherine were desolate at the absence of visionary experiences or the physical remnants of them, Marguerite promoted *wesenmystik*. This radically introvertive mysticism pushed past the traditional identity of religious women who identified with Christ's humanity and instead focused on annihilating the will entirely. Without authorising herself and

her theology through physical suffering, Marguerite did not align herself with the recognised exemplars of holiness and was not accepted by the society she wanted to influence. Rejecting the use of a key hagiographical topos such as physical asceticism significantly weakened the ability of a female mystic to acquire authority.

Utilising Hagiographical Topoi: Humility

Humility, too, was a key hagiographical topos expected in the writing of late-medieval female mystics. However, this humility was not a negation of the self so much as an empowering tool to bring credibility in a society where women had a lower social status and yet were chosen as a vessel for the divine. Mechthild engaged heavily with this, regularly referring to herself as an unworthy sinner who did not deserve the gift of visions or the intimate relationship with God. Both Catherine and Mechthild emphasised their saint-like innocence and renunciation of worldly life; and their suppression of visionary experience was followed by the divine call to write. Mechthild wept at the shame of writing yet dared not disobey God's command. Her writing contained more images of female lowliness and submissiveness than the women at Helfta, suggesting Mechthild had been influenced by the patriarchal secular society in which she spent most of her life. Similarly, Catherine omitted in her own writings many of the miracles attributed to her by Raymond. As a sinful human, and more significantly a weak woman, Catherine maintained humility and allowed those around her to promote her cause. By claiming the topos of humility, both Catherine and Mechthild adhered to societal expectations for female mystics, gaining credibility which largely protected them from heretical accusations.

However, promoting humility did not always protect one from heresy charges. Humility was the core virtue that Marguerite believed in: in her view, only by being in the abyss of humility where no self remained could one be in perfect relationship with God. This total humility and loss of self qualified Marguerite to receive divine secrets and be united with the Trinity in a more extreme way than the other two women. Yet it did not gain her the same level of credibility as Mechthild or Catherine, perhaps because she did not explicitly align herself with the Annihilated Soul of which she wrote in *The Mirror*, and thus she was not automatically connected to this perfect state of humility. For women, displaying

humility pre-empted criticism based on gender in a way that was not as necessary for men (who in their writings did not stress this virtue of themselves as much).

Marguerite may also have escaped charges of heresy had her humility been more emphasised, perhaps by a man of clerical authority, although her obstinacy during her trial would likely still have condemned her. Her belief in the importance of humility did not transfer to submission to the religious hierarchy when her ideas were challenged. Thus, Marguerite's more complex relationship with humility meant that the hagiographical topos did not provide her as much authority as Catherine and Mechthild's own claims did. Humility provided access to authority, but it had to be used with care.

Concluding Statements

In conclusion, it is clear from these three case studies that there were set routes to authority for laywomen. By adhering to them, women could gain a significant level of influence. These routes were in various ways always gendered and often problematic. Notwithstanding their common gender, however, Mechthild, Marguerite and Catherine had significantly different experiences: gender alone did not determine their access or otherwise to authority. Therefore, within the late medieval Church which privileged access to authority for the male priesthood, laywomen's ability to gain authority was influenced by several factors. Significantly, the woman's own agency was key in the level of authority she gained. By employing key hagiographical topoi, seeking support from notable men in the ecclesiastical and political hierarchies, and strategically utilising the historical context in which they lived, these three women were able to achieve varying degrees of authority that superseded the expectations for non-religious women. These case studies have shown that while women were able to break social conventions in speaking publicly and having ecclesiastical influence, there were set paths for how women could access this authority. In particular, Marguerite's failure to understand and capitalise on her political context, build a strong network of male supporters, and exploit some key hagiographical topoi led to her alienation from the churchmen who could validate her authority. The varying degrees to which Catherine and Mechthild took advantage of these paths correlate with the varying levels of authority and influence they achieved. Thus, laywomen's relationship with authority in late-medieval Europe

is a rich tapestry of context, individuality and agency, and has a significant place in historical scholarship.

This thesis contributes to the current focus in scholarship on medieval piety and faith amongst women. André Vauchez's work on sainthood and how social expectations of holiness changed over this period provided an insight into the paths to authority women could take. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker's study on noblewomen's expression of their spirituality highlighted the need for analysis of non-religious women. I have expanded this to include women from a non-noble background. John W. Coakley's work on the mutual benefits in the relationship between spiritual women and their confessors has been extended here to compare how detrimental the lack of such a relationship could be to a woman's success. Elizabeth Alvida Petroff's studies on mysticism and Caroline Walker Bynum's research into asceticism and the body have both been drawn from and furthered here to focus on how these ideas relate to non-religious, non-noble and not always orthodox women. Even so, these case studies were still above average in terms of social circumstances and access to education. Further research could perhaps explore what, if any, authority peasant women were able to exhibit in regards to their spirituality, although sufficient evidence could be difficult to uncover. My research was limited to women who had written texts and these works formed the main sources for how these women engaged with the idea of authority. Not all women had the means to record their relationship with the divine, and of those who did, many of those texts may not have survived. Greater consideration, too, could be made to the comparative experiences of laywomen in other geographical locations further afield than these three countries. Thus, despite focusing on these women as examples for a wider group of society, they are still in their own way extraordinary and cannot be an absolute representation for all medieval laywomen's experiences with authority. However, they do not claim to be – and as this thesis has shown, women cannot be treated as one homogenous group in scholarship based solely on their shared gender. The impact of context on women's experiences creates too many variables to have one definitive and unanimous explanation of the relationship between laywomen and authority.

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