

A Severed Head and Two Plumes of Smoke: The Memory of Catherine of Siena and Marguerite Porete

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Abstract: This article contrasts the contemporary reception and fate of Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) and Marguerite Porete (1250-1310), two outspoken medieval religious women who wrote, spoke, and acted on their religious convictions. The paper emphasizes their approach to disseminating theological ideas and concepts and explores their willingness to conform to social norms and structures of the time. Drawing from texts they authored, contemporary reports on their actions and lives, and expert scholarship, this article seeks to show how two women's dissimilar approaches to religious activism led one to sainthood and the other to execution by burning.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a time throughout which women were considered inferior in all aspects to men, a considerable number of them nonetheless set out to follow their religious calling outside of strictly cloistered monasteries. Theirs was a path filled with obstacles, resistance, ridicule, and danger as they walked a fine line between orthodoxy and heresy, acceptance and denunciation, and admiration and condemnation. In the early thirteenth century, the Catholic Church and its officials had ramped up the pushback against heresy by instituting new canon laws and undertaking inquisitions into the “depravity of heresy.” While women were not the sole – or even main – target of these inquisitions of the Middle Ages, they nevertheless became the center of attention the moment they stepped outside of their clearly defined roles in society, which could either lead to absolution and penance, admiration and sainthood, or condemnation and death at the stake. What was it that made some religious women saints, to be revered and followed, but other sinners, to be condemned and punished? By examining contemporary reactions to the lives and works of Saint Catherine of Siena and Marguerite Porete, this paper sets out to prove that the primary difference between one fate and another was that of contemporary support from, and obedience to, religious officials in the church as well as an ability or lack thereof to navigate the clerical and secular world with sensibility and expertise.

Traditional medieval gender roles, defined and set by society and religion, have been strict but not necessarily absolute. As Chris Wickham points out in *Medieval Europe*, ambiguity of rules and varying interpretations thereof resulted in women who broke the mold and forged their own paths.¹ Generally, women were supposed to restrict their religious work to teaching religion to their children and to help with the upkeep of churches, and most women adhered to these expected behaviors.² Still, women increasingly wanted to be actively involved in religion without subjecting themselves to the confinement of institutional orders. These women found ways to active religiosity by becoming anchoresses, tertiaries, beguines, or mystics.³

¹ Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 194, ProQuest Ebook Central.

² Sandy Bardsley, *Women's Role in the Middle Ages*, *Women's Roles through History* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 208, Ebook.

³ Bardsley, *Women's Role in the Middle Ages*, 4, 32, 39-42, 46-47. Anchoresses were (usually wealthy) women living in bricked-off enclosures who dispensed spiritual advice to women in their community. Tertiaries were associated with monastic orders but lived with their families.

Catherine and Marguerite stood out as religious women of the Middle Ages because of their character, theological work, and perception. Catherine of Siena, a charismatic ascetic penitent and mystic, became renowned as a holy woman, peacemaker, and author of *The Dialogue*, twenty-six prayers (*Le Orazioni*), and over 300 letters to a wide range of recipients.⁴ More recently she has also found recognition as a skilled theologian, politician, and reformer, although her contemporaries preferred the former labels and dismissed the latter. Her circle of followers, her *famiglia*, her earliest biographers and hagiographers, and many recipients of her letters had high opinions of her.⁵ She was noted for her strict asceticism, her service to the sick and poor, and her ability to bring souls back into the church through oral and written persuasion. She also was an avid advocate for crusade and church reform. Her literary work is still circulated to this day and the *Dialogue* is used as a manual for living a pure life of asceticism and service, using *caritas* to extend God's love to everyone.⁶

Marguerite Porete, on the other hand, was a beguine from the Low Countries about whom little is known beyond the information found in trial documents and her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*.⁷ Marguerite was an astute theologian and mystic, as well as a critic of the church. She voiced her thoughts on how to spiritually become one with God by freeing one's soul for the purest love for and from God, thus shedding worldly worries and thoughts.⁸ Deemed "obstinate" and "rebellious" by her inquisitors, her book, the *Mirror*, was condemned not once, but twice by ecclesiastical authorities for "containing heresy and

Beguines lived in communities (beguinages) with other women but made no life-long vows and were free to leave the community at any time. Mystics could hold any of these roles or be laywomen with the means to spend much time with prayer and meditation, and who often had revelations or visions from God. Most of these women were involved in charitable work within their communities.

⁴ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). Cited throughout the paper as *Dialogue*. Vida D. Scudder, trans. and ed., *St. Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1906). Cited throughout this paper as *Letters*. This is an older translation and, as with all translations, bears the potential for errors. Furthermore, this collection provides only a one-sided communication, as there are no primary sources for letters Catherine received, so conclusions about letters she received must be deduced from her subsequent answers and her hagiography.

⁵ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. George Lamb (New York: P.J.Kenedy & Sons, 1960), 304 and 378. Cited throughout the paper as *Legenda maior*. The hagiography of Raymond is problematic in that it is written from the point of view of a contemporary male superior to Catherine and is thus more anecdotal than strictly factual. Additionally, translation errors may occur. *The Miracoli of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, in *Dominican Penitent Women*, ed. Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 87-104. The *Miracoli* is the work of an anonymous Florentine author who was told about Catherine by fellow penitent women during a trip to Florence in 1374. Her followers became known as *famiglia*, family, whom Catherine saw as sons and daughters and who saw her as mother.

⁶ Eloise Davies, "Catherine of Siena: a Dominican political thinker in fourteenth-century Italy," *Renaissance Studies* 35, no. 2 (2019): 237-254, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rest.12633>. Davies explores Catherine's philosophy in terms of service to community and salvation through such service, called *caritas*. In many works, *caritas* is translated as "charity," but it is closer in meaning to "love for the neighbor through acts of charity."

⁷ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, ed. Edmund Colledge, Judith Grant, and J.C. Marler, Notre Dame Texts in Medieval Culture, Vol. 6 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999). Cited throughout the paper as *Mirror*. This edition is a translation from the French original copy of the fifteenth century. Other translations use the Middle English copy or the Latin copy. All surviving manuscripts have slightly varying wording, and some might miss chapters. As always, translations bear a risk of errors.

⁸ *Mirror*, 140-146.

errors.”⁹ Against all odds, the *Mirror* survived the attempted purges and is still used today for inspiration to meditation as a means to become one with God.¹⁰

Although both women’s lives and work centered on religion and the urge to serve and teach others, they were received vastly differently by their contemporaries based on their source of inspiration and their understanding of gender roles in the Middle Ages. Seemingly ever obedient, Catherine first followed the rules of her household as set forth by her father, then those of the Sieneese penitent women’s *mantellate* as set forth by the religious leaders of the region, and finally the rules of the church as set forth by her male superiors.¹¹ She dutifully complied with her confessor’s directions, her pope’s demands, and Christ’s rules.¹² Catherine accepted male superiority and exhibited obedience toward men, therefore becoming an asset to the church as well as to her male contemporaries. Being an asset enabled her to promote her political and religious ideas.¹³ Furthermore, her knowledge and authority regarding religious and political matters allegedly stemmed from visions and revelations she received as the “Bride of Christ” rather than from her own opinions and thoughts.¹⁴

Marguerite, unlike Catherine, failed to apply finesse and outwardly unconditional obedience when dealing with church officials, which resulted in her persecution, the condemnation of her book, and her ultimate death at the stake. Additionally, Marguerite did not cloak her authority and knowledge in visions and revelations but wrote from experience and personal theological knowledge.¹⁵ This is not to say that

⁹ Sean L. Field, “Appendix A: Translations of the Trial Documents,” in *The Beguine, The Angel, and the Inquisitor: The Trials of Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart*, trans. Sean L. Field (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 300–31. https://www.scribd.com/read/305203761/The-Beguine-the-Angel-and-the-Inquisitor-The-Trials-of-Marguerite-Porete-and-Guiard-of-Cressonessart#search-menu_322589. Cited through the paper as *Beguine*. Marguerite’s inquisitor, Guillaume of Paris, repeatedly refers to Marguerite as being “obstinate and rebellious” and to her work as “containing heresy and errors.” Unfortunately, there are few surviving original documents, and some of those documents have been dated wrong during previous translations. Nevertheless, they provide a general idea about the happenings surrounding Marguerite’s trial, sentencing, and death.

¹⁰ Danielle C. Dubois, “Natural and supernatural virtues in the thirteenth century: the case of Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls*,” *Journal of Medieval History* 43, no. 2 (2017): 174–192, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2016.1261258>.

¹¹ Emily A. Moerer, “*Consorella* or *Mantellata*? Notes on Catherine of Siena’s Confraternal Legacy,” *Confraternitas* 18 (January 1, 2007): 2–15. <https://search-ebscohost.com.libproxy.troy.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsair&AN=edsair.doi.....c40a4c57cf16c838d135b409b24cf648&site=eds-live>. The *mantellate*, a confraternity initially defined as a tertiary Dominican Order, was an informal group of lay penitent women who wore the habit of Saint Dominic. They congregated in the church of Saint Dominic in Siena for devotion. Unlike cloistered nuns, however, its members otherwise lived at home with their families. It was only after Catherine’s death that the group was officially turned into a tertiary order of the Dominicans. Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, “Writing Religious Rules as an Interactive Process: Dominican Penitent Women and the Making of their *Regula*,” *Speculum* 79, No. 3 (July 2004): 660–687, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20462977>. Lehmijoki-Gardner’s research explores the hierarchy of the Dominican Order and its confraternities and tertiaries, including the making of rules and regulations groups like the *mantellate* followed.

¹² Carolyn Muessig, “Introduction,” in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, ed. Christopher M. Bellito, Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Boston: Brill, 2012): 1–21.

¹³ D. L. Villegas, “Catherine of Siena’s spirituality of political engagement,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77 (2): a6319, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6319>. Villegas discusses Catherine’s impact on papal policies through spirituality. The author states that Catherine achieved her goal of getting Gregory XI to move the papacy back to Rome, thus enabling a more direct influence on Italian city-state politics. She did not, however, succeed in organizing a new crusade, which was another one of Catherine’s main missions. Unfortunately, Villegas denies Catherine agency in these goals by stating that she was merely put in place to achieve those goals for others, a stance this paper does not support.

¹⁴ *Legenda maior*. Throughout his hagiography of Catherine, Raymund of Capua refers to Catherine as a Bride of Christ and to Jesus as her Bridegroom. He recounts her telling of visions and ecstasy during which she received her knowledge and strength. Convinced that Catherine received her knowledge and ideas directly from God, he fully trusted her advice and directives.

¹⁵ David Kangas, “Dangerous Joy: Marguerite Porete’s Good-bye to the Virtues,” *Journal of Religion* 91, no. 3 (July 1, 2011): 299–319, <https://doi.org/10.1086/659656>. Kangas states that Marguerite wrote as a woman, refusing to explain herself utilizing supposed visions and dreams. *Beguine*, 24. Field also states that Marguerite, at least after the first condemnation of the *Mirror*, lacked a confessor, a male clerical confidant, who could shape or influence her, which made her a rogue in the eyes of the church.

Marguerite did not attempt to follow the rules of medieval religious society, though. When she finished her first manuscript of the *Mirror*, she sought clerical consent for the righteousness and truth in her writing.¹⁶ When Marguerite was accused of having authored a heretical book by the bishop of Cambrai, Guy of Colmieu, she obeyed his orders and recanted her errors as her manuscript was burned for the first time.¹⁷ After this event, however, Marguerite decided to follow her own path, violating the bishop's order not to disseminate her book anymore, or else she would be condemned as a relapsed heretic and punished accordingly.¹⁸ Furthermore, by the time she was questioned by the royal inquisitor in Paris, Guillaume de Paris, in 1308 through 1310, she chose to remain silent rather than obey his demands to confess and abjure.¹⁹

Catherine knew better than to openly rebel against male authority and quite probably felt that men *should* assume leadership.²⁰ Yet, cloaked in such outward obedience and submission was a strong-willed woman who used her status as a holy woman as well as cunning methods to achieve her goals. By employing submissive language and appeals to masculinity, thus highlighting the superiority of her addressees, she changed views and minds and caused action. Writing to Popes Gregory XI and Urban VI, for example, she made sure any demands for action were prefaced by mentions of it being God's will, followed by variations of "pardon me, pardon me," or "pardon my presumption," or "Pardon, father, my ignorance."²¹ In a letter to Gregory in which she urged him to take action about the unrest in Florence, she wrote,

For I consider that a timorous man cuts short the vigour of holy resolves and good desire, and so I have prayed and shall pray, sweet and good Jesus that He free you from all servile fear, and that holy fear alone remain.²²

This was a clever way to appeal to his desire to appear strong and decisive. In a letter to Sir John Hawkwood, an English mercenary, she advised the prospective crusader to stop fighting against other Christians, but instead use his "pleasure in war and fighting" to "go against the infidels," throwing in for good measure an appeal to his manliness by stating, "...and thus you shall show that you are a manly and true knight."²³ Such pleas woke the chivalrous desire of a medieval man to do a frail young holy woman's bidding.²⁴ One time, however, she pushed too far. In a letter to Pope Gregory XI, as her patience wore thin over his failure to reform the church, affect peace within the Italian regions, and organize a crusade, she urged him to use his authority or resign.²⁵ An angry Gregory swiftly punished her by cutting ties, causing

¹⁶ *Beguine*, 78-80.

¹⁷ *Beguine*, 72.

¹⁸ *Beguine*, 12.

¹⁹ *Beguine*, 138-139.

²⁰ *Dialogue*, 329. "For, as I have told you, the source and companion of obedience is humility. But disobedience comes from pride, which in turn comes from selfish love for oneself and deprives one of humility." Obedience was important to Catherine, and she never questioned her role as subordinate to men.

²¹ *Letters*, Letters to Pope Gregory XI and Pope Urban VI, pages 117, 128, 133, 166, 182, 235, and 247.

²² *Letters*, "To Gregory XI," 165-166.

²³ *Letters*, "To Messer John," 102-103.

²⁴ *Legenda major*, 305. Pope Urban VI is quoted by Raymond as saying, "A mere woman puts us to shame. I call her a 'mere woman' not out of disrespect, but with reference to her sex, which in itself is weak, and also for our own instruction."

²⁵ *Letters*, 233-235. In this letter to Gregory XI, Catherine tells Gregory in no uncertain terms, "if you are not willing to use it (authority), it would be better for you to resign what you have assumed (the papacy); more honour to God and health to your soul would it be" (234).

her to quickly try to make amends by appealing to his male superiority and pointing out her female weakness, thus excusing her lapse in judgment.²⁶

Marguerite initially set out to follow the rules of her time by seeking approval for the *Mirror* from clerics of the church.²⁷ Sean L. Field points out the likelihood that Guy de Colmieu might have gotten hold of the manuscript through Marguerite herself, who possibly sought his approval but was instead met with hostility and the order to cease spreading her ideas.²⁸ Additionally, at some point between the condemnation of the *Mirror* by Guy de Colmieu around 1306 and her second arrest around 1308, Marguerite pursued counsel for her book by addressing three officials of the church in an ever-higher-ranking order. According to her prologue to the *Mirror*, Marguerite spoke with a Franciscan Friar, John of Querayn, “with a great reputation for the perfection of his life,” a Cistercian Monk, Dom Frank, “cantor of the abbey of Villiers,” and Master of Theology, Godfrey of Fontaines, “a theological scholar.”²⁹ All three men praised her works but cautioned her to be careful with its distribution.³⁰ For Marguerite, these positive reactions must have meant approval and that her work was “divine” and she was on the right path, which explains why, when previously explicitly forbidden by Guy de Colmieu, she continued her work on the *Mirror* after its condemnation, thus displaying a stubbornness which stands in stark contrast to Catherine’s obedience.³¹

Catherine did not only write letters to influence people, she also took to teaching them as they flocked to her wherever she went.³² Raymond of Capua, confessor, mentor, friend, and hagiographer, avoided the term “preaching” in his hagiography, instead using terms like “speaking” and “teaching,” as those were acceptable actions for lay religious women, especially with the consent of their clergy.³³ Beverly Mayne Kienzle insists that despite all the substitute phrases deployed by Raymond and his fellow men, Catherine truly *preached* to a growing following of diverse lay people, priests, and nuns.³⁴ At one point, Raymond recalls a visit to a monastery outside of Siena after an invitation from the friar, one of Catherine’s devotees. While there, the men urged Catherine to speak to them, and

²⁶ *Letters*, 237-247. Catherine pleaded in a letter to Raymond of Capua to make amends with the pope. “Pardon, most holy father, all my ignorance, and the wrong that I have done to God and to your Holiness” (241).

²⁷ Sylvain Piron, “Marguerite in Champagne,” *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 43 (2017): 135-156, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jmedirecult.43.2.0135>. Piron points out that it was crucial for women to seek approval of male religious authorities regarding any religious writing before circulation.

²⁸ *Beguine*, 71.

²⁹ *Mirror*, 180-181. The only proof for this is an addendum to later copies of the *Mirror* in which Marguerite describes the reactions of these clerics to the content of her book. While there is no physical evidence of these interactions, they are likely to have happened. See Sean L. Field, “The Master and Marguerite: Godfrey of Fontaines’ praise of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*,” *Journal of Medieval History* 35 (2009): 136-149, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2009.03.003>. Field lays out a possible timeline and argument for each encounter.

³⁰ *Mirror*, 181. “But he (Godfrey of Fontaines) said this, that he did not counsel that many should see it, because they might leave their own working and follow this calling, to which they would never come; and so they might deceive themselves, for it is made by a spirit so strong and perceptive that there are but few such, or none.”

³¹ *Beguine*, 11.

³² *Legenda Maior*, 106. Raymond retells how Catherine, told by Jesus to “Open, by ministering to them, the doors of souls,” felt compelled to “go and talk to anyone.” Eventually, people sought out Catherine, and Raymond reports, “I have at times seen an endless stream of men and women coming down from the mountains and countrytowns around Siena, as though summoned by an invisible trumpet to see or hear Catherine...”

³³ *Legenda maior*. Throughout the entire work, Raymond avoids the use of the word “preach” when referring to Catherine talking to the people.

³⁴ Beverly Mayne Kienzle, “Catherine of Siena, Preaching and Hagiography in Renaissance Tuscany,” in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto, Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Boston: Brill, 2012): 127-154.

...persuaded by their reiterated requests, she began to speak, saying what the Holy Spirit suggested to her. She spoke about all the different kinds of temptations and illusions with which the enemy can afflict solitaries; the way to avoid falling into his traps; and how to achieve complete victory over him; and she said all this so well and in such an orderly fashion that she filled me and all the others with amazement.³⁵

Another time, he reports her speaking to a sinner, reminding him of the fate awaiting him should he not change his ways, "...and gradually she went after him, using words now biting, now sweet," meaning she employed the way in which preachers spoke from pulpits, therefore clearly preaching.³⁶ Still, Catherine's action of preaching was tolerated due to her immense success in reaching souls.³⁷

Marguerite did not preach, but she certainly taught the people in her inner circles about the conclusions she had reached in the *Mirror*. As a beguine, she lived with other beguines and likely followed the tradition of spreading texts through songs during gatherings, or, later on, through reading the book to followers.³⁸ In historiography, the *Mirror* often appears as the work of a solitary woman refusing to see the error in her ways, and frequently there is a vacuum in her life between the time of the first condemnation and the final trial.³⁹ Huanan Lu, however, credibly places Marguerite in the beguinage Sainte-Élisabeth at Valenciennes, where she probably authored her original manuscript.⁴⁰ Moreover, Sylvain Piron makes a convincing argument for Marguerite's potential spreading of her ideas among the beguines through oral teaching and the use of songs and poems. Piron also has Marguerite traveling from the Low Countries into France after the first condemnation of the *Mirror*.⁴¹ Her fellow beguines and their clergy must have been familiar with her ideas and works at the time, although condemnation of the *Mirror* by the bishop of Cambrai would have meant a scandal, and Marguerite would have by now had the reputation as a difficult and dangerous woman.⁴² Marguerite herself mentions her fellow beguines and contemporary clerics in the *Mirror*, which often references the phrases "listen to this book," and "hearing this book," which indicates that it never was

³⁵ *Legenda maior*, 266.

³⁶ *Legenda maior*, 213.

³⁷ *Legenda maior*, 217. Raymond recalls that Gregory XI is "delighted and greatly encouraged by Catherine's great harvest of souls."

³⁸ Troy J. Tice, "'Containing Heresy and Errors': Thomas of Bailly and the Condemned Extracts of the Mirror of Simple Souls," *Catholic Historical Review* 104, no. 4 (Autumn 2019): 614-635, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cat.2019.0013>. Tice describes how beguines often transmitted texts and poems about religion orally, which led to the widespread dissemination of lyrics and therefore theology and ideas regarding faith.

³⁹ Robert E. Lerner, "New Light on *The Mirror of Simple Souls*," *Speculum* 85, no. 1 (January 2010): 91-116, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27866772>, and *Beguine*. Lerner and Field both claim there is no proof of Marguerite having been part of a beguinage or having left the area of Hainaut in the Low Countries at any point.

⁴⁰ Huanan Lu, "Marguerite Porete et l'enquête de 1323 sur le beguinage Sainte-Élisabeth de Valenciennes," *Revue du Nord* 440 (July-September 2021): 451-486, <https://doi.org/10.4000/acrh.24733>.

⁴¹ Piron, "Champagne," 135-156. Citing her research and the use of logic, Piron deduces that Marguerite must have left Hainaut toward the region of Champagne for the *Mirror* to end up in the hands of the bishop of Champagne. Piron further argues that it is likely that Marguerite was denounced to the bishop, who otherwise was not known to seek out heresies.

⁴² Lu, "Marguerite Porete," 451-486. During an inquisition into the beguines' proper life and work in 1323, the community of Sainte-Élisabeth at Valenciennes unanimously claimed that while there was "some woman named Marghonette" who had been executed for heresy a while ago, none of the present beguines had listened to or agreed with her ideas. This vehement denouncement of knowledge of the *Mirror* and its content seems self-serving and deflective in the face of potential persecution for circulating condemned material. Lu describes in detail the change in names from "Marghonette" to "Marguerite," as Marguerite was a rather common name, and the directors of the beguinage would want to ensure there are differences made between the various Marguerites. Further, Piron argues that the leadership of the beguinage would have expelled her, doubtless to protect themselves from further trouble at a time when sentiment against lay religious women ramped up. See Piron, "Champagne," 135-156.

meant to be read by “simpler souls” but instead be read to them as a way of teaching them.⁴³ Nonetheless, Marguerite went against the order to cease the spread of her beliefs through her writings. She must have known that a second condemnation would make her a relapsed heretic, and as such she would be sentenced to burn at the stake.⁴⁴

Catherine’s success lay in her diplomatic reasoning and her outward obedience to her superiors. Raymond of Capua, for example, deemed Catherine the perfection of a holy woman, not just because she set a great example for others, but also because with her he could further his own agenda within the Dominican Order and the church.⁴⁵ *Legenda maior* contains multiple mentions of St. Dominic specifically, and he assigns Catherine to a tertiary order of the Dominicans which during her lifetime did not exist.⁴⁶ Lehmijoki-Gardner points out this inconsistency, attributing such misinformation to Raymond’s desire to promote his order and emphasize his role in Catherine’s spiritual life and later canonization.⁴⁷ Still, Catherine’s works provide an insight into the mind of a fascinating medieval religious woman who played an active role in local and papal politics despite gender barriers. Eloise Davies, for example, maintains that Catherine was an astute politician who effected change in her time, even if contemporaries failed to acknowledge this role of Catherine due to her gender and the label of a mystic.⁴⁸ Carolyn Muessig further stresses Catherine’s involvement in local life in terms of religion and politics, pointing out letters of Catherine to everyday people whose attitudes she sought to correct so they could find the right path to heaven.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Catherine clearly expected the same obedience she displayed toward her superiors

⁴³ *Mirror*, 27, 28, 107. On pages 152 and 153, Marguerite, in a poem, wonders what the Beguines, the Priests and the religious will say when they hear what Love (or God) has to say to them, after they told her that she was “all astray” due to her ideas. She resolves that she will not bother explaining anything to them, as they will not understand.

⁴⁴ Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 92-93 and 151. Death by fire was reserved for those who were “stubborn and recalcitrant” or who “have lapsed back into heresy.” Once found guilty by the inquisitor, such heretics were turned over to secular officials who then carried out the punishment. This course of action released the church from the responsibility for the heretics’ death while ensuring that the will of the church was carried out. Deane’s book provides excellent information on the evolution of church procedure, penitence, and punishment, as well as on various heresies of the Middle Ages as defined by the Catholic Church.

⁴⁵ Lehmijoki-Gardner, “Writing Religious Rules,” 660-687. Lehmijoki-Gardner expounds on Raymond’s general opinion about women, stating that he preferred the virginity of Catherine over the piousness of widowed women. He was generally averse to penitents not in Catherine’s circle and pointed them out whenever possible.

⁴⁶ *Legenda maior*, 60.

⁴⁷ Lehmijoki-Gardner, “Writing Religious Rules,” 660-687. Lehmijoki-Gardner explains in detail why the *mantellate* were not a tertiary order of the Dominicans but rather loosely attached to them, contrary to Raymond of Capua’s claims. While *Legenda maior* provides an excellent initial primary source for the life of Catherine, this and other discrepancies in his book mean that a careful interpretation of his statements is necessary. His descriptions of events must be weighed against his personal goals and points of view and other primary sources, like Catherine’s letters and the *Dialogue*, as well as previous works about her life, such as *Miracoli*, and descriptions by earlier confessors and companions of the saint. Secondary sources must also be viewed with caution. Suzanne Noffke, a leading expert on the life of Catherine, for example, often lacks critical views of Catherine’s work as she seemingly reveres the saint in all her extensive work, starting with her compilation and translation of Catherine’s letters, her essays on the *Dialogue*, and her general commentary on Catherine. She does, however, rightfully point out the issues with the translation and dissemination of transcripts of Catherine. See Suzanne Noffke, “The Writings of Catherine of Siena: The Manuscript Tradition,” in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, ed. Christopher M. Bellito, Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Boston: Brill, 2012): 295-338.

⁴⁸ Davies, “Dominican Political Thinker,” 237-254.

⁴⁹ Muessig, “Introduction,” 5-10. *Letters*, 104-108. In a letter to Monna Colomba, an elderly woman in Lucca, Catherine chides Monna for not only being involved with “vain diversions and worldly weddings,” but also enticing “young women, who are wanting to withdraw from going to these things” by talking them into partaking in these worldly pleasures. Catherine reminds Monna to find her way back to God and the proper way of life, “by love of virtue and your salvation.”

to be exhibited by the people whose souls she set out to save, as can be seen throughout her letters, as well as in the *Dialogue*.⁵⁰

Marguerite, on the other hand, had no use for such obedience to anyone other than God. The conviction that her work was true and godly must have been the reason why Marguerite freely admitted to the bishop of Châlons, Jean de Châteauvillain, and the new bishop of Cambrai, Philip de Marigny, that she indeed had another copy of her book and that she had talked about it with others.⁵¹ At this point, she likely believed that she could get out of trouble as she had followed Godfrey of Fontaines's recommendation and therefore not violated the rules. A recurring theme in the surviving trial documents is that of Marguerite as "obstinate and rebellious," refusing to answer questions about her text at all.⁵² Guillaume of Paris, her inquisitor, deemed her book heretical and Marguerite a relapse for defying bishop Guy de Colmieu's orders, yet, try as he might, he could not get her to admit to it or discuss the ideas in her book with him, even after a lengthy stay in prison.⁵³ Of course, it is unlikely that obedience at this point would have saved Marguerite, as relapsed heretics were deemed beyond redemption. It is also possible that Marguerite did not care about Guillaume of Paris's opinion – or that of the Parisian experts of theology. She herself had noted in the *Mirror* that clerks and the like would not understand her work.⁵⁴ Additionally, the accusations of heresy were placed on excerpts from the book that, when read out of context, obviously went against church doctrine, even though the work in its entirety had been deemed sound and just by previous readers like Godfrey of Fontaines, who also had been a master of theology at Paris.⁵⁵ Regardless, the premise is that Marguerite was primarily excommunicated and executed because, as Guillaume of Paris stated, she "sent the same book ... as if it were good and licit" despite having been warned not to.⁵⁶ Had she obeyed or even attempted to appeal the original verdict of bishop Guy de Colmieu, she could have lived out her life as a free beguine rather than an imprisoned heretic who was burned at the stake.

Catherine and Marguerite were exceptional women of their time whose intellects rivaled and often surpassed that of male contemporaries. Yet, their fates were vastly different. Catherine largely remained within the boundaries set by a male-dominated church. She certainly faced adversity and resistance in her life, but the way she responded to either by pointing out God's will in all her actions and her seemingly

⁵⁰ *Dialogue*, 328. Catherine wrote an entire chapter on obedience, and the word itself appears in the book over 200 times, proving how important such virtue was to her.

⁵¹ *Beguine*, 75. Her original confession can be assumed from the trial documents, as Field points out. Of course, adequate interpretation of these documents is difficult, as not all documents have survived into modern times, and previous translations may and do contain errors that quite possibly change the meaning of words. Still, these sources provide important information about how Marguerite was perceived by her inquisitor, the panel of theologians judging her work and her relapse into heresy, and the people witnessing her execution.

⁵² *Beguine*, Appendix A.

⁵³ *Beguine*, Appendix A.

⁵⁴ *Mirror*, 89-91. Marguerite describes how "because of these men's crudity, I have to be silent and to be circumspect in my words which I learned to speak in secret places, in the secret court of that sweet land." She further refers to the men of the mendicant orders as "...none the less man earns his food and his sustenance through his labor," referring to the begging of the mendicants.

⁵⁵ Field, "Master," 136-149. Field argues that Godfrey of Fontaines must not have deemed the *Mirror* heretical, or else he would have explicitly expressed this opinion. Tice, "Containing Heresy and Errors," 614-635. Tice laid out convincingly that some members of the expert panel in Paris might have very well seen the *Mirror* in a different light had they received the entire document rather than a contemporary translation of excerpts. That they only received excerpts can be derived from the trial documents, especially Guillaume of Paris's statements regarding the text. See Fields, *Beguine*, Appendix A.

⁵⁶ *Beguine*, Appendix A.

absolute obedience and subordination to clergy meant that she was largely free to follow her religious and political path under the protection of the church. Marguerite, on the other hand, overstepped her boundaries and eschewed gender roles by not even pretending to cloak her work in the mysticism of visions and prophesies, and, once under the watchful eye of the church, experienced not only one but two inquisitions, which put an end to her life's work. Surely, she would have been pleased to know that various versions of the *Mirror* survived in different translations and that her spirituality is still relevant more than 700 years after her untimely cruel death. Catherine, a severe ascetic, died at the young age of thirty-three in Rome, and her severed head is enshrined in the Church of St. Dominic in Siena, where people to this day pilgrimage to pay reverence to the saint. Marguerite's lasting legacy is that of "two plumes of smoke," as she and her book were burned in Paris in 1310.

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