Self-Defence and Its Limits in Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*

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Abstract
This article examines how Marguerite Porete defended her ideas in her mystical treatise *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, which along with its author was condemned as heretical in 1310. Most scholarship has focussed on the final sixteen chapters of the *Mirror* as evidence of Marguerite's self-defence. This article shows that Marguerite was concerned with defending her ideas throughout the course of composing the *Mirror*, and not merely while writing the final chapters. Focussing on two key concepts in the *Mirror* which were singled out at her trial in Paris, it shows how Marguerite repeatedly presented these concepts in ways which were meant to shield them from criticism. The article then examines the reactions of two later readers of the *Mirror* to these defences, exploring their successes and failures and the vastly different ways in which they could be interpreted.

Keywords: Marguerite Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, heresy, textual reception, defence, mysticism

The story of Marguerite Porete has become iconic in the history of heretical mysticism.[1] She composed the *Mirror*—a mystical treatise describing the Soul's journey to becoming 'annihilated' in union with God—in Old French in the last decade of the thirteenth century. Sometime between 1297 and 1305, the *Mirror* was condemned as heretical by Guido of Collemezzo, the bishop of Cambrai, and Marguerite was ordered not to possess or circulate it again. She was later found to have contradicted this order and had again possessed her book. Marguerite was taken to Paris and given into the custody of William of Paris, inquisitor and confessor to Philip IV the Fair of France.[2] Here she refused to take the inquisitorial oath and confess, and was imprisoned for a year and a half. Finally, in the spring of 1310, at the request of William of Paris, five canon lawyers reviewed her case and pronounced her a relapsed heretic. Twenty-one theologians were likewise consulted on at least fifteen articles taken from her book, of which we know only three, and judged it heretical.[3] Marguerite was publicly sentenced on

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[1] The standard account of Marguerite's trial and its aftermath is Field, *Beguine, Angel, and Inquisitor*.

[2] On the events leading up to Marguerite's second arrest, see Piron, 'Marguerite in Champagne', and Field, *Beguine, Angel, and Inquisitor*, pp. 39-62.

[3] On these events see Field, *Beguine, Angel, and Inquisitor*, pp. 85-166; Courtenay, 'Marguerite's Judges', pp. 215-232; Kelly, 'Inquisitorial Deviations and Cover-Ups', pp. 936-973.

31 May 1310, and on the next day, 1 June, after moving the watching crowd to tears with 'many signs of penitence, both noble and devout', she was burned at the stake.[4]

One of the most enduring images from this story is Marguerite's defiance: her decision to continue to possess her book despite Guido's condemnation, and her refusal to formally confess to William of Paris. These actions have taken Marguerite's reputation through several personas: a contumacious heretic; a self-incriminating madwoman; a silent victim of persecution; a defiant martyr for intellectual freedom; a disillusioned adherent to the Church. Scholars have commented that some of Marguerite's defiance—such as her recirculation of her book—can be seen as neither madness nor deliberate antagonism, but rather a form of self-defence, born of a genuine desire on her part to be perceived as orthodox.[5] The strongest example of this desire is Marguerite's acquisition of the opinions of three churchmen on her work, which she attached to the *Mirror* itself; each man offered qualified praise of the work, and did not find it heretical.[6] Such an acquisition can clearly be seen as an effort to garner support for her work.

The most often cited textual effort at defence by Marguerite is the modifications she may have made to her book after the first condemnation in Valenciennes. Many have suggested that Chapters 123-139 were added to the *Mirror* after this initial condemnation, as they have a distinctly different tone from the rest of the work and attempt to explain and clarify some of her ideas using Biblical metaphors and first person reflections.[7] But how much and in what way Marguerite might have revised her work is a deeply complicated question that remains to be fully investigated.[8] Recently, Sylvain Piron has suggested that these chapters may not necessarily post-date the Valenciennes condemnation, and that the *Mirror*'s composition process, rather than being linear, was perhaps more an amalgamation of several existing pieces brought together by the author.[9]

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[4] The quotation is from the Continuator of the Chronicle of Guillaume de Nangis, translated by Field in *Beguine, Angel, and Inquisitor*, p. 234.
[5] See Field, *Beguine, Angel, and Inquisitor*, pp. 46-55; Newman, 'Annihilation and Authorship', p. 616.
[6] The appraisals can be found at the end of the Latin translation and the beginning of the Middle English; it does not appear in the Chantilly French. See *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 405-409, and *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, pp. 249-250. The names of the churchmen are John of Quievrain, a Franciscan; Franc, a Cisterican monk of Villers; and Godfrey of Fontaines, a famed master of theology at the University of Paris. On Marguerite's dealings with Godfrey see Field, 'Master and Marguerite'.
[7] Field, *Beguine, Angel, and Inquisitor*, pp. 46-49; Newman, 'Annihilation and Authorship', p. 616; Newman, *Medieval Crossover*, pp. 142-143; McGinn, 'Evil-Sounding, Rash, and Suspect of Heresy', p. 196, n. 3. Colledge, Grant, and Marler, Introduction to *Mirror of Simple Souls*, xli. Lerner argues against this in 'New Light', p. 100.
[8] Field points to this issue as one of twelve 'major questions' that still remains in Marguerite and *Mirror* studies. Field, 'Debating the Historical Marguerite', pp. 26-27.
[9] Piron, 'Marguerite in Champagne', pp. 136-138.

A focus on these final few chapters as the primary example of Marguerite's self-defence means that less attention has been paid to how Marguerite may have constructed defences in other sections of her work.[10] In particular, there has been little detailed exploration of how Marguerite may have defended the specific points which would eventually be singled out and condemned at her trial, all of which come from earlier chapters in the *Mirror*. Such an investigation need not be constrained by a pre-condemnation vs. post-condemnation framework, particularly in light of Piron's theory of a non-linear composition of the *Mirror*. As has been pointed out, someone or something drew Guido of Collemezzo's attention to Marguerite and her *Mirror*.[11] It is reasonable to assume that her work attracted criticism before its public condemnation in Valenciennes, and equally reasonable to believe that Marguerite herself was aware—and concerned—from the outset that her ideas may be taken amiss by some of her readers.[12] Therefore, 'defence' here can be taken on three levels: defence in reaction to condemnation, defence against received criticism, and pre-emptive defence against anticipated criticism. Since it is impossible (at the moment) to know precisely what went into the *Mirror* at what stage, the defences discussed here will not be considered as the result of any specific incident, but instead will have all three serve as the background.

My focus in this piece is not on the final section of the *Mirror*, but rather on two main concepts in the text which were explicitly singled out as proof of the *Mirror*'s heresy during Marguerite's trial in Paris. These are arguably the points from the *Mirror* which attracted the most attention and controversy both in the Middle Ages and in modern scholarship. They are:

> That the annihilated soul gives license to the virtues and is no longer in servitude to them, because it does not have use for them, but rather the virtues obey its command.[13]

> That the Soul annihilated in love of the Creator, without blame of conscience or remorse, can and ought to concede to nature whatever it seeks and desires.[14]

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[10] Michael Bailey has recently highlighted some of the other areas in which Marguerite attempts to defend her work. See Bailey, 'Magic, Mysticism, and Heresy', pp. 65-66.
[11] Piron, 'Marguerite in Champagne', pp. 146-147; Van Engen, 'Marguerite of Hainaut and the Low Countries', p. 61.
[12] Van Engen notes that the *Mirror* hints at 'tensions' surrounding its content, 'Marguerite of Hainaut and the Low Countries', pp. 58-61. Bernard McGinn also hints at this thread of concern, commenting that the *Mirror* seems to be 'flaunting its extreme statements at the same time that it often seeks to qualify them and to protect its essential orthodoxy'. McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, p. 253.
[13] From the theologians' judgment of the *Mirror*, Latin printed in Verdeyen, 'Le procès d'inquisition', p. 51. The English is taken from Field, *Beguine, Angel, and Inquisitor*, p. 128.
[14] From the continuation of the chronicle of Guillaume de Nangis. Latin in Verdeyen, 'Le procès d'inquisition', p. 88. English from Field, *Beguine, Angel, Inquisitor*, pp. 128 and 234. For useful tables

There are three purposes for this choice: First, I want to suggest that controversy and potential criticism was a concern for Marguerite throughout her composition of the *Mirror*, rather than something which only preoccupied her when writing the final chapters of her book.[15] Second, focussing on the extracts from her trial allows us to analyse how Marguerite presents points from her work which are known for certain to have been controversial during her lifetime and beyond. Third, I have selected these two points because we have specific written reactions to them from later medieval readers of the *Mirror*. This allows for a glimpse into how these defences fared in the *Mirror*'s wider reception. These three aims allow for an assessment of self-defence regarding both Marguerite Porete's possible mindset, and what effect—if any—these defences had upon later readers of the *Mirror*, detached from the events of her trial.[16]

The Mirror's Internal Defences

The *Mirror* takes the format of a trialogue between the voices of Love, the Soul, and Reason; other voices, such as Truth or Pure Courtesy, occasionally interject their own comments. Love and the Soul explain the main ideas of the *Mirror*, sometimes of their own prompting, but often in response to the questions or exclamations of Reason. Reason serves as the uncomprehending voice in the *Mirror*, representing those who do not understand the spiritual status which Love and the Soul describe. Marguerite explicitly presents Reason as the voice which rules the institutional Church.[17] Constantly asking questions, expressing shock, and occasionally being insulted by the Soul, Reason is often both a punching bag and the springboard for Marguerite's ideas, as her shocked questions and cries of dismay prompt explanations from Love or the Soul which expand

showing the concordance between the trial excerpts and passages in the *Mirror*, see Field, Lerner, and Piron, 'A Return to the Evidence' p. 161. I have not included the third error, 'That such a soul does not care about the consolations of God or his gifts, and ought not to care and cannot, because [such a soul] has been completely focused on God, and its focus on God would then be impeded' (Verdeyen, 'Le procès', p. 51; Field, *Beguine, Angel, and Inquisitor*, p. 224), as it was not specifically commented on by later readers, and Marguerite herself does not seem to have focussed on explaining it as she did the other two.

[15] Sean Field, among others, has noted that scholars looking to use the *Mirror* as an avenue to Marguerite herself have to proceed carefully, as the copies of the *Mirror* which have come down to us—and upon which modern editions are based—are all far removed from the time of the *Mirror*'s composition, and there are numerous variations between the various traditions. It is, however, safe to assume that where the content between traditions matches, then the general idea—if not the mode of expression—was a product of Marguerite, and not the addition of later scribes. See Field, 'Debating the Historical Marguerite', p. 20. Particularly troublesome are chapters 121-137, as the French, Middle English, and Latin versions all share various—and differing—lacunas in these sections.

[16] My focus here is on the way in which Marguerite presented her ideas in the text and how they were later perceived, rather than with the theological implications of her ideas and whether they were truly 'orthodox' or 'unorthodox'.

[17] For example in Chapter 43, *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, p. 133.

upon key concepts. This moves the narrative forward and allows Marguerite to present her ideas in a (relatively) straightforward and recognisable format.[18] It also reinforces the idea that Reason is an impediment to annihilation, and that debating and overcoming Reason's constant queries is a crucial goal of the Soul's journey. This format in and of itself could have served as a defensive layer. By expressing her ideas not in the first person, but through the personas of various characters, Marguerite employs an age-old device that puts a slight distance between herself and what her *Mirror* says, and as a result places it in a more allegorical, rather than literal, realm.[19] Within this format, the voice of Reason itself also serves as a tool of self-defence. In voicing dismay, fear, and bewilderment, Reason may be a self-conscious representation of Marguerite's critics.[20] Reason's cries of shock, in addition to prompting Love and the Souls' explanations, can also be seen as acknowledgments of the jolt that readers themselves may feel when reading some of Marguerite's statements on virtuous behaviour and institutional Church practices.[21]

Such an undercurrent can be clearly seen when we turn to the ideas condemned during Marguerite's trial. The first, concerning the Soul's freedom from the Virtues, first appears in Chapter 6 of the *Mirror*. Here the Soul does indeed state that it is free of the Virtues and rejoices in this freedom, characterising her servitude to the Virtues as slavery and torment.[22] A little later in the text, in Chapter 8, Reason expresses her concern:

> Ah, Love, says Reason, who understands only the obvious and fails to grasp what is subtle, what strange thing is this? This Soul experiences no grace, she feels no longings of the spirit, since she has taken leave of the Virtues, which give to every pious soul a form of good life, and without these Virtues no-one can be saved or attain to perfect living, and with them no-one can be deceived; and none the less this Soul takes leave of them. Is she not out of her mind, this Soul who talks like that?[23]

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[18] On the parallels between the treatment of Reason in courtly love literature and the *Mirror*, see Newman, *Medieval Crossover*, pp. 153-160.

[19] On functions of the dialogue format see Piehler, *The Visionary Landscape*, pp. 31-33.

[20] David Kangas comments that Reason's statements sometimes 'eerily…cause her to channel Porete's inquisitors'. Kangas, 'Dangerous Joy', p. 302.

[21] Paul Piehler notes that the reader is inclined to identify him-or-herself with the questioner in a dialogue, allowing for the process of conversion to the viewpoint being advocated by the respondent. Piehler, *Visionary Landscape*, p. 32.

[22] *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 24 and 25; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, pp. 254-255. Chapter references are to the Chantilly chapter reckoning, which is used in the French and Latin critical editions and the modern English translations. Danielle Dubois has shown how Marguerite's concept of leaving behind the Virtues aligns closely with some thirteenth-century scholastic conceptions of natural and supernatural virtues. See Dubois, 'Natural and Supernatural Virtues'.

[23] English from *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 18. The Latin conveys an even stronger sense of dismay: 'Quomodo igitur haec anima sic effronte recedit a uirtutibus? Amisitne sensum quae sic temerarie loquitur?' ('How then does this Soul brazenly recede from the Virtues? Has she not lost her mind to speak so rashly?'). *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 28 and 29. My translation. The Middle English can be found in *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 257.

This amazed speech serves several purposes. First, the reader is reminded that Reason is unable to understand 'the subtle'. By having Reason then repeat the standard view of the Virtues immediately after this, Marguerite makes it clear that such a view is not a correct understanding of her words. Finally, by adding Reason's concerned statement on the state of the Soul's sanity, the text is anticipating not only a lack of understanding on the reader's part, but also anticipates the discomfort or dismay which such a statement on the Virtues may provoke. The entire passage shows that Marguerite knows what she has written will shock, but this self-conscious acknowledgment allows her to present such shock only as the result of misunderstanding, rather than it being genuinely wrong.

Reason's dismayed question, then, strengthens the second and more obvious layer of defence, that of Love's following explanation. Immediately after Reason asks if the Soul has lost her mind, Love responds 'No, not at all'.[24] The unencumbered Souls 'possess the Virtues better than any other creature', but do not have the *use* of them, and the Virtues serve the Soul as their 'mistress'.[25]

This effort to contextualise has been mentioned frequently, but less attention has been paid to just how much Marguerite seems to have been concerned about this issue. This passage was not left as the only defence of her statement on the Virtues; Marguerite returned to this idea repeatedly and explained it multiple times. Each time, the explanation is prefaced by statements of confusion, amazement, or dismay, by either Reason or the Virtues themselves. For example, in Chapter 19, the Virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity ask 'Who are [these Souls], and where are they, and what do they do?'[26] Here, Love is the one who is surprised. In an almost chastising tone, Love wants to know why they ask these questions. Faith, Hope, and Charity already know where these Souls are, because they are with them 'at every moment of time' and make the Soul noble.[27] Love speaks as if it should be self-evident that these Souls are served by the Virtues. 'Why should they not?', she demands, 'Are not all the Virtues praised and

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[24] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 18; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, p. 29; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 257

[25] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 18; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, p. 31; *Mirrour,* ed. Doiron, p. 258.

[26] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 38; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 74-75; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 272. This passage also contains an awareness of criticism, as it continues: 'Reveal them to us by Love, who knows everything, and so they will be set at rest who, hearing this book, are dismayed. For all Holy Church, if she were to hear it read, would be dismayed by it, say these three divine Virtues.'

[27] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 39; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 74-75; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 272. Dubois notes that Faith, Hope, and Charity, as divine virtues, are not meant to be counted amongst the 'lesser' virtues from which the Soul has been freed. See Dubois, 'Natural and Supernatural Virtues', p. 184.

written about and commended because of these Souls, not the Souls because of the Virtues?'[28] Once again, Marguerite steers around the idea of moral abdication by reiterating that the Virtues are still with the Soul, and that the Soul itself exalts the Virtues. And, again, she reinforces the explanation with a comment on the Church's lack of understanding: 'But who they are—to speak of their worth and dignity—neither you nor they know that, and so Holy Church cannot know it.'[29]

The same formula appears again in Chapter 21. Here, seemingly with no prompt, Reason once again gets anxious about the Soul's freedom from the Virtues:

> 'Now, Love, says Reason, I have still another question to put to you; for this book says that this Soul takes leave of the Virtues in all matters, and you say that the Virtues are always with such Souls, more perfectly than with anyone else. These are two contradictory statements, it seems to me, says Reason; I cannot understand them.'[30]

'Let me set your mind at rest', says Love.[31] She repeats the argument from Chapter 8, that the Souls have only taken leave of the *use* of the Virtues, and then adds that the Soul 'has within her everything which the Virtues are able to teach, and infinitely more', because she has been transformed into Divine Love.[32]

In the final example, from chapter 56, we find a more explicit acknowledgment of how Marguerite's conception of the Virtues might appear to readers. The Virtues themselves complain that they are given little honour by Love and the Soul because they label those who live by the Virtues' counsel as 'lost'. 'Truly, if anyone said this to us, say the Virtues, we should hold him for a heretic and a bad Christian.'[33] But, the Virtues are not merely accusing the Soul here. They cannot understand how anyone can be 'lost' by following their precepts, but, despite this, 'we believe perfectly and with no element of doubt in all that you say'.[34] They don't understand it because 'understanding it is not part of our office', but, whatever understanding they may have, they still serve the Soul

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[28] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 39; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 74-75; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 272.
[29] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 39; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 74-75; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 272. Bailey also uses this passage as an example of Marguerite's awareness of the 'inscrutability' of her work. Bailey, 'Magic, Mysticism, and Heresy', pp. 65-66.
[30] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 40; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 78-79; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 273.
[31] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 40; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 78-79; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 273.
[32] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, pp. 40-41; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 78-81; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, pp. 273-274.
[33] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 75; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 160-163; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 296. The Middle English just has 'yuel cristen'; the Latin goes a step further and adds 'infidel' (*infideli*) before 'bad Christian' (*malo christiano*).
[34] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 75; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 162-163; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 296.

through the direction of divine love.[35] Marguerite (or, rather, the Soul), then addresses her audience directly:

> And so I say to all who will hear this book: Whoever serves a poor lord for long can expect a poor reward and little payment. Now it is so, that the Virtues have realised and perceived clearly, as those who have been willing to hear have heard, that they have no understanding of the state of being of Perfect Love.[36]

Here Marguerite relies solely on a lack of understanding as her defence. Her concept of the Virtues is explicitly framed by heresy (or at least as the belief of a 'bad Christian'), but it is then made clear that such a perception is only the result of an inability to understand. The tone, though, is slightly more defiant here: rather than explain again, Marguerite instead emphasises how poor understanding is what keeps such ideas from seeming acceptable, rather than any real deficiency in the concept itself.

This awareness of potential misinterpretation also appears in regard to another point excerpted at her trial, in which the Soul gives to Nature all it asks without a troubled conscience. This can first be located in Chapter 9, where it is written that the Soul 'does not desire sermons or masses' and 'gives to Nature all that it asks without remorse of conscience.'[37] This passage is sometimes used as the prime example of the *Mirror* not getting a fair hearing, due to the fact that reading it out of context omits the following qualifying sentence: 'But this Nature is so well ordered through having been transformed in the union with Love, to whom this Soul's will is joined, that it never asks anything which is forbidden.'[38] This qualifier is not, however, present in the Middle English, and there has been some doubt as to whether it was instead a later addition by another scribe, and not Marguerite's own words.[39] This does not mean, however, that Marguerite made no attempt to explain or defend this statement, merely that this specific sentence is missing. The rest of the surrounding text and this point's reappearance later in the book makes it clear that Marguerite did attempt to defend this point. Even without the more explicit qualifying statement, after the passage in Chapter 9 there still follows an

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[35] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 75; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 162-163; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 296.
[36] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 75; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 162-163; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 296.
[37] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 20; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 32-33; *Mirrour*,ed. Doiron, p. 258.
[38] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 20; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 32-33.
[39] Lerner notes this omission in 'New Light', p. 103; Colledge and Guarnieri also noted it in 'The Glosses', pp. 362-363.

explanation that is meant to push against notions of licentiousness: 'Such a Soul is not concerned about what it lacks, except at the needful time; and none but the innocent can be without this concern.'[40] This is less direct than the statement missing from the Middle English, but it still gets at the same message: the Soul is in a state of innocence and therefore is not pursuing illicit things, nor does it have any care for anything outside its innocent state. Reason, though, is not entirely satisfied with this. While her reaction is more puzzled than alarmed regarding this point, she still expresses her amazement with one of her favourite phrases: 'For God's sake, what does this mean?' Love then provides a familiar explanation: Those who persist in obedience to the Virtues, as well as 'every teacher of natural wisdom, every teacher of book-learning', will not be able to properly understand this point. Only those who seek 'Perfect Love' will understand.[41]

A little later, in Chapter 13, the statement on conceding everything to Nature is restated, not by Love, but by Reason.[42] Reason calls this point 'astonishing', then proclaims her confusion, and follows up by stating what *she* thinks spiritual perfection entails: one *should* desire sermons, prayers, etc. and should deny Nature what it asks. Once again, Reason concedes that her understanding is poor, and then declares that she is, in fact, in obedience to Love and the Soul, a statement for which Love commends her. Answering Reason's confusion, Love explains that, rather than utterly rejecting poverty, sermons, shame, etc., the Soul is rather just indifferent to them, since in the state of annihilation she cannot be troubled by such things.[43] The issue returns one more time in Chapter 17. Love again states that the Soul concedes to Nature whatever it asks and repeats that the Soul is indifferent to temporal things. She then adds that to refuse Nature's demands would disrupt the Soul's 'innocence' and 'peace' in which they exist. Once again, a comment on 'correct' understanding is integrated into the explanation.[44]

In each of these examples, we can discern a consistent model of defence made of several components. First and most obvious are the explanations and clarifications themselves. Marguerite makes sure to point out that freedom from the Virtues,

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[40] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 20; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 34-35; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 259.
[41] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, pp. 20-21; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 34-35; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 260.
[42] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, pp. 29-30; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 54-55; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 266.
[43] *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, pp. 30-31; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 56-59; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, pp. 266-267.
[44] 'But such creatures are so excellent that one dares not openly talk of this, especially of their customs, which give them a state of being where they understand as should be understood; but there are few who taste such understanding.' *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, pp. 36-37; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, pp. 68-71; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, pp. 270-271.

indifference to pious actions and feelings, and giving to Nature all it asks does not entail anything sinister or licentious.[45] But it could be said that the more crucial defensive element is her acknowledgment of how her statements may be found shocking, wrong, or even heretical. The surprise and alarm with which Reason and the Virtues address these concepts can be seen as a self-conscious representation of criticism, either real or anticipated.[46] By acknowledging the shock value of her ideas, Marguerite then attempts to defuse them by directly addressing these fears and pointing to their cause, which leads us to the crux of Marguerite's self-defence. If some spiritual thinkers resorted to what Robert Lerner has famously called the 'ecstasy defence' to fend off accusations of heresy, then Marguerite could be said to resort to an 'esoteric defence'.[47] As Michael Bailey has pointed out, Marguerite was generally aware of the 'inscrutability' of her words, and took pains to acknowledge this as part of her defence.[48] In each of the above examples, Marguerite's explanation of her ideas is repeatedly coupled with statements that most readers will be unable to comprehend her words. Furthermore, this tactic is strengthened by linking it to Reason and the Virtues' dismay and confusion. By having the 'unenlightened' voices cry out in shock, Marguerite clearly links those feelings of discomfort to an inability to understand. This allows Marguerite to present others' shock over her ideas merely as a misunderstanding, rather than any true error on her part. Importantly, it is not only the voices of Love and the Soul calling Reason and the Virtues ignorant. The latter two voices themselves admit that their understanding is inadequate, and that, despite their inadequacies, they still believe what Love and the Soul say and accept their statements as true. All of this serves to soften the *Mirror*'s more daring expressions. Therefore Marguerite defends her ideas by both explaining her concepts *and* pointing out her critics' inabilities.

The way in which these defences appear in the text is also telling. They are not presented and explained once, then left alone. Instead we see Marguerite raising these points repeatedly throughout the text. Reason queries them multiple times and Love or

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[45] These are some of the exact accusations that the *Mirror*'s critics would make against it later on; see below.

[46] Dubois also notes that Marguerite recognised the potential for controversy over her statement on the Virtues. Dubois, 'Natural and Supernatural Virtues', p.179, n. 14.

[47] Lerner, 'Ecstatic Dissent'.

[48] Bailey, 'Magic, Mysticism, and Heresy', pp. 64-66. This is not to say that the *Mirror*'s esotericism exists only as a defence, as it also plays into Marguerite's concepts of social and spiritual elitism, but merely that in these specific passages it also serves a defensive purpose. Jennifer Schuberth also notes the *Mirror*'s reliance on resisting interpretation, but characterises it more as defiant 'anti-interpretation rhetoric' aimed at resisting Church models of interpretation, rather than a defensive mechanism aimed at reconciling with such models. See Schuberth, 'Holy Church is Not Able to Recognise Her'.

the Soul repeat their explanations. Often these points reappear suddenly, with no connecting thread from the previous discussion. This may also be part of Marguerite's defence, repeating a point several times to solidify her argument and fix it in the audience's mind. It perhaps also indicates that Marguerite felt compelled to revisit these points multiple times during the composition process, prompted by repeated criticisms. Such a pattern also points toward the more haphazard process of composition and compilation suggested by Piron.

Defences Put to the Test

We know that at least three churchmen saw Marguerite's work as orthodox during her lifetime.[49] But in the end, of course, Marguerite's written defences did not save her. It has in the past been suggested that the presentation of these points to the Parisian theologians, as out-of-context passages, would have stripped these ideas of their defences and therefore made the *Mirror*'s condemnation almost a foregone conclusion.[50] We have no way of knowing for certain how the theologians came to their conclusion about the *Mirror*.[51] But, unlike Marguerite, the *Mirror* survived and went on to encounter many different readers across late medieval Europe in anonymous French, English, Latin, and Italian versions. Some of these readers left behind their own assessments of the *Mirror*, and commented on the same ideas and passages noted above. Two of these readers—the translator of the Middle English version and an anonymous canon lawyer who read a Latin version—will be the focus of the next section. These two readers offer ideal opportunities to examine how the *Mirror*'s defences were received when read in context.

The first reader to be examined is the Middle English translator of the *Mirror*. He (or she) is known only by the initials 'M.N.', which he appended on either end of the glosses he made to his translation, which is thought to have been completed in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century.[52] M.N. also provided a prologue, in which he tells us that he had already translated the *Mirror* out of French many years before, but was now doing it again because some of it had been 'mystake', either meaning misunderstood

[49] See above.
[50] For example Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, pp. 75-77; Epiney-Burgard and Zum Brunn, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*, trans. Sheila Hughes, pp. 144-146.
[51] A forthcoming article by Troy Tice casts some light on how Thomas of Bailly, one of the twenty-one theologians, may have approached Marguerite's text. See Tice, "'Containing Heresy and Errors'". See also Field's sketches of some of the theologians in Field, *Beguine, Angel, and Inquisitor*, pp.133-143.
[52] On debates over M.N.'s identity and some potential candidates, see Stauffer, 'Possibilities for the Identity of the English Translator', pp. 264-292.

or taken amiss.[53] He confesses that he is uneasy about the task, since the *Mirror* speaks of 'high divine matters' and is expressed in mysterious and impenetrable language.[54] In order to make sure that its words are not 'mistaken' again, M.N. appends glosses to certain passages in order to explain them more fully. In this, we see a reflection of Marguerite's own warnings about readers being unable to understand what the *Mirror* is saying. This similarity continues in M.N.'s glosses.

Like those involved in Marguerite's trial, M.N. singles out the *Mirror*'s statement on the Virtues, clearly seeing it as a point which needs clarification. Immediately after the Soul's declaration of freedom from the Virtues in Chapter 6, he states 'I am stirred here to say more on this matter'.[55] He then appends a lengthy gloss. When the Soul served the Virtues, he writes, she endured 'many sharp pains and bitterness of conscience' because serving the Virtues meant constant warring against the vices. This vigilance against vice was what kept her under the command of the Virtues, and at the outset of such striving 'it is often very sharp and hard.' But when she 'has deeply tasted' of divine Love once she experiences union, 'then the Soul is light and gladsome, for the sweet tastes of Love drive out from the Soul all pains and bitterness and all doubts and dreads.'[56] In this sense, when the Soul takes leave of the Virtues, she is really taking leave of the painful toil and thraldom which resulted from fending off vice. She is then the Lady of the Virtues, possessing and commanding them as her 'subjects'.[57]

What we see in this gloss is M.N. both repeating and adding to Marguerite's own defences. He re-states her explanation that the Virtues remain with and serve the Soul, but adds a 'backstory'. In this backstory, serving the Virtues is specifically couched in terms of warring against the vices; the Soul does this at the Virtues' command. It is this war which the Soul finds painful and exhausting, not necessarily the Virtues themselves. So, in a sense, M.N. lays the blame for the Soul's pain in servitude more at the door of the vices, rather than the Virtues themselves. Therefore, in M.N.'s telling, when the Soul joyously proclaims to be free from service to the Virtues, it is rejoicing more in being free from the onslaught of the vices. The Soul united to God has no need to war against the vices because they no longer pose a threat to her, and therefore in being freed from servitude to the Virtues she is also freed from the vices. This is arguably a safer representation of the Soul's spiritual transformation, wrapping it in more traditional

[53] *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 248.
[54] *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 248.
[55] *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 255.
[56] *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 255.
[57] *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, pp. 255-256.

images of fighting vice and championing virtue.[58] Such a portrayal more forcefully guards against impressions of licentiousness and immorality by making it explicit that those are the exact things which the Soul is leaving behind when it declares itself free from the Virtues.

M.N. takes a similar tack with the statement on giving to Nature all that it asks. His gloss first addresses the question of indifference to things like sermons, fasting, and prayer. First, he explains that the Soul united to God has no will nor desire, and therefore thinks on nothing that is beneath her state of union. But there is also another understanding, he writes. It is not that the united Soul abandons such actions entirely, but rather the *manner* in which she does them changes. She still performs these actions, but without any attachment or feeling for them of her own, because it is Love and God's will that works in her, rather than her own will.[59] These Souls are so rooted in God and God's will that 'they do nothing of [their] own…but God does all things that are good.'[60]

Notably, M.N. not only explains what is meant, but he makes an effort to directly counter any potential objections by explaining what is *not* meant. 'It should not,' he writes, 'be taken that they leave [pious activities] undone. He would be blind that took it in that way; but all words in this book must be taken spiritually and divinely'.[61] Then, in addressing the question of giving to Nature, he forcefully asserts: 'God forbid that anyone be so carnal as to think that it should mean to give to nature any lust that draws it to fleshly sin, for God knows well it is not so meant.'[62] This is followed by further exegesis: '…these souls…have been so mortified from such wretchedness, and so illumined with grace, and so arrayed with love of God, that it quenches all fleshly sin in them, and mightily drives down all bodily and spiritual temptations'.[63]

M.N.'s interaction with these concepts adds an interesting element to the story of the *Mirror*'s self-defence. On one level, it shows that M.N. agreed with Marguerite's own defence and explanation of these concepts. By re-translating the work and adding his glosses, he clearly believes the work to be of value and worth explaining to readers. His

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[58] It also echoes a line from the *Mirror* itself which occurs later, where Love states that the Soul 'makes war on the vices, by fostering virtues'. See *Mirror*, ed. Colledge et al, p. 64; *Mirouer/Speculum*, ed. Guarnieri and Verdeyen, p. 137; *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 289.
[59] *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 259. Kerby-Fulton comments that M.N. 'rescues' this passage by converting it to 'semi-Pelagianism'. *Books Under Suspicion*, p. 286. This 'detached' performance of pious activities is also found in Meister Eckhart. See for example his *Predigt* 1, in *Teacher and Preacher*, trans. and ed. McGinn, pp. 240-241, and his *Predigt* 2, in *Essential Sermons*, trans. and ed. Colledge and McGinn, pp. 178-179.
[60] *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 259.
[61] *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 259.
[62] *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 259.
[63] *Mirrour*, ed. Doiron, p. 259.

glosses essentially repeat the same explanations that Marguerite herself provided, although with a little extra detail and in a more direct manner. With the Virtues, he notes the Soul's 'mastery' and embodiment, rather than rejection, of them. Regarding conceding to Nature, he explicitly states that it does not involve anything which is illicit or forbidden, and commands the reader to understand things 'spiritually and divinely', not literally. Both explanations are already found in the *Mirror*, as we have seen, but M.N. addresses the issue more directly.[64] In this sense, M.N. himself is comfortable with how these concepts are presented and explained. This is not to say, however, that M.N. did not feel any unease whatsoever about the text.[65] The very fact that M.N. penned his glosses indicates that the existing defences in the *Mirror* were not entirely effective. That is, M.N. himself accepted how these points were presented, but other readers might not have, as suggested by his first translation being 'mistaken' by some. His efforts, then, add another layer of defence to the *Mirror*'s already in-built defences.

In addition to layering Marguerite's own explanations, M.N. also reflects her most basic and essential defence: the *Mirror*'s inscrutability. By admonishing readers against literal or, worse, 'fleshly' interpretations of its words, and urging them to take them 'spiritually and divinely', M.N., like Marguerite, places the reader's own inadequate understanding as the culprit of error, rather than any inherent error within the *Mirror* itself. The very existence of his glosses also attests to this, as they are a signal to the reader that one's initial or unsophisticated understanding of the *Mirror* will not necessarily provide a beneficial reading of its words.

While M.N. does represent weaknesses of the *Mirror*'s defences, overall he is an example of their success. He is aware of the risks that might come with its words, but he accepts the explanations of its more controversial points and merely adds further clarification. The next reader to be examined, however, could not have been more different.

Sometime before 1317, a canon lawyer—whose identity for now is unknown—read through the *Mirror* and sat down to write his assessment of it.[66] It was not a friendly exercise. Working from a full copy of the text, he selected thirty-five passages from a

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[64] Marleen Cré notes that M.N.'s glosses are 'interpretive rather than corrective', in that they clarify the trickier parts of the *Mirror* by relying on its own internal textual evidence. Cré, 'Further Thoughts on M.N.'s Translation', p. 256.

[65] Kerby-Fulton notes M.N.'s sense of 'panic' and his 'defensive tone' when glossing some of the *Mirror*'s more provocative passages. *Books Under Suspicion*, p. 282-290.

[66] It is not yet known how or why the canon lawyer came to pen his attack on the *Mirror*, but it is possible that he did it as a formal commission.

Latin *Mirror* and wrote lengthy refutations of each extract.[67] The result is a polemical treatise which both rebuts the *Mirror*'s main ideas and paints the book itself as the diabolical musings of an anonymous evil heretic.[68] Included in his thirty-five extracts are the *Mirror*'s statements on the Virtues and the passage on conceding to Nature. As will become clear, Marguerite's defences had little effect on his opinions and, in some cases, the defences themselves became the target of his ire.

The *Mirror*'s statement on the Virtues was a particularly disturbing point for the polemical author. He interprets it literally, in exactly the manner that Marguerite and M.N. did not want it to be interpreted: that by rejecting the Virtues the Soul has turned away from goodness in order to embrace vice. 'When virtue is renounced, vice is immediately admitted', he writes directly after quoting the passage from the *Mirror*'s Chapter 6.[69] This characterises his entire take on the matter, and it colours his view of the *Mirror* as a whole. In the author's opinion, if the Soul has receded from the Virtues, then nothing else that it does can be rooted in goodness; it must by default be motivated by base desires. Receding from the Virtues means being manured with the 'dung of the vices' (*stercore vitiorum*) and receding from obedience to the commandments of God, which therefore means turning towards evil.[70] In dealing with this concept, the polemicist makes a direct attack on the very passages which Marguerite used as a defence: the clarification from Chapter 8, in which she explains that the Soul merely does not have the *use* of the Virtues, but she still possesses and embodies them. Unsurprisingly, the author did not find this convincing. 'To him who knows to do good and does it not, it is for him a sin', he writes, quoting James 4.17.[71] Either one lives temperately with the use of the virtues, or intemperately without them. If intemperately, one is therefore full of vice; there is no middle ground. 'It is not possible to do good except by being driven virtuously', he writes.[72] The Soul's recession from the Virtues means a recession from its own salvation, since giving up on the Virtues means giving up on the commandments of God, which are necessary to salvation.[73]

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[67] The text is found in Padua, Biblioteca universitaria, MS 1647, ff. 215v-221v. It survives only in a fifteenth-century copy, but was probably originally written before 1317. For an overview of the text's structure and its potential origins see Trombley, 'New Evidence on the Origins of the Latin *Mirror of Simple Souls*', pp. 137-152.
[68] On the author's techniques and use of common anti-heretical tropes, see Trombley, 'Text as Heretic'.
[69] MS 1647, f. 216rb. 'Cum renuntiatur uirtuti statim uitum asciscitur'. This is an inversion of a passage from Gratian's Causa 32. See Gratian, C. 32 q. 1 c. 9, *Decretum Gratiani*, ed. Friedberg, c. 1117. All translations from MS 1647 are my own unless otherwise noted.
[70] MS 1647, f. 218rb and 216rb.
[71] MS 1647, f. 216va. 'Scienti bene facere et non facienti, pecatum est illi.'
[72] MS 1647, f. 216vb. 'non posse fieri bonum nisi uirtuouse agendo'.
[73] MS 1647, f. 216vb.

This view of the *Mirror*'s statement on the Virtues blends into the polemicist's take on the passage about conceding to Nature. Man's nature belongs to the 'lower part' (*inferiorem partem*), which is sensuality, and sensuality inclines man to brutishness. 'For one wants to eat and drink, to sleep, to luxuriate, unless he is restrained by the judgment of reason, which according to this author the Simple Soul has thrust away from itself.'[74] He is just as unmoved by the explanations the *Mirror* provides on this point. In fact, he finds the defence itself to be what gives away the Soul's 'true' intentions. 'And so that it does not seem to have erred, it excuses itself,' he writes. 'Why was it necessary to say "without remorse of conscience", since in lawful things remorse of conscience has no place?'[75] In fact, he writes, the Soul instead desired that which was *not* lawful, since it wanted to separate from the goodness of the Virtues:

> If this Soul was by the grace of God so well ordered in itself as to not ask [for anything] except that which is lawful in the highest degree, as it said, without a doubt it would neither have taken itself away from obedience to the Virtues nor separated [from them] without remorse of its own conscience, because in something that is lawful one does not have a place for remorse of conscience, as was said. Therefore let those be silent who try to defend this error on account of this little line: "But yet such a soul, et cetera". Beware, for he has set this to spring his trap. For, according to the Blessed Leo: 'How else are heretics able to deceive the simple except with poisoned cups smeared with some honey, lest those things which are wholly meant to be deadly might be detected by their sour taste?'[76]

Therefore, by insisting that it means nothing improper, the Simple Soul, to the polemical author, 'protests too much'. It betrays the Soul's desire for illicit things, and also tries to deceive the reader into thinking it is innocuous with the 'honey' of an explanation. The defence becomes the condemning evidence.

This also happens with Marguerite's other defence, that Reason's inadequacy will keep readers from properly understanding her words. Rejecting Reason is taken as further proof of the *Mirror*'s error. Such a rejection means the Simple Souls are similar to beasts

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[74] MS 1647, f. 217rb. 'Uult enim comedere et bibere, dormire, luxuriari, nisi refrenetur iuditio rationis, quam secundum istum auctorem anima simplex a se repulit.'
[75] MS 1647, f. 217rb. 'Et ne uideatur errasse se excusat, dicens "sed tamen tallis natura est"?' 'Quid neccessarie fuit dicere "sine remorsu conscientie", cum in re licita non habet locum remorsus conscientie?'
[76] MS 1647, 217ra. 'Si ista anima dei gratia esset tantum in se ordinata ut non requiererit nisi summe licitum, ut iste dicit, procul dubio nec subtraxisset se obedientie uirtutum nec disisset sine remorsu proprie conscientie, quia in re licita non habet locum remorsu conscientie proprie ut dictum est. Sileant ergo qui conantur hunc errorem defendere propter illum uersiculum: "Sed tamen tallis anima, et cetera". Caute, enim posuit illum ad comprehendens decipulam suam. Quomodo enim, secundum Beatum Leonem, "possent heretici decipere simplices nisi uenenata pocula quodam mele prelinirent, ne usquequaque sentirentur insuauia que essent futura mortifera"?' The quotation is from Leo the Great's letter to Turibius. See *Leo the Great*, ed. and trans. Neil, p. 91.

(*bruta*), because separation from Reason means sinking into sensuality, by which only beasts are ruled.[77] The 'blind evil spirit' (*non uidens malignus spiritus*) of the Simple Soul defends itself by saying that what it speaks of is beyond all human senses. But, the author notes, if the Simple Soul advocates for abandoning scripture and the doctrines of the saints and the entire church, this means that 'we would henceforth adhere to this evil spirit' (*adhereamus hinc maligno spirito*) who has a 'deranged intellect' (*insanum intelectum*).[78] 'It is similar', he writes, 'to that defence of the sect of Mohammed, which says that one ought to fight with the sword, not with the reasons of the Scriptures. But we say one ought to win with Reason, not the sword.'[79] Reason, rather than being an impediment to divine understanding, is for this author an essential component. As the higher part of man's nature, it is what keeps the soul from straying into sensuality. Departing from Reason and the Virtues are acts that must of necessity lead to madness and licentiousness, allowing the lower part of man's nature to rule. Therefore, by making rejection of Reason necessary to understanding its main arguments, in this case the *Mirror*, rather than being shored up against criticisms, is in fact left vulnerable to them.

Conclusion

As we have seen above, while Marguerite Porete did not write a formal written defence directly addressed to her critics, she did attempt to defend and explain her more controversial ideas within the *Mirror* itself. Examining these defences and how later readers interacted with them provides a few new insights into Marguerite's composition of the *Mirror* and its later reception.

First, it is clear that Marguerite made attempts at self-defence in her text in places other than Chapters 123-139. The above passages show repeated attempts to clarify, but also to defend and justify her ideas by trying to link any dismay or shock that her statements may have produced to her readers' inadequate understanding. The disjointed presentation of these defences—appearing several different times in the text, sometimes with an abrupt change of subject—indicates both an ongoing and perhaps sporadic composition process in which Marguerite felt the need to revisit these points and repeat her explanations. It is entirely possible that such revisiting was the result of criticism that

[77] MS 1647, f. 216vb.
[78] MS 1647, f. 216vb.
[79] MS 1647, f. 216vb. 'Similis est ista defensio secti machometi, qui dicit pugnandum esse ferro, non rationibus scripturarum. Nos autem dicimus ratione uincendum non ferro.'

she encountered over the course of writing the *Mirror*, and not just in reaction to the condemnation in Valenciennes.

We can also see that the *Mirror*'s defences could both succeed and fail. The *Mirror*'s two condemnations and Marguerite's trial are obvious failures. The trial context, however, has been seen as an 'unfair' failure, in the sense that the theologians who condemned the *Mirror* were only given extracts, and therefore given its most controversial passages with none of the accompanying defences and explanations, making it inevitable that it would be found heretical. M.N.'s positive perception of these points seems to reinforce this, as he clearly did not find them heretical, but felt they merely needed further clarification. But, almost paradoxically, M.N.'s glosses also demonstrate the weaknesses of the *Mirror*'s defences. M.N. himself did not find them heretical, but he clearly saw that they could cause trouble for others. He therefore layered on another defence in order to ward against such trouble.

The Paduan polemical treatise is, of course, a more obvious example of failure, and in fact provides a more detailed case than the condemnation from the theologians. Here, the author did read the more controversial passages in context, along with their explanations, and came to the exact same conclusion as those who passed judgment in 1310. What is more, not only did the explanations have no effect on him, but he seized on them as errors in and of themselves, and turned them against the *Mirror* as further proof of its 'folly'. This is a useful reminder that the theologians' judgment of the *Mirror* in 1310 could still have gone against it even if they had been allowed to peruse it in full.

In terms of its later readers, part of this mixture of success and failure stems from the worlds which they each inhabited. M.N., if he was not a Carthusian himself, was in all likelihood associated with a Carthusian milieu.[80] He inhabited a spiritual environment that was relatively friendly to the type of esoteric, complicated mystical expression that the *Mirror* certainly represents.[81] Conversely, the polemical author's response represents a clash between fundamentally different world outlooks. While we do not yet know specifically who the author of the polemical treatise was, it is almost certain that he was a canon lawyer. He read the *Mirror* at face value and inhabited a world firmly rooted in logic and reason, the exact opposite worldview to what Marguerite said was required to properly understand her words.

[80] On this context see Marleen Cré, *Vernacular Mysticism in the Charterhouse*.
[81] Cré, 'Further Thoughts', pp. 243-248.

This exemplifies both the benefits and the difficulties of mounting a defence in the mystical and intellectual spheres. Orthodoxy or heresy could hinge on a text being read in 'the right way'. The above examples highlight just how little consensus there was over what 'the right way' entailed.[82] This is a defining characteristic of many of the mystical controversies which took place over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[83] Defence depended on asserting the supremacy of one interpretation over another, and how generous or flexible the audience was in its perceptions. It is of course common knowledge that there was great ambiguity between heresy and orthodoxy. When it came to self-defence, such ambiguity could be a double-edged sword. One's explanation or defence of their ideas, and whether or not these were successful, could depend entirely on whom they were being explained to. Ambiguity could be as much of a weakness as a strength, allowing opponents to dismantle the target as much as allow its supporters to defend it. The examples of M.N. and the polemicist reveal that, by defending her ideas, Marguerite Porete provided her readers both with tools that could shield her work, and with weapons that could tear it apart.

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[82] As Michael Bailey has pointed out, the Church was well aware of the difficulties presented by these ambiguities. Bailey, 'Magic, Mysticism, and Heresy', pp. 74-75.
[83] In the case of mysticism, Lerner's *Heresy of the Free Spirit* remains an excellent summary of the 'predicament of the mystics'. See Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, pp. 182-227.

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