

Historical Fiction



Philadelphia

EUGENIE FREED

University of the Witwatersrand

The historical Marguerite Porete, condemned as a heretic, was burned at the stake on 1 June 1310, in the Place de Grève in Paris. Guiard de Cressonessart, who claimed to be the Angel of Philadelphia and her 'defender', was sentenced at the same time to perpetual imprisonment. Despite its official suppression, Marguerite's *The Mirror of Simple Souls* survived as an anonymous mystical text, and was translated during the fourteenth century into English, Italian and Latin versions. In 1946, over six centuries after Marguerite's death, her authorship of the work was finally established by an Italian scholar, Romana Guarneri.

*What is man, that thou art mindful of him? . . .
For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels . . .
to have dominion over the works of thy hands . . .*

(Psalm 8: 4– 6)

My cell measures three paces by four. It is dark and dank, and I share it with rats. I scarcely see natural light in the daytime, and I am not indulged with a lamp to drive back the darkness during the long nights.

For almost five years, both before and since the trial, I have been incarcerated beneath the court-rooms of the Grand Châtelet – and, for the first year and a half of that time, so was she. The law-courts, as well as the dungeons beneath them, stink always of dried blood from the surrounding *abattoirs*, their stench mingling with the foul effluent from sewers nearby that pour the city's filth into the Seine. Night and day we who are confined here are forced to breathe in these noxious fumes. Those few of my beghard brethren who have visited me in this

prison, and the sister *beguines*^{*} who tried to sustain her with their love while she was kept here, bound up their noses and mouths and carried bunches of strong-smelling herbs, yet they gagged. As for me, I need no nosegay, for my sense no longer discerns the vile odours.

Today, the first day of June, in the year of our Lord thirteen hundred and thirteen, marks three years since I saw her for the last time. On that day my broken body lay prostrated in the slime covering the floor of this cell. I knew not whether it was day or night, nor did I care. Yet, when I heard footsteps and voices approaching, I knew she was nigh . . . and I compelled my limbs to bear me, so that I could I crawl to the door. I laboured to raise my head to the grate, hoping to catch a glimpse of her – for we had so long been kept apart! She moved as though in a trance. Two jailers held her, one gripping each arm – though God knows, she offered no resistance. Gil, the head jailer, walked ahead, holding a lamp.

Were they dragging her? What had been done to her in the bowels of the *Châtelet*?

As the lamp-light fell on her face, I cried: ‘*Marguerite!*’ My voice was hoarse, unrecognizable, from grief, and from my final encounter with the hooded spectres. Pray God she had not met with them! But she lifted her head – and though it was impossible that she could have seen me, she smiled. Even now I see her face, glowing in the lamplight. A lock of dark hair, streaked with grey, had fallen from the head-covering she still wore; it trailed across her brow. But her countenance was composed, lit from within by perfect love, in perfect peace. I did not deserve that look, but she gave it me, and my memory has cherished it ever since. I never saw her again.

* * *

I no longer recall on which day I met her, nor whether I saw her first in the flesh or in a vision. It happened fourteen years after I had joined the *beghard* brotherhood. She had come from *Valenciennes* in *Hainaut*, her birthplace, to Paris. She was living in the *beguinage* that the saintly King Louis the Ninth had raised alongside the old city-wall

* ‘*Beguines*’ were religious women who devoted themselves to caring for the poor. Some lived in communities, others did not. They did not take monastic vows, and were free to return to secular life if they so wished, and to marry and bear children, though it was understood that they would remain chaste while serving as ‘*beguines*’. Religious men who made the same choice of lifestyle were known as ‘*beghards*’.

in the rue des Barrés. Both of us served the community of Saint-Paul, in the Marais, but we had not yet met.

Passing through a narrow alley-way one day, I glimpsed a face, surrounded by the gauzy head-covering of a beguine, the veil tied beneath the chin. Only a face: for a moment I imagined it framed by dark hair hidden beneath the veil. That radiant oval countenance seemed to float towards me through the air – dark eyes, pink cheeks unlined, smiling rosy lips: a woman of mature age with the face of a young girl, and the demeanour of one disposed only to do good to her fellow-creatures. In a moment it vanished, so suddenly that I wondered: did such a woman actually walk towards me, or did my fancy create her?

That night I dreamed of her. She wore a white headdress and her form was hidden in a beguine's ample black robe. All I could see was that face, smiling upon me, and upon all mankind. I was woken from that dream by a brilliant light. Half asleep, all amazed, I saw radiance – so dazzling that I had to shield my eyes with my hand – emanating from a being at the foot of my bed.

I gasped: 'Who are you?'

The spirit replied, not in a voice, but in words that entered my mind: 'Guiard of Cressonessart, the time has come for you to know who you are, and what God wills you should do.'

'Who am I, then?' I cried. 'Am I not Guiard? Only tell me God's will!'

'Tomorrow, go pray in the Saint-Chapelle. There you will be told.'

The light faded and was gone in an instant. My chamber door flew open; I rose to peer about in the dark outside, but no one was there. Yet when I closed the door, it opened again of itself; I could not keep it shut, try as I might. I lay in the shadows, wide-eyed, and sleepless, marvelling at this visitation.

At dawn I hastened across the Grand-Pont to the Isle de la Cité and the Sainte-Chapelle. Entering the lower chapel, I knelt before the altar between pointed arches, where the morning light streamed in through many-coloured windows. I entreated the Lord, of his grace, to reveal the meaning of my dream. And in the same manner as on the previous night, there came to me these solemn words, imprinted forever within my heart.

'Guiard: you are that Angel of Philadelphia of whom I told my

servant John on the isle of Patmos.[†] I set before you an open door, that no man can close; I will make you a pillar in the temple of God. Your task is to defend the oppressed. Especially I charge you, in the spirit of the brotherly love you embody, to protect the beguine Marguerite, and to help her deliver the message the Lord sends through her to mankind.'

Next day I did indeed meet with her.

I had gone with my brother beghards to our hospice, to minister to a dying man. As I entered the dormitory where he lay, I saw her at the other end of the room, tipping water from a bottle between the parched lips of another invalid. Her face, encircled by the white veil of the beguines, seemed to give out light, as when I had seen it in the alleyway two days earlier. A shining ray fell upon the ailing man, and surely, for the moment, relieved his pain. His thirst satisfied, she corked the bottle, and raised her head.

At that moment the sick man on the pallet before me thrashed about, choking in his death throes. I fell to my knees, murmuring the Lord's Prayer, holding the consecrated wine to his lips. He could not respond. In a short time he gave up the ghost – but as his spirit departed, his features glowed for a moment with a wondrous light. I believe he died a sanctified death, in the reflected radiance proceeding from her.

We met on the arching cobblestones of the lane outside the hospital. The chill wind whipped at her veil as I ventured to speak:

'Pardon me, sister: I saw you at the hospice. I am of the beghard brethren.'

I gestured towards the habit I wore.

'I am called Guiard de Cressonessart. May I know your name?'

She stopped to look up at me, raising one arm to secure the windswept veil. Her movement gave a hint that a woman's body was hidden beneath the fullness of her black mantle. Her voice was low and warm:

'In God's name I greet you, brother Guiard. I am called Marguerite Porete. Yes, I was at the hospital, but I return now to the beguine; my work awaits me.'

'May I know what your task is?'

[†] Revelation 3: 7–13.

She hesitated a moment; then—

‘Some years ago our gracious Lord began to reveal to me a path of spiritual guidance for the Christian soul. It has been my sacred task to set this down, in a book. That is my occupation.’

She bobbed her head, as in salutation, re-tied her veil beneath her chin, and was gone.

I was left standing in that windy passage, awed by the wonderful ways of the Lord. For it was clear that the duty assigned me was both to protect Marguerite from harm, and to help her to distribute this book.

Now I had to gain her confidence.

* * *

My first attempt to make my calling known to Marguerite was inauspicious. The black-robed bulk of an elderly door-keeper barred me from entering the beguinage.

‘Marguerite Porete is at work, and may not be disturbed.’

‘I come to assist her in her labours, not to disturb them.’

The lady glowered at me, sniffed and turned away. I lingered till sunset, then as the shadow of the old city wall engulfed the rue des Barrés, I went away. Early next morning I was back, braving the cold wind and the icy glances of the concierge, who poked her head out from time to time to see whether I was still there. At noon Marguerite emerged, with three other beguines.

I placed myself in her way.

‘Dame Marguerite – my sister, I must speak with you.’

‘Of what, brother?’

‘Of a matter of importance that concerns us both.’

Her brow creased for a moment. The other beguines paused, the oldest one frowning at me severely. Marguerite, standing before me in the street, had a scent about her like that of clean linen, or a meadow in summer. She seemed so little, so frail; but beneath the apparent fragility, I sensed even in that heady moment the strength that sustained her. She tilted her head back to speak to me.

‘Is this a spiritual matter, brother Guiard, that you say concerns you and me?’

‘It is; I would speak with you apart.’

She glanced at her three companions, then back at me; then she spoke decisively:

‘Go, my sisters, I will follow.’

They walked away, the older beguine turning back to glare at me as they turned the corner.

Marguerite pointed to the wooden bench against the wall of the beguinage, where I had been waiting. We sat down, and haltingly I began to tell her that which I scarcely dared to divulge: how I had been sent to pray at the Saint Chapelle, and what the Lord had revealed to me there.

Only then did I become fully assured of the truth of my vision: for she listened to my story, and believed me. She made me repeat the sequence of events. Then, she questioned me; had I ever before had such a revelation? And I told her how the Lord had spoken to me in my youth, asking me to serve him, and how I had left the life of wealth and ease into which I had been born in order to live as a beghard, ministering to the poor. It was enthralling to watch her face as successive emotions passed over it: first bewilderment, perhaps doubt; then sober thought, and finally that miraculous smile returned, its warm light flowing from the deep wellspring of goodness within her being.

‘Brother Guiard, I too have been favoured. Like you, I am of noble blood, and was well nurtured as a child; but at the age of fifteen, I was called by the Lord to cast aside my worldly privileges and become a beguine. Teaching is my vocation, and serving the poor and needy.’

She spoke slowly and thoughtfully:

‘If you are appointed my protector, brother Guiard, I thank the Lord for providing me with such defence. By the grace of God I completed the writing of this book three years ago, and now I am engaged in sending it out into the world.’

She looked down, smiling modestly.

‘Doctor Godefroy de Fontaines, a celebrated scholar of the Sorbonne, has approved its teachings.’

Raising her head, she added:

‘I will surely be in need of your support, in brotherly love; for some will question that which God has made manifest to me in the teachings of Love.’

‘How name you this book?’

'The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls and those who only remain in Will and Desire of Love.'

She smiled at my perplexity.

'More shortly, it is known as *The Mirror of Simple Souls*.'

'When may I read it?'

'Soon. My young sister-beguine Annette is engaged in making copies. I wrote in French, that the unlettered folk we serve can the more easily receive its message. Next week I will have a copy to lend you.'

On the night of the day I received her book, my lamp burned through the hours of darkness. I read aloud the dialogue of the Soul with Love, and Love's debate with Reason. I sang with Holy Church in praise of the Soul liberated from the will:

You live completely by the kernel,
 who no longer has will,
 And those live by straw and by chaff
 and gross silage,
 Who have retained the practice
 of human will.
 Such folk are servants of the law,
 But this Soul is above the law,
 Not contrary to the law . . .
 God is in her will.[‡]

I fancied I heard Marguerite's low voice, resonant with conviction. Often I had to break off reading, my mind wrestling to grasp this kernel of wisdom she offered: to unite itself with God's Will, the Soul must transcend Reason, giving up any will of its own – until, having relinquished everything but God, the 'Annihilated Soul' liberates itself through Love.

I was profoundly moved, indeed stunned, by these teachings. I felt a deep reverence for Marguerite, though I also feared for her. Surely she needed protection: the earthly Church would not look kindly on a doctrine that strove to liberate the soul so that it no longer required the Church's ministrations.

[‡] Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen L. Babinsky (New York, 1993), p. 196 (chapter 121).

When next I saw her, radiating peace and holiness amongst the sick and dying, I fell on my knees and kissed the dusty hem of her garment. She smiled but moved on, intent upon her work of mercy.

* * *

It was in the spring that I received Marguerite's note: 'Brother Guiard, I must speak with you; come as soon as you can.'

I hastened to the rue des Barrés, where the gate-keeper glared at me, but admitted me to a common-room furnished with plain wooden chairs and a bare table bearing a glass filled with white daisies. When Marguerite came down, her face was serene, but her tidings were disturbing.

'I sent copies of my book to friends in Valenciennes and Cambrai, because I longed to share its message with those dear to me, amongst whom I lived when the Lord first revealed my vocation to me. The Bishop of Cambrai obtained a copy, and has condemned it.'

I drew my breath in sharply; this was what I had feared.

'The Bishop has declared my book heretical, claiming it is yet more reprehensible because, being written in French, no priest is needed to interpret it.'

Marguerite's brow furrowed.

'I have received a letter from his lordship of Cambrai.'

She produced the parchment with its broken red wax seal from a pocket in her robe. I read through the pompous Latin with growing disquiet.

'I, Guy de Colmieu, Bishop of Cambrai, declare that my duty as a guardian of the Church requires me to inform Marguerite Porete that her book known as *The Mirror of Simple Souls* contains serious errors of Christian doctrine. Hereby I proclaim that every copy of this book in my diocese be brought to me for public burning, before the church of Saint-Géry in Valenciennes. The said Marguerite Porete is commanded to be there present to witness this act. She is forbidden to make or disseminate any further copies of this book, or to teach the doctrines contained therein.'

'My sister, what will you do?'

'I will go to Valenciennes, I have no choice; the Bishop has sent his lackeys to fetch me. But, brother, I vow before you, and before God, that I will continue to distribute my work. Our Lord is mightier than any Bishop, and he himself imposed this task upon me. I accepted it

gladly then, and I will not withdraw now. The learned Godefroy de Fontaines sanctioned this work – and other scholars have too. *The Mirror of Simple Souls* will not be suppressed by a Bishop whose head is like a block of wood.’

‘But, sister, surely you know what is likely to follow the burning of a book!’

‘I do. But I know too that our Lord bade me spread his word abroad, and I cannot deny him.’

‘Then I will go with you to Valenciennes.’

‘How will you travel, my brother? You cannot be seen to escort me. Annette has undertaken to bear me company.’

‘I will ride behind, at a distance. I too have made my commitment to our Lord.’

She smiled at me.

‘It will give me courage to know you are nearby.’

* * *

In Valenciennes, the Bishop housed Marguerite and Annette in a tall, narrow town-house. A couple of hulking fellows wearing the Bishop’s livery loitered constantly about it. I lodged nearby, though not daring to show myself, lest my presence inflame her situation. But she knew I was close at hand.

Preparations in the church square of Saint-Géry started the morning after our arrival. While the Bishop’s servants piled bundles of faggots in layers in the shadow of the church, a crowd began to gather around its twelve stone pillars, symbolic of Christ’s apostles. However, the pyre was small, only three layers high; and when the Bishop’s men began to carry out books and lay them open, face downwards, over the firewood, most of the mob dispersed. A conflagration of inanimate writings was not nearly so well worth watching as the roasting of a live heretic. So when at noon the Bishop himself mounted the pulpit set up before the church, his audience comprised only Marguerite and Annette, their two guardians, the manservants who were to tend the fire, a few inquisitive children and myself, lurking behind an apostolic pillar. Had the Lord not declared he would make me a pillar in God’s temple? From my vantage-point I watched both Marguerite and the Bishop, hoping he did not see me.

The spade-like beard of Bishop Guy de Colmieux did not confine itself to his chin, but also sprouted plentifully from his ears and

nostrils. His face looked more apelike than human under his white mitre as he set about condemning *The Mirror of Simple Souls* to this sparse audience.

‘The books upon this pyre,’ he intoned, ‘are crammed with errors and heresies, so many and so wicked, they cannot be numbered or spoken of.’

He glowered at Marguerite under bushy grey eyebrows.

‘In committing these cursèd writings to the flames,’ he declaimed, ‘the Church cleanses itself of such vile profanations.’

The crackle and smell of burning straw and the reek of singeing parchment-skins began to waft through the square. The Bishop cried hoarsely:

‘Thus does our careful mother the Church purge iniquity!’

The pyre sputtered and smoked. Marguerite the author, who had invested her whole being in these writings, and Annette the scribe, whose painstaking work these copies were, watched in bitter silence as the flames reduced their labours to charred fragments.

Marguerite turned away. The look on her face declared plainly her iron determination that this would not be the end.

* * *

They came to fetch me by night.

Weary from travel, I was sleeping heavily when I was woken by a thunderous hammering at the door. It gave way and fell inwards almost immediately. They rushed towards me. How many, and who they were, I cannot say. As rough hands grasped me, another man appeared in the doorway, evidently directing the operation. He wore a livery whose device I did not recognize.

‘Put on your clothes!’ he commanded.

‘What is this? Who are you?’

‘I am Patrice de Montours, envoy to Guillaume de Baufet, Bishop of Paris.’

‘Why do you break into my lodging?’

‘Aha, *Monsieur le beghard*, that you will learn in good time. Get dressed!’

One of my captors ripped my habit from its hook in the wall, rolled it into a ball, and threw it at me. I struggled to put the garment on, but when I tried to fasten the rope-girdle about my waist, they jerked it

away and used it to truss my wrists together.

‘Why do you bind me? I have committed no crime!’

Patrice de Montours raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

They half-dragged me through dark streets. As dawn was breaking, I caught my first glimpse of the Grand Châtelet, its towers catching the light of the autumnal sunrise. And as my abductors hauled me towards it, my nose caught for the first time that stench that never abates. Stumbling through the grand arch at the entrance to the Châtelet, gagging at the all-pervading smell, a foreboding seized me that I might never leave this place.

I was flung into a cell. For hours, no one came. I peered through the grate in the door: no sign of life. I called, yelled, beat the door with my fists: nothing happened. I had slumped in a corner, exhausted, when at last the door opened, and there stood Patrice de Montours, all supercilious disdain.

‘Why am I here? I have done nothing to deserve imprisonment – without trial or explanation! Let me go, this moment!’

‘Softly, softly, *Monsieur!* Tell me, my friend, are you acquainted with the beguine Marguerite Porete?’

‘We beghards are committed to the same cause as the beguines, of relieving the poor. I have worked beside Marguerite Porete in the Marais.’

‘Are you aware that she has been disseminating serious doctrinal errors?’

‘Errors? Her teachings have the approbation of renowned scholars!’

‘You have been distributing copies of her book, even after it was publicly condemned and solemnly burned in Valenciennes by the Lord Bishop of Cambrai. Only yesterday you delivered a copy to Châlons-sur-Marne, to the Bishop.’

Did he know how many other copies I had given out amongst my beghard brethren and our followers?

‘I am bound to aid and protect Marguerite Porete.’

‘And who assigned this task to you?’

‘I was divinely appointed.’

‘Divinely appointed, no less! Did not our good Lord reveal to you the earthly consequences of propagating heresies?’

I said nothing.

‘The beguine is in custody; she will have to answer to a court, and so will you.’

* * *

At first, interrogations. There were two interrogators, both sporting the same livery as Patrice de Montours. The first was red-faced, loud-voiced, and always angry, the other softly-spoken and seemingly concerned about my well-being, though deaf to my repeated demand to be removed from this stinking, slimy cell. They alternated. Each in his own manner tried to pry from me any scrap of information concerning Marguerite’s life, her writings, her circle of acquaintance. I refused to answer their questions.

The red-faced one yelled: ‘Obstinate mule! You will pay for this!’

The apparently sympathetic one pleaded with me.

‘But a few words from you will assist the Inquisitor, and save you much suffering,’ he wheedled.

‘The Inquisitor? Who is that?’

‘The Bishop of Paris.’

‘Give me word of how the beguine fares.’

‘I understand your concern . . . do you wish to send her a message?’ my sympathetic interlocutor enquired.

I was not so imprudent as to accept this offer.

Gil the jailer told me that the same two interrogators were alternately visiting Marguerite in her cell.

So she and I were being worked like marionettes in a grim puppet-show. I resorted to keeping silent.

The angry questioner arrived with a brace of jailers. They bound my wrists, fettered me, and forced me to lurch down flight after flight of dark stairs.

‘Where are you taking me?’

The red-faced one smiled; a fearsome sight, for I had never seen him smile before.

‘We will show you a place where stubborn mules become more eloquent than Balaam’s ass!’[§]

[§] Numbers 22: 21–34.

At the end of a winding underground passage, he unlocked an iron door. The jailers thrust me through it.

I staggered into a cavernous stone-walled chamber, the surfaces of its walls and ceiling alternately recessed and protruding. A furnace glowing in one corner, covered by a heavy grate, made the place uncomfortably warm. Its stinking atmosphere seemed compounded of pain, fear, and human excrement. A large rat darted over my feet. Flickering torches cast shadows upon a rope and pulley, hanging from an iron hook embedded in the ceiling. Suspended from it was the naked body of a man, hung by his wrists, which had been tied behind his back. Two masked black-hooded servitors were jerking on the rope, raising and lowering it. With each jolt, the victim yelped like a tormented dog; piss dripping down his legs puddled on the stone floor. Another man, also naked, was bound head-downwards to a T-shaped wooden structure fastened to one wall: arms roped to his sides, legs apart, feet fastened to the ends of the horizontal cross-bar. A continuous low groaning came from the open mouth in his purple face, though he seemed also to be trying to form words. The hooded ones loosened his bonds and lowered him to the floor. A neatly tonsured clerk in a monk's habit, seated at a small desk nearby, dipped his quill-pen into an inkwell, and began writing.

Behind the clerk's desk, in an arm-chair on an elevated platform, sat another man, neither masked nor hooded, wearing a bishop's cassock and mitre, a heavy silver cross about his neck. Covering his nose and mouth with a cloth, he watched the clerk intently. He did not look at the naked creature on the floor. Then he lifted the cloth and yawned: in that instant, to my dazed eyes he looked like a slaving wolf.

With my bound hands, I tried to point; unable to speak, I wanted to know who that cleric was.

'Ah, the Inquisitor,' said my red-faced escort. 'Guillaume de Baufet, Bishop of Paris.'

I retched.

My companion responded with a rattling gurgle that might have been laughter.

'Take him upstairs.'

* * *

The next time I was shoved into the inferno hidden beneath the law-courts, I was no longer an observer.

The masked servitors in their black hoods dealt with me as they had been instructed. After two days, so I was told, I confessed my errors, even those of which I knew nothing, and renounced whatever the Inquisitor required. All was recorded in impeccable Latin, in neat script, by the clerk in that black hole, but I have no memory of what was done or what I said.

Afterwards, I was dragged back to the surface of the earth, heaved into a court-room in the Châtelet, and tried. Since I had confessed so freely, the Inquisitor in his mercy sentenced me only to this perpetual imprisonment, which I will enjoy until Death relieves me.

I was desperate to know what had become of Marguerite. My only hope was Gil, who appeared to have some sympathy for me. Late in the summer of 1310 he paid me a visit in my cell, and seemed inclined to be expansive.

‘Tell me, what happened to the beguine?’

Gil stroked his chin.

‘Marguerite was stubborn. She persisted in her obstinacy under all circumstances.’

‘Was she tortured?’

‘She would not renounce her errors. Even when offered free absolution.’

‘But was she tortured?’

‘She refused steadfastly to take the oath before the court, and remained silent when questioned.’

‘Is she in prison, then?’

Gil shook his head.

I groaned, and began to weep. Gil watched me for a moment.

‘She met her death courageously, she was calm and dignified to the end,’ he said. ‘Many folk in the Place de Grève were moved to tears.’

* * *

I share my cell with rats. One of them, much larger than the others, fascinates me. I watch him as he scurries about his rodent business. Often I have a kind of waking dream in which I am transformed – my face mutates into his sharp face – I am resolved into a giant rat, scuttling around on the slimy floor. Am I not the Angel of Philadelphia? Can angels fall so low as to become rats?