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Common Knowledge, Volume 8, Issue 1, Winter 2002, pp. 188-203 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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DECREATION

How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete,
and Simone Weil Tell God

Anne Carson

This is an essay about three women and will have three parts. Part One concerns Sappho, a Greek poet of the seventh century B.C., who lived on the island of Lesbos, wrote some famous poetry about love and is said to have organized her life around worship of the God Aphrodite. Part Two concerns Marguerite Porete, who was burned alive in the public square of Paris in 1310 because she had written a book about the love of God which the papal inquisitor deemed heretical. Part Three concerns Simone Weil, the twentieth-century French classicist and philosopher whom Camus called “the only great spirit of our time.”

Part One

What if I were to begin an essay on spiritual matters by citing a poem that will not at first seem to you spiritual at all. Fragment 31 of Sappho says:

He seems to me equal to gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it
 puts the heart in my chest on wings
 for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
 is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
 fire is racing under skin
 and in eyes no sight and drumming
 fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
 grips me all, greener than grass
 I am and dead—or almost
 I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty. . . .¹

This poem has been preserved for us by the ancient literary critic Longinus, who quotes four complete Sapphic stanzas and then the first line of what looks like a fifth stanza and then breaks off, no one knows why. But the first four stanzas seem to compose a unit of music and thought; let's consider the thought. It comes to us bathed in light but this is the weirdly enclosed light of introspection. Sappho is staging a scenario inside the little theater of her mind. It appears to be an erotic scenario but the characters are anonymous, their interrelations obscure. We don't know why the girl is laughing, nor what the man is doing there, nor how Sappho's response to them makes sense. Sappho seems less interested in these characters as individuals than in the geometric figure that they form. This figure has three lines and three angles. One line connects the girl's voice and laughter to a man who listens close. A second connects the girl to Sappho. Between the eye of Sappho and the listening man runs a third. The figure is a triangle. Why does Sappho want to stage this figure? Common sense suggests it is a poem about jealousy. "Lovers all show such symptoms as these," says Longinus. So let's think about what the jealousy of lovers is.

The word comes from ancient Greek *zelos* meaning "zeal" or "hot pursuit." A jealous lover covets a certain location at the center of her beloved's affection only to find it occupied by someone else. If jealousy were a dance it would be a pattern of placement and displacement. Its emotional focus is unstable. Jealousy is a dance in which everyone moves.

1. *Sappho et Alcaeus: Fragmenta*, ed. E. M. Voigt (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak and Van Gennep, 1971). All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited in the text.

Sappho's poem sets the stage for Jealousy but she does not dance it. Indeed she seems to forget the presence of her dancing partners entirely after the first stanza and shifts the spotlight onto herself. And what we see in the spotlight is an unexpectedly spiritual spectacle. For Sappho describes her own perceptual abilities (visual, aural, tactile) reduced to dysfunction one after another; she shows us the objects of outer sense emptying themselves; and there on the brightly lit stage at the center of her perception appears her own Being:

I am . . .

she says at verse 15 ("greener than grass I am").

This is not just a moment of revealed existence: it is a spiritual event. Sappho enters into ecstasy. "I am greener than grass," she says, predicating of her own Being an attribute observable only from outside her own body. This is the condition called *ekstasis*, literally "standing outside oneself," a condition regarded by the Greeks as typical of mad persons, geniuses, and lovers, and ascribed to poets by Aristotle.

Ecstasy changes Sappho and changes her poem. She herself, she says, is almost dead. Her poem appears to break down and stop. But then, arguably, both of them start up again. I say arguably because the (last) seventeenth verse of the poem has a puzzling history and is regarded with suspicion by some scholars, although it appears in Longinus and is corroborated by a papyrus. Let us attempt to see its coherence with what goes before.

"All is to be dared because even a person of poverty. . .," says verse 17. It is a new thought. The content of the thought is absolute daring. The condition of the thought is poverty. I don't want to give the impression that I know what verse 17 is saying or that I see where the poem is headed from here, I don't. Overall this poem leaves me wondering. Sappho sets up a scenario of jealousy but that's not what the poem is about, jealousy is just a figure. Sappho stages an event of ecstasy but that's not what the poem is about either, ecstasy is just a means to an end. Unfortunately we don't reach the end, the poem breaks off. But we do see Sappho begin to turn toward it, toward this unreachable end. We see her senses empty themselves, we see her Being thrown outside its own center where it stands observing her as if she were grass or dead. At which point a speculation occurs to me: granted this is a poem all about love, do we need to limit ourselves to a reading of it that is merely or conventionally erotic? After all, Sappho is believed by some historians to have been not just a poet of love and a worshiper of Aphrodite on Lesbos but also a priestess of Aphrodite's cult and a teacher of her doctrines. Perhaps Sappho's poem wants to teach us something about the

metaphysics or even the theology of love. Perhaps she is posing not the usual lovesong complaint, *Why don't you love me?* but a deeper spiritual question, *What is it that love dares the self to do?* Daring enters the poem in the seventeenth verse when Sappho uses the word *tolmaton*: “is to be dared.”

This word is a verbal adjective expressing a mood of ability, possibility or potential. Sappho says it is an *absolute* potential:

pan tolmaton: all is to be dared.

Moreover she consents to it—or seems to be on the point of consenting when the poem breaks off. Why does she consent? Her explanation no longer exists. So far as it goes, it leads us back to her ecstatic condition. For when an ecstatic is asked the question *What is it that love dares the self to do?* she will answer:

Love dares the self to leave itself behind, to enter into poverty.

Part Two

Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake in 1310 for writing a book about the absolute daring of love. *The Mirror of Simple Souls* is a theological treatise and also a kind of handbook for people seeking God. Marguerite Porete's central doctrine is that a human soul can proceed through seven different stages of love, beginning with a period of “boiling desire” (chap. 118), to an ecstasy in which the soul is carried outside her own Being and leaves herself behind. This departure from her own center is not passive. Like Sappho, Marguerite first discovers in reality a certain absolute demand and then she consents to it. Like Sappho, she sees herself split in two by this consent and experiences it as a kind of “annihilation.” Marguerite's reasoning is severe: she understands the essence of her human self to be in her free will and she decides that free will has been placed in her by God in order that she may give it back. She therefore causes her will to depart from its own will and render itself back to God with nothing left over. Here is how she describes this event:

... a ravishing expansion of the movement of divine Light is poured into the Soul and shows to the Will [the rightness of what is ... in order to move the Soul] from the place where it is now and ought not to be and render it back to where it is not, whence it came, there where it ought to remain. Now the Will sees ... that it cannot profit unless it departs from its own will. And thus the Soul parts herself from this will and the Will parts itself from such a Soul and then renders itself and gives and goes back to God, there where it was first taken, without retaining anything of its own. ...²

2. Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen L. Babinsky (New York: Paulist, 1993), chap. 118. I have altered Babinsky's translation slightly. All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited in the

Now it is noteworthy, in light of Sappho's account of ecstasy and its consequences, that Marguerite Porete twice refers to herself at the moment when God's abundance overflows her as:

I who am in the abyss of absolute poverty. (chap. 38)

She also describes her impoverishment as a condition of physical and metaphysical negation:

Now such a Soul is nothing, for she sees her nothingness by means of the abundance of divine understanding, which makes her nothing and places her in nothingness. (chap. 118)

Throughout *The Mirror* she speaks of herself as null, worthless, deficient, deprived and naked. But at the same time she recognizes her poverty as an amazing and inexpressible kind of repletion; and of this absolute emptiness which is also absolute fullness she speaks in erotic language, referring to God as "overflowing and abundant Lover" (chap. 38) or as "the Spouse of my youth" (chap. 118). Even more interesting for our analogy with Sappho, Marguerite Porete twice proposes jealousy as a figure for her relationship with God. Thus she refers to God as "the most high Jealous One" and speaks of God's relation to her Soul in this way:

Jealous he is truly! He shows it by his works which have stripped me of myself absolutely and have placed me in divine pleasure without myself. And such a union joins and conjoins me through the sovereign highness of creation with the brilliance of divine being, by which I have being which is being. (chap. 71)

This is an unusual erotic triangle consisting of God, Marguerite and Marguerite. But its motions have the same ecstatic effect as the three-person situation in Sappho's poem. Marguerite feels her self pulled apart from itself and thrown into a condition of poverty, to which she consents. Her consent takes the form of a peculiarly intense triangular fantasy:

... and I pondered, as if God were asking me, how would I fare if I knew that he preferred me to love another more than himself? And at this my sense failed me and I knew not what to say. Then he asked me how would I fare if it could happen he should love another more than me?

text. See also "The Mirror of Simple Souls," trans. Edmond Colledge, in *Notre Dame Texts in Medieval Culture*, vol. 6 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), chap. 118; and *Le mirouer des simples ames*

anienties et qui seulement demeurent en vouloir et desir d'amour, ed. Romana Guarnieri, *Archivio Italiano per la storia de la Pietà* 4 (1965): 513-635.

And here my sense failed me and I knew not what to say. . . . Beyond this, he asked me what would I do and how would I fare if it could be he preferred another to love me more than he. . . . And there I fainted away for I could say nothing to these three things, nor refuse, nor deny. (chap. 131)

Notice how Marguerite turns the fantasy this way and that, rotating its personnel and reimagining its anguish. Jealousy is a dance in which everyone moves. It is a dance with a dialectical nature. For the jealous lover must balance two contradictory realities within her heart: on the one hand, that of herself at the center of the universe and in command of her own will, offering love to her beloved; on the other, that of herself off the center of the universe and in despite of her own will, watching her beloved love someone else. Naked collision of these two realities brings the lover to a sort of breakdown, as we saw in Sappho's poem, whose effect is to expose her very Being to its own scrutiny and to dislodge it from the center of itself. It would be a very high test of dialectical endurance to be able to, not just recognize, but consent to this breakdown. Sappho seems to be entering on a mood of consent when her poem stops. Marguerite faints three times before she can manage it. But then, with a psychological clarity as amazing as Sappho's, Marguerite pushes open the implications of her own pain. Here is her analysis of what she sees when she looks inside Marguerite:

And so long as I was at ease and loved myself "with" him, I could not at all contain myself or have calm: I was held in bondage by which I could not move. . . . I loved myself so much along "with" him that I could not answer loyally. . . . Yet all at once he demanded my response, if I did not want to lose both myself and him. . . . I said to him that he must want to test me in all points. (chap. 131)

Marguerite reaches rockbottom here when she faces the fact that loyalty to God is actually obstructed by her love of him because this affection, like most human erotic feeling, is largely self-love: it puts Marguerite in bondage to Marguerite rather than to God. Her reasoning uses the figure of jealousy in two ways. She sees jealousy as an explanation of her own feelings of inner division; she also projects jealousy as a test of her ability to decenter herself, to move out of the way, to clear her own heart and her own will off the path that leads to God. For in order to (as she says) "answer God loyally" she cannot stay one with her own heart or with her own will, she cannot love her own love or love herself loving or love being loved. And insofar as she can "annihilate" all these—her term—she can resolve the three angles of the dance of Jealousy into a single nakedness and reduce her Being from three to two to one:

Now this Soul . . . has left three and has made two one. But in what does this one consist? This one is when the soul is rendered into the simple Deity, in full knowing, without feeling, beyond thought. . . .

Higher no one can go, deeper no one can go, more naked no human can be. (chap. 138)

Part Three

Simone Weil was also a person who wanted to get herself out of the way so as to arrive at God. “The self,” she says in one of her notebooks, “is only a shadow projected by sin and error which blocks God’s light and which I take for a Being.” She had a program for getting the self out of the way which she called “decreation.” This word is a neologism to which she did not give an exact definition nor a consistent spelling. “To undo the creature in us” is one of the ways she describes its aim.³ And when she tells of its method she uses language that may sound familiar. Like Marguerite Porete she expresses a need to render back to God what God has given to her, that is, the self:

We possess nothing in this world other than the power to say ‘I’. This is what we must yield up to God. (*GG*, 71; *PG*, 35)

And like Marguerite Porete she pictures this yielding as a sort of test:

God gave me Being in order that I should give it back to him. It is like one of those traps whereby the characters are tested in fairy tales. If I accept this gift it is bad and fatal; its virtue becomes apparent through my refusal of it. God allows me to exist outside himself. It is for me to refuse this authorization. (*GG*, 87; *PG*, 48)

And also like Marguerite Porete she feels herself to be an obstacle to herself inwardly. The process of decreation is for her a dislodging of herself from a center where she cannot stay because staying there blocks God. She speaks of a need “to withdraw from my own soul” and says:

God can love in us only this consent to withdraw in order to make way for him. (*GG*, 88; *PG*, 49)

But now let us dwell for a moment on this statement about withdrawal and consent. Here Simone Weil enters upon a strangely daring and difficult negotiation

3. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 81, hereafter cited in the text as *GG* = *La pesanteur et la grâce*, ed. Gustave Thibon (Paris: Plon, 1948), 43, hereafter cited in the text as *PG*.

that seems to me to evoke both Marguerite Porete and Sappho. For Simone Weil wants to discover in the three-cornered figure of jealousy those lines of force that connect a soul to God. She does not, however, fantasize relationships with ordinary human lovers. The erotic triangle Simone Weil constructs is one involving God, herself and the whole of creation:

All the things that I see, hear, breathe, touch, eat; all the beings I meet—
I deprive the sum total of all that of contact with God, and I deprive God
of contact with all that insofar as something in me says ‘I’.
I can do something for all that and for God—namely, retire and respect
the *tête-à-tête*. . . .

I must withdraw so that God may make contact with the beings whom
chance places in my path and whom he loves. It is tactless of me to be
there. It is as though I were placed between two lovers or two friends.
I am not the maiden who awaits her betrothed but the unwelcome third
who is with two betrothed lovers and ought to go away so that they can
really be together.

If only I knew how to disappear there would be a perfect union of love
between God and the earth I tread, the sea I hear. . . . (*GG*, 88; *PG*, 49)

If only she could become what Marguerite Porete calls an “annihilated soul,” if only she could achieve the transparency of Sappho’s ecstatic condition “greener than grass and almost dead,” Simone Weil would feel she had relieved the world of an indiscretion. Jealousy is a dance in which everybody moves because one of them is always extra—three people trying to sit on two chairs. We saw how this extra person is set apart in Marguerite Porete’s text by a canny use of quotation marks—remember her plaintive observation: I loved myself so much along “with” him that I could not answer loyally. When I read this sentence the first time, it seemed odd to me that Marguerite Porete puts the quotation marks around the “with” rather than around one of the pronouns. But Marguerite knows what she is doing: the people are not the problem here. Witness is the problem. She is trying to use the simplest language and the plainest marks to express a profoundly tricky spiritual fact, viz. that I cannot go toward God in love without bringing myself along. And so in the deepest possible sense I can never be alone with God. I can only be alone “with God.”

To catch sight of this fact brings a wrench in perception, forces the perceiver to a point where she has to disappear from herself in order to look. As Simone Weil says longingly:

If only I could see a landscape as it is when I am not there. But when I am in any place I disturb the silence of heaven by the beating of my heart. (GG, 89; PG, 50)

As we saw, Marguerite Porete found a way to translate the beating of her own heart into a set of quotation marks around the word “with.” And Sappho found a way to record the beating of her heart while imagining its absence—for surely this is the function performed in her poem by “the man who opposite you sits and listens close.” This man, Sappho tells us, is “equal to Gods”; but can we not read him as her way of representing “the landscape as it is when I am not there”? It is a landscape where joy is so full that it seems to go unexperienced. Sappho does not describe this landscape further but Marguerite Porete offers an amazing account of a soul in some such condition:

Such a Soul . . . swims in the sea of joy—that is in the sea of delights flowing and streaming from the Divinity, and she feels no joy for she herself is joy, and swims and floats in joy without feeling any joy because she inhabits Joy and Joy inhabits her. . . . (chap. 28)

It seems consistent with Simone Weil’s project of decreation that, although she too recognizes this kind of joyless joy, she finds in it not an occasion of swimming but one of exclusion and negation:

Perfect joy excludes even the very feeling of joy, for in the soul filled by the object no corner is left for saying “I.” (GG, 77; PG, 40)

Part Four

Inasmuch as we are now entering upon the fourth part of a three-part essay, we should brace ourselves for some inconsequentiality. I don’t feel the cause of this inconsequence is me. Rather it originates with the three women we are studying and the cause of it is the fact that they are writers. When Sappho tells us that she is “all but dead,” when Marguerite Porete tells us she wants to become an “annihilated soul,” when Simone Weil tells that “We participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves,” how are we to square these dark ideas with the brilliant self-assertiveness of the writerly project shared by all three of them, the project of telling the world the truth about God, love and reality? The answer is we can’t. It is no accident that Marguerite Porete calls her book a *Mirror*. To be a writer is to construct a big, loud, shiny center of self from which the writing is given voice and any claim to be intent on annihilating this self while still continuing to write and give voice to writing must involve the writer in some important acts of subterfuge or contradiction.

Which brings us to contradiction and its uses. Simone Weil speaks plainly about these:

Contradiction alone is the proof that we are not everything. Contradiction is our badness and the sense of our badness is the sense of reality. For we do not invent our badness. It is true. (*GG*, 148; *PG*, 100)

To accept the true badness of being human is the beginning of a dialectic of joy for Simone Weil:

If we find fullness of joy in the thought that God is, we must find the same fullness in the knowledge that we ourselves are not, for it is the same thought. (*GG*, 84; *PG*, 46)

Nothing and something are two sides of one coin, at least in the mind of a dialectician. As Marguerite Porete puts it:

Nothing is nothing. Something is what it is. Therefore I am not, if I am something, except that which God is. (chap. 70)

She also says:

Lord you are one goodness through opened out goodness, absolutely in you. And I am one badness through opened out badness, absolutely in me. (chap. 130)

Marguerite Porete's vision is dialectical but it is not tragic: she imagines a kind of chiasmic immersion or mutual absorption by means of which these two absolute opposites—God and the soul—may ultimately unite. She uses various images of this union, for example, iron which when placed in the furnace actually becomes fire (chap. 25); or a river which loses its name when it flows into the sea (chap. 82). Her common images carry us beyond the dialectical account of God and soul. For dialectic is a mode of reasoning and an application of the intellectual self. But the soul that has been driven by love into God, the soul consumed as into fire, dissolved as if into water—such a soul has no intact intellect of the ordinary human kind with which to construe dialectical relationships. In other words such a soul passes beyond the place where she can *tell* what she knows. To tell is a function of self.

This situation is a big problem for a writer. It is more than a contradiction, it is a paradox. Marguerite Porete broaches the matter, early in her *Mirror*, with her usual lack of compromise:

For whoever talks about God . . . must not doubt but must know without doubt . . . that he has never felt the true kernel of divine Love which makes the soul absolutely dazzled without being aware of it. For this is the true purified kernel of divine Love which is without creaturely matter and given by the Creator to a creature *and takes away absolutely the practice of telling.* (chap. 18; emphasis added)

Marguerite delivers herself of a writerly riddle here. No one who talks about God can have experienced God's love, she asserts, because such Love "takes away absolutely the practice of telling." She reinforces this point later by arguing that, once a soul has experienced divine Love, no one but God ever understands that soul again (chaps. 19 and 20). We might at this point be moved to question what Marguerite Porete thinks she is doing in the remaining chapters of her book, which number 139 in all, when she gives a step-by-step account of the soul's progress toward annihilation in God. We might wonder what all this telling is about. But we are unlikely to receive an answer from Marguerite Porete herself. Nor I think will any prudent writer on matters of God and soul venture to nail such things down. Quite the contrary, to leave us in wonder is just what such a writer feels compelled to do. Let us look more closely at how this compulsion works. We have said that telling is a function of self. If we study the way these three writers talk about their own telling, we can see how each of them feels moved to create a sort of dream of distance in which the self is displaced from the center of the work and the teller disappears into the telling.

Let's begin with Simone Weil who was a practical person and arranged for her own disappearance on several levels. Among other things, she is believed to have hastened her own death from tuberculosis in 1943 by a regime of voluntary self-starvation undertaken out of sympathy for people in France who didn't have enough to eat. However that may be, when her parents insisted on fleeing France for America in 1942 she briefly and reluctantly accompanied them, leaving behind in the hands of a certain Gustave Thibon (a farmer in whose vineyard she had been working) about a dozen notebooks of personal reflection (which now form a substantial part of her published work). She told him in a letter to use the thoughts in the notebooks however he liked:

So now they belong to you and I hope that after having been transmuted within you they will one day come out in one of your works. . . . I should be very happy for them to find a lodging beneath your pen, whilst changing their form so as to reflect your likeness. . . .

In the operation of writing, the hand which holds the pen and the body and soul attached to it are things infinitely small in the order of nothingness. (GG, 11)

Gustave Thibon never saw Simone Weil again, nor did he follow the instructions of this letter, to transmute her ideas into his own—at least not explicitly. Instead he went through the notebooks, extracted punchy passages, grouped these under headings like The Self, The Void, The Impossible, Beauty, Algebra, Luck, The Meaning of the Universe, and published them as a book whose English title is *Gravity and Grace by Simone Weil with Introduction by Gustave Thibon* (London 1952). That is, he made a serious effort to force her back into the center of herself, and the degree to which she nonetheless eludes this reinstallation is very hard for readers like you or me to judge from outside. But I admire the final, gentle piece of advice that she gives to him at the close of her letter of 1942:

I also like to think that after the slight shock of separation you will not feel any sorrow about whatever may be in store for me and that if you should happen sometimes to think of me you will do so as one thinks of a book read in childhood . . . (GG, 12)

When I think of books read in childhood they come to my mind's eye in violent foreshortening and framed by a precarious darkness, but at the same time they glow somehow with an almost supernatural intensity of life that no adult book could ever effect. I remember a little book of *The Lives of the Saints* that was given to me about age five. In this book the various flowers composing the crowns of the martyrs were so lusciously rendered in words and paint that I had to be restrained from eating the pages. It is interesting to speculate what taste I was expecting from those pages. But maybe the impulse to eat pages isn't about taste. Maybe it's about being placed at the crossing-point of a contradiction, which is a painful place to be and children in their natural wisdom will not consent to stay there, but mystics love it. So Simone Weil:

Man's great affliction, which begins with infancy and accompanies him till death, is that looking and eating are two different operations. Eternal beatitude is a state where to look is to eat. (GG, 153; PG, 105)

Simone Weil had a problem with eating all her life. Lots of women do. Nothing more powerfully or more often reminds us of our physicality than food and the need to eat it. So she creates in her mind a dream of distance where food can be enjoyed perhaps from across the room merely by looking at it, where desire need not end in perishing, where the lover can stay, at the same time, near to and far from the object of her love.

Food and love were analogous contradictions for Simone Weil. She did not freely enjoy either of them in her life and was always uneasy about her imaginative relationship to them. But after all, eternal beatitude is not the only state where to

look is to eat. The written page can also reify this paradox for us. A writer may *tell* what is near and far at once.

And so, for example, in Marguerite Porete's totally original terminology the writer's dream of distance becomes an epithet of God. To describe the divine Lover who feeds her soul with the food of truth, Marguerite Porete invents a word: *le Loingprés* in her Old French, or *Longe Propinquus* in the Latin translation: English might say "the FarNear." She does not justify this word, simply begins using it as if it were self-evident in Chapter 58 of her book, where she is telling about annihilation. At the moment of its annihilation, she says, God practices upon the soul an amazing act of ravishing. For God opens an aperture in the soul and allows divine peace to flow in upon her like a glorious food. And God does this in his capacity as *le Loingprés*, the FarNear:

For there is an aperture, like a spark, which quickly closes, in which one cannot long remain. . . . The overflowing from the ravishing aperture makes the Soul free and noble and unencumbered [and its] peace lasts as long as the opening of the aperture. . . . Moreover the peace is so delicious that Truth calls it glorious food. (chap. 58)

. . . And this aperture of the sweet movement of glory that the excellent FarNear gives is nothing other than a glimpse which God wants the soul to have of her own glory that she will possess without end. (chap. 61)

Marguerite Porete's concept of God as "the excellent FarNear" is a radical invention. But even more radical is the riddle to which it forces her:

. . . where the Soul remains after the work of the Ravishing FarNear, which we call a spark in the manner of an aperture and fast close, *no one could believe . . . nor would she have any truth who knew how to tell this*. (chap. 58; emphasis added)

Inside her own telling, Marguerite Porete sets up a little ripple of disbelief—a sort of distortion in the glass—as if to remind us that this dream of distance is after all just a dream. At the end of her book she returns to the concept one last time, saying simply:

His Farness is the more Near. (chap. 135)

I have no idea what this sentence means but it gives me a thrill. It fills me with wonder. In itself the sentence is a small complete act of worship, like a hymn or a prayer. Now hymns and prayers are the conventional way for lovers of God to mark God's farness, for prayer lays claim to an immediate connection with

this Being whose absence fills the world. But Marguerite Porete was a fairly unconventional lover of God and did not engage in prayer or credit its usefulness. Simone Weil, on the other hand, although she was never a Christian herself, had a profound attachment to that prayer which Christians call The Our Father. During the summer of 1941 when she worked in the vineyard of Gustave Thibon she found herself repeating this prayer while she worked. She had never prayed before, she acknowledges in her notebook, and the effect was ecstatic:

The very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport it to a place outside space . . . filling every aspect of this infinity of infinity.⁴

Prayer seems to have been for her an experience of spatial contradiction—or perhaps a proof of the impossible truth of God’s motion. In another passage she returns to The Lord’s Prayer and its impossible truth:

Our Father who art in heaven. There is a sort of humour in that. He is your Father, but just try going to look for him up there! We are quite as incapable of rising from the ground as an earthworm. And how should he for his part come to us without descending? There is no way of imagining a contract between God and man which is not as unintelligible as the Incarnation. The Incarnation explodes unintelligibility. It is an absolutely concrete way of representing impossible descent. Why should it not be the truth? (*GG*, 148; *PG*, 100)

Why should the truth not be impossible? Why should the impossible not be true? Questions like these are the links from which prayers are forged. Here is a prayer of Sappho’s which will offer us one final example of the dream of distance in which a writer tells God:

. . . [come] here to me from Krete
to this holy temple where is
your graceful grove of apple trees and altars
smoking with frankincense.

And in it cold water makes a clear sound through apple branches
and with roses the whole place
is shadowed and down from radiant-shaking leaves
sleep comes dropping.

And in it a horse meadow has come into bloom
with spring flowers and breezes
like honey are blowing. . . .

4. *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: Mckay, 1977), 492.

In this place you Kypris having taken up
 in gold cups delicately
 nectar mingled with festivities:
 pour.
 (frag. 2)

This fragment was scratched on a shard of pottery by a careless hand in the third century B.C. The text is corrupt and incomplete. Nonetheless we can identify it as a hymn of the type called “kletic,” a calling hymn, an invocation to God to come from where she is to where we are. Such a hymn typically names both of these places, setting its invocation in between in order to measure the difference—a difference which it is the function of the hymn to *decreate*—not to destroy, but to decreate. Among the remarks on decreation in Simone Weil’s notebooks is the statement:

God can only be present in creation under the form of absence. (*GG*, 162; *PG*, 112)

For the writer of a kletic hymn God’s absence is something tricky, perhaps impossible, to tell. This writer will have to invoke a God who arrives bringing her own absence with her—a God whose Farness is the more Near. It is an impossible motion possible only in writing. Sappho achieves it by various syntactic choices: for example, suppression of the verb in the first stanza of her poem. In the English translation I have tentatively supplied an imperative “Come!” in square brackets as the first word of the poem, and the sense may seem to require this, but the Greek text has no such verb. It begins with the adverb “Here.” In fact the imperative verb for which the entire poem, with its slow and onomatopoeically accumulating clauses, seems to be waiting does not arrive until the very last word of our text: “Pour!” The effect of this suspension is uncanny: as if the whole of creation is depicted waiting for an action that is already perpetually *here*. There is no clear boundary between far and near; there is no climactic moment of God’s arrival. Sappho renders a set of conditions which at the beginning depend on Aphrodite’s absence but by the end include her presence. Sappho imitates the distance of God in a sort of suspended solution—and there we see Divine Being as a dazzling drop that suddenly, impossibly saturates the world.

To sum up. Each of the three women we’ve been considering had the nerve to enter a zone of absolute spiritual daring. Each of them undergoes there an experience of decreation, or so she tells us. But the telling remains a bit of a wonder. Decreation is an undoing of the creature in us—that creature enclosed in self and defined by self. But to undo self one must move through self, to the very inside

of its definition. We have nowhere else to start. This is the parchment on which God writes his lessons, as Marguerite Porete says.

Marguerite's parchment burned in 1310. To us this may seem an outrage or a mistake. Certainly the men who condemned her thought she was all wrong and referred to her in the proceedings of her trial not only as "filled with errors and heresies" but as *pseudo-mulier* or "fake woman."

Was Marguerite Porete a fake woman?

Society is all too eager to pass judgments on the authenticity of women's ways of being but these judgments can get crazy. As a case in point, the book for which Marguerite Porete was burned in 1310 was secretly preserved and copied after her death by clerics who transmitted the text as an anonymous devotional work of Christian mysticism, until 1946 when an Italian scholar reconnected *The Mirror* with the name of its author. At the same time, it is hard to commend moral extremism of the kind that took Simone Weil to death at the age of thirty-four; saintliness is an eruption of the absolute into ordinary history and we resent that. We need history to be able to call saints neurotic, anorectic, pathological, sexually repressed or fake. These judgments sanctify our own survival. By the same token, Sappho's ancient biographers tried to discredit her seriousness by assuring us she lived a life of unrestrained and incoherent sexual indulgence, for she invented lesbianism and then died by jumping off a cliff for love of a young man. As Simone Weil says:

Love is a sign of our badness. (*GG*, 111; *PG*, 68)

Love is also a good place to situate our mistrust of fake women. What I like best about the three women we've been studying is that they know what love is. That is, they know love is the touchstone of a true or a false spirituality; that is why they play with the figure of jealousy. As fake women they have to inhabit this figure gingerly, taking a position both near and far at once from the object of their desire. The truth that they tell from this paradoxical position is also fake. As Marguerite says briskly:

For everything that one can tell of God or write, no less than what one can think, of God who is more than words, is as much lying as it is telling the truth. (chap. 119)

So in the end it is important not to be fooled by fake women. If you mistake the dance of Jealousy for the love of God, or a heretic's Mirror for the true story, you are likely to spend the rest of your days in terrible hunger. No matter how many pages you eat.