Perhaps one of the earliest narrative tropes I encountered was the one where a group of kids try to save the orphanage, or their parents’ homes, or the school by putting on a show. I still have a clear image of a five- or six-year-old Spanky, dressed as a Roman soldier, reciting Mark Antony’s speech from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, while trying to dodge spitballs from his friends and the domineering of his overprotective mother. By bringing down the house (quite literally, of course) he was able to win the prize so the young girl with stage fright could buy a new dress.¹ The trope was made famous in Rodgers and Hart’s musical comedy, *Babes in Arms*, starring Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, and the two actors made quite a few movies featuring this plot device. I guess having had this story line run through my head so many times as a kid, it sank in and resurfaces every now and again as something I would like to try. So when I encountered trouble getting students and colleagues interested in the work featured in my dissertation, the old trope naturally sprang to mind.

¹ This is from Season 13 of what is now known as *The Little Rascals*, an episode called “Beginner’s Luck,” which was aired on February 23, 1935, according to TV.com. This was probably also my first encounter with Shakespeare.
At the MLA meeting in Seattle in January of 2012, I ran into one of my mentors from Arizona State, Curtis Perry, who is now at the University of Illinois in Champagne. He had recruited me to be one of his teaching assistants for Renaissance literature years before, but I had heard the siren song of medieval literature and had left him to pursue some earlier works. I was finally on the job market full time after having received my PhD the previous spring, and had been diligently hammering away at job applications while working as an adjunct at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, but had not received any callbacks. I was beginning to grow worried that my six years as a PhD candidate had been for nothing. When I opened up to him about my concerns, he sat me down and asked me to give him my pitch. I spent the next five minutes telling him about the exciting time I had had as a student tracking down materials on a late-thirteenth, early fourteenth century French mystic named Marguerite Porete, who had been tried and executed in 1310; about how her book had been translated — even after her execution for heresy — into Latin, English, and Italian; about the conference I had attended in Paris on the anniversary of her death; on the connections I had made between her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, and other works that might lend clues as to why it had been translated into English sometime during the following century. He listened patiently and when the five minutes were up, he held up his hand, and said in mock-interviewese, “Thank you for your interest, but we will be going in another direction to fill this position.” I was heartbroken.

He told me that everything I’d been discussing was immensely interesting — to a scholar — but as a department head trying to fill a position, none of this would be of interest. “Rob, most colleges need a guy who can teach *Beowulf* and Chaucer and who can fill in a little with Shakespeare. Marguerite Porete, while she sounds interesting, is useless for a department in a typical liberal arts college.” He told me to reconstruct my cover letter to emphasize the basics, to show that I had experience
teaching the usual authors. I did so, and the very next application I sent out landed me my current position.²

I should have realized then and there that the life of a medievalist in a general educational college system was going to be hard, at least as far as bringing in my research. After only a few weeks at my new job, I began to notice that mentions of even Beowulf and Chaucer, let alone Marguerite and her Mirror, brought on that glassy-eyed look when I spoke to many colleagues. My school mostly caters to good students who are looking for an education that will help land them a good job, so medieval literature is a tough sell to even the brightest of students. Luckily, as part of our general education classes, the students are required to take at least one medieval course, and while art and history are my main competition, literature seems the most accessible to most of my students. I have a rotation of three classes that cover interesting, but fairly standard, materials: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Chrétien de Troyes’s Perceval are among the most exotic. Don’t get me wrong, I do enjoy teaching these works, but there’s no real room for the work I spent more than six years contemplating and so I spend most of my time thinking about anything but Marguerite Porete and her book.

The coordinator of the English department at Dominican College, Ellen Dolgin, has been very kind and spends a lot of time trying to include my topics of interest in the classes she assigns me. She has also encouraged my conference attendance. One of the very first opportunities she had to get me onto a panel she was hosting at the local Northeast MLA in Harrisburg was about Joan of Arc, and after hearing me go on about my own heretic, she invited me to write a paper for her panel. I immediately proposed a comparison of the two — how one was still condemned, but the other had managed to rehabilitate

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² I am probably remembering this a little more harshly and Curtis is more direct and high-handed in my memory than he ever has been to me in real life. But the truth is that he gave me an insight into the harsh truth of the industry, an insight that was only proven by the success I had using it.
herself all the way to sainthood — but she seemed disappointed. Her own work on Joan, as seen mostly through the lens of the twentieth century, and her study of the theater give her a very different perspective on this medieval woman and so my proposal may not have been exactly what she had bargained for. “I don’t think my audience will be interested in Marguerite Porete — she’s too obscure.” And perhaps she was right. The paper ended up as a look at how other authors saw Joan, particularly Shakespeare, who is well known, and Christine de Pizan, who at least was a little better known than my Marguerite.

Another opportunity to bring Marguerite’s *Mirror* to a wider audience arrived while I was having lunch with several of the organizers for the following Northeast MLA meeting during that conference. As this was the first of the smaller conference to which I had been, I was surprised about the fact that there were very few (if any) panels that were multilingual. As an English professor, I felt like I missed two-thirds of the conference, because the various papers presented in other languages were part of panels only relevant to those languages. Since the next conference was going to be in Canada, I felt as though at least one French and English panel should be scheduled. When I mentioned this to the 2015 president, she asked me if I had an idea for one. Without missing a beat, I suggested a reading of Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror* in the various languages for which we have manuscripts: Latin, Middle English, Old and Middle French, and Italian. I was told to get on it right away.

I was inspired by two events that occurred during my studies. The first of my inspirations was Benjamin Bagby’s haunting per-

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4 Again, this quote is from the memory of a sensitive junior academic responding to the fact that his chosen dissertation subject is pretty much an unknown.

5 There are three Middle English manuscripts, two Italian ones, and five Latin, to go with the Middle French version: Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS F XIV 26 (ancien 986), which has been used to make most of the modern translations in English. An Old French fragment exists in Valenciennes, Bibliothèque municipale ms. 239.
formance of *Beowulf* in Anglo-Saxon. Back in April 2003, while I was still studying for my master’s, Bagby brought his performance to Angel Orensanz Center for the Arts in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and my wife and I went to see him spin out the first 852 lines of this medieval classic with only a wooden harp to accompany him. Though they did provide a translation in supertitles, we could feel the power of the words through his performance. The presence of the performer right there in front of me hearkened back to the way medieval *scops* must have played before kings. Just as the actors in a live performance of a play can interact with the audience, Bagby was able to reach out into the audience and bring the story to life.⁶ *Beowulf* had never felt so real to me before. Bagby’s performance inspired me to teach it in my high school classroom to great response from the students. Though I did not have the means to show them Bagby’s marvelous performance at the time, I was able to bring a little of his enthusiasm and drama to my own readings. Though I was neither as accomplished a performer nor did I perform it in Old English as Bagby had, the memory of his performance greatly influenced my own, and the students were able to see this ancient poem with which they had been struggling as a living, emotional work.

The second inspiration came from my PhD days at Arizona State. A friend of mine — Jeremy Eisenberg — and I decided to take Chaucer’s challenge and translate a little piece of Chrétien de Troyes’s *Lancelot* in octosyllabic rhyming couplets. I was the guy creating the trot from the Old French and he was the poet trying to make it sound good. We each critiqued each other’s work until it was in pretty interesting shape; we created about 800 lines of poetry and an introduction explaining our process that was later published in the University of Wisconsin: Fox Valley journal.⁷ We chose the “Knight of the Ford,” in which the un-

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⁶ A DVD of his performance was released in 2005, which can be found on his website BagbyBeowulf.com.

named Lancelot, entranced by thoughts of Guenevere, stumbles into a ford protected by a knight. They fight until the unnamed ford knight surrenders and is handed over to an inexplicably present young lady. The piece worked well as a dialogue, which we discovered in the creation of the poem and we got the idea to actually perform the piece during a graduate conference. We were also invited in to a class on performance to present it again. Something magical happened in both performances: a piece of literature, often overlooked, took on new life in performance. We were able to express the humor of the piece, and a few of the hidden meanings we had taken and incorporated into our work, in a way that we could not do in a lecture. By letting the audience experience the poem in performance rather than in explanation, we reached more of them in a way that they would certainly remember.

I have never been one for performing in front of a crowd, even in teaching. Sure, I sing in the shower and in my car when I’m driving alone, but I would never consider doing this in a public forum, even one with a captive audience. But during these two performances something awoke in me that recognized the importance of performance as a connection between the student and the work. I saw how performance brought the piece to life and challenged the starkness of the words on the page. Thanks to Jeremy’s interest in the process, we discovered that we were not the only ones to notice this; it became apparent that performance was a way to get some of these medieval works back into the public eye.

I began to think of ways to bring such performance to the classroom and how this could work well for Marguerite’s Mirror. The performance idea seemed to work well with relatively known works like Beowulf and Chrétien’s Lancelot, but could it work with something as obscure as the Mirror? Toronto’s NeMLA meeting would provide the opportunity to find out.

I contacted several of the people I had met at both the International Congress for Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo over the years and the conference in Paris in 2010 in honor of the seven hundredth anniversary of Marguerite Porete’s death and asked
I Know! Let’s Put on a Show!

if any of them might be able to attend the conference in Toronto the following spring. Sadly, no one else was going and I was beginning to despair of pulling this off. Then I got the idea to ask several people if they wouldn’t mind recording themselves reading various passages.

Marguerite’s Mirror is written in the form of a play with three main characters: Love (ostensibly God), Reason, and the Soul. In the Chantilly manuscript, the text of the book appears with the names of the characters at the beginning of each passage, just like any other play would be formatted. There are several other characters who appear here and there with names like Truth or Holy Church the Little or The Height of the Intellect of Love. The Soul and Love spend the better part of the Mirror trying to explain to Reason why an individual soul would want to surrender herself to become one with God, while Reason keeps asking more and more questions. Love is very generous to Reason throughout the text and always tries to make Reason understand that asking questions is exactly what keeps her separate from God. By accepting nothingness — noughting — the Soul has become one with God and no longer has to worry about being separated from her. All three of the main characters are females, which probably also helped in the condemnation of the text in 1310.

The play is a long one — more than sixty thousand words in length in the Chantilly manuscript — so there have been a lot of questions about whether the book was meant to be read aloud. Barbara Newman has suggested that the play may have been read aloud as part of the puys of Northern France in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Its public nature

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8 The 2010 conference was coordinated by three Marguerite Porete scholars, and a volume of essays followed: Sean L. Field, Robert E. Lerner, and Sylvain Piron, Marguerite Porete et le Miroir des simples âmes: Perspectives historiques, philosophiques et littéraires (Paris: Librarie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2013).

may in fact be what roused the Church’s anger at both the text and its author. Clearly, though, there was far-reaching interest in the text within the Church. The Middle English and Latin texts travel with approbations from three sources, one of which has been identified as Godfrey of Fontaines, a master of theology at the University of Paris at the end of the thirteenth century, who suggested that while this text should not be made available to all people, it was a worthy text that deserved some study. But it is quite possible that even he would have been uncomfortable having it shouted out on the street corners of France or having it performed in a public theater.

My idea was to have each of the primary parts—Love, Reason, and the Soul—read in the various languages of the extant manuscripts. I thought it best that Love be read in the Middle French of the Chantilly manuscript, Reason in Latin, and the Soul in Middle English, and I knew just the people for the parts.

Zan Kocher has long been associated with the Mirror, having studied it and written about it for more than thirty years. His book, The Allegories of Love in Marguerite Porete, is a mainstay of studies about the Mirror and connects the Mirror to several secular romances that also would have been subject to performance. He was one of the first people to tell me of the discovery by Geneviève Hasenohr of a new manuscript of a fragment of the Mirror discovered and brought to light among American scholars by Sean Field and Robert Lerner. I had the great good fortune to travel with Zan to Valenciennes to see the new manuscript during the conference in 2010 and learned so much about both texts from him through the years since. I knew he would be perfect as the character Love right away and was pleased when he accepted my request to do the readings on camera.

Marleen Cré gave me my first insights into the three Middle English manuscripts—particularly the British Library MS

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Additional 37790 — in her magnificent book *Vernacular Mysticism in the Charterhouse*. I met her at the Paris conference and was astounded by the wealth of information she had about the *Mirror* and other books like it that had found their way from France to England. I knew that her reading of the Middle English would be wonderful and again was pleased to find her amenable to the task. Justine Trombley, a graduate student when I met her at Kalamazoo, has done wonderful work with the Latin manuscripts. Though I had no idea at the time what an actress she was, I knew that her love of the Latin would make her a perfect candidate for the role of Reason.

Though the idea had come to me more than a year before the performance date, I had not thought it all through until January of 2015. I was still hopeful I could get people to come to the conference to do the reading there, so when I finally gave in, there was only about two months left before the conference. My instructions to my readers scattered all over the world — Zan on the west coast of the United States, Justine in Scotland, and Marleen in Antwerp — were few. My plan was to have them each film themselves for three or four different readings and then I would splice them all together here in New York and cart the finished product with me to Toronto. Of course, I had never done anything like this before and knew very little about the various obstacles to getting this right.

Though I suggested simple ideas about dress and location for the filming, I was really afraid of scaring off my actors and so let them make the final decisions on wardrobe and placement. Zan explained to me how he took the little direction I gave him to create his role: “[Love] speaks with confoundingly high authority. She not only personifies human love for God but also turns out to be a face of God himself. Also Love is masculine in medieval Latin, but feminine in Old and Middle French. Medieval paintings personify her as a robed, perfectly regal-looking lady with long wavy hair. I turned out to be a luddite baritone with sideburns. Maybe wearing a bathrobe would compensate? Lacking a video camera or operator, I perched an aging laptop on pieces of furniture while reading aloud. As a first ill-fated
attempt to appear spiritual, I tried to align my head in front of round household objects that might remotely resemble a halo. This proved impossible, as the camera angles made them skew to the sides. Then I stacked dictionaries under the laptop, to gaze upward at the lens in another desperate bid to look spiritual. More light was needed: a construction job spotlight with a metal mesh frying-pan cover balanced on top to diffuse its glare. Reading to the laptop, I remembered what professors had told me in graduate school: nobody knows exactly how medieval French sounded.”

Marleen writes: “I thoroughly enjoyed this chance to give voice to the beautiful, theologically challenging, poetic, intensely human text that Marguerite Porete’s Mirror is. It was fun to speak the lines of the soul in Middle English. I had wanted to film with the apple trees in bloom in the background, but that didn’t work. I was filming against the light, but it was interesting to try and select a setting that would fit the soul (Latin Reason sitting in an office with books, and French Amour against a white curtain). It was amusing that some audience members noticed my glasses (decidedly un-medieval) — I hope they also noticed the beauty of the Middle English translator’s diction in his re-voicing of Marguerite’s text.” While the concept of Marleen’s glasses could easily have been understood in the Middle Ages, the style was definitely twenty-first century, and yet that seemed to make the reading all the more relevant to the audience. They also loved the setting she chose. During the last passage, Marleen’s dog barked, as if on cue, and the audience was drawn in to her performance all the more. Even though the language was unclear to the audience, the reality of the emotion and power behind the words were evident.

Choosing the passages we would read proved challenging as well.\(^{11}\) There is a lot of talk, as you might imagine, in a spiritual

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\(^{11}\) I used the Guarnieri/Verdeyen text (Marguerite Porete, Speculum simplicium animarum/ Le mirouer des simples âmes, eds. Romana Guarnieri and Paul Verdeyen [Turnhout: Brepols, 1986]) for the Middle French and Latin, and the Doiron edition (Marilyn Doiron, ed., “The Mirror of Simple Souls:
text like the *Mirror*, and the question was how we would engage the audience in the text. The opening passage to the book is a good one, as Marguerite uses it to explain why she is writing this book and the main ideas of the work. She tells us a story, using a scene from the popular romance *The Romance of Alexander*, and explains how she, like Candace from the romance, fell in love with a king she had never seen, and draws a picture of him — Candace with a painting, Marguerite with her book — so that she may feel closer to him. Love tells the story and the Soul makes the connection between the heroine of *Alexander* and herself: a nice simple passage with which to begin.

Chapter 11 of the Chantilly *Mirror* is a wonderful little question and answer session among the three primary characters. They get to interact a lot. Love laughs at many of Reason’s questions, not in a mocking way, but in a loving head-shaking way a teacher might have for a student who is still struggling to get past her own prejudices against the difficulties of a text. This one would prove the most difficult as the interactions would need to be cut together neatly so as to make the dialogue sound alive. Zan wrote of this process: “Marguerite Porete had crafted the mystical conversations so tightly that in the video it seemed as though the characters were talking to one another, even though we recorded our lines separately in different locations.”

We included the Valenciennes fragments, which amounts to much of what Chantilly records in chapters 77 and 78, because we wanted to include the older French. Zan did a wonderful job reading this section and one could really hear the difference in the language.

But chapters 85 through 88 are where the action is. This was actually the very first sequence I knew I wanted to incorporate into the video. During the conversation, Love and the Soul explain how the Soul, by the gift of noughting, has become one with God and therefore needs to answer to no one, not even God. The union being complete, the Soul is now lost in God and

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A Middle English Translation,” Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà 5 [1968]: 241–355) for the Middle English.
simply is God. Reason can no longer bear the strain and cries out: “Ah God! … How dare one say this? I dare not listen to it. I am fainting truly, Lady Soul, in hearing you; my heart is failing. I have no more life,” and promptly dies. The Soul immediately responds: “Alas! Why did it take so long, this death!” Justine’s acting really came through for us here as she sputtered the lines in Latin and then passed out stage right. The audience really reacted well — first in astonishment, as they only heard her Latin words, and then with bouts of laughter as they realized that Reason’s questioning was over.

Justine writes of her performance: “Performing the Mirror was in a sense very surreal, because as a medievalist your time is always spent reading sources, and not really thinking about how it might sound out loud, and when you do hear it read out, it brings a depth and immediacy to it that one wouldn’t normally think about. In terms of the Mirror specifically, it made me think of Marguerite herself reading out loud to listeners, and the later audiences who surely must have read it aloud to others at some point. I think that brought home to me just how much more ‘shocking’ some of her statements may have seemed when uttered aloud, rather than just being happened upon while looking contemplatively at a page.”

This last section also was important because it included lines for three new characters: Courtesy, Truth, and Nobility of the Unity of the Soul. One day while I was describing the project to a few colleagues at Dominican College, one of them — Giovanna Czander — suggested that I have those parts read in Italian, the one language I had not yet used from among the extant manuscripts, and then volunteered to read them for me. And this is the whole point of the project: here was someone who was not intimately familiar with the works of Marguerite Porete volunteering to just read the works. Giovanna is the Religious Studies professor at Dominican College and we have discussed

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12 This modern English translation used here is taken from Ellen Babinsky’s 1993 translation of the Mirror (Marguerite Porete, The Mirror of Simple Souls [New York: Paulist Press, 1993], 163).
our studies quite a bit around the office. Giovanna describes her experience this way: “Preparing to do a dramatized reading of an excerpt from Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror* gave me a surprising insight on her work. I had not realized until then how the text lends itself to being read aloud and even performed. I could almost see the characters as I read the text and imagine the possible interpretations. I had fun doing this and I realize that this playful dimension is also part of the fact that the text may have actually been a ‘play.’” Her reading, as it involved three separate characters, required her to come up with three “costumes”: a candle for Truth, a wreath for Courtesy, and a hat for the Nobility of the Unity of the Soul. While her costumes were simple, her reading was well performed and our audience enjoyed the subtleties of the various characters. I was moved by her reading, as it finally gave me an opportunity to bring the reading of this marvelous book outside of the small group of scholars who have already been associated with Marguerite and her *Mirror* and into my small college.

As I gathered the various pieces of the performances and learned how to splice them together as carefully as possible, I began to realize how this project really brought the *Mirror* to life for me. Even though I had read it several times over the years I had been working on the text, I had only once heard the text read out loud. In Paris, during the conference for the seven hundredth anniversary, several actors had read the parts out of the French Chantilly text. Now here I was hearing several of the texts read aloud by non-actors, and still feeling the power of the words. Zan Kocher as Love, cheerfully chastising Justine Trombley’s Reason, while Marleen Cré’s Soul kept the discussion moving forward. And Giovanna Czander bringing it all together as the three spectator characters who arrive to cheer on Love and the Soul and presage Reason’s death.

Finally, the night arrived to show what we had cobbled together. We were scheduled on Saturday evening just as the parties were getting started at the conference, so we ended up with a very small audience. Half the audience was made up of conference staff and my colleagues, but we did manage to draw a few
the lone medievalist as teacher

I had hoped for a few more. It was not just about having students attend a performance, but actually to get them to be part of a performance that made the difference. My intent had been to get a few volunteers from the audience to read passages from a fifth text in several of the modern translations from all the parts of the world I could find. I had with me modern versions in French, Spanish, Italian, Hungarian, and of course English. So after inundating them with the videos, I asked for volunteers to read from the modern versions.

I was delighted when Ellen Dolgin, who was at first skeptical of the relevance of the *Mirror*, read from the English text. Her own interest lies in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century stage, particularly in the writings of Shaw and the performances of his plays. Her own interest in the stage and in acting brought a whole new beauty to Marguerite’s words. Ellen wrote after the experience: “What struck me most about being with the grad students in languages/lit at NeMLA was their own excitement about the power and beauty of Marguerite’s concepts in each of the languages and the electricity we all felt when alternating voices and languages to bring the words to life. Watching the video and the exuberance and joy each felt about the courage and vision of Marguerite deepened my own already rich response to Marguerite and my urge to read more on my own.”

One of the most amusing stories that came out of this night in Toronto was Zan Kocher’s experience at a conference just a few weeks later: “In May 2015, going into a third decade of hearing papers at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, I sat down in a lecture hall and received a handout from the person passing them out, a young man I had never seen before. He gave my face a searching look and stated, in the past tense, ‘You read Marguerite Porete.’ ‘Yes,’ I agreed, thinking: that neatly sums up a quarter-century of research effort. Then I realized he must have meant that he had been in Toronto and seen the video.” A star is born!

The circle then comes back around for me. As a medievalist, my goal is to bring these ancient works back into circulation. By employing the specialties and talents of others — whether it
be their knowledge of other languages or their ability to perform — a difficult or obscure author may find new light. What I discovered through this little experiment is that in some sense all scholars are lonely in their specialties and that by working together with other disciplines we can really help clear obscurity no matter what the field. Though we had a very small audience for our first performance, the story of our accomplishment began to circulate and I have had several requests from other members of the Marguerite Porete scholar family, and a few from non-medievalist colleagues who want to perform this book they’ve heard about from me and from several of the other people in my office. As part of my regular teaching obligations, I have had the opportunity to bring *Beowulf*, Chaucer, and Shakespeare to my students, but I have also uncovered a way to bring a few of the less likely works to them as well.

I suppose I can’t really take credit for coming up with the “Let’s put on a show” trope, and perhaps we didn’t save the orphanage or rescue Granny, but I do believe that our little show could be a way to make the medievalist in a general education college just a little less lonely. With new technologies, medievalists can work together across distances, and with performance, we can reach beyond our own specialty to make these works relevant again to students (and colleagues) in all fields.