

❖ CHAPTER ONE ❖

NOBILITY AS HISTORICAL REALITY AND
THEOLOGICAL MOTIF

Most students of western European history are familiar with a trifunctional model of medieval social organization. Commonly associated with modern scholar Georges Duby and found in medieval documents in various forms, this model compartmentalizes medieval society into those who pray (*oratores*), those who fight (*bellatores*), and those who work (*laboratores*).¹ The appeal of this popular classification is, in part, its neatness, yet that is also its greatest fault. As Giles Constable explains in an extended essay, such a classification relies too fully on occupational status and thus obscures more fruitful and at times overlapping ways of classifying individuals and groups.² Constable explores other social classifications, such as those based on gender or marital status; founded on age or generation, geographical location, or ethnic origin; rooted in earned merit, function, rank, or on level of responsibility; and based in inborn or inherited status. Some social systems express a necessary symbiosis of roles within society (such as clergy, warriors, and laborers), while others assert a hierarchy of power and prestige (such as royal, aristocratic, and common, or lord and serf). Certain divisions, such as those based on ancestry, can be considered immutable in individuals although their valuation in a given society can fluctuate. Others, such as status in the eyes of the church, might admit of change in individuals (through, for instance, repentance)

while the standards (such as church doctrine regarding sin and repentance) might remain essentially static over time.

Constable's call for alternative ways of conceiving medieval social structure aids the reader of Porete's *Mirror*, in which a trifunctional model is of little relevance. As explained more fully in the following chapters, Porete adopts as her central image an immutable, inborn nobility of certain chosen souls. This crux of her exclusive and revolutionary theology derives, at least in part, from a pivotal social distinction in the secular world. It is the task of this chapter to show that despite—or perhaps because of—its labile nature, the term *noble* became a powerful part of the late medieval theological imagination. In particular, a debate swirled around the distinction between nobility of blood or nobility of virtue in the later Middle Ages, and the clamor of this debate echoed in literature and theological writing. In Porete's time, nobility in the secular world was associated more often with foundation in an ancient race than with earned social status, and the consequences of this emphasis can be seen in Porete's writing as well as in her unfortunate fate.

The shifting and ambiguous nature of the terms *nobility* and *noble* makes certainty in definition difficult—if not impossible—for the historian. Maurice Keen, for instance, readily admits that his conclusions—and those of other scholars—are necessarily inconsistent.

Late medieval ideas about nobility, it seems to me, did not owe their shape to any single, unitary influence. Rather, in an effort to make sense of contemporary conditions, and to explain what was of value in current conventions, what valueless and unacceptable, writers on the subject blended a series of approaches, Christian, chivalrous, Aristotelian, Romanist and humanist.³

Porete and the authors with whom she is compared in this work mixed a variety of sources in their works and thus none of them can be said to express one “correct” definition of nobility. They each use the term to express a spiritual or social ideal in a complex and changing world. A true synthesis of such disparate usages would be impossible and, worse, unfair to the sources it aims to reconstruct. One can certainly provide interpretive answers to certain questions, such as: Who comprised the medieval nobility? Was that nobility granted based on merit, or was it inherited through a long family line? If one were noble in blood, must one then be noble in deed as well in order to maintain that status? If one was noble in deed alone but born to a low station, might one be considered truly noble? What qualities of character would one expect to find in noble individuals or families? One can venture answers to these questions, but the answers are not neat.

Many authors and texts could be chosen to illustrate the range of uses for the term *nobility* in literary and theological works. The authors chosen here are an exclusive few, chosen to represent a certain range of possibilities

for “nobility” and “noble” in theological and mystical contexts.⁴ These include Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (935–1000), who follows traditional martyrology language in associating nobility with beauty and fine bearing, and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who called for eliminating worldly distinctions within the folds of monastic institutions. This examination will look especially closely at three perspectives: *Le Roman de la Rose*, Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), and Hadewijch of Brabant (thirteenth century). Explicit similarities and divergences with Porete will be explored more fully in the book’s conclusion. Unfortunately, the scope of this work excludes many other relevant writers and texts.⁵ All of these sources do illustrate in important ways the power of social classification (and nobility in particular), yet only a few can be chosen here as representatives of key “types” of theological speculation.⁶ This survey will highlight some of the essential theological constructions Porete imposes on the term *nobility* (and the closely related term *lineage*) in her *Mirror of Simple Souls*, which will be explored more fully in the following chapters.⁷

RECONSTRUCTING THE MEDIEVAL NOBILITY

This investigation assumes that Porete did not set out to describe the social world in which she found herself, although it assumes a degree of correlation between the literary and theological use of these motifs and its basis in social fact.⁸ This study does not aim at a single, clear picture or at a simplified definition of what proves to be a tremendously abstruse term. As noted above, the modern lack of consensus on the issue seems simply to replicate the lack of consensus in medieval sources. Maurice Keen explains this conundrum as follows:

If one asks how [late medieval people] could hope to have it so many ways, to maintain for instance that virtue was the foundation of true nobility but that princely recognition was essential to make it valid while at the same time proclaiming the acceptability of the hereditary principle, the answer is, simply, that they are reflecting the tensions and ambiguities of contemporary aspirations and of contemporary conditions.⁹

In short, lack of clarity on this issue is a reflection of the rapidly changing society from which these sources come, one that was assimilating a money economy, a growing merchant class, and an influx of new spiritual movements, as described in more detail in the following chapter.¹⁰ Porete found herself in the maelstrom of these changes, and her response to them certainly contributed to the shape of her theology.

Lucid and contemporary theorizing about any given social order is rare, yet awareness of social order is ubiquitous. All individuals in all societies are

enmeshed in social orders that affect and even direct their movements and potential. This is apparent in a range of written sources. Literature, legal charters, chronicles, wills, and theological works often attest to a concern for and awareness of “the powers that be” and the horizon for advancement or change in any given time or place. Consider, for instance, the figure of the Bel Inconnu of Arthurian legend, who is ignorant of his ancestry only to realize he is of a lineage of brave knights; the increased use of *sermones ad status* in the later Middle Ages; or the *debats d'honneur* and *specula* for those in many walks of life, both of which were popular in the later Middle Ages into the Renaissance.¹¹

Or consider the ways in which early Christians found ways to both reflect or reject the prevailing social order in which they found themselves.¹² As Wayne Meeks points out in *The First Urban Christians*, early Christians used kinship terms to describe relationships within the group. Those terms were symbolic of a hierarchy that had been theoretically expunged, because members of the group were understood to be united by common possession of the Spirit and thus equal.¹³ This unity set the growing Christian community against (or above) its pagan neighbors while aiming for equality within the group. The rhetoric of Paul's letters aims at an ideal of eliminating markers of hierarchy or differentiation within the group. For instance, in Galatians 3:28, Paul tells his readers that among those who accept Christian doctrine, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”¹⁴ This rhetoric underscores the ideal that Jesus conferred saving grace to all who follow him.

This aspect of Pauline rhetoric never found a foothold in the world (if it was ever meant to). Internal differentiation set in quickly as certain individuals came to be thought to possess “more Spirit” than others, evidenced in, for instance, the rising “cult of the saints” described so vividly by Peter Brown or the growing hierarchy of church offices. As Christianity became institutionalized, it followed the timeworn rule that true egalitarianism exists only temporarily in any society. Indeed, the medieval church that derived from this seed of equality became defined by an intense focus on merit and hierarchy. From Charlemagne's plea to “Let everyone serve God faithfully in that order in which he is placed” to Pope Gregory VII's statement that “The dispensation of divine providence ordered that there should be distinct grades and orders,” the Western Christian world has tended to value a merit-based, hierarchical system of works while accepting that individuals are born to certain stations in life.¹⁵

The huge historical corpus of interpretations of the medieval nobility attests to two enduring truths: a notable lack of consensus on some of the most basic lines of inquiry coupled with a great silence on the issue from the perspective of historical theology.¹⁶ Both the interest and lack of consensus

stem in part from the many contradictory or ambiguous references to nobility and lineage found in medieval chronicles, legal documents, and literary works. “Lineage” is relatively easy to define: a lineage (Old French *lignage*, *lygnage*, or Latin *genus*) denotes an unbroken line of consanguinity, usually through the male line. The emergence of genealogies in the eleventh and twelfth centuries signals a growing consciousness of lineages in medieval culture, leading one scholar to assert that “the rise of the *lignage* family was the fundamental social fact of thirteenth century France.”¹⁷ The power of noble lineages led, in some cases, to seeking out or appropriating ancestors, because recalling eminent founding figures or epic origins legitimated claims to high social and moral status. In consequence, these lineages were, at times, completely mythic. Even so, they remain an important witness to the tremendous power of a single idea from which others spring. That idea, put simply, is that blood matters in establishing worldly power.¹⁸

“Nobility,” however, remains a protean puzzle. The Latin *nobilis* (Old French *gentil*, *franche*) and *nobilitas* (Old French *noblesse*, *noblece*, or *gentilece*, *franchise*) were commonly associated with terms such as *clarissimus*, *praeclarus*, *illustris*, and *venerabilis* and were often—although not always—divided into *genere nobilis* (noble by birth) or *divitiis nobilis* (noble by wealth/merit), as described below.¹⁹ Modern scholars have encountered difficulty in establishing unambiguous definitions; as a case in point, one standard dictionary lists seven definitions of *nobilis* in use during the Middle Ages.²⁰ An overarching generalization can be made that, prior to the twelfth century, “noble” was a term used primarily in learned, largely ecclesiastical circles; after the twelfth century, it gained more widespread usage in secular society.²¹ Yet within that range, scholars are faced with a dizzying array of viewpoints, as one finds reference to an abstract “nobility” of character or bearing, to nobility as a social class, to noble acts and noble things and noble institutions, to ennobling oneself through works, to inheriting nobility through the mother’s line or the father’s line, to the relative “level” of nobility of certain professions.²²

The complexity and quantity of the sources continues to feed the scholarly debate, which began in earnest in the 1960s.²³ Marc Bloch could perhaps be credited with initiating the ongoing discussions and disagreements regarding the origins and nature of the European nobility.²⁴ Bloch insists that nobility as a distinct social class arose in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when the basis of social status shifted from merit to inheritance. According to Bloch, those who held aristocratic power from late antiquity until the eleventh century did not do so based on inherited power; rather, they earned their status through personal ambition and ability. Hence, there was no officially recognized nobility of blood prior to the eleventh century. Yet this view, which was considered a breakthrough in its time, has been seriously challenged in various ways by Georges Duby, Gerd Tellenbach, Léopold Genicot,

and others.²⁵ These changes have been due, in part, to the changing interests and methodologies of scholars.²⁶ Some scholars have argued for more complex reconstructions of the ideas of nobility and lineage or have aimed to reconstruct the daily life of nobles as closely as possible.²⁷ Constance Bouchard, for instance, has shown that scholarly debates over the purported “newness” or “oldness” of medieval nobility have been overly simplistic by arguing for the Carolingian roots of the purported “new” nobility.²⁸ Others have turned to regional studies.²⁹ None have focused exclusively on themes of nobility and lineage in spiritual texts.

Throughout these studies, however, one anthropological and theological theme continually arises, as it did in the Middle Ages. The problem is summed up (and purportedly solved) by a well-known contemporary of Porete. Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) writes in *Il Convivio* that “if Adam himself was noble, we are all noble, and if he was base, we are all base, which eradicates any distinction between these conditions and so eradicates the conditions themselves.”³⁰ He goes on to argue that “nobility” is earned through virtuous conduct and that nobility must be “engendered anew” in succeeding generations. Dante argues that nobility is, in short, “the perfection of the nature proper to each thing,” including plants and animals and inanimate objects.³¹ He refutes those who claim that nobility is based on inherited wealth and fine manners, passed on through time. No, he insists, riches are intrinsically ignoble and lineage alone neither ensures nor confers nobility, as a lineage itself has no soul and thus cannot be correctly called noble.³²

So let none of the Uberti of Florence or the Visconti family of Milan say “Because I am of such a race I am noble,” for the divine seed does not fall upon a race (that is, family stock) but on individuals; and as will be proved below, family stock does not make individuals noble, although individuals make family stock noble.³³

Nobility is thus a quality earned through virtue and good character.

Here Dante rehearses a well-worn argument: human beings, all descended from one forbear, have no other way to distinguish themselves other than through virtue or vice.³⁴ For Dante, lineage confers nothing nor does it rescue the bad man from his ways; in fact, more is required of those who are high-born. “Thus he who is descended of noble stock through his father or some ancestor, and is also evil, is not only base but basest and deserving of contempt and scorn more than any other ill-bred person.”³⁵ It is not surprising that this view is found in so many other texts, since it provides an answer to a key social and theological dilemma that is based on quantifiable works and behaviors.³⁶ Nor is it surprising that it was a mainstay of much Christian anthropology. Adam, as the sinful progenitor of humanity, was thought to have bequeathed sinfulness to his descendants. The only hope to distinguish

oneself from the mass of sinful humanity was through works and virtues, aided by divine grace. Those on this side of the argument held that humanity was descended from one root and that, therefore, only individual moral excellence (*probitas morum*) distinguishes one individual from another.³⁷ Such a system rewards those who strive. Yet this was not the only possible solution, as Porete assures her readers, because it overlooks the power of an “ontological” nobility.

The discussion in Dante’s *Convivio* gets at a central issue in both medieval and modern debates over the medieval nobility: is blood or merit the primary arbiter in determining noble status? Scholars have uncovered a tendency by the twelfth century to privilege nobility of blood over nobility of virtue.³⁸ According to Maurice Keen, around the twelfth century lineage began to take “pride of place over vocation” in establishing nobility, thus narrowing but not completely eliminating the chances that knights and others could earn a noble title.³⁹ Nobility came to rest on the notion of foundation in an ancient race and inborn authority and power, while knighthood was achieved largely through prowess and public military service.⁴⁰ Nobility and knighthood, once considered identical by scholars, were not necessarily linked. Nobility was at times declared by royal certificate in the form of patents of nobility; at other times, that certificate merely underscored a recognized family lineage.⁴¹

In an important sense, of course, these two categories were not mutually exclusive, yet one was always given higher status in determining nobility, as we will see in Porete’s *Mirror*. In general, those who were noble by blood were expected to be virtuous in deed, and those who were virtuous in deed could thereby uncover a “hidden” nobility.⁴² Yet before delving further into the debate about blood or virtue, it is possible to present a description of characteristics shared by those called “noble,” apart from how the status was attained. For instance, nobles commonly were expected to own property and a common patronym that was possessed by all members of the lineage.⁴³ In secular custom, the title of “noble” came to be granted only to those who possessed fixed, inalienable property, transferred through the generations of one family in unbroken succession. This property belonged to the lineage itself rather than to individuals. Linked to this fixed residence was a family name, often related closely to the name of the family castle, giving the lineage an identity based on geographical rootedness.⁴⁴ Family identity was also promoted in several public ways; for instance, through family gifts to monasteries and through other charitable works done in the family name. This fixed residence of noble families contrasts markedly with the mobility of the growing merchant class, which can be said to have experienced more change in location and status than the landed nobles. This theme of rootedness is found in many theological texts. Another common attribute was freedom from mundane affairs and a

direct link to the monarch. Nobles enjoyed unparalleled political liberty and immunity from certain laws. As Léopold Genicot asserts in the following passage, the late medieval noble was defined primarily by his freedom in many spheres:

At the end of the middle ages the image of the noble was fully delineated: he was a person directly linked to the sovereign, free from all banal exactions, authorized to judge, exempt from the parochial system, a man who neither worked nor traded.⁴⁵

It is no surprise to note that nobles often comprised much of the ruling class.⁴⁶ And it is not surprising that this element became prominent in theological works: the noble soul is the soul closest to God.

Yet a noble was defined not only by what he owned or by his extraordinary rights; in fact, noble behavior and bearing were tremendously important. This code was based in large part on courtly models. Nobles were expected to embody such virtues as prowess, courage, loyalty, and largesse, and thus to distinguish themselves physically and morally from commoners. Closely connected to this idea was an overwhelming moral denotation, in which nobility was associated with good character, moral worth, magnanimity, and ethical goodness.⁴⁷ Nobles were thus united to one another and easily recognized by others, as described below in the writings of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. These common attributes were the raw material on which theological and literary writers built: a common name, property, certain privileges, freedom, a distinguished code of conduct, and a high level of education relative to others. As we shall see, rather free reinterpretations abound.

These interrelated themes are found often in mystical texts, particularly those that adopt themes from the so-called "courtly love tradition," which itself has been the subject of much scholarly wrangling.⁴⁸ This investigation is not centrally concerned with this tradition and its influence on mystical writing; nevertheless, many themes predominate in the courtly love tradition that will arise here. To put it very briefly, in the courtly love model starting with the writings of troubadours, the focus of drama is on the relation of reverence and proper behavior between a lover (the poet) and the beloved, who is both socially and morally superior to the lover and thus unattainable. She describes in courtly language the anguishing distance and nearness of God to the soul who longs for Him.⁴⁹ The beloved appears to embody all virtue, and the poet reveres her and obeys her will, enduring all trials and distance for the sake of this lofty love. The love of a relatively low-status individual for a superior was thought to be particularly ennobling. In these tales, only the noblest of lovers can endure all trials for the sake of such a seemingly hopeless and endless love; only the noblest of lovers can be entirely *simplece*, without duplicity, fully loyal to the beloved. This yearning and thwarted desire for a faroff beloved

can be found as a commonplace in twelfth- and thirteenth-century literature and will be represented below primarily by Hadewijch of Brabant.

HROTSVIT OF GANDERSHEIM: THE BEAUTY OF HIGH BIRTH

Porete certainly adopts many of these themes, as will be seen more fully in the following chapters. Yet she twists themes of nobility and lineage and “courtly love” in revolutionary ways; the authors examined here also adopt and transform themes and expressions from these loosely connected “traditions.” Perhaps the simplest example is provided by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (c. 935–1000), a writer of hagiographic plays who spent much of her life as a Benedictine nun at the convent in Gandersheim. She is commonly regarded as the first German woman poet.⁵⁰ Social status—and particularly noble status—plays a central role in her creative image making.⁵¹ She thus joins a long tradition of associating the outer physical status of the human being with inner worth: the evil, the bad, the corrupt are described as ugly, while the noble, the good, the valiant are described as beautiful.⁵² Examples of this abound in her writing as they do in early church martyrologies.⁵³

For instance, she praises the benevolence of a noble wife in the following way:

Of noble descent she was, endowed with special gifts,
And counted mighty kings among her fine ancestors.
Her noble countenance shone forth in stellar beauty,
Wondrously reflecting her worthy family line.⁵⁴

Here Hrotsvit follows the model of praising illustrious ancestors, which have endowed their descendants with a physical mark of greatness that reflects their inner goodness. One encounters this emphasis on noble bearing throughout Hrotsvit’s works. In her tale of “The Martyrdom of the Holy Virgins Agape, Chionia, and Hirena,” Diocletian remarks to one of the women he has imprisoned that “The renown of your free and noble descent / and the brightness of your beauty demand / that you be married to one of the foremost men of my court.”⁵⁵ Here the ideal is that such extraordinary beauty must be preserved through careful breeding. Likewise, in the “Martyrdom of the Holy Virgins Fides, Spes, and Karitas,” the Emperor Hadrian remarks of the young girls before him that

The beauty of every one of them stuns my senses;
I cannot stop admiring the nobility of their bearing,
their many excellences . . .
You appear to be of noble descent.
I would like to know from where you came,
who are your ancestors, and what is your name?⁵⁶

The girls' mother, Sapientia, responds that she knows that pride in ancestry is not becoming to a Christian, she is not afraid to describe her family's eminence. Hadrian responds that "The splendor of your noble ancestry illumines your face;/and wisdom, inherent in your name, flows in your speech's grace."⁵⁷ Again, Hrotsvit follows the traditional portrait of the martyr: physically beautiful and noble in bearing, able to withstand persecution and easily recognized as especial holiness. Hrotsvit here represents a much wider usage, in which external acts and physical beauty are significant signs of an inner nobility, of interior peace and fortitude, and of enduring virtue. Porete does not adopt this particular usage, except insofar as the annihilated soul appears beautiful to God. Hildegard of Bingen uses this theme as shown below, yet her practical understandings of social status within the convent are perhaps more relevant to Porete's writing.

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN: ELITISM UPHELD

Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098 of noble parents and died in 1179 in Rupertsberg, where she had served as abbess. Hildegard was a precocious visionary and reformer who wrote lyric poems, musical compositions, treatises on medicine, many letters, hagiographical biographies, and the monumental *Scivias* (1141–1152).⁵⁸ This work, meant to be a comprehensive account of the Creator's care and plans for his creatures, presents twenty-six prophetic, apocalyptic visions focusing on the church, the divine-human relationship, and redemption. It depicts humanity as the exalted image of God, the supreme reflection of the divinity; nevertheless, that image is fallen and in need of grace. In her view, human beings are microcosms of the whole, granted free will and a powerful intellect. In her cosmology, all of creation yearns to return to its Creator, yet this return will never be complete during human life on earth. The human soul wanders in a harsh and unforgiving land of exile, a prodigal daughter "driven from [her] inheritance" who seeks to return from her path of error.⁵⁹ The *Scivias* and selections from her letters form the core of this investigation.⁶⁰

Like Hrotsvit, Hildegard employs "noble" most often as a modifier for the highest virtues to show that they endow their possessor with impregnability and ensured success.⁶¹ "Noble" becomes a staple descriptor throughout her works as she connects nobility and outward appearance and bearing. For instance, she describes Christ as a youthful man who is pale, manly, and noble in appearance. He is both beautiful and pale, poor yet noble.

His face is manly and noble, for He is the strong Lion who has destroyed death and the noble Sinless One Who was visibly born of the virgin. But he is pale; for He did not seek earthly honor by earthly means, but was gentle, poor and humble with a holy humility.⁶²

Here strength and beauty and nobility come together in one supreme exemplar.⁶³ Yet other things, such as cities, church buildings, and certain individuals (chaste priests and virgins, for example), can share in such nobility; that is, they can be impenetrable, victorious, beyond corruption.⁶⁴ They cannot be breached. Church buildings, for instance, those built with “the most noble of stones,” will stand indefinitely.⁶⁵ Her personification of Judaism in the form of a huge woman named Synagogue, for instance, “foreshadowed the bulwarks and defenses of the noble and chosen City,” the triumphant Christianity.⁶⁶ Hildegard exults that Christians can proudly state, “I take off the Old Testament, and I put on the noble Son of God with His justice in holiness and truth.”⁶⁷ She extends this physical strength to the very physical body of Jesus Christ and of those who embody His example of patience and constancy.⁶⁸

Yet Hildegard’s adoption of this motif also has practical implications. Hildegard insists, for instance, on the value of what she sees as eternal distinctions “between people of inner and outer life, spiritual and secular people, and greater and lesser people.”⁶⁹ God has established ranks for all creatures, including the angels. Hildegard is careful to point out that “they are all loved by God, although they are not equal in rank.”⁷⁰ The goal of the human life on earth is to do well in one’s given rank, safe in the knowledge that God loves all for their merit, humility, and works.⁷¹ This and other passages give us important insight into Hildegard’s social vision, in which individuals can move between levels, both spiritually and in the secular realm, yet in which one’s rank is always considered of paramount importance.⁷²

Hildegard is quite open in asserting a necessary hierarchy in the world if not on a spiritual plane, as well as in insisting on inborn characteristics proper to given ranks. Certain traits and types of knowledge are natural to the noble. For instance, Hildegard proposes an analogy of a king who, lacking a body of matured noble warriors, gathers an army of common folk who seem suitable for leadership. Later, however, “as justice required,” the matured offspring of the nobles are promoted beyond the commoners as commanders of the army.⁷³ This parable makes it clear that certain characteristics are inherent in the noble that can only be approximated in the commoner: given a choice, commanders will chose those born with certain abilities over those who might learn them. The attributes of the warrior, including courage and steadfastness, can be found “inborn” in those of noble lineage.

This notion of inborn attributes extends to Hildegard’s ideas about the redemption of fallen humanity. The noblest soul of all is Jesus Christ, the noble son of God who opened heaven. God explains to Hildegard in a vision that “because Adam transgressed My precept, he and his race were without a law until the time that prefigured the nobility of My Son.”⁷⁴ Her depictions of this ransoming depends on seed and fertility metaphors, both of which imply lineage and inborn characteristics. For instance, “God gave the earth a new

vigor when Noah brought forth in his vineyard that noble seed of obedience which Adam, like a wanton boy, rejected in his foolishness.⁷⁵ Those who reject heaven are “cut off from the noble work of God’s hands, from all honor and from the beatitude of the celestial vision, and exiled from the Living Fruit and the root of the Just Tree.”⁷⁶

It is clear that this salvation could not be accomplished by any other than Jesus Christ. He was of “the root of Jesse, who was the foundation of the royal race from which the stainless mother had her origin.”⁷⁷ Jesus came from a human mother of the proper lineage at the necessary juncture in history, to ransom a human race initially created for the high calling of spiritual nobility. She writes, “But when the human race was created, oh!oh!oh! the noble Seed, and oh!oh!oh! the sweetest Offshoot, the Son of God, was born human at the end of times for the sake of humanity.”⁷⁸ In short, Adam cut humanity off from its rightful lineage, and Jesus Christ restored it.⁷⁹ For fallen humans, then, the only way to recover the lost nobility is to imitate Christ’s high nobility and resolute endurance. God helps those who resist despair, she says, patiently enduring despite the difficulties such a soul must encounter.⁸⁰ Virtues lead to “the members of Christ” becoming “nobly perfected in splendor and united to their Head.”⁸²

It seems, from the above description, that all of humanity was leveled by Adam’s sin. Yet, for Hildegard, both earthly and heavenly life are hierarchically ordered, with God as the noblest of all.⁸³ This hierarchy is designed by God for the good of all. “For in secular affairs there are lesser and greater nobles, servants and followers; and in spiritual matters there are the excellent and the superior, the obeyers and the enforcers.”⁸⁴ These distinctions are determined by divine institution in direct response to human selfishness.

There was excess and vaunting because no people honored any other people, and everyone was doing as he pleased; and this would have continued if God, in His infinite wisdom, had not done away with it. Therefore, He made distinctions between one people and another. He made the lesser subject to the greater in the service of obedience, and made the greater help and serve the lesser with intelligence and devotion, just as it was granted to Jacob by his father, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to be lord of his brothers.⁸⁵

It is clear that, to Hildegard, God has made each of his creatures to fulfill a particular role. She goes further in Letter 6, in which she reports to Pope Eugenius what the “Living Light” had said to her. She explains that those “sealed” with balsam on foreheads will remain sealed and will thereafter have no business with the unsealed.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the unsealed can cross over and associate with the sealed, thereby aiming for the better part.

Perhaps the most telling example of Hildegard’s world view comes in her correspondence with Mistress Tengswich, Prioress of Echternach. It is

certainly the most discussed. Tengswich writes first to Hildegard to inquire about “strange and irregular” practices in the Rupertsburg convent. Some of those practices are related to the apparent immodesty of the virgins on feast days, which seems to deny the words of 1Tim 2:9. Tengswich goes on:

Moreover, that which seems no less strange to us is the fact that you admit into your community only those women from noble, well-established families and absolutely reject others who are of lower birth and of less wealth. Thus we are struck with wonder and are reeling in confusion when we ponder quietly in our heart that the Lord himself brought into the primitive Church humble fishermen and poor people, and that, later, at the conversion of the gentiles, the blessed Peter said: “In truth, I perceive that God is no respecter of persons” [Acts 10:34; cf. Rom 2:11]. Nor should you be unmindful of the words of the Apostle in Corinthians: “Not many mighty, not many noble, but God hath chosen the contemptible and ignoble things of this world” [1 Cor 1:26–28].⁸⁷

Tengswich thus accuses Hildegard of breaking with church tradition and denying the authority of scripture in establishing an elitist standard for members of the Rupertsburg convent.

Hildegard responds that her view concurs with the divine plan. God Himself ensures that lower orders not overtake higher as is shown in the stories of Satan and Adam, who “wanted to fly higher than they had been placed” and were duly punished.⁸⁸ Earthly rank and difference must be respected, and one must practice humility when among equals. She illustrates this with a metaphor from the realm of animal husbandry. Who, she asks, “would gather all his livestock indiscriminately into one barn—the cattle, the asses, the sheep, the kids?” They must be kept separate, she insists,

lest people of varying status, herded all together, be dispersed through the pride of their elevation, on the one hand, or the disgrace of their decline, on the other, and especially lest the nobility of their character be torn asunder when they slaughter one another out of hatred. Such destruction naturally results when the higher order falls upon the lower, and the lower rises above the higher.⁸⁹

Hildegard here appeals to divine inspiration, rather to the text of the New Testament as does Tengswich.⁹⁰ Hildegard has been criticized by modern scholars for this elitism; Peter Dronke, for instance, even goes so far as to criticize Hildegard on this point, imagining she was capable of rising higher than this level.⁹¹ Emilie Zum Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard seem to concur with Dronke when they note that “in spite of the universal character of her visions, Hildegard did not go beyond the feudal conceptions of her age. For she defined a hierarchical theory of convent life, as opposed to a more evangelical experience.”⁹² These authors seem to see Hildegard from Tengswich’s

perspective: as a renegade against a divine decree of egalitarianism in church. Yet in this regard, Porete and Hildegard are soulmates. For both, what might be perceived as “snobbishness” is firmly based in an understanding of personal divine illumination. Bernard of Clairvaux had another interpretation of the divine decree.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX: EGALITARIANISM UPHELD

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), founder and abbot of the Cistercian abbey of Clairvaux and a leading churchman of his day, was a noted mystic who wrote extensively on political, theological, spiritual, and ecclesiastical issues.⁹³ This investigation will look most closely at his letters, in large part because they span the gap between his theological agenda and his pastoral efforts. Bernard is perhaps the foremost representative of the tradition of using images and metaphors from feudal life and chivalry in didactic, spiritual writing.⁹⁴ For Bernard, human life—and monastic life in particular—is an ongoing military-style combat: one becomes a *miles Christi* not only by crusading against the infidels but by embodying *imitatio Christi*. His interests and his language favor images of military battles and Christian knighthood and he uses the term *nobility* explicitly within those contexts.⁹⁵ Yet Bernard is a worthy counterpart for this examination because he eschewed ideas of ordained hierarchy in the hopes of establishing “classless” institutions, whether monastic or military. Like Hildegard and Hrotsvit, Bernard was himself of a noble family, yet he insisted that “in nature, none is inferior, none superior; none is placed ahead or behind; and none is noble or nonnoble, for nature creates us all equal.”⁹⁶ Accordingly, distinctions among individuals must be made according to merit, not on the basis of status at birth.⁹⁷ Bernard’s theological anthropology is stated in a brief below:

To use terms familiar to you: man is a rational and mortal animal. The one we are by the grace of the Creator, the other as a consequence of sin. By our reason we share in the nobility of the angels, by our mortality in the weakness of animals.⁹⁸

What one does with one’s mortal and weak state is at stake in Bernard’s writings, which are imbued with ideas about mystical union with God. Part of the preparation for such a high goal is the shedding of earthly honor. In his extensive correspondence, Bernard urges his fellow nobles to jettison their noble status and secular power in exchange for the greater nobility of service to the church.⁹⁹ For instance, Bernard writes to a noble youth who he believes is wasting his intellect and “noble bearing” in futile secular study “when they would be so much better used in the service of Christ.” If the youth would but give up his riches and give himself to God,

[God] will take away all those gifts which have earned you such spectacular, but such treacherous, applause in your own country. Noble birth, a lithe body, a comely appearance, a distinguished bearing, are great acquisitions, but the credit of them belongs to him who gave them.¹⁰⁰

Here one sees Bernard referring to the traditional association of nobility and appearance. Yet he does not value these worldly attributes, including notoriety, as they are meaningless in comparison to the higher calling of the Christian. Bernard also wrote to one of a group of noble youths, all of whom turned their lives to church service. He begins by quoting 1 Cor. 1:26, which Mistress Tengswich had also chosen in making her point to Hildegard.

I read that God did not choose “many noble, many wise, or many mighty” but now contrary to the usual rule he has converted by his wonderful power a whole band of such. They have deemed the glory of this world worthless; they have trampled on the flower of their youth; they have held their noble lineage of no account; they have considered worldly wisdom foolishness . . . all the privileges, honours, and dignities of their position they have treated as things no better than dung that they might gain Christ.¹⁰¹

His companion letter to the youth’s parents explains that “[i]f God is making your son his own, as well as yours, so that he may become even richer, even more noble, even more distinguished and, what is better than all this, so that from being a sinner he may become a saint, what do either you or he lose?”¹⁰² In Bernard’s view, abandoning worldly social status has infinite rewards. And the sacrifice is more meaningful if it is greater: to give up noble worldly status is harder than abandoning worldly penury.

Bernard does sanction the nobility of virtue, most particularly when it is found in those least likely to display it: those of the worldly nobility. He despise worldly riches and praises those who embrace poverty.

The title of poverty is a noble one, which God himself is pleased to commend through the mouth of his Prophet when he says: “I am the man that sees my poverty.” Poverty is a surer title to nobility than all the purple and pearls of a king.¹⁰³

Here “nobility” is clearly not worldly nobility but spiritual nobility: high status before God if not before other people. Yet status in the world cannot be completely overlooked. Bernard writes that “it is not easy to know whether the baser sort lack the glory of the world by their own choice or by force of circumstances. I certainly praise anyone who is virtuous through necessity, but I praise far more her who is virtuous by the free choice of her will.”¹⁰⁴ Likewise, in a letter to the virgin Sophia, he takes the opportunity to note that few nobles take this path, and he implies that the difficulty in giving up worldly

riches makes the sacrifice all the more praiseworthy and virtuous than it is for those to whom poverty is a "necessity."

Again, he begins by quoting the passage from 1 Corinthians:

"Not many noble, but the base things the world hath God chosen." Hence you are indeed blessed amongst others of your rank, because while they are contending for worldly glory you, by your very contempt for it, are exalted much more gloriously and by a far truer glory. You are far more distinguished and honorable for being one of so few than for being one of a great family. For what you have been able to do by the grace of God is yours, but what you have by your birth is the gift of your ancestors. And what is yours is all the more precious for being so rare.¹⁰⁵

Bernard thus notes that moral vigor accompanied by inherited nobility is rare. He remarks that "God is not at all a respecter of persons and yet, I don't know why it is, virtue is far more pleasing in the nobility. Perhaps because it is more evident."¹⁰⁶ Bernard welcomed former worldly nobles into the folds of his monastic institutions, stressing the new identity as monk that excluded any advantage based on birth and emphasized the acquisition of humble merit. His ideas are perhaps best expressed in his "In Praise of New Knighthood." In that short work, Bernard praises the knights by remarking that "[t]here is no distinction of persons among them, and deference is shown to merit rather than to noble blood. They rival one another in mutual consideration, and they carry one another's burdens, thus fulfilling the law of Christ."¹⁰⁷ This idea of earning merit for oneself is continually reiterated in *Le Roman de la Rose*.

LE ROMAN DE LA ROSE: THE NOBILITY OF VIRTUE

Le Roman de la Rose was perhaps the most influential vernacular allegorical poem of the Middle Ages. It was written by Guillaume de Lorris, who wrote the first 4,000 lines of the tale between 1225 and 1230, and Jean de Meun, who continued the work (albeit in a distinctive vein) and finished it in the 1270s.¹⁰⁸ Little is known of these authors, and the evidence for their dual authorship, generally accepted by scholars, is provided only within the text itself. The *Roman* is an account of a young man's dream, in which he falls in love, is separated from his beloved, endures torments during the separation, and overcomes several obstacles before finally possessing his beloved. This is a conventional plot for a courtly romance. This tale has survived in hundreds of manuscripts, all of which testify to the text's tremendous popularity from the time of its writing through the sixteenth century. The vast corpus of critical work on this text attests to its enduring fascination for modern scholars.¹⁰⁹ The *Roman de la Rose* provides an engaging secular counterpart to the *Mirror of Simple Souls* in several important ways. Perhaps most importantly,

the allegorical structure of the *Roman* was widely influential in teaching those of Porete's generation how to express abstractions, such as Love and, most particularly, love at a distance. This is evident in the allegorical dialogue form of the *Mirror*. Even more similarities can be found in the apparent world views of each text, best seen by looking at the more theological aspects of the *Roman*.

The speculations presented by the God of Nature in the *Roman de la Rose* are founded on two fundamental assertions that are central to the plot: that human free will and divine omniscience are completely compatible, and that true nobility derives primarily from individual virtue, not from inborn class status. The cosmological system of the *Roman* rests on the notion that all created things will return to their beginning.¹¹⁰ The allegorical figure of Nature presents the example of the heavens, which revolve slowly back toward their origin so that in thirty-six thousand years they will return to the point at which God first created them.¹¹¹ God created the visible world from a blueprint that existed in his mind from eternity:

[B]efore [the world] had external existence [God] held the loveliness of its form preordained eternally in his thought. There he found the model and all that he needed. . . . Nothing had existence outside his thought, for he who has need of nothing caused all to spring from nothing. Nothing prompted him to do this except his gracious, generous, courteous will, free from envy, which is the font of all life.¹¹²

Here, as in Porete, the ideas on which the world was formed are the very thoughts of God. This notion is here blended with courtly virtues attributed to God: courtesy, largesse, and the absence of envy. All of these ideas are found also in the *Mirror*, as will be seen in the following chapters.

The *Roman* posits Nature as the former of corruptible things and God as the creator of eternal things. Nature explains that God—as a traditional triad of power, goodness, and wisdom—creates human beings eternally by his will and then entrusts Nature to form humanity in God's own image.¹¹³ Nature goes on to describe how all men, created as “new miniature worlds” (microcosms), are born through her “alike in their nakedness, strong and weak, high and low. I make them all equal in their human estate; Fortune does the rest.”¹¹⁴ Humanity, like all of created nature, will return to her origin in God; however, she will not follow the predictable pattern set by heavens or by other natural phenomenon. Humanity will return to God to face judgment for her waywardness in using her free will to remove herself from God and from the laws of nature.¹¹⁵ God foreknew this recalcitrance, yet this divine foreknowledge does not detract from human free will:

God sees [any action] now as if it had already happened. He has seen it from eternity, by true demonstration in his eternal mirror, which none

but he can polish, without taking away from free will. This mirror is God himself, from whom we took our being.¹¹⁶

Divine foreknowledge does not keep virtue, vice, and Fortune from shaping an individual's destiny.¹¹⁷ Free will, the master of both body and soul, is more powerful than destiny alone.¹¹⁸

Theoretically, no individual is excused from following reason and using free will to act in praise of God.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, it is apparent that the lover in the tale seeks his beloved with impunity while ignoring the advice of Reason. This is a crucial parallel to Porete's understanding of the ultimate fate of reason in the realm of love, as described in the following chapter. Those who wish to live in love must move beyond reason. In the *Roman de la Rose*, then, the lover places his heart and body entirely in the service of the God of Love. The lover does not, however, place himself in Love's service without the express invitation of Love; indeed, the lover must be "courteous and noble" at the outset in order to be permitted to serve the God of Love. The rewards for this service are unsurpassed.

Serving [the God of Love] is without fail painful and burdensome, but I make you a great gift, and you ought to be grateful to have such a good master and a Lord of such renown, for Love holds the standard and banner of courtesy and is of such good manners, so kind, free, and gentle, that whoever is able to serve and honor him becomes free from baseness and misconduct and from bad practice.¹²⁰

A good and gentle Lord imparts those qualities to the servant who serves him well. The servant, by serving, becomes free from baseness, from vile habits, and from impropriety. Yet he must be high-born to be allowed into the Lord's service at all, meriting the highest master and thereby attaining the highest likeness to that master. After the God of Love accepts the courteous and noble lover into vassalage, he will raise that lover to "high rank, as long as [the lover] does not relinquish it by wickedness."¹²¹ The lover, however noble, must continue to merit even his servitude.

In proper service to the God of Love, moreover, the lover loses all ability to act on his own account. "My heart is yours and not my own, for it must—for good or ill—do your will. No one can take it from you."¹²² This notion is repeated later in the narrative, when the lover reports that any pains endured in the service of Love cannot hurt him. An examination of the quest of the lovers in each of the tales (the young man in the *Roman* and the soul in the *Mirror*) reveals a shared necessity for the lover to place himself fully in the service of Love, forsaking all individual willing and all attention to the dictates of Reason. All is in the hands of God: "I," says the lover, "can no longer take an active part."¹²³ This notion is reiterated by Marguerite Porete in expressing the utter passivity of the soul in both

creation and in annihilation. The lover in the service of love is beyond harm from any created thing.¹²⁴

Yet in the *Roman*, nobility is not necessarily inborn. Clerks and others who have learned the appropriate virtues are constrained to strive toward achieving nobility and are faulted more than the simple, foolish folk (and even princes) who do not have that understanding.¹²⁵ Those who wish to attain nobility, the “most honorable thing on earth,” must proceed from goodness of heart. Low birth is not itself an impediment to attaining noble rank; indeed, Nature cites many cases in which a high-born heart was proven to be base and a low-born heart was nobler than a king’s.¹²⁶ There is considerable flexibility in this notion of nobility, which revolves primarily around the virtuous disposition of an individual’s heart and the learning that individual has had regarding proper noble behavior. Thus, Nature states clearly that “nobody is noble who is not intent on virtue, nor is anyone base except for his vices.”¹²⁷

It is apparent in the *Roman* that lineage alone is not strong enough to establish or to enable an individual to sustain virtuous conduct. Indeed, those who look to a lineage and claim nobility thereby must bear in mind that any nobility to which they lay claim as an “inheritance” was originally earned by their forebears. Noble ancestors are constrained to live up to the example set by those who came before. Nature explains that

nobility comes from good courage, for nobility of the lineage fails if it is not from goodness of heart. Thus must [the noble person] imitate the prowess of his forebears, who gained nobility though great effort. [Those forebears] took all of their virtues with them and gave only their possessions to their heirs, who received nothing else from them, neither nobility nor worth, unless they can earn nobility by works, by their sense, or by virtue.¹²⁸

To claim nobility based on lineage alone is thus to steal nobility from another: one must earn the nobility gained by one’s forebears yet again in order to lay claim to nobility.¹²⁹ The value of imitation of those forebears is reiterated several times in the text. For instance, the figure of Genius explains the value of maintaining the purity and fecundity of one’s lineage by exhorting his hearers to “Remember your excellent fathers and venerable mothers! Model your actions upon theirs, and beware of betraying your ancestry.”¹³⁰ Although nobility can be achieved by a low-born individual, it will not enter into a base heart: the noble heart is generous, courteous, gracious, compassionate, and inclined to largesse, one of the most essential virtues of the lover.¹³¹ Those who love are those who give, according to the *Roman de la Rose*: “Nobody ever knew how to love who disliked giving.”¹³² Avarice is despised by God, who loves generosity and charity.¹³³

As in the *Mirror*, those who love in anticipation of gain are merchants, who foolishly seek treasure they will never fully possess. The largesse of the

noble is contrasted to the avarice and pettiness of merchants, who never have enough and are at constant war with themselves and others. Merchants possess “wretched hearts” and are concerned only with amassing and augmenting stores of wealth, wealth that will never suffice, no matter how much it amounts to.¹³⁴ Even worse is poverty, which seems to be considered totally negative throughout this tale.¹³⁵ Noble folks possess hearts that do not love for wealth or with anticipation of profit.¹³⁶ In contrast, the merchant has set himself a nearly impossible task: to acquire property that belongs by right to others. He thus

aspires to drink the whole of the Seine but is never able to do it, because always some remains. This is the burning anguish, the everlasting torment, the agonizing conflict that tears at his vitals and tortures him with his lack; it is that the more he gains, the more he lacks.¹³⁷

The merchant is thus in servitude to a quest he cannot end. Yet those who listen to the counsel of Reason might be led to understand that those things that the merchant seeks are never properly his own. Reason insists that all people possess

something much better and more precious. Those gifts are rightly yours that you feel within you and understand so well in yourself, which remain with you always and may not leave you so as to serve others likewise. The other, external, gifts are not worth [anything] . . . for you should know that everything you own is enclosed within yourself.¹³⁸

This notion—that all that one ever needs is enclosed within—belies the efforts of merchants and others who seek worldly gain. It is the means by which nobility, once earned, is maintained. With Hadewijch of Brabant, we enter a world in which nobility is both granted eternally to the soul and must be earned in earthly life.

HADEWIJCH OF BRABANT: THE SOUL'S NOBLE IMAGE AND LIKENESS

With Hadewijch we come closest to the theological world of Marguerite Porete. Hadewijch, like Porete, was a Beguine who lived in the thirteenth century, and details of her biography are extremely scarce. It is likely that she was born into a noble family.¹³⁹ Like Porete, Hadewijch saw herself as the conduit for a truth that was hidden to all but a particular few, her fellow “brave knights.”¹⁴⁰ Like Porete, too, Hadewijch describes the fully matured noble person as untouched by commands or counsels of those “aliens” who do not understand the secret message and thus aim to destroy God. For both, the world is divided into noble and non-noble, or nobles and “alien rustics.” Both of these authors use nobility as a central theme, as a concept that significantly informs and shapes their theologies. Yet the differences between the two are