

## COURTING SANCTITY



# COURTING SANCTITY

HOLY WOMEN AND THE CAPETIANS

SEAN L. FIELD

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS

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*For Tamara Myers Field*



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## PREFACE

This book would not exist if not for Sylvain Piron's invitation to present a series of seminars in Paris at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in the spring of 2016. Given my interest in Isabelle of France and Marguerite Porete, Sylvain suggested the topic of *Les femmes saintes et la cour capétienne*, challenging me to think about whether a usable history could link a saintly princess to a condemned heretic. Jacques Dalarun, Xavier Hélary, Elizabeth A. R. Brown, and Sylvain himself graciously agreed to act as respondents for these seminars; each helped me see weaknesses in my initial arguments and perceive avenues for development. The discussions following these presentations were likewise of enormous value. Among the participants, I particularly thank Nicole Bériou, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Damien Boquet, Alain Boureau, Béatrice Delaurenti, Camille de Villeneuve, Fabien Guilloux, Anne-Françoise Leurquin-Labie, Constant Mews, Alain Provost, André Vauchez, and Xenia Von Tippelskirch.

As I worked on the book over the following year while on sabbatical from the University of Vermont, an invitation from Jennifer Edwards to give the 2016 Costello Lecture at Manhattan College allowed me to develop parallels between Isabelle and Marguerite. Ian Wei's invitation to come to Bristol in March 2017 as a Benjamin Meaker Visiting Professor at the University of Bristol's Institute for Advanced Studies gave me the opportunity to present work in progress at seminars with faculty and graduate students, and at a colloquium on Capetian sanctity organized with Cecilia Gaposchkin, Emily Guerry, and Lindy Grant. This trip to Europe also included research time in Paris and Lille funded by a UVM College of Arts and Sciences Small Grant Research Award.

Along the way Michael Bailey, Damien Boquet, Elizabeth A. R. Brown, Cecilia Gaposchkin, Madeleine Jeay, Robert E. Lerner, Alain Provost, and Walter Simons all read one or more chapter drafts, and Elizabeth Brown, Danielle Dubois, Cecilia Gaposchkin, Xavier Hélary, William Chester Jordan, Alain Provost, and Walter Simons graciously allowed me to consult not-yet-published work. Elizabeth Brown and Alain Provost provided invaluable transcriptions

of unpublished documents. Once I had a complete draft of the book, Cecilia Gaposchkin, the most generous of scholars, organized a seminar at Dartmouth College to review it. Charles Briggs, George Dameron, Christopher MacEvitt, Monika Otter, and Walter Simons went well beyond the call of scholarly duty with their critiques of the manuscript, for which their only recompense was the delicious dinner prepared afterward by Dr. Gaposchkin. After the manuscript had passed through peer review, in the spring of 2018 Miri Rubin gave the penultimate draft a meticulous reading (and then rereading), which not only improved the book but produced its title. Her enthusiasm truly infused the last phase of this project.

My perspective on Isabelle of France has been greatly enriched in the course of collaborating with Jacques Dalarun. Work with Robert E. Lerner and Sylvain Piron on Marguerite Porete has shaped my understanding of that endlessly fascinating woman. Walter Simons generously lent his time and talents to an annotated translation of the sources for Elizabeth of Spalbeek's interaction with the French court; my understanding of this episode was immeasurably enriched as a result of his unmatched expertise. Like everyone who works on Capetian history, I owe an enormous debt to Peggy Brown's unfailing willingness to share photographs and transcriptions, offer bibliographic tips, wrangle invitations, and make introductions in the service of scholarship. Like all of his students, I think of every project I undertake in terms of the intellectual ideals and scholarly standards upheld by Robert Lerner. Any merits this book may have are due to the help of this long list of stellar scholars. Only its weaknesses belong uniquely to me.

At Cornell University Press I thank Mahinder Kingra for supporting this project from its inception, and the two anonymous readers for stimulating critiques. Jonathan Chipman and Walter Simons kindly allowed me to use map 3, while Cecilia Gaposchkin (cartographer to the Capetians) created maps 1 and 2. The Interlibrary Loan staff at UVM worked tirelessly to fulfill my obscure requests.

Finally, my family. Cecilia and Romare politely asked every now and then, "Is your book finished yet?" Yes, thank you, it is. Kristen Johanson deserves all the real credit for everything. And I am fortunate to be able to consult on fine points of erudition with my father, Larry, and my brother, Nicholas. But I dedicate this book to my mother, Tamara Myers Field, who comes from a long line of literate Linscotts. She has never aspired to sanctity, but she is the most discerning reader and the kindest person I know.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ADN	Lille, Archives départementales du Nord
AN	Paris, Archives nationales de France
BAV	Vatican City, Biblioteca apostolica vaticana
BnF	Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France
Field, <i>Isabelle</i>	Sean L. Field, <i>Isabelle of France: Capetian Sanctity and Franciscan Identity in the Thirteenth Century</i> (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).
<i>Princesse mineure</i>	Jacques Dalarun, Sean L. Field, Jean-Baptiste Lebigue, and Anne-Françoise Leurquin-Labie, <i>Isabelle de France, sœur de Saint Louis: Une princesse mineure</i> (Paris: Éditions franciscaines, 2014).
RHGF	M. Bouquet et al., eds., <i>Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France</i> , 24 vols. (Paris, 1738–1876).
<i>Rules of Isabelle</i>	Sean L. Field, <i>The Rules of Isabelle of France: An English Translation with Introductory Study</i> (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2013), additional documents translated by Larry F. Field.
<i>Writings of AH</i>	Sean L. Field, <i>The Writings of Agnes of Harcourt: The Life of Isabelle of France and the Letter on Louis IX and Longchamp</i> (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).



## COURTING SANCTITY





# Introduction

Isabelle, the younger sister of King Louis IX of France, lay shivering with fever at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, just west of Paris, in late 1243 or early 1244. Her mother, the dowager queen of France Blanche of Castile, had to depart “for the affairs of the realm,” and left Isabelle in the care of Louis’s wife, Marguerite of Provence. When Isabelle’s illness worsened to the point that her life seemed in danger, the king and his mother rushed back to her bedside. Finding her only daughter “very ill and in peril of death,” Blanche, heartsick with worry, sent in all directions to ask for prayers for her recovery. She particularly sent to a “most religious and contemplative” woman in “Avauterre,” pouring out her anguish in hope that this woman would pray for Isabelle’s return to health. The holy woman wrote back to Blanche with a prophecy: Isabelle would survive her illness, but “her heart would nevermore be in the world, nor in the things of the world.” Indeed, upon her recovery Isabelle turned away from fine clothes and ornaments “to prayer and to works of perfection and to a religious life.”<sup>1</sup>

This story, recounted in Agnes of Harcourt’s *Life of Isabelle* (c. 1283), introduces several themes that shape this book. First, it hints at the way women of

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1. *Writings of AH*, 56–57. The dating of the episode is not certain, but see the reasoning in Field, *Isabelle*, 32–33. Cécile Léon, *Le Château de Saint-Germain-en-Laye au Moyen Âge, XII<sup>e</sup>–XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles: Histoire et évolution architecturale d’une résidence royale* (Paris: Les Presses Franciliennes, 2008), 211, confirms the court was at Saint-Germain-en-Laye in February 1244.

and closely linked to the French royal family—the Capetians—helped create an aura of sanctity around that dynasty. Isabelle is the prime example of this dynamic. After recovering her health, she developed a reputation as a holy woman at court before going on to found the female Franciscan community of Longchamp. Second, this anecdote suggests the potential for holy women *outside* the court to exercise influence with the royal family. Blanche of Castile could have hurried to any number of local saints' shrines in her hour of need, or perhaps sought out a male figure within her favored Cistercian orbit.<sup>2</sup> But she thought instead of a holy woman. At the same time, Blanche's anxious wait highlights the fact that not even a queen could be sure what message might be conveyed through such a mouthpiece. Allowing a holy woman to speak for God provided a powerful means of demonstrating divine favor—as long as she did not report unwelcome tidings. Finally, Agnes of Harcourt's text illustrates the way the roles of holy women tied to the court would be retrospectively reinterpreted in writings from the 1280s. In this example, the story of the princess's illness helped Agnes explain how the royal family had come to terms with Isabelle's embrace of a semireligious existence as a bride of Christ, and with her rejections of the dynastic marriage that had been urged upon her.

Unfortunately, Agnes of Harcourt did not give the name of the holy woman in question. The passage was long misread as indicating the woman's location in either Angleterre (England) or Nanterre. The former always appeared implausible, but the latter, just ten kilometers east of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, seemed an obvious place for Blanche to have sought help. There is now no doubt, however, about the correct reading of the passage.<sup>3</sup> The word *Avauterre* (or *Avalterre*) in Old French was the literal equivalent of "Low Countries" in modern English.<sup>4</sup> In thirteenth-century usage it most often indicated the south-central, largely French-speaking, part of the Low Countries centered around Nivelles, Namur, and Liège and stretching west toward Cambrai and Douai (see map 3).<sup>5</sup>

2. For example, in 1240 Louis IX and Marguerite of Provence had asked for prayers from Thibaut of Marly, abbot of the Cistercian house of Vaux-de-Cernay, in hopes of conceiving a child. See Lester, "Saint Louis and Cîteaux Revisited," 23. On Blanche of Castile's close relationship with a number of female Cistercian houses, see Berman, *White Nuns*, chap. 6; and Grant, *Blanche of Castile*, 174.

3. The correct reading is found in BnF, Duchesne ms 38, fol. 74r. See Field, "Agnes of Harcourt as Intellectual." In *Writings of AH*, I read "en Ananterre," from BnF ms. fr. 13753, fol. 129r. I am now certain that the correct reading in that manuscript is indeed "en Avauterre." For further details see Field, "De la Vie française de Claire d'Assise à la Vie d'Isabelle de France."

4. See the entry for "Avalterrae" in Du Cange's *Glossarium infimae et mediae latinitatis*, at <http://ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr/AVALTERRAE> (Éditions en ligne de l'École des chartes).

5. See Simons, "Worlds Apart?" A particularly relevant example of this usage is found in the 1282 testament of Pierre of Alençon, son of Louis IX. Among his charitable bequests was one to the abbey

The correct reading of this passage opens new perspectives on Blanche of Castile's search for saintly intervention, and indeed on Capetian expectations about holiness in the 1240s. Where better to seek a direct link to divine aid than in the southern Low Countries, where holy women were a newly visible and dynamic presence? The twelfth century had given rise to a "religious movement" in which increasingly literate laypeople in Europe's bustling towns adopted apostolic ideals of engagement in the world.<sup>6</sup> While both sexes were caught up in this religious fervor, women were a particularly powerful element, as embodied in a figure such as Marie of Oignies (d. 1213), a young woman from Nivelles who persuaded her husband to live in chastity and devoted herself to serving lepers alongside an informal community of like-minded women.<sup>7</sup> Sympathetic churchmen publicized this striking new model of women's religiosity by writing *vitae* (saints' lives) of Marie and of at least ten other holy women from the southern Low Countries in the first half of the thirteenth century.<sup>8</sup> These women led varied existences, some as recluses, others as part of Benedictine or Cistercian communities, and still others spending part or all of their adult lives as beguines.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, beguines were the most distinctive element of the "women's religious movement" as it emerged from the Low Countries. Beguines pursued lives of simplicity and charitable care for the sick and poor, living singly, in small groups, or in larger and more formal communities. They were chaste but not members of any formal order, and their vows were not permanently or canonically binding. They came from across the social spectrum and could focus on prayer and contemplation or on a life of service tied to a parish church, hospital, or other charitable institution. By the second quarter of the century, some beguinages (beguine communities) took on more formal aspects as convents under a *magistra* (mistress) or as larger courts holding several hundred women within complexes that often included gardens, chapels, and varied housing

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of Longchamp, where, he noted, his "dear aunt" Isabelle of France was buried; one to the beguines of Paris; and one "to the poor beguines of *Avauterre*, at Cambrai, at Nivelles, at Douai, and at Liège." See du Cange, *Histoire de S. Lovys IX*, 183. Du Cange did not understand the word he read as "Auaucerre" and suggested emending to "Auxerre." Coincidentally, du Cange printed the first edition of Agnes of Harcourt's *Vie d'Isabelle* and the testament of Pierre of Alençon back to back in this volume. On Pierre of Alençon's testament see Hélyar, "La mort de Pierre, comte d'Alençon." I would like to thank Walter Simons for pointing me to Pierre's testament and for suggesting the possible identity of the holy woman from *Avauterre*.

6. Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*.

7. Mulder-Bakker, *Mary of Oignies*.

8. Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 37; Van Engen, "The Religious Women of Liège at the Turn of the Thirteenth Century"; Ritchey, "Saints' Lives as Efficacious Texts."

9. Simons, *Cities of Ladies*.

arrangements. Most of the women treated in this book were called beguines at one point or another; even Isabelle of France was linked to beguine piety.<sup>10</sup>

This, then, was the dynamic world of female holiness that drew the admiration of pious Christians, including the Capetians, in the first half of the thirteenth century. Certainly there was no shortage of contacts between Paris and the *mulieres religiosae* (religious women) of the Low Countries. Jacques of Vitry, who eventually wrote the *Life of Marie of Oignies*, was a student in Paris around 1207 when he first heard of and began to correspond with Marie. And in the 1220s Parisian students carried letters back and forth between Theophania, the *magistra* of the Hotel-Dieu in Paris, and Goswin of Bossut, cantor of the Cistercian community of Villers in Brabant and author of works celebrating the holy women of the Low Countries.<sup>11</sup> By the 1240s, members of the Capetian family were already supporting beguines.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the earliest example, as Walter Simons points out, is Louis IX's substantial monetary gift to the beguines of Cantimpré (Cambrai) in January 1240.<sup>13</sup> Blanche of Castile, for her part, was probably the queen who gave early support to the beguinage known as La royauté or Le reine in Nivelles by 1241.<sup>14</sup> Blanche even owned a copy of the *Life of Marie of Oignies*.<sup>15</sup> The Capetian court was well aware of the holy women of Avauterre by 1244.

Who, then, was Blanche of Castile's mysterious correspondent? Although there is no way to be certain, an educated guess might be that this was Lutgard of Aywières (1182–1246). Over a long career Lutgard had been variously a beguine, a Benedictine prioress, and a Cistercian nun. By the 1240s she was part of the Cistercian house of Aywières in Couture-Saint-Germain, south of Brussels and about twenty kilometers northeast of Nivelles. Lutgard was widely renowned for her prophetic gifts, as memorialized in the Dominican Thomas of Cantimpré's *Life of Lutgard* (1246–48).<sup>16</sup> Among Thomas's stories about Lutgard's powers of prophecy, especially noteworthy is an episode involving Marie, Duchess of Brabant, at the time of her death in 1224. The duch-

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10. For Thomas of Cantimpré's linking of Isabelle to the beguines of Paris, see chapter 1. The point was first suggested by McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, 229.

11. Both of these examples are drawn from Simons, "Beginnings," 33–34.

12. See generally McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, 224–33.

13. Simons, "Beginnings," 39.

14. See Simons, "Worlds Apart?"; and de Louvet, "L'Origine nivelloise de l'institution béguinale," 41–42. Farther south, Blanche had made a small donation to the beguines of Crépy-en-Valois as early as 1239. See McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, 232; and Grant, *Blanche of Castile*, 206.

15. Simons, "Worlds Apart?" based on Anne Bondéelle-Souchier, "Les moniales cisterciennes et leurs livres manuscrits dans la France d'Ancien Régime," *Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses* 45 (1994): 193–337 (at 221n122; see also 300–303).

16. See Thomas of Cantimpré, *Collected Saints' Lives*, for text and introduction to Lutgard's career.

ess, who had “loved Lutgard for a long time,” fell ill and sent to Lutgard to ask for her prayers. Lutgard replied that Marie should confess and “wait for the Lord with a most trusting heart.” Sure enough, as Lutgard had predicted, the countess passed away, but then appeared to Lutgard in a vision to reveal that the Virgin Mary had rescued her from purgatory.<sup>17</sup> Although in this case Lutgard’s revealed knowledge pointed to death rather than recovery, there are obvious similarities with Blanche of Castile’s exchange with the holy woman of Avauterre at the time of Isabelle’s illness. But what makes the example particularly relevant is that Marie, Duchess of Brabant, was the daughter of King Philip II of France (r. 1180–1223), half sister to the reigning king of France Louis VIII at the time of her death, and hence sister-in-law to Louis’s wife, Queen Blanche of Castile.<sup>18</sup> Twenty years later, in her moment of need, Blanche’s mind might well have flown to the venerable Lutgard, who had so impressed her kinswoman.

This book offers the first assessment of the shifting relationships between such holy women and the Capetian court, across the thirteenth century and into the first decades of the fourteenth. It argues that during the reign of Louis IX (r. 1226–70) holy women were central to the rise of the Capetian self-presentation as uniquely favored by God, that their influence was questioned and reshaped under Philip III (r. 1270–85), and that would-be holy women were increasingly assumed to pose physical, spiritual, and political threats by the death of Philip IV (r. 1285–1314). History is never quite so neat, of course, and so this study also notes ways in which holy women were sometimes problematic as vehicles for Capetian claims, and unconvincing as examples of spiritual danger. Still, the narrative thread of *Courting Sanctity* runs from creation, through interrogation, to destruction of the relationship between holy women and the court.

## Capetian Power, Women’s Religion

This narrative takes shape at the intersection between two established perspectives on the long thirteenth century, the political and the religious. On the one hand, scholars of French political history have long argued that Capetian power grew exponentially in the century between the Battle of Bouvines (1214) and the death of Philip IV (1314). This growth in power was due not only to increased military might, rapid economic development, and emerging

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17. Thomas of Cantimpré, *Collected Saints’ Lives*, 264–65.

18. Simons, “Worlds Apart?,” also draws attention to this familial link.

administrative sophistication, but also, as Joseph Strayer put it in a classic essay, to a successful campaign to present the “Most Christian” (*christianissimus*) French king as uniquely favored by God, with France as a new “Holy Land” and the French as a new “chosen people.”<sup>19</sup> The development of this Capetian self-presentation has generally been demonstrated through a male-dominated narrative, running from the piety of Louis IX, through efforts to promote his swift canonization, to Philip IV’s designs on all forms of sacred power within his kingdom, as seen in his attacks on pope Boniface VIII, on the Templars, and on bishops Bernard Saisset and Guichard of Troyes.

On the other hand, scholars of women’s religious experience have argued that enthusiasm for the early women’s religious movement gave way to increasing suspicion of beguines, female mysticism, and other forms of unregulated female religiosity by the time of the Council of Vienne (1311–12). Dyan Elliott, for instance, has shown how women became testing grounds for questions around religious authority, as women’s bodies and voices could be made to “prove” truth through various kinds of interrogation. Nancy Caciola has similarly analyzed the way communities questioned women’s contact with the supernatural, assigning divine or demonic meanings to what they beheld. Both of these analyses move from early thirteenth-century support for such women to increasing doubt and darker fears by the fourteenth century.<sup>20</sup> For beguines specifically, the early backing of men such as Jacques of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré gave way to increasing skepticism by the 1270s and harsh scrutiny by the 1320s.<sup>21</sup>

*Courting Sanctity* brings these two historiographic strands together. The 1250s saw the emergence not just of Isabelle of France but also Douceline of Digne, a beguine closely linked to the Capetian count of Provence. In the 1270s, at the very moment when increasing suspicions of beguines were starting to be heard, the Capetian court faced a crisis in which both king and queen were subject to defamatory rumors. The outcome of this crisis centered on the testimony of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, a visionary holy woman from the Low Countries. Elizabeth’s decision to deny any claims to prophetic knowledge marks the moment when the rising power of the Capetians intersected with the declining status of beguines and other holy women. After 1300, the arrests of Paupertas of Metz, Margueronne of Belleville, and Marguerite Porete formed key links in the chain of attacks Philip IV launched against supposed spiritual dangers threatening the kingdom of France. Thus a focus on

19. Strayer, “France: The Holy Land.” For a survey of historiography, see Field and Gaposchkin, “Questioning the Capetians.”

20. Elliott, *Proving Woman*; Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*.

21. Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, chap. 5.

these women calls attention to new models of French royal holiness, exposes new turning points in the Capetians' relationship to the holy, and offers new insights into how the court imagined itself as besieged by the forces of darkness in the early fourteenth century. At the same time, it highlights the explicitly political dimension of the rising suspicions directed against semiregulated religious women.

## Parameters of the Book

The importance of these thirteenth-century interactions is clarified by looking back from the late medieval period. As scholars such as André Vauchez and Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski have shown, in the post-1348 age of plague, at the height of the Hundred Years' War and during the upheaval of the Great Schism, holy women found ways to make their voices heard amid the disarray of disease and disaster.<sup>22</sup> Though male saints and visionaries expressed themselves as well, it was women such as Constance of Rabastens, Marie Robine, Ermine of Reims, Jeanne-Marie of Maillé, Colette of Corbie, and eventually Joan of Arc who came forward with the most powerful revelations instructing kings of France, French nobles, and popes as to what God wished them to do. *Courting Sanctity* shows that this direct engagement between holy women and kings and queens of France was not new in the later fourteenth century. Only a brief interlude in the second quarter of the fourteenth century, following the death of the last direct Capetian king in 1328, separates figures such as Douceline of Digne, Elizabeth of Spalbeek, and Paupertas of Metz from the rise of the politically engaged mystics of the Great Schism.

Looking forward from the twelfth century, just as narratives about the rise of Capetian power often begin with the reign of Louis VII (r. 1137–80) but find their footing with the triumphs of his son Philip II, the earliest significant evidence for an encounter between the French court and a holy female figure seems to date from the 1180s, when the peasant visionary Alpais of Cudot (c. 1150/55–1211) received support from Louis VII's widow Adèle of Champagne (d. 1205), Adèle's brother the archbishop of Sens William "of the White Hands" (d. 1202), and her son Philip II.<sup>23</sup> But sustained relationships

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22. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries*; Vauchez, *Laity in the Middle Ages*, esp. chaps. 17–22.

23. Thus Blumenfeld-Kosinski begins with Alpais in "Holy Women in France," 242–43. For donations from Adèle and Philip in 1180 and 1184, see Blanchon, *Vie de la Bienheureuse Alpais*, 27–30; for William of the White Hands, see Blanchon, 25. For a new edition of the most important texts, see Stein, *Leben und Visionem der Alpais von Cudot (1150–1211)*.

between Capetians and holy women developed only in the thirteenth century. *Courting Sanctity* thus begins in the 1240s, at the moment when the women's religious movement was reaching its full flowering and the Capetian family was crystalizing its self-conception as a lineage blessed by God.

Within these chronological boundaries, the book focuses on the Capetian case. Gábor Klaniczay has offered insightful comparison with royal saint-making in eastern Europe,<sup>24</sup> and no doubt more detailed comparisons with other European courts will emerge. The present study, however, includes brief excursions beyond the French royal family only when they illuminate a specific point of analysis. Nor does *Courting Sanctity* attempt to study every facet of the Capetians' conceptualization of female sanctity; for instance, the ways in which French kings and queens imagined patron saints such as St. Geneviève or venerated newly canonized figures such as St. Elizabeth of Hungary lie beyond its bounds. It centers instead on tangible interactions between living holy women and the Capetian court, including the kings, their wives, their children, and occasionally their royal cousins and close advisers.

Even so, this book cannot claim to illuminate every such interaction. For one thing, tantalizing glimpses of fragmentary evidence sometimes remind us how much has been lost. When the royal accounts of 1239 reveal support from Blanche of Castile for an anchoress in Étampes, the many questions that spring to mind cannot be pursued for lack of evidence.<sup>25</sup> More fundamentally, any attempt to catalog every interaction between a Capetian and a "holy woman" immediately runs into the question of how to define the limits of the "holy." The Capetians supported many houses of Benedictine, Cistercian, and eventually Franciscan, Dominican, and other nuns. Like other patrons, the royal family demonstrated deep respect for these communities—for instance, by leaving bequests in exchange for prayers. *Courting Sanctity*, however, focuses on more dramatic examples of individual women who developed reputations for extraordinary sanctity or direct contact with the divine. As in Peter Brown's classic study of "the Holy Man" in Late Antiquity,<sup>26</sup> here "holiness" is understood as the exceptional powers attributed to saintly, prophetic, or clairvoyant figures by those who observed, represented, and wrote about them.

The shift from Brown's focus on holy men to my analysis of holy women reflects the reality of medieval ideas about gendered access to divine power. Thirteenth-century Europe produced mystically inclined male saints, but it was more often women whose spiritual gifts were seen as offering direct access to

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24. Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses*.

25. Grant, *Blanche of Castile*, 219.

26. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity."



God. Much scholarship, often inspired by Caroline Walker Bynum's seminal work,<sup>27</sup> has argued that medieval culture saw women as closely linked to Christ through somatic piety, visionary experiences, and love-drenched mysticism.<sup>28</sup> And as John Coakley has shown, well-educated churchmen were often among the most ardent admirers of *mulieres sanctae*, frequently portraying these women's charismatic, clairvoyant holiness as a complement to their own, more formal authority.<sup>29</sup> Thus while such gendered expectations about sanctity and visionary power were never exclusive, at their productive peak in the thirteenth century they shaped a cultural expectation that holy *women* were most likely to be directly in touch with God and hence vehicles for the divine will.

Isabelle of France, Douceline of Digne, Elizabeth of Spalbeek, and Paupertas of Metz all (in slightly different ways) were "holy" in this sense; they were women who offered access to the divine will, whose prayers could move God, who could see the state of others' souls, who knew in advance the fate of others in the next world, who could offer hope of healing and other miracles, or who could foresee the future and perceive otherwise hidden events across space and time. But as suspicions about beguines and other semireligious women mounted by the turn of the fourteenth century, reputations for unambiguous holiness grew harder to find, at least in proximity to the French court. Thus the holiness of the two women considered in the final chapter, Margueronne of Bellevillette and Marguerite Porete, was more contested. Margueronne's claims of supernatural knowledge were limited to modest clairvoyant abilities, while others depicted her as wielding darker powers of sorcery and storm raising. Marguerite's own book testifies to her conversations with God, but there is scant evidence for a wider reputation as a miracle worker. Concluding with these women illuminates the way the very notion of female holiness had been transformed into a site of danger and contestation by 1300.

These holy women varied widely in terms of status, coming from royalty, lower nobility, merchant, and lower-class backgrounds. These differences in status profoundly impacted what was possible for each woman. A princess enjoyed access to kinds of power that an obscure beguine could hardly imagine. Nevertheless, all of the women studied here shaped and were shaped by Capetian claims to holy authority.

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27. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

28. For example, the essays in Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, continue to inspire.

29. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*. See also Mooney, *Gendered Voices*; and on the idea of women's prayers as more efficacious than men's, see Griffiths, *Nuns' Priests' Tales*, esp. chap. 5.

## Chapter Outline

*Courting Sanctity* follows a three-part chronological organization. Part one argues that holy women within and closely tied to the royal family of France were central to the projection of Capetian sanctity. Most important was Isabelle of France (chapter 1), the court's spiritual star in the 1250s. Yet by refusing to become a nun at Longchamp, as popes and friars had assumed she would, and by fighting for her rule of the *Sorores minores* in the face of Franciscan opposition, the princess made herself an awkward model of female holiness. At the same time, in the south, Isabelle's brother Charles of Anjou forged a quasi-familial relationship with his "co-mother" Douceline of Digne (chapter 2). Douceline's miraculous powers and ecstatic prophecies helped cement Charles's status in Provence, and in return Charles put his weight behind Douceline's own reputation. Most importantly, Douceline voiced divine approval when Charles contemplated his epoch-making invasion of southern Italy. But Douceline too lost some of her appeal, as her message shifted from assurance to warning—what God had given to the Capetians, he could take away if arrogance replaced gratitude. As the Capetian family courted its reputation as uniquely favored by God, these two holy women played essential roles, but at the same time insisted on voicing their own perspectives. Could such instruments be effectively controlled?

Part two shows that the case of Elizabeth of Spalbeek (chapter 3) in the 1270s brought exactly this issue to a head. Elizabeth, a holy woman with an already established reputation for prophecy, was said to have broadcast a message from God that was not at all to the royal family's liking. The scandal threatened first the public reputation of Philip III, said to have "sinned against nature"; then the safety of Queen Marie of Brabant, accused of poisoning her stepson. In the end, it was the king's favorite Pierre de La Broce who lost his life, while Elizabeth retreated into silence. Consequently, the 1280s saw concerted, but not entirely successful, attempts to shape acceptable textual models of female sanctity tied to the court (chapter 4). Most important was Agnes of Harcourt's *Life of Isabelle*, which shows that Isabelle continued to be remembered as a saint by the royal family, the nuns of Longchamp, local Franciscans, and townspeople west of Paris. But its gaps and awkward omissions reinforce the sense that Isabelle's was always a difficult sanctity. At the same time, her mode of holiness, based on charity and asceticism more than mysticism, presented a safer alternative to Elizabeth of Spalbeek and her unruly prophecies. This hagiographical current was particularly necessary because William of Nangis's *Deeds of Philip III* highlighted those very controversies at almost the same moment. In narrating the scandals of 1276–78, he sought to

make Elizabeth of Spalbeek, in the guise of a nameless “beguine of Nivelles,” the instrument through which divine revelation could dispel lingering suspicion of Queen Marie of Brabant. Meanwhile, the Italian Franciscan Salimbene wrote appreciatively of Douceline of Digne, while offering an unflattering view of Capetian fortunes at the end of Philip III’s reign, vouched for by the visions of an unnamed holy woman.

Part three demonstrates that by the first years of the fourteenth century, Philip IV and his court turned against the influence of women with reputations for holiness. Rather than silencing these women, in some cases the Capetians now used torture, threats, and incarceration to force them to speak the court’s “truth.” The real life of Paupertas of Metz (chapter 5) can be glimpsed behind only a single chronicler’s account. She seems to have worked for peace during Philip IV’s siege of Lille, before issuing a prophecy that warned Philip IV not to engage his enemies in battle. Philip’s subsequent retreat was an embarrassment. The king’s brother arrested Paupertas and tortured her into stating that she had intended to harm the royal family through poison. Her story was recorded by monks writing at Saint-Denis, colored in satanic tones, and included in their ongoing narrative of events around the court. Similarly, Margueronne of Bellevillette (chapter 6) was taken into custody in a situation that virtually guaranteed her eventual confession to charges of abetting Bishop Guichard of Troyes in his murder of Queen Jeanne of Navarre through sorcery. As a *divinatrix*, Margueronne was presented as inherently dangerous and perhaps demonic. She was jailed, threatened, and made to confess that her link to the supernatural had been an essential part in the sorcery that had killed the queen. In a sense, the problem with such women was thus solved. Worn down in prison, tortured or threatened with torture, they could be forced to admit that they were nefarious agents of the king’s enemies, satanically inspired poisoners, or sorceresses.

Marguerite Porete’s execution is in a sense the culmination of this narrative. First censored for writing a book that the bishop of Cambrai had deemed heretical, Marguerite was ultimately declared a relapsed heretic and burned in Paris. Whereas Elizabeth of Spalbeek had been repeatedly questioned in 1276–78 but allowed to go free, Paupertas of Metz had been tortured in 1304 but at the last moment imprisoned rather than killed, and Margueronne of Bellevillette had been threatened but left to languish in prison in 1308, Marguerite Porete was relaxed to the secular authorities and executed in 1310. There could be no more emphatic end point for the long slide toward the destruction of holy women’s authority. Yet at the same time, Marguerite’s inquisitor eschewed the torture that would have produced a public confession. Thus, unlike Paupertas or Margueronne, Marguerite resisted proclaiming the

Capetian court's "truth." This mute anticlimax reflects the fact that Marguerite had not been charged with spectacular crimes against France and the royal family—there is no sorcery or poison or even prophecy in her case. Sentenced for refusing to give up a book, Marguerite Porete, the only one of these women to meet her death at the stake, seems in some ways the least threatening.

Marguerite's silence also indicates the ambiguity inherent in these women's legacies. Well into the post-Capetian era, hagiographers and historians continued to reimagine the role of these women in Capetian history, finding ways to place them more firmly on the side of saint or the side of sinner. The book ends with an epilogue, rather than with a synthetic conclusion, precisely because these women's after-histories merge into the era of politically powerful "saints and visionaries" sparked by late-medieval war and schism.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, a word on the nature of the evidence. The sources used for this study vary considerably, giving the analysis a shifting texture. Chapter 1 (Isabelle) is based on a range of contemporary documents such as papal bulls and eyewitness accounts of life at court; chapter 2 (Douceline) rests largely on one hagiographic text; chapter 3 (Elizabeth) centers on records of detailed interrogations carried out by religious officials; chapter 4 (writing in the 1280s) analyzes biographical, hagiographic, and chronical accounts; chapter 5 (Paupertas) studies a single chronicler's narrative; and chapter 6 (Margueronne and Marguerite) investigates records of ecclesiastical inquisitions. These varying sources, in Latin and French, allow analysis not only of holy women's interactions with the court but also of the ways in which those interactions were represented.

In sum, I offer here a history of the initially productive, increasingly tenuous, and eventually destructive relationships formed between members of the French royal family and holy women across the long thirteenth century. It foregrounds women but also illuminates the obsessions, aspirations, and fears of men. It is, I hope, a true history in the (always imperfect) sense that it rests on the firmest verifiable evidence I am able to muster. But it is surely only one of a number of true histories that could be written based on this evidence. As the late Hayden White (trained as a medievalist) would put it, historical facts acquire meaning only when historians "emplot" them into narrative story types.<sup>31</sup> That is, past events have no intrinsic shape or significance until the historian assigns it to them. I am thus well aware of the determining role my

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30. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries*.

31. See the essays in Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007*, ed. Robert Doran (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

own perspective has played in deciding which events are given a place in my plot, which moments are offered as starting, turning, or ending points in my story (which could, I suppose, in White's terms, be called a tragedy), and what kinds of narrative connections are drawn between them. Another historian would tell a different story, present a different plot, and make different choices about which facts to include and how to link them. This is as it should be. As Sarah Maza has written, "The past would surely die if we merely memorialized it, if we did not argue about it." In that spirit, I too consider this book "an invitation to continue the conversation."<sup>32</sup>

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32. Sarah Maza, *Thinking about History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 9.