



*Courting Sanctity: Holy Women and
the Capetians*

Sean Field

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Courting Sanctity: Holy Women and the Capetians. By Sean Field. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-1501736193. xiii + 266 pp. \$43.95.

We are experiencing a golden moment in the study of Capetian male monarchs and the visual culture associated them, through the inspiring research of Elizabeth A. R. Brown, William C. Jordan, Xavier Hélary, Meredith Cohen, and Cecilia Gaposchkin. At the same time, some of the most interesting recent insights come from the focus on women of the period to tell the story of the Capetians. This practice has largely centered on Capetian royal women as the patrons of religious institutions or commissioners of devotional manuscripts, but Sean Field has shifted the conversation to consider women's sanctity as a political force used in the crafting of the Capetians' public identity as divinely favored. Field's important work on Isabelle of France, daughter of Louis VIII and Blanche of Castile and sister to Louis IX (*Isabelle of France: Capetian Sanctity and Franciscan Identity in the Thirteenth Century*, 2006), has already demonstrated that Isabelle was a formidable figure whose founding of the Franciscan monastery for women at Longchamp, with her brother's support, was a defining act of piety for the courtly circle. In *Courting Sanctity*, Field broadens his lens beyond pious women of the royal bloodline to consider a diverse assortment of women whose claims to holiness linked them to the Capetian house, voluntarily or involuntarily. The scope of Field's book thus recalls Caroline Walker Bynum's revelatory *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1987), but his chief interest is not in the nature of these women's spirituality, but rather in how they interacted with the fulcrum of male rulership. To this end Field begins at the heart of the Capetian world with the saintly Isabelle of France and moves to non-noble but well-connected women, and then turns to the far end of the societal spectrum, where we encounter women of humble origin, one born a serf and another burned as a heretic. It is an audacious move to weave these women into a single narrative, and the reader may gasp at parallels drawn between the pristine Isabelle of France and a shadowy beguine.

The book opens with an introduction and a chapter outline that are models of clarity, in keeping with all of Field's historical writing. The text proceeds chronologically, although with forays into the complicated historiography of his subjects, since the author's brief is as much the crafting of the record of these women's lives as their actual experiences. The business of the book depends on Field's impressive command of primary sources: monastic chronicles, court proceedings, and hagiography, as well as of the thicket of secondary sources that surrounds them. The first chapter begins with a distillation of Field's earlier work on Isabelle of France, here reframed for the purposes of his broader argument. Thus, Field recounts both Isabelle's remarkable success in securing Franciscan affiliation for Longchamp and the glossing over of her tenacious effort in written accounts. The next holy woman we encounter, Douceline of Digne, is likewise well known through her *Vida* and abundant modern scholarship. This Provençal beguine famous for her prophecies was credited with helping Beatrice of Provence, wife of royal brother Charles of Anjou and sister to Queen Marguerite, survive childbirth. Douceline was made godmother to the child and became an advisor to Charles, issuing prophetic warnings that were heard but not always heeded. Field brackets Isabelle and Douceline together as demonstrating divine support for the Capetians.

The relationships between the remaining four holy women and the Capetians were more fraught, as each was suspected of plotting against the royal family or undermining its authority during the troubled final years of the dynasty. Three of them, Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Marguerite Porete, and Margueronne of Belleville, left large footprints in the historical record and are much

discussed in modern writings, including Field's own. Paupertas of Metz, by contrast, is known only through a single monastic chronicle, albeit in several versions. These women were accused of spreading false prophecy and dangerous slander about Philip III and Marie of Brabant, in Elizabeth's case; of heresy, in the instance of Marguerite; of using sorcery to kill Jeanne of Navarre, for Margueronne; and of plotting to poison Charles of Valois, with Paupertas. These more marginalized women provide a fascinating read, with lurid tales of wax images baptized and stuck with pins, or of feathers laden with poison. Each of the four women was pulled against her will into the maw of the inquisitorial process. Only the well-connected Elizabeth escaped unscathed—Field assumes because she remained outside French territory—while Paupertas was arrested and tortured, Margueronne tortured and imprisoned, and Marguerite executed.

The reader may not always be persuaded that the six women in Field's study cohere into a single narrative. As the author acknowledges, the story proves to be not so much about "courting sanctity" as about the dark turn in Capetian attitudes toward holy women, from initially receptive, to suspicious, and finally to vituperative. But ultimately the women are united by the old tale of the distrust of women who are neither bound to an earthly husband nor married to Christ, a distrust so profound that it does in fact join to Isabelle of France, whose disturbing resistance to taking monastic vows was written out of Longchamp's history, and Marguerite Porete, whose recalcitrance in the face of authority was punished by her being burned at the stake. One cannot help but reflect on the price the Capetians paid for their suspicion of women, since at several junctures they might have ensured the continuity of their direct line by allowing a royal princess to succeed her father.

Field's decision to tell the tale of the final decades of the Capetians through holy women, whether born to the royal house, sought out by it for spiritual authority, or caught up in the deadly machinations of court bureaucracy, offers a useful counterpoint to the accusations hurled at other groups, be it the Jews, the Templars, or the three daughters-in-law of Philip IV, during the paranoid downward spiral of the dynasty. Another benefit of Field's careful combing of the textual record is the window it offers into the lived experiences of women during these decades, in a way that recalls Lindy Grant's magisterial *Blanche of Castile, Queen of France* (2016). We learn, for example, that the villein-born Margueronne of Bellevillette, before becoming entangled in the sorcery charges against the bishop of Troyes, was known for her helpful ability to control the weather and find lost animals. And likewise, we witness the behavior of elite women as they cluster around religious houses founded by Capetian women, whether at Isabelle's founding of Longchamp, or at Lourcine, reestablished by Marguerite of Provence. Here we glimpse the many Blanches and Marguerites, taking monastic vows or visiting royal residences on the monastic grounds.

Courting Sanctity is a handsome volume with a beautifully edited text, as well as that rarest of pleasures for the reader—actual notes at the bottom of the page. It also boasts a splendid bibliography and a useful index. Once again, we benefit from Field's ability to conceptualize complicated historical events and to lay them for us out in lucid prose. Field's work continues to offer us fresh insights into the intriguing world of the Capetian court.

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