Isabelle of France

Capetian Sanctity and Franciscan Identity in the Thirteenth Century

Sean L. Field

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In February 1259, Pope Alexander IV approved the first rule for the new Abbaye de l’Humilité-de-Notre-Dame, founded by Isabelle, the sister of King Louis IX of France. Though the first nuns would not enter the abbey until June 1260, the new rule had recently been composed by a team that included Isabelle and an illustrious group of Franciscan university masters. Alexander offered a preamble that justified his support for this potentially controversial new female Franciscan form of life. He began with a brilliant solar metaphor: God, “the true sun, flashing with perpetual brightness,” illuminates the hearts of the faithful. But while his light shines on everyone, he often sends even more powerful rays to infuse the minds of kings and princes, so that they may “propel and lead others by their saving example towards the sweet taste and love of heavenly things.” In this way, Louis and Isabelle, “suffused with this light,” were leading exemplary lives—Louis ruling as the “most Christian prince . . . and illustrious king of the Franks,” and Isabelle “shining with the luster of virginal modesty and powerful with the brightness of other virtues.” Compelled by such outstanding piety, Alexander consented to set aside the Fourth Lateran Council’s prohibition on creating new orders, “specially out of consideration for the King and Isabelle,” and to approve this new rule.¹

Alexander’s rhetoric raises a number of questions that will be central to this study. They concern the development of Capetian sanctity, the
institutional relationship of women to the Franciscan Order, and the nature of women’s access to power in the thirteenth century.

Royal Piety and Capetian Sanctity

Just what was Isabelle’s role within the intensely devout court of St. Louis? What sort of influence did she wield, and to what ends? Rarely did the medieval world witness a convergence of piety and political power as complete as that exhibited by the Capetian court in the midthirteenth century. Much of the credit for creating this climate goes to Louis, driven by his failed crusade and his sense of Christian duty to become the perfect saint-king and royal penitent. Louis IX’s mother, Blanche of Castile, is usually portrayed as a stern, even domineering woman who strongly influenced the king’s religious as well as political development. Yet Isabelle may have done as much as her mother or brother to set the tone of Capetian piety.

Though Isabelle of France is hardly a household name today (and not to be confused with the Isabella of France who married Edward II of England), in 1259 she enjoyed a widespread renown. She initially gained a reputation as a budding holy woman due to her successful rejection of her family’s plans for her marriage. She was betrothed at a very young age to the son of a powerful noble family, and, more dramatically, in 1243, Emperor Frederick II sought Isabelle’s hand for his son and heir, Conrad. But Isabelle refused to marry, preferring to dedicate herself to a life of virginity. In the 1250s, popes and friars began to note and publicize her piety. Isabelle capitalized on this growing reputation by establishing her new house for Franciscan women. The Abbey of the Humility of Our Lady, or Longchamp as it became better known, was situated just west of Paris near the Seine in the modern Bois de Boulogne (on the northern edge of the site now occupied by the Hippodrome de Longchamp). Upon founding her new abbey, Isabelle chose to remain a laywoman rather than becoming a nun. She constructed a modest residence and chapel on its grounds, where she was regarded by the sisters as a source of holiness and healing. At her death in 1270, her tomb at Longchamp became an object of pilgrimage and the site of numerous reported miracles. Pope Leo X eventually recognized her posthumous reputation for sanctity by granting Longchamp permis-
tion to celebrate Isabelle's office in 1521, from which time she has traditionally been known as the “blessed” Isabelle of France.

Pope Alexander’s praise offers striking evidence of Isabelle’s reputation for piety in 1259. Isabelle and Louis are paired together here, but it is she who is singled out as “shining with the luster of virginal modesty and powerful with the brightness of other virtues.” Shining and powerful, *nitida et polles*—a striking image of radiating renown and incandescent influence.

Isabelle of France’s fame, I will argue, helped to create the aura of sanctity that increasingly surrounded the French royal house in the thirteenth century. Her career should be considered as part of the larger narrative that links the growth of Capetian power to the idea of a divinely ordained, virtuous, and holy royal family through an intertwining of “piety and state building.” Scholars interested in this notion of Capetian holiness and the promotion of French royal ideology in general have rightly pointed to the reign of St. Louis as a decisive moment. But if Louis’s reputation was undoubtedly instrumental in fostering this notion of the Capetians as (in Marc Bloch’s phrase) a “pre-eminently holy” family, so was his sister’s.

The idea of a “sacred” monarchy was gradually built upon a host of stories and symbols surrounding the throne—the fleur-de-lis, the holy oil of Reims, the oriflamme, the royal touch, and the claims to the favor of the patron saints Denis and later Louis himself. The kings of France earned their “Most Christian” reputation through concrete support for the church as well, manifest in the crown’s crusading activities, its frequent role as defender of the papacy and university, and its guardianship of the royal collection of relics deposited at the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. But this model of sacral kingship was only part of the story. The idea of the Capetian line as a holy royal family also rested on a broader concept of dynastic sanctity—it was not just the anointed kings who were seen as holy, but also the entire bloodline, a *beata stirps*, as André Vauchez has called it. This wider concept of a holy lineage needed, in turn, to be fed by publicly recognized displays of real-life devotion. Visible saintly behavior was crucial to the emergence of the “reputation for outstanding piety” enjoyed by the later Capetians. Indeed, it was essential for members of the family other than anointed kings to be regarded as particularly imbued with holiness, if the wider claim of family sanctity were to ring true. Certainly a number of royal family members, notably Blanche of Castile, were particularly pious.
But, besides Louis, only Isabelle was treated as a truly holy figure, credited with miracles, or seen as a saint. Without her example, there would have been no real pattern of thirteenth-century Capetian holiness, and claims to the contrary would necessarily have rung hollow.

For several decades after Isabelle’s and Louis’s deaths in 1270, their cults ran on parallel tracks. Around 1280, miracles were being recorded not only at Louis IX’s tomb to the north of Paris at Saint-Denis, but also at Isabelle’s burial site to the west of Paris at Longchamp. At the same time, saints’ lives were being composed for both siblings, and pilgrims were visiting both sites in search of cures and other divine aid. Members of the royal family in this era considered Isabelle, as well as her brother, to be worthy of veneration. In the dreams of the nuns of Longchamp, Isabelle and Louis remained linked as saintly intercessors. Although the fortunes of the two cults diverged for a time after the early fourteenth century, the contribution of Isabelle’s thirteenth-century visibility to the process of Capetian saint-building was a crucial link in constructing the French “religion of monarchy.”

Thirteenth-Century Models of Sanctity

Beyond the immediate Capetian context, as a saintly, royal woman tied to the Franciscans, Isabelle was also part of wider European trends. How does Isabelle’s career fit into received ideas about thirteenth-century models of sanctity? Vauchez has shown that in the thirteenth century, sainthood was increasingly associated with the mendicants, women, lay people, and royalty, a model which Isabelle embodied as fully as any other contemporary figure. But, more specifically, Isabelle exhibits a convergence between sanctity, dynastic power, and gender that is usually regarded as more typical of Central European ruling houses in this period. As Gábor Klaniczay has demonstrated, within these dynasties in the thirteenth century it “became the task of the female members to assure the halo of sainthood for the family, to ennoble them to become a beata stirps.”

The most influential of these Central European princesses was surely Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–1231), the daughter of Andrew II of Hungary and his wife Gertrude. She was raised at the court of her future husband, Ludwig IV of Thuringia. They married in 1221, and their union produced
three children. Even during her marriage Elizabeth, influenced by Franciscans newly arrived in the territory, was known for her concern for the poor. Upon Ludwig’s death in 1227, she devoted herself to charitable works by building a hospital dedicated to St. Francis and caring for the poor, sick, and lepers, and led a life of extraordinary asceticism under her harsh (indeed, sadistic) confessor, Conrad of Marburg. She was canonized with great speed and publicity in 1235. A number of Elizabeth’s female relations and followers adopted similar lives, including such well-known figures as Hedwig of Silesia (1174/8–1243), Margaret of Hungary (1242–1270), and Agnes of Bohemia (1211–1282). Isabelle of France has even plausibly been treated as one of these filiae sanctae Elizabeth (daughters of St. Elizabeth)—women who took Elizabeth as a model.

There is some reason to think that Elizabeth of Hungary could indeed have been a model for Isabelle. The names Isabelle and Elizabeth were considered to be the same, perhaps making some sort of association natural. More concretely, Jean of Joinville recounts that at a celebration in 1241 for the knighting of Isabelle’s brother, Alphonse of Poitiers, their mother encountered the son of St. Elizabeth. Blanche of Castile then proceeded to kiss him on the forehead out of devotion, “because she thought his mother must have kissed him there often.” Though it is not clear that Isabelle was actually present on this famous occasion, the incident demonstrates that Elizabeth was venerated at the Capetian court. But whether or not Isabelle ever consciously imitated St. Elizabeth, she resembled her in important ways. They were both royal women influenced by the Franciscans, dedicated to charity and care of the poor, and, while drawn to a distinctly penitential spirituality, they nevertheless declined to take monastic vows.

Isabelle was part of a wider group of noble women who were inspired by and helped to establish this emerging model of piety.

In setting up her community outside of Paris, Isabelle had something else in common with these “daughters of St. Elizabeth.” Klaniczay describes Central European princesses as inhabiting and promoting “heavenly courts”—hospitals and monastic communities where the female residents’ fasting, asceticism, and devotion operated as religious critiques of their male relatives’ worldly courts. These holy princesses did not simply renounce temporal authority; rather, they traded it for the influence that comes with saintly prestige. But Isabelle and her foundation of Longchamp
match this model only in part. She did create a “heavenly court” of sorts with her new foundation, and other Capetian princesses and noble women did eventually congregate there (though never to the extent of some of the Central European royal foundations). But her house’s relationship to the Capetian court was fundamentally different, since Louis himself was a pre-eminently saintly figure, and his court “was undoubtedly the closest replica of the ‘court of heaven’ that thirteenth-century Europe had to offer.” Isabelle of France and her abbey at Longchamp must be seen as contributing to, not critiquing, the exercise of Capetian religious power.

Female Franciscanism

A different set of questions arises within the context of Franciscan history. Why did Isabelle of France feel the need to co-author a new rule for Franciscan women? What ideals did her rule embrace? How did it differ from other contemporary forms of life? And what was its impact? By 1259 the complex relationship between women, the Franciscan Order, and the papacy had reached a delicate stage. The institutional relationship between male Franciscans and women’s houses associated with the order was in a state of confusion, with multiple rules in effect and the male order generally seeking to free itself from obligations to female communities. Isabelle was therefore stepping into a veritable minefield. Moreover, her negotiations with the Franciscans and the papacy did not end in 1259, for the first rule was quickly supplanted by a revised rule that was approved by Pope Urban IV in 1263. Why was this revision necessary, and whose desires lay behind it? The impact of Isabelle’s rules have generally been overlooked, or at best treated as a footnote to the history of women and the Franciscan Order in the thirteenth century. This history has recently begun to receive renewed attention, and Isabelle’s story offers an important vantage point from which to consider the issues at stake and how they were conceived and contested by all sides.

This story can only be recaptured through a close examination of Isabelle’s rules, by reconstructing their writing process, identifying their innovations, and assessing her personal contributions and successes as well as her capitulations and compromises. Closer attention to the ideas embod-
ied in the two rules reminds us that St. Clare of Assisi’s famous battle for absolute poverty was only part of a more complex interaction between women, the male Franciscan Order, and the papal curia. Isabelle’s vision of an order of *Sorores minores* (in English, “Sisters Minor,” in French, *Soeurs mineures*, a title parallel to the male *Fratres minores*) reveals that in the 1250s and 1260s other models of engagement between the male Franciscan Order and the women’s religious movement were possible and indeed implemented. Moreover, the extent to which patrons and Franciscan women from across Europe subsequently sought to adopt Isabelle’s rule for their own houses has not previously been highlighted. This process led eventually to the rule’s spread from France into England, Italy, and Spain and to its influence on the lives of countless women over the next several centuries.

**Women and Power**

Finally, the question of just how Isabelle achieved such notable success in negotiating with the Franciscans and the papal curia has ramifications for the wider field of women’s religious history and the larger question of medieval women’s ability to act as agents within political and religious institutions. Thirteenth-century women and men functioned in a culture in which status and wealth as well as gender shaped access to power and institutions. I have translated Alexander IV’s Latin adjective *pollens* as “powerful,” but it might be rendered more prosaically as “capable” or “potent”—in short, “able to get things done.” As Pauline Stafford has put it, power at its root is “the ability or chance to realize our own will, if necessary against the resistance of others. It is efficacy, that is, the ability to act effectively, to produce effects.” By this practical definition, Isabelle of France was indeed a powerful historical actor who effected change and made her impact felt. Historians have recently begun to revise earlier, negative generalizations to argue that royal and noble women and their networks could play important roles in transmitting power and influence in this era. Of particular relevance to the present study are the essays in the recent *Capetian Women*, edited by Kathleen Nolan, which seek “to uncover how royal women gained access to power” and to “expand our understanding of what was possible for a woman of privilege in medieval France.”
The collection as a whole highlights the multiple sources of authority available to women associated with the French royal family, focusing on ritual and patronage as well as on more traditional aspects of political power. But of the many Capetian women considered in this collection, Isabelle best exemplifies the coming together of religious and political power in someone who declined to marry, embraced a life of pious celibacy, but remained a laywoman.28

Isabelle’s involvement with the composition of a rule and the process of securing its approval marks her as a woman able to exert direct influence within both religious and political spheres. By walking a tightrope between court and cloister, Isabelle retained the combination of royal influence, lay status, and Franciscan-inspired sanctity that allowed her to articulate her vision of female Franciscanism.

Sources

Isabelle’s case for sanctity was recorded and promoted in the most intriguing item in her dossier—the contemporary Life of Isabelle, written by the third abbess of Longchamp, Agnes of Harcourt.29 Agnes belonged to a leading Norman noble family. Her father, Jean I of Harcourt, and brother, Jean II, were crusading companions of Louis IX and Philip III, and her brothers Raoul, Robert, and Guy went on to enjoy successful careers in the church.30 Agnes, probably born in the early 1240s, was most likely a lady-in-waiting in Isabelle of France’s household before entering Longchamp with the first group of women to take the veil there in 1260. She served two terms as abbess of Longchamp; the first probably spanned the years 1264 to 1275, while the second lasted from 2 September 1281 to 29 August 1287. Surviving documents from the archives of Longchamp reveal Agnes to have been a literate woman and book owner as well as a leader who worked to protect her house’s position, lands, and income. She died after March 1290, most likely on 25 November 1291.31 Her first known composition was a brief Letter on Louis IX and Longchamp, written during her second term in office, on 4 December 1282. At the request of Charles of Anjou (another brother of Isabelle’s and Louis’s), Agnes began work on her biography of Isabelle around 1283 and completed it sometime before the middle of 1285.
Agnes's *Life of Isabelle* is one of the few biographies written by one European woman about another before the end of the thirteenth century, and it is probably the first substantial female-authored prose work in French. Yet in spite of the attention paid to medieval women as authors in recent decades, Agnes’s work has been practically ignored by scholars. This neglect is all the more surprising because the *Life of Isabelle* is surely the most lively Capetian biography next to Joinville’s famous portrait of Louis IX. Agnes’s prose is animated and energetic, her text is filled with personal reminiscences and stories about the royal family and leading Franciscans, and she provides a vivid tableau of religious life around the French court in the middle of the thirteenth century. Moreover, though Agnes herself is a remarkably strong first-person presence in her texts, the *Life of Isabelle* and the *Letter on Louis IX and Longchamp* also collect the memories of others concerning Isabelle’s life, character, actions, and miracles. Several members of the royal family offer their recollections, including Louis IX and his wife, Marguerite of Provence. A number of Franciscans also recount Isabelle’s actions and miracles, and a total of twenty-three sisters of Longchamp are mentioned in Agnes’s writings, many of them acting as witnesses to Isabelle’s posthumous miracles. In Agnes of Harcourt’s texts, therefore, we have a treasure trove of information about Isabelle and her relationship to her family, to her Franciscan advisers, and to the nuns of her royal abbey from a well-informed female perspective.

While Agnes’s texts provide the foundation for the present work, a largely untapped body of documentary evidence also survives to complement them. This study draws on a number of recently edited papal bulls, advice literature written for Isabelle, inventories of her books and possessions, and abundant archival evidence for the princess, her biographer, and their abbey. This rich dossier allows access to aspects of Isabelle’s career that necessarily remain beyond the historian’s grasp for women who moved in less exalted circles.

**Historiography**

Isabelle of France is thus a figure of evident importance for scholars interested in Capetian, Franciscan, and women’s history. But although her
first printed biography appeared in 1619 and French authors have offered a steady stream of pious treatments of her life ever since, she has been the subject of very little serious study. Albert Garreau contributed the twentieth century’s only notable biography of Isabelle, a short book in 1943 and a slightly expanded version in 1955. Since Garreau retained the edifying focus typical of hagiography and was not aware of most of the evidence for Isabelle’s life, it should not be surprising that his picture of her as a uniformly quiet and humble saint is unsatisfying and incomplete. Isabelle has attracted a limited amount of attention in other scholarly works. Gaston Duchesne’s survey of the history of Longchamp, now over a century old, devoted several pages to her. Gertrud Mlynarczyk’s thorough study of Longchamp in the fifteenth century contains a brief section on Isabelle and the foundation of her abbey, and an article by Beth Lynn has rekindled some interest in Isabelle among scholars of Franciscan women. Among biographers of the thirteenth-century Capetians, William Chester Jordan’s work on Louis IX first pointed out the potential interest of Isabelle’s career, and Miriam Shadis and Jacques Le Goff have since echoed his sentiments. Most recently, Jordan has returned to the subject in a welcome article stressing Isabelle’s importance to our understanding of the climate of devotion at the court of Louis IX.

Even scholars as eminent as Jordan and Le Goff, however, have been limited by the lack of available and trustworthy evidence. The few recent assessments of Isabelle of France have been based almost exclusively on readings of Agnes of Harcourt’s biography, while most of the additional evidence for her life has remained unexplored. Until recently it has simply been too difficult for historians to separate the wheat from the chaff, to find a solid evidentiary base from which to reach conclusions. As a result, our picture of Isabelle has remained inadequate, missing some of the princess’s most important aspects as a powerful royal woman, controversial Franciscan patron, and influential author of a rule.

Plan and Scope of the Book

This book generally follows a chronological outline. Chapter 1 considers the evidence for Isabelle’s early life and asks how she was able to
avoid marriage and find a role at court as a devout virgin, while chapter 2 analyses the contours of her youthful piety and demonstrates the spread of her reputation in ever-widening circles by the 1250s. Chapters 3 and 4 together investigate Isabelle’s impact on Franciscan history by examining her foundation of Longchamp, her involvement in the genesis of its rule and its revision, and the wider significance of these accomplishments. Chapter 5 returns to Isabelle’s later life at Longchamp, establishing that she did not become a nun there, but also highlighting her continued influence in shaping her house’s role, and the level of saintly renown she enjoyed by the time of her death. The final chapter focuses on the ways in which Isabelle was remembered as a miracle-working source of holy power by the royal family, Franciscans, the nuns of Longchamp, and Agnes of Harcourt herself, and it concludes by briefly sketching the history of her cult’s temporary eclipse and eventual reemergence.

Power and influence frame the questions that I pose. My approach addresses the world that Isabelle knew, the people with whom she interacted, the decisions she made, and the impressions she left. The larger project of writing her into synthetic histories of medieval piety and sanctity has to be left to future scholarship. This study should make the importance of that task evident.