Introduction
Modern and Medieval Contexts

On 31 May 1310, at the Place de Grève in Paris, the Dominican inquisitor William of Paris read out a sentence that declared Marguerite “called Porete” to be a relapsed heretic, released her to secular authority for punishment, and ordered that all copies of a book she had written be confiscated. William next consigned Marguerite’s would-be supporter, Guiard of Cressonessart, to perpetual imprisonment. Guiard was not an author, but rather what might be termed an apocalyptic activist, charged in his own mind with an angelic mission to defend the true adherents of the Lord—including Marguerite—as the time of Antichrist grew near. The inquisitor’s sentences also sketched the bare outlines of Marguerite’s and Guiard’s stories. Marguerite had earlier been detained by a bishop of Cambrai, her book had been burned at that time, and she had been released with a warning never again to write or speak about the ideas contained there. She chose to ignore this order, however, and communicated her book to others, including a neighboring bishop. This audacity landed her before an inquisitor and the next bishop of Cambrai, and eventually led to her incarceration under William of Paris’s jurisdiction by fall 1308. It was at this point that Guiard appeared in Paris and attempted to defend Marguerite in some way. He was also promptly imprisoned, and the two remained uncooperative until spring 1310. Over several months, William of Paris then conducted inquisitorial processes against them, complete with multiple
consultations of experts in theology and canon law. Under threat of
death, Guiard at last consented to testify, perhaps shocking his inter-
rogators with the news that he considered himself to hold the office of
“Angel of Philadelphia.” Marguerite, however, remained uncoopera-
tive to the bitter end. Nothing further is known about Guiard’s fate
after the sentencing of 31 May, but Marguerite went to her execution
the next day.

Contemporary chroniclers recorded Marguerite’s death and Gui-
ard’s imprisonment as among the most noteworthy events of 1310. But
memory of the trials faded over time, and these two were largely forgot-
ten. Marguerite’s book, however, lived on. Although the trial documents
never gave it a title, modern scholarship has identified it as the swirling
exploration of spiritual nonbeing known as the Mirror of Simple Souls
(Miroir des simples ames), which circulated in unattributed copies
of the original Old and then Middle French, and in translations into
Middle English, Latin, and Italian, until Romana Guar nieri reconnected
it to Marguerite’s name in 1946. This announcement led in turn to a
wave of scholarly interest in Marguerite Porete as an author and thinker.
The unique surviving Middle French manuscript of her book was edited
by Guar nieri in 1961 (and in a more widely available edition of 1965)
and then reprinted alongside Paul Verdeyen’s edition of the Latin ver-
sion in 1986. Modern translations into English, French, Italian, German,
Spanish, and Catalan have followed, along with a torrent of linguistic,
theological, philosophical, and literary studies that shows no sign of
slowing down. Historians, however, have written comparatively little
about Marguerite since the 1970s, perhaps out of a sense that she and
her book were best left to scholars of literature and theology. Guiard,
for his part, has drawn relatively little interest after the thorough ar-
ticle by Robert E. Lerner in 1976 that made the facts of his case available
to the scholarly world.

The Curse of the Burned Beguine?

Although this study focuses equally on William of Paris, Guiard of
Cressonessart, and Marguerite Porete, it is the latter who undoubtedly
stands as the riveting figure at the center of the book. As the author of
a sophisticated spiritual treatise, a woman undaunted in her determi-
nation to write in spite of repeated official condemnation, and a seemingly fearless opponent of inquisitorial persecution who went to her death without ever deigning to testify at her own trial, in recent decades Marguerite has earned an ever-increasing number of admirers, scholarly and otherwise.5

The stark fact is that Marguerite Porete was the first female Christian mystic burned at the stake after authoring a book—and the book’s survival makes the case absolutely unique. Indeed, the import of this moment extends beyond a history of misogynistic censorship. Taken from a northern French perspective, the sentencing of 31 May was, as Henry Charles Lea famously put it, “the first formal auto de fé of which we have cognizance at Paris.”6 In the history of book burning, it is the first known instance of an inquisitorial procedure ending with the burning of both a book and the accused author.7 If one thinks in terms of a history of violent intellectual repression, Marguerite has been described as “the only medieval woman, and possibly the only author of either sex, who died solely for a written text.”8 No matter what perspective is applied, the execution of Marguerite Porete marks a historical watershed.

And these events had wider consequences, since the church fathers at the Council of Vienne in 1311–12 almost certainly drew on extracts from Marguerite’s book in crafting the decree Ad nostrum, which set in motion decades of inquisitorial persecution of beguines and beg-hards accused of being antinomian “heretics of the Free Spirit.”9 Pope Clement V and the churchmen gathered at Vienne may also have had Marguerite in mind as an example when they constructed the decree Cum de quibusdam, which attempted to legislate against communities of problematic beguines. Thus, as recent work has shown, 1310–12 marked a turning point not only in the whole beguine movement but in the way churchmen regarded female authors and ecstatically devout women more generally.10 Guiard’s case has not generally been thought of in such dramatic terms, but I will suggest that it can be seen as a step toward the crackdown on Joachite-inspired apocalypticism that culminated in condemnations and executions under Pope John XXII by the 1320s.11

Given the great interest of these trials, it is startling to note how frequently errors concerning some of the basic facts have been made and repeated. Indeed, this pattern is so striking that one might be tempted
(tongue firmly in cheek) to imagine Marguerite as a forerunner of the Templar grand master Jacques of Molay, who supposedly hurled curses from the pyre in Paris in 1314. But rather than calling her contemporary antagonists to a reckoning in the next world as Jacques is rumored to have done, perhaps Marguerite—always distrustful of arrogant scholars—placed a more subtle malediction on all those who would dig to the bottom of carton J428 in the Archives nationales de France, where the trial documents are now found. This supernatural hypothesis, fanciful though it is, would at least offer some explanation for why scholars have so resolutely persisted in repeating misinformation about her trial.

For the most concrete example, consider several problems with chronology. In 1887 the American medievalist Henry Charles Lea (really his paid copyist) misdated a crucial document to 30 May instead of 9 May 1310, and thereby had a panel of canon lawyers declaring Marguerite a relapsed heretic only the day before her sentencing. Lea can be forgiven for occasional lapses in his pioneering work—carried out by “remote control” from Philadelphia—but the effects of this error have nevertheless continued to linger right up to the present. Not only was his erroneous date repeated when it was quickly reprinted in Paul Fredericq’s still widely used collection of sources, but a recent translation into English of several of the documents from Marguerite’s trial (available on the World Wide Web) is based on Lea’s edition and hence continues to propagate it as well. This error matters, for it fundamentally misrepresents the inquisitor’s timetable and obscures the relation between Marguerite’s trial and other events occurring in Paris in May 1310.

The great French medieval historian Charles-Victor Langlois, for his part, not only followed Lea’s mistake in 1894 but added another layer of confusion by shortening Marguerite’s life by one day, claiming that she was burned on 31 May. Twentieth-century scholars as accomplished as Herbert Grundmann, Romana Guarnieri, Robert Lerner, Kurt Ruh, and Miri Rubin have inadvertently repeated the latter error. A single day may not seem enormously important, but the correct date of Marguerite’s death has continued to elude historians, appearing as early as 1 May 1310 in one influential work and as late as 1311 in another.

Yet curses (even imaginary ones) run their course, scholarship marches on, and all the trial documents were at last correctly dated by
Lerner in 1976. One might have hoped, therefore, that subsequent scholarship would no longer be plagued by these factual errors. Unfortunately, several more recent publications have once again muddied what should have been clearing waters. Most importantly, Paul Verdeyen in 1986 published an article with the laudable goal of bringing together for the first time all the Latin trial documents pertaining to Marguerite and Guiard. Yet precisely because this work was intended to provide the definitive critical edition of the entire proceedings, any misinformation it conveyed was bound to be widely repeated. It is thus particularly lamentable that Verdeyen misread the date of the document in which twenty-one masters of theology condemned extracts from Marguerite’s book as 11 April 1309 instead of 11 April 1310 and that he then compounded this error by repeating it in his short introduction to what has become the standard multilingual edition of Marguerite’s work. In this telling, the theological condemnation of the book would have been the very opening of the process, taking place a whole year before any further action occurred and coloring the rest of the process accordingly. Given this mistaken idea, Verdeyen’s analysis of the subsequent course of the trial could not avoid conveying some misleading assumptions about the way William of Paris had approached his task.

Another influential account of Marguerite’s life, the introduction to the most recent English translation of Marguerite’s *Mirror*, by Edmund Colledge, J. C. Marler, and Judith Grant, does get the date of 11 April 1310 correct but still indicates that this is the earliest document from the process (neglecting documents dated 3 and 9 April), then states that four canon lawyers were called in to consult on Marguerite’s legal status “seven weeks later”—which, in fact, brings us right back to Lea’s original misdating of 30 May for that document! If the standard edition of the trial documents, the critical edition of the *Mirror of Simple Souls*, and the most recent English translation of that work all contain such chronological errors, it can hardly be surprising that others who have summarized the trial have often repeated one or more of these mistakes.

Nor does the problem with accurate dating stop at the trial documents themselves. For example, Marguerite Porete first ran afoul of ecclesiastical authority when her book was condemned and burned by Guido of Collemezzo, bishop of Cambrai. This event must have occurred between 1296 and 1306, because those are the years in which...
Guido held the bishopric of Cambrai. But over time, on the basis of no additional evidence, some scholars have inadvertently slipped into stating that the condemnation occurred “in 1306” or a similar formulation.25 Again, the point matters, because if indeed Marguerite’s first encounter with ecclesiastical censure happened only in 1306, then her path to inquisitorial arrest afterward was short and direct, whereas an earlier date would have allowed her time to mull over her response.

The first goal of this study, therefore, is to get the facts straight, where they can be established. These facts then provide the starting point for further analysis of actions, choices, and motivations. I hope that in many instances a clear grasp of the data allows me to offer interpretations that can be supported with contextual evidence or at least persuasive argumentation. At other points, however, the fragmentary documentary record permits only pure hypotheses. I have tried to make these two registers clear to the reader—if the speculative moments are marked by the use of words such as perhaps and phrases such as might have, these cumbersome formulations at least preserve the line between what I take to be established facts and what should be understood as more subjective interpretation.

In sum, this study analyzes the trials of Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart in new detail and from previously unconsidered perspectives. I also hope it tells a compelling story and illuminates issues in a way that will be informative to scholars, students, and general readers alike. I therefore explain ideas and events throughout the book without assuming specialized knowledge. With this goal in mind, I now turn to an elucidation of the larger issues (most of which will be familiar to specialists) essential for understanding the context of the trial.

Intellectual Context: Beguine Mystics

Although it was her book that first got Marguerite Porete in trouble, simply writing a controversial book, even one in French expressing daring theological ideas, was not enough to land a woman in an inquisitorial prison and certainly not in itself sufficient to justify her execution by the secular authorities. To the contrary, the Mirror of Simple Souls was part of a wider flowering of a new kind of text—religious literature written in vernacular languages by thirteenth-century women,
sometimes nuns but frequently beguines or others on the edges of organized religious communities (chapter 1 will examine what it meant to be called a *beguina*).[^26] Many of these texts reported visions or mystical experiences, most asserted theological truths of some kind, and virtually all were vibrantly original.[^27] These works encompassed several genres: for instance, the beguine Hadewijch wrote Flemish poetry, letters, and vision literature; Beatrice of Nazareth’s Dutch *Seven Manners of Loving* more closely resembled a didactic treatise; Mechthild of Magdeburg’s German *Flowing Light of the Godhead* was a sprawling spiritual diary of sorts; the Carthusian prioress Marguerite of Oingt wrote a *Mirror* and a life of her fellow nun Béatrice of Ornacieux in Franco-Provençal (and other works in Latin); and the Provençal beguine Felipa of Porcelet and the northern French Franciscan abbess Agnes of Harcourt authored vernacular lives of their communities’ founders (Douceline of Digne and Isabelle of France respectively).[^28]

In short, Marguerite had plenty of company as a thirteenth-century woman writing in the vernacular about religious subjects. Her book, moreover, had much in common with some of these texts. Like the *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, the *Mirror of Simple Souls* was its author’s life’s work, a nonlinear narrative encompassing everything learned over years of reflection. And like Hadewijch, Beatrice, and Mechthild, Marguerite treated love, in various ways and multiple manifestations, as the central subject of the text. Thus Marguerite’s project sits comfortably among the texts of an emerging group of “beguine mystics” or within the overlapping genre of *mystique courtoise*.[^29] Hadewijch and Mechthild in particular were at times as daring as Marguerite, but while there are indications that they had to deal with various sorts of suspicion, they did not face inquisitorial persecution. The brand of love-drenched vernacular theology that these women favored may have been provocative, but it was not necessarily heretical.

In other respects, however, Marguerite and her *Mirror* did stand out from the contemporary crowd. One important difference from many medieval female-authored works on religious subjects is that Marguerite did not base her message on visionary authority. Only as a seeming afterthought did she briefly report having had conversations with God.[^30] Marguerite did not claim that God spoke through her or that what she knew came from a mystical access to the divine that others lacked. In fact, she did not deign to explain how she knew what she

---

[^26]: Sometimes nuns but frequently beguines or others on the edges of organized religious communities (chapter 1 will examine what it meant to be called a *beguina*).
[^27]: Many of these texts reported visions or mystical experiences, most asserted theological truths of some kind, and virtually all were vibrantly original.
[^28]: These works encompassed several genres: for instance, the beguine Hadewijch wrote Flemish poetry, letters, and vision literature; Beatrice of Nazareth’s Dutch *Seven Manners of Loving* more closely resembled a didactic treatise; Mechthild of Magdeburg’s German *Flowing Light of the Godhead* was a sprawling spiritual diary of sorts; the Carthusian prioress Marguerite of Oingt wrote a *Mirror* and a life of her fellow nun Béatrice of Ornacieux in Franco-Provençal (and other works in Latin); and the Provençal beguine Felipa of Porcelet and the northern French Franciscan abbess Agnes of Harcourt authored vernacular lives of their communities’ founders (Douceline of Digne and Isabelle of France respectively).
[^29]: In short, Marguerite had plenty of company as a thirteenth-century woman writing in the vernacular about religious subjects. Her book, moreover, had much in common with some of these texts. Like the *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, the *Mirror of Simple Souls* was its author’s life’s work, a nonlinear narrative encompassing everything learned over years of reflection. And like Hadewijch, Beatrice, and Mechthild, Marguerite treated love, in various ways and multiple manifestations, as the central subject of the text. Thus Marguerite’s project sits comfortably among the texts of an emerging group of “beguine mystics” or within the overlapping genre of *mystique courtoise*.
[^30]: Hadewijch and Mechthild in particular were at times as daring as Marguerite, but while there are indications that they had to deal with various sorts of suspicion, they did not face inquisitorial persecution. The brand of love-drenched vernacular theology that these women favored may have been provocative, but it was not necessarily heretical.

In other respects, however, Marguerite and her *Mirror* did stand out from the contemporary crowd. One important difference from many medieval female-authored works on religious subjects is that Marguerite did not base her message on visionary authority. Only as a seeming afterthought did she briefly report having had conversations with God. Marguerite did not claim that God spoke through her or that what she knew came from a mystical access to the divine that others lacked. In fact, she did not deign to explain how she knew what she
knew at all. More broadly, first-person experience is only rarely locatable in the text, and the *Mirror* almost entirely lacks the kind of somatic suffering and bridal imagery that characterizes many writings about and by contemporary women.31

Instead, Marguerite employed a dialogue form in which numerous personified qualities and “characters” such as Love, the Soul, and Reason ask and answer questions about the state of nonbeing, annihilation in love, and destruction of the will that allows the simple soul to be nowhere and nothing and hence in a state of nondifference with God, who is All. Such perfect, annihilated souls leave behind not only reason but also the need to pursue pious activities such as penances, fasts, or masses—or even the virtues themselves. The book is aimed at once at those who have already attained the noble status of annihilation and at those “forlorn” souls who still strive for it. The perfect love (*fine amour*) at play here is not a meditative longing for the crucified Jesus but an impossible, self-destroying descent into an abyss of humility so profound that from its depths no self remains to impede God’s self-recognition there. In form, the *Mirror* is a mix of meditation, poetry, and instruction, oscillating in mood from exaltation to despair, scolding to mockery, and humility to haughtiness. It can, at first reading, seem chaotic in the way it drops themes, picks them up much later, contradicts itself, and generally proceeds along anything but a straight line. Its culmination, however, comes at chapter 118 (in the Middle French manuscript), which outlines a seven-step descent to annihilation in God; and what unifies the book is the idea that elite, annihilated souls—who have and will and know both everything and nothing, who are both impossibly distant from and utterly united to God—follow a spiritual path that transcends the more common road of Christian charity and good works.

Although nothing can replace the experience of reading the *Mirror* oneself, a nearly random excerpt from the middle of the book (chapter 46 in the Middle French manuscript) will serve to provide the flavor for those who have not yet read it:32

Now [says Love], has this Soul fallen and come to knowledge of the more—indeed, only insofar as she knows nothing of God in comparison with his all.

© 2012 University of Notre Dame
O, alas, says Reason, dare one really call that nothing, that thing which is of God?

Ah alas, says this Soul, how else should one call it? Truly it is really nothing, whatever is given or shall be given to us from him. Indeed, even if he gave us the very same thing which is said above in this writing—by comparison, even if it could be that which was truth—still it would be nothing compared with a single spark of his goodness, which remains in his knowing, beyond our knowing.33

The role Reason plays here is characteristic, acting the dunce and waiting to be corrected by Love, while the Soul seeks its way to simplicity. Reason is no fool, however; he asks logical questions, but this rational approach is repeatedly slapped down as indicative of blindness to higher truths.

It can readily be imagined that not all churchmen would have appreciated this didactic technique. Moreover, the author’s underlying message in a work with this format could be difficult to understand, and uncharitable readers could easily take particular remarks ascribed to particular personifications out of context. Still, caution is required before assuming that specific elements of the way Marguerite constructed or justified her text explain why her work was condemned, since there is no record of any contemporary churchman noting these points, approvingly or disapprovingly.

Equally important to Marguerite’s treatment by authorities may be the fact that she had no known confessor to help shield her from suspicion. A fruitful strand of recent scholarship has analyzed the way such male confidants could influence their female charges, present them within an orthodox context, and bask in their spiritual glow.34 Again, however, this lack of a prominent confessor cannot wholly explain why Marguerite alone among her peers went to the stake. For one thing, Marguerite did receive encouragement from some churchmen, including Godfrey of Fontaines, so she cannot be seen as an utterly lone figure (as she is too often portrayed).35 Moreover, Hadewijch is not known to have had a confessor who promoted her writings, yet she did not suffer the same inquisitorial persecution as Marguerite. It is therefore necessary to expose Marguerite’s specific actions and the context in which they were made in order to explain her fate.
nicely puts it: “Medieval heresy was a juridical concept. Books or beliefs could not be heretical in the abstract; they became heretical only when authoritative churchmen—popes, synods, individual bishops, or inquisitors—pronounced them so. As for the human beings who wrote the books and adhered to the beliefs, they could be executed for the crime of heresy only if they proved ‘obdurate’ or ‘relapsed,’ that is, if they either refused to abjure their heretical views or did so under pressure but later recanted or resumed their prior activities.” Accordingly, it will be necessary to investigate exactly how and why a bishop pronounced Marguerite’s book heretical and what subsequent “obdurate” behavior led to her execution.

Intellectual Context: Joachite Apocalypticism

If a woman writing about “annihilated souls” can sometimes be hard to contextualize, it is even more difficult to convince a modern audience that a man claiming to be the “Angel of Philadelphia” was anything other than deranged. Yet Guiard of Cressonessart was working with ideas that were very much in the air around 1300. Most generally, the claim that the time of Antichrist was near was no novelty in the later Middle Ages, and the idea that the Book of Revelation, with its seven churches, seven angels, and other recurring symbols, foretold in some mysterious manner the events that would accompany the last times was equally accepted.

More specifically, Guiard’s testimony shows him to have been an intellectual heir of Joachim of Fiore (ca. 1135–1202), an Italian abbot whose formulations about the relationship of the Christian past to the Christian future were immensely influential. Joachim’s writings proposed a fundamentally new way of understanding God’s plan for the full scope of Christian history. In several interlocking major works written between the 1170s and his death, Joachim combined meticulous reading of the Old and New Testaments with flashes of revelatory insight to offer his vision of the future. One of his “big ideas” was the “concordance of testaments,” essentially that the Old Testament offered a guide to interpreting the second half of Christian history from the Incarnation to the Last Judgment. Read correctly, the Old Testament not
only foretold events from the time of Christ up to the (twelfth-century) present but also laid out what was to follow. An essential addition to this methodology was Joachim’s strategy for reading the Book of Revelation. Traditionally, Christian scholars had seen Revelation as a repetitious description (with its recurring series of sevenfold symbols) rather than as a continuous narrative. Most importantly, St. Augustine had authoritatively asserted long ago that the passage (20:1–5) that speaks of a thousand-year reign of the saints with Christ referred to the Christian present (that is, the time after Christ’s incarnation) and not to some future period of earthly bliss. Joachim, however, read Revelation as representing a continuous history from the time of Christ to the Last Judgment and therefore posited a millennial reign of the saints to arrive after the time of Antichrist and before the Last Judgment. Furthermore, he argued that close study of the Bible revealed an unfolding pattern, with the Christian time line divided into three overlapping statuses: those of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Since the third status was equated with the millennial Sabbath after Antichrist, signs in Revelation associated with the coming of Antichrist also heralded the imminent arrival of the status of the Holy Spirit. In practical terms, this meant that for those influenced by Joachim’s ideas, a fundamentally new dispensation of understanding, concord, and spiritual intelligence (the third status) awaited beyond the looming time of Antichrist.

Guiard emerged from this tradition, but his thoughts must have been filtered through those of the many Joachite thinkers who developed these ideas over the course of the thirteenth century. Thinking or writing in this vein was not in and of itself heretical. It is true that one specific (and now lost) book by Joachim dealing with the Trinity was condemned by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, but his works as a whole were not off limits to the faithful, and his ideas about the third status were never condemned. They could, however, be pushed too far, as when a Franciscan student at Paris, Gerardino of Borgo San Donnino, published a work known as the Eternal Gospel, which mixed his own comments with some of Joachim’s authentic writings. Flush with millennial enthusiasm, Gerardino asserted that Joachim’s works would be the Scripture of the third status, fulfilling if not superseding the Old and New Testaments, and that the Franciscan order would lead the
way into the age of the Holy Spirit while much of the rest of the church hierarchy fell away. This was enough to get Gerardino imprisoned for life by his order, as he continued to adhere to these claims even after the pope ordered his book destroyed.42 Despite this episode, Joachim remained a major inspiration to later thirteenth-century thinkers, especially within the Franciscan order.

This is not, of course, to say that there was nothing audacious or novel about Guiard’s claims: by insisting that he himself was the Angel of Philadelphia, he was obviously crossing over into dangerous territory as far as church officials were concerned. Nevertheless, as with Marguerite, it is essential to realize that within contemporary intellectual currents Guiard was pushing boundaries of orthodoxy rather than inventing “heresies” out of whole cloth.

The Reach of Royal Power in the Reign of Philip IV

Unfortunately for Marguerite and Guiard, the France of Philip IV (r. 1285–1314) was not a promising atmosphere for pushing boundaries where royal interests were concerned; and increasingly the king and his men insisted that royal power was implicated in all questions of ecclesiastical authority within the realm. Over the course of the thirteenth century, the French royal family had presented itself as a holy lineage (beata stirps) with the Most Christian Kings ruling over a French “chosen people.”43 The crown’s role as leader of crusades, defender of the papacy, guardian of the university, and keeper of Christ’s crown of thorns merged with the king’s unique anointing and reputedly miraculous healing touch to support this public image. More specifically, the lived sanctity of Louis IX and his sister Isabelle (both d. 1270) had helped to foster a public perception of a saintly royal family, which in succeeding decades provided an argument for the sanctity of the whole Capetian line.44 As the French realm developed from a modest twelfth-century domain centered on the Île-de-France to the nascent nation-state of the early fourteenth century, this special aura of holy authority was essential to the king’s ability to command the loyalty of his subjects.45

Philip IV’s reign witnessed the medieval culmination of this “religion of royalty.”46 He not only worked for Louis’s canonization in
1297 but also did everything possible to translate this royal reputation for piety into real political control over church affairs in his kingdom. The best recent commentators have developed a picture of Philip as “a captious, sternly moralistic, literally scrupulous, humorless, stubborn, aggressive, and vindictive individual.” He adhered to “two religions”: a conventional Christian piety and “the religion of monarchy,” which merged in his outlook to make devotion to Christ nearly identical with respect for the crown. As king of France, he was God’s anointed on earth, the defender of the church in his kingdom, and responsible for dispensing divine justice. For Philip, “no true believer could fail to see that the interests of the French monarchy and the interests of the Church were identical.” Thus he could be a “constitutional king” but also “chase phantoms” with “an element of terror” and thereby rule over an era of “unceasing strife, unending fear.”

After 1295, conflict and controversies in ecclesiastical contexts multiplied, as Philip and the newly elected pope Boniface VIII (r. 1294–1303) descended into a test of wills. An initial struggle over Philip’s right to tax the clergy of France was quickly settled more or less to Philip’s satisfaction by 1297. The real battle was set off in 1301 by the case of Bernard Saisset, bishop of Pamiers. Bernard, a southerner with little love for the “French” of the North, was accused of making derogatory remarks about the king, insulting royal officials and northerners generally, and conspiring to see Languedoc removed from the crown’s control. The bishop was arrested and sent north to Senlis, where, at an assembly of churchmen, the royal court added charges of heresy and simony to the list of accusations. Philip sought a quick ecclesiastical condemnation, hoping Bernard could then be handed over to secular officials for punishment (a draft memorandum specifically mentioned execution). But Boniface ordered that Bernard be turned over to him and that the bishopric’s seized revenues and temporal goods be restored. The propaganda contest that ensued far surpassed the specifics of this case to lay out with increasing intransigence the cases for royal and papal supremacy over the church in France (or more specifically, over ecclesiastical temporalities in the realm). It was in November 1302, in the heat of this contest, that Boniface published the famous bull *Unam sanctam*, probably the most extreme claim of universal papal sovereignty ever put forward.
In response, a French contingent headed by Philip’s increasingly powerful advisor William of Nogaret (a former professor of law) embarked on an audacious plan. In March 1303 Nogaret described Boniface in terms reminiscent of the propaganda concerning Bernard Saisset, painting him as a false pope, simoniac, and blasphemer. He now proposed to bring Boniface to account for these crimes by taking him into French custody and convoking a council that would judge and presumably depose him. In June, at a public gathering at the Louvre, a royal group led by William of Plaisians, Nogaret’s “right-hand man,” read out a list of accusations against Boniface that now included corruption, atheism, sodomy, possessing a private demon, having clerics killed, and hating the French and their king. Over the next weeks, royal officials pressured the clerics of the realm to sign letters of “adherence” stating their support for the king. William of Nogaret meanwhile set off for Italy. He may originally have been charged with more general negotiations, but by the end of June he must have received instructions to put in motion a plan very much along the lines of what he had originally proposed back in March. When he learned that Boniface was about to excommunicate the king, on 7 September he and a small, armed group controlled by the Colonna family (mortal enemies of Boniface VIII) broke into the papal palace at Anagni and arrested the elderly pope. But as some of the attackers threatened to execute Boniface on the spot, the townspeople of Anagni rallied and freed him on 9 September. Nogaret beat a hasty retreat, and Boniface was able to return to Rome. But the pope was a broken man, physically and mentally incapable of any official actions after this point. He died on 11 October.

These dramatic events coincided with a favorable turn in Philip’s military fortunes. An ongoing war in Flanders had been proceeding very badly, with the low point being a humiliating defeat at Courtrai in 1302. But a reassuring victory at Mons-en-Pévèle in 1304 was followed by a favorable peace treaty in June 1305. Combined with the election of the more compliant French pope Clement V that same month, Philip seemed to have emerged triumphant in his major military, political, and ecclesiastical battles. Just as importantly, Philip’s political operatives had perfected their signature techniques of defaming the crown’s perceived enemies: paint the accused as a demonic heretic and threat to the Chris-
tian people of France, convoke public assemblies to clamor in favor of these accusations, and pressure church and lay assemblies to formally support the king. As the drive to amass more effective control over the kingdom continued, this three-step process would serve the king’s interests well.

In 1306–7 the king launched two new assaults, which were—if possible—even more audacious than the attack on Boniface VIII. On 22 July 1306, after a month of secret planning, Philip’s men arrested all the Jews of the kingdom (some one hundred thousand people), while the crown confiscated their goods and claimed the right to collect the principal of all debts owed to Jewish moneylenders. By October, all Jews had been expelled from the realm. In adopting this method of raising funds, Philip was following in the footsteps of his great-great-grandfather Philip II and emulating the more recent model of Edward I of England, who had similarly expelled the Jews from England in 1290. Thus after the summer of 1306 France was theoretically a “pure” Christian land, with only those Jews who had chosen to convert to Christianity remaining. The crown had again buttressed its image as defender of the faith, while enriching itself and demonstrating a remarkably disciplined ability to carry out a mass arrest and deportation.60

The following year Philip and his advisors put this experience to use in their infamous attack on the Knights Templar. The Templars were a military order founded in the twelfth century as monk-warriors dedicated to combating “Saracens” for control of the Holy Land.61 By the thirteenth century, however, they had houses all across Europe, and many members had never seen the Holy Land or engaged in combat with an infidel. Indeed, most Templars in Europe were not knights at all. Particularly after the fall of the last crusader outpost at Acre in 1291, there were questions about whether the military orders were still necessary, suggestions that the Templars should be combined with the Hospitallers in a single, leaner order, and rumors about moral laxity. But the Templars’ international organization had also made them a convenient network within which to transfer funds from place to place, and Templar commanderies often functioned as repositories for the wealth of nobles and kings. In fact, the Templars of Paris acted (at times) as treasurers to King Philip in the last years of the order.62 Historians have recently veered away from simplistic arguments that would portray
Philip as coveting only the wealth of the order. The fact remains, however, that Philip was chronically strapped for cash, and the existence of an order of dubious necessity, with extensive revenues and little reason to respect French royal sovereignty, was a temptation for a crown recently experienced in mass arrests and confiscations.

To accuse an entire order of heresy and apostasy was unprecedented, but this is exactly what Philip and his men did. At several points this book will have to examine elements of this affair in some detail, for the “trial of the Templars” intersects with those of Marguerite and Guiard in important ways. Suffice it to say here that according to the crown, witnesses had denounced the Templars for crimes including spitting on the cross, denying Christ, idolatry, sodomy, and other immoral acts associated with a supposed secret portion of their initiation rite. It was not just that individual brothers had sinned; rather, the whole order had become an anti-Christian bastion of blasphemy and unbelief. These charges were wildly implausible, yet Philip and at least some of his advisors may well have convinced themselves that the Templars’ crimes were real. This was, after all, a king who perceived anti-Christian plots all around him and could not abide rival sources of authority. The more such rivals could be painted as heretics, the more clearly Philip could present himself as the shining beacon of faith standing between the Christian people of France and their enemies. Thus in late 1307 Philip ordered all Templars in France arrested, a command that was again carried out with impressive secrecy and frightening efficiency. Many Templars spent the next four years imprisoned, most confessed under torture, and eventually the order was suppressed by the Council of Vienne in 1312—but not before this affair again developed into a test between royal and papal authority, as Philip and Clement V maneuvered to control the proceedings.

It might seem as though this would be all the scandal that Paris could deal with, but the trials and attacks continued up through 1310 and beyond. For example, Guichard, bishop of Troyes, had been the subject of several scandals going back to 1301, but after accusations in early 1308 the royal court accused him of sorcery, devil worship, usury, illicit sexual relations, and murder, including causing the death of Philip’s queen, Jeanne of Navarre (d. 1305). The papal commission inquiring into his case formally began its work on 7 October 1308, but the process
was allowed to drag on without ever reaching a conclusive resolution (eventually in 1313 Guichard was released to papal custody and then transferred to a far-off see in Bosnia). Finally, there was the ongoing attempt to launch a posthumous heresy trial of Boniface VIII. Philip had insisted on such a trial early in the pontificate of Clement V, and Nogaret continued to push the idea as a way of vindicating his personal role in the “outrage at Anagni.” Clement at last agreed to consider the list of articles against Boniface in 1310, and witnesses testified about a familiar cluster of accusations, including heresy, hatred of the French, blasphemy, and rejection of Christ.

Taken together, the affairs of 1301–12 are an essential background to our story. Over and over again enemies were created and cast in a common mold, only so that their destruction could redound to the glory of the Most Christian King. If the French crown was the defender of the faith, then its enemies must be heretics. Conversely, anyone accused of heresy must be an enemy of the crown, according to the logic by which Philip sought to make himself (in Julien Théry’s stark phrase) “pope in his kingdom.” In the Saisset affair, Nogaret argued that “what is committed against God, against the faith, or against the Roman Church, the king considered committed against himself.” The king and his men were thus “pontificalizing” the presentation of royal power, explicitly taking formulations used by popes going back to Innocent III to equate heresy with lèse-majesté, and in a newly literal way portraying the king as the aggrieved party in any case of heresy within his realm. To be accused of heresy in the France of Philip the Fair was to be accused of a direct attack on the king, making any heresy trial by definition an affair of royal interest.

Moreover, several semireligious women had recently run afoul of the royal court. According to contemporary chronicles, in 1304 a pseudo-mulier (pseudo- or false woman) originally from Metz but living among beguines in Flanders had gained influence over Philip IV and his wife, Jeanne of Navarre, through her prophecies. But this woman’s malignant ways were supposedly exposed after she tried to poison the king’s brother Charles of Valois. When Charles had her captured and tortured, she admitted to her maleficia (though she was eventually freed). Four years later, in the trial of Guichard of Troyes, two of the star witnesses against the bishop were the devineresse Margueronne of
Bellevillette (also called Marguerite of Bourdenay) and the midwife Perrote of Pouy. These women supposedly had helped Guichard to poison the queen and also attested to his plot to murder this same Charles of Valois. To judge from these episodes, the king and his family may have been on guard for attacks of such *pseudo-mulieres*—the very term with which a chronicler later labeled Marguerite Porete.

At the same time, however, the foregoing survey of these many “affairs” of the reign of Philip IV highlights ways in which the trials of Marguerite and Guiard were different. Unlike Bernard Saisset, Guichard of Troyes, or even Boniface VIII, neither Marguerite nor Guiard was accused of any direct attack on the king or kingdom (though such an idea might lurk beneath the surface of the charges), and neither was accused of anything like sorcery or invocation of demons. And both Marguerite and Guiard, to some degree, forced themselves onto inquisitorial attention—there was no need to drum up a list of wild accusations against them, since their own actions formed the basis of their convictions. The question of just exactly how the patterns of royal politics shaped the trials will require careful investigation.

*Dominicans, Inquisitors, and the Crown*

The link between the court and the trials of Marguerite and Guiard, however, is not in doubt. Not only did the surviving records end up in the possession of Nogaret and Plaisians (see Epilogue I), but the inquisitor, William of Paris, was also Philip’s Dominican confessor. Thus a final element is necessary to add here—the rise of papal inquisitors and the ties between inquisitorial office, the Dominican order, and the French crown.

“The Inquisition” with a capital “I” is more a product of the modern imagination than a reflection of medieval reality. No such “monolithic medieval institution” existed in the thirteenth or fourteenth century. By the 1230s, however, the first papal inquisitors of heretical depravity were indeed carrying out their work. The impetus for the emergence of this office went back to the twelfth century, as the church responded to the challenge posed by popular “heresies” such as the Waldensians (or Poor of Lyons) and the (so-called) Cathars of south-
ern France. These groups attracted laypeople desiring to live the life of the apostles, wandering and preaching in poverty and simplicity. The church’s uneasy response was ultimately twofold: on the one hand increasingly strident attempts to suppress unlicensed preaching and doctrinal deviation by laypeople, but on the other—under Innocent III (r. 1198–1216)—the incorporation of the new Mendicant orders (those that begged for their existence) as an acceptable embodiment of these newly influential impulses. The order of Lesser Brothers (Ordo fratum minorum) of St. Francis and the order of Preachers (Ordo praedicatorum) of St. Dominic are better known simply as the Franciscans and Dominicans. Both orders were dedicated to itinerant lives of preaching and poverty, while Dominic in particular intended his order to be preachers who would combat the heretics of southern France.

During these same decades from the mid-twelfth to the mid-thirteenth centuries, canon and civil lawyers developed the new (or newly rediscovered) trial procedure of *inquisitio*. As opposed to an accusatorial system, where an accuser had to come forward to present a case against a defendant, in the inquisitorial system of justice an investigating judge was empowered to inquire into the truth of the matter where well-established public opinion, or *fama*, reported that a crime had been committed. If that *fama* identified an individual as the likely guilty party, the judge could then proceed to a specific inquiry against this person. The adoption of inquisitorial procedure increasingly characterized secular as well as ecclesiastical justice in thirteenth-century continental Europe. Louis IX, for example, empowered *enquêteurs* to investigate charges of official corruption in France from the 1240s on (his saintly reputation and the use of the French term tends to obscure the fact this was a secular use of inquisitorial procedure), and this form of governmental inquiry continued under the later Capetians. Similarly, popes used inquisitorial procedure when investigating defamed bishops or other church officials.

Regarding heresy specifically, it was first bishops who were instructed to conduct inquiries in their dioceses in 1184 and 1215. In the wake of the Albigensian Crusade, however, Gregory IX sought to deploy a more flexible and mobile kind of agent—the first papally empowered inquisitors of heretical depravity. From 1209 to 1229 northern French knights had answered the papacy’s call to stamp out heresy.
in the South. The result was both a vast increase in the power of the French crown in Languedoc and the destruction of organized religious life of the rebellious “good men” and “good women” of the region, dualist-leaning dissidents usually labeled by historians as Cathars. The task now was to pressure all those leaders, believers, and supporters of the heretics. Beginning in the 1230s, the pope turned to the order that had been created to fight heresy in the region, the Dominicans. In succeeding decades, ad hoc episcopal inquisitions continued to function, and Franciscans and other friars could be appointed inquisitors in specific regions. But it was the Dominicans whose identity as an order became increasingly bound up with the office of inquisitor.

Dominican brothers were usually commissioned as inquisitors for a specific region by the order’s provincial, who in turn was given this power by the pope. Thus there was no “Inquisition” with an international or national structure, and no “Head” or “Grand Inquisitor” in Paris or Rome. There was no bureaucratic organization, hierarchy, or permanence to the office, only individuals with a few notaries and minions as aides, empowered for a specific region and heavily reliant on both parish priests and secular authorities to carry out their work. To the extent that semipermanent offices of inquisition were taking root in places like Toulouse and Carcassone, this was a function of Dominican brothers passing on their records, circulating their manuals, and employing the same notaries and assistants over time. In some cities of Languedoc, the presence of inquisitors might indeed have begun to seem very much like a permanent fact of life by 1300. Nothing similar, however, could be found for the Île-de-France, where historians have had trouble even tracing the existence of specific inquisitors between the 1270s and the time of William of Paris in the early fourteenth century.

Wherever he was assigned, the inquisitor’s job was to convert heretics to orthodoxy. If fama reliably indicated to an inquisitor that a person within his jurisdiction was a heretic or a supporter of heresy, he could charge the defendant, develop a list of accusations, and proceed to an inquiry that gathered witnesses and interrogated the suspect, who would have to swear an oath to tell the truth about the charges. Unless a criminal had been caught in the act, however, a conviction could come about only from the testimony of multiple witnesses, or through confession. Torture was a newly accepted (if still exceptional) method of extracting confessions in thirteenth-century French courts, and it could
be used in inquisitions where vehement suspicion of heresy lacked other proofs. The admission of guilt would then have to be repeated “without coercion” on a following day. Theoretically, suspects were allowed to know the charges against them, to defend themselves, and even to have legal counsel. In practice, however, inquisitors of heretical depravity might or might not adhere to such legal restrictions, and the evolving practice of the office, embodied in a string of ever more elaborate manuals for inquisitors after 1248, often counted for more than the letter of canon law. Moreover, the early inquisitorial campaigns were aimed at breaking up established (or imagined) groups of heretics, not at idiosyncratic individual thinkers. This meant both that “secret crimes” that might exist only in the mind of an individual were not the intended target of inquisitors and that the exact procedure to be followed in a unique individual case might not always be clear, even to an inquisitor wishing to proceed with scrupulous legality. In such cases, recourse to legal experts was a common expedient.

Confession and penitence were the desired ends of a heresy inquisition. A contrite offender would be assigned a greater or lesser penance and reconciled to the church, generally in a public ceremony involving elaborate staging and a procession of those being sentenced to specific categories of heretical crimes. The burning of an unrepentant heretic was a failure of sorts—perhaps necessary but brought on (according to this rationale) only by the victim’s own unreasoning refusal to choose the salvation offered to him by the church and its inquisitors.

Executions for heresy were thus the exception rather than the rule. For example, the early Dominican inquisitors Bernard of Caux and John of Saint-Pierre questioned at least 5,471 men and women of the Lauragais region in 1245 and 1246. Although only 207 sentences from this “great inquisition” survive, not one of these was a death sentence. Later and more complete evidence comes from a recent analysis of the registers of Bernard Gui, one of the best-documented southern French Dominican inquisitors of the early fourteenth century, and shows that 6.5 percent of his sentences resulted in burning at the stake (41 out of 633 cases). Far more frequent were penitential sentences ranging from the wearing of yellow crosses and undertaking of pilgrimages to perpetual imprisonment. Inquisitors generally looked to break up associations and change behaviors, and they used coercive interrogation, imprisonment with greater or lesser deprivation, and visible penances to these
Executions that did occur were generally of those who had “relapsed.” The legal principle was that after someone had been properly penitent and readmitted to communion with the church, any return to heresy was a sign of hardened obduracy and rendered the offender liable to “relaxation to the secular arm,” which inevitably meant death by fire.

If Dominicans were the most prominent inquisitors of heretical depravity, they were also particularly close supporters of the French crown. Most evidently, Philip’s confessors were all Dominicans—William of Paris was the third man from his order to hold that position (after Nicholas of Gorran and Nicholas of Fréauville). Philip was also able to count on Dominican masters of theology at the University of Paris for intellectual support. The Parisian Dominican convent of Saint-Jacques (so named for its location on the rue Saint-Jacques) housed friars who had come to study at the university from all over western Europe, but the French delegation there, at least, provided some of Philip’s strongest ecclesiastical supporters when loyalties were tested in the battle with Boniface VIII. The “ablest” polemical treatise supporting Philip’s theoretical position versus Boniface VIII, for example, was the work of the French Dominican master of theology John of Paris (or John Quidort).

This intellectual relationship between Dominican masters and the royal court was part of a wider process by which Philip repeatedly sought public support from the masters of theology at the University of Paris. The university—a corporate entity comprising multiple faculties and possessing the right to grant teaching licenses—took clear shape only in the early thirteenth century. The faculty of theology at Paris was unrivaled for prestige, and by the middle of the century Franciscan and Dominican masters were among its most influential members. Moreover, in the first years of the fourteenth century the university was becoming a “new source of authority,” as the king asked the masters to provide formal opinions on questions around the dispute with Boniface VIII and the trial of the Templars. Though there were deep rivalries between Mendicant and secular masters, competition between students of various teachers, and a wide variety of opinions expressed on nearly every controversial question of the day, the court hoped that university masters would speak with one voice in supporting royal policy.

Philip IV thus looked to Dominicans to act as his confessors, to take the lead in promoting royal ideology within university circles,
and to combat heresy within the realm as inquisitors. These roles, however, did not always mesh seamlessly, since not all Dominican masters were as thoroughly proroyal as John of Paris, and not all papally empowered inquisitors could be counted on to do the royal will. But for friars like William of Paris who tied their careers to the royal court, supporting the Most Christian King merged easily with inquiring into heresies that threatened the kingdom.

The Sources

To return from context to evidence, the primary source base for this study is at once quite wide and very narrow. The *Mirror of Simple Souls* itself provides some evidence for its author’s experiences, and a large number of extant letters, testaments, accounts, chronicles, and other texts sheds light on subjects such as the career of William of Paris, the political context at the court of Philip IV, and the public perception of the trial. The “Continuer of William of Nangis,” for example, is the best of our narrative sources for the trial and its aftermath (the relevant passages are translated in Appendix B of this book). William of Nangis had been a monk at Saint-Denis, the Benedictine abbey just north of Paris well known for its position as “custodian and interpreter of royal history” in medieval France. In addition to biographies of Louis IX and Philip III, William compiled a universal Latin chronicle that traced events in France up to his death in 1300. After 1300, other unidentified monks of Saint-Denis continued the work, and these chronicle entries provide crucial testimony at various points throughout the present book.

On the other hand, this study rests, at heart, on a very close analysis of just seven documents preserved on six pieces of parchment, prepared in 1310 as part of the trials of Marguerite and Guiard. There must once have been additional documents, so it should not be thought that these are the “complete” records of the trials. Moreover, some documents as they now survive are official, notarized copies, intended to stand as formal legal records, while others are unnotarized copies made either as preliminary records or as additional, informal copies for royal or inquisitorial officials. These documents are translated into English in Appendix A, where they are presented in chronological order. Here, however, it is worth listing them in the order in which they are found.
folded up in the bottom of carton J428 in the Archives nationales de France in Paris.105

No. 15 is a large piece of parchment preserving two discrete notarized documents. The first, shorter, text is properly dated 11 April 1310 and summarizes how twenty-one masters of theology condemned extracts from an unnamed book. The second, longer, text is dated 31 May and gives the final sentences of both Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart.

No. 16 is the most complex document. Another large piece of parchment, it contains a single notarized document that reflects several earlier stages of composition. It relates how theologians and canon lawyers were called together in March 1310 to consider the case of Guiard of Cressonessart and then incorporates a decision by the canon lawyers, dated 3 April, that Guiard may be considered a recalcitrant heretic. The entire narrative, however, is preserved within a framework added when this actual document was copied and notarized, 4 October 1310. Thus this document mentions the earliest stage of the trial (March) but may have been the last to be actually copied (October) in its current form.

No. 17 is an unnotarized copy of the same 3 April decision by the canonists that is incorporated into no. 16.

No. 18 is an unnotarized copy of the canonists’ 9 April decision on the case of Guiard of Cressonessart after he decided to testify. This document contains our only summary of what Guiard actually said under interrogation.

No. 19 is an unnotarized copy of the canonists’ decision concerning Marguerite Porete, dated 3 April and nearly exactly parallel to no. 17 on Guiard of Cressonessart.

No. 19bis, dated 9 May, is an unnotarized copy of the further decision by the canonists that, in light of her whole history, Marguerite Porete may be considered a relapsed heretic.
Introduction 25

At various points in the book, the production of each of these texts will be the subject of analysis. I hope that one of the contributions made here is a clearer understanding of these documents in and of themselves—how, when, and why they were produced and copied, what choices they reflect, what preparatory stages they reveal, what perspectives they privilege, and (very often) what problems they attempt to hide with their silences. Moreover, I hope that the English translations in Appendix A will make this evidence more readily usable to students and nonspecialists and will allow readers to decide for themselves how persuasive they find the interpretations advanced here.

Plan of the Book

My analysis of this evidence takes the form of a chronological narrative. The first three chapters set up the trial analysis by investigating events before 1308. Chapter 1 gleans what little information survives about the lives of Marguerite and Guiard before their first encounters with church authorities. Chapter 2 pieces together Marguerite’s story from the time she first was arrested by the bishop of Cambrai until she was turned over to William of Paris. Chapter 3 then turns to the inquisitor and presents the first substantial study of William’s career up to 1308. The next four chapters focus on the trial itself. Chapter 4 examines William of Paris’s first legal moves and the intervention of the masters of canon law from March to 3 April 1310. Chapter 5 is devoted to Guiard of Cressonessart, examining in detail his testimony and the canonists’ response of 9 April. Chapter 6 focuses on the masters of theology who were asked to weigh in on extracts from Marguerite’s book on 11 April. Chapter 7 centers on the 9 May decision by the canonists, the 31 May sentencing, and the executions of the next day. The book concludes with three brief epilogues: the first traces the end of William of Paris’s career; the second focuses on Arnau of Vilanova’s intriguing “Letter to Those Wearing the Leather Belt”; and the third steps back to consider the way these trials affected decisions made at the Council of Vienne and beyond.

Thus the book follows several narratives simultaneously as it shifts from the perspective of Guiard and Marguerite to that of William of
Paris and others involved in the trial. Running throughout, however, is my primary argument that Guiard of Cressonessart and Marguerite Porete were caught up in a highly contingent series of events, where their own choices combined with the specific political situation and limited legal options of their inquisitor to drive them toward perpetual incarceration and the stake. The constraining factor in these individual choices was the political context at Paris by 1310. Guiard and Marguerite were processed by Philip IV’s political machine, where all stories and all fights were ultimately about royal power. The individuals entered this machine through their own choices but were then ground down by the larger forces at play. Marguerite was drawn in from Hainaut and eventually executed not so much for her ideas as for her stubborn refusal to submit to episcopal and inquisitorial demands for obedience; in Philip IV’s Paris a rebellious “heretic” was an affront to the crown and could be treated only as part of a wider contest for political power. Guiard threw himself into the gears of the machine in an attempt to announce his own rival eschatological narrative, but there was room for only one defender of the “true adherents of the Lord” in Philip the Fair’s kingdom.

In a certain sense, William of Paris also paid for his close association with the royal court. He was both the willing instrument and the convenient scapegoat (in papal eyes) for the most brazen of Philip’s moves, the attack on the Templars. But by the time he was conducting Marguerite and Guiard’s trials, William had been sidelined from the grand events of the Templar affair and may have been something of a liability in Philip’s ongoing negotiations with Clement V. His extremely careful handling of the trials of Marguerite and Guiard, I shall argue, resulted from this weakened position and his need to reestablish a credible position for himself as a papal inquisitor at Paris. Certainly there can be no moral equivalency between the man who read out the sentence on 31 May 1310 and those who suffered its punishments. Nevertheless, William too may have found that his initial choices led him toward a diminishing range of options as the trial gathered momentum in the spring of 1310. In this sense all three historical actors at the center of this story were swept up in the ideological juggernaut that a decade of unrelenting royal propaganda had set in motion.
Background to a Beguine, Becoming an Angel

One of the trial documents from 1310 refers to Guiard of Cressonessart as “arising from himself,” presumably as a way of attributing his “heresy” to his own stubborn imagination. The description seems strangely appropriate, however, given how little is known about the lives of Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart before they came into conflict with ecclesiastical authority. But the bits and pieces of evidence that survive do establish certain facts and help to contextualize the religious, social, and political settings from which Marguerite and Guiard emerged.¹

Background to a Beguine

The Mirror of Simple Souls conveys the sense that its author felt herself to have passed from youth to maturity,² so a reasonable estimate might put Marguerite’s birth sometime near 1260. The trial records state unequivocally that she came from the county of Hainaut. More specifically, by the time her book was burned she almost certainly lived in or near the town of Valenciennes. For one thing, Guido of Collemezzo, the bishop of Cambrai, chose to burn her book there (rather than in the city of Cambrai itself), probably out of a desire to make its condemnation known to inhabitants of her hometown. A Franciscan who
commented on her book at around this time probably came from Qué-
rénaign, a mere eight kilometers south of Valenciennes.3 Just as signifi-
cant may be the mounting evidence that this area was an early center
for the circulation of manuscript copies of the Mirror.4 Finally, Jean
Gerson was probably thinking of the author of the Mirror of Simple
Souls when he referred to “Marie of Valenciennes” in 1401.5 Though the
latter is a late and secondhand indication, Gerson presumably had some
basis for employing this designation.

Valenciennes was located on the Escaut (or Scheldt) River just at
the point where it became navigable for medieval boats heading to the
North Sea.6 It is today a French city, but the medieval political context
was more complex. The Escaut marked the border between the coun-
ties of Flanders and Hainaut; the former was theoretically dependent
on the kingdom of France, and the latter on the empire. However the
Ostrevant—a little sliver of territory on the left bank of the Escaut—
was controlled by the counts of Hainaut after 1257. What makes these
details relevant is the fact that Valenciennes actually straddled the Es-
caut. Most of the medieval city was on the right bank and hence part
of Hainaut and presumably an imperial city. Yet the left bank section
of Valenciennes could be considered part of the Ostrevant, and thus
theoretically on the “French” side of the Escaut. This same river was
also an ecclesiastical boundary, with only the right bank pertaining to
the bishop of Cambrai and the left to Arras.7 Valenciennes thus was a
potential trouble spot where larger questions of political control could
be fought out. The French crown had involved itself in disputes between
Flanders and Hainaut over Valenciennes and the Ostrevant since the
days of Louis IX; in the early fourteenth century this was just the kind
of area where Philip IV was seeking to impose his authority during his
long wars with Flanders.8

If Marguerite’s geographic origins are fairly certain, nothing is
known about her family. The epithet “Porete” does not tell us anything
concrete.9 Although this last name does show up in both the Low
Countries and Paris at this time, in Marguerite’s case it was probably a
recent nickname, not an indication of deep family affiliation, since the
trial documents usually refer to her as “Marguerite called Porete” and
not simply “Marguerite Porete.”10 In Old French poret meant “leek,”
and figuratively could refer to any object of little value, in phrases such
as “that’s not worth a poret.” Perhaps the nickname therefore tells us something about Marguerite’s self-image or reputation, consistent with her apparent reference to herself as a onetime “mendicant creature” in the *Mirror.*

There are, however, reasons to suspect that Marguerite emerged from the urban patriciate (the wealthy and politically active urban class), if not the lower aristocracy. First, the *Mirror of Simple Souls* projects an image of self-consciously aristocratic haughtiness, though transferred into spiritual imagery. Second, she seems to have enjoyed impressive access to resources. She must have been able to pay for writing materials and perhaps scribes in order to copy and circulate her writings. Moreover, it has recently been argued that she may have owned a book of hours, a possession generally appropriate to the upper classes. More broadly, the *Mirror* reflects a deep familiarity with the vocabulary of courtly romance. While nothing prevented literate people of any background from reading such material, or illiterate people from hearing and absorbing it, there is still a distinct projection of upper-class tastes in Marguerite’s brand of *mystique courtoise.* Finally, her access to important churchmen such as Godfrey of Fontaines (to be investigated in the next chapter) indicates that she may have enjoyed a certain social standing.

Related to the question of status is that of education. Authorship of the *Mirror* is self-evident testimony to her high degree of vernacular literacy. There is no doubt that Marguerite was also familiar with secular romance literature: she refers in the *Mirror* to the *Romance of Alexander,* she probably knew the popular *Romance of the Rose,* and recent work has shown her familiarity with a rich body of trouvère songs, and perhaps Chrétien de Troyes. More controversial is the question of Marguerite’s level of Latin literacy. Her modern editors have found echoes of authors including Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Richard of Saint-Victor, William of Saint-Thierry, and pseudo-Dionysius in her book. Although some of these authors may have been known to Marguerite at second hand, and some were being translated into French by the end of the thirteenth century, it is at least possible that she encountered them in the original Latin. The *Grandes chroniques de France* labeled her a beguine “clergesse,” which points in the direction of (at least perceived) Latin literacy. Similarly, the
Mirror contains numerous biblical echoes (the majority from the New Testament). Again, some of these probably entered Marguerite’s vocabulary through liturgical repetitions, sermons in the vernacular, and perhaps personal conversations with churchmen; yet it is also possible that she had a basic familiarity with the Latin Bible.

Exactly how Marguerite acquired her learning is unclear. Contacts with a larger beguine community (béguinage) suggest one explanation, since many did offer instruction to young girls, sometimes including Latin and Bible study as well as vernacular reading and writing. For example, a school existed from at least 1267 at St. Elisabeth’s in Valenciennes, and in the fifteenth century (admittedly late evidence) boys and girls received education there, with both male instructors and beguines teaching reading and writing, including Latin grammar.

This possibility of ties to a beguinage raises the question of just what the trial records and other contemporary witnesses meant when they labeled Marguerite a beguina. The French term béguine or the Latin beguina generally designated an unmarried laywoman leading a devout religious life in the world, but it could convey a wide range of fluid and overlapping meanings. In the larger communities of the Low Countries (modern Netherlands, Belgium, and a part of northern France), such laywomen began to gather into new kinds of pious communities in the first half of the thirteenth century. These beguinae (the Latin plural) could live in individual houses or could gather together in medium-sized convent-style arrangements or in larger “court” settings that had their own church and even formed their own parishes. Life in any of these forms of beguinage “offered single women of all ages an opportunity to lead a religious life of contemplation and prayer while earning a living as laborers or teachers.”

Beguines had both supporters and detractors among churchmen from their very beginnings. But while early thirteenth-century sympathizers provided practical care and textual promotion, by the last quarter of the thirteenth century many churchmen increasingly regarded them with growing skepticism and suspicion, as unclassifiable elements that destabilized the boundary between lay and religious life and spread confusion with their unauthorized preaching and teaching. The most often cited example is the Franciscan Gilbert of Tournai, who complained in 1274 that beguines needed to be regulated or suppressed be-
cause of the dangers inherent in their unsupervised reading, translating, and interpreting of Scripture and theological texts. The hostility that Marguerite and her writings encountered certainly fits into this pattern.

The trial documents not only label Marguerite a *beguina* but also suggest her ties to a wider circle of semireligious (asserting her stubborn efforts to circulate her book “to simple people, beghards and others”). Moreover, the *Mirror of Simple Souls* reveals familiarity with organized beguine life. It would therefore seem safe to refer to Marguerite as a beguine from the vicinity of Valenciennes. Some scholars, however, have questioned whether she was “really” a beguine at all. One version of this argument was based on a circular logic that echoed that of her eventual accusers: since churchmen were troubled by the idea of wandering, unstable, “false,” beguines, whom they accused of circulating suspect ideas, and since Marguerite was accused of circulating suspect ideas, then she must have been a wandering, morally questionable, unregulated woman—and thus not a “real” beguine like those in more stable communities. More recently, other scholars have made the related claim that since Marguerite’s accusers meant the term *beguina* in a hostile and pejorative sense, it cannot be taken at face value. Still others have thought that Marguerite’s writings somehow lack the essential qualities of beguine literature, so she must not have been a proper beguine. All of these strands of doubt can also cite a statement in the *Mirror of Simple Souls* itself that includes beguines among those who will say that the author errs.

These arguments, however, all contain their own flaws. For instance, there is in fact no evidence to indicate that Marguerite was a wanderer. And the idea that *beguina* had become such a loaded term of opprobrium as to render its use by hostile authorities meaningless is an oversimplification: it has recently been pointed out that clerics and university masters at the very time and place of Marguerite’s trial portrayed beguines in a variety of ways, from models of humility, piety, and visionary mysticism to charlatans and arrogant spiritual rebels. Indeed, if there was one city in which beguines had unusual claims to respectability, it was the Paris that Marguerite’s judges inhabited. The several hundred beguines living in the *grand béguinage* there enjoyed a special veneer of respectability because their house had been founded...
(before 1264) by the revered Louis IX and continued to be supported by the royal family over the next decades. Indeed, practical care for this community was assigned by the crown to the canons of the Sainte-Chapelle (a royal institution founded by Louis IX to house precious relics of the Passion), university masters routinely preached there, and Parisian Dominicans provided pastoral care as early as 1301. Other Parisian beguines, many of them successful workers in the luxury silk trade, lived in scattered individual houses in the university quarter. So when Parisian churchmen called a woman a *beguina*, they spoke from firsthand knowledge of the possible spectrum of beguine living arrangements and were familiar with a range of positive and negative images of these women. Finally, there is no reason why one beguine could not fear that other beguines would misunderstand her, and the idea that Marguerite’s writings do not satisfactorily fit some modern definition of what beguine-authored texts “should” be is too self-evidently problematic to require refutation.

More fundamentally, the very fluidity of the label renders moot an argument about whether Marguerite was “really” a beguine. In contemporary common parlance, the word could say as much about a layperson’s religious self-presentation as about her relationship to a formally constituted community. In this looser sense, a beguine was someone who claimed special contact with God, acting and dressing in ways that set her apart. But depending on the observer’s perspective these claims to divine knowledge could be true or false, and ostentatiously pious actions and dress could be sincere or deceiving. A *beguina* could thus be a woman of saintly life or a false prophet. Just as Nicole Bériou asserts for the terms *preudhomme* and *béguin*, being a *beguina* was a “way of existing in society . . . a way of being named and therefore judged by others.” As a status, it rested on a woman’s public presentation but existed also in the mind of the beholder. Thus, when trial documents and chronicle entries labeled Marguerite Porete a *beguina*, they were simply stating what seemed a readily apparent fact—that Marguerite was a laywoman offering a manifest self-projection of uncommon religious devotion while insinuating a special knowledge of God. She might have had some link to a beguine community, or she might not. The label in its context is neutral on the question.

How likely is it, then, that Marguerite had ties at some point to St. Elisabeth’s, the main beguinage in Valenciennes? This was one of

© 2012 University of Notre Dame
the best established court beguinages in the southern Low Countries, with origins stemming back to the bishop of Cambrai’s approval of a hospital staffed by brothers and sisters in 1239. The community enjoyed Dominican support and consistent patronage from the local aristocracy. At least by the 1260s (and probably earlier) multiple residences had developed around the original hospital, forming a larger court structure substantial enough to constitute its own parish. It is impossible to generalize about what kind of woman could have been a beguine there because living arrangements varied so widely, reflecting the varying economic backgrounds of the beguines and the differing vocations possible within the community. A charitable fund to support poor beguines is attested from at least 1273, but other beguines bought and sold land or left sizable bequests that demonstrate their high status. A beguine named Elekine de Biausart, for example, left her house to her two sisters and her daughters Marie and Marguerite in 1254. From the 1260s there was also a specific convent for the béguines au sac, who adopted a stricter form of voluntary poverty and followed their own rule, while some beguines actually staffed the hospital and lived communally. One early document refers to those “who live in the hospital and other religious women called beguines who lived in the same street and in the neighborhood [voisinage] who follow the path of a religious life.” All of these women were part of St. Elisabeth’s, but the differences between the various kinds of lives lived there (rich and poor, communal and individual, “truly” poor and voluntarily poor) are striking. There is no single profile of a beguine at St. Elisabeth’s, and thus no reason to insist that Marguerite could not at some point have fit into this diverse community.

If, on the other hand, Marguerite did not have ties to St. Elisabeth’s, the most likely alternative scenario would be to imagine her as a beguine living elsewhere in or near Valenciennes. Given patterns in neighboring towns and Valenciennes’ status as the largest city in the region, there must have been other centers of beguine activity in other parishes not associated with St. Elisabeth’s. Virtually nothing is known about them, however, because the research in the local archives remains to be done. Thus several of the most astute recent commentators on Marguerite’s life have considered it most likely that she would have lived as an “independent” beguine in Valenciennes or a neighboring town.
Guiard of Cressonessart’s background is even less clear than that of the woman he would eventually attempt to shield from inquisitorial persecution. Small clues, however, provide some interesting indications about his life. Most concretely, the trial documents refer to him as a *beguinus* (or once as a *pseudo-religious*) from the Diocese of Beauvais. Although English usage usually translates *beguinus* (or *beghardus*) with the more Germanic term *beghard*, it should be noted that contemporaries labeled Marguerite and Guiard with gendered versions of exactly the same Latin word: *beguina/beguinus*.

Male *beguini* have been much less studied in recent years than female *beguinae*. Though beghards could form communities roughly analogous to female beguinages, in the course of the fourteenth century *beguinus* (*béguin* in French) increasingly became a catchall term referring to ardent or hypocritical zealots standing outside the organized church. In the South of France, moreover, the labels *béguin/béguine* and *beguinus/beguina* were just beginning at this time to be applied to the dedicated lay followers of the Franciscan Peter of John Olivi (1248–98), increasingly under suspicion for their beliefs on absolute poverty and its relationship to the imminent coming of Antichrist. Though Guiard was a northerner, his ideas were related to Peter’s (as we shall see), which adds another level of possible meaning to the use of the term. This label is thus in some ways even less definite than the feminine *beguina*. It can only be taken to indicate that Guiard’s accusers understood him to be, like Marguerite, projecting a conspicuous image of spiritual superiority.

If Marguerite and Guiard were living lives similar enough to warrant the use of an identical label by their inquisitor, there were nevertheless some obvious differences between their backgrounds. The most striking may be Guiard’s clerical status. At his final sentencing, it was ordered that he be stripped of clerical insignia before being imprisoned, which would indicate that at some point he had taken at least minor orders. This does not necessarily imply that he was ordained a priest; many men became clerks in order to study at a university or otherwise enjoy the protections of ecclesiastical status. But new evidence (cited in chapter 5) that Guiard was literate in Latin further indicates the reality of his clerical status. Apparently Guiard had at one point begun...
an education aimed at a career in the church but had instead gravitated toward a life that ecclesiastics perceived as that of a *beguinus*.  

Guiard was also more mobile than Marguerite. Since the trial documents identify him as from the Diocese of Beauvais, he must truly have come from the hamlet of Cressonessart, or Cressonsacq as it is known today. This little village, situated forty kilometers east of the cathedral town of Beauvais and some ninety kilometers north of Paris, had a recorded population of 215 in 1303 and still has fewer than 400 inhabitants today. Guiard’s roots were thus farther south than Marguerite’s and were located more firmly in the Capetian heartlands. Yet Guiard’s own testimony shows that he traveled fairly widely, substantiating other evidence—much of it hostile—that *beguini* did sometimes lead itinerant lives.

In 1310, when he finally consented to explain his self-conception to his inquisitor, Guiard stated that he had realized approximately four years earlier that he had been given the office of “Angel of Philadelphia.” Since he revealed that he had experienced this flash of insight while in the lower chapel of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, by 1306 he must have traveled from his native area to the Île-de-France. He further confessed that he had risked his safety on behalf of the true adherents of the Lord in Reims by opposing the Franciscans and Dominicans there before similarly exposing himself to danger on behalf of Marguerite Porete in Paris. He gives no overt dating for these events, but since it seems clear that he took up his active mission of defending the Lord’s adherents only after 1306, he must have traveled from Paris to Reims and back again between 1306 and the fall of 1308. Moreover, Guiard testified that the quintessential representatives of the current age of the church were “runners” who had given up everything to uphold evangelic rigor. This description sounds as though Guiard pictured himself as following an apostolic model of itinerant poverty.

His reference to the lower chapel of the Sainte-Chapelle deserves further attention. This was the marvelous chapel built by Louis IX between 1239 and 1248 to hold the crown of thorns and other relics newly purchased from the emperor of Constantinople (mentioned above because its canons were given practical care of the Parisian grand beguinage). The upper chapel is the stunningly beautiful space that still draws tourists today with its glowing stained glass and magical ambience. The lower chapel now (rather disappointingly) contains a gift shop, but it
constituted an important liturgical site in the early fourteenth century. There is some evidence for how and when the lower chapel was used—for instance, on Pentecost, the Feast of the Dedication (April 26), and Maundy Thursday for specific rituals involving ecclesiastics, “the people,” and even the king. But on the whole, “the extent to which the upper and lower chapels were used as distinct spaces, and for whom, remains unclear.”66

What is clear is that the Sainte-Chapelle was the preeminent site linking Christ and the Passion to the French monarchy. As recent scholarship has shown, at certain points in time it would not have been unusual to find a large, mixed crowd of pilgrims gathered there. In addition to its function as a private chapel, the Sainte-Chapelle was a site where the royal court could display its self-conception as a divinely ordained and saintly family. Thus multiple papal and episcopal letters offered indulgences to pilgrims who visited on various feast days.67 For instance in 1298 and 1300 indulgences for visiting on the feast day of the newly canonized St. Louis (25 August) were added, and then in 1300 and 1306 for the translation of his relics (17 May, or the Tuesday after Ascension).68 It is interesting that St. Louis and his relics were the new attraction at about the time that Guiard’s revelation must have occurred. Yet perhaps the most likely time for him to have found himself at the Sainte-Chapelle in 1306 was during Easter week, when a particular stress was laid on liturgical processions that brought king and people together.69 Indeed, since Guiard testified on 9 April 1310, his reference to “four years earlier or more,” if taken to imply any exactitude, would indicate a date very close to Holy Week 1306 (Easter Sunday fell on 3 April in 1306), a time of heightened eschatological awareness as the faithful contemplated the mystery of the Resurrection.

The Sainte-Chapelle was a monument to the ideals of Capetian sanctity, as the juxtaposition of the relics of St. Louis with the crown of thorns demonstrates. Guiard, however, absorbed the Christological dimensions of this highly charged space and refashioned them in his own idiosyncratic manner. The flash of insight he experienced there caused him to imagine himself, not the French monarchs, in direct relation to Christ. In a certain sense it was this act of apocalyptic reimagining that set him on a collision course with the royal confessor, William of Paris.

© 2012 University of Notre Dame
Guiard does not say whether he formed part of a group that day in the Sainte-Chapelle, but he did, apparently, have associates or even followers. At least when his interrogators asked him if those who wore tabards were “of his society,” he responded that only those were who also wore a long tunic and a leather belt, particularly the latter. He also stated that there were others who knew of his calling, and he spoke of warning some of these associates not to take on a new habit without proper approval. At least in his own mind, Guiard was not a lone wanderer but a leader of a spiritual movement.70

Guiard was thus a beguinus, probably in minor orders, who traveled (at least) within the geographic triangle formed by Cressonessart, Reims, and Paris. In spite of his ties to other like-minded men, this description makes him sound like a marginal figure. Intriguingly, however, it is possible that Guiard actually came from the seigniorial family of Cressonessart, which had been particularly tied to the Capetians for over a century. Dreux I of Cressonessart was an associate of Louis VII; his son Dreux II participated in the Fourth Crusade; and his grandson Thibault I of Cressonessart fought in the Albigensian wars.71 Indeed, the family’s control over their domain continued up into the fourteenth century: Thibault II appears in documents from the 1240s and 1250s; Anselm seigneur of Cressonessart is documented in 1281, and two more Thibaults show up as lords of Cressonessart in 1286 and 1317.72 The family also rose to considerable eminence within the church. Thibault I’s brother Robert of Cressonessart was bishop of Beauvais from 1237 to 1248 and died in Cyprus after taking the cross as part of Louis IX’s crusade.73 This pattern was repeated in the next generation as Thibault II’s brother Robert became bishop of Senlis in 1260, remaining in this position to at least 1282 (when he testified at the inquiry into Louis IX’s sanctity).74 Moreover, in Paris, Agnes (of Mauvoisin), widow of Dreux II of Cressonessart, was an important early patron of the Cistercian abbey of Saint-Antoine-des-Champs, making substantial bequests to that community beginning as early as 1206 before entering the community herself in 1214 and perhaps later serving as abbess.75 Indeed, her descendants continued to patronize this important house for generations.76

Unfortunately, no documentary evidence indicates whether the “de Cressonessart” label reflects Guiard’s membership in this seignorial family or merely his place of origin. A century earlier, such a label
would almost certainly have reflected noble status. But it was just at the end of the thirteenth century that Frenchmen systematically began to turn names of villages into lasting family names.77 Still, there is at least a possibility that Guiard’s origins lay with some collateral branch of the noble family—a possibility again enhanced by the Latin education revealed by his testimony.78 Moreover, such a background would fit well with the audacity and sense of mission displayed in his eventual public opposition to the inquisitor William of Paris.79

Nothing more is known about Guiard until his dramatic attempt to come to Marguerite Porete’s defense in 1308. The trial documents and the text of the Mirror of Simple Souls, however, provide tantalizing clues about Marguerite’s experiences in the first years of the fourteenth century. It is to this evidence that we now turn.
Marguerite Porete has often been portrayed as a solitary figure whose stubborn disdain for churchmen set her on a certain path to the stake. The evidence, however, reveals another picture. Although the hostility of some ecclesiastics certainly contributed to her arrest, trial, and death, the positive reactions of others are also well attested. This chapter will trace her encounters with churchmen in the decade before 1308. Two bishops of Cambrai, a bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne, and an inquisitor of Lorraine were among those whose opposition led to her eventual incarceration, while a Franciscan, a Cistercian, and a secular master of theology were willing to praise her book. A close examination of Marguerite’s interactions with these seven men reveals something of the mental framework within which she must have conceptualized her Parisian trial. By the time she was in the custody of William of Paris in 1308, she would have been well aware of the danger that some churchmen saw in her writings. But she also had good reason to know that more positive interpretations were possible as well.

An Italian Bishop in Cambrai

The first of the seven churchmen was Guido of Collemezzo, bishop of Cambrai. His burning of Marguerite’s book is, in fact, the earliest concrete event that can be documented for her career. Recent work on
Guido allows some reasonable inferences about how he would have perceived a book such as the *Mirror of Simple Souls*, and a close reading of the evidence reveals unexpected nuances in Marguerite’s own response to his condemnation.

A study by Pascal Montaubin has shed new light on Bishop Guido's background and political loyalties. Guido of Collemezzo came from an Italian family, based in the Diocese of Anagni, that had produced a string of successful churchmen, most notably Peter of Collemezzo, archbishop of Rouen and then cardinal before his death in 1253. Our Guido of Collemezzo is probably the same *magister* who taught canon law at the university of Naples and in 1276 was named a counselor to Charles of Anjou, the king of Sicily. It is certain that he was well connected to the papal court by 1290 and enjoyed the patronage of the Franciscan cardinal Matthew of Acquasparta. Like others in his family before him, he accumulated ecclesiastical preferments in a French context, being named treasurer of Thérouanne in the 1270s, then by 1290 archdeacon of Arras, canon of Paris, and canon and treasurer of Noyon. In spite of his French positions and prebends, he seems to have remained primarily in Italy through 1295, since he is found acting as notary of Boniface VIII’s chancery in June of that year.

Boniface VIII promoted Guido to the See of Cambrai on 21 October 1296. In making this appointment, Boniface was imposing his own man against the will of the cathedral chapter, which had tried to elect a local candidate, Gerard of Relingues. After several months of wrangling, Guido was consecrated bishop of Cambrai sometime between 21 December 1296 and 1 January 1297, and arrived in his diocese by 26 July 1297. (Gerard was mollified by being given the diocese of Metz in April 1297.) The arrival of an “outsider” such as Guido was a particularly dramatic shift, since his predecessor had been William of Avesnes, brother of the Count of Hainaut. Guido was in fact part of a sizable Italian contingent at Cambrai whose orientation and loyalty was toward Boniface VIII and Rome. Guido was not politically foolish enough to present himself as an overt opponent of Philip IV, but there is no doubt that he was Boniface VIII’s protégé.

Guido needed whatever political skills he possessed to manage his new diocese. On an ecclesiastical map, the Diocese of Cambrai was subject to the archbishop of Reims and therefore within a French orbit. Politically, however, it lay almost entirely in imperial territory,
covering both the county of Cambrai (where the bishop was also count) and the larger county of Hainaut. Thus Guido occupied a precarious perch between the counties of Flanders, Hainaut, and Artois, balanced (as it were) on the line between the Empire and the Kingdom of France. In addition to negotiating the difficult waters of Philip IV’s battles with Boniface VIII, Guido’s hands were full on a local level, as a long-running contest between the bourgeoisie and the cathedral chapter of Cambrai culminated in the years 1298–1313. In dealing with open revolts of 1298, 1302, and 1305, Guido seems to have played peacemaker between town and chapter, while protecting church privileges.

One intriguing episode in this battle may be particularly relevant: on 29 June 1304, Guy was forced to rescind his previous banishment from Cambrai of a beguine named Marion de Fayt, daughter of Gillon de Fayt (chaplain of the church of Notre-Dame of Cambrai), after admitting that her case pertained to the chapter’s jurisdiction rather than his own. Though Marion’s offense is not specified, and there is no way to link this episode directly to Guido’s handling of Marguerite Porete, it does show that at least one other controversial beguine drew his public disapproval.

As a canon lawyer and apostolic notary, Guido’s outlook was probably more administrative and legalistic than theological. His likely attitude toward an author such as Marguerite may be inferred from a legal reference book, known as the Summa Innocenti abbreviati, that he wrote before he became bishop. This work was a simplified summary of Pope Innocent IV’s Apparatus (ca. 1251), itself a commentary on Gregory IX’s authoritative collection of canon law known as the Liber extra. Guido’s book was thus a contribution to the long tradition of academic commentary on church law, intended to clarify scholars’ understanding of an ever-growing body of papal decrees. Given the number of surviving manuscripts and their geographic dispersion, this text must have been fairly popular.

All known manuscripts of this Summa carry a prologue, in which Guido explained why he thought it necessary to offer this short guide to Innocent’s authoritative canon law commentary:

I, Guido of Collemezzo, treasurer of Noyon, have often considered Pope Innocent IV’s published Apparatus on the Decretals to be of great profit to experts. Three reasons can be stated to all,
however, why it might be rather unhelpful to some people: first, because in such a treasury of knowledge the amount of material is often detrimental to beginners; second, because it collects such a diversity of opinions that many people do not know in which one Innocent’s approved opinion actually lies; third, because he has “ploughed the seashore” [i.e., wasted his time] by writing materials extraneous to their own headings, since the young with their weak memories will not have gotten to know [the collection] through protracted study. And therefore, after examining this [collection] as diligently as I could, I was eager to compose the present book, in which no material would appear unnecessarily [and] the true opinion of Innocent is always laid bare, with superfluous things cut away. And thus all the things which have been approved by the same Innocent, but are scattered across the larger volume, are rightly situated [here] under the appropriate titles.11

Guido here displayed a striking determination to stick to the most straightforward presentation of legal truths. Even when considering an ordered, approved, and learned legal commentary—composed by a pope no less—Guido still feared the dangers inherent in exposing the impressionable minds of students to controversial ideas. The safest course was to specify the approved ecclesiastical stance on any given point of canon law while cutting away all the clutter of contrasting opinions.

Though these ideas were expressed well before Guido encountered Marguerite Porete, they contextualize his eventual response to her work. If he feared the effects of a pope presenting several possible legal interpretations, Marguerite’s mocking debates between Holy Church the Little and Perfect Love would surely have outraged him. More fundamentally, Guido was simply not the man to read a daring, controversial work with a sympathetic eye—let alone one written in French by a laywoman. Everything about Guido’s orientation predisposed him to be suspicious of a book such as the Mirror. As a recent arrival from Italy, he can have had little experience with written expressions of beguine spirituality;12 as a canon lawyer he was probably inclined to see problems in terms of the proper application of ecclesiastical authority; as an embattled administrator he must have had limited patience with anything perceived as a challenge.
We have only the briefest of indications as to when, why, and how Marguerite came to Guido’s attention. It must have been between summer 1297 (when Guido arrived in his new diocese) and autumn 1305 (there is no evidence for his presence in Cambrai after October of that year). Further details are found in two terse passages in Marguerite’s later trial documents. This is of course a version of events supplied by her eventual inquisitor, William of Paris. Although William states that his facts are based on the “depositions of many witnesses,” they obviously form a highly selective account and must be used with care.13 In later chapters it will be necessary to determine what this account reveals about William’s own agenda. Here the bare outline of his narrative can be extracted to attempt to reconstruct these early events.

The first document (AN J428 no. 19bis) records the advice given by a team of canon lawyers to William on 9 May 1310. As a preamble to this advice, the canonists first related the facts as William had supplied them. According to this narrative, Marguerite “had composed a certain book containing heresies and errors, which had been publicly and solemnly condemned and burned by order of the reverend father lord Guido, former bishop of Cambrai.”14 The second account (AN J428 no. 15b) is found in Marguerite’s final sentence, which William read out on 31 May 1310. Addressing Marguerite directly, it states that “you composed a certain pestiferous book containing heresy and error. For this cause the said book was condemned by Guido of blessed memory, then bishop of Cambrai, and by his order burned at Valenciennes, in your presence, publicly and openly.”15

Among the things these passages do not state is exactly how Guido became aware of Marguerite and her book. There is no evidence that Guido was an active heresy hunter, so perhaps Marguerite and her book were thrust upon him in some way. Her teachings may have been denounced by a hostile churchman, for instance. But it is also quite possible that Marguerite deliberately sought the bishop’s attention, given the evidence (discussed below) for subsequent actions of exactly this kind. Nor do we know the specific reasons why Guido found this book theologically objectionable—what “damnable material” “jumped out” at him (to paraphrase his fears about the effects of Innocent’s Apparatus) is nowhere recorded.

Though Guido’s actions are better documented than his thoughts, there are questions here too. It is clear that he forced Marguerite to
watch her own book burn—perhaps she even had to consign it to the flames with her own hands. But was Guido himself present in Valenciennes at this moment? It seems probable, but the texts only say the burning took place at his orders. Did he even ever meet with Marguerite face to face? Again, it seems likely that he would have interrogated her personally, but this is not spelled out, and the task could have been delegated to a subordinate. And if there was such a meeting, did it take place in Valenciennes, or was she first detained in Cambrai and only then sent to Valenciennes for the book burning? Neither document provides answers to these questions.

Guido’s warnings to Marguerite, however, were clear. Returning to the same two documents, the first (J428 no. 19bis) records that “by a letter of the aforesaid bishop it was ordered that if she should again attempt by word or in writing any things like those contained in the book, he was condemning her and relinquishing her to be judged by secular justice.” In the second (J428 no. 15b), William of Paris recounted, “You were expressly prohibited by this bishop, under pain of excommunication, from composing or having again such a book, or using it or one like it. The same bishop added and expressly stated in a certain letter sealed with his seal that if you should again use the aforesaid book, or if you should attempt again by word or in writing those things that were contained in it, he was condemning you as heretical and relinquishing you to be judged by secular justice.” Thus Marguerite was forbidden not only from circulating her book again but from writing or speaking about the ideas it contained. The order did not entirely prohibit her from writing again on any subject, but obviously any future authorial activity would run a grave risk of being perceived as returning to the ideas that had been condemned in her book.

These warnings in themselves reveal further interesting details. First, there is the existence of a formal, sealed letter. Such a document has never been found, either in the surviving trial records or in the various archives of the Diocese of Cambrai. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt that Guido did put his warning to Marguerite in writing. For one thing, although William of Paris does not actually say he held it in his hands, he implies that he has had access to this letter. Moreover, there seem to be structural and grammatical traces left in William’s Latin that indicate copying from another text, showing that he
may have taken his version of Guido’s warning directly from the letter in question. Thus it seems that Guido kept a record of his condemnation and preserved it carefully enough that it was retrievable by William of Paris in 1310.

Second, Bishop Guido made a fine distinction here between condemning a book and condemning a person. Guido condemned and burned Marguerite’s book as “heretical” and containing “errors.” His threat was that if Marguerite showed herself to be persistent in flouting ecclesiastical authority he would take the separate step of condemning her in her person as a contumacious heretic, which would likely result in her death at the hands of the secular authorities. The wording—at least as William of Paris later related it—implies that Guido considered this to be a sentence that would automatically take effect if Marguerite was found to have disobeyed his orders. This rather delicate phrasing, however, does not state that Marguerite herself was personally labeled a heretic at this time. Indeed, the single most striking thing about this encounter is that Marguerite walked away from it personally unharmed. Her release indicates that she must have shown some level of cooperation and expressed contrition and willingness to obey in the future—otherwise she would surely have faced personal excommunication and condemnation. Even if she had been convicted of heresy but reconciled through sincere penance, some kind of punishment would probably have been imposed (imprisonment, pilgrimage, wearing of distinctive markings). The lack of any indication of such punishment suggests that she was able to convince the bishop that she herself was not a heretic.

This moment has not been fully factored into most accounts of Marguerite’s career. Her later refusal to cooperate with her inquisitor has become the enduring image with which historians evoke her resistance to ecclesiastical authority. At this point, however, there can be no question of her having remained mute. She must have given Guido some reason to believe that she had learned her lesson. As to why she might have adopted a contrite attitude at this juncture, it is possible that she was simply intimidated or frightened. She may have been subjected to harsh imprisonment or other pressure as Guido mulled over her case, though there is no specific evidence one way or the other. But it is also possible that she was temporarily willing to reassess the legitimacy of her writing and ideas in the face of a bishop’s censure.
If Marguerite had indeed promised not to recopy her book or write further in the same vein, she broke that promise in short order. The same two trial documents continue (William’s version of) the story, though again only in the most laconic language. The first (J428 no. 19bis) tells it this way:

And this same inquisitor [William] also found that she acknowledged in court—once in the presence of the inquisitor of Lorraine and once in the presence of the reverend father Lord Philip, then bishop of Cambrai—that after the aforesaid condemnation she had possessed the said book and others. This same inquisitor also found that the said Marguerite, after the condemnation of this book, had communicated the said book, one similar to it containing the same errors, to the reverend father Lord John, by the grace of God bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne, and not only to the said lord but to many other simple people—begardis and others—as a good book.23

The second (J428 no. 15b) accuses Marguerite in very similar terms:

After all these things, against the said prohibition, you several times had and several times used the said book, as is evident from your acknowledgments, made not only in the presence of the inquisitor of Lorraine, but also in the presence of the reverend father and lord, Lord Philip, then bishop of Cambrai and now archbishop of Sens. After the aforesaid condemnation and burning, you even communicated the said book, as though good and licit, to the reverend father Lord John, bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne, and to certain other people, as is clear to us from the evident testimonies of many witnesses worthy of faith who have sworn concerning these matters in our presence.24

The most basic fact that emerges from this account is that Marguerite subsequently circulated her book not only to “simple” people, including “beghards,” but also to at least one other bishop. This course of ac-
tion must indicate that she hoped to find a more sympathetic response from other readers and generally sought a fresh appraisal of her work.

As part of this campaign, it is highly probable that during this period Marguerite made additions and revisions to her book. Indeed, if one imagines Marguerite recreating from memory the contents of a burned book, then common sense would suggest that the result would have to have been something significantly different from the earlier version. But even if—as seems likely—copies of her first text survived, the process of copying and circulating would tend to produce additions and changes. Specifically, scholars have generally agreed that at least the final seventeen chapters of the *Mirror*, those numbered 123–39 in the Middle French manuscript, were probably added on after Marguerite’s first brush with authority. The authorial perspective and tone of the *Mirror* change abruptly at this point. Starting with chapter 123, the text employs less dialogue, shifts dramatically to an authorial first-person voice, and at least initially focuses on devotional and hagiographic material that seems comparatively uncontroversial. If indeed these chapters were added after the book’s first condemnation, then this material offers important evidence for Marguerite’s reaction to adversity. Rather than accept the idea that her book contained “heresy” and “errors,” she sought to clarify and restate her ideas for the benefit of those who had not understood her properly the first time.

After chapter 122, where the Latin word *Explicit* (“The End”) is found in the Middle French manuscript, there is an additional heading (not a chapter title but a unique, larger section break) that reads, “Here follow some considerations for those who are in the state of being of forlorn-ness, who ask the way to the land of freedom.” These seven considerations make up chapters 123–28, on the apostles, Mary Magdalene, John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary, her Son, the suffering of Christ, and the Seraphim. Quite in contrast to most of the *Mirror*, Marguerite here employs an undisguised first-person voice, while limiting herself to what is essentially biblical commentary. This little section ends with a summary recounting the seven considerations and then flows into chapters 130–32, where Marguerite tells of her own spiritual journey through the land of the forlorn and of the considerations she dwelled on at that point. Again in sharp contrast to the rest of the book, here Marguerite herself speaks to God, and God to her. At the culmination
of the section, Marguerite relates three paradoxical questions posed to her by God: How would I fare if I knew he could be better pleased that I should love another better than him? . . . if it could be that he could love another better than me? . . . if it could be that he would will that someone other would love me better than he?” She states that as a result of her inability to answer, her will was “martyred,” bringing her out of her spiritual “childhood.”

What is so distinct about these related chapters (123–32) is not just the emergence of the authorial voice but its use in addressing directly those who have not yet reached the state of the free, annihilated soul—that is, those who do not yet understand her message because they are yet “forlorn.” The author has redirected her attention to those who might like to understand but have not done so as of yet. This sustained shift in emphasis is the best argument for seeing these additions as having been made after the book’s initial condemnation.

With these additions, Marguerite attempted to show an imagined audience of dubious churchmen that she understood the kind of straightforward relation to the saints and the Scriptures that they might like to see in a devout woman, and she came as close as she ever did to arguing that her knowledge came at least in part through conversation with God. Thus she made more clear her credentials as both a textual scholar and a mystic.

To cap off this concluding section, however, Marguerite returned to some of her more audacious statements, as though she could not resist restating them after providing a new grounding in textual exegesis and spiritual experience. Dialogue returns briefly for chapter 133, with Marguerite reformulating some of her riskiest ideas. “Divine Love,” for instance, here addresses the “Soul,” saying: “I have found many who have perished in the affection of the spirit, through works of virtue, in the desire of a good will; but I have found few who were nobly forlorn, and I have found fewer still who are free without fail . . . such as this book asks for; that is, who have one single will which fine amour causes them to have. For fine amour causes one to have one love and one will, and so my will has become a non-will.” The offhand equation of “works of virtue” with those who “have perished” (or “are lost”) was exactly the sort of passage that would ultimately be held against Marguerite.
At the very end of the book, two different endings survive, since chapters 137–39 show significant differences between the Middle English version on one hand and the French and Latin on the other. It may be that the earlier ending is the Middle English’s brief “gloss of this song,” which offers a surprisingly optimistic coda affirming that in spite of the paradoxical nature of the three questions that have martyred her will, God loves no one more than her (as chapter 136 has already asserted) and must be joined to her. The French and Latin versions, by contrast, present three completely different chapters, entitled (in the Middle French) “How this soul is professed in her religion and how she has guarded well her rule,” and then “How the soul returns to her first state of being,” and “How nature is subtle in several ways.” Particularly in the very last chapter, Marguerite slips into much darker tones, complaining of how “wily” nature is, lamenting, “I have experienced this to my great misfortune.” Overall these last seventeen chapters are a confident culmination of the work; perhaps, however, at the very last, they offer a glimpse of Marguerite’s fears that her tribulations were not over.

Seeking Support: A Friar, a Monk, and a Master

Having attempted to clarify her ideas, it was probably at this time that Marguerite showed her book to three further churchmen and recorded their positive assessments as a new epilogue to her book. Although the unique surviving French manuscript of the Mirror does not preserve this material, both the English and the Latin versions of the Mirror of Simple Souls carry a short section that cites the “witness” of the “clerks” who have read the book. The first of these men was a Franciscan “of great name, of a life of perfection,” called John “of Querayn”; the second was Dom Franc, chanter of the Cistercian abbey of Villers; and the third was the well-known secular master of theology, Godfrey of Fontaines. Marguerite’s interaction with these men again provides essential evidence for reconstructing her mind-set in the years before her Parisian trial.

Geographically, these three all came from near Marguerite’s base around Valenciennes. It is possible that she was randomly soliciting
the support of whomever she could contact and that it just so happened that these were the three men who gave her the positive responses she sought. Upon close inspection, however, there is a logic to the sequence. For one thing, these consultations are listed in chronological order: “The first was” John, and “after him” Frank read it, and “after him” Godfrey. Each figure also gets a little farther removed from Valenciennes, and a little more exalted in status. The Franciscan John “of Querayn” was probably from Quérenaing, a village only some eight kilometers south of Valenciennes.32 His home friary was very likely that of Valenciennes. Thus it makes perfect sense that Marguerite would show the work first to a local friar, perhaps one accustomed to providing pastoral care to beguines. If John was really “of great name,” then perhaps Marguerite hoped his renown for a “life of perfection” would reflect well on her book.

From there, Marguerite sought the support of a senior Cistercian (the office of chanter ranked only behind those of abbot and prior) of Villers, a community some ninety kilometers distant from Valenciennes.33 Invoking ties to Villers suggests that Marguerite saw herself as part of the tradition of holy beguines with which this abbey had long associated itself through authorship of vitae, liturgical veneration, and burial. Thirteenth-century women in this tradition included Ida of Nivelles, Marie of Oignies, and Juliana of Mont-Cornillon.34 Indeed, the author of Ida of Nivelles’s life, Goswin of Bossut, had been Franc’s predecessor as chanter of Villers in the 1230s.35 Thus, although neither John nor Franc is a well-known figure today, their positive assessments would have gone a great distance toward convincing Marguerite that her book could be appreciated by influential friars and monks. In turn, she could have expected that the inclusion of their praises would have inspired confidence in the readers who encountered them.

With these encouraging reactions secured, Marguerite then turned to the most imposing of her three referees. The praise of Godfrey of Fontaines must have been the glittering jewel in Marguerite’s array, for Godfrey was among the best-known theologians of his age. If a master of his stature could praise the Mirror, then Marguerite might reasonably have hoped that Bishop Guido’s condemnation was simply wrong.36 Stemming from a noble family in the Liège region (some 170 kilometers east of Valenciennes), Godfrey held canonries in Liège, Paris, and Co-
logne and was regent master of theology at Paris from at least 1285 to approximately 1299. After travels that probably included an extended stay in the Low Countries, he returned to his chair as regent master in Paris by 1303. The last secure documentary evidence for his life places him in Paris in February 1304, and the necrology of the Sorbonne records his date of death as 29 October, but without a year. Thus he may have died as early as October 1304, but there is some reason to suspect that he lived until at least 1306, or even a few years longer.

These dates offer only some wide parameters as to when this meeting would have taken place. It must have been after he assumed his chair as regent master at Paris around 1285 and before Marguerite was imprisoned in autumn 1308 (since it is unclear exactly when Godfrey died, this factor does not usefully narrow down the possibilities). The years between 1300 and 1303 might have offered the best opportunity, since this was the period when Godfrey seems to have been in the Low Countries most steadily. But his encounter with Marguerite could also have been during one of the many times that he must have passed through Valenciennes as he traveled between Liège and Paris.

What was the nature of the interaction between Marguerite and her three “clerks,” and what did the latter actually have to say about the Mirror? The only direct evidence comes from the report given by the author herself. This “record of the clerks that have read this book” is found in its fullest version in the Middle English version and given in a literal modern English translation here:

The first was a Franciscan of great name, of a life of perfection. He was called John “of Querayn”, who said, “We send you this by these letters of love, receive them out of courtesy, for love prays this of you, to the worship of God and of them that have been made free of God, and to the profit of them that are not, but if God wills, may yet be.” He said truly that this book is made by the Holy Ghost, and even if all the clerks of the world were to hear it, unless they understood it, that is to say, unless they have high spiritual feelings and this same working, they would not understand what it meant. And he prayed for the love of God that it be wisely kept, and that only a few should see it. And he said thus, that it was so high that he himself might not understand it.
And after him a Cistercian monk read it, called Dom Franc, chanter of the abbey of Villers. And he said that it was proved well by the Scriptures, that it is all truth that this book says.

And after him read it a master of divinity who is called master Godfrey of Fontaines. And he blamed it not, no more than did the others. But he said this, that he did not counsel that many should see it, because they might leave their own workings and follow this calling, to which they would never come; and so they might deceive themselves, for it is made by a spirit so strong and perceptive that there are but few such, or none. And therefore the soul never comes to divine usages until she has this usage, for all other human usages are beneath these usages. This is divine usage and none other but this.

For the peace of listeners was this proved. And for your peace we say it to you, for this seed should bear holy fruit to them that hear it and are worthy. Amen.42

We have only the author’s word for what these men said or wrote to her, and she may have been highly selective in choosing what to include. Particularly in the case of her very brief treatment of Dom Franc, it is tempting to speculate that what she left out may have been much more extensive than what she put in. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that she falsified these comments outright, since circulating her book with misattributed praise would have surely been counterproductive.

There are clues here as to the different kinds of interactions that Marguerite had with these three men. She seems to have met and spoken with all three, yet their responses were not based simply on her oral description of her ideas, since she refers to the three clerks who have “read” the book. With John of Quérenaing, Marguerite apparently was able to quote from a letter that he had written back to her: He said, “We send you this, these letters of love; receive them out of courtesy.”43 With Dom Franc and Godfrey, by contrast, Marguerite states that they read the text, but she then gives only references to what they “said,” and no sense of quoting from a written report. Though these details may be mere coincidence, they suggest that Franc and Godfrey read her book but then gave their responses in face-to-face meetings. Nor would such meetings be extraordinary events in this context: Mendicants routinely
offered pastoral services to beguines and laypeople, the Cistercians of Villers were well known for associating with local religious women, and university masters often preached to beguines in cities such as Paris (Godfrey of Fontaines was demonstrably aware of such preaching).44

These responses are often described as “approvals.” But in fact the Middle English version (more detailed and reliable than the Latin) uses the verb proved, not the noun approval, to conclude the passage. By using this language, Marguerite was not suggesting semiofficial ecclesiastical approval but rather a “testing” of the book (probatio in Latin). The value or truth of the book, she claimed, had been proved or tested by these clerics’ assessments, in the way that gold is proved in the fire, or revelations are proved to be from God, or saints are tested or proved by their trials.45 Marguerite’s language acknowledges possible controversy and the need for some kind of test of her book’s orthodoxy, but she claims that these churchmen’s readings offer exactly the necessary proofs.

Marguerite is most careful to stress the divine justification the men found for her writings. John says it is “made by the Holy Ghost,” Franc “that it was proved well by the Scriptures,” and Godfrey that it was “divine usage.” But both of the two longer responses, by John and Godfrey, are in fact far more emphatic about cautioning that the book could also be easily misunderstood, and both men strongly urge her not to circulate it indiscriminately. John suggests that she should expect many churchmen not to understand it, even—with good Franciscan humility—admitting that he might not have understood it himself, and prays that “only a few should see it.” Godfrey worries that the book might have negative effects, leading people away from the more straightforward path of everyday piety when they might never really understand the more difficult spiritual route laid out by the Mirror. Thus he “did not counsel that many should see it.”

Marguerite, however, puts these mixed messages to good use. For instance, she begins her report of Godfrey’s assessment with her own editorial statement: “He blamed it not, no more than did the others.” This argument from silence suggests to the reader how to understand what follows, even though most of Godfrey’s assessment stresses what he cannot do. What is notable is that Marguerite did not simply suppress these warnings. She must have felt that they highlighted the very