

## Introduction

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### *Saint Colette in Her World*

Saint Colette of Corbie (1381–1447) was a “new” saint, a woman living in the turbulent world of fifteenth-century France. The two biographies translated in this volume were written by two people who were close to her and spent decades working and traveling with her: by Pierre de Vaux, a Franciscan friar, her confidant and confessor, just after her death, and by Perrine de Baume, a fellow nun and niece of Colette’s mentor and confessor Henry de Baume, about twenty-five years later. These kinds of saints’ Lives are quite different from the legends of the early Christian saints who remained popular throughout the Middle Ages. Saints such as Catherine of Alexandria, Margaret of Antioch, or Alexis hailed from a distant past, and their legends were constantly reworked and translated into many languages. Their cults continued to flourish in many parts of Europe. But in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it became more common to find Lives of contemporary holy people—many of them women!—composed by those who knew them, wishing to exalt them and propose them as models to other Christians. Many of these Lives, such as those of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–1231), Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181–1226), Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373), or Raymond of Capua’s Life of Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), were written with a view to their subjects’ canonization. Elizabeth, Francis, and Birgitta were canonized just a few years after their deaths, but others had to wait decades or even centuries: Catherine was canonized in 1461 and Hildegard, although beatified in 1326, only made the final step onto the altars in 2012.

Colette’s two biographies, both written in the French of the mid-fifteenth century, represent first-hand testimony from two confidants, but they are quite different in form: Pierre de Vaux strove to compose a traditional hagiographic account, while Perrine de Baume dictated a memoir, giving us her thoughts as they came to her. Both clearly hoped for their beloved subject’s canonization, but centuries passed with repeated unsuccessful efforts, and it was not until 1807 that Colette finally became an official saint. Who was this Colette, the “little handmaid of our Lord” and the “glorious mother,” as her two biographers always called her?

1. See Alastair J. Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden, eds., *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition, c. 1100–1500* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010). For France, see Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, “Holy Women in France,” in that volume (241–66), which presents brief biographies and a list of primary sources for all presently known holy women in France from about 1100 to the mid-fifteenth century. As well, see André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), for a comprehensive study of this period.

## 2 Introduction

Saint Colette of Corbie, a restless spiritual seeker who spent most of her life as one of the most important reformers of the Franciscan Order, was born into a time of multiple crises. The plague epidemic that had killed millions still lingered in many parts of Europe, the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) that pitted England against France was still not over,<sup>2</sup> and the Great Schism (1378–1417) was tearing apart the Western Church, dividing Europe into different regions whose rulers pledged obedience to two different popes, one based in Avignon, the other in Rome. Despite this religious and societal turbulence, however, Colette succeeded in establishing convents of her own order, an offshoot of the Poor Clares, throughout Western Europe, and in reforming a number of others—often in the face of difficulty and of opposition from other religious orders (including parts of the Franciscan Order, which she sought to reform). Colettine communities can be found throughout the world today in countries as far away from each other as Germany, Norway, the Philippines, and Japan. Throughout the centuries, Colette has been invoked particularly as a patron saint of expectant mothers. She is known to us primarily through the two biographies in this volume and through letters by, to, and about her, some of them translated here.<sup>3</sup> About twenty of them were painstakingly collected and translated into modern French by nuns of the Order of Saint Clare. They reveal her efforts to found her own communities, and the support she received not just from religious figures but from the nobility and both French and English royalty. Before we take a closer look at the life and works of Colette, however, some background on the divisions affecting both the Roman Catholic Church and its religious orders will help to place this remarkable woman in the context of her times.

### *Schism and Division*

The crisis of a divided church deeply affected many Christians at the time in both the religious and secular spheres.<sup>4</sup> A conflict between the papacy and Philip IV, king of France, had led to the election of a French pope, Clement V, in 1305. Clement moved the papal court to France, where it was established at Avignon for

2. On the later phases of the Hundred Years' War during Colette's lifetime see Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years War, Vol. IV: Cursed Kings* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

3. Many medieval saints are also known through copious testimonies gathered from their contemporaries at their canonization trials. This is not the case for Colette, whose canonization was delayed until 1807. On the many centuries of delays and their causes see Anna Campbell, "Colette of Corbie: Cult and Canonization," in *A Companion to Colette of Corbie*, ed. Joan Mueller and Nancy Bradley Warren (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 173–206.

4. On the many people concerned with this crisis see Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Schism, 1378–1417* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006). For a concise summary of the conflict, see pages 2–11.

almost all of the fourteenth century; all subsequent Avignon popes were French. Toward the end of the century, however, there were more and more calls for a return of the papacy to Rome. Pope Gregory XI (r. 1370–78) finally heeded these calls, but died shortly after his arrival in Rome. The cardinals assembled to elect a successor, but the conclave was encircled by the irate Roman populace, clamoring for an Italian pope. The cardinals had in fact elected an Italian, Archbishop Bartolomeo Prignano of Bari, as Pope Urban VI, but the uproar was later used to present the cardinals' decision as a disputed election, one conducted under duress. Soon the cardinals realized that they had elected an authoritarian despot who wanted to curtail their luxurious lifestyle in the pleasant surroundings of Avignon. Just a few weeks later they decamped from swampy Rome to the more healthful climate of Anagni and proceeded to elect another pope, Robert of Geneva, a relative of King Charles V of France (1338–1380), as Pope Clement VII (r. 1378–94). In a letter to Charles V they described Urban as an oppressive and rabid monster and declared Urban's election invalid, but stated no theological or doctrinal differences. In the wake of this double election, all the European powers were forced to pick a side. In choosing a pope, England and France echoed the hostilities that had pitted them against each other in a dispute over territory and inheritance rights: England opted for the Roman pope, France for the one in Avignon. The Spanish kingdoms deliberated for a long time and finally chose the pope in Avignon, while, not surprisingly, the Holy Roman Empire adhered to the Roman pope. After Clement's death in 1394 the Spanish cardinal Pedro de Luna was elected as Pope Benedict XIII (r. 1394–1417), and on the Roman side several popes followed Urban VI after his death in 1389. Countless unsuccessful efforts were made to resolve this crisis, which also extended to many monastic orders. Thus the Franciscans had two Ministers General throughout the Great Schism, eight different ones adhering to the Roman obedience, and three to the Avignon obedience.<sup>5</sup>

In 1409 the Council of Pisa resulted in three popes (although France and England now adhered to the same pope), and it was only at the Council of Constance (1414–18) that the delegations from all the countries involved finally agreed on one pope, Martin V (r. 1417–31), a scion of the powerful Italian Colonna family, and forced the three other popes to abdicate. The Franciscan Order also reunited in 1421 under the Minister General Antonio Vinitti.

The Great Schism was over, but as the Hundred Years' War dragged on, another crisis of the Church erupted at the Council of Basel. Convoked in 1431

5. J. R. H. Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: From its Origins to the Year 1517* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 384. Anna Campbell, in "Contextualising Reform: Colette of Corbie's Relations with a Divided Church," *Franciscan Studies* 74 (2016): 353–73, points out that in some provinces, the different administrative parts of the Franciscan Order were divided because dioceses within them chose to adhere to a different pope (357).

by Pope Martin V and continued by his successor Pope Eugene IV (r. 1431–47), it had two main tasks: to discuss whether the Council should take precedence over the papacy when it came to decisions on the future of the Church, and to decide what to do about the Hussite heresy, a movement begun by the theologian Jan Hus, who had been burnt at the stake by the Council of Constance in 1415. Eugene’s ongoing struggles with the Council of Basel came to a head when the council suspended him in 1438, deposed him as a heretic in 1439, and elected its own pope: Amadeus VIII, duke of Savoy, who became antipope Felix V. Despite the council’s machinations, however, the exiled Eugene IV eventually returned to the papacy in 1443, and the Council of Basel was finally declared closed in 1449. As we will see, Colette played a part in some of the conflicts during this complicated and eventful period.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Franciscans and Reform*

The most important current that determined the course of Colette’s life was the growing desire for church and monastic reform that swept through most of Europe:

The middle and later part of the fourteenth century saw widespread reform movements across various religious communities endeavoring to return to the original precepts and communal standards of their foundations. Augustinians, Dominicans, as well as Franciscans underwent reform, and so-called observant communities dedicated to this endeavor emerged; for all, the meaning of poverty was one of the central issues.<sup>7</sup>

What did monastic reform mean in this era? By the time Colette appeared on the scene the Franciscan Order was about a century and a half old. Francesco

6. Details will also be explained in the notes to each Life. References to specific paragraphs in my translations of the biographies by Pierre de Vaux and Perrine de Baume will be given parenthetically: V = Vaux; P = Perrine, followed by the paragraph number.

7. Christopher MacEvitt, *The Martyrdom of the Franciscans: Islam, the Papacy, and an Order in Conflict* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 152. For a detailed account of Colette’s reforms, see Duncan Nimmo, *Reform and Division in the Medieval Franciscan Order: From Saint Francis to the Foundation of the Capuchins* (Rome: Capuchin Historical Institute, 1987), 443–77. An excellent concise analysis of the different currents of the Franciscan reform, as well as Colette’s role in this conflict, is Marie Richards, “The Conflict between Observant and Conventual Reformed Franciscans in Fifteenth-Century France and Flanders,” *Franciscan Studies* 50 (1990): 263–81. For a detailed study of the impact of the Colettine reform on the wider Franciscan reform movement see Ludovic Viallet, “Colette of Corbie and the Franciscan Reforms: The *observantia* in the First Half of the Fifteenth Century,” in Mueller and Warren, eds., *A Companion to Colette of Corbie*, 76–100.

di Bernardone—later known as Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), or Il Poverello because of his absolute embrace of poverty—renounced his father’s wealth, reportedly stripped himself naked in the streets of Assisi, and left his family in order to form, with some companions, a community devoted to the ideals of poverty, obedience, chastity, penance, fasting, working and begging for alms, and fraternal love.<sup>8</sup> The friars were also allowed to preach with the permission of local bishops. Francis did not see himself as the founder of an order, but soon realized that even his initial rather small group of followers needed some guidance. He composed a first simple rule in 1209 and a more detailed one in 1223 that was approved by Pope Honorius III, and it is this rule that is still followed by the Order of Friars Minor, the First Order of the Franciscans. After Francis’s death the Franciscans continued to grow into a well-organized pan-European order, divided into provinces and headed by Provincials under the jurisdiction of the Minister General of the entire Franciscan Order.

The origins of the Order of Saint Clare, known as the Poor Clares or the Second Order of the Franciscans, are not quite as clear. Like the early Franciscans, the followers of Clare were at first an informal group of women seeking a religious life outside of the established monastic orders. Chiara di Faverone, known in the English-speaking world as Saint Clare of Assisi (ca. 1194–1253), came from a family of the minor nobility, which meant that she was well educated and adhered to the spiritual ideals of her social class, including concern for the poor, mostly in the form of almsgiving.<sup>9</sup> Clare’s passion for poverty became the guiding light of her life and religious aspirations. Aware of the activities of Francis and his brothers, she decided in 1212 to leave her family and join them. Francis welcomed her into the religious life of his creation, composing a brief *forma vivendi* (rule for living) that stressed an ethic of evangelical poverty and charity. In order to avoid scandal, however, Francis first brought Clare to a nearby house of Benedictine nuns. Eventually Clare and a group of female companions were given permission by bishop Guido of Assisi to install themselves near the chapel of San Damiano, which was already serving as a center for the Franciscans; here, the friars “recuperated from their travels and did chores for the women.” Preaching and begging,

8. Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order*. A very accessible biography of Saint Francis is André Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*, trans. Michael F. Cusato (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

9. For a concise account of the origins of the Clarissans see Alison More, *Fictive Orders and Feminine Religious Identities, 1200–1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 33–40. More detailed accounts are in Lezlie S. Knox, *Creating Clare of Assisi: Female Franciscan Identities in Later Medieval Italy* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008); Bert Roest, *Order and Disorder: The Poor Clares between Foundation and Reform* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013); and Catherine M. Mooney, *Clare of Assisi and the Thirteenth-Century Church: Religious Women, Rules, and Resistance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

the hallmarks of the male Franciscans, were of course impossible for women, but they combined “physical labor and possibly some type of hospital service with a life of prayer and meditation.”<sup>10</sup> Ugolino of Ostia, the future Pope Gregory IX (r. 1227–41), became their Cardinal Protector, knowing full well that this new group needed some kind of rule in order to be able to continue and eventually receive papal approval. In 1219 he composed a *forma vitae* or rule for them, and decades later in 1253 Clare composed her own *forma vitae*, but it was not until a decade after her death that an Order of Saint Clare was created by Pope Urban IV (r. 1261–64).<sup>11</sup> As Alison More observes, “Urban’s imposition of a rule and a regular identity was consistent with the spirit of institutionalization that became increasingly prevalent in the thirteenth century.”<sup>12</sup>

Neither the First nor the Second Order of the Franciscans, then, let alone the so-called Third Order,<sup>13</sup> was created as an institutionalized monastic order by Saints Francis and Clare, but evolved over a period of decades and even centuries into the highly organized orders that dotted the map of Christian Europe when Colette appeared on the scene. With growing institutionalization came growing wealth, and a gradual moving away from the ideals that had motivated Francis and Clare to rebel against their lives of privilege and to shun the monastic orders that already existed in the early thirteenth century. Clare had in fact tried to prevent the encroachment of wealth and possessions in her request for the “privilege of poverty” that was eventually granted her by the pope:

Clare’s “privilege of poverty” was a legal exemption that Clare obtained after a daunting struggle with the papacy that enabled Clare and her sisters to opt out of the feudal financial system of attaching property to their monastery. According to papal policy monasteries were to have landed endowments that earned a regular income to protect their inhabitants from fickle benefactors, political upheaval, and natural disaster.<sup>14</sup>

10. Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 15.

11. For details on the development of the 1253 *forma vitae* see Mooney, *Clare of Assisi*, chap. 8.

12. More, *Fictive Orders*, 34–35.

13. The Third Order, or Tertiaries, were laypeople wishing to pursue a life of penitence. They were not enclosed, and often continued to live with their families. On Third Orders more generally see Alison More, “Institutionalizing Penitential Life in Later Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Third Orders, Rules, and Canonical Legitimacy,” *Church History* 83 (2014): 297–323.

14. See Joan Mueller, “Colette of Corbie and the ‘Privilege of Poverty,’” in Mueller and Warren, eds., *A Companion to Colette of Corbie*, 101–29, at p. 106. For the wider context of later developments of the ideals of poverty, see James D. Mixson, *Poverty’s Proprietors: Ownership and Mortal Sin at the Origins of the Observant Movement* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009). On the development of the Clarissan Rule, see Julie Ann Smith, “Faciatis litteras edoceri”: Literate Practices in the Clarissan *Formae*

In the view of many Clare's followers, the rule thrust upon the Order of Saint Clare in 1263—the so-called Urbanist rule—perverted this all-important ideal of evangelical poverty. A second rule approved by the papacy in 1263—Isabelle of France's rule for the order of the *Sorores minores* (Sisters Minor)—was followed at houses such as Moncel, where Colette tried out the religious life for a short period of time. But it too veered away from Clare's original ideal of evangelical poverty, and proved unsatisfactory for Colette.<sup>15</sup>

The Europe-wide movement that reflects this desire for a return to original monastic ideals, especially that of poverty, is commonly called the Observant reform movement. It extended to many different orders and many different regions. It was an often controversial movement, and, because it included rebels who questioned the established order of the medieval Church, accusations of heresy were leveled against some of its most radical adherents—communities such as the so-called Spiritual Franciscans, a loose group of Franciscans who only after the fact were seen as having formed a more organized movement.<sup>16</sup> In France the Observant reform originated in the 1380s at the Franciscan house of Mirebeau, and can be connected to Henry de Baume, one of Colette's confessors and an important mentor. Colette and Henry would work for reform within the Franciscan Order, and establish a number of reformed "Coletan" friaries in France. Yet even within the Observant movement there were differences. Henry de Baume had apparently left the friary at Mirebeau because of its decision to place itself under the authority of a Vicar General rather than the Franciscan Provincial, who in turn reported to the Order's Minister General. This internal dispute over administrative structures would pit the Observant Franciscans against the Coletans in the friary at Dole, and Colette herself against the Observant reformer John of Capistrano—two battles she would eventually win.

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*Vitae*," in *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Antwerp Dialogue*, ed. Virginia Blanton, Veronica O'Mara, and Patricia Stoop (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 23–41.

15. The Urbanist rule is named after Pope Urban IV (r. 1261–64). On Isabelle of France's rule see Sean L. Field, *The Rules of Isabelle of France: An English Translation with Introductory Study* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2013). For a history of the Rule of Saint Clare and how it is observed in modern times, see also the introduction to *La Règle de l'ordre de Sainte Claire avec les statuts de la Réforme de Sainte Colette* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1892).

16. See David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century after Saint Francis* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

## *A Brief Biography of Colette of Corbie*<sup>17</sup>

### *The Sources*

Colette's biographers, Pierre de Vaux and Perrine de la Roche et de Baume (b. ca. 1408), both spent decades with the saint. Not much is known about Pierre de Vaux, most often referred to as Pierre de Reims, except what we can gather about him from his biography of Colette, his letter to the citizens of Amiens in 1443 (translated in the section on Letters), and a few other references.<sup>18</sup> He was Colette's companion and eventually her confessor, and wrote his biography of Colette shortly after her death in 1447. Around that time, he became the Visitor for Colette's convents.<sup>19</sup> He made one business trip to Rome for Colette's reform, but otherwise seems to have spent all his time living near Colette or traveling with her from convent to convent. His biography of Colette is modeled on Saint Bonaventure's mid-thirteenth-century *Life* of Saint Francis, who had been canonized in 1228, a mere two years after his death. Pierre's text is divided into chapters, beginning with Colette's life story (including the beginning of her reformist activities and the persecutions she experienced), then moving on to chapters on each

17. This brief biography can do nothing more than give a sense of Colette's place in the complicated world of the fifteenth century and of the major elements of her reforms, her spirituality, and her charisma. Almost all of the information about Colette's life comes from the two biographies translated in this volume. Additional details can be gleaned from some letters by, to, and about Colette translated in the section on Letters. For a much fuller picture of Colette's life, see the massive study by Elisabeth Lopez, *Colette of Corbie (1381–1447): Learning and Holiness*, trans. Joanna Waller (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2011), originally published as *Culture et sainteté: Colette de Corbie, 1381–1447* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 1994). It draws on a wide variety of documents, including accounts of eyewitnesses collected after Colette's death with a view to her canonization. Lopez's *Petite vie de Sainte Colette* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1998) also gives an excellent overview of Colette's life and times. For a concise biography see Simone Roisin, "Colette de Corbie," in *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques*, vol. 13 (Paris: Letouzey, 1956), cols. 238–46.

18. Pierre de Vaux dit de Reims et soeur Perrine de la Roche et de Baume, *Les Vies de sainte Colette Boylet de Corbie, réformatrice des Frères Mineurs et des Clarisses (1381–1447)*, ed. Ubald d'Alençon, Archives Franciscaines 4 (Paris: A. Picard Fils, 1911). Ubald d'Alençon (hereafter "Ubald d'Alençon" or "Ubald") was the religious name of Léon-Louis Berson (1872–1927), a Capuchin friar and historian. See his introduction to the *Vies*, xxviii–xlii, for information on Pierre and Perrine, and xxii–xxviii, for the many later biographies of Colette. For Pierre de Vaux (hereafter "Pierre de Vaux" or "Pierre"), whose life is discussed on pp. xxviii–xxxiii, no precise birth or death dates are available; since he was often called Pierre de Reims, it was assumed that he was from that town in Champagne. Ubald d'Alençon provides a detailed biography of Perrine (hereafter "Perrine" or "Sister Perrine") on pp. xxxiv–xlii. Although Perrine's full name was de la Roche et de Baume, she is generally referred to as de Baume, a practice I follow here. See also Lopez, *Learning and Holiness*, 3–5. Twelve manuscripts of Pierre's text and three of Perrine's survive. For more information, see the preface to the translation.

19. On the function of the Visitor, see below.



of Colette's principal virtues, such as the three main Franciscan ideals of poverty, obedience, and chastity, followed by chapters on her special devotion to Christ's Passion and the Eucharist. In many ways, in fact, he presents her as a second Saint Francis.<sup>20</sup> The biography, which ends with an account of her gift of prophecy and miracles, is filled with lively anecdotes and fascinating details of Colette's life that only an eyewitness could have recorded. Pierre's admiration of Colette and his close emotional attachment to her shine through on every page.

We have more information on Perrine, daughter of Alard de la Roche et de Baume and the niece of Henry de Baume, Colette's mentor and previous confessor. Her father's castle served as a rest stop for Colette and her companions after a decisive trip to Nice (described below) to meet with Pope Benedict XIII in 1406, and after she had to leave Corbie in 1408; Perrine may have been born around that time. Perrine spent some thirty years with Colette, in seven different convents. After Colette's death, she occupied the position of mistress of novices for a time.<sup>21</sup> Probably around 1471, just when the first inquiries for the canonization of Colette were launched, she dictated her memoirs to Father François des Maretz, who then served as confessor to the Poor Clares in the Hesdin convent. Perrine quotes—and modifies—long passages of Pierre's text that had already been circulating in several manuscript copies at the time,<sup>22</sup> but she uses a completely different structure—basically no discernible structure at all. There are no chapter divisions, but a long series of separate paragraphs with occasional subheadings. In view of a possible canonization trial, she adopts the stance of a witness, often saying "I testify that" and adding her name and age.<sup>23</sup> Because she was a female

20. See Nimmo, *Reform and Division*, 460–67, for a detailed analysis of the parallels between Francis and Colette. Bonaventure was Minister General of the Franciscans from 1257 to 1274.

21. This was around 1458, as we learn from a letter by Agnès de Vaux published in *La Règle de l'ordre de Sainte Claire*, 286. Agnès, one of Colette's closest friends, was the abbess at the convents of Auxonne and Hesdin, and appears often in the biographies.

22. How much Pierre may have relied on Perrine's (probably oral) testimony is a question I am investigating in an article comparing the perspectives and methods of the two biographers, one male, one female. As far as I can determine, there exist only two other cases of Lives composed by a male and female biographer who had personal relationships with their holy subjects: Saint Radekund (ca. 525–587) and her biographers Venantius Fortunatus, bishop of Poitiers, and the nun Baudovinia, as well as Margherita Colonna (ca. 1254–1280), whose two Lives were penned by her brother Giovanni Colonna and Stefania, a Franciscan nun who knew Margherita well. See *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. and trans. Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halborg, with E. Gordon Whatley (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1992), 60–105, and *Visions of Sainthood in Medieval Rome: The Lives of Margherita Colonna by Giovanni Colonna and Stefania*, trans. Larry F. Field, ed. and intro. Lezlie S. Knox and Sean L. Field (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

23. Indeed, Marie Richards argues that Perrine's text was meant to supply the missing eyewitness testimony in order to complement Pierre's biography; see "Franciscan Women: The Colettine Reform of the Order of St. Clare in the Fifteenth Century" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1989), 261–62.

religious and not a male confessor, she had access to many facets of Colette's life that Pierre—however close he was to the saint—did not. Many events inside the convent walls, especially at night, could not be known to any man. Perrine thus opens a window for us into some of the most intimate and revealing moments of Colette's life.

### *Early Life and Religious Exploration*

Saint Colette of Corbie (1381–1447) was born Nicolette as the daughter of Robert Boëillet (or Boilet or Boylet), an elderly carpenter at the local Benedictine abbey, and his equally elderly and extremely pious wife Margaret Moyon, a widow for whom this was the second marriage.<sup>24</sup> A mature child (what hagiographers call a *puella senex*, or an “old girl”), she attended the local abbey school and had friends whom she tried to engage in pious games.<sup>25</sup> Although her parents were very devout, they feared that she was overdoing her piety and tried to prevent her from attending too many masses. As her biographer Perrine de Baume tells us, her friend Adam Mangnier once helped her climb out of her window so that she could attend the recitation of matins in the overnight hours, a move that caused her father to build her a little oratory in their own house.<sup>26</sup> In Corbie, little Colette saw herself as a savior for dissolute women whom she approached with offers of help and consolation, attempting to convert them to a better life.<sup>27</sup> She was small, but grew miraculously when her tiny stature caused detractors to speak to her parents and urge them to rein in her pious overtures to these women. After a pilgrimage and a prayer to Christ,<sup>28</sup> the fourteen-year old girl experienced a growth spurt and could henceforth spread her pious messages unimpeded.

24. Colette's mother was supposedly sixty years old when Colette was born. Postmenopausal women giving birth miraculously is a frequent motif in saints' lives, but Elisabeth Lopez—who has written the most thorough study of Colette—speculates that Colette may have been adopted (“Sainte Colette,” in *Sainte Claire d'Assise et sa postérité: Actes du colloque international organisé à l'occasion du VIIIe centenaire de la naissance de Sainte Claire, UNESCO (29 septembre–1er octobre 1994)*, ed. Geneviève Brunel-Lobrichon et al. (Paris: Les Editions franciscaines, 1995), 193–217, at p. 194. We also learn that Colette's mother had been married before and widowed (see, for example, V 67). There are references in both Ubald d'Alençon's introduction and Perrine's biography to Colette's niece, but no siblings are mentioned, so it is possible that Colette's mother had children from her first marriage.

25. As Lopez writes, “Benedictine abbeys provided two types of education: the school itself for young monks and those considering joining and ‘little schools’ open to the children living around the abbey. These gave a rudimentary education, particularly to boys” (*Learning and Holiness*, 13n16).

26. P 3. For a discussion of matins and other prayers of the Liturgy of the Hours, see 29, below.

27. V 10.

28. Neither biographer indicates where Colette went, but her biographer Alphonse Germain believes she most likely traveled to the chapel of Notre-Dame-de-Barbières in the small town of Albert in

Colette's parents died when she was seventeen, and the Benedictine abbot Dom Raoul of Roye became her guardian. He had plans of marrying her off, but Colette resisted, going so far as to crash one of the abbot's dinner parties in order to enlist the support of his pious guests for her own plans for a religious life. But she was not certain which direction this life should take. Her search for the perfect fit took many twists and turns before she became a Poor Clare, that is, a member of the Second Order of the Franciscans.<sup>29</sup> Colette's search for her true vocation gives us a panoramic view of the choices open to a young woman desiring a religious life at the dawn of the fifteenth century. First, Colette decided to become a beguine after getting rid of everything she owned.<sup>30</sup> Colette disliked the beguine life, however, and decided to become a *conversa* or lay sister with the Benedictines in Corbie.<sup>31</sup> She then moved to the royal abbey of Moncel near Pont Saint-Maxence in Southern Picardy as a "servant," but the lack of true poverty of this abbey (which followed the 1263 rule of Isabelle of France, known as the Rule of the *Sorores minores*)<sup>32</sup> disturbed her. She returned to Corbie, where her mentors became impatient with her lack of direction. One of these mentors, the reformist Franciscan Jean Pinet, guardian of the Hesdin friary, advised Colette to become a recluse, since none of the available convents was strict enough for her.<sup>33</sup> For four years, from 1402 to 1406, she lived in an anchorhold, that is, a cell constructed for her adjacent to the church of Saint Etienne in Corbie.<sup>34</sup> Becoming an anchoress or recluse was an option for women who desired an enclosed life of

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today's Département Hauts-de-France, about 20 km from Corbie. See *Sainte Colette de Corbie: 1381–1447* (Paris: Charles Poussielgue, 1903), 16.

29. P 12.

30. Beguines were pious lay women who, starting in the thirteenth century, began to form groups that often lived in special "béguinages" and usually made their living from needlework and similar tasks. Some of them continued to live at home. Supported early on in France by such holy personages as King Louis IX, they were also often seen as suspect because they were not enclosed in convents. On the Beguines, see Tanya Stabler Miller, *The Beguines of Medieval Paris: Gender, Patronage, and Spiritual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

31. Lay sisters were responsible for most of the manual work in the abbey.

32. Isabelle of France (1225–1270) was the daughter of Louis VIII and Blanche of Castille, and sister of Louis IX (later Saint Louis). She had founded the *Sorores minores* of Longchamp in 1260. Although Isabelle was never formally canonized, Longchamp had a local Office approved for her in 1521; it was extended to the whole Franciscan Order in 1696. See Sean L. Field's *The Writings of Agnes of Harcourt: The Life of Isabelle of France and the Letter on Louis IX and Longchamp* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003) and *Isabelle of France: Capetian Sanctity and Franciscan Identity in the Thirteenth Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), as well as Field, *The Rules of Isabelle of France*.

33. For the important role that Pinet played at the beginning of Colette's reforms and for many years to come see Duncan Nimmo, *Reform and Division*, 446–47.

34. Bert Roest, "The Poor Clares during the Era of Observant Reforms: Attempts at a Typology," *Franciscan Studies* 69 (2011): 343–86, at p. 348.