CHAPTER 3

But Where to Draw the Line? Colette of Corbie, Joan of Arc and the Expanding Boundaries of Women’s Leadership in the Fifteenth Century

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Colette of Corbie and Joan of Arc energetically uplifted and transformed their respective worlds—two distinct, yet overlapping worlds in early fifteenth-century France and Flanders. Despite popular narratives that circulated in later centuries about a personal encounter between Colette and Joan, historical records have not documented a meeting. However, the memory of subsequent generations joining these two women together in direct encounter suggests that they perceived key similarities between the two, i.e. leadership qualities that set Colette and Joan apart from other women in their generation, if not also from female leaders of future generations.

As Colette’s younger contemporary in a fervently charismatic society enduring prolonged conflict and crisis—including the Hundred Years’ War, the Papal Schism, and contentious divisions among the Franciscan order—Joan inherited from Colette a model of inspired female leadership that she innovatively extended into lay society, including military ranks. “Charismatic society” is a term derived from the sociological work of Max Weber and used here to frame the leadership of Colette and Joan, and importantly, the worlds of their devout supporters who championed the women and their missions. In Weber’s analysis, “charisma” is a strategy that resolves pressing social upheavals by creating rallying points for communal unity in the relationship between a prophet and her followers. “The holder of charisma seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his mission. His success determines whether he finds them.”¹ Both Colette and Joan laid claim to an authority of divine inspiration by which they exercised transformational leadership in their worlds of social crisis. A community affirmed each woman’s claims to divine inspiration and committed itself to her cause, actively empowering her leadership in tangible ways. Colette and Joan both enjoyed clear, and at times intense, affirmation of their divine missions from distinct groups of supporters. Both women grappled with the complexities of a fractured society

by endeavoring to build symmetry, a world of lived peace below aligned to that of realized peace in heaven.²

Identified as intermediaries between heaven and earth, their leadership roles revitalized specific covenants made between a merciful God and fragmented peoples. This essay considers their lives as represented in texts authored by male clergy who heralded them as holy women soon after their deaths. In this examination of the earliest biographies of the two women, the official rendering of Colette versus that of Joan emerges in bold relief, helping us to understand both women more fully. The texts show that, in the context of competing ideologies and political propaganda among the French, the idea of reform of the existing social order gained prominence as a political concept among the intelligentsia and underwent significant development that included openness to fresh possibilities for female leadership.³

Colette (1381–1447) was an only child, born in Corbie near the cathedral city of Amiens, a town in northern France where a Benedictine abbey long stood. Colette is remembered for ushering in austere reforms first among the female, then the male order of Franciscans, wielding significant authority among sectors of the mendicant society, as well as in the eyes of the Burgundian ruling elite, with no less affirmation than that of a pope.⁴ Joan (1412–1431) was one of five children born to a farming family in the village of Domrèmy in the Lorraine region of eastern France. Joan rose up at age seventeen to direct French armies against the English and their Burgundian supporters. The Anglo-Burgundian political alliance that Colette endorsed and Joan abhorred sought to submit France to the English throne. In 1429, when Joan took the military reins to steer the fortunes of the French kingdom towards political independence from the English, Colette had already spent two decades in establishing and reforming communities of Franciscan female and male religious.

In her reform efforts for the Franciscan order, Colette first exerted influence over its female branch, “the Poor Clares,” and then extended her efforts to the friars. The Order of St. Clare was from its outset in the thirteenth century an

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