

Networks of Influence: Women and Power in Fifteenth-Century France

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Medieval women were often able to exert power and influence through the social and kinship networks that underpinned the political structures of their time.¹ Social and kinship networks of patronage among the aristocracy of France in the fifteenth century sit at the heart of the success of St Colette of Corbie and her reforms of the Franciscan Order. From the beginning of her career as a religious reformer, Colette was supported by women from the ruling houses of France, in particular the house of the Valois dukes of Burgundy, in her quest to found reformed convents of Poor Clares. These women had extensive feudal and familial networks via relationships that were frequently constructed via the men they married, gave birth to, or deputised for. Yet the men were often absent during this period through their pursuit of civil war and war with England, death, or imprisonment, leaving the women in more overt positions of power their lands. Margaret of Bavaria, duchess of Burgundy, was governor of the duchy of Burgundy for her husband, John the Fearless; Marie of Berry, duchess of Bourbon, acted as regent during her husband's imprisonment by the English in 1416; Bonne of Artois ruled Nevers as regent during her son's minority. Other women in the networks had agency in their own right through their statuses as widows, such as Blanche of Savoy, countess of Geneva. During this period of instability, the familial links between the women ensured that relations were maintained between the opposing sides, which in time were drawn upon to bring about a unified effort towards establishing peace, symbolised in the patronage of Colette's reforms. The actions of these aristocratic women in promoting and supporting of religious reforms in their lands give us an interesting insight into the types of

power and influence that women could employ to further their political and familial ambitions.

Colette of Corbie

Saint Colette of Corbie, who undertook reforms of the Franciscan Order in the fifteenth century, was a highly influential saint in this late medieval period, whose aristocratic and royal patrons during her lifetime were among the most powerful in Europe.² These same patrons and their descendants supported her cause for canonisation from the time of her death in 1447 until her eventual canonisation in 1807.³ According to her hagiographers, from an early age Colette showed great devotion and piety, intent on living her adult life as a religious woman of some kind. At the loss of her parents in 1399, Colette gave away her inheritance to the poor, and convinced her guardian, the abbot of the great Benedictine abbey of Corbie, to allow her to take up a religious life instead of marriage. When he finally relented, Colette sampled various forms of religious life, including as a beguine and as a Benedictine nun, finally opting in 1402 for the austerity of an anchorhold. Under the guidance of her confessor, Colette took the vows of the Third Order Franciscans. However in 1406, following a vision of St Francis in which Francis chose her as his agent of reform of his Order, Colette was released from her anchorhold and was received by Pope Benedict XIII in Nice, from whom she received the veil of the Poor Clares, and was given permission to found a convent of reformed Poor Clares.⁴ From the time of the first successful reform of the former Urbanist Poor Clare convent in Besançon, Franche-Comté, in 1410, Colette reformed and founded a total of seventeen convents throughout Burgundy, France, Flanders and the Empire.

The late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries saw a reform movement, known as the Observant movement, sweep through many religious orders, including the Augustinians, the Dominicans and the Franciscans, with the aim of taking these orders back to a strict observance of their rules. Although there had been a few isolated reforms of female houses of the Franciscan Order, Colette was the first to instigate significant and organised reform the Poor Clares.⁵

Her agenda was to found and reform houses of Poor Clares in which was established the widespread observance of the *Rule* written by St Clare and approved by Pope Innocent IV in 1253 which espoused the ideal of communal evangelical poverty and a deep, interdependent relationship between the friars and nuns. Colette took Clare's *Rule*, hitherto only ever observed by Clare's own monastery of San Damiano in Assisi, and used it as the basis of her own *Constitutions*, which gave the Order the legislative framework which allowed them to live the life of simplicity and communal poverty originally envisaged by St Clare.⁶ The nature of Colette's reforms of the Poor Clares led directly to Colette establishing houses of reformed friars – Coletans – who would provide both the spiritual and temporal support required by the strictly enclosed Colettine nuns. This was controversial, not only because it gave the appearance of female spiritual influence over the Coletan brothers; but also because the Coletan reforms were in direct competition to the Observant reforms taking place at this time, causing friction between these two strands of Franciscan reform.⁷

The reforms were implemented by Colette with the full support of the Franciscan Order and successive Popes, but she needed powerful backing to take them forward, often in the face of hostile opposition. These patrons, initially from the court of Burgundy, were drawn to her piety and energy, her determination and her growing reputation for holiness, but they also saw an opportunity to exert their political and cultural influence through founding houses of a popular religious reform throughout their lands, and those of their neighbours.⁸ It benefited Burgundy to be associated with Colette and her establishment of a purer form of Franciscan life as it allowed her reputation in turn to enhance its reputation and image. Already, while in her anchorhold, Colette had become known as a 'living saint' and visionary; a woman with spiritual authority.⁹ In providing financially for, and elevating the status of, the reforms through association, the patronage of the Burgundians showed how a secular power could exploit Colette's spiritual authority for its own ends, whether to gain salvation through the efficacy of her prayers, or to bolster its prestige in areas where its support was waning or non-existent.¹⁰

The networks

Corbie, in the region of Picardy, was not yet under the suzerainty of the Valois dukes of Burgundy in 1406 when Colette started on her reforming career.¹¹ Colette's first link with Burgundy was through her Franciscan confessor, Henri de Baume.¹² He was an eminent friar known for his great learning and humility, who leaned towards a stricter observance of the Franciscan rule and he had been part of the beginnings of the French Observant reform movement that had been conceived at his former monastery in Mirebeau c.1370.¹³ His family was in the service of the duke of Burgundy, and using his contacts in the Burgundian court, he introduced Colette to a powerful network of women at the head of which was Margaret of Bavaria, duchess of Burgundy who were linked to each other either through kinship ties or through relationships within the court, thus knowing one member was the key to knowing the others.

The first woman to whom Colette was introduced was the widowed Marguerite de Rocheouart, baroness de Brissay. Henri de Baume had come to Colette in 1405 from Mirebeau, near Poitou in the county of Anjou. The commune of Mirebeau belonged to the de Brissay family, and he was well-acquainted with the baroness, thus he knew that she was a devout woman and sympathetic to reform; she was also highly connected.¹⁴ She was the daughter of the knight, Aimeri de Rocheouart, captain-general of Poitou, who had been counsellor and chamberlain to king Charles V, and whose family was among the highest in the land. Her husband, Gilles de Brissay, was highly influential in court as the direct vassal of Charles VI, and his wealth as sole heir to his family's estates alongside the wealth that Marguerite brought to the marriage meant that he was considered one of the richest men in the royal court. Marguerite is named in the *Vie de Sainte Colette* by Pierre de Vaux as 'a noble and powerful woman of the knightly class and a baroness, who was the widow of the lord de Brissay and the daughter of the lord de Rocheouart.'¹⁵ Pierre de Vaux's naming of the baroness, and description of her high birth, is a deliberate move to fix in our minds that Colette's reforms were supported by high status individuals, and particularly women. Indeed, in the highly illuminated manuscript of the *Vies de Sainte Colette*

commissioned by Margaret of York, duchess of Burgundy (d.1503), in 1473, and given to the convent in Ghent founded by Colette in 1442, one of the miniatures depicts the baroness witnessing the scene of Colette receiving the veil of the Poor Clares from Pope Benedict XIII.¹⁶ The baroness was pivotal at this early point in Colette's career, offering to do everything within her power to help Colette, using both her networks and her substantial means.¹⁷ It is possible that the baroness helped Colette and Henri de Baume early in 1406 after Colette's decision to reform the Franciscan Order had been made, to obtain a bull from Benedict XIII, dated April 29, 1406, giving permission for Colette to found a monastery in which the privilege of observing the strictest poverty could be observed.¹⁸ She was instrumental in obtaining a papal brief of 23 July 1406 from the papal legate, Cardinal Antoine de Chalant, giving Colette permission to leave her anchorhold, which Jean de Boissy, the bishop of Amiens, had originally said that he could not give.¹⁹ Finally, the baroness put all her means and retinue at Colette's disposal to accompany her to Nice for an audience with Pope Benedict XIII, in order for Colette to present to the pope in person her petition to found a religious house observing strict poverty, and be received into the Order of Poor Clares.²⁰

The baroness de Brissay in turn introduced Colette to Blanche of Savoy, countess of Geneva. On Colette's journey to Nice, they stopped in Rumilly, Haute-Savoie, in the diocese of Geneva, where they were received by Blanche. Blanche was the widow of count Hugh of Chalon, a vassal of the duke of Burgundy for his estate of Montmirey-le-Chateau in Franche-Comté. She was also the daughter of Count Amadeus III of Savoy and sister of the Robert of Geneva, the late pope Clement VII, who had been succeeded by Benedict XIII. She was well-known to the baroness de Brissay through connections at court, and also to Henri de Baume.²¹ The two women collaborated in securing papal approval for Colette's reforms. Blanche used the influence that she had at the papal court in Avignon to arrange an audience for Colette with the pope. Both women accompanied Colette to Nice, where the baroness de Brissay acted as Colette's ambassador to the pope. Through these women, Colette successfully obtained permission from the Pope for the reforms; he

confirmed the earlier bull of April 1406, and Colette received the veil of the Order of Poor Clares from his hands, at the recommendation of his cardinals and Henri de Baume. Blanche then accompanied Colette back to Picardy where she attempted, but failed, to establish her first reformed convent of Poor Clares in line with the bulls with which she had been issued by the pope.²² After an unsuccessful two years, Blanche persuaded Colette to accompany her to Franche-Comté, and gave Colette half of her chateau in Frontenay in which to house the women whom she had already attracted to the reformed Franciscan life.²³ Blanche was eager to see the growth of the reform movement, and wanted to establish a convent in her estate of Rumilly, in Haute Savoie.²⁴ Yet at Colette's request, she instead used her personal links with archbishop of Besançon, Thiébault de Rougemont, to secure permission for Colette to reform the existing Urbanist Poor Clare convent in Besançon. The archbishop was part of Blanche's network through her marriage to her late husband, Hugh II of Chalon-Arlay, who was viscount of Besançon, the temporal ruler of Besançon under the suzerainty of the Archbishop.²⁵ The reform was given papal approval in the bull, *Dum attenta*, 27 January, 1408.²⁶

Blanche of Geneva in turn was the key that directly unlocked access to the duchess of Burgundy, Margaret of Bavaria. Margaret of Bavaria was an immensely powerful woman. Having been governor of Flanders for her husband until 1409, the duchess exchanged places with her son Philip, count of Charolais, at the request of the Flemish, and took on the governorship of Burgundy and Franche-Comté, though she was never officially styled as Lieutenant or Governor despite having the requisite powers.²⁷ She officiated over meetings of the estates she governed, formed armies, raised finance for the duke, and had the power to appoint ducal officials. She collaborated with, and governed alongside, the ducal council in Dijon and the nobility, but there is 'ample evidence to suggest that she was in sole and effective command of affairs.'²⁸ She was highly trusted by the duke, as is evidenced from the fact that she was left mainly on her own in Dijon, but she was in close contact at all times, with the duke carrying out her wishes.²⁹ In 1409, the year in which Margaret of Bavaria had been appointed lieutenant in Burgundy, an account book for the duchess of Burgundy records that shortly after the duchess was

installed as lieutenant, Blanche of Geneva, accompanied by a party of twenty people, came for the express purpose of visiting the duchess, with whom they stayed for eight days.³⁰ While we cannot know the conversations that took place on that visit, it is highly likely that Blanche spoke of Colette, and Blanche's support for and patronage of the young reformer.

Blanche's patronage of Colette also reached the duchess of Burgundy through Guillaume IV of Vienne, counsellor and chamberlain of the king of France and successive dukes of Burgundy, governor of Franche-Comté, one of the most distinguished members of the courts of France and Burgundy, and the first knight of the Order of the Golden Fleece, who was married to Blanche's niece, Louise of Geneva.³¹ Shortly after the successful reform of the convent in Besançon in 1410, he offered Colette a site in his town of Gray for a monastery. However, by this time Colette had already settled on the site of the *Vieille Monnaie* in Auxonne for the monastery.³² Guillaume personally intervened with the duchess on Colette's behalf in order to solicit her help in obtaining permission for the foundation from the duke, which was duly granted 3 August 1412. Papal permission for the house followed on 25 September, 1412.³³ In a very short space of time, Colette's connection to the court of Burgundy had become remarkably strong.³⁴ The foundation in Auxonne was followed by two further foundations under the patronage of the duke and duchess of Burgundy: in Poligny (1415); and Seurre (1421-3), in the fief of Guillaume of Vienne.

These women helped to establish Colette's reforms for both political and spiritual purposes. Colette's reforms took place at a time of great discord in France: a power struggle within the royal family between duke John the Fearless of Burgundy, duke Louis of Orleans; and the Hundred Years War with England. The power struggle developed into civil war when in 1407, the duke of Burgundy ordered Louis' assassination. Thereafter, Burgundy was besieged by wars, economic stagnation, plagues, famine, social disorder and depression, making the duke highly unpopular throughout his lands. The foundation of the first reformed convent in Besançon in 1410 and its timing were therefore significant in a number of ways. Although Besançon was in Burgundian lands, the city had been a Free City of

the Empire since 1290, and guarded this privilege jealously. Free Cities tended to have considerable wealth, and many were self-ruling enclaves with trading links, and old, established wealthy families. Moreover, it was able to appeal directly to the Holy Roman Emperor should need arise. John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy, had been trying to obtain control over the city for a number of years. In 1407, Besançon had been placed under interdict due to troubles between the townspeople and the archbishop, who ruled the city. The citizens therefore had turned to the duke of Burgundy, offering the lordship to him in a bid to destabilise the archbishop's authority. The duke made preparations to accept the lordship, but in 1409 the project was dropped. In 1410-1412, discussions eventually brought about peace between the citizens and archbishop, and the interdict was raised. In May 1412, John the Fearless was once again offered lordship of the city, in return for Besançon becoming the administrative centre of the county rather than Dôle where the *parlement* sat. Once again the discussions came to nothing, and the duke eventually dropped the idea of increasing his control over the city, at least in political terms.³⁵ However, the association of the Colettine reforms, even at this early stage, with Burgundy, opened up an new opportunity for Burgundy to exercise influence in the city. The elaborate display of Burgundian grandeur with which Colette and her nuns processed into the city to take possession of the convent accompanied by Blanche of Geneva and her niece, Mahaut of Savoy, ensured that the association of Colette with the house of Burgundy entered the collective consciousness of the citizens for years to come.³⁶

The monastery in Auxonne, founded in 1412, followed in the wake of a particularly bitter conflict in the civil war which broke out after the Armagnacs had negotiated a treaty in Bourges with Henry IV of England in May 1412 for military support against the Burgundians. Burgundy retaliated by launching an offensive against Bourges, the centre of Armagnac power and the capital of Berry, which was home to the highly influential John, Duke of Berry, Burgundy's uncle. The subsequent treaty of Auxerre brought temporary peace, and pardoned the duke of Burgundy and his men for their part in the assassination of Louis of Orleans, but it was a short-lived victory for the duke.³⁷ At the duchess's request, the duke gave his permission for the Old Mint

in Auxonne to be used for the foundation. This was partly as recognition of one of his most loyal men, Guillaume of Vienne, in whose fief Auxonne was situated. But it was also a means of indulging in some positive propaganda for the dynasty. The duke's willingness to grant the site in Auxonne to Colette suggests that he had given some consideration as to how association with the saintly and popular reformer could be used as positive 'spin' by demonstrating the piety of the duchess and of the ducal house, which would share in the masses, prayers, and charitable acts, with the aim of improving the duke's popularity throughout his lands.³⁸ Thereafter, the duchess became highly influential in the progress of the reforms. Margaret used her patronage to further her family's political ambitions, reward faithful vassals, and opening link the status of the ducal house with the growing popularity of the saintly reformer; Colette in turn benefited from the staunch backing of a powerful and wealthy patron to take the reforms forward.

The foundation in Poligny (1415) followed further armed conflict, this time where the lives of the duchess and her children were threatened in the southern Burgundian lands near Dijon. A popular revolt in Paris against the duke, stirred up by the Armagnacs, forced him to flee at the end of the summer of 1413, leaving Paris to the Armagnacs. From May 1414, the Armagnacs besieged towns controlled by Burgundy in Picardy, such as Compiègne, Soissons and Bapaume, which fell quickly into their hands; they had less success with Arras as the duke of Burgundy had sent two thousand troops there to meet the onslaught. Yet the wars in the north left the southern regions at a potential disadvantage. The duchess of Burgundy, however, had fortified defences at her chateau at Rouvres to protect her children, and mustered an army that successfully met the raids that were being launched upon the eastern borders of the duchy by Louis de Chalon, a disgruntled vassal of the duke, whose defiance years earlier had caused his lands to be confiscated.³⁹ While a peace treaty was negotiated in Arras by the duke of Brabant, who was John the Fearless' brother-in-law, John the Fearless himself returned to Dijon. At this juncture, the duchess requested from him on Colette's behalf an old arsenal in the well-fortified, second city of the duchy, Poligny, in which to establish a third monastery of the

reforms.⁴⁰ As thanks for the prayers that had kept his wife and children safe in the recent skirmishes, and to secure prayers for the future, John gave his consent.⁴¹ As gratitude to Colette for her prayers that had kept them safe, and to secure prayers for the future, the duchess supported a foundation in the second city in the duchy of Burgundy.⁴² At the same time, pope Alexander V gave permission to bring the parish church of St Hippolyte into Poligny under the duke's patronage. These two acts of patronage created a visible sign of ducal authority in the city.⁴³ The town was home to a number of the duke's close advisers and courtiers, whose daughters entered the monastery, including the young Élisabeth of Bavaria, great-niece of Blanche of Geneva.⁴⁴ Not only did the reforms now have a high standing in the duchy and county of Burgundy through the status of the women who had joined, but Colette herself had acquired a reputation for holiness and apostolic living that imbued her with authority, both spiritual and temporal. This in turn indirectly increased the standing of the house of Burgundy as her patrons as Colette's reputation spread through the lands of the duke.

Finally, a fourth convent was founded in Seurre (1419-21) in Franche-Comté under the duchess' patronage. Margaret of Bavaria by now had established herself and her family as principal patrons of the reforms, and in 1417 had been accorded a papal bull permitting the foundation of four reformed Franciscan houses.⁴⁵ Colette approached her for permission to found a convent in the town shortly after the Armagnacs had finally avenged the murder of Louis of Orléans and murdered John the Fearless Montereau in 1419, having lured him into a trap laid for him by the dauphin, Charles, and his councillors.⁴⁶ The duchess undoubtedly had spiritual reasons for the foundation, given the recent events: the convent could serve as a place in which prayers and masses could be said for the soul of the late duke, providing comfort and consolation for the duchess and her family, and providing for the spiritual health of Burgundy. It also had more overt political motives: Suerre was in a fief belonging to Guillaume of Vienne, who had been at the duke's side when he was murdered. No doubt for him, the foundation at Seurre was made in part in thanks for his loyalty to the duke and as a reward for his faithful service. After Seurre, there were to be no more foundations

made in Burgundian lands until 1435 due to an injunction obtained by the provincial minister of the Franciscan province of Burgundy against all new reformed houses, not just those founded by Colette.⁴⁷ With regard to Colette, this injunction in part indicates the concern at the authority that Colette had gained through association with Burgundy and the strength of her relationship with these powerful patrons who were keen to found more convents, even though this was increasingly controversial in the wider context of the Observant reforms.⁴⁸ This in turn reflected the growing political strength of Burgundy and its ambitions, which after the death of John the Fearless, were pursued with similar energy by his son, Philip the Good (d.1467). The injunction, however, did not prevent Burgundy from playing a significant continuing role in the furtherance of the Colettine reforms; instead, there was potential to encourage Colette to find new opportunities outside Burgundy by which the duchess could exercise soft power and continue the dynasty's expansionist political ambitions and influence the political landscape in the pursuit of peace.

Alliances beyond Burgundy

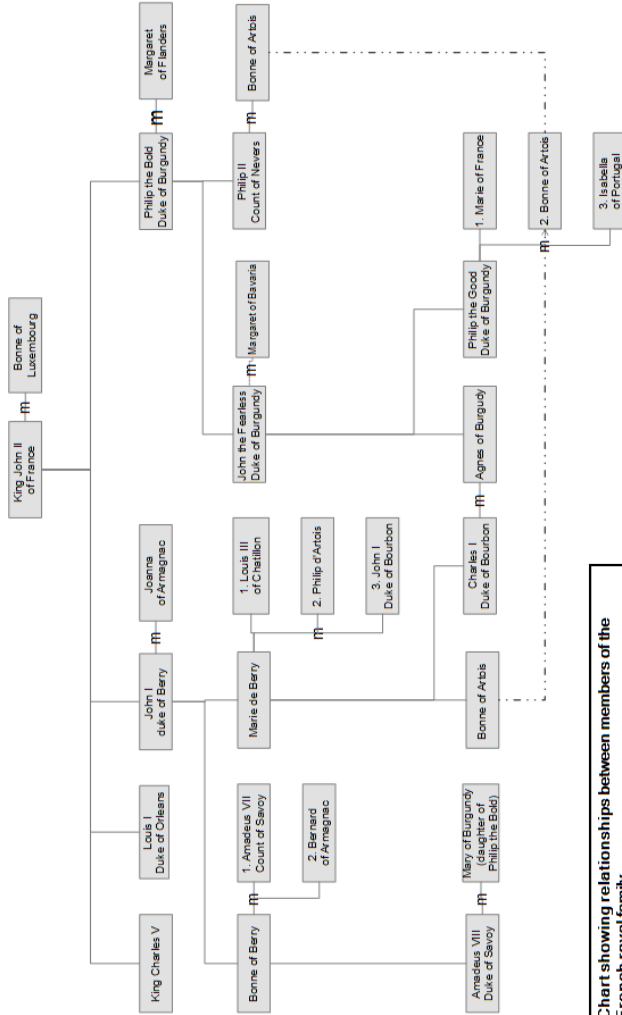


Chart showing relationships between members of the French royal family

Before an injunction was ever in place, however, Colette had been looking for new opportunities for foundations in neighbouring lands, and had approached Marie of Berry, duchess of Bourbon, and Bonne of Artois, countess of Nevers, as potential patrons.⁴⁹ In 1419-23, Colette founded a convent in Décize in the county of Nevers under the patronage of Bonne of Artois. Marie of Berry then founded two convents: one in Moulins (1421), the seat of the dukes of Bourbon; the second in Aigueperse (1423-25) in the Auvergne, of which Marie was duchess in her own right as the sole surviving heir of John, duke of Berry (d.1418). Both women were closely related to the duchess of Burgundy (see above chart). Marie of Berry was the daughter of John I, duke of Berry, and therefore first cousin of John the Fearless, duke of Burgundy. Her daughter, Bonne of Artois, was married in 1413 first to Philip II, count of Nevers, the youngest brother of John the Fearless. After Philip's death at Agincourt, 1415, Bonne married duke Philip the Good of Burgundy in 1424, son of John the Fearless and Margaret of Bavaria. However, no matter how closely these women were related, the civil war had put them on opposing sides politically: Marie of Berry's father, John I, duke of Berry, and her second husband, John I, duke of Bourbon, entered the conflict on the side of the Armagnacs. There is no doubt that relations between the two families of Burgundy and Bourbon were strained at this time on account of the civil war. In 1418, Marie's brother-in-law, Bernard of Armagnac and a number of other Armagnac supporters in Paris in 1418 were murdered by the Burgundians, and her son, Charles of Bourbon, was captured by John the Fearless in the same year; in return, John the Fearless was assassinated in 1419 by the Armagnacs (or Dauphinists) as final revenge for the murder of Louis of Orleans in 1407.⁵⁰

Yet it seems apparent from letters written at the time that Margaret of Bavaria and Marie of Berry had maintained relations despite the troubles; indeed, Margaret wrote to Marie shortly after John the Fearless' death to report what had taken place.⁵¹ Bonne of Artois, countess of Nevers, was perhaps a useful bridge between the two women at that particular time in her position as daughter of Marie of Berry and sister-in-law of Margaret of Bavaria. The familial connection between the two houses was significant for Colette as it

meant that, as long as the duchess of Burgundy was in agreement, expansion into other provinces would be assured, whether as a political or spiritual influence. Colette skilfully negotiated the connections between the two women, demonstrating that she was highly aware of the political significance of the move, and how to use the situation for her own ends. Having sounded out a Burgundian courtier as to whether the duchess of Burgundy would be offended, Colette received the response that the quarrels between Margaret's husband and Marie's had no impact upon the friendship they had for each other.⁵² She then approached Margaret of Bavaria in person to ask 'permission' to pursue negotiations with Marie of Berry.⁵³ Bonne of Artois at the same time discussed her plan for a convent in Décize in her husband's territory of Nevers with Margaret of Bavaria.⁵⁴ The dominance of Burgundy over the spread of the reforms and the duchess of Burgundy's ready acceptance of the request suggests that she understood clearly the political implications of supporting the expansion of the Colettine reforms.

At the same time as Colette sought to move beyond the borders of Burgundy, the two duchesses were involved in negotiating a political settlement between their families through a marriage contract between Margaret's daughter, Agnes of Burgundy (c.1407-1476), and Marie's son, Charles of Bourbon (1401-1456). Negotiations aimed to create a demilitarised area on the south-west frontier of the duchy of Burgundy, especially the counties of Charolais, Forez, Beaujolais and Nevers, in order to create a buffer zone between it and hostile lands.⁵⁵ Burgundy's strategy to defuse the threat from the territories around its borders is reflected in the sites put forward for the new foundations: Décize in the proposed 'buffer zone'; Moulins the seat of Bourbon power; and Aigueperse in Auvergne, the lands of the dukes of Berry. For her part, Marie of Berry had pious motives for bringing Colette's influence into her lands, no doubt in the aim of associating herself and her family with the popular reformer. However, there can be little doubt that there was a large element of political interest on the part of the duchess of Burgundy also with regard to the extension of the reforms into neighbouring lands, perhaps even suggesting to Colette – or indeed to Bonne of Artois or Marie of Berry – locations that would aid the establishment of peace between them. After John the Fearless'

murder in 1419, this process speeded up. His son, Philip the Good, succeeded him as duke, and was immediately taken up with negotiations with England that resulted in the Treaty of Troyes (1420);⁵⁷ Margaret of Bavaria therefore picked up her late husband's negotiations with Bourbon.⁵⁶ The capture at Agincourt of John, duke of Bourbon, by the English, meant that the truce was in fact completed between her and Marie of Berry, ending hostilities between them. As a result, Bourbon became a neutral zone between Burgundy and France.⁵⁷ In 1422, Margaret also finalised the marriage treaty between Agnes of Burgundy and Charles of Bourbon.⁵⁸ Philippe de Forceville even suggests that Colette used her influence with the Duchess of Burgundy to remove the obstacles from the planned marriage between Charles I of Bourbon and Agnes of Burgundy.⁵⁹

For the house of Burgundy, expansion of the reforms into neighbouring areas ensured that it could maintain a soft influence outside its own purview, in line with its overt expansionist policies elsewhere in France. The foundation of religious houses which were clearly associated with Burgundy, ensured that Burgundy had some sort of foothold in the area, based upon the network of relationships and alliances built and maintained in particular by the women of the court. The convents of the Colettine reforms had been populated with women from among the nobility and urban bourgeoisie of Burgundy and Franche-Comté. For example, Odile, Mahaut and Perrine de la Baume, nieces of Henri de Baume, all entered the reforms in Franche-Comté; Mahaut went on to be the first abbess of Orbe (founded 1426-28), whereas Perrine became Colette's closest friend and adviser in seven convents, and later her hagiographer. Even where convents were founded in non-Burgundian lands, the sisters who initially populated the convents came from the first four houses that Colette established in Franche-Comté and Burgundy. For the founding of the convent in Moulins in the Auvergne, Colette took seven sisters with her from Poligny and Besançon, and took Sister Marie of Corbie from Seurre to be the first abbess of Moulins.⁶⁰ For the convent in Décize, Colette requested five sisters from Poligny and Besançon to accompany her. This had the effect of extending the soft power of Burgundy and influence of the Burgundian aristocratic and elite urban families into disputed territories beyond the physical

boundaries of the county and duchy of Burgundy as a means of initiating and eventually consolidating political control, as was a long-established practice throughout western Europe.⁶¹ As each house of the reforms was founded on the basis of communal poverty and strict enclosure – that is, the foundations received neither dowry for women joining the order, nor did it own land or property from which to obtain income, they depended on the generosity of the immediate locality and the donations of family and other benefactors to finance and fund the foundations, thus creating new links between neighbouring lands.

Conclusion

It is clear that female networks particularly among the Burgundian aristocracy in the fifteenth century were highly influential in establishing St Colette of Corbie and her reforms at the forefront of Burgundy's political and spiritual endeavours. The foundations coincided with periods in which Burgundy was in need of softer influence in order to achieve political goals, such as establishing a presence in Besançon at a time when the city was independent of Burgundian power; or times where waning fortunes necessitated the favourable publicity that the support of a recognised holy women could bring, such as the foundations in Poligny or Seurre. The support of religious foundations in strategic locations was a successful means of establishing goodwill, pockets of support for the regime in specific localities, and opportunities for feudal vassals to demonstrate their loyalty. It was a means of wielding a soft power in lands suffering the upheaval of war, much of it at the instigation of the duke of Burgundy, whose actions in pursuing expansionist policies, and in his brutal murder of Louis of Orleans, precipitated the civil war. As a ruler invested with the power of governorship, and as the matriarch of the Burgundian dynasty with responsibility for the spiritual health of the family, the duchess of Burgundy was afforded considerable scope in championing Colette, both promoting the reforms for their own sake, but also using the patronage politically to further the aims of Burgundy beyond its borders. In this last, the duchess's actions were in line with the expansionist ambitions of the dynasty pursued by her

husband and son in their wars, such that the Burgundian foundations made in the northern lands from 1435 were part of a programme of joint patronage of Philip the Good and his duchess, Isabella of Portugal, in peacefully consolidating their power after the Treaty of Arras (1435).

The early fifteenth century was an unusual and unique period for these women and demonstrates more visibly the kind of power that they could employ in the absence of their husbands and sons. The women used their networks, constructed in part in relation to the men to whom they were wives, mothers, daughters, or deputies, to wield more overt political influence in these difficult times. Due to the wars, the women had been left at the head of the affairs of their territories, whether as governor, regent or ruling in their own right. The baroness of Brissay and Blanche of Geneva were both wealthy widows in charge of their lands and estates; Marie of Berry, was regent in Bourbon after the duke of Bourbon's capture by the English at Agincourt; Bonne of Artois ruled Nevers as regent during her son's minority. With regard to the reforms of St Colette, the women were willing to use the strength of their relationships with each other to collaborate in extending the aims of their royal houses through their exercise of soft power. Colette and her nuns and the importance of the foundations lent prestige to the families, while the women of the reforms also offered comfort and promising intercession and masses for their female founders who, besides their political roles, were important in praying for their husbands and sons, both living and dead, and ensuring the safety and salvation of their kin.

The foundations under the patronage of the Burgundians, the duchess of Bourbon and Bonne of Artois were only the beginning of the reforms that continued up to and beyond Colette's death in 1447. The networks that supported the early foundations spread the reach of the reforms further into Bourbon lands, Savoy, into the Languedoc, to the northern Burgundian lands and into the Empire through the foundation of new houses and the entrance of many young women – daughters, sisters, nieces – as nuns in those houses. After Colette's death, her cause for canonisation was supported by these same networks: even in the eighteenth century, descendants of the houses of Burgundy and Bourbon were signatories to petitions for Colette's

canonisation. The strength of the support for Colette highlights the extent of influence and prestige that these women had by associating themselves, their families and members of their courts with the reforms during her lifetime, and her cult and canonisation after her death.⁶²

Notes

- 1 Studies over the last few decades relating to women and power include: Mary Carpenter Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens, London: University of Georgia Press, 1988); Mary Carpenter Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2003); Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo & Louise Lamphere, *Women, Culture & Society*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974). More recently, Brenda Bolton and Christine Meek, *Aspects of Power and Authority in the Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007); Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (Oxford, Oxford University Press; 2013);
- 2 Elisabeth Lopez, *Colette of Corbie (1381-1447): Learning and Holiness*, (New York: St Bonaventure Press, 2011); Nancy Bradley Warren, *Women of God and Arms: Female Spirituality and Political conflict, 1380-1600* (Philadelphia PA., Bristol: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Anna Campbell, 'At the request of the Duchess? Gift Exchange and the Gendering of Religious Patronage', in *Staging the court of Burgundy : proceedings of the conference "The splendour of Burgundy"*, ed. W. Blockmans, T-H Borchert, N. Gabriëls, J. Oosterman & A. van Oosterwijk (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 183-88; Joan Mueller and Nancy Bradley Warren, *A Companion to Colette of Corbie*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016).
- 3 On Colette's cult and canonisation see Anna Campbell, 'Colette of Corbie: Cult and Canonization', in ed. Mueller and Warren, pp. 173-206. With regard to the ongoing support of the same families over the generations, Queen Marie de Medici (1575-1642) was a notable patron of Colette's cause for canonisation in the seventeenth century; she was also seven generations descended from both John the Fearless and Margaret of Bavaria on the Burgundian side, and John I of Bourbon and Marie of Berry on the Bourbon side.

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- 4 Benedict XIII, Pedro da Luna, was pope of the Avignon obedience during the Papal Schism 1378-1417. France recognised the primacy of Avignon over Rome at this time, hence Colette's request was initially granted by Benedict XIII, though her reforms were fully recognised by Martin V in 1417 once the schism had been resolved.
 - 5 Bert Roest, *Order and Disorder: the Poor Clares between Foundation and Reform* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p.169.
 - 6 For Clare's Rule, see: Marco Bartoli and Frances Teresa Downing, *Clare of Assisi* (London: DLT, 1993); Joan Mueller, *The Privilege of Poverty: Clare of Assisi, Agnes of Prague, and the Struggle for a Franciscan Rule for Women* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006); Bert Roest, 'Rules, Customs, and Constitutions within the Medieval Order of Poor Clares', in *Consuetudines et Regulae*, ed. Carolyn Marino and Maines Malone, Clark (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 305-30; Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, *Francis and Clare: the Complete Works*, (London: SPCK, 1982).
 - 7 Coletan brothers were those specifically associated with Colette's reforms. See Anna Campbell, 'St Colette of Corbie and the Friars "of the Bull": Franciscan Reform in Fifteenth-Century France', in *Rules and Observance: Devising Forms of Communal Life*, ed. Mirko Breitenstein, Julia Burkhardt, Stefan Burkhardt and Jens Röhrkasten, (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2014), pp. 43-66; Ludovic Viallet, 'Colette of Corbie and the Franciscan Reforms: The *observantia* in the First Half of the Fifteenth Century', in Mueller and Warren, pp.76-100.
 - 8 Colette's reputation for holiness was such that the great Dominican saint, St Vincent Ferrer, came to consult Colette with regard to the ongoing Papal Schism afflicting the Church. See Paul-Bernard Hodel OP, 'La Rencontre de Saint Vincent Ferrier et de Sainte Colette de Corbie', *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, LXXIX (2009): 193-219.
 - 9 Henri de Baume was directed to Colette in Corbie by an anchoress in Marseilles by the name of Marion Amante, according to Catherine Rufiné's letter U. d'Alençon, 'Documents sur la réforme de Sainte-Colette en France: Lettre de Catherine Rufiné', *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, 3 (1910): 82-97.
 - 10 Warren, pp.11-35.
 - 11 From 1419, the counties of Picardy - Boulogne, Ponthieu, Amiens and Vermandois - were gradually acquired by duke Philip the Good of Burgundy, whose possession of which was confirmed by King Charles VII of France in the Treaty of Arras in 1435.

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- 12 For Henri de Baume, see Hugolin Lippens, 'Henry de Baume coopérateur de S. Colette: Recherches sur sa vie et publication de ses Statuts Inédits - Une contribution à l'histoire de la réforme dans l'Ordre des Frères Mineurs au XV siècle', *Sacris Erudiri*, 1 (1948): 233-76
- 13 John R. H. Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: From its Origins to the Year 1517* (London: OUP, 1998); James D. Mixson, *A Companion to Observant Reform in the late Middle Ages and Beyond* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).
- 14 Marguerite de Rochechouart married her second husband, Gilles de Brissay (knight), in October 1394. He followed John of Burgundy, the count of Nevers, on an expedition to Hungary against the Turks, was captured and died in prison c.1396. Her father, Aimeric de Rochechouart was a knight, and counsellor and chamberlain of the king, and captain-general of Poitou and Saintonge. *Dictionnaire des Familles Françaises Anciennes et Notables à la fin du XIX siècle*, pp.127-128, and Lanier, *Archives généalogiques et historiques de la noblesse de France*, Vol.8, pp.11-12. She is known in most Colettine literature as 'Isabeau de Rochechouart', after *Histoire de la maison de Brissay depuis le IX^e siècle jusqu'à nos jours*, published in 1889 by the Marquis de Brissay, but Ubald d'Alençon says that she is Isabelle de Bourgogne (Ubald d'Alençon, *Les Vies de sainte Colette Boylet de Corbie, réformatrice des Frères Mineurs et des Clarisses (1381-1447)* (Paris : Couvin, 1911), Introduction.)
- 15 Pierre de Vaux (PV) §34: 'ungne noble et puissante dame chevaleresse [et baronesse qui pour celluy temps estoit] vesve du singneur de Brysay et fust fille du Sr de Roche Chouaert' (a noble and powerful knightly lady and baroness who was the widow of the lord de Brissay and the daughter of the lord of Rocheouart), Ubald d'Alençon, *Les Vies de sainte Colette Boylet de Corbie*, p.33.
- 16 Ghent, Monasterium "Bethlehem" of the Zusters Clarissen-Coletienien, ms 8, f 23v.
- 17 PV, §34.
- 18 *Bullarium Franciscanum* (BF) VII, §1004.
- 19 Faculty of Egress. Archives du Monastère de Sainte-Claire, Poligny: Amiens 2.04.
- 20 Pierre de Vaux, naturally, emphasised that Colette wanted to found a convent of Poor Clares, but the actual Papal Bull given by Benedict XIII in 1406 gives permission for Colette to found a house of Poor Clares or Benedictines, even though he received her into the family of Poor Clares.
- 21 Lopez, *Learning & Holiness*, p.310. Henri de Baume was from la Baume, which was owned by Blanche of Geneva.

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- 22 *BFVII*, §1004, 1013, 1014, 1015.
- 23 Baroness de Brissay had died c.1406/7. The women included Marie of Corbie who became abbess of Aigueperse.
- 24 Rumilly was opposed by Colette on the grounds that she preferred to found monasteries in towns that were highly fortified with strong defences, given the dangers arising from war. Towns were also centres of population where recruits could be attracted, and economic centres that could support the reforms. It was also likely that Rumilly did not have a suitable house of Franciscan friars nearby who could act as confessors to the nuns.
- 25 Archives du Monastère de Poligny, Sèries A, 28, *La Vie de la Bienheureuse Collette, Reformatrice des religieuses de Sainte Claire par l'Abbé de St Lórent*, 1630, p.59.
- 26 *Dum attenta*, 27 January, 1408. *BFVII*, §1038.
- 27 Richard Vaughan, *John the Fearless: the Growth of Burgundian power*, (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002), p.153.
- 28 Vaughan, *John the Fearless*, p.175.
- 29 Vaughan, *John the Fearless*, pp.173-192.
- 30 Urbain Plancher, *Histoire générale et particulière de Bourgogne, avec des notes, des dissertations et les preuves justificatives ; composée sur les auteurs, les titres originaux... et enrichie de vignettes, de cartes géographiques, de divers plans, de plusieurs figures... Par un religieux Bénédictin de l'abbaye de S. Bénigne de Dijon et de la congrégation de S. Maur* (Dijon : A. de Fay, 1739), p.285.
- 31 For Guillaume de Vienne, see Vaughan, *John the Fearless*, pp.81, 94, 279-80. He was one of John the Fearless's most devoted men, highly trusted, and eye-witness to the duke's death.
- 32 The Abbot of Saint-Laurent wrote that there was a letter from Henri de Baume and François Claret asking her to come to Dôle on the pretext of introducing the reforms to the house of friars there. Apparently, the letter also suggest that Colette should take a detour to Auxonne, and consider founding a convent there. See Saint-Laurent, p.87.
- 33 Jacques Theodore Bizouard, *Histoire de Sainte Colette et des Clarisses en Bourgogne* (Paris, 1881), p.25.
- 34 Perhaps relations with the house of Burgundy were rooted further back than 1412. The Abbot Douillet claims that John the Fearless was staying in Corbie in 1407 and had become acquainted with Colette there, just before she travelled to Burgundy with Blanche of Geneva. See Florimunde-Auguste Douillet, *Sainte Colette, sa vie, ses oeuvres, son culte, son influence* (1st ed.) (Paris, 1869), p.197.

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- 35 Douillet, pp.184-5.
- 36 Jacques Theodore Bizouard, *Histoire de Sainte Colette et des Clarisses en Franche-Comté*, (Besançon, 1888), pp.20-22.
- 37 Kelly DeVries, 'John the Fearless' Way of War' in *Reputation and Representation in Fifteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Douglas Biggs, Sharon D. Michalove and Albert Compton Reeves, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 51.
- 38 Bizouard, *Franche-Comté*, p.22.
- 39 Vaughan, *John the Fearless*, p.179-180.
- 40 The foundation charter was issued 2 June 1415. Original is in Archives de la Côte-d'Or, Dijon, B 11682 (Séries B-Cour des Comptes de Bourgogne).
- 41 Warren, *Women of God and arms*, p.12.
- 42 Warren, *Women of God and arms*, p.12.
- 43 Alexander V was elected pope at Council of Pisa in 1409 after the deposition of Benedict XIII and died only ten months later.
- 44 Élisabeth was the daughter of Mahaut of Savoy and the Elector Palatine, Louis III. Mahaut was the daughter of Amadeus of Piedmont, or Savoy, and Catherine of Geneva. She was therefore niece of Blanche of Geneva. When she was a baby, Colette asked for Élisabeth to join the reforms when she was old enough. Élisabeth wrote a memoir of Colette for the canonization investigations in 1471 which is a valuable source for the early years of the reforms.
- 45 *Supplementum ad Bullarium Franciscanum : continens litteras romanorum pontificum annorum 1378-1484 pro tribus SPN Francisci ulterius obtentas, Appendice hierarchica addita*, (Grottaferrata (Romae), 2002), §410.
- 46 Vaughan, *John the Fearless*, p.286.
- 47 *BFI* §1544, dated 3 December, 1422, confirmed the injunction issued by the Provincial Minister of Burgundy. In 1435 the duke of Burgundy and Charles VII of France signed the Treaty of Arras, which brought to an end the hostilities between the two sides: Burgundy recognised Charles VII as king of France, while Burgundy was exempt from homage to the French throne. A number of northern French domains, including Picardy, became vassal states of the duke of Burgundy. A period of peace after this treaty allowed for the Burgundy to aid the consolidation of its lands through the founding of Colettine convents in Picardy and Flanders.
- 48 Campbell, 'Friars of the Bull'.
- 49 Elisabeth Lopez, 'L'Observance franciscaine et la politique religieuse des ducs de Bourgogne (2me partie)', *Annales de Bourgogne*, 72.2 (2000): 177.

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- 50 Vaughan, *John the Fearless*, p.281.
- 51 Vaughan, *John the Fearless*, p.281.
- 52 Jacques Fodéré, *Narration historique et topographique des convents de l'ordre S.-Francois et monastères S.-Claire, érigés en la province anciennement appellée de Bourgogne, à présent de S.-Bonaventure*, (Lyon, 1619), p.71.
- 53 Fodéré, p.71.
- 54 Saint-Laurent, p.141.
- 55 See Vaughan, *John the Fearless*, pp.180-183.
- 56 The Treaty of Troyes was an agreement whereby the English king would become king of France on the death of Charles VI. To cement this provision, it was arranged that Catherine of France, daughter of Charles VI, would marry Henry V. Henry V was recognised as regent of France, and successor to the throne, of which Charles VII was disinherited. The death in 1422 of both Henry V and Charles VI obviously changed the political landscape.
- 57 Lopez, 'L'Observance franciscaine', p.179.
- 58 Richard Vaughan, *Philip the Good: the apogee of Burgundy*, (Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer; 2002), p.7. They were never actually married in the end.
- 59 Philippe de Forceville, *Une Grande Figure Politique de la Premier moitié du Xve siècle: Sainte Colette de Corbie et son alliance avec Yolande d'Anjou, 'Reine des Quatre Royaumes'* (Paris, 1958) p.37.
- 60 Saint-Laurent, p.139.
- 61 Marjorie Chibnall, 'The Empress Matilda and Church Reform', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 38 (1988): 107-130 (109).
- 62 Campbell, 'At the Request of the Duchess'; Warren, *Women of God and Arms*; Campbell, 'Cult and Canonization'.