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Seeing Double: John Gerson, the Discernment of Spirits, and Joan of Arc

DYAN ELLIOTT

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UPHEAVALS frequently clear the way for the entrance of some of the most unlikely actors into public life. So it was that a series of crises facilitated the emergence of a cadre of prominent female mystics in late medieval Europe.¹ Not surprisingly, the visibility achieved by these women directly conflicted with the avowed aims of patriarchal institutions of the period. Over the course of the high and later Middle Ages, canon and civil law had acted in concert to restrict female initiative, even as the growth of official bureaucracies had gradually forced women out of the political arena.² This trend was dramatically demonstrated in France, where in 1316 a Parisian assembly under Philip V sought to bar women from acceding to the crown altogether.³ And yet, the triune disasters of the Black Death, the Hundred Years' War, and the papal schism created a vacuum in institutional authority into which female mystics and prophets would move. These women not only captured the imagination of the public but even won the confidence of popes and princes. Adversity does indeed make strange bedfellows.

The authority of these women depended on Christendom's conviction that they

Earlier versions of this article have been presented at the Cultural Studies and Medieval Studies programs of Rice University; the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Bristol; the Institute of Historical Research, London; and the 36th International Congress for Medieval at Kalamazoo, Michigan. I would like to thank these various audiences for their intelligent responses. I am also indebted to the anonymous readers of the *AHR*. But I am especially grateful for the careful readings of Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Paul Strohm. This article is dedicated to Leonard Cohen.

¹ For background, see particularly André Vauchez, "Les pouvoirs informels dans l'Eglise aux derniers siècles du Moyen Age: Visionnaires, prophètes et mystiques," *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome: Moyen Age* (hereafter, *MEFRM*) 96 (1984): 281–93; Vauchez, "Sainte Brigitte de Suède et Sainte Catherine de Sienne: Le mystique et l'Eglise aux derniers siècles du Moyen Age," in *Temi e problemi nella mistica femminile Trecento*, 14–17 ottobre Convegno del Centro di Studi sulla Spiritualità Medievale, Università degli Studi di Perugia (Todi, 1983), 229–48; Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices*, Margery Schneider, trans. (Notre Dame, Ind., 1993), 219–36.

² In Italy, for example, civil lawyers looked to canon lawyer Gratian in order to justify the husband's control of his wife's dowry. See Susan Stuard, "From Women to Woman: New Thinking about Gender c. 1140," *Thought* 64 (1989): 208–19.

³ See *Continuatio Chronici Guillelmi de Nangiaco* ann. 1316, in *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, vol. 20, MM. Danou and Nandet, eds. (Paris, 1840), 617. Note, however, that other chronicles date this meeting as 1315. The decision was confirmed in 1322 and 1328. See André Poulet, "Capetian Women and Regency: The Genesis of a Vocation," in *Medieval Queenship*, John Carmi Parsons, ed. (New York, 1993), 112. This exclusionary legislation would become implicated in the genesis of the Hundred Years' War when the question of woman's ability to transfer, if not wear, the crown arose. If it were conceded that women could transfer the crown, then Edward III of England would be the true king of France by his mother, Isabelle.

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Joan of Arc and spirituality, burette, for example, is innovative.