

**“So she says”: Reimagining the Inquisition of Na  
Prous Boneta, a Heretic, 1325**

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April 19, 2017

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Robert McCaughey, for his guidance and encouragement throughout this entire process. Thank you for believing in my topic. I would not have been able to complete this thesis without all of your help.

I owe my enthusiasm for medieval history to Professor Joel Kaye. Thank you for teaching me the importance of studying our past and for helping me understand this complicated world with your invaluable wisdom.

Thank you also to my mom for always supporting me and to my friends for listening to me talk about medieval heretics all year.

## Introduction

*Na Prous Bonnet, the daughter of Durand Bonnet, of the parish of Saint-Michel de la Cadière in the diocese of Nîmes, an inhabitant of Montpellier since she was around seven (so she says), was arrested there as one accused and suspected of the heresy of the Beguines who were burned, and was brought to the prison at Carcassone, as is established by her confession made in legitimate judicial proceedings. She spoke freely, willingly, and without interrogation on the sixth of August, in the year of our Lord 1325.<sup>1</sup>*

So begins the inquisitorial record of Na Prous Boneta<sup>2</sup>, who was burned at the stake in 1325.<sup>3</sup> At her inquisition before Henri de Chamay, Na Prous remained steadfast in her belief of her divine mission, fearlessly, intelligently, and quickly affirming her faith, prepared to die in her “truth”.<sup>4</sup> Her confession details extraordinary visions of Christ and a profound spiritual message calling her towards outspoken, reformative action. She was not exceptional in her rejection of the orthodox Church doctrine—Na Prous Boneta lived in a time of incredible religious upheaval—but her bold statements landed Na Prous in front of the inquisitor, and in the pages of history was branded a heretic:

And having been warned, asked, and exhorted many times in judicial proceedings and

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<sup>1</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta),” Medieval Sourcebook, Fordham University, trans. David Burr, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/naprous.asp>

<sup>2</sup> The prefix “Na” is a shortened form of the Latin and southern-French word “domina,” meaning “lady.” (Petroff, Elizabeth A. "PROUS BONETA, NA (c.1290-1325)." In *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Katharina M. Wilson, and Nadia Margolis. ABC-CLIO, 2004. [http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=http%3A%2F%2Fsearch.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fabcwma%2Fprous\\_boneta\\_na\\_c\\_1290\\_1325%2F0%3FinstitutionId%3D1878](http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=http%3A%2F%2Fsearch.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fabcwma%2Fprous_boneta_na_c_1290_1325%2F0%3FinstitutionId%3D1878))

<sup>3</sup> William Harold May. "The Confession of Prous Boneta: Heretic and Heresiarch," in *Essays in Medieval Life and Thought, Presented in Honor of Austin Patterson Evans*, ed. John Hine Mundy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887).

on other occasions to revoke and abjure all the things reported above as erroneous and heretical, she persevered in them, claiming that in the aforesaid, as in the truth, she wishes to live and die.<sup>5</sup>

Integrating the study of women with the study of the Middle Ages remains a new task. It aims to create a more complete story by illuminating the long-neglected female voices of history.

Although feminist scholarship has made many achievements in medieval studies, the challenge remains to situate these new theories within the framework of a larger historical narrative that has for so long overlooked female experiences. Nancy F. Partner expands upon the problem in *Studying Medieval Women*:

Now that women medievalists and medieval women are visible and permanently part of the scene, there remains some major disagreements over how centrally the results of the more than two decades of scholarship on women have been incorporated into the main body of medieval studies... What is beyond dispute, however, is that feminist scholarship (using the term in the inclusive sense proposed by Judith Butler) has restored to the Middle Ages the substantial reality that human societies consist of *two* sexes.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of making broad claims about a universal human condition or ubiquitous circumstances, feminist scholarship strives to explore the nuances of the specifically female experience during the Middle Ages. It is not enough to simply study medieval women using the same framework developed around the study of medieval men; the experiences of medieval women must be examined on their own terms. Ute Stargardt expresses a similar sentiment in the introduction to her translation in 1997 of the hagiography of Dorothea of Monatu: "In the last two decades, largely due to feminist scholarship, the literature of medieval feminine spirituality has attracted

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<sup>5</sup> "Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta)," (Fordham University).

<sup>6</sup> Nancy F. Partner, "Introduction," in *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, ed. Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1993), 1.

much critical attention. Yet, a lot of work remains to be done in studying the many texts written by or about medieval holy women.”<sup>7</sup>

An important component in the advancement of medieval women’s history is studying the place of women within the medieval Catholic Church, an institution predicated on the notion of male authority, wherein women have been relegated to second-tier roles. In response to these restrictions, medieval women created their own outlets for expressing their religiosity, leading to a rise in female mystics and visionaries. Visions provided women with power in socially sanctioned ways that allowed them to establish legitimacy as religious figures.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, they relegated religious women to the role of “mystic,” a less authoritative position, conversely allowing ordained male clerics to maintain their higher status. In her book *Proving Women: Female Spirituality and Inquisitorial Cultures in the Later Middle Ages*, Dyan Elliot has argued that putting women into a position of perpetual subordination allowed the Church to create a foil to the proper behavior for the clergy.<sup>9</sup> It is within this tension—the competing needs of the Church to validate women’s religious desires while maintaining the male-dominant hierarchy—that the actual experiences of spiritual women becomes distorted.

The inquisitorial record of Na Prous Boneta illustrates this phenomenon. A leader of a group of women deemed “heretical” by the official institutional church<sup>10</sup>, Na Prous provides an

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<sup>7</sup> Johannes von Marienwerder, *The Life of Dorothea Von Montau, a Fourteenth-Century Recluse*, trans. Ute Stargardt. Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1997, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Petroff (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Dyan Elliot, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitorial Cultures in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 48.

<sup>10</sup> *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, 276

illuminating case study through which to investigate the construction of religious women's identities in the later Middle Ages. This thesis explores the meaning of Na Prous Boneta's identity as a heretic by investigating the interplay between imagery and language in her confession. Through comparison with other contemporary female visionaries and saints, the present study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of Na Prous's spirituality, pulling back the shroud of sinfulness implicit in the label of "heretic." Instead of analyzing the meaning of Na Prous's spiritual beliefs, a related matter that is outside the scope of this thesis, I will focus on deconstructing her inquisitorial record.

Dyan Elliot utilized a similar methodology, which focused on "how the religious identity of the individual is established."<sup>11</sup> To do so she examines documents of clerical work that she calls "masculine discourses," which are "essential to an understanding of the environment in which female spirituality develops." The inquisitorial record of Na Prous Boneta will serve as the "masculine discourse" under investigation in this thesis as a way to understand the "environment" surrounding Na Prous's religious identity. Elliot's method has informed by own approach, whereas I will mostly focus on "the 'frame' for female spirituality"—the external factors that shape and constrain the picture of Na Prous's spirituality.<sup>12</sup> Juxtaposing the ways in which female saints were constructed with the ways in which female heretics were constructed, it is clear that the inquisitorial record of Na Prous Boneta, the written narrative of her heresy, was

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<sup>11</sup> Elliot, *Proving Women*, 6

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

shaped by the interests of the Church.<sup>13</sup> By creating a power dynamic in which women did not have legitimate religious authority, the Church controlled not only the experiences of spiritual women, including female heretics, but also the writings about them. A female visionary relied on her male confessor to legitimize her teachings, creating in effect a dialogue between the visionary and her confessor, with the latter “correcting” doctrinal errors and inconsistencies in the women’s visions.<sup>14</sup> A similar process is replicated between heretic and confessor in the Inquisitorial Record of Na Prous Boneta. In such cases, the underlying presence of the male voice is undeniable.

Moreover, the confessor became the “chief witness to his individual penitent’s piety,” inserting himself into the narrative and then receiving reflective glorification.<sup>15</sup> This desire to control the writings by and about female religious women reveals fundamental insecurities in the internal organization of the Church. The institutional medieval church was mistrustful of women who claimed religious authority, preferring them to find acceptable ways to express themselves within the parameters of the Church’s teachings.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the attacks on women like Na Prous, who the Church cast as “heretics,” may well have stemmed from anxiety over the

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<sup>13</sup> Note: The primary source documents upon which I will be drawing in this thesis are translated into English from their original Latin. However, I do not believe that this will hinder my ability to work closely with the texts, as their translations very accurately reflect the intended meaning and sentiment of their medieval authors.

<sup>14</sup> *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, 9

<sup>15</sup> Elliot, *Proving Women*, 48

<sup>16</sup> *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, 20

possibility that their religiosity would undermine the hierarchical distinctions between men and women. These women threaten the established social and religious order.<sup>17</sup>

The Church targeted male spiritual teachers on the basis of their “heretical” doctrine for centuries, but in these instances the primary focus of their attacks were the incongruence between these men’s beliefs and the official doctrine of the Church. In the case of women, however, their prescribed gender identity exacerbated the Church’s anxiety and compounded the effects of their dissidence. This is the main difference between the accusations against women and men as heretics.

Women were often declared heretical for performing tasks that men routinely conducted within the Church. For example, the inquisitor Bernard Gui, writing around 1324, accused the Waldensians of allowing women to perform the sacrament of the eucharist.<sup>18</sup> This was a major problem for the Catholic Church for two reasons: first, only ordained priests could carry out this highest sacrament; second, only men could be priests. Because of their gender and the subordinate status it imposed, women faced multiple forms of persecution by the Church. It was in the best interests of the Church to silence these women. And so it did.

Na Prous Boneta lived at a particularly fraught time and place in the history of the Medieval Church. Over the course of the High and later Middle Ages, female spirituality came to be seen as a threat to not only the church, but to society more broadly.<sup>19</sup> In the thirteenth century,

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<sup>17</sup> Shulamith Shahar, *Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect: Agnes and Huguette the Waldensians*, (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2001), 55.

<sup>18</sup> Shulamith. Shahar, "Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect : Agnes and Huguette the Waldensians," (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK ;: Boydell Press, 2001)., 48

<sup>19</sup> Elliot, *Proving Women*, 1

tensions became most pronounced when the criteria for affirming the spiritual claims of holy women grew more rigorous.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the rise of literacy among lay society in late medieval Europe led to the proliferation of religious movements, many of which garnered great distrust.<sup>21</sup> As tension heightened around the role of spiritual women, the Church tightened its control over them. Writing about this desire to maintain male dominance, Beverly Mayne Kienzle postulates that clerical attacks against women:

[R]evealed a deeply rooted fear that allowing women a voice of authority in matters of religion would subvert a social and religious structure grounded in their lack of power and convinced of their fundamental subordination, sinfulness, and propensity for seduction.<sup>22</sup>

Because the hierarchy of the church depended upon priests, a specifically male office, in the most prominent positions of power, the threat of women's mounting religious zeal was doubly threatening. Complicating the situation further, Na Prou's alliance with male-centered heresies—the Spiritual Franciscans and the teachings of Joachim of Fiore—made her threatening to the Church for reasons beyond simply being a woman. By aligning herself with movements already deemed heretical, Na Prou was automatically condemned by the Church. But it may well have been her gender that explains her extreme fate of being burned at the stake.

Na Prou Boneta's narrative was shaped by the influences of men, albeit controversial ones, before being written down, as opposed to the narratives of Dorothea of Montau and other

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<sup>20</sup> Elliot, *Proving Women*, 121

<sup>21</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, "The Holy and the Unholy: Sainthood, Witchcraft, and Magic in Late Medieval Europe," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 24, no. 3 (1994), 359.

<sup>22</sup> Beverly Mayne Kienzle, "The Prostitute-Preacher: Patterns of Polemic against Medieval Waldensian Women Preachers," in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker, 99-113 (University of California Press, 1998), 101.

saints, which were molded by the male perspective during the writing process. These saintly women would receive their messages directly from God in an unmediated communication between heaven and earth; however, Na Prous spoke as a representative for God's ideas as they were revealed to Joachim of Fiore and later Peter John Olivi. The issue of authorization is paramount to understanding Na Prous's heretical status and becomes especially significance since she upheld to the power of men condemned by the Church instead of deferring to the supremacy of the clergy.

## Chapter I: Background Information: Welcome to Na Prous Boneta's World

To begin the discussion about the nuances of Na Prous Boneta's spiritual identity, it is helpful to look at the model of heresy laid out by Walter L. Wakefield and Austin P. Evans in *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*. They define heresy as "doctrinal error held stubbornly in defiance of authority."<sup>23</sup> The most troubling aspect of sectarian movements for the Catholic Church was that they provoked strong emotions among the laity and roused them to provide evidence for the religious aspects of their daily lives.<sup>24</sup> Na Prous Boneta's inquisitorial record closely mirrors this framework of heresy. The document of her confession is filled with references to her defiant religious ideas. Her beliefs and accusations against the Church also follow other common patterns that Wakefield and Evans observe among heresies in the High Middle Ages: advocacy of apostolic poverty and preaching; protest against concentration of power in the hierarchy; and objection to abuses of the sacraments.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the scholarship done by Caroline Walker Bynum in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* provides a useful framework for understanding the spiritual lives of medieval women, which can help inform a more nuanced understanding of Na Prous Boneta's spirituality. Bynum sheds light on both the "cultural construction of categories such as 'female,' 'heretic,' or 'saint'" and the "asymmetrical

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<sup>23</sup> Walter L. Wakefield and Austin P. Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

power relations between men and women or clergy and laity.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, Bynum denaturalizes the ideas of “woman,” “heretic,” and “saint,” showing how men have disproportionate authority to shape these identities. The categories of “saint” and “heretic” are contingent upon this uneven power system: “Female creativity must be facilitated by men; female saints are not canonized or revered unless they are in some way religiously useful to men.”<sup>27</sup> Using her argument as a foundation, it is possible to consider the other side of the saint/heretic dichotomy—what happens when “female creativity” is not mediated by an authorizing male voice? Through analyzing the inquisitorial record of Na Prous Boneta, I extend Bynum’s focus on female saints to encompass female heretics.

It is clear that the male-dominated Church desired to control the religiosity displayed by some medieval women visionaries. The surviving textual accounts of female saints, known as hagiographies, reveal a persistent male presence behind the words. Catherine Mooney explores the problem of “voice” within the male-authored hagiographies of female saints in her book *Gendered Voices*. Male perceptions of female spirituality, she writes, often overshadowed the reality of the women’s experiences: “male-authored depictions of holy women, however sincerely intentioned, are likely to reveal far more about men’s idealized notions of female sanctity and its embodiments in women’s lives than they reveal about the female saints

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<sup>26</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 17.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

themselves.”<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, there are few medieval female voices untouched by male overseers, as clerics exercised control over the textualization of their experiences.

Indeed, women’s stories would likely not have been recorded without the sanctioning of a male cleric.<sup>29</sup> The depth of the male control is so extensive that in certain cases, such as Christine of Stommeln in the hands of her editor Peter of Dacia, the account becomes a “collaborative literary persona” rather than an historical biography.<sup>30</sup> Through the process of censoring, editing, and framing, the authentic woman is lost to history.

### 1. The Spiritual Franciscans



Fig. 1, Giovanna da Milano, *Saint Francis of Assisi*, 1360-1365. Painting on wood. Louvre Museum.

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<sup>28</sup> Catherine M. Mooney, "Voice Gender and the Portrayal of Sanctity," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>29</sup> "Gendered Voices : Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters," ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia, Pa. :: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999)., 7

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

Na Prous Boneta was associated with the radical wing of the Franciscan Order known as the “Spirituals,” who by the beginning of the fourteenth century had been declared heretical because of their rejection of papal decisions and commands. Their story begins with St. Francis of Assisi (fig. 1). In 1209, Francis founded the Franciscan order (Order of Friars Minor) based on the principle of imitating the life of Christ (*imitatio christi*), especially in regards to poverty.<sup>31</sup> In her inquisitorial record, Na Prous Boneta asserts that “Saint Francis bore witness to the life of poverty instituted by Christ.”<sup>32</sup>

Despite similarities to other lay apostolic movements of the twelfth century that were declared heretical, such as the Waldensians,<sup>33</sup> St. Francis’s mission was approved by Pope Innocent II. He was officially allowed to spread his message that the Franciscan order must not own any possession either individually or as an institution.<sup>34</sup> As the movement splintered into competing ideologies at the end of his life, the extent of Francis’s radical commitment to voluntary poverty became a central issue of contention.

Out from this debate emerged the Spiritual Franciscans, “rigorists” who stringently followed Francis of Assisi’s strictures.<sup>35</sup> In opposition to the branch of the Franciscan order that took a more lenient view of the rule of poverty (they accepted that property given to the

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<sup>31</sup> Neslihan Senocak, "Franciscan Order," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Robert E. Bjork ('Oxford University Press', 2010).

<sup>32</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta),”

<sup>33</sup> Peter Waldo and the emergence of the Waldensian movement will be discussed in further detail later in this thesis. The Waldensians provide an important comparison to the Franciscan order when considering the issue of saints versus heretics.

<sup>34</sup> Senocak, "Franciscan Order”.

<sup>35</sup> "Spiritual Franciscans,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone ('Oxford University Press', 2009).

Franciscans would be owned by the Church), the Spiritual Franciscans refused to compromise on this teaching.<sup>36</sup> They were accordingly condemned by Pope John XXII, who, in the decretal “Cum Inter Nonnullos” of 1323, proclaimed the Spiritual Franciscans’ uncompromising beliefs about poverty to be heretical.<sup>37</sup> During her inquisition, Na Prous Boneta chastises John XXII for this decision, claiming, “the sin of this pope when he betrayed the Franciscan friars to death was as great as the sin of Adam when he ate the apple.”<sup>38</sup>

## 2. Peter John Olivi

A disregard for accepted Church doctrine in favor of heretical beliefs was built into the framework of Na Prous Boneta’s religious ideas. She was an ardent follower of the cleric Peter John Olivi (1248-1298), a prominent leader of the Spiritual Franciscans who was known for his controversial opinions and connections with some female mystics. Na Prous was a member of the Beguines of Provence, laypersons who were devoted to the cult emerging around Olivi in Languedoc around 1300.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta).”

<sup>39</sup> Yrjönsuuri, Mikko, "Peter John Olivi," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund, 947-50 (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011); Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 91-2; "Spiritual Franciscans."



Fig. 2, Languedoc-Roussillon *région*, France. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Languedoc (fig. 2) has a prominent and enduring history of heresy in the Middle Ages, having been a site ravaged by Crusaders from the early thirteenth century.<sup>40</sup> After some of the Spirituals were burned as heretics, lay followers worked to promote their teachings.<sup>41</sup> Strong support for Olivi figures prominently in the account of Na Prous's inquisition,<sup>42</sup> which records her as saying, "because the pope destroyed the writings of Brother Pierre Déjean [Peter John Olivi], written by the hand of divinity, the sacrament of the altar lost its effectiveness and power, which it will never recover."<sup>43</sup> Her assertion that Olivi's writings are divinely inspired attest to her disregard for the authority of the Catholic Church.

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<sup>40</sup> Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 34, 40

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 41

<sup>42</sup> May, "The Confession of Prous Boneta."

<sup>43</sup> "Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta)."

She also shows her distrust by speaking sacrilegiously about the eucharist, “the sacrament of the altar,” losing its power. The Catholic Church viewed the eucharist as the cornerstone of Christian devotion; it was only to be administered by an ordained priest. By saying it has “lost its effectiveness,” Na Prous insinuates that the clergy had become irrelevant to religious expression. Thus, she rejected the orthodox authority of the Catholic Church, aligning herself instead with the new message of the heretical Spiritual Franciscans. Furthermore, she positions Olivi above the ordained priests with her bold proclamation that his writings were “written by the hand of divinity.” While priests serve as interlocutors between Heaven and the earthly realm, Olivi, according to Na Prous, became a physical vessel for God, a prophet delivering St. Francis’s message:

Again, that Saint Francis is as great a saint in paradise as is Blessed John the Baptist, for just as Blessed John prepared the way for the Lord, so Saint Francis prepared the way for the Holy Spirit. Likewise the Lord told her, so she claims, that he gave as many graces and as much glory to Brother Pierre Déjean [Peter John Olivi] as he gave to the Son of God in his person, that is, insofar as he was man and not insofar as he was God.<sup>44</sup>

### 3. The Beguines

The controversy surrounding the ideal of apostolic poverty that divided the Franciscans at the beginning of the 14th century gave rise to the Beguines, a sect in Southern France advocating for the message of the Spiritual Franciscans.<sup>45</sup> The Beguines believed that Olivi was “a prophet who had received God’s revelation of things to come.” This explains her extreme reaction to the pope’s destruction of Olivi’s writings. Further emphasizing her belief in his prophetic status, Na Prous Boneta says that “Brother Pierre Déjean [Peter John] bore witness to the divinity in holy

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<sup>44</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta).”

<sup>45</sup> Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 54

scripture.”<sup>46</sup> Additionally, the Beguines believed that the world was approaching the end of time, “in which a cataclysm would herald the coming of the Antichrist.”<sup>47</sup> This belief in the imminent arrival of the Antichrist directed Na Prou’s condemnation of the pope. The record states that Na Prou claims Christ told her “that Antichrist himself—by which she means this pope—matches the complete evil of all the demons.”<sup>48</sup> She also positions the pope in spiritual conflict with Olivi, arguing that “the son of God battled with the devil in single combat, and in a similar way the writing of the Holy Spirit given to the aforesaid Pierre Déjean battled with Antichrist in single combat.”<sup>49</sup>

### 3. Joachim of Fiore



Fig. 3, Joachim of Fiore, *Liber Figurarum*, ca. 1250-1350. Ill. MS. The Archive for Research on Archetypal Symbolism.

<sup>46</sup> “Na Prou Bonnet (Boneta).”

<sup>47</sup> Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 55

<sup>48</sup> “Na Prou Bonnet (Boneta).”

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

Olivi and the Beguines found their inspiration in the writings of the Italian Cistercian monk Joachim of Fiore (1132-1202) (fig. 3). He is best known for writing commentaries on scripture that prophesied a new age in which the church hierarchy would become unnecessary, a philosophy understandably very popular among the Spiritual Franciscans.<sup>50</sup> Joachim theorized that this new age would overturn the current age, bringing with it a new Christ. Spiritual Franciscans associated this new Christ with Saint Francis. Everyone is now condemned because of this “Antichrist” pope, according to Na Prou Boneta, setting the scene for this new religious age:

because the sins of this pope is, as has been said, as great as that of Adam, it was necessary for christ to die again in person and spirit so that souls could be saved, because otherwise no soul would ever again enter paradise. And this has occurred, she claims. Christ has died a second time in person and spirit, so she claims the Lord told her.<sup>51</sup>

This allusion to Christ dying a second time could be a reference to the death of St. Francis or the condemnation of Olivi’s works.<sup>52</sup> By recalling Christ’s death and resurrection—a transformative act—Na Prou calls for a spiritual revolution. In this new age, “it will henceforth be necessary for whoever wishes to be saved to believe in the works of the Holy Spirit given to Brother Pierre Déjean.”<sup>53</sup>

When the Spiritual Franciscans made their split from the mainstream Franciscan movement, the Church increasingly became seen as their enemy due to the persecution that the

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<sup>50</sup> Paul Lagasse, “Joachim of Fiore,” in *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>51</sup> “Na Prou Bonnet (Boneta).”

<sup>52</sup> May, “The Confession of Prou Boneta.”

<sup>53</sup> “Na Prou Bonnet (Boneta).”

Spiritual Franciscans faced. Joachim's writings deal extensively with the Antichrist and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, both of which are themes that Na Prous Boneta speaks about in her inquisitorial record.<sup>54</sup> Na Prous's adherence to the Spiritual Franciscan ideology of Peter John Olivi explains why her own religious ideas were so heavily influenced by Joachim's apocalyptic theology, and many of her beliefs come from his teachings.<sup>55</sup>

### 5. The Main Characters

Na Prous Boneta's beliefs, informed by her adherence to the Spiritual Franciscan and Beguine movement, threatened the stability of the Church hierarchy by attacking the Pope—its highest leader. Equally troubling was that this assault came from a woman. Na Prous's zealotry for the teachings of the Spiritual Franciscans—her deep commitment to extreme religious principles based on imitating the life of Christ—led her to castigate Pope John XXII as evil and anti-Christian. An allusion to the teachings of Joachim of Fiore, she repeatedly refers to the pope as "Antichrist." Her interrogation immortalizes her scathing critique:

"Again, Christ told her, so she claims, that to say 'Antichrist' is the same as saying 'the sum total of all evil,' that Antichrist himself—by which she means this pope—matches the complete evil of all the demons, Lucifer and all the rest who fell from heaven."<sup>56</sup>

Including Na Prous's incendiary comments about the pope in the official record acted as a way for the clergy to control and silence their opposition. Church writers acknowledged the existence

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<sup>54</sup> "Joachim of Fiore," in *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*, ed. Encyclopaedia Britannica (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014).

<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth A. Petroff, "PROUS BONETA, NA (c.1290-1325)," in *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson and Nadia Margolis (ABC-CLIO, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> "Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta)."

of these beliefs, then showed the grave consequences for their promulgation in order to extinguish them from social consciousness. They accomplished this by dismissing Na Prou's questioning the church as heretical ramblings ("Again, Christ told her, so she claims"<sup>57</sup>).

Comparisons with other contemporary medieval women are helpful for better understanding Na Prou Boneta's specific case. In 1319, only six years before Na Prou would find herself under the same fate, two Waldensian women—Agnes Francou and Huguette de la Côte—were brought before Bishop Jacques Fournier during his first year as Inquisitor in Pamiers.<sup>58</sup> Following questioning, they were burned at the stake for being heretics.<sup>59</sup> The inquisitions and subsequent condemnations of Agnes, Huguette, and Na Prou further reveal the trend towards heightened religious anxiety in France during the first quarter of the fourteenth century. As is evidenced by their stories, was also a time when the female followers of charismatic male "heretics," just like Na Prou Boneta, were seen as especially dangerous.

Agnes and Huguette belonged to a tradition of subversive women; the accusations cast against them followed a standard pattern of behavior ascribed to "bad, corrupting women," textual patterns recycled from Catholic writers of Late Antiquity and repeated by later writers and Inquisitors.<sup>60</sup> They were not deemed to be dangerous entirely in isolation of social or historical trends, but because they conformed to an existing narrative of problematic women. Their inquisitor, Lord Jacques, presented Agnes and Huguette in this tradition to bolster his

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<sup>57</sup> The original Latin text reads: "item dixit sibi christus, ut asserit"

<sup>58</sup> Shahar, *Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect*, vii

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, ix

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 55

claims about their heretical acts and justify their sentences. The record states that Huguette “wished to join his [accused heretic Jean of Lorraine’s] faith and his sect and to obey him, and that she believed that the things he said to her were words of truth.”<sup>61</sup> Her strong allegiance to this heretical man’s beliefs make her, like Na Prous, a threat to the Church’s claims to authority.

## 6. The Waldensians and Women

The Waldensian heretical movement, because of its similar commitment to poverty and condemnation by the Church, helps situate the case of Na Prous Boneta within the framework of a larger social and religious trend. Also known as the Poor of Lyons, the Waldensians were founded in the late twelfth century by Peter Waldo, a wealthy merchant who was inspired by St. Alexis to adopt a life of apostolic poverty in 1173.<sup>62</sup> Living during late 11th-century, St. Alexis defied his wealthy parents to become a nameless beggar who lived an anonymous life under the staircase of his parent’s house until his death.<sup>63</sup>

The Waldensians were regarded skeptically by outsiders who accused it of affording a heterodox status to women. They occupy a particularly interesting space within Christian dialogue about women’s proper role within the Church. Their existence demonstrated that anxiety around the gendered religious hierarchy radiated out from the center of Christianity and into some peripheral movements. The idea that the Waldensians conformed to the principle of

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<sup>61</sup> Shahar, *Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect*, 144

<sup>62</sup> Michael Frassetto, “Waldensians,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (‘Oxford University Press’, 2010).

<sup>63</sup> Sarah Kay, “Alexis, Vie De St.,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (‘Oxford University Press’, 2010).

apostolic poverty in hopes of authentically imitating the life of Christ, yet did not view men and women as equal on earth,<sup>64</sup> conveys a fundamental notion that the space for women within Christianity was inherently subordinate to that of men.

Within this framework, Waldensians women carved out special roles for themselves and over time assumed different positions within the movement. After the second decade of the thirteenth century, there emerged a distinction between “Brothers” and “Sisters” from “Believers.” Accusations by the Catholic Church that the Waldensians allowed women to preach, hear confessions, and consecrate the eucharist were common until the fourteenth century, when they became less frequent.<sup>65</sup> The Sisters (called “*Sorores*”),<sup>66</sup> according to the inquisitor Anselm of Alessandria writing in the late 1260s, lived in poverty like their male counterparts, except they were not ordained to act as priests.<sup>67</sup> However, by the early fourteenth century, the time of Agnes and Huguette, the activity of the Sister had disappeared, and Raymond de La Cotê, the man with whom there were arrested, asserted in his inquisition that the Waldensians did not allow women to be preachers.<sup>68</sup> The fact that Agnes and Huguette were not *Sorores* brings the accusations against them into sharper focus; these women were not targeted because they had religious authority or spiritual power, but because they were guilty of association with heretical male

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<sup>64</sup> The Waldensians could be said to have undermined the female role within Christian theology by diminishing the role of the Virgin Mary as a mediator between the faithful and Christ and her power to help people who prayed to her (Shahar, *Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect*, 36)

<sup>65</sup> Shahar, *Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect*, 46

<sup>66</sup> Peter Biller, *The Waldenses, 1170-1530: Between a Religious Order and a Church* (Aldershot: Variorum, 2001), 125.

<sup>67</sup> Shahar, *Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect*, 47

<sup>68</sup> Biller, *The Waldenses*, 127; Shahar, *Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect*, 131

preachers, similarly to Na Prous Boneta. Unlike Na Prous Boneta, however, Agnes and Huguette did not claim an identity that contradicted with the accepted role of women within the Catholic Church.

Many religious women in this period shared the common experience of having their identities constructed by men and the Waldensian women were no exception. It is clear that the depictions of the early Sisters' preaching by Catholic writers followed a "scriptural prophesy," which reveals more about the attitude with which the late twelfth century Catholic men viewed these women than about the actuality of these women's lives.<sup>69</sup> In the century preceding the lives of Agnes and Huguette, there was a large contingency of Church writers who were interested in the Waldensian Sisters and emphasized their preaching. Many of these texts survived into the fourteenth century, preserving the "literary existence" of the Waldensian Sisters in the mind of clerics. This tradition remained alive around 1300 when Jacques Fournier questioned Raimon de la Côte and Huguette about how the Waldensians received women and if the women heard confessions.<sup>70</sup>

### 7. Saintly Women

A crucial component to discussions about female heresy is the inclusion of cases of female saints. Although seemingly opposed to each other, saints and heretics both represent efforts by the Catholic Church to command control over religious practice, either by condemning the beliefs or actions of the heretics, or by lauding those of the saints. Stories of female saints

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<sup>69</sup> Biller, *The Waldenses*, 128.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

who lived around the same time as Na Prous Boneta, such as Dorothea of Montau (d. 1394) and her confessor John Marienwerder (d. 1417), help construct a more complete picture of women's spirituality. As part of his efforts to guide her spiritual life, John transforms Dorothea's story from that of a woman originally cast as a heretic into one of a saint.<sup>71</sup> In his description of her spiritual development, John obscured her past, especially downplaying her marriage of twenty-seven years, while highlighting all the requisite early signs of her religious prestige common to most female saints: an early spiritual awakening (she was scalded by hot water when she was seven); raptures during her marriage; and bodily, mystical interactions.<sup>72</sup> From his role as the authority on Dorothea, John Marienwerder puts himself in a position to receive secondary glory for his ability to recognize Dorothea's spiritual authority should her canonization be successful. Elliot argues that this desire influenced his portrayal of Dorothea's story: "[T]he clerical quest for self-authorization in the writing of a mystic's *vita* and revelations virtually obscures the independent contours of a mystic's spirituality, and ultimately of her (or his) life."<sup>73</sup> Mooney agrees that John's attempts to have Dorothea declared a saint play into his desire for self-authorization.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Dyan Elliot, "Authorizing a Life: The Collaboration of Dorothea of Montau and John Marienwerder," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney, 168-91 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 173.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-2

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 169

<sup>74</sup> Mooney, "Voice Gender and the Portrayal of Sanctity," 11



Fig. 4, Hildegard of Bingen, *Hildegard's Vision*, *Illumination from Liber Scivias*, 1165. Ill. MS. Art History Survey Collection.

Another useful case study is that of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179).<sup>75</sup> A prolific female visionary, she became the subject of much discussion even in her own time, and many male writers—Gottfried, Guibert of Gembloux, and then Theoderic—performed as her hagiographer.<sup>76</sup> The ways in which these men each constructed their own hagiography of Hildegard's life are wildly divergent, using various narrative styles to recount their stories.<sup>77</sup> Behind the three voices of the *Vita S. Hildegardis* (Life of Hildegard), it is possible to distinguish each having their own

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<sup>75</sup> John Wayland Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 45.

<sup>76</sup> Barbara Newman, "Hildegard and Her Hagiographers," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney, 16-34 (Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

distinct model of sanctity.<sup>78</sup> Overall, the works about her life aim to document that her visions are approved by the Church. Later books about her *Vita* and writings by the Cistercian monk Gebeno were intended to be reformist and antiheretical, and in order to perform this function Gebeno had to inspire confidence in the credibility of Hildegard's visions.<sup>79</sup> Hildegard, along with these other female saints and heretics, provides a background for understanding the complexities of female spirituality in the Middle Ages.

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

## Chapter II: Canonization vs. Inquisition, Saint vs. Sinner

*Again, the lord God has told her; so she claims, that the truth of these things, or at least some of them, can be found in three books of sacred scripture: the Apocalypse, the Bible, and Daniel. She says she fervently believes that everything she has said is true and should take place as stated. On this coming Good Friday it will have been four years since she received the Holy Spirit, and she still possesses it. Although if she were following her own will in the matter she would not want all the aforesaid things divulged throughout the whole world, God wants them divulged.<sup>80</sup>*

Na Prous Boneta does not share her story freely, but through the coercive process of the Inquisition. As a foil to canonization, the Inquisition turns certain inflammatory people into heretics, branding them with shame and infamy. However, these two processes share many similarities in their procedures and goals, resulting in two identities—the heretic and the saint—that have many commonalities despite being on opposite ends of the spiritual spectrum. Elliot identifies what she terms “the priest’s dual role of confessor and inquisitor” to explain how the two processes became merged. She argues that “the very enlistment of the inquisition for both sanctity and heresy intensifies any implicit tendency for the two extremes to dissolve into one another.”<sup>81</sup> Over the course of the Middle Ages, the inquisitorial process and canonization become so conflated that their boundaries start to blur.

### 1. Canonization

*See and hear how the ancient, the eternal God has renewed his grace in the land of Prussia in his special maiden named Dorothea. Her life, as it is described here, was meant to be for all who encountered it, and indeed through God’s grace has become already for many a*

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<sup>80</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta).”

<sup>81</sup> Elliot, *Proving Women*, 121

*lesson, a light, and a way to leave the wide road that leads to perdition and a guide to the path that leads mankind to the portal of the heavenly kingdom.*<sup>82</sup>

This passage, taken from the introduction to John Marienwerder's account of Dorothea of Montau's life (d. 1394), sets up the narrative as a "lesson" for its audience. Dorothea becomes a "guide to the path" towards God, a model of proper religious behavior; it is through her actions that people may understand how to shape their own relationship to the divine. Her legitimacy comes not from human sources, but is imbued directly from God. John Marienwerder, the man through which her life's lessons are disseminated to the world, argues for the credibility of this account by appealing to the power of God, portraying Dorothea's authenticity as ordained by "God's grace." The process of canonization appeals to imagery of the heavenly instead of earthly realm to mask the ways that saints are constructed by human forces. Doing so gives the saints more authority and power.

Canonization is the process through which a person's sainthood is officially recognized.<sup>83</sup> It serves specific institutional purposes and has the power to recognize a person's place in heaven. The formalization of a canonization process emerged out of the Catholic Church's desire to have more direct control over popular veneration of saints. For centuries, cults emerged around purported saints in an organic manner; the community's "intuition" about a person's sanctity would lead to the emergence of an active cult. Although local bishops sometimes authorized these cults, they did not formally examine each case. With the rise of literacy and the increasing centralization of the Church, popular intuition was met with more distrust. This skepticism heightened with the rising prominence of mass heretical movements. In response, the

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<sup>82</sup> Johannes von Marienwerder, *The Life of Dorothea Von Montau*, 35

<sup>83</sup> Katajala-Peltomaa Sari, "Canonization," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage* (Brill).

Church developed the process of canonization, which would allow the more learned to approve of and guide popular sentiment.<sup>84</sup>

Another major motivation behind canonization was the pilgrimage movement, in which Christians would travel to venerate the shrines of saints. In 1234, canonization became a “papal prerogative.” From then on, the papacy claimed to exercised complete control over every new cult that developed, and the rules for saints and sainthood became standardized throughout medieval Europe. In order to be considered a saint, the person must have lived an exceptional life and be proven to have performed miracles posthumously. Additionally, all proposed saints endured an evaluation by papal commissioners, who carried out investigations and led inquisitorial committees that questioned witnesses about the person’s life. At the end of the canonization process, the saint was declared an intercessor for the entire Catholic Church, endowing that saint with the power to facilitate communication between those on earth and God in heaven. The Church maintained the legitimacy of the saints by preaching about their miracles to the faithful on the feast day of each saint.<sup>85</sup>

This end result of canonization depended heavily on authentication by the male cleric; therefore, men played a large role in the process whereby a person become officially recognized as a saint. This relationship becomes especially amplified by the gender implications of a male confessor and a female penitent. Because only priests can hear confessions, and only men can become priests, the religious women depended upon men for both their spiritual propriety and

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<sup>84</sup> Aviad M. Kleinberg, "Proving Sanctity: Problems and Solutions in the Later Middle Ages," *Viator* 20 (1989).

<sup>85</sup> Sari, “Canonization”.

the authorization of their spiritual claims. As briefly mentioned earlier, this system enabled men to accrue for themselves some of the saint's glory by recognizing her saintliness:

Not only is confession represented as the frequent venue for the discussion of a woman's spirituality, including the disclosure of revelations, but the confessor himself becomes chief witness to his individual penitent's piety, which will frequently lead him to undertake the writing of a saintly woman's vita and the promotion of her posthumous cult.<sup>86</sup>

This helps explain why John Marienwerder was so invested in advocating for Dorothea's canonization; it was his way of achieving self-authorization. Elliot's identification of the male cleric's role with that of a "witness" continues the application of legal language to the process of canonization and further corroborates the extreme power men wielded in the Church's ultimate mission towards discerning religious truth. A regular part of the canonization process was to collect testimony from witnesses during the investigation into the proposed saint's life and miracles.<sup>87</sup>

As a "witness," the cleric's role is to vouch for the woman's religious authority. He becomes a gatekeeper of the Church, allowing acceptable models of religiosity through while casting out those deemed heretical. During Dorothea's life in the fourteenth century (1347-1394), the process of canonization was still not completely established. However, a written account of the proposed saint's life had become an important part of the canonization process.<sup>88</sup> By taking on this important task, John inserts himself into the most authoritative part of Dorothea's

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<sup>86</sup> Elliot, *Proving Women*, 49

<sup>87</sup> Ira M Berger, "Charles De Blois and the Process of Canonization in the Fourteenth Century" (Columbia University, 1963).

<sup>88</sup> Johannes von Marienwerder, *The Life of Dorothea Von Montau*, 1; Berger, "Charles De Blois," 51, 52

canonization. Examples of male clerics benefitting from this process of authentication also exist earlier in the Middle Ages. In the introduction to *The Life of the Holy Hildegard*, the monk Theoderic explains his motivation for completing the monk Gottfried's biographical work:

Therefore we want to be sure that the burning light of Christ should not be hidden under a bushel but should be placed on a lampstand so that for all those living in the house of God it would be an inspirational, beaming image for their lives, their words, their deeds.<sup>89</sup>

Theoderic tasks himself with the monumental act of being a witness to the works of God conducted through the life of Hildegard, his "burning light," or shining star. He and Gottfried are responsible for making her virtues known and for preserving them in writing, which helps people everyone be better Christians. It is intriguing to note that Theoderic performs the evangelizing work of God by sharing Hildegard's life story, while Hildegard herself does so through her special, direct union with God.

## 2. The Inquisition

*Again, she said and claimed that the Lord God told her that the book which Blessed John said he had seen sealed with seven seals, she herself, Na Prous, opened. And that the first seal was opened by the notary if whom she spoke above, and the second was opened by a certain apostate Minorite friar of whom she spoke above, and the third seal was opened by a certain other person whom she names, and moreover that the whole book was opened to me, Mennetus the notary, who writes this.<sup>90</sup>*

*Therefore on Wednesday, the last day on the month of April, Guile Petri Barthe, the above-mentioned notary, came in person to the castle of Allemans at the order of the lord Bishop and the Inquisitor to Agnes, to notify her that she must appear before them in person at the door of the church of the Allemans castle to hear the sentence regarding the matters to which she had confessed. Agnes received the notice voluntarily, on the given day, in the presence of Magister*

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<sup>89</sup> Gottfried and Theoderic, *The Life of the Holy Hildegard*, trans. Adelgundis Führkötter and James McGrath (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 35

<sup>90</sup> "Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta)."

*Marc Rivel, notary of the pariage land, etc....The sentence was published on Thursday, the 1st day of May, and recorded in the register of sentences concerning the heretical depravity.*<sup>91</sup>

These two passages come from the introductions to the inquisitorial records of Na Prous Boneta and Agnes Franco, and they reveal stark differences in tone and language between the processes of canonization and inquisition. Although the saints' lives and the inquisitorial records both focus on the individual person, the inquisitors project a general sense of mistrust towards the heretics. Confessions, as with the saints' miracles, become the defining proof of the women's heretical status. Yet the miracles, which are proof of divine ordination coming from God, the confessions result from the human-directed inquisitorial process. They are grounded in the earthly realm, as attested to by the transparency of the legalistic process, which reveals itself thorough the use of vocabulary such as "testimony," "judicial proceedings," and "sentencing."<sup>92</sup>

To begin our discussion of the ways in which the inquisitorial process reveals itself in Na Prous Boneta's record, it is fruitful to consider the basic steps of the inquest. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which declared yearly confession to be mandatory for all Christians, helped promote the confession as the primary proof of orthodoxy.<sup>93</sup> Simultaneous with the rise of confession as the preferred form of proof was the supersession of the inquisitorial procedure over methods of torture.<sup>94</sup> The institution of the inquisition arose in Southern France, where Na Prous Boneta lived, around the early thirteenth century in response to the Church's desire to suppress

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<sup>91</sup> Shulamith Shahar, "Appendix: Translation of the Interrogations of Agnes and Huguette," in *Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect: Agnes and Huguette the Waldensians* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2001), 137-8.

<sup>92</sup> "Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta)."

<sup>93</sup> Elliot, *Proving Women*, 14.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

dissident religious groups and move towards more centralized authority within the Church. During this transition, some judges were left uncertain about what constituted absolute truth. This ambiguity produced a heightened tendency towards full confessions, which became the ultimate means to establish complete certainty.<sup>95</sup> Gender dynamics within the Church figure prominently in the act of confession as proscribed by Lateran IV. Although women are required to confess to a priest, they cannot hear confessions themselves. Na Prou's inquisitors have a privileged access to her interior life based in part on their gender, which allows them police to her.

### 3. From Martyr to Heretic

Religious suppression, especially the persecution of self-professed Christians, is not a new historical phenomenon. Many of the earliest Christian martyrs were those killed at the hands of pagans for their subversive religious beliefs. At another place, in another time, Na Prou may have been venerated for her willingness to uphold her Christian principles in the face of such great persecution. The difference for her was that her prosecutor did not condemn her for having a *Christian* belief, but for having the *wrong* Christian belief. Instead of developing out from a religious battle between pagans and Christians, the institution of the inquisition emerged from a doctrinal struggle between different Christian groups, often positioned as opposing each other in beliefs.

The main change from Roman to Medieval times is that the direction of the martyr's power has shifted. In the days of the early Church, a pagan inquisitor would accuse a Christian,

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<sup>95</sup> Elliot, *Proving Women*, 18

who would become a martyr upon dying for her beliefs. This becomes reversed during the Middle Ages; the Church now condemns subversive Christians as heretics, thereby emboldening the inquisitor as the more righteous of the two. Much as John Marienwerder plays the important communal role of recording Dorothea of Montau's saintliness, the inquisitors in Na Prous's trial also fulfill a vital duty, which provides them with legitimizing authority. By exposing heresies, inquisitors amass a vital significance not only within the institutional church, but also Christian society more broadly. They possess substantial power to shape perceptions about a person's acceptability, the full force of which is seen in the inquisitorial record of Na Prous Boneta by her ultimate fate—being burned at the stake.

Martyrdom provides the first insight into how the boundary between saint and sinner often becomes blurred. A martyr is defined as “a person who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of witnessing to and refusing to renounce a religion.”<sup>96</sup> While this definition makes it clear that the person must die for his or her religious beliefs, it does not explain the circumstances under which the penalty or death must arise. Like most labels throughout history, “martyr” is a vague description devoid of fixed meaning. Instead, its application changes depending on the specific social context of a time and place. The perspective from which this “penalty” arises remains subjective, and is typically applied by a marginalized group in opposition to the subordination they face by the dominant authority. Using the term “martyr” allows the persecuted group to reconceptualize their coreligionists' deaths as an act of noble

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<sup>96</sup> *Miriam Webster Online*, s.v. “martyr,” accessed January 23, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/martyr>.

resistance, thereby legitimizing their beliefs while undercutting the moral authority of their antagonists. Calling someone a “martyr” can therefore be viewed as an act of resistance.

Na Prous arguably fits into the definition of a martyr. The idea that many Spiritual Franciscans and Beguines were being killed unjustly at the hands of the Catholic Church figured prominently in her inquisitorial record:

[T]his present pope, John XXII, is like Caiaphas, who crucified Christ. Moreover, the poor beguines who were burned, and also the burned lepers, were like the innocents beheaded by Herod’s command. Again, just as Herod procured the death of innocent children, thus this Herod, the devil, procured the deaths of those burned beguines and lepers.<sup>97</sup>

She first likens the condemnation of Olivi to the crucifixion of Christ. This is a powerful identification that recalls the Spiritual Franciscans’ desire to live the most authentic apostolic life (*vita apostolica*) imitating Christ. Through this identification, she bolsters the Spiritual Franciscans’ claims that their commitment to poverty mirrors the life of Christ and his disciples. If Olivi becomes the Christ figure in her comparison, then the Spiritual Franciscans and the Beguines represent Christ’s disciples and early followers. This parallel illustrates the desire of certain religious groups with more radical beliefs than those sponsored by orthodox doctrine to look back towards a “purer Church.”<sup>98</sup> The clergy responded to these heretical claims of martyrdom with increasing anxiety.<sup>99</sup> Na Prous Boneta positions herself and her fellow Beguines and Spiritual Franciscans as the true heirs of proper Christianity, rejecting Pope John XXII and casting him as the antagonist (or Antichrist).

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<sup>97</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta).”

<sup>98</sup> Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 4

<sup>99</sup> Elliot, *Proving Woman*, 62

Furthermore, Na Prous identifies the burned Beguines (which will in retrospect include herself) with the “innocents” condemned to death under four succeeding rulers of ancient Palestine all known by “Herod.” The four Herods were each responsible for ordering acts of martyrdom against early Christians.<sup>100</sup> Na Prous’s historical allusion to these important moments in Christianity carry with them the immense weight of their victims’ saintly status. Those persecuted under the four Herods have become monumental figures in the Christian faith, symbolizing the resilience and righteousness of the Christian cause.

Through comparison, Na Prous extends these qualities to the Beguines who follow Olivi. If Olivi becomes the Christ figure in her narrative, then the Beguines, including herself, become analogous to early followers of Christ, willing to risk death for their passionate religious beliefs. She uses these allusions to Church history as a way to legitimize Olivi’s message and his followers. Instead of acting in deliberately un-Christian ways, the Beguines, according to Na Prous, followed the early precedent of pious Christians facing similar persecution.<sup>101</sup> These allusions additionally undermine the position of the Church officials conducting the interrogations. If the Beguines take the positions of the early Church martyrs, the “innocents,” then those metaphorically “beheading them” must be aligned with the enemy of Christianity embodied by the four Herods. Na Prous ardently upheld the righteousness of her preaching, saying that even if she were burned while under excommunication, “she would still believe herself to be saved and a glorious martyr in paradise.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> “Herod,” in *The Dictionary of World History* (‘Oxford University Press’, 2015).

<sup>101</sup> Elliot, *Proving Woman*, 175

<sup>102</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta).”

The early fourteenth-century interrogations of Beguins often had unintended consequences for the Church. The sermon for sentencing the accused became a grand performance showcasing the dangers of obeying the Church, and a mandatory attendance policy suggests that these public executions were intended to deter heretical beliefs from spreading. However, they often had the unintended consequence of creating a “new generation of martyrs” instead.<sup>103</sup> The alternate view that the people who condemned the Spiritual Franciscans are the true heretics shows how these identities are not essential, but contingent upon the perspective of the viewer. The Beguin Petrus Dominici of Narbonne argued that the Beguins and Spiritual Franciscans who were killed by the inquisitors were martyrs, while those responsible for their deaths, including the pope, were the real heretics.<sup>104</sup>

Na Prous Boneta echoes this belief in the statements she made during her inquisition: “Again, the sin of this pope, when he condemned the writing of Brother Pierre Déjean, the holy father, was as great as the sin of Adam when he ate the apple.”<sup>105</sup> Christ told her, she recalls, that the Pope, identified him with Adam and the Fall of Man, both doomed society and disobeyed God’s command, bringing shame to people on Earth. Adam was cast out of the garden when he ate the apple. Is Na Prous suggesting that the pope also be cast out from his “garden,” or station in life—the pontificate?

The conspicuous addition of the accusatory phrase “she asserts” into the middle of the narrative draws attention back to the looming authority of the Catholic inquisitors. They

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<sup>103</sup> Elliot, *Proving Woman*, 173-174

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta).”

undermine the legitimacy of her claim that Christ told her this by refusing to corroborate it themselves. Given the scandalous nature of Na Prou's statements, the Church wanted to remind those reading that it was the real authority.

#### 4. The Inquisition as Crowd Control

The process of the inquisition is the tool by which the Church policed, directed, and extinguished certain beliefs. Like the saintly lives of Dorothea and Hildegard, the heretical life of Na Prou was intended to be a lesson in proper religious beliefs and spiritual expression. Casting certain beliefs as heretical allowed the Church to control the discourse surrounding Christianity. Philosophical disputations about the stigmata by Franciscan Peter Thomas, written around 1310-1330, provide an example of this dynamic. His arguments supporting the supernatural origins of the stigmata illustrate the standard pattern of logic for orthodox thinkers that is used to maintain the Church's monopoly over religious thinking. Peter Thomas reaches the conclusion that saying the stigmata are not supernatural is heretical, which limits the scope of the discussion by confining it towards the sole goal of proving the validity of an existing dogma.

This type of "compulsory belief" acts as a "final trump card;" something one must believe is true simply because the Church proclaims it as such.<sup>106</sup> Doctrinal beliefs heavily construct the categories into which people become placed. The Church only views martyrdom as a harbinger of saintliness for people whom express these specific orthodox beliefs. However, a heretic might also be seen as a martyr according to the perspective of those who belong to her

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<sup>106</sup> Elliot, *Proving Woman*, 167-168

own religious group. Na Prous Boneta's lamentation of the Beguines' death illustrates the point. Saints and heretics might not be as mutually exclusive as the medieval church made them seem.

Na Prous's transgressive appeal to early church martyrs recalls past traditions that are counter to the contemporary institution of the Inquisition. The juxtaposition of her attempt to align herself with the martyrs of the early church, whom defended themselves against pagan officials, with the highly rigid, legalistic procedure she faces under the direction of the Catholic Church draws attention to how these two experiences, although superfluously connected, work to serve different ends. While early Christian martyrs were persecuted for rejecting the official state religions of their pagan societies, heretics like Na Prous are persecuted as part of a wider system related to the goal of directing the public sentiment towards saints and relics as proof of authenticity.<sup>107</sup> The inquisition developed in relation to canonization as a way to further bolster the authority of the saints by creating an opposing category against which to compare their sanctity. Because of the emergence of pilgrimages and cults throughout Europe, the Church now needed a way to both recognize legitimate saints and denounce illegitimate ones, turning those whose beliefs challenged the unwavering authority of the Catholic Church into heretics. The Inquisition was a system through which ecclesiastical officials could produce the "truth," a process with a specifically gendered dimension—female sanctity becomes the model against which the heretic is constructed, and women serve as the ultimate "proof of orthodox contentions."<sup>108</sup> In order for the Church to have proof of proper behavior, they need to have models of improper behavior, a function which Na Prous Boneta serves well.

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<sup>107</sup> Elliot, *Proving Woman*, 2

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

When reading Na Prou's inquisitorial record, it is clear that her prosecutors desire to suppress and control her explosive opposition to papal authority and her grandiose religious claims as a way to model proper female spirituality. The repeated use of "so she says" by the church officials to qualify her claims purposefully frames them as unreliable, unbelievable, and un-Christian. By casting suspicion onto Na Prou's narrative, the Church successfully frames her as the antithetical counterpart to the saint. Ultimately, this serves the main purpose of the Inquisition as a response not only to curtailing heterodox beliefs, but also promoting orthodox beliefs.

There are many instances throughout the Inquisitorial Record of the phrase "Again, Christ told her, so she claims," being repeated multiple times in succession<sup>109</sup> As soon as the Church presents a statement by Na Prou, they qualify it with a disclaimer expressing their disapproval. Because they are the claimants of authority on the word of God, the Church has the implicit power to comment upon the truth-value of a religious statement or vision without needing to provide evidence for why they uphold or reject its accuracy. The Inquisition functioned by putting the heretic on trial, following a guilty-until-proven-innocent philosophy that forced her to validate the truth behind her claims and allowed the Church to play an entirely offensive role. The authority of the inquisitors is automatically established and there is no burden of proof on the Church. Like the previously discussed writings of Franciscan Peter Thomas demonstrate, the church has unquestioned authority to establish doctrine, and then can cast people as heretical solely based on their rejection of that doctrine.

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<sup>109</sup> "Na Prou Bonnet (Boneta)."

The contemporary inquisitorial records of the Waldensian women illustrate a similar emphasis on finding the “truth.” Specifically, the inquisitors focus on extracting confessions from Agnes and Huguette about the Waldensians attitude toward female preaching and hearing confession, two especially controversial claims against the heretical group. The proceeding uses highly legalistic language that solidifies the process’s intent to reach a certainty of truth. The confession of Agnes Francou begins by explaining that:

The Bishop, who wanted to question her about certain matters concerning the Catholic faith, and chiefly about the Waldensian heresy and additional matters, because of which she was summoned and [about which] she was highly suspected, asked her to swear on a volume of the Books of the Gospels which was extended to her, that she would tell the truth as a principal witness.<sup>110</sup>

By casting her as “highly suspected” and “a principal witness,” the inquisitors here also place Agnes and Huguette within the temporal and legal system of the inquisition. However, unlike the saints who were witnesses to God’s divinity, the heretics are witnesses to human impropriety. But by trying to force Agnes and Huguette to expose these improper practices, the Church can simultaneously advocate for the model of proper behavior it wishes to espouse.

The demand that Agnes swear to the veracity of her statements is repeated many times throughout the inquisitorial record, yet each time Agnes refuses. It becomes a specific point of fixation for the inquisitors, which illustrates the extreme importance they placed on finding the “truth.” They insist repeated that she swear during her trial:

She was once more asked to swear to tell the truth, and it was impressed upon her that she was obliged by law to swear at the trial, and that not swearing constituted a mortal sin. She was told that if she persisted in her stubbornness and refused to swear to tell the

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<sup>110</sup> Shahar, “Appendix,” 131

truth, as required in trials concerning matters of faith, it would be possible and obligatory to condemn her as one of the heretics.<sup>111</sup>

In her inquisition, Huguette also resists these demands:

When she appeared before him, the lord Bishop wished to question her regarding those informations and ordered her several times to swear to tell the purest truth about all the matters in which he wished to question her as a principle witness. . . . But Huguette replied that on no account would she swear, and would not dare to swear.<sup>112</sup>

Agnes and Huguette's refusal to swear appears to hinder this process and prohibit the inquisitors from fulfilling their ultimate purpose. Whether this was Agnes and Huguette's deliberate aim or not is hard to tell, but their refusal to swear does offer them a convenient way to avoid perjuring themselves. In comparisons with the saints, who are viewed as inherently truthful because of their authorization from God, the heretics are treated with an extreme skepticism that serves to further delegitimize their claims.

Increasing tension around women's religious zeal, coupled with the increased use of the inquisitorial method, further blurred the distinction between saint and heretic. The two religious models came to rely upon definition themselves in opposition to each other. They did not exist in isolation, but instead grew increasingly convergent over time. "Contemporary representations of female sanctity," as a method of constructing the "other," were in many ways sculpted to confound the heretic."<sup>113</sup> And conversely, representations of heretics were created as templates against which proper female spirituality, characterized by the saints, could be constructed.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 136

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 139

<sup>113</sup> Elliot, *Proving Women*, 2

Inquisitions themselves, developed to uncover the “truth,” created a formal system that solidified the transparency between the saint-heretic distinction. Elliot proposes that when considering the concept of heresy, it is important to understand the term “inquisition (*inquisitio*)” as a process instead of an institution. This means that the idea of an inquisition was changing and adaptation, developing with the ideas and needs of society. Through its continued application, the inquisitorial method “undermined clerical perceptions of the essential integrity of female spirituality,” so that by the end of the fourteenth century women’s spirituality is viewed more and more skeptically. Na Prous Boneta arose within this tension and become an exempla of improper female spirituality. At the same time, her becoming so might illustrate the overlap between her inquisitorial record and the saints’ hagiographies. The use of the inquisitorial process for truth seeking in cases of both heresy and sanctity led to increasingly closer distinctions between the two. Although the same process was intended to produce two different results, over time the effects of the inquisition started to morph together. Supporters and challengers of spiritual women began to use various methods of the inquisitorial procedure to either authenticate or disprove the women’s religious experiences.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Elliot, *Proving Women*, 2-3

### Chapter III: A Comparative Analysis of Na Prous Boneta & Dorothea of Montau

The close parallels between the processes of the inquisition and canonization lead to many similarities between the Church's construction of the lives of saints and heretics. Richard Kieckhefer, in discussing the relationship of the holy to the unholy, remarks that "[s]ainthood and witchcraft are sometimes seen as mirror images of each other, alike in their patterns of behavior yet reversing each other's values."<sup>115</sup> Comparing the record of Na Prous Boneta's inquisition with the hagiography of Dorothea of Montau reveals where their stories overlap and where they diverge. Their similarities demonstrate that sainthood and heresy are indeed "mirror images of each other," while the differences in their treatment provide insight into the "values" ascribed to each identity. The divergent uses of themes, images, and language prove that Dorothea's and Na Prous's narratives were constructed from the same building blocks, but with the intention of different results.

Additionally, the two documents may be used comparatively as a way to discern how certain women crossed the line of acceptable spirituality and entered into the realm of being judged heretical. Identifying their differences enables a more clear understanding of why Na Prous Boneta was such a controversial figure within the Catholic Church of the early fourteenth century. As an anchoress<sup>116</sup>, Dorothea was a nonthreatening figure; she proves that there was a

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<sup>115</sup> Kieckhefer, "The Holy and the Unholy," 355

<sup>116</sup>An anchoress is a religious woman who lives in complete solitude. On May 2, 1393, Dorothea was enclosed in a cell at the cathedral of Marienwerder, and remained there until she died on June 25, 1394. During this time, Dorothea made many confessions to John of Marienwerder. (Dyan Elliot, "Dorothea of Montau, St. (1347-1394)," in *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson and Nadia Margolis (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO), [http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=http%3A%2F%2Fliterati.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fabcwma%2Fdorothea\\_of\\_montau\\_st\\_1347\\_1394%2F0%3FinstitutionId%3D1878](http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=http%3A%2F%2Fliterati.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fabcwma%2Fdorothea_of_montau_st_1347_1394%2F0%3FinstitutionId%3D1878))

remarkable amount of freedom in spiritual thought afforded to women during the same period. This changes in Na Prou's case because of the inherently political message for which she advocates—a message ultimately inspired by the apocalyptic teachings of Joachim of Fiore. There are a number of incendiary charges that Na Prou made: the pope is the antichrist; the end of the world is imminent; the eucharist has lost its power; the killing of the heretical Beguines is akin to the killings of early church martyrs; the church should adhere to St. Francis's doctrine of strict poverty mirroring the life of Christ. Because the nature of their relationships to the church hierarchy varied to greatly, comparing the narratives of Dorothea of Montau and Na Prou Boneta helps elucidate how the identities of saint and heretic are constructed.

### 1. Beginning the Relationship with God

There are certain similarities between Na Prou's and Dorothea's stories, which attest to the fact that the two processes of the inquisition and canonization operated in analogous ways. However, there are also many differences that can be seen from the very beginnings of their stories with the inceptions of their relationships with God. In her *vita*, John portrays Dorothea as having had a unique relationship with God since her childhood. Chapter III of John's account is titled "[h]ow she was aided since childhood by God's grace" and quotes God as revealing to her that she has always been connected to Him: "When you were still a child I drew you to me in love; you perceived me and contemplated me; you loved me, and whatever I put into it, you preserved therein."<sup>117</sup> Dorothea's intimacy with God, he "drew [her] to [him] in love," creates a special relationship between the two that transcends Dorothea's earthly existence. By invoking

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<sup>117</sup> Johannes von Marienwerder, *The Life of Dorothea Von Montau*, 37

the innocence of her childhood, John writes that God was drawn to Dorothea not for her actions or status within the world, but for something more pure, perhaps her spirit or her character.

In contrast, the catalyst for Na Prou's religious activism is a singular, defining moment with God occurring later in her life:

She claimed that on Good Friday, four years before she made the confession written below, while she was in the church of the Franciscans in Montpellier listening to the service with some other people, she adored the crucifix, as it is customary to do. When she had made her adoration in this way and had returned to her seat, after the mass was over and most of the people had left the church, the Lord Jesus Christ has transported her in spirit (that is, in her soul) to the first heaven. When she was there she saw Jesus Christ in the form of a man as well as in his divinity. He appeared to her and showed her his heart opened like the door of a lantern. Out of his heart came rays of the sun, but, brighter than rays of the sun, which illuminated her all over. Immediately she saw, clearly and openly, the divinity of God, who gave her his heart in the spirit. She said, "Lord, I have little to recommend myself," and Christ replied, "I will give you more if you are faithful to me."<sup>118</sup>

This account begins with her in a Franciscan church, a space sanctioned by the Church, and "adoring the crucifix" in the "customary way." By starting the narrative with her correctly following Church doctrine, Na Prou's eventual fate becomes an even more powerful statement about the ways that female devotion can sharply deviate from the accepted path. The moment of her encounter with Christ ironically becomes the catalyst for a spiritual reversal in which she spontaneously transforms from a proper religious woman into a heretic. Joachim of Fiore describes his sudden spiritual understanding in a similarly singular way. He writes in an autobiographical work that while he was struggling to understand a text, "on Easter Eve, as he lay meditating at about the hour when the Lion of Judah burst from the tomb, suddenly the stone was rolled away from his mind and he understood the concords of the Scriptures."<sup>119</sup> Just like Na

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<sup>118</sup> "Na Prou Bonnet (Boneta)."

<sup>119</sup> Marjorie Reeves, "Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future" (London: S.P.C.K., 1976).

Prous's experience occurs after mass, Joachim of Fiore's experience happens around Easter, another charged time associated with Christ's transcendental nature. Both the mass and Easter center around Christ's physicality; the mass transforms the eucharistic wafer and wine into Christ's flesh and blood, while Easter celebrates Christ's resurrected body. It was during these charged times of increased contact with Christ's physical nature that Joachim and Na Prous experienced defining moments of spiritual clarity. However, his enlightenment is associated with the intellect, while hers is bodily, a reflection of a certain gendered division of religious devotion.

## 2. The Ecstatic & the Physical

Na Prous' physical experience of Christ follows a common narrative around female spirituality; it is not a phenomenon unique to heretics for women to have visions of Christ appearing to them while participating in the mass. Research by Caroline Walker Bynum shows the deep connections for Medieval women between receiving the eucharist and experiencing "mystical union or ecstasy, which was frequently accompanied by paramystical phenomena."<sup>120</sup> Na Prous Boneta describes "rays of the sun" coming from Christ's heart that "illuminated her all over," imagery that imagines her as being consumed into Christ's physical form and uniting her to him. She sees him "in the form of a man as well as in his divinity," which emphasizes the physical quality of the mystical union Bynum describes.

Like Na Prous, Dorothea also experienced "pure illumination" from God.<sup>121</sup> One time she was "drawn into great sweetness and burned in ecstasy of hot, burning love, elevated above

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<sup>120</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 125-6

<sup>121</sup> Johannes von Marienwerder, *The Life of Dorothea Von Montau*, 28.

herself, and in that state was given to drink until she was spiritually inebriated.”<sup>122</sup> This clear reference to her being in ecstasy accompanies a mystical experience of God manifested in physical form. Na Prous’s experience of God also comes with extremely heightened emotional reactions, reflecting Bynum’s assertion that devotion by women more frequently involves a mystical union and joining together with God.<sup>123</sup> The unstable dichotomy between saint and heretic manifests itself in this ecstatic language, with references to Na Prous Boneta’s “great fervor and love” of God characterizing her extreme emotions.<sup>124</sup> The linking of heightened feelings with Christ’s physicality serves a specific narrative purpose. Mooney argues that men within the church emphasized physicality as a tool to construct the narrative around female spirituality. Physical signs as manifestations of interior spirituality—fasting, bleeding, swooning, etc.—separated women’s devotion from men’s. Instead, men are more often characterized by a religious devotion focused on the mind and the spirit.<sup>125</sup>

The ecstatic experiences women mystics have in relation to religious devotion, and the highest sacrament of the eucharist in particular, are particularly powerful for the ways in which they afford women closer access to God. Bynum argues that these visions allowed women to circumvent the authority of the male priests and claim some of the right to prophesy on their own terms. This “eucharistic ecstasy,” according to Bynum, “was a means by which women claimed ‘clerical’ power for themselves, or bypassed the power of males, or criticized male abuse of

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>123</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 155.

<sup>124</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta).”

<sup>125</sup> Mooney “Voice Gender and the Portrayal of Sanctity,” 10, 13.

priestly authority.”<sup>126</sup> Religious women had a special ability to criticize the corruption they saw within the clergy.<sup>127</sup> Moreover, this criticism was compounded by Na Prous’s identity not only as a woman, but also as a Spiritual Franciscan.

There are many examples from Na Prous Boneta’s inquisitorial record in which she evokes the power of her visionary experiences with God to challenge clerical authority within the Catholic Church. When she explains how the sacrament lost its effectiveness following the destruction of Olivi’s writings, Na Prous reflects Joachim of Fiore’s theological prediction of a new Christ and casts St. Francis into this role: “Again, Jesus Christ told her that St. Francis began his order in that same perfection and attitude as had Christ, when he began with his apostles to hold to poverty. In that same perfection and altitude St. Francis began to hold to poverty with his brothers.”<sup>128</sup> Her denigration of the eucharist’s power and her identification of St. Francis as the new Christ are both direct attacks on the authority of the Church that comes out of her communication with God. By raising Francis into the position of perfection previously held by Christ, Dorothea turns away from the ecstatic devotion to Christ’s physical form that characterized so much of female mystics’ religious practice. The clergy lost their ability to regulate eucharistic devotion, a method of ensuring orthodoxy, as a tool for exerting ecclesiastical control over Na Prous.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 135

<sup>127</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 136

<sup>128</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta).”

<sup>129</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 143

Dorothea, by contrast, follows the proper model of female sanctity, devoting herself to the eucharist and the priests who administer it. She had almost an obsession with the sacrament, while Na Prous rendered it useless after Olivi's condemned by the Church. Her male confessor, John, restricted Dorothea's access to the eucharist, and she often to fight him for to it.<sup>130</sup>

Dorothea's hagiography details the ravenous hunger she felt for the sacrament before her death:

Even though her burning desire and agony for Our Lord were severe every day, they were much more so on the last day of her life. That day shortly after midnight as mass was about to start and she had confessed her sins, she sobbed and wept, yearning fiercely for the soul's nourishment to satisfy her spiritual hunger. Finally, because of her ravenous craving she could not tolerate waiting any longer.<sup>131</sup>

The priest's ability to manipulate Dorothea's religious practice illuminates the ways in which she was forced to conform to a male-directed spiritual practice.

### 3. Agent or Object?

Power is a crucial element to these women's stories. The molding, censoring, and condemning of their narratives shows a preoccupation of the male clerics for regulating the women's power, so that it does not overpower their own claims to authority. In order to do this, women are made to be passive objects in their spiritual experience, whether or not this is how they personally view their relationship to God. When women use their own voices to describe themselves, they often employ more assertive and active language, a characteristic that Na Prous follows.<sup>132</sup> In order to be saved, Na Prous claims, it is necessary for a person to believe "in the

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 42

<sup>131</sup> Johannes von Marienwerder, *The Life of Dorothea Von Montau*, 204

<sup>132</sup> Mooney, "Voice Gender and the Portrayal of Sanctity," 10

words that she herself has spoken;” moreover, her inquisitors record her saying that God told her, “you shall be the beginning and cause of salvation of all human nature or humankind through those words I make you speak.”<sup>133</sup> Here Na Prous is actively speaking the words of salvation; she is performing the task for God.

Mooney argues that women use language of doing to describe their own actions. By contrast, she describes how men use language of being to describe women’s religious roles. For example:

Although Clare of Assisi accentuated her and her sisters’ active *following* of Christ’s footprints, both her hagiographer and a pope describe her as *being* ‘the footprint of the Mother of God,’ a phrase evocative of imitating but casting Clare in a decidedly more passive position.<sup>134</sup>

This dichotomy replicated itself in the writings about Dorothea of Montau and Na Prous Boneta. Dorothea embodies a static role as the wife of Christ, whereas Na Prous performs the action of delivering God’s message as the Holy Ghost.

Writings by and about Hildegard of Bingen exemplify the effects of this difference in authorial voice. Because Hildegard produced her own oeuvre she presents a useful case study in the different ways medieval men and women conceived of female saintliness. She modeled her own literary persona on the prophets, using a style standard in hagiographic writings about biblical heroes.<sup>135</sup> One of her hagiographers, Theoderic, however, preferred to shape his narrative around her bridal mysticism instead of biblical prophesy. As Barbara Newman explains in her chapter for *Gendered Voices*, [a]lthough [Theoderic] does laud her as a prophet, he is less

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<sup>133</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta).”

<sup>134</sup> Mooney, “Voice Gender and the Portrayal of Sanctity,” 10

<sup>135</sup> Newman, “Hildegard and Her Hagiographers,” 24

concerned with her ability to speak *for* God than her privileged relationship *with* God, which is significantly gendered.”<sup>136</sup> In their account of Hildegard’s life, the monks Gottfried and

Theodoric write about her extreme virtues after taking the veil:

After this bride of Christ made profession of her monastic vows and had received the blessed veil, she made great progress and advance from one virtue to another...And of all these jewels of dynamic virtues which came to her from the hand of the highest Artist, Hildegard treasured patience as the ornament for the bride of Christ.<sup>137</sup>

The exaggerated importance of patience as a virtue praises Hildegard for her obedience and passiveness towards God’s will. By contrast, Na Prous’s controversial nature comes from her claims to be taking her relationship with God a step further by actively speaking *for* Him, instead of simply receiving his message.

#### 4. Female Roles in Relation to Christ

In discussing their relationships with God, Na Prous Boneta and Dorothea of Montau both describe themselves as recipients of his message. God, in his physical, manly form as Christ, appears to Na Prous and Dorothea and sweeps them up into visionary fervor. Returning to Na Prous’s narration of her initial account with God, she recalls how, “she saw Jesus Christ in the form of a man as well as in his divinity.”<sup>138</sup> Moreover, Na Prous emphasizes the direct experience she has with Christ, saying that “she frequently saw the Lord God face to face.”<sup>139</sup> These intimate experiences frame the type of relationship she portrays herself having with God;

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<sup>136</sup>Newman, “Hildegard and Her Hagiographers,” 25.

<sup>137</sup> Gottfried and Theodoric, *The Life of the Holy Hildegard*, 37.

<sup>138</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta).”

<sup>139</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta).”

their interactions are not fleeting or ordinary, but substantial moments that encompass both body and soul. Female mystics throughout the Middle Ages describe their interactions with God in physical terms as a way to further create a unique space of religiosity. This allowed them to operate outside of the male-dominated church hierarchy, which dealt instead with the spiritual terms of communion. For example, Dorothea experienced mystical pregnancy in connection to her preparation for communion.<sup>140</sup> Images of mystical pregnancy before receiving the eucharist allude to a metaphor from the Bible of Christ's mother as the good soul. The symbol of pregnancy further conflates women's proper spirituality and the physical manifestations of their union with god.<sup>141</sup> Each woman is related to Christ through specifically gendered roles, especially that of the mystical bride, the model on which John Marienwerder bases Dorothea. Na Prous Boneta, on the other hand, fashions herself instead as akin to the holy virgin.

By taking the image of his bride or lover, Dorothea of Montau embodies an important metaphor for the union of woman mystics with the humanity of Christ. Because this is a specifically female role, Dorothea's gender gives her a unique, special access to God. The male clergy may have the ability to commune with God through spiritual means, such as the eucharist, but Dorothea can join together with his briefly fleshy, human form in mystical union.<sup>142</sup> John Marienwerder deliberately places Dorothea into the role of Christ's bride to elevate her as a harbinger of His good works:

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<sup>140</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 146, 173

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 44

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-5

the Lord...has renewed in his elected bride Dorothea his merciful, miraculous deeds, for the world as an improvement, for himself as praise and honor, and for those grown cold in his love as kindling so that he may be esteemed and honored greatly in her.<sup>143</sup>

Dorothea is positioned as specifically chosen by God, “elected,” to share in this union with him and to bring him “praise and honor” as his surrogate in the earthly sphere. Not only does the image of Dorothea as bride cast her as a representative or agent of God, but it also disguises an unsavory fact of her biography—her marriage of twenty-seven years.<sup>144</sup>

The combination of mystical pregnancy and bridal imagery in the *vitae* of Dorothea of Mantau and other female mystics placed the women in a somatic union with God that allows them to serve as vessels for his religious message in ways unavailable to men. According to John Marienwerder’s account, Dorothea is, as God’s bride, imbued with special access to the holy trinity. He writes, “the Lord gave her the Holy Ghost as a bridal gift and with it a taste of his sweetness.”<sup>145</sup> This language casts Dorothea in a passive role as the recipient of the Holy Ghost, in contrast to Na Prous Boneta, who actively embodies this role.

Na Prous’s inquisitorial record also discusses the theme of the Holy Ghost, but in a way that positions her within a new Holy Trinity. In her vision of the new spiritual age, inspired by Olivi and Joachim of Fiore, Na Prous occupies a very prominent role as “the new vessel of the Holy Spirit,”<sup>146</sup> and becomes the conduit through which God sends his message: “God told her that it was she, Na Prous, to whom the Holy Spirit was to be given.”<sup>147</sup> This is related to the

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<sup>143</sup> Johannes von Marienwerder, *The Life of Dorothea Von Montau*, 30

<sup>144</sup> Elliot, "Authorizing a Life," 171

<sup>145</sup> Johannes von Marienwerder, *The Life of Dorothea Von Montau*, 184

<sup>146</sup> Petroff, “PROUS BONETA, NA (c.1290-1325)”.

<sup>147</sup> “Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta).”

bridal imagery because it conceptualizes a very intimate exchange between the two. However, the idea of Na Prous carrying God's redemption for the people mirrors Mary's carrying of Christ. By positioning herself in relation to the Virgin Mary, Na Prous assumes a much more active role than the passivity of being God's "wife." Instead of the underlying sexual connotations alluded to through marriage, the image of the Virgin Mary offers another version of mystical pregnancy that benefits from more platonic, maternal ideas.

Although her position is similar to that of the mystical, pregnant bride (she is given this Holy Spirit to carry inside herself), Na Prous aligns herself with the Virgin Mary as the means through which a new spiritual revolution begins. According to Joachim's theology, the work of God proceeds in three successive ages: the Age of the Father, the Age of the Son, and the Age of the Holy Spirit.<sup>148</sup> It was this final age that Na Prous ushers in, representing the arrival of the Age of the Holy Spirit, much like the Virgin Mary represented the arrival of the Age of the Son. However, in contrast to Mary, who just gave birth to Christ, Na Prous "had come to believe in herself as in some way the Holy Spirit, and that others would be saved if they had faith in her."<sup>149</sup> This rhetoric was incredibly subversive for the Catholic Church and threatened to overturn the legitimacy of the institution by further rendering the powers of the priest obsolete. If the Third Age, as professed by Olivi and Joachim, were about to begin, then the sacraments of the altar and of confession, along with the papacy, ceased to be valid. Priests were no longer needed to intercede in the forgiveness of sins, since penitence became an internal sacrament.<sup>150</sup> Na Prous

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<sup>148</sup> Reeves, "Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future," 6

<sup>149</sup> Petroff, "PROUS BONETA, NA (c.1290-1325)".

<sup>150</sup> Petroff, "PROUS BONETA, NA (c.1290-1325)".

Boneta diverges from Dorothea because she does not work within the hierarchy of the Church like Dorothea does. While Na Prous claims her authority for herself, Dorothea operates through a male confessor to gain her legitimacy. She circumvents the authorizing force of male power by attempting to claim legitimacy through association with the Virgin Mary.

The role of the bride suggests that Dorothea takes a more passive, subordinate stand in her relationship with both God and the clergy. Her confessor, John Marienwerder, used such nonthreatening language to make Dorothea a more palpable female saint for the Church. This purposefully docile symbolism casts Dorothea in a more acceptable role and reflects the way language is used to construct narratives. In contrast to John's description of Dorothea, Na Prous's identification of herself as the Holy Ghost defies the accepted role of women within the Catholic Church.

Na Prous's major point of departure from the accepted spirituality displayed by Dorothea of Montau is that her ideology questions the institutional Church, whereas Dorothea operates within the accepted system. While Na Prous promotes heretical anti-clericalism, Dorothea's commitment to her confessor and her devotion to the eucharist can be used as evidence for the validity of the priesthood.<sup>151</sup> This divide is similar to that of St. Francis and Peter Waldo; both men advocated for poverty, but one accepted the overarching power of the Church, while the other rejected its claims to authority. Closely examining some of Na Prous Boneta's more inflammatory statements provides insight into why the Church officials felt so threatened by her, but did not feel threatened by Dorothea, and how the male narrators fashioned each of the women's religious identities.

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<sup>151</sup> Elliot, *Proving Women*, 52

## Conclusion

*The aforesaid [Na Prous Boneta] made her deposition and confessed freely and willingly, and as many times as her testimony was read to her in the vernacular she confirmed and approved it. And having been warned, asked, and exhorted many times in judicial proceedings and on other occasions to revoke and abjure all the things reported above as erroneous and heretical, she preserved in them, claiming that in the aforesaid, as in the truth, she wishes to live and die.*<sup>152</sup>

Sometime around August 6, 1325, Na Prous Boneta was burned at the stake in Carcassonne for her religious beliefs.<sup>153</sup> The record of her inquisition ends with an affirmation of Na Prous's commitment to living and dying according to her version of "the truth." Even when "warned, asked, and exhorted many times" to renounce her positions and adopt more orthodox ideas, Na Prous refused to acquiesce to clerical demands. Through this death sentence, an immense display of institutional power, her inquisitors have condemned her to be immortalized as a "heretic." However, history is often written by the winners, making it possible for us to challenge this label and question the motives of the inquisitors that led to their condemnation.

Much like the Waldensian women Agnes and Huguette, who are also remembered in history as "heretics" for refusing to swear to their confessors, Na Prous's tenacity shows that she believed what she was saying to be her own truth. But what is the "truth"? By denaturalizing the labels of saint and heretic, truth also becomes relative. The Church clearly knows what it wants the truth to be, but Na Prous Boneta does not uphold these same principles. In fact, her inquisitorial record claims the opposite of many orthodox convictions to be true, so who is right? This question might be impossible to ever answer.

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<sup>152</sup> "Na Prous Bonnet (Boneta)."

<sup>153</sup> Petroff, "PROUS BONETA, NA (c.1290-1325)".

The boundaries between saint and heretic are deliberately blurry and imprecise, as exemplified by the story of Dorothea of Montau vacillating between these two identities. At first, her husband called her a witch who destroyed their family with her religious fanaticism and neglectful behavior.<sup>154</sup> Although he says that he could have provided testimony about her witchcraft had there had been a trial, Dorothea's husband offers no evidence of her witchcraft when ecclesiastical authorities conduct their investigations.<sup>155</sup> In the end, Dorothea is canonized and her confessor exploits this fraught relationship with her husband in her *vita* as proof of her orthodoxy.

Dorothea, Na Prous, and the other women heretics I have discussed here are united by their transcendence of society's normative expectations. Just as Dorothea's label of saint or heretic shifted according to external perceptions, Na Prous's identity could be reconstituted based on the perspective from which she is being viewed. Sanctity is not an implicit trait within a person, rather it is something that is created by the process of recognition. Kleinberg explains it succinctly: "People are not saints unless others consider them saints."<sup>156</sup> The inquisitorial record of Na Prous Boneta illustrates how this also works in the reverse—she is only a heretic because the Church saw her as such. When judging a woman as either a saint or a heretic, her community is not engaging in an objective process, but one that directed by its "intersubjective" relationship to the subject. The criteria of sainthood and heresy are defined and recognized by the

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<sup>154</sup> Kieckhefer, "The Holy and the Unholy," 365.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>156</sup> Kleinberg, "Proving Sanctity," 185

community.<sup>157</sup> “Saint” and “heretic” are socially constructed identities; therefore, they do not exist outside of an ahistorical space, but are constantly evolving.

By exploring how the categories of “saint” and “heretic” emerged out of similar processes with a common aim of finding the elusive, fictitious “truth,” I have sought to encourage a more nuanced understanding of Na Prous Boneta’s legacy. This subjective, binary system of classification, as with most categorizations of people. It is contingently based on the specific reality of a certain time and place in history. Understanding how Na Prous’s identity is constructed involves engaging with the following important questions: why she became a “heretic;” who called her a “heretic;” the motives behind the label of “heretic.” These questions complicate the historical narrative and force us to rethink vbroad, universalizing labels. By reading Na Prous Boneta’s inquisitorial record and putting her in dialogue with other contemporary saints and heretics, we learn that identities are complex entities that tell us more about the society who created them than the person who embodies them.

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<sup>157</sup> Kieckhefer, "The Holy and the Unholy," 366

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