

Introduction by Tanya Stabler

Aline Kiner's *La nuit de béguines* was published in French in 2017 to both critical and popular acclaim. It centers on a controversial group of historical women called beguines. Long a source of fascination for medieval historians, beguines are currently having a moment in historical fiction as well. *La nuit des béguines* interweaves a climate of suspected heresy into a story that centers on the Parisian women whose lives are imperiled by the unwanted scrutiny that Marguerite Porete (the only medieval author to die for a book, in 1310) inadvertently drew to their status and community. Aline Kiner's engrossing novel tries to explain why the Parisian beguines descended into obscurity.

The novel opens at the beguinage located in the Marais of Paris with the arrival of a mysterious young woman, Maheut, cursed with red hair (a diabolical color), who seeks refuge at the Paris beguinage after fleeing a violent forced marriage. One of the older beguines, Ysabel, who works in the community's hospital and tends its gardens, takes Maheut in and nurses her back to health. How to protect her? The situation worsens as a Franciscan friar, the enigmatic Humbert, arrives in Paris with a mission that eventually intertwines the fates of the imprisoned beguine Marguerite Porete, the fugitive Maheut, and a book known as *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. Soon, Ysabel and her fellow beguines—particularly Ada and the spirited silk merchant Jeanne du Faut—are drawn into a pact involving the condemned book and the fugitive Maheut.

Beguinares could serve as safe havens for women and Kiner's book, drawing on recent scholarship by medieval historians, brilliantly explores the varied motivations that brought together women of diverse circumstances, ages, and backgrounds. Surrounded by walls, the beguinage was a kind of city within a city, a "City of Ladies" as one historian has called it.¹ The walls surrounding the beguinage separated its female inhabitants from the city in order to protect the women from threats to their bodies and reputations. Still, the beguinage was remarkably porous. The beguinage and its chapel drew royal patrons, bourgeois supporters, and clerical visitors. Its residents were likewise drawn out of the enclosure to nurture spiritual friendships with clerical advisors, carry out property

¹ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001)

negotiations with family members and business associates, and fulfill spiritual and social obligations.

Kiner utilizes these historical details to great effect, focusing in particular on the women's interpersonal relationships. Indeed, the backstories for the main characters, which Kiner reveals as the plot develops, accurately convey the varied circumstances and motivations that drew medieval women to the beguine life. Illuminating the lives of these ordinary women pursuing an extraordinary alternative to the binary choices of medieval life (marriage or cloister), Kiner's book immerses the reader in the world that was truly unique but—by 1310—already in decline.

The book's plot, fueled by the women's complex personalities, is set in motion by the fate of one of the most fascinating historical figures in history, a beguine known as Marguerite Porete. Marguerite's story, to be sure, has all of the drama and intrigue of fiction. Lost to history up until only a few decades ago, Marguerite Porete only came to scholarly attention when an Italian archivist made the connection between the fragmentary trial record of a beguine burned at the stake in 1310 and *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, which scholars had long assumed to have been written by a male cleric.

Marguerite's extraordinary story and tragic fate, as well as the Council of Vienne, haunt the women in *Night of the Béguines*. While the historian can only interpret the facts as revealed in the available documents, Kiner's fictional exploration of the men (especially the friar Humbert) and women whose lives are upended by Marguerite's fate and the subsequent church council that condemned their status is a fascinating example of the relationship between historical reconstruction and imagination. Faithful to the historical context, Kiner brilliantly fills in the spaces between historical fact and the unknown. Scholars now understand that Marguerite was not a solitary figure and Kiner rightly places Marguerite in the midst of influential religious patrons, making sense of her actions.

Yet Kiner never takes the focus off the women whose lives come to be intertwined with the woman from Valenciennes. Indeed, as Kiner suggests, the beguinage was a hub where information and news flowed and circulated. This feature of the beguine life, however, was also dangerous. Ysabel's concerns about the increased pressure she knew Marguerite's trial would bring to their lives were well-founded. The beguines'

claims to live a religious life in the world meant that they were under constant scrutiny and the women understood the precariousness of their existence.

Details about daily life, the marketplaces, the silk workshops, the beguinage and its hospital, and medieval cuisine convey the rich texture of life in medieval Paris and will delight readers familiar with this time period while enchanting those who wish to know more about these marvelous women.

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