This chapter examines how women contributed to shaping understandings of the supernatural during the sixteenth century by their interpretations of who could have access to it: either by suggesting that they themselves were touched by the divine, or that they knew how to recognise it in others. The evidence drawn on in this chapter was produced by both women and men, and includes canonisation records, testimonies about what people understood to be miraculous, holy and diabolical female behaviour, as well as constructions of martyrdom by female martyrs and their male contemporaries. In many ways, the recognition of the supernatural could be as important in creating ideas about divinity as being the holy person oneself.

Convents promoting divinity

Convent communities were among those groups of women most involved in the promotion of concepts of divinity. The institutional setting and its links to ecclesiastical authorities enabled them to understand and interact with the bodies by which their concepts of sanctity might be ratified. Convents could be instrumental in the promotion of candidates for sanctity. In the Franciscan abbey of Longchamp, Isabelle, sister of Saint Louis, was venerated not only as their founder but also for her holy life and the miracles that had occurred in her name since her death in 1270. As early as the 1280s, Agnes of Harcourt, third abbess of Longchamp, had compiled a vernacular hagiographical text designed to promote Isabelle’s claims for canonisation, probably intended to coincide with the proceedings underway for her brother, Louis IX.1 In 1521, the Longchamp community received approval through a papal bull to celebrate Isabelle’s office at Longchamp. The nuns had been
prompted to seek permission ‘after the kindness of God shown by several miracles in the monastery of Longchamp to declare and approve the glorious and excellent miracles of madame saint Ysabel of France’. In particular, they acted after a miracle which had cured the then novice Jeanne Charphaude in 1516 and which had been documented with a tableau hanging over the entrance to the abbey church. A hagiography probably produced by Robert Messier around 1518 expands upon Harcourt’s thirteenth-century text, and may have been prepared as part of the proceedings which led Pope Leo X to grant the community their special office. Indeed, Messier was specifically identified in the ratification manuscript for his efforts in promoting the Longchamp nuns’ case for Isabelle. Although much of Messier’s life drew on Harcourt’s thirteenth-century information, scholars have noted the addition of new elements of her sanctity – her abject and humble existence at Longchamp and a mystical facet to her piety. The continued significance of Isabelle’s sanctity for the Longchamp community during the turbulent years of the sixteenth century is attested by additions to this manuscript of further miracles through the century completed by another hand.

An added incentive for female monastic communities to promote a holy figure in their midst was the possibility of spiritual tourism. Blessed Françoise d’Amboise, Duchess of Brittany and later a Carmelite nun, was not officially beatified until 1863; nevertheless her reputation as a devout and holy woman grew during her lifetime and was sustained after her death in 1485. Indeed, the contestation over her place of burial attests to the contemporary significance of her spiritual patronage. She was not buried in the grave prepared 28 years earlier alongside her husband, Pierre II, Duke of Brittany, in the collegial church of Notre-Dame in Nantes, but instead, the nuns of her community claimed that she had expressed a wish to be buried in the Carmelite (formerly Benedictine) community of Notre-Dame de Couëts. This was contested by the canons of Notre-Dame, who argued that more people would be able to visit her grave if she were buried in a publicly accessible location, rather than in the church of an enclosed convent. In 1492, the diocesan authorities agreed to the nuns’ compromise: Françoise’s body would be placed in a crypt attached to the nuns’ choir, which communicated with the chapel by a grilled door. The chapel itself was accessible to the general public, thereby permitting the faithful to pray in front of her tomb. When Françoise’s tomb was opened in order to move her body to the new location, her corpse was discovered to be completely preserved – an important sign of her sanctity.