I encountered Giannino (his name is actually a diminutive of Giovanni) for the first time in a codex in the Vatican Library while I was trawling through works that had nothing to do with him. He then turned up in a manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, while I was researching the life of the Roman tribune Cola di Rienzo. Something drew me to Giannino, and I promised myself that one day I would explore his story.

The merchant from Siena who believed that he was the king of France was a man of the fourteenth century, a small man full of intrigue and stubbornness, but also an ingenuous man, firmly convinced of the rightfulness of his claim, for which he abandoned a life of ease and security and threw himself into a crazy adventure in various parts of Europe. He wandered among the courts of the princes of Christendom, and sometimes got thrown into their prisons, and everywhere he went—Italy, Hungary, France—he met lords and soldiers, innkeepers and merchants, clerics and confidence men of many nationalities, with all of whom he entered into a complex web of relationships. This alone would have made him worth rediscovering.

Giannino’s story is so absurd that it has been considered a literary invention, like the Novella del Grasso legnajuolo (The Tale of Grasso the Woodworker) or Pirandello’s Enrico IV. Nevertheless, just as it is certain that Giannino was not the king of France (because, apart from anything else, he never succeeded in becoming so), it is likewise certain that a Sienese merchant who claimed the Capetian crown for himself really did exist.

The sources available to us for reconstructing his strange career are atypical, and they have come down to us through complex channels of manuscript tradition and erudite interpretation. For this rea-
son, too, the challenge of trying to solve the puzzle of Giannino was worth taking up.

Actually, he is of interest for many other reasons as well. I think of him as an individual on the borderline, because his life unfolds along the frontier between two areas that are central to medieval studies: the sacrality of royal power and the commercial culture of the merchant—the frontier, so to speak, between the Île-de-France and Tuscany.

The merchant who tried to make himself into a king is not the only caprice of history which seems to have an endless capacity for leaving us stunned with amazement. But he is an apogee of sorts, because in Giannino’s life truth and lies, essence and appearance are always interwoven, in a whirl of authentic, false, or nonexistent documents, of revelations, claims, inventions and intrigues, of factual record, memory, and literature. A medieval dreamer, Giannino inspires both fascination and melancholy.