

# *Marguerite de Navarre*



MOTHER OF THE RENAISSANCE

Patricia F. Cholakian and Rouben C. Cholakian

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Patricia F. Cholakian, 1933-2003

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Scholar and Companion



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# Preface

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The biographer's task is always a formidable one, for any human being is ultimately unknowable, no matter how many facts one gathers about her. But when one is reconstructing the life of a woman who lived in a time—five hundred years ago—and a milieu—the French royal court—so different and so far removed in every way from twenty-first-century America, then it becomes nearly overwhelming. Official records document the comings and goings of a woman like Marguerite de Navarre, who lived in history's limelight, but it is extremely difficult to get any sense from these of what she was really like, what she thought and felt, or how she lived her day-to-day existence. To do that it is necessary to find primary sources, which are usually very rare. In Marguerite's case, however, we are privileged, for her writings—her poems, plays, and the collection of novellas known as the *Heptaméron*—are a gold mine of information. Yet, strangely, they have not really been explored for their biographical implications. Our aim here is to do just that, to supplement what can be learned about the official and public Marguerite of archival sources with what can be gleaned from her writings. For we firmly believe that just as her life undoubtedly shaped what she wrote, what she wrote offers some insight into who she was.

As we are well aware, such an enterprise is not without peril, for it must rely heavily on conjecture. The most literal-minded critics will reject many of our conclusions, aligning themselves with Marguerite's first serious modern biographer, Pierre Jourda, who refused to acknowledge the veracity of any text not supported by incontrovertible historical evidence; to them we can only reply that it has always been common practice for writers to camouflage personal experience with fictitious details. Others, although they do not argue that the autobiographical must coincide in all respects with the historical, may disagree with our deductions; in reply to them, we promise that we will provide as much documentation as possible to support our conclusions, and that we will always endeavor to make it clear when we are dealing with fact and when we are advancing our own hypotheses.

We also realize that the text, any text, even one that outwardly purports to be autobiographical, is subject to the ambiguities inherent in all forms of expression. There are not only the inevitable gaps that students of language readily acknowledge between words and the ideas they convey, but the important breach between conscious and unconscious intention that modern psycholinguists have more recently brought to our attention. "Meaning," they tell us, is forever visible and invisible. Without wanting to turn our biography into a labyrinth of psychological double-talk, we intend to keep these cautionary remarks in mind.

We have embarked on this project because no up-to-date biography of Marguerite de Navarre exists in English, in spite of the fact that, thanks to feminism's reevaluation of early texts by women, she is now viewed as one of the most important writers of her time—"the ideal and unequalled ancestor of the greatest women of letters," as Pierre Jourda has called her. For while her writings are at last receiving the scholarly attention they merit, her life continues to be viewed through the prism of the life of her brother, François I, the French

Renaissance king who admittedly deserves much credit for turning France into a modern nation and his court into an artistic mecca. But history is only now beginning to acknowledge the significant role in these achievements also played by François's brilliant sister, Marguerite. It is our earnest hope in these pages to draw attention to the need for reassessing her contributions.

This is not to say that the Queen of Navarre has been totally neglected as a biographical subject. The year after her death, a devoted officer of her household, the poet Charles de Sainte-Marthe, delivered a funeral oration that eulogistically recounted the life of her patroness. Although often overstated and embellished, his remarks are nevertheless valuable as an evaluation of how Marguerite was viewed by her contemporaries. And at the end of the century, Pierre de Bourdeille, abbot of Brantôme, importantly included the Queen of Navarre in his two-volume social history of French royal women, *Recueil des dames* (1665–66 [posthumous]; Ladies' stories). No one who wishes to write about Marguerite can overlook this priceless documentation. As we shall see, much of what we are able to reconstruct about the *Heptaméron's* autobiographical elements can only be corroborated thanks to Brantôme's remarks.

In more recent times, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Queen of Navarre has been regularly featured in gender-specific anthologies with titles like *Ladies of the Reformation* (1857), *Les Femmes de la cour des derniers Valois* (1870; Women in the court of the last of the Valois), *Les Femmes de lettres en France* (1890; Women writers in France), *Five Famous French Women* (1905), or *Famous Women of France* (1941). It is fair to say, however, that very little of what appears in these superficial biographical essays provides much that is worthy of serious attention. They invariably fall into what the French disparagingly call "petite histoire."

As to full-length biographies, perhaps her gender did inspire some women biographers to choose her as a subject, for three of them wrote books about her in the nineteenth century—two French countesses, Louise de Broglie Haussonville (1870); and two Englishwomen, Mary Robinson (1886 and 1900)<sup>1</sup> and Martha Walker Freer (1895)—whereas only one man, Victor Luro (1866), did so. And in the twentieth century, there are the biographies by Hedwige de Chabannes (1973), Nicole Toussaint du Wast (1976), and Marie Cerati (1981), although curiously, there are more by men: in English, H. Noel Williams's (1916), and Samuel Putnam's (1936); and in French, not only Jourda's massive work (1930) but more recently, Jean-Louis Déjean's (1987). While many of these works are informative as well as engaging, except for Jourda's they tend to suffer from two weaknesses: either they embed Marguerite's story in the history of the reign of François I, with the result that they end up telling his story rather than hers; or they appeal to the popular taste for royal gossip, often failing to document sources or to distinguish fact from legend.

As for more substantive scholarship devoted to Marguerite's life, in the nineteenth century this took the form of biographical notices attached to editions of the *Heptaméron*—notably those of Paul Lacroix, also known as the "bibliophile Paul L. Jacob" (1841); Le Roux de Lincy (1853); and Félix Frank (1879). The definitive work, however, is the magisterial, two-volume compendium, *Marguerite d'Angoulême*, published in 1930 by Pierre Jourda. Indeed, the sheer magnitude of Jourda's achievement may explain why few have since ventured onto the ground he covered. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the thoroughness of Jourda's research, his study is limited not only by the sexual prejudices of his time but by a somewhat

pedantic literalism.

Marguerite de Navarre's life warrants the same sophisticated critical and scholarly attention that has been focused on her texts over the last decade. Until now, biographers have viewed her writing as a sideline of her complex and productive life, while literary critics have used her life to learn more about the texts that are their primary concern. By and large neither group has looked at the autobiographical dimensions of her work. Here we intend to remedy this deficiency by reading her texts deconstructively backwards, in order to find out what can be learned from them about her. It is our hope that in so doing we shall enrich our readers' appreciation of both the life and the writing of the remarkable French woman whom the nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet called "*la mère aimable de la Renaissance*"—benevolent mother of the Renaissance.

## *Author's Note*

Alas, in the midst of preparing this manuscript, my coauthor, Patricia F. Cholakian, succumbed to cancer. Any success that accrues to this enterprise, however, belongs in good measure to her. Patricia's *Rape and Writing in the Heptaméron of Marguerite de Navarre*, published in 1991, immediately made her one of the major voices in Marguerite de Navarre scholarship, and much of what has gone into this work has drawn heavily from her extensive knowledge of Marguerite's work, acquired over many years of research.

Most authors are glad to have one good editor. I had three: Corona Macheimer, who helped to shape a first draft into a more readable and polished text and whose astute observations and suggestions were responsible for the expansion of key themes and the sharpening of important arguments; Michael Haskell, who patiently shepherded the manuscript to publication; and Wendy Lochner, who saw the merit of our project from the start. To all I am grateful.

A few preliminary stylistic remarks are in order. Marguerite de Navarre was, perhaps above all, a writer, and this is a literary biography. It seems reasonable, therefore, that each chapter begin with an epigraph from one of her texts.

In dealing with foreign titles, we have distinguished between titles with given names maintained in the original (Marguerite de Navarre), and those without, translated into English (duchess of Navarre); where there is no real English equivalent for a title, we have retained the French (seigneur de Bonnivet). As for textual translations, unless otherwise specifically mentioned, they are Patricia's and mine; the original texts of Marguerite alone are given in the notes. Whenever feasible, we have consulted all editions of major works. Though we have favored throughout Michel François's excellent 1960 edition of *L'Heptaméron*, we did not neglect others, and in certain instances (particularly in chapter 2), we have drawn upon the valuable English translation by P. A. Chilton.

Marguerite's abundant correspondence was first gathered together in a pair of publications by F. Génin in 1841 and 1842. A few years later, Aimé Champollion-Figeac collected the correspondence associated with the captivity of François I in Spain. Marguerite's correspondence with Guillaume Briçonnet, Bishop of Meaux, is now widely available in the two-volume set edited by Christine Martineau, Michel Veissière, and Henry Heller and

published from 1975 through 1979.

Because Génin and Champollion-Figeac are less accessible, all citations from these collections have been cross-referenced with Pierre Jourda's extremely useful chronological listing of the correspondence, *Répertoire analytique et chronologique de la correspondance de Marguerite d'Angoulême*, indicated by "R," plus the corresponding number of the letter.

Even a literary biography cannot ignore context, especially when it involves such an important historical figure as Marguerite de Navarre. Among the many useful sources we consulted along the way, R. J. Knecht's excellent biography of Marguerite's brother, *Renaissance Warrior and Patron: The Reign of Francis I*, has to be singled out. His careful research has served throughout as an indispensable guide.

In the list of references, works by Marguerite de Navarre are distinguished from secondary sources. While we have included an extensive bibliography, it should be noted that Marguerite de Navarre studies have so exploded in recent years that in order to keep up, one has to consult regularly such sources as the annual MLA listings. Nonetheless, H. P. Clive's 1981 annotated bibliography continues to be of invaluable service to scholars in the field.

ROUBEN C. CHOLAKIAN  
NEW YORK CITY, JULY 2004

# *Chronology*

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## HISTORY

## CULTURE

1492	Columbus sails under Spanish flag Expulsion of Jews from Spain Death of Lorenzo de Medici Fall of Moorish Kingdom in Granada	Jean Duvet (1485–1570?) Jean Cousin (1490–1560?) Jacques Cartier (1491–1557)
1494		Leonardo da Vinci's <i>Last Supper</i>
1495	Charles VIII defeated at Fornovo	
1497	Cabot sails to North America	
1498	Savonarola burned in Florence Louis XII mounts French throne	
1499	Peace of Basel Amerigo Vespucci sails to New World	
1501	Beginning of American slave trade	Michelangelo's <i>David</i>
1503		Leonardo da Vinci's <i>Mona Lisa</i> Pope Julius II (1503–1513)
1506		Foundation stone of Saint Peter's laid in Rome Pierre Bourdichon (1506–1570)
1508		Michelangelo paints the Sistine Chapel
1509		Amboise Paré (1509–1590)
1510		Jean Goujon (1510–1569) Bernard Palissy (1510–1590?)
1513		Pope Leo X (1513–1521)
1514	Death of Anne de Bretagne	Philibert Delorme (1510?–1570)
1515	Death of Louis XII François I mounts French throne Battle of Marignano	Grünewald's <i>Isenheim Altarpiece</i> Budé's <i>De asse</i>





1516	Signing of the Concordat de Bologna	Erasmus's <i>In Praise of Folly</i> Machiavelli's <i>The Prince</i> More's <i>Utopia</i> Erasmus's edition of New Testament
1517	Luther's ninety-eight theses	
1519	Magellan circumnavigates the earth Charles V elected Holy Roman Emperor Cortès sails to Mexico	
1520	Suleiman the Magnificent is Sultan of Ottoman Empire	François Clouet (1520–1572)
1521	Luther excommunicated	Lefèvre's <i>Commentarii . . . evangelia</i>
1522		Luther's German translation of New Testament Pope Adrian VI (1522–1523)
1523	Zwingli establishes Reform Church in Zürich	Pope Clement VII (1523–1534) Lefèvre's French translation of the New Testament
1524	Death of Queen Claude German Peasant Revolt	
1525	Battle of Pavia	Tyndale's English Translation of New Testament Lefèvre's <i>Épîtres et évangiles</i>
1526	Treaty of Madrid	
1527	Sack of Rome	
1528	Reformation Church established in Berne	Castiglioni's <i>Il cortigiano</i> Lefèvre's French translation of the Old Testament Collège de France
1529	Peace of Cambrai Diet of Speyer	
1530	François I marries Eleanor of Portugal Diet of Augsburg Denmark adopts Lutheran creed	Publication of Henry VIII's "Great Bible"
1532		Rabelais's <i>Pantagruel</i>
1534	Placard Affair Foundation of Anglican Church	Rabelais's <i>Gargantua</i> Pope Paul III (1534–1549)
1535	Execution of Thomas More Cartier takes Canada for France	



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1536

War between France and Holy  
Roman Empire

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Calvin's *Christianae religionis in-  
stitutio (Institutes of the Christian  
Religion)*

1540

Society of Jesus

1541

Geneva Theocracy

French version of Calvin's *Institutes*

1542

Roman Inquisition

1544

Treaty of Crépy

1545

Council of Trent

1546

Death of Luther

1547

Death of François I

1548

Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*

1549

DuBellay's *Défense et illustration de  
la langue française*

First Book of Common Prayer



FRANCE, c. 1550







# 1. *Mother of the Renaissance*

And the pleasure of sweet writing  
To which I was so naturally inclined.

—LA COCHE

In an isolated palace in the woodlands of Berry, in central France, a Flemish “lady of high birth” and her brother, “a noble lord of high estate,” are paying a call on an old friend. It is late and the princess is preparing to retire. She bids goodnight to her host and his aged mother who has brought her a bedtime snack of preserved fruit. She climbs into her bed and a lady-in-waiting pulls the bed curtains around her. She is tired after a long day in the open air watching the men, who have been hunting deer, gallop through the woods. She drifts off to sleep.

Unbeknownst to the princess, the old lady who normally sleeps in the room below has been convinced by her son to sleep elsewhere so as not to disturb their guest with her coughing. And he has taken her place. At the moment, he is gazing at himself in his mirror, admiring the figure he cuts in his fine nightshirt and assuring himself that the lady in the room above will find him irresistible when he puts into motion the daring plan he has devised. After all, she is high spirited and fun loving, and despite her virtuous reputation and her refusal to accept him as her official admirer, she clearly enjoys his company. Why, just now, she has permitted him to stay in her room until bedtime.

He listens to the sounds in the lady’s chamber. He hears her attendant walk across the floor and lie down on her cot. At last, when all is quiet, he enters a secret passageway, creeps up a narrow staircase, and removes a trap door cunningly concealed behind the wall hanging next to the princess’s bed. Before she knows what is happening he has taken her into his arms and begun making love to her. She does not, however, react as he had imagined. She fights him off, literally tooth and nail, clawing at his face and screaming for help. Her lady-in-waiting rushes to her side, and her assailant, bruised and bleeding, makes his escape before the alarm can be raised.

The princess has no doubt as to the identity of her attacker and, shaking with fury, vows that he will pay with his head for this outrageous assault. Her attendant, who is older and wiser, discourages her, however. “Be careful,” she warns, “or instead of avenging your honor you may well lose it. If your brother punishes this man as you demand, and he is put to death it will be noised about that he had his way with you; and most people will say that he could not have done so unless you encouraged him. You are young and beautiful and it is no secret that you like to have a good time. There is no one at court who has not seen the way you treat the gentleman and everyone will say that if he carried out this deed it was your own fault. And you, who have always held your head high, will be the subject of gossip and rumor wherever this story is told.” The princess realizes that there is more than a little truth in what the old woman is saying. She decides to do nothing and keep the incident a secret. She and her brother depart the next day; needless to say, their battered host sends word that he is too tired to bid them farewell.

Pierre de Bourdeilles, abbot of Brantôme,<sup>1</sup> the social chronicler known to literary critics

simply as Brantôme, categorically identifies the heroine of this story, the fourth in Marguerite's collection of narratives called the *Heptaméron*, as the author herself. The brother mentioned in the story's opening paragraph is none other than Marguerite's own brother, François I of France. As for the would-be rapist, Brantôme connects him with Guillaume Gouffier, seigneur de Bonnivet, a close friend of the family. The evidence is unimpeachable, for both Brantôme's grandmother, Louise de Daillon, and his mother, Anne de Vivonne, had been ladies-in-waiting in Marguerite's entourage, and witnessed some of the events he later described in his gossiping memoirs. The incident in question probably took place at Bonnivet's own château, during a state visit that Marguerite and the king of France made there about 1520. She would have been in her twenties.<sup>2</sup>

Brantôme's disclosure is of critical importance to Marguerite's biographers, for it not only reveals the identity of the principal actors in a novella in which the pivotal event is a sexual assault; it suggests that others of the Queen of Navarre's works may be looked upon as autobiographical. Yet despite the fact that no one disputes the accuracy of Brantôme's assertion, scholars have seldom reflected seriously on the question of why Marguerite decided to write about this distressing event, let alone the more intriguing question of what she revealed about herself in doing so. Moreover, as we shall see, there is good reason to believe that novella ten, in which the young heroine, Floride, is assaulted not once but twice, represents another personal "rape story."<sup>3</sup> Whether the three episodes described in novellas four and ten represent separate encounters or, rather, indicate that Marguerite was so distressed by her one frightening experience that she returned obsessively to the stinging remembrance of it, we are encouraged to look more closely for other autobiographical signs in her writings.

It is our considered conviction that Marguerite's early traumatic experience or experiences with male aggression was one of several factors that importantly changed the direction her life was to take, not only in the writing of the *Heptaméron*, in which rape and seduction are prominent themes,<sup>4</sup> but in her overall spiritual and literary development. When, in the early 1520s, she decided to contact the eminent evangelist and religious reformer Guillaume Briçonnet, it was not because of guilt over sibling incest, as one theorist has suggested,<sup>5</sup> but because of a series of psychological pressures, not least of which was her ordeal with Bonnivet.

Was Marguerite scarred beyond ever experiencing genuine love? This we do not know, though we suspect that the speculations to this effect have been greatly exaggerated, at least with respect to her second marriage. We do know that by and large women of aristocratic standing were not permitted to make their true feelings a factor in matchmaking, and Marguerite was no exception. In 1509, at the age of seventeen, she was married off to the duke of Alençon, a lackluster personage who was disgraced for allegedly cowardly behavior at the battle of Pavia (1525), accused of abandoning the contest at a key moment in the French king's campaign to seize control of the Duchy of Milan. He died later that same year, leaving his widow childless. Two years after that, still very much a matrimonial catch, Marguerite was married again, this time to a virile and much-admired hero from that same battle at Pavia. He, junior by ten years, Henri d'Albret was king of the tiny, independent territory of Navarre, a prize piece of land nestled up against the Pyrenees, which was eventually annexed to France in 1589. It may be that this union, too, was loveless, but in any event, it was not childless. Marguerite and Henri had a daughter, Jeanne, and a son who died in infancy.



Whatever her private sufferings, Marguerite never shrank from her public responsibilities. She and her ambitious brother constituted an almost inseparable pair. From the moment François mounted the French throne in 1515, his articulate, charming, and intelligent sister was close at hand. Since 1328 the Valois courts had been noted for their brilliance; under François I they reached their dazzling apogee, and his sister, Marguerite, was highly visible in virtually all aspects of the court's life. She was the architect and animator of its refined entertainments, the king's respected counselor and confidante, and a significant player in his political and diplomatic affairs. After the defeat at Pavia, for example, when the king was taken captive, it was Marguerite who undertook the arduous journey to Madrid, nursed the ailing king back to health, and astutely parlayed for his release.

In addition to her preeminence at court, Marguerite was a leading figure in the intellectual and religious movements of her time, a stalwart and unremittingly generous patron of the major writers and thinkers of the French Renaissance. She was a key figure in the reformist movement, often risking her own position in her fearless battle against corruption and abuse, a cause to which she committed herself throughout her entire adult life. How many times did she come to the rescue of her favorite but foolishly outspoken poet Clément Marot? How often did she shield from attack anticlerical writers like Louis de Berquin, who, despite his serious efforts, finally came to his martyr's end when he was burned at the stake in 1529?

Marguerite's courageous interference in religious matters not only made her suspect in the eyes of the powerful, conservative Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris, the highest ecclesiastical authority in France at a time when church and state were at once intertwined and often in competition for supremacy; it several times came close to making her lose the affection and protection of her brother. In 1534, for example, hot-headed reformists boldly plastered inflammatory anti-Catholic broadsides on the walls of royal buildings. The so-called Placard Affair, which intensified the conflict between religious conservatives and those who, like the queen of Navarre, sought to reform the church, caused severe tensions. Only the year before, Marguerite had been condemned by the theologians at the University of Paris for the reformist ideas in her controversial poem *Le Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* (Mirror of a sinful soul). After this difficult moment, her relationship with François was never quite the same.

Marguerite's most significant role as supporter of the reformist movement came through her connection with the "Cercle de Meaux," whose leader, Guillaume Briçonnet, bishop of the important northern city and early advocate for change in the church, became her personal spiritual advisor. Many of the reformists from Briçonnet's entourage—Gérard Roussel, Michel d'Arande, Pierre Caroli, Guillaume Farel, and Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, all of whom were one time or another in conflict with prevailing attitudes—enjoyed the queen of Navarre's magnanimous protection.<sup>6</sup>

She was not, however, a Protestant. Like the reformers of Meaux, she sought not separation from the mother church but correction of its major abuses. Like them she believed in challenging the autocratic rule of clerics who did not wish to share the interpretation of sacred text. Like them she believed in making the Bible available to everyone and thus, as a generous patron, encouraged its translation into the vernacular. They in turn recognized her as a true and loyal promoter of their cause and often turned to her for help. Indeed, the most famous of these Meaux disciples, the humanist scholar Lefèvre d'Étaples, breathed his last at Marguerite's residence at Nérac, where he had taken refuge.

Marguerite practiced what the reformers preached. She worked industriously to improve



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