

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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MARGUERITE DE NAVARRE

Public importance of Marguerite de Navarre. Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549) was princess of France, queen of Navarre, and wife to Henry II of the kingdom of Navarre. Her brother was to become King of France, as Francis I, and she herself was to become the ancestress of the Bourbon line of Kings of France. (She was grandmother to Henry of Navarre, who as Henri IV was to become the first Bourbon king of France.) Nor were these noble frameworks the peak of Marguerite's worldly importance, for she was a serious imaginative writer, a patroness to the greatest French writers of her time—Rabelais, Montaigne, Marot—and what some have called the first modern woman. One might give some thought in this setting to Christine de Pisan, also viewed—from a different optic—as the first modern woman.

Life and work of Marguerite de Navarre. Marguerite was already in birth privileged with a distinguished gene pool: her father took an eleven year old bride, Louise, who was in absolute truth a prodigy, and though Marguerite was obliged by her father—for reasons of estate consolidation—to marry an older man widely considered a laggard and a dunce, she took advantage of her enforced move to the city of Cognac, close to Italy, to enlarge her cultural awareness, and to fall under the spell of the great Italian tale-teller Giovanni Boccaccio. For this intense growing atmosphere Marguerite was well prepared by the classical education she had been given as a child, and when her brother became king she was enabled to give full vent to her literary talents. She became the center of a literary salon, the 'New Parnassus,' and began to share out the distinguished personality she had been forming for herself. Her first published work, the *Miroir de l'ame pecheresse* (1511), *Mirror of the Sinful Soul*, grew from the loss of her first and only child and serves as a rich complement to the imaginative tales she constructed in the *Heptameron* (1558). In the *Mirror* she writes 1400 lines of verse lamenting her miserable behaviors in life—her faithlessness, her unreliability, her lack of faith—and then tracking her path back to grace.

Marguerite the confessional writer. The intensity of her soulful confessions not only seemed arbitrary and self-indulgent, to the many contemporaries who found her self-confessions heretical, but found an attentive ear in others, such as Anne Boleyn, the wife of Henry VIII, who quite probably promoted Marguerite's ideas in England, on the highest levels and at such a degree that the Protestant turn to Elizabethan religious life may owe something to Marguerite's work. Marguerite's most famous work, the *Heptameron*, reflects a very different turn of imagination—a turn which shows how many sided the Renaissance French mind could be. As we see, in the prologue to this work, the influence of Boccaccio's *Decameron* is strong—and the parallel to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is evident. A group of travelers is detained in an abbey, while waiting for the completion of a bridge, which will enable them to continue on their way. Each traveler in turn—though the sequence was incomplete at Marguerite's death—offers a diverting tale, which will help the company pass the time. It is surprising for the modern reader to discover how bawdy, risqué, and entertaining these tales can be. What can be more guaranteed to keep you awake, than the tale of the nobleman who, becoming aware that the king is cuckolding him with his wife, then takes up with the queen, generating a pattern of mutual deceptions which keeps the foursome quite happy.

Reading

Primary source reading

The *Heptameron*, tr, intro by Paul Chilton, 1984.

Secondary source reading

Cholakian, P and Cholakian., R., *Marguerite. de Navarre, Mother of the Renaissance*, 2006.

Further reading

Lyons, J. and McKinley, M., *The Heptameron and early modern Culture*, 1993.

Original language reading

Janda, Pierre, *Une princesse de la Renaissance, M. d'Angouleme*, 1973.

Suggested paper topics

What interface do you see between *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul* and the *Heptameron*? While some of the tales in the latter are provocative and sensuous, the former text appears to beg for freedom from the temptations of the body, and its sinful life. Do these two texts fit together? Can you think of contemporary (to us) parallels to this kind of double sensibility?

How would you compare the narrative contents of the *Heptameron* with those of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Decameron* of Boccaccio? Is Marguerite, a lady, far more delicate in sensibility than her two male counterparts? Is she more complex and devious, as a narrator?

Excerpt <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/navarre/heptameron/heptameron.htm>

TWO children were born of the marriage of Charles of Orleans, Count of Angoulême, a prince of the blood royal of France, and Louise, the daughter of Philip Duke of Savoy, and Margaret of Bourbon. The elder of the two was Margaret, the principal subject of this memoir, born on the 11th of April, 1492; the younger, born on the 12th of September, 1494, was the prince who succeeded Louis XII. on the throne of France, February, 1515, under the name of Francis I.

Married when she was little more than eleven years old, Louise of Savoy was left a widow before she had completed her eighteenth year, and thenceforth devoted herself with exemplary assiduity to the care of her children, who repaid her solicitude by the warm affection they always felt for their mother and for each other. She was a woman of remarkable beauty and capacity, and her character and conduct were deserving, in many respects, of the eulogies which her daughter never wearied of lavishing upon them; but less partial writers have convicted her of criminal acts, which brought disasters upon her son and her country. In the first year of his reign, Francis I. committed the regency of the kingdom to his mother, and set out on his expedition to Italy. He was absent but a few months; nevertheless, this first regency enabled Louise of Savoy to fill the most important offices with men entirely devoted to her interests, and even to her caprices and to gratify by any and every means the insatiable thirst for money with which she was cursed.

In the beginning of the year 1522, Lautrec, one of the king's favorites, who commanded his forces in Italy, lost in a few days all the advantages which Francis had gained by the victory of Marignano. He returned to Paris with only two attendants, and sought an audience of the king, who refused at first to receive him. Finally, at the intercession of the Constable of Bourbon, Francis allowed Lautrec to appear before him, and after loading him with reproaches, demanded what excuse he could offer for himself. Lautrec calmly replied, "The troops I commanded not having been paid, refused to follow me, and I was left alone."—"What!" said the king, "I sent you four hundred thousand crowns to Genoa, and Semblançay, the superintendent of finance, forwarded you three hundred thousand."—"Sire, I have received nothing." Semblançay being summoned to the presence, "Father," said the king, (who addressed him in that way on account of his great age), "come hither and tell us if you have not, in pursuance of my order, sent M. de Lautrec the sum of three hundred thousand crowns?"—"Sire," replied the superintendent, "I am prepared to prove that I delivered that sum to the duchess your mother, that she might employ it as you say."—"Very well," said the king, and went into his mother's room to question her.