9. Imagination and Influence

The Creative Powers of Marguerite de Navarre at Work at Court and in the World

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Abstract
This study examines Marguerite de Navarre's many sources of power and her goals in using it. Beyond her use of seigneurial rights, fiscal resources, patronage, and influence over her brother, François I, it explores how she wielded her considerable powers of imagination as a writer and scripter of narratives: to craft programmatic personas for her brother, self, and other courtiers; to build relationships, especially with other women; to generate valuable cultural capital; and to shape affairs at court, in France, and abroad. Her concern with promoting religious renewal stands out as her abiding ambition, which conflicted occasionally with her attempts to champion her brother, her family and household, and her patronage and religious networks.

Keywords: Marguerite de Navarre, religious reform, religious engagement, letters, cultural patronage, literature, diplomacy, networks

For what is the hart of a Man, concernynge hys owne strength before he hath receyved the gift of faythe? Thereby only hath he knowledge of the goodnesse, wysedome, and power of God. And as sone as he through that faythe, knoweth pythely the truthe hys hart is anon full of charyte and love.

— Marguerite de Navarre, translated by Elizabeth I, prefatory verse epistle, Le Miroir de l'ame pecheresse (The Mirror of the Sinful Soul) (1533)

1 ‘Quel est le cuer d’ung homme quant à soy / Avant qu’il ait receu le don de Foy, / Par lequel seul l’homme a la congnossance / De la Bonté, Sapience, et Puissance ? / Et aussi tost
Marguerite de Navarre (1492–1549) played many roles during her 57 years. Among French female courtiers, she arguably ranks among the most powerful after the two regent/queen mothers of the sixteenth century, Louise de Savoie (1476–1531) and Catherine de Médicis (1519–1589). Setting her apart among that group, she produced a large corpus of literary works, which earned her high regard in her own day and ever since as one of the most important female writers of early modern Europe for her contributions to religious, social, and political thought. Recognizing that her literary career was an important aspect of her political one, this study attempts more narrowly to analyze her ‘worldly’ influence as a female courtier: how she won power; the limits she encountered in wielding it; and to what ends she put it. It also investigates her collaboration with and influence on other noble women in those pursuits.

The primary focus of this essay and volume — a preoccupation with power — it should be recognized, is framed from a modern perspective. Theorists following the path from Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) via Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche to Michel Foucault, often treat power (authority, might, or influence) as an end or reality unto itself. In the epigraph quoted above, Marguerite, faithful to the religious and philosophical traditions of her day, asserted that power (puissance) was — as Elizabeth I (1533–1603) rightly interpreted her meaning — ultimately God’s. In her pithy formulation, a blend of Christian and Platonic virtues — Faith and Love framing Goodness, Wisdom, and Truth — give rise and purpose to power. Put another way, those traditions held that moral ends should shape how holders use power and be the standard by which their use of it be judged. The object of our study, Marguerite, has something to say subjectively and substantively, about our preoccupation with power as well as the power we wield and the conceptualizations we employ in studying her use of it. Eschewing any moral judgment about means or ends, this essay follows Max Weber, who

qu’il congnoist Verité, / Son cœu est plein d’amour et Charité.’ Translation by Elizabeth I, ‘The preface’, A Godly Medytacyon on the christen sowle (1548), B2v.

2 Among the recent studies on the subject of French women’s power, Viennot, chs. 12–13, provides a useful overview grounded in a longue durée perspective.

3 King and Rabil count Marguerite as one of 28 major female religious writers in Europe from 1450–1700; Stjerna presents her as one of 11 major female ‘models, leaders, and teachers’ during the Reformation; and Broad and Green examine her literary works as contributions to political thought For a penetrating reading of her Heptaméron in that vein, see Ferguson, Part 2, Ch.3.

4 See Stephenson on Marguerite’s ‘raw’ power; and Reid, 2009, on the ends to which she put her might and the results. The latter work will only be cited to draw attention to particular points, not for the bulk of the information or interpretation related below, which can be readily found via the work’s table of contents and indices.
understood authority (rule, power, or influence) to originate from three possible sources: tradition (inherited power), the law (elected or bureaucratic power), and charisma (attracted power). This essay explores how Marguerite valorized and increased her inherited powers by use of her imagination and intellect (charisma), that is, through her ability to convince others of her vision of the world.

Along those lines, among Marguerite’s many qualities, two stand out as essential to understanding her influence. First, as exemplified in The Mirror of the Sinful Soul, she was a gifted writer, endowed with creative powers of narrative invention and subtle reflection. Second, as the title page of the 1533 edition of The Mirror forcefully announced, she was ‘Marguerite de France, Unique Sister of the King, by grace of God Queen of Navarre’. As Machiavelli would have recognized, fate had bestowed on her great fortune. She was the sole, beloved sister of François I (1515–1547), whom contemporaries recognized at the start of his reign as forming one angle of the closely-knit ruling ‘royal trinity’ composed of them and their widowed mother Louise de Savoie. As will be explored below, the obvious sine qua non for Marguerite’s influence was her close rapport with her brother, which was in dynamic balance with his relations with his mother and, later, his mistress Anne de Pisseleu (1508–1580) as well as his closest male councillors.

The full measure of Marguerite’s influence in her roles as a royal courtier, diplomat, territorial lord, patron, writer, forceful voice in the querelle des femmes (debate about women), theorist in several fields, religious reformer, and champion of the poor and persecuted has not been fully plumbed after over 170 years of ever growing study since François Génin published an edition of her correspondence and observations based on it. Nor will or could all those roles and that huge body of scholarship be surveyed here. Taking inspiration from Marguerite’s greatest literary work — one unfinished and unpublished at her death — the Heptaméron (Seven Days) (1558), this essay presents and interprets contes (tales), that is, representative vignettes, from seven days or seasons of her life’s work. Collectively, these interpreted episodes throw into high relief the main contours of her acquisition and use of power at court and beyond. Borrowing Lucien Febvre’s apt characterization of the world reflected in her Heptaméron, these vignettes demonstrate that Marguerite sought and wielded influence for both ‘sacred and profane’ purposes. She promoted the interests of

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5 For orientation to the literature, see Clive; Ferguson and McKinley, ‘Introduction’; and Reid, 2009, I, ‘Introduction’.

6 Febvre.
the Valois dynasty and her own house. Like her mother, brother, and the burgeoning ranks of humanist educated nobles throughout Europe, she patronized the new arts and learning to enrich culture, literature, and courtly life. Lastly and most distinctively, far beyond the worldly concerns of most courtiers, she strove with domestic and foreign allies to effect evangelical religious renewal in France. Her determined efforts put her in conflict with conservative Catholics. As a result, her dynastic and religious goals were at times at cross-purposes and she experienced her most bitter failures on the latter front.

Whatever the tally of Marguerite's victories, defeats, and stalemates, the hallmark of her unfinished life's work at court was her remarkable, perhaps exceptional, use of imagination to multiply fortune's gifts and win significant power from, or influence over, her male relations — her brother, his sons, and her two husbands — by providing them with political service, advice, exploitable cultural capital, and, at times, by scripting for them narratives of possible actions that promised to fulfil their dynastic ambitions. Beyond those core relationships, she exercised significant influence by fostering and collaborating with a broad circle of noble men and women, humanist and religious writers, churchmen, town notables, and commoners. If not always successful in her goals, she helped to create opportunities and expectations for cultural and religious revitalization in France, which would not have existed without her efforts and those of her networks.

The Celebration of the Treaty of London, 1518: The New Role of Women at François I's Court

On 22 December 1518, François I had the three women closest to him, Queen Claude (1499–1524), Louise de Savoie, and Marguerite, host the banquet for the ratification of the Treaty of London. During the dinner, breaking with custom, women and men were seated together. This innovation, Robert J. Knecht observes, was an early example of the much more prominent role François gave to women at court than his predecessors had. It was a lasting precedent. As the century wore on, while women generally lost rights, especially over property within marriage, female courtiers continued to exercise significant influence. Although a minority, never making up more than 20 per cent of the court, women were present in greater numbers than during the late Middle Ages, especially in the households of queens, regents, and mistresses — a trend that had begun under François's mother-in-law, Anne de Bretagne (1477–1514). Women also had more frequent and intimate interactions with
the king and his courtiers.\footnote{Knecht, 2008, pp. 58–60, 72–74; citing Jouanna, pp. 812–13. See also Michon, 2015.} Thereby, some female courtiers had increased opportunity to exert influence since access to the ruler was a key to power.\footnote{Raeymaekers and Derks; Claerr and Poncet.}

While presence and access were important, the quality of the relationship mattered most. François's two wives had little say in shaping his rule. His first, beloved wife, Claude, was a retiring figure. Ambassadors at court never credited her with holding significant sway at court before her early death in 1524. Daughter of the powerful Anne de Bretagne, her influence might have increased had she lived to oversee the rearing and marriages of her sons and daughters. After her death, the responsibility for educating them fell to Marguerite, who chose the children's tutors. François's second wife, Eleanor of Austria (1498–1558), was even less influential over him. While her household was larger and had more women in it than those of Claude or Louise, François paid slight attention to her. Theirs was simply a state marriage, which sealed in 1530 a short-lived peace treaty with François I's chief enemy, her brother Charles V (1500–1558).

During François's reign, only three women figured among his important formal and informal councillors. His mother, Louise, dominated during the first half of his reign. She sat on his council and twice served as regent during his war-time absences.\footnote{Michon, 2011, provides a thorough review of the relative influence of François’s 44 leading councillors.} Some speak of her as a co-ruler from his accession in 1515 at age 19 to her death in 1531. His mistress for the last two decades of his reign, Anne de Pisseleu, a young woman from an unremarkable noble family, came to court in 1526. Only towards the end of his reign did she exert extraordinary sway, serving as leader of an anti-imperial faction at court, which included Marguerite and François's third son, Charles (1522–1545); a group that a rival faction associated with the dauphin Henri (1519–1559) swept from court at his accession. Marguerite was the only councillor (male or female) to exercise influence over the whole of François's reign, and, though clearly second to Louise during the first half, as were all other courtiers, she exerted significant sway over her brother in spurts from the 1520s to the end of his life.

The foregoing examples illustrate the core fact that the unfettered will and affection of the ruler shaped an elite woman's capacity for influence at court. They also provide comparative context revealing how fortunate Marguerite had been in 1518 to have been at court presiding at that treaty celebration. For women of royal blood — whose marriages monarchs sought to regulate as a matter of state — the starting point for their adult careers depended upon
the sovereign’s decision over whom they would marry. Unlike Charles V’s four sisters and three daughters, Henry VIII (1491–1547)’s two sisters, Queen Claude’s sister, Renée de France (1510–1574), François’s two surviving daughters, and most other early modern princesses, Marguerite had exceptionally not been subject to the traditional dynastic policy of being married off at a young age to a foreign prince in order to seal a political alliance. Instead of being wed to Henry Tudor, as Louis XII (1462–1515) once intended, he had her betrothed in 1509 to Charles d’Alençon (1489–1525), a match designed to tie the heir of a royal blood line and possessor of important territories closer to the royal house.

Thus, when François became king, Marguerite was lucky to be in a position to rise in power with him. After his accession, second only to Louise, François granted her and her husband more gifts, powers, and territories than any of the other men and women he brought to court. Crucially, he gave Marguerite sovereign territories of her own, including the Duchy of Berry, as well as a large annuity, which secured her a degree of independence, including from her husband. As he stated in the official acts of his gift, François appreciated the loyalty of his beloved sister and trusted her to use those gifts to bolster his rule. Subsequently, François augmented her seigneurial and fiscal power by granting her lifelong usufruct of the Alençon territories after the death of Charles (in 1525) and allowed her to choose her second husband, Henri d’Albret (1503–1555), King of Navarre, the most powerful feudal lord in France. At court, however, her relationship with François and personal sway mattered most. After his death, her fall was immediate. Henri II, who evidently did not love her — likely because of their opposing religious views and factional loyalties in the 1540s as well as because Marguerite had cherished his brothers prior to their deaths more than him — kept her from court. Henri gave her daughter Jeanne d’Albret (1528–1578) in marriage against Marguerite’s will, and even laughed at the queen’s diminished station.

In sum, through a fateful decision by Louis XII, dynastic chance, and François’s appreciation for her outstanding qualities, at the start of his reign Marguerite had acquired substantial seigneurial powers and a leading position at court.

Captain Marguerite and the Meaux Reformers: An Independent Religious Agenda

In September 1521, Louise and Marguerite left court to visit Bishop Guillaume Briçonnet (c. 1472–1534), who, with a team of humanist scholars from Paris headed by Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples (c. 1455–1536), was orchestrating
innovative reform in his diocese of Meaux. The visit marked the importance of what had become a close relationship between Marguerite, Louise, and female members of court and Lefèvre’s circle. The visit was a reunion of sorts, since both groups had had substantial interactions at court and in Paris dating back to 1516. Though Briçonnet’s first reform efforts in the diocese began in 1518, only after 1521, when Lefèvre’s team arrived to reinforce his attempts to improve his clergy and educate the laity did their relationship flourish. That move precipitated Marguerite to initiate regular correspondence with Briçonnet in June 1521. In her first letters, she begged him to allow one of the Meaux group, Michel d’Arande (fl. 1521–1539), to return to court to finish a series of Bible lessons he had been giving to her and other ladies at court. She also placed herself under the spiritual tutelage of Briçonnet and the Meaux group, and promised to serve as their champion, or as Briçonnet likened her, their ‘captain,’ at court. Over the next four years, Briçonnet and Marguerite carried on an intensive spiritual and tactical dialogue, resulting in over 120 long letters, which document their efforts at court to promote the Meaux reform as a model for the rest of France. François’s defeat at Pavia in 1525 enabled conservative critics from Paris to pressure Briçonnet into ending the reform experiment as well as to level accusations of heresy against Lefèvre’s group, forcing them to flee to safe havens.

Marguerite’s involvement with the Meaux group and their reform program was the most transformative experience of her life. Under their tutelage, she underwent a spiritual awakening and was inspired to express her new faith in works of poetry and prose. Her first two substantial poems were religious dialogues and date from this period. Her unpublished *Pater Noster* (Our Father), c. 1524, was a verse translation of the exposition of the Lord's Prayer by Martin Luther (1483–1546) as a dialogue between the God and the soul.¹⁰ In her *Dialogue en forme de vision nocturne* (Dialogue in the form of a Night-time Vision), published in 1533, she channelled her grief at the death of François’s daughter Charlotte (b. 1516) soon after child’s passing in 1524: the spirit of her niece speaks to her, consoling and instructing her in the knowledge of true saving faith. Inspired by the Meaux circle, these works exhibit the hallmarks of her later works: discursive form; intimate settings; characters — more often women than not — modeled on her family, courtiers, familiars, or some heavenly or holy figure; a preoccupation with spiritual instruction and consolation; and Scripture as the omnipresent frame and subject of her discourse.

Those spiritual and literary awakenings paralleled her emergence at court as the leading advocate of a contested evangelical agenda of religious

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renewal. Already in July 1521, Marguerite and Briçonnet worried that her advocacy of their reform program might break the royal trinity. She and Briçonnet tried twice over the period 1522–1523 to induce Louise and François to back specific reform proposals based on the Meaux model. Those efforts failed for a variety of reasons: the preoccupation of Louise and François with the first Habsburg war (1521–1525) and opposition from conservatives at court, such as Chancellor Antoine Duprat (1463–1536), as well as the Faculty of Theology and Parlement of Paris. On the defensive, Marguerite was forced to spend her credit with Louise and François to induce them to protect the Meaux group as well as a series of evangelicals who preached under her aegis in Paris, Lyons, Mâcon, Grenoble, and her seigneurial territories of Alençon and Bourges. Marguerite's efforts at court and across France were so forceful that she earned admiration or condemnation at home and abroad as a leader of the ‘Lutherans’ in France. Diplomats, journalists, street singers, pamphlet writers, and hostile preachers described her as a version of the image of her portrayed in a tableau vivant staged in the cloister of Notre Dame of Paris in the summer of 1525: that is, as a woman riding on horseback accompanied by devils on foot with Luther written on their fronts and backs.11

Marguerite’s leadership during this first phase of the Reformation, when religious frontiers and identities were being explored and clarified both in France and the Empire, did not permanently tarnish her reputation or fundamentally undermine her position at court. Her standing there, however, was thereafter complicated by her independent religious agenda, which her brother or mother tolerated but did not actively support and other courtiers positively opposed. Through the rest of François’s reign, her reputation and religious agenda both attracted friends and made enemies. She worked the numerous allies who flocked to her into a broader network. Beyond her relationship with her brother, this network became one of her most important sources of power for advancing her various political, social, cultural, and religious projects.

François’s Captivity, 1525–1526: Purgation and Protection

François I’s defeat at Pavia on 24 February 1525 was a disaster of enormous proportions, including for Marguerite. Unlike most of the nobles, who died on the field, or the few taken captive, including her brother, her husband, Charles d’Alençon, commander of the rear guard, was the only major figure

11 Knecht, 1994, p. 236 for the incident; Reid, 2009, I, pp. 299–305 for the reputation of Marguerite and her network c. 1525.
to escape the battle. Fate or fortune erased that dishonor and also ended Marguerite’s long, childless marriage, when Charles died unexpectedly of a pleurisy within weeks of returning to France (11 April), leaving his major estates to her in his will. Then, during the summer, with her brother in captivity and the court facing strong opposition within France, Louise and Duprat allowed discontented Parisian authorities to indict the Meaux group and others in her evangelical network on heresy charges. Marguerite’s greater challenge was to save her brother, the lesser, her persecuted evangelical ‘brethren’. She responded by using her pen, imagination, and newly growing network to attempt to protect persecuted evangelicals and save her brother, body and soul. The remarkable series of letters from that year display her prodigious creativity and resilience as a leader and religious thinker when her main support, François I, was at his weakest.12

Marguerite took it upon herself to minister to François as a sort of spiritual adviser. In March 1525, she sent him (via his childhood friend, and closest companion in captivity, Anne de Montmorency (1493–1567)), her copy of Lefèvre’s translation of Paul’s epistles. She promised that if he were to read them each day ‘as if in prayer’, he would be delivered. Her relentless efforts over the rest of the year to lead François to embrace an image of himself as newly remade by God to restore a badly broken church ultimately failed. The poems and letters François wrote during captivity, some in direct response to her overtures, do not reflect her religious interpretation.

Marguerite’s efforts, however, succeeded on two other fronts. In the summer of 1525, François and Louise agreed that Marguerite should be sent to Spain (where François had been transferred) to negotiate the terms of his ransom. François’s only act during his captivity was late in 1525, when Marguerite was with him in Spain. He ordered the suspension of proceedings against Lefèvre and the rest of the Meaux group. On the political front, she ultimately failed to complete the negotiations for François’s release. Instead, shortly after dismissing her from Spain as a meddler, Charles agreed with Montmorency essentially to the same terms she had proposed. While in Spain, she did win a symbolic victory of her own crafting, however. When she arrived, François was mortally ill, barely conscious. She had the Eucharist celebrated before him and convinced the officiant to allow him to commune. When her brother recovered soon after, courtiers credited Marguerite with his salvation, and proclaimed to the hostile Parlement of Paris and public back home that the king’s restoration from near death by the Eucharist was a clear sign that God had blessed his anointed to whom they owed obedience.

12 Over 140 letters date to 1525, a tenth of her known correspondence.
While scripting such morality plays out of the dire circumstances of François’s captivity, Marguerite also succeeded in securing safe havens for the main members of the Meaux group while she was absent. During the fall of 1525, Anne Malet de Graville (c.1490–c.1540), a former lady-in-waiting of Queen Claude, sheltered Pierre Caroli (1480–1550), a member of the Faculty of Theology and Meaux group, who had been in trouble for his preaching in Paris. Given the proximity of Marguerite and Anne at court and the fact that Marguerite had taken Anne and her daughter into her household by 1529, it is likely that Marguerite arranged for Caroli’s protection under Anne’s wing. If so, Anne would be the first of many noblewomen in Marguerite’s network to protect persecuted evangelicals at her request or in emulation of her.

Marguerite also helped to arrange the high-profile escape into exile with Sigismund von Hohenlohe (1485–1534), a distant cousin, who was a leader of the Reformation in Strasbourg, of the three most prominent figures in the Meaux group: Lefèvre, Gérard Roussel (1500–1555), and Michel d’Arande. Through correspondence with Sigismund, Marguerite kept tabs on the Meaux group and called them back after François’s release was assured. In the following years Marguerite secured the ex-Meaux campaigners positions either in her household or in François’s gift: Caroli as priest of Alençon, Roussel as an abbot and her almoner, d’Arande as a bishop, and Lefèvre as tutor to François’s children.

These episodes demonstrate Marguerite’s considerable tactical political skill and influence with her brother. Equally, they show that even when François was at a psychological low point, she was unable to convince him fully of his supposed role as a reforming king. These vignettes also reveal that the ever-conservative Anne de Montmorency had emerged, as he would remain until his disgrace in 1541, as her major rival for François’s favor. In her letter to Montmorency, noted above, Marguerite complained she was envious of him since though she wished it more than he ever would, she could not serve François as easily because ‘fortune has done me this wrong, that in making me a woman, it has made the means difficult’.¹³ Her statement was a frank admission that her gender constrained her from assisting her brother as Montmorency could, but it was also a challenge to Montmorency: neither fortune nor he would stop her.

¹³ Marguerite de Navarre to Anne de Montmorency, [March 1525] ‘Bien est vray que toute ma vie j’auray envie que je ne puis faire pour luy office pareil au vostre, car où la voulenté passe toute celle que pouriés avoir, la fortune me tient tort, qui, pour estre femme, me rend le moyen difficile’ [Translated passage in italics]. Génin, 1841, n° 25, p. 176.
The Diet of Augsburg, 1530: The New Protestant Powers and Political Possibilities

On 25 August 1530, Martin Bucer (1491–1551), a leading reformer from Strasbourg, wrote to Martin Luther and others from the Diet of Augsburg, where the nascent ‘Protestants’ were taking a major step towards establishing themselves legally by presenting their confession(s) of faith to the Emperor for recognition. Bucer told Luther that French evangelicals had written to him outside of the official diplomatic channels ‘at the order of the Queen of Navarre’ expressly to encourage them to present a united front and a single confession of faith. Three rival confessions of faith were in competition and the Protestants were trying, but failing, to settle on one agreeable to the majority. The ‘French brethren’ were pleading with them, Bucer noted, because they believed that if the German Protestants were united they would be able to advance the evangelical cause in France, since François was not hostile to it and many nobles had been won over by ‘that most Christian heroine, the king’s sister’.

Bucer’s testimony reveals that Marguerite was serving as the active leader of French evangelicals and had clear plans for advancing their cause. Moreover, his letter testifies to her geo-political political acumen. Well before François and his councillors, she saw and seized upon the opportunity to cooperate with the nascent German Protestants to advance François’s dynastic ambitions against Charles. Thereby, she also sought to advance her network’s reform objectives.

Whereas François I had no diplomatic representation in the Empire during the 1520s, in the 1530s and 1540s, following the paths blazed informally by members in her network to centers of power in the Empire, he established strong representation. Two of Marguerite’s closest allies at court, the learned Guillaume du Bellay (1491–1543), whom she had chosen to accompany her to Spain in 1525, and his equally talented brother Jean (1492–1560), whom she helped have named bishop of Paris, employed a coterie of German operatives such as Johann Sturm (1507–1589), subsequently an influential educator and humanist, and Johann Sleidan (1506–1556), the future official historian of the German Lutheran movement, to gather information, communicate via back channels, and make formal diplomatic overtures to Protestant powers. Marguerite, the Du Bellay brothers, and other courtiers, including Anne de

Montmorency’s rival, Philippe de Chabot (1492–1543), and eventually Anne de Pisseleu would champion from 1530 to the end of François’s reign, principally in three extended periods — 1531–1535, 1538–1543, and 1545–1547 — political alliances with the German Protestants, schemes which always carried the promise of mutual aid and, whether probable or not, religious concord. In each of these periods, Marguerite was, as diplomats ever noted, a leading architect and key instigator at court of these anti-Habsburg, pro-Protestant overtures.

The Alençon Heresy Trials, 1533–1534: The Limits of Influence

In 1533, an iconoclastic attack in Marguerite’s ducal seat of Alençon dealt her a severe blow. On the eve of the feast of Corpus Christi, two commoners took statues of the Virgin Mary and Saint Claude and hung them from the gutter of a house. Their act could reasonably be interpreted as a violent symbolic attack on belief in the cult of the saints, the Virgin as intercessor before Christ, as well as the doctrines of the real presence and the sacrifice of the Mass. The judges of her ducal exchequer court, which, as an apanage territory, enjoyed independence from oversight by the region’s royal high court, the Parlement of Rouen, treated the event as a minor infraction and handed down lenient sentences. What happened next reveals much about the limits of François’s tolerance for direct attacks on the church and tradition, the degree of Marguerite’s influence over him in such matters, the strength of opposition to her religious agenda at court, and, ultimately, the otherwise opaque workings of her influence on the local level via her networks and the prominent role of women in them.

In response to the lenient sentencing of the iconoclasts, in 1533 and again in 1534, evidently spurred by Marguerite’s bête noir, Chancellor Duprat, François ordered two special judicial commissions, made up of hand-picked, conservative judges from several parlements, to re-investigate and re-try their cases. With the help of the local bishop, these commissions enlarged the investigation beyond the act of the two iconoclasts. They discovered cells of heretics, indicted over 40 of them, and eventually, in the summer of 1534, handed down harsh verdicts (only 21 of which survive) including at least nine death sentences and three of banishment from the realm.

16 For the data and analysis backing up this interpretation of Marguerite’s relationship to the local networks at Alençon, see Reid, 2009, I, pp. 393–416; and for a critical edition of the record of the 42 individuals tried and sentences of 21, see Farge, II, pp. 1245–73.
During this affair, Marguerite wrote to her brother three times in an attempt, initially, to convince him to order the first commission of 1533 to send the expanded docket of cases back to the ducal court for retrial. Evidently, François agreed for a time, only to change his mind. Marguerite submitted to his final decision, promising to cooperate with the second special commission, which passed final sentence. Despite her best efforts, she had lost a significant battle at court, had her territorial rights overturned at the king’s express order, and suffered a black mark against her name.

This fray transpired in the context of a complex set of interrelated struggles from 1533 to 1535 at home and in the foreign arena that were shaping the religious direction of France and Europe including French support for Henry VIII during his request for an annulment through his break with Rome (1528–1535); François’s first period of cooperation with German Protestants (1531–1534); his negotiations with Clement VII (1478–1534) for an alliance, which was eventually sealed by the marriage of the Pope’s niece, Catherine de Médicis, with François’s second son, Henri; and a rapidly escalating period of religious strife in French cities between evangelicals and Catholics (1533–1535). Marguerite had ignited that domestic season of strife by having her almoner Roussel preach during Lent of 1533 at the Louvre. It finally exploded when radicals in the evangelical movement posted incendiary placards against the Mass in October 1534 and again in January 1535, precipitating a massive persecution sanctioned by François.

Marguerite and her court network were heavily involved in all of those momentous episodes. The less well-known Alençon affair, however, allows us to glimpse something of her unheralded and difficult-to-measure leadership of evangelical communities in the towns and burgs of France, both those under her control and beyond. Despite her promise to cooperate, in fact she did much behind the scenes to dull the judicial blow and save her subjects. 27 of those indicted had connections to Marguerite: she employed eleven of them in her household or ducal administration, several after the trials, including two of those sentenced to banishment. She also had relatives of sixteen others in her service, including in the 1540s, the son of one iconoclast and a relation of the other. The ex-Meaux campaigner, Pierre Caroli, whom Marguerite had named priest of Alençon in 1530, saw his case — one evidently too politically sensitive for the judges to handle — remitted to the king’s Privy Court, where he found clemency.

Retrospectively, when the names of those indicted at Alençon are compared with those on the rolls of her household, the officers of her duchy, and the directors of the local Hôtel-Dieu, or poor relief foundation, it is clear that Marguerite was directly responsible for fostering the several
conventicles of evangelicals, which the external judges discovered there in 1533 and 1534, dating back to 1523 when she first sent Michel d’Arande to preach in Alençon. Subsequently, she appointed a series of clerics, several of whom, like d’Arande and Caroli, were indicted for spreading heresy in her duchy. These conventicles included town notables and ducal officers as well as commoners in nearby villages. Given the focus of this essay, it is noteworthy that a coterie of elite women indicted by the judges seem to have anchored several of these sodalities: including the elite women Marguerite had given over-sight of the town’s poor relief system and a local noblewoman, Jeanne d’Avoise.

Alençon was one venue of Marguerite’s local influence. In dozens of other towns similar evangelical cells formed, some in her seigneurial territories, like Bourges and Nérac, but many more in places outside her direct reach as lord such as Meaux, Nîmes, Lyons, Grenoble, Aix, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Orleans, Troyes, and Paris. Marguerite fostered such communities by ensuring evangelicals in her network were appointed to key ecclesiastical, royal, and university positions as well as by protecting evangelical sodalities when authorities targeted them.

La Coche (The Coach): Literary Clout at Court and in Print

During mid-winter 1541–1542, Marguerite presented Anne de Pisseleu, her brother’s mistress, with a deluxe manuscript of her poem, The Coach, which she had commissioned with detailed miniatures corresponding to the story and act of dedication. Befitting the recipient, in the poem the figure of Marguerite and several interlocutors discuss the nature of true love in its various forms and counterfeits. The figure of Marguerite lauds Anne as an exemplar of the perfect amie (female friend/lover), not for her great beauty and grace but for her perfect, virtuous love of François.

By that time, Anne was exerting powerful influence over Marguerite’s brother. With the gift of The Coach, Marguerite was nourishing her already close relationship with Anne, because, as she often told ambassadors during this period, she needed Anne’s help to sway the king. Marguerite had chosen her time and manner of currying favor carefully. That winter, Anne was riding higher than ever. She had convinced François to reverse the pro-Habsburg policy of their greatest rival, Anne de Montmorency, who

17 Petris, introduction to La Coche, in Navarre, 2012, pp. 271–76.
18 Navarre, 2012, La Coche, ll. 1244ff.
left court in quasi-disgrace in June 1541. As a mark of his growing esteem and deference, François was having special apartments decorated for Anne in his favorite residence, Fontainebleau. Marguerite’s poem echoed the themes of that project.

Marguerite’s gift of The Coach to Anne exemplifies three aspects of her attempts to wield influence in the latter years of François’s reign, a period when she was reaching her full powers as a writer and simultaneously facing stiffer competition at court. First, she more frequently deployed her literary works as cultural capital in the pursuit of her personal, dynastic, and religious agendas. In the 1540s specifically, she renewed her effort, similar to the one during François’s captivity, to convince him of his calling to be a restorer of the church, a role which corresponded to the reform and dynastic foreign policies that she and Anne were proposing in those years. As part of this campaign, Marguerite addressed a series of New Year’s Day poems to her brother in the 1540s, which again prescribed for François a reforming persona. Thereby, she drew François I, who was also a poet, albeit one whose pen had largely run dry since the 1520s, back into the intimate world of their previous poetic exchanges and induced him to respond. His poems from the 1540s exhibit that in some measure he accepted the religious persona Marguerite ascribed to him. Given the large number of surviving contemporary manuscripts of their poetic exchanges, which invariably contain copies of Marguerite’s other literary works alongside those of other court poets, her overtures to François were widely circulated and noted at court and in literary circles.

Second, Marguerite collaborated more closely with a sodality of women at court and their male relatives and allies to keep the king’s grace, win favors, and shape his policies. At times in the 1530s, Marguerite had acted in concert with other ladies to sustain their relationships with François, such as in April 1537, when she, Anne de Pisseleu, Catherine de Médicis, Marguerite de Bourbon-Vendôme, and François I’s daughter, Marguerite de France (1523–1574), co-signed a letter of encouragement while he was on campaign. In the 1540s, Marguerite cultivated her relationships with important female courtiers by involving them in her literary efforts, even

19 Extending the work of Knecht, 1994, Potter, pp. 543–56, confirms Anne’s dominant power at court, and corroborates Reid, 2009, II, pp. 497–516, that Marguerite and Anne collaborated throughout the 1540s in attempts to guide François’s foreign policy towards alliances and religious concord with the German Protestants and England.
21 Reid, 2013, pp. 45–47.
22 Génin, 1842, n° 83, p. 138.
if they were not capable of creating such works themselves. In addition to Anne, she had copies of *The Coach* made for Anne’s sisters and, similarly, dedicated her *Fable du faux cuyder* (Fable of False Belief) to François’s daughter, Marguerite. On at least one occasion in 1542, Marguerite had ladies at the royal court perform one of her plays. Indeed, many of her late plays, longer poems like *The Coach*, and, above all her *Heptaméron*, are peopled with noble men and women (sometimes only women) in courtly settings. These works reflect and project the women’s sodalities she cultivated and cooperated with in maintaining influence at a court that was formally dominated by François but by no means solely directed by him and his male courtiers.

Third, in the 1540s, Marguerite drew on the cultural capital she acquired over the years as one of the leading women in the republic of letters. The significance of that capital and ways she deployed it have yet to be fully measured. In the 1540s, although she had been writing consistently since the 1520s, she had stopped publishing new material after the last authorized versions of her *Mirror* in the winter of 1533–1534. Then in 1543 she released two of the aforementioned works: *Épître envoyée au roi par sa soeur unique, la roine de Navarre* (Letter sent to the King by his Only Sister, the Queen of Navarre), which was one of her New Year’s Day verse letters to François, and the *Fable of False Belief* (reprinted in 1545, 1546, and 1547). In early 1547, when her brother’s death was imminent, she had her secretary secure a copyright privilege to publish a collection containing all her previously printed works and a selection of unpublished ones in the *Marguerites de la marguerite des princesses* (Pearls from the Pearl of Princesses) (1547) and *Suite des marguerites* (More Pearls) (1547). Thereafter, however, even though they were designed in part to flatter Henri II, she withheld from print her three late major works: *La Navire* (The Ship) and *Les Prisons* (Prisons), which she completed after François’s death and contain some of her most important religious reflections, and her incomplete masterpiece, the *Heptaméron*.

In response to her literary œuvre and patronage of other authors, she received a crescendo of recognition as one of the leading women in the republic of letters. Authors from France, Italy, England, Switzerland, and the Empire dedicated at least 76 books to her and wrote dozens of poems in praise of her. Religious figures running the spectrum from Protestant reformers like Wolfgang Capito (c. 1478–1541) and Huldrich Zwingli (1484–1531) to conservative Catholics like Pierre Doré (1500–1569) chimed in to the chorus.

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23 The figures are from the author’s (incomplete) unpublished lists of books and poems dedicated or addressed to Marguerite.
of praise sung by the leading literary figures of the day, including neo-Latin luminaries, Salmon Macrin (1590–1557) and Nicolas Bourbon (c. 1503–c. 1550), and the most widely read French authors Clément Marot (1496–1544) and François Rabelais (1483/94–1553). How much her reputation as a cultural and religious paragon weighed at court or in her dealings beyond remains a question begging investigation.

Jeanne d’Albret’s First Marriage: An Abrahamic Sacrifice to the Hard Realities of Power Politics

In June 1541, Jeanne d’Albret, who was, according to Marguerite, still pre-pubescent, was forced by François I to marry William, Duke of Cleves (1516–1592). Jeanne had previously protested the marriage proposal, even directly to François when he visited her to inform her of his decision. At the marriage ceremony, Anne de Montmorency had literally to carry the unwilling Jeanne to the altar. That was his final humiliating duty before he left François’s court for good. The purpose of the marriage was to seal an important anti-Habsburg military and defensive alliance between François and the Duke, a wavering Catholic leaning to the Protestant cause, whose extensive lands straddled the Empire and Low Countries. The alliance was intended thereby to serve as the basis for a broader coalition between France and the German Protestant princes, in chief John Frederick I (1503–1554), Elector of Saxony, the Duke’s brother-in-law, who were supporting the Duke in a territorial dispute with the emperor. As part of his grander ambition to thwart the power of his rival, François was thus committing his support to the Duke in an imminent war with Charles V as well as implicitly to the German Protestants, on whom the Emperor had also threatened to wage war.

The marriage was also diametrically opposed to the interests of Marguerite’s husband, Henri de Navarre, who had been negotiating semi-secretly with Charles to marry his sole heir, Jeanne, to the Emperor’s son in return for the restitution of Lower Navarre on the Iberian side of the Pyrenees, which the Spanish had conquered in 1517. Marguerite was thus the monkey-in-the-middle between her brother and husband.

Marguerite played a major role in bringing the Cleves marriage to pass and in managing its outcome. The affair reveals that she had embraced the inexorable logic of her pro-Protestant foreign policy when fortune presented an alliance between France and Cleves as the best means of promoting it as well as her brother’s dynastic interests. To those two ends, she sacrificed her husband’s wishes. Viewed in terms of gender politics, Marguerite made some
hard choices in this affair, which reveal her commitment to her brother as the prime source of her power. The Cleves marriage also displays her cagey political sense for she both orchestrated the political alliance it sealed and planned for the likelihood that it would fall apart, as it did when Cleves lost the war with the Emperor and capitulated in 1543. As early as 1538, when Montmorency was leading François towards reconciliation with the Emperor, Marguerite learned from the Du Bellay brothers’ German agents that a French marriage alliance with Cleves could bind François, the German Protestants, and Henry VIII together against the Emperor. During the marriage negotiations, Anne de Pisseleu and Marguerite worked hard to promote the three-way alliance. They held long, private interviews with English and Protestant ambassadors to plot and plan. From 1540 onwards Marguerite seconded those efforts by sending dozens of letters to reassure the Duke and his Protestant allies of her and her husband’s agreement to the marriage, to express their happiness with it once it happened, as well as to maintain good relations with them up until, and even after, Cleves’ defeat voided the raison d’être of the marriage. After the Emperor forced Cleves to foreswear his French and Protestant allies, Marguerite appealed to François and the Pope to have the marriage annulled. In her letters, she assumed total responsibility for having forced her daughter into the marriage despite Jeanne’s opposition, noting that the marriage had never been consummated and was thus not valid (Marguerite had ensured that the Duke only put a symbolic foot into the nuptial bed). As proof of Jeanne’s unwillingness, Marguerite produced two secret, formal protests signed by Jeanne on the day before, and of, the wedding. The witnesses included members of the Albret household, including Marguerite’s close friend and hand-picked governess for Jeanne, Aymée de La Fayette. Marguerite had built into the marriage alliance scheme an escape hatch should it fail: blaming herself via Jeanne’s protestations against the forced marriage she exculpated her brother and ‘freed’ her daughter to serve once again as a bargaining chip in François’s foreign policy. In all this Marguerite accepted and played by the iron law, as she put it to her brother, that ‘a girl should have absolutely no will’ of her own in marriage matters.24 The contrast with her contemporaneous literary meditations on the voluntary, mutually

24 In an apology to François, Marguerite summarizes this harsh rule of dynastic marriage politics: ‘Monseigneur, ayant entendu que ma fille, ne connoissant […] ne l’obéissance qu’elle vous doit, ny aussi que une fille ne doit point avoir de voulonté, vous a tenu ung si fou propous que de vous dire qu’elle vous supplioit qu’elle ne feust point mariée à M. de Cleves’ (emphasis added), Génin, 1842, n° 105, pp. 175–76; discussed by Petris in Navarre, 2012, p. 275.
enriching, affection between perfect lovers — her brother and his mistress in *The Coach* — is staggering, but completely congruous with the gendered rules of that era's game of dynastic politics, wherein the fates of families and states were shaped by whether such ‘advantageous’ marriages actually paid off, not least in producing (male) heirs.

**Conclusion: Abiding Influence**

In June 1536, shortly after the death of Anne Boleyn (c. 1501/7–1536), an unidentified English ambassador sympathetic to the Catholic cause, writing to the English court about the Emperor's preparations for war with France, quipped that he ‘would be loath the King [Henry VIII] should have married in the French race, for they have been trained with the queen of Navarre’.25 It was a backhanded compliment of sorts, admitting that Marguerite had great influence on other women, and, implicitly, that such women could sway the policies of kings. The ambassador likely had in mind Marguerite's influence on Boleyn, who spent part of her youth at the French court. As modern scholarship has established, Anne had close, discrete ties to Marguerite and her network. Before and during her reign, Anne acquired many evangelical works in French, including Marguerite's *Mirror*. Her brother George (1504–1536), who served several terms in the early 1530s as ambassador to the French court and was in frequent contact with Marguerite, transmitted at least some of these works as well as personal messages. In early 1534, most likely at Marguerite's request, Anne appealed for the neo-Latin poet, Nicolas Bourbon, to be released from prison in Paris after indictment on heresy charges. Anne employed him as the tutor of noble children in her household. After her execution, Bourbon returned to France and Marguerite eventually made him tutor to her daughter Jeanne.

It is not surprising, then, that in 1544 Anne's daughter, Elizabeth, would be set the task, designed to help her win the favor of her step-mother, Catherine Parr (1512–1548), of translating Marguerite's *Mirror*.26 The decision to publish Elizabeth's translation in 1548, early in the reign of Edward VI (1537–1553), clearly had a political dimension and could not have been made without the approval of the English court. The publication served to bolster Elizabeth's persona as a pious and learned princess by associating her with the pious

25 2 June [1536], Brewer, X, n° 1042, pp. 432–33.
26 Ellis argues that Elizabeth learned a form of rhetorical ‘indeterminacy’ from Marguerite, which served her well when addressing concerns over her marriage and succession plans.
and learned queen. Much the same could be said for the decision in 1550 and 1551 to associate the young Seymour sisters with two editions of poetry in honor of Marguerite after her passing.

Those cross-channel examples of Marguerite’s stature as an evangelical paragon reflect her exemplary role among powerful women of the French court and beyond. While obedient to the gendered behavioral norms and expectations of women within marriage and families, at court, and as nobles, Marguerite creatively exploited the available social pathways. As a courtier and writer, she developed, and passed on to contemporaries and succeeding generations, traditions of female agency she had learned from her forebears. She had grown up witness to the formidably able political manoeuverings of Louise de Savoie and Anne de Bretagne, and the piousness of her mother-in-law, Marguerite de Lorraine (1463–1521).27 She imbibed and invoked in her literary works the ideas of female writers who had gone before her, such as the renowned French royal courtier, Christine de Pizan (1364–c.1430) and the martyred mystic Marguerite Porete (c. 1248/50–1310). In turn, Marguerite’s reputation attracted the attention of contemporary female writers. The Genevan reformer, Marie Dentière (c. 1495–1561), dedicated to the queen her Epistre tresutile (A Most Helpful Letter) (1539), an apology for the evangelical cause containing a strident ‘Defense of Women’ and their right to discuss Scripture with one another despite the attempts of men on all sides of the religious controversy to keep them silent.28 In the 1540s, the renowned religious poet, Vittoria Colonna (1492–1547), prompted by Renée de France, Duchess of Ferrara, initiated a spiritual correspondence and exchange of religious poetry with Marguerite. In 1542, the first letters of Marguerite and Colonna were published in Italian, adding to their lustre as major religious literary figures.

These literary examples of Marguerite’s stature among women are telling markers of her influence. More importantly, following the English ambassador’s line of thinking, they suggest that her influence over her brother, at court, and in the world — explored in the seven examples above — was broader and stronger than it otherwise would have been precisely because she sought influence among women and succeeded in attracting their attention and aid. In two articles published in 1972, Nancy Roelker analyzes Marguerite’s possible impact on elite French noblewomen active either in evangelical reform during her generation or later as supporters

27 For analysis of Marguerite’s relationship with her mother-in-law after the latter’s retirement to her convent, see Reid, 2009, I, pp. 109–11.
28 Fols. 4r–5r. For orientation to the literature on Dentière see Stjerna, pp. 133–47; and McKinley’s introduction to Dentière.
of the Huguenot party during the first religious wars. Roelker notes ties between Marguerite, the anchor of the first generation, and four or five of the 28 elite women she cites for those two periods. One can easily make the case for Marguerite's direct or strong indirect influence on over half of those cited by Roelker, as well as many ladies of the lesser nobility whom Roelker did not cite, such as (noted above) Anne Malet de Graville, Jeanne d'Avoise, or Aymée de La Fayette. Roelker's sketch of Marguerite's influence on the women of her generation remains to be completed. What seems clear, however, is that, unlike Marguerite's campaign to win her brother's heart to an ardent desire for religious and personal renewal, she had much greater success with noble women. In the summer of 1542, Anne de Pisseleu — whom Roelker oddly does not count among her 28 — vaunted to an ambassador that she had recently come to a knowledge of the word of God by reading the Gospel, and then turned to Marguerite to complain teasingly: ‘Madame, how could you have wanted to do me this ill-turn of hiding and depriving me of such a great good for so long? I am now so calm and confident that I count myself happy and do not know how to thank God enough’. Anne's was another backhanded compliment. In addition to The Coach, Marguerite had evidently convinced Anne, unlike François, to read the Scriptures, leading Anne to claim adherence to the evangelical cause and boast of her ability to move François to support it. Anne's testimony and the other vignettes cited above show that Marguerite was not just evangelical in her beliefs and writing, but a dynamic evangelist on several fronts. At court, in the realm, and indeed internationally, she not only sought to spread 'knowledge of the word of God', but also promoted culture and learning. In particular, she advocated by word and example that women play a vital role in deliberations over matters sacred and profane helping to ensure that ‘Faith, Goodness, Wisdom, the Power of God, Truth, Love, and Charity’ would be embedded in the hearts of kings, men, and women and realized in some measure on earth.

Or, as some modern theory asks, were her pious claims mere cant to mask more mundane ends? At times, one suspects, as Febvre argued, it was a bit of both.

29 Roelker, 1972a; Roelker, 1972b.
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