



## Women of the Reformation

### Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549)



#### Chronology

- April 11, 1492 — Marguerite is born to Charles de Valois, Comte d'Angouleme, and his wife Louise de Savoie
- September 12, 1494 — Marguerite's brother Francis is born
- 1498 — on the death of King Charles VIII of France, Francis becomes 2nd in line to the throne, after King Louis XII; together with Marguerite and their now widowed mother they move to court at Amboise, where they received a "liberal arts" education
- December 2, 1509 — Marguerite is married against her wishes to Charles, duc d'Alencon. In Alencon, she set about making the lives of her husband's people better by collecting funds to provide almshouses and hospices for orphans, abandoned children, the elderly and sick could live. Reformed convents and hospices insisting on hygiene and healthy diets. Demanded that poor or abandoned unwed mothers be given food and shelter for weeks before and after childbirth.
- May 18, 1514 — Francis marries Princess Claude, daughter of King Louis XII, who dies at the end of the year
- January 25, 1515 — Francis becomes King of France
- October 31, 1517 — Luther posts the 95 Theses at Wittenberg, Germany. Marguerite requests that Luther's writings be translated into French and sent to her.
- 1521 — following Luther's excommunication she seeks spiritual advice and is introduced to Guillaume Briconnet, bishop of Meaux, whose "Circle of Meaux" became the center of French evangelicalism; Marguerite becomes as supporter, student and promoter of reform.
- 1525 — Peasants War in Germany. Marguerite's own writings begin to circulate in manuscript (hand written) formats among evangelical networks. Because much of what she wrote was controversial, she did not want to put her brother or her mother in a position of having to protect or silence her. None of her writings were published before her mother's death in 1531; many were not published until the 1960's!
- January 1527 — Marguerite married Henri d'Albret, King of Navarre and moved to Bearn north of the Pyrenees
- November 16, 1528 - Marguerite gave birth to a daughter, Jeanne d'Albret
- July 14, 1530 — Marguerite gave birth to a son, Jean, who died on Christmas Day
- Marguerite was a writer. Most of her works circulated in manuscript (handwritten) formats among evangelical circles as she did not want her mother or her brother to have to either protect or silence her work. Only after the death of mother in 1531 did she permit any of them to be printed and published. Most of her works were not published until after 1960.

- *Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* (The Mirror of the Sinful Soul), published 1531, is a 1434 line poem addressed to Christ, her constant and forgiving intercessor. The Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne condemned and blacklisted it as heretical.
- October 17, 1534 — Affaires des Placards: anti-Catholic posters appeared overnight in public places in Paris, Blois, Rouen, Tours and Orleans. One was even posted on the door of King Francis' bedchamber! The main issues were “abuses of the papal mass invented directly contrary to the Holy Supper of our Lord, sole mediator and sole savior Jesus Christ.” The perpetrators were arrested and burned at the stake on November 13. It is in the aftermath of this that Jean Calvin left France.
- *L'Inquisiteur*, written in 1536, presents an obvious caricature of Noël Bédard, the overzealous censor of the Sorbonne
- As an effective means to proselytize, particularly to those who could not read or write, Marguerite began work on her *Chansons spirituelles*, in which new religious verses were written to the melody of popular—and occasionally naughty—songs, easily recognized and retained. Handwritten copies of these songs circulated as far as Geneva, thereby avoiding religious censorship. Marguerite included them in *Marguerites de la Marguerite des princesses*.
- June 1541, King Francis arranges the marriage of Marguerite's 12 year old daughter Jeanne to the duke of Cleves (brother of Anne of Cleves) over the protests of the family. Jeanne refused to walk down the aisle and had to be carried to the altar. The marriage was not consummated as the princess had not yet reached puberty. Marguerite spent the next two years doing everything to get the marriage annulled (Pope Paul III granted in 1545).
- In 1541 Calvin's *Christianae religionis institutio* which had been dedicated to King Francis, was published in French as *Institution de la religion chrétienne*. Marguerite's relationship with Calvin had deteriorated over the years, and they grew estranged when she found his dogmatism excessive. In 1545 Marguerite broke all contacts with Calvin after his writings criticized and ridiculed her spiritual advisers.
- A list of her writings:
  - Petit Oeuvre dévot et contemplatif* (Brief Devout and Contemplative Work)
  - Dialogue en forme de vision nocturne* (Dialogue in the form of a nocturnal vision)
  - “Oraison à notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ” (Prayer to Our Lord Jesus Christ)
  - Oraison de l'âme fidèle à son Seigneur Dieu* (Prayer of the Faithful Soul to Our Lord)
  - Discord étant en l'homme par la contrariété de l'esprit et de la chair* (Discordance Caused in Man by the Conflict between the Spirit and the Flesh)
  - “Récit de sa conversion” (Account of Her Conversion)
  - Comédie de la Nativité de Jésus-Christ* (Comedy on the Nativity of Jesus Christ)
  - Comédie de l'adoration des Trois Rois à Jésus-Christ* (Comedy on the Adoration of the Three Kings to Jesus Christ)
  - Comédie des Innocents* (Comedy of the Holy Innocents)
  - Comédie du Désert* (Comedy in the Desert)
  - Le Malade* (The Patient)
  - L'Inquisiteur* (The Inquisitor)
  - Comédie des quatre femmes* (Comedy for Four Women)
  - Trop Prou Peu Moins* (Too Much, Much, Little, and Less)
  - Marguerites de la Marguerite des Princesses* (Pearls of the Pearl of Princesses)
  - Les Prisons* (her spiritual autobiography)
  - L'Heptaméron* (incomplete at the time of her death published in 1558)

## Excerpts from the poems of Marguerite of Navarre

### *The Paradox of Mortification*

Make me blind that I may see,  
crippled and bound to walk and run.  
Drown me in nothingness that I may be  
whole and complete and all in Thee.

### *The Rapture of Divine Love*

Perfect love — would that it were known!  
bestows a pleasure that can never end,  
and every breath of bitterness is blown.  
Perfect love, it is the eternal God,  
which sheds abroad in hearts its charity  
and raises up the whole man from the sod.  
He who by love is brought to utter naught  
loves only that which is naught  
and thereby to wholeness he is brought.  
I did not know, I would not have believed,  
that love by dying can increase.  
But now I know, for now I have received.

### *The Doctrine of Election*

God has predestined His own  
that they should be sons and heirs.  
Drawn by a gentle constraint  
a zeal consuming is theirs.  
They shall inherit the earth  
clad in justice and worth.

### *Mirror of the Sinful Soul* (excerpts)

*N.B. Anne Boleyn brought a copy of this poem with her to England. In 1544, her daughter Princess Elizabeth translated into English.*

When God please to justify the heart he confers the gift of faith by which one has knowledge of His goodness, wisdom and power. One if filled with love and charity and has no longer fear. This gift of God allows itself no repose until man is made into God. No one can understand this save the one to whom the gift is given.

Take not offense, sweet Virgin Mary, I am of no mind to detract from your preeminence. But did not Christ say that he who does the will of God is his brother, sister and mother?"

A father will have compassion on his son. A mother will never forget her child. A brother will cover the sin of his sister. But what husband every forgave the faithlessness of his wife? I am the bride of Christ. I have been faithless to him. And he has forgiven me.

### *The Primacy of Scripture*

Encased in lambskin is the sacred Word  
embossed with markings of a deep blood  
red,  
sealed with seven seals may now be heard  
by those who find that law and grace are  
wed.

### *Justification by Faith*

To you I testify  
that God does justify  
through Christ, the man who sins.  
But is he does not believe  
and by faith receive  
he shall have no peace,  
from worry no surcease.  
God will then relieve,  
if faith will but believe  
through Christ, the gentle Lord.

O charity, to make me a new creature, to make me beautiful! Does thous not give me scepter and crown in thy kingdom?

Jesus, true fisher thou of souls!  
My only Saviour, only advocate!  
Since thou God's righteousness hast  
satisfied,  
I fear no more to fail at heaven's  
gate.  
My Spouse bears all my sins,  
though great they be,  
And all his merits places upon me...  
Come, Saviour, make thy mercies  
known...  
Jesus for me was crucified:  
For me the bitter death endured,  
For me eternal life procured.

...  
Satan, where is now thy tower?  
Sin, all withered is thy power.  
Pain or death no more I fear,  
While Jesus Christ is with me here.  
Of myself no strength have I,  
But God, my shield, is ever nigh.  
...

Not hell's black depth, nor heaven's  
vast height,  
Nor sin with which I wage continual  
fight,  
Me for a single day can move,  
O holy Father, from thy perfect love.  
...  
How beautiful is death,  
That brings to weary me the hour of  
rest!  
Oh! hear my cry and hasten, Lord,  
to me,  
And put an end to all my misery.

O my god, that death is fair  
which takes me from this fetid air.  
By death I'm victor in the race.  
By death I look upon Thy face.  
By death I am to Thee conformed.  
By death I languish for me kind.  
O sweet death, where is thy sting?

***Prisons*** (excerpts)

Churches entrance me with their ancient towers  
triumphant portals and chimes that mark the hours  
altars within, with silver marked and gold, given lavishly by those of old.  
They hoarded not their goods and lands but gave  
as if by prayers perpetual mankind to save.  
The candles flicker and the torches flare, while bells harmonious reverberate in air.  
'Paradise is this,' I say to me, 'chants melodious, organs with holy glee  
reverent priests with sermons that console to bring the seeker to his cherished goal.  
I am in rapture, Lord, my altar Thou. My pilgrimage in Thee is ended now.'  
Then in my fancy comes hypocrisy which sweet seduction she entices me.  
for honor says I should a church endow. Or give a fee to break my wedding vow.  
Let me devote some of my sordid gain to house a relic brought by Charlemagne.

Lord, when shall come the festal day so ardently desired  
that I shall be by love upraised and seated at thy side,  
the rapture of this nuptial joy denudes me quite.  
Seductions of love and fame no more delight.  
Assuage my streaming eyes and hear my sigh.  
And may I have a gentle sleep when I shall die.