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Marie Dentièrre, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre and Preface to a Sermon by John Calvin*. Ed. and trans. Mary B. McKinley. *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*. University of Chicago Press, 2004. xxix + 110 pp. Notes, bibliographies, and index. \$18.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-226-14279-5.

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Mary B. McKinley's edition and translation of Marie Dentièrre's 1539 *Epistre tres utile faicte et composée par une femme Chrestienne de Tornay, Envoyée à la Royne de Navarre seur du Roy de France* is a very useful work indeed. For the first time since its original publication enraged the Genevan Council of Two Hundred, McKinley has made widely accessible in its entirety the open letter that she terms "the first explicit statement of reformed theology by a woman to appear in French"(p. 2). [1] That she has done so in lively English prose should earn her the gratitude of students of early modern France, the Reformations, and women's studies.

McKinley describes Marie Dentièrre (1495-1561) as "walk[ing] onto the stage of Reformation Geneva in . . . scenes" both "dramatic" and "fleeting" (p. 1). Daughter of a noble family (the d'Ennetières, in a local spelling) Marie left the Augustinian convent of Tournai in the early 1520s as Martin Luther's ideas gained currency in northern France and the Low Countries. She appears next in Strasbourg as the wife of Simon Robert, a former priest of Tournai turned reformer. Following Guillaume Farel to the Valais in 1528, they became "the first French married couple to accept a pastoral assignment in the Reformed Church," and a letter from Martin Bucer suggests that Marie played an active role in their mission (p. 2). After Simon Robert's death in 1533, Marie Dentièrre married another of Farel's followers, Antoine Froment, with whom she settled in Geneva during the heady early days of evangelical ascendancy. There we glimpse Marie Dentièrre in 1535, preaching against monastic life and praising marriage to a hostile Jeanne de Jussie and her sisters at the convent of the Poor Clares. Not until the Genevan Council of Two Hundred's expulsion of Calvin and Farel in 1538 does the spotlight again fall on Marie Dentièrre. According to Froment, Marguerite of Navarre "wanted to learn from a friend [commère] of hers, named Marie Dentièrre, from Tournai, . . . how this dispute had come about and why the ministers of God's word in Geneva had been expelled" (quoted by McKinley, p.12). Dentièrre responded with the *Very Useful Epistle*, apparently sending it directly to Marguerite before its anonymous publication in Geneva. Once the speculation over the *Epistle's* authorship and the scandal over its attacks on the Genevan Council had subsided, Marie Dentièrre largely disappears from view, except for a letter written by Calvin five years after his return to Geneva, in which he related as a "funny story" his confrontation with "Froment's wife" while she was "harangu[ing]" in taverns and on street corners against the Calvinist ministry (quoted by McKinley, p.19). As McKinley observes, the hostility expressed in the letter "makes all the more interesting" the brief text that rounds out this volume, the preface to two 1561 editions of Calvin's "Sermon on the Modesty of Women in their Dress," signed "M.D." (p. 22).

McKinley's introduction applies the findings of a generation of scholarship in women's history and literary studies to fill in the sparse documentary traces of a life story from which Marie Dentièrre seems all too often "an intriguing absence" (p.18). While the pioneering studies of Marie Dentièrre focus on the heroine boldly confronting her Catholic or Protestant opponents, McKinley looks for relationships – between Dentièrre and Katherine Zell, who during Dentièrre's stay in Strasbourg would have provided a model for "a woman who was a partner in her husband's pastoral work and advocate of the reformed religion in her own right" (p. 4); between Dentièrre and the widow mentioned in Calvin's mocking letter of 1546 as sharing her views of the ministers (p. 20); between Dentièrre and her son-in-law Jean-

Raymond Merlin, Coligny's personal chaplain, who, as William Kemp has suggested, might have invited her 1561 preface (p. 23).<sup>[2]</sup> Most importantly, McKinley draws on the work of Kemp, Diane Desrosiers-Bonin, and others to illuminate the multiple connections between Marie Dentière and the addressee of her *Epistle*, Marguerite of Navarre: spiritual kinship through Marie Dentière's daughter, for whom Marguerite was godmother (p. 12), mutual friends in Strasbourg and among the French evangelicals patronized by Marguerite (p.13), and Marguerite's powerful example as "a woman who dared to articulate and to publish dissident religious beliefs" in her *Mirror of the Sinful Soul* (pp. 14, 51). McKinley highlights similarities between the two women's views of the Lord's Prayer and human nothingness (pp. 62, 66). She also unveils Dentière's criticisms of Marguerite's compromises with Catholicism, as when she glosses as a pointed warning to Marguerite the punning allusion in Dentière's statement that if Catholic clergy "are obstinate in their malice, rejecting the doctrine, the admonitions and the word of God, like dogs and swine, you must not give them holy things or pearls [*marguerites*]" (p. 76). In analyzing the *Epistle*'s rhetorical strategies, McKinley pays particular attention to the ways in which Marie Dentière includes Marguerite in such phrases as "we women" to authorize her own writing, encourage other women in the pursuit of scriptural truth, and sharpen her calls for Marguerite to intervene with her brother, French king Francis I, on behalf of reformed religion (pp. 51, 80-81).

Historians of France will appreciate McKinley's commitment to situating Marie Dentière's writing in the contexts both of Genevan events and of the struggles for religious reform in France. This dual vision is most evident and most intriguing in McKinley's presentation of the preface to Calvin's sermon on modesty in women's dress: she not only discusses the sermon's scriptural basis in 1 Timothy 2:8-12 and its fruition in the Genevan sumptuary laws of 1558, but also posits that its 1561 republication with a preface by Marie Dentière was intended to counter rumors of French Calvinists' debauchery that intensified after the violent disruption in 1557 of a nocturnal meeting of the Reformed church in the rue Saint-Jacques in Paris (pp. 22-23, 30-31). Throughout the volume, McKinley emphasizes the ideas, interests, and experiences shared by reform leaders in France and French exiles; particularly interesting are her comparisons between Marie Dentière's attacks on the Mass and those made by Antoine Marcourt, author of the Placards of 1534 that had turned Francis I against the reformers.

Scholars of the Reformation, of Geneva, or even of women's writing, may find Dentière's preface to Calvin's sermon a poor substitute for excerpts from an anonymous work long attributed to Dentière, the 1536 *La guerre et deslivrance de la ville de Genesve*.<sup>[3]</sup> In an argument that I would like to see developed further, McKinley finds unconvincing the stylistic affinities between the *Epistre tres utile* and *La Guerre et deslivrance* on which Albert Rilliet based his 1881 attribution of the latter to Marie Dentière; she asserts instead that the similarities between the anonymous history and the writings of male reformers like Farel, Viret, and Froment are more evident (pp. 7-8). For teaching purposes, it is true that *La guerre et deslivrance*, principally concerned to portray the Genevan Reformation in a providential light, shows little overt concern about women's roles, while the four-page preface shows Dentière cautioning women against extravagant dress and cosmetics. There is also some merit to including a text whose late date shows that, despite Calvin's reprimand, Marie Dentière "remained actively involved in religious reform until the end of her life" (p. 2). Although McKinley's introduction could point the way to an interesting discussion of Dentière's choice of tactics, I suspect that students will see the preface as little more than a puzzling postscript to the *Epistle*.

With only two sixteenth-century copies of the *Epistle* known to exist (one in Geneva's Musée Historique de la Réformation, the other in the Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris), nonspecialists' access to the text has been mediated through the excerpts published in the late nineteenth century by A.L. Herminjard and Albert Rilliet and through Thomas Head's valuable English translation of them in Katharina Wilson's *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*.<sup>[4]</sup> Head remedied Herminjard's omission of the "Defense of Women" in which Dentière bolsters with biblical examples her seemingly modest assurance

to Marguerite de Navarre that women “are not forbidden to write and admonish one another in charity” before gendering her call for religious reform: “Who are they, I pray you, who have invented and contrived so many ceremonies, heresies, and false doctrines on earth if not men?” (pp. 55-56). McKinley’s edition restores more of Dentièrè’s advocacy of women’s learning and preaching as well as her sharpest challenges to Marguerite of Navarre, for instance: “Why don’t you make [the cardinals and bishops who are in your courts] support their case publicly, before everybody? They are just so many doctors, so many wise men, so many great clerics, so many universities against us poor women, who are rejected and scorned by everyone...We say the opposite of what they say; let them prove what they say” (p. 61). [5] McKinley’s edition also has the considerable merit of reintegrating Dentièrè’s challenges within her critiques of the Mass, her denunciations of idolatry, her scholarship in humanist and ecclesiastical Latin and even in Hebrew, her commentary on current events, and her interpretation of biblical history – in other words, of restoring the coherence of Dentièrè’s religious vision. The restoration of the *Epistle’s* original epigraphs and marginal references further reminds the reader that Dentièrè’s advocacy of religious reform and of women as reformers shared a scriptural framework, notably that of her epigraph from 1 Corinthians: “For he has chosen the weak and despised of this world to shame the great.”

Even in a series devoted to communicating the ‘other voice in early modern Europe,’ McKinley’s volume is exceptional. Her translation conveys the vigor and oral cadence of Dentièrè’s prose, and her sensitivity to the meaning and flow of each sentence as a whole yields a more readable text than Thomas Head’s earlier rendition.[6] Students will also appreciate that McKinley’s comprehensive introduction takes no background knowledge for granted, and that her footnotes not only cite but summarize the biblical passages on which Dentièrè rests her arguments. McKinley’s introduction, combined with the Series Editors’ introduction on medieval and early modern women’s writing, to which she helpfully refers, will ease the inclusion of this work in syllabi focused on French history or literature, Reformation Europe, or women’s studies. True, the combined introductions far exceed the 42-page length of the primary sources. But students who take the time to read the texts alongside McKinley’s fine explications of the contexts and posterity of Marie Dentièrè’s writing will learn much about the dynamism of the early Reformation and about the choices involved in making and writing history.

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## NOTES

[1] For the sixteenth-century publication of the *Epistre*, Cynthia Skenazi gives the figure of 1500 copies for the first press run in “Marie Dentièrè et la prédication des femmes,” *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* XXI.1 (1997), p. 8. McKinley notes that Froment saved “some 400 copies” from confiscation and that the work continued to circulate (p. 15). According to the website of SIEFAR (Société Internationale pour l’Etude des Femmes de l’Ancien Régime), Diane Desrosiers-Bonin, William Kemp, and Isabelle C. Denommé are editing the *Œuvres de Marie d’Ennetières* for publication by Droz. See William Kemp, “Ennetières, Marie d’,” 2003 <http://www.siefar.org/DictionnaireSIEFAR/SFDennetieres.html> (July 2005).

[2] See, notably, Natalie Zemon Davis’s evocations of Dentièrè in “City Women and Religious Change,” *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford University Press, 1975), pp. 82-83 and 85; and Thomas Head, “A Propagandist for the Reform: Marie Dentièrè,” in Katharina M. Wilson, ed., *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987) pp. 260-283, and “The Religion of the Femmelettes: Ideals and Experience among Women in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century France,” in Lynda L. Coon, Katherine J. Haldane, and Elizabeth W. Sommer, *That Gentle*

*Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), pp. 140-173.

[3] Edited and published by Albert Rilliet in *Mémoires de la Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Genève*, vol. 20, and as *La guerre et délivrance de la ville de Genesve composée et publiée en 1536 par Marie Dentièrre de Tournay, ancienne abbesse et femme d'Antoine Froment* (Geneva : Imprimerie Charles Schuchardt, 1881).

[4] Aimé-Louis Herminjard, *Correspondance des Réformateurs dans les pays de langue française. Recueillie et publiée avec d'autres lettres relatives à la Réforme et des notes historiques et biographiques* (orig. pub. 1866-97 ; reprint ed. Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1965), vol. 5, pp. 295-304 (no. 785); Head, "Propagandist," pp. 260-261 and 267.

[5] I regret that I have been unable to consult McKinley's "The Absent Ellipsis: The Edition and Suppression of Marie Dentièrre in the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Century," in Collette Winn, ed., *Women Writers of the Ancien Régime: Strategies of Emancipation* (New York: Garland, 1997), pp. 85-99. However, a quick comparison of McKinley's and Herminjard's texts suggests that the latter systematically excised Dentièrre's assertions of women's ability or obligation to debate religious matters.

[6] Head's version offers word-for-word translation emphasizing English cognates of the original French. In McKinley's version, Dentièrre informs Marguerite Navarre, "I wanted to write you, not to teach you, but so that you might take pains with the King, your brother, to obviate all these divisions which reign in the places and among the people over whom God commissioned him to rule and govern. And also over your people, whom God gave you to provide and for and keep in order" (pp. 52-53). Head renders the passage, "I have wished to write you, not in order to teach you yourself, but in order that you may take care with the king, your brother, to heal all those divisions, which reign in those places, towns, and peoples over which God has commissioned him to reign and govern, and also to take care for your lands, which God has given you, for the purpose of watching over and giving order" (Head, p. 276). Sometimes the differences between the translations concern not style but meaning. McKinley gives the word *caphards* or *cafards* its proper sixteenth-century meaning of "hypocrites" (see A. J. Greimas and T. M. Keane, *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (Paris: Larousse, 1992)). While McKinley has Dentièrre conclude, "all preachers and ministers must follow the way of God's word, caring for nothing else but that God be glorified and honored throughout the land and that their neighbor be won to our Lord" (p. 85), in Head's version the phrase appears as ". . . that one be joined in the next to our savior" (Head, p. 279); Herminjard's edition reads, "que Dieu soit glorifié et honoré par toute la terre et le prochain gagné à nostre Seigneur." (Herminjard, p. 301). McKinley's version of Dentièrre's "Defense of Women" opens, "Not only will certain slanderers and adversaries of truth try to accuse us of excessive audacity and temerity, but so will certain of the faithful, saying that it is too bold for women to write to one another about matters of scripture" (p. 54). Head's translation begins the same passage, "Not only do we wish to accuse any defamers and adversaries of the truth of very great audacity and temerity, but also any of the faithful who say that women are very impudent in interpreting Scripture for one another" (Head, p. 277).

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