Evangelical Secrecy and Courtly News: 
*The Heptameron* (1559)

General Introduction

Marguerite de Navarre’s collection of seventy-two short stories, titled the *Heptameron* (1559), makes secrecy a central narrative and thematic concern. Here I argue that secrecy functions in several of her stories in relation to the ideas of openness and of news (*nouvelle*). Secrecy occupies a central place in the *Heptameron* in part because its stories parody medieval literary conventions relating to the phenomenon of love service, for which secrecy is a necessary means of protecting individual and collective honor. The stories dealing with love service reflect on the way prohibitions against speech lead protagonists first to suppress their fantasies, then to invent secret stratagems to achieve their desired ends.

The contrast between Marguerite's stories and her devotional poems has led scholars to search for ways to articulate the connections between them. The *Heptameron*’s relationship to Marguerite's devotional works and to the history of religion in France during the late medieval period into the first half of the sixteenth century has been notably discussed by Robert Cottrell, Gérard Defaux, Edwin Duval, Jan Miernowski,1 and most recently by Gary Ferguson and Mary Mckinley, who study the *Heptameron* from the point of view of sixteenth-century French religious and literary history and explore the multiple ways in which spiritual concerns play into Marguerite’s stories.2

---


Numerous scholars have discussed the way that Marguerite conceived of secrecy in both secular and spiritual terms. Richard Regosin’s work on secrecy in the *Heptameron* adopts a Foucauldian view of the history of sexuality, arguing that Marguerite’s stories illustrate the paradoxical status of repressed erotic drives that continue to disclose themselves obliquely. He explores Foucault’s view that prohibitions on sexual discourse not only create the need for fables of secrecy but also depend on them for their authority. In work on secrecy and religion, Mary McKinley studies the *Heptameron* in terms of changing perspectives on sacramental confession, showing that both Guillaume Briçonnet and Marguerite challenge the absolutionist understanding of confession that dominated late-medieval Church doctrine, according to which the power of absolution belongs to the sacrament and to the institution of priesthood. The *Heptameron*’s forty-first story, in her view, articulates a contritionist perspective on the sacrament of penance, according to which the remission of guilt depends entirely on interior contrition, not on external institutions. Secrecy generates narratives, she argues, in which a feminine subjectivity becomes articulated in resistance to “male-dominated” narratives associated with institutional control over women through confessional practice.3

Secrecy becomes important in the *Heptameron* in ways that Frank Kermode’s ideas on secrets and narrative also help to clarify. Kermode’s work argues that secrecy functions in narrative through motive and emplotment; in his view, secrets invite readers to reevaluate how motive (what he calls *dianoia, ethos*) relates to action and event. He writes that secrets “are at odds with sequence, which is considered an aspect of propriety; and a passion for sequence may result in the suppression of the secret.”4 Secrets in this view stand at odds with narrative arrangement and propriety, and, we may further speculate,