Conclusion: Secrecy and Covers between Literature, Philosophy, and Theology

Early sixteenth-century humanists and Evangelicals imbued their literature with questions pertaining to secrecy as a medium for both disclosing and concealing sacred truths. They turned to ancient and medieval traditions of literary and theological thought about the role of aesthetics in theology and devotion, in which the metaphor for secrecy as “cover” or veil (*integumentum, involucrum*) has a long-established and well-known tradition of scholarship, which nonetheless has not been studied specifically in connection with secrecy. The metaphor of the veil also raises questions concerning how human reason and discourse can be appropriately transferred from worldly to divine matters? How can human language describe divine essence in its absolute separation from the world?

Marguerite’s spiritual directors, Lefèvre and Briçonnet, draw especially on pseudo-Dionysius’s theory of metaphor (*transumptio*) to theorize how names can be attributed to divine essence in theological speculation. Briçonnet combines theological and literary theories of metaphor (*transumptio*) to emphasize the ambivalent place that human discourse, and figural language in particular, occupy in Christian piety. As Chapters 1 and 2 discussed, Erasmus, Lefèvre, and Briçonnet rearticulated ancient and medieval concepts of secrecy in various philosophical and literary genres in their effort to reform and cultivate spiritual life. They drew on ideas of secrecy in their pedagogical reform initiatives, arguing that the sacramental and pastoral values traditionally associated with the Roman Church need not be mediated exclusively through institutionalized forms of devotional practice exclusively or based on popular forms of late medieval piety. They extend their speculations on secrecy to the sphere of Biblical interpretation and aesthetics, primarily in Origenian, Augustinian, and pseudo-Dionysian terms. We have also seen, in Chapters 3 and 4, how Marguerite de Navarre sustains but also problematizes this distinction between secrecy as metaphysical union, on the one hand, and secrecy as prudence in court life, on the other.

In studying secrecy in courtly and religious works by early modern authors and in their patristic and medieval sources, I have focused on the metaphor of the cover because it has remained largely unstudied in contemporary humanistic scholarship despite its centrality and importance for the early modern French vernacular tradition. Together, secrecy and metaphors of covering appear at the very beginnings of the European and French vernacular literary
traditions, in their earliest and most monumental literary texts.¹ For instance, the idea that secular literature can help explore divine secrets influenced such authors as Dante—in his *Paradiso* and *Vita Nuova*, where Beatrice serves as a screen lady both hiding and disclosing divine mystery—as well as Chaucer, Marie de France, and Chrétien de Troyes.

This medieval tradition was first revived and reformulated in the early sixteenth-century French literary tradition by Clément Marot’s translation of the prologue to the *Roman de la Rose*.² During that same period, Lefèvre d’Etaples and the Group of Meaux pursued their renewal of ancient and medieval models for understanding the place of fiction in devotional life and of devotional life in fiction, while Erasmus explored the possibilities of prophetic speech, inspired commentary, and Socratic dialectic, as we know from Screech’s work.

The term *secretum* refers to the way the Divinity initiates those to whom it reveals its secrets. Throughout the Western tradition, pseudo-Dionysius’s translators have used the terms *velamen*, *integumentum*, *couverture*, and *voiles sacrés* to translate his ideas on secrecy and divine mystery.³ Secrets enable transcendent truths to accommodate themselves to human finitude. The word *tectum*, or cover, reappears in connection with secrecy in pseudo-Dionysius’s works, as it also does in Boccaccio’s ideas on profane literature and Christian mysteries.

Secrecy represents a problem of sacred and profane values throughout the *Heptameron*. As I discussed in Chapter 4, Marguerite later adapted Christian humanist notions of secrecy to narrative fiction in her *nouvelles*, where devotional and courtly secrecy are brought together in an uneasy tension. In Chapter 4, I addressed how the *Heptameron’s* narrative strategies develop secrecy through the themes of courtship and love service. Marguerite’s *nouvelles* explore Lefèvre’s, Briçonnet’s, and Erasmus’s spiritual anthropologies, and they combine them with what Marc Fumaroli has described as an anthropology of pathology and literary fiction. Marguerite opposes devotional mystery to the profane pursuit of honors, profits, and pleasures that I have discussed throughout the preceding chapters. The *Heptameron* explores the world of honor, profit, and pleasure, to which these other reformers had opposed spiritual secrecy. The *Heptameron* reflects critically through narrative

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³ See Philippe Chevallier, *Dionysiaca* (Paris-Bruges: Desclée, de Brouwer & Cie, 1937) for the different terms used to translate pseudo-Dionysius’s works.