SPIRITUAL DIALOGUES AND POLITICS IN THE
CORRESPONDANCE BETWEEN MARGUERITE DE NAVARRE
AND GUILLAUME BRIÇONNET (1521–1524)*

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The correspondence between the humanist reformer Guillaume Briçonnet (c. 1470–1534), bishop of Meaux, and the politically influential sister of King Francis I, Marguerite de Navarre (1492–1549), reflects four years of France’s volatile religious and political state of affairs in the 1520s. Their exchange of a total of 123 letters spans the period from June 1521 until November 1524 and comes to us in a single manuscript, Paris, BnF 11.495, in the handwriting of two successive copyists, with additional later annotations and corrections in a third hand.¹ Modern editors agree that Marguerite had her correspondence copied by these two secretaries shortly after, if not simultaneously with the exchange of letters, in a clear effort at preservation. The fact that the manuscript of the second copyist breaks off in mid-sentence, leaving it unfinished, allows for speculation that the correspondence might have continued for a while in 1524, though nothing seems to indicate it lasted much longer than that.²

For Briçonnet, the recently appointed bishop of Meaux who had already established himself as an active reformer and leader of the Circle of Meaux—a group of French clerics seeking to reform the Church according to evangelical ideals—the exchange of letters with Marguerite provided an ongoing opportunity to gain political support for the budding French reform movement.³ Briçonnet’s disciples promoted ideals

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³ For much of the following information, we have benefited from the scholarship of Martineau, Veissière, and Heller, ‘Introduction générale’, 1–5; H. Heller, ‘Marguerite of Navarre and the Reformers of Meaux’, in Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance 33 (1971), 271–310; V.-L. Saulnier, ‘Marguerite de Navarre aux temps de Briçonnet. Étude de la correspondance générale (1521–1522)’, Première partie, in Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance 39 (1977), 437–478; and Deuxième partie,
similar to those of other early sixteenth-century reform movements, such as the importance of the vernacular translation of the Scriptures, the ethical integrity of the clergy, and an emphasis on salvation by faith. Yet by no means did they put forth a militant call for action in the Lutheran manner: the sermons of Briçonnet and his allies such as Lefèvre d’Étaples, Michel d’Arande, and Guillaume Farel advocated a reform from within the Church, based on a theological perspective that relied heavily on the Scriptures as well as on the mystical writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. At the same time, it is undeniable that the theologians of the Sorbonne virulently attacked Briçonnet’s evangelism, which they saw as dangerously close to Lutheran beliefs and that, in turn, the bishop incessantly sought to strengthen his political ties with the court. In 1520, the latter still expressed sympathy for his ideals and protected his followers, some of whom were employed as almoner or as chaplain of Marguerite herself. Yet this relationship between court and Meaux reformers was of a fragile and oscillating nature: Francis I varyingly supported or denounced the reformers according to strategic and political motivations based on the various successes and failures of his foreign policy in Italy, as well as the degree to which he sought to antagonize or reconcile the popes, who considered Briçonnet a heretic.

For Marguerite, then still duchess of Alençon, Briçonnet’s letters served as religious counseling that provided her with spiritual support. The sister of the king was then, and would remain even after 1525, a faithful protector of French evangelicals. Yet unlike her brother, her sympathy towards the reformers surpasses political motivations and reflects a genuine interest in their scriptural theology: her initiative to correspond with Briçonnet is undeniably elicited by a need for spiritual guidance based on the gospel. Triggered by the departure of her husband, Charles d’Alençon, with Francis’s armies, Marguerite’s letters express worldly anxieties in troubled times of war, diplomacy, church politics, aristocratic marriages (including her own), and health issues, which are reworked by Briçonnet into long-winded spiritual

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