H-France Review Vol. 25 (September 2025), No. 72

Theresa Brock. *The Visionary Queen: Justice, Reform, and the Labyrinth in Marguerite de Navarre.* Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2024. viii + 227 pp. Notes, references, and index. $150.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1644533277; $32.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-1644533086; $32.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1644533093.

Review by Nora Peterson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The Visionary Queen explores the labyrinth as meaningful symbol for Marguerite de Navarre's life and work, one that showcases the full depth of her political agency, while also highlighting how her political engagement proves inextricable from her faith and creative endeavors. As Brock writes in her introduction, the Queen's engagement is "innovative, visionary, and worthy of modern attention, including for its pro-woman orientation and the resonances between her life and writings and our own concerns today. Indeed, Marguerite's writing can be read as an exploratory space in which to develop a vision for reforming institutions and fostering justice, two objectives she pursued in her real-world engagement" (pp. 6-7). The major goal of the book is to bring the "visionary thrust of the queen's life and works to the fore" (p. 3).

The book is divided into two parts, with the first focusing on the cultural, historical and social background of Marguerite, her political and social milieu, and the complex history of the labyrinth as physical object and as metaphor. The second section comprises a series of close readings and theoretical analysis of how Marguerite de Navarre uses the labyrinth to weave her vision of justice into the *Heptaméron.* The general introduction to Marguerite, her life, and her impact is thorough and written in an accessible way. Scholars of Marguerite will be familiar with most of the material here, though it is a helpful reference. *The Visionary Queen* will be of most productive use for historians and scholars of (early modern) women writers who are hoping to expand their lens and knowledge beyond their scholarly discipline, field, or literary tradition. Brock's explanation of the specific ways that Marguerite was involved as a key figure at the intersections of various institutions helps to provide context for non-specialists about the Queen's power and impact in the Renaissance. Brock also does a wonderful job of incorporating some of the most famous passages from the *Heptaméron* and frequently cited scholarly interpretations of them, which makes access to the critical conversation easier for those who may not be interested in working through the entire body of scholarship, but who want a strong grasp of the most common readings.

That said, there are elements of analysis that are valuable to scholars of Marguerite de Navarre and of Renaissance literature more generally. Two of these stand out in particular. In chapter

one, Brock introduces the unicursal labyrinth (which marked Marguerite's lifetime). In this model, the labyrinth appears flat to a person standing at the entrance. The viewer would see a series of distorted lines leading towards the center and back out. Disorientation would come from the overwhelm of the experience, but, as Brock explains, there would not be choices as to which direction to take. Next, Brock contextualizes the development of the multicursal labyrinth from the late sixteenth century. She notes that this kind of labyrinth, inspired by the German *Irrgarten,* is likely the kind that readers would be familiar with today, with its various paths and routes. Brock explains that in Marguerite de Navarre's time, a labyrinth would have been a physical structure and a symbol. Another fascinating trope in Brock's study is its introduction of the *in bono* and *in malo* elements of the (multicursal) labyrinth. Whereas the *in bono* element inspires awe and reference for Christ, *in malo* represents trial, suffering, and endurance. Both are reconciled through "wonder at how God creates order out of apparent chaos, good out of experiences that seem evil" (p. 26). The two elements often stand in tension. These distinct but frequently overlapping ways of working through the labyrinth theme are extremely helpful and fruitful in framing the multiplicity and polysemous qualities of the *Heptaméron.*

In general, the structure and organization of the book works well, beginning with its context and framing of the labyrinth as trope in Marguerite's world, and finishing with increasingly complex analyses of this theme in the *Heptaméron.* One caveat: the chapters do get progressively longer. Chapter one is a pithy twelve pages, while chapter six is nearly three times longer. Neither length is inherently objectionable, but it makes the book feel unbalanced. At times, the discussion of authors and texts that influenced Marguerite also feel unbalanced--sometimes too long, as in the long analyses of Boccaccio and Castiglione in chapter six--and sometimes not well-enough developed, as in the various Vives sections, or the underexplored connections with Rabelais.

Chapter one, "The Labyrinth as Structure and Symbol," invites the reader to imagine the well-known labyrinth in the Chartres Cathedral. It then provides a concise overview of the labyrinth as both structure and symbol from the Middle Ages to the early modern period. In a revision to how modern-day readers understand the concept of labyrinth, a structure that emerged in the 1600s according to Brock, this chapter argues that "Marguerite would have been well positioned to grapple with the polysemous character of the labyrinth across genres and disciplines and in both overt formats and subtler allusions" (p. 27). Building on the work of Penelope Reed Doob, Brock traces the tradition of labyrinth writing in various medieval and early modern authors. While Brock expands the examples to include Rabelais and Calvin, she does not return to these authors later in her analysis--there remains, then, an opportunity, to build on the reading and analysis started here.

Chapter two, "From the Labyrinth, a Vision: Competing Influences on Marguerite's Religious, Political, and Creative Endeavors," returns to Marguerite's infancy, then offers a window into the visionary and labyrinthine aspects of the Queen's life. It discusses Marguerite's early interest in religious reform and connection with Guillaume Briçonnet and outlines the delicate balance between her desire for reform and her need to stay in line with François. The chapter's aim is to shows how major life events such as her brother's captivity in Spain, the birth of her daughter and death of her mother, the opposition she faced over her controversial *Miroir de l'âme pêcheresse,* and the division of loyalties she faced during her final years are reflective of the time

in which she lived, and reveal the constant tension throughout Marguerite's life between *in bono* and *in malo* elements of the labyrinth.

Chapter three, "'We Walk by Faith, Not by Sight': Exegesis, Pilgrimage, and Labyrinthine Connections in the Reformation," is much more complex than the previous two chapters. It unfolds in multiple directions, exploring questions of interpretation, pilgrimage, and self-reflection as they played out in sixteenth-century thought and in Marguerite's work. It begins with the correspondence between Briçonnet and Marguerite, and how their letters explore topics of exegesis, pilgrimage, and the labyrinth. References to sight, blindness, and the path towards salvation are common, and Brock convincingly argues that they reflect *in bono* and *in malo* elements of labyrinth. The chapter then discusses exegesis and its relationship to pilgrimage in the writings of some of Marguerite's contemporaries, including Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Desiderius Erasmus. It outlines the critical stances of the former two thinkers in relation to pilgrimage and aligns Marguerite with Erasmus's more moderate position. Both share the emphasis that the labyrinths hold the potential to refocus the individual inward. The next part of the chapter compares the frame of the *Heptaméron* to a labyrinth, suggesting that it "unfolds in a labyrinthine manner" (p. 62). Brock argues that "The *Heptaméron* projects its readers into a similar position as that of the storytellers since they must proceed in the faith that from this assemblage of tales, colored by diverse ideologies, some larger in bono meaning will emerge" (p. 63).

In a final critical turn, Brock suggests that Marguerite's cultural reflections overlap with our own efforts to interpret her. She engages with Stanley Fish, Umberto Eco, and Yves Citton in order to weigh how reader response theory, the idea of the model reader, and reading as an *Irrgarten*-like process all can be useful tools in how we approach the *Heptaméron*. Ultimately, Brock argues, the stories and debates "can be viewed as aiming not only to teach people how to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors but also as training them to recognize the consequences of interpretation" (p. 68). These various threads are incredibly useful, and add to the impact of Brock's argument, but the complexity of this chapter and suggestions for how to balance the process of reading with the author's project made for a difficult read after the first two (less dense) chapters. The interpretive process seems deeply connected to the *in bono* and *in malo* components of the labyrinth that Brock so effectively links to the *Heptaméron*, so perhaps an integration of those two readings earlier on would have lightened the lift here.

Taken together, the chapters in the second half of the book promise to show how, in the *Heptaméron,* the "three main factors of Marguerite's multifaceted identity work together to reveal most clearly her commitment to institutional reform" (p. 71). The strongest statement in these chapters is that men should be as alarmed as women about the mistreatment and violence towards women in the world, and that they should work together to correct institutional corruption. To make this point, Brock suggests that the novellas of the *Heptaméron* are dominated by the *in malo* elements of the labyrinth, while the frame is dominated by the *in bono* elements. Another component of Brock's methodology in this section is to balance close readings of individual tales with a broader, bird's-eye view of what she calls "statistical trends" across the novellas (p. 16). Brock uses these trends to shed light on various groupings of novellas that share similar themes, patterns, or textual structures.

Chapter four, "Into the Labyrinth: Mirroring Sin, Prompting Reform," the opening chapter in the second part of the project, uses the *miroir* genre to shed light on sexual misconduct in elite Renaissance society and notes the reasons for the controversy surrounding *Miroir de l'ame pecheresse*. This is a literary genre used in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, which served as a place where knowledge on a particular subject was collected and shared for the purposes of instruction. Comparing Marguerite's own mirror text to others (by Porète, Erasmus, and Augustine), Brock moves to the *Heptaméron* as a kind of alternative mirror--suggesting that it lays the blame for corruption at the feet of institutional leaders. As such, the *Heptaméron* implicates nobility in sexual sin and shows that unchecked power can all too easily lead to injustice. Brock's reading is astute, though it is slightly odd not to see any mention of the fourth novella of the *Heptaméron*, which explicitly addresses this topic, or Nancy Frelick's analysis thereof. In this novella, after a foiled sexual assault, the perpetrator contemplates his injuries in the mirror and reflects on the folly of his behaviors.[1] Moving on from the aristocracy, Brock focuses on abuse of women by clergymen, using the mirror effect to show that clergy struggle with the same lack of accountability as noblemen. The final section considers sin in a wider social lens, showing the "wide-ranging nature of injustice" towards women in every social class (p. 92).

Chapter five, "Down Tortuous Paths: Exploring Approaches to Justice and Reform," considers the reader's experience of the conflicting approaches towards injustice in the novellas. It examines "the model reader's experience of walking down the numerous paths of the *Heptaméron*'s tales and how that experience constitutes a form of education" (p. 99). The chapter begins with the larger historical and literary context, citing from Erasmus and Vives. It then analyzes six different response patterns to injustice in the tales: mercy, verbal reproach, nonviolence/official channels of justice, physical retribution, trickery or deceit, and combinations of the above. Given that the final technique is by far the most common, Brock argues that readers must "learn to think differently" along the *in malo* path of the *Heptaméron's* novellas (p. 125). Unlike Erasmus and Vives, the *Heptaméron* does not offer clear-cut solutions.

Chapter Six, "Above the Labyrinth: A Higher Vision for Reforming the Self and Society," argues that the frame narrative enclosing the tales of the *Heptaméron* provides an alternate lens of justice--one that reflects the *in bono* idea of the labyrinth. In order to make her case, Brock first positions herself within conflicting scholarship, including that of Thomas Beebee and Christine Planté. The chapter sets out with a focus on the evangelizing function of the frame. It includes readings from the frame and selected novellas from Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier,* both texts upon which Marguerite drew in the *Heptaméron.* Unlike her predecessors, Marguerite leans more heavily on polyphony, thus appearing to "bow to masculine literary genius even as she defies expectations for women's use of the dialogue" (p. 143). Oisille, writes Brock, who is the eldest and most spiritual of the ten storytellers in the *Heptaméron,* is the "embodiment" of the ideals promoted in Vives's *Education of a Christian Woman* (pp. 148-149). As such, with Oisille as the avatar of a powerful, faith-led woman, the devisants are empowered to effect change. God is at work through Oisille and has a bird's-eye perspective on the labyrinth. Brock's reading of the frame as the *in bono* response to the *in malo* elements that dominate the novellas is a solid one. It does get slightly lost as there are long sections comprising readings of Boccaccio and Castiglione that distractingly break up the

chapter, and it would be interesting to see more comparison, perhaps early on, of the relationship between novella and frame as *in bono* and *in malo* tropes.

The brief conclusion, "The Empirical Reader at Labyrinth's End: Responding to Marguerite's Vision," offers scholarly and cultural angles for how to bring Marguerite's labyrinthine life and work into today's social conversations and, perhaps, the university classroom setting. Brock argues that entering the *Heptaméron* today is like entering a labyrinth because the sixteenth century is a foreign setting to twenty-first century readers. She notes the fruitful potential of a text that weaves together many parts of the labyrinth and leaves readers to decide what to do with them, and she provides various critical responses for how to deal with uncertainty. She connects these issues to the words of modern-day episcopal priest Dr. Lauren Artress, and then to various women-led activist causes and to influential popular figures such as Emma Watson who seek to recruit men to feminism and to advocate for institutional reform.

Brock's is a noteworthy contribution to scholarship on Marguerite de Navarre, with contributions that will be of particular value to non-specialist historians, literary scholars from non-French traditions, and scholars of women writers. Also of note for Renaissance scholars is her productive reading of multicursal and unicursal labyrinths as a trope for early modern texts, as well as the productive tension between *in malo* and *in bono* elements of a text.

NOTE

[1] Nancy Frelick, "Mirroring Discourses of Difference: Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* and the *Querelle des femmes*," *French Forum* 42 (2017): 375-392.

Nora Peterson
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
npeterson10@nebraska.edu

Copyright © 2025 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172